Felt Like You Were Mine

by EtoileGarden

Summary

Adam Parrish is an only child - not that that affords him any luxuries - for more than a decade. When Ethan is born, it changes his entire life plan, and the canon of his story.

Adam does not go to Aglionby, meets up with the other pieces of his soul through other means.

Notes

I had a dumb dream, I wrote a dumb fic.
If you've ever read any of my other fics, you'll know I don't edit!!!! The day I edit I will inform you of it with great pride

See the end of the work for more notes
What Was Important

If the conception of Adam Parrish had been an unhappy surprise, it was nothing in comparison to that of his younger brother.

Adam had spent a large portion of his childhood being reminded that he was the reason his parents were stuck together; if he hadn’t had the audacity to demand existence, his parents wouldn’t have had to get married so quickly, wouldn’t have had to waste their money. It was very carefully impressed upon him that he had been a burden the moment his heart had started pumping blood, and that it was this burden that had so held Robert and Alice Parrish back in life. He had accepted this. Understood it. Believed it. He worked very hard to make up everything he had ever taken from his parents, worked very hard to stop taking from them, worked very hard to erase all his debts. It wasn’t easy. While Adam wasn’t exactly a very expensive child, there were too many unavoidable and constant costs that accompanied his existence, continued adding to his bill. Food, schooling, vaccinations, clothes, more clothes when he grew too quickly, doctor fees for when he broke his arm, for when he broke his other arm as well.

By the time he was 13, it had come to his attention, through careful observation of the world around him, that in fact it was not his fault he was born, was not in fact obliged to continue making up and apologising for his subsistence.

Of course, there was a difference between knowing and believing. There was a difference between believing things to be true for other people, but not for yourself. He couldn’t make up the distance between these things. Didn’t see the point in it. Even if he could force himself to truly believe he didn’t deserve to be blamed for being born, it wasn’t exactly as if the blaming would stop, as if his parents would align their beliefs with him and stop requesting the money from his part time jobs to pay for his food, his clothes, or even better, let him quit his jobs and pay more attention to school and sleep. It was far easier to simply agree with what was being said to you, it didn’t chafe so much that way, and Adam couldn’t afford anything else slowing him down. He was 13, and he had a plan, and that plan didn’t involve finding some semblance of self worth while he was still pinned down in this trailer. He could believe himself worth something when he had proved it, when he had left this place, when he didn’t need to look back.

Then Alice figured out she was pregnant. Some people find it immediately obvious that they’re pregnant. They get nausea early on, they gain weight, they’re craving food, they feel strange, the list of symptoms go on. Other people notice nothing for months on end, their bodies just continue on as normal, doesn’t put any warning lights on to inform you that it’s starting a new project. Alice was in the second group of people. Didn’t think anything was truly amiss until she was five months in and her jeans finally didn’t button up anymore. This was an issue which resulted in an argument that lasted a full day and ended with two black eyes, one for Alice, one for Adam, and Robert going to stay with a friend for the week.

Alice had said it was too late to do anything about it. Robert suggested it wasn’t too late if they didn’t go by usual routes. Alice pointed out that this was dangerous. Robert pointed out that he could be more dangerous. Alice suggested she could leave him. Robert reminded her that she hadn’t yet. Alice said she didn’t want it, it wasn’t her fault he’d knocked her up. Robert illustrated just how much he didn’t think it was his fault, using his fists and the wall. It was very persuading.

It didn’t really matter. The conception, the circumstances, the arguments surrounding it all. What was important was that Ethan was born before Adam turned 14. What was important was that Ethan being born put a damper on Adam’s plans to leave. What was important was that Adam resented this, resented this until his bones ached with it. Resented this but could not bring himself to consider
Ethan a burden. It wasn’t his fault he was born into this badly constructed family. It wasn’t his fault that his being born meant that Adam had to get another part time job to help with the bills. It wasn’t his fault that neither Robert or Alice wanted him at any point.

What was important was that Adam had very, very few memories of parental affection, or any affection, did not have the capability or time to seek it out elsewhere. Did not have the emotional wealth to give it out without receiving it in turn. Ethan couldn’t return it. But when Adam came home and fetched him from his bed, stopped the crying, fixed the problem, their mother would smile at Adam, and that was close enough.

What was important was that Adam hadn’t been broken out of knowing how to love, figured it out himself, gave it to Ethan. What was important was that by the time Ethan was 1, with no example of parental love, he already knew he was loved.

So, this is how it went. Adam did not abandon his plan, he just stretched it out a little, changed the details, accounted for further expenses, logistics of the pros and cons of legal custody. This is how it went. Adam found another job, tried his best to forget about his aspirations for Aglionby, found another job, got all A’s, barely slept.

This is how it went. Adam woke earlier than the sun, cycled across town to a dusty and cramped factory, worked until the last possible moment, and then cycled home to change clothes and dress Ethan. Adam swapped lawn mowing for child care - he would take Ethan with him on his way to school in the mornings, drop him off at the house of a work acquaintance, Jules and his wife Dana. In return, Adam would mow their lawns once a week, do any other small jobs in the garden that they asked him to. After school, he would head to work at Boyd’s. After Boyd’s, it was back to pick up Ethan, then back home. At home there was homework, chores, and keeping Ethan out from under his parent’s feet. Then he would put Ethan to bed, get back on his bike, and cycle into town for his shift at the cafe, where he would serve the boys he wanted to be, and wash dishes until both his hands and his soul felt like they were deteriorating. He would cycle home. He would crawl into his bed. Ethan would crawl out of his bed, and into Adam’s bed. They would both sleep. And then they would do it all again.

This is how it went. If Adam could keep Ethan out of the house for long enough, quiet for long enough, happy for long enough, then his father would only hit Adam. His mother would only scold Adam. Ethan could escape with Adam unscathed. It was the unspoken deal in the house. Not the escaping, that was the unspoken and the unknown. If Adam shut up, if Adam kept Ethan shut up, Adam wouldn’t have to bear witness to Ethan being hurt. It was enough.

It wasn’t so bad. It could be worse. Adam could do this. Would do this. Couldn’t not do this.

It was harder today. Not a new kind of hard, not even a rare kind of hard, just a hard which would disrupt his day enough to disrupt his week, and if it kept being hard, might disrupt his life timeline by a few more months.

Ethan wouldn’t go to sleep. This might not sound like a huge thing. This probably only sounds like a mild irritation in the everyday scheme of life.

Ethan would not go to sleep, he had tripped and fallen while at childcare that afternoon and skinned his knee, and only now was he deciding that it really, really, really hurt. 3 year olds, once they set their mind on not sleeping in favour of something else, are very difficult to persuade. Even mild mannered ones such as Ethan.

Ethan would not go the fuck to sleep and Adam needed to go to the cafe, needed to know that Ethan would be asleep, not getting on their parent’s nerves, getting in trouble.
If Adam was his father, he knew very well what he would do in this circumstance. There were in fact, a few options. Give Ethan something real to cry about. Leave and lock the door. Yell at Alice to shut the noise off until either the noise stopped or he got bored of yelling and decided to speak with his hands instead.

Adam wrapped Ethan up, like a small, inconsolable burrito, took his largest jacket - a ratty offcast from their father - and buttoned Ethan up against his chest. Cycled one handed into town, one arm busy holding Ethan tightly against him. If this was his factory shift, he wouldn’t be able to do this - he’d have to drop by Jule’s and apologise profusely and plead. Jules would roll his eyes, and Dana would sigh, but they’d take Ethan and it would be alright and Adam would be further in debt. At the cafe he knew his boss disapproved, but not enough to tell him to stop, not enough that he didn’t sigh and suggest he park Ethan and his blankets on the break room couch. On good nights, or rather, on the nights that started bad because Ethan wouldn’t sleep, and then gradually shifted into ok nights because his boss didn’t fire him for bringing a toddler to his job, Ethan would be asleep by the time they arrived. Somehow the bumpy, sweat inducing ride inside Adam’s jacket lulled him to sleep better than whispered lullabies and a semi comfortable mattress. He would stay asleep as Adam would deposit him in the break room. He might wake up a little when the other workers took a break, but they would pat his head and talk quietly and he would go back to sleep. He would stay asleep as Adam cycled them back home and tucked Ethan into bed beside him.

Tonight was just a bad night all around.

Nino’s was jam-packed. He had arrived, already bedraggled due to the excess exertion it took to peddle a crying child, to a madhouse of Aglionby students, and an irate Blue. She had taken one look at the still sniffling Ethan in Adam’s arms, and cursed ferociously in a very Blue way, which meant that none of the words were technically swears, but they sure sounded like it.

“Hestia, Adam,” she snapped, voice only hard due to their surroundings, “you really had to bring him in tonight?”

Adam did his very level best not to snap back. He snapped back anyway. He had already spent all his energy in being polite at school, at his after school job, at home.

“I didn’t have a fu- a choice, Blue,” he gritted out over the noise of rioting students. “He wouldn’t sleep and I couldn’t leave him. What the hell is going on here?”

In her favour, Blue only rolled her eyes instead of raising to argument bait like she sometimes did when Adam’s voice hardened. She took him by the elbow, brushed Ethan’s dusty hair out of his damp eyes, and dragged them both to the break room.

“Some Raven Boy sport celebration. I don’t know. I keep overhearing things about how ridiculously buff they all are, and how any simple waitress wouldn’t be able to keep her hands off their guns. I can tell you now that their noodle arms aren’t the kind of gun I feel the need to restrain myself from currently.”

Adam would have laughed if he didn’t already feel stretched to the breaking point. He smiled weakly instead, juggled Ethan inside his coat. Blue began undoing his buttons for him while he held Ethan up, and Ethan finally stopped sniffling to fake shyness. He liked Blue a lot, but he always had to warm back up to her every time they met. Blue didn’t mind, she said she liked the challenge.

“What are you going to do, Adam?” Blue asked once the jacket was undone, and Ethan was technically released but still clinging tightly to Adam’s neck. Adam blinked.

“I mean,” she said, “he doesn’t look like he’s gonna go to sleep, it’s too noisy anyway, and I need you out there like, five minutes ago.”

On the bad nights, Adam had two choices. He could choose to leave Ethan in the break room, shut the door behind him so Ethan couldn’t follow, and hope that Ethan would go to sleep sooner rather than later. Or, he could put Ethan up on his hip, plaster on his blandest face, and go and entertain the ravens in the front. He didn’t really want to choose either of these.

He put Ethan down on the couch, said he would be back very soon, did not shut the door. He had
too much experience with closed doors, could not bear to be the one closing them. Even if it was the sensible options. On good nights, Ethan would be comforted by the sound of the kitchen and the cafe, would close his eyes and go to sleep before Adam had returned to check on him.

As previously mentioned, this was a bad night, and Adam was halfway through taking an excessively snobbishly Aglionby order, pizza with fucking avocado (who really wants warm avo if they’re not doing it for the aesthetics?), when he heard Blue call his name in a warning tone mere moments before Ethan’s hands attached themselves to his trouser legs.

“Oh,” he said eloquently, interrupting the overly polished boy in front of him, “I am so sorry, I-” he shook his head, stooped, and scooped Ethan up and onto his hip. To his credit, Ethan did not immediately demand further attention, simply pressed his face into Adam’s shoulder. This was more likely due to shyness than any social cues however. “Please do continue,” Adam said as firmly as possible, as if by retreating to his hardest voice he could smooth over the fact that he had a small child clinging onto him.

An alarmingly non-descript boy in the very corner of the booth piped up before the polished one could speak again.

“Think that’s his kid?” he hissed, “They look identical!”

“Brother,” Adam snapped, immediately resented himself for snapping, “sorry,” he said again, “this is my brother. Please do continue your order, we have the avocado sausage pizza and a coke so far, what else can I get you?”

The entire table spent an entire moment looking gobsmacked, why, Adam could not say. Perhaps because he had veered off his lines as the gormless waiter. Perhaps because he had responded to such an obvious insult. Perhaps because he had dared to address them at all. He was feeling more bitter every passing moment.

“I am sorry,” the polished one gushed, “truly. Noah didn’t mean to offend you. He was just surprised, we’ve seen you before and Noah said you looked entirely unique, I think he was just interested to see someone who looks so much like y-” he’s cut off by an elbow to the stomach from the third member of their party who looks equal parts irritated and amused. Noah is blushing. So is Adam.

“Shut the fuck up, Dick face,” the third one said, fondly, “the dad doesn’t wanna hear about Noah’s crush or your ideas.”

Noah becomes pinker. So does Adam.

“Not the dad,” he reminds the table, “I just said.”

He receives a sharp grin in return, more teeth than friendliness, and then Gansey unfolds himself again.

“Ronan,” he hisses, returns the elbow just as hard as received, and then turns to face Adam again, his face the very picture of apology.

“Please ignore all three of us. These two aren’t really fit for human company, and apparently neither am I tonight. Can we double the pizza order and the coke order, and add three servings of fries?”

Adam nods. His face still burns. Ronan is chuckling evilly beside Gansey. Noah is apparently steaming.

He double timed it back to the kitchen, places the order, rushes back into the break room to try and reason with Ethan.

Ethan allows himself to be reasoned with.

Undoes the reasoning within the next twenty minutes, re-attaches himself to Adam’s legs while Adam is carrying a pizza and a tray of drinks. Luckily none of this goes flying and Ethan does not get stood on.

Blue goes on her break and takes Ethan with her.

When she comes back inside, Ethan is asleep, lulled by the relative quiet of the night, and the rocking of Blue’s arms, but Blue is seething.

She deposits Ethan in the break room, and in between tables, releases the reason of her anger at
Adam.
“Those pretentious bastards-” she says as they pass in the kitchen, “left while I was outside with Ethan.” They have to wait five minutes for the next installment of the sentence as Adam has to deal with an angry customer.
“That stupidly angry looking one,” she says as they huddle together by the counter, “Who’s always here with the one with the hair, y’know, the - the president cellphone one -”
“Oh,” Adam suggests, hating that he does indeed know, “Gansey,”
Blue shoots him a look, continues, “Ok,” she says, “Gansey. The bald boy he’s always with, asked if the kid was mine, and if that meant that you were my kid as well.”
“Oh,” Adam says, has to abandon the conversation momentarily to deliver a bill.
“Before I could even say anything, like where he could shove his face,” Blue bit out as soon as Adam returned, “Mr cellphone-”
“I thought it was president?” Adam cut in.
“Shut up, Adam,” Blue hissed, “Mr president cellphone did his stupid smarmy smile and said, ‘oh no, of course we do not think you are the mother, ma’am, you look nothing like a mother.’ and then I asked what he meant by that,”
“Blue,” Adam groaned, Blue ignored him.
“And he said that I just looked like I preferred a different life style, like what does that even mean? And then he must have twigged he wasn’t making it better and he started babbling on about how he didn’t mean to imply that I couldn’t be the mother, it’s just that all the mothers he knows tend to dress like mothers-”
Adam makes a noise somewhere between a laugh and a groan. Blue continues to ignore him.
“So I told him he was wasting my time, and get this, he pulled out his wallet, his wallet Adam, and asked if I wanted to be refunded. What the actual hell?”

At least Ethan doesn’t wake up until the ride home, and then he goes back to sleep as soon as Adam puts him into bed. It could be worse.
What Ethan staying awake so late last night means that in the morning when Adam’s arrived home from his shift at the factory, Ethan is very grumpy to be woken up. Usually by the time Adam’s dragged himself inside and back to their small bedroom, Ethan is already sprawled on the floor, in his pajamas still of course, quietly playing with Adam’s old toy car, or his transformer, or the small collection of duplo Adam had saved up to buy for him. Today, he was still a crumple under Adam’s blankets. Adam uses this to as much of his advantage as he can, and changes out of his work clothes quickly - a task that’s easier to accomplish while not fending off a freshly rested and hungry toddler. Ethan still hasn’t stirred by the time Adam’s fully dressed again, so he sits on the edge of the bed beside the snoring lump.

“Ethan,” he says, voice low, “hey, time to wake up! Don’t wanna be late for Dana, yeah?”

“Mm,” Ethan says, still asleep. Adam shakes his shoulder gently.

“C’mon,” he cajoles, “I can hear your tummy grumbling, let’s get breakfast, yeah?”

Now Ethan opens his eyes, but scrunches up the rest of his face into an expression Adam knows all too well. The, ‘yes I want food but I don’t want to be awake’ face. For a 3 year old, he had it down pat.

“I know you’re tired,” Adam soothed, untangling Ethan from the blankets and tugging him upright, “but we gotta get moving.”

It could be worse, Ethan is very grumpy, doesn’t cooperate in the getting dressed process, or the being quiet rule, or even the eating quickly game. But, Adam knows that plenty of other toddlers could be throwing tantrums right now, screaming and entirely refusing to put their clothes on, throwing their cereal bowl instead of chewing agonisingly slowly. Adam is very lucky. It doesn’t change the fact that he’s late to Jule’s anyway, or that Ethan cried when Adam left, or the fact that he can pedal as fast as he can force his legs but he’s still going to be late for first period. It could be worse, Ethan could have cried before they left home, waking Robert up, Dana could have yelled at them for being late and disrupting her morning, his teacher could have sent him to the office instead of simply raising her eyebrows. Adam is very lucky.

He reminds himself this as he marches through his day, his late start throwing him vaguely off kilter throughout the rest of his classes, despite not really affecting is timeliness for the remainder of his lessons. He just really doesn’t like being late. He needs to be able to have all his ducks in a row, to have his timetable sorted so he knows where his feet will land next, because if he doesn’t, if he puts one foot wrong, he might have to reshuffle his plans, again, and he does not have time for that.

Blue is in his English class. They both sit in the back; Blue because she wants to be able to doodle without being scolded, Adam because he wants to be able to work on other homework in every free second of the period. They don’t usually talk much, save for hellos, which Adam appreciates because he does not have time for talking. Blue usually seems to understand this and saves her talking for Nino’s.

“Adam,” she says today, voice quiet against the chatter of the classroom, “how are things at home?”

Adam wills himself not to flinch away from the question. He manages but can’t force himself to look up at her. “They’re fine,” he says.

“Ok good,” Blue says. She sounds like she’s chewing on her nails. “Just, look, I know you don’t really believe what we do, the psychic stuff and all-”
“It’s not that I don’t believe it,” Adam mumbled to his book, “it’s more like I don’t not believe in it.”
“Useful,” Blue says drily, then shakes her head and gets back on track, “so Persephone was doing a reading, or I think it was reading, she was very vague about it, and said that something happened yesterday that was gonna change the entire course of your life.”

Despite the fact that he was used to Blue’s odd statements, surreal remarks, and otherworldly outlook, this was not something he was expecting to hear during his last period on an already stressful day. Definitely not something he wanted to hear, not something he had space for in his mind. Of course, now that it was in there, it was going to burrow around and find a way to exacerbate all of his anxieties. It was a very heavy feeling sentence.

“Ah yes,” he replied tautly, “I knew skipping breakfast was a bad idea. Damn, all my dreams blown away from just that.”

He wasn’t looking at Blue yet, but he could feel her scowl scouring the side of his face.

“Adam,” she hissed, “I never said it was a bad change.”

Now he looked at her, “Right, so something happened during the shitstorm that was yesterday which is going to change my life for the better?” he clarified, and her scowl deepened.

“I didn’t say it was a good change either, just a change.”

“What,” he sighed, “is the point in telling me that? Nothing happened yesterday. Everything was life as usual. Yesterday was just another step on the way out of here.”

“Well maybe it was a trick step,” Blue suggested, “or it was actually a worm-hole step and you’re suddenly hundreds of steps further forward than you thought you were but you haven’t realised it yet?”

“I would realise it,” Adam said, “I think the view would be better.”

Blue hit him on the arm with her book before he realised how his words might have been taken.

“God, Blue,” he hissed, aware that the teacher was looking over at them, expression unamused, “that wasn’t a jab at you or your looks or whatever, I was just saying, you’d think if I was that much higher I wouldn’t be in a trailer park.”

Blue shrugged unhelpfully.

He tries not think about it while he’s at work at Boyd’s. It’s one of those things - like knowing you’re being treated badly but also knowing there’s nothing you can do about it yet. Maybe, very unlikely, but maybe something had happened yesterday that would change his entire life, but he didn’t know, couldn’t know what. Probably something happened every day that changed or rerouted his entire life. Like the butterfly effect or something, but in real time rather than the past. Maybe if he stepped on a worm on his way to pick up Ethan, he would change the entire course of his life again. If he let himself think about it too much, while checking oil, fiddling with engines, changing tires, the idea that something dreadful was going to happen would start to snowball in his mind. It was always like this. If he paid attention to that nigging fear in the back of his mind, it would take over and slowly and methodically explain to him all the ways his plans and dreams would go wrong. It was very useful for making sure he had the best possible plan, but not very useful when he was trying to concentrate on other things.

Instead he worries about whether or not he should have, or even could have, taken the opportunity to tell Blue exactly how pretty she is. Because it’s very. It’s a lot. But if he did that he would probably have to follow that up. He couldn’t see much good coming out of it, really. He liked Blue, he did. Sometimes he thought he liked her enough to want to tell her everything about himself, to try and be known to someone. But, that took time, and energy, and Adam did not have either of those things in excess. Anyway - he wasn’t stupid. He’d known Blue for a long time now, he had been far more interested in her when he had first met her. She had been a lovely mixture of both mysteriously intriguing, and extremely easy to talk to. He had crushed on her for what felt like endless weeks. Now she was still both these things, but it was clearer to Adam that his attraction to her was more out of habit now than anything else. If he was going to use any of his time on dating, it was either going
to be for something easy that he could fit seamlessly into his life, or for someone he couldn’t get out of his head - which seemed unlikely. Blue was not easy, was the opposite of easy, and he liked that, that’s part of what made her his friend. She would require far more time than he had to actually date, and she wasn’t magnetic enough to him that he felt he could make the time. By the time Adam was scrubbing at his arms in the workroom sink, he felt vaguely guilty for even going through all of these hypothetical situations in which Blue had no say in the matter. He knew that if she knew what he was thinking, she would certainly have some very stern words to say.

Ethan is crying when Adam arrives. He stops his sobs in favour of burying his face in Adam’s shirt as Dana bundles him into Adam’s outstretched arms crossly. She explains that he’d barely quieted down since he’d left him here this morning, that he was probably coming down with something, that if he was still this crabby or sick tomorrow he wouldn’t be able to come here in case he got Dana’s kids sick.

“I’m sorry, Adam,” she says, she sounds frustrated, but still earnest, “I can’t risk them catching something right now, we don’t have the money for the doctors, and it’s bad enough that they might have been exposed to something today already.”

Adam does understand, he does, he nods, absentmindedly wipes both snot and tears from Ethan’s cheeks with the sleeve of his work coveralls.

“Sorry,” he says, he sounds earnest, but still frustrated, “I didn’t realise he was sick. Just thought he was tired. I didn’t mean to-”

Dana cuts him off easily with a shake of her head, “Not your fault,” she says, “ring me in the morning to tell me if he does come down with something, ok?”

Adam agrees, Adam apologises again, Adam says thank you. He feels like an idiot. Of course he should have realised Ethan was getting sick. How could he have missed that? He was an idiot.

“Hey, bud,” he says, once he’s tied the arms of his coveralls around the both of them to hold Ethan to him during the ride, “you feeling bad?”

“Mm,” Ethan says. He’d nonverbally insisted on being tied on chest to chest, rather than facing outwards, and had since then pressed his cheek into Adam’s chest and shoved half his hand into his mouth.

“Yeah?” Adam sighed, tangled his fingers in Ethan’s messy curls, “What feels bad?”

“Mm,” Ethan says again.

“Bud,” Adam says, soft, “you can use your words, I’ve got you.”

“M’tummy,” Ethan says around his hand.

“Your tummy feels bad?” Adam asks, “Is it hurting?” He presses the flat of his hand to Ethan’s forehead, sticky with smeared tears and snot, and probably juice, and definitely too hot.

“Yeah,” Ethan says, he seems to be working up to saying more because he removes his hand from his mouth and gulps against the front of Adam’s shirt for a few seconds.

Adam shifts the two of them slightly on the bike seat so he can wrap his arm more firmly around him. It’s an awkward position, his feet on the ground, legs bracing the bike to keep it from wobbling, arms bracing Ethan.

“It’s… itchy,” Ethan says, “inside ‘n’ outside. Make it stop.”

“Ok,” Adam says firmly, “We’ll try and make this better. Was it itchy this morning?”

“No,” Ethan says, he puts his hand back into his mouth, “just felt bad.”

“Your tummy felt bad?” Adam tried, “Or you felt bad?”

“Me,” Ethan says, or possibly, ‘mrr’, it was hard to tell due to the fingers in the way.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were hurting?” Adam asked, keeping his voice carefully gentle, “You know you can tell me when you’re hurting.”

“Wasn’t,” Ethan said, “not hurting. Just bad.”

In Adam’s ideal world, he would be able to instantly tell what was wrong with Ethan, and would then be able to fix it. In his ideal world, Ethan wouldn’t be getting sick and sad. In his ideal world, he wouldn’t be feeling frustrated both at Ethan for getting sick, and at himself for blaming Ethan for
that. In his ideal world, this wouldn’t be his problem, their parents would be the ones holding Ethan and looking after him right now. That wasn’t quite true. Maybe half true. None of his ideal worlds featured a lack of Ethan. Not anymore.

He checked his watch. They were already going to be late for dinner, just from this short conversation, another ten minutes wouldn’t hurt. They cycled into town, or, Adam cycled while Ethan sniffled into Adam’s shirt, and managed to make it to the pharmacy before it shut for the evening. If Adam was the praying type, he would thank God for pharmacists and over the counter advice, every time he walked in.

The pharmacist eyed up Ethan’s pink face and snotty cheeks, listened to the very short list of symptoms Adam recited. Adam and the pharmacist both tried to get more information out of Ethan, but Ethan kept his hand in his mouth and his face turned away.

“It could just be a 24 hour bug,” the pharmacist said wearily, she smiled at Adam, “it could be growing pains, it could be the beginning of a nasty cold, really all I can suggest are some mild pain reliefs, and to visit a doctor.”

“Alright,” Adam says, weighs up the amount of money he can afford to not save and not give to his parents, “Which pain relief would you suggest?”

They get home almost half an hour late, which means that his father is waiting by the door, and his mother has already cleared away the dinner. He knows from experience that explanations aren’t actually very useful, but he tries everytime anyway, just in case today is the exception.

“Ethan’s sick,” he says as he climbs the steps slowly, “I dropped by the pharmacy to get him-”

“Don’t,” Robert interrupted, “try an’ make excuses. You should have called to say you were going to be late.”

This is true. Adam accepts this, he nods.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he says, tries again, “I wasn’t thinking, I was worried about Ethan-”

Robert scoffs. He hasn’t moved out of the doorway. “If you were so worried about the brat you would have called home.”

“Yes sir,” Adam says.

“We expect you to at least get home when you’re supposed to, if you’re not going to show us any other respects,” Robert continues, “we don’t live around your fucking schedule.”

“No sir,” Adam says.

“Just because you want to spend all your time with school and work doesn’t mean we should have to wait until our dinner gets cold.”

“No sir,” Adam says. Ethan sniffs.

“Anyway,” Robert says, digs in further, “it’s your own fault he’s sick, if you hadn’t taken him out with you last night. God, I don’t know what you’re trying to fucking prove, boy, do you think having a kid will get you girls?”

“No sir,” Adam says, shuffles Ethan around to his other hip, “can I take Ethan inside now? I want to put him to bed.”

“No sir,” Robert demanded. Adam did not roll his eyes. Did not point out that this was not a conversation. Did not point out that he had asked for permission. Held Ethan tighter.

“No sir,” Adam says.

“Take him inside,” Robert snarls, “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yes sir,” Adam says.

Alice is standing by the kitchen sink. She looks up at her sons as they enter, but her expression remains bland, even as she speaks.

“You should know better, Adam,” she says, “you know how he hates it when you’re late.”

“I know,” Adam says, wants to leave.

“You won’t think you’re so smart for riling him up if it gets Ethan in trouble,” she says. She says this
a lot. So does Robert. It’s not like they need to give him any extra incentives for keeping his head down, but they both know how easy he is to flatten with words like this. He wonders if it actually pleases Alice to know that his stomach is nothing but cold fear, or if she’s truly just stating the fact as if he could forget it.

Adam nods.

“You’ll have to go without dinner tonight,” she says, also unnecessarily, Adam knows this, Alice knows that Adam knows this. She continues speaking and it certainly feels like this must be fun for her, there’s no other reason anyone would bother saying what she does, “there’s nothing for Ethan either. If you had got him back earlier, there would have been.”

This is your fault, she says, your fault I live here, your fault I’m stuck here, your fault there’s not enough food, your fault that Ethan has to go without.

Adam nods.

He carries Ethan into their bedroom, shuts the door, thanks the sky above that Ethan is too tired to have been making noise during the monologues his parents had held. Wonders how much Ethan understands from them, about them.

He sits them both down on his bed, shucks his backpack off onto the bed behind him, and peels Ethan off onto the bed in front of him. Now Ethan complains. He lets himself drop backwards first, in a dramatic expression of misery at being put down, and then realises he has to move forwards again to get back onto Adam’s lap, and rolls over to sit back up.

“Hey, hey, sweetheart,” Adam mumbles, shifting onto one knee and presses his hand gently against Ethan’s chest, “let’s get you into your pjs, yeah? I think you need an early night tonight.”

“Don’t wanna early night,” Ethan wails, “I’m itchy.”

“Yeah?” Adam soothes, works around Ethan’s flailing hands to tug his grubby shirt off, “Your tummy?”

“Yeah,” Ethan says, hiccups, “an’ my face,”

“Your face?” Adam asks, tries to free Ethan from his pants, gets them momentarily stuck on the shoes, takes the shoes off and then finishes pulling the pants off.

Ethan has apparently had enough of talking, because he shoves his hand into his mouth again, which at the very least has the bonus of muffling his crying a little.

He thinks maybe Ethan has a rash, it could have very easily been caused by their laundry detergent - the cheapest money could buy, not very gentle on the skin - or something he could have come in contact with at Jule’s, or maybe a food allergy, or maybe in response to fever. God. Adam didn’t know. His skin looked a little raw, but he couldn’t tell if that was just a heat reaction to crying, or something more volatile. God. He wrangles Ethan into his pajamas as quickly and gently as he can manage at the same time, desperately wanting to do something that’ll help with whatever was going wrong, but not entirely sure where to start.

He didn’t make it further than the pajamas by the time Robert had had enough of the crying.

If he had looked large and foreboding in the front doorway earlier, he positively loomed in the doorway of the bedroom.

“What the fuck,” he starts, almost pleasantly, “are you fucking doing? I thought you were putting him to bed? Are you trying to be as asshole?”

“No, sir,” Adam says, isn’t sure in this moment if he ought to let Ethan climb into his lap as he’s attempting to do, or if he ought to put Ethan behind him right now.

“Get the fuck out here,” Robert demands, jerks his head out the door, and Adam hesitates.

“Dad,” he says in a thinly veiled attempt at appealing to something softer, “can I just finish putting him to bed?”

Robert doesn’t need to step further into the room to make his threat known, he does anyway. “I said, get the fuck out here,” he repeats, “I need to talk to you and I don’t want to do it with that screaming away in my ear.”
Can I Just?

Adam does shut the door on Ethan this time. It doesn’t feel so much like shutting him in and trapping him as it does shutting everything out and protecting him. He won’t let himself feel bad for that, even as he feels guilt curdle his stomach at leaving him alone, crying and sick. He knows it’s not his fault. He knows this.

His father is leading the way out of the house, down the steps, round the back, into the garage. He hasn’t started talking yet. Robert Parrish often comes off as somewhat dimwitted, but that’s just his face and his lack of ambition. He’s clever enough to know exactly how to stir Adam’s anxiety up to the boiling point. Knows that every second he stays quiet, Adam’s mind will suggest another theory of what Robert is going to say, to do.

Adam is never sure if his mother is intentionally cruel, but he has never doubted his father’s intentions.

“I thought,” Robert said, finally, leaning heavily against the thick workbench in the back of the garage, “that you swore to me and your mum that you getting another job wasn’t gonna interfere with your chores at home.”

Oh, right, this again.

“Sorry sir,” he says, always the safest sentence starter, “I will get all the chores done—”

“Sorry?” Robert snaps back, the speed he can switch from drawl to growl doesn’t impress Adam anymore. He understands just how easy it is, has to work hard not to fall into the simplicity of it.

“Sorry? You think you can get away with neglecting your family duties by just saying sorry?”

“No sir,” Adam says, “I’ll make it up to you, I’ll get it all done.” He wants to tack on an ‘I swear’, but he knows his promises mean nothing to Robert right now.

“You fucking better,” Robert says, “do you realise how easy you’ve had it? When I was your age I had four jobs. You think my father let me go to school? Let me keep any of the money I made? Fuck no.”

“Yes sir,” Adam says. He’s heard all of this before.

“You have no sense of fucking duty,” Robert spat at him, “You pay more attention to your stupid cafe job, and that brat’s runny nose than to the wellbeing of this household.”

All the sensible parts of Adam suggest that he sticks to the well worn, ‘sorry sir’, but the rest of him, the more volatile parts of him which are too much Robert for his liking, disagrees.

“Well I’m so fucking sorry,” he spits back, “that I thought your infant son’s health was more important than getting home on time.”

He doesn’t exactly regret having said this, he certainly regrets saying so little when he knows he’ll get punished now whatever he adds on, but he does wish he had a little more self control over his own anger. This wasn’t going to get him out of here any sooner. This would hold him back. Getting angry and fighting back never helped. He was an idiot. This was the only thing he and Robert ever agreed on.

The first blow is always the worst.

When it’s over, he’s distantly aware that he can hear Ethan still crying inside, that his father is speaking to him.

“Do you know how much of a fag you look?” he’s saying, “Carrying that snot brat around town like some fucking mother hen? I suppose I ought to be glad you ain’t crying as well. It’s bad enough you’re such a fucking snob, but I’d truly have failed as a father if you were such a fairy as well.”

“Yes sir,” Adam says. He’s heard all of this before as well. They’ve lost their sting now.

“You learned your lesson?” Robert asks, he always sounds almost fatherly after he’s finished.

“Yes sir,” Adam says. Keeps his head down, hopes, hopes, hopes that Robert lets him go to Ethan now.

“Go shut that noise up,” Robert says. Adam’s heart leaps. “I don’t want to hear it anymore. You’re not going to your pansy job until all the chores out here are done though,” he adds, “I’m not gonna
go soft on you now.”
“No sir,” Adam says, pushes himself up off of his knees, “Yes sir.”

He wants to go straight through the house into his bedroom and pull Ethan into his arms, but he’s been doing his best for three years not to expose Ethan to the direct after effects of their father’s displeasure. He washes the blood off his face quickly, rougher than he ought to, presses toilet paper to the small smattering of cuts until he’s content they’ve stopped ebbing blood out. His shoulders, his back feels bruised as well, but nowhere else is bleeding. His eye is swelling rapidly, and his lip is very obviously busted, cut open on the outside from his father’s ring, from the inside by his own teeth, but he’s not too much of a mess.

His mother stands in the bathroom doorway and watches. Sometimes she stays silent while he washes the blood off, but not today. Nobody was doing silence today apparently.
“I heard you backchat,” she says, “do you think that’s going to help anyone?”
She doesn’t expect an answer, so Adam doesn’t provide one.
“Don’t you think it was bad enough with Ethan screaming in the background without you adding to it?” she asks, her voice is remarkably bland for someone needling. “No wonder he hit you.”
She doesn’t immediately move out of the doorway when he turns away from the sink to leave the room, instead simply stares at him, as if cataloguing the visible damage.
“Can I just—” he says haltingly, “get past? I’ll get Ethan to be quiet.”
Now Alice isn’t replying. She stares at him a moment more, then walks away.

Ethan is sitting in a little bedraggled heap just inside the bedroom, and only pauses in his crying for long enough to ascertain that it was Adam. It was awful, Adam thought, how he knew that if it was Alice, or Robert who had walked into the room instead of Adam, Ethan would have managed to be quiet. At least for a little while. He had learned, like Adam had at his age, that crying to their parents didn’t get them comfort. Luckily for Ethan, he had only been taught this with yelling, rather than the backs of hands and the toes of boots. Adam had his first broken bone when he was 3.
Because it was Adam, and Adam didn’t yell when Ethan cried, Ethan resumed his gulping sobs, lifted his arms out and up to Adam instead.

“Bud,” Adam mumbled into the top of Ethan’s head, “sweetheart,” he gathered the boy in his arms and then dropped the both of them down onto his bed, shuffling backwards until he was leaning against the wall, “I’m sorry, buddy,” Adam says, “I didn’t wanna leave you. I’m back now.” Ethan hiccups. His body is still shifting with rapid gasps, but the actual sobbing has stopped now that he’s surrounded by Adam’s arms.
“You hungry, bud?” Adam asks, shifting a little so he can lean over Ethan in his lap to grab his bag by the strap and drag it closer to them.
“Yeah,” Ethan says, voice dragging with his gasps and hiccups, “but,” he continues, pressing his face against Adam’s upper arm, “m-mum said no food.”
Sometimes Adam thinks it was easier when Ethan couldn’t speak, didn’t understand what their parents words meant. He still didn’t understand all of it, but enough to know when they were being told they couldn’t have something.
“No, bud,” Adam says, firm, soft, “I have food for you here, remember? We got you some cereal bars when we went shopping? Look, they’re your favourite.” He tugs the box of yogurt coated bars out of his bag, and holds it close to Ethan can see it, blinking through his tears.
“Oh,” he says, “yeah,” he reaches a damp hand out and Adam presses the box into it, “chocolate chips in ‘em?” he asks.
“Yeah,” Adam says, “and we got some special drink for your itchy tummy too, is it still itchy?”
“Yes,” Ethan says, the tears suddenly starting again as if he had only just remembered he had things to cry about still, “real itchy, an’ I’m hot,” he adds, voice quickly slipping back into a wail.
“Hey, hey,” Adam shushes, quickly rearranging Ethan and the box in his arms to pull Ethan into a tighter hug, “hey, it’s ok, it’s ok, we’re gonna make it better, ok? But we have to be nice and quiet now cos mum and dad wanna watch tv, ok?”
It takes a few moments more, Adam rubs Ethan’s back gently while Ethan swallows down his tears and his breathing evens out a little.

“Here,” Adam says, opens the box and then opens a bar for Ethan, “eat this, and then you can have the special drink, ok?”

“Mm,” Ethan says, “ok.” he takes the bar. While Ethan is busy chewing, Adam reaches over him to rustle through his bag until he finds the bottle of medicine as well, and then his water bottle.

It doesn’t take too long, thank God. Once Ethan’s stomach has something in it, and after the pain relief kicks in, he settles down easily against Adam and falls asleep in a relieved rush. Thank God. He detaches sweat damp hands from his shirt, and rearranges Ethan on the bed rather than on top of him, and then goes out to the garage. While he works through his chores, he tries to decide what would be best. He was pretty sure it wasn’t the best idea to take Ethan into work with him two days in a row, or to take a probably contagious toddler into a cafe kitchen. He was equally certain it wasn’t the best idea to leave Ethan here though. If he woke up, all odds pointed to him being upset and uncomfortable, and the best outcome of that happening here while Adam wasn’t around to calm him down, was Ethan being ignored and left to cry it out. He didn’t like the odds of any best outcome actually happening. He was already uneasy enough being in the garage rather than in his room with Ethan. Usually Ethan was still awake at this point, playing with his sparse toys or twigs just outside the garage while Adam worked. When he was smaller, Adam used to bundle him in blankets and squish him into a cardboard box at his side so he could keep an eye on him. He had considered doing that tonight, but he didn’t want to risk Ethan waking.

In the end he decided he would rather risk his job than Ethan, but couldn’t afford to risk his job so much by not going, so he had to take Ethan with him again. It was warmer at the cafe, anyway, better for a sick child, and Ethan was likely to stay put at least.

“You finished?” Robert grunted when Adam came back inside. He was parked on the small two seater couch in front of their battered tv, didn’t take his eyes off the game playing to address Adam. Alice, sitting next to him, didn’t look up either.

“Yes sir,” Adam said.

“Everything?” Robert pressed.

“Yes sir,” Adam said.

“If I find anything unfinished -” Robert didn’t bother finishing his threat.

“Yes sir, “Adam said, “can I go to work now?”


“And-“ he started, hesitated again. Robert didn’t look at him, Alice did. “Can I just- I thought I could take Ethan, so he doesn’t disturb you later if he wakes up.”

“Why would he wake up?” Alice asks sharply, “Isn’t he sleeping through the night?” It sounds like an accusation.

“He does,” Adam says quickly, “it’s just that he’s sick. He’s not sleeping well.”

Robert grunts again. Alice’s face looks sour, but Adam isn’t exactly sure why. He waits for an answer. Robert finally tears his eyes away from the screen, just long enough to shoot a bitter look in Adam’s direction, and then nods.

“Yeah,” he says, “I don’t want to wake up to screaming. It’s your fault if he gets sicker though. Know that.”

“Yes sir,” Adam says.

Adam always knows that. There are two things Adam knows best of all. Firstly, he’s getting out of here. Secondly, he is responsible for Ethan.

He changes into his work clothes quickly. He had been hoping that after finishing work in the garage he would have enough time to get at least some of his homework done, but no such luck. He was already on the verge of being late as it was. He dumped out the contents of his school bag, and repacked it with the cereal bars, Ethan’s medicine, a blanket, and spare pair of clothes for Ethan just
in case. Then he rolled Ethan up in the blanket he was lying under, apologising softly as Ethan grumbled, and sat on the bed to button him back into his jacket. He had considered more than once, buying a proper front pack for Ethan, but firstly, they were expensive, and secondly, his father already objected to how apparently feminine Adam appeared carrying Ethan around, and wouldn’t approve of spending money on enhancing that. He liked to remind Adam that he hadn’t carried him around at all when he was Ethan’s age, and Adam was just fine.

Nino’s was quiet when he arrived, and Adam allowed himself a brief moment of relief. At the very least, even if his boss and workmates are mad at him for bringing Ethan in again, at least they won’t be overrun with pretentious students as well. Everyone is in a more forgiving mood when the place isn’t so crowded.

Blue raises her eyebrows, unimpressed, as he comes in.

“Hey you were the one who told me my life was changing,” Adam replied, “apparently in my new life I bring Ethan to Nino’s with me.”

Blue rolled her eyes, then stepped out from behind the counter. She reached her hand out, but stopped it mid air before it made contact with Adam’s face. Oh right.

“I meant this,” she says, her hand hovering over Adam’s bruises, “what happened?”

Adam shrugged, sidestepped away from her hand to drop himself down into an empty booth to start unbuttoning Ethan. “Nothing important,” he said.

Blue slid into the seat opposite, leaned across the table to glare at him. It was a reasonably mild glare seeing as it was tempered with concern, and far too much pity.

“Are you getting into fights?” she asked, “Or is it your-” she tends to stop without finishing her sentence in situations like this. Adam appreciates that.

“Not getting into fights,” Adam says, answering the unfinished question.

“Is this why Ethan is here tonight?” Blue asks, skipping neatly over the line of other questions she so obviously wants to ask, suggestions she wants to make.

“No,” Adam says, wraps one arm around the snuffling bundle of blankets that Ethan is while he shrugs off his jacket, “he’s sick. I didn’t wanna leave him alone.”

“Oh,” Blue’s face pinches as she leans further over the table. She has to stand up to do so. “You do realise this is a diner, right? Like, we serve food here, not germs.”

“Yes, Blue,” Adam snaps, sighs, “look, sorry. I didn’t mean to snap.”

Blue glares at him, a little harder than her previous glare, but not by much.

“I was thinking I’d keep him out here rather than taking him through the kitchen. We’re usually not so busy on Thursdays, there’s always at least one booth empty. I thought maybe I could just keep him here so I could keep an eye on him and not have him sniffing around the food.”

Blue looks torn. She glances out of the booth in the direction of the kitchen, and then sighs.

“It’s just us and the kitchen guys tonight,” she says, “the boss isn’t coming in. It should be alright.”

“Thanks,” Adam says, relief flooding through him.

“Don’t thank me,” Blue says, but she’s finally smiling, “it’s just luck. Or destiny. Who knows.”

“Yeah,” Adam says pleasantly, “in my new life, the boss is never here.”

“Sometimes,” Blue says, “I swear you have a sense of humour.”
He's not mine, but his problems are

Chapter Notes

This is just a real short chapter!

For once, things appeared to be going smoothly. Ethan, bundled in both his blankets and wedged in the corner of the back booth, fell back to sleep promptly. The flow of customers was steady, but slow, and no one was too loud. He and Blue spent most of their night leaning against the counter, talking in low voices about anything that didn’t involve Adam’s apparent new life, current life, or past last. Future dream life was fair game.

Blue had been regaling Adam with outrageous stories about her cousin when the door fairly slammed open.

“Holy Mother of—” Blue yelped, spinning round to face their new customer just as the door slammed open again and the yelling began.

“-can’t keep fucking running away from this, Ronan!” the latest door banger yelled, a man, or a very old looking teenager, who looked like a cleaner, fuller version of Ronan.

“Get some fucking glasses,” Ronan snapped back, he had stalked into the middle of the relatively empty diner, “‘cos it sure looks like I can.”

The older version of Ronan opened his mouth again, ostensibly to continue yelling, but Blue got there first.

“Excuse me,” she snapped, hands braced on her hips, the glare learned from her mother carved onto her face, “either you put your inside voices on immediately, or you leave before I call the police.”

In the ringing silence that follows this, Ethan begins to cry.

Adam moves automatically, slips past Blue into the booth, completely ignores the two men standing threateningly in the middle of the diner, ignores the startled faces of their other customers, and pulls Ethan and his blankets and his already tear stained face into his lap. His hands flutter between cupping Ethan’s sleep, sick hot cheeks, and smoothing down his hair and back.

“It’s ok,” he says into Ethan’s hair, “no one’s mad at you, you’re ok, they’re not yelling at you.”

He can vaguely hear Blue talking in the background, male voices responding, quietly now, but he tunes them out in favour of ducking his head down closer to listen to Ethan who is speaking, just like Adam had taught him, in barely a whisper.

“-not in trouble?” Ethan is asking damply, “not been bad?”

Hot, uncomfortable fury puddles in Adam’s stomach. He swallows it down, rubs his hand up and down Ethan’s back. “No,” he says firmly, “No, bud, you’ve not been bad. You’ve been real good. You’re not in trouble.” He pulls back slightly so as to lift a hand to wipe tears from Ethan’s eyes with the heel of his palm, to look carefully at his face. “It was just some silly people talking too loud. No one’s mad at you,” he repeats, slowly, nods at Ethan until Ethan nods back.

“You’re ok?” Ethan asks, still in a whisper. His eyes are dripping, and his nose is running considerably, but his face is screwed up in concentration as he stares back up at Adam, un-scrunches his fists from the blankets and reaches to touch Adam’s cheek. Adam supposed Ethan had probably been too hysterical, and then too asleep earlier in the evening to notice his face.

“Yeah, I’m ok,” Adam says, moves his mouth into an approximation of a smile, “you ok? How’s your tummy?”

He can still hear Blue in the background, her tone is still taut, but not as tense. Dealing with customers. There’s a pull of guilt in the back of his mind for leaving her alone to deal with this mess.
He ignores it.
“Still itchy,” Ethan breathes, and Adam sighs, tries to keep the smile like thing on his face.
“Sweet heart,” he says, “you don’t have to whisper here, ok? No one’s gonna be mad. Let’s get you some more of your special drink, yeah?”
“Ok,” Ethan whispers, exhales loudly, “ok,” he says again, a little louder. Adam’s not-smile becomes a little more authentic. He shuffles them both back further into the booth to grab his backpack to fetch the medicine.
Blue slips into the booth next to them, leans onto the table to look at Ethan.
“Heya bud,” she says, “sorry about the loud noises. Some people haven’t been taught proper manners.”
Ethan leans a little out of Adam’s arms to look at Blue properly, his smile comes a lot easier than Adam’s, although it’s still wobbly.
“I’ve got proper manners,” he boasts, “Ad’m says I’m real good.”
“You are real good,” Adam confirms, sitting up straighter with the medicine in one hand, and tugging Ethan until he’s only sitting on one of his legs.
“Yeah,” Blue adds, “you say thanks more often than my cousins do, you’re much nicer than them.” Ethan’s smile becomes a little less wobbly. Adam rolls his eyes. He still feels wobbly. Doesn’t want to make eye contact with Blue, in case she can see just how fucked up he feels right now. How much he’s fucked Ethan up. It doesn’t really matter anyway, Blue’s eying up the pain relief in Adam’s hand instead of Adam’s face.
“You hungry?” she asks Ethan, “He should probably eat something with that,” she directs to Adam. “Yeah,” Ethan says.
“Yeah,” Adam says, “I know, I have cereal bars for him.”
Blue makes a face. “We can do better than that,” she says, “we’re in a diner, Adam.”
They have a very quick argument, held entirely with their eyebrows, and then Blue nods and stands up, “A savoury muffin it is then,” she says, and sweeps away before Adam can say anything else.
Ethan perks up even further.
“Muffin?” he asks. Adam sighs again, but his smile is a real thing now. Ethan’s face is still wet from crying, but his eyes are dry and his body is relaxed in Adam’s arms.
“Yeah,” Adam says, “they have so much cheese on, just you wait, bud.”
“Um,” says a voice from beside the booth, “It’s Adam, right?”
God. His arms tighten unconsciously round Ethan’s waist as he looks up at the angry intruder, Ronan, standing awkwardly in front of them, no longer angry, but still intruding. For once he doesn’t look as feral as usual, his face isn’t stretched into a shit eating grin or a sneer.
“What’s it to you?” Adam says brusquely.
“Jesus,” Ronan mumbles, scratches at his stubbly chin, “I feel really bad about upsetting your kid,” he says, addresses this to his own booted feet, “I wanted to say sorry.”
He should just say ok, then turn around. He shouldn’t tell this stranger not to swear in front of Ethan. He shouldn’t ask him what the hell he thinks he’s doing, bursting into a diner like that, stomping around and yelling like he owns the place and doesn’t care who’s caught in the crossfire. He shouldn’t tell him that he doesn’t give a crap about half-assed apologies from rich jerks. He opens his mouth to say exactly what he shouldn’t.
“Ok?” Ethan asks. He’d pressed himself closer to Adam’s chest when Ronan had started speaking, but now he was leaning out again, looking up at Adam’s face. His hands like claws in Adam’s t-shirt.
“Ok,” Adam repeats, puts his hand on Ethan’s shoulder. He desperately wants to tell Ronan to leave. Instead, Ronan speaks again.
“Hey, kid,” he says, and Adam stiffens, “sorry for yelling.”
Now that he’s being addressed directly, Ethan retreats back against Adam’s chest, sticks his hand in his mouth. “S’ok,” he says.

“Nah it’s not,” Ronan says. Adam isn’t sure whether to glare or agree. “My little brother hates yelling too. Me and Declan should know better.”

“You should also move,” Blue announces, returning with a napkin full of muffins and a glass of juice.

Ronan glances at her, and then glares down at her, but steps aside anyway to let her place the juice and muffin on the table, before sliding into the booth next to Adam.

“I figured we could both take our break now, seeing as some idiot scared away all our customers,” Blue says to Adam, does not turn to look back at Ronan who still hovers uncomfortably by the side of the table.

“Hey,” Ronan snapped, “I said sorry. And I said I’d make up for losing you customers.”

Now Blue does look at him, her disdain very clear on her face. “Yes,” she said, “the only thing you rich raven boys are good for, spending money. So long as your friends don’t make even more of a mess here than you did.”

Adam felt slightly out of the loop, but also a little more like he didn’t care he was out of the loop right now. Making sure Ethan didn’t try to stick his entire muffin into his mouth at once, along with his hand, felt most pressing.

Blue turns back to Adam. “I thought you could dilute his medicine in the juice,” she told him, “It’ll be gentler on his stomach that way. I think.”

“Oh,” Adam says, ignores the urge to turn this down, “thanks, I’d just been using water, but this’ll be nicer.”

Blue opens her mouth, probably to agree, but Ronan slides into the booth opposite them and she changes tack, “What are you doing?” she snaps, “Pretty sure we didn’t invite you to sit with us.”

Ronan ignores her, he’s busy staring at Ethan instead. Adam had been uncomfortable ever since Ronan had arrived, yelling and slamming doors, and this careful scrutiny was screwing his stomach up even more. He couldn’t even begin to guess what interest someone like Ronan would have in trying to continue this one sided conversation with him, or with Ethan.

“What’s wrong with him?” Ronan asks, nodding at Ethan. Adam bristles even as he reminds himself that Ronan isn’t asking what’s wrong with him in general, but rather what he’s sick with. Or maybe why he cries so easily. Or why he barely talks when he has the option of hiding his face against Adam instead. He’s doing that now, while still chewing on the muffin, holding it close to his face in both hands like he’s eating an apple. Adam knows he’s going to be grubby and spit damp, can’t bring himself to care, even as he feels crumbs collecting in the crooks of his arms.

“He’s sick,” Blue spits out, “obviously.”

“Obviously,” Ronan repeats, rolls his eyes, “I mean, what with? And why would you bring a sick kid to work anyway? Shouldn’t he be at home in bed or something?”

Yes, he should be.

“You do realise that’s none of your business, yeah?” Adam drawls in reply, does not look at Ronan. He’s so sure all his worry and insecurity is written all over the lines of his face right now, and he needs to be able to look like he has this under control. He has this under control. Ethan is fine. Ethan is fine.
“Are you always this touchy?” Ronan asks. He’s put aside his earlier abashed looking stance, his earlier humility - if you could call it that - and replaced it with his usual sneer. Adam almost prefers the sneer, at least it felt like the truth.

“Only when I’m talking to assholes,” Adam replies, immediately regrets it. He tries not to swear too much in front of Ethan, he gets that enough from other people.

“Especially ones that don’t seem to know when they’re not wanted,” Blue points out venomously. She’s wearing her mother’s glare again.

“I know when I’m not wanted,” Ronan says, “it tends to be all the time, so I just ignore it now. Anyway, I’m a customer. You weren’t coming to me, so I came to you.”

Blue looked like she was going to implode. Ethan had stopped nibbling on his muffin, was just pressing the side of his face into Adam’s shirt now.

“So are you going to order, then?” Adam asks vaguely, too busy trying to crane his head enough to see what Ethan’s face was doing.

“I was going to wait til Gansey got here,” Ronan said, “but I guess-”

He’s interrupted by Blue.

“Oh for goodness sake,” she huffed, “why didn’t I realise that of course your friend would be that prat. I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want you to make up for our lack of customers, you can just go.”

“Jesus Christ,” Ronan snapped, “can you fucking make up your mind?”

“I just did!”

“Ad’m,” Ethan mumbles, “Ad’m, don’t like this, don’t like this.”

Even though his voice is small and muffled against Adam’s chest, it was enough to shut both Blue and Ronan up immediately, the both of them looking suddenly guilty.

“Bud,” Adam said, jostles Ethan around in his lap so he’s sitting across his knees sideways and Adam can see his face properly. It’s twisted in something like fear, and very pink. Fuck this entire night. He cups Ethan’s muffin smeared cheek, rubs his thumb under his eye to wipe at the quickly falling tears. “I’ve got you. Tell me what’s wrong?”

“Oh fuck,” Ronan is whispering. There’s a soft thud, and an ‘Ow’, and Adam thinks that Blue might have just kicked Ronan under the table. He doesn’t turn to look, just keeps brushing away each new tear with his thumb.

“‘lue’s bein’ mean,” Ethan gets out in a shuddering breath, “don’t like it, don’t like ‘lue bein’ mean.”

“Blue’s real grumpy right now,” Adam agrees, he hears Blue make a noise in response to this, but can’t tell if it’s in irritation or abashed agreement, “is that scaring you? She’s not grumpy with you,” Ethan’s shaking his head, and then nodding his head, and then shaking it again. It dislodges Adam’s hand, but Ethan reaches for it and pulls it back to his face with both of his hands.

“Don’t want ‘lue bein’ mean,” Ethan sniffs helplessly, “you don’t like mean.”

The rest of the booth is very quiet. Adam is mostly grateful for that, he doesn’t really want either Blue or Ronan popping into the conversation and confusing things right now. Ethan is tired, and sick, and upset, and Adam just wants to fix this with as little fumbling as possible. He would prefer, of course, that they were alone, this was all far too much dirty laundry to be airing at once. Ethan didn’t deserve that. Not that he wouldn’t care. But Adam cared for him, possibly too much.
“I don’t,” Adam says, nodding, “but sometimes people are just mean by mistake, yeah? Cos they’re grumpy. Blue isn’t mean, she’s nice. She’s always nice to you, isn’t she?”

Ethan looks conflicted. “Yeah,” he mumbles, “yeah.” His eyes flick past Adam’s shoulder to glance at Blue, and then at Ronan. “She should say sorry,” Ethan announces, a lot firmer suddenly, “cos you say that you have t’say sorry when you’re mean.”

This is true. He does say that. He turns to look at Blue with raised eyebrows. She looks back at him, face still covered in guilt. He knows she feels badly about upsetting Ethan, knows that she knows how easily scared he gets by raised voices.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” she says to Ethan, reaches tentatively across to squeeze his knee, “I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m sorry for being mean.”

Ethan does not look appeased.

“No,” he says, Blue’s face falls, “no, s’posed to say sorry to him,” he releases Adam’s hand to point at Ronan, who’s been sitting frozen during this entire exchange.

“Oh,” Blue says, “of course.” She says, squeezes Ethan’s knee again and straightens up to stare across the table ruefully at Ronan.

“I-” she starts, scrunches her face up in distaste, but continues anyway, “I’m sorry for snapping at you.”

Ronan glances from Blue’s tepid apology to Ethan’s tear stained face, to Adam, back to Blue again, and then he shakes his head.

“I’m sorry too,” he says, it sounds a little forced, but still sincere, “I shouldn’t have sworn at you.”

“Ok,” Blue says.

“Ok,” Ronan says.

“Ok,” Ethan says, sniffs hard, presses his face back into Adam’s shirt.

“Is that better?” Adam asks him, rubbing his hand down Ethan’s back, “No one’s being mean anymore,”

“Everyone’s friends,” Ethan mumbles, “s’better,”

“That’s right,” Adam said, glancing sideways first to Blue and then Ronan, “friends, no more being mean,” he added firmly, trying to keep his stern expression from slipping into a glare.

Blue looks pissed, but nods. Ronan looks inexplicably and somewhat suspiciously pleased.

“I can do that,” Ronan says, he’s actually smiling, not sneering, not grinning with all of his teeth and malice.

“Ad’m,” Ethan whispered, and Adam looked back down at him.

“Yeah, bud?”

“Who’s he?”

“Uh,” Adam said, remembered that actually he only knew Ronan’s name, and that usually he appeared to be perpetually angry and a little spiky.

“I’m Ronan,” Ronan said, leaning so far across the table that half his torso was pressed against it, “I’ve got an older brother too, but yours is much nicer than mine.”

Huh.

“Oh,” Ethan says, he sounded interested, “we can share,” he suggests, glances back up at Adam, “Ad’m always shares with me, he’ll share with you too.”

“Uh,” says Adam.

Blue sniggers. Ronan’s smile has shifted into a toothy grin, this one isn’t the fearsome type though.

“Oh then,” he says to Ethan, “if we’re gonna share brothers I should know your name.”

Ethan keeps looking at Adam, “Ad’m,” he whispered, “he’s not a stranger now, yeah? Do I tell him my name?”

“Uh,” Adam says again, really needs to remind his brain to use different words occasionally, “yeah bud, you can tell him your name.”

“m’ Ethan,” Ethan mumbles, switching back to shyness. Ronan’s grin crinkles the corners of his eyes.

The door opens and Adam watches Blue’s face shift into waitress mode, and then swiftly back out into a grimace as she sees who it is. “Oh,” she says, “our backup customers are here.”
“Ronan Lynch,” Mr. President Cellphone Gansey is saying, disgruntled and firm, and yet still managing to sound genial, “what mess have you been making? Declan called me six times on the way over, and your text was quite frankly horrifying.”

Ronan’s smirking. It’s different from his usual sneer, different as well from the smile he had been directing at Ethan just moments before. It’s genuine amusement, but it looks closed off.

“Chill out, Dick,” he says, “hi Noah.”

“Hi,” Noah says softly, stepping out from behind the ridiculously present presence that was Gansey, “are you holding these guys hostage? How did you get them to sit with you?”

“And what on earth did you mean by emergency pizza buying?” Gansey continues.

Blue answers the both of them. “Yes,” she says, “he is holding us hostage. Luckily, you two are here to break us out by buying enough pizza for about—” she pauses, looks to be doing some quick calculations in her head - Adam knows she isn’t - “the 11 people Ronan scared away.”

“It was 6 people, maggot,” Ronan cuts in.

“9 at least,” Blue replies firmly, “don’t forget we’re friends,” she adds in a singsongy voice that is at complete odds with her stony expression. Ronan looks at Ethan, then to Blue, and purses his lips before turning back to look at Gansey who appears to be at a loss. Noah, however, is standing there completely at ease, hands in his pockets, a small smile on his face.

“We’re buying at least 4 pizzas,” Ronan tells him, “tea and thickshakes for everybody, and way too many fries. Also those cheesy muffins.”

There’s a moment where Gansey just looks at Ronan, and Ronan looks back, and Gansey looks back, and Ronan looks back.

“I’m not eating anything,” Noah pipes up, “so good luck eating 2 pizzas each.”

“Blue and Adam and Ethan can help,” Ronan says.

Blue says, “What?” at the same time Gansey says, “Who?” and Adam says, firmly, “No.” While Ethan struggles in his arms and says, “Pizza!”

“Gansey,” Ronan says, “don’t pretend you don’t know their names. This here is Blue, y’know the waitress you have a knack for accidentally insulting, and Adam, who we have all pissed off, and Adam’s not-son, Ethan.”

“Pizza!” Ethan says again. His muffin is on the floor, has been for a while now, half eaten, all forgotten.

“In case you’ve forgotten,” Adam says stiffly, “we work here, we’re not about to sit down and eat pizza with you.”

Gansey glances around the empty diner and frowns, then turns back to the group and says, “I don’t see why not, no one else is here. It would be a pleasure to get to know the three of you better, especially now that Ronan appears to be in a polite mood.” He speaks with so much authority, Adam can almost forget how ridiculous this situation is.

“Well,” Blue says, “not very polite, but he apologised reasonably nicely, so I suppose that must count for something.”

“Wait,” Noah gawked, he’d suddenly got much closer and was leaning into the booth over Ronan’s shoulder, “you managed to get the word ‘sorry’ past your lips? You, Ronan Niall Lynch, apologised? Did you swear in the middle of it to make up for it?”

“Fuck off,” Ronan hisses, batting affectionately at Noah’s ear, “you’re making me sound like an ogre.”

“You are an ogre,” Gansey says inattentively, “are we all sitting in this booth? Ronan, budge up.”

Before either Blue or Adam can say anything, Ronan is shuffling round the booth until he’s sitting in the corner next to Adam, and Noah is sitting next to him, and Gansey is sitting opposite Blue smiling with all his extremely white and straight teeth, looking like a heavily photoshopped toothpaste ad.

“So,” Gansey says to Blue, “you and Ronan are friends?”
He's Ok Enough

It turned out that Gansey, somehow, despite his overly moneyed and fresh from the box smile, was very easy to talk to. He had a knack for asking questions that didn’t feel too personal as to be intrusive, but were intimate enough that you felt like he was truly paying attention to you, really wanted to get to know you. What really made it though, what really kept Adam, and probably Blue, at the table, kept them talking, was how sweet all three of the boys had been with Ethan. By the time Gansey, Ronan, and Noah had left, just before Adam and Blue shut the diner up for the night, Adam felt like he and Gansey had known each other for years. He knew Blue had really hit it off with Noah as well. Ethan had eaten as much pizza as he could force into himself, drank all his juice with his medicine in, and fallen asleep within half an hour.

In the morning, Ethan was still a little more lethargic than usual, when Adam got back from his shift at the factory, a little too sniffly to say he was better. He lets Ethan sleep in a little longer than usual while he called Dana to try and persuade her that the symptoms weren’t bad. She just reiterated that she couldn’t risk her kids getting sick, and that she was sorry. Adam’s mother listened from their small dining table, arms crossed on the table in front of her.

“Taking him out with you was a bad idea then?” she asked. She had a habit of not looking at him while she spoke. Today she was staring out their dusty window, as if addressing the question to the neighbouring trailers.

“He’s better than he was yesterday,” Adam said, tried not to let his irritation bleed through into his voice, “but he’s not completely better yet.”

“And you don’t have anywhere to take him.” Another of her habits was stating the obvious.

“No,” Adam said, “I don’t.”

“Your father and I expect you to be responsible, Adam,” Alice finally turned to look at him, her mouth twisted, “you can’t just take your brother out late at night and then not accept responsibility when he gets sick.”

Adam considers pointing out that he very much doubted that his taking Ethan out with him the last few nights was the cause for Ethan getting sick. Considers pointing out that it was more likely the lack of constant nutrition provided by Robert and Alice, the thin blankets, the cheap soap.

“Yes, ma’am,” he says instead, “I’ll find someone to look after him.”

“Don’t bother,” she says, “luckily for you, I’m home today.”

Oh. Oh fuck. She shouldn’t be home, she should be leaving for work in about half an hour. If she was home, something had happened. He didn’t say anything and she confirmed his worries without prompting.

“The convenience store shut down,” she said, “I’m out of work for a while, so I can watch Ethan, but you’re going to need to make up for what I’m not earning.”

Oh. Of course. He desperately wanted to point out that he didn’t have any time to get another job, but she either hadn’t finished talking, or wanted to preemptively shut him up.

“And don’t give me any of that shit about how you’re saving for college,” she continued, “that’s still years away, and this is now. You can afford to give us the excess money you’re earning. We’re feeding you and housing you after all, it’s not like you need it right now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, “I’ll get Ethan dressed and fed then.”

“Yes,” Blue said. They were sitting together in English, and Blue was again ignoring their unspoken rule of not speaking. “That was weird last night, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Adam agreed vaguely, he had to finish the sentence he was writing before he could engage his brain for other things. “But,” he continued, “kind of nice? Surprisingly?”
“I’m considering rethinking my, ‘all raven boys are bastards,’ rule,” Blue said, her voice heavy with faux seriousness. “At least for Noah. He was sweet.”

“Gansey was ok,” Adam added, flipped a few pages in his work book, “definitely not as much of a pretentious idiot as he looks like.”

“Yeah the both of you seem to speak the same over-enthusiastic geek language,” Blue grinned, “not that that’s a bad thing of course, but wow, listening to you guys chat was like being dunked into a school nightmare.”

“I resent that,” Adam said stiffly, then grinned as well, “anyway. You and Noah were all off in band land. You can’t tease me for being a geek when you’re just as bad as me.”

“At least when I’m ‘geeky’, I’m still being fun,” Blue shot back.

“Think they’ll go back to ignoring us now?” Adam asked, “It’s not like they’re gonna wanna hang out with Henrietta trash locals on the daily.”

Blue snorted. “Call yourself a trash local if you want, I prefer recycled local.”

Adam rolls his eyes.

He can’t concentrate at Boyd’s. He had only managed to stay so focused at school because of the constant input of information demanding his attention. At Boyd’s it was far easier to let his thoughts drift, and he couldn’t stop them from worrying about Ethan. Practically, he knew Ethan was safe. Alice had never been physically violent to Adam, he didn’t think she would be to Ethan either. But Ethan was sick, and sad, and he needed attention and comfort, and Alice had never been good at either of those things. It wouldn’t hurt him, Adam told himself firmly, Ethan would be ok even if he wasn’t picked up whenever he wanted it today. He would be fed, and Adam had given his medicine to him with breakfast, and given it to Alice in case he got worse in the afternoon. He would be fine. He would survive being ignored for a day, and then tomorrow hopefully he would be better enough to go back to Dana’s. He would be fine.

He’s too busy trying to convince himself of this, all the remnants of his attention taken up with the automatic movements of tightening nuts, that it takes him far too long to realise that someone is standing beside him. They clear their throat, Adam’s brain helpfully, and excessively belatedly informs him that they’ve done this about 5 times now, and Adam whirls around on his ass, scraping the fabric against the concrete he’s sitting on.

“Damn,” Ronan said, his mouth quirked up in the corners - not quite what you could call a smile though - ‘I was beginning to think you were ignoring me. Were you?’

Adam’s mouth supplies this; “Uh.”

He gets jerkily up onto his feet, pulling himself up on the truck he was working on, and wipes his hands down the front of his overalls.

“Naw,” he drawls, clears his throat, “sorry,” he said, “I was just- I wasn’t ignoring you. Something wrong with your car? BMW yeah?”

Something odd is happening to Ronan’s face. A widening of eyes and a flash of his real smile again before he shrugs and wipes his face clear before slipping into his sneer. “I’m flattered you noticed,” Ronan replied, “but nah. I’m actually here on Gansey’s behalf.”

“Oh,” Adam said, “his… Camaro?”

“Fuck,” Ronan scoffs, “you have a car kink or something? How the hell do you even know what we all drive?” He doesn’t wait for Adam’s answer, “But no. He just wants to know if you’re working tonight.”

“Oh,” Adam says again, frowns, “why?”

“Beats me,” Ronan says, “I think you made his little nerd heart happy last night. Probably wants to bombard you with wacky questions about other shit he likes to research in his spare time.”

“Well,” Adam shrugged, glanced down at the tools at his feet, “I am working tonight. Every weekday night from 8 to close. We’re gonna be pretty busy tonight though, so it’s not like I can chat much.”

“He’ll be devastated,” Ronan sighs, and Adam shoots him a sharp look, unable to decipher exactly how sarcastic Ronan is being here.
“He’ll live.”
“Probably,” Ronan agrees, “but I’m gonna have to put up with his sad face all night. I’m letting you
know now that this will be your fault.”
Adam nodded, automatically, “Yep,” he agreed, turned away and sat back down, “I really need to
get back to work,” he says, already getting back to work, “I guess I might see you tonight, then?”
There’s a beat of silence, and then Ronan is scoffing again.
“If you’re lucky,” he says.
Adam returned to his worrying.

Ethan was fine. Ethan was fine. He was crying, and alone, but fine. When Adam had biked up to
their trailer - a little earlier than usual because he didn’t need to ride back over to Dana’s to pick
Ethan up before coming home - it was to a locked front door and the muffled sound of crying. For
the half a minute it had taken him to fumble his key out of his pocket and into the door and then to
get to his bedroom, he had feared the worst. No matter that he wasn’t sure exactly what the worst
was, or which or the worsts he was worried about. Ethan was fine. He had been slumped on the
floor by the closed bedroom door, and after a quick examination, was found to be physically fine.
“Sweetheart,” Adam said, scooping him up into his arms and holding him close, “what happened?
Where’s mum?”
“Dunno,” Ethan sobbed, “woke up,” he added helpfully. Adam rubbed his back, then shuffled him
in his arms so he could drop his backpack off without putting Ethan down.
After a few moments and several gasping attempts at speaking, Ethan pulled away from Adam’s
neck and managed to get more words out without being interrupted by tears. “I fell asleep,” he
started, “outside. Mum was doing garden things,” his lip quivered. Adam nodded reassuringly and
Ethan continued, “woke up, door was closed.” he looked at Adam, guilt bare on his face, “Think I
made her mad. Didn’t mean to sleep. Said sorry but no one opened the door.”
His voice was beginning to stutter between harsh breaths again, so Adam dragged him back close
to his chest and pressed his lips to the crown of Ethan’s head.
“Baby,” he said, “you didn’t do anything wrong. You’re allowed to sleep. You’re ok. I’ve got you—
Thought you weren’t coming,” Ethan sniffed, “scared you weren’t.”
Fuck.
“Hey,” Adam mumbled, “hey, Ethan, bud,” he pulled them apart a little, holding Ethan away from
him enough that he could look down at his face, “I’m always coming back for you, ok?”
“Mm,” Ethan sniffs.
“Ok,” Ethan says, then, “I’m hungry.”
“Ok.” Adam says, “let’s get you a snack.”
There’s a note on the table from Alice. Adam reads it after he’s dug out some crackers for Ethan.

Adam
Had to run to the store. Ethan’s asleep.
Alice.

There was nothing there to indicate when Alice had left this note. He supposes he should feel
grateful that she had at least thought to leave him a note. He didn’t know how long Ethan had slept,
how long he’d been awake and alone. He suspected he couldn’t really ask Ethan, the fear and guilt
he would have felt after waking alone and shut in would have made it feel longer than it really was.
It could have been five minutes. It could have been hours. He throws out the note and takes Adam to
the garage with him to do his chores before dinner.

When they come back in, Alice is in the kitchen making dinner, and Robert is in his spot on the
couch.
“Got an early start on the chores?” Robert asks. Adam nods. He needs to go to the bathroom to wash
up, but he’s not sure yet if Robert’s finished speaking. Ethan has attached himself to Adam’s leg, sits
down on his foot and looks up at him grinning. At least Ethan is feeling better.

“God,” Robert snaps, “stop fucking standing around, go wash up, you look like a hobo.”

“Yes, sir,” Adam says. Walks carefully to avoid overbalancing or tripping with Ethan on his foot, makes sure to grin down at him the whole time.

“You’re getting real heavy,” he says once they’re in the bathroom. Ethan bounces slightly on Adam’s foot and Adam groans theatrically. “Ethan, you’re gonna squash me!” he says, grins more as Ethan giggles. Ethan’s ok.

He’s ok enough that after dinner, Adam finishes off the rest of his chores easily while Ethan drives the toy car up and down Adam’s legs and along the garage floor and chatters the whole time about what the car is doing. He’s ok enough that when he yawns sleepily as Adam carries him back inside for a quick shower, he’s not so exhausted by sickness that he’s crying. He’s ok enough that he wants a bedtime story before bed and doesn’t lie down until Adam says, ‘the end’, and kisses him on the forehead.

“Ad’m,” Ethan mumbles when Adam sits on the opposite bed, homework laid out in front of him. “Yeah, bud?” Adam whispers back, scrawling equations as quickly as his hand and mind can work them.

“‘M I goin’ to Nino’s with you?”

“Not tonight buddy,” Adam says, flashes him a quick smile, “it’ll be real boring tonight.”

“I wanna go,” Ethan says, just a warning hint of a wail in his voice.

“Buddy,” Adam says firmly, “you gotta stay here and sleep tonight to make sure you get properly better. Dana misses you.”

Ethan’s silent for a few moments. “You comin’ back?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Adam says, leans across the gap between the beds to card his fingers through Ethan’s freshly dried hair, “yeah. I promised, remember? Always coming back.”

“Ok,” Ethan says.

Adam does his homework, Ethan goes to sleep.

Blue isn’t working tonight, which means that Cialina is. Adam likes Cialina just fine. Not as much as he likes Blue, probably partially because he works more often with Blue so they get on better, but mostly because she’s not as subtle or thoughtful as Blue.

“Who the fuck did that to your face?” she asks as Adam signs in. She’s ringing up a bunch of raven boys at the counter, but leaning over backwards to gawk at the bruising that Adam knows is starting to shift into an ugly yellow. “You get beat up too often,” she says as he walks past her, notepad in one hand, jug of water in the other, “waste of a pretty face.”

“I agree with the loud one,” a voice from the booth to his left says, and Adam turns to raise an eyebrow at Noah who’s grinning up at him from the shadow of the booth corner.

“Hello to you too, Noah,” he says.

“Adam!” Gansey says, far too pleased and surprised sounding for someone who had sent a scout to see if Adam would be working tonight. “It’s good to see you! I realised after we left yesterday that I didn’t get your number, and I wasn’t sure how I would reach you!”

Adam rolled his eyes, despite the warmth in his stomach. “Gansey,” he says pleasantly, reaches over the table to fill up their water glasses as an excuse to linger momentarily, “good thing you know where I work then.”

“Yes,” Gansey says, a little awkwardly, but then he brightens, “I wasn’t sure if you were working tonight, I’m glad you are!”

Adam glances across the table at Ronan, who hasn’t greeted him, and is apparently very invested in his coke.

“Oh,” Adam said, “Ronan didn’t tell you then?”

Ronan becomes further invested in his coke. Noah perks up considerably for someone who already appeared entirely perky, and Gansey raised his eyebrows.
“Didn’t tell me what?” he asked.
Adam was confused. He had also run out of glasses to fill.
“When I work? He came by Boyd’s today to ask.” He’s pretty sure the glare Ronan is boring into the ice in his glass is meant to be directed at him.
“Boyd’s?” Gansey asks, the confusion evident in his voice. They all look at Ronan. “No, he didn’t tell me. What’s Boyd’s?”
“It’s where I work,” Adam says. His confusion is letting up, even as he sees it set heavier into Gansey’s expression, “I have to go see other tables, excuse me.”

He doesn’t manage to swing past their table again for a good twenty minutes. Nino’s wasn’t as busy as it could be, but it was still busy enough that Adam was feeling tugged in too many directions at once within the first five minutes. In a short lull between rushes, Adam pauses back at Gansey’s booth with the water jug excuse. He’s pleased to see that they’re still there, even though it’s obvious none of them are eating anymore. Instead, Gansey has a thick journal spread out on the table in front of them, plates and glasses shoved back to create a clean ring around it. He’s talking earnestly and excitedly. Noah is nodding, and Ronan is rolling his eyes.

“Hey,” Adam says, hefts his jug, “water?”
“Yes please,” Gansey says, flashes a smile with all of his teeth at once, “how are you today, Adam?” Ronan has put his face down on the table.
“Yeah I’m good, thanks,” Adam said, attempted to match Gansey’s smile, “how about you guys?”
“We’re great,” Gansey says, replying for the entire table, “listen, Adam, I was wondering - what do you know about Welsh kings?”
Well. Ok.
Ronan groans loudly across the table, folds his arms over his head.
“Uh,” Adam says, “not really that much? Why?”
If Gansey is disappointed, it’s hard to tell, his face droops just momentarily, but when it bounces back it’s to a smile brighter than before. “Well,” he says, “I’m very interested in one king in particular, Glendower. Have you heard of him?”
“I don’t think so,” Adam says, then he does something he usually doesn’t bother doing. Doesn’t usually have time for doing. Creates an opening. “I’m on my break in half an hour. If you’re still around you could tell me about him.”
Gansey beams. Ronan groans again.
“We’ll be around,” Noah says, he’s rolling his eyes, but he looks pleased, “can we get a dessert menu?”
“You’re not even gonna eat,” Ronan says, “what the fuck do you want with a dessert menu?” His head is still buried under his arms.
“It’s to appease you,” Noah says pertly, “since we’re staying here and you apparently want to be sulking.”
“I’ll make sure you get that menu,” Adam tells them, and leaves.
Adam’s break is barely long enough for what sounds like a very condensed version of an introduction to Welsh Kings and Owen Glendower. It is long enough for him to become irretrievably intrigued. Less by the story (although the story was fascinating, and he absolutely did want to hear more), more by how Gansey became while he was telling it. It wasn’t that he lost his polished edges, not exactly, they just became sharper and brighter less edge like and more other.

Here was a boy who had found a loose end, and when he had tugged on it and discovered there was no other end in sight, hadn’t given up, rather, had become entirely invested in discovering it. Adam could relate to that. It was impressive really, how even while Gansey told Adam, just very briefly in their short amount of time, how he had traveled around the world to follow his leads, Adam didn’t quite feel his usual bite of jealousy. He imagined that if this were anyone else, someone with less magnetism, they would casually mention their expensive travels, and Adam would feel like he was less, and then think less of them as well.

He didn’t feel that. Not quite. The jealousy was still there, it was always there when he was around people he was striving so hard to be like, but it was tempered by something. After careful consideration, he thought it might be affection, although it was so early in it was hard to tell.

When he slides out of the booth, the regret on his face real, Gansey takes hold of his wrist loosely to make him pause.

“Can I have your number?” he asks, “I would love to get to talk to you about this more, preferably when you’re not working.”

Adam hates this question. Not that he gets it often.

“Sorry,” he starts, winces at the sight of Gansey’s face falling so dramatically. He hadn’t put his posh boy face back on, was still wearing the rawly excited one from his storytelling, and wasn’t hiding his emotions. “I would,” Adam hastens to add, “it’s just, I don’t have a phone.”

“Who the fuck doesn’t have a phone?” Ronan jibes, “If you’re gonna turn him down, you should think of a better excuse.”

Adam rolls his eyes. He also hates this response to his answer. Gansey looks stricken.

“Just because you were born clutching a cellphone doesn’t mean everyone can afford them, Lynch,” Adam snipes back. Now Ronan looks stricken, also haughty.

“He didn’t mean it, Adam,” Gansey says smoothly, he’s put his mask back on, “ignore him.”

Adam wants to roll his eyes again, but instead he smiles at Gansey, a little tightly, but still a smile. “I can deal,” he says, then, “I honestly don’t have a phone, but, I finish work at Boyd’s at about 4 tomorrow. I could meet you at Aglionby about 4.30? If you’re free, and don’t mind Ethan tagging along.”

“Oh yes,” Noah says, “bring Ethan. He’s good fun. Is he feeling better? I meant to ask earlier but Gansey talks a lot.”

“He’s doing much better, yeah,” Adam says, he’s still smiling. He turns back to Gansey, wanting permission from the obvious leader of this gang before he can accept that any plans have been made.

“That works out great!” Gansey says, enthusiastic, “Ronan finishes tennis at 4.20-” he pauses here to allow both Ronan and Noah to share what must be a commonly occurring snigger and high five, “- and I finish up with crew at 4, so we’ll be around!”

“Right,” he’s still smiling. His mouth feels strangely stretched with it, “great, I’ll meet you in the parking lot at half past then.”

He goes back to waiting tables, tries not to pay attention to Gansey’s table. He doesn’t want to look too eager, nor does he want to distract himself from work. He does notice them leave though, about half an hour before his shift ends, which is why he’s very surprised when he leaves for the night and
finds Gansey and Ronan still in the parking lot, standing close together in between the two of their parked cars. They’re not fighting exactly, but they’re certainly having a very firm discussion. If he had had any hopes of slipping his bike and himself away without being noticed, they were thoroughly dashed. Ronan had glanced over almost immediately after Adam had stepped out, and waved at him, motioning for him to come over. With some trepidation, Adam did.

“I thought you guys were gone,” he said in greeting.

“Noah has,” Gansey said with a sigh, “and I would have liked to as well.”

“I’m not stopping you,” Ronan pointed out, “you’re the one stopping me.”

Adam has no idea what is going on, but also doesn’t really want to waste the energy in finding out either. He has to go home. Has to check on Ethan.

“Adam,” Gansey says, “can I appeal to your obvious good senses and ask you to help me persuade Ronan not to be an idiot?”

Right.

“I’m not sure that’s something you can fix with persuasion,” Adam said, “or that I’m a very good candidate for helping, especially when I don’t know what I’m helping with.”

Gansey opens his mouth, but Ronan cuts in.

“I’m going to go... hang with a...mate that Gansey doesn’t approve of. He’s trying to persuade me that it’s in my best interests to come home and be bored, and I’m trying to get it through his thick skull that he’s not my parent and therefore can’t tell me what to do.”

Right. Adam’s 100% sure that this isn’t exactly the full story, or the most truthful version of the story, or quite the version that Gansey would tell.

“Well,” Adam says, not wanting to be in the middle of this conversation, and not quite understanding how or why he was, “Ronan’s right,” he shrugs apologetically, “it’s not your job to keep him in line, Gansey. If he wants to be an idiot or whatever, then I guess you can tell him you think he’s being an idiot but it’s his choice.”

“But-” Gansey says, frowning heavily.

“No butts,” Ronan says swiftly, “Adam has spoken. I’ll be an idiot if I want to. Speaking of, whereabouts do you live?” He directs this last bit to Adam, who frowns and doesn’t really want to reveal this bit of information.

He gives the vaguest location possible, and, inexplicably, Ronan looks very pleased.

“I’m meeting my mate near there,” he said, “wanna ride?”

Adam looks to Gansey. Gansey is looking both very upset and slightly pleased, and his smooth mask isn’t in sight, although Adam can’t say if it disappeared some time during this exchange or if it wasn’t on when Adam had come out.

“I have my bike,” Adam says, easily turning Ronan’s offer down.

“We can put it in my boot,” Ronan counters, “I have room.”

“Uh.” Adam says.

“Look,” Ronan snapped, “if you don’t want to, that’s fine. Just say so. If you do, quit stalling, I want to get going.”

Adam looked at Gansey again, this time Gansey shrugged.

“He’s a good driver,” he offered, “when he bothers to follow the road rules.”

Adam sighed.

“That would be nice, thanks,” he said, “let me get my bike.”

When he gets back with his bike, Gansey is sitting in his car, door open.

“You know he’s a bastard,” he’s saying to Ronan, “I’m not trying to control you. I’m just worried.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ronan grumbles. He opens the passenger door, slams it shut again, “I know. God. I’ll see you at home later, ok?”

“Text me,” Gansey replies, then leans out of the car to look at Adam, “sorry for dragging you into that,” he says, “we’re still on for tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yeah definitely,” Adam said, “I’ll see you then.”

Gansey lifts a hand in farewell, tells Ronan to text him again, and then shuts his door and starts the Camaro up with a growl. Ronan turns to Adam.
“Boots open,” he grunts, turns on his heel, and stalks his way around the car to the driver’s side door.

Right.

The boot is impressively large, and also littered with a strange assortment of odd objects. Nothing that looks delicate or precious though, so Adam doesn’t bother being careful of them as he slides his bike in, then slams the boot on it. For a moment he wonders if it’s presumptuous to get into the passenger side door. Then for another moment he wonders what the hell he’s doing getting into a car with someone he barely knows. Letting someone he barely knows do him a favour. He gets into the passenger side seat.

“Thought you’d died back there,” Ronan said starting the car up before Adam had even fully settled in the excessively luxurious leather seat, “you took your time.”

“Didn’t know you were in a rush,” Adam said stiffly, managed to buckle up before Ronan pulled them swiftly out of the parking lot.

“I’m not,” Ronan said, Right.

“So,” Adam says, “why doesn’t Gansey like your friend?”

“Because he’s a piece of shit,” Ronan replied promptly. He doesn’t look at Adam. He says, “I wanted to say - I shouldn’t have said what I did. Earlier.”

“What?”

“About the phone, Christ, keep up.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t be behind if you knew how to hold a conversation,” Adam replied. God. He was not cut out for being nice.

Ronan laughed.

Right.

“Whatsoever,” Ronan says, “we good?”

Right.

Adam hadn’t realised they had been ‘bad’, or even that they were at a place yet in which they asked each other if they were good. Didn’t think there was a ‘we’ involved here.

“Yeah,” Adam said, “we’re good.” Then he frowned, staring out the window at the darktown rushing past them he asked, “Why did you lie earlier? About Gansey sending you?”

It had been bugging him all night. It was only one of the things in the pile of things bugging him right now, but this one seemed to be easily enough asked.

“I didn’t,” Ronan said. He was back to grunting.

“You did,” Adam retorted hotly, “Gansey had no idea what Boyd’s was, let alone that you came to see me. How did you even know I worked there?”

Ronan turns a corner a little too sharply.

“I’ve seen you there before,” he replied shortly, “and I didn’t lie. I never said Gansey sent me.”

“You did, you-” Adam cuts himself off, frowning heavily as he tried to recall Ronan’s exact words. “You implied it,” he said, “you said you were there on his behalf.”

“Yeah, well,” Ronan mumbled, “I was. He did want to know your working hours and shit. He was complaining about it all last night after we left. I just didn’t end up telling him.” He drags his gaze away from the road ahead of them to stare at Adam, “I don’t lie,” he said firmly.

Adam wanted to laugh at this, but Ronan’s face was strangely serious, so he simply nodded instead.

“Ok.”

They were quiet for a short while, Ronan continuing to take corners too fast, but at least smoothly and cleanly.

“So,” Ronan said into the silence, “how many jobs do you work? You’ve got Nino’s, Boyd’s, babysitting Ethan -”

“Ethan isn’t a job,” Adam replied almost automatically. He closed his eyes as he rested his head against the cool window, “I also work at the factory just off main street.”

“Fuck,” Ronan replied eloquently, “you at school, too?”
“Yeah. Mountain View.”
“Shit man, do you actually have any time that you’re not working or at school or shit?”
“Obviously,” Adam sighed, “I’m spending it with you guys tomorrow.”
“Oh yeah,” Ronan said, then, “ok, but that’s still not exactly free is it? You’re still babysitting.”
“I like spending time with Ethan.” Adam says stubbornly. Keeps his eyes closed.
“Sure,” Ronan says, “I like spending time with Matthew too, but like-”
Adam interrupts, “Do you have a problem with Ethan coming tomorrow?”
“No,” Ronan replies, quickly, “but-”
“Good.” Adam opens his eyes, sits up straighter, “because there’s no other option. It’s this driveway on the left up here, just stop at the letterboxes.”
Ronan pulls the car up with a crunch of gravel, but puts his hand out before Adam can undo his seatbelt. He doesn’t touch, comes to halt just above Adam’s shoulder. Adam stares at it.
“Hey,” Ronan mumbles, “I like Ethan. There’s no problem with him coming.”
“Ok,” Adam says, “pop the boot will you?”

The house is quiet when he lets himself in, and he can hear Ethan’s sleep snuffling as he slips carefully into his room. He’s not in his own bed though, at some point in the night he must have woken up and climbed into Adam’s bed before going back to sleep.

Adam changed quickly in the dark, then got into bed beside Ethan, lifting him up to make space for the two of them. Ethan stirs slightly, enough to mumble something incomprehensible, and then goes back to sleep in the crook of Adam’s arm.

If yesterday was weird, he thought, today had been weirder by far. Except today was now yesterday, but only just. Still. It had been weird. Like he had said to Blue, nice as well, but very strange. Really though, what was he thinking? He had offered up some of his only free time to Gansey with barely a second thought. He had been planning on using that time to get some extra credit work done, maybe take Ethan to the park. He hadn’t thought about what Ethan would want at all. Maybe he would hate it. He had seemed to like the guys when he had met them the other day, but he had been hopped up on pain medication and pizza. Right. He would ask Ethan if he wanted to tomorrow. If he didn’t, he could meet up with Gansey at the carpark anyway and just cancel then. It would be fine. Of course, to get to tomorrow properly, he really needed to go to sleep.

Ethan was still snuffling calmly, his face pressed into Adam’s armpit, hands clutching at Adam’s t-shirt. He could hear his father’s snoring through the walls.
He was excessively tired. The last few days had seemed longer than usual, harder work, both emotionally and physically. His shoulders and back still ached from his father, and his face still stung.

He should be sleeping, sleeping easily. He couldn’t. He was too busy seething. Or not seething. Over thinking maybe. Ronan was so goddamned nosy. It settled uneasily in Adam’s stomach, a vague suspicion that Ronan was trying to get something on him. For what, Adam couldn’t even begin to guess. It could be a stupid Aglionby dare, get dirt on some trailer trash and turn their lives even more upside down. Except no. He’d noticed Ronan around Nino’s before, and while he always seemed prickly and venomous, he was only ever with Gansey and Noah. And anyway, Adam had seen him smile so softly at Ethan. Had seen that smile a few times before, directed at his friends. He didn’t really think Ronan would be trying to get to know him for a dare. Or at the very least, the most uncharitable part of Adam’s brain offered, even if Ronan would do this for some horrible reason, Gansey wouldn’t. He was far too earnest for that. Of course, he had only known them for a few days - known of them for longer yes - that didn’t mean he was qualified to know them at all. Right. He needed to sleep. He needed to stop thinking about shit. He needed to sleep.
Weekends were structured very differently to Adam’s weekdays. They weren’t exactly less stressful, but they required less brain power which meant that Adam had more emotional energy left for paying attention to Ethan. That and the fact that he had evenings off meant that Saturday was his favourite day of the week.

“Hey bud,” he said as he tugged a jumper over Ethan’s head, “did you like those boys from Nino’s the other night?”

“Huh,” Ethan said, “pizza boys?”

Adam didn’t bother biting down on his laugh. “Yes, the pizza boys. Gansey, the one with the pink shirt you liked, Noah, the one who told you all those silly jokes, and Ronan, the one—”

“With no hair!” Ethan finished and Adam laughed again.

“Yeah. Did you like them?”

“Mm,” Ethan mumbled, “yeah. I like pizza too. An’,” he said, voice raising suddenly, “Oh! Ad’m, I was s’posed t’be sharin’ you!”

“What? Here, hold your foot still for your sock.”

“I told him,” Ethan said, very seriously, foot quivering with the effort of holding still, “we could share you. ‘Cos his big brother’s not nice. ‘Member?”

“Oh yeah,” Adam remembered, “I’m sure Ronan doesn’t actually need you to share me with him, but I know he appreciated it. That was very nice of you.”

“I liked him,” Ethan offered, shaking his feet now that they were socked and free.

“I’m glad,” Adam said, “what do you think about hanging out with them after Dana’s today?”

“Will there be pizza?” Ethan asked, his face about as sly as any 3 yr old can make it.

“Hmm. I don’t know,” Adam said truthfully, “do you only wanna come if there’s pizza?”

“Mm,” Ethan narrowed his eyes up at Adam in an effort to hold back his grin. It didn’t work. “No, I wanna come,” he said, “and I want pizza.”

“Maybe.”

It was because of Ethan’s good mood all that morning that Adam was taken by surprise when he tried to drop him off at Dana’s like usual, and Ethan refused to let go of his hand.

“Ethan,” Adam tried softly, “buddy I gotta go to work.”

“No.” Usually, when Ethan said no to things, his voice was very firm. Adam had taught him that as carefully as possible, installing in him the ease of refusing something he didn’t want without sounding like he could be persuaded otherwise. Right now though, his voice wobbled.

“Bud,” Adam mumbled, dropped down into a crouch to put him at Ethan’s eye level, his knees protesting. “What’s up? Are you feeling itchy again?”

“No,” Ethan reiterated, his voice a little less wobbly, “no. Just don’t want you to go.”

Adam glances up at Dana who’s seated at her kitchen table, studiously ignoring this small confrontation. He knows she’ll jump in if he asks her to, but he would prefer not to.

“How come, bud?” Adam asks, “Don’t you have fun here?”

“No,” Ethan says, firm, but then waivers almost immediately, “yes,” he says, “but, but—”

“And I’m coming to get you at 4.20, remember?”

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“And I’m coming to get you at 4.20, remember?”
“Yes,” Ethan says, grips Adam’s hand tighter.
“And then we’re gonna go play with the pizza boys, yeah?”
“Yeah,” Ethan sniffs.
“We don’t have to, if you don’t wanna,” Adam says, lifts his free hand to wipe at the forming tears in Ethan’s eyes.
“I wanna,” Ethan says, “I wanna come with you.”
“Sweetheart,” Adam says, “I can’t take you to this work with me. I’ll be back super soon though, ok? You’ll barely notice I’m gone.”
Ethan’s face continues to crumple, so Adam continues to try and appease him.
“Look,” he says, “how about this. You stay here with Dana and your friends, Mari and Shelby, and if you really don’t wanna stay, you can ask Dana to call me at lunch time and I’ll come get you.”
Ethan’s face pauses mid crumple. Doesn’t uncrumple yet though.
“Lunchtime?” he asks.
“1 pm?” Adam suggests.
“Call you at 1?”
“If you don’t wanna stay,” Adam says, “Yeah. Is that alright with you, Dana?”
“Yeah,” Dana replies, “I can get hold of you through Jule’s cell, yeah?”
“Yeah,” Adam said, turned back to Ethan, “Ok?” he asked.
“Ok,” Ethan said.
“I have to go now, ok baby?”
“Ok,” Ethan says. Doesn’t let go of Adam’s hand yet.
“You have to let go of me now, Ethan,” Adam prompted, squeezing Ethan’s hand in his own, “I have to go.”

He worries throughout his entire shift at the factory. Ethan had never really been a fan of Adam leaving, but neither was it like him to make a fuss about it. He wasn’t sure what was to blame right now. If it was their mother for leaving Ethan alone and shut in at the house for God knows how long, or if it was his recent sickness making him more vulnerable and emotional, or if Adam really was just failing at protecting Ethan from their family. He tried, harder than he tried at most things, to keep Ethan feeling secure. To not let him feel neglected. Obviously something wasn’t working. He can’t bear it. Sometimes, Adam thinks he’s very strong, but this is proven false every time anything goes wrong with Ethan. It’s like a kick to the guts, except worse, because he’s taken plenty of kicks to the gut, and they don’t leave him feeling quite as worthless as he does when he realises he’s failed Ethan again. He fucking hates this job. It leaves him too much mind space to think, to over think, to worry. Too much of his life is taken up with worrying. One day, he tells himself, he’ll go to work and just work, and maybe he’ll even enjoy the work. One day, he’ll have got himself and Ethan out of here, got them somewhere safe. One day, he will be able to sit somewhere with his thoughts running free, and not spend the entire time creating anxiety crop circles.

Dana calls at 1.

Adam is nothing if not well planned. He has had his life planned out in full colour detail since his tenth birthday. Every last moment of every week is written down on the wall planner on his door. He knows exactly how likely he is to get to eat, for Ethan to get to eat, every day, and has a back up plan if their parents don’t provide the food. When he told Ethan to call at 1, it gave him just enough time to cycle back to Dana’s, pick Ethan up, and take the both of them to Boyd’s, so long as he didn’t stop to eat lunch like he usually did on his way to Boyd’s on Saturday. It worked. Hopefully the plan didn’t backfire with Boyd telling him he couldn’t have Ethan at the garage with him.

When he gets to the garage, Boyd isn’t there, and the receptionist barely blinks at Ethan trailing behind Adam. Maybe he was right the other day when he’d said to Blue that this new life she’d
mentioned meant his bosses were never at work. He installed Ethan in the bed of the ute he was working under for the day. There wasn’t anything here that was exactly a ‘kid’s toy’, but, there were plenty of interesting bits and bobs of scrap hanging around that Ethan was keen on pulling apart and pushing back into vague togetherness again. He was content to sit on the ute above Adam, fiddling with junk and entertaining himself so long as he could still see Adam’s feet sticking out.

“Did you have fun with the girls today?” Adam asked from somewhere under the ute.

“Uhuh,” Ethan replied, rolled what sounded like a knut across the ute bed.

“What did you guys do?”

“Dress ups.”

“Yeah? What were you dressing up as?”

“Well,” Ethan said, Adam could hear him shuffling around above him, “first I wanted to be ‘lue, cos I like her hair, but then Mari wanted th’skirt I wanted so I was a pirate ‘nstead.”

“Ooh,” Adam interjected.

“Yeah! ‘N’ then I was a ‘rocodile, cos we were watchin’ tv and there was a ‘rocodile and it gotta sleep all day and wear butterfluf - butterflies and Shel has sparkle buffer- butterfly hair clips so I was that ‘rocodile.”

“That sounds super fun!”

They’re a little early to Aglionby, not by much, but by enough that when Adam cycles into the parking lot, feeling horribly out of place, Gansey is nowhere in sight. His bright orange Camaro is though, so he stops next to that to wait for them.

He realises only after a few minutes that Ronan’s BMW wasn’t in the lot as well, so he guessed the two of them must have come in together. Although, come to think of it, he wasn’t sure if either of them lived on campus or not. It sure sounded like they lived together though.

He and Ethan sit together on the grassy verge to the edge of the parking lot, just in front of the Camaro. He tries not to think about how very wrong he must look here; shabby and grease stained, so much less than the surroundings. Ethan didn’t care. He was happy to sit in the grass and tear handfuls of it up while continuing to chatter to Adam. Adam made murmuring sounds every so often in response, Ethan didn’t need it to be a two sided conversation, and pulled his science book out of his bag to get some work done while they waited. He didn’t think Gansey and the others would take long, but there was no point in wasting any time.

They had barely been there for five minutes, Adam was only a few questions into the homework, when he heard Ronan’s voice float across the lot. He sounded angry. Ethan immediately stopped talking, Adam couldn’t tell if it was because he recognised Ronan’s voice, or if he was simply responding to the angry tone.

“I fucking told you I’m busy today,” Ronan was snapping.

“You can blow Dick anytime,” another voice responded, not heated like Ronan’s, but cool and greasy. “I’m a far more rare offer. C’mon, you’ve never been to one of my house parties before.”

“Yeah there’s a reason for that,” Ronan growls in reply.

“Fuck off with that, you’re sounding like Dick. You know you want to. Thought you said last night that Dick didn’t own you? Sure sounds like you’re back on his leash now.”

“Rather be on his leash than yours,” Ronan spits, and Adam finishes stuffing his homework into his bag and pulling Ethan into his arms, so he can stand up to catch Ronan’s attention. He doesn’t want to sit there, hidden by Gansey’s Camaro, listening to Ronan’s argument for longer than he has to. Doesn’t want to look like he was eavesdropping, or to have to expose Ethan to something that sounds like it could easily slip into ugly. Or uglier.

“Ohhh,” the other half of the argument is a tall, pale boy. Half his face is hidden by white sunglasses, but what is visible is gaunt and stretched into a sneer that looks more like a grimace, more like a threat than any of Ronan’s sneers. “This is what you’re busy with, Lynch? Didn’t take you for a sugar daddy.”
“Fuck off,” Ronan snarls, his tone, though still heated, is less volatile now. His eyes flash from the gaunt boy, to Adam, to Ethan in Adam’s arms, to Adam’s expression. “Don’t be a shit, Kavinsky,” he says, voice lower and calmer still, “I’ll see you later.”

With that, he strides away from the boy, Kavinsky, towards Adam. Kavinsky yells after him.

“If you’re not coming this evening, I don’t wanna see you tonight either!”

“You won’t!” Ronan snaps back over his shoulder.

Adam doesn’t say anything as Ronan stops in front of him and drops his sports back on the hood of Gansey’s Camaro.

“Hi,” Ronan grunts, drops himself on the hood of Gansey’s Camaro as well and presses the heels of both his hands into his eyes for a long moment before speaking again. “I didn’t realise you guys were here already. You good, Ethan?”

Ethan appears to be considering whether or not he was indeed, good. He had his arms looped tightly around Adam’s neck, but the rest of his body was relaxed now that Kavinsky had stalked off in the opposite direction.

“Uuhuh,” Ethan says eventually, then, “you’re real loud.”

Ronan groans, peels himself away from the Camaro again to fold around himself and drop into a disheveled heap on the grass by Adam’s feet.

“Yes,” he agreed, “I am. I’ll try to be quieter if you want.”

Ethan wriggled in Adam’s arms, so Adam lowered the both of them back to the ground next to Ronan, but kept his hands around Ethan’s waist. Ronan looked to be almost buzzing with something. Anger, or maybe just more generalised discomfort. He looked to be trying, very hard, to put a lid on it though.

“You grumpy?” Ethan asked, very serious. He didn’t try to wriggle more out of Adam’s lap, knew the hands on his waist were a caution.

“Yes,” Ronan said again, then flopped backwards into the grass to stretch out on his back, propped his head up on one hand, and grinned at Ethan, “I don’t wanna be though, what would you suggest to stop being grumpy?”

“Huh,” Ethan said, “dunno. Pizza?”

“Bud,” Adam said, the unease that had been eating up his stomach at Ronan’s anger reappearing was dissipating now Ronan seemed to be calming his own discomfort, “you have pizza on the brain.”

“Pizza’s much better enjoyed on the stomach instead,” Ronan chimed in. He shot an apologetic look Adam’s way, just a quick flash of remorse, and then plastered his smile back on as Ethan turned to look at him again. No, it wasn’t a plastered smile, Adam changed his mind, it was another strangely real one that went hand in hand with the apology he’d just blinked at Adam.

“Ad’m said maybe to pizza,” Ethan informed Ronan, “would that make you not grumpy?”

“Maybe,” Ronan said. He started to tear out handfuls of grass now, adding to Ethan’s piles of shredded greenery.

“Um,” Ethan said, slithered off Adam’s lap to perch closer to Ronan and join him in with the tearing, “how ‘bout,” he said, then dropped his handful of grass on Ronan’s shaved head, “a hug? That’s what Ad’m does when ‘m grumpy.”

“Hey!” Ronan protested cheerfully, and dropped his own handful of grass onto Ethan’s messy hair, then, “does that make you less grumpy?”

Ethan cackled with laughter, forgot to answer for another moment while he tore out more grass to throw at Ronan. “Uuhuh,” he said, “hugs fix e’rythin’.”

“This is true,” Ronan replies seriously.

“What’s true?” Gansey asks from behind them. He’s leaning against his car door, Noah peering out from behind him.

“Pizza boys!” Ethan exclaims, very pleased, “hugs fix e’rythin’,” he repeated, then, “he’s grumpy.”

“Isn’t he always?” Noah asked. The two of them dropped languidly down onto the grass next to Adam, Gansey paying no heed to his pale shorts as he pressed them knee first into dirt. Adam did not wince. “Hello Adam!” Noah said, “sorry we’re late, Gansey had to chat with everybody in the room.”
Gansey shrugs, he’s shuffling closer to Ronan who’s eyeing him suspiciously. “It’s true,” he said, “I’m sorry Adam, it’s lovely to see you. I hope we didn’t leave you in Ronan’s care for too long.” Ethan is back to tearing at the grass, Noah’s joined him now. Adam thinks that possibly all of these boys would be better friends with Ethan than with himself.

“No, it’s fine,” he said, “Ethan and Ronan were just discussing anti-grumpy treatments.”

“Ronan needs a lot of those,” Gansey said primly. He’d finished shuffling now and was kneeling right beside Ronan, “and we don’t want him grumpy today, so we’d better treat him right away.” “Oh fu- pi- get off, Gans,” Ronan protested, awkward in his attempt to not swear in front of Ethan, and to no avail as Gansey pulled him semi upright into an ungainly looking hug.

“You heard Ethan,” Gansey said, “hugs fix everything.”

“Is that what we’re doing then?” Noah asked, delighted, and all but threw himself at the two of them to join in, turning the half-hearted hug into a pile up.

“You’re fu- you’re squishing me, God, Noah, what the f-heck,” Ronan’s muffled complaints were nowhere near as angry as Adam thought they might be, neither were his efforts to free himself from his friends.

“Hey Ethan,” Gansey said from somewhere on top of Ronan and underneath Noah, “would you like to help cure Ronan’s grump?”

“No,” Ethan replied, firmly but with a smile still on his face. He abandoned grass pulling for climbing back into Adam’s lap though, and the two of them watched in mild bemusement as their apparent new friends tussled.

“Alright,” Gansey said eventually. He was grass stained and pink cheeked, with leaves in his now mussed up hair, but he had somehow managed to put on his professional aura. “I was thinking we could head back to Monmouth - that’s our place, and order pizza in? It’s not very flash, but I figured that seeing as I have all my research there it might be the best option.” Adam had not been entirely sure of what to expect from this …he wasn’t sure what to call it. Meet up? Group hang? Play date? Research meeting? Whatever. He hadn’t, however, expected to be invited back to their house, or whatever ‘Monmouth’ was, for pizza and what sounded like it was going to be a full on lecture on Glendower.

“Pizza!” Ethan exclaimed, and Adam decided he may as well go along with it.

“Alright,” he said, “sounds good. Where’s Monmouth?”

They loaded Adam’s bike into the back of the Camaro. There was less room in it than in Ronan’s BMW, but it fit with a little imagination, and Gansey seemed to have plenty of that. He didn’t really trust this car, as beautiful as it was, to be a very safe ride for a small child, especially one without a carseat. But, Gansey looked to be the very picture of a safe driver, and he promised it was a short drive, so Adam slipped into the backseat beside Noah, Ethan in his arms, and buckled them both into one seat. Due to the lack of discussion about seating arrangements, he assumed that Ronan always had shot gun.

Monmouth was ridiculous. It was also everything Adam had ever dreamed of. Or at least parts of it were, the masses of space, the grandiose look of it, the piles of books and ephemera, the obvious feeling of homeliness. Never had he ever dreamed of having a cardboard model of Henrietta in his house though, or of having the majority of his kitchen located in the bathroom. What the fuck even were rich teenagers. Who okayed them living alone like this. Seriously.

He didn’t know how he would have explained any of this to himself of a year ago. Of a month ago. Of a week ago. How he came to be sitting on a couch in the middle of a refurbished factory, being plied with pizza and coke and crazy facts about a long dead Welsh King. That was the easier part to explain actually, it was simple to put into words; Adam meets a bunch of idiots at the diner, the idiots are not as idiotic as they appeared to be, the idiots invite him over, he goes over. What really was hard to explain, and was something that he couldn’t currently explain to himself, was how he came to be sitting here so comfortably. How he was happy to be wasting valuable time on some
conspiracy theory. How Gansey made him want to believe in the conspiracy theory, in magic, in wishes, in the future. How for just a moment, he wasn’t simply Robert’s snob kid, or Alice’s stingy son, or Ethan’s overbearing brother. He got to be Adam. It was a beautiful bubble to be in - Ethan was being entertained by Noah and Ronan, who for some reason owned a cacophony of strange, exciting things, like a glow in the dark bubble blower, a slinky that slunk upstairs by itself, a toy car that made engine noises when you pushed it along. If Adam wasn’t so taken up with Gansey’s luminescence and enthusiasm over Glendower, and ancient artifacts, and Ley lines - which Adam was slowly being informed about - he would have happily sat down with Ethan to be entertained by Ronan and Noah’s strange collection of toys. As it was, Gansey was actually asking Adam for his opinion on things, and then seeming to be interested in and respected hearing his answer, a phenomenon so rare that there was no way Adam would give that up for squealing cars.

It felt almost too good to be true. He kept feeling like it was all going to fall through any moment. Like when he argued with Gansey about paying for the pizza, it felt inevitable that this would be the moment that either Gansey would realise Adam wasn’t good enough to be here, or Adam would realise that Gansey really was just like all the other rich shit raven boys. Yeah, Gansey looked a little disappointed when Adam insisted on paying his share, and a little confused, but he didn’t push, didn’t make stupid comments about it. Or when Ronan asked what the doctor had said Ethan had been sick with, and Adam had to admit they hadn’t been - Ronan had looked horrified, and even more so when Adam had defended himself by saying they didn’t have health insurance. Even near the very end of the evening, when Adam had realised the time and said he should get his bike back out of Gansey’s car, and Gansey had offered to drive him back. He didn’t want Gansey seeing what kind of area he lived in. It had been bad enough with Ronan, but Ronan felt rough around the edges, he didn’t fit into the trailer park, but he didn’t seem like he would stand out quite as starkly in it as president cellphone Gansey. His hesitation in accepting had been obvious enough that he had had to watch as Gansey’s face fell.

“Or if you’d rather bike back, that’s fine too-” Gansey said graciously, “-I’m not trying to keep you longer than you want to stay, of course.”

“No,” Adam started, “a ride back would be great, actually,” he said firmly, “better for keeping Ethan from getting sick again right now as well.”

It had been ridiculously easy, the time spent with them all. In truth, he had spent the majority of his time with Gansey - Ronan and Noah had apparently heard all the Glendower stories a million times over - but befriending Gansey felt like a package deal. If you wanted to be friends with him, you were also friends with his gang. Adam could do that. Noah was somehow quiet and loud at the same time, but he entertained Ethan, and his voice tended to be soft. Ronan was a prickly enigma wrapped in a snarling mystery, but tied up with heart wrenchingly real smiles. It could work. It could work because they accepted the fact that he was also a package deal, 2 Parrish boys for the price of 1, and they were all so sweet to Ethan.

He can’t shake the feeling that something was going to go wrong, or that this had all been a huge joke, maybe he was a charity case and this was Gansey’s good deed for the day. Most of him believes that this isn’t true, but the small part of him that has control of his anxiety is very loud. He sits in the backseat of the Camaro on the way home as well, even though it’s just him, Gansey, and Ethan. He doesn’t really think Gansey’s likely to cause an accident, but it’s safer for Ethan to be in the back, and, he thinks, safer to be strapped in with Adam, rather than sliding around in the backseats by himself. Gansey doesn’t appear to mind, just chats with them from the front seat.

“We’ll see you again soon?” he asks, “I have to confess I’m a little anxious about not knowing how to get in contact with you. I almost feel like as soon as I drop you off home, you’re going to disappear.”

Adam tried not to laugh at that, but laughed anyway. Gansey couldn’t know just how likely and unlikely that was. The juxtaposition of this being that there was no way Adam could just disappear
from Henrietta. For at least another year he would be tied down to the trailer park, but also, Adam disappeared quite regularly. Not from Henrietta, not from the trailer park, just from life in general. Never for long, only for long enough to be able to walk without limping, without causing to much of a scene with his face. Bruises were ok to go about his everyday life with, freshly broken noses and bones were not. It wasn’t actually funny.

“Sorry,” Adam said, cleared his throat and readjusted Ethan on his lap, “it’s just - it’s a common problem. Uh, I’m at Nino’s every week night, I told Ronan this the other day, so we can always arrange times then. But I should probably tell you that my schedule is pretty crammed. I think Saturdays and Sundays are really my only days I can take time off.”

“Sundays?” Gansey asked, “Could we steal you for tomorrow as well?”

“Oh,” Adam said, hadn’t expected he would actually be in such high demand, “what for?” He caught Gansey’s eyes in the rear view mirror, couldn’t make out his expression.

“When we were talking about the geographical structure surrounding the artifacts I was telling you about, I thought you were really onto something. I was wondering if you might want to come for a bit of a field trip with us tomorrow, to see it for yourself.”

Huh. Well, first things first.

“Whaddya think, bud?” Adam asked, squeezing Ethan slightly, “Do you wanna hang out with the pizza boys again tomorrow?”

Gansey laughed. He’d asked Adam on the way to Monmouth what Ethan had meant by pizza boys, and had found it very amusing to learn that his appearance was most remembered by the pizza he had brought with him.

“Mm,” Ethan mumbled around his hand, “Mhm, Ro’an said he’d get more bubbles.”

“Well, if there’s gonna be more bubbles,” Adam said, “I think we’ll have to come. I finish work at 12, so I’m free after that, but I have to be home by 6.30.”

“We can do that,” Gansey said, “I could come pick you up from yours? Or from work? Where will you be working tomorrow?”

“Boyd’s,” Adam said, “but nah, that’s fine. I’ll just bike out to you now I know where you guys live.”
During the next few months, it becomes a thing. During the week, Gansey, and Ronan, and usually Noah would all turn up at Nino’s while Adam was working and distract him to the best of their abilities. When Blue was around as well, they would distract her too. In the weekends, Adam and Ethan would either meet the boys at Aglionby after their sport’s practices, or would cycle to Monmouth. Sometimes, when everyone’s schedules aligned, Blue would turn up as well, or the Camaro would pick her up on the way out of town. After their first Sunday field trip, Adam hadn’t exactly been convinced of magical happenings that Gansey was insinuating, but the evidence of some huge historic event happening here was far too obvious to ignore. Too tempting to turn down.

During the weekday evenings, at the diner, they didn’t reenact their initial pizza party, like the first night they had all properly hung out together at Nino’s, but Adam tended to sit in a booth with them on his breaks now, spend the short time chatting and joining in with distracting Blue. They didn’t only talk about Glendower and Ley Lines and magical wishes, but it was a large chunk of their conversation - especially after the second week in of these Nino visits when Gansey had admitted that he believed Glendower was still alive, was simply sleeping somewhere, waiting to be found woken. When Adam had shared this with Blue, in the back of English class one Monday morning, Blue had given him a look, and then another look, and another look, none of which Adam could quite translate.

“What?” he asked, and Blue gave him yet another look.
“You don’t believe him?” Blue asked in reply, her looks were becoming a little clearer now, something, something, amusement maybe?
Adam had shrugged, fiddled with his pen, “I don’t know,” he said eventually, “I believe that he believes it.”
“You can’t just be on the fence about everything, Adam,” Blue said, or sighed, “It’s just like you saying you don’t not believe in psychics.”
“I’m not on the fence about everything,” Adam had replied, vaguely offended, “I just don’t like to believe in anything, or, in this case, not believe in anything until I have proof.”
“You really expect to be able to find proof that something doesn’t exist?”
“No, not exactly. I just - look, I really like hanging out with Gansey, and joining in with his research. Even you admit that he’s ok. It’s really interesting stuff, and, I dunno, I’d kind of like it to be true? It just seems silly to believe in it when I don’t have any proof.”

Adam had learned, throughout his life, that in general, having faith that something would turn out how you wanted it to wasn’t a good idea. If you wanted something, you had to work for it, plan for it, you couldn’t just think - wouldn’t it be nice if I found another job by the end of the week? You couldn’t go about with the belief that you just had to think positively and positive things would happen to you. You had to go out and apply, and prove that you were the best candidate, had to find the jobs yourself. If Adam just believed in Glendower, in magic, in the idea that his entire life could change through a wish, there was every chance of wanting it too much and then being disappointed. Better to have no expectations until you’d built up the staircase to the thing and added a hand rail.
Gansey didn’t quite work like that. Yes, he had miles of extensive research, and years of academic exploration about it all, but the main thing that fueled him, that backed up his certainty that what he was looking for was real, tangible, magic, was his belief in it. He didn’t need all the back up plans Adam had, or the crash mat, or the undeniable evidence, he just needed his belief. Everything else was just the icing on top.

It had taken a few weeks for Adam to realise that Ronan, despite his cavalier attitude toward the whole thing, his eye rolling over Gansey’s enthusiasm, believed in this just as firmly as Gansey. Adam suspected, however, that this belief wasn’t rooted quite in the same dirt as Gansey’s, but was more a product of his faith in Gansey. Adam could sympathise. Gansey had the rare talent of convincing people of the impossible. It was that charming smile, mixed with his old money accent, and that knowing look in his eye.

Noah, on the other hand, was very difficult to read on his opinion on the whole thing. He never seemed to question anything Gansey was saying, but neither did he give his opinions on it. Adam had asked him, the second weekend they were all hanging out together, in the back of Gansey’s car (which Ronan had told him with mild irritation, was called the Pig) what he thought of the whole Glendower thing.

Noah had shrugged, had leaned forward over his knees to prop his face up in his hands, cupping his cheeks. “Do you believe it?” Noah had asked him back.

Adam had shuffled Ethan around between his legs, glanced at the front seat where Gansey and Ronan were arguing playfully and not paying attention to the conversation in the backseat, and had shook his head.

“No, should I?” he had asked.

Noah had laughed. “Well,” he said, “I had to die before I really believed in it, so maybe you want to make up your mind before it gets to that point.”

Adam knew this was a joke, had laughed carefully as well so as not to betray his unease at this ominous answer, or rather, the lack thereof.

Noah had a very strange sense of humour. It rocked back and forth between exceedingly immature jokes with Ronan that left Gansey slightly pink, Noah and Ronan howling with laughter, to somewhat morbid ones that never quite seemed to gel with the tone of the conversation. Ethan always thought he was funny though - not because he understood any of the jokes, he just seemed to find the way Noah delivered them hilarious.

Actually, Ethan seemed to think all of the boys were hilarious. He still played shy, for at least the first five minutes after arriving, but he had warmed up to all of them extremely quickly. It usually took him a while to feel comfortable enough with new people to let Adam out of his sight - it had taken months on end before he had stopped crying when Blue held him, and even though he’d been staying with Dana during school hours for years now, he still got shy around her and Jules sometimes. With the boys though, he was happy enough to follow Noah around Monmouth, and to sit on Ronan’s knee to play video games, he even let Gansey pick him up to pass him over a fence to Adam on one of their field trips.

Adam had a few theories about this. The main one was this - the majority of people Ethan had had to interact with during his life thus far tended to be people Adam worked with, who were therefore busy and not about to pay much attention to a small child, or people who were looking after him, like Dana, but were also looking after other children at the same time and therefore not giving him much attention either. The only constant person in his life to give him attention was Adam, and even Adam had to abandon him in favour of working and school on a regular basis. In comparison, the boys seemed to have nothing but attention for him. They all wanted to talk to him about his day, Ronan always seemed to have some strange new toy to show him, and Gansey was seemingly endlessly delighted by the way he talked to them. Adam didn’t usually bring him into Nino’s with him, despite
the fact that he had done so two days in a row upon first meeting the boys, but when he did he sat Ethan in the booth with them instead of in the back room.

When this happened, at least one of the group would stay until closing, usually Ronan because unlike Gansey he didn’t seem to care about being exhausted for school in the morning, and unlike Noah, he had his own car, and, for some reason, Ethan seemed to prefer Ronan to the other two when choosing who to sit on. Adam had tried to insist that they didn’t need to stay, that Ethan could go nap in the break room until Adam was ready to leave, but Ronan wouldn’t hear it. Mumbled something about not having anything better to do anyway, that he didn’t want to disturb Ethan who was sleeping with his head in Ronan’s lap, that he was still hungry, was avoiding homework. What Adam heard instead was that Ronan was staying specifically so he could drive the two of them home. Adam was sure this was a ploy designed by Gansey, who had been horrified upon hearing that, in fact, Ethan did not just magically teleport to wherever Adam was, and had to be toted around on Adam’s bike without even a kid seat. Adam had tried to point out that Ethan was very light, and so it wasn’t that much extra work, and that his only other option was walking. Gansey had suggested he could pick the two of them up in the mornings before school if that would help at all, and Adam had suggested that he had been doing this for Ethan’s entire life so obviously he had it under control. He hadn’t objected, or at least not verbally, when Gansey bought a car seat though. There was no point in getting mad at Gansey about this because it did make sense. It would be Gansey who could get in trouble for driving around with a toddler and no car seat. This was far safer for Ethan on their road trips, and Adam couldn’t object to Ethan being safer, even if it meant that he had to put up with having someone else’s wealth pushed into his face.

Still.

No matter whose ploy it was, it was almost always Ronan who was still sitting in the booth as Adam cleaned around him, and then who would insist on carrying Ethan - fast asleep - to the car and buckling him into the car seat which lived in Ronan’s car at night, Gansey’s at day. Ronan who would drive them home, and park at the end of the drive. Ronan who would then ignore Adam’s protests, get out of the car with them, and walk Adam’s bike down the drive so he had both hands to carry Ethan. Ronan who never commented on the trailer park, or the fact that Adam didn’t want him driving the BMW to his house, never looked at Adam or his surroundings with pity.

This was why Adam accepted the assistance, the lift. Because even if it was Gansey pushing this, driven by his own horror and pity, Ronan never suggested it with pity. He barely suggested it. He tended to simply state it. Fuck off Parrish, get in the fucking car before Ethan wakes up. Somehow, somehow, Ronan’s foul mouth and abrasive words had more persuasion in this than all of Gansey’s charm. Also. Also - this was for Ethan, really. It was good for him to have someone to be with when Adam brought him in, good for him to be around more people who treated him like he was special, good for him to spend less time being jostled about on Adam’s bike.

Adam didn’t usually bring Ethan with him, that was why his boss had never complained too much when he had (at least, that’s what Adam assumed), it had been limited to maybe once a month. In the few months since Ethan’s brief illness however, Adam had been bringing him to Nino’s almost every week. He wasn’t ill anymore, but he was still sleeping badly. On top of this, with less income coming in - even with Adam handing over more of his paychecks - the household was more skint than usual. Most people, in response to having less money, tend to cut down on their ‘luxury items’. Adam supposed Robert simply didn’t count beer as a luxury. He supposed that actually, probably most people in their situation wouldn’t count beer as a luxury - more as a means to avoid reality for a while. Robert tended to avoid reality very heavily when they were broke, usually at night time, loudly and relentless. When he was very obviously avoiding reality, Adam attempted to avoid him. With Ethan not sleeping well, the chances of him waking and somehow irritating a drunkenly raging Robert was at an all time high, and Adam had no intention of risking it on dangerous nights. So. Ethan came with Adam to Nino’s more often. This meant a few things.
Firstly, it meant that Ethan got to spend more time with his pizza boys, more time being lavished with attention.

Secondly, it meant that Adam was spending a reasonable amount of his time sitting on soft leather seats in Ronan’s BMW, and being introduced to Ronan’s music. It changed depending on whether Ethan was asleep or not. Ethan asleep brought out a wide variety of soft orchestral music, strings and pipes, singing in a language Adam didn’t know. Ethan awake meant Ronan played something that was probably music, if music was bright and angry and awful.

Thirdly - it meant that Alice scowled at Adam more. She started in the evenings when Robert started drinking and Adam started to pack Ethan away, and then she’d continue in the morning before they could leave again. It meant that Robert needled him more, accused him of trying to steal their child, of trying to look pitiful, of treating he and Alice as people who couldn’t be trusted with Ethan. It did not, however, mean that either of them asked Adam to leave Ethan behind.

Adam would not leave Ethan behind. Over his dead fucking body.

-

He gets on well with all the boys. He has to admit that he and Gansey seem to get along the best, even while Gansey is constantly putting his foot in his mouth trying to be helpful to Adam and just coming off as pretentious. They have the most shared interests out of the whole group, the same drive for education and answers, and looking after people. Well. Adam had one person he wanted to look after, and spent all his energy looking after. Gansey tried to spread all his energy out over the entire collection of them all. Adam and Noah were definitely friends now, although they seemed to have the least in common out of everyone. Noah was just comfortable to be around, even if sometimes his jokes made Adam uneasy, or his stare made Adam feel too known. Blue, however, got along ridiculously well with Noah. They fell easily into the habit of sitting close together to whisper not secret secrets in each others ears, to jointly tease everyone else in the group.

Adam would say that Ronan was his friend, for sure. Even if it wasn’t always clear. He snapped at everyone, made too many pointy remarks and bad decisions, and he always seemed to be buzzing with some sort of badly concealed anger. Ready to fight someone or something at any given moment. In fact, Adam had seen him spring into fights at the drop of a hate - with his brother Declan, who had been the man Ronan was fighting with that one eventful night at Nino’s - with the friend Gansey disapproved of, and even Ronan didn’t really seem to like - Kavinsky. The only people Ronan never snapped at, or growled at, or displayed any sort of aggression to was Ethan and Ronan’s younger brother, Matthew.

So, Adam couldn’t figure out if he ought to be surprised or not when he walked out of Nino’s after close on a night he’d left Ethan sleeping peacefully at home because their father was out of town, and Ronan’s BMW was idling in the park by his bike.

He doesn’t bother waiting for Ronan to open the door and say something, just steps up to the driver’s side and opens it himself.

“I don’t have Ethan, tonight,” he says, “you don’t need to give me a lift.”

“Fucks sake, Parrish,” Ronan replied. He had his seat pushed back, and his eyes closed. Hadn’t even twitched when Adam had opened the door. “I don’t just stay for Bud. Put your bike in the boot, it’s open.”

Adam considers saying no. He’s good at saying no. Almost as good as he is at saying sorry. He
considers lying, say he likes the bike back, that he doesn’t like Ronan’s music, that he’s not in the mood for Ronan tonight. Ronan swears again. Adam unlocks his bike, shoves it into Ronan’s boot, and climbs into the passenger seat. Ronan swears again. This time it doesn’t sound frustrated. Generally, Adam isn’t a fan of being sworn at. Not that this is an unusual stance to have. Somehow, somehow, somehow, Ronan tends to swear like he’s speaking some sort of dark language. Like the Latin he likes to spout during Glendower research days, strange and show-offy. Like the Latin - it pisses Adam off, just a little - and impresses him at the same time. It shouldn’t, but it does.

“Ok,” Adam says, buckles up, “what trash are you making me listen to tonight?”

“You’re a barbarian,” Ronan gasps in mock offence, “I’ll have you know that my taste in music is very refined. Anyway, Buddy really likes it.”

“Buddy,” Adam says, shuts his eyes, “has not had the greatest education in music. I’ll admit that that’s my fault, yes, but at least I never tried to persuade him that that yelling you listen to is musical.”

“There’s still time to teach the both of you,” Ronan said easily. He’s pulled smoothly out of the parking lot, “never fear, I’m willing to take on the task of your musical education.”

“Please, God, no,” Adam said blandly, he can’t stop his mouth from curving up into a smile though, “I’ll do anything.”

Ronan’s laugh is more like a bark than a laugh.

“Ok,” he says, “do you have to go home yet?”

Adam’s mouth curves the opposite direction.

“Yes,” he says firmly, then a little less firmly, “well-”

“Because-” Ronan says, “I felt like going for a drive.”

It’s not exactly an invitation, but it’s enough. Robert is supposed to be away until tomorrow morning. Ethan went to sleep easily. Alice wasn’t as sour as usual. Adam can afford to take some time out of his already late night - can afford to spend just a little time not working, not studying, not with Ethan.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

“Dunno,” Ronan replies, “but I feel like fries too.”
But, but, but

Chapter Summary

Hi, my name's Ronan, I like swearing, fast rides out of town, and boys.

They don’t go very far - Ronan knows better than to try and push Adam’s limits any further than he already has. He drives them speedily out of Henrietta, then cruises round the outskirts looking for a particular 24/7 diner he used to frequent with his father, and more recently, with Gansey. Lately of course, they’d been sticking with Nino’s almost constantly - it was their number 1 food destination because it had everything Ronan, Noah, and Gansey wanted in one place; pizza, coke, Adam, Ethan, and Blue. Still. Even if Ronan appreciated the simplicity of everything being in the same place, he missed his old haunts. Besides, Nino’s fries weren’t as good.

They don’t talk much on the way there. He shoves his phone into Adam’s hands at the first stoplight they reach, and instructs him on first plugging the phone into the car’s speakers, and then navigating Ronan’s music. After that, the conversation is limited to, ‘skip this song’, and ‘ok now this is ---- and you should listen to them because ----’.

It would have been relaxing, driving in the dark, music blaring, Adam in his passenger seat - except having Adam in his passenger seat was only relaxing in theory. The physical experience of having him sitting there was the very opposite of relaxing. Not because he made Ronan uncomfortable, not exactly, it was more like having Adam there made Ronan feel all too aware of himself. All too aware of how easily he slipped from making Adam grin to making Adam grimace.

Ethan was much easier to figure out, much happier to be in Ronan’s presence, wasn’t suspicious of every kind gesture. Gansey had teased him frequently in the last few months - since meeting the Parrish boys - that he should have guessed the reason Ronan didn’t usually make friends was because he got along better with toddlers instead. Noah was always gleeful in backing Gansey up here, pointing out that it was because Ronan and Ethan were at the same emotional level. Ronan would usually prove them right by threatening to push Noah out the window, and occasionally, actually pushing him out the window. He was fine though, of course.

It wasn’t really true though. Yeah, Ronan got along really well with kids - when he wanted to - although most kids didn’t try to approach him seeing as he wasn’t exactly friendly looking. It wasn’t because they were less judgemental than people his age, although that was one of Gansey’s theories. Children were perfectly capable of being judgy little shits.

It was because they were open about it, truthful. If they didn’t like you, you would know, if they thought your shirt was ugly, you would know, if they didn’t want to eat something, you would know. As someone who valued honesty - even if it came hard to them - Ronan appreciated this about children.

Adam, however, was a completely different thing. It felt like every second thing out of his mouth was a lie. Never a malicious lie, usually not even a big lie. Often the lies felt like they thought they were actually truths. Still, it was obvious - at least to Ronan - that Adam was brought up with lies, lied constantly, and expected to be lied to. This trait in anyone else would have made Ronan exceedingly uncomfortable. Declan was a liar, through and through, and Ronan hated it in him. Kavinsky lied; loudly, blatantly, while sleeping. It was one of his least desirable traits. His father had
lied, probably more than Ronan had realised - I’ll be home soon - he’d say - I won’t be late - he’d say. Niall’s lies were the only thing he had ever hated about his father.

But.

But, but, but.

Adam wasn’t a liar. This felt like a very important distinction. He lied, but he wasn’t a liar. It was obvious - even after only knowing him and Ethan for a few weeks - that Adam was almost solely responsible for Ethan and his upbringing, and Ethan never lied. Noah had tried to coax him into just bending the truth a little, one night at Nino’s, by telling Blue he hadn’t gotten one of the lollipops being handed out at the door that night. Ethan had entirely balked, had climbed off of Noah’s lap and into Ronan’s and pouted until Noah agreed that lying for more lollies wasn’t a good thing.

Also - Ronan had figured out a way to avoid Adam’s lies. It wasn’t a great way, in fact, it was a way Ronan kind of despised, but it was a little nicer than being lied outright to. The best way to get mostly truth from Adam, was to simply avoid asking him any personal questions. Or at least, any personal questions that didn’t relate directly to what they were doing at that very moment. You could ask him if he was warm enough while studying at Monmouth, and he’d tell the truth, you could ask him if he actually was having fun braiding bracelets with Noah, and he’d tell the truth. You couldn’t ask him how he was if you wanted the truth. You couldn’t ask him if he was hungry if you wanted the truth.

So, Ronan stopped asking. He simply tried to guess at what Adam’s answer might have been if he were to be asked, and if he answered truthfully. It was altogether an entirely too convoluted game.

But.

But, but, but.

Adam was coming to get fries with him, at past midnight, on a school night. Adam hadn’t said no. This felt a little like being told the truth. His comfortable slouch in Ronan’s car seat didn’t feel like a lie, neither did his exasperated laughter at Ronan’s choice of music.

It was truth enough.

This is why Ronan ordered them both cokes, and one serving of fries. Adam protested at this, until Ronan stepped away from the counter and told him he was paying. For anyone else, this would probably have doubled the protests, but Adam’s stopped. Circumnavigating lies by not asking. He didn’t need to listen to Adam tell him he didn’t want a coke, didn’t want Ronan to pay for him. Instead, they squished into a small corner booth together without interrupting their quiet cheerfulness with small arguments.

“So,” Adam said, “Beyonce, huh?”

“God,” Ronan said, he would have dropped his head into his arms, but Adam’s smile was too real to risk missing, “I knew letting you look through my music was a bad idea.”

“You didn’t let me,” Adam objected, “you ordered me to. Something about fixing my music education? I think I must be doing ok though, I already knew Beyonce was good.”

“Good?” Ronan laughed, “Never let Noah hear you say that Beyonce is just, ‘good’. If you think I’m crazy when it comes to music, you haven’t talked to him enough.”

“That’s why I don’t talk to him about it,” Adam said.

“Alright,” Ronan said, “so tell me what you actually listen to then, when I’m not apparently ‘assaulting your ears’.”

Adam laughed, but then shrugged, his ears turning vaguely pink.
“Well,” he said, shrugged again, “I don’t, really? Like, I hear stuff on the radio at work and all. Obviously I know who people like Beyonce are, or like, I don’t know, Kanye West? But I don’t really ever sit down and listen to music.”

Ronan did make an effort not to gape. It wasn’t a very good effort, but it was an effort all the same. “What the fuck do you mean, you don’t really?” he asked, “come on. Even if you’re not like, constantly plugged into headphones or whatever, you must have a favourite artist or something? Someone you actually waste money buying their album on?”

Adam only shrugs again, ears pinker than before, eyes on the table, and Ronan realised he’d done that thing again. The thing where he slips from making Adam grin into making Adam grimace. It was so easy, so, so, fucking slippery. What the actual fuck. This was like an acquaintance level ok question. What music do you listen to?? Hell.

Their cokes arrived, and Adam thanked the waitress pleasantly - his raw Henrietta accent, which Ronan could never fail to notice, was always heavier, smoother, when he was speaking to employees. Also when he was the employee.

“Ok,” Ronan said, took a gulp of his coke, regretted it as the bubbles hit his nose, “I understand. You’re strictly a Beyonce kind of guy. There’s nothing to be ashamed about, Parrish. You already know I like Beyonce. You don’t have to pretend to be manly in front of me. I know the truth.”

The grin is back, albeit hidden slightly by Adam’s coke.

“Yeah, you got me,” Adam said, “maybe now that the secret’s out I’ll drop all my physical labour jobs. No point in pretending to be manly.”

“Exactly,” Ronan said, “no amount of car grease changes the fact that you’re made up of about 98% maternal instinct.”

Annnnd the grin is gone again.

“Right,” Adam says, “because God forbid guys look after kids. Only faggots wanna play house.”

They sound like someone else’s words in Adam’s mouth. It’s still Adam’s mouth saying them though.

“Fuck, Parrish,” he said, “I was joking. Don’t be an asshole.”

Adam looks abashed. He’s staring into his coke like he hopes it’s going to suck him in and drown him. “Sorry,” he mumbles, “I didn’t mean that. I’m uh - nah. I’m sorry.”

Ronan shrugs. The waitress returns with the fries. Adam’s accent sweetens as he thanks her. Ronan breaks his rule that isn’t a rule.

“You get a lot of shit for it?” he asks, then shoves a handful of too hot fries into his mouth. Glares at the table through the burning on his tongue. Adam continues cradling his coke, staring into the bubbles.

“For what?” he asks. He knows what.

“Don’t play dumb,” Ronan says through his fries, finally swallows, cools his mouth down with coke. “I’ve had to sit in on too many of your study sessions with Gansey to believe you’re anything but a fucking genius.”

“A bit,” Adam says.

“Assholes from your school?” Ronan asks. Adam makes a noncommittal sound, shrugs one shoulder. “You know I didn’t mean shit by it, right?” Ronan asks. It’s suddenly very important that Adam knows this. “I think it’s great how good you are with Bud. Who gives a fuck that you’re a guy. Fuck gender stereotypes.”

Adam snorts. “You sound like Blue,” he says.

“I’ve been hanging out with her too much,” Ronan says, “She’s crazy, but she’s right.”

“Mm,” Adam says. Finally takes some fries, stops staring into the depths of his coke. It’s mostly ice now anyway.

“You do know, right?” Ronan repeats, insistent.

“Yeah,” Adam says.
“You know,” Ronan says, “You never said why.”
Adam snorts again. “Lynch,” he says, “You’re doing that thing again. The thing where you just assume I know what the hell is going on in your head. I never said why what?”
Ronan knows he’s pushing his luck, but, that’s kind of his thing. So whatever.
“Why you’re always looking after him,” he says, “he’s barely ever with your parents.”
Adam is all slow deliberate movements as he reaches for more fries, chews them, swallows, takes a long, rattling drink from the ice in his glass.
Ronan hates being patient, but he’s had a life’s worth of sitting still in mass to teach it to him. He waits.
“They work,” Adam offers, final, firm.
“So do you,” Ronan points out.
“Yeah,” Adam agrees, “but my hours are more flexible. It’s easier for everyone if I have Ethan with me.”
“Yeah, that makes sense,” Ronan says, nods, “but like, I thought you said your mum was still out of work? Weren’t you asking Blue just the other day if she knew of any openings?”
Adam shrugs. He’s very obviously uncomfortable, but his face is impressively blank. “It’s easier for everyone if I have Ethan with me,” he repeats.
Ronan knows lies. He also knows truths that only just scrape by as truth because of severe omission. He also knows, through weeks of observation, how Adam’s face gets smooth and calm like it is now, only when he hates, hates, hates the subject of conversation.
“Easier for the rest of us too,” Ronan says, “it makes Noah feel more at home when there’s two toddlers in the room. I bet it makes Blue feel better too, not being the shortest for once.”
Adam’s laugh is strained and taut, but it’s still a laugh.

He hopes this doesn’t count as a fight. He never starts out to pick fights with Adam, they just happen naturally. Gansey seems to think it’s Ronan’s one goal in life to piss Adam off. He was forever berating Ronan for being rude, to everyone at Aglionby, to Blue, to Adam, mostly to Adam. As if he thinks Adam needs protecting from Ronan. Ronan wants to remind Gansey that actually, he’s the reason Adam joined their group at all, that he wanted to be friends with Adam before Gansey had even noticed him. Of course, if he did that, Gansey would point out that he’d done so by picking a fight in front of Adam and freaked Ethan out. Not the most auspicious start. Anyway - one thing he’d tried to explain to Gansey that Gansey had simply quite ardently refused to get - was that with some people, fighting was just a louder version of discussing subjects. Or playfully teasing. With Blue, he had tried to point out, he’ll insult her, and she’ll insult him back, and so on so forth, and it looks like fighting but they’re both quite happy.

He gives Adam free reign of the music on the way to the trailer park, keeps his comments entirely music related and manages to earn a few more smiles. They’re still a little strained - he’d managed to ruin the easy going mood the night had started with - but at least they’re still genuine smiles. He thinks, at least.
When he pulls into a crawling stop at the end of the driveway, Adam doesn’t move immediately to get out, just keeps thumbing through Ronan’s music library.
“I know more of this than I thought I would,” he says over the low bass thudding through the speakers, “still barely anything though.”
Ronan speaks without thinking.
“You can borrow that if you want,” he says, “extra homework for your music education.”
Adam’s rolling his eyes, but smiling. He turns the music off.
“I have enough homework already, don’t you give me any,” he says, “besides - Gansey will kill you if you give your phone away. It’s bad enough you never answer it.”
“Yeah well,” Ronan shrugs, “if you had it, at least Gansey could get an answer from it.”
Adam puts the phone on the dashboard, unbuckles his belt.
“Thanks for the ride,” he says.
“Thanks for the fries,” Ronan says.
He pulls away as soon as Adam shuts the door, doesn’t want to be tempted to sit in his idling car and watch Adam walk away into the darkness ahead of him.

Noah is still around when he gets home. He’s sitting at Gansey’s desk, bathed in moonlight and staring blankly at one of Gansey’s hundreds of scribbled on maps. He looks too thin in the cold light - stretched thin until he’s almost see through.
“Hey,” he says, soft enough not to disturb Gansey who’s snoring quietly in the background, loud enough to catch Noah’s attention. He knows Noah already knows he’s there.
Noah turns to look at him, his face suspiciously absent for a few seconds as the moon filters through it. It’s one of those nights then. “You good?” he asks.
“Yes,” he says, blinks, becomes more boy, more alive again, “yes,” he repeats. “Just tired.”
“How does that even work?” Ronan asks, crosses across the shadowed floor to scuff his hand through Noah’s hair, “it’s not like you can sleep.”
Sometimes Noah would slap back at Ronan’s hand, more often he just leaned into the warmth like he was doing now.
“Dunno,” he said helpfully, then, “you been out with Adam?”
“Uhuh,” Ronan grunted, ruffled Noah’s hair, and pulled away to walk to his bedroom. Noah floated behind him.
“Did you have a good time?”
“Uhuh.”
“Anything fun happen?”
“Jesus, Noah,” Ronan huffed, “I thought Gansey was my house mother?”
“I’m just curious!”
“Nosy fucker. I need to sleep.”
Noah sighed, leaned against the frame of Ronan’s door. “Fine. Leave me alone,” he said with mock drama - lessened slightly by the need to be quiet - “bring me back something exciting.”
“If you’re lucky,” Ronan said, grinned, and shut his door.

Gansey is not impressed. Actually, he is impressed - grudgingly - but only because he’s an academic, and this sort of thing is entirely up his alley. He’s not impressed because they don’t need another screaming mouth in the house. He’s also unimpressed, because he doesn’t think the name Chainsaw is appropriate for a baby raven, even if it does sound a little like one. He’s not impressed, because it woke him up at the ass crack of morning and he’d actually been sleeping well for once, didn’t even need to get up early.
Noah, however, is entirely delighted.
“I didn’t know you could bring back real live things!” he exclaimed, far too early in the morning for yelling, “I want a cat next!”
“I don’t think having a dream cat and a dream bird is a good idea,” Gansey pointed out. He’d put his glasses on grumpily, but was slowly losing the grump as he peered at the tiny bird cupped in Ronan’s hands. “Who knows what would happen if a dream creature ate another dream creature.”
“Parrish is gonna flip his shit when he sees this,” Ronan said, “do you think Bud will like her?”
“Her?” Gansey asked and Ronan rolled his eyes. Noah laughed,
“Obviously I’m talking about Chainsaw,” he said.
“Obviously,” Gansey muttered, “Chainsaw.”
Ronan resented the fact that Adam didn’t go to Aglionby for several reasons. The first, and foremost reason currently, was because during school hours, Adam was entirely out of bounds. If he were at Aglionby, Ronan could show him Chainsaw/bother him throughout. Secondly, and most importantly, was because Adam would actually appreciate the highly complicated and extremely expensive class Ronan was currently sitting in. Sure, you could get the same marks at Mountain View as you could at Aglionby, but there was no denying that the education at Aglionby was better, the prospects more prosperous, the easier it was to get into universities with. It was wasted on Ronan, who was spending the entire lesson staring into his duffle bag to keep an eye on Chainsaw. Gansey had tried valiantly to get him to leave her behind, but she needed to be fed regularly, so. He would much prefer to spend his time with Chainsaw than learning some shit he was never going to want to know or need.

He had wondered, vaguely until he had left for school so Noah couldn’t eavesdrop on his thoughts - if bringing Chainsaw out of his dreams was a direct correlation to his conversation with Adam. Sure, it wasn’t exactly the same domestic look as caring for a child, but it was still following the maternal instinct train of thought. Baby that needs to be cared for. Was he trying to prove a point to Adam through a fucking bird? Honestly though, that was probably one of the least strange thing his brain had tried to do while asleep.

He also wondered, even more vaguely and with far more paranoia, whether it was also due to the question he was working himself up to asking Adam. This was a question he had discussed with some length with Gansey and Noah, and they had both agreed it would need to be a subject to be brought up with some caution to Adam. The more time he had spent with Ethan - at Monmouth, trekking around Henrietta, at Nino’s - the more he wanted to ask Adam if he could babysit. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. Dana’s was so close to Aglionby, it would be easy for Ronan to pick Ethan up from there after school. Adam wouldn’t have to change his schedule at all - Ronan could drop Ethan off at Boyd’s after Adam’s shift, or he could even just pick Adam up and take them both back to their home. Adam had mentioned, only in passing, how grateful he was for Dana, but how little time he had to pay her back, and how little time she had to spend on Ethan. Ronan had time. He had way too much time. Of course, the flaws with this plan were still problems Ronan had yet to figure out. Adam wouldn’t want to accept this for free. He would want to pay Ronan back for his time somehow, and Ronan was against that with every fibre of his being. This is of course, if he would even trust Ronan with Ethan without Adam there to supervise. Hence Chainsaw? He wasn’t sure. Plus, Ronan wasn’t actually entirely sure he would know what to do with a toddler for hours on end. Despite liking kids well enough, it wasn’t as if he had much exposure to them. He’d been a toddler himself when Matthew was born, and they didn’t have any close cousins. There were altogether, too many problems, too small a chance that Adam would agree. But. But, but, but. Gansey thought it was a good idea. So there was still a chance that it could work.
Adam isn’t at Nino’s on Friday. Blue is though, and she comes to sit on the edge of their table. “Can we get you fired for being unhygienic?” Ronan asked, shoved ineffectively at Blue’s hip. She scowled at him and hit him over the head with one of the menus she’d brought with her. “You’d have more luck getting me fired for physical assault, she offers, “but I think you’d regret it.” “Only because Parrish would chew me out.” “Speaking of,” Gansey interrupted, “where is he? I thought his shift started ten minutes ago?” Blue sighed and dropped the rest of the menus with a clatter onto the table behind her. “Yeah, he told me in class today that he’s got Cialina covering him tonight. Also, even though I look nothing like a messenger, he asked me to tell you guys he can’t make it tomorrow.” Blue does a very good job of looking unconcerned. “Oh!” Gansey is all but pouting, “That is a pity! Is he alright? Did he come down with something?” “Did Ronan piss him off too much last night?” Noah asked, elbowing Ronan in the ribs. Ronan did not appreciate this. “I did not,” he snapped, “what’s wrong with him, maggot?” “Goddess, you are a sour puss,” Blue snarled back, “He’s fine. Something came up.” Gansey was frowning, but he looked appeased. It was obvious that Blue was lying, but apparently Gansey hadn’t noticed. Ronan opened his mouth again, but Blue beat him to it. “Ethan is fine too. Geez, what’s got your panties in a twist?” “You’ve gotta wear panties to get them twisted,” Noah said slyly. Ronan smirked, Blue gagged dramatically, and Gansey retrieved Ronan’s duffle bag from the floor between their feet. He put it gently onto the table beside Blue and unzipped it just a little. “He’s just grumpy because he wanted to show off his daughter to Adam,” he said, and Ronan would have smacked him round the head for his amused tone, but it was true. “He thought she and Ethan could have play dates,” Noah chimed in. Blue looked horrified, “there better not be a baby in there she said,” then peered into the bag. “Why, she said, “do you have a tiny dinosaur in your bag?” “Her name’s Chainsaw,” Ronan replied, not actually offended but sounding it, “and she’s a fucking raven.” This is followed by a very tense moment in which all 3 of the boys worry that Blue is about to piss herself laughing, all over their table.

Saturday is a fucking shit show. Chainsaw woke all of Monmouth up regularly from around about 2 am, which meant that Gansey was pissed, which meant Ronan was pissed, which meant Chainsaw was louder, which meant that Gansey was more pissed. Noah seemed to take the whole thing in his stride, but possibly because he had simply disappeared at about 4 in the morning. “This is why I didn’t want kids with you,” Gansey grumbled at the only vaguely respectable hour of 9.30. “We both end up grumpy and the baby isn’t even asleep.” “Shouldn’t have fucking knocked me up then,” Ronan mumbled back, his cheek pressed into the
table, Chainsaw perched in his loose grip by his face. She seemed happy at least.
“Doesn’t even look like me, Gansey said as he poured himself another coffee, “how do I know
she’s mine?”
“FUCK, Dick,” Ronan groaned, grinning evilly, “have you even seen her? You both have the same
manic expression. You’re totally the dad.”
Gansey rolled his eyes.

By the afternoon, Noah still isn’t around, which makes Gansey twitchy, and twitchy Gansey makes
for an irritated Ronan, and a lot of progress in cardboard Henrietta.
“He’s probably fine,” Ronan yells from his bedroom after the third excessively heavy sigh from the
miniature main street. “He’s probably just off doing ghost shit.”
“You know that isn’t true,” Gansey called back, “you know he’s disappeared because he doesn’t
have enough… power or something. Besides. That isn’t what I’m worrying about. Not exactly.”
Ronan would really like to continue lying flat on his back on his bedroom floor making googly eyes
at Chainsaw. Instead he gets up, cupping Chainsaw carefully against his bare chest, and goes to join
Gansey who’s staring dolefully at an Aglionby building he’s trying to construct.
“Paint it hot pink,” Ronan suggests as he drops himself down by Gansey, “who spat in your coffee,
then?”
“Well,” Gansey says, “Jane has threatened to on numerous occasions, and I certainly wouldn’t put it
past you or Chainsaw.”
“Chainsaw shat in it.”
“Charming.”
“Ok, God, spill, Gansey.”
“So,” Gansey says, “it’s a little bit about Noah, I mean, I am very worried about how often he’s been
disappearing lately, but-” he pauses here, stares down the piece of cardboard in his hand as if it was
the source of all his issues.
Chainsaw makes a scratchy noise. Ronan agrees with her.
“-I was thinking, we all think that Noah’s power is somehow linked to the Ley lines, yeah? And the
Ley lines are definitely linked to Glendower? And in the last few months with Adam we’ve actually
been making progress with Glendower?”
“Oh,” Ronan says, “Oh, ok. Right. You want to tell Parrish?”
Gansey looked pained.
“I think he could help,” he says, “he already is helping, but if he knew what was actually going on -”
“God,” Ronan snapped, “stop giving me those shifty puppy dog eyes. I thought we agreed that
Parrish was obviously like… too busy with his own shit to drag into ours?”
“Yes,” Gansey sighed, “yes, but - what if he can help keep Noah around?”
“Yes,” Ronan says, “yes, but - what if you tell him that you fucking died and this dead king you’re
in love with brought you back to life, and then Parrish decides we’re nuts and leaves?”
“You didn’t,” Gansey pointed out.
“Oh I did decide you were nuts,” Ronan said, “I just didn’t leave because I’m obviously nuts too. I
had a pretty fucking good reference point, man, bringing shit out of dreams? Of course I was ok with
it. Normal people aren’t quite so ok with magic being real.”
“Adam isn’t normal people.”
Ronan definitely agreed with that.
“Besides,” Gansey said, “I know you’re dying to tell him about your dreams, and you know Noah is
more comfortable when people know he’s dead. I think we should tell Blue too.”
Chainsaw screeches, and Ronan quickly loosens his grip from the claw like fist he had began making
around her.
“Seriously?” he snapped, “Why don’t we just tell everyone? We could take out an ad in the paper.
Put a poster up in Nino’s.”
Gansey has given up all pretence of working on his town. He’s crossed his arms around his knees,
drawn up to his chin, and is staring at Ronan, biting his lip.
“Blue’s family are psychics,” he points out, “she’s more likely to believe us than most people. And I bet she’d be really useful helping too. Noah is always saying he feels better when she’s around, that’s a starting point, and not really something we can ask her about unless she knows.”

Ronan would very much like to make some scathing remark about how Blue’s family were probably all hacks, but he’s had this argument with Gansey before. Gansey takes advantage of Ronan’s silence and continues speaking.

“I honestly think we should tell them. We spend most of our time with the two of them now, anyway, it’s not fair for them to be coming on all these trips with us and not knowing that there could be real danger, real power behind it all. Adam deserves to know.”

“God,” Ronan snaps, “God. Fucking damn it. Whatever. We have to talk to Noah about it first though,” he adds, “I’m not going to fucking out him as a ghost without his explicit permission.”

“Of course,” Gansey says, then, “if it helps - I don’t think Adam will leave us, Ronan.”

“Oh fuck off,” Ronan says, “fuck right off.”

Ronan does not go to tennis. He’s too grumpy to trust himself with the power of sending a tennis ball straight into Tad Carruther’s fucking face, and he doesn’t want to take Chainsaw to the courts with him. Instead, he digs out an old shoebox, stuffs it with blankets, swaddles Chainsaw up inside it, and straps her into the passenger seat of his BMW. Noah still isn’t back. Gansey’s decided to go to a crew party after practice. He wants to drive to Blue’s psychic/witch/women motel and demand she tell him why she lied about Adam being fine, and why he’s not fine, and if he had asked her to lie or if she had decided to do that for him, and why she gets to know Adam’s secrets. Instead, he drives to Boyd’s. He reckons there’s a half and half chance that Adam will be there or at his trailer, and Boyd’s is the safer place to check first. He doesn’t know what the fuck Adam’s parents deal is - do they not like him having friends? Do they hate rich people, is that why he can’t drive his BMW where they could see it? Is Adam embarrassed of them? Is Adam embarrassed of Ronan? Whatever the problem is, Ronan doesn’t want to be the one causing it. He’s not gonna turn up there uninvited.

He leaves Chainsaw in the car, windows cracked open.

The receptionist doesn’t seem at all bothered by him just walking in and asking where Parrish is, which is good because he doesn’t want to cause a fuss for Adam. She points through the glass door into the garage to a pair of feet sticking out from under a bright red mini.

“Pretty sure those are his feet,” she says, then very suddenly she frowns, “you ain’t here to give him trouble, are ya?”

“Uh,” Ronan says, “No… ma’am?”

“If you do,” she says, waving her pen at him warningly, “you’ll be sorry.”

“I won’t,” he says, and makes his way hurriedly into the garage.

When he gets to the car, he’s not quite sure about the etiquette involved in announcing your arrival to someone whose head is under a car that’s making a series of grumbling noises.

He apparently doesn’t need to, because Adam’s hand - grease stained and bony - suddenly appeared from under the side of the car.

“Hand me the torque, willya?” Adam asks.

This was a moment in which Ronan very desperately wished he had paid more attention when Declan had been trying to teach him shit about fixing cars and stuff. He knew the basics, and he had money to pay people to do everything else, so who gave a fuck, honestly. He gave a fuck. Honestly. What the fuck. He had no idea which of the tools scattered by Adam’s knees was the torque, although he was certain of a few that weren’t the torque.

“Jack?” Adam called, and Ronan swore. He crouched down next to Adam’s legs, picked up the tool that looked least like other things he knew the names of and pressed it into Adam’s grubby palm.

The hand withdrew, Adam made a strange noise, and then reached back out, tool still in hand. He dropped it by his side, and gripped the edge of the car as if to pull himself out.
“Ronan?” he asked.
“That wasn’t the torque, then?” Ronan replied, and was pleased to hear Adam snort in reply.
“No. Geez. What’re you doing here?”
“Just dropped by to hand you non-torques,” Ronan said sweetly, and heard Adam snort again. This one sounded more exasperated, but still amused.
“It’s the one by the spanner,” he said, “with the red handle.”
“Huh.” he picked up the torque, filed away its existence in his mind, and handed it to Adam.
“Yes,” Adam said, did something under the car that created an awful scratching noise that left Ronan wincing, “what are you doing here?”
“I had something to show you.”
“Something that couldn’t wait till I wasn’t at work?”
“You’re always at work,” Ronan pointed out, “I was going to show you at Nino’s yesterday, but you never came.”
There’s a long pause, ostensibly caused by Adam needing to concentrate on whatever he’s doing under there, but it feels uncomfortable to Ronan.
“Didn’t Blue tell you I wasn’t coming in?” he asked eventually, then handed the torque back out to Ronan, “Can you hand me the spanner now?”
Ronan passed him the spanner. “Yeah, she did,” he said, “didn’t say why though.”
“Something came up,” Adam replied. It sounded like he’d stuck the spanner in between his teeth, his words were muffled and oddly shaped.
“Ok, so Blue did say that,” Ronan admitted, shifted so he was sitting down, leaning against the side of the car, “what came up then?” He stifles the extremely inappropriate urge to make a dick joke.
Adam doesn’t answer straight away.
“Is Ethan ok?” Ronan asks.
“Yes,” Adam says immediately, firmly, “Ethan is fine. He’s at Dana’s right now, pretty sure he’s fingerpainting. Look, I was just really busy the other night.”
“And today?” Ronan pressed, “You working a double shift this afternoon or something? That why you’re not coming over?” He knows he sounds a little needy.
“Do I need to have an excuse for not wanting to hang out for once?” Adam asks. Not meanly, but the question still stings a little. Ronan elbows Adam’s calf.
“Only when you’ve already agreed to hang,” he says, “and when you’re acting really fucking suspicious about it. What the hell is going on, Parrish?”
“What was it you wanted to show me?” Adam asks, and Ronan sighs, swears, sighs again.
“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,” he says, “spill.”
“God,” Adam huffs. He slides the spanner back out along the concrete, and then slides himself along after it until he can sit up. He’s wearing huge, extremely ugly, goggles, and the rest of his face is ridiculously grubby. He looks fantastic. Until he removes the goggles, which reveals that his face isn’t actually as grubby as Ronan had initially thought.
“Holy shit,” Ronan said, “is this why your fucking receptionist told me to be nice to you?”
Adam frowns at him, reaches a dirty hand up to cover one side of the heavily purpled bruise of his face. “Etta told you to be nice to me?” he asks.
“She told me not to make any trouble,” Ronan clarifies absent mindedly, then, “what the fuck, Parrish? Who’s been beating you up?”
“Who says it’s not me beating someone else up?” Adam says in a terrible attempt at bravado. He looks like he’s wishing he’d never come out from under the car.
“Me,” Ronan says firmly, “because, a. You’re not that type of guy, and, b. Unless your opponent is in the fucking morgue, winners don’t usually look as shit as you do.”
Adam shrugs.
“Seriously,” Ronan says, shuffles forward a little, “who the fuck did this?”
“God,” Adam snaps, tries to shuffle backwards, but he’s already pressed against the car, “it’s not important, ok? I didn’t want you guys to see this because I knew you’d make a fuss. God damn.”
If Ronan had hair, he’d be tearing it out. He thinks just briefly that he understands a little how Gansey feels now, marvels at the fact that there isn’t just clumps of Gansey hair all over their flat.

“Ok?” Ronan asks, is aware his voice is a little too loud, and lowers it quickly, casting a glance back at the door to the receptionists office, “Ok? It’s not ok! It’s not like the first time we fucking met was when your face was covered in those shit ugly yellow bruises!” he hadn’t asked about them then because it wasn’t his fucking business. It was different now. A little at least. Surely Adam knew that. Of course he knew that. That’s why he was fucking hiding them. Because he thinks Ronan would make a fuss. Like he was doing now. Fuck. Fucking fuck. He continues anyway. “Of course I’m making a fucking fuss, you look like you had a fight with a brick! And what about Ethan? How the hell is he supposed to cope with his big brother looking like this?”

“Fuck you,” Adam hisses, “you think I’m doing this on purpose? You think I like Ethan seeing me like this? What the hell is wrong with you?”

Ronan is also aware that he’s not actually angry with Adam, he’s just angry in general. He snaps anyway.

“Right,” he says, “so fucking explain what this is then.” There is quite a large likelihood that he’s being unfair. He’ll regret it later, right now he just wants answers, doesn’t want Adam to keep dropping lies and half truths. Only half a second ago Adam had looked pissed beyond belief, his entire body wound up taut like he was going to snap in half, or snap something else in half. Now though, he’s slumping back against the car, dropping his head down to hide his face which has slipped back into that awful bland expression he wears.

“It’s unavoidable,” he says. His voice isn’t soft, but it’s very quiet. “There’s no point in explaining it. No matter what I do, or who I tell, it’s gonna keep happening. So we may as well just ignore it. It’s better to ignore it. Safer for Ethan.”

This doesn’t sound like a lie. It doesn’t sound like the truth either, but it isn’t a lie. Adam doesn’t think it’s a lie.

“Doesn’t look safer for you,” Ronan says, and Adam scoffs. All his anger seems to have burnt out, leaving something ashy and dark behind. It lingers in a bitter taste in Ronan’s mouth.

“Could be worse,” Adam says, not a lie, “better me than Ethan.” Not a lie either, but shouldn’t have to be a truth.

He’s not entirely sure he gets it. Not entirely sure he’s on the right track. Not entirely sure if he can ask for clarification, or if he wants to. He feels like Adam’s dislike of talking about his home, about his parents is clarification enough. His unwillingness to let anyone come to his. His firmness on the matter of Ethan being with him, not his mother or his father. Ronan wants to punch someone in the face. Except he really doesn’t want that, not with Adam’s bruises staring at him. He doesn’t know how he’s supposed to handle this situation if he can’t fall back on sarcasm or punching.

“There’s gotta be something-” he starts to say, words awkward and too large in his mouth, and Adam cuts him off with a shake of his head.

“No.” he says, “There’s nothing you guys can do. Please, God, Lynch, please just leave it alone. I don’t want to talk about it, and I don’t want it to be a thing. Ok?”

It’s about as ok as Noah being dead.

“Ok,” Ronan says. Lie.

“Thank you,” Adam says. Not a lie. No matter how many times Ronan swallows, the ashy lump in his throat isn’t going down, neither is the anger in his fists. He kicks at one of the spanners instead. Adam sighs. Ronan swears.

“Ok,” Adam says again, “I have like, five minutes, what is it you wanted to show me?”

Everything is kind of shit, and Ronan could rattle off an entire list of things he completely hates right now, but at least Adam is smiling weakly at him, seems to actually want to know what it was Ronan wanted in the first place.

Ronan grunts, then says, “Follow me,” and stalks out of the garage.
“Five minutes,” Adam repeats, warning in his voice, but he follows Ronan out through the reception area, past nosy Etta, into the parking lot, and to the BMW.

Chainsaw is furious about being left alone for so long, so Adam gets to meet her for the first time while she’s squawking angrily. It suits the mood. Neither of them say anything for a long moment. Ronan holding Chainsaw gently against his shoulder in an attempt to soothe her, Adam standing to the side, staring. Ronan tries very hard to not attempt to catalogue how many bruises he can count.

“Where did you get it?” Adam asks eventually, and Ronan rolls his eyes. “Chainsaw’s a she,” he said, “and I found her. She’s imprinted on me or some shit, so she’s stuck with me now.”

“Well,” Adam says, he’s moving cautiously closer now that Chainsaw’s quietened down somewhat, “she sounds just like you. It’s uncanny really.”

“Fucker,” Ronan snorts. “Looks like you too,” Adam continues, he’s almost smiling, “baldness is genetic, right?”

“You’re a little shit,” Ronan says through his grin, “wanna hold her? She probably won’t crap on you. Wouldn’t matter though, you’re already grubby as hell.”

Adam’s glare isn’t heated.

“Better not,” he says, “I don’t wanna confuse her over who her daddy is.”

Ronan shrugs, “Your loss, Parrish.”
It took some persuading - some very speedy persuading seeing as Ronan had only 2 minutes to do it all in - but Adam agreed to come to Monmouth after work like usual. Ronan’s not sure whether he ought to be pleased or offended that Adam only agrees after he hears that Gansey will be out. Does that mean that Adam prefers Ronan to Gansey? And if that is the case, shouldn’t Ronan be upset on Gansey’s behalf seeing as Gansey thinks the sun shines out of Parrish’s nostrils? Or is it that Adam cares more if Gansey sees him like this, in which case it’s Ronan that doesn’t matter so much. Adam clears this up, although he seems oblivious to Ronan’s inner panic over it.

“Hey,” he says, right before Ronan can take his foot off the brake, leans in the open driver’s side window. “Can we - I would really appreciate if this -” he pauses to motion at his face, “-doesn’t get to Gansey. I don’t want to deal with his worry right now.”

“Wow, Parrish,” Ronan grunts, “that’s harsh.” He attempts to smile as he says this, can already see that Adam doesn’t enjoy what he’s saying. “I don’t wanna keep secrets from him,” Ronan continues, truthfully, “but I won’t say anything to him either.”

“Thanks,” Adam mumbles, he doesn’t make eye contact as he turns to leave.

“But,” Ronan says, and he hears Adam snort.

“Oh ok,” Adam says, “here comes the extortion.”

“Damn straight,” Ronan says. He wasn’t sure what to do with his face, so he turned away from Adam even as Adam turned back to him, and pretended to be heavily invested in rearranging Chainsaw’s swaddling.

“But?” Adam prompts. He’s leaned back in the window, his voice is warm right behind Ronan’s head.

“But,” Ronan repeats, “you’ve gotta tell me - is that my fault?”

There’s a loud cracking noise, and Ronan abandons his fiddling to whirl around. Adam is standing just outside the car, cupping the top of his head with both hands and sporting a pissed off expression. Obviously he’d pulled out of the window too fast and smacked his head on the window frame.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Adam says. His voice isn’t as angry as his face is.

“I’m not,” Ronan snaps back, “it’s my fault you were home super late.”

“No,” Adam says firmly, drops his hands back down to his side, “I chose that. This has nothing to do with you, Ronan.”

Ronan wants to argue, but his 2 minutes are long up, and he’d seen Adam check his watch even as he turned back round to face Ronan.

“Ok,” Ronan says, “Ok. Hey, I’ll pick you up here when you get off?”

“Thought we were meeting at Aglionby?” Adam mumbles, “I’ve gotta get Ethan.”

“Yeah,” Ronan nods, starts easing off the brake, “we can go get him together.”

If Ronan is out of time to argue, Adam definitely is. He nods. Ronan leaves.

There isn’t that much point in going back to Monmouth - Adam only has about an hour left at work, and Ronan can easily kill that time fucking about it town - but he wants to check if Noah’s reappeared. Also get more food for Chainsaw. Also, he wants to lie down on his bedroom floor and quietly reconsider every single thing he’s noticed about Adam and beat himself up for not clicking
earlier. Obviously Blue already knew. Whether because she was simply more observant than Ronan was, or because Adam trusted her enough to tell her straight. Neither of these options ought to make him jealous - Blue was Adam’s friend first, for much longer than Ronan had even known of Adam. He was still jealous. And angry at himself for being jealous. Partly because it was a stupid thing to be jealous about, and partly because none of this shit was about him.

Noah wasn’t back. Or if he was, he wasn’t back at Monmouth, so Ronan didn’t even bother going to his room to lie down on the floor. He ends up in the middle of cardboard Henrietta - his feet somewhere near the newest house - a freshly painted Fox Way. Chainsaw scrabbles her way from his chest, down to this stomach, pecks at his waistband, then hikes back up to sit in the concave of his shoulder.
No wonder Adam was so jumpy around arguments and slamming doors. Of course he would have had to perfect his terrifyingly blank face. His arms tightening around Ethan whenever anyone raised their voice was suddenly unsettlingly horrifying.

Fuck.
Fuck.
Fuck.

It takes him a while to actually find his phone - turns out it was between his mattress and the wall - he only spots them because his headphones are still plugged in and are sticking out. When he does, he doesn’t quite know exactly what he wanted it for. Chainsaw doesn’t have the answer, she just croaks reproachfully at him for moving around so much. He wants to talk to his mum. He wants that so fucking badly. He calls Matthew instead, drops down heavily onto his mattress as the phone rings in his ear.

“Ronan?” Matthew’s voice is a mixture of worry and joy, “Is something wrong?”
“Can’t I just call to say hey?” Ronan says, scowling even though Matthew can’t see it.
“Well,” Matthew laughs here, “yes, but you never do. Hey!”
“Hey.”
There’s a silence for a moment, Ronan can practically hear Matthew’s brain whirring.
“Did you actually just call to say hey?” he asks.
“Pretty much,” Ronan says, snorts, “just been - wanted to check up on you.”
“Like a Dec style check up about my grades or a general check up?”
“Matty,” Ronan said, “Matthew. Have I ever asked you about your grades? No. Never. Tell me what you’ve been up to. Killed anyone with kindness yet?”
Matthew laughs, and then he talks - fills up all the achingly hollow space in Ronan’s mind with inane, cheerful conversation about various sweaty sports, too many friends, what his teacher said the other day, the fact that he’d unconsciously colour co-ordinated his socks and his boxers for three days in a row.
It was almost what Ronan needed. About as close as he felt he could get. Plus he hadn’t talked to Matthew properly in a few days. Half the times he’d seen him around Aglionby, either Declan had been with him, or he’d been encompassed by his gaggle of friends.
It isn’t until Ronan needs to be in the car right the fuck now, does he cut into Matthew’s ramble and say goodbye.
“I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?” Matthew asks in farewell.
“Of course,” Ronan says, “bright and early. See ya, dork.”
He leaves Chainsaw in her shoebox in his room. She’s asleep, and he doesn’t want to wake her.
Baby birds need to sleep a lot, right? Maybe he needs to research this a little more thoroughly.

He’s almost at Boyd’s when he realises that Ethan’s car seat is still in the Camaro, and swears viciously into the pumping music before switching it off. He takes advantage of a red light, and speed dials for Gansey with one hand.
“Ronan?” Unlike Matthew, Gansey’s voice is just worried, “Are you alright?”
“God,” Ronan snaps, “yes. Surprise, I know how to use a phone. You still at school?”
“Could’ve fooled me,” Gansey says, sour, “yes. Do you need something?”
“Yeah,” Ronan says, pins the phone to his ear with his shoulder so he can shift back into gear, “I’m dropping by in like 20 mins, need to get something out of the Pig. I’ll just grab your keys, ok?”
“Ronan,” Gansey says. His voice isn’t exactly icy, but it is certainly a little chilly. “You know how I feel about you with my car keys.”
“God,” Ronan says again, “I’ll have them for like… 5 minutes tops. I swear. I just need to grab something.”
“So I’ll come open it for you,” Gansey says, “what is it you need?”
“Fuck, Gans,” Ronan hisses, turns a corner a little too roughly, “would it kill you to trust me for 5 minutes?”
From the silence on the other end of the phone, it sure sounds like it might.
“Dick,” Ronan huffs, hears Gansey sigh in response. Someone on Gansey’s side is yelling for him to come back.
“Ok,” Gansey says, “if you have my keys for longer than 5 minutes I’m coming for your ass.”
“Gansey,” Ronan says kindly, “if you want my ass so bad, you just need to ask.”
“Thanks,” Ronan says, hangs up as he pulls into Boyd’s parking lot. Adam is already waiting, leaning against his bike which is propped up against the garage wall.
In the natural light, and after washing off the grease and grime, his bruises are even worse. They stand out starkly, huge, blunt, ugly things on his angular face. The two don’t fit together well. It makes him look almost delicate, the worst kind of delicate - like freshly smashed fine china.
“Hey,” he says as he yanks the door open, “did I really just see you on the phone? I don’t think I’ve seen you use that as a communication device since… ever.”
“Funny,” Ronan snaps, “boot’s open.”
“Nice to see you too,” Adam says as he drops his rucksack into the footwell before heading to the boot with his bike. He appears to be in a strangely good mood for someone with a purple face and a limp. It’s unsettling.
“What’s gotten into you?” he grunts as Adam settles into the passenger seat and does his seatbelt up. Adam frowns at him.
“What?”
“Your face,” Ronan says, hastens to add, “it’s weirdly smiley.”
“God,” Adam huffs, for some reason his smile is back on, “am I not allowed to be happy?”
“Well, sure,” Ronan says, doesn’t want to turn the grin into a grimace like usual, but very much does not understand, “just didn’t think you were in a great mood.”
Adam snorts, doesn’t reply, just reaches out for Ronan’s phone to plug it into the speakers. They drive in silence for a few moments while Adam fiddles around in Ronan’s library, and then soft rock pours out around them.
“Lame,” Ronan says.
“It’s your music,” Adam points out, “I like it.”
“Lame,” Ronan says.
“I’m just - I wasn’t looking forward to going home,” Adam says, doubling the conversation back suddenly, “so I’m - yeah.”
He gives Ronan exactly 6 seconds to parse this, and speaks again before Ronan can work up a response.
“Carseat still in Gansey’s car?”
This was much easier to respond to.
“Yeah,” Ronan says, “we’re going to go pick it up before we grab Ethan, we have time since you’re not biking.”
“Lynch,” Adam says, he sounds inexplicably distraught, “I thought - we said no Gansey!”
Oh right.
“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Ronan snaps back, clenches his fists around the steering wheel, “I didn’t tell
him for fuck’s sake. It’s just a grab and run. He won’t even be around.”

It’s silent for a block, silent except for the music, that is. When Adam speaks again, his voice is hard to hear over the drums.

“Sorry,” he says, “I didn’t mean to snap, I panicked.”

“It’s fine,” Ronan says, he means it, but he can’t look at Adam to say it. “But you know, Gansey isn’t gonna fucking judge you or anything. You can trust him with this shit.”

“It’s not that,” Adam says, still too quiet. Ronan has to strain to hear him. It sounds like he’s staring out the window, his voice muffled by the glass as well as the music. “He’ll just - he’ll just be so… right. He’ll offer me all these fucking solutions, and he won’t understand why I can’t take them. He won’t get it, and that’ll upset him. And I’ll get mad. I don’t want that.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, wants Adam to go back to his earlier mood, “hey, I have a playlist you should put on. Best songs ever. That’s the name of the playlist, and obviously, the description.”

“No,” Adam says.

Less than 30 seconds later he’s yelling playfully angry at Ronan over the discordant strains of the Murder Squash Song while Ronan cackles.

He leaves Adam in the car, parked beside the Pig, while he goes to find Gansey. Crew practice is just wrapping up, so Gansey is caught in about 5 conversations at once. Ronan waves at him as he enters, then heads straight for Gansey’s bag, and leaves again before Gansey can break away from his crew mates. He knows Gansey is not joking about the 5 minutes, so he legs it back to the carpark, unlocks the Camaro, and leaves it open for Adam to grab the seat from while he runs back to Gansey.

“Huh,” Gansey says as Ronan presses the keys straight into his hand, undeniable proof that he’d kept his promise, “I expected you’d linger outside the door just to tease me into coming to chase you.”

“Please,” Ronan sighed, “and risk you going all crew captain on me? No thanks.”

“What were you getting?” Gansey asks.

“Just shit,” Ronan replies with a sharp grin, nods at the boy hovering behind Gansey’s elbow, “I think you’re wanted, captain.”

Gansey glances away from him, and Ronan takes the chance to escape. If Gansey asked him anymore questions he was gonna spill. Better to just leave.

He checks that the Pig is locked before he climbs back into the BMW, and Adam glares at him.

“Of course I locked it,” Adam says.

“If you hadn’t it would have been my head on the line, not yours,” Ronan shoots back, “can’t blame me for being cautious.”

“When have you ever been cautious?” Adam snarks.

Ronan thinks he could write an entire essay on his cautious moments of only the last few months with Adam, could even add references. Instead, he revs his car and speeds out of the lot.

“Never,” he grins.

Ronan’s the one to wait in the car while Adam goes in to fetch Ethan. Gansey’s texted him, and he checks it quickly to make sure it isn’t Gansey saying he’s coming home instead of going to the party. It’s just him saying he’ll be back late, and not to get into any trouble. There’s a follow up text which just tells him to avoid Kavinsky. Another texts which just says, ‘Noah?’ Ronan deigns to reply to that one, he knows how worried Gansey is about Noah.

‘No Noah. he’ll b back soon.’

He ignores the following text replies. Gansey texts far too quickly. His thumbs were mutants.

The back door opens, and a laughing, and very messy Ethan is deposited into the carseat.

“Hey buddy!” Ronan says, twisting round in his seat so he can grin at Ethan while Adam swiftly buckles him in, “Have you had a fun day?”

“Yeah!” Ethan says, enthusiastic, he waves paint covered hands in Ronan’s direction while Adam
wrangles his arms into the straps. “Dana says ‘m an’artist! An! We had ho’dogs for lunch!”
“Wow! I’m so jealous,” Ronan sighed, “I love hot dogs. What did you paint?”
“Ad’m,” Ethan says, “show Ro’an!”
“Please,” Adam says automatically, but he pulls the sheet of paper from the small shoulder bag he’d brought out with him, and flourishes it towards Ronan.
It’s - possibly a house? There’s definitely eyes. Could be Blue. Maybe a pizza?
“It’s great!” Ronan enthuses, “Wow, buddy!”
Adam raises his eyebrows at Ronan, grinning widely as he shuts Ethan’s door and gets into the front with Ronan. He takes the picture back, and holds it up so Ethan and Ronan can both see it.
“This is a pizza,” Adam says, pointing to - the whole paper? Ethan makes an affirmative noise from behind them. “And we are the toppings,” Adam continues, biting down on laughter, “this is you,” he adds, pointing at a scribbly black smudge.
“Oh!” Ronan gasps, “It looks just like me!”
“Pizza boys!” Ethan crows.
“Where are you?” Ronan asks Adam, and grins as Adam points himself out, and then Gansey, Noah, Blue, Ethan, and a sausage he had been informed was important.
“Where’s Gans?” Ethan calls out to them.
“Gansey had to go play with his boring friends tonight, Noah too,” Ronan said, “but I have something very exciting to show you at home.”

He’s a little worried that Ethan will be scared of Chainsaw, she’s pretty loud and Ethan isn’t a big fan of loud. However, either because ravens are very smart birds, or because Chainsaw comes from Ronan’s head and therefore wants what Ronan wants, she’s almost creepily docile upon meeting Ethan. Ethan is delighted. She caws softly at him from Ronan’s hands, and after a few moments of just looking at her, Ethan dares to reach out to stroke her feathers gently. Adam looks about as relieved as Ronan feels. Eventually, Ethan climbs into Ronan’s lap with Chainsaw, and Ronan helps him balance the bird against his chest.
“You got homework?” Ronan asks Adam who’s staring at Ethan with a stupid expression on his face.
“Yeah,” Adam nods, “you guys good if I go do it in the main room?”
“We can make our own fun without Adam, yeah, buddy?” Ronan asks, pokes Ethan’s tummy.

It’s probably only been about half an hour of Ethan and Chainsaw making ridiculous noises at each other and taking turns at poking Ronan, but it feels both longer and shorter. By the time Chainsaw seems to have tired of bobbing up and down, and she and Ethan both are making noises of hunger, Ronan is definitely ready to move onto something else. He shows Ethan how to feed Chainsaw, which takes far longer than it ought to, but at least Ethan and Chainsaw both seem to enjoy it. Ronan does too, but he wants to go distract Adam from his homework now. If Ethan is hungry, and Ronan is too, Adam must be hungry. Adam was always hungry, no matter how often he said he wasn’t, sometimes it was like having an extra person in the room because Adam’s stomach growled so loudly.
“Wanna get food?” he asks Ethan, who, due to prolonged exposure to Chainsaw’s communication methods, caws loudly in Ronan’s ear.
“Fantastic,” Ronan says, “me too.”

Adam is asleep on the floor. His cheek is squished against his open book, and his hand is outstretched, his pen a few feet away. Upon seeing Adam asleep, Ethan immediately shuts up and presses his grubby hands over Ronan’s mouth.
“Hsshhhhhhh,” he insists, despite the fact that it was Ethan who had still been cawing as they’d walked into the room.

Ronan nodded, peeled the chubby hand off of his lips. He felt that maybe Adam would want them to wake him up so he could finish his homework, so he wouldn’t look weak. Not that he did look weak, but Ronan was pretty sure that that was what Adam would think about it. He carried Ethan to the couch and sat them both down opposite Adam’s prone body.

“He’s tired,” Ethan whispers to Ronan. Ronan nods seriously, pulls his phone out of his pocket so they can order deliveries instead of going out. “Ad’m got in trouble,” Ethan continues, his own face serious now.

“Yeah,” Ronan breathes back, puts his phone down on the couch cushion next to them so he could pay more attention to Ethan’s sudden melancholy.

“Is my fault,” Ethan whispers, presses closer to Ronan.

“Hey,” Ronan said, frowning deeply, “no it’s not. That’s not your fault.”

“Is!” Ethan insisted, “I woke dad up, ‘m not allowed to.”

He needs to wake Adam up so Adam can reassure Ethan. He has no idea what he’s supposed to say.

“You didn’t do anything bad,” Ronan says firmly, doesn’t know for sure that that’s true, but he can’t believe it isn’t. “You didn’t - none of this is your fault, bud.”

Ethan’s cheeks are damp. The panic in Ronan’s stomach is beginning to hurt. “Is,” he mumbles again, “mum says.”

Oh. The panic suddenly turns to fury, almost chokes him for a second. What the actual fuck. What the fuck. What the fuck. Don’t swear in front of Ethan. Don’t break something in front of Ethan. He needs to wake Adam up so Adam can reassure Ethan. He has no idea what he’s supposed to say.

“You didn’t do anything bad,” Ronan says firmly, doesn’t know for sure that that’s true, but he can’t believe it isn’t. “You didn’t - none of this is your fault, bud.”

Ethan’s cheeks are damp. The panic in Ronan’s stomach is beginning to hurt. “Is,” he mumbles again, “mum says.”

Oh. The panic suddenly turns to fury, almost chokes him for a second. What the actual fuck. What the fuck. What the fuck.

“Wha-?” he starts, sitting up on his knees and gazing blearily over at the two of them, then his gaze sharpens into concern, and he’s shuffling over to the couch, “hey, hey, sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

Ethan only snuffles in reply, and Adam climbs onto the couch next to them to offer his lap and arms. Ethan barely hesitates before releasing his almost painfully tight grip on Ronan’s arms and toppling into Adam’s. He still doesn’t reply though, just buries his face into Adam’s shirt. Adam presses his face against the top of Ethan’s head, mumbles reassurances into the mess of his hair, and then looks up at Ronan.

Ronan had been expecting him to look angry, to him it must have looked like Ronan had done something shitty. Adam just looked confused though, and worried.

“What happened?” he asked.

This wasn’t supposed to be a thing. Adam didn’t want to talk about this. Fucking fuck.

“Hey, uh,” Ronan pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, “he was worried…” he mumbles, then pours the rest out in a rush, “about you. He said it’s his fault. That your mum said it was his fault.”

This is met with absolute silence. Ethan has stopped sniffling. Ronan drops his hands to see what Adam’s face was doing. Yup. Completely blank.

“Oh,” he says, then, with what looks like great difficulty, fits a comforting smile onto his face, “baby,” he says, shuffling Ethan around on his lap so he can talk to him properly, “baby. This isn’t your fault at all.”

“Mum said-” Ethan mumbles, and Adam shakes his head hard.

“No,” he says, firm, “mum is wrong. This was my fault. It’s never your fault. You didn’t do anything. And I’m fine, I’m fine, ok, Ethan?”

Ethan looks to Ronan who has absolutely no clue how he’s supposed to help out here.

“See?” Ronan tries, “It’s not your fault at all.”

As Ethan eventually calms down, which takes much longer than getting upset, Adam appears to be getting less and less in control of his face. He still has his arms wrapped around Ethan, his voice is still low and soft as he directs Ethan’s emotions back into safety, but his smile has completely
disappeared, his jaw keeps trembling.
“So,” Ronan says evenly, “I was gonna order some pad thai delivery. You guys keen?”
Maybe he should have just tried this technique the moment Ethan had started crying, because he
immediately sits up straighter and nods.
“With chick’n!” he requests cheerfully.
“Adam?” Ronan asks, and when Adam nods jerkily, he holds his hands out to Ethan, “Hey bud,
come help me order, yeah?”
“Good idea,” Adam says, his voice is beginning to sound hoarse, “make sure Ronan doesn’t order
anything silly, ok?”
“Ok,” Ethan says, lets Ronan pluck him out of Adam’s lap. The two of them stride out of the room,
Ronan only just remembering to swipe his phone before they leave.

He orders way too much food, half trying to buy Adam a little more time, half unable to turn Ethan’s
suggestions down. They stay in Ronan’s bedroom - Ronan insisting that they definitely need to find
all the toy cars they can so they can drive them through cardboard Henrietta - until Adam appears in
the doorway. He’s back in control of his face again, and his smile almost looks real.
“Hey,” he says, squatting down on the floor next to Ethan, “what’re you guys up to?”
He won’t meet Ronan’s eye.

Their food arrives half an hour later, and Adam doesn’t even comment on how much food there is,
just presses a few crumpled notes into Ronan’s hand. The food cheers Ethan up completely, and
looks to lift Adam’s mood a little. Ronan can’t help but wish that Gansey were here. Or Noah. He
doesn’t know how to handle his own emotions half the time, let alone two other people’s when he
doesn’t know what their limits are. If Gansey were here, he could have stayed with Adam while
Ronan ordered food. He even wished Blue were here. Blue already knew all Adam’s secrets, it
seemed, she would have known what to do. After they eat, Ethan wants to chat with Chainsaw some
more, and Adam wants to finish his homework. This time they all pour into Ronan’s room, Adam
sitting cross legged on the floor with his books, Ethan and Ronan flopped on his bed with Chainsaw
hopping all over them. Although Ethan appears to be entirely happy again, he’s a little clingier than
he had been earlier. While before he had been happy to run around Ronan’s room, grabbing things
for Chainsaw, and generally causing havoc, now he stayed perched in Ronan’s lap. He’s asleep by
the time Adam finishes up. Chainsaw is perched on top of Ethan’s stomach, his hands folded gently
over her. Ethan sprawled on his back on Ronan’s legs.

“I’m sorry,” Adam says into the silence.
Ronan wants to throw something out the window. He can’t move for fear of waking Ethan and
Chainsaw.
“Nothing to be sorry about,” he grunts.
“God,” Adam sighs, shuts his books and pulls his knees up in front of him so he can bury his face in
them. “Don’t. Of course there is. I’m sorry you had to see any of that.”
“Parrish,” Ronan snaps, “What the fuck. I can deal with Ethan being upset. That’s not your fault. Or
his.”
“I know,” Adam mumbles into his knees, “that wasn’t- I’m not - God, Ronan. You shouldn’t have to
help clean up my messes.”
“What the fuck,” Ronan repeats, has to be careful to keep his voice level and low, “this isn’t exactly
your fucking mess.”
Adam makes a muffled noise which sounds a lot like a dismissal. God. Fuck. He needs Gansey here.
Gansey’s so much better at being smoothly comforting.
“And,” Ronan continues, doesn’t think there’s any point in picking an argument about whose fault
this is, “I don’t have to do anything. I wanted to help. Fuck, Adam, I’m your friend aren’t I?”
Adam makes another muffled noise. It doesn’t sound dismissive.
“It’s fine,” Ronan adds, it’s not fine at all, it’s the very opposite of fine, “look, chill out, ok? Shit happens. It’s fine.”
He can already hear Gansey telling him off for being so horribly coarse. Adam is lifting his head though, offering him a watery smile, Ronan surges on.
“Really, you were both probably hangry,” he says, “Ethan definitely cheered right up over food.”
“Yeah,” Adam agrees, “we should definitely have just eaten earlier.”
It’s not ok, it’s not ok, it’s not ok.
He grins back at Adam. “What time do you need to be back?”
“Hm,” Adam lifts his wrist, “should probably head off now. How gone is Ethan?”
“So gone,” Ronan replies, pokes Ethan’s cheek, “Chainsaw tired him out.”
“Looks like he exhausted her too,” Adam says, gathers his books, and stands up. “Want me to carry him out?”
“Nah, I got him.”

It feels horribly wrong to take the both of them back to the trailer, back to their parents. Ethan barely stirs when he’s strapped into his seat, or when he’s unstrapped. Ronan carries him, covered in Adam’s jacket, down the driveway just behind Adam and his bike. He doesn’t usually make this walk with the two of them, except after Nino’s, but Ethan’s asleep and he doesn’t want to leave Adam to juggle a bike, 2 bags, and a sleeping toddler. For once, there are lights on in the trailer when they get there, Ronan can see people moving about inside it as Adam props his bike up against the outside wall. He doesn’t want to hand Ethan over, doesn’t want Adam to take him inside. Doesn’t want Adam to go inside. He hands Ethan over.
“Are we seeing you guys tomorrow?” he asks, voice low.
“Maybe,” Adam says, “I still don’t really want Gansey to see this. But. Maybe. I’ll call from Boyd’s if I can make it, ok?”
It’s not ok.
“Ok,” Ronan says, nods, readjusts the jacket on Ethan’s shoulder, looks over Adam’s shoulder to see the face of a woman in the trailer window.
She has her sons’ eyes, but that’s all. Everything else about her looks unfamiliar, sharp and cold.
Adam glances over his shoulder, nods to his mother, and turns back to Ronan.
“See you,” he says.
“Parrish,” Ronan says, “you don’t have to st-”
“Lynch,” Adam interrupts, “thanks for today.”
Then he turns away, and carries Ethan up the stairs to the front door. His mother stays in the window, eyes Ronan up through the glass and dark as Adam walks inside.
Things have been done Wrong

Despite the fact that Blue Sargant had been friends - or at least very good acquaintances - with Adam for a few years now, and had been spending time regularly with Gansey, Ronan, and Noah, none of them had actually stepped foot within her house before, let alone her bedroom.

This is part of the reason why it takes her a good long moment to take in the fact that Noah is sitting on her bed. Not just that he is sitting on her bed, it’s not that he had walked in while her back was turned and sat down, or she had walked in and found him there, it’s more that she looked up from the book she was reading while curled up under her blankets and realised that there was a body sitting next to her, a hand on her arm.

She is not in the least bit ashamed to admit that she immediately screamed and hit him over the head with her book.

Before she, or Noah, had had a chance to recover from both the sudden appearance and the screaming, Persephone had opened Blue’s bedroom door, looked at them both, and then said; “Oh, he’s here,” and left again. They could both hear her calling down the stairs to the rest of the house that everything was fine. The rest of the yelling occurring in response was harder to decipher though.

“I’m sorry,” Noah says, suddenly very much not on Blue’s bed anymore. He’s pressed back against the far wall, staring down at his toes. Blue could have sworn he hadn’t actually moved.

“You should be!” Blue snapped, “What the hell were you thinking just… appearing like that?” and then, because this was Noah, and something about Noah made Blue feel a little softer, she swung her legs out of bed and frowned carefully over at him, “are you alright?” she asked.

“No,” Noah says, his voice is so quiet Blue feels like she could mistake it for the voice in her own head. “No,” Noah says again, “I haven’t been alright.”

Because this is Blue, and Blue has been raised by countless women who know which questions are the right questions, and which questions are the wrong questions, she asks, “how long haven’t you been alright?”

Noah is still looking at his feet, his entire face is in shadow. “Almost 8 years,” he says, “almost.”

Because this is Blue, and Blue has been raised in an environment particularly prone to picking up on not only emotional distress, but spiritual distress, distress so dire it seems to distort the air around it, she asks, “What happened almost 8 years ago, Noah?”

Part of her wishes he had kept looking at his feet, the rest of her feels somehow more at rest as he lifts his face to look at her. The smudge on his cheekbone, of what had seemed to be a birthmark, or a scar, or a lingering bruise, seems to have spread over his face. It hadn’t been that his face was in shadow earlier, it was shadow, spreading from the inside and bleeding out of his pale skin.

“I died,” he says, matter of factly. He’s shivering.

Because this is Blue, and Blue has been raised surrounded by spirits, and magic, had been made aware from very early childhood both of the curse of her being, and the gifts of her being, she holds her hand out to him.

He takes it, and for once the ice touch of his hand doesn’t just seem like an odd quirk of bad circulation, the lightness of his touch not just a feeling.

“This helps,” he says, voice still quiet, but growing a little fuller, “you help.”

“My power?” she asks, “You need it to be… around? Or not my power necessarily, but-“

“Yes,” Noah says, then, “something is going wrong on the line.”
Ronan had been reasonably certain that his night couldn’t get any worse, couldn’t have anymore curve balls to smash his face in with. He’d driven back home from Adam’s, regretting every metre he was putting between them. He wanted to go back for them at every stop sign, every red light. It wasn’t fair. He had known from the get go that Adam wasn’t normal, that Adam had something he felt needed to be kept secret, had something going on behind his carefully blank expression. He hadn’t expected any of this. He probably should have, but he couldn’t. It wasn’t fucking fair. He couldn’t get it out of his head. Ethan’s utter misery, his conviction that he, a 3 year old, was to blame for their parents smashing Adam’s face in. Adam’s confident comforting facade slowly crumbling as Ronan watched. It fucking wasn’t fucking fair. He wanted to call Matthew again. He wanted to see his mother. He wanted to see his father. He wanted to call Kavinsky and go racing until the speed had left his stomach and his emotions far behind in the dust. He had his phone out, his heart locked up, his thumb hovering over the ‘K’, when it rang in his hand.

Gansey.
He didn’t want to answer. He wasn’t allowed to talk to Gansey about this. Gansey would see right through him if he saw him right now, if he talked to him for too long.
“Dick?” he growled into his phone.
“Ronan,” Gansey huffed, it wasn’t a huff of frustration, more like of exertion, “are you home? Blue just called me. I’m heading to hers. Noah is there. Should I come pick you up first?”
None of this made sense. It didn’t fit in with the rest of the day.
“What?” he snapped.
“Noah turned up at Blue’s house. Apparently she’s… she’s like a conductor or something for the power that keeps Noah… alive? I’m not sure. She knows Noah is dead. Ronan. We have to tell her everything.”
“What.”
“Ronan, please.”
“Fuck, I’m on my way. I’m in town. I’ll see you there.”
Gansey hangs up without saying goodbye.
He throws his phone into the back seat, swings his car round, wide and screeching, and drives to Fox Way.
His phone is ringing in the back seat, he ignores it. It’ll be Gansey again, maybe he should answer it. He ignores it. It could be Kavinsky, somehow sensing Ronan’s weakness, his near call. He ignores it. Maybe, he thinks as it starts ringing for the sixth time, maybe it’s Matthew. Fuck. He pulls over briefly, he’s so fucking close to Blue’s he may as well have kept going, but he can’t help it, he needs to check.
It’s fucking Gansey. All of the calls were Gansey.
“What?”
“We should have Adam here too,” Gansey says, no preamble, “he deserves to hear everything at the same time as Jane.”
“Yeah,” Ronan snaps, “he does.”
“Can you go get him?” Gansey asks. He’s not really asking, he’s assuming that Ronan will just turn around and drive to Adam’s to pick him up. It’s not an unfair assumption to make, it does seem like the kind of thing Ronan would do.
“No,” he snaps, “he can’t come out tonight.”
“Right, I forgot,” Gansey says, disappointment dripping out of Ronan’s cellphone, “we should talk to him as soon as possible.”
Ronan pulls back out onto the road. He could hang up now and continue this conversation in a block and a half, face to face.
“What about waiting to talk to Noah?” he asks.
“Noah already told Blue,” Gansey says, “I don’t think he’d be against telling Adam. Of course we’ll ask him though. Are you close?”
Ronan doesn’t bother replying. He can see the Camaro. He hangs up and throws his phone back into
the backseat.

Blue is out front, waiting for them, it’s how it usually works. They turn up in the Camaro, Blue is sitting on the step outside her house. Sometimes they see various ladies and children poking out windows to gape, sometimes one of the women will glare at them.
Tonight, Blue is standing in her open door, a collection of her family standing behind her, Noah crowded against her side, gripping her hand. Gansey is getting out of his car. Ronan doesn’t want to get out of his car.
He gets out of his car.

Noah is somehow managing to look both more dead than usual, and more alive than usual at the same time. It’s disconcerting to look at. Everything about the scene they are in is disconcerting. Ok, so he’d accepted that Blue’s family probably weren’t hacks. That they were probably on some level au fait with the kind of magic and mythology he and Gansey dabbled in on a daily basis. It was different knowing this in the back of his mind, and having to sit in something called ‘the reading room’, while three equally strange women talked at them about all their secrets. Well. Most of their secrets.

Gansey appeared to be torn between being ecstatic and befuddled at this turn of events.
“So it’s all real, then?” he asks at one point, “Glendower, ley lines, all of it?”
All three of the women scoff as one. The most formidable looking one, shook her head at them, and the one who looked a little like a mirage spoke quietly.
“If that was a question you really needed answering, you wouldn’t be here,” she said.

Ronan did not want to be here.

Noah was sitting on a squashy chair opposite the couch Ronan and Gansey were perched on. He was all but glued to Blue’s side. Blue, although she was surely understanding a lot more of this mystic bullshit than Ronan was, still looked confused, and very worried.
Despite the fact that he was the one who had refused to get Adam, Ronan wished he were here anyway. Yeah, he was newer to all of this than Ronan, and didn’t seem to really believe in any of it - or at least not as vehemently as him and Gansey - he understood the academic side far better, and he was more level headed than Gansey about it.
Everything was being explained, and absolutely nothing was being explained, and everything was kind of shitty but also kind of amazing, and it was doing his fucking head in.
He was having enough trouble trying to wrap his head around the idea that Blue was like some sort of fucking power outlet - good at making psychic readings louder and reviving ghosts, both, apparently. Trying to wrap his head around the idea that Blue probably understood a lot more about their field trips and quests than she had ever let on, that she could have suggested they talk to her family before now.
It didn’t matter that he was already both mentally and emotionally overloaded, the information and surprises kept on coming.
They knew about the ley lines. But they weren’t ley lines. It was a corpse road. It was a ley line, but it had a different name. Glendower was connected to it, is connected to it, or, the line, the road, is connected to Glendower, is connected to magic, to readings.
Although it’s Blue’s mother, Maura, that does the majority of the talking, the explaining, and the formidable one, Calla who does the majority of the glowering, it’s the third one who keeps drawing his attention. Persephone. She’s doing it on purpose. He’s trying to concentrate on keeping up with this shit that’s going on, trying not to explode about every strange word, and she keeps raising her eyebrows at him. Keeps tilting her head at him like she’s trying to ask a question. It’s driving him fucking nuts. He can’t keep still in his seat.
“Ants in your pants?” Calla snaps at him, and he glares ferociously at her. She’s the least disconcerting of all three of them, but also the one he finds himself the most wary of. He does not want to respond to her. Instead he swivels his glare to Persephone.

“What’re you staring at?” he asks her. Possibly snaps at her. Gansey puts his hand on his knee, comforting, calming, and intensely irritating. He can feel Blue’s glare even across the room. Persephone is unmoved.

“I was wondering where Adam was,” she says vaguely, “and you know the most.”

Now Ronan shifts his glare to Blue, her own glare meets him half-way.

“What the heck is that look for?” Blue spits at him, they both ignore the mild protestations from their various onlookers.

Ronan thinks his cause of annoyance should be obvious.

“Why is she asking about Parrish?” he asks.

Everyone in the room is looking at him as if he’s a few sandwiches short of a picnic.

“Uh,” Blue says sarcastically, “because we all know him. His existence isn’t limited to Nino’s, you know.”

Maura chips in here, “We see him around quite often,” she says, “and seeing as he’s part of your dead king scavenger hunt, surely it would make sense for him to be around now?”

“He’s important,” Persephone adds.

Gansey is looking at him as if to say, ‘I told you so’. Or maybe he’s not. Maybe he’s just imagining that.

“We would appreciate if you’d keep a civil tongue in your head,” Calla is saying to him, “or I’ll make sure it’s civil out of your head.”

“Calla,” Maura says.

“Maura,” Calla says.

“We’re done here tonight,” Persephone says, “things have been done wrong.”

“What does that mean?” Gansey asks. He’s been on the edge of his seat since they’d sat down, but now he looks on the verge of falling off it.

“It means you boys suck at sitting still and listening,” Calla growls.

Maura rolls her eyes.

“It means,” Persephone says, “this isn’t the only way this has gone.”

It’s not much of a clarification. Calla is already standing, sweeping her way out of the room. Maura is still seated, she’s pinning Gansey to his seat with a steely gaze.

“You know,” she says firmly, “I told Blue not to tell you any of this.”

“Mum,” Blue protests.

Persephone has somehow managed to leave the room without anyone noticing.

“It’s dangerous,” Maura continues, ignoring Blue, “I told her to avoid you all completely, actually, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“Miss Sargant,” Gansey begins, “I promise I will do my utmost best to make sure Ja-”

“Stop that,” Maura says, she’s rolling her eyes again, “I don’t want your promises here. I trust Blue to stay as safe as possible within these circumstances. I just wanted to let you know that I disapprove, and to point out that you might not be taking this seriously enough. One of you is already dead because of your quest.”

Gansey’s hand, which hadn’t shifted from Ronan’s knee, tightens around bone. “Noah died before any of this,” he says, not quite stiffly - his voice is too well cultured to be stiff while talking to adults he wants to impress. “Unless you’re talking about me, no one else is going to die.”

Maura looks entirely unimpressed. Noah looks entirely uncomfortable. For that matter, so does Blue. Noah speaks, he’s been quiet almost this whole time, and his voice is surprising.

“That’s not what he means,” he says. He’s talking to Blue, to Maura, and it makes no sense to Ronan even as he sees Maura’s face shift into something a little like realisation. Blue’s plain discomfort shifts into uncomfortable confusion instead.

“What do you mean?” she asks, first of Noah, then turns to Gansey, “What do you mean, ‘unless you’re talking about me?’”
This is Gansey’s most and least favourite story. Most favourite because it’s his origin story. It’s how he stumbled upon what turned into the most important thing in his life. It led him all around the world, to Henrietta. It’s his least favourite because, of course, he died, and dying is not a fun thing to remember. It’s his least favourite because Ronan still wakes him up from nightmares about it sometimes. His hand is tight on Ronan’s leg.

“Well,” Gansey says, “I’m deathly allergic to wasps. I didn’t discover this until I was ten, and stood in a wasp nest.” he shrugs. “I heard Glendower speak to me,” he says, “he told me, ‘You will live because of Glendower. Someone else on the ley line is dying when they should not, and so you will live when you should not’.” He’s speaking almost haltingly. He’s usually much better at telling this story. “That’s how it all started,” he says, “because I died, and Glendower brought me back to life. So I’m going to repay the favour by finding him. No one else is going to die.”

-Chainsaw is fucking pissed when they get back. It only feels appropriate given Ronan’s mood. Luckily for her, her mood is vastly improved with food and attention. Ronan’s however, is very quickly going even further downhill the more attention Gansey gives him. He’s sitting on Ronan’s bed, trying very hard to talk to him about the evening’s events. Noah is perched on Ronan’s windowsill. He isn’t trying to add to Gansey’s one sided conversation, still seems to be in some sort of vague shock.

“This changes everything,” Gansey is saying, “there’s so much more they can tell us about all of this. We should tell them about your dreaming too.”
God. Fuck. Shut the fuck up.

“And Ronan,” Gansey seems to know he’s treading on very thin ice here, he’s absentmindedly picking at loose threads on Ronan’s duvet cover, “maybe we should take Adam and Blue to the forest. To Cabeswater. Or we should tell Maura about it? We know it’s connected, kind of like Noah, how it keeps disappearing. Maybe they could help us keep it more corporeal-”
They can’t take Adam to Cabeswater. They can’t bring Adam into this. It’s too much shit right now, it’s too large and all encompassing. Adam doesn’t have the time for it, the energy for it. It’s not fair. It’s not fair. It’s not fucking fair.

“Stop,” Ronan snaps. Chainsaw glares balefully at him, “I know you’re all sorts of orgasmic over this right now, but I’m not in the fucking mood. God.” He’s still cradling Chainsaw to his chest, can’t slam his fists into the wall like he’d like to. He drops his head against it instead with a loud thunk. He’s not actually mad at Gansey. Or at Gansey’s enthusiasm. God is he mad though.

“Ronan-” Gansey begins.

“Stop,” Ronan says again, “I’m as pleased as you are that Noah is back, and that maybe Maggot’s wacko family of witches can help him out, I’m even pleased that you’ve got something more to go on for your boyfriend, but I really. Don’t. Want. To. Talk.”
Chainsaw assists in punctuating his words with croaky caws.
There’s silence behind him for a few moments. He can hear Gansey’s slow breathing.

“Ok,” he says eventually, “you’re in a shit mood, ok. I didn’t think it was just me who was invested in finding Glendower, though.”
He’s not leaving. He’s still sitting on Ronan’s bed, breathing evenly and waiting for Ronan to stop being a shit apparently.

“Whatever,” Ronan snaps, clears his throat, “God. Yes. I’m in it with you.” he doesn’t lift his head from the wall.

“Ok,” Gansey says again, “uh, do you want to… talk about what’s got you so shitty?”

“No,” Ronan says, then, “those witches were so fucking judgy.”

“They barely said anything to you,” Gansey protested softly.
Ronan grunts in reply.

“Ronan,” Gansey says. He’s got his captain voice on. The one that commands obedience, yet somehow comes off as friendly, “this isn’t about the psychics and Glendower at all, is it?”
“What part of, I don’t want to talk, did you have trouble with?” Ronan says with venom he doesn’t feel. Gansey is standing right behind him, hand on his shoulder, tugging him away from the wall.
“We don’t have to talk about it,” Gansey offers, “just, tell me if something happened? You were fine this afternoon.”
“I’m fine now,” Ronan says, it’s not really a lie. It just depends on how you define fine.
“Sure,” Gansey says, “nothing happened? Did Declan call?”
“No,” Ronan says, sighs, lets Gansey pull him over to his bed, sit him down. “God, Gansey. Sorry for fucking raining on your parade. I’ll be excited about this shit later, ok? I just want to sleep right now.” Ok, that was a lie.
“Are you going to church, tomorrow?” Gansey asks, Ronan nods. “But you’ll be home in the afternoon?” Ronan nods. “Should we drop into Boyd’s during Adam’s shift, see if he’s available to come over tomorrow?”
“He said he’d call,” Ronan mumbles, “if he’s free. I saw him today.”
Gansey just frowns at him.
“I needed Ethan’s car seat from the Pig,” Ronan continues, even as he’s telling himself to shut up, “I’m sure you noticed it was gone from your car. I drove them home.”
“Ok,” Gansey says. Doesn’t ask the rest of the questions Ronan can practically see in his mouth, “so we’ll wait for his call. If he does, we should get Blue over as well.”
“Yeah,” Ronan says. He should tell Gansey what’s going on with Adam. Explain why none of this is a good idea.
“Do you… want to go for a drive?” Gansey asks, and Ronan finally cracks a smile. It’s a very sweet offer.
“Can I drive the Pig?” he asks, knows the answer.
“Why would you even ask that?”
“Someday I think I’ll ask you, and you’ll just absent mindedly agree. I’ve gotta keep trying is all.”
“It’s never going to happen, Ronan.”
“Well,” Ronan shrugs, “you can’t blame me for trying. Orange juice?”
“Ok. You can choose the music if we go in the Pig.”
Fair enough.
“Ok,” Ronan nods, “Noah, you coming?”
Despite the fact that Adam didn’t have a cellphone, Gansey had insisted on giving him his number anyway, just in case. It had come in useful, Adam often called from Boyd’s, to say he would be running late, or coming early, or that he had to be home earlier. Ronan hadn’t realised that Gansey had given Adam his number as well, until his phone rang after church.
It was a local number that Ronan didn’t recognise, and on any other day, he would have ignored it, or cancelled the call, assuming it had to be a misdial. Today he knew better.
“Adam?” he asked, before he could consider how stupid he would sound if he didn’t, in fact, know better.
“Oh,” Adam replied, sounding shocked and tinny over the phone speaker, “how did you know it was me?”
“I’ve been hanging out with the psychics, it’s rubbed off on me.”
“Never knew it was contagious,” Adam replies, then, “about this afternoon-”
Ronan interrupts. “Something’s happened,” he says, “it’s kind of a big deal. Gansey really wants you over today. He’s got - we’ve got some shit to tell you.”
“What?” Adam sounds worried, “What’s happened? Are you guys ok?”
“Yes,” Ronan says, reconsiders, “No. But yes, but... God. It’s really hard to explain over the phone. Look, if you come over, everyone’s gonna be way too distracted with this shit to give a crap about your face. So don’t worry about that.”
“What the hell?” Adam snaps, “Ronan? Is someone hurt?”
“Gansey’ll explain. I’ll come pick you up,” Ronan says, “at 4?”
“What the hell?” Adam repeats, “Lynch-”
“Please?”
“Lynch, if this is going to be... dangerous or something, I can’t bring Ethan.”
“It’s not going to be dangerous,” Ronan says, can’t help but tell the truth, “not today, anyway.”
“What the hell.”
“What?”

Adam does not look pleased when he gets into the passenger seat of the BMW. Part of this is probably due to the swelling of his face, but Ronan is under no false pretences about his own role in Adam’s bad mood.
“Ok,” Adam says, buckles his seatbelt up with excess force, “please tell me you didn’t murder anyone.”
“What? No.” Ronan snapped, fumbled the clutch and pulled out of Boyd’s accompanied by a hideous screeching. “I didn’t do the murdering.”
“Lynch,” Adam says, voice muffled, his face is in his hands, “tell me that that was a bad joke.”
“It... was?” Ronan tried, bit his lip, “None of us did any murdering.”
“That is not reassuring,” Adam tells him, not quite loud enough to classify as yelling.
“I’m sorry,” Ronan says, means it, “everything is just... really fucked up right now.”
“Your vague and ominous statements aren’t helping. Just tell me what’s going on.”
“I’m... not sure where to start,” Ronan says, knows it’s obvious that he’s playing for time. He wishes he’d gotten Gansey to pick Adam up. But, if Adam totally freaked out and bailed after hearing everything Gansey wanted to tell him, then this would probably be the last time Ronan would get to see him. He was possibly being dramatic. He was probably being dramatic. He was definitely being dramatic. Just because he was being dramatic didn’t mean it wouldn’t come true.
“I usually tell Ethan to start at the beginning,” Adam says grumpily.
“I would,” Ronan says, “but I’m not sure where the beginning is, myself.”
Adam looks like he’s about to blow a fuse. Very quietly though.
“Lynch,” he says, “have you lured me into your car on false pretences? Is there actually an...emergency going on? Stop fucking stringing me on.”
“It’s about Glendower,” Ronan says quickly, “and it’s all going to sound stupid, and like I’m stringing you on, and I don’t know how to start telling you any of this without you thinking I’m crazy, or joking. Gansey is so much better at this than I am.”
“So,” Adam says, “I can wait until we get to Gansey. Just tell me everyone’s fine.”
“Um,” Ronan says, “everyone is fine.”
It’s not really a lie.

After they pick Ethan up, the conversation shifts to what Ethan did with his day, and what he had for lunch, and what he dreamed last night. Ronan both loves and hates this. He loves this, because it feels so natural, so easy. He hates this because in just a short while, Adam was going to see how extremely unnatural and not easy Ronan was, Gansey was, Noah was, even Blue was. No matter what Gansey thought, there was no way Adam had enough time for anything that wouldn’t easily fit into the few spare cracks of time in his life.
“Blue’s at Monmouth too,” Ronan tells both the Parrish’s. The two of them react very differently.
“‘Lue!” Ethan cries out gleefully.
Adam shoots Ronan a very sharp look, “Does she already know what’s going on?”
“Um,” Ronan says, tries to keep his tone cheerful for Ethan, “she was kinda there when some...stuff went down?”
“Right,” Adam nods.

Things go downhill a lot faster than Ronan had expected. Possibly he ought to have warned Gansey about the state of Adam’s face. He hadn’t wanted to be drawn into a conversation in which he might break his promise to Adam, though.

The look Adam sent Ronan was not quite pure poison, but pretty ferocious anyway.
“It’s nothing,” Adam said, smiling in what he obviously thought was a reassuring way.
“That’s not nothing,” Gansey says, sounding somewhat affronted.
“Dick,” Blue hisses.
“You look dreadful!” Gansey continues loudly, “Who did this?”
In response to Gansey’s blatant horror, Adam’s near tangible unease, Ethan starts crying. Nothing dramatic. Just very soft sniffling from his position behind Adam’s legs. Adam reached around himself to place his hand on the top of Ethan’s head, offering reassurance before he spoke to the floor. “I don’t want to talk about it in front of Ethan.” he says diplomatically, “Ronan says there’s something you wanted to tell me about Glendower?”

First of all, Adam seems to think it’s an elaborate prank. His gaze shifts from face to face, looking for the cracks and the grins to begin. Then he asks if everyone was high. Then Noah, quite accidentally, dropped out of existence again right in front of Adam. They hadn’t quite gotten to that point of the story yet, either. It was a mess. There wasn’t any yelling. Adam wasn’t a yeller, or at least, he wasn’t a yeller in front of Ethan. He kept his voice impressively level the entire time. Level enough that Ethan doesn’t really notice anything major is going on behind his back. Adam believes Blue over Gansey. It doesn’t matter that Gansey has thousands of dollars of education and research around these subjects - Blue is the one he believes to tell him the truth. Doesn’t stop him from shaking his head the entire time she spoke though. Ronan doesn’t want to take part. He spends the entire conversation sitting on the floor amongst mini-Henrietta with Ethan and the toy cars they’d gathered
up yesterday. Gansey doesn’t try to drag him into it, possibly because he’s aware that they need to keep Ethan distracted because Adam obviously doesn’t want Ethan involved, possibly because he’s aware that Ronan really, really, really doesn’t want to be doing this.

In the end, it doesn’t really seem to matter that Adam believes them. It doesn’t seem to matter that Blue explained it to him carefully, or that Gansey explained it to him academically, or that Noah explained it to him demonstratively.

He says, “I’m really sorry, Gansey.”
He says, “Maybe if circumstances were different.”
He says, “It’s not like that, Blue, I do believe y’all. I just - I can’t.”
He says, “Don’t. You know I can’t.”
He says, “Lynch. Could you drop us home?”

Ethan isn’t pleased to be leaving so soon, but he keeps his complaining to the minimum. Ronan had always been impressed by how easily Ethan kept his temper tantrums in check - even mild mannered Matthew had been more prone to tantrums. Now he knew at least some of the truth behind Ethan’s family life though, it only made him feel ill.

“Parrish,” Ronan tries, once they’ve driven a few blocks away from Monmouth.
“Don’t,” Adam says. He’s sitting in the back with Ethan, looking far more tired than he had when Ronan had picked him up.

Ronan manages to keep his mouth shut for the remainder of the drive back. He can’t stop himself from glancing back at Adam in the rear view mirror at every opportunity though. Searching for any sign that maybe things will be ok. He knows they’re not. He knew they wouldn’t be. He didn’t even get to tell Adam about himself. About his dreams. When he pulls up at the end of the driveway, he’s terrified that Adam is about to unbuckle himself and Ethan, and then walk right out of Ronan’s life. Instead, Adam just sits there, one hand on his seatbelt buckle, one hand on the side of Ethan’s carseat, a sick expression on his face.

“Adam,” Ronan tries again. Adam meets his eyes in the mirror.
“Don’t try and change my mind, Lynch,” he says.
“I wasn’t going to,” Ronan replied, drops his eyes from Adam’s, “are we going to see you again?”
“It’s not like I’m going anywhere,” Adam says, he’s taking his seatbelt off now, “I’ll still be at Nino’s.”

Ronan turns in his seat to watch as Adam begins unbuckling Ethan. “Don’t act dumb,” he says, “you know what I mean.”
“Yeah,” Adam agrees, and for a moment relief sweeps through Ronan’s lungs, “I do,” Adam continues, “I can’t, Ronan. Not while… not while this is going on. You all say it’s going to be dangerous. I can’t do that. Not with-” he sighs. Doesn’t look at Ronan as he gets out of the car and reaches back in, first for his backpack, then for Ethan’s day bag, and then for Ethan.

Ronan gets out of the car. He intends to take the bags from Adam, but Ethan reaches for him instead. He thinks, just very briefly, that Adam won’t let Ethan go, but then Ethan is wrapping his arms around Ronan’s neck.
There’s no dawdling, as much as Ronan would like there to be. Adam hoists the bags up on his shoulders and starts walking, even as Ronan is quickly locking his car.
“You know,” Adam says to the gravel in front of him, “the day we first met-
“When I burst into the diner yelling?” Ronan asked, “Or the first time you had to take Gansey’s terrible pizza order?”
“Neither,” Adam sighed, “the time you called me a dad, and pissed Blue off.”
“Oh,” Ronan said, “what about it?”
“The next day Blue told me that Persephone - who you’ve apparently now met - did a reading or...something, and said that that day changed my entire life somehow.”
“Oh,” Ronan said, didn’t know how else he was supposed to reply. Why Adam would tell him this. What this meant.
“Tought it was all bullsh- bull,” Adam admitted drily, “I don’t think that anymore.”
They walked in silence for a few steps more.
“Because of Glendower?” Ronan asked.
“Hey,” Adam said in lieu of replying, “if Noah doesn’t - if I don’t see Noah again, tell him I’m sorry I didn’t say goodbye, yeah?”
“You’ll see him again,” Ronan insisted, “we’ll come to Nino’s.”
“Mm,” Adam said, “It just - it just sounds like whatever’s going on - it’s getting worse. I don’t want him to waste his energy coming to a greasy diner.”
“He happens to like that greasy diner,” Ronan objected, realises he’s out of time for objecting, they’re barely metres away from Adam’s front porch. Ethan’s arms are mercilessly tight around his neck. “Bud,” he says, turns his attention to the boy in his arms, “you ok?”
Adam stops, he’d been walking a few steps ahead of them both, now he turns around to look at them.
Ethan nods against the side of Ronan’s face. “Not seeing No-ah?” he asks, and Ronan watches as Adam’s face twitches from steadily serious into sad.
“I dunno, sweetheart,” he says.
“I wanna see him,” Ethan says, “didn’t say bye.”
“I know,” Adam soothes, steps closer until he can put his hand against Ethan’s cheek, “he had to go, ‘cos he wasn’t feeling good. Maybe when he’s feeling better we can see him again.”
Despite the comfort of Adam’s hand, Ethan’s grip on Ronan doesn’t lessen, neither does the magnitude of his pout.
“What about,” he sniffs, “what about ‘lue?”
“You said bye to Blue,” Adam points out, and Ethan shakes his head.
“We seein’ ‘lue again?” he asks.
“Oh,” Adam frowns, “of course we are.”
“An’ Gans?” Ethan presses on.
Adam’s frown deepens, but his voice softens, and he shifts his palm from Ethan’s cheek up to his curls instead. “Maybe not for a little bit,” he says, “he might be busy.”
Ronan wants so badly to intervene. To say that of course they weren’t going to be busy. Of course they were going to see Ethan again very soon. But if Adam didn’t want them to, then of course they weren’t. God. Who knows, maybe if they came to Nino’s too often now, Adam would just leave Ethan at home. Maybe he’d think it would be safer.
“An’ Ro’an?” Ethan asks. Ronan looks at his feet. He had thought Ethan’s grip was tight earlier, now he wasn’t sure he could breathe - not that it mattered, because he didn’t really want to anyway.
“I-” Adam falters, “I don’t know, baby,” he says, and now Ronan definitely can’t breathe.
“But-” Ethan begins, Ronan agrees.
“Why don’t you ask him?” Adam suggests.
Oh. He has to breathe to speak. Ethan is staring up at him. Adam is staring at his jaw. He needs Adam to meet his eyes so he knows what Adam wants him to say.
“Ro’an?” Ethan asks.
Adam is not fucking looking up.
“Of course, bud,” Ronan says, “I’ll see you again really soon. You said you were gonna help teach Chainsaw tricks, remember?”
“Yeah,” Ethan says, his relief visible on his face, in his slackened arms.
Adam doesn’t look mad, but his gaze is still focused on Ronan’s jaw, his face is becoming blank.
“Adam,” Ronan begins, but is interrupted before he can get any further.
“Adam!” a voice yells out into the slowly darkening evening, “Stop fucking about and get your ass in here.”
Oh.
Adam doesn’t turn around. Ethan’s arms cinch back into painful tightness. Ronan sees Robert
Parrish for the first time, in the front door of his trailer. He’s stocky. He looks like Adam, if Adam was heavier, if Adam was about 70% duller, if Adam’s face was indented with frowning. If Adam looked like he was made up of Henrietta soil - all warm browns, his tan skin, his scattered freckles, his dirt coloured hair - Robert was made up of Henrietta dust.

Adam doesn’t turn around, he just holds his hands out for Ethan, and Ronan does not want to let go of him, does not want to let go, wants to grab onto Adam as well. He hands Ethan over even as Ethan’s fingers dig into his shoulder.

“Get that fag off of my lawn,” Robert is yelling, “how fucking dare you let a piece of punk looking shit like that hold my son?”

Adam looks like he might be about to vomit. Ronan feels like he might be about to vomit.

“I’ll call you,” Adam says, it’s unexpected enough that for a moment Ronan forgets that he feels like he might be about to vomit, then Adam says, “leave. Just go.”

Adam is turning around. Adam is walking towards his father. His father is still yelling. Ethan is shrinking in Adam’s arms. Ronan is turning around. Ronan is walking away from the trailer.

The yelling stops before he’s even half way down the driveway, and only then does he let himself breathe properly. He stops, stands in the middle of the road, stares at the trailers around him. He could hear every fucking word, clear as day, even as he walked away from it, even as it moved behind closed doors. Surely everyone in this whole fucking park could hear it. Surely everyone here knew what was going on. No doors were opening. No one looked worried. He was definitely going to vomit, and he didn’t want to do it here.

He makes it to his car, and then he makes it into town, and then he makes it to Monmouth, and then he throws up on the weeds in their parking lot.

He expects that Blue and Gansey will be fighting it out inside. Not anything loud or violent of course, just simmering and spitting about how they ought to have handled that whole scenario. He’s not expecting his day to just continue getting worse. He probably should have.

He walks in on Noah halfway through his death scene. He’s seen it once before. Once was more than enough. From the look on Gansey’s face, he’s never seen it before. Blue looks like she too needs to go retch into the weeds outside.

“It’ll stop soon,” Ronan says, announcing his return with what he hopes won’t turn out to be a lie. Gansey can’t seem to tear his eyes away from the thrashing on the floor, but Blue looks to him immediately, eyes glinting.

“He’s done this before?” she asks. Her voice doesn’t shake at all.

“Yeah,” he walks along behind the couch so he doesn’t have to walk too close to the unfolding scene, “only once that I know of though,” he adds, and now Gansey looks at him.

“You’ve seen this before?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says again. He knows Gansey is really asking why he hadn’t told him about this, why this wasn’t something they had looked into, why Ronan was keeping secrets. Sometimes. When Gansey’s nightmares got really bad, he would re-enact his own death scene. Unconsciously. Realistically. It looked quite similar to Noah’s, although the circumstances were wildly different. Ronan did not want to trigger these dreams.

“He won’t remember this,” Ronan says after a few empty seconds in which no one makes eye contact, no one looks at the spot of floor that Noah is inhabiting. “Or at least,” he continues, “he didn’t last time. He doesn’t mean to do this.”

“Do you think it’s to do with his disappearances?” Blue asks, “If he and the corpse r- the ley lines were more stable, do you think this would stop as well?”

Noah is standing in front of them, cheek smashed in, his smile says he’s unaware of his appearance. “Do you think what would stop?” he asks. Thank God Adam is gone. Thank God Ethan is gone.

Later, after Blue has gone home, and Noah’s cheek has faded back into a bruise rather than a gash, Ronan perches on the end of Gansey’s bed.
“I do understand,” Gansey is saying dolefully, “I know Ethan has to come first. What I don’t get is why this would have to effect Ethan.”
Ronan shrugs.
“Are you worried about Matthew?” Gansey asks him. He’s not trying to make a point, he’s genuinely asking.
“I’m always worried about Matthew,” Ronan replies, “but not about this, no. But,” he says, before Gansey can continue, “Matthew’s not dependant on me.”
“Well,” Gansey says, “Ethan shouldn’t be dependant on Adam.”
“Yeah,” Ronan agrees, “but he is.”
“Why?”
“Why would I know?” Ronan shoots back, “You’re the one always holing up with Parrish and your hundreds of books. Shouldn’t you know?”
The look Gansey gives him is very telling.
“Perhaps,” he says, “but he’s more comfortable with you.”
Well. That was good to know. But probably moot now. It didn’t matter, Adam wasn’t comfortable with any of them now.
“It’s not my business,” Ronan says, then, because he knows this will distract Gansey, “should we go check on Cabeswater tomorrow?”
What was Important

The only thing Adam had been grateful for on Monday, was that he didn’t have English class, and therefore, wouldn’t have to see Blue. It wasn’t that he was mad at her. Well. He was a little. He was mad that he had known her for years now, and she had never made an effort to convince him that psychics were real. That wasn’t fair. He knew that. It wasn’t her job to make his mind up for him. She had told him her truth, and left it up to him to decide if he believed in it, and he had refused to make that decision. He was mad that he hadn’t realised just how truthful she had always been with him, even when she must have known how he was keeping so much from her.

Blue didn’t bother waiting for Adam to come to her this time. She sought him out at lunch, even though he’d avoided the cafeteria in favour of the quiet library. She must have known he was trying to avoid her, but it didn’t stop her.
“You hiding?” she asked as she sat down next to him, pulling a sandwich out of her bag.
“We’re not allowed to eat in here,” Adam replied.
Blue raised her eyebrows and took a pointedly large bite.
“I don’t want to talk about it,” Adam said. Then he had to wait for Blue to finish chewing the pointedly large bite, and swallow it.
“I’m not going to try and change your mind about it,” she said eventually, “you’re right that it could be dangerous to get involved in. Mum thinks you’re doing the right thing.”
“But you don’t?”
“No,” Blue says, “no, I do think you are. Well. I think you’re doing the only thing you can do. Not the best thing.”
“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with that,” Adam sighed. He had been trying to get next period’s homework done, but he had hardly been able to concentrate on that before Blue had turned up. He definitely wasn’t going to get it done now, so he shut the book, and leaned back in his seat to look her over. She didn’t look as frustrated as he had been expecting.
“Neither do I,” Blue admits through another mouthful of sandwich. Adam tries not to look as frustrated as he feels. None of this is actually Blue’s fault.
“Adam,” Blue says, “Persephone is asking about you.”
Somehow, Adam isn’t surprised. “What is she asking about?”
“Well,” Blue says, abandons her sandwich on the table in favour of digging out a yogurt from the bottom of her bag. The sandwich has only two bites out of it. “It’s a little hard to tell, honestly. She wants to know how your face is, and if you have at any point taken Gansey’s car for a joyride.”
“Oh,” Adam says, skips over the question about his face, “No? Is this something she sees in my future?”
“Hm,” Blue hummed, ripping off the yogurt cover, “I dunno. She was kinda vague about it. She also asked if Gansey had broken his thumb at any point recently. She’s not a fan of explaining herself.”
“Is anyone at Fox Way big on explanations?” Adam mumbled, very carefully not eying the sandwich up. There had been no breakfast that morning. No dinner the night previous either, apparently Robert didn’t appreciate the way Ronan had looked at him, didn’t appreciate Adam having anyone walk anywhere with him.
Blue snorted, and then tipped the yogurt up to slurp it straight out of the container. It’s far too slurpy to be eating in a library. Adam can only hope that the librarian is otherwise occupied and not about to pounce on them. He had a reputation to keep up.
“Only if it’s someone else giving the explanation,” she said, “and even then, only to watch you squirm. They already know what you’re going to say.” Then she said, “Eat the darn sandwich, will you?”
Because it was Blue, and Blue never wore a look made out of pity and money, and was capable of being more stubborn than Adam in concentrated bursts - Adam ate the rest of the sandwich without
It wasn’t exactly the first time Adam had turned up to school bruised and swollen, but he thought perhaps his teachers had decided they would only pay attention every 8th or so time. This usually worked out reasonably well for him. The rest of the student populace had by now learned that neither teasing or pity went down well, and generally left him and his bruises alone. Adam definitely preferred it when the teachers did the same, when they kept their comments confined to class and extra credit. Sadly, this turned out to be the 8th time, or whatever arbitrary rule they had in place for calling him out of class to talk to the school counselor and his homegroup teacher together. He didn’t know why they bothered, really. Nothing ever came out of these meetings except for mutual frustration. It was exhausting having to tighten up his ‘everything is perfectly fine’ act, even just for ten minutes.

“Oh, everything is perfectly fine,” he said, smiling as pleasantly as he could through a distorted mouth, “I fell off my bike. I wasn’t paying attention. I know it looks bad, but it barely hurts.”

“Mr Parrish,” the guidance counselor, Leanna, said gently, “I certainly sympathise with clumsiness, it’s just difficult to believe that you can be accidentally injuring yourself so frequently.”

Kerry, his homegroup teacher, chimed in here. “We’re not here to try and make things harder for you, Adam,” she said, “We’re simply worried about your wellbeing, and your education. It must be difficult to get work done while you’re hurt. If we can, we would like to help you find a way to avoid this sort of situation.”

In the past few days, Adam has had far too many conversations he did not want to have. “Like I said,” he smiled, “I just wasn’t paying attention. I’m not having any trouble keeping up with the school workload. I am a little worried about missing class though,” he added.

“Mr Parrish,” Leanna tried again, “if there is anything worrying you, you are welcome to tell either myself or Mrs Green here about it. We want to see you succeed, you’re doing so well in your classes.”

“Thank you,” Adam said, “may I go back to class now?”

“Alright, Adam,” Kerry said, “I’ll see you at school tomorrow. Look after yourself.”

“Yes ma’am,” Adam said, “thank you ma’am.”

Sometimes he wondered if he ought to just make up some imaginary feud with someone from another school. Or say he was part of something stupid like a fight club. Or that he skateboarded and was terrible at it.

He went back to class.

Blue didn’t bring the boys or Glendower up again at Nino’s. They went back to their in between customer chats about science and the future. Gansey didn’t show up, neither did Ronan, neither did Noah. Adam cycled home. Ethan was in his bed, not asleep, waiting for him to get back. They slept.

The next morning, they went through their daily routine as usual. None of the events of the last few days should have effected this at all, so Adam did his best not to let it. Who cared if Glendower was possibly still alive, asleep somewhere in Henrietta? Ethan still had to be dressed and fed before going to Dana’s. It didn’t matter that Gansey had died and come back to life, that Noah was dead, and not dead, Adam still had to make it to class on time. There was no point dwelling on the fact that Gansey probably thought he was a coward, that Ronan was disappointed in him, he still had to go to Boyd’s and smile at his customers. It was all fine, so long as Ethan was fine. And he was. He told Adam all about his day, about the adventures he and Mari and Shelby went on under the furniture, about the
chalk drawings they did, about lunch. He calmly in the garage at home with Adam while Adam did his chores. He stopped talking the moment Robert walked in. He crawled behind the wheel of the car so Robert couldn’t see him. Ok. He wasn’t completely fine, but this level of un-fine was normal. He was alive, and in no imminent danger of physical or super-natural harm. That was what was important. In a few years, if Adam could keep up the constant cycle of home, school, work, Ethan, he could take Ethan away and maybe then Ethan could be more than fine. This is what was important. The possibility that this could happen. That maybe, just maybe, they could make it happen. This is what Adam reminded himself as he served tables that night. As he seated another group of Raven boys in the booth he had started to think of as Gansey’s court. As he watched Blue slip out into the parking lot on her break to speak to someone in an orange car, and then come back inside for the both of them to pretend that it didn’t happen. Adam goes home. Ethan is in his bed, not asleep, Adam strokes his hair until he falls to sleep. Adam sleeps.

On Friday, Blue corners him at work, during a relatively quiet moment. Relatively quiet for a Friday, means that the entire diner is full, but everyone's too busy eating to be yelling so much.

“What’s going on with you?” she demands of him, hands full of empty plates, hair everywhere. Adam has an armful of menus, a handful of crayons, and a harassed look. This question only serves to enhance his expression.

“Nothing?” he replies after he dumps the menus and the crayons on the designated table, rattles of the not so special specials, and finds Blue again.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Blue hisses, darts away for a moment to hand someone a stack of napkins, “Adam Parrish, I am aware that you’re default position is minimum conversation, but the only things you’ve said to me in the last few days are people’s orders.”

Adam gets to leave this conversation for a full five minutes in which he takes a very confused couple’s orders. What they’re confused about, he doesn’t know, but it means that they change their mind on what they want to eat more often than he’d changed his socks in the last month.

“If it hasn’t slipped your notice,” he says stiffly to Blue as he takes a breather by the kitchen door while she fakes stacking menus, “I kind of had a bombshell dropped on me recently.”

“Yeah,” Blue said, “you look like it too. Usually you act like everything is fine anyway though. Which means that things are especially not fine.”

“God,” Adam sighs, pushes himself away from the kitchen, “I already have the school guidance counselor on my back, I don’t need you there too.”

The quiet moment ends. Adam has to wait until they’re cleaning the diner up to apologise.

“Look,” he says, tries to ignore that he’s on his hands and knees under a table, mopping up soup, “I’m sorry for being a shit to you.”

“You should be,” Blue replies from somewhere over by the counter, “I’m the only one who’s actually told you the truth straight up this whole time.”

This is true.

“I know,” he says, “I’m just having a … hard time wrapping my head around it. I’m not mad at you. I swear. So yeah. I am sorry.”

“Oh,” Blue says, he can hear her coming closer, or rather, he can hear the broom coming closer and assumes she must be attached to it. “Adam,” she says, “this only has to be as… awkward as we make it. You could still talk to them you know. Set down ground rules or something. Like, no magic at Nino’s.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, “nah. I know you guys are super busy with it all. I wouldn’t want to like, hold that up with my boring sensibilities or something.”

Blue kicks his butt. Not hard, just enough to be surprising.

“Stop whining,” she says, “I know this is shit. I know you have a lot of shit going on. You don’t
have to be stupid about it. I’m not trying to be your damn therapist, Adam, I’m trying to be your friend.”
The soup is cleaned up. He should really come out from under the table. It’s easier to have this conversation when he has an excuse not to make eye contact though.
“I know,” he says, “I wasn’t - no, I was being whiny there, but I did mean it. From what you guys told me, and from what I already knew of what was going on before I knew it was all true, things must be pretty full on. I don’t want to get in the way.”
“Has it occurred to you,” Blue says, the broom is moving away again, towards the door, “that you don’t have to assume stuff. You could just ask me about what’s going on. You don’t have to be involved, but you could be kept updated.”
Adam comes out from under the table.
“Is Noah ok?” he asks.
“Yes,” Blue says, she doesn’t turn to look at him, and he’s grateful. “He’s still disappearing, we haven’t gotten that sorted, but we…” she pauses here.
“What?” Adam asks, he thinks he might not want to know what. That he shouldn’t want to know.
“We found his bones,” Blue says to the dust pile she’s making, “and his car. We think Cabeswater is trying to tell us something. Is trying to help us work it out.”
This is not something you expect to hear in a just closed diner in a small, dusty town. Despite himself, Adam asks, “Cabeswater?”
“Oh,” Blue says, “Oh. It’s - it’s a forest. On the Ley Line. Connected to the Ley Line. But also - no. You should ask Ronan what Cabeswater is.”
“Blue,” Adam says, “are you trying to get me involved?”
Blue sweeps a little more.
“Only a little,” she admits, “honestly I just want to let you know what’s happening. But, I miss you. It feels wrong without you there.”
Adam wipes down four tables before he can bring himself to respond. He still doesn’t word it properly.
“You and I were never really… I mean, we never really hung out outside of Nino’s or school before this. We barely hung out at school. I don’t see why it would feel weird without me.”
He’s close enough now, his table wiping having brought him down her end of the diner, that she can poke him easily in the side with the broom.
“Adam,” she says, “I know that wasn’t meant to be hurtful, but it kind of was.”
“Sorry,” Adam says.
“But I do get what you mean,” she adds on, “I did like to think that we were friends. Or at least, very good acquaintances, but after… after Gansey… it was different, y’know? Something changed. It was like,” she paused as if she couldn’t think of the right words, or, she could, but they were too big to get out of her mouth. Adam knew that feeling.
“I know,” he says, “it’s stupid. It felt like it was supposed to be, right? Like once we met Ronan and the rest, it just made sense to all be together.”
It feels stupid to say out loud, especially in this dimly lit room.
“Yeah,” Blue says, “it is stupid. But that’s what Persephone said too. That we were meant to all be together. The 5 of us. She doesn’t like it when it’s only me and the other boys, says we’re missing something vital. Even Calla agrees. Even mum.”
Adam does his best to ignore that part of his heart that is wailing on about how he had found someplace to belong.
“It was never the 5 of us,” he says, “It was the 6 of us. Ethan was there too.”
“I know,” Blue says, “I know.”

Adam goes home. Ethan is awake in his bed. He has been every night all week. He won’t sleep until Adam wraps his arms around them both. He was fine though. He was fine. He was fine. They were
both fine. Sometimes toddlers had trouble sleeping. He’d get over this change in their routine, even if it wasn’t much of a change. It was more like the idea of a change. They both hated this idea.

He wakes up. He dresses Ethan. He feeds Ethan. He bikes the both of them to Dana’s earlier than usual so he can mow the lawn. He kisses Ethan goodbye. He cycles to Boyd’s. He lies under a car and he tells himself that he just needs to hold out for a while longer. He tells himself that Ethan is fine. He reminds himself that he told Ronan he would call. He reminds himself that he can talk to Ronan without having to get involved. Blue said that. Ethan can still get to spend time with his pizza boys, if they’re careful. They just need to keep back a little.

He calls Ronan on his break. No answer. He calls again. No answer. He’s seen Ronan watch his phone ring across the room on countless occasions, never making a single move to pick it up. He crosses his fingers, he calls Ronan again. Ronan picks up on the fourth ring. “Adam?” he asks, and Adam does not close his eyes in relief.

“Hi,” he says.
“You called,” Ronan observed, needlessly. Adam snorts at him before he can stop himself.
“I said I would,” he replied.
“Are you alright?” Ronan asks in a rush, “Please tell me you’re alright. That Ethan is alright. I didn’t get you guys in trouble? Ada-”
“We’re fine,” Adam cuts in. He’s not sure whether to be pissed off at how… not pitying, how worried Ronan sounds, or if he should be flattered. Warmed. “We’re fine,” he repeats, “nothing happened.”
He hears Ronan exhale, relief, continues on before Ronan can ask anymore questions.
“What’s Cabeswater?”
He doesn’t quite understand how, but he’s agreed to get off work a little early. Agreed to Ronan coming to pick him up. When Adam climbs into the front seat, the first thing he notices is that Chainsaw is with Ronan, the second thing he notices is that Chainsaw is about twice as big as she was last week.

“Yikes,” he says, “what’ve you been feeding her?”

“Love,” Ronan replies promptly, not a hint of irony in his voice seeing as it was all plastered over his face.

“Well,” Adam says, “hi.”

“God,” Ronan grunts, bangs his head back against the headrest causing Chainsaw - on his shoulder - to squawk in alarm and peck at his ear in disapproval. “It’s only been a fucking week, Parrish. Less than a week. You don’t need to sound so awkward.”

Adam grins. “Asshole,” he says.

“Yes,” Ronan grins back, then, “wanna grab a coffee or something? I want you awake before I bother telling you any of this shit.”

Oh yeah.

“Ok,” Adam says, shuffles around in the seat so he can chuck his bag into the back before he pulls the seat belt on, “anywhere but Nino’s.”

“Well of course,” Ronan scoffs, “the coffee there tastes like ass.”

They end up in a small cafe a few blocks away from Dana’s. Adam isn’t sure if this is because his own anxiety is obvious, or if this is some manifestation of Ronan’s anxiety, or if it was just coincidence. In the last few months spent with Gansey, though, Adam had begun to lose all belief in coincidence.

Ronan sneaks Chainsaw in, despite Adam’s half hearted objections. He tucks her into the top of his shirt, and then buttons his jacket up, pops the collar. You can tell she’s there if you’re looking for her. If you’re not, you’re more likely to just be confused about the lump.

He tries to pay for Ronan’s coffee - it’s horrifying, black, with three sugars - but Ronan gets in before him, and in retaliation, buys Adam’s as well.

“Asshole,” Adam says as they drop themselves down at a spindly table.

“You’ve already called me that today,” Ronan pointed out, “don’t be boring, Parrish.”

Chainsaw makes a noise which sounds like agreement, and Adam quickly glances over at the counter to make sure the waitress hadn’t noticed before saying;

“She really is just like you, although her feathers are growing in faster than your hair.”

“That’s because she doesn’t shave,” Ronan replies, his grin is shark like and false, and fading quickly. “But also,” he says, “She’s - she’s part of what I need to tell you.”

“What?” Adam asked, “You found her in Cabeswater? So, what? She’s a magic bird or something?”

“Well,” Ronan looks strangely pleased, “Yes. And no. I guess technically she came from Cabeswater, and technically she’s magic, although she’s more of an asshole. But -” he pauses as if he doesn’t know how to say what needs to be said. Doesn’t want to say it. His expression shifts smoothly from strangely pleased to strangely upset.

Adam fiddles with the sugar packet jar in the middle of the table, guilt settling in his stomach.

“I’m not gonna just leave,” he says, “not this time.”
Ronan snorts. Chainsaw snorts.
“I wasn’t worried,” Ronan says, “I was just pausing for dramatic effect.”
“Ok,” Adam scoffs, rolls his eyes.
“So,” Ronan says, staring straight down at his chest, at Chainsaw hidden by his collar, “I didn’t just find Chainsaw. I took her out of my dreams.”
Adam doesn’t bother trying to sit on the fence about this. He’s had enough sitting on the fence to last him a life time.
“Oh...kay,” he says, “ok. What does that mean?”
Ronan shrugs, he’s still looking down at Chainsaw, not up at Adam. “It means,” Ronan says, “that as long as I can remember, I’ve been able to take things out of my dreams. If I want it enough, I can take it. Make it real. I never really thought too much about, but recently, since meeting Gansey the research maniac, we realised there had to be a power source to create these things. We figured it was almost definitely kept running by the Ley lines.”
Adam sits still for a long moment so that these exceedingly ridiculous statements have time to settle in his mind. Their coffees come. Ronan sips his cautiously, adds another two sachets of sugar. Adam grips his mug tightly, doesn’t drink it yet.
“Oh,” he says eventually, “ok. You...can take shit out of your dreams. Ok. You can create living creatures. Ok. You didn’t bother thinking about it until you were like, 15. That makes sense. How is this related to Cabeswater?”
Ronan is smirking at him. It’s a fake smirk. It’s a smirk designed specifically to cover up relief.
Adam is not usually fooled by cover up expressions.
“Well,” Ronan shrugs, takes another, happier, sip of his coffee, “We’re still figuring that out. What we know, is that Cabeswater is where I go in my dreams. It’s where I get the stuff I take out from. What we don’t know, is if the dreaming or Cabeswater came first. What we do know, is that Cabeswater is on the Ley Lines, functions because of them. We also know that Glendow-” he stops abruptly, almost guiltily, takes a gulp of his coffee. Adam knows it’s because of him. Ronan didn’t want to over step whatever boundaries he thought Adam had put up. Truthfully, Adam hadn’t put any boundaries up. Didn’t know where to put them yet.
“That’s amazing,” he said after a long moment. Ronan had been staring into his coffee, but now he looked up at Adam, both eyebrows raised as if expecting the punchline. “Truly,” Adam added, “you’re amazing. You made Chainsaw.” he said, the awe he felt leaking out into his voice. He shook his head, “She’s so perfect - she’s just like - she is a real bird. You made a real bird. That’s so… so fucking cool.”
He knows he’s just stating the obvious here, but it’s ridiculously cool. It feels safer to be amazed about as well. To be so obviously impressed by Glendower and wishes and Ley Lines meant showing that he was intrigued, tempted, wanted to be part of it. To be impressed with Ronan’s dreams just meant that he was impressed with Ronan.
Ronan is inexplicably blushing.
“You really think so?” he asks, looking to be speaking to his coffee.
“Fuck Ronan,” Adam said, leaned a little across the table, “of course.”
“My dad,” Ronan mumbles, “my dad could do it too. He was much better at it than me. He probably would have been able to tell us if the forest or the dream came first.”
It occurs to Adam, that, probably because of his own careful avoidance of the subject of parents, that he knew nothing about Ronan’s parents. It sounded like something he probably should know a little about, the way Ronan’s voice shook slightly. The way he was speaking in past tense. He takes a bracing sip of his coffee.
“What happened?” he asked, “To your dad?”
For a long moment, he thinks Ronan isn’t going to answer him, that he’s just going to sit there drinking his disgustingly sweet coffee until Adam takes the question back. He’s just opening his mouth to do so, when Ronan finally speaks.
“He was murdered,” he said flatly, and Adam finds himself putting this onto the list of things he wasn’t expecting to hear.
“Oh,” he replies, weakly.
“They never found out who did it,” Ronan continues, he’s staring over Adam’s shoulder into the middle distance, “or why. Declan says it’s because he was involved in some shady business, but that’s not a real explanation.”
“No,” Adam says. He doesn’t know if he ought to do the polite thing and apologise, doubts that that’s the kind of thing Ronan would appreciate. “When was this?” he asks instead.
Ronan lifts one shoulder, “A few years back now,” he said, “not long after Gansey moved here.”
Adam nods. He doesn’t know if Ronan wants comfort here, if he needs comfort here. He doesn’t know how to go about offering comfort anyway. It wasn’t his forte, unless the person needing comforting was a 3 year old. He didn’t think Ronan would appreciate being comforted the way Adam comforted Ethan, pulling him onto his lap and kissing his head.
“And…” Adam starts, thinks he really ought to stop poking at what was obviously a still open wound for Ronan, pokes anyway, “your mum?”
Ronan’s face twists. He had been keeping a reasonably steady hold on his expression until now. Had contained what was obviously afuck load of emotions. Now he looked raw and far too vulnerable.
Ronan wasn’t the type of person Adam would have imagined to look vulnerable.
“She - she was a dream,” Ronan says. He sounds almost embarrassed, but defiant. “One of my father’s dreams. When he died- when he was murdered - she just… stopped.”
“Stopped?” Adam asked.
“Like a broken clock,” Ronan mumbled, “I don’t know how else to describe it.”
“I’m sorry,” Adam says now, “for prying,” he adds when Ronan looks up at him finally.
“No,” Ronan says, “no. It’s nice. Being able to tell the truth about this. I know none of this was what you were expecting, or wanting, to hear. So I’m sorry.”
This was so fucking ridiculous.
“Lynch,” Adam snaps, not meanly, “if I’m not allowed to be sorry, neither are you.”
“God,” Ronan snorts, “fine, that’s the last time I apologise to you then.”
“Fine,” Adam replies, grins, drinks his coffee.
“Do you want to know more about Cabeswater?” Ronan asks eventually.
“Yes,” Adam says.

Ethan is beyond ecstatic to see Ronan. You’d think it had been months on end rather than just one week apart. Ronan wasn’t much more contained than Ethan was, to be quite honest. He’d come into Dana’s with Adam when they went to pick Ethan up. He hadn’t asked, he’d just gotten out of the car with Adam after parking, and walked up with him. It was a bit weird, but not bad weird, it just made it feel oddly domestic.
“Dana,” Adam said, over the chaos that was Ethan all but screaming in delight in Ronan’s arms, “this is my friend, Ronan, he’s the one I mentioned to you, who Ethan keeps talking about.”
“Oh,” Dana says, smiles, “the bald one with the bird?”
“I’m not bald,” Ronan protests, he’s holding Ethan upside down by his ankles while Ethan gleefully cackles, “it’s just shaved.”
“It’s very sad,” Adam tells Dana solemnly, “how young he is to have gone bald.”

After they’re all buckled into their respective seats in the BMW, and Ethan has calmed down enough for Adam and Ronan to be able to hear each other over him, Ronan turns to Adam.
“So,” he said, “do you want to come to Monmouth, or?”
Good question.
“Um,” Adam says eloquently, “I’m not sure. Is Gansey there?”
“Fu-geez,” Ronan stutters, “yeah. You’re not really gonna avoid him, are you?”
“No!” Adam protests, he can feel his face heating up, “Well. Ugh, yeah. I don’t know. I just - I feel
“Hey Ethan,” Ronan called, tipped his head back towards the backseat.
“Mmhuh?” Ethan replied.
“Did you know, buddy,” Ronan said, “that your brother is an idiot?”
Adam laughs, but Ethan frowns.
“No,” he says, “Ad’m’s real super clever.”
“Huh,” Ronan says, “I can’t really argue with that. Ok,” he turns back to Adam, “Gansey definitely wants to see you,” he says firmly, “just because he’s an oblivious ass sometimes doesn’t mean he never wants to see you again.”
“Ass,” Ethan says.
Ronan laughs, Adam frowns, Ronan quickly stops laughing.
“C’mon,” Adam says, “even if he’s not… mad, I doubt he’s very happy with me.”
“He’s just sad because he’s lost his best researcher,” Ronan replied, “you realise you help over just a few months got him further than he’d managed by himself all year? That’s the only thing he’d ever be even vaguely grumpy at you about.”

He should be used to it by now, maybe, this soft side of Ronan. This side of Ronan that complimented him on all the things Adam prided most about himself. He wasn’t. His face burned, his heart burned. He stared into his lap. He’s about to say ok, when Ronan’s phone rings.
“Um,” Ronan says, dropping his phone onto his lap and looking at Adam, “I just got given a message that I think is actually for you.”
“What?”
“So,” Ronan shrugs, “Gansey called to tell me that Blue called to tell him that Persephone told her that I’m supposed to turn up at Fox Way at about 4.30, once I’ve picked up the kid. Who I assume is Ethan.”
“What?” Adam repeated, “How?”
“Um,” Ronan made a face, “Psychics?” he suggested.
“God,” Adam mumbled.
“Ass,” Ethan suggested.
“Fox way, then?” Ronan said.
“Ok,” Adam says, “buddy boy,” he leans around his seat to reach out to pat Ethan’s knee, “we’re gonna go see your friend Persephone! Maybe Blue too.”
Ronan waits until they’re almost there, and Ethan is distracted by some apparently fantastic trucks outside his window, to mumble to Adam;
“So- Persephone doesn’t freak you the fuck out?”
“Uh” Adam says, glances back to look at Ethan, “no? Sure, she’s a little… strange. But she’s nice. She makes real good pie too.”
“Pie?”
“Yeah, I swear, she was the only reason I didn’t outright disbelieve in psychics. She had this insane habit of sending pies - which she claimed were cast off pies - with Blue to Nino’s to give to me on weeks where we didn’t have much food at home. It’s not like I told anyone I wasn’t eating, so I kinda… well, I felt like her psychic ability must have been for sensing when people were hungry.”
“You felt like her psychic ability was for sensing when people were hungry,” Ronan repeated, disbelief evident in his voice, “so, your smarts really only cover more traditionally academic subjects then?”
“Shut up,” Adam grinned, “what the hell else was I supposed to think? I was hungry, there was pie.”
Ronan continues this conversation down the road Adam had been hoping he wouldn’t. He’d already regretted saying as much as he had.
“How often,” he says, pretends to be very focused on the traffic ahead of them, “how often do you
guys go hungry?”
“I always make sure there’s food for Ethan,” Adam says, he can feel his voice hardening even as he speaks. Wishes that his body didn’t automatically shut down his emotions at the first sign of trouble. Wishes Ronan wouldn’t ask questions.
“What I was really asking,” Ronan sighs, “is how often you go hungry. I already knew you would never let Ethan go without.”
“Ad’m,” Ethan calls from the backseat, “did ya see th’ truck?”
Adam leaps on this opportunity to avoid this conversation, and swivels round in his seat immediately, “Which truck, buddy?” he asks, “the big pink one?”
“No! I like that one too. The one wi’... wi’ the baby truck onnit!”
“Yeah! Wasn’t that cool? That was a tow truck.”
“When ‘m big,” Ethan says confidently, “‘m gonna be a ‘o’ truck.”
“You’ll have to be really big!” Ronan chips in, “You’re gonna have to eat all your greens to make sure you grow big and strong!”
“I do!” Ethan insists, “I always f’nish all m’food.”
“Even your crusts?” Ronan asks.
“Yes!” Ethan says, “‘rusts are good.”
Ronan is glancing at Adam so often that he’s barely looking at the road. It’s enough to make Adam want to roll his eyes. To snap at Ronan. To thump his own chest until his heart shuts the fuck up. He hates how concerned Ronan gets for him. How obvious this concern is, even as Ronan is attempting to act aloof and uncaring. He hates it because he can’t respond to it how normal people can. He can’t respond to it with promises to look after himself, with acceptance, with a smile. That’s not how the Parrish’s work. Adam’s already a terrible Parrish. He’s already spilled too much about his life to Ronan, to Blue. He just wants to go home. Except he doesn’t. He never wants to go home. He can’t shake the feeling though, wanting to go home, even though home isn’t really a place that exists. He can feel Ronan staring at him. Shakes his head, shakes himself out of his spiralling thoughts and discovers that they’re parked outside Fox Way.
“You good?” Ronan asks.
“Yeah,” Adam mumbles, “sorry, was just thinking about sh-stuff.”
“Ad’m,” Ethan says, “we seein’ Seph?”
“Yeah,” Adam says, unbuckles himself.
“Seph and pie?” Ethan clarifies, and Adam finds himself snorting.
“Maybe,” he says, “let’s go and see.”
There is pie. If Adam had still been nursing a few doubts about the veracity of psychics, his favourite cherry and almond pie, already sliced and plated in Persephone’s hand as she opens the door, quelled these doubts.

“Coffee isn’t lunch,” she greeted them, pressing the plate towards Adam.

Adam’s holding Ethan’s hand with one hand, takes the plate in the other, and has no hands free to resist with when Persephone takes him by the shoulder and firmly encourages him inside.

“Me too?” Ethan asks, tugging at Adam’s jeans.

“There’s pie in the kitchen for you too,” Persephone reassures him, “and for you,” she adds, turning to look at Ronan as he slowly follows them all inside.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” Adam says, “I very much appreciate the pie, but what’s this about?”

“You’re always so hungry,” Persephone replied vaguely, leading them into the kitchen, “hungrier than you’re supposed to be right now. Emptier too.”

She waves at them to sit at the table, seats herself on the other side of it. There are three more plates of pie on the table. Adam sits down, puts his pie in front of him. He turns to pick Ethan up to sit him on his knee, but Ronan is already scooping him up and sitting them both down next to Adam.

Persephone pushes two plates towards Ronan, and Ethan bounces excitedly in his lap.

“What do you say, Ethan?” Adam prompts as Ethan forgoes the fork on the edge of the plate Ronan puts in front of him, and picks at the pie with his fingers.

“’Anks,” Ethan smiles through an already bursting mouth, “love pie.”

“Pie is very good,” Persephone agrees, lifts her gaze up from Ethan to Ronan, “eat your pie.”

Ronan also forgoes the fork. He pulls bits of crust off to feed to Chainsaw, perched on his shoulder.

“This is about Glendower, then?” Adam asks, and Persephone frowns. She picks up her fork.

“No, she says, “this is about you. Eat your pie.”

Adam has had too many manners ground into him to forgo his fork.

They all eat their pie.

For a few long minutes, the only noise in the kitchen is the sound of chewing, Ethan’s noises of appreciation, and the sounds of the house around them.

The pie is so fucking good.

“Ethan,” Persephone says, pushes her plate away from herself primly, “why don’t you go play with the girls upstairs? Ronan can take you.”

“Um,” Ethan says, he looks to Adam. Ronan also looks to Adam. They’re wearing matching questioning looks, right down to the smear of cherry on their cheeks.

He leans forward to cup Ethan’s face with one hand, and wiped at the stain on Ethan’s cheek with the other. “You’ve met Blue’s little cousins before, remember?” he says, “At the playground? It’ll be fun.” When Ethan nods, Adam lifts his head to look at Ronan, and automatically reaches up to wipe the stain on his cheek as well, “Is that alright with you?” he asks him.

“Um,” Ronan says, and Adam quickly jerks his hands away.

“Sorry,” he says, “habit. You had pie on your face. It’s gone now.”

“Right,” Ronan mumbles, “yeah, I’ll take Ethan.”

He and Persephone stay seated as Ronan hoists Ethan up further in his arms, stands, and walks out of the room.

“Does he know where he’s going?” Adam asks.

“No,” Persephone replied, unconcerned, “he’ll find his way, it’s clear enough.”

Adam narrowed his eyes. Everything Persephone had ever said to him suddenly felt like it might have meant something else.

“Are you saying that the stairs are easy enough to find, or are you… saying something psychic?” he asks.
"Yes," Persephone says, smiles serenely at him. "Will you clear up the dishes?"
"Yes ma’am," he says.
Persephone waits until he’s standing before beginning to speak again.
"In another time," she says, "another version of Adam Parrish is standing in a kitchen just like this, clearing pie dishes. He was already much changed. You will never be that Adam Parrish."
"Oh," Adam Parrish said, "kay."
"That’s not a bad thing," Persephone tells him, "it just means that we have less time than that Adam Parrish did. The longer we go without talking about this, the shorter time this Adam Parrish will have."
"Um," Adam said, stacking the plates up on the bench, "shorter time of what? Am I going to...die?"
Persephone laughed, and then turned in her chair to look at him. "Oh," she said, "you’re serious. No."
"Well, that’s good to know."
"Is it?" she said genuinely curious to hear his answer.
"Yes," he says, "I haven’t got a back up plan for Ethan if I’m not around."
"Ah," she says, "Ethan. Yes. That is what has cut down our time. Not a bad thing, just different."
Adam has absolutely no clue what she’s talking about. How he’s meant to be responding. If he should be rinsing the dishes, or if she just wanted the table cleared.
"So," Persephone says, "we’re just going to get started before anything happens, so that when it does, it won’t matter that our time was shorter."
"Get started?" Adam asks.
"Sit down," she says, pulls a small bag out of her pocket, "and tell me what you already know about tarot."
Adam obeyed, cautious.
"Nothing at all," he admitted.
"Good," she said, pulls her cards out of the bag, and hands them over to him, "how do they feel?"
"Um," Adam says, closes his fingers around the stack, their worn edges brushing softly against his skin. "Warm."

It’s over an hour before Adam makes his way upstairs, following the faint sound of Ronan’s laughter. He feels simultaneously more awake than he had been for years, and completely exhausted.
Ronan is sitting on the floor of what Adam thinks must be Blue’s bedroom, Ethan on his lap, and various Sargant and friend children are scattered around him. Blue is lounging on her bed, seemingly directing this small troop of children in their construction of wooden block and book buildings.
Chainsaw is observing the entire scene from her perch on top of Blue’s wardrobe.
"You’re not making another Henrietta, are you?" he asks, leaning against the doorframe. It’s so very strange seeing Ronan here, at Fox way, in Blue’s bedroom, surrounded by small children. Not that Adam was any less out of place in any of these scenarios, it was just that Ronan, quite simply, did not fit the aesthetic of it all. Blue’s room was a jumble of warm colours, canvas and cloth and plants. The children were soft and bubbly things, open with emotion. Ronan, in the middle of it all, stood out starkly in his artistically, and not so artistically, ripped black clothing, with his closely shaved head, the leather wrapped round his wrists, threateningly chunky boots. The only soft and warm looking thing about Ronan was the smile he had been directing at Ethan, and which was now pointed at Adam.
"No," Ronan said, "the world doesn’t need anymore Henriettas."
Adam agreed.
"Moon town!" Ethan informed him.
"The craters are swimming pools," a frizzy haired girl to Ethan’s left said.
"And the buildings are rockets too," a small child in a pink onesie chipped in.
"Come sit with me," Blue directs, pushing herself up into a more upright position, and patting the
He had to navigate the floor very carefully to avoid tripping, or knocking over haphazard and fragile constructions, and then found himself too awkward to actually sit down on Blue’s bed. It was her bed, it felt too private. He knows this is a stupid thing to be freaking out about, but he’s freaking out about it anyway.

“God, Parrish,” Ronan says, “are you going to sit down or just loom over our work like a deformed Godzilla?”

“Shut up,” Adam snorted, glanced at Blue, and sank quickly down onto the floor instead, leaning against the side of the bed in some sort of compromise. “You having fun buddy?”

“Ohuh,” Ethan said, “Ronan’s bin tellin’ stories.”

“Uh yeah?” Adam asked, glanced up at Blue, who grinned back down at him. “What kind of stories?”

“’Bout Chainsaw!” Ethan said, paused for a moment to assist the frizzy haired girl in balancing a block/book tower, “cept she’s actually a cool princess who has a - a skateboard, an’ kicks ass.”

Chainsaw adds onto this statement with a loud croak.

“Oh really?” Adam said, elbowed Ronan hard in the side, “That sounds real cool.”

Ronan shoots Adam a quick glance, which is obviously meant to be an apology, but is entirely ruined by the shit-eating smirk on his face. Adam rolls his eyes.

“Noah’s gonna teach me to skateboard,” Blue says, nudges the back of Adam’s head with her foot, “wanna join, sometime?”

Adam laughs, can’t help but feel comfortable despite the numerous things in this particular scenario he’s uncomfortable with. “I might watch,” he says, “is Chainsaw gonna be taking lessons too?”

“No,” Ronan says hotly, “weren’t you listening? She already has a skate board. She kicks a-” Adam elbows him again.

“Ass,” Ethan finishes for Ronan, then reaches across the floor, “here,” he says, hands Adam a block, “help.”

“Where am I putting this?”

Somehow they end up being wrangled to stay for dinner. Adam protested this as much as possible, doesn’t want to impose, knows that Blue’s family isn’t exactly rich either, should probably go home and do his homework. Blue persuades him into it with her eyebrows, Ethan persuades him into it by virtue of disappearing off into the house somewhere with his new friends - laughter trailing behind them - and Ronan persuades him into it by asking Maura what dinner was.

It was something with a lot of bacon, a lot of butter, not very much broccoli, and homemade bread. Adam’s stomach joined in the persuasion. He calls his mother to inform her they wouldn’t be home for tea. She isn’t exactly pleased about this, but she isn’t displeased either. Blue calls Gansey and invites him over as well. Ronan calls Gansey immediately after Blue hangs up, and tells him to bring Chainsaw’s dinner. Apparently this requires a lot of directions, and Ronan leaves the room to do so. Adam realises he is alone with Blue, in her bedroom, and is immensely grateful he chose not to sit on the bed with her. It feels wrong for him to be here - not necessarily in Blue’s room - but in any girl’s room. He’d spent his entire life being informed by his father both that he was never going to see the inside of any girl’s room, and that he had better get into some girl’s bed soon to prove that he was a man. The sheer level of sexual innuendo from this so called advice led to a discomfort he felt was probably unhealthy. He didn’t want to involve Blue in any of this. Didn’t want to be in this position which, due to his father’s repetition on this matter, felt somehow dirty, despite the innocence of it all.

“I haven’t changed my mind,” he says.

“Hmm?” Blue asks. She’s kneeling up on her duvet, a biscuit procured from unknown depths in her hand. She’s attempting to lure Chainsaw down, is adamant that the two of them become friends.

“I still don’t want to be involved,” Adam clarified, shuffled a little further away from the bed, and
wrapped his arms around his knees, “I know that’s what Persephone is trying to do.”
“What is Persephone trying to do?” Blue asked, continued waving the biscuit.
“C’mon, Blue,” Adam scoffed, and Blue dropped her hand.
“Don’t c’mon Blue me,” she said sternly, “I don’t know what she’s up to. All Ronan said was that there was pie.”
“Oh,” Adam said, “Well. She wants to teach me how to… read cards, I think? She was a little vague on the whole thing.”
Blue stares at him. Chainsaw leaps off the top of the wardrobe and lands with a flump on the bed next to Blue, attacks the biscuit. She’s not quite got the hang of the whole flying thing yet, but she’s weirdly advanced for her age. Probably a dream thing.
“She’s teaching you to read?” Blue asks, “And you’re letting her?”
Adam shifts uncomfortably, unwraps his arms from round his legs, then rewraps them. “Yes?”
Blue continued to stare. Chainsaw joined in. It was unnerving to say the least.

Ronan returns, Ethan in his arms, and a scowl on his face.
“Dinner in 5,” he announced, then, “Calla is a - a - jerk.”
“Excuse me,” Blue says sharply, “we’re feeding you, don’t be rude.”
“A jerk?” Adam asks.
Ethan squirms against Ronan’s grip, then immediately changes his mind when Ronan bends to put him down, and re tightens his hold around Ronan’s neck. Ronan fixes whatever conundrum Ethan is apparently having, by simply sitting down on the floor, and holding one arm out for Chainsaw. She comes after a few moments of hesitation, dragging her biscuit off of the bed with her.
“You never said that Calla could fu- read minds by touching people,” Ronan snapped at Blue, and Blue sat up straighter. She looked shocked for a moment, and then pissed.
“Why would I?” she asked, “I didn’t see why it would be important. It’s not like she goes around touching people and telling their future without being invited.”
“Well I didn’t invite her,” Ronan snaps back, pauses as Chainsaw pecks at his bare foot. Ethan picks up her discarded biscuit. Adam spends half a second considering letting him eat it.

“Buddy,” he said, shuffling across the floor until his knees bump into Ronan’s, “buddy, don’t eat that biscuit, it’s Chainsaw’s.”
Ronan takes a break from his glaring contest with Blue to glance down at Ethan, Chainsaw, and the biscuit.
“Nah,” he says, “Chainsaw can share.”
“What I meant to say, Ronan,” Adam says, rolls his eyes, “is that I try not to feed Ethan floor food. Here bud, gimme the biscuit, we’re eating dinner soon anyway.”
“Wow, rude,” Ronan mumbles as Ethan reluctantly relinquishes the biscuit.
“Says the king of rudeness,” Blue says grumpily, and Ronan lifts his head back up to continue their interrupted glaring while Adam returns the biscuit to Chainsaw.
“What did she even say to you?” Blue asks, and Ronan’s glare hardens from almost playful to actually a little scary.
“It wasn’t any of her business,” he says, no, snaps, “and it isn’t any of yours either.”
Ethan climbs out of his lap and straight into Adam’s. He’s got the biscuit again. Chainsaw follows him, hopping from her perch on the bump of Ronan’s knee, onto Ethan’s legs. Adam can’t tell if she too is attempting to escape Ronan’s snapping, or if she’s just chasing her biscuit.
Gez,” Blue grumbles, “keep a lid on that temper would you.”
“You keep a lid on your-” Ronan starts, voice rising, stops immediately as Adam moves to stand up.
“I think I hear the Pig,” Adam says, shifts Ethan until he’s sitting on his hip, “I’m going downstairs,” he adds, walks out of the room before either Blue or Ronan could respond.

Ronan swears softly behind him.
To feel awake with my eyes open and also doughnuts

Chapter Notes

i just want to say right now, that every time I've written the word doughnuts tonight I've written it as doughbuts first. Including in this note and I was concentrating very hard on spelling it right.

He’s not really looking forward to seeing Gansey, or rather, he is, he just doesn’t want to have to go through the initial moment of awkwardness that was inevitably coming. No matter what Ronan said, Gansey must be a little annoyed, or hurt, that Adam had just walked out after he had shared what had obviously been very delicate information. He’d told Adam about how he’d died, for fucks sake, and Adam had said sorry and left. It wasn’t like he could wipe the slate clean by saying he would get involved now, because that wasn’t happening. Nothing had changed, except that he’d realised he missed seeing them.

Calla was at the door, opening it for Gansey, and when she caught sight of Adam approaching, she raised both her eyebrows and pulled an indecipherable expression.

“Something on my face?” Adam asked, Ethan pressed his fingers against Adam’s cheeks.

“Me,” he suggested.

“No,” Gansey said, still standing in the doorway, limned with evening light.

“You don’t really know much at all, do you?” Calla said, not meanly, then turned back to Gansey, “Come on then, pretty boy, you’re letting the dark in.”

“Oh, sorry,” Gansey said, wiped his perfectly clean topsiders on the door mat quickly, and stepped inside. “Adam,” he said, “it’s so very good to see you.”

“I’ll just go then,” Calla announced, “don’t muck up the hallway with your emotions.”

“You too,” Adam said, awkward.

“Gans!” Ethan said, “Wanna biscuit?” he holds out the very crumbled and damp looking biscuit, it looked like there had been a bite taken out of it, and Adam wasn’t sure if he ought to laugh or swear.

“Oh,” Gansey said, “that’s very sweet of you”

“Oh,” Adam said, “I should warn you that that biscuit has been in Chainsaw’s beak, and on the floor.”

“Still good,” Ethan said happily, “but you can have it. I had my bite. Can’t have anymore ‘fore dinner.”

“You weren’t meant to have any,” Adam tells him as firmly as he can while rolling his eyes. Gansey takes the biscuit.

“I’ll just keep it in my pocket until I’m hungry,” he said, “is that alright, Ethan?”

“Uuhh,” Ethan said, then twisted in Adam’s arms, distracted by the sounds of Blue’s cousins in another room, “gonna go play wi’ Vanna ‘n’ Layla” he says, wiggles until Adam releases him, then runs off.

“He’s doing ok?” Gansey asks. He’s still standing right against the door, hasn’t moved to take his jacket off yet, “He looks well.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, “No Noah?”

Gansey sighed, and shook his head, “He’s been having a harder time than usual lately staying corporeal. He wasn’t around when I left tonight.”

“Ah,” Adam said. Stared over Gansey’s shoulder at the door for a half moment too long, then, “Gansey, I’m really sorry. For freaking out a little. I should have explained more. That was kinda shitty of me.”
Gansey looked shocked. “Oh,” he said, “oh, Adam.”
Not exactly the response Adam had been expecting.
“No need to apologise,” Gansey said, he wasn’t wearing his formal Gansey face, but his voice was heavy with his old-money accent. It was an interesting mix of boy-Gansey and posh-boy-Gansey. “You explained enough. It wasn’t fair on us to put so much on you with so little warning. Of course I’m... disappointed that you can’t get involved in this, but I’m not disappointed in you.”
It was such a pretty little speech, so validating, that it took Adam a few moments of heavy blinking before he could find his voice again.
“I appreciate that,” he said slowly, “I was worried I had ruined our… uh, friendship.”
Gansey smiled widely at him, then frowned, “Ronan didn’t say anything to make you think that, did he? He didn’t say I was angry?”
“Oh, God, no,” Adam said quickly, “no. Very much the opposite.”
“I’m glad,” Gansey said, smile back, “I shouldn’t have doubted him really,” he added mournfully, “but he does let his mouth run faster than his head sometimes. Where is he? And Blue?”
“Upstairs,” Adam said, “they’ll come down soon though, dinner’s probably ready now.”
“To the kitchen, then?” Gansey said, finally moving forwards from the door to throw his arm companionably over Adam’s shoulder. Adam’s not the biggest fan of being suddenly touched, but this is ok. It’s very friendly, very careful, Gansey isn’t trying to get anything out of him from it.

Blue and Ronan appear not long after, are immediately sent back out to fetch the kids, and reappear moments later - Ronan with a child under each arm, and Blue carrying Ethan over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes.
Dinner is a massive affair - more and more people squish into the kitchen, plates are handed out from a seemingly endless cupboard, and the noise is utterly ridiculous. The food is… interesting. It’s good, very buttery, very bacony. Ethan appears to be appreciating it.
“It’s not always like this,” Blue tells them once they’ve found a place to sit, their overburdened plates on their knees, “we don’t usually have this many people here for dinner, we just lucked out tonight apparently.”
“It’s… an experience,” Gansey says carefully.
“It’s great” Ronan grunts through a mouthful of mashed potato, “if you like people.”
“Wan’ my lett-us?” Ethan asks the group as a whole, holds a handful of damp lettuce leaves out to Ronan, “don’ like mayo on it.”
Ronan barely even hesitates before accepting the food into his own hand, “hey,” he says, “I thought you needed to eat your greens so you could become a tow truck?”
“Mm,” Ethan says, “maybe later.”
“Need a napkin?” Blue asks Ronan, “There’s a packet in the shelves by the sink if you do.”
“Nah,” Ronan grins, deposits the lettuce onto his already full plate, wipes the mess of his palm on his jeans, “these need washing anyway.”
“Ronan!” Gansey protests, “That’s disgusting.”
“Ew.” Ethan adds.
It was far too noisy in here, far too many people, definitely not enough space. Adam was stupidly happy. Everyone had food, and a place to sit, and everyone was chatting around them. It certainly made a difference from the tense silence of the usual Parrish dinners. Ethan didn’t talk at mealtimes at home, didn’t say he didn’t like things, definitely didn’t laugh and try and climb onto people’s laps even while their plates were taking up that spot.

Gansey drove them home that night. Adam had been all set to go back with Ronan, Ethan’s car seat was in the BMW anyway, but Gansey had popped up beside him as he was thanking Maura and Calla and Persephone for dinner, and had suggested he come in the Pig.
“Yeah, whatever,” Ronan said, when Adam told him, “I’ve got other plans anyway.”

Adam had to hand it to Gansey - it was obvious he wanted to be talking about Glendower, Ley
Lines, whatever they had all been up to in the week Adam hadn’t spoken to any of them, but he was doing an admirable job of keeping the conversation subject on other things. He had spent most of the evening letting Blue lead the conversation, and asking Adam science questions that didn’t seem to be relevant to anything but Gansey’s peculiar thought process. In the Pig, he got a little more serious than he had been all evening.

“Adam,” he said once he’d pulled out onto the road, “you of course don’t have to answer this if it makes you uncomfortable, but I feel like I would be being a bad friend if I didn’t ask.” Well, this was foreboding.

“Alright,” Adam said cautiously, reasonably certain he knew what Gansey was going to ask, but not certain enough to cut him off now.

“Is everything… alright at home for you and Ethan?”

Yup. Adam was very familiar with this question, even more familiar with his response of avoidance. He glanced back at Ethan in the backseat - exhausted by too much food and excessive playing, he was asleep in his car seat, head held up on the straps.

“No,” he says, “not really. Did Ronan say something?”

“Oh,” Gansey said, “No. No, he’s very good at keeping secrets, he wouldn’t tell me anything.”

“We’re fine, Gansey,” Adam said.

“Adam,” Gansey said softly, and Adam’s heart sank a little. He was also very familiar with this tone of voice, the patronising words that usually accompanied it. “I know we haven’t been friends for long,” Gansey continues, taking a different route than the one Adam expected, “all the same, I’m happy to listen if you wanted to talk about anything. I know I’m rather useless for anything but history expeditions and finger food, but I am here for you if you need it.”

This is altogether too earnest, and too sweet. Adam stares out the windshield uncomfortably, wonders if the situation would improve if he were to yank the door open and barrel roll out into the night. Ethan would be fine with Gansey for a little bit.

“Oh,” Ethan says, breaking sleepily into Adam’s awkwardly terse silence, “No-ah.”

The Pig juddered slightly as Gansey startled slightly, and Adam turned round in surprise to see Noah staring back at him from next to Ethan.

“Oh,” Noah said cheerfully, “I didn’t mean to appear so suddenly.”

“I’m just glad you appeared,” Gansey said. His voice was still overwhelmingly earnest. Apparently tonight was heartfelt Gansey night. Although, most nights were, just not quite to this level.

“Hi Parrish’s,” Noah adds, leaning over so that Ethan can get his arms around Noah’s side in an awkwardly buckle restrained hug, “missed your grubby faces.”

“Excuse me,” Adam said archly, his mouth finding its way into a wide grin, “my face is perfectly clean.” He wants to add on that maybe Noah is thinking of Ronan and Ethan, but he’s not sure the joke would stick without context. “Hi, Noah,” he adds, “you good?”

“That depends on who you ask,” Noah replies, then narrows his eyes - possibly not on purpose, Ethan is squishing his cheeks. Adam would tell him to stop, but Noah looks like he doesn’t mind it, he’s squishing Ethan’s cheeks right back, anyway. “Ronan told you about Cabeswater?”

“Oh!” Gansey said, the Pig judders again. Apparently tonight was heartfelt Gansey night. Although, most nights were, just not quite to this level.

“Psychics,” Noah said sagely, “they kick uh- butt.”

“Ass,” Ethan corrects, Noah and Gansey snort, and Adam sighs, knows he has to address this.

“Buddy boy,” he says, pulls himself a little further around in his seat so that he can look Ethan full on, “we don’t say that word, ok?”

“Ass?” Ethan asks innocently. Gansey does his best not to snort again, Adam does not believe that Noah is doing his best.

“Yes,” Adam says firmly, “it’s a bad word.”

“Ro’an says it,” Ethan says. He’s not arguing for the sake of arguing, Adam knows this, he’s simply pointing out what he knows is true.
“Yeah,” Adam agrees, “but he shouldn’t, and neither should you, ok?”
“Mm,” Ethan says, his hand is in his mouth.
“And you definitely shouldn’t say it at home, yeah?”
“Mm,” Ethan says.
“Buddy,” Adam says, needs to make sure Ethan knows this is important, “not in front of dad. Ok?”
“Mm,” Ethan says, “ok.”
Now would be a perfect moment to barrel roll out of the car. He shouldn’t have had this conversation in front of Gansey and Noah, but he couldn’t risk waiting and having Ethan swear in front of his parents. He’d left it long enough, didn’t have good chances at pushing his luck.
“He’s right,” Gansey says seriously, “Ronan says a lot of bad words, and he shouldn’t.”
“Yeah,” Noah says, “Gansey never says bad words, do you Gansey?”
“Ah,” Gansey says, “no, no of course, I never say bad words. Absolutely never in front of my parents.”

It’s only when Gansey pulls up at the end of the driveway does Adam realise his bike is still at Boyd’s. He has to work very hard at not swearing right then and there and ruining the conversation they’d just had.
“Oh shhhhh-ooot,” he moans, slaps his hand to his forehead. Gansey looks very alarmed.
“Adam?” he says, “Are you alright? What’s wrong?”
“Nah, it’s just - I left my bike at Boyd’s earlier. I forgot it when Ronan picked me up.”
“Oh,” Gansey said, “that is unfortunate. Can your… parents drop you off at work?”
Adam snorts a little before he can stop himself, “No,” he says.
“I can drive you there right now,” Gansey suggests, makes to put the car back into gear, but Adam shakes his head, touches Gansey’s hand before he can.
“No, it’s ok,” he says, “Um, I’ll figure something out. It’s fine. It’s a bit out of your way.”
“It really isn’t,” Gansey starts to say, but Noah interrupts.
“Ronan’ll come pick you up,” he says swiftly, “what time is your first shift?”
Adam’s first instinct is to say no. So is his second, third, and fourth instincts.
“Uh,” he says, “I have to have Ethan at Dana’s by 7.30.”
“Fantastic,” Noah grins, “Ronan loves early starts.”
“What about between the factory and Boyd’s?” Gansey points out, and Adam raises his eyebrows. He had been unaware that Gansey remembered his work schedule, even as simple as it was.
“Ronan’s free at 1,” Noah says, “he’ll be happy to pick you up again.”
He can’t quite tell if that’s sarcasm or not.
“Ok,” he says.
“Would you be free after Boyd’s to come to Monmouth?” Gansey asks carefully, “just for a homework date?”
“Um,” Adam says, “ok.”
“Oh,” he says, once he and Ethan and their bags are standing by the side of the Pig, “can you tell Ronan to meet me here when he picks us up? Not to meet us at the door.”
“I’ll tell him,” Gansey promises, and Adam waves him off.

Alice is not pleased with their lateness. Not that they’re late. Adam said they’d be home before 9, and it’s still quarter to.
“You talk a big talk, boy,” she says quietly, standing in his bedroom door while he toes his shoes off, and then sits down to take Ethan’s shoes off as well, “but for all your whinin’, you’re not doing a better job at lookin’ after the kid than we are. Shouldn’t he be in bed by now?”
“Yes,” Adam admits, “I’m sorry we’re home late.”
“You should be,” she says, “you’re lucky your dad’s out still, he’d have a word or two to say about this.”
“Yes ma’am,” Adam says.
“Where were you even?” She asks, “You got yourself a girl?”
“No, ma’am,” Adam said, “I was just studyin’ at Blue’s house.”

Alice looks unimpressed, “Please,” she says, “you think I was born yesterday? Studying at a girl’s house? Boy, your dad used that excuse at your age, and we ended up with you not long after.”

“That’s not—” Adam starts, and his mother cuts him off with a quick wave of her hand.

“I don’t like you exposin’ Ethan to that kind of shit. Especially not with that Blue girl. Her whole family is bad news. Fuckin’ witches or somethin’”

“Um,” Ethan says from behind Adam, “um, I like ‘lue.”

Ethan is not really in the habit of talking around his parents, let alone speaking directly to them. Alice gapes.

“Excuse me?” she snaps, her voice is still quiet but hard, “I know you ain’t talkin’ back to me, Ethan.”

“He’s not,” Adam says quickly, shuffling backwards a little until Ethan was pressed against his back, “he’s half asleep, mum, you’re right, it’s past his bedtime. I’ll put him to bed.”

“Naw,” Alice says slowly, “you can’t always be gettin’ in between, Adam. He’s my kid, not yours. I asked him a question.”

“Please,” Adam says, “he wasn’t being rude.”

“Ethan,” she says, steps into the room “you talkin’ back to me?”

“No,” Ethan mumbles, presses his face into Adam’s shirt, “no. I’m sorry.”

“Mum,” Adam says, “please, lemme put him to bed.”

She just stands there glaring into the room for a long moment, then shrugs one shoulder angrily, “I need to talk to you,” she snaps, “put him down and then come out here.”

“Yes ma’am,” Adam says, “thank you ma’am.”

All of Ethan’s exhaustion has gone out the fucking window. When Adam turns round after their mother shuts the door behind her, he’s still clinging to Adam’s shirt, his breath a little gaspy, but at least he’s not crying.

“Baby,” he says, as quietly as he can manage, doesn’t want Alice to hear, “baby, you’re ok, she’s gone. You’re not in trouble.” He takes hold of Ethan’s hands, gently begins to try them off his shirt so he can shift properly and pull Ethan into his lap. He’s never sure if it’s a good or a bad thing that he knows exactly how Ethan feels right now, knows exactly how much he thinks he’s fucked up, knows exactly how scary their mother is when she snaps, when she’s still taller and bigger than you.

“Didn’t say the bad word,” Ethan gasps out, “only good ones.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Adam soothes. It’s not exactly as if he can coherently explain that half the time, any words he says to Alice are just going to be heard as bad words. Doesn’t know how to explain that when he’s out with Adam, with Ronan, Blue, Gansey, Noah, he can talk as much as he likes, but he shouldn’t at home. Doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to train Ethan in silence. He wants Ethan to be able to speak freely.

“Is my fault?” Ethan asks, Adam’s managed to wrangle him into his lap now, presses his face against the top of Ethan’s head, exhales heavily.

“No,” he says “you didn’t do anything wrong. Mum’s just in a bad mood. It’s gotta be a real quiet night tonight, ok?”

Sometimes this works, just telling this to Ethan. Sometimes when he says this, Ethan will nod and let Adam put him to bed easily and happily. Other times he’ll get upset, cry for Adam to hold him for just a little bit longer. Thank God tonight is an easy night. Or relatively easy. He doesn’t look at all happy about it, needs a few extra kisses, a few extra promises to come back soon. He doesn’t bother tucking him into Ethan’s bed, tucks him up in his own, knows that’s where he’s going to end up tonight anyway.

“Tomorrow,” he whispers, once Ethan is pajama’ed and tucked in, hair stroked, “Ronan’s gonna come get us, won’t that be fun?”

Alice never really looks thunderous - that’s Robert’s forte - instead she often looks like the human personification of a drizzly day. Overcast, damp, miserable, cold.
“You’re not gettin’ us enough money,” she says without preamble once Adam shuts the door behind himself. “You know I’ve not found any steady work, and it’s gettin’ colder now. We’re spending more on power and food, you need to get more money to us.”

“Mum,” he tries, “I’m already giving you most of what I’m earning-”

“Bullshit,” she says, “I was in your room earlier. Found one of your payslips.”

Fuck.

“You’re earning a shit load more’n you told us you were,” she said - her voice manages to hold so much warning in it even as she keeps her tone low - “your dad is gonna be so fuckin’ mad at you, boy. I don’t need that kinda fight in my house right now, so you’re just gonna up what you’re payin’ us, got it?”

“Mum-” he says.

“Don’t mum me,” she snaps, “you’ve been lying to us, you little shit, you ought to be thanking me for not telling your dad. You know how much trouble I could get in if he found out I knew? Do as you’re told for once in your goddamned life.”

There’s not really any more point in arguing.

“Yes ma’am,” he says, “I’m sorry ma’am.”

“I don’t want your sorries,” she says, “I just want you to earn your keep. You get that?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I’m just lookin’ out for you,” she says, “I’m not raisin’ a liar. You oughta thank me, you know.”

“Yes ma’am, thank you ma’am.”

“Go do your chores before your dad gets home.”

Ronan looks all sorts of exhausted when he picks them up the next morning. He’s also wearing the same clothes as yesterday. Usually it was hard to tell seeing as the majority of his wardrobe tended to look exactly the same, but the mayo smear was still visible on his jeans.

“Geez,” Adam said as he buckled Ethan in, “you look like death warmed up.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ronan grumbled, “good morning to you too. You realise it’s the a- the crack of dawn, right?”

“Uhuh,” Adam rolls his eyes, “actually, that was a few hours ago.”

“Whatever,” Ronan moans, reaches back to pat Ethan’s knee languidly, “hi buddy. Sleep well?”

“No,” Ethan said cheerfully, he had been extremely psyched to wake up this morning to the reminder that Ronan was coming to get them, “so much yelling las’ night.”

“Oh,” Ronan said, “uh - hey, how about we go drive through Micky D’s, I need some breakfast, and you look like you could do with a bagel or something, Adam.”

“Hey!” Ethan says, “Can I get chick’n nuggers?”

Ronan really did look like death, not even warmed up death actually. The bags under his eyes had bags, his eyes were bloodshot, and his stubble was edging into scraggly beard territory.

“Hmm,” Adam said, as he slid into the front seat next to Ronan, “yeah ok, but we gotta be quick. Ok Ronan?”

“Uhhh,” he said, squeezed Ethan’s knee, then turned back to the front. “You good?” he asked Adam, and Adam snorted.

“Yeah I’m fine,” he replied, poked Ronan’s jaw, “what about you? Did you even go home last night?”

Ronan pulls out, does a tight turn, and pulls back onto the road before replying.

“Nah,” he says, “I had sh-stuff to do. I’m good to drive though, don’t worry.”

“You didn’t sleep?” Adam says, unable to keep the shock out of his voice, “The hell, Ronan?”

“Hey,” Ronan shot him a quick grin. If it was meant to be comforting, it missed its mark by a long shot. “Watch your language, Parrish. Seriously though,” he continued, “I’m fine. I don’t need much sleep.”

“Remember how I said you look like death?” Adam said, “I’ve changed my mind, you look worse. I think you definitely need sleep.”
“Yikes,” Ronan snorts, “are you mothering me?”
“No,” Adam snaps, sighs, glances back at Ethan, “no,” he says quieter, “do what you want, so long as it’s not endangering my - Ethan.”
Ronan doesn’t look at him. “Didn’t know my looks were that dangerous,” he said, “I’ll shave if you think it’s that scary or whatever.”
“Lynch,” Adam says, “I’m talking about your capacity to drive and function as a human being.”
“Do you seriously think I would come pick you guys up if I was incapacitated in any way?” Ronan replies, his voice has dropped down into something very much like a hiss, “Do you seriously think I want to fuck up Ethan’s life even more?”
Adam does his best not to let this hurt. Does his best not to let his barely contained temper overflow. It’s not Ronan’s fault he’s already near his boiling point. Breathes in, breathes out, looks through the window and the near empty town.
“Of course not,” he says, “I trust you. It’s just -”
“What?” Ronan says, not quite a snap.
Adam shrugs, “Even best intentions go awry, that sort of stuff,” he mumbled.
The car is quiet for a few long moments, save for Ethan in the back - he’s narrating the passing scenery - doesn’t particularly care that no one’s listening, can’t hear their hissed anger over the sound of the car. Ronan breaks the silence.
“I do look like a mess,” he said, “I know I probably don’t look fit for driving or anything really right now, but I promise you that if I wasn’t, I would have got Gansey to come. I’m not risking Ethan for anything, or you.”
What the hell is up with these idiot magic boys and their need to say emotional shit on car rides in which Adam couldn’t escape. He absolutely could not leap out of the car today, he needed the fucking ride.
“Thanks,” he says, “you really should shave, by the way, you look like a hooligan.”
Ronan laughs.

Dana is very amused to see Ronan again, particularly because Ethan is clinging to him like a very determined monkey while Adam stands beside the two of them and attempts to patiently yank him off.
They haven’t even made it away from the side of the car yet, so Dana just stands in the doorway to watch the scene unfold.
“I wanna play with Chainsaw,” Ethan is saying, “an’ I wanna see my pizza boys.”
“I know, bud,” Adam says, “but we’re doing that this afternoon, ok? It’s Dana time now.”
“Yeah,” Ronan says, “Chainsaw’s still asleep right now, but I be Shelby and Mari are waiting to play with you. Don’t you want to see them?”
This gives Ethan pause, and distracts him for long enough for Adam to extract him from Ronan. The three of them troop over to the waiting Dana, Ronan carrying Ethan’s bag.
“Domestic trouble?” she asks Adam dryly, and Adam laughs awkwardly in response.
“I wanna play with Ro’an today,” Ethan informs her dolefully.
“Well that’s a pity,” Dana says kindly, “because you’re coming to play with us instead.”
Ethan pouts, but it’s not actually the expression he wears when he’s really upset, so Adam peels him out of his arms and nudges him inside.
“We’ll see you really soon,” Ronan tells him as Dana bends slightly so she can take hold of Ethan’s shoulders before he decides to attempt escape, “I’ll come pick you up with Adam this afternoon, ok?”
“Hmf,” Ethan says, hides his face behind Dana’s legs, “ok.”
“Thanks Dana,” Adam says, “see you, buddy.”
“So,” he says, once they’re back in the now much quieter car, “where were you all last night, then?” Ronan snorts. “You sure you’re not mothering me?” he asks, “Because you’re starting to sound like Gansey.”

“Excuse me for being worried when my ride pulls all nighters,” Adam says, “even if they don’t affect his driving skills.”

Ronan grins at him, purposefully squeals his wheels as he pulls back out onto the road, and laughs at Adam’s over exaggerated wince.

Adam isn’t expecting Ronan to provide him with an actual answer after all that, so is taken aback, when Ronan hits his steering wheel - not hard - and says, “You remember that - uh - argument I had in the Alionby car park, like, months back now? Tall dude, skinny. Shitty sunglasses.”

Adam remembered. He nodded.

“Yeah,” Ronan shrugged, “that was K. Kavinsky. He’s a, God, well, he’s not a friend. He’s uh - I think he’d like to call us enemies or something. But, he can dream too, I mean, take shit out of them.”

“Wait, wait,” Adam says, “Kavinsky? That was Kavinsky? That asshole with his mob of creepy friends who are responsible for like, 3/4ths of Henrietta’s drug addiction?”

“Uhhhhh,” Ronan winces, “yeah.”

“Fuck,” Adam mumbles. “He’s a dreamer? I thought that was only you. And your dad? Wait - do your brothers dream too?”

“Nah,” Ronan says, drums his fingers impatiently on the wheel, “I dunno how this shit works, honestly, like I assume there has to be some genetic component or whatever, but neither Declan or Matty got it. K won’t say if his parents had it, but I don’t think they did.”

“Ok,” Adam says, “So? You were out all night with Kavinsky?”

“Yeah,” Ronan shrugs, his fingers continue to drum, “he’s… he’s a better dreamer than I am. Sometimes he offers to help me out. Sometimes I say yes.”

“Does it help?” Adam asks, he’s aware that he’s pushing against some boundary, is willing to push it a little further.

“Sometimes,” Ronan replies vaguely, “his methods are… questionable. God, I don’t know man. He’s an asshole, but he knows his shit.”

“Gansey doesn’t like it?” Adam says, he already knows the answer, obviously.

Ronan laughs tightly, “No,” he says, “which is fine, but it’s not really any of his business.”

They’re at the factory, but they’re still a little early, even with their breakfast stop, so Adam doesn’t make a move to get out.

“Yeah,” he agrees, “I’m pretty sure I said this to him months ago, that it’s your decision to be an idiot.”

“Exactly,” Ronan says, doesn’t sound very happy about it.

“I wish you wouldn’t, though,” Adam added.

Ronan looks at him, he’s stopped drumming his fingers in favour of lifting his wrist to his mouth so he can gnaw at the leather bands there.

“Yeah?” he asks with a mouthful of leather.

Adam rolls his eyes. “Is that so surprising?” he asked, “I’m not generally a fan of idiocy.”

Ronan drops his hand to his lap, cocks his head in a way rather reminiscent of Chainsaw, “What else do you wish?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Ronan shrugs as if he hadn’t actually fully sorted what he did mean before he opened his mouth, “I mean, you never fucking say what you want, Parrish. Like, you barely even admit that you’re hungry. Everything out of your mouth is all this practical shit, and looking after Ethan, and science, which is great and all, but like, what the fuck do you want, Adam?”

Most of what Adam wanted was too big to try and fit easily into small words. He wanted out. He wanted to wake up in the morning and feel ok, to look forward to getting up, to not have to sneak around the house for fear of waking his father. He wanted to feel safe, to feel like he could keep Ethan safe. He wanted the stability of a good job, a full bank account, a working car, a warm house,
someone who would fucking hold him for once.
“I want,” he said, “to feel awake when my eyes are open.”

Ronan blinked at him.
“That’s either really deep,” he said, “or you have really boring dreams.”
“Ok,” Adam conceded, “I also want a really sleek car, and also a doughnut.”
“Better,” he said, “go to work, before you’re late. I’ll see you in a few hours.”
“Are you mothering me?” Adam grinned, hooked his backpack from near his feet.
“Please,” Ronan snorted, “I’m bringing doughnuts when I come back, and you’re driving to Boyd’s.”
Adam skips over the doughnut bit, “I can’t drive stick,” he says.
“Call yourself a mechanic?” Ronan snorted, “I’ll teach you, it’s easy. Get out of here, I’m going to be late for church.”
Oh yeah. “See ya, Lynch.”
Since Ethan had been born, Adam had been carefully working on expanding his life plan, changing details so that he would have the resources to take Ethan with him, enough money, enough options. The main thing about this revamped plan, was that it would take him a lot longer to get to his original plan. In his original plan, he would leave home as soon as possible, travel to the university the furthest away as he could, the one that would give him the most money for coming, and work from there on changing every single thing about him that could connect him to Henrietta and his parents. He would never look back. It was a simple enough design, though a lot of hard work, obviously. He could and would work himself to the bone to get the best possible grades at university, to get the best possible job afterwards, to move on and up and away. With Ethan, his end result was still on, up, and away, but the steps before that were a bit trickier. He still planned to leave as soon as possible. As soon as he graduated, he planned on taking Ethan with him on whatever university money he could get. He had enough money saved up now to put a deposit on a very, very, very, tiny studio. He’d have to get at least one job immediately after arriving, even if, on the slim chance, he got a full ride scholarship. He would have to find cheap childcare for Ethan. He wouldn’t be able to work himself as hard as he wanted to, it wouldn’t be fair on Ethan. He would have to take university on slower. This had been his plan for a few years now. He wasn’t so sure he could keep it up anymore though. Not at their house. He had counted on his parents continuing to all but ignore Ethan, to direct all their anger at Adam, to let him stay between them and Ethan. Alice snapping at Ethan last night was only one event, but Adam knew better than to think it wouldn’t be repeated. He could still remember the slide in his relationship between himself and Alice, the few weeks in which she had gone from simply cold and disappointed in him to verbally abusive. At the time, he hadn’t exactly been old enough to comprehend, but he remembered thinking it was his fault. He must have said something stupid, done something stupid, been stupid. Now, he thinks Alice must have simply judged him old enough to be fully aware of how terrifying she could be. It’s only because Robert is more dangerous that Adam forgets sometimes how debilitating Alice is as well. He was going to have to change his fucking plan. He didn’t quite know how yet, didn’t know quite where to start, how to start. He just knew that if he had to see even one fucking bruise on Ethan that didn’t come from Ethan’s own roughhousing, he was going to completely lose all his shit. He was not letting that happen. Never. If there was one bruise, there would always be more. If there was one bruise, his parents would start persuading Ethan that he deserved it. If there was one bruise, Ethan might believe them.

Ronan had an entire box of doughnuts waiting for Adam when Adam opened the BMW door, which was an entire box more of doughnuts than he had been expecting. He also hadn’t expected Ronan to be sitting in the passenger seat, eyebrows raised, a smirk on his face. He had changed into clean clothes since the morning, had shaved as well. Adam hoped that he had done this before church. “What?” Adam said. “You’re driving, remember?” Ronan reminded him, reached out to grab the door that Adam was still holding open, “Go round the other side,” he ordered, and tugged the door out of Adam’s grip to slam it shut. Adam couldn’t be bothered starting a physical tussle over the door just to continue this conversation, so he walked quickly around the car, and slid in on the driver’s side. He chucked his bag into the back, and then turned to Ronan. “I told you I can’t drive stick,” he said. Ronan looked unconcerned, he opened the doughnut box. “Uhuh,” he said, “and I said I’d teach you. Want a doughnut before we start?” “Are you-” Adam started, shook his head, “ok, so if the doughnut’s the carrot, what’s the stick?”
Ronan shrugged, “I dunno,” he said, “uh, I’ll play our favourite song on repeat and eat all the doughnuts?”
“You wouldn’t,” Adam said, gasped theatrically.
“I would,” Ronan said, shoved the box towards Adam, “seriously, have one.”
Adam had a doughnut, then he let Ronan put his life in Adam’s hands. He was an ok teacher - he definitely knew what he was talking about, and it helped that Adam knew all the theory anyway. He still bunny hopped far too often though, in reasonably embarrassing places. Thank God no one would ever guess it was him in the driver’s seat. Every time he did so, or when he changed the gears too roughly, making the whole car grind and shudder, Ronan would swear viciously and elegantly. At the first incident of this, Adam had warily glanced to gauge how high Ronan’s temper was, and had been surprised to find him grinning.
“Fucking ballsacks, Parrish,” he hooted, “don’t tell me you’re giving up already.”
“Fuck off,” Adam had spat happily back.
“You fuck off,” Ronan had retorted, “seriously, you’re in the middle of the goddamned road, dude.”

Embarrassing himself further, he had jumped the first time Ronan’s hand had closed over his on the gear stick, guiding his hand into the right gear, muttering something about the shift being a little stiff. This had resulted in another bunny hop, and Ronan whipping his hand back as if he’d been burned. “Mary and Jesus,” he said, “I thought you were gonna throw us through the fucking windshield - “
“Sorry,” Adam mumbled hastily, cheeks burning, “my foot slipped.”
“Yeah,” Ronan agreed, “up your ass, God.” He was still grinning though, looked completely relaxed despite his claims of being scared for his safety.
Adam had allowed himself to simply snort in reply, to start the car back up, to ask Ronan to show him the shift again.
They got to Boyd’s unharmed, and early enough that they had time to sit there and devour more than half of the box.
“Hell,” Ronan laughed, “good thing we had breakfast earlier too - otherwise this box probably wouldn’t have cut it.”
“Ah,” Adam said, “sorry.”
“Oh fuck off,” Ronan replied, “I’m teasing. You should have seen Matthew earlier - he ate three sandwiches during mass - hiding them from Declan the whole time. This is nothing.”
“Fucker,” Adam mumbled, took another doughnut.
They sit and eat in companionable silence for a moment.
“You and Gansey good?” Ronan asks.
“Yeah,” Adam nods, “you and Blue?”
“Uhuh,” Ronan shrugs, “still think Calla’s a bit of a bitch though.”
“Rude,” Adam said.
“She started it,” Ronan said heatedly, “touching my shoulder and then fucking swearing at me out of the blue.”
“Yikes,” Adam says, wants to ask what she said, but doesn’t want to risk Ronan telling him it wasn’t any of his business. “You good?” he asks instead.
“Course,” Ronan scoffs, “it takes more than a nosy fucking psychic to shake me.”
“Of course,” Adam said, “you’re unshakeable. Like a rock.”
“Unlike a rock, however,” Ronan said, “I can detect sarcasm.”
“And I’m very proud of you,” Adam replied, “but I should probably head in now,” he added, leaning over and into the back seat to grab his bag, “thanks for the lesson.”
“You sucked ass,” Ronan said cheerfully, “but you learn quick. I’ll pick you up after your shift and you can drive to Dana’s?”
“Oh,” Adam paused half way out of the door, “I was just going to bike,” he said, watched Ronan’s face fall - just slightly - before he quickly stuck a nonchalant expression on, “but if it’s for a lesson, yeah, that’d be good.” Ronan’s face lit right back up, his nonchalant expression falling completely away.
“Gans said you’re coming back to Monmouth after?” he asked, opening his own door now so he could walk around to the driver’s seat, “Something about homework?”

“Yeah,” Adam nodded, hefted his bag onto his shoulder and leaned against the side of the car as Ronan approached, “I uh, there’s something I might need some help with though. I’m not sure yet.”

“Oh?” Ronan shut the car door rather than getting into the seat, leaned against it, “What kind of thing?”

“Um,” he would very much prefer not to get into it now, before he’d made up his mind about asking for help. He wasn’t even sure why he’d said anything. He shouldn’t have said anything, “I’m not sure if it’s anything yet.”

“Ok,” Ronan said, doesn’t sound pleased about having to wait, about possibly not getting an answer. “Are you guys ok though?”

This is the point in which Adam would usually lie. He had plenty of experience with concerned faces and concerned questions, was very used to overriding his own emotions and smiling reassuringly.

“I don’t know,” he said, “I - it’s probably nothing. I have to go. I’ll talk to you later.”

He regrets every part of that exchange as soon as he’s inside the garage. He shouldn’t have said anything, and if he was going to say anything, he should have said everything. He shouldn’t have said anything when he didn’t have any time. He shouldn’t have left Ronan hanging, especially when he had looked so worried.

He can’t decide if it’ll be worth it or not to actually tell him what’s going on - if Ronan would actually be able to help in any way Adam could allow, or if it’d just lead to him feeling useless as well. It didn’t really feel like there was much of a winning situation here. He just wants things to be easy. He just wants to get to have friends without any of this shit. No magic shit, no fucked up families shit.

Really he should stop dwelling on this all while he isn’t in any position to problem solve anything but cars - but he can’t help it. He can’t push it out of his mind, and anyway, he needs to decide if he should talk to Ronan about it, if he should talk to Gansey and Noah about it as well. Maybe he should just circumvent the boys entirely and go to Fox Way for help. They were actually adults, adults with the advantage of knowing better than most how situations would pan out. Adults were supposed to know what to do in this kind of situation. But, but, but, adults also tended to freak out more, to take things a step further than Adam wanted things to go. Things appeared far too black and white to the majority of adults who had attempted to get Adam to let them help him. They were always too unwilling to do things without the law on their side, and Adam didn’t think he could get the law on his side enough for it to be worth the consequences.

He wasn’t opting for anything that might separate Ethan from him.

He hurries to finish up a little quicker than possible so he can go hunt Boyd down before Ronan arrives. He doesn’t have a plan yet, all he has is a stomach of doughnuts and panic, and the knowledge that whatever he does, he’s going to need more money for it.

It doesn’t take too much convincing. Boyd likes him well enough, and Adam is a reliable worker - he’s more than happy to tack on a few extra hours to Adam’s already chock full schedule. He wants to chat a lot though, he always likes to catch up on what Adam’s been up to, if he’d caught the latest game, how school was, if he had a girl yet. Adam thinks this extra interest, this casual, and slightly overbearing, kindness, was due to the fact that there was no doubt that Boyd knew what his home situation was. Knew, and felt bad about it, but didn’t want to intervene or address the situation, so attempted to make up for his avoidance of it by being extra good to Adam.

It both irked, and comforted him.

It also meant that by the time he finally escaped Boyd’s questioning, Ronan was already waiting, and popped the car boot as soon as he caught sight of Adam. By the time Adam had put his bike in, chucked his bag after it, and shut the boot again, Ronan had gotten out of the car, and gotten back in on the passenger’s side.

“Am I really driving again?” Adam asked as he slid into the seat, relishing in the soft leather beneath him, the gleaming dials in front of him, Ronan’s smirk beside him.
“Yes,” Ronan said, “we’ve got the time for you to fuck up and go slower.”

“Y’know,” Adam drawled, turning the key, “if you’re bored of driving me ’round, you can just say.” Ronan scoffed loudly, “Please,” he said, “if you’re fishing for someone to tell you you’re not boring, you’re looking in the wrong place.”

“Wow,” Adam said, managing to reverse out of the park with minimal grinding, “if I’m so bored to hang with, maybe I should just head home then.”

He was teasing, very obviously so - his voice light and sarcastic - but Ronan sat up straighter anyway, snapped his head round to look at Adam, “No,” he said, “don’t.”

It wasn’t quite panic that was tinging his voice, but something at least very similar. Adam couldn’t figure it out while his head was busy with reminding his hands how to shift gears while his feet shifted pedals.

“Ronan,” he said, trying to stall for time to sort his thoughts out while not stalling the car, “I’m not gonna go home. Chill.”

“Right,” Ronan says, then clears his throat, then leans across the dash, “mind if I put music on?”

“No,” Adam said, “so long as I can still hear your instructions over it.”

“I can yell,” Ronan offered, his grin on, his voice back to usual - sardonic.

“Ronan,” Adam said, risked throwing a quick glare his way.

“Adam,” Ronan mimicked back, but the music he puts on his instrumental and soft. He fiddles with the volume for a few moments, then says; “you keep fumbling the shift between 2nd and 3rd.”

“Ugh,” Adam huffed, “I know, I just - I can’t seem to get the hang of it. I know it’s simple, my hands just aren’t fuckin’.”

“Ok, look, here,” Ronan offered, hovered his hand over the gear stick, “you’re gonna have to change down again in a second, I’ll guide your hand again like I did earlier - you just gotta get it smoother.”

“Right,” Adam sighed, “ok.”

His hand, held firmly under Ronan’s, performed admirably - the shift going ridiculously smoothly for all his earlier hiccups. His foot however, immediately slipped off the clutch the second Ronan’s fingers tightened on his, he stalled with an impressively loud grumble from the car, and stopped in the middle of the road.

“Fuck,” Adam swore loudly, “God. Sorry.” Ronan was laughing at him.

“Fuck off,” Adam grumbled, hastily bringing the car back to life.

“That was awful,” Ronan informed him unnecessarily. A few cars had come to a halt behind the BMW, and were honking already. Ronan rolled his window down, stuck his entire upper torso out the window, and cussed them out thoroughly while Adam quicken up his hastening, even more eager to get out of there before Ronan brought someone’s fury down on them.

“Shut up,” he hissed as he finally got the car moving again, “you’re making such a fucking scene.”

“I’m defending your honour, Parrish!” Ronan protested, pulling his head in anyway and rolling the window back up.

“Fuck,” Adam swore loudly, “God. Sorry.”

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“Shut up,” he hissed as he finally got the car moving again, “you’re making such a fucking scene.”

“I’m defending your honour, Parrish!” Ronan protested, pulling his head in anyway and rolling the window back up.

“Fuck off,” Adam said again, couldn’t keep himself from laughing, “like I need you to defend my honour, God.”

“You like it,” Ronan retorted brattily, “anyway, you never seem to need anything, doesn’t mean you can’t want it.”

“Right,” he rolled his eyes, “and you think I want you hanging out a window swearing, all in my name?”

“Well you weren’t gonna do it,” Ronan replied without really replying, “so ok, maybe I’m using you as an excuse. Lemme live, Parrish.”

“Psh,” he couldn’t help it, for all his intentions of sounding frustrated, his face was too fixed into a grin for anything to come out sounding anything but amused. He can’t say for sure, but he thinks it’s because of this. Because even when he’s feeling fucked up and inside out, Ronan can still fucking make him grin - even while stalled in the middle of the road. Because of this, when he pulls up outside Dana’s house, he puts the brakes on, turns the car off, and stares at his lap as he says; “About that thing that I wasn’t sure was a thing,”
Ronan’s voice is picture perfect nonchalance. “Yeah?”
“It’s kinda stupid,” Adam prefaced, “and, like I said, it might be nothing, but - and - don’t say anything about this to anyone yet, ok, but-“
“Adam,” Ronan interrupted, “God, spit it out, will you?”
“I think I need to get Ethan out of our house,” Adam spat out, “I think I’m possibly - probably - freaking out over nothing, but I’m actually freaking out. I’m freaking out so bad, Ronan, I need to get him out of there. I can’t risk it anymore, it’s getting too - it’s too - I can’t fucking - I fucking -”
“Shit, shit,” Ronan mumbled, unbuckled his seat belt so he could lean over to grip Adam by the shoulders, “ok, ok. Stop, stop and breathe. Ok?”
“Fucking,” Adam gasped, stopped trying to get it out, dropped his head back against the headrest and lifted his hands to grind the heels of his hands into his eyes until spots exploded in his eyelids and his breathing returned to normal. He hated so much how easily he had gone from effortlessly happy to full on freaking out. Hated that Ronan had been sitting right there to witness the entire transition. Hated that there were tears pricking in his eyes under his hands, and if he lowered his hands, this would be the second fucking time Ronan would have seen him crying and just - fuck. He had just wanted to sit there and very calmly explain that he thought that he thought Ethan would be safer moving out of their house, not stumble at the first hurdle and then stutter out into incoherence. God.
“Hey,” Ronan was saying, “you’re ok. You’re fine, take your time. We have time.”
There was never going to be enough time in the world, Adam thought, for him to get to ok. In fact, they probably only had about 5 minutes, which was barely enough time for anything at the moment, so he forced his face to smooth out, couldn’t force the tears back into his eyes, wiped them away even as they continued to fall, and dropped his hands into his lap.
“Sorry,” he said, carefully keeping his voice steady, “sorry, I didn’t mean to freak out on you. I’m fine.”
“Shit,” Ronan said again, “it’s fine, Adam,” his hands were still tight on Adam’s shoulders, “you don’t need to fucking apologise.”
“Sorry,” Adam said again, instinct, “I shouldn’t have brought any of this up. It’s fine.”
“Ok,” Ronan said, “ok, no. It’s not fine, Don’t tell me it’s fine, Jesus, you don’t have to tell me what’s going on if you don’t wanna, but don’t tell me things are fine when I can fucking see that they’re not.”
God he can’t make his eyes stop leaking. This is so fucking stupid.
“Ok,” he says, his face feels like stone, heavy and rigid, “I’m sorry.”
“Adam,” Ronan says, “c’mon.”
Adam does not want to ‘c’mon’. He wants to get out of the car and find a nice secluded area to fucking cry for a bit until his eyes can behave themselves, and then he wants to get Ethan, and then he wants to fucking leave the country with Ethan and never cry in front of anyone ever again. His entire face is wet, but he can’t bring himself to lift his hands out of his lap to wipe a the tears - as if he pretends they’re not there, Ronan won’t notice. Ronan lifts his own hands from Adam’s shoulders, wipes far too gently at Adam’s cheeks with his thumbs.
“I don’t get it,” Adam mumbles, he’s still staring into his lap, at his hands, clenched in tight fists, at the tear droplets on his trousers.
“Get what?” Ronan asks, one hand still on his face, the other returned to Adam’s shoulder.
“What have I ever done for you?” Adam asked, “What have I ever given you, that you would fucking - that you would drive me places, get me doughnuts, wake up early for me, let me stall your fucking car - I just - I don’t get it.”
“What the fuck?” Ronan asks him, and Adam barrels on, it’s easier to ignore the tears dripping down the side of his face if his mouth is spitting out stupid shit.
“I get it with Gansey,” he says, “I help him with his research and shit. And I get it with Blue, we’re around each other so much it’s stupid to not do stuff for each other, but I have no fucking clue what I do for you that you would-“
“Stop,” Ronan says, he’s lifted his other hand back to Adam’s face, turns it to face him, “don’t be an idiot, Parrish. You’re always doing shit for me - you’ve fucking helped me so much with my shitty homework the last few months, and you let me hang with Ethan, you always add the extra ice cream to my thickshakes, you listen to even my really shitty music with me- just - you’re freaking out, and saying dumb shit that I’m pretty sure you’re gonna regret later, so - just - stop. Ok? You’re fine.”

It takes a few more minutes. A few more minutes of staring at Ronan’s shoulder while Ronan rubbed at his tears until they stopped. A few more minutes of Ronan telling him he was fine.

“Ok,” he says, knows he looks like a complete and utter mess, “this was a disaster, and we really need to go grab Ethan. On a scale of 1 to very, how obvious is it that I’ve been crying?”

“Um,” Ronan said, brushed his thumb back over Adam’s cheekbones, “where on the scale would ‘extremely’ sit?”
Dana eyes the both of them up suspiciously as she hands Ethan over, but doesn’t comment on Adam’s red rimmed eyes. She does glare at Ronan though, as if she suspects he is the cause of Adam’s misery, glares more when Ethan runs to Ronan first, not Adam, and wraps his arms around Ronan’s knees.

“You came!” Ethan says joyfully while Adam collects his bag and thanks Dana.

“I said I would,” Ronan replied, bent down to grab him under the arms and hoisted him up into his arms, “did you have a good day?”

“Adam,” Dana says, “while you’re here, could you just come into the backyard with me to give me your opinion on some bushes?”

“Um,” Adam says, glances from the door, to Ronan and Ethan - Ronan nods at him - back to Dana, “yeah sure. I’m not sure I’ll be any help though.”

She does lead him outside, but stops right outside the patio door after closing it.

“Adam,” she says, “you know I think you’re a very sensible boy, and I have nothing against, y’know, gays, but do you think this is a good decision if he’s upsetting you so much?”

“Um,” Adam says again, squints as if maybe that would make her sentence a little clearer, “what?”

“I know, I know,” she said, glanced over their shoulders through the glass door, “you’re very private - I don’t want to pry into your personal life - but I saw you two through the window - and I think it’s important for you to know that good relationships should not involve the amount of crying that you were doing.”

Maybe the squinting did help, because he did understand now, and was also exceedingly embarrassed. His stomach felt like something was curdling inside it. He wasn’t sure if he was more upset that she had seen him crying, or if she had assumed that Ronan was the cause, or if he was worried that somehow any part of this would make its way to his parents. It shouldn’t. Dana didn’t know them. Wasn’t affiliated with them at all except through Adam.

“Oh,” he said, “oh, no, oh. Dana, no.”

“No,” she said, “it’s ok, I’m not judging -”

“No, Dana,” he said, “we’re not a- He’s not my- I was upset about something else, and Ronan was comforting me. He didn’t do that. He’s uh - he’s never made me cry.”

Dana looked skeptical, but a little mollified.

“And uh,” Adam stuttered, “he’s not- we’re not together like that.”

“Oh,” Dana said, “oh. Well, I’m sorry. I just assumed - y’know - you’ve never brought anyone with you before, and Ethan really likes him, and the two of you seem really close.”

“Well,” Adam shrugged, “so, uh, is there a bush you wanted me to look at?”

“Oh,” Dana said, “well, no.”

Ronan drove them back to Monmouth, Adam wasn’t going to risk stalling and creating a crash hazard while Ethan was in the car. He also doesn’t want to risk causing another scene, and he’s vaguely worried that if he gets back into the car next to Ronan, Ronan might ask how he’s doing, or might just look at him, and he’d just disintegrate again. He gets into the back with Ethan instead, doesn’t meet Ronan’s questioning look in the rearview mirror. He does lean forward in between the car seats though, and snags Ronan’s phone so he can put some music on - fills the space with something with a lot of loud uncoordinated clanging.

“Hey buddy,” he says under the cover of the so called music, “you talk to Dana ‘bout Ronan, much?”

“Uhuh,” Ethan replies, “‘bout Chains-aw, too.”

“Yeah?” Adam asks, “What do you say?”
"Um," Ethan says, has to pause for a moment to fiddle with the laces on his shoes - a very important task - "jus’ ‘bout how he looks after me when you’re busy, ‘n’, how he’s so silly you laugh lots, ‘n’, sometimes Chains-aw sits onnis head. I like that."

"Huh," Adam says, "that is pretty funny, she slips all over the place when she does that."

"Yeah!" Ethan said, gleeful, "Cos he’s BALD!"

"Hey!" Ronan called from the front seat, "I heard you say bald! I’m not bald! It’s shaved!"

"Bald!" Ethan calls back, "Bald!"

Adam had been a little worried - only a very little - that Gansey wouldn’t really want to just do homework when they got there. That he would sneakily slip some research in, or that he would spend the entire time looking like he wanted to talk about magic and shit. Adam just could not do that today. Not even the theory of it. Not even the thought of it. He could do homework, or he could do panic, and that was it.

Gansey was spread out over the floor next to mini Henrietta, science papers scattered everywhere.

"Adam," he said, "please tell me you’ve covered this, we have a test on tuesday and I’ve been neglecting my homework."

"Uh," Adam said, dropped his bag by the door, and strode over to crouch down next to Gansey. He scrutinised the papers on the floor, then Gansey’s harried expression - ruffled to perfection, especially with his glasses perched in his hair - "Yeah," he said, "yeah I know this stuff. It only looks complicated, it’s actually super easy."

"Ok nerds," Ronan announced, still in the doorway with Ethan on his shoulders, "Ethan and I are gonna go see if Chainsaw wants to wear sunglasses."

"Hi Ethan!" Gansey said, lifting his head briefly to smile at Ethan, "Don’t let Chainsaw bite your fingers!"

"Gans!" Ethan smiled back, "S’ok, she on’y bites Ro’an."

Gansey snorted.

"When you’re done bettering yourself," Ronan says, crossing the room in some sort of hop skip pattern to make Ethan laugh, "come find us, Parrish, I made you a mix tape I wanna play to you. Get you some proper education."

"Get stuffed," Adam grinned back at him, "I’m not falling for your friggin murder pumpkin trick again."

"Hey!" Ronan called from his doorway, "it’s murder squash, loser!"

"Don’t play it to Ethan either!" Adam says, then turns back to Gansey, "Ok, so - show me where you’re stuck."

They’ve been studying for about half an hour, Gansey’s a quick learner, it only took Adam about 10 minutes of explaining before Gansey was nodding and figuring the problems out for himself, so Adam’s working on his math’s homework when it occurs to him.

"Is Noah around?" he asks, and Gansey looks up guiltily.

"Um," he said, dropped his gaze back down to his book, "well. He was earlier this afternoon, but he uh, he left about 5 minutes before you got here."

"Oh," Adam says, has always been very good at reading between the lines, "he disappeared because I was coming?"

"No," Gansey said hurriedly, "well. No. It’s just, I think he didn’t want to accidentally disappear in front of you again, and then he overthought it and well. He doesn’t ever disappear on purpose. It just happens. It’s not really anything to do with you Adam."

"Sorry," Adam mumbled, "I know this is kinda hard for you guys. Not being able to talk about it while - I’m sorry."

"Honestly Adam," Gansey says seriously, "it’s fine. You’re not at fault for anything." He reaches across their papers and books and squeezes Adam’s leg. Horrifyingly enough, this appears to knock over the hastily constructed defences Adam had built over his emotions, and he can feel his eyes stinging again. He really could not catch a fucking break
from his emotions today. It was bad enough that he’d fucked up in front of Ronan, there was no way in hell he was going to do the same to Gansey.

“Ok,” he says, stands up, “I’m just gonna… gonna go piss. I’ll be right back.”


There is something exceedingly surreal about crying in a bathroom that doubles as a kitchen. God. He had no reason to be crying right now. Things were fine at this very moment. He really did need to get his homework done, couldn’t afford to be taking breaks specifically to cry about shit he couldn’t do anything about right now. It didn’t matter how often he told himself this, the tears kept coming. Gansey probably thought he was taking a fucking shit cos he was taking so long. God. He tries to erase the evidence by splashing cold water on his face, rehydrating by drinking straight from the tap as well, and drying off carefully, but his eyes are still pink.

If Gansey does notice though, he doesn’t say anything. He’s absorbed in his book when Adam drops back down onto the floor next to him, and barely twitches in response to Adam’s mumbled greeting. It’s good. Adam finishes the rest of his homework, feels stupidly proud of himself for not needing to go back to the bathroom again. Hates himself a little for feeling proud of himself.

“Gans,” he says.

“Mm,” Gansey says, “mm?”

“You good? Stuck on something?”

“Oh, no, well. Kind of. But I have it, I just need to focus on it. You explained it really well earlier.”

“Oh good,” Adam said, stood up, “I’m uh, gonna go see if that playlist was a joke or not.”

“Good luck,” Gansey smiles, “I’ll be done soon. Are you here for dinner?”

“No,” Adam tries not to sound mournful about it, “mum wants us home for dinner.”

“Pity,” Gansey sighs, “maybe next time.”

Ethan is wearing the sunglasses and Chainsaw. She’s folded up atop his head, which is resting on Ronan’s pillow, and the sunglasses are askew on his face. He looks to be completely asleep, judging by the steadily growing pool of dribble on his chin.

Ronan is sitting cross legged on the floor, scrolling through something on his phone.

“How long’s he been out?” Adam whispers as he moves to sit down next to Ronan, leaning against the side of the bed.

“About 10 minutes,” Ronan whispers back, “who knew chasing a bird around a room could be so exhausting?”

“Who indeed,” Adam replied wryly, “did you get the glasses on her at all?”

“For about 5 seconds,” Ronan scoffs, “she looked very cool. I got a blurry photo. The new cryptid.”

“I’m impressed,” Adam smiles, then lets the smile slide of his face in favour of exhaling heavily and dropping his head backwards onto the mattress, and closing his eyes. “I’m so fucking tired.”

He hears Ronan put his phone down on the floor, and then feels Ronan unfolding his legs as he turns slightly to face Adam, the mattress dipping a little as he leans on it.

“Do you… wanna talk about it now?” he asked.

“You don’t want to play me the murder squash song?” Adam mumbles, “I think I’d prefer that.”

Ronan snorts softly, “I did make you a playlist,” he said, voice strangely hesitant, “and it’s not all the murder squash song.”

Adam cracked one eye open. “I’m not sure I believe you,” he said, then watched as Ronan shuffled around to pick his phone back up, then snagged his headphones, then moved back next to Adam.

“Here,” he said, handed Adam one of the ear buds, pressed the other into his ear, “it’s better over the speakers, but I don’t wanna wake buddy up.”

The first song is the fucking murder squash song. He groans when it starts, glares at Ronan the entire way through, but doesn’t take the ear bud out. He wasn’t lying when he said he’d prefer this than talking right now, and anyway, it’s almost worth it to see Ronan grinning so cheerfully back at him - obviously reveling in Adam’s faux anger.

The second song is… not the murder squash song. Adam doesn’t know the second song. Probably
because it’s not in English, but it’s beautiful, so he doesn’t really care that he can’t understand it. The third song is instrumental, he knows this one, he puts it on in Ronan’s car all the time, it’s all bodhran and bouzouki. Ronan had a habit of pointing out all the different instruments he could whenever he played instrumental music - it was a habit that Adam pretended to find annoying, but was actually very impressed by.

The fourth song is another instrumental, and he relaxes enough to close his eyes, to pillow his head on his arms. He can hear Ethan snuffling in his sleep, Ronan breathing deeply beside him, muffled through the music, but clear enough. It’s very peaceful. The fifth song, of course, is the murder squash song, and it almost gives him a fucking heart attack. Ronan is laughing very, very quietly in an attempt to not wake Ethan up.

“You little fucker,” Adam hisses, pulls the earphone out and sits up properly, “I was half asleep.”

“Good song placement then,” Ronan observed, an evil smile on his lips, “I don’t want you falling asleep before you finish the playlist.”

“Cruel,” Adam adds, then, “I’ll finish it another time.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, then, “ok, tell me what’s going on,” he pulls his own earphone out, turns the music off, and drops his phone on the bed.

“It’s -” God, even thinking about actually verbalising this shit, talking about it to a real person, brings a fucking lump to his throat. It feels like there’s a rock wedged in his esophagus. “I thought I could keep Ethan out of it. Out of the... blast zone. But I - last night -”

“Fuck,” Ronan hisses, “fuck, Adam, did he get hit?”

“No!” it feels like his insides are coming apart, “No. But I - I’m scared he will be. He’s getting older, he talks more and- and- and my parents don’t really like... talking.”

He pauses for a moment to let Ronan swear venomously under his breath.

“I’m not home all the time,” he continues, “and sometimes I might not be fast enough. Or strong enough. I don’t want to risk it. I can’t risk it. Even if it’s nothing... nothing physical, Ethan doesn’t deserve any of... that.”

“No,” Ronan says fiercely, “he doesn’t. Fuck. Ok. You guys can stay here, don’t go home. Just stay here. Gansey’ll be fine with it. Noah’ll be fine with it. He doesn’t exactly use his room either, so you could stay in there, we can-”

“Ronan,” Adam sighs, “it’s not that fucking easy. I can’t just ... I can’t just up and go. I can’t just take Ethan with me. That would be kidnapping. I need a plan first. I need to be able to find some way to make them let me take him. To let me leave. I don’t know how yet.”

“The Gansey’s have a whole heap of lawyer connections,” Ronan said, “hell, the both of us have money, we could like, pay your parents off or some shit or-”

“Fuck, Ronan,” Adam protested, “I’m not - I can’t pay for lawyers, and I can’t take your money.”

If this was Gansey he was talking to, he thinks there would have been a lengthy and earnest argument here. Ronan looks like he disagrees completely with Adam, but lets this disagreement out in a drawn out groan instead.

“What the fuck are we gonna do then?” Ronan asked, “How are we doing this?”

There are too many things today that are making him want to cry. The fact that Ronan is immediately on board with helping, on board enough that he says ‘we’, not ‘you’, just that makes him want to retreat back to the bathroom and cry into the sink.

Instead, he picks at the coverlet, breathes deeply for a few seconds.

“I don’t know,” he admits, “everytime I try and think about it - I just - it’s like my brain just shuts down. I just start panicking.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, his voice softening, “that’s ok. That’s why I’m here. We’ll figure this out together, ok?”

It feels like cheating to involve someone else in this. To have someone help him in his escape plan. He’s been planning his escape for years, always alone, always independent.

“Ok,” he replies, sniffs, presses the side of his face against the bed, “sorry.”

“Fuck off,” Ronan says affectionately, lifting his hand to brush his knuckles across Adam’s cheeks, wiping away the tears, “you’re not the one who ought to be sorry.”
The last time, before this fucking week, that he’d cried in front of somebody, he’d been 8. The school principal had called Adam to his office to have a very serious talk about his bruises, his unwillingness to talk in class. He’d very softly, very kindly, grilled Adam about his home life, and while Adam had managed to say that things were fine, that he was fine, that his parents were fine, he hadn’t managed to stop himself from crying while saying it all. His parents got a phone call home, their trailer got a visit, solemn faced adults talked carefully to his parents while his parents smiled carefully back. Everyone went away. For two weeks, Adam didn’t get hit, Adam didn’t get yelled at. Then apparently his parents had decided the attention on them was off and punishment was due, and Adam missed the next week of school.

He could not fucking believe that he was crying in front of Ronan. Not even for the first time. He was fucking openly crying in front of someone he’d only known for a few months.

His father had always looked enraged, and embarrassed, when Adam had cried as a child, his mother always disdainful. Ronan just looked sad. He had lain his head down on the bed next to Adam’s, tipped forward until their foreheads were pressed together, cupped Adam’s cheek.

“Sorry,” Adam huffed wetly, “I know this isn’t a - hh - a good brainstorming technique.”

“I dunno,” Ronan mumbled back, “people are always saying it’s good to cry, maybe it’ll help.”

“It’s never helped me,” Adam sniffs, “and me crying isn’t gonna help Ethan either.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, he’s still holding Adam’s face, rubbing his thumb under his eye. “Ok, you’re totally right, this is a terrible brainstorming technique.”

Adam snorts, turns his face a little to hide more of it in the blankets, allows himself to feel relieved when Ronan doesn’t take his hand away yet.

“D’you,” Ronan is saying carefully, “do you want to tell Gansey? He might be able to help.”

“No,” Adam breathes into the material, “no.”

“Adam,” Ronan says, “I know this is a… a point of fucking pride for you or something, but like, this is serious.”

“God,” Adam says, “I fucking know, Ronan. It’s just. I just can’t. Not yet. I can’t.”

“But you’re telling me,” Ronan says, “I don’t see why it’s different.”

“Ronan,” Adam says, sighs, sniffs, “it’s fucking different.”

“Why?” Ronan persists. Adam would very much like to be mad at him for needling right now, for needling at all, but he can’t quite get there. Not with his hand gentle on his face, his lack of judgement at his total and complete breakdown, his immediate agreement to help.

“Because,” Adam tries, turns his face completely into the blankets so Ronan’s hand has no choice but to fall away, “he’s Gansey. And you’re… you’re Ronan.”

“Uh,” Ronan says, “ok, now I’m seeing why you’re the top of all your classes.”

“Fuck off,” Adam says into the bed. He’s stopped crying. He could probably be breathing properly now as well if he wasn’t smushing his face into a mattress. His insides still feel raw and exposed and ugly, but he feels less compressed. Doesn’t feel like he’s suffocating under his own panic now.

“Ad’m,” Ethan says, voice small with sleep, “tha’ was a bad word.”

Chainsaw croaks in agreement.

Chapter End Notes

Next update, I'll include the playlist in the notes :)
There’s not really any more time to talk about possible plans with Ronan, not with Ethan awake and comprehending. Not with Gansey coming in announcing that he’s finished studying and needs to be congratulated. They turn their attention instead to agreeing with Ethan that Adam shouldn’t have said that word, and that it wasn’t a good thing. It isn’t for another half hour, when Ronan helps Adam pack all his books and Ethan back into the BMW to take them back to the trailer, that they get to address the problem again. The problem which apparently Adam can’t keep calm for long enough to get past confirming that there was definitely a problem. Of course, with Ethan in the backseat, they still can’t talk about it very much. Ethan wants to talk to them, he’s very vibrant and chatty after his nap, and wants to fill Adam in on their bird shenanigans and also the dream he just had in which he was a potato chip.

They don’t mention it at all until Ronan parks at the end of the driveway, and the two of them collect the bags, Adam’s bike, and Ethan.

“So,” Ronan says, he has Ethan’s shoulder bag hanging from his elbow and Ethan sitting on his hip, “I’m gonna do some research when I get home, see what precedent I can find for situations like this.”

“You’re gonna do research?” Adam asked, twisting his face into exaggerated shock, “Who are you, and what did you do with Ronan Lynch?”

“You little sh-pooper,” Ronan sniffed in fake offense, “I’ll have you know I’m very good at research when I can be bothered.”

“Well,” Adam said, reminded himself that he was too close to home to let any of his emotions come back to the surface, “thank you for bothering.”

“You don’t need to thank me for being a decent human, Adam,” Ronan grunts, “it’s the least I can do.”

“It really isn’t,” Adam says, matter of fact, “most people wouldn’t.”

“Y’know,” Ronan says, “Gansey is always telling me that I have a very cynical outlook on life, but I think you’re even worse than me.”

“Maybe,” Adam says, “it doesn’t lessen my appreciation for you.”

“Stop,” Ronan says, “you’ll make me blush.”

“Alright,” Adam snorts, “I’ll try and come up with a plan too. Will I see you at Nino’s tomorrow night?”

“Of course,” Ronan says, “you’re bringing Ethan, right?”

“Yes,” Adam doesn’t need to think about it, “whaddya think about that Ethan? Pudding at Nino’s with Ronan tomorrow?”

“Can I have th’ strawb’ry cheesecake?” Ethan asks, “I like th’ sprinkles.”

“Yeah,” Adam smiles, “I think we can do that.”

They’re outside the trailer. Adam does not want to be outside the trailer. Ethan doesn’t look like he wants to be outside the trailer either, he’s clinging tightly to Ronan, his legs have locked around his waist. Ronan’s face is set in something like steely determination, his own arms are tightening protectively around Ethan. They have to go in. There’s no avoiding it tonight. He can’t risk getting in trouble right now, not until he has a plan, not until he can know for certain that his actions can’t
result in his parent’s punishing Ethan. He has to go in.

“I have to go in,” he tells Ronan.
“I know,” Ronan says, doesn’t loosen his hold on Ethan.
Adam walks his bike to the side of the trailer, props it up and locks it, then returns to Ronan who looks to be frozen to the spot.
“Ronan,” he says. Ethan looks upset, not as upset as Ronan.
“I know,” Ronan repeats, “I know. I just hate it.”
“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Adam says, tries to sound reassuring.
“Will you guys be ok?” Ronan asks, is obviously not reassured. He does let Adam take Ethan out of his arms though.
“There’s a large possibility that I’ve been overreacting,” Adam says, “I think we’ll be fine.”
“Call me,” Ronan says, “if anything goes down. Ok?”
“I don’t have a phone,” Adam points out, “but ok.”
“Ok,” Ronan, shifts his weight from foot to foot uneasily, then ducks forward, presses a kiss to Ethan’s cheek, “ok. God. You’re gonna be fine,” he says, it sounds like he’s trying to reassure himself more than Adam.
“Yeah,” Adam said, nodded firmly, “we will be. Chill out, dude, you’re freaking Ethan out.”
“Sorry, buddy,” Ronan said, “it’s fine.”
“Yeah,” Ethan replies, “chill ou’”
“Ok,” Ronan laughs, “goodnight.”

Adam does not want Ronan to leave. Does not want to turn around himself and carry Ethan and their bags up the steps to the trailer. Does not want to go inside. Knows that his mother will have been watching the whole scene, she won’t have heard what they were saying, but she’ll have seen the whole thing, and he’s sure she’ll have some biting remarks to make. He wants to call out for Ronan to wait up, he’s changed his mind, he’ll stay with them at Monmouth. They can work out the fine details later.
He turns around, he carries Ethan and their bags up the stairs, into the trailer, past their mother in the kitchen, and into his bedroom.

“You’re still hanging out with that punk?” Alice calls after him, “I thought your dad told you he looked like bad news.”
Adam busies himself with unpacking and repacking his bag, with pulling Ethan’s duplo out from under his bed for him to play with.
“He was in the neighbourhood,” Adam replied, not technically a lie, “sorry ma’am, I didn’t realise dad didn’t want me around him.”
“You and Ethan both,” Alice said, appearing in their doorway, “I saw him fuckin’ leaning in and kissing Ethan. What kind of man does that? Fags, that’s what. I don’t want Ethan around that kind of behaviour. We didn’t raise you like that, and we sure as hell aren’t raising Ethan like that.”
She’s talkative tonight.
“No, ma’am,” Adam mumbles, shuffles their bags under the bed, hopes that Ethan isn’t absorbing any of the conversation, hopes that duplo is enough to keep him distracted.
“Speak the fuck up,” Alice commands, “we didn’t raise you to mumble, neither.”
Well, they kinda did, but he doubted she would appreciate this being pointed out.
“No, ma’am,” Adam repeats clearly, “sorry ma’am.”
“Better,” Alice says, “dinner is as soon as your dad gets home, you better be ready by then.”
“Yes, ma’am,” Adam says, “do you need a hand with anything?”
“Huh,” Alice snorts, “you’d be no help in the kitchen, boy. Anyway. You really wanna piss your dad off?”
“No, ma’am,” Adam says, and Alice finally leaves the room.

It’s obvious when their father gets home. The front door crashes open first, and then, Adam’s door
smashes open.

Ethan jumps. Adam manages not to swear.

“You,” Robert says, “what the fuck are you up to?”

“Um,” Adam says, has no idea what Robert could be referring to, what he could know, who he could have talked to.

“Um?” Robert mocks, “Um? Is that all you have to say? You really think you’re so high and fucking mighty, don’t you? That you’re so much fucking better than your parents, than everyone in this town”

“Um,” Adam says again, winces as he does, “No, sorry sir, no.”

Robert, in all his incandescent rage, looks too big for the doorway, like he won’t fit through. He does though. Instinct tells Adam to step backwards, to move away from his approaching father, but fear propels him forward, blocking his way further into the room.

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” Robert snarls, reaches for him and hooks him by the collar of his shirt, “I’ve seen who you’re fucking spending your time with.”

Oh.

“Y’see,” Robert continues, mercifully dragging Adam out of the room rather than pushing him further into it. Adam can only hope that Ethan stays where he is. “I thought he was just some fucking fag punk from your shit school, but no one there drives a fucking BMW, do they?”

“No sir,” Adam coughs, tries to loosen Robert’s grip just slightly.

“And then I realised,” Robert mused, his grip tightens as Adam scrabbles at his hands, “that I fucking know who that kid is. I’ve heard about him before. Him and his fucking pretentious family. That’s Ronan fucking Lynch, innit?”

There’s no real point in lying here.

“Yes, sir,” Adam gasps out, and hears his mother gasp from behind him as well. He knows she’s not gasping out of worry.

“Do you really think,” Robert says, it’s at this point that he first slams Adam against the wall, “that hanging out with rich scum like that is gonna do anything for you? Is gonna change who you are?”

“No sir,” Adam gets out, head ringing.

“It fucking won’t,” Robert continues as if Adam hadn’t said anything, “shit bags like that would sooner run you over with their posh cars as they would help trailer trash like you out. You look like a fucking idiot,” there’s spit flying everywhere, “trying to fit in with boys like that. You are fucking embarrassing yourself and your mother and me.”

“I’m sorry,” Adam tries, “I’m sorry.”

“You fucking will be,” Robert tells him, and the juxtaposition between the calm of his voice and the slamming of his fists is impressive. Adam had stopped bothering being amazed about this sort of thing years back, though.

“Imagine my fucking surprise,” Robert snarls, “I was just driving home, after a good day at work, actually fucking earning my living, when I saw that little shitbag unlocking his car. Of course I recognised him straight away, not many people have tattoos that big or ugly. Should have realised who he was when I first saw him, I just never expected you to be so. Fucking. Stupid.” He emphasised each word with a smack against the wall of the trailer - shaking the entire house and Adam’s head with it.

“God,” Robert snapped, “shut him up, will you, woman, fuck!”

“I will,” Adam gasps, becomes limp in his father’s hands, “I will. Please. I’ll get him to be quiet.”

Just when Adam thinks his father has reached the height of anger, Robert proves him wrong again.

“You’re not fucking listening, are you?” he roars, “I’m tellin’ you you’re no better’n us, we don’t
need you babyn’ him and turning him soft. Don’t think you’re doin’ him any good with your fucking hugs and kisses.”
Robert isn’t about to let him go, isn’t about to let him go comfort Ethan. He resumes his struggling. He doesn’t want Alice in their room, yelling at Ethan to be quiet.
He knows this is a bad idea. The struggling. He keeps on anyway, even as his father slams him against the door lintel. He manages to twist, to ignore the blossoming pain, to wrench himself out of his father’s grasp. This only means that Robert has two hands free to punch him, and so he does.
Being punched while you’re standing at the top of a set of stairs, even short shallow ones like the ones at the entrance to the trailer, is never a good idea. Not that being punched is usually a good idea. He’s aware that he’s falling, and he’s going to hurt however he lands, and then his head is hitting the railing and he stops being aware of things for a moment.
If he wasn’t familiar with the feeling of swimming in and out of consciousness, he wouldn’t have realised he had blacked out for a moment, so similar were the conditions of waking up to what was happening before. Robert was still yelling, just, he was now standing over Adam to do so, was bending down to grab his shirt again, yelling something about getting up. About being a man. About who the fuck knows. There’s swearing and Adam can’t lift his head properly. Everything is off balance and wrong. More so than usual. He can’t even feel how much pain he’s in yet, nothing is connecting in his head except for the fact that he can still hear Ethan crying, even through Robert’s yelling, even through his head buzzing, even through his mother speaking to his father. He hears something about faking it. He hears Ethan crying. He tries to roll onto his hands and knees, tries to push himself up. Now he’s rolled over he can’t hear Ethan crying anymore. He can barely hear his father. He can hear sirens coming closer.
He’s only dimly aware of someone asking if he’s drunk, aware enough to shake his head, to immediately regret shaking his head as it intensifies the nausea, the pain, the hollow feeling in his skull. Everything is simultaneously too loud and too quiet.
It isn’t until he’s being lain down on a stretcher in the back of an ambulance, until the general clamor surrounding them is muffled by the doors being shut, does he come too enough to panic. He tries to sit back up, but there are hands holding him down, soft voices telling him to calm down, that he’s safe, that he’s fine.
“Wait” he gasps out, words difficult to push past what feels like bruising inside his throat, “Ethan, I can’t leave Ethan-”
“Sir,” a woman is saying, voice clear and calm, “please calm down-”
“No,” Adam snaps back, continues struggling, “he’s cryin’, I’m not leavin’ without him. Don’t leave him with her.”
“Who?” she asks.
“Please,” it’s hard enough to sound coherent, to think coherently, he can’t explain anything right now. “My brother. In the bedroom. Please.”
“Sir-”
Adam manages to sit up, it’s a bad idea, but he’s fucking damned if he’s gonna leave Ethan here after that.
“You mother has him,” someone is saying, they obviously think this is reassuring, “your father’s been taken in for questioning, you don’t need to worry about your brother.”
“Fuck,” Adam hisses, struggles further to try and get off the bed, but the hands are back, stopping him, “no. No. I’m not leaving without him - I - he’s coming with me.”
If he had more brain space right now, he’d be panicking about the fact that he was in an ambulance. That he didn’t have the money to be in an ambulance. He doesn’t have the mental capacity right now to panic about more than one thing at once.
“Please,” he knows he sounds desperate, knows he needs to lie back down before he blacks out again - everything hurts - “please, I can’t leave him.”
He doesn’t know if it’s what he’s saying that convinces them, if it’s his stubbornness that does it, if they didn’t want to leave the 3 year old with his mother in the first place, but Ethan gets brought in.
Alice is the one bringing him in. He’s limp in her arms, but crying heatedly.

“Adam,” she says - he can barely hear her until he tips his head away from the door, “I’m going to the police station to clean up your mess. They say you’re cryin’ for Ethan,”

“Ma’am,” someone says sharply, “Please don-”

“Mum,” he croaks, “please, give him to me.”

Ethan jumps when he hears Adam’s voice, thrashes in his mother’s arms and leans, arms outstretched towards him.

She only huffs angrily, passes him over, struggling to keep hold of him as he tries to escape her. This is not a scene any 3 year old ought to be exposed to. Adam knew he probably looked worse than he usually did after a beating, the look of it all enhanced by the ambulance, by the stretcher, by the tears streaking down his face. It was still better than leaving him with his mother.

“I ain’t payin’ for this shit,” Alice tells him, “we don’t have the money for that.”

“I know,” Adam says, wraps his arms around Ethan, ignores the stabbing pain that brings, “I know.”

None of the EMT’s are very keen on letting Adam hold onto Ethan on the drive over to the hospital, but neither Adam or Ethan are willing to let go of the other. Adam’s head keeps swimming back into murky waters - it’s difficult to keep hold of consciousness - he’s only vaguely aware of anything else around them that isn’t Ethan’s small body against his, Ethan’s gasping sobs, Ethan’s hands clutching his clothing, his skin so tight it hurts.

Everything’s a blur. A haze of voices and lights. When Ethan tucks his head against Adam’s left shoulder, he can’t hear him crying, even as he feels his body shake with the sobs. He has to wait to be seen properly. There’s nurses asking him questions and flashing lights in his eyes, but he can’t concentrate on them. Can’t translate the hubbub into words, into answers, into anything legible. He asks for a phone. Calls Ronan. Prays to Ronan’s God that he answers his fucking phone. Ronan’s God is listening.

“I’m at Mountain View Hospital,” he says, “room 12B on the first floor.”

“The fuck.” Ronan says.

“We need a new plan,” Adam mumbles, not useful.

“I’m on my way,” Ronan is saying, “what’s going on?”

“Ethan’s fine;” Adam says, Ethan is still crying into Adam’s neck.

“Adam,” Ronan says. Adam can hear his car keys jingling, knows Ronan can hear Ethan crying, even if Adam can’t.

“I’ll see you soon?”

“Fuck,” Ronan says, “yes.”

He needs the time between hanging up on Ronan and Ronan arriving with a bang in the waiting room. Needs it to swallow his pride, swallow as much anger as he can, swallow blood. He can’t pay for the ambulance. He needs what money he has. He can’t pay for the hospital visit - he doesn’t have enough money for what he suspects this will end up costing. He needs Ronan’s money. He needs Ronan to hold Ethan so he can pay attention to the nurses, then the doctors too. He needs Ronan to hold Ethan because he thinks his own limbs are going to stop working soon and he doesn’t want to be holding Ethan when that happens.

There’s no real time for explaining anything when Ronan gets there. Adam has enough time to take in Ronan’s utter and complete panic, enough time to feel so overwhelmed relief he could faint with it.

“Hey,” he says, casual, “can you hold Ethan for a bit?”

Ronan looks like if he opens his mouth the only thing that will come out is swearing. He nods sharply, sits next to the two of them, and begins wrangling Ethan off of Adam.

“Baby,” Adam mumbles, his mouth doesn’t really want to work that well, “please sit with Ronan for a bit, ok? I’ll be back in a minute. I have to get cleaned up, baby. Ronan’ll look after you.”

Ronan is swearing now, very quietly.

“No,” Ethan is saying, sobbing, “no, no, no.”
“Let Ronan hold you,” Adam pleads, “I’ll be right back, sweetheart.” Ethan is just wailing incomprehensibly, so Adam lifts his gaze up to Ronan. “Can you?” he asks, helplessly. None of them enjoy it when Ronan peels Ethan off of Adam, but as soon as Ronan’s shuffled Ethan around in his arms to cradle him against his chest, Ethan stops struggling. Doesn’t stop crying though. Ronan looks stricken. Adam doesn’t have time to be stricken. Someone is leading him away into another room.

Chapter End Notes

Ronan’s playlist for Adam (You can find all of these on Youtube, except for the ‘canon’ murder squash)
-Murder Squash
-Kaleo - Vor I Vaglaskogi
-Muñeira de Piornedo - Galician Bagpipes, fiddle, bouzouki, bodhran, guitar
-Alef - Sol
-Murder Squash
-Tom Odell - Hold Me
-Arlissa - I surrender (Acoustic)
-Darren Hayes - Bloodstained Heart
-Dessa - Alibi
-Murder Squash (remix)
Tell me What you Saw

When Adam comes out- less hazy, more coherent, more aware of just how fucked he was- Ronan was still sitting in the waiting room. Ethan is curled up on his lap, obviously asleep, Ronan’s arms in a protective cage around him. Ronan’s eyes are closed as well, but Adam doesn’t doubt that he’s awake.

“Hey,” he mumbles, drops himself into the chair next to Ronan. He’s almost jealous of how peaceful Ethan looks, wishes he was small enough to get into someone’s lap to be comforted.

“You look like shit,” Ronan says, shifts his arms carefully around Ethan so he can reach out and brush his fingers against the bandage covering Adam’s left ear, “how bad is it?”

“Um,” he says, can’t bring himself to let himself lean into Ronan’s hand, “I- mild concussion. Sprained wrist. Couple of bruised ribs. And I, uh,” he has to pause for a second, has to take a deep breath, has to remind himself that this isn’t going to be the worst thing he has to say tonight. He doesn’t even know if it’s still tonight, or if it’s crept into morning. “I’m probably never gonna… never gonna hear out of this ear again,” he says. Ronan’s fingers had still been on the edge of the bandage, just dusting over skin, but they stiffened and drew away at Adam’s words.

“You can’t hear anything?”

“No,” Adam’s own hand crept up to the bandage, pressed against it. He didn’t really need it. His ear wasn’t bleeding, but, it felt more like something that could heal if it was hidden away. “They said that there was a chance it could… improve, but that my full hearing would never come back.”

“Fuck,” Ronan said, voice low, “fuck, Adam, I - fuck.”

Adam laughs, entirely without humour. “I can’t work for at least a week. Can’t use my hand.”

“Fuck,” Ronan says again, with feeling.

Adam grits his teeth, his courage, ditches his pride. “I won’t be making any money. And I… I can’t pay for tonight, anyway, I-” he can’t fucking do it. He can’t do it.

“Oh,” Ronan says, “I - I paid for it already. Don’t complain. I did it and I’m not taking it back.”

“Oh,” Adam says, isn’t sure if he should feel relieved or angry. Settles for both. “I’m sorry.”

Ronan looks like he’s in physical pain. He lifts his hand back to Adam’s face, covers Adam’s hand in his. “Don’t,” he says, “none of this - don’t blame yourself for any of this. I want to be here.”

Adam doesn’t want to be here.

“Did Ethan go to sleep ok?”

“Uh,” Ronan chuckles, drops his hand from Adam’s, “he cried for about 5 minutes straight after you left, then just fell asleep in the middle of a sob. He’s been knocked out since.”

“Good,” he wanted Ronan’s hand back, dropped his own into his lap. “I never wanted him to see any of this.”

“No,” Ronan agrees, “you know it’s not your fault, you know that, right?”

God.

“I have a plan,” he says instead of a reply, “it’s kind of shitty, but I think it’ll work.”

Adam’s mother is home when they arrive at the trailer. So is his father. Adam had spoken briefly to the police at the hospital, told them he wasn’t ready to speak to them yet, that he was too concussed, too tired, too upset to be thinking clearly. He told them he was staying with a friend. Didn’t tell them he was going back to the house first.

They drop by Monmouth first. There is no way he is taking Ethan back to the trailer. They have to wake Gansey up. Adam really is not ready for explanations, is not ready for the pity and the concern that follows explanations. He carries Ethan into Monmouth, stays by the door, holding him a little too tightly while Ronan wakes Gansey, explains as briefly as possible what’s going on.

Gansey wants to come with them, but he backs down when Adam spoke up and said that they
needed someone to stay here with Ethan. Ethan wakes up just briefly when they transfer him from Adam’s arms into Gansey’s bed. They have to take a moment for Adam to crouch down next to him and stroke his hair until he falls back to sleep.

“What if he wakes up and wants you?” Gansey asks in a whisper, following them back to the door, “What do I do?”
“Just tell him I’ll be back soon,” Adam replies.
“Rub his back,” Ronan suggests.

His father opens the door. It’s obvious they’ve been waiting for him to get back. It’s also obvious that they weren’t expecting Ronan to be standing behind him, looming, gargoyle-esque. They don’t seem to notice the lack of Ethan, or if they do, they don’t comment.

“You better not be here looking for money for that fuckin’ hospital,” Robert growls. He doesn’t even bother to pretend to look remorseful.

Alice hovers behinds him.

“No,” Adam says. He wants to be snapping but his head hurts too much to be snapping. His voice is coming out reedy and weak, and he knows his father notices. “No,” Adam repeats, still weak, “I’m here to make you a deal.”

“The fuck,” Robert snarls, his eyes flicker from Adam’s face to Ronan, his glare shifts into something darker, “you think bringing this fucker with you means you have some power here? You think you have anything over me?”

Ronan is supposed to be being quiet. He can’t seem to do it. “Have you fucking seen him?” he snaps, moves in closer behind Adam until his chest is pressed up against Adam’s shoulders, “you’ve fucking smashed his face in. You don’t think that’s anything?”

“Was I talking to you?” Robert snaps back, his voice isn’t weak at all.

Adam takes a half step back, presses himself against Ronan. Mostly warning him to stay back, to shut up, partially to comfort himself.

“The police want me to make a statement,” Adam says, toneless. “They spoke to the doctors. They know that I didn’t just fall down the stairs. My injuries are too obviously man made. They want me to press charges.”

His father doesn’t reply. He doesn’t look worried yet, but he doesn’t look quite as smug as he did a few seconds ago either. Alice hasn’t moved.

“So,” Adam continues, “I won’t press charges.”

“Of course not,” Robert snorts, “they wouldn’t stick, anyway. You know that. It’s your word against mine, they’re gonna believe me over you any day. You don’t wanna look stupid do you?”

Adam has to stop his mouth spitting out the usual - no sir.

“They say they have enough evidence.” he says instead, “They say they just need my statement, and they’ll put you away. For years.”

Robert’s cool facade is slowly ebbing away.

“Here’s the deal,” Adam says, swallows a couple of times to keep his heart out of his throat, “I don’t send you to jail for the next few years. You let me and Ethan leave.”

“Excuse me?” Alice snaps, “Are you tryin’ t’blackmail us?”

“Yes,” Adam says seriously, “yes I am. You let Ethan and me go. You don’t try and follow us. You don’t ask for my pay. You don’t try an’ contact us, and I let y’all stay outta jail. I let y’all keep your fuckin’ pride.”

“The hell,” Robert snaps, takes a step towards Adam, his firsts already raised. Adam isn’t going to flinch back, never wants to have to flinch back again, but Ronan is gripping him by the shoulders and tugging him back. Is shoving himself in front of Adam. Is getting in Ronan’s face.

“This is the best fucking deal you are ever going to get,” Ronan says, voice cold and hard, “Adam’s being fucking way too nice. If you don’t take this deal, I’m going to fucking make your life hell. I have enough money for it. I will fuck you up.”

“Ronan,” Adam mumbles. He doesn’t have the strength to make his disapproval clearer, just tilts forwards until his forehead presses against Ronan’s neck, “Ronan,” he says again, “we’re not doin’
“We’re not doing that,” Ronan agrees, “so long as he takes your fucking nice deal.”

“Who the hell do you think you are,” Robert spits, “threatening me?”

“I think,” Ronan says slowly, “that I’m someone who doesn’t give a shit what you think. Take the deal, Robert.”

“Ronan,” Adam says. Can’t bring himself to lift his head. He just wants to go to bed now. Just wants to go back to Ethan. Just wants tonight to be fucking over already. His head is pounding.

“Robert,” Alice mumbles, “you go t’jail an’ we lose the house. I can’t afford it myself.”

“If you don’t take the deal,” Adam says from behind Ronan, “I’m sending you to jail. I’m gonna call social services about mum. I’m gonna get Ethan out of here anyway. I ain’t gonna stay here an’ help with the bills. I’m not doing this anymore. This is the simplest way for all of us.”

Robert doesn’t speak. Ronan inhales like he’s about to start snapping again, and Adam reaches round him to take his wrist. Ronan simply exhales.

There’s a long moment now, a tense moment. Adam and Ronan standing in the dark of the steps, Robert and Alice standing inside the pale light of the trailer.

“Fine,” Robert snaps. “Fine. The two of you can fuck off. This goes both ways though, you hear? I’m not gonna pay for either of you two. I’m not gonna answer if you guys call. This is it. You cut yourself off from us, we cut ourselves off from you. You hear?”

“Yes,” Adam says. Doesn’t say that Robert hasn’t been paying Adam and Ethan’s way for years anyway, “I hear. I don’t contact you. You don’t contact me. That’s the deal.”


“Robert,” Alice says.

“Shut the fuck up,” Robert hisses, “you want me to go t’jail? You want the fucking embarrassment of our fuckin’ shitbag of a kid sending me t’jail?”

Alice doesn’t reply.

“Ok,” Ronan says, “so now we’re gonna come in and get Adam and Ethan’s shit, and then we’ll be gone. Got it?”

“Don’t fucking talk to him like that, you fag,” Alice spits.

“Mum,” Adam says, tugs at Ronan’s wrist until Ronan lets him move back in front, “please. Don’t. Just let us get my stuff. I bought it all. Let me take it.”

No one says anything. Robert scoffs, turns away from the door, stomps to his room, slams the door behind him. Alice just blinks at the two of them in the doorway.

“Move,” Ronan says, his arm drops carefully around Adam’s shoulders, mindful of the bruises, the bandages, the hunched way he’s holding himself, “get out of the way, Alice. We’ll be gone soon.”

Alice doesn’t say anything. Her expression doesn’t change. It stays sour, sour, sour. She moves, turns, follows her husband.

Ronan follows Adam inside the trailer for the first time, hopefully the last time. Into the room Adam has spent his entire life hiding in.

He doesn’t comment on the darkness, the dampness, the smallness, the blandness. He just picks up Adam’s backpack, still on the bed where Adam had dropped it after coming home earlier that day. They pack together in silence. Ronan holds various bags open while Adam stuffs things in. He just wants to get out of here. Just wants this to be done. Just wants to see Ethan. Just wants to hear. Just wants someone to fucking hold him and tell him he was doing the right thing. That none of this was his fault. That they were gonna be ok.

When they leave, bags weighing them down, neither Robert or Alice are around. Adam locks the door behind him. Leaves his key on the table in the kitchen. He has anything that could be important. He’s always been in charge of his birth certificate, of his school paperwork. He’s got them, he’s got Ethan’s paperwork. He doesn’t need anything else from this house. He never needs anything else from this house.

He doesn’t bother yelling goodbye. They stick the bags in the backseat, Ronan grabs his bike, chucks it into the boot. Adam curls up in the front passenger seat, focuses on the pain in his wrist, in his ribs, in his head, ignores the blankness in his ear, the terror in his stomach.
They don’t bother unpacking when they get back to Monmouth. Don’t bother talking. Adam can’t. He just can’t. He needs to get Ethan. He needs to get into bed. He needs to not. He just can’t. Not now.

Gansey is still awake. He’s curled up on top of his blankets, with his journal propped up on one arm, Ethan on the other.

“Hey,” he says when Ronan shuts the door behind Adam. “Did everything go… ok?”

“Yeah,” Ronan mumbles, holds Adam steady while he stands on one foot to take his shoe off.

“Ethan ok?”

“Yeah,” Gansey nods, “he’s just been sleeping. You guys gonna sleep in… Noah’s room?”

“Mm,” Adam says, finishes with his shoes and crosses the room to Gansey’s bed, “is he around?”

“No,” Gansey shakes his head, “he’s been out since this afternoon. He won’t mind though.”

“Sorry,” Adam mumbles, bends to lift Ethan out of the crook of Gansey’s arm, “thanks for lookin’ after Ethan.”

“Of course,” Gansey says, sits up, shutting his journal as he did. “Always, Adam,” he added, shifting to put the journal on the ground by the bed, “you two are welcome to stay here as long as you like, ok? We want you here.”

Adam doesn’t want to hear this right now. Can’t deal with this right now. He nods. Ethan mumbles in his sleep.

“C’mon,” Ronan says, hand to the small of Adam’s back, “it’s late. You need to get some sleep.”

“Mm,” Adam says, lets Ronan lead him away from Gansey and his worried expression, lets him lead him into Noah’s bedroom. Lets him nudge him down onto the bed.

“He’s never slept in it,” Ronan says awkwardly, nods at the clean lines of the bed spread, “it’s clean.”

“Mm,” Adam says.

“Adam,” Ronan says, “it’s gonna be ok.”

“Mm,” Adam says, shifts Ethan in his arms, brushes the hair off of his forehead. Everything has been foggy all night, but now it’s getting worse, his eyes are starting to blur as well.

“You should get into bed,” Ronan says, tugs at the blanket under Adam, “think there’s enough room for the both of you here?”

“Mhm,” Adam mumbles. He doesn’t move, so Ronan moves for him. Tugs at the blanket carefully until it’s untucked enough to pull out from under Adam’s legs.

“Um,” Ronan says, “you want me to - to go? Do you need anything else, or?”

“No,” Adam says.

“Ok,” Ronan nods, stops fiddling with Noah’s blankets, “ok. I’ll be… I’ll be right in my room if you need me, and-”

“No,” Adam says again, “please,” he adds, “just. Don’t go yet. I can’t. I don’t want to be alone yet.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, drops down into a crouch by the bed, “ok. I’ll stay. You gonna get into bed?”

“Mhm,” Adam says again, shuffles backwards further onto the bed. He regains enough control of his limbs to turn round and lie Ethan down against the wall side of the bed, to tug the blanket up over his back, before sliding under the blankets himself. He lies down, tucks his body round Ethan’s body, hooks his chin over Ethan’s head, closes his eyes.

“Um,” Ronan says, “d’you- can I do anything?”

“Mhm,” Adam says again, doesn’t move at all. His ribs are aching abominably, he’s squishing all his bruises together in this position, and his wrist is trapped painfully under himself. His deaf ear is pressed into the pillow, and he can almost pretend he can’t hear only because of that. “Don’t talk,” he says, “can’t bring himself to care if this is unfair or not, ”just stay.”

“Ok,” his eyes are closed, and he feels more than hears Ronan shifting up from a crouch and perching on the side of the bed. For a moment, Adam thinks he’s just going to sit there - like some sort of guardian gargoyle thing - but then Ronan carefully shifts again until he’s lying on his side next to Adam. He’s on top of the blanket, pinning it down behind Adam. It’s not too tight, it’s almost comforting being held so firmly by the blankets. Ronan hooks his arm around Adam’s waist so he
can rest his hand on the small lump that’s Ethan. With his eyes closed, Adam can pretend, if he tries very hard, that he’s just being held for the sake of being held.  
“Ok,” he says again, “go to sleep. We’ll figure the rest out in the morning.”  
“Mm,” Adam says.

Morning comes far too quickly. Not really surprising seeing as they went to sleep nearer to morning then they ought to have. It also comes as a Monday, which wasn’t a surprise at all, but extremely unwelcome. Adam wakes to Ronan whispering, and Gansey attempting to whisper.

“-called in sick already,” Gansey is saying, it sounds like he’s hovering near the doorway.

It is a surprise to realise that Ronan is still on the bed, though he’s sitting up on the edge now, rather than warming Adam’s back. “Thanks,” he says, “Adam’s gonna have to call in too. And we should call Dana. Fuck,” he adds, “we need to call the factory he works at.”

“I’ve already missed tha’ shift,” Adam mumbles, tries to roll over but instead lets out a hiss of pain as his ribs and arm protest the movement. Ethan also protests in grumble form.

“Adam,” Ronan says, “hey.”

“Did you sleep alright?” Gansey asks, “How are you feeling?”

Adam really would prefer not to answer either of those questions. “Did you say you called in sick, Gansey?”

“Oh,” Gansey says, Adam tries again to roll over, manages it this time, gritting his teeth. “Not for me, I called in for Ronan. I figured you’d probably want less people here this morning, so I was planning on going to school. I can stay though if you would like?”

Maybe in theory he would like this. Would like to have Gansey being sensible about everything. In practice, he thought he wanted as few people around as possible to witness any probable panic attacks that would be coming for him as soon as he got out of bed and thought a little bit more about his life now.

“No,” Adam says, has to pause so he can sit up, every bone in his body protesting. “No you’re right,” he says, “I think a quiet day would be good. If that’s alright?”

“Of course,” Gansey says, doesn’t look at all offended, “obviously feel free to kick Ronan out too if you need.”

“Hey,” Ronan protests. He’s turning round to shuffle back on the bed to lean against the headboard with Adam. He lifts his hand to press the tape on Adam’s ear bandage back down, “breakfast?”

Ethan is happy enough over the beginning of breakfast. He’s very excited that Ronan has several different kinds of cereal to choose from, even more excited when Chainsaw joins them in choosing by tipping over a few of the boxes so she could taste test. Ronan does all the breakfast wrangling while Adam sits in Noah’s bedroom and makes as many phone calls as he can hack at once. He has to call the factory to apologise for his absence that morning, then he has to make it worse by informing them that he won’t be able to work for a week. Then he has to call school and tell them that he had just been hospitalized and wouldn’t be in today, and probably not tomorrow, and would make sure they got a copy of his hospital notes to prove that he wasn’t lying. Then there was Boyd’s, then Nino’s, then Dana. He left Dana for last because he was worried she would have the most questions. Really, he ought to have left Boyd’s for last. Etta was extremely consternated to hear that not only was he not coming in today, but not for a week, and had a lot of very pointed questions about his health, and then she put Boyd on the phone who asked all the same very pointed questions. Dana simply told him she hoped he was ok, and to call her if he had any updates or needed anything. Easy.

When he joined the breakfast circle on the floor - it’s not really a circle. It’s Ronan sitting surrounded by boxes and spilled cereal, Ethan leaning against his knees on one side, Chainsaw on the other - Ronan pressed an overflowing bowl of cornflakes into his hands. “Sorry it’s so full,” he said, “Ethan poured and knows how hungry you get.”
“Thanks buddy,” Adam says to Ethan, has to sit down very carefully to avoid wincing from pain, “this looks great.”

“M’good,” Ethan mumbles round his spoon, abandons his bowl and mess in favour of climbing on top of Adam’s lap. Adam has to put the bowl down next to them so Ethan doesn’t put his feet in it.

“Y’ok?”

“Yeah,” Adam says, it’s mostly the truth. He wraps his arm around Ethan’s waist, presses his cheek against his head. “I’m ok. The nice people at the hospital looked after me while Ronan was looking after you.”

“Ok,” Ethan says, makes grabby hands in the direction of his bowl. Ronan passes it over obediently.

“Um,” Adam says, interrupts himself by sticking a spoonful of cornflakes into his mouth. He chews slowly. “So,” he finally continues, “you like it here, yeah, baby?”

“Uhuh,” Ethan says, doesn’t bother finishing chewing before he speaks. Adam now has chewed up cereal on his pants. Doesn’t really give a shit. Mostly because he knows Ronan doesn’t give a shit.

“You wouldn’t mind staying here for a bit, right?”

“Uh,” Ethan says, his mouth is still full, “uh,” he looks from Ronan to Adam, “wi’ you?”

“Yes. With me, and with Ronan, and Gans, and Noah,” Adam confirmed.

“Uh,” Ethan says again, “wi’ pizza?”

“Don’t push your luck, buddy,” Adam grins, is relieved to find that he can still grin, “you wanna stay here or not?”

“I wanna,” Ethan says, makes grabby hands in Ronan’s direction again. Ronan glances around the floor, hands over the cereal box. Ethan shakes his head, leans forward in Adam’s arms to grab onto Ronan’s shoulder. Ronan continues to be obedient, shuffles closer until his shoulders are pressed up against Adam’s, and Ethan can rest his head on Ronan’s chest while still sitting on Adam’s lap.

“Ro’an,” he says.

“Yeah?” Ronan asks, he’s been handed Ethan’s bowl now, holds it carefully so Ethan can spoon his cereal himself.

“Uh,” Ethan mumbles, looks to be struggling with verbalising whatever it is he wants to say. He sucks on his spoon instead.

Adam understands the feeling. He’s too hungry to be spoon sucking though. He’s very aware that he probably looks like a mess, shoveling soggy cornflakes into his mouth like he thinks there’s time limit on them, but he can’t be fucked.

It isn’t until his spoon is scraping the bottom of the bowl that he realises that Ethan still hasn’t continued speaking. He hasn’t eaten any more either, he’s still just sucking his spoon, holding tightly onto Adam’s arm around his waist with one hand, and pressing his face into Ronan’s shirt. Apparently Adam is not so good at observation when he’s fucking starving.

“Hey buddy,” he says, “You good?”

“Mm,” Ethan says.

Ronan is giving Adam a look that is somewhere close to the tipping point of panic.

“You wanna talk about last night?” Adam asks.

“Mm,” Ethan says again.

“Do you wanna tell me what you saw?”
Breakfast is abandoned in favour of concentrating on Ethan. Adam’s had enough of soggy cornflakes now anyway. He shoves his bowl a little away from them so he can shuffle Ethan around into a comfier spot in his lap.

This isn’t really what Adam wanted to be doing with his morning, but neither had it been what he wanted to be doing with his week, with the last 3 years, with his life. It’s certainly better than some alternate scenarios he could be in right now. Ronan doesn’t look like he wants to be doing this either - but he doesn’t make any move to leave.

Ethan has a lot of questions. Not really questions, more like overflowing emotions that end in a question mark. He sits on Adam’s lap still, legs curled in beneath himself. His head is tucked under Adam’s chin now, but he has his hand knotted into Ronan’s shirt.

“Mum ‘n’ dad was-” Ethan mumbles, he still has his spoon in his mouth and it makes it a little hard to understand what he’s saying, but Adam’s spent Ethan’s entire life listening to him talk through his hand in his mouth so this is nothing. “-real mad?” Ethan finishes.

“Yeah,” Adam says.

“’Cos,” Ethan continues slowly, “’cos of me-”

“No,” Adam interjects, maybe a little too sharply, “no baby-”

Ethan keeps speaking through his spoon, “’cos Ro’an was holdin’ me.”

Oh. God. Adam loved how smart Ethan was, but he wasn’t appreciating it today. He didn’t want Ethan being able to put together the various clues of their parent’s anger, how it related to him - even if in actuality - it had nothing to do with Ethan or Adam or Ronan. All of Robert’s anger was his own, handed down to him from his own father. He was simply trying to pass it down to his own sons. Alice’s anger was her own as well, taught to her from childhood just as she was trying to teach it to them.

Adam risks a glance at Ronan. Ronan looks horrified.

“No,” he says again, tightens his grip around Ethan trying to find the balance between not comforting enough and claustrophobic. “He wasn’t mad because of Ronan holding you. He wasn’t mad at you at all, buddy.”

“Bu-” Ethan begins, has to pause to breathe snottily into Adam’s shirt, “-mum said -”

Adam desperately does not want Ronan to hear what their mother said. Even if he had heard it said to his face the previous night. However, he also doesn’t want to keep interrupting Ethan. He wants Ethan to feel like he can say what he wants to, what he needs to, to feel safe in doing so.

“-said Ro’an’s bad,” Ethan gets out. His face was already damp and sticky with milk and cereal, but now it’s getting damper with tears as well. Adam hasn’t changed his clothes since the previous night - his shirt is already blood and dirt stained, cereal and tears isn’t going to make much of a difference.

“Didn’t like the - the - the kissin’.”

“Mum and dad,” Adam begins carefully, “don’t know Ronan. They’re just - they don’t like new people, and they don’t like us makin’ friends - but they’re wrong, sweetheart. We’re allowed to make friends, we’re allowed to have hugs ‘n’ kisses.” He pauses for a moment to wipe at the accumulated tears, snot, and general grub of Ethan’s face, pauses to make sure Ethan isn’t dissolving under his own emotions and fear, pauses to make sure that Ronan is ok. Ronan looks like he’s going to throw up. He still doesn’t move away though. He’s covered Ethan’s hand on his shirt with his own, and his shoulder is still pressed firmly against Adam’s.

“Ronan’s not bad,” Adam continues, “he’s never been bad t’you, has he?”

“No,” Ethan mumbles. He’s finally removed the spoon, drops it damply into Adam’s lap. “No. Ro’an’s always - ‘n’ always happy wi’ Ro’an.”

“Ok,” Adam nods encouragingly, “and I’m always happy with Ronan too. Mum ‘n’ dad were wrong about that. Ok?”

“Mm,” Ethan nods. He isn’t finished yet, Adam knows this. His heart still sinks when Ethan
continues. “Ad’m,” he says, and now his voice is shaking as his breath comes in roughly, “was so scared.” he pauses to sniff loudly, “dad was - th’ house was shakin’ an’ I was askin’ mum to stop it - an’ - no one was listenin’ t’me at all an’ you was bleedin’ so much an’, an’.”

Adam wants to cut him off here, doesn’t want to hear anymore, doesn’t want Ronan to get an inside view of this. It’s bad enough that he saw the aftermath so clearly. He presses his lips to Ethan’s forehead in a prolonged kiss, makes a small hum that he hopes is encouraging.

“Then -” Ethan continues, he’s let go of Ronan’s shirt in favour of holding Ronan’s hand instead, “there was th’ p’lice, an’ - an’ I didn’t know where you were - an’ - mum was holdin’ me an’ I hate mum holdin’ me ‘cos it’s too tight an’ she pinches me an’ I wanted you-”

Ronan moves suddenly, and Adam is scared he’s finally had enough, finally heard enough, that he’s going to sweep Chainsaw up from the spilled cereal and go hide in his room. That would be ok - Adam usually deals with this kind of thing himself - but it feels so much easier having someone else here to hold Ethan. Someone else to share the weight even just a little. Ronan doesn’t move to get up or away, he pushes himself impossibly closer and shuffles until he can wrap his arm around Adam’s waist, while still holding Ethan’s hand in his other hand. It squishes his bruised ribs even more, sends dull pain through his bones, but it’s ridiculously comforting, so he leans into it.

“Did anyone tell you what was goin’ on, bud?” Adam asks, hopes that maybe the presence of the police would have helped make Alice pretend to be a mother. The knowledge that she’d reverted to her pinching technique did not fill him with hope, however.

“No,” Ethan wails, “no. Jus’ mum said you were bein’ silly an’ wouldn’ get up and tha’ I was too loud an’ was in trouble, an’ I was callin’ you an’ you weren’t answerin’ even though I was cryin’, Ad’m, you weren’t comin’.”

This hurts more than last night did.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he says, “I’m sorry - I couldn’t hear you - ‘cos, when I fell, I hit my head real bad.”

“Real bad,” Ethan repeats, squints up at Adam through his tears, “I saw - saw th’ blood an’ saw th’ p’lice takin’ you away.”

“Yeah,” Adam nods, “those were some nice people from the hospital - they were worried I hit my head too hard and were too worried to realise they needed to let me get you first.”

“Should’ve,” Ethan agrees, “was scared.”

“I know,” Adam says, “me too. But it’s ok now, I’ve got you.”

“Yes,” Adam says, presses another kiss to Ethan’s head, then leans his head sideways against Ronan’s shoulder.

“No mum ‘n’ dad?”

“No,” Adam says firmly, “we aren’t - we aren’t gonna see them again, Ethan. Not unless you want to.”

“Oh,” Ethan says, “no one’s gonna yell at us?”

“No,” Adam says again, “no more yelling. No more fighting.”

“No more bruises?” Ethan asks, finally uncurls himself enough to press his damp fingers against the darkening marks on Adam’s face, “No more blood?”

“No more,” Adam assures him, hopes he can keep his word.

“No more cryin’?” Ethan adds, “Don’ like it when you cry.”

Adam would laugh if it wasn’t so fucking upsetting. “I know,” he says, “it makes me sad to see you cry too.”

They’ve probably not talked about it enough, possibly talked about it too much, but Ethan doesn’t seem to want to ask or say anything else, and Adam just wants to go back to bed. It’s Ronan who finally speaks again.

“We should get you guys cleaned up,” he says quietly, “and into clean clothes. I can go bring your stuff inside while you’re in the shower.”

“Mm,” Adam says.
“Mm,” Ethan says.
“C’mon,” Ronan says, lifts his arm from around Adam’s waist to cup the back of his head instead, rubs his thumb down his neck, “you’ll both feel a bit better when you’re clean.”

They’ve showered here before, Ethan more often than Adam - seeing as Ethan was more predisposed to jumping into mud puddles in the parking lot than Adam was. Because of this, Adam knows where to find the towels, which bodywash belongs to who, which shampoo Ethan likes best, and how the nefarious shower dials work. The first time he had attempted them, he’d given up and showered in ice cold water.

Now, he plops Ethan down onto the bathroom cabinet and peels off his stupidly grubby clothing. There’s dried patches of Adam’s blood on Ethan’s shirt, from where they’d pressed together in the ambulance, he assumes, and it makes him feel sick. He’s not cut out for this. If he were, he would have managed to clean Ethan up last night, wouldn’t have put him to bed in horrifically dirty clothing and done nothing about it until the next morning. No, if he were actually good at this, Ethan wouldn’t have had clothes with blood on at all. None of this would have happened. He had to forcefully squash down these thoughts as he continued undressing Ethan, there was no point in wallowing just yet. He needed all his wits about him for washing a squiggly and upset 3 year old. Once Ethan was undressed, he picked him back up and put him in the far end of the tub before turning the shower on.

“How’s the water?” he asks as he bundles their clothes up to put into the empty laundry basket by the door, “Warm enough yet?”
“Mm,” Ethan hummed, “I dunno. M’toes like it.”
“Ok,” Adam smiles, walks back to the bath to put his hand under the stream of water, “yeah, I think we’re ready,” he says as he steps into the tub with Ethan, and then crouches down before putting his arms out.

“C’mere,” he says, “let’s get you clean ok?”
Ethan comes happily - he’s a fan of showers and splashing in general - but he immediately hooks his arms around Adam’s neck which deters the cleaning process slightly.
Any other day, Adam might protest, might peel him gently off. Today, he shifts until he’s kneeling instead of crouching, and lets Ethan just hold on while he reaches for the body wash and starts soaping Ethan’s back up.

“M’sorry,” Ethan mumbles into Adam’s neck, and Adam pauses just momentarily before he continues sluicing grime off of Ethan’s skin.

Eventually, Adam does have to insist Ethan turn around at least, there’s only so much cleaning he can do when Ethan is all but plastered to his chest, and that’s when the next problem comes to light. Ethan stands in front of him, head tipped down to avoid water falling directly into his eyes, while Adam scrubs up his front, wipes his face, cleans his fingers. He had been extraordinarily dirty - some
of it was left over grime from playing at Dana’s in the morning, some from playing with Chainsaw, some was from holding onto a bloody and dirty Adam. When it was washed off, Adam could see the sharp black bruises on his upper arms.

“Ethan,” he says, tries to sound as normal and steady as possible, keep wiping at some encrusted snot on Ethan’s cheek, “are those bruises from mum pinching you?” Ethan nodded, and Adam bit back the curse bubbling in his throat. He couldn’t remember if his mother had left bruises on him when he was younger, if she’d pinched him hard enough. It would have been difficult to tell her bruises apart from his father’s though. The only consolation out of all of this, was that Adam was always the one who washed and changed Ethan. If she had hurt him like this before, he would have known. Knowing this didn’t really help the fact that she had now, though. Didn’t stop the bile stinging the back of his mouth.

“That’s never happening again,” Adam says carefully, cups Ethan’s face and leans over him to keep the water out of his eyes. “Baby,” he says, “Never. Ok? If anyone ever hurts you, ever, ever, you tell me, yeah?” “Mm,” Ethan says, blinks furiously as water dribbles from his fringe into his eyelashes, “yeah.” “Ok,” Adam says, “good. Wanna help me wash my hair?”

They stay in the shower until their skin is pruney, the floor is soaked, and Ronan knocks on the door. “Hey,” he calls through it, “all your stuff is in the bedroom. You guys good in there?” “Yeah,” Adam calls back, “we’ll get out now.”

Ronan is on the opposite side of the room when they emerge, Adam with a towel around his waist and a towel swaddled Ethan in his arms, and doesn’t turn around. Chainsaw squawks happily at them. Ethan squawks happily back.

Adam waits until they’re dressed, until Ethan is dry and happy and following Chainsaw who appears to be leading him around to all the various pieces of cereal she’d hidden around the room. She picks it up in her beak, he holds his hands out, she drops it into them, and he eats it. Occasionally she’ll peck it back up before he can.

He takes Ronan by the arm and pulls him into Noah’s room. He doesn’t shut the door, doesn’t want to scare Ethan like that.

“I need to tell you,” Adam starts out, he’s still holding Ronan’s arm, “before you see it yourself or whatever, because I don’t want it brought up around Ethan again just yet, but, his arm is all bruised up.” A few weeks ago he wouldn’t have dreamed of telling anyone else this. Would have kept it to himself, even while panicking internally and driving himself into the ground with guilt. Now, he can’t help but to share his anguish over this.

“Fuck,” Ronan says, it’s eloquent enough. He covers Adam’s hand on his arm with his own, squeezes it, “your mum?” “Yeah,” Adam spits, shuts his eyes and leans backwards until he can prop himself up against the wall, “it’s not - well. It is bad. Not as bad as it could be, I guess. I’m just - I’m so angry,” he says, “that I let it get to this point before I finally fucking left. If I’d just… clicked like a week earlier, I could’ve gotten him out before he got hurt, before he had to see this shit, before-” Ronan steps forwards, lifts his hand, and covers Adam’s mouth. He doesn’t press hard, it wouldn’t actually stop Adam from speaking if it wasn’t for the element of surprise. Adam opens his eyes to find Ronan very close, expression fierce.

“Stop,” Ronan is saying, his voice is hard but his eyes are gentle, “you didn’t have a way to get out a week ago. You didn’t have proof you needed to. You couldn’t have guessed this would happen. This is not your fault, Adam.” He closes his eyes again, can’t handle the heat of Ronan’s gaze right now.

“I was supposed to be looking after him,” he says, “I was supposed to make sure nothing bad happened to him.” “No,” Ronan says, he’s stepped closer now, Adam can feel his breath on his face. “No, that was
your parent’s job, and they fucked that up to hell and back. This was never your job. Never your responsibility. You did it anyway though. You did keep him safe. You did your fucking best, Adam. He’s fine. You did good.”

Well. Neither was it Ronan’s job to look after Adam, to speak to him so gently, to reassure him like Adam did to Ethan. It definitely wasn’t Ronan’s job to have to keep wiping the tears off his face. If Robert could see him now, Adam had no delusions over how he would react. Crying openly, seeking comfort, being held by another man. All condemnable actions in his father’s eyes.

“Hey,” Adam sniffs, doesn’t open his eyes, doesn’t think he’ll be able to keep speaking if he does. He’s already embarrassed enough that he’s crying yet again. That Ronan probably thinks he’s so fucking soft now. That he’s just proving himself to be the frail piece of shit his father has always told him he was. “Could you just -“ he says, shrugs one shoulder, “just - uh - hold me. For a bit. I just - I need -”

It doesn’t matter that he can’t verbalise what he wants, what he needs, or why. Ronan is already closing the gap between them, one hand on the back of Adam’s head, the other wrapping around his waist and pulling him closer still.

“Ok?” Ronan asks, rests his head on Adam’s shoulder, runs his hand through Adam’s still damp hair.

“Mhm,” Adam mumbles, presses his face against the skin of Ronan’s neck, hopes he doesn’t mind getting a little damp.

“Ok,” Ronan says again, just holds him.

It’s not really enough. Not enough to make any of this better, or to make him forget about how screwed up he is, how much he’s screwed up, how much he could be screwing Ethan up. It is enough to make him relax, enough to help him breathe a little, enough that he feels like he can maybe get through this. Half deaf, homeless, bruised all over, but, he can probably get out of this ok. So long as Ronan keeps on holding all his pieces together until he can do it for himself again.
Yep, yep, yep.

Adam only takes the Monday, and the Tuesday off. Ronan does his best to try and persuade him without sounding too much like he’s trying to tell him what to do, but to no avail. Adam’s concussion is no longer pulling him down into constant fatigue, and apparently, if he takes a break longer than 48 hours his entire life will collapse. Which is bullshit, and Ronan mumbles this under his breath, but can’t bring himself to actually say it to Adam’s face. Not when he looks so determined. He goes back to school on Wednesday, insists that Ronan does as well. The only plus side here is that Adam cannot go to work, his right wrist it too fucked to do much more than sit at the end of his arm.

So - this is how the first Wednesday goes. Adam is up obscenely early. Ronan only knows this, because he fell asleep in Noah’s room with them again on Tuesday night. Ethan had insisted on holding his and Adam’s hands while he went to sleep, and Ronan had fallen asleep before him. He had woken only when Adam shifted away from the other side of Ethan that morning, climbed out over the 2 of them. Ronan supposes that if you’ve spent your entire life getting up before the sun, it’s not going to be an easy habit to break. However, seeing as he doesn’t have work to go to or chores to do, he ends up pacing the living area, probably attempting to figure out how to fit this new development into his life plan, until everyone else gets up as well. They eat. Ronan drives Adam and Ethan to Dana’s, Ethan doesn’t want to go inside, Ethan cries, Adam looks like he’s going to cry, Ronan carries Ethan inside. Ethan agrees to be left behind with Dana only under a few conditions. Condition 1 is that Ronan pinky promises to come back as soon as school is over. Condition 2 is that Adam comes back as soon as school is over. Condition 3 is that they both come back as soon as humanly possible.

Ronan promises.

Ronan goes back to the car, shoos Adam out of the passenger seat, and insists Adam drive them to Mountain View. Adam protests mildly, then drives. He only stalls a few times, and when they get to the high school, he looks less upset.

Ronan wants to tell him to just stay in the car. To drive them out of town and around the country for a bit. To drive back to Dana’s and pick Ethan back up. To come back home with him and just please fucking rest some more. Ronan does not. Ronan tells him to have a good day, says he’ll be there to pick him up as soon as school’s out.

Ronan does not pay any attention to anything at all during class. He has no idea what’s going on in classes, and quite frankly, does not give a single fuck. Gansey is oddly quiet next to him. He leaves Aglionby early, arrives at Mountain View long before the last bell rings, and sits in the parking lot until Adam comes out.

Adam looks like a textbook image of frustration. Adam does not want to talk about his day. Does not want to say if he’s in pain. Does not want to drive. He does take Ronan’s phone though, puts his playlist on. Doesn’t speak at all on the ride to Dana’s.

When they get there, Ethan is pressed up against the kitchen window, watching for their arrival, and is already jumping into Adam’s arms the instant Dana opens the door to them. Adam still appears to be incapable of speech, so Ronan thanks Dana, asks about the day, asks after Ethan’s mood. They go back to Monmouth. Adam sits in the back with Ethan. If he didn’t have to drive, Ronan would too.

Ethan is all played out. He just wants to be held. Adam is all schooled out. He just wants to hold Ethan.

Gansey and Ronan sit in the bathroom/kitchen/laundry, pretending to make tea while having a very quiet freak out session about how little Adam is speaking, how little is expression is changing. They they pretend to drink their tea while having a very quiet freak out session about how long Noah’s been gone.

Then Adam comes and knocks on the door, Ethan in his arms, and informs them that he’s fine, thank
you very much, and he’s sorry that he’s worrying them, and he’s especially sorry that Noah hasn’t returned yet, and if they think it will make it easier, he could find somewhere else to stay. Ronan knows this isn’t supposed to be passive aggressive, isn’t meant to be cruel. Tells Adam very stiffly that they wanted him and Ethan here, and that Noah had proven before that if he needs to reappear somewhere else, he can do so at Blue’s, so Adam could stop friggin blaming himself for that.

Gansey also says all of this, a lot more effusively, with hand waving, and far too many expressions. Ronan suggests dinner.

They have dinner.

Ethan falls asleep in his dinner.

Adam goes to put him down in Noah’s room.

Ethan doesn’t want to be put down.

Adam wants to do his homework.

Can’t do his homework while cradling Ethan.

Ronan offers his arms.

Adam does his homework with Gansey in the living area, Ronan strokes Ethan’s hair and tries to remember the words to his mother’s lullabies in Noah’s room.

He isn’t asleep with Adam comes in. He whispers a greeting, hears a soft reply. He begins trying to figure out how to ease his way out from under Ethan without waking him, or panicking him, but then Adam is sitting down next to him on the bed, reaching across him to brush back Ethan’s fringe.

He asks Ronan if he’s staying here tonight.

Ronan suggests that he could, Adam mumbles something that sounds like an affirmation.

Adam gets into bed next to him. Does not speak. Does not move. Is asleep before Ronan can figure out if he should say something.

When he wakes up in the morning, Adam is lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling. He’s not getting out of bed to go pace and brainstorm.

“Hey,” Ronan mumbles, tries to move his arm and finds that it’s dead from having Ethan’s head on it all night. “You good?”

“Mm,” Adam says, he closes his eyes now.

“Have you been awake long?” Ronan asks, there’s light creeping round the edges of the curtained windows, but he can’t tell by that what time it is.

“I always wake up at 4,” Adam replies, somewhat mournfully, turns his head on the pillow so that he’s facing Ronan even though his eyes are still closed. “I don’t have anything to get up for though.”

Ronan knows that this is only the truth, but it sounds a hell of a lot more depressing when it’s put like that.

“It’s probably good for you to get to sleep in a little,” he tries, “especially so you heal quicker.”

Adam doesn’t seem to want to hear this, he screws his face up, frees one of his hands from under the blankets, and rubs at his eyes.

“Sorry,” he says.

Ronan has never heard someone say sorry so often in such a short time. Especially when they haven’t done anything that they ought to be apologising for.

“Why?” Ronan asks, winces as feeling starts to creep back into his hand in the form of pins and needles.

“For-” Adam breaks off to sigh heavily, to screw his eyes tighter closed, “for moping around your house. For not having a plan. For taking advantage of your kindness.”

Ronan does try not to snort.

Adam glares at him, then lets his face slip into that horrible blankness he wears.

“I’m not being kind,” Ronan says, “if I was being kind, I would be doing shit I didn’t want to do. I want to have you here. I want to look after Ethan. Fuck you if you think that letting me help you is you taking advantage.”

It’s not exactly coherent, but in his defense, it is horribly early. Hopefully too early for Ethan to be
"You don’t get it," Adam says, sharp, closed off, he turns his head away again, “you just don’t get it.”

No, of course he doesn’t fucking get it, because Adam won’t fucking explain anything. Can’t seem to get words out about how he’s feeling without shutting down. He has to remind himself that he’s not actually mad at Adam for this. If he’s mad at anyone over Adam’s inability to convey emotions, it’s Robert and Alice Parrish. Not that Ronan can really talk. He knows he kinda sucks at talking about feelings himself. He knows this is a very clear example of the pot calling the kettle black.

“Ok,” he says, finally wriggles his arm out from under Ethan so he can roll onto his side to face Adam. There really isn’t enough space in this bed for the 3 of them. There isn’t really enough space in the bed for 2 of them either. “Ok, so explain it to me, then.”

Now Adam snorts, shifts under the blankets as if to get out of bed. Ronan sighs.

“Alright,” he says, “maybe I’ll never get it, or whatever, I’m not gonna make you tell me if you don’t wanna, but fuck, Adam. You can’t tell me I don’t get it if you don’t give me a damn chance to get it.”

He’s not sure if he’s pleased that he’s managed to get Adam’s face out of the blankness, or if he feels like a class A piece of shit for pushing him hard enough that he breaks his facade. He knows how much Adam hates losing control. Knows how useless Adam feels when he can’t stop himself from crying - not because he says anything of course, but it’s obvious in his face when he’s not in control of his emotions.

Adam’s stopped moving, he’s no longer trying to get out of bed, and Ronan isn’t sure if that’s a good thing either.

“I don’t wanna keep doing this,” Adam gets out, “I know I shouldn’t be. I know I’m - I’m out of the fuckin’ fire or whatever- but. look - I know - I know you’re tryin’, tryin’ to help. But I can’t - I can’t do this right now. Not without - not without - ugh-” he motions angrily at his face, “-without this. An’ I hate this. I know you’re - you say you don’ care or anythin’, but I can’t. Ok?”

It’s the most he’s said about how he’s feeling, even if it’s barely coherent, even if it’s just talking in circles, even if he’s just telling Ronan that he doesn’t want to say anything.

“Ok,” Ronan says, really truly means it, “ok. You don’t have to talk. Don’t talk. Just - gimme something. Lemme help somehow.”

Adam finally shifts again. Rolls onto his side towards Ronan. Doesn’t speak, just presses forward until he can lean into Ronan’s chest, hide his face in it.

Since Monday morning, he hadn’t verbally asked for touch, or comfort of any kind. He had leaned against Ronan a little more, had stood closer. Ronan understood this. He did the same thing with Gansey often enough when he needed some comfort a little more solid than words. Gansey was too honest, too real with his friendship for Ronan to do much sneaking around about this though. If Ronan wanted to be hugged, and Gansey picked up on this, Gansey would just fucking hug him. Would tell him that he could just ask for it if he wanted it. Ronan wasn’t brave enough to do that for Adam.

He was brave enough to shift forward as Adam leaned into him. Enough to wrap his arms firmly around him, to tuck his chin on top of Adam’s head. Enough to pull him closer.

“It’s fine,” Ronan mumbles, tips his head down so he can press his cheek against Adam’s forehead, “you’re fine. We’re gonna get through this. You’re gonna be fine, Ethan’s gonna be fine. You’re both gonna be fine.”

“Ok,” Adam says into Ronan’s shirt, “ok.”

“Please,” Ronan adds, “don’t say sorry anymore.”

“Sorry,” Adam says, then snorts into Ronan’s chest, “sorry, that was a joke.”

“You’re an idiot,” Ronan says affectionately, scrubs his hand through Adam’s hair, “and you have no sense of humour.”
“Hmf,” Adam says. He’s still crying, Ronan can feel the tears slowly soaking through his shirt, but he almost sounds cheerful, “weren’t you trying to cheer me up?”
“Gave it up for a lost cause,” Ronan replies casually, “now, can we go back to sleep until it’s a normal kind of time to be awake?”
“Pff,” Adam snorts again, rubs his face against the front of Ronan’s shirt, “plenty of people are up at this time, you dumbass.”
“Yeah but no one actually enjoys it,” Ronan replies, lets his hand drift down from Adam’s hair to the side of his face until his fingers brush against the shell of his ear, until his palm fits against his chin. Adam’s shoulders jerk. He doesn’t pull away, but he drags one of his hands up to cover Ronan’s hand in his, and tugs it away from his ear.
“Don’t,” he says, doesn’t let go of Ronan’s hand, holds it against against his shoulder instead, “it feels weird. ‘Cos I can’t hear it.”
Ronan was an idiot. Of course. Adam had removed the bandage over his ear after his shower, and hadn’t mentioned it since the night at the hospital. He should have remembered though.
“Ok,” he says, can’t help himself, squeezes Adam’s fingers in his own.
“Ok,” Adam says, “I could probably sleep some more.”
“Thank God,” Ronan sighed, “I need at least 3 hours more sleep before school.”
“Mornin’,” Ethan chirps, pulling himself up on Ronan’s shoulder, “we cuddlin’?”

Dropping Ethan off at Dana’s that morning was just as hard at the previous day, but Adam makes it inside with Ronan rather than needing to stay in the car. Dana is very relieved to see him.
“I’m sorry,” Adam says to her, shoots Ronan a glance, “I know he’s not doin’ so great right now, if it’s too much for you with the other kids, I can find some other arrangement.”
“Oh psh,” Dana says easily, she has Shelby on her hip and Mari hanging onto her knees, “listen kid, your Ethan’s tantrums have nothing on my kids. I’m more worried about you.”
“Well,” Adam says, shrugs. Ethan has his arms wrapped tightly around his neck, is unwilling to unwind himself yet, even with the girls calling to him to play. “Um,” Adam continues, “I thought I could give you Ronan’s number. If Ethan’s too upset, if he needs me, or if you can’t- Ronan’ll come get him. Right, Ethan?”
“Mhm,” Ethan says.
Dana raises her eyebrows, looks from Adam to Ronan to Ethan to Adam again. “Ok,” she says, “lemme grab my phone and I’ll stick you in.”
“I’ll come get you whenever, if you need, ok bud?” Ronan says, leans over Adam’s shoulder to hook his chin on it. Presses his lips against Ethan’s forehead.
“No, baby,” Adam says again, then, “can I ju’ come wi’ you?”
“No, baby,” Adam says, “Ronan’s gotta go to school too. We’re gonna be back super soon though, you know that. And if you need us, we’ll come back sooner.”
“Mm,” Ethan grumbles, not really appeased. He lets Ronan kiss him though, lets Adam put him down, lets Mari hand him half of her banana.

“Hey,” Ronan says once they’re back in the BMW, Adam in the driver’s seat again. “So I know Gansey hasn’t said anything to Blue. Won’t say anything unless you say he can. But you saw her in school yesterday, yeah?”
“Yeah,” Adam says, shifts gears smoothly, “I told her. She already knew though. Kinda-”
“Not from Gans-” Ronan begins, and Adam cuts him off easily.
“No, I know,” he says, risks glancing a smile at Ronan, “I know. Her whole family is psychic, remember? She knew shit went down, that I was at hospital, that we’re not livin’ at home anymore. She said that Persephone wants to see me again.”
“Oh,” Ronan says, “you’re ok with that?”
“I guess,” Adam shrugs, grinds the gears slightly, “I dunno, Ro. I keep wishing shit would just go
back to normal. But that’s not what I want. I just dunno if I’m ready for like… fucking psychic lessons or whatever it is that Seph wants to be doin’ with me. Y’know?"

“Yeah,” Ronan says, his stomach is oddly warm, “well, you don’t have to. Or if you do want to, you don’t have to do it yet.”

“Yeah,” Adam breathes, has to concentrate as he navigates his way around a busy roundabout, “it’s just - Seph sounded - last time. I didn’t get half of what she was saying, but it kinda felt right. And urgent. And I dunno if that’s just ‘cos everything else was feeling urgent and wrong, or if it actually was right.”

“Well,” Ronan says “if you do want to go, I’ll come with. If you want.”

“Yeah,” Adam says again, pulls up outside Mountain View, “i do. You ok with answerin’ your phone if Dana calls?”

“I said I was,” Ronan said, undoes his seatbelt and leaned into the back of the car to grab Adam’s bag. “I get him first, and then you, yeah?”

“Uhuh,” Adam says, hooks his bag over his shoulder and opens the door, “you got my timetable, right?”

“God,” Ronan sighed, opened his own door, “yes. And yes, I can find my way ‘round Mountain View to find you.”

“Ok,” Adam rolls his eyes, holds the driver’s side door open for Ronan, “I just want to make sure shit doesn’t happen. See you here after school if not earlier?”

Ronan rolls his eyes right back at him, “Yes. Chill. Go earn your scholarships, Parrish.”

Dana calls at the end of lunch. If this was Ronan skipping last class for any other reason, Gansey would have a whole lot to say about it - all conveyed through his special Gansey expression. Because this is for Adam, for Ethan, Gansey simply looks worried. Less worried than he might have looked earlier that day. Ronan had spent lunch filling him in on what Blue knew, that it wasn’t a secret from her now, that Adam was doing a bit better.

“Will I see you all after school?” he asks, walking Ronan out to the parking lot, “And would you like me to tell the office you’ve gone home sick?”

“If you can wrangle it,” Ronan says, unlocks his car, “and yes. I think so. If we’re not coming, I’ll text or call or something.”

“Wow,” Gansey looks impressed, “this whole situation is awful, but at least it has you actually using your phone.”

“Don’t get fuckin’ used to it,” Ronan drawls, “see you, Dick.”

Ethan isn’t crying when he gets there, but his face is still wet from it. While Ronan does Ethan’s shoelaces up, Dana makes sure his bag is packed. Shelby and Mari sit near Ronan’s feet and offer Ethan various stickers they say will make him happy.

“Adam doing ok?” Dana asks casually.

“Yeah,” Ronan says, doesn’t think of it as too much of a lie.

“I dunno exactly what’s going on,” Dana says, hands Ethan’s bag over, “but I know they’ve moved out of their parent’s place. I just wanna let y’all know, that if you guys need anything, I do wanna help. I can’t do much, but they’re good kids.”

“I’ll tell him,” Ronan says, “thanks for - uh - your concern.”

Dana rolled her eyes, patted Ethan’s cheek, “Alright, kiddo. I’ll see you tomorrow. We’ll miss you, ok?”

“Kay,” Ethan says, manages a watery smile, holds his arms up for Ronan to pick him up now.

“We’re gonna get Ad’m, now?”

Adam has English last. When Ronan finally finds the classroom, having only received a few strange looks from various students and teachers, he isn’t sure if he ought to just try and attract Adam’s
attention, or if he should knock on the door. Doesn’t know which option Adam will find least intrusive.
He risks a glance through the glass top of the door and somehow manages to immediately make eye contact with Blue. Her spiky hair and wildly bright clothing makes her stand out easily in the classroom. Ethan waves. Blue smiles. Ronan steps away from the door, waits.
It doesn’t take long, he hears Adam’s voice, low and careful inside the room, and then a few moments later the door opens and Adam is stepping out.
Ethan immediately pours himself into Adam’s arms, and Adam shuffles his bag further up on his shoulder to wrap his arms around Ethan’s waist.
“You ok, sweetheart?” he asks, hoists him up onto his hip.
“Mhm,” Ethan nods, “Ro’an got me. ‘M ok.”
“Everything good?” Adan asks, addressing Ronan now. Ronan tugs at the strap of Adam’s bag until Adam releases it, then swings it up onto his own shoulder.
“Yeah,” he says, “wanna go get fries?”
“Yep,” Ethan says, “yep. yep. yep.”
If I'm blushing it's because of my Irish genes

They go through a drive-thru to get fries. Neither Ronan or Adam are keen on anywhere they can’t just collapse in, and Ethan doesn’t care about the location so long as he can see both of them, and can have fries.

“Blue will get you notes, yeah?” Ronan asks as they troop up the stairs in Monmouth. Adam has their bags, Ronan has Ethan, Ethan has the fries.

“Yeah,” he says, they all pause to shuffle their various loads for a moment while Ronan locates his keys to unlock the door, “I said - I said I’d try to come round in the evening. To see Seph too. Otherwise I’ll just grab them tomorrow morning.”

“This evening?” Ronan repeats, surprised, he steps aside to let Adam through, then follows him in, shutting the door behind him.

“Fries now?” Ethan suggests, jiggling up and down on Adam’s lap, “Fries, fries, fries?”

“Uhuh,” Adam says to Ethan, grins at him as he drops their bags by the couch, “fries now. And yeah. I wanna. Will you come?”

“I said I would,” Ronan says, swings Ethan and the fries onto the couch, “before dinner?”

“Yeah,” Adam nods, “not for a long visit though. I can’t right now. I don’t have the energy.”

“Good.” Ronan drops himself down next to Ethan who’s tearing the bag open to get to his salty prize. He motions at Adam to come join them, “Thank Mary you’re finally acknowledging you’re not actually super human.”

“Hey,” Adam says, fake offense heavy in his voice as he squishes down on the couch next to Ronan, “I refuse to acknowledge that.”

“Hey baby,” Ronan says to Ethan, grabs him round the waist and plops him onto his knee, “do you think Adam needs to sleep sometimes?”

Ethan has a mouth full of fries, he replies anyway.

“Uhuh,” he manages to get out, “sleep is good. Ad’m always says I need to.”

Adam sighs dramatically, flops out against the back of the couch and Ronan, “Oh,” he says, “betrayed by my own flesh and blood.”

They wait until Ethan’s devoured the majority of the fries, fed the rest to Adam and Ronan, but mostly to Chainsaw. Wait until Ethan lies himself out across the both of their laps, pulls Adam’s hand to his hair.

“Hey baby,” Ronan says again, allows his hand to be dragged to Ethan’s hair as well, “how’re you feeling?”

“Full,” Ethan says, unsurprisingly.

“I bet,” Adam snorts, threads his fingers through the curls and starts gently working out knots, then, “were you sad at Dana’s?”

“Mm,” Ethan says, “got scared.”

“Yeah?” Adam asks, “What were you scared about, sweetheart?”

“Um,” Ethan mumbles, “was scared. Scared maybe you wouldn’ hear me.”

“That is scary,” Adam says carefully, “but we heard you, yeah? Ronan heard when you called, and he came an’ picked you up, and then we all got fries.”

“Yeah,” Ethan agrees, “but what if - what if you don’t?”

Adam looks to Ronan now. Ronan isn’t exactly sure how he’s supposed to be more helpful in this situation than Adam, but he tries anyway.

“We’re always going to come for you,” he says firmly. It doesn’t feel like a lie. So long as he can fucking move, he’s going to come if Ethan needs him. If Adam needs him.

After Ethan has digested enough to move again, had enough cuddles and reassurances to be happy to run around without needing to hold onto the both or one of them, Ronan sprawls out on the couch
and traps Adam there with him by stretching his legs over Adam’s knees. Adam squeezes just above his kneecap, and Ronan almost kneels him in the face, manages to avoid doing that, but can’t stop the extremely undignified squawk coming from his mouth. His face a little too pink, he clears his throat. “So,” he says. Adam leans over the arm of the couch to try and undo his bag, probably to get his homework because this fucking loser never thinks he ought to just chill for a bit. “Uhuh?” “I was thinking,” Ronan continues slowly, isn’t sure if he’d prefer Adam to look at him or if it would be safer to blurt it all out while Adam is otherwise occupied. He’s out of time to make up his mind though, because Adam’s straightening back up with a couple of textbooks and a pen. “What?” “You should get a phone,” Ronan says, checks that Ethan is safely in the other room banging pots while Chainsaw does vocals. “So even if I can’t get to my phone, Dana, or whoever has Ethan can get you.” Adam grimaces at his textbooks, looks like he’s quite carefully not looking at Ronan. “You know I can’t afford one right now,” he says, “I would if I could.” “Gansey has a spare,” Ronan says to his lap, “his parents bought it for him last year, but he’d already bought one. You could have that. I know Gans is never going to use it.” “I can’t just - take handouts from you and Gansey. I’m already taking too much,” Adam says, still to his textbooks. He’s opening the books now, pretending he doesn’t care about this conversation. “If you don’t use the phone, it’s just going to sit in the bottom of his desk drawer for fuckin’ years,” Ronan says, picks at smushed fries ingrained in his pants, “really, you’d be doing Gans a favour.” “Ha, ha,” Adam intones, “I’m not a 3 year old, Ro, I’m not falling for that.” “Ok,” Ronan says, “but you do have a 3 year old, and a phone would be super fucking useful. Just think about it, ok?” Adam glares at him. It’s nice, because he’s finally looking up from his books. “Ok?” Ronan repeats, flicks the mashed fry in Adam’s direction. Adam grunts, flicks it back at him. “Ok,” Adam sighs, “fine. Ok. If Gansey agrees, I’ll take it.” That was a hell of a lot easier than Ronan had actually been expecting. A hell of a lot quicker too. His surprise must have shown on his face, because Adam snorts, and pokes his cheek. “I’m not quite as immovable as you thought?” “Just easier,” Ronan replies, pokes him back. “Hey,” Adam grins, “I have never once in my life been accused of being easy.” “Huh,” Ronan finds himself grinning back at him, “I guess it did take me a couple of months to get into your bed.” For a moment Adam just stares blankly at him, and he thinks he’s definitely gone a little too far, but then Adam is laughing so hard Ronan’s fucking freaked he’s going to puncture a lung or some shit. “Jesus, Mary,” Ronan snorts, “God, I know I’m funny, but that was not worth this response.” “I’m only easy for you, darlin’,” Adam drawls, wiping tears from his eyes, “but you’re still not gettin’ into my pants.” Something about Adam saying darling, with his fucking thick as honey accent, elongated and sweet, turns Ronan’s stomach inside out, and he’s blushing again before he can inform his brain that it’s a bad idea. His mouth moves without consent as well. “In a couple more months, then?” he asks, plasters a shit eating grin over his embarrassment. Adam hits Ronan’s legs with his books, “God,” he says, “you think you’re so suave.” “Nah,” Ronan bites out as cheerfully as he can, swings his legs off of Adam’s, “I tend to rely on my good looks to get me through.” “That must be difficult,” Adam snarks as Ronan stands up, “where’re you goin’?” “Gonna go, uh, play with the kids,” Ronan says, brushes salt and crumbs off of his clothes. “You don’t have homework?” Adam asks, glances meaningfully at Ronan’s backpack.
“Uhhhh,” Ronan screws his face up, “y’know,” he says, “I’m pretty sure I hear Chainsaw calling me, gotta go.”

He hears when Gansey gets back, but he and Ethan are too busy creating a fort for Chainsaw to go say hello yet, so he just sits there taping random bits of furniture and cloth together and listens to Adam and Gansey talk in the other room. It’s nice. Nice because he knows that Adam’s been feeling kind of wary around Gansey lately, because Gansey is just too… too earnest for Adam. He doesn’t use sarcasm and drama to hide his feelings and his kindness, and Adam just does not seem capable of accepting anything that isn’t thinly veiled in something vaguely insulting. But he also knows that Adam has missed getting to just chat with Gansey. That is how all of this began, after all, even if Ronan wants to take credit for instigating their meeting, it was undeniably Adam and Gansey who had clicked so easily in the beginning.

Ronan didn’t really feel like he could do that much for Adam right now, there wasn’t much he could say that would make any of his past or present that much easier to cope with, and the only thing he felt he had of any use to offer was money which Adam didn’t want from him. What he could do though, was talk to Gansey, ask him, politer than he ever asks for anything, to just chat about nerd shit with Adam. To not ask him about his feelings, his money, his family. To just not. Knew this sounded like a really weird and very shit favour to ask, but he still managed to persuade Gansey that this was truly for the best. Adam’s best and Gansey’s best. He assumes Gansey is taking this to heart, because, even though he can’t hear what they’re saying, they both sound like they’re on their way to some full on geek out over something.

When Gansey turns up in his doorway, a full half hour later, Ethan and Chainsaw are napping in the finished fort, and Ronan is sitting in the entryway to it, fiddling around with various playlists on his phone.

“Ronan,” Gansey hisses, drops down to his knees beside him, “you are never going to believe what Adam just asked me.”

“Um,” Ronan says, glances over his shoulder to check that Gansey hadn’t woken Ethan up, “if your hair is actually a wig? Not so surprising, I’ve seen him staring suspiciously at your hair far too often.”

“What?” Gansey’s hand flies to his hair, “You think he doesn’t like it?”

“God, Gans,” Ronan snorts, he is trying to be quiet but it’s not quite working, “I’m sure he thinks your wig is lovely.”

“Ronan,” Gansey raises his eyebrows, doesn’t lower his hand, “Adam asked if I knew of anyone with a spare phone going for cheap, and I said I had one he could have, and he asked how much, and I said I’d give it to him for $10 because I figured he would say no if I said it was for free, and then he actually grinned at me, and said it was a deal.”

Ronan’s not sure if this is a better deal than the one he had just struck with Adam or not, knows that Adam probably thinks it is, and that’s enough for him.

“Iron,” Gansey says again, “that was way too easy, do you think he’s sick?”

This snort is not at all quiet, and wakes Ethan up.

“Gansey,” Ronan sighs, drops himself backwards into the fort and reaches out for Ethan who’s grumbling sleepily at him, “the more fuss you make about it, the more likely it is he’ll change his mind.”

“True,” Gansey says, shifts onto his hands and knees and shuffles into the fort doorway, “hey Ethan, did you just wake up?”

“Mnhm,” Ethan yawns, climbs sideways onto Ronan’s chest, “where’s Ad’m?”

“Bathroom,” Gansey says as Adam ducks down next to him.

“Here,” Adam says as Gansey jerks backwards in shock.


“You would think,” Ronan says dryly, staring up at the cloth ceiling, “that after all our years with
Noah suddenly appearing beside us, we’d be less easily spooked.”

Adam laughs, at Gansey’s surprise and Ronan’s sarcasm, and then wriggles his way into the fort to lie on his stomach next to Ronan. Chainsaw immediately hops up to come investigate his hair.

“What’s this then?” Adam asks Ethan, pokes his tummy, “you guys been buildin’?”

Gansey squashes himself into the fort as well, stretches out on Ronan’s otherside.

“Yeah,” Ethan says, happily and loud, he enjoys having all his boys paying attention to him at once. “S’for sleepin’ and stories.”

“What kind of stories?” Gansey asks, rolls onto his side, carefully so as not to tug at the haphazard walls. “I love stories.”

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At 5, all of them pile into the Pig. Ronan hadn’t expected Adam to be so open about going to talk to Persephone, let alone to invite Gansey along as well - although he had told both Gansey and Ronan that he didn’t think Persephone would want an audience. It was nice.

Gansey let Ronan play music on the way over, which was a bad idea, and one Adam fixed as soon as Ronan turned on Murder Squash. Ethan had cheered, Gansey had groaned, Ronan had laughed, and Adam had leaned forward and snatched the phone right out of his hand.

“No, today, satan,” he mumbled under his breath, he didn’t pause it right away, just scrolled quickly until he landed on what he was looking for and put it on before pressing the phone back into Ronan’s hand.

It was a good thing that Adam prefered to sit in the back with Ethan, and Ronan liked to sit up front with Gansey, because it meant that Adam couldn’t see his face immediately pinken a-fucking-gain. It was nothing to be embarrassed about, and he wasn’t really, it just felt a touch too intimate for his playlist to be playing when other people could hear it. Not that Gansey was going to figure out just by the songs that this was something specifically crafted for a reason, but knowing this didn’t suck the heat out of his face.

“This is nice,” Gansey says appreciatively, glances back at Adam, “I didn’t even know Ronan had real music on his phone.”

“F—shove off, Gans,” Ronan grumbles, squashes himself down in his seat. Adam leans forward behind his seat, wraps his arms around the headrest so his hands dangle against Ronan’s chest. It’s Gansey he speaks to though.

“It’s a pleasant surprise,” he agrees, “he does kinda look like he came outta the womb listening to some electronic screeching on his giant headphones.”

“Ow,” Gansey remarked, “that can’t have been a good experience for his mother.”

“You guys suck,” Ronan grunts. He would slump further down in his seat, but then Adam might take away his arms, “after all I’ve done for your musical education, Parrish, I’m hurt.”

Adam simply lifted one hand, patted him on the cheek, and then pulled back away.

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Adam had been right that Persephone would want a private audience with him. She fed all 4 of them fresh pie - Blue was there too but she insisted she’d had enough pie for the day, and stuck with yogurt - and then sent the rest of them off into the rest of the house to entertain themselves. Ethan wants this to be done by dressing up, and Blue is amenable to this idea and backs him up in wrangling Gansey and Ronan into agreeing. Ronan would do almost anything for Ethan, and Gansey was just a huge fan of dress ups, so it wasn’t exactly difficult.

After dress ups, Blue announces they have tadpoles in the downstairs bath, so they all troop downstairs in their various outfits to look at them. Then Blue gets hauled into the kitchen - Persephone decided the backyard was a better teaching place today - to give a hand with some jam
bottling, and Gansey immediately, very graciously offers his assistance. Ronan quite enjoys making and bottling jam, but Calla is presiding over the kitchen, and he has no intentions of getting close enough for her to read him again, even just by mistake. Instead, he hoisted Ethan onto his shoulders, and carried him upstairs, and then back downstairs, and then upstairs again, and then downstairs into the kitchen to quickly ask Blue for drawing supplies because Ethan wanted to make art. Then they went back upstairs and sprawled out on the floor to draw.

While Ethan drew, Ronan fiddled with pencils, and attempted not to think about Calla, and secrets, and his own many mistakes. It was an attempt unfulfilled.

The thing was - Ronan had been born into secrets. He was made out of secrets. He’d been raised with secrets. Maybe some people would say they were lies, but his father hated lies, and loved secrets, so it was secrets that Ronan was intertwined with, not lies.

For most of Ronan’s life, this hadn’t been a problem. Or, if it had, Ronan hadn’t realised it had been a problem. When his father died though, with his mother becoming un-alive soon after, he had not only discovered that there had been far more secrets - secrets that toed the line a little too close to lies - than he had ever known, but also discovered that he was not fully in control of his own secrets.

His main secret, of course, was his dreaming. His father’s dreaming. His mother; the dream. This used to be an easy secret - it was a family secret, protected and intimate, comforting. Afterwards, with no one else to dream with, with brothers who didn’t want to talk about it, he hadn’t known how to deal with the secret turned unsafe, alienating, and painful. After he had been able to talk to Gansey about it, to Noah about it, it became easier, but never as easy as it had been. He didn’t think it ever would be.

The next secret followed hot on the heels of the first - and it wasn’t really a secret - not when Gansey knew it, and Declan knew it, and now Adam knew at least some of it. The not-secret was that Kavinsky helped him control his dreaming. Helped him feel less alone in it. The secret-secret was that it didn’t help anymore. Hadn’t helped him for months. That Kavinsky sometimes slipped him pills he didn’t want, drinks he didn’t want, thoughts and feelings he didn’t want.

His third secret - he didn’t know if he could really call it a secret, if he could have ever called it a secret - was Adam Parrish. This was by far his favourite secret. His least painful secret. It was currently the most predominant one, the one in control of the majority of his emotions and actions. The problem was, even if this was his favourite and least damaging secret - it had the potential to be Adam’s least favourite, most damaging secret to find out about Ronan.

When Calla had brushed against him the last time they were here, had accidentally toppled straight into the mishmash of Ronan’s stupid ass feelings, he couldn’t tell what it was she had seen. If it had even been any of his top secrets. How much she could decipher from it, what she had felt. He hadn’t really wanted to ask. Suspected what she had seen was as much to do with his secrets as it did his guilt.

“Ro’an!” Ethan was saying, tugging at the cuff of his trousers, “Ro’an! Lookit my drawin’.”

“Oh, hey!” Ronan grins, discards his own paper and thoughts, “This is so cool, buddy! I love it!”

“Is us,” Ethan tells him solemnly, stands up just to swivel and drop himself heavily down into Ronan’s lap, “this is me,” he says, points to something Ronan had previously assumed was a very pretty yellow triangle with eyes, “this is Ad’m,” he continues, Adam is a curious mix of tree and human, “this is Chains-aw,” Ethan grins, stabs at the paper with his finger - Chainsaw is a collection of black and blue lines with a smiley face floating somewhere in the middle of it - “An’ this,” Ethan says, puts his palm down on the paper so he can point to the smudgy collection of arms and legs that are somehow encircling everything else on the paper, “is you.”

“It’s beautiful,” Ronan says truthfully, “am I holding you all?”

“Oh yeah?” Ronan grins, wraps his arms around Ethan’s middle, “I’m like an octopuss.”
“Uhuh,” Ethan says, squeals in delight as Ronan stands up with him in his arms to chuck up in the air. When Ronan’s done flinging him about, and Ethan’s done screaming with laughter, and is simply clinging around his neck panting, Ethan expounds further on his likeness to an octopus.

“Mari has a stuffed’un,” he says, “an’ it sits on her teddy shelf with all its arms out like -” he peels away from Ronan a bit, trusting Ronan to be holding him up, and spreads his arms out wide, “-this, an’ it’s holdin’ all her other teddies and that’s like what you do w’ me an’ Ad’m.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, “ok,” Ethan grins at him. Then he leans forwards again so he can rest his head against Ronan’s collarbone, curling in on himself.

“Ad’m’s still real sad,” he says quietly, “an’ real tired. I don’ like it.”

“Yeah,” Ronan agrees, walks the both of them over to Blue’s bed and slumps down on it, “are you real sad too?”

“Um,” Ethan says, curls up more, “I like stayin’ wi’ you.”

“Yeah?” Ronan says again, leans back to give Ethan more room on his lap for curling up.

“Yeah,” Ethan mumbles to Ronan’s bellybutton, “but we’re not ‘llowed to stay wi’ you. We’re gonna be in real big ‘rouble when we get home.”

“You’re not going to go back to your old home, baby,” Ronan says carefully, wonders if he ought to try and stem this conversation, if he should go fetch Adam, “remember, Adam said you never had to go back if you didn’t want to? Never have to see your mum and dad again if you don’t want?”

“We have to,” Ethan says firmly, “always have to. Or Ad’m gets hurt an’ mum gets mean an’ dad gets angry an’ I hav’ta stay in my room an’ be real real quiet.”

If this was any other 3 year old, saying anything else, Ronan would just be sitting here marvelling at how well he’s constructing sentences, at how much he can articulate. Because it’s Ethan, and the things Ethan needs to be able to articulate about tend to be horrifying shit, Ronan doesn’t have enough space around the pain in his stomach to feel properly impressed.

“Baby,” he says, soft, quiet, firm, “Ethan. You never have to go back. Adam’s not going to get hurt again. You guys aren’t going to be in trouble. You’re allowed to be here, with me, and Gans, and Noah. No more mean mum and angry dad, ok? You never have to stay in your room and be quiet, ok?”

Maybe he’s overestimating how much Ethan can take in all at once, because there’s no response for a long time, except for Ethan rubbing his runny nose on Ronan’s shirt.

“Ok,” Ethan says just as Ronan opens his mouth to try and be comforting in shorter sentences. “Never gonna go back?”

“How do you want to back?” Ronan asks.

“No,” Ethan replies. Sticks his finger into the indent of Ronan’s bellybutton.

“You’re never going back,” Ronan confirms.

“Am stayin’ with you?” Ethan asks next, which is a harder question to confirm.

“Um,” Ronan says, “you can stay with me for as long as you and Adam want.”

“Ever,” Ethan says, “ever ‘n’ ever.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, “let’s go and see if Adam’s done yet, yeah?”

Tonight, Ethan goes to bed easily. He’s fast asleep and tucked into bed long before Adam heads off, and despite the fact that he knows that this is a good thing, for Adam and Ethan, he can’t help but feel a little disappointed. He has no excuse to get to stay so close to Adam tonight. To Ethan.

Instead, he lies on the couch with his head phones around his neck while Adam and Gansey sit on the floor. Gansey’s showing Adam is way round his new phone, and Adam actually looks like he’s kind of having fun. They stopped in town on the way back to Monmouth to pick up some food and a simcard for the phone, and Adam had picked out a very simple plan, refused to be persuaded into anything with data and perks. It was a very boring conversation, even though Ronan was pleased he
had instigated it successfully enough for Adam to actually follow through and get the phone, so he zoned out about halfway through. His brain detours straight into his usual zone out daydreams, most of which tend to revolve around the simple things - finally fucking getting out of school, properly beating Declan in a fight (physical or verbal, it really didn’t matter), getting to talk to his mum again, getting to go home, getting to go home, getting to go home, no more secrets, holding Adam’s hand and Adam holding his hand back -

“Ronan,” Adam was saying, his hand on his ankle, “Gans says there’s definitely enough space on this for some music, and that it came with headphones too. I was wondering if you could put my - uh - those songs I like on it for me. Or show me how to.”

“Mm,” Ronan grunts, nods, closes his eyes, “when?” Adam’s hand is so hot on his bare ankle.

“Um,” Adam says, “my phone’s all set up now, and Gansey has a phone call he wants to make. Maybe now?”

“Mm,” Ronan says again, “ok. My laptop’s in my room, let’s go there.”

“Ok,” Adam says, squeezes Ronan’s ankle, and then lets go to stand up and offer Ronan a hand. Ronan takes his hand, doesn’t think at all about how it’s like holding Adam’s hand while Adam holds his hand back, because they let go again as soon as Ronan is standing, and Ronan is already turning and walking off to his room.

“So,” Ronan says, nudges his door open with his foot, “you want the playlist I made you, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Adam says, nudges the door closed behind them, “I can’t just steal your phone every time I wanna listen to it.”

“I mean,” Ronan shrugs, “you could. It’s not like I use it that much.”

“Mm,” Adam nods, “but you do use it, and if I listened to it as much as I wanted, you’d never get it back.”

Ronan hides his face by ducking down to pull his computer out from under a pile of clothes and books, “Christ, Adam,” he said, “if I knew you liked murder squash that much, I wouldn’t have bothered with any other songs.”

“Fuck off,” Adam snorts, “I like the other songs. A lot.”

“Yeah?” Ronan mumbles, sits down cross legged on his bed, laptop in front of him, “I made you another one. Less Murder Squash in it.”

Adam sits down next to him, leans over onto Ronan to tuck his head on Ronan’s shoulder so he can see the computer screen.

“That’s really - really nice of you,” he says, very close to Ronan’s ear, “I’m lookin’ forward to it.”
This is short, but I'm also leaving you guys with Ronan's second playlist, which is much longer. (Again, you can find everything here on youtube, and other internet sources.)

- Betray - Son Lux
- No Angel - Beyonce
- Pray (Empty Gun) - Bishop Briggs
- Can't Help Falling In Love With You - Ingrid Michaelson
- Disclosure - Magnets ft. Lorde
- Exit Music - Amanda Palmer
- Firewood - Regina Spektor
- Hideaway - Kiesza
- Brother - Kodaline
- Let It Be Easy - Jed and Hera
- The Louvre - Lorde
- Love Is Blindness - Jack White
- Heart Is Full - Mike Snow
- Good Guys - Mika
- MLK - U2
- Real Love - Regina Spektor
- Symphony no. 7 in A major - Beethoven
- Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow - Lykke Li

On Friday, Ronan drops Ethan off at Dana’s, Adam gives Dana his new phone number as well, the two of them kiss Ethan goodbye. Ronan gets Adam to drive to Mountain View. When Adam parks outside the school gates, he doesn’t make to get out of the car immediately, he does turn the engine off though.

“Um,” he says, “I think I should talk to you about what I’m doing with Persephone.”
“Ok,” Ronan says, undoes his seatbelt.
“Not right now,” Adam continues, fiddles with the buckle of his seat belt, “I’ve just been thinkin’ about it, and, Seph hasn’t said so, but I’m pretty sure it’s got something to do with Cabeswater.”
“Ok?” Ronan says again, “What do you mean?”
Adam shakes his head, “Later,” he says, “I could be completely wrong. The whole thing is crazy, but I - it’s stupid. I’ll tell you about it this afternoon, ok?”
“Oh c’mon,” Ronan moans, well aware he sounds petulant, “you can’t just leave me hanging like this. Skip first period with me.”
“I can’t afford to miss any more class than I have to,” Adam says firmly, leans over to the backseat now to grab his bag, tweaks Ronan’s cheek on his way back up. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to leave you on a cliffhanger.”

Ronan rubs his cheek, scowls, “Whatever,” he says, pulls himself out of the car so he can swap seats with Adam. When he gets to the driver’s side though, Adam hasn’t gotten out yet, hasn’t even opened the door, so Ronan does. “I thought you weren’t missing anymore class?”
“I’m not,” Adam sighs, “I’m going in.”
He doesn’t move to get out.  
“Yeah,” Ronan says, “I can see that.”  
“Y’know,” Adam mumbles, wraps his fingers around the steering wheel, “I almost went to Aglionby.”

Ronan did not know this, of course, Adam had never said anything about it before.  
“Yeah?”

“I always wanted to. Figured it’d give me a better chance of gettin’ outta here. I talked to a couple of my teachers about it a lot a few years back. They told me I had a real good chance at gettin’ in on scholarship, so I arranged some meetings with coordinators here, they were keen on me too. So long as I could make up the extra cost. I was gonna. Then Ethan was born, and all the money I was makin’ in my jobs had to go to lookin’ after him, and savin’ up for gettin’ him out eventually.”

This is not the kind of thing Ronan had expected to hear, especially not right outside Adam’s high school, in the open, out of the blue.

“Fuck,” he says, nothing else seems appropriate, “you’ve been planning on leaving since he was tiny?”

“Yeah,” Adam nods, “I always knew I had to leave as soon as possible. Or I’d be stuck here, stuck with them, for my entire life. It just got more important when Ethan was born.”

“Fuck,” Ronan says again. He wants to push Adam further over on the seat, and climb in next to him so he can hug him. There really isn’t room, and this really isn’t the place for it either.

“Yeah,” Adam agrees, “it’s not that I resent him for it - I just - I would’ve really liked to get to go to school with you.”

“Don’t be a sop,” Ronan says, automatic, then, “me too. You could take notes for me.”

“Fuck off,” Adam says easily, finally swings his legs out of the car and stands up, “there’s no way I would participate in your avoidance of an education.”

“Hey,” Ronan says before Adam can walk away, “did you listen to the playlist last night?”

“The new one?” Adam asks, fiddles with his backpack straps. Ronan nods. “Yeah,” Adam says, “in bed. I think I fell asleep halfway through though, so I’m gonna have to relisten.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, feigns disinterest, folds himself down into the car seat, still warm from Adam. “I really liked what I heard, though,” Adam added, kept fiddling with his bag, “I - I appreciate it.”

“Cool,” Ronan mumbles, pulls the door to, “see you later, nerd.”

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Dana calls him during Latin, about 20 minutes before lunch starts. He’d programmed Dana’s number with the Murder Squash as the ringtone, so there could be no way he would miss a single call. It also had the added bonus of Gansey gaping at him in horror, the entire classroom jumping as one being, and Whelk turning bright red in frustration at the front of the class. He scoops his bag up in one hand, and answers the phone with the other while leaving the room as fast as possible. Gansey will deal with the aftermath, he knows this, and he can apologise to Gansey for that later.

“Everything ok?” he asks, forgoing a hello.

“Mhm,” it’s Ethan on the other end of the phone. “Oh, hi baby,” Ronan murmurs, wrangles his way into his backpack with only one hand free, “what’s up?”

He can hear Dana talking soothingly to Ethan, but can’t quite make out the words. “C’mon get me?” Ethan asks.

“Yeah, I’m on my way right now,” Ronan says reassuringly, “you wanna tell me about your morning?”

“Played horses,” Ethan snuffles, “then w’napped, an’ I had a bad dream.”

Ronan knew all about bad dreams.

“Oh baby,” he said softly, “that sucks real bad. Do you wanna tell me about it?”

“Mhm,” Ethan says, then, “No.” then, “Maybe later. I jus’ wanna go home now.”
“Ok,” Ronan says, he’s at his car now, has to shift the phone to his other hand to unlock the door.
“I’m gonna be there super soon, and then we can go get Adam too. Ok?’
“Ok,” Ethan says. There’s rustling, and then Dana is on the phone.
“Ok?” she asks, “Sorry for disturbin’ your class, you’re on your way?”
“It’s fine, I wasn’t paying attention anyway,” Ronan says, “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Ethan hadn’t been crying on the phone, he sounded like he had been very recently though, and when Ronan arrived at the house, he was crying again.
Dana looked like she’d walked through a tornado, but was still somehow appearing reasonably calm.
She had Ethan on one hip, Shelby on the other, both of them crying. Mari was sitting sedately at the kitchen table sipping from a juice box.
Ethan doesn’t stop crying when Ronan plucks him out of Dana’s arm, but he does quiet down a little, and buries his face in the collar of his school shirt.
“Shelb’s cryin’ cos Ethan’s cryin’,” Mari informs him loudly, takes a rattling sip from the box, “an’ Ethan’s cryin’ cos he had a nap.”
Dana drops herself down on a chair next to Mari, pats her head, and readjusts Shelby to sit in her lap.
Shelby’s stopped crying, but she’s still sniffling.
“Thanks for coming so quick,” Dana says, rubbing circles into Shelby’s back, “I would’ve called Adam, but I thought the both of you would prefer he stay in class a little longer.”
That was a very well informed observation, Ronan smiled, nodded, hoisted Ethan up a little higher so he could wrap one arm around his legs, just under his bum, and his other around his waist.
“Thanks,” he says, “is Ethan’s bag packed?”
“Yup,” Dana says, points towards the door, “it’s just there waitin’ for y’all. I won’t be seeing you two tomorrow, will I? Adam’s not back at work yet, right?”
“Um,” Ronan says, crosses the room and squats ungainly to pick the bag up, “as far as I know. I’ll double check with Adam when I get him, but I’m pretty sure we’ve got him tomorrow.”
“Lemme know,” Dana says, waves them goodbye from the kitchen table.

“Hey baby,” Ronan says as he puts Ethan into his carseat, “how’re you feeling?”
Ethan allows himself to be put down, but refuses to release his grip around Ronan’s neck, effectively holding Ronan down with him. “M’ok,” he mumbles.
“Yeah?” Ronan asks, doesn’t bother trying to free himself, just shuffles around until he can slide into the backseat next to Ethan’s car seat, and pulls him back into his lap instead, “Do you wanna tell me what your dream was about?”
“Mm,” Ethan says, “I want Ad’m.”
“Ok,” that makes sense, “ok, let’s go get Adam then, yeah?”
“Mhm.”
“Baby,” Ronan says, kisses the top of Ethan’s head, “you gotta let me go so I can drive us to Adam.”
“I don’t wanna,” Ethan says firmly, reiterates this by tightening his grip around Ronan.
“Hm,” Ronan says, squeezes Ethan gently back, “ok. We can sit here for a bit. You tell me when you’re ready, ok?”
“Mhm,” Ethan says, doesn’t loosen his grip in the slightest.
It’s another 5 minutes or so before Ethan finally yawns and wriggles a little, says; “I want Ad’m,” again, and allows Ronan to buckle him into his seat. The good thing about this short break is that by the time they get to Adam, he’ll be on lunch break.

He texts Adam when they get to the school, and receives a reply almost immediately, saying that he’s on his way, so he doesn’t bother getting out of the car. Just climbs into the backseat to sit with Ethan while they wait.
Ethan wants out of his seat, and back into Ronan’s lap, and also wants music and Chainsaw. Ronan can do 3 out of 4 of those things very near instantly.
When Adam arrives, it’s with Blue, the both of them look very serious and they simultaneously switch their expressions to soft smiles when they open the car door.
“Hey, sweetheart,” Adam says to Ethan, climbs into the backseat next to Ronan. Ethan immediately abandons Ronan’s lap for Adam’s. “Ro said you had a bad dream?”

“Mhm,” Ethan says, sticks his hand into his mouth, presses his face into the threadbare shoulder of Adam’s jersey, and does not expound any further. Blue leans into the car behind Adam, ruffles Ethan’s hair gently.

“Hi grumpy,” Blue says to Ronan, and Ronan scowls.

“Maggot,” he replies, “you thinking of ditching class with us?”

“I wish,” Blue replied with a scoff, “I have a test next period that I can’t miss. I just wanted to talk to Adam while he was still here.”

Adam speaks over Ethan’s head; “she had a message for me. From Seph. About Cabeswater.” He doesn’t sound pleased about this. Ronan isn’t sure if he’s pleased about this either.

“Oh?”

“Persephone didn’t say Cabeswater, she just said that Adam would know what she was talking about-” Blue started, shrugged, “it didn’t make any sense to me, but she was very firm that I tell him today.”

Adam tips his head down to rest his cheek against Ethan’s head, faces Ronan, “Seph- uh - there’s more. But let’s deal with this first, yeah?” he squeezes Ethan a little as he speaks, and Ronan nods.

“Yeah,” Blue agrees, pulls back out of the car, “mum told me this morning she has a tea for bad dreams, but I wholeheartedly do not recommend it.”

“Thank you,” Adam says seriously. He’s told Ronan before about Maura’s teas, the ones he’d tried, and how surprised he was that he hadn’t died.

Blue says her goodbyes, Ethan makes a noise that is probably in response to this, and Adam and Ronan both wave to her as she shuts the door. When they’re alone, Ethan pulls away a little to look up at Adam, reaches up to touch his cheek. Adam’s face is still bruised - they’ve faded into ugly yellows mostly now, but they’re very obvious, even on Adam’s tan skin.

“Dreamed dad was angry,” Ethan says simply, “y’ok?”

“Sweetheart,” Adam says, covers Ethan’s hand with his own, brings it to his mouth to kiss, “I’m ok. Dad’s not angry.”

Ronan thinks that in all likelihood, Robert is probably very angry right now, he’s lost his main source of income, and his main punching bag. It was a scary thought.

“And,” Ronan adds, “you and Adam are safe here, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Adam agrees, “buddy boy, that’s a really scary dream to have, but, we aren’t gonna see dad again. No more yelling, remember?”

“Mhm,” Ethan says, “le’s jus’ cuddle now, kay?”

“Kay,” Adam smiles, shuffles backwards on his seat to give Ethan a little more lap. Once Ethan has curled himself up against Adam’s chest, and rearranged Adam’s arms around him to his own satisfaction, Adam turns to Ronan again.

“Hey,” he says, “is Cabeswater child friendly?”

“Um,” Ronan says, frowns heavily, “I- well - sometimes?”

Adam looks torn, about what, Ronan can’t exactly say yet. He sighs heavily, and shifts his gaze over Ronan’s shoulder to stare somewhat moodily out of the window.

“Seph-” Adam starts, sighs again, lifts his hand to stroke Ethan’s hair almost absentmindedly, “she asked Blue to tell me that my gut was right, and I should go say hello to it today while the weather was nice, and that Ethan would enjoy the sun there.”

“Um,” Ronan says again, “is this a riddle?”

Adam laughs, just a little, but still. “No,” he says, “or, well, kind of? I guess? I don’t know. What I think it means, though, and I’m almost 100% certain that I’m right, is that she’s telling me to go to Cabeswater today, with you and Ethan.”

“Um,” Ronan has apparently discarded the majority of his other words today.

“I know it’s not like a - uh - a tourist attraction, and I shouldn’t treat it like it is,” Adam mumbles,
“and if you don’t think it’s a good idea, I completely defer to you, and I could be wrong about it all, I really have no idea what I’m doing or what she’s trying to teach me.”

“Adam,” Ronan says, he’s already leaning against Adam’s shoulder - the squishiness of the backseat with a kid-carseat in it rules this the only comfortable option - but he leans closer anyway, “if you think it’s a good idea, then so do I.”

Adam finally brings his gaze back from the window to Ronan’s face, specifically, it seems, to roll his eyes.

“Ro,” he says firmly, “I’m not asking for validation, or whatever, I’m asking if you think it’s safe. If you’re ok with this.”

“I’m ok with it,” Ronan says, “and I think - I think that if Persephone thinks it’s safe enough to take Ethan, than it probably is. Or, it is today, and that’s why she specified today, rather than tomorrow or next week or something.”

“Ok,” Adam says, drops his head sideways onto Ronan’s shoulder. “God,” he says.

“Yes?” Ronan asks.

“Shut up,” Adam snorts, lifts his head to elbow him - it’s not a very hard elbow seeing as they’re squished together and Adam’s arms are occupied with Ethan, but still.

“It’s just so- so stupid,” he adds after a few moments of silence.

“Which part?” Ronan asks dryly.

“It feels right,” Adam says - he sounds oddly distraught about it - “it feels like the right thing to do. Going there. With you. And I can’t say why, I can’t track down reasons I have to prove to myself that it’s a good idea.”

“Um,” Ronan says - his vocabulary reverted back to faulty. “Lemme see, good reasons… it’s really pretty? I want you to come? Persephone wants you to go? Apparently Ethan will like it?” he doesn’t add in that he’s dreamed about Adam there before, that he wants to see for himself if real Adam looks quite as in place in real Cabeswater as dream Adam did in dream Cabeswater.

“Well then,” Adam sighs, lets his head return to Ronan’s shoulder, “I suppose that’s enough reasons to go.”

“Yeah?” Ronan asks, suddenly extremely excited. “With Ethan?”

“Wi’ me,” Ethan mumbles against Adam’s front, “not leavin’ me.”

“We’re not leaving you anywhere, sweetheart,” Adam assures him, then turns his head a little until his face is pressed against Ronan’s pulse - which immediately jumps and embarrassingly speeds up.

“Is it bad-” Adam whispers, to him only, “-that every rational part of my brain tells me I shouldn’t, or at least I shouldn’t take Ethan, but every other part of me tells me I have to? That I’m ignoring the rational bit?”

“Um,” Ronan says. Lifts his hand to cup the back of Adam’s head, “No. Persephone said to trust your gut.”

“Yeah.” Adam mumbles, low, unsure.

“Do you trust Persephone?” Ronan asks, curls his fingers against the base of Adam’s neck.

“Yeah.” Adam mumbles, still low, still unsure.

“Do you trust me?” Ronan asks.

“Yeah.”
Cabeswater will always be at least partially a secret. Just because Ronan has been with it his entire life it didn’t mean he knew it completely. Just because Gansey, Noah, and now Blue, had walked inside it with him - discovered new parts of it with him - didn’t mean they knew it. Didn’t mean it was something that could be easily shared. Cabeswater knew Ronan. It always knew Ronan. It spoke to him in his dream, sometimes it stung him in his dreams. It always listened to him while he walked inside it. It knew Gansey. It was wary of Gansey, wary but eager. It wanted to give Gansey what Gansey wanted, but at the same time, refused to give anything. It knew Noah. Knew Noah because whatever magics tied it to Ronan, tied it to the line, tied it to Glendower - they were the same magics that tied Noah to life. Knew Noah because it was there when he died. Knew Noah, and kept his secrets for him.

It should not have been a surprise, when Adam, holding Ethan tightly in his arms, walked through the tall grass until the tall grass was Cabeswater, and Ronan heard the forest around them sigh in relief and then sigh Adam’s name.

Adam heard it too. Stopped short. Ronan watched his arms tighten around Ethan, his muscles jump, his jaw clench.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Nos vos desiderabat” said the leaves, “receperint retro, magi.”

“What was that?” Adam asks again. He’s frozen to the spot, only relaxes slightly as Ronan steps in closer to him, wraps his arms around his shoulders, and stares up at the moving canopy above their heads.

“Cabeswater,” Ronan says, “speaks Latin. Because it’s an asshole.”

“Ok,” Adam says, “ok. Ok. Ok. It’s a magic forest that can speak, and it speaks Latin. That’s fine, I can deal with this. It’s fine.”

“It’s fine,” Ronan repeats, “you’re fine.”

“What is it saying?” Adam asks.

“Um,” Ronan says, isn’t sure if translating will be a good idea if he wants to keep Adam vaguely calm. Knowing what they’re saying isn’t exactly helping him keep calm. “Well,” he says, “they say - they say they missed you. And welcome back. And I think they called you magician.”

“The fu-” Adam says, coughs before he can finish the sentence, shifts Ethan onto his hip, “I mean, what the heck?”

“Cov’r y’mouth,” Ethan chides, “or germs get ev’rywhere.”

“Sorry bud,” Adam mumbles, “you’re right.” He turns his head to Ronan again, raises his eyebrows, “Am I freaking out too much over this?”

He’s barely freaking out at all. “No,” Ronan replies truthfully, “but we can leave again if you want?”

“No,” Adam says, “I - it doesn’t feel… unsafe? Just extremely odd.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, “um, let’s go further in then? This is just the outskirts. It gets prettier the further in you go. And if we want sun, summer is this way-” he points, and then realises, when Adam’s face shifts into deeper confusion, that he should probably explain about the fact that Cabeswater does what it likes with seasons and time. He does so on the walk.

Adam is far more relaxed when they reach summer. When the grass is lush under their feet, and Ethan is reaching out of his arms to try and catch butterflies and bugs, falling leaves and sunbeams. Ronan wants to put his arm back around him, to feel if his muscles have loosened, aren’t as tense and stiff as they were when Cabeswater first spoke to him. So he does, wraps his arm around Adam’s waist under the pretense of helping him over a large mossy log. Adam is warm and relaxed under his arm, turns his head to look at Ronan over his shoulder, smiles.

“Hey,” he says, “safe enough here to let Ethan down, do you think?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, he doesn’t think Cabeswater will hurt them, “so long as we keep an eye on
“A dream river?” Adam asks, stoops to release Ethan into the grass, “There shouldn’t be a real river around here, there’s nothing on the maps.”

“Nothing here is on the maps,” Ronan shrugs, tugs Adam down and backwards to sit down on the log with him as they watch Ethan pluck leaves from a bush, “I don’t really know if this is… if Cabeswater is a dream, or like, from a dream or if my dreams are from Cabeswater.”

“Chicken or the egg.” Adam mumbles, lifts his arms into the air to stretch languidly in the warm air, then, “Jeez, it’s hot in here,” he says, tugs his jumper off. His t-shirt underneath is even more threadbare, and too small. It rucks up with the movement of the jumper removal, and stays caught halfway up his torso, and Ronan takes the opportunity to poke the bare skin.

“Christ, Ro!” Ethan squawks, jumps sideways, and tugs his shirt down, “You’re a menace!”

Ethan leaves his leaves, and runs back to the two of them, “Ok?” he asks, and Ronan leans forward to hook him into his lap.

“Yeah,” he says, “you never told me that Adam’s ticklish!”

Ethan laughs, Adam glares.

“I’m not,” Adam says, “you just caught me off guard, anyway,” he adds, suddenly mischievous, “Ethan’s the ticklish one.”

Ethan’s expression slides from happily amused to warily amused, “Oh,” he says, “m’not.”

“Oh?” Ronan asks, pokes his side just lightly, Ethan squawks louder than Adam does.

Eventually, when Ethan is tickled out, he simply flops down on top of Ronan, and the two of them lie in the grass panting while Adam laughs from the tickle free safety of the log. His hair is lit up by the soft glow of the sun coming in from the trees behind him, and the haze it casts over him makes him look almost otherworldly. When he deems it safe enough to come closer without being tickle ambushed, he crosses over the clearing to drop down into the grass next to Ronan, and returns to looking more human. Or as human looking as Adam gets, he always has a sort of ethereal look about him. Ethan is still on top of Ronan, but he’s lying crosswise over his stomach now, knees in the grass on one side of Ronan, fingers plucking daisies on the other side. Adam sits by Ethan’s knees, leans again Ronan’s hips, and lets his hand rest on the small of Ethan’s back.

“So,” he says, “do you know what Cabeswater meant?”

“Which bit?” Ronan asks, drops his forearm over his face.

“Well,” Adam sighs, “all of it. I’ve never been here before, never been anywhere like this, so I don’t get why I’d be welcomed back. But more specifically, the magician bit, I guess?”

“Um,” Ronan says, shrugs, “I actually have no idea. Cabeswater always just seems to… know people. I don’t know, Adam.”

“So it knew the others too?” Adam asks, leans over Ronan’s hips to show Ethan how to press a hole into the daisy stems to chain them together.

“Yeah,” Ronan says, “kinda? I guess?”

Adam rolls his eyes at him.

“I don’t know,” Ronan protests mildly, “it isn’t really big on explaining. And it only speaks Latin and like, tree-ish or something.”

“So -” Adam sighs again, “-how do you think we should go about trying to figure out what Seph sent us here for?”

“We could try asking Cabeswater?” Ronan suggests.

“Oh,” Adam says, “will it answer our questions?”

“Maybe,” Ronan says, “it doesn’t always, but I think it does want to help most of the time.”

“Ok,” Adam nods, sits up straight again, “I assume your Latin vocab isn’t just swear words and dirty jokes?”

“Hey,” Ronan says sharply, grins wide despite himself, “I’ll have you know I’m top of the class.”

“Good,” Adam says, sounds oddly pleased, “can you ask it when I was here before?”

“Um,” Ronan say, “yes. Hang on, lemme think how to phrase it.”
He asks. Cabeswater rustles their leaves. Ethan accidentally breaks his chain, and Adam shows him how to start again.

"Quis est?" the trees murmur, "Quis est?"

Adam looks to Ronan expectantly, and Ronan frowns.

"Uh," he says, "they're saying - 'who is ... it...he?'"

"Who is he?" Adam repeats, "I thought they knew who I was."

"Me too-" Ronan starts, breaks off as the breeze carries more words to him.

"Puer-" they say, "quod sit novum," they add, "alium."

"The boy," Ronan translates slowly, "he's - new. Different."

"The boy," Adam repeats, "is that - is that me, or Ethan?"

Ethan looks up at his name, holds up three daisies smushed together.

"Nice," Ronan tells him, then to Adam, "I think not you."

"Oh," Adam says, does not look pleased, "new? Different?"

"Different for it, maybe?" Ronan suggests.

"Different from what?" Adam persists.

"I don’t know," Ronan groans, "God, Adam, I’m as lost as you are."

"This is your forest," Adam says, close to snapping, "how can you be lost in your forest?"

Ronan digs the heels of his hands into his eyes until the blinking darkness becomes painful.

"It’s not my forest," he says evenly, "it doesn’t belong to anyone."

"It’s connected to you, though," Adam protests.

"No," Ronan says, "I don’t know. I’m connected to it. I don’t- Adam, I don’t know how any of this works."

Adam exhales roughly, then inhales sharply, then sighs softly.

"Sorry," he says, "sorry. I just - "

"I know," Ronan grits out, "I still think it’s safe. Don’t worry."

"Ok," Adam mumbles, "is it ok if - could we ask some more questions?"

"Yeah I guess," Ronan says, "I dunno if they’ll reply though, and if they do, if it’ll be any more useful than what they’ve already said."

"Still worth a try, though?"

"Yeah," Ronan says, pushes himself up on his elbows - Ethan makes a noise of vague protest at being jostled - "what do you wanna ask?"

"About the - ok, so the other day at Blue’s, when I was doing… readings with Seph. She got me to do a reading about myself? I had no idea what I was doing, and she didn’t really explain it either, but I drew the uh - the magician card, so, so - maybe ask Cabeswater what it means by calling me magician?"

This is the first time Adam’s actually really said anything about what he’s been doing with Persephone, apart from saying he wanted to talk to Ronan about it. It’s a lot more… well, magic sounding than Ronan would have thought Adam would have been comfortable with.

"Ok," he says, "so, Cabeswater," he addresses the trees, "Uh - Magi? Quid est illud in animo?" He just has to assume that Cabeswater will understand him no matter how bad his grammar is.

"Oculi-" say the trees, "manibus-" say the trees, "sacrificium," say the trees.

"No," Ronan says, "quid est?"

It sounds like the trees around them are sighing at the petulance in his voice.

"Amica," they say, "amicus noster," they insist, "ante, alium, rursus?"

Adam stares at him.

"So?" he asks.

"The magician is their friend, apparently," Ronan says, "before, or, some other time, or something. They want to know if it will happen again, I think?"

"What?" Adam asks, "The magician becoming their friend, or me being the magician? What do they mean by again?"

"I don’t know," Ronan says firmly, knows his voice is coming out spiky, "you should ask the psychics or Gansey or someone. I don’t know anything about this."
Adam just looks at him for a moment.
“Hey,” he says, “that’s enough for today, yeah? Let’s go home.”
“Yup,” Ronan agrees brusquely, loops his arms around Ethan’s waist, and stands up with him and his interesting chain of daisies.
“Hey!” Ethan protests, “Wasn’t finished!”
“Next time,” Adam tells him, standing up, “your chain looks so pretty, buddy! Good job!”

As soon as they had gotten into the car, Adam had unplugged Ronan’s phone, still plugged into the car speakers, and had replaced it with his own, and put on the second playlist. This one is a little more embarrassing to be listening to right next to Adam. Adam doesn’t seem to mind though. They don’t talk much on the ride back. Ethan appears to be feeling much happier than he was when they’d picked him up from Dana’s, and spends the entire time fiddling with his daisies, and gasping theatrically every time one of the stems broke. There was continuous gasping the entire drive home. It wasn’t until they were barely 5 minutes from Monmouth did Adam finally say anything.
“I am going to talk to Gansey about it,” he says, “and Seph. I might even talk to Calla and Maura about it too. This whole thing feels bigger than I expected, more important than I expected.”
Ronan grunts in reply.
“I need to talk to you about it too, though,” Adam continues, “even if Cabeswater isn’t connected to you, or whatever, I think whatever this thing with me, about the magician, about I don’t know, it’s connected to you too.”
“What the f-heck does that mean?” Ronan asks.
“I don’t think it’s a bad thing,” Adam sighs, leans his head against the window, “it’s just a feeling.”
“You’re not really the kind of person who does things on feelings,” Ronan points out.
“No,” Adam agrees, lifts his head away from the window just to thud his forehead back into it, “I’m not.”

At Monmouth, they realise none of them have actually had lunch yet, so their first task involves scrounging up an edible and vaguely healthy meal. Adam insists on the vaguely healthy part.
“I’m gonna buy your guys groceries,” he mumbles, standing in front of the fridge, “do you realise that black lump in the back used to be a lettuce?”
“A what?” Ronan jokes, leans over Adam’s shoulder with Ethan on his back, “What’s a lettuce, Ethan?”
“So good!” Ethan tells him, “Crunchy!”
“Ahhh,” Ronan groans, drops most of his weight against Adam’s back, “of course he likes greens. You’re both nerds.”
“Oi,” Adam says, doesn’t push him off, “wanting to be healthy and not have our teeth fall out of our heads before we’re 20 doesn’t actually mean we’re nerds.”
“No, I know,” Ronan says, “the nerd bit was unrelated. I’m just making an observation.”
“God,” Adam huffs, finally decides that the leftover pasta from a few nights ago was probably their best bet and pulled it out, “you are ridiculous. Pasta, Ethan?”
“Uuhh,” Ethan says, tugs at Ronan’s ears, “Chains-aw wants pasta too?”
“Yeah, probably,” Ronan agrees, follows Ethan’s tug commands, and straightens up, “let’s go get her.”
“ Faster!” Ethan crows, and Ronan dashes out of the bathroom/laundry/kitchen while Adam microwaves the pasta.

After they’ve finished eating, Ethan decides he wants to build a castle next to Gansey’s Henrietta, and Ronan sets him up with empty yogurt pots and ice cream containers. Adam persuades him to do the dishes next, then stands on his left to dry them as they’re washed.
“So,” Adam says.
“Mm?” Ronan asks, flicks dishwash suds at Adam.
“Fuck off,” Adam grumbles, whips at his legs with the dishcloth.
“Oh?” Ronan grins, “You wanna do the dishes?”
“Fuck off,” Adam repeats.
“Ok,” Ronan says, “what’s so?”
“So,” Adam says again, “I like the playlist.”
“Oh,” Ronan says, “cool.”
“I don’t think I’ve heard most of the songs before,” Adam continues, finishes drying a bowl and turns away to shelve it, “you have good taste when you’re not trying to implode your eardrums.”
“No,” Ronan says, “I always have good taste. Including the eardrum implosion music.”
“Sure,” Adam snorts, “whatever helps you sleep at night.”
Ronan pulls the plug in the sink, wipes his hands on the seat of his pants, and does not turn around before asking; “How’s your ear?”
Adam takes his time in answering, dries two more bowls and puts them away before he does.
“The same,” he says, “I’m supposed to go in for a checkup on Monday. For my wrist too.”
“I’ll drive you,” Ronan says, then, “by the same, you mean you still can’t hear anything out of it, right?”
“Right,” Adam says testily, dries his hands and then drops the dishtowel on the bench.
“Um,” Ronan says, pushes himself away from the sink, “you feeling … ok about that?”
Adam laughs. It’s not an amused laugh.
“No,” he says flatly, “it doesn’t matter though.”
Ronan bristles. Apparently he’s in a bristly mood today. “It does matter,” he says.
“God, Ronan,” Adam sighs, “it doesn’t. It is what it fuckin’ is, ok? It doesn’t matter how I feel about it because there is literally nothing I can do about it right now.”
“Doesn’t mean you can’t feel shit about it,” Ronan says, “or want, like, to vent about it. Or whatever.”
“Well I don’t want to,” Adam says, “I don’t want to talk about it, Ro.”
“Ok,” Ronan huffs, “do you want to talk about Cabeswater instead?”
“No,” Adam says, and Ronan huffs again, “no,” Adam repeats, “I wanna talk about the fuckin’ playlist, obviously.”
“Oh,” Ronan says, “um. What about it?”
“Ronan,” Adam says, he looks excessively uncomfortable, “C’mon.”
Fuck.
“Um,” Ronan says again, folds his arms over his chest as if he could somehow protect himself like that, “you want to know where I pirate my music?”
“Ronan,” Adams huffs, drags his hand down his face, “God. Are you seriously trying to be difficult right now, or are you just - just - never mind. I’m gonna go do my fuckin’ homework.”

Fuck. This is probably where he ought to pull his head out of his ass and face this probable rejection head on, but it’s a lot easier to just not. Instead, he shuts the door after Adam leaves, and gets into the shower instead. He doesn’t really need a shower, but it feels like a better option than following Adam out.

He’s just standing there, face upturned so that the water can attempt to drown him a little easier, when the door opens.
“Oh, no,” Adam says.
Ronan inhales a lungful of water, and replies via a coughing fit. He’s ridiculously thankful that he had the self preservation to pull the shower curtain. That Gansey had insisted they needed one.
“Fuck, Adam,” he says once he can actually speak again, “heard of knocking?”
“Can’t hear that much,” Adam replies, “I don’t want to do my homework yet.”
“Um,” Ronan says, presses his face against the wet tile of the shower wall, “ok?”
“I want to talk about the playlist- about the music you chose specifically for me to listen to, and why,” Adam says.

At least, Ronan thinks, if he throws up from nerves right now, he won’t have to do much clean up seeing as he’s already in the shower.

“Mm,” he says.

“Ro,” Adam says. He sounds like he’s a lot closer now. “I can’t deal with… with-” he pauses, seemingly struggling with words, and Ronan struggles with the desire to put his face back under the shower stream. Instead he turns the shower off so he can hear easier, so Adam can hear easier, and attempts to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach. He already knows that Adam has too much on his plate right now to deal with whatever emotions Ronan has. Already knows that Adam is a very sensible person who does things very carefully. Already knows.

“I don’t want this to be all vague,” Adam settles on, “so much in my life right now is uncertain, there’s been so many fuckin’ curveballs happening, I can’t predict what’s gonna happen next. I’m sorry if this is… selfish of me, I just need to know for sure.”

“Um,” Ronan says.

This is just a stupid scenario all round. Why did this moment have to happen while he’s naked and wet and hiding behind a plastic shower curtain that’s decorated with smiling ghosts because Noah thought that was funny.

“So,” Adam says, he’s starting to sound a little desperate, “am I reading way too fuckin’ much into this all, or are you - do you wanna - God - do you like me?”

“Um,” Ronan says. There’s a window near the shower. If he moves quickly enough, he might be able to leap out of the shower and through it before Adam can do anything. “Yeah,” he says.

“Ok,” Adam says. It sounds like he’s nodding.

“So,” Adam says, slow, serious.

“I’m not expecting anything,” Ronan blurts out. Is met with a very, very loud silence.

“Um,” Adam says.

“Honestly,” Ronan continues, “I don’t want to change anything. I just want to stay friends, and help look after Ethan, and all that shit.”

“Oh,” Adam says. Sounds inexplicably disappointed. “I thought—” he said, “-maybe you wanted to like - I dunno - fuck. Date?”

The actual fuck. The actual fuck. The actual ever-loving fuck.

“Uhhhhhh,” Ronan says, “is that a thing that… you want?”

This is so stupid. Why does this have to happen while he’s in the shower. What the fuck. “I guess,” Adam mumbles.

“You guess?” Ronan snaps before he can stop himself, “That’s really flattering, Parrish.”

“God,” Adam snaps back, “it’s not like you sound super enthusiastic either.”

“Yeah well-” Ronan starts heatedly, then exhales loudly, drops down onto his ass into the wet tub, “I am,” he says, “I am super, fucking enthusiastic.”

“Ok,” Adam says.

Ronan curls until he can press his face into his knees, “But if you’re not,” he says, “than I don’t want to date. I don’t want to muck this up. Muck Ethan up. I only want to date you if you’re serious about it.”

“Ok,” Adam says.

“So,” Ronan mumbles, thinks if he presses his face just a little bit harder, it’ll fuse with his kneecaps,
“I can just stop, with the flirting or whatever, if that helps.”
“Ok,” Adam says, “first of all, you fucker, you’re winning the cynical award today. Secondly, I said ok, I’m serious, I am. Thirdly, I know you’ve noticed me flirting back. You’re not an idiot. Except maybe you are.”
“Well I might be an idiot,” Ronan says, “but at least I won an award.”
“Fuck off,” Adam says, more amused than pissed, “is your head still up your ass?”
“I hope not,” Ronan says, “but let me clarify, in case I’m missing something. You, Adam Parrish, want to be my, Ronan Lynch, boyfriend?”
“God,” Adam groans, “and I’m the nerd?”
“Yes.”
“Yes, I do. Are you getting out of the fuckin’ shower at any point?”
“Uhuh,” Ronan says, “yup. That’s gonna happen. Yup.”
A few, very long, moments pass, in which Ronan does not get out of the shower, and then Adam sighs.
“Ok,” he says, “I’m just gonna go do my homework then. Don’t fall down the drain or whatever.”
“Ok,” Ronan says.

He really, really, really fucking wants to talk to Gansey. To Noah. Should probably finish talking about it with Adam first though. He gets out of the shower, frees his phone from his jeans pockets, and dials Gansey.
“Ronan?” Gansey asks, confused.
“Gans,” Ronan mumbles, trying to keep his voice low so Adam doesn’t hear and think he’s gossiping or some shit. Which he isn’t. Definitely not.
“You ok?” Gansey asks, “Is Adam ok? Ethan? What’s going on?”
“I like Adam,” Ronan says, figures he ought to start at the beginning.
“Oh,” Gansey says, “yes? I know?”
“No,” Ronan says, “I like him. Like, in a gay way. Like, I’m gay, and he’s the object of my affections.”
“Oh,” Gansey says, “yes? I know?”
“Oh,” Ronan says, “well, ok. He likes me back.”
Gansey inhales and Ronan interrupts before he can say anything.
“Don’t say you already know.”
“Ok,” Gansey says, “I won’t. Adam likes you back?”
“And he wants to- to date, to be my boyfriend.”
“Ok,” Gansey says, “and this is a problem, why?”
“It’s not,” Ronan wails, drops his voice again, “it’s just - Gans. He has so much shit going on. He shouldn’t have to have my shit too. I have a lot of shit. Like, really shitty shit. Shit that I spend a lot of time ignoring. Adam deals with his shit. Adam has a fucking life plan. Like, a 40 year life plan. I only vaguely know what I’m doing tomorrow-”
“Ronan,” Gansey says, “I can’t believe I have to tell you this, but, maybe Adam’s thought about this too?”
“Mm,” Ronan mumbles.
“Maybe,” Gansey continues, “he’s aware that, seeing as you’re human, you will have your own shit, and he’s ok with that. And maybe, you should talk to him about it.”
“Fuck off,” Ronan says, “ok, dad, God.”
He doesn’t quite feel better, but he does feel vaguely calmer. Gansey makes a disgruntled noise.
“Oh,” Ronan adds, “also we went to Cabeswater today and it was really weird to Adam, so we’re going to need to talk about that too.”
“Ronan,” Gansey says, “what the fuck?”
“Ok, dick,” Ronan says, “talk to you later.”
“Ronan-”
Ronan hangs up.
By the time he’s dressed again and composed enough to finally leave the bathroom, Gansey’s arrived home. He must have been leaving school when he’d called, Ronan realised. Gansey’s crouched down next to Ethan, helping him carefully craft his castle, and Adam is nowhere to be seen. “What are you doing here?” Ronan asks dumbly, and Gansey blinks at him. Ethan hands Gansey another yogurt pot. “I live here,” Gansey replies. “I mean,” Ronan says, “why aren’t you at school? Where’s Adam?” “God,” Gansey says, he sounds far too amused, “do you even know what time it is? How long have you been panicking in the shower for?” Ronan does not appreciate the humour in the situation. He crosses his arms and scowls. “Adam’s in his room,” Gansey adds on, his smile dials up a notch into overbearing, “he said something something homework, and if you didn’t dissolve in the shower, could you help him with a science problem.” Ronan immediately turns on heel, he had left the bathroom only after building up his resolve to actually face Adam without the safety of a shower curtain, and if he didn’t do it quickly he would probably end up under his blankets. “Ronan,” Gansey says before he can make his escape, “what happened in Cabeswater?” “I think Adam wants a group meeting about it later. With Blue too. I’ll go check. See ya.” Gansey looks like he’s going to protest, but Ethan interrupts, insisting that Gansey needs to pay attention to the stacking.

He doesn’t bother knocking, just opens the door and walks in. it’s not like Adam had knocked before barging in on him in the shower, anyway, so fair’s far. “Hey,” Adam says mildly, doesn’t even look up from the books spread out across his stretched out legs. “Nice shower?” “Fuck off,” Ronan says quietly, shuts the door behind him, “are you actually doing homework?” “Yes,” Adam replies, he still hasn’t looked up, “but I can stop if you actually wanna talk or something.” “No science problem you need help with then?” Ronan snarks, crosses the room to flop down on the end of the bed. “Are you gonna keep asking dumb questions?” Adam snarks back, draws one foot back just a little so he can kick Ronan’s thigh lightly. Ronan would really like to keep asking dumb questions, to put off being serious for just a while longer. Not because he didn’t want the serious, or the serious he hoped would happen, but just because the serious was fucking terrifying. “No,” he says, “and I’m done freaking out about it.”
“Ok,” Adam says, shuts his books, and with little to no ceremony, sweeps them off of his legs, the bed, onto the floor.

“The fuck,” Ronan says after the thudding stops.

“We gonna talk?” Adam asks, the tips of his ears are pink, but nothing else yet.

“What do we need to talk about?” Ronan deflects, apparently he’s not done asking stupid questions after all, “We already confirmed that I’m going to be your fucking boyfriend.”

He expects Adam to roll his eyes, or to reply with something sarcastically biting, or overly serious. Instead, the pink in his ears spreads down into his cheekbones, and he drops his gaze from Ronan’s face to his lap, grins.

“Yeah,” he says, “we did.”

Ronan’s next question had been going to be something along the lines of - is this a joke? But he figured the actual, literal fucking joy on Adam’s face kind of answered that one. He had told himself he was going to be chill. Or at least a little chiller than choking on the shower.

“Oh my God,” Ronan mumbles, “you really are serious about this.”

Adam kicks his thigh again, this time Ronan reaches out and grabs his foot before he can take it away again. Adam doesn’t try to pull away.

“Yes,” Adam says, looks up from his lap, “yes, I’m serious. I told you. Do you really think I’d pursue a - a relationship with someone who’s so important to Ethan without believing it would actually work?”

“Well,” Ronan says, shrugs, “no. That’s why I - that’s part of why I didn’t think you’d want this.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says. It’s easier to talk about this, he finds, if he stares straight ahead at the wall instead of at Adam whose gaze he can feel pressing against his cheek. “I thought you wouldn’t want any more… uh, shit to deal with. Like, I know your priority is Ethan, so-”

“He still is,” Adam says, “my top priority. That’s not gonna change, you should know that.”

“I know that,” Ronan says, stiff, “he should be. I don’t have a problem with that.”

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“Yeah?”
Adam rolls his eyes, “This is the man I’ve chosen to place my affections in,” he says dryly, Ronan’s heart feels like it’s going to fucking revolt. “Yeah, I’m gonna kiss you again.”

“But?” Ronan asks.

“But what?” Adam replies, he’s shifting back along the bed so he can unfold his legs, has his hand hooked around the strap of Ronan’s singlet.

“The way you said that sounded like you meant to have a but at the end,” Ronan says, lets Adam pull him along the bed with him until they’re both leaning against the headrest, legs outstretched. “Ok,” Adam says, “but - we are gonna have to go talk to Gans about Cabeswater soon. If I don’t start getting some vague semblance of answers I think my head is going to explode.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, “we could try and relieve some of that pressure by exploding something else?” Adam eyes him, “You know,” he says, “I legitimately can’t tell if that was meant to be dirty, or if you’re referring to yours and Noah’s explosion shack out back.”

“It’s all part of my charm,” Ronan smirks, shifts, so he’s twisted sideways towards Adam, so he can press fingers (that are not shaking goddamn it) to Adam’s chest, “I’m an enigma.”

“You’re something, alright,” Adam grumbles, his hand is back on Ronan’s face, thumb pressing into the hollow of his cheek, fingers reaching round his neck, pulling him closer.

This kiss is not a dry press of lips. This kiss is every night Ronan dropped Adam off at his house, every long silence between the two of them in which he’d almost leaned in. It’s a little - quite a lot - desperate, and excruciatingly uncoordinated.

Ronan gives zero fucks that their teeth just smashed together, most likely cutting his lip in the process. Adam doesn’t seem to care either, simply huffs into Ronan’s mouth, grips his face more tightly, and tilts his head. Keeps kissing him until there’s less teeth and less room to breathe and less space between them. Eventually Ronan has to be the one to pull back - he simply does not have this whole breathing while kissing thing down pat, and it feels like his chest is going to burst. Partially due to straining lungs, mostly due to beating heart. His hand is twisted in the fabric of Adam’s shirt, he’s a little scared he’s gonna stretch it, but also a little more scared of letting go.

“Ok?” Adam asks again, presses his forehead to Ronan’s cheek, slides his hand down from Ronan’s jaw to his shoulder.

“Uh, yeah,” Ronan snorts.

“Um,” Adam says, “was that - was I your first kiss?”

“The fuck?” Ronan asks, can’t be bothered lifting faking anger, “Was I that bad?” Adam, unhelpfully, laughs, “No,” he says, “sorry. No. I was just wondering.”

“Because I’m terrible at kissing,” Ronan sighs, “oh dear. I’m going to have to practice. I wonder whoever could help me?”

Adam snorts. “I wonder, indeed.” he replies dryly, “you’re insufferable.”

Ronan snorts. “I, wonder, indeed.”

“Ok?” Adam asks again, watches as Ronan lifts their joined hands to his mouth, kisses the back of Adam’s hand.

It’s by mutual and unspoken agreement that they decide now is a good time to go conference with Gansey. On Ronan’s side, it’s because he thinks if they start kissing again he’s definitely going to refuse to do anything else ever, and then Adam would get annoyed at him. On Adam’s side, he thinks, it’s probably because he’s ridiculously sensible and realises that Ronan needs to either stop now to breathe, or never ever, ever, ever stop. Before Adam can open the door though, Ronan has to stop him.

“Wait,” he says, reaches a hand out to brush against the back of Adam’s t-shirt. It’s hanging funny, because, yes, he did stretch it. “I need to ask another stupid question.”
“Ok,” Adam says, amused. He turns around and leans with one shoulder against the door, “what’s up?”
“This is going to happen again, right?” Ronan asks - aloud, it’s even more stupid than it sounded in his head, and it sounded pretty fucking stupid in his head. He presses on anyway. “The kissing. And. Stuff. It’s not just like a once off thing?” Adam looks confused.
“No?” he says, “It’s not a once off thing. I don’t want it to be, anyway. Why would it be?”
“God,” Ronan mumbles, “I’m just checking.”
“Ok?” Adam says, pushes away from the door and reaches for Ronan’s hands. This is a feat because both his hands are stuffed as far as they can go into his jean pockets. He lets Adam tug them out.
“Hey,” he says, he’s fucking holding Ronan’s hands, squeezing them gently between his, “remember how I just fuckin’ said I was serious about this? That kinda means I’m not just gonna wanna kiss you once or whatever. We don’t revert back to that dumb avoiding the obvious topic of conversation once we leave the room, ok?” Ronan really, really, really fucking wants to not leave the room, just in case, wants to kiss Adam again, just in case.
“I know,” he says instead, “Christ, Adam, I told you it was a dumb question, it’s fine.”
Adam rolls his eyes, squeezes his hands again, “Ok, dumbass,” he says, “then I have a dumb question for you.”
“Whatever, turdface,” Ronan grumbles.
“Are you gonna freak the fuck out if I wanna hold your hand in front of like, Gansey? Or Blue? Or like, just in general?”
“You want to fucking hold my hand?” Ronan can’t stop the question from exploding out of his mouth. Watches as Adam’s face pinkens again.
“Uh,” he says, “yeah. I’d like to. We don’t have to obvious-”
“I’m good with it,” Ronan cuts in, clears his throat, attempts to force on a calm tone, “we can hold hands in front of those guys,” he says, “yup.”
“Ok,” Adam smirks, “let’s go solve some magic mysteries then, yeah?”
Blue comes over for dinner so everyone can be filled in at the same time. Adam had been considering suggesting they just drop into Fox Way so they could talk to the actual Psychics about it all, specifically Persephone, but really he didn’t think he had enough energy today to deal with much more than just their small group. Anyway, he didn’t fancy walking into Fox Way and having everyone suddenly realise he and Ronan are together now. Didn’t think he could deal with having that many smug knowing looks pointed at him.

Gansey ordered dumplings and steam buns for everyone, Blue brought icecream and some leftover birthday cake from a random cousin’s birthday, and Adam elbowed Ronan and told him that tomorrow they were going grocery shopping and buying vegetables. Gansey caught this interaction, and smirked at Adam, who, although he could feel his cheeks heating up, did not give a single fuck.

“Ok, so,” Gansey says once everyone has finished eating, and Ronan and Ethan are building a terribly slimy wall out of dumplings, “Adam, do you want to start this meeting off?”

“Um,” Adam says, he kind of wants to roll his eyes at how formal Gansey is being- he’s using his business voice - but he can understand why. He’s been actively avoiding all participation in this sort of thing since he’d found out it was all real, and now, he was asking everyone to talk about it with him like it was a normal thing to do. “I think Cabeswater thinks I’m someone else, and Seph thinks I’m them too. Or rather, Seph knows I’m not, but thinks I need to catch up with that person anyway.”

This statement is, of course, met with a variety of confusion.

“Okay,” Gansey says slowly, “and who do they think you are?”

“Me,” Adam says, fiddles with the already splintered chopsticks by his plate, “me but from - uh - from another timeline. I think. I don’t know.”

“From another timeline?” Blue asks, she’s shredding steam buns to throw into the air for Chainsaw to catch, “Like, a parallel universe or something?”

“Yeah?” Adam says, “I guess. But - ok, so I know I haven’t had much, or anything really, to do with all of this, and I know that’s my own fault, but - Cabeswater’s some sort of magical, time subverting, self contained… being, yeah?”

Gansey nods seriously. Ronan mumbles something about it being a self contained asshole.

“Right,” Adam says, “so what if, what if in another timeline, or God, I don’t know, this is all just off the top of my head. In another something, something was different in my life, or one of your guys lives, that meant that I was, um, the magician. Like Cabeswater said. What if I was the magician in that timeline, but Cabeswater sort of stretches over all the timelines. Like - so if each timeline is a stream, then Cabeswater would be the ocean. They all connect, and so when I walk into Cabeswater in this timeline, it thinks I’m the same as I am in whatever other timeline it’s most familiar with.”

“That’s very sci-fi,” Blue says, Chainsaw, now on her shoulder, agrees loudly. “But also completely believable. We could run that by my mum.”

“I’ve read up a bit about alternate, or parallel universes, and how magic alters and bends them,”
Gansey says thoughtfully, “I might ring Malory and ask if he’s read much about it.”
“Ro?” Adam asks, “Whaddya think?”
“I think,” Ronan says, “that you should tell them about your card reading too.”
“Oh yeah,” Adam says, he’s completely forgot about that. “I should tell you guys about what Seph has been teaching me.”

It takes a while, he has to keep stopping and starting, filling in gaps in his knowledge about psychic shit with Blue. It’s not like he has all that much to go on, really, just a few hours with Persephone learning about shutting his eyes and feeling, which felt like a waste of time, and then actually shutting his eyes and feeling, which felt like a fucking heart attack. And then of course, Cabeswater speaking to him. It wasn’t much, but it seemed to fit together, to him, and now to Gansey and Blue and Ronan too.

He was extremely glad they had done it at Monmouth, because that meant there was a natural end to the progression of the meeting and the discussion, and the brainstorming. Blue had to get back by 10 because she was getting up early the next morning, and Ethan had to be put to bed before he went into overdrive.

Blue caught him alone before she left, ducking into Noah’s room while he was in there grabbing Ethan’s pj’s for after his shower.

“Hey,” she said, shutting the door behind her, “you doing ok?”
“Uhuh,” Adam said, nodded firmly, found Ethan’s pj’s. “I mean, it’s - it’s a lot. Not really. It feels like whatever this shit is, it’s way bigger than I am, and-” he broke off with a sigh, and shrugged.
“Yeah,” Blue nodded, stepped closer to him so she could put her hand on his shoulder, “I’m sorry if I dragged you into this. Or if I dragged you into this too quickly or something.”

He had missed Blue, this week. Yeah, they’d been seeing each other in school, but there wasn’t really any time for him to actually chat with her. He missed working with her and getting to talk about nothing and everything at the same time. Now, they had just spent an entire evening talking, but he hadn’t really gotten to talk to her yet.

“I’m starting to think that this isn’t something I could have avoided,” Adam admitted, “and - and - I don’t think I want to avoid it. Anymore. Which sounds weird, I know, I spent weeks pretending none of this shit was going down, but it feels right.”

“Even though it could be dangerous?” Blue presses.

“Yeah,” Adam says, frowns, “I - I want in. And I don’t really care about the danger, except in regards to Ethan. I’m not gonna do anythin’ that could end up hurting him.”

“No,” Blue says, “I know. I think it might be useful to talk to mum about that too, maybe? Just, y’know, raising babies in magical environments?”

Adam snorts, “What,” he says, “and have Ethan turn out like you?”

Blue snorts as well, but also smacks his upper arm, “Ass,” she says, “better like me than like Ronan.”

“Um,” Adam says, “I wanna tell you somethin’.”

He knows his nerves are visible on his face, in his voice, because Blue’s expression immediately changes from playful to worried.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Nothin’ bad!” Adam says hastily, then frowns, “Well, I dunno, you might think it is.”

“Adam, what?”

“I’m datin’ Ronan,” Adam says, “so, like, um… yeah.”

Blue’s eyebrows are raised, and still going up even as Adam watches. The rest of her face is oddly still though.

“Blue?”

“Wow,” she says, her eyebrows have finally parked at her hairline, “my cousins are going to be distraught. What happened to your rule of not dating anyone unless it was easy? Lynch is like the
Adam folds his arms, “So he’s an exception,” he says, “I told you it was a 2 part rule with room for exceptions.”

“Ok,” Blue narrows her eyes, “what’s his exception?”

Again, Adam can feel his cheeks heating up, the tips of his ears burning, “Um,” he says eloquently, clutches Ethan’s pj’s close to his chest, “I just - whenever I’m with him, it feels right. Not just in a sappy, butterflies in my stomach or pounding heart or whatever way, but like - I feel safe. Ethan likes him, and I trust him with Ethan, I trust him with me.”

“Wow,” Blue says again, “Hestia, I never thought I’d see the day that Adam Parrish would be so soppily lovestruck,” she grinned, “it’s almost gross.”

“Fuck off,” Adam says easily, grins back at her through his blush, “I like him.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that,” Blue says, “well, I’m happy for you, but I have to go talk to Ronan and let him know I’ll break his kneecaps if he mucks this up.”

Before Adam can respond to this - he hasn’t decided if he wants to tell her to go easy on Ronan, or to give her his blessing to threaten away - Gansey knocks on the door.

“Jane?” he calls, “Do you still want that ride?”

Adam mouths ‘Jane’ at Blue, who crinkles her nose back at him, and then she opens the door.

“Yeah,” she said, glanced back to Adam, made an expression which could easily be read as - does he know????

Adam nods.

“Richard,” she says - now it’s Gansey’s turn to crinkle his nose in distaste - “as you appear to be in charge of Ronan most of the time, i feel like I ought to inform you that if he in anyway upsets Adam, I will maul him.”

“Blue,” Adam says, rolls his eyes, “I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yup,” Blue says, rolls her eyes back at him, “I’ll call and confirm that mum and all are ok with it in the morning.”

“I’ll be back soon,” Gansey says to Adam, then to Blue, “can we stop in at the store on the way back?”

Adam goes to see how Ronan and Ethan are getting along.

They both appear to be having the time of their lives, the bathroom, not so much. The two of them were utterly soaked. This wasn’t a bad thing for Ethan, seeing as he was naked and in the shower, but Ronan looked like a bedraggled stoat.

“Hey,” he called over the whooping and splashing, “is anyone actually getting clean in here?”

“Yeah!” Ethan calls back, “’M so clean! An’ so’s the floor, ’n’ the walls, ’n’ Ro’an-”

“We got a little distracted,” Ronan admits, “you were taking too long with the pj’s.”

“Ah,” Adam snorts, leaves the pj’s on the bench far enough away from the shower that they won’t get wet, and walks carefully over to the tub, “I see, of course it’s my fault.”

Ronan grins at him, Ethan attempts to pull him into the tub with him.

“Woah, buddy,” Adam says, “I’m gonna shower later, don’t worry.”

Ethan pouts, he’s been getting better at pouting recently, and Adam blames Ronan. “Is not so fun when no one’s wi’ me,” Ethan says.

“Ro’s with you,” Adam points out.

“In the water,” Ethan clarifies, folds his arms petulantly. There’s still soap in his hair, so Adam crouches down by the side of the tub and reaches in to start gently rubbing it out. It was true that Adam usually showered at the same time as Ethan, it was more time efficient, and meant that Ethan didn’t have to be alone in their house. Here, there were more people actually willing to wash him, willing to watch him while Adam showered, or even went out for a walk maybe.

“Yeah,” Adam says, quickly swipes his thumb over Ethan’s eyebrow to stop suds from reaching his
eyes, “but look how much space you have! You didn’t get to splash this much at home.”
“Hmf,” Ethan says, but appears to be appeased enough.

By the time Ethan’s dried and in his pj’s, all his energy is depleted, and he’s drooped into a small damp puddle in Adam’s arms.
“Wanna story,” he insists anyway, as Adam pulls the blanket up over him, “I’m not sleepy ye” Ronan snorts beside him, and even though Adam rolls his eyes, his chest is warm with fondness. They might be technically homeless, and Adam might be getting into something extremely magically wack, but Ethan was happy here. In Monmouth. With Ronan. With Gansey, and Blue, and Noah, when he was here.

“Oh,” Adam says, settles down on the bed next to Ethan, “one story.”
“Two,” Ethan mumbles, presses his face against Adam’s thigh, grips tightly to his trouser leg. Ronan perches on the edge of the bed next to him. There’s not really enough room for that, and he can see Ronan’s leg muscles tensing as he holds himself on.

“One,” Adam says again, strokes Ethan’s cheek softly, “Ro, do you wanna tell it?”
Ethan is asleep by the fourth sentence. Lulled to sleep quickly by Ronan’s voice - dropped down into a hushed lilt - and Adam’s gentle stroking. Not to mention hours of running around and playing.

He doesn’t say anything right away. Keeps stroking Ethan’s hair. Shifts until he can lean his head awkwardly against Ronan’s shoulder. Listens to Ronan’s voice, the story he appears to be weaving out of nothing. He wants Ronan’s hand in his hair as well, but this is good enough for now. It’s an uncomfortable position, the angle of his neck, the squish of hips and legs, but he’s happy in it. He closes his eyes and listens.

“Adam,” Ronan says, voice still low, “you asleep?”
“Mm,” Adam says, “no.”
“You were snoring,” Ronan snickers.
Adam opens his eyes so he can roll them, peels his cheek away from Ronan’s shoulder, “Why did you ask then?” he whispers back.
“Because,” Ronan says, his face is dimly lit - the only light in the room is coming through the ajar door - and what Adam can see of his expression is all softness, “I wanted you to be awake.”
“God,” Adam mumbles, his neck aches abominably even though he can’t have been asleep on Ronan for long, “that’s kind of you.”
“That’s me,” Ronan agrees, lifts his hand to rub at Adam’s cheek where he had been pressed into Ronan’s shoulder, “do you want to go to bed now?”
“Yes,” Adam says truthfully, presses his face into Ronan’s hand, “but I wanna - I wanna - do you think Gans will go all old school on us if we share a bed?”
Ronansnorts, then covers his mouth and glances over at Ethan’s slumbering form, “Shit,” he says in an amused and rough whisper, “he’s not our parents, it’s not like he can do anything about it,” he said, “not that I think he’d care.”
This is what Adam thought as well, but still, “It’s just,” he starts, sighs, and straightens up a little so he can stretch his arms above his head, moving in small careful movements so as not to jostle Ethan, “I know he… worries. And I don’t wanna worry him more.”
“Shit,” Ronan says again, “did he say something weird to you?”
“No,” Adam says, “just - he told me not to break you.”
“Break me?” Ronan repeats, “The hell, Dick?”
“It’s fine,” Adam hurries to add before Ronan can work himself up as he looks to be doing, “I expected the best friend talk, honestly, at least he didn’t threaten me with bodily harm like Blue is gonna do to you.” Ronan snorts at this, but he still looks disgruntled.
“I’m not fucking breakable,” Ronan grumbles, then suddenly jumps back a few comments, “wait,” he says, “you want me to sleep here, tonight?”
“Um,” Adam says, he’s pretty sure Ronan is fine with sharing a bed, they had before, but that had
always been under some sort of guise of something else, “no,” he says, then continues before Ronan’s face can fall too far, “I kinda wanted to- if it’s ok with you- to sleep in your room?”

“Um,” Ronan says. Adam considers backpedaling quickly, opens his mouth to do so, but Ronan gets in first. “What about Ethan?” Ronan asks, “Will he be ok waking up alone?”

“If we leave the doors open, yeah, I think so,” Adam says. He’s pretty sure this is true. Ethan doesn’t tend to panic about being left alone unless he’s closed in. “You don’t have to say yes if you don’t wanna,” he adds.

“I wanna,” Ronan replies quickly. Even in the dim of the room, Adam could see the flush spreading over his cheeks. God the two of them were fucking awkward.

He knows this wasn’t exactly what this was, but he had never had a sleepover before. Especially not with a partner. He really wasn’t sure if there was some kind of sleepover etiquette he ought to be following, like, where should he look while Ronan changes into his sleep clothes, should he leave the room? Should he leave the room to get changed, himself? Ronan solves his dilemma by simply shucking his pants as soon as he’s pushed the door to.

“He says, turns to Adam awkwardly, jeans balled up in his hands, “I usually sleep in my boxers. Is that ok with you? I have pajama pants somewhere if you’d prefer-” he trails off a little awkwardly and Adam lets himself laugh at their fumblings.

“No,” he says, “that’s fine. Me too.”

“Oh good,” Ronan says, “I hate pajama pants.”

From there it’s a little bit easier. Adam is good at breezing through situations he finds awkward or difficult - you have to be able to just fucking do shit when you’re in charge of a small person. He’s had to take Ethan to class with him before, had to walk around town with his head held up high while covered in bruises, had his parent’s money card denied in shops. If he’d let himself be cowed by the knowledge that everyone would stare at him and talk about him, he’d never make it anywhere. He mostly manages this, though, by reminding himself that their opinions didn’t matter. That the only thing that mattered was that Ethan was looked after. It doesn’t quite work as well as usual for this, because he does care about Ronan’s opinion. He pushes through this awkwardness by knowing that Ronan didn’t give a shit if he was acting awkward and dumb.

“You ok with the wall side?” Ronan asks. He’s kicking at the clothes strewn around his bedroom floor while Adam folds his pants to put on the desk chair.

“Yeah,” Adam says, snorts at Ronan’s inefficient method of cleaning, “so long as you don’t mind me climbing over you if I needa get out.”

“I definitely don’t mind you climbing me,” Ronan replies. It’s obviously meant to come out smoothly, but he stutters it a little, and Adam snorts again.

“Wow,” he says, climbs onto the bed - bedsheets everywhere - and crawls over to the other side, “you’re sure good at sweet talkin’,”

“Fuck off,” Ronan mumbles, his cheeks are bright pink again. Or maybe they just hadn’t faded yet from earlier. He’s still kicking his clothes into the corner of the room into something vaguely resembling a pile, “It got you into my bed, didn’t it?”

Remembering an earlier conversation, not really a conversation, more of an earlier flirting session, Adam laughed again. “Yeah,” he drawls, “you still ain’t got inna my pants though, have you?” Ronan’s flush seems to be escaping down his face, down his neck, under the hem of his shirt. He turns away from the bed to crouch down and look inside the still constructed fort. “I got you out of them though,” he pointed out. Adam can hear the blush in his voice. He reaches into the fort then, an action which is met with a loud squawk that Adam jumps at.

“God,” Ronan hisses, drawing his hand back quickly and shaking it as if he’d just been bitten, “Goddamn savage. Found Chainsaw,” he added over his shoulder to Adam, as if their topic of conversation had been about looking for her, “was gonna give her some fucking pudding, but she
just got herself grounded.”
“T’im sure she’s real disappointed about that,” Adam says dryly. He shuffles forwards until he can slide his legs down under the blankets, then lies back against the mattress. He’s sat on Ronan’s bed before, sprawled on it even, but that hadn’t prepared him for how fucking comfortable it would be.

“Fuck,” he mumbles, turning his head slowly to and fro on the pillow, eyes closed. “I’ve changed my mind, Ro, I wanna sleep here by myself. You can go sleep with Ethan.”
He’s met with a sudden silence, Ronan’s grumbled cursing cut short. Oh. He cracks one eye open to squint over at Ronan who is squinting back at him, expression troubled. Before he can speak to reassure him, Ronan’s expression clears, and he raises his eyebrows.
“You better be fucking kidding,” he says.
Adam grins, shrugs, doesn’t lift his arms fast enough to block the shirt Ronan throws at him. Before he pulls the shirt off, Ronan throws himself at him as well, knees thudding onto the bed by Adam’s thighs. They wrestle for a moment, barely any exertion spent, really more of an excuse to get their hands on each other, and then Ronan flops down on his back beside Adam.
“I was definitely kidding,” Adam says through a huff of suppressed laughter, his body still flooding with adrenaline from the sudden action and amusement, “as comfortable as your bed is, I do only wanna sleep in it ‘cos you’re here.”
“You’re fucking-” Ronan begins, grunts, throws his arm over his face, “-a fucking sop bucket.”
He has to remind himself that when Ronan says this, it’s really, really not a bad thing. He swallows. Grins. Lets himself be happy about it and rolls onto his side so he’s facing Ronan.
“Yeah,” he says, “yeah I am.”
“Mm,” Ronan mumbles from under his arm, “God. I still - I feel like I’m fucking dreaming.”
Adam snorts again, shuffles closer to Ronan, “Now who’s a fucking sop bucket?” Adam teases, then pinches Ronan’s forearm, “there.”
“Ow,” Ronan says, frowns, removes his arm from his face, “there what?”
“There,” Adam says, pinches him again, not hard, “you’re not dreaming.”
“Oh,” Ronan says, realisation dawning, then he shakes his head and rubs at the pinched skin, “doesn’t prove anything,” he says in an almost joky tone, “I still feel pain in my dreams.”
“Oh,” Adam says, “well, sorry for pinching you. How can I convince you then?”

For a moment he thinks Ronán’s going to say he can’t, or he’s going to say something extremely deep and fatalistic. Then he swivels over onto his side as well, shuffling down the bed until their faces are drawn even. “Kiss me and I’ll believe it,” he says, mouth shifting into an easy and comfortable smile.

Adam very much wants to kiss him. “Oh sure,” he smiles, cups Ronan’s face gently in his hands, “you really expect me to believe you’ve never dreamed about kissing me?”
He can feel the heat coming from Ronan’s face.
“I wouldn’t,” Ronan says, voice suddenly soft. He’s very pliant under Adam’s hands, face lax, eyes drooping, “it wouldn’t be fair to you.”
“It’s not real,” Adam points out.
“Exactly,” Ronan says, his eyes fully closed now, “I want this to be real. You going to fucking kiss me or not?”
“Charming,” Adam says, grips Ronan’s face tighter in his hands, rubs his thumbs over the tips of his cheekbones, and leans in to press his lips lightly against Ronan’s. Ronan exhales through his nose, doesn’t move his lips.
“Ro,” Adam mumbles, lips brushing against Ronan’s still, “kiss me back. This is real.”

Ronan kisses him back. Very slowly. It doesn’t feel cautious though, more like he’s savouring it, like he wants to feel every movement. Adam wants to feel everything too, yes, but he also just wants. Just wants. Has wanted for so long to get this kind of thing. Wants. He wants Ronan to open his eyes, to press hard against him, to pull him closer, to deepen the kiss. He also wants Ronan to be sure
of himself, in himself, that he wasn’t dreaming. That Adam wants him.
It’s almost as if Ronan is reading his mind, because he finally moves more, dips his hands down to
wrap his arms around Adam’s waist to pull him tentatively closer. Adam pushes through the tentative
and presses forward, opens his mouth against Ronan’s. He can feel Ronan’s heart beating against his
chest. Or maybe it’s his heart he can feel beating against Ronan’s chest.

“Oh,” Ronan mumbles into Adam’s mouth, “definitely not dreaming.” He’s finally kissing back with
intention. It’s not just a careful experiment of lips rubbing against each other anymore, it’s Ronan
with his eyes open, lashes dipped low, mouth open and wet against his. Probably too wet, but what
the fuck. It was what he wanted. Something sloppy and rough and real and Ronan. It was what he
fucking needed. Something warm and comforting and passionate and, God fucking damn it, Ronan.
He would probably have just kept pushing forwards, taking as much as Ronan was willing to give
him, if Gansey hadn’t arrived home just then, shutting the front door loudly behind him and making
Adam jump in Ronan’s arms in a well ingrained response. It’s just Gansey, he tells his heaving chest
firmly, just Gansey who still isn’t used to having roommates who actually sleep. Which reminds him.

“When I can work again,” he mumbles, Ronan’s arms are tightening back around him now it’s
obvious he’s not actually trying to get away from his embrace, “I’m gonna look for a flat.”

“The fuck?” Ronan mumbles back. He looks a little confused at the fast paced change of activities.

“Why?”

Adam would rather be kissing than having this conversation, knows that Ronan would rather that
too, but he really does need to have this conversation, and he’s been putting it off all week.

“Because,” he says firmly, can’t help himself, ducks forwards to press another quick kiss to Ronan’s
lips, “it’s not fair on you guys. I can’t just mooch of y’all. Even if the both of you are sickeningly
rich.”

“Fuck that,” Ronan says, lets himself be kissed before pulling away so he can look at Adam
properly, “you know we both want you two here.”

“You’re biased,” Adam points out, tone even.

“Whatever,” Ronan says, “Gansey is just as in love with you as I am, possibly in a less gay way,
though.”

“What?” Adam says.

“He wants you both here too,” Ronan carries on quickly, “he’s said so.”

“Oh,” Adam sighs, rolls away from Ronan to lie on his back so he can stare up at the ceiling. He
wants to roll straight back into Ronan’s arms again. “It doesn’t matter that you guys want us here. It’s
still not actually fair to expect you both to just be able to cope with suddenly living with a kid. It’s a
lot of work. You guys are teenagers. I’m not doing that to you for longer than I have to.”

“We’re coping just fine so far,” Ronan says heatedly, “we’re not entirely useless, you know.”

This is not how Adam had wanted tonight to go.

“I know,” he says in an attempt at placating “and I’m really impressed, but just because you can,
doesn’t mean you should.” He’s suddenly horribly tired. He had been tired all day, but now it felt
bone crushing. He doesn’t want to start a fight with Ronan right now. He didn’t come in here to do
that. He came in here so he could hold onto Ronan, not push him away. “I don’t want to fight with
you,” he says, and his words come out a lot more desperate than he meant them to.

“I’m not fighting with you,” Ronan snaps, sighs, rubs his hands over his face, “I’m not fighting with
you. This is your fucking decision, I know that, I just - I just think we should talk about it a bit more
before you decide anything.”

All the self destructive parts of Adam tell him he ought to tell Ronan that this isn’t any of his
business, that he has no place here to try and persuade Adam otherwise, that he should just go back
to bed with Ethan.

“Oh,” he says, “ok, we’ll talk about it. Not now though.”

Ronan just looks at him.

“I’m tired,” Adam mumbles, “if we talk about it now I will fight. And I don’t want to. So not now.”
“Ok,” Ronan says, hesitates, then rolls back over against Adam’s side, “just -” he says, sighs, starts again, “I just want to let you know that you don’t have to fucking do this by yourself. I’m fucking serious about you too, you know, that means I’m serious about Ethan as well.” He’s wrapping his arms back around Adam’s waist and Adam, gratefully, allows himself to be reeled back in against Ronan’s chest.

“Mm,” Adam says. That’s all he can manage right now.

“Mm,” Ronan agrees, presses his lips firmly against Adam’s forehead, “go the fuck to sleep.”
Scrabble Eggs

Chapter Notes

Today's chapter is fluff and stuffing xxx

(Also, forewarning, use of homophobic slurs in this chapter again)

Ethan wakes the both of them up at some entirely unGodly hour. It’s alright though, because he doesn’t require either of them to be functioning, or even moving, he just wants to get in as well and put his cold feet against Adam’s stomach and his cold hands on Ronan’s face. Ronan makes a vaguely disgruntled noise, but lifts his arm up and out of the blankets to sling it round Ethan’s shoulders.

Adam is well used to being used as a heater, and simply shifts until he can cup Ethan’s feet to rub some warmth back into them.

“How long’ve you been up, bud?” he mumbles into the pillow.

“Ages!” Ethan says happily right into Ronan’s ear, “M’n Gans’ve been makin’ scrabbled eggs!”

“Egg-citing,” Ronan mumbles, doesn’t even flinch at the sudden increase in noise in the bedroom as Chainsaw seems to suddenly realise her favourite play buddy is awake and joins in with the morning chorus. It’s ok. Adam can sleep through the cawing and whooping. He totally can. Ronan seems content enough with it as well.

“Ad’m,” Ethan says brightly, he’s wriggled out of Ronan’s grip now so he can climb back out of the covers to perch on Ronan’s hip so Chainsaw can get to him easier, “wha’ssa fag?”

Adam cannot sleep through this.

He rolls over and sits up, reaches out to stop Ethan from falling off of the bed with the sudden movement, and then hoists him over to dump him on his lap.

“It’s a real bad, mean word,” Adam says, awkward because he can feel Ronan’s eyes on him, knows that Ronan hasn’t moved a muscle since Ethan spoke, “That only horrible people say.” He really doesn’t want to go into the ins and outs of the etymology of this, especially not so early in the morning, especially not to a fucking 3 year old.

Ethan wiggles in Adam’s lap, presses himself closer to Adam’s chest, and holds his hand out to Chainsaw who is crossing the bedroom floor in a way which she obviously thinks is sneaky.

“’Kay,” he says, then, “mum’n’dad says it.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, hesitates.

“’Bout you,” Ethan says. Chainsaw hops up onto the bed.

“Yeah,” Adam says.

“Why?” Ethan asks, folds Chainsaw up against his chest.

“Because-” Adam sighs, rests his chin on the top of Ethan’s head, risks a glance down at Ronan who still hasn’t moved, even as his fucking bird dug her claws into his side to climb up over him. “They were tryin’ to hurt me,” he says, “they were mad at me and wanted to make me feel bad.” He desperately wants Ethan to stop asking questions. He feels like desperate is his main state of being.

“Why?” he asks, “What made you think about that this morning, buddy?”

“Um,” Ethan says. He’s stroking Chainsaw’s back feathers, very, very gently. “Was dreamin’,” he says, “’bout home.”

“Oh,” Adam says. Ronan finally moves, and, thank God, he’s moving closer not getting out of bed
and the situation. He rolls over until he’s pressed up against Adam’s hip, and reaches up so he can wrap one arm around Ethan, and coincidentally, round Adam’s waist as well.

“Bad dreams?” Ronan asks, “Is that why you’re awake so early, baby?”

“Um,” Ethan says again, “uhuh. Was lookin’ for Ad’m, found Gans instead.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” Adam said quickly, guilt already churning in his stomach, “were you scared wakin’ up alone?”

“No!” Ethan protests, squeezes Chainsaw a little. She squawks but doesn’t attempt to escape.

“It’s ok to be scared,” Adam says softly, “I get scared too.”

“So why are you in here?” Ethan asks into Chainsaw’s feathers, “For cuddlin’?”

“Um,” Adam says, shrugs, “yeah.”

Gansey knocks on the doorframe.

“Way to ruin the friggin moment, Gans,” Ronan grumbles from by Adam’s hips.

“Sorry,” Gansey says, ducking his head around the door, “there’s a lot of scrambled eggs left, I was wondering if you two would like some?”

They head off to Fox Way after lunch, after Ronan gets back from church and Adam’s had time to do some homework. All of them pile into Gansey’s camaro because that’s where the carseat was. It’s about 3 blocks away from Blue’s house when the air between Adam and Ethan’s carseat began to slowly inch into chilly, and then downright freezing.

“‘M cold,” Ethan grumbles.

“Jeez, Gans,” Adam mumbles, rubs the goosebumps on his arms, and then leans across to rub Ethan’s arms, “do we really need the aircon?”

“No?” he confirms, “Are you hot?”

“No,” Adam replies, frowning back with just as much confusion, “I’m freezing, can we turn it off?”

“It’s not on— Gansey begins, but Ronan interrupts him with an exasperated noise.

“It’s Noah,” he says, swivels in his seat to look into the back at Adam and Ethan - or - to look at the space between Adam and Ethan, “honestly, Gans, obviously it’s Noah.”

“Oh,” Gansey says, “right of course, sorry Adam, I wasn’t thinking.”

“You’re gonna wanna shuffle,” Ronan says to Adam, “or else you’ll have a lap full of ghost.”

He shuffles obediently, cautiously, glancing from Ronan’s calm face to Ethan’s grumpy one. He isn’t exactly sure how he’s supposed to explain a suddenly appearing friend to Ethan, and isn’t sure how he’s going to react either. One moment Noah isn’t there, the next, he is and his brain is trying to tell him that he’d been there this entire drive. Along with his own, reasonably (vaguely) firm grasp on reality, the lingering chill in the air reminds him that this is not true.

“Oh!” Noah says, he sounds out of breath, although Adam isn’t sure if he even breathes to be out of breath, “Adam! Hello!”

“No-ah!” Ethan crows, grumpiness and chilliness forgotten, “I’m sleepin’ in your bed!”

“That’s a great place to sleep!” Noah replies brightly. It’s a brightness Adam recognises well, the kind of tone you plaster on to cover up the cracks. It’s obvious, looking at Ronan’s face, still turned towards the back of the car, and catching Gansey’s eye again in the mirror, that Ethan is the only one Noah is fooling with his facade. “How long have you been sleeping there, monkey?” Noah asks Ethan, tweaking his cheek playfully and grinning widely as Ethan laughs.

“Um,” Ethan says, “for - for -lotsa nights.”

“A week,” Ronan says, “it’s Sunday again.”

“Oh,” Noah says, the car seems to get colder again for just a moment, and then Noah’s fingers are curling around Adam’s wrist, very gentle, mindful of the cast. “Because of this?” he asks.
Even through the cast, Adam can feel the cold of Noah’s fingers, and he shivers despite himself, winces as Noah pulls quickly away.
“I’m sorry I’m so cold,” Noah mumbles, “I don’t.”
“It’s fine,” Adam says, reaches across himself to wrap his own fingers round Noah’s wrist. If he concentrates, it feels like he’s holding nothing at all. “We’re on our way to see Blue, that’ll help, yeah?”
“Yeah,” Noah says, glances into the front seat at Gansey, then at Ronan. “Is it happening, then?” he asks.
Rearview mirror Gansey looks confused again.
“S’what happenin’?” Ethan asks, reaching out of his seat so he can wrap his fingers round Noah’s other wrist. Adam wonders if he should be pleased or not that Ethan is rolling with this as well as he is.
Noah turns to smile at Ethan, “All of us together again,” he says, “all of our pieces in order.” This statement does not change Gansey’s expression. Ethan crinkles his face up in another grin.
Adam wonders how many more people and...beings feel like their timeline is slightly warped.

The answer is at least one household full of psychics - all of whom are trying to speak at once when they get there. They appear to have walked right into a house wide argument, and Adam immediately wants to walk out again. Ethan’s grip on his arm seconds this. Blue appears in the hallway with a grumpy look on her face before Adam can turn around and force his way out though the small blockade of boy they’ve created in the doorway.

“Hi,” she says flatly, “sorry about this - mum and Calla and Persephone are fine with you guys coming over, but apparently some people, naming no names, definitely not naming Neeve, think this is a bad idea and don’t want to help us sort out all the different ‘ends of string’, as she puts it.”
“Oh,” Gansey says from somewhere behind Adam, “should we leave?”
“No,” Blue says, much to Adam’s disappointment, “but let’s go outside until the shouting calms down a bit.” Her eyes are on Ethan, are on the quiver in Adam’s arms.
Ronan’s hand is on the small of his back, he’s not sure if it’s been there the whole time and he’s only just become aware of it or not, but now that he’s noticed it, it’s infinitely comforting.
“Good idea,” Gansey says, his voice is already retreating outside.
Sitting on the patchy grass of Fox way’s front lawn means that they can still hear the yelling, but it’s no longer overwhelming, and Ethan relaxes again enough to climb off of Adam to attack a crop of daisies.

“’M learnin’ t’make daisy chins!” he tells the group excitedly, “y’all’re gonna help?”
“I love making daisy chains!” Blue says. She’s sat herself down between Gansey and Noah so she can link her arm with his. He’s already starting to look more real, less cold, more alive at her touch.
“Can you show me how to do it?”
“Uhuh,” Ethan says, “firs’ you gotta get the flowers,” he begins.
Gansey shuffles closer to the Noah&Blue chain, ostensibly to get closer to the daisy chain instructions, coincidentally leaning up against Blue’s other side.
“Think they’re gonna take long in there?” Adam mumbles up to Ronan who still hasn’t sat down. He’s standing at Adam’s back with his arms folded.
“You’d think psychics would have better time management,” Ronan grumbles back, sits down as Adam tugs at his jean legs, “schedule their witchy duels for some other time.”
“Some witchy duels just happen when they want to,” Persephone tells him, appearing almost as suddenly as Noah from behind them. “This one will be finished soon, though,” she adds on, “the pie will be done in 5 minutes, and then we will all go inside.”
“Pie,” Blue says dryly, “the universal peace maker.”
“Pie!” Ethan says excitedly, drops his class and his daisies.
Persephone joins their messy circle on the ground, smiles at Ethan, “Please,” she says, “keep going. We will have pie after daisies.”

Today’s pie is apple and rhubarb with walnuts and cream and an entire kitchen full of sour faced psychics.
“So,” Maura says, “your magical treasure hunt led you in over your head, did it?”
She’s talking to Gansey and ignoring Blue’s pointed glare.
“Yes,” Gansey replies solemnly, “but I don’t think this is really about my quest anymore.”
“Oh no,” Calla says loudly and through a mouthful of cream, “this is definitely still about your ‘quest’.”
“With all due respect,” Gansey says, “I don’t see how I am important in anyway in this situation.”
“With all due respect my ass,” Calla replies, “I never said you were important, pretty boy, I just said it was still about you and your games.”
“Calla,” Maura says, “let’s try to leave egos alone today.”
“But they’re so fragile and loud,” Calla replies with a sharp smile.
“God,” Ronan snaps, “I thought pie was supposed to chill everyone out.”
“What Calla means,” Persephone says from somewhere by the sink, “is that Adam becoming Adam becoming Adam is intrinsically tied to the search for Glendower, just as that is tied to Gansey becoming Gansey.”
“And that makes perfect sense,” Ronan adds on, but his voice is more mumble than grumble, and Adam’s answering elbow is gentle.
“We can’t give you all the answers you’re looking for,” Maura says, “mostly because we don’t want to, but we can try and give you a hand.”
“The fu-udge is the point in telling us you don’t want to tell us everything?” Ronan asks, his voice is a snapping point again. Adam doesn’t elbow him this time because he agrees.
“It doesn’t matter,” Gansey says, more sigh than anything, “please, we would love to hear whatever it is you are willing to tell us. Can we start with the topic of Adam not being the Adam Cabeswater apparently knows?”

They don’t get away from Fox way until nearly 6. Adam’s brain feels like it’s going to drip out of his ears, and he doesn’t even feel that much closer to understanding what the fuck is going on with his life. Not usefully, Ethan is a bag of energy - he had spent the entire afternoon drawings with various Blue cousins upstairs - and now all he wants is attention and Adam to throw him in the air. Something not achievable while strapped into a car and running on zero energy.
“Hey,” Gansey calls to Ethan, he’s half turned in his seat at a red light, “d’you know how to play soccer?”
“Nah,” Ethan replies, “I wear ‘em though.”
Adam laughs despite his exhaustion, and Ronan snorts. Gansey takes a moment more, but then he grins as well, “Ah,” he says, “I was thinking more of the soccer that involves kicking a ball about,”
“I wanna kick a ball about,” Ethan says.
“Fantastic!” Gansey says, turns back around as Ronan nudges him to let him know the light’s turned green. “I have a ball somewhere downstairs, Ronan, Adam, Noah, do you guys want to join in?”
“Yes!” Noah says, “I’ll be the audience.”
“I was hoping to go grocery shopping,” Adam admitted, leaning forward against the back of Ronan’s seat so he could reach around to rest his hand on Ronan’s shoulder, “Ronan?”
“Yeah,” Ronan says, “we’re going grocery shopping for green things, apparently.”
Noah laughs.
“Is that ok, if I leave you with Ethan for a bit?” Adam asks.
“Of course,” Gansey says, he sounds far too excited over the prospect of babysitting “I would love
“Ok, sweetheart?” Adam says, craning his neck so he can see Ethan round Noah.
“Gonna play ball,” Ethan agrees, “wi’ Gans an’ No.”
“Ha,” Ronan snorts, “No.”
“Yeah, yeah,” Noah snorts back, “you know I’ve heard this all before.”
“I ‘No’ you have,” Ronan grins, “but it’s so nice hearing it from someone new and unassuming.”

Grocery shopping with Ronan is an ordeal. It’s worse than shopping with a hyperactive toddler, or a tantruming toddler. It’s also much more fun, even if they do argue over the spinach, and the carrots, and the broccoli, and the rice, and the tinned tomatoes. Offering to buy Ronan a lollipop at the end if he’s good works just as well as it works on Ethan. Which is to say, it works as incentive for about five minutes until he gets distracted by something else. The current something else is seeing how many items he can sneak into the basket of the man on the phone in front of them before he realises. So far it’s 8.
“No,” Adam says firmly, stretching away from the trolley to grab the back of Ronan’s shirt before he can drop a catering size jar of pickles in the basket, “you’re gonna get kicked outta here, and I’m not gonna stop them.”
“Aw, Parrish,” Ronan pouts, can’t hold the pout for very long, grins widely, “getting kicked out is all part of the fun!”
“It isn’t,” Adam says sternly, releasing Ronan so he can grab the tins he wants, “if this is the only grocery store near here that I won’t bump into my parents in.”
He knows it’s not really fair to drop something so serious into a playful conversation, but it’s the truth, and it’s something he needs Ronan to know. He doesn’t want to have to dance around these kinds of things, he needs Ronan to just know them straight out and understand that they’re not something to play with.
“Oh shit,” Ronan says, his grin falls away, “yeah. Sorry.”
“Hey,” Adam says, lets his tone soften, “Ro,”
Ronan’s putting the pickles back, but glances over his shoulder at Adam in acknowledgment.
“I’m not like-” he hesitates, doesn’t want to seem overbearing, but also doesn’t want to create any unnecessary moments that could fester, “I’m not mad at you or anything.”
Ronan snorts a little, but Adam can hear the relief in it. “Whatever,” he says, “I’m not going to get us kicked out.”
“Well,” Adam snorts back, “I appreciate that. It must be so hard for you to behave.”
“It is,” Ronan agrees mournfully, trails after Adam as he walks down the aisle in search of corn chips, “really I need more incentive than a lollipop at the end. That’s too far away.”
“A lollipop and a kiss?” Adam suggests, finds the corn chips and releases the trolley so he can crouch down and compare prices.
“Depends who the kiss is from,” Ronan sneers and Adam straightens up to shoot him an unheated glare.
“Yeah,” Adam says, “I was thinking I’d ask the cashier.”
“You do that,” Ronan says, “and I am never coming shopping with you again”
“Who said I don’t want that?” Adam retorted, ducked as Ronan threw a bag of chips at his head, and found himself laughing loudly.
“You’re such an ass, Parrish,” Ronan grins, he looks to be reaching for another bag of chips to throw, so Adam abandons the trolley again in favour of stepping forward to grab Ronan by the wrists.
“Babe,” he says through his own grin, “if we can just get out of here without anymore glares from everyone else in here, I’ll be very happy, but I’m gonna kiss you anyway.”
Ronan is turning pink, it’s even more shocking than usual under the white glare of the supermarket lights. He’s still grinning though, so Adam isn’t worried he’s embarrassing him or anything. He
doesn’t care that they’re getting disapproving looks. Doesn’t care at all.
“Ok,” he says, “I’ll hold you to that. Babe.”
“God,” Adam laughs, “we’re not gonna be a pet name kinda couple, are we?”
“Hmm,” Ronan hums, “I don’t know. Are we gonna be? Darling?”
“God,” Adam snorts again, “you’re the worst.”
“Yeah,” Ronan agrees happily, drops a bag of chips into the trolley, “but you’re still going to kiss me.”
It’s kinda funny how easy it is to just pretend that this is normal. That it’s not weird to go grocery shopping with Ronan, to go back to a place which is far too easy to call home, to unpack it all into a kitchen that’s actually a fucking bathroom. It’s too comfortable, too safe, too nice to actually be what Adam is used to being normal, but somehow his brain is trying to convince him that it is. Whenever he isn’t actively thinking about how he needs to move out, how he’s imposing, how he needs to get his life together, everything else happens on some sort of stupidly happy autopilot. Even with Cabeswater, even with the idea that he isn’t who he’s supposed to be hanging over him, even with all this damned magic which he just really does not understand enough to be involving himself in. He needs to talk to Ronan about it. About how he does have to move out. About how it’s what’s going to be best for all of them. But he really wants to do this when he’s not entirely exhausted, and it’s just not looking like that’s going to happen anytime soon.

The longer he stays here, the more he’s going to owe them. Adam’s already spent his entire life struggling to get out of debt with his parents, he can’t afford to be indebted to anyone else right now. The longer he stays here, the deeper in he gets, the less likely he’s going to be able to pay them back. Going grocery shopping for them, cooking dinner that doesn’t have a bucket of grease in, that’s not anywhere enough to break even with being given a place to stay, a bed, warmth, babysitting, transport, care.

“Hey baby,” Adam says to Ethan as he wrangles him out of dirt stained pants, “will you be ok sleeping here by yourself tonight?”
“Um,” Ethan says, he’s dropped onto his back so he can assist the removal of his pants by kicking his legs frantically - it’s not actually very useful, surprisingly - “you gonna be workin’?” he asks. “Nah,” Adam says, finally manages to release the pants from the whirlwind of leg, “I can’t work until my cast comes off, ‘member?”
“Oh yeah,” Ethan says - freed of pants, he pulls himself over to the otherside of the bed so he can hang off it to hold his hand out to Chainsaw making a sock and lettuce nest underneath it, “gonna be wi’ Ro’an?”
“Yeah,” Adam lets Ethan escape for now so he can get up and fetch Ethan’s pj’s while chucking his pants in the clothes basket, “you can come join us when you wake up if you want,” he says. “Kay,” Ethan says, surprisingly more chipper about this whole thing than Adam had expected. He crosses back over to the bed with the pjs and waits. “Bu’,” Ethan says after a few minutes, still hanging upside down over the bed - his cheeks pink with it. “Wha’ if-” he begins slowly, accepts a shred of lettuce Chainsaw gives him, “wha’ if ‘m havin’ a ba’dream?”
“You could call for me,” Adam suggests, grasps Ethan round the waist to pull him back onto the bed to continue the getting changed process, “our doors’ll be open so we can hear you, an’ I’ll come to you. Or you can come to us. Ok?”
“Mm,” Ethan says, obviously considering. He considers while Adam pulls his shirt off, and then replaces it with his pj top, then finally gets Ethan back into pants. “Kay,” he offers eventually, “’llow’ed t’ yell f’you?”
“Yeah,” Adam says, hopes Gansey won’t care. Knows Noah won’t. Ronan was the one who had suggested it. “You can yell as loud as you like if you need to, you’re not gonna get in trouble for it.” “Kay,” Ethan says again, “Ro’an gonna tell th’ story tonight?”
“Wan’ me to go ask?”
“Uhuh.”
“Ok?” Adam asks, pausing in the doorway.
“Oh,” Gansey says - he always manages to sound somehow plummy when he’s surprised - “Adam, yes. Are you looking for Ronan?”
“Yeah,” Adam says, works on not narrowing his eyes. Not everything has to be suspicious. “D’you know where he is?”
“He’s on the phone,” Gansey says after a moment, “out front. He said he’d be back in a minute.” He doesn’t give Adam a chance to ask anything else, simply pats the bed beside him in clear invitation, and says; “you’ve got your check up tomorrow?”
“Yeah,” Adam says again, pushes away from the door to drop onto the bed next to Gansey, careful not to knock off any of the books and papers, “at 1. Ronan said he’d take me. Will his grades survive him taking an hour off?”
Gansey snorted, then cleared his throat, “they will if he actually does his homework this week. You know;” he continues very seriously, “Ronan isn’t stupid. He just doesn’t bother trying, half the time.” This was something that Adam knew, that had annoyed him to no end when he had first gotten to know Ronan, that still annoyed him a little.
“Yeah,” he says, “he doesn’t seem to deem it important.”
“Maybe you could-” Gansey breaks off to shrug, “-persuade him to try harder?”
“I’m his boyfriend.” Adam says, the thrill that goes through him when he says this is mostly a good one, “not his handler. I’ll talk to him about it, yeah, but I’m not gonna try and make him do something he doesn’t want to.”
“I’m glad to hear it,” Ronan says from the doorway, phone in hand, “I already have handlers.”

Gansey looks like he’s going to ask about the phone call. Ronan looks like he’ll pitch a fit if he’s asked about the phone call. Adam stands up.
“Ethan wants to know if you’ll tell him a story?”
Ronan pockets the phone, Noah appears in the kitchen/bathroom/laundry doorway. “Course,” he says, “you want in, too, No?”
“Fuck off with the ‘No’s’,” Noah says with a grin, “yeah, haven’t heard you tell a story for ages.”
“I’m in too,” Gansey announces, pushes his books away.
Adam rolls his eyes. “Y’all gotta be quiet,” he reminds them, “Ethan’s meant to be goin’ to sleep.”
“You heard him,” Ronan says, already walking towards Noah’s open bedroom door, “no heckling.” Ethan is extremely excited to have all his boys around for storytime, so takes a bit longer than usual to settle. He does settle though, pulls Adam’s hand to his hair after a while, and is asleep soon after.
“Is he sleeping?” Noah whispers loudly across the room from where he and Gansey are sprawled, “Or is that Chainsaw snoring?”
Adam doesn’t snort, because that would wake Ethan up, just keeps stroking his hair. “He’s asleep,” he confirms, “but that is Chainsaw snoring. She takes after her dad.”
“Hey,” Ronan retorts quietly, “you’re the one who snores.”
“No I’m not,” Adam replies, grins, “don’t worry, your snoring is adorable.”
“It really is,” Gansey chimes in, “he almost looks sweet when he’s asleep.”
“Like a sleepy puppy?” Noah suggests.
Ronan unfolds himself from his perch on the edge of the bed. “I resent this,” he says, “I’m going to go piss.”
“He really is so charming.” Noah sighs as Ronan leaves, “I can definitely see why you went for him, Adam.”
“Ha ha,” Adam says, extracting himself from Ethan’s sleep soft grip. He readjusts the blankets round Ethan’s shoulders, and then offers a hand to Gansey still on the floor.
By the time he’s torn himself away from the bedroom - after checking to see if Chainsaw was under the bed still, that Ethan was still fully covered, that his breathing was steady - and made his way to Ronan’s room, Ronan’s already there, stripping his jeans off and kicking his boots across the room.

“Hey,” Adam greets him, closing the door most of the way, “you’re still good with me sleeping here, right?”

Ronan stops in the middle of pulling his shirt off specifically to fix Adam with an expression which simply reads - Duh.

“Ok, cool,” Adam says, shrugs one shoulder, “y’know,” he says, “until like… yesterday, I can’t remember the last time I wasn’t sleepin’ in the same room as buddy.”

Ronan chuck his shirt into his clothes mountain and quirks an eyebrow at Adam, “So,” Ronan says, crosses the room to drop stomach first onto the bed, “you guys usually shared a bed, yeah?”

“Uh,” Adam says, takes his own shirt off and resists the urge to throw it to join Ronan’s, folds it instead, “well I mean, we had our own beds, but, yeah, he usually ended up in my bed.”

“So,” Ronan says again, his voice has taken on a somewhat suspicious edge, “you barely ever had time to, like, be alone?”

“Um,” Adam says, unbuttons his jeans, “are you asking about how often I got to get o-”

“Nope,” Ronan says quickly, “not asking.”

“Right,” Adam draws, begins folding his jeans as well, then just drops them in a crumple on top of his shirt and climbs onto the bed next to Ronan.

“Just,” Ronan says, “that would have been… awkward.”

“Uuh,” Adam says, rolls his eyes, nudges at Ronan until Ronan shifts enough that Adam can lie down on the bed, “it was fine.”

“Sure,” Ronan replies, rolling onto his side so he can smirk at Adam. The smirk’s effect is somewhat dampened by the pink of Ronan’s face. “So you’re telling me you’re not overwhelmingly sexually frustrated?”

“If this is all part of your seductive plan to get into my pants,” Adam says, “can you leave it for a time when I’m not about to fall asleep?”

“Huh,” Ronan says, “that wasn’t actually working, was it?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Adam snorts, “of course it wasn’t.”

“Hey,” Ronan shrugs, uses the movement to not so sneakily wrap his arm around Adam’s waist to pull him closer, “can’t blame me for checking.”

“Mhm,” Adam says, presses his face against Ronan’s shoulder, “you good?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Dunno,” Adam says. From this position he can only just see the tendrils of Ronan’s tattoo creeping over his shoulder. He lifts his hand to draw his finger along one of the lines as he speaks again. “You just seemed real tense after your phone call, and Gans looked worried.”

Ronan makes a disgruntled noise, sighs, stretches his neck so he can prop his head up against the top of Adam’s head. “I haven’t been going dreaming with K, lately,” he says quietly, “he’s pissed off.”

“Oh,” Adam says, “why?”

“Why haven’t I, or why’s he pissed?” Ronan asks, shivers as Adam traces the line curling up the back of his neck.

“Both,” Adam says, rubs his fingertips against the stubble on Ronan’s neck.

“Um,” Ronan says, “I haven’t because - because I don’t think he’s helping much anymore. He’s pissed because, well- ok -promise you won’t get mad?”

Adam pauses his hand midline, and pushes away a little so he can look up at Ronan. “I don’t wanna break any promises, but I’m not plannin’ on gettin’ mad.”

“Right,” Ronan says, “I told you you weren’t my first kiss,”

“Ok,” Adam says, “so Kavinsky was. I’m not gonna be mad that you guys have history, Ro.”

“Right,” Ronan mumbles, “I know that, it’s just. He doesn’t feel like it’s history.”
“Ok,” Adam says again, “because?”
Ronan groans, pushes himself a little further away from Adam, “Because,” he says, “because he’s an idiot, because he doesn’t take no for an answer, because he’s used to getting what he wants. I don’t know. I - we - we were never a thing. He thought we were. Or we were going to be, or something. I never wanted it. I’ve told him that before, but he didn’t listen. Doesn’t listen.”

This is a lot more information than Adam had been expecting.

“Ro,” he says, “I’m not mad.”
“I haven’t told him that I’m with you,” Ronan replies flatly.
“Ok,” Adam says, “still not mad. Maybe a little miffed. But I mean, I guess this is still really new or whatever so like-”
“I didn’t tell him,” Ronan continues, “because he was already mad that I’ve not been around, and he gets… unpredictable when he’s mad. I didn’t want him being mad at you.”
“I can look after myself,” Adam objects, opens his mouth to object further, but Ronan sighs and shakes his head.
“God,” he mumbles, “fuck, I know, Parrish. This isn’t about you looking after yourself, this is me trying not to add onto your shit pile.”

They’re both quiet for a moment. Ronan looks uncomfortable, twitching under the sheets like he has ants in his skin.

“Babe,” Adam says, slow, calm, “tell me what’s going on?”
Ronan’s expression softens at this, not entirely, it goes from taut and shuttered to just shuttered, but at least it’s something.
“I have,” he says, lets Adam tug at his arms to pull him closer again.
“No,” Adam says, “you’re trying not to add to my shit pile by not telling me. I wanna help.”
“You are helping,” Ronan mumbles.
“What am I helping with?”
“God,” Ronan huffs, “not thinking about shit. Which I much prefer to talking about it.”
Adam gets that. He does. He knows he’s notoriously awful at talking to anyone about what’s going on with him, that up until recently it was just something he never did. That he still doesn’t do it that much, even with Ronan.
“Right,” he says, presses his lips against Ronan’s shoulder as he tightens his arms around Ronan’s waist, “ok. I can help with that. But I would prefer to help in a more permanent way. If, or when, you want to.”

For a long moment, he thinks Ronan isn’t going to respond, and he’s partially right.

“Who was your first kiss?” Ronan mumbles into Adam’s hair.
“Um,” Adam snorts, “a girl called Madison at middle school. I think I was 12. We dated for like a week until I told her I wasn’t going to the dance. She’s, uh, the last person I dated before you.”
Now Ronan snorts.
“Ok,” he says, “but you’ve kissed other people, right? It’s not just been me and Madison.”
It’s very odd having the comparison of Ronan and Madison side by side. Not a mental image Adam ever thought he would have. It almost makes him giggle.
“No,” he agrees, “there were others. Not many. No one recently. You’re the first - first guy.”
“Huh,” Ronan says, “I suppose I’m flattered.”
“What about you?” Adam asks, knows he’s pressing, but it feels like fair give and take, “Or was it just Kavinsky?”
“He doesn’t count,” Ronan grumbles, he’s sliding his hands up and down Adams upper arms, “not really. It’s just been you.”
“Now I suppose I’m flattered,” Adam shoots back. Most of him is trying to be sensible, trying to tell
him that obviously there’s a lot more here that Ronan needs to talk about. That he really is tired, really does need to go to sleep. The rest of him, however, is much louder, much hungrier, and much more insistent. It also renders him slightly incoherent. “Flatter me more,” he mumbles, peeling himself away from Ronan’s chest so he can tip his head back in clear invitation.

He can feel Ronan smiling as he presses his lips against his, still smiling as he parts his lips, smiling more as they knock teeth again when Adam moves his head a little too quickly. They both need the practice. That’s entirely fine with Adam. He can make room for this kind of practice.

Noah knocks on the doorframe.

Adam pulls away quickly, causing an embarrassingly wet noise and eliciting a very grumpy sound from Ronan.

“Um,” Noah says.

“The fuck, Noah,” Ronan bites out. He throws his arms over his face, rolls angrily onto his back.

“The door was open,” Noah protests, “how was I supposed to know you two were getting frisky?”

Adam’s face feels like a fireball.

“Ghostly intuition,” Ronan says. His voice is still snappy, but somehow no longer mad. “What’s up?”

It only occurs to Adam in this exact moment that Noah is back now, and though he might not actually need to sleep, they were still occupying and taking over his bedroom.

“Oh,” Adam says, abashed, “God, I’m sorry Noah, I didn’t even think.”

“No,” Noah says, “you’re right, I don’t need to sleep, I’m not worried about the room.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, catching up quickly, “what do you want then?”

“Company,” Noah says simply. “Gansey is off on the phone, Ethan’s asleep. I thought you guys were still up.”

“We can do company,” Adam replies, glances at Ronan. He half expects Ronan to look grumpy about this, to snark at Noah to leave because they were obviously busy. Instead, Ronan is nodding and sitting up, shuffling closer to Adam and pulling the blanket up beside him.

“Thanks,” Noah says, oddly enough, already in the bed. If Adam thinks about that too hard it hurts his mind, so he doesn’t think about it at all. “I was cold.”

“Ah,” Ronan says, and there’s the snark, “I see, so you thought you’d come warm yourself up on us and leave me a block of ice?”

“I mean,” Noah grins, “If you’re amenable.”

“Fuck,” Ronan hisses, undoubtedly in response to what appears to be the world’s coldest hand pressed against his abdomen, “you’re an asshole, No.”

“Takes one to ‘No’ one,” Noah replies back in good humour, “you don’t mind me freezing your boyfriend, do you, Adam?”

“Nah,” Adam grins, “so long as you leave this side warm.”
The thing was, Adam thought grumpily the next morning - standing under the stream of the shower, blessedly alone - was that even though he and Ronan were talking, they were, it was more like they were collecting important conversations than actually resolving any of them. And yeah, it made sense that they didn’t have the time or energy to finish the conversations, they were busy with fucking magic and mucked up timelines, and also homework, but the lack of resolution just made things muddy. He had started up a list in his head, things they had touched on but not finished, that needed to be finished. It went like this;

1. I have to find a flat
2. No it’s not about pride
3. Yes I know you guys are happy to have us here, want to have us here.
4. Is something going on with your dreaming?
5. Do we need to talk more about Kavinsky?
6. What’s wrong?
7. Let’s wait a little bit longer before talking about getting off, ok?

The thing was, neither of them were apparently very good at talking, specifically talking about their feelings. Here were the things that Adam was good at talking about;

1. Cars
2. Scientific equations
3. Calculus
4. Ethan
5. Food

And the things Ronan was good at talking about;

1. Shit
2. Racing
3. Bad jokes
4. Ethan
5. Star wars

The thing was, even if they were good at talking about feelings, they had to find a time and a place to do so without being interrupted by Gansey, or Noah, or Ethan, or Blue, or even Chainsaw. Which was increasingly difficult in the confines of Monmouth. Hard enough to finish just one topic of conversation, let alone an entire list of them.

A knock on the bathroom door jolts him out of his moping. “Adam,” Gansey calls through the closed door, “do you mind if I come in for cereal?” “Uh,” Adam says, the sound swallowed up by the rushing water, he raises his voice, “yeah sure.” The ridiculous ghost shower curtain is pulled, but it’s not like he’d be horrified if Gansey saw him naked anyway. He felt like Gansey had already pulled back all the curtains separating them mere
weeks after they started hanging out, had introduced a very personal intimacy into their friendship very early on. Gansey had already seen his mind stripped bare, who gave a fuck about his body.

“Will you and Ronan go straight to the hospital this morning?” Gansey asks cheerfully, opening the fridge.

“Yeah,” Adam replies. He had long finished actually washing, was indulging himself in the luxury of just standing in clean warm water, but felt like he ought to make it sound like he was showering, so he reached for the soap, “we’ll drop Ethan off at Dana’s, and then go in.”

“Well they take the cast off?” Gansey asks, the fridge closes.

Adam runs the soap mindlessly over his shoulders, glances down at the somewhat soggy cast.

“God,” he says, “I hope so. I need to get back to work.”

“You know,” Gansey says, and the change in his tone from cheerful to careful is almost palpable, “you’re welcome to stay here for as long as you need. You don’t have to get back to work immediately.”

Gansey has no idea what he’s talking about. No idea. Gansey is too far removed from Adam’s entire life to understand exactly how insulting this is. He needs to not get angry at Gansey right now. Especially not while standing in Gansey’s shower. Especially not while crashing at Gansey’s house. Especially not when Gansey is just trying to be a good friend. He squeezes the soap too hard and it shoots out from his grip, escapes the curtain, and clatters sloppily onto the floor.

“Oh,” Gansey says.

Adam’s clenched fist is creating bubbles. It somewhat lessens the frustration.

“I need to work so I can look into renting a small flat,” Adam says firmly, “but thank you for your offer.”

“Oh,” Gansey says again, it sounds like he’s bending over to pick up the soap, “but-”

“Can you pass me the soap back?” Adam interrupts, sticks his hand out of the curtain.

“Yes,” Gansey says, palms the slippery bar back into Adam’s hand, “but-”

“Thank you,” Adam says firmly.

There’s a short silence.

“You’re welcome,” Gansey says, stilted, leaves.

Dana is very pleased to see them all again. Possibly because Mari and Shelby are ecstatic to see Ethan again. The house is all in uproar.

“When are you getting the cast off?” Dana yells over the thudding of small feet and yelping of shrill voices.

“Hopefully today,” Adam calls back, has a little trouble trying to regulate his raised voice when it’s too quiet on one side and too loud on the other. He sounds a little like he did when his voice was breaking.

“We’re going to the hospital now,” Ronan offers, side eying Adam and his pitchy voice.

“Oh good,” Dana smirks, “our lawn is gonna need mowing soon.”

They have to troop outside, following the laughter, to find Ethan to say goodbye before they leave.

“Sweetheart,” Adam calls from the sliding door, “we’re goin’ now, ok?”

Ethan barely looks up from the handful of bugs Mari is offering him.

“'Kay,” he calls back.

They make it to the front door before Ethan crash lands into the backs of their legs.

“Baby,” Ronan says, catches Adam’s arm to stop him from pitching forwards, “What’s up?”

“Needa g’bye kiss!” Ethan demands, hands fists in Adam’s trouser legs, “can’t go wi’out it!”

“Adam,” Ronan gasps in mock horror, “such a travesty! How could you?”

“Shut it,” Adam grins at him, swivels so he can hook Ethan under the arms to hoist him up.

“Goodbye, sweetheart,” he says seriously to Ethan, kisses his forehead gently, then plants a smackingly sloppy kiss on his cheek. Ethan squirms and giggles, reaches out for Ronan.

Ronan leans in to allow Ethan to reel him in with his arms around his neck, and drops a kiss on his
nose.
“Bye, baby,” Ronan says.
“‘Kay,” Ethan says, squirms again until Adam releases him, “bye,” he says, then departs with great haste screaming something about coming back for the bugs now.

“Hey,” Ronan says as they shut the door behind them.
“Mhm?” Adam asks, accepts the BMW keys from Ronan as they walk down the front path.
“If I ask for goodbye kisses like that, will you give them to me?”
“Babe,” Adam scoffs, unlocks the car, then pauses and rolls his eyes at Ronan over the roof, “I was going to say, in your dreams, but then I realised that I probably would just kiss you anyway. Look what you’ve done,” he tacks on, ducks down into the car, waits until Ronan settles into the seat expectantly beside him, “you’re ruining all my sensibilities.”
Ronan opens his mouth, glee far too apparent on his face, and Adam quickly cuts back in.
“But don’t,” he says, “I want to at least come off as vaguely sensible to other people.”
“Does the gang count as other people?” Ronan asks.
Adam sighs, starts the car up, “No,” he concedes, “go ahead then, feel free to barrel into my legs while screaming at me in front of them, anytime.”
“Everytime you leave the room, then,” Ronan agrees cheerfully, “sounds good.”

What also sounds good, is getting to spend this drive to the hospital - not too long, but long enough - listening to Ronan’s playlists, and bantering stupidly back and forth like they are now. What Adam does instead, is review his list of necessary subjects in his head, and then brings out the most pressing.

“So,” he says, the change in his tone must be obvious, because Ronan pauses in putting music on, turns his head slowly to look at him. “This morning Gansey offered to let me stay with you guys for as long as I want.”
“Yeah?” Ronan asks.
“Yeah,” Adam nods, “which is great, very sweet, but, you know I can’t just stay with you guys for free. I know it’s not like you guys need the money, but it’s not right. And I’m gonna pay y’all back for how long I’ve been with y’all too.”
“Adam,” Ronan sighs, but Adam cuts in again quickly. For all he hates doing it, he interrupts people far too often.
“And,” he continues, “I do need to move out. As soon as I’m earning enough money to do so. Staying with you guys isn’t a permanent solution, and I need to find a permanent solution as soon as possible so I can settle Ethan.”
Ronan is quiet.
Adam is quiet.

He changes gears smoothly despite his sweaty palms.
“Why can’t Monmouth be a permanent solution?” Ronan asks.
“Because,” Adam sighs, wishes he could just leave it at because, knows he can’t, “because, like I said before, y’all are teenagers, it’s not fair to expect y’all to live with a toddler. It’s one thing to have one around for a coupla weeks, but the novelty will wear off soon and it’ll become a chore, and I don’t want that t’happen. And, I can’t just rely on y’all. I can’t just stay at Monmouth, using your utilities and warmth and kindness. Eventually that’ll run out and I’ll have nothing. I need something with a contract so I know where I’m at.”
Ronan is quiet.
“An’,” Adam continues, knows his voice is verging on hysterical, “an’, I know this thing with us, I know we’re serious, but, if we break up or somethin’, an’ I’m not sayin’ I wanna, or that I think we will, but, how fuckin’ shit would that be for Ethan t’have to live in tha’ kinda enviromen’? I gotta get him somethin’ stable that isn’t reliant on my capacity for relationships.”
Ronan is quiet.
He’s said too much, or he’s not said enough. He’s not explained it properly, he sounds like a fucking asshole, fucking, fucking, fuck. He needs to pull over and turn around and apologise and kiss Ronan but. If he does that he’ll need to take it all back, and he can’t take any of it back, because it’s all true, even if it does make him an asshole, it’s all true and he needs Ronan to know this. He wants to pull over and turn around and apologise and kiss Ronan.


His voice is unnervingly taut, but there’s no malice in his words.

“Yeah?” Adam asks, voice smaller than he intended.

“Yeah,” Ronan says, huffs, “God. Yeah I get it. You’re worried that if this falls through it’ll unseat Ethan, and Ethan’s already been fucked around with housing and family enough as it is already. I get that. He needs somewhere stable with people who’ll look after him and love him and not treat him like a nuisance.”

“Yeah,” Adam says.

“But,” Ronan continues, “so do you, God, Adam. What are you even planning? You’re going to move out into a small dingy flat with just you and Ethan? Who’s going to make sure you’re eating, getting enough sleep. You keep saying how it’s not fucking fair on us to have to fucking ‘cope’ with a toddler, but what about you? What about you, Adam? That’s not fair.”

“I know it’s not fucking fair,” Adam says, snaps, back. They’re approaching the hospital parking now, “but it’s a reality. My reality. It doesn’t have to be your reality.”

“I want it to be,” Ronan snaps, “Ethan’s already settled in at Monmouth. He likes it there, he seems comfortable there. Gansey and Noah love him, I love him, Chainsaw loves him. It’s not like he could be a worse roommate than I am, and they all still love me anyway, they’re never going to think of him as a burden.”

They have to pause for a moment so Adam can lean out of the window to take the parking ticket from the machine, to navigate the tight corners of the building.

“That’s all well and good,” Adam says tightly, “but it doesn’t take into fuckin’ consideration our relationship, or the fact that I ain’t gonna jus’ live somewhere rent free. I’m fuckin’ done with owing people for my existance. I’m not gonna do it with my fuckin’ boyfriend.”

“There’s a park there,” Ronan points out, then, “you said it, you think we’re going to break up, I don’t think so either. It’s no less unsafe than making a fuckin’ contract with one of the asshole landlords around here. And anyway, who the fuck said anything about you living with us rent free?”

Adam pulled into the park Ronan pointed out, turned the car off, and slumped back into his seat.

“You really think we’re gonna last?” he asks, he doesn’t mean it to sound so negative, but he’s aware that that’s the way it comes out, “Even though we’re already fuckin’ arguing? If you wanted to pull out of this early, before you end up with responsibilities, I wouldn’t resent you for it.”

“Oh fuck you,” Ronan sighs, undoes his seat belt, “don’t do that. You don’t want pity, so don’t sound so fuckin’ pitiful. Of course we’re going to argue. Everyone argues. It just so happens that we probably have a lot of things to argue about right now, seeing as everything is fucking new, you have a kid, and we all have weird magic shit going on. Yes, I want to be with you, and I want your fucking responsibilities, even when you’re being so damned condescending.”

It’s a lot to take in. Ronan’s obviously angry, it burns the edges of his voice, but he keeps his tone level. The calmness of his anger reminds Adam, just for a moment, of Robert, but unlike Robert, Ronan is actively trying to show he cares, actively trying to make things better. Isn’t lashing out.

“Sorry,” Adam mumbles. Now that they’ve parked, it feels like the realisation of how much of an idiot he is has caught up with them and slammed into his back. “Sorry. I - that was real shit of me to say.”

“Yeah,” Ronan nods, “it was.”

“I’m sorry,” Adam says again, “also I lied, I would resent you if you broke up with me right now.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Ronan snorts, “of course you would. I’m a fucking catch. I’m not going to break up with you, you asshole.”

“Ok,” Adam sniffs, “that would be kinda embarrassing. Can’t even keep a boyfriend for a week.”

“We’re going to make it more than a week,” Ronan says firmly, “have a little faith, Parrish.”
“Ok,” Adam says, “am I about to be late for my appointment?”
Ronan fumbles for his phone, which is still half hooked up to the speakers, glances at it, “Nah,” he says, “you don’t need to be in there for another 20 or so.”
“Ok,” Adam says again, swipes the back of his hand across his face, “um, can we - can we take a break from this conversation and just - just -”
“Woah, Parrish,” Ronan says, “I didn’t realise hospital parking lots were your turn on.”
“Fuck off,” Adam says, the lump of anxiety in his stomach dissolving a little, “I’ve changed my mind, I don’t wanna kiss you right now after all.”
“Aw, come on,” Ronan says, reaches over to unbuckle Adam, “let me reiterate how much I want to be with you, but nonverbal this time.”
“I have a list,” Adam says, lets Ronan tug him into an uncomfortable lean over the gear stick.
“A list?” Ronan repeats.
“Of things we needa talk about,” Adam says, “I know it’s...unromantic or whatever, but.”
“Psh,” Ronan says, leans into Adam’s space, “I don’t need romance.”
“Ro,” Adam says, snorts, “you made me 2 ridiculously romantic mix tapes.”
“Whatever,” Ronan sighs, “you have a list, ok. Did we just attack number 1 on the list?”
“Yeah,” Adam says, presses his forehead to Ronan’s, “we haven’t finished it yet, though.”
“Psh,” Ronan says theatrically, wraps his arms around Adam’s torso, “Can we fight on the same team to finish it?”
The gearstick is digging almost painfully into Adam’s stomach, so he climbs awkwardly out of his seat and into Ronan’s, which really means he climbs into Ronan’s lap, which is probably a little much, but it makes the hug so much easier. So much warmer.
“I would like that,” he mumbles, “but I gotta - gotta think about it. About the rent thing.”
“Ohuh,” Ronan says, turns his face until it’s pressing into Adam’s cheek, drops a kiss on his jaw, “we’re still paused, it’s fine.”
“Um,” Adam says, shifts his face a little so Ronan can continue kissing along it, “this isn’t me doubting that you wanna be with me, but, like, after which occasion of me crying in front of you did you decide you wanted to date me?”
Ronan laughs into Adam’s neck, then pulls back to tip his head back against the headrest and looks at Adam. He looks a mixture of overly confident and extremely bashful.
“Last year,” he begins, and Adam raises his eyebrows.
“Pretty sure I didn’t cry in front of you last year,” he says.
“Last year,” Ronan says again, firmly, “I took my car into Boyd’s for a check up. I saw you there.”
“Oh-kay,” Adam says slowly, “and... I was crying?”
“Stop,” Ronan snorts, squeezes Adam’s sides making him squawk and glare indignantly, “no. I just saw you. And then I kept seeing you. Everywhere. You were at Nino’s, you were biking past Aglionby, you were in town, you were in the supermarket, you and your shitty bike, and Ethan. You were everywhere.”
“Um,” Adam frowns, shifts a little in Ronan’s lap so he can move back to lean against the dashboard, “sorry?”
“Stop,” Ronan repeats, squeezes his sides again, this time gently, “you were fucking - fucking irresistible. I kind of thought of you like a celebrity crush. Not that I had any of those. I thought you had to be a complete asshole, to look so good and sound so good. Then I actually talked to you, and you were the absolute best kind of asshole.”
Adam’s pretty sure he’s being complimented here, but it’s a little bit of a stretch. He narrows his eyes, and Ronan continues.
“Not to sound like... like a cheezy fucker,” Ronan says haltingly, “but I was fucking head over heels with you since the first time you glared at me in Nino’s.”
“Oh my God,” Adam says, “you cheezy fucker.”
“Noah’s been giving me shit for it for months,” Ronan sighs, “sometimes it kinda sucks having a best friend who can occasionally read your emotions.”
“Do we still have time?” Adam asks, pushes away from the dashboard.
Ronan lifts his wrist up to his face, his very watchless wrist, and nods.

“Ok,” Adam says, glances around, out the car windows, then leans back in to press his lips to Ronan’s. Ronan’s arms are tight around his waist, Adam’s hands cupping Ronan’s face to tip his head back. It’s a very different angle than they’re used to, but hey, it’s all part of the kissing learning curve. Plus, he’s always wanted to make out in a car, in fact, his fantasy usually involved making out in a car just this sleek, although in these fantasies the car belonged to him, and usually he was with a woman. This was better though. This was real.

This was also starting to get a little bit hard underneath his lap, in a way which would become a problem for being able to respectfully leave the car.

“Mf,” he says coherently into Ronan’s mouth, “Ro,” he says, pulls away just enough to speak, “um, should I get off you?”

Ronan blinks at him, shakes his head, then pauses, then mournfully nods. “Um,” he says as well, “maybe we should go in now.”

It probably wouldn’t have mattered if they were late, seeing as the doctor is also - predictably - running late, and they have to sit in the waiting room for another half hour after his appointment was supposed to be happening. They don’t unpause the conversation yet. Adam still needs time to think. Doesn’t want to start it all up again in a waiting room full of strangers. They talk about the food they bought the other night, about the different meals Adam wants to cook, about when they were all gonna meet up with Blue and the psychics again, about Gansey’s mini Henrietta.

The actual doctor appointment is shorter than the time they spent in the waiting room. It goes like this; the doctor raises his eyebrows at Ronan coming in with him, asks if Ronan is his brother. Adam says no, this is my boyfriend. The doctor somehow raises his eyebrows more. The doctor checks his ears, asks too many questions, agrees with Adam’s analysis that there had been no improvement. The doctor looks at his wrists, asks too many questions, agrees with Adam’s analysis that the cast can come off now. The cast comes off. The doctor has a quick check of Adam’s ribs, the doctor asks some more pointed questions about his home life, the doctor sends them on their way.

“You feeling ok about all that?” Ronan asks as they walk back to the car park, “your ear and all?”

“No,” Adam replies truthfully, “but ok enough. It’s what I expected anyway.”

“Still,” Ronan says, “do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Adam says firmly, “it’s not on my list.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, “but it’s on mine. I want us to talk about it.”

He stops by the car door to fix Ronan with a steely look. Ronan fixes him back with a steely look of his own.

“Fine,” Adam relents, “that’s fair.”

“Good,” Ronan says, “do you want to drive to Mountain View, or should I?”

“I will,” Adam says, he has the keys anyway, “that ok?”

“Obviously,” Ronan scoffs, “I wouldn’t have given you the option if it wasn’t.”

He waits until he’s parked outside the school before unpauing the conversation. Turns to Ronan after turning the car off.

“Oh,” he says, “let’s talk about me and Ethan staying at Monmouth. All of us. We should talk to the flat about it, because it concerns all of them. We need to talk about rent, and house rules, and all that stuff.”

“Oh,” Ronan says simply, “family meeting. I’ll tell Gans when I see him.”

“Cool,” Adam says, “will you pick me up after school?”

“Yeah,” Ronan smiles, “before or after Ethan?”

“Before,” Adam says, “I like - I like getting to have it be just us for a little bit.”
“Even when we’re arguing?” Ronan prods teasingly, and Adam rolls his eyes.
“Better to argue when Ethan’s not around,” he replies seriously, then undoes his seat belt and leans
over the gap between them, “I need to get to class,” he says, “text me.”
“I might,” Ronan grins, accepts the quick kiss, “nerd.”
Gansey is far too excited. He looks like he thinks he’s doing a great job at appearing calm and in control, but in reality it looks like he’s about to bounce right out of his seat.

“So,” Adam continued, has to not look at Gansey while he’s talking because he’s too distracting with all his badly disguised glee, “I’m going to want to sign an actual lease, and I’m going to want a copy of the signed version. Not because I don’t trust y’all,” he adds on quickly, “I’m just going to need the documentation.”
“I’ll have my lawyer send the documents over as soon as possible,” Gansey says, “we can have it signed tonight, if you’d like.”

He wouldn’t really. He kind of just wanted to put this all off until he was feeling 100% sure that this was actually the right thing to do. For him and for Ethan and for Ronan.

“Ok,” he says, “just,” he turns a little to look at Noah perched on the end of the couch, “are you sure you’re alright with this? I know you don’t exactly sleep in your room, but it’s still your room.”
“It’s not exactly like you sleep in it either,” Noah shoots back with a smirk, “yes, I’m fine with it. If I desperately need my own space, I’ll lock you all out of the bathroom or go camp with Blue.”
“It’s fine,” Ronan chips in firmly, “we’ve gone over this a hundred times already this evening, Parrish.”
Gansey beams at him.
“Ok,” Adam says again, “let’s sign tonight. I start at Boyd’s tomorrow, so I can start paying rent this week, plus back pay.”
“Adam,” Gansey says, “I told you you don’t need to worry about back pay. It’s not like you put us out or anything, and, you did the grocery shop for us.”
“Right,” Adam nods, “and I told you that I was still going to worry about back pay, so I’m going to pay it back.”
Gansey opens his mouth again to continue this argument going nowhere, but Ronan gets in first.
“Enough, Dick,” he snaps, “let’s just hurry up and get the papers before you lose out on the best room mate you’re ever going to get.”
“Any room mate is going to be better than you,” Noah jibes, “it’s not like he has that much to compare.”
“Hey,” Ronan gasps in mock offense, “I am a great room mate. And you’re not one to talk, you’re dead.”
“That’s deadist,” Noah sniffs.
“That’s not even a thing,” Ronan sniffs back. Adam rolls his eyes. These were his new room mates. Almost officially. This was his choice. He was probably going to regret this.

He signs the paperwork half an hour later anyway.

Now he just has to hope that life is just as optimistic about this as Ronan is that this will all work out, that this is the right thing to be doing. Ethan certainly thinks it is; Adam had attempted to have a
serious (or as serious as you can get with a 3 year old who’s attempting to wrestle a bird) conversation about them staying at Monmouth, and Ethan had been very vocal about how much he liked that idea. Ronan had been right that Ethan was already settled here, Adam knew this, but it did help hearing Ethan be so enthusiastic about it.

It isn’t until later that night, his hands deep in soapy water doing dinner dishes while Ronan argues inanely with Noah behind him, that he realises he forgot something off of his list. “Ronan,” he blurs out, whipping around and splashing Ronan with dishwater bubbles. “Adam,” Ronan says back, wipes foam off of his face and attempts to smear it on Noah’s, “I just realised,” Adam says slowly, grabbing a hand towel and chucking it at Ronan’s head, “you’re my boyfriend-”

“Uh,” Ronan raises his eyebrows, “you just realised this?” “Alright!” Noah pipes up cheerfully, “I’m going to go join Ethan and Gansey’s soccer game, bye.” “No,” Adam rolls his eyes, leans back against the countertop. Noah leaves silently. “I just realised that you’re my boyfriend and we haven’t told Ethan.” “Oh right,” Ronan says. This doesn’t seem to come as much as a shock to him as it does to Adam, “I wasn’t sure you wanted to let him know yet.” “Well,” Adam pauses a moment, shrugs, “honestly I wouldn’t have wanted him to know if we were still living at home. There’s no reason not to tell him, here though.” “No, I agree,” Ronan nods, grins, “you’re so fucking...cute, Parrish,” “Excuse me?” Adam snorts, “Please.” “Nah,” Ronan doesn’t drop his grin, steps forwards into Adam’s space, “you are. When you’re not being a complete hard ass.” “Hey,” Adam finally grins back, “I have a feeling you like my hard ass.” “Fuck, Parrish,” Ronan says, “wanna just abandon those dishes?” “Nope,” Adam says, lets Ronan lean into him to fold his arms around him anyway, “I’ll be done soon though. Then we can tell Ethan, I assume that’s what you wanted to abandon the dishes for?” Ronan makes a grumbling noise into Adam’s hair. “Ok,” he says, “you realise what this means, though?” “That we’ll finally have clean plates?” “No,” Ronan kisses his cheek and draws away again, “that I have to tell my brothers.” “Oh,”Adam says. He’s not even met the infamous Lynch brother’s yet. “God.” “God indeed,” Ronan sighs. “You don’t have to,” Adam says carefully, “if you don’t want to. It’s just, I mean, Ethan lives with us, and, yeah. Are you even - are you out to them?” “Uh,” Ronan says, runs his hand over his scalp distractedly, “no. But I guess it’ll be harder for Declan to reject if I’m actually with someone, so, now’s a pretty good time I suppose.” The mood is decidedly glummer than it ought to be. “Ok,” Adam says, “it’s your choice.”

They go through Ethan’s bedtime routine together, and when it gets to storytime - Ethan tucked in and propped up against the pillows, Chainsaw nestled under his arm - Adam squishes in next to him and looks at Ronan perched near the end of the bed. “Sweetheart,” he says, “you know how Ronan an’ me are real good friends, yeah?” “Yeah,” Ethan nods, he’s assisting Chainsaw in her nightly preening, although assisting might be too generous a term. He’s lucky his fingers aren’t being pecked. “Well,” Adam says, “we like each other a whole lot, a lot more’n just bein’ friends. So, me an’
Ronan, we’re datin’. He’s my boyfriend.”
Ethan fiddles with Chainsaw’s feathers a little longer, face screwed up in concentration. Then he looks up to glance first at Ronan at the end of the bed who’s picking anxiously at the coverlet, and then up at Adam next to him.
“Gonna be kissin’ him?” he asks.
“Um,” Adam says, “yeah. We’re gonna be kissin’.”
“An’,” Ethan continues slowly, “if y’gonna be kissin’, y’gonna be yellin’ at each other too?”
“Um,” Adam says, “no. No, baby, why would we be yellin’?”
“Cos,” Ethan says, and he suddenly seems dangerously close to tears, “kissin’ means gettin’ married, an’ gettin’ married means yellin’, an’, an’, an’ bein’ mum ‘n’ dad an’, an’-”
The tears are here now.
“No,” Adam says, horrified because this is something he hadn’t even considered, “no, baby, it doesn’t mean that at all-”
“It does,” Ethan wails.
“Nah,” Adam continues, voice firm as he pulls Ethan into his arms, almost dislodging Chainsaw as he does, “what about Dana and Jules, hey? They’re married, and they kiss, and they don’t do yellin’. An’ they’re real nice to Shelby and Mari. An’ what about Mr Boyd and Louisa, huh? They’re married too, and they do lotsa kissin’ and no yellin’. You really like Louisa, she gives you cookies. Me an’ Ro aren’t gonna be doin’ yellin’ jus’ cos we’re kissin’.”
Ethan’s quiet for a long moment, save for some sniffing, while he seems to be taking in Adam’s words. Ronan is very quiet as well, still at the end of the bed. Adam wants him here, with them, so he loosens his grip around Ethan so he can reach out for Ronan, and thankfully, Ronan comes immediately. He shuffles up the bed so he can lean into Adam’s side, so he can wrap one arm around Adam’s back, the other around Ethan’s.
“No yellin’?” Ethan clarifies, leaning into Ronan’s arm.
“No yelling,” Ronan replies, “we’re still going to be just the same Adam and Ronan, baby.”
“Wi’ kissin’.”
“Yeah,” Adam nods.
“Kisses f’r me too?” Ethan asks.
“Yes,” Ronan grins, ducks down to press one into Ethan’s curls, “lots of kisses for you too.”

Ronan is volunteered for story time again, something which Gansey and Noah appear in the doorway for, and it’s very lovely but Adam just wants to be alone with Ronan again. After Ethan drifts off, and they all shuffle as quietly as they can out of the room, it’s obvious Gansey wants to chat. He has his information imparting face on.
“I was thinking,” Gansey begins brightly, and Adam yawns in the most embarrassingly fake way.
“Oh,” Gansey says, “Adam, you must be tired? It’s been a long day for you.”
“Yeah,” Adam says, knows he sounds horribly unconvincing, but Gansey somehow appears convinced, “sorry. I think I’m just gonna go to bed now.”
“Of course,” Gansey smiles, “I just wanted to say, before you go, that I’m very happy to have you here. Officially. I’m looking forward to having a roommate who knows how to do the dishes.”
“I know how to do the dishes!” Noah protests, Ronan snorts.
“Maybe,” Gansey says dryly, “but you never do.”
“Because I don’t eat” Noah shoots back.
“Ok,” Adam says, “goodnight!”
“Goodnight, Adam,” Gansey says airily, then, “oh, we should celebrate. Maybe go out for Nino’s after your shift- or maybe not Nino’s, sorry.”
“Ok,” Adam says again, “sounds good.”
“Right,” Ronan says, “I’m off to bed too. See ya losers.”
“Ugh,” Noah sighs, “they’re not tired, they’re going to go canoodle.”
“And you’re not fucking invited tonight!” Ronan says as he follows Adam to his bedroom. Before they close the door, Adam hears Gansey speak again, somewhat confused, somewhat amused. “You were canoodling with them?”

“So,” Ronan says, leans back against his door, “are you really tired or is Noah right, and you’re sneaking us away to make out?”

“Pshh,” Adam snorts. He feels so exhausted it’s like he’s been run over by a truck full of bricks. He wants to belly flop onto the bed and have Ronan undress him so he doesn’t have to move anymore. Instead, he turns to sit on the edge of the bed and leans down to undo his shoes. “No. Well, maybe a bit. But seriously,” he sighs, “I wanted to just...make sure you’re ok with telling your brothers about us.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, “admittedly less fun than making out.”

“Ronan.”

“I’m ok with it,” Ronan says. He pushes away from the door and drops himself heavily down on the bed next to Adam, immediately begins wriggling out of his shirt. “I’m… I’m freaked out as all hell, but I want to do it.”

“D’you think they’ll...take it badly?” Adam asks weakly, pulls his own shirt off.

“Declan might, probably will,” Ronan says, “and- I think Matty would be fine with it, but if Declan isn’t, he might keep Matty away from me. He already thinks I’m a bad influence.”

“Oh,” Adam says, “that’s...shit.”

“Uhuh,” Ronan snorts, “it’s whatever. Honestly, I’m used to Declan fucking hating me, I don’t care what he thinks about this, I just don’t want him to stop me seeing Matthew.” His voice is far to blase. “Babe,” Adam tries. It keeps hitting him, in hugely overwhelming waves, that he doesn’t know anywhere near enough about Ronan. That Ronan knows so much about him, but Adam doesn’t even know what’s going on between Ronan and Declan. Definitely not enough to say what he says next. “I’m sure he doesn’t hate you.”

Ronan snorts again, lets himself fall backwards against the crumpled bedsheets, “He hates me,” he says flatly.

“Why?” Adam asks, twists so he can lie down on his side next to Ronan.

“Ugh,” Ronan says eloquently, lifts his hands to cover his face, chews at the leather brands he wears on his wrists, “because he’s an asshole?” he suggests, “Because I’m an asshole? Because I don’t do the family name proud or some shit. Because I actually have emotions, and apparently his robot brain doesn’t like that.”

“You’re not an asshole,” Adam says, not really sure where to begin in addressing all of these statements.

“Yeah I am,” Ronan contradicts, “we both know I’m an asshole.”

“Ok,” Adam rolls his eyes, “you’re an asshole. But the least assholey asshole I know.”

“What a commendation,” Ronan mumbles through leather, “I’m flattered.”

“Have you always?” Adam starts, sighs, begins again, “were you and Declan ever friends?”

“I guess,” Ronan says, “we’ve always been really...different though. After dad died we had even less in common.”

At a glance, he just looks pissed off. Very intensely pissed off. Eyebrows drawn down into a glare, teeth bared in a snarl as he bites at his wrists. As close up as Adam is, as carefully as he’s watching, he can see the gleam in Ronan’s eyes, the wetness collecting at the corners, the tremble of his lips. “What happened?” Adam whispers, wants to take Ronan’s shaking hands in his. So he does. Slides his hand up Ronan’s arm until he can slip his fingers between Ronan’s and pulls their joined hands down to rest in between them.

“He didn’t even fucking cry,” Ronan says blankly, “just started in on business like dad had gone on holiday or something. He didn’t want to talk about it. He wouldn’t explain anything and I had no one
Adam makes a small noise, just an acknowledgment that he’s listening, an encouragement to keep
going, squeezes Ronan’s hand in his. He’s not sure what he had been expecting when he’d brought
this up, only that there was something else there that wasn’t just nerves about coming out.

“I fucked up a lot,” Ronan admits, “stole dad’s car. Got blackout drunk. Punched him in the face. I
just wanted him to admit that he was as fucked up feeling as I was. Instead I just proved to him that I
was fucked up, and that he was the only sensible one.”

He pauses here to breathe, inhaling deeply through his nose and then exhaling shakily out his mouth.
He does this a few times until his exhales come out smoothly. His eyes are closed, but that doesn’t
stop the wetness in the corners of his eyes become small rivulets running down the edges of his face.

“I moved in here with Gansey pretty soon after dad died. Sometimes I think that made it worse
between us. Like, if I’d just moved into Aglionby like he wanted, we would have been forced to
actually talk it out. I didn’t want to see him though. Didn’t want to see him so put together and
fucking calm while I felt like I was fucking...fucking falling apart, and he didn’t want me seeing
Matty while I was drinking and apparently ruining my life, so I resented him for that so I didn’t see
him unless I wanted to fight him and-”

Adam lifts his free hand to press his thumb to the corner of Ronan’s eye, wipes ineffectively at the
tears there. Ineffective because they’re falling thick and fast now, and his thumb isn’t the best at
window wiper impersonations.

“Adam,” Ronan says, his eyes are still screwed closed, “I’m really fucked up.”
“You’re not fucked up,” Adam mumbles, shifts until he can press his lips to Ronan’s cheek, tastes
salt, “you were grieving.”
Ronan makes a noise that’s somewhere between self-deprecation and an actual full on sob. Fucking
shit.
“Fuck,” Ronan grunts, he’s pressing his free hand into his eyes as if he thinks that pushing his
eyeballs in will stem the flow of tears, “fuck I’m sorry Adam, I didn’t mean to- I didn’t want to-”
“Ro,” Adam presses in closer, “God. It’s fine. It’s your turn anyway, yeah?” he attempts in a vaguely
joking tone, “we’re always dealing with my shit, about time you cried on me for once.”
Ronan snorts, then sobs, then says, “I couldn’t deal with it. Couldn’t deal with how little Declan
seemed to give a fuck about mum and dad. I - I - my dreaming got out of control. I’ve always - I’ve
always had nightmares. Not usually that bad. But I could always go to dad about them, or mum, or
Dec. And I couldn’t go to any of them. And I- I couldn’t. I couldn’t, Adam-” he breaks off here to
breathe again, to calm his breathing down. “I didn’t want to deal with it anymore,” he says, voice
quiet, “I didn’t mean to let it happen, but I -” he pauses again here and Adam feels decidedly out of
the loop. Decidedly like whatever was in the loop was a lot shittier than he had been expecting.
“We haven’t really talked about my dreaming much,” Ronan mumbles, “but you know I can bring
shit out with me. That the stuff I dream is real. That I - that I have to want it.”

“Ro,” Adam is relatively certain that he does not like where this is going.
“This is part of the reason - I think - part of the reason Dec doesn’t trust me at all,” Ronan says,
because Lynch’s don’t fucking give up, and I did, even if I didn’t mean to. I obviously wanted to -
and - God, Adam, I haven’t said this out-fucking-loud before-”
“It’s ok,” Adam says, can’t bring himself to speak in above a whisper, “it’s ok, you don’t have to if
you don’t want to.”
“I wanted to die,” Ronan says simply, “and so my dreams tried to make it happen. And they almost
did.”

Fucking fuck, fuck, fuck and shit.
“Ronan,” Adam whispers.

“Declan was so fucking mad,” Ronan mumbles, “Gansey says it was because he was scared, but that’s hard to see when he doesn’t say it.”

“Yeah,” Adam agrees, “babe-” he doesn’t know what to say. Sorry seems too stupid. Too shallow. It’s fine,” Ronan says, voice rough. He’s stopped crying, but his eyes are still closed, “I don’t want to anymore. I don’t. But Declan’s fucking - I don’t think he believes me. He thinks everything I do is self-destructive and also specifically set out to piss him off. What if he thinks that this - that this is too, that us-”

“Then we’ll deal with that together,” Adam says, “we’ll show him it’s not. If he doesn’t wanna see that, you still have Gans, an’ Noah, an’ Blue, an’ me an’ Ethan. It’s gonna be ok.”

Ronan sniffs, wipes roughly at his face, and then says, “Well obviously it’ll be ok. Even if Declan’s fucking pissed, I still have the fucking hottest boyfriend ever, so honestly, I’m winning no matter the outcome.”

“That can’t be true,” Adam says carefully, knows he’s stepping on thin ice while Ronan is still so obviously upset, “because I’m pretty sure I have the hottest boyfriend ever.”

The ice doesn’t break, but Ronan’s face thaws into a lopsided smile and he snorts. “Fuck off,” he says, “for a smart guy you’re sounding pretty damn dumb right now Parrish.”

“Maybe we should ask Gansey and Noah’s opinions,” Adam teases, “I’m pretty sure they’d agree with me.”

“Please,” Ronan scoffs, rolls over so he can trap Adam underneath him, “Noah would definitely say you’re hotter, if only to piss the both of us off, and Gansey would refuse to comment. I win.”

“I think we should check, just in case,” Adam says, tilts his head as if to call out to the boys in the other room, and Ronan immediately drops his full weight onto Adam’s chest, covers his mouth with his hand.

“Oh my God,” he hisses in amusement, “don’t fucking do it.”

Adam grins under Ronan’s palm, then kisses it, and peels it away from his face.

“Ok,” he says easily, “you ok?”

“Fuck,” Ronan replies, presses his face against Adam’s neck, “yeah.”

“Thanks,” Adam mumbles, bringing his arms up to wrap around Ronan’s shoulders, “for telling me.”

“God,” Ronan grumbles into Adam’s skin, “I’m sorry I dropped so much shit on you at once. I didn’t mean to.”

“Ro,” Adam says firmly, squeezes his arms tighter, “thank you for telling me. It’s fine.”

Ronan’s silent for a little too long, so Adam cranes his head sideways to catch a glimpse of his face, says; “babe. It’s not too much. You’re not scaring me off. I wanna be here for you.”

“I’m just thinking,” Ronan mumbles, follows Adam’s neck as it moves away, “Gans would not fucking believe how much we talk about our feelings.”

Adam laughs despite himself, “I can’t fucking believe how much we talk about our feelings,” he says, “it’s fucking hard.”

“You can say that again,” Ronan grimaces, and then, “oh fuck, that was such a good opportunity for an innuendo.”

“You’re an idiot,” Adam says calmly, “do you wanna drink? I’m so thirsty now.”

“Oh yeah,” Ronan nods, “me too. Thirsty for you.”

“Ronan.”

“Yeah, I’m fucking dehydrated as all fuck. Juice?”

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I’m having emotions about Declan currently.
He hadn’t been having so many problems with sleeping lately, hadn’t been at all worried about going
to sleep next to Adam and bringing something dangerous out. He was a little worried now. Not
hugely worried, more like he was aware that he was still upset, that he was thinking about all the shit
he tried his best to avoid. It didn’t really seem worth it to go to sleep right now and run the risk of
bringing out some sort of annoying stress demon to fuck shit up for Adam even more.
This was why he had waited until Adam was asleep enough to be snoring softly before he
unwrapped himself from the blankets and Adam’s arms, and escaped the temptation of sleeping.

Gansey was still up. He had all the lights off, was sitting in a patch of pale moonlight with his phone
propped up on his cardboard buildings - torch on - shining down on the small house he was crafting.
“Can’t sleep?” Gansey asks without looking up. He doesn’t need to, he and Ronan are both used to
this routine.
“Don’t want to,” Ronan says instead, pads across the wooden floor to crumple into a heap next to
scrap of cardboard scattered around Gansey’s feet. “I’m psyching myself out too much to do it
safely next to Adam right now.”
Gansey looks at him now, to raise an eyebrow in carefully conveyed worry. “Something wrong?” he
asks, “You and Adam didn’t fight did you?”
“No,” Ronan snorts, then shakes his head, “well actually. Yeah, we did. But that was earlier.”
Now Gansey’s worry is less carefully conveyed. He puts his craft knife down.
“You guys are fighting?” he asks, despairing, “What about? You both seem so… happy.”
“We are,” Ronan says quickly, really doesn’t want Gansey getting the wrong idea here, “we really
are, Gans, it’s just - we kinda have a lot to talk about. It’s not like either of us are exactly…well,
normal.”
Gansey stares at him for a long moment, doesn’t lose the worried crease between his brows, “Ok,”
he says at last, “what are you psyching yourself out over then?”
“Coming out to Declan,” Ronan says in a rush before he can shake his head and tell Gansey it was
nothing, “it just has...so much potential to go wrong.”
“Also potential to go really well,” Gansey retorts, puts down the cardboard now as well, “why are
you coming out to him now? Because you guys told Ethan you were dating?”
“You heard that, huh?” Ronan asks, draws his knees up to his chest to rest his chin against them.
“Yeah,” Gansey drops his eyes, “I wasn’t meaning to listen in, just, Ethan was a little loud when he
got upset.”
“Yeah,” Ronan says, finds himself grinning, “he was, wasn’t he?”
“This is a good thing?” Gansey asks, narrowing his eyes.
“Yeah,” Ronan says, nodding emphatically, “him feeling safe enough here to be upset is a good
thing.”

This sits in between them for a few long seconds, and then Gansey exhales harshly.
“God,” he says, “I’m so glad they’re out of there.”
“Me too,” Ronan agrees, his brief joy already fading back out into a somber aftermath, then,
“partially because we told Ethan. Mostly because I’m so fucking sick of pretending I’m some shit
I’m not.”
Gansey just looks at him, and that’s encouragement enough for him to keep talking.

“I just - look I know it’s so fucking early on, and you’re probably going to think I’m an idiot, but I kind of fucking love Adam. I don’t want to be in a situation where I can’t be open about that just because I’m scared.”

“That was surprisingly eloquent,” Gansey teases him gently.

“Yeah well,” Ronan snorts, “I’ve been thinking about it for the last few hours non-stop.”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot,” Gansey offers, and Ronan snorts again.

“Dude,” he says, “you’re allowed to tell me I’m an idiot for saying I’m in love with my boyfriend of 1 week. I’ll disagree with you, but you can say it.”

“No,” Gansey shrugs, “I get it.” He leans forward to pick up his craft knife and cardboard again, “So,” he says, “you don’t want to sleep because you’re too busy freaking out about Declan not accepting this?”

“I can’t sleep,” Ronan sighs, picks up a piece of cardboard and starts folding it along lines Gansey had etched out, “because I’m freaking out that because I’m freaking out I’ll dream some bad shit and bring it out.”

“Oh,” Gansey says, “have you, lately?”

“No,” Ronan sighs, “honestly, I haven’t even really been dreaming much. Let alone bringing anything out.”

Now Gansey frowns, fiddles aimlessly with the knife, sliding the blade in and out, “you’ve not been dreaming?”

“Not really,” Ronan says, frowns now as well, “not for - I haven’t brought anything out since Chainsaw I think.”

“That’s not normal, is it?” Gansey asks, “I know you don’t bring stuff out every night, but there’s usually something one a week at least.”

“Yeah,” he cannot fucking believe he’s barely noticed this, “yeah, I haven’t - I haven’t been dreaming - what the fuck. What the fuck, Gansey?”

“Do you think this is related to Noah disappearing too?” Gansey asks slowly, “Cabeswater being weird, you not dreaming, Noah disappearing more often-”

“Where is Noah?” Ronan interrupts, “He’s not gone again is he?”

“No,” Gansey says, “he’s in the car park star watching apparently, I don’t know.”

“Right,” Ronan says, “makes sense. So.”

“I think-“ Gansey says slowly, “I think it’s all connected to Adam-”

“None of this is Adam’s fault,” Ronan cuts in sharply.

Gansey looks him square in the face so he can roll his eyes with full effect.

“Lynch,” he says firmly, “I’m not saying it’s his fault, I’m saying I think it’s connected to him. Like it’s connected to you and Noah.”

Ronan takes a few beats to feel a little embarrassed at his apparent over reaction, but quickly pushes through that, “Ok,” he says, “because… Cabeswater’s spending too much energy trying to figure out what his deal is? Because they think he’s supposed to be someone else and it’s going haywire? Like a power surge or something?”

“That… that sounds like it could be something,” Gansey says slowly, “so maybe if it got its head around Adam being Adam it would settle down again?”

“Maybe,” Ronan shrugs, “worth asking the psychics about? See if it’s something they’re willing to fucking divulge.” He growls the last part, and Gansey gives him a somewhat reproachful look.

“Ok,” he says, “they are doing their best to help out in an unprecedented situation. Try and be nice about it.”

Ronan gapes, “Dick,” he says, “they literally told us they know a whole fuck tonne of shit they’re not going to tell us because they just don’t want to. I think I’m allowed to be a little mad about that.”

“Maybe it’s for our own safety?” Gansey suggests, shrugs.

“For our safety my ass,” Ronan snaps, “they just like lording it over us. This is our lives they’re talking about, not some stupid teenager game.”
“They know that,” Gansey sighs, “I’m sure they’ll tell us if one of us is in...danger.”
“Wouldn’t bet on it,” Ronan says, “some of them just look nasty.”
“Adam trusts them,” Gansey points out.
“Adam kind of trusts them,” Ronan corrects, “Adam doesn’t exactly trust anyone. He doesn’t even fucking trust himself.”
“He trusts you,” Gansey says.
“Eh,” Ronan says, shrugs, “I think he trusts me to a certain extent.”
“Wise,” Gansey teases. Ronan kicks him. Accidentally knocks over the open pot of liquid glue next to the stack of cardboard. This is definitely entirely Gansey’s fault, because who fucking leaves a pot of glue open on the floor. Seriously. This guy is meant to be a scholar or some shit.

After they’ve finished scrabbling around and sniping good naturedly at each other while mopping up the spilled glue, Gansey shoves his shoulder and then pulls him in for the kind of side hug that ought to be awkward with anyone, but that Gansey somehow made feel natural.

“Ok,” he says, “you know what I think?”
“Yeah,” Ronan says, “that blue cheese smells good and that boat shoes actually look nice. Fucking weirdo.”
“I think,” Gansey says, raising his voice as if he could ignore Ronan’s comments like that, “that you should definitely go to bed because you’re going to need to be in your least snappy behaviour tomorrow. Adam’s probably wondering where you are as well.”
“Gans,” Ronan mumbles, tightens his arms unconsciously around Gansey’s waist, “you seriously don’t think I’m going to bring anything out? I’m not going to hurt him?”
“I seriously think you’re going to be fine,” Gansey says, lets Ronan squeeze him probably a little too tightly, squeezes back, “the both of you are. Go to bed so I can.”
“You’re not even going to sleep, are you?” Ronan says, releasing Gansey, “you’re going to read boring books until your brain just turns itself off in protest.”
“Yes, Ronan,” Gansey deadpans, “that is exactly my plan. Goodnight.”

Adam’s awake when he gets back into bed, but only just barely. Enough that he makes a noise of complaint when Ronan presses his cold knees into the backs of Adam’s thighs, enough that he rolls over once Ronan’s properly under the blankets, and presses forwards until he’s resting against Ronan’s chest.

“Wh’rd y’go?” he slurs into Ronan’s chest.
“Talking with Gansey,” Ronan whispers back, wraps his arm around Adam’s shoulders, “you were snoring too loud to sleep.”
“Fuck you,” Adam gets out with remarkable clarity, and then goes right back to sleep, cheek pressed against Ronan’s collar bone, arms hooked round Ronan’s hips.

Ronan goes to sleep.

It’s pretty uneventful to be quite honest, that is, until he wakes up. When he wakes up it’s to Adam still half on top of him - very thoroughly asleep still which either means that he’s more exhausted than usual, or it’s actually ridiculously early - and Ethan standing by the side of the bed tugging at Ronan’s arm.

“Mf,” he gets out, “hey baby.”
“’M gettin’ in,” Ethan informs him seriously, “an’ Chains-aw peed th’ bed.”
“Oh,” Ronan says, still too asleep to quite parse this until Ethan’s climbing under the blankets with them and pressing his damp pj pants against Ronan’s bare torso. “Oh,” he says, a little louder, “oh dear,” he says, wriggles his arm free of the blankets so he can wrap his arm around Ethan to hold
him close, doing his best not to think about how wet the pants were, “did you have a bad dream, baby?” he asks, bending his neck in an extremely uncomfortable angle so he can see Ethan’s face past Adam’s sleep mussed hair.

Ethan stares back at him, distraught.

Fucking oh dear indeed.

“Sorry,” he sniffs, “Chains-aw di’n’t pee th’ bed it was me ‘m sorry I lied.”

Ok. He can do this.

“Baby,” he says carefully, “it’s ok. I know it was you, I’m not mad,” he glances down at Adam, considers elbowing him awake, “sometimes telling the truth is scary, huh?”

“Mm,” Ethan mumbles, presses his wet face into Ronan’s neck, “I wanna be good,” he sobs, “don’t wanna be bad.”

“Oh God,” Ronan mumbles, “baby, Ethan, sweetheart, you’re so good - Adam, Adam wake up - you’re not bad, baby.”

“Mm,” Adam says.

“Am,” Ethan protests into Ronan’s skin - damp and tickly - “was lyin’ t’you an’ you’re my friend, an’ now I’m bad.”

“Mm,” Adam says again before Ronan can try and soothe Ethan again, “mm, Buddy? What’s wrong?”

From the slur of his voice it’s obvious he’s still mostly asleep, but as Ethan wriggles in Ronan’s grip, arms outstretched to Adam, he wakes up enough to prop himself up one elbow.

“Hey,” he murmurs, voice rough from sleep, “not havin’ a good mornin’, huh, bud?” he asks, gathering Ethan in all his dampness into his arms.

“Ad’m,” Ethan sobs out, “I peed th’bed.”

“Hey,” Adam says again, slowly lying the both of them back down, strokes his hand through Ethan’s hair, “it’s ok. It was an accident. A yucky feeling accident.”

“An’ then,” Ethan continued, “I lied ‘bout it an’ said Chains-aw did it.”

“Ah,” Adam says, meets Ronan’s eyes over the top of Ethan’s head, Adam looks almost amused, “you feel bad about that, huh?

“Uh-huh,” Ethan hiccups.

“We’re not mad at you, baby,” Adam says, voice firmer than Ronan would have dared use on Ethan at this point, “thank you for telling me you lied, you don’t needa feel bad about it, ok?”

They’re all silent for a few moments, Ronan with bated breath, Ethan with stilted sobs, Adam with a muffled yawn.

“Kay.” Ethan mumbles.

“Ok,” Adam repeats, “you wanna have a shower an’ get into some nice’n’ clean clothes?”

“Mhm,” Ethan says.

“Ok,” Adam nods, presses a kiss onto the top of Ethan’s head, then hoists him up a little further in his arms as he pushes himself up onto his knees and then climbs out of the bed over Ronan. Once out, he bends back down to Ronan and kisses him firmly on the cheek, “thanks,” he says, and disappears out of the room with Ethan.
He gets up. Strips the bed down and gathers the sheets up, and then after a moment of hesitation, carries the bundle of sheets into Noah’s room to strip the bed there too. The mattress probably needs disinfecting, but he can deal with that a little later. Right now he’s carrying all the sheets to the bathroom/laundry/kitchen so he can start the load before anything starts to smell.

“Hey,” Adam greets him as he edges in round the door. He’s standing at the edge of the shower, one hand out under the stream of water, the other holding Ethan up on his hip. “Oh, babe, are those the sheets?”

“Um,” Ronan says, dumps them all on the ground so he can pull the washing currently in the machine out. He would just drop them on the floor if he wasn’t overwhelmingly aware of the fact that he was currently not only a role model for Ethan here but also a new boyfriend who shouldn’t push his fucking luck. He piles them into the empty laundry basket instead. “Yes? They need washing, so I’m washing them.”

Adam, quite inexplicably after his earlier gung ho attitude about the whole thing, suddenly looks like he might be about to cry.

“You didn’t need to do that,” he says, voice small, “I would have washed them. You don’t have to go to the hassle of-”

Oh right. Ok, no.

“Adam,” he interrupts, shoves the sheets into the machine, “I’m not playing house with you, I am quite literally, and quite happily, living it.”

“Oh,” Adam mumbles, pull his hand out of the water, “that’s… thanks.” He crouched down by the edge of the tub to start undressing Ethan, who isn’t crying anymore but doesn’t seem to want to let go of Adam for such mundane things as undressing.

He kind of wants to abandon the sheets right there, half in and half out of the machine, so he can cross the room and pull Adam and Ethan both into his arms to tell them that they didn’t have to fucking say thanks. He wants to be here. Not specifically dealing with pee covered sheets, but here looking after them both. Instead, he finishes loading the washing machine, sticks in the detergent, sets the dials, and then kicks it to make it start. Then he looks over at the shower and almost chokes on his own tongue. Adam’s in the shower too, which makes sense seeing as he was just carrying around a pee sticky toddler, but it, quite obviously, means that he’s completely naked - save for said toddler attached at the hip.

He’s pretty sure this is a bad moment to be thinking about how fucking sexy Adam is, but it’s kind of difficult to be thinking about anything else.

“Hey,” Adam says, and only now does Ronan realise that Adam’s looking oddly bashful, “this is ok, right?”

“Uh?” Ronan says coherently, “Uh-huh. Yup. Very sensible, want me to quickly put your guys’ clothes in the load too?”

“Yeah,” Adam says, “that’d be useful.”

“Right,” Ronan nods, ducks forward to gather up the clothing and busies himself with kicking the washing machine until it stops again, depositing the clothes, and then kicking it back into gear. Adam is mumbling behind him the whole time, and by the time he turns around again, Ethan has been detached from Adam’s hips and is now standing just at the edge of the spray while Adam leans down to rub shampoo into his damp curls.

“Um,” Ronan says, “I should...go?”

Adam glances at him, his bashful moment obviously fully passed, “Stay,” he says, “if you want. You’re probably going to need a shower too.”

“Right,” Ronan says, this is very correct. His entire side feels sticky. “True. I’ll just, uh, sit here and
admire the view then?” he adds, crossing the room to perch at the edge of the tub, lets his voice slide into teasing, and gets a face full of water for his efforts.

“Perv,” Adam retorts with a grin, “go ahead then.”

“It is a good view,” Noah agrees casually, leaning against the sink by the doorway, and Ronan almost tumbles into the bath.

“No-ah!” Ethan exclaims, “I peed your bed!”

He sounds a lot less upset about it now. Noah laughs,

“It’s your bed now, squirt,” he says, “is that why it’s shower time in here?”

“Uh-huh,” Ethan replies, “wanna join?”

“Mm,” Noah scrunches up his face in barely concealed amusement, “I would, but I can’t, sorry little bean.”

“How ever will we deal with the tragedy of you not showering with us?” Adam asks, voice heavy with mock despair.

“Be strong, Adam,” Noah says, grins at Ronan, “I’m sure you’ll find a replacement for me soon enough.”

“Good morning?” Gansey says to the entire room, “I’m assuming that the toilet is currently unavailable?”

“No wanna Gans!” Ethan calls, holds onto Adam’s legs so he can lean out over the side of the tub, “wanna shower?”

“If you value your privacy, yes, the toilet is unavailable,” Adam says blandly, but the corners of his mouth twitch in amusement, “sorry, Gans.”

“I’ll survive,” Gansey says dryly, leans against the door frame, “Is this a shower party? I don’t think there’s enough room for me, sorry, Ethan.”

“Yup,” Noah says cheerfully, “Ethan’s inviting us all to join them, I sadly had to refuse as well.”

“There’s another toilet downstairs, y’know,” Ronan points out over the clamour of the room.

“Ah,” Gansey shrugs, “this is more fun.”

Ronan turns to look at Adam just in time to catch him rolling his eyes, but he’s smiling. He doesn’t even look vaguely uncomfortable at being naked in a room full of people.

“I’m going to have some breakfast,” Gansey announces, “does anyone object?”

“Why would we object?” Noah asks.

“I don’t know,” Gansey shrugs, knocks his glasses lopsided, doesn’t bother to correct them, “maybe it’s weird watching people eat while you’re in the shower?”

“It’s a little weird,” Adam acknowledges, “but knock yourself out. We’ll be done in a minute, won’t we, you little soap monster,” he added on to Ethan who was currently rubbing the soap in between his hands for the sole purpose of creating as much foam as possible.

“Yup,” Ethan agrees happily.

“Oh, Gansey,” Adam says as Gansey bends over the fridge, “sorry about just disappearing on you last night. You wanted to grab dinner somewhere? I’m fine with it being at Nino’s, so long as I’m not working.”

Gansey almost knocks his glasses completely off into the fridge in his haste to pull out of it and beam at Adam.

By the time they’re on their way to school, they have a plan. It’s a very tightly time restricted plan, as almost any plan including Adam and Declan has to be, but it ought to at least physically work. It goes like this. Ronan drives them to drop Ethan off as usual, then Adam drives the 2 of them to Mountain View to drop himself off, and Ronan drives to Aglionby. Then Ronan convinces Declan to meet him for lunch outside of school. Then Ronan drives back to Mountain View during his study class which just so happens to be right before lunch, picks Adam up, and drives the two of them to
meet Declan. From there they had half an hours tops before they would have to leave again. It’d have to do.

He’s pretty convinced that Declan will agree to lunch with him, mainly because Declan is always trying to get Ronan alone to yell at him, so he’ll probably think of this as a perfect chance. His plan is to tell Declan first, so if there’s any yelling it can happen and be over with as soon as fucking possible, and then he’ll tell Matthew. He’s pretty sure Matthew will take it better than however Declan will, but if he doesn’t, then at least Ronan’ll already be used to being disappointed and disappointing.

The one flaw in this plan, Ronan realises in first period, is that now he can’t fucking concentrate on anything that isn’t lunch break. Declan had agreed easily, probably partly because he was in a hurry, and he didn’t seem too suspicious, so that was a bonus.

It didn’t stop Ronan from worrying though. By the time study period comes round, he abandons all and any pretence he had left of actually doing any work, and drives to Mountain View as soon as possible. This also turns out to be a bad idea, because he can’t exactly just go in and steal Adam from his class just because he’s nervous, and now he has to sit in fucking Mountain View’s carpark being nervous instead. When Adam finally fucking texts him to say he’s finished class, Ronan feels like he’s going to explode. He texts Adam back, then shifts into the passenger seat. He doesn’t want to drive right now. Now with his hands shaking and his stomach roiling.

Adam doesn’t comment on this when he turns up, just hops into the driver’s seat, accepts the keys from Ronan, and leans over to kiss him.

“You ok?” he asks, turns the car on smoothly.
“Yup,” Ronan says emphatically, pops the p, crosses his arms tightly over his chest.
“Babe,” Adam says, backs out of the park, “feel free to be absolutely fucking terrified right now if you want. I can try and stay calm enough for the both of us.”
“I’m fine,” Ronan says, “ish. Just, promise you won’t break up with me even if he offers to pay you off or something.”
“The fuck, Ronan?” Adam snorts, pulls out into traffic, “Firstly, I’m having trouble believing that Declan would do that, secondly, of fucking course I’m not going to break up with you for money.”
“Yeah, yeah,” Ronan mumbles, “I know that in theory, but-”
“Anyway,” Adam continues breezily, “if I want to be rich all I have to do is stay with you and become your sugar baby, right?”

Ronan chokes on his own saliva this time. Adam laughs at him so hard Ronan spends half a second actually worried Adam will crash the car.

“Fucker,” Ronan gasps out eventually once Adam’s laughter has subsided to giggles, and he didn’t actually come anywhere near close to crashing.
“Nah,” Adam says, far too cheekily, “if I’m your sugar baby I’m pretty sure you’d be the fucker.”

Ronan was still not fucking prepared, but at least this time he didn’t choke.

“Right,” he says hoarsely, “but seeing as you’d actually never agree to being a sugar baby, I’m gonna have to insist that you’re the fucker.”

Adam clears his throat loudly, his cheeks tingling pink, “Ok cool,” he says, “uh, any other theories you want me to debunk before we meet up with Declan?”
Yell at me about trc stuff at etoilearden.tumblr.com if you feel the need for a larger yelling ground x
Declan’s already there when they arrive, he must have already gone inside. His empty volvo is parked front and centre, and after Ronan points it out to Adam, he turns and parks as far away from it as possible. He knows this is done specifically for his amusement, and it works. He waits until Adam’s put the handbrake on before leaning over and pulling Adam into a hard kiss.

“That’s how you wanna come out, huh?” Adam teases him as Ronan pulls back again to undo his seat belt, “I suppose it’s nice and quick.”
“I would prefer that,” Ronan says honestly, opens his door, “but I want to say the words to him.”
“Well,” Adam says, gets out of the car, “I’m proud of you.”
“Alright, alright,” Ronan grumbles, “let’s not get too soppy.”
“Pfft,” Adam says, waits by the door for Ronan to walk round the car to him, “you’re gonna be fine, Ro.”
“I know,” Ronan says with as much fake confidence as he can muster. “Hey,” he says, “you sure you want to come in?”
“Do you want me to stay out here?” Adam asks, he looks vaguely surprised.
“No,” Ronan says quickly, scratches the back of his head, “just, it’s a lot to ask-”
“Ronan,” Adam interrupts, “don’t finish that sentence. I want to come in with you.”
“Ok,” Ronan says, “let’s go settle my doom then.”
“Have a little faith,” Adam snorts, reaches out and squeezes his hand quickly.
He wants to hold onto Adam’s hand but he’s already pulled his hand back, shoved them into his jean pockets, so Ronan shoves this particular want back down and leads the way into the cafe instead.

Declan has a table facing the door. He always does, mostly so he can be in full view of everyone in the cafe, partly so he can see everyone who comes in. When he sees Ronan, he lifts one hand in a half wave, then drops it back to the table as he sees Adam.

“Declan,” Ronan grunts, pulls out a chair and drops into it. He shoves at the chair next to him, and Adam pulls it out and sits down ridiculously elegant.

“Ronan,” Declan says back, not looking at Ronan, “who’s this?”

“Adam Parrish,” Adam says cooly, holds his hand out across the table. Declan stares at it for a moment, glances at Ronan, and then shakes Adam’s hand firmly.

“And you’re here, because?” Declan asks bluntly, and Ronan huffs in irritation.

“Declan,” he says again before Adam can respond, “he’s here because I want him here.”

“Fine,” Declan says, mouth snapping into a thin line, he finally turns back to Ronan. “And why am I here?”

“Because,” Ronan begins, falters, clears his throat angrily, “I need to tell you some shit and wanted to do it away from your fucking poncey cronies.”
Declan ignores this pointed jab, rolls his eyes, and waves his hand graciously in Ronan’s direction.

“Go ahead,” he says, “tell me some shit.”

“May I fetch y’all some drinks?” a waitress asks, appearing to their left, Adam jumps, badly startled, and Ronan resists the urge to reach out in comfort, then regrets resisting.

“A coffee,” Declan says, “Black. 2 shots. No sugar.”

“Flat white for him,” Ronan says, Adam nods, his hand has drifted up to his ear. “Orange juice for me.”
Declan is watching Adam with narrowed eyes. The waitress nods, writes this all down in her notebook, then smiles; “And can I get y’all any food? Or would you like a moment longer to think about it?”

“A moment,” Declan says sharply, “thank you.”

“Your drinks will be out soon,” she says, smiles, leaves.
He wants so badly to ask if Adam’s ok, but he knows Adam does not like talking about his ear,
almost definitely will like it less in public. His hand is still cupped over his left ear, but he seems almost unaware of this. He turns instead to Ronan, raises his eyebrows.

“Carry on,” Declan says, “get whatever this is over with.”

“Right,” Ronan says, would prefer to keep looking at Adam, turns back to Declan. “I know you like to be invasively involved in my life, so I thought I should inform you that I’m dating.”

“I’m not sure whether to be more shocked that you’re telling me,” Declan snorts, “or that someone’s willing to date your grumpy ass.”

Adam twitches beside him.

“Who’s the unlucky girl, then?” Declan presses on.

“Not a girl,” Ronan replies brusquely. He had imagined this going much differently. He was going to be a whole lot more eloquent about the whole thing, more coherent.

“Oh,” Declan says, pauses, frowns, then, “and is Adam here as moral support for you telling me this, or are you two-”

“We’re together,” Ronan snaps, “he’s my boyfriend.” Now he reaches over and grabs onto Adam’s hand, less as a show for Declan, more for his own stability. Adam squeezes his fingers gently.

“Oh,” Declan says.

“I don’t care if you fucking disapprove,” Ronan continues vehemently, “I’m only telling you because I don’t want to keep him a secret. I’m gay, that’s not changing, so you can get over it or you can fuck off.”

“Ro,” Adam mumbles.

“Ronan,” Declan sighs.

“Don’t,” Ronan breathes, “don’t fucking-” he’s not actually sure what he doesn’t fucking want Declan to do or say, but he’s only coming to the realisation right now that if Declan is indeed about to make light of this, or tell him he’s wrong, or anything like that, if he does, Ronan feels like his veins are going to burst.

“Ronz,” Declan says again, swallows heavily, adam’s apple bobbing wildly, “ok.”

“Wha-” Ronan says, “ok?”

“Yeah,” Declan shrugs, “I’m not - I am surprised. Somewhat. It’s fine, though, obviously it’s fine.”

His veins still feel like they’re going to burst. So do his lungs.

“I’m glad you told me,” Declan continues, “that you trusted me with this.”

“Ro,” Adam says again, voice soft.

“You honestly don’t give a fuck?” Ronan asks, his voice coming out a lot weaker than he intended, “You’re not about to try and Catholic guilt shame me or some shit?”

Declan scoffs. “Please,” he says, “and make you hate me more? No. I doubt God gives a shit that you’re gay either.”

“I don’t fucking hate you,” Ronan snaps, and Declan scoffs again.

“Alright,” he says, then, “where did you meet Adam?”

Adam snorts.

“The fuck,” Ronan says, “we’re not seriously doing questions now, are we?”

“We do have all of lunch,” Adam points out calmly, “better get them over sooner than later.”


“You drinks,” the waitress says, bobbing up on the right this time, by Declan’s elbow.

“Thank you,” Declan says pleasantly.

“Thanks,” Adam smiles.

“Can we get nachos for the table?” Ronan asks, “and,” he glances at Adam, “extra salad?”

“Sure,” she says, “anything else?”

Declan looks mildly sour about Ronan ordering for the table, but shakes his head anyway. Ronan knows how much Declan likes his nachos. Adam shakes his head as well, and the waitress whisks away again.

“What do you do, Adam?” Declan asks, jumping right back in, “You’re not from Aglionby. Mountain View? Jobs?”

“Yes I go to Mountain View,” Adam replies, fiddles with the handle of his coffee mug, “I work at
Boyd’s mechanics off West st, at Nino’s, and the factory of Main.”

Declan, to his credit, barely blinks.

“Good grades?” he asks.

“Fucks sake,” Ronan hisses, “don’t-”

“Yup,” Adam answers breezily, “I’m in all advanced classes.”

Now Declan looks impressed.

“You never told me all advanced classes,” Ronan says, shocked, “the fuck, Parrish?”

“It never came up,” Adam shrugs, the tips of his ears are slowly going pink.

“Impressive,” Declan says, “you have big plans for after school, then?”

They haven’t really had this conversation either, and Ronan doesn’t want to have it with Declan present.

“Some,” Adam answers vaguely, seemingly in the same boat as Ronan, “mostly just to make enough money to support Ethan and myself.”

“Ethan?” Declan asks, lets his confusion show for just a moment.

“My brother,” Adam says, he glances at Ronan, “I take care of him.”

“Your parents?” Declan asks, eyes narrowed.

“Not worth talking about,” Adam says tightly through a smile, “any further questions?”

“So many,” Declan says, “Where do you live?”

Adam looks to Ronan again, he’s asking a question with his eyes, so Ronan replies out loud.

“He and Ethan just moved into Monmouth with us,” he says, “signed the lease the other day.”

“They what?” Declan asks loudly, clears his throat, “How long have you two been dating?”

“Oh,” Adam says.

“5 days,” Ronan replies, can’t stop himself from smirking.

“5- what? 5 days? The fuck, Ronan?” Declan is still looking at Adam, less in an appraising way now, more in a, ‘what the actual fuck kind of witchcraft has this boy been doing on my brother?’ kind of way.

“We’ve known each other for longer though,” Ronan says, has to consciously loosen his grip on Adam’s hand before he starts grinding freshly healed bone, “they moved in before we started dating.”

“Still,” Declan says stiffly, “this is even beyond your general irresponsibility. What does Richard have to say about this?”

Adam makes a noise beside him which could arguably be a half swallowed laugh.

“Gansey was the one who suggested it,” Ronan says pointedly, “he and Adam were friends first.”

“This has nothing to do with you, Adam,” Declan says, “but I don’t approve of this. Not the dating,” he adds on quickly, “the moving so quickly part-”

“Oh please,” Ronan sneers, “moving quickly? Says the guy who fucks the girl on the first date-”

“At least I don’t move her in beforehand!” Declan snaps back, “What about when you two break up? Then you’ll have to go through the awkwardness of moving out! And with his brother! How old is he anyway?”

“He’s 3,” Adam says, voice small, at the same time that Ronan says, “We’re not fucking breaking up, you shit heap!”

“3?” Declan says, sits back in his chair in horror, “You moved a 3 year old in with a group of risk taking idiot teenagers? And you think you’re never going to break up after 5 fucking days together? God. I should have ordered a stronger drink.”

“Fuck you!” Ronan spits, shoving his chair backwards, the legs screeching loudly against the floor, “Fuck you! Stop fucking acting so high and mighty-”

“Um,” says the waitress, “will you still be wanting your nachos?”

“Yes,” Declan says firmly to the girl, waves his hand angrily at Ronan, “Ronan, sit down, let’s talk about this sensibly.”

Ronan does not sit down. The waitress wavers. Declan nods impatiently at her, so she begins setting the food down on the table. Adam shuffles his chair backwards and reaches round to take Ronan’s hand again.
“Babe,” he says quietly, “c’mon, it’s not so bad.”
“Fucking is,” Ronan hisses, grips at Adam’s fingers tightly, “he’s being a fucking ass.”
“So are you,” Adam says, “sit down, let’s finish this, ok?”
He can feel Declan’s eyes on him as he sits angrily back down. He doesn’t shift his chair back towards the table, sits slumped with his arms folded as well as he can while still holding onto Adam’s hand.
“Ok,” Declan says once the waitress leaves again, “I understand that there’s nothing I can say here that will convince you to consider that moving in together so quickly might be a bad idea-”
“No,” Ronan snaps.
“We’re not stupid,” Adam sighs, “it probably looks like we are, I get that, but we’ve discussed this. We both know how messy it would be if we broke up now, especially with a child involved, and we’re both prepared to risk that because we’re - we’re serious about each other. This isn’t just some stupid fling. I wouldn’t move my brother in with someone unless I trusted them unequivocally. And I do trust Ronan.”
Ronan swallows.
Declan sighs.
Adam’s jaw flexes.
“Right,” Declan says heavily, “no chance of convincing you then. Ok. That’s fine. I’m - I guess I’m glad to hear that you two are at least talking about these sorts of things before just doing it, but still.”
“Can you shut up now?” Ronan grumbles, scooping food up on a chip, “Or at least stop being such a fucking downer.”
Declan rolls his eyes, “Fine,” he says, “how’re your grades, Ronan?”
“Fuck off,” Ronan says, “also, don’t tell Matthew any of this, I want to be the one to tell him.”
“We need to talk about your grades sooner or later, Ronan,” Declan warns, sticking a heavily loaded chip into his mouth, “I won’t tell Matthew. I have a feeling he’ll be overjoyed about you admitting you have feelings.”
“Oi,” Ronan snaps, “Matthew knows I have feelings.”
“Oh,” Declan raises his eyebrows, “maybe it’s me who’s overjoyed.”
It’s not so bad. Not as bad as it could be. Declan manages to make almost decent conversation, doesn’t slip back into digging and prodding at their choices, asks Adam more about his classes. At the very least, he seems to approve of Adam. Adam doesn’t seem to be totally against him, either. When they make to go, Declan pulls his card from his wallet and announces that he’s paying, and Ronan expects Adam to kick up his usual fuss. Instead, Adam shrugs, says; “Feel like we deserve a free lunch after that grilling.”
It kind of feels like a normal thing to have done. To have come out to his brother, to have introduced Adam to his brother, to watch his 2 worlds collide.
“You are coming back to school now, yes?” Declan asks sharply as they walk together into the parking lot.
“God,” Ronan rolls his eyes, “yes. I’m just going to drop Adam off at school first.”
“Good,” Declan says, “I wasn’t kidding about talking about your grades. I’ve been getting warning letters.”
“I don’t care,” Ronan says, “I don’t want to be there anyway.”
“I want you there,” Declan says, “and I know Gansey does too.”
“Whatever,” Ronan grinds out, “fuck. See you the fuck later.”
“Nice to meet you, Adam,” Declan says, ignores Ronan, “good luck with my brother.”
“I don’t need it,” Adam replies pleasantly, “see you around.”
Ronan kind of wants to make the both of them late for school by pushing Adam into the back of the BMW and making out with him until he can’t breathe. Adam still has the keys, he holds them up in the ear, lifts his eyebrow inquiringly, and Ronan shakes his head, so Adam climbs in on the driver’s side again.
“Not in the mood for driving?” Adam asks.
“I’m always in the mood for driving,” Ronan grins, “you just look really hot behind the wheel.”
“Oh fuck off,” Adam grins back, “you did real good in there, sweetheart.”
Ronan knows he’s already blushing, “Fuck off,” he gets out, “I’m sorry if it got a bit heated.”
“Please,” Adam snorts, “you think I didn’t expect him to be completely horrified about us already
living together? No sane adult is going to think that’s a good idea.”
“But you do, right?” Ronan asks quickly, doubt gnawing at him.
“Yes,” Adam says emphatically, “yeah I do. Never said I was sane though. Or an adult.”
“Hey,” Ronan says, “thanks for being there.”
“I only came for the free nachos,” Adam smiles back.
“Yeah,” Ronan says, “and I’m only dating you for your sense of humour.”
“It is my best asset,” Adam agrees thoughtfully, reaches to turn the car on.
“Hang on,” Ronan says quickly, reaches out to stall him, “can we not go yet.”
“Why?” Adam asks, narrows his eyes, “We have class again soon, you know I ca-”
He only feels a little bad for cutting Adam off mid-sentence with a kiss. He might have felt more bad
if Adam hadn’t immediately melted into it. It was forever awkward, kissing over a gear stick, leaning
in with their torsos so far apart, but it was still fucking good. He would have happily kissed Adam
like this for weeks if it was all he could get. Adam pulls back only a few moments later though, rubs
his calloused thumb down Ronan’s cheek, and smiles.
“We gotta get going, babe,” he says, “let’s save this for when we actually have time to make it good,
yeah?”
“God,” Ronan grumbles, presses back in for another short kiss, “when will we ever have time.”
“We’ll make some tonight, ok?” Adam says, straightens up in his seat leaving Ronan no choice but
to do the same.
“Hmf,” Ronan sniffs, “I suppose.”
“Y’know,” Adam says, starts the car up, “I really am proud of you. That was a real tough thing to
do.”
“Adam,” Ronan groans.
“No,” Adam says sharply as he pulls out of the park, “you’re gonna hear this, whether you like it or
not Ronan Lynch, I’m fucking proud of you.”
Adam snorts, navigates through traffic to pull onto the road, “what for?” he asks, and his bemused
tone has Ronan bemused.
“Excuse the fuck out of me?” Ronan says, which pulls another snort from Adam, “What for? For
being the best fucking brother anyone could ask for? For dealing with so much shit and still coming
out of it as fucking lovely as you are? For getting amazing grades and apparently being in all the
shitting advanced classed, you fucking nerd? For- God, Adam, I could go on for hours.”
Adam is bright pink. “I think you might be a bit biased,” he says softly, “being my boyfriend and
all.”
“Psh,” Ronan says, “don’t be ridiculous. I could get Gans to type you up a list of things he loves
about you, or finds impressive about you. He’d even put a bibliography in. It’d be at least 12 pages.”
Adam laughs out loud, glances quickly over to grin at him, “Gansey is-” he starts, shakes his head, “I
don’t understand how easy Gansey seems to find it to like me as much as he does.”
“I don’t think you understand how easy it is to like you,” Ronan retorts.
“No,” Adam says seriously, “no I don’t think I do.”
Ronan glances at him now, “I’m gonna show you,” he says, just as seriously, “you’re gonna know.”
Adam is smiling again.
“Ok,” he says, “I look forward to it.” They stop at a red light, and Adam turns to grin somewhat
cheekily at Ronan, “I am assuming you’re referring to our planned make out session tonight?”
“Maybe in part,” Ronan says.
It isn’t until they’re pulling into Mountain View’s parking lot does Ronan remember to say, “Oh, I
wanted to tell Matthew today as well. Would you mind if I do it at school?”
“I don’t mind,” Adam rolls his eyes, “let me know how it goes, ok?”
“Yeah, I will,” Ronan says. They both get out of the car so Ronan can get into the driver’s seat, meet
“We should have Matthew round,” Adam says, leaning into Ronan’s chest as he hoists his bag onto
his shoulders, “have him meet Ethan?”
“Yeah,” Ronan agrees, ducks his head down to graze his lips against Adam’s, “I’d like that.”

He drives back probably a bit too fast - he’s hoping he can make it to Aglionby in time to catch
Matthew before he goes back to class. He manages, but only by a hair, and only because Matthew’s
class is opposite the parking lot. Ronan catches him just before he walks through the doorway.
“Matty!” He yells, locking his door, “Matty, wait up.”
Matthew looks up and away from his friends, waves at them to carry on, and then stands waiting
under the building’s awning, grinning wildly at Ronan approaching.
“Hey!” He greets as soon as Ronan’s close enough, “Did you go out for lunch?”
“Yeah,” Ronan nods, steps up to punch Matthew’s shoulder lightly, “with Declan, believe it or not.”
“What!” Matthew gasps, he’s already grinning but it gets wider, “Without fighting?”
“Oh,” Ronan rolls his eyes, “we fought, of course, but it wasn’t bad.”
“Why?” Matthew asks, shifts his bag off his shoulder and onto his other one, “Were you guys talking
lawyer stuff, or are you two finally being nice to each other?”
Ronan snorts. “I had some shit to tell him,” he says casually, “and I wanted him away from Aglionby
in case he explodes. You know he likes to look all tidy around school.”
Matthew snorts as well. “Yeah,” he says, “what shit?”
“Well,” Ronan says, his stomach is tying itself in knots again even as he tells it not to, “I want to tell
you the same shit, actually.”
“Ok,” Matthew narrows his eyes, “you’re acting weird, what is it?”
“I’m dating a guy,” Ronan says, “his name’s Adam, and he’s great, I really like him. Also I’m gay.”
Matthew blinks at him. “Oh,” he says, “that’s great!”
“Yeah I fucking think so too,” Ronan grins, “I think you’ll really like him, Matty, I want you to meet
him.”
“Ok!” Matthew agrees immediately, “Where is he? Who is he? Is he from Aglionby?”
“Nah,” Ronan says, “I wouldn’t date any of these losers, he’s from Mountain View. You should
come from Monmouth some time and meet him there.”
“Cool,” Mathew says, obviously entirely means it, “I’m looking forward to it! Will you tell me more
later? I have to get to class, I can feel Ms Gunderson glaring at the back of my head.”
“Yeah,” Ronan says, “she’s got her killer face on. Good luck, bro.”
“Text me,” Matthew says insistently as he turns round, “I want to know how this happened.”

He’s happier than usual to go to class. Mostly because he has this class with Gansey. He slips in late,
ignores the teacher’s sarcastic comment, and sits down next to Gansey. Gansey looks at him, then
grins.
“Went well then?” he asks in a low whisper, shoving his open text book over to Ronan’s desk so he
can see what they’re doing.
“Much better than I expected,” Ronan replied, can’t keep the stupidly giddy smile off his face, “God,
Gans, I was - I was honestly so scared.”
“I know,” Gansey says seriously, leans down to pull Ronan’s books out of his bag seeing as he’s not
doing it himself, “I’m glad it went well. I’m proud of-”
“Nu-uh,” Ronan says, “I’ve had enough of that from Adam today, if you do it too I will fucking
melt.”
Gansey laughs quietly, “Ok, loser,” he says happily, “what did Adam think of Declan?”
“I didn’t even ask,” Ronan realises, “I was too busy trying to figure out the best way to persuade him
into skipping class in favour of hooking up in the BMW.”
“Ronan,” Gansey groans, “like that would work with Adam, you know how he is about school.”
“Yeah,” Ronan lifts his eyebrows, “did you know he’s in fucking all advanced classes?”
Gansey lifts his eyebrows back, ‘Uh,” he says, “yes? Of course. I do my homework with him. He’s
exceedingly clever, Ronan.”
“Well I knew that,” Ronan rolls his eyes, “I just wasn’t aware of how much of a nerd king he was.”
“You love it,” Gansey says.
“Yeah,” Ronan says, “love him.”
He’s blushing. So’s Gansey. You’d think Ronan had just professed his love to him instead of about Adam.
The teacher is standing in front of Ronan’s desk, her crossed arms at Ronan’s eyeline.
“If you’re quite finished,” she says, “can I please carry on with my class?”
“God, uh,” Ronan says, “actually, could you give us another 5 minutes or so?”
Gansey hits him over the back of the head.
“Thank you, Richard,” the teacher says.

He would very easily have stayed in such a good mood all day, if it hadn’t been for who was waiting for him in the parking lot, leaning against his car.
“Lynch,” Kavinsky says as he approached, “haven’t seen you round for a bit.”
“Haven’t wanted to be round you,” Ronan grunts, “move out of the way,” he says, brandishing his keys.
Kavinsky doesn’t move. “Come over tonight,” he says, “I’ve got some cool shit to show you.”
“Nah,” Ronan says, shoves at his shoulder ineffectively, “shift your ass, I need to get going.”
“You know your dreaming sucks without me,” Kavinsky hisses, then, “where are you off to in such a hurry?”
“I’ve got shit to do,” Ronan snaps, “get the fuck out of the way.”
Kavinsky’s already too close, gets closer as he leans into Ronan’s face, breathes stale smokey air in it, “you’ve got shit to do with me,” he says slowly, “you and me, stop fucking avoiding the obvious, Lynch.”
“There’s no obvious here,” Ronan says, “except that you’re in my way.”
“We fucking belong together,” Kavinsky drawls, leans heavily back against the car door, “the sooner you realise that, the better shit we’re gonna make.”
“We don’t belong together,” Ronan says sharply, “I don’t belong with you. I never have. I never will.”
“Oh, for fuck’s sake, baby,” Kavinsky cries out in mock hurt, “you know that’s not true. Anyway, no one else would want ya, you may as well take what you’re offered.”
“Fuck that,” Ronan says, “I don’t believe that shit anymore.” He grips Kavinsky’s arm tightly to physically shift him out of the way. Kavinsky is wiry and taut with muscle, but Ronan’s stronger and healthier, shifts him easily.
“Is Dick finally fucking you hard enough?” Kavinsky taunts as Ronan unlocks his door and climbs in, “he finally making you feel good? You think I can’t make you feel better?”
“I know you can’t make me feel good at all,” Ronan snarls, “I don’t need you, K. I never will.”
Kavinsky stares at him, stares at him, and then laughs. Ronan drives away.

He’d usually get Adam to make the drive from Mountain View to Dana’s, but even with how hot Adam looks behind the wheel, Ronan needs to drive right now. Needs to exercise the bright hot anger out of his blood through the thrum of his engine.
Adam climbs into the seat beside him, chucks his bag into the back seat, leans over to kiss him on the lips, then looks at him appraisingly.
“What happened?” he asks.
“Kavinsky,” Ronan mutters, “was being a shit. It’s nothing.”
“Ok,” Adam says easily, does his seat belt up, “are we about to be breaking road rules?”
“Nah,” Ronan says, then reconsiders, “do you still consider it breaking road rules when no one sees it?”
“Yes,” Adam says firmly.
“Well,” Ronan shrugs, “kinda then?”
“Ok,” Adam says, “don’t kill us. Let’s go.”

He doesn’t kill them, he does discover that Adam, despite his sensible exterior, is a fucking speed
demon and appears to love every moment of it.
“Don’t,” he says, as they pull up outside Dana’s, “ever do that with Ethan in the car.”
“Obviously,” Ronan drawls, “you liked that?”
“Yes,” Adam says, “I see what you mean now, about looking hot behind the wheel.”
Ronan flushes.

Ethan has an entire litany of important things to tell them when they pick him up. Most of it is to do
with scratch and sniff stickers. He’s covered in them, but only the grape ones, which is important
apparently because grapes are the most exciting.
Happy Holidays!
I pray you all had a lovely time, and got to spend it with people you love xxxx

It feels ridiculously odd to drop Adam off at Boyd’s rather than taking him back home, but, Ronan supposes, he had better get used to it because now that Adam’s arm was out of his cast he would almost certainly throw himself back into work. He kissed Ronan goodbye before he got out of the car, then opened the back door to lean in and kiss Ethan goodbye as well, then hoisted his work bag up on his shoulder, and left. Ronan and Ethan both sat in their respective seats staring dolefully after him until he disappeared into the building, and then Ronan sighed and turned round to smile at Ethan.

“Wanna go to the park, buddy?” Ronan asks, “Go play on the swings?”
Ethan’s face shifts easily from upset to happy again, “Yes!” he grins, “Gonna go so high!”

He had been vaguely worried that he would bump into someone he knew at the park - some dumb shit kid from school or something. Not that he would have been embarrassed to be seen with Ethan, but because he was worried that they would say something rude or shitty about it to him, and Ethan would hear and get upset. This didn’t happen though. Instead, the two of them tried out every single swing, picked bunches of daisies and dandelions, raced each other across the grass, and collapsed into a giggling heap under a tree.

“Make me a chain?” Ethan asks, depositing the collection of flowers onto Ronan’s stomach.
“Will you show me how?” Ronan asks back, pushing himself up into a vaguely upright position and leaning against the tree trunk. He knows how, but Ethan enjoys telling people how to do it, and it’s entertaining having a 3 year old attempt to demonstrate the fiddly process. They eventually end up with 2, quite shoddy, daisy chains. One of which Ronan threads through Ethan’s curls, and the other which Ethan shoves haphazardly onto Ronan’s head.

“Am I pretty?” Ronan grins, and Ethan stares at him, then smiles widely.
“Uh-huh!” he says, then, “Am I?”
“You sure are, baby,” Ronan smiles back, taps his nose gently, “super pretty.”
Ethan grins for a moment more, then shifts uncomfortably, climbs up into Ronan’s lap and pushes close until his mouth is all but pressed to Ronan’s ear. “M’allowed to be?”
“Allowed to be what, baby?” Ronan asks, hooks his arm carefully round Ethan’s waist.
“Pretty,” Ethan clarifies quietly.
“Um,” Ronan says, squeezes his arm a little tighter, “yes you are. You’re allowed to be pretty.”
“Ok,” Ethan says, and just like that everything’s ok again. He blows a raspberry against Ronan’s ear, and then hops off of his lap to run away cackling while Ronan chases after him.

He had planned on taking Ethan home before Adam’s shift ended, but they spent too long at the park, so by the time he pulls up outside Boyd’s again, Ethan is back in his carseat, covered in grass stains, his daisy chain - a little wilted - still perched in his hair.
Adam laughs as he climbs back into the front seat, leans forwards to wipe what Ronan assumes is a smudge of dirt off of his face, and then turns to Ethan.
“You guys had a nice day?” he asks, “What were you doing? Rolling around in mud puddles?”
“Yeah!” Ethan says immediately, “An’ runnin’, an’ swingin’, and makin’ daisy chains.”
“Sounds great,” Adam says, doesn’t seem at all annoyed that Ronan hadn’t taken Ethan home yet, “I like your flower chains.”
“What about you?” Ronan asks, he kind of wants to lean over and wipe the smudge of grease off of Adam’s collar bone, but he also kind of likes it there, “nice day?”
“Good to be back at work,” Adam shrugs, “Boyd was pleased to see me.” He straightens back up in his seat, fastens his seat belt.
“Home?” Ronan asks.
“Yeah,” Adam nods, “I’m pooped.”

He tells Adam about telling Matthew on the drive home, and Adam leans against the headrest of his seat, smiles softly at Ronan until Ronan feels like his heart is going to bust out of his mouth.
“Stop looking at me like that,” he snaps, can’t stop his mouth from curling into a matching smile.
“Like what?” Adam asks.
“Like you’re - like - fu- uh - so soppy, like.”
“Can’t help it,” Adam says, shrugs, “I’m happy you’re happy.”
“Yeah?” Ronan snorts, “Well I’m happy you’re happy, so suck it.”
Adam snorts back, “Ok,” he says, “that made zero sense.”

Gansey has cooked dinner. Or rather, he’s attempted to cook dinner, then attempted to dispose of this attempt, and then ordered in pizza. Adam laughs at him, and Gansey looks miserable into Adam shakes his head and promises to teach him a few easy recipes.
“It’s not like anyone ever taught me to cook,” Gansey defends himself later as they sit on the floor eating pizza right out of the box. Ethan is lying on his back, pizza in both hands, one slice for him, one slice for Chainsaw, who’s perched on his tummy.
“What about when you were travelling all round the world?” Noah asks. Ronan snags another slice of pizza.
“Uh,” Gansey says, “fast food and convenience store sandwiches.”
“Poor rich boy,” Adam teases gently, “we’ll start off simple, don’t worry.”

By unspoken agreement, Glendower isn’t discussed tonight, neither is magic or ley lines or alternate realities. Gansey seems to get that coming out is enough of an emotional work-out for Ronan for one day, and that Adam’s probably exhausted enough from going back to work. Ronan appreciates this. He also appreciates that Adam isn’t fool enough to try to start back at Nino’s again straight away. He’ll go back next week when he feels more confident with his wrist and his hearing.

Instead, they talk about simple recipes Gansey could try without risking burning Monmouth down, and about running round the park, and about Noah’s favourite band, and Gansey points out the smudge of grease on Adam’s collarbone while Ronan glares ferociously at him. It’s a good evening. He can almost forget about his run in with Kavinsky. Between his brothers’ easy acceptance of who he was and who he was with, and this simple camaraderie between the 5 of them here, Kavinsky and his sour comments didn’t feel important. They still stung though. Not enough that he wants to bring it up again, doesn’t want Kavinsky to ruin his mood again.

Adam has other ideas, though. At least he waits until after Ethan is put to bed, after they’ve said goodnight to Gansey and Noah and gone to Ronan’s bedroom. Adam closes the door behind them, and Ronan turns around to look at him, eyebrows raised.
“Oh?” he says, “Is this the moment in which we’re making room to make out?”
Adam snorts, leans back against the door, “In a minute,” he says, and Ronan steps forward so he can loops his arms around Adam’s neck.
“In a minute?” he asks, presses a kiss to Adam’s temple, “Why in a minute?”
“Mm,” Adam says, lifts his own arms to wrap around Ronan’s waist, “Did you wanna talk about what happened with Kavinsky this afternoon?”
“Oh,” Ronan says, freezes in the middle of pressing another kiss to Adam’s cheek, “not really.”
“You were really upset about it,” Adam points out, “I jus’, jus’ wanna make sure you’re doin’ good.”

“It was nothing,” Ronan insists, leaning back in Adam’s arms, “he’s just still mad that I haven’t been dreaming with him. I told him I didn’t want to see him again, he was rude about it.”

“Oh,” Adam says, cinches his arms tighter around Ronan’s waist, pulling him closer again, “well, I’m glad.”

“Mhm,” Ronan says, then, “I uh, I wanted to ask you something too.”

“Oh?” Adam says.

“About your ear,” Ronan clarifies, can feel Adam stiffening in his arms, “I know you don’t want to talk about it, but it’s obviously really shitty for you, I - let me know if there’s anything I can do to help with that, ok?”

Adam sighs, tips his head back against the door and closes his eyes. “Am I that obvious?” he asks.


Adam shrugs, keeps his eyes closed. “I dunno,” he says, “you’re pretty good about it. It helps that you usually sit on my right side.” He opens his eyes, looks at Ronan, “I honestly don’t know how you can help with this, Ro,” he says, “I think it’s just something we both have to learn to deal with.”

“We could - uh - we could learn sign?” Ronan suggests.

“I’m not fully deaf,” Adam protests, “I can still hear you just fine.”

“Probably not in really loud places though,” Ronan retorts, “or in crowds, or if we’re stuck on the wrong side of each other. It could be really useful as well, we could talk about Gansey right in front of him.”

Adam laughs at this, but is still frowning. He shrugs. “Maybe,” he says, “for now let’s just - let’s just deal with it as it is.”

“Ok,” Ronan agrees, “can we make time now?”

“That is why I shut the door,” Adam says, his frown is sliding away to be replaced with a shy yet sly smile, “that and to have deep conversations, but mostly for the making out.”

“Think we should hang a sign on the door?” Ronan asks, tugging Adam away from it, “‘Gansey and Noah - don’t interact’?”

“You’re terrible,” Adam laughs, allows himself to be tugged. They’re still slightly awkward at this, too many limbs at once, not enough grace and knowledge to know where they’re supposed to be. Ronan manages to wrangle them both onto the bed with minimal catastrophe anyway.

He shuffles backwards until his calves his the bed base, and then all but falls backwards against it, dragging Adam with him.

“Mpf,” Adam lets out against his lips, snorts at the inelegance of it all, but doesn’t even try to rearrange them into a more comfortable position, just lies on top of Ronan’s chest and keeps kissing him, the both of their legs hanging off the end of the bed.

This is not actually something Ronan had ever expected to like. He liked to be in control, he liked to be able to get out of things easily if he needed to. From past experience, being pinned down by someone else’s full body weight was not something he liked in any way at all.

He really fucking liked this. He didn’t feel trapped, even with Adam’s arms on either side of his head, his legs bracketing Ronan’s hips, the angle of the kiss forcing his head up and back, his neck exposed and open. He could happily stay like this forever. Until a better option opens up, that is, which it does next.

Adam pulls away a little, and Ronan, extremely embarrassingly, makes a small noise of complaint and attempts to follow his lips up.

“This can’t be comfortable for you,” Adam says huskily, shifting until he’s sitting up on Ronan’s hips, “we should get further onto the bed.”

Ronan vaguely agrees, but right now it’s so much easier to just sit up against Adam, wraps his arms
back around Adam’s waist, and shift until he has Adam essentially sitting in Ronan’s lap again.
“This is comfortable for me,” Ronan mumbles against Adam’s jaw, feels him shiver against his lips, “this is - I like this.”
Adam shifts in his lap, not much, just a lift of his hips, but it’s definitely enough for Ronan to be reminded about; a. How very gay he is, and b. How very gay he is for Adam.
“Ngh,” he says coherently, “fucking kiss me.”

For a moment, Adam looks unsure, but then he’s leaning back in to kiss Ronan, mouth open, lips wet. Ronan wants to just kiss him back, but the moment of hesitation on Adam’s face is too loud in his mind to ignore. He kisses Adam back for a short second, then pulls away again, lifting his hand to cup Adam’s jaw.
“What’s wrong?” he asks, and Adam raises his eyebrows at him.
“Nothing’s wrong,” he says.
“You don’t wanna kiss right now?” Ronan tries, and Adam looks almost guilty, sighs heavily, and climbs off of Ronan’s knee, which was not the result Ronan had really been hoping for.

He doesn’t get up off of the bed though, just crawls further onto the bed and flops down on his side against the wall, reaches back to pull Ronan up alongside him. Ronan shuffles up until he’s where Adam wants him, and then raises his eyebrows.
“You don’t?” he asks, needing clarification, “We don’t need to, you know, I’m fine with not. That’s ok with me. If you don’t want to kiss, or make out or whatever you just need to say-”
“No,” Adam cuts him off with a quick kiss, a press of lip on lip and nothing more before he pulls back again, “that’s not it. It’s just, something else on my list.”
Ronan narrows his eyes, “Your list of important things we need to talk about?”
“Yeah,” Adam says, and it’s obvious he’s uncomfortable. The tips of his ears are red, he’s biting his lip, he’s not meeting Ronan’s eyes.
“Ok,” Ronan says, “so let’s talk about it.”
“It’s-” Adam begins, rolls his eyes, “it’s so much fuckin’ easier to just not talk about,” he sighs angrily, “I really like you,” he says.
“Ok,” Ronan says again, “well I was pretty sure about that, but, good to know?”
“Stop,” Adam sighs, closes his eyes, “I really like you,” he repeats, “and you’re really - really hot-”
“Well I know that too,” Ronan butts in, and Adam opens his eyes, reaches out to press the flat of his palm against Ronan’s mouth.
“Stop,” he reiterates, “I’m trying to be sensible here.”
“S’ry” Ronan mumbles under Adam’s hand, lifts his own hand up to cover Adam’s over his mouth.
“Ok,” Adam sighs, the pink in his ears is making it’s way to the tips of his cheeks, “so you need to know that this isn’t about me not being like… attracted to you or anything, I’m just not ready to - to do anything more than kissing. Ok?”
Ronan stares at him. Adam isn’t meeting his eyes.
“Not with anyone,” he says, “I’m not comfortable with that right now, and I thought I should let you know before we uh - before we end up in a situation where like - where you might want to do more. I don’t wanna have to turn you down in the heat of the moment or anythin’, so -”
Ronan peels both of their hands away from his mouth. “Ok,” he says firmly, “babe, that’s fine,” Adam meets his eyes now, but only for a half a moment, and then he’s staring off over Ronan’s shoulder, “Are you sure?” he asks, “Cos I know you - I know you want more, it’s just that I can’t do mo-”
“Babe,” Ronan says again, firmer, covers Adam’s mouth with his hand this time, “it’s fine. I’m happy with just kissing. I don’t wanna do anything you don’t want to do. So, yeah, maybe I get - uh - worked up, sometimes? It’s just ‘cos you’re fucking hot and I fucking love you, I’m not expecting anything to happen, you know? I just want to get to be with you and kiss you. If I do want more, it’s like, hey,” he breaks off to shrug, “knows he’s blushing awfully, “I have hands of my own, I can always go jerk off in the shower or whatever. You don’t need to worry about this kind of shit,
Adam is staring at him. Ronan shrugs again, drops his hand from Adam’s mouth. Isn’t sure if he needs to say more to reassure Adam. Adam is staring at him with an intensity that’s almost startling.

“Ok?” Ronan tries, carefully, “Babe?”

“You love me?” Adam asks, and his voice is thin and small.

“Oh,” Ronan says, his own words replaying chaotically through his head, “oh God, Adam.”

“You love me?” Adam asks again.

“Fuck,” Ronan says, scrambles to sit up, “fuck, Adam, I- I meant - you don’t-”

“Ro,” Adam says, he’s not moving at all, “do you?”

“God,” Ronan snaps, his shoulders drawing in close, “yeah I do. I don’t expect anything back, it’s not - you don’t - it’s fine. If you don’t want to hear that just ignore it, ok? I won’t say anything else-”

“Ro,” Adam says again, “I’m not gonna fuckin’ ignore it.”

“Right,” Ronan says.

“I-” Adam finally pushes himself into a sitting position as well, leans against the wall, “I don’t know if I can - if I can say it back yet? But I really - God Ro, God. Could you - would you say it again?”

Ronan stares at him. Adam is as red as Ronan feels.

“Um,” Ronan says shakily, “I love you?”

“Fuck,” Adam says, draws his knees up and hunches over them, “do you fuckin’ mean that?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says defensively, “I do. I didn’t mean to say anything though.”

“Say it again?” Adam asks, voice muffled by his knees.

“I love you,” Ronan says, voice no steadier than before, “I fucking love you, ok Parrish?”

“Ok,” Adam says, sniffs hard, “ok.”

They sit there a moment, Adam curled up around his knees, Ronan desperately trying not to run away, then Ronan reaches out, brushes his hand lightly against Adam’s shoulder. Light so it would be easier for Adam to push him away if he needed to.

Adam doesn’t push him away, he uncurls from round his knees and leans into Ronan’s hand, then leans past the hand so he can lean into Ronan’s chest, “sorry,” he says quietly, “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t scare me,” Ronan says, wrapping himself firmly around Adam, “you just - ok, yeah you scared me a little. I know it’s too early to say shit like that.”

“Not if you mean it,” Adam mumbles.

“Well I do,” Ronan says, firm, truthful.

“You’re ok with - that I can’t - with me not saying it back yet?”

Ronan snorts, “yeah,” he says, firm, truthful, “I am. And before you start back on the previous topic, I am also fine with not doing more than kissing. I want to take this as slowly as we need. Ok?”

“Ok,” Adam says, “ok. Then, can we kiss again?”

“Oh,” Ronan says, “have we finished with this moment already?”

“Dick,” Adam says, he can feel Adam’s face twisting into a grin against his chest.

“Nah,” Ronan snorts, “that’s Ganse-”

“Stop,” Adam laughs, pushes himself up in Ronan’s arms so that he can kiss him, “stop being a shit head.”

“Can’t,” Ronan grins back, “it’s just who I am, Parrish, can’t you accept me for who I am?”

“God,” Adam says, kisses him, “you’re insufferable,” kisses him again, “thank you.”

“For what?” Ronan asks, gets kissed again.

“For -” Adam shrugs, presses a kiss to Ronan’s jaw, “for saying that. No one’s said that to me.”

This shouldn’t be as surprising to Ronan as it is, knowing what Adam’s life was like up until recently. It still hits him like a boot to the stomach though.
“God, babe,” he hisses out, takes Adam’s face in his hands and kisses him hard, “don’t thank me for that.” He wants to tell Adam how awful his parents were for never having said this to Adam, wants to rant about how it is entirely unfair that Adam could be this old and never had anyone tell him they love him. Instead he says; "Remember how I said I was gonna show you how - how likeable you are? How loveable you are?"

“Mm,” Adam says.
“I have half a mind to march you out to Gansey and have him tell you how much he loves you too, and half a mind to just kiss you until you suddenly realise it through like, osmosis or some shit.”
“Nerd,” Adam says, “I like the second option.”
“Me too.”
The thing about everyday life, was that it had to keep happening, despite everything else going on around you. This was a hassle. It wasn’t like Adam didn’t have a lifetime of experience of juggling far too many responsibilities at once, but all of those things had slotted easily enough into each other. Trying to fit school, homework, work, Ethan, Ronan, Noah, Blue, and Glendower into a reasonable schedule seemed entirely impossible.

Impossible or not, it was what Adam was going to fucking do, whether it killed him or not. The last few weeks hadn’t just been game changers, they had been moments of his life in which he could very easily see the two separate decisions he could make, and he had knowingly, and very purposefully, chosen all of the harder ones. Or maybe not the harder ones, the more convoluted ones, the less generic ones. If he had been the Adam of last year maybe, he would have picked and chose more selectively. Maybe he would have picked Ethan and only Ethan, like he had been for the last few years. Maybe he would have picked Gansey, but not Glendower, or Glendower but not Gansey.

This Adam though, the Adam of now, the Adam who knew he wasn’t the Adam he could be, he chose all of it. More importantly, he wanted to choose all of it. Most importantly, he felt as if it had all chosen him, as well. This wasn’t some pie in the sky thing, this was something that burned him right to the marrow with how real it felt. Which, quite honestly, did sound somewhat pie in the sky-y, but it was true. He had been haunted by indecision and anxiety over every single one of his choices all his life.

Maybe if he hadn’t stood up when he did he wouldn’t have been hit. Maybe if he spoke up earlier to someone, things would have been easier. Maybe if he didn’t work so hard at school his parents would like him. Maybe if he worked harder at school his teachers would like him. Maybe if he got another job he’d have enough money to go to Aglionby. Maybe -

There was no maybe here. No maybe about Ronan. Sure, a lot of general terror that he was going to fuck shit up, but no real belief that this was the wrong thing to do. He had absolutely no regrets about Ronan.

There was no maybe about Glendower, about wishes, and Cabeswater, magic, and psychics. No maybes now. A fuck load more terror than he has about Ronan, but no maybes. He had never given himself a maybe option about Ethan. That wasn’t going to change.

The thing about everyday life, is that one moment you can be fast asleep with your boyfriend, your literal actual fucking amazing boyfriend, and the next you can be jolted into awakening in one of the most terrifying ways possible, and you kind of forgot that could happen because you were busy with everyday life things.
Ronan was stiff next to him, stiff and shaking wildly, eyes wide open, staring down a breathlessly pale many beaked, many eyed, many winged, thing perched heavily on Ronan’s chest. He can see feet with talons (or maybe they’re talons with claws) pressing into the skin of Ronan’s chest - blood beading out.

He’s pretty sure he yells, it’s surprising, after all. He scrambles up out of the blankets, hand tight on Ronan’s shoulder, eyes flicking from Ronan’s taut face, to the face (?) of the thing (bird?), to the door. He hopes, prays, that it’ll be Gansey who comes through the ajar door in response to his panicked yell, not Ethan. Not Ethan.

“Ronan,” Adam is saying, “Ronan, fuck, fuck, Ronan-” he doesn’t know what he wants to be saying, what he ought to be saying, if saying anything would actually be useful. Is this normal? Is this what happens when he brings things out of his dreams? Is he fucking dying? Please say something? What the fuck? What the fuck what the fuck.

Ronan’s door slams open, slams Adam’s heart into his rib cage until he sees that it's Gansey, alone, in the doorway. Gansey immediately shuts the door behind him, trapping them in with the thing, keeping it out of the rest of the house. He doesn’t move closer, just stares at the scene. It’s like a wax work tableau. From a horror house or something, lit by flickering candles maybe, because there’s no real movement happening, just the shake of Ronan.

“Don’t panic,” Gansey says in a panicked tone, it's hard to tell if he's talking to himself, or Adam, or Ronan, “everything is going to be… is going to be ok-” he’s leaning over slowly as he speaks, reaching for Ronan’s desk chair like he’s going to use it as a weapon. Ronan speaks.

“Don’t-” he rasps. He’s stopped shaking, is suddenly so still against Adam's legs it's almost scary. The thing on him still isn’t moving at all, just leaning in over him. Gansey pauses, fingers wrapped around the top of the chair, terror in his eyes. Adam doesn't understand enough of what's going on to be quite as terrified as Gansey looks, but he's scared enough. His fingers ache in their tight grip on Ronan's shoulder, but he can't bring himself to let go. “It won’t-” Ronan gets out, coughs harshly, “it’s not going to hurt me,” he says, “or anyone here.” “The fuck, Ronan,” Gansey gasps, “that’s one of those fucking - those fucking things - the ones that - you know what they do-” “Not this one,” Ronan says, his breathing is hard and shallow - most likely because his chest is being slowly squished - but he seems quite calm. Or calm at least in comparison to Gansey and Adam’s quite tangible panic.

“You’re bleeding,” Adam points out - his voice is a lot rougher than he wants it to be - and Ronan glances down at the talon digging into his skin, grunts in annoyance, and simply shoves the thing off him. It lets out an aggrieved noise, similar to that of a pissy Chainsaw, and flaps its wings wildly as it lands on the floor. It’s fucking huge when it’s not crouched and curled in on itself. As big as a fully grown man. Gansey stumbles back against the door, and Ronan sits up. “It was protecting me,” he says slowly, voice still raspy, “I know what’s fucking up Noah.”
Chapter Notes

there are no dickcakes in this chapter.

This statement is enough to give everyone pause, enough to quell maybe a little of the panic, not enough for either Gansey or Adam to be entirely comfortable being in a room with what looks and smells like an omen of some gruesome death. Ronan snorts at them in a way that sounds like he’s trying to be disparaging about their discomfort, but his pale face gives him a way a little.

“It’s fine,” he says, pulling himself out of the tangle of sheets, away from Adam’s stiff knuckled grip, “I’ll get rid of it. Don’t want to freak Ethan out.”

“Good,” Gansey says, still by the door. He’s gripping the back of the chair like he’s ready and willing to use it as a weapon in a moment’s notice if need be. Adam doesn’t say anything. Just stays crouched on the wall side of the bed.

“Ok,” Ronan says, doesn’t approach the bird/thing, goes to his windows instead and pushes them wide open, “get out of here, will you?” He doesn’t turn to address it, but it appears to know it’s being spoken to. It cocks its head and shambles over to Ronan’s side. Adam wants to swear, wants to pull him away from the bed and yank it away from Ronan. Stop it from pressing its feathers, it’s leathered skin, against Ronan’s bare side. He doesn’t. Because Ronan doesn’t look worried, pale yes, worried no. He steps away from the window, away from the thing. “Go to the barns,” he says, “don’t fuck shit up.”

It’s not exactly eloquent, but the thing/bird appears to understand. Probably because it comes straight out of Ronan’s head. It leaps through the window, and Ronan closes and latches it firmly in its departure. Turns back to Adam on the bed.

“Babe,” he says. Now he looks worried. Worried and pale, and his chest is still bleeding. “Babe,” he says again, “are you ok?”

Adam snorts. He doesn’t mean to, but it’s kind of funny. “Yeah,” he says, “I’m fine. Freaked out as all hell, but I’m fine. C’mere, lemme look at your chest.”

Ronan obeys immediately, crosses the room in two quick steps and drops down to his knees onto the mattress in front of Adam. Adam isn’t sure if this extreme promptness is due to the fact that Ronan is freaked out, or that Adam looks freaked out and Ronan feels bad about it. Whatever reason, it gets Ronan in Adam’s hands quickly, which certainly helps calm Adam down at the very least. The gouges aren’t very deep, just surface scratches really. They look like somewhat bigger versions of the marks Chainsaw leaves on Ronan’s shoulders when she’s scrambling for a better hold. This, rather than Ronan’s calm facade over the whole ordeal, is what really calms him down. This thing, this bird monster thing, had no apparent ill intention towards Ronan. Obeyed Ronan.

“You’ll need plasters,” Adam says, fingers pressing into the skin next to the scratches, skittering over Ronan’s ribs, “and we should probably disinfect the cuts. Are dream things sterile by nature? Because that didn’t look sterile.”
“No idea,” Ronan says, lifts his hands from the bed to cover Adam’s on his chest, wraps his fingers around Adam’s. The both of their hands are shaking.

“Ok,” Adam says, feels better still with Ronan holding onto him, “let’s get this cleaned up, and then you can tell us what’s going on with Noah. Is that ok, Gans?”

Gansey clears his throat as he’s addressed, as if he’s almost forgotten he was there, shuffles slightly. “Yes,” he says, “yes. Do we - want me to go see if Ethan is up?”

“You don’t have to-” Adam begins, and watches over Ronan’s shoulder as Gansey actually rolls his eyes.

“Parrish,” he says, not meanly, “I’m vaguely freaked out here, and going to go look after Ethan would do me a lot of good. Can I?”

“Oh,” Adam says, knows Gansey is refraining from insulting Adam’s pride, “yes.”

“Sorry, Gans,” Ronan mumbles. He’s dropped his chin to his chest, is leaning closer in to Adam as he speaks.

“It’s fine,” Gansey says, sounds entirely sincere, “terrifying, but fine. I’m glad this wasn’t a - I’m glad this monster was benign. Go get cleaned up. Let Adam look after you, ok?”

Ronan snorts, completes his slow tilt forward so that his forehead is pressed against Adam’s shoulder. Gansey turns to leave, holds the door half closed as he sidles out, as if he’s worried the bird will come back and force its way through it, or that Ethan will burst in from the other side and see the blood. Not that there’s too much, but still. “And,” Gansey continues, “Adam, let Ronan look after you.”

Now Adam snorts as well.

“Are you really ok?” Ronan mumbles into Adam’s neck once the door clicks shut behind Gansey, “I know this wasn’t exactly an easy introduction to my dreams.”

“I-” Adam says, pauses to think about, frees his hands from between himself and Ronan so he can wraps his arms around Ronan’s torso to drag him closer, “yeah,” he says, “I am. I’ll be better when everything is explained more and you’re not bleeding on me.”

“Sorry,” Ronan mumbles, makes no move to pull away from Adam, “are you going to nurse me then?”

“No,” Adam snorts, “I’m going to- yeah. I’m going to nurse you. Is the first aid kit in the bathroom?”

It turns out that, yes, there is a first aid kit in the bathroom, but Ronan also keeps one under his bed for obvious reasons, so they just use that. Adam prefers this, because it lowers the risk of Ethan seeing Ronan’s scratched up chest, of seeing Adams shaky hands. Once Ronan’s sat, not quite stoically, through being disinfected and plastered up, Adam leans back in and kisses him gently.

“You ok?” he asks, voice firm, “Was this - were you having bad dreams because of - uh - last night?”

Ronan gives him his speciality Lynch look. Adam knows this is a speciality Lynch look because he’d seen it on Declan’s face yesterday as well. It was the one that very clearly read; ‘are you a fucking idiot because you sure as fuck sound like a fucking idiot’. 
“No,” Ronan says firmly, “it wasn’t that.”

“Because,” Adam continues, ignores the loudness of Ronan’s face, “I’ve read - no, stop laughing at me - I’ve read that when there’s a disparity in the first - uh - in the first ‘I love you’s’, it can lead to anxiety and uh-”

Ronan cuts him off, “Adam,” he says, “Jesus and Mary on a bike. You fucking nerd. I’m not anxious about it. I’m fine. It sounds more like you’re anxious about it, and lemme tell you right the fuck now that you don’t need to be. Ok?”

“Ok,” Adam says eventually. Ronan’s threading their fingers together, pulling him closer, smirking at him. “So what did cause it then?”

“Is it ok,” Ronan says, pulls Adam closer still so he’s all but speaking against Adam’s skin, “if I just tell you all together? I think it’s gonna be a long story and I kinda want to kiss you until your hands stop shaking so much.”

“Kissing me isn’t the answer to that,” Adam snorts, presses forward into the kiss anyway.

They’re interrupted a few minutes later, which according to Ronan’s grunt of annoyance, isn’t long enough, by a light knocking on the door, and then Noah’s voice.

“Gansey’s making pancakes for breakfast with Ethan, and asks me to ask you guys to keep your snogging to a minimum so we can have breakfast and answers sooner rather than later.”

“Tell Gansey that-” Ronan begins, and Adam rolls his eyes, presses forward to shut him up with another quick kiss, and then calls back in reply to Noah.

“We’ll be out in a minute,” he says, “tell Gans thanks, and that I’ll do the dishes.”

“That’s very sweet,” Noah says, then, “also, just saying, I can practically feel all your emotions right now, you might want to tone them down a bit Ronan.”

“Fuck off,” Ronan snaps, tightens his arms around Adam, winces as that pulls at the plasters and scratches.

“Pancakes!” Noah says happily, and, hopefully, leaves. It’s sometimes difficult to tell if Noah is still nearby when he doesn’t really make noises as he walks.

Ronan’s frowning heavily when Adam turns to look back at him.

“Your emotions aren’t too loud,” Adam says, “we have a minute. We should probably spend that putting shirts on and putting the rubbish in the bin but we could also-”

Ronan cuts him off with the also, which mostly involves kissing.

They join the rest of the flat in the lounge about 5 minutes later, which receives only minimal smirking and eyebrow raising from Gansey and Noah, and a loud joyous greeting from Ethan which involved leaping off the back of the couch onto Adam’s back.

“Oh!” Adam exclaims, swings his arms around so he can hold Ethan in a piggy back, “Did you sleep well, sweetheart?”

“Uh-huh,” Ethan says into Adam’s ear, not quietly. Luckily it’s his left ear. “Woke up when Gans said pancakes and now e’rythin’s so good!” With every word his voice gets louder.
“Heck yeah pancakes!” Ronan says, squashes against Adam’s back to hug Ethan, making a Parrish Lynch sandwich. “Gans, did you use the pancake pan that makes fun shapes?”

“No,” Gansey says, and before Ronan can make his groan too loud, adds, “because it has a tendency to make pancakes in the shape of certain anatomy, and I didn’t think that was appropriate.”

“It’s one of Ronan’s dream things,” Noah supplies with a grin. He’s sitting on the floor surrounded by multiple bottles of half empty maple syrups, and plates of pancakes, “I call it the - the d-i-c-k-cake maker. It’s great.”

“I want to say that’s how I realised Ronan was gay,” Noah says, squirts a ridiculous amount of syrup onto a pikelet size pancake which he’s not even going to eat, “because why else would he make edible d- uhs. But it was pretty obvious before that, so.”

“It wasn’t.” Ronan protests, releases Ethan and Adam so he swing himself over the couch to settle onto the ground next to Noah, swipes his maple syrup overflowing pancake, “I’m very subtle.”

“About as subtle as a car crash,” Gansey mutters, pats the ground next to himself, “Adam, come sit with us.”

He has to hand it to Gansey, he may have no idea how to cook most things, but he’s really good at breakfast making. He tells him this through a mouthful of pancake and syrup, and Gansey blushes in reply. Apparently as good as he is at speaking earnestly, he’s not so good at receiving in kind.

“Ok,” Noah announces once everyone is stuffed to bursting with pancakes, “we have just under an hour before you all need to be out of here, and I am not sitting around all day without answers, so start talking, Ronan.”

“Geez,” Ronan mumbles, “who died and made you the boss?”

“Well,” Noah shrugs, “I died, so, me I guess.”

“Thanks for shi-pooping on the mood, man,” Ronan snorts. Gansey leans over the plates the shove his shoulder.

“Stop being a jerk, Ronan,” he says dryly, “come on, what’s going on?”

“Ok,” Ronan says, stuffs another whole pancake in his mouth at once, tries to speak through it, “so-

“No talkin’ wi’ y’mouth full!” Ethan commands from across the room where he and Chainsaw are picking apart some styrofoam packing peanuts from one of Gansey’s recent insomnia purchases, “’S’naughty!”

“Yeah, Ronan,” Noah says, “it’s naughty.”

“Don’t be naughty, Ronan,” Gansey says, stacking breakfast plates.

“I saw Kavinsky,” Ronan begins, mouth finally empty, “uh - in my dreams. God, that sounds...bad. The real Kavinsky, not like, I wasn’t dreaming about him, he was in a dream too, we were in the same place,” he hurries to clarify, grinds the heel of his palm into his forehead, and shuffles back on
the floor until he’s leaning against the couch.

This clarification doesn’t really make Adam feel better about it, and a quick glance around the room shows that Gansey and Noah feel the same.

Ronan continues.
“Gans and Noah know about this a bit more,” he says, “but you know how I’ve said that Cabeswater is from my dreams, or, or, I dream from Cabeswater or whatever? That’s also where Kavinsky goes in his dreams to take things, but, from what I can tell he’s not… he’s not welcome there. Not really. Still. We’ve been there together before while dreaming, never while not physically near each other though - so - and, ugh, ok Gansey already knows this but I haven’t been dreaming lately. Not since Chainsaw. Not really, so it was a surprise to find myself in a dream, with Kavinsky of all people and - fuck,” he breaks off, sighs, droops backwards more so his head rests on the couch cushions, “I hate trying to explain this-”

“Bad words!” Ethan yells, still across the room, surrounded by chips of styrofoam.

Ronan slaps his hand over his mouth, groans. Adam sighs, leans over to poke Ronan in the side - causing him to squawk and double over - and gets to his feet to cross the room over to Ethan.

“Hey bud,” he says, stooping down to scoop him (and coincidentally Chainsaw) up into his arms, “do you wanna dress yourself today? Like a big boy?”

“M not a big boy,” Ethan points out seriously, squirming in Adam’s arms to pull himself up higher, “an’ I don’ like doin’ butt-uns.”

“You’re getting real big,” Adam replies cheerfully, hoists him up higher, “an’ you do so good with the buttons now, wanna give it a try? You can wear whatever you like?”

Ethan appears to be considering.

“Ok,” he says, wriggles again, this time because he wants to be put down, “’m gonna dress Chainsaw too, bye.”

“Ok,” Adam grins, “bye.”

“Ok,” Ronan sighs once Ethan’s disappeared into his and Adam’s room, drops back against the couch, “so. I - Kavinsky was doing his usual posturing, talking about all the shit he’d been stealing from Cabeswater lately, and then I saw Orphan Girl-”


“This is a question I ask Ronan frequently,” Gansey sighs, dramatic. He’s sprawled himself out across the floor on his stomach, propped his head up in his hands, “he’s always so obscure in his answers.”

“She’s someone who’s always been in my dreams,” Ronan grunts, “not really a dream guide, more like a dream companion. She’s always the same. I don’t know how to explain it. She’s just there.”

“Obscure,” Gansey mumbles.

“Orphan Girl?” Adam repeats, “Why is she Orph-”

“I don’t know,” Ronan says, shrugs awkwardly, closes his eyes, “that’s just what I- what I call her in my head. Can I continue now?”
“Please do,” Noah says, squeezes maple syrup straight out of the bottle into the air like a miniature sugar geyser. Everyone elects to ignore this.

“She was fuckin’ hiding behind some trees, obviously didn’t want K to see her. She’s never been there when I’ve been there with K before, so it was really suspicious. She was trying to tell me something, but it’s not like I could get away from K without him being suspicious, and I can barely understand her at the best of the times, let alone while she’s hiding behind half the fucking forest, and - ugh. She seemed really frantic so I tried to get round it without exposing her to K by asking Cabeswater what was wrong.”

“Because it talks to you the most when you’re dreaming, right?” Gansey interrupts, “I mean, you can talk to it in real life too, but you can have something more like a conversation while you’re asleep—”

“Don’t fucking butt in,” Ronan snaps, “yes. Kind of. It still speaks in fucking riddles though. It uh - it told me that there were many thieves, many thieves and only one - uh - greywaren, whatever the fuck that is, told me that the thieves were sapping it, I think? It was speaking Latin, and my Latin is not better while I’m asleep, plus K was saying dumb shit the entire time and - ugh. So, I asked if it was weaker because K was stealing shit from it all the time and, and it said yes, in a roundabout way of course, but then it said there was something else, something more awake, and of course that’s the moment K decides we ought to start a fucking brawl or whatever the hell and there was all this fucking… all this fucking fire and I told him to cut it out because he was going to burn the whole fucking place down, and then my- the fucking nightmares came, and Orphan Girl was acting all hysterical and screaming at me in tree-ish or some shit, and Cabeswater was just doing that pretentious ass leaf rustling that sounds like Gansey sighing when he thinks you’re being dumb—” he has to pause to breathe, and also for Gansey to kick his legs. Continues. “-It was getting kinda - kinda dangerous in there, and I - I guess I panicked and my dream just produced that white ass ugly motherfucker I brought out with me, and it was just - just stomping out fires and the nightmares and shit - and then - uh - then I woke up.”

“So—” Gansey says after a few moments, “Cabeswater’s fucked up because—”

“Because of the dreaming,” Ronan mumbles, “I - I don’t think my dreaming. Not so much. I think that’s what it meant by… by thieves and greywaren? But I know K has been dreaming a fuck load lately. I know there’s something he really wants to show me, so it has to be something big - and I guess he’s been taking it from Cabeswater so… so that’s draining it more than dreaming usually drains it, and because Cabeswater’s what keeps Noah’s magic tank fueled up, it hasn’t had enough juice for Noah, and I guess not for me either and that’s why I’ve not been dreaming so much - and—”

“What did it mean,” Adam asks, “about the something more - awake, was it?”

“I don’t know,” Ronan groans, lurches forwards, tugs up his knees, and wraps his arms around them, “I don’t know. It seemed almost - no. Orphan Girl seemed scared about, Cabeswater just seemed kind of… pissed off. So - ok, this probably isn’t as informative as I made it seem? But that’s at least half an answer. Thieving is sucking up all Cabeswater’s energy, ergo, Noah has less energy, ergo, disappearing.”

“Ergo,” Gansey mumbles, “what do you think, Noah?”

“I think I feel drained,” Noah says, “and I think the forest is feeling drained, and feeling deader than usual.”

“Deader than usual?” Adam asks, “You or the forest?”

“Both?” Noah suggests, shrugs. His shoulders are almost transparent for a moment.
“We should talk to Blue about this,” Adam says, “what do you think, Ro? Maybe the pyshics could shed some light on the deader than usual thing, or the more awake thing.”

“Maybe they can,” Ronan says to his kneecaps, “but maybe they won’t, just to piss us off.”

“Or,” Gansey says, “maybe they will because they’re not awful people, Ronan.”

Ronan snorts.

“Right,” Adam says, pushes himself up from his sprawled lean against Gansey’s side, “we need a game plan. I think we should talk to the psychics first. Gans?”

“I agree,” Gansey says, “Psychics, then Cabeswater?”

“Yeah,” Adam says, bites his lip, “uh, I have work this afternoon and tonight, so I don’t think I can come, but you guys should go.”

“No,” Ronan says, “We’ll go to Maggot’s house in the evening between jobs, and we’ll go to Cabeswater tomorrow same time. We’re not doing this without you, Parrish.”

“I agree,” Gansey says sternly, “whether you like it or not, Adam, you’ve become a key piece in this puzzle, I think. We need you with us.”

“Ok,” Adam says, “I - I think I’ll ask Maura if she can babysit Ethan tomorrow night then. I don’t want to take him into the forest with us. Not if there’s something… awake in it.”

“No,” Ronan says again, “we’re definitely not fucking taking him anywhere dangerous.”

“Bad words!” Ethan says loudly from the doorway, “Am dressed!”

Ethan is wearing one of Ronan’s black singlets, tucked sloppily into a pair of his own bright red pajama bottoms, 2 pairs of mismatched socks on both feet, and a small beret that Adam has never seen before perched lopsided in his curls. Chainsaw is also wearing mismatched socks, and another of Ronan’s singlets.

“Oh my heart,” Noah mumbles, “who has a camera?”
It's not as if

Chapter Notes

What are we doing today? Just playing cards. Or playing in cards.

This is the plan they decide upon before piling into their cars and driving off to school and Dana’s;

1. Ronan don’t go talk to Kavinsky yet.
2. Gansey calls Mallory after school.
3. Ronan picks Adam, Blue and Ethan up. Adam to Boyd’s, Ethan and Blue to Fox Way.
4. Ronan has a civil conversation with the psychics.
5. Maybe Noah turns up?
6. Gansey picks Adam up from Boyd’s and goes to Fox Way.
7. Patch things up between Ronan and Calla
8. Information?
9. Success?
10. Ronan takes Adam to work, Gansey takes Ethan home.

He’s not sure how the plan is going for anyone else past no.3, but he’s already had to add another sub-category to the plan, and all he’s meant to be doing right now is automotive repair. He supposes this is partially his own fault, he can’t really expect Gansey to be thinking about anything much more than his quest right now, certainly not enough to remember to add everyday life variations into their plan, especially seeing as Adam had forgotten as well.

Declan Lynch is standing in the grimy forecourt of the garage. His neatly pressed school uniform does not look at all at home there, but his broad shoulders and grim face do.

“Oh,” Adam says in greeting, hadn’t expected Declan to be the Aglionby boy Etta had told him was waiting to speak to him. He wipes his hands on the seat of his coveralls, nods, “Declan, car trouble?”

Oh yes, there it is, the Lynch speciality look. He much prefers it when it’s Ronan directing it at him, not Declan.

“We both know I’m not here about my car,” Declan says, “do you have a moment to spare?”

“I can take my 15 now,” Adam offers, “if you don’t mind me grabbing a coffee while we talk.”

“There’s a cafe round the corner-” Declan begins, but Adam is already nodding back at the garage, “kitchen inside,” he says, “it’ll be empty right now.”

He doesn’t wait for Declan to reply, because his expression has changed into another one that Adam has seen before, the expression people wear right before they’re about to offer to pay for you.

“Come on,” he says over his shoulder, already walking back, “I’ll just tell Etta I’m on my break.”
Once in the kitchen, he flicks the kettle on, and reaches up to the shelf for a mug. “Want anything?” he asks as Declan follows him inside, hovers in the doorway. Unlike most people hovering in doorways, Declan doesn’t appear to be unsure. Instead, he just looms. “There’s uh - instant coffee and gumboot tea.”

“No thank you,” Declan says, takes his looming from the doorway to sit down at the rickety table. “I want to talk to you about Ronan,” he announces.

Adam doesn’t pause in his movements. The kitchen is small enough that he doesn’t really need to move his feet to reach anything, so he just stands in that one spot while the kettle boils.

“Oh?”

“And before you get defensive, because I’m sure Ronan’s only said bad things about me, let me tell you that I’m only here in Ronan’s best interests.”

“Oh?”

“Ronan has had a… a troubled background,” Declan begins, and that’s already enough. Adam pours his boiling water as noisily as possible.

“I know,” he says stiffly to his mug, stirs the mud like coffee with possibly too much force. Declan makes a noise behind him. Possibly a huff of discontent, possibly of amusement.

“I suppose it does come off as rather obvious,” Declan says, “but-”

“If you’re here,” Adam says, grips his mug tightly even though it scalds his palms, doesn’t turn round to face Declan, “to tell me to be careful with Ronan, that’s fine, I have no intentions of hurting him. Ever. If you’re here for any other reason-”

“I don’t think you’re going to hurt him,” Declan interrupts, “rather, I’m worried he might hurt you.”

His stomach is scalding now as well. He turns on heel to face Declan, raises one eyebrow, keeps calm.

“Ronan isn’t going to hurt me,” he says flatly, “and I’m more than capable of looking after my own well-being."

Declan sighs. His head in his hands.

“I’m going about this wrong,” he says, grunts, “it’s not that I think he will purposefully hurt you, it’s that he’s… he’s involved in some dangerous things.”

“I know,” Adam says again, exhales anger.

“I really don’t think you do,” Declan says, and it’s obvious he’s trying very hard not to come across as condescending, but it’s just not working. “Ronan has a lot of secrets. Our family has a lot of secrets.”

“I know everything,” Adam says, “that I need to know, and I can tell you that with him I’m safer than I ever have been before.”

Declan rolls his eyes, and when Adam inhales, it’s anger in his lungs again.

“Are you trying to scare me off?” Adam snaps, “Or get something from me? Look, I don’t have much time, so speak plainly.” He takes an over large gulp of his still too hot coffee, swallows it
“I don’t want to scare you off, no,” Declan snaps back, “I’m just giving you fair warning before you get in too deep. Dating Ronan Lynch is not a game, this isn’t something easy, you can’t tame him. When I say he’s involved in something dangerous, I’m not just talking about his frankly idiotic racing, or even his drinking-”

“You’re talking about his dreaming,” Adam finishes firmly for him, “and your father’s death. You’re talking about his nightmares, what he brings out from them. I know. You think he could be with me and not have me know? That’s far too close to lying. I’ve already made my choices, Declan.”

Declan stares at him, apparently entirely unimpressed.

“He told you,” he says unnecessarily. Adam nods. “He’s told you about Gansey’s treasure hunt as well, then?” Adam nods. “Are you going to tell anyone?” Declan asks, “If you tell anyone-”

“For fucks sake,” Adam grits out, “No. Is that all?”

Declan continues to stare at him. Adam gulps more of his coffee. He’s all too aware of Declan’s eyes on him, cataloguing his grubby work clothes, the unevenness of his hair, the roughness of his hands-

“I saw Joseph Kavinsky this morning,” Declan begins slowly, watches Adam’s face carefully, “how much do you know about that?”

“If you’re digging for info,” Adam says blandly, “you’re not getting any.”

Declan snorts. “Alright,” he says, taps at the plastic topped table with his knuckles, “Kavinsky appears to believe he currently has the upper hand with something,” he says slowly, “I wanted to make sure Ronan was aware of this.”

“So why are you here?” Adam asks.

“I also wanted to make sure you were aware of Ronan’s…activities with Kavinsky,” Declan continues, “and so you could tell Ronan to be careful around Kavinsky, seeing as he doesn’t like listening to me.”

“We already know,” Adam says, “now, if you’re done attempting to defame my boyfriend to me? I might cut my break short so I can get some more work done.”

Declan grits his jaw tightly, but stands up as Adam turns to put his mug in the sink.

“I love my brother,” Declan says loudly, and Adam turns round quickly at the sudden change of tone, “but he has no self-preservation. His only instinct is chaos. He may not approve of lying, but he’s perfectly happy to bend the truth. Forgive me for sounding aggravated, it’s just I’ve spent my entire life cleaning up his messes-”

“Oh,” Adam breaks in, “I’m not dealing with your family issues right now. I get you guys have shit to deal with, but it does not involve me pandering to your grumpiness. Excuse me.”

He leaves Declan in the kitchen. He probably shouldn’t have, but he’s too stressed out to do
anything else right now. He can’t deal with Declan talking at him, treating him and Ronan both like they had no idea what they were doing. He’s overreacting. He knows this. Declan probably was just trying to help. Probably wasn’t purposefully winding Adam up. Knowing this doesn’t stress him out less, doesn’t make him change his mind about heading straight back into the garage and all but shoving himself back under the car he was fiddling with.

He needs these few short hours at Boyd’s, getting tired and dirty but not exhausted. Not confused. He knows what he’s doing here, he knows how things work.

By the time Gansey comes to pick him up after his shift, he hasn’t managed to stop stressing over it, hasn’t managed to snatch the few hours allotted to him to make his brain shut up.

“What did Mallory say?” he asks as he straps himself into the front seat of the Camaro. It felt weird to be riding shotgun with Gansey, he was so used to either sitting in the back with Ethan, sometimes with Noah and Blue as well, or riding with Ronan.

“He says he has heard of some precedents for ley lines being drained,” Gansey reports cheerfully, “or otherwise simply just stopping working, which he theorises could be due to drainage or simply a disruption in the energy distribution.”

Adam lets Gansey talk to him about this for the majority of the ride. It isn’t that he isn’t paying attention - he is, he’ll be able to repeat all of this back to Gansey if needed - it’s that he’s trying to decide whether it’s worth it or not to mention his break visit to Gansey before Ronan. Declan had been right in his implications that Adam barely knew Ronan. They had only just got together, had only met a few months prior. Gansey knew Ronan much more intimately, and as an added bonus, also knew Declan.

It isn’t until they’re parked just down the block from Blue’s house though, caught in between some neighbours toyota and Ronan’s BMW, does Adam make up his mind.

“Declan came to see me today,” he says as they unbuckle their belts.

“Oh dear,” Gansey replies unhelpfully. Stills in his seat and stares at Adam.

“How much does Declan know?” Adam asks. Gansey looks confused, so Adam continues; “About Glendower. About Cabeswater. I know he knows about Ronan’s dreaming, but is he involved in anything more?”

This really doesn’t seem to be where Gansey thought this subject of conversation was going to go, he still looks confused, but answers anyway. “We’ve never told him anything straight up about Glendower. He doesn’t know about Noah being… Noah. I think he suspects that this isn’t just some history obsession I have, but I don’t think he thinks it’s anything important enough to be worried about or he would have already stepped in to have a firm word with us about it.”

“Does he do that often, then?” Adam asks carefully, presses the door handle in but doesn’t open the door. “Step in for a firm word?”
“Not as often as he wants to, I suspect. Usually about Ronan’s grades, or driving, or drinking, or whatever else Ronan thing Ronan is doing that he disapproves of.”

“Ok,” Adam says, opens the door.

“Are you going to tell Ronan?” Gansey asks from the driver’s seat.

“Oh,” Adam says, “yes. Of course.”

As expected and planned for, the house is in a mild state of chaos when they step inside. Ronan is sitting grouchily at the bottom of the stairs, arms squeezed around his legs, face buried in his knees. There’s a huddle of women - Calla and Jimi they key members of which - standing in the doorway closest to Ronan having a very energetic whispered argument. Blue and Ethan are nowhere to be seen.

“Afternoon,” Gansey says grandly, and the whispering pauses for a moment for eyebrows to be lifted and the conversation to be shuffled from the doorway into the reading room, door closing behind them. Ronan has pushed himself off of the stairs, re-buries his face in Adam’s neck.

“Oh my God,” he groans loudly, “I am never on psychic patrol again. It’s like being dropped into a pool of angry scientists - they all want to get in my head and tell me why I’m wrong.”

Adam snorts out a breath of laughter, wraps his arms around Ronan’s waist for a quick squeeze, and then manhandles him round and under his arm instead - pulling him tight hip to hip against him.

“I’m sure you’d survive it,” he says, “where’s Ethan?”

“And Jane?” Gansey asks, “I thought they would be with you to defuse irritation?”

“Yeah,” Ronan sighs, “no one can get pissy while Ethan’s around looking so adorable, so Calla instructed Blue to take him upstairs so we could all get pissy.”

“Wise,” Adam says seriously, nods, “are we banned from the current conversation they’re having?”

“I think so?” Ronan says, “They’re arguing over the definition of awake, and what adjustments they should make to account for a teenage boy brain apparently.”

“That is important,” Gansey says, “should we go upstairs to join Blue and Ethan while they sort that out then?”

Ronan grunts in affirmative, and then looks over his and Adam’s shoulders behind them, “No Noah?”

“Not currently,” Gansey says, “he said something about the energy here being off right now and not to count on him coming. We can report back to him later tonight.”

It turns out there’s more arguing upstairs, also Blue, but no Ethan.
Blue’s argue partner is her cousin Orla, the subject at hand is difficult to work out however.

“I said I wasn’t. Maybe I’m not psychic like you all, but at least I have some semblance of sanity!” Blue is hissing as they clear the landing.

“This has nothing to do with sanity,” Orla scoffs in reply, “but watch out, your cause of madness has appeared.”

The look Blue gives Orla is nothing short of icy. It doesn’t seem to effect her at all though, she just laughs and disappears off into her room. When the gaze is redirected to Gansey though, it creates enough of an oomph to make Gansey take a short step backwards and to glance nervously over his shoulder as if he hoped that the glare was actually for someone behind him.

Adam pushes through the awkwardness barricade Gansey is hastily constructing.

“Blue,” he says, “where’s Ethan?”

“Ah,” Blue says, unarms her scowl - Adam can hear Gansey’s sigh of relief behind him - “he’s in Persephone’s room with her. He wanted to play with her cards.”

“Oh,” Adam says, tries to push down the coil of unease in his stomach. He fails, and it sproings back up to jab him firmly in the ribs, “is that safe?”

“Yes,” Blue says immediately, “of course. Persephone wouldn’t ever put buddy in danger, Adam.”

“I know, I know,” Adam mumbles, “uh, it’s that door over there, yeah? Can I just knock?”

“Of course,” Blue shrugs, then turns on Gansey, “what have you been saying to Orla?”

“I - what?” Gansey replies coherently, “I haven’t?”

Ronan snorts loudly, follows Adam across the hall to Persephone’s door. Adam raises his fist to knock, pauses before he makes contact with the wood - waits a half beat.

“Come in Adam,” Persephone calls from inside, “and finish that knock, will you? It’ll give me a headache otherwise.”

Ronan snorts again, Adam taps the wood, then pushes the door open.

He supposes that for most people walking in on their younger brother playing with a pack of cards - tarot or no - would not be a big deal, most certainly would not be verging on the edge of terrifying.

Ethan and Persephone are both sitting on the floor, both entirely at ease, cards littering the ground around them while Ethan grabs them at random to stare at closely before releasing it haphazardly and grabbing another.
“Oh,” Ronan says, presses into the doorway with Adam. This particular doorway is almost too low for Adam to stand in, and manages to be just perfect for pressing down on the top of Ronan’s head. It’s squishy, to say the least.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Persephone says as Adam opens his mouth, “Ethan is just picking cards for you to read.”

“Oh,” Adam says now, swallows, “I don’t feel like that’s… I’m not comfortable with this,” he says, “I don’t want this to be happening.” His insides are shaking, but his voice is steady enough.

Persephone nods. “I know,” she says, “but don’t worry,” she adds on as Ethan presses a card into her hand, “that’s the last card.”

Ethan grins up at them from the floor, various spektors smudged across the cards by his knees winking up at him. He appears entirely unfazed.

“Hi!” he says happily, “Seph says y’gonna tell us a story!”

“Did she?” Adam says. Feels his voice come out stiffer than intended.

“Uh-huh,” Ethan continues, “says I can choose it so I did an’ now y’gonna tell it!”

“Right,” Adam says, clears his throat.

Persephone looks awfully serene for someone who obviously knows she’s pissing someone off.

“Of course,” Persephone says, “we don’t have to do it now, if you’d rather not. I’ll keep the cards set aside for you until later.”

“I want it now!” Ethan pipes up, pushes himself up on his knees and then climbs to his feet to dash over to Adam’s knees, “I found all y’cards!” he says to Adam’s jeans, tone imploring, “all th’ Ad’m cards!”

He does not like this. Does not like this at all. He can hear Blue and Gansey bickering still in the hallway behind them, can feel Ronan tense against his side. Stares at Persephone still calmly on the floor, making no move to gather up her spilled cards. He does not want Ethan involved in this.

“I’ll read the story,” he says slowly, “but baby,” he leans down to pull Ethan up into his arms, “I don’t want you playing with the cards without me here, ok?”

Ethan pouts, shrugs, presses his chin into the bone of Adam’s shoulder.

“Kay,” he says, “can play with Seph though?”

“Yes,” Adam says. It’s not that he doesn’t trust Persephone. He trusts Persephone. It’s just that she’s a lot braver, a lot quicker than Adam ever thinks he will be. Persephone smiles at him, shakes her head.

“Babe,” Ronan mumbles, and Adam glances sideways at him, then leans backwards out the door.

“Hey,” he calls to Blue and Gansey, “I’m telling a story in here apparently.”
“Oh!” Gansey says, dropping his argument swiftly, “What kind of story? Is it nap time for Ethan?”

“No!” Ethan says, as offended as any 3 year old can be, “Had nap time already.”

“Sorry, bud,” Gansey says with a grin, “of course.”

“Come in,” Persephone says loudly, she’s still on the floor, and she gestures around the rugged floorboards, “sit down.”

They all sit in a vaguely circular circle. All of them brushing cards away from the spot of floor they’ve elected to sit in until the middle of their lopsided circle is a small pile of cards, like hastily raked leaves. Adam sits next to Persephone, Ethan on his knee. Ronan sits down so close to Adam he may as well be on Adam’s other knee. Blue sits down opposite the 4 of them, and Ethan immediately abandons ship, crawls through the card pile - scattering them as he goes -, and flops down in Blue’s lap which is currently voluminous and fluffy with some sort of wool and taffeta skirt. After a moment of hesitation, Gansey sits down firmly between Ronan and Blue, looks to Adam expectantly. Persephone hands him the cards, and Adam immediately recoils, drops the cards onto the floor.

“Oh!” Blue says, “Adam, are you alright?”

“I just didn’t expect them to be so hot,” Adam mumbles shakes his hand. Ronan catches his hand mid-shake, tugs it close to his face to inspect the palm. “Why are they so hot?” he asks Persephone.

“They’re your cards,” she shrugs, “Ethan was very particular about them.”

It’s far too easy to find the cards again. They may have been dropped onto the card pile before he had even seen which ones they were, but it wasn’t as if they were hard to pick out seeing as they were pumping heat as if they were seeking his fingers. Once he’s gathered them back up again, one handed because Ronan has refused to release his other hand, Ronan reaches over with the hand not holding Adam’s, and presses his palms to the uncomfortably warm cards Adam is holding.

“They feel hot to you?” he asks.

“Yes,” Adam replies, “ah - but not physically, I suppose.”

“That makes no sense,” Ronan grumbles.

“That makes perfect sense,” Gansey objects.

“It barely makes sense,” Blue offers, leans over to elbow Gansey.

“Story now?” Ethan asks.

“Story now.” Adam confirms, hesitates. He’s counting on whatever mystical power is heating his hands up to show him what he’s supposed to do next, but just staring at the backs of the cards is probably not useful. He wonders if he holds Blue’s hand if the heat will get hotter.
He shuffles slowly through them, counting them out silently, 10 cards, feeling them out until he hottest card is on the top of the stack in his hand. It remains difficult to shuffle and sort cards one handed, but he would absolutely prefer to hold Ronan’s hand right now than have this particular thing be easier.

“Um,” he says, glances at Persephone who nods encouragingly, “ok,” he says, clears his throat as if he thinks that this will somehow enhance either his storytelling or tarot reading abilities, and flips the first card.

It’s Death. Because of course it is. Now he glances at Ethan.

“We’re starting this story,” he says slowly, “at the - uh - the end. But it’s not actually the end, it’s just the end of one thing before it turns into something else-”

“Oh,” Blue says, “oh, is that Death?”

Gansey is staring at his lap, Blue is staring at a spot on the wall behind Adam’s head. Ethan is wriggling like a fish.

“No in’trupt’an!” he says, “Ad’m’s storytell’in’!”

This stupid mystical power thing is not helping his storytelling or tarot reading abilities. He flips to the next card, spends a few seconds feeling offended until his brain reminds him what this card means. The Fool.

“We have to trust,” he says, “in the new beginning- uh - uh - “ flips to the next card. The Knight of Swords. “- trust in the new beginning, and be resolute, be - be determined to go after it because - “ flips card. The Magician. He wonders for a moment if he ought to have started with this one, it’s singing his fingertips. “-because once we go after it the power to - to - to manifest - becomes - the power to manifest becomes clear and -” flips cards. Accidentally turns 2 at once, the Wheel of Fortune and The Emperor stare up at him. “- ugh - this manifestation occurs -” God he sounds like an English essay. “-in the connection between the forever changing cycles of - uh - no - the forever changing cycles and the structure of daily life - or - no, yeah.” The Empress comes next, brighter than The Emperor, heavier in his hand. “So from this beginning - this power - comes abundance? No. Well, yes, but no. Once you realise where your power lies, the end of the beginning where we started, springs with new life. That’s the power - that’s -” He flips the cards, the last 3 all at once, none of them wanting to shift alone in his hands. The High Priestess, The Hanged Man, and the 5 of Swords. He brushes his thumb over their rough edges, shrugs, continues. “ -that’s the power you need to go within the subconscious, to delve deeper, to pick out the mind games and the twisting of words and realise - realise the next step? That’s not useful-”

“I don’t get it,” Ethan complains. He’s still mostly on Blue’s lap, but he’s melted out of it a little on the rug, has his feet propped up against her shoulder.

“Ok,” Adam nods, drops the cards onto his lap and leans over the circle to brush his hand through Ethan’s curls. He needed a haircut. “So there was a boy, not much older than you, and he was scared about yesterdays and tomorrows because he couldn’t see into them. Then one day, a tomorrow came that wasn’t quite as scary because he could see a little into that tomorrow, and that tomorrow said he’d been there before and could get through it again, and would get through it again. So, this boy decided to go into tomorrow and he liked it, and he went into the next tomorrow and the next
tomorrow told him that if he kept going into tomorrows, he would end up in today, and when he ended up in today, he wouldn’t be so scared of yesterday either because he would have the power to change the tomorrows.”

Ethan is squinting at him, has his hand caught on the top of his head so he can grip Adam’s fingers. “Ok,” he says, “am I the boy?”

“No,” Adam smiles, “he’s older than you, remember?”

“Oh yeah,” Ethan says, smiles back, upside down, “ok. I like it.”

“Great,” Adam says, “storytime is over then. Persephone, can I talk to you?”

“You can always talk to me,” Persephone replies smoothly. She’s leaning forwards now to gather up her cards, “I might even listen.”

“I’ll join y’all outside in a minute,” Adam tells the rest of the group, hopes its hint enough for them to get up and go, and to take Ethan with them.

“Ok,” Gansey says, uneasy, clambers to his feet. Blue pulls herself up using Gansey’s leg as a lever, and then sweeps Ethan up with her. “Ronan,” Gansey says, “come on.”

Ronan lets go of Adam’s hand, but Adam doesn’t let go of his. “No,” he says, “it’s ok.” He hopes Gansey doesn’t feel left out. He thinks Blue is too sensible to feel left out. Ronan’s fingers clamp back around his.

The door closes, and Persephone is holding a miraculously tidy pack of cards, the 10 from Adam’s lap somehow in her hands as well.

“You did a good job,” she says vaguely, stands up to root around on her paper crowded desk, “you remembered what I told you very well. A little stiff, yes, but you got there, I think.”

“It still sounded like complete bull shit to me,” Adam says truthfully, watches Persephone snort as she slips the cards into a small drawstring bag, “I can see how it would relate to my life, sure, but I can also see how I could make that relate to anyone else’s life.”

“Yes,” Persephone says happily, drops herself down on the end of her bed, “but you wouldn’t be able to make them feel those cards the way you did if they weren’t for them. Those were your cards, Adam. Ethan knew that.”

“Why,” Adam asks plainly, “why does Ethan know that.”

“He’s your brother,” Persephone says, “he’s the missing link, he’s the spare puzzle piece, he’s the newly discovered species. He knows you most of all, but more importantly, it all knows him.”

Ronan is twitching uncomfortably in Adam’s hands, against his side, and Adam frowns deeply.

“What all knows him?” he asks, “Please, Seph. I just want him safe.”

“You do want him safe, yes,” Persephone says, “it’s not all you want. It all is what thinks it ought to be here instead of Ethan.”

This does nothing to ease Adam’s fear or Ronan’s twitching.
“It isn’t going to hurt him,” she says gently, “you love him too much. It wouldn’t do that to you. It doesn’t understand you enough yet, but it understands that.”

“It?” Adam presses.

“I suppose it could be Cabeswater,” Persephone says slowly, “or it could be time, or it could be the corpse road, or it could be just it.”

“I see.”

“Oh,” Persephone adds on suddenly, “I know they are finished arguing downstairs about what is awake and what is not, but I have another awake and alive thing I need you to learn.”

“Excuse me?” Ronan says before Adam can.

“Not the same awake thing,” Persephone says reassuringly, “or maybe it is. But a different same one. Your puzzle pieces aren’t the only things being broken. Your dreaming isn’t the only thing out of place.”
The psychics are all in disagreement, which is not useful. It seems that Maura’s mother, Persephone, and Calla are the loudest voices on one side, and Blue’s somehow aunt Neeve is leading on the other side. They’re all very polite about it, but it’s the snarkiest and most brutal polite Adam has ever heard, and he’s spent plenty of long hours watching Blue politely burn Aglionby boys. In the end, there is no real answer, or maybe there’s too many answers. The closest thing to a next step is apparently to return to Cabeswater and simply ask it themselves.

Persephone is very vocal about this. She repeats over and over that Adam has to ask what it wants to get the rest of his story. Adam has to ask. Adam has to ask what it needs. Adam needs to ask it, and be mindful about what he’s asking.

Maura is more concerned with what Gansey needs to be doing, or what he needs to not be doing, or what he should have really never done in the first place. He has to step back, but he has to move forwards quicker, but he needs to make way for his cohort but he needs to lead the way and he has to speak up.

Calla glares at Ronan over the rim of an overfull tumbler of wine, and says only one word to him, “Communicate,” she says sternly, returns to her drink.

Neeve, amidst her loud disapproval over a group of teenagers messing with such delicate and powerful imbalances, imparts a cryptic sounding message which can only be for Noah, although she doesn’t mention him by name.

“The dead one,” she says, “the forest isn’t finished with him, and the murderer isn’t finished with the forest. Unless you all want to end up like both the murdered and the murderer, I suggest you stay out.”

Gansey takes Ethan back to Monmouth for dinner and bed, Ronan takes Adam to Nino’s.

They drop in at a sushi shop on the way, buy a double packet of salmon avocado rolls, and sit in the BMW’s front seats to eat their dinner in near silence.
“We’re not taking Ethan to Cabeswater this time,” Ronan says after they’ve scrunched the plastic container up and shoved it and their chopsticks into the plastic bag acting as a rubbish bin hanging over the back of the passenger seat. It’s currently mostly full of empty juice boxes and dinosaur plasters.

“No,” Adam agrees, sighs and stretches awkwardly in the cramped space, “we’re not.”

“I don’t trust Neeve,” Ronan says next, hunching forward over the wheel and resting his forehead against the dashboard, “I don’t think Blue’s mum trusts her either.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, presses his cheek against the cold window pane, “this evening was a mess, huh.”

“It was certainly an experience,” Ronan grunts, “and,” he adds, “I had no idea you were already so adept at reading those fucking cards.”

Adam shrugs, “I’m not really,” he says, “I just know what they’re all supposed to mean. It’s just a bunch of memorisation.”

“Hm,” Ronan says, peels his forehead away from the plastic of the dash so he can squint skeptically at Adam, “I would say you’re right except we know now that psychics and shit like that is real, and Persephone wouldn’t have been so pleased with you if you were just trotting out shit you memorised. She’s not holding exams.”

“Mm,” Adam says, shrugs again, “I don’t know, I don’t understand it yet. I don’t - I can’t explain why the cards are hot, or how I know if I’m reading them how they want to be read, or - I don’t understand it Ro, and it drives me nuts.”

Ronan laughs at him, leans over the gear stick to drag his hands through Adam’s hair, ruffling it up, and then cupping his cheeks. “You can’t understand everything, Einstein,” he says through a smirk, “some things you have to take on faith alone.”

“I’ve never been great at faith,” Adam mumbles back, face squished in Ronan’s hands, “I need to know the rules to things.”
“So ask for the rules,” Ronan suggests, leans forwards to press their foreheads together.

“Ask Cabeswater?” Adam asks, feels rather than sees Ronan shrug.

“Or the cards,” Ronan adds, “or yourself, or God, or whatever the fuck you feel like needs to be asked. Try asking the wind.”

“Are you purposefully trying to wind me up?” Adam asks, betrays his attempt at sternness by giggling, by pressing his face forwards so he can kiss Ronan’s cheek.

“Always,” Ronan says cheerfully, “now stop worrying about all this academic magic fuckery, you’ve gotta go pretend to be a boring waiter now.”

Adam snorts as Ronan pulls himself back into his seat and yanks on his seatbelt.

“Please,” he says, “if I was ever a boring waiter you wouldn’t have looked twice at me.”

“I dunno,” Ronan grins back as he brings the car to life, “you do have a great ass.”

Blue is very pissed off when he gets to Nino’s. Not at him, which is nice.

“I’m so pissed off,” she says unnecessarily as Adam joins her by the counter, tying his apron on, “I don’t get why Neeve is - why she’s trying to stop us when even my mum wants to help now. This has nothing to do with her! Goddess, it almost sounded like she was- like she was trying to threaten us.”

“Yeah,” Adam agrees, drops a couple of menus off at a table, “we’re just going to ignore her though, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Blue nods emphatically, “Cabeswater this weekend?”
“Yes,” Adam says, “but I’m going to leave Ethan at Dana’s. I’m not sure I’m happy leaving him in the house with Neeve right now.”

“That’s fair,” Blue sighs, fetches the mop to go clean up a spilled juice, “I’m not happy living in the same house with Neeve right now,” she adds as she marches past him, mop aloft.

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The nest two days pass with brutalising slowness. Partly because he wants it to be the weekend so he can at least attempt to get some more answers, partly because he’s back at the factory from Thursday, and it stretches his day out even longer. If time flies when you’re having fun, it only makes sense that time drags when you’re bored out of your skull.

It’s almost funny, Adam thinks, how he had managed his entire life, not exactly happy, not even quite content, but resigned to his boring extra jobs. Now, with this brief glimpse into a life that wasn’t all working and moving forwards, brainless work at the factory made him itch all over with irritation and exhaustion.

School had always been an escape for him, a chance to get out of his house and continue working on his way out. Now, despite the fact that he still wanted to be there, wanted to learn, wanted to get out, he wanted to be home more.

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By the time Saturday afternoon rolls in, bringing Ronan in his BMW into the parking lot of Boyd’s, Adam is utterly exhausted. Utterly done with his normal life.

Ethan is in the backseat, bag packed beside him ready to go stay with Dana for the afternoon/evening, and is as enthusiastically awake as Adam is begrudgingly upright.

“Ad’m!” he announces as Adam pours himself into the front seat, “Y’gonna pick me up b’f’r bed, yeah? Can’t g’te sleep w’out stories.”

“Buddy,” Adam replies as cheerfully as he can manage, drops his head to one side so he can chuck a
small smile back at Ethan, “of course we’re gonna pick you up before bed.”

“Di’nt getta story las’ nigh’!” Ethan reminds him loudly, bouncing against his carseat straps, “was sad.”

“Gans didn’t tell you a story?” Ronan asked, shocked and horrified and grinning widely.

“Nah!” Ethan retorted, enjoying Ronan’s horror, “Said he onl’ had borin’ stories an’ then he fell asleep!”

Adam snorts, turns more in his seat so he can look at Ethan properly. Ronan is reaching around his waist to buckle him in, apparently eager to get driving again.

“Gansey has lots of exciting stories,” he says, “we’ll get him to tell the story next time maybe, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Ethan says, then, “why’m’I goin’ t’Dana’s?”

Ronan clicks him in, resettles in his own seat, and pulls out of the parking lot.

“We’re going on a long walk,” Adam tells Ethan, “with no parks, and Shelby and Mari wanna hang out with you today anyway.”

“Huh,” Ethan says, “kay.”

They meet the rest of the gang in the field outside Cabeswater, Gansey had gone to pick up Blue while Ronan had gone to pick up Adam and drop off Ethan, and they were all gathered outside the Pig now, backpacks and stoic expressions on.

“Who died?” Ronan asks as he and Adam clamber out of the car and walk towards them, “Not Noah again?”
“Ha, fucking ha,” Noah says, rolls his eyes. Blue kicks Ronan’s ankle as Adam elbows him in the hip.

“Hey!” Ronan yelps, “Gansey, the entire Nino’s waitstaff is beating me up!”

“I feel like you’ve brought this upon yourself,” Gansey says calmly as Blue then elbows Ronan while Adam resorts to kicking his ankle.

“ Seriously,” Adam says while Ronan hops on one foot to rub his shin, “has something happened? Everyone looks… grim.”

“Nothing has happened,” Blue says, “just, I was just telling Gansey and Noah about a visitor we got this morning.”

“A visitor?” Adam repeats, tucks himself under Ronan’s arm by lifting it by Ronan’s hand and slinging it over his shoulder. “What kind of visitor?”

“I think it was a uh - a hit man kind of visitor,” Blue says in a tone far too casual for the contents of her sentence.

“Excuse me?” Adam says.

“Did he come for Calla?” Ronan asks, “Or Neeve?”

“No,” Blue says, “he came for the graywaren.”

“Oh,” Ronan says.

“Ah,” Adam says.

“He’s been sent to retrieve it for a professor, I think,” Blue continues, “he doesn’t know what it is, he
thinks it’s a magical artifact, and he thought the local psychics might have more of an idea about where to find it than most people here.”

“And did they?” Adam asks pointedly, presses himself closer against Ronan’s side.

“Mum and Calla got him to tell us poetry,” Blue says slowly, “and then we sent him away. Not all of the psychics are on our side, Adam, but none of them are going to participate in… in helping a hitman.”

“Well,” Noah says, “not on purpose.”

“That wasn’t ominous at all,” Ronan says, “do we want to keep talking about this or should we go in before it gets too late?”

“We should go in,” Gansey replies immediately, “something’s awake in there, and it’s waiting for us.”

“It’s waiting for us?” Blue asks, eyebrows raised, “And we want to walk right to it?”

“We could jog?” Noah suggests, “But walking will probably conserve more energy for when we want to run away from it.”

“I’m really feeling good about this,” Adam sighs, “what happened to summer and daisy chains?”

“Probably my fault,” Ronan replies, “sorry ‘bout that guys. Shall we?”

“We shall,” Gansey says, adjusts his backpack straps, “everyone ready? Excelsior!”
At first, Cabeswater doesn’t appear any different to how Adam remembers it the first and last time he had been here. The grass is lush beneath his feet, the air feels cleans against his face, the trees seem to bend towards him in some sort of arcane welcome. He can’t hear any whispering though. Doesn’t know if last time’s greeting was a one off or not, because no one else seems put out that the trees aren’t speaking. Ronan is holding his hand tightly, but not tightly enough to cause alarm. Blue and Gansey are a little further ahead, Noah holding onto Blue’s hand just a step behind them.

“Hey,” Adam mumbles, waits until Ronan tips his head towards him, “greywaren? You’ve dreamt about that before, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Ronan mumbles back, he sounds troubled, “I - I’m not sure I know what it is though.”

“But you have an idea?” Adam asks, recognises the sound of a half formed secret in Ronan’s mouth, “An idea that’s scaring you?”

“Pff,” Ronan says halfheartedly, grips Adam’s fingers tighter, “I’m not scare- yeah. I have an idea.”

“Will you tell me this idea?” Adam tries, looks away from their friends, up at Ronan who’s currently being cast in shadow by the leaves overhead. Dappled in darkness, he looks more upset than he sounded.

“I-” Ronan begins, then glances around as if he’s worried about the trees listening in. This is, Adam supposes, a very real worry here. “I’ve heard the word before,” he continues, voice almost too low to hear. “In my dreams, out of context. I’ve never really - never got it, but now I”m thinking, and this is just a theory, now I’m thinking,” Ronan stumbles over his words, “what if it’s me?”

“What if it’s you?” Adam repeats, “The voice or the -”

“The greywaren,” Ronan confirms, he’s stopped walking now, stands among the twisted knots of the roots, gripping Adam’s hand too tightly, “I think I’m the greywaren, and when I’ve heard it in my dreams before it was when the forest was greeting me. God, Adam, no, I really think it might be me-”

“Guys,” Gansey’s voice floats back to them, sounding much further away than it really ought, “guys, are you seeing this?”

Looking up, towards Gansey’s voice, Adam realises they’ve somehow walked much further than he realised, out of the spring lit, easily spaced trees and saplings, into a darker more twisted, crowded patch of forest that he doesn’t recognise as any season. In front of them, Blue, Noah, and Gansey are standing in the mouth of a cave, carved into a cliff front that appears to have reared out of nowhere.

“Oh,” Ronan says, “oh.”

“I don’t recognise this,” Gansey says slowly as Adam and Ronan make their way cautiously towards the rest of the group, “and I don’t mean to imply that I’m familiar with the entirety of Cabeswater, I don’t think that’s possible, but we’ve been here before and this cave never has. This is new.”

“It looks old,” Blue says, not objecting to Gansey’s comment, “ancient, in fact,” she adds, fingers crumbling stone at the entrance, bits of rock and dust dripping off at her touch.

“Looks evil,” Noah adds uncomfortably, “I don’t like it.” He’s gripping himself tightly as if he’s
being wracked with chills, never mind that he’s constantly colder than anything around them.  “It looks,” Gansey says loudly, “like a clue. Like Cabeswater is trying to tell us something.”  
“Or,” Adam says, “it’s part of the awake and terrifying thing that’s corrupting Cabeswater, and if we go in it’ll eat us.”  
“Ugh,” Noah says, “ugh, it feels wrong.” Blue steps towards him, wraps her arms around his shoulders, and pulls him close, wincing as she does at the cold, but not releasing him. He keeps his own arms wrapped around himself, but leans into Blue’s embrace, tucks his face into her shoulder, and speaks again, “It feels like the wrong place to look,” he says firmly. 
“The wrong place?” Adam asks, “Because it looks like if we go in we’ll never come out, or because there’s another terrifying cave we’re supposed to go in?”  
“Both,” Noah replies firmly, and now Gansey steps away from the cave entrance, reaches out, not to Noah, but to Blue, puts his hand gently on the small of her back.  
“Is this taking too much energy?” he asks slowly, then, “Noah, are you fading?”  
“No,” Blue says as Noah says, “maybe.”  
“Can we-” Gansey says, makes a face, “can we go in just the entrance? Have a quick look at what we might be dealing with?”  
“Yes,” Noah says, presses his face harder against Blue’s shoulder, “but I’m not coming in.”  
“Wimp,” Ronan says cheerfully, “you can be our point of reference for coming back out again, then.”  
“Ok,” Noah says.  
“We don’t have torches or anything,” Adam protests, “we’re not equipped for this kind of exploring, Gansey.”  
“Au contraire,” Gansey says, voice suddenly grand again, as if Noah agreeing that they could go in was all he needed to regain his earlier excitement, “I packed headlamps in our backpacks, and rope. We can tie the rope to a tree out here, and tie it to the leader as well. That way we’ll know how far we’re going in, and how to get back out.”  
“Ok,” Adam says, already defeated. He doesn’t have much more of an argument to put up here except that he doesn’t really feel like dying in what looks like a very damp and desolate place. “We should tie the 4 of us together though, not just to the tree and the leader.”  
“You’re right,” Gansey nods happily, “I have carabiners too. We’re doing this then?”  
“Ugh,” Blue says, “I guess. I’m glad I’m at least wearing jeans today.”

They unpack the equipment on the rough roots while Gansey explains how he thinks they ought to go about it, exclaims about how the age of the cave looks like it matches the age of the stories of Glendower.

Noah sits on a nearby hump of wood, arms tight around his knees, eyes wary.  
“Oh,” Adam says as Gansey fastens the rope around his waist while Adam holds his arms up and out of the way, his watch at eye level, “my watch has stopped. Who has the time?”  
“I do,” Ronan replies promptly, he’s already attached to the rope, lifts his wrist with his sleek posh watch up, then frowns, “no I don’t,” he says, “mine has stopped too.”  
“Huh,” Gansey says, finishes with Adam’s attachment and reaches into his pocket for his phone.  
“Same,” he says, “we’re running in a timeless place, I think. That’s nothing to worry about,” he adds, it sounds like he’s saying this for his own reassurance as well as the group’s, “Cabeswater does this sometimes, messes with time flow.”  
“Yeah,” Ronan agrees, “it slows right down, sometimes. Maybe out watches and shit are working, just too slowly to see at a glance.”  
“No,” Blue says, she’s leaning in under Gansey’s arm to look at his phone, “no, Gansey’s phone says it’s only been 2 minutes since we walked into Cabeswater, and it’s definitely been much longer. I think it’s stopped.”
“Time doesn’t stop,” Noah says from behind them, “only the idea of time.”
“Helpful,” Ronan snarks, pushes Gansey’s hand holding the phone to one side, “put your phone away and let’s get going, time may or may not be wasting.”
Gansey smiles, pockets his phone. “Ok,” he says, “remember, 3 tugs if you’re alarmed in the slightest, we leave if we’re at all afraid.”
“Well I’m already afraid,” Noah says, “so let’s leave.”
“Maybe,” Blue says, slow and thoughtful, “could we ask Cabeswater if it’s safe? Would it tell us? Do you think it can tell us?”
“It hasn’t been talking since we came in,” Adam replies before Gansey or Ronan can, “at least, I haven’t heard anything.”
Gansey frowns, “I think we could still try, couldn’t we, Ronan?”
“Sure,” Ronan shrugs, he’s sidled up on Adam’s right side, is leaning in against him, “if Cabeswater doesn’t reply though, do we assume it’s unsafe? Or that the entire forest is out of business?”
“No,” Gansey says, “I don’t think so. Sometimes it just ignores you, doesn’t it?”
“Yeah,” Ronan says, shrugs again, “only when I’ve pissed it off though.”
“So always?” Blue asks snidely.
“ Fuck up, short stack,” Ronan says, and Gansey sighs loudly.
“Ok,” he says, “Ronan, could you ask?”
“This is why you ought to pay attention in Latin class,” Ronan smiles, “Alright,”

He glances up at the tightly packed leaves above them, and the dark bark surrounding them, yells a question in Latin into the heavy air.

It’s silent.

After almost an entire minute, Gansey makes to speak again, but before he can make out a single word, a hissing rustle stops him.

‘Greywaren semper est incorruptus,’ it says, the voice, or the sound of the trees rougher than Adam remembered, as if the words were formed by breaking of bark and snapping of twigs.

All eyebrows go up at the mention of Greywaren, and Blue turns to Ronan for a translation, but Gansey gets in first.

“Always safe,” he says, “The greywaren is always safe.”

“The greywaren is always safe?” Blue repeats incredulously, “Ronan, what did you ask Cabeswater?”
“I asked,” Ronan grits out, his face is stiff, as is his hand in Adam’s, “if it was safe for us to go in.”
“So,” Gansey says, the excitement is palpable in his voice, “the greywaren, it’s us? Or, one of us? Or-”
“It’s me,” Ronan says, voice as harsh as the forest, “it told me in my dreams. I’m the greywaren.”

“You’re the-” Blue sounds pissed, “why the hell didn’t you say, Lynch? I just told you that a literal hitman came to my house looking for it, for you! Why didn’t you say?”
Gansey just stares, nodding along to Blue’s words, then he glances from Ronan’s disgruntled expression to Adam’s, “Did you know?” he asks, “Did Ronan tell you this?”
“Like 5 minutes ago,” Adam says cautiously, “let’s not get pissy about it, Ronan only just figured it out himself. There wasn’t time for a big show and tell about it.”
“Exactly,” Ronan says before Gansey or Blue or Noah can react further, “so there we go. I’m the greywaren and Cabeswater says the cave is safe for me, which ought to mean it’s safe for all of us, so let’s fucking go in.”

Gansey stares at him a moment longer, than shrugs, nods, turns to Blue. “Alright?” he asks her, waits
for her to nod, then turns to Noah, “If we keep tugging on the rope,” he says, pointing to the end tied around the tree closest to the cave mouth, “try not to panic.”

“That’s great advice,” Noah says sarcastically, “I’ll try not to disappear as well, shall I?”

“Please,” Gansey says, very sincere, “if you do though, we’ll see you back at Monmouth?”

“Hopefully,” Noah says, not sounding very hopeful, “don’t die in there.”

They go in. Gansey had dug out a handful of marking disks, pressed them into Blue’s hand. He had slipped so easily into leader mode, into captain mode, Adam wondered if this was the Gansey people saw at Aglionby as he instructed them all on cave safety, ordered Ronan to keep time through whistling, and immediately situated himself in the lead.

He thinks that in any other context he might resent this, or rather, if this was anyone other than Gansey he might resent this, but there’s no point in resenting Gansey for this. Gansey knows the most about caving, knows the most about this quest, knows the most about ordering people about while still sounding loving. It’s an interesting trait.

It’s ridiculously dark inside. Dark and deep and dank. Ronan’s whistled reels take them past dry rock into moss covered walls, to slippery mud floors, to stalactites and stalagmites and a constant drip and a darkness that seems deeper than this cave ever could be.

He wishes Gansey had arranged them differently. He wants to be closer to Ronan. He doesn’t mind being in between Gansey and Blue, it’s not that their presence isn’t comforting, it’s just that Ronan’s the only one whose hand he wants to hold onto right now.

“Gans,” he says eventually as Blue places another marker and Adam can see she’s running out, “I don’t think we’re going to find anything,” he says, “we should go-”

Gansey disappears. Adams spends all of 2 seconds agape and shocked, and then the rope at his waist tugs him sharply and painfully, knocks him down into the mud soft ground. He scrabbles for a hold in the slippery mess, doesn’t find one, but manages to dig his feet into it, manages to press himself down enough that he’s not tugged after Gansey who he realises now must have fallen into a hole.

Not disappeared. Not whisked away by some magical evil.

He has to spend a few moments catching his breath, all of the oxygen slammed out of his lungs as he’d fallen, adrenaline making his throat feel taut and painful.

“Gansey?” he calls out, “Are you okay down there?”

There’s no answer, just the rope around Adam’s waist pulling tightly, reassuring him that Gansey was certainly still there seeing as his body weight was trying to cut Adam in half. This isn’t as reassuring as it could be though, not with Gansey not replying, not with the impenetrable dark all around him, not with his lungs and his skin burning from sudden impact. “Gansey?” he tries again, tries to peer over what he assumes must be the ledge of the hole, tries to catch a glimpse of Gansey. Three tugs pull at his waist, Gansey responding, and he exhales in loud relief, drops his head back down, doesn’t care about the mud.

“What’s going on?” Ronan is saying from behind them, “Where is he?”

“He must be hangin’,” Adam says into the mud, panic is still coursing through him. He can’t move, can’t get up for fear of being tugged over the edge as well, dragging Blue and Ronan over with them both. He can only vaguely see the 2 of them through the gloom, but what he can see is Ronan holding tightly to Blue as if he’d grabbed her at the first sign of trouble.

After a few moments of muted discussion, Blue creeps forward, using Adam and Ronan as anchors to keep her from sliding into the hold as well. She calls down to Gansey, and when he finally does reply, his tone is so unGansey like it prickles at the base of Adam’s spine.
Gansey is afraid. Gansey is panicking. Again, he wishes he could hold onto Ronan. Selfish, he knows, it’s Gansey who needs comfort right now, Gansey who’s dangling in midair. Hornets, Gansey says, and it’s like the air around them is suddenly listening, as if the forest had been following them into this deep disgusting hole just waiting for Gansey to get scared and remind the trees about his deepest fear.

Blue is panicking now too, like she feels the distinct change in the feel of the cave. She gets up on her knees, looks to Adam, then over her shoulder at Ronan.

“Ronan,” she says, “new plan: Adam and I are going to pull Gansey out very quickly.”

“What? That is a fucking terrible idea,” Ronan says. “Why is that the plan?”

It’s obvious Blue doesn’t want to say it out loud, to say what both she and Adam are suddenly so terrified of, so Adam speaks, voice low, wishes he knew Latin or whatever so he could speak for Ronan’s ears only, to spare Gansey from hearing them frightened by this too, “There’s something in the hole,” he says, “bees? Maybe.”

“No,” Ronan said firmly, “No, there is not. That is not what is down there.” he speaks as if saying this will make it true, and honestly, it might. He keeps going, he’s no longer speaking to Adam, maybe he never was in the first place, he speaks directly to Cabeswater, voice loud, not loud enough to mask his fear. “No. Do you hear me, Cabeswater? You promised to keep me safe. Who are we to you? Nothing? If you let him die, that is not keeping me safe. Do you understand? If they die, I die too.”

Adam can suddenly hear what it was that must have terrified Gansey so much, a faint humming noise, like a buzz, like a horde of bees.

“Cabeswater,” he says, voice stronger than he feels, “I am not the Adam you want yet, not the Adam you need, if Gansey does not get out of here safely, I promise you I will never be that Adam for you.”

The buzzing is louder. Heavier. It sounds almost frantic, it sounds numerous.

“We’ve been trying to help you,” Blue says, “we’re looking for what’s hurting you. We’ll keep helping you, but you have to help us-“

Until now, Blue’s headlamp had been shining a beam of light directly into the darkness where Gansey was hanging. It continued to shine, Adam was sure, but it was suddenly completely obscured by rapidly moving black shapes, chaotic and many winged, rustling and surrounding Gansey completely.

“Gansey!” Blue shouted, or maybe Adam had shouted it, his mouth stings like he’d screamed it. It might have been Ronan, panting behind him.

Then the rustling exploded out of the hole, poured into the open area, caught in the beams of light from Ronan, from Adam, and it wasn’t bees. It wasn’t hornets. It wasn’t insects at all, it was ravens. Ravens and ravens and ravens, more and more until it felt as if even the air was feathers, the mud was clawed feet, the little space for noise between the rustle of wings was filled with the cawing of birds. Discordant in the rush and tumble of their rise and then smallness of the space, and then slowly more sing song like, and then suddenly in words that no bird ought to be speaking.

They sing;
‘Rex Corvus, parate Regis Corvi.
The Raven King, make way for the Raven King.’

They disappear as quickly as they had come, in a rush and a whisper, heading back towards the exit. Everything is silent for a long moment, silent but for the beating of their hearts, overly loud, the
heaving of their lungs.

“Hold on,” Gansey says, “I’m coming out.”
Don't Wanna

Noah is no longer in the clearing when they come out of the cave. This is not very surprising. Neither is the rope they had tied to the tree in the entrance. This is also surprisingly unsurprising. They had walked for too long, too deep into the dark for it to have made any sense for the rope to have been long enough. Adam supposed Cabeswater had decided it was most logical to just cut some edges. The tree the rope had been tied to was also gone. None of this is surprising, but it’s uncomfortable. It’s uncomfortable because it’s not surprising, because it makes the 4 of them feel watched. Like the trees that Ronan had grown up with, the stories in the moss surrounding them, like Cabeswater didn’t belong to any of them.

Blue has to go home. They all have to go home. They have to pick up Ethan. They have to hop and skip back into whatever normal life is for a moment.

They part ways outside the forest, and it’s not exactly a farewell of any sort - they know they’ll see each other again ridiculously soon, that they’ll be in contact again probably before the night is over, but it feels like the kind of situation that calls for hugging before they part ways in their separate cars.

Blue wraps her arms around Adam’s shoulders and he leans down against her, presses his cheek to her hair, spiky with clips, “You good?” he mumbles, and she chuckles in reply, tugs herself away.

“I’m very dirty,” she says, “and itchy, and cold. But I’m good.”

“Ok,” Adam says, “me too.”

“I’ll see you 2 back at the house soon?” Gansey asks, reaches his hand out to bump knuckles with Adam, “with Ethan?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, deigns to reach over to ruffle Blue’s hair, which earns him an elbow to the ribs and a softer bump of shoulder to elbow. “Will you pick up some takeaways or some shit on the way
“Yeah,” Gansey says, “today is not a day for mature decisions around cooking. How about Italian?”

“By Italian,” Blue says, climbing into the front seat of the Pig, “do you mean pizza?”

“Uh,” Gansey says, looks to Adam and Ronan, “do I mean pizza?”

“Yes please,” Adam says, gets into the driver’s seat of the BMW, “you also mean garlic bread.”

-E-  

Ethan’s already eaten by the time they pick him up. He’s been fed, bathed, and squished into his pjs to watch some barbie movies with the girls. It takes some persuading to get him to leave, but once he’s in Adam’s arms, it takes further persuading to get him into the car seat. He clings tightly to the grubby collar of Adam’s shirt, grips round Adam’s waist with his legs.

“Don’t wanna,” he cries as Adam attempts to peel him off into the seat, “missed you an’ now I wan’ hugs an’ hugs.”

“We’ll do lots of hugs at home,” Adam tells him, gives up for the time being on removing the clinging toddler through any kind of force, “we just needa drive there first, yeah?”

“Nah!” Ethan replies, clings tighter.

“Huh,” Ronan says, he’s leaning against the passenger side door, arms crossed, eyebrows raised, “but there’s gonna be garlic bread at home,” he says slowly, “if we don’t go home, how are we gonna eat the garlic bread?”

“‘Lic bread?” Ethan asks, perking up immediately in Adam’s arms, stretching up over his shoulders so he can look at Ronan, “‘lic bread at home?”
“Yup,” Adam replies, rolling his eyes, “and you can have some if you let me put you in your seat now.”

“Um,” Ethan says, screws up his face in concentration, than exhales heavily, “kay,” he says.

There’s driving home, there’s dinner, there’s putting Ethan to bed, there’s Noah appearing halfway up the main street of Gansey’s mini Henrietta.

There’s no actual pause in activities for anything more than breathing until after the pizza boxes have been stuffed in the recycling, and Noah has been filled in on the birdsong, the disappearing cave floor, the malevolent feel of the forest. Not until after Gansey’s chewed almost half a mint plant in leaves while attempting to talk both to Malory on the phone and Ronan and Adam next to him, relaying messages with half breaths, and sighs.

“Fuck,” Ronan says once they’ve finally wound the day down, once Gansey is crashed out on his bed, half under the blankets, blankets half under him, once they've finally retreated to Ronan's room. “That was a fucking day.”

“Yeah,” Adam says emphatically. Wants to follow in Gansey’s footsteps and just fall asleep on his bed, who cares that his clothes and skin are ingrained with dirt. Showers were a tomorrow thing. “Ro,” he says as he jerkily tugs his clothes off, “what if - d’you think they were hornets? At any point?”

Ronan’s got his back to Adam, he’s standing on the other side of the room, feeding Chainsaw out of his hand. He’s already stripped out of his shirt, and his tattoo is bending and shifting on his back as he moves his arms.

“No,” he says firmly, shakes his head, “no.”
“No because you don’t want them to have been,” Adam asks, steps out of his trousers, “or no because you honestly believe they were always ravens?”

Ronan shrugs, tattoo disappearing into sudden shadows cast by his movements, and then turns to Adam, “I don’t know,” he says honestly, “I don’t know if I want to know.”

“That’s fair,” Adam sighs, sighs again as he drops himself down onto the mattress. Today wasn’t more physically demanding than most days for him, but he felt drained. He felt off. He felt like the forest was wronger than usual. “Come to bed?”

Ronan doesn’t reply, but he takes his jeans off, chucks them into the pile with his shirt, and crosses the room to climb onto the bed next to him. He nudges Adam with his knees until Adam shuffles over to make space for him, and then lies down, slings his arm round Adam’s stomach. “What is it?” he asks.

“I want to go to Cabeswater again tomorrow,” Adam says after a moment. “I feel like it needs something from me.”

“Something like what?” Ronan asks, tugs at Adam’s hip until Adam presses himself closer.

“I don’t know,” Adam says, “something about… something about the other Adam, I guess. Something that other Adam does. Or did. Or would do.”

“Can I come?” Ronan asks, “Can it wait until after church?”

“Yes,” Adam says, he’s almost surprised Ronan is even asking. To him it just felt obvious. He was going to go to Cabeswater, so Ronan was coming with him. Of course he would wait for Ronan to go to church first. Adam didn’t do traditions, not really, not for himself, but he saw the merit in them, saw the need for them, knew that if he had a tradition he wouldn’t want to break it. “Of course I want you there,” he says, “I think I’ll need you, anyway,” he adds, closes his eyes and lets the voice in his head lead him, “pretty sure I have to lift shit?”

“Lift shit?” Ronan repeats, “You realise you’re the buff one here, right?”
Adam snorts, wriggles in Ronan’s grip until he’s rolled onto his side so he can hook a leg over Ronan’s to pull him closer still. “You’re pretty buff too,” he says, runs his hand up over Ronan’s wrist, up his arm, grips his bicep, “I could use some extra muscle.”

Ronan flexes under his hand, and Adam snorts again, presses forward to kiss him lightly, “Show off,” he says, “do that again.”

Ronan smirks at him, flexes, laughs as Adam squeezes his arm, then tilts his head up to kiss Adam back, “You like that?” he asks, and his voice is almost cautious.

“Yeah,” Adam says, and it’s so weird, so weirdly nice, to just say some shit like this. To hop back into everyday fumbling conversations about bodies and likes and emotions, rather than staying inside the labyrinth like conversations of Cabeswater and what Cabeswater wants.

“Maybe I should work out more,” Ronan teases, flexes again, then reaches down to pull Adam’s hand away from his arm, tugs it up to his mouth, holds his fingers to his lips.

“Maybe you should,” Adam replies, lets Ronan breathes against his knuckles for a moment, then drags a fingertip down, pulls it against Ronan’s cheek, across the dip in his lip, presses at the corner of his mouth. “I’d like you however you look, though.”

“Yeah?” Ronan breathes, his eyes are half shut. His hand is still holding Adam’s at his mouth, but his grip is loosened until it’s just his fingers looped loosely over the jutting bone in Adam’s wrist, “Even if I dressed like Gansey?”

“Even if you dressed like Gansey,” Adam confirms, rubs his thumb across Ronan’s lower lip, “even if you were actually bald.”

Ronan cracks one eye open, raises his eyebrows, “Brave words,” he says against Adam’s thumb, shifts a little under Adam’s hand, then bites down around Adam’s thumb knuckle.

“Oi,” Adam says, voice coming out a lot lower and a lot less annoyed than he had been aiming for, “we’ve already eaten.”

“Dessert stomach,” Ronan mumbles nonsensically around Adam’s thumb, closes his lips around it, presses his tongue flat against the pad of it, and sucks hard.
“F- um,” Adam says, changes his mind, “fuck,” he says firmly, and Ronan opens his mouth so Adam can pull his hand away. “My hands probably have like - cave dirt on them,” he says, “under the nails or some shit. You probably don’t want that for dessert.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Ronan says, his lips are as slick with spit as Adam’s thumb feels, and he wants to put his hand back up, to rub his fingers across his lips again, to tempt the both of them just a little bit more.

“You like my hands way too much,” he says instead, “is this a thing? Have you always had a thing for hands?”

Ronan grumbles at him, but he doesn’t sound embarrassed by it, “No,” he says, “just yours.”

“Kinky,” Adam mumbles back, snorts as Ronan laughs, “shut up.”

“I love your hands,” Ronan says, and he’s suddenly awfully serious for someone who was laughing mere moments ago, “because they’re just - you work so fucking hard, all the time, Parrish. You work ‘til your hands bleed, I’ve seen you do that. And they’re fucking beautiful. Like the rest of you,” he adds on, voice dropping down into a mumble. “I always wanna hold them,” he says, “always wanna kiss them.”

This feels so much like something he can reply to sarcastically, or teasingly, but it’s twisting at his heart instead, and all he can do in reply is press his lips to Ronan’s again.

-

The morning arrives with a few other things. Thing 1 is the cascade of rain against the roof, pressing in on the windows. Thing 2 is Ethan climbing in and over Ronan to tuck himself under Adam’s arm. Thing 3 is Ronan blinking his eyes open minutes after Ethan had woken the both of them up, minutes after his body had stiffened. If it wasn’t for the fact that Adam had seen the item appear in Ronan’s hand, had seen that it wasn’t dangerous, he would have fucking leapt the shit out of the bed to deposit Ethan on the other side of the door rather than simply lying there waiting for Ronan’s body to let him move.
Thing 3 is a small white container that Ronan turns in his hands as he blinks up at Adam before handing over.

Thing 3 says ‘manibus’ in a sloping script across the lid, and when Adam looks to Ronan, Ronan says, “For your hands.”

While Ronan goes to church, Adam and Gansey pour through papers and books galore. They’re not exactly sure what they’re looking for. Something something suddenly appearing caves, something something burial tombs, something something who the fuck knows.

“So I was thinking,” Gansey says as Adam pushes away another unfruitful book, “I might ask Malory to come stay for a while.”

“Oh?” Adam says, reaches backwards to grab Ethan before he can run and slip over in the discarded papers behind them, tugs him giggling into his lap, “d’you think he’ll be able to help more if he sees some of this stuff?”

“I don’t know,” Gansey admits, “I think he might. Mostly I just want some more opinions. Not that your opinions, or Blue, or Ronan’s, or Noah’s aren’t good,” he adds on hastily as if Adam would suddenly have become disgruntled over this, “it’s just that he’s spent so much of his life surrounded by this sort of research, it might be useful.”

“I agree,” Adam says, shrugs, “if you think it’s a good idea, it’s probably a good idea.”

Gansey smiles at him, Ethan attempts to climb inside Adam’s shirt - no particular reason for this, it’s just there.

“I love having you here,” Gansey says suddenly, “you have no idea how much nicer it is with you around.”

Adam shrugs, really doesn’t know how to respond, so Gansey just barrels on.
“I love Ronan like he’s my own blood,” Gansey says, “probably even more, and I love Noah, but neither of them are exactly great flatmates, you know? One of them is dead, through no fault of his own, of course, and has problems with materiality, and one of them used to spend most of his time listening to something he called music but which sounded like a thousand tubas being squashed.”

Adam laughs despite himself, shakes his head, “I suppose,” he says, “after that sort of experience, it’s understandable that you would think I’m a good flatmate.” He unbuttons the top of his shirt to attempt to lessen the strain on the fabric from having an extra human inside it, pokes at Ethan to generate squealing.

“Please,” Gansey says grandly, “you cook, you clean, you hold actual conversations, you study, you’re perfect.”

“Again,” Adam snorts, “I think you’re biased. But I appreciate it.”

“And I appreciate you,” Gansey replies, flips a book open, “and there’s nothing you can do about it, so stop trying to persuade me otherwise.”

It doesn’t take too much persuading to convince Gansey that it’s a good idea to let Adam and Ronan go off to Cabeswater by themselves. He doesn’t look happy about it, but he agrees with Adam when he says he needs to be able to have as few distractions from whatever it is he’s hearing or feeling as possible. He needs to figure out what it is that other Adam gives Cabeswater that Cabeswater misses so much, and he can’t help but feel that with Gansey there, both and the forest will be distracted. Gansey does try and point out that Ronan might also be distracting, which is a point Adam acknowledges to himself, certainly, but aloud he replies that Ronan is more in tune with the forest, the forest trusts him more, and therefore he shouldn’t get in the way of anything. Gansey looks like he’s going to point out that he actually meant he thought Ronan might be distracting due to other reasons, and Adam beats him to it by blushing and announcing he needs to shower.

Ethan is happy (ish) to be left behind with Gansey and Noah. Ronan remained his favourite pizza boy, but he was a fan of how easily Gansey gave in to him, and was relaxed enough around him to climb onto his lap to be cuddled, so it was good enough.

Gansey comes down into the parking lot as Ronan and Adam make to leave, phone in one hand, Ethan clutching to the other. The rain has stopped now, but the parking lot is full of puddles and the smell of damp stone. Gansey picks his way around the puddles.
“Blue’s going to come over,” he tells them through Ronan’s open window, “to look at maps of caves around here and because apparently Orla is being insufferable.”

“Sounds good,” Adam says, leans over Ronan to peer down at Ethan, “All right, buddy?” he asks. Ethan is wearing a disgruntled expression and also raven feathers in his hair.

“I wanna come,” Ethan says, “I like it.”

Gansey looks a little bit helpless, he’d obviously brought Ethan down here under duress, “I’ve told him he has to stay here with me,” he explains, and now Adam can see that in reality it’s Gansey clutching at Ethan’s hand rather than the other way round, “but he insisted on asking you again.”

“Buddy,” Adam says sternly, “you’ll be bored comin’ with us. Blue will be here soon, you’ll have heaps of fun.”

“No!” Ethan insists, tugs at Gansey’s hand as he tries to pull away, “don’t wanna!”

“We’ll be back soon,” Adam adds, looks up from Ethan’s grumpy expression to Gansey’s worried one. He doesn’t want to impose this on Gansey. It isn’t really fair. Neither does he want to drive to Dana’s and ask to leave him there. Neither can he bring Ethan with them. He isn’t sure how to explain it, but all night he’s been feeling something, in his gut, or his mind, or his fingertips, something pulling at him from Cabeswater. He had dreamed about it all night, dreamed about it telling him exactly what it wanted, speaking right into his deaf ear. He had been able to hear it all in his dream, but as soon as he’d woken up, it had disappeared because so had his hearing. He needed to get there soon, needed to figure it out soon. That was all he knew, that was as much as he could explain. None of this, however, would be explanation enough for Ethan, his screwed up face was getting pinker, the beginning throes of a rare tantrum.

“Don’t wanna!” Ethan repeats, manages to pull his fisted hand out of Gansey’s grip, and he scrabbles at the window frame of the car, “miss you. Y’always goin’ an’ I’m’alone, an’ I don’t like it!” He finishes at a near yell, and Adam bites his lip, leans away from the window to unbuckle himself, and climbs out of the car.

“Hey,” he says as he circles round the car to get to Ethan who is still clinging to the door, “you’re not all alone, you’ve got Gans, an’ Noah, an’ Blue!” He drops down into a crouch in front of Ethan who looks like a small pink thundercloud, and tugs him into his arms, “You’ve got Chainsaw,” Adam continues as Ethan huffs grumpily against the front of his shirt, buries his face in it, “An’ Dana, an’
the girls, and Seph - are you still lonely?”

“No,” Ethan says, rubs his face hard against fabric, smearing snot as he did, “no, miss you.”

“Why do you miss me?” Adam asks, runs his hand through Ethan’s curls, “Am I away too much?”

“Yes!” Ethan says, rubs more snot into Adam’s shirt, “Away an’ busy, an’ always - always talkin’ no’ jus’ t’me.”

“Huh,” Adam says, rubs his hand up and down Ethan’s back, “that’s because we have lots of friends,” he says, “you’ve gotta learn to share me, baby.”

“Don’t wanna,” Ethan mumbles.

“You gotta,” Adam retorts, “we gotta share. You share your breakfast with Chainsaw sometimes, yeah? And Blue shares her hair clips with you? And Gansey shares his pizza with you? You gotta share me too.”

“Don’t wanna,” Ethan repeats, and Adam shakes his head, presses a firm kiss to the top of Ethan’s head, and then looks up at Gansey.

“Will you-” he begins, shakes his head, “is it alright if I leave a toddler on the verge of a proper tantrum with you? Or would you prefer I stay?”

“I can handle it,” Gansey says, almost confidently, “I’ve lived through all of Ronan’s tantrums.”

“Hah,” Adam says, hears Ronan snort grumpily behind them, “that’s true. If he doesn’t calm down, you can call me though, ok? I’ll come back.”

“Alright,” Gansey says, crouches down beside the two of them, “should I take him?”

“If you would,” Adam says, addresses Ethan, “you go with Gans now, ok, bud? I’ll be home soon, but you gotta be good for Gans now.”
“No,” Ethan replies, fists his hands in Adam’s shirt, “want you home now.”

“Soon,” Adam promises, lets Gansey take him. He leans in to kiss Ethan’s angrily hot cheeks, accidentally kisses Gansey’s out of habit as well. “Uh,” he says, “g’bye.”

“Um,” Gansey says, hoists Ethan up a bit further on his hip, “see you soon.”

“Did you just kiss Gansey?” Ronan asks, far too amused as Adam starts the car up.

“Accidentally,” Adam says firmly, pulls out of the parking lot, “don’t try an’ make anythin’ outta it.”

Ronan laughs, “Fuck off,” he says, “as if I’d worry you’d leave me for our resident rich Dick.”

Adam glances at him sideways, his face breaking into an unwilling smile, “Did you seriously just double pun that?” he asks, and Ronan cackles in reply.

Cabeswater is quiet when they get there, and Adam pauses just before the invisible line between reality and whatever Cabeswater counted as.

“I think-” he says slowly, holding his arm out to stop Ronan from keeping on walking, “I think it wants us somewhere a bit different today.”

“Different like what?” Ronan asks. He had stopped a few inches before Adam’s outstretched arm, but had shifted forwards to press against it, “Is it saying something to you?”

“No,” Adam says, “it’s just a feeling - also - also a feeling that we’ve forgotten something.”

“Forgotten something?” Ronan repeats, glances down at the two of them, and then around them,
then back at the parked BMW, “Like what?”

“Like,” Adam hesitates, he isn’t sure what. He actually honesty has no idea what he’s doing. He’s following vague ideas vague feelings, and he really doesn’t like it. “I don’t know,” he admits, “something I actually don’t have.”

“Well,” Ronan says dryly, “that’s useful. Any idea where we might get this thing that you don’t have and don’t know what is?”

“Oh shut up,” Adam snaps back, amused and exasperated in equal measures, “maybe we should ask Cabeswater.”

“What would you like me to ask it?” Ronan asks, he’s speaking as if he’s teasing, but Adam can hear the serious underlay.

“I don’t know,” Adam says again, it’s one of his least favourite things to say, “maybe we should start out by asking it what it needs?”

“Think we should go in to do that?” Ronan asks, and Adam glances down at their feet. There’s nothing visually different between the damp grass he’s standing in and the grass he’s refraining from stepping into, but it feels very important for him right now not to break the unseen barrier between them.

“No,” he says, “no I think we should wait-”

“Wait?” Ronan says, apparently he’s into repetition today, possibly as an influence from mass, “Wait for what?”

“God,” Adam snaps, has to say that extremely annoying phrase again, “I don’t know.”

“Oh good,” A voice calls out from behind them. It sounds like their voice is being taken by the wind, but the air around them is still. “You waited!”

Adam whips around, Ronan right behind them. Climbing up the grassy rise just behind the BMW is
a figure in a billowy green dress and an oversized yellow jacket. Their hair is floating around them like it’s being caught on the non-existent breeze, and for a moment, in the bright sunlight and odd air of the place, Adam doesn’t recognise them.

“Persephone,” Ronan snorts, “the fuck is she doing here?”

“Huh,” Adam says, his brain finally clicking into place, “of course.”

“What?” Ronan asks, elbows Adam, “Of course what?”

Adam doesn’t reply, just waves at Persephone, and starts making his way towards her, breaking into a half jog after just a few steps. He can hear Ronan cursing behind him, and then the sound of Ronan following.

“Seph,” Adam says once he’s close enough to speak to her without yelling.

“Adam,” Persephone replies calmly, as if they often met out in random fields with no prior communication, “you forgot this.”

She’s holding out a small velvet bag to Adam, the drawstring caught around her fingers.

“Oh,” Adam says, hesitates before reaching out to it, and then only brushes his fingertips against the bottom of it. “I don’t think-” he begins, and Persephone cuts him off.

“You don’t need to think,” she says, “you’re supposed to take these. I’m not using them right now, and you can’t talk to rocks without them.”

“Pretty sure I can’t talk to rocks with them either,” Adam replies, “will you come with me?”

“Oh,” Persephone says, actually laughs, looks to Ronan who’s just arriving at Adam’s shoulder after having chosen to walk while Adam jogged, “no you have company enough.”

“Ronan can’t talk to rocks either,” Adam persists, and Persephone laughs again.
“I can’t what?” Ronan snaps, “Why?”

“He doesn’t need to,” Persephone says calmly, unlaces her fingers from the string until the bag is resting heavier against Adam’s, “he just needs to do what you tell him.”

“I need to do what?” Ronan says.

“How do I know what to tell him?” Adam asks, the 2 of them ignoring Ronan’s slight offense.

“The cards will tell you,” Persephone says as if that’s obvious, “I have to go before Calla gets bored of waiting, so take the bag will you?”

“Right,” Adam says, takes the bag. It feels heavier than it should be. “Ok.”

“Don’t worry about Ethan,” Persephone says in parting.

“Don’t worry about Ethan?” Ronan repeats. He really is doing a lot of repeating today. Adam leans sideways until he can knock his shoulder against Ronan’s, then drops his head down on it.

“I don’t know,” he says, is aware that if Ronan’s refrain for the day is repetition, his is this irritating admission.

“Are you worrying about how upset he was this morning?” Ronan asks, he’s looping his arm around Adam’s waist and pulling him close and Adam is letting himself be drawn closer without a second thought. It feels as normal as breathing in now to fall into easy touches.

“Yes,” he says.

“Are you worrying that you’re being a bad brother?” Ronan asks, resting his chin against Adam’s forehead, and Adam exhales loudly.
“Yes,” he says.

“Well that’s dumb as shit,” Ronan tells him firmly, “you idiot.”

Adam snorts at this atypical comfort, “Thanks,” he says dryly, means it.

“He’s a kid,” Ronan continues, “kids are selfish, even ones like buddy. You know you're not abandoning him at all.”

“Right,” Adam sighs, “but what if I am? A bit? I used to spend all my spare time with him. This has all been very different for him, y’know.”

“Different in a good way,” Ronan says, “you know that, babe. It wasn’t good for either of you to have only each other. He just has to get used to it.”

“I’m not used to it,” Adam retorts, “how can he be if I’m not?”

“He will,” Ronan says, “you will.”

Adam sighs. He’d quite like to just stay like this for a while. In an empty field, sun all around them, Ronan all around him, lips pressed to his forehead.

“Ok,” he says, “let’s go figure out what this forest of yours wants.”
Angry Tree

What this forest wants, or so far as Adam can tell, is for the two of them to walk right back up to the invisible boundary, and lay out the first 3 cards his fingers touch upon reaching into the velvet bag.

What the cards tell him, or at least, what Adam thinks the cards tell him, is that he needs to go forwards until he stumbles, and then to make amends. Whatever the hell that means.

What this turns out to mean, is that he and Ronan trudge along what feels like the edges of Cabeswater until Adam catches his foot on a jagged piece of rock jutting from the ground, and stumbles, would have fallen flat on his face if Ronan hadn’t been there, grabbing at his arm and his waist roughly and counter balancing him.

“Huh,” Adam mumbles as Ronan tugs him back upright, cursing about muddy ground and stupid boyfriends who don’t look where they’re going simply to give their boyfriend a heart attack. “Right,” Adam say, ignores Ronan’s complaining, and pulls out the cards in the bag that sear his fingertips. There are only 2 this time.

“What do they say?” Ronan grumbles, “It just looks like some kind of shady nonsense to me.”

“Uh,” Adam says, runs his fingers over the cards. Doing this doesn’t actually help at all, but he’s always been tactile. Touching things makes learning them easier. “To move forwards you have to get rid of obstacles.”

“Right,” Ronan snorts, “just your everyday fortune cookie bullshit, then.”

“Oh,” Adam says, “this is where your muscles come in handy.”

Ronan narrows his eyes, looks from the cards to the rock which had tripped Adam, then sighs. “Are we digging this up?”

“Yeah,” Adam says, far too excited over the prospect of using their hands to dig out a hunk of rock. He’s not actually excited about that, he’s excited about the fact that it feels right. It feels like he’s understanding something. He doesn’t actually understand anything yet, but it’s a nice feeling. “We’ve gotta get it off the line. Oh!”
“Oh?” Ronan asks, he’s already dropping to his knees by the stone, careless over his jeans.

“Oh!” Adam repeats, “Of fucking course. It’s the Ley line!”

“What’s the Ley line?” Ronan asks, “And isn’t ‘the Ley line’ the answer to every fucking question around here?”

“The boundary we’ve been following,” Adam says, “the edge of Cabeswater. It’s a Ley line. Does Gansey know this? He probably knows this but doesn’t realise he knows this.”

Ronan frowns, looks at the boring dirt surrounding his knees, then at the boring dirt at Adam’s feet, then at the boring dirt a few metres away.

“Ok,” he says, “you sound like you’re right.”

“We should check it on the maps when we get back home,” Adam says, drops to his knees beside Ronan, small sharp stones digging into his skin even through his jeans, “but I’m pretty sure it’s right. It feels like it.” He pushes his fingers into the soft dirt around the edges of the rock, is thankful the rain loosened the earth, prays the rock isn’t in too deep. He digs at it for a few moments before realising that Ronan hasn’t joined in, and he looks up at him with a scowl.

“Hey,” he says, “if you’re just gonna watch, can you at least stop looking at me like that?”

“Like what?” Ronan asks, still looking at Adam as if he can’t believe what he’s seeing.

“Like I’m an alien or some shit,” Adam sighs, plunges his hands back into the dirt.

“You said ‘home’,” Ronan tells him, “You’ve been saying ‘home’ a lot lately.”

“Um,” Adam says, presses his fingers into the curve which he thinks is the bottom of the rock, “yeah?”
“I like it,” Ronan says simply, “when you say that.”

Adam snorts. He’s not sure how else to reply.

“I like what your voice does when you say it,” Ronan adds on, and Adam snorts again, pushes at the rock, can’t even make it wobble.

“What does my voice do?” he asks.

“It gets all warm,” Ronan says, “like you mean home when you say it.”

“What else do people mean?” Adam asks, he knows what else people mean. He’s not sure what he’s acting so obtuse. It’s just easier, maybe.

“A house,” Ronan says, “the place with their bed.”

“And what do I mean?” Adam asks, almost feels cruel asking it.

“Uh,” Ronan says, he’s scratching halfheartedly at the dirt now, “a place you belong.”

“I’m not talking about Monmouth, y’know,” Adam says to the rock, resolutely staring at the ground like all his attention is on that. “I don’t belong in Monmouth.”

“I know,” Ronan snorts, chucks away a handful of dirt.

They don’t need to say what he means.

They dig out the rock. Ronan splits a nail. Ronan swears bloody murder. Ronan sucks his bloodied finger, then curses bloodier murder over the dirt in his mouth. Adam consults the cards, not about Ronan’s finger, carries the rock over the Ley Line, into the outskirts of Cabeswater, leaves it at the foot of the first tree he comes to. His stomach flips, his skin prickles, something clicks into place around him and it sounds as if the grass all around them is sighing. Adam’s eyes itch and itch and itch.
“Are we digging out more rocks?” Ronan asks once his finger has stopped bleeding and his anger has abated, “Should I say goodbye to the rest of my nails now?”

“No,” Adam says, hand inside the bag. He’d wiped it thoroughly on the front of his jeans to rid it of as much grime as possible, doesn’t really want to dirty Persephone’s cards. Nothing calls out to him, nothing burns him. “Let’s go back and get clean. Next time we should bring shovels and gloves or something.”

“Good idea,” Ronan says, throws a grubby arm around Adam’s shoulders, “let’s go get fries first.”

“We’re covered in mud,” Adam points out. Doesn’t bother to say no because he knows that he’s going to say yes in a few moments anyway.

“Drive through,” Ronan retorts, starts tugging Adam back in the general direction of the car, “make out session in random parking lots.”

“God,” Adam sighs, lets himself be tugged, “dirt is not a turn on, Lynch.”

“Says you,” Ronan replies, “probably because there isn’t a mirror here.”

“Stop it,” Adam says, not at all seriously. “you know what’s nice while getting physical? Being clean. Not smelling like sweat and mud. That’s what’s nice.”

“C’mon,” Ronan says, grins at him over his shoulder, “you don’t sound like you’re convincing even yourself.”

“You’re a jerk,” Adam replies, “fries first. I’m hungry.”
“So,” Ronan says through a mouthful of salty potato, “I’m pretty sure I vaguely understand what we were doing today? But, care to expand on why I had to injure myself?”

“You wouldn’t have broken your nail if you had just listened when I told you it wasn’t loose enough to pull out yet,” Adam replies calmly, stuffs a handful of fries into his mouth, doesn’t care how crass it looks. “We’re realigning the line. Or, channeling it. The rock was interfering. I think? Like a broken wire in a circuit.”

“Damn,” Ronan snorts, “even magic breaks, huh?”

“Everything breaks,” Adam shrugs, “but that means everything can be fixed, right?”

“Pretty sure that doesn’t really follow through,” Ronan says, “but I suppose we can try.”

Ethan is grumpy when they get home. Gansey informs them that actually, he had been perfectly happy since about ten minutes after they had left until the moment Gansey had told him they were back, and Adam snorts. Stares across the room at the ajar door to Noah’s old room in which Ethan is apparently sulking with Chainsaw in.

“I don’t know what I did wrong!” Gansey is saying mournfully, his hands full of unfolded maps, parts of Henrietta spilling from his fingers onto the floor. Blue rolls her eyes at Adam, and Adam snorts again.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Adam says evenly, “he’s mad at me.”

“Why?” Gansey asks, even more horrified than before, “You’ve not done anything!”

“Because he’s 3,” Adam sighs, “and I left him behind when he wanted to come with me.”

Gansey frowns. “But he was fine,” he argues, “he was happy enough when he calmed down
“He’s 3,” Adam repeats, shrugs, doesn’t really know how to explain it any further than that, “he’ll be fine again in a minute. I’ll talk to him.”

“I’ll shower,” Ronan says, “and then we should probably do a magic meeting, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Adam says, “Blue, will you be sticking around for a bit longer?”

Blue looks to Gansey, Gansey looks to Blue, Noah sticks his head out from the Bathroom.

“Yes,” Noah calls, “I’m braiding her hair soon.”

“Yes,” Blue says to Adam, “I think I will be.”

“Bud,” Adam says, peers round the bedroom door. He can see Ethan’s feet sticking out from under the bed, Chainsaw’s tail feathers are peeking out too. “I’m home.”

“G’way,” Ethan replies.

“Do you want me to?” Adam asks, leans against the doorway. He really wants to rub his eye, it’s still itchy from getting dirt or some shit in it, but his hands are still grubby and he doesn’t want to make it worse.

Ethan doesn’t reply.

“Can I come under there, too?” Adam asks.
There’s a long silence, and then Ethan makes a noise that’s most likely an acquiescence, so Adam comes into the room, drops uncomfortably onto his knees which are beginning to really feel all the little bruises and scrapes the ground had left him, and squishes himself into the gap under the bed.

“Hey,” he says quietly, presses his cheek to the dusty floorboard, accidentally makes eye contact with Chainsaw. “You feelin’ sad, sweetheart?”

“Mmhm,” Ethan says into his arms pillowed under his head, “an’ mad.”

“And mad?” Adam asks, “Because I told you you had to share?”

“No,” Ethan says, “‘cos-‘cos-‘cos y’r mad.”

“I’m mad?” Adam asks, “I’m not mad.”

“Y’r mad,” Ethan insists, “mad at me.”

“I promise I’m not mad at you,” Adam says quietly, “I’m not mad at you. I just had to go out with Ronan and couldn’t take you.”

“You left,” Ethan accuses, and now his voice is all quivery, still muffled in his arms, and it makes Adam feel quivery as well. It doesn’t matter that he agrees with Ronan that he’s not being shitty. It doesn’t matter that he knows he doesn’t have to be with Ethan all the time. Not when Ethan has other capable and caring people he can be with. It doesn’t stop his stomach from twisting with searing pain, his throat from clogging with sudden disgust at himself.

“I came back,” he says through his blocked throat, “I always come back. I didn’t leave because I was mad at you, Ethan.”

“Bu’,” Ethan gasps out, his composure, if you could call it that, slipping fast, “bu’ wha’ if-”

“I’m always coming back,” Adam insists, “even if I was mad at you, baby, I’m always coming back for you.”
“Not in my dreams,” Ethan sobs, and Chainsaw caws mournfully, presses her head against Ethan’s, glares at Adam over the curls.

“Not in—” Adam stutters, then slides himself across the small stretch of floor between them, and wraps his arm awkwardly round Ethan. Awkward only because there really wasn’t actually room enough for cuddling under the bed. “You been having more bad dreams, baby?”

“Dreamed y’not comin’ back,” Ethan cries, “dreamed I - I - th’ cards - y’were mad ‘bout th’ cards an’-” He has to pause here to breathe, to uncurl himself from his knees and to recurl himself into Adam’s arms, Chainsaw shuffling around after him. “Was mad a’ me,” he repeats, “an’ left me an’ Chains-aw an’-” more breathing, more mourful cawing, “an’ the tree told me am bad - an’-”

“The trees?” Adam asks, interrupts as gently as he can, threading his dirty fingers through Ethan’s hair, knows he’ll have to wash it soon anyway. “The trees said you were bad?”

“No,” Ethan mumbles against Adam’s shoulder, “no th’ tree, th’ angry tree an’-”

“The angry tree?” Adam asks. He feels like an angry tree now.

“Uh-huh,” Ethan grumbles, “angry tree said y’were gonna leave me an’ - an’ tha’ - an’ tha’ am bad, am wrong - an’,”

“Baby,” Adam says firmly, desperately wonders if he could actually beat up a fucking tree, “I’m not going to leave you. The dream wasn’t real. You’re not bad, and you’re not wrong. You’re so good, baby, you’re so good.”

“Was real,” Ethan insists, he already sounds vaguely more cheerful, though his voice still sounds wet, “‘Seph says.”

“What did Persephone say?” Adam asks, is now a tree angry at a witch.

“Says am real in dreams too,” Ethan mumbles, “dreams am real.”
Adam wants to reiterate here that the dream was not real. But he also does not want to say something that could potentially be a very difficult lie. He really, really wants to go talk to Persephone again.

“Well,” he says, as calmly as possible, “That dumb tree doesn’t know anythin’. It’s wrong. I’m not going to leave you, and you’re not bad.”

“Gans says am sweet,” Ethan contributes, sniffs hard, “an’ ‘Lue says am funny.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, “You are sweet, and funny, and also the very best brother. Ok?”

“Ok,” Ethan says, sniffs again, “not mad?”

“I’m not mad at you,” Adam clarifies, presses a kiss to Ethan’s forehead, “I promise. But baby,” he adds on, needs to address this as well, “y’know sometimes I’ve gotta go do stuff without you, yeah?”

Ethan sniffs again, this time grumpily. “Yeah,” he mumbles.

“And y’know,” Adam says, “I’m not gonna leave you alone, not ever again. Gans’ll be there, or Blue, or Dana, or Ro.”

Ethan makes an indecipherable noise, Chainsaw replies.

“And I’ll always come back,” Adam continues, “ok?”

“Mhm,” Ethan grumbles.

“And,” Adam adds on, “if you’re lonely, if you miss me, you can tell me, ok? If you want cuddles I’ll give you cuddles. If you want me to come sleep with you, I will.”

“Want cuddles,” Ethan says.
“Ok,” Adam says, squeezes his arms around Ethan until Ethan snorts happily. “Ok,” Adam says again, presses more kisses to Ethan’s forehead, “let’s get out from under here, yeah? I’ve got dust in my eyes.”
Dope up

Ronan’s just turning the shower off when Adam opens the bathroom door a crack and sidles in. He looks a little uncomfortable, keeps blinking hard like he does when he doesn’t want to cry.

“Hey,” Ronan says, stepping out of the tub to grab his towel, “Ethan ok?”

“Yeah,” Adam sighs, stepping up to the sink to turn the tap on and scrub his hands. He’s leaning forwards towards the mirror, keeps blinking hard, squinting at his face. “He’s just - he’s having more bad dreams,” he explains slowly, “about trees. And Persephone told him they were real, so, I don’t know, Ro. Do you think Cabeswater could be - could be getting into his sleep?”

“I don’t know,” Ronan says, just the mere idea is turning his stomach into a sinkhole of horror, “fuck. When did Persephone tell him this? Why didn’t she say anything to you?”

“Fuck knows when or why,” Adam grumbles, he’s shaking water off of his hands now, is tugging his lower eyelid down and staring at his bloodshot eyeballs, “God, could you look at my eyes? I think there’s something in them.”

“Dirt or some shit?” Ronan asks, tying the towel around his waist and wiping his hands on it before stepping over to Adam. He reaches up to cup Adam’s cheeks softly, turns his face towards him. Adam shifts against the counter so his whole body is facing Ronan’s, closes his eyes briefly as Ronan’s thumbs rub against his cheekbones. “They’re looking pretty bloodshot.”

“Yeah,” Adam mumbles, lets Ronan tip his head side to side, up and down as he peers into Adam’s eyes, “they were kind of itchy while we were digging, but they’re actually really sore now, I think I scratched my pupil or some shit. Do you see anything?”

“No,” Ronan says slowly, stretches the skin around Adam’s eyes, “nothing. I think you must have washed whatever it was out already and just left the irritation.”

“Ugh,” Adam grumbles, “well, thanks.”

“Of course,” Ronan says, presses a light kiss to the corner of Adam’s eye, then drops his hands down to bracket Adam’s hips instead. “You going to shower now?”

“Yeah,” Adam says, leans in against Ronan’s damp chest, “will you go keep Ethan company? I’m - I’m worried about him.”

“I can do that,” Ronan says, kisses the top of Adam’s cheek, “maybe try pressing a cold flannel on your eye?” he suggests and Adam pulls out of his grip to undress for the shower.

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By the time Ronan is dried and dressed, Ethan is outside his door with Chainsaw, yelling something about a song he wanted to sing to Ronan.

The song is a true classic. It’s got that thing about music that Ronan likes, the thing where if you played it on repeat on a long car journey, everyone in the car would go insane.
“Wow buddy,” Ronan says effusively, pulling Ethan up into his arms - Chainsaw flies up to perch on his shoulder - “what a beautiful song!”

“Chains-aw an’ me made it,” Ethan tells him proudly, bounces on Ronan’s hip, “las’ night.”

“Last night?” Ronan asks, “When last night? While you were sleeping?”

“Uh-huh,” Ethan says, apparently already bored with this conversation because he’s attempting to bounce Ronan across the room to the door.

“So,” Ronan says, follows Ethan’s instruction relayed via kicking heels, leaves the room in favour of the lounge, “was Chainsaw in your dreams too?”

“Uh-huh,” Ethan says again, they’ve reached is destination apparently, his over full toy chest (Gansey had impulse bought a large treasure chest which he insisted he had bought for his own reasons but Ronan knew he had bought specifically for Ethan’s toys), and is now squirming in Ronan’s arms to be put down. “She’s always there now.”

“Oh?” Ronan says, sits down with Ethan and opens the box up so Ethan can dive in, half his body disappearing into the cavernous depths of the box, “always? What does she do in your dreams?”

Chainsaw is on his shoulder still, making very irritated noises, pecking at his ear, as if she thinks he ought to be directing these questions to her instead. Seeing as Ronan hadn’t had the foresight to learn Raven, however, he doesn’t bother.

Ethan resurfaces with an armful of dolls, and grins up at Ronan.

“Yells,” he says, “Chains-aw yells at bad people.”

“Huh,” Ronan snorts, that makes sense. He lifts his hand to Chainsaw, strokes down her neck feathers, “are there lots of bad people in your dreams?”

“Uh-huh,” Ethan says again, presses 2 dolls into Ronan’s hands, “play now. Y’re th’ mums.”

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They have their magical meeting. The meeting itself is actually very unmagical, it’s all long winded explanations and confusion and debates. It begins with Noah saying he felt brighter, and then Adam does his best to explain how he knew what needed to be done, Blue does her best to try and decipher when and why Persephone was talking to Ethan about dreams, Gansey does his best to pinpoint exactly which point of the Ley Line had been fixed, and how they might go about seeing the results, and Ronan does his best not to get frustrated.

This quest had been going on for years now. Before Adam and Blue had joined their group, everytime Ronan and Gansey had discovered a new clue, or thought they were getting closer to the answers they wanted, nothing had come of it. Because nothing had come of it, it had been easy to keep going. Because there was no danger. Because Gansey was not put off by dead ends.

Now, things were happening horrifically quickly. Ley lines fixed, caves appearing, birds singing Latin, Ethan having possibly real bad dreams- it was dangerous. This was not frustrating because of
the quickness of the discoveries, one after another like dominoes, it wasn’t even really frustrating because of the danger. 2 things Ronan had always been a fan of were speed and danger, this was not an issue. What was frustrating was the slowly burgeoning knowledge that this speed, this sudden yet still slow reveal of the quest, of Gansey’s mission, none of this would be or could be happening without Adam and Blue.

This was frustrating because from the beginning they had all known that this would be dangerous for Adam. This was frustrating because all of this made it feel like there had never actually been any choice about any of this.

Adam would have always had to join their group for anything to have happened. Blue would always have had to join their group for anything to have happened. Adam would always end up joining. Blue would always end up joining. No matter what timeline they were in, and Ronan was still vaguely dubious over the idea of having multiple timelines, they would end up in the same danger.

This was fucking frustrating because Ronan wanted a lot of things, but one of these things that burned higher up on the list was the fucking choice to shit. He knew this rankled with Adam. That the idea of some sort of predestined fate annoyed the hell out of him. Knew that Adam craved autonomy above all. But Adam was busy being sensible and magical and academic, so Ronan was frustrated and annoyed for the both of them.

If he were Adam, he would probably currently be creating an itemized list of all the things that were irritating him, and then he could work through it all piece by piece. However, he was not Adam, so he just sat there in an uncomfortable stew of it all while he tried to focus on only what they were talking about. Difficult to do when his brain is swirling in a million different directions at once trying to figure out if he can do anything to help at all.

In the end, they don’t really get very far before they need to eat dinner before Adam has to go to work. Frustrating. Because they had pizza and garlic bread last night, Adam is in his element. His element, of course, being adamant on occasionally eating vegetables, and he makes them courgette stir fry with rice noodles. After they’ve eaten, Adam puts Ethan to bed, taking a little longer than usual, while Gansey and Ronan grudgingly do dishes. Noah sits in the empty bathtub laughing at them for being alive and therefore capable of being ordered to do chores. Blue also sits in the bathtub and laughs, despite being perfectly alive.

Blue is on at Nino’s tonight as well, so it makes sense for Ronan to take both her and Adam to work. He doesn’t really begrudge this, except for the fact that he very much enjoys this trips with Adam. It’s not much, it’s just 5-10 minutes at a time of just him and Adam and no magical issues, but he likes it. Even if they’ve already spent the whole day together. Luckily, Blue’s presence in the backseat doesn’t deter Adam from kissing Ronan goodbye. If anything, it excipitates it seeing as when Adam leans in to kiss him, Blue makes a gagging noise, so Adam very quickly changes the chaste peck to a full on french kiss that has Blue scrabbling for the door handle.

“Text me when you get off,” Ronan mumbles as Adam pulls away, wiping at his mouth and grinning chaotically, “and don’t rub your eyes.”
“Bossy,” Adam says, opens his own door and climbs out to follow Blue who’s stomping her way to the entrance, “see you soon.”

He knows it’s probably a little overbearing, or maybe a little creepy, but he always stays in the parking lot, car idling, until Adam is inside. Definitely a little pathetic, and on this occasion, a bad idea because it means that by the time he turns away from Nino’s to drive away again, his passenger side door is opening.

“Glad I caught you,” Kavinsky says cheerfully as Ronan whips back around, “it’s been a while.”

“Get the fuck out of my car, Kavinsky,” Ronan snaps back, “get out.”

“Y’know,” Kavinsky sas, ignoring Ronan, “I heard something pretty interesting about you yesterday.”

“Get out,” Ronan repeats.

“Skov was just cruising around last night,” Kavinsky says, pulls a hand rolled cigarette (probably not actually a cigarette) out of his pocket and bites down on the end of it while he fumbles in his pocket, ostensibly for a lighter, “told me he saw you all parked up in a nice dark corner so he went to go investigate,” his voice is cramped down through his clenched jaw, “you’re never gonna guess what he saw,” he grins, finally pulling the lighter out and lighting up. Definitely not a cigarette.

“He saw you getting out of my car and leaving me the fuck alone?” Ronan snaps.

Kavinsky laughs, exhales smoke everywhere, “Nah,” he drawls, “he saw you getting tongue fucked by that fucking trailer trash.”

Ronan blanches, Kavinsky continues.

“Good on you,” he sneers, “finally coming out, huh? Pity you’re doing it with a piece of shit like that.”

“Fuck off,” Ronan snaps.

“I’m hurt,” Kavinsky says, offers the joint to Ronan, who bats it away, “you didn’t even think to tell me. Aren’t I important to you at all, Lynchy?”

“No,” Ronan says blandly, “get out of here before I fucking push you out.”

“I don’t think you will, though,” Kavinsky says, “you don’t want to make me even more upset now, do you?”

“Why the fuck not?” Ronan sneers, and Kavinsky laughs again. He’s going to have to fucking deoderize the whole car before Ethan can get in here again. It already stinks to high heavens.

“Because,” Kavinsky smiles, “I have something I want to show you, and if I can’t show it to you now, I’m just going to show it to you and everyone else later, and I don’t think you’d like that.” He shrugs, and then adds on as if in after thought, “Oh, and also because I’m more than happy to fuck up Parrish’s life even more than I’m sure it is if you keep ignoring me.”

“Bastard,” Ronan hisses, “God. What the fuck do you want to show me? Hurry the fuck up with it.”
“Now, now,” Kavinsky tuts, “patience, darling. It’s at mine.”

“The hell I’m going to yours,” Ronan snaps, and Kavinsky grins at him again, a long slow smirk.

“Skov’s inside Nino’s right now,” he says slowly, “he’s grabbing me a choc shake, but I bet he could grab me a nice handful of your boy toy’s hair too if I asked.”

“Fuck off,” Ronan says with feeling.

“You can drive me to mine,” Kavinsky says, flings his feet up onto the dash, “he can bring my drink later. Let’s go.”

“I’m not staying,” Ronan says flatly, “and I’m not drinking with you, or dreaming with you, or doping with you. I’ll look, and then I’m going. Ok?”

“Whatever you say, sweetheart,” Kavinsky drawls, leans over simply to puff smoke into Ronan’s face, “you do you.”
Hi Ronan I'm Ronan

Chapter Notes

TW - a lot of blood.

He’s been to Kavinsky’s far too often, but not at all recently, so it’s confusing when he doesn’t recognise the front of the house Kavinsky directs him to pull up to, but not confusing enough that he worries about it yet.

He worries about it when he's inside Kavinsky's house, and yes, it is Kavinsky's house, and he doesn't recognise any of the interior. Not that he’d ever really spent that much of his time here looking at the decor, or even that much time here awake or comprehending of his surroundings, which is really just proof of how different it has to be for him to have noticed. That isn’t actually saying that much though, because most people would have noticed the fact that there’s a fucking car smashed half way through one of the walls. If this was anyone else, Ronan would have thought there had been a crash, or an accident, or some shit. Because this is Kavinsky, and Ronan recognises the car type, he knows Kavinsky would have just dreamt that car into being not caring about the lack of space in the room he was in. It was probably lucky (or unlucky depending on who you ask) that he hadn’t squished himself in the process.

The house is littered with dream objects, so many more than usual. Kavinsky usually keeps his crap sequestered to his room and the basement, but now there’s random fucked up shit everywhere. There’s something dripping stickly down the staircase Kavinsky’s dragging him up that’s either blood, or- no, it’s blood.

“If you’ve brought me here to see a dead fucking body,” Ronan snaps, tugging his arm out of Kavinsky’s grip, “I am telling the police.”

“Baby,” Kavinsky laughs, grabs at Ronan again and reattaches his hand at the junction between Ronan’s shoulder and neck, “he’s not dead yet.”

“The fuck,” Ronan says, tries to tug away again, but Kavinsky has his claws in, nails digging deep into his skin. “What the fuck are you doing, K, who do you have up there?”

“Just you,” Kavinsky smiles as they stumble onto the blood slick landing, “just you.”

“The fuck,” Ronan says again, Kavinsky opens the first door to the left, and Ronan’s surprised enough to let Kavinsky just propel him inside.

He’s standing in the doorway, Kavinsky still clutching him tightly, toothy sneer looming over his shoulder. He’s also lying on the blood soaked floor, his head propped up against the far wall, his chin pressed into his bare chest.

“Just you,” Kavinsky says again, squeezes Ronan’s neck tighter, “have you ever wondered,” he continues before Ronan can even begin to gather his thoughts, “if you could dream a dreamer?”

No. Ronan had never fucking wondered that. Now he was though. Now he was staring at himself, at his blood stained chest barely shifting with breath, at the fact that this copy of him isn’t even chained
up to keep him here.

“What did you do?” Ronan gasps out, and Kavinsky shakes Ronan by his scruff, laughs quietly.

“I didn’t,” he says, “I barely did anything, baby. This is all you.”

Ronan doesn’t have words, he just stares at Kavinsky.

“I missed your sweet face,” Kavinsky croons, tugging at Ronan and lifting his other hand to pinch his cheek, “you were ignoring me and ignoring me and what else was I supposed to do?” Honestly,” he laughs, “it was a mistake, but what a beautiful mistake to make, huh?”

Ronan continues to stare.

“So,” Kavinsky continues, his nails are digging into Ronan’s cheek now as well, “can you dream a dreamer? The answer is yes. You can dream a dreamer, look at you, my own darling dreamer.” He shakes Ronan again, forces him another stumbling step into the room. The blood in here is thicker than it was outside. Darker, stickier. “Look at you dreaming,” Kavinsky smiles, “isn’t it beautiful?”

Oh. Now he’s looking at himself again, at the way he can see his eyes moving under his lids, the faint tremor in his fingers, the look of a dreamer in a nightmare.

“As soon as I brought you out,” Kavinsky says, “you fell back to sleep.”

“Why?” Ronan asks roughly, the version of himself on the floor is starting to shake, “What did you dream me as?”

“I dreamed you,” Kavinsky says, “as you. This is you, baby. This is the real you, when you take away all your masks, and all your stupid inhibitions, when you take away Dick and his dick.”

“What am I dreaming about?” Ronan gets out. He can already see what he’s dreaming out. The sharp lines are already being drawn out against his bare chest, fresh blood ebbing out of them.

“Your beautiful horrors,” Kavinsky drawls, “I think you make about 5 a day. You’re like a monster factory. One will come out in a minute, you’ll get to see for yourself.”

“The fuck,” Ronan breathes out, “why?”

“Why are you dreaming nonstop about horrors?” Kavinsky asks, “Because you hate yourself? Because you are a horror? Because you know what you deserve?”

“Why did you dream me like this?” Ronan snaps, he’s finally coming into himself enough to lift his arms to catch Kavinsky’s, to rip his hands off of his skin, “This isn’t me.”

“It was you,” Kavinsky says, “I dreamed you as I know you. I am a little disappointed though,” he adds, “you’re always asleep or crying, not really much time in here to have any fun with you.”

“Fuck you,” Ronan gasps, bats hard at Kavinsky’s hands as he tries to reattach himself to Ronan again, “how long have you had me here?”

“Oh I don’t know,” Kavinsky says, sighs and drops his hands back to his side, “for as long as you’ve been ignoring me? For long enough that I’ve made a pretty little business out of it?”

“A business?” Ronan asks, takes another step into the room, boots sliding and sticking at the same time, “What do you mean?”
“Your little feathered horrors are so good at fighting,” Kavinsky laughs, “I’ve never made anything quite so viciously fucked up as them. People pay good money to watch them fight. Or to fight them. Your lovely monsters and my drugs are the new entertainment in Henrietta, you know.”

“Fuck,” Ronan says, “fuck, fuck you fucking fucker.” He takes another step into the room even as his double begins to shake harder, as he can tell the horror is about to appear. He makes it to the dreamer’s side just as his body seizes up, just as the horror clatters on the slippery floor beside them. He meets his own eyes, wide and bloodshot and utterly horrified. He knows how it feels, obviously, this is him. He knows the feeling of waking up with blood coursing down his stomach, with the veay knowledge of a monster by his side, with his limbs stiff and unyielding. He’s never woken up to his own face though. That’s probably a little terrifying as well.

“Oh come on,” Kavinsky yells at him, “you stay in there and that horror’s gonna have a field day,” he says, “2 scared Ronan’s to tear to shreds. You can’t do anything to help yourself here, baby.”

“Hey,” Ronan breathes out to himself, grips his shoulders tightly even as his fingers slip on blood and sweat slick skin, “you don’t want this,” he says firmly, “you don’t want this.”

The horror is rearing up on its back legs, Ronan can see the subtle differences between the horrors he dreams up in his own reality, and the horror that comes from Kavinsky dreaming a malfunctioning Ronan. There are more scales than feathers, more heads than usual, more venom.

“You don’t want to hurt yourself,” Ronan continues, raising his voice over the heavy breathing of the horror, “you don’t want to hurt anyone. You don’t want this. We don’t want this.”

“Give it up,” Kavinsky drawls from behind him, “and watch out.”

Ronan jerks away at Kavinsky’s words, doesn’t quite avoid the claws raking at his face. A loud noise cracks in the air around them and the horror falls to the ground. Kavinsky is holding a gun like thing in the air, smoke dribbling out of it.

“It’s just asleep,” Kavinsky says, “like you.”

The Ronan in his hands has relaxed from the stiffness of his sleep paralysis, is blinking up slowly at Ronan’s horror struck face.

“Fuck,” Ronan mumbles to his double, “are you-?”

The double closes his eyes. Goes back to sleep. There’s clear lines down his face, salt water washing away dry blood.

“I told you,” Kavinsky sighs, “you sleep and you cry. Just like normal. Come on, it’ll be boring in here now until the next horror comes. Let me show you some more.”

“No,” Ronan rasps out, throat dry, “isn’t this enough?”


Ronan doesn’t exactly let himself be dragged down into the basement to watch the fight, but he
doesn’t see any point in actively resisting either.

He recognises a few people in the crowd, but not the majority of them. They don’t even look like Henrietta locals. Too slick, too well moneyed, too alive and undusty.

“When you said this was Henrietta’s new entertainment,” Ronan breathes, Kavinsky has wrapped his arm painfully around Ronan’s shoulders as he tugs him round the circular crowd surrounding the fight ring, “I thought you meant for Henrietta, not for your fucking drug tourists.”

“You need to get out more, boo,” Kavinsky jeers, squeezes him tighter, “this is my Henrietta. MY drug tourists are your fight tourists now. This is yours too. This is ours.”

“It isn’t,” Ronan protest harshly, winces as the background grumble of the crowd suddenly becomes a wild roar. It’s hard to see much through the haze of drug thick smoke in the air, the mess of people, but he has no doubt about what’s just happened. Kavinsky confirms it for him.

“The monsters are here,” he hisses into Ronan’s ear, “we getta fight now.”

“I don’t want to watch this,” Ronan hisses back as Kavinsky tugs him to the front of the crowd, “I don’t need to see this.”

“I think you do,” Kavinsky laughs, “won’t it be therapeutic? Watching your monsters fight each other instead of you?”

“Prefer to watch them fight you,” Ronan snaps out, stumbles into the ring walls. It’s a two part fence. The part Ronan has stumbled into is sharp, all barbed wire and cut of wire ends, but the inner fence is all but crackling with power.

“The outside one is to keep everyone out,” Kavinsky tells him unnecessarily, “the inside one is to keep everything else in.”

His palms are bleeding. He can only tells because of the stinging. He’s already covered in his own blood from the room earlier, can’t make out what’s fresh and not.

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He’s back to pick Adam up after the shift. He’s only just in time. Hasn’t managed to get away in time to wash first, so he’s sitting in the front seat covered in dry and tacky blood. He knows this is a stupid, awful idea, but he needs to see Adam now. Needs to tell him everything right now. Needs Adam to wrap his arms around him right the fuck now and ground him back into his own body. His head feels light and heavy at once, the effect of all the drugs in the air around him, and his car still stinks of Kavinsky's dream joint.

“Hi babe,” Adam sighs as he climbs into the passenger seat, “thanks-” he cuts himself off as he chuckes his bag into the back seat and catches sight of Roan. “Fuck!” he yelps, “Fuck, Ro, what-? You ok? What happened?”

“Kavinsky,” Ronan says simply, doesn’t have it in him to figure out a better way to explain this, “he-it’s not bloo - it is my blood but it isn’t my blood, I’m not - Adam,” he breaks off, needs Adam to pull him back in, “is it alright if I - can we get blood on your uniform?”
Adam stares at him for one long horror struck moment, and then he’s pushing across the space between the two seats and wrapping his arms around Ronan, tugging him close to his chest, his lips to Ronan’s forehead.

“I’ve got you, babe,” he breathes, “I’ve got you.”

“Fuck, Adam,” Ronan mumbles, presses his face down against Adam’s shoulder, presses his nose against his neck, inhales sweat, and familiar soap, and Adam.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” Adam asks, “When we’ve cleaned you up?”


“Of course,” Adam says firmly, clutches Ronan tighter to him, “course.”
Let me in again

There’s a packet of wet wipes in the glove compartment by Adam’s knees, and after Ronan’s stopped clinging to him so desperately (now only mildly desperately clinging), he gets them out and shuffles against Ronan’s weight so he can begin wiping at the rapidly drying blood on his face. Ronan’s head is thick with the horror of it all. All he can do right now is let Adam move his face around, fingers firm on his jaw. All he wants right now is for things to not have happened. For Adam to hold him tighter. To get to go home with Adam to Ethan and to bed and not to awful, awful, awful conversations.

Once the blood is cleaned off of Ronan’s face, Adam takes Ronan’s hands in his, begins to wipe gently at the blood there. This blood is a mixture of his (Ronan’s), and his (dream Ronan’s) blood. He’s pretty certain that there is no way to tell the difference. He thinks that somehow Kavinsky will have got his blood, at the very least, entirely perfect. The blood on him is his blood. It’s his blood. It’s his blood. He’s bleeding out in Kavinsky’s fucking mansion. He’s alone, and terrified, and hurting in Kavinsky’s mansion. He doesn’t have Gansey to pick him up, doesn’t have Noah to cheer him up, doesn’t have Adam to hold him. It’s his blood.

“Adam,” he says, hoarse. He feels like there’s blood in his throat too. He’s dreamed that before. Of blood pouring down his throat. Or was it out of his throat? Who knows. The point is; he’s dreamed of blood moving through his throat before - viscous and sharp, choking him and clogging his mouth.

“Ronan,” Adam replies. He sounds almost calm, but Ronan knows he isn’t. This is just how Adam sounds when he’s looking after someone. Just how Adam sounds when he’s terrified beyond belief and the only thing keeping him upright is the need to be capable. Ronan can’t do that right now. Can’t sound calm. Just hearing Adam being calm chokes him even further. When he doesn’t speak further, Adam continues to wipe gently at his hands, turning them in his so he can clean blood from the palms as well. “Is this your only injury?” he asks, pressing the wipe carefully to the ragged edges of the tear in his palm. It had stopped bleeding, had crusted over in a ridge of dried blood, but at the moisture and the wiping, begins leaking blood out again.

“Yeah,” Ronan mumbles, “barbed wire,” he adds. Adam makes an odd noise his his throat, keeps cleaning the mess of Ronan’s hands.

He has no fucking clue where he ought to start. Opening with, ‘Kavinsky has a clone of me in his upstairs bedroom that he’s using to generate monsters for supernatural dog fights’, just didn’t feel like it would be easy to say or hear.

“Kavinsky knows about us,” he says instead, and Adam pauses just for a second, then resumes cleaning the cut. The foot well is already littered with bloodied wipes.

“Ok,” Adam says, waits.

“He knows you’re important to me,” Ronan says next. It’s easier to speak in stilted fragments. His brain is too full of himself staring up at him to be able to form a coherent full sentence.

“Ok,” Adam says, waits.

“He threatened to have you hurt,” Ronan says.

“Ok,” Adam says, drops another wipe to the floor and picks up Ronan’s other hand, “what did he blackmail you into doing?”
“I went to his,” Ronan mumbles. His clean hand is stinging viciously, whatever the fuck the wet wipes have on them is in his cut, but it’s clean. It’s clean.

“Did he hurt you?” Adam asks. He’s asking Ronan’s hands. He hasn’t looked up at his face the entire time Ronan’s been speaking and Ronan is both pleased and devastated by it. He doesn’t want to have to see the horror on Adam’s face when he tells him what happened, but he also wants, wants, wants just Adam. He just wants to see him properly.

“Not… not me,” Ronan says carefully, and now, finally, Adam looks up. He’s still holding Ronan’s bloodied hand, but he’s not wiping anymore.

“Not you?” Adam asks, “But someone?”

“Adam,” Ronan says again, “I’ve told you that he’s a dreamer.”

“Yes,” Adam says.

“And I’ve told you that he - that he feels he and I are … something.”

“Yes,” Adam says.

“And that he’s mad that I haven’t been to him lately.”

“Yes,” Adam says.

“Adam,” Ronan says, knows his voice is leaking desperation all over his already horrifically mucky seats, “Adam, he dreamed me.”

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It’s a good thing that Gansey finally has putting Ethan to bed down, because otherwise it would have been a lot harder going home for fear of letting Ethan see Ronan like this. Adam had done a good job in wiping him down, but there’s only so much wet wipes can do, and it didn’t stretch to cleaning the mess off of someone who knelt down in weeks worth of blood and then stood front row at a very messy monster fight.

Gansey is a little more used to seeing Ronan covered in blood, but not this much. Not like this. He turns round when they come in, already speaking aloud about how he thought Ronan would come back in between dropping Adam off and picking him up again, and cuts himself off mid sentence to yelp in horror.

“Ronan!” He cries, “What happened?”

Adam glances from Gansey, to Ronan, to Ethan’s bedroom door, still ajar as always, a faint pink light emitting from it (a night lamp originally dreamed for Gansey’s bad dreams, now for Ethan’s), and then nods in the direction of the bathroom/laundry/kitchen.

“We need to get Ronan into the shower,” he says, Ronan very much agrees, but doesn’t say anything, just keeps pressing himself against Adam’s hand at the very small of his back. It feels like that’s the only thing keeping him together right now. “We can talk in there. I don’t want to risk Ethan hearing or seeing this.”

They go to the bathroom, Adam in charge. Gansey perches on the counter by the sink, immediately begins fiddling with a stray rubber duck, hands too anxious to stay still. Adam presses Ronan closer to the shower, then begins very efficiently stripping him. He speaks in very short sentences, voice low and soft as he directs Ronan, and it’s much easier than having to direct his own body.

“Arms up,” Adam says, tugging at the hem of his shirt, “Good, head in. Ok.”

Only once Ronan is entirely naked, and Adam is ordering him carefully into the shower does Gansey speak.

“Whose blood is that?”

Ronan doesn’t want to tell this story again. He had spilled as much as he could force out of himself to Adam in the car before Adam had decided they needed to go home and clean him properly and tell Gansey, and he wasn’t sure he could force it out again. There was apparently no need though, because Adam simply picks up the soap, lathers it in his hands, begins cleaning up from Ronan’s wrists, and says over his shoulder, “Kavinsky dreamed a clone of Ronan that appears to only be able to dream monsters and bleed. This is dream Ronan’s blood.”

Gansey swears with remarkable clarity and creativity from behind them. Adam rubs at dried blood under Ronan’s leather bands.

“He’s running some sort of monster fight club in his basement,” Adam continues once Gansey’s exhausted his swearing tank, “and he’s draining the ley line with dream Ronan’s constant monster production, and probably extra drugs to keep up with the revenue created by his monster fights.”

Gansey apparently has more swearing left in him after all. Adam leans further into the tub to run the soap along Ronan’s shoulders, to nudge at him to turn under the water so he can get at Ronan’s back. There’s less blood there, barely any in fact, but he does feel dirty all over. He does want Adam to clean him everywhere.

“He didn’t say what he wanted from Ronan. He did threaten Ronan with hurting me if he didn’t do as he was told though,” Adam says blandly, fingers pressing firmly against the knots in Ronan’s upper back, in his neck, up into the stubble of his hair. “It sounds like he wants Ronan to join him or some shit. I’m not sure that dream Ronan is connected with that. It feels like it’s a diversion.”

“A diversion?” Gansey asks after a few more mouthfuls of swearing, “For what?”

“Hell if I know,” Adam says, rubs soap on Ronan’s head, lathers it, careful not to let the bubbles slip down into Ronan’s eyes. “Ronan said there were a lot of out of town people at the fights. A lot of… strange people. Made me think of the hitman Blue said visited them. Of the Greywaren.”

“Oh,” Gansey says, he sounds like he gets where Adam is going, but he’s not managed to fill in all the dots yet. Ronan hasn’t either.

“He wants Ronan’s attention focused on this,” Adam says, presses lightly at the back of Ronan’s head until he bows it down under the water so Adam can wash it out, “so he can achieve whatever it is he really wants. Or,” he adds with an angry sounding scoff, “until he can have Ronan I suppose.”

Once Ronan’s head is out of the water again, he finally finds his voice. “Diversion or not,” he says roughly, “we can’t leave him - me - him there.”

Adam’s hands are still on him, resting on his shoulders now. Still apart from his thumbs moving
slowly against slick skin.

“The dream Kavinsky has,” Adam says slowly, “it’s not you, Ronan.”

“I know,” Ronan snaps, his voice breaks half way through, “I’m me. But,” he adds, knows he’s about to sound nonsensical, “it is me. That was me in there.”

“It can’t be you,” Adam says, and he’s still speaking slowly, as if he thinks Ronan’s just too wound up right now, “because he came from Kavinsky’s head, and you, the real you, the you you, you’re not in his head.”

“That’s not how it works,” Ronan says, it feels like a wail in his mouth, “I didn’t need to be. That’s still me bleeding out in his fucking house, Adam.”

Adam’s looking to Gansey now, hands dropping from Ronan’s shoulders so Ronan can finally turn around again. “Gansey?” Adam asks, “The dream, it’s not - it’s not a real perso- a real Ronan, is it?”


“The fuck,” he says, “he’s a real person, Parrish. He’s real. He’s as real as I am.”

“Ronan,” Adam begins, but Ronan shakes his head.

“And he is me,” he adds firmly, “he’s me. He’s fucking terrified, and he’s hurt, and he’s alone, and he’s - he’s - he’s - fuck.”

“Ronan,” Gansey begins. He’s hopping off of the counter now, is crossing over to join Adam at the side of the tub, hand already outstretched. Ronan shakes his head again, presses the heels of his hands up against his eyeballs until it hurts.

“He’s me,” he says, “if you’re trying to say we should fucking leave him there or some shit, or just forget about him or - if you’re saying he doesn’t matter - it’s - I’m not doing that.”

“We’re not going to leave him there,” Gansey says consolingly, gripping the unpulled shower curtain tightly. He’s getting water on him. “We’ll get him out, Ronan.”

“How?” Adam asks, “That sounds like we’ll be walking right into Kavinsky’s trap. Or maybe the hitman’s trap.”

“Fuck that,” Ronan says, “just leave me to fucking bleed out then.”

“Ronan,” Gansey says. Adam doesn’t say anything. Ronan wants to tear off his skin. He turns the shower off instead.

He’s not fully clean, but it’s enough for now because he’s suddenly feeling too exposed, too vulnerable, and he wants to go to his room and wrap himself in his sheets, and sleep until none of this ever happened.

“Ronan,” Gansey says again as Ronan steps out from the shower. Adam hands him his towel, but still doesn’t say anything. “Adam,” Gansey tries instead. Ronan doesn’t know if Adam says anything to this, because he’s leaving the bathroom now and making his way swiftly to his bedroom, water still sluicing off of him, leaving a small river between bathroom to bedroom.

Once he’s inside with the door shut he feels marginally better. Then he feels exponentially worse. He has no fucking clue what to think. Knowing Kavinsky it was equally possible that this dream double shit was a trap or a diversion for something else as it was that it was just him playing twisted games
in an attempt to get into his head. Knowing Kavinsky, it probably didn’t matter which one of these options it was. Knowing Kavinsky is what got him into this mess.

He needs Adam to come in now. To wrap his arms around him and to tell him that obviously they wouldn’t leave him with Kavinsky. Obviously they would save him. They just needed to work out the details.

Adam doesn’t come in, so he dries off and gets into his sweat pants instead.

Adam doesn’t come in, so he feeds Chainsaw and kicks his clothes around instead.

Adam doesn’t come in, so he climbs into his cold bed and buries his face in the pillows and tries not to let his emotions bury him alive.

That Ronan. The Ronan that was probably asleep right now, asleep and dreaming, that Ronan hated himself with an intensity which Ronan recognised easily. He couldn’t quite relate to it, not anymore, but he could feel it in his gut, in his bones, in the tips of his fingers. No one can dream monsters like that without wanting them to tear your skin from your bones. To pull the blood from your veins. To press their claws deep enough until you just stopped. That Ronan was spending all his time locked into sleep and hatred and sleep and hatred and sleep and hatred. He had self loathing to the max. Fear, and anger, and disgust.

That Ronan, Ronan thought, had probably been accidentally dreamed to be able to bleed and bleed and bleed and bleed, because the amount of blood in that room, the amount of blood down those stairs was simply inhuman. There was no way he could have bled so much and not be dead. This is an even worse thing to think, Ronan thinks, because that Ronan, with all that self hatred, can’t even end it.

Adam doesn’t come in, and Ronan really fucking needs him to come in. He gets up out of bed and leaves his room instead.

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Gansey is at his desk, turns around as soon as Ronan appears, and fixes him with a worried look. Adam is nowhere to be seen.

“Ronan,” Gansey says, and Ronan goes to him. He knows how to follow directions even if he usually doesn't.

“Please,” Ronan says, the word sharp in his mouth as he drops down on his knees next to Gansey’s chairs. He’s not purposefully going for supplication in his pose, he just wants to be close enough to be held, but it works. “Please don’t leave me there.”

“Ronan,” Gansey says again, and he sounds very, very young. Ronan supposes that actually, all of them are, in fact, very, very young. “I don’t want to leave you there.”

“Then don’t,” Ronan choked out, “don’t, I can’t.”

“I know,” Gansey says, “we’re going to try.”

“Trying doesn’t mean anything,” Ronan says, “we have to do.”
“We will,” Gansey says firmly. Ronan’s pressing his forehead against Gansey’s leg, Gansey is just resting his hand on the top of Ronan’s head. “But we can’t just charge in. We need to find out what the trap is. We can’t risk anyone being hurt.”

“I’m being hurt,” Ronan snaps, “he’s being hurt,” he corrects himself, “right now. For weeks. Gansey.”

“I know,” Gansey says again, “we need more information, Ronan.”

Ronan could point out again that the information that there’s a Ronan out there being shredded by his own self hatred ought to be information enough, but he knows there’s no point. Gansey is careful and academic. He’s not going to let anyone of his little posse run into danger like this for someone else. Even if that someone else is a replica of the original member of his posse.

Instead, Ronan says; “Where’s Adam?”

“He’s in his room,” Gansey says.

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Gansey says, he sounds uncomfortable, “your door was shut. Maybe he thought you wanted space.”

“I didn’t,” Ronan grits out, presses his forrid harder against Gansey’s leg until Gansey’s fingers tighten comfortably on his neck, “I didn’t.”

“So go tell him,” Gansey says, squeezes Ronan’s neck in comfort again.

“How can I?” Ronan asks, “He doesn’t - he doesn’t - he thinks I should be left to bleed out alone.”

“Ronan,” Gansey says.

Ronan knows he’s spouting rubbish. His stomach is curdling at his own words, but his brain is viciously telling him it’s true.

“He doesn’t think that,” Gansey says firmly, “you know he doesn’t.”

“I don’t,” Ronan denies, horribly close to tears, “I don’t know that.”

“Ronan,” Gansey says, “we can argue this out all night, or you can ask him.”

“Can I sleep in your bed tonight?” Ronan asks instead, and Gansey pauses for a long moment.

“Yes,” he says eventually, “so long as that’s what you actually want. If you really want Adam to come to your room instead, then no.”

Ronan is silent.

“Ronan,” Gansey says, “Would you prefer Adam?”

Ronan is silent. Gansey squeezes his neck carefully,

“Please,’ Gansey says, “his door is open.”
He doesn’t know if he ought to knock or not. He wouldn’t have if this was the previous night. But, if this was the previous night, Adam would be in his bed already. He clears his throat instead, presses the door open a little further.

Adam is on his side in the bed, back facing the door, Ethan curled up towards him, hand gripping tight to Adam’s wrist. Neither of them move when Ronan steps into the room.

“Adam,” Ronan whispers in the dim light, “are you awake?”

“Yes.” Adam replies.

“I can’t-” Ronan begins, stops, sighs, tells his tears to get the fuck back into his eyes thank you very fucking much, “are we fighting?”

“No,” Adam says, “I don’t think so.”

“Why are you in here, then?” Ronan asks, manages to keep the tears out of his voice even as they fall heavier.

“Ronan,” Adam sighs. He still doesn’t roll over. “Your door was shut,” he says, “I thought you were mad.”

“I was,” Ronan says, “I am.”

“Well then,” Adam says, as if that was that.

“I am,” Ronan repeats, “but I didn’t mean to shut you out.”

Adam takes a moment to reply, and when he does, he sounds tired. “I know,” he says, “I know. I just didn’t want to fight. It’s too late for fighting.”

“I don’t want to either,” Ronan says, his voice is cracking again, and he swallows hard.

“Ro,” Adam says, “we’re going to wake Ethan up. Do you want me to come to your room?”

“Yes,” Ronan says, “yes.”

“Ok,” Adam says, “I’ll meet you there in a minute.”

- He doesn’t close the door when he goes back to his room. He leaves it wide open and collapses back onto his bed. Focuses on keeping himself together. Gansey had looked at him as if to ask a question as he’d walked past him again, but Ronan didn’t trust himself to be able to keep moving if he had to talk, so he’d just shrugged at him and walked faster. Gansey would get his answer soon enough when Adam walked past. Adam does knock before he comes in, even though he can see right into it. He knocks, then comes in, pulling the door to behind him, and comes to perch on the edge of the bed.
“I’m sorry,” he says, quiet, “I didn’t mean to - I’m sorry for upsetting you.”

“I know,” Ronan mumbles, and Adam shuffles back further onto the bed until he can lie down on his side next to Ronan on his stomach.

“Hey,” he says, “Ro. I’m not going to leave you to bleed out.”

“Maybe not me,” Ronan says into his pillow, “but what about him?”

“You really think he’s you?” Adam asks after a few moments, and Ronan huffs his frustration out, and then nods sharply.

“Even if he wasn’t,” he adds, turning his head to the side so he can speak clearly, “he’s still a person. Dreams are still people.”

Adam looks vaguely skeptical, but then his expression clears, and he tilts his head forwards to press his forehead to Ronan’s.

“I don’t want to leave him there to bleed out, either,” Adam says, and Ronan huffs again.

“You don’t want to,” he says, “but you will?”

“I thought we weren’t fighting?” Adam asks, but his tone is mild enough, “No,” he says in reply to Ronan, “not if we can help it. I’m not doing anything without everyone agreeing on it. I’m not doing anything until I know you’ll be safe.”

“I’m not safe,” Ronan says, frowns against Adam’s forehead, “I’m stuck in a nightmare loop.”

“No,” Adam sighs, “I know. I’m sorry. I - I have to admit I’m more attached to you than dream Ronan. I want both of you safe, but I want you safe more.”

“Adam,” Ronan says, thinks that this is probably as close as they’re getting for tonight, “will you stay with me tonight?”

“Of course,” Adam says, he sounds surprised, “yes. I’m here, aren’t I?”

Ronan grunts.

“Ro,” Adam says, “I know I was acting… real cold. But I have no intention of leaving you here alone if you want me here.”

“I want you here,” Ronan says firmly, “I need you here.”

“Then I’m here,” Adam says simply, “I wanna give you anything you need.”

“Just you,” Ronan says, “for now,” he adds on dryly, and Adam snorts weakly, tilts his head back down to press a kiss to his cheek.

“Do you want to sleep?”

“Maybe,” Ronan says, “Adam.”

“Ro?”

“I love you,” Ronan says. Just wants it on his lips. In Adam’s ears. “I’m sorry for shutting you out.”
“Hey,” Adam says, kisses Ronan’s other cheek, “so long as you let me back in.”
Morning comes, and it doesn’t magically erase any of last night. It does leave him feeling a little less anxious though, which is useful, because there’s no way he can face another day as freaked out as he was last night. Adam is awake when Ronan opens his eyes, but he’s still curled up around Ronan’s side. Not holding onto Ronan exactly, just sort of molded along his body.

“You’re not up,” Ronan mumbles into the pillow, and Adam blinks at him, then shifts to wrap his arm low over Ronan’s hips.

“No,” he agrees.

“Why?” Ronan asks, “It’s a school morning. You don’t like sleeping in on school mornings.”

“I was busy thinking,” Adam says, presses his face against Ronan’s shoulder until Ronan lifts his arms to wrap around Adam to pull him closer. “Trying to figure out Kavinsky’s angle. I don’t know him well enough to get a very good idea of it.”

“I know him too well,” Ronan says, “and from experience his only angle is to have fun and fuck shit up.”

“That’s really not useful,” Adam says, sighs damply against Ronan’s chest, “also thinking about how we make sure he can’t use me as a tool against you.”

“What do you mean?” Ronan asks. He’s still foggy with sleep, Adam curling into him not helping him wake up any further, just lulling him into comfort.

“If he’s using the fact that we’re together as blackmail for you, we need to do something about that,” Adam says plainly, and Ronan’s heart feels like it stops for a moment.

“Wait,” he says roughly, flails stupidly under the blankets until he can get enough of a grip to push himself into a vaguely upright position, “you’re not going to break up with me, are you?”

“What?” Adam asks, propping himself up on his elbow now Ronan’s knocked him off him through his flailing, “No. You dipshit. Of course not.”

It’s too early to bother feeling embarrassed, so he simply feels relieved instead. “Ok,” he says, “then what?”

“I just,” Adam starts, shrugs, hesitates a moment, and then leans back in onto Ronan’s chest, “I don’t know, actually. The only thing I can think of is that we should stick closer together so you know he can’t do anything to me, but we already spend most of our time together. Really I’m just -” he breaks off again, presses his nose in against Ronan’s neck, “-does he know about Ethan?”

This is something that Ronan has also been worrying about.

“I don’t know,” he says truthfully, “I know he saw you and Ethan that one time, but I’m not sure if he’ll have put it all together. Now that he knows about us, though, he might have done his research.”

“Would he hurt a 3 year old?” Adam asks, “To get to you?”

“I don’t know,” Ronan says again, it’s almost painful to have to say this. To say this about someone he had willingly spent time with. “I have no idea what’s going on, Adam. He let me go last night,
after he’d shown me everything. I think he’s just waiting for me to come back to him because I’m curious, or freaked out, or something, but I can’t put it past him to - to try and sweeten the incentive by… I don’t know.”

“Ok,” Adam says, he doesn’t sound ok, “ok. Do you think you should ask Declan if he knows about any of this?”

“What?”

“You’re always saying that he has his nose in everything, he might have heard about the fight club. Might know about some of the out of town guys.”

“Maybe,” Ronan shrugs, “he always knew more about dad’s business than I did as well. Maybe some of the people will be in the same circles. I don’t really want to ask him though.”

“Let’s ask him anyway, yeah?”

“God,” Ronan sighs, “yeah. Fuck, Adam,” he adds after a few moments, “I wish you came to Aglionby. I don’t want to go without you right now.”

“I know,” Adam says simply, “but look, I have a phone now. You need to keep your phone constantly on you. We’ll keep contact throughout the day, ok? It’s going to be fine. Kavinsky will give you at least a day to go back to him before he tries out other options, right?”

“Yeah,” Ronan shrugs, “maybe. I’m sorry.” He doesn’t bother trying to explain what he’s sorry for. It would take too long. Mostly he’s sorry because he doesn’t want to add danger to Adam’s life. Mostly he’s sorry because this is all his fault. Mostly he’s sorry because he’s so fucking scared.

“Babe,” Adam says, kisses at his neck, “this is going to be ok. It does feel kinda like a horror movie, but it’s gonna be ok. I think.”

“Ugh,” Ronan says, “breakfast?”

“Yeah,” Adam agrees, doesn’t let go of him, “I’m thinking I might do a reading before we go to school.”

“A reading about the day?”

“Yeah,” Adam says, kisses him again, “I don’t think I’ll get anything very useful out of it, but I hope that maybe if something…awful is going to happen today, the cards might hint at it.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, “I’ll get Ethan up while you read?”

- 

By the time Adam comes out from the bedroom, Ethan and Ronan and Gansey are almost finished their eggs on toast. Ethan is wearing most of his, Gansey got yolk on his glasses - nobody knows how - and Ronan is attempting to explain to Ethan that he purposely got his tattoo, he didn’t just fall into a puddle of ink like Ethan thinks.

“Bu’ why?” Ethan asks through a mouthful of buttery toast, “Ad’m says not t’ draw on myself an’ not to draw on other people, an’ tha’ ink’s uh bad for our skin?”

“Well that’s true,” Ronan says carefully, he has no intention of trying to tell Ethan that Adam could
ever be wrong, especially not with Adam coming into the room, “but this is very special ink for skin. Eggs, Parrish?”

“Yeah, thanks, babe,” Adam says, dropping down next to Ronan and taking the proffered plate of eggs and toast. The eggs are a little congealed, but Ronan knows that Adam, despite his desire to eat healthily and well, will eat almost anything handed to him. “Morning baby, morning Gansey.”

“Aw,” Gansey says, he is also talking through his toast, “Ronan is babe, and Ethan is baby, but I’m just Gansey?”

“Uh,” Adam says, bites off half his toast in one go, “mornin’...buttercup?”

“Oh come on,” Ronan snorts, but Gansey cuts him off with an imperiously thrust out hand.

“No,” he says to Ronan, “I like it very much.”

“If he’s buttercup I need a name too,” Noah says from behind them, and Adam jumps so hard he spills egg yolk on his trouser legs.

“Oh shi--ugar,” Adam mutters, then scrunches his face up into a small smile as Noah circles around them to come into view, “how long have you been around, Noah?”

“I’m not sure,” Noah says with a shrug, perches next to Gansey and pokes at the bits of egg white still on his plate, “sorry about the surprise.”

“No it’s fine,” Adam says, “I’ll just clean it off in a second-”

“I’ll lick it!” Ethan suggest brightly, already on his feet, “I like egg yuk!”

“Oh,” Adam snorts, “no thank you baby, you can have some of the egg yolk from my plate if you like though.”

“Yum!” Ethan says, picks out the leftover yolk straight from the egg and puts it whole in his mouth before plopping himself down on Adam’s lap, straight into the egg yolk spill. At least he hadn’t changed for the day yet.

“So,” Noah says, “Adam?”

“Oh,” Adam says, glances up from Ethan, to Noah, to Ronan, then shrugs, “I dunno. Bab? Is that a word?”

“Bab,” Noah says, altogether too pleased, “fab.”

Gansey groans. Ronan groans. Ethan steals a bite of Adam’s toast as well.

It’s very strange, Ronan thinks as they finish off breakfast, as Adam whisks Ethan away to get cleaned and changed, that there’s all this shit going on, all the fucking time, and yet they still sit down and have breakfast and stupid conversations. It’s less strange, Ronan thinks, as Adam scrubs the yolk out of his pants with one hand while pressing his cellphone to his ear to the other (Persephone on the line so he can confer with her about card meanings), that he can take the time from feeling sick with fear about Kavinsky, and body doubles, and hit men, to feel jealous about Adam calling other people pet names.

- Ethan is in a good mood when they drop him off at Dana’s. Adam mumbles something about the
nightmare-free-night-light being part of it. It had been Gansey’s idea to dig it out from downstairs and set it up for Ethan, but it was Ronan that Adam was smiling at in thanks. Despite Ethan’s good mood however, both Adam and Ronan are on edge as they drop him off at Dana’s. Just the idea that Kavinsky might try something, the mere thought that Ethan could in anyway get involved, terrified Ronan enough that his nerves felt jagged.

“So not to worry you or anything,” Adam is saying quietly to Dana in the kitchen while Ronan helps Ethan untie his shoelaces while Shelby and Mari are trying to do them back up for him in the lounge, “but we’re had a bit of a problem with… I know you wouldn’t just let him go with anyone, but can I just ask that you only let me or Ronan pick Ethan up?”

“What’s going on, Adam?” Dana asks, her voice a little louder than Adam’s, confusion evident in it, “Of course I wouldn’t just let some stranger take Ethan. Are you in trouble?”

“No, no,” Adam assures her swiftly, “it’s just -”

“Is it your parents?” Dana asks, she’s dropping her voice down low, but Ronan, straining to here, still catches her words, “Are they trying to find you?”

“No,” Adam says again, “they know where we are, as far as I’m aware. It’s nothing really, Dana, just some local idiots talking big.”

“And threatening a toddler?”

“Just threatening in general,” Adam says, Ronan can hear the shrug in his words, “we just want to cover our bases.”

“You’re not actually going to tell me what’s going on, are you?” Dana asks, and Adam laughs, low and rueful.

“Nothing’s going on,” he says calmly, “thank you, Dana.”

Adam comes into the lounge just before Ethan escapes off behind the couch to play barricades and baboons with the girls to say goodbye, and to save Ronan from being a baboon.

“Ro’ll pick you up right after school, ok buddy?” Adam says, brushes Ethan’s curls away from his face, “you have fun with the girls, yeah?”

“Yu-huh,” Ethan says, “bye.”

“Bye,” Adam says, rolls his eyes at Ethan’s blase attitude, and reels him in close to press a quick kiss to his forehead despite his squirms, “love you buddy.”

Ronan thinks that this is possibly the first time he had ever heard Adam say this to Ethan, wonders if this is the first time he has send this to Ethan. Doesn’t think it can be. Ethan just looks at Adam, then pushes up to kiss Adam’s cheek as well, very sloppily, before Adam releases him.
Adam drives the two of them to Mountain View, like normal. It’s also normal for him to not get out immediately, the two of them like to take just a moment here; usually for a quick kiss (which isn’t about to be interrupted by small children, overly loud friends, or Adam falling asleep) and a recap of their plans for the day. This wasn’t something Ronan had ever thought he’d need; fully fleshed out plans for his day, but, here he was with a boyfriend and a toddler, and an entire timetable to be followed. He loved it.

Today however, Adam looked to have other plans, because once he pulls the handbreak on and unbuckles himself, he turns in his seat to look at Ronan, and not in either of his usual - I’m going to kiss you right now, or, here’s the plan kind of looks.

“What?” Ronan asks, unbuckles himself as well.

“Did you really think I was going to suggest we break up this morning?” Adam asks, and Ronan scoffs, then coughs, then frowns.

“No,” he says, “not really - it’s just - no.”

Adam frowns at him, reaches across the gear stick to take his hand. “I’m not going to,” he says firmly, “I’m not just going to bail when things get hard.”

“I know that,” Ronan says, rolls his eyes, “you don’t need to tell me that, Parrish,”

“I think I do,” Adam says, “because life is so fucking - fucking weird right now, and there’s so much… shit going on, and I don’t want us to be one of those shit things. I don’t want us to be part of the uncertainty.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, swallows.

“I’m not uncertain about us,” Adam continues. He looks exceedingly embarrassed, his cheeks are pink, but he looks equally determined to keep on, “I have been completely certain of us since the first time we kissed. Maybe before. You are so - so important to me.”

It’s a whole little speech. Ronan’s cheeks are pink now as well.

“Thanks,” he gets out, it feels a little weak so he quickly adds on, “I feel the same. I mean. You too. I mean, Adam-” he shakes his head, clutches at Adam’s fingers, even as it pulls at the rips in his palms, “-you know I love you.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, then, “the cards this morning-”

“Yeah?” Ronan asks, suddenly straight back in nerve jagged high alert. Adam squeezes his fingers reassuringly, shakes his head.

“No it’s fine,” he says calmly, ducks forwards to drop a light kiss to Ronan’s lips, “they just, I’m not sure. I wasn’t getting much - not many of the cards were, uh, calling to me - so I didn’t get a very thorough read I don’t think? But, there was something about - about I think sleeping together but in a - God, I didn’t think about how that would sound out loud, - in a kind of - let me start again. There was something which I think could be loosely translated to dreaming together, and finding strength through that.” His cheeks are a lot pinker now.

“Dreaming together?” Ronan asks, “Do you mean me and you dreaming together or - not me and K?”

“No,” Adam says, voice suddenly harsh, “not you and Kavinsky. No.”
“Ok,” Ronan says, eyebrows raised, “you and me, then?”

“Yeah,” Adam shrugs, “I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Obviously you’ve made at least a little something out of it though,” Ronan pushes, “you’re the logical connections guy, tell me what you’ve logically connected this morning.”

“Shut up,” Adam scoffs, “I just think that to get this dreaming… thing, whatever, I need to work more on fixing the line. On just generally getting Cabeswater stronger, Noah stronger, your dreaming stronger.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, and while this was definitely a good idea just the other day, and still mostly is, the problem is; “will strengthening the line mean that - uh - dream Ronan will dream more as well? Won’t that strengthen K and the dream, too?”

“I don’t know,” Adam shrugs, “from what I can gather, from you and Cabeswater, and the cards, Kavinsky is not the favoured dreamer here.”

“Right,” Ronan shrugs, “ok. I trust you.”

“I have to go to class,” Adam says suddenly, glancing at his wrist, “fuck, I’m going to be late. Text me as soon as you get to school, ok?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, thrown slightly by the sudden shift in topic, “I’ll text you every hour.”

“God,” Adam says, he’s pressing closer to Ronan now, “in any other situation I would sound like the awful overbearing boyfriend right now.”

Ronan snorts, shifts so he can wrap his arms quickly around Adam’s waist to tug him just that bit closer so he can kiss him properly. Adam kisses him back hard and hot, then drags himself away, releasing Ronan’s hands last.

He doesn’t want to go to school. Not that he ever really wants to. But. Adam wants him to go to school, if not for the education right now, at least to be with Gansey, to be somewhere kind of safe. Also, he does want to be safe. He would prefer to just follow Adam into his classes, but Adam doesn’t want that. So. He goes to Aglionby, he texts Adam as soon as he gets out of his car and again as soon as he sits down next to Gansey in class. Adam texts back after the second text, before Ronan’s heart can freak out too much. It’s very short. Just a quick, ‘same xxx’.

He sticks to Gansey’s side. This isn’t new. But he usually sneaks away to the corner of the room to glower when Gansey is flocked upon by his adoring fans. Today he glowers from Gansey’s side instead. It means Gansey is a little less popular today, but he doesn't seem to mind it. They still don't have an official plan, but Gansey and Adam both agree that they all need to stay close and in constant contact.

He only manages to find Declan at the very end of lunch as Declan is rushing off to some random meeting with a potential job contact, doesn’t get to ask him any pertinent questions. Declan takes one look at Ronan and Gansey’s proximity to each other, at their matching expressions, and then sighs, says he’ll come round to Monmouth in the evening. This is not exactly something Ronan wants, but he supposes it’s probably a good idea.
Ronan picks Adam up from mountain view parking lot. He texts when he gets there, and only then does Adam actually come outside to slide quickly into the passenger side seat. He has a strange look on his face, and as soon as he shuts the door behind himself he exhales loudly and leans in against Ronan's side.

“What?” Ronan asks, worried, “what happened, babe?”

“No, nothing,” Adam sighs, “God, nah, I've just been worrying about you all day because I'm an idiot.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, “oh.” He lifts his hand to cup Adam's head awkwardly - only awkward because of the angle. “Nothing happened,” he says softly, “we're all fine.”

“I know,” Adam mumbles, “it's just what I do. Worry. I'm just happy to see you safe, is all.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, “you wanna go straight to work, or, do you wanna come with me to get Ethan first?”

“Uh,” Adam says, presses closer to Ronan, “just let me know he's fine when you get him, yeah?”

“Ok,” Ronan says again, “ok, Parrish, gimme a kiss and let's go.”

Adam doesn't bother replying, just twists up and kisses him hard, and then sits back down again properly in his seat and buckles himself up while Ronan starts the car back up.

He idles in the parking lot of Boyd’s until Adam disappears inside the mechanics, then takes off again. He has to trust that at least at Boyd’s, he’s surrounded by reasonably strong men who appear to like him well enough to protect him should anything happen. He needs to not sit around worrying too much when worrying wasn’t actually going to help. He needed to make a plan. First, he needs to pick Ethan up. Once Ethan is buckled safely into the car, he texts Adam to inform him of this, and then drives straight back to Monmouth while making promises with Ethan about chicken nuggets. He has to hope they still do have those frozen dinosaur chicken nuggets in the freezer otherwise he is also going to be ridiculously disappointed.

He carries Ethan upstairs to the tune of Murder Squash with new lyrics, that mostly follow the pattern of; ‘WANT CHICK’N NUGS AN’ NUGS AN’ NUGS AN’ CHAINS’AWSSSS’

As much as he loves the original, he has to admit that this is better, plus the lyrical genius is simply astounding. Chainsaw meets them at the door, she appears to want to be joining in on the music. Noah also meets them at the door, he appears to want to be able to glare at Ronan as soon as possible. Ronan shrugs at him with a shit eating grin on his face as he sweeps past him, dumping his and Ethan’s bags on the floor as he crosses the living area to the bathroom.

“This is your fault for giving him terrible music taste!” Noah hisses at him. Despite his hissing and his glare, he can’t seem to stop his face from shifting into a grin at Ethan’s exuberance.
“Oh,” Gansey says when Ronan opens the bathroom/kitchen/laundry/hell site door, he’s making a very strong smelling cup of coffee, “Ethan wants chicken nuggets, huh?”

“We all want chicken nuggets,” Ronan corrects him, having to raise his voice quite considerably over the chorus being belted out in both his ears, Chainsaw on one side, Ethan on the other (NUG NUG NUG NUG NUG NUG NUG NUG).

The next few hours pass with irritating slowness. He and Gansey heat up the nuggets (squished behind the frozen peas) and have afternoon tea with Ethan and Chainsaw and Noah in a patch of sunlight on the floor by the cardboard town hall. Blue gets dropped off by her mother after they’ve cleaned up the tomato sauce from the floor, and they get to work in attempting to figure out what the shit they ought to do now. Blue drops the absolutely confusing news that her mother is going on a date with the hitman, Gansey drops the more confusing news that there are now 2 Ronans, Noah disappears while holding Blue’s hand, and Ronan is around about 99% sure that another monster just got dreamed into reality.

He wants Adam.

By the time he eventually does go to get Adam, they’re no closer to any solution, and Ronan feels entirely strung out. He knows it’s not anyone’s intention to be making him feel so fucked up about all of this, but none of them, not even Gansey, quite seems to get just how real this situation is. Or possibly more accurately, how real dreams were. How real dream Ronan was.

Adam comes out when Ronan texts, opens the driver’s side door, and motions at Ronan to shuffle over. Ronan shuffles over, Adam hops into the driver’s seat. They don’t talk. Adam looks too tired for talking. They drive. They park. Adam undoes his seat belt and climbs over the gap between them into Ronan’s lap, wraps his arms around Ronan’s shoulders and buries his face down on his arms.

“Hey,” Ronan mumbles, lifting his arms up slowly to wrap carefully around Adam’s waist, “what’s up?”

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” Adam says quietly, “about dream Ronan. About you.”

“Neither,” Ronan admits, squeezes his arms tighter around Adam until Adam exhales roughly.

“I’m sorry,” Adam says, voice even quieter now, “I should have understood how you felt earlier. This is - I’m sorry.”

“Don’t,” Ronan grunts, “don’t be a dumbass, Parrish. You have nothing to be sorry about.”

Adam snorts beside his ear, “I do,” he says, “I didn’t stop long enough to think about what this must be like for you to see yourself like this and- let me be sorry, ok?”

Ronan sighs, shakes his head, “You had enough to worry about. Speaking of, however,” he adds, possibly not the wisest mood in this particular fraught moment, because Adam jerks in his arms and sits up straighter to look at him.

“What? What’s happened, now?” he asks.
“No,” Ronan says, “God. No nothing. Just, Declan’s going to come over soon. So we can talk about this shit with him too. Although he doesn’t know that.”

“Oh,” Adam says, rolls his eyes, looks like he might be about to climb out of Ronan’s lap to get out of the car, so Ronan re-tightens his grip on him, keeps talking.

“So we might get some more answers, which’d be nice, but we also might get some Declan yelling, which won’t be nice.”

“Ah,” Adam says, he seems to understand that Ronan’s not actually wanting to be talking for the sake of talking right now, because he leans back in against Ronan’s chest, leans his cheek against the top of Ronan’s head. “Tell me how your afternoon has been?”
Declan arrives soon after they get inside. Adam is spread out across Gansey’s desk, Gansey at his elbow, the both of them talking in low voices. They’re supposedly doing homework, but actually discussing Kavinsky. Blue is helping Ronan entertain Ethan, which means that she’s holding Ronan’s ankles still while Ethan paints his toenails. Noah is still gone. This leaves just Chainsaw to greet Declan when he quietly pushes the door open, having forgone knocking because, he’s an asshole.

“Ronan,” he says loudly over Chainsaw’s insistent cawing, “you didn’t ask me here to help paint your nails, did you?”

“F-shut up, Declan,” Ronan sneers from between Blue and Ethan, “Chainsaw, don’t bother, come over here.”

Chainsaw, who had been fluttering up in bursts around Declan’s feet, lets out one more loud cry, and then clatters back towards Ronan to peck at his feet.

“Oh,” Blue says, releasing Ronan’s ankles, “this is your brother then?”

“Older brother,” Gansey clarifies from the desk, “Declan.”

“Gansey,” Declan says, gazes across the room, “Parrish.” Adam nods at him, doesn’t get up from the desk. “I don’t believe I’m acquainted with -” he pauses now as he looks properly at Blue and Ethan. “-These two.”

Adam gets up now, he looks vaguely pissed off. Ronan appreciates this look on him. He crosses the room easily, comes to stand behind Ronan’s back, presses his hand to Ronan’s shoulder.

“I’m Blue,” Blue says stiffly, “Blue Sargant.”

“And this is my brother, Ethan,” Adam chips in, his voice terse as well. Terse enough that Ethan drops the nail polish brush and looks up at him. Ronan reaches down his legs to him, and Ethan lets himself be pulled up onto his lap. The slowly spilling nail polish is saved by Blue.
“Oh,” Declan says. He’s staring at them. Just the 3 of them, Blue doesn’t appear to be making it into his line of vision, and Ronan wonders what he’s seeing. Does he see them as a small family unit, him, Adam, and Ethan? With Adam holding Ronan up, and Ronan holding Ethan up? Or does he see them as 3 irresponsible children ganging up on him. “Pleasure to meet you,” he says finally, holds his hand out to Blue.

Blue does not take his hand. “Sorry,” she says, “wet nail polish.” Her nails are very conspicuously unpainted as of yet.

“Who’s this?” Ethan asks in a carrying whisper.

“This,” Ronan says to Ethan, doesn’t look up at his brother, “this is my older brother, Declan-”

“Oh,” Ethan says suddenly his face growing stormy, “th’ not nice one?”

“Ah,” Ronan says, shrugs. Blue snort. He can all but feel Declan’s scowl.

“Don’t be rude, buddy,” Adam says from above them, he’s stepping back a little, sidestepping round Ronan, and then offering Ronan a hand, obviously implying he ought to stand up. Ronan takes his hand, tugs himself and Ethan upright.

“I don’t think it’s rude for a 3 year old to repeat what he’s heard said,” Declan says stiffly, he’s talking to Adam but glaring at Ronan, “and I’m sure Ronan’s said much worse about me, so I should count myself lucky that’s all he’s saying.”

“It’s rude,” Adam counters, “because even if he has heard rude stuff said about you, which isn’t actually as common an occurrence as you may think, because he knows he’s s’posed to be polite to new people, right Ethan?”

Ethan pouts, hangs his head, presses his face against Ronan’s neck, and Ronan bites back a snort.

“Mhm,” Ethan mumbles, “‘m’sorry.”
Declan looks very confused about the variety of interactions he’s being exposed to, manages to compose himself vaguely anyway, and crouches slightly so he’s on eye level with Ethan who is very determinedly not looking at him.

“That’s alright,” he says softly, “I hope I’m not so scary you can’t even look at me.”

Ronan had forgotten, seeing as he hadn’t seen it for a very long time, that Declan was very capable of being soft and sweet with young children. He had always been soft and sweet for Matthew, probably had been for Ronan as well, even if Ronan refused to think about it.

“‘M’not scared!” Ethan protests, peeling his face away from Ronan’s neck to sit up straight in his arms and look properly at Declan. “Am’n’t scared of no thin’!”

Adam snorts from behind them. So does Blue. Ronan just raises his eyebrows at Declan as Declan raises his eyebrows at Ethan.

“Not scared of anything?” Declan asks, “Wow, you sound super brave. Even I’m scared of some things.”

“What’re-” Ethan begins, nuzzles back in against Ronan, “what’re you scared ‘bout?”

Ronan would also like to know.

“I’m scared of mushrooms in my dinner,” Declan says, shudders theatrically, “and long car trips.”

Ronan knew about the mushrooms, that distaste had been something younger Declan had been very vocal about, even if now he just smiles and eats whatever’s on his plate. Thinks maybe he ought to have known about the car trips.

“Oh,” Ethan says, “‘m scared of doors,” he whispers back, “an’ yellin’.”

“Ah,” Declan says, nods seriously, “I promise not to do any yelling then, ok?”
“Uh-huh,” Ethan mumbles, looks up at Ronan, then wriggles in Ronan’s arms to look at Adam, “what’re y’all scared ‘bout?” he calls loudly, and Declan laughs. An actual laugh. Not a snigger, or a fake belly laugh for the sake of his peers, or a polite chuckle. A real, honest to God, Lynch laugh.

“Actually,” Adam says, “that’s why you’re here, to talk about something’s we’re scared about.”

“Oh,” Declan says, his face has shifted from raw amusement back into his stiff facade again, “I see.”

“And we can’t actually do that in front of - uh - E - T - H - A - N, so.” Ronan adds, jiggling Ethan up on his hip.

“Is that why this Blue girl is here?” Declan asks, finally looks at Blue again, and Blue makes a noise very similar to that of an aggravated bull.

“I’m not a babysitter!” She says sternly, Ronan thinks that if Ethan wasn’t here, she would be yelling, “I’m a girl, not your surrogate mother, so please take that sexism of yours and shove it elsewhere.”

“Ah,” Declan says after a few moments of vaguely terse silence, “I apologise.”

“Noah was going to babysit,” Adam says, “but he’s had to - to disappear for a bit,” Declan scowls, Adam shrugs and continues, “as it is, I’m going to our room with Ethan while you guys talk.”

“Oh,” Declan says, “I suppose that makes sense.”

Now Ronan’s annoyance pricks up again. “Not because he’s any less involved in this than any of us,” he says stiffly, “Adam’s.”

“I know, Ronan,” Declan interrupts, he’s rolling his fucking eyes, “it makes sense because they’re brothers. God. Are all of you this sensitive?”

“What the-” Ronan begins, frustration boiling up in him. Adam places his hand gently on Ronan’s shoulder, leans in and kisses him on the cheek.
“Babe, please,” he says softly, “let’s try and not do any fighting?”

“No fightin’,” Ethan agrees, stretches his arms out to Adam. Adam pulls him easily into his own arms, then turns to face Declan, raises his eyebrows, turns further to face Gansey.

“If it gets—” he starts, pauses, shrugs, “-come get me, will you?”

“I will,” Gansey promises.

—

“So,” Declan says gruffly once they’ve all settled down, once Adam and Ethan have disappeared into (Ronan’s) bedroom talking about watching youtube videos with Chainsaw, “what the hell is this all about?”

“Did you know,” Ronan says, decides that cutting straight to the chase is probably the easiest thing to do here, “that Kavinsky is running a fight club in his basement?”

Declan just looks at him.

“Oh,” Ronan says, “you did. Ok. So tell me, did you know he’s using dream creatures to fight?”

Declan continues to just look at him. Ronan manages not to scream.

“Ok,” Ronan says, clears his throat, refuses to look at Gansey or Blue, “so did you know, did you know, that he has his own dreamt up version of me there too? That the dream creatures are dreamed by the dream version of me? Did you know that was fucking happening, Declan?”

Declan is staring at him now, the answer etched out in the horror in his face. “He what?” he asks loudly, “A dream what?”
“A dream me,” Ronan snaps back, “those are my fucking monsters he’s fighting with. Do you want to know how I found out, Declan?”

“I don’t know,” Declan says stiffly.

“He kidnapped me,” Ronan says, knows he needs to lower his voice so he doesn’t freak Ethan out, “by threatening to hurt Adam, and then, he took me to his - literally blood soaked - mansion, and showed me a fucking half dead dream version of myself that he’s forcing to dream monsters for him.”

Declan looks like he might throw up, and Ronan feels suddenly ashamed of himself. At least manages to lower his voice.

“Did you know,” Ronan says again, voice rough and aching, “that I’m the fucking greywaren?”

Declan isn’t looking at him anymore. He’s staring at the wall behind Ronan’s head. He’s clenching his hands. He’s swallow convulsively. Ronan thinks he might actually be about to throw up.

“Did you?” Ronan demands, “Did you know there’s fucking - there’s fucking hitmen looking for me? Did you know, Declan?”

“Of course I fucking knew that,” Declan hisses suddenly, “of course I knew. I’ve known forever, and you can’t fucking try and pin that on me, so don’t - this isn’t my fucking fault that I know and you don’t. I told dad he should tell you and he didn’t want to, so-”

“Dad knew?” Ronan asks, “What the hell?”

“Oh course Dad knew,” Declan snaps, “there was a fuck load more going on then you were ever privy to Ronan, just because you were his golden child didn’t mean he told you everything. In fact, he barely told you anything, did he? Did he ever fucking explain about your dreaming? About the dangers of it? About his business with it? Did he ever tell you how we made our fucking money?”

“No,” Ronan snaps back, “because you were always taking all his time, and so I-”
“No,” Declan interrupts harshly, “no. No, no, no. I was not fucking taking all his time. He was taking mine. All those business trips I went on with him? You really think I wanted to? I was a fucking child, Ronan, do you realise what those business trips even were? Do you understand nothing?”

“I understand that you’re taking out your anger at our father on me rather than addressing the actual fucking problem,” Ronan says, keeps his voice low through gritted teeth.

Gansey’s hand is tight on his knee. He’s not holding him back, not this time, just offering support, which Ronan really fucking needs right now. He thinks that Declan probably needs it too, but honestly? He’s not strong enough to give that to Declan right now.

Blue stares between the 3 of them, “There’s obviously a lot of shit going on here that needs to be solved,” she says firmly, “but I think I should remind you both that we really need to address this whole Kavinsky thing.”

Declan stares at her as if he’d forgotten she was there as well, then glances to Gansey as if he expects Gansey to have something to say. When no one else speaks, Declan shrugs.

“Fine,” he says, “I agree. Kavinsky is a fucked up shit hole, and this is a step too far. What is it you’re wanting me to do?”

By the time Declan and Blue leave (Declan offered to take her home, she refused, Gansey took her home instead), Ronan is done with all of this shit. He has been done with all this shit since before this shit started, but still. He’s done with it all, and Adam, Adam is fast asleep in his bed. Ethan is propped up in the crook of Adam’s arm, the laptop perched on Adam’s legs, Chainsaw comfy in Ethan’s lap, youtube video blaring, Adam snoring.

“Hey buddy,” Ronan whispers when he comes in, “you’re still awake!”

“Uh-huh,” Ethan says, doesn’t look away from the computer screen, “watchin’ dancin’ and twirlin’.”
“Sounds good,” Ronan says, perches carefully on the edge of the bed to check whatever it was he was watching was actually toddler friendly, “has Adam been asleep for long, baby?”

“Uh-huh,” Ethan says again, rubs his eye sleepily, “started snorin’ ages an’ ages ago.”

“Huh,” Ronan snorts, “he’s pretty tired, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Ethan says, finally looks away from youtube. “Bed?”

“Yeah,” Ronan agrees, “I’ll put you to bed now, c’mon.” He shuts the laptop lid down, and plucks Ethan carefully from Adam’s loose hold. Chainsaw makes a few low complaints, but Ethan holds onto her gently, and she comes too.

They go through the bedtime routine mostly quietly. Ethan is yawning every few moments, which makes Ronan yawn every other few moments, until they’re just yawning in unison round toothbrushes and Chainsaw is clucking disapprovingly.

He tucks Ethan into bed, Chainsaw nestled beside him, kisses him gently on the forehead.

“Ro’an,” Ethan mumbles before Ronan can get up again, “what’re y’scared of?”

“What?” Ronan asks, runs his fingers gently through Ethan’s hair. It’s getting pretty long now, Adam had mentioned a while back now that they ought to go get it cut. They just kept getting distracted from it by all this supernatural shit, and that wasn’t really fair on Ethan.

“What’re y’scared of?” Ethan says again, “Muchrums like De-lun?”

“Oh,” Ronan says, winces as his mind gives him a hurried slideshow of about 100 different things he’s terrified of. “The dark,” he says, “I’m scared of the dark.”

“Oh,” Ethan says, “m’too. D’you need th’ night light?”
“Baby,” Ronan says softly, leans in to kiss him again, “no, the night light is for you. You ready to sleep?”

“Mmh,” Ethan says, “g’night.”

“Night, baby,” Ronan says, “love you.”

“Mm,” Ethan replies, eyes already shut, breath already evening out.

He strokes Chainsaw’s back feathers gently, then leaves, the room all aglow in pink.

Adam’s still asleep when he gets back to the room. Lying on top of the bed covers, jeans still on, face screwed up in what doesn’t look like a very restful expression.

“Hey,” Ronan says softly, sits back down on the bed by Adam’s hip, leans in over Adam’s shoulder, “Adam, hey, wake up babe.”

“Nh,” Adam says, doesn’t wake up. His face crumples further, and Ronan grips his shoulder gently, squeezes it.

“Babe,” he says again, “it’s just a bad dream, you’re ok, wake up.”

Adam does not wake up. Ronan shakes him a little bit harder than he means to, panic loosing his limbs. Adam grunts, his eyes fly open, and he flinches back hard.

“Sorry, sorry,” Ronan says quickly, holding his hands up by his face, and backing up so fast he almost topples right off of the mattress, “it’s just me, babe, I’m sorry I didn’t mean to scare you I-”

“It’s ok,” Adam says, hoarse, he’s blinking heavily up at Ronan, pushing himself up on his elbows,
“I- I was-”

“Having a bad dream?” Ronan asks, “You were - you looked upset.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, “I didn’t mean to fall asleep,” he adds, he looks a little disorientated about this, glances around the bed which is devoid of Ethan, Chainsaw, and the laptop. “Is everyone gone?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, shuffling back onto the bed properly and nudging at Adam to get in under his arm, “I just put Ethan to bed too. You good?”

“Yeah,” Adam says slowly, “yeah, I just -” he pauses leans hard against Ronan, curls his fingers around Ronan’s nape, “-remember my reading from this morning?”

“Yes,” Ronan says, eyes Adam sideways, “I do.”

“So I was just dreaming,” Adam says, clears his throat, “and I think-” he frowns, shakes his head, “I don’t know, actually,” he mumbles, “if this was just a... a bad dream or if I was actually sharing a dream with you - I mean, with dream you-”

“What?” Ronan asks, shock making him louder than intended, he coughs, lowers his voice, “You were dreaming about dream me?”

“I think so?” Adam says, “I- you were - I think we were in Cabeswater? Except it didn’t look like Cabeswater, it looked like - no it looked like Cabeswater if Cabeswater was covered in like... black sludge. And you - dream you - was there. In a hollow tree, just - just crying - and-” he cuts himself off, his eyes are suddenly wet. Ronan drops his head onto Adam’s shoulder. “There was this sound everywhere,” Adam continues slowly, “like claws on stone. It just kept getting louder, and dream you just got... more and more scared, and I was trying to - to comfort you - him - but he didn’t know me. He wouldn’t let me touch him.”

Adam is very coherently describing a dream that Ronan is very familiar with. It was a dream he’d only started having last year. The tree he and Gansey had stumbled on in Cabeswater. The foolishness of the both of them standing in it and letting it fill their heads with terrifying images. The horror he felt afterwards. The horror he continued to feel afterwards. They had avoided that area ever since.
He remembered telling Kavinsky about the tree, one alcohol fueled late night or early morning, when his dreaming was going awry and Kavinsky was in one of his softer moods. He’d regretted it immediately upon sobering up. This easy hand over of one of his biggest fears to Kavinsky, and obviously he had been right to be worried about it. Kavinsky had dreamed Ronan so well, that dream Ronan was having Ronan’s nightmares.

“The version of me who Kavinsky thought he knew,” Ronan says, “he didn’t know you.”

Adam looks at him.

“No,” he agrees, then, “you think - you think that was him, then?”

“I think it very well could have been,” Ronan says, “I - what did he look like?”

Adam shakes his head, the wetness in his eyes is beginning to leak out, spill down his cheeks. “Hard to say,” he says, “just - scared. He looked like you but - hollow. Like the tree.”

That sounded about right.

“Did he say anything to you?” Ronan asks.

“No,” Adam says, “not to me. Just - I think he was speaking to the forest. To the monsters. To himself.”

“What was I- he - what was he saying?”

“I’m not sure,” Adam admits, “I think it was in latin. I’m sorry, Ronan, I really am, I’m so sorry. I don’t know - I just - I don’t-”

“Babe,” Ronan says, “nah, nah it’s fine, it’s not your fault-”

“It is,” Adam says, he’s started to rock slightly, “I’ve - somehow - somehow I’ve mucked up the fuckin’ - the fuckin’ course of your timeline or some shit. None of this is supposed to be happenin’
“Adam,” Ronan says firmly, “this isn’t your fault. This is in no way your fault-”

“I was supposed to have done something to help already,” Adam says, ignoring Ronan, “I can feel it, I was supposed to have given something, supposed to have fixed something, I was supposed to be able to - to - to fucking speak Latin, Ronan.”

“Adam,” Ronan says again, “Parrish, stop. Stop. That isn’t our life. This is. You’re not supposed to have done anything, no matter what a stupid fucking forest thinks, you’re not running late, you’re not… not fucked up for not knowing Latin, baby, you’re just - this is just - this isn’t on you.”

Adam breathes raggedly for a few moments, still rocking, then turns against Ronan, clutches him tightly.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, “I didn’t mean to panic.”

“You don’t need to apologise,” Ronan says into his hair, also growing a little too long, “I would have panicked if I were you too.”

“I hate this,” Adam says, “nothing is still long enough for us to solve one problem before there’s another. We’re getting a backlog of supernatural and really fucking dangerous issues. I - I can’t get my head around them.”

“I know,” Ronan says, “I know. I can’t either, it’s - I feel like I’m asleep half the time. Everything’s so vague. It feels weird going to school, and you going to work, and shit like that, like we’re supposed to put normal life on hold.”

“Yeah,” Adam agrees, “I want to - but - we can’t, can we?”

“I suppose not really,” Ronan admits grudgingly, “I don’t know.”

“I need a list,” Adam mumbles against him, “of all the shit going on. Of all the shit we need to do. So I know where we’re at. Is this a very odd thing to need in the middle of - of - of fucking magic?”
“No,” Ronan snorts, “I think Gansey thinks you can only have magic if you also have lists.”

“Good to know,” Adam sighs, “I think I need to make a list, and take it to Persephone or something.”

“Take it to the cards?” Ronan suggests, and Adam shrugs expansively.

“Did you guys get anywhere with Declan?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, sighs, “kind of. But it’s getting really late, darling, I don’t wanna - can I fill you in tomorrow?”

Adam sighs as well. For a moment he looks like he’s going to say no, is going to insist that Ronan tell him right now. If he did, Ronan would of course tell him. Instead, Adam nods, presses himself firmly against Ronan.

“Ok,” he says, “let’s go to bed.”

“Please,” Ronan says, “I’ve already brushed my teeth and everything.”

“Good job,” Adam mumbles, pushes himself up and off of Ronan again, “I needa take my jeans off and brush my teeth too.”

“You go do that, then,” Ronan says, sits up as well and rubs his face, “I’ll be waiting here.”

“Good,” Adam says, smiles at him a little crookedly, leaves.
This morning’s list is a little harder to compile than most of the lists Adam has put together in his early morning thoughts before. He gets out of bed a little earlier than usual, Ronan still out like a light and snoring softly. He wants/needs to get some homework done before school, but he also needs time to think to himself, so he needs more hours to do it in, so, awake too early. He already misses being pressed up against Ronan’s side by the time he gets into the shower.

There’s a fuck load too many issues currently, which is one of the harder things about this list, the next hardest thing is deciding which ones were most important, but the hardest was knowing that as of yet, he didn’t know how to fix them.

It went like this;

1. Get to the bottom of Kavinsky’s plot
   - Get Dream Ronan out
   - Figure out if it’s connected to hitmen
   - Keep everyone safe

2. Fix the Ley line
   - Keep Noah stable
   - Get Ronan’s dreams better
   - Figure out what the cards meant
   - Why am I dreaming?
   - What is Ethan dreaming?

3. Get Ethan a haircut.

He could do item number 3. That was it. Actually. He wasn’t even sure if he could get Ethan a haircut, when they would have time for it. He stays a little too long in the shower, pressing his forehead to the cool tile wall of the shower with the water running while he tries to keep his head calm.

By the time Ethan is awake and up, he’s out of the shower, dressed, and is on the last section of his homework. Normally he would be feeling pretty fucking good about this, that he’s already achieved so much and it’s still early, but with his list hanging over him, he just feels heavy. Ethan adds to this by dropping himself into Adam’s lap, stomach over his knees so he’s hanging off of Adam’s legs.
“Was dreamin’,” Ethan says instead of saying good morning, and Adam’s own greeting catches in his throat, “‘bout angry trees ‘gain.”

“Oh,” Adam says, “a bad dream?” He shouldn’t be able to be having bad dreams right now.

“No,” Ethan says slowly, fiddles with the fabric of Adam’s pants leg, “jus’ loud. Made Chains’aw mad.”

“What happened that made Chainsaw mad?” Adam asks, rubs his hand soothingly along Ethan’s back.

“Th’ angry tree,” Ethan says, very seriously, “says - says - says Ro’an’s hurtin’ th’ for’st?”

“Ronan’s hurting the forest?” Adam repeats slowly, “Is that what he said?”

“Yes,” Ethan says, “says is bad. Chains’aw di’nt like it.”

“No,” Adam agrees, “she wouldn’t. How are you feeling?”

“Sad,” Ethan says plainly.

“Baby,” Adam says, hoists him upright so he’s sitting on Adam’s lap instead of hanging off of it, “what’ll make you feel better? Breakfast? Cuddles?”

“Mhm,” Ethan says, curls up against Adam’s chest, hooks his hand in the sleeve of Adam’s t-shirt, sticks his other hand in his mouth, “Ro’an’s not bad,” he says, muffled by his fingers.

“No he isn’t,” Adam says firmly, squeezing his arms tightly around Ethan and rocking the both of them side to side, “he’s real good. That bad angry tree man,” he continues, “he said Ronan? He didn’t say something like, ‘dream Ronan’, did he?”

“No,” Ethan mumbles, “nah.”
“Hm,” Adam says, sighs, doesn’t know what to think.”

Ethan removes his hand from his mouth.

“Said in pasta Ro’an,” Ethan clarifies, puts his hand back into his mouth, “I’unno.”

Huh. “In pasta?” Adam asks, “Imposter?”

“Uh-huh,” Ethan says, “food?”

“Yes food,” Adam nods, stands up, holding Ethan carefully to him, “want cereal and bananas?”

“Mhm,” Ethan says.

Gansey joins them for cereal and bananas. He looks very tired, a little less tired somehow when Ethan clambers over to him to get into his lap. Ronan appears a few moments later, whistling a vaguely melancholy tune. Chainsaw appears to hear this as a specific insult to her because she comes barrelling angrily out of Ethan’s bedroom barely a second later.

“Mornin’ to you to you incorrigible twerp,” Ronan grumbles out through a yawn, lopes over to Adam to drape himself over his shoulders, “you’ve been up for ages,” he says (complains), “I was cold.”

“Sorry babe,” Adam snorts, condescends to tip his head back to press a kiss to Ronan’s cheek, “I had homework.”

“An’,” Ethan chips up from Gansey’s lap, he’s in the middle of spooning his mushy cereal into Gansey’s mouth, “cuddlin’ me.”

“Yes,” Adam agrees, watches amused as Gansey good naturedly swallows his force fed cereal, “I had homework and cuddling to do, and also, listening to dreams.”
“Oh?” Ronan asks, frowns. He untangles himself from Adam’s torso to sit down next to him instead, “bad dreams? Is this light broken?”

“I don’t think so,” Adam replies, “Ethan said it wasn’t bad. It just made him sad. It was about the angry tree man again though. It seems like the amount of dreaming dream Ronan is doing is really sucking the life from Cabeswater.”

“Ugh,” Ronan says coherently, slumps down, rests his head against Adam’s arm, “great.”

“Well that’s not good,” Gansey says, his mouth is momentarily free from Ethan’s ministrations while Ethan feeds himself for a little while, “but so long as we stick with our plan from last night, we’ll hopefully fix that eventually.” He has to stop here, Ethan and his spoon is back.

“What was the plan from last night?” Adam asks, “I was too tired last night, what happened?”

Gansey, is mouth overfull, nods at Ronan.

“Gansey makes it sound like we have a real plan,” Ronan sighs, rubs his face against Adam’s arm until he lifts it up to wrap around his shoulders, “we don’t. We have maybe a ‘pla’, probably more of a ‘pl’.”

Gansey pauses Ethan’s spoon mid air to say, “It’s a plan.”

“Fine,” Ronan huffs, “the plan is that we wait a bit to give Declan time to talk to his contacts about what’s going on. While that’s happening, you need to work on fixing the Ley line, obviously I’ll help you with that, and Gansey and Blue are going to try and pinpoint where we’re supposed to be looking next to help Cabeswater, and Blue is also supposed to be asking her mother questions about a certain 3 year olds dreams, which is now a little bit more important so-” he looks over to Gansey who’s chewing steadfastly while tugging his phone out of his bag slung over the back of his chair.

“I’ll call her after I’ve finished eating,” he confirms, mouth full, holding the phone up, “Ethan, buddy, think you should eat the rest of your cereal?”

“Yeah, Ethan,” Adam adds in, “stop feeding Gansey your food, you need to eat that and Gansey can feed himself.”
Ethan pouts at the both of them, but goes back to feeding himself, and also Chainsaw who has been slowly picking her way to the group of them (she had several important patches of floor to peck at first) to sit close by Ethan’s bowl.

“Ok so,” Adam continues, turning his attention back to Ronan, “we have to sit still on the Kavinsky thing while Declan looks into it?”

“Yes,” Ronan grunts out.

Adam glances at Gansey, eyebrows raised, looks back to Ronan, “And you agreed to this?”

“I didn’t really have a choice,” Ronan says unhappily, “Declan’s right that it’s dangerous to do anything right now, and he has the right fu-ugh-ing contacts to try and find out what K’s game is. I can’t help the dream if K has me too.”

“Ok,” Adam says slowly, turns back to Gansey, “what do you think?”

“I think Declan’s right,” Gansey shrugs, “as much as it pains me to admit it. There are too many ends of string right now, it’s useful having someone else here to pick one of them up.”

“Ok,” Adam says again, leans back in against Ronan, “Ley line this afternoon then?”

“Yeah,” Ronan agrees, leans in as well, “what about -?”

“I could take Ethan with me to Blue’s,” Gansey offers, “we can keep an eye on him.”

“Oh,” Adam says suddenly, “can you ask if Blue can give him a haircut while you guys have him?”

“Oh yes,” Gansey says, perking up, “she cuts hair?”

“She cuts hair well enough to cut a 3 year olds hair,” Adam says politely, then, “I - if he’s gonna be
at Blue’s with y’all, can you make sure he’s always in your view? And not around Neeve?”

“Yes,” Gansey says firmly, bounces Ethan on his knee, “of course. I’ll keep him safe, Adam.”

Adam does something he had previously considered unthinkable after they drop Ethan off at Dana’s. He’s driving, so he has the excuse of keeping his eyes on the road to not look at Ronan while he says it.

“I’m going to call in sick to Boyd’s this afternoon,” he says, “so we have more time for the Ley lines.”

“What?” Ronan asks, he sounds completely shocked, but appears to realise this is probably not a good thing to push on because he follows this up with, “ok, Parrish. Straight to the grunt labour I see.”

“I want to fix this,” Adam says firmly to the windscreen, “I can’t - I can’t bear the idea of sitting around fixing shit for rude wankers instead of doing something that is actually going to help you. Help us.”

Ronan’s silent for a long moment, and then his hand is closing loosely around Adam’s wrist on the gear stick.

“Thank you,” he says quietly, “thank you.”

“I’ll keep on with Nino’s,” Adam continues, “I don’t want to be wandering around an angry forest in the dark, so there’s no point in missing that. Plus I need to make rent.”

Ronan doesn’t argue this point. Adam’s mind can fill in all the relevant comments he thinks Ronan would have made anyway. He kisses Ronan goodbye, reminds him to text when he gets to Aglionby, and leaves.
The first thing he notices upon entering his classroom is that the room suddenly quiets down. The second thing he notices is that everyone is pretending not to look at him. This is Maths, so he doesn’t even have Blue to go sit with, to explain what’s going on, so he ignores this as well as he can and sits down at his normal desk by the window. His classmates generally don’t pay him much attention. Certainly not to the point of having to pretend they’re not. He resigns himself to simply not knowing what’s going on, but doesn’t have very long before he no longer has to.

“So Parrish,” he hasn’t talked to this guy before, not even in passing, but he’s pretty sure his name is Thomas, and he isn’t sure why he’s perching on the edge of his desk and isn’t sure he wants to know either.

Adam glances at Thomas, so smugly sitting on Adam’s desk, and simply reaches down to his bag to grab his maths books.

“So it’s true, then?” Thomas asks. The chatter had started up again when Thomas had sat down, but now the room was quiet again. Apparently they all wanted to know if it was true, whatever it was.

“Yes, Thomas,” Adam says flatly, “the earth is round, always has been.”

It probably isn’t wise to be so aggravating, but Adam is tired, and sick of being confused, and sick of feeling out of place. He doesn’t need this shit. The class is tittering slightly, and Thomas looks pissed off. Not put off though, he continues.

“So you’re a fag?” Thomas spits at him, “And your daddy chucked you outta your trailer for it?”

Adam knows at least 3 other people in his class also live in the trailer park. Thomas probably shouldn’t be picking at that particular aspect of Adam’s failures if he wants crowd approval.

“Nah,” Adam says, as casual as he can well his blood beats hard in his deaf ear, “I left before he had the pleasure.”

“So you are a fag, then?” Thomas presses, “You and that hot shot Aglionby bastard, right? The famously fucked up one? Lynch?”
The famously fucked up one is currently texting Adam, a simple message saying he’s in class and Adam can stop worrying about him like a broody grandmother.

“Lynch and I are boyfriends, yes, if that’s what you’re asking,” Adam says, not looking up from his phone as he sends a quick reply back to Ronan. Just a frowny face and a heart.

“If that’s what you’re asking,” Thomas mimics back in a truly dreadful impression of Adam and his accent (also probably a dumb move in this class. He’s already losing crowd ratings fast). “No wonder your dad chucked you out. That why he beat you too? Fuck, if I-”

Adam’s hands are shooting out before he realises it himself, shoving Thomas off of his desk. His fingers hurt with the force of it. His eyes are burning. Not with tears.

“Nah,” Adam says again, his drawl loud and hard in his voice as he leans back in his chair while Thomas scrambles up off the floor, “he beat me ‘cos he likes bein’ in control. Y’wanna know why I left?”

Thomas’s face is bright red, but the classroom appears to seethe with curiousity, so he nods.

“‘Cos,” Adam continues, is well aware that he’s going to regret every single word he’s saying, of the privacy he’s losing, “I’ve a kid brother who doesn’t deserve to be fucked up. So I took ‘im an’ left. You got anymore shitty comments to make about that?”

Thomas’s face says he does, but the teacher’s arrival says he doesn’t.

As expected, Adam regrets replying to Thomas at all, never mind as aggressively and as personally as he had. He has bigger issues to think about now though. Like maths, like this afternoon, like how itchy his fucking eyes were, how sore his fingertips were.
He calls Boyd during lunch, not Boyd’s, but straight to Boyd’s cell, doesn’t want to have to go through Etta. He says he needs to take some personal time, lets Boyd assume he’s talking about needing to look after Ethan, asks for a week, says he understands if Boyd can’t give him that. Boyd offers a fortnight, reminds him that Adam’s his best worker, he’s happy to give him a break if he needs it. He texts Ronan immediately after hanging up, to let him know that he has the afternoon off, will tell him later that he has the whole week off. When he looks up from his phone, Thomas is by the table he’s sitting at in the library. He’s not alone, he has a couple of girls from Maths class, and a few other people Adam thinks are in his biology class.

“I’m busy,” he says shortly, holds up the book he’s reading for English.

“Thomas is just here to apologise for this morning,” the girl on Thomas’s left says. Adam’s pretty sure her name is Maria. “And so are we.”

Thomas is scowling, he does not look like he’s here to apologise, and if he is, it’s not of his own volition. Adam does not say anything, so (probably) Maria continues.

“There’s been a lot of rumours going around,” she says shyly, “about you. So I just wanted to say, on behalf of all of us, that we’re sorry for participating in it.”

“Well,” Adam says, shrugs one shoulder, “most of the rumours were true, so.”

“That’s not the point,” Maria objects, and Adam sighs.

“It’s fine,” he says, “it’s not like I expected anything less.”

“See?” Thomas snaps, “He doesn’t give a fuck. He’s a fag, not a whiner.”

Adam’s eyes hurt so fucking bad.

“If you keep saying that word-” he grits out, has to pause for a moment because he really does not want to threaten violence, even if his fingertips are aching with the idea of it. It turns out he doesn’t need to continue, because Blue is stepping towards the group of them quickly, her voice loud, her
face hard and stormy.

“-I’ll fucking knock your teeth out,” Blue finishes for him, stomping right up to Thomas. She’s a good couple of heads shorter than him, but she’s somehow formidable, like a bobcat. “And then,” she continues, “I’ll let everyone know a fucking short ass queer girl did it.”

Thomas blanches, Adam gapes a little. This was not how he had been planning on spending his lunch time, but he can’t bring himself to care that much. Blue is blazing, and it’s very impressive. She flings herself down in a chair next to Adam, and then glares at the group gathered around the table.

Maria nudges Thomas hard in the ribs. He blushes, glares hard, averts his gaze.

“I’m fucking sorry,” he spits out, storms off. Maria shrugs a little, she’s looking at her feet.

“Um,” she says, “well, we’ll leave you to it? Um. Yeah.”

They all leave. Adam sits there staring at his book in his hand for a long moment, and then turns to Blue.

“Queer girl?” he asks, and she snorts at him.

“Please,” she says, “you think you’re the only bisexual around here?”

Adam shrugs, “I hadn’t really thought about it,” he admits, “hadn’t actually thought about labels at all.”

Blue shrugs as well now, slumps forwards and the table and gazes up at him from her pillowed arms. “You don’t need a label,” she says, “if you don’t want. Some people find them useful. Others don’t. You are who you are.”

“I guess,” Adam says, fiddles with the corner of the book cover, “it just hasn’t seem important enough to think about,” he says slowly, “there’s been too many other things going on. I don’t think it ever really properly occured to me.”
“That you liked guys?” Blue asks, “Or that you could say you were bisexual or something else?”

“Uh,” Adam says, sighs, “maybe both. I don’t know.”

“Fair enough,” Blue says, then, “it’s been all around school. You and Lynch. I’m kinda surprised no one said anything earlier, I mean, you two do suck face an awful lot in the parking lot.”

“Yeah,” Adam snorts, “yeah. I don’t know. I guess we’ve just been lucky up til now.”

“You don’t wanna be out?” Blue asks. She doesn’t sound judgemental.

“It’s not that,” Adam says, shuts his book, “it’s just - I don’t like attention. And also, also, if people here know, then people back at the trailer park know, so, my parents will know.”

“Ah,” Blue says.

“Which is… fine,” Adam says, shuts his eyes as well to try and ease the sting a little, props his head up on his book, “just uncomfortable. It’s not that I’m embarrassed of Ronan, Blue, it’s just that I don’t want us to be public property.”

“I get that,” Blue says, soft, pats Adam vaguely on the head, “I’ll glare at anyone that’s saying shit about you, don’t worry.”

“Thanks Blue,” Adam snorts, “my hero.”

“Damn straight.”

“Damn queer.”

“Damn queer!”
Ronan picks him and Blue up after school, it only made sense because they would be taking Ethan straight to Blue’s anyway.

For the first time though, slipping into the car next to Ronan, he felt self conscious about leaning over to kiss him hello. He could feel the eyes of his classmates on him and it pricked uncomfortably in his skin.

“Why’re the both of you looking so crap?” Ronan asks after a few seconds once Blue and Adam are both buckled in but haven’t said anything, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Adam mumbles, doesn’t really see the point in explaining school drama. Blue says heavily from the backseat and then leans forwards in between them.

“People at school found out Adam’s dating you,” she tells Ronan. Ronan looks from Blue to Adam, then back out the windscreen.

“Ah,” he says, “are they being shitty about it? Do I need to fuck some people up?”

“No,” Adam snorts, “it’ll blow over, honestly it’s just annoying.”

“You sure, babe?” Ronan presses, looks like he wants to lean over to kiss him but doesn’t, “I’d be happy to.”

“Yeah I’m sure,” Adam says, puts away his self consciousness and leans in to kiss Ronan, “I’m just grumpy. Got some dust in my eyes.”

Ronan frowns, takes Adam’s face in both his hands to peer into his eyes. “Again?” he asks, “I don’t see anything.”

“I dunno,” Adam mumbles, covers Ronan’s hand with his own and pulls it from his face but holds
onto it tightly still, “it’s probably just - I probably just scratched it the other day and I must’ve rubbed it and aggravated it again.”

“Guys,” Blue says, “as much as I’m happy you guys have such a nice relationship, can you stop like, canoodling in the front seat so we can go all ready?”

“Geez,” Ronan snorts, pulls away from Adam, “sounds like someone’s jealous, Sargant,” he adds, putting the car into gear and earning a sharp laugh from Blue.

“Jealous?” she asks, “Of what?”

“That I get a hot ass boyfriend,” Ronan says cheerfully, pulling out of the park, “and the closest you have is a nerd dumbass dick or a freezy ghost companion.”

“You’re such an ass,” Blue says, rolling her eyes, “you know I could have a boyfriend here at school right? Or a girlfriend? Just because I haven’t told you doesn’t mean I don’t.”

“Yeah sure,” Ronan says, “but you don’t.”

Blue blows a raspberry. They go to pick up Ethan.

They meet Gansey at Fox Way. They’re not staying long, but Adam wants to see Persephone before they leave, so Ronan lets himself be dragged off into the reading room with Gansey and Blue and Ethan to talk to Maura while Adam traipses upstairs.

“Oh good,” Persephone says when Adam knocks on the frame of her open door, “I was just dreaming about you.”

“Dreaming about—” Adam begins, then remembers something he’s angry about, “why didn’t you tell me Ethan was having dreams?” he asks sharply, sitting down on the end of her bed. She’s at her
window, leaning against it while detangling wool in the light coming in. “Real dreams.”

“Oh,” Persephone says, looks a little confused, “I thought you knew. Why?”

“Because they freak him the fuck out,” Adam says, “and they freak me out. What were you dreaming about me for?”

“Ah,” she says, “you’re going to go fix the Ley lines today,” it wasn’t a question, “and you think that maybe it’ll help you - uh - what’s the word - tune - I think - into the connected dreams?”

Adam stares at her, pursed lips, tense shoulders. “Yeah,” he says, “I think so.”

“Oh good,” she says again, “so do I.” Then she says, “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“You’re a psychic,” Adam says, not polite, “you tell me what I’m thinking.”

Persephone sighs, puts her untangled wool down on the windowsill.

“There’s no point,” she says, “in wondering why your timeline is skewiff. There’s no right answer to that, and it’s certainly not the right question. What’s important is what you do here, in this life.”

“If that’s so important,” Adam says, “why does everything I do feel like it’s wrong, or it’s not working because I haven’t done what I was supposed to do in the - in the other time?”

Persephone shrugs eloquently, steps away from the window and sits down on the edge of the bed next to Adam. “Magic is very set in its ways,” she says, “it leaves all sorts of remnants.”

“Remnants like my eyes feeling like they’re not mine?” Adam asks, “Like my fingers feeling like violence all the time? Or is that just me? Is that just who I am in every timeline?”

Persephone looks at him shrewdly, lifts one hand to press lightly against his forehead, and then to drop down to cup his cheek gently.
“Yes,” she says, “remnants like that. I know this is difficult, Adam, but you have to stop and remember what you have promised, what you have given away.”

“I haven’t,” Adam protests, “I - to who?”

“To anything with power,” Persephone replies vaguely, “if you haven’t promised it, they have no right to take it.”

None of this makes sense. It does make him feel a little more at ease though. Somehow. He has one more question. Well. He has a million more questions, but he has one more before he wants to go.

“Is this my fault?” he asks, “Ronan being hurt. Glendower not being found. Cabeswater being under attack. Is it because of my timeline being changed?”

“Oh,” Persephone says, lifts her other hand so she’s cupping Adam’s face entirely, “Adam. How could Ethan’s birth be your fault? Ethan’s birth was never a fault. You know that.”

With every fibre of his being, yes.

“Sometimes,” she says, “magic slips down the wrong path. No one is at fault here for the times changing. You can’t blame yourself for other people’s pain when you didn’t cause it.”
Adam lets Ronan drive them to Cabeswater. Partially because Ronan looks itchy with discomfort, obviously needs to get to blow off some steam with the gas pedal, mostly because his eyes still hurt. No, they don’t still hurt, they hurt more, they’re stinging now, like it’s not dust in his eyes but sand, or gravel, or shattered glass. He has to keep blinking hard, and that’s not very safe driving practice.

“Have you been crying?” Ronan asks, very straight forward, once they’re back on the road. When they’d said goodbye, Blue had been wrapping a towel around Ethan where he sat perched on a high kitchen stool, ready for his hair cut.

“No,” Adam says, not exactly offended, but a little miffed. “No, it’s just - my eyes hurt.”

“Yeah,” Ronan grunts, keeps his own eyes focused on the road, “they’re all red, looks like they’re swelling up a bit.”

“I keep rubbing them,” Adam mumbles, “that’s probably irritating them more.”

“Well stop rubbing them, then,” Ronan says, unhelpful, and Adam takes a break from squeezing his eyes shut to glare at Ronan’s profile.

“Gee,” he says, “I never thought of that.”

“That’s why I’m the brains of this operation,” Ronan says back, “you’re welcome.”

Adam allows this to be funny for exactly 9 seconds, and then says, “I’m pretty sure I’ve got like - pretty sure whatever’s fucking my eyes up is magical or some shit.”


“No,” Adam says slowly, “I’ve been thinking about it all day - because - because I got mad when Thomas - the guy who confronted me about being a - about dating you - I shoved him. Off of my desk. I didn’t think about it, I just did it, like, it felt like my hands weren’t even attached to me and it was only then, when I got mad, that my eyes started hurting again.”

“What?” Ronan repeats, this time less incredulous, more confused.

“I think it’s psychosomatic,” Adam says, embarrassingly stumbles a little over the word, “I don’t think there’s anything in my eyes, or wrong with my eyes at all.”

Ronan pulls the car up in a muddy patch in walking distance from Cabeswater, “The fuck?” He asks. Adam shrugs.

“I don’t know, not really,” he says, “Persephone wasn’t very useful about it-”
“Wait,” Ronan says, “you told Persephone you were worried about this, but you didn’t mention it to me?”

“I didn’t know if it was a big deal or not,” Adam defends himself, “I still don’t. I’m telling you now.”

“We spend all our time together, Parrish,” Ronan snaps, “you couldn’t find a moment to mention that perhaps some magic, probably fucking connected to Cabeswater, was fucking your eyes over?”

“No I couldn’t,” Adam snaps back, undoes his seat belt, and pushes the door open, “because we’ve been fucking busy with a lot of other shit. I went to Persephone first because she was more likely to know what was going on-”

“But she didn’t,” Ronan retorts, copies Adam by opening his door and slamming his way out of the car.

“She might have,” Adam says, slams his own door, and then regrets it when his fingers hurt, his eyes burn more.

He has to pause here, to lean against the car, to press the heels of his hands against his eyes to try and lessen the sting. Ronan is by his side in an instant, hovering with such anxiety, Adam can basically feel Ronan’s hands hesitating over his shoulders.

“Let’s not fight about this,” Adam grumbles, “maybe I should have told you earlier. I didn’t think it was important.

Ronan takes this as permission to touch him, which it was, presses his hands against the sides of Adam’s shoulders, inclines towards him. “I shouldn’t have gotten so fucking mad,” he mumbles, “I didn’t - it makes sense that you would talk to Persephone about it first.”

As the vague anger coiling in his stomach subsides, so does the pain in his eyes. He’s still tense though, all his muscles pulled tight, his head aching with the constant stress of everything, so the pain still lingers behind his eyelids. Or at least, he’s assuming they’re connected. They feel connected. It just makes sense, quite honestly, that this fucked up magic - whatever - is linked so intrinsically with his anger.

“Ro,” he says, drops his hands down to his side, lets Ronan pull their torsos together, “remember when we went to Cabeswater, and you asked it questions?”

“Yes,” Ronan says.

“It said something to you,” Adam sighs, “that you didn’t translate.”

“Did it.” Ronan says, flatly. That’s enough to confirm Adam’s suspicions that it wasn’t just him reading into things.

“What did it say?”

Ronan grunts, shrugs against Adam, says, “Something about a sacrifice.”

“Something about a sacrifice?” Adam presses, “What kind of a something?”

“I don’t know,” Ronan says, “look - if it thinks you’re a sacrifice, or you need to be sacrificed, or -”

“Ro,” Adam butts in, “what?”

“I asked it about you,” Ronan says quickly, “about you, about the magician, about - about - and it
“You were asking about me,” Adam says, “and Cabeswater was talking about the other me.”

Ronan is silent for a moment, then he says, “Yes.”

“I -” Adam starts, has to think a second, “I haven’t promised anything to Cabeswater,” he says carefully, “but Cabeswater seems to think I have. So other me did, which has to have been the - uh - sacrifice - so,” he doesn’t really know where he’s going with this, he’s just thinking aloud hoping it’ll make sense if he can hear it. “So, it still thinks whatever promise I made to it is valid. So? What promise did other me make?”

“Your hands,” Ronan mumbles, “your eyes. Cabeswater said - well. It said hands and eyes. I don’t know.”

“Other me is fucking stupid,” Adam says, turns a little so he can press his face against Ronan’s shoulders, “because having burning eyes is not a great time, an I don’t think I’m getting anything out of it from Cabeswater yet.”

“So are we beating a forest up?” Ronan asks, he suddenly sounds considerably calmer, as if, by hearing Adam slowly work things out, he feels like everything will be ok. Adam does not have this luxury, because he’s in his own head where he knows nothing is worked out.

“No,” Adam says, “we’re telling a forest no, and then we’re going to make it stronger, which won’t be fun because if it’s stronger maybe it’ll just ignore the no.”

Whether because Adam is more stressed out, and therefore Cabeswater is more aware of him, or because Cabeswater is breaking down faster, it’s a lot easier this time to find where to start fixing.

It’s just a spot of brambly ground, no obviously different from the ground around it, but Adam can feel the break there as if it’s drawn out in police tape. He doesn’t pull Persephone’s cards out immediately though, doesn’t drop down to ask what’s wrong, what he has to do. Instead he takes Ronan’s hand, unconsciously seeking support, and stands to face in the direction of the forest. He feels a little bit like an idiot.

His tongue feels thick and heavy as he repeats the words Ronan had been repeating slowly to him as they’d walked. This is extra irritating because some part of him feels like his tongue knows these words.

“Non est promissionem,” he says loudly, feels a little more like an idiot, staring into nothing, shouting into the wind. “Non hic. Non est mecum.” Ronan is squeezing his hand, tightly enough that it almost weighs out the tingling in his fingers. He has to glance up at Ronan’s face, to read the words off of his lips, doesn’t want to say them wrong, “Revertetur- manibus meis - oculi mei.”

He doesn’t feel any different. His eyes are still feeling rubbed raw, his fingertips still feel wrong. Nothing changes about the scenery. The wind doesn’t carry back any rustling words. Adam looks to Ronan again.

“Do you think we have to be in Cabeswater for it to hear?”
“Nah,” Ronan says, “I think it heard well enough.”

“I don’t feel different,” Adam says, “how are we supposed to know if it heard?”

“I guess we have to wait,” Ronan says. He doesn’t sound pleased about it. “You know what I hate?”

“Warm avocado? Slow cars? Highschool?”

“I hate that none of this is straightforward,” Ronan says viciously, “is it too much to fucking ask of the world that I can just get to spend like, maybe a week, where nothing awful happens and I can just be with you. Like a normal couple.”

“Oh,” Adam says.

“I can’t even imagine what dating you would be like without surreal horror happening in the background.”

“Probably a bit more boring,” Adam says, leans in against Ronan’s side, “and I’d probably spend more time doing homework. C’mon, time to play cards.”

With everything that had been happening since the last time they were here, with Kavinsky, Dream Ronan, Ethan’s dreams, Adam’s dreams, increasing constant horror, Adam had been expecting today’s work to be harder. Or more dangerous, or bolshier. More obvious, maybe, like he’d shift a rock just so, and it wouldn’t just be a small ‘ah’ in the pit of his stomach to tell him it was right, but a brightening of sun, a cleaner breeze.

There was none of that. Just the barely there voice encouraging him on, the heat of the cards against his knuckles, the sweat on his back.

They stayed out as late as they could before Adam would be late for Nino’s, piled pebbles and rocks and leaves in random spirals, pocketed handfuls of dirt, kicked indents in the ground. It was exhausting, dirty work, and by the time they climbed back into the BMW (Ronan driving again), Adam was wishing fervently that he didn’t have to go to work. They had shifted nature around until their fingers were battered, and Adam could still feel the line was wrong, was fractured, was still yelling at him from his marrow. It felt like none of today had been worth it, had just been an excuse to tire him out.

“Home?” Ronan asks as he turns the car on, “We can shower quickly, and then drive to Nino’s.”

“It’d be faster if I shower first and then just take the car,” Adam says sleepily, then yawns, frowns, says, “I mean, if I’m allowed-”

“You’re allowed to borrow my car whenever,” Ronan says, “it’s Gansey who has a hang up about people driving his baby. But anyway, I’m coming to Nino’s with you, so we may as well drive together.”

“Oh,” Adam says, “will you pick me up again?”

Ronan snorts, “Nah,” he says, “I was thinking I’d just leave you to walk home. Don’t be a fucker,
“Piss off,” Adam mumbles, leans against the window, can’t bring himself to care that he’s probably leaving a smudge of dirt on it.

“I’m going to stay,” Ronan continues, “at Nino’s with you. I’ll bring homework or some shit and order food and chill in a booth.”

“Do homework?” Adam says, “Who are you, and what have you done with my boyfriend?”

“Fuck off,” Ronan says primly, “don’t think I don’t know how worried you and Gansey both get over my grades, even if we have more important things to think about right now.”

“Ok,” Adam says simply, “I know this is just an excuse to get me into the storage closet on my break.”

“Why would I want that?” Ronan asks, doesn’t manage to stop the grin from creeping up over his face.

“God knows,” Adam says, reaches across the hooks his fingers round the hem of Ronan’s shirt. He’s not trying to start anything, just wants to hold on, just wants to touch.

“I’m scared,” Ronan says loudly, “of you alone in Nino’s.”

“Me too,” Adam says.

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They’d been in contact with Gansey and Blue throughout the day, so they were caught up with the days happenings, but Ethan isn’t so easily satisfied with communication via phone, and is displeased when Adam arrives home in no hurry to sit down for a cuddle.

“Been good all day!” Ethan yells at him from the lounge while Adam darts into Ronan’s room to grab his work clothes and a change of clothes for Ronan, “An’ no cuddles!”

“I’ve been cuddling you!” Gansey protests from his desk, Chainsaw squawks at him to butt out. Gansey does not butt out. “So’s Blue! And Seph! And Maura! And Chainsaw!”

“I’ll cuddle you for a bit when I’m clean,” Adam promises as he walks from Ronan’s room to the bathroom, “I’m so proud of you for bein’ good, baby”

“No!” Ethan responds loudly, follows Adam into the bathroom where Ronan is already stripping off and stuffing his muddy jeans in the washing machine. “Don’t wan’ you t’go!” he says, slams the door shut behind him

“No slammin’ doors,” Adam says sharply, yanks his shirt off, “I have to go to work, Bud, but I’ll be back soon.”

Ethan already looks to be entirely regretting having slammed the door, especially with Chainsaw on the other side of it. He’s brought his hands up to his face, all 10 fingers stuffed in his mouth, eyes wide.
“’M’sorry,” he gets out, crumples in on himself a little. Ronan shuts the washing machine door, scoops Ethan into his arms, glances up at Adam.

“Wanna shower with us, baby?” Adam asks, softens his voice as much as he can, “Gans said you still had little prickly hairs in your shirt.”

“Mhm,” Ethan snuffles, presses his face in against Ronan’s neck, “mhm.”

“Ok-doke,” Ronan says, holds Ethan up with one arm, and deftly peels his shirt off of him while Adam turns the shower on. “It’s gonna be a real quick shower,” Ronan tells Ethan switching arms and yanking Ethan’s pants off. “So no splash wars today, ok?”

“Mhm,” Ethan says, curls himself in agreeably against Ronan’s torso, uncaring that Ronan is grimy and smelly.

It is a very quick shower. Also a very crammed one. The shower isn’t really meant for 2 people, or at least 2 people who are attempting to use the shower to actually get clean, and certainly not for 2 people trying to get clean while pacifying a small, squirmy toddler who wants to be held, have his hair washed, and not get soap in his eyes.

They deliver him to Gansey when they get out of the bathroom. Adam and Ronan dressed again and needing to leave, Ethan wrapped up in the biggest towel Adam’s ever seen, slightly pacified, very damp, and still a bit sudsy.

“We’ll be back by 11,” Adam says, peeling Ethan’s arms off of his neck as he attempts to deposit the soggy burrito of a toddler into Gansey’s lap, “and Ronan’ll text when we get to Nino’s.”

“Wanna g’bed with you!” Ethan protests tiredly, accepts his fate of being in Gansey’s lap, and wraps his arms around Gansey’s neck instead.

“You can sleep with me,” Gansey offers Ethan kindly, nods at Adam and Ronan, “we’ll catch up properly tomorrow at breakfast?” he asks, and Ronan nods, fishes his keys out of his jeans pockets, the 2 of them already moving away to the door.

“Sleep in Ethan’s room with him,” Ronan calls at the door, “make use of the night light.”
A Dream in a dream, or a Dreamer in a dream, or a Dream dreamer in a dream?

Nino’s is, thank God, entirely uneventful. Adam works, Ronan sits in a corner booth and glares at his homework, and then they both go home. Despite his exhaustion earlier in the evening, and the ache in his back muscles from long periods of bending to the ground to shift random rubble, Adam is excessively awake. He’s almost hoping Gansey will still be up so they can have a chat about the next steps right now, or even, that Ethan will be so he can sit down and give him a proper cuddle. Of course, when they get into Monmouth, it’s entirely dark save for the pink glow of Ethan’s room, and a quick peek through the half open doorway shows that Ethan and Gansey are very thoroughly awake. Gansey is curled round the edge of the bed while Ethan is out flat like a starfish. It’s obvious who has the upper hand here.

“C’mon,” Ronan yawns from behind him, tugging at the back of his shirt, “I know they’re cute but I fuckin’ need’a sleep now.”

“Mhm,” Adam says, lets Ronan drag him off to their bedroom, thinks that he’ll probably fall right back into his exhaustion as soon as his head hits the pillow. Before that can happen though, Ronan decides to assist Adam in undressing, is tugging his t-shirt off over Adam’s head.

“What’re you doing?” Adam asks, unhelpfully very interested in what Ronan is doing.

“Helping,” Ronan says blandly, chucking the shirt into the ever growing pile of their clothing. The room really needed a good sort out, the clothes really needed to be put away. Adam wasn’t sure he could even tell which of his clothes were his anymore.

“Helping?” Adam asks, stepping forwards towards Ronan and skimming his hands along the hem of Ronan’s shirt, “Or ‘helping’?”

“Um,” Ronan says, shivers a little as Adam grazes his fingers along Ronan’s hips under the shirt rather than actually pulling it off of Ronan. “What?”

“Oh,” Adam says, blinks at Ronan’s confusion, and quickly draws his hands away, “ah, sorry.”
“What?” Ronan says again, stepping forwards as Adam steps backwards, then, “Oh - Oh!”

“I know you’re tired,” Adam says, turns round to start unbuckling his jeans, “sorry, it’s late.”

“Parrish,” Ronan grumbles, plonking himself down on Adam’s back and wrapping his arms around Adam’s torso, “yeah I’m tired, tired enough I didn’t even realise what you were saying, but I’m not so tired that I don’t want to-” he trails off to punctuate his sentence with a careful kiss to the side of Adam’s neck, a small bite at his ear.

“Ah,” Adam says, inhales sharply and turns his head so he can meet Ronan’s mouth with his own, kisses him. Ronan releases his waist so he can pull his shirt off, and Adam takes the opportunity to turn back around, dropping his jeans and kicking them over to the pile as he does.

“Sometimes,” Ronan says, fumbling with his jeans button while Adam coils his arms around Ronan’s shoulders and kisses his neck, “you need to just say straight out that you wanna fucking make out because I don’t want to miss out on some good kissing just because I’m as dense as a brick.”

Adam snorts against his neck, pushes against Ronan’s torso as Ronan wriggles his way out of his (very) skinny jeans, until Ronan gets the message and sits down on the bed.

“Ok,” Adam says, untangling himself from Ronan’s torso for a moment so he can help Ronan get his feet out from the jeans, and then he’s climbing onto Ronan’s lap, knees on either side of Ronan’s hips, “I want to make out with you,” he says, “if you hadn’t noticed,” he adds, kisses the side of Ronan’s mouth, “if you’re up for it.”

Ronan makes a vaguely disgruntled noise, plants his hands firmly on Adam’s (underwear clad) ass, and tugs him closer, “obviously I’m up for it,” he says, “being tired was just a phase.”

“Idiot,” Adam says cheerfully, “fair warning, my awakening is probably only a phase as well,” he adds before he ducks down to keep kissing Ronan. Ronan possibly answers, but it’s entirely in muffledese, and it’s obviously not important enough that he thinks he ought to stop kissing Adam for it, so Adam doesn’t stop kissing him either.

“What brought this on?” Ronan asks a while later once they’re stretched out along the bed, or once Ronan is stretched out on his back along the bed, Adam stretched out on top of him, mouthing at Ronan’s shoulder. “Was it how sexy I look while studying?”
“Half the time you were ‘studying’,” Adam says, slowly shifting his kisses from Ronan’s shoulder to his chest, “you were trying to balance salt shakers on your nose, so no.”

“Not trying.” Ronan objects, shifting his arm to give Adam more kissing scope, “I managed to balance it for a minute, you were just in the kitchen.”

“Sure,” Adam says, bites Ronan’s pec, earning a hiss, then, “I just wanted to,” he says, “you touched me and I wanted to. So sue me, I’m a horny teenager apparently.”

“I’m not suing for that,” Ronan says, pushes his hand into Adam’s hair, tangles his fingers in the curls, “I will sue if you don’t come back and kiss me again soon, though.”

“Huh,” Adam says, doesn’t move back up his body, just glances down a bit, then grins up at Ronan, “and here I thought you were enjoying this?”

“Ugh,” Ronan says, wriggles under Adam’s weight, “obviously I am, sure,” he grumbles, “but if I enjoy it for much longer I’m gonna need another fucking shower and then I’ll be too clean.”

“Poor baby,” Adam sighs, grazes his teeth across Ronan’s ribs, “ok,” he says, kisses Ronan’s stomach, “me too, so.”

“So,” Ronan says, reaches down to grip Adam by the shoulders to tug him back up to a more respectable place. He’s panting, flushed and a bit sweaty, and arches to kiss Adam as soon as Adam’s face is in reach.

Sensible parts of Adam remind him that he probably wants to go to sleep soon because he has school in the morning, and magic all day, and if he keeps kissing Ronan like this they’re both going to get too worked up. Less sensible, but considerably more pressing parts of Adam suggests that perhaps if he just keeps rocking against Ronan, he won’t need to sleep.

“Adam,” Ronan mumbles after a few seconds, tipping his head out of the kiss, “if you keep- if we keep - uh - God if you keep grinding up on me I’m going to fucking cum in my pants.”

“Oh,” Adam says, has to concentrate on stilling his hips, “sorry,” he breathes, “I - uh - got -”
“Yeah,” Ronan snorts, “I know,” he says, as Adam rolls off of Ronan and onto his side next to him, “me too.”

“Ugh,” Adam says, sighs, presses his face against Ronan’s sweaty shoulder, “God, y’know,” he says as Ronan lifts his arm up to wrap around Adam’s shoulders, “I really did mean what I said about not being ready for… for anything more than kissing, and I still do mean that,” he says quickly, tries to ignore how hard he currently is because it’s not making his words feel very truthful, “I just - sorry,” he finishes awkwardly.

Ronan’s still panting a little, and his laugh is a bit breathless. “Don’t be sorry,” he says, “I knew we weren’t going to do anything more.”

“I didn’t,” Adam says, “I probably would have just - quite happily - kept going.”

“Hey,” Ronan says, he’s slowly edging onto his side, “you told me you weren’t ready for anything more,” he says, “and that’s what I’m going with until we have like, a fucking proper talk in which you tell me you want more. So like, as fucking turned on as I am right now, or, as you are right now, I don’t want to do anything more unless I know for sure you’re not going to regret it.”

He’s very coherent for someone who’s delegated the majority of their blood elsewhere.

“Thanks,” Adam says in a small voice, “I don’t want to do anything you’ll regret either.”

“Mm,” Ronan says, presses a light kiss to Adam’s cheek, “maybe we both need to get off more.”

“God,” Adam snorts, “when the fuck would we have time to do that?”

Ronan isn’t small by any means. He’s taller than Adam, and broader as well, although Adam likes to think that that’s just because Ronan’s already had most of his growth spurt. But. Curled round himself in the hollow trunk of this rotting tree, he looks small. He looks delicate.
Just like last time, Adam can hear the faint noise of claw on wood, claw on rock, claw on claw, but he can’t see any of the monsters yet. The ragged sound of dream Ronan’s breath is still the loudest thing in the mossy clearing. The clearing is a little lighter than before, the air a little less putrid. Dream Ronan’s eyes are tight shut. Adam isn’t sure if he’s meant to look around, to talk to the groaning trees surrounding them, or if he’s meant to sit down next to his not boyfriend and try and comfort him.

He whirls around when a particularly loud click echoes through the clearing, but it’s just the sounds being carried oddly through the trees, no monsters in sight.

“You’re back,” Dream Ronan says from behind him. His voice doesn’t sound like Ronan’s at all. Or rather, it sounds like what Adam thinks Ronan might sound like if he had only ever screamed and cried and never spoken.

He crouches at the lip of the tree, keeps his hands in sight, not sure how uneasy Dream Ronan will be today.

“Yeah,” he says, “what are you dreaming about?”

The Dream itself looks at him like he’s an idiot, then pulls himself a little more upright against the rough inside of the tree, winces, as if this small movement is pulling at some unseen wound.

“What does it look like I’m dreaming about?” he asks, voice harsh.

“Nothing good,” Adam says blandly, “has the dreaming been happening easier tonight?” he asks, feels guilty asking when it’s for his own needs about Cabeswater, not Dream Ronan’s.

“Dreaming fucked up monsters has always been easy,” Dream Ronan says bitterly, venom enough that Adam wants to look away.

“Look,” Adam says, tries to be soft, “I know you don’t know me-”

“Don’t be fucked up, Parrish,” Dream Ronan scoffs, “of course I know you.”
“Oh,” Adam says, narrows his eyes, “but last time-?”

“I know you,” Dream Ronan sighs, “doesn’t mean we’re friends. You’re Gansey’s friend. Why I’m dreaming about you is beyond me.”

“I’m dreaming about you,” Adam interjects, “if you know me,” he adds, knows he’s probably completely off track for whatever he’s supposed to be doing here, “why aren’t we friends?”

Dream Ronan stares at him, rolls his eyes. He doesn’t look as small as he did before, now, like he’s filling up the hollow tree with his personality. The forest is all but silent around them. “Because you’re an insufferable know it all?” Dream Ronan suggests, “Because you think I’m a worthless asshole?”

“I don’t,” Adam snaps, clears his throat, “think you’re worthless. You are an asshole.”

“Ah see,” Dream Ronan scoffs, “insufferable know it all.”

Adam does his best to ignore this, “What do you mean that I’m Gansey’s friend?” he asks. It didn’t make sense for this to be a thing that Kavinsky’s version of Ronan ought to be saying.

“Fucked if I know,” Dream Ronan says, rubs the back of his hand under his nose roughly, “whatever it means,” he says, “means that you and Gans spend all your fucking time in school chatting about nerd shit.”

“What?” Adam asks.

“I know,” Dream Ronan says, sounds gloomy, “I mean,” he adds, “why am I even explaining this to a figment of my imagination? Am I so pleased not to be stuck in some fatalistic nightmare that arguing with Parrish is entertaining now?”

“Ronan,” Adam says, “when you wake up, where are you?”
Dream Ronan looks at him. His face had been a carefully cultivated sneer for the last few minutes, but now it was troubled again, the cracks underneath his mask showing clean through his skin. He swallows. Adam tries again.

“Ro,” he says, “do you know when you’re awake, and when you’re asleep?”

“I did,” Dream Ronan says, and his voice cracks harshly, the noise of it echoes somewhere in the trees, “I’m not so sure anymore.”

“Ro,” Adam says again, he wants to reach out and take Ronan’s hand, but he doesn’t think this Ronan would appreciate that. Probably doesn’t appreciate Adam calling him ‘Ro’, either. “I want to help you,” he says carefully, isn’t sure how much he can promise, “I want to get you out of this dream/nightmare loop,” he says, “stop you from dreaming monsters up day in and out.”

“I’m never waking up,” Dream Ronan whispers, his voice is all cracks now, so are the noises in the trees, “I’m never waking up, am I? Am I like mum? Did it just take longer for me to stop working? Is this where she’s stuck too? Nightmares and nightmares? Is this hell, Parrish?”

“No,” Adam says before he can consider it, “I- Ro,” he doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say here, what could help, “we’re going to work this out,” he says, “you’re not a-” he starts, then bites his tongue. Real Ronan was not a dream. This Ronan was a dream. He doesn’t know how to comfort a dream.

“Why are you here?” Dream Ronan asks him, he doesn’t sound upset about it, it’s just his voice is nothing but upset. “Why not Gansey? Or Noah?”

“Because,” Adam says, doesn’t know, he reaches out and takes Dream Ronan’s hand. Dream Ronan lets him, squeezes his fingers hard. “Because,” Adam says, “because I love you.”

“Don’t be dumb,” Dream Ronan says, tugs at Adam’s hand as if he wants to pull him closer.

“I am kind of dumb,” Adam says, shrugs, “but I’m going to work this out. That’s why I’m here. To get you out of this.”

Dream Ronan smiles, but it’s a little bit too late. The ticking of claws is ever closer, Adam can see flashes of scales and feathers between tree trunks. Knows Dream Ronan has seen them too.
“If you’re getting me out of this,” Dream Ronan says, smile already gone, “now would be a good time.”

“I’m sorry,” Adam says, feels it all the way down in his stomach, in his toes, in the stupid part of his soul some version of himself had given to the forest, “I don’t know how yet.”

“Ok,” Dream Ronan says, “then go before they get here.”

I don’t want to, is what Adam wants to say. But he’s scared. Scared of whether or not he can die in his dream, if he can die in Dream Ronan’s dream, scared of leaving his Ronan alone, of leaving Ethan.

“I’m going to help you,” he says again, vehement, and Dream Ronan grimaces at him, says;

“Adam? Adam, God, Adam, fuck please wake up-”
He can hear Ethan crying. This is the first thing that lodges in his mind. He can hear Ethan crying, and his next thought is one that comes from years of experience, the instinctual need to get up right now and stop the crying before it wakes anyone up. To comfort Ethan.

He can’t fucking move.

His third thought, is blind panic.

Blind, because he can’t move, and, he can’t see.

Only when he attempts to thrash out, to move, does he finally translate the noise around him into Ronan’s voice, and only because it suddenly stops as he moves, and then restarts again in a gush.

“Adam, babe?” Ronan is saying, and now Adam can feel Ronan’s hand shaking on his face, “Adam, wake up, it’s dream, wake up-”

Ronan ought to know, better than anyone, that knowing it’s a dream isn’t always useful.

“I can’t-” he finds himself saying, his mouth moving before he’d realised he could talk, “-I can’t see- Ro - I can’t-”

Ronan’s voice is suddenly a lot calmer now Adam’s responding, but it doesn’t help calm Adam down. He can still hear Ethan crying in the background, can work out the noises around it that’s Gansey trying to soothe him, that’s Chainsaw trying to tell off whatever’s upsetting him.

“Babe,” Ronan says, “open your eyes,” his fingertips brush lightly over Adam’s eyelids, and he must be bending over him closely, because he can feel Ronan’s breath on his cheek.

He opens his eyes, and feels entirely, ridiculously, horrifyingly stupid for a full 3 seconds over his momentary ‘blind’ panic, and then sinks straight back into a more full blown panic when he realises what he can see with his eyes open.

Firstly, he sees Ronan’s face, which is usually a comforting thing to see, just not when there’s blood on it. Second, he can see why he can’t move.

There’s a tangle of greenery over their bed. Thick ropey vines that look to have burst right through the mattress are coiled around his arms, trickling tendrils of it creeping over his chest. There are thorny branches hooked around his legs, he can feel their points digging into his skin, can feel the heat of his blood on his ankles, the wet of it under his calves.

“What,” Adam says, doesn’t have anything else useful to say. Ronan shakes his head. He looks as upset, as confused as Dream Ronan, and Adam can’t even lift his hand to hold his. Instead, Ronan has started tugging on the vines around Adam again, his hands leaving bloody smears where he touches, and Adam wonders how long this has been happening, how long Ronan has been trying to wake him, trying to free him, slashing his own hands open on the thorns around Adam.

“Stop,” Adam gets out, startling himself as well as Ronan. “Stop,” he repeats, “you’re hurting yourself -God - Ronan -God your hands-”

“Fuck my hands,” Ronan says, he’s not tugging at Adam’s restraints anymore, but he’s not moved his hands, “I don’t care,” he continues, “I need to get you out of this-”
“Stop,” Adam says again, he needs to breathe, and he can’t while Ronan is willfully injuring himself, “just - that’s now how this works-” he continues, barely knowing what he’s saying.

“How what works?” Ronan asks, he’s all but wailing. He pulls his hands away, demonstrates how his face came to be bloody as he presses his fingers into his cheeks, drags at his skin, “What the fuck is going on, Adam? You were - I was - Fuck - what’s going on?"

“I don’t know,” Adam hisses, the thorn pricks in his skin are really starting to sting, but they can’t be as bad as Ronan’s tears, “I just know-” he mumbles, has to speak slowly for the knowledge to catch up with his mouth, “I just know that these - this - this fucking plant isn’t trying to hurt me.”

“The fuck is it doing, then?” Ronan snaps.

“It thinks it’s protecting me,” Adam says, bland, “I think.”

“Why do you think that?” Ronan asks, he tugs at a vine again, “It’s fucking - it’s fucking-”

“From the night horrors,” Adam says, closes his eyes to try and make sense of the jumbled voices in his head, the mixed memories. Some of those memories don’t belong to him. Most of the voices don’t belong to him. They feel like they belong to something a lot older. A lot other. Maybe the forest.

“From the-” Ronan repeats.

“I was dreaming in your dream again,” Adam says, focuses hard on breathing slow and calm, on feeling safe, “in Dream Ronan’s dream,” he clarifies, “I talked to him. And then - then the monsters came, and I panicked, and - I think this is Cabeswater trying to protect me. It just got - confused. Thought I was really there. I think - because I was confused, it didn’t know how to protect me either so it just - did its best.”

“Its best fucking sucks,” Ronan says, hoarse. He sounds unconvinced, and utterly awed at the same time. Adam opens his eyes to watch the vines retreating, disappearing into nothing leaving holes in the sheets and gouges in his legs. “I don’t understand,” Ronan says.

“I do,” Adam says, “or,” he sighs, “some of it. I understand some of it.”

“So what the fuck’s going on?” Ronan asks, voice hard, but his hands gentle as he helps Adam up into a sitting position.

“I-” Adam says, sighs, feels dizzy, rests his head against Ronan’s shoulder. “In a minute?” he asks, “Why’s Ethan crying? I need to go to him.”

Ronan rests his own head on Adam’s, sighs as well. “He came in,” he says, “he was awake when I started trying to wake you, and came in to see what was going on. He’s freaked out.”

“God,” Adam breathes, “God damn.”

“It’s not your fault,” Ronan mumbles, “c’mon,” he says, “if we just - if we just wipe the blood of you you can go to him - it’ll be ok. He’ll be ok.”

“I don’t want to do this,” Adam says, much to his horror, in a half sob, “I don’t want to do this, Ro, this is too much. It’s too much, I can’t do this.”

He needs to get a grip. He needs to suck his emotions back into his lungs. He needs to uncurls his fingers from around Ronan’s arms. He needs to get the fuck up, clean up, and go look after his
brother who fucking needs him.

“I know,” Ronan says, his voice cracking just like Dream Ronan’s, “I know- I’m so sorry, Adam, I’m so sorry- I’m so-”

“Stop,” Adam says, can barely get the word out this time, his lungs feel full to bursting, “it’s not-” he says, “I’ve got to go to Ethan,” he interrupts himself, “I’ve gotta, I’ve-”

“Ok,” Ronan is saying, “ok.”

It feels like swimming through a haze, getting off of the shredded sheets and stumbling onto the floor. He’s looking for track pants that his legs won’t bleed through, looking for a towel to wipe his face and body down. He finds the track pants, and Ronan finds the towel. Wipes his back carefully while Adam yanks the pants on, and then turns so Ronan can wipe his stomach and shoulders, hands and face. It’s a far cry to the touching they were doing only hours ago.

-“Adam,” Gansey says, relief and concern loud in his voice as Adam strides towards Ethan and Gansey perched on Gansey’s bed. “Oh, Adam.”

Ethan is crying a little too hard to form words. Instead, he arches in Gansey’s arms, reaches for Adam, and Adam drops himself down by Gansey’s side and pulls Ethan into his arms to hold him tightly to himself. This is more painful than the thorns in his legs. More painful than the grit in his eyes. He hasn’t held an Ethan this upset for a while now. Had put aside the knowledge of how awful it felt to have failed, again, fucking again, in protecting him.

“Baby,” Adam soothes, or, attempts to soothe, “baby, it’s ok. I’ve got you now, everything’s ok.” Ethan cries louder. Adam hadn’t been aware that this had been an option. Gansey winces a little beside them, doesn’t move away though, instead, presses in close and wraps his arms around the both of them.

Ronan comes out then. He’d lingered behind a moment longer to clean himself up, to haphazardly wrap cloth around the ruins of his palms. He looks like he’s planning on going to the bathroom to wash off properly, but catches Adam’s eyes as he steps into the room, and changes course immediately. Crosses the room and climbs onto the bed on Adam’s other side, presses himself into the hug so that Gansey clutches onto him as well. Ethan continues crying. Adam wants to cry. Wants to cry so badly.

-It takes a while for the 3 of them to settle down enough to actually do anything. Ethan is inconsolable for a long while, and it’s difficult to get out of him exactly what he saw and what he’s still scared about now Adam’s safe and there’s no blood anywhere.

“Was th’dream,” Ethan explains eventually, his voice is all quavery, and his face is buried against Adam’s bare chest - slippery with tears and snot now. “Th’ bad dream,” he clarifies, “where I’m not all’wed.”

This really isn’t much of a clarification, but enough that now they very much understand why he’s so upset. He had felt like he had walked in on a nightmare. Adam, suspects this is very much how
Ronan had felt as well, waking up from what had supposedly been a nice enough night for him, to see a nightmare clawing his bed apart.

Ethan doesn’t get put down at all that morning. He clings to Adam while they eat a very somber breakfast. This has shaken up their plans a little, but honestly, this is just one more awful supernatural even to add to their little collection of them, so not too much. The whole scenario had gone down very early, earlier than any of them had been planning on waking up, so they have plenty of time to eat their vaguely burnt toast and drink the pulpy dregs of the orange juice before they have to start talking it over.

“We need a new bed,” Ronan says, beginning the conversation on a vaguely lighter note. “Or at least a new mattress, that one is fu-hm - uh - to all heck.”

“Sorry,” Adam sighs, “I didn’t realise that I could do that.”

“Obviously not,” Gansey says, he sounds like he’s trying to sound consolatory, but he mostly just sounds intrigued. “This is new to all of us. No one would have guessed that when you felt endangered you would suddenly produce Cabeswater weaponry. I’ve never heard of such a thing. Is this to do with you fixing the ley line, you think?”

“No,” Adam says, reaches for more toast and discovers Ethan’s already nabbed the last piece of toast from their plate. Ronan passes over one of his pieces, already slathered in butter. “No I don’t think it is. Or, well, kind of, but more to do with the fact that I’m not the only Adam Cabeswater knows.”

“Can you expound more on this?” Gansey asks, reaches over to put more toast in.
Ethan is getting crumbs stuck in the still wet snot he’s smeared over Adam’s arms.

“Right,” Adam says, “so we’re all on board with the fact that there are different… timelines, or alternate universes I suppose, in which we have doubles. Or whatever.”

“Yes,” Gansey says, quickly. Ronan shrugs agreeably beside them.

“So,” Adam picks at the crust on his toast, “in one of these… universes, the Adam in that one made a… a sacrifice we think, to Cabeswater. As far as we can gather, he offered his hands and eyes to - I don’t even know what he offered them for. But it sounds like there was a give and take. That Adam looked after Cabeswater, saw things for Cabeswater, and I guess in return, Cabeswater looked after him. Like we saw this morning. Although that didn’t exactly feel like being looked after.”

“What I don’t fucking get,” Ronan hisses, Gansey elbows him for swearing, but Ethan looks too engrossed in crunching his toast, “is why, Cabeswater is a frigging multi-dimensional power force, but it still can’t seem to freaking differentiate between our different universes. It should be obvious that this Adam isn’t the same as the other Adam.”

“Also-” Adam says, says it slowly because he hasn’t quite figured this out, “also - I talked to the dream Ronan in my dream. Or in his dream. The one Kavinsky has.”

Ronan and Gansey flinch as one. Ethan doesn’t know enough to flinch.

“He-” Adam doesn’t know how to say this, “I don’t think he’s our timeline’s version of you, Ro,” he says, “because - because you- he knew who I was because the me he knows goes to school with that Ronan and that Gansey. He knows that version of me because I’m friends with Gansey.”
Because having to try and explain some weird sort of fucked up multi-dimensional dream kidnapping thing isn’t hard enough, after they’ve run through Adam’s dream enough that they all feel thoroughly confused, they have to discuss their plans for what’s next. It’s mostly just more of the same. More of trying to fix the line. More of trying to see where Cabeswater wants them. More of waiting for Declan. Adam doesn’t want to wait anymore. He promised Dream Ronan he was going to help. He’s so scared of leaving him there now.

He’s also scared of going to school. It might sound stupid. Really, school was probably the place he should feel least afraid of, there was unlikely to be any supernatural shit happening there - but school meant he had to leave Ethan. School meant he had to leave Ronan. School meant he had to pay attention to something that wasn’t working this shit out. School meant maybe feeling angry enough again that his hands stopped belonging to him. Pleading with Cabeswater hadn’t done anything to give them back to him. If anything, it had seemed to make the connection stronger. This in itself was fucking terrifying.

“Ok,” Ronan says while they drive to Dana’s. All of them are in his BMW, Gansey on one side in the back, Ethan in his carseat on the other, and Blue, who they picked up first, wedged in between them. Ronan is in the passenger seat while Adam drives. In the rearview mirror, he can see Ethan clutching tight to Blue’s hand and (just barely) Blue hooking her fingers round Gansey’s wrist.

“Here’s the plan for today; No one has anything awful happen to them during the hours we’re all at school-”

“Don’t be such a-” Gansey starts, seems to think better of it. Blue sighs.

Ronan continues. Adam can feel his eyes on him. “Adam’s taken the week off of Boyd’s, so after school, we’ll collect everyone again, and take Blue, Gansey, and Ethan back to Monmouth while Adam and I go to Cabeswater-”

“Hang on,” Blue objects, “I think Gansey and I should go do some scouting today. We’ve pinpointed a few areas we think we should look at-”

“But we can’t take Ethan to Cabeswater with us,” Adam protests here, “and neither can he go with you guys to places you think might have magical caves of doom.”

“I miss Noah,” Ethan interjects loudly here, “an’ I don’ wanna be left behind!!”

“No one’s leaving you behind,” Blue tells him softly, “don’t worry buddy.”

“Gansey?” Ronan asks, “Caves?”

“I do agree with Jane,” Gansey says carefully, “there’s only so much research we can do before actually physical experience is necessary. All our coordinates point to this area we want to be looking at- so-”

“Let’s skip Ley Line strengthening today, then,” Adam says, “Ronan and I could go to yours, Blue, and talk to your mum, and also - Persephone said she wanted to talk more about cards with me. That way we can be doing some work while looking after Ethan.”

“Right,” Ronan says, doesn’t seem put out by this change in their plans at all, “and I could call
Declan while I’m at it as well.”

“That’d work,” Blue agrees, “maybe Seph could cut your hair while she’s at it.”
Rubber Duck with a View

School is thankfully uneventful. Adam’s classmates don’t try and worm more information out of him, and if they’re still watching him and whispering about him, than he doesn’t really care. He has more important things to think about, to worry about. He texts Ronan constantly. Nothing useful, it’s just that he wants to be able to touch Ronan right now, to hold on to him and feel he’s safe, and because he can’t do this, texting him is the next best thing.

Again, when Ronan comes to pick him up, he picks Blue up as well seeing as they’re headed to her house. Ethan is very excited to be greeted by almost their full cohort, and bounds excitedly into Blue’s arms when the three of them meet him at Dana’s doorstep. Dana is less excited, nods at Adam, a clear request for him to come talk.

“Everything ok?” Adam asks, voice low as he allows Dana to peel him away from the group. He can feel Ronan’s eyes on his back. “Did something happen?”

“No,” Dana says, clarifies, “nothing happened, but everything is not ok.”

“Oh,” Adam says.

“Ethan’s been much more delicate, lately,” Dana says, “he cries at the drop of a hat, and he’s always asking when you and Ronan will be back.”

“Oh,” Adam says, “I’m sorry-”

“I’m not trying to… parent shame you,” Dana sighs, “I’m sure you’re doing your best-”

“Dana,” Adam interrupts, “I’m going to tell you something I know you already know.”

“Ok?” Dana says, she looks confused, also a little miffed at being interrupted.

“My father beat me at home,” Adam says, drops his voice down even more. They’re isn’t really a need, Ronan and Blue are at the BMW strapping Ethan into the seat and can’t hear, and even if they could, it’s nothing they don’t know anyway. It just feels wrong to say this loudly. “Over the smallest things. Regularly. And he yelled, threw things. My mother too, to a lesser extent - Ethan never got… I got him out of there before my father could start hurting him too, but he’s still spent his whole life being around that violence, and anger, and-”

He has to pause because he feels like he’s getting off track, and also because Dana looks close to tears. He clears his throat.

“I don’t want Ethan to be crying, or anything like that, but just - just the fact that he feels like he can, Dana, it feels like an achievement, because he always had to be so quiet and so good back with our parents. He wasn’t allowed to be a child with emotions. He can now. If this is too much, though, we can cut down the hours you have him? I don’t want to overwhelm you-”

“No,” Dana says, “no, I’m not overwhelmed - I was just - I was just worried. I still am. But for different reasons now. I’m perfectly happy to keep watching him.”

“Thank you,” Adam says, “sorry to be so blunt about all of this, but I’m also in kind of a hurry, I do have to go. Thank you for talking to me-” He tacks on. He let’s Dana squeeze his shoulder, and then hurries off to the car.
“Everything ok?” Ronan asks when Adam gets into the passenger seat. Blue and Ethan are strapped in in the back and are engaged in a thumb war, although Ethan is using all of his fingers.

“Yeah,” Adam says, buckles up, keeps his voice pitched low, “Ethan’s just been sad lately, Dana’s been worried.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, “what did you tell her?”

“The truth about our parents,” Adam says, shrugs, “it’s as much truth as I can give her.”

“Yeah,” Ronan agrees.

- 

Gansey meets them at Blue’s, doesn’t bother coming inside. Instead, Blue hops out of Ronan’s car, kisses Ethan goodbye, and hops into Gansey’s car.

“We’re off to a couple of spots,” Gansey tells them, leaning out of his window while Adam unbuckles Ethan, “Jane is especially keen to check out some farm that apparently has a curse on it? It ought to be interesting.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Ronan tells the two of them, shoddy advice, and Adam straightens up with Ethan in his arms and chips in.

“Don’t do anything he would do, either,” he says, “keep in touch, yeah?”

“Obviously,” Blue says, leans across Gansey’s lap so she can half hang out the window, “just because you’re the one with the kid doesn’t mean you have to be the group parent, Adam,” she says, “Dick and I are big kids who can look after ourselves.”

“Dick and Jane go on an adventure,” Ronan mumbles.

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The problem with staying behind at Fox Way is that despite the fact that Adam and Ronan and Ethan are the ones experiencing the increasingly strange dreams, the psychics are the ones who want to tell them what’s going on. It feels both patronising, and relieving.

Adam sits in the same stool as Ethan had yesterday, a similar towel wrapped around his shoulders while Persephone snips at his hair. Ronan is perched against the kitchen counter with Ethan in his arms and Chainsaw, somehow here before them, perched on the top of his head. Ronan is observing the haircut, Ethan is having a conversation in Raven and whispers with Chainsaw.

“So,” Maura says from over by the kettle where’s she’s mixing something that smells suspiciously like rotten lettuce, “Kavinsky’s dream Ronan, while plucked from a dream, is Ronan from what Cabeswater appears to consider the original timeline, are you getting this?”

“That’s literally what Adam just told you,” Ronan says, “so yeah, we’re fu-hecking getting this.”

“I wanted to see if it had really sunk in as a plausible reality,” Maura says calmly, “or if it was still just abstract to you.’
“Everything’s pretty abstract, right now,” Adam confesses from beneath his combed out curls, “including things that I’m 99% sure are reality. Like this haircut.”

“Right then,” Calla says, she’s half underneath the kitchen table, something about it being less nosy there, “so we’ll do a session with the both of you and try and read into your original selves.”

“I think it’s unhelpful,” Persephone says, tugs at Adam’s hair so he turns his head slightly and she can cut just behind his ear, “to refer to the other versions of them as the originals.”

“Can you do that?” Ronan demands, “get a reading from the other us’s through us? But we’re different people.”

“Well,” Maura says, “generally no. But seeing as you have a powerfully confused magical forest muddling you all up currently, we might just be able to.”

“What’s the point?” Adam asks, “Don’t we need to fix what’s going on in our timeline before we fix that one?”

“Maybe,” Maura says, shrugs, “but best to see for ourselves first.”

“I don’t want you guys in my head,” Ronan grits out. From beneath his hair, Adam can’t see Ronan very well, but he can make out the stiffness of his body, “or in other Ronan’s head. I don’t think Cabeswater has me confused at all anyway, I’m the greywaren in both timelines, right? It’s just Adam Cabeswater is being a dumb sh- ship about.”

“Maybe,” Calla says this time, “but now that both you and other snake are in the same timeline? I’m sure Cabeswater is going to be confused. How’s your dreaming been?”


“Your dreaming,” Calla says again, “how much have you dreamed since this other Ronan has come on screen?”

Ronan doesn’t reply, which is apparently answer enough for Calla, because she snorts and knocks on the underside of the table.

“Yes, yes,” Persephone says, “I’m almost done here. Then we’ll look.”

Adam hadn’t been entirely sure what he had expected this reading or whatever it was to involve, but he wouldn’t have guessed the grape juice. He felt that possibly the three women were having them on by making them sit in a cross legged circle around the scrying bowl, but he wasn’t certain enough to call them out. He also hadn’t been expecting Persephone to be leading this. Even though it was Persephone he defer to for most things magic, he had assumed Maura was the leader of their little trio. However, it was Persephone who knelt down in front of the bowl, who instructed Ronan to hand Ethan to Maura, Adam to hold Ronan’s hand, Calla to hold her Persephone’s shoulder with one hand and Ronan’s foot with the other, Maura to be ready to pull her out if need be. He also hadn’t expected to see Persephone suddenly stop inhabiting her body after she had looked into the dark liquid for only a few moments.

“What do you mean that dream Ronan is absolutely definitely not a dream?” Gansey demands over the phone. It’s Ronan’s hone on speakerphone, but Adam’s the one holding it. Ethan is back in
Ronan’s arms, the three of them conked out on Blue’s bed upstairs.

“I mean he came from Kavinsky’s dream, yes,” Adam says, “but Kavinsky didn’t make him, he just stole him from Cabeswater. I’m pretty sure. The Cabeswater’s overlapped or something, and he took him.”

“Does Kavinsky know this?” Blue asks, voice tinny on the other end of the phone. Gansey has his phone on speakerphone as well, because apparently he needs his hands for gardening.

“We don’t think so,” Ronan sighs.

“But we do think it’s part of why Cabeswater is so suddenly getting so uppity about me not being the Adam it knows,” Adam says, “because that Adam’s Ronan is here, so-”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Gansey wails from over the phone, “Adam didn’t you say that Dream Ronan, or, sorry, other Ronan told you that he and you weren’t friends in that timeline, that it was you and me who were friends? So-”

“Well if the timelines are muddled,” Adam says, “then Cabeswater might have a fuller view of what that timeline ends up in. I don’t know, Gans.”

“I don’t think that’s the part we need to be focusing on,” Ronan interjects, “can we focus on the fact that there is actually a me out there who has no freaking clue why he’s like…suddenly in an alternate universe?”

“Call Declan,” Gansey commands, “and what do the psychics suggest?”

“The psychics have names, you know, Dick,” Blue says.

“Maura said we needed to get other Ronan to stop dreaming,” Adam says, “that he’s… blocking the line or something. Crossing the wires? I don’t know.”

“Not that she gave us any suggestions on how to do it,” Ronan adds grumpily. “When will you guys be back? And also, why are you gardening?”

“The haunted house guy,” Gansey says -

“Jesse Dittley,” Blue reminds.

-“We’re trying to get acess to the cave on his land, so, gardening.”

“Because that makes sense,” Ronan snorts, “ETA?”

“Late dinner?”

The plan had been to stay at Blue’s house until she and Gansey got home, but the psychics, after spending some time dipping in and out of Adam’s head, didn’t seem all that forthcoming. Also, Neeve had come back from wherever she had been blessedly busy at, and had began eying them up like she was figuring out how best to eat them, or possibly, dissect them. They go home.

“All I’m saying,” Adam says grumpily as he stirs the too watery contents of what is supposed to be pea and ham soup over the stove, “is that we can’t just barge into his house and perform a rescue mission for other Ronan until we have a better grasp on what to do. And,” he continues, “on what weird restrictions Kavinsky’s dreamed onto him - if he’s somehow been… mutated to just be
dreaming non-stop and... and to bleed non-stop, he’s obviously not just plucked straight from Cabeswater, Kavinsky has added extras.”

“And all I’m saying,” Ronan replies from the bathtub where he’s forming a foam mohawk on Ethan, “is that what better way to figure out what’s going on then by going straight to the source?”

“Kavinsky isn’t the source,” Adam retorts, “he probably thinks he is, but he isn’t. If there is a source, it’s Cabeswater.”

“Well fine,” Ronan says, sour, fetches the rubber duck from the sink for Ethan, swipes foam onto the seat of Adam’s pants as he passes by, “is there anything else you think might be useful from the dream? Did other me say anything about Kavinsky? Did he know where he was?”

“Babe,” Adam sighs, bats the foam off of his ass, “we’ve been over this. You’re - he’s mostly just scared. He thinks the whole thing is a nightmare, which is true.”

“Yeah,” Ronan sighs as well, takes a quick break from their conversation to quack at Ethan and for Ethan to quack back, and for Chainsaw, roosting on the high windowsill above them, to caw back, very offended. “And it’s not like you could tell him he wasn’t, because, well, yeah. He is.”

“Yeah,” Adam agrees, hesitates over the soup for a moment longer, and then says, “I love you.” There isn’t a reply, so Adam looks over his shoulder. Ronan is staring at him. Elbow deep in the bath. Ethan is standing up in the bath next to him, balancing the duck carefully on top of his head, foam and water dripping down over his face. He waits until the scene is complete and Ethan retrieves the duck from Ronan’s head to go perform some other daring acrobatic feat (climbing the bath taps), and then he hands Ronan a towel so he can wipe his face.

Ronan wipes his face. Doesn’t get up from the floor by the bath, just stares at Adam.

“Why did you say that?” he asks.

Adam thinks about being offended, but he doesn’t really feel like it. “Because,” he says, turns back to the stove quickly to turn the element down so it doesn’t burn or boil over while he’s distracted, then crouches down in front of Ronan, socks immediately getting soaked in the quickly growing puddle. “Because I said it to other you last night. I didn’t have anything else I could say to reassure you - him - and that was the only truth I knew. But well, I guess,” he’s talking quickly, a little embarrassed, and a little embarrassed that he’s embarrassed, “it wasn’t true enough then, because I love you, not him, and I’m sure because the two of you are basically the same person, I’m sure I love him too, but it’s you - it’s I love you and it wasn’t fair that I had said it to him and not you.”

“Oh,” Ronan says. Ethan splashes him. Ronan ignores this. “I’m - some dumb part of me,” he snorts, “is trying to be jealous because other me got to hear you say it before I did.”

“Some dumb part of me feels really guilty about saying it to other you first, too,” Adam says, decides that it doesn’t matter if his pants get wet as well, drops down onto his knees in front of Ronan, “so, forgive me?”

“Obviously I forgive you,” Ronan says, hands already wrapping themselves around Adam’s wrists, tugging him closer, “I love you.”

Adam kisses him.

Ethan puts the duck on his head.
Shoes off the bed

They end up going mattress shopping before Gansey and Blue get back from their gardening/cave finding trip. Ethan's already insisted on changing into his pajamas after his bath, and is very excited over getting to go out shopping wearing them, even though he's also wearing his socks and shoes and a brand new jacket Gansey had not very sneakily bought him online.

Ronan can't help it. He feels like he's going to burst with happiness, which is absurd seeing as he's so scared about other Ronan, about Kavinsky, about basically almost every aspect of life at the moment. But. Adam loves him. Adam says he loves him. Adam wants to go on household shopping trips with him and Ethan. He gets to drive into town to go to the shops, Ethan in his arms, Adam holding his hand. He feels like he's going to burst.

Adam had suggested they go to an op-shop or something, citing their cheap prices, but there was no way Ronan was buying a piece of crap mattress when he already had a hard enough time sleeping, and when he has such a good excuse to buy a fantastic mattress for Adam to sleep on without it being so obviously Ronan spending money on Adam.

“IT’s my bed,” Ronan says as he unbuckles Ethan. Adam is standing leaning against the boot of the car, arms crossed, but amenable enough to be in the parking lot of a more expensive shop. “I’m not sleeping on a mattress which’ve had other people’s body fluids on it.”

“We could give it a thorough clean before we put it on the bed,” Adam retorts. He opens the driver seat door, and yanks Ronan’s keys from the ignition where Ronan had forgotten them in his domestic bliss haze, “it’d be as good as new.”

“It wouldn’t be,” Ronan says, lifts Ethan out of the car and plops him out of the car before leaning in again to grab his leather jacket off the back of his seat, “plus, we’d have to wait for it to dry before we could go to bed, and there’s not enough time left today for that.”

They’ve been having this conversation the entire car trip, and it’s not actually an argument, or, it is, but it’s for fun. He shrugs his jacket on while Adam makes grumbling noises and checks the car doors are shut and locked, and then scoops Ethan up onto his hip.

“We need a new duvet, too,” Adam says, obviously bored of arguing against getting a nice mattress.
He leans in to zip Ethan’s jacket up a bit further, and then slips his hand into Ronan’s. “My over protective vine bodyguard shredded it a little too, plus,” he adds, “I think I saw Chainsaw ripping more bits off of it when I was grabbing my jumper earlier.”

“Ah,” Ronan snorts, “great. Do you wanna go to the op-shop for that, then?”

“No,” Adam admits, almost shyly, squeezes Ronan’s hand, “there’s actually, uh, there’s actually a really nice one here I thought we might - that we could get.”

It’s a remarkably quick, and thorough shop. Adam, though most of his shopping skills seem to be in thrift, appears to never not know exact specs for what he wants (even though it’s only a fucking mattress), and so they waste no time in trying to remember what size they need, and what firmness, or whatever the fuck.

Ronan himself has only a few stipulations; firstly, he doesn’t want a mattress with stripes, and, secondly, it has to be more expensive than that, Parrish. He has no concerns when it comes to duvet buying, not that he had actual concerns over the mattress, because Adam is very much set on a very comfortable looking deep blue one that he picks out easily within the first two minutes of walking in to the store. Apparently he’d seen it in a catalogue at the factory and had been pining. The only hold up is when they pause to let Ethan bounce test a couple of the mattresses, shopping basically done. They just have to go pay now, go get someone to bring their to-be-new mattress out to the BMW so they can pretend it’ll fit on the roof. Ronan had brought ratchet tie-downs and bungee cords to assist with this.

“Only bounce on your bum,” Adam tells Ethan, “you’re wearing shoes, c’mon, get your shoes off of the bed, buddy.”

“Is not a real bed, though!” Ethan protests, drops down onto his bum obediently anyway, “none one’s gonna sleep in it?”

“We still don’t wanna get them grubby,” Adam tells him through a half grin, “’cos that’s rude. Good boy.”

“And maybe the employees sleep in them,” Ronan says unhelpfully, perches on the edge of the bed
next to Ethan and reaches in to tickle him, “or maybe the store mice!”

“No mice!” Ethan squawks, very excited about the prospect of mice, or about the idea of mice sleeping in huge beds, maybe.

Adam is looking over his shoulder, and has obviously spied something, because he mouths, ‘I’ll be right back,’ to Ronan, and quickly trots off down an aisle leaving Ronan in charge of keeping shoes off of the bed. The problem, is, see, is that you just can’t achieve a good enough bounce on your bum just on a bed. It would be ok on a trampoline, maybe, but this mattress was simply not bouncy enough.

“Jus’ wanna bounce a little,” Ethan cajoles, and Ronan isn’t as good at being stern as Adam is. He glances over his shoulder.

“Gotta take your shoes off first,” he compromises, “and then we could do a little bit of bouncing.”

“You gonna bounce too?” Ethan asks, very, very excited. Ronan would, but he thinks Adam won’t appreciate the shoes off compromise if he comes back to his brother and boyfriend jumping on the bed.

“At home, maybe,” Ronan says, helps Ethan take his shoes off.

Ethan gets in one and a half good bounces before the shop assistant catches them.

“Excuse me,” she says loudly and primly from behind them, “no jumpin’ on the beds please.”

Ronan’s plan for this eventuality had been to scoop Ethan up into his arms and turn around with the most polite smile and apology he can manage so as to not embarrass Adam, but this plan had not accounted for Ethan dropping himself flat down against the bed before Ronan can even react, and scooting himself right off of the bed into Ronan’s knees.

“Oh, no,” Ronan says, crouching down before Ethan pulls him off balance, speaks over his shoulder, “sorry, ma’am,” he says, intends to say more, but Ethan is gasping horribly in his ear, drawing his attention back to him.
“’M’sorry,” Ethan says, very quiet, “sorry, sorry-”

“Hey,” Ronan says, “sweetheart, hey-”

“Ethan?” A lot of things suddenly click in Ronan’s head as the shop assistant speaks again. “Ethan is that you?”

“Adam-” Ethan sobs almost noiselessly against Ronan’s front, “Adam-”

Ronan stands up. He does not want to turn around to face Alice Parrish. He wants to climb over the bed and escape, but Adam is still somewhere in the shop, and they haven’t bought their purchases yet, and-

“Adam-” Ethan says again. Ronan turns around. He’s going to get their trolley and go find Adam. He is going to ignore Alice.

He gets to their trolley, only has one hand to push it because he needs to hold Ethan up with his other. Alice puts her hand against the other end of the trolley.

“It’s Lynch,” she says sharply, her polite shop voice gone, “isn’t it?”

“Let go of the trolley,” Ronan says.

“You’re the one who turned him into a fag,” Alice says.

Ronan decides to abandon the trolley and just go find Adam. Unfortunately, Adam has already returned. He has a plastic encased sheet looking thing in his arms, and a horror struck expression.

“Mum,” he says.

Alice lets go of the trolley like she’s been burned, turns to look at him slowly.

“They’re talking about you all over the fucking trailer park,” she tells him, no preamble, “you have any idea how fuckin’ ashamed your dad and I am? Everyone knowing you turned into a useless sissy.”
Ronan doesn’t dare say anything, not with Ethan in his arms, though he doubts Ethan would be able to hear anything over his own ragged breaths. He’s not crying, just sucking air in roughly and choking it back out.

“Don’t swear in front of Ethan,” Adam says tautly, “an’ be thankful I ain’t shamin’ you with the police.”

Alice is white and rigid with fury. Ronan doesn’t think Adam’s white and rigid demeanour is all fury. Before Alice can respond, Adam is circling around her, dropping the package in his arms into their trolley and plucking Ethan from Ronan’s arms.

“C’mon,” he says, “we need’a buy this stuff.”

“Yeah,” Ronan says weakly, pushes the trolley away before Alice can grab it again, follows Adam, who’s all but marching back down the aisle.

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They don’t get out of there for another 15 or so minutes, it takes them a while because the ‘strong’ shop assistant has trouble wrangling their mattress out to the car, and then Ronan has trouble strapping it down by himself. Adam had climbed into the backseat of the BMW as soon as they’d gotten to it, Ethan still in his arms, crying outright now. Ronan had sent the assistant away, insisting that he could handle strapping it on.

By the time he’s done with the mattress, chucked their duvet (and the mattress protector Adam had gone off to get (it advertised itself as essential for parents with small children)) into the boot, and opened the backseat door to look in, Ethan’s stopped crying, and is, in fact, asleep in Adam’s arms. Adam’s face looks like it’s made of stone.

“Let’s just go home,” Adam says before Ronan can open his mouth, “let’s just drive home.”

“Ok,” Ronan says. He reaches out and straps Adam (and Ethan in his arms) in, and shuts the door before opening the front seat door and climbing in. Adam shuffles around a little underneath Ethan, and then hands the car keys up. Ronan drives them home.
Gansey is back when they pull up into the carpark, is still out by his car with Blue, the both of them very grubby. Noah is perched on the roof of the camaro, also somehow grubbier than usual.

“Oh,” Gansey says as Ronan climbs out, “good, you bought a new mattress, “I was wondering if you’d all just sleep in my bed with me tonight.”

“In your dreams,” Ronan retorts, a little tightly. He had been watching Adam in the rearview mirror as much as he could get away with on the drive back, had not been enjoying what he’d seen. “Can you give me a hand with the mattress?”

“Where’s Adam?” Blue asks, approaching just behind Gansey.

“I’m here,” Adam says, climbing out of the car, Ethan still in his arms, “I’m just going to go put him down,” he tells Ronan, who nods. They all watch Adam walk off.

“What happened?” Noah asks, hopping off of the car roof and popping up by Ronan’s shoulder, “That was not a happy chappy.”

“Is it because of how expensive the mattress is?” Gansey asks, a little worried sounding, “Because you wouldn’t let him pay?”

“No,” Ronan snaps, slams the car doors and turns away from his friends to start unbuckling the mattress, “he picked this one out. His mum started working at the bedding place we were at. We had a - an incident.”

“Oh,” Gansey says, sounding appropriately horrified, “Oh God. What happened?”

“Not much, just - can we just get this mattress down first?” Ronan grunts, “It’s apparently going to rain tonight. I want it inside before this.”

“Right,” Gansey says, “Oh - uh, we’re all a bit grubby-“
“It has a plastic covering right now,” Ronan says shortly, “it’ll be fine.”

“So it won’t matter if it’s rained on-” Noah begins, and Ronan isn’t really in the mood right now.

“Not risking it,” he says.

“Ronan,” Gansey says, “we’ll handle the mattress, you go to Adam, will you?”

Ronan thinks about arguing just for the sake of it, but only for about half a second. He drops his hands from the mattress and whirls away from the car. He chucks his car keys at Gansey; “There’s some shit in the boot, too,” he says, takes off towards the house, a little faster than possibly necessary.

He bumps into Adam coming back down to the parking lot at the top of the stairs.

“Oh,” Adam says, looks very surprised at Ronan’s sudden, quite disheveled, appearance. “I’m just coming to help,” he says, “was I taking too long?”

He’s doing a very good job at sounding normal and unaffected. Ronan isn’t convinced.

“Gansey and muscle arms are bringing the shit up,” Ronan says, doesn’t move out of Adam’s way, just takes another step up towards him so he’s not quite as short, “we’re not needed.”

“If we help it’ll get done quicker,” Adam says, doesn’t say this with conviction.

“Babe,” Ronan says, changes his mind, “is Ethan ok?”

“Yeah,” Adam mumbles, sighs, hangs his head, “no,” he says.

Ronan doesn’t push, just nudges Adam back up the stairs, starts heading towards his room, then changes his mind, and steers them towards the bathroom instead. Once they’re inside, he closes the door behind them.
“Why’re we in here?” Adam asks dully.

“Because Gans and Blue’ll take the mattress into our room,” Ronan says, “they won’t be coming in here immediately.”

“Mm,” Adam says.

“Adam,” Ronan says, “are you ok?”

“Yes,” Adam says, “no,” Adam says, “yes,” Adam says again, roughly, steps back to go sit on the edge of the bathtub, to drop his head into his hands. “I just wasn’t -” he says, “I wasn’t-”

Ronan grabs a glass from the sink, rinses it, fills it with water. He crosses over to Adam, perches next to him, and hands him the glass.

“Neither was I,” he says.

Adam takes the glass, takes a gulp, breathes, drains it, and then leans down to put the glass on the floor.

“It’s so stupid,” Adam says, “that I just… forgot that that could happen. Bumping into them. Like - like I thought that the only issues I had right now were fucking magic ones, which are bad enough, I forgot that I’m fucked up so normally as well, y’know?”

“That’s not-” Ronan says, pauses, “me too,” he says, “it’s not fair that we - you - have to - it’s not fair.”

“And I just-” Adam bites out, “I just - Ethan is so … I don’t know how to… how am I supposed to tell him that he’s safe, that he’s ok, when our fucking - when mum can just pop out of nowhere and - he was so scared, Ro.”

“I know,” Ronan says, “he just - he realised before me - as soon as he heard her voice, Adam, he just
dropped right down like he was in a fucking action movie, just her voice -”

“I know,” Adam says as well. He’s picking viciously at the skin around his nails, and Ronan reaches out to grab onto his hands. “I thought I’d be ok seeing her again,” Adam says, quieter, hands limp in Ronan’s, “I wasn’t sure if I’d be ok seeing dad, but I thought - I thought I’d be able to hold myself together around her. But I couldn’t. She just - I was so angry. So - so fucking angry, and scared, and - fuck.”

“You held yourself together amazingly,” Ronan says, “no, don’t, don’t look at me like that, God, Adam. You were great. You didn’t - you didn’t raise your voice. You didn’t even stutter. I know you felt so shit, I know you felt like you were falling apart, I know you felt like… like you were just fucking so fucked up when you got in the backseat with Ethan. But you’re not. You’re so fucking strong.”

“Stop,” Adam mumbles, exhales loudly, then twists so he can press himself chest to chest with Ronan, quite an acrobatic feat perched on the edge of the bath, “I don’t need - I don’t want - you don’t need to talk me up, babe. I just - it just sucks. And it makes me feel… awful. But I’m ok. I just need - just need you to fucking hold me and - I’ll be ok.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, “let’s go to Ethan’s room?”

“Yeah,” Adam agrees, doesn’t move just presses himself harder against Ronan, “I’m sorry,” he says.

“Don’t-” Ronan begins.

“I want us to be focusing on you,” Adam says “you and other you, but it’s just-”

“We can take a break,” Ronan says, “we’re not the only ones working on this. You need a nap.”

“I always need a nap.”

They go the Ethan’s room. They can hear Blue and Gansey in the hallway outside the front door, it sounds like the mattress is stuck, despite what sounds like absolutely stellar directions from Noah.
“Should we go help?” Adam whispers. He’s clinging onto Ronan’s side.

“Fuck no,” Ronan snorts, ushers Adam into the bedroom, shuts the door gently behind them. It’s still light outside, just, but Adam had pulled the curtains in here before obviously, turned on the night light too, so the room is dim and pink. It makes Adam look more tired than before. “Bed,” he whispers.

They sleep for about an hour. Wake up when Ethan does. They had got into bed squished together on the edge of the bed so as not to wake Ethan up by jostling him. He wakes the two of them up by clambering over Ronan’s back and sliding down in between them to get ultimate cuddling.

“Hey,” Adam mumbles, voice hoarse, blinks at Ethan, then shuts his eyes again when Ethan presses his cheeks to Adam’s. “Nice nap?”

“Had a bad dream,” Ethan says.

“Yeah?” Adam asks, eyes open again.

“Dreamed we saw - saw mum,” Ethan mumbles, “an’ she was scary.”

So it wasn’t another instance of the dream lamp possibly malfunctioning.

“Oh,” Adam says, “baby, that wasn’t a dream.”

Ethan sniffs against Adam’s chest.

“We saw her at the shop, didn’t we?” Adam says softly, “And she was scary, but we didn’t let her be mean to us, did we? We came home and had cuddles instead.”

Ethan sniffs again.
“We got a really nice mattress,” Adam says, “and you can jump on this one, and mum isn’t gonna tell you off because she’s not in charge and she’s not allowed to. ‘Cos you’re here with us, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Ethan says. “‘M hungry.”

“Let’s get dinner?” Ronan suggests from Adam’s other side, “And see what Gans and Blue found in the dirt?”
Gansey and Blue mostly found a lot of random rubbish and weeds in the dirt. They apparently also
made friends with the owner of, said dirt, and through this friendship, gained access to the cave on
his property that their map work had pointed out to them. Apparently he hadn’t been keen on letting
them look at it, but Blue had convinced him, seeing as the reason he hadn’t wanted to let them in was
because of the curse, and the curse (supposedly) only affected Dittley’s. So. Ronan’s not entirely
sure he follows quite yet. He knows they’re going to go to this cursed cave. He knows Gansey
thinks it’s important. He knows Blue thinks it’s important. He knows he can’t rank in order of
importance all the things pressing in on them right now, but, he does kind of feel like maybe? Maybe
getting other Ronan out of Kavinsky’s clutches was a little more important than finding Gansey’s
dead king, who, if he had been dead and not dea all this time, could probably stay like that for a
couple more weeks while they sorted out the rest of their fucking messes.

“I think it’s really important,” Adam says, cutting Ronan’s thoughts in half. They’re all (Gansey,
Blue, Noah, Adam, Ronan, Ethan) sprawled out in the lounge eating pita bread stuffed with cheese
and ham while they hold their dirt magic meeting. “I think it’s really important that we continue with
this search as much as we possibly can,” Adam says clearly, “so we keep our two timelines as much
in line as possible. As far as we can tell, we’re all most likely on kind of the same track in the other
time, though, maybe ahead? I don’t know how time works in multiple dimensions…”

“No one expects you to,” Ronan drawls, snorts, picks cheese out from the front of his top from
where Ethan is dropping half his dinner as he tries to eat while balanced on Ronan’s shoulder. “Just
because you’re our inhouse genius doesn’t mean you have to have answers to this sci-fi bull.”

“I think you are right though,” Gansey tells Adam, while Adam rolls his eyes at Ronan, “about
trying to keep our timelines as much in track. If all this… extra drama happened because Cabeswater
was confused about changes in the timeline, it’s best to try and keep everything else smooth.”

“Having said that, of course,” Blue chips in, “we can only guess at what happens in the other time.
So, we might be wildly off course if we try and correct our course.”

“We’ll just have to go with what feels right,” Gansey tells her earnestly, “I follow my gut as far as it
will take me. That’s how I found Ronan, and Noah, and, you.”

“An’ me!” Ethan says loudly, he hadn’t appeared to be paying any attention up to this point, but he
knows when he’s being excluded from something.

“Yes,” Gansey says, “and you and Adam. Although I feel like I have to credit that more to Ronan
“I think we’re on track enough,” Noah says, as if he’d been waiting for a proper introduction into the
conversation, “it does feel right, Gans, and it - well, I think I have an advantage over you all in
knowing things like this.”

“Because you’re dead?” Ronan asks, doesn’t bother with tact, “Or because you’re vaguely multi-
dimensional as well. Are you holding out on us, Noah?”

“No,” Noah shrugs, “I’m not sure, I don’t think I’m the same me exactly as I am in the other time as
well, but I’m not always exactly sure I’m the same me as I was here before either. But, I think if we
were any more out of alignment I would know. I can feel when it’s… wrong.”

“Right,” Ronan says, “thank you for that… vague…”

“No,” Adam says, “I get it. You can feel when it’s wrong. Like there’s a … uh, a power inside you
that’s lacking. Or like something’s turned off, or on too hard, or-”

“Yeah,” Noah nods.

“Like my dreaming,” Ronan mumbles, “it’s turned off.”

“Speaking of dreaming,” Blue says here, gets up off of the floor from where she’s perched on a pile
of cushions, and half jogs over to her backpack by the dorms of cardboard Aglionby, “we dropped in
home before coming back here, and mum gave me these to give to you guys,” she says, tugging out
some bottles of quite frankly, disgusting, looking liquid. “She says she thought it might help if Adam
felt more in control in his dreams, so this is - uh - lucid dreaming? And she also said that Ronan
might be able to get into his dreams easier if he were more open? I don’t know what this is, but it
smells gross.”

She crosses the room to Adam and hands both bottles over. Ronan leans over to look at them.
They’re in repurposed soda bottles, the labels torn off and replaced with paper tap with words
scrawled over them. Nothing very informative. One says - Coca Cola - and the other says -snake.

“Calla labeled these?” Adam asks dryly, and Blue snorts, nods, returns to her perch by Gansey.
“I don’t really want to drink this,” Ronan sighs once they’ve finally got to go to bed again.

Ethan fell asleep with half his pita bread still clutched in hand, fillings dribbling out all over Ronan’s lap, and the group had taken that as their cue to leave. Gansey had drove Blue home. Adam had left Ronan and Noah to clean cheese and mayo and ham off of Ronan and Ethan, while he’d gone to quickly strip and remake Ethan’s bed with the mattress protector, and then, while Ronan put a cleaner (and still mostly asleep) Ethan to bed, Adam had gone to make their own bed with the new bedding. Noah trailing after.

By the time Ronan had turned up in the room, Adam was alone again. Noah disappeared while Adam had had his back turned.

“You don’t have to drink it,” Adam says, sounds tired, “we don’t need to try everything all at once.”

“Are you going to drink yours?” Ronan asks, perches on the edge of the bed in his boxers while Adam finished getting undressed.

“Yeah,” Adam says, “I want to - I kind of want to go back into other Ronan’s dream again, try and actually pay attention to what else is happening. And if - if Noah disappeared just earlier because another monster just got dreamed, I think now is a good time to go in because his monsters won’t be so close yet.”

“True,” Ronan says, “well. I’m going to drink mine too, then.”

“We should tell Gansey,” Adam says, folds his jeans up and puts them away in one of Ronan’s drawers, “so he can keep and ear out.”

“Hopefully we won’t shred the bed up,” Ronan says, “although if we do, we can always just go shopping again. To a different shop.”
“Oh fuck!” Adam says suddenly, pausing halfway to the door, “fuck, we forgot Ethan’s shoes at the shop!”

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The drink might have tasted like it had been drunk and then thrown up by a sick raccoon, but obviously Maura knew her shit. He hadn’t opened his eyes in such a fully formed dream Cabeswater for a while. Neither had he seen it in such a sickly state. The trees were thick and dense, but also diseased looking, like if he pressed against them, they wouldn’t be solid but would just brittle or soft. However, even with such ruin going on inside it, Ronan can feel how high its defenses are up, how tightly wound up it is at his being there. It has never been so suspicious of him.

“Hey,” he says to the trees, “it’s me. It’s just me.”

The trees do not reply. Someone else does.

“Which Ronan are you?” Adam asks.

This is not the first time Ronan has seen Adam in his dreams. Usually dream Adam is a lot foggier than Adam in front of him, usually very obviously a dream. This Adam is Adam. It’s funny, he thinks, because until he’d turned to see Adam, he had thought that the forest around him was solid and real, but in contrast to Adam, he could easily see which was the dream.

“Your one,” he says, “the one in bed with you.”

“Good,” Adam says, crossing the small distance between them, “I thought it had to be.”

“What are you doing here?” Ronan asks, lets Adam take his hand.

“This is where I come when I see other Ronan,” Adam shrugs, “we’re in the wrong place right now, though.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, “so, am I in your dream right now? Or are you in mine? Or are we both in his dream?”
“No,” Adam says slowly, “I think we’re all just in Cabeswater. Not in anyone’s dream.”

“It’s wary of me,” Ronan says then, “Cabeswater is. Like it’s suspicious of me being here.”

“Because there’s two of you,” Adam suggests, “we should find other Ronan.”

“I think it’d scare me to see me in my dream,” Ronan says, follows Adam leading him through the trees anyway, “probably not as scary as seeing myself upon waking up from my dreams though,” he adds, thinking back to meeting his dreamself at Kavinsky’s.

He doesn’t want to see his dreamself. It scares him.

“I think it’ll be ok,” Adam tells him, squeezes his hand, “do you know this part of Cabeswater?”

Ronan snorts, “yes,” he says, a little bitter, “of course. This is where a large portion of my nightmares take place.”

“Right,” Adam says, “that makes sense.”

“It isn’t usually so -” Ronan says, waves his hand uselessly at the rot around them.

“Yeah,” Adam nods.

He can see the hollowed out tree through the clearing in front of him. He can see a shape inside it. He can remember being inside it. Things are always bad inside that tree.

“Adam?” Ronan says, but it’s not him speaking, it’s other Ronan, his voice caught and far away through the thick air between them. “Parrish?”

Adam turns to look at Ronan, then nods over to where other Ronan is calling from, “Do you want yourself to know that we’re-?” he whispers, glances down at their joined hands.
“You’re the one who told him you love him,” Ronan whispers back. “I don’t want to let go of you.”

“Ok,” Adam says easily, walks into the clearing.

Other Ronan looks worse than Ronan remembered him. Maybe it’s because he’s not covered in blood in here, so Ronan can see how pale his skin is, how stretched out and dark his eyes are. He looks between Adam and Ronan, and exhales shakily.

“Oh,” he says, “it’s not that dream then.” Ronan realises that his voice hadn’t sounded so roughly hoarse because of some dream distance, but because that’s just how it sounds.

“What dream?” Adam asks.

Other Ronan snorts, shifts uncomfortably in his wooden confines, “the one where you’re here to comfort me,” he says stiffly.

“Ah,” Adam says, crouches down at the lip of the tree. He doesn’t let go of Ronan’s hands, so Ronan is tugged a little awkwardly after him. “It’s not a dream,” Adam tells other Ronan, “I am here, and so are you.”

Both Ronans snort. Adam looks up at him, eyebrows raised.

“I don’t know if there’s any point-” Ronan says, “-what’s the point in telling him that it’s real when it’s all going to feel like a dream again the next time he waves up?”

“What would you tell me, then?” Other Ronan snaps at him with a desperate rage that Ronan finds all too familiar, “Or are you planning on just being a fucking asshole?”

Adam sighs. Ronan bites his lip. He’s older than this Ronan. Not just mentally, but physically as well. He recognises it easier here. He’s a year older maybe. Maybe a little less. This Ronan is still deeper in grief than Ronan is now, deeper in grief and caught in a net by Kavinsky.
“No,” Ronan says, “get the fuck out of that tree.”

“The fuck?” Other Ronan snaps.

“Ro-” Adam begins, voice cautious. Both Ronans’ eyes snap to him.

“He needs to get out of the tree,” Ronan says firmly, “it causes fucking nightmares.”

“Oh sure,” Other Ronan says, “it’s the fucking tree that causes the fucking nightmares.”

“Get out of the tree,” Ronan repeats, reaching in to take other Ronan by the upper arm, “I’ve been doing this longer than you.”

“What the fuck is going on,” Other Ronan says, angry, but only surface anger as he lets Ronan haul him out of the tree into the soggy leaves surrounding it, “if this isn’t a dream than what the hell is it?”

Adam is reaching in now to steady Other Ronan, his hands going seemingly instinctively to cup Other Ronan’s face. “It’s still a dream,” Adam tells him carefully, “and it’s still real.”

Ronan watches as Other Ronan leans in against Adam’s hands, and can’t decide if he wants to tug Other Ronan away, or if he wants to give not himself the comfort he so obviously needs. Settles for tightening his grip on Other Ronan’s arm instead.

“I know you don’t believe in alternate timelines and that kind of crap,” Ronan tells Other Ronan firmly, “but that’s what the fuck is going on. Fucking - fucking Kavinsky - from our timeline, the one I’m from - he stole you. He’s a dreamer, if you didn’t know that? He stole you from your timeline and brought you into ours. I don’t think he realises. He thinks he just dreamed you, but you’re real, aren’t you?”

“What,” Other Ronan breathes, “the fuck? What the fuck are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you’ve been kidnapped from your time and refurbished as a sick dream of K’s,” Ronan snaps, “and that this Adam is my Adam.”
“Ro,” Adam says again, he sounds almost amused.

“So-” Other Ronan says, “what the fuck now? I don’t belong here, so you guys are just gonna - just gonna - leave me here?”

“No,” Adam says firmly, “we’re not. I wasn’t lying when I said I was going to get you out. It’s just - well. It’s difficult to figure out how to when you’re here and also at Kavinsky’s, and also… well, yes, in the wrong place.”

“I’m not you,” Ronan says to Other Ronan, “I don’t want this kind of shit anymore. So no, we’re not fucking leaving you here.”

“Oh,” Adam says, “I have an idea. I’m not sure if it’ll work? But it’s an idea.”

“Yeah?” Both Ronans ask.

Adam looks to Other Ronan. “Were you dreaming when you were taken?” he asks, “What’s the last thing you remember before you were in this… nightmare?”

“Uh,” Other Ronan says, “yes, I think. I went to sleep. There was - no. It was just a normal day. And then I went to sleep. And this.”

“Ok,” Adam says, turns to Ronan, “Ro,” he says, “do you think - think you could take him from this dream?”

“Uh,” Ronan says, “well he’s - well. He’s a real thing. With a physical body elsewhere. I think I could? Maybe? Take him out, but what if I’m just… replicating him?”

“Like,” Adam says slowly, “like you could take him out of this dream, but he’d still be at Kavinsky’s?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, “I don’t know, Adam.”
“What do you think?” Adam asks, turns to Other Ronan.

“I want to get out of here,” Other Ronan says flatly.

“How will we know if it works?” Adam asks.

“Um,” Ronan says, closes his eyes, “we’d want to go to Kavinsky’s. See if he’s still there after we take him out. Or, I guess, wait until Kavinsky gets all in my face about it.”

“If you take him out,” Adam says again, slow, “and I stay asleep for a little longer, I can see what happens when he’s gone.”

“What do you mean?” Other Ronan asks, “When I’m gone?”

“If another one of you appears in here,” Ronan says, catching on, “or if I like, take a copy of you out with me.”

“Right,” Adam nods, “so?”

“Ok,” Ronan says, “I’m down. If you think this is a good idea.”

“I think I think it is,” Adam says.

Other Ronan doesn’t say anything.

“Ronan?” Adam asks Other Ronan. Other Ronan just nods.
Ronan wakes up to find himself in an overly full bed. In one hand, he has himself, sprawled out against his shoulder, he has Adam. Other Ronan is already blinking blearily at him, though Ronan himself is still stiff with bringing something out of his dream. Adam is still asleep, breathing deeply.

By the time he can move again, Other Ronan’s eyes have begun to droop, to slip shut again, and he shifts quickly upright to catch Other Ronan before he can slump over.

“Hey,” Ronan says harshly, “hey, wake up. Don’t go back to sleep - don’t go - don’t-”

Other Ronan squints at him, his breathing laboured, looks like he’s trying his best to do as he’s told. Shuts his eyes. He’s rigid in Ronan’s arms for a moment while Ronan tries to wake him back up, and then he relaxes, obviously deep in sleep again.

“Fuck,” Ronan hisses, shifts to try and wrangle himself out from under Other Ronan, “fuck, fuck fuck,” he mumbles while he drags himself out of bed and folds Other Ronan down against the blankets. Kind of hates how Other Ronan curves in against Adam’s sleeping body. He wants Adam to wake up now. Other Ronan has probably dropped straight back into where Adam is so Adam has no reason to stay there now he knows how his theory panned out. Adam’s still asleep. He checks the time. It’s a little past 6 in the morning, which is gross, but not awful. He really needs to pee. He gets up. Goes to pee. Comes back. Adam is still asleep.

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“Gansey,” he says into the dimly lit lounge, “Gans, wake up.”

“How?” Gansey mumbles into his pillows.

“How’an?” Ethan mumbles, popping his head up from by Gansey’s shoulder.

“Ah,” Ronan says, “g’morning, baby,” he says to Ethan, crosses over to perch on the side of Gansey’s bed to let Ethan lean out of the blankets to pillow his head on Ronan’s lap.

“What’s up, Ronan?” Gansey asks, rubbing his eyes.
“Adam’s not awake yet,” Ronan says, and Gansey yawns.

“Really?” he asks, “And you’re bored?”

“No,” Ronan says, “well, no. No. We were dreaming. Together. With… with Other Ronan.”

“Oh,” Gansey says, suddenly much more awake. He sits up to grab his glasses, dislodges Ethan a bit. Ethan grumbles, but just curls up more against Ronan’s lap. “Oh, what’s happened?”

“We, uh,” Ronan says, because dream ideas never sound quite as good outside of dreams, “we brought Other Ronan out. Or, I did. I brought Other Ronan out of the dream.”

“What?” Gansey says, “What? Where is he?”

“He went back to sleep,” Ronan mumbles, “like he did at K’s… we uh - Adam was staying in the dream to see if that would happen, but - but he’s not awake yet.”

“Oh,” Gansey says, clears his throat, “he’s probably fine, Ronan,” he tries, “was it unsafe when you left him?”

“Not really,” Ronan acknowledges, “it’s just - it’s been - maybe five minutes.”

“Give him another five,” Gansey says, “and then we’ll start panicking.”

“Ok,” Ronan mumbles. “I should - I should go back in there, so if he wakes up he’s - yeah.”

“Ok,” Gansey says, “I’ll get up, make some breakfast. We probably don’t want - don’t want this one in that room right now, yeah?” Gansey asks, nods down at Ethan.

“No,” Ronan agrees, “not when we don’t know what’s going on. Especially as there are… uh … two of me right now.”
He’s been sitting on the end of his bed for just over six minutes, watching Adam and Other Ronan sleep apparently peacefully together, before Gansey steps inside the room, pushing the door further open than the crack Ronan had left.

“Nothing?” Gansey whispers.

“Nothing,” Ronan replies dully, glances over at Gansey to make sure Ethan wasn’t following. “Is bud asleep again?”

“Yeah,” Gansey says, closes the door behind himself and crosses the floor to join Ronan and the end of the bed, leans his hip against Ronan’s side.

Ronan drops his head against Gansey, sighs heavily. “They don’t look -” he starts, sighs again, “-I don’t think we need to panic. They don’t look like they’re in trouble. They’re probably just talking.”

“Hm,” Gansey says, is silent for a moment, and then looks down at Ronan contemplatively. He drops his arm along Ronan’s shoulders, squeezes him gently. “Are you seriously jealous of yourself, right now?”

“No,” Ronan snaps, “no,” he says again, a little softer, “I just - I’m not jealous, I just know that if he’s me, if he’s anything like me then he definitely has the hots for Adam.”

“Sounds like he met his version of Adam a bit differently to you, though” Gansey points out.

“Yeah,” Ronan says, “they get to go to school together and that world’s Parrish and Gansey spend all their time nerding it up, which means that that Ronan is absolutely, fucking definitely pining over him.”

“Well,” Gansey begins.
“That’s fucking not even an issue, here,” Ronan interrupts, voice back to a slight snap even while he’s leaning in closer to Gansey, “who cares about romance drama when we have fucking body doubles to deal with?”

“You’re right,” Gansey agrees, “we do need to focus on the actual problem.”

“We’re gonna have to-” Ronan starts slowly, “-gonna have to go see if we actually managed to physically take Other Ronan out of K’s house, not just take a dream copy of him. I don’t even want to think about how… pissed off Cabeswater will be if we end up with three fucking Ronan’s in this timeline."

“I think anyone, forest or not, would be rather… taken aback by three Ronan’s,” Gansey says teasingly, then sobers quickly, “yes,” he says, “but we will have to plan this Kavinsky check very carefully. You’re not just going to wander in there.”

“Obviously not,” Ronan snaps.

“Ronan,” Adam grumbles, “you’re sittin’ on m’fuckin’ foot.”

“Fuck,” Ronan replies loudly, not about the foot, tugs himself away from Gansey’s arm as he crawls up the bed towards Adam, “God, you’re awake!”

“Mm,” Adam says, huffs as Ronan bundles himself into Adam’s arms, lying himself right on top of Adam rather than trying to get in between him and Other Ronan. “Were you worrying?”

“Not much,” Gansey replies behind Ronan’s back, “just a little wary.”

“Sorry,” Adam says, rubs his hand from the top of Ronan’s head down to the base of his spine, “I was just talking to Other Ronan. He was … upset.”

Gansey makes a small inquisitive noise behind them.

“He’s just scared,” Adam explains, his voice is low, raw with exhaustion, “he doesn’t know where he’s going to wake up next. What he’s going to wake up with. I couldn’t tell him either, and it’s not
like I could stay.”

“Did he want you to?” Gansey asks, Ronan grunts.

Adam shrugs, dips his head down to speak more to Ronan. “I told him to stay out of the tree,” he says, “I don’t understand it as much as you do, but if you think it’s a bad idea for him to be in it it’s best we try and keep him out.”

“Good,” Ronan says, then, “did he say anything else useful while you were in there?”

“Not really,” Adam yawns, glances from Ronan to Other Ronan, than looks over Ronan at Gansey who’s sat down at the end of the bed now instead of standing by it. “Or, maybe? I don’t know. He said he’d been having… weird dreams for a while now.”

“Weird dreams like wet dreams?” Ronan mumbles into Adam’s armpit, and Adam snorts and squeezes Ronan’s shoulders, possibly in reprimandation.

“No,” Adam says, “he was very careful to clarify that, because they were - uh - they were about me. Or - well. He wasn’t sure if they were about me or if they were about his Adam.”

“What kind of weird dreams?” Gansey asks.

“Well,” Adam says, “he got a bit blushy about them, so I think he didn’t tell me everything-”

“Definitely wet dreams,” Ronan says, gets another squeeze.

“But he said it was about being in the forest with his Adam. He said he was shifting rocks - which makes me think that when we were doing fixes on the Ley Line,” Adam says, nudges Ronan again, “it slipped into that timeline as well, but, well, the timing doesn’t match up at all but seeing as he’s from a different timeline and all -”

“He’s about a year younger than me,” Ronan mumbles, finally pushes himself up on Adam’s chest a bit so his face is exposed, looks down at Other Ronan’s sleeping face, tucked into the pillow by Adam’s side, “so the timing is definitely completely out no matter how we look at it.”
“Oh,” Adam says, looks at Other Ronan again, “I thought he just looked so different because of the dream-”

“Huh-” Gansey says, is leaning forward over the bed so he too can peer at Other Ronan’s face carefully. “God, he does look so much like you back then, Ro,” he says, “how long has it been since-?”

“Not long enough,” Ronan replies, clears his throat, pushes himself further upright, and then tugs at the blankets on his (currently Other Ronan’s) side of the bed to expose Ronan’s forearms, which are pink and scabby. “Definitely not long enough.”

“Oh,” Gansey says, recoils slightly at the sight, but then appears to be gritting his teeth and pushing through his discomfort because he leans in closer again, “he’s in a - I wonder how much of his emotional vulnerability and… disregard for himself … I wonder if that had an effect on why he was able to be taken.”

“I wasn’t taken,” Ronan grumbles.

“No,” Gansey shrugs, “different timeline. But he’s - “

Adam’s tugging the blanket back up over Other Ronan, slightly dislodging Ronan as he does so. “We need a plan,” he says, “preferably before we find out if Other Ronan is going to wake up with a monster in this bed.”

Ronan’s door has a lock, which is the main reason it’s Ronan’s room, and it comes very much in useful for ease of mind. They’re going to keep the door locked, not so Other Ronan can’t come out - if he ever wakes up - but so Ethan can’t go in, so monsters can’t come out. The plan for the morning is that they keep an eye on Other Ronan and his dreaming while performing their normal morning activities - breakfast, showering, Glendower plotting, chasing a raven and a toddler around the house, calling a household of psychics to talk to one or three of them or a non-psychic. Gansey will take Adam to school and Ethan to Dana’s, do the after school pick up as well. Ronan will stay home to keep an eye on Other Ronan. He will not get any funny ideas about checking out K’s house by himself. Everyone will brainstorm ideas on how to approach the K situation while they’re at school.
After school everyone - including Blue - will come back to Monmouth to put their brainstorm to together. From then on the plan is yet to be made.

They’re up to the showering part of the plan. Ethan is somewhere in the middle of cardboard Henrietta with Gansey and Chainsaw eating pop-tarts and pretending to be giants being fed by the generous cardboard residents who made them giant pop-tarts in their huge (but tiny to them) ovens. Adam is in the shower. Ronan is supposed to also be eating poptarts in tiny Henrietta and exclaiming (in falsetto for some reason) over how amazing it was to be eating there, but he’s going to be missing out on his daily dose of driving with Adam, feels like he needs to spend as much time as possible with him, lets himself into the bathroom.

“Ronan?” Adam asks from behind the smiling ghost shower curtain.

“Yeah,” Ronan replies, makes his way across the floor - stepping over Gansey’s soggy towel - to the shower, and pulls the curtain aside just a little as he leans against the damp wall by the shower.

“Hey,” Adam says, doesn’t appear at all bothered at the shower curtain being pulled, leans a little out of the spray to press a wet and soapy kiss to Ronan’s face, “get in with me.”

“I showered last night,” Ronan points out, doesn’t feel like he needs to shower, certainly not if he’s just going to spend his whole day sitting around the factory keeping an eye on Other him.

“I’m not suggesting you get in to get clean,” Adam says, kisses him again, has lifted his hands - water splashing off of them - to cup Ronan’s face.

“Oh,” Ronan says, a little surprised, but very willing, especially now his shirt was already wet, “ok,” he says.

He steps backwards so he can tug his shirt off, steps out of his pants. Adam pulls the curtain back a little more, has stepped back in the tub to give Ronan room to get in under the shower spray. He kicks his clothes backwards, not wanting them to get wetter than they already were, and steps into the tub, Adam already reaching for him to tug him closer.
“Mm,” Ronan says against Adam’s lips, hasn’t even got his second foot in the tub before Adam’s arms are around him, his mouth on his, “babe,” he manages, hopping to keep his balance. Adam pulls back to help steady him, waits until Ronan’s standing properly, then reaches around him to pull the curtain back closed and loops his arms around Ronan’s neck, pressing himself closer.

“Can we?” Adam asks, “Do we have time?”

“Time to make out?” Ronan asks, lets Adam shuffle them round in a tight circle so he can press Ronan against the wet shower wall, “Yeah, I think so.”

“Ok,” Adam mumbles, kisses Ronan hard, somewhat desperately.

Ronan kisses him back carefully, definitely not against the intensity of the kissing, the press of Adam all wet and hard against him, but -

“Babe,” Ronan gasps, tips his head to the side to break out of the kiss, “what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Adam says, presses another kiss to the side of Ronan’s neck, “nothing - I just -” he pauses to kiss Ronan again, sucking harder at his skin until Ronan’s worried he’s going to moan in the shower and cue Gansey in to what was going on in here. “-Just -” Adam continues, “-I’m just-” Adam says, stutters, “-just-”

“Adam,” Ronan says, reaches up to cup Adam’s cheek so he can tip Adam’s head back and make eye contact, “did something… happen?” he asks, completely unsure as to what he’s even asking, can’t even begin to imagine what he thinks might have happened to have tipped Adam into starvingly horny so early in the morning.

“No,” Adam says, sighs, “no,” he says again presses in against Ronan again, but with less intensity now, he’s just resting, not angling for something. “I’m just-” he begins again, getting stuck at the same place as before, “-it’s so fucking weird seeing you like that,” he blurts out, “so - you but not you yet.”

“Other Ronan?” Ronan asks.
“Yeah,” Adam mumbles, closes his eyes, leans harder against Ronan, “you’re - he’s so - he scares me.”

“Why?” Ronan asks, “I mean, he scares me too, but he scares me because I never wanted to see myself like that again-”

“Yes,” Adam says, “that.”

“What?”

“That,” Adam says again, “I feel so… God, Ro, I’m sorry, this is just so dumb, and -”

“What?”

“I keep thinking about - about how he’s been through fucking hell - with his parents and his … uh-”

“Suicide attempt.”

“Yeah,” Adam sighs, “and he has Gansey, yeah, but I - he doesn’t - fuck, this is just-”

“He doesn’t have you,” Ronan finishes for him, “bit big headed, huh, Parrish?”

“I know,” Adam says, sounds embarrassed.

“I agree though,” Ronan shrugs, holds Adam against him in case Adam has any ideas about pulling away, “I could definitely have used a bit more love back then. I’m not sure I would have been able to handle it, but I probably needed it.”

“Mm,” Adam mumbles, “so I just - I can’t really be there for him. And I wasn’t there for you. I just want to - I love you,” he says, bites it out against Ronan’s chest, “and I want you to feel how much I love you-”
“I know how much you love me,” Ronan counters, can feel it all in his chest, spilling hot and heavy in his lungs, “I feel it every fucking day, just holding your hand, Adam.”

“God,” Adam mumbles, “soppy.”

“I love you too,” Ronan says, plans to ride this soppy wave all the way out, “I also love making out with you, and, I absolutely fucking love the idea of kissing you like this in the shower, fuck, pretty sure I’ve had a literal wet dream about this, but you don’t need to do it because you think I don’t know how much you love me.”

“I know you know how much I love you,” Adam says, a little grumbly, “I told you it was stupid. I think I was just … feeling … like everything else is so fucking hard right now and I can’t do anything about it, but this, this I can do. This isn’t hard.”

“Um,” Ronan says, knows he’s going to earn a scowl from Adam, glances down at the two of them, shifts his hips just a bit, “this is definitely kinda hard.”

“Fuck off,” Adam snorts.

“I’m happy to be how you unwind,” Ronan says then, truthful, “I just want us both on the same page about what’s happening.”

“Ok,” Adam says, “can we, then?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, “uh,” he adds, “just kissing, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Adam acknowledges, “there isn’t a lock on the fucking bathroom door, Gansey or Ethan could walk through at any moment.”

“God,” Ronan shudders.
The house feels eerily still once everyone has left for school. Ronan hasn’t been here alone for a while now, it’s strange. He’s so used to having Adam here. Ethan here. Gansey here. Chainsaw is here, somewhere, but she’s having a quiet day somewhere secretive, probably destroying something downstairs. Of course. He’s not actually alone. Other Ronan is in his fucking bed right now, but he’s silent and as still as the grave, thank fuck.

He spends the first hour actually doing his homework. Then he spends the next twenty minutes gathering up the dishes and washing them all. Then he unlocks his bedroom door, locks it again behind him, and perches on the edge of his bed to watch Other Ronan sleep.

He looks far too peaceful to be in a nightmare, but Ronan can’t rule it out entirely. There’s no sign of destructive dreaming, but Ronan is very used to dreams which trick you so carefully into thinking you’re in a good dream, and then very suddenly surprising you with actually not being in a good dream.

He watches Other Ronan for five minutes. It’s surprisingly restful watching him sleep, also stressful though, not knowing what’s going to happen next. He texts Adam and Gansey with updates. He goes to his desk to look for his earphones so he can listen to music without risking interrupting Other Ronan’s dream with heavy rock. Maura’s dream tea bottles are on his desk still. They’d barely drunk a quarter of their respective bottles last night. Ronan considers.

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He wakes up, or whatever you call it in a dream, to what at first glance looks like the exact same forest as the previous night. Cabeswater is still rotting, still putrid, but… less. It’s not as panicked at his arrival either. It’s only really noticeable because last night the rot in the air had been so thick it was all you could really take in.

He finds Other Ronan sprawled out in the dark moss in the clearing he had been in the previous night. He still looks spooked, his closed eyes dark, his cheeks pale, but he doesn’t look as bone cleavingly terrified as he had at Kavinsky’s. He doesn’t look up as Ronan crosses the clearing to him, and if he hadn’t been able to see the steady rise and fall of his stomach, Ronan would have been almost scared that he was dead.

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“You doing ok?” Ronan grunts.
Other Ronan opens his eyes and squints up at the dim canopy of trees above them, “sure,” he snorts.

Ronan snorts back, drops himself down in the moss beside him, ignores the smell of dying greenery. “Adam says you were dreaming about him.”

Now Other Ronan opens his eyes properly, eyes Ronan sideways.

“How have you been having any other weird dreams?” Ronan asks. “Maybe like, dark ones? About this place? About-”

“Of course I’ve been having weird dreams,” Other Ronan scoffs, “I’m a fucking - that’s what I fucking do.”

“Ok, smart ass,” Ronan says, “God. I’m trying to help.”

“Why?” Other Ronan asks, closes his eyes again, like Ronan does when he’s pretending disinterest.

“Because I grew out of my self hatred,” Ronan replies, “and I have no interest in hanging around with a version of myself who’s still a whiny piss shit.”

Other Ronan opens his eyes again to glare, the effect somewhat dulled by the wet sheen in his eyes, “You’re such an asshole,” he bites out.

“Pot,” Ronan says, “kettle.”

“If you have no interest,” Other Ronan says, “why the fuck are you here?”

Ronan sighs, tugs a handful of dead moss out of the ground beside him. “Because,” he says, might not hate himself anymore, but still isn’t great at being nice to himself, “you don’t deserve any of this shit. You don’t. Because I know you’re scared. Because I know how fucking fucked up you’re feeling about dad right now, and about mum, and how you think Declan fucking hates you, and how you hate that Gansey thinks you tried to kill yourself because you don’t want to admit to yourself that you did.”
Other Ronan glares harder.

“I get it,” Ronan says bitterly, “the urge to fucking be an asshole to me because I’m you, but there’s no point in having a bigger dick contest. We have the same fucking trauma, the same fucking powers. The same fucking dick. And I want you to be happy. Because I want to be happy.”

“So,” Other Ronan says, still glaring, but not with aggression anymore, “in about a fucking year I turn into a fucking zen master or some shit? Do we do fucking yoga? Are we vegan?”


“How long has it been?” Other Ronan asks.

“What?”

“Since I fell back asleep?” Other Ronan clarifies.

“Oh,” Ronan says, thinks, “a few hours,” he says, “not long, but, long enough that I was expecting some sign of monsters.”

“I think getting out of that fucking tree helped,” Other Ronan mumbles.

“Why the fuck were you even in it anyway?” Ronan says.

“Because,” Other Ronan snaps, sniffs, “I - I don’t know. It was there. I feel like - I’m not all me. I’m - I mean I am me. I’m definitely me, I’m not a… I’m not K’s fucking dream, but I think he did something to me. I think I’m… different. I have memories that aren’t mine, that -”

“They’re mine,” Ronan sighs, “because K thought he was dreaming me. He swiped you instead, and just fucking - fucking stuffed his own asshole ideas on top.”
“What the fuck am I supposed to do about that, then?” Other Ronan asks, “Am I always going to be fucking fucked up?”
Smarties don't eat floor smarties

Ronan wakes up to Adam perched on the bed by his hip, which is a nice surprise. The blood curdling glare on his face, however, is not a nice surprise.

“Um,” Ronan mumbles, wishes he hadn’t opened his mouth because now he can’t pretend to still be asleep, “you’re home?”

“Yes,” Adam snaps, “I’m home and you’re a fucking shit head.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, swallows to try and get some moisture back in his mouth, “well-”

“No,” Adam interrupts, loud, “don’t try and - God. You can’t just… can’t just - you need to tell me, or Gansey, or both of us before you just fucking do your own thing. You don’t need our fucking permission or anything,” he continues, voice cracking slightly, “but it’d be nice if we had some warning before you stopped replying to your phone, before we had to come back to your locked room and no answer from you inside except for your fucking phone ringing - before - God,” he cuts himself off to look away from the Ronans in the bed, to swipe his hand angrily over his eyes. “Fuck, Ronan,” he mumbles.

Ronan hadn’t brought anything back with him, so he wasn’t caught in his dream paralysis, but he still felt frozen. Doesn’t know how to respond without sounding condescending, because as soon as Adam says it all Ronan realises that, yes, he should have texted them, or called, or even waited for them to come home. He had been too caught up in the idea to think about that, but he can see very clearly that he is fully in the wrong here, even if he thinks the pay out of his excursion had been worth the risk, it wasn’t worth doing it in such a way that caused such obvious distress.

Adam is standing up, getting off of the bed, still swiping at his face, sniffing angrily.

“I have to - I promised Ethan I would come watch him do a dance, so, like, fucking wake up more and decompress with Gansey or something because I’m just - I’m really angry right now. So, just - I’ll -” he trails off, shrugs, leaves the room.

He doesn’t slam the door, just closes it quietly behind himself, footsteps even.

Ronan stares at the closed door until it opens again, Gansey.
“Are you feeling thoroughly chagrined?” Gansey asks quietly.

Ronan clears his throat, doesn’t know how to reply.

“Adam,” Gansey begins, a little awkward, “- I think, was angry enough for the both of us, so-”

“You can be angry too,” Ronan says to the ceiling, clears his throat again, and then pushes himself upright, “I know I fucked up.”

“We were scared,” Gansey says, quiet, shrugs, “Adam was-”

“Don’t,” Ronan mumbles, climbs off of the bed, “I could see how freaked out he was.”

“Yeah,” Gansey says, sighs, steps properly into the room to cross over to Other Ronan, sits down on the bed next to him, and rearranges the blankets so they’re covering him more evenly. “Was it worth it?”

“No,” Ronan spits out.

Gansey is silent for a moment, and then he says, “I didn’t mean that in a passive aggressive ‘was it worth it in exchange for our fear’ way, I just meant; was it useful?”

Ronan feels like the biggest fool around, also the shittiest one. He falters. Gansey reaches out to hook his fingers around the belt loops of Ronan’s jeans, and tugs him back towards the bed. Ronan lets himself be tugged, sits back down next to Gansey.

“I think I know why this Ronan is always fucking asleep,” Ronan mumbles, nodding down at his sleeping double, “it’s not because of K. I think.”
“Ok,” Gansey says, sounds intrigued, “go on.”

“So, we already know he was sleeping when K took him. Which is how it happened, etc, etc, and his dream, when he was taken, wasn’t exactly a great one. Monsters and shit. But it was - after the - y’know - I didn’t bring - sometimes I can fight my own battles inside my dreams. Find the answers, or the way out of them inside it, because it’s my head, I just need to know where to look, how to look, and I think - I’m getting off track, I think.”

“Ok,” Gansey says again, “go back to where you went off track.”

“Need a time turner,” Ronan mumbles, “but, right. I think he keeps going back to sleep because the… dreaming part of him is still trying to find the… answer, I guess? The way out? So it is actually a good thing that he’s sleeping so much because he needs to to find it, whatever it is. Just - when he was with K. Well. No one really gets good answers when they’re with K.”

“So you think K didn’t distort him?” Gansey asks.

“No,” Ronan mumbles, “no, I think he probably did. A bit. Like the - the bleeding thing. And probably the amount of monsters too. I just think… I think he probably did a shitty enough job of dreaming those additions on that so long as we have Other Ronan’s actual… body, it won’t… I don’t know. We need to find out if K has him still.”

“Ok,” Gansey says, sighs, “how was it? Talking to yourself?”

“Uncomfortable,” Ronan says, pulls his feet back onto the bed so he can wrap his arms around his knees, “I’m so - he’s so ... Look. Thanks for being there back then,” he grits out, “I don’t think I would have - I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you.”

“Don’t say that,” Gansey says, then wraps his arms around Ronan, tugged up knees and all, “you’re strong, you would have been ok-”

“I would have been dead,” Ronan replies roughly, “let’s not try and sugarcoat something so fucking bitter.”

“Ok,” Gansey says, squeezes him tighter, “Blue’s here too,” he says after a few moments, “out in the parking lot with Adam and Ethan.”
“Mm,” Ronan says.

“For brainstorming,” Gansey reminds.

“Mm,” Ronan says.

“Do you want to… talk with Adam first?”

“Yes,” Ronan sighs, “but he’s… he wants space to be angry, and I want to respect that.”

“Right,” Gansey says, then, “should we brainstorm first, then?”

“Ugh,” Ronan grunts, leans sideways until he can press his head against Gansey’s shoulder, “I don’t know. I just - I need to apologise to him before I can fucking talk about all this shit-”

“Language,” Ethan chides from the doorway. He’s poked his head through the open crack, Chainsaw, at his feet, poking her head through just a little lower than Ethan’s, “c’m’on an’ play!” he demands.

“Oh f-” Ronan begins glancing from Ethan to Other Ronan, they don’t want this to be a thing they have to explain to Ethan. Gansey looks as stricken as Ronan feels.

Adam appears behind Ethan, whisks him up over his shoulder so he’s hanging head first down Adam’s back.

“We’re finished dancing,” he explains, holding Ethan firmly so he can’t wriggle back around to look into the room. Ethan giggles behind him as Chainsaw climbs up Adam’s pants legs with a combination of claw, beak, and sheer dream determination, “Blue’s just making some coffee, she needs you to help her get the beans down from the top shelf, Gans,” he continues, “and there’s some juice boxes in the fridge for Ethan.”

“Ok,” Gansey says, glances from Ronan, to Other Ronan, to Adam, back to Ronan.
He squeezes Ronan’s shoulders once more, than stands up and crosses to the door to pluck Ethan off of Adam’s back. He grabs him by the ankles to carry him swinging away like that. Chainsaw springs off of Adam’s legs and attaches herself to Ethan’s hanging shirt instead. Adam closes the door, shutting himself into the room with both Ronans again.

“Sorry,” he begins, “for just...leaving earlier.”

“It’s fine,” Ronan says, “I get it.”

“I don’t like… it scares me being angry at you,” Adam says, leans back against the door, “but I don’t want to get in the habit of just walking away from conversations because I’m scared.”

“I knew you were coming back.” Ronan says, “when you were ready. That’s ok.”

Adam shrugs, sniffs a little, rubs just under his nose, “I’m angry,” he says, “because you could have put yourself in danger with no one here to help, and I’m angry because you weren’t in danger but I had no way of knowing that for hours.”

“I know,” Ronan says, “and I’m really, really sorry. I should have told you guys, I know that. I wasn’t thinking, I just… wasn’t. I should have called, or waited. So, I’m really sorry for not doing that, and I’m really sorry I scared you, and I’m - I know you said I don’t need permission, or whatever, but going into a dream like that, when we’ve been working on this together, I should have got the green light from you first. We should be a team, and I was fucking off by myself. So. Yeah. I’m sorry.”

Adam just looks at him for a moment, and then nods, rubs at his face again, and then pushes off of the door to join Ronan on the edge of the bed.

“I’m still kinda pissed,” he says to his knees, “but it’s more… residual. I just need to know - need to know you won’t just do this again-”

“I won’t,” Ronan says immediately.
“And I don’t mean, like,” Adam mumbles, “obviously you don’t need to tell me about everything you do. I’m not trying to - to monitor to you. I just mean for things like-”

“I get it,” Ronan says, “babe. Honestly. I know you’re not trying to control me or whatever.”

“Right,” Adam nods. He’s fiddling with his hands in his lap and Ronan wants to reach over and take them in his.

“Are you ok?” Ronan asks.

“Yeah,” Adam says, exhales loudly, glances over his shoulder at Other Ronan behind them, and then leans in against Ronan’s side, “yeah. I am now. And I - dunno if you need this or whatever - but like, I forgive you.”

Ronan sorts a little, presses his side against Adam and reaches out to take his hands, “thank you,” he says sincerely, “I appreciate that.”

“Mm,” Adam says, lifts his head up so he can press a firm kiss to Ronan’s cheek, “how is he doing then?” he asks, glancing back down at Other Ronan again, “And how are you?”

“He’s -” Ronan begins, shrugs, drags Adam’s hands up to his face so he can press light kisses to his knuckles which are a little red from Adam’s worrying leading to picking at the skin there. “He’s confused. He’s not having nightmares right now though, so - that’s good.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, lets Ronan kiss his hands a little more, open mouthed, then lifts his hands from Ronan’s so he can cup Ronan’s face instead, rubs his thumb across Ronan’s lower lip. “And you?”

“I’m ok,” Ronan says, mostly truthful, “it’s hard.”

“Yeah,” Adam says again, ducks in to kiss Ronan, keeps his thumb pressed in at the corner of Ronan’s mouth.
“Adam,” Ronan mumbles when Adam pulls away only enough for breath. He can feel spit connecting their lips, “when you're...emotional, do you get like… horn-”

“Nah-uh,” Adam snorts, leans into to kiss Ronan once more, hard, then drags himself away, dropping his hands from Ronan’s face, leaving a wet patch at the corner of his mouth, “don’t you finish that sentence.”

“It’s a sincere question,” Ronan protests cheerfully, “I mean, this morning too-”

“I always want to kiss you,” Adam says, “and it’s a nice way to resolve problems.”

“After the problem is resolved,” Ronan points out.

“Yes,” Adam says, rolls his eyes, “we should go out and finally do what we’re supposed to be doing.”

- 

Blue is very intrigued by Other Ronan being physically present in the house, yet not really mentally present. Ronan sort of wants to argue against that. He thinks that the decrease in horror in Other Ronan’s dreams means that, at least partially, he is mentally out of Kavinsky’s house and in Monmouth instead. Gansey points out that this could be a good indicator that that could mean Other Ronan is also physically out of Kavinsky’s house. Ronan points out back that while this is a good possibility, it’s not something they can just leave to chance, they need to know for sure.

Noah points out that they could ask the psychics to scry, or Adam to ask the cards, and Adam jumps at the sudden appearance of Noah on the arm of his chair and Ethan squeezes his juice box at the sudden shock of Adam jumping underneath him, and manages to squirt Gansey in the cheek with orange juice.

They clean up. They re-assemble. Adam gets Persephone’s cards.

Ronan likes watching Adam with the small velvet bag of cards. Something about it is irresistibly powerful, like the cards are dripping confidence into Adam through the tips of his fingertips as he brushes them over the soft edges of them. Each time he takes the bag out, he seems to have grown more used to the feel of them in his hand, more sure in the card he draws and the words on his
tongue that form in response. Like he knows that he knows how to use this power, knows that he can.

He takes out ten cards, then shuffles them, frowns, puts two back in the back, looks to be reaching for another two to replace them, but then simply puts the bag down and looks back to the eight cards in his hands.

“So,” Adam says, staring down at his hands in his lap, cards held loosely, “am I just asking about Other Ronan’s physical being?”

“Maybe ask about his mental being, too,” Gansey suggests, “it would be useful to know if his dreamscape that he’s in is situated within our… world, or in his, or in a shared one.”

“Complicated,” Ronan grumbles, “can’t you just ask for the way out?”

“If you could just ask for clear and clean cut answers,” Blue snorts, “we could just ask the cards where the fuck Glendower is too.”

“Could we?” Gansey asks.

“No,” Blue says, “seriously, Richard?”

“Doesn’t hurt to ask,” Gansey shrugs.

“If I pinch you after asking silly questions, will you stop asking silly questions?”

“No, I might ask more silly questions, like, why are you pinching?”

“Ok,” Adam says loudly, “I think it’s helpful to remember that the cards aren’t actually some know it all device, more like a useful conduit to help focus spiritual and mental energies into. Sure, they hold power, but not unless you know how to use it.”

“Wow,” Noah says, sounds a little mocking, but looks sincere, “you sound just like a real psychic.”
“I’m just saying what Seph’s said,” Adam mumbles, “can I do this reading now?”

“Yes,” Gansey says, sounds a bit apologetic.

“Yes,” Blue says, doesn’t sound even a bit apologetic, “Ethan, baby, don’t eat smarties off the floor.”

This is what they get out of the cards; Reflections distort and twist reality when the surface is unclean. Dreams are only to be trusted when you know you are awake. Bodies should know where they belong. Adam’s eyes redden, and he blinks, blinks, blinks. Adam gets a headache. Adam shuts his eyes and touches the cards blind even as his fingers flinch away from them. Adam puts the cards back away. Reaches up with shaking hand to cup his deaf ear. Says; “I think we’ve overbalanced something. I need to go to bed.”

Ronan helps him up off of the wood floor, shoots Gansey a look which he hopes is very clearly, ‘keep Ethan occupied’, and follows Adam to Ethan’s bedroom.

“Why here?” Ronan whispers, shutting the door behind them as Adam climbs onto Ethan’s bed, laying himself out on top of the duvet.

“Don’t want to sleep with him right now,” Adam mumbles into the fabric.

“Do you want me to stay?” Ronan asks.

“Yes,” Adam sighs, shifts himself further up the bed so he can put his head on the pillow, squints at Ronan, “I want to sleep with you. Turn off the light? And close the curtains?”

Ronan obliges, then sits down cautiously on the edge of the bed, waits until Adam curls his hand around his wrist before moving to lie down fully next to him.
“Are you ok?” he asks.

“I feel like I just took an axe to the head,” Adam mumbles, eyes screwed closed, “and my eyes hurt so fucking much, Ro.”

“Fuck,” Ronan mumbles back, “will painkillers help, do you think?”

“No,” Adam says, “I don't know. I think it’s more… in my head than in my head. I can hear - I can hear...Cabeteswater, I think. In my deaf ear.”

“What?” Ronan asks, has to work hard to keep his voice hushed, “What do you mean?”

“Sometimes I can hear it there when I’m reading cards,” Adam explains lowly, “really quietly. Indecipherable. Just nudging. Now it’s really loud and - huh - still indecipherable.”

“Do you know what it’s nudging about?”

“I think,” Adam says slowly, exhales shakily, shudders in Ronan’s arms, “I think it’s… angry at me.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I’m not… not fulfilling my end of the bargain?” Adam suggests, “I don’t know. I’m not - I don’t know.”

“There is no bargain,” Ronan insists, knows there’s no point in saying this to Adam, “it shouldn’t be hurting you.”

“It just wants… attention,” Adam says, “I don’t know.”

“Well it’s not like you can give it attention if you’re in too much pain to ever open your eyes,”
Ronan snaps, quickly lowers his voice again, presses his lips to Adam’s forehead, “sorry,” he breathes, “I didn’t mean to raise my voice.”

“I don’t think,” Adam begins, “I don’t think it liked you meeting yourself. I think that was too much of a … a crossover for it. Like how it’s confused and mixed up because I’m not the Adam it thinks I am, having two Ronans interact must cross a lot more wires.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, frowns, “fuck, I’m sorry babe-”

“No,” Adam says, “it’s just a thought. Fuck,” he adds on, Ronan can feel Adam’s body bracing, as if trying to protect itself from a physical hit rather than a headache. “Fuck,” he repeats, “maybe - can we maybe try painkillers anyway?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says immediately, “I’ll go grab some. You good if I leave for a bit?”

“Yeah,” Adam breathes, presses his face into the pillow as Ronan pulls away. “Hurry up.”

- 

An hour, a heavy duty painkiller, one of Gansey’s sleeping pills, and half a cold peppermint tea later, Adam’s forehead finally un-creases as he sleeps, relatively peacefully in Ronan’s arms. Adam had originally planned on just lying down for half an hour maybe, until his headache lessened a little, but instead it had gotten worse, and his eyes had blurred, and he’d pressed his face in against Ronan’s neck and breathed oddly until Ronan had peeled him off and gone for Gansey’s sleeping pills.

Now, he looks like he’s going to be out for at least an hour, which is definitely going to fuck up his sleeping schedule, but there’s no way Ronan is going to try and wake him up earlier than Adam wakes up by himself.

- 

“He’s out?” Gansey whispers from the doorway.

Ronan can hear Ethan and Blue in the lounge playing some odd version of go-fish. Chainsaw, though usually attached at Ethan’s hip, is perched at the foot of the bed.
“Yeah,” Ronan whispers back, shifts a fraction under Adam’s weight so he can look at Gansey without twisting his neck painfully, “I think we need to tell the psychics about this.”

“Yeah,” Gansey says, tiptoes into the room and sits down near Chainsaw, “I agree, that shouldn’t have happened. Is he worried?”

“He thinks Cabeswater’s mad. Or confused,” Ronan sighs, “I think he was in too much pain to be worried, though.”

“I don’t like seeing him like that,” Gansey mumbles.

“No,” Ronan says, turns his head back so he can press his face to the top of Adam’s head, “I hate it. Is Ethan ok?”

“A bit miffed that Adam’s napping without him,” Gansey says, “but yes, he’s ok. I don’t think he realised Adam was hurt because he was still secretly trying to eat those smarties.”

“Chainsaw’s teaching him bad habits,” Ronan acknowledges. Chainsaw quirks her head at him at mention of his name, caws softly.

“Do you think,” Gansey says, “that Adam’s with Other Ronan, now?”

“I don’t know,” Ronan says, frowns, “he - I dunno.”

“Sorry,” Gansey says, sounds vaguely amused, “I know this is a tense situation and everything, but it is a little funny watching you try not to be jealous, even while Adam's asleep in your arms.”

“I keep wondering,” Ronan mumbles, electing to ignore Gansey’s amusement, “about what it would be like for me to meet the Other Adam.”

“Whether you’d like him as much as our Adam?”
“I guess,” Ronan shrugs, “Other Adam doesn’t have an Ethan. He goes to Aglionby. I wonder - I wonder if he’s ok.”
“You’re here again,” Ronan says, or, well, Other Ronan says. He sounds surprised. “Is it night time again for you? How long has it been?”

Adam keeps his eyes shut. Even with his cheek pressed into the cool moss, the sound of the breeze in the canopy of trees above him, his head is still pounding abominably, his eyes are still stinging. If he focuses very hard, too hard, he can feel past the dirt and greenery on his skin, can still feel his Ronan’s arms around him.

“It’s late afternoon,” Adam mumbles into the ground.

“Why are you here?” Other Ronan asks. It sounds like he’s squatting down next to Adam, “What’s wrong? Why are you - are you crying?”

“No,” Adam grumbles, lifts one hand slowly from his side to press the side of it clumsily to his face, can indeed feel tears dripping from his eyes. From the stinging of his eyes, not the stinging of his emotions.

“You’re just like him,” Other Ronan says, reaches out with one hand to nudge at Adam’s hair before moving to sit fully in the dirt right beside him. “He doesn’t cry either.”

Adam finally opens his eyes. Other Ronan is sitting with his knees to his chest, arms around them, head resting on his arms, looking down at him. He looks... more. The air around them almost smells fresh.

“Who?” Adam asks.

“Oh,” Adam says, “Other Adam.”

Other Ronan snorts, “sure,” he says, “Other Adam.”

“I’m really not upset,” Adam says, quietly, winces as he peels himself up off of the ground to hold himself up on his elbows, “I’m just… in pain.”

“Oh,” Other Ronan says, “ok, you’re not like him, then. My Adam doesn’t admit he’s in pain.”

Adam isn’t really sure he wants to know about this other version of himself. Doesn’t want to know if he’s suffering.

“He goes to Aglionby with you?” Adam asks.

“Yeah,” Other Ronan says, shuts his eyes now that Adam is looking him in the face, “joined this year. Got into Gansey’s pants by fixing his car for him.”

“What?” Adam asks, “Into his pants?” This was not something he had considered his other self to do, though, it wouldn’t be the weirdest thing.

Other Ronan snorts again. “Not literally,” he says, “though I doubt Gans would object.”

“Right,” Adam says, thinks he probably really shouldn’t pry anymore. His head hurts so much still, he should take this opportunity of being in Cabeswater to try and fix things more. He can’t hear it, though, despite being smack bang in it. Cabeswater is eerily devoid of whispered wishes. “Seriously,” he says, “why aren’t we friends in your world?”

Other Ronan frowns into his knees, turns his shoulders away from Adam. “He… lies too much.”

Now Adam frowns, pushes himself a bit more upright. Waits for Other Ronan to continue.
“And I get why he’s lying,” Other Ronan snaps, “it’s not like I’m a ball of sincerity either, but it’s just - I’m too f*cked up to pretend he’s not f*cked up too.”

Adam considers it. “Ok,” he says.

“I mean,” Other Ronan mumbles, “we hang out. I guess. With Gansey and sometimes without. I just wish - I guess I wish I’d met him before all the shit happened.”

“Yeah,” Adam offers, sits up properly and nudges Other Ronan’s side with his shoulder, “if you’re anything like my Ronan,” he says, “and I think you really are, you’re going to be ok. And… Other Adam will… he’ll acknowledge he has emotions and shit eventually. He just needs time.”

“So,” Other Ronan says, doesn’t look up or open his eyes, “you admit you have emotions and shit?”

“Oh yeah,” Adam scoffs, “all the time. I’m like a… a waterfall of feelings these days.”

“God,” Other Ronan groans, “we do all grow up to be hippies.”

“Hey,” Adam snorts cheerfully, “we’re barely older than you.”

“Um,” Other Ronan says, has finally opened his eyes again, looks at Adam carefully, “Ronan - your Ronan - he said that in this world you have a brother.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, clears his throat.

“But not in my world,” Other Ronan says, like Adam knew he would, “your Ronan said - he said that that was why things were so different here.”

“I guess it’s part of it, yeah,” Adam says. “Ethan - Ethan is the reason I didn’t go to Aglionby, and he’s also the reason I started talking to my Ronan.”
“Am I - is it a glitch?” Other Ronan asks, quiet, “like… Cabeswater has me here because it knows that there shouldn’t be two separate versions of us, and so, and so it’s going to just… cancel the other or something. Like, maybe it’s already been canceled, and I’m just an accidental remnant because I was dreaming and in Cabeswater when it destroyed everything else, what if my version of all of us is the wrong version and we-”

“Stop,” Adam sighs, leans in against Other Ronan to wrap his arms around Other Ronan’s shoulders. If he closes his eyes, he can still feel his Ronan’s arms around him. “That’s not what’s happening. Your… your Adam and Gansey are fine. Your world is not the wrong world, and neither is mine, they’re just different, and… confusing for Cabeswater or some shit.”

“How do you know that?” Other Ronan gasps, is drooping gratefully in Adam’s arms.

“Because I’m mostly certain that the glitch is us all meeting, not us all existing. I don’t know what to tell you, I don’t have… scientific evidence here, it’s just a feeling. But I believe it.”

“It’s gotta be a pretty fucking big feeling for you to believe it.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, “probably. Was it useful, earlier? Talking to Ronan?”

Other Ronan shrugs.

“Yeah,” he says eventually, “I suppose.”

“Because,” Adam says, carefully, “it looks like it was useful. Cabeswater is looking… healthier.”

“Yeah,” Other Ronan admits, “it’s… I think because - because there have been no monsters to fuck it up in here. It’s cleaning itself or whatever.”

“Because your mind is less upset?”

“Whatever,” Other Ronan says, “maybe. Have you guys found out whether or not some part of me is still at fucking K’s house?”
“Not yet,” Adam says, “we’re - personally, I don’t think you are. But we don’t have a solid answer yet.”

“Because if I am,” Other Ronan says, “and I’ve stopped bringing monsters out for him, what use am I for him? If he like… kills his copy of me, do you think your copy dies too?”

“That’s not happening,” Adam says, firm. He knows he’s wearing the voice he uses with Ethan, but he can’t help it. He feels like he needs to treat this Ronan as younger, as more delicate, to keep him properly separate from his Ronan.

- 

By the time he wakes up again, sleeping pills releasing him back into reality, his headache is more of a background buzz of pain rather than an all encompassing shroud. His Ronan is still holding him, arms wrapped loosely around his waist. Adam can hear faint music leaking out of headphones, a little tinny, and opens his eyes to look at Ronan with his eyes closed and music on. He can’t immediately tell if he’s awake, until Chainsaw, for some reason perched on the headboard, caws loudly, and Ronan’s eyes flash open and meet Adam’s.

“You’re back,” he yawns, yanks his head phones down around his neck, “how’s your head?”

“Less sore,” Adam replies, untangles one of his hands from the mess of sheets and Ronan so he can rub the back of his neck, “how long was I out?”

“A few hours,” Ronan says. He hasn’t turned off his music, so it’s still floating out of his headphones, something low and instrumental. “Were you with the whinier version of me?”

“Don’t be a dick,” Adam scoffs, regrets scoffing because it makes his headache poke him hard, “yeah I was.”

“So weird,” Ronan says, “you asleep right fucking here, him in the other room, but you’re both chilling out in dream compost world.”

“It’s looking a lot healthier there,” Adam says, levers himself a little more upright, is immediately
tugged back down, Ronan’s hand on his elbow, “smells less rotten. I don’t think Kavinsky has Other Ronan still at all.”

“No,” Ronan says, frowns, “I still think we need to check, though. I just-”

“Yeah,” Adam nods, “where is everyone? What happened after I checked out?”

“Uh,” Ronan says, sighs, wriggles a little to encourage Adam back down against his shoulder, “I’ve been here with you this whole time-”

“Oh,” Adam interrupts, “I know! I could feel you-”

“What?”

“If I thought about it,” Adam explains, “I could still feel you holding me. I think like, if I wasn’t already all headache and shit I might have been able to pay more attention or like, see what else was happening outside of the dream, but-”

“Is this some psychic, witchy, thing?” Ronan asks.

“Uh,” Adam shrugs, presses his cheek against Ronan’s shoulder, “maybe?”

“Cool.”

“Anyway,” Adam says, “you were saying?”

“Right. I think Gans, Noah, and Ethan are making dinner. Blue went home to discuss shit with her witches.”

“She gonna ask about what happened with me?” Adam asks, isn’t entirely sure he wants her to. It’s a little embarrassing, after all.
“Yes,” Ronan says, rolls his eyes, “it’s important, Parrish.”

- 

After dinner (and showers and storytimes and magic meetings and psychic phone calls), they go back to bed in Ethan’s room. Ethan is extremely ecstatic about this, Adam a little less so. It’s not that he doesn’t like sleeping with Ethan, he does, he loves cuddling Ethan, it’s just that he’s gotten used to getting to have space to sleep, and also space to kiss his boyfriend before he goes to sleep. Neither of these things happen when there is an almost four year spread eagled in the middle of the mattress in between him and his boyfriend.

“What if,” Ronan whispers over Ethan’s snuffling snores, “I go back to Other Ronan’s dream when I go to sleep? And Cabeswater doesn’t want that.”

“I don’t know,” Adam sighs, has started the slow process of shuffling Ethan into a more space saving position, “I don’t know if that was something that annoyed Cabeswater, it was just a feeling.”

“Your feelings are usually pretty spot on, witch boy,” Ronan mumbles, catches Ethan’s suddenly flailing limbs before it can smack him in the face, kisses the back of his hand and carefully folds his arm back against his chest. “I don’t want you to end up in more pain.”

“Yeah neither,” Adam snorts, “can you, like, are you able to try and direct your dreaming away from it?”

“I don’t know,” Ronan says, “I’ve never tried to not dream about anything like this before. Usually when I try and avoid dream subjects it’s pretty futile.”

“Stuff like,” Adam mumbles, “the monsters?”

Ronan shrugs a little, reaches over Ethan to rest his hand against Adam’s chest. “I guess,” he says, “I haven’t though. Not for a long time. Not been stuck in bad dream loops, y’know? I’ve been… I’ve been ok. Not like Other Ronan.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, reaches up to loops his fingers around Ronan’s wrist, rubs his thumb over bone, under leather, “how long until Other Ronan starts dreaming monsters again, do you think?”
“I don’t know,” Ronan replies, sighs heavily enough that it ruffles Ethan’s short curls, “maybe he won’t. Because he’s - he’s more awake in that dream than I usually am, so maybe he won’t. But I - I don’t know, babe.”

“Ok,” Adam says, “it’ll be fine.”

“I can try and keep myself out of his dream tonight,” Ronan says, “will you dream with him, do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Adam says, truthful, “I’m not usually very purposeful about my dreaming.”

“Today’s been super long,” Ronan says, “but I don’t want to go to sleep now.”

“Babe,” Adam yawns, “because you don’t want to sleep or because you’re a bored and bouncy toddler than needs attention?”

“The latter,” Ronan says, “I need storytime. Or kissing.”

“Ronan,” Adam snorts, squeezes Ronan’s wrist, then lifts his hand up to his mouth to kiss Ronan’s fingers, “we’ve already had storytime and kissing today.”

“There shouldn’t be a daily limit on either of those,” Ronan grumbles, turns his hand so he can cup Adam’s face.

“Go to sleep,” Adam says, “I’ll kiss you later, when my brother isn’t kneeing me in the stomach.”

- 

“Is this later?” Ronan asks, later, voice soft like he’s half asleep.

Adam isn’t sure how much later it is, or, where this later is. He recognises it as Cabeswater, but not
the Cabeswater they had been dreaming into lately. It’s sun dapples and smells like fresh air and clean water. He can hear a hush of a stream somewhere. There’s also something kneeing him in the stomach.

“Fuck,” Adam hisses, sits up straight from the bed of long grass he’d been lying in. Ronan, eyes closed, is still lying down, surrounded by green and sunlight, Ethan curled like a kitten, back to Ronan’s chest, knees where Adam had been moments before. He’s still very much asleep. “Did we just - did you - did we just bring Ethan into a dream with us?”

Ronan’s eyes snap open now, properly awake, or properly dream awake, lifts his head as he takes in the scene in front of him, of Ethan physically in his arms still.

“Oh fuck,” he agrees, “he’s still...asleep though?”

“Please tell me this isn’t Other Ronan’s dream,” Adam says, voice a whisper as he leans in over Ronan and Ethan, “it doesn’t feel like it.”

“I don’t think it is,” Ronan whispers back, “it feels more like… this feels more like one of my dreams.”

“He is you,” Adam points out. Ronan rolls his eyes.

“I know,” he says, “I mean, the dreams feel different, because we’re at different… emotional stages, or what the fuck ever. This feels like me.”

“Right,” Adam says. Ronan rolls his eyes again, then drops his head back down in the grass.

“It feels safe,” Ronan persists, “like… like dreams are supposed to feel. There’s sunshine, Parrish. We could just enjoy this for a few moments.”

Adam does enjoy the feeling of sunshine on his bare torso. Does enjoy the comforting and heady smell of healthy trees. Does very much want to curls back up in the grass with Ronan and Ethan.

“We should talk with Cabeswater,” he mumbles, shuffles back in close and lies himself down as
close to Ronan as he can with Ethan in the way, “now that we’re here and not… now that it’s your
dream and it’s safe.”

“Or we could just lie here for a while,” Ronan says, “and pretend we have a normal life.”

“Normal people don’t usually cuddle in dream forests,” Adam points out, shifts Ethan’s legs so it
doesn’t feel so much like Ethan’s foot is trying to puncture his spleen. “I don’t want a normal life
with you.”

“I want a normal life with you, though,” Ronan protests. His eyes are closed again, even as he’s
wrapping his arms as far around Adam’s back as he can reach. Ethan grumbles in between them,
probably getting a little squished.

“It’s never going to be ordinary,” Adam replies, “it can’t be. Not with you being a dreamer and me…
I don’t know what I am. But we’re not going to be normal. Or at least not what other people call
normal.”

“No,” Ronan says, “I know, I mean - I want to get to do our not normal shit together, my dreaming,
your witch/psychic nonsense, but not while also fearing for our lives or whatever.”

“Oh,” Adam says, on the same page now. He squishes in closer again, “we’ll get that,” he says.
“You and me. And Ethan. Us. We’re gonna - you and me.”

“Veniam in me,” a voice says loudly behind Adam somewhere, “sero te!”

Adam whips his head around, shock beating his heart loud in his deaf ear, catches sight of a pair of
hooved legs before Ethan lets out a small grumpy noise of awakeness, and he swivels back again to
wrap his arms protectively around him.

“It’s ok,” Ronan is saying loudly, he sounds a little exasperated, “fu- damn it, Orphan Girl, you
couldn’t have let us know you were coming?”

“caput blandeque coruscant Et non poterat!” the … Orphan Girl responds sharply, “Non solum
fuerunt!”
I've changed my mind, I can deal with boring

So first of all; Orphan Girl is pissed off at Ronan for reasons that Adam has yet to properly comprehend because he can’t speak fucking Latin, and second of all, the moment Ethan opens his eyes properly and sits up to catch sight of Orphan Girl, his face brightens in recognition and he waves.

“Salve, crispus puer,” Orphan Girl says to Ethan, leaps over the tangle of RonanAdamEthan to land in the leaves by Ronan’s back.

“Chains’aw!” Ethan says brightly, struggles in Adam’s shocked tight arms.

Orphan Girl makes a noise terrifyingly similar to that of a chainsaw.

Ronan makes a noise that is probably a laugh, but it sounds a little bit like a bark. The surreality of the situation is finally making this feel properly like a dream.

“No, bud,” Ronan says, sounds very amused as he scoops Ethan out of Adam’s arm, which forestalls the wriggling. “This isn’t Chainsaw.”

“Is?” Ethan says, as confused sounding as Adam feels, “she sings our songs wi’ me.”

Ronan looks to Orphan Girl. Adam stares at Orphan Girl. Ethan holds his hands out to Orphan Girl. Orphan Girl steps forwards as if she’s going to pluck Ethan from Ronan’s arms.

“Wait,” Adam says wildly, shifting himself quickly so he’s leaning half across Ronan’s torso, blocking reach to Ethan, “what the hell is going on, here, Ronan?”

“Solum,” Orphan Girl mutters.

“English,” Ronan snaps at her, “Adam doesn’t understand Latin. But don’t say that in English.” To
Adam he says, “Remember I mentioned Orphan Girl before? This is her, she’s not going to hurt Ethan-”

“How does she know Ethan,” Adam interrupts, “why does he think she’s Chainsaw?”

“Dreaming,” Orphan Girl butts in in loud strangely accented English, “butt face has been away so curly boy has been playing with me.”

“I think,” Ronan says, “that Ethan has - we know he’s been having ‘real’ dreams, so it sounds like with all the dream crossover he’s been dreaming in Cabeswater with Orphan Girl, maybe? And she and Chainsaw are both loud and annoying so he must have thought they were the same-”

“Am curly boy,” Ethan says against Adam’s chest, is pressing his palms against Adam’s shoulders, “an’ Chains’aw’s m’friend.”

“Her name isn’t Chainsaw,” Adam tries, and Orphan Girl makes the chainsaw noise again.

“Brat,” Ronan snaps, “stop it, you’re not helping.”

“I don’t want to help,” Orphan Girl retorts, “I want to run around but you’ve shut up the forest around me and I’m bored and you’re a gross old mean butt face.”

Ronan gapes.

“Is not!” Ethan protests sticks his head out the gap between Ronan and Adam’s torso so he can see Orphan Girl, “Ronan’s so nice!”

“Well,” Orphan Girl says, “he hasn’t been here.”

“Has there been another Ronan here?” Ronan asks then, and Orphan Girl looks at him like he’s something a little gross but a little interesting she has discovered on the bottom of her hooves.

“No,” she says, “he stays in the other side.”
“The other side?” Adam asks.

“I’m shut up in here,” Orphan Girl reminds the both of them loudly, “your trees and dreams,” she spits at Ronan, “don’t let me out! I want to run!”

“Sorry,” Ronan says, “I think they’re just trying to keep you safe. Strange things are happening here right now.”

“I am a strange thing happening here right now!” Orphan Girl says, “I am a strange thing! I am your strange thing and you leave me!”

“Other Ronan was sucking up all his dream strength,” Adam says now, can’t fight the urge to defend his boyfriend, even from a small hoofed being in one of his own dreams, “he couldn’t dream himself here to see you, it isn’t his fault.”

“He needs to tell the strange things to stop then,” Orphan Girl says, “he knows he has to-”

“Nah,” Ronan says here, “this isn’t like it was then,” he tells her, “that was different. This isn’t something I have control over, it’s bigger than me and my dreaming.”

“Well,” Orphan Girl says, “I don’t like it. I don’t want to be here by myself all locked up.”

“Have me!” Ethan protests. Adam has finally released him enough that he’s managed to wriggle his way off of Ronan’s lap so stand in his full pyjama glory on the mossy ground in front of Orphan Girl. “Playin’!”

Orphan Girl looks at Adam.

“Yours?” She asks, reaches down to take Ethan’s hand. Adam kind of doesn’t want that to happen, but he can feel that Ronan doesn’t think it’s a bad idea, so.

“My brother,” Adam says.
“Yours,” Orphan Girl says again, “mine now,” she adds a little cheekily.

Ronan still feels calm next to him, so Adam pushes down the bolt of fear in his stomach.

“Stay where we can see you,” he says to Ethan.

“Big bugs?” Ethan asks Orphan Girl, “And baby butterfies?”

“Big bugs!” Orphan Girl says, “And baby butterflies! I’m a big bug! You’re a big bug!”

“Am big bug!” Ethan hoots.

“I feel like our kids are going on a fucking playdate and we’re doing the whole awkward parents in the park thing,” Ronan grumbles after Orphan Girl and Ethan have disappeared into a bush.

He pushes himself up off of the ground and stretches in the sunlight.

“You don’t think of her as your kid, do you?” Adam asks, not even sure where he wants to begin in trying to sort out his confusion. He stays seated in the nest of twisted blankets.

“Oh God no,” Ronan snorts, “fuck no. She’s more like… like a sister. Or a fucking trickster god or some shit. Just small and furry and a little bitey.”

“She’s from your head?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, then frowns, “I mean, I guess. She’s always been around. I dunno when she turned up.”
“What do you think she meant when she said Other Ronan is on the other side? Do you think she can see him from here? If we go to the… edge of this place or whatever do we see him too? Is it like platforms moving through space?”

“I don’t know,” Ronan says, sighs, turns to flop back down next to Adam, tugs at Adam’s arm to pull him a little closer, “I don’t know, babe. I know that if this was you? You would know every fucking thing about dreaming, and how it works, and what… I dunno, what astral plane we’re on right now, but I don’t work like that. I’ve never cared about the science behind all this. It’s just who I am, it’s like how I don’t give a fuck how my body works, it just does. I don’t need to know how my veins work, I don’t need to know how my dreams come tangible - well - maybe I do, but it never felt like I did.”

“Ok,” Adam says, let’s himself be tugged in against Ronan’s shoulder. “I get it. I mean, it’s frustrating, because I want answers, but it’s not - I’m not frustrated with you, and I get why you can’t answer this shit. I don’t know what we’re supposed to do here.”

“We could practice normal,” Ronan mumbles, kisses his temple, “we could sit in the sun and kiss.”

“Ethan is here,” Adam points out, “and your Orphan Girl.”

“Not all kissing has to be hardcore sexual,” Ronan points out with a snort, “you sex fiend. I just mean - like this -” he bends a little to press another kiss to the corner of Adam’s mouth. Adam kisses him back on reflex and Ronan shifts beside him to correct the angle.

“Mm,” Adam says a few moments later, drops his head down on Ronan’s shoulder, “it’s almost Ethan’s birthday.”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, “damn, can’t believe he’s gonna be twelve already.”

“Ha ha,” Adam says, “he’s gonna be four.”

“I know,” Ronan snorts, “like I don’t really know how old he is, dude. What are we doing for it?”

“Hm?” Adam says, rubs his face against the crook of Ronan’s neck, “What? I don’t know. We don’t really do birthdays. I usually just buy him an ice block and something. Got him duplo last year.”
Ronan makes a grunt like noise, shuffles on his ass, and then manhandles Adam onto his lap.

“We can do better than that now,” he says against Adam’s cheek, kisses him, “we could really do birthdays now. I know we have shit on, but, we could get him a cake. Balloons. Presents. Do it at Foxway and invite Shelby and Mari and Blue’s cousins? Have something real for him?”

“We’ve never-” Adam begins again, and Ronan forestalls him with another kiss.

“Yeah,” he says, “but we could start now. I wanna start now. I love him. I wanna… I want to give him what he deserves, like I wanna give you what you deserve.”

“Ok,” Adam says, “ok. We can have a party. Let’s talk to Gansey and Blue, and Maura about it before we tell him though, yeah? I don’t want to- I don’t want to get him excited and then not do it. He’s always been - I don’t want to disappoint him.”

“Obviously,” Ronan says, kisses him again, “I love you,” he says, “I love you.”

Adam is very aware of how close Ethan and Orphan Girl are, he can hear them chattering loudly in the bush.

“Baby,” Adam mumbles, “the kids -”

“We aren’t doing anything gross,” Ronan points out, “love declarations are child friendly, Parrish. You’re just sitting in my lap. Now, if I had my hands down your pants -” he begins, slipping one hand under the elastic of Adam’s sweats, “-that’d be a different story.”

“Oi,” Adam snaps, difficult when he’s snorting, he bats Ronan’s hand away, “cut it out, Lynch. I love you too. Asshole.”
Waking up from this dream is oddly more disorientating than waking from real dreams usually is. Possibly because this is the second time he’s woken up this morning, possibly because the circumstances between being ‘asleep’ and awake were so similar seeing as in the dream he was caught in Ronan’s arms and when he opens his eyes, he’s still there.

Ethan is already awake, chiming for attention, crawling up onto Adam’s chest.

“Breakfast!” He calls into Adam’s face, “Hungry!”

“Hungry,” Ronan joins in, rolling onto his side so his face presses into Adam’s hair, “hungry!”

“Ughhhhh,” Adam greets them, wraps one arm around Ethan, the other around Ronan. “Fine, c’mon then, babies.”

Whether or not Ethan realises exactly how real his dreams are, Adam can’t tell. Whether he is perfectly aware that playing with Orphan Girl was a thing that happened and he’s happy to just roll with it, or if it’s more dreamlike for him. He’s not sure how useful it would be to try and talk to Ethan about this, because he doesn’t want to confuse Ethan, and he doesn’t want Ethan to worry about the dreaming.

They have breakfast. They fill Gansey and Noah (who had arrived back into existence after being out all night just in time for coffee) in on their less weird than usual dream that was also weirder than usual because it was more of a joint dream. They all watch Ethan run around the house with Gansey’s wrestling singlet tied around his neck as a cape while Chainsaw caws out an apparent theme song.

“Don’t dream by yourself, today?” Adam mumbles to Ronan while he puts his shoes on.
Gansey is in the bathroom with Ethan, helping with teeth brushing, and the three of them are almost out the door to leave for school and babysitting.

“Or at the very least fill us in before hand?”

“I’m not gonna dream without you here,” Ronan says, leans down from the couch arm to kiss Adam, “but I have just been struck with an idea.”

“Do tell me this idea,” Adam says, almost cheerfully. He finishes with his shoes and stands up to be the one leaning in over Ronan now to take his face and kiss him again.

“I’m gonna be here all day,” Ronan points out, unnecessarily, “and I think we all doubt that other me is gonna dream anything scary up and out, and if he does, he’s all locked in. So,”

“Babe,” Adam rolls his eyes, “stop stalling, what’s up?”

“Leave Ethan with me?” Ronan suggests, “I think Dana’s great and everything, but I wanna hang out with him, and I’ll be bored here baby myself, and this way we get to hang out with Chainsaw together, and-”

“Ok,” Adam says, kisses Ronan again, “sounds good. I’ll call Dana and tell her. This way,” he adds, dropping his voice, “I can talk to Gansey about a possible b-i-r-t-h-d-a-y party in peace.”

Ronan grins up at, tilts his head in request of another kiss. Adam grants it.

- Adam has zero qualms about leaving Ethan with Ronan, he doesn’t know why Ronan was so nervous about asking, but he trusts Ronan with Ethan almost more than he trusts himself with Ethan sometimes. What he does have qualms with is how surprised Ronan had looked when he’d said ok.
Gansey is more excited about the prospect of a birthday party than Adam thinks Ethan ever will be. He okays it immediately, asks if he can be in charge of decoration. Adam has to inform him that it’s not going to be a big thing, and decorations will be balloons, maybe party hats if he’s lucky. Gansey is obviously disappointed, but brightens up immediately and asks if he can get custom made balloons with Ethan’s face on. Adam pops this idea very quickly. Suggests that Gansey could get pre printed fun pictures balloons, or maybe even helium balloons.

School is… boring. Sure, it’s a much needed mundane break in his daily life, and sure, he needs the qualifications and the education, and sure, it could be a fuck load worse, but. He’s bored. He wants to be at least learning something interesting, something useful. He doesn’t need to fucking memorise dead people dates and spend hours writing out math problems he already knows.

Of course, when Ronan calls him at lunchtime, the boredom of school is absolutely preferable to what Ronan has called to tell him.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, here is some reassurance; Ethan is completely fine, do not fret.
Everything is fine

This is the first thing Ronan says to him;

“Ethan is ok.”

Having Ronan saying this, in between gasps, no less, Adam cannot help but fear a million different worsts. His mind skids helplessly back to the trailer, back to the smell of alcohol in the air, even while he’s reminding himself - futile - that his biggest fears are a lot bigger than Robert Parrish’s fists now.

“Ok.” Adam replies, or at least he thinks he replies, he can’t hear himself over the pounding of his heart. Either way, Ronan continues.

“Kavinsky is here,” Ronan says, which, while scary, isn’t the scariest thing Adam has heard. Ronan continues. “Kavinsky is here, and he knows we have other me.”

“What’s going on?” Adam asks, because he doesn’t know where to begin really. Doesn’t know how much time they have to fill Adam in on what has already happened.

“Kavinsky is here,” Ronan says, “and he’s asleep.”

“What?” Adam asks.

“He’s asleep,” Ronan replies, “and dreaming, and I don’t know what he’s dreaming, or if he’s with other me in his dreams, and what’s happening, because I can’t go to sleep - I don’t know what to do, Adam-”

Adam also does not know what to do. His spare hand is clenched so tightly that he can feel his - chewed absurdly short - nails digging into his palm. “Call Gansey,” Adam says, “I have an idea. I think. I have to call Persephone and I - are you ok?”
“Yeah,” Ronan rasps out, and it sounds a little bit like a lie. “I’m down the block from Monmouth,” he adds, “In the BMW. Ethan’s with me. I didn’t - I dunno if Kavinsky’ll bring out a monster or some shit or - I don’t know.”

He can hear Ethan in the background chiding Ronan on his bad language.

“I know, baby,” Adam says, “call Gansey. I’m going to - I’m going to Cabeswater, I think.”


“I have to go now if my plan is going to be in time at all,” Adam says, because his brain is moving way faster than his mouth or his feet and he can’t keep up with it. “Love you,” he adds, “call Gans.”

“What?” Ronan asks, starts to say something else but Adam is hanging up.

He thinks he knows what he’s doing as he starts jogging towards the parking lot, knows he is at least on the right track when he sees the Fox Way car parked haphazardly in the entrance, Persephone in the driver’s seat.

“You took your time,” she says as Adam climbs in, “I thought maybe I had the wrong day.”

“Sorry,” Adam gasps, breathless due to the combination of panic and sprinting the fuck over to the car, “I’m not as good as other Adam, probably.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Persephone says, pulls out of the lot with a screech that Ronan would probably have enjoyed, “I’m not judging you against yourself.”

“Who better to judge me against?” Adam asks, scrambles for the seat belt.

Persephone shrugs.
“Are we going to scry?” Adam asks, “Or are we… aligning lines? I can’t figure it out.”

“What do you have to figure out?” Persephone asks, and, first of all, Adam has to fucking figure out exactly what Persephone is even asking.

Then he can answer.

“I can hear it - Cabeswater - I think - in my deaf ear,” Adam explains, “I can’t hear it very well. I can hear the gist of it. I think. The current gist is ‘help’.”

“Clear enough, I suppose,” Persephone says, then pulls an impossibly large bicycle lamp out of her voluminous jumper pockets, “we haven’t had much time to learn scrying,” she says, “but I want you to look into the light and tell me which way to go.”

“What,” Adam says, “the fuck.” He takes the light anyway. Presses it on. He holds it in his lap, one hand white knuckled around his seatbelt to keep himself steady, the other holding the light steady as he stares into it, eyes already watering. He has no idea how he’s supposed to fucking… read directions from a lamp.

“Stop thinking,” Persephone says, and her voice is slightly off, louder and clearer than usual, yet, like he’s hearing it from underwater. “Stop thinking and just ask.”

He has to fucking think to ask.

“You don’t,” Persephone says.

Adam doesn’t bother wondering if he said his last thought aloud or not. It’s moot.

“Head left after this intersection,” he feels his mouth saying as his eyes start dripping painful tears, “and then right.”

“Oh good,” Persephone says, underwater, bright, strange, “I didn’t know if you could do that or
Adam does not think about this.

He continues not to think about this as he snaps out for Persephone to stop, stumbles out of the car, and bruises his hands on a collection of rocks on the side of the road, digging shallow grooves to unearth tar shrapnels. He chucks them into the backseat of the car, presses the heels of his hands into his eyes until the inside of his eyelids is a blinding white light, and says, “Turn around and turn left.”

He is pretty sure he has to be in time, because his ear isn’t killing him with Cabeswater’s anger, but he is certainly not expecting to be dropping down to his knees by a small creek, ostensibly to fish out a large quartz flecked rock, and instead, to be dropping down onto his knees and straight into a dream that is not his in any way. He is elbow deep in the stream still, and as he stares at Ronan - Other Ronan - across from it, he recognises it from the dreams. Other Ronan looks right back, though he really shouldn’t be, he’s caught, arm to arm with Kavinsky.

Adam works on instinct. He grips numbly at the rock, tugs at it, wills Other Ronan to stop looking at him and focus on turning his dream around.

He’s not sure what he’s supposed to be doing here. He had thought he was strengthening the line to give Other Ronan help in - in holding Kavinsky off, maybe? But now he’s thinking maybe he needs to be a more direct source of power. He doesn’t know. All he knows is that this bloody rock needs to come out of the water, but it’s holding tight in the river bed, and the water is icy cold so it feels like Adam’s fingers are just bone tips, rough and brittle.

He looks away from the grapple fight in front of him to focus on yanking at the rock, and scrabbling his hands in shovel like movements in and out of the pebbles around it, and when he looks up again, Kavinsky is shifting and blending and smoking in front of him, like his bones are trying to escape his skin. His arms are shifting, extending, his eyes, already dark and hollow, are becoming cave like. Other Ronan is staring at Adam, chest heaving.

“Don’t look at me,” Adam yells at him, voice raw in his mouth, “this is your dream, Ronan, this is your dream.”

“They’re never my dreams,” Other Ronan wails back at him, he’s backing away from the shifting
form of Kavinsky, “they don’t belong to me.”

“They do,” Adam snaps back, can feel blood ebbing out of his fingers around his nails, “right now they just belong to the parts of yourself you don’t like.”

“I don’t like any part of me,” Other Ronan replies hotly, “I need - I need my dad -”

“Ronan,” Adam says, gets half his fingers around the sharp curve of the rock, “do you still want to die in here?”

Other Ronan stares at him, he’s backed himself as far away from Kavinsky as he’s able to, his flush against a tree with Kavinsky advancing again, a shadow shape of claws and scales, and teeth.

“No,” he says, “I don’t want to-”

“Then you need to convince your dream of that,” Adam says, “tell it what you want.”

“I want to go home!” Other Ronan yells at him, “I want - I want to be ok -”

Adam’s hand slips a little on the rock as it gives, can feel the underwater cascade of pebbles slipping into the hole he’s making underneath it.

“What do you want,” Adam repeats, “I’ll give you the fucking power to have it, so long as you know what it is-”

“I want to get out,” Other Ronan says, and he’s lifting his hands up to push against the oncoming Kavinsky, “I want Cabeswater to let me go, I want to know I am awake-”

The rock comes loose, and Adam pulls it out of the water, up against his chest where the weight of it sends him backwards onto the stone littered bank. The stream in front of him makes an awful gurgling noise, like a sink being emptied, like a whole bag of marbles being dropped down a staircase, like Other Ronan gasping.
He’s not exactly sure what happens. If he had to try and put it into fucking words - which he knows he’s going to have to do - he would say it was like the dream around him had been mist, and it had been sucked up? God.

It was as if Adam, removing the stone, had been like removing a cork in a magical vacuum, and it had pulled the dream out of reality and into the stream, sucking it down and sucking Adam’s breath down until none of either remained and the river made an odd choking noise, and then continued to ripple as normal.

His fingers are bleeding. A little excessively. They’re torn up a lot more than he thinks they ought to be. He can feel hot blood pouring from his nose as well, but he doesn’t really care so much about that because he’s just so fucking tired. The only thing he cares about is going back home to Ronan and Ethan and then going to sleep. Right now he would settle for having a quick nap here in the water, rock clutched to his chest.

Persephone tells him to get back into the car, the afternoon isn’t done yet.

He is vaguely aware that he is buckling himself back into his seat, that Persephone is pressing his phone to his ear, that Gansey’s voice is torn up and wet pouring out of it. Persephone is starting the car back up, turning away from the stream. The rock is heavy and wet in his lap.

“Adam?” Gansey is saying now, “Adam? Please, Adam? Say something?”

“Gansey,” Adam says, needs more context in this conversation. Had Persephone answered the phone and told Gansey what was going on? Had Cabeswater answered the phone and told Gansey nothing?

“God,” Gansey says, “where are you?”

“With Seph,” Adam mumbles, “coming. Where are you?”

“I’m at Monmouth,” Gansey says, “with Blue. Ronan and Ethan are at the bakery down the road-“
“I’m coming to Monmouth,” Adam butts in, is mostly saying this so Persephone knows where to go - although he’s sure she already does. “Are you - where in Monmouth are you?”

“Adam,” Gansey says, “I don’t know if it’s safe - Kavinsky is still here - it’s -”

“He’s still asleep?” Adam asks.

“I think so,” Gansey says, says something away from the phone that Adam can’t make out “he’s - he’s still breathing.”

“I’m coming there,” Adam says, feels like the rock in his lap is in his stomach instead. “Is Other Ronan still there?”

“I don’t know,” Gansey wails, “the door is locked and Ronan has the key and - I can hear - I can hear noises in there -”

“I’m coming,” Adam says again, “I’ll be there soon. I have to - I have to call Ronan.”

Gansey is probably replying, but Adam’s brain has shut off again as he ends the call, and navigates with numb fingers to Ronan’s number.

It barely rings once before it’s answered, which is excessively impressive for a Ronan phone call.

“Adam ,” Ronan says, and Adam thinks that if Gansey’s voice had sounded shredded it was nothing compared to Ronan’s.

He thinks that when his brain and his eyes are finally working and he checks his phone properly he is going to have a fuckload of missed calls and texts.

“Baby,” Adam says, can hear his voice slurring which is really not what Ronan needs to be hearing right now, “everything is fine.”
“Parrish,” Ronan says, “everything-”

“It will be,” Adam says, “I’m going back to Monmouth now. I think - I think Other Ronan is gone. I think - Please will you stay where you are with Ethan for a bit longer?”

Ronan is clearing his throat.

“Ok,” Ronan says, voice stiff, “ok. I’ll - me and buddy’ll get some pie.”

“Get me some too?” Adam asks.

“Sure,” Ronan says
The first thing he notices when he arrives at Monmouth’s carpark is that there is an extra car there. When he engages his brain, he realises it’s Declan’s.

“I’m not coming in, am I?” Persephone asks once the car stops.

“No,” Adam says, then shakes his head to clear his eyes, looks at her. “I don’t think so?”

“Neither do I,” Persephone agrees, “too distracting.”

“Ok,” Adam says, lets himself tumble out of the car. At some point Persephone had pressed tissues into his hands, and they’re wrapped around his bloody fingertips, inhibiting the amount of movement he can carry out. Honestly this should only be inhibiting things like opening doors or whatever, but somehow it’s reached all the way to his legs, to his eyes, to - probably that’s actually the after effects of doing whatever the FUCK he just did out by Cabeswater.

He can hear voices on the upper landing, follow them, realises once he gets there that the voices are inside his head not out of them, and has to force himself to concentrate harder to find the source of his friends’ voices.

They’re in the main room. Gansey is perched on the edge of his bed, Blue sitting so close against his legs she may as well be on them. Declan is standing by Gansey’s desk. They all shut up as Adam walks in.

“Adam,” Blue says, jumps off of the bed and is at Adam’s side in the time it takes him to blink (just once, very heavily). She pats at his face, and then brushes lightly at his knuckles. “What happened?”

“Is he gone?” Adam asks, lifts his heavy hands a little so Blue can look at them - at the tissue sticking awkwardly to blood.
“Kavinsky?” Gansey asks, also on his feet now, but standing still by the bed, “No. He’s in the bedroom-”

“Other Ronan,” Adam clarifies, “is he gone?”

Declan nods from behind Gansey.

“He just - he just stopping being,” Gansey says, “like Noah does sometimes.”

“And Kavinsky didn’t wake up?” Adam asks, “He’s still asleep there?”

“On the bed,” Declan tells him, very bluntly. He sounds like he just swallowed a box of gunpowder and then a lit match.

“Oh,” Adam says.

“What happened, Adam?” Blue asks again.

Adam is very aware that his knees don’t really want to be doing the whole standing up sort of thing anymore. But everyone is looking at him expectantly and waiting for him to fill them in, to solve the mystery. Whatever. Whatever. Whatever. He leans a little against Blue and she wraps her arms around his waist. He does not look at Gansey.

“I patched the Ley line,” he says, “a little,” he adds on, because he isn’t sure how much he helped it and how long it will hold or any of that useful stuff, “until Cabeswater felt strong enough to let me into the dream Kavinsky and Other Ronan were in. And then I - I helped talk Ronan into finding the way out of the dream. I suppose the way out was the way out into his actual timeline. He just vanished with the dream. I can’t explain why Kavinsky is still asleep. Did you try to wake him?”

“Yes,” Blue says by his clavicle.

“We tried quite hard,” Gansey chips in, he’s finally crossing the room to Adam now, as if he can sense how much weight Blue is holding up and is coming to relieve it. “He’s very, very asleep. Should we be worried?”
“I don’t know,” Adam says, leans in gratefully against Gansey’s shoulder. He will have time later to be embarrassed about how weak he looks right now, about how he can’t even hold his own body weight up. “Declan,” he slurs.

“Parrish?” Declan replies. He is still by the desk.

“You were supposed to be looking into K,” Adam says, says it into Gansey’s neck because he can’t keep his head up anymore, “we were counting on you. How the fuck did he fucking get in here. Do you have any idea how scared both Ronan’s were?”

If Declan replies, Adam misses it. His eyes have become too heavy to hold up as well. Nothing is functioning anymore. He wants Ronan. He wants Ethan. He wants pie. He wants Kavinsky not to be in their fucking bed.

-  

“I don’t like that,” Ronan is saying, quite close to him, “can’t we just - I don’t know - wear gloves and throw him down the stairs?”

“Ronan,” Gansey says, “and then what?”

“I don’t care,” Ronan says, and it’s the raw viciousness in his voice that forces Adam’s eyelids open.

Ronan is sitting by his hip, one arm draped over Adam’s torso. Adam guesses he has to be in Gansey’s bed. There’s a warm lump pressed up against his back. That, he supposes, is Ethan. His limbs feel as if they’re made of molten lead, and it’s with great effort that he lifts one hand to brush at Ronan’s leg.

“Adam,” Ronan says, and, just like that, his voice has left all viciousness behind. It’s still raw though.

“How long was I out?” Adam asks, closes his eyes again, which is probably a bad move if he wants to stay awake.
“An hour,” Ronan says. Adam can feel him shifting around on the bed, onto his knees, onto his side, snaking in by Adam’s side so Adam is in a Ronan and Ethan sandwich. “You snored the whole time.”

“You didn’t;” Gansey says from somewhere above and to the left of Adam, “you barely snored at all.”

“You probably haven’t slept enough, to be honest,” Blue adds from around about the same place as Gansey.

“I don’t feel like I’ve slept at all,” Adam mumbles. Ronan’s hand is on his face, thumb rubbing against his cheek bone, “I’m so tired.”

His eyes snap open.

“God,” he grumbles, hadn’t quite mentally realised how close Ronan’s face was. “Kavinsky is still asleep?”

“Yes,” Ronan says from right the fuck in front of Adam’s face. “We can’t wake him up. We were just discussing how to get him out of here.”

“I said we should call Prokopenko, or maybe Skov, get them to come pick him up and take him away.” Gansey says.

“I said we should throw him down the stairs,” Ronan adds.

“I don’t think he’s waking up,” Adam says, “I think I - well. I think Other Ronan took the dream out from under his feet and we’ve - well - I don’t know. I don’t think Kavinsky is in there anymore.” He pauses a moment. “Ethan is asleep, right?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, is somehow closer than he was before, presses a stubbly kiss to Adam’s chin, “he got right into bed with you and went to sleep as soon as we got back.”
There are a lot of things on right now, balls in the air, things to consider. Whatever. Whatever. Whatever.

“What do you mean he’s not waking up?” Gansey asks.

“Yeah,” Ronan chips in, as if he’s only just processed Adam’s words himself, “he’s not in where?”

“I don’t know,” Adam repeats, “in his body. He’s not. I don’t think. I don’t know. It’s just - when the stream took it all it felt very final?”

“The stream?” Blue asks.

“Yeah,” Adam says. His eyes are closed again. He thinks that maybe he ought to fight them, but he’d rather not, and Ethan is so warm against him, and Ronan is so soft around him, and his head is so heavy, and.

-  

When he wakes up this time, he’s in a different bed, and the air around him is quiet. There is still warmth pressed up against him on both sides though. His head feels remarkably clear, his limbs light.

“Where’s Kavinsky?” he asks once he’s cracked his eyes open to locate Ronan curled up on his shoulder. They’re in their bed, which is very absent from Other Ronan and Kavinsky.

Ronan stirs, then jerks, then lifts his head to look blearily at Adam.

“Baby,” he mumbles.

“Darling,” Adam replies, because Ronan is all pink cheeked and mussed and soft looking and Adam can’t fucking help it.
At this, Ronan becomes pinker and softer looking, ducks in and down to press a kiss to Adam’s lips.

“Have I been asleep for ages, then?” Adam asks, because Ronan is very tender, tastes of sleep, and the room is dark and still.

“It’s already tomorrow,” Ronan sighs against his lips, “I would have been more worried that you’ve been asleep for like… 14 fucking hours, but from what the psychics said, it sounds like you just used up a fuck load of energy with your witchy powers.”

“Mm,” Adam says, tips his head up so they’re kissing again a little. “You talked to them?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, drops his head down to nestle it into the crook of Adam’s shoulder, breathes wetly against his neck, “Persephone told us what happened, and Maura translated.”

“Ok,” Adam says.

“Baby,” Ronan mumbles, “I’m so sorry.”

“What?” Adam asks.

“I hate that you had to do that alone,” Ronan whispers, “I don’t want - I know you don’t think that this is my fault, but, I dragged you into all of this. I want to be able to be there with you to back you up when you’re doing this - this witch shit.”

“Hey,” Adam says, “you were backing me up.”

“That wasn’t me ,” Ronan protests, “that was other - that was him.”

“No,” Adam says, “not that. I know that. You were with Ethan. You were looking after him, keeping him safe. If you didn’t have him I wouldn’t have been able to go to Cabeswater. To do any of that. If I didn’t know he was safe I don’t think I would have been able to do any of that shit.”

Ronan is silent for a long while.
“You really trust me with him?”

“Ronan,” Adam says, frees his hand (with some effort) from the blankets, and reaches up to tug at Ronan’s ear lobe until Ronan lifts his head. “Yes. I trust you with Ethan. I trust you .”

“I trust you,” Ronan replies, blinks rapidly, “I trust you with my life.”

“This isn’t a competition,” Adam snarks, but he has to blink hard as well.

“If it was,” Ronan says, “I think you’d win.”

“Kavinsky,” Adam remembers. Ronan frowns at him.

“What the fuck,” Ronan says, “we were having a moment.”

“Sorry,” Adam says, dips his head to press a kiss to Ronan’s forehead. “What happened to him? He was in here, wasn’t he? Now we are.”

“Good detectiving, detective sleuthson,” Ronan says, “he’s not here anymore.”

“Gee,” Adam says, “thanks for that.”

“Declan took him back to K’s fucking mansion. Used all his sneaky business crook man skills to sneak him in without being seen. If he’s not waking up, he can do it in his own bed.”

“Ok,” Adam says.

“And,” Ronan adds, “I dunno what you said to him? Gansey said you said something . He bought us a whole new set of sheets, and an identical duvet to the one we just bought because he thought we wouldn’t want to sleep in a K tainted bed.”
“He was right,” Adam says.

“So,” Ronan says, “K is gone, the bed was stripped, beaten, and remade, we tidied up, had dinner, and went to bed.”

“Tidied what up?”

“All the shit Other Ronan had dreamed out into here,” Ronan says, “it looked like it had fucking snowed dreams in here. Like an explosion of dream shit. Dream diarrhea.”

“Great imagery,” Adam snorts.

“My biggest dream is to be an evocative storyteller,” Ronan tells him, “can we go back to sleep for a little bit?”

“Yeah,” Adam says, and then changes his mind, “actually, I am so fucking hungry. Get off me for a moment so I can grab food?”

“Ah-hah!” Ronan caws, suddenly enough that Adam jumps a little. Ronan quietens down immediately, presses a kiss and an apology to Adam’s cheek, and then sits up to reach over the side of the bed. “Pie,” he announces, “like you asked for.”

“I love you,” Adam says, says it with sincerity.
Chapter End Notes

I drew some FLYWM fluff, please enjoy! The kiss one Ethan is either like -HEY WADDERU DOIN or - HEY WERE RE MKISSES????

also i sincerely believe that pre haircut parrish boys are like little sheep in the mornings.

PS, you can find me with more TRC art at ardenetoile.tumblr.com
PPS. and you can yell at me about TRC things at etoilearden.tumblr.com
When Ronan wakes up next, Adam isn’t next to him anymore, and Ethan is poking his eyelids, complaining about something something food something snoring.

He relies on the still comfortable feel in his bones to not panic about Adam not being next to him, lets Ethan drag him out of bed. In reality this is Ethan pulling Ronan by his thumb while Ronan pretends Ethan’s strength is overwhelming and he has no other option than to tumble out of the bed.

In the main room, he can hear kitcheny noises from the OSH hazard bathroom/kitchen and makes a beeline for what he supposes has to be Adam seeing as Ethan has abandoned Ronan ship to go wake the lump of blankets that is Gansey up.

“God,” Ronan says when he joins Adam in the kitchen, “are we feeding an army, or just you?”

Adam has what looks like an entire sandwich already in his mouth, is slathering more bread with peanut butter while he chews. Judging by the amount of crumbs on the counter, Ronan is willing to bet that the sandwich in Adam’s mouth is not his first of the morning.

“Fu-ing ‘un-ry,” he says through the bread, “‘re’s ‘than?”

“Ethan’s jumping on Gansey,” Ronan says, “he’s also hungry, but not quite that hungry.”

“I’m so sorry,” Adam snarks, swallowing, “I’m starting to understand why there’s always so much food at the psychic's house.”
“We could make scrambled eggs,” Ronan suggests, leans against the door lintel, “sausages. Omelettes? Porridge? An actual breakfast food? You can eat as much as you want, babe.”

“There’s hash browns in the microwave,” Adam admits, “enough for all of us, not just me. Stop judging”

“I’m not!” Ronan defends, can’t help his amusement though. “I’m not at all surprised you’re fucking ravenous, you skipped like two meals and used all your energy up doing crazy shit. You have to admit it’s a little funny walking in on you stuffing bread into your mouth like you’re being timed though.”

Adam has stuffed his latest sandwich into his mouth and doesn’t deign to reply verbally, just holds up his middle finger, chews determinedly.

“Eggs, too?” Ronan suggests, pushes himself away from the door and over to the counter and Adam, “To go with the hashbrowns? Chew slower you’ll give yourself indigestion.”

Adam appears to be attempting to reply to this, but his mouth is gummed together with the peanut butter. Ronan drops a quick kiss to his crumby cheek and then ducks around him to open the fridge to grab eggs.

- 

By the time Gansey and Ethan make their appearance (preceded by a lot of giggling and what sounded like Ethan being thrown in the air), Adam is making an insane amount of coffee while Ronan prods at a cluster of eggs spitting at him from the frying pan.

“How did you sleep, Adam?” Gansey asks, tugging Ethan further up on his hip, “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes,” Adam says, smiles at Gansey - a rare un-exhausted smile - “I feel like I’ve finally managed to get enough sleep. Sorry about yesterday.”

Gansey frowns, obviously unsure as to what Adam is apologising about. Ronan doesn’t blame him,
he has no idea what he’d been apologising about either.

“Yesterday only worked out because of you,” Gansey says firmly, “I think we would all have been lost without you and your connection to Cabeswater.”

“Thank goodness Other me made some weird deal, then, huh?” Adam replies, “Want coffee, Gans?”

“Wan’ Co-fee!” Ethan demands from where he’s attempting to climb up onto Gansey’s shoulders, “An’ pasta, an’ peenuttabutta.”

“How about hashbrowns and eggs?” Ronan suggests from the stove while Adam snorts at Ethan’s request.

“Yes, please,” Gansey says.

- Truly honestly thank FUCK it was Saturday. Otherwise, Ronan has this sneaking suspicion that Adam might have insisted on going to school, despite the fact that all shit had gone down yesterday. Instead of school, they have to go over everything, have to run through everything they know, fill in the gaps for people who weren’t there or who were asleep. Blue comes over - Maura with her (and honestly that’s a trip, mothers’ shouldn’t be allowed into houses that house small towns in them (or houses that has a room with a fridge and a toilet)) - and Declan comes over.

“I have news,” Declan tells them. He has been mostly quiet for the majority of the conversations. He had elected to lean against the wall gripping his mug of coffee instead of joining everyone else on the couches (and floor around the couches if you were Noah, Ethan, and Ronan). “I’m not sure if it will be news to you, though,” he adds, directs this to Ronan.

“Go on then,” Blue snorts, “you don’t needs to preface your information with disclaimers.”

“I have news,” Noah mumbles, “I’m not sure it will be news unless you’re dead, though.”
“Guys,” Gansey says, “your sense of humour is appalling.”

“That was all Noah,” Blue replies.

Ronan, though usually very firmly on the heckling side when it involves his brother, wishes that his friends would shut the fuck up a little bit so he can hear what Declan says.

“I think Prokopenko was one of Kavinsky’s dreams,” Declan says loudly, obviously having decided that he can’t be bothered waiting for Gansey to tame his court. “Because according to my sources he has also apparently un-wakeable. Like our mother,” he adds, eyes flicking again to Ronan. “I think this is probably a good thing. Prokopenko was in Kavinsky’s mansion, so the official story is most likely going to be that the both took some unsafe drug.”

“That means he’s really de-gone?” Gansey asks, “If his dreams have stopped. That only happens when the dreamers are… gone? And there isn’t another explanation for Prokopenko?”

“Proko was a dream,” Ronan says. Had never been comfortable with the idea of sharing that knowledge, but now it was out in the open. “He wasn’t originally though.”


“And yeah. S’far as we can tell, dreams only stop when the dreamer does.”

“Kavinsky won’t be coming back from this dream,” Declan says, sounds very final, “but I can’t even begin to guess where he is now.”

“I’m sure you could begin,” Maura offers, “he might be in the Other version of here, he might be in the liminal space between awake and asleep, he might just be gone. Maybe he is in Cabeswater, but with no link between his body and there anymore.”

“I think he’s gone,” Adam says, says it quietly. “He felt gone.”

The room takes a moment to digest this. Ronan thinks they’re all digesting it very differently, although there appears to be a common theme of relief. Ethan is busy stacking Gansey’s coin
“I’m making sure the monster ring is dismantled,” Declan continues after no one else breaks the silence. “I started working on that after we first talked about it,” he adds, as if he feels he needs to prove he’s been doing shit. “I’m having the monsters put down. Seeing as they come from an… alternate universe Ronan, I don’t think … ah … Cabeswater would appreciate them hanging about wrecking havoc. On the same note, though,” he says, his tone, which had already been serious, goes almost dour. “Obviously I can’t work directly in the machinations of cleaning up Kavinsky’s shit, which is why I didn’t notice earlier, but there has been someone poking around in his monster rings. Or several someones.”

“Well yeah,” Ronan says, “there were a fu- a lot of people there. Gotta be some curious as- butts.”

Declan looks overly amused at Ronan’s careful swear-word-avoidance-stutter.

“Yes,” he agrees, “but these ones are more important. They’ve been sent here to look for something.”

“Oh,” Blue says, “you’re talking about the people hunting the Greywaren?”

Declan looks startled, and then a bit grumpy.

“Yes,” he says, “they currently think it is Kavinsky - for good reason - but with him off radar they will focus on you next, Ronan-”

“Oh,” Maura says, “as much as I hate to get involved in this, I feel I ought to mention that I’m very well… acquainted with one of these particular… hit men. He knows already that Ronan is the greywaren.”

“What?” Declan snaps, but he’s drowned out by the various other versions of this being spat out around the room, the loudest by far from Blue.

“He’s agreed not to kidnap you or hurt you,” Maura says, in what she apparently seems to think is a reassuring tone, “he’s on our side. We’re trying to work out how to lure the other bounty hunters out of here. Get them off the trail.”
“And you didn’t think this was worth mentioning?” Blue demands of her mother, “Not to sound dramatic, but this is kind of a life or death situation here.”

“Well,” Maura says, “I had it under control, and I figured, you all already have far too many life or death situations, all of which I disapprove of by the way, to deal with.”

“I want to meet him,” Ronan says, “if he’s helping us I want to meet him. I don’t trust him.”

“If Ronan’s meeting him,” Declan says flatly, “then so am I.”

The thing is. Ronan is utterly, bone deep, relieved that Kavinsky isn’t a threat to them anymore. Doesn’t have power over him. Can’t threaten Adam or Ethan. Isn’t draining the ley line. Isn’t fucking shit up.

The other thing is. Ronan is utterly, soul deep, alone in who he is. When his father had died, Ronan had thought himself the only dreamer left, and that had been just another shattered breath upon an already crushed heart. Then he had been dragged into Kavinsky’s orbit and he hadn’t been alone, and for a while, a very short while, it had been so good to feel known, to see himself in someone else. He has no idea if there are any others out there. Surely there has to be, honestly, but.

He had asked K about it once, a smoke hazy night, and K had laughed at him, asked him why the fuck he cared, said that if there were others, they didn’t count. Then he had put his cigarette out on Ronan’s jean clad thigh.

The fucking thing is. He can’t convince himself that he has any reason to truly be upset about K being gone - even if his being gone means that Ronan is once again the only one as magically fucked up as him. This doesn’t mean that he isn’t upset. It just means he can’t justify it, means he doesn’t know how to process it, means he doesn’t know how to bring it up to Gansey who looks so pleased that K is gone, or to Noah because Noah will look at him like he does, or to Adam, because, Adam is so blunt about K being gone. And he should be. He absolutely should be. Ronan wants Adam to feel zero remorse about any hand he might have had in this whole shitting thing, and is pleased that it’s obvious that Adam doesn’t have any remorse. But. Fuck. FUCK.

The thing is that he feels so fucking alone about this and he needs Adam to remind him that he isn’t,
just, without having to tell Adam why he needs this.

“...”

“It almost feels like the end of something,” Gansey is saying that evening. They’re all - the six of them - squished into the kitchen thing while Adam and Gansey cook. “We still have Glendower to find, and wishes to grant, but for some reason I felt like it would all be wrapped up tighter in the mystery of Other Ronan, you know? Like, I almost felt like we would find Glendower and the wish we would get granted would be putting Cabeswater back to rights and Ronan back to his bed, but it turns out we didn’t need Glendower for that, just Adam.”

“Well,” Adam says, “that’s not really true. And it probably is tied up in it all, in some odd way. Maybe the search will be easier now there’s less drain on the line?”

“I still feel really good about the cave at Jesse’s,” Blue says, “when we were there last it felt almost… blocked, like it was waiting for something else to happen first before we could look into it. Maybe this was the thing.”

“True!” Gansey says brightly, knocks the saucepan with an excitedly flailing hand. Adam steadies it. “Maybe everything will truly flow now. I’ve been feeling - it’s been feeling so close recently. Like we’re on the very edge of discovery, like we just need to be tipped over - like-”

“You’re describing the moment before orgasm,” Ronan says dryly, “getting really into that edging mood, huh, Gans?”

“Hey,” Gansey says, “what have I said about comparing my Glendower comments to sexual acts?”

“That it’s almost too easy?” Blue asks.

“Hey!” Gansey says.

“So,” Adam interrupts, loud over the stirring of sauce into pasta, “we have some pretty exciting news for Buddy boy here, don’ we, Gans? Blue?”
“Huh?” Ethan says from over in the bath. He’s not actually having a bath right now, that would be a step too far even for them, but he’s playing with the ever growing collection of ducks.

“Yes!” Gansey says, very, very excited. Ronan doesn’t think he’s seen him this excited over something non-Glendower related in a while.

“What?” Ethan demands, tugs at the shower curtain.

“It’s your birthday real soon,” Adam tells him calmly, “remember? You’re gonna be four.”

“Real big!” Ethan chips in.

“Yeah,” Adam acknowledges, “and you know how you gotta go to Shelby and Mari’s birthday party a while back?”

“Uh-huh.”

“We’re gonna invite them to your birthday party too,” Adam says, keeps his voice very level and calm, almost amusingly so next to Gansey’s expression.

“For me?” Ethan asks, almost suspicious, like he suspects it’s a trap, but then, “wi’ cake?”

“So much cake!” Gansey says, “And balloons, and games, and all of us-”

“We’re gonna have my cousins there too,” Blue says cheerfully, “it’s gonna be super fun, baby.”

“So this monday,” Adam says, turns off the stove, “after school we’re gonna pick you and Dana and Shelby and Mari up and take you to Blue’s, and we’re gonna give you presents and eat cake. How does that sound?”

“An’ Chains-aw?”
“Yep,” Ronan chimes in, “She’s coming.”

“An’ dream chains-aw?”

“Ah,” Ronan says, “sorry bud, maybe not.”

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Ronan’s already in his room, shovelling handfuls of clothes into his drawers when Adam comes in for bed, holding a yawn back behind his hand. Evidently his sleep marathon had already worn off.

“Are you actually tidying up?” Adam asks, “Or just redistributing mess?”

“Bit of both,” Ronan admits, “Ethan went down ok?”

“Yeah,” Adam says, “he’s so fucking excited about the party. I was half tempted to just chuck him into Gansey’s bed and tell him it’s his fault for talking about cake all through dinner.”

“You should have,” Ronan grins, “s’nice he’s excited though.” He’s got both his hands in the drawer, trying to shove the tangled clothing down enough to close it.

“Yeah,” Adam says, crosses the room to press himself against Ronan’s back, wraps his arms around his stomach, “I’m really - thanks for telling me to do this, babe.”

“Hm,” Ronan says, isn’t really in the mood for one of their casual arguments about whether or not Ronan can really be thanked for this, “he’s so lucky to have you as his brother.”

“We’re lucky we met you,” Adam counters, “so fucking lucky. Or like - hah - I don’t know. With all this...Cabeswater shit, it’s more like fate, isn’t it?”

Ronan snorts before he can help himself, abandons the drawers and turns in Adam’s arms so he can grab at him. “Fate?” he asks, grins widely, “God you’re such a sap, Parrish.”
“Shut up,” Adam grins back, “it’s not sappy if it’s true.”

“It is,” Ronan says, bends to kiss Adam quickly, “bed time?”

“Yeah,” Adam agrees, “I’m so excited about having our bed back with just us in it.”

“Sap,” Ronan reiterates.

“Maybe,” Adam agrees, pulls himself from Ronan’s arms so he can start undressing.

“I was thinking we should go vegan,” Ronan says, leans against the chest of drawers so he can watch Adam get caught in his shirt as he tries to give Ronan a look while taking it off.

“What?” Adam asks, throws his shirt at him.

“Other Ronan asked if we were,” Ronan laughs, “because we actually talk about feelings instead of molotov cocktailing them all the time.”

“God,” Adam says, undoes his jeans and kicks his way out of them, “you scared me, dick ass.”

“You’re a dick ass,” Ronan retorts, starts undressing as well, “throwing clothes all over my nice clean floor.”

“Oh this is a nice clean floor?” Adam asks, “Well, I’m so sorry.”

“Dick ass,” Ronan says again.

“So,” Adam says, scratches at his wrist, then at his back, and steps over to tumble onto the bed. “How’re you feeling?”
“About?” Ronan prompts, dumps his clothes on top of Adam’s.

“About Other Ronan going back,” Adam clarifies, wriggling his ass down the bed and shoving the blankets down with his feet, “about - about Kavinsky. Not being… about him being gone.”

“Uh,” Ronan says, stretches until his back clicks, and then comes to shove Adam over onto his side of the bed. “Ok.”

Adam raises his eyebrows. Ronan only feels the effects of this for a few moments though, because as soon as he’s properly on the bed, Adam is pressing himself against Ronan’s chest, tucking his head in on his shoulder. He doesn’t say anything else. He’s obviously waiting.

“I’m glad Other me’s gone back,” Ronan says into Adam’s hair, “I’m - I hope he feels… better there. I think him being back will solve a lot of problems.”

He’s not saying anything here that hasn’t already been said by everyone and himself already today.

“And K?” Adam asks into his neck.

“Oh,” Ronan says, shrugs his shoulders, “y’know.”

“I don’t,” Adam says, Ronan can feels his eyelashes flicking against his skin, “that’s why I’m asking.”

Horribly, Ronan can feel his eyes fucking welling up, which is absolutely not an ok thing to be happening right the fuck now in his boyfriend’s arms about a complete and utter fuck ass.

“Um,” Ronan says, “I’m - I dunno how I feel. How do you feel.”

“Confused,” Adam says, “and pleased,” he adds, an almost vicious note in his voice, “but,” he says, “also worried. Because you’re worried about something.”

“Wouldn’t it be weirder if I wasn’t worried about something?” Ronan retorts, “There’s always
“something to worry about right now.”

“Ronan,” Adam says, tips his head away from Ronan’s neck as the fucking salt fucking water fucking drips the fuck out of Ronan’s eyes and down his fucking cheeks. “Ronan,” Adam repeats, the edge of his voice shocked.

“God,” Ronan grumbles, swipes with irritation at his face, because he’s not even sure he feels like crying, not even sure why he is. It’s like his fucking body is too confused to figure out how it’s supposed to be reacting so it’s just releasing the floodgates. “I’m not crying for him ,” he says, because that feels important to say.

“It’d be ok if you were,” Adam tells him, shuffling up onto his elbow and reaching his other arm around Ronan’s chest to squeeze him tight, “I - I know you guys weren’t always so - so-”

“No,” Ronan grumbles, wishes Adam would lie back down so he doesn’t feel so under scrutiny, “it isn’t about that. Me and him - it’s not about that , it’s about - about -”

Shit and hell.

Adam waits. He’s fucking good at waiting.

“What if there’s no one else?” Ronan says after a few damp moments, “What if I never meet anyone else who can dream.”

“Ah,” Adam says, “babe-”

“I know that’s an unanswerable question,” Ronan says quickly, “it’s just - it’s scary. And - God, maybe it is a bit about the fact that K’s - he’s what - he’s basically dead, isn’t he? And we’re all just like, OKAY with it. Is that what we’re all like? Someone dies in our house and we just roll with it? I don’t want to be like that, I don’t - Adam - I fucking hated him but I can’t - he was still-”

Hell and shit. Maybe he should drop the talking emotions part and just go vegan. Apparently opening his mouth meant that even the weird vague thoughts he hadn’t even looked at yet are just dropping out of his mouth all fucking willy nilly.
“I’m sorry,” Adam says, and there’s the fucking remorse Ronan hadn’t wanted to hear, “I’m sorry,” he says again, “I think - none of us want to think about it like that - but it’s true - and I-”

“You don’t need to be sorry,” Ronan grumbles, tips his head back on the pillow until all he can see is the ceiling, “it’s not your shitting fault.”

“Nah,” Adam says, “I’m - uh - God I’m an ass. I’m sorry ‘cos I just - I don’t - the shit you’ve told me about K, the shit Other Ronan told me about K, the shit about him that I’ve fucking heard - I just - I’m not sorry he’s dead.”

“Huh,” Ronan says, sniffs hard.

“So like,” Adam shrugs, “you’re allowed to need to … to mourn, Ro, I’m just sorry that I can’t. I can’t with you.”

“This is the fucking weirdest conversation Ronan says, “are you actually worried I’ll be mad at you for not feeling sad about this?”

“Yeah,” Adam says.

“I’m not mad at you,” Ronan says quickly, “at all.”

“Ok,” Adam says.

“Is there something about fucking nighttime that makes us have all these fucking heart to hearts?” Ronan asks.

“Yeah,” Adam says, “usually it’s the dark making it less embarrassing ‘cos we can’t see each other, but the light’s still on, so like. Nah. We’re just the emotional weirdos Other Ronan is confused about becoming.”

“Makes sense,” Ronan says, swipes at his face again, rolls over so he’s chest to chest with Adam, “do you have anything you wanna cry about right now, then?”
“Maybe tomorrow,” Adam says, drops down from his elbows to his shoulder, grips Ronan tight, “I’m too tired right now.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, “will you come to church with me tomorrow?”

“What?” Adam asks, doesn’t sound tired anymore. “Why?”

Ronan squirms a little. “Because,” he says, wonders how many times Adam is gonna let him be this pathetic, “because I’m scared about being apart from you right now. Like, I know the bad shit that’s happened lately has happened because of K, and he’s gone so like theoretically we should be totally fine just doing normal shit but-”

“Will we have to pretend to be ‘just friends’ if I go?” Adam interrupts.

“No,” Ronan says quickly, “I mean - maybe some people there would prefer it, but no. I wanna hold your hand the whole fucking time. I’ll kiss you at the peace.”

“The what?”

“The peace the - y’know - uh -”

“Right,” Adam rolls his eyes, “and this - you know - I’ll come, babe, but you know I’m not just gonna come and automatically be a - a catholic, or whatever.”

“I know ,” Ronan says, “I know. I just want you there.”

“Are we bringing Ethan?”

“Do you wanna bring Ethan?”

“I feel like he wouldn’t appreciate sitting quiet for like… however many hours we’re gonna be talked
at, but I guess - we’ll see how he is tomorrow?”

“Fair call,” Ronan says, “I love the fuck out of you, y’know.”

“I love the fuck right back out of you,” Adam retorts, “dumbass.”
Chapter Notes

hey guys - believe it or not but I think FLYWM is nearing its end! (In maybe like ten chapters don't panic. Idk. I'm bad at guessing and also at not dragging shit out). Just thought I'd let you all know NOW so it doesn't jump up at you. :) 
Also i love Declan y'all

If Declan is not pleased to see Adam climbing out of Ronan’s BMW the following morning, he does not show it. He does show his surprise, however, when Ronan leans into the back of the car to grab Ethan and pull him out.

Matthew is ecstatic. Ridiculously so. It is only right now, as Ronan is straightening up with Ethan on his hip, that he realises that Matthew has not met either Adam or Ethan yet, and this is the first time he’s possibly even seen them, and GOD, Ronan had wanted them to meet so much earlier than this but fucking other shit had taken precedence.

“Hi!” Matthew greets Adam, bounding from Declan’s side to Adam’s, bounces exuberantly on the spot as he holds his hand out to him. “I’m Matthew! You can call me Matty! I’m Ronan’s brother! I’m! So! Excited! To! Meet! You!”

He’s like a fucking fizzing firework.

Adam laughs, almost uncomfortable, but takes Matthew’s hand and lets himself be shaken. “Hi Matty,” he says easily, “I’ve been really looking forward to meeting you too.”

“You have?” Matthew asks, looks from Adam to Ronan, to Declan, to Adam, “He’s mentioned me?”

Adam doesn’t hold back.

“Of course,” he says effusively, “he talks about you a lot, he loves you.”
Adam’s grin is probably a little blinding.

“And is that your brother?” he asks loudly, pointing at Ethan with hand as Ronan circles the car to come join them. He hasn’t let go of Adam’s hand yet. Ronan had kind of forgot to mention to Adam how touchy he was.

“Yeah,” Adam says, turns a little as Ronan comes in behind him, bumping up against his back with Ethan’s knees, “this is buddy - Ethan - Buddy, this is Matty, Ronan’s baby brother.”

“Like me!” Ethan says, very pleased. Matthew uses the hand not holding Adam’s hand to reach out to shake Ethan’s. Aglionby was really doing weird shit to him. Who the fuck shakes a babies hand. Overly polite and obedient kids, that’s who.

“Yeah!” Matthew grins, “Like you!”

Ethan, because no one shakes his hand, just grabs onto Matthew’s hand and holds tight. Matthew looks like he’s going to implode.

“Yes, yes,” Declan says from behind the small knot of brothers clutching onto each other, “can we go into church now? Good to see you, Parrishes.”

They go in. Matthew releases Adam because he has to hurry in to say hi to the choir ladies because they like to ruffle his curls. Ronan grabs onto Adam’s hand, threads their fingers together, tugs him so they are shoulder to shoulder, keeps Ethan on his hip so he’s surrounded by Parrishes. Declan gives him a look, but says nothing.

Adam has brought an activity book for Ethan, and a small tupperware of banana chips, and lots of pencils for him to draw all over the activity book with, and as soon as they’re settled in the pew, Ethan wants them.

They put Ethan at their feet, where he sprawls, half under the pew, chips in mouth, pencils in mouth and hands.
Declan doesn’t say anything.

Ronan kisses Adam full on the mouth at the peace.

Matthew giggles, Declan says nothing.

Adam stays in the pew with Ethan while the Lynches all go up for communion. He doesn’t want a blessing either. Declan doesn’t comment.

“Are you guys coming to lunch with us?” Matthew asks as they spill out of the church.

Ethan is slumped against Adam’s shoulder, complaining about something in a low grumpy voice. Adam’s hands are busy holding Ethan up and soothing him, so Ronan can’t cling on to him. Instead, Matthew is clinging to him. He is slung over Ronan’s shoulders, arms crossed around Ronan’s chest. Declan is still quiet.

“Yeah,” Ronan says, “uh, I can, bab- uh - Adam, do you need to get back?”

“I can do lunch,” Adam says, is patting Ethan’s hair down. He ducks down a little to press a quick kiss to Ethan’s cheek before turning to look over his shoulder at Declan. “Is that alright?”

“Of course,” Declan says stiffly, “it will be good to have all of us together.”

“Yeah,” Matthew chimes in, “you should invite Ashley,” he suggests to Declan, “it can be a real family lunch.”

“No,” Declan says. Still very stiff. “This is enough, I think.”

Ronan considers pushing on this issue. Doesn’t. He crouches down a little from the knees so Matthew can hop up onto his back.
“We’ll take the BMW,” he tells Declan, “and Matty.”


“Normal place?” Matthew asks, digging his heels into Ronan’s thighs, “I want the chicken salad and chips and also the fish fingers.”

“You need to stop growing,” Ronan snorts, “you’re gonna spend all our money with how much food you eat.”

Matthew gets his chicken salad, his chips, his fish fingers. Also a large hot chocolate with extra marshmallows. Declan gets pan fried fish a caesar salad, and a black coffee. Ronan buys a fucking huge dish of nachos and the frothiest latte money can buy. Adam gets a sandwich for himself, and a mini quiche and apple juice for Ethan. Ronan feels like he should have suggested they go somewhere else, just this once. Somewhere a little cheaper. He knows Declan will offer to pay for lunch, but he also knows that this time Adam will not let him pay for lunch. And if Ronan offers to pay for lunch Adam will turn him down. So.

This hasn’t been such an issue lately, in fact, hardly at all. Adam had been letting a lot of money things slide, had been letting Ronan provide for him every so often. This feels a little different though, like, he feels that Adam feels like he needs to prove himself in front of Ronan’s brothers, and Ronan paying for his lunch is not the way he wants to do that.

Matthew and Ethan end up sitting basically on the same seat, because this cafe offers colouring in pages to children, and Matthew is a little (fake, but possibly actually real) upset he doesn’t get one and Ethan immediately chimes up that he’ll happily share. They get on as easily as Ronan thought they would, which is very. Ronan thinks that on Ethan’s half, this is probably partially due to the fact that both Ronan and Adam like Matthew and show it, and mostly due to the fact that Matthew is just intrinsically likeable.

“Do you guys want to come to Bud’s birthday party tomorrow?” Adam asks, extremely casually while everyone is distracted with eating.

Matthew all but chokes on whatever greasy thing he currently has in his mouth.
“When is it?” Declan asks, because he never says no to anything until he can act like he is too busy.

“Right after school finishes,” Adam says, reaches around Matthew so he can reposition Ethan’s juice a little further away from the edge of the table. “I thought it might be a good opportunity for Ethan and Matty to hang out more, and also,” he adds on, not looking at Ronan or Declan, “to talk with Maura about the… about that guy she knows.”

“We can come,” Declan says. Matthew actually chokes a little this time.

- - -

They stay out a little longer than Ronan usually stays with his brother’s after church. He supposes this is mostly due to the fact that Ethan and Matthew have a lot of things to talk about at length (mostly things about food and their favourite dinosaurs). It means that Ronan has to practice more patience with Declan, because there is no way he’s picking a fight with him in front of Ethan, and also, because he doesn’t want to pick a fight with him because Declan keeps looking at him like he has something to say and Ronan thinks he knows what is is.

When Ronan had gotten back from the bakery with Ethan to Monmouth the other day (after Adam had fucking defeated the shitty mess that had been mangled timelines and Kavinsky), Declan had been there. Declan being there had only been an afterthought in Ronan’s mind for quite a few minutes because he was focused on Adam, Adam, Adam, Adam, Kavinsky? Adam.

But then, then he had been able to breathe because Adam was fine, just asleep, and no one else seemed worried, and Kavinsky wasn’t waking up anytime soon to fuck more shit up, so. He had been able to look at Declan and had seen how white and pinched his face was. He had gotten up from Adam’s side because he needed a drink of water, and Declan had intercepted him on the way back and had wrapped his arms around his shoulders and tugged him in against his chest.

This was odd for very many reasons, but the main reason it was odd was because from a distance Ronan always saw Declan as so much bigger than reality. He held himself like a stone monument, large and imposing. Pressed chest to chest, the reality was that Declan is built almost identically to Ronan. That he’s not even a full head taller.

“I should have told you about K earlier,” Declan had said, “I shouldn’t have underestimated him.”
He didn’t say what Gansey told him later. That Declan had broken in to Ronan’s bedroom to see Other Ronan and Kavinsky, to try to wake one or both of them up. That he had sat on the edge of the bed, gripping Other Ronan’s hand until he had simply disappeared.

So. It wasn’t like he was all warm feelings and happiness towards Declan right now, but, he wasn’t the usual bitter anger that generally accompanied spending time with Declan. He almost wanted to spend time with Declan.

Adam was the one who ended up starting them home, which Ronan wasn’t really surprised about. Adam always seemed to be skirting the edge of exhaustion, but today he seemed to have already just fallen right into it.

“Need a nap?” Ronan teases as they pull into the parking lot at Monmouth. Ethan is asleep in the backseat, head hanging on his seat straps, and Adam looks like he might be about to follow suit.

“Yeah,” Adam admits, “take me to bed.”

“For a nap?” Ronan clarifies, because he would much prefer stating the obvious than missing a suggested make out session or whatever.

“Yes,” Adam says emphatically. He yawns, unbuckles himself, stretches. “I’ll put buddy down. You don’t have to nap with me, though, obviously,” he adds, already pulling himself out of the car.

“Don’t be a dumbass,” Ronan snorts, “what the fuck else would I wanna do with my afternoon?”

“Dunno,” Adam says, yawns again as he opens the backseat and reaches in to unbuckle Ethan, “hang out with Gans? Make playlists? Play with Chainsaw? Speed around in the car?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, gets out of the car, resists the urge to slam the door, closes it very quietly instead so as not to wake Ethan up, “nah. Napping with you trumps all that shit.”
“You’re so -” Adam says, pauses a moment while he lifts a mumbling half asleep Ethan up and onto his shoulder. Positions him carefully before shutting the car door again. “So gay,” he finishes with a smirk over the top of Ethan’s head.

“Guilty as fucking charged,” Ronan whispers.

Gansey meets them in the main room, mouth already open to say something very loudly. He shuts it quickly at Ronan’s expression, spots Ethan asleep, and then says in a whisper; “How was church?”

“Fine,” Ronan says in a low voice as Adam peels off from him to take Ethan to his bedroom, “nice.”

“Oh good,” Gansey says, sounding pleased, “do you think Ethan is gonna sleep long? Blue and I were thinking we could take you and Adam to Jesse Dittley farm and cave today - we could leave Ethan with Maura or Persephone-”

“I don’t think today is good,” Ronan says before Gansey can start thinking up more suggestions, “Adam’s really tired.”

“Oh,” Gansey says, “more tired than usual?” It’s a joke.

“Yes,” Ronan says firmly, “he needs a nap.”

“Do you think he’s ok?” Gansey asks. His voice had returned to normal once the bedroom door had shut behind Adam, but now he dropped back into a whisper.

“Yes,” Ronan says again, firmer, “he is. He’s just - he’s gotta be fine, Gans. He’s just tired. Things have been tiring. He’s fine.”

Gansey looks at him oddly.
“Are you ok?” Gansey asks.

“Yes,” Ronan says, clears his throat, “hah,” he says, “none of us are really ok, Gans. We’re all just dealing, right now, aren’t we? None of us are ok. Probably we’re never gonna be ok, are we? Things are gonna just keep piling up and dragging us down, and, sure, we’ve fixed one problem, but that just means there’s room for another problem, doesn’t it? Something else fucked up is gonna happen soon, isn’t it? We’re-

“Hey,” Gansey says. He has his arms around Ronan before Ronan’s even really aware he was moving towards him. This is a very different kind of hug than the one from Declan. For one, Declan was very stiff about it while Gansey just sort of molds around him because they’ve been leaning on each other for years now. For another, Gansey is shorter than him, but his shoulders are wider.

“Hey,” Gansey says again, “we can’t think like that. That’s not how this is going to be forever.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Ronan asks.

“It really isn’t,” Gansey replies, “it isn’t.”

He can hear Adam closing Ethan’s bedroom door behind him again.

“We’re gonna get to normal,” Adam says from behind them, “to our version of normal.”

Ronan clears his throat, nods against the side of Gansey’s head.

“Yes,” he says, “I know.”

Adam is behind him, hand resting against the small of his back.

“It’s just really overwhelming, sometimes,” Ronan adds in a mumble. Can feel Gansey nodding back against him now.

“Yeah,” Adam says, rubs his thumb against the dips in Ronan’s spine, “it is. It’s ok to be overwhelmed, baby,” he says, voice soft.
Ronan snorts a little. “You know,” he says, is pleased he can make his voice sound normal, “when you’re caught off guard with emotions you immediately go into your comforting Ethan voice?”

Adam tsks behind him, presses his thumb in a little harder. “Yes,” he says, “is that a problem?”

“No,” Ronan says, then, “take me to bed?”

“Thought it was the other way around?” Adam shoots back. Gansey clears his throat.

“While you guys are napping,” he says, “I was thinking I might go with Blue to the Dittley’s?”

“Sounds good,” Adam says vaguely, “do you need us to come?”

“Maybe next time,” Gansey says evenly. He squeezes Ronan once more, then releases him. “Ronan needs a nap right now. We’ll keep you updated though,” he adds quickly.

“Ok,” Adam says.

- 

They go to bed.
Indestructible daisy chains

Despite the fact that Ronan hadn’t really been planning on napping as well (had been planning on being that creepy boyfriend who just watches their boyfriend sleep, because God *damn* Adam looks cute when he’s asleep), he must have fallen asleep, because when he wakes up, the room around them is dark, and Ethan is sitting on his hips talking to Adam.

“An’” Ethan is saying, “sh’says is more fun wi’ me, an’, an’, an’, *yeah.*”

“You are very fun,” Adam yawns back, “do you guys always just look for bugs?”

Ah. Orphan Girl.

“Nah,” Ethan says, “s’m’times? We jum’ up’n’down an’ yell at the’ cloud. Cloud-ssss.”

“Good use of time,” Adam says. “Ro,” he adds on, because somehow he always seems to know when Ronan’s awake, “I’m hungry as heck. Let’s get up and eat.”

“’M hungry too!” Ethan announces, bounces a little on Ronan’s hip, “an’,” he adds, raising his voice substantially, “Adam said I hadda be quiet ‘cos you’re sleepin’ bu’ NOW YOU ARE WAKE AN’ WE CAN YELL.”

- Gansey has texted, says they’ll eat out, and also, that Noah was with them but he disappeared, so if he turns up again, to let them know.

Adam makes them quiche. Ronan pokes around Monmouth as if Noah might be hiding behind the curtains, Ethan on his shoulders, Chainsaw on Ethan’s shoulders.

-
Monday arrives quickly. After Gansey had gotten back, he had filled Ronan and Adam in on their farm discoveries, which were mostly along the line of ‘there’s something in there, I know it.’ Then he had filled them in on the arrangements at Fox Way that had been made for the birthday party tomorrow. Persephone had asked permission to make the cake, permission Adam had immediately given obviously, because when was he supposed to bake a cake and in what kitchen, and also Persephone is like a god revealed in bakery. They look at the photos of the cave on Gansey’s phone. Snort as he quickly thumbs past the pictures Blue had taken of him doing dumb shit, snort louder as he thumbs even quicker past the photos he’d taken of Blue while she wasn’t looking.

They go to bed. They wake up.

“Is it time f’party now?” Ethan asks, around about six thirty.

“No,” Ronan tells him, because Adam has groaned in response and shoved his head under Ronan’s arm. “Not yet, bud, this afternoon, remember?”

“Wan’ cake now, though,” Ethan protests, sticks his lower lip out as far as it will go, slumps despondently against the edge of the bed.

“You can have breakfast now,” Ronan suggests, “we got those choco bites you like. And orange juice.”

“Mm,” Ethan says into the sheets. Reaches out scrabble at Adam’s side, “cuddlin’ first. An’ kisses.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, because who can deny someone that fucking adorable? “C’mere then, baby,” he says, sits up a little to reach over Adam and lift Ethan into the bed.

“Am four,” Ethan tells him seriously once Ronan’s plonked him down in his lap and has tugged the blanket up around him. “Am real big. As big as Matty.”


“God,” Adam groans, pulls himself out from under Ronan and into a vague upright position, “yeah,” he says, “yeah. Happy birthday, sweetheart.”
Ethan grins widely at him, bellyflops over from Ronan’s lap into Adam’s.

“Tell me th’ story,” Ethan demands of Adam, staring up at him, kicking his legs against Ronan’s thigh, “m’birfa-day story.”

“Ahh,” Adam says, and this is obviously a tradition here. Or, Ronan supposes, as much of a tradition as there can be when Ethan is only four years old. “Ok, come under the blankets then, right here, and we’ll tell the story.”

“’Kay,” Ethan says, wriggles up from his horizontal position across Adam and Ronan and hops into the bed where Adam is holding the blanket out for him. “Ready,”

“Alright,” Adam says, leans in against Ethan and Ronan, drops his head down so he’s resting it on Ronan’s shoulder. “When I was four and a bit years younger than I am now,” he starts, “I found out I was gonna be a big brother.”

“’Cos of me!” Ethan says.

“’Cos of you,” Adam agrees, “and then, mum had an accident, and you came early!”

“Uh-oh,” Ethan says.

“Uh-oh. You came so early, that when you came out you had to go into an incubator - a warm place to help you keep growing - ‘cos you weren’t all baked yet!”

“Like a cake!” Ethan says.

“Yes,” Adam says, “you were still soggy in the middle!”

“Oops,” Ethan says.

“And you were so little, so little that the baby clothes we had didn’t fit you -”
“Th’ name bit!” Ethan says loudly.

“Ok,” Adam says. “So, ‘cos mum was so - ‘cos she was so tired after the birth, she went home to sleep, and I stayed with you at the hospital. But she forgot to give you a name before you left, told me I should, so, y’know what I almost called you?”

“What?” Ethan asks, although he obviously already knows.

“Almost called you Goliath, like the giant, ‘cos you were so small I thought it’d be funny.”

Ethan laughs. Ronan snorts.

“But then I thought,” Adam says, “that you suited Ethan better. Because that means strong, and you were so strong, baby.”

“Am,” Ethan agrees, “an’,” he says, “how long was I in the inca-u-better for?”

“Two months,” Adam tells him, “and you got bigger, and bigger, and the nurses let me hold you properly, and I visited you every day and talked to you, and then, I got to take you home, exactly four years ago now.”

“Yeah,” Ethan says, grins widely at him, “and I keep gettin’ big uh and big uh and soon I will be the big uh est.”

“You will ,” Adam grins back at him, lifting his head from Ronan’s shoulder, “I bet you’re gonna be bigger than me!”

“So big!” Ethan says, “An’ now breakfast?”

“And now breakfast,” Adam agrees, “c’mon, then.”
He leans over, kisses Ronan, and then gets out of bed, Ethan on his hip.

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Ronan doesn’t get to ask Adam about all of this until after they’ve dropped Ethan at Dana’s and Adam’s driving them to Mountain View.

“So,” he says, “it’s not his actual birthdate today?”

“No,” Adam says, is looking over his shoulder to check for an opening into the traffic, “but I’ve always celebrated his birthday on the day he got out. It made more sense to me at the time.”

“It makes sense,” Ronan agrees, “did you really name him?” he asks.

“Yup,” Adam says, glances from the traffic to Ronan and offers him a small smile, “and I did really almost call him Goliath. That’s probably the only bible story I know, though, don’t get excited.”

“I’m amazed you didn’t call him David instead,” Ronan says, and Adam laughs a little.

“My uncle is called David,” he says, which is the first time Ronan has ever heard of any other Parrish family members, “I didn’t know anyone called Ethan.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, then, “did you - did your parents ever visit him in the NICU? Or was it just you?”

“Just me,” Adam says, clears his throat, “it’s always been just me,” he adds, not quite bitterly. “I don’t blame my mum for that though. She wasn’t in good shape.”

“Because of the… accident?” Ronan asks.

Adam nods. He doesn’t need to expand on this. Ronan can very well imagine what the accident was. Who it was.
“Hey,” Ronan says, “call me a bad boyfriend, but like, I don’t know when your birthday is.”

Adam laughs. Doesn’t give him the answer.

“Babe,” Ronan cajoles, “come on. I gotta know when to be obnoxiously soppy and attentive to you all day.”

“Uh,” Adam says, “you’ve missed out this year already then,” he says, says it quickly, clears his throat again. “It was last week.”


“Yeah,” Adam shrugs, “we were, uh, busy. It was wednesday. The third.”

“What the fuck,” Ronan says.

Adam shrugs again. The tips of his ears are slowly burning pink. “We were busy,” he repeats, “there was no point in mentioning it. It’s not like I do anything for it anyway.”

“I want to do something for it,” Ronan protests, “it’s important.”

“It isn’t,” Adam objects, “it isn’t. I really don’t - I don’t like my birthday, Ronan. It’s not like Ethan’s. There was fucking no one who wanted me when I was born, I don’t want to have to spend a day remembering that.”

“Yeah your parents were the fucking shittiest,” Ronan says, “but I want you now. So does Gans, and Blue, and all the fucking witches, and Ethan. We fucking want you. And love you. And want to fucking get to celebrate that you’re here, with us.”

Adam shrugs yet again, but this time it doesn’t look like a dismissal so much as a, ‘throat too blocked to say words’ shrug. He pulls in at Mountain View, parks. Puts the brake on. Tips his head to the side to look at Ronan.
“Ok,” he says. “I turned eighteen on the third. I don’t want to celebrate it because it just - it hurts. I don’t want a present. You wanting me here with you is enough.”

“I’m always gonna fucking want that,” Ronan says, possibly snaps, “I love you.”

“I love you,” Adam says back to him.

“I’m sorry you spent your fourteenth birthday in hospital looking after a tiny baby,” Ronan says, “I’m sorry you haven’t gotten to have a proper birthday, or be happy about it being your birthday. I’m sorry we didn’t get to meet earlier.”

“You can spoil me on my birthday next year,” Adam tells him, “I’m hoping we won’t be in such a weird position next year.”

“You’ll let me get you a present?” Ronan asks.

“Maybe,” Adam smiles, “maybe just a cake.”


“Stop it,” Adam mumbles, kisses him again, “this is too much emotion for morning.”

“Deal with it,” Ronan mumbles back into the kiss, “I have nowhere else to put all these emotions.”

“Hey,” Adam says, kisses him once more, bites down on his lower lip, pulls away, “when will you be eighteen?”


“Just thinking,” Adam says, “about what things will be legal for us to do in October.”
Ronan stares at him a moment, then snorts loudly. “Oh my God,” he says, “fuck off.”

Adam laughs at him, leans in to kiss him again.

“Anyway,” Ronan says once Adam pulls back again, “pretty sure it’s legal seeing as we’re only a few fucking months apart. You’re not suddenly too much of an adult to be with a seventeen year old.”

“Uh-huh,” Adam says, unbucks himself, “well maybe.”

“Wait a minute,” Ronan says, “is this a conversation?”

“What?” Adam snorts, “What do you mean ‘is this a conversation’?” He leans into the backseat to grab his backpack.

“I mean,” Ronan says, “are we having an actual discussion about when we wanna do...stuff.”

“If we have to say stuff, then I think we aren’t,” Adam teases him.


“Um,” Adam says, fiddles with the zip on his backpack. “I guess it could be.”

It’s a little stupid how quickly Ronan’s emotions can shift from simply warm and mushy to far too horny for a school morning.

“Do you wanna?” he asks.

Adam shrugs one shoulder. “What a dumb question,” he says, “of course I wanna.”

“So?” Ronan says.
“I mean,” Adam continues, glances out the window of the car, “like, not right now.”

“No,” Ronan says, “no. I mean - before. You said you weren’t ready for anything else. Anything more. You are now? You feel ok about it now? You’re not just… saying yes because… just because?”

“I’m saying I want to,” Adam says, finally looking at Ronan, pinning him down firmly with his gaze, “because I trust you with… with everything. Because, God, I am so attracted to you. Because this feels real, feels like it’ll last, feels good.”

“Thought you said it was too early in the morning for emotions?” Ronan says.

“These aren’t emotions,” Adam says, “they’re facts. What about you? Do you want to just because, or?”

“Fuck that,” Ronan says cheerfully, “I don’t do that shit for just because. It’s because I love you. And I think I fucking always will.”

“Pretty sure Declan would have something to say about getting hitched so young,” Adam says.

“No one said anything about fucking getting married, Parrish,” Ronan snorts, “I’m just talking about commitment.”

“We could say something about getting married,” Adam says then, “not yet. Maybe in a couple of years.”


“Ok?” Adam says.

“Yeah. So. Can I suck you off tonight?”
“Oh my God,” Adam says, “I’m going to fucking class, Lynch. Yeah. I guess. I mean. If we have time. We still have, like, shit to do. Go to school. I love you. Bye.”

He leans in to kiss Ronan once more, than basically explodes out of the car.

“Do you have a present for Ethan?” Gansey asks in history, “I dunno how many I can give him before Adam eviscerates me.”

“Probably one,” Ronan snorts, “fucking hell, Gans, how much shit have you gotten him?”

“Just a few things,” Gansey protests, “I just - internet shopping is so… addictive.”

“I kinda wanted to dream him up his own little raven, but I think Chainsaw would be mad as hell.”

“She would be,” Gansey agrees, “plus we don’t need any more additions to our household.”

“Whatever,” Ronan says, “but yeah. I - I actually don’t have his present yet.”

“Ronan,” Gansey gasps, and Ronan hurries to continue.

“Cos I wanna dream it,” he says, “but I’ve been… like, not in the right mood or place for dreaming the last few days.”

“Well,” Gansey says, “you better hurry up and put your mind in the right place before this afternoon.”

“Was planning on napping at lunch,” Ronan grunts, “you wanna be my pillow?”

“Sure,” Gansey says, “do you think that now you’re openly dating someone else, people will stop
assuming we’re dating?”

“Nah,” Ronan snorts, “they’ll just think you’re my bit on the side.”

“Ugh,” Gansey says, “whatever.”

He naps at lunchtime, out by the field under a tree, head in Gansey’s lap, Gansey on look out. It’s a warm day, and people are too involved with the impromptu soccer game on the field to pay attention to Ronan, and their clamouring blurs easily into an almost white noise.

He falls asleep easily. He just wants this to be an in and out. He thinks Cabeswater will be ok with this, it’s very simple, it’s not even for him.

Orphan Girl is holding it, sitting in a patch of sunlight brighter than what Ronan had fallen asleep in.

“Hi brat,” he says to her, crosses the patch of flowers in between them, “that’s for Ethan.”

“I like it,” she says, simple, puts it in her mouth and bites at it, “I want to get out of here.”

“Excuse me?” Ronan asks, drops down next to her, “what’s wrong with in here?”

“You didn’t fix it,” she says, “you think you did and you didn’t.”

“What?” Ronan asks, frowns heavily at her, “Is Other Ronan still here?”

“No,” she says, “that wasn’t the problem.”

“It was a problem,” Ronan points out, “what is this problem then?”
“Something is coming,” she tells him, “it’s gonna wake up and come.”

Ronan remembers the witches saying something was awake.

“It’s not here already?” He asks, and she shakes her head hard.

“When all the tree branches were crossed,” she says, “the wind told me.”

“The wind told you what?”

“About Glendower,” Orphan Girl says, as if she’s just saying something very normal. “About who’s waking up.”

“What?” Ronan says, this is all a lot to be hearing while he’s asleep in Gansey’s lap. “Glendower is going to wake up?”

“I didn’t say that,” Orphan Girl says crossly, hands Ethan’s present over to Ronan.

“What are you saying, then?” Ronan asks back, just as cross.

“That I want to get out of here!” Orphan Girl snaps, leaps to her hooves, “I want to get out! I want to get out!”

Before he can work up words or a response, She’s taken off in a whirl of rage, disappeared into the trees.

Ronan wakes up.

“Oh,” Gansey says, takes the present out of Ronan’s frozen hands, “it’s beautiful.”
There’s a short pause while Ronan regains control of his body, and then he sits up out of Gansey’s lap, and leans against the trunk of the tree they are under.

“It is, isn’t it,” he says, “very sturdy too. I know this, because Orphan Girl had it in her mouth just a few moments ago.”

“Ah,” Gansey says, hands it back over.

“She’s scared,” Ronan says, “she says something is coming. That something is waking up.”

“I thought that - I thought the waking up thing was the Other you,” Gansey says, “I thought we’d fixed that.”

“Apparently not,” Ronan says, “she said something about Glendower, Gans. He’s connected to what is going to wake up. We’re close.”

“And she’s scared about that?” Gansey asks, narrows his eyes, “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Ronan admits, “maybe he won’t be the only thing waking up.”

“That is scary,” Gansey agrees, “and exciting. Will you wrap Ethan’s present?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, “haha, I should have got Cabeswater to dream wrap it or some shit.”

“Can you imagine?” Gansey says, “It’d wrap it in like… indestructible leaves. Or the idea of moss. Or maybe a pizza box.”

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Gansey goes to pick Adam up today. He’s going to pick Adam and Blue up and take them to Fox Way while Ronan goes to pick Ethan, Dana, and the girls up. He wants to pick Adam up too, but there isn’t enough room in his car, and Dana doesn’t know Gansey well enough for him to be the one picking Ethan up. So.
“Ro-OH-NAN!” Ethan greets him from the kitchen window. It’s open, and he’s hanging half out of it, Dana holding onto the back of his shirt, “HEY.”

“Hey baby!” Ronan calls back, wrestling the gate open, “You ready to party?”

“YES,” Ethan yells, gets hooked back into the kitchen.

Dana opens the door a moment later, releasing Ethan, and Ethan bounds into Ronan’s legs, clings until Ronan picks him up and swings him up onto his hips.

They pack everyone into the BMW. It’s a bit of a squish, three car seats along the back of the BMW, but they make it. Having Dana sitting next to him in the front of the car is really fucking weird. He hasn’t had an adult in his car for quite a long time.

“It’s so nice you guys are doing this,” Dana says as they drive, “I know Adam’s always been...too busy to do a party before this, so I’m glad he feels like he has the time to do it now you two are...friends.”

“Boyfriends,” Ronan says without thinking, and then, panics slightly, “Uh,” he says, “I mean-”

“Ah hah,” Dana says, “so, is this a new development or was Adam...bending the truth last time I asked if you two were dating?”

“Uh,” Ronan says, because he doesn’t want to even imagine Adam lying about them being together, but it would kind of make sense. He’s never asked Adam about Dana’s views on ‘gayness’. Maybe she was super homophobic. Maybe she’d be shitty about it. Maybe Adam just didn’t want her to know ‘cos he wanted to keep it seperate -

“It’s fine,” Dana says soothingly, “I said that to him before as well. Just, y’know, uh, it’s a surprise ‘cos it’s Adam, y’know. But -”
“When did you ask last time?” Ronan asks.

Dana shrugs, “A while back,” she says, “when you first started coming to the house to pick the big boy up, back there.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, “we probably weren’t then.”

“So,” Dana presses, “you are now?”

“You’re not gonna go spreading this around to his parents, yeah?” Ronan asks, “I mean. They already know, but they don’t need to know jack shit- uh. Anything more.”

“Never,” Dana says firmly. “I don’t even know them, but I’m pretty sure I’d hate ‘em.”


“Good,” Dana says, “he needs that.”

Ronan nods stiffly. Hopes he hasn’t fucked any shit up.

-  

When they get to Fox Way, there are balloons out in the yard, and Adam leaning against the doorway, waiting for them.

Ronan wants to follow Ethan in leaping out of the car as soon as he’s unbuckled to ran full tilt at Adam’s legs to be pulled into his arm for kisses and for chucking in the air.

He instead follows at a vaguely more demure pace, helping Dana get the girls out of the car, and greets Adam with a slightly less demure kiss. The fact that he doesn’t shy away from it in front of Dana makes Ronan think, happily, that Dana not knowing was simply because it had slipped Adam’s mind, not because it had been a purposefully kept secret.
“Hey,” Adam says when Ronan pulls back, jostles Ethan up more on his hip, “glad you could make it.”

“Don’t be a butthead,” Ronan says, glances back at Dana arriving just behind him with Shelby and Mari, “where else would I go with a car full of kids?”

“Hi Dana,” Adam says around Ronan, tugs Ronan a little to the side so he can see her, keeps his fingers hooked in Ronan’s belt loops. “Thanks for coming, please come in.”

“What a perfect host,” Ronan mumbles into Adam’s ear, and Adam snorts.

“Take Ethan and go to the kitchen, will you,” he says, bundling Ethan in all his flailing limbed glory over to Ronan, “and I’ll show the girls where to put their shoes and stuff.”

Ronan and Ethan head to the kitchen, Ethan talking a hundred miles a minute, which is impressive, and would be more impressive if what he was saying was coherent.

Once in the kitchen, Ethan gets swept out of his arms by Blue, and then he’s somewhere with Maura, and then Adam and the girls and Dana are in the kitchen too, and Ethan is grabbing the girls’ hands and running off somewhere outside to the backyard shed where the best bugs are, and Blue’s cousins are promising to show them which ones taste the best, and there’s a small collection of presents growing on the table, surrounded by pies and nibbles and chippies and juices, and Persephone gives him a sneak peak of the cake, and there’s so fucking much going on. People everywhere.

Declan and Matthew arrive about ten minutes later, are greeted by Calla, which has to be an experience in itself, and then by Orla, which is like a completely opposite and yet possibly more terrifying experience, and by the time Declan makes it to Ronan in the reading room where he’s hiding from everyone, he looks harried as all hell.

“Hey,” Declan says.

“Oh.” Ronan says, despite the fact that he’d watched him and Matthew arrive and be greeted through the window, “You’re here.”
“I said I would be here,” Declan says flatly, “so I am.”

“Are you here for the party, or to meet Maura’s hit man?”

“Could be both,” Declan grunts, shoves his hands into his pockets. “I wanted to - I’m glad I get to see that you have a community.”

Ronan snorts, then sighs, then leans hard against the window pane, cheek sticking to glass. He wants Adam. Adam is somewhere wrangling children, or helping in the kitchen, or talking to Dana, or Persephone, or Maura, or whatever.

“Where’s Matthew?” he asks.

“He heard the kids were eating bugs and immediately wanted to join them,” Declan says wryly, “so I think he’s outside somewhere.”

“How’s he doing?”

“He’s fine,” Declan says, “probably would be better if you spent more time with him.”

Ronan scowls, shifts squeakily on the glass so the scowl hits Declan. “I’ve been a bit fucking busy,” he points out.

“Yeah,” Declan says, “I know. You’ve been so busy you might’ve died or some shit. He needs to see you more than once a week. You might have a whole new family, here, Ronan, but Matty doesn’t. He only has us.”

“What about you,” Ronan asks then, “what do you have. Why are you talking about Matty like you don’t exist.”

Declan looks at him for a moment like he wants to say that he doesn’t, that that’s not important. Than he shrugs, looks away.
“I need you too,” he says, “you and Matty are my only family. You’re the only things truly important to me. I need you to be my family. That’s why I’m here, Ro. I’m here because this is your family, and I want to be part of it. Even if it’s just a small part.”

This is honestly far too truthful, hard hitting. Ronan has to close his eyes. To swallow hard.

“Shit’s been hard,” Ronan mumbles, “I’ll try and do better.”

Declan squeezes his shoulder, leaves his hand there.

“We should,” Ronan says, sighs, “we should go and join the party again.”

They join the party again.

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Ethan opens presents; he gets new shoes from Gansey - ones that light up and flash when stomped, a hand knitted jumper from the witches, an entire fucking 800 piece lego set from Declan and Matthew (he can see Adam rolling his eyes, still smiling though), matching shirts with Chainsaw from Blue, the indestructible daisy chain from Ronan (which ends up in Ethan’s curls immediately), a collection of toy cars from Dana and the girls, a picture book about skateboarding from Noah, and a battered looking handwritten book from Adam. Everyone gets sloppy, chocolate smeared kisses.

They sing happy birthday, or, various versions of it. Ethan blows out his candles with only minimal spit. They eat cake - Persephone’s constructed a ridiculously huge and extravagant cake that looks like a log covered in bugs. The children are ecstatic. Adam kisses Ronan full on the lips twelve times throughout the party. Games are played until children drop like flies. Witch children are bundled onto the sofas, Ethan is splayed out in Adam’s lap, head lolling. Declan offers to take Dana and her girls home.

Ronan, Gansey, and Blue assist in cleaning up after the rampage of children and excitement mixed together. Adam is asleep underneath Ethan.
When Adam wakes up it’s not to his usual wake up call of Ethan poking him, but rather to the absence of Ethan’s weight on top of him. The now just as familiar weight of Ronan is wedged into the armchair next to him.

“Where’s buddy?” Adam asks, eyes still closed, to announce the fact that he’s awake and to give Ronan a chance to pretend he wasn’t just staring at Adam’s face for god knows how long.

“I just put him down in Blue’s room,” Ronan says. He hasn’t bothered to look away from Adam’s face, just leans in closer when Adam opens his eyes. “Cos Declan’s back. And - and Maura’s hitman mate is coming over. Remember?”

“Oh,” Adam says, because he had forgotten, “oh. Yes. Everyone else is gone?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, “the cousins all got scooped up and tipped into a car or something. Gans and Blue are in the kitchen with Dec.”

“Matty?”

“Nah,” Ronan shakes his head, a painful looking smile glancing across his face, “nah. He’s gone to a mate’s. He doesn’t need to be involved in this. He doesn’t know much about - it’s best if he doesn’t have to get freaked out.”

“That’s fair,” Adam says, yawns, “you’ve made my leg go dead.”

“Want me to go off?”

“No,” Adam says, “I don’t want to deal with the pins and needles yet.”

“We have to go into the kitchen soon, too,” Ronan points out, “before he gets here. Or before
“Mm,” Adam says, would really like to put off feeling returning to his leg painfully. “We have a couple of minutes though, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, “we absolutely do if it’s for kissing.”

“Oh good.”

-

By the time they go to the kitchen (hop to the kitchen in Adam’s case), only a few minutes later, they walk straight into a stiff ensemble of some very unhappy people.

“- did he tell you that?” Declan is snapping at Maura. He’s pointing at a man Adam doesn’t recognise, who’s leaning against the kitchen sink. Apart from the unhappy twist of his mouth, there’s nothing of note about him.

“No,” Maura says, “no, but I’m not surprised, Declan-”

“Because it’s his job?” Declan says, “I thought you said he wasn’t a threat to minors? I might be over age but he attacked me in my dorm. Matthew lives there. Hundreds of children live there. What if he picked the room wrong? The wrong time?”

“I didn’t,” the man says, “I don’t expect you to forgive me for your black eye, Declan, but I do hope that you’re willing to put you ill-will aside for a moment to listen to some more pressing information I have.”

“What’s going on?” Ronan asks from the doorway.

“Sit down, Ro,” Declan grunts, “and don’t get too fucking close to this prick. He might be helpful, but he also fucking beat me up a while back when he first got here looking for information on you.”
Adam glances at Ronan, who doesn’t look noticeably worried, but whose hand has twitched in his. They sit down at the table next to Blue and Gansey.

Adam thinks that no one in the room is expecting this man to say what he does next. Possibly not even Maura. What this man says next is that he is the one who killed Niall Lynch. Adam does not think this is a useful thing to say. Even if it is an important thing to say, it could, and should, have been seen differently. Or possibly, after he had made it clear why he did, and what he believes in now. Because he doesn’t, however, it’s more like a bomb goes off in the kitchen than anything else. He supposes he should be pleased that everyone still has their eyebrows and various limbs.

Not pleased, because Ronan refuses to stay in the kitchen after this, goes upstairs. Doesn’t want to hear anything else Mr Allen - because he thought that was the next useful thing to tell them - has to say. Adam had stood with him, intending on going with him, because, obviously, if Ronan was upset he wanted to comfort him, but Ronan had shook his head, gone off by himself.

Declan looks like he wants to follow suit. Instead, he sits there, much straighter backed and held together than he had been when Adam and Ronan had walked in earlier. Nods stiffly at Mr Allen and tells him to continue.

This is what they learn; Mr Allen’s former boss - who is apparently vaguely crazy(?), is coming to Henrietta. Mr Allen’s former boss, Greenmantle, will not find the idea of kidnapping distasteful as Mr Allen had. Neither does Greenmantle have any qualms about other people getting hurt on the way to getting what he wants (Declan snorts at this). This is what they learn; Mr Allen wants to help. Wants to help them take Greenmantle out and down, and away from this picture.

This is what Gansey says to this;

“‘We will take this into consideration.’”

This is what Declan says to this;

“I’m going home. Tell me what you decide to to, Richard.”

He gets up. Pauses in the door, goes upstairs first.
After Declan’s left, Adam goes upstairs to find Ronan, which is what he assumed Declan had been doing as well. As it turns out, Ronan is very easy to find. He’s sitting in Blue’s room, Ethan on his lap, book in hand, reading Ethan a story.

“Hey,” Adam says from the doorway.

“Hey,” Ronan replies, returns to the story.

Adam comes in, sits next to the two of them on the bed. Ethan flops a little bit so he’s still technically sitting in Ronan’s lap, but his head is in Adam’s. Ronan finishes the story. Once he’s finished, he leans sideways as well until his head is on top of Adam’s.

“Let’s go home,” he says,

“Ok,” Adam says, “Gans suggested we pick up some fish and chips for dinner.”

“Ok,” Ronan says, “is he gone?”

“Mr Allen?” Adam asks. “Yes. He is. Babe -”

“Not yet,” Ronan says, “not yet. Later. Let’s go.”

“Wanna ho-dog,” Ethan chips in, “insteada fishies.”

“Ok,” Adam says, “we can do that.”

Fish and chips and hotdogs are bought, along with a bottle of tomato sauce because Gansey sends them an emergency text saying they’re out at the house.
Ethan eats half his hotdog before he falls back to sleep; apparently having an entire day dedicated to feeding him and playing with him was exhausting. Adam pauses halfway through his own meal to wake him up again so they can change him into his pjs, brush his teeth, and put him to bed.

They attempt to discuss Mr Allen. Attempt to because Ronan is only grunting in response to things, and Gansey doesn’t have enough information, and Adam is just tired.

“Tomorrow,” Gansey suggests, “we'll talk more about it tomorrow. We should probably ask Blue if she can get more information out of her mother, as well.”

Ronan grunts.

“Ok,” Adam says, “probably best to sleep on it. He said Greenmantle wasn’t in Henrietta yet, yeah? We have a bit of time.”

“God,” Gansey sighs, “onwards to the next adventure I suppose.”

Ronan grunts.

Adam thinks; I am so not getting a blowjob tonight.

- 

Ronan is silent as they brush their teeth, get undressed, climb into bed next to each other. Silent as Adam reaches over him to turn the light out.

“Babe,” Adam says to Ronan’s back. “Hey.”

“I don’t want to fucking work with him,” Ronan says, “I don’t care that he was just doing his fucking job, I don’t care if he has some sob story or whatever about why he did it. My dad is dead, my mum is - she’s - she’s broken. Matthew’s the only one left in my family who’s even mostly ok, and for all I fucking know he cries himself to sleep every fucking night, and - and - and -”
“Yeah,” Adam says, wraps his arms carefully around Ronan’s hips, pulls himself flush against Ronan’s back. “I know. Nothing makes that ok.”

“I’d fucking given up on ever finding out why dad was fucking murdered,” Ronan grunts, “and then I hear it out of the fucking blue by some random shitting guy who also apparently fucking beat my older brother up? And then he tells us this and his next fucking words are that he wants to help? What?”

“I know,” Adam says.

“This was such a bad idea,” Ronan says, “I mean - God. I mean doing this today. Today was so fucking good. Until it wasn’t. I just - God. One fucking day. Y’know?”

“Yeah,” Adam says, “I know. I know, Ro.”

“We still have to fucking let him help us though,” Ronan snaps, “fuck, Parrish. FUCK. We still have to let him help us because he’s so fucking bad at his job his fucking boss is coming. This is probably part of what Orphan Girl was talking about, God.”

“What?” Adam says.

“Orphan Girl,” Ronan grunts, “God. We haven’t talked much about shit today. I slept at lunch to grab Ethan’s present. She was there. Freaking out about some shit coming. About some shit waking up. Y’know, like some of that shit Seph was saying a while back.”

Adam’s quiet for a while, trying to sort through all the various folders in his brain of crazy shit he’s heard in the last few months.

“So,” he says, “now Other Ronan’s back in his timeline, things have straightened up again across Cabeswater, so… the alive thing Persephone said was there before wasn’t there? Or, it was but in a different… realm? But it’s coming now?”

“I don’t know,” Ronan snaps, “Orphan Girl was scared. God. I don’t know. It’s too late. I’m too tired. Things are too shit. Fuck - ha, and here I was telling Other Ronan shit would get better. I wonder when he gets to fucking meet our father’s murderer -”
“Babe,” Adam says, “turn around, will you? Let me hold you properly.”

“God,” Ronan groans, turns jerkily in Adam’s hand, presses his damp face immediately into the crook of Adam’s shoulder. “God. I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing right now, Adam.”

“I know,” Adam says. “It’s so much shit. It’s not fair.”

“Why is every single fucking day of our lives like some terrible dramatic soap opera?” Ronan mumbles into Adam’s neck, “You know how often I used to cry? Like, well. Only when I was drunk.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, because he’s still fucking bad at this sometimes. The comforting thing. He doesn’t know what to say to make this better, not this time.

“Declan fucking hugged me goodbye when he left,” Ronan sniffs, “fucking hugged me. He’s hugged me more this past week than we have for like a good fucking year.”

“Oh,” Adam says, “Ro.”

“I miss my dad,” Ronan says, “I miss my mum. I miss ‘em so fucking much.”

“I know,” Adam says, feels like fucking crying himself now, “I know. I’m so sorry, Ro.”

“And,” Ronan continues, because now that he’s switched from grunting to talking he apparently has a lot of talking to do, “I got so freaked out this afternoon because I thought I’d accidentally outing you to Dana.”

“Oh,” Adam says, “what do you mean?”

“I didn’t realise she didn’t know we were together,” Ronan says, “called you my boyfriend in front of her.”
He sounds mildly guilty, also a little accusatory, behind the general maudlin and sniffs.

“*Oh*,” Adam says, “oh God, you’re completely right, I never told her, did I?”

“She said she asked you once, and you said no,” Ronan mumbles, “I guess that was before we were dating.”

“Yeah,” Adam says, emphatic, “yes. Babe. Yes. I am never gonna fucking lie about being with you. I just - I guess I assumed for some dumb reason that Dana knew, because everyone else in my life did, so like - yeah. Sorry. I wasn’t trying to hide us. I promise.”

“I know,” Ronan mumbles, “sorry. I didn’t mean - ok. I kinda was hurt about it but I was pretty sure you didn’t mean to - yeah. It’s. Yeah.”

“I love you,” Adam says, kisses the top of Ronan’s head because that’s the easiest part of him to kiss right now.

“Love you too,” Ronan sighs, “what do we do now?”

“About Dana?” Adam asks, “Or Mr Allen? Or Orphan Girl?”

“God,” Ronan says, “The latter two. Maybe you should write another fucking list.”

“Maybe I should,” Adam agrees, “would that help you?”

“You’ve no fucking idea how much easier things feel when I think you know what the hell’s going on,” Ronan says, “so yeah. Maybe.”

“Ok,” Adam says, “so we’ll work through it list style -”

“Not now,” Ronan says, almost sounds desperate, “not now. Let’s - can we just pretend the last few hours didn’t happen? That we just finished today fucking happy?”
“Yeah,” Adam says, “yeah. We can do that.”

“It was such a good day,” Ronan mumbles, “Ethan had such a fun time. He loved it.”

“He did,” Adam says, “you guys made it such a good time for him. He loves the daisy chain too. He’s wearing it to sleep in right now.”

“Good,” Ronan says, “good. And no children died from eating too many bugs?”

“No children or Matthews died,” Adam confirms, “and Dana is still talking to me, so the psychics weren’t too scary either.”

“Nah,” Ronan says, “they were. Dana’s just badass.”

“True,” Adam says, kisses the top of Ronan’s head again.

“What was the book you gave him?” Ronan asks, “I didn’t get a chance to look at it in the whole present rush.”

Adam laughs, a little rueful.

Perhaps not his most exciting present,” he says, because honestly, three, sorry, four years olds aren’t the most interested in history when they could be having lollies instead. “It’s the journal I kept when he was first born. I’d write down whenever he - whenever he gained lots of weight, or like, when he first smiled. Shit like that. Y’know? I kept writing in it until about a year ago. Ran out of room. So it’s got just. Stuff about him. Stuff he did. Stuff that made me proud. I dunno.”

“God,” Ronan says, “that’s the sappiest present.”

“He probably won’t care about it for a few more years,” Adam shrugs, “or maybe never.”
“Don’t be an idiot,” Ronan says, “he’ll probably want it as his bedtime story tomorrow night. That’s so - Adam,” he says, “you’re so fucing thoughtful sometimes you know? Sometimes it just fucking hits me how - fuck - how much of an adult you are.”

“I thought we’d decided I wasn’t too adult for you?” Adam teases, and Ronan finally pulls his head out from Adam’s shoulders and grin at him.

“Fucker,” he says, “I mean. You’re so good. You’re so - fuck - strong.”

“Shut it,” Adam says.

“But you shouldn’t have to be,” Ronan continues, very much not shutting it, “‘cos you’re still a fucking - you’re still a fucking teenager. You were a kid when Ethan was born. You shouldn’t have been alone for that.”

“Well,” Adam says, “I was, so-”

“Nah,” Ronan says, “what I’m fucking trying to say, Parrish, is that you’re not gonna be. Ever again. Fucking ever. I’m gonna fucking be here. With you. With you and Ethan. For you and Ethan. I’m gonna - you don’t have to go this alone.”

There’s a fucking lump in his throat. He has to cough before he can speak around it. “Thought I said we could talk marriage in a few years,” he says as lightly as he can manage.

“Fucker,” Ronan says again, repeats what he’d said just this fucking morning, “I’m talking about commitment.”

“Ok,” Adam says.

“Hey,” Ronan says, “are you gonna be...disappointed if we don’t do - uh - ?”

“No,” Adam says, as firmly as he can manage around the lump still in his throat and over the yawn he’s trying to squash down. “Of course I won’t be fucking disappointed, Ro. If you’re gonna be here with me forever like you say you will, we’ve got plenty of time.”
“Yeah,” Ronan says, “we do.”

“Ok, then,” Adam says, “wanna sleep?”

“Yeah,” Ronan says, then, “wait no, I wanna make out a bit first. Can we do that first?”

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Tuesday arrives loudly. By loudly, this means that it arrives in the shape of EthanandChainsaw in their matching shirts, Ethan with his light up shoes and indestructible daisies on, and singing a new song they had apparently made up negative two seconds ago. The key lyrics are; ‘TRUCK TRUCK TRUCK TRUCK TRUCK TRUCK TRUCKING!’

“Hey,” Adam mumbles, pressing his palm against Ronan’s face, “y’know how y’were sayin’ I didn’t have t’do this alone? Y’wanna deal with this one?’

“He’s yours before breakfast,” Ronan mumbles back.

Ethan throws himself at their torsoes, kicks around until he can get under the blanket. Chainsaw following his lead.

“No shoes in bed,” Adam says, rolling over so he can wrap an arm around Ethan’s waist to scoop him out from under the blankets, “g’morning buddy.”

“Mornin’!” Ethan says, “Gans said t’wake y’all up.”

“Oh,” Ronan says, rolls over now as well, “why?”

“Dunno,” Ethan says cheerfully, perfectly happy for Adam to keep him caught under his arm while Adam checks his watch.
It’s not late. In fact, it’s pretty fucking early, which means, of course, that Gansey doesn’t want them awake for anything mundane like school.

“Ok,” Adam says, levers himself up off of the bed, “go tell Gans we’re up an’ getting’ dressed, ok?” He releases Ethan onto the floor, where he does a forward roll, heels flashing pink and yellow past his ears, and then jumps up right again, daisies swinging over his eyes.

“Kay!” Ethan says, disappears in a whirl of slammed doors.

“God,” Ronan says, “how much birthday cake did he eat yesterday?”

“Too much,” Adam says, standing up and sifting through the clothes on the floor for something to wear, “do you thing we ought to panic about whatever Gansey is waking us up for now, or should we wait to panic until after we hear what it is?”

“If we panic now will that stop us from panicking later?” Ronan asks, following Adam slowly out of bed.

“Probably not,” Adam admits, tugs his undies off to replace them with a fresh pair, “let’s wait til we know what we’re panicking about, then?”

“Good call,” Ronan sighs, tugs a jumper on, “it might be nothing, though.”

“And I might not go entirely grey before I’m thirty,” Adam replies, discovers his jeans and starts pulling them on, “but it’s unlikely.”

“Damn,” Ronan snorts, “you’re gonna look pretty fucking distinguished at thirty then. Unless you dye your hair? Can we go bright pink.”

“In your fucking dreams, Lynch,” Adam says, kicks Ronan’s pants in his directions, “I’m gonna go pee. See you out there.”
He has about two minutes to himself, before he has to face whatever it is Gansey is about to tell them. Most of this time is spent peeing and washing his hands and splashing water on his face, so, he has about thirty seconds to himself. To stare at himself in the mirror and think, ‘what the actual fucking fuck is my life’. Also to try and see how many grey hairs he already has. Probably too many for a newly eighteen year old. But. Whatever.

He brings the cereal, milk, and bowls out with him when he comes out again, figures they may as well eat while being given bad news.

Ronan is sitting on the couch, Ethan on his lap with a handful of toy cars. Gansey is lingering by his desk, Noah, looking reasonably solid, is next to him.

“What’s going on?” Adam asks, carries the breakfast gear to the middle of the room and plonks it down.

“Blue called me this morning,” Gansey says, he’s poring over a map, Adam realises, “and says that mr Allen dropped by very early this morning to say that Greemantle is already in town. She said - uh - she said that Persephone has also spent all early morning having… visions, I think, and she says - she suggests that we go to the cave now. Today. This morning.Apparently that is what the cards are saying. Or Persephone's visions are saying. SOmething about - I’m not sure.”

“Go to the cave today?” Ronan repeats, “Because Greenmantle is in town? How do those two relate?”

“She said something about Persephone saying something about getting there before him,” Gansey says, “so - it sounds like he is also looking for Glendower maybe? Or for sleepers? Or for something in that cave?”

“So..?” Adam says, “that’s, well, we’re gonna go spelunking then? At dawn?”

“Dawn was an hour ago,” Gansey says, possibly an attempt at humour, possibly not, “but yes. What do you guys think?”

“I hate it,” Ronan says, matter of fact, “but whatever, I guess.”
“Are we prepared to go spelunking?” Adam asks, “isn’t that supposed to be dangerous without proper equipment? The stuff we had last time was ok, but well, y’know-”

“This cave looks better formed,” Gansey says, “and we’ll make sure we bring some better gear. I have a lot of stuff downstairs, don’t worry.”

“Well,” Adam says, “obviously we have to drop buddy off at Dana’s first.”
There are several, several things that Adam does not like about the situation they are in. The first thing is that he doesn’t like caves. It had been bad enough the first time they had gone ‘caving’ in Cabeswater, but that had been ok because he’d told himself it wasn’t a real cave. It was a magic cave. This cave was very, very real. The dirt and mud and cobwebs wouldn’t let him forget that even if he tried.

They’re far enough in that it seems like they must be closer to whatever is in there than whatever is out there, when the eerie-ness truly begins.

It’s singing. Soft and low and for a moment Adam thinks it’s Ronan, but when he looks to Ronan, Ronan is looking horrified and looking at his shoulder where Chainsaw is perched. It’s her, but it isn’t really. They can all see that, the way she’s stiff on Ronan’s shoulder, the way her singing actually has a tune.

“We’re on the right track, then,” Gansey says grimly, “we must be close.”

Ronan doesn’t look pleased about this. No one looks pleased about this. Adam takes Ronan’s hand and Ronan squeezes his fingers tightly. They continue on.

It’s cold, and dark, and Adam’s shoes are beginning to let dampness into his socks when they very suddenly reach what appears to be the end of a corridor. There’s a shape in the stone wall that looks like maybe it could be a door, and when Blue reaches out to touch it, it shimmers and shifts until the maybe is gone and it is a door. She can’t pull it open, though.

“Gans,” Ronan says, “you have to open it.”

He does. Simply reaches out, grips the stone handle, and gives it one solid tug, and the door swings open without a creak. Beyond, there are a hundred hundred figures, and the four of them stop in the doorway, frozen in shock. Except for Chainsaw, who, as they had walked had eventually stopped singing, but only now appears to have unfrozen herself. She caws loudly, then pushes off of Ronan’s shoulder, and flies away, back the way they had come.
Ronan swears, winces from the bite of her talons, and Adam holds his breath. They are all looking in through the dim light at the figures who have not moved at all at the noise.

“I don’t think they’re alive,” Blue says after a moment, “statues?”

“A stone court for Glendower?” Gansey says, hushed. He fumbles with the light on his head, turns the beam up, and takes a half step inside before faltering.

It’s easy to see why. The stone court isn’t a stone court, it’s a skeleton court. All kinds of animals scattered around a large hall like cave, all down to bone and staring eye sockets. If this was a court, it couldn’t protect anyone. Adam could see some of the bones had fallen out of place, some didn’t even look like skeletons anymore.

Ronan exhales behind him. Adam can see Blue reaching for Gansey’s hand. It’s ridiculous, because, they didn’t know what they were looking for, and this was still something so surely it should be an exciting find. It’s depressing though. All of them know it. Ronan speaks quietly.

“They’re waiting for Glendower,” he says.

“They’re dead,” Blue replies.

Gansey lifts his head. He seems to be reviving in spirits from Blue’s hand in his. Adam supposes that if she’s the magical energy source replenisher for so many things, it made sense that she would reinvigorate Gansey, who was by very definition, magical.

“Maybe they just need to be woken up,” Ronan says, “maybe they need convincing.”

Adam thinks he understands.

Blue looks up at Gansey.

“Maybe,” she says, “they’re not waiting for Glendower.”
Gansey takes another step into the room. Blue stays where she is, so their arms stretch between them, hands clasped in the air. Gansey reaches with his free hand, touches very gently at the skull of the closest animal - it looks to be deer, it’s skeleton somehow still holding together - and closes his eyes.

“Wake up,” he says.

There is no difference, and then, there is a difference. The difference happens between one breath and the next, the difference is that in between these breaths, there were only four sets of lungs shifting air, and then, there were hundreds.

They get one long moment of amazement, of staring at Gansey who can bring skeletons and dust to life with a word, and then they’re interrupted by a ruckus of birds raising from the stone floor and swooping around the high ceilings.

They sing what had been sung in the last cave, they sing;

“Make way for the raven king”.

It rattles around the rocky caverns for minutes on end until Adam feels like his one hearing ear left will go deaf in protest, and then, just as suddenly as it began, it ends, all the birds - the ravens - swooping away into spaces unseen.

Gansey clears his throat. He’s still clutching to Blue’s hand, both their knuckles white with it.

“Well then,” he says, ostensibly to the deer, “take me to the grave.”

Adam thinks this is a poor word choice. The deer apparently doesn’t think so, because it turns, and trots off, and, miraculously, all the other previously lifeless skeletons, now full of life, shuffle and move and make way for the raven king. Adam thinks he might vomit with the strangeness of it all.

They follow Gansey down through the corridor of undead/dead/undead creatures, two sets of magical beings clutching onto each other as if for dear life, following something that can only be magic, trying to find something that is magic itself, perhaps.
It’s a long way, or perhaps, not a long way at all. Adam doesn’t bother checking his watch because he feels that there is no real time right now. The only time that matters is that they will be missing school currently. When they reach it, Gansey looks as if he is boiling over with unkempt excitement. Adam is disappointed in himself, because he can not make himself feel the same way. Perhaps because it’s cold and dark and wrong down here, or perhaps because it’s still early, or perhaps because this isn’t his moment, or perhaps because when Gansey opens the coffin like thing, it is not Glendower inside at all, but a woman bound and face down.

“Again, again, again,” the woman says, voice muffled, and then suddenly clear as the four of them watch as she turns her head slowly to one side. More alive than the animals Gansey had woken. “We do this again, and again, and again. Once here for good luck? Twice there to finish it.”

Gansey, who had gasped and leapt back upon revealing her, takes an unsteady step forward now and says, “Who are you?”

The woman laughs, long and low and rattling, like her lungs are full of her ribs.

“In pairs, in pairs they come,” she says, “two for joy? Misery more often, two for joy? Why come twice, then?”

“Who are you?” Gansey repeats, “your decorations - your - your burial site is - Glendower ought to be here.”

“He came in pairs too,” the woman says, “in pairs of bastards, like testicals. So, and so and so, so does this.”

“There are two graves,” Blue says quickly from beside Gansey, “yours and Glendower’s? You are his pair?”

“Oh cruel lily, cruel blue lily, lily, lily, lily blue,” the woman scorns, her voice slipping into song and out again, “his pair I am not, never, no, can you not see my skirts? My hair? Not for my father, no.”

“Gwenllian!” Gansey snaps suddenly, not out of anger, but sudden shock.

“Oh,” the woman simpers, “a prize for the prince, for the golden boy, a prize, should I bow? Should I curtsey? You’ll have to free me first.”
“We’ll untie you,” Gansey says, voice taut as if he has to hold it firm so as not to shake, “and you don’t need to curtsey.”

“Pah!” Gwenllian lets out, “As if I would! To you? To who? To the poison dream? To the masterless pup? To the mirror, blue, blue, lily, lily? Maybe I’d go to my knees for her.”

Blue takes a hasty step back. Adam, because Gansey is no longer holding Blue’s hand and she looks cut adrift, reaches with his free hand and tugs her finger by finger closer to him and Ronan. He feels sick, though he’s not sure why. Gansey is looking at the huddle of them, as if asking with his eyes if he ought to untie her or not. Blue fumbles at her waist, wordlessly produces a bright pink switchblade. All eyes follow it as she reaches with it, handle towards Gansey, and Gansey takes it.

Gansey cuts the knots holding Gwenllian, who, like a spirit unchained, rises immediately from the coffin, skirts and hair everywhere. Gansey stumbles back again, but Gwenllian doesn’t rush him, just stands there in her coffin, legs in a wide stance, and laughs deeply.

“In twos, in twos,” she says once she’s finished laughing, “In threes, and fours, and sixes. Who knows how many more? How many more again and agains? This is the only one for today.”

“What?” Ronan whispers, then, clearing his throat, “Stop speaking in riddles.”

“In riddles is how you dream,” Gwenllian snaps at him, “would you deprive your dog of his bone? Oh? You have. Oh. Is he bad boy?”

“I don’t have a dog,” Ronan snaps back.

“He’s by your side now,” Gwenllian sneers at him, “heeled, I see, tamed, I see, following you with his tongue out, I see.”

Adam, as if slapped, winces at the words. Ronan’s hand is tightening around his, but before anyone can speak in angry rebuke, Gwenllian is talking again, speaking back to Gansey.

“You’re done,” she says, “you’ve died already, once? Twice? Done and done and dusted and he is dust, oh, so dusty, you’ve seen his dust you’ve tasted his dust.”
“I’ve only died once,” Gansey tells her, solemn, and she shakes her head.

“Died once here,” she says, “Died twice there, maybe dead forever elsewhere? Who knows, who cares, who dreams it up? Not me, not dear daddy, not - oh. It’s not done, you’re not yet, though.”

“I don’t understand,” Gansey says, “are you talking about .... the parallel universes? Where I’ve already done this?”

Gwenllian’s eyes shine in the light of Gansey’s torch, brighter than everyone elses. “Yes,” she says, “oh you know, you know already, but your words are so loose so fake so useless here. You’ve found him once, you can’t do it again.”

“What?” Gansey says, “No. If you’re here he’s here somewhere too.”

“He’s fixed, he’s solid, he’s stuck in one spot,” Gwenllian sings, “you found him, disturbed him, rewrote the lot. He’s gone, I’m here, I’m here and also there, and it too is here and there and also everywhere.”

“It?” Blue asks. She’s still gripping tight to Adam, her shoulders squared as if she’s expecting a fight, “What is it?”

“Awake,” Gwenllian says brightly, she turns and looks wide eyed at Adam, “awake, isn’t it?”

“Who?” Adam asks.

“You didn’t promise anything here,” Gwenllian says to him, her voice suddenly lower than before, “you didn’t wake anything. You fixed? Yes. You fought? Yes. You didn’t do the waking? Would you like to know who did the waking? Would you like to know who? Who is waiting and not even knowing they’re waiting?”

“You won’t find it here anymore,” she says, “it’s gone, he’s gone, out of the dark and into the light and back into the dark and through the trees, trashing and thrashing and crying and writhing and soon he’ll bring it back out.”

“Who?” Adam asks a third time, voice cracking.

“I want to go back to yours again, lily lily blue,” Gwenllian says, spinning on her heels around in a full circle once, and coming to a stop with her eyes boring into Blue’s, “they hate me there and love me there and I miss it.”

Adam will never understand how they ended up traipsing back up through the rocky cave and out onto Jesse Dittley’s farm, Gwenllian at their heels, disappointment and confusion coursing through them. Nothing made sense? And yet? Did it? Adam felt dirty, not just physically, but emotionally. Like somehow this was a failure on his half. That if he hadn’t come down here with them in the first place then maybe? Gansey wouldn’t look so distraught.

They pile into the pig, a tight squish, Gansey and Blue in the front, Ronan and Adam bookending Gwenllian in the back.
Hey guys I'm in China right now, and I'll be here for a month! So my writing schedule is a little bumpy.

Things are an uproar at Fox Way. An uproar because of the various things that have already occurred in that house before the sun was even properly up, and uproar because Mr Grey is in the house, an uproar because Gwenllian is in the house now too. Mostly the uproar is the chaotic mess of everyone attempting to squeeze answers of out of everyone else, which is difficult to do when you can’t even hear the questions being asked because everyone is speaking at once.

Gwenllian has sat herself right down on the middle of the table after helping herself to an entire jug of Maura’s mystery tea which she had plucked from the fridge, as if she had known it would be there. Mr Grey is huddled on one side of the kitchen, Maura tight at his side as if they are conferring. Calla is yelling at someone about something just outside of the kitchen. Blue and Gansey are both trying to get the attention of the psychics. Persephone is hovering at Adam’s elbow. Adam is clutching to Ronan.

“No promises,” Persephone remarks lightly to Adam, and he glances at her from underneath his brows. “No promises,” she repeats again. “remember that.”

He nods, although he doesn’t understand what there is to remember about that, and Ronan presses himself further against Adam’s side.

Gwenllian speaks then, her voice loud and piercing above the babble in the kitchen.

“Grey shadow!” She calls, in a tone so pointed that everyone shuts up. Mr Grey steps forwards, as aware as everyone else that it’s him being addressed. “Your… master is here,” she sing songs at him, “you didn’t know who he brought with him did you? Who and what and who he’s with?”

“No -” Mr Grey begins to say, but Gwenllian continues, speaking loudly over him.
“So much simpler last time,” Gwenllian says, almost as if to herself, “and yet here we are again. Again. Again. Today is different, is it not? Is it not, golden boy? Olden golden boy? Dead and dead again boy? Oh - I forgot - not dead and dead again yet, yes?”

Gansey’s shoulders are very square as he looks up at Gwenllian where she’s perched on the table.

“I couldn’t say,” he says, “I’ve never lived the again before. You have, haven’t you? You come from a parallel life?”

Gwenllian cackles, and then spins on her behind, her many skirts making this easy and slick. She spins, once, twice, fully around until she’s facing Gansey again before starting to speak once more.

“No,” she says, “I come from a womb, I come from an egg, I come from blood and bone and semen. But I have seen your other worlds, yes, I have seen them, or they have seen me, or we have seen each other in the reflections. Because, yes, mirrors,” she says, voice slowing down as her head, also slowly, turns until her gaze is on Blue, “we mirrors don’t always have to show the reflection you give us, do we? Blue, lily, lily, lily?”

There’s a lot to unpack here. Adam thinks he’d prefer to just throw the whole suitcase out. Gansey is pausing, obviously considering her words. Everyone else in the kitchen is silent, also attempting to figure out the true meaning behind her words.

“So,” Gansey says, “tell us what’s going to happen.”

“Pah!” Gwenllian spits, actually spits, a long glop of saliva flying from her mouth to land with a faintly sickening splat on the kitchen floor. “I’ve told you, again, again, again, small dead prince? Small dead and dead king? It’s different. Just as you are different. Different and dead, they’re very similar."

Calla, having come back into the room when Gwenllian had started speaking, lets out a noise of annoyance at the spitting, but before she can truly say anything, Persephone speaks instead.

“Different indeed,” Persephone says softly, holds Gwenllian’s gaze as she turns to look at Persephone, “different and yet the same? The sleeping king does not sleep? And now neither does the third?”
Gwenllian’s mouth curves into a sharp smile and she points at Persephone with the jug of tea, brownish green liquid slopping over the sides. “You,” she says, “come twice.”

“The sleeping king?” Gansey interjects, “Glendower? Who you say is gone?”

Gwenllian spits again. This time Maura makes a noise of irritation.

“Gone,” she tells Gansey, “you’ve already shaken his dust once, the universe cleaned it up for you everywhere else. That is what magic is for? You think? Cleaning? He’s gone. You could be gone too. What isn’t gone?”

“The third sleeper,” Maura cuts in, “the third sleeper. Our cards say not to wake the third sleeper.”

Adam can see Blue shooting her mother an aggrieved look.

“You’ve been reading the cards about this and not telling us what they say?” she asks, and Maura sighs heavily. She’s stepped further away from Mr Grey.

“It was a recent reading,” she says, slow, “and we weren’t sure how relevant -”

“Let’s cut the bull shit,” Calla says harshly, speaking over Maura. “Sorry Maura. Of course we do readings about your raven boys’ strange happenings. Too much oddity has occurred here for us not to. Of course we don’t always tell you. We’re adults and we’re shitty sometimes. It happens. Here’s what we know; there are three sleepers. One, we assumed had to be pretty boy Gansey’s king, the other obviously is Gwenllian, and the third? The third only read of danger and of past mistakes.”


“The third is awake,” he says, “awake and causing havoc in Cabeswater, yeah? And - from what she said to Mr Grey - uh - maybe? Maybe his boss has the third sleeper.”

The room is quiet around them. He’d been talking to Ronan, but the kitchen had been listening in.
“How would Greenmantle know about it?” Mr Grey says, speaking directly to Adam. “He didn’t mention anything about sleepers to me. Just the Greywaren.”

“How’s off?” Ronan snarls, he’s not looking at Mr Grey, rather staring hard at the floor, his hand curled around Adam’s arm, “but maybe Greenmantle knew you weren’t to be fucking trusted.”

“Is Glendower dead?” Gansey asks then, loud. He’s looking at Gwenllian. She looks back.

“He has always been dead,” she says, “always. Always. Always. You could never save him, little prince king, you could only be him.”

Gansey frowns at her.

Ronan makes a small noise beside Adam, and he looks away from Gansey to see Ronan’s face twisted in confusion, and possibly pain, and a smear of something dark and viscous on his lip.

“The fuck,” Ronan mumbles.

Adam stares, and then reaches out to wipe the liquid like thing from Ronan’s face. It didn’t look like blood, or spit, or anything… human. It looked wrong. It was also starting to drip from Ronan’s nose.

“The fuck,” Ronan repeats, his eyes slamming shut, his forehead crinkling. He looks like he’s been hit with a sudden headache.

“What’s going on?” Gansey asks. He’s right behind Adam now.

“Oh,” Gwenllian says. A glance over his shoulder shows that she’s standing on the table now, peering in down at them. “It’s started already? Oh, well. I’ve always wanted to see the death myself.”

“What’s going on?” Gansey asks again, this time not only to Ronan and Adam, but at the assembly crammed into the kitchen, “The death? What’s wrong with Ronan? What’s started?”
Ronan’s eyes have been closed for too long. He’s leaning too heavily against Adam’s shoulder. He jerks his shoulder under Ronan, swipes the black liquid under his nose, whispers Ronan’s name. Ronan’s eyes flash open, but his body is suddenly stiff and heavier, suddenly all his weight against Adam like he can’t hold himself up anymore. It’s like he is when he’s woken up from a dream, bringing something out with him. From his hands fall sudden flowers, blue and pulpy, wet with dew, wet with the black liquid dripping out of Ronan. He had been asleep. Asleep. Awake again now.

“It’s awake,” Ronan hisses as soon as his lips move again. All eyes are on his magical flowers lying damply on the round, “it’s awake. It’s in Cabeswater, it’s -” he blinks out again.

“Oh,” Gwenllian says, “so quick.”

“Ronan,” Adam says, shakes him a little, and then turns to Gansey, “help me lie him down.”

He and Gansey together take Ronan’s sleeping body in hand, lie him down on the kitchen floor, making even less room.

“What do we do?” Blue is asking, asking it to Maura, to Calla, to Persephone, to Gwenllian.

“Sacrifice!” Gwenllian caws triumphantly, “Sacrifice! Sacrifice!”

Blue looks horrified. Adam feels horrified. He needs Ronan to wake up. He’s asleep in Cabeswater, where, whatever the awake thing was, was as well. God.

Ronan eye’s flicker open again, this time, bringing with him a rain of golden floating things - which a second glance shows to be firefly like sparks of light.

“It’s everywhere,” Ronan says hoarsely, “and I saw -” he breaks off to cough, for his eyes to flick from Adam’s face to Gansey’s, “- Whelk -” his eyes shut again, his body slumps again.

“Whelk,” Adam repeats.

“Whelk,” Gansey says back to him, brow furrowed.
There is no time for any proper discussion of Whelk, here, because, not only is Ronan still asleep and oozing black on the floor, Gwenllian spinning in wide circles, feet shuffling on wood behind them, Gansey demanding answers from the watching psychics, but. Blue is also staring over Ronan’s sleeping body at Adam. She’s staring in horror at Adam’s face, and though Adam can’t see what it is she’s seeing, he can feel that something is wrong. Something is wrong with his eyes. In very much the same way something had been wrong with his eyes before. They feel sandy. They feel stiff. They feel scratched and sore and aching. They feel wandering.

“What’s going on with your eyes?” Blue asks him. This draws the attention of Gansey, of Persephone, of everyone else. Gwenllian sings behind them.


“Persephone -” Adam begins, because, he doesn’t know what’s going on with his eyes but if he has to guess, he would guess that Persephone might know more than him about it. He doesn’t get the rest of whatever he was about to say out of his mouth though, because Ronan’s eyes snap open again, dark shapes falling from his hands. Small animals - frogs, skinks, birds - all tarred liberally with the black ooze, but shaking it from themselves as they scuttle away from him. Ronan’s eyes snap open, and while he is still frozen on the floor, while his eyes fix on Adam’s face, Adam’s hands lift from where they were resting comfortingly on Ronan’s chest, and press themselves harshly around Ronan’s throat. Ronan, frozen, doesn’t even gag, barely blinks, just looks at Adam while his eyes swim with confusion.

As if they are also frozen, everyone around him sits still and watches, confusion also evident as Adam looks up from his hands which he cannot pull from Ronan’s neck. Gwenllian alone continues to move, singing her horrible song.

“Stop me -” Adam gasps out. His shoulders already ache like fire from the effort of attempting to pull his arms away, but his hands are so tightly gripped on Ronan’s skin. Ronan moves first, but he’s not fighting Adam, fucking not fighting, just slowly lifting his black slicked hands and looping his fingers around Adam’s wrists. “Stop me!” Adam repeats, harsher.

“What -” Gansey starts.

“Adam!” Blue says.
“Oh,” Maura sighs.

“Well fuck,” Calla adds on.

“Promises,” Persephone says.

The Grey Man has his arms around Adam from behind, his hands pressing in under Ronan’s fingers, thumbs hard and strong as he forces Adam’s grip off, careful as he folds Adam’s arms back towards his own chest, hands caught in the Grey Man’s still. He yanks Adam away from Ronan, holding his hands tight. Adam’s hands fight, but he does not. Ronan’s chest is heaving, heaving, heaving, his eyes are shut again. He’s asleep. He didn’t fight. He’s asleep.

“Tie my hands,” Adam asks, voice too raw.

He’s turning his head to the side, screwing his stinging scratching eyes shut because he thinks he knows what’s going on. He thinks. He turns his head until his face is pressed in against the Grey Man’s shoulder, and the Grey man shifts his grip on Adam so he’s holding his hands with one hand, lifts his other hand to cover Adam’s eyes with his palm. Adam thinks it’s not safe for his hand to be only held with one other hand, and so whatever it is trying to fight with his body tries to break free again. He cannot break free. He cannot pay attention to what is going on around him now. His body is too fraught. It is too loud. His eyes hurt and hurt and hurt and his hands feel like they’ve been cut off and replaced with vipers. They don’t belong to him. Everyone is talking. All he can hear is the sing song of Gwenllian’s taunts, and the sound of his own voice breaking when he asked someone to stop him, and the sound of his father’s fist to the side of Adam’s face because now Adam was ever more like him ever more like him ever more like him. Someone is tying his hands. His fingers are being laced painfully together. The material around his hands and wrists are soft, but tight and firm. The Grey Man’s arms are replaced by someone softer, whispier, more floral. Adam opens his eyes, he still can’t see anything. Just the amorphous cloud of Persephone’s hair as she holds him stomach to stomach to her with his chin propped up on her shoulder, vision nothing but her hair and ear.

“Promises,” she whispers to him, “only need to be kept if they were made in the first place.”

“They were made,” Adam sobs back. It’s a quiet sob. It’s barely audible. He knows she can hear him. “Just because I didn’t make them doesn’t mean they don’t hold me. They do hold me - my hands - he - other me. He made a promise and it took away my hands and my eyes and -”

“Would any version of yourself promise your eyes and hands to a demon?” Persephone asked.
Adam had no answer. He couldn’t begin to guess how desperate other versions of himself might be.

“Who would you sacrifice your hands and eyes to?” Persephone asks next.

“No one,” Adam says, then, “Ronan,” then, “Ethan,” then, “no one. Not as a sacrifice.”

“You yourself, maybe?” Persephone prompts, “For yourself maybe?”

Adam has to think. Hard to do through pain and a muddle of noise, and confusion, and with candy floss hair tickling his nose.

“Cabeswater,” he says.

“Cabeswater,” Persephone says. “There’s a demon in Cabeswater, that’s what we think, yes?”

“Destroying,” Adam says, “destroying everything. Taking over. Warping - what’s it doing to Ro-”

“One thing at a time,” Persephone says. “There’s a demon in Cabeswater.”

“I know,” Adam says, “I know, I know, I know, I - oh.”

“Oh?” Persephone says.

“In Cabeswater,” Adam says.

“In,” Persephone agrees.

“Promises,” Adam sighs.
“Promises,” Persephone agrees.

“None of which I made anyway,” Adam adds, “even if they bind me through some sort of… magic. It’s not - it’s not -”

Persephone doesn’t let go of him. She lets him think it out. She gives him altogether too much time when they both know how much chaos the kitchen (at the very least) is in. He sighs.

“Untie me?” he asks.

- 

When he gets his hands back, his vision unclouded from Persephone’s hair, the commotion in the kitchen suddenly grows louder. Not about him. About Ronan.

Ronan is still lying on the kitchen tiles. He’s surrounded by an ever ebbing ooze of black sludge, by flowers and gems and trinkets. His eyes are open, and he appears to be straining to sit up a little, eyes focusing on one spot. Adam follows the gaze and he sees hooves first. He looks back to Ronan, surprise and shock warring because he knows who this is, but Ronan’s eyes are already closed.

Orphan Girl gets up on her hooves, she’s making a faint wailing noise, a little like the noises Chainsaw makes when she’s shut out of the bedroom and wants in. She clatters across the floor to Adam, and bares his into his legs, pressing her face into his hip bone and clinging tightly. He barely has any balance and has to reach out a wild hand for a wall to keep the upright before dropping his other hand down onto her head.

“Kerah, Kerah, Kerah,” Orphan Girl wails, “It is awful!” she says, “It is awful! Awful! Help him! T’implora!”

- 

This is what they do. Ronan is unwakeable. Ronan is… Ronan is being… unmade? It is difficult to
get things out of Orphan Girl while she is so hysterical. Her words are half sob, and what isn’t sobbed is either in Latin or… something else. Gansey can barely translate the Latin, and no one holds their hands up to translate the something else. The demon, the thing, the third sleeper? It is awake. How? Orphan Girl can’t seem to tell them that, she does not know. She says there is a man, a man and a woman and a horrible horrible horrible thing that is a demon.

So. This is what they do.

Glendower is out. Gansey is in. Ronan is asleep. Adam is trying to join him. Gwenllian is apparently focusing and pumping energy, Blue as well, the both of them honing the house into a fast and uncomfortably magic machine. Maura suggests that if Ronan stays here with so much heightened magic, he will be unmade quicker. They’re not even on the Ley Line and the demon is sucking at him. Gwenllian says they need to be on a Ley Line to die. Gansey says that then they will avoid Ley Lines. Gwenllian says she thinks he misunderstood her.
Adam knows that if there is a future, there will never be a day that he will be able to look back on this day and laugh. Look back with fondness. No way in hell. The sludge coming from Ronan has taken over the kitchen. Ronan has been shifted onto the table to keep him from fucking drowning in his own unmaking. Orphan Girl is shaking and shuddering and wailing and refusing to let Adam scry into Ronan’s dreams. Adam can’t think. Can’t think. Can’t think. Everyone is talking loud around him. He can’t scry. He can’t read cards. He can’t talk with Cabeswater or whatever. He has no power to help here. All he can do is hold tightly to Orphan Girl and try to calm her. What if Ronan dies on the table next to him? What then?

He catches Gansey’s eye across the room, and that is the only hint he gets that something is about to happen. Gansey is not joining the clamouring chaos of the room. He is standing almost a little out of the noise, hand reaching for Blue’s as his eyes lock with Adam. He has a plan. He has a plan. He wants Adam to come with him because he has a plan. Adam does not want to leave Ronan.

Persephone is by his shoulder, peeling a squawking Orphan Girl out of Adam’s arms.

“Go,” she tells him, “you’re going to be needed. You are needed. Go.”

Orphan Girl reaches for him. Her tear stained face eerily reminiscent somehow of both Ethan and Noah. Adam’s heart feels hollow and heavy at once. He wants to kiss Ronan good bye but Ronan’s mouth is open and gasping for air and Adam doesn’t want to get in the way.

He goes.

“Where are we going?” he asks as he slides into the back of the Camaro, shuffling into the middle of the seat so he can lean in between the two front seats to see Blue and Gansey. Gansey is buckling his seatbelt, Blue is not. “Why are we not telling anyone?”

“Because they are adults and will try and stop us even though they know we have to do it,” Gansey says to the windscreen. He starts the Camaro up with a grunty growl, “because if they try and talk us out of it I might be talked out of it.”
“What is it?” Adam demands. He turns to look at Blue and is all at once horrified to see that she is crying. “Blue?”

“Gwenllian told us already,” she says, “Sacrifice. Death on the Ley line.”


“You know all the research as well as I do,” Blue says, she sniffs, wipes her face on the back of her hand. The car is juddering with how fast it is being forced to go so quickly after it’d been woken up, “you know how sacrifices work.”

“I don’t know how or why this sacrifice does,” Adam snaps, “tell me what’s going on.”

“We’re driving to Cabeswater,” Gansey says calmly, “to sacrifice me to stop the demon. I have - we think - Adam, please, this is the only thing we can think of. We need to do this before the demon kills Ronan. I think this is what all my research has led to. If Glendower is dead - Adam. Give me another way.”

Blue is still crying. Gansey is adamantly staring at the road in front of him, one of his hands has left the wheel though, has drifted over to Blue’s leg. He clutches to it like a lifeline. Adam feels like maybe he’s drowning in the black unmaking pouring from Ronan.

“Please,” Blue whispers, “give us another way, Adam. Please.”

He’s the wrong Adam. He’s the wrong Adam. He’s the wrong Adam. He doesn’t know how to solve this. He came into this too late. He’s made no deals with Cabeswater. He doesn’t understand shit. He’s the wrong Adam and Gansey is going to die and be dead and the demon would unmake Ronan and that would unmake Orphan Girl and Adam would be just the same Adam he had been before he had met Gansey and Ronan and magic. Oh, Blue.

“Sometimes time stops in Cabeswater,” Adam mumbles. His head hurts so fucking much. “Sometimes time stops in Cabeswater, right? It gets stuck.”

Blue is nodding. Adam doesn’t need this confirmed, he already knows it, but it’s still useful.
“If we’re in Cabeswater,” Adam says, “we could ask Cabeswater to hold the time still when Gansey… when we make the sacrifice. It loves Gansey. And it loves Blue. And I think it appreciates me. If we ask it, maybe it would hold time still, so - so Gansey’s… soul would still be close to his body. Because -” he’s talking out of his ass, but maybe his ass has some good ideas. “Look. If we make the sacrifice, if Gansey offers himself as a sacrifice for this, then - once it’s made it’s made. The demon will be dead. That doesn’t mean Gansey has to stay dead too. If we can keep him close enough to his body we could put him back in it. Which can only happen in Cabeswater, so - yeah. Yeah?”

Gansey is nodding. Blue is looking somewhere between relieved and skeptical. Adam feels like a fraud.

There’s a flood outside Cabeswater. Which makes vague sense seeing as it’s raining, but also no sense because it’s the same black sludge from the kitchen at Fox Way, which, Adam supposes, actually makes more sense.

“It’s being unmade,” Gansey says. They’re still sitting in the Camaro outside the path. It feels like once they get out of the car there’s no going back. Gansey will be dead as soon as they open the door. “We should hurry.”

They get out of the car.

The ground is marshy underneath their feet. Blue isn’t wearing shoes. Adam may as well not be wearing shoes for how dry his dumb ass shoes are keeping his feet, and he thinks Gansey’s boat shoes might just get sucked right off of his feet too.

There’s a sound, almost immediately. A buzzing. A rustle that was bone chillingly worse than any night time leaves pressing against bedroom windows.

“It’s not wasps,” Blue says firmly, to Gansey, or to Adam, or to Cabeswater, “you don’t die from wasps.”

“I know,” Gansey says. His voice doesn’t sound like it knows.
They trudge further in.

Trees are keeled on the ground. Black sloshing out of them, up from them, like they’re disintegrating into the dark tumultuous sky above them. In the corners of his eyes, Adam thinks he sees movement. Similar to Ronan’s night horrors in his nightmares. He blinks and they’re gone. He can’t trust his eyes. Can’t trust his eyes. Can’t trust his eyes.

“Adam,” Gansey says, “can you ask Cabeswater to stop time?”

“What?” Adam says, “You’re the one that speaks Latin.”

“Cabeswater will listen to you,” Gansey shrugs, “please?”

There’s only one tree in close proximity that doesn’t look like it’s been tarnished inside and out, and Adam steps close to it to press his palms to the rough bark. He can’t speak Latin, but he can - he can feel - maybe the… spirit(?) of Cabeswater if he concentrates. It’s just like shifting rocks. Just this time he needs to communicate the idea to Cabeswater rather than the other way around.

There’s a harsh noise behind him, a noise of shock, and then there’s something cold and hard pressing against the back of his skull, and he can hear the forest around him apologising to him.

“You’re the one they cry about,” a voice says to him, male, angry, “you’re the one they want to listen to. You’re their hands, yes? Fixing all their little hurts? You can’t fix shit if you don’t have hands.”

Oh, Adam thinks. Oh. So this was the end of the line. So Gansey was going to die in a dying forest, and Ronan was going to die choked on his own nightmares, and Orphan Girl was going to die because she had been made, and Blue was probably going to die from circumstance, and Adam was going to die because for some reason, in some life, he had chosen this. Ethan was going to be alone. Ethan was going to be alone. Ethan was going to be alone.

“Let it be to kill the demon!” Gansey’s voice is the loudest thing in the caught breath still air. The purest thing in the stench of rotting forest and dank ground. The worst thing to hear even after what had just been said into Adam’s ear.
The metal against the back of Adam’s head is suddenly gone, replaced by relief and a rending noise like claws tearing through metal, and he spins in the wet leaves to see - to see. It’s like when Noah appears, or disappears, and there is no logical way to know how he got there. There is a man, a man with elongated features stiff with anger and horror. There is not a man. There is a gun in a hand, fingers tight and white on it. There is a gun in the dead leaves at Adam’s feet. He snatches it up. He doesn’t know much about guns. Knows how to put the safety on. Does that.

Gansey is.

Gansey is on the ground.

Gansey is on the ground.

Gansey is on the ground and Blue is beside him on her knees and Gansey’s eyes are shut and Blue’s eyes are shut, but his are shut like they will never open again and hers are shut like she never wants to open them again.

Gansey is on the ground.

Adam had not asked the forest to pause. To keep them still in the moment. To hold Gansey’s spirit close to him.

Gansey is on the ground.

“Is the demon dead?” Adam asks. His voice sounds too normal. “Was that man the demon?”

“I don’t know,” Blue wails, “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“How did he -” Adam asks “ - I didn’t see -”

“I kissed him,” Blue says. She doesn’t need to say anymore. Adam knows. Adam knows what that means. What hurts, almost the very most, is knowing that Blue knows she has a true love and he is
dead. “I kissed him, Adam. I kissed him. He’s gone. He’s dead.”

The sky above them is clearing. The air is almost imperceptibly cleaner. Adam doesn’t know what to do. His phone rings. He answers it without thinking about it, just lets his hand move.

“Where are you?” Ronan demands. He sounds raw, tired, alive. “Where are you? What did you do? God - God, Adam - where - Gansey -”

“Cabeswater,” Adam says, “we made a sacrifice to kill the demon. Gwenllian knows what we did.”


“I’m sorry,” Adam says, because, what else can he say? He is sorry. He is sorry. He is so sorry. “I -”

“I’m coming,” Ronan says, “I’m coming. I’m coming now. Don’t - I’m coming.”

The phone goes dead. Blue is looking at him, but not really. She’s looking through him. Adam drops down onto his knees beside her, beside Gansey. He looks asleep. He looks like a boy. Young. Tousled. Like he ought to be alive.

“The demon is dead,” he says, flat, “Ronan is fine now. He’s … he’s coming.”

Blue nods. “This is going to hurt him a lot,” she says.

Adam thinks that this is a stupid thing to say. He doesn’t tell her this. He nods. He reaches out, brushes his knuckles against the line of Gansey’s jaw. He’s warm, warm like life.

“I can’t do this,” Adam says, “I can’t.”

Blue looks at him bleakly.
Adam doesn’t know what it is he can’t do. His very bones are cold. He feels drenched in ice water, in despair, in horror, in - Noah is suddenly beside him, leeching all his heat.

“Some demon,” he says conversationally, as if he wasn’t sitting in a collapsing forest, “pretty wacky, huh?”

“What the hell?” Blue says, “Noah?”

“This isn’t how I thought it went,” Noah continued, “y’know, I thought Gansey got to be all sacrificial, and then, so did I, but I - I’m not sure what happened. Maybe there’s just like a - a pause before I go.”

“What?” Adam asks, “What do you mean?”

“If Gansey’s dead I should be dead,” Noah says, wails, maybe, “or, well, more dead. I don’t know what’s happening. This isn’t like I felt it would go. I saw something different? And then he was here and I didn’t think he was supposed to be here -”

“Who?” Adam says, “Noah - Noah -”

“Whelk,” Noah sighs, “with the demon. That wasn’t how the story went, was it? I thought there was meant to be someone else. Someone else with the demon. Waking it, warming it, with it. Why was he here?”

“Whelk - he - with the gun?” Adam says, “He’s gone now. He’s -”


“Oh?” Blue asks. She’s threaded her fingers with Noah’s. Her other hand is resting lightly on Gansey’s stomach.

“Oh,” Noah says, “I don’t know. There’s mean to be more for him. Isn’t there? He’s meant to get more? This isn’t where it stops?”
“His heart’s stopped,” Adam says, “I don’t know how to get it going again.”
Maybe

There’s nothing to do. Is there? Nothing to do but wait. Wait for Ronan to arrive so he can start grieving, wait for the adultier adults to arrive to take charge. It’s too wrong. Too wrong. Like a chunk has just been cut straight out of Adam’s stomach. He can’t comprehend it. He can’t. It isn’t making any sense.

He has Blue’s voice in one ear, she’s not exactly talking, she’s just speaking. Disjointed words. Not directed at Adam. Maybe directed to Gansey’s body. Maybe to Noah who is just sitting beside her staring, staring at Gansey. In his other ear, his deaf ear, he has the memory of Persephone speaking to him. Reminding him of how the spirit leaves the body. The soul can only get so far away without being recalled before it’s gone for good. That’s not useful, because Adam knows this, and that was what he had been planning before Gansey had actually died. Before Gansey had actually died. Before Gansey had actually died without any warning.

“Someone else is meant to be here,” Noah says lowly, “I never knew who. But they were meant to be here. They were meant to be angry.”

“I am angry,” Blue says. She doesn’t sound angry.

“Someone else,” Noah repeats, “to force you out of your heads. There aren’t enough of us here. There’s meant to be more.”

“There isn’t any more!” Blue says, voice suddenly raised, “Nothing! No more! The end!”

Noah is shrinking back from her, but not out of reach.

“No,” he says, softly, “there’s supposed to be more.”

“Ronan should have been here,” Adam agrees hoarsely.

“No,” Noah says, then, “yes. He was supposed to be here. But someone else.”

“Who cares?” Adam says then, still as hoarse, but suddenly angry, “They weren’t. We fucked it up.
I’m sorry I fucked this up. I’m sorry.”

“You’re his magicians,” Noah says suddenly, “aren’t you? Do some magic.”

“What?” Blue says.

“That’s what the other person was supposed to say. Wasn’t it?” Noah asks, “They were supposed to push you up and into moving. Do magic!”

“What do you even mean?” Adam demands, “Do some magic? Neither of us are magicians -”

“You’re all connected to Cabeswater,” Noah says, “isn’t that magic?”

Adam begins to speak, and then he pauses. Because. Then he has to think. And. Maybe he understands. Maybe? He doesn’t understand. He does. He has to think.

“Maybe it won’t work,” Adam says, slow, “maybe it won’t work -”

- 

Cabeswater doesn’t understand. Not at first. Maybe Adam is being too incoherent in his confusion. Maybe he’s asking too much. Cabeswater hasn’t been asked this kind of thing before. It seems to think, however, that maybe, maybe. Maybe it’s not been asked before because it hasn’t been thought before.

Adam shows what he wants. He thinks it. Blue thinks it. The forest around them is alight in the rustle of dead leaves. Gansey’s skin is still warm.

Cabeswater doesn’t understand.

Cabeswater understands.
Gansey’s skin is still warm.

Adam feels like he’s gone blind. Not physically. But blind.

Gansey’s skin is warm.

There are three cars parked haphazardly outside where Cabeswater used to be. One car parked neatly. Neatly because Gansey had parked it neatly because he knew he was going to his death and he had obviously wanted as many loose ends as possible tidied up and away. One of the haphazard cars is the BMW, a black trail leading away behind it showing the speed it had driven. Another, the dilapidated Fox Way car. The third was one Adam did not recognise, but assumed had been Whelk’s. Before Gansey has… disintegrated him by killing the demon? Adam didn’t know. Everything was just too much to wrap his head around, honestly.

They had met Ronan in the outskirts of the crumbling trees, him tearing through the decay, them picking their way out of it.

It was difficult to explain just how dead Gansey had been when he was so very heavy and alive in Ronan’s arms, but Gansey had tried to explain, and Adam had tried to explain, and Ronan had shook his head a lot and pressed his face in against Gansey’s shoulder.

The psychics were just tearing up into their haphazard position by the time they had made it out of the trees, or the trees had made it out of them, or something.

Now they were all gathered together, alternately crowding and then attempting to give Gansey space. Ronan was still clinging to Gansey, and Gansey was clinging back, and Blue was clutching Gansey’s free hand, and Maura was examining the palm of Blue’s free hand, and Noah was beside Maura, peering at Blue’s hand like he knew what he was doing, and Adam still felt cut up and out and empty.

Gansey is not dead.

Gansey is alive.
Gansey is here. Here. Here. Alive.

Adam feel empty.

It’s so hard to be joyous when you feel empty. Which isn’t to say he wasn’t relieved, because he was. He was so relieved he could vomit from it. He was so pleased and happy and thankful that Cabeswater had sacrificed itself for Gansey, for Adam, for Blue, for Ronan. But he was so empty.

Gansey’s phone is blowing up. Adam hears snatches of it. He was supposed to have been somewhere with his family tonight. Where was he? They know he has his own life but can’t he do just this one thing for his family?

Adam wants to break the phone.

They segment carefully into cars. They drive to Fox way.

- 

At Foxway there are cards drawn, herbs burned, questions asked - of them and of divine spirits or whatever -, and disgusting tea made and forced down all of their throats.

There are Maura and Calla and Persephone in the reading room with Gansey and Blue, and there is Ronan on the phone with Declan in the kitchen with Jimi. There’s Noah lurking in the hallway, looking both deader and aliver than usual. There’s Adam, taking the keys out of Ronan’s jeans pockets and getting into the BMW and driving to Dana’s because he needs to get Ethan. He needs to.

- 

“Adam!” Dana greets him at the door.

Adam isn’t sure if her shock is because he’s hours later than he’s supposed to be, or because he’s still got tears running down his face because he hadn’t been able to stop them before getting out of the car, or if it’s because he looks roughed up and there’s black sludge staining his clothing, and blood,
and God knows what else.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Adam says, as if that makes up for the absolute chaos of how he looks, “is Ethan alright?”

“I - well. Adam - I - yes. He’s alright. He’s sad because you’re late but he’s alright. Jules is bathing him and the girls right now.”

“I’m sorry,” Adam says again, “there was an accident -” he says, because, what else can he say? “- my friend - my friend Gansey and - and Ronan were -”

“Oh God -” Dana says, her hands jumping to her face, and then away to take him by the shoulder to lead him inside. He feels like putty. He lets her pull him in and close the door behind them. “Oh God - honey - are they -”

“Oh,” Adam says, clears his throat, swipes at his face, because shit he still can’t stop his eyes from leaking. “They’re - they’re ok. It was just - there was a while I didn’t know if they were. Everything was a mess. But they’re ok.”

“Thank God,” Dana says, throws her arms around Adam’s shoulders and hugs him tightly, disregarding his grubby clothes. “You must have been so scared.”

This is not helping Adam stop crying. He wants to press his face down against her hair and hold on to the back of her jumper and cry more. He nods jerkily instead. She pats his back, smooths his hair, releases him, and wipes at his face a little.

“What do you need?” She asks.

“Um,” Adam mumbles, clears his throat, “I just - I need Ethan. I’m gonna take him home.”

Dana looks at him for a moment, and then nods, and then frowns and says, “Home? Your new home, yes? Not back… there?”

“No,” Adam says, chokes a little at the force of the word, “no,” he repeats, “never back there.
“Home to our new home.”

“I’ll fetch him,” Dana says, pats Adam’s arm, “if you wanna pack his stuff up, it’s all over the lounge floor.”

“Ok,” Adam says.

-

Ethan comes out in borrowed pajamas, his hair fluffy from recent towelling, his eyes red rimmed from recent crying. He ignores Adam’s disheveled appearance, just barrels straight into his arms, winds his arms tightly around Adam’s neck.

“Y’didn’t come!” Ethan wails, “Didn’t come!”

“I’m sorry, baby,” Adam says, still doesn’t have his face under control, “I’m so sorry. I’m here now. I’m here now.”

“Thought y’wouldn’t!” Ethan continues, voice catching on a large sob, “Y’wouldn’t!”

“I always, always will,” Adam says, tries to keep his voice low, “even if I’m late. I am always coming for you. Remember? I will always come for you.”

To Dana, he says;

“I’m sorry again. I’ll reimburse you for your time. Thank you.”

-

He drives the two of them back to Fox way. This is difficult because Ethan does not want to be separete from Adam, but being in his carseat very specifically means being separated, so the entire drive back is accompanied by Ethan crying and Adam trying to soothe him.
Ronan is waiting in the doorway for them. Adam hadn’t told him where he was going but he was sure he knew. If Ronan had objected, he would have stopped Adam from taking the keys.

By the time Adam’s made it around the car to get Ethan out of his seat, Ronan is at the car as well.

“You came back,” he whispers as Adam lifts Ethan out of the car and into his arms.

Adam turns against the car to face Ronan, Ethan’s crying shuffled down into sniffling. “Of course I came back,” he says, “why wouldn’t I?”

Ronan wraps his arms around the both of them - Adam and Ethan - tugs them against his chest, presses his face in against Ethan’s hair.

“I don’t know,” he admits, “but I’m really fricking glad you did.”

Adam wants to cry again. He’s only just fucking stopped.

“Are they ok in there?” he asks, pressing himself forwards into Ronan’s embrace, trying not to squish Ethan in the middle.

“Relatively,” Ronan says.

“Are you ok?” Adam tries then.

“Relatively,” Ronan repeats.

Adam swallows.

“Are you ok?” Ronan whispers, “Baby - are you ok?”
“No,” Adam whispers back, “but - yes. Relatively.”

Ronan sighs, lifts his head to kiss Adam’s cheek. “I know,” he says, “but it’s - this is -”

“I think this is where we’re supposed to say something like, ‘things will only get better now’, but I feel like that would curse it.”

“Isn’t just saying you think you’re supposed to enough to curse it?” Ronan asks.

Adam shrugs. “We should go in,” he says.

They go in.

Adam knows he should not feel as upset as he is right now. Gansey is alive. The demon was dead. Everyone was here. Everyone was relatively ok. Ethan was in his arms. No one was horribly hurt. He should be ok. He wants to go home and take a shower and get into bed with Ronan and Ethan and go to sleep. Except he also wants to go find Gansey and Blue and Noah and hold onto all of them and not let go. He wants to grieve, but how is supposed to grieve when there is no one to grieve?

It takes about a fortnight for things to go even vaguely back to normal. There’s a lot of talking that has to happen. A lot of working shit out. A long of explaining and not understanding and explaining and vaguely understanding and explaining and getting it enough to move on. Noah spends a lot of time trying to explain what was supposed to happen, but having the knowledge of what was supposed to happen jumping away from him. Gwenllian offers a lot of unhelpful insights and spends the two weeks afterwards eating biscuits that everyone suspects she’s stealing from the next door neighbours. Gansey apologises to his parents for missing their event and Blue doesn’t talk to him for a whole day after that, and that they make up and Gansey persuades Blue not to yell at his parents. Maura, Persephone, and Calla find Whelk’s body on the northside of what used to be Cabeswater, shockingly, also Neeve’s body. They had been under the assumption she had just gone home rather than dying, but Gwenllian tells them that it was just what happened and that maybe this time it was her own fault all the way through.

Adam sleeps a lot. As often as he can manage. He’s worked out, thanks to Persephone, that maybe
he feels so empty because part of him has always been full of Cabeswater. It feels like a lie. That he had had something that was holding him together without him even knowing it, without him giving anything to it, and now it was gone because of him.

Ethan is fine. Ethan is good. Ethan is alright because for him it was just Adam coming to get him a few hours too late and that was smoothed over by Adam not leaving his side for a few days straight. Ronan appears to be attempting to do the same smoothing over thing to with Adam, sticking himself close to Adam’s side. Adam appreciates the fuck out of this.

He thinks, that maybe? Things would be ok.

-  

Of course. There was still the question of Glendower. Of Gansey’s life. The fact that he had been chasing someone who was dead for nearly a decade. This comes out in fits and spurts.

It’s Gansey staring unseeing at his journal, not even noticing when someone comes into the room.

It’s Gansey doubting himself. Doubting that he ever heard anything when he was dying the first time.

It’s hard to try and comfort him because Adam doesn’t have any answers, and Ronan doesn’t have any answers, and the answers the psychics give are still a little too vague because they’re not sure either, and then -

Then it’s Blue and Gwenllian in the same room with Noah and Noah - who was full and lively in fits and bursts - becomes full and livelier than before and full of memories.

It’s Noah smacking himself in the forehead, as if he’d just forgotten his keys or something, and then going to Gansey.

Everything is a little ridiculous
“It was never Glendower?” Gansey says, for possibly the third time, disbelief and belief warring loudly in his voice.

“It was because of Glendower that you lived,” Noah tries, hands flying around in the air with the impossibility of only having words to describe something so other worldly, “I was - I can’t put it all together. What happened in the other time. The other place, BUT, but, listen. It was because of Glendower even if he wasn’t aware of it. You wouldn’t have found me if you you weren’t looking for odd shit, for Glendower, you wouldn’t have found Ronan, or Adam, or Blue. You’d probably still have had to die because Blue would at some point have accidentally killed you but -”

“Oi,” says Blue.

“- Sorry,” says Noah, continues, “ but, see, it makes sense? Right? I kept losing time while all this shit was going on. I was so unsteady all the time. Because we were crossing lines with other times and shit and all BUT. Dudes. It was always me, right? Echoed along the line when I died and Gansey died at the same time! What a coincidence, except, you know what we think about coincidences.”

“Have you been drinking coffee?” Ronan asks.


“I think it’ll make more sense to me once I’ve had a while for it to sink in,” Gansey says eventually, “but I feel I ought to say, to all of you, that - well,” he pauses, shrugs, looks at his hands in not quite abashment, “meeting all of you has been better than my wildest dreams of meeting Glendower.”

“Oh, Pshaw,” Blue says.
Maybe Ronan’s favourite thing about the city was the fact that he could go out for a jog and not bump into a single person he knew, or maybe it was the wide range of cafes and restaurants to choose from, or maybe it was how short the drive was from here back to the Barns. Probably it was actually simply the fact that Adam was here, and Ethan was here and that Ronan being anywhere else in which they were not was too dreadful a concept to even consider.

There was, truthfully, a wide range of things that Ronan hated about the city - but he would hate the exact same things about being in almost any city, so. He and Adam had discussed the pros and cons of Ronan following Adam to university, a very in depth and carefully conversation. It went a little bit like this;

‘I can’t ask you to leave your home, or Opal, or - or your mum -’

‘Who said shit about asking?’

‘I said shit about asking.’

‘Look, Parrish. If you head off to fucking - fucking Yale. Or Harvard. Or whatever. By yourself? Ethan is gonna call me everyday to nark on your for not eating or something else necessary and simple.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘And I’d miss him. He’s my fucking little brother now too, y’know. And Chainsaw would miss him. You’d do that to a bird, Parrish? Take away a bird’s only friend?’

‘God you’re dramatic.’

‘Listen. Unless you can say to me in all truthfulness that you don’t want me to come with you? I’m
coming. I wanna be there for Ethan when he starts school.’

‘You don’t wanna be there for me when I start school?’

‘Piss head. I wanna be there for you when you start school. I want you to come the fuck home to me after every single day of courses and complain to me about dumbass people and tell me how you’re the smartest one of them all and compliment me on my amazing cooking skills and go to bed with me every fucking night.’

‘This isn’t the proposal, right?’

‘It’s not the proposal. God. I promised you there’d be like… a band or some shit.’

‘If you get a band I’m going to say no.’

‘Parrish you wound me.’

‘You really wanna come?’

‘Fuck off. I do.’

‘Ok. Cool.’


- So. This was how it went. They found a small flat in the central city, Adam insisted on paying half the rent, Ronan said sure if he could pay for electricity, Adam said sure so long as he pays for wi-fi,
they shook on it. They find a school for Ethan, one that’s close enough he could even walk to it. They have a flat-warming party a week and a half before Adam’s course starts because the psychics insist it’s necessary. A lot of herbs are burnt in each room. A lot of alcohol is consumed in almost every room. They possibly annoy every single one of their neighbours.

This is how it went. Adam and Ronan took Ethan to his first day of school, Chainsaw coming with them as an extra cherry on top. Ronan takes Adam to his first day of class. Kisses him hard outside the building because he can and because Adam’s nervous and this has always been more effective than telling him not to worry.

This is how it went. Ronan accidentally gets a job coaching tennis, Chainsaw loves fetching tennis balls, Ethan becomes an accidental mascot of the tennis club, Adam thinks the whole thing is hilarious. Ronan learns how to cook so many more dishes, teaches them to Ethan as well. Cleans up the mess before Adam gets home. Adam gets a job down the street from them as a mechanic, only working part time because Ronan gives him a look which convinced him that that was all he needed. Adam brings home 100% grades, and pies from the bakery near campus, and Chainsaw when she waits for him outside his classroom window.

- 

Ronan thinks it is quite possible he is happier than he has ever fucking been. It’s harder to dream without Cabeswater, and it’s harder to dream when he’s not so aligned with the line, but he’s aligned with Adam and Adam is more magic than he had ever dreamed of and he dreams legal papers to ‘officially’ adopt Ethan, and he dreams flashing shoes for Ethan, and he dreams a pen that never runs out of ink for Adam, and he dreams, and he dreams, and he dreams.

He dreams more for the new Cabeswater he and Adam had been working on back in Henrietta, he dreams the outlines and the shape and he dreams how it would wake dreams and he dreams how it would give dreams to ability to stay awake and he plans and he plots. Adam plans and plots beside him, sometimes awake, sometimes asleep. Everytime they return to Henrietta, they return with carefully coiled ideas, and piece by piece they put them together, sometimes with the help of the Fox way ladies, sometimes with the help of Blue, and Gansey, and Noah, sometimes just the two of them.

Eventually it’s blue enough, or green enough, or awake enough, or dream enough, and they - with Declan and Matthew - steal their mother from the home she was in and wake her in the forest and wake her out of the forest and the forest wakes in her and she wakes in the forest and there’s waking and forest and crying.

-
Ronan had always thought that if he ever had the bad luck to move out of Henrietta, then the least he would do is make sure he didn’t move anywhere near Declan.

Declan lived less than half an hour away via the bus. Matthew lived an hour and a half by car away at the Barns with Aurora and also Opal who insists that living in a city would eat her feet(hooves) off.

When Aurora and Matthew visit, so does Declan, and Ronan and Adam’s little flat is chock full and Ethan is ecstatic and Adam is pleased and Ronan’s heart is fucking fuller than the flat.

Declan visits by himself too, citing the need to check up on Ethan’s education, and bringing lego for Ethan or an interesting article for Adam, an elbow in the ribs and a hug for Ronan.

- 

Gansey somehow persuaded his parents that currently, traveling the world with Blue and assisting in ecological research and clean up was more pressing to the world than getting a fancy degree, and half the video calls Ronan and Adam and Ethan receive from them were from places that were wet and green.

“You guys picked right,” Ronan tells them, “University’s for losers.”

Adam is sitting on the couch behind him, hair everywhere, pen in mouth, laptop on lap, frantically working on finishing an assignment due in the next forty six minutes. He takes time off from writing to give Ronan the finger.

- 

This is how it goes.

Ronan wakes up in the morning to sunlight on his bedspread and Adam in his arms and sometimes a trinket from his dreams. He wakes up in the morning and he isn’t terrified, or angry, or hungover. He wakes up in the morning and he feels ok. He wakes up in the morning and Adam is kissing him. He
wakes up in the morning and Ethan is sitting on the bed asking/demanding waffles for breakfast.

He spends his day outdoors telling people what to do, or indoors ignoring people, or indoors helping out at Ethan’s school, or outdoors running around parks racing Chainsaw, or indoors kissing Adam.

He spends his evenings with Ethan and Adam and Ethan and Adam and Declan and Matthew and Aurora and Gansey and Blue and Noah and family, family, family, family.

He goes to bed at night with Adam. He goes to bed at night with Adam and kissing and time and skin on skin. He goes to bed at night without fear. He goes to bed at night and looks forward to waking up in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

So guys. Uh. this is the end I guess. I'm probably going to write some more oneshots of this AUverse because I love Ethan to pieces, so if you have requests for scenes you wanna see (whether a missing scene from within this story or a future scene) lemme know and I'll see what I can do about writing it for you! Thank you to all of you for spending so much time reading this mammoth of a wacky story and putting up with my sporadic posting and zero editing. I've appreciated every single comment and kudos. This story has brought me so much joy! Both in writing it and in the response it got, and in the fact that it has helped me improve my writing so much!

AS always, you're welcome to hit me up on my tumblr - etoilearden

End Notes

Hi guys! If you like my writing feel free to come yell at me on my Tumblr etoilegarden.tumblr.com

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!