Summary

In a dystopian world, Jared struggles to survive. Bookers and patrol are out to get people like him on the streets. Shelter and food are difficult to come by, especially in his condition. He meets a stranger who gets more involved than he should--everything changes.

Notes

EDIT: oooookay. i was working on my chapter for House when a really bad no good terrible mood struck me. so i put on "think twice" by eve 6 and this is what happened. i've intentionally left the ending open-ended and mysterious so A) you can fill in the blanks as you like and B) i may come back to this in a little while. i also purposefully left things vague so i can either flesh them out later or again, let you shape it.
so there you go! this is not a happy story. but i suppose you can make the ending what you'd like.

EDIT 2:
okay... so this is a verse. XD started as a one-shot but y'all asked for more so here you go! :D

EDIT 3 (2019): wtf. XD
There are times when Jared can still hear Lucas’ voice.

A pleasant and soft English accent echoes in the shell of his ear, warm for a fleeting few seconds before it cruelly disappears. This hurts more than it helps.

Outside, it’s raining.

Inside, some people are dry and huddled with blankets.

During his daily rummaging for food and clothing, Jared peers into windows, curious and aching. A few minutes prior, he watched a grandmother carefully tuck in her granddaughter, wrapped in fluffy, cheerfully decorated quilts.

Jared found a quilt in a dumpster nearby just last week.

It was a lucky find, too, because it had hardly been singed by the fireplace. Yes, the smell of smoke and mothballs makes it less than ideal, but a faint hint of peppermint lingers. Aside from the smell, the quilt has barely any other physical damage. It's worth keeping. He has plans for it.

Turning away from the window, Jared adjusts his focus and priorities. Survival demands every scrap of his energy. The alleyway appears quiet and well-lit... for now. That can change in one devastating second. He must stay vigilant and aware of his surroundings.
Is the rustle of a garbage bag due to the cold breeze that has been chasing after him for the past three days? Or the result of someone watching him, waiting for him to make a mistake?

Time to leave the alley.

There are times when Jared needs to walk in such a way that his steps announce his arrival before his voice. With the sun dipping beneath the horizon, he keeps his footsteps silent.

In his mind, he reaches for his map of safer places to sleep within a reasonable distance of this alley. It might rain later. He takes that and a few other factors into consideration as he circles the block a few times. A suitable place to stay proves more difficult to find tonight, since it seems that others have also made a prediction of inclement weather. Everyone looks for shelter wherever they can find it. A precarious balance must be maintained when selecting a spot. Good spots would be near dumpsters or garbage cans—the best ones would have food or clean recyclables.

The best spots, free of Bookers and Patrol, no longer exist.

Jared lost Lucas to a pack of Patrol.

Not now. There is no time to waste on bleak thoughts.

Rain starts to saturate his grey, shadowed environment. The cold breeze shoves at Jared's thin layers of clothes. Despite the disruption to his routine, he settles on what seems like the safest spot for the moment. He can move if he needs to, though he'd prefer to rest a while before that. Jared crouches down and slides underneath a public bench. Far from the perfect spot, he tries to see the advantages of his selection. His size makes it difficult to find any shelter large enough in height or width to completely cover himself from the elements. However, underneath the bench allows him to lie on his side—the only position he finds comfortable.

Squeezed under the flat, black seating, he uses his canvas pack as a pillow and settles in. His legs stick out no matter how he tries to twist his body. After a few minutes, and with a few quiet grumbles, Jared digs through his pack and pulls out two newspapers. The papers won't keep him very warm or dry, and he'll wake up covered in pulp, but they will help him blend in. He places a few sheets over his head, trying not to totally block sight of the street or sidewalk. He got lucky with this bench—it's against a building on a relatively unoccupied street.

He tucks his hands into his coat in an effort to stay warm. He should try to sleep.

This is a good spot, he repeatedly tells himself. The shelters were full—they are always full—and no church would take him in his state.

“Come back when the baby is born,” the Priest there had told him, with a dismissive wave. “Try then.”

The bench is as good a place as any.

Not too far away sits an apartment complex, which means trash bins and dumpsters can't be far. Maybe a few residents will toss a few bags away before they head to work in the morning. The food procured from scuffing is often better than the food served by community kitchens. The watered down, chicken-flavored broth from six hours ago wasn't enough to go on, but it did quell some of the pain.

It's Wednesday, and he hopes the community kitchen on the corner of Oak will add noodles into the soup on Friday. The kitchens rarely offer anything besides soup, since it seems to stretch further. In Jared's experience, every kitchen seems to run out of food after the first hundred people in line.
Earlier today, after hours of standing or sitting on the sidewalk, he was the second to last to receive a paper cup of broth. It was thin, cold, and somehow oily, but he downed it in a few gulps. It had been easier with Lucas around. They made a good team.

Lucas would tell him to keep his chin up and be thankful for their health. They could do a lot worse. And with the baby on the way, Lucas made a point that Jared had to get his rest.

These thoughts need to stop.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Jared closes his eyes. The rain refuses to back down. Thunderstorms might roll through, though Jared’s not too afraid of them. Out in the openness of the public park, he would worry, since he’d be time times more vulnerable and exposed. But here? Under this perfect bench? Thunder is of little concern.

Fatigue pulls at each of his senses. Cars eventually stop driving past. The hour is late. Most people with access to a car have gone home, dry and warm. And everyone without such a place, has already found their lodging for the night. The only thing the rain seems good for is its steady tempo. Jared dozes, half awake, half asleep, lulled by raindrops tapping against the concrete sidewalk.

Was it always like this?

He can't remember.

What does it matter, anyway. He's here, under a bench, and he should be grateful. So what if it’s uncomfortable and he’d rather be inside, stretched out on an actual bed. Wishful thinking can only hurt him. But what if he had a room of his own, with a large, plush mattress and a vast selection of blankets and pillows? What if he had candles and a fireplace? Clean clothes and plate after plate of fresh food? A bathroom nearby, complete with running water and warm towels?

Why stop there? Why not imagine an entire house. Spacious rooms with wide windows. Couches. Chairs. Closets. All he needs to do is open up one of the closets and retrieve a few more blankets, then head over to the living room, where a sippy cup sits on the coffee table.

Not thinking, he tries to sit up--only to hit his head on the bench.

“Ow,” he snips, and rubs the subsequently tender spot on his head.

That's what he gets for dreaming. It would be wonderful to roll onto his back or change positions, but that isn’t possible. His shoulders and lower back complain about the sidewalk, so he must find relief another way.

A street light flickers. Someone’s apartment light turns on for a minute. A car drives by and Jared braces himself. It could be the car of a civilian, maybe someone working a night shift. Night shift workers tend to be kind. Some have given Jared sandwiches or coffee. Some have threatened to turn Jared over to Patrol. However, those are in the minority, and far better to run into them than the force they invoke. Jared peeks through his newspaper fort, trying to catch a glimpse. He looks for the tires, which turn out to be sleek and adorned with spikes.

Patrol.

“Stay filthy,” Lucas had instructed, one time smearing mud onto Jared’s clothes. “They’ll be less
likely to touching if you’re dirty. Come on then, love, put this on.”

Jared's sweater may have been a bright red color at some point.

Now, with the lack of light and an abundance of wear, tear, and stains, it looks more like the rust on older dumpsters. Aside from the protective measure, Jared stopped trying to wash items of clothing last month. It isn't worth the effort or the trouble. It took six months to build up a selection of clothes, all of which he either wears in layers or rolls up into his pack. Two pairs of jeans, an old leather belt, four over-sized sweaters, and about three or four pairs of socks. Too many layers and his movement becomes limited. Too few layers and he ends up at the mercy of the weather.

He wanted to keep Lucas' coat. It had been the finest thing in his possession--soft, warm, waterproof.

The black car parks across the street. Jared listens to the sound of car doors opening and closing. The car drives off.

Lucas would understand why Jared had to trade the coat.

People don't throw away baby bottles.

Taking the opportunity, Jared stretches before curling back up. Rest. Without rest, he can't function. And he needs to function--not just for himself. He closes his eyes and lists off the items in his pack: socks, a spare sweater and jeans, the quilt, two t-shirts, an empty plastic water bottle, two like-new baby bottles, a broken watch, and an empty pack of cigarettes. He doesn't smoke, never cared for it, but on the nights when Lucas' voice makes itself heard in his head, he likes having it near.

A Patrol car glides past by once more. Jared's eyes snap open at the same time car doors open.

With mechanic efficiency, Patrol use harsh flashlights to search the sidewalks. Unforgiving light sweeps over concrete while Jared holds his breath. An accusing circle of light stops inches away from his spot. He was in the station last week. He can’t go back. Not like this. Not so close to his due date.

Ten feet away, a garbage can tips over with a loud, sudden crash. Orbs of light race towards the cacophonous sound.

Jared lets out the breath he had been holding.

He closes his eyes, grateful for whoever or whatever created the distraction, even if by accident. He stares at the car and wills it to leave. Go away. Keep driving. Make no more stops tonight.

Maybe this isn’t the best spot after all.
On Friday, Jared is twentieth in line.

A fight broke out around number forty but he doesn’t care about that anymore. He walks back to the bench, where he’s stayed the last two nights, and hefts himself onto it. It’s just after three and he has some rummaging to do as soon as the sun goes down. For now, he holds his cup of soup and drinks it as slow as possible.

The steam from it curls around his face and he breathes it in, sighing.

It’s beef and noodle soup today. The volunteer felt sorry for him and gave him two pieces of beef instead of just the one. He even has the happy fortune of discovering a carrot halfway through. The soup is stretched out not just to soothe his hunger but to give his fingers a chance to warm up. While he eats, the street is his entertainment. The lights on the buses that drive past are pretty. The puddles from all the rain lately make funny noises when something drives through them. Sometimes they splash up so high that the light from the apartments catches on the drops of water.

There was a choice today: crackers or bread.

Jared weighed those out carefully. Crackers had a better chance of being fresh, and you get four of them, but bread was usually more filling, though you only get one piece. Seeing that the pieces of bread handed out before his turn were not moldy or soggy, he chose the bread. It’s a good choice, he congratulates himself as he takes a small bite of it; sourdough is tasty.

“You owe me half of that.”

The voice out of nowhere startles Jared. He almost drops the bread in his hands.

“You shouldn’t set down your cup on the bench. Anyone could take it.”

At the mention of someone taking his food, Jared’s eyes narrow at the source of the voice. The person is male, with shorter hair that’s dark now but has hints of lightness, covered by a ratty baseball cap. He’s dressed much the same way Jared is, but with more layers that are in better condition. A collection of plastic spoons dangle from his belt. Once all these details are processes, Jared quickly glances at the stranger’s face: a sort of broken nose, a full mouth but with a split lip, and elegant eyebrows. Whatever his back story is, Jared doesn’t care. He picks up his soup and holds his food near his chest.

The stranger gives a crooked smile. “I knocked over that trash can. Remember? Patrol would’ve gotten ya. So maybe you can share some of that soup? Or bread. I’m not picky.”

There’s a difference between being grateful and allowing someone to take advantage of him. Jared has learned. It took a while and a few experiences he would rather forget, but he learned. He stands up, pushing himself off the bench, and starts to walk away. The stranger follows.
“Aw c’mon, don’t be like that. I helped you out.”

“Thank you,” Jared grumbles and keeps walking.

“Fine,” the stranger mutters, “but you shouldn’t stay under that bench anymore. You’re too exposed.”

Jared ignores him. He’s still following.

The stranger trips over an empty can and knocks into Jared, who gasps at the contact. The stranger’s eyes go wide as they reach Jared’s middle. “You… you’re…

Juggling everything in his hands, Jared covers up his belly with his coat. He stares down the stranger, who looks away first and starts muttering on about how he’s sorry and how he won’t bother Jared for food anymore but he really should find another spot.

Before Jared can retort that his spot is perfectly fine, the stranger ducks into an alley. Jared peers in, too curious not to, and sees what the stranger is after: a restaurant has just thrown out their trash. A small amount of soup is left in Jared’s paper cup; he downs it fast and tucks the last crust of bread he has into a pocket for later. He starts to try to find his own alley; if one restaurant is putting garbage out, maybe another might nearby.

“Hey, hey wait!”

A brief glance back at the alley shows the stranger kneeling on the ground, prying open the fresh garbage bag with one of the spoons. Their eyes meet.

“I’ll share,” he blurts out, hands on the bag. A moment is taken to take a preliminary look through the bag, just to make sure it’s not all paper and plastic. Some breadsticks are pulled out, stray pieces of something shaken off them. “Aha!” the stranger chirps and tastes one. “Pretty good. I think…” he rifles through carefully, experienced in glass hiding in bags. “Yep, I knew I smelled pasta.” A handful of noodles with red sauce dangle from his outstretched hand.

This is tempting.

It’s a kitchen bag. There’s bound to be a piece of meat in there someone inside didn’t finish or sent back.

Jared’s pride waivers when the stranger discovers chicken ravioli and crusts of garlic bread.

Kneeling down on the wet ground, passing back and forth handfuls of what they find, Jared and the stranger have a feast.

Most of the food is still warm.

For a week, Jared refuses to give up his new spot.

He continues to watch the street from his view underneath the bench. Over the weekend there are more people out at night than usual. Their cheerful, drunk shouts are welcomed new noises to Jared, who struggles more and more each day to squeeze himself into his spot. There is only one night that Jared dares to switch positions; he spends it turned over, his back to the street. The ease of pressure on the small of his back is welcomed but ultimately not worth the worry. Without a view of the street he’s vulnerable.
For that entire week, every time he comes back for the night he finds something new left there. One night it’s half an apple. It’s a red apple, crisp and only a little bit bruised and brown. Jared munches on it happily, savoring the crisp, white meat of it. Fruit is difficult to come by. On another night he finds a tattered, chewed up travel pillow wedged under the spot in the bench where Jared usually rests his head. It’s a little scratchy but it’s luxurious. A real pillow. Who would have thought?

Today, Jared is searching for another spot. He has added the travel pillow to his pack of belongings.

One walk around the block at ten yields nothing better than his current location. Every potential lead is examined and weighed out carefully but many spots are already taken. It’s been colder this week. If he could find something with a heat source that would practically be heaven. He did try two shelters—each on the opposite sides of town—but at each one he was turned away. Too full. Maximum capacity. Same old story.

As he walks down a larger street, past the museum, he wonders what it might be like to go into a place just to walk around. There’s no need to be in a museum; there’s just the want of interesting things to look at and fun ways to pass the time. There are no fights for blankets in a museum, no poorly kept shower stalls or yellow-stained cots. Just hallway after hallway of wonder and amusement placed there for that purpose alone.

On his tip toes, Jared manages to get a glimpse of the inside of the museum.

It’s empty now, closed, but the building itself is well-taken care of. The floors are made of tile and form a mosaic of the night sky. Jared has never seen anything so beautiful. He would never want to step on that floor and risk it getting dirty. His fingers press against the glass and soon enough, his breath fogs it up. Time to move on. Best to move himself now instead of being dragged away later. A hurried look through the museums garbage doesn’t turn up any food but Jared does find a broken model of the solar system. It’s about the size of his hand and he reasons that it won’t take up much space. As he tucks it into his pack, he laughs to himself—the solar system won’t take up much space. That’s a good one.

Back near the bench, Jared sits down on it, glad for a rest. He can’t find any other spot so he might as well settle for this one again. It’s not good to stay in one place for too long and a week is pushing it but there are no better alternatives. Near midnight he finally gives into exhaustion and slides under, grunting at the sudden smallness of the space. A week ago it was somewhat roomy. Now he’s cramped, which he could stand, but it’s not good if he needs to get away with any kind of speed. He prays that he won’t have to worry about that tonight. Fatigue presses into him and it’s a struggle to not fall into a deep sleep. He has to remain on the edge of alertness just in case. Every half an hour he rouses himself out of snoring. At four, an hour before he usually gets up, he opens his eyes to see a whole orange in front of his face. It sits there, perfect and untouched. The peel is still intact. Jared looks around from his spot underneath and sees no feet or hands near. After a minute of desperate waiting, just to be sure, Jared finally reaches out for it.

His hand stretches out just in time to cause a pair of familiar shoes to step on and trip over it. It’s the same man from before, again on his phone, cursing from the falter in his step. The orange rolls away and Jared whimpers for a second before he braces himself.

Being attacked from underneath the bench haunts him for hours after.

The man kept grabbing for him, pulling at his hair, until all Jared could see was his great, threatening hand moving around in angered frenzy. A chunk of hair is ripped out and Jared starts to sob, trying to curl further back against the wall. Polished shoes replace the hand and Jared takes two kicks to the face and head. Bleeding from his nose, Jared holds his arms over his belly. The man keeps sweeping
his leg under the bench, until he hits Jared hard enough in the head that Jared groans and goes still. Although the world is black for a minute, Jared is still aware of the wetness that lands on his head. It’s spit.

“Easy. Fuck. Easy.”

The stranger grips onto Jared’s shoulders as he hefts Jared from out underneath the bench.

“Careful now. Almost there.”

Jared swears he can hear Lucas somewhere in the ringing of his ears but the stranger’s subtle Southern drawl is closer. For the first minute, Jared tried to help the stranger with his efforts, but he’s boneless with exhaustion after that. Eventually, the stranger eases Jared’s legs out and props him up, sitting against the wall. It’s around ten in the morning. The street is empty, rush hour over.

Face to face, Jared notices freckles on the stranger’s ruddy face.

He squeezes his eyes shut and gasps. His pack. He needs his pack. The stranger understands this and gets it for him; he knows how valuable the items are inside, even if they’re broken.

Clutching onto his pack, Jared’s mouth opens to heave a grunt of pain. No. Not now. Not now. Not when he’s got dried blood all over his head and face, not when he barely has the strength to keep himself sitting up, not when the only person in front of him is someone he is indebted to—twice.

His water breaks.

In between two dumpsters, in an alleyway, Jared gives birth.

The stranger dragged him there, foot by foot, leaving a trail of blood on the sidewalk.

He stays.

Plastic gloves are produced from the stranger’s pack and the spoons are cleaned off with a clean handkerchief. Jared’s jeans are pulled off and his feet propped on the stranger’s broad shoulders as he kneels in front. Jared points to his pack and the stranger nods. The quilt is taken out and folded, set aside for the right moment.

The entire event is faster than Jared expected. After so many months, the big event lasts less than an hour. It doesn’t seem fair. It’s bloody and messy and he almost passes out. The stranger forces a slice of orange into his mouth and makes him chew. After that, when the baby crowns, a handkerchief stuffed into Jared’s mouth silences his screams. It’s like being ripped in half. Blood is all over the stranger’s trembling hands.

Jared doesn’t expect what happens next.

He pushes the baby out.

After a moment of silence, it lets out its first cry. Alive. It’s alive.
The stranger leaves them two days later. It’s raining once more but he’s provided them with an umbrella that only has two holes in it. The baby has latched onto Jared’s nipple and is feeding hungrily, crying when it runs out of milk.

“You need to eat,” the stranger declares, determination in his features. His clothes are still stained with blood but he hasn’t minded. It’s Friday. “I’ll get you something.”

Jared looks up and shakes his head. “Don’t go.”

“You two will be fine,” Jensen insists. Spoons and a bag are gathered. “Lucky kid has eaten more than both of us. I still got a shot in line and I bet I can snag a sandwich from the dumpster on Third. Stay put.” There’s something more that lingers in that last bit but Jared doesn’t dare to point it out.

He holds the baby close as the stranger turns and leaves, rounding the corner of the alley, disappearing from sight.

Jensen got lucky.

Fifty two in line.

He wheedled an extra piece of bread from the volunteer at the front and he sees three pieces of beef floating around in the broth. On his way back to the alley, he stops in another and finds a sandwich, just like he said.

Proud of his earnings for the day, he balances everything carefully.

“You two ready for a buffet?” he calls out.

Jared is gone.

The model of the solar system is strewn everywhere, planets smashed to pieces.

Jensen finds the baby under the dumpster, wrapped in that quilt.

It’s still alive.
Five Years Later

Spoons are useful things. They’re lightweight and innocuous. Ha. Innocuous. Fancy speakin’.

“What I mean,” Jensen clarifies, kneeling down in the alley, “is that these here are choice tools. They’re cheap and easy to find when you’re scuffing. Plus, snap ‘em here…” He snaps a plastic spoon in half and holds it up. “And you can hurt someone if they get too close. Instant weapon, pow pow pow kind of stuff. You got it?”

The lesson isn’t sticking completely yet. It’ll take time. He grabs another spoon from his belt and leans in a little closer, his voice careful and hushed. He makes eye contact to signify the seriousness of what he says. “Look. Bad people don’t like us. That’s why we hide. But sometimes… sometimes they find us. Sometimes they want to ask us things and we have to answer. Be honest. Remember what I told you about lying, yeah? Okay. Well, sometimes they think we’re lying and they’ll wanna look at what you have, the stuff you carry. These spoons? They don’t look like much so the bad people won’t care and they’ll move on.”

How do you explain patrol and Bookers to a five year old kid? Hazel eyes look up at him. Jensen passes the kid a spoon. “This one’s yours,” he says and watches tiny, dirty fingers take hold of the spoon like it’s a sacred object. This is a good reaction. Tools can save or condemn someone like them.

“Thank you daddy.” They are simple words but Jensen rewards good manners.

He picks up Henry and places him on his shoulders. It’s almost midnight.

“C’mon,” Jensen says, walking out onto the sidewalk. “Let’s see if I can find you an orange.”

There’s a lot of shit in a garbage bag from a restaurant. It’s not just food that gets thrown in there and Jensen has learned never to just grab and eat. He has learned out of experience and necessity.

Small hands find half eaten chicken nuggets. They pass them over to Jensen for inspection.

“No go, buddy,” he sighs and tosses the nuggets back into the bag. “Sorry. I’ll find you something real good in the next bag, okay?” Henry frowns but nods, stoic and quiet. He’s a good kid. The best kid. A second bag is hefted out of the dumpster Jensen managed to pick open. Many businesses have started locking up their trash. Fancier places have better locks. This place is one of Jensen’s most reliable ones and they have yet to upgrade. Using the handle of a spoon he tears open the bag from the bottom.

“Jesus fu… ugh.” He groans and pushes the bag away from them. “Careful. Move a bit.” The smell is awful. Abhorrent. Just plain fucking gross. Shit. It’s their third stop of the night, one week after the lesson on spoons, and they haven’t found anything to eat. Oh, there’s a bite or two of something here and there but that isn’t enough. It’s not as simple as stealing formula or trading food for a wet nurse’s services for a few hours. The kid has to eat actual food. This is frustrating.

Kids aren’t that common on the street. Most of them get placed in orphanages or reform houses or
factories. Jensen doesn’t remember where he came from. His hunger has eaten away at a lot of his earlier memories. But he knew he could never… he just… he stood on the steps of the big church downtown with a squirming, wailing bundle in his arms and he couldn’t do it.

But he has always found a way. A whistle signifies that they’re done here. He’s not gonna try another bag and risk that smell again. Henry waits by the wall, hidden in the shadows of the dumpster just like Jensen taught him. He steps out when he sees Jensen take a step forward. They’ll try the restaurant three blocks down. The lock there is iffy but it’s a relatively safe place to scuff through and Jensen knows a good alley system to get there.

Concealed in the darkness afforded by the alley, Jensen offers his hand out to Henry.

Hand in hand they start their trek.

He has met parents on the street with kids and was fortunate, in most cases, for the acquaintance. He would never have figured out how to silence a baby during a raid or change diapers without, well, without having diapers. No way would he have figured out that a baby sling is the most useful thing ever. But there were a few things he saw that alarmed him and subsequently decided he would never do.

Some parents take advantage of a child’s smaller size and send them out to scuff on their own. He’s seen kids work at mining what they can and bring it back to their family only to have it taken away and eaten. Henry is old enough to look for food but he’s not old enough to know what’s good and what’s spoiled. Not yet. It takes four bags but Jensen finally finds pasta that passes his inspection. He holds it out for Henry and lets the kid eat from his hands.

“Is it good?”

Henry nods.

“Good.”

The noodles are eaten at a pace Jensen taught him to eat at: efficiently. They always have to be quick but Jensen also learned that eating too fast hurt more often than it helped. Henry slurps a noodle and gives a shy smile. Jensen bumps their noses together and Henry places his hands on Jensen’s face. A sweet, appreciative thank you is whispered and Jensen kisses his cheek. “Wait for daddy to eat,” he murmurs and brushes the kid’s hair out of his face. It’s getting long. One of these days he’ll find a razor and trim it. For now he’s got to find his own dinner.

Halfway through two more bags, Jensen pauses.

He just caught the smell of a sandwich that might be good—his stomach hurts from hunger—but no, something else, something bad. He looks over to Henry and holds up two fingers. The kid assumes position by crawling behind the dumpster and hiding as best he can. Jensen stands up from crouching and soundlessly makes his way to the end of the alley. Flashlights. Fuck. He holds his breath, pressed against the wall. Not tonight. Please not tonight.

They caught him twice. Both times they got him bad. The spoons saved him. Since he didn’t have anything on him that could be considered dangerous they let him off easy. The meaning of that is subjective. Either way, Henry was alone on two occasions.

Not tonight. Please.
The shine of a flashlight creeps along the ground, one inch away from Jensen’s boot. It stays there for ten seconds—he counts—and moves to the right, away from his boot. Twenty seconds later the lights disappear. Jensen clutches his chest and crouches down but he doesn’t dare move until an entire minute has passed. Sometimes they linger. Sometimes they follow.

Two minutes just for safety and the coast is clear. He goes back to where Henry is.

“Good boy,” Jensen breathes into his hair, holding him tight to his chest. “My good boy.”

A few minutes after that Jensen finds that sandwich. It’s a good night after all.

Henry sleeps during the day. Jensen keeps watch.

He named the kid Henry because it was a name no one could make a nickname out of. The kid has to grow up fast. Henry is a serious name.

But that doesn’t mean they don’t have some fun.

Friday, after Henry wakes up, Jensen treats him to a game. He scoops the kid up and places him on the top of a dumpster that has a slanted top instead of a flat one. Jensen waits at the edge of it, kneeling, with his arms outstretched. “Where are you going today buddy?”


“To the moon,” Henry announces, excitement in his tone.

The countdown is made and Henry lifts off. Well, he pushes himself off the lid and slides down three feet into Jensen’s arms. It’s the best slide Jensen has found. In the three times that Henry is placed on top of the dumpster they go to the stars, Jupiter, and back to the moon. At sunset they take a break and sit quietly in the alley. Henry falls asleep but Jensen stays awake, keeping a hand on Henry’s shoulders. They waited in line today but weren’t part of the hundred to get soup. That’s okay. Soup isn’t that filling for a kid anyway. The bread would have been nice.

Sundown fades into evening. When the streets are quiet, Jensen picks up the kid and holds him steady. Henry’s head rests on his shoulder. He keeps on sleeping and Jensen doesn’t wake him up. Rest is good.

Tonight’s accommodations must change. They’ve stayed in an old sewer tunnel, which was lucky because it started to rain mid-week and it allowed them some privacy. He washed and changed Henry with rainwater, then kissed his bruises and owies all better. The kid doesn’t get scraped up that much—he’s a good kid—but scuffing takes muscle and sometimes there are accidents. He’s five. Anything shiny catches his attention. Jensen doesn’t get upset but he does switch to his serious voice when that happens.

Henry is still young enough to want to be held. Jensen feels him wake up halfway through Jensen’s first circle around the block but he stretches some and makes himself comfortable. A pat to his back and a kiss to his ear have him sleeping again soon enough. As Jensen steps over a puddle of filthy water he hopes the kid doesn’t grow into one of those teenagers who think they’re too cool for their parents. He’ll concede at not being called daddy past the age of ten but that’s where he draws the line. Right.

The city looks run down at night. Well, at least this section does. It’s not as high-end as downtown but Jensen rarely goes there. Patrol is heavier near luxury shops; it’s not worth scuffing the bags and
dumpsters from rich people restaurants and cafes. Besides, those locks are new. Jensen has skill but he’s heard whispers of the locks being tapped into a Booker feed. He sticks with old school locks that can be picked with a few seconds of patience. Tonight looks like it won’t rain. This takes him on a round that’s a bit longer—the scenic route, he jokes to himself—and he stops for a detour at the Italian place with the faux gold cat statue in front. A fresh bag. He can smell it. With a few taps to the shoulder, he gently wakes Henry up. He gets a little pout and sleepy eyes but the kid needs to wake up anyway. Sleep too much now and he won’t be able to sleep during the day later. That was a hard lesson but a good one.

Setting Henry down, Jensen pats his head and takes his hand. Together they approach the bag that the kitchen staff was too lazy or busy to throw into the dumpster. Bags like these are either jackpots or snake eyes and Jensen doesn’t take chances. Three steps away he squeezes Henry’s hand once and the kid nods. He hangs back and waits patiently, still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

This bag has been tied instead of clipped. Jensen studies it. No rips or tears and he can smell garlic bread. One kick to the end of it proves that there’s more than food in there—kitchen stuff, paper, cans. He crouches down and carefully unties the top. Although the staff has gone home by now, Jensen doesn’t like to make a lot of noise. Never good to make too much noise. That was an even harder lesson.

“Daddy,” Henry whispers in a tone that Jensen immediately recognizes. “I need to pee.”

“Alright buddy. Let me open this.” A quick check inside and it’s a good bag. He gets up and sides up to the wall furthest away from the bag. That’s a rule: never mess where you eat. Even if it’s a few steps away it’s still better. Number ones are easy to handle. Number twos involve a more complicated system. That’s also why Jensen takes care in choosing what they eat—not a good thing to be shitting bricks when your toilet system involves a plastic bag and some newspaper.

Jensen stands behind Henry, forming a wall of privacy. The kid does his business and asks for a wipe, which Jensen hands him. A pack of wet wipes is the nicest and newest thing they have. Jensen found it during a scuff two weeks ago. Wipes are luxury. They’re down to five. Henry wipes his hands and Jensen takes it, folds it, and uses the other side to wipe down Henry’s face. He pokes Henry’s dimples with the corners of the wipe and gets a happy laugh. When Henry is washed up for dinner, Jensen takes a quick swipe at his face and hands and discards the wipe into the dumpster.

A pull from Jensen’s canteen provides them with cool water. The fountain on Third is their main source. Sometimes Jensen manages to get juice from the line or in trade. When he can, he gets fruit punch.

After dinner Jensen picks Henry up again and resumes their route. Even though Henry is awake, Jensen feels better carrying him, having him close. On the way—weaving in and out of alleys and side streets—Henry has one hand on Jensen’s chest and the other on his ear. He counts the number of door they pass because Jensen asks him to. This is school time. One, two, three, five. No, buddy, try again. One, two, three… uhm… daddy, what’s after three? Four, baby. Four, five, six.

At six, Henry starts over at one. He can make it to ten but Jensen excuses him. A big dinner means a full belly means a sleepy Henry. Arrived at their lodgings, Henry has fallen asleep again. Jensen also feels the pull of drowsiness but resists. They have to settle in and he never goes to sleep in a new place for the night right away. He waits an hour. An hour is typically plenty of time to tell if the place
is viable or not. Jensen is a light sleeper and it’s saved them more than once but sleeping still makes him nervous. One day Henry will be old enough to be a lookout so they can trade off and that’ll make Jensen feel a lot better. For now, he naps throughout the day as Henry sleeps, trained by now to doze one hour and stay awake the next. Time is told through a cheap watch he found on a park bench. He times it to the large clock in the center square.

Tonight’s accommodations consist of the alley tucked behind a retirement home—the alley isn’t wider than a dumpster—and the fire escape. Jensen is hesitant to prop them up on the fire escape so he weighs the pros and cons while he looks up at the bottom step. He can get Henry up there no problem. The bottom platform hangs just another two feet above Jensen. Jumping down wouldn’t be too hard as long as he’s careful. The issue lies in emergency get away. They would be vulnerable here from patrol but safer from anyone like them looking to steal. Jensen has fought men and women for spots and scuffing grounds—he isn’t afraid to do it again.

“Buddy,” Jensen whispers and taps Henry’s shoulder. “We’re here. Wake up.”

“Huh?” the kid yawns and looks around. He wraps his arms around Jensen’s neck. “Daddy.”

“C’mon, buddy just an up and you’ll get a story.”

“…’bout dinosaurs?”

“Yeah.”

“…in space?”

“Sure. Dinosaurs in space it is.” He lifts Henry up to the platform and vigilantly sees that he gets on. While he does this he notices a rip on the inside of Henry’s jeans. Gonna have to patch those up. A woman at the clinic they go to once every six months said Henry was small for his age. She attributed to the lack of fresh food—nothing Jensen could do about that—and something else he prefers not to think about: the lack of breast milk. There was even less Jensen could do about that.

Up and secure, Henry scoots to the edge of the platform, holding onto the railing like Jensen taught him. Good boy, wait for daddy. Jensen tosses up his pack and rubs his hands together to prepare. Scuffing and walking keep him lean, but lifting his body weight up some eight feet is going to take effort. It’s early yet and he could scuff around the area; sometimes retirement homes throw away crutches or pieces of walkers that could come in handy. But he’s tired and he knows Henry needs another hour of sleep. There will be time to scuff for things later. He jumps up and misses the two bars that hang off the edge. Fuck. He’s more tired than he thought. The second jump is successful but it takes him longer than he cares to admit to pull himself up and onto the platform. Henry watches, concerned, and Jensen knows that one day he’ll be helping his old man up without a second thought. He’s a good kid.

“See? Not so bad,” Jensen huffs, wiggling on his middle, trying to get his legs hoisted up. The muscles in his arms burn from the exertion. This is good exercise. Right. “Oof. Okay. Next time you’re gonna lift me up here first.”

“Silly daddy,” Henry says with a small, shy smile. He always gets a little more introverted when they’re in a new place for the night. It’ll wear off in an hour or two. One more swing of his right leg and Jensen will be completely up and they can get on with dinosaurs in space.

Just as Jensen is hauling his ass onto the platform and settling in, voices shout out. Ugly words echo in the alley and Jensen immediately covers Henry’s ears. He places Henry in his lap but cloaks him with his coat. Henry doesn’t make a fuss. He knows the drill. Shit. This was what he feared. But
patrol doesn’t make noise and Bookers certainly don’t either, so he knows it’s just people. What kind of people he can’t say, but no one’s attacking the dumpster in search of food so that has to mean something. Maybe it’s just an argument between some staff from the home. When Jensen hears laughter, dread sinks into his stomach.

They have to stay as still and quiet as possible. He scoots them into the corner of the platform with the most shadow, his pack out of sight. This is worse than a fight. It’s what he witnessed five years ago. The victim is pushed against the dumpster and beaten by three. Three against one. Sexual demands are made. The victim makes no sound. Their head is slammed into the dumpster and blood runs. Jensen can see it, even in darkness.

A lifetime ago he would have interfered or distracted the three hunched and hooded figures. They’re people. Not that hard to get the best of. But now he can’t. He closes his eyes when a figure presses their boot on the victim’s face. Jensen feels small hands and fingers against his chest, holding on tightly. Although Jensen has him covered, Henry can still hear loud crashing and banging. They’ll leave after this. When it’s over and safe to get down, they’ll leave and go back to the sewer tunnel until Jensen can think of another spot. He made a mistake. He will fix it.

A dim blue light shines from three stories up. It’s a nightlight or a lamp but it flickers.

Finished, the victim completely unresponsive, the attackers leave the alley. Jensen waits ten minutes. Henry sniffles. When it’s clear to Jensen that the attackers have no plan to come back, he launches into action. They do the entire thing backwards this time; first it’s Jensen who has to climb down from the platform and Henry must slide into his arms. There’s hesitance at that part but Jensen assures him softly that it’s just like sliding off the dumpsters.

“Daddy will catch you,” Jensen restates, his tone confident but a little rushed. He wants to get out of this alley and forget about the beating and his lack of action. He should have helped. If he had been clever about it he might’ve been able to distract the attackers. It’s too late for that now, Jensen chides himself. Too little, too late. He looks up at Henry, who is still uncertain and takes one more sentence of coaxing. Finally, Henry pushes himself off the edge of the platform and lands securely into Jensen’s arms. Jensen hears the kid breathe a small sigh of relief. He holds him extra tight as he starts to walk out the alley. Keep walking. Whatever it is, don’t get involved. Got involved once. His chest squeezes. He presses a kiss to Henry’s cheek. It’s not like that this time.

There are lessons that extend beyond counting and shapes and scuffing. But how do you teach compassion when gestures of it could potentially be more harmful than good? He should just walk out of the alley before anything else happens, get back to the sewer, and plan better.

That is exactly what he should do.

“Stay here,” he says in a firm voice, looking directly at Henry. “Be daddy’s good boy and stay here.”

“Are you gonna help them?” Henry asks, sleep no longer pressing on him.

“Gonna give them a breadstick so they have something to eat later. Stay here.” He has Henry stay in the shadows next to a paper and cardboard recycling bin. While he dislikes turning his back to Henry, who is still uncertain and takes one more sentence of coaxing. Finally, Henry pushes himself off the edge of the platform and lands securely into Jensen’s arms. Jensen hears the kid breathe a small sigh of relief. He holds him extra tight as he starts to walk out the alley. Keep walking. Whatever it is, don’t get involved. Got involved once. His chest squeezes. He presses a kiss to Henry’s cheek. It’s not like that this time.

The steps he takes are cautious and guarded. Three against one. How fucking unfair is that? Jensen can’t tell if the victim is a man or a woman even when he gets five feet away. They are face down on the pavement with a hood over their head. From head to toe they’re covered in rags and plastic bags sewn together. Not too close. Don’t get too close. Jensen glances back over at Henry, who is motionless and silent in his place. Good kid. Turning back, Jensen can tell that the victim won’t be
waking up for a while. The most Jensen can do is leave a few breadsticks for them to eat; he wraps them in a cleaner rag that he has on him. The bundle is left near the victim’s face so they’ll see them whenever they come to.

With that, Jensen is done.

He scoops up his kid and turns the corner.

On the walk back to the sewer tunnel, Jensen tells the story of two dinosaurs in space and how they like to jump from planet to planet. They go everywhere they want—all across the solar system.

From his pocket, Jensen pulls out Jupiter.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Jensen mends what he can.

Chapter Notes

warnings for graphic violence, physical abuse.

a tough chapter. jensen tries but he's not always able to avoid the street.

thanks for reading. <3

It’s not like he didn’t try.

He asked around. Have you seen this man? Have you seen this man, please? Please, he was just here. For two years he continued searching. But the neighborhood changed. People left. They left for cities with less locks on the dumpsters, wider scuffing territories, and less patrol. After three years barely anyone from before was left, leaving Jensen with his unanswered questions.

Sometimes he thinks they might have been better off if they had left like the others. Maybe a larger city would be safer. Maybe there would be a park or a play place Henry could roam through instead of resorting to dumpster lids. But moving is risky in itself and Jensen could never justify it. He has no connections in other cities. Besides. If they left... No, it’s better to stay. There are no guarantees anywhere so they might as well stick around.

“Fuck,” Jensen grumbles and looks over towards Henry. Still asleep, good. Shit, that hurt, stupid needle. He’s mending Henry’s jeans and two shirts, plus one of his own. Regular mending is necessary to make their clothes last a little longer. Once a year all the churches have Bin Day. This past year was brutal. For one day a year large bins are placed on the sidewalk at midnight filled with donated clothes and assorted odds and ends. It is first come, first serve and the lines start as soon as the sun goes down. Jensen traded a walker he had rigged and fixed up for a woman to watch Henry while he waited in line. The year before that Jensen left Henry with the wife of the guy who used to run a shoe store. Jensen paid in blow jobs for a month but it was worth it: the lady washed and cleaned Henry in an actual tub, gave him new clothes, and gave him lunch on a plate. Her husband wasn’t mean, either; he just got a little rough sometimes. It was a good deal. But she’s alone now, that lady, and Jensen hasn’t wanted to ask why.

Bin Day is wonderful and terrible. You can only take what you can carry—no bags, boxes, or carts allowed. Anyone seen taking more than they are able is flogged and made an example of by the priests. Jensen is always extremely careful in that aspect. What is worse than the threat of the whip is the frenzy. He has been bitten and punched and trampled in the crush of the crowd. He never used to go to Bin Day. In fact, he’d mock those that did. Why stand in line for the hope of one new shirt, risking injury, when you could just mend what you had? That was before. Last year he got a shirt for Henry that the kid religiously insists wearing as his bottom layer at all times. Jensen has it drying to
the side now; he’ll mend it as soon as it’s less damp. It’s a little too big for Henry but he’ll grow into it—a purple t-shirt with a silver star patched on the front. Jensen would rather have the kid get attached to a shirt—something useful—than a stuffed animal. He’s a good kid.

It’s been a week since his mistake in lodging. They’ve alternated staying in this tunnel and huddled together against a dumpster that rarely gets emptied on Fifth. The stench is worth the security.

Since it rained last night Jensen moved them back to the tunnel and set out three pans to collect rainwater. Henry has been cleaned and is sleeping in a nest of tote bags Jensen found discarded from the retirement home. It’s sundown and Jensen wants to scuff for supplies tonight. The canteen needs to be refilled and Henry could use another pair of underwear. That is always one thing Jensen has never been able to find at Bin Day—kids’ underwear. It’s always gone by the time he gets to any bin. It has always been easier to find boxers or briefs for himself and that never seems fair. Ah, and socks. They need socks. Hmm, should make a list.

As Jensen finishes his mending and wrings out the last of their washed clothes he thinks about where might be the best places to look for underwear and socks. There is a consignment store nearby that sometimes throws out things too damaged to sell but lately their locks have been tricky. He could scuff near a department store but their locks, he’s heard recently, are electric and shock if tampered with incorrectly. There’s no point in hoping for an employee to be too lazy to open the dumpster and just leave the bag next to it instead. Jensen hates his last resort but he isn’t sure of any other option. They’ll have to try a shelter. Shelters are kinder to kids but Henry will have to go inside alone, if they let him in, and pick out one thing from a community bin. Jensen trusts the nuns but he wouldn’t trust a priest farther than he can throw ‘em. No one is going to coax his kid away from him.

The mending done, Jensen undresses. There’s a pan of water left for himself and one clean side of the very last wipe. He’s proud of himself for making the wipes last this long; and he’s hopeful that they’ll find more. He folds what he’s wearing and sets them to the side. Being naked means being vulnerable so he works fast. He’s more careful when it comes to Henry’s baths, but that’s because Henry doesn’t yet know the difference between a rash and an open sore that could be infected. Jensen has a few sores on his body and he does his best to wash them out. They itch like hell but he refrains from scratching... most of the time. A dash of powdered soap—another luxury item he found three months ago—and Jensen is able to feel clean. He shaves fast with a blunt razor he keeps hidden in the tunnel and immediately buries it away again. Never have anything sharp on you. Never. Even the darning needle he’s just used goes right back into his pack, stashed away in the lining of one of his boxers at the bottom of his pack.

Anything considered a weapon might be taken as a threat, which might be taken as attempting to fight back. That is the worst thing anyone like them can do: fight back. It never, ever ends well. The risk he took tipping over that garbage can one night was enormous but that was... that was different. Some people keep butter knives and plastic forks on them because they think they’re nothing much, no big deal. How much damaged can you cause with something like that? It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what they think; it matters what patrol thinks. And no one knows what Bookers think. No. He keeps his spoons on him in plain sight to lessen the threat. They’re mostly tools but when they’re weapons they aren’t for defending himself against patrol: they’re for scaring off people trying to steal his things or scuff his bags.

In any case, Jensen is careful at all times.

When it gets cold Jensen leaves the scuff on his face. Henry likes to tug at it and rub his face on it in awe. But it’s warm enough now that shaving feels good. Within minutes he’s washed and dressed again. Right, now he can get to making a list. Underwear, socks, wipes if they can find them...
Looking up from his pack, Jensen sees the stretch of gravel leading to and from the tunnel.

On it are lights. Flashlights.

His breath hitches and he chokes on his own horror. How could… not tonight.

The crunch of boots deafens him. Henry. Stay down. Keep quiet. No matter what happens to daddy you have to hide. Don’t look. Whatever they do to daddy, don’t look. Just wait. Wait and it will be over and daddy will be okay. These were lessons. Jensen prays that these lessons stick.

Sometimes patrolmen take their young ones out for rides to teach them the ropes. That seems to be the case tonight. Patrol never speak. Dressed in black, with heavy boots and weapons all over them, they have a different smell to them. They don’t smell like trash or dumpsters or dirty water or dried out wipes. They smell clean. Too clean. The younger, smaller one is given Jensen as a gift and a lesson.

A nightstick is used because the young one hasn’t learned much else. Rookie shit. It still hurts.

Jensen watches his own dark shadow on the side of the tunnel descend to the ground as he’s beaten. He tries his best to move forward, away from Henry, but he doesn’t get very far. The gravel stings. The elder joins in. Three shadows meld into one until Jensen can’t breathe. Having knocked the wind out of him, the elder taps at Jensen’s chin and tilts his head. His nose is tapped and then smashed, causing Jensen to groan and seize in pain. Blood gushes and delicate bones snap. His spoons are tapped and Jensen braces himself.

Just don’t take me. Just don’t…

A sense of failure sears through him when the nightstick whacks down once more. He can’t help the sounds of agony that force themselves out of his mouth. Every yowl echoes against the brick walls of the alleyway. Shut up. Shut the fuck up, he snaps at himself. Henry doesn't need to hear this. Take it like a man. Close your mouth your son of a bitch. You motherfucker keep your pathetic trap shut. The nightstick batters against his hip bones. Why are you crying, Jensen? Some example you're setting. This is nothing. You're nothing. Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut...

One blunt tip curls around to the curve of his ass and taps there.

It wouldn’t be the worst thing. It really wouldn’t. At least, as long as they did it out of sight from his hidden child in the tunnel. Then they could do whatever they wanted and Jensen wouldn’t fight back. Fighting back would mean they’d take him in and he can’t do that again. Not the station. Not to the Bookers.

I’m alone, Jensen screams internally. I’m alone and there’s no reason to look inside the tunnel.

A call on their radio goes out. It’s not a voice but a series of blips. Three blips means a body was found and they need to investigate. Someone else’s dire misfortune is Jensen’s salvation. With a final blow to the head and Jensen goes still.

Before he blacks out completely, he sees them turn the corner. Good enough.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Recovery is difficult; Jensen needs help.

Chapter Notes

soooo tired and about to pass out. long yucky day. seeing your comments makes everything a lot better, though. thank you. <3

next chapter is the big reveal for a few things. :D

One day, Henry will be old enough to be able to get his old man a shot of whiskey.

For now, a cold towel pressed to Jensen’s forehead is good.

Small hands work diligently in the day and a half that Jensen is completely unable to move. Jensen lies in a puddle of rainwater and blood until midnight on the day that moving no longer causes his vision to blur or his ears to ring. Henry hasn’t eaten more than a leftover breadstick for almost two nights. They’ve both slept outside the tunnel instead of in it because Henry isn’t able to move Jensen and he refuses to sleep without him.

It rained for a few minutes earlier today and Jensen started bawling like a baby. He was glad Henry was asleep. Rain drops on his face hurt.

If he can manage to get them something to eat and maybe a pull of liquor he should be fine. He will be fine. He’s got to get something special for Henry. Good boy, taking such good care of daddy. Thank you, baby. Go get your stuff. It hurts to speak or move his jaw but the kid understands everything that he says in silence. It’s been like that between them since Henry latched onto the first bottle Jensen gave him.

While Henry is distracted, Jensen takes the time to set his nose. It hurts. That’s all he can describe it as: it hurts. It’s pain. No flowery language necessary—it just fucking hurts. However, the crunch of his nose is worth being able to breathe a little easier. He takes out a rag and wipes at his face but his hands are shaking so the job is paltry. Whatever. They just need to get out of here. He doesn’t have to look pretty to do that. Nope. He just needs to get up. Get up. Motherfucker, Jensen, get up.

He rolls onto his side and claws at the stained gravel. No. No, no, no—get up!

With a splash, he falls back into the puddle. Henry runs over with tears in his eyes. It’s then that Jensen has enough of his wits about him to realize how stressful the past day and a half has been on the kid. Daddy wouldn’t wake up. Daddy wouldn’t move. Daddy left Henry alone.

Bodies of people are found in alleyways, under benches, in the sewer, and on the street all the time. Whether they fell there or were dumped no one ever really knows. Patrol pick up bodies but that
doesn't mean Bookers don't put them there first. Several times now, over the years, Jensen has walked them into alleys looking to scuff or for lodging and has found bodies instead. Face down, usually. That helps. What's worse is when they're face up with their eyes wide open and a look of shock on their stiffened and gray faces. He has always found bodies by themselves; if people were with anyone, their companions soon left the scene.

What it must have been like to see Jensen that way. I'm sorry, baby.

Two more attempts and Jensen finally manages to crawl over to the inside of the tunnel. Henry starts to cry and he clings onto Jensen so tight it hurts. But that's okay. It's a good kind of hurt. He smooths out the kid's light brown hair and presses kisses to his face. Jensen knows he looks like hell but Henry isn't afraid of him and that's what matters.

By three they are on the street, hand in hand. Henry keeps wiping at his eyes, still upset, but he's a brave kid and he knows they need to move. The pack slung over Jensen's shoulders weighs down on him and he can't walk without stumbling every few feet. Once, he vomits into the gutter. Nothing comes up but black, thick blood. It matches the color of the street.

By four, it's clear to him that he is failing. He can't stop coughing and the pounding in his head drowns out everything around him, clogging his senses. Where are they? Baby, stay there. Fuck. What street is this? Is it Oak? Or is it Maple? Why does it have to be so god damned dark? He squints at a street sign for a minute before he's able to decipher that they are on Maple and First. Breathing heavily, he tries to think of what they have available to them. Shelters recruit children. They coax them away from their parents with promises of new clothes, fresh food, and toys. These children are sent to monasteries and government buildings until eventually, they become the priests and nuns outside on the street at Bin Day, watching diligently for people to whip. They could whip their own flesh and blood and not notice or care.

One of the people at the fire on Sixth—a garbage can fire lit once every six months—used to be a priest. There are never guarantees. Never.

Maple and First. Fuck, his head. Maple and First. Jensen holds onto Henry’s hand and tries to think. This is a familiar intersection, he knows that. If only he knew why. If the spinning sensation in his head would just clear out for a minute… Focus. Focus, god dammit. Henry squeezes his hand. Jensen wants to cry. How can he accept comfort from a five year old? What kind of man is he?

A shiny black car can be seen two blocks down. Patrol.

Fuck pain.

Jensen scoops up his kid and disappears.

Her name is Leila.

The shop is still on Maple and Third. Everything is as it was the last time they were there, except for Leila’s husband. She doesn’t talk about him and Jensen doesn’t dare to ask. It’s enough that she heard his knocks at the backdoor of the shoe store—and answered. In her nightgown and robe she takes Henry into her arms and lets Jensen in after her.

“Just a day,” he pleads, putting down his pack near the door. “I… they…”

A nod is given. She doesn’t need details. His face says enough. Henry fidgets until he is set down on a chair, where he reaches for Jensen. A chair is offered to him that he accepts and when he sits he
can’t imagine ever getting up again. Henry climbs into his lap. Leila puts on a pot of coffee and lights a candle no bigger than her hand. Too much light at this time might attract unwanted inquiries. Jensen can tell she is a shrewd woman; she has had to be surviving alone.

Her black hair is tied back with a velvet pink ribbon. She must be fifty, at least. Her face doesn’t show it but her hands do. Something strong is added to his coffee and it burns the back of his throat but he finishes the entire mug.

Henry is given a blue sippy cup of warm milk. The kid takes it from her after a glance to Jensen, who nods. Hungry, Henry finishes the entire thing. The motion of him drinking against Jensen’s chest soothes them both. When Jensen could find bottles of formula he would hold the bottle near his own nipples, hoping that Henry would latch on without a problem. He learned to coax Henry to suck on his nipple first and then to replace it with the bottle. He was always worried Henry wasn’t eating enough. The signs of him drinking, pulling from whatever bottle Jensen could recover from scuffing and a quick wash in rainwater after, always put Jensen at ease. He feels the same relief now and pats Henry’s head when the kid yawns and makes himself comfortable against Jensen’s chest.

Nearly two days of worry and an empty stomach has worn the kid out. In a few hours, Jensen will wake him up to eat. He doesn’t dare assume Leila will feed them in addition to providing them shelter, which is risky enough, so he’ll go out later and scuff for something to bring back.

In silence, Leila shows Jensen to a cot she’s placed in the inventory room. The cot is big enough for Henry only, which works just fine. Henry is set down carefully; Jensen minds his head. Stuffed animals are not something Jensen can have Henry dependent on—so he takes one of his shirts, rolls it up, and places it in Henry’s arms. One quick fan through Henry’s hair and Jensen lets him rest. The kid deserves a lot more than one night on a cot. It’s best not to think about that.

Exhaustion and pain press into Jensen. He turns towards Leila. He’s prepared to give her anything. He can do things for her maybe she’s been missing, maybe things she never had. The expression on her face is unreadable. Sure, he isn’t much to look at right now but he can move behind her. There would never be a need to see his face.

Sharp eyes and the motion of her hand fastening the tie to her robe are her reply: no. Not that.

In a series of elegant movements she steps over to the cupboards in the backroom. A dark bottle is retrieved and she pours clear liquid into a glass. Using a clean towel, she dabs some of it on and approaches Jensen. To reach his face she has to stand up on her toes. He smells what it is before the towel comes into contact with his face: vodka. He gives a slight hiss when it presses to a gash on his bottom lip. It isn’t long before she thrusts the bottle into his hand. One pull for each swipe of his face. Before long, the world is numb to him. He teeters backwards and she takes the bottle back.

A quilt that smells like cherries is given to him. The candle is snuffed and door to her room upstairs is firmly closed.

Jensen slumps onto the floor at the foot of the cot.

He can feel Venus in his coat.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Jensen is forced to look for food on his own and stumbles downtown.

Chapter Notes

BIG REVEAL CHAPTER. OMG.

i kept debating on this back and forth--hopefully it works! so excited to describe the big reveal in the next few chapters. 8D

tags have changed a little!

<33 thank you for reading!

It hadn’t all been easy, obviously.

Even with a quiet baby that rarely fussed or cried, Jensen still struggled to make do. There had been plenty of times when he’d struggled with feeding Henry. His inability to produce milk frustrated him to no end. It would have been easier had he been able to be Henry’s source of food. But his body wasn’t equipped to do such a thing no matter how many desperate attempts he made.

Food hadn’t been their only problem.

In fact, Jensen nearly lost Henry.

And in that close call, Jensen nearly lost himself.

He can hear a voice in his head now, as his fingers graze a brick wall and his vision is cloudy. Something to eat. He has to find something to eat. Scuffing has proven nothing but a scrap of stale bread. Three dumpsters have been turned over with the same bitterly disappointing result. How much longer he can go, exerting energy without providing sustenance for his body, is questionable.

Leila was feeding Henry breakfast as Jensen left. She made him a plate of pancakes, ham, toast and milk. Cautious but hungry, Henry dug into the food; he listened when Jensen murmured for him to slow down and take smaller bites. No plate was given to Jensen. A small hand held out an offering of ham for daddy. Jensen knelt in front of him and kissed his nose. “No, baby. That’s yours. Eat up, don’t be rude.” He then announced that daddy had to go get something really fast. In fact, Jensen would return so quickly, it would seem like he’d never left. For now Henry needs to stay here with Leila, who is their friend, and try to sleep as much as he can. He isn’t to touch anything and he is to do what Leila says as if it were daddy speaking to him. After a dutiful nod and a hug, Jensen left.

“These things happen,” a street doctor had said in a shelter, where Jensen had begged and pushed his way into in search of help. “There will be more babies.”
That’s the kind of help offered to people like him.

Besides checking Henry’s temperature the doctor did nothing. In his white, pressed coat he turned away from a young man holding a three month-old with a high fever and yellowed skin. It took everything Jensen had to trade a midwife for a packet of herbs and a bottle of formula. For three days Henry’s breathing did not sound without a persistent rattle. For three days Jensen held onto him and nursed him back to health, crying when the fever finally broke and Henry started eating on his own once more.

“These things happen.”

Stumbling around, Jensen leans against a brick building and closes his eyes for a moment.

Breakfast was not provided to him because she can’t have him forming attachments or creating a dependency on her already generous hand. He understands. He gets it. As long as Henry is taken care of that’s all that matters. She’s already done them terrible favors. And for what? Her husband isn’t there anymore. Is she lonely?

As a last resort, Jensen heads downtown. It’s dark out, which provides him with some cover, but his reflexes are dull. Twice, patrol cars slither their way up the street and he doesn’t see them until their flashlights get too close too fast. He sticks to the back route and ignores everyone and everything on the way. There’s a restaurant in the center of downtown that hasn’t switched over their locks yet. But because it’s in the center—where there are people out even at night—not much scuffing is ever attempted. It’s too risky for the food, which is about as good as any other place, and there are safer options further away from all the activity. But Jensen doesn’t have time to be thorough anywhere else.

He makes it to the alleyway of the restaurant without too much of a problem. A few people glance at him and mutter under their breaths but they don’t seem to be the type to make a fuss and call over a patrol car. Elegant people walk arm in arm down the clean, well-lit sidewalks of downtown. Heels and polished shoes tap rhythmically as people go to their late-night dinner and theater reservations. Jensen knows all about their plans. He’s watched them from rooftops like ants in a colony.

No one else is in the alley and the dumpster has an open lock. Jensen coughs and pounds on his chest with his fist a few times. He washed his face and cleaned himself up as well as he could at Leila’s before Henry woke up. Bruising in his ribs will take a while to heal. Right now he just needs something to eat.

The pavement here is slick, like the alley’s been washed.

Washed of what, Jensen wants to know, but the cramps in his abdomen don’t allow him to investigate. It won’t do a lick of good if he passes out here. He walks up to the dumpster and eyes it the way he’s taught Henry: check for the quality of lock, check for smells, check for rats, and never put your back to the alleyway entrance. This lock is old but well-maintained. Jensen takes a spoon off his belt and breaks the handle of it in half lengthways. He manages despite his shaking hands. Using the handle and listening carefully—attentive to the entrance that leads to the street and the door near the dumpster to the restaurant kitchen—he picks the lock. It takes a few minutes longer than he’d like but when it clicks he breathes a sigh of relief. Good. Without a noise, he lifts the top and props it up properly. He reaches in and drags out the first bag. Again, he looks for signs: is the bag ripped, does it look like it’s been tampered with, and are there insects or rats attached to its outsides?

This is a fresh bag. A spoon helps him cut it open and he finds that the restaurant hasn’t changed. Diner food. He crouches down and starts gorging himself. Half an eaten BLT. Two thirds of a hot dog with ketchup. Digging deeper, past paper products and crumpled up napkins, he finds two
pieces of donut. He breaks his own rule and eats as fast as possible, stuffing his mouth, cramming food in as fast and greedily as possible. A miracle happens and he finds a Styrofoam cup of coffee.

He’s so busy eating, he doesn’t immediately notice the restaurant door opening.

Orange light spills into the alley and Jensen can’t move fast enough. The restaurant employee sees him with his hands deep in the bag because he saw a mostly whole burger that would be good to keep for later.

“Oh,” is blurted out by the male employee. Kitchen staff. There’s another bag in his hand.

There are numerous ways in which this could go. More than likely, the guy is going to scream for help and run inside and call patrol. Or his coworkers will come out and Jensen can’t scramble away from an entire staff unharmed. Or this guy will take care of Jensen himself; Jensen is still tender.

The door is shut quickly and the employee holds the bag in front of him, like a shield.

It’s a heavy bag.

Jensen should bolt but he refuses to leave his finds until something actually happens. For now, the employee is just standing there, dumb to what’s going on. Since there has been no scream or call for help, he continues digging around for the burger. Every few seconds his eyes flit back up to the employee, who hasn’t moved or made a sound. Light from the street proves that the employee is young-ish, has dark hair, and a full mouth. He’s trim and is wearing an apron so he’s either a cook or a bus boy. Does he want something in exchange for the bag he’s holding or Jensen’s presence here? Sometimes staff can be bought, though Jensen rarely has anything they want, even himself. He can give decent blow jobs but the younger guys want pretty girls and no amount of closing their eyes and pretending will give them that with Jensen.

Found it. The burger is tucked away in his coat. Two seconds later a handful of fries are added. One rapid rummage through the bag and the rest is inedible, mangled up, or just a bunch of paper. Gone too soon. And Jensen’s stomach complains about the way he ate.

“Here,” the employee breathes and holds out the bag. “Take this one.”

“Why?” Jensen snaps. “Why are you watching?” Does this guy get off on this?

Instead of handing over the bag, it’s tossed, though not unkindly. They both look at each other. The guy looks away first, nervous and fidgeting. His eyes and face are too honest. “Maybe I just wanna be nice.”

Ain’t no such thing as just wanting to be nice but Jensen doesn’t mention it. He may not be entirely trusting of this guy but he won’t be rude or mean either. Another spoon opens this bag and Jensen can feel how warn the food still is. Much of what he finds is carefully wrapped in some of the cleaner napkins he finds throughout this bag and from the other. There’s no telling what he’ll do after Leila’s place but at least he’ll have food for Henry tomorrow.

“Do you want some water?”

At this, Jensen flinches. What the hell?

“I’ll be right back. I’ll get you some water.”

Once more the door opens and shuts. The kitchen is busy for being so late. Jensen gets through the rest of this bag and reties both up before hauling them back into the dumpster. He may have eaten
like a pig but he won’t leave a mess like one. Just as he’s shutting the lid, the door opens and the guy steps out, his eyes searching for Jensen. He’s a little clumsy, this one, and bumps himself with the door as he’s shutting it. In his hands are a bottle of water and two take out containers.

“I’m on break,” he says quietly. “But I brought extra. Jimmy’s working the grill and… uh… here.” One of the white containers is placed on the ground with a bottle of water next to it. The guy takes a seat near the door and stretches out. He opens his container and Jensen observes him. “It’s just burgers and mashed potatoes. Sorry, no fries. They were another two minutes in the fryer and I didn’t wanna wait. But the potatoes are not so bad. They’re from a box but well, you won’t tell, right?”

This guy can talk. He rambles on about how he has a fifteen minute break but they owe him ten extra minutes from yesterday so he has some time to spare. Jensen takes a bite out of the fresh burger and stops himself from moaning. It’s not just fresh—it’s good. Anything this guy wants from Jensen is fine. He has a mostly whole, new, untouched burger to give to Henry later on plus food that is top quality in terms of scuffing.

Even from a box, the potatoes are fluffy and buttery. He takes two quick bites of them, using one of his unbroken spoons, and downs two sips of water. The bottle is pocketed and Jensen sits for a moment, full enough for the first time in a long while, from food that hasn’t been sitting there forever.

Relaxed, the guy smiles. “Do you want some soup? They’re gonna toss it because Tom put onions and…”

Everything changes in a matter of seconds. The door opens and a shadow appears in the light produced from it. “Misha!” a loud, authoritative voice snaps. “Where’d you put…” Sharp eyes trail over to Jensen. Run, you ass, echoes in Jensen’s head but he can’t move. Now he’s the dumb one, crouched there like they’re just having a picnic. “What… boy, get back inside! Go! Before I stick you with dishes from here to eternity!” The voice steps aside and the guy scrambles back inside with only a small glance to Jensen. Before the door shuts, Jensen hears, “What have I told you about feeding them? They aren’t pets, you idiot, now he’s gonna bring back more and we’ll have an infestation. Jesus Christ, why do they stick me with the ones wet behind the ears? Jimmy!”

Well. Jensen stands up and huffs. He won’t come back here. He’s got pride, dammit. Tonight was an exception—a measure of desperation. Besides, he doesn’t need to rely on the naïve handouts of a bored wanna be philanthropist. Yeah, Jensen knows big words. He knows what infestation means, too. If he were less grateful of what he received tonight he’d throw one of the rotten tomatoes from the salad scraps at the door.

This entire thing has been strange but not as strange as a few things Jensen has seen in his time. He sighs and looks around to make sure nothing is out of place. Having digested a bit has made his mind a little clearer. Scuffing this far out of his usual territories is risky but since he hasn’t had a problem he decides not to worry about it more. He’s taken what he’s needed and a little more so he’s pleased. This also gives him an opportunity to poke around downtown and see if there’s news. Maybe he can try asking again. There may be whispers or threads of something somewhere. There just has to be.

He lingers in different alleyways until it’s late enough for the street lights to be turned off. Downtown is always busy but there are lulls in activity and if he’s lucky, more of his people will be out. Gradually, he makes his way out from tiny, winding side streets and towards the arterial main road. They slept all day at Leila’s and Henry’s breakfast, in the apartments that line downtown, would be dinner. Jensen hopes Henry has fallen asleep again. It’s likely that he has with so much stress.

Inside his coat the food rattles. This is a happy weight. Jensen searches with quick eyes and renewed
senses for a cluster of people. Is it time for a fire? It has been some time since his last communication with a fire. They are vulnerable in numbers but it is the best way to gauge for Booker sightings and patrol increases on particular blocks. There isn’t a network but if someone has seen something of note a fire is one of precious few options to find out about it. He can’t be sure to catch one tonight since they happen once every six months but he weighs his situation. Having Henry secure in one place gives him the freedom to move around with only the risk of endangering himself. Therefore, he can afford to run a few errands that might put his neck out there a little. He cannot stay out all night and trespass on Leila’s generosity for too long, or have her think that Jensen leaves Henry in the care of others often. One rapid round seeking snippets will satisfy his curiosity. That’s it.

Although Jensen rarely spends time downtown it didn’t take him very long to learn a map of it. He has faster and reliable exits in a few parts and others that are not so speedy but better at hiding for long term usage. This has always been his strength—navigation. If only he could have shared his talent when it really mattered... If there had been another exit out of that alley. Venus remains nestled in a pocket near his chest.

He is down to two planets and he doesn’t want to think about their meanings. A fence is climbed and he jumps down, landing only a little crooked and breathing harder than usual. Damn ribs.

For half an hour he searches and nearly gives up. He misses his kid.

At the dead end of three converging side streets, he finds a fire. All turn to him and recognize the shape of his clothes. They all make room once he steps into the light; everyone sees the state of his face and they understand how carefully he breathes. Weathered, weary faces stare into tonight’s fire. Six men and three women and someone Jensen can’t place for either. A flask is being passed around and it is offered to Jensen. He takes a pull—half out of need for the dull ache in his body and half out of respect for the kindness—and passes it along. Quietly, he discloses his purpose: has anyone seen this man? Please, any information on him at all, no matter how cold the lead. As an incentive, Jensen pulls out a hunk of bread and passes it through the circle.

The bread is eaten first, its quality tested. No one will give a shit about his question if the bread’s moldy. It isn’t. Jensen doesn’t mind paying for something important. He isn’t stingy when it truly matters.

Someone seems to know something but they are hesitant to share. One of the older men nudges one of the women and a murmur is heard. “Tell him.”

This woman could be Leila’s age but no one would know it. Time has been difficult to her. Her own experiences with patrol are still fresh on her and etch deep into the marks and wrinkles of her face. She tightens a scrappy shawl around herself and does not meet his eyes as she speaks.

“First and Park.”

Jensen nods and grunts to signify that he’s heard the message. Before he leaves the circle, the organizer pulls him back by his elbow. “Don’t,” he states simply but with the tone of a father. “Let it be and go back to where you were. You will never unsee it.” Their eyes meet for a solid ten seconds. The grip on Jensen’s elbow is loosened. “Don’t go.”

Whatever the old man is trying to spare him from, Jensen can handle.

He leaves the fire without a glance back.
First and Park are the dead center of downtown. It’s where the town square is and in the summer, a farmer’s market is held. Everyone knows better than to steal from that farmer’s market; patrol watches it carefully and offenses are not easily forgiven. Jensen found a coin in the sewer two summers ago and, finding that it could not buy what they needed, spent it on cotton candy for Henry. Little hands and mouth were sticky sweet for hours after, until Jensen kissed and licked it all off, pretending to be a dinosaur, tickling Henry the entire time. The coin bought more than it meant to.

He hasn’t been to First and Park since that summer. The man with the cotton candy pushcart had been nice enough to accept Jensen’s coin and not cheat him out of a fair amount of fluff. Jensen’s portion was just as big as the others purchased with the same coin. He walked away content that time.

Now, he approaches with a difficult, scratching pain in his belly. Yes, he’s full but so much food has made him uncomfortable. He hopes Henry learns from him and follows the rules a little better when he’s older. The pain gives way to nausea brought on by anxiety.

New structures have been erected in the town square. They are cylindrical and made of steel. Four of them are lined up with only a few feet in between each other. Of course, they are kept in plain sight, to deter vandalism. This is an area strictly monitored. Somewhere there are alarms, Jensen can sense it. Each structure is at least two and a half dumpsters high but only half a dumpster wide. All are sealed and covered up with plates that shield the outside like silver dragon scales. A low hum can be heard. Are they on? Upon closer inspection, each structure has a clock attached to the base of it, with numbers in red. Each one is set to a different amount of time.

Looking around, Jensen sees a few other people, some are like him but most are not.

One couple seems to be waiting; they are crying and holding a jacket in between them. Another group of three are also hovering nearby, whispering among themselves, asking each other if it feels cold or not. “What’s it feel like?” “How should I know?” “Well, I thought…” “No. They only… her…” “At least it’ll never happen again.” “Not to her.”

Jensen can only catch some of their back and forth conversation. He fears patrols being called if something he does is taken the wrong way. Moving through and keeping his distance, he thinks he’s been led astray. The woman didn’t know what she was talking about and the man, well, hunger does odd things to people. Information from the fire was too good to be true. He should turn back and ignore what these structures are because they cannot be of any concern to him. Perhaps they are some kind of amusement for the people who live near here and people like Jensen are milling about in hopes of catching a small glimpse. Either way, tonight has been good to him and it’s best not to test his luck.

His feet turn. A noise from one of the structures is made. It’s louder than a hum but discreet so as not to cause any disturbance. It sounds like sliding doors but much slower. Scale by scale is peeled back. Jensen sees the top of one structure and quickly looks down to the clock. It says two minutes. It is counting down. Blood tinted liquid is revealed to be inside. Scales continue shifting down. The liquid seems thicker than water. There are no bubbles floating at the top and under the scales the structure appears to be constructed out of durable, thick glass. Dark strands of something like seaweed appear when the scales fold down further. Jensen hears someone gasp and someone else sob.

The clock reads one minute when the scales crawl backwards, towards the base, the middle of the structure bare.
That is not seaweed.
That is hair.
That is not liquid.
That is blood.
Mars and Venus shift.

There are thirty seconds left on the clock.
Jared will be released.
His eyes and mouth are open.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The container is on display in the middle of downtown. It opens. Jensen is there to witness it.

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU for your patience!!! <333

quick upload before work (i’m late!) so not many notes. if you have questions let me know!

Jared falls into Jensen’s arms with a wet, bloody squelch.

His eyes roll back and his mouth hangs open as his body adjusts to breathing oxygen. Jensen panics. The hold he has on Jared does not last long. They topple over and Jensen is struggling to keep his coat wrapped over Jared, desperately attempting to allow him some dignity in that of all things.

Gasping and looking around, Jensen can’t fixate his eyes. He hears the terrible sound of another container opening and the group that had been behind him is still sobbing.

What is this? How is this happening in the middle of downtown? It’ll be dawn in an hour.

“Help,” Jensen hears a voice shout and he isn’t sure if it’s his or Jared’s. “Please, help us…”

It can’t be Jared. He’s not… he isn’t… awake.

Jensen scoops out mucus and blood from Jared’s mouth the same way he had done for the newborn in the alleyway five years ago. Coughing and sputtering out of bodily instinct, it’s clear that Jared has no idea where he is or what is happening. What if Jensen hadn’t been here? Would Jared have fallen onto the ground? Would he have choked to death? Jared isn’t cold. He is warm and his skin is soft, without blemishes or bruises or scars. His hair is plastered to his face but it’s been recently trimmed. This wasn’t random. Jared’s body has been cared for. But what now? What is going on? How is Jensen going to get Jared out of downtown and all the way back to Leila’s without either of them being seen? How is Jensen going to move Jared at all?

A new set of voices break through Jensen’s panic.

“Hold his head up. Jemma, give the boy your coat.”

“But what about Marshall…”

“Marshall’s clock got reset. Give the boy your coat, now.”

“…dad.”
“Charles, we should go.”

The wife and daughter attempt to pull back their elderly father and husband. He has a tenuous look in his eyes. It’s an explosive mix of disappointment, grief, and anger, none of which are recent or new. Many years have been spent in agony; what little hope that lingers inside is deteriorating. With an abrupt wave of his hand, he disregards his companions. He locks eyes with Jensen, kneeling down. “Get off the streets,” he snaps at Jensen. A black coat is passed and laid over Jared. The old man’s voice is as rough as the stubble on his face. “Get him in bed. Keep a bucket near. He’ll purge.” Fast hands work at tying the sleeves of the coat around Jared’s waist. “Don’t let the fever go on for more than twenty-four hours. Do you understand? Listen for liquid in his lungs.”

From behind them, his wife panics, looking out at the street. “Charles!”

“Shut up!” He is rapidly losing his grip, slipping into something darker right in front of Jensen. A canvas bag is hauled off of the man’s body and shoved into Jensen’s clumsy, shaking hands. “It’s once every five years. They can only do it once every five. Get up. Jemma, help the boy.”

His daughter is reluctant. What does it mean for a clock to be reset? Jensen doesn’t have a chance to turn and find out. He feels a hand on Jared and he immediately bristles, growling a warning. The daughter yelps and complains, but the older man moves her out of the way. Already, his movements and mannerisms have changed. Moving towards an idling, sleek black car, Jensen and the older man manage to carry Jared along. This part was planned. The body they are carrying is all wrong to the family, but they had thought this through. A tarp is draped over the backseat. The wife opens the back door and the old man rumbles instructions to ease Jared in carefully, minding his head. Jensen gets into the car first so he can receive Jared. Entering the car means a ride will be given. He looks for any sign from the old man that might mean danger. But really? What’s more dangerous? Their choices are limited.

Forcing his voice to work, Jensen blurts out the address to Leila’s. The wife slips into the driver’s seat, taking care not to slam the door. It’s the old man who gets into the back with Jensen and Jared, while his daughter scrambles into the front. She’s young. Maybe twenty. By the smoothness of her skin Jensen can tell—in the two seconds he manages to get a good look of her face—that she has never known a life on the streets. These are regular people. Somewhere, they have a home. They’re fortunate enough to not only have a car but to know how to drive and maintain it. In their household, in their world, spoons are dainty things used for scooping sugar into tea.

Her hair is tied back with a violet ribbon.

The car pulls forward and accelerates with a jolt. Jensen closes his eyes for a moment and presses his fingers into the meat of Jared’s shoulders. He is sitting with Jared’s upper body cradled against his chest. Of all the things that pass through Jensen’s mind, one thought sticks out.

*I’ve held your child this way, a thousand times before.*

Practiced hands descend onto Jared. Jensen watches every movement the old man makes. The outlines and shadows of buildings fan themselves over the work in the backseat. Fingers that are not Jensen’s check for a heartbeat, then for a fever, and lastly, for any broken ribs. It’s a checkup more thorough than any Jensen has had in his entire life. There isn’t anything overly complicated about what the old man does; he isn’t a doctor. He just knows what to look for.

Turning a sharp corner, the car’s tires screech. Lights from behind them caused the sudden turn. Jared’s mouth opens but a sound doesn’t come out. Jensen holds onto him tighter.

“Watch your speed, Mary!” the old man snaps, wiping his face with a handkerchief.
“I saw patrol!”

“You will if you keep speeding!”

“Don’t yell at me, Charles!”

“Keep your wits about you then!”

From the inside of a car, Jensen can’t see his usual landmarks. The streets and sidewalks and alleyways they pass are a dizzying, overwhelming blur. Although the speed decreases, this is still ten times faster than anything Jensen can manage on foot. There are no pauses in a car, either. No need to pause for an alleyway filled with broken glass. It’s all so simple—this steering, this press of a pedal, this shift of gears.

The time spent inside the car simultaneously feels like a second and an hour have passed. Before Jensen can fully understand what’s happening, the car stops and he lurches forward, slamming into the back of the front seat. The old man snaps at his wife and their daughter begins to cry. A hand pulls Jensen out of the foot well. With a click, the old man’s door opens up to the sidewalk that leads up to Leila’s shop. The headlights are cut; the engine rumbles as it waits in park. “Mind his head!” the old man snaps and crawls out of the car backwards, taking the lower half of Jared’s body. “On three, lift up. One, two, three.”

Wisps of dawn press against the last stretch of night.

Jensen’s coat is heavy with the food he found tonight. He hears the Styrofoam container the employee gave him rattle as he heaves Jared out of the car with the old man’s help. Jared is not a small person. He’s grown. This is no time for sentiment, Jensen snaps at himself internally. He follows the old man’s short, hurried instructions and together, they drag Jared towards the back of the shop. The sidewalk sees the last drips of blood from the surface of Jared’s body. Jared’s eyes are open but there is no response. If the older man hadn’t checked him over, Jensen would be panicking.

“This is how they always are,” the old man states, as if it’s law. “They’ll be like this for a few days. Rest is important, do you understand? You have an hour before the purge. Listen to his lungs. Do you get it, boy? Are you listening?”

Two blocks down, a car with flashlights on the sidewalk turns onto the street. Jensen stumbles. Jemma’s coat is slipping off.

“Hurry!” the old man snips, his breath heaving. There isn’t time to help Jensen up the stairs. Even in his rush, the old man doesn’t let go of Jared briskly. From the car, his wife and daughter are sobbing for him to get in. He turns towards them and takes two steps in their direction. Jensen can feel himself trembling. The flashlights are taking their time, scanning every portion of the sidewalk, sweeping thoroughly. He knows that without having to see it.

Against his better judgment, ignoring the panicked cries of his family, the old man grunts and faces Jensen. “Get inside!” he hisses, motioning Jensen away. The features on his face are hard now, like drying cement. “It only happens every five years.”

“What happens?” Jensen gasps, just as the old man is halfway to the car. The back door is opened for him. Flashlights near.

The tires don’t screech as they pull out, back onto the street. That would be too obvious.

From his place by the corner of the shop, peering out to the street, Jensen barely catches the old man’s answer. With the smell of gasoline and rubber in the air, the car departs. No one looks back.
Jensen doesn’t loosen his hold on Jared.

He heard it.

He did.

He’s sure of it—terribly, sure that he did.

“The harvest.”

That’s what he heard.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Once again, Leila is asked to open the door. Jensen learns more about what has been done to Jared.

Chapter Notes

warnings for graphic depictions of vomit, blood, fighting.

quick update because once again, i’m late for work! difficult chapter. things will be explained later. thank you for reading and hanging in there.

Leila answers the door alone. Smart.

She refuses to allow Jensen in until he tells her who the man is with him. Also smart.

Through her own methods, she pieces things together. She opens the door and firmly shuts it after them, but cuts them off to go to Henry. He’s in the backroom, on the cot, playing with a few empty shoe boxes and pretending they are space ships. Jensen can hear him ask if his daddy is back. Before Leila shuts the door—staying in the room with him—Jensen catches her answer that yes, daddy is back but needs to do something else in the building first.

Jensen’s back twinges as he hauls Jared inside. There would have been no way—no way at all that he could have dragged them both here unseen, unharmed, and in time for the purge. Going upstairs is an arduous, sweat inducing battle. Jared is dead weight; Jensen immediately scolds himself for thinking that.

It bothers Leila to allow them into her personal quarters, but it’s the only bathroom in the building. In comparison to the actual store, the backroom and apartment above it are cramped. She doesn’t keep fancy things; she isn’t that kind of woman. Instead, she keeps spare candles—thick ones—and plastic jugs of water tucked away where she can find space. He’ll clean everything, top to bottom, after they’re done.

A rubber duck on the edge of the tub tells Jensen that Leila gave Henry a bath.

Regret taunts Jensen in the strangest form. He would have loved to have been there—or to have done it himself. Yeah. They could have had the tub filled with warm, clean water. No ridiculous pans of rainwater. No hurried washes with a rag. No careful measure of soap that doesn’t even form bubbles to play with. He could have washed Henry’s hair and they could have played soap monsters and the duck could have been the hero that saved the day. Jensen could have had squeals of joy, little hands clapping and splashing water, and the opportunity to murmur, “Close your eyes, baby.”

He is given the opportunity to use the tub, but in a completely different way. Seconds after he props Jared against it, the both of them on their knees, the purge begins.
Jared’s mouth stretches open and the muscles in his throat work. His eyes are also open, but they aren’t focused on anything, nor are they looking around. All Jensen can liken it to is the time he had just put Henry down for sleep and a stranger walked into their alley. Jensen got up and snapped at them that this was their spot—get out. But they didn’t respond. Their eyes were open but they made a snoring sound that tipped Jensen off: sleepwalking. How fucking dangerous. He turned the person around so they would march out of the alley. What was worse? Waking them up and inviting danger or sending them out onto the street? Well, Jensen did what he had to.

This is like sleepwalking. Except, Jared can’t hold himself up. He doesn’t move. It’s messy. What comes out of Jared looks like blood at first, but when Jensen touches it, it feels more like liquid plastic. There isn’t anything warm or cold about it, either. It’s room temperature and slides right off of his skin, down the drain. Jensen struggles to keep them both up, and he massages Jared’s throat, trying to make sure nothing is left. What is causing this to happen, if Jared has no control over his body?

Not a stain is left on the white tub when Jared finally stops retching. Blood would have left a tint at the very least, requiring bleach, but whatever it is it gives the tub a shine. Jensen shoves these details aside for the moment; he’s tired and he’s seeing things, that has to be it. He’s still recovering from his run in with patrol—they probably hit him in the head too hard this time.

Jensen twists them both so that they are sitting on the floor, their backs against the tub. He has Jared in his arms longer than he should. It embarrasses him. They’ve never touched this much. He delivered Jared’s baby—my baby; Jensen shudders—and touched him in tender places because of that. But this? What could be interpreted as an embrace? After everything that has happened in just a few short hours, Jensen feels like throwing up. No. He just wants to clean up and sleep. No. He just wants to clean up and see his kid and pretend like they can all pick up where they left off five years ago.

As Jensen separates himself from Jared, Jared’s eyes widen and his mouth moves instead of hanging open. It’s in these thirty seconds, as Jared’s hands and shoulders begin to move, that Jensen notices something. More than the staggered, fragmented movements, Jensen’s concern deepens. Something is not right. Jared starts coughing and hacking without too much issue; normal reactions for someone who has just spent half an hour hanging over a bath tub and emptying into it. The noises are a little muffled and distorted—like he’s constantly gurgling water—but they are audible.

What remain inaudible are the words Jared is trying to speak.

Jensen sits as still as possible, watching the other closely. Jared hasn’t noticed him yet.

They did something to his voice.

For a second, Jensen pulls up a memory. He can hear Jared screaming in the alley, gripping onto Jensen’s shoulders, grunting low as Jensen murmured for him to push.

Is that the harvest?

It probably isn’t that simple.

Hands to his temple, Jared curls himself up. For a minute, all he does is sit there, his shoulders trembling. Five years. After all that time, Jared has returned without a scar or a scratch. He has no sores, no open wounds, and no broken nose or bruised up ribs. Jensen feels ridiculously self-conscious about himself in this silence. Being naked and clean—Jemma’s coat fell off on the stairs—
looks nicer than the state Jensen is in. He shook off his coat at the bottom of the stairs, hoping that some of the food inside it was still salveagable. This is too much on Leila’s generosity. As soon as Jared can get it together, they need to leave, even if it’s daylight. A fever can be handled on the street. Rest can be had in the tunnel, if it’s safe.

Without the use of his vocal cords, Jared will need more care and attention on the street. They’ll need some way to signal each other that isn’t too loud or complicated. Jensen wonders if Jared knows how to snap. This is stupid. There are people in tubes in the middle of downtown; there is something going on called the harvest; Jared is back.

Jensen is already assuming that Jared will stay with them.

A noise is made and it’s from Jensen. He regrets it at once.

Nothing has been done to Jared’s hearing. He tenses up and slowly lifts his head. His eyes focus on Jensen’s duct-taped sneakers, and hurriedly make their way up until they are eye to eye. Jensen tries to keep his expression as neutral as possible, to express that he means no harm, to signal that he’s… he’s waited for this for five long years. In just one look, can Jared tell that Jensen has asked around? He hasn’t given up.

In the first ten seconds, Jared doesn’t recognize him.

After that brief moment, knowledge comes back. Jared gasps. Jensen holds his hands up, moving forward an inch, about to ask Jared not to panic.

Jared closes the distance between them and delivers a right hook against Jensen’s chin.

Not expecting the movement or the strength behind it, Jensen crumples with a shout. He holds his hands up for a different reason as Jared grabs him by one of his layers of shirts. Another blow, this time to Jensen’s left eye. In the space between the tub and the toilet, Jensen is pinned down and beaten.

Exhausted and overwhelmed, he takes it.

Even with one eye, Jensen can read Jared’s lips.

“Don’t go.”

Jensen didn’t hear the knock on the front door of the shop that pulled Leila away from the backroom.

But he does hear the scream from the bathroom door.

Henry disobeyed Leila. He got out of the backroom and found daddy’s coat at the bottom of the stairs. He’s a smart kid. Daddy went up. So he went up. Because he probably had a very good day and he just had to show daddy the spaceship he made and tell him about the food he ate.

Jared lets go of Jensen’s shirt and allows him to drop onto the floor. He turns to the small figure, screaming and crying in the doorway.

The movements Jared makes after are too fast, too aggressive. There is no way he doesn’t recognize who Henry is. They look too much alike. He knows. But he isn’t moving towards Henry for an embrace or to comfort him. He means to scoop Henry up and bolt.
Jensen grabs Jared’s left leg and pulls him down. When Jared kicks, Jensen bites down, growling like a mad man. No. No. Maybe Jensen deserved what he just got. Fine. He shouldn’t have left them alone five years ago. He should have stayed when Jared asked him to. He should have waited just a few more hours and gone out to scuff then and not before. But no one takes Henry away from him. Not even Jared.

Using a reserve of strength Jensen is surprised to find, he wrestles Jared down. He shouts at Henry to run. Go. It hurts him when Henry doesn’t listen. They talked about this. Henry knows he has to listen to what daddy says. Jensen tries again but Jared’s hands clamp down around his neck. Jensen seizes. He thrashes against Jared, trying to smack or scratch him—anything to get the pressure off his throat.

How is this…

How...

Something black appears in front of Jensen, aimed at Jared’s face.

It’s the barrel of shotgun.

Holding it, is Leila.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Leila takes control of the situation; Jensen and Henry spend time alone afterwards.

Chapter Notes

okay, for this chapter, i hope that the bath scene doesn't come off as creepy. it is supposed to have a desperate tone to it--everything jensen cares about or for in the world is his kid--so i hope i pulled it off. it's not just henry who needs to know he's safe.

jared is both a welcomed addition and a potential threat to what jensen has built in the past five years. underneath all of this is his fear that henry will choose to be with jared because that's his biological parent. but he doesn't admit that out loud or to himself. not yet.

hope you enjoy this chapter. we'll pick up with more chaos and answers in the next chapter, when jared wakes up. don't worry--answers are coming! <3

There is no official name for people like them.

In his time, Jensen has heard himself and others referred to as a variety of things. They are like items on a restaurant menu, of which he’s only tasted from the dumpster: wanderers, strays, unwanteds, shifters, the lost… Homeless doesn’t quite cut it. It’s not just that they have no homes or nice clothes or money to purchase those things. It’s something more; it runs so much deeper.

Exactly how they become other, Jensen doesn’t know. It's never been his business to know. Does it help a goldfish to know they’re in a bowl? He’s been too busy surviving—working towards living—to spend time thinking about the state of the world. All he knows is that people like them must not be seen in groups, must not be exposed on the streets, and above all: they must avoid patrol and Bookers. That is his reality; fancy philosophizing doesn’t belong in day-to-day life, taking care of a baby when he could sometimes barely take care of himself.

Maybe, the concept started small. Maybe, it sprung up in one city to start with and one by one, other cities took action. Maybe, they used to be a small segment of a city’s population, easily subdued and hidden away with the threat of light violence, perhaps a night or two in jail. Maybe, when they grew in number, another level of violence was added, and then another, until beatings in daylight became minor annoyances. Sure, why not? That’s all entirely plausible. If they’re keeping people in tubes in the middle of downtown, anything’s possible, right?

If they’re cutting vocal chords because their subjects refuse to stay quiet, then all those theories are technically possible, right?

These things happen.
“Get up.”

Only patrol and Bookers are allowed to have guns.

Did the old man stash this away? Or was this her addition after he left? Leila holds the gun steady, without a tremble, and taps the barrel to Jared’s throat when he doesn’t follow command. She repeats herself for the last time and aims lower. Jared glares. He shoves Jensen off of him and rises up, leaning to the left from the bite mark Jensen has left on his leg.

“Downstairs,” is ordered, the barrel thrust into the center of Jared’s chest. “Now.”

Jensen isn’t stupid enough to ask her not to shoot. She won’t; he knows this. Firing a shot with that thing would be heard and questions would be asked. But Jared doesn’t know that. He doesn’t know anything about them. Henry slips past as Leila and Jared are exiting the bathroom. Immediately, he buries himself in the crook of Jensen’s neck. He cries so hard he starts to choke—his face is red from the force of his panic. As best he can, Jensen tries to calm him down. No words help. Jensen kisses his forehead and embraces him tightly.

How different would this situation be if it had all been reversed? Maybe, if Jensen had given Jared a break from breastfeeding and had him go out to the line for food, and if he had stayed behind with the baby… would Jensen have ended up in a container all the same? What name would Jared have chosen?

Footsteps are heard coming up the stairs. Jensen braces himself. With Henry attached to him, he stands up, holding onto the tub for leverage. He’s slow, very slow. Now he has injuries from patrol and Jared to heal from. If he could just… rest. If they could all just stop and give everyone a chance to catch up, wouldn’t that be ideal? He gasps in pain as he gets to his feet. All he wanted to do was stay a night so he could heal. Bodily instinct tells him that it is day time. The steps up the stairs are not heavy.

Silence is thick between them for a moment as Jensen looks to Leila in the doorway. Henry glances back to see who it is and hides himself right after confirmation that it is not the bad man who hurt daddy. Jensen straightens himself as much as he can, never mind the pain. If she means to make them leave he can’t blame her. No ill feelings; she has done for them what most people wouldn’t dream of doing.

“Clean yourself up,” Leila murmurs. “I have him locked in the backroom.”

She moves forward and takes out a bottle of vodka from underneath the sink. It is placed on the counter, along with a dark blue towel. She doesn’t meet his eyes when she leaves and closes the bathroom door. Has she really been alone for all this time? Why not marry again? Why not seek the company of another?

“Daddy needs a bath,” Jensen announces to the child in his arms. Moving his mouth and making his voice work causes pain; his voice is shot. “Sit and wait?”

Adamantly, Henry shakes his head no. He doesn’t let go of Jensen for a second, even while Jensen is undressing. Everything takes twice as long and it frustrates Jensen to no end. How is he going to scuff when he can’t even get his jeans off? Henry sits on the toilet seat, holding onto Jensen’s left hand as Jensen sits on the edge of the tub. It’s funny how none of the blood smeared on the floor belongs to Jared, even though he was the one purging. Jared isn’t even the one with a smattering of purple bruises all across his body. Life on the street is dirty. There is no way to avoid it. Regular
washings don’t protect anyone from a constant layer of grime—it’s part of who they are. Jared’s hands, Jensen noticed, are too clean for the street. Five years ago, their hands looked much the same. As they are now, it’s clear that Jared has not been on the street recently. So where has he been? He can’t have spent five years in that container…right?

By some miracle, Jensen gets the tub going. While it fills up, he undresses Henry. Leila has given him new clothes. The sight of them makes Jensen pause. He takes great care in setting the shirt and jeans aside, folding them neatly, tucking the socks underneath the shirt so they don’t get lost.

The water is tested and Jensen slips in first. He bites down on his right hand as his injuries meet the water. Sharp breaths are taken. Do not scream. Do not frighten Henry any more than what he’s been through already. Jensen groans. Shut up. Oh, fuck. “Wait,” he gasps when he sees Henry try to climb in with him. “Baby, wait. Let me…it’s dirty…let me…wait.” Not a full minute in the tub and the water looks rancid. Two days of blood, sweat, and the street slough off of him. Scabs and sores on his body open up from the heat and Jensen clings to the edge of his restraint. He wants to cry. He wants to slam his fist into the tile wall. He wants to finish here, grab his kid, and leave. He wants everything to go back to what it was, what he understood, because that seems so much simpler than what is going on.

What kind of man is he?

He’d rather turn back time like a coward than face the uneasy future? Would he turn back time to that moment five years ago when he knocked over garbage cans to distract some patrol?

By the time he drains the tub, the water is a murky, odorous black. It smells like dead skin and festering wounds because that is exactly what Jensen has on his body. He feels ashamed of himself like this, especially in front of Henry. This is the most injured Henry has seen him. Despite the horror of Jensen’s body, small hands reach for him. “Daddy,” Henry cries, “please?”

Rewards have always been given for Henry saying please and thank you. Sometimes it would be an extra story, other times Jensen would manage a treat, maybe an orange if he could find one or a paper airplane. The best thing he has right now is physical affection. Jensen refills the tub. He notices that it is still clean, even after the black water. That was not blood that Jared had been retching. It’s still cleaning whatever surface it touched, acting like a sheet of plastic that dirt and debris slides off of.

“Yeah, kiddo, c’mere.” Jensen holds his arms out and Henry climbs in without a problem. When the water reaches a comfortable level, Jensen shuts off the faucet. Henry is pressed against him so they are chest to chest. After a minute, Henry settles with his left hand on Jensen’s face, resting his head on Jensen’s shoulder. None of that is taken for granted. Every time Henry reaches for Jensen or searches for him in a room or an alley, Jensen holds onto those moments. He does his best to repay this now, cradling his boy, kissing his cheeks, and pressing them so close, water can’t get between them. Henry coos. He’s still too afraid to ask about the bad man. It’s good enough for him that daddy is here, holding him, calling him a good boy, kissing the bumps and owies on his hands.

As much time as possible is given to staying close and being together in warmth and relative safety. Soon enough, Jensen has to go downstairs and see what is going on. He needs to speak to Jared. They must talk without arguing. They have to leave.

Gently, Jensen moves them in the tub. He sits Henry on the edge again, once Henry is more stable, and begins to wash himself properly. Henry swings his legs, he squeals when Jensen moves his hand in the water like a shark. “Go on,” Jensen says quietly, holding his arms out again. “Daddy’s got you.” It’s important to rebuild trust between them after what has just happened. It’s important for Henry to feel stability in something—someone. Hazel eyes light up and small hands clap together in
excitement. This isn’t nearly as scary as the fire escape, but it’s much more fun than the slides. Henry rocks back and forth on the edge of the tub for a few seconds, and pushes himself forward.

Jensen catches him in an embrace, the water splashing around them. It’s worth every ounce of pain in his ribs, middle, and hands. It’s worth everything when Henry places both of his hands on the stubble framing Jensen’s face. Carefully, curious, Henry touches Jensen’s split lip, glancing up at Jensen every few seconds to see if it’s okay to touch. Jensen nods. He leans back in the water. One by one, Henry grazes his fingers over the scars and bruises on Jensen’s face. The shame he felt before has shifted into tentative pride. Henry whispers that daddy is strong. Do they hurt? Jensen murmurs that yes, they do, but not because Henry is touching them.

It’s a good lesson, being this close. Jensen kisses the tips of Henry’s fingers. The life they lead doesn’t afford much time to be afraid of getting hurt. He’s wanted—tried—to kid himself that Henry will never get hurt while he’s around. But that’s bull shit. Stupid.

Bravely, Henry looks at every mark on Jensen’s face. He presses a kiss above Jensen’s swollen eye because it looks the worst. The water is cold when Jensen eases them up and out of it. He feels better from a variety of things—the good food he ate earlier, having Henry near him, and the bath have helped. Like always, he dries off Henry first, tickling him lightly and redressing him before he gets too cold. Jensen compliments the clothes, which makes Henry smile and start talking about how Leila said he could pick out any shirt from a whole basket of clothes. He chose a long sleeve purple one because he remembered daddy talking about staying warm.

“That’s good,” Jensen says, patting Henry’s shoulder. “You’ll grow into it quick, I think.” The sleeves are the only problem with the shirt, but Jensen fixes that by rolling them up. Henry has on an undershirt underneath the shirt. Jensen helps him into underwear that is also new, and finally, has Henry sit on the toilet again so he can put on the socks. The last thing to get put on is a pair of jeans that are also a little too big. Jensen does his best to fit the clothes to Henry, but, as he said, the kid will grow into them soon enough. Then it’ll be a problem of everything being too small. Well, Jensen is good with a needle.

With less care than he did with Henry, Jensen dries himself off. He sits on the edge of the tub after grabbing a few things off the countertop. Henry watches and waits patiently. Jensen dabs a splash of vodka onto a corner of the towel and takes a small pull from the bottle for himself. Grimacing, he ignores the burning in his throat and braces himself. Do it. The sooner he starts, the sooner it’s over. One by one, Jensen swipes at every sore and open cut. He cleans out a nasty looking one on his middle, shuddering as he scrapes pus out of the wound. Shit. He has to be more careful. Infections take forever to get rid of and he can’t afford illness.

He takes a deep breath and finishes with a press of the towel to his eye, which is now completely closed. The mark from it will probably be permanent. He’ll thank Jared for it later. Jensen sighs and scolds himself for the childish thought. They need to talk and they need to act like adults. Henry holds out the bottle of vodka for Jensen, who takes it appreciatively and resists another drink. He sets it back on the counter and gets dressed. His clothes might not be new but they feel lighter to him after the bath. Two minutes later and Jensen has the bathroom cleaned up and back in order. Henry helps by rearranging the soaps and hairbrush on the sink countertop.

“I need to talk to the man downstairs,” Jensen says, keeping his voice as soothing as possible, taking Henry into his arms. “I want you to stay with Leila and have breakfast. Can you do that?”

Instead of speaking, Henry replies by wrapping his arms around Jensen’s shoulders and holding on tightly. No. Jensen sighs and kisses Henry’s cheek. He shuts the bathroom door and opens the door leading to the stairs. From the small stove below he can smell coffee and eggs. If Leila doesn’t give
Henry breakfast, Jensen can give him a piece of something from his coat. The burger is probably still good and it’ll be filling.

Carefully, Jensen climbs down the flight of stairs, holding onto the railing with one hand and onto Henry with the other. They make it down without incident and Jensen finds Leila serving two plates of food—eggs, biscuits, and slices of ham are arranged. She turns to them and doesn’t say a word. The plates are set down, one of the portions a little smaller than the other. Jensen doesn’t move from his place. He isn’t bold enough to assume that one of them is for Henry. He waits. He waits until she offers, which she does as she sits down to the regular sized plate. Jensen sits Henry down in the chair opposite from her.


“Eat your breakfast,” Jensen insists. “Don’t be rude. I’ll be in the next room.”

“You might as well sit.” Leila picks up a biscuit from Henry’s plate and butters it. Her voice is stern. “He’s asleep. Can’t wake him.”

“Asleep? But he was just…”

“He won’t remember that. Drink your juice, Henry.”

“Thank you ma’am,” Henry whispers and picks up the sippy cup she has out for him. “Daddy, can you cut my meat?”

Jensen picks up the fork and knife near Henry’s plate and cuts the ham into smaller pieces. Using a cutlery feels so strange. He sees a spoon on the table. That one is made of silver. The ones Jensen has in his coat are plastic. Their uses are completely different. “Did he fall asleep on his own?”

Leila brushes her hair back and picks up her cup of coffee. “Yes.”

“Do I have to?” Henry asks when Jensen passes him the fork.

“At the table, yes.” Jensen pats Henry’s shoulder. “You’ll get the hang of it, don’t worry.” He takes a seat at the third chair and keeps his hands folded in his lap. The food from the restaurant filled him up for a while, but he still can’t get over the fact that there is fresh food right in front of him. Henry eats quietly, just the way Jensen has always taught him.

A cup of coffee is passed over to Jensen.

Before she lets go of it, Leila looks at him. Her words are chosen carefully, spoken with gravity. “I know you. I know your boy. That’s why I let you in here.” She glances towards the backroom but focuses back on Jensen. “But I don’t know him.”

Day time changes everything. Jensen can see that her hair is changing from black to gray. He can see that his own hands look rougher, the cracks and bruises standing out brighter, harsher. He can see that Henry has lost weight recently. But he finishes everything on his plate and looks up at Jensen for praise. How can two people share the same smile? Jensen takes Henry into his lap. This can’t be good, right? He shouldn’t be holding Henry so much, shouldn’t be taking baths with him still. He should be teaching Henry how to fight and letting him scuff on his own. Kisses shouldn’t be given out, their hands shouldn’t slip together, and Henry shouldn’t be calling him daddy at this age.

“Thank you,” Jensen says to Henry and squeezes him close before setting him back onto his chair. Henry picks up his plate and hands it over to Leila, who takes it with quiet thanks and sets it underneath hers. “I…” Jensen starts to say but clears his throat. “I looked for him. Five years.” A sip
of coffee is taken. Nothing stronger than coffee is in it but he’s grateful all the same. The world is different with only one eye to see out of, but he can still see and that’s more than some people have. There is no compromise that Jensen can reach to satisfy everyone. If he were less selfish he’d have Henry stay with her, assuming she would take him in. In time, Henry might forget about daddy and the street all together; he’s young enough that in a few years, this’ll all be blurry.

But Jensen isn’t willing or able to let his kid go.

And he isn’t willing or able to let his kid grow up without knowing that he can get a hug and a kiss from daddy whenever he needs or wants one. Screw everyone else. Henry can call him daddy and ask him for praise until the day Jensen dies. It would be a good life.

Breakfast is cleared away. Henry helps wash dishes.

Jensen slips into the backroom, closing the door behind him.

Slumped in the corner, half covered with a quilt, Jared is passed out. A closer look reveals heavy breathing, indicating a deep sleep. Beads of sweat are gathering at Jared’s forehead and his face is flushed. When Jensen steps forward, close enough to reach out and touch him, Jared doesn’t stir.

He’s promised Leila that they’ll be gone by nightfall. All three of them.

Whether or not Jared stays with them, they’ll just have to see. But where Jensen goes, Henry goes too. That is not up for debate or discussion. In five years, Jensen never gave up looking. The search being over does not mean being daddy ends, either.

He’ll fight Jared all over again if he has to.

For now, he adjusts the quilt over Jared and tucks him in.

This is the fever.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

While they wait for sundown, Jensen and Henry help Leila around the shop.

Chapter Notes

ahhh okay, i’ve just finished my edits for Animated Language, so i’m happy to actually post new stuff. :D

sorry, i keep delaying answers. i just feel like a break in chapters between this one and the next is necessary. this fic is longer than i’ve anticipated it being (lol) and the pacing has been stretched out. bear with us all. <3

also, i’ve set up a Q&A week over on my tumblr--ittakesalotofwater.tumblr.com. you can submit questions about any fics past or present and i will answer them. :D anon is on, so you don't need a tumblr account to ask a question. i look forward to hearing from y'all!

enjoy this update!

Henry helps out in the shop.

Every single customer that passes through compliments Leila’s nephew, who is visiting from out of town. He stands at the register for most of the day, next to Leila, and respectfully says the piece that she taught him: “Good day. May I wrap this for you?”

Shoes are wrapped with great care, in between folds of delicate tissue paper, and placed into sturdy boxes. Leila is patient with him. When he stammers or goes quiet, she keeps one hand on his right shoulder like Jensen explained to her, and takes over whatever needs to be done. The bell above the shop rings at least three times an hour. Henry likes the sound of it, pointing to it and glancing back towards the backroom door, where he knows Jensen is. A mix of men and women stop in. One woman buys three pairs of heels. She gives Henry a coin for all his extra work. “Start them young,” the customer says cheerfully, patting Henry’s head. “Never too early to learn a day’s work.” Leila keeps Henry a little closer to her after that.

It breaks something inside Jensen when Henry brings him the coin and insists that daddy keep it.

“This is yours,” Jensen explains, pulling Henry onto his lap as they have lunch. “Just like this sandwich is yours. Daddy would never take what is yours. Do you understand?”

“I take from you,” is countered by stubborn hazel eyes. “Daddy gives all the time.”

“That’s my job. That’s what daddies do.” Jensen tips the sippy cup up to Henry’s mouth, signaling that the conversation is over. Over paperwork, Leila watches them, going back to her work when
Henry settles into Jensen’s arms. As always, the feeling of Henry drinking and eating against him lulls and soothes them both. Jensen runs his hand through Henry’s neatly trimmed hair. Before he went out on the sales floor with Leila, she gave him a haircut. It’s chin length now, fine and silky as ever. Jensen was also shorn, as he calls it. Her scissors were better than any razor he’s been able to find.

Lunch is eaten slowly. Henry finishes every bite of his sandwich. Jensen eats the last of the burger in his coat. When Henry asks for a piece, he convinces the kid that the celery Leila put on his plate is much tastier than any burger. Of course, Henry isn’t completely sure of that, but he finishes the celery too, enjoying the crunch of it, squealing when Jensen picks one up and turns it into an airplane.

Throughout the day, in between doing chores, Jensen has checked on Jared. Twice, Jensen forced liquid into him, but neither time woke him. Herbs can be purchased or traded for to help the fever break and Jensen begins to consider it when Jared begins talking in his sleep. It isn’t actually talking—words cannot be spoken—but Jensen sees his mouth move with the intent. He can’t make out what Jared is saying in his sleep and he figures that it’s best not to. Fever dreams never make much sense. If the fever lasts more than twenty-four hours, Jensen will try scuffing for something. Until then, cold compresses and rest will have to do. At each visit, water in Jared’s lungs is checked for, but Jensen hears nothing. No wheezing, no coughing—not even a sneeze.

Every time he has touched Jared’s forehead, feeling for his temperature, Jensen marveled at the smoothness of his skin. Not one mark. Not even a bruise. As the day draws to a close and Jensen finishes his chores for Leila, he thinks back. Neither of them had been very clean when they met. Jensen hadn’t been able to secure a place to change and wash in a week when he spoke to Jared for the first time. But Jared had been filthy, as if he believed dirt and grime would protect him. Everyone on the street has their superstitions, their set of beliefs that keep them safer for an hour or a day at a time. Jensen didn’t judge; he had his spoons.

But how does someone go from living like that to looking like this? Pristine. Jensen knows that word. It fits here. Jared’s skin is pristine. Something about that doesn’t sit well with him.

Leila does not allow chores to pile up. When something needs to be fixed, she fixes it. So, at first, it seems like there might not be much her can do for her. They need to wait until sundown to leave, when Jared will hopefully be awake enough to walk and the streets will be safer for travel. But Jensen can’t sleep and he can’t be idle. With Henry helping Leila, Jensen is free to work. He starts with the vents. After lunch, Jensen started with cleaning and scrubbing out the oven. Now, as he’s mopping, Henry runs in from the sales floor.

“Sorry, daddy,” Henry squeals, wiggling in the grasp of Jensen’s hands. He holds up another coin. “Look! I helped a lady. She had a big hat. And, and she told me… she told me I could buy a toy. Daddy, can I buy a toy?” This is the first time that Henry has asked for a toy. Jensen isn’t sure what to say. He just told Henry that this is his money and he gets to spend it as he wants. But toys aren’t good for kids on the street. It’s unwise to become attached to something unnecessary and not very practical. When they need to get away, the toy might not make it with them. It’s money that could be spent on socks or shoes. Two coins might buy them a night of shelter in a cheap motel towards the outskirts of the city. They’d be able to sleep in a bed for an entire sixteen hours.

With care, Henry is set back down. Jensen wipes sweat from his forehead and breathes out. A ridiculous thought flits through his mind—he can ask Jared about these things now. Right?
For the moment, Jensen deflects the question. It’s something he hates to do, but at least if he thinks about it and makes a decision later, he’ll feel better instead of blurting out a hasty answer. He reminds Henry that he’s still technically working and that Leila must be looking for him. Hazel eyes widen and he jumps over the slick spot of the floor near him, back towards the shop, where the bell has rung again.

In one afternoon, Jensen cleans everything in the backroom from top to bottom. The work tires him, but it gives him a renewed sense of purpose. He is reminded that he can fix things; he can polish and scrub as well as anyone. Every chore is done thoroughly. In addition, he has their things ready, not that they arrived with much to begin with. But his coat has been aired out and the food tucked away and he’s mended what he could. Pride radiates through him when he lies down with Henry after dinner. Leila has provided Henry with a sippy cup of warm whole milk, half a teaspoon of chocolate powder mixed in.

With luck, the milk will put Henry to sleep and he’ll stay asleep for the entire journey back to the tunnel. They curl up near the oven, where it’s warm, and Leila writes letters on the kitchen table after she finishes the dishes. Sundown is near. The last customer left half an hour ago, the same time that Jensen last checked on Jared, who hadn’t stirred or changed.

Suckling the sippy cup, Henry lays on Jensen’s chest. He pauses to yawn and rubs at his eyes. Sleepily, he holds out the cup. Jensen takes a sip, and then holds it back to Henry’s mouth. “Finish it, baby,” Jensen whispers. “Drink up.”

“...’m full,” Henry murmurs with a pout. He pushes away the sippy cup.

“There’s just a little left. You can drink a little, right?”

“No.” Fussy and tired, Henry hides his face from Jensen.

About to remind Henry about the importance of finishing everything he’s given to eat or drink, Jensen freezes. A noise has interrupted them. Leila is also motionless, except after a moment she puts down her pen and covers up her letters. Smart. Jensen taps Henry’s right shoulder once—stay quiet. Henry’s grip on Jensen tightens, but he does as is signaled to him. He’s a good kid.

With a loud creak, the door to the store room swings open.

Jared leans against the doorway, wrapped in a quilt. The room is absolutely still for thirty long seconds—thirty seconds in which Jared’s eyes conduct sharp, calculating sweeps over Leila and Jensen before finally landing on Henry. Hazel eyes meet hazel eyes once more.

Henry cries.

Jared turns away.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Leila's is left; along the way, several signs are given.

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU for your patience while I get back to this. Finally, I'm able to update this properly. <3

Let's see if y'all can pick up all the symbolism here. If not, I'll make things a little clearer. But I don't wanna give everything away if I don't have to, you know? Pay attention to movements.

Who let this verse get so long? Huh? Was it you? I bet it was. XD

On our way to drama, the road is long and dark. ;-;

A spare change of clothes is handed over to Jensen. Leila doesn't say whose clothes these use to belong to but Jensen thinks he recognizes one of the zippers on the pants. Either way, he isn't so rude to ask. Clothes are clothes and he is grateful. Tentatively, he gives them to Jared, who refuses to make eye contact for more than ten seconds at a time. Sitting in the store room, Jared glances at the clothes—a pair of jeans with no holes that look long enough, and a flannel shirt mended on the right sleeve, plus a pair of thermal socks and gym shoes. This is better than any of the clothes Jensen has rescued from Bin Day. It's better than anything he has on at the moment or in his pack. He was tempted to swap something out, maybe the shirt, but Jared deserves nice things. It can't be easy being out of that container. Jensen itches to ask about more—and to tell him more—but senses that he should wait. Answers can come later. But maybe that's what doomed them in the first place: thinking that they had any right to later.

With his foot, Jensen nudges the clothes closer to Jared. They need to leave. Leila has done enough for them and Jensen doesn't leech off the kindness of his connections. She's holding Henry, like he taught her, pacing around in the tiny kitchen area. Whatever she's whispering into his ear, Henry is paying attention to. Good kid.

"We have to go," Jensen says out loud, his voice rougher than he means it. He tries again, softer. "Gotta find a good spot before… you know."

That's how he found Jared the first time, huddled under a bench too small to properly hide him. It was a dangerous spot, way too exposed and with no quick out. Tonight, Jensen wants to find the tunnel again, and if it works, they'll stay there tonight and tomorrow. With luck, he can find a place to scuff nearby. He took advantage of the running water at Leila's and cleaned out all their supplies. Every canteen and pan has been scrubbed clean, and all of their clothes were hand washed and hung to dry.
Thinking that Jared might want privacy to change, Jensen leaves the storeroom, shutting the door. The silence between them extends beyond Jared’s inability to speak. It leaves a gnawing sensation in Jensen’s stomach, something that claws at him from the inside out, deeper than hunger normally does.

“501 Maple Street,” Henry announces to Jensen as Leila passes him over. Jensen kisses his forehead. Pleased, Henry repeats it. “501 Maple Street, daddy.” He touches Jensen’s face, admiring the smoothness of it for once, and moves his hands to Jensen’s ears. Instead of a kiss, Jensen embraces him tightly, and then sets him down with clear instructions to get his things together. Jensen already checked Henry’s pack over, cleaned everything and mended what he could, but it’s good for Henry to do it himself. Still wearing his new clothes, Henry walks over to the back door, where their packs wait, and he sits down to studiously catalog his items.

“He’s getting big,” Leila comments, opening a cupboard and pulling out a bottle of vodka. “You won’t be able to carry him much longer.”

“I’m stronger than I look,” Jensen replies quietly. “Got muscles on these bones.”

She pauses, hand on the cabinet, stock-still. “Don’t speak about bones.”

Five minutes later, after Jensen’s face is cleaned up once again, Henry is the ambassador of goodbyes. He hugs Leila as she holds him, and dutifully repeats her address. One last sippy cup of warm milk is given to him to take with. “What do you say?” Jensen prompts with a nudge, scooping Henry up into his arms, assuming their usual positions for a journey.

Before Henry answers, the door to the storeroom clicks open. Henry whispers a hushed thank you to Leila, his friend, and holds onto the cup to burrow into Jensen’s chest. He hasn’t asked Jensen much about the bad man who hurt daddy, because he’s a good kid and he trusts that Jensen will tell him what he needs to know. Henry’s too young to see the similarity in his own face and the stranger’s. But he’s smart enough to recognize that around the stranger, being quiet and staying close to Jensen is the best course of action.

Lingering in the doorway, tugging on his left sleeve, Jared doesn’t make eye contact with anyone.

A pack is handed to him. There isn’t much in it—another spare shirt, a spoon, and a canteen full of clean tap water. It’s best if the water holds out for as long as possible. Rainwater can’t always be depended on or trusted, and Jensen doesn’t like using the fountains with frequency.

Nothing is said as the three of them exit the backroom, into the alley, towards the inner channels of the city. Half of its population is sleeping; the other half are on the move. Soon enough, the three of them will join that second half.

Henry waves goodbye until they are out of sight.

Five alleys over, one hour later, moving slowly but as silently as possible, they come across an intersection of alleys Jensen has passed through before. There’s nothing remarkable about this place; alleys intersect all the time. It’s no cleaner or dingier than any other section. Jensen found a coin here once, with a smudge of something black on it, which he used to buy formula. But he also heard someone get picked up by patrol in this spot, dragged away, babbling about going to a place with underwater castles and people. The thought of that person’s pack falling to the ground as they gave up the struggle causes Jensen to move a little faster. Patrol paths change every night; they are called to where they are needed. Being tucked away from the street doesn’t give them much of an
advantage; patrol enjoy the chase. Some of them know alleys better than Jensen thinks is right.

Pushing that thought aside, Jensen folds his coat over Henry, who has fallen asleep, full and warm. Two alleys back, Jensen wiped a drop of milk from Henry’s chin, dabbing gently so as not to wake him up. The motion provided relief to Jensen, who listened to the heavy footsteps behind him for the entire awkward walk. He tried to think of a way to tell Jared to lift his feet up more—don’t make so much noise—but in the end, Jensen couldn’t break the silence.

At the end of the intersection, three feet from passing into the next set of alleys, Jensen stops abruptly. Jared bumps into him and huffs, annoyed at the collision, snorting as if to say, “What’s the hold up?” Jensen ignores the reaction; he can’t pry his eyes off what’s in front of them.

Five twisted wire hangers have been lain down on the pavement, arranged in a perfect circle. Old blood is smeared on the tip of the one pointing towards the street, away from safety. There is also something darker and filmier on the others, something that Jensen has only seen once before. Each hanger points left.

Avoid the left; do not go west.

Still asleep, Henry shifts around in Jensen’s coat, rolling against Jensen’s ribs, kicking without meaning to. From his hands, the sippy cup falls to the ground. The sun shaped cup rolls to the outer edge of the hangers. It spins for a second, before it stops, and the mouthpiece points left.

Do not go left. Jensen takes in a sharp breath and bends down, squatting awkwardly with Henry at his middle, but he manages to grab hold of the cup. Quickly, he pockets the sun.

When he is standing back up, Jensen grunts as his right shoulder is knocked into. Jared pushes past roughly, turning right, away from the hangers even though he doesn’t know the way to the tunnel.

Jensen follows. He’ll take the lead in a few steps.

He holds onto Henry tighter than he realizes.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Arrangements for the night are not as easy to prepare for.

Chapter Notes

Uploading from my phone since I'm not near wifi at the moment. Forgive the mistakes here!

Yay an update! Let me know what y'all think. We are already off to a rocky start.

Also, reference pictures for this verse are up at ittakesalotofwater.tumblr.com.

Enjoy!

Someone has been staying in the tunnel.

Plastic bottles half filled with murky water stand guard outside of the tunnel's opening, which is about ten feet high. These are old pathways into the sewers. Further into the tunnel is a brick wall that the city put there years and years ago to deter movement into the sewers. Jensen wouldn't want to live inside the sewers anyway. That's too risky. Anyone could catch something; anyone could slip and fall into the water.

Caution and safety take time to follow through with. The biggest danger is that this someone might return. Who knows what state of mind they're in? Once you leave a spot, it's fair game for others. Those are the unspoken and unwritten rules. Jensen starts to plan for that person to return since there's a plastic bag with papers in it to the left of the tunnel, purposefully kept out of water on the ground. Make a decision. Do it. Stay here and risk confrontation or move on and risk a more dangerous spot.

An answer comes to him a moment later.

Two streaks of blood, made by fingertips, curl around the tunnel's mouth and stretch to its sides. What caused that? Could it have been patrol? Jensen has left blood here for that reason; does that make this spot less safe than any other spot?

Who's to say that person, whoever they are, didn't get into a fight with another person like them? Whatever happened, however it happened, it was unplanned and caught the person off guard. There was no time to pack. Crushed glass glitters on the floor of the tunnel. Unusual. Jensen has left small glass shards, pebbles, and woodchips on the ground outside of wherever they stayed. It's a safety precaution—the best thing they can get next to an actual security system. If someone tries to sneak up on them while they're sleeping, they'll step on the shards and make noise. Jensen is a light sleeper. Some days, he doesn't sleep at all.
But why inside the tunnel?

"Not here," Jensen murmurs over to Jared, who is fifteen feet away, standing behind and staring at the ground. "We have to find a new place." Out towards the street, peering over the corner of the alley, Jensen tries to decide which direction to go. Inside or further away? Does he try near the dumpster on Sterling or the retirement home again? He can't fit three people on that fire escape, but they could sleep underneath it. There is no response from Jared, which is just as well since Jensen selfishly wants to keep the decision his.

Orbs of light crop up on the sidewalk outside of the alleyway to the tunnel.

Flashlights.

Swallowing a gasp, Jensen freezes against the wall, immediately curling back towards the tunnel. He looks over at Jared, who remains silent and still, but there is no tension or fear to his stance. Does he not see the lights? Does he not care? Henry snuffles in Jensen's coat, shifting around and waking up. A press to his right shoulder and Henry's fingers grip onto Jensen's shoulders. He stays quiet. He's a good kid.

Please not tonight. Of all nights. Please. They haven't even settled in.

As the lights graze the pavement inches away from Jensen's sneaker, he starts to formulate a plan. He'll put Henry down and cover him with his coat. He can also lay his pack down over it, that'll help it look more natural. One tight squeeze to Henry is given as the flashlight creeps forward. No. Not tonight. Not so soon. How could he have led them directly into danger? He avoided going left. Henry's warm, rapid breath settles against Jensen's neck, matching the pace of his heartbeat.

Maybe these signs were left here as a warning. Jensen should have read them better. The flashlights creep all over the alleyway, sweeping over crushed cans and crumpled pieces of paper. Don't come near the tunnel. There's no reason to explore further. Nothing to see here. Jensen can be ready to take a beating if it comes to that; he isn't ready to leave Henry in Jared's care.

From the Patrol car, Jensen can hear their radio. He can't decipher any of what is being transmitted. It's full of static, and spoken in a completely different language this time. The sound of it feels like spiders, crawling forward, each of their eight legs twisted and moving separately from the others. An actual spider skulks out of an empty can. It feels the warmth of their bodies and squirms forward, climbing Jensen's sneaker. The radio is cut.

They're listening.

Working its way into Jensen's laces, the spider curls up. It isn't moving as fast anymore; it teeters and gets confused. A struggle occurs. In seconds, the spider strangles itself on the laces.

Switched off for a moment, the flashlights reappear, hoping to catch something or someone off guard. The spider's legs stop twitching. A lifetime later, the orbs of light retreat back onto the sidewalk, and Jensen hears the car inch forward on the street.

He holds his hand up to Jared--don't move. Not yet.

Only after Jensen counts to ten six times does he dare to move. Patrol can always come back. Or worse--Jensen has seen them park their car a block ahead and double back on foot. He listens for everything, making certain that Patrol has moved on. With an outward breath, Jensen makes a final decision. They will stay here until tomorrow evening. If the person who was staying here comes back, Jensen will deal with them.
Before Jensen moves forward, he brushes the spider from his shoe.

Settling into a spot should take time. Working too fast can leave room for accidents that were entirely preventable, had someone just taken the time to sweep.

A broom is too large and bulky to carry with, but Jensen devised his own method a while back. For safety, he brushes the glass inside the tunnel back towards the sewers. There are numerous tunnel entryways to the sewers throughout the city, however, this is the only one with two exits—one leads back into the alleyways they came from and one leads out into the street. T-shaped, the tunnel sits on the left side. This is a good spot for numerous reasons, but like everything else, it might be changing. One beating out of all the times they've slept here isn't terrible, but it's enough to make Jensen cautious.

He takes his time setting up their spot for the night. This is a routine for them. Henry's job is to be lookout for Jensen, standing at the tunnel's opening, holding onto the rim. Jensen turns his back to the sewers as he sweeps, pushing the glass back, never letting Henry out of his sight. This is how they always do it, but Jensen makes it a point to call out to Henry every few seconds.

"One," Jensen prompts in a whisper.

Never faltering in his job for the night, Henry doesn't turn towards Jensen to answer. "Two."

"Three."

"Four."

"Five."

"...six, daddy."

"Yeah. Seven."

Instead of a broom, Jensen uses an old shirt bundled over his right hand. He crouches down and pushes debris away. They never sleep too far inside the tunnel for safety, but since there are three of them now they'll need more space. The tunnel itself is made out of cement, which is perpetually wet no matter what. Drips of water course down the insides like filmy veins. It goes on for about five or six long paces before it takes a sharp right and leads to the sewers. Jensen turns for a second—just one second—to make sure that the brick wall is intact. It is.

"Daddy?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't know the answer."

Why put glass on the inside of the tunnel if there's no danger from the sewers? All the danger is out there—from the alleys or from the street. Jensen just can't make any sense of it. He does a second sweep, more thorough near the mouth. Jared hasn't moved from his place, nor has he decided to look at either of them. Fine.

Next up is laying down their supplies.

"Repeat it to yourself, baby. Try again." This is the most school time that they've had in a while. It's
good for Henry to think things through instead of Jensen just giving him the answer. Henry's nose scrunches in thought. Small fingers are held up, like Jensen taught him to do.

The previous inhabitant's belongings are carefully moved aside. Jensen does not touch the bottles. Those can stay there.

Within five minutes, Jensen has everything set up the way he wants. He has laid down two pizza box tops inside the tunnel, spaced about three feet apart. They'll sleep with Henry in the middle, Jared on the inside, and Jensen closest to the mouth. Blankets are unrolled from Jensen's pack. Henry politely asks for his sippy cup, which is empty, but Henry suckles on it anyway. That's okay for tonight, but in the morning, Jensen will tuck it away again. He doesn't want Henry to damage his teeth.

Placing cardboard beneath them and the cement provides a layer of protection from the chill. Cement gets cold.

Glass that was found around the outside of the tunnel has been kept. "Step over it," Jensen whispers to Jared, waiting for him to make his way over so they can settle. "You'll take the inside tonight." A moment later, Jensen adds. "You probably want to sleep more."

This is odd. All of it feels off. It's not the happy reunion that Jensen had pictured on nights when he couldn't get Henry to sleep or stop fussing. This isn't how it would be if Jensen had stayed with Jared that day, instead of going out to get food. Everything would be different. The look Jared is giving their arrangements right now would be different.

He's looking at the pizza boxes and threadbare blankets like he can't believe he has to sleep here. He's not looking at it like it's the best Jensen can do--like it's the best that Jensen has been able to ever provide on his own. No. That's the look of someone who is used to better, even though he slept this way and worse when Jensen found him.

Jared shakes his head, arms crossed over his chest, and sits down where he has been standing. He doesn't have to mouth his answer, Jensen gets it.

Anger works its way across Jensen's face.

"No one's making you," Jensen snaps, "but the minute it starts raining, you better have a fucking plan."

The second pizza box top goes unused for the duration of the night. Henry sleeps on top of Jensen, covered by a blanket and hidden by Jensen's form.

From the tunnel, Jensen watches Jared.

Jared buries his face in his hands.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The party moves from the tunnel to another spot in search of safety.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Traveling takes time.

By dusk the next day, the three of them migrate from the tunnel towards the retirement home. Too many Patrol cars passed by throughout the day. Fortunately, Henry slept most of the day, exhausted from so much that has happened in so little time. For a while, Jensen debated on staying in the tunnel. What could it hurt? Was it really any less safe than any other spot?

However, Jensen packed them up quickly after Henry's second nap of the day, when he woke up startled and wide-eyed. As soon as he got a hold of Jensen's attention, he whispered, "Daddy. Daddy, I can hear something inside the dark."

A few, tiny shards of glass sparkled in the tunnel's inky trench. Until Jensen finished gathering their things--ignoring his usual order and routine--he had Henry stand outside at the opening. Within twenty minutes, they were in the alleyways once more. Jared didn't question Jensen's decision to move them; he made no noise, no motion, and no signal that he protested their route or destination. Although the silence between them irritated Jensen, he preferred it to arguing.

It isn't as simple as walking from place to place. Safety comes from being hidden and remaining unseen. Invisibility is not afforded to those with children; Jensen learned that the very first day on the job. He can manage better now, but he can't always carry Henry, especially the larger he gets. Either they get where they need to be faster, with the risk of being seen, or they get there slower, but potentially safer. Tonight, Jensen alternated between carrying Henry for two blocks, and allowing him to walk on his own for one. In and out, Henry slipped from view, humming a tune Jensen had been humming at the start of the week.

Behind them, Jared followed, soundless but large. His shadow stretched over all three of them. Henry was careful to stay two steps ahead of Jensen whenever he did walk, glancing back at Jared for a second before squeezing Jensen's hand.

Every alley is different. Some are dead ends. Many are circular. Jensen can no longer remember the very first time he entered an alley or learned the routes. All he knows is what he knows now.

Christmas lights overhead, hanging like moss from a wooden balcony, means that they're near Devon Avenue. A stark yellow light above a delivery door for a butcher's shop signifies their arrival at Berry Street. The pavement there is also slick with pink liquid that bubbles in the rain. Henry steps over one pink puddle with precision. The motions remind Jensen of his very first steps.

At the intersection of three alleyways, it begins to rain. Fat, slick raindrops mix with the sweat and dried blood on Jensen's face. The wound on his bottom lip opened again. For a moment, Jensen stops them all and closes his eyes, just to feel refreshed as the rain picks up. He catches Henry doing
the same, tilting his head back and catching raindrops on his tongue.

"What's it taste like, buddy?"

"Like blue."

"Mine tastes orange."

Henry checks Jensen's answer, sticking his tongue out again, tasting two raindrops. He scrunches his nose and shakes his head. "No, daddy. Blue."

Corrected, Jensen nods and continues their movement down the alleyway with the ancient recliner. Two years ago, it was just a recliner someone had thrown out. Now, it has become part of the alley itself, covered in vines and debris. This is near Minnow Place, which means they are nearly there. The plan is to stay at the retirement home alley for two nights and then seek out a spot near the murals on 8th. There are more restaurants towards that section of town; three of them means another mouth to feed and scuffing will require more effort. If there is a wider selection of dumpsters to choose from, the better their chances at finding one good bag instead of rummaging through several.

Five blocks away from their destination, the rain picks up.

A stop is made. Jensen lets go of Henry's hand so he can reach into his coat. Jared's eyes flit back and forth between Jensen and Henry. Jensen tries to ignore that.

Third pocket to the left down. Henry holds out his hands for what Jensen pulls out of the pocket--one plastic bag. It isn't a blue plastic bag, which is Henry's favorite color, but he accepts it gratefully, murmuring a thank you and tying it on himself to prove that he can do it without help. Jensen passes a bag over to Jared, who looks at it like he's never seen a plastic bag before. With a frustrated and impatient sigh, Jensen begins to put his on.

"Only the little guy has an umbrella," Jensen explains, tying the handles of the bag underneath his chin. He checks to see if Henry did his properly, which he did. "Bags'll keep you dry." He isn't sure why he's detailing this to Jared--because he should know the use of plastic bags by now. Still, it's awkward not to say something. It isn't raining hard enough to warrant the use of the umbrella, and a check on Henry proves that he doesn't mind the rain as it is. Jared, however, is much harder to please. He returns the bag to Jensen and turns up the collar on his shirt. Jensen resists the urge to snap at him and give him a lecture about being exposed in adverse weather. Instead, Jensen ties a bag over his head and continues their walk.

Certain sides to a few brick buildings are familiar to Jensen. Many of them just blend together. He can tell the difference between the pipes on the side of the five story building near Lake, and he knows the olive green rust on the edge of the wine shop by Cedar. The pavement there is slick, but a darker red, and Henry points out an empty bottle left near the employee door.

For the final block, Jensen scoops Henry up and tucks him under his coat. They approach the blue light above the retirement home alley. It's empty. Jensen breathes a sigh of relief. He conducts his sweep with Henry on him, which makes it take longer, but it's worth it. He's not putting Henry down until he verifies that this will be better than what they just left.

No glass. No wood chips. No bottles left out. No signs of anyone staying here tonight except for them.

Satisfied, Jensen sets Henry near the dumpster closest to the blue light. The rumble of Jensen's stomach prompts dinner. A glance at the dumpster shows that electric locks have not been added,
however, regular locks are still on, wrapping and winding around the lid like steel snakes. Not a problem; Jensen can pick it. It'll take a minute to find his tools, but he's grateful for the work. This keeps him active and in practice. Plus, finding a dumpster without a lock on means one of two things: the employee at the end of the night was in a rush and didn't lock up properly, or it's a trap.

Set up must be done first. Jensen chooses a dumpster without a puddle of water near it--it looks to be a little cleaner than the rest--and remembers it for when he's done.

Pizza cardboard is laid down for Henry to camp out on while Jensen works. With the rain, they'll need to be creative in how they sleep tonight; Jensen works on a plan as he completes his usual sweep of the area. He kicks aside cans and paper, takes out his shirt and brushes away pieces of plastic and pebbles. Near the street entrance, he lays down a row of pebbles acquired from the fifth pocket down on the right, creating something like gravel. Pebbles and bottle caps are more conspicuous than glass; they look more natural on the pavement. The same is done for the entrance and exit from which they came in, though in addition, Jensen leaves his own sign to whomever might come across it: a rock the size of his hand, with an X carved on it. Others will know what it means, and if they choose to ignore the sign, they'll have to put up with Jensen.

Jared doesn't stand near Henry; he looks at him while holding his arms to his chest. His hair is soggy and hanging in limp strings. Jensen wonders if it turns into waves like Henry's does as it dries.

Talking means creating noise, which threatens their invisibility. But he needs to establish boundaries for Henry. He has to tell him what's going to happen and when as much as possible. "I'm gonna find dinner," Jensen announces quietly to Henry and Jared. "Then we'll figure out sleeping arrangements." It is Jensen's hope that he can get Henry fed, cleaned up, and told a story by three. It's midnight now, according to his watch, and three hours should be enough. As Henry sleeps, Jensen will continue scuffing, hoping to find something in these three dumpsters that he can trade for more supplies. Jared will help; he doesn't have a choice there. Everyone pulls their own weight.

A cough sounds out and Jensen looks in Jared's direction. The man looks confused as he watches Jensen pick the first lock. What? Doesn't he remember scuffing? Doesn't he remember the bag of Italian food Jensen willingly shared with him? Or, does he think that Jensen has contacts and connections like Leila all across the city, and that they give handouts every night? Does he really think that's how they've survived all this time, on the generosity of others?

Within two minutes, Jensen has the lock picked and the chains off. He folds them neatly on the ground, flips the dumpster lid carefully, and assesses the contents. Before he reaches in, he hears Henry speak up.

"Daddy."

"Yeah?"

"It's wet."

"Oh. Okay." Jensen moves over to the kid and sees that in his work, it's started to rain harder. The cardboard is useless. He picks Henry up and apologizes softly, smiling when a kiss is given to his cheek and a murmur that it's okay, he isn't that wet. Henry is a good kid. The best kid. A new location is assigned to Henry, sitting on the edge of the dumpster, at the corner where it's more stable. From Henry's pack, Jensen grabs his umbrella, glad that he patched it up before they left Leila's. She had the right kind of thread needed for the material.

Once Henry is settled, Jensen begins scuffling as quietly as possible, moving things around only when necessary. He reaches in and grabs a crutch, pulling at it until it is freed from the bags
surrounding it. The top part is broken, but all the rest looks fine. He sets it aside for now, laying it down on the pavement, cautious of the noise.

The first bag is disappointing. It has all the right looks to be a good one--no holes, no rips, no leaks. If it weren't raining, he might use this as a demonstration for Henry. Opening the deceptive bag yields food that has gone rotten inside styrofoam containers, which explains the lack of smell until Jensen opens one. Moving the bag aside, Jensen hauls over a second one. Opened up, this bag is a better start. He finds a dish of macaroni and cheese at the top. That's good enough for him to grab hold of the bag and pull it out of the dumpster and onto the ground. Breathing hard from the effort, wiping the rain and sweat out of his eyes, he begins to dig. Pieces of meatloaf are scattered throughout the bag, like crumbling bricks. He takes three more plastic bags out of his coat and begins doling out portions. Henry is always served first; Jared's presence doesn't change that. Jensen tries to find the best pieces of food for the kid, smelling and touching everything before placing it into the bag. He has to work quickly if he doesn't want their food to get wet.

At the bottom of the bag, Jensen finds a bundle of pasta and a few raw carrots. There are brown ends on the carrots, but he bites them off and spits them out, placing the good portions in Henry's bag, happy to have a vegetable for the kid. Every thirty seconds, Jensen glances up at Henry to check on him. Henry watches the blue light above them and the alley's entrances and exits, looking out for Jensen like he has been taught.

Plastic bags tied up for the moment, Jensen gathers up the bag and tosses it back into the dumpster. The one bag should be enough for now. He'll find more when he's scuffing later. For now, he wants to get them out of the rain as much as possible. Henry is placed back on the ground, the dumpster is shut, and Jensen walks them over to the fire escape. They won't climb up on it just yet, if at all. Jensen drags over an empty milk crate from one of the alley walls and sits on it, sitting Henry on his lap. "Here," Jensen mutters, holding out the plastic bag he made for Jared. It takes twenty seconds for Jared to respond and grab the offering. He doesn't even dig in right away, even though he's got to be as hungry as Jensen. Fine. Whatever. Jensen unties Henry's bag and small fingers go for the macaroni first. "There's carrots in there," Jensen says, nudging Henry's cheek. "I want you to eat 'em."

"Yes, daddy." Henry scoops up a handful of macaroni. "Can I have my sippy cup?"

Part of set-up meant Jensen set down two pans, his canteen, and Henry's cup where it could all gather rainwater. Jensen looks over to the cup, which appears to be half full. "Hey," he sighs to Jared, "do you mind passing that over?"

Jensen can't tell if Jared does mind or if he's just slow to react. The guy holds the sippy cup like it's porcelain, but he fumbles it when it comes to placing the lid on. Jensen fixes it as soon as it is handed to him, and presents it to Henry, who mumbles a soft, "Thank you." Two sips later and Henry continues eating. Jensen takes a few bites of meatloaf and some of the noodles he found. It's all bland and mushy, but it's not spoiled and it's filling. Dessert is a bite of a cookie before passing it over to Henry to finish up. The crinkle of their bags, and the sounds of chewing, contrasts with the pervasive silence from Jared. He doesn't open his bag. Instead, he stares. The more Henry eats, the wider Jared's eyes get. When Henry wipes his mouth, finished and full, Jared's mouth is hanging open.

"Hey," Jensen hisses, snapping his fingers. "The hell is your problem?" As quickly as Jensen tenses up, so does Henry.

Use of his voice is attempted, but all that comes out of Jared's mouth is a garbled, haunting noise. Hehis eyes for a second before pointing at Henry's plastic bag. What? What about it? It's empty. Jared
hasn't even touched his food, what does he care about what Henry just ate?

Jared points to the dumpster, then back at Henry, and finally, shakes his head and turns away from them. The five year old in Jensen's lap clings onto him, hiding away because he understands all those gestures and the meaning of Jared's looks. He's five years old, but he knows.

Upset, Jensen counts to three.

No. No, it's not gonna work. His voice is harsh and sharp when he finally finds it, and it's louder than he means it to be.

"Grow up. Act like a fucking adult, would you? If you have another solution to scuffing, I'm all ears. Do you think I want him eating this way? Do you think I wouldn't rather be giving him hot meals every day? Don't you think I've tried? What are my solutions here, Jared? Because you aren't offering anything but shame, and my kid doesn't need that." Huffing, Jensen holds Henry closer to himself. "That's right, my kid. I don't know where you've been, but it ain't been here. And you can be upset with me for it, but don't you dare look at him that way, like you're better than us. Because after everything, look at where you are." Jensen stands up, Henry with him, and he kicks the crate out towards the dumpsters, away from Jared. "You're right back where you started from."

Had the evening gone better, Jensen would have propped Henry up on the fire escape for the rest of the night, to sleep there while Jared and Jensen remained on the ground. But now, there's no way Jensen can stand to be within ten feet of the other adult in the alleyway. Henry is dry from being covered in Jensen's coat plus the umbrella, and that's all that matters. When he has to get up before dawn to scuff more, he'll arrange Henry on the crate like he has always done.

Maybe Jared doesn't understand that he doesn't have to stay. No one is forcing him.

In turn, Jensen thinks to himself, adjusting Henry's umbrella, maybe he doesn't understand that people change in five years. He stupidly assumed that they would all fall into place once they were reunited; that he would see Jared hold Henry the same way he did five years ago.

They spend the rest of the night apart, and this time no one looks at each other.

Chapter End Notes

woo! updates! anon asked when the next chapter would be up for this so i put myself to work. XD

enjoy!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By two in the morning, Henry is asleep. Jensen dozes for a while, lulled by the sensation of Henry's breathing, but he wakes up and gets to work. There has to be enough time to scuff for breakfast, plus any items he can find and make use of, before the morning commute begins. The rain has let up. Jensen shucks his coat off and drapes it over Henry, who curls up with one of the sleeves on top of the crate.

Jensen unties the plastic bags over their heads and tucks them into an outside pocket for quick access, should it start raining again.

Standing up, ready to scuff, Jensen looks over at the second curled up form across the alleyway.

After all these years, the idiot still doesn't understand how to remain invisible. It's not impossible for people their size; it just requires more thought and creativity. Jensen shakes his head, glad that Jared is sleeping, making one less thing to worry about for the moment. He tries to scuff and think about their situation, but it doesn't work. Everything concerning Jared will have to wait for Jensen to have a spare moment and properly focus.

From the same dumpster that he found dinner and the crutch in, Jensen digs a little further. After an hour, he uses the crutch as a tool to push some of the heavier bags out of the way. He's hesitant about hopping into the dumpster itself. If anything happens, he has to be able to get out of it in seconds. With the way his joints are and the very real bruising on his ribs, he doubts he'd be able to jump out that fast. Jensen sighs. He decides to try another dumpster. The lid is shut without a sound, and he locks it back up, just as it was.

In the next dumpster, three bags in, Jensen finds some soiled blankets, used diapers, and a million plastic pill containers. Two dumpsters to go and a lance of anxiety hits him square in the chest. If he doesn't find anything here, he'll have to extend his scuffing elsewhere. That means he'll either have to take Henry with and then come back, or leave him with Jared. Very little appeal is attached to that last option.

The third dumpster is more fruitful. Bag number one yields biscuits and ham steak. From his back pocket, Jensen takes out a cloth bag and deposits five intact biscuits and two pieces of ham steak. At the very bottom, he rummages to find two unopened packets of strawberry jam. Good. This is a good start. Four bags in, and Jensen has filled the cloth bag with what he thinks is a decent meal. He pauses from scuffing to tie the bag onto the dumpster near Henry, who hasn't stirred.

By five, at sunup, Jensen has salvaged two twisted walkers, another crutch, a bed pan, and a collection of pill trays. He'll spend the day fixing these items up with pieces of tape and wire. Eventually, he'll enlist Henry's help, because the kid should know how to fix things.

Fatigue sets into Jensen at six, which is just as well since there is more noise and movement on the sidewalks from the morning commute. Henry wakes up for ten minutes, asks to go to the bathroom, and Jensen tends to him. By six thirty, everything is put away. Jensen sits on the crate, taking Henry back into his lap. Yawning, Henry wraps his arms around Jensen's neck and settles in. One more glance across the alley. Either Jared is very still while he's awake or he's actually asleep; Jensen doesn't care too much at this point.
Eyes drooping, Jensen catches himself yawning and wiping at his eyes. Just an hour, he murmurs, adjusting his hold on Henry. Just an hour.

Children need stability. They need boundaries and a routine and someone they can depend on to provide those things and more for them. Enforcing the routine is the most difficult part. Jensen hates waking Henry up from a nap, but if he doesn't wake up now, he won't sleep later.

Breakfast is quietly eaten between the two of them. Jared continues to sleep. Unlike Henry, Jensen doesn't bother to wake him up. Echoes of what the old man said to him about rest pass through his mind. Jensen should have asked more questions. He should have demanded some kind of explanation. Beating himself up about it now isn't going to do them much good; Jensen wipes Henry's mouth with his sleeve and wraps up what they didn't eat. Knowing Henry has eaten decent food sets Jensen at peace for the moment. The second part of their morning routine begins. While Henry works on his school projects--find three objects that are red, two that are circles, and one that is the opposite of black--Jensen works at fixing his assortment of items pulled from scuffing. He turns over what he knows about Jared so far as he uses a rock to fix a crooked, dented portion in one of the crutches.

There is something called the harvest. And when it's done, its participants are placed in containers. But it's not a secret, because those containers are in the middle of downtown for anyone to see. The people inside the containers look healthy and come out just fine, well, except for the purging. Jensen got a pretty good look of Jared and he couldn't spot anything on his skin--no scars, no sores, nothing.

"Buddy, don't touch that." Henry found a shoe wedged under one of the dumpsters. Today is overcast from the rains, which tells Jensen they might have a storm later tonight.

"But it's red."

"Find something else, please." Children need manners, too. Jensen has never spoken to Henry like a baby. That doesn't mean he hasn't been affectionate; he just likes to treat Henry with respect.

There's a small sigh as the shoe is abandoned. Jensen smiles and shakes his head.

Okay, back to what he knows. Jared can't talk. Sounds can be made, but they still come out distorted. How did that happen? Did they cut his vocal chords? They had to. Something was happening to Jared and they decided he was making too much noise. Who is they, anyway? Government? Patrol? Bookers? Jensen doesn't remember much of what happens down at the station anymore; he prefers it that way. Whatever happened to Jared, though, seems more complicated than just being taken from the streets. Maybe it started that way and became much, much more.

One o'clock rolls around and Jensen whistles for Henry to stop what he's doing. The whistle wakes Jared up, but Jensen ignores him. They have to stay on schedule.

"What'dja find, buddy?" Jensen sets his tools aside and holds out his hands. "Can you explain?"

Half of a bouncy ball is dropped into Jensen's palms first. It looks like a dog chewed it up. "This is red," Henry reports, "and bouncy." One red item. The next is a crumpled up advertisement for laundry detergent. "This is a circle. Uh, and crinkly." Henry fishes around in his pockets for the rest of his findings, which turn out to be a red push pin missing the actual pin, a smashed red key chain in the shape of a cloud, a blue bottle cap, and a white-ish cotton ball.

"If I need to open a bag," Jensen prompts, holding out the items, "which one of what you found
would be the best to use?"

All the seriousness a five year old can have shows on Henry's face. He looks at each item, sometimes reaching out and touching one that he thinks might be the answer. In the end, he selects the key chain. "Good job, baby," Jensen coos and hands him the key chain. "It's got a point to it, but it's not something that could be a weapon. Okay... Let's see. Pick two things here that I could put on the ground for someone to trip on."

School goes by quickly, and Henry is given a firm embrace at the end for a job well done. Jensen sets the kid up with a lunch. Side by side, they sit together on the ground, and Jensen explains his projects. It feels like it's just the two of them again. On the opposite side of the alley, Jared sits up, knees to his chest, and keeps his distance.

Honesty has always been Jensen's rule. He doesn't bullshit Henry into thinking that they lead a life of rainbows and sunshine. But he also doesn't rob Henry of a shot at having an actual childhood, even if it is a childhood on the streets, spent on milk crates and dumpster lids. So Jensen knows that he owes Henry an explanation about Jared. Lunch is finished with a drink of water from Jensen's canteen.

"Let's change your clothes, buddy." Jensen opens his pack, digging around to find Henry's clothes rolled up underneath his own. "Okay, yellow shirt or blue shirt?"

"Blue, please."

"An excellent choice, sir."

"Are you gonna change too?"

"Hmm, maybe. Why?" An arm is slung around Henry's shoulders. "Am I stinky?"

A squeal is given, followed by a tight hug. "No, daddy, you're not stinky. You're silly."

"Well, that's better than being stinky." A new outfit is laid out for Henry, along with a change of shirt for Jensen. He can switch out his bottom layer at least, since to be honest, he does stink. Sweat and rain don't make for the best smells after a few hours. Henry stands up while Jensen sits on the crate, turned to face the wall for privacy, and they start their routine. Feeling safe for the moment, Jensen takes the opportunity to give Henry a quick wash. He uses a clean orange rag and one of the pans from the night before.

Deep breath. Just be honest. "Buddy, uh, I wanna talk to you about something."

Henry tries to bounce the rubber ball in the water, frowning when it doesn't work. He looks at Jensen. "About the man?" he whispers, glancing over Jensen's shoulders. "He's watching us, daddy."

Bristling, Jensen tries to stay focused. His back is to Jared. "I know. He... He just doesn't know any better." Within two minutes, Henry has been washed with the rag. There are no sores on him and the scrapes he's gotten from the past two months seem to be healing up just fine. Jensen wrings the rag out and sets it aside for himself to use in a moment. He dries Henry off with a light pink rag and gets him into a clean pair of underwear and jeans, followed by two pairs of socks, the dirty ones on the outer layer. Jensen is careful with Henry's things; not one sock has been lost in all of their travels.

"Why is he mad?" Henry holds his arms up for Jensen to put on his first shirt. "Daddy, I'm hungry."

To explain Jared, Jensen must explain himself. But how does he do that? There isn't blood between
them. Henry doesn't even look like Jensen.

A biscuit from breakfast is handed over, with jelly spread inside it. Henry munches happily, staying still as Jensen fusses over the way his clothes are folded and tucked. "Baby, I..." I found you. I found him. I found both of you. I couldn't leave. I don't know why. "He's mad because I got to spend a lot of time with you and he didn't."

Thinking this over, Henry pouts as he holds his biscuit. "People shouldn't hit people, even if they're mad. That's what you said."

Jensen nods and leans forward, elbows resting on his thighs. "Yeah, I did. But it don't always work that way." He scoops Henry up, pressing his nose to the kid's cheek. "You remember stuff too well." Another deep breath. "Okay. Look. Jared is gonna stay with us for a while. I don't know how long. But he's daddy's friend from a long time ago, before you were born. So, we're gonna let him spend time with you, because you know, you're great and who doesn't wanna do that?" Breathe out. Stay calm. Get to the gist of it, c'mon. "Just... Uh..." I'm not your daddy. Say it. Just say it. He'll understand; he's a smart kid. You raised him that way--you did, no one else. That matters.

From the apartment complex behind the retirement home, a window opens. Noise from the apartment spills out into the alley, causing Jensen and Henry to tense up. Instinctively, Jensen tightens his hold over Henry. People in the apartment are screaming at each other. After two swear words, Jensen grumbles under his breath, annoyed at the people, and covers Henry's ears.

After ten minutes hiding inside Jensen's coat, Henry falls asleep. The awful people in the apartment argue for an eternity. There goes their discussion. It's just as well, Jensen decides, setting Henry down on the crate, leaving him so he can scuff for dinner. At least he has done a basic introduction. More information can wait.

Standing up, Jensen changes. He doesn't care if Jared watches him. It ain't a pretty sight when he takes off his layers. Unlike Jared, Jensen has plenty of scars and scrapes and blemishes. The bath at Leila's helped some of the sores on his back and middle, but the bruising around his ribs remains bright. Jensen doesn't dare touch the bruises; they'll heal over eventually. He wipes himself off gently, not paying as much attention to himself as he did with Henry, since he needs to get dinner started and their things together. He puts on a clean shirt for his first layer and drapes three more over that one. Stinky is no longer his middle name once he's done. Stubble is already growing in, itchy and rough, but the time and effort to shave right now isn't worth it. His chest is still tight from his discussion with Henry.

"I need some supplies," Jensen says to Jared, who hasn't left his spot once, not even to pee. "So I'm gonna find dinner and him and I will go trade after dark. You can stay or go do whatever you want til we come back." Plastic bags from the night before are reused, gathered up in Jensen's hands. He looks at them, crumpled up, and looks at Jared. "Maybe you should go now. Take a walk. I... I like to do things at a certain time and it's almost dinner. You... I can't have you looking at him like that again. Maybe all you see is a kid, but he's a smart kid, and he knows." With his voice quieting down, Jensen shakes his head and turns to walk over to the fourth dumpster.

Out on the street, someone is playing a radio. It might be coming from the retirement home itself, though Jensen can't say he's ever heard them play something for the residents before. At least it's not two people screaming about small cocks and easy lays. Fuck, that was awful.

The lock gives way as easy as the rest and Jensen flips the lid soundlessly. Above the rustle of bags being moved, Jensen hears footsteps approaching. He's nearer to the street by this dumpster, so Jared must mean to exit through there and onto the sidewalk. Fine. It's almost dusk. If he walks around now, he might be able to blend in with the rest of the people on their way home for the evening.
Jared has the advantage of looking clean and rested enough that no one will question him. Jensen huffs from the burn in his arms as he tugs at a heavy bag.

A knock at the edge of the dumpster throws Jensen off balance. He glares at the source.

"What," Jensen snaps, reaching for the desired bag once more.

That look is still there, though Jared is trying to hide it—a look of disgust. Like he wasn't eating out of the same dumpsters or in the same way five years ago. Jensen's mouth tightens as he peers at Jared, silent as always, standing across from him.

Jared reaches out, extending his right hand towards Jensen, but pulls back as he sees the look on Jensen's face. A second later, he tries again, spurred on by the challenge. Two steps forward are taken and Jared has his hand over Jensen's left bicep. Jensen is ready for a fight; he's not going to let himself be taken for a chump again, especially not by some cheap shot taken while Henry's asleep.

But the hold on Jensen isn't forceful.

The fingers over his bicep begin to move, even though Jared's eyes are closed and he's biting down on his bottom lip, his face flushed. A full minute passes—fingers tapping and pressing the entire time—before Jensen figures it out.

This is music.

Jared is playing to the sound of the piano from the radio nearby. Every note is perfectly synchronized. The tune starts out with two keys, side by side, alternating. Another note is added, this one deeper, allowed to resonate with a harder touch. Not a note is missed, even when the tune becomes complicated and layered. Entranced, Jensen closes his eyes. The speakers din as Jared plays louder, more commanding. It's a haunting tune.

Gradually, the notes dwindle. The fingers that play them begin to tremble and waiver.

From the radio, wherever it is, the announcer's voice crackles through, sounding tinny and stuffy. "That was Sonata no. 14 in C-sharp minor."

Rain falls.

Jensen opens his eyes. Jared looks directly at him.

There is more than music between them.

Chapter End Notes

i know we are all anxious for answers, hang in there! <3
Rain turns into snow.

It happens like magic—dark, quiet, and instantaneous. Smaller snowflakes swell swiftly into ones that Jensen recognizes as a threat. These will stick. They will accumulate, pile, and smother anything caught unaware. Snow seems soft and harmless. It almost seems like it could be played in and enjoyed; after all, it makes the street look so pretty and light shines off of it.

Bodies have been found in the snow.

When a snowflake lands on a portion of Jensen’s exposed skin—over the top of his hand—it turns gray, mixing in with the dirt and soot on him. In the two minutes that it takes Jensen to close up the dumpster and gather their things, there is already a fine layer of it over Henry.

There is no time to talk.

There is no time to listen to music stolen from a radio that isn’t theirs, nor is it theirs to know anything about. There is no time to linger in this spot, because now, the weather has turned on them and this is not enough. A spot with shelter above them must be found as soon as possible. Jensen glances over, back to Jared, who is looking at his hands. In his head, music is still playing for him.

Music is replaced by the deceptive accumulation of flurries. “We have to move,” Jensen murmurs, rapidly tying up a plastic bag of food he has scuffed. “If you’re sticking around, you have to carry stuff with me so I can trade it. Maybe… maybe someone will have a lead on where we can go.”

He doesn’t trust Jared to be alone with Henry. Not yet.

The blue light from one of the apartments reflects their shadows on one of the alley walls. Snow blankets everything, leaving behind a nearly plastic film, making the brick glisten and the pavement slick. Henry is not woken up; he can sleep for this journey. Jensen scoops him up, one hand underneath Henry’s head and the other pulling him up. It is getting more difficult to carry Henry. When he was a baby it was easier. Jensen had a sling made out of canvas bags he had sewn together. Once that sling disintegrated, Jensen used whatever he could find—plastic bags, garbage bags, even a bunch of old, tattered scarves. He could try again, but the sling would have to be made out of something more durable. Jensen shakes his head.

All is back in place, as they found it.

“Oh need you to carry as much as you can.” Jensen has one arm free while Henry is tucked under his coat, against his chest. He picks up one walker to carry places two of the better crutches under his arm. His pack and Henry’s pack are on his back. The weight of everything and the combination of the snow causes anxiety to permeate his senses. What way is it again? Does he go towards the western alleyways or should he stick to the safer, but longer and more circuitous route?

Jared lifts up one walker and looks at Jensen.

“Everything else,” Jensen presses. “I can’t carry more. You have to get everything else.”

A frown pulls at the edges of Jared’s mouth.
This is the best Jensen could cobble together. This is what his resources and the time he had were able to create and it has to be good enough. It will be good enough. But he can’t trade any of it for things they need unless it’s carried over to the trading area. And if they don’t hurry, not only will any leads of spots be useless, everyone in the trading area will have left to seek shelter of their own.

There is no time to assess the quality of what Jensen is taking. There is no time to stand there, as if the world operates at their pace.

Jensen has to get Henry out of the snow.

“I’ll do it,” is hissed at Jared. “Move. I’ll do it myself.”

Shouldered out of the way, Jared stands there, gripping onto the one walker while Jensen arranges the rest. Fine. He should have known better anyway. If he wants something done right, he’ll just have to do it himself. This is why, he wants to tell Jared, well this is a large part of why Jensen never… he didn’t… with anyone… this whole time. It had to be just the two of them. No one could come before Henry.

Not even himself.

A decision about their route is made after Patrol is seen driving west—the long route it is.

Snow mixes in with sweat on Jensen’s forehead. He has to stop them twice along the way to breathe. On the third time, he is forced to wake Henry up and have him walk. Yawning and rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Henry walks alongside Jensen, carrying a crutch. Alley to alley, they stay close to the walls, as out of sight as possible.

Jensen and Henry lead. Jared hangs back.

At the border of the trading area, Jensen stops all of them. He sets his things aside carefully and gets to his knees. If he inhales too fast or too deep, his ribs ache and his breath rattles. All of his movements are cautious. From a pocket in his coat, Jensen takes out a knitted hat. It has one hole in it that he has yet to patch up. Next, he pulls out a pair of mittens from another pocket and holds them in his mouth while he places the hat on Henry. Dimples flash for a moment in thanks and small fingers play with the ear flaps until Jensen puts the mittens on. There’s one more piece to this, just to be safe. He shifts his weight from one knee to the other. They have three hours until sunrise. In those three hours, Jensen has to trade what they have to collect supplies they need. A list has been formed in his head: herbs, blankets, sewing items, clothes if there are any, and food if anyone can spare it. Then, he needs to speak to someone… anyone… about those tubes downtown.

They can’t be a great mystery, those tubes, because they’re in the center of a populated, well-lit area. But because of their location it makes sense to Jensen why he hasn’t seen or heard of them before.

People like him stay where the light can’t harm them, where the imprints of their footsteps can’t betray their resting places. Henry sniffs. Jensen wipes at his nose, then ties a plastic bag over the hat for an extra layer between against the snow.

Familiar hazel eyes look at him, more familiar and comforting to Jensen than the hazel eyes that gave birth to these.

Jensen presses their noses together and closes his eyes to let out a sigh.

A break.
Just a small one. The last one.

Henry places his hands over Jensen’s cheeks. The fabric of the mittens scratches against the stubble growing in on his face. No matter the layers between them, Jensen basks in the touch.

A hiccup sounds out behind them.

For the first time, Jensen experiences a strange, unnerving feeling. As they load up to keeping moving and enter the trading area, he tries to pinpoint what it is. He flips through emotions in his head.

The doorway to the trading area is reached ten minutes later. Resting in a nook carved into the doors, which are really just particle board and stacks of empty fruit crates, a single candle is lit to signify one thing—open.

Some people come here with nothing.

Jensen feels the weight of everything in his hands and in the hands of those with him.

He thinks back to his nose pressed against Henry’s.

He feels rich.

Chapter End Notes

gah, i uploaded this update into House by mistake. XD that's what i get for being up at 1am.

thank you for your patience! i have another chapter forthcoming. i'm still easing back into this verse. please let me know what you think about this chapter though. i would appreciate that a lot. next chapter has big answers and some drama. i can't wait to post it!

thanks again!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Every trading area within this city is different. Jensen knows of three. He frequents this one because there are people who know him and Henry. The deals and bargains he strikes here are often more accommodating than the ones at other areas.

Numbers do not guarantee safety. Numbers expose them to a raid. Therefore, no more than twelve people are in the trading area at a time. If someone isn’t recognized or spoken for, they are not allowed in. The rule bends for children. Any child is welcome without question. Jensen has seen children show up without clothes, dirty and soiled, their feet bleeding from the debris on the pavement they don’t know any better to avoid. He’s seen these kids stumble up to the doorway and fall over from exhaustion. There is no other place to go. The shelters will take them and never let go. The hospitals will turn them over to Patrol—or worse, to Bookers. Children are not allowed near fire circles; there is information children cannot know. They don’t need knowledge of the bodies, the attacks, or the alleyways closed down with yellow tape and blood.

Madge always takes children in.

She opens the doorway when she sees Jensen and Henry. Every twist and turn has lead them here, to the watchful eyes of Madge, a stocky, sturdy woman dressed in multiple coats and a dress made out of quilt scraps. Hands on her hips, she smiles at Henry. The backdrop of their surroundings isn’t as dreary to the kids who find themselves here once Madge takes over. For Henry, this is a place Jensen brings them so they can stock up and he can play with Madge and other children in the meantime. Filthy, gray walls lined with the rust and scum built up over the years disappears.

It’s just like playing on top of dumpster lids.

They aren’t in an alleyway. They’re in space.

“Mister Henry,” Madge sighs playfully, “it’s been a spell, and I do believe you are taller.” She keeps her voice down, but her tone is genuine. A smile peeks out from under the hat and bag Henry has on.

The friendly demeanor drops. “Jensen.” Madge’s eyes dart to the person behind them and her words are clipped, curt. “Who is that?”

Their supplies to trade are set down. Henry inches forward, towards Madge, but he doesn’t leave Jensen’s side. He’s a good kid.

“He’s with me.” Jensen leaves it at that, making direct eye contact with Madge. “You gonna give my kid a hug or you gonna make him wait?” She gets the hint: shove off the subject. Henry is picked up and embraced tightly.

“I got stuff to trade, is anyone in?”

Hopefully, there is at least one other child here to be a temporary playmate. If not, Jensen knows Madge will watch Henry.

“Old Lady’s here. York, too.”

“That’s it?”
“It’s snowing, Jensen.”

“I know,” he grumbles. “But I was hoping…”

“Patrick and Lu haven’t been ‘round here for months.”

A bad word is muffled. Two people aren’t much to trade with.

“I found a tea set the other day; would you like to have pretend tea with me, Henry?” Madge brushes aside a piece of Henry’s hair from his eyes. When she receives a nod, she looks over to Jensen and Jared. “Well? You gonna come in or not?”

This time, Jensen waits for Jared to walk ahead. Madge takes Henry over to the safest place in an alleyway, on the side of a dumpster, where there are two overturned crates to sit on.

Everyone is in.

Jensen closes the doors and pushes the crates back in their place.

The Old Lady had a name a long time ago. She forgot it. One day, she woke up in her spot and her pack was gone and she couldn’t remember her name. She suggests Jensen to get out of the trading area as soon as possible; the snow is supposed to stick. Large, gray clouds are heavy with snowflakes. The temperature is dropping and the sun will rise soon.

She trades him two packets of herbs for one walker.

Held out on her wrinkled, bruised palm, she explains that the blue plastic bag is for fevers; the red bag is for issues with the stomach. Jensen pockets them and slides over the walker he had to fix up the least; it’ll last her a few months at least, if she’s careful. Their business at hand is done, however, before he leaves, he wonders. Does she have anything for the throat?

“Sore throat?” she rasps, coughing.

“No.” Briefly, he looks over his shoulder at Jared, who stands a good thirty feet away while Jensen talks trade. “Something to make a voice come back.”

Beady, weathered eyes narrow. She continues to cough and holds her hand up for Jensen to wait. Once the fit passes, she wraps the threadbare, yellow towel around her shoulders tighter. “Come back? A voice doesn’t come back. It’s gone.”

“But how do you know?” Jensen presses. “Can’t something be done? What if I mix these bags?”

“You don’t mix the bags!”

“Great,” he breathes out, frustrated even though he is aware that none of his problems are necessarily her fault. “I won’t mix the bags. Thanks.”

What she owns is stuffed into two large canvas bags. Each time she coughs, her entire body quakes underneath the layers of what she has managed to find herself or has traded for from others. She sniffs and shakes her head, wisps of what’s left of her gray hair moving. Her cracked, dry mouth sets into a flat, disapproving line. “You don’t get the voice back. That’s part of the agreement. You don’t know nothing about nothing, do you?”

He skips past manners this time. Crouched down, as the snow falls, he asks, “What do you know?”
“I know you got a crutch I could use. Helps me find food.”

“It’s yours.”

Pleased, she holds the crutch in her lap, running her hand over the length of it, not even minding the dents. But none of these tools and none of her herbs will fix the problem that presses at all of them in the muck of snow that turns brown when it lays over trash and waste.

“If I tell you what those tubes are for? Tell me how I can get his voice back.”

They have to leave. York isn’t going to give up any of his shit unless Jensen agrees to duck behind a dumpster and... well, it’s not going to happen. Madge can distract Henry, but no one can distract Jared, and those eyes would be on him the entire time. Jensen won’t have it. He’s done what he’s had to for them to survive. He has crawled and begged and put parts of his body to work he hadn’t realized had value. But they aren’t desperate for much else right now. The herbs are enough. There is a limit to what Jensen can or will give at any moment.

It occurs to Jensen that the Old Lady is holding out for more.

He sneers at her as he kicks a bed pan towards her bags.

“Tell me,” Jensen repeats, dropping his voice to a whisper. “Tell me now or I take it all back.”

Laughter from the Old Lady sounds like a dumpster lid clattering shut. “They’re healing tubes. It’s before the purge.” She cradles the crutch, gripping onto it until her knuckles turn white. “The purge releases toxins from the harvest. When it’s your turn, you give the State organs. Organs for a program. Little hearts and kidneys and livers. Eyes are good, too, if they can be spared. Good price for them.”

Words begin to match up with what the old man told Jensen in the car. The harvest. The purge.

The Old Lady basks in attention. “I see it all the time. All the time. They’re taking all of us, one by one, marching us into white rooms with knives and crinkly paper. Pop! One organ out. Pop! They help themselves. I heard some of the Bookers eat them like grapes.”

“Don’t embellish,” Jensen barks.

She blinks at him.

Jensen breathes out through his nose. “Stick to the basics.”

“Maybe you have a bite of food to spare?”

“No! You’ve bled enough out of me—talk!” Madge looks over. Jensen grits his teeth and turns back to the Old Lady. His voice is kept at its lowest, quietest register. “How do they pick people for the tubes?”

What skin shows of hers is covered in scabs and sores. She scratches at a large blister on the side of her face, frowning now that she has fallen out of favor. “Well,” she huffs, “they have a number. Your number is selected, you show up, and copies of your organs are made.”

“Then what?”

“They sew them back in.”

There wasn’t a scar on Jared, not even a blemish or a bruise. The water in the tubes must fix that.
Even now, dirt and dust sloughs off of Jared when it otherwise sticks to Jensen. Snow brightens his skin.

“So they... they just let them back out into the world? That’s it?”

“Of course not,” the Old Lady mutters. “Their chords are cut. The voice is gone. You don’t get that back.”

Jensen fills in the blanks—cutting vocal chords assures that information isn’t spread. Just how the Old Lady knows all of this will remain unknown. He doesn’t want to talk to her any more than necessary.

“That’s it?”

“Do you have bread?”

Muttering, Jensen reaches into his coat. He picks out a small piece of meatloaf from a pocket on the left. It’s soggy and falling apart, but she stuffs it into her mouth, chewing loudly. “You give... the organs...” Jensen tries his best not to watch her eat. “…they take the voice. They heal you up. They set you up with a home and money. Very nice. And your number is never picked again. Bookers only eat copies once.”

Every muscle in Jensen’s body tenses.

Throbbing escalates in his ribs until he breathes out ice.

That can’t be. He tells her, “But I... there isn’t anything on them when they come out. They’re naked.”

She shakes her head and scratches at her face again. Licking her fingers, she mentions that money and access to their apartments aren’t in physical form. “It’s all in the eyes.” She points to her own and Jensen’s. “That’s how they keep it. That’s how we can’t get in.”

Jensen can’t breathe.

He can’t think.

He can’t function the way he’s supposed to—the way he must.

All he can do is see red as he stands and turns to the person he’s spent five years searching for.

Blood rushes to Jensen’s face. He points square at Jared. “You have money,” Jensen shouts, his voice filling the alley, “and you let us eat out of a dumpster?! You have a place to stay and you let us sleep in the rain?! When were you going to do something? Or were you planning on leaving?”

Steps are taken towards Jared, who backs away, frightened.

“No,” Jensen bellows. “You don’t get to be scared. Is it true?! Tell me right now—nod, shake your head, play the god damn invisible violin, I don’t care!”

He doesn’t care about the organs. He doesn’t care about the operation, the harvest, the purge, the magical water, or the numbers that are drawn to select candidates. None of that matters. This does. Two inches away from Jared, Jensen leans in and asks his question in a clear, urgent whisper.

“Do you have money and a place to stay, Jared?”
There aren’t layers enough to conceal the way Jensen is trembling with anger. The contents of his pockets shake. Venus moves.

Tears well up in Jared’s eyes and spill down his pristine, pale cheeks.

He nods.

Jensen rotates the way he has explained the planets rotate around the sun. Something stronger than gravity pulls him towards his kid.

It’s time to run.

Chapter End Notes

answers! but how reliable are they?
Every morning at three, a white, unmarked truck pulls up to Sommerset and does a U-turn. It doesn’t stop, it barely pauses. All it does is make its U-turn and drive down Sommerset again, back to where it came from. Jensen has watched it for years whenever he was near.

The van is more reliable than getting soup from a line.

Holding Henry in his coat, Jensen crosses Sommerset and Tulane seconds after the truck turns.

All this time.

There was a way—even for just a few hours—to keep Henry out of the cold and the rain and the misery that is a life spent in the shadows of dumpsters and Jared did nothing. Jensen can’t forgive that. He can and has forgiven a lot of things—but not that. He could never withhold anything from his kid.

Jensen has slept on the ground. On crates. On fire escapes. On pieces of cardboard. On a bed of plastic bottles he fashioned together once to make something like a mattress. On dumpster lids. On tires. Against brick walls, cement walls, and wood walls. Inside tunnels, doorways, and nooks. Whatever the surface, wherever they were, Jensen always had Henry in the safest place. Sometimes that was his lap. Other times it was the dumpster lid, underneath the cover of a duffel bag, or on two crates to keep him elevated and out of the rain.

The temperature drops.

Snow begins to fall faster, accompanied by a razor sharp wind that cuts not only through exposed skin, but anything not fit to stand against it. A twinge in Jensen’s back slows him down, combined with the low visibility and a persistent ache in his ribs. The streets and alleyways are dim. An hour is left before sunrise. A few windows have an orange cast to them, but as of yet, not another soul is on this stretch of Tulane.

Leaving Jared was easy.

Turning around, taking Henry, and running away was easy.

In no time at all, he disappeared with Henry, far, far away from Jared and the gargled noises he made with his mouth. Where was that effort when Henry was sleeping in the rain? Where was that desperation when Jensen was scuffing for something to feed Henry?

It serves Jared right.

This is what Jensen has to do.

It was a mistake to think that Jared would… that they could…

What kind of person watches their own flesh and blood eat scraps from garbage bags? Who sits there, silent and unmoving, staring at their kin, judging even in that silent manner when they have a solution the entire time? What’s the use in staying with them? Why didn’t Jared leave? He didn’t have to stay with them. And Jensen and Henry are certainly not obligated to stay with him.
They’ve survived—just the two of them.

Jensen’s footsteps are covered in fresh snow seconds after he makes them.

Venturing further into the alleys and away from the streets, Jensen’s body screams at him to stop moving. The snow is heavy. It will stick. It is determined to bury the city with wall after wall of howling, snapping snow. The rage of it covers landmarks. Eventually, Jensen has to stop, not only because his back demands it, but because he has lost his bearings. He took a right, then another right, and a left, and all of this should lead them back to the retirement home. But he wants to change their trajectory. This isn’t weather they can wait out on some crates. An umbrella will do nothing. And if they fall asleep in this…

Desperate, Jensen lifts Henry out of his coat and onto a dumpster. This alleyway is narrow. It has room for one dumpster and a series of smaller trash bins, but nothing more. Kicking aside broken crates, Jensen shoves a layer of snow off the lid before he props Henry up.

“Daddy,” Henry cries over the din of snow. “Daddy…”

“It’s okay.” No, it’s not. “Buddy, it’s okay.” He hadn’t expected the snow to turn into a storm. “We’re gonna rest here. Just a minute.”

Luck makes an appearance. The dumpster isn’t locked. At a frantic pace, Jensen announces his intentions, even if he can’t hear his own words, and he places Henry on the ground, in between his legs as a shield. Pain harpoons his rib cage. The only way to lift the lid is to brush the accumulated snow off of it. With the wind whipping in all directions, no matter how he does it, the snow he sloughs off flies into his face. He blinks, coughs, and grits his teeth. All they have to do is stay dry and awake until the worst of this passes. That’s all.

He should have forced Jared to take them somewhere.

He should have laid it on Jared—emotionally or physically—until he led them to a hotel and paid for it.

Not that it would have worked.

Not that he can stand to be around Jared for another minute.

The lid gives way. Jensen flips it. It lands against the wall with a rattle and a thud. Ten seconds are spent for Jensen to inspect the inside. He reaches in and feels for anything sharp. Clear. It’s fine. It doesn’t even smell so bad. There’s only half an inch of snow inside, which means the lid is secure and this is okay. It’s okay. Quickly, he picks Henry up again and lowers him in.

All of this has distracted Jensen.

As he holds onto the lid with one hand and the rim of the dumpster with the other, about to climb in, he doesn’t notice a light on the snow nearby.

Rough hands pull Jensen back, extracting and wrenching him away.

The lid slams shut.

Jensen is pitched into a pile of snow, his head knocking against the brick wall opposite the dumpster. Holding his hands up, he shouts, the noise of it lost to the surge of biting, relentless wind. A steel-toed, black boot finds its way directly into his stomach.
A light shines into Jensen’s eyes.

Snow doesn’t hide black uniforms, nor does it hamper the black car waiting at the end of the alleyway.

Stay still. Don’t move. Don’t be a threat.

These are the things Jensen tells himself.

Hold up. Up. Hands up.

Fists and boots rain down all over him, beating him until he’s spitting out blood and gasping for breath. The force of it all takes Jensen’s breath away. Over and over again, into the pit of his stomach, that boot pounds. Whump whump whump. Jensen spits up. His face is smacked. And then, that same pair of merciless hands yank his hair and begin to drag him towards the car. No. Not again. Not the station. Jensen doesn’t even know… he doesn’t even know the intersection… where this alley is…

From the alley, the dumpster lid clatters. Through blood and spit and snow, Jensen sees small hands lift up the lid.

No.

Faceless, masked, bundled up, the patrol pauses. It drops Jensen in the snow of the sidewalk, and turns, baton raised high.

The higher the baton, the more brutal the force.

Jensen crawls on his middle and reaches out for the patrol’s boot.

Three steps away from the dumpster, a car begins to honk—the patrol car.

Stepping over Jensen, the patrol runs to the car, where the driver’s side door is open and an unauthorized person is in the seat, pressing down on the horn repeatedly, flashing the lights on and off. Throughout the alley and into the street, the sound of it all is jarring and riotous. Lights in windows above them switch on. Jensen hefts himself up doesn’t look back to the car. On all fours, he drags his way back to the dumpster and knocks twice against the side of it.

Hide.

Blood and snow fill Jensen’s rapidly dimming vision. Something is broken. Something tender and frail. He lays in the snow, sweating and hot and panting. He could burn right through this storm.

A door slams shut. Jensen braces himself, his breathing coming in small, pained gasps.

Tires squeal against slick pavement. The patrol car is gone.

Why?

Doesn’t matter. None of it matters unless. He can. He can. Someone or something will be back. Something worse than one patrolman. If he can get up. If he can crawl into… if he could see… 501 Maple Street…

Footsteps crunch into the snow nearby.

Someone else is still here.
Jensen moans as hands work their way into the front of his jacket, lifting him out of the snow. Trembling, he holds his hands up. This is the last of his strength. All he can hope for is that the dumpster remains untouched. He’s alone. Alone.

Alone, he lets out one last, cold exhale and passes into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

as always, thanks for your patience! i’m getting back into updating things, hooray! :D
Daddy does not open the dumpster.

Henry looks up, blinking away snow and wind, hidden underneath a cardboard box. There used to be food in this box. He can still smell it—tomatoes and cheese. There are other smells in here too, like the kind when clothes get wet for a very long time.

Daddy did the signal to hide.

And Henry didn’t listen once already.

And now, daddy is on the ground. The bad person hurt him. The bad person made daddy go really quiet and really still and Henry panicked. He had to look. Just look. Because he thought he might not see daddy for a long time again. But because he wanted to look, daddy is not inside the dumpster with him. He is not picking and searching through things to find something for Henry to eat. He is not smoothing out Henry’s hair or calling him baby or holding him close to block out the sound of the wind or asking him what color things is.

What color is snow?

White.

What color is blood?

Red.

If he could, daddy would smile and nod and tell him, “Good job, buddy.”

What color are the hands that reach for him, under the box and crumpled up paper and tin cans?

Blue.

This person and daddy. They had a fight. Adults do that sometimes. They don’t always agree—that’s what daddy said about fights. Adults get upset and they maybe say mean things.

Henry doesn’t understand what this adult said to be mean.

Because he can’t talk.

Daddy’s friend reaches in and lifts Henry out, cans and plastic bags rustling. He puts Henry on the ground. The snow goes up to Henry’s middle, but nothing falls from the sky anymore. A lot of snow is pink. The snow around daddy is bright red, like a fire truck.

Band-aids.

Daddy needs a lot of band-aids. Henry has some in his pockets. He can share. He would share if daddy would just wake up and start moving and hold Henry close, warm and safe. With some time, he can take care of daddy, the same way daddy has taken care of him. And Henry knows how to look for food. He could do it. He’s been watching daddy for a while and he's smart. Leila and daddy said so.
The friend is tall.

He kneels down, like daddy does whenever he needs to talk to Henry.

Is daddy going to wake up soon?

This friend looks at Henry like he’s something new and shiny. Like he’s a pretty doll in the toy store window or a nickel out of Leila’s purse. He looks at Henry like that, but a little sad. Henry smiles when he sees toys; why doesn’t this man ever smile when he sees Henry?

A finger is pointed at Henry. Then, two fingers make the shape of a person walking. After that, the man points at himself. He does this one more time, slowly, so Henry can understand.

Follow me.

Gloved hands hold out a corner of the sweater the tall man is wearing. Henry should hold onto it as they walk.

Henry shakes his head. He’s sposda listen to adults. He listens to Leila. She tells him to do something and he does it because she’s one of his friends. This man is daddy’s friend, but he’s not Henry’s friend yet.

The man who can’t talk watches him as he stumbles over snow.

He will not go anywhere without daddy.

Even if.

Even if that forever sleep happened to him. Even if there is dying. Even though daddy told him—if this happens, you go to Leila. You go far away. You don’t look back at daddy, you don’t wait, you find Leila and you stay with her. You be a good boy and you leave.

He won’t be a good boy now, not anymore. Daddy hasn’t moved this whole time. That’s bad. That’s not sposda happen. Someone has to fix him. Can’t this friend do it? Can’t he do it, please?

Sound doesn’t come out of the man’s mouth. He only nods. Henry doesn’t let go of daddy’s coat until the man scoops daddy up, off of and away from the snow. Just like the man, Henry follows after him silent, without a word.

He clings to the man’s sweater and puts on a plastic bag over his head, like daddy taught him.

They walk.

Chapter End Notes

it's tough writing like a five year old thinks. henry's a very smart five year old, but still.

small chapter, but an important one.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There’s a voice somewhere in the background.
Straining to listen, another voice appears, this one smaller, curious.

“Would you like a glass of milk?”

“Yes, please.”

“I have some chocolate to stir in. Do you like chocolate?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“You don’t have to call me sir.”

“Daddy says it’s polite.”

“You are polite. But you don't have to call me sir.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll mix some in and you tell me if you like it. How’s that sound? If you don’t like it, I’ll drink it and get you plain milk.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t have much to eat. All I had in the fridge before… uh, never mind. Do you like cereal?”

“Yes.”

“How’s your milk?”

“Good. Thank you.”

“See, you are polite. You know please and thank you.”

“Daddy taught me.”

“That’s good.”

“Can I—can I have a blue bowl?”

“Sure you can.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“…”
“Henry?”
“Yes?”
“How old are you?”
“Five.”
“Do you like being five?”
“Yeah. I can help with things. Leila, she let me help in the shoe store.”
“What did you do in the shoe store?”
“I-I took money from pretty ladies and counted it. Like this: one, two, three.”
“That’s really good. You helped out a lot.”
“It was fun. Do you want me to count things for you?”
“Oh, yes. Let’s see. Uhm… here we go. See these?”
“Yes.”
“These are batteries. I need them for this little thing.”
“That’s a funny little thing.”
“It is, isn’t it?”
“Can I touch it?”
“Yeah.”
“Does it hurt?”
“No, Henry, it doesn’t hurt.”
“…”
“Didn’t you like the cereal?”
“I did.”
“Are you full?”
“Um. Yes.”
“Are you saving it for later, Henry?”
“…when daddy wakes up, he has to eat.”
“I… I have food for him, too. When he wakes up, he’s not going to be able to eat solids right away. You know what a solid is? Something hard and crunchy like cereal.”
“It can be soggy in a while.”
“You’re right. But we’ll give him something else, okay? Eat the rest and you can count the batteries for me.”

“Is daddy going to be okay?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re going to help him?”

“Henry.”

“…?”

“Finish up. We’ll talk in a little bit. I have to switch out batteries and do a few other things.”

There’s no mistaking it.

That is Jared’s voice.

Not terribly long ago, when it wasn’t snowing and the sky was a little clearer, Jensen found something unusual when he was scuffing. He pulled at it, careful not to rip what he had found, and wrestled it from underneath a heap of egg shells and plastic bottles. The circular, blue, construction paper top was bent, and many of the streamers hanging from it were warped, but it was mostly intact. All it took was some wiping away of egg shells and gunk, plus a bit of string from his pack, and he was able to give Henry an actual toy. He explained it carefully as they sat on top of a dumpster, one of the big gray ones near Pine and Chestnut. It was a wind catcher. Man, he was so proud of that damn thing and he hadn’t even made it, he’d just pulled it out of the trash and untangled the streamers a bit. But to Henry, it was an hour of sitting back and watching something beautiful dance in the wind.

Jensen hung it up on a nail sticking out from the brick wall the dumpster was set against.

Every change in the wind was a clap of small hands and a beaming, dimpled smile.

He snuck kisses in, holding Henry close, a serious voice in his head telling him that he was being too soft, too indulging. He had to limit affection. There couldn’t be too much of it. Life didn’t allow them to feel so much. Jensen didn’t want to raise someone ill-equipped to deal with what was out there.

That voice in his head shut up the second the string on the wind catcher snapped.

Carried off by the wind that had amused them, it fluttered off into the street and out of their reach. He hadn’t even made it.

And yet, he was crushed when it flew away.

So he turned the whole thing around.

“When it flies off, you make a wish,” he said to watery hazel eyes. “If it never flies away, you don’t get a wish. See? Now you get a whole wish all to yourself.”
Whatever Henry wished for, he did it while holding onto Jensen, tighter and closer than before.

Memories like these mock him.

They make him desperate, desolate, and selfish.

Paranoia churns through him, resulting in sweat pouring off his entire body. Wherever he is, he’s naked. Is he in a tube? He opens his mouth, expecting a rush of water, thinking he’s going to gulp in a wave of it. Did they do it yet? Did they take what they wanted? Did they harvest? Have they mined him for tissues and organs and tendons and blood? Funny. Fuck. That’s funny. Ha, ha, ha, ha —there’s an unlimited supply of nightmares in his skull, right out in the open, they could crack right in there and take those too. Take it all.

Predators use every part of their victims.

Scoop it all out. Reap what this life has given him.

He’s almost disappointed when all he sucks in is air.

And then there it is.

Maybe they can use that too.

Jensen screams.

Chapter End Notes

ahhhh! even i’m all like, "what’s next?! jared has a voice?! what?!"

next chapter is going to be rough. :/
There is nothing friendly or reserved about Jared’s hands all over Jensen.

Palms and fingers press into Jensen’s bare chest, and then rotate back to his shoulders, scooping him up, lifting him from his horizontal place to a vertical one. Aggravated and miserable, Jensen struggles. Where are they going? What the fuck is Jared doing? Did he volunteer him for the tube? Bits and pieces of these thoughts are sputtered out, crumbling from his mouth in fragments. Let him go. Let him go, he can walk on his own.

The floor underneath becomes cold and hard. A bright white light switches on, detectable even through his closed eyes. Somewhere above, a whirring can be heard, and with every step Jensen takes, the louder it becomes. This place is cold and silent, save for the terrible drone of fan blades, great, big, long wings that turn constantly. Where is Jared taking him? What kind of machine is he putting Jensen into? Where is his body going to end up—on what table, in what tube, suspended in how much water for how long?

“Stop screaming,” Jared hisses into his ear, pushing him forward. His feet slap on the ground. Being naked doesn’t bother him. All of his scars and sores and scrapes and bruises are exposed. Frigid air brushes over them, sinking and settling in the longer he’s in this place. Opening his eyes hurts. Nothing is in focus and there is crust all over the edge of his vision.

“I said stop screaming.” Again, Jared is biting and blunt. “You’re scaring Henry with your racket.”

Finally, Jensen can string more than a few words together. He is at the edge of something hard and glacial. They have stopped moving. As he teeters forward, unsteady and weak, he can feel tendrils of stream rising up.

How fucking nice of Jared to tell Jensen what might or might not scare Henry.

Jared’s hands stay on Jensen’s shoulders, bearing down and applying pressure. “Get in.”

“No! Let me go…!”

“Just get in!”

“LET ME GO.”

A ball the size of an orange hits Jensen in the back of the head. The force of it isn’t enough to knock him out, but it is enough to pitch him forward. He holds his hands out to brace himself against a fall. Jared’s arms wrap around him. There is no heat to Jared’s skin or his breath, though Jensen can feel Jared’s muscles working with effort to pull Jensen down.

“You have to make everything so fucking difficult!” Jared wrenches Jensen into the steam. The sound of his voice escalates. “Why’d you run from me, Jensen?! Why? What was the point in that? Look what you did, you could’ve gotten yourself killed in that alley and Henry would’ve seen the entire thing. What kind of harm was I to you, huh? Sit down.”

Water. It’s clear, clean, warm water that sloshes around Jensen as his trunk is shoved down and his ass hits the bottom of a tub. Jared’s hands are cool on Jensen’s shoulders—holding him in place—
despite the temperature of the water. He is like the tile floor and the bathtub.

Jensen is in a bathroom.

“Y-you had… money… and… this…” Jensen spits out, lightheaded and still without his vision completely intact. It’s more than steam and crust in his eyes. There is a stubborn, milky haze in between him and anything around him.

“Yes, I have money and this apartment,” Jared snorts. His hands tighten their grip. “Don’t even think about leaving this tub, do you understand me?”

“…you’re talking.”

“Sure.”

“I felt sorry for you.”

Hands lifted, Jared lets out a harsh laugh. “Don’t talk, Jensen.”

Who is this person—where is the guy passively sitting and staring at them in the alleyway, never making a sound or a move or giving any indication that he could do either of those things? Where are the sad looks and helpless footsteps? Quaking, splintering chills run through Jensen, from head to toe. Where’s the young man huddled next to a dumpster, pleading with Jensen not to leave…

Jensen wipes at his eyes and blinks through the film. He can see the door.

Water shucks off of him as he attempts to lug himself out of the tub.

Out. That’s all he can think of—out.

“What did I say?” Jared grumbles, walking over from a sink. In three steps, Jared is in front of Jensen, shoving him back down into the tub, easily overpowering any flinches or flails from Jensen. “You’re running a… fever…” Not a note of sympathy hangs in Jared’s tone. Hands push down on Jensen’s chest again. “…because you were an idiot and ran off into a snow storm. Stay still! If your fever doesn’t break, you’re going to go blind!”

In the middle of their fight, over the ripple of water, another voice emerges.

“Daddy?”

Before Jensen can reply, Jared slams him down, nearly lying flat on his back, water lapping at his ears. Jared’s lips press against the curve of Jensen’s ear. But they don’t move. Jared speaks, but his mouth does nothing. “I remember, Jensen,” Jared mutters, his hands near Jensen’s throat. “I remember squatting by that dumpster and pushing out his head. And if you don’t cooperate with me right now by shutting up and staying still, I’m going to give you memories you can’t forget, either. Do you understand?”

Concerned, Henry asks again. “Is my daddy okay?”

“Are you okay, Jensen?” Jared asks, an edge to his voice as he moves away.

Breathing hard, a blanket of uneasiness is cast over him. There’s so much wrong, so much backwards and twisted inside out, that he can’t make sense of any of it. A slice of reason punctures the fevered mist.

“I’m fine,” he croaks out. “I’m fine, buddy. Go wait outside.”
This time, when Jared lets go, Jensen only moves to situate himself in the tub.

“I finished counting batteries.” Henry sounds relieved.

Jared steps over to the doorway. His tone softens. “Good. Did you finish your sandwich?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. I’m going to wash him, and after that, he’s going to sleep for a while. Wait for me where I showed you.”

“Okay.”

Jensen is sweating. The bathroom door clicks shut. Light from the ceiling begins to fade. Unexpected fatigue plucks away at him, tugging his consciousness towards darkness one more time. It’s been a while since he’s had a fever. But Henry is okay. He’s warm and dry and hopefully, Jared has had enough sense to get him into a change of clothes.

It’s easy now, with the water and the scent of flowers around him to lull into a void.

It could be a little drop of poison that smells so sweet mixed into the bathwater.

Something inside him has him pack away his fear, his worry, and his resentment.

Dipped into the water, a washcloth gently swipes over his eyes, then his forehead. He lets out a shaky, trembling sigh. Not a part of him aches like it should. And Jared’s voice as he speaks next is much too relaxed.

“He’s a good kid.”

Hours later, in the middle of the night, Jensen wakes up.

Horizontal again.

Startled, he sits up, pitch-black all around. Sheets and blankets twist around him from his sudden movements. The smell of shampoo and soap is on him. He brings his hands up to his face and tests for bruising, for swelling, for the tell-tale injuries of running into patrol.

Not a scratch.

His nose only has the slight bump to it he’s always had. Further down, on his chest and middle, his fingertips scan and skim, feeling for sores and raw, tender scabs. The absence of these things causes panic to pulse in his chest.

How can this be? He’s never been without some kind of stinging, open wound. The thought of the tubes comes back to him, but his skin is warm, and a faint sheen of sweat hangs over his face. He is not alabaster, and he is not unfeeling. He’s just… unsoiled.

“You’re awake.”

Flinching at the sound of Jared’s voice, Jensen’s breath hitches. The haze is gone from his eyes, but he can’t adjust to this lack of light. “Yeah,” he exhales, the muscles in his throat working. “Where…”
“Here.” Jared turns on a small cube of orange light. Something silver gleams above Jared, but Jensen only catches a glimpse of it. The light washes over Jared, softening him, casting a serene glow, making him appear almost warm. Convenient. Sitting in a high-backed chair three feet away from the bed, Jared leans forward. His eyes are serious and solemn, and his mouth is set in a line. The cube is placed on a nightstand in between them; the light doesn’t reach Jared’s mouth. It doesn’t have to for Jensen to know his mouth isn’t moving as he speaks.

“If I show you something, are you going to scream?”

Jensen shakes his head. “No.”

“Do I have your word?”

“Uh huh. Henry?”

“Asleep,” Jared murmurs, folding one leg over the other. He’s dressed in loose, black attire. Jensen is still without clothes, but there are layers of blankets over him. As he draws up one of the blankets to his chest, Jared adds, “…in the next room.”

“Okay.” Covered up, Jensen maintains his line of sight focused on Jared.

The cube is slid back, towards Jared, its light extending out until he reaches Jared’s face once again. A second flutters past where Jensen sees something like worry in Jared’s eyes, but the second is smothered and replaced with a removed, distant look.

That silver gleam returns.

Suspended in air, a sphere floats out in front of Jared. It is smooth all over, shiny, and simple. This must be what hit him in the head. It moves independently, without Jared moving or commanding it. Closer and closer, it inches towards Jensen, hovering in the air unlike anything Jensen has ever seen before. Hazel eyes follow the motion of the sphere and keep watchful track of Jensen’s reaction.

“I’m going to give you one piece of advice, Jensen.”

Jared’s voice—just as Jensen remembers it from before—filters out from the sphere, smooth and pure.

His lips are stationary.

And Jensen is riveted in place.

“Don’t run from me anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

woo! an update! i’m done with big bangs for now (yay) and back to updating these fics. House is hopefully next. <3
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It is the last few hours of nighttime.

Jensen no longer sweats through the sheets or tosses and turns in his sleep. Alone, he is motionless, save for the rise and fall of his bare chest. He lies underneath a new change of bedding. What remains of the fever slips off of him, cast away like a threadbare sweater. This illness departs and fatigue sets into him in its place. The sheets covering him are as murky in color as the rest of the room. Everything is dark. Even with the impending sunrise, Jensen feels that this room could block it out and contain permanent dusk.

On his back, he traces the line of his nose and then the shape of his lips.

No bath or shave at Leila’s has ever left him so smooth, so unblemished. The dirt could wash off of him, yes, but all of his scars and bruises and sores have left. Closing his eyes, his breath peaks. There is nothing between him and the silk sheets. Underneath him, the bed is neither hard nor soft, and the room is kept heated by some unseen furnace.

No fire in a garbage can. No flame made from newspaper scraps.

Guilt pours over him. Here he is, warm and resting, and where is his kid?

How can he lie here thinking about silk sheets when…

A door opens.

Light from the outside cuts in, blocked only by the silhouette of a broad-shouldered figure. Floating behind, the silver orb follows in a steady line. Jensen begins to sit up, slipping somewhat.

“Lie down.” Something is in Jared’s arms. The orb circles around and rests on the nightstand.

“I…” Jensen starts, his voice coarse.

“Lie down.” Without any command or adjustment in its settings, the orb is able to change Jared’s tone of voice—quiet and stern. As he steps up to the bedside, Jensen fears that he might want to share this bed. He might expect a place next to Jensen. Maybe this is his bed. And in his bed, Jared has the right to create the rules.

Half up, half down, Jensen catches a glimpse of chestnut hair splayed over Jared’s arm. He swallows back the protest crawling up his throat.

Henry sleeps in Jared’s hold, his thumb in his mouth.

This moment is odd. Something in Jensen’s stomach twists. How did it go? Five years back, in one of hundreds of alleyways, Jared’s blood was drying on the pavement, mixing with sewage. Jensen was pressing down on his belly, trying to get the blood to let up; there was so much of it. And the afterbirth, he had never expected that. He had never given much thought to the process of giving birth. He wasn’t capable of it, so why did he have to care?

That was it—and that is why this seems strange.
Henry was minutes old when Jensen cut the cord between him and Jared, cleaned out his eyes, nose, and mouth, and bundled him in the singed quilt Jared had purposefully set aside. From the start, Henry was a good kid. He was quiet for a newborn, gurgling but not crying.

Jensen passed the baby over, his arms covered in Jared’s blood.

And now, Jared passes Henry over, his hands washed of Jensen’s blood.

Instead of a quilt, Henry is dressed in a black shirt four sizes too large for him. Jensen cradles him close. Socks without any holes or stitches are on Henry’s feet, and underneath the shirt is a pair of loose shorts. Lying down, head on Jensen’s chest, Henry stirs for a moment. He snuffles and reaches out for Jensen. Small fingers curl around the nape of Jensen’s neck, holding on securely. Necessary adjustments are made of the sheets and blankets until together they are wrapped in warmth.

There was never this luxury for Jared.

The best Jensen could do for Jared at the time was peel him orange slices and bear down on him to stop the inundation of blood.

“Sleep.” The orb whispers. Jared steps back towards the door. “You both need it.”

But what happens now? Where exactly are they?

Exhaustion hooks itself into Jensen’s eyes, dragging the lids down despite the turning of his mind.

The door shuts.

For the very first time, Jensen and Henry sleep in a bed.

Chapter End Notes

small chapter, but more is on the way. <3
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

There is now art for this fic thanks to the lovely quickreaver! It's gorgeous and amazing. Please, send her some love through a comment here or at her tumblr: quickreaver.tumblr.com. Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Did he wash you?”

“No.”

“Did you wash yourself?”

“Yeah, all by myself.”

“Good job, buddy.”

“He put me in the tub, daddy, and then there was pink water.”

“Pink?”

“Yup. It was nice. Look, ‘member when I got that… that cut? It’s gone. You too, daddy.” Henry presses his hands on either side of Jensen’s face, testing for bruises. “You got no bumps or scratchies here.”

No blade or razor has ever given Jensen a shave this smooth. Henry is correct; all of their scrapes or scars have vanished, including any minimal ones hardly ever worth mentioning or paying attention to. They are both miraculously pristine.

Curtains have been drawn back.

Daylight spans across the dark wood floor, fanning out from a window behind them. Jensen can’t see the view, but he can see the sky. Outside, gray clouds loom, the kind that bring more snow. The thought of cold wind and icy precipitation seems impossible from this bed. He lies on his back with Henry straddling his chest, and continues to ask a few more questions about what Henry and Jared did while he slept. Henry was given the task of counting batteries, then he was handed a coloring book and crayons, except the coloring book only had pictures of the insides of people. He colored in hearts and lungs and spidery things called veins. Jared gave him a sandwich and soup before bed, plus a big glass of warm, sweet milk.

Nothing about what Henry says or how he describes it is terrible or alarming.

It’s too… normal.

“Daddy?” Dimples peek out in a hesitant frown. Jensen knows this tone. “…I gotta…”

“Yeah, baby.” Jensen presses a loud kiss to Henry’s cheek, tugging him forward, lifting him up, and scooting from the bed.
Not one muscle aches. Not one joint pops. Jensen’s body acts as if it is separate from the rest of his experience; one minute he’s scooping Henry up from bed and the next he’s walking without any issue. It’s not just the patrol beating the shit out of him that’s gone—it’s every tissue rejuvenated and every muscle relaxed. How much of that is due to sleeping in an actual bed, and whatever Jared has done to them?

Pink water.

Was that blood from Henry’s cuts and scrapes, which would have tinged the water, or liquid similar to the stuff inside the tubes?

“Daddy.”

“Huh?”

Henry smiles and bumps their foreheads together. “You don’t have clothes.”

Looking down at his nakedness, Jensen laughs quietly. “Oh. You’re right.”

Years of running, dodging, and scuffing have kept Jensen lean. Other things have helped—the lack of food, the constant search for something in a bag that will stretch a little longer in his stomach—but he remains more astonished at the sight of his new skin.

He sets Henry down on the floor for a minute and looks around their space. This must not be Jared’s room. There’s hardly anything in it. In the center, against a wall, is the bed, and behind it are two large windows. On the right side of the bed is a plain, black nightstand. Next to that is the chair Jared occupied, also black. From what Jensen can see as he scans the room from his place near the door, there are no personal ornaments or decorations.

This is just a room.

“Want my shirt?” Henry offers, holding his arms up.

“Nah, buddy. I look good, right?”

Giggling, Henry nods. When Jensen lifts him up again, he holds onto Jensen’s neck. “I can see your butt.”

“My butt? Really? Well, is it a nice butt at least? Would you say it’s an amazing butt?” Jensen kisses Henry on the nose and relishes having him this close again. In his jokes and kisses are his apologies for fucking up. He should have known better.

Walking to the door that must lead to the rest of the place, Jensen braces himself to see Jared. Maybe they can talk. Maybe they can do that without one of them getting upset… at least, not right away.

Jensen half expects the door to be locked from the outside. That is how things have been going lately.

Gratitude fills him as the handle twists without an issue. He pulls the door open; with Henry balanced in his left arm, he peeks out. They are at the end of a long, white hallway. Jensen and Henry have not been inside many buildings, let alone homes, but this is drastically different from what they’ve seen. There isn’t much room at Leila’s. She has the shop in front and living quarters just behind and above it. However, she keeps it all very neat and clean of course, but here, there is ample space, even in this hallway alone. Jensen walks past six more doors, three on either side. Those could be bathrooms or more rooms like the one they woke up in.
His footsteps are soundless on the polished, dark wood floor.

A window at the end of the hallway provides light, but so do illuminated discs on the ceiling. As in the room they woke up in, there are no paintings, no photographs, and no decorations on the walls. Jensen can see his reflection in the floor. Surrounded by this bare simplicity, he steps into a larger room, where he begins to feel uncomfortable about his nudity. Maybe he should have grabbed a sheet from the bed.

“How do you know where the bathroom is?” he whispers to Henry, nosing Henry’s cheek.

“I don’t remember, daddy.”

“Okay. We’ll find it.”

This space seems to be the living room. Everything is plain and sleek and impersonal—except for a vase of white orchids on a circular table in the middle of two couches. Besides themselves, the orchids seem to be the only other living things.

Jensen can see the front door and entryway.

Why would Jared leave them alone? He couldn’t expect them to stay inside the room all day, could he?

Breathe, Jensen reminds himself. There is a bathroom in here somewhere. Next to the kitchen is another hallway. Perhaps the bathroom with the tub Henry and he have now both bathed in is there. He takes two steps over, away from the orchids.

Click.

A lock on the front door turns.

Henry’s grip on Jensen tightens.

Before Jensen can duck behind one of the couches, the door swings open. Jared steps in, shutting the door behind him, the silver orb swinging out in front of him. His eyes immediately land on Jensen and Henry.

“Oh.” Jared’s eyes widen before he looks away. “I didn’t expect you two to be up.”

Dressed in a black suit, with a black shirt, tie, and shoes, Jensen burns to make a crack at how colorful Jared’s life seems. Fortunately, the desperate wiggle Henry gives jolts Jensen back to their original mission. “Bathroom,” he manages to work out, sounding somewhat civil. “We need a bathroom.”

Polished shoes clack on the floor. Jensen and Henry follow after.

This is an astounding difference between the man with stringy hair, watching and never speaking, and whoever this is. The suit fits to the smallest detail, and Jared wears it like a second skin. Questions fill Jensen’s mind as they are led down that second hallway. The orb hovers in front of Jared, though it peeks out on occasion as if it’s checking to see that Jensen and Henry are still there. Can it see? It must be able to. The lack of a camera on the outside of it doesn’t mean it isn’t capable of transmitting some kind of feed. But what does Jensen know?

“Do you need me to come in with you?” Jensen asks when they stop in front of a door.
“No,” Henry murmurs, looking at Jensen and then at Jared. “I’m okay.”

“You sure?”

Henry nods and does another wiggle. The orb nudges the door open, revealing a plain, white marbled bathroom. Jensen can’t tell if it’s the same one he was in before. He sets Henry down and lets him go do his thing. Surprisingly, Henry shuts the door.

Anxious, Jensen stands outside, next to Jared. They are each silent, with their backs to the door. The orb floats out of Jensen’s view. Jared maintains correct, stiff posture, his hands behind his back; Jensen folds his arms over his chest.

“Maybe,” Jared says but does not really say, “I should get you something to put on.”

“Nah. I’m fine.”

“You must be cold.”

“Not as cold as you.” Is this tactic childish? Maybe. But it might get results. Jared’s eyebrows lift and his mouth twitches. Not a hair on his head is out of place, nor is it frizzy, stringy, or messy. His coif—Jensen has heard that word before, but he can’t remember where—is perfectly groomed. It looks like Jared spends a lot of time brushing it. The idea of that in contrast to the man Jensen dragged out from underneath a bench is nearly amusing. Fuck, anything is funny at this point. Downright hilarious.

A response cannot be made.

The door opens. Henry peeks out at both of them, curious and cautious. His eyes stay on Jensen and a smile blooms.

“I can’t reach the sink,” Henry announces. He holds his hands up.

Jensen reaches down and slips his hands underneath Henry’s arms. “C’mere, pal.”

Stepping into the bathroom, Jensen is hesitant to have his back to the door. He can do this. He’s only going to hold Henry up to the faucet and then they can… they can do whatever it is they were going to do for the rest of the day. They have to be somewhere up high. As Henry pumps soap out of a clear dispenser, Jensen adjusts the temperature of the water. He can balance Henry, his pack, three bags, and an umbrella all at once. This is nothing. Synchronized, Henry slides down Jensen’s arm and washes his hands, exactly like Jensen taught him. Dirt doesn’t slough off into the drain this time.

Henry leans into Jensen’s hold. “Can I wash your face?”

“Does my face look dirty?”

“No! …but can I?”

“Sure. Make sure I get clean.”

“I like you clean.”

“I like you clean too, baby.”

Small hands pat down Jensen’s face with warm water.

A larger hand offers Henry a hand towel. Henry doesn’t hesitate to take it from Jared.
Jensen should have gotten a better view of the street from here. He should have checked the condition outside. Better still—he should have looked for clues to exactly who Jared is and what the hell he’s been doing for the past five years. This apartment belongs to him. They don’t give away apartments to people who used to misguidedly sleep under benches.

“Do you want… do you want your face clean too?”

The generosity of a five year old jolts both Jensen and Jared.

Stunned, Jared hesitates in the doorway.

“Yeah, he does,” Jensen murmurs. He kisses Henry on the cheek, looking at Jared. “I’ll hold you, you wash, okay?”

This is Jensen’s first and only thank you. Most of the credit goes to Henry.

Jared leans forward. Not a word sifts out of the now hidden orb. Gently, Henry swipes the towel over the bridge of Jared’s nose. His movements are tender, thoughtful, and tranquil. Halfway through, Jared’s eyes close and his face relaxes. Color seeps into Jared’s face for the first time. A faint, rosy blush spreads from across his nose and into his cheeks.

Hazel eyes meet each other.

Weeks ago, Jensen was digging through a pile of bags at midnight, scuffling for food. Standing here, in this foreign, sanitary place, a chill scores and slices through him.

Familiarity lies inside dumpsters and alleyways.

He doesn’t know his way around Jared’s eyes.
Chapter End Notes

thanks for your patience y'all! <3 please don't forget to leave quickreaver some love.
Henry wants to help with breakfast.

He can’t reach the countertop, so Jared moves a chair and Henry climbs on top. Before Henry can start on his assigned task, Jensen rolls up the baggy sleeves of what must be Jared’s shirt. If he had his pack on him, he could try pinning the sleeves so they’d stay, but he doesn’t, so he does his best.

Shoulder to shoulder, Henry and Jared stand at one of the long kitchen counters.

The resemblance there is unmistakable.

Jensen doesn’t have dimples. His nose is a different shape and his eyes don’t have that elegant tilt to them. Henry’s hair is a shade lighter than Jared’s, but it might darken with time.

Who is to say this is Jared’s first or only child? There was never time to ask. Jensen doesn’t ask now.

It is Henry’s job to whisk the eggs in a bowl without splashing or spilling. Jared will cut the vegetables for their omelets. From the white, humming cooler, Jared pulls out three peppers—one of each, red, yellow, and green. An onion joins the peppers a second later, and Jared sorts through things. Jensen doesn’t look into the fridge. He would prefer not to look in there. Clues to Jared’s time apart from them won’t be hiding inside a crisper.

“Am I doing okay?” Henry whispers. He bites his bottom lip and glances up at Jensen.

Nodding, Jensen is thankful for the opportunity to soothe these concerns. “You’re doing great.”

A few more ingredients are placed on the counter, close to the electric stovetop: a pat of butter, a pint of cream, and a block of cheese. Everything looks fresh, but in a different way. The peppers are not uniform in size. The onion is no larger than a baseball, and the block of cheese is wrapped in wax paper, not sealed in a bag.

None of it comes out of a garbage bag, either.

“Did you go shopping?” Jensen asks, pushing off the counter.

The orb peeks out from Jared’s shoulder, where it usually hovers. As Jared pulls out a cutting board from a cupboard, along with a knife, he replies. His hands are always moving. “Earlier, yes.”

“So you eat.”

“…yes.”

“Regular food?”

Bothered, Jared pauses. He has pierced through a red pepper. “Jensen.”

“What.”

For a moment, it seems like there’s something more Jared wants to say. There is something he would like to utter to put Jensen in his place. However, all he comes up with is, “You should get dressed.
You might get a chill.”

Clothes rest on an island in the center of the open kitchen. They are not leftovers or hand-me-downs or secondhand or even a bit frayed. It was all selected with care, folded, not tossed on top of the surface. Nothing this new has ever turned up in a bin. There has never been enough coin to spend on something like this, either. Even if Jensen could have afforded to walk into a shop and purchase an outfit, he wouldn’t have. Shirts and pants can be mended; every bit of currency he’s had he has spent it on food.

It can’t hurt to accept these things, can it?

He can return them. He will return them.

First, Jensen picks up the pair of drawstring, charcoal pants and steps into them; they are too long in the legs. In two seconds, he carefully folds over the hems. Preferring to remain barefoot, he forgoes the black socks he found aside the pants.

“Do you have a store like Leila?” Henry chimes in, taking a second to look over at Jared, chin tilted up.

“No.” The orb lowers its volume but the tone is somewhat flat, almost uninterested, at least that’s how it could sound to a five year old. “I don’t have a store.”

“Oh.”

Conversation can’t be held up by Henry alone. Jensen waits a few beats, slipping on a black t-shirt, fussing with the sleeves. Say something, Jared. The kid wants to talk. This is big for Henry. He’s shy with most people. It doesn’t have to be much—which kinds of peppers does he think are the best? Is he having fun whisking the eggs? Shit, even something about the cheese would be more interesting. Something. Anything.

Jensen knows that Jared is capable of speaking to Henry. Even through the fever, he remembers their conversation about cereal. But now, it’s almost as if having Henry in the kitchen is a nuisance. The eggs will need a whisk or two by bigger hands, but the kid has tried his best and true to his word, there isn’t a drop spilled. Chopping the peppers and onion seems to be more important to Jared than speaking to his… Jensen stops there. That’s enough out of his head.

“Can I have a blue omelet?” Jensen murmurs, sliding over, bending down, and kissing Henry’s cheek. “Make mine blue, buddy, okay?”

Henry huffs and pouts at the absurd request. “Daddy, the eggs aren’t blue!”

“What? What do you mean they’re not blue?”

“They’re yellow. Right? They’re yellow.”

With this question poised to Jared, Jensen peers over to Jared. Play along. Jared has shed the coat of his suit and rolled up his own sleeves to cook, but he’s still as stiff as a board. There is a coral tint to his face, however, it’s all from the anxiety radiating off of him. From what Jensen can tell, there are multiple facets to Jared; there is one that likes to taunt Jensen with the past, one that enjoys dangling the present in front of him, and yet another that is threatening and severe. While this may be—and Jensen certainly has his own cards to play—there is an unspoken manner of behavior in front of Henry.

Follow it.
Finally, Jared’s mouth forms a tight smile. “Yes. Yes, the eggs are yellow.”

That isn’t a terrible reply, but there is no segway into another joke or any further conversation. Clearly, the Jared who was so touched in the bathroom has been replaced with the usual sort. Jensen adjusts the whisk in Henry’s hand. “I guess you guys win.” He rests his chin on Henry’s shoulder. “But I swear, you can make them blue. If I add green peppers into them, then will they come out blue?”

Curious, Henry mulls this over for a moment. For two whisks, Jensen holds his hand over Henry’s. “N-no. I don’t… maybe?”

“I thought green and yellow make blue,” Jensen adds. “Or maybe I’m just being silly.”

“Yeah. You’re being silly.”

Jensen elbows Jared’s arm.

“Very silly,” Jared says. He looks over to the bowl of eggs and makes eye contact with Henry. A hint of a smile helps; Jensen can tell it’s strained but Henry can’t and that’s what matters. “You did a very good job with the eggs. Do you want to pour them into the pan?”

After a nod, Jared helps Henry down from the chair. Jared touches Henry like he’s afraid. Is he afraid of him? Or afraid he might hurt him? Quiet again, Jared moves the chair a few inches away from the stovetop, where a pan with oil is already waiting. At the turn of a knob, Jensen can see the black, sleek material of the stove begin to brighten. Heat. This is heat without matches or kindling or newspaper or huddling over it so moisture doesn’t put out the flame. All anyone has to do is push the knob in and turn it to the right.

Jensen’s voice comes out more breathy than he means it. “Careful.” He fixes Henry’s sleeves again as Jared passes the bowl over. “Hold it steady.”

“Like this?”

“Yeah. Tip it slow. Easy, baby. There you go.”

Cream was added to the eggs to make them richer. The resulting mix is thick. Henry concentrates, not once looking up from what he’s doing. Jensen eyes the distance between Henry and the burner. He glances over to see Jared fixated on Henry’s expression. They make the same exact one—down to the way their dimples form.

“Just a little back,” Jensen murmurs. His attention wheels back to Henry. “That’s good. You’re all done.”

The next time Jensen notices that Jared is distracted, is when they are eating the results of their work, fifteen minutes later. All three of them sit in a dining room, at a large, plain white table that is out of place with the rest of the dark apartment. Jared has silver. He has candles. He even has crystal glasses.

What he doesn’t have is a sippy cup.

As Henry and Jensen wash up for breakfast, Jared disappears into the hallway with the bathroom. The orb floats in the kitchen, stationary, in the center of the room. Jensen narrows his eyes at it while he dries his hands on a towel. Can it see? Did he leave it here to keep an eye on them? Make sure they don’t grab something while he’s out? Or maybe just to make sure they don’t eat anything extra? Henry taps Jensen’s chin. Jensen leans down and kisses his nose.
He loves them clean.

Henry presses their noses together, hands on Jensen’s face, and coos at the absence of prickly facial hair. The eggs smell good, Henry whispers, can they really eat it? How come daddy’s friend is so nice but so quiet? And why… why does he stare?

Kids are good with asking questions. Adults are not so great at giving answers.

Jensen smushes his mouth against Henry’s cheek and blows out a wet, loud kiss. Distracted, Henry squeals and wiggles in Jensen’s arms. They walk like penguins—look, Jensen knows a thing or two about shit, it might not be a lot but it’s something—into the dining room, where Jensen lifts Henry and sits him in fancy chair.

The orb does not follow them.

“Too short,” Henry giggles, craning up to reach the top of the table. Jensen looks around. He doesn’t see much else that could act as a prop.

“Nah, everyone else is too tall.”

The solution takes a few seconds. Jensen scoops Henry up, sits down on their chair, and lowers Henry into his lap. Content, Henry rests his head against Jensen’s chest, one hand over Jensen’s collarbone.

A second later, Jared walks in, the orb floating after him once more. There is no longer a clack to Jared’s footsteps; he wears only black socks now, and has changed into an outfit that looks nearly identical to the one given to Jensen, except the pants are the correct length.

Jared pauses, two steps away, at the sight of Henry and Jensen.

Henry takes his hands off of Jensen and reaches out for what Jared holds—the sun sippy cup.

“I-I have to fill it,” Jared stammers out. “Juice or milk?”

Bothered by the knowledge that Jared has their stuff in another room—and that he has access to all of it—Jensen bristles. Those are their belongings. And it might not be fucking crystal or shiny silver forks, but it’s theirs and he has no right to go through it.

A soft voice answers Jared’s question. “Milk, please?”

“Okay.”

When Jared comes back, he hands Henry the sippy cup and lays down their meal with the other. In the center of the table, he places the skillet, the omelet still intact. A lid was placed over the skillet for the eggs to rise as they cooked. The cheese has melted. Jared cuts into the omelet and serves Jensen and Henry their pieces first.

“Coffee?” Jared asks, holding up a small, metallic pot.

“No.” Grudgingly, Jensen adds a small thank you.

Using a fork that Jensen has given him, Henry pokes at the omelet. He bumps his head against Jensen’s chest and looks up at him.

“The eggs aren’t blue, daddy.”
Another set of hazel eyes are focused on Jensen. This time, Jensen can’t read the expression.

He breaks eye contact with Jared to press a kiss to Henry’s forehead. After, Henry picks up his sippy cup. It has been cleaned to shine like new. Henry takes a drink, his eyes fluttering from the warmth of the kitchen after cooking, the pull of sweet, cold, clean milk, and the comfort in which they have found themselves.

Comfort they know now because of Jared.

Jensen has no more answers than he has started with. But his mind shuts off for a few moments. The sensation of Henry drinking from his cup, so close and near to Jensen, lulls them both. Jensen’s shoulders loosen; the hunger for the food in front of him is allowed to be felt. He keeps one hand on Henry’s head and an arm wrapped around him. About two minutes into this reprieve, he taps Henry’s sippy cup as a signal to stop. He won’t eat breakfast if he finishes the cup.

It is half full when Jensen sets it down on the table.

Henry asks for a story during breakfast.

Everyone at the tables finishes two slices of omelet each.

Chapter End Notes

thank you again for your patience! <3
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

This is a story Jensen has told before.

Up on the highest building, two brown birds met on a clear, sunny day. The bigger bird was a darker color because she was from one side of the building that had shade. The smaller bird was a lighter color because she was from one side of the building that had sun. They met because the smaller bird was carried into the shade by a gust of strong wind. She cried for help, but she was too far from her the other sun birds to be heard.

The bigger bird, who had always been curious, flew over and asked the small bird why she was afraid.

“It’s dark.”

“It is.”

“I can’t see.”

“I can.”

“I don’t know where I am.”

“I do.” The bigger bird stepped closer, her head tilted. “Do you want me to show you around?”

Being so used to the sun, the little bird was cold and worried. From where she was, she couldn’t see the sun. How could anyone live here? She wanted to tell the big bird to go away—she would find her own way back and never have to see this place again.

“You can hold onto my wing,” the big bird said.

If a bird offers you their wing, it’s really special. They can’t fly if you hold onto one wing, so it means they’re going out of their way to walk, and walking takes time. Even the little bird knew this.

Wing in wing, these two birds walked through the shade. The big bird knew exactly how to get to the edge, where the shade ended and the sun started. It wouldn’t take too long and the little bird could fly back to her side in no time. Because she wasn’t used to being in the dark, the little bird had trouble seeing her way around. She held onto the big bird tight, tripping over twigs and pebbles from time to time.

“What’s it like in the sun?” the big bird asked, moving aside a twig so the little bird wouldn’t step on it.

“Warm,” the little bird said. “And bright.”

“Sometimes I sit on the edge. It seems nice out there.”

“It is. You’ve never left here?”

“Not yet, but I plan to!” As they crossed a bridge made out of weaved grass, the big bird told the little bird all of her wonderful plans to see the world. She would start with the sun side of the
building, and then, she would fly to another building and another building after that.

The little bird realized that living in the sun meant she could see a lot more of the outside than the big bird. Every day she saw the other buildings around theirs. Once, she had even peeked over the ledge and saw the street below. But she hadn’t thought of leaving her side, let alone the entire building. How was it that a bird who had never truly seen other buildings wanted to explore them anyway? The big bird talked with so much excitement that eventually, on their walk, the little bird started to feel excited too.

By the time they arrived at the edge, where the shade and the sun met, the little bird could see better in the dark. She didn’t let go of the big bird’s wing, even when they stopped.

“You’re not afraid of anything,” she said to the big bird.

The big bird chirped, “What? I’m afraid of things. I’m afraid of thorns and rain, those aren’t fun.”

“I like the rain. It cools me off.”

Neither bird wanted to let go of the other’s wing.

“Let’s do it,” the little bird said, standing up a bit taller. “If it rains, I’ll be there. If it gets dark, you’ll be there.”

Beside her, the big bird looked out into the sun. She smiled. “This’ll be my first time out in the sun, and I might not be able to see very good. We might have to hold wings a little longer.”

A gust of wind pushed them both an inch further towards the sun. An adventure was starting.

The little bird squeezed the big bird’s wing.

“We can hold wings always,” she said, and she took the first step out into the warmth of a sunny day.

Henry falls sound asleep against Jensen at the table.

Jensen begins to stand, cradling Henry in his arms, aiming to put him down for a nap. It feels like midday. This would be the usual time for sleep anyway.

From the head of the large, sleek table, Jared speaks quietly. He stares at Henry’s sippy cup.

“Jensen.”

Jensen pauses, halfway between the sun and shade.

“I am a Booker.”

Chapter End Notes

What! what?!? i wrote that and I'm like 'what?!'
who had money on this? XD
He’s beautiful.

Just look.

No. Stop staring. Staring is bad. You’ll frighten him.

But look.

He has hair now.

Push.

It was like being ripped apart.

Not that labor.

No, in the alley by the dumpster, that was good pain.

Pain he expected.

It was everything that fell out of him after.

Forty-eight hours following the first appearance of life he ran out of milk.

Sitting in the rain after leaving that strange woman’s—Leila?—house, Jared tried not to stare. Don’t look.

Every time he looks at Henry, it astounds him that he managed to carry a baby to term, after living on scraps and crumbs and slivers—remember how good that soup tasted, remember looking into the museum… His thoughts are jumbled up again… What was it that Lucas said stay dirty don’t look stop staring you’re scaring him and oh my god why what is he doing bringing them here to this apartment and Henry is not the name Jared would’ve chosen but it fits and now he can’t imagine anything else all he ever knew Henry as was a baby and where did all these voices come from and why did the tube have to be so cold?

Not labor.

He ran out of milk. So Jensen had to get something for him to eat. It made sense.

Don’t look. Don’t notice the way he holds onto Jensen with small hands that once curled around his fingers. Don’t look. Hours of labor and two days of milk are nothing in comparison. How many days has it been?

Push!
Jared gave birth to something twisted six months after he was taken.

It slid out of him, onto a tile floor, and it chewed its way through the cord that connected them.

It was born alabaster white.

Globs of black mucus and phlegm sluiced off of it.

Bulging, purple veins replaced its eyes and nose. One of its arms was long and muscular, its fingers constantly twitched. The other arm was all of one inch in length; it had too many joints, and caused that limb to flail in the air, flapping and crippled.

Screaming and kicking at the thing, Jared writhed on his back, his legs spread and covered in blood. It had three rows of serrated teeth. With every lurch of its round, hard body, the thing convulsed. It throbbed and heaved from the pain of its existence. Born this way. Born feet first with its toes broken.

Look.

Look at Henry.

He is all Jared has been able to think about.

His nose is the same. And those eyes. And he’s so sweet.

How does childhood survive in the shadows of dumpsters?

What did Jensen feed him in those first few hours after?

The thing could only breathe through its mouth—through its gurgling, hissing, and spitting craterous maw. Its jaw unhinged with a crack. The little arm shook so hard it snapped in half and dangled there, more useless than it had been before. Rolling on its sides, the thing seemed to laugh.

Push.

Destroy it.

Not seemed.

It was laughing.

Smearing mucus all over itself from its movements, it reeled from side to side in convulsive tilts. This caused the external veins to squeeze, forcing black, thick blood clots out of its mouth. It mashed tissue and nerves of itself and Jared in between each cracked and yellowed tooth. Closer and closer, it pitched itself forward. Mommy, it moaned. Mommy.

Mommy, kill me.

Mommy, please.

With a steaming squelch, the placenta passed. Streams of blood fled into a drain in the center of the empty, gray room.

He bled for two weeks following Henry’s birth.

Patrol hauled him off to a station.
It was there that he learned. Patrol maintains the day to day order of the streets and protects the citizens of the city. Standard uniform includes black masks, black gear, and black gloves. People trust Patrol to take care of problems.

Patrol are not human.

And neither are Bookers.

Underneath every Patrol’s mask is a hood that hides the same swollen, exposed set of pulsating veins.

They see through sound.

Have you ever seen a Patrol without a mask?

Bookers control and command Patrol; their appearance is what they wish to be. By transformation and imitation, they have seamlessly integrated themselves into this world. Their species has maintained itself through physical and technological advancements. To keep Patrol mollified while they feast, Bookers allow them to handle the beings on the streets.

Just keep things quiet.

No one needs a scandal.

Human organs are a valuable source of protein.

However, killing the host outright and taking the resulting leftovers is counterproductive.

That’s why they created The Harvest.

Bookers are here to stay. The Harvest will be normalized in a decade or two—it’ll seem helpful and progressive. It’s one big machine; it goes deeper than Patrol getting carried away and picking off the vulnerable and weak from the streets to torture them in stations.

Jared was born human. He lived as a human. He gave birth to one human.

He reported that human dead.

Crushed beneath a dumpster.

And when superiors at the station went back to check his story, the baby was gone. Only the quilt and the baby’s silence had saved it when Jared first heard the approaching heavy footsteps. Henry was a good baby.

For five years Jared didn’t know what actually happened to his own child.

What was worse? Knowing or not knowing? And which end did he prefer?

The dumpster being moved.

Or a stranger.

Wasn’t Jensen a stranger?

He imagined every possible scenario—except this one.
The thing in that gray room died.

That’s what Jared knows for certain.

He killed it.

He was tired of being laughed at. Of being shut in the dark for days, covered in filth, taken out and paraded for line after line of Patrol. He was tired of his milk dropping, trickling from him and into a drain instead of the baby he’d left in the alley. Tired. Tired of being the victim, tired of hiding, tired of figures deceptively shaped like people, with their hands reaching out and covering his mouth while they hauled his ass closer to the cell bars.

He was tired of being haunted by the weight of Jensen’s hands bearing down on his stomach to push out the afterbirth and stop the bleeding. He was exhausted from the continuous, unending pressure in his hips reminding him of the weight of his baby’s head pushing against him, forcing him open and demanding to be brought into the world.

Labor had been worth it in that alley, because the second the baby latched on, Jared felt something so much larger than himself.

Bookers understand that they cannot feed to excess.

They’re careful. There is a system, an order, and a hierarchy to follow. They do not pick off people on the streets because of quality. Those organs are weaker, often riddled with disease and malnourished. So they started a campaign.

It is an honor to serve in The Harvest.

Prominent recovery tubes were erected in public spaces in an effort to display transparency.

Those called to serve are told their organs will be copied and donated to the sick, the wounded, and the dying.

Jared’s number was selected.

There is so much more to tell.

He killed the thing before it could latch onto him and suckle on milk that didn’t fucking belong to it. Covered in sweat, rancid blood, and filmy tears, Jared sat up, ignoring the pain in his abdomen. He grabbed the only resource he had. He scooped up the placenta and crammed it into the thing’s hole. Down. Push down. He didn’t stop pushing the slippery mound of membranes down. The thin, filmy barrier of the organ ruptured.

Look at him!

Look at…

PUSH.

Screeching, Jared stuffed the thing’s mouth full of its own nourishment.

He jammed it in further, beat it down. The long arm wrapped itself around Jared’s wrist, cracked fingernails digging into the tendons, drawing line after line of blood.

Why?
The thing suffocated.

It choked and gagged until it seized.

Look at him.

When Jared opened his eyes again, the thing was Henry.

They have their conversation in the living room—in view of the front door.

In the bedroom at the end of the hall, Henry sleeps soundly.

Which one is a more ridiculous story—Jensen’s or Jared’s?

Don’t stare.

Sitting across from each other, the distance between them extends far beyond six inches.

Two days together. Five years apart.

Jared interrupts Jensen’s process of this information. He interrupts the certain plans to escape, to launch himself and Henry back out onto the street, into the snow and into the potential hands of Patrol who have perfected the game of cat and mouse. The fun lasts longer this way—catching, releasing, catching, releasing, until one day, those who are caught cease to be entertaining. Their screams are no longer as pleasing. After that, crude modifications are made: cut the vocal chords.

See if silence makes it better.

It does and it doesn’t.

The orb stays near Jared as it delivers his message.

“I want my son back.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay. I’ve written this about 12 different times.

Please let me know (kindly!) what you think. I’m a bit nervous posting this, just because I don’t wanna let anyone down with this reveal. But hey, tried my best. Obviously, there’s more to the story and we’ll switch back to Jensen’s POV.

Thanks for hanging in there!
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“What a hock of bull.

You want sad stories?

You want tough shit to swallow?

Whatever the fuck you think you’ve been through—whatever the hell keeps you up at night—just remind yourself that he has spent his entire life hiding in dumpsters, eating out of my hand, and sleeping under blankets I made out of plastic bags and newspapers.

You’re some piece of work, you know that?

I left you to find food. When you stop blaming me for doing what I thought was right, maybe then some sense can get through your thick head.

Aliens? Is that what you’re telling me? Yeah?

So. Fucking. What.

What am I supposed to do with that information, Jared? How does that make my situation any fucking different? What the hell do I care what’s under the Patrol mask if they’re still gonna beat the shit out of me? What’s the point in knowing any of that?

I don’t know how you got all of this—this place, these things, your fucking job or whatever it is you call it—and I don’t wanna know.

I gave Leila’s husband one blow job every week for a year just so my kid could have a decent meal every now and then. I punched a woman in the face one Bin Day just to get my hands on a pair of shoes for him. And I have scuffed through practically every dumpster in this city just to find something else to eat to make it through another day.

Now you say that you want him back?

Because you’ve spent a few days with him you think this entitles you to something more?

Let me ask you this—did you know where we were this entire time? Did you have cameras on us? Could you tell every time he went to sleep hungry or I stayed up to find us a place to sleep? Did you see every time I got beaten half to death and he had to watch from the dumpster? Did you have something to do with me being taken to that fucking station—twice? Did you know, god dammit look at me! Did you know any of this?

What does it matter anymore?

I don’t know what’s worse—you knowing or not knowing.

I don’t wanna know.

But I do know that you think you’ve got the upper hand here with this place, this stuff, and whatever money you’ve got. Let me just tell you something—you don’t walk into his life and expect a place in
it. He doesn’t know who the fuck you are. He may have trusted you to bring us here, but he’s not leaving with anyone but me.

I’ve done a lot of fucked up shit over the years and I’d do it all over again—times ten.

So don’t think—not for one fucking second—that I will be stepping out of the picture.”

Jensen pushes past Jared in the cold, dark hallway. Their shoulders collide, but Jensen keeps moving. He wrenches open the door to the bedroom he wants and slams it, despite knowing better.

Henry wakes up, startled and frightened.

Rushing over, Jensen scoops him up and squeezes them close together. It will always be the two of them. He makes this promise as he kisses Henry’s cheek and cards through his fine, chestnut hair. It was them the night it flooded so badly in the alleyways that they slept on the lids of dumpsters, crawling from one to the other to make it out in search of higher ground. It was them that hot summer night that a fire started in one of the apartments on Linden, and they were trapped in the alleyway directly behind it until Jensen tipped over one of the dumpsters so they could climb the fire escape on the building opposite of the flames. It was them then and it is them now.

This is all they’ve had. This has been the best Jensen has been able to give such a good kid.

He slips them both back into bed. Henry falls back asleep as soon as Jensen folds the covers over them. The scent to the linens is fresh, unobtrusive enough so that Jensen can inhale a scent natural to his little boy. He still remembers that new baby smell.

If what he’s done has seemed like a lot, it’s not nearly enough.

Eyes squeezed shut, Jensen tries to block out a dangerous train of thought. But it keeps churning towards him, thundering over its tracks, bolting out from darkness and hurling itself into the harsh light of his consciousness.

Maybe Jared can give Henry better.

Mercury is not the hottest planet, although it is closest to the sun.

Venus is.

Something about its atmosphere.

Venus, Mercury, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune.

Jensen doesn’t want to share.

The stars are his. The planets are his. The ground, the sky, the wind, the water, it's all his. All of it has been his day in and day out for so long that he can't remember anything before it. He doesn't remember what it's like not to worry about someone else. What would his life look like alone? What would solitude feel like?

If he were alone, he wouldn't have to care.

About anyone but himself.
The possibility frightens him.

Sleep strains itself over his mind until it decides he's best left with his thoughts.

Only necessity draws them out of the room.

Henry leads the way this time, his bare feet silent on the hallway tile, and silent still on the hardwood floor of the living room.

Everything is as polished and serene as before, though with the passage of time and the setting of the sun, a small fire crackles from the center of the living room. It is the orb they see first, snapping flames reflected in its sleek surface.

Henry lets go of Jensen’s hand. He reaches up and holds his hands out for the orb. Anxiety courses through Jensen; he doesn’t know what the orb is entirely capable of. Can it see? Does it operate out of Jared’s command or its own? Is it too, an alien?

Henry seems to trust it.

In a gentle, cascading spiral, the orb descends and lights up blue the second Henry’s fingertips come in contact with it. He smiles with easy, unfiltered wonder, dimples soaked in corn silk, and looks up at Jensen in silent question.

On one of the couches, Jared sits, hunched over with his elbows resting on his knees. He is in black still, and completely immobile. The only sense of warmth to him is the dancing fire nearby.

Jensen did not sleep more than ten minutes while Henry napped. Now it’s nighttime and they are both awake.

Looking down, Jensen nods to Henry. Fine. Go along.

He can’t quite piece together everything Jared said before his declaration of intent for Henry. Something doesn’t seem right about it all. Maybe it’s too strange to believe just yet. Aliens? Here? Doing what, exactly? Why feast off a population and not make their presence known? If they have infiltrated so much, what’s the use in hiding anything about it? His head spun whenever he tried to recap the system and hierarchy described to him today.

What he can control is limited, and even that is up for question.

All Jensen knows is that they are here, in this apartment, with this man, who no longer needs oranges or travel pillows.

With every step Henry takes, the orb’s color shifts in a gradual gradient—from blue to coral to a shade that resembles the crisp inside of a ripe watermelon. Small hands squeeze the orb, careful not to drop it. His first steps were in an alleyway, surrounded by bundles of whatever soft things Jensen could find to cushion his falls.

There is nothing out of place here. Everything in every room, every space, is pristine and organized. Even the borrowed clothes Jensen has on don’t wrinkle.

Bright pink, the orb is held up, offered.

“Jared?”
The name sounds so different spoken by Henry. The orb turns black for a millisecond, then settles back to a shade that is almost fuscia. Jared looks at the five year old standing in front of him.

“How can you make more eggs? Please?”

This is by no means easy.

But Jensen can’t ignore the warm bed, the clean clothes, or Henry waking him up and telling him that he likes it here, can they stay?

He said, “For now.”

For now, this is what they have.

The outside world has to wait.

Two sets of hazel eyes look at Jensen.

He only trusts one.

Chapter End Notes

personal life = chaotic. nice to get back here, where there is chaos i can control. :)
yay for jensen realizing that he might possibly need to think of things differently.
From one of the living room windows, Jensen can see treacherous snow piling up high against the ledge.

Inside the apartment, the temperature is comfortable enough for Henry to stay barefoot. He doesn’t ask for a blanket or another layer of clothes. Outside doesn’t exist as far as everyone inside is concerned.

Jensen fixes the clothes Henry has on, using plastic pins Jared provides from a drawer in the kitchen. No mention is made whether or not Henry will receive clothes that actually fit him; Jensen doesn’t bring it up and Henry would never ask. Henry is content to be the center of Jensen’s attention for two minutes. He fidgets at the end, just as Jensen works to pin the hem of his shirt.

A raspberry to the cheek becomes the severe consequence of fidgeting.

“Baby, stay still,” Jensen murmurs, failing at hiding his smile after a roar of giggles. The last pin slips into place and Henry is no longer swimming in fabric. It’ll do.

Order has been restored to the kitchen since this morning. All the counters have a sheen of cleanliness to them and the utensils have been put in their proper places. There is no sign anywhere that outside, snow is being whipped around by the wind, collecting in large piles of insulated danger.

There is ice in the freezer box above the refrigerator.

Whatever maintains this apartment’s temperature keeps it consistently warm.

In the kitchen, Jared opens the fridge. Jensen peeks inside it, unable to stave off his curiosity. This aspect of the kitchen has also been taken care of. The shelves are fully stocked with vegetables lined up in neat rows on one side and chilled meats and dairy on the other. There are no brand names to anything, no telling from which store anything came from, unlike the peeling, torn labels on cans Jensen was digging out of dumpsters not so long ago.

The first to break the silence that has fallen over them, Jared opens the fridge a little wider, standing back, holding the door. He looks at Henry. The orb stays near Jared now, nearly out of sight, hovering just behind his shoulder.

“Pick what you’d like to eat.”

The quality of sound from the orb can almost replicate an actual voice. But it’s too crisp, too sharp to come from vocal chords.

Henry stays near Jensen’s legs, small hands held in front. He bites his bottom lip and looks up at Jensen for a hint at what to do. Leila has never done this; she always made Henry’s meals with what she had on hand. And Jensen has never owned anything close to a fridge. There is no context here. Even for Jensen, this feels strange, like if they reach in for food, the door will fling shut.

How bad will it snow tonight?

“Buddy?” Jensen nudges Henry and kneels down. “Do you wanna eat a big bowl of broccoli?”
Last summer, they found steamed, sludgy, gray broccoli inside a takeout container. Just the sight of it was enough to turn them both off broccoli for life. Maybe it tastes differently when fresh, who knows? They won’t be finding out.

“No,” Henry replies right away with a nose scrunch of disgust. “Not that, please, daddy.”

Soothing any worry, Jensen pats Henry’s back. “That’s okay, we won’t have that. Jared’s asking you what you wanna eat. We know you don’t want yucky, gross broccoli. How about… uh… a sandwich?” From his place, Jensen searches the fridge for something resembling peanut butter or jelly.

Above them, the orb makes a sound resembling a cough.

Both Henry and Jared look up.

“I can make other things besides omelets. Pasta?”

When Henry doesn’t respond, Jensen whispers to him, “Sketti.”

No go.

Jared continues. “Pancakes? With some fruit on top? Or… mashed potatoes? Do you like mashed potatoes? I could grill some chicken, too.”

Whatever this is—their time in front of the fridge—it becomes too much for Henry. Overwhelmed by the new ability of choice, plus the pressure of selecting something from the fridge and not a dumpster, Henry turns. He hides his face in Jensen’s shoulder and clings to him, on the edge of tears.

Jensen’s eyes meet Jared’s; he’s met with an expression that almost matches Henry’s.

Well, he can only pick up one person for soothing backrubs. Henry takes his place against Jensen, arms around Jensen’s neck. Standing up, Jensen takes care of Henry first.

“Hey, pal, we’re sorry. Jared just wants you to eat whatever you want. See, he’s like your own cook.” Jensen rotates slightly, so that Henry can make eye contact with Jared if he feels brave enough. Back rubs continue, quelling shaking shoulders. “So if I tell him, ‘Henry wants a big, huge bowl of broccoli,’ he’ll probably make it.”

Waiting a beat, Jensen squeezes Henry.

“Should I tell him that?”

“No,” Henry responds quickly, shaking his head. “I don’t want broccoli.”

“Tell Jared, so he knows.”

Tilted towards Jared in Jensen’s arms, Henry murmurs, “I don’t want broccoli.”

It’s a good enough statement, but Jensen knows Henry can do better. He taps Henry’s right shoulder once. They need to be polite, even if things between Jensen and Jared are anything but polite.

Prompted, Henry speaks again, this time a little louder. “Excuse me… I… I don’t want broccoli, Jared.”

Henry’s part in this is over. Jensen kisses his cheek as a reward for his manners, and turns to his next audience. This could be a good opportunity to lord his parenting skills over Jared. He could cement
the fact that Jared has no idea what he’s doing with a five year old. In fact, that might help secure Jensen a more permanent place; Henry and Jared will get nowhere without Jensen there to mediate… for now.

But Jensen sees the spark of hope in Jared’s eyes—and the nauseating green color the orb has turned. The guy is nervous enough to shit bricks, and yet, still prepared to cook a six course meal for Henry at the drop of a hat.

“Offer him two choices at a time,” Jensen instructs, making an effort to keep his voice light. “And after two rounds, you have to step in and make a decision. He’s a good kid. He’ll eat what’s around.”

Jared nods, a little too eager. Before he can start the whole pick and choose process again, Jensen ends it.

“That was enough for tonight. Just offer him what you want to make.”

A few seconds of silence pass. In a voice very much unlike how he’s addressed Jensen previously, Jared asks, “…do you want to eat anything specific?”

It’s still unsettling to hear Jared without seeing his mouth move. But that’s neither here nor there. Henry is hungry, and as much as he doesn’t want to admit it, Jensen is as well. Someone has to make a decision here about food and it might as well be him. Plus, this gives him a chance to get some real vegetables in Henry.

“Chicken’s fine.” He shifts Henry’s weight around. “If you feel like going through the trouble of making it, that is.”

This is Jared’s out. He can still bail on the chicken idea and give them sandwiches. The orb swings out from behind Jared, floating around Jensen and nudging his back. Jensen represses the instinctual urge to swat at the thing.

“No trouble. Go, go sit and I’ll work in here.”

A few prepared meals won’t be the glue to hold them all together.

Jensen shakes his head. “No, we’ll stay.” He isn’t comfortable being out of the room while food for Henry is prepared. Not yet. “We can help, right buddy?”

Small fingers card through the hairs over the nape of Jensen’s neck. Henry coos, “I wanna wash things, please.”

The three of them settle into the kitchen. Jared provides Henry with a chair to stand on again. Very seriously, Henry washes the three vegetable choices Jensen decided on—zucchini, yellow squash, and tomatoes. “They cook good,” Jensen murmurs, completing his own task of peeling potatoes. “And soak up flavor. Kid friendly.”

Cutting chicken into cubes, Jared nods. The orb stays near him, no color over its sleek, steel surface. “You’re very knowledgeable.”

“You think I don’t know sh…stuff about food.”

“I did not say that.”
No, Jensen thinks, technically, Jared doesn’t say anything—the orb does.

“Yeah, well.” Jensen reaches over and fixes one of Henry’s sleeves. The pin fell out. “I do. I know some.”

“I know that. I’ve always known you were… smart.”

“Sure, whatever.”

“…you knew exactly where to put your hands.”

By the grace of the universe, before Jensen can make an idiot of himself, Henry drops a squash into the sink. He lost his grip on it.

The squash rattles around, banging against the silver bottom of the sink. If they were alone, the squash falling would cause a few giggles because of its funny shape and resemblance to a banana. Jensen might fake stepping on it and slipping, pick it up and then try to peel it. But they are all different here, in this kitchen, with a third to their party of two. Wide-eyed, Henry looks at Jared first, frightened that he did something wrong.

His eyes settle on Jensen.

“Easy there,” Jensen says with a smile. “You’re gonna break my banana. That’s a banana, right?”

“No.” Dimples flash in relief. Nothing was done wrong. “Daddy, it’s a squash.”

For a few seconds, they are back in an alley, crouched over a crate, sharing whatever Jensen pulled in from an hour’s worth of scuffling. Jensen picks up the poor squash and hands it back to Henry. He concedes that it might possibly, maybe, just maybe, be a squash. But they’ll just have to find out later.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jensen spots a flash of bright pink.

The orb swishes, flying out of the room.

Good.

Jensen is tired of talking tonight anyway.

Chapter End Notes

a shaky start, but a start nonetheless!

glad to be able to update something. work is crazy with the start of summer. i hope y'all are doing well!
Chapter 28

After dinner, Jensen insists on washing the dishes.

“You don’t have to.” Jared sets down their plates and silverware onto the kitchen counter.

“You cooked.”

“Yes, and you helped.”

“Just let me wash the stupid plates,” Jensen mutters. “Go back in there. He’s gonna ask for a story and I’m all out of ideas.”

In comparison to the dining room, the kitchen blasts light from the ceiling. Everything is bright in here. Everything is clean and new and stocked far beyond what one person could ever use or need. Who keeps a set of plates for six on hand when there is only one occupant? Jared has never scrambled to accommodate either Jensen or Henry. There has always been enough food, plates, chairs, towels, and beds for them. In fact, there seems to be extra of everything.

Lost, Jared looks towards the dining room, where Henry waits patiently for the return of at least one adult.

“I don’t know any stories,” the orb filters out in a whisper. “None fit to tell him.”

Trying his best not to sound irritated, Jensen takes a deep breath. “So make shit up. He’ll listen.”

Still holding onto the stack of plates, long fingers rap nervously over the sides. “What do I do after? Will he fall asleep during the story? What if... do I carry him to bed?”

Reaching out, Jensen pushes the faucet handle up. A blast of cold water with decent pressure streams out. Clean water rushes into the sink and down the drain. The concept of sink is hardly new to Jensen; however, he still can’t believe that his hands are on one with control of the temperature and the output.

He rinses his hands first, then slides the plates out of Jared’s grasp, careful with the position of their hands. “What did you do those nights I was out of it?”

“I explained what was going on.”

“Okay.”

“...and I fed him.”

“Right.”

“Then I showed him his bed.”

“Fine.”

“That’s it.”
Jensen shakes his head. He starts washing the cups they used first, though he glances over to the dining room before responding. “Just get in there, would you? He’s sitting there all by himself.”

This is just some of what Jensen doesn’t understand. One minute Jared seems confident enough to kick Jensen’s ass, slice threats into him, and run this apartment like it’s his kingdom and Jensen and Henry are his subjects. But then the next minute, Jared becomes this nervous wreck, concerned with the opinion of a five year old and begging Jensen for advice on how to proceed.

The man walks back to the dining room as if sentenced to read ten books in front of an audience of millions—shoulders slightly slumped, one hand behind his back, and the orb flashing teal.

However, still from the sink, Jensen witnesses a three second transformation.

Stepping into the dining room, Jared’s shoulders straighten, his hands rest at his side, and the orb sparks lilac. He runs a hand through his hair and nods once to Henry.

This isn’t some fucking business meeting. Jensen puts down the soapy glass in his hands.

“Did you always have a funny little thing?” Henry gets up from his chair and stands beside Jared, looking up at the orb.

Jared stares at Henry for a second.

Then he smiles and places the orb in Henry’s hands. “No. I did not.”

Jensen cuts the pressure from the faucet by half to hear the conversation.

“Can it see?”

“No, sometimes.”

“Can you talk?”

“…no.” Jared’s shoulders bristle. Held by curious hands, the orb goes black. “Only through the orb.”

Sensitive to the change in Jared’s demeanor, Henry makes himself small. He disconnects the eye contact between himself and Jared and focuses solely on the orb.

A tinge of panic rests at the surface of what Jared rushes to say next. “B-but it can help me put my coat on. And it can bring me things. Do you want to see?”

“Okay.”

Slowly, the orb rises out of Henry’s hands and into the air. Once more a lilac color, it races out of the dining room. Jensen watches it whip through the kitchen and out towards the living room. Henry waits, eyes wide, and grabs Jared’s left hand out excitement. When the orb comes back with Jared’s black coat, it is bright red, glowing now.

Even when Henry lets go so he can clap, the orb remains practically neon.

The orb spins with Jared’s coat, making it flutter, and together, Jared and the orb put on a small show. Jared circles the orb, and leans forward just as the orb swishes back. He plays cat and mouse with his own coat, to the delight of his audience. The show becomes a dance. Jared’s footsteps on the floor ring out, crisp and confident. He grabs a sleeve and twirls, spurred on by peals of laughter and shouts of, “Me too! Please? Me too!”
Scooping Henry up, Jared holds him in one arm.

Their dance accelerates. The twirls become spirals. Faster, faster, around and around…

Jared halts their dance.

He sweeps the coat over his shoulders, draping it over himself and Henry. In time with everything else, he drops to his knees, Henry still in his hold. From underneath the black coat, a multitude of squeals and giggles spill out.

Staring at the drain, Jensen’s hands have turned red from the water.

Was the hesitance before just an act?

He shuts off the faucet and dries his hands.

Aiming to remind Jared that he was meant to get Henry ready for sleep, Jensen steps over to the dining room. Displeased, he crosses his arms over his chest.

The coat flips open.

Crimson light projects from it, shining over Henry, casting an auburn shade over his hair. Both Henry and Jared look up from the floor, and Henry places his hands out towards Jensen.


Jared’s eyes meet Jensen’s. A smile peeks out for a split second, but fades away once it recognizes the expression of distrust Jensen makes no effort to hide. Sighing, Jared sits up, Henry too, and shucks off the coat. The orb swings around. It dips underneath the coat and rises with it to drape it over a chair.

“I think,” Jared murmurs to Henry, “it’s time for bed.”

Henry whispers back, “I’m not sleepy, Jared.”

“Oh, I know, me neither. But I… am not in charge of bed time.”

Glancing over, Henry smiles at Jensen. “Daddy is.”

“That’s right. We should probably listen to him.”

“Can’t we play?” Henry clasps his hands over the orb as soon as it nears him. “Just a little longer, daddy?”

Jensen shoots a glare at Jared. Now he’s the bad guy. Now he’s the enforcer of rules and routine, while Jared gets to roll around on the floor and reap the benefits of Jensen’s parenting. Great. So much for trying to get Henry on a routine that does not involve hiding before first light or wandering through alleyways in search of a safe spot to retire.

“We can go to bed now,” Jared says, nudging Henry’s chin with his knuckle. “And play in the morning.” He mimics a yawn; the sound emanates from the orb. “See, I’m feeling sleepy anyway. I might even fall asleep right here.”

“No,” Henry laughs. “You have a bed, don’t you?”

“I do.”
“Does the orb sleep with you?”

As they speak, Jared stands, still holding Henry. He walks off towards the living room. Jensen follows.

“It sleeps next to me on the nightstand.”

“Can I have one?”

“…you can share mine.”

“I can?”

“Yes.”

“How’s it work?”

Past the living room, the three of them make their way to the bathroom Jared has relegated for their personal use. He sets Henry down on a step stool in front of the sink and looks down at him when he answers. “I tell it to do something.” The orb, now lime green, rotates in Henry’s hands. “And it does it.”

Unsatisfied, Henry’s brow furrows. He looks to Jensen for an explanation.

Who knows how much of this is the truth?

“Ask him, buddy, not me.”

Once again, Henry focuses on Jared and the orb. This time, Jared takes the orb from Henry’s hands, and sets it above his shoulder, where it hovers in its usual place.

“How?” Henry asks, his hands on the edge of the pearl white sink. “How’s the funny little thing know what to do?”

Jensen clears his throat and makes a washing motion with his hands. Get the show on the road. They can talk and wash up for bed at the same time. Jared takes the hint. He turns on the faucet to a medium pressure and helps Henry wash his hands and face. Jared executes each and every motion with extreme care, diligent and thorough. Anxiety seems to have faded pretty fast.

“I talk to it, from my mind.”

“How?”

“Well… you know how to whisper?”

“Oh huh.”

“It’s like that, but in my head.”

This explanation has been cut to fit the understanding of a five year old. Jared is an efficient tailor; he says only what is necessary for Henry’s questions to be satisfied and then move on.

With his teeth brushed, hands and face clear of all remnants of dinner, Jared helps Henry off the stool. The orb passes over a towel to dry his face.

It glows rouge.
Crossing the hallway, Henry slips his hand into Jensen’s. As they walk, Jensen’s mind turns over the seemingly infinite questions he’s pocketed throughout the years—most of them born from this week alone. If the orb can see, did Jared have any idea of where they’ve been? How they were? Did he, if he supposedly works for them, ever see Jensen at the two stations he was taken to?

How exactly is the orb tied to Jared? How does it share the composition of his body and his emotions?

Untethered by these concerns, Henry jumps into bed, scooting over and making room for Jensen.

“Story time, daddy?”

“I have one,” Jared speaks up. “If… that’s okay with you.” He asks the question to Jensen.

“Fine,” he replies, slipping into bed. He looks at Henry and presses a kiss to his cheek. “I’m gonna stay here until you fall asleep, buddy, okay? Then me and Jared are gonna be in the next room talking.”

Finally, a yawn emerges out of Henry, without any protest. He nods to this information and situates himself underneath the covers. Tonight’s desired position to fall asleep faithfully resembles many nights prior—one arm curled under and the other draped over Jensen’s chest.

Jared stands near the edge of the bed.

Jensen sighs. “You gonna sit or you gonna stand there?”

Fumbling to take his seat, Jared looks behind himself to make sure he’s not squashing anyone. Only after he’s assured of this, does he plop down, gently, as if not to make a dip in the mattress.

Marigold now, the orb floats in front of Henry, moving from side to side, acting like a rubber ball. Henry smiles in amusement, and plasters himself against Jensen a little further. Jensen takes a deep breath. His own heart rate slows as he listens to the cadence of Jared’s voice produced from the funny little thing.

In the span of two minutes Jared tells a simple story.

The big bird and the little bird, on one of their adventures, stop to take a drink of water from a fountain. They sit on the edge and listen to the water run. Hot and a little tired from the excursion, the big bird dips her foot into the water. The water from this fountain—the orb turns cerulean—is so clean and cool it sparkles like diamonds. Much too fascinated by the water and her reflection, the big bird doesn’t notice at all when the little bird dips her foot in.

Chirping happily, the little bird splashes her companion.

After a few clucks and flaps of feathers, the big bird gets in some of her own splashes.

They cool off together, flying over the surface of the water, flapping their wings down and flicking bursts of water at each other. This is how they pass the time in between adventures—happy and at play.

There might be more to the story, but the target audience has fallen asleep.

Jensen, however, remains very much awake.
woo hoo! updates! 2,000 words just for you. thanks for hanging in there, it's been crazy around here.

got another chapter coming right up. :D

i've missed you all!
“I don’t get you,” Jensen states, once back in the living room.

The fireplace is lit, burning through seemingly fresh wood, though none is kept stored around it. Where does everything come from here? From where does Jared receive new stock of food and other commodities throughout the apartment? Did he always have a set of plates to entertain guests? Has he been throwing dinner parties while Jensen has been scuffing through dumpsters at risk of electrocution?

Who’s he kidding, though? Of course Jared has.

He has been living this kind of life for a while.

The proof is in his lack of skill on the street. He hasn’t had to worry about finding food for quite some time.

“Maybe you would if we spent more than two days together,” Jared snaps back. He drapes a blanket over the longest couch, but he does not sit down. Neither does Jensen.

“When are you planning on chucking us out?” Jensen keeps his hands on his hips, feet apart. “Or is it the opposite—maybe you think you can keep us in here forever?”

Hands raised, Jared shakes his head. “I have never—at any point—made a declaration that you would be kept here like some kind of prisoner.”

“You said not to run.”

“That is different.” Jared looks down at the floor, quiet now. “And partly selfish of me. I cannot get to know either of you if we do not spend time together. I… I apologize for my former briskness.”

“I still don’t trust you.”

“Nor I you.” Shaking his head, Jared takes a seat. “Perhaps I should mention to you that I am fully aware of the butter knife in your left pocket. So tell me, who has earned any trust here?”

Jensen doesn’t flinch. “I’ve got a right to protect myself and my kid by any means.”

Huffing, Jared’s shoulders bristle. “With a butter knife?”

“You can give me a real knife, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Abso—look… I understand that all you have had to defend yourself with has been your set of spoons, but there is nothing and no one here that would require you to…”

Jensen cuts in, defiantly insisting, “My spoons were not weapons.”

A piece of wood and ash crackle in the fireplace. Jared glances to the sound, keeping his eyes on the flame. “Yes they were. It was clever. They were some of the first things I noticed about you. Crack one in half and the point would be sharp enough to fend off strangers. It wouldn’t do shit for Patrol, but at least…” The orb fades to the color of blood. “Well, never mind. You can return the knife.”
Remaining still, Jensen gives his reply—short and simple. “No.”

If Jared wants to confiscate it, he can. Let him try.

But all he does is sigh—again.

He crosses one leg over the other and sits back in the couch. “I wish, Jensen, that you would cut me a break. It would make things much easier between the two of us, and as a result, between the three of us.”

“One story, one dinner, a couple nights in a bed and new clothes ain’t gonna suddenly wrap everything up in a nice little package,” Jensen quips.

“And your stubborn, rash behavior fueled by paranoia and rules that have no place within these walls will not get us to any better sort of place, so please!” Standing again, Jared points to the couch. “Sit down so that we may talk—please, Jensen. I am asking you to work with me.”

It is still disconcerting to hear Jared’s voice and not see his mouth move.

He must understand that, because his next lines are spoken in time to his lips.

“I’ll speak this way.” The orb continues to push out sound; Jared just acts along with it. “If it causes you to be more at ease.”

Most of the progress that has been made today has been as a result of Jared trying—somewhat desperately—to fit into their lives. Jensen yields—for the moment.

Taking a seat, he keeps at least a foot of space between them at all times. He looks straight ahead at the fire. For more than a minute, neither one of them speaks.

The orb swings in front of Jensen’s face, inches away from his nose.

It shines, sapphire and vibrant.

Working with the orb, Jared speaks. “Touch it.”

Jensen hesitates.

“It won’t hurt you,” Jared adds. “Henry touched it.”

That doesn’t necessarily mean shit. Jensen is aware that Jared could poison him, stab him, drown him in the fucking kitchen sink, it doesn’t matter the method—but Jared could easily commit the act and have no one to answer to but Henry, who could, with time, understand any lie fed to him as the truth.

What stops Jared, Jensen doesn’t know.

All he’s got is a butter knife.

Carefully, Jensen raises his hands. He braces himself as his fingertips skim the surface of the funny little thing.

“It’s hardwired into me,” Jared explains. Jensen feels the murmur ripple against his touch. “Melded into my genetic makeup now. The process is extremely… unpleasant. Though, there is a team out there researching ways to make it less… unpleasant.”

A string of technical terms follows. Jensen catches the words cortex, implant, and enhancement. He
understands that in order to make Jared more efficient, the orb was given to him in exchange for one human sense or ability for the Bookers to study. He could give up his eyes, his hearing, or his vocal chords—those were the choices presented to him at the time.

Choosing his vocal chords, he was sat in a blank room with nothing but a recorder the size of a dime. Into the miniscule microphone, Jared read off a list of words projected onto a wall.

It was his initial word bank.

New words can be added every week.

“Try to smash it,” Jared prods. “Go on, try.”

Jensen shakes his head. “Are you crazy?”

“I wouldn’t ask you to do it if you could. But try.”

Shrugging, Jensen grips the orb. It seems to struggle for a split second, on instinct. Does it have a mind of its own? No. These are Jared’s reactions; some he is better at hiding than others. Can he feel Jensen grip tighter? Yes. But only because he chooses to feel it.

Jensen stands and pitches the orb against the nearest wall.

It looks like it is made out of material that might shatter, like one of the planets.

But it comes back to Jensen whole, not a single crack over its glossy, silver shell. It nestles into his hands, cobalt and warm.

Sitting back down, Jensen runs one finger from the top of the orb over its circumference. He watches Jared, who only shakes his head.

“Not now,” he mumbles. “I don’t want to feel that now.”

The orb floats without Jensen’s hands. It winds around and rushes past, circling the room before landing in Jensen’s palm again. This time, it is scarlet. Jensen clasps his hands over it again. Instantly, every nerve in his body floods with warmth and the feeling he gets when laid down with Henry, rested and at ease.

Tilting to the right, the orb rushes Jensen, increasing in heat, ramping up its energy. From head to toe, he rides a tidal wave of joy in its purest form. His eyes close, a gasp punches out of his lungs, and electric snaps glide through every artery, every vein, every hair. A ring of laughter echoes in his ears.

“Daddy,” Jensen hears, clear as a bell.

Jensen opens his eyes to the dim living room. Coughing, he shoves the orb away from him.

Jared said it wouldn’t hurt.

Before Jensen can launch off of the couch and away from Jared’s reach, a hand grasp Jensen’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry!” Jared blurts out, panic in his eyes. “It’s… I’ve never seen it do that before! Jensen, please, speak to me. Are you okay? Do you need a glass of water? I’ll get you a glass of water.”
Shrugging off Jared’s hand, Jensen shakes his head, still trying to catch his breath. He waves Jared away, but keeps his ass on the couch. Besides, he can’t make Jared feel bad if he runs into the next room.

“I’m fine,” he sputters. “Just peachy. What the fuck was that?”

Anxiously, Jared replies, “I-I don’t exactly know.”

“How long have you had that thing?”

“…three years, give or take.”

“And you’ve never seen it pull that shit?” Jensen swats at the air in front of him. He feels like he’s been singed, though nothing on him is actually smoking. “Holy fuck.”

In a split second, the orb zips into the kitchen and careens back, balancing a glass of water on its top. Jensen shoots a look at Jared for an explanation.

“Magnets.” Jared takes the glass off and hands it to Jensen. “Invisible to the human eye. I’m sorry.” As Jensen takes a drink, Jared continues in somewhat of a ramble. “It’s capable of… of transmitting emotions… my emotions. Or… better put… I can show you what I’m feeling through physical sensations. I was trying to show you a happier one. I… sadness isn’t that fun to experience through this.”

Sniffling, Jensen mutters, “Would I be a sobbing mess if you’d flipped on sadness?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then exactly what?”

Hushed, Jared’s lips barely move. “…you would be emitting screams of agony.”

Mommy.

Jared has only been called that by one thing.

Jensen hears “daddy” every day.

The orb rests upon the mantle, black now, nearly unseen. Jared sits forward, his elbows on his knees again, hair hiding most of his face from Jensen’s view, and his left leg bouncing.

“I’m not giving you back the butter knife,” Jensen rumbles, shifting in his seat. “But maybe you could try not to give me a heart attack tonight? Just try.” He knocks their knees together and whistles at the orb. “Okay, get back over here, squirt.” Taking a deep breath, Jensen concentrates on the present. Fuck the past. “What else can this do?”

Descending slowly into Jensen’s palm, the orb flashes the color of a neon sign outside one of the diners that Jensen knows serves terrible meatloaf. It’s kind of ruby, a little bit mahogany.

“Quite a few things.”

“Yeah? Can it set an alarm?”

“Yes.”

“Too easy. Can it open a can?”
“Yes.”

“No shit,” Jensen laughs. He turns the orb over. “How? I don’t see any spikes on it.”

A smile flashes. “There’s a tiny laser attached. It’s not very strong, but it can cut through aluminum.”

“I don’t see a laser.”

“Not all things are perceptible to the human eye.”

With a scoff, Jensen taps the orbs. “Whatever. I’m not believing it until I see it. What about the camera?”

“There is no camera.”

“But you said…”

“I know what I said.” The orb lifts up, out of Jensen’s hands, and floats between him and Jared. “It’s not vision based on sight. It’s vision based on echolocation—sonar signals and sound waves. Human vision is incredibly vulnerable to multiple deficiencies. This method is better.”

So, the orb could not have seen Henry or Jensen.

“My eyes work fine,” Jensen huffs. “What else does this thing do?”

Through the night, Jared explains. The orb’s colors are linked to settings Jared created early on in the transplant. The shades of each color changes with the intensity of what he’s feeling, though he can mask most things. Controlling the orb has been a work in progress over the years. He has finally mastered many of its uses and commands. It can also be used for some fun; he makes it light up and twirl.

Jensen falls asleep with his hands on the orb during an emotion Jared calls, “Calm.”

Bathed in lapis, Jensen’s fingertips trace circles over the sleek, cool surface, until sleep has its way.

He dreams about a fountain.

Chapter End Notes

another one for you!

happy birthday to quick, who has made beautiful art for this fic and continues to motivate me to add to this verse. <3

comments are love!
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

No less than an hour or two into sleep, Jensen wakes up.

Startled, his first motion is to lay a hand over the butter knife in his pocket. As his eyes adjust to the ochre hue before dawn, he realizes that he is not alone. Still on the couch in the living room, his right side feels warmer than his left.

“I heard it too,” Jared whispers.

Black and soundless, the orb rotates in the air between them.

From their position on the couch, it might seem like they fell asleep together. At once, Jensen creates a rift, pushing himself further down the couch. He brushes off the memory of sleeping against someone his own size, not against a brick wall or on a crate or crammed onto a fire escape. His thoughts zoom in on a repeat of the noise, a scuffling sound coming from either the kitchen or the dining room.

Standing up, he listens.

Is there someone else here? But then Jared would have told him. Right?

He looks back at Jared, who remains seated. Jensen tilts his head towards the kitchen. Whoever managed to slip inside this apartment uninvited is there. It sounds like they dropped something. As Jensen takes a step, the orb glides past, preceding him into the scene of the crime. Hanging back, Jensen focuses, holding the knife out, bracing himself for an encounter.

This is not his spot.

But he will defend it.

His shadow stretches over the wall separating the kitchen from the living room.

“Stop.”

He sees and hears the orb before Jared walks into the edge of his vision. The orb halts him, hovering square in the middle of his face. Frustration flaring, Jensen directs a sharp glance at Jared.

“What are you hiding?” he hisses, a notch above a whisper. “Who or what is it?”

Noises in alleyways can take the shape of many things. Tremors in the night might be rats skittering through, squeaking and scraping at dumpsters. Other noises could come from innocuous—there’s that word again—things like cans tipping over or dumpster lids flapping from a gust of wind. Jensen was good at separating the noises he had to worry about and the ones that meant he could tuck a spoon back into his belt.

But there are no rats here. No cans out in the open, no dumpster lids, no debris to blow over.

Jared bites his bottom lip, glancing to the kitchen and back to Jensen. The orb remains obsidian, masked from revealing any of what it saw. Jensen bristles and makes his start to muscle past Jared and see what it is for himself.
Does Jared even sleep? Or was he just sitting, plastered against Jensen for this entire time?

How could he let his guard down and fall asleep there instead of with…

“Give me the knife, Jensen.”

*Thud.*

“No.”

*Rustle.*

“Please.” Jared extends his hand. His voice stays firm, but there’s an edge to it. It’s not angry or upset. Is it anxiety? “You need to give me the knife.”

Jensen could have run in there by now. And he could have done so even with Jared standing next to him.

The orb saw something—something startling enough for Jared to look worried, act worried, and take the knife from Jensen so he doesn’t react with it. What could possibly cause Jared to look so nervous? His expression is nearly the same as when he was told to do story time...

Relinquishing the knife, Jensen rushes into the kitchen. Three steps in and he freezes. He prays for Jared not to turn on the lights.

From the floor, Henry looks up, frightened.

“Baby,” Jensen breathes, falling hard to his knees. “What…?”

Small hands cling to discarded strips of yellow squash Jared had peeled earlier and tossed into a white compost bin. The bin itself is turned over, spilling out vegetable peels and eggshells, some of it crunching underneath Jensen as he moves forward.

Nothing is right in the world until Henry is in his arms.

Crying, Henry hides in Jensen’s chest.

Soft sobs yield the truth before the sun rises.

“I was hungry, daddy.”

Chapter End Notes

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did we have some happiness before? well, now here are some feels.

sorry for the short chapter, more on the way.

this verse... /sniffs/
“Here we are, one bowl of cereal with a banana.”

“…”

“Buddy, what do you say?”

“Thank you, Jared.”

“You’re welcome.”

“What’s this? You’re serving me too?”

“A bowl of cereal for you. Do you like bananas? I could cut up another one.”

“No, it’s okay. This is good.”

“I thought that while one of us is eating, we might all do the same.”

“Uh huh.”

“Daddy, can I have some of your stars?”

“Stars?”

“Oh, those are marshmallows. You got a lot of stars.”

“I got lots of moons. Jared, what’d you get?”

“A good mix of both.”

“…can I have some of your stars too?”

“Of course. Here.”

“Thank you.”

“You know what… all the food inside the fridge, that’s kind of like these stars.”

“It is? How?”

“See how your daddy and I are sharing with you?”

“I like the stars. They taste good. Is… is that okay? Do you want some back?”

“No, buddy, that’s not what Jared’s saying.”

“What I am saying is that I’m more than happy to give you any food, including the food inside the fridge.”

“Oh.”
“You can eat anything here, anything at all, but the food inside the fridge is much nicer, don’t you think?”

“Yes?”

“Look, let’s go see it.”

The three of them venture over to the kitchen, leaving behind their cereals.

Outside, the sun rises.

Jared opens the fridge, unleashing another kind of light. He crouches down to his knees, looking at Henry. In between them both, the orb floats. “See here? This is bread. We can make you a quick sandwich with this and some peanut butter. Or see this? An apple, right here, so you can just take it and snack. Or, and don’t tell daddy…” Jensen shoots a slightly disapproving look to the man. “…here we have a package of cookies. But if you eat one, the rule is that you have to share with me.”

Henry smiles, amused at having a secret with Jared. Small hands press against Jared’s chest as he leans forward, peering into the fridge again, this time unafraid.

“I like cookies,” Henry murmurs. “Can I have one now?”

“Cereal,” Jensen rumbles, rubbing the back of his neck. Damn the way he fell asleep on the couch.

Both pairs of hazel eyes cast a glance at Jensen that puts him in his place. Cookies. Now.

It hardly matters though, because all three bowls of cereal are eventually emptied by their respective owners. Henry munches happily on a cookie while Jensen scoops him up, carrying him back to bed.

At the doorway to the cool, quiet room, Jensen lingers.

He shouts down the hallway, hoping his voice will carry to the kitchen.

“Hey, you’re being rude.”

Jensen then whispers a question to Henry. The answer is, unsurprisingly, yes. Not thirty seconds later, Jared rounds the corner of the hallway, frowning, ready to defend himself against the accusation. “I was washing…”

Although Jensen’s next movements are rough, he takes care, minding Henry. He places Henry into Jared’s arms without warning; Jared scrambles to hold the kid, acting as if Henry were made of glass. There’s really no wrong way to hold a five year old, Jensen reflects, seeing the kid giggle at Jared’s lack of grace. Jared could learn.

“Second bedtime is your responsibility,” Jensen informs Jared briskly. “You two better fall asleep.” He walks to the bed and climbs in first. “Don’t wanna know how much sugar you guys had.”

The answer to that, whether Jensen wants to know it or not, is a lot.

He falls asleep first, to the sound of Henry humming a song.

“That’s daddy’s favorite,” he whispers to the orb, eyes on Jared. “Wanna hear mine?”

Henry can’t show Jared only one favorite; he has to show him all.
Three days pass this way.

Jensen counts them by the number of times Jared lights the fireplace in the living room. Every evening, their party of three sits in front of the fire. Sometimes, Jared will roast marshmallows for Henry—Jensen declines, too sweet—or as was the case last night, hot dogs.

Tonight, there’s a pot of beans and rice over the fire, cooking in a cast iron container.

“One, two, three, four, five,” Henry counts out dried beans on the floor, laying on his tummy. His legs kick in the air and for a minute, Jensen swears... he looks just like one of the kids in the park. The kids who always had new clothes, fresh food, and a home with four walls. “Six, seven, eight, nine, ten.”

Jared sprawls out next to Henry, shifting from sitting cross-legged to also being on his stomach.

Henry eats up the attention.

There have been no more compost incidents. Jared never took away the container; he left it there to reinforce that what Henry did wasn’t wrong. There were just better ways to do things.

Two days ago, Jared and Jensen sat at the dining room table with needles and thread while Henry colored on blank sheets of paper. Within a couple of hours, Jensen had two t-shirts made for Henry, using one of Jared’s. In addition, he was able to clip down and mend two pairs of shorts. Underwear and socks followed, however, those were gifts that Jared slipped into one of the drawers in the bedroom. He didn’t make a show of the items. Jensen had Henry thank him for them anyway.

New clothes. Plenty to eat. Fresh linens every two days.

“Eleven,” Jared instructs, sliding over a bean. “Twelve, thirteen…”

“Ninety!” Henry squeals.

But no mention of the outside.

No conversations about why Jared left at around nine every morning and did not return until three in the afternoon. Today, he was late. Henry begged Jensen to tell him the time off the clock in the kitchen every five minutes past three. At five, Jared walked in, his collar loose and color drained from his face.

No talk about the impossibility of staying this way.

This is no long-term solution.

Jensen has a child to worry about.

“How do you work?” Jensen asks, sitting on the couch. Henry waves at him, even though he’s two feet away. Waving back, Jensen waits for a reply.

The apartment is always clean. The fridge is perpetually stocked. Even the temperature in the apartment never needs tending; it’s always set at a comfortable seventy degrees. Something must fuel this place. And if it’s not sheer will, then it has to be money.

Aliens or not—money makes things happen.

Though here, inside these rooms, the outside world has begun its erosion. When Henry is hungry, he goes to the fridge. Sometimes he asks Jensen to open it, sometimes he asks Jared. Today, he didn’t
ask at all. He reached in, grabbed an apple, took a bite, and offered some to Jensen. All Jensen could do for a moment was stare at his kid.

“I think it’s bath time,” Jared suggests, not bothering to answer Jensen’s question. “I think we can squeeze it in before dinner.”

More and more, Jared speaks working with the orb. He takes whatever trouble it is to move his mouth in time with the sound. The effect calms Henry, though he enjoys holding onto the orb, murmuring into its sleek surface and watching the colors change.

Rearranging the beans, Henry makes piles. “Can I have a blue towel this time, Jared?”

“You can have a blue towel this time, Henry,” Jared asserts.

Some things have not changed. Jared does not sleep with them. He rarely sleeps, if at all.

He hesitates calling Henry by name. Jensen wonders what he might have chosen instead.

“Daddy?”

“…”

“Daddy?” Henry places a hand on Jensen’s knee, standing now, concern in his eyes. “Are you gonna take a bath too?”

Snapping back into the present, Jensen shakes his head. He stands, picking up Henry, balancing the kid on his hip. “No, pal. I took one this morning.”

There isn’t a scratch on Henry. All of his blisters and bruises—any evidence of life on the streets and in the alleyways—have disappeared. Even his hair is glossier, silky, only a shade lighter than Jared’s. Still on the small side, Henry easily fits in the crook of Jensen’s arm.

Nose to Jensen’s cheek, Henry laughs. “I get the tub all to myself?”

Jared follows them to the bathroom appointed theirs. Silent, he picks out a blue towel from the linen closet just outside. Three days have been enough to establish a routine; Jensen follows through. He sets Henry down on the closed lid of the toilet, sits himself on the edge of the tub, and starts the water. Clear, clean, warm water flows out, so easily available Henry can’t help but reach over and splash his hand.

“Bubbles,” Henry mentions, hopeful, tugging on Jensen’s sleeve once. “Please?”

A far cry from being cleaned with a wet-wipe, Jensen can’t say no to the request. He tips forward a glass bottle of purple liquid, another present that suddenly appeared yesterday. The novelty has far from worn off. Henry pulls off his shirt, folds it neatly, and looks back at the tub.

Jensen remains nervous about sharing bath time with Jared. Yes, Jensen has seen more of Jared than Jared would perhaps like to admit, but a naked child is different. As welcoming as Jared has been with Henry, Jensen still can’t squash a feeling of unease.

“It’s okay,” Jared murmurs above the rush of water. “I’ll go check on dinner.”

That keeps happening. Can Jared read…

“I can’t read your mind,” he states flatly before shutting the bathroom door. “You’re just that easy.”
Dinner time is the gateway to full bellies and warm cuddles on the living room couch.

Jensen must be drunk.

The double serving of rice and beans, plus a large mug of hot chocolate, have him lain down, with one equally sleepy five year old curled into him. Steady, warm breaths puff against Jensen’s stubble.

Eyes drooping, Jensen allows himself to sink into the couch, his right hand rubbing circles into Henry’s back. Hopefully, tonight grants them a full eight hours of rest.

Taking care of Henry within this space has posed several new challenges to Jensen. No longer focused on surviving from moment to moment, they’ve had to adjust. There are games of hide and seek throughout the apartment—in all the rooms with open doors, which are few—and intense coloring sessions. Henry frequently colors people he knows. Jensen was the subject of the first portrait in crayon, followed by Jared and the orb, which he colored pink. Next was Leila, wearing “pretty shoes” and after that, Maggie. When everyone was accounted for, Henry began drawing people outside of portraits, in different spaces. He crafted a delicate scene of himself and Jensen sitting on the couch, which was very impressive.

Jared plucks one drawing from today’s stack.

He holds it, on the couch opposite of them. Looking at it, his expression is a mixture of sadness and gratitude.

By the time he glances up again, Henry has fallen asleep. Soundlessly, Jared moves forward to place the sheet of paper back on the coffee table with the others.

“Keep it,” Jensen rumbles, moving his left arm. “Help me up.”

Without any hurry, they make a careful transfer. Jared handles Henry like gold this time, instead of glass, though still mindful of his hands. He brushes Henry’s hair away from his forehead. The drawing sticks out from under Jared’s arm.

Stretching, Jensen yawns before he resumes a vertical position. When he stands, Jared begins the nightly walk to their bedroom. Henry’s head rests on Jared’s shoulder, his arms mostly slack, but his right hand grips onto Jared’s black shirt.

Always black. Jensen never sees Jared out of anything but a black button down, black slacks, and polished black shoes with plain black socks. Even in his own apartment, he rarely dresses down. It must be a uniform.

Henry takes to the bed without a fuss, curling around one of Jensen’s pillows. That fact remains difficult to believe—Jensen has three pillows all to himself. Two of which are slightly denser, with the third one being fluffier, more pliable. Henry claims it, wrapping his arms around it and continuing to sleep without a care in the world.

Rest.

That’s what this is.

Jensen doesn’t trust it.
Jared drapes the blankets over Henry and cautiously runs his hand over the kid’s shoulder.

“Does he ever have nightmares?”

“Not often,” Jensen murmurs, stepping away from the bed. “Reality is enough.”

Seeing that Jensen means to talk, Jared only nods; the orb hovers close to him, black. However, Jared doesn’t move towards the door. He remains at the bedside and runs a hand through his hair. The orb flashes silver and Jared closes his eyes, taking a deep breath. Hazel eyes pull the same look Henry tries to get an extra story out of Jensen at night.

The question is simple, and yet so overwhelmingly complicated.

“Can I?” Jared asks, a hitch in his voice. “Can I stay here tonight, please?”

Instinctively, Jensen’s first reaction is a firm no. No one has ever slept with him and Henry before. It has always been the two of them—whether they were huddled inside a tunnel or sharing a fire escape.

There was a point in time when it could have been the three of them.

And Henry won’t get far with Jensen. He won’t. Jensen knows. What could he offer in terms of a future? He can’t read anything more complicated than an Enter/Exit sign, he can’t write, and most of the luxuries they’ve had have been earned through some kind of rough barter with manual labor or oral sex. None of what he’s done to keep Henry safe and fed brings Jensen any shame.

There just isn’t much future in scuffling through dumpsters, garbage bags, or compost bins.

Grief courses through him hotter than any soup from a line.

His voice thick, Jensen replies. “Fine.”

Stiff, he climbs into the bed, placing himself in the middle. Jared can stay. But Jensen needs this control—for now. Without a word of argument, Jared steps over to the other side. In a few quiet movements, Jared shucks his outfit off, shedding black, stripping down to a soft, white undershirt. The neck dips at his collarbone. His plain gray boxer briefs ride up slightly as he climbs onto the mattress.

This isn’t Jensen’s bed to control; if Jared had really wanted he could have forced their sleeping arrangements to look however he wanted.

But he didn’t.

That has to count for something.

“This is awkward,” Jensen breathes, flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

Jared curls up on his side, facing Jensen and Henry. An inch of respectful space is kept at all times.

The rise and fall of their chests match for a second in time.

In his head, Jensen wipes down Jared’s brow with a dirty rag. He stuffs a slice of orange into Jared’s dry, cracked mouth, and prepares the quilt Jared had bundled up in his pack.

That’s all in his head.
“No,” Jared whispers, the orb out of sight and his lips moving. “It’s not.”

So it isn’t.

Jensen wakes up with a weight on his chest.

He’s woken up this way before.

Today seems different.

“He’s waking up!” Henry squeaks, wiggling on Jensen’s chest. From his perch, he claps his hands and presses them on Jensen’s cheeks. “Daddy!” the kid giggles. “Wake up, daddy!”

Buttermilk daylight stretches over the bed, highlighting three distinct forms.

The tilt of Jensen’s head to the right reveals the third form—a second pair of hazel eyes as bright and clear as the first. Jared smiles in a shy sort of way. He looks back and forth from Henry to Jensen, giving a soft sigh.

This can’t be real.

None of it can be real.

Henry tumbles off of Jensen, plopping himself directly in between Jared and Jensen. He kicks his legs up, small toes saluting the ceiling, and he declares to Jensen that Jared promised to make them pancakes for breakfast—thick, fluffy, buttery, syrupy pancakes. And today, Jared doesn’t have to leave, so he’s going to color with him and they are going to color so many pretty things together. Daddy can join, of course, and wouldn’t it be fun if they counted more beans today? Could they do that? Could they do that please?

“Did you give him coffee?” Jensen yawns, rubbing sleep out of his eyes, rolling onto his stomach but still facing the energetic activity centered in the middle of the bed.

Jared beams up at Henry, who has sat upright again, counting the fingers on Jared’s left hand. The fingers in question tap Henry’s chin. “Just a cup or three,” Jared admits.

Not real.

Not real, not real, not real.

“Any left for me?”

“I didn’t actually…”

“That’s a joke.”

“Oh. Yes. But I can make coffee.”

“Don’t. Not yet.”

“Okay.”

Multiple shifts and movements occur within the bed. Henry sits on Jensen’s back as he holds up his hands to Jared’s to marvel at the difference in size. A minute or two later, Henry sits on Jared’s’
middle to repeat the comparison with Jensen’s hands. After that, Henry rolls in between both men and settles, nestled, counting the freckles over Jensen’s nose. He gets all the way up to eleven.

In his place, Henry tilts back and leans into Jared, chest to back, raising his hands up to lay over Jared’s chin. “You don’t have scratchies,” Henry assesses, completely serious. “Are they going to have scratchies one day?”

Breakfast hasn’t even been started and the kid is asking about puberty.

“Maybe,” Jensen rumbles, unwilling to part with his pillow just yet. “You can always borrow mine, buddy.”

This seems too normal.

It can’t be real.

Jensen died in the snow. He’s almost certain of it.

Or maybe he died years before that.

Maybe he died back before, when he didn’t even know Jared, and this is the result of a hunger that extends far beyond food.

That has to be it.

Because he blinks and he’s in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, laughing at the look of horror and awe in Jared’s face as he realizes that five year olds do not have motor skills comparable to an adult and yes, it is perfectly possible to get pancake batter on the ceiling—getting it off is the impossible part.

An entire week flutters past, faster than Jensen can account for, with morning and nightly chases to and from bed. With pick me ups and swing me arounds and watch what I can dos and daddy I can count to fifteen now!

With bath times where a story about a brave sailor diving the brimey deep gets told three nights in a row by two somewhat tired adults making it all up as they go. With breakfast by eight, lunch by noon, and dinner by six. With full bellies and cheeks filling out and proper clothes brought to them so they can sit three to a couch and make up for seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, and years so fast it makes Jensen’s head spin and his convictions about being dead more and more certain.

Maybe he’s face down in his own blood on Maple Street.

Maybe he is nothing but a corpse in a dumpster.

But he cannot be this person—this stupid, illogical person who sees Jared off the first morning he must go back to work, doing a job Jensen still knows nothing about and stopped asking after when kisses and hugs and affection from Henry made fools of them both. He simply isn’t this mass of muscle and tissue cooking dinner in the kitchen while Henry paints with watercolors across long strips of butcher block paper.

It is not possible that any of this is.

Or that any of it was.

He isn’t this person who worries that Jared hasn’t arrived yet and it’s already sundown. He said he
might have to stay late since he took time off, but what does that mean? Time off from what?

Jensen isn’t pacing by the door, impatient, paranoid, and about to climb the walls.

Why couldn’t Jared stay?

He isn’t praying.

He’s not.

He’s not praying that history repeats itself in this moment, in this way.

Dinner sits on the table—long since cold.

Henry clings to Jensen as they wait near the front door.

At his breaking point, Jensen extends his hand out, reaching for the door knob. He can’t stay here in suspense any longer. He can’t stand here doing nothing for another minute.

The door opens without his hand upon it.

Instantly, Jensen hides Henry behind the couch.

Jared lurches through the doorway, grasping the knob, digging his nails into the doorframe. His palms leave thick, ruby smears against the pale walls.

It is not Jensen shouting Jared’s name, rushing over.

That’s Henry.

All Jared manages to say, stumbling towards his private rooms, is no consolation to anyone.

“Patrol fought back.”

Chapter End Notes

extra long chapter, thank you for waiting! <3

comments are most appreciated!
Chapter 32

Jensen has one recurring nightmare.

Every time the nightmare visits, only one variable changes. Henry stands in a hallway full of ivory light, holding his sippy cup in one hand and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes with the other. Tired hazel eyes search around for something—someone—familiar. Quietly, he murmurs a name that remains muffled to Jensen no matter how intently he listens.

A sliver of a noise pierces the eerie stillness of this pristine corridor.

Cracks rupture the wall to Henry’s left. Always to Henry’s left. From the breech, a monster lurches forth—churning and foaming in a rampage.

It’s always water.

And Jensen can see the moment in Henry’s eyes where he loses all hope—followed by the crush of his little boy underneath the merciless wave.

Whenever the nightmare works its claws past from where it lurks, Jensen doesn’t sleep. He doesn’t let Henry out of his sight for any amount of time. A different question has begun to echo in Jensen’s head when he breaks from the vision: does Jared have this nightmare? Can they share a nightmare and a child?

Jared bleeds all over Jensen.

This is real time.

Jensen had to muscle his way into a room he’s never been in or invited to before.

Pecking, vicious cardinals breech Jared’s skin, molting thick, scarlet feathers over his hands and waist. Three blazing gashes stain anything and everything in between them—the graphite sheets, their inky clothes, and Jensen’s hurried fingertips.

Pushing blood aside, Jensen tests the exposed ruptures of skin. The gash on Jared’s abdomen stretches out for a good four inches, as measured by Jensen’s fingers. Although it is the largest wound, Jensen judges it as shallow, based on the amount of blood shedding out. The same description can, thankfully, be applied to the wounds on Jared’s hands; it all looks worse than it is.

“Y-y-you don’t have to.”

“Just shut up.”

“I’ll heal… in a minute…”

“Stay still.”

“It… ah!”

“Listen to me.” Jensen maintains his voice low enough for Henry—standing in the doorway—not to hear. “Healing does shit if you’re gonna bleed out.” Turning to Henry, Jensen nods twice. Henry
understands; dutifully, he brings over one of the three hand towels Jensen gave him to hold in a hurry. “Go wait in the hall, buddy, okay?”

This command causes the muscles in Jensen’s shoulders to tense. Hallway. Henry. Alone. But his nightmare is just that—a nightmare. Better to tell the hallucination to fuck off instead of risking Henry panicking at the sight of blood and pain Jared is now incapable of masking.

Fidgeting, Henry hesitates. He chews on his bottom lip.

“Jared’s gonna be fine,” Jensen soothes. “Right now, I need my best man in the hallway as a lookout, okay?” One more desperate look and Henry eventually agrees on the virtue of necessity, darting out to his post. The best kid. Henry is the best kid.

It was hell getting Jared to allow Jensen near him at all. Only the gush of crimson prevented him from fighting Jensen off any longer.

Laying on his side, Jared braces himself for the press of Jensen’s hand against his abdomen. The experience singes, familiar in both their minds. At the first pulse of pressure, Jared hisses and twists away from Jensen. Reflexes.

Any amount of blood lost on the streets quickly becomes a problem. In Jensen’s experience, things always go from bad to worse in the blink of an eye. When another surge of blood drips past the towel, he bears down with the palm of his hand, willing Jared to stop it. Stop bleeding.

As much as it hurts, pressure has to work. It just has to.

Twenty exhausting seconds pass before Jared’s hands heal. The wounds begin to close up completely on their own. Stitches are not required. Not even a fucking band-aid. The edges of skin sliced by whatever hurt Jared come together on their own, folding up, fusing to form one, single clean line. A full minute passes since Jared hissed at the pressure. Underneath the mess of blood there’s not a scar or sign of what happened.

All that is left is what brought them here in the first place: Jared’s blood on Jensen’s hands. Not a single question can be asked about the process, the progress, the predicament… With his own blood-slick hands, Jared grabs Jensen by the sides of his face, immediately ending any and all physical space between them.

He blocks out stars, suns, moons, and planets.

Their lips smack together.

For the briefest second in time, Jensen’s eyes close. He understands this on the surface. He registers the fact that his lips push against Jared’s. His lungs accept a sharp intake of air, and produce something sounding suspiciously similar to a moan.

Jared’s fluttering hands settle over critical arteries and veins in Jensen’s throat.

This is wrong.

They were getting along fine. Shit made sense.

Even his own reaction to this—this is a kiss, a fucking kiss—boils up unsettling, uncomfortable sparks throughout his body. Eyes closed? Moaning? Leaning into Jared, blood and fingertips and all? No. Over and over again that one word thunders inside his head.
Until he hears it force its way out of his lips, echoing against Jared’s mouth.

“No.” Jensen’s hands join the protest. He shoves Jared back, rougher than he’d expected, but entirely necessary all the same. Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, Jensen scrambles off the bed.

His voice continues to race ahead of his thoughts, biting and harsh. “Don’t do that again—do you understand? You don’t do that without asking. You don’t touch me without asking. Are we clear?”

Using the hem of his shirt—which isn’t even his—Jensen cleans off the past sixty seconds.

He walks to the doorway. Henry looks up at him with wide, curious eyes, a question hovering, waiting to be asked. Jensen’s not sure how much the kid saw, if he saw anything. But in the long-term it doesn’t matter, because that’s not where Jensen’s priorities gravitate. The sun is not that. It’s this.

It’s the little boy in his arms, who doesn’t hesitate to let daddy make everything better.

Henry believes that still.

Jensen wouldn’t trade that faith for anything—even if he knows it’s a lie.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for your patience! i’m battling health issues right now, plus i’m still in this writerly slump, so it’s been tough. but hey! an update!

comments are appreciated. :D
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Innocuous.

Superfluous.

Magnanimous.

Transcendental.

Jensen rolls these words around in his head, wishing he had his spoons in hand. Something familiar would help right now. Something more than holding Henry close as they lie together in their designated bed within their allocated room. Brief conversation passes between himself and Henry; Jensen keeps it as simple as possible. Jared fell outside, and hit a bench. He had three cuts, none of which were deep, and he’s already patched up. No mention is made how Jared became patched up.

Yawning, Henry nods and begins to drift off, settled in his newly claimed space. He takes the middle portion of the bed. It’s the warmest and safest place to be. Daddy on his left, Jared on his right.

Except, Jared doesn’t join them tonight.

Sleep does not find Jensen easily, but it eventually brings his eyes to a close for a few quiet hours.

He washed them up before folding the covers back. While Henry brushed his teeth, Jensen scrubbed at his face with soap. For a second, he contemplated washing his mouth out with the bar. He’d done that after a few less than ideal situations and completed transactions. But he hesitated. And when Henry was ready—or so he thought he was ready, Jensen rumbled that he knew someone hadn’t washed their face and it sure wasn’t him—he forgot about it.

In the seconds before sleep claims him, he presses a kiss to Henry’s cheek.

After several kisses Jensen concludes that he does not have a problem with kisses. At least, not like this.

The numbing effect of sleep smothers out the brief thought that kissing Jared is radically different than any kisses Jensen has experienced.

Predictably, Jared leaves early, unseen and unheard.

“You’d think it’s too much to ask for some consideration,” Jensen grumbles to himself as he makes breakfast. “Do you think I was too harsh?” He poses the question to a bowl of whisked eggs. The eggs keep mum. Sighing, Jensen tosses the eggs into the pan, where vegetables and bacon are already waiting.

Out in the living room, Henry colors, set up already with his pack of crayons and folder of paper. A realistic streak has inspired him to color the living room, even if the color scheme lacks inspiration. Jensen checks in for a second, peering over, happy to see Henry debating between a dark brown crayon or a black crayon for the leather couches.
That’s the kind of problem kids should have.

Any time Jensen asks what Henry would like to eat, he responds with, “Ommylets.”

Back in the kitchen, Jensen continues playing chef to the world’s least fussy five year old. He adds cheese last, and once he splits it in half, he adds a dash of hot sauce to his. Anything anyone could want is up for use in the fridge. How it gets there, Jared has never explained and Jensen no longer questions. It’s enough that the food is there. Whatever gets used, is inevitably replaced.

“Breakfast, buddy,” he calls out, a piece of toast dangling from his mouth. “C’mover to the table.”

Jared placed a few hardcover books on a chair for Henry last week. Jensen draped a towel over it to act as a cushion. Some nights, Henry will skip his chair and sit in Jared’s lap. Other nights, he’ll sit in Jensen’s. Most nights, he’s been content to wiggle from Jared to Jensen and vice versa, switching out for dinner and then dessert.

“Can we eat here?” Crayons litter the immediate space around Henry, who looks up, smiling still dressed in his pajamas. They’re not really pajamas—just one of the three sets of clothes Jared and Jensen have patched together to make fit.

The question seems harmless at first. However, Jensen hesitates.

Eating on the floor brings back memories of shit they’re purposefully avoiding. But it’s such a simple request. How can he say no? But what if he says yes? Will he set a precedent? The war between potential crises takes place in his head, in a matter of seconds.

“We have to eat dinner at the table,” he states as firmly as he’s capable.

Henry beams at the achievement—those damn dimples get Jensen every time and the kid knows it. To detract from his power over Jensen, Henry begins explaining his drawings and the complexities of crayons. When breakfast begins to cool down, Jensen reels the kid in, and they eat together like before. Sitting on Jensen’s lap, Henry digs into his plate, munching and cooing happily, laughing when Jensen makes faces in between bites of toast.

One slice of toast in hand, Henry attempts to feed Jensen. He misses more than once, but the effort is there, and the kid seems satisfied with the way he’s taken care of Jensen for the moment.

Jensen takes a deep breath.

He loads up their empty plates. It has to happen before Henry starts coloring again or moves onto a different activity. There isn’t much in terms of games or entertainment in Jared’s apartment, but they’ve always been good at passing the time together no matter what their surroundings.

Standing, Jensen scoops up their plates and silverware.

“C’mon, buddy, help me wash these dishes.”

“Okay,” Henry chirps, “but can I wash this time? Please?”

“But you do a good job at drying.” He sets up a stool Jared provided for them at the start of the week.

“But drying is boring, daddy. I can wash. I watched you and Jared do it lots of times.”

Lots of times probably means three or four. However, this decision occurs much faster than the
previous dilemma. Jensen scoots the stool over to the sink. “We can wash them together. Sound
good?” Once he receives a nod, Jensen lifts Henry up and they start. There isn’t much to wash. He
wraps himself around Henry and places his hands over small ones. Together, they pour in liquid
soap; Henry oohs and aahs at the bubbles.

As warm, clean water runs out of the silver faucet, Jensen clears his throat.

Relax.

This is his son.

Henry beats him to breaking the silence. “When’s Jared coming back today?”

“…later,” Jensen answers, more awkward with words than he had anticipated.

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s fine.” Well enough, anyway. “I told you, it wasn’t anything I couldn’t patch up.”

“I helped, didn’t I?”

“You sure did, pal. No one’s a better lookout than my boy.” Henry smiles at the praise. They rinse a
plate, followed by another. Jensen does the silverware himself, cautious of the points. He murmurs
against Henry’s cheek, settled in a pose familiar to them.

After a few seconds, Jensen finds his nerve again.

Water. Always to the left. Fuck.

“Hey, you like Jared, right?” he asks, keeping his tone light, despite the tightness in his throat.

The water’s at the perfect temperature. Not too hot, not too cold. They have the cups, cutting board,
spatula, and pan left to wash.

“I like Jared lots, he plays with me. Like you.”

“Yeah. What else do you like about Jared?”

Henry takes ten seconds to think through his answer. He replies cheerfully, honest without hesitation.

“He’s daddy’s friend.”

Leave it to a five year old to know more about the world than Jensen.

“He is. He’s my friend,” Jensen repeats. He shuts off the water for a second then flips it back on.
Control. There’s control here. And they’re safe. The door is locked from the outside every morning,
not by a key, but by something much more secure. Jensen can’t explain it—the system is complicated
—but he is aware of its existence.

Maybe he should open his eyes to other facts.

Squeezing Henry tight, Jensen closes his eyes.

“He’s your friend too,” he rumbles, “and I want you to know that he li—loves you very much. Do
you know why?”

Curious, Henry asks, “Why?”
“Well… before you… remember you asked me once, how you were born? You thought you were hatched out of an egg.”

“Like the birds in the story.”

“Yeah, buddy, but those are birds. You weren’t hatched.”

“Oh.”

“I told you, you were a gift and my kid to take care of.”

Henry nods.

He can’t feel Jensen’s heart begin to break.

“Everyone is born out of someone. Everyone grows in tummies for nine months and then they’re born…” Fumbling on the words, the explanation—and frustrated with his own inability to make this clear—Jensen leaves enough room for a dangerous pause.

“I came out of your tummy?” Henry scrunches his nose and tilts his head back to look up at Jensen, seeking confirmation.

Jensen shuts the water off.

The dishes are done.

He turns Henry around on the stool and kneels down. They aren’t eyelevel, but it’s only right for Jensen to look up at his kid.

“No,” he blurts out, hands on Henry’s shoulders. “No you didn’t, buddy. I… I helped… when you were born I was there and I helped because Jared asked me to.” He didn’t. Not really. But Jensen was already involved. “Jared gave birth to you and he couldn’t take care of you, so I did.”

Confusion sets in first.

“Jared? I was in his tummy?”

“Yeah.”

Hazel eyes search Jensen’s for a joke, a lie, a trick—anything.

Fear chases after.

Henry asks a question out of Jensen’s realm of possibilities. Small hands grip over Jensen’s arms.

“I’m still your best boy, right?”

Fuck everything. Jensen hugs Henry tight against him. “Of course,” he sniffs, wiping his eyes with one hand while holding Henry with the other. “And I’m still yours, right?”

The question’s worth more than stars; Henry answers back like they’re talking about lightbulbs.

“Daddy,” he states, simply, leaning into Jensen. “You’re so silly.”

More questions follow. Jensen answers them as best he can. Henry asks why Jared left; Jensen
answers that the bad people took him away. Now he’s back.

“Did Jared really have me in his tummy?” They move to the living room once again, splayed out on a couch, crayons forgotten for the moment. Henry sits on Jensen’s middle, poking his stomach. “Was I a good baby?”

“You were the best baby.” Jensen pokes Henry’s nose in turn. “He did have you in there. When you came out you were this big.” He holds his hands out to baby size. “You were perfect, buddy. And I’m so lucky Jared asked me to take care of you.”

A mischievous smile appears, framed by infamous dimples. “So I wasn’t hatched?”

“Nope. Sorry, kid.”

“You sure?”

“Pretty sure. I was there, remember?”

“No.”

“Well, I guess you wouldn’t remember. But I do. Jared does.”

“Can Jared take care of me now?”

“…yeah.”

“He won’t leave?”

How Henry can go from joking around to asking these kinds of questions is beyond Jensen; he’s mastered it. “You have to ask Jared, buddy.”

Biting his bottom lip, Henry nods. Concerned, he inquires, “You won’t leave too?”

That’s the one question all day Jensen has not one problem answering.

“No. Never.”

It feels like a lie, but it isn’t.

Jared returns after Henry’s bedtime.

Jensen commands Jared to the room. Jared tries to protest—don’t want to wake him, it’s late.

“Wake him,” Jensen orders. “Wake him up and tell him you’re here. When a kid asks if you’re going to come back, it means he expects you to come back.”

He presides over the event, listening to Henry’s snuffles and soft inquiries. He mumbles something about a tummy, but after Jared smooths out his hair and tucks him back in, he trails off and falls asleep again.

The orb remains the only light in the hallway, glowing blue above Jared’s shoulder.

Standing two inches away from Jared, Jensen lets out a breath he’d been holding since Jared didn’t show up at his expected hour. But that issue is for another time. He slumps against the wall, his back
to it, and sits down on the floor yet again. He’s spending a lot of time here lately.

Knees pulled up, Jensen pats the space of cool, ivory tile next to him.

When Jared doesn’t immediately respond, Jensen mutters, “Sit down.”

Without a sound, Jared complies.

He isn’t wounded today. The door opened and there was no blood, no chaos, no threat. It was only Jared, looking as nervous and skittish as before—possibly more so.

There’s an extra omelet in the fridge for Jared that Henry insisted on making.

“I told him,” Jensen starts out, his voice sounding out in an even, hushed tone. “That he… and you… well, I was there. And you asked me to take care of him so I did.”

Painful revolutions whirl forward.

Lips move without the production of sound from them. It’s an act. But it’s an act that requires effort and thought.

“…thank you.”

Jensen’s lips move with the production of sound. He’s not sure about what follows.

“He’ll ask you about it himself. He… he doesn’t get how he came out of your tummy.” Jensen can’t help but shake his head. “Figured I’d let you field that one.”

He makes no mention of the previous question Henry will one day ask.

“That’s alright,” Jared whispers. His voice has no joy to it, no relief. Only a deep sadness, darker than the ocher hallway.

Where’s the whooping? The celebration? The happiness?

Before Jensen can press for any further reaction, Jared blurts out, “He’ll still never look at me the same way he looks at you.”

“What?” Words stumble out thick and stumbling. “What do you mean… he’ll have to. Look, it’s not a competition. He’s five.”

Are they talking or are they arguing?

Shoulders trembling, Jared turns away from Jensen to say his next piece.

“I just… I want a fraction of what the two of you have.”

“You’ll get it.”

“…will I? At what cost?”

“None on your part,” Jensen answers, confident in a way that makes him flinch. “Let’s be honest, okay? Since we’re talking we might as well cut right to it. When shit goes down, who’s going to survive? You don’t have to think too hard about it.”

“…”
Jensen sighs. “The answer is you. And when I ask who’s the most important person in all of this—out of everyone in the whole world and beyond—the answer is him.”

“I know. I know that part.”

“Yeah, well, I know you know that. I guess.”

For a long minute, no one speaks.

Following tradition from a pint-sized source, Jared breaks the silence first.

“I’m sorry I kissed you. It was… inappropriate.”

“Yeah. It was.”

“I will ask.”

“That’s… that’s not entirely my point, Jared. You can ask but I still can’t let anyone or anything distract me. Not even you. That’s just… the way it’s gotta be.”

“You sound so sure.”

“Give me some credit.”

“I am!”

“Then let it go! Okay? Let’s move on. Whatever. It’s done. I don’t wanna hear any more about it. What I want is for you to promise me that he gets a free ride with you, no strings attached. He stays with you to the end. Promise me.”

Hazel eyes meet his. The orb turns lilac.

“I won’t promise,” Jared snaps. “You’re cutting yourself out of the picture…”

“The picture never included me to begin with!” Jensen forms a wall with his voice. “I’m not leaving this talk without you swearing that he gets protection first—out of anyone. Do it. Just say it. Say that your son will be the first to get help… if he ever needs it.”

Only an inch of space remains from Jensen to Jared.

“…I promise.”

Space closes. Jensen nudges Jared’s shoulder and stands up. Exhaustion from today sets in.

“Good. Dinner’s in the fridge. Just heat it up. Don’t miss dinner again. You’re gonna keep us inside all day, the least you can do is show up on time. He needs routine. He likes routine.”

“I’ll be there.”

Jensen nods.

“Picture wasn’t mine to begin with, Jared. I just held your space in it. Kept it warm for you.”

He opens the door to the room. Henry hasn’t stirred. The door does not shut after him.

“Done an okay job of it,” Jensen murmurs, stepping towards the bed. “I think, anyway.”
No more is discussed this night.

That’s enough for now.

Chapter End Notes

eek! so much in this chapter! comments are love. <3
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The morning after their discussion, Jensen wakes up to Jared and Henry conspiring together. They lay in bed, waiting for his lazy ass to wake up. Within seconds of Jensen’s eyes opening, Henry relays the series of events Jared has planned for them today. Henry speaks too fast for Jensen to catch all of it; Jared smiles and allows for the hug given to him right after.

“Can I plant things?” Henry asks, laying on top of Jared, wiggling in a way that can’t be comfortable.

Jared hardly flinches. “You can.”

Without the orb in sight, Jensen might forget about it all together. But there it is, on his side of the bed, hovering and glowing coral.

“I was here,” Henry coos, running his left hand over Jared’s middle.

The three of them are dressed in different variations of black, blue, and gray.

Irritated by the hovering presence, Jensen turns his back to the orb, facing Henry and Jared. He watches Henry’s hand, making sure his touch remains respectful. Seconds later, his eyes flit up to Jared’s, searching for any signal to step in. Is this painful? It can’t stir up rainbows and sunshine—not entirely. Jensen has his questions still. Did Jared like being pregnant? How difficult was it on the streets? What kept him from… utilizing alternatives? Because they exist. Jensen’s heard of them.

They saw some proof of it on the way to the spot not long ago.

What drove his decision to go through that kind of pain knowing that it could end up sour?

Henry was a healthy baby. A little small. But healthy.

“You were right here,” Jared murmurs, his voice fractured. He places his right hand over Henry’s left and slides it up just an inch. “You liked to kick on this spot.” A tight smile appears for Henry’s benefit.

In awe, Henry presses his ear to the spot.

Looking up, he asks, “Did I hurt you? Is there another me in your tummy now?”

Grief breaks through the porcelain barrier of Jared’s composure. All neutrality shatters.

Jensen begins to reach for Henry. What can he joke about—how can he sweep this under the rug for the moment? These are questions five year olds ask. They want to know the ins and outs to everything. It’s not Henry’s fault.

“No,” Jared says to Jensen first. “It’s fine.” Wiping away tears, Jared sniffs. He refocuses his attention on the concerned child in front of him. “No, there is no baby in my tummy right now. There isn’t anything in there because we haven’t had breakfast yet.”

“…Oh. Are you okay?”
“Yes. I’m just a little sad.”
“Why?”
“Because I missed you here.”
“But I’m here now.”
“You are. That’s right.”
“So is daddy.”

To this, Jared nods. Jensen lays on his back, swimming in the warmth of blankets around them and floating a top a plush, comfortable mattress.

Why hasn’t it always been like this?

Henry rests in the crook of Jared’s arm, until he shifts over, his small form stretched out over Jared’s middle. He faces Jensen, waves, then looks up at Jared.

It’s incredible, how freely Henry gives his touch.

He sets his right hand over Jared’s cheek and speaks with the confidence of his five years.

“I like it here.”

After breakfast and washing the dishes, Jared asks Jensen if he wouldn’t mind a new activity.

They discuss it while Henry uses the bathroom all by himself.

At first, the plan seems impossible. Where could Jared possibly have space for a garden? Would that involve going up to the roof? If it was snowing three weeks ago, what must the weather be like outside? For once, Jared doles out answers then and there. There is space. No, they would not go to the roof of this building. The weather outside is gray and rainy. Most of the snow has turned to slush, however, there are predictions of more snow in the coming week.

Slush was bad. Not as bad as snow or rain, but it was irritating and treacherous. Mounds of it collected in the alleyways, concealing patches of black ice that hadn’t yet thawed.

But none of that happens to be Jensen’s concern lately.

“How long are you keeping us in here?” That question is his concern.

And it’s the one answer Jared doesn’t give.

Henry returns, eager to carry on with the play date promised to him this morning.

It isn’t that strange to Jensen when Henry walks over to Jared and puts his arms up to be held.

At the end of the hallway leading towards Jared’s room, the three of them stop in front of a door.

It looks like any other door in the apartment. The handle is silver, the door is pearly white. With his arms wrapped around Jared’s neck, Henry watches in excitement as Jared places his hand over the
The door swings open without a creak.

Instantly, Jensen inhales the scent of earth.

Hearty, rich, robust soil.

Color follows the scent as they step inside the room. White walls have been replaced with light green, textured windows. They look almost like stained glass panels. Light the color of fresh buttermilk spills out from wide, modern fixtures on the ceiling. Every particle of luminescence feels and looks like actual sunlight; it warms and welcomes, drawing them in along a paved, arterial sidewalk that cuts through the length of the room.

Lush and resplendent, foliage fills the room, blooming, growing, thriving in bunches. Tall, wispy trees stand delicately along the perimeter, with one solid, stately willow resting in the back, its branches languidly dipping into a crystal pond. Flowers of every color, rounded bushes, and thick floors of emerald grass make up the rest of the space. To Jensen’s immediate right are a patch of lapis bell flowers, neighbored by scarlet roses. Any and every kind of flower waits for them. Some are small and dainty. Others are large, almost to Jensen’s waist. Sunflowers wave when the most natural breeze of air floats by.

This couldn’t be just any room. It alone seems to stretch out, surpassing the size of the kitchen, dining room, and the living room put together.

Out by the willow, there’s a portion of only grass, trimmed short and soft.

Henry pleads to be set down.

Jared complies, though he kneels down to be at eye level with him.

“Nothing here can hurt you,” Jared murmurs, clasping Henry’s hands in his own. “But I need you to be safe. No climbing. No eating anything you see here. And please, do not pick anything, even if it looks very pretty. Understood?”

Nodding, Henry looks over at Jensen, then back at Jared.

“Go on,” Jensen says, waving the kid off. “But you need to listen to Jared, buddy.”

With a joyous cry, Henry bounds off, running straight into the nearest grove of colorful life. He smells and touches everything, and once Jensen gives permission, takes his socks off and wiggles his toes in soil and grass. He becomes a blur of movement and laughter, flopping down next to flowers, trotting off to the willow, racing back to his favorite bunch of sprightly daises.

Jensen breathes in deep, eyes closed.

The air here—it’s so pure, it goes straight to his head.

So much so that he doesn’t protest when Jared asks him to step out of the room for a minute. Jared calls out to Henry—they’ll be right back—and the garden disappears behind the seemingly plain door.

That’s a word Jensen uses often when he thinks of Jared—seems.

In the hallway, which is devoid of all life except them, Jared looks at Jensen.

His expression betrays the happiness of the garden two feet away from them.
Some people are capable of predicting the weather. It might snow. It has a chance of snowing. It could snow. It is likely to snow.

But Jensen has no way of predicting what Jared will say.

Especially this.

“I want you to fight me.”

Chapter End Notes

thank you for your patience as always! <3 comments are greatly appreciated!
No one had to tell Jensen twice to punch Jared in the face.

It would feel good.

Get a lot off his shoulders.

Standing in a completely empty room, Jensen missed on the first two tries.

On the third, Jensen’s closed fist made contact with Jared’s jaw.

Jared hardly flinched. There wasn’t a bruise on him. No mark, nothing, not even a turn of his head. In fact, the only pain from the blow reverberated in Jensen’s own hand. He’d swung punches only three times before in his life. Or that he could remember. And none of them had ever been at Patrol. The risk had been too great there. Fight back. Make things worse.

He’d only fought others like him for spots, blankets, food, and clothing.

Never within Henry’s sight.

“Try again.”

The orb isn’t in the same room. It stayed behind with Henry. How’s it doing that? How’s Jared doing that? How does Jared think he can house a forest inside this apartment and not tell him? How does this guy think he can live in this fancy apartment for five years while his son ate from the crumpled remains of Styrofoam containers thrown out in cavernous, filthy dumpsters?

Jensen ignores the throb across his knuckles. Muscles tensing, he pulls his forearm back, prepared to strike out a stiff right hook that would start at Jared’s left ear and drag across his jaw.

Miss.

“Again.”

Sleek hardwood floors reflect Jensen’s every desperate movement and the eerie stillness Jared conducts. His frame moves, but it moves too quick for Jensen to truly register it. That has to be it. Because over and over again, he dodges, fakes left and right, pivots, twists, and resorts to enraged kicking. Nothing affects Jared, standing there almost listless, not an ounce of concern in his eyes. Jensen breaks into a sweat. The muscles in his shoulders and arms ache, tension winding them into painful masses of tendon and tissue.

They move at least ten feet from where they started.

Panting, Jensen pauses. His hands shake as he bends over, sweaty palms over his knees.

He could pull Henry and himself up a ladder, or walk long distances in all kinds of weather, or even go without food for three days at a time. Countless beatings. Hands fisted into his hair. Fingernails clawing into his shoulders, teeth digging into his chin. The hissing, frantic fury of fights in the streets over somewhere to sleep, a sandwich thrown out not ten minutes prior, or an in-tact shirt at the bottom of an otherwise depleted bin. He had survived all that and more.
Yet here he is.

Shame radiates across the bridge of his nose, stretching into his cheeks and over his neck.

Jared takes two steps and leans towards Jensen.

Refusing to make eye contact, Jensen focuses on the rattling rise and fall of his chest.

Soothing and calm, Jared says, “It’s alright. Good effort.”

Five years.

Five long, wonderful years.

Jensen’s fist collides with Jared’s nose.

There is nothing but a sickening, shattering crunch, a spray of blood, and Jared falling back, his ass on the floor.

Shoulders back, standing upright once more, Jensen clenches his fists.

Jared just smiles through the blood coursing down his mouth, dribbling past his chin and staining his throat. Slightly dazed, Jared’s eyes eventually focus, meeting Jensen’s directly.

“If you’re trying.”

Jensen used clean rags and towels to clean up Henry minutes after his birth.

Jared’s blood was matted all over him, thick in the tuft of dark hair on his head. Mucus, blood, birth fluid, and tears. Holding the squirming bundle, Jensen tried to concentrate on his task, worried about dropping the baby.

That’s right.

He hadn’t been Henry then.

Just… the baby.

A name hadn’t been chosen or given. Jared was in and out for the first six hours after the delivery. When Jensen had the bundle somewhat presentable, Jared held him against his chest for a few minutes. And what Jensen should remember, he doesn’t. He can’t recall the expression on Jared’s face as he looked at the baby for the first time—as the baby gripped onto his finger and whimpered when they were separated.

No idea.

Everything just happened so fast.

One minute Jensen was pulling Jared out from under a bench, the next minute he was covering Jared’s mouth to silence his screams, and the minute after that, Jensen was pressing the last clean towel between Jared’s legs. He pushed down on Jared’s lower stomach with one hand and held the baby in the other.

During clear moments, Jared, pale and panting, would try to nurse.
The baby latched on after a few tries.

He ate better than either adult.

Day became night became day again. Jensen had a pack on him. In rationed portions, he fed Jared as Jared fed the baby. Pieces of stale bread passed from Jensen’s fingers to Jared’s lips, the baby between them, looking up with the most curious eyes.

There wasn’t much in the pack; that it stretched for two days still seems miraculous.

But even that wasn’t enough. Hunks of mealy bread and slices of a brown apple couldn’t sustain a grown person feeding a tiny person. Dread burrowed into Jensen’s stomach like maggots in week-old takeout containers.

And it never left.

After every meal, Jensen could feel time slipping way. He wanted to grab time by the throat and squeeze the life out of it. He wanted to charge at it, make it feel as afraid as he felt, because while Jared and the baby slept, he did not. While Jared and the baby were awake, so was he. There were so many minutes throughout the day for him to contemplate tracking time, trapping it, tying it down, ignoring its volatile thrashing, and…

Two days seems like a lot.

As comfortable as he was going to be, Jared and the baby slept long stretches of time, both exhausted from the past eight or nine months. Jensen watched them. He checked on the towel underneath Jared. He cleaned smaller towels to use as diapers. He assembled meals from the dwindling supply in his pack. Keeping his hands busy was better than sitting there wondering—what now?

Sometimes, Jared slept without the baby cradled in his arms.

Jensen took over.

Sometimes, Jared was awake and held the baby while Jensen scrounged in the alleyway for anything they could make use out of. He picked through it all. They couldn’t make clothes for the baby out of stained towels, nor could they make any out of empty soda cans or ripped cardboard.

In between two sheets of cardboard, Jensen found a dead bird.

Its neck had been broken and its wings pulled off.

Unlike anything else he found and took out of the dumpsters in that alley, Jensen kept that knowledge to himself.

In the empty room, five years later, Jensen charges at Jared.

But he’s got no element of surprise. Jared predicts his movements.

Anger that had been simmering boils over. Jensen lets out a feral yell, frustrated with his lack of hold, irritated by the blood and sweat in his eyes. The rasp of his uneven breathing thunders in his ears.

Jared swings out. So fast. On target.

Jensen’s cheek all but shattered.
Combat erupts. For a split second, Jensen thinks he sees surprise carved into Jared’s expression. But he blinks; they blink, and it’s gone.

Crimson drips down Jensen’s neck.

He had no idea what the sun really looked like the first time he held Henry for more than a minute.


Get back up again.

Jared is nothing more than a charcoal figure on brilliant white paper, smeared in blood.

And once more, Jared pulls Jensen up, shaking him, causing his bones to quake inside their meaty package. If they are swords, Jensen is a kitchen knife.

Blow after blow.

The lack of finesse. A curling wave of agony.

Bursts of pain behind his eyes. Explosions of hurt decimate his face.

For a moment, Jared withdraws.

Tasting metallic failure, Jensen teeters on his knees, swaying as he blinks up towards this inky figure cut from nighttime and shadow.

The collar of Jensen’s shirt sticks to him, wet with blood and sweat.

Fingers extend outward.

Jensen can’t breathe.

Until Jared pinches the bridge of Jensen’s nose using the hem of his own shirt.

He wipes.

And they keep turning.

There are more Patrol than Bookers.

It was never unknown to the Bookers that they were outnumbered. They depended on Patrol to carry out the more physically challenging task of enforcement on the streets—keeping the peace, silencing trouble, and sweeping any undesirables aside.

People like Jensen—or as Jared had once been—are often malnourished. Their bodies tolerate pain, but do not yield fruitful, protein-rich organs. Rehabilitating these individuals was attempted through a secretive, experimental program, which ultimately proved to be a failure. The amount of care and skill required to boost the organs of each participant was too lengthy. Success rates in the sample group were determined too low to continue. Three fourths of the participants remained in the same poor health after the program as they had been in before; the remaining individuals saw some improvement, but never reached a viable level of health.
Decisions were made.

Patrol were issued to the streets and given free reign over the undesirables. Bookers emphasized psychological fear above all else. It seemed an effective way to maintain order without much blood. Fear would keep these individuals inline and prevent them from spoiling the rest of the population.

Likewise, it would keep the prime population from extending any help towards these individuals, and prevent them from questioning the divide or the disparity.

Yes, it would have been easiest to eliminate this section of the overall human population.

All at once, it would have been easy. Trapped, cornered, or herded into a space, the Bookers could have done it in every major city across the world within the span of three days.

But Patrol needed something to focus on, something to allow them to hunt in the long-term.

Even if it was a child learning how to walk.

“What were they like?” Jared dabs an open cut above Jensen’s right eyebrow, using a clean towel dipped in something pink. Or maybe it had been white and Jensen’s blood had stained it this way.

Bristling at the sting, Jensen growls, “What was what like?”

Jared continues to speak without the orb. His mouth moves and the volume adjusts as he sees fit in the situation. Oddly enough, Jensen has found himself confused without the color provided by the annoying orb.

“His first steps. What were they like?”

“…he got up and walked.”

“No,” Jared sighs softly. He scrapes a portion of dried blood off of Jensen’s cheek. “Did he fall down? Did he try to get up right away? How old was he?”

Bruises cover Jensen from head to toe. Even his hair hurts.

At the end of their time in the empty, stark room, Jared helped him up and half-carried him to the nearest bathroom. This will all hurt more tomorrow. Jensen refuses to answer any of these questions without asking his own first. It’s owed to him. For the past hour, Jensen has been a rag doll, throttled around in the empty room, his blood staining the hardwood floors and alabaster walls.

“How are you talking?” Jensen tries not to flinch away from Jared’s hand on his chin, tilting him up to look at the cut underneath his left eye.

Another dab.

Maroon blood mottles the towel. Jared folds it, dips it into the sink again, and gently presses it to Jensen’s eye. He sweeps away crusted blood and minds the blossoming bruise around it.

“This,” he murmurs, swiftly showing a sliver of steel the size of a coin underneath the collar of his ebony shirt. Right after, he continues his repairs, hands moving to Jensen’s forehead. Although each wound carries with it a puncture of discomfort from the towel, ultimately, Jensen finds this touch soothing. He closes his eyes, ignoring any way he might be leaning into these hands. Jared’s voice surrounds him in the tiled bathroom.

“Not as many capabilities as the entire orb, but just enough to be a microphone.”
One calm brush over Jensen’s brow eases the last of the tension out of his shoulders.

Fatigue convinces him to share. It begins as a morsel of detail and becomes an entire meal.

“\"I set down bags and paper for him to crawl on.\"" His voice washes up against Jared’s forearms. “\"I don’t remember how old he was. Not exactly. Maybe a year. Around there. He’d wake me up, crawling, and when I found enough paper I’d crawl with him. He liked moving. But he was good. Never gave me much trouble if I had to scoop him up and… be on the go.\”

He only got in the one punch. Jared blocked every other hit afterwards; Jensen could not say the same. Tested, pushed to limits, he could defend himself and his own when necessary. But the people he was up against on the street were so much like him: starved and desperate. Expert fighters they were not. Strategy isn’t part of survival. It has always been a frenzied struggle, motivated by instinct, fueled by the different between eating that night or not. And it used to be that Jensen would leave well enough alone. He’d go without if necessary.

Somewhere along the way, it wasn’t enough to look out for himself.

One punch and Jensen was usually able to defend his spot, secure food for his kid, or grab the last sock from the bottom of a bin.

One punch hardly made a difference against Jared.

Eventually, Jensen exhausted every reserve of his strength. He lacked the stamina to continue.

Bookers remain outnumbered. The skirmish on the streets which caused Jared’s injuries has them panicked. Jared still refuses to say what it was about, but he is certain that it is not the last.

This is only the beginning.

“\"It was night.\"”

How long have Jared’s fingers been carding through his hair?

“\"He grabbed onto a crate and pulled himself up.\”

How long has it been since Jared placed the towel on the edge of the sink and instead, cupped Jensen’s jaw with his free hand?

“Fell down first two times. Didn’t cry. I was… proud. He’s always been a good kid.”

The three of them will sleep together tonight.

This might be the only beating Jensen appreciates.

“Third time, I knelt a few steps away from him and held my arms out. I… I said, ‘Baby, you do this, and I’ll let you walk to the moon.’”

He’s never told anyone that.

Despite the dull ache coursing throughout his body, and the persistent anxiety of Henry being in another room, Jensen knows the exact moment Jared kneels down. Long, smooth fingers dip down to brace Jensen’s shoulders. Opening his eyes, Jensen meets hazel ones framed in fragile, crystal tears.

Fifteen minutes ago, Jared was shouting at Jensen to punch harder, dodge faster, defend his right,
defend his right! Right side or right? Right side or right?

All of this will hurt more tomorrow, even though he can already feel the swelling in his face diminish.

Words spill out of Jensen, cracking and brittle. “It was so hard without you.” Despite a sharp, shaky inhale of breath, he can’t stop speaking, can’t hold back this last part. “All of it.”

Jensen doesn’t move away, refuse, or break the embrace that follows. Tender and aching, his ribs rattle and roar against Jared’s. His hushed cries meet one, cold, smooth cheek. He hears what the resentment in his veins has yearned for these past five years.

“I’m sorry, Jensen.”

And it is followed by something entirely new.

“I’m here now.”

Chapter End Notes

thanks as always for your patience!

please comment, even if you're a long time reader. this is a pivotal chapter and i'd love to know what you think.
Two minutes slip by, carving out yet another different reality, displayed to Jensen in the plain reflection of the bathroom mirror.

The person in the mirror appears dissimilar than the person bleeding on the floor half an hour ago.

It’s like the ending that was written—that started with Jensen’s bruised, used, and swollen face—has been erased. He took more from Jared than he gave, never quite able to bombard as good as he got. The skills and techniques he’s held onto over the years have worked for evasion and survival. Rudimentary. That’s what Jensen has practiced—rudimentary attacks and defense suited for shadows and emaciated, shrunken forms dressed in patched up coats and plastic bags.

Not a bruise or a cut remains on his face.

The person as he knew before is gone.

Even pain retreats with each passing minute. The water was pink to start with. Looking down at the sink, it has turned white, clear what lay in the pans Jensen used to fill with snow and melt down for a bath.

What is Jared doing to him?

In so many ways than just this.

Their eyes meet through the reflection in the mirror. When Jensen turns, Jared doesn’t vanish. He is present, solid, and as real as Jensen can comprehend—standing there holding the towel in his hands, looking nervous and hopeful all at once.

Life has been messy, but generous.

Lonely most of the time.

Brutally imperfect, but supremely perfect all the same.

None of this is what they asked for. And if they had a chance to start over, they might choose to rewrite something more true to what they deserved. Or they might not.

Whatever drives Jensen to reach out and take hold of Jared’s hand stretches out and unfurls itself. It sinks into their palms, threads itself in their fingerprints, and leads the charge. Running from the bathroom, they sprint down the hall. The door to the garden flutters open without hesitation, without a lock or a twist of the knob. Jensen’s bare feet land on the overwhelming sensation of healthy, lush grass and soil. He can hear the steps behind him as clear as his own heart beating.

Through amber fires and sweeps of scarlet, past smatterings of sapphire and amethyst, hand in hand two sets of pounding feet storm forward.

Right until they reach the aged, stately willow tree.

Its roots expand in every direction, holding firm in the soil, claiming everything around it. And in its curling, unbreakable branches rests the center of everything.
Cradled and rocked with a breeze without origin, Henry sleeps, an ivory lily in one hand.

And the orb in the other.

Jensen used to be reckless, just enough to stir the fire inside him.

He got hurt and toughened up. When he could have turned away, he stuck around, and offered his help. The pillow. The orange. The rags, his hands, his fingers holding onto the newborn wet with blood, its eyes shut tight, its entire face red, its small body vigorous and alive.

He’s not anything like he used to be.

None of this is what he asked for.

But it’s his.

“Ours,” he says, letting go of the breath he’s held tight in his chest.

Jared will teach him how to fight better.

“Ours,” Jared echoes.

They can start over.

Jensen steps forward and picks Henry up, holding him close in a familiar position, kissing his cheek. Henry doesn’t stir; he snuffles and tucks his head under Jensen’s chin, each breath of warm air a reminder that the fire inside Jensen never died.

He no longer avoids Jared’s eyes. Silently, he offers—hold him.

Graciously, Jared declines, kindness in his motions. The branches of the willow tree stretch out again, waving free.

As they walk through, away from the door and towards the rest of the garden, Jared slips his arm around Jensen’s waist.

He’d rather hold them both. If that’s alright.

When they stop at a gently sloping hill, Jensen leans in.

Chapter End Notes

short but important transitional chapter. i hope you enjoy. a longer update on the way. thanks for sticking around! i know this isn't an easy story to follow, but perhaps it's worth it. :)
Henry receives a red cape. Jared ties it on him after dinner, three nights after their first visit to the garden. Kneeling down, Jared’s hands work with care and attention, smoothing out any wrinkles. He ties the cape not too tight and not too loose. Jensen listens to the magical properties of the cape listed out for Henry.

The cape must only be worn inside the garden and with the supervision of either Jared or Jensen. Henry nods, hooked on every word, his small fingers clinging to the sides of the gift.

He’s going to fly.

“Close your eyes,” Jared murmurs, slipping his hands into Henry’s. “Think of the tallest tree you’ve ever seen.”

Dinner was a thick, hearty soup filled with vegetables and tender cubes of beef. They each had a side of crusty bread to accompany every last drop of rich, almost buttery broth. Each bowl started off filled to the brim; on their way to the sink they were empty. The potatoes Jared added in gave way to their spoons like pillows. Carrots floated pleasantly on the top, sliced into coins by Henry and Jensen.

“Make it taller. Much, much taller.” Slowly, Jared spreads Henry’s arms out to his sides. “You’re going to fly all the way up to the top of that tree.”

Shutting off the water, Jensen leans against the sink, looking into dining room. Reverent hands move cautiously, still holding within them a hint of hesitation. Touch remains a peculiar thing between them all. The fastest learner has been the youngest of them all. Eyes still closed, Henry smiles in response to Jared’s hands under his arms. The smile breaks into a joyous laugh as Jared lifts him up. Rising to his feet, rotating once, Jared reminds Henry to keep his eyes closed.

Henry replies, breathless with excitement, “Okay.”

They make a good picture, the two of them.

Jared holds Henry in the crook of his left arm, held almost high enough to reach his shoulder. The cape flutters when Jared spins them around in one quick circle. “Are we at the top yet?”

“No,” Henry answers, curling his right arm around Jared’s neck for balance. “It’s really, really tall.”

Without warning, Jared looks over to Jensen.

There’s no time for Jensen to pretend he wasn’t staring. A blush that matches the cape spreads over Jensen’s face. In response, Jared smiles, mirroring the excitement of the child in his arms down to the flash of dimples.

He raises Henry above his head, every motion effortless and gaining in confidence. The top of the tree arrives. Henry’s hair hangs down, framing his face, dangling in the space between him and his
“You’re at the top,” Jared announces. “What do you do next?”

“Open my eyes!” Henry squeezes Jared’s arms. “Please? Can I?”

This is a good sign. A good sign of a good kid. The best kid. The only kid who would want to open their eyes before flying. Pride radiates in Jensen, and when his eyes meet Jared’s again, he nods his agreement.

“Oh, Jared murmurs, “open your eyes.”

Henry squeals in response to his view of the world. His eyes land on Jared and a second later, on Jensen.

“Look!” Small hands wave. “I’m at the top!”

“Yeah, buddy,” Jensen sighs with his own smile.

“What now?” Henry whispers to Jared. “What do I do now?”

“You ready to fly?”

“From here?”

“Yes.”

“…where do I go?”

“Anywhere you want.”

Conflicted, Henry chews on his bottom lip, frowning. Jared’s hold on him never waivers.

“Anywhere, Jared?”

It waivers a little when he hears his name. “Anywhere you want.”

“Can I come back here?”

“Of course.”

“The moon. Can I go to the moon?”

“You got it. Close your eyes for a second.”

“Daddy and I played a game like this. Right, daddy?”

“Yep.”

“Is it okay?”

Jensen calmly answers back. “Go ahead, pal. Just come back before bedtime.”

Going to the moon means Jared dipping and lifting Henry over and over again until the entire apartment fills up with giggles and streaks of laughter. From the dining room to the living room to the kitchen to their bedroom to the garden, the red cape flutters behind Henry.

Barefoot, he sets off on the grass, arms flapping at his sides, jumping and pleading for Jared to climb
the willow tree with him. Before the two of them can set off into the distance, Jensen warns about
trees, five year olds, and broken limbs. This might make him fussy, but he’s willing to proudly wear
the badge if it means Henry walks away without a broken arm. Jared assures him that they’ll be
careful, followed by Henry’s own commitment to being safe.

Jensen sits down on the grass to watch one black, lean figure lift up one small, red figure onto the
sturdiest bottom branch. Underneath the canopy of wispy willow branches, the three of them shout
out to each other.

“Daddy! Can you see me?”

“Not really,” Jensen calls out, his knees to his chest. “You must be halfway there by now.”

“No,” Henry laughs. “We aren’t that far away, daddy.”

“Sorry, sorry, it just seemed like you had a good boost.”

Meticulous, Jared guides Henry up until the willow’s branches drape around them.

At the top, completely shrouded, Jensen listens to conversations back and forth about the moon, the
sky, the distance, and the order of the planets. Questions are answered patient and simple. The
willow tree doesn’t mind that they take their time.

The last question causes Jensen to laugh to himself.

“How are we gonna get down, Jared?”

Chapter End Notes

tiny chapter, but something at least! thank you all for the nudges to keep going with this
verse. <3 it's the holidays and i work retail. sigh.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next three evenings are difficult.

Jensen slips out of bed, without a scratch, and returns the same way by morning just before Henry wakes up. In between these twilight hours, Jensen bleeds, bruises, and breaks.

Pink liquid splashed onto his face patches up the cuts on his lips; it deflates the violet swelling under his eyes. And if he sits in a tub full of this liquid, within seconds of submerging his sprained ankle, fractured ribs, and broken hand, his bones fuse together as easily as the flowers in the garden grow.

On the fourth day, earlier than usual, Jared stumbles into the apartment and shouts for Jensen.

Jared does a poor job of covering the injuries with his right hand while reaching out with his left. “Human bodies,” Jared pants, staggering towards the guest room, “...so easy… to pierce.”

Even the orb couldn’t help Jared on the streets.

It occupies Henry in the living room, changing colors and playing a tune, nudging his cheek and curling around his arms and hands like a magic trick. At the same time, Jensen presses down on the deep, seeping wound across Jared’s middle, listening to the squelch of organs and blood. That’s all he can manage to do, aside from watching the color drain from Jared’s face and the convulsions rise through him.

Blood soaks through black fabric. Jensen peels away layers, pieces of material sopping wet, sticky with Jared’s blood. A desperate question lingers on Jared’s lips, much too close to tumbling out. Adjusting the pressure, Jensen’s eyes meet Jared’s. The orb might be elsewhere, but Jensen sees his own question reflected back in familiar eyes. Worse, as the seconds tick past, answers do not surface. This is worse than failing to duck to the left--deeper.

Why isn’t Jared healing yet?

Any second now.

Laughter rings out from the living room. Jensen flinches at the sound. He looks up from his soaked palms to see Jared gasping, eyes closed, his head moving from side to side. Muscles seize. Jared’s legs buck, a reflex, something uncontrolled. This is not a wound Jensen can fix with pressure, needle, and a thread.

There has to be some kind of alarm inside this apartment. Some way to alert the outside. But Jensen can’t leave. He can’t allow the pressure on the wound to fly away.

There’s no telling what it might take with it if he does.

Last night, they had a quiet dinner. Henry asked for fluffy potatoes. Jared set him on a stool--not a chair anymore--and showed him how to wash potatoes. Once Henry passed the potato washing exam, Jared started peeling them, using a small knife. The skins fell off easily enough, until there was nothing but pearly, white meat.

“Hey pal,” Jensen shouts, trying to keep his voice and hands steady. “C-can you come here?”
Few things are more important to Jensen than keeping Henry out of this.

Away from whatever lurks within the tunnel in the alleyway.

Adjusting his shoulders to block out Henry’s view, Jensen moves on the bed, his hands ever present on Jared’s abdomen. Explanations whir through his mind, increasing in fervor with every small, cautious step sounding out in the hallway. Honesty. It’s best to be honest. He hasn’t lied, so much as he’s concealed the truth. Isn’t that parenting? Isn’t this the instance Jensen has been readying Henry for by teaching him to avoid flashlights, never sleep in an open space, and always, always check the exterior of a dumpster before scuffing?

“Daddy?”

The more he panics, the more Henry will worry.

“Pal, I need you to…” Jared gasps. Jensen’s hands flutter, changing pressure, gauging pain, praying for the open slits of skin to heal. The truth tumbles out of him. “Jared’s hurt and we need to help him. Can you do what I ask?”

Jensen gives the kid an option, without consequences. But how does he convey that to a five year old?

“I can help, daddy, let me help,” Henry cries out, rushing forward with the orb held up.

“Easy, easy with that.”

Holding it close, tucking it under his chin, Henry murmurs, “Okay.” He looks up, awaiting instruction.

It was never Jensen’s intention to raise him this way. Or maybe it was. How else would they have both survived? Both needed the other. Maybe, some other portrait could have been painted. “Go into the garden.” His voice lowers, remaining steady despite his slippery hold. He speaks firmly, locking eyes, reiterating to his kid that this is important. “I want you to find a yellow flower. The petals will all be yellow and the middle part will be yellow or brown. Bring me as many as you can find, no less than three.” A groan from Jared prompts Jensen’s voice to rise, a little louder than he means it.

“Do you understand, pal?”

“Yes.”

“Repeat what you’re getting.”

“More than three,” Henry mumbles, looking down at the floor and then at Jared, “three yellow flowers. Daddy, is Jared gonna…?”

“Go.”

“Do I…?”

“Take it with you, but go. You have to run.” Seeing fear spike through Henry tugs at something in Jensen’s chest. He eases his tone. “I’m going to make a paste out of the petals and he’ll be okay. But right now, you need to help me, pal. You’ll do fine. Go.”

Small for his age, Henry’s footsteps barely make a noise.
His back arched, Jensen tilts forward, cautious and afraid.

Maybe he should have kept the orb near.

It was clear, crystal white when Henry tucked it under his chin. Aching memories tell Jensen it should have been that light shade of coral. They had fallen into routine--deceptive and alluring.

The world has changed in a span of only twenty minutes. Each minute that Henry does not return multiplies the storming panic in Jensen’s chest. His heart rattles and his breathing slows to match the tempo of the body underneath him. Exhales become an effort. Jensen allows his eyes to close, promising only a moment.

Aligning himself into a natural curve, Jensen retains control over every muscle.

His forehead presses against Jared’s, putting them nose to nose.

This is as close as Jensen has placed their lips.

Possibilities hover in the space that remains. Conflict and confusion spar for a brief moment. This is beyond that fraction of distance. Jensen inhales enough for the two of them. On the exhale, his mind produces a single Calendula--bright, fresh, and healthy. It looks like a daisy, but the shape of its petals are different, This one has two layers of petals leading to the buttery center. Its stem provides contrast, amplifying each petal until they threaten to burn.

Calendulas do not grow in alleyways.

They do not grow in any place Jensen has ever been. He’s only purchased them in the strange, menacing hours before dawn. Every flower placed in his hand has been dead, clipped from the earth. Nothing grows in tunnels, over fire escapes, or in the asphalt shadows of dumpsters.

Bookers brought Patrol to enforce rules and order. Less desirable citizens of this planet needed to be kept under control and surveillance. It has been important to shutter them off from the rest of society. It’s like holding a light in one hand and the prize in the other. Distract. Attract. Build up groups of healthy donors and keep them satisfied just enough to guarantee a return on the investment. Invade by subtle measures, barely noticeable change. Years, generations, all of that passed until the questions were put to rest.

They came and found their food source--docile, self-centered. Happy enough with individual desires.

Keeping humans alive and moderately content has been the Bookers’ goal. What they had not counted on, had never once imagined, was for Patrol to disagree.

Patrol want slaughter. They crave it. Some fun can be had--behind bars, in dead ends, or by plucking victims from underneath benches--and breeding can be attempted. But it isn’t enough to keep their savage natures in check, allowing them only to project onto malnourished, sickly humans.

One out of two larvae have survived birth from a human host.

Before it died from its own genetic mutations, Patrol managed to stash away their young. Bookers had imposed limits on their breeding, but numbers could be faked. Larva could be hidden.

In Jared’s case, the Bookers promoted him and made him an ambassador. They could trust Jared. He had killed the mutant himself, without the aid of any weapon. But that was only one Larva. Patrol kept breeding, if not with themselves, then with human prisoners at the stations. It was done cleverly, despite the mutations.
Patrol now outnumber Bookers.

“Daddy!”

Jensen flinches, though his hold never falters.

“Look, I got lots,” Henry proclaims, rushing to the edge of the bed. He hefts up the bouquet, a generous offering of the correct flower. Pride surges through Jensen, quickly tamed by urgency.

“You did great, baby,” Jensen says, his praise as bright as the petals. “Take off the petals. It’s okay. Yeah, good, just… a little faster.” The wound hasn’t closed. Jared’s blood has thickened, almost into a paste, mashing between Jensen’s fingers. It looks like skin and muscle are fighting, struggling to meet across a wide gorge. But they aren’t fast enough. Jared doesn’t groan in response to Jensen’s shift in pressure.

Small hands tear off petals, collecting them in a pile on the bed.

“Okay, that’s good, that’s good. Now, I need you to tear up some of the leaves. You can mix it all.”

“Like this, daddy?”

“Yep. Good. Okay. Scoop it into my hand.” Jensen receives the first pile. Without hesitation, he spits into the palm of his hand. For thirty seconds, he takes a risk. He lets go of Jared’s abdomen. Mashing the petals and leaves together in the palms of his hand, Jensen works hard. These aren’t the right tools or ingredients. The setting is off. The audience is inappropriate.

What seems like hours pass before something resembling a salve forms. Jensen coats the outside of the wound. His fingers graze the perimeter of open flesh. This seems primitive. Ridiculous.

Finished, Jensen sheds his shirt, tearing it into two pieces. “I’m making… a bandage,” he explains, trying his best to steady his breathing. Tying both pieces together, Jensen slips it under Jared, completing the task.

“Back… go back to the living room, pal.”

“...I wanna stay.”

“No,” Jensen sighs, looking down at his hands. “Not right now.” Failure could soon soak his fingers.

“Please?”

“...” It was Jensen who taught him how to ask.

“No. Listen to me. Go back to the living room.”

Henry’s eyes well up. Without another glance at Jensen, he places the orb on the bed and leaves.

Sitting down on the bed, Jensen greets the next few minutes ahead of them.

They might as well be five years.

Chapter End Notes
phew! thank you all for your patience! this fic took a hiatus as i was recently diagnosed with fibromyalgia. concentrating is more difficult, plus i have been coping with pain. but i’m so glad i have been able to write this chapter this week. thank you to the anon who requested this on tumblr recently. and to all y’all who have hung in there! :D

thank you! <3
Color never really existed in Jensen's world. If it did, it was a warning. It was a signal to move and move quick. Hide. Dodge. Inhale and never ever exhale until the coast was clear.

Jensen remembers the blue light of the residential senior home, visible from the alleyway. That was one color he took some comfort in. It stayed lit at all hours, steady, consistent, and reliable. Not once did Jensen see it go out or switch to a different color. He knew it as intimately as he knew his coat. The glow from it could almost provide him with spiritual shelter. Almost. But almost was a lot better than nothing or never.

Blue.

The color emerges from the nightstand, slipping out like a secret. It washes against Jensen's eye lids and gently withdraws. A second later, it appears again, unobtrusive, and once again leaves. Its presence remains calm, even though it ebbs and flows.

Blue.

His mind searches for blue. But hadn't he just seen red? Hadn't red stained his fingers, his hands, wrists, and forearms? Blood.

Jensen wakes with a start. His eyes snap open and he immediately reaches out for Henry. He fell asleep. He fell asleep with his hands on Jared, but where is Henry?

“With me,” a voice answers, soft and faint. It means well, and Jensen briefly appreciates the effort it must take, but he does not find peace until his hands find Henry--curled up on Jared's right side, sound asleep.

Blue light allows Jensen to see Henry's long eyelashes resting against his cheeks. And how tightly his right hand clasps around Jared's shirt. This is safety and security. This is a warm bed without rain, snow, shadows, or dark tunnels.

Securing a bed like this has been Jensen's goal from the start. He never thought the bed would include himself. Or Jared.

“You okay?” Jensen keeps his voice hushed and sits up. His hands are sticky with dried and drying blood. From a quick look, he doesn't see the wound, but his eyes may not be the best in the dark after having so much light.

Jared exhales, somewhat ragged, mostly tired. “Better. I'm sorry if I woke you.”

“I'm sorry,” Jensen blurts out, without thinking through his words. Quickly, he adds, “I'm sorry I fell asleep.”

Blue transforms into a pale shade of pink. It glows bright for a moment, then recedes into its more conservative shade.

“Thank you,” Jared murmurs. His mouth does not move, and he closes his eyes. The orb turns blue once more. “We all need rest.”
There could not be more truth to those words. Jensen sinks back into the mattress. He feels Jared’s breathing even out, and watches Henry’s grip remain solid on Jared’s shirt. Comfortable silence fills the room. Gradually, the orb dims. Jensen allows his eyes to close and his body to relax.

Before he drifts off, he adds to Jared’s words, though he keeps the addition to himself.

They deserve rest.

Chapter End Notes

woah!!! thank you for your patience! I hope you enjoy the update. wow, how things have changed since i last updated this fic. i’m settling into my new job, which includes a commute on the train. i’ve been particularly productive this week writing on my way home. :)

this is a small chapter, but i figured small is better than none! more to come! <3
The morning proves difficult.

Jensen and Henry do what they can to assist Jared getting up from the bed. With Jared's arm around Jensen's shoulder, and Henry offering his hand to Jared's free one, the three of them shuffle down the hallway. Each member of their party exists in different states of exhaustion. Even Henry moves a little slower, careful to measure his steps against Jared's.

Though the walk must be incredibly painful, Jared never allows it to show in his expression or tone of voice. The orb, however, falters once or twice as it whirs through the air. Its previous shade of blue has changed to a deep violet. It makes for a stark contrast against the white door Jared leads them to.

The door swings open on its own and reveals what seems like an extension of the grand garden. Flowers, grass, vines, and saplings extend throughout the room, though simpler in their arrangement and color. Delicate vines thread against the ceiling, tiny cream colored flowers blossoming in between. In the center of it all lies a deep, circular pool filled with familiar pink water. Steam hovers at the surface of the pool, indicating that this is meant for more than a simple wash.

Henry looks up at Jensen and Jared, awaiting instruction, but his question clear.

“Not long for you,” Jared murmurs, brushing hair from Henry's eyes. “This is strong.”

Easing down, their trio settles at the pool’s edge. Jensen tests the temperature of the water before he allows Henry to touch it.

“It's not that warm.”

Jared takes a deep breath. “Once you're in, it will be.”

Although he accepts the answer, Jensen feels the need to get in first. A question of decency tugs at him. Henry has seen him undressed before. Not often, as their situation never allowed for much privacy, time, or space, but it is no mystery to Henry what Jensen looks like underneath his layers of fabric armor. But the same cannot be said for Jared.

“Daddy,” Henry pipes up. “Hurry up.”

Jensen laughs. Really laughs.

The water does feel warmer once Jensen completely submerges. He sighs at the immediate effect of heat and healing. It can be a rush, so he carefully lowers Henry into the pool a few inches at a time. Henry wiggles his toes in the water, amused by the color. He coos at the heat and the sensation of Jensen holding him close, chest to chest, clean, revitalizing water lapping at their skin. As soon as his hands reach the water, Henry starts testing his boundaries against Jensen. He isn’t shy in front of Jared. He’s impatient to explore water deeper than a bathtub—despite his inability to swim.

“Just a second,” Jensen says, his tone firm. “You don’t know how to swim. I’m not letting you loose just like that.” Of course, Jensen does not add that he also doesn’t know how to swim, and if the pool were any deeper, he’d have a tough time maintaining his head above water. It already reaches the top
curve of his shoulders.

Henry huffs, but takes advantage of their close contact and the heat. He curls up in the crook of Jensen’s shoulder and relaxes, gone slack and asleep within a few minutes.

“You’ll need to take him out soon.” Jared lingers at the edge, only submerging his feet.

“Would it hurt him?”

“No,” Jared quietly replies, looking down at the water. “The more you use it, the more you depend on it.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s limited, for one.”

“Oh.”

“Over time, it makes you feel less human.”

“...is that how you feel?”

Jared looks up and gives a small, tired smile. “Not at this moment, no.”

For the next ten minutes, their entire party bobs and floats in the pool of rose colored water. Jensen transfers Henry from his arms to Jared’s. Henry never stirs. He simply accommodates himself to Jared’s hold.

Jensen understands what makes this moment different.

He leaves Jared and Henry for a minute, just to collect a few towels from one of the regular bathrooms. When he returns, Jared gently deposits Henry into the soft, comfortable wrap. Unwilling to part the three of them just yet, Jensen fashions a small nest of towels and sets Henry down.

How does that happen?

All he had to do was walk to a known location, no more than twenty steps or so away, and gather a few towels. There was no danger en route to the towels. No threat of discovery. No fear of accusation or punishment. And when he returned, he had the ability to provide a comfortable, decent place of rest.

Maybe there will be a day when it won’t seem so strange.

Once again, he slips into the pool, able to stretch out his arms and legs without hitting the edges or disturbing Jared. He tests his own abilities, curious to see, and decides he does not want to submerge his head at all.

Jared remains in one spot, his eyes closed.

The temperature inside this room is mild and inviting. Jensen settles an arm’s length away from Jared, leaning against the edge. He can feel the difference in his body already. Nerves jumpstart back to life. Muscles release from their knots. Any bruises or scratches he had mend and disappear.

Jensen takes a page of inspiration from Henry’s book.

He flicks some water across Jared’s chest and face.
slightly longer update! :D thank you for reading! please comment, it's what keeps me going. <3
None of the filth on the streets exists in Jared's apartment.

Jensen looks at himself in the mirror. He wonders, for a second, if that filth would include him.

He hardly looks the same. There are times when he'll catch his reflection in the mirror, on a glossy countertop, or the expanse of the dining room table and stare in disbelief. The shape of his face has changed. From gaunt and jagged to solid and smooth. Is this the result of every bath he takes, submerged in warm pink water? Or is this how people look after sleeping on mattresses and pillows? His entire life, he never knew what a comfortable bed felt like; all he knew were the last, leftover places and exposed corners of the city.

It feels criminal for anyone to take their bed for granted.

“Do I have to go to sleep?” Henry clings to Jensen, arms and legs wrapped around him in an effort to avoid being tucked in. “I'm not tired, daddy.”

“Uh huh. But I am.” Jensen might be clinging to Henry back. He is familiar. He is what Jensen has known in the last five years. Day in and day out. “Besides, the sooner you sleep, the sooner you can wake up and ask Jared to make you breakfast.”

Unsatisfied, Henry shakes his head. He molds against Jensen. “I don't wanna sleep.”

“I'll stay here until you do, pal.”

“No. I don't wanna sleep alone.”

“You're not alone, Jared and I are gonna talk adult stuff in the living room. We'll be right next door. I promise.”

An exhausted, almost fearful sigh brushes against the nape of Jensen's neck. “I don't like sleeping alone.”

Any resolve Jensen once possessed crumbles.

He trudges into the living room. Jared, relaxed on the couch, looks up from the pale green glow of the orb. The orb flies over and changes into a calming shade of light blue.

“Couldn't do it, huh?” Jared's voice brushes against Jensen's ear, though he himself has not moved.

Henry takes the orb into his hands and holds it close against his chest. Jensen sits down with care, next to Jared, and allows Henry to settle against them. He spreads out across their laps and yawns, focused on the steady rhythm of colors fading in and out.

In two minutes, he's out.

Jared and Jensen move their conversation to the bed, big enough for the three of them.
“Tell me what it was like.”

“What what was like?”

“Everything after I… left.”

“You didn’t leave. You were… taken.”

“Jensen. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if you hadn’t helped me.”

“I didn’t do much. Just shared some stuff with you.”

“Is it that small to you?”

“N-no, but I don’t wanna make a big deal out of it.”

“Why’d you help me.”

“Only you could ask a question and not have it sound like one.”

“Feel free to answer one of them without deflecting.”

“I thought we were going to talk business.”

“We are. But I want to know.”

“…you just looked like you needed a break.”

“Yes.”

“I wasn’t gonna keep him.”

“I am very glad you did.”

“Yeah.”

“Is it odd to say he looks like you?”

“Ha, okay, sure.”

“You know, when two people spend enough time around each other, they begin to bear some resemblance.”

“I guess.”

“Jensen.”

“Hm?”

“I would give and do anything to keep him safe.”

“…”

“I just… needed to say that.”

“That’s fine.”
“Is it?”

“It’s fine. Just follow through on it.”

“Oh course.”

“It was tough when he started talking. Because… that’s just really when it hit me that he wasn’t gonna stay that small forever. Dada was his first word. And then, it was slow for a while, just little things here and there, like no, okay, gimme. Then he kept growing. One day, words just exploded. He was naming everything. But you know what he had around him to name? Socks, when I could find them. Bag. Shoe. Garbage. Pipe. Puddle.”

“Keep going.”

“Do you remember what it was like? Living out there?”

“Yes.”

“We played this game. He’d slide down the lids and I’d catch him.”

“Did he grow fast?”

“No. He’s still small for his age.”

“How did you soothe him when he cried?”

“I… I mean, sometimes all I could do was cover his mouth. If I had more time, you know, I rocked him, tried to get him to eat. He was a good baby, though.”

“Do you miss it? Being out there?”

“You?”

“I miss what I lost out there.”

“Well, I found what you lost, so we’re even.”

“I am trying to keep you safe. Not imprisoned.”

“So how are you gonna do it?”

“Do what?”

“Send us back.”

“I’m not.”

“No?”

“We are leaving.”

Chapter End Notes
small update, but hopefully it packs a punch. :)

comments are love! <3
Jared explains the plan like a story.

He speaks through the orb, which casts an aqua color across the bed that make the blankets look like ripples of water.

The Bookers know they can't possibly win without a show of force. Unfortunately, Bookers also know that they are outnumbered. Physical strength is not--has never been--their strong suit, thus the alliance with Patrol. Bookers abhor Patrol. They think them common. Inferior. Their breeding was supposed to be limited, and for a time it was, until they started breeding with humans. Not everyone who gave birth in holding cells killed their mutant young. Not everyone could do it. Jared saw person after person devoured by the abnormal creatures agonizingly produced by their own bodies.

Fighting would be an exacerbating effort in futility. Fighting back would thin out their already paltry numbers.

Resistance cannot be physical.

It must be grounded in planning, research, and mobilization.

Jensen reminds Jared that this is not a story.

“You're talking about real people,” he murmurs, angled away from Jared. “Not just some model of the solar system you find in a dumpster and pitch into your pack.”

Aqua blue turns red.

“I know that,” Jared quips. “I am not treating you like pieces of painted styrofoam.”

“You're right. Because there's nothing inside styrofoam. But I know what's inside me: organs. You think Bookers will take humans along with them just for the company? It's a bargain. You provide them with a food source and they bail with us on board.”

“It isn't that simple.”

“You made it sound that way.”

“Why are you upset?”

“I'm not.”

“...it could be mutually beneficial. Think of what we could accomplish together.”

“They're parasites, Jared. Did you forget that?”

“No. Of course not. But there would be consent. The pink water could extend life, give people a higher quality of life, better than anything we ever knew. They don't need to hide. They don't need Patrol if their hosts are willing.”

“To have their organs taken, replicated, and eaten?”
“Yes.”

Jensen draws his knees up to his chest. The effects of the pink water are undeniable. He's experienced it himself. It doesn't, however, make him invulnerable.

He makes eye contact with Jared.

“You'd want your son to volunteer his organs for some parasite who just sees him as a meal ticket?”

The orb turns orange. “That's not--you're oversimplifying things, Jensen.”

“Am I? You seem to think we can all leave together like it's so damn easy. I couldn't leave the city in five years. What makes you think we can just up and leave the entire planet?”

“Of course it's more complicated. I am only outlining. There will be a set plan, coordinated and strategic. I am not the only one who supports this. But there are some things I cannot explain to you because you do not know. You can't understand it.”

Eyes narrowed, Jensen grumbles, “You've decided I can't understand it.”


Henry tosses and turns for a moment. Jared squeezes Jensen's shoulders, his eyes glued to Henry.

After a minute, Henry settles, asleep on his stomach and lying between Jensen and Jared, who both exhale in relief.

The orb floats closer to Jensen's shoulder.

Jared catches Jensen's attention.

“Please,” he whispers, somehow managing to imbue warmth into his tone. “That's not what I meant. My apologies.”

He couldn't leave the city for various reasons. First, he wanted to wait for Jared. Then, as the years passed, the obstacles grew. He could only read a few street signs, ones that he had been deciphering for years. Anything new would throw him off. Finding a few reliable places to stay the night without being harassed or bothered was difficult enough without navigating unfamiliar streets and neighborhoods. And what would he do about illness? Weather? Other people like him on the other side of town that he hadn’t struck deals or bartered with who would regard him as an outsider?

Leaving was for people with cars and coats and plans.

Leaving frightens him. Jared and Henry could survive. He knows that. Henry’s still young enough to learn--and to forget.

Jensen places his hands on Jared’s forearms. He notices how the glow of the orb nearby highlights the flecks of blue in Jared’s eyes. He devours each detail like the first hot meal he ever ate--dimples so differently, distinctly framed around an attractive, appealing mouth.

It’s Jensen who leans in first. When their lips press together, it feels like the world tilts.

The orb turns scarlet.
Chapter End Notes

an update yay! :D

comments are love! ~
Scuffing returns to Jensen’s mind.

How he would rake through garbage bags to find food that hadn’t spoiled or was about to spoil. People were so careless with their trash. They would toss in anything and everything. It was more work, more for Jensen to sort through. More work for his stained, calloused fingers.

On a good day, he could comb through two bags and find an adequate amount of food for them. The pockets in his coat made excellent storage units. Once, he found a triple decker sandwich mostly intact. That had been a good day. His life has been a series of searches for warmth, food, shelter, and still something else. What was it? What else had he been searching for, thirsting for, hungering for?

Affection.

Such as the kind he received from small fingers curled around the collar of his coat on rainy nights. The distinct press of tiny palms against his chest for balance whenever a bird flew past and attention had to be paid. Any voluntarily reach, touch, bump, tug, laugh from Henry became his sole purpose of being.

When did that start? Is it possible to pinpoint an exact moment?

It was not instant.

Neither is this.

Jensen separates from Jared, the both of them still mired in shock from their lips meeting. His eyes open to meet Jared’s. Years of a nocturnal existence hasn’t diminished Jensen’s sense of sight. If anything, scuffing, traveling, watching for the dreaded reach of a flashlight’s hunt—have made his eyes all the more sensitive to detail in the dark. He scans Jared’s expression, and from it, pulls a sense of pain, excitement, and curiosity. Jensen wonders what must reflect in his own expression.

He looks towards Henry, asleep, in between them.

“There are lots of things I’d do at night,” Jensen murmurs. He reaches over and smooths out the blankets over Henry. “But this… with you… to go any further. I don’t want that to be one of them.”

Jared replies with a small smile. He nods—understood.

They kiss again, the both of them lean into it. From a distance in Jensen’s mind—way, way far back—this feels like the natural course of things. How things should have been. An easy and logical progression of two people joined by circumstance and survival. Their heads tilt, mouths open, and tongues slide together. Once or twice their teeth click. Breathing occurs in pants and sighs and the most silent moans.

With a great deal of care, Jared places his right hand onto Jensen’s chest.

Jensen allows it.

In turn, he places his hands on the comfortable, solid space of Jared’s shoulders and neck. They sit,
cross legged, and bend towards each other, like the willow trees on the creek. It remains difficult to believe that such a field, such a wide open space exists only a few doors down. Or that Jensen can respond to the touch of an individual that is not his child. Or that he can affect the rhythm and depth of their kisses.

It feels unnerving to have control, yet entirely necessary.

Jared pauses and pulls back. His eyes scan Jensen’s.

Henry stirs. Their hands do not drop from one another, however, their eyes both immediately glance over. The orb glows shades of calming, soothing blue and green. It hovers close to Henry, whose eyes flutter open for a brief second before he falls back asleep. Jensen reaches over and places a hand on Henry’s cheek for reassurance. After a faint sigh, Henry’s breathing steadies out once more.

Jared moves his hand to Jensen’s cheek in the same manner.

Time for sleep.

Not the end--Jensen reassures. Jared slips under the covers, on the opposite side of Henry. He ruffles Jensen’s hair in response--not the end, only a pause.

That’s how it should have been all along.

In the morning, Jared prepares breakfast with Henry’s eager assistance. They break eggs together over a blue bowl and it is Henry’s job to whisk. He accepts his duties with aplomb, and frequently looks up and over for the approval of the adults around him. There is never a lack of affection for Henry.

In this environment, Henry thrives. His letters on paper become steadier and more legible. He understands more numbers, colors, shapes, and words. Some of the clothes he had started with require mending or larger sizes. Though still small, it requires slightly more effort to pick him up and lull him into sleep for naptime in the afternoon. At first he insists that he isn’t tired. He was in the middle of coloring a picture of their breakfast.

“I was going to color the cups yellow, because they look like flowers,” he mumbles, head laid against Jensen’s shoulder. “Can we go in the water later, with Jared? The pink water. Daddy, how do you make pink?”

“Red and white,” Jensen answers. He keeps his voice low, in a rumble, trying not to cause more excitement. He walks around the bedroom, rubbing gentle circles over Henry’s back.

Little feet swing while little hands hold on. “I like pink. And blue. And red. An’ orange. An’ yellow. And purple. And brown. And turkos.”

“Turquoise.”

“Turkos.”

“What did you find that’s turquoise?”

“A flower,” Henry yawns. “Jared said it’s turkos. That means it’s blue and green. Then he turned the orb that color.”
“You should go to sleep, pal. We can talk about flowers and colors later.’’

“What if I have to go to the bathroom?’’

“Do you?’’

“Yes, please.’’

Jensen sets Henry down and follows after him. Henry chooses to go to the bathroom down the hall—not because there is anything wrong with the one connected to their bedroom, but because it means a chance to avoid his nap a few minutes longer. This also means he gets to hurtle past the living room, where Jared is, reading over papers on the long couch. Jared looks up, notices the look on Jensen’s face, and refrains from engaging Henry in any further activity. One trip to the bathroom later and some stalling at the sink while washing his hands, Henry begs Jensen to stay in bed until he falls asleep.

Physically and emotionally unable to decline this request, Jensen caves in.

Why leave if they could have all of this? Why leave if this place seems safe enough from the outside? Why take Henry out of this environment? Why take that risk?

Henry talks and talks and talks. He chatters on, holding his feet or rolling around. He pats Jensen’s cheek, mimics taking a bite of Jensen’s nose, and squeals when Jensen growls. Finally, Henry falls asleep, more or less on what has now become his naptime schedule. Jensen stays, as promised, and leaves after he counts to one hundred.

Perhaps, these simple moments could take place anywhere. They don’t need a large, comfortable bed with warm, dry blankets. They never have. They always made do with whatever spot Jensen provided. Maybe they have grown accustomed to comfort--luxury--but they have certainly not grown dependent. At least, not Jensen.

This apartment is quiet. The only noises are ones they make themselves.

Jensen hardly ever has a reason to flinch anymore. No clang on a fire escape, no banging on a dumpster, no doors slamming shut, no slow, steady crawl of tires on the street.

No mentions from Henry about sounds from the tunnels.

Back in the living room with Jared, Jensen paces. The orb follows him. Jensen looks at Jared, not the orb, when he speaks.

“Patrol are in the tunnels beneath the city--they’re hiding there.’’

The orb turns black.

Chapter End Notes

/looks around/ is anyone still here? o_o

after quickreaver reposting the beautiful art they made for this fic, i was inspired and my muse cooperated. i had to go back and read lots of chapters before this so i could get into this verse again. i'm still not 100% sure i'm in the right headspace to add this back
into update rotation, so i humbly ask for continued patience. i won't abandon this work, but i recognize my limitations.

thanks for reading any of my works, it's always appreciated. <3
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

you may need to reread the very first chapter and chapter 15 before this one:

prologue: http://archiveofourown.org/works/1241242/chapters/2549557

chapter fifteen: http://archiveofourown.org/works/1241242/chapters/6445079

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Uneasy dreams haunt Jensen that night.

They slither underneath his eyelids and project pictures of startling white backgrounds. Nothing but pure, blinding white in every angle, every inch, every smothered step. White noise rushes past Jensen’s ears—silent howls. Pinpricks of moisture sabotage the nerves on his bare forearms.

He stands barefoot in the middle of nothingness wearing black pants and a black t-shirt.

Sight seems to take its leave. Unless it really is that difficult to see. What is it? What’s this all around him?

Snow.

Mountains of it.

Brutal cascades of it.

Jensen stumbles forward. His hands and feet cannot, will not, register any sensation that should accompany snow. No cold, no ice, nothing. Just the wild whip of wind and ice. This could be the blank pages of paper Jared supplies to Henry. Instead of opportunity for creation, Jensen understands that snow only means destruction. It never brings life.

The only way to survive it is to hide.

Shelter. Establish a base, then proceed from there. Glare from the sheets of rapidly falling snow snatches away any hope for a clear line of vision. Twisting, turning, trudging, Jensen pushes on. His dreams will have to do better than this. They want him to survive winter? He’s done it. More than that—he’s done it five times over with a child to look after. He shouts out to the nothingness. It has to do better than this.

Frigid gusts of wind bite at Jensen, followed by a brutal barrage of ice shards to any exposed skin.

Instinct forces his arms up.

Like a trigger, the ice spawns a flurry of flakes thick enough to consume every inch of black fabric and flesh. Jensen coughs and coughs out snow. He breathes and breathes out snow. He moves and moves into snow. Didn’t he talk about birds? And the sun? And travel and adventures? Are these butchering shards of ice his lies come back to taunt him? His dreams will have to do better than this. He’s done it. He’s served his stories and eaten the impossibility of each one. He’s stuffed himself full
of his own quixotic nonsense--gorged on it all. When he couldn’t find food, that’s what he ate. He shouts out to the nothingness. It has to do better than this.

Jensen’s hand strikes something solid.

Rigid. Stiff.

Impulsive, instinct drives him to claw. Fingers outstretched, the tendons in his arms work overtime to clear away page after page after sheet after pile after pile after pile after pile after pile of…

The Old Lady.

Ice covers her wrinkled, blistered, bruised face. Her eyes froze wide open, frightened, staring out into nothingness.

Bodies under the snow. Not just any bodies. The vulnerable. The sick. Those clutching to their threadbare shawls and pieced together walkers and broken crutches. Those hidden behind dumpsters, those that used to dangle from fire escapes, those that pressed themselves thin against brick walls to avoid round spots of light.

At the corner of Maple and First, Jensen tries to run.

He trips on a bench.

The bench.

And his body slides underneath it without question. This is safe. This is safe. For now, this is safe. Stay still. This won’t last forever. He’ll go stand in line soon and hopefully get a little more soup than usual.

Breaking through the wind, Jensen hears his own voice like a siren.

“You owe me half of that.”

No. He doesn’t owe anyone anything. Everything he’s got, he’s earned--no, he’s fought for. He’s worked his hands to the bone for. No one comes up to him and demands shit from him. That’s not the way this works.

“You shouldn’t stay under that bench anymore. You’re too exposed.”

This spot is perfectly fine. It’s fine. It’s safe. This is safe. For now, this is safe. Jensen doesn’t know what he’s saying. He’s wrong. This spot is fine. Jensen had to leave. He had to go find food for them. This spot is safe. He said he would come back and he wouldn’t lie. Not now, not after he said. Not after he washed blood off of his hands. He wouldn’t just leave. He left, yes, but he’s coming back. This is safe. This spot is fine.

“You two will be fine.”

Between two dumpsters in an alley.

Jensen digs Jared out of the snow. There is no baby underneath the dumpster. It’s in Jared’s arms. And it is no longer alive.

It wasn’t safe. He lied. And it should have been him.

“You owe me half of that. You shouldn’t stay under that bench anymore. You’re too exposed. You
two will be fine. You owe me half of that. You shouldn’t stay under that bench anymore. You’re too exposed. You two will be fine. You owe me half of that. You shouldn’t stay under that bench anymore. You’re too exposed. You two will be fine.”

“Jensen!”

Jared pushes Jensen against the doorframe, hands on Jensen’s chest.

The orb shines bright white, illuminating as much of the darkened hallway as it can.

Jensen’s chest heaves. Sweat trickles down his temple and throat. He shakes his head and looks around—this is the apartment. The doorway to their room. The room the three of them sleep in. One word muscles past his quivering mouth. Jared answers. Henry is fine. He’s in bed, still asleep, and he’s fine.

“He’s fine,” Jared repeats through the orb. “Jensen, he’s fine.” Jared places his thumbs on the side of Jensen’s throat. “You were walking in your sleep. Jensen. Look at me.”

You owe me half of that. You shouldn’t stay under that bench anymore. You’re too exposed. You two will be fine.

“Fine,” Jensen gasps. “You two will be fine.”

There is no snow here. But Jared’s expression turns cold all the same. “What?”

With a shove, Jensen breaks their physical contact. He steps out, further into the hallway, closer to darkness. “It should have been me,” he says. “It should be me.”

“You’re not well. Stop talking like that.”

Jensen shakes his head. “No,” he snaps back. “No— you don’t… I know.”

“What do you know?”

“You two.” The world tilts. “Will be fine.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Jensen. Jensen?”

It’s Jensen’s eyes that roll first. The Old Lady said there was a pretty price on them. His body follows in a tumble, a pitch, a fall. Whether or not he hits the floor, he has no idea.

He just knows who should be between the dumpsters this time.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was creepy to write. o_o

probably gonna go to sleep with the lights on. anyway... so... onwards??
Two strong hands pull Jensen up from the raspberry deluge.

He doesn’t cough or sputter or choke the way he expects to after being submerged. No panic, no desperation, no struggle. Only surprising, radical, intoxicating… calm.

For the entirety of his time in the tub, he rests against Jared, a complete dead weight.

Pink water at the perfect temperature surrounds them both, rising up to their shoulders. The muscles in Jensen’s feet begin to relax first, followed by his calves, thighs, hips, abdomen, back, arms, shoulders, neck, and jaw.

With every bit of care, Jared applies handfuls of water to Jensen’s hair. And when it’s time to get out, which is decidedly too soon, Jared picks Jensen up with no more effort than it is to pick up a towel. As their bodies leave the tub, the water splashes, lapping at their limbs in pink lemonade waves.

Jensen stands up on his own, but Jared insists on drying him off.

From head to toe, Jared pats him dry in gentle, tender motions. Time passes without a single cold draft or penetrating chill. Fresh pajamas. Thick socks. Slippers. Not a single word between them. Jensen, too fatigued. Jared, unable. The orb waits for them in the doorway to their room. But still, even when reunited with the orb, they remain quiet, slipping back into bed and under the covers.

Jensen takes Henry into his arms. Henry curls into him. Please, no more nightmares. No more fevers. No more worries. No more fears. That is all absolutely impossible.

Encouraging sleep, Jared runs a hand through Jensen’s hair.

That too, at one point, had been absolutely impossible.
great deal of pain this past week but have managed to update things, so that's pretty awesome. :)

i have art for y'all next chapter!
Chapter 46

The world is large.

On the living room floor, the three of them rest on a nest of soft blankets kept warm by some unknown source. Henry lies between them, sprawled out, wearing only a blue nightshirt and white socks. His hair fans out, longer by the day. Jensen hasn’t wanted to cut it and Henry hasn’t asked.

Two days have passed since fever surged through Jensen’s body.

He finds it odd that he can’t remember ever being feverish out in the elements. Not that he had the time, inclination, or instruments to check his temperature while scuffing or climbing fire escapes.

To think he used to do all of that. All of that movement.

In these two days, Jensen has only left their bed to use the bathroom. All of his meals have been delivered by way of Jared bringing in trays laden with soup and fresh bread. Jensen fluttered through the passing hours by sleeping--either dreamless and heavy or light and dozing.

None of his former worries haunted him.

“How many stars are there?” Henry asks, holding both his hands out in front of him.

Jared turned off all the lights in the living room, kitchen, and hallway, then brought out a cube no larger than Henry’s hands. He placed the cube in the center of the living room and tapped it twice. From this cube, the night sky fills the room. Crystal clear. Infinite. Almost within reach.

“Millions,” Jared murmurs through the orb, which is nearly always next to Henry. “Too many for us to count. Or even know about.”

Henry smiles and sighs, relieved. “That’s good. I only know up to twenty.”

Returning the smile, Jared asks, “Do you like the stars?”

“Yes. I think they’re pretty.”

“What do you think it’d be like to live on one?”

Brow furrowed in concentration, Henry thinks over his answer for a moment. He taps his fingers against his chin. “I think… very bright.”

“Very bright,” Jared echoes, his tone as soft and warm as the blankets.

“Like when we turn a lamp on. Right, daddy?”

Jensen opens his eyes to answer. “Sounds right to me, pal.”

“Can we,” Henry sits up and tugs on Jensen’s shirt. “Can you hold me up, please, daddy? Please.”

They had grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup for dinner, followed by cookies Jared and Henry baked earlier. While Henry colored and told stories about his drawings, Jared and Jensen
reclined on the large leather couch, side by side, until Jared tucked Jensen in under his shoulder.

It surprised him how well he fit.

Just like it surprises him how much light and color exists in space. He thought it was all cold, black, bleak, and empty.

Somehow, this knowledge helps. They won’t be stumbling into a dark room. There will be plenty of light. Plenty of lamps. Jensen has to hold onto that. He has to. There can be no other way.

“I think Jared can hold you up a lot higher than I can.” He looks over at Jared and offers a small smile. “Closer to the stars and all.”

If Henry had been afraid of the projected night sky, they would have put him to bed and stayed up to discuss it. Henry gleefully climbs onto Jared, hugs him, then gives instructions on how he would like to be held up against the stars. He’d like to go side to side, just a little, and then up and down. Jared raises him up, laughing along. The orb circles around Henry, changing colors quickly, its movements animated and smooth.

Jared lowers Henry back down, taking him in his arms, and the two of them sit upright. Jared points out different stars and constellations on the walls. He picks them out, one by one, and includes a history of who discovered them, how they were named, and how far away they are. Henry sits in his lap, one hand on Jared’s forearm and the other clutching to Jared’s shirt.

Eventually, his eyes start to close and he rests his head against Jared’s chest. He asks a few more sleepy questions, yawning in between.

Soon, they will put him to bed, then come back to the living room to discuss plans to move forward.

The world is large.

And the universe is larger.

Chapter End Notes

GASP. An update!!! (!!!)


To those of y'all still here, I thank you. I'm lucky to have you as a reader. Know that I greatly appreciate you. <3

So uh, hopefully I can end this fic in five chapters. /rolls up sleeves/ Let's do this.
In the bathroom, with the lights on and the door half closed, Jared and Jensen sit undressed on the edge of the tub.

Jensen asked Jared to fill the tub with regular water.

After adjusting the faucet, Jared made it happen. They both watch the colorless water fill up the ivory space. Thundering, the water rushes from the spout, like the downpour from gutters after a heavy rain.

Guilt tugs at Jensen as he steps and sinks into the deluge. He can have this because Jared offers it to him. He can walk into any room in this apartment and turn on lights, adjust temperatures, and find a comfortable piece of furniture to rest on. He can access the kitchen and any of the bathrooms for instant, clean water. He can help Jared into the tub, the two of them adjusting their frames and legs, and watch Jared’s skin shine without getting wet. Water doesn’t touch him. Or more, water doesn’t stay on him.

How many people do not have what Jensen has.

He never felt guilty when he scuffed or when he made it to the food lines before they closed. It was everyone for themselves and he needed what he needed.

It’s difficult to feel that way now.

They sit with their legs pulled up to their chests, only their knees and toes touch. Jensen’s skin turns shades of pink and red throughout his body. The pores in his face open up from the steam of the water.

His voice, quiet and calm, ghosts over the surface of the water between them. “Do you miss feeling human?”

Without the orb, Jared can only nod or gesture.

The orb stays with Henry in the room. Jared meets Jensen’s eyes and nods.

“...do you think I’ll miss it?”

Jared looks away, his mouth presses into a tight line. He nods.

A sigh escapes Jensen. Heat seeps into him, past the layers of skin, muscles, and bones. Is this all he is? All there is to him? Tissue and bone. Nails and teeth. He takes in all the wrinkles on his hands, the whispers of scars and bruising, and each ghostly freckle.

Maybe it’s best not to focus on the details slipping away.

With his head tilted back, he exhales. “Everything’s gonna change,” he murmurs, words languid and heavy. “I don’t even know how to write my own name.”

Ripples of water reach out towards Jensen as Jared extends his right hand and gingerly places it over Jensen’s left knee. For a moment, neither of them speak; they instead choose to watch as Jared’s
thumb smooths over the curve of Jensen’s kneecap. Beads of water trail down or up, it depends, Jensen thinks, on the perspective of it all.

Quietude orbits.

Jared stills his thumb, then traces the shapes of letters in water against Jensen’s knee. Most of the letters feel curved and smooth. The steady confidence of Jared’s hand reminds Jensen of how he played violin in that alleyway, like it was knowledge known to him always.

Jensen extends his legs out and forward, his arms on the tub’s edges, tucking himself under Jared’s legs and hips. Hazel eyes express concern—something wrong?—then gratitude.

Nothing’s wrong.

As their eyes meet, smiles surface. Jensen tips his head back and rests his hands on the warm, sleek surfaces of Jared’s legs. This feels… good. Suspicion rises, heralding internal questions and ringing alarms that one hundred and ten percent of his being must be dedicated to Henry.

But why not have this?

Why not reach out, drag his fingers, skim over nerves, and take in the visual before him. Why not indulge and allow Jared to push himself forward, kneel, cause the water to splash over the edge, and kiss him firm, solid, and wet.

They slip around. Water laps at their skin. Workable hunger fuels a fierce and rough meeting of lips, tongue, and teeth. Touch. Touch and suck. Touch and suck the bottom of Jensen’s lip. Touch and suck the bottom of Jared’s lip. Touch. Touch and press and gasp. Scattered dots of desperation. Jensen runs his hands down the muscled expanse of Jared’s back. His fingers dip, dig, and squeeze the rounded curve of hips. Jared breaks their kisses to press his forehead against Jensen’s. Eyes closed, he bites his lip and arches into Jensen’s touch.

Flesh and blood.

A flash of guilt and a tinge of something he can’t quite place compress themselves against Jensen’s chest.

Can he remember the last time he did something like this? Kissed someone? Felt his cock respond so eagerly? Can he remember any scrap of time where he could relax enough to touch himself?

Jared stills, his muscles tense under Jensen’s hands. Once again, they make eye contact, and once again, a frown tugs at the corners of Jared’s mouth. His brow furrows and he opens his mouth to speak, then coughs and looks away. That doesn’t happen very often—Jared almost never forgets the orb.

Before Jared completely peels himself away, Jensen catches him the shoulders and pulls him back in.

“It’s strange,” Jensen murmurs, between kisses. Kisses he tries to keep as soft and pliant as possible. “I… I haven’t been with someone in a long time. I can’t remember when.” He can faintly remember performing for others. But those were one-sided transactions. In alleyways and attics and dark rooms. Not in the light and certainly not in clean, warm water.

And not with someone like Jared.

Whose eyes contain a kindness to them Jensen noticed the night they met on the street.
That seems so far away and long ago. It all does.

“Does it feel the same?” Jensen clasps his right hand over Jared’s left and squeezes. “Hot? Tingly?”

Some of the tension drains from Jared’s jaw and shoulders. He squeezes Jensen’s hand and nods.

“I feel like I shouldn’t. Like I’m selfish. Like… I need to go out and find food. Check the fire escape. Listen for cars and defend stuff.”

Jared shakes his head and presses a kiss to Jensen’s palm.

“Oh maybe,” Jensen breathes, his voice heavier and quieter than expected. “If I do something like this with you, you’ll think less of me.”

After a second, the orb drifts in, its lights a calming blue. Jared sits back in the tub and holds the orb in his hands. He taps his fingers over it, anxious.

His voice filters out of the orb, collected and easy. “It’s part of being human.” Jared speaks without moving his mouth. “And I would never think less of you. It feels good. To have these feelings. For you. About you.” Jared briefly smiles. “You know what I mean.”

Jensen returns the brief smile and nods.

Jared allows the orb to float between them. It radiates a deep shade of violet. “We don’t have to do anything. We can go back to bed.”

“What if… we went to the living room?”

“Then we’d be in the living room.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” Jared murmurs and flashes a smile. “It’s damn uncomfortable in here anyway.”

Hefting himself up, Jensen tries to laugh without making too much noise. “You could’ve said something.”

“And spoil your bath?”

“I just wanted to sit in the water. You know.”

“I know.” Standing up and stepping out, Jared hands Jensen a towel. “I’m teasing.”

He is. He is teasing. With the way his hips moves. With how toned and firm the muscles in his legs and arms look. With the elegant movements of his fingers. With how he tucks his hair, slightly wavy now from the humidity of the water, behind his ears.

Silently, they walk from the bedroom back out to the living room. The orb slips back into bed with Henry and stays there.

They climb back into the nest of blankets, this time unclothed and pressed close together.

Solid. Jared feels solid against him.

And when their mouths meet again, he tastes sweet and decadent. Under the heated blankets, lying side by side, their bodies align. Jensen shivers when their cocks touch. Sparks of pleasure course
through him. He gasps and closes his eyes--sinking into the rush. Jared kisses him, encourages him to keep touching, then changes their position.

He pins Jensen down.

Kisses him rough.

Solid. Solid against him.


Jensen pulls him close, driven by the howling in his blood. Twist. Coil. Ache.

They move against each other in a grinding, raspy rhythm, their cocks slick from sweat and spit. Jared matches Jensen thrust for thrust. They line up, hard and heavy. Pleasure overwhelms Jensen. He tries to stay quiet. But it all feels so good. Jared feels so good. Over him. On top of him. All around. Jensen rocks his hips to meet each grind and push from Jared.

Gripping, clinging, holding onto Jared, Jensen wills himself not to close his eyes.

With a shout and a groan, he comes undone. Jared wraps his right hand around Jensen and urges him on, applying firm pressure. Jensen reaches up, places his hands on Jared’s jaw line, and allows his body to tense before it gradually unwinds. He makes a mess between them, sticky and thick, then can’t help but moan when Jared does the same.

Everything changes.

Everything is changing.

Jared lies down beside Jensen, settled on his stomach, and slings his arm over Jensen’s chest.

Panting still, Jensen tilts his head and presses his lips to Jared’s forehead.

A noise escapes Jared, something like a wince.

He closes his eyes tight and squeezes Jensen close. He tucks his head under Jensen’s chin and moves his lips in a silent murmur.

Thank you.

Chapter End Notes

gasp! finally!

i agonized over this chapter. i hope y’all like it. comments are love.
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Birds can fly to safety.
Jensen wishes for wings.

It seems that his hands can only hold so much peace at once. No matter how tight his grasp, it slips away, nothing more than sand and fragments of dreams between his fingers.

For three nights, he argues with Jared.

On the fourth night, after sparring, Jensen refuses to get up. He lies in a pool of his own blood and makes no attempt to move. Jared broke his left arm as easily as tearing a piece of warm bread. Pressure throbs over his face in one purple, black, red mask. Punch after punch after jab after jab after hook after hook. He took it all. Screamed for it. Rocked forwards and backwards on his heels. Welcomed it all.

Jared stopped.

Kneeling beside Jensen, he runs a hand through Jensen’s hair, threading through the thick mats of blood.

There are others, Jared emphasizes, speaking hushed and low through the orb. He keeps repeating the names of more people like them–people on their side with the same goal. The plan demands complete and absolute cooperation.

No matter how malignant the pieces.
No matter how fetid the means.
No matter how high the price.

It cannot come together without this first step.

Years ago, as Jensen searched for a place to stay the night, he uncovered dried, fleshless corpses buried beneath a pile of rags and sheet metal. Their jaws were askew. Rib cages shattered. Arms draped over each other in a protective huddle.

How long had they been there.
How long had they waited.

Jared carries Jensen over to a warm bath. He heals faster than when they started this task. Necessary. Necessary task.

The next day, Jared makes pancakes for breakfast. The day after that, he makes cinnamon rolls. The three of them spend hours in the garden, the grass soft and silky underneath their bare feet. Henry laughs, giggles, squeals, and shouts with unbridled joy. He has put on weight. Grown a bit. Mastered the art of writing his name. He vocalizes his dislike of the color gray, the smell of broccoli, and the sound of thunder.
In the quiet of a relaxed afternoon, Jensen shows Henry how to throw an effective punch.

Henry laughs at the new game. His fists connect against the palms of Jensen’s hands. After a round, he asks for some juice and a story.

At night, after they place Henry to bed, Jared invites Jensen back to the garden.

Under the willow tree, Jared makes the announcement.

It’s time to go.

Time to leave the apartment and go back to the streets.

Without Henry.

Jensen begs for wings.

Chapter End Notes

i... i’m sorry? sorry in advance? oh boy.

thank you for being here. <3 i’ve been battling liver tumors and other exciting things. i hope i can keep writing. y'all are awesome.
Chapter 49

A terrible refrain thrums through Jensen’s veins the next morning.

Henry sits at the dining room table and works on the plate of pancakes, sliced strawberries, and whipped cream Jared put together for him. Pleased with the unusually sweet and decadent breakfast, he rattles off his favorite crayon colors, the many reasons why he likes strawberries, and how good he is at somersaults, or as he calls them, flip-overs.

In the kitchen, Jared and Jensen attempt to put together two duffle bags of supplies. Jared takes care of the non-perishable items, while Jensen wraps and preserves a smaller quantity of fresh food. The last carton of strawberries finds a guaranteed spot. He works with the stacks of paper towels, plastic bags, glass jars, and containers provided to him.

This is nothing like how he used to preserve leftovers or future meals.

None of this is anything like what he used to do.

He breaks the uneasy silence between himself and Jared. His shoulders hold as much tension as his voice. “I’ll tell him.”

Jared pauses. The orb stills near his hands. “I thought we agreed to tell him together.”

“I don’t like your version of the truth.”

“It isn’t a version of the truth. It is the truth.”

“Yeah, and he doesn’t need to know it.” Jensen rips leaves of lettuce and folds them in between paper towels. “I’ll tell him what he needs to know.”

The orb turns the color of the strawberries Jensen packed. Jared shakes his head and turns to face Jensen. “You will do him more harm with anything but the absolute truth--explained in a way he can understand, of course. We agreed on this last night. We don’t have the privilege to change any part of our plan.”

Jensen can change his voice on a dime, with more ease than Jared can through the orb.

And he may not have much, but he does have years of experience in ending conversations.

“We do this my way,” he mutters and zips up the duffle bag. Without looking at Jared, he walks towards the dining room. “We do this one thing my way.”

When they told Henry the truth of his birth—he asked them both for reassurance that they wouldn’t leave. Jensen’s reply sits in the back of his throat like bile. “No. Never.”

It felt like a lie, but it wasn’t.

Now, it is.

A strange quiet prevails.
“I don’t want to wear shoes.”

“I know, pal. We have to.”

“Why are you wearing your coat?”

“...it’s cold outside.”

“We’re going outside?”

“Yeah. Yes. All of us. It might be snowing.”

“I don’t like snow, daddy.”

“Me neither. That’s why we have to wear shoes and coats.”

“Can I have my old coat?”

“No, baby. Jared got you a brand new one. See. What color is it?”

“Red.”

“Yep.”

“Do you got a new coat?”

“I like my old one better. I look like a marshmallow in the new one.”

“I like marshmallows. Can I have some?”

“Buddy.”

“Hmm?”

“...I’ll get you some but I want you to do me a favor. Listen to me.”

“Okay. I can do it. I can help.”

“I know you can, but this is... really important. Here’s your sippy cup. Don’t lose it.”

“Juice?”

“Hot chocolate.”

“Ooh.”

“When we go outside, I want you to look at your sippy cup and your marshmallow. Nothing else. Can you do that?”

“I can do it.”

“Good. Great. I know you can, pal.”

“When we come back, can we play with the flowers?”
“I… we’ll see, okay? Is the hot chocolate warm?”

“Yeah, it’s got whipped cream. You wanna sip?”

“Sure. Mm. That’s good. Okay. You’re all buttoned up. Next up, we got a really nice new scarf, a hat, and some mittens.”

“Blue, red, blue.”

“How many tassels on the scarf?”

“Uhm… six.”

“Look at you, the master of numbers. Okay. Let’s go check on Jared. Make sure he’s got all the tassels on his scarf.”

“Where are we going?”

Jensen holds Henry close to his chest. The down jacket Jared procured for Henry adds cushion between them, so Jensen squeezes him tight. He’s not going to tell Henry that there are three plans in place. None of them involve coming back to this apartment. He’s not going to tell Henry that instead of spoons in his coat pockets, he hid knives, tasers, and two pistols. He’s not going to say anything about preferring his old coat—launched and mended by Jared’s hands—because it feels right to leave the apartment as he entered it. There will be no mention of the god damn tears in his eyes that threaten to spill over with every miserable moment.

Kids don’t need to know stuff like that.

They need to know stories about birds, the names of planets, how to count to ten, and the security of a comfortable bed.

Small for his age, Henry perfectly fits against Jensen.

Jared knocks on the door. Dressed in his usual black outfit and black coat, he cuts a formidable figure in the doorway. He gives a tense smile, and through the orb asks, “Ready?”

Jagged fear accumulates in the pit of Jensen’s stomach. He would slice himself open, from head to toe, and scoop out every organ for everything to work out.

“Yeah, yeah we’re ready,” Jensen murmurs, his mouth dry. He adjusts Henry’s scarf and walks them towards the front doors of the apartment, where two duffle bags and two backpacks await them.

As Jared opens the door, Jensen answers Henry’s question.

“We’re going to Leila’s.”

Chapter End Notes

who’s still here? anyone? bueller?

i’m determined to finish this fic by the end of the year.

comments are love, as always. <3
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the way out of the apartment building, they talk about a room.

One room of their own, with a large, plush mattress big enough for all three of them to sprawl over. Suitable for big and little sleepers, along with the softest pillows in existence. And blankets. Plenty of blankets to curl up in, to build forts out of, and to drape around chilly shoulders. Red blankets. Blue blankets. Green blankets, too.

What about a fireplace?

Yes, one of those, of course. And candles so it’s never dark.

Clean clothes follows. Socks without holes, yes, and big comfy sweaters.

Then fresh food, plenty of snacks, maybe a giant plate of cookies, or a tub of ice cream, or a strawberry cake. And when they’re full, before the fire is ready to see them to bed, they make use of the bathroom nearby. Wouldn’t a late night bath be fun--look at all the hot water and fluffy towels.

Could they jump on the bed?

“Yeah, pal,” Jensen whispers. He double, triple checks his hold on Henry against his chest. He maintains a tight, unyielding clasp of his hand over Henry’s eyes. “We can jump on the bed.”

Char.

A curtain of ashes.

The thrash and lick of choking, raging fire.

Jensen forces himself to keep talking. Keep spitting out words like diseased teeth--rotted, black, and bloody. They don’t have the luxury of arguing. Jensen barely has the ability to cope.

Jared kept them inside the apartment while the city burned. Within their temperature controlled environment, as they lay on clean sheets, ate fresh food, and wandered barefoot through the garden, Jensen and Henry were kept completely ignorant to the chaos outside.

Now, Jensen steps through the city, solid boots on his feet as he watches the city in its final death throes.
“A whole house,” Jared adds, the orb nestled between Henry’s hands. Jared’s voice comes in crystal clear, soothing and smooth. “Not just one room or one bed--a whole lot of them.”

Their huddled party of three hide in the covered entryway to the apartment building.

A tremor in the ground underneath them spurs them to move.

Jared’s motions betray the calm tone of his voice. The sidewalk. Get onto the sidewalk. Walk. Run, if at all possible. Abruptly, Jared grabs Jensen by the shoulder and forces them both to crouch down. They haven’t moved more than a block in what feels like hours. Smoke, ash, and dark, twisted shadows smother their flight. A slow start. But they can’t stay outside, exposed and vulnerable.

This fire burns in a different way. It burns in colors other than orange or yellow.

A thousand flames reach for him, a wall of burning eyes--sinister and threatening. These flames breathe. They move in unison. They remain still, then snap open and relish the way muscle moves over bone. They tease and taunt, hovering within the distance of an aggressive sigh.

Flames without heat.

They’re being watched.

“Stop,” Jared gasps in a hush. He stops, frozen in his tracks, and crouches down.

His heart thrashing against his chest, Jensen stops and follows suit. He cradles Henry’s covered head.

One slimy ball of ochre slams and sticks against the wall, inches away from Jared’s face. It curdles. From underneath its inky membrane, bones crunch and blood hisses. A sharp joint breaks free of the wax. Seeping pain, rotted in agony, the joint jerks and twitches.

A hand pops out.

And it peels back its mealy protective skin.

“No.” The orb vibrates twice.

Jensen’s eyes dart back and forth between Henry and the orb, and Jared.

“This way.” Jensen shouts above the tremors and screams. His hand lands squarely on Jared’s shoulder. “Keep moving!”

Small fingers tug at Jensen’s coat. Jensen and Jared are suited in black--both easier to hide and easier to lose. Jensen insisted on wearing his old coat, the one that acted as a second skin, the one Henry practically grew up in. Jared had it washed, had it mended, and had it preserved. It still fits.

Henry fidgets against Jensen. He kicks and squirms, fighting against the sling that holds him flush against Jensen’s chest.

Words fail him.


Two miniature, malformed arms climb up Jensen’s left leg. The joints are out of place. Veins rope around the shrunken forearms. All of it white, in absolute contrast to its shell. It shrieks and shrills and Henry cries, struggling to keep his hands over his ears.
The thing grips onto Jensen’s thigh. It squeezes and digs its malicious nails in, bleeding acid, oozing slime. These are the living, breathing tumors of violence and blood that snatched Jared from him and Henry, tortured him, and thrust them all into desperate means of survival.

A bed. A room. A home.

Jensen screams.

He kills it.

...using one of the few weapons Jared gave him before their departure.

Jared calls it a Folly. It releases two silver bullets simultaneously, followed by a blast of fire.

“I got it,” Jensen coughs, acid in his mouth. “It’s fine, pal. I took care of it. Shh, we’re good.” He lifts his head and scans for Jared. Located, Jensen tilts his chest. “This way, it’s shorter.”

The sidewalks lay in pieces. Large chunks of concrete form an oppressive mountain range. Jared climbs pieces first, tests out the stability, then reaches for Jensen and helps him over.

It is tedious.

And time consuming.

And savagely necessary.

“We’re okay,” Jensen stammers out, his voice waxy and wilting. He uses one hand to steady himself on concrete and the other hand to reach for Jared. “Buddy, we’re okay. Jared’s got us. We’re moving.”

While those things are essentially true, they omit the larger picture. Move too fast and one of them will slip into the crevices formed by the broken sidewalks--where more than shards of concrete and glass lie. Move too slow and they’ll continue to inhale smoke. Keep moving. *Keep moving.*

Their surroundings crumble. There isn’t time for Jensen to pull Jared aside and ask for explanations or have him detail the cause of an onset of ground tremors. For all his reflexes, even Jared fights at maintaining his balance. Soot and smoke choke their lungs and irritate their eyes.

Where is everyone?

This is Opal and Oak. Jensen recognizes it on sight--despite the desecration around it. He’d always find a couple of people on the street, huddled over a fire, trading gossip and information.

Roaches flee the area, providing a sickening crunch any time Jensen takes a heavy step. Some of the roaches appear poisoned. They don’t look or move quite right. Waiting for Jared’s signal to keep moving, Jensen watches a roach flip over, helpless on its back--as it succumbs to its painful end.

Life was not comfortable or cozy in the alleyways. Jensen always checked for roaches or vermin. He one time found a snake while scuffing a seemingly dull garbage bag. These things were part of his life, their life, and he never questioned their presence.

Watching them die adds to the sinking weight in his stomach.

He opens his mouth to shout for Jared to head left, not right, when a hand yanks him back by the shoulder blade. Jensen reacts--brutal, primal--his intensity at a maximum. Nothing--absolutely nothing--is getting in the way of him carrying Henry to safety.
His right hand connects with the jaw of an unknown male assailant, who takes the hit, stumbles back, then rears forward. A survivor. Someone Jensen may have traded with before, in another life, in an alleyway or next to a dumpster. Blood pours from their compromised eyes, running like red rivers into their open mouth. They reach for Jensen in an effort to take his coat, trying to wrestle over it.

“Stop!” Jensen howls, leaning heavily against a slab of concrete, his feet not far from the collection of roaches and pulsing black spheres. “Don’t do this! Stop!”

Jared rushes over to help. Henry clings onto Jensen, his fingers digging into muscle.

Maple and Third. Maple and Third. Maple and Third.

They need to find Leila. They need to escape. Leave. Go. Keep moving.

Jensen holds his breath. His body moves on its own accord, fueled by instinct and protection. He slams his head against the stranger’s—a disorienting blow. Blood sprays everywhere and Jensen can’t tell to whom it all belongs. This is worse than Bin Day. This is worse than being the last in line for food and realizing there are hundreds behind in queue. Worse than never feeling completely clean.

The man falls backwards and drops ten feet into the crevice.

What is cleanliness next to survival?

Blood rages inside Jensen’s ears. Keeping his head up seems an impossible task. More impossible than the one laid before him. More impossible than forgetting his happened.

Jared looks at Jensen. He reaches out, places his hand on the side of Jensen’s face, cradling through thick gloved fingers. Jensen leans into the touch, out of exhaustion or fear, he has no idea. A bed. A room. A home.

Over the man’s mottled screams and attempts to rise up, the orb issues a firm command. Jared’s voice splinters through the roaring sound of agony.

“Keep moving.”

And so they do.

Until they reach what used to be Maple and Third.

Every house, every upright structure, threatens to fall apart at any second. Scorched. Invaded. Slit from corner to corner. Smoke plumes forth from the only house Henry has ever known as a safe spot. Memories run wild through Jensen’s mind. People used to take walks here, on this very block. He’d find the best dumpsters not too far away.

Is this the same place?

Jared and the orb carefully explore the rubble. From underneath the top layer of Jensen’s coats, Henry sniffles and cries for Jensen to let him see. Jensen chokes on smoke, his words disintegrate. Instead, he rocks Henry, back and forth, and keeps a lookout.

Would they have been better off moving from this city to the next, like he had so often tried to plan throughout the years? Jared might have found them in a new location. But what’s to say this isn’t happening elsewhere?
Tremors from underneath the city remind him of the perilous fact that the tunnels have been taken over.

The orb returns, whipping through the air, cloaked in black. It stops half an inch from Jensen’s ear. He braces himself for the worst.

Jared whispers, “I see no sign of her.”

This part of the city hasn’t met with the same deluge of creatures. The destruction of property is worse—as is the loss of life. Jensen coughs, his eyes watering. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices a stack of stiff bodies, all dressed in a variety of clothes, some like the ones he used to wear, some dressed like the ones he grew accustomed to in the apartment.

The violence is indiscriminate.

By his side again, Jared places a kind hand on Jensen’s shoulder and leans in close. The orb slips underneath Jensen’s hands, back to its previous place. It plays a snippet of instrumental music for Henry. Jared waits on Jensen to make the next decision. Continue here or move to the base, where Jared has arranged to meet others like him, other fighters in a dying resistance.

They should check the bodies. They have light.

“I wanna make sure,” Jensen says, meeting Jared’s eyes. “I have to make sure.”

With a frown, Jared nods. He understands. He looks over to the nearby fire and the threat of buildings collapsing. Jensen knows the risk. Hand in hand, they make their way into the center of the street. Quickly, they execute a transfer, keeping Henry’s eyes covered and view blocked every second. Henry shrieks and blindly reaches out for Jensen.


Jensen lands a few inches away from the alley. The smell hits him hard.


Covering his mouth and nose with his gloved left hand, he scans the stack.


He’s looking for black hair.

Not this one.

Maybe a velvet pink ribbon.

Not a match.

Jensen’s knees threaten to buckle. He fights to hold himself together.

Keep moving.

An eternity later they arrive at the cavernous opening of an underground shelter--at the intersection of Oak and Vine.

In the shadow of burning museum nearby, the hidden door opens for them.
One last look at the alley and the dumpster--Jensen turns away from the city.

Holding Henry, he follows Jared into the dark.

Chapter End Notes

yaaaaassss an update! :D

hoping to guide this fic to a smooth ending. thank you for being here and holding onto this fic. <3 i can honestly say i never ever expected this one shot fic to become a novel. thank you for all the encouragement over the years! comments are love!

for early access to updates/bonus fic/art, visit me on tumblr for more details: www.compo67.tumblr.com. <3

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