F.O.X.E.S. Division

by a_case_for_wonder

Summary

"It’s as if someone is doing experiments, only using the whole world as their lab."

A plane lands itself at Logan Airport, every person horrendously dead inside, and FBI Agent Andrew Minyard’s carefully controlled existence is thrown into chaos. Suddenly, the people he’s promised himself he would protect are in danger.

Neil Josten is a name that should have existed only on paper, until Andrew Minyard knocks on his door and drags him back to Boston to enlist the help of his old acquaintance and disgraced scientist Kevin Day.

A team where everyone has their own past to run from shouldn’t be able to save the world, but maybe they can anyway. Maybe they can save each other too, while they’re at it. In this lab, anything’s possible.

OR

A "Fringe" AU where Andrew is Dunham, Neil is Peter, Kevin is Walter, and Unit Chief
David Wyamck heads up the Fringe and Other Xeno-Experimental Sciences Division of the FBI

Notes

Hey y'all. So this is a Fringe-AU I've been working on. You absolutely don't have to have seen the TV show "Fringe" to follow this - it's just an FBI Sci-Fi adventure! I really tried for in-character and their backgrounds are mostly the same but things have been altered slightly which changed things, as you will see. Anyway, happy reading!

The fic is broken into Parts, six chapters each, which loosely correspond to Fringe episodes. There will ultimately be 12 Parts. Chapters alternate between Andrew and Neil's POV, first chapter is Andrew.

See the end of the work for more notes
Part 1, Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

This is the beginning of Part 1 "Turning off Auto Pilot" based around Fringe S1E1

Andrew's POV

Warnings for fairly explicit sci-fi gore and a good amount of violence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 1: Turning off AutoPilot

Chapter 1: It's Hard Times Being FBI

Andrew Minyard’s phone buzzed to life on the dark surface of the bar, but he was content to ignore it. A glance down at the single “A” on the screen was enough to have him reaching for his glass again, only to find it empty. He flicked his fingers towards the bartender and got an easy smile in response.

“That’s four tonight, huh?” Roland said knowingly, voice pitched perfectly over the loud music of the club. He switched out Andrew’s glass in a practiced motion. “Working off the stress of the week? You know, we have a policy – buy four, get a drink of your choice free.” Then he winked.

Andrew slid him a flat look along with his tip.

“I’m aware of the policy. I did used to work here.” Andrew pointed out. Then, because Roland was right – he was trying to burn through some stress, he added “What time do you get off?”

Roland grinned, annoying but dark and easy in the club’s low lighting.

“I’m aware of the policy. I did use to work here.” Andrew pointed out. Then, because Roland was right – he was trying to burn through some stress, he added “What time do you get off?”

Roland grinned, annoying but dark and easy in the club’s low lighting.

“Well, my shift ends at two so…” He made a show of considering. “Quarter after?”

Andrew offered no verbal response, but flipped him off casually against his glass as he took another swallow.

“Aw, don’t tease.” Roland pouted, then laughed at the deadly glare Andrew sent his way. A flurry of overlapping drunken voices made themselves heard from halfway down the bar, and Roland flashed him an apologetic look that was entirely unnecessary before slipping away. Andrew didn’t come to drink at Eden’s Twilight for Roland’s company – not exactly. He came here because when he asked, Roland would leave him the hell alone to drink in peace. The fact that this was one of their other kind of nights didn’t change that.

Andrew’s phone rang, and he looked down fully expecting to see the same single letter caller-identifier that had been flashing on his screen on and off for days now, ignored with increasing frequency. Instead, it was an unlisted number. Well, that he was definitely not answering. He stuffed the phone into his pocket. If they really needed something, they would leave a voicemail. Maybe he would even listen to it.
He was just glad it wasn’t Aaron again – he’d done about all of that interaction as he could take for a while. He’d gotten a text days ago that simply read “in town Sat. Nicky says dinner or else.” As if his cousin had the power to sling threats among them. But Andrew had begrudgingly allowed plans to be made, and the group text hadn’t stopped pinging since, which was half the stress he was trying to drink away now.

Andrew slugged his way through most of his whiskey and checked the time. 1:15 AM. That meant forty five minutes to kill until Roland was free, if he wanted to wait around that long. He didn’t, really, but the prospect wasn’t any less enticing than returning to an empty apartment to dwell on the unwelcome dawning of the weekend. He hadn’t yet decided when his phone rang yet again in his pocket. Annoyed now, he almost didn’t even check who the caller was.

He checked.

It was Higgins.

Fuck.

Well, weekends never did mean much to the FBI, did they? He wondered what white-collar bullshit could possibly be calling him in at this time of night. Andrew emptied his glass a bit regretfully, and left Eden’s Twilight’s best-looking bartender to fend for himself for the night, grateful as always that he had never given the man his number.

He walked out of the club and flipped open his phone.

“Minyard.” Let Aaron have to use his first name.

“You out and about?” Came the voice from the other end of the line. Andrew still in the middle of walking to the street to hail a cab. He checked the caller ID again. His boss’s phone. Not his boss’s voice.

“Is Higgins dead?” He asked flatly. The voice gave a gruff laugh.

“Not dead, here with me actually. But I needed to talk to you. This is Special Agent David Wymack. I’m calling you in on a case.”

David Wyamck. Andrew knew the name, if not the man himself. He worked out of Boston, as Andrew did, but he apparently reported directly to Homeland Security. Andrew had never gotten a very clear idea what it was Wymack did, just that it involved some kind of counter-terrorism and cutting-edge data-based threat analysis. It didn’t seem suspicious from the outside, but Andrew knew that never meant much. Whatever the nature of his job, Wymack’s reputation in the Bureau was solid. He brought baked goods to the office whenever his wife was stress-baking, which was often. He was also apparently a loud-mouthed hard-ass, with a penchant for grandiose threats but an even bigger one for taking unorthodox agents under his wing. All in all, not an agent Andrew thought he’d be inclined to hate outright, but certainly not one he would trust.

And certainly not his boss.

“Could you put Higgins back on the line?” It wasn’t intoned like a request.

“Got a problem talking to me, Minyard?” Wymack asked.

“Got a problem not knowing why I’m talking to you at all.” Andrew shot back, unable to decide on an honorific for the man just yet and so dispensing with his name entirely.
“Because this is my case, and I asked your unit chief here very nicely to borrow you and Walker for it, because you’re apparently the best he’s got. We’ve got a big threat on the horizon tonight and I need the best. So why aren’t you halfway here already?”

If Wymack thought flattery was going to get him anywhere – with him or Walker – he hadn’t been keeping up with his water cooler talk. Then again, Andrew was feeling restless. Nothing like a good looming terror threat to stave off the bloody itch of boredom, right?

“You haven’t told me where it is.” He reminded Wymack. “Also, it is half past one in the morning on a Saturday. And I am, as you put it, out and about."

“The incident is at Logan.” And didn’t that make it sound so official and interesting? “You drunk, Minyard?”

There was no judgment in the question, Andrew was surprised to hear, just a request for a genuine assessment of his functionality. Andrew considered. He’d have to go home to get his gun, and he lived at the other end of Boston from the airport, by design.

“You got a girl with you?” Wymack asked when the silence stretched on too long. If Andrew had been the laughing type, he may have just then.

“If the Bureau buys me a cab, I won’t be drunk by the time I get to you.” He said.

“It is. Doesn’t seem like my problem though."

“Glad to hear the rumors of your sunny personality are all true.” Wymack observed. “Fine. You can expense the cab.” There was a strange note of tension in his voice that, without knowing the man better, Andrew wasn’t able to parse. “Just get your ass down here.” The line clicked as Wymack hung up.

The cab ride was even longer than it should have been, what with traffic around the airport choked in a snarling mass. Andrew didn’t sleep – couldn’t, not in an unfamiliar car with an unfamiliar driver, but he closed his eyes and tried to rest, ignoring the occasional buzz of his phone. Whatever it was, work or not, it could certainly wait until he was on the scene. The car dropped him off at the entrance to the airport, and Andrew wound his way towards the center of the flashing blue.

Everywhere was bright and loud in the night, the grounds teeming with dozens of overlapping voices, an alphabet soup of official-looking jackets all vying for dominance. His mind was still grappling with taking all of it in as he got to the police line. It wasn’t until after he’d been let through with a nod that he realized the cop had never asked to see his badge. Before he could turn around and say “security protocols,” a voice punched its way through the night.

“Minyard!”

Whatever-his-Unit-was Chief David Wymack cut an imposing figure even in this crowd. He towered over Andrew by at least a foot– not that that was particularly unusual. What perhaps was unusual was that the mass under his heavy wool coat was clearly all muscle rather than fat. Andrew would have guess ex-military if he hadn’t looked the man up. Andrew silently weighed his opinion of the man a little more favorably. He had no patience for agents who talked tough when they had let themselves go soft.
“Sober yet?” Wymack asked wryly when Andrew was more in hearing range. In response, Andrew walked the rest of the way to him in a pedantically straight line, heel-to-toe. Wymack folded his arms, unimpressed.

“Good.” Wymack said. “Follow me, scene’s this way.”

The place was settled on the otherwise-empty tarmac like a ghost, the emergency lights glowing eerily through partially obscured windows. There were apparently no survivors, not even the pilot. The plane was part of an early high tech autopilot system and had landed itself right on schedule, hours after a brief and violent distress call. An intercepting craft reported mysterious stains on the windows and no signs of life as the plane made its way with unnatural peace towards Boston. By the time she arrived, the CDC and every other federal agency within spitting distance was waiting. Now, it was time to open her up.

They went to get dressed. The CDC techs had gone through and hadn’t found any unusual readings, but as Wymack had said, ‘Something caused this and I’ll be damned if anyone touches or breathes it before we figure out exactly what.’

At the door to the plane, Wymack stopped him with an arm held out, stopping well short of touching him. Andrew cocked an eyebrow, only vaguely curious why he was being stopped now, after so much work had been put into getting him to the scene.

“Problem Chief?” He drawled. Wymack frowned. It was neither the stern, almost paternal look Andrew had already clocked as his usual expression, nor the righteous fury that sometimes made its way through Bureau gossip chains. This tension was something else – an animal that has only ever been a predator who finds his hackles raised nonetheless. Andrew was familiar with the sensation. He waited. Inside the hazmat suit, his breath was loud in his own ears.

“Minyard, what you are about to see is classified at the highest level.” Wymack said. “You walk out of here, you speak of it to no one but me and your designated team. You tell your cab driver, you tell your barber, hell, you so much as whisper about it in a prostitute’s ear, I will bury you so deep even you don’t know where you are. Are we clear?”

“Crystal, Chief.” Maybe this case would be interesting, he thought.

He was right.

“This” was a scene of death unlike anything Andrew had ever encountered, and he had encountered more than most, even for someone in his line of work. Around the Bureau, Minyard and Walker were known as the team to go to whenever a scene needed a cool head, a steady stomach, and sometimes a way with tricky witnesses. They had seen a lot.

They had never seen anything like this.

The passenger’s faces were all but gone, seemingly dissolved. The skin was gelatinous, the connective tissue pulling apart like soft wax to reveal white bone. Their eyes were gone. Their tongues were gone. Some skulls had lulled into their owner’s laps, but at least the bone all still seemed to be there – if slumped and scattered amidst unpleasant puddles on the carpet. Andrew was sure he had stepped on human teeth.

The rest of their bodies had hardly fared batter, although whatever had caused this seemed to have run out of strength before the larger masses around the torsos and thighs could completely liquefy. Small blessings, then, that they weren’t wading their way through an inch of human goo.
The clothes and luggage were untouched, though not by the panic of the passengers. Bags and suitcases littered the aisle. A discarded insulin pen was abandoned under one seat. The body of a flight attendant was sprawled on the ground near the door to the cockpit, and there appeared to be a set of bones more than there should have been in there. Andrew turned toward the door of the plane where Wymack was waiting, a studiously not-ill expression on his face. Andrew’s eyes met his through the plastic of their suits.

“Chief, what the fuck is this?”

Wymack smiled grimly.

“That, Minyard, is exactly what I’m asking you to figure out.”

He and Wymack had managed to extricate themselves from their suits and found their way inside to the crowded command center. Andrew scanned until he spotted the familiar bleached-white bob making its way towards them. Renee Walker came to stand before them, her beatific smile flawless as always on her calm face, even in the midst of this chaos. It was her perfect cool and easy warmth that had endeared her to her superiors on her rise through the Bureau. But it was the barely-hidden hard glint in her eye that made her such a good agent in the first place. Renee smiled at him with just a bit too much teeth – good. Whatever had happened on that plane, he had no use for her sweet talking church girl. He needed the sneak and the brawler she kept chained but well-fed inside of her. He had a feeling that before this case was over, he would be handing her back some of her knives.

“Renee Walker, good to meet you, sir.” She was saying to Wymack. She had half a head on Andrew but the unit chief still dwarfed her. She shook his hand with a steady grip. “Is he here yet?”

“Almost.” Wymack replied.

“Is who here?” Andrew asked, eyes narrowing. Renee suddenly had a look about her that he was all too familiar with – one that said she was about to play mediator.

“Have you checked your phone recently, Andrew?” She asked. Before he could either ponder that or answer, he spotted the blond hair and popped collar in the doorway. His mind flashed back to an incessantly ringing cellphone; Wymack knowing he wouldn’t pick up for an unfamiliar number; the cop who had let him through the line without batting an eye – almost as if he remembered seeing his face.

“Aaron. What the fuck are you doing here?” Andrew spat, slipping into German without thinking about it. Wymack frowned slightly and watched them.

His twin brother blinked coolly at him, unwrapping his scarf and peeling out of his jacket calmly before answering.

“I tried to call you.” Aaron said. “It’s not my fault you don’t pick up your phone, asshole. And you know what I’m doing here. I’m working, same as you.”

“You work in DC.” Andrew reminded him.

“I work in data.” Aaron corrected, which was certainly one way of putting it. “Usually that means DC. Tonight it meant here.”

Andrew favored him with a disbelieving look.

“I got the call about this four hours ago. You weren’t supposed to be getting into town until tomorrow, but you got here before I did. Why.” he demanded flatly.
Aaron looked briefly startled, as though he hadn’t thought Andrew would put together this very simple timeline. He looked uncertain, and very, very suspicious.

“Have you been working for Wymack this whole time?” Andrew demanded suddenly. Wymack’s head snapped around towards them at the sound of his name. Aaron shook his head just once, as if to clear it.

“No! No, I mean… I pass information on to a lot of different teams, his occasionally included. But I haven’t been lying to you. You’re right, I wasn’t supposed to get into town until tomorrow – and I was actually here to talk to Wymack. About something unrelated, though.” Aaron shifted on his feet uncomfortably. “At least, I thought it was.”

Aaron sighed, glancing towards Renee and Wymack, and switched back to English.

“One of the passengers on the flight manifest of flight C-731 may be connected to something I’ve been… trying to sort through.” Aaron admitted. He met Wymack’s expectant stare with a cold indifference that rivaled Andrew’s own. “That’s as much as I’m willing to say until I’m more sure.”

“You will share now.” Andrew said, staring down the side of his face. Aaron didn’t even twitch, didn’t move his eyes from the Chief to Andrew.

“Not yet.” He said firmly. “Give me some more time. You know how it is with data – better kept close to the vest.”

“Like a gaping chest wound.” Andrew said.

“Are you two quite done?” Wymack broke in, exasperated. “We have a goddamn terror attack to solve, if you don’t mind.”

“Doing my best here, Chief.” Andrew said, eyes still on Aaron’s cheek, his voice empty of guile but also of anything else. Aaron gave an annoyed sign. Renee’s phone rang.

It turned out they’d gotten a call on the tip line – some anonymous old lady had seen some “suspicious” men handing off a briefcase in the parking lot of a storage unit not far from the airport. She couldn’t say what about the encounter struck her as so suspicious, which in Andrew’s experience could either make the tip much more or much less legitimate. It wasn’t a great start, but it was just slightly better than the nothing else they currently had to go on. Wymack listened gravely, then turned to look them over with an appraising eye.

“Walker, you stay with me. Stay on the tip line for now, but I’ll want to start setting up interviews with families and potential witnesses soon.” He turned towards Andrew and Aaron. “You two, follow up on the storage unit. Yes, the hot line tip. Yes, both of you. Seriously. Work your personal shit out in the car, if you don’t mind, dealing with it is above my pay grade and its goddamn unprofessional. So it had better be gone by the time you get back, got it?”

Wymack seemed to take their silence as confirmation.

“Good. Get out of my sight.”

The ride to the storage facility was silent, as Andrew had known it would be. He and Aaron had never had much to say to each other. Aaron had tried to be his brother for a while when they had first met as teenagers, Andrew fresh out of juvie, fists swinging at anything that came too close. He had
tried for longer than most people had. Despite his disastrous track record of forgotten promises, he had, in some tiny ways, never stopped. For that, Andrew tolerated him.

Tonight though, Aaron was all stone as he stared down the road, hands tight on the wheel of whatever shitty sedan he was driving these days – Andrew hadn’t stopped to notice. He would normally have preferred driving, but Aaron had glared daggers at him when he’d held out his hand for the keys, so he told himself it was for the best that he didn’t have to deal with the car’s undoubtedly shit handling. He didn’t try to break the silence. For all the progress they might have made in their decade and a half as a “family,” his and Aaron’s interactions were still mostly formal, scripted, and Nicky-driven affairs. Dinners when they were all in town; a quiet evening of drinks at Christmas; both of them pointedly ignoring their cousin’s group message on their birthday. It had been a long time since they had been thrown together like this, and Andrew didn’t think either of them was quite equipped to handle it. They had never worked together so directly on a case before, and it was by design.

“What’s your comm channel?” Aaron broke the silence as they pulled into the lot of the storage facility. The yellowish lampposts were the only source of light around, giving the whole place a strange and disconnected aura. At some point, it had started to snow.

“Three.” Andrew said. “But I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

“Worried about me, brother?”

“Your lack of field experience does not inspire confidence.”

They trudged toward the units – they were all locked, of course, and couldn’t be opened without a reasonable suspicion that something nefarious lurked inside. They both scanned the parking lot – nothing suspicious. Of course, the woman’s sighting was hours old by now, even if she had seen something of importance. It was unlikely whatever characters she had seen would have just hung around waiting to be discovered by federal agents. That only left one place to look.

“Just so we’re clear, this is your fault.” Aaron said, and heaved up the lid to the dumpster.

Together, they began to sift through the trash. Nothing caught Andrew’s eye until he spotted half a dozen hard plastic bottles. They weren’t labeled, but they were empty. Certainly, they didn’t seem like something that should end up in the trash in a place like this. He noticed Aaron had picked one up.

“These are lab-grade chemical bottles.” Aaron said, frowning at them. And that definitely was strange. Aaron unscrewed the cap and took a careful whiff. He backed off quickly, face pinching.

“Ammonia.” Aaron pronounced. Then, with growing concern, “a lot of it. No, I mean a lot Andrew. These kinds of bottles are used for really highly concentrated chemicals. I can’t imagine what you’d need this many bottles for.”

Imagination had never been Aaron’s strong suit – not that it was Andrew’s either. But the only answer was ‘nothing good.’ Aaron might have actually discovered something useful. “Is it enough to give up probable cause?” Andrew asked. Aaron considered for a moment, than gave a small, dark smile.

“You bring your picks?”

_*Like I leave home without them_ said Andrew’s answering nod. They got to work opening the lockers. The first one was nothing but old furniture. The second a drum kit and stacks of unlabeled
cardboard boxes. The third held a car, a seeming decade’s worth of dust piled up on the cover but enticing, clearly expensive curves showing from underneath. Andrew reached out and trailed a finger along where the edge of the wheel well would be until Aaron coughed pointedly.

Ten units down, they struck gold. Animal chattering greeted them as the steel door slid up into the ceiling. Monitors glowed with masses of numbers and what looked like molecular diagrams. Rows and rows of canisters and test tubes lined metal racks and refrigerated cases. The whole place reeked of ammonia. A monkey, of all things, banged at the wall of his cage and Andrew snapped into action.

“I'm calling Wymack.” He said. Aaron nodded and began snapping pictures on his phone – neither of them had brought a camera. Andrew pulled up the unlisted number from earlier in the night, only to curse quietly when his phone registered no signal. He waved his phone at Aaron to tell him he was walking away to make the call and headed back towards the car. He was almost there, still searching for a signal, when he heard a far-off crash of another until door banging open, and his brother’s voice sliced through the snowy air.

“Stop! FBI!”

Andrew’s comm buzzed to life on his shoulder.

“Andrew, we’ve got a runner! Southeast corner and headed your way!” Aaron’s voice crackled through the speaker. Andrew tore off towards him. God, but he hated running. He narrowed his eyes against the snow and breathed through the small surge of adrenaline Aaron’s voice had startled out of him, pushing himself to go faster. He was almost smiling. Aaron had found a suspect. This had been a shit assignment and Wymack had known it, had only sent them on it to get them out of his hair, but they had actually found something. They were going to come back with a suspect and a real lead, at least a whole locker full of evidence. He couldn’t wait to see the look on Wymack’s face.

A dark flash across his vision. A body dashed across the aisle between two rows of units, a second body close behind. The second was definitely Aaron, and he looked like he was losing ground. Aaron had been faster than Andrew, once, at least at running, but he spent most of his time behind a desk these days. Andrew looped to cut them off, now squinting through the heavy snowfall. Something was wrong. The suspect should have been running toward the only exit, but instead they seemed to have come around, circling back toward the lab unit he and Aaron had discovered, a twin of it now open across the way. Why? Surely the man didn’t think he would have time to grab anything and get away? Not with two agents hot on his heels. But why else would he come back this way, unless…

Andrew was reaching for his gun. For his knives, his phone, anything; but the man was reaching for his pocket and Andrew was too slow, too late-

“Aaron!” was all he had time to shout, and that stranger’s mirror of a face was whipping around toward him, meeting his eyes for one helpless second before the world exploded around them.

The rest was flashes. The crackle of a radio, someone’s voice calling his name – or was it? The overwhelming smell of burning plastic searing his nostrils. Bright while light and air so sterile he wasn’t sure he could breath it - coming to with fists swinging. His fist stopped by a firm block, a hand as familiar as his own. Who’s? His mind revved ineffectually. There had been snow. A deafening noise. The smell of ammonia. The sound of chattering moneys – did that make sense? His own face, turned toward him as everything shattered.
Andrew sat up like a shot.

“Aaron.” He gasped.

“Alive.” Renee said, clear and firm. He turned to look at her, and she finally removed her hand from his still-raised fist. She looked exhausted, pale and wan in the fluorescent hospital light. There were dark bags under her eyes, and a telltale red line around the sides of her throat that said she had been tugging at her silver cross necklace. Alive, her voice said. Her eyes said there was a very big ‘but.’ The world still felt like it was coming at Andrew in waves. He hoped it was just exhaustion and not a concussion. He gripped the rail of the bed until his fingers ached.

“Tell me.” he said.

“Aaron was exposed to some kind of mixture of raw chemicals during the explosion.” Renee told him. “It’s caused some kind of…flesh condition. The doctors have never seen anything like it. It’s like…” Her voice never wavered, but she paused and closed her eyes, breathing deeply. When she opened them, Andrew noticed they were pink and puffy around the edges.

“It’s better if you see for yourself.” She finished.

He nodded, and she kept talking. Andrew didn’t have a concussion, she told him, so she didn’t see any reason he needed to stay in the hospital. They called a nurse and Andrew bore her prodding with clenched hands and gritted teeth, only breathing properly again when she left and Renee quietly handed him his clothes, armbands on top of the pile, his knives already heavy in their sheaths. He pulled them over his forearms gratefully. There was nothing there Renee had never seen, but he had no interest in parading old scars around in front of any more strangers right now. The knives’ weight was reassuring against his body, and he got to his feet steadily despite the pounding in his head. He turned towards Renee when he was done changing; the sound of his stillness was enough for her to turn back around. She met his eyes for one steady moment before turning to the door, and he followed her out of the room towards his brother.

There was a doctor waiting for them outside of the ICU. He tried to say something – maybe encouragement, maybe a warning. Andrew pushed past him without bothering to listen. He needed to know. He needed to see. He shoved his way bodily into the room to Aaron’s bedside, and there he stopped dead.

There wasn’t much that could shake Andrew Minyard. He had trained himself to stop feeling when he was still small, shut down against the barrage of pain and anger and loss that had soaked like a stain through the tattered tapestry of his childhood. At some point he had reached deep inside of himself with hands determined to destroy, snapping off whatever he could reach, and years of therapy might never entirely replace whatever it was he had broken. Andrew had watched violence and death. He had survived it. He had perpetrated it. He had stood in the aisle of a plane full of dissolving human corpses and never flinched. Now, he felt the bile rise reflexively in his throat, and when he pressed his hands against his thighs he felt them trembling.

To describe Aaron as ‘alive’ was technically not a falsehood, but to Andrew it seemed a gross overstatement, almost a joke. He was hooked up to half a dozen machines, his breath so shallow Andrew could barely see his chest moving – what little of it was visible around the cold packs wrapped around his body to keep his core temperature down. This was, presumably, an attempt to slow the progress of whatever haywire chemical reaction had taken hold of his body, and seemed to be slowly turning it transparent.

It was a surreal thing to look at. Aaron’s skin was translucent, like someone had replaced it with a thin layer of gelatin, unveiling all the twisting veins and muscles beneath. He was a ghostly, grisly
model of a human being. It reminded Andrew of something one might see in an anatomy class – he wondered if Aaron himself ever had, he’d been the biology major – a preserved corpse, not a living human being. For a brief, wild moment, it seemed like something had wrapped Aaron in a grotesque body-shaped chrysalis, and Andrew had to fight the urge to reach out and tear it off of him.

“Oh my god.” A soft gasp pulled Andrew out of his thoughts. He turned to see his cousin Nicky standing in the doorway, hand over his mouth in shock, puffy eyes overrun with tears.

“Andrew, what happened?” He asked softly when he’d managed to lower his hand. Renee had come up behind him with a soft hand on his back, and he leaned into it without noticing. Andrew didn’t speak. He didn’t think he could. He turned to the nearest doctor and stared him down until the silent question manifested itself in the space between them.

It seemed to be some kind of tissue crystallization, the doctor explained. No one had ever seen anything like it before. Andrew was getting very tired of that phrase. They were trying to slow the process by keeping Aaron’s temperature down, but they weren’t sure what to do when they didn’t even know what he’d been exposed to. Here, Andrew turned silently to Renee, but she shook her head sadly. The lab had been obliterated in the explosion. That was the last information Andrew could take. He grabbed Nicky by the wrist and pulled him from the room and out into the freezing air.

Nicky remained silent, shaking a little from the tears or stress or the cold, arms wrapped around himself, while Andrew lit a cigarette. He stayed silent while Andrew smoked it all the way through, and lit another. It didn’t seem right that the sun was out, wan and thin in the way of winter. It seemed like it should still be the middle of the night, Andrew just stepping out of the club to an unwelcome call on his phone. He was almost through the second cigarette when Nicky spoke.

“What are we going to do?” he said. His voice carried unevenly through the winter air on the clouds of his breath. Andrew turned, stubbing out the last of his cigarette, and regarded his cousin, needing to know how close Nicky was to breaking. He was calmer than Andrew had expected to find him, eyes wide and red but shoulders square and firm as he looked down at Andrew.

Nicky was usually more of an emotional drain than a resource, but these were desperate times. And underneath the flamboyant, goofy façade, he was a good agent: observant, relentless, and much, much better at sweet-talking than Andrew ever cared to be. Andrew was going to need him for this, that much he knew. He placed his hands on Nicky’s shoulders and held his gaze.

“We are going to find someone who can fix Aaron.” He told Nicky, his voice leaving no room for argument. “We are going to get that person to do so. And then we are going to find the people responsible for this, and bury them.”

That Nicky invited himself over to Andrew’s studio when they left was unsurprising; that Andrew let him, only slightly less so. Andrew’s mind was full of sirens on endless loops: Aaron wasn’t supposed to be in the field; Aaron definitely wasn’t supposed to be in Boston; wasn’t supposed to ever work with Andrew. Wymack had only sent them on that godforsaken assignment because Andrew couldn’t keep his goddamn bad attitude in check for once.

_I’m not letting you out of my sight._ His own words mocked him loudly from the inside of his skull. He’d been staring Aaron in the face when the bomb went off.

Sleep was going to be a useless pursuit, never mind that he’d been up for over twenty four hours, not counting the time lost to unconsciousness after the explosion. Instead of trying, Andrew logged into
the Bureau’s servers and began searching every database he could think of for anything the even remotely resembled Aaron’s condition. Across the room, Nicky was desperately doing the same. Andrew lost track of time. His eyelids felt like sandpaper. The screen of his computer was painfully bright, even on the dimmest setting.

Across the room, a quiet click and loss in light meant Nicky had shut his computer. Andrew felt him staring, but ignored him – he had more important things to do than deal with Nicky’s more maternal instincts. He felt more than saw Nicky stand and go towards the kitchen, and a few minutes later a plate of reheated Chinese takeout was being shoved gently into his lap. He looked up to find Nicky frowning down at him, a matching plate in his own hand, and suddenly wasn’t sure when the last time he’d eaten was.

“You’re going to eat that.” Nicky told him, indicating the food.

“Try to make me and I’ll stab you with your own fork.” Andrew said sourly, now keenly aware of the dull ache in his head and the painful twist of his stomach. Nicky didn’t even blink. Andrew might have been the more aggressive of them, but Nicky had been working around Andrew’s bad habits since he was a teenager. There were whole volumes of Andrew’s self Nicky didn’t know, but what he did know had, on an occasion or two, been just enough to keep Andrew alive. This much could be said for Nicholas Hemmick: he was good at working with what he had.

“You are going to eat this.” Nicky repeated. “And then we are going to talk about the case for exactly ten minutes, and then we are going to bed and not getting up for at least five hours, hear me Andrew?” Nicky’s voice softened, but didn’t waver when he added “we’re no good to him dead.”

Andrew felt himself snarl, but picked up his fork and began shoveling the food into his mouth without looking at it.

“Kevin Day.” He said around a mouthful of chicken, because fuck Nicky, they were starting this conversation now. Nicky nodded his understanding.

“Yeah, I kept seeing that name too.” Nicky said. “Some big shot up-and-coming research scientist, worked on a bunch of top-secret defense research, primarily biomedical.”

Andrew scoffed. Biomedical. That was certainly one way to put it.

“You think he’s our in?” Nicky asked.

“I think he’s been locked up in a psychiatric hospital for the last eight years following the accidental death of Tetsuji Moriyama.” Andrew said baldly.

“Wait, Moriyama as in Massive Dynamic?” Nicky asked, eyes widening.

“The late elder.” Andrew confirmed, then continued. “I also think Kevin Day has researched and written more about chemically induced flesh conditions than anyone on the planet, and definitely more than is healthy.” Andrew grimaced around his food. “Yeah, I think he’s our best chance.”

Nicky nodded slowly.

“Unfortunately, I have some bad news on the hospital front.” Nicky said with a wince. Andrew suddenly remembered him taking a call in the hallway. “St. Claire’s has restricted his visitation to immediate family only. Of which Kevin Day has none.”

“You’re telling me there’s nothing we can do.” Andrew said, voice all ice. Nicky raised one hand, palm out. Andrew narrowed his eyes but waited.
“There is one exception. Since being declared mentally unfit to care for himself, Day has a friend who holds power of attorney over his medical decisions. That person would be able to visit him, and Day could be remanded to his care if necessary.” Nicky said. Andrew drummed his fingers impatiently as Nicky took a bite of food and chewed.

“I’m waiting, Nicky.”

Nicky swallowed, then shrugged, checking his notes.

“Looks like you need to find a… Neil Josten.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
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Up Next:

“There’s only one exit to your building.” Minyard drawled down at him. “One: that’s a major fire safety hazard, you should really think about moving. Two: you really should have found a window.”
Chapter 2: Becoming Neil Josten

Alex Williams tore his way through the crowded Shanghai streets as fast as his feet would carry him, the press of a million bodies tight around him, and debated letting go of Alex Williams. Alex had always had a complicated relationship with crowds. He wasn’t claustrophobic, but the way it was so easy to lose himself among the close press of other people meant it was just as easy for others to slip in, slip up to him unnoticed. He debated higher ground: more sparsely populated, but the advantage of spotting an enemy more quickly was negated by the enemy being able to spot him that much more quickly as well.

Maybe Alex really just had a complicated relationship with anonymity in general, he reflected. It was surprising when he thought back on it, how long he had managed to hold onto his current identity – He’d been Alex Williams for five years now. Having the same one for so long helped in some ways. He’d been able to establish an actual network of non-criminal people to do business with, and it was easier to prove himself real. But it would make running away that much more difficult when he had to. He knew this like he knew his own name, real and bloodstained beneath fifteen years of dirt and lies. It was only a matter of time.

He would miss Shanghai when he had to leave it. With it’s large international population and the most active shipping port in the world, it had been a natural destination after a rather disastrous attempt at disappearing in Tokyo. He still wasn’t sure how his father had found him so quickly so far away from Baltimore, but he’d had to run faster than he ever had before just to escape with his life. He’d fled like the wind, shedding identities like layers of clothing in his mad dash towards China, one after the other, burning through most of his reserve cash before finally crashing in Shanghai. It was an easy place to disappear in, he figured, and it was as good a time as any to learn Mandarin.

Four years later, he was still there, his cash reserve was painstakingly rebuilt. He had a small, sparsely-furnished apartment and a little office at an inconspicuous but respectable address, and he was finally starting to feel safe. A foolish feeling perhaps, but one that had found its way into his body nonetheless. Emboldened, he’d put out his first feelers back toward the cities he had left behind. It was then, twelve years on the run and almost too late, he found out about Kevin, and Neil Josten had been born.

Neil Josten wasn’t like his other identities. He lived entirely, thoroughly, on paper. Alex had never used the name in person, it existed purely as a character to reach out and back into Kevin’s life, deftly arranging for power over the man’s medical care to be handed from the state over to himself. To Neil Josten. Luckily, Kevin had had just enough mental fortitude to go along with the plan, and
Alex had been able to see it through without ever leaving China. It was an effort, and an expense, to create an identity that would pass the kind of background checks necessary for the endeavor, but it had been worth it – Alex knew all too well who would have eventually stepped into the void if he hadn’t. The possibility was simply an unacceptable fate for the closest thing Alex had ever had to a friend.

Plus, he didn’t really have to do anything. St. Claire’s had a decent reputation, as psychiatric hospitals went, and Kevin had been convicted of the negligent homicide of his godfather in an airtight case. The only way he was going anywhere was if he was remanded entirely to Alex’s care, and that was too dangerous for the both of them. So Alex had signed the necessary dotted lines, rebuilt his cash reserves again, and spent most of his time forgetting the small paper identity that still tied him, like a kite string, to Boston.

Later, he would reflect that from so far away, it had been easy to forget that the string was coated in glass until it was suddenly pulled tight; until he’d looked down and saw his hands were bleeding.

The first tug came on a not-yet-bright winter morning, when a loud buzzing startled Alex from a fitful sleep. It took a few minutes for him to realize that the sound was his doorbell – he had never heard it before. He eyed his duffle where it sat beside the door, then checked the peephole. White guy. Short. Leather jacket over a collared shirt, knit hat pulled low over his ears. A completely blank but somehow impatient expression on his face. He looked too clean cut to be one of his father’s men – if only just – and definitely too small. Slowly, Alex opened the door. When the man didn’t immediately draw a weapon or try to force his way inside, he opened it a little wider.

“Hello?” He tried, wondering what the fuck a random American – because he was clearly American, whoever he was – was doing at his apartment at ass o’clock in the morning.

“Neil Josten?” The man asked flatly. Alex blanched, panicking for a split second before he remembered that he had rented this apartment under that name in order to make the identity more solid. But Neil Josten was barely even a real identity. Why had someone come all the way to China looking for him?

“That’s me.” Alex said slowly. “How can I help you?”

Now that the door was open, Alex got a better look at the man. He was shorter even than Alex, maybe five-foot even, but he carried himself like he expected to be able to take on anyone in a fight and win. Maybe he could. It was a fact of his survival that Alex could size up any possible opponent at a glance. This man’s knuckles were a mountain range of clustered scars from repetitive splits and definitely some repeat breaks, his fingers curled loosely at his sides. The blank but not-quite-hollow non-expression on his face screamed ‘danger.’ In fact, everything about the man did.

“You heard about flight C-731?” The man asked, out of the blue. Alex frowned, confused. The question pulled him out of the moment enough to suddenly realize he was still in his sleep clothes. Because it was four in the morning. What the hell was going on?

“I’m sorry, who are you?” He asked, not sorry at all and not caring to sound it. The man didn’t smile, didn’t extend his hand for a shake.

“Special Agent Andrew Minyard, FBI.” He said.

Alex ran.

It was stupid, maybe. Definitely. But he grabbed his bag and ran. Alex couldn’t imagine what the FBI would want with Neil Josten, but he wasn’t interested in waiting around to find out. He bolted
past the man – Minyard, Alex hadn’t heard the name before but that didn’t mean anything – and heard the man swear and start after him. The man was fast for his size but Alex was faster, he was always faster. He took the stairs three at a time, shoving his way past neighbors and delivery men in his sprint to the street. If he could just get out the front door, he could lose himself in the crowd and-

He pushed through the door only to feel a sharp weight crashing into his gut. A boot. Minyard’s boot. Alex crumpled against the outside of the door, gasping for air, glaring up blearily into impassive hazel eyes. The man’s hat had come off some time during the chase, revealing a shock of blond hair. Alex moved his jaw to speak but could only gasp, clutching at the strap of his bag on his shoulder. He was pretty sure Minyard’s heavy boots weren’t typical FBI dress code.

“There’s only one exit to your building.” Minyard drawled down at him. “One: that’s a major fire safety hazard, you should really think about moving. Two: you really should have found a window.”

“Fuck you.” Alex spat, when he finally had air to. Minyard’s bored expression didn’t twitch.

“Interesting, but I don’t think so.” He said. Then, before Alex had time to process that, “Get up. I didn’t break anything.”

Alex prodded gingerly at his ribs and discovered that the man was right. It didn’t make him any less pissed off.

“What the fuck do you want from me?” He snarled, staggering to his feet. Minyard looked at him like he was trying to decide whether or not he was stupid.

“Flight C-731.” He said again, as if that made any goddamn sense at all.

“What the fuck do you think I know about it?” Alex asked.

“It’s not you, it’s who you can get me to.” Minyard answered. He casually stepped closer to Alex, who was at this point backed into the wall of the building. He wouldn’t be able to bolt this time.

“Kevin Day.”

Of course. Why would anyone be interested in Neil Josten if it wasn’t something to do with Kevin? Well whatever the agent wanted, Alex would turn down whatever he had the power to. Kevin meant Boston, and Boston was much too close to Baltimore for his liking.

“What does the FBI want with Day?” Alex asked. Minyard regarded him for a long moment.

“I need his help.” He said at last. Alex sensed it wasn’t an admission he was in the habit of making. “There’s some elements of the case surrounding Flight C-731 that we believe pertain to some of Day’s research.” Alex was confused.

“Kevin was a theoretical physicist.” He said. That was what Kevin had always told him. Minyard raised an eyebrow.

“That’s certainly one way of putting it.” He said with a snort. “Day was part of a group of classified researchers working directly with the Department of Defense in an area known as fringe science.” Alex’s mind was scrambling.

“By fringe science, you mean pseudoscience?” he said. Minyard shrugged.

“Sure. Telekinesis, astral projection, mind-reading. Teleportation, re-animation.”

“Wait, re-animation? You can’t be serious.” Alex cut in. “If that’s true, then what the hell does the
FBI want with him now? Are you really so desperate you’ve resorted to recruiting mad men?”

Minyard stepped even closer to him, so close Alex could feel his breath. His face was a deadly mask.

“Don’t need to. They already have me.” He said. “Here’s the thing, Josten. Someone… a man is dying, nothing pseudo- about it, and Kevin Day is the only man who might be able to tell me how to stop it.”

Alex studied the man more closely, and suddenly realized that despite his steadily brutal demeanor, he looked tired. Whatever this was, it wasn’t an ambush. Alex met the man’s eye squarely.

“We all want to save someone who’s dying.” He said. “I’m sorry, I can’t help you.” He made to push past Minyard, but ran aground against his shoulder, an unyielding solidity that for some reason made him pause rather than step to the side to slip by.

“Runner.” Minyard commented without looking at him. “Should have known, with your file. How much time do you have left in Shanghai, do you think?”

Alex swallowed loudly, pulse racing. “File?”

“Your FBI file, Mr. Josten. Neil – can I call you Neil? Neil, did you think it was a coincidence it was so easy for me to find you? I know everything. The things you’ve done. The people you’re running from. Hey, do you think my being here will make it easier for them to find you? Oops. My bad.”

“What do you want from me?” Alex was starting to feel like a broken record. Or maybe a hostage victim.

“Simple.” Minyard said. “You have the power to get me into see Kevin Day. You will come with me to Boston, and you will do so, so that Day can help me save a man’s life. After that, I don’t really give a fuck what you do, but maybe, if you’re very helpful, the FBI will be kind enough not to let your information fall into the wrong hands.”

It was through sheer force of will that Alex didn’t reach up to touch the fading bruise on his cheekbone. Minyard was more right than he knew – or maybe he did know. Even far away from Baltimore and his father’s men, Alex Williams had been managing to get himself into trouble. It was almost time to leave. He’d been dreading letting such a fleshed-out identity go, but he would do it when he had to. He liked Alex Williams, but he was prepared to lose him.

Maybe…maybe he could be Neil Josten, just for a little while.. It felt monumentally stupid to go to Boston, but he didn’t have any other good contingency plans in place yet anyway. Plus, his father was in prison, so as long as he kept his head down he should be safe. It was dangerous. It was reckless. His mother would have wrung his neck if she’d saw him so much as consider the taste of it in his mouth.

When he found himself mentally calculating the cost of cashing out Alex Williams, he realized he had already made up his mind. He was going.

“Neil Josten.” He said with a rueful smile, sticking out a hand to seal the deal. “At your service, Agent Minyard.” Minyard didn’t take the proffered hand, but he met Alex’s – Neil’s – eyes gave a curt nod of acceptance.


He remembered Minyard’s cold gaze, and tried not to imagine he’d made a deal with death himself.
The fragile thrill of starting over died out as soon as Neil was checked into his hotel. There was nowhere safe to put his bag. It didn’t fit in the hotel safe, and anyway he imagined the hotel staff had a key that could break into it anyway. He considered asking Minyard to stop so he could buy his own safe, at least for the binder, but decided it would raise too many questions. For now, he did leave his gun there – it couldn’t be traced back to him, could always be replaced, and was an unlikely target of maid-based robbery. Then, they were on their way to St. Claire’s. Neil knew he needed to make sure he could talk to Kevin first, alone, without Minyard there. He trusted Kevin to keep his secret but he couldn’t keep what he didn’t know to, and Neil hadn’t had time to warn him that he was coming. One surprised slip and it would be over.

Minyard drove them to the hospital. Neil had never been much interested in cars, but he knew expensive when he saw it. The beast of a vehicle he was looking at wasn’t new, he could tell. But it had been pricey when purchased. He’d raised his eyebrows at it as he’d gotten in, but Minyard had merely shrugged.

“Bought it with Tilda’s life insurance. Only good thing she ever did was die.” He said. Part of Neil wanted to ask who Tilda was, ask for what was clearly the larger story there, but it didn’t seem like the moment. Minyard didn’t seem the type to yield to pushing, and Neil couldn’t afford to be going into their next play at a disadvantage. The good thing about it, Neil supposed, was the lack of a spare tire in the trunk wheel well. He’d slipped his bag in there before leaving – it was as safe as anywhere if he couldn’t be holding it in his hands. That taken care of, Neil spent the ride staring out the window, soaking in a wintry Boston he hadn’t seen in years. Minyard only glanced at him occasionally, never speaking. Each look felt like the scrape of a shovel. As St. Claire’s loomed into view, Neil tried not to imaging that the digging was his own grave.

“I need to speak to him alone.” Neil said as soon as they were signed in. Minyard gave him an unimpressed look.

“In what universe do you think I would allow that right now?” He asked.

“Look, I’m not going to… you know what, I don’t know what it is you think I’m planning, but I’m not. It’s just… Kevin can be fragile. He’s a tough, smart asshole underneath, but he hasn’t had an outside visitor in five years.

“He’s my friend.” Neil said, a necessary exaggeration. “I don’t want some strange Fed just barging in and hammering him for scientific minutiae without at least a little warning.”

For a tense second Neil thought Minyard would refuse him, but finally he gave a small short nod. With a sigh of relief, Neil headed down the hall to Kevin’s room.

He wasn’t prepared for what he saw. Neil hadn’t laid eyes on Kevin in fifteen years, but the man seemed to have aged twice that. His eyes were dull, a beard that didn’t suit him grown in haphazardly around his sallow cheeks. The small, black “2” stood out on his left cheekbone. Tucked inside the sleeves of his institutional sweatshirt, his hands were shaking.

Neil shut the door behind himself and approached the small table. Kevin looked up at him, eyes clouded and confused, and Neil belatedly realized that Kevin had never seen him with his dyed dark brown hair and brown contact lenses.

“Kevin.” He began, taking a seat. “I’m Neil Josten.”

It took a moment, but Kevin’s eyes cleared just a little. He took a small, startled breath.

“Nath-” he started.
“Neil.” Neil cut him off before he could say the name. “Neil Josten. Tell me you can remember that.” Kevin frowned, a spark of his old arrogance beneath the haze.

“Neil Josten. It’s a name” He said. “Okay. So tell me, Neil Josten, what are you doing here?” There was an accusatory note in his voice now, but Neil refused to let it sting. He wouldn’t regret what he’d done. Still, he knew better than most that Kevin had never been great at holding himself up – he’d never had to learn how.

“Look, I don’t want to be here any more than you want me here.” Neil said truthfully, then cut to the chase.

“Kevin, I’m here because the FBI has some questions for you. You’ve heard about flight C-731, the one at Logan? They found some freaky shit inside and they think… they think you might be able to help them figure it out. Something about your old research. I have an agent with me now, will you speak to him?”

That Neil phrased it was a question was a foreign courtesy, but he figured he maybe owed it to Kevin just this once. He only hoped Kevin would comply, because Neil didn’t actually have a plan for if he didn’t.

Luckily, he didn’t have to. Kevin nodded, and soon enough Minyard was joining them, ignoring the chair to Neil’s right in favor if hopping up onto the table, sliding into Kevin’s space. Minyard was curious like that, Neil had noticed. He wasn’t afraid to get into other people’s personal bubbles if he thought he could press it to his advantage, but he stayed just out of arm’s reach whenever else he could. He avoided handshakes where he could and glared daggers at anyone who attempted to touch him for any reason – those who didn’t instinctively stay away, anyway.

“Mr. Day.” Andrew said smoothly. Kevin watched him warily, hands folding and unfolding on the table.

“My name is Special Agent Andrew Minyard.” he said. “I take it Neil has told you why I’m here?” Kevin nodded. “Excellent.”

Minyard pulled out a folder and began spreading pictures across the table.

“A man is dying, Mr. Day. You are going to help me save him.”

Neil didn’t hear whatever they said next. He was too busy staring at the photographs spread on the table before them. Minyard hadn’t shown him these before. It was a gruesome sight – a man tangles in hospital tubes and wrapped in cold body packs. His skin was, impossibly, translucent and sticky-looking, like he was made of gelatin. As baffling as that was, it wasn’t what drew Neil to the pictures. It was the look of the man himself. Underneath the mess of tubes, and if you somehow ignored the skin condition, the man Andrew Minyard was showing Kevin pictures of looked like… Andrew Minyard.

Kevin seemed to have come to the same conclusion.

“Your brother?” Kevin asked.

“Twin.” Minyard confirmed, dead and deadly. And that was a revelation. Kevin considered the photos for a long moment.

“I might be able to help.” he said cautiously. “Over the course of my research, we had lab animals that developed conditions like this. Some of them, we were able to save.” When he looked up, there was a fierce twist to his face, a flash of the bright, arrogant boy Neil had known long ago.
“I’d need an exact list of chemicals that he was exposed to. But I think I could synthesize a cure. Of course, I’d need access to my lab again. The basement of Harvard Medical, I’m sure you know the one. Up to date equipment, obviously.” He said.

Kevin’s voice imperious, and so sure it was easy to get caught up in, underplayed with a kind of hard longing so strong Neil had to look away. He remembered being enraptured by the work at Kevin’s godfather’s lab when he was young, enamored by physics and chemistry, the simultaneous predictability and unknowableness of it all. He’d dreamed of one day doing his own research, peeling back the secrets of the human body, the mind, the universe. But he’d left those dreams behind. He hadn’t allowed himself to want anything like that in what felt like lifetimes. He couldn’t let himself get caught up now.

“Your lab has been empty for eight years, I doubt it’s in the shape you left it.” Neil reminded Kevin. “And you are confined to this hospital.”

“Then sign me out of here. I know you can.” Kevin said fiercely. He turned to Minyard. “You wanted me to help you save your brother. Get me my lab back, and I promise you I can.”

The air in the room was like electricity as the two stared each other down. It was only because Minyard was seated on the table that he had a slight height advantage over Kevin – probably that was why he’d done it. He stuck out his hand like he was going for a shake, but overreached and grasped Kevin’s forearm instead. It was an intentional move, Neil guessed – it forced Kevin to do the same, and Neil knew he would recognize the unmistakable feel of knife sheaths beneath the fabric of Minyard’s button down. Neil had seen Minyard casually unloading them at the airport.

“Okay, Day. It’s a deal.” Minyard said, voice like a tomb door slamming shut. He turned on Neil. “Make it happen, Josten.”

It would be up to Minyard to gain access to Kevin’s old lab and get it re-stocked with current forensics equipment. Neil didn’t know how he planned on making that happen, but witnessing Minyard’s resolve on the case so far, he had no doubt he would. But to get Kevin into the lab, he would need Neil’s help. Specifically, he needed Neil to have Kevin checked out of St. Claire’s and remanded into his care. If they did that, there was no telling what complications it would bring. Neil Josten was a good identity, one of the best he’d ever crafted. It had had to be to pass Riko’s scrutiny. But it would be impossible to hide if he tied himself to publicly to Kevin Day.

For the second time in as many days, Agent Andrew Minyard was demanding Neil do something monumentally stupid. Maybe he should give him the whole story, the real story, just so he would see that he was asking too much. But Neil couldn’t do that. His secrets were the stitched that held him together; without them, he was nothing but scraps of a man scattered across continents; nothing. And somehow that had brought him here, to this room where his old almost-friend, a man who Neil had never know to do something for someone other than himself, was promising to do his best to save a stranger’s life. Neil looked between Minyard and Kevin and found he didn’t want to say no.

A couple of hours later, they were leading a freshly-shaven Kevin Day blinking into the winter light.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Kevin said as they pushed their way through the swinging doors into the basement lab. Neil looked around. The floor and walls were stone but the ceilings were surprisingly high, giving the sound of the room an odd cathedral-like ring. The smell of dirt hung heavily in the air. The lights flicked up on machinery covered in plastic and eight years worth of dust, and it felt, awfully, impossibly, like coming home.
Neil tried to shake away the reminder of other basements, other stone rooms with different tools and blood spattered on the walls, but the chilling feeling had wrapped itself around the base of his spine and refused to let go. He stalled out on the step. It was through sheer force of will that Neil restarted his footsteps and continued into the room, staring down the machines that Kevin was eagerly pulling the dusty covers from. He looked up to where pale light was leaking in from the high windows, the tramping feet of students just visible, and told himself ‘Boston, not Baltimore’ until he could breathe again.

“What was that all about?” A voice said behind Neil, and his body flashed cold than hot in quick succession. He didn’t recognize the voice, but it was speaking German and how had they know that-

“Overwhelmed by the interior decorating?” Came the reply in a dry voice Neil recognized as Minyard’s, and Neil breathed a sigh of relief. They weren’t talking to him. He debated letting them know he could understand them, but decided to hold onto that information for now.

“No.” The first voice said again. “That wasn’t awe, that was pure panic. I know you saw it too, Andrew.”

“Did I?”

Finally, Neil turned around. The new arrival was a man about Kevin’s age, a handful of years older than Neil and, he guessed, Minyard. He stood maybe six inches taller than Neil, which gave him a full head on Minyard, but his slight frame and easy stance made him appear smaller than he was. His face brightened when he saw Neil looking.

“Hey there!” He said in perfect English, as Neil had known he would. His German was much smoother than Minyard’s, but Neil hadn’t taken him for a native speaker for a second. “You must be Neil.” He strode over and grabbed Neil’s hand into a warm shake. “I’m Special Agent Nicholas Hemmick, but please, call me Nicky. I’m kind of Andrew and Renee’s assistant around here. I hope my cousin hasn’t scared you too much yet. I know he can be a bit prickly.”

“He doesn’t frighten me.” Neil answered truthfully. The situation Minyard put him in terrified him, but the man himself did not. Minyard was at worst an unpredictable hothead and at best a calculable promise of violence, the sort Neil had stopped being as afraid of as he should have been long ago.

“Wait, cousin?”

They looked nothing alike. Aside from the differences in build, Nicky was much tanner than Minyard, and his hair was dark and wavy where it was styled precariously on top of his head. Nicky grinned.

“I take after my mom.” was all he said on the subject. Then his smile turned a hair shark-like, and he raked a glance over Neil, head to foot. “And who do you take after, might I ask? Please, tell me so I can thank them.”

Neil swallowed the bile that suddenly rose in his throat, reminding himself that Nicky wasn’t seeing his father. Neil had his natural hair and eye color covered, and his baggy clothes were carefully anonymous. His hand went towards his hair impulsively although he couldn’t see to check the roots. Minyard’s eyes narrowed, tracking the movement. Nicky’s smile faltered a little. He tried to cover the awkward moment with a hard clap on Neil’s shoulder. Neil barely held in his flinch.

“Did I say something?” Nicky muttered in German, half turning away for Neil. And, okay, that was going to get old fast.

“I don’t think the rabbit likes his parents very much.” Minyard replied with an impassive shrug.
Before the conversation could continue, Kevin’s voice cut suddenly across the lab.

“Minyard! I’ll need as many sample’s of the patient’s flesh as he can spare.” He commanded. Nicky and Neil both winced. Minyard simply took out his phone to make the call.

Soon, the awkward conversation was almost forgotten amongst the bustle of new equipment – and flesh samples – arriving in the lab. The floors were swept, the cobwebs dusted form the corners, the counters filled. Finally, Neil could see what Kevin had been talking about before. It wasn’t at all like the other state of the art labs he had been in. There were no sparkling white linoleum floors, no gleaming tables and plastic-covered walls, but Neil had never had any love for such sterile environments anyway. This place, with its stone, its dark corners, its history, was a different thing entirely. It was a vital thing. Almost living. It really was beautiful. Kevin called him over to one of the work stations, and they got down to business.

In the late afternoon, a young woman poked her head in through the door.

“Andrew?” She called, lettering herself in and glancing around. Neil took a moment to size her up. She was perhaps 5’5”, thin but sturdy-looking in a plain shirt, work pants, and scuffed leather boots. Her chin-length hair was bleached almost white. There was a silver cross around her neck, a winsome smile on her face, and unmistakable knife scars on her hands.

Her eyes landed on Neil as she waited for Minyard, and she waved at him in polite greeting. Neil distrusted her immediately, but figured he should introduce himself on his own terms. He finished jotting down his noted on the slide Kevin had him looking at and headed over to where she was now talking quietly with Minyard.

“…need you to set me up a meeting with Riko Moriyama.” Minyard was saying.

“You need to fucking what now?” Neil couldn’t stop himself form saying. Minyard raised an eyebrow at him. The woman frowned slightly.

“He’s got a point, Andrew.” She said. “Riko is the head of a multibillion dollar international company. I doubt we can just schedule an appointment, and Massive Dynamic has ties to the Department of Defense – they aren’t going to respond well to legal threats.”

“Does it look like I care?” Minyard asked flatly. The woman smiled, and there was an edge buried in it that Neil had no doubt many had cut themselves on before.

“You never do.” She said, sharp as a switchblade, and turned to Neil. “I’m sorry, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Special Agent Renee Walker. I’m Andrew’s partner.” If Neil visibly hesitated at shaking her knife-scarred hand, she didn’t acknowledge it, but she smiled knowingly at the look he passed between her and Minyard. “FBI partner.” She clarified.

“For now!” Nicky called from across the room, sing-song. The face Minyard pulled was long-suffering. Renee just gave a small shake of her head. Neil took both actions as confirmation in the negative, but he could see where Nicky was coming from. Minyard was more relaxed and expressive in Walker’s presence than Neil had seen him in anyone else’s so far. Perhaps it was just over-exposure. Neil shuffled awkwardly.

“Nice to meet you, Agent Walker.” He managed.

“Renee is fine.” she assured him, still smiling, then turned back to Minyard. “I’ll see what I can do about that meeting. And Andrew…” She cast a meaningful look around: at the basement lab, the stacks of unorthodox equipment, and the possibly mad scientist that had just sprung from a
psychiatric hospital. “You be careful, okay? We’ll figure this out.”

“Goodbye Renee.” Minyard said. She must have heard something in his voice that Neil didn’t, because she smiled warmly before leaving.

Across the lab, Kevin looked up from where he’d been muttering curses over his microscope. He walked over to where Neil and Minyard were still standing by the doorway.

“Have your FBI technicians made any progress?” Kevin asked.

“They say the condition is being caused by a synthetic compound.” Minyard answered.

“That’s like saying rain is caused by a wet compound.” Kevin bristled. Minyard’s flat gaze said he knew that.

“No luck finding the suspect from the storage facility?” Neil asked. Minyard shook his head again, frowning.

“It’s a fucking closed loop.” he muttered viciously.


“This case.” Minyard said tersely, gaze locked somewhere past Neil’s hip. “I didn’t get a look at the suspect’s face. I think Aaron did, but I can’t ask Aaron because he’s in a medically induced coma. The only way to talk to him is to fix him, and that requires a list of chemicals that were in the lab, which I can only get from the suspect who’s face I didn’t see. Fucking. Closed. Loop.”

It was the most Neil had ever heard Minyard say at once, verbosity didn’t sit naturally on him. His voice remained flat, his face a perfect blank mask, his only tell the way his fingers were drumming irregularly against his thighs.

“Maybe you could.” Kevin said suddenly. He wasn’t looking at Minyard, though the comment had clearly been directed at him. He was staring at piece of equipment Neil didn’t recognize and hadn’t been able to figure out. It was an oblong metal tank, around seven feet long and three feet high, with bulkhead style doors on one end and a small sliding panel on one side that would allow one to see inside. At some point, someone had painted words on the side in what appeared to be white-out, now cracked and peeling with age. Neil squinted to read them.


“Could what?” Minyard asked.

“Talk to your brother.” Kevin said, still staring at the tank.

“What?”

“It’s an old experiment we…Riko and I… invented, years ago, when we were young and stupid, I guess.” He looked lost in a memory. “Riko was really into mind-expanding drugs, something he got from Tetsuji, I guess. We figured out a way to connect with an unconscious mind through a shared dream state. Sensory deprivation tank, some electrodes, a good amount of the drugs, and you could literally meet the other person in the space between your minds. Even used it on a dead body, once. You can do that if they haven’t been dead for more than six hours.”

The silence was deafening.
“Yeah, because after six hours, that’s when they’re really dead.” Nicky said weakly. “So you want to, what, pump Andrew full of homemade acid you cooked up in your basement lab, stick him in a rusty tank with some wires on his head, and tell him he can talk to Aaron? Jesus, you really do belong in an institution.”

“Nicky.” Minyard said warningly. Kevin’s expression turned thunderous.

“It is not crazy just because you are too small-minded to understand it.” Kevin said. “I am being serious. Aaron Minyard will not live another 24 hours in his current condition. This is your best option, and the science is really very simple.”

“Simple.” Neil said angrily. “Kevin, do you have any idea how fucking ridicu-“

“I’ll do it.” Minyard cut him off. His eyes were boring into Kevin’s. “I’ll call the hospital and have Aaron transferred here. Get it ready.”

“Andrew,” Nicky began.

“Shut up, Nicky.” Minyard said coldly, then pushed past them and out of the lab probably as fast as he could without running.

“Goddamnit.” Nicky whispered into the silence, sitting heavily in a nearby chair. He had his chin resting in his palms, eyes closed and lips mumbling soundlessly. Neil wondered if he was praying. Kevin, for his part, had already walked away to begin preparations, and Neil knew he would soon be roped into helping. Whatever Neil had thought he’d signed up for, it definitely hadn’t been this.

“There’s no changing his mind, is there?” Neil said to Nicky, more of an observation than a question.

“Noticed that huh?” Nicky said tiredly, looking up at him. “Yeah, the twins are two of the most stubborn assholes I’ve ever met. Nightmare charges, the both of them.”

“Charges?”

Nicky shrugged uncomfortably. “Their mom died when they were fifteen.” Nicky told him. “Car accident. Andrew was actually in the car. I was living in Germany with Erik – my husband, then boyfriend – at the time. I came back to take care of them until they turned eighteen. I still own the house in Cambridge.” Nicky said. Neil could sense there was a lot more to the story – it didn’t begin to explain how all three of them had come to work for the FBI, for one – but decided it wasn’t the moment to push.

“That’s… really something, Nicky.” Neil said.

“Yeah, so when I say I know Andrew, I do. He doesn’t really do emotions, you know? Practically a little psychopath when he was a teenager, and not much better now.” Nicky gave a shaky sigh. “I’ve never seen him like this.”

Neil frowned, thinking that over. He had met true psychopaths. He’d been raised among them. Minyard seemed to be a whole host of unpleasant things, but Neil wasn’t convinced that was one of them.

“I’ll go find him.” Neil offered, when it became clear Nicky wasn’t capable of doing much in his worried state. Nicky offered him a small smile.

“Good luck.” He said.
Neil found Minyard on the roof of the building, sitting with his toes against the lip, knees tucked up against his chest, smoking. He gave Neil an unimpressed glance when Neil walked over and sat down beside him, just out of arm’s reach.

“Not worried about mixing drugs?” Neil asked, suddenly unsure where to start. He hadn’t had the chance to really talk to Minyard yet, and he sensed Minyard was about as much a conversationalist as he was. That is, not one. Minyard blew a stream of smoke into his face. Neil just inhaled. It wasn’t his mother’s brand, but it was closer than anything he’d been able to find in Shanghai, and he was momentarily thankful to the cold bite of the Boston air for kept memories of a California beach at bay. Noting his reaction, Minyard held out the pack in silent offer. Neil accepted, lighting up and dragging just once before settling with the smoke loosely between his fingers, breathing just often enough to keep it burning. Minyard watched him do all that before speaking.

“I think, whatever Day is going to give me, nicotine is going to be little more than a blip on the radar.” he said.

“You’re probably right.” Neil admitted. “Getting up your nerve, then?” Minyard didn’t offer that a response. He stubbed out his cigarette and lit another, movements sharp and economical. He was staring over the edge of the roof like he was daring it to crumble beneath them.

“You know you don’t have to do this.” Neil said, because he thought someone should. “We’ll figure it out another way.” Minyard spun on the cement of the roof to face him fully.

“A tip, Josten. I don’t do anything I don’t want to do.” He said. It had the ring of truth, and Neil knew he should probably leave it there, but he couldn’t help prodding just once more.

“Would he do it for you?” He asked quietly.

Minyard stood abruptly, grinding the last of his cigarette beneath his boot. He stared down at Neil.

“No.” He said. “But that is irrelevant.”

He turned on his heel and headed back down toward the lab, and Neil followed him down.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading! More chapters to be posted next week!

Up Next:

“Aaron?” Andrew tried calling, moving to stand on the familiar blue owl logo at the center of the Exy court like it would hold him in place. Outside the plexiglass walls, reality was a swirling, flashing abyss. A mix of their memories, Andrew guessed. He did his best not to look.
Andrew stared at the tank from his perch and tried not to think of it as a casket. Neil’s words were itching under his skin. They’d brought in Aaron – Aaron’s body his mind kept trying to say, but he shut it down – a little over an hour ago. He was growing weaker by the minute. Renee had nothing. The FBI techs had nothing. Andrew – Andrew had this. He lit a cigarette, as close to glad as he could be that the small windows near the ceiling actually opened, and that there was one close enough to the spiral staircase that led the emergency door to let the smoke out. He ignored the way Nicky and Neil kept glancing up his way as they finished their preparations. Nicky was using a bucket to shovel salt into the tank so Andrew would float in the water. Neil was helping Kevin with the last of whatever the hell it was he was doing. Amidst the small bustle, Aaron lay like a statue, translucent and very, very dead-looking. Andrew closed his eyes and breathed as deeply as he could.

Shared dream state, Kevin had said. Meeting in each other’s minds. It hadn’t felt worth pointing out that no one in their right mind would want to step inside Andrew’s dreams or head, and he rather doubted Aaron’s would be any better. He had considered, for a moment, whether this was a violation of privacy too great to be forgiven. He was literally forcing himself inside his twin’s head, and he couldn’t exactly ask permission.

Possibly, Aaron would never forgive him, certainly Andrew wouldn’t forgive himself. He was use to that, though, and the alternative was Aaron dead, which was really no alternative at all. The choice hadn’t really been that difficult, in the end.

Down below, Kevin set a tray of wires and syringes down next to the tank. Nicky laid eyes on it and dropped the bucket he was holding like it had burned him. His eyes darted back and forth between the tray and Andrew like his mind had finally caught up with the reality of the situation.

“Andrew,” he began.

“No.” Andrew said shortly, making his way down towards the tank.

“Problem?” Kevin asked, sounding annoyed. Nicky turned on him.
“Yeah, Day, I’d say there’s a fucki-“

“Don’t make me stab you to shut you up, Nicky.” Andrew said with emphasis. He reached Kevin and stood facing him. His pulse was calm. He’d slipped into the comforting embrace of apathy hours ago. He chose his words carefully. “The last time I was high was by court order. It was… unpleasant.” He explained.

“The world is unpleasant.” Neil broke in, and Andrew glanced at him, almost surprised. “As are the people in it. You knew that already. Are we doing this or not?” Neil’s eyes were hard but his cheeks were pink, and Andrew would have cursed himself for staring if he hadn’t needed something to focus on very, very badly. His mind was screaming that of course they were doing this, but his body refused to give the go-ahead.

“I can’t watch this.” Nicky exclaimed suddenly, angrily. With effort, Andrew slid his gaze Nicky’s way.

“Then go.” Andrew said flatly. It was permission, not a challenge, but he wasn’t sure Nicky would understand that, so used to seeing Andrew as combative. Maybe he did, though, because he gave Andrew a small fearful nod and hurried from the room. With a monumental effort, Andrew dragged his gaze away from the empty swinging of the lab door. His eyes found Neil’s and he nodded, just once.

Kevin began arranging things on the tray once it was clear they were proceeding.

“Well, we’re ready, then. Clothes off, Minyard. Ah – you can leave your underwear, I guess. Shouldn’t hurt.”

He wasn’t looking at Andrew when he said it, so Andrew started down the side of his head for a moment before beginning to comply. He’d known this was coming, had had time to prepare. Neil turned his back as Andrew peeled out of his socks, shirt and pants, leaving him in just underwear and his black armbands. Kevin stared at them pointedly, and Andrew slowly, deliberately, removed both knives from each arm, laying them on the tray. He crossed his arms over his chest in a clear signal he was done undressing. Kevin rolled his eyes.

“Fine. That’ll do. Neil, come here and help me with the electrodes.” Kevin said. Andrew held Neil’s gaze as he approached with the bundle of wires Andrew knew had to be stuck to his face and torso. He didn’t really have the energy to put up a fight right now, so he dropped his arms and braced himself for the touch of Neil’s fingers on him.

Instead, Neil held one electrode out to Andrew, palm up in a clear invitation, and waited for Andrew to pluck it from his hand.

“That one goes to the left of your sternum, right above your heart.” Neil said, his voice echoing into the tense silence, and nodded his approval when Andrew pressed the sticky pad to his own skin. He didn’t really have the energy to put up a fight right now, so he dropped his arms and braced himself for the touch of Neil’s fingers on him.

Instead, Neil held one electrode out to Andrew, palm up in a clear invitation, and waited for Andrew to pluck it from his hand.

“That one goes to the left of your sternum, right above your heart.” Neil said, his voice echoing into the tense silence, and nodded his approval when Andrew pressed the sticky pad to his own skin. Neil talked him through where each one went until all eight were placed. That was the easy part, Andrew knew. Next, Kevin held up a small syringe, and an absolutely lethal looking metal probe.

“This needs to go into the base of your brain.” Kevin said, sounding almost apologetic. “I’m going to give you an anesthetic, but you’re still going to need to brace yourself.” He turned towards Neil. “Neil, hold him.”

Neil stepped forward on instinct, then stopped and looked at Andrew carefully.
“You could just brace yourself on the tank.” He offered, uncharacteristically gentle. “Or just against the wall?”

Andrew understood what Neil was offering, if not why or how he knew to. As surprising as the offer was, it was unwelcome, and when Andrew ran through it in his head he knew it wouldn’t work. He shook his head and silently stuck his arms out, bent at the elbow. Neil stepped forward again, mirroring the gesture. Andrew grasped onto his forearms, tight enough it would probably bruise, but Neil didn’t make a noise of complaint. Slowly, not letting their bodies come any closer than they had to, Andrew leaned his neck forward until his head was resting on Neil’s shoulder. Neil was warm through the fabric of his shirt, and Andrew felt him draw a small, unsteady breath.

“Okay?” Neil asked quietly.

“You’re the one whose body is about to be cut open.” Andrew ground out. He felt Neil’s nod, and then a deep pinch at the base of his skull, followed by a growing numbness. The local anesthetic.

There was only so much it could do, though. The next prod was twice as deep and the world whited out for a second in pure, blinding sensation. His whole body was a bright shout of pain. Andrew held desperately still, clutching at the arms in his hands, trying to remember how to breathe, until the world came into something like focus again. Once seated, the probe was still incredibly painful, but it was just this side of bearable. Andrew figured whatever cocktail he was about to be injected with would have him forgetting about it in short order anyway. He let go of Neil’s arms and stepped back, breathing heavily, before sticking an arm out to Kevin.

“Let’s get this over with.” he said.

Kevin wasted no time in tying off his arm and injecting the drugs neatly into his vein. The effect felt fast, but Andrew knew the instant woozy feeling was only the beginning. He staggered to the tank, determinedly under his own power, and levered himself down and inside, wires trailing behind him.

It was unnaturally quiet even with the doors open, the soft lap of the water tickling at his ears. A cold and unfeeling womb appropriate for a man who had never felt anything but apathy and hate for his mother. Kevin’s face loomed in the doorway. Behind him, Neil peered down over his shoulder, and Andrew squinted at him but his face wouldn’t come into focus. They had been so close a moment ago, there had been something about his eyes… The thought slipped away as the drugs took hold, and Andrew blinked dazedly up at them.

“Good Luck.” Kevin said seriously.

The doors shut with a clang. Andrew took a deep breath through the haze, closed his eyes, and let himself float as his mind slowly broke apart.

 Darkness; darkness; something like light. An empty Exy court with banners he didn’t recognize on the walls, but a familiar logo on the floor. Equally familiar bars on the windows. He blinked, and it was somehow also the old house in Cambridge, was also an empty stretch of back road in Oakland, all the details wrong. It was a dorm room, a jail cell, a hospital ward so bright you almost didn’t notice the heavy stench of fear.

Andrew clenched his fists, nauseous and dizzy. Reality settled and he was back on the Exy court.

“Aaron?” He tried calling, moving to stand on the familiar blue owl logo at the center of the court like it would hold him in place. Outside the plexiglass walls, reality was a swirling, flashing abyss. A
mix of their memories, Andrew guessed. He did his best not to look.

“Aaron, come one you asshole.”

“Andrew?” Came a voice from behind him. Andrew whipped around. It was Aaron, staring at him in confusion and something a little like wonder.

“Where are we? What are you doing here?” Aaron asked, coming closer.

_Rescuing you, asshole._

“Working the case.” Andrew said. “Aaron, the man you saw at the storage facility. I need you to show me what he looked like.” Aaron frowned.

“I’m cold.” Aaron said, like a realization. It caught Andrew off guard.

“You’re not wearing shoes.” Andrew told him. It was true. Aaron was dressed in an old WSU hoodie and sweatpants. He was barefoot – an old habit they shared. Andrew glanced down and was only half-surprised to find he was dressed the same, the only difference the numbers on the backs of their hoodies.

“I’m really cold, Andrew.” Aaron said again. “What the hell is going on?” He suddenly looked paler. Not like his face was drained of blood, but like he was physically flickering from existence. In a flash, Andrew strode over, grabbed him by the front of his sweatshirt, and dragged him back so they were both standing on the owl.

“I’m keeping my promise. Okay? Now show me the suspect from the storage unit.”

Aaron’s eyes widened. He glanced around, then focused back at Andrew. Outside the plexiglass, it had started to snow, dull yellow lamplight reflecting off the flakes. The storage facility. The scenery began to move and jump by – Aaron, running. The back of a brown jacket and a head of brown hair dashed around a corner in front of them. The suspect.

_Aaron, we’ve got a runner!_ Aaron’s disembodied voice seemed to come from everywhere around them at once. He knew Aaron was staring at him but his own eyes remained locked on the memory playing out before them. They were rounding a corner, looping back to where they had found the first lab. Andrew tensed, focusing.

There was the skid of feet on snow. The click of a drawn gun, dark and incongruous in Aaron’s hand – or was it? The man, turning toward the noise, his face wild and determined as he reached for his pocket.

The court was gone. There was snow beneath Andrew’s bare feet.

Aaron! The flash of a face Andrew just recognized as his own, staring him down as the world exploded.

They pulled him from the tank screaming, though he wouldn’t know that until later. The world was black. It was ringing white. It was viselike hands on his upper arms as his feet slipped uselessly on the wet floor, the shout of voices above him, the taste of salt and iron deep in his throat.

“Let go of him! I’m telling you, Day, let go!” A voice was shouting, familiar enough to crack through the cacophony. The hands released him and he fell heavily onto the floor, siding as he went
down, fists lashing out at anything they could reach. There was a startled yelp as his knuckles connected with a shin bone.

“Andrew. Andrew! Andrew Joseph Fucking Minyard.”

Nicky. It was Nicky, voice packed full with desperation. Andrew clutched at his own arms, gripping into the wet fabric there, and forced himself to breathe.

When he opened his eyes again, Nicky and Kevin were starting down at him, wide-eyed. Neil had his back to them, but he turned back a moment later to toss a dark bundle at Andrew’s feet. Andrew reached out on instinct and grabbed it. Clothes.

He pulled the shirt over his still-dripping torso and got shakily to his feet. His gaze slid past the three assembled men to the one lying unconscious and prone on a gurney, wrapped in cold packs.

“I saw him.” Andrew said to Aaron. His voice did not shake.

Andrew didn’t allow Nicky to send him immediately home and to bed. He didn’t let Renee, either. The countdown was still only going down and they weren’t waiting on anything but Andrew. He did allow Renee to hand him cup after cup of sweet black coffee, and didn’t snap at her once as he hunched over his computer, fiddling with the facial reconstruction software. His memory was flawless, even for faces, but he had only seen this one for a panicked second in dim light and snow, not to mention the explosion and his rather dramatic exit from the tank that had his brain rattled. The incessant tick of the clock on the wall had a jump in his spine he couldn’t shake. He just needed to get the nose right…

“There.” Andrew said. Renee hurried over as he printed out the image and handed it to her. She frowned down at it, squinting oddly.

“Andrew, how did you get this man’s face again? I thought you didn’t see him?” She asked slowly.

“I told you not to ask me that.” Andrew said. “You trust me, yes?”

“Of course. Just, well, one question. Did you have a chance to look over the photos of the passengers on the manifest?”

“No.” Andrew said.

“No?”

“Renee.”

She sighed, grabbed a nearby manila folder and shuffled through it. She snatched up the sheet she’d been looking for and handed it back to Andrew – it was the sheet for one of the passengers on the manifest, one Morgan Steig. And the face Andrew had reconstructed from Aaron’s memory looked exactly like him.

“All passengers were accounted for.” He said. This he knew.

“Morgan Steig was on that plane.” Renee agreed. “His insulin pen was at the scene.”

At that moment a giant ambled into the room, waving cheerfully at Renee.

“Walker! Thanks for the RSVP, lady.” He called, grinning as he approached. He pointed a finger at
Andrew when he reached them. “I know you know you’re invited too, you tiny asshole. Just send me a yes or no so I know how many plates Dan and I have to buy, ok?” Andrew knew about the stiff envelope sitting on his counter, he was just ignoring it. And he was content to ignore Boyd for the moment, too. That was, until Boyd leaned over his shoulder to peer down at the papers in Andrew’s hands.

“Ooh, Evil Twin?” Boyd suggested cheerfully. Andrew’s fist was closing around the papers before he could think to stop it. He took a deep breath through his nose as Boyd hurriedly backed up. “Uh, shit. I- Right. Never mind. I’m sure you’ll get to the bottom of it, Minyard. Fuck knows you always do.”

Andrew knew, somewhere, very deep down, that Boyd meant well. Unless you were threatening him, he nearly always did. But Andrew had never learned to appreciate Boyd’s somewhat unpredictable brand of geniality. He put up with Renee’s calm surface because he knew she was that way by intentional effort. Her kindness was a brutal, ruthless commitment to herself, and it had taken Andrew years to realize that it somehow permeated all the way down, all the way through the woman she was and the girl she’d been. She was far from righteous in a fist fight, but she was never, ever wrong. Boyd was not so reliable, and Andrew avoided dealing with him whenever possible.

Andrew smoothed out the crumpled paper in his hand on the desk, scanned it, and nearly reconsidered that position. Nearly.

His fingers weren’t shaking as he typed a name into the computer, but he thought it might have been a near thing. It was the sleep deprivation, probably. He motioned Renee over, and he knew Boyd was watching curiously from his desk.

“Morgan Steig’s emergency contact is one Richard Steig.” He told her. His eyes slid to Boyd’s in a bored challenge. “His twin brother.”

Boyd whooped and turned back to his own work, but Andrew wasn’t done.

“Renee. Look at his employment history.”

“Massive Dynamic.” she murmured, reading. “Recently let go.”

“Think that will get us an audience with Moriyama?” He asked.

Renee offered him a thin, knowing smile.

“It’s certainly a foot in the door.” she said. “Call a car, I’ll call Wymack.”

Andrew drained the last of his coffee as he stepped out of his car in New York City. It settled sourly in his stomach, a protest to the scant amount of actual food he’d managed to eat in the past day. At least the air was brisk, something he normally wouldn’t be grateful for – he hated the cold as a rule, but the turmoil of the last 48 hours had him hot and itchy under the skin, and the cold winter wind was a steadying thing against his face. Above him loomed Massive Dynamic. It was the tallest building for blocks around, the giant M-D sign steely and glinting from on high. Every window was reflective glass. Andrew wondered if they were even real, if there were any windows in this building of secrets at all, beyond the first floor lobby. He pushed the thought aside and made his way into the building. The day hadn’t stopped counting down. He had a case to break.

Andrew knew the Massive Dynamic building was full of research laboratories, but all of that was hidden away from public sight behind layers of doors and biometric scan locks. To the casual
viewer, it was nothing more than a rather lux office building. The floors were dark marble, the walls crisp white and hung with vague, neutrally-colored and expensive-looking paintings. The air was at once echoing and muffled. Every surface shone.

The white-walled office he was led to was no different, the lighting from the recessed fixtures so soft and natural you could almost forget the unnatural lack of windows. It was empty but for a simple white and steel desk. The desk sat near the center of the room, away from the walls, but closer to the back than the door. In the space between the doorway and the desk, the marble floor yawned like a black hole.

“Power move.” Andrew commented as he crossed the expanse and took a seat. He propped a bored elbow up on the gleaming white surface of the desk, maybe in one of his own.

“Thank you.” The woman behind it said. “I designed most of the interiors here myself. I presume I don’t need to introduce myself, Agent Minyard?” Oh, she was all about power moves, all right. And it was true. In her black suit, perfect blonde curls, and red slash of lipstick the only bit of color in the room, she was unmistakable by design. Andrew held up a hand and began to tick off on his fingers.

“Allison Reynolds, 30. Unmarried. Former heiress to the Reynolds Hotel and Resort fortune, disowned when she left the family business to pursue a career in mechanical engineering, specializing in robotics. Taken under the – ah – wing, of Riko Moriyama seven years ago. Massive Dynamic’s right hand woman, New York City’s bitchiest bachelorette. Oh, and occasional underground street brawler. Am I missing anything?”

Reynolds raised here eyebrow at that last one, but Andrew had never been one to underestimate his opponents, and he didn’t make a habit of going into fights unprepared. Besides, Renee had had her eye on the fight scene in Boston – just three hours from New York, the perfect distance for discretion – for a while now. Stories of the fighter who called herself the White Fox, perfect twin blonde braids and fists you always saw coming just a second too late, were hard not to hear if you knew where to listen.

“You forgot ‘very expensive team of attorneys always on standby.’” She returned coolly. “Now if you’re done pretending to threaten me, may I ask what brings you here?” As if she didn’t already know.

“Flight C-731.” Andrew cut to the chase. “It is my team’s belief that technology developed at Massive Dynamic was at play in the attack that brought down that plane. In addition, Riko Moriyama’s research has been implicated in the current critical condition of a survivor of the attack, which is why I will need to meet with him immediately.”

“Mr. Moriyama will be out of the country for the next two weeks.” said Reynolds, as if he hadn’t already heard that over the course of five increasingly threatening phone calls. She considered him for a moment. “I wasn’t aware that there were any survivors.”

Andrew gritted his teeth. “There was one.” he said.

“Well, whatever you are hoping to find here, Mr. Minyard, I can assure you, you will not.” She told him.

“Massive Dynamic has its hands in cutting-edge development, defense, and biomedical research all over the world, Miss Reynolds. Do you really mean to tell me there is no way your technology could have anything to do with this attack?” He asked, voice flat.

“I mean that this company is not what you think it is.” She said, and then she peeled off her hand.
Andrew looked at the shiny metal exposed fingers twitching like spiders at the end of a long glass forearm, then to the lifelike silicone glove now held in Reynolds’ right hand. Admittedly, he hadn’t seen that coming.

“Is there a point you are trying to make?” he asked.

“Since you seem to think you know a bit about me” she said “you won’t be surprised to hear I injured my arm in a fight. Destroyed, more like. Mangled all the tendons and nerves when the bone shattered. The technology that saved my life when I was bleeding out on that mat was developed here at Massive Dynamic. Riko designed the battery that powers it himself, although most of the robotics are mine. I owe my life to this company.” she said. If there was something off about the way she said it, Andrew didn’t care enough to make note of it.

“Richard Stieg.” He changed tact. The clock was ticking. Reynolds shrugged, pulling the cover back on her prosthetic with practiced ease. It really was extraordinarily lifelike.

“An average chemist, worked here for a few years. Fired three months ago when he was caught trying to steal company secrets – he didn’t manage to get away with anything. An unremarkable man, really.” she said. Andrew fought the urge to lash out so hard he was surprised his whole body didn’t twitch. He brushed a thumb across one forearm and saw Reynolds glance warily down at it. There might be biometric locks on very door, but he hadn’t passed through any metal detectors.

“Richard Steig is the primary suspect in a terrorist incident that killed a plane full of innocent civilians, including Steig’s own brother, and continues to threaten the life of an FBI agent. Does that sound like an unremarkable man to you, Miss Reynolds?” He asked, calm and deadly.

She held his gaze, mouth a thin red gash, and for a moment he wasn’t looking at Allison Reynolds. He was facing down the White Fox on her own turf, and he was itching for a fight. Instead of claws or fangs, though, she pulled out a phone.

“Jean darling? Bring me everything we have on Richard Steig.” She said smoothly. “Yes, the FBI is here, and they asked, just, so nicely. Yes. Thanks a million dear.” She hung up. The silence stretched out between them as she considered him across the desk.

“Tell me, does Wymack think this has anything to do with The Pattern?” she asked out of the blue.

“The Pattern?” Andrew asked. She blinked in what appeared to be genuine surprise.

“Oh, sorry. I assumed you had clearance.” She said, and Andrew felt his interest twitch. What the fuck was going on?

“Miss Reynolds I’m a federal agent. I’m cleared to know whatever you are cleared to know.” He told her.

“Apparently not.” She said with a small shrug. She glanced at her phone, then back to him. There was a look on her face that settled unnaturally over her Hollywood-perfect features, and it took Andrew a moment to realize it was something akin to concern. “Look, Agent Minyard… you don’t see the type to take friendly advice-“

“I’m not.” he agreed.

“But just. Just be careful out there. It’s a cruel world, and things aren’t always what they seem.” she said grimly.

As of Andrew didn’t already know that.
Before he could respond, a rather harried looking man came in and handed over a folder with a silent nod – Jean, presumably – some lackey or another. Reynolds held it out to Andrew between perfectly manicured fingers.

“We’ll be seeing you, Miss Reynolds.” He told her, reaching out to take it.

“Very expensive team of lawyers.” She reminded him before relinquishing her grip. He offered her nothing but a lazy salute in return before leaving.

Neil was on the roof when Andrew returned, like he’d been waiting for him, and Andrew couldn’t bring himself to be surprised. Whatever the taught, tangled threads that stretched between himself, Neil, and Kevin Day, it had been Andrew who had brought Neil to Boston. It was Andrew’s direction he was inevitably waiting on now.

Neil was already smoking, or at least holding a lit cigarette near his face in his usual absurd waste of nicotine. It was evening, but there was enough light from the city to illuminate his features, and Andrew couldn’t help thinking, not for the first time, that there was something a bit off about Neil. A bit feral, maybe, something small and snarling kept close to his center under careful lock and key. Andrew wondered if he had been born like that, or if something had made him.

“Did you get the information you were looking for?” Neil asked as Andrew approached, holding out his cigarette pack and lighter without prompting.

“Enough.” Andrew replied, accepting the offering. “Renee’s working on it.”

“Because she sent you home for a nap?” Neil guessed, smirking. “Hasn’t she learned you have no sense of self-preservation?” Andrew shot him a glare as he lit up. Of course Renee had noticed, that was why she was always on his case about it.

“You’ve known me for two days, Josten.” he said.

“Exactly.” Neil said, once again not bothering to make any sense at all.

“Has anyone ever told you that you are excruciatingly irritating?”

“Never.” Neil deadpanned. He shifted on his feet, looking at Andrew sidelong. “Funny, I would have thought nothing could get under your skin.”

Andrew didn’t have an answer for that. He focused on smoking and not checking his phone. When Renee had something, she would call.

“Hey, I have a question.” Neil said to the open air in front of them. Then, apparently choosing to interpret Andrew’s silence as permission to continue, “I figure I have a right to know, after all this, what exactly is in my file?”

He had turned to face Andrew now, his back to the edge of the roof, his whole body tense and trying very hard not to look it.

“I don’t give out information for free.” Andrew said flatly, aiming for discouragement.

“Neither do I.” Neil shot back, because of course he did. “But I still want my answer, Minyard.”

Oh, what the hell. He’d already gotten what he needed out of Neil. And short of pushing Andrew off
“Okay.” Neil’s voice came from behind him. Andrew felt himself still. Just like that, Neil would believe him again?

“How have you survived this long with so few brain cells?” Andrew drawled, turning back around.
Neil rolled his eyes.

“’It’s because I’m so pretty.” Neil said sarcastically.

“That will only get you so far.” Andrew said, words out of his mouth before he could stop them. Neil blinked. By the grace of whatever demons powered this universe, his phone chose that moment to finally ring.

Andrew checked the caller ID: Renee. He flipped it open and headed towards the entrance to the roof.

“Talk to me. Where? Got it. Yeah. No. Call Chief and send for backup. Yeah. We’re on our way.”

He hung up the phone with a snap and gestured for Neil.

“They found him.” Andrew said. Neil’s eyes widened and he straightened like a bolt of electricity had gone through him.

“The suspect? The guy from your dream? They actually found him?” Neil exclaimed. “Holy shit! Minyard, Kevin-“

“Is coming with us.” Andrew cut him off. They had no time to waste. “Go get him, I don’t know what we are going to find when we get there.

The car ride was excruciating, with Day trying not to have a panic attack in the back seat and Neil offering up some kind of poor attempt at comfort, presumably. It was impossible to say, since they were speaking French. Had he known Neil could speak French? He didn’t think so. Another odd bit of the puzzle, though this piece didn’t fill in any edges, just left more blank spaces in between. When they arrived, Andrew gave them a stern warning to stay put, and left them to sort out their differences if they could.

Renee was waiting for him on Steig’s front step. She jerked her chin towards the door wordlessly, but Andrew shook his head. For whatever it was worth, this had always been a moment more suited to Renee than him. She raised her fist and knocked firmly and loudly on the door.

“Richard Steig, this is Agent Walker with the FBI. Please come to the door.” She enunciated, loud, a predator so sure of its own victory it doesn’t care if you hear it coming. They waited the requisite silent moments, breathing through the itch of it, then Renee leaned back a kicked the door in with the heel of one well-practiced work boot. Andrew had never bothered to tell her he could have just as easily picked the lock. She knew anyway, and maybe it was satisfying to see her land a kick on something that wasn’t him, for once.

The inside of the house was empty and almost eerily normal. The rooms were scattered with plain furniture in greys and browns, a few shelves of knick knacks, and a few boring bits of art on the walls. There was no one here, but Andrew’s gut was telling him someone had been, and recently, but it took him a moment to place why.

There was a rug askew on the living room floor. Too much for the normal everyday shift of living. Too little to be intentional, especially with this uninspired decorating scheme. Andrew bent down and plucked up the corner to peer underneath.

“Walker.” he called her over – there was a trap door underneath. This time, she held the door and allowed him to descend first into the darkness. Renee may have had the more trained, precise
fighting style, but Andrew’s reflexes were faster. They always had been. He switched on his flashlight, then relaxed the instinctive tensing of his muscles in the next breath when nothing jumped out in reaction, and made his way down into the shadows of the basement.

It turned out his reflexes weren’t needed this time – there was no one in the basement. That wasn’t to say it was empty. The room was full of the same kinds of things they had found in the storage unit lab, right down to the numbers and diagrams on the scattered computer screens. Thankfully, this time, there were no monkeys. There was only the darkness, the glowing from the screens and the lights from the insides of the cooler cases, and the unique oppressive silence of waiting for something to pop from the shadows.

Nothing did, but upstairs, a door slammed, followed by the hectic stampede of running boots. Every nerve in Andrew’s body went electric. He raced up the rickety stairs, Renee’s footfalls defter but no slower behind him, following the shouts from the agents upstairs. He shoved past bodies crowded uselessly in doorways and out onto the street, eyes catching on the back of a brown leather jacket, a face turned over it’s shoulder for a fraction of a second before it raced around a corner.

It was him. The man from the storage unit, the man from Aaron’s dream. Richard Steig. It was him. He was real – the tiny flicker of doubt Andrew had been ruthlessly suppressing finally sputtered and winked out, leaving only a flood of savage determination in its wake.

Renee had looped off to the side to try and cut Steig off, but even as he ran Andrew knew they wouldn’t catch him. Steig was taller than both of them, and apparently kept himself in shape. Andrew took a ragged breath through his exhaustion and pushed himself faster – cursing Steig, cursing his own short fucking legs, cursing the stupid FBI and his stupid twin brother and his stupid smoker’s lungs closing up on him now, of all goddamn times.

There was a flash of grey and brown like a shot across the end of the alleyway, followed by a far off grunt and a sudden cry. Andrew raced toward the source of the sound, gasping for breath as he rounded the corner. He skidded to a stop at the scene in front of him.

It was Neil. Somehow he had heard the commotion and, for some reason, had come running like the devil was at his heels. He had Steig down on the ground now, one knee firmly on his chest, the toe of a sneaker hooked warningly against his groin, and his hand-

“Neil Josten, put down the knife before I have to arrest you.” Andrew wheezed, pulling up and shoving Neil bodily off of Steig, replacing Neil’s weight with his own. He leaned a forearm firmly against Steig’s throat in place of the blade Neil had been using. He could hear the telltale footfalls of the others getting close. He looked up at Neil.

“Go back to the car.” he ordered.

“You’re welcome.” Neil said sarcastically, like Andrew didn’t have a wanted terrorist suspect struggling beneath his knee, and Christ, where was his backup, already?

Andrew didn’t miss the way Neil casually slipped the knife into his own pocket, even though Andrew was ninety percent sure he hadn’t had one on him before, which meant he had taken it off of Steig. If weren’t for the legal implications – and maybe even with them, actually – Andrew would have approved. Better to not have Neil’s fingerprints on a weapon at the scene anyway. Neil set off for the car at a light jog. When Renee rounded the opposite corner half a minute later, Andrew realized he had still been watching the empty space where Neil had gone.
Thanks so much for reading!

up next: “You’re dehydrated, you know.” Neil said ... “You should watch that.” behind them, Neil heard Nicky snort quietly.

“Next time I’m chasing down a wanted terrorist and trying to save someone’s life, I will try to remember to drink more water.” Minyard said.
Part 1, Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Neil's POV

Chapter Notes

warnings for threats of extreme violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4: Keep Your Poison Bottled Up

Neil wasn’t sure why he and Kevin were coming along to apprehend a dangerous suspect, or how they were even allowed to (the short answer, he suspected, was that they weren’t) but he was glad to get Kevin out of the lab. At some point during Minyard’s eight-or-so hour absence from Boston, Kevin had gone distracted. He’d started flipping through old notebooks he’d found stuffed in the backs of drawers, apparently still there after nearly a decade of neglect, and feverishly scribbling over the notes, ideas, and equations found there.

On the surface, it didn’t look like a breakdown. It looked like the old Kevin resurfacing, brash and arrogant and frighteningly brilliant. As unpleasant as that Kevin could be, Neil would have preferred it to the raw, unstable burn that was Kevin now. It wasn’t sustainable, this fervor. It wasn’t a scientific impulse, it was fear.

It had begun as soon as Minyard had explained where he was going – to New York City, to Massive Dynamic, to try to get an audience with Riko Moriyama. Kevin hadn’t raised any verbal objections, but his frenetic behavior had begun as soon as Minyard was gone. Neil wasn’t surprised he hadn’t handled talking about Riko well. Hours later, he hadn’t improved.

The quiet of the car seemed to help a bit, or maybe it was just the relief of actual progress on the case, even if neither Neil or Kevin would be doing anything for it. Kevin looked less twitchy, but there was a deep-seated fear in his eyes Neil knew was a few wrong moves away from full-blown panic.

“Kev.” He whispered urgently from beside him in the backseat. He switched into French in a grasp at something old and familiar. “Kev you have got to calm down.”

Neil had never been a master of comfort, but the only other option at the moment was Minyard, and Neil seriously doubted he would be any better. So he had to try. Kevin was breathing too fast, to shallowly, one thumb rubbing incessantly over the two on his cheek – a nervous tick Neil didn’t remember from their childhood, when it had only been marker. Neil reached up and took hold of Kevin’s wrist, tugging lightly. He might not be natural at comfort, but Neil was no stranger to panic.

“Kevin, listen to me. You are not in St. Claire’s. You are not in the Nest. You are in a car in Boston
with Neil Josten and Agent Minyard, and both of us have promised to protect you. We are on our way to get a suspect so that you and I can save a man’s life.”

Neil saw Minyard’s hands tighten on the wheel out of the corner of his eye, but remained focused on Kevin. “Kevin, talk to me.”


“We’re going to beat him at his own game, Kevin.”

“We can’t.” Kevin said furiously, hopelessly.

“We already are.” Neil shot back.

“We are here.” Minyard’s voice cut in in English from the driver’s seat, stopping the conversation in its tracks. They had pulled into a neighborhood of unassuming apartment buildings and duplexes. Minyard got out of the car then paused, ducking his head back inside.

“I have not told anyone you are here with me. If you die, you will not be missed.” he said threateningly, and left them with a slam of the car door.

Neil watched him go, wondering idly how on earth he had ended up here. Here, sitting in a car in the middle of the Boston suburbs, with Kevin Day, waiting on an FBI agent who knew so little but far too much about him. He wondered why it didn’t feel as frightening as it should.

“He doesn’t know who he’s going after.” Kevin said into the silence of the car. He didn’t have to explain what he meant. Riko Moriyama had always been a bit of a loose cannon, driven by the reckless desire to be noticed by his father at all costs. No matter that it was a hopeless dream. “Estranged” didn’t begin to cover the relationship between the first and second families of the Moriyamas. They weren’t really families at all. They were business partners, nothing more.

But Riko wanted nothing more than his father Kengo’s praise, and it had always made him impatient with the rate of Evermore University’s research. Neil hadn’t been surprised to hear that Riko had liquidated the schools to start a for-profit research company soon after Tetsuji’s death, but he had been wary. A University would always be subject to some degree of public scrutiny. A private company faced fewer such restrictions – there was no telling what the mad genius new head of the Moriyama branch family would get up to there.

And now Minyard was going after Riko, probably thinking he was nothing more than another overeducated, megalomaniac CEO. In some ways it was a fair assessment – Riko didn’t have true power, not the way his brother’s family did, but he had money. He had money and greed and jealous rage. His network of resources was vast, and Neil wasn’t sure even the force of the FBI would be enough to stop him, if it came down to it.

“I think we have to tell him.” Kevin said. Neil couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “I’m serious.” Kevin continued. “He has to know what he’s getting into.”

“He’s not getting into anything.” Neil said, as much to himself as to Kevin. “He’s solving one case, and it barely even involves Riko, certainly as far as the FBI is concerned. Once he does, he’s going to kiss both of our asses goodbye, and in a few months he’ll have forgotten any of this ever happened.” Neil didn’t doubt his own words. He felt Kevin stiffen beside him, but was distracted by a sudden commotion from the direction Minyard had left in.

Suddenly, a man in a brown leather jacket was sprinting past the car. Neil craned his neck but didn’t seen any agents close behind him. He only saw a brief flash of the man’s face, but it was enough.
His heart picked up, and before he could register Kevin’s sputtered protests or second-guess himself he was pushing out of the car and running.

He sprinted after Steig without a second thought: to whether or not Steig was armed; to why he should even bother except to get this log ordeal over with already; to what would happen if an agent besides Minyard or maybe Renee Walker caught him here, kneeling in an alleyway with Steig under his knee, knife held tight to his throat like a promise.

“…put the knife down before I have to arrest you.” A severely out of breath voice was saying, and Neil relaxed his shoulders just slightly. Minyard. Neil let Minyard replace his weight on Steig, replacing the knife with a neat forearm across Steig’s throat. There were well-shoes footfalls coming closer. The other agents, no doubt.

“You’re welcome.” Neil said, for no reason in particular, when Minyard ordered him back to the car. He went without complaint though, turning and setting off for the car at a jog, staving off unwelcome thoughts of the state Kevin was likely in at this point. Somehow, Neil felt Minyard’s eyes on his back the whole way there, even when he was out of sight. He kept the knife.

Kevin looked like being left alone in that car had been like his own personal ninth circle of hell. If it was, then Neil’s was the waiting area outside the interview room at the FBI field office. The fluorescent lights were headache-inducing, the chairs plastic and uncomfortable, not to mention every exit between there and the outside – of which there were five – was watched over by at least one armed federal agent.

Neil had felt startlingly naked these past few days without his gun tucked safely against his side, and he hadn’t brought his duffel into the building, knowing it would be searched. He’d stuffed the bag back into Minyard’s trunk when they’d left the lab, ignoring the almost-curious look that was sent his way. His gun was there now, among more vital things, and so was the knife he’d taken off Steig. He didn’t intend to keep the knife. It wasn’t a particularly nice one, but the weight of it in his hand, the startling simplicity of its handling even after all these years, still made him uneasy. But he was smart enough not to leave a weapon with fingerprints on it at a scene swarming with federal agents.

And now he sat with Kevin, who was holding it together surprisingly well considering the state he’d been in in the car. They had been like this, unmoving, for over an hour. The clock ticked loudly. Neil’s back ached from keeping upright in the sticky plastic chairs. Behind a large pane of one-way glass, Minyard was still trying and failing to pull any information out of a battered but completely silent Richard Steig.

Neil watched Steig’s face through the glass and felt an uncomfortable, frustrated pull of recognition. He had never met the man before, but he had known men like him. Power hungry fools who cared nothing for the harm they inflicted on the world in pursuit of their selfish goals. Average men who were certain of their own genius, certain it made them untouchable, certain their control over a few measly elements made them God.

Minyard stormed from the room after more than an hour of fruitless questions and threats, face a perfect mask and hands already reaching for his cigarettes. Neil let him pass. When the door slammed on the waiting room, he made up his mind.

“Wait here.” he said to Kevin. Between one blink and the next he was out of his chair and across the room, and into the interview room with Richard Steig.

The door shut behind him with a soft, final click. The quiet in this room was different. More oppressive and intentional, something you could feel pressing in on your ears. The silence held, total,
while Steig sized him up.

“Who did I offend to be saddled by the midget brigade?” Steig sneered.

“Height joke – original.” Neil said balefully. “Didn’t stop me from running you down.” Neil leaned casually against the door. “But I’m not here for small talk. I’m here for you to tell me the chemicals that you had in the storage facility you so kindly blew up on Aaron Minyard. I know you had no problem killing your own twin brother, but Agent Minyard is not going to take kindly to you killing his, and you really don’t want to have to deal with that.” Steig actually laughed.

“I don’t know if you’ve been paying attention, but I think I’ve made it pretty clear that I am not going to share any information.” He said.

Neil walked over and leaned, palms-down against the cold metal of the table, just out of Steig’s reach. baiting himself, just barely. Steig was looking at him like he was an insect, a petty inconvenience he would step on on his was out. Neil wanted nothing more than to punch him in the face, but he knew that wouldn’t get him anywhere. And it certainly wouldn’t win him any favors with the FBI. He changed tact.

“Oh that’s too bad.” he said softly. “Because we don’t know much about what is killing Aaron Minyard, but the poison form the plane…well, that we know a bit about, don’t we?” He raised an eyebrow at Steig, who scoffed in return.

“You know nothing.”

“We know it’s water soluble.” Neil said, backing away from the table to lean against the wall near the door again. He sagged a bit in the pretense of casualness, steadying himself. “That’s how you got it into your brother’s insulin pen, into his bloodstream. So when our labs figure out the exact formula – and they will, Steig – it will be just, so easy to slip you some. In your food…” He slid a pointed glance toward the cup of water on the table “in your water.” He took a shallow breath, and pulled a small plastic bottle from his pocket.

“Hey, Steig, eyes getting dry?”

All the color drained from Steig’s cheeks, and his face twisted suddenly in an ugly, desperate snarl.

“It turns the human breath into poison.” Steig said through clenched teeth. “You wouldn’t even make it out of the room. You’d never save your precious agent.” Somewhere outside the door, Neil thought he heard someone who sounded like Kevin shouting, but he ignored it.

“Maybe.” He conceded, and gave the cap of the bottle a quarter twist. Steig’s breath caught. “But at least a terrorist would be dead. Hell, they’d probably make me a hero.”

Holding the bottle poised between his fingers, Neil took a step closer Steig.

“You know. They say not to fight fire with fire, especially if you’re in the same house. But really it’s easy.” He smiled now, turning the cap another quester turn, Steig’s gaze frantic and hypnotized. “You just block the exit. And this door locks from the outside.

“So here’s what’s going to happen. You are going to write me a list of every chemical compound that was in that lab. You’re going to do it because underneath your pathetic delusions of grandeur, you’re nothing but a coward who fears death more than anything else. So tell me those chemicals or I swear I will upend this bottle into my own mouth, and we’ll see just how fast my breath turns to poison.”
Neil gave the cap another turn. He was wearing his father’s snarl now, a smile dipped in blood. There were footsteps racing towards the door.

By the time Minyard fumbled the lock and crashed through, Steig was already writing.

“You absolute fucking imbecile. What the hell do you think you were doing?” Minyard seethed, stone-faced when they were finally in the car on their way back to the lab. Neil had sat shotgun to give Kevin room to spread out in the back, already immersed in noted and scribblings about possible antidote for Aaron.

“Getting Steig to talk.” Neil said. He’d thought that was obvious. So what if the methods were a little unorthodox? Minyard reached around him and grabbed his cigarettes out of the glove compartment, elbowing down the window with his other arm and lighting up one-handed. He tossed the cigarette pack back carelessly, and it landed in Neil’s lap. It wasn’t really an invitation, but Neil took it as one anyway, lighting up while he waited for Minyard to keep talking.

“One.” Minyard said at length, holding a finger up form the wheel. “It is my job to interrogate suspects. Not yours. Your job is to babysit Day.”

“And chase down suspects for you, apparently.” Neil couldn’t resist prodding. He knew he really shouldn’t, but there was something about Minyard’s seemingly impenetrable apathy that made it irresistible. Even in a moment where it would mean his own danger and maybe a crashed car, he wanted to see what was underneath.

He only regretted it a little when there was a knife pressed to his throat. Neil glanced sidelong at Minyard, but Minyard hadn’t taken his eyes off the road, his right arm extended across the console to hold the blade deftly at the exposed skin of Neil’s neck, close enough Neil could feel the press of it when he swallowed.

“Two. I know you weren’t bluffing with the eye dropper. If you were Steig would not have reacted like that.” And this time something showed in Minyard’s voice, a heavy threat. “So I would like one very good explanation for how you came to have that bottle in your pocket.”

“It wouldn’t have helped.” he explained. “No, really” he added at the way Minyard’s hand twitched, as though yearning to dig the knife in. “We have no idea how similar the contents of the lab were to the actual end poison. Aaron could have been exposed to a dozen different compounds that aren’t in that bottle at all.” he took a breath.

“We’ve got exactly one shot to get this right. His body is extremely compromised, and even the antidote will be a bad shock to his system before it helps. We get it wrong, it will kill him.”

“You get it wrong, I will kill you. Myself.” Minyard said, which such cold finality that Neil didn’t doubt him for a second. But he put the knife down, so he must have been satisfied with Neil’s explanation. They spent the rest of the ride in controlled, brittle silence.
Nicky was waiting for them when they walked through the lab doors, and he sagged visibly in relief at the sight of them. Aaron was still alive, but Neil knew he couldn’t have much time left. His vitals were dropping, organs straining under the slow but steady hardening of his flesh.

At Neil’s heels, Kevin was bouncing ideas about antidotes off of him, each more desperate than the last. It wasn’t counteracting the crystallization that was the real problem. Now that they had an understanding of what Aaron had been exposed to, they understood better just what was happening to his body. The problem was Aaron had been exposed to a lot of nasty things, and counteracting them was going to require something equally nasty, and Neil wasn’t sure Aaron’s body could handle it. Kevin noticed his limited responses, took it as a personal offense like always, and began pulling bottles off the shelves in silence, apparently having decided to forgo input altogether. Neil finally snapped.

“Kevin, the things you are suggesting will kill him.” He said, not caring if Minyard or Nicky overheard. They knew what was at stake. “If you put that in his veins—”

“It’s the only thing that will reverse the crystallization reaction!” Kevin returned angrily. “Maybe if you’d kept up with your chemistry—”

“My chemistry is fine!” They were yelling now, but Neil hardly cared. “You’re the one who never stopped to think about the broader effects on the human subject! That combination won’t have time to cure him, because his body will reject it before it has time, and he. Will. Die.”

“Well we have to get it into his blood somehow!” Kevin shouted furiously. Neil stopped short, staring at him.

“Kevin that’s it.” He said in a rush. “We need some of his blood. If we dissolve the antidote into his blood and then give it to him, we can trick his body into accepting it. It won’t be as much a shock to his system.” Neil turned to Nicky. “Do agents keep a backup blood supply?”

Nicky’s face had been a war of conflicting emotions as he’d followed their argument. Now, his face went from confused, to bright, to sorrowful in an instant.

“They do.” he said. “But Aaron is based out of DC, not Boston. His back up supply is down there. Fuck.” Neil couldn’t have agreed more. They were so close.

“Mine is here.” Minyard spoke up from behind them. He was already shrugging out of his jacket. “We don’t even have to call the hospital.”

Neil looked him over. Minyard looked even more haggard than when he’d found Neil in Shanghai. He looked hollow, like someone had scraped the inside of him out and left the shell hanging in the wind.

“You’re in no shape to give blood.” Neil told him firmly. “Look, your supply’s at Boston General, right? We’ll just call and get it. We have enough time for that.” He hoped they did. But Minyard was shaking his head.

“I used mine. Got shot last month and ran through my supply. Haven’t had a chance to replenish.” he said grimly. Neil didn’t know why he was surprised anymore.

“So you’re telling me you were shot like, four weeks ago, lost enough blood to go through your whole backup supply and… you know even the Red Cross only lets you donate every ten weeks, right?” Neil said, but Andrew was undoing his cuff and rolling up his sleeve.
“Spare me the bleeding heart act, Josten.” Minyard said. “It doesn’t suit you and we don’t have time for it. We are out of options, so just do it.”

He was right, Neil knew it. Minyard sat heavily in a chair near Aaron, staring at his brother’s unmoving form as he rolled up one sleeve, neatly folding down the top of the armband underneath. Neil watched as Kevin approached with the IV pole and tray of implements, and felt Minyard’s gaze like a weight on his back. He plucked the tray from Kevin’s hands.

“I’ve got it.” he said lightly, and turned to set it down beside Minyard, who eyed him impassively in return.

“Think you’re something special, do you?” Minyard asked. His hands were tapping erratic rhythms on his thighs.

“‘I’m nobody.” Neil said easily.

“Sure.” Minyard said, almost a murmur. Neil wondered if he was going to pass out before he was even done giving blood. Neil picked up the rubber tourniquet band in one hand.

“Can’t let you do this one on yourself.” he said, almost gently, unsure if it was an apology or not. It sort of felt like one, for some reason. Neil could only imagine how little he would like a stranger’s hands on him if he were as stressed and exhausted as Minyard was right now, so he kept his touch as quick and light as possible as he tied off the rubber tourniquet and slipped the needle in into his vein. It took him a couple of times to find it.

“You’re dehydrated, you know.” he said, maybe just to get Minyard to look away from Aaron’s near-lifeless body. He turned to Neil, looking like he was fighting to keep his eyes open. “You should watch that.” behind them, Neil heard Nicky snort quietly.

“Next time I’m chasing down a wanted terrorist and trying to save someone’s life, I will try to remember to drink more water.” Minyard said, speech heavy with sarcasm and slurred with exhaustion. Neil undid the tourniquet and handed him a small soft rubber ball to squeeze.

“Try not to squeeze it to pieces. Or pop the needle out of your own vein.” Neil advised. Minyard just sighed and began squeezing rhythmically, the sparse but bright light of the lab playing strangely off of his wide knuckles. Neil didn’t realize he’d been staring until the hand stopped and the ball popped him in the forehead.


“Tell me when he’s done.” he told Nicky. “One pint – not a drop more.”

By the time Nicky called him back, Neil had finished helping Kevin with the last of the preparations of the antidote. Neil went over to the retrieve the bag, and Nicky was handing Minyard a Gatorade, already unscrewed.

“Drink.” Nicky said, gentle but firm. “We don’t have time to take care of you, too.” Minyard glared up at him, pale and haggard, but raised the bottle to his lips and drank. He and Nicky sat quietly by Aaron while Neil and Kevin finished preparing the antidote, dissolving it into the blood, and transferring it to a new bag for Aaron.

Neil slipped the needle into Aaron’s vein, but paused before connecting the IV to the bag of antidote-infused blood. They had no idea what they were doing, when it came down to it. Kevin was the most brilliant chemist and physicist Neil had ever met, but they were going up against the unknown. They had no real guarantee Steig hadn’t lied to them, or hadn’t simply forgotten something vital; no
guarantee the blood would help enough with the introduction. He met Minyard’s eyes across Aaron’s body.

“We’ve done everything we could.” He said, and if it sounded like a threat it was because he meant it as one. “What happens to us if he dies?” It was an ugly question, but it needed to be asked. Minyard held his gaze for a long, agonizing moment, his eyes bloodshot, his mouth an unforgiving line.

“You leave as fast as you can.” Minyard said, sounding like he was speaking from a chokehold, and Neil understood it was all he could offer.

Neil connected the line to the IV bag. It felt like the lab was holding its breath as they watched the dark blood snaking its way towards Aaron’s vein. For a minute, a year, an eon, nothing happened. Then, Aaron began to convulse violently. Minyard’s hand shot out as he stood, splayed atop the cold pack that wrapped Aaron’s chest. Aaron shook, and Neil’s head was a siren echoing leave as fast as you can. Kevin’s grip on his arm was viselike and he was rooted to the spot, staring in grim determination at the gurney like he could physically will the antidote into working.

The shaking stopped. Every atom in Neil’s body screamed that it hadn’t worked, that he had to get out right now – and then Aaron opened his eyes.

“Aaron.” Minyard said urgently, leaning over him. Neil almost warned him against leaning on Aaron, but he saw the hand on the cold wrap was deceptively light – Minyard was leaning most of his weight into his other hand, clutched in a death-grip on the rail of the gurney. “Aaron.”

The color was, miraculously, already returning to Aaron’s skin. Neil’s heart beat with wild triumph in his chest. They had won.

Aaron was staring up at his brother like he didn’t believe he was real.

“Andrew?” he finally managed. His voice was thick and dry. His lips were probably still numb. His eyes roved the lab desperately. “Nicky?”

Nicky crowded Minyard’s shoulder and for once Minyard just let him.

“Hey kid.” Nicky said tearfully, grinning from ear to ear. “It’s good to see you.” His voice was so raw with unchecked emotion Neil couldn’t look at him. Instead his gaze fell on Minyard – Andrew, he supposed, since there were properly two of them now – who was looking down at his brother with an intensity in his gaze that belied the carefully blank set of his face. Aaron blinked up at his drowsily.

“I had a weird dream…you were there.” Aaron said slowly. Nicky let out a startled, wet laugh, but Andrew just blinked and withdrew his hand from Aaron’s chest.

“Go back to sleep, Dorothy.” Andrew said shortly. Perhaps unable to do anything else, Aaron did, closing his eyes and falling into a natural sleep within minutes. The room let out the breath it had been holding and suddenly Nicky was bowling him over in a surprisingly strong hug. He was saying “thank you, thank you” over and over like an incantation. When Neil finally managed to unfreeze himself and get Nicky at arm’s length, Nicky had tears running down his face, a smile so wide it looked like it must hurt.

“If I wasn’t a happily married man, I would kiss you.” Nicky said emphatically. “Neil Josten, Kevin Day, you are godsends. I cannot thank you enough.”

“We’re just glad it worked.” Neil said uncomfortably, because there was nothing else to say,
extricating himself from Nicky’s hold and stepping away. Kevin took that opportunity to step forward and reach out a hand, shaking Nicky’s warmly.

“We were happy to help.” Kevin said, for a brief flash every inch the brilliant young man who had been the second-brightest face of Evermore University. “He’ll need monitoring, but now that we’ve broken the crystallization process he should be able to be moved to a standard hospital for recovery.”

“Thank God.” Nicky breathed, sagging into a chair. “Okay. I’ll call the hospital and have them send transport over. Andrew, would you-

But Andrew, like his brother beside him, was already asleep.

Neil stayed behind with Kevin while Andrew and Nicky accompanied Aaron back to Boston General. After all the commotion in the last – how many days had it been? Only two or three, somehow. Well, he knew he should catch up on some much needed rest. But when the lab doors swung shut on Andrew and Nicky’s retreating figures, Neil knew sleep would be long in coming. He felt hot and itchy all over. He realized it had been days since he’d gone for a proper run. He considered going out and running right then and there, uncomfortable clothes and icy streets be damned, but he checked himself and realized it probably wasn’t one of the more brilliant ideas he’d ever come up with.

He settled instead on an ancient couch that had probably been dragged down here by trouble-seeking students years ago, and attempted to at least relax. He stretched his arms and legs restlessly, and eventually just lay back, closing his eyes and willing his body to settle out. A few minutes later, he felt the couch dip as Kevin joined him, sitting heavily on the other side.

“It’s over.” Kevin said into the quiet. Neil cracked an eye and glanced over at him. He was staring down at his lap, one hand rubbing absently at his tattoo in a nervous tick he hadn’t had when Neil had last known him. Back when the little black “2” had been only marker, and much more innocent. Neil offered only a short sound of agreement before closing his eyes and settling back again. Typically, Kevin had no idea when he was being asked to shut up.

“What happens now?” Kevin asked.

“We go back.” Neil said without opening his eyes. He felt Kevin turn his body towards him.

“I can’t go back.” Kevin said, and there was a hint of desperation bleeding into his voice. It was so pathetic, so unlike the Kevin he remembered, that Neil finally relented and looked at him properly.

“What are we supposed to do Kevin? You know I can’t stay in Boston. And even if I could, it’s not like either of us can just get a job.” Neil said.

“I can’t go back.” Kevin insisted. “Nath- Neil. You can’t. You can’t send me back there.”

“What the fuck do you want from me, Kevin?” Neil sighed, exasperated. Kevin frowned, then got up and began pacing restlessly. After a few laps he abruptly stopped and turned on Neil.

“Why did you even do it?”

“Do what?” Neil asked, thrown.

“Why did you do this – Neil Josten, the name, the money, getting responsibility over me. I know it must have cost you to make an identity the fooled even the FBI. Why did you even do it? It’s not like
we were best friends. I haven’t seen you since you were twelve.” Kevin said in a rush. “What could I possibly be worth to you?”

“You aren’t worth anything to me.” Neil told him.

“Cut the bullshit, Neil.” Kevin said harshly, and Neil supposed that was fair. But he still wasn’t really sure how to explain. Or maybe he just didn’t want to.

“You’re right, we weren’t that close.” Neil said slowly. “But you were maybe the closest thing to a friend I had – you and Jean.” Kevin looked suddenly guilty at the reminder, but Neil pressed on. “After my mom – after we left, I didn’t have anyone but her. She died, a little over five years ago now.”

Neil watched Kevin put the timeline together in his head, and continued.

“I made it to Tokyo, and then to Shanghai. I was safe there, or something like it, but I was… I’d never been alone before. Nothing there meant anything to me. I got curious about you, about where your life had gone when mine had gone to shit, I guess. I started doing some research.” Neil paused. “I guess I was hoping that one of us had made it.”

“Instead you found that I had been convicted of homicide and committed to a mental institution.” Kevin surmised. “Well, sorry about your disillusionment. That still doesn’t explain the rest, though.”

Neil hesitated, but he didn’t have any reason to lie. Not to Kevin, and not about this.

“Riko.” He said at last. “I was reading up about the court case, and I saw that Riko was petitioning the courts to be named your next of kin.”

Kevin blanched, stopping in his tracks. “He what?”

“Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t have known. Well, he was arguing that because you were both raised together by Tetsuji, he was basically, legally, your brother. He was getting close, too. So I know you and I weren’t really that close, but I know what Riko is. I couldn’t let him – he wants to own you, Kevin. He always has.” Neil said.

“And now you do instead.” Kevin said bitterly, and Neil was surprised by how much the casual barb stung.

“I’m not Riko.” he said darkly.

Kevin just laughed, a dark, unhealthy sound.

“It doesn’t matter Neil. Riko owns me anyway.” he said. “If I go back there, he owns me anyway.”

“I don’t understand” Neil said.

“Obviously.” said Kevin. He stood still and looked at Neil squarely, like he was explaining something to a child. “Massive Dynamic’s medical division owns St. Claire’s. Through a shell corporation, of course, so it’s not public knowledge, but they bought it out…oh let’s see…probably right around the time Riko lost that case to be declared my brother.” His eyes were boring into Neil’s. “If I go back there, Riko owns me. No matter what our relationship is.”

Neil’s stomach sank. It made too much sickening sense not to be true. All these years, he had thought a fake name on a flimsy document would be enough to protect Kevin from Riko. But Riko was always a step ahead, courtesy less of his intelligence than his wealth and greed. He had been a step
ahead the whole time. There was just one thing Neil still didn’t understand.

“I get that Riko felt threatened by you. That’s why he did it.” Said Neil, not bothering to clarify. He didn’t need Kevin to tell him it was Riko who had set the fire that had killed Tetsuji. Probably he had intended it to be Kevin himself who died, and framing him was just a backup plan. Kevin had always been smarter than Riko, but he’d spent much of his adolescence holding himself back, careful never to outshine his ‘brother.’ Apparently, he’d gotten worse about hiding his genius. Probably Tetsuji had begun to favor him. It wouldn’t have taken much.

“But.” Neil said. “Why take it so far? Why buy out St. Claire’s, just for some sick puppet-master fantasy? What about you is so dangerous to him?”

Kevin looked grim as he sat back down on the couch.

“I’m the only one who knows about the things we’ve done.” he said, and his tone sent a chill down Neil’s spine. “About what we started.” Neil had never been a big fan of mystery.

“Yeah, Kev, you’re gonna have to expand on that.” He said.

And so Kevin did. Haltingly, at first, and then more quickly, words and thoughts tumbling over each other in their rush to escape. He told Neil stories of Evermore, of late nights in the deepest labs of the Nest, of long hours in this very lab beneath Harvard. The way they had pushed at the boundaries of science, the human body, mind, and spirit. The dark, unexplored caverns of forbidden knowledge they had dared to walk into, eyes open; the things the had seen.

By the time he was finished, the picture was more complete, but far more baffling and horrifying than Neil had dared imagine. More so than he had any idea what to do with. He didn’t have a clue what to do next. One thing was for certain: being Neil Josten was suddenly more dangerous than it ever had been. Before he could come to a decision, the phone in the lab rang. It turned out to be Andrew.

“Call a cab to go – the Bureau will cover it.” Andrew said without preamble. “Take Day, go back to the hotel and get some sleep. Don’t leave town before I’ve talked to you tomorrow.”

Well. It was something, anyway. He could be Neil Josten for one more day, surely. Neil heaved himself off the couch with a sigh.

“Come on Kevin.” he said wearily. “I’m calling us a cab. Let’s go get some rest, we can figure this all out tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! <3 yell at me on tumblr @ a-case-for-wonder

Up next:

“What could a runaway like you possibly know about keeping promises?” Andrew asked, stepping closer.
Chapter 5: Recruitment

Andrew didn’t leave the hospital that night, though he did finally sleep. In the morning he woke with a sickening jolt at the unfamiliar sights and sounds of the room, but a glance to his left at his family, still sleeping soundly across the room, was enough to calm his racing pulse. It was the first time he had ever felt anything like relief at being in a hospital, and it made him furious. Andrew hated hospitals, with their plastic walls and anonymous uniforms and endless prodding fingers. Even being there as a visitor set his teeth on edge.

He suspected it was the smell. He’d read somewhere that smell was the sense tied most strongly to memory. Well, Andrew’s memory was flawless as it was filled with horrors. Nothing smelled quite like a hospital, at once so dirty and so sterile it was nauseating. But he was relieved to be here, because it meant Aaron was safe. Not dying. Not better, not by a long shot, but not dying. The cold packs were gone, and there were fewer tubes and wires now. Andrew had given the list of chemicals to the doctors and they’d been treating the last of Aaron’s symptoms, one by one.

Aaron would be sleeping for a while yet, Andrew knew. His body was still exhausted, worn through with the effort of just staying alive while his own flesh tried to turn itself into stone. It was a battle that was far from over, but one Andrew couldn’t fight for him. Right now, Aaron was asleep, Nicky was beside him, there was an FBI guard outside the door, and what Andrew needed was a cigarette. Or four, maybe. He would see.

When he got outside, Chief Wymack was there, almost definitely waiting for him. Andrew mentally bumped up his cigarette ration to at least two or three and lit up with a short nod of acknowledgement to the man who was still, technically, his boss. He leaned heavily against a brick column as he smoked.

“They things will kill you.” Wymack said, before pulling a pack out of his pocket and lighting up himself. It was a terrible joke, but it was a joke, not an act; Wymack smoked with the weary comfort of the long-addicted, something Andrew knew all too well.

“How is he?” Wymack started again after a few minutes. Andrew allowed himself a moment to knock the words together in his head. Thinking in clear sentences was an effort this morning, and he had an uneasy feeling it would be that way for a while. He was tired. The nicotine was just making him jittery.

“Doctors say full recovery, a few weeks.” He managed at last. “Full strength, a month, maybe.” Close enough to complete sentences. Wymack seemed to understand, but he was watching Andrew curiously.
“Glad to hear it.” Wymack said, and he even sounded like he meant it. Well, he did have a reputation for sentimentality, and he’d worked with Aaron, even if their correspondence had been mostly electronic. “That was some seriously solid work on this case Minyard. Finding Day, finding Josten so you could use him, tracking down Steig. I mean that was some real detective work. Can’t say your attitude couldn’t use some work, but Higgins was right. You’re one of the best, Minyard.”

Andrew didn’t dislike Wymack, exactly, but he knew a potential threat when he saw one. He also knew what people sounded like when they were angling for something, and he didn’t like it one bit.

“What do you want Chief?” he asked dryly. Wymack huffed softly, not quite an amused sound, then turned serious.

“Flight C-731. Some people in the circles I work with think it might have been more than simple terrorism.” Wymack said.

“Simple terrorism” Andrew echoed.

“We think it’s part of something we’ve been calling The Pattern.” Wymack said. And that had Andrew standing up straight, more alert than he’d been all day.

“Reynolds mentioned something called The Pattern. And you, actually.” He didn’t bother to hide the note of accusation in his voice.

Wymack nodded in acknowledgement, but offered nothing else in the way of explanation. Instead he flipped open a manila folder in his hands, something that looked like case notes inside. Andrew wondered tiredly if he was about to be on the receiving end of some kind of prepared speech, but when Wymack spoke again, Andrew didn’t see him glance down once.

“36 recorded incidents of a paranormal nature in the last nine months alone.” Wymack said. His cigarette was forgotten in his fingers, his whole body focused. “47 children who disappeared in 1998 found a few months ago, halfway around the world, looking like they hadn’t aged a day; a low-flying plane in Sri Lanka emits a high frequency sound that blows out all nearby windows, an hour later an earthquake measuring 8.7 on the Richter scale hits, causing a tsunami that wipes out 83,000 people in the area; in Kansas, a hospital patient emerges from a coma and begins writing down a series of numbers, all of which correspond exactly to real-time coordinates of US military ships in the south pacific.”

He snapped the unreferenced folder shut. “It’s as if someone is conducting experiments, but using the whole world as their lab.” Wymack finished.

Andrew took a drag of his cigarette and tried to figure out of he was curious or not. Certainly, those were puzzles. Good ones, even. Another day they just might have been interesting. But he was tired, and he thought he had had enough fucked up mysteries for close to a lifetime in the last three days alone. He didn’t need more.

“Why are you telling me this?” Andrew asked, contempt putting an edge into his words, snapping off all the edges. His brain felt like cotton. His body felt like shards of glass, brittle and deadly to the touch. He didn’t want to be hearing this, he decided. The world was dark enough, cruel enough, without something even more incomprehensible lurking underneath.

“I’m offering you a job, dipshit.” Wymack said. Like it had been obvious. Maybe it had been, in a way, but Andrew could not accept.

“I have a job. I have to get back to it.” he said, an attempt at impassivity that might have just come
out as petulant, but he wasn’t sure he cared. “I would like to go back.” Andrew said, with emphasis, not even really sure what he meant this time.

Wymack just gave him a long, appraising look that left Andrew feeling far too seen.

“With all due respect, Minyard,” he said gruffly, “I don’t think you can.”

He left Andrew with the remains of his second cigarette. Andrew stomped it out and lit a third, refusing to dwell. He had told the truth; he had a job. One that was mostly interesting. One he was good at, and even a few people he could stand doing it with. He didn’t need new puzzles, no matter how intriguing. He needed to leave this case as far behind as he could. He wouldn’t forget, but he would put as much space as possible between himself and all these horrible riddles: the dark taunt of Riko Moriyama’s Massive Dynamic; Kevin Day and his arrogant, frail genius; Neil Josten with his startling questions and sharp, watchful eyes.

He chain smoked until Nicky texted to say that Aaron was awake – and apparently, asking for him, which, Andrew thought with something like grim amusement, might be a first for them. Also, apparently Neil had shown up at some point. Nicky said to “say hi” but Andrew doubted it. There was only one thing to be done about it all, he supposed. He crushed his empty pack in one hand, tossed it in a nearby trash bin, and headed inside.

The scene inside Aaron’s hospital room was as irritating as it was predictable, Andrew supposed. He thought another man might have laughed at the sight of it. Nicky, standing guard over a gaunt, pouting Aaron; Neil backed into a corner, shoulders hunched like an angry cat, shirt soaked through with what Andrew assumed was the contents of Aaron’s bedside water pitcher.

“The Fuck.” Was all he got out as he entered the room. Nicky looked up at him and sighed in relief. Neil straightened out like he’d had to physically lower his hackles. Aaron’s expression didn’t change except to turn to Andrew and say

“I need to talk to you. And I don’t want him to hear it.”

Neil bristled ineffectually at that, crossing his arms over his chest. Andrew rolled his eyes.

“If it has to do with the case-“ Neil started

“It’s still none of your damn business.” Aaron slurried at him. The slur was more likely from pain than drugs. Nicky hadn’t left Aaron’s side; he would have made sure the doctors didn’t give him anything he would regret.

“What is this about?” Andrew asked Aaron, switching to German before he and Neil could circle on each other again.

“What I came to Boston for in the first place.” Aaron said, switching languages as well. That made Andrew pause. With everything that had happened, he’d nearly lost track of the fact that Aaron had been planning to come to Boston on other business anyway.

“You had information for Wymack.” Andrew recalled. Aaron had said he had thought it might be related to the case, but hadn’t said how. “Steig?” he guessed. Aaron shook his head.

“Massive Dynamic.” Aaron said, translating the words clumsily into German to avoid letting Neil hear.

“If it concerns Massive Dynamic, it concerns Kevin, and therefore it concerns me.” Neil broke in, his German perfect and unnervingly fluid, practically native-sounding. Aaron and Nicky stared. Andrew
offered Neil his most unimpressed look.

“I don’t care for surprises.” Andrew said, switching back to English with a mixture of annoyance and relief. He hadn’t been looking forward to a prolonged German conversation. Neil offered him a baleful look.

“I lived in Shanghai, Andrew.” he said, and Andrew determinedly didn’t react to the casual way his first name fell from Neil’s lips. “I speak six languages. You really think I wouldn’t know something as common as German?” Damn him for being this way, a knot Andrew’s fingers were itching to untangle.

“It’s Andrew now, is it?” Nicky asked slyly, startling Andrew from his unconscious stare-off. Neil shrugged blankly.

“There’s two of them now.” he said. From the bed, Aaron groaned.

“Why do you need to know this?” Andrew asked Neil.

Neil finally crossed the room and seated himself in a chair near the door, still a few feet away from Aaron and Nicky, Andrew between them. He seemed to be considering how much he could share.

“According to Kevin, Massive Dynamic owns St. Claire’s.” he said seriously. And well, that was certainly something to consider. “I took up care of Kevin to protect him from Riko, but Riko wouldn’t be stopped so he had his company buy out the whole damn hospital. I don’t want to be involved in any of this, but I am now, and if I’m going to keep my promise to Kevin I need to know everything.” Funny, he almost sounded like he meant it.

“What could a runaway like you possibly know about keeping promises?” Andrew asked, stepping closer until he was standing over him. Neil was a prey animal through and through. But maybe he was an especially stupid one. Neil looked up and met his eye levelly.

“Not much, maybe.” He admitted quietly. “Doesn’t mean I’m not going to try.” Yes, he apparently really was that stupid. Andrew scoffed in his face before turning back to Aaron and Nicky.

“Share with the class, Aaron.” he said, final. Aaron glared but gestured them over, pulling a tape player from the bottom drawer of his bedside table. Curious. Aaron threw Neil a last, suspicious glance before pressing play, the recording crackling to life.

“This is C patient zero dash three, trial number four” came the voice of Tetsuji Moriyama, unmistakable from hundreds of interviews and press releases. “Today we are attempting telekinetic control of electrical circuits.”

“What the fuck” Nicky breathed beside him. But it was what came next that turned Andrew’s blood to lead.

“Ready, AJ?” Tetsuji’s voice said, and a wave of nausea rolled though Andrew’s gut. It was a coincidence, he told himself firmly, careful not to visibly react. Only two people had ever called his that, and neither of them were famous scientists. Besides, surely he would remember this, of all things.

“Ready.” a small voice replied. Nicky gasped softly. Aaron looked grim. It was unquestionably the voice of a young child, and even from the sounds of that one word, the child was likely drugged.

The recording continued from there, obviously the notes from some kind of test or experiment. It seemed Tetsuji was trying to get the child to turn on a series of lights with their mind. It was weird,
and definitely illegal, but Andrew allowed himself to relax a little. It wasn’t him. *AJ* wasn’t *Andrew Joseph*. Surely, even drugged, he would never have forgotten something like this.

At one point in the recording, there was a commotion that sounded like it came from far away, seemingly unrelated to the experiment. Tetsuji muttered something unintelligible, and there was the sound of a heavy door opening and shutting, followed by a nearly inaudible whimper that had Andrew clenching his hands into fists. A moment later, the sound of the door opening again, but this time it was a different child’s voice who spoke.

“Hello?” the voice said. “Who are you? Why do you have that thing on your head?” Silence and small footsteps. “Can you hear me? Hey, why do you have wires all over you? Are you being punished?”

“Go away,” the first child’s voice said.

“You should be more careful” said the second child. “*The Master-*”

The sound of the door opening again.


“Nathaniel, leave at once, you do not belong here.” Tetsuji ordered.

“Yes, Master.” the second boy said meekly. The door closed with a dull click a few seconds later.

The test began again. It sounded exhausting, and it didn’t seem the boy was getting anywhere. Which should have been obvious, because telekinesis wasn’t possible. But the boy was clearly in distress. Andrew’s skin was crawling as he listened.

“Again, AJ.” Tetsuji commanded.

“I can’t.” the boy whispered. “I want to stop. Please, I want to stop. Please.”

Andrew had heard enough. He left the room before anyone could notice he was shaking. He texted Nicky something about needing to meet Renee about the case and got in his car, only breathing again when the engine roared to life beneath him. Then, he actually did call Renee.

“Got time to hit the gym?” he asked without saying hello.

“Andrew. Are you all right?” She asked. But he didn’t have an answer for that, not really, so he stayed silent. “I’m not sure I want to fight you with you like this.” she said uneasily.

“Renee.” Andrew didn’t have time for this. She sighed.

“I’ll hold the bag for you, okay? Then after, maybe, we can do a round. You pull a knife on me I’m taking it and I’m not giving it back.” she said firmly. Andrew begrudgingly supposed that was fair.

“Meet you there in twenty.” He said, and hung up.

On the ride there, he rolled all the windows down, turned the radio up too loud, and did nothing but hold on and breathe.

It was lunchtime, so the gym was mercifully empty. Renee tossed him a granola bar when she greeted him, probably correctly guessing he hadn’t eaten. She took up post behind a large hanging bag when he was done.
“Wrap your hands, Andrew.” She said when she saw he was bare knuckled.

“Don’t tell me what to do.” he said.

Infuriatingly, she just stepped back from the bag, putting her hands on her hips. Her stance was too casual. If he started hitting now, the whole thing would swing and probably knock her right over.

“Nicky told me you’re low on blood.” She said, and Andrew really didn’t want to know when or why they had been talking about him. “I don’t want to be cleaning any more of it off the equipment.”

Andrew really hated how often she was right. He wrapped his hands efficiently and they squared off again, Renee bracing the bag for him while he went through all his hits and kicks with as much force as he could muster, trying to get her sneakers to slide on the mat. Trying to erase the horrible itching and crawling with the clean burn of exertion.

“Anything you want to talk about?” She asked him between sets of punches, wiping a patch of hair from her face. They were both sweating.

“Wymack offered me a job.” He grunted around punches. “Investigating extra-freaky shit.” It wasn’t what was bothering him most, but it might be something it would actually help to talk to his partner about.

“But you like the job you have.” Renee guessed. Andrew didn’t like anything, but that wasn’t an argument worth having with Renee anymore.

“I’m not about to become a goddamn sci-fi detective.” he told her, with a flurry of hits that finally had her footing slipping. She signaled for a break, tossing him a bottle of water and laying down on the mat. He sat down beside her a few feet away.

“You might have to.” She said after a while. Andrew didn’t turn to look at her, focusing instead on the intricate truss work of the ceiling, the dense, damp plastic of the mats beneath his legs.

“I don’t have to do anything.” he told her.

Renee was repeatedly tossing her water bottle into the air, catching it just above her face. Once day she was going to break her nose doing that.

“I just mean – being effective at your job is important to you. But the Bureau doesn’t make it easy for us. Half the cases we work, we aren’t fully briefed on. Corporations have higher security clearances that we do… Makes you feel a little obsolete, doesn’t it?” she said.

“You sound like Bee.” Andrew said sourly, though he a mental note to make an appointment with Dobson soon. Renee laughed.

“My apologies. But we both just want what’s best for you.” she said.

“We are not obsolete.”

“No.” Renee agreed. “But we are not as useful as we could be.”

“You think I should do it.”

“I think you should ask yourself why you really don’t want to.”

Before Andrew could think of a reply to that, Renee got up and walked back towards the hanging bag, taking up a position on the other side this time.
“Come on, Minyard, ready to get pushed around?” She grinned. Andrew hauled himself up after her.

“Bring it, Walker.” he said, bracing himself against the bag. This, he could do all day.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! <3

Up Next:

"It was a truth, of the kind Andrew seemed to swallow like the dark mouth of a cave swallows offered secrets, black and unblinking."
Chapter 6: Let's Make a Deal

It was time to pack up their bags. Metaphorically, anyway, Neil supposed. Kevin hadn’t been allowed any possessions inside St. Claire’s, a fact that had struck Neil as strange until he’d found out about Riko’s meddling. Kevin had brought nothing out with him, and had nothing to return with. Neil’s belongings were all already packed, as they always were, securely in his duffel. He’d racked up a few personal items in the years since he’d stopped in Shanghai, but the essentials were never more than fit in this one bag. Everything else could be burned, if necessary.

Kevin had been silent and ranting by turns for hours. The subject varied: Riko, Neil, the FBI, his doctors at St. Claire’s, the general state of research science, Neil again. Neil tried not to let it bother him. He couldn’t imagine being in Kevin’s position, but his mother’s voice still echoed loudly in his ears. It was far past time to keep moving. It didn’t matter how good it had felt to be back in a lab again, to solve an impossible challenge, to beat a villain at their own game. All that mattered was survival. It wouldn’t do to forget that now.

Still, for now they were waiting on Andrew. The hours were dragging by, creeping towards late afternoon. Neil had started to wonder if they should just call a cab, but Andrew had said he would see them off. For some reason, Neil knew that even in this small thing, Andrew would keep his word. They waited.

It was nearly five in the evening by the time Andrew walked back through the lab doors. The sun was low on the horizon, casting beams and long shadows through the high windows of the basement lab. Maybe it was the light that exposed the near-invisible twitch beneath Andrew’s mask, like a glitch in a hologram; something not-quite-real fighting desperately to escape. Andrew took one despairing look around the lab and at the two of them.

“I guess this is it, then.” Neil said. It was meant to be light, but the words made him slightly nauseous. It came out sounding like a challenge despite himself.

“Come with me.” Andrew said, gesturing at him. He turned and left without waiting to see if Neil would follow.

Neil followed, leaving Kevin grumbling on the sofa, heading up the winding stairs to the roof.

The air was bitterly cold in the low light of evening. They walked towards the edge of the roof in comfortable silence. Neil hadn’t planned on smoking, but he was feeling out of sorts with the unexpected pang of leaving. He lit up and took a couple of drags before holding the cigarette near his face, breathing in the steady, vaguely sickening smell of home. A moment later, Andrew plucked the cigarette from his fingers, settling it between his own lips. Neil watched him do it, then shrugged and lit another for himself. If Andrew felt like explaining himself, he would. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t.
Neil knew that by now. Andrew made his way to the edge of the roof and looked over.

“Thinking about getting rid of me by pushing me off?” Neil asked, mostly to have something to say. The easy silence felt suddenly strained.

“Six story drop.” Andrew pointed out, not looking at him. “More than enough.”

“I’d just pull you down with me.” Neil told him. Andrew turned to look at him. His face was still as always, but it was reassuring in its impassivity. Neil could tell Andrew; he could tell him the thought that was gnawing at his insides and it wouldn’t mean anything to Andrew, which meant it wasn’t dangerous.

“I don’t know how to go back.” Neil said, an admittance without pretense. He didn’t want compassion or pity, and Andrew couldn’t offer them anyway. It was a truth, of the kind Andrew seemed to swallow like the dark mouth of a cave swallows offered secrets, black and unblinking.

Neil never expected the darkness to answer back.

“Then don’t.” Andrew said. Neil blinked, his mind skittering like a wrinkled tape.

“What?”

“Stay.” Andrew said, stepping closer. Close enough now that Neil could feel the heat radiating off of his body in contrast to the cold air.

“I can’t.” Neil said.

“Why not?” Andrew breathed, and Neil – Neil couldn’t. Couldn’t tell him about his father, about his years in the darkness of Evermore’s Nest. About a voice saying Nathaniel impossibly on an old tape, wrapping a constrictor knot around his throat. He shifted the subject.

“You can’t go after the Moriyamas.” Neil said. Andrew raised a skeptical brow.

“Oh? Why not. Do tell me.” Andrew said. Neil hesitated. This was dangerous.

“You don’t… you don’t know who they are.” He said.

Andrew took a step back from him, taking a long drag. Then, to Neil’s surprise, he snorted.

“I know who they are, Neil.” Andrew said, mockingly, and Neil thought maybe he should be offended but instead he just felt overwhelmingly relieved. Andrew knew. He knew what he was getting himself into and knew himself capable of winning despite that. It didn’t lessen the danger, but it made it easier for Neil to give him a piece of the truth, a reason he couldn’t stay.

“My father worked for the Moriyamas.” Neil said, cutting out every possible detail for now, and changing things where he had to. He would figure out what was safe to fill in later. “When I was young, I lived at Evermore with Kevin and Riko, for a while. My father was – not a kind man. Neither was Tetsuji, which I guess you know. Eventually they caught my father stealing, and killed him, but my mother escaped with me and the money. She died and I’ve been on my own ever since.”
Neil took a shuddering breath and tried to calm his racing pulse. “But if the Moriyamas are wrapped up in this, I have to go.”

Andrew considered him across the cold, brittle space between their bodies.

“The way I see it.” Andrew said plainly, “if the Moriyamas are involved, you have to stay.”

“I don’t understand.” Neil said. His feet wanted to move but he didn’t let them.

“Of course you don’t.” Andrew said, infuriatingly still, his hazel eyes lit amber in the sunset, boring into Neil’s own, cementing him to the spot. “Let me explain. There is some very weird shit going down. Wymack’s asked me to help. I don’t want to, but I think I have to. And if I’m going to do this I will need Kevin Day, which means I will need you.

“I hate you, and I hate working with you, but you’re the only one who can keep him out of St. Claire’s and, frankly, the only one who speaks his freaky science language. So tell me what it would take to convince you to stay.”

Neil blinked. How could he explain any more than he already had? It wasn’t that he didn’t want to stay. It was that he couldn’t.

“I’ll make you a deal.” Andrew said, and again Neil noticed how ragged his voice sounded, how tired. There were pink spots high on his cheeks that didn’t look like they were from the cold.

“I’m listening.” Neil said warily.

“You, keep Kevin here and sane and solving this goddamn nightmare mystery.” Andrew said. “Let me deal with the Moriyamas.”

“You can’t.” Neil said, despite himself. Because Andrew knew who the Moriyamas were, but he hadn’t dealt with their cruelty firsthand. Not like Neil had. Andrew’s face twisted into something that was not a smile, but not quite anything else, either. Whatever it was, it was chilling and reassuring all at once.

“Oh, Neil. You have no idea what I’m capable of.” Andrew said. “So, do we have a deal or not?”

Still, Neil hesitated. “In the lab,” he said, “Kevin started telling me things. About the Moriyamas, their experiments. You’re right, there’s some very, very freaky shit going on out there.”

“And you want to run.” Andrew guessed.

“It’s what I do.” Neil reminded him, guiltless. “It’s kept me alive this long.” But it was a last attempt at convincing himself as much as Andrew, because Neil was so, so tired of running. The triumph of solving Aaron’s illness had been the most brilliant thing he’d felt in years. Neil Josten didn’t feel like a paper man anymore. He felt like him, a person he wanted to keep being for just a little while longer.

“If it gets too hot, I’m out.” He told Andrew. “But…can you really protect me?”

Suddenly, Andrew’s hand was curled around the open zipper of Neil’s jacket. They both glanced down at it, Andrew seeming almost surprised to find it there, white-knuckled around the metal and nylon.

When Andrew looked back up, his expression was smooth and serious again. The low lighting cast half his face in orange light, the other half in shadow but for the cherry glow of his cigarette. Neil thought wildly of his mother’s stories of crossroads devils, of half-dead things who would buy your
soul in exchange for whatever you were desperate enough to sell it for.

“I don’t make promises I don’t intend to keep.” Andrew said, with such finality you couldn’t help but believe him, and Neil suddenly wondered which one of them was supposed to be the demon.

Neil took a deep breath of cigarette smoke and Boston air, freedom and damnation all in one breath, and he wasn’t even sure which was which.

He said “I’ll stay.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! That concludes Part 1 of this story, "AutoPilot." Part 2, "After Midnight" will continue in this same fic, and I really hope you stay tuned because I'm really enjoying writing it :)

<3 yell at me on tumblr @ a-case-for-wonder

Sneak Peak for Part 2:

"Andrew was realizing he hadn’t really stopped to consider the logistics of protecting Kevin Day and Neil Josten from the Moriyamas. First of all, if he was going to protect them, he needed to know just what kind of threats were likely to be coming. Kevin’s history seemed to be an open book, but Neil was frustratingly enigmatic. Which was why it was fortunate that whenever they went out, he had taken to leaving his duffel bag in Andrew’s spare wheel well."
Part 2, Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Start of Part 2: "Just Around Midnight," based on Fringe S1E18 "Midnight"

Andrew's POV

Chapter Notes

no major warnings for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 2: Just Around Midnight

Chapter 1: Problem Permanence

Andrew watched Neil and Kevin retreat behind the swinging glass doors of St. Claire’s Psychiatric Hospital and considered how the fuck he had gotten here. A week ago, he had…well, he’d had a life. Not a normal one, maybe. Not one he loved, though that was never something he had asked for. But he had a job that was predictable where it could be and interesting where it counted. He had a family who never stopped nagging him, a psychiatrist who actually helped him, work associates he didn’t always actively want to stab, and a pretty bartender to maybe fuck on weekends. Not a great life, but a surprisingly manageable one.

Now this. Aaron had spent just a few days in the hospital in Boston before moving back to DC to complete his recovery. Andrew had been forced into a few days of mandatory rest after the case was squared away, but now he was back. Which meant adjusting to the fact that certified mad scientist Kevin Day and his mysterious protégé Neil Josten were now more or less permanent fixtures in his life.

The truth of it was, Andrew didn’t regret the deals he had made to keep Aaron alive. He recognized he would have done just about anything to save him, and was prepared to repay whatever debts he accrued in the process.

He owed Wymack, at least, he figured. For the business with securing Day, the lab, and the extraordinarily expensive equipment for it. For allowing Josten along. For not asking too many tough questions about the badly-covered gaps in his reports. Andrew hadn’t made a deal with Wymack, not officially, but that didn’t mean he was not aware of the balance of their relationship. Neither was Wymack, apparently. He’d reached out to Aaron’s superiors in DC to ensure he would get full salary for whatever the length of his recovery, and that his career track wouldn’t be penalized for his absence.

If Wymack had left two rather expensive bottles of whiskey on Andrew’s desk, a sticky note on one that said this one’s not for you, that was Wymack’s business. And well, if Andrew had kept both, but
stuck the note to an equally pricey bottle of rum before giving it to Aaron, that was his.

But Andrew was realizing he hadn’t really stopped to consider the logistics of protecting Day and Josten from the Moriyamas. First of all, if he was going to protect them, he needed to know just what kind of threats were likely to be coming. Kevin’s history seemed to be an open book, but Neil was frustratingly enigmatic. Which was why it was fortunate that whenever they went out, he had taken to leaving his duffel bag in Andrew’s spare wheel well.

Neil and Kevin were inside St. Claire’s finalizing the paperwork to have Kevin remanded into Neil’s care. It was bound to take a while, but Andrew didn’t suspect his presence would help the process along at all, so he’d told them he would go and grab food and coffee and wait for them in the car.

He punched in a to-go order on his phone for the coffee shop down the road, and under ‘special requests’ promised double the price if they would deliver to his car. Order confirmed, he got out and opened the trunk of the Maserati, pried open the wheel well, and took out the unassuming black duffel tucked inside.

It was an old, ratty thing, like all of Neil’s possessions seemed to be. Clearly it was meant to be inconspicuous. (Though how Neil expected to go unnoticed with a face like that…well, Andrew had clocked him for an idiot from the start. No surprise there, he guessed.) At any rate, the bag’s appearance only made Andrew more curious when he saw how protective Neil was of the thing. Like it held the only things that mattered in Neil’s entire life. Andrew undid the zipper, and his stomach twisted uneasily as he got a look inside.

It was packed meticulously, every item probably in the same place it had been when Neil had started packing this bag years ago. There were three pairs of pants and seven shirts, perfectly folded and smoothed. Andrew memorized the layout and lifted them aside, along with the tightly rolled up socks and underwear – eleven pairs each – underneath. There was a small case with toilet sundries that he set aside for separate perusal, but he didn’t expect to find anything of interest there. Andrew was beginning to get frustrated – two weeks worth of ratty clothes and a bag of toiletries? That was what Neil clutched to his chest like it was his child? – when he spotted the slim black binder.

Andrew pulled the binder out gingerly, flipped it open, and felt everything in him go on high alert. Inside were pages of newspaper clippings, torn-out magazine pages, and printed out news stories. All pertained to Kevin Day and Riko Moriyama, detailing their rise to scientific stardom. It could have been innocent hero-worship, but Andrew knew better. He worked for the FBI – he knew a stalker notebook when he saw one. He was about half a second from running into St. Claire’s and detaining Neil immediately, charging him with anything he thought might stick to keep Kevin from being signed away to him, and then he took a closer look at the dates.

They oldest ones were nearly thirteen years old, which was odd because hadn’t Neil been living at Evermore then? They stretched on at fairly regular intervals from there, but the newest ones were over five years old. Which was the time Neil told Andrew he had started running. Warily, Andrew flipped through them, and it took only a moment to realize this binder wasn’t just about the pages – it was about what was between them.

What was between them was money. A lot of it. Close to a quarter million in large bills and bank notes, by Andrew’s estimation. Which was alarming in and of itself, but there was more. There was a sheet on indecipherable numbers Andrew could tell were code. He snapped a quick picture of the page. Nicky was excellent with code work, Andrew would see if he would take a look at it later. There were also several packets of cheap dark brown hair dye, and a large supply of contact lenses.

Andrew squinted at the contacts. He had noticed that there was something strange about Neil’s eyes, other than the fact that he was often rubbing at them. Apparently this was it. And they weren’t just
any lenses, they were colored, brown. And according to the packaging they had a prescription strength of 0.0, which meant Neil was only wearing them for the color. Neil wore clothes that made him look just this side of homeless, so there was no way this was vanity. He was hiding himself. Andrew wondered what his eyes looked like underneath, what could possibly be so striking about them he would keep them covered every waking moment.

Anger churned in Andrew’s gut. Neil – whoever he was – would pay for this. Andrew didn’t take kindly to being deceived.

But.

Andrew had put Aaron’s life in Neil’s hands, and Neil had delivered. Andrew wasn’t sure what that meant, but he decided perhaps he could give Neil one chance to explain himself before murdering him outright. Recalling the items’ previous arrangement to mind, Andrew swiftly re-packed the bag and tucked it back in the wheel well.

A harried-looking waitress from the coffee shop arrived with his order a moment later, and Andrew gave her double as promised. She was gone moments before Kevin reemerged, Neil at his heels. Andrew did his best not to look at Neil any more than usual as he approached, to not try and see what might be beneath the contacts and hair dye, the curated inconspicuousness of his ratty jeans and thick, loose shirts. Andrew plunked the tray of food and drinks into Neil’s lap as he climbed into the passenger seat and let him sort out the order as Andrew got them on the road.

“We are going out tonight.” Andrew announced when they had been on the road for several minutes. Kevin sounded like he choked around a bite of sandwich. Neil just stared at him, bemused.

“I didn’t think you got to dictate our schedules outside of work.” Said Neil, frowning.

“Social contracts aren’t really your strong suit, Josten, don’t give yourself a headache.” Andrew said lazily, grabbing his coffee off the tray and taking a sip. “Think of it as an introduction to your new and thrilling life as an official consultant to the FBI.” For some reason, that seemed to make Neil look a little green. Andrew pulled up in front of their hotel and tapped his hand in a show of impatience.

“Shoo. I’ll be back at nine.” he told them. “We’re going to a club I know, try to dress in something that won’t embarrass me.” He tapped his fingers on the wheel as they scrambled out of the car. Neil shot him an odd look over his shoulder once he had grabbed his bag.

“This doesn’t seem like a good idea.” Neil said seriously.

“Noted.” Andrew said. “Don’t care.” He rolled up his window and drove off before Neil had any more chances to complain.

Taking Neil and Kevin to Eden’s was a necessary thing. Andrew had done it with co-workers before, with varying degrees of success. each trip was a little different, and not all had involved what he had in mind for tonight. Tonight’s venture would be riskier than usual, but more than necessary following what Andrew had found in Neil’s bag, so to Eden’s they would go.

First, though, he would have to find something for Neil-Fashion-Disaster-Josten to wear. Kevin, surprisingly, Andrew didn’t think he needed to worry about. He’d been a high-profile Raven, after all, as familiar with Tetsuji’s high society dinners as his basement labs. Nicky had taken him shopping earlier in the week and he’d returned with a slim, neutral wardrobe, serious bordering on severe. He wouldn’t look like a regular at Eden’s, but he wouldn’t look like fresh meat either. And besides, Andrew didn’t think it would be worth the effort of talking him into something bolder.
Neil, however. Neil was a challenge. Always hiding himself behind washed-out oversized shirts and jeans with ratty hems from walking all over them. Honestly, Andrew thought, as he rifled through a rack of slim black pants, choosing a pair with minimal rips and tears, he was doing this for Neil’s own safety. Eden’s was a bit of a lion’s den by design, he couldn’t drag Neil there looking like a poorly-dressed fawn. He wanted Neil honest, not dead. At least for now.

“Hello, anybody home?” Nicky called as they knocked on the door to Neil and Kevin’s hotel room later that night. Kevin answered the door and Nicky gave a low whistle. “Your mad scientist cleans up nice, Andrew.”

Kevin glared at them in response, but Nicky wasn’t entirely wrong. Kevin had managed to dress himself half presentably, in dark tan pants, a severely cut black button down, and some kind of short boot. Riko must not have been able to get into his bank accounts during his committal, because his brand taste was clearly expensive. He would have looked a bit like a rich investment banker, but the tattoo on his cheek gave an edge to everything about him. It would do.

Then Neil emerged from the bathroom and Nicky actually laughed.

“Oh, sweetie. Thank god we brought you something.” Nicky said, and Andrew had to agree, although he had known this was coming. Neil had…tried, he supposed. He was wearing his darkest, least-torn jeans and a dark grey shirt that was exactly as loose and faded as all his others. His badly cut hair was wet from a shower, and it looked like he’d at least attempted to comb it.

But none of that was what caught Andrew’s eye. He was looking at Neil’s face, and what he saw there was venom. Was pure, unhidden violence. Huh. Maybe Andrew hadn’t put his things back so carefully after all. He idly wondered what he had missed.

“Get out, Nicky. You too, Kevin.” Neil said, eyes never leaving Andrew.

“Andrew, what the fuck did you do?” Nicky whispered in fast German, probably forgetting that Neil could understand him perfectly well.

“It’s nothing. Just give us a minute. Take Day with you.” Andrew responded in English. He didn’t look at Nicky either, refusing to take his eyes off Neil in case he tried something. Andrew was pretty sure he was faster with a knife, but he knew Neil had a gun somewhere and had yet to find out if he actually knew how to use the thing.

Nicky shot them another nervous look before saying “All right, Kevin. Let’s, uh, take a walk, shall we?” and hustling a very surly looking Day out of the room.

The door clicked shut behind Nicky, and Andrew and Neil were left alone in deadly silence.

“Game’s up Josten. Let’s see.” Andrew said, almost a whisper, gesturing towards his face. Neil crossed the room in three long strides, into Andrew’s space, barely a foot between them. Foolish, foolish, didn’t he know how many knives Andrew kept on him?


“This may surprise you, but I hear that a lot. You will have to be more specific.” Andrew said dryly.

“How dare you go through my things?” Neil nearly hissed the words. Andrew regarded him coolly.

“Was I wrong to? Wait, wait. Pause right there, Neil.” Disregarding his own discomfort, Andrew pressed closer to Neil. He was a faster draw, surely. He grabbed Neil’s face in a bruising grip and forced his face down at himself. “We will settle this tonight, understand? Unless you want me
shouting your precious secrets so anyone in this flimsy hotel hallway can hear them. Now, I don’t have time to deal with your sad identity issues. I asked nicely once, and I won’t do it again.” He tapped one lazy finger against Neil’s cheekbone, to make sure he got the message.

Neil stared at him a long moment, so long Andrew almost thought he was going to refuse. He was, oddly, shaking. He didn’t seem the type to get shaky about anger. Neil’s fury could run almost as cold as Andrew’s own – that Andrew had seen. This was something else, an internal war that Andrew wasn’t privy to the sides of. Finally, Neil reached up with trembling hands and plucked the contacts from his eyes.

Oh.

Oh that was something, wasn’t it? It certainly started to explain why Neil went through so much trouble to hide his eyes, when they looked like that. Like a summer sky cut through with ice. Like a perfect shot of something that would surely kill you. They were certainly distinctive.

“As I suspected. A lie from head to foot. What the fuck are you doing on my team, Neil Josten?”

“Same thing you are.” Neil answered, blue eyes burning with an unnatural honesty. “The only thing I can.”

Interesting. He actually sounded like he believed that made any fucking sense at all.

“That’s a terrible answer.” Andrew informed him, letting him go. “But no matter. I’ll get the rest later. You’re still coming out with us, and leave the eyes, if you don’t mind.”

In answer, Neil shoved past him and went to let Kevin and Nicky back in. They both startled when they saw the change, though Kevin had obviously known.

“Baby blues, huh?” Said Nicky with a nervous chuckle, then seemed to recover himself. “As if you needed to be more of a looker. It’s unfair, honestly. Well, it’ll go well with the black anyway.” Neil turned to him suspiciously.

“What black?”

Chapter End Notes

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Up Next:

Neil tried to focus on Andrew’s face but it kept slipping out of focus.

“Leaving so soon?” Andrew asked.
Part 2, Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Neil's POV

Chapter Notes

This chapter brings us the Eden’s Scene (TM), aka basically what inspired this whole dang AU to begin with. Warnings for everything that scene entails, plus graphic descriptions of a dead body.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 2: Nights Out, Lights Out

“I have money, you know. I can buy my own clothes.” Neil said, surly, when they were in the car. The pants were too tight. The shirt was weird. At least the boots were practical, in an aggressive sort of way. He imagined they would do a good amount of damage to someone’s face. Andrew’s, maybe.

“I know.” Andrew said, not bothering to look over his shoulder. Right, Andrew knew Neil had money, and now Neil knew it. “I just don’t trust your fashion sense more than I trust anything else about you.”

Neil was furious. Furious at Andrew for having the gall to paw through his things like he had earned the right to know anything about him. Furious at himself for making it so easy, leaving his most important possessions right there in Andrew’s car. Furious for allowing himself to be lulled into a sense of security by the strength with which Andrew held his ground; his own stupid assumption that that strength wouldn’t turn against him. But perhaps he was most furious that there was a part of him that felt like something like relief; somehow Andrew figuring out a few of his secrets had given Neil a brief, wild urge to tell him everything, just to see what he would do. But that definitely wasn’t one of his better instincts talking, so he held it desperately in check.

Neil tugged nervously at the top, a snug black sweatshirt with a high collar, wide sleeves, and an off-center zipper that looked like silver teeth. Nicky turned back from the passenger seat and offered him a friendly pat on the knee and a shark-like grin.

“You look ready to party.” Nicky

“My specialty.” Neil deadpanned, but they had arrived at Eden’s Twilight, their destination.

Neil was a bit confused when they skipped the line and were waved straight inside after their hands were stamped with some kind of UV ink, until Nicky explained that he, Andrew, and Aaron had worked here while they were in college. They waded into the flashing black embrace of thudding bass and anonymous black-wrapped bodies. Neil swallowed uncomfortably. It was difficult to make
out a face that wasn’t right in front of you, and it was far too public and crowded of a place to make it worth carrying a gun.

Andrew shoved Nicky and Kevin off to find a table, grabbing Neil by the edge of his sleeve, and headed toward the bar, where there was a blessed few inches of breathing room. A bartender waved them over in apparent recognition. Neil figured he and the cousins must have worked together, but he was still surprised anyone could greet Andrew with that kind of easy cheer.

“Fresh meat?” The bartender asked. Neil was pretty sure he winked.

“Drinks, Roland.” said Andrew, so at least Neil knew the man’s name now. Andrew tossed an overly generous and preemptive tip across the bar that Roland snatched up immediately. Neil frowned. Something was off.

“How many in your party?” Roland inquired.

“Four.” Andrew told him.

“I don’t drink.” Neil said firmly, and wondered if it would matter. Andrew looked at him for a moment, oddly piercing, then turned back to Roland with a silent shrug.

“Drinks for three and a coke, coming up.” Roland said easily, and moments later was pushing a tray across the bar that seemed to have far too many glasses on it for three people. Did Kevin even drink? And what had that tip been about?

Neil found out a moment later, back at the table, when Andrew lifted up the stack of napkins on the tray to reveal several packets of fine, yellowish powder, which Andrew and Nicky immediately upended into their mouths. Neil startled.

“You have got to be fucking with me. What is that?” He asked. Nicky wagged a packet at him.

“Cracker dust. Nothing strong, just a nice kick for the weekend. Used to pick it up at Sweetie’s back in the day, but we’ve had to get a bit more discreet.” Nicky explained. “There’s plenty to go around if you’re interested.”

Neil just shook his head, but Kevin had picked up a packet and was eyeing it curiously.

“Kevin you can’t be serious.” he said, but Kevin just shrugged.

“I’ve taken homemade acid, Neil.” he said seriously. “I hardly think this will be anything I can’t handle.”

“Yeah, trust the guy who’s made homemade acid.” said Nicky with a small snort. Neil had noticed that despite their rocky start, he and Kevin were developing an uneasy sort of camaraderie.

“Whatever.” Neil said reaching for his soda.

“Wait, shots before drinks!” Nicky called suddenly, passing a shot glass of soda Neil’s way and picking up one of liquor for himself. Kevin and Andrew followed suit. Nicky held out his shot glass like a toast. “To the new team!” he said cheerily, and drank.

Neil smelled the sickly sweet scent of something not right a second before the glass reached his mouth, but it was too late. Andrew’s elbow jostled his up, tossing the shot into his mouth, and his body was swallowing before he could think. He gagged around the taste, but it did nothing to stop the sudden onset of wooziness, nor the way the world started to tilt. Neil clenched his hands into
fists, focusing in the sensation, and breathed slowly and deliberately. Somewhere off to his left, Nicky was asking him something, and then Neil registered Andrew’s name, accusation all through Nicky’s tone. Andrew’s voice came back, dismissive and cold. A moment later, Nicky was hauling Kevin – already a drink in addition to the dust, had he always been a drinker? – upright and off toward the dance floor.

To Neil’s right, Andrew was watching him, cool and calculating as he sipped idly at his drink.

“Nicky’s a bit offended by the crudeness of my methods, but he should have known this was coming. Give it a few minutes, it hasn’t even hit yet.” Andrew advised him as the room got fuzzier around the edges. “Then we’ll talk.”

“Fuck you.” Neil spat as clearly as he could, but even those simple words were already slurring. Andrew gave him an unimpressed look and that same infuriating salute as he walked away toward the bar. Suddenly there was a hand on his other arm, a loud voice shouting laughter unintelligibly in his ear, and Neil felt Nicky drag him towards the dance floor.

The press of bodies would have been uncomfortable to Neil if he was sober. High, he clung to control with both hands, focused on the stickiness of the floor beneath his feet, the nauseating smell of sweat all around him. The lights were low but for a mess of brightly colored spots and strobes that made everything look like it was moving in slow motion. Or maybe that was the dust. Neil could feel it, churning in his gut, but it was like the fervor in his brain and the fear in his body refused to connect with each other. The heavy electronic beat of the baseline was the loudest thing he had ever felt, pulsing into his bones, making it hard to breathe. He couldn’t make out bodies or faces in the all-black-dressed crowd. Time meant nothing. Space was getting difficult to differentiate. All the music was a uniform assault on his senses.

Neil had fought off Nicky’s grip almost immediately, but Kevin found him again in the crowd, looming over him until Neil registered his face, then grabbing onto his arm with a roll of his eyes that said exactly what he thought of Neil’s tolerance. So far Neil had staved off complete panic as the drugs worked their way deeper into his system, but in that moment Kevin’s familiar seriousness had been replaced with an unreadable drunken glaze, and his presence wasn’t anything like safety. Neil shook him off too and began stumbling through the crowd for an exit.

Another figure pressed against him, warm and heavy.

“Hey stranger.” She purred, running a finger under his jaw. “Wanna get out of here?” Neil shoved roughly past her, ignoring the uncomfortable after-burn of where her finger had touched him. He really needed to leave.

He was wondering fuzzily how much longer he could keep his footing for when a firm hand was hauling him out of the sweating choke of the crowd. It was almost a relief until he realized it was Andrew, and then he was up against a wall, a hand at his throat, his legs numb and useless beneath him.

Neil tried to focus on Andrew’s face but it kept slipping out of focus.

“Leaving so soon?” Andrew asked. Neil knew his face was twisting, but he couldn’t feel it.

“I hate you.”

“Again, your opinion is irrelevant.”

“I’ll kill you.” Neil meant it too. He hadn’t ever killed anyone – well, anyone who wasn’t actively
trying to kill him back, but he was pretty sure this counted and anyway, he was past caring. All his instincts were screaming shoot and then RUN but he didn’t have his gun.

“You can try. Others have, and I don’t think they would recommend it.” Andrew told him. “Now give me one good reason I should let you stay on my team instead of sticking a knife in you where you stand.”

“I didn’t want to be on your fucking team in the first place.” Neil slurred. “Why do you even care?” Words were getting difficult, they came out with his breath. If it weren’t for Andrew’s hand hot around his throat, Neil wasn’t entirely sure he would still be standing. Andrew tilted his head dangerously, his hand turning Neil’s the opposite way, a thumb pressing under his jawline, grinding the back of his head against the wall.

“I don’t. But Riko Moriyama is up to something, Kevin Day is wrapped up in it, and suddenly you fall right into my lap, exactly the person I need. But all I really know about you is that your whole appearance is a lie and you’ve got a stalker binder full of cash you keep next to your gun.”

Neil blinked from within Andrew’s grasp as the pieces fell into place.

“You think I’m, what, some kind of spy for Riko? Really?” He asked, bewildered and furious at once. “I’m in as much danger as Kevin from that psycho.”

“Give me one reason I should believe you” Andrew said. “If you’re in so much danger, what the fuck are you doing here? I’ll give you five minutes to think about your answer. When I get back, you’d better have one.”

Then the hand was gone and Neil’s vision filled with bare and black-clad legs. He struggled to his feet, hands scrabbling hard at the dirty wall behind him.

Neil couldn’t be there when Andrew got back. He couldn’t. But the world had turned into a sickening blur. An arm was around his shoulders, keeping him upright, and Neil’s body leaned into the weight before his brain could tell him to resist. There was bright, forced laughter in his ear. Every stitch of Neil’s clothing crawled against his skin. His head swam and his stomach cramped. He had to get out of here now. He threw Nicky off again; his body was moving, acting for him before his mind could fully process what it planned on doing. The rest of the night was a haze of suffocating bass and shattered light.

The world came back into focus the next morning on an unfamiliar couch, though it might as well have been a stretch of asphalt for all the comfort it offered. Neil felt distinctly like he’d been run over by a steamroller. His head was pounding, and it felt like there were bruises all over his body. He reached one hand up gingerly to his face. A back eye and a swollen cheekbone, but his nose didn’t feel broken. He sat up with some effort and looked around. The only one in the room was Kevin – a good choice. He was the only person Neil didn’t actively feel like murdering right now.

“You can relax, you didn’t tell Minyard any of your secrets. You picked a fight with some guy in leather twice your size before he could get anything out of you.” Kevin told him before he could ask. Well. That explained the bruises anyway. Kevin tossed him a bottle of Gatorade and Neil fumbled the catch against his chest. “What the hell was that all about anyway?”

“He got himself knocked out on purpose. So that he wouldn’t spill any of his secrets.” A voice drawled from the doorway. Neil whipped his head around and regretted it immediately as the throbbing kicked up a notch. Andrew was leaning against the doorway, changed into dark sweats, his feet barefoot against the wooden floor. Kevin looked at Neil with renewed interest.
“Clever.” he admitted.

“Stupid.” Andrew corrected. Neil unscrewed the Gatorade and began drinking, ignoring the queasy slosh of it in his stomach.

“Where are we?” he asked, right as Nicky poked his head in to join them.

“Cambridge, our old house.” Nicky explained. “Andrew, Aaron and I lived here while they were in high school, and then through college. None of us live here now, though – we kind of wanted our own spaces, you know? Plus Aaron’s moved to Washington. I rent it out when I can, to help cover the taxes, but it hasn’t had anyone in it lately. Andrew and I crash here sometimes if we go out at night, since it’s closer to downtown than either of our apartments.”

Neil took a moment to get a better look at his surroundings. It was a bit of a run down place, clearly, but it was a softer kind of worn than the abandoned apartments and empty warehouses Neil had occasionally inhabited. It smelled like dust and bacon and eggs from the kitchen. There were big old windows that let in a lot of light, peeling wallpaper, a scattering of lumpy mismatched furniture, and worn wooden floors running through the place.

“How did you afford a house in Cambridge?” Neil couldn’t help asking. Nicky looked a bit sheepish, but Andrew rolled his eyes.

“It had recently been the scene of a triple homicide.” Andrew told him. If he had been expecting a recoil, he was disappointed, though his face betrayed nothing. Actually, it made a lot of sense to Neil.

“Clever.” he said.

The mild praise didn’t mean he felt any less like crawling out of his skin at being here. He couldn’t remember most of their night out before and wasn’t sure he could trust Kevin’s assertion that he hadn’t given anything up. God, being Neil Josten had been a terrible idea. He needed to get back to the hotel and check his bag, he needed his gun on him.

“Bathroom?” he asked Nicky. “I need to shower.” he gestured down at his clothes, which stank of sweat, spilled drinks, and maybe blood. Nicky wrinkled his nose in agreement and pointed up the stairs. Neil was halfway up when Nicky called after him.

“Hey, let us know if we need to take you to the doctor or something about those bruises. You didn’t bleed on the car seats but you about took Kevin’s head off when he tried to get a look at you to see if you had any injuries.”

Neil froze on the stairs, staring back at Kevin. Had they gotten his shirt off? Had they seen? His hand flew to his zipper, but Kevin was shaking his head.

“I don’t know how you had that much fight still in you, but you didn’t let me check anything other than your face.” he said. “Which was stupid, and if you bled out internally in the night it would have been entirely your fault.”

“Thanks.” Neil said sarcastically. He could feel Andrew’s gaze on him, cool but curious. “I’ll let you know if I discover I’m dying.”

“Or don’t.” Andrew offered, but tossed a bundle of what turned out to be clothes at him. Neil ignored him, but took the offered clothes and made his way up the stairs.

The bathroom was as old and clean-but-dingy as the rest of the house, but the feeling of the hot spray
on his bruises was a welcome relief. He did take a moment to assess his injuries, but there was nothing actively bleeding, and even the worst of the bruising wasn’t swelling, so internal bleeds seemed unlikely.

When Neil finally felt human again, he dried off and got dressed without turning off the spray. The slightly short pants and too-wide shoulders of the shirt told him the clothes were Andrew’s. Or maybe Aaron’s, he supposed, if they still kept things at the house. Neil eyed the small window, considering. It was unfortunate that the bathroom was on the second floor; it would be a drop he wouldn’t relish, especially in his condition. But there was dirt and grass below it, not concrete, so as long as he controlled his fall he wouldn’t break anything. Unfortunately, the window was old and appeared to have been painted shut.

Neil was just about to grab the bottom and try when there was a sharp knock on the door.

“Stop trying to figure out if you can escape through the window and come downstairs.” Came Andrew’s voice through the door. “Wymack called. We have a case.”

Unnerved but unable to think up a better solution, Neil complied, but he slipped a spare pair of contacts from his pocket into his eyes. He hoped that at least on the job, Andrew wouldn’t be able to pull any tricks.

The car ride to the scene might have been awkward if either Neil or Kevin had cared to feel anything but wretchedly hung-over. As it was, Andrew turned the radio on too loud and Neil tried to ignore the dull ache in his head. Two bottles of Gatorade, a plate of eggs and bacon, and a handful of aspirin still hadn’t been able to chase it away by the time they pulled into the warehouse district of Cambridge. Wymack crossed his arms as he took them in at the scene.

“Minyard, I know your reputation, but you asked to keep these wretches. I assumed that meant you wouldn’t actively try to kill them.” Wymack said. Andrew just shrugged.

“You know what happens when you assume, Chief.” He said. Wymack’s expression darkened, and he turned on Neil.

“You. If this asshole gets up to anything I don’t expect you to just take it. You’re a member of this team now and I expect you to act like it.”

Neil fought against the instinct to step back, nearly losing at the last second. Wymack didn’t miss the just-aborted movement, and his expression softened a fraction. He stepped back under the pretense of getting a better look at all of them, and Neil was grateful for the space even if he didn’t particularly like his weaknesses being found out. Wymack turned to Kevin.

“That goes for you too, Day. It took a lot of paperwork to spring you from the bin, kid. I expect you to make it worth my time.”

Kevin looked startled to be being addressed; he’d been watching Wymack with a badly-concealed intensity that Neil couldn’t parse.

“Uh, yes, Chief.” Kevin managed, and Neil nodded along. Wymack just rolled his eyes.

“Okay. Well first things first.” Wymack said. He reached into his pocket, pulled something out, and threw it at Neil, who just managed to catch it—it was a metal ring, and on it a single silver key.

Neil’s breath caught in his throat.

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“For the lab.” Wymack explained. “Consider it motivation. If you prove yourself trustworthy on this case, we’ll be considering you and Day a permanent arrangement, at least for the time being. That
means letting you be in the lab without a babysitter, so you’ll need to be able to let yourselves in.”

“Thank you.” Neil managed, clutching the key tightly in his hand, unsure what else to say. Luckily, he was saved by Renee arriving on the scene.

“Morning, Walker.” Wymack greeted her, and she responded with a smile and a small nod. “Okay. Welcome to your first official case as Foxes. It’s a weird one, obviously, so buckle up.”

“Foxes?” Nicky piped up.

“Right, forgot to tell you.” Wymack said. “You’ll get the official paperwork soon, but you work for a separate division of the Bureau now. Fringe and Other Xeno-Experimental Sciences Division. F.O.X.E.S.”

“Cute.” Said Andrew dryly.

“No one asked you.” Wymack reminded him.

“I like it.” Renee said with a small smile, because of course she did. “It’s got a ring to it, don’t you think?” She asked, for some reason looking at Neil when she said it. “Foxes Division.”

Neil didn’t have an answer for that. As far as he was concerned, Wymack could call them whatever he liked. It didn’t make this whole venture any more or less dangerous or stupid. Luckily, he didn’t have to answer, as Wymack had already turned and started leading them to the scene.

“Issues.” Andrew murmured as he brushed past Neil, tapping a finger lightly against his fist – Neil realized his was still clutching at the key, white-knuckled. He stuffed the thing into his pants pocket and followed after the others.

“Deceased’s name is Bob Dutton, insurance salesman.” Wymack said to them as they walked. “Wife reported him missing last night, says he hadn’t been home since Wednesday.”

“It’s Saturday.” Nicky pointed out. “What took her so long?”

“You’ll have to ask her.” Wymack said. “You and Walker are on interview duty as soon as we get back. Anyway, body was found this morning by some poor suckers in waste management. They called the local cops, and the local cops called me.”

Neil almost asked what had made the cops call Wymack so immediately, but then they rounded the corner and the question died in his throat.

“He isn’t dressed like an insurance salesman.” Andrew commented.

“No shit, Minyard.” Wymack said.

He was right. Neil didn’t know a lot about insurance salesman, but he knew they didn’t typically wear that much leather. Or that much jewelry. Neil didn’t say anything because it was so extraordinarily obvious, but he thought that the outfit started to explain why Mrs. Dutton had taken two days to report her husband missing. Clearly, he’d been spending some nights away lately. Whether she was aware of just what he was up to or living in denial was the only question.

Unfortunately, the outfit wasn’t the most distinctive thing about Bob Dutton, or his body. That lay in the answer to why the police had immediately called Wymack to the scene, which was that his head was nearly detached from the rest of him. The top of Dutton’s spinal column was a splintered mess of bone shards, the surrounding flesh ripped and torn haphazardly. The edges of the wound looked
disturbingly like bite marks.

There was a small gagging sound behind him, and Neil turned to look at his companions. The sound had been Nicky – he looked distinctly queasy. Renee had taken out a notebook and was calmly jotting down notes. Andrew was eyeing the corpse like a cat, but he had one hand on the back of his own neck, fingers tapping idly as though imagining the wound in his own flesh.

Kevin walked briskly over to the body, crouching down and leaning what should have been far too close to a decomposing corpse for someone still fighting off a hangover. Neil desperately hoped he didn’t vomit on the body – they’d had to pull over once in the car – but apparently this smell, of all things, didn’t bother Kevin. Kevin pulled a magnifying slide from his pocket and peered through it at the wounds. When he stood he was frowning, but there was a glint in his eye that anyone would have called excitement.

“Human.” He announced.

“Excuse me?” Wymack said, staring. There was a determined, grim smile threatening to show at the corner of Kevin’s mouth.

“Get this body back to my lab.” Kevin said. “The bite marks are human.”

Neil groaned. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

Chapter End Notes

So after some thought I'm going to be making this one fic with parts instead of a series, I think it will be less confusing that way. With that in mind, I'll be re-titling the piece from "Turning off AutoPilot" to just "FOXES Division" so watch out for that title in the future!!

Thanks for reading!
find me on Tumblr @ a-case-for-wonder

Up Next:

“Do you want me to bring my gun?” Neil asked quietly as they got out of the car, the first voluntary thing he had said to Andrew all day.
“You have a gun?!” Kevin hissed violently from the back seat. Neil gave him a flat look that was somehow an eye roll despite not actually being one.
“Kevin.”
Chapter Summary

Andrew's POV

Chapter Notes

warnings for brief gore/violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3: Lubov Pharmaceuticals

The basement lab. Andrew supposed that was another thing he would have to add to the list of things-now-part-of-his-life. At least the weird-looking body on Kevin’s slab was a stranger this time. And considering the injuries, it was thankfully quite dead.

He’d swiped a cushion off the ugly couch and dragged it up to the emergency exit door, cracked the window, and lit a cigarette. He was here because Kevin and Neil’s rather precarious position with the Bureau required they still be supervised for the time being, and also because there wasn’t much else for him to do. They hadn’t been able to find Dutton’s car yet. Renee and Nicky would talk with Dutton’s wife and his associates, but there was nothing in his records they didn’t already know. Sure, he had been spending more money on weekends than most dumpy middle class salesman were wont to do, but they had already figured that part out from the outfit, and it hadn’t gotten them anywhere.

Stepping out on your wife wasn’t an unlikely way to wind up dead, true, but it didn’t seem like the kind of thing that would bring about…whatever it was that had killed Dutton.

The stairs vibrated beneath Andrew’s feet and he glanced down to see Renee making her way up to him. She stopped a few steps down and sat, surveying the room, maybe trying to see it as he was. Below them, Neil was fussing over a stack of glass slides and a monstrous piece of equipment that looked more like an ancient computer than a microscope. According to Neil, who had accepted the insult to his precious equipment with grace earlier, that was because it was somewhere between the two. He was hunched over it now, fingers twitching precisely at knobs and keys, eyes regretfully brown again and squinting at the many tiny screens.

Kevin, for his part, had put on a pair of over-ear headphones that did nothing to stop the tinny echoing of over-loud classical music from reaching all the way to Andrew’s perch, and hadn’t stopped poking at the body since it had arrived. At some point he’d cut most of Dutton’s back right open and started taking apart the spine with a particularly grotesque fervor.

“So this is the new home base, huh?” Renee observed. Andrew took a drag on his cigarette and blew the stream of smoke neatly out the open window.

“Something like that. What do you think?” Renee took a moment to glance around the room again.
“Good stronghold for the zombie apocalypse.” She said at last. “Small windows, stone walls. The ceiling would probably hold even if the building collapsed above us.”

“Minimal points of entry. Easy to get trapped underground with no access to resources.” Andrew pointed out.

It was a running, well, not a joke exactly, between him and Renee, making their plans for the apocalypse. It had started on one of their first cases together, an End of the World cult they suspected was starving its members – including children – based on the conviction that the demons who would soon walk the earth would not want to eat them if they were “pure.” Back then, Andrew had thought Renee was nothing more than a do-gooder sure to be in over her head soon. By the time they had broken down the doors to the compound and hauled out the survivors, he’d watched her handle battering rams and frightened children with equal grace, and had gained a grudging respect for her tenacity.

The sparring hadn’t come until later, but they’d got to talking then, about the end of the world. It was a conversation they still fell back on from time to time. It was easy, like picking up an old book right where you left off. It had also allowed them to open up to each other, bit by bit. To share tidbits about their pasts and presents in and around weapon preferences and the pros and cons of the higher ground.

“You wouldn’t get trapped.” Renee said. “There are steam tunnels that run all through this campus. All through Boston. I’m sure there’s a vent in the building somewhere.”

“Good to know.” Andrew said. They sat in companionable silence for a while before Renee felt compelled to speak again.

“And how are Kevin and Neil settling?” She asked sweetly.

“Like a cracked foundation.” Andrew muttered. Kevin was abrasive; arrogant and needy by turns, but Andrew had expected that and could bear it. Neil was more of a problem. They hadn’t spoken since Eden’s, but Andrew could feel himself being watched. He didn’t regret what he had done, but now he was stuck with a Neil Josten who was even surlier than before, which was saying something, honestly. Well, they were going to have to work together, like it or not. Neil would see that what Andrew had done was only necessary. He would have to.

“Neil will come around.” Renee said, too knowing to the last. “He’s smarter than you give him credit for,” here she leaned back and whispered conspiratorially “and rather handsome too, don’t you think?” Andrew narrowed his eyes at her.

“Keep your useless do-gooder thoughts to yourself, Walker.” he advised, but his words were only met with a gentle laugh.

Andrew distracted himself by turning his attention back to the lab below. Nicky was leaning toward the body like he would rather be doing anything else, snapping pictures for the case file.

“Someone tried to behead a body…with their teeth?” Nicky was asking Kevin, sounding thoroughly unnerved. Speaking of zombies.

“Closer to de-veined, actually.” Kevin said, prodding at the ragged wound with a pair or forceps. “Like a shrimp.”

“Oh, right.” Nicky said, looking a bit green. Kevin glanced up at him, caught his queasy expression, and rolled his eyes.
“Don’t you have something useful to be doing?” He said, and Nicky nodded in weak acknowledgement before retreating toward the door.

“I think that’s my cue.” Renee said, getting up and stretching her legs. She turned back and offered Andrew a calm smile. “I’ll let you know if we find out anything form Mrs. Dutton.” Andrew nodded, not moving from his perch as she and Nicky gathered their things and left the lab.

“Minyard!” Kevin shouted up at him some time later. “Get your short ass down here, we’ve got something.”

‘Something’ turned out to be two somethings, which Kevin explained in such thorough, excruciating scientific detail that by the end of it Andrew had absolutely no further understanding of what it was they had actually discovered.

Neil muttered something to Kevin in French. Kevin responded hotly, arms crossing in front of his chest and glaring around the lab imperiously.

“In English.” Andrew cut in before they could get at each other’s throats. “Actual, understandable English.”

Kevin heaved a long-suffering sigh, but Neil just rolled his eyes at him.

“What Dr. Day over here means is we found syphilis. It’s in the saliva around the wound, but not in Dutton’s blood.” Neil clarified.

“You’re telling me our murderer has syphilis.” Andrew said. It could be helpful information down the road as an elimination tool, but it didn’t exactly help them track down a suspect in the first place.

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“Not just any syphilis.” Neil explained. “Really old syphilis. Like, this strain hasn’t been seen in humans in decades. Which is…confusing. I mean the only places that have access to this stuff are medical research labs, and they have to special request vials of it from the CDC. In order for a person to actually have this in their system, they would have had to have been injected with it. On purpose.”

The look of befuddlement on Neil’s face was almost funny, more so because he didn’t seem to think that the information he’d given Andrew was actually helpful. Josten thought like a criminal, but he didn’t think like an investigator; contrary to popular belief, the two weren’t quite the same. He could imagine someone being forcibly injected with antique syphilis, but he couldn’t imagine how that information could be useful.

The most mundane possibility was that the murderer had at some point in their life been part of a medical research trial – Andrew knew that old viruses like syphilis were sometimes used as carriers to fight other diseases, like cancer. Other possibilities existed, in the more extravagant realms of the imagination, but they were irrelevant. Because Neil had mentioned the CDC, a bureaucracy almost more wound up in red tape than the FBI, and bureaucracy meant records.

“I’ll call the CDC, see if they’ve had any requests for that virus in recent months. What was the other thing?”

“Oh, yeah. The vic’s missing all his spinal fluid.”

Okay, how had Day possibly turned that into something so convolutedly scientific Andrew had missed it?
“What?” Andrew said. It was Kevin who answered.

“It’s a plasma-like fluid in your brain and spine that-“

“I know what spinal fluid is, Day.” Andrew cut him off. He hadn’t survived Aaron’s slog through med school for nothing. “I’m guessing it couldn’t have just drained out through the neck wound?”

“That would be a no.” Neil answered when Kevin just looked affronted.

So they were looking for a syphilitic, possibly cannibalistic murderer who gnawed on their victim and for some reason drained their spinal fluid. Somehow, Andrew couldn’t find it in himself to be surprised.

By the time evening rolled around, they were no closer to an answer. Dutton’s car was still in the wind, and Renee and Nicky hadn’t gotten anything useful out of his wife. She’d been aware, in the naïve and denial-filled way so many spouses were, of the secret weekends her husband had been keeping as of late, but she didn’t know any of the details.

Luckily, the CDC finally dug up the information Andrew had requested. Apparently, the only recent request for the particular strain of syphilis found on Bob Dutton had been sent to one Lubov Pharmaceuticals, a small private research company with a Boston address.

And it turned out syphilis wasn’t the only thing Lubov had requested. Over the last six months, the company had requested an array of rare, old infectious diseases, along with an unusual neurotoxin, the name of which had Andrew reaching for his car keys, hanging up the phone without another word.

“We’ve got a location.” Andrew called to Neil and Kevin.

“How do you know?” Neil asked, grabbing his coat and catching up.

“The address Lubov gave the CDC is in a residential area of Boston.” Andrew said, already pushing out the door. He could hear both sets of footsteps behind him.

“Weird place for a medical research company, don’t you think? Also, they’ve been working with a neurotoxin I remember reading about in one of Wymack’s files. It’s shown up in other – other FOXES cases.” Andrew grimaced a little at the name. He would have to get used to it eventually.

The address for Lubov Pharmaceuticals wasn’t just in a residential neighborhood, it turned out to be a house. A pretty little white thing straight out of a realty catalogue, if a bit run down. With a wooden fence, a rickety porch, and burlap-wrapped bushes in the front yard, it was the picture definition of harmless. Neither Neil nor Kevin had anything to say about it as they approached, though, and Andrew wasn’t surprised. They all knew more than most how little appearances meant, how easily they could be manufactured.

Andrew hadn’t wasted time on things like “red tape” and “back-up” on the way there. Sure, the address had been suspicious, but he hadn’t expected an actual house. He’d expected a small business where they could go in and ask questions, make a few demands, knock a few heads around with threats of warrants and see what shook loose. Ventures like that were never particularly dangerous, in Andrew’s experience, and he’d wanted Neil and Kevin’s more trained scientific eyes looking out for anything amiss.

A house, however. A house was dangerous. A house meant either a very dedicated individual operation, or else a terrorist cell, neither of which Andrew was thrilled to be facing with only his current companions.
“Do you want me to bring my gun?” Neil asked quietly as they got out of the car, the first voluntary thing he had said to Andrew all day.

“You have a gun?” Kevin hissed violently from the back seat. Neil gave him a flat look that was somehow an eye roll despite not actually being one.

“Kevin.” was all he said. Which, Andrew had to admit, was fair. And while the thought of someone else armed was tempting-

“Are you legal to carry in the state of Massachusetts? Do you have a firearms license from…literally anywhere?” Andrew asked. He already knew the answer.

“Not exactly.” Neil admitted.

“Then no.” Andrew told him firmly. But a moment later thought of a better solution. He slipped a slim knife out of the strap at his left ankle – it was the hardest draw anyway, only for absolute emergencies or absolute discretion – and handed it over. “Take this. If you have to use it, I didn’t give it to you. I dropped it and you picked it up.” For some reason, Neil balked.

“No.” Neil said. Andrew cocked an eyebrow at him.

“I’m offering you a weapon I know you can use. What do you mean no?”

“I don’t want to take it.” Neil said, sounding suddenly strange. He was staring at the knife like it was a live snake, and Andrew suddenly remembered the odd way Neil had watched Renee’s hands when they had first met. He had recognized the scars for what they were.

“Too bad, I don’t have time for your issues right now.” Andrew said, and shoved the hilt into Neil’s hand. Neil’s hand wrapped around it instinctively, a perfect grip. There was a story there, but right now they had more pressing things to worry about. “Day, you stay in the car until we come and get you.”

“Are you going to leave me the keys?”

Andrew considered it briefly.

“No.”

They headed up to the house without another word.

There were no lights on in the front of the house, despite the still-early darkness of the late winter evening. But there was one on in the back, so that was where Andrew went, leading Neil up the stone garden path along the side of the house, his own gun drawn low ahead of him, Neil’s breath reaching the back of his neck in clouds. They reached the corner nearest the back door. Even from outside, Andrew could smell a sweet stinging odor like the inside of a hospital that made his stomach turn. A low whine echoed. That did it. There would be hell to pay whether he was right or wrong, most likely, but Andrew was sure they needed to get inside, and now.

“FBI, put your hands up!” He said, loudly and clearly, using his left hand to wrench open the door, his right still holding his gun. The smell was stronger with the door open, mingled with the iron of blood and something heavy like bleach. The lights were bright inside the small room, nearly empty but for a jumble of equipment and cages. There was only one person in the room – a man in a wheelchair, hunched over a table on which the remains of something hairy and bleeding were
propped up, the head of the thing dangling from a severed spinal column. Andrew pointed his gun straight at him.

“Whoever the fuck you are, you’re under arrest.”

“My name is Doctor Nicholas Boone, and whatever you think I’ve done, I swear I haven’t done it.” The man said yet again when he and Renee were situated in the interrogation room. Andrew was watching from behind the glass. Renee had sent him out with a made-up excuse that made it sound like she was sending him out of the office, and he’d grumbled along with it even though he loathed the little acting games she put them up to sometimes. It was a trick they’d been employing for a while. It had irritated Andrew at first, the idea that Renee “oh how nice” Walker would be better at getting information out of criminals than he was, but it turned out she was a sharp judge of character. When Andrew was more suited to an interrogation, she excused herself too.

“You’ve said that, Mr. Boone, but you haven’t heard what we are accusing you of.” Renee said neatly, shuffling open her small notebook and taking out a pen.

“Well considering your other agent came at me with a gun drawn, I assume something terrible and violent, which I can’t have done.” He gestured vaguely to the wheelchair. Renee smiled, an expression that was soft unless you knew her.

“You’ll have to give us a little more credit than that, Mr. Boone.” She said. “Now, do you know a man by the name of Bob Dutton?”

The questions went on for some time, easy questions from what Boone did for a living (he was a professor of biological chemistry at a local college, and had done his doctorate in gene therapy) to various questions gauging his potential connection to Dutton. Renee wasn’t really getting anywhere information-wise, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t making progress. Boone was relaxing, slowly, letting his guard down. Then Renee shuffled her papers a little, flicking her hair off of her shoulder, and Andrew sat up.

“Now Mr. Boone. About these chemical and disease samples you requested from the CDC…would you mind telling me how one of them would have come to be in the saliva of a bite mark on a murder victim?”

Boone paled visibly, hands clutching at the table.

“Also, did you know that one of the chemicals you recently requested is on a watch list for its potential use in biological weapons?” She asked calmly. Boone’s eyes had started to dart about frantically, his body twisting subconsciously toward the exit.

“Mr. Boone.” Renee said again, drawing his gaze back to herself. “I’ll be honest with you, I don’t think you were out last night ripping an innocent man’s neck open with your teeth, but I think you know something about who was. So I’m going to ask you to tell me what you know, or I am going to arrest you here and now on suspicion of domestic terrorism, and I’m afraid you won’t see the outside world again for a very long time.”

Boone’s throat worked madly, the muscles jumping in his jaw. His trapped-animal eyes finally caught on the silver glint of the cross around Renee’s neck and stuck there. That was another thing Renee was good at, knowing when to keep the cross out, and when to tuck it away.

“They have my wife.” He whispered at last, voice broken and trembling. Andrew stood up and
really started paying attention. In the room, Renee reached out a hand and placed it over Boone’s
trembling one.

“Who has your wife, Mr. Boone?” She asked gently.

“They call themselves ZFT. Zerstörung durch Fortschritte der Technologie. They’re…scientists. But
the things they do. They recruited me about a year ago with this mad talk of making the human race
better, making people stronger. When I realized the things they were doing, I wanted out. But I was
too valuable to lose, I knew too much.” He sounded broken, pathetic. He sounded like Kevin when
Andrew had met him in St. Claire’s. Andrew pushed the comparison from his mind.

“They kidnapped Valerie a month ago, they won’t let her go unless I continue working for them. I
don’t want to do it but…” He looked at Renee with pleading eyes. “I just want my wife back, Agent
Walker.”

“I can only imagine.” Renee said quietly. “Nicholas, what else can you tell me about ZFT? It could
be very important. Is there a leader?”

That was Renee’s mistake – the only one she ever made – assuming others were like her. Andrew
always assumed the opposite, but Renee liked to believe the best in people, liked to believe in their
strength. Whatever she had reminded Boone of, though, he clammed up immediately.

“I think I know where they’re keeping her.” He said. “Get me my wife back, and I’ll tell you
whatever you want to know.”

It felt like a trap and Andrew knew it, but a spare few hours later he and was getting out of the car in
front of a dirty, abandoned-looking warehouse in Chinatown. Boone had been able to give them a
general idea of the area, and Andrew had managed to track down the place itself – he’d discovered it
had been drawing an awful lot more power than an imports warehouse had any right to be.

It was the middle of the night now, but it had been dark so long from the season and the clouds that
time had started to seem senseless. It had started raining at some point, and the freezing slush was
doing nothing for Andrew’s mood. A sign on the dingy glass door next door advertised imported
nuts and dried goods. The door with the number they were looking for had no other markings on it at
all.

He’d brought backup this time, and Andrew signaled a hushed formation as they entered the
building, branching off to check each room. Inside the building was quiet. There was only the
hollow sound of rain on the metal roof echoing against the walls. The tension of the raid eased
slowly as they cleared each room, but Andrew didn’t let himself relax. He glanced to the agent
beside him.

“Well this was anticlimactic.” She said. Andrew agreed, but he wasn’t about to admit it to some
random agent whose name he didn’t even know.

“Call Chief, something’s not right.” Andrew said. The agent nodded and pulled out her phone.

“Agent Wymack? Yeah we’re here sir.” The agent said, her eyes still darting to the entrances and
exists. Andrew’s were doing the same. Fuck but this still felt like a trap. “We’re at the address Boone
gave us. No, no. No one’s died.”

Andrew almost smirked at that. So little faith.

“Well, sir, there’s nothing here. Not a lab, not a prison, and definitely not Valerie Boone.”
Andrew heard Wymack’s muffled curse through the crackle of the phone. She frowned for a moment, then snapped to attention as a different voice spoke.

“Who? Yes. No. Yes but- Sir I really think- yes. I’ll put him on.” She held the phone out to Andrew. He frowned but took it.

“Agent Minyard?” It was Boone.

“That’s me. What’s going on, Boone? Why are we here?” There was the sound of nervous shuffling, the muted sound of Wymack saying ‘speak, man.’ and then Boone’s voice again.

“Look, it’s not a trap, okay? None of you are going to get hurt I just… I don’t actually know where ZFT’s headquarters are. The building you are in used to be one of our labs. I know I haven’t done anything to earn your trust, but I need you to do something for me. In the northeast corner there’s a door with an electronic keypad. Code is 34448.”

Andrew made his way toward the door, gesturing the agents behind him to stand back. He stopped in front of it.

“What’s behind this door, Boone?” he asked.

“A lab.” came the answer. “I need you to get me five vials out of the case in the back. I need them to make the antidote.”

“What antidote?” Andrew punched in the code and opened the door. Inside was a lab, as promised, but a ransacked one. Overturnd chairs and shattered glass littered the floor. There was a fine layer of dust over everything, like it had been weeks since anyone had been there. Andrew picked his way across toward the glow of the refrigerated case and it’s racks of vials.

“I’m afraid I wasn’t quite honest with you about Valerie.” Boone’s voice said, and Andrew stopped in his tracks, holding up a hand to freeze any agents where they stood. He waited in tense silence for Boone to explain.

“I was part of ZFT, and I did try to leave. But they didn’t just kidnap my wife…they infected her. Made her into this thing that – she’s only doing it to survive, Agent Minyard. I need to help her.”

Andrew had a sudden, dreadful certainty about where this was going. “She’s… She’s the one who killed your Bob Dutton.”

Pieces of the puzzle began to slot into place in Andrew’s mind. He grabbed the vials Boone named and turned back to the car as quickly as possible. The answer, the whole fit of it was there, somewhere out in front of him, trembling like a rippled pond. He couldn’t see it clearly yet, but he was beginning to understand the kind of predator they were dealing with. He asked for Wymack back on the phone.

“Chief. In the morning, have Boone brought to the lab.” Andrew said, closing the car door and turning over the engine.

“Minyard as far as we know, this guy’s complicit in this madness.” Wymack said sharply.

“Oh, he definitely is.” Andrew said. “But he’s not dangerous, and we need him anyway.” There were lots of different kinds of monsters; this Andrew knew well. Boone might be a brilliant scientist, but he was as weak as he was proud. Andrew didn’t approve of how easily Boone had allowed himself to be manipulated, but he believed him. And if he was telling the truth about his wife, they didn’t have a lot of time.
It was a rare instance that Andrew didn’t particularly care to be right, but here it was. Because if he was right, come morning there was going to be another body waiting to be found.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

Up Next:

“Kevin, stop there.” Neil said. “What do you mean Tetsuji and Riko were involved? What does ZFT have to do with the Moriyamas?”
Chapter Summary

Neil's POV

Chapter Notes

warnings for slight discussions of gore

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4: Strangely Transmitted Disease

Dr. Nicholas Boone, the man in the wheelchair said his name was when Neil and Andrew busted into his back-room-lab. He said it over and over, stumbling on it in a way people who had just made up or practiced an identity never did, Neil would know. It didn’t really matter what his name was, of course. They were taking him in no matter what. Andrew called Nicky and Renee for backup, and he and Renee took Boone away for interrogation. Soon enough Nicky was ferrying Neil and Kevin back to the Harvard lab, fetching them all coffee while they settled in to wait for the crime scene techs to pack up Boone’s things and bring them over for examination.

The contents of Boone’s ‘lab’ was an odd jumble of things. Empty animal cages had crowded most of the room, and a few pieces of equipment including a centrifuge and an aging microscope had taken up the rest. Neil wasn’t particularly interested in any of that – although Kevin had cooed over the microscope for a few minutes as if that model featured in his fondest memories. Maybe it did.

Neil was much more interested in the small refrigerated case of vials, and he began going through them while Kevin took to examining the bloody, furry thing that Boone had been in the process of dissecting when they’d arrested him.

Nicky hung around at the fringes, occasionally fetching something from a cabinet or doing other some small favor for either Neil or Kevin, but mostly supervising. He was trying a bit too hard to be helpful, and it was making Neil nervous. Neil was used to sizing up threats, both physical and otherwise. Nicky wasn’t a threat, exactly, but after the disaster of the previous night it was apparent he wasn’t an ally either. Andrew clearly had the final say between them; if Andrew decided to draw a battle line between himself and Neil, it was clear which side Nicky would fall on.

When they didn’t need him, Nicky was occupying himself by scribbling away at a sheet of numbers, incomprehensible from a distance. Neil kept himself to the other side of the lab and out of the way of Nicky’s wobbly attempts at peace-making. Nicky was nice enough, polite enough. He was fine. But if he asked Neil if he needed anything one more time it was going to be very hard not to punch him in the face, consequences be damned.

At the autopsy station, Kevin was working on the fur-corpse. The thing had turned out to be a small dog. It was a welcome relief when Kevin called Neil over as he carefully removed a long syringe
from its spinal column.

“There’s not as much fluid here as there should be.” Kevin said. “I’ve already checked the flesh for punctures and there aren’t any, so it can’t have been drawn out while he was still alive.”

“He?”

“It’s a male dog, Neil.” Kevin said. That wasn’t really what Neil had been getting at, but he didn’t correct Kevin.

“Okay.” Neil said. “How else could it have been drained? Is the wound on the dog like the one on Dutton?” Kevin scoffed.

“Use your eyes, Neil. A child could see that this neck and spine were cut open with precision instruments, not teeth.”

“There’s a lot of fur in the way.” Neil argued. “So that’s a no, then?”

“That’s a no.” Kevin confirmed condescendingly. “In answer to your actually reasonable question, I don’t think there’s any way this spinal fluid could have been removed at all. I think this dog was sick, and whatever his illness was was causing him to not make enough.”

Neil stared at the dead mess on the table. There was a thought tugging at him, a puzzle piece that refused to shift into place just yet.

“Give me some samples from i- from him.” Neil told Kevin. “I’ll compare them to the vials from the case, see what we can come up with.”

The hours that followed were mostly quiet except for Kevin’s classical music burbling over the speakers. They worked in oddly comfortable synchrony for a while – separately, but together. Neil sorted his way through the slides Kevin passed him, taking as detailed notes as he could. But of course casual silence around Kevin never lasted, because Kevin had never been allowed to do anything casually in his life, and Neil doubted he knew how to start now. He began to pick and bicker at Neil’s questions and mistakes, berating him for even the smallest oversights as they worked.

“Working with you is like being stuck with a high school intern.” Kevin said in annoyance after Neil had, apparently, missed a vital observation about cell count in the latest sample. Neil felt his neck heat at the note of accusation in Kevin’s tone.

“I didn’t exactly grow up in a lab like you did.” He reminded Kevin. Neil had only been twelve when his mother had stolen him away from Evermore in the dead of night; he hadn’t done much practical lab work while he was there. “And there was only so much time on the run for pondering the mysteries of chemistry and physics.”

By that, he meant there was no time. Neil had wrangled a high school diploma by the skin of his teeth, but he’d done a lot of it from a shitty laptop in the backseat of whatever five hundred dollar car they were driving that month, and it was hardly worth taking the time to do advanced courses when they only cost more money and he wasn’t going to college anyway.

Neil looked up from his hands to find Kevin staring at him strangely. His thumb was rubbing absently at his tattoo again.

“How did you learn any of it?” Kevin asked, this time with genuine curiosity. Neil shrugged.
“We had access to the internet, and libraries when we were in one spot for long enough. A lot of universities offer online classes for free. I started doing those when I was sixteen or so, I guess. In secret.” Neil paused. There was a strange feeling in his chest when he remembered those days. It wasn’t longing or nostalgia, exactly. But it was something, tight and uncomfortable, like remembering the pain of an old injury that you know was almost much, much worse.

“My mom hated any time she saw me doing it.” Neil continued, quieter. “It should have been harmless, taking a free course on astrophysics from Berkeley or whatever, making up equations on restaurant napkins. But I think it reminded her too much of Evermore. I think she was afraid that if I got too invested, I would try to go back someday.” Neil shook his head, an ugly half smile pulling at his lips. “I guess she ended up being right, in a way, didn’t she?”

Kevin’s left hand had clenched into a fist where he was holding it near his cheek. He looked at Neil, or maybe through him, and Neil couldn’t begin to guess what thoughts were beating against the thin line of his mouth. He didn’t think he wanted to know.

“Yes.” Kevin said at last, a single, harsh syllable, and turned away from Neil again, back to his work. Neil swallowed a weary sigh and pulled out another slide to examine. He was almost through when the lab phone rang. Neil picked it up.

“Yes.” Kevin said at last, a single, harsh syllable, and turned away from Neil again, back to his work. Neil swallowed a weary sigh and pulled out another slide to examine. He was almost through when the lab phone rang. Neil picked it up.

“Hello.”

“You need a cell phone.” Was the first thing Andrew said.

“Why? I’m constantly being babysat by either you or Nicky, and the lab and the hotel have phones.” Neil said irritably. This couldn’t actually be what Andrew was talking about. Neil was proved right when Andrew sighed and immediately switched topics.

“Boone says he was working for some kind of German mad scientist group and now they’re blackmailing him by holding his wife hostage. The group’s called ZFT. Zerstörung durch Fortschritte der Technologie. Ever heard of them?”

“No, but I can tell you they’re not actually German. Destruction by the advancement of technology? It’s not even grammatically correct.” Neil said. “If they’d wanted to translate it properly it would have been…” Neil trailed off when he noticed Kevin staring at him. “uh. I think Kevin might have heard of them.”

“Find out what he knows.” Andrew instructed, and hung up.

Neil approached Kevin, who was staring back down at the dog now, but not really seeing it. He was clearly lost in his thoughts, head twitching every so often as though one of them had struck him. Neil knew the feeling.

“Kevin? What’s ZFT?” He asked. Kevin didn’t answer at first. He looked around like he was hoping there was a bottle of vodka he could crack open for this, but finding none, he just settled heavily on his stool.

“I was never part of it.” Kevin said slowly. “It’s a... scientific community. A little like a religion in some ways, or maybe a cult. They believe that the universe will reach a... a tipping point, I think. Some kind of clash, like end times. They believe that the only means of survival would be to have created sufficiently advanced technology to destroy... whatever it is that’s coming. That’s why they did a lot of their experiments. Trying to make humans stronger, smarter. To unlock them, you could
say. Bring them to their full potential.” Kevin shuddered slightly.

“I know Tetsuji and Riko were involved, somehow.” Kevin continued “but—”

“Kevin, stop there.” Neil said. “What do you mean Tetsuji and Riko were involved? What does ZFT have to do with the Moriyamas?”

Kevin’s hand twitched like he was fighting to keep it still. “I’m not sure what their part was, but they were…members. I was always left out. I think it made me jealous when I was little, but I overheard Tetsuji telling Riko that my mother had specifically forbade my involvement.” Kevin’s face pulled in an ugly way. “Maybe he could only hold to that particular request at the expense of all the others.”

“Boone claims he started working for ZFT but when he tried to get out they kidnapped his wife as a hostage.” Neil said.

“That’s not outside the realm of possibility.” Kevin said, a confirmation. “But also not really our job, is it? We need to find out what he was actually doing in that lab.”

But actually, the information was helpful, because it got Neil thinking: ZFT was working on strengthening humans, and Bob Dutton had been found with human bite marks on his neck. It stood to reason that he had fallen victim to one of ZFT’s experimental subjects. But why had they ripped open his neck, and what was the connection to this dead dog?

“Does he have syphilis?” Neil asked. Kevin looked confused.

“Boone? How should I know?”

“Not Boone, the dog.” Neil clarified. He really should have stuck with ‘it.’

“He” did have syphilis, as it turned out. The same strain that they had found on Bob Dutton, and which they had found a vial of in the case from Boone’s lab. That seemed to indicate that Boone had given the dog the disease himself, though to what end remained unclear. Kevin didn’t think the syphilis itself would have depleted the dog’s spinal fluid, but he explained the way diseases like that could be modified and used to carry other things into the body.

“It’s possible whatever was attached to the syphilis modified the dog’s genes somehow, and that modification is what’s burning through his spinal fluid.” Kevin postulated after a long discussion. “If so, it’s likely the same thing that was done to our murderer.” That logic Neil didn’t follow, and it apparently showed on his face.

“Neil, if you’re going to be any help at all try to keep up.” Kevin said. “Did you even look at the bite marks on Dutton?”

“Autopsy was your job.”

“And you need to have all the information if you’re going to do yours. Now. The bite marks weren’t just on the skin. They were on the spinal cord itself. And to the inside of them were other marks – round punctures, like from large needles.” Kevin’s eye’s had lit up in a way they only did when he was about to say something especially absurd. “I think our murderer has a condition that makes them run out of spinal fluid. Burn through it, maybe. Probably a side effect to whatever enhancement they were trying to achieve. The syphilis would increase body temperature dramatically. But I think that they are killing purely in order to replenish. They’re not just killing, they’re feeding.”

Neil let that sink if for a long moment before he said “Kevin, I’m not sure you’re supposed to look that excited about it.”
“It’s kind of incredible.” Kevin admitted. “A syphilis-based gene modification that can change a human so thoroughly they can feed on spinal fluid? It’s-“

“One strangely transmitted disease, amiright?” Nicky cut in, reminding them of his presence with a sly grin. “Get it? Because it’s an STD? Oh yeah, also that’s literally what normal people’s nightmares are made of.”

Maybe precisely because he wasn’t looking for it, but that was the moment that Neil’s eyes caught on exactly what the sheet of numbers Nicky had been scribbling on was. His blood froze, all thoughts of Boone, the dog, and their current case forgotten. He snatched the paper out of Nicky’s hands.

“Where did you get this?” he said as urgently as he could, though he already knew the answer. There was only one person who had been in that binder, and he also happened to have access to Nicky, and probably the ability to ask favors without too many questions.

“Andrew, why?” Nicky asked, looking concerned. “I’m pretty crack at codes so he asked me to take a look at it, said it was related to some stuff for Wymack.” In typical Andrew fashion, it was almost the truth. “Plus, gives me something to do in between taking pics of all your gross projects and making weird smoothie runs.”

Kevin did have a weird thing for health smoothies, for a man who had manufactured his own drugs. That and unnecessarily expensive coffee. Maybe he’d picked it up in St. Claire’s, but Neil doubted it. Somehow, it was just Kevin.

“I haven’t really made any progress.” Nicky was still talking. “I mean, there’s a pattern there, I can see it. I’m pretty sure it’s just a basic cypher, but it seems to have a complicated key.”

That was because the key was Neil’s birthday. Well, not Neil’s. Nathaniel’s. Mary had given him the page of numbers when he was small and taught him how to encode them. In a rare bout of maternal softness, she hadn’t argued when he’d chosen his real birthday as the key. It was the one thing about him that he could never really lose, but would never be allowed to keep. Neil wasn’t surprised Nicky hadn’t managed to crack the code, but his fingers still shook as he grasped the paper. He knew taking the physical copy was useless when there was surely a digital copy. Still, he couldn’t help himself from tearing it to pieces, disposing of it in a bag for biological waste for good measure.

“It’s mine.” Neil said heatedly, because there was no way out of admitting it. “But it’s nothing that’s going to put you in danger, so back off and tell Andrew the same.” Nicky held up his hands in surrender, wide-eyed. Then he pulled out his phone, pulled up the picture, and let Neil watch him delete it.

“All gone.” Nicky said nervously. “Look, you know he didn’t tell me it was yours, right?” Neil deflated a little.

“Yeah.” Neil said. For one, Nicky had a terrible poker face unless he was really trying. If he’d known he was trying to unlock Neil’s secrets, he definitely would have been acting differently.

On the other hand, it was interesting that Andrew hadn’t told him. Maybe it was so Neil didn’t find out. But maybe it was also so that no one but Andrew found out. Other than his eyes, Andrew had kept Neil’s secrets, so far. He had shown himself willing to make his own judgments in his own time, without involving his family or the rest of the FBI.

Andrew still had the original picture, of course. There was little Neil could do about that. But in theory he wouldn’t be able to crack the code unless he discovered Neil’s real birthday. If he ever
managed that, it would only be because he had discovered Neil’s original identity, and at that point a page of emergency contact numbers for his mother’s family and the locations of some old stashes were going to be the least of Neil’s worries.

“Let’s just- let’s just get back to work.” Neil muttered, turning his back and pretending his voice had been steady. He could feel his heart pounding a rabid rhythm in his chest. He began to walk back to his work station but Nicky’s voice stopped him.

“Hey,” Nicky said, “it’s late. It’s been a long day and we’re all tired. Andrew and Renee will get something out of Boone I’m sure. Until then, why don’t we call it a night? Hey, we could grab something to eat somewhere? Ice cream, maybe?”

Nicky had an uncomfortable, hesitantly hopeful look on his face that Neil didn’t want anything to do with. The reminder of the hour was like the flick of a switch in his body, a cue for it to suddenly remember how little rest he’d gotten after the shit-show of the night before. His muscles were still aching from the bruising of his apparent fight; his face would be a mess for days to come. And he wouldn’t soon forget the bright sound of Nicky’s laughter in his ear, holding him inside the hot press of the crowd at Eden’s as the drugs took him over. It was clear Nicky meant the proposal of dinner as a friendly gesture, a peace offering of sorts, but Neil wasn’t sure he was ready to take it.

“No.” Neil said, and accepted the hurt look on Nicky’s face with silence even as it eased towards tired understanding. “But you’re right. Let’s go home.” He walked to the door, grabbing his coat and bag before Kevin could begin to argue. Nicky followed without another word.

Neil collapsed face first into his pillow almost as soon as he walked in the hotel door, and his eyes were closed by the time he heard Kevin settle heavily in the other bed. Maybe, he thought blearily as the darkness of sleep closed around him, maybe this case could take a day off. Just an empty Saturday to go for a run and do absolutely nothing else. No Kevin prodding him about science, no Nicky watching him guiltily, no Wymack with his heavy paternal appraisement. No Andrew and his guarded stare, guiltless and unforgiving and unnerving.

The universe must have had other plans, though. Because when the hotel room phone rang brightly at 7:00 the next morning, it was Renee’s somber voice saying they had better come in.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Happy Holidays!!

Up Next:

“I’ve always been more of a math person.” He admitted. That seemed appropriate, Andrew supposed. Neil was a complex math problem himself. One that Andrew was determined to solve.
Chapter 5: Mark of the Devil

Saturday dawned like so many of Andrew’s had before: with a rising body count. Another ripped open spine in another foul-smelling alleyway. Andrew didn’t dawdle at the scene and Wymack didn’t ask him to. The scenes were dump sites, that was becoming clear. There was nothing there to be found.

At least the excursion to the scene had bought Andrew an hour outside of the lab. Boone was joining them there today and was about as much of a nervous wreck as Andrew would have expected any semi-guilty, semi-hostage person to be under the circumstances. He seemed to relax a bit as they made their way into the lab, though, perking up visibly at the sight of the gleaming counters of equipment. Great, another lab junkie to add to his babysitting roster. Just what Andrew needed.

Neil was going to be bad enough on his own – Andrew had no doubt that the second day after Eden’s would be even worse than the first. Neil only seemed to have two temperatures when it came to conflict: brittle silence or blistering confrontation. All that remained to be seen was which he would choose today. Luckily, Dutton’s car chose that moment to be found on the edge of town, and Andrew made a decision.

“Josten, with me.” Andrew called across the room. Neil’s face made it clear exactly what he thought of that proposition, but he had enough survival instincts for the time being not to argue. He grabbed his coat and tramped after Andrew out the door. Andrew half-expected Neil to ignore him for the whole car ride, like he’d done for most of the day before. Apparently his moping quota was up though, because instead he spent the ride staring at the side of Andrew’s face like there was a puzzle there he was trying to work out.

“ZFT. What did Day know?” Andrew said when Neil opened his mouth to speak. Neil rolled his eyes and turned his gaze to the front, but obediently relayed what little information Kevin had been able to supply. It was troubling that there was yet another connection to Massive Dynamic and the Moriyamas, especially a connection that they now believed involved human experimentation. Andrew’s mind flashed back to the young voices on the old tape recorder, and he gripped the wheel tighter with both hands for a moment before giving in and reaching for a cigarette.
“Where are we going?” Neil asked when Andrew was lit up.

“Dutton’s car was found this morning.” Andrew said.

“So we’re going to the scene?”

“Wrong. The car was stripped of all its tech including GPS. Probably unrelated to the crime, of course. Just opportunistic criminality, you know the drill.” Andrew left a pause to see if Neil would rise to the obvious bait. Neil continued to stare silently out the window. “But that makes the car itself useless to us.” There had been a third body found near Dutton’s car, actually. An identical kill pattern but no ID. There was nothing useful about the scene itself, and the body was on its way back to the lab as they spoke.

“So Neil, you tell me, where are we going?” Andrew prompted.

At this Neil finally turned to look at him again. There was wariness there, of course, Neil wasn’t enough of an idiot to feel completely safe in Andrew’s company, but there wasn’t real fear. There was just a quiet moment while Neil considered the pieces, and figured it out.

“We’re going to a chop shop.” Neil said. Not bad at all.

“Close enough.” Andrew confirmed. They were nearly there. “And actually, you’re going, not me. I need someone who looks and acts like someone who would be shopping for tech at one of these places, and you fit the bill.”

“Someone who looks like a criminal, you mean.”

“On a roll, Josten. You’re looking for a woman named Leah. You can tell her Doe’s asking.”

“Doe?”

“She knows me, her colleagues don’t.” Andrew said, knowing it didn’t really answer Neil’s question. They pulled into a crumbly side street and parked. The shop was a few blocks away, but Andrew knew his car would stick out in an area like this, and they needed a bit more discretion. He could have borrowed one from the Bureau, of course, but all of their vehicles screamed “fed,” and were almost more noticeable than his own. He gave Neil instructions for reaching the shop, shooed him out of the car, and settled in to wait.

Patience hadn’t always been much of a strong suit for Andrew, but he was learning. He knew Neil, trustworthy or not, would need time to be ready to re-confront their conversation in Eden’s. He’d made the first big move. He was prepared to settle in for the long game now if need be. Andrew didn’t trust Neil, not without more of the story, not by a long shot. But the shop he had sent Neil into wasn’t affiliated with the Moriyamas or any of their associates, so there was no one there for Neil to use against him, least of all Leah. Plus, the scrappy thing really did look like one of their regular customers, and there was no use wasting that.

When Neil came back fuming, a slip of paper clutched tightly in one hand, Andrew recognized that he had gotten what he’d come for, but his plan might have backfired just a bit.

“Here’s your goddamn chip.” Neil said, shoving the paper into the cup holder between them. He clicked his seatbelt with unnecessary force. “Did you know your contact is an undercover cop?”

Oh, more points to Josten. Andrew hadn’t been sure he would notice.

“Of course I did. But Wilds is good at her job.” Andrew said dismissively, starting the car back up
He wouldn’t ever say it to her face but he knew it was true. Not a lot of cops could have pulled off the undercover work she did, and even fewer female ones. “I couldn’t risk her cover by going in there myself.”

“You still could have told me.” Neil accused.

“And risk relying on your abysmal acting skills? Neil, what do you think would have happened if I told you you were going to meet with an undercover cop?”

“My acting skills are fine.” Neil said heatedly.

Probably that was true, actually. It was one of the more frustrating things about Neil. He lied as instinctively as he breathed, absolute truths and inventions of whole cloth spun together with frightening grace.

“Why didn’t you tell me she was a cop?” Neil asked again, this time curious rather than accusing.

Andrew risked a glance at him, finally pinpointing why Neil had been so rattled – not because Wilds was a cop, but because Andrew might not have known it, might have thrown him into the lion’s den without thought or care to the possible danger. And, well, he did have a point there, didn’t he?

“Maybe I just wanted to see if you would figure it out.” Andrew said. “My turn. How did you figure it out?”

“We’re doing a round?” Neil asked. When Andrew didn’t respond, he answered anyway, a lopsided smirk making his mouth catch the light. “When I told her you sent me, she laughed.”

Honestly? Fuck Wilds.

“And that told you she was a cop?”

“I don’t think a CI would be that easy going about you.” Neil said. He paused a moment, then, “Also, she kept rubbing at her hip, but she wasn’t limping. She’s used to carrying a gun there. You really should let her know, it’s a pretty obvious tell.”

It wouldn’t be, not to most people, but Andrew made a note to tell her anyway. If for no other reason than it was always good to have something to lord over BPD Captain Dan Wilds.

“I will let her know.”

They said nothing else for the rest of the ride back.

“‘I know it’s my fault, what she’s become.’ Boone’s voice cut quietly through the silence of the lab, and Andrew felt himself tense. It had been approaching midday by the time he and Neil gotten back to the lab. Kevin and Boone had seemed to be getting on just fine, working on some kind of test that involved rats. Andrew knew they were working on an antidote to whatever ZFT had infected Boone’s wife Valerie with, but he hadn’t bothered to check in on them. If they came up with a solution, he would know. Andrew’s focus couldn’t be on helping save Valerie Boone, no matter how she had gotten to be what she was. Andrew’s focus had to be on stopping her.

Andrew pulled the crumpled piece of paper Neil had handed him earlier from his pocket. Inside was a tiny computer chip, the kind that held the memory of GPS units like the one from Dutton’s car. Theoretically, this was exactly that chip. Andrew popped it into a scanner and pulled up the information on it, jotting down the last dozen or so addresses that the car had gone. This was his
work to do.

But Kevin and Boone weren’t far away, and Andrew had never tuned out information that might be useful to him in his life. It would have been more work not to listen.

“I was the one who wanted to join ZFT.” Boone was saying. “Valerie, I think she saw them for what they were long before I did. She was the one who convinced me…who made me brave enough to try to get away. I helped them make this awful thing, and now they’ve…” Andrew shifted in his chair. Boone sounded like he was about to cry. “She was afraid I would wake up and find I’d become a monster. Look what I’ve done to her.”

“Nicholas.” Kevin’s voice said “We still have time to save her.” There was a long, fragile pause, and then Kevin spoke again, more quietly.

“I used to work with people like ZFT. The things we did were unconscionable, I know that now. Hell, I spent three of my years in St. Claire’s trying to invent time travel just to fix it. I couldn’t, but now I’ve been given another chance. A chance to help people, to fix the mistakes I’ve made.”

“Do you think we can ever be redeemed, men like us?” Boone asked “Can we ever be forgiven?”

“Maybe not.” Kevin said. “But we can still change.”

For some reason, those words drew Andrew’s gaze to where Neil was working, equally on the fringes of the conversation. Andrew would not be redeemed for his sins, because he did not regret them. But he hadn’t needed forgiveness from Aaron to keep his promises, and he wouldn’t require Neil’s either. He looked at Neil properly only to realize that Neil’s eyes were already on him. Without a word, Neil put down what he was doing and began making his way through the lab to Andrew, and stopped beside him.

The silence between them went on long enough to become thoroughly irritating, enough that Andrew put down his work and met Neil’s gaze levelly. Andrew didn’t have anything he cared to say, so he didn’t break the silence. It was only too predictable that Neil broke first. But when he did, it was to unexpectedly pull something from his pocket and shove it towards Andrew.

“I found this in the things from Boone’s lab.” Neil said, and Andrew picked it up. It was a small point-and-shoot digital camera. “There’s a video on it I think you should see.”

Andrew clicked the thing on. Apparently it was the kind that would open back up wherever you last were, because the little screen filled with the still of a short video. He pressed play.

On the screen was a cheerful looking woman waving for the camera. The setting appeared to be a small backyard – the backyard of Boone’s house, Andrew realized. So this must be Valerie Boone, Nicholas’s wife. Well, at least they knew what she looked like now, but there wasn’t anything else useful about the video so far. She called cheerfully at the camera for a few minutes – Andrew had the volume off, but he could see her lips moving – before waving the camera over.

It was when she took the camera and turned it around that Andrew understood why Neil had wanted him to see this. Because there was Nicholas Boone, in a video dated only three weeks old, walking.

“Hey Boone!” Andrew called across the lab, ignoring the way Neil stiffened. Andrew waved the camera casually in the air. “Care to explain?”

Boone looked startled for a minute, but then he just sighed and made his way over to where Andrew was working, Kevin trailing curiously behind.
“When they first infected Valerie, her needs were mild.” He said softly. “We knew the disease was depleting her spinal fluid, but I didn’t want her to have to resort to murder. So I gave her my own.” He stroked a hand lightly over his wheelchair. “I would have done anything for her. But eventually, I couldn’t keep up with her hunger. The disease got worse, and she began…hunting.” Boone put his face in his hands, apparently defeated.

Eventually, Kevin coaxed Boone back to work at their station, prodding at the bodies of the three victims and whatever they were doing with the rats. It was interesting to witness the fumbling attempts at comfort from a man who was such a broken mess himself, but apparently he and Boone had bonded. Terrific. Andrew turned back to his work on the GPS addresses. There was a map spread out on the table next to him, and Andrew looked over to see Neil still standing there, squinting between the map and the list of addresses Andrew had written down.

“Abandoning the science posse?”

Neil shrugged. “I don’t really deal with bodies. Plus the chemistry they’re talking about is a bit over my head. Complex genetics.”


“I’ve always been more of a math person.” He admitted. That seemed appropriate, Andrew supposed. Neil was a complex math problem himself. One that Andrew was determined to solve.

“Hey, where was the first body dump again?” Neil asked, grabbing a marker off the table and beginning to circle each of the addresses on Andrew’s list. He moved unerringly between them, like he had the layout of the city memorized. Andrew rattled off the address of the first dump site and Neil circled that one too.

“Okay, we just need the site where the car was found, the other dump site from this morning, and Boone’s house.” Neil said.

“347 West Main, 501 Walnut, and 83 Jackson, off of Church.” Andrew said. Neil glanced up in surprise, like he’d expected Andrew to have to look those ones up. Andrew just held his gaze until Neil shrugged and turned back to the map, marking the new addresses before drawing a careful line between the body and car dumps. They made a lopsided sort of rectangle on the map. Neil tapped a red dot near the center of the rectangle – one of the addresses from Dutton’s GPS.

“What’s at this address?” Neil asked. Andrew punched it into the computer. “A convenience store.” He told Neil, and watched him deflate for just a moment before frowning more deeply at the map. Neil’s finger found an intersection just a few blocks away from the marked spot, resting there as he finally made the connection Andrew had made as soon as Neil had drawn in the rectangle.

“Ding.” Andrew said softly. If you were Dutton, a man stepping out on his wife, you probably wouldn’t program your GPS for the actual place you were going. You’d choose someplace a discreet distance away, someplace that would look innocent if anyone looked it up. Andrew called more loudly over his shoulder, “Day! We need to see those bodies under black light.”

Andrew arched an eyebrow at Neil before walking to where the bodies were laid out. Kevin had pulled out a black light and was waiting for Andrew, questioning.

“I need to see their right hands.” Andrew instructed. Kevin waved the wand over the back of the right hand of each of the three bodies, and caught his breath.
“Fuck.” came Neil’s emphatic whisper at the sight of the glowing UV stamps there. Andrew had known that was coming. What he wasn’t expecting was for Neil to add “I saw her.”

“What?!” That was Dr. Boone.

“I saw her.” Neil repeated. “She ran into me on the dance floor. Her skin was burning.” He ran a hand through his hair and laughed hollowly. “She asked me if I wanted to get out of there.”

Boone winced. Kevin’s face was pinched in a frown. But Andrew was watching Neil. He looked shaken, but not nearly as much as someone who had just realized they were targeted by a genetically modified serial killer ought to be.

At least they knew what tied all three men together now, and it seemed they had also discovered Valerie Boone’s hunting grounds.

Eden’s Twilight.

“Well Neil,” Andrew said, and watched his face go from horror to badly-controlled anger in a second. “ready for round two? We are going to apprehend Valeria Boone tonight, and you are coming with us.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!

Up Next:

“Neil.” Andrew’s voice interrupted his thoughts. He looked up and found Andrew looking intently down at him. Neil felt his own words from earlier echoing like a shot between them. It’s far from my worst scar.

“How the tables turn.” Andrew said dryly.
Chapter 6: Can't Go Back to Eden(s)

Of course they were going back to Eden’s Twilight. Somehow, with the way things had been going, Neil couldn’t bring himself to be surprised. So it came to be that just a handful of hours after the reveal of the UV stamps, Neil was climbing back into a car with Andrew, this time an intimidating, bureau-issue vehicle. Renee was following behind in a separate vehicle, but Nicky had climbed into the back of theirs. Neil wished Nicky had gone with Renee. Neil slumped in the passenger seat next to Andrew and tried to decide if he would actually rather be riding with Renee himself. Honestly, he wasn’t sure. He was just glad Kevin had been left behind.

To his credit, Kevin actually had spoken up on Neil’s behalf, snagging his sleeve as they all left the lab and suggesting that maybe he should stay and help work on the antidote with Boone. It was actually a nice gesture. It would have been more of one if Neil hadn’t been aware that it was at least partially motivated by Kevin not wanting to be left alone, even with Boone for company. Even so, Neil knew there was no getting out of this particular adventure.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine.” He assured Kevin. If he was very lucky, that might even turn out to be true.

Neil tried to fiddle with the radio in the car as they got on their way, but apparently Andrew was in the mood for silence, because his hand was deftly batted away from the controls. Neil fidgeted with his own hands instead, trying not to look at Andrew, trying not to find something, anything, in the still features of his face. Anything for a clue as to what the fuck was going on in his head.

The things was, Neil was furious at him, but it wasn’t an emotion he could sustain for long periods of time. He hadn’t forgiven Andrew for drugging him in the club, but it was clear to him that Andrew had only ever intended to use Neil’s inebriation exactly as he had – to try and extract information he knew Neil wouldn’t part with sober. That in and of itself should have been a terrifying thought, of course, but then… Andrew knew a fair few of Neil secrets already. More than anyone living besides the men he was running from, and maybe Kevin. And for whatever reason, he had kept them to himself. He’d prodded and kicked and torn his way into Neil’s carefully constructed shell, but he hadn’t betrayed his confidence. Not yet anyway.

The thing was, Neil was angry, yes. But where he wasn’t angry, he still wasn’t afraid. So in the
moments where his anger ebbed, he found something strange present underneath; it took Neil most of the day to realize it wasn’t a presence at all but an absence. Somehow, in the wild, exhausted sprint of their first case, Neil had grown too comfortable with Andrew’s silent, steady presence. He felt the loss of that comfort like a hollow.

Of course, Nicky didn’t allow the silence in the car to stretch on too long. He never could.

“So Neil, you said you actually met the suspect when we were here?” Nicky asked. He sounded a little horrified and a little awed.

“Yeah.” Neil answered. “She bumped into me on the dance floor, asked me if I wanted to get out of there.” He rubbed his hand along the underside of his jaw, remembering the burning touch of her fingers.

“Whoa.” said Nicky. “She was literally trying to make you her next victim. Neil, man, I am so sorry. You’re lucky to be alive.”

“Not really. It’s not like I was ever going to go with her, high or not.” Neil said, before he could think any better of it. Nicky let out a soft, entirely too excited gasp.

“You’re one of us? I knew it. I knew it! See Andrew, you’re outnumbered now. I told you he was too pretty to be straight.”

“I’m not.” Neil said.

“What, not pretty? Neil-”

“I’m not. Gay.” Neil said, with a small shrug.

“Bi then? Or wait that doesn’t – well what are you then? What way do you swing?” Nicky prodded.

“I don’t.” Neil said shortly.

“What?” Nicky said again.

“I don’t – swing. At all.” Neil said. Nicky was frowning at him like he was trying to figure out if he was for real. It was almost funny – this was one of the few things Neil knew for sure to be real about himself. Of course it would be the most unbelievable.

“Wait, so you mean you don’t-“

“Hey Nicky. Shut up.” Andrew advised, flat voice cutting through the air of the car. Neil wasn’t sure whether or not to be grateful, but at least it meant the rest of the ride was spent in silence.

That didn’t mean Neil didn’t feel a spike of nervousness when they pulled over a few blocks away from the club and Andrew gestured for Neil to follow him, leading him around to the back of the car, instructing Nicky to go find Renee. Once Nicky had gone, Andrew lit a cigarette and offered out the pack silently. Neil frowned slightly down at it, but took one. It felt like an admission, somehow. Whatever. He lit it and inhaled gratefully.

“You’re not going to freak out on me, are you?” Andrew asked, surprisingly the one to break the silence. Neil snorted.

“You mean, because the last time I was here someone drugged my soda and then threatened to stab me?” He pointed the end of his cigarette loosely in Andrew’s direction. “You think that’s the first
time I’ve had someone spike my drink? I’ll be fine.”

Something flickered across Andrew’s face at that, there and then gone; Neil wondered if he’d somehow managed to strike a nerve. He wasn’t sure Andrew was capable of sympathy, but even if he was it was the last thing Neil was interested in. You didn’t work your way through the unground business world of half of Europe and a good chunk of China without running into trouble here and there.

“Good.” Andrew said after a long moment. “As long as you’re going to be a danger to this team, you might as well be useful to it.” And there it was again, the anger, pushing up from under Neil’s skin.

“What do you want from me, Minyard?”

“Nothing.”

Neil scoffed. Andrew blew out a stream of smoke that brushed the top of Neil’s head, making his eyes water.

“Fine. A truth. Give me a reason to trust you, a real one.” There was something in the empty depth of his eyes that told Neil a slim story wouldn’t cut it this time. Taking a breath, he shrugged out of his thin jacket, then paused.

“Only if I get a turn after.” Neil said. Andrew nodded briefly.

“Go on then.” he said.

Before Neil could think better of it, he reached up and tugged at the collar of his shirt, pulling it down over his right shoulder. He watched Andrew’s eyes track the movement, watched the cigarette sag just slightly in his mouth and his body grow even more still as he registered what he saw there: the perfect imprint of a clothes iron, pale and shiny, the steam holes a sickly-neat symmetrical pattern of raised dots inside of it.

“My father did this to me.” Neil said, his voice too loud in the quiet of the alleyway. “I was eight, and I made too much noise while he was trying to have a business meeting. With a member of the Moriyama family.” He tugged his shirt back up but Andrew’s eyes didn’t move, locked onto Neil’s shoulder as if he could still see the decades-old burn through the fabric.

“It’s far from my worst scar.” Neil said, and Andrew’s eyes snapped up to his. “But it convinced my mother to try sending me to Evermore just to get me away from him. Guess she didn’t know the branch family was nearly as bad. So if you’re looking for proof that I’m not working for Riko…I was handed over to the Moriyamas like a piece of property. As soon as my mother could she got me out of there, too, and we never looked back.”

Andrew dropped the remains of his cigarette and ground it out beneath his shoe. Neil expected a derisive comment about his sob story. Instead, Andrew shrugged out of his leather jacket and held it out.

“There’s no time to get changed.” he said. “Here. Try not to look like you’d rather be at a poetry reading.”

Neil reached out and shrugged into the jacket, still warm from Andrew’s body. He still wasn’t sure where this left them, but it seemed Andrew had accepted his story, so Neil guessed they were on the same side again, for now at least.

He was a little worried by how much of a relief that was.
Andrew was slipping out of his shoulder holster, tossing it into the trunk and deftly exchanging it for one that went at his hip. He was still in all black, just a small patch of skin showing between the sleeves of his t-shirt and the tops of his armbands.

Neil did a mental check of his own pockets: left, wallet and hotel card; right, thermal imager for tracking Valerie by her body heat; in the pocket of the jacket he’d just slipped off was Andrew’s knife, unreturned but unasked for. Just closing his hand around it made Neil’s stomach turn, but Andrew had been right before: an illegal gun wasn’t much use when he was working an official case with the FBI. He plucked the knife out and stuck it in the pocket of Andrew’s jacket, heavy against his side. Andrew had to have have noticed, but he didn’t say anything. He just closed the trunk with a heavy thud and turned toward the street.

They made their way through the darkness toward Eden’s, where Valerie Boone waited, hunting.

They met up with the others near the entrance of the club. Renee and Nicky had both managed to dress the part, Neil noted. His own hands fussed at the zipper of his borrowed jacket. Renee smiled kindly and reached out to cover one of his hands with her own.

“Think about it this way, Neil.” She said. “If you weren’t with us, if this wasn’t an FBI case, would you be nervous at all?” Neil’s mind flashed back to the last bar he’d been in before Eden’s. It had been just days before Andrew had found him in Shanghai; the black eye from the brawl had still been fading on his cheek when they met. She was right. Sure, Neil was new to the tighter regulations of the FBI, new to the strange underbelly of seemingly science-fiction cases they were solving. But facing down dangerous strangers in a crowded nightclub? That kind of shit Neil had been dealing with for years.

Neil pulled the thermal imager out of his pocket and wagged it slightly at Nicky and Renee.

“Right. Ready?” he said. Nicky gave him a thumbs up.

“Let’s catch a vampire.” Nicky said.

Renee and Nicky split off to keep watch over the exits, and Neil let Andrew lead the way back into Eden’s Twilight.

Of course, Andrew was a regular at Eden’s. He wasn’t going to go unnoticed. It was only a moment before a voice was calling ‘Minyard!’ from the direction of the bar, and Neil turned to see Roland making his way towards them, a tray propped up on his shoulder. He grinned cheerfully down at the two of them.

“Back so soon?” Neil felt the raking glance Roland afforded him before turning back to Andrew. “That was fast.”

“Here on business tonight Roland.” Andrew said, fishing something out of his pocket and handing it over. It was a picture of Valerie Boone. “Seen her around?” Roland took a moment to examine the picture, then handed it back with a shrug.

“Not really my type. Nah, I don’t remember seeing her. If I do though, I could give you a ring?” Roland said, a gleeful lilt to his voice.

“You don’t have my number, Roland.” Andrew said, and turned around, leading Neil away from the bartender without another word. Neil didn’t quite know what to make of the exchange, but there would be time to think about that later. Now, he held up the thermal imager and began to scan the
people around them. It was a crowded club, almost overly-warm despite the cool temperature outside. Most of the bodies he saw on the screen read warmer than average, but he knew Valerie’s signature would be distinctive. They pressed forward into the crowd.

It was strange, actually, being back here. But with their purpose in mind, the close press of bodies in the club weren’t nearly as bothersome as they had been before. Neil let his posture relax, his steps lengthen. He had survived plenty of hellholes while on the run for more than a decade of his life. Eden’s Twilight in no way topped that list. He didn’t love the crowds, or the or the distance to the exits, or the noise, but he could more than manage. Neil held up the image scanner a little higher, then handed it over to Andrew so he could scan the other side of the room.

“Oh, now you’re my kind of guy. What’s that there?” A man’s voice said from the other side of Andrew. Neil looked over to see a leather-dressed man, dark and slight, watching Andrew and the imager with interest. Andrew offered him the barest of glances.

“It’s a handheld thermal radiometer.” Andrew said. Neil watched the man frown slightly in confusion, and then Andrew went on. “It tells me if you’re hot.”

“Oh. And?” The man said, leaning in. Andrew looked up at him more fully, face still utterly blank in the flashing lights of the club, and stuck out his arm so the hand with the imager rested against the man’s chest, making the whole screen glow red.

“You’re hot.” Andrew said blandly, “but I’m looking for someone with syphilis.”

And that was – something to figure out later. Definitely – later. The man stumbled back in surprise and let them pass. Andrew handed Neil back the imager.

“Renee, Nicky, anything on the exits?” Andrew called over his radio. Both answers came back negative. But then there was a flash in the corner of the imager. A woman’s shape, bright white. “Andrew” Neil gestured to the screen.

“Renee. South-west corner” Andrew called over com, seeing it too, and beginning to shove his way through the crowd, Neil following close behind.

“She’s got someone with her.” Renee’s voice crackled out from Andrew’s shoulder. Neil could see that, in the glimpses he got of her on the imager. A bright white shape with a red and yellow one trailing after her by the hand.

“Renee, get her outside and don’t let her out of your sight, we’re right behind you.” Andrew said. They were nearly running now, or as much as they could in the crowded space. Sweat was running down Neil’s back in surprise and let them pass. Andrew pushed through first, outside into the cold.

“Valerie Boone, stop where you are!” Came Renee’s commanding voice. Valerie whipped around, eyes widening as she saw the three of them there. She looked pale beneath the streetlights, the skin of her face sagging a little. Then, a desperate look in her eyes, she grabbed for the man she’d brought out with her. Her eyes seemed to blaze. Her jaw opened, and behind her teeth was a horrifying row of jagged fangs, like shark’s teeth. She pushed the man face first against the nearest wall, the back of his neck exposed-

The next moment Valerie was on the ground, and Renee was calmly tucking away her tranq dart gun. She trotted over and offered a hand to the man, who had slid to the cold ground, shivering in shock. He got up on trembling legs, staring with wide eyes at the mouth of Valerie where she lay on
the ground. Renee turned to where Neil still stood by the door to the club, Andrew by his side, his real gun drawn and raised, eyes locked on Valerie Boone’s unconscious body. Renee looked at Andrew for a long moment, then carefully stepped between him and Valerie, blocking her from his sight. He lowered the gun with a slight shake of his head.

“Why don’t Nicky and Neil look after this man here, and you and I can take Valerie?” She suggested. Neil noticed she didn’t say where they would take her. He supposed “back to the lab” probably wouldn’t have been comforting to the man she seemed to currently be supporting almost entirely on her shoulder.

“Neil’s with me. We will take her.” Andrew said.

“All right.” Renee said easily. Nicky made it around the corner then, and she quickly filled him in. Within a few minutes, they were loading an unconscious Valerie Boone onto a stretcher and into the back of the SUV, and Andrew got them back on the road to the lab.

Exhaustion settled over Neil the moment they were moving – or maybe it was an adrenaline crash, who could say. But even as his eyelids weighted down, he couldn’t keep still. He felt restless, and the body in their back seat wasn’t helping matters.

“Take your turn.” Andrew said after a while. “I am tired of your squirming.”

“I’m not squirming because of a question, I’m just – whatever.” Neil said. He thought about what he wanted to ask. He meant to ask something that might have given him useful information. What he said was “You’re gay.”

Andrew glanced at him, sidelong. “That’s not a question, Josten.” No, but that was a confirmation, or as good as one, coming from Andrew.

“Okay. Why doesn’t anyone know you’re gay? I mean they’re all betting on you and Walker getting together, even Nicky. Didn’t you guys live together for years?” Neil asked.

“It is not my fault Nicky hasn’t managed to figure it out.” Andrew said simply. “As to the rest, Walker knows. So does everyone else for whom it is any of their business. Which is no one. Pass me a cigarette.” Neil did, stealing one for himself and making a mental note to pick up a pack soon.

“Okay.” he said again. He wasn’t sure if Andrew was expecting anything else.

If he had been, it disappeared the next moment, when an unholy, gasping hiss echoed through the cab of the car, and Valerie Boone’s hand latched itself around Neil’s throat.

The next thirty seconds were a blur in Neil’s memory. Valerie’s sharp nails at the skin of his neck, her breath inhumanly hot on his shoulders. His own startled shout slipping out of the open windows and into the night. The heavy squeal of breaks, honking horns, and the abrupt jolt of the car stopping. Neil flailed back blindly with his fists at whatever parts of Valerie he could reach, his own hand closing around the burning skin of her throat, fighting to keep her snarling mouth out of reach of his own spine.

She fell back with a thud. Neil gasped heavily, finally looking around, and found Andrew with Renee’s tranq gun in his hands.

“Whatever is burning through her spinal fluid must be burning through the tranquilizers as well.” Neil gasped, voice strained.
“Hm.” Andrew said in apparent agreement, and shot her again for good measure. Neil’s eyes danced back and forth between them, relief and adrenaline making him even shakier than before. He slowly turned back to the front and resettled himself in his seat, only breathing properly when the car was moving again, the gentle bump of the road and the chill from the open window soothing his hot, frayed nerves.

“Let’s get her inside.” Neil said when they’d arrived back at the lab.

Andrew got out of the car and went around to start unloading the stretcher, Valerie firmly re-secured to it.

“You didn’t even reach for the knife.” Andrew said.

“Huh?”

The stretcher between them, Andrew gestured at the pocket of Neil’s borrowed jacket, where his borrowed knife still sat like a loadstone against his ribs.

“Oh.” Neil said. “Next time, I guess.”

Andrew just glared, so Neil took up the other side of the stretcher, and they got to work getting Valerie inside.

Inside the lab you could have cut the tension with a knife. Boone and Kevin were staring each other down across a table, a dead rat on the steel surface between them like they were fighting over a bad choice of restaurant rather than the life or death of Boone’s wife.

“It’s the only way.” Boone said vehemently, clutching tightly to the arms of his chair. “It needs spinal fluid, and it needs to be mine.”

“You will die if we take that much out of you.” Kevin spat.

“Then I die.” Boone said. “You don’t think I deserve that, after what I’ve done to her?” Kevin made a disgusted noise, but his rage quieted into something tighter, trembling.

“If you’re suicidal take it somewhere else Boone. I won’t do the job for you.” Kevin said.

“Enough.” Andrew cut in, and Kevin and Boone’s heads both snapped toward him. “What is going on? Kevin.” He said, when Boone opened his mouth to talk.

“We figured out the formula for an antidote for Valerie.” Kevin said. “But it needs spinal fluid for it to work. We know that Boone is a match, but the amount we need is far more than he can give without it killing him. Honestly, it’s more than a healthy person could give without it killing them. It can’t be done.”

“I have enough.” Boone said, looking the surest Neil had seen him yet. “It will certainly kill me, but it would be enough.”

Neil felt his stomach turn. Boone was asking them to drain him of his spinal fluid. To intentionally kill him in order to create the antidote to save his wife. Neil looked to Andrew, who was watching Boone with suspicion, his arms crossed tightly over his chest.

“Kevin’s right.” Andrew said. “We’re not going to be your way out.”

“It’s the only-“
“That is final.” Andrew said, ice cracking through every word.

But suddenly, Neil had an awful, awful idea.

“Dr. Boone, do you think Valerie’s victims would have had to have been a spinal fluid match for her? Like, did she have some way of sensing it when she was choosing her victims, do you think?” Neil asked.

“Josten-“ Andrew started.

“Dr. Boone?” Neil spoke over him, and waited for an answer.

“Yes.” Boone said carefully. “We never nailed down the exact science, but we think it was tied to smell. She could sense when a person had a fluid type she could feed on, yes.” Bone frowned. “I’m not sure where you’re going with this.”

“I am.” Andrew said, sounding coldly furious. Neil ignored him, and turned to Kevin instead.

“Valerie approached me in the club on our first night. She…tried to make me one of her victims. She tried to do it again in the car tonight, actually. If she wanted to hunt me, she must have sensed that I was a match, right?” Neil took a breath. “I can be a donor.”

Kevin looked at him thoughtfully. “That could work.” He admitted. “If I could take, say, 10 ccs from you, and 5ccs from Boone, that would be enough. Boone, could you handle that?”

“Yes.” Boone said.

“Without dying?” Neil stressed. He could feel Andrew’s gaze heavy on the back of his neck.

“Yes.” Boone repeated. His eyes fell to Valerie’s face, still unconscious and strapped down to the stretcher. “Let’s do it.”

The rest of the prep of the antidote took no time at all. Soon, all that was left was drawing the spinal fluid from Neil and Dr. Boone. Kevin had each of them lie prone on one of the autopsy surfaces, and Neil tried very hard not to think about the irony of that just then. He was distracted from those thoughts when Kevin said

“Okay, I need to take this from the base of your spine. So shirt off, and I’ll need to push your pants down just a bit to clean the area.”

Neil froze. Pants – whatever. His lower back was relatively clear and he wasn’t particularly sensitive about it. But his shirt? He felt his face pinch, his hands balling into fists. This was to save a life, he reminded himself. It was worth it, it was worth it, it was-

“Neil.” Andrew’s voice interrupted his thoughts. He looked up and found Andrew looking intently down at him. Neil felt his own words from earlier echoing like a shot between them. It’s far from my worst scar.

“How the tables turn.” Andrew said dryly, then held up a finger to Kevin and went to rummage through a drawer across the room.

He came back holding a plastic garbage bag, a pair of scissors, and a roll of medical tape. Neil looked at him in confusion, but Andrew offered no explanation as he calmly ripped the bag down to one layer, than used the scissors to cut a small square hole in it, about the size of a large post-it note. It was only when Andrew laid the bag out over Neil’s back that he finally understood, and Neil felt
relief wash through him. Shimmying his arms beneath the covering of the bag, he carefully pulled the edges of his shirt and pants out of the way. With the plastic over him, the only bare skin showing was through the little square Andrew had cut. Andrew held up the tape in silent question, and Neil nodded. It was the work of seconds for Andrew to tape off the edges of the square so the plastic wouldn’t shift.

“Ready to go?” Kevin asked.

Neil glanced up at Andrew. “Not gonna offer me something to hold onto?” he joked.

“Hold onto the table.” Andrew recommended, unimpressed.

“And try not to squirm and get yourself paralyzed.” Kevin added unhelpfully.

The rub of the iodine was cold, and the pressure of the needle stung, but Neil had grit his teeth through worse. He breathed firmly through his nose and clung tightly to the edge of the table, and then it was over, and he let himself go limp for a minute while Kevin pressed a bandage onto his spine. Neil reached around to pop the edges of the tape carefully from his skin and shift his clothes back into place before sitting up, shrugging off the plastic shield.

Part of him wanted to thank Andrew for the consideration, but Andrew had already walked away to observe the same procedure being done on Boone. By the time Boone was getting himself back into his chair, Kevin was already combining the spinal fluid with the rest of the antidote, and within the hour he was standing over Valerie Boone, arranged on her front as Neil and Boone had been, syringe in hand. The sedatives, if they had their timing right, were set to wear off in minutes.

“I trust you, Dr. Day.” Boone said quietly. Kevin stared at him, apparently startled more by that small gift than anything else that day. He nodded a little in silent thanks, and carefully injected the solution into the base of Valerie’s spine. He withdrew the needle, smoothed out a bandage onto her, and carefully turned her onto her back, ratcheting up the gurney so she was half-sitting. And then they waited.

It was ten minutes before Valerie’s eyes fluttered open. She glanced around the room in apparent fear before her eyes landed on Boone. Her entire face lit up, her mouth stretching into a bright smile.

“Nicholas!”

“How do you feel?” he asked urgently. In response, she reached a hand up into her mouth. A second later she was holding a collection of sharp teeth, their roots already rotting as her body began to reject their foreign genetics.

“I think I’m going to be okay.” She said, then laughed. She laughed and laughed, a peeling sound that rang off the walls and cracked into Neil’s chest. “I think I’m going to be okay! Nicholas, darling, you’ve done it! You’ve-Nicholas?”

Dr. Boone had started to shake. In a moment it wasn’t tremors but convulsions, his whole body jolting with the force of it, his eyes rolling back in his head, his breath gasping.

“What’s happening?” Valerie asked desperately. “Help him!”

“Dammit!” Kevin spat. He and Andrew hurried to get Boone up onto a table, running to grab an oxygen mask, a muscle relaxant, anything that might help, but Neil already knew it was too late.

“Dammit Boone, you said you knew how much you could spare. You told me you wouldn’t let me kill you, Boone!” Kevin was shouting now, railing, even when Boone’s body went limp. When
Valerie wailed for him to stop. He shouted until Andrew gripped his arm tight enough to bruise and wrenched him bodily away from the table.

“Get ahold of yourself, Kevin.” Andrew ordered. Kevin was shaking all over, looking at Andrew like a drowning man.

“He said he trusted me.” Kevin said hoarsely. Andrew took him by both arms now, shook him roughly.

“It is not your fault he did not care if he died.” Andrew said, a harsh whisper. “Go find Nicky. We will need to talk to Wymack about this.”

At that, Kevin went, if possible, even more white.

“I killed someone.” he whispered. “I killed someone.”

“I will not let them send you away for this.” Andrew said firmly. “I promise. Now go find Nicky.” He shoved Kevin toward the door, and at last Kevin went, clutching his face in his hands.

It took a while to calm Valerie down, unsurprisingly. Neil had never been particularly affected by death, or very good with empathy in general, but he remembered the pain of losing his mother. He reminded himself that Valerie and Boone had been married, and seemingly happily – they’d intended to spend the rest of their days with each other. This was a loss that would hurt her.

But Neil explained, as carefully as he could, what Boone had done for her, the sacrifice he had made, and eventually she calmed. Eventually, Boone’s body was wrapped up and taken away, and Valerie left with a sad wave, the last of her fangs gone from her gums, but her husband gone, too. And then it was just Neil and Andrew in the lab, the chaotic mess of the last several hours sprawled out around them, the quiet of the small hours of the night heavy but for the buzz of the fluorescent lights.

Andrew turned to him, taking in his blank face.

“That apathy does not bode well for your sanity.” he commented. Neil shrugged.

“I don’t really get suicide.” he admitted. They could call what Boone had done ‘sacrifice’ instead, maybe, but they all knew it was a little of both. “I spent so much of my life just trying to survive, I can’t imagine actively trying to die.”

“And yet here you are.” Andrew said, and Neil didn’t miss his meaning. He snorted lightly, titling his head back to stare up at the ceiling, hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans. He felt Andrew watching him for a moment, but didn’t look at him. He found he couldn’t, just now.

“Yeah, well. Now Boone’s dead, and he didn’t even live long enough to tell us what he knew about ZFT.” Neil said.

“Wrong.” Andrew said, and at that Neil finally did look down.

“What?”

Andrew held something out to him – it was the little digital camera. Except now there was a sticky note on it, and in unfamiliar handwriting was written in case. Neil took it and switched it on. On the pause screen was a video still of Boone’s face, the background of the lab clear behind him. Neil held the camera out so Andrew could see, and pressed play. Nicholas Boone, who had died in this room only hours ago, came to life on the little screen.
If you’re watching this, I suppose I didn’t make it. He began. First of all, don’t take it personally, Dr. Day. You did everything you could possibly have done, I’m sure. You’ll be redeemed yet, I know it. Now, about the information I promised you…

Boone went on to explain his dealings with ZFT: the way he had been recruited, the places they’d met. He warned them that this information likely wasn’t current, they’d probably changed much of it since he’d left.

But there are some things that won’t change. He said. One: ZFT is working on creating genetic human hybrids. Soldiers against the end of the world as we know it. I think they’re testing them against each other in underground fight clubs, trying their strength.

Two: the leader. Leadership of ZFT has been being passed down through the same family for generations, like the worst kind of cult. And the leader now is particularly dangerous, young and brash, reckless. Now, I couldn’t tell you why they chose a lopsided German name when the whole leadership’s Japanese but-

Neil’s blood froze in his veins. It couldn’t be. It couldn’t. But there was nothing else it could be, really, was there?

The leader of ZFT is Riko Moriyama, CEO of Massive Dynamic.

The video ended there.

“So when Kevin said the Moriyamas were involved…” Neil started.

“Apparently.” Andrew finished.

“Do you think he knew?”

“Doubtful.”

Neil felt the bile rise in his throat. “I have to go.” he sputtered. But like a flash, Andrew’s hand was tight around the lapel of his jacket – Andrew’s jacket – tugging at the collar, forcing Neil’s head down to meet his eyes.

“You are not going anywhere.”

“Andrew I have to. If Riko-“

“You are under the protection of both me and the rest of the FBI. Riko will not get to you here. I will stop him, do you understand?”

Neil wanted to say you can’t stop my father, but Andrew thought his father was dead. So he nodded, and then he felt Andrew press something small and ridged into his palm. A key. Neil looked down curiously, and it took him a moment to realize that Andrew had taken it off his own ring – it was the key to the house in Cambridge. Neil had seen Andrew lock the door with it just the previous morning.

“Nicky mentioned you and Kevin were getting tired of living in hotels.” Andrew said. “We’re in this for the long haul, Josten. You are not going anywhere. You are staying here, got it?”

What could Neil do? He nodded again, numbly, hand curling around the metal so hard it was sure to leave marks. He could do this. He could belong a little bit more, a little bit longer.
It couldn’t last. Neil knew that. He suspected Andrew knew it too. But right here, in the buzzing light of the lab, Andrew’s key warm in his palm, Neil didn’t think there was much he wouldn’t have given to take the offer. Maybe that should have frightened him. But the strange feeling that had replaced the hollow from before wasn’t fear. It was something much less familiar.

He thought it might be hope.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!

This chapter marks the end of Part 2: "Just Around Midnight"

Up Next - Part 3: "More than One of Everything"

“And against her, ladies and gentleman, the White Fox!” Yaakov stepped back. Allison Reynolds stepped into the ring.
Part 3, Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

warnings for descriptions of a physical attack including a gunshot

Chapter Notes

**EDIT: so you might have noticed the chapter count jumped from 18 to 66 and thought - yikes dude! That's mostly because I decided to do all eleven parts/episodes in one fic rather than breaking it up into four like I'd originally planned. Still the same story, same pacing, same everything, now to be all in one place! I hope you stick around to the end!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 3: There's More Than One of Everything

Chapter 1: The White Fox

“They do take the underground thing a bit literally, I know.” Renee said conversationally as she and Andrew made their way down the second set of rickety metal stairs that led to the fighting ring. Andrew didn’t respond because he didn’t have to – Renee sometimes spoke just to ease the tension of a silence, but she wasn’t chatty by nature and she well knew that Andrew wasn’t either.

She wasn’t wrong of course, about the underground thing. The Dungeon – no points for subtlety there, but accurate – was two stories beneath the Boston asphalt, and the weight of earth above their heads had a way of making itself felt despite the reasonably high ceilings. Bald, glaring fluorescent lights hung on chains from the bare-bones system of steel rafters. The walls were unfinished concrete, the stains of years lingering on the porous surface. The floors at least were sealed, painted in layers and layers of bright, bloody red.

Fights in The Dungeon were cage matches, battled out on a kind of raised dais surrounded by high chain link. The mats on the fight floor were red, too. The fighting ring was the most brightly lit part of the room, the spectator areas were dim and sunk quickly back into shadow. The whole place stank of stale sweat, vomit, and spilled beer.

Andrew and Renee were here to see the White Fox fight. Andrew had considered whether his attendance was worth the risk, since Reynolds now knew his face, but after the winter had brought their team a string of cases involving violently-modified humans, genetically and otherwise, he was convinced that Reynolds hadn’t just taken up illegal street fighting for the adrenaline rush. Riko, Massive Dynamic, and possibly the mysterious ZFT were mixed up in it somehow, and Andrew wanted to know how.
Renee led the way through the crowd toward the dais. Her fingers played at the straps of her sports bra, the tic more of a meditative gesture than anything else. She’d left her cross necklace in Andrew’s pocket. She was fighting tonight, so she was dressed economically in black shorts and a close-fitting purple tank, high-collared but cut in to accommodate her shoulder blades in the back, like a leotard. The cut also served to show off the tattoos that were normally hidden by her office wear: twin daggers, one on each shoulder, blades pointed inwards towards her heart.

He’d asked her once, in a fit of restless curiosity, about the tattoos, why she hadn’t had them removed. She’d told him about her knives, how she’d kept them to remember her past, and as a reminder of who she was striving to become. He’d assumed the tattoos were much the same. Maybe they were. Maybe she’d just been in a mischievous mood that night, because she’d just smoothed her hair back with both hands and, with her sweetest smile, told him ‘girls think they’re hot.’

Well, there was no denying they offered a certain look when she stepped into the ring to fight.

The match she was fighting tonight wasn’t high stakes. Renee had to be careful how often she fought, and how high-profile her opponents were in fighting circles. Too often, and too high stakes, bookies would start paying attention, maybe even agents, which was the last thing they needed. Too few, too low, a quiet woman like her would quickly be labeled a spy and kicked to the curb.

“Emily!” A booming male voice cut through the crowd from somewhere up ahead. A second later, a giant emerged from the masses. He was bald, his mouth a mess of missing and cracked teeth. His nose had been badly set several times, and the left side of his face dipped awkwardly in what had probably been a busted cheekbone. He stood at well over six feet, and he was grinning down at Renee.

“Alex! Hello!” She called back in cheerful greeting, allowing him to pull her into a brief hug, her not formidable form nearly disappearing against him.

“And who is this?” Alex asked when Renee pulled back, peering down at Andrew. Now that he’d said a few words together, it was easier to hear his accent, something Eastern European that Andrew couldn’t quite place. “So tiny. Does he fight?”

Andrew had a rather inappropriate retort on the tip of his tongue, but lucky for all of them he had always preferred glaring silence to verbal mockery.

“Alex, this is my student Charlie. Charlie, this is Alex, he runs The Dungeon.” Renee said smoothly.

They both knew the risks of bringing Andrew here, of allowing him to meet Alex Yaakov, head of the largest underground fight club in Boston. Yaakov wasn’t a bad man, by Andrew’s estimation. He ran a tight ship of The Dungeon, an impressively clean show all things considered. Yaakov didn’t encourage undue violence outside the cage, discouraged actual dealing within the club, and had banned absolutely all firearms from the premises. He was just a man who liked to fight, and didn’t particularly like sports organizations telling him how he could and couldn’t do so. He wasn’t a bad man, but Andrew knew he would make a terrible enemy. Anyone who could grin through a face like that would.

“Is he fighting tonight?” Yaakov asked, appraising. “I don’t have anyone else so little on the roster.”

“Not tonight.” Said Renee, with a smile she couldn’t quite conceal. “I’m just showing him the ropes.” It wasn’t a dig. Andrew had been brawling all his life, but when it came to technique – and knives – Renee had taught him everything he knew. Yaakov was still grinning. He would probably still smile like that with blood in his teeth.
“That’s my girl. Knock them dead out there, ya?” Yaakov said, then turned to Andrew. “I will keep an eye out for you, Charlie, you look tough. We will have to think of a fight name for you, no? Let’s see. Tiny Charlie, ah, Silent Charlie- oh! of course! The Little Tramp!” Yaakov roared, delighted at his own joke, and this time even Renee couldn’t hold in a laugh, eyes sparkling with amusement that had nothing to do with appreciation for Yaakov’s pop culture reference. Andrew, for his part, raised one brow and tapped two fingers against his temple in a faux-jaunty salute. Not exactly Chaplain, but close enough to startle another throaty laugh out of Yaakov before he left them.

“I think he likes you.” Renee whispered as Yaakov walked away, voice still shaking with silent laughter. “Your own nickname already.”

“You take this to your grave, Walker.” Andrew told her, but it was without heat. It wasn’t long before Renee’s fight was about to start.

“Up next!” Yaakov shouted into his mic over the roar of the crowd from his place in the center of the red mats. “Get ready for a good fight ladies and gentlemen! We’ve got two hometown heroes facing off tonight. First, your favorite mountain of muscle, with a face almost as pretty as mine, The Shotgun!”

A man entered from across the ring. Renee had mentioned this fighter before. He looked as mean as she’d described, bald and bare-chested, with a scattering of tattoos and a collection of scars that were impressive mostly in their variety. He wasn’t enormously tall, a lick shy of six foot, but his bulky muscle clearly wasn’t all for show. He got a good cheer from the crowd of The Dungeon as he stalked onto the mats, leering around his mouth guard and pumping his fists at the spectators.

“And second to the cage, the Dungeon’s own little lady.” Yaakov continued. “Don’t let her smile fool you, this bit of dynamite will blow you to pieces. Please welcome, Phoenix!”

Renee stepped out into the red mats, her platinum bob glowing like a halo in the jitter of the fluorescent lights. She raised one hand in acknowledgement of the crowd, but didn’t break focus as Yaakov left the cage and she met The Shotgun at the center of the mats. The top of her head only reached his bottom lip, but Andrew knew it was woe to anyone who thought that made her the lesser opponent.

The difference in their body language was interesting. The Shotgun was a like a restless animal, bouncing from foot to foot, rolling his neck and joints like they might seize up if he stopped. Renee, by contrast, was a study in stillness. A perfect calm had settled over her as she’d stepped into the cage. Not her usual serenity, but a precise, deadly focus that left no room for extraneous movement. The Phoenix was Renee Walker cut down to the core; the breath of silence before an explosion; perfect potential energy.

They shook hands. They squared off.

The fight began.

They were a blur of motion on the mats. They called Renee’s opponent The Shotgun because when he attacked it was everywhere at once, a rain of fists and feet. Renee moved. She was used to using her size to her advantage, this Andrew knew because she had taught him how to do the same against her. A punch to the face wouldn’t have nearly as much power from a head down, so she aimed for his gut, his throat, the backs of his knees. The Shotgun was good, he was very good. He was more than a hobbyist, that much was clear, but it was also clear that he was used to fighting weaker opponents- people he could just beat into submission.

The Phoenix was no such opponent. She was both well-trained and well-practiced; she had learned
her style on the street and honed it in the gym. Her hands and feet were small but her hits were as precise as they were lethal. The Shotgun was brute strength but The Phoenix was vicious and always fought dirty. She was merciless.

The fight was over in five minutes. The crowd was losing its mind. Yaakov ran back on and hoisted Renee bodily up on his shoulder – she perched there like a queen, one fist raised, her face empty of everything but quiet satisfaction.


Her stoicism didn’t crack until she was out of the ring, tucked into a corner and stretching out her sore muscles. Even then it was just a small, pleased smile as she caught the water bottle Andrew tossed her and drank. She didn’t get euphoric when she fought, at least not outwardly. Andrew always wondered if it was a kind of guilt, but he never asked.

“Four fights until hers.” Andrew said when she had screwed the cap back on the bottle. They stayed in the back until then, out of the crowd for the time being, until it was time.

They made their way back to the cage just as Yaakov was introducing a female fighter on the mat. Andrew didn’t recognize her from Renee’s rosters, but his eyes narrowed when they heard her name: the Raven. She was tall, muscled like an Exy player, dressed all in black that nearly disappeared against her dark skin.

“Yaakov thinks he’s an artist.” Andrew muttered to Renee, and she nodded that she understood his meaning. With the dark walls, red mats, and bright lights, and the scheduled opponent, the next fight was going to be a work in chiaroscuro.

“And against her, ladies and gentleman, the White Fox!” Yaakov stepped back.

Allison Reynolds stepped into the ring.

She was dressed to live up to her name: spotless white sneakers, shorts and top, her blonde hair twisted back into precise twin French braids that swung down past her shoulders like a taunt. She looked pristine, and that illusion was the whole point. Some fighters wore black or red so it would be harder to tell if they were bleeding. Reynolds wore white so you would know exactly when she was, so you would watch her fight through it, unstoppable.

Her arm looked impressively real, he noticed. The only hint that something wasn’t right was the tan neoprene brace on her elbow. She and the Raven shook hands; squared off; fought.

Yaakov was an artist in more ways than one, Andrew thought as he watched them. The two fighters were a good match. The Raven was tough while Reynolds was fast and tenacious. They had clearly fought each other before. They seemed to know each other’s tells, dodged well and hit hard where it mattered. Andrew wondered if Reynolds knew all of her opponents. He wasn’t sure if their were any rules in the Dungeon that prohibited fighting with prosthetics, but no matter how good her glove looked, he doubted anything could disguise the feel of being punched with a robotic hand.

Reynolds was good, that much Andrew couldn’t have denied if he wanted to. It was no wonder she’d caught Renee’s eye. Renee had been put on assignment keeping an eye on the fight scene in Boston a little over a year ago. She and Higgins had quickly agreed that there was something going on, even farther beneath the surface. It hadn’t been until recently, with the revelations about the Moriyamas and ZFT, that they’d had any idea what that something might be.

Andrew glanced over at Renee and found her eyes glued to the ring, a small frown of concentration
of her face. She was weighted just slightly forward on her feet, Andrew saw, arms and legs twitching minutely, probably feeling the fight out for herself as she watched it, trying to anticipate the women’s moves before they happened.

The White Fox won her round, but it was a near thing. That didn’t stop Andrew from catching the tiny fierce grin on Renee’s face at the sight of it.

“Fresh air?” She asked, unrepentant even when caught. He gestured toward the door. Lead the way. They made the long walk up the stairs for Renee to breathe un-recycled air and Andrew to breathe cigarette smoke, ignoring her gentle smile when he stood pointedly downwind.

“You know you’re not allowed to fight her, right?” He said when his first hand burned down. She stuck her tongue out at him. Renee had a second fight scheduled that night, but it wouldn’t be against the White Fox no matter how entertaining Alex Yaakov or Renee herself might find it. Reynolds knew the FBI – or at least Andrew – knew her identity, but presumably she thought he’d learned it from Wymack. They didn’t think she knew Renee was with the Bureau, and certainly no one else did. It wasn’t worth the risk.

Andrew was halfway through his second cigarette when she checked her watch and jerked her head back toward the door. It was time to head in to get ready for her second fight. They were almost to the door when a sound stopped them both cold.

Muffled fighting from the other side of the building. Raised voices, garbled men and a woman’s slur. Andrew met Renee’s eyes for a split second and then they were running. The sound of fists on flesh, a cut-off scream. Three gunshots in quick succession. Pounding feet. Silence. Andrew’s breath in his own ears. Renee’s beside. He rounded the corner expecting the worst.

He wasn’t expecting to see Allison Reynolds, blood soaking her perfect white outfit, her prosthetic arm smashed, the fingers twitching grotesquely at the end of the broken glass wrist. Renee ran and crouched beside her, hands searching her abdomen for the bullet wound.

“She’s alive, but there’s no exit wound. The bullet’s still in her.” Renee said. “Allison. Allison can you hear me?”

Reynolds’ head rolled against the brick wall. Her eyes fluttered weakly. Renee pressed more firmly against her bleeding stomach and Reynolds twitched, hissing and blinking up at Renee.

“…Phoenix?” Her voice was thin and unsteady. Her eyes searched their surroundings for signs of the men who had attacked her. When they landed on Andrew, her eyes widened, probably the only flight response her body had energy left for. “Minyard? –th’ fuck?” She struggled around the words. Renee rested a hand on the side of her face.

“Stop talking.” She said gently, seriously. “Save your energy.” She turned to Andrew. “Go get the car. We’re taking her to the lab.”

Of course they were.

But even Andrew couldn’t find it in himself to make a comment about getting blood all over his good seats as Reynolds’ breath rasped through the enclosed space of the car. Later, he would get her to pay to have it cleaned. She had more than enough money. Later, if she lived.

“Alex, find someone else for my second fight tonight.” Renee was saying into her phone, clutched
between her chin and shoulder as she attempted to hold Reynolds’s blood in with both hands. “Yes I know there was money on it. No. I really don’t care, Alex.” A brief pause, and then, “Alex, I’m in a car with the White Fox, and she is currently about ten minutes from bleeding out in the back seat from a gunshot wound she got outside your club. No, I’m not taking her to a hospital, I’m taking her to a friend. But unless you want a whole lot of bad word of mouth and a dead woman on your conscience, you will find another fighter to fill in for me right now, and you will not say another word about this to anyone, do you hear me?” A heartbeat. Four. Eight.

“Good.” Renee said sharply. Then, softer. “Thank you Alex. I know. We’ll do everything we can for her, I promise. Yes, I’ll let you know.” She didn’t bother hanging up the call, just dropped the phone from her chin to the floor and let Yaakov end it.

“How long?” She asked.

“We’ll be there in five minutes.” Andrew told her. He’d already roused Kevin and Neil as well as Wymack. They would all be waiting in the lab when they arrived. Andrew took a breath and pushed them faster through the winding streets of Boston. He really didn’t need anyone dying in his car.

Kevin and Wymack were waiting with a stretcher when they arrived. Andrew let them take her without a word, but he caught Renee’s wrist as she stepped out of the car to follow them, digging in his pocket and handing back over the necklace that had been burning a hole in his pocket. She clutched it in a bloody hand with a grim nod. Then she was following after the stretcher, leaving Andrew alone with a fresh headache and a car that reeked of blood.

It was morning by the time Andrew went into the lab. He’d spent nearly two hours at a coin car wash, doing his best to get the blood out of the seats, and the rest in a nearby all-night coffee shop substituting caffeine for sleep. Renee had texted an hour ago to say the bullet was out, half an hour ago to say Reynolds was stabilized, but it would be a while before she woke up.

Inside the lab, no one was speaking. Neil was working on cleaning and bandaging Reynolds’s stitched up wound now that they were sure she wasn’t dying, while Kevin hooked her up to an IV for fluids and adding something for the pain. Neil’s gloves were bright with Reynolds blood, matching the scattered surgical tools on the table beside him even though he had no reason to have anything like proper medical training. There was a story there, somewhere. Maybe Andrew would get it out of Neil later. Wymack was sitting on the couch, amusingly out of place in his smart suit and stern frown, the seat beside him missing the cushion Andrew had stolen for his smoking perch.

The perch was where he spotted Renee, sitting on his cushion at the top of the steps, arms folded across her stomach, watching over the lab like a hawk. Her face was blank in a way he recognized from his own reflection. He left her there and pulled out his phone and dialed Nicky.

“Come to the lab, bring breakfast.” Andrew said, and hung up before Nicky could ask any questions. True to form, mother hen that he was, Nicky arrived not twenty minutes later with an armful of egg sandwiches and coffee. Andrew grabbed a sandwich and coffee and went over to the couch. He perched on the arm away form Wymack, the empty slot of the missing cushion between them. Wymack glanced pointedly at the sandwich and coffee in his hands. Andrew took an exaggerated bite. Wymack rolled his eyes, but went and got his own.

“Whatever they did, they were fast.” Andrew said when Wymack was sitting again. “Renee and I were over there in thirty seconds and she was already on the ground.” Wymack shrugged.

“Muggings aren’t supposed to be drawn out affairs, Minyard.”
“This wasn’t a mugging. And Reynolds wasn’t a random target. I doubt many people outside of Massive Dynamic knew about her arm, but it was smashed deliberately. Someone wanted to destroy her.”

Wymack appeared to be considering that when there was a commotion across the lab.

“Get the fuck off of me!” a voice was slurring. Andrew glanced over to see Reynolds sitting up on her gurney, clutching her still-fritzing arm to her chest. Neil and Kevin had backed up hastily, but Renee had made her way down from her perch by the emergency exit, quickly extracting herself from Nicky’s comforting arm and hurrying to Reynolds’ side.

“Allison?” She said. Reynolds’s eyes snapped to Renee.

“Where the hell am I? Who are you?” Reynolds snarled. Renee smoothed down her hair. She was still dressed from the club, but she was earing Nicky’s FBI windbreaker over her shorts and tank.

“My name is Renee Walker, Ms. Reynolds. I work with the FBI, and you are in a medical research lab at Harvard, here with my team. They saved your life.” She said, deliberately even. It didn’t evoke the calm she was going for. It took a full ten minutes to calm Reynolds down, only for her to start screaming again when she realized who Kevin was, and another ten minutes after that. Andrew pinched the bridge of his nose. If he didn’t wish they’d let her die on the pavement at the club, it was only the years of therapy talking.

In the end, it was realizing that they were Wymack’s team – and that Wymack himself was there – that brought Reynolds out of her frenzy. Wymack tersely explained the team he had assembled, and Reynolds glared suspiciously around at the lot of them, lingering longest on Renee.

“I can’t tell you anything about the fights.” She said at last, which was proof enough that Riko was involved, somehow. Renee nodded her understanding.

“Do you know who attacked you?” Wymack asked.

“Yeah.” Reynolds said. As Andrew had suspected. She was running her hand over and over her mechanical arm, finally dead at her side. “His name is David Robert Jones. He is – he was a student of Tetsuji’s. I mean the man was his mentor, his hero – almost a father figure, you know? At least that’s what I’ve heard. Riko initially hired him in R&D for Massive Dynamic, but they never got on. Riko fired him after about a year and he’s been out for revenge ever since.”

“Do you know why he came after you?” Renee asked. “I wouldn’t think you would be an easy target.” Allison’s mouth pulled nervously.

“I don’t know why, exactly. But I know what he was after.” She held up her prosthetic. “I designed the mechanics of this hand, but it doesn’t just run on batteries. It was powered by a very powerful energy cell designed by Riko himself. Jones took it when he attacked me.”

“What could he do with something like that?” Renee asked. Allison shook her head.

“Unfortunately, the question is, what couldn’t he do?” She said.

It was all Andrew needed to hear. He left Renee to deal with Reynolds and hauled Wymack off to the side.

“We need to bring Riko in now.” Andrew said. Wymack tugged at his collar. At some point he had taken off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves. The exposed flame tattoos wrapping his forearms looked more normal on him than a double-breasted ever would.
“Look, Minyard, give me some time to-“ Wymack began.

“Chief we have solid intelligence that ZFT is wrapped up in illegal human modification and fighting, and that Riko is behind ZFT.” Andrew said. How didn’t Wymack see that the time to act was now?

“I’m not-“

“Look, I don’t care how much money that fuck has. I don’t care how deep he thinks his political connections go. He needs to be brought down for this, and-“

“Minyard!” This time it was Wymack who cut him off, so forcefully that Neil startled from across the room. Wymack waited a beat, Andrew supposed to see if he would listen. Andrew waved his hand in an impatient gesture to continue.

“What I was going to say was I’m going to start making the necessary calls to set up the interview we both agree is necessary. And I would greatly appreciate it if you would kindly stop cutting me off when I’m trying to tell you to stop drilling, you’ve struck oil. Got it half-pint?”

Andrew did nothing but drum his fingers on his thigh for a moment.

“Got it.” he said tersely. They would talk to Riko. Andrew would get his answers if he had to shake him out of the man. He would get them by any means necessary. Wymack had to know this, and he was quietly giving Andrew the go-ahead. Internally, there was a crack of something like relief inside of him.

Typically it couldn’t last long. Wymack’s phone rang, and he picked it up with a grunt. A garbled string of words form the other end, and then Wymack was moving, snatching a paper and pen off the counter and scribbling notes down on it. He hung up the phone with a grim look that drew the attention of everyone in the room.

“There’s been an incident.” Wymack said, just as Nicky said

“Hey. Where’d Kevin go?”

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Watch out Renee, your crush is showing :)  
Thanks for reading!!

Up Next:

The twin bed still had dinosaur sheets on it. It was hard to picture the Kevin he knew ever having this kind of childishness. Kevin had been just thirteen when Neil had met him, but even three years of Tetsuji’s guardianship and Riko’s dubious brotherhood had already scrubbed all traces of youth from him.
Chapter 2: The House at Reiden Lake

A flurry of phone calls later, Kevin was still nowhere to be found. Neil wasn’t sure exactly when he had slipped away, and he would have admitted to some worry. They’d lived out of separate-but-adjointed hotel rooms for the first month of their stay in Boston, but despite their close proximity he hadn’t seen much of his new colleague outside of official case business. They’d moved into the house in Cambridge soon after the case with Valerie Boone though, and it had been…an eye opening experience.

Neil knew that neither he nor Kevin was what any normal person would call ‘socially adjusted.’ No one who spent any portion of their childhood at Evermore would be.

It was like this; the things he and Kevin had been through had turned them each inside out, but in opposite directions. Neil was habitually solitary, while Kevin didn’t like to be alone. Neil had always rolled with the punches; he was flexible to the point that he sometimes forgot to eat if there wasn’t food in the house, or there didn’t seem to be time. Kevin clung to his routines like a lifeline, and struggled whenever they veered off course. Kevin had borne his abuse because there was a light at the end of the tunnel: a career, a future, the bright promise of something better. Neil had endured his lot because what was behind him was much, much worse.

The four years they had spent living within each other’s orbit were a tenuous connection to each other at best, but they were making do. They talked about work or about new research that came out from here or there. Neil went for runs early in the morning, slipping back in the door just as Kevin was waking up. They were learning the delicate dance of staying in each other’s space but out of each other’s way. While Neil took comfort in hideaway spaces, so he’d claimed the smallest bedroom with the best view of the street. Kevin’s anxiety made him claustrophobic, and after a week they’d pushed all the living room furniture back against the walls to make a wide, breathable space by the windows.

Neil hadn’t looked forward to a roommate to expose his night terrors to – although their bedrooms were technically more separated here, it was somehow harder to face Kevin in the morning in Cambridge than it had been in the hotel, to pretend Kevin hadn’t heard. Kevin, for his part, never woke in the night screaming. He just didn’t sleep. It had been a little embarrassing the first time Neil had made his way shakily downstairs after a particularly brutal nightmare, still clammy with sweat, to
find Kevin hunched over a book on the floor by the couch facing the open expanse of the living room. All four lamps in the room were on, and Kevin looked up a bit guiltily when he noticed Neil at the foot of the stairs – he had his headphones on, never quite comfortable with silence. Fuck but they were both a mess. Well, there was little to be done about it.

“Tea?” Neil had asked wearily, and Kevin had nodded. It became – not a habit, after that, not a routine, and certainly nothing either of them looked forward to, but a known quantity. Neil had nightmares, Kevin had insomnia. Sometimes it drove them out of their rooms at the same ungodly hour, and when it did, Neil made tea. It helped Neil to remember that the world was real; that he had carved a safe space for himself in it, even if it was temporary. It helped Kevin not to be alone.

Which was why Kevin disappearing didn’t make any sense.

“He doesn’t go anywhere by himself if he can help it.” Neil said, and felt the group’s eyes turn to him. “It’s an old habit from Evermore, probably reinforced in St. Claire’s. You’re never alone. I can’t imagine what would have made him go somewhere by himself.”

“We have to consider the possibility that he’s been kidnapped.” Andrew said seriously. He’d gotten up from his perch in the couch as soon as Wymack had hung up the phone. He was still dressed from the fight club –black joggers and a short-sleeved black hooded sweatshirt that finished down over his hips. It suited him better then his button downs ever did, and emphasized the demand in his voice. Neil remembered Andrew’s promise of protection to Kevin in the interview room at St. Claire’s. He wondered if Andrew felt like he had broken that promise – if he felt anything about it at all. “His coat and hat are gone, but if Riko’s behind this he could have been coerced.”

There was something uncomfortably like panic beginning to bubble in Neil’s gut. Wymack put in a call with the police department to keep their eyes out. If Kevin had left on his own, where had he even gone? How had he even called a cab? He didn’t have a cell phone, as far as Neil knew.

“What else can we do?” Renee asked. Neil had learned she was nearly always the voice of calm reason, of reassurance. The thing was, no one had an answer for her. Then, Allison Reynolds spoke up.

“I think I can help.” Allison said. “I just need my phone.” Renee grabbed it for her out of her bag, and she quickly dialed.

“Hi. Yeah, no just a little under the weather today that’s all, don’t worry about it dear. Hey, I need a priority one grid search, and I need it under the table, can you do that for me? You’re a doll. Okay, subject is Kevin Day. Yes. Yes. As soon as possible. Now.” Allison shuffled uncomfortably on the gurney, her mangled arm bent awkwardly against her chest. “Hey, have Jean give me a call, could you? I might need him for something later. Thanks a million dear. Bye.” She hung up the phone, and turned to Wymack.

“Close your ears, Agent Wymack.” She said. He crossed his arms suspiciously, but Allison addressed her next words to Andrew and Renee.

“Massive Dynamic maintains remote access to all our traffic and security cameras. I’m getting a colleague to use them to track down Kevin. If he’s been anywhere within sight of a camera, we’ll find him.” Allison said. Neil understood why she’d told Wymack to close his ears – there was no way that was even remotely legal, but he wasn’t about to complain, and Allison and Wymack must have had some kind of deal, because he frowned but said nothing.

Still it was a relief to know that something concrete was being done to find Kevin. Patience wasn’t a natural instinct to Neil, but compartmentalization he knew by muscle memory. He shoved aside
worry about Kevin for the moment right as Andrew spoke next.

“What’s the incident, Chief?”

The incident had been in New York City, not far from Massive Dynamic’s headquarters. A truck had crashed in the middle of a busy street, careening to a halt against a flood of traffic in the middle of an intersection. The back end of the truck looked like it had been sheered off by a laser; it was simply missing, a gaping opening with a slight burn around the edges. The truck itself was empty, and the driver hadn’t survived the crash.

None of that was why Wymack – and by extension, the FOXES Division – had gotten the call. They’d gotten the call because according to eyewitness accounts, the truck had appeared in the intersection as though out of thin air.

It felt routine, at this point. Whenever Wymack got a call, they listened through the normal bits and waited for the curveball. This time it was a truck that had appeared to teleport. Of course, it was usually Kevin who came up with whatever grand scientific theory explained the latest incident, and Kevin wasn’t here.

Without Kevin, they would have to rely on regular detective work. Andrew and Renee had been sent all of the information from the scene and divided it between themselves, scouring photographs, data, witness statements, anything taken from the scene that could tell them what had happened. Andrew and Renee were good at their jobs, some of the best, but what they found made the whole thing make even less sense than before.

The VIN of the truck didn’t exist. According to Andrew, the only way that was even remotely possible was if someone had managed to build a semi from scratch in their garage. Even then, the weirdness didn’t stop. The company advertised on the trailer didn’t seem to be real, nor did the shipping company listed on the cab door. The address was an empty field in Hudson; the telephone number was a dentist’s office.

The fingerprints of the driver pulled no matches in any database. That didn’t necessarily mean anything – plenty of people had never been fingerprinted – but his driver’s license came up as false too. In fact, the whole license card looked like expensive nonsense, like an incredibly realistic movie prop. It had a hologram strip and everything, but it didn’t look anything like the licenses issued by the state of New York. They’d even found the man’s name in the DMV database – same face, same name, same state – but the address on the license was different. Why use a obviously fake CDL when you had a real one?

“Makes no goddamn sense.” Andrew was muttering to himself. His body was facing his work, but he was staring up at the emergency exit door. Probably wanting a cigarette but refusing to break focus.

Neil was feeling excruciatingly useless. Now that Allison wasn’t on the brink of death, there was nothing for him to do here. He wasn’t a real Bureau agent, he couldn’t comb through databases or intuit his way to the truth. There was no way for him to help.

Suddenly, Andrew turned to him.

“Josten, you make any sense of this identity shit?” Andrew asked. His tone was blank, but Neil knew a challenge felt a shiver go down his spine.

“What’s your name?” The setting sun was hidden behind February snow clouds.
“You know my name.”

“I know what your ID says. I’m not an idiot, Neil. I told you I would keep your stupid secrets. But I need to know who you are if I am going to protect you.”

Andrew had snow on the tips of his eyelashes and the shoulders of his wool coat, and Neil wasn’t sure when he had started believing Andrew could stand between him and his demons, but apparently he had. Even so-

“I’ll tell you. When I think of something I want to know enough to trade.”

“Do that.”

Neil shook himself out of the memory. Andrew hadn’t broken his promise to keep Neil’s secrets yet. This might be a quiet dare, a prod to remind him the truth Andrew was still owed, but Andrew didn’t expect Neil to out himself in a room full of other agents just to help on a case.

“As a fake ID, it doesn’t make much sense.” Neil admitted. “Why not pretend to work at an existing shipping company? Why the fake address and the weird phone number? It’s actually a sloppier ID than if he’d picked somewhere real, because it’s more noticeable.”

Andrew nodded briefly – apparently Neil had echoed his own thoughts on the matter.

There was a small trill from across the room – Allison’s phone ringing. She snatched it up, pulling a keyboard and mouse from a nearby computer and typing and clicking furiously even as she talked. Soon, a grainy image popped up on the screen.

It was Kevin. The video was only minutes old, and he appeared to be fine, exiting a cab on the corner of what looked like a summer camp town in the mountains. He was alive.

Neil was surprised by how relieved he was at that news. Kevin wasn’t a friend, he never had been. But Neil’s life had been tied up in his since childhood. He’d always hoped that Kevin would be able to have the life he couldn’t. That had turned out to be a foolish hope, but still. If Kevin was dead, what hope did Neil have? Less than none at all.

“Where is this?” Andrew demanded.

“Upstate New York, a little dot on the map town called Reiden. Anybody heard of it?” Allison said. Wymack swore, which was a good an answer as any – they all turned to look at him. He looked aged by years in an instant.

“Reiden Lake.” Wymack’s voice came out choked. He cleared his throat roughly and started again. “Reiden Lake was where Kaleigh had her summer home.” He said.

“Kaleigh Day?” Renee asked curiously.

“You knew her.” Andrew said, a statement rather than a question. Neil watched Andrew watch Wymack, and hoped Andrew wasn’t about to start a fight. Neil knew all about the need to keep secrets, the habit of it. If Wymack had withheld knowing Kevin’s mother, he could well have had a good reason to. Wymack nodded.

“Kevin knows you knew her.” Neil realized. That at least might explain why Kevin looked at Wymack with a weird kind of awe when he thought Wymack wasn’t looking. Wymack spread his hands a little, an uncharacteristically tentative gesture. He might, he might not. “I’m guessing you haven’t talked about it.”
“Kevin Day, talk about it?” Andrew said with a quirk of a brow. And yeah, that was fair.

“I knew her in undergrad.” Wymack said, his gruff voice unusually wistful “Firecracker of a woman, bright as anything. I was there on an Exy scholarship and didn’t mean to do anything but get by in the academic department. Kaleigh was my tutor in biology.” Wymack smiled at the memory. “She somehow got convinced I was more than just some meathead, thought I could make something of myself. We kept in touch a little, over the years. She was the one who talked me into applying for the FBI.” He sighed deeply. “When she died…what a loss for the world.”

Neil tried to imagine grieving for someone like that, someone you had only known for a few years. He tried to imagine a mere acquaintance meaning so much to him that their loss would weigh on him decades later. He came up short.

“You said Reiden Lake was her summer home?” Renee asked, gently prodding.

“She owned a little house there. I guess it would belong to Kevin now.” Wymack said. “Though god knows why he would go there now.”

“And alone.” Added Neil. He had already made up his mind about what to do. “I’ll go get him.”

Everyone looked at him in surprise, but it was Andrew who spoke.

“I am coming with you.” Andrew said, stepping into his space. Neil had expected he might. Andrew had been even more tense than usual since they had discovered Kevin was missing. But just as much as Neil understood how seriously Andrew took his promise of protection, he knew that this was something he had to do. He owed it to Kevin.

“Andrew, you have a case to solve and I’m not any help here.” Neil said. “I’ll go get Kevin.”

“I don’t trust you.” Andrew said, like that wasn’t abundantly clear. Neil nearly laughed although nothing was funny.

“I’ve survived worse than Kevin Day in a mood, Minyard.” Neil reminded him. “I’ll be fine. Kevin will be fine.”

For a moment, Neil was sure Andrew was going to refuse. He found himself longing for a cigarette just to have something to hold between himself and Andrew. Something to do with his hands.

Then Andrew’s hand was tossing him something, and Neil was caching it on instinct, without looking.

“You don’t get to keep this one.” Andrew said. Neil looked down – it was a car key. He looked back up at Andrew in surprise. “If you so much as dent it, I will kill you.” Andrew told him, and then he was walking away without a look back. Neil looked back down at the car key in his palm, a small thing, dangerously expensive, still warm from Andrew’s pocket.

Neil closed his hand around the key.

“We’ll be back soon.” Neil said.

It had been several years since Neil had been behind the wheel of a car. Actually, he had never actually taken a formal road test, under any of his identities. It just hadn’t seemed like the moment to mention it when Andrew, despite his own words, was handing over the key to his car with
something very much like trust hidden in the blank lines of his face. Besides, Neil Josten had a valid Massachusetts license from the time he had supposedly lived in Boston, and Neil was confident he knew the rules of the road and how to operate a vehicle without getting pulled over or crashing.

At least, he was pretty sure of that, right up to the moment he tried to maneuver a Maserati through the streets of Boston. Boston drivers were as crazy as the streets they were forced to navigate, it turned out. It made sense that this was where Andrew had learned to drive. Neil held his breath through a series of left turns that by all rights should have been illegal except that everyone else was making them, and thanked the stars that his mother had seen fit to teach him to drive a stick shift.

Neil had never been fond of driving. He preferred the reliable rhythms of his own body, or at least the anonymity of mass transit, to get his from place to place. Cars were, at least in his experience, unreliable death traps, and this one was the furthest thing from anonymous you could get. It had also held a near-death Allison Reynolds just the day before.

Neil tried lighting a cigarette from the glove box just to calm his nerves, but even surrounded by the low rolling mountains of New England, the flicker of the lighter against the smell of the leather seats and the lingering odor of blood was enough to make his stomach heave. The cigarette was tossed before it was half-burned. Neil rolled down all the windows and pressed his foot to the gas, willing the exit for Reiden Lake to come into view.

It took its time, as geography always seemed to at times like this, slipping by in unhurried rolls no matter how much Neil pushed at the edges of the speed limit. Neil reached it eventually, though, and shortly after that he was rolling down a small gravel path toward the water, coming to a stop beside a small red bungalow.

Neil closed the car door quietly behind himself and made his way toward the house. It was a small place – one level with a wrap around porch that had probably once been a cheerful, crisp white. Now most of the paint was cracked and greying. There were no other tire tracks in the dirt. Kevin must have walked all the way from town. The front steps of the porch were covered in a layer of dirt and leaves, just recently kicked-through. The screen door creaked as Neil pushed it open.

“Kevin?” Neil called into the house. The whole place smelled musty, rot settling in from a combination of harsh winters and hot, humid summers with no upkeep. It clearly hadn’t been empty for the whole twenty two years since Kaleigh Day had died. Kevin must have continued to come here as he’d gotten older, taking solace away from Evermore where he could. Certainly, it hadn’t been touched in nearly a decade. Neil grimaced a little at the way the dust coated the inside of his nose, the back of his throat. At least he knew Kevin was here – there were fresh footprints in the thick dust on the floor.

Neil followed the footprints past a small kitchen and breakfast nook, the afternoon light pouring through the dirty windows, spilling generously on the table with it’s faded checked cloth. Across from the kitchen was a little living room, with rustic wooden tables and a matching sofa and armchair in faded plaid. Past both rooms, the footprints split off in either direction. Neil followed them to the right first, and found an open door at the end of a short hallway.

“Kevin? It’s Neil.” He called, although surely Kevin had heard his footsteps by now. There was no answer. That didn’t mean that Kevin wasn’t there. Neil pushed open the door.

It was a child’s bedroom. Kevin’s. Even though this had been a vacation home, the room was overflowing with the marks of a child enamored by science and the physical world. A poster of Einstein was tacked crookedly to the wall. The little shelf and nightstand overflowed with primer books on planets, the stars, volcanoes – anything and everything there was to be discovered, it seemed young Kevin had wanted to know it. Someone – either Kevin, Kaleigh, or both – had stuck
glow in the dark stars to the ceiling. Neil would have been willing to bet they formed real constellations. The twin bed still had dinosaur sheets on it. It was hard to picture the Kevin he knew ever having this kind of childishness. Kevin had been just thirteen when Neil had met him, but even three years of Tetsuji’s guardianship and Riko’s dubious brotherhood had already scrubbed all traces of youth from him. It hadn’t seemed odd to Neil, who had been homeschooled before Evermore and never exposed to boys his own age. He had just assumed it was Kevin. Now, he wondered.

Unbidden, Neil’s thoughts turned to Andrew. Their truth game had continued on and off in the time since Valerie Boone and the disaster of Eden’s Twilight, and they’d each been poking at the mysteries of each other’s pasts, bit by bit. Andrew had grown up in foster care – that much Neil had already known. But Andrew’s stories and snatches of truth never stretched back that far if he could help it, and Neil’s curiosity had gotten the better of him one night.

“Did you like your foster parents?” Neil asked. He had been thinking about his own parents, about the times he had considered running away. About the times his mother spat that they should have given him away. The times his father said they should just kill him and be done with it. Lola offering to get rid of his body. His mind felt unfocused, hazy in the cold air of the rooftop and the clouds of cigarette smoke.

“How many were there?” Neil asked cautiously.

“Thirteen.” Bored. But that was – that was a lot. Thirteen foster homes in less than fifteen years was a lot. Neil almost blurted out ‘why?’ but caught himself at the last second. It felt rude, not to mention it was unlikely to get an answer. Instead he amended his question.

“Well, were any of them good?”

Andrew took a long time to answer. Neil watched him, studied his unmoving features, his gaze fixed on the horizon. The silence was so long Neil was on the verge of taking the question back when Andrew finally lowered his cigarette.

“The last ones tried.” He said bluntly. “I almost- I was never going to be able to keep her.” He turned to Neil then, a deadly mockery of a smile clinging to the edges of his lips. Neil was frozen to the spot. Andrew never looked at him when answering Neil’s questions. He watched Neil talk, and most days seemed to tolerate being watched in between, but he turned away whenever it was his turn, preferring to offer his answers to the uncaring air. This was a departure, and Neil found it wasn’t a pleasant one.

“She should have known better.” Andrew said, the words carving into Neil for reasons he couldn’t grasp. “I should have know better, too. Not as smart as I thought I was, I guess.”

That had been over a week ago, and the openness of the answer had nagged at Neil all the while. Now, standing a room that spoke so clearly of childlike wonder and when it had ended, he heard Andrew’s voice again, like an echo.

“I was never going to be able to keep her…I should have known better, too.”

Neil wondered if Kevin thought much the same thing. He left the bedroom, barring the bathroom (tiny, empty) and a locked door off to the side with no footsteps in front of it, there was only one
room left to check in the house. Neil made his way to the other end of the hall and knocked on the closed door there.

“Kevin?” He called out. “Kevin I’m coming in.” Neil opened the door.

The bedroom was larger than the first, though only slightly. The windows were hung with light lace curtains, blowing slightly from a breeze through a cracked pane of glass. The queen sized bed was covered in a floral-patterned quilt, and on that quilt was Kevin Day, still and flat as a corpse, eyes staring blankly up at the motionless ceiling fan.

“Kevin.” Neil said. It was enough to get Kevin’s head to roll heavily to the side to look at Neil.

“…Neil.” Kevin finally acknowledged, and Neil breathed a sigh of relief. He’d been half-expecting Kevin to call him by his old name. Kevin looked bone-tired, his face haggard and his eyes red and puffy like he’d been crying. But his voice and eyes were clear. He didn’t look drunk or high, but he had one hand clutched so tightly around a small picture frame that his thumb had punctured the glass, blood oozing slowly onto the paper below.

“What the fuck, Kevin?” Neil said, and let that hang, not breaking eye contact until Kevin finally got restless enough to answer.

“This was her room.” Kevin said.

“Yeah, I got that Kevin.” Neil said with a roll of his eyes. “I know this is her place. But what are you doing here?” Kevin only sighed at him. Neil looked balefully down at him.

“I’m going to see if there’s anything to make tea.” He told Kevin. “Turn your brain on and be ready to talk when I get back.”

There was no power in the house, but Neil spotted a camping stove tucked in a corner that miraculously still had a little fuel left, and a small kettle. Loose tea would have long gone stale after years just lying around, but a search of the drawers turned up a handful of sealed packets that actually still smelled like something when Neil tore them open, and even a bottle of honey. It took an age to get the water hot on the camp stove, but eventually the tea was made.

When Neil made his way into the bedroom, Kevin was sitting up, scooted to the corner of the bed furthest from the door. He’d wiped his bloody thumb off on his shirt, and he seemed to have stopped actively bleeding by the time Neil handed him is mug.


“I didn’t want to be alone, really.” Kevin said, hands wrapped around the mug like it was the only thing keeping him warm. It was cold in the bungalow. “I just needed to be here.”

Neil took a deliberate sip of his tea. Definitely stale, but bearable. He took another.

“Why?” he asked. Neil didn’t expect a quick answer and he didn’t get one. He continued to sip quietly at his mug. When it was almost empty, Kevin spoke.

“She was shot.” he said. Neil frowned.

“Allison Reynolds?”

“My mother.”
Of course.

Neil hadn’t clipped that particular newspaper article for his collection – he’d been a toddler when Kaleigh Day had been shot dead in her own home in a robbery gone wrong. He’d read about it later, though. Perpetrators never caught. Her ten year old son had been in the house at the time of the intrusion. At the time, it had been considered a miracle that he had survived.

Neil’s eye caught on the bloodied photograph now lying at the foot of the bed. It showed a laughing Kaleigh Day, a Kevin of perhaps six or seven overflowing out of her arms, all limbs and smiles. She’d had Kevin young, before she’d even finished her PhD. Neil stared at the woman in the photograph, thin and blonde and laughing. She would have been perhaps thirty five when she’d died – not much older than Allison Reynolds was now. The resemblance was superficial, but now that it was in front of Neil it was inescapable. It was little wonder Kevin had been pulled under.

That didn’t mean Neil had time to indulge him, though.

“Allison is going to be fine.” Neil told him firmly. “You helped save her life. She helped us find you, actually. But now you need to come back to the lab.”

“Why?” Kevin asked. He still sounded exhausted, but now more alive than dead.

“Because the man who shot Allison has been involved in a suspected terrorist attack in New York City. His name is David Robert Jones and-“ Kevin, who had been staring into his tea, jerked his head up sharply at the name, eyes wide. “…you know him?”

It was like watching a blurry video of Kevin Day come back into focus. He put down the tea, smoothed his hands over his bloodied shirt, and turned to face Neil across the bed. He was pale and shaky, but there was a spark of purpose in his eye.

“Neil, I need you to tell me everything you know about this supposed terrorist incident.” he said.

Neil told him everything, the truck and the “window” and the ID markers that didn’t add up. Neil told him about the battery missing from Allison’s arm and Kevin swore.

“Now do you understand why we have to go back?” Neil asked. But Kevin shook his head.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?” Neil asked. They had to go back.

“My mother bought this house for a reason.” Kevin said. “It was an ideal spot for some of her and Tetsuji’s experiments. It’s on a…” Kevin trailed off, looking suddenly uncertain. He was staring at Neil in a way Neil had noticed him doing from time to time, like Neil was something Kevin had dreamed up and was likely to disappear in an instant. Like he was from another planet.

“What is it, Kevin? What do you know?” Neil prompted, getting irritated. They were wasting time. Kevin sighed deeply.

“Is there more tea?” he asked. “Because this is a long story.”

Chapter End Notes
Kevin and Neil BONDING. YES.
Thanks for reading!

Up Next:

Across from Andrew, Renee cocked her head to one side. *Ready?* He nodded, and she turned to Reynolds, smoothing back her hair.
“What do we need to know?” Renee asked.
“Okay.” Reynolds said. “Buckle up geeks, this is gonna get weird.”
Chapter Summary

Andrew's POV

Chapter Notes

warnings this chapter for brief descriptions of mutilated bodies (of children...sorry)

For those of you who know Fringe: we're starting to get into it now! Here we go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3: Deja Vu

By the time Andrew realized he hadn’t asked Neil if his driver’s license was even real, Neil and the Maserati were both long gone from the parking lot of the Harvard lab. Another belated realization – Neil still didn’t have a phone. Neither did Kevin, as far as Andrew was aware, and no doubt service to the little summer home at Reiden Lake had been cut long ago. The good news was that the car was a stick, so if Neil hadn’t known how to drive it he probably wouldn’t have even gotten out of the parking lot.

The bad news was that Andrew hadn’t thought much about Neil’s leaving because he was immediately distracted by a development in the case. As they’d been going over the details of the incident in New York yet again, Reynolds had spoken up.

“Can I look at the video?” Reynolds asked. She’d been getting twitchier by the minute, sneaking worried glances at Wymack like there was something she needed to tell him, but was afraid to. Wymack nodded to her and pulled up the video footage on a nearby monitor. It was even more unreal on tape than in description. The truck didn’t just appear. It was like it drove into existence. A swath of air over the Manhattan intersection seemed to shimmer, like a rippled pane of glass, and then the truck seemed to appear through it.

“There’s more then one of everything.” Reynolds said, almost a murmur, but there was weight in every word.

Wymack went a shade pale, and there was an out-of-place twitch threatening to show in his solid frame. Reynolds looked positively grim.

“What.” Andrew said.

“I think I know what Jones is doing.” Reynolds said. She didn’t look away from Wymack, her whole posture worlds away from the pin-neat business woman with the bloody razor smile Andrew had first met in the offices of Massive Dynamic. She looked shaken and maybe just a bit resigned.

“Do you want to do the honors of explaining, or shall I?”
“Be my guest.” Wymack said.

Allison adjusted herself in her seat, tucking a few flyaway hairs behind her ears with her left hand, and tugged a little at her clothes – Renee’s spare ones from her gym bag, so they were a little short and left her looking oddly ordinary. She still had blood in her braids. She was no longer looking at any of them in particular.

“Okay, I have no idea how to ease into this, so I’m just going to say it.” Allison said. “Jones is trying to create a portal to a parallel universe.”

What. The. Fuck.

It was the kind of silence where you heard the most minute, mundane things: the ticking of a clock, the cars on the street, the beating of your own pulse. Andrew had never been one to roll with the punches. He’d learned young to beat whatever parts of his reality into submission he could. The words stuck in his brain and refused to register.

“You’re joking.” Nicky said, the first to find his voice. “You’re fucking joking.”

“I wish she was.” Wymack said, and that was enough to shake Andrew’s scrambling thoughts back into line.

“You knew about this, Chief? You believe her?” He asked sharply.

“Believe me Minyard, it took a lot of convincing.” Wymack said. “But...yeah. Massive Dynamic has been aware of the existence of a parallel universe – alternate reality, whatever you want to call it – for some time. Reynolds here clued me in about a year ago. You lot-“ Wymack’s hands were on his hips as he scanned the room, “weren’t to be read in until absolutely necessary. I hope you can understand why.”

He didn’t look like he was lying, though that didn’t mean he wasn’t just deluded. But Andrew had, almost despite himself, developed a begrudging respect for the man in their months working together. He didn’t think Wymack was one to be easily swindled by a fanciful story. If Wymack thought this was real, there was proof enough for him to believe it.

Andrew wasn’t sure if that was more or less worrying.

“I don’t.” Andrew said in the end.

“Because it’s fucking weird, Minyard.” said Wymack, sounding exasperated. “Please use your brain for one godforsaken second. There’s a parallel universe, and we have the technology to travel to it, although it’s very, very dangerous. Some of the best agents I know would have a breakdown just thinking about it. Tell me, why should we read you in on this a moment before it becomes absolutely relevant?”

“We are not those other agents.” Andrew said simply. They were both right. They both knew it. It wasn’t so much an impasse as a moment of mutual recognition.

A parallel universe. Andrew shoved at his scrambling thoughts like a mess of fallen boxes, ramming until they fell back into line, into their proper places. He could worry about the implications later. Right now there was a truck from nowhere in the middle of a New York street, and it was his job to stop it from happening again.

His brain had always been good at puzzles; if this was what it took to figure this one out, so be it. Andrew packed away every reservation, every disbelieving demand, every instinct demanding he
somehow fight the very idea of this, and tightened down the latches firmly.

Across from him, Renee cocked her head to one side. Ready? He nodded, and she turned to Reynolds, smoothing back her hair.

“What do we need to know?” she asked.

“Oh okay,” Reynolds said. “Buckle up geeks, this is gonna get weird.”

The parallel universe had been discovered some twenty-five years before, Reynolds explained. Tetsuji Moriyama and Kaleigh Day had been the ones to discover it, but they hadn’t shared their research, too afraid of the impact it would have on the public. They didn’t have the technology to cross over then, just a machine that allowed then to look, like a little window. It wasn’t until years later that they made the first cross.

“How similar is the other universe to ours?” Renee asked. She had one finger wrapped through her necklace.

“I’ve never been, so this is only what I know from Riko and my own research but—” Reynolds said “quite similar. It’s our world. It’s… it’s us. There’s another one of each of us over there, living our lives, just a little differently. The theory is that they actually began as one, at the beginning of time, and just…grew apart. Maybe a deliberate schism, maybe some kind of weird cosmic anomaly, we don’t know. But they’re connected somehow, we know they have to be.

“There’s no other explanation for the extent of the similarities. Like… have you ever had Déjà vu? Like you’ve been somewhere before even though you know you haven’t? Déjà vu is like a glimpse of the other side, a moment where the skin between your reality and the reality of you over there is thin. But it’s just a glimpse. What Jones is trying to do is create a portal that will allow him to physically cross into the other universe. My guess is to finally kill Riko, because Riko crossed over through his own portal weeks ago and has been hiding there ever since.”

Andrew made a derisive noise that clearly meant let him. Reynolds must have understood, because she responded accordingly.

“Look, Agent Minyard, I know what you think of Riko. But the fact remains that what Jones is doing is going to hurt a lot of innocent people. Not to mention, you can’t just tear holes in the universe without consequences. Jones isn’t being careful, and I’m afraid what he’s doing will cause lasting damage.” Here, Reynolds held up a hand in anticipation of Andrew cutting her off.

“I don’t know if you give a shit about that either.” She said. “So I’m going to offer you a trade. I know your vendetta against Riko is personal as much as professional, Agent Minyard. In fact, I’m counting on it. So here’s the deal. You stop Jones from tearing up the universe, and I will make sure you get your in-person meeting with Riko.”

She held out her left hand. “Deal?”

Andrew wasn’t fond of being figured out so quickly, but it wasn’t like she was wrong. He folded his arms across his chest rather than take her hand, but he said “Deal.”

He was out the door seconds later, cigarettes already out of his pocket. It wasn’t until he got to the roof that he realized he was waiting to hear footsteps behind him – it had been awhile since he’d been up here alone. Neil had taken to accompanying him out here more times than not, seeming to find solace in the smoke and a sort of mutual, companionable aloneness. Andrew lit up and told himself he was grateful for the solitude.
Just when Andrew thought he was getting a handle on his new life, it went and did this. It was too much. Andrew couldn’t deal with it, couldn’t imagine how anyone else was. Another reality, another version of this shitty world, as if one wasn’t enough. As if the universe – except he couldn’t think of it that way anymore, could he? – as if the goddamn multiverse needed any more of that shit. Really.

Andrew couldn’t think about the people over there, not if he wanted to keep his head on straight. Andrew rearranged his brain again – the other universe was a dark box containing nothing but a cowering Riko Moriyama. The rest of it didn’t matter. The rest of it could be a black hole – was a black hole, as far as Andrew was concerned. The only think opening a gate to such a place could bring was destruction. So Andrew would stop Jones, and then he would get his meeting with Riko. And then he would, well, he wouldn’t forget, but he was going to damn well pretend he knew nothing about all of this for the rest of his life.

But then, he’d said that before, hadn’t he?

It wasn’t long before his phone rang. Renee.

“Talk to me.”

“There’s been another one.” came Wymack’s voice through the phone. Damn Walker and her tricks. Andrew would have hung up immediately, but there was a note of fear buried in the Chief’s voice that made him freeze with the phone at his ear.

“Agent Minyard, did you hear me?”

“What the fuck do you mean there’s been another one?” Andrew demanded.

“A soccer field in Providence. A bunch of kids playing a game when-”

“-Like New York?” Andrew cut him off.

“Worse.”

Andrew did not like the sound of that.

“I want you and Walker on the scene as fast as you can get there.” Wymack said, as if Andrew wasn’t already putting out his cigarette and making his way down the stairs at a clattering pace.

The drive to Providence took less than an hour, but it felt years longer. Renee had offered him the keys and although he hated driving the clunky government vehicles, he’d accepted just to have something to do. Impatience was itching under Andrew’s skin. He wasn’t usually like this, but his brain was still in tumult despite his best efforts, still trying to wrap itself around the phrases ‘alternate reality’ and ‘hole in the universe’ and now ‘children’s soccer game.’

“I hate when it’s kids.” Renee broke the silence of the car quietly as they pulled up to the scene with its flashing lights. Andrew just tightened his hands on the wheel. She knew he did too.

The air in Providence was bright and the ground clear of snow, but it was cold, even for early spring. For that, Andrew was the closest thing he ever was to grateful. Neither of them were strangers to blood and gore, or particularly bothered by it. Still, Andrew hoped – and he told himself it was for Renee’s sake, because it really wasn’t any fun to watch her get sad – he hoped the scene wasn’t too gruesome. Wymack had left strict instructions for the scene not to be touched until they got there, which meant there was nothing but a few hastily erected tents shading the bodies from the sun on the
At least the cold meant there was no smell. It meant there were few insects crowding the scene even with the time it had taken him and Renee to arrive. It meant there were few passers-by to get in their way, to gawk and leer at the carnage. Andrew idly wondered when he had begun caring about such things. Walker’s unhelpful influence, probably.

It was a gruesome scene, but there was no use pretending it was anything he hadn’t seen before. For one, he had seen too much in his career, and especially with his short time in FOXES Division, for much to shock him even if it was new. For another, he actually had seen a body cut in half before. And whatever the strange circumstances, that was what he was looking at now.

According to witnesses, it had happened much like the case in New York. A small group of men, lead by a man matching Jones’ description, had been seen operating a strange piece of black equipment near the soccer field. Moments later, there was a shimmer in the air, maybe 10x10 feet, like a rippling window. The window had stayed open for less than ten seconds, during which time three young boys had run over to investigate. The window had closed as the young boys were attempting to reach through it. Apparently, the laws of physics didn’t appreciate having people hanging half in, half out of them. When the window had winked shut, it had sliced through them like a laser. Like a guillotine.

Except, not quite like that. Because the halves of their bodies that had been on the other side of the window had disappeared. Not turned to ash, not hacked to pieces, not carried away as trophies by some deranged killer, like Andrew had seen before. They were just gone. Sliced off and swallowed up by the window. By the black hole.

“It’s not the most awful thing we’ve ever seen.” Renee murmured form beside Andrew. “But somehow it’s the most disturbing.”

She wasn’t wrong.

Andrew tracked down the officer in charge of the scene and arranged to have the bodies transported back to the lab. He doubted they would be of any use, but maybe when Kevin got back he would be able to make something of the strange, cauterized wounds. There was almost no blood on the ground. But there was something – a burned line in the grass that hadn’t been visible on the New York asphalt, an inch wide and ten feet long, right where the window had been. And around it, a wide circle where the grass appeared to have been blown flat, from the center out, by whatever force had created the window. Andrew took a few pictures and followed Renee from the scene. None of it made any goddamn sense at all.

“We know what Jones it trying to do, more or less.” Renee said, later, sitting over cups of coffee in a nearby café. “And we’re pretty sure we know why. The thing we don’t know is, why isn’t it working?”

“Walker, three kids got sliced in half by his magic window, what about that would you call not working?” Andrew asked acidly. Renee eyed him levelly over her cappuccino. He was biting the wrong head off and they both knew it.

“He must have failed in New York or he wouldn’t have tried again.” She said. “And no one saw him walk through the window in the eight seconds it was open, so we have to assume he failed here, too. It’s almost like…” She trailed off, fussing with her necklace. Suddenly Andrew understood where she was going.

“Like these have been practice runs.” Andrew finished the train of thought for her. “If that’s true,
where and when is the real deal?"

“And how do we stop him?” Renee added softly.

Andrew’s coffee was getting cold anyway. There was nothing left for them to do in Providence.

“Let’s go back to the lab.” He said. In the car, he dialed Nicky.

“Agent Hemmick,” Andrew said, “I need you to gather up every FOXES case and every open case file referring to unexplained natural or biological phenomena you can find and bring them to my office. Walker and I are on our way back now.”

Renee threw him a surprised glance from the passenger seat.

“Going back how far?” Nicky asked. Andrew considered for a moment.

“All of them.” He said, and hung up the phone.

“All of them” turned out to be a stack of case files going back twenty years. They were brought to Andrew’s desk on hand carts stacked four high with boxes. Some of the newer boxes contained just a handful of essential hard copy items, but many of the older ones were stuffed to overflowing with photos, witness statements, notes on anything that might have been of use.

Going through the files took hours. At some point Renee stopped by with more coffee, cast a critical eye over the mess, and joined him. She didn’t make any of her usual teasing comments on his luddite tendencies, even when he started printing physical copies of photos, maps, and statements from some of the newer cases, forgoing digital maps and spreadsheets in favor of paper, marker and pins. It wasn’t real luddite-ism, anyway. Andrew didn’t distrust or dislike computers. But they felt too much like the inside of his own head sometimes, a black hole of endless data with no meaning. Whenever possible, Andrew preferred his world where he could touch it, information that was real and solid under his hands, and could be physically sorted into its proper place. (If he stopped short of actual red string, it was only because dry erase marker was much less of a hassle.)

Bee had once suggested it was an impulse left over from his years of forced medication, when the sensation of endless high had made his thoughts unreachable, when he had clung to the physical sensations of the real world with both hands, even when it hurt. Maybe especially then. Whatever the reason, Andrew worked better this way. He wasn’t going to let his habits’ possibly unsavory origins keep him from solving cases by them, if that was what it took.

“What are you looking for?” Renee asked after a while. She had caught onto the bare bones of what he was doing fairly quickly without asking – they had been working together long enough to be familiar with each other’s habits – she just didn’t yet know the why of it.

“The Pattern.” he answered simply.

“What do you mean?”

“Chief and Reynolds keep calling it that. The Pattern. Like all of these cases we work on are connected somehow. But not every case has had a connection to Massive Dynamic or Riko Moriyama. Most of the cases in these files don’t either, as far as I can tell. So how and why are they connected?”

“What’s the pattern in The Pattern.” Renee murmured, looking thoughtful. “Okay, what have you
There were maps tacked all over the walls, bulleted lists and pictures of suspects on whiteboards. The was a map of locations of all known incidents, plus maps and charts that divided them by type (human mutation, physics anomalies, biological anomalies, biological attacks,) by number of victims, by vicinity to various transportation routes, by similarities in victims or suspect pools. None of it was forming anything close to a “pattern.”

“What can I do to help?” Renee asked, smooth as always. They knew each other’s strengths. She knew when to take the lead and when to cede it, and data processing was definitely among Andrew’s strengths.

“Just keep adding the older cases to the map.” he said. He hadn’t been adding them in any particular order before, since they’d been shuffled around as he’d familiarized himself with their details, but now there were a few boxes of the oldest cases left, unbothered with since there were so few details in them. Renee nodded and hefted the first box onto the counter near the general location map, which was covered in neat white pins, spaced perfectly randomly from each other, with no discernible pattern at all.

“You’re out of white pins.” She informed him. “Guess it’ll have to be red the rest of the way.” Andrew shrugged his indifference, and didn’t pay her any more mind until a few minutes later, when he heard a quiet but urgent “Andrew.”

He looked up at her, but she only pointed at the map. On it were a dozen or so red pins, markers from the oldest suspected pattern-related cases, and he understood immediately what had caused the urgency in her voice. The red pins were clustered in three small spots on the map. Andrew grabbed a handful of the dry erase markers off the desk and went to the map.

“Renee, I need you to read me back the case locations, but group them by five-year periods.” Andrew said, uncapping a red marker. “Start with the oldest.”

As Renee read case dates and locations, Andrew used the dry erase markers to color the tops of the white pins on the map. It didn’t take long for Andrew to be sure of what he was seeing, but they kept at it through all the cases because he knew the others would want the full visual picture. Renee called the rest of the team in when they were done, and Andrew stepped back to survey the map from a distance as they arrived.

“What are we looking at?” Wymack asked after a moment of staring at the map.

Three clusters of red, with rings of green, blue, and black expanding in uneven circles outward from Renee’s red pins. They weren’t clusters in the traditional sense, which is why they hadn’t been spotted before. There weren’t a higher number of cases at the center of the circles, but they formed an unsteady but clear path outwards, oldest to newest, undeniable in full color.

“Pattern events organized by date.” Andrew said. “The oldest events took place around three distinct areas.”

“New York and Providence.” Reynolds said as she looked, eyes widening in understanding. “They’re thin spots.”

“Pardon?” Renee asked. “Could you explain that?”

“Thin spots between universes.” Reynolds explained. “They’ve always existed, but they seem to
have been becoming more common over the years. New York and Providence are some of the oldest, and thinnest. The originals, if you will. Jones must be exploiting them to try to create his portal.”

“What’s that third spot?” Nicky asked, at the same moment Wymack, squinting at the map, let out a quiet, emphatic

“Fuck.”

Andrew knew exactly what he meant. Seeing the third red spot on the map had had his hand immediately digging in his pocket for his car keys, but of course he had already given them away. He waved his hand in a flourish at Wymack. Be my guest.

“That’s Reiden Lake.” Wymack said.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!
comments much appreciated, or find me on tumblr @ a-case-for-wonder

Up Next:
“Kevin, here’s what I need you to do. I need you to shove your superiority complex up your ass and help me gather supplies.”
“You’re fucking with me.” Neil said, but he knew Kevin wasn’t.

“I’m not.” Kevin said, for the third time, and to his credit he barely looked irritated at the number of things Neil had already made him repeat. It was just…

“Another universe, Kevin? How long have you been sitting on that one?” Neil asked. Kevin shuffled awkwardly into the corner of the couch. They’d moved to the living room at the start of this conversation, on Kevin’s insistence that they might as well be more comfortable than sitting cross legged on an old bed. Neil had taken it as a good sign that Kevin had been willing to leave Kaleigh’s room. Now, he just leaned back in his chair, trying to make the world around him make sense again.

“I’ve known for as long as anyone.” Kevin admitted. “My mother told me as soon as they found it, which was when I was…five, maybe? I don’t really remember the exact conversation. I was maybe eight or nine when she and Tetsuji invented the portal device that Jones is using.”

“Were you ever planning on telling us?” Neil asked. He felt uncomfortably hot all over, shaky and feverish as he tried to readjust his hold on reality. He forced his body to stay still even as every muscle threatened to twitch out of his skin. Another world like this one. Another Butcher. Another blood-spattered Baltimore. It was too much to consider.

“If it became relevant.” Kevin said with a shrug. “It is now, I guess.”

“You could say so.” Neil said bitterly. “And while a man tries to tear holes in the universe in New York and Providence” – he’d heard about the second attack on the radio on the way, in rather unsettling detail – “we’re sitting in an unheated bungalow, without a phone, in the middle of the mountains. Fantastic.”

Kevin was looking at him curiously.

“What?” he asked.

“New York and Providence.” Kevin said slowly, setting down his mug. His eyes were flickering
from Neil to a point over Neil’s shoulder. When Neil looked behind himself, his eyes fell on the single locked door at the back of the house.

“What are you thinking, Kevin?” Neil asked. He didn’t expect a straight answer, and he didn’t get one.

“Do you know how to pick locks?”

The locked room turned out to be a kind of study, with shelves stuffed with books and overflowing file folders, an ancient desktop computer perched on the desk along with definitely too many calculators than one person should need. The two walls not covered in shelves and windows were filled with chalkboards covered in the hectic thoughts of someone at work. Equations, diagrams, random snatches of words. Overlarge question marks and frustrated circles around bits that weren’t making sense. It was almost comforting to look at, at a little haunting, to see Kaleigh Day’s notes still etched in chalk after 22 years. Bits and pieces of some of her last work before her death. It was remarkable to see someone’s imprint last so long.

Then Neil noticed that the two walls weren’t quite the same. Both were covered in white chalk work, but the handwriting was different. Now that he was looking for it, it was easy to tell which one was Kevin – and he was sure it was Kevin, was sure if it had been anyone else’s thoughts invading Kaleigh’s space, Kevin would have erased them long ago. They were a bit neater than Kaleigh’s, his thoughts written out in straighter rows, less spontaneous sprawl and more a methodical working-through of whatever problems he was sorting.

A day ago, Neil wouldn’t have known what to make of all the writing. Some of the formulas he was familiar with, but some were strange to him, though he recognized scattered pieces and ideas from them. He wondered if Kaleigh had invented them herself. Now, with context, he saw the work for what it was. The equations seemed to be trying to measure holes in the fabric of space. Portals. Kevin’s equations took it a step further, and Neil had a good guess what he had been working on.

The numbers on the walls burned their way through Neil’s brain like wildfire. This was the part of science he had always taken a shine to. Not the muck of blood and guts – those he knew only by practice, by necessity. He could cauterize a wound or stitch up a bullet hole, but he would never fully grasp the complexities of the mind, body, and spirit. This was better, the clean world of numbers and mechanics, puzzles that you could jostle around until all the pieces fell into place, until the skeleton of the world suddenly came into view before you, the stitches that held it all together.

And these numbers were extraordinarily beautiful. The turns of phrase they wrought on the chalkboard were almost a foreign language, at first, but Neil was good with languages, too. He learned his way around quickly, sifting through equations and diagrams breathlessly. Hearing Kevin talk about the other universe in plain language had been like someone trying to describe a new color to him, impossible and confusing. Seeing it laid out like this, beautiful and messy in white chalk on green, it was easier to accept. Because the numbers, strange as they were, fit together in a way that made sense. There was no denying them.

“It exists.” Neil breathed, and Kevin made a sound that could have been a laugh.

“Yeah.” Kevin said. “But now we have to figure out how to stop Jones from getting there.” Kevin paused, and Neil felt himself being looked over. “You know, when you left Evermore… I mean, I know you and your mother had your reasons, but I had really hoped you would stay. You were already so brilliant after just a couple of years. We really could have made something of you.”

Neil swallowed around a sudden lump of longing in his throat, longing for a life that was never his and he knew would have been terrible in its own way even if he’d managed to hold onto it.
“Your work is about closing the portals.” Neil said instead.

“It was one of the last things she had started working on before she died.” Kevin said. “She never finished it. We never really talked through the physics, obviously, I was too young. But I have all of her notes. She and Tetsuji had figured out a way to open the portals, but she was afraid that if something upset the balance during the process, they would get stuck open. She was trying to create a plug. A switch that would shut down a soft spot for good, so that the portal device could no longer work.” Kevin frowned at his side of the chalkboard.

“I got really close,” he said. “I even built a prototype. But the math isn’t quite right, I know it isn’t.” Kevin’s face suddenly darkened with frustration. “And now we’re out of time. Jones is coming and we are out of time!”

Neil froze.

“What do you mean, Jones is coming?” he asked. Kevin, who had been holding himself together remarkably well, had started to crack again, just a little. His body was still mostly relaxed, but his eyes had gone a bit wild.

“I told you, my mom didn’t pick this place for the view.” Kevin said. “It’s located on the thinnest soft spot in North America. New York and Providence were trial runs. If Jones wants to open a portal into the other universe, he’s coming here, to Reiden Lake.” Kevin let out a shaky sigh. “And we have nothing to stop him.”

“Not yet.” Neil said, the beginnings of an idea already sketching itself out in his head. “Let me see the prototype.”

Neil didn’t bother asking if the thing was in the house. Kevin wouldn’t have worked on it anywhere else. Kevin dug through a bottom drawer in the desk for a minute, pulling out a small lockbox. Then he went over to the chalkboard covered in Kaleigh’s notes and pulled the bottom corner back just slightly. They key that had been wedged there dropped to the floor with a small, bright sound. Carefully, Kevin opened the box.

Inside was a little rectangular mass of chips, wires, and glass. Neil reached out, turning it over in his hands.

“Here.” Kevin said, setting a stuffed manila folder beside him with a thunk. “My notes on the plug, plus my mother’s notes on the original portal device. Maybe you can make more sense of it than I could.” His tone was disdainful, but Neil was surprised enough that Kevin had gotten the words out at all that he didn’t comment.

Neil took his time carefully looking over the ‘plug,’ then reading through the notes, then looking over the plug again. When he looked up, Kevin was tapping his foot impatiently.

“It’s useless, isn’t it?” Kevin guessed. But Neil shook his head, pressing down on a strange, giddy feeling that was growing in his chest.

“Actually, the theory is perfect, as far as I can tell.” Neil said. “It’s just the execution that’s the issue. Real life is not a frictionless vacuum, Kevin.”

Kevin squinted his eyes at him.

“Did you just make a joke?” Kevin accused, then shook his head. “Whatever. We still don’t have a lab, and without the proper equipment-“
Neil held up a hand to cut him off.

Like any student of the sciences, Neil could appreciate the luxury of a well-stocked, state of the art lab. The lab at Harvard was like something out of a dream, even if the damp stone walls still got under his skin. But unlike most science students, Neil had spent most of his life without a permanent address, let alone a lab or workshop. He’d been keeping his own equipment going by the skin of its teeth for as long as he could remember. (Neil might have disliked cars, but that didn’t mean he didn’t know how to keep an undercarriage together with a coat hanger, re-wire a headlight, or patch a tire with the contents of his mother’s purse.) Mary might have hated his obsession with math, but even she could see the advantage of knowing how to fix things, and had allowed him to figure things out.

If there was ever a niche that fit Neil’s skills perfectly, he thought making a plug for a hole in the universe with the contents of an abandoned summer cabin might fit it perfectly.

“Kevin, here’s what I need you to do. I need you to shove your superiority complex up your ass and help me gather supplies.”

When Neil was sure that had Kevin’s attention, he continued.

“We need the camp stove, matches, some knives, and anything you can find with wires or a computer chip. Oh, and a pair of reading glasses if you have them.” Neil said. He felt himself grinning, a feral thing he didn’t have time to smother. “Let’s do this.”

They go to work. It was more than a little strange, having Kevin be his assistant for once. Not that it stopped the usual flow of irritating comments about his work, but in Neil’s fervor he let them roll off of his back. He paused occasionally to have Kevin explain the thought process behind some of the equations in his notes – the pure math made sense, but at some points Neil lost track of its basis in reality – but other than that he just worked, nearly breathless with the thrill of it.

By the time Neil looked up, the sun had gone down. Kevin was sipping sourly at their last packet of tea, complaining about the lack of food.

“You can see if there’s anything stashed in the car, if you don’t think Andrew will kill you.” Neil said. “And anyway, you chose to come to an unoccupied summer home in the middle of the mountains, you can hardly complain.”

“I didn’t expect to get stuck here.” Kevin retorted. “I didn’t know about Jones, and I didn’t expect you to show up.”

“Really?” Neil asked, genuinely confused now. “After everything, you didn’t think either Andrew or I would come after you? Kevin, we thought you’d been kidnapped.”

Kevin looked away uncomfortably. “Are you done yet?”

“I think so.”

Neil held up the new device, some of the solders still slightly warm to the touch. He was squinting in the low light of the room, and his head ached from using an old pair of Kaleigh’s reading glasses as a makeshift magnifying glass, but he’d done it. The math was solid, the electronics made sense. If Jones tried to use his device to open a portal at Reiden Lake, this would be able to shut it down.

Probably. It wasn’t like they could do a trial run. They wouldn’t really know if it had worked until Jones tried to open the portal.

“How close do we have to get for this thing to work, again?” Neil asked. His brain felt like the
cornstarch gack he had once made in a children’s physics class at Evermore – solid under pressure, but once he let go it had started dissolving into a puddle of goo. He realized he had been awake since the middle of the night before.

“No further than ten yards, to be safe.” Kevin said. “Ideally, as close to the center of the soft spot as possible.”

There wasn’t time for second thoughts now. Jones had had plenty of time to regroup after his attacks on New York and Providence. It was more than likely he and his team were on their way to Reiden Lake as they spoke.

“Okay. You know where that is?”

“It’s in the woods around the other side of the lake.” Kevin said.

Neil grabbed his jacket off the floor and tossed Kevin his own. “Let’s go.”

They were almost to the site when Neil spotted flashing lights through the trees and suddenly a loud voice was yelling in his ear, firm hands grabbing at his arms and pulling them behind his back.

“Stop right there buddy, police.” The voice said.

“Get the fuck off of me.” Neil snarled, thrashing violently in the man’s grip, his heart pounding wildly at the weight of the body looming over him.

“Sir this area is an active crime scene, you need to come with me.” the man insisted. Were they too late? Had Jones already gotten there?

“We’re with the FBI you imbecile.” Neil snapped, Kevin silent in another agent’s grip beside him. The agent at his back just snorted.

“Right.” The agent said, and began to shove them through the trees toward the nearest parked cop car. Neil knew what would happen once they got there. Handcuffed to the seat, locked between bulletproof glass and a metal cage. Neil wasn’t claustrophobic, but he didn’t like being locked in.

And Kevin was claustrophobic.

“They are with me, officer.” A voice cut through the trees at the last moment. Neil’s head whipped around.

“Andrew.”

Andrew rolled his eyes from behind the cigarette hanging out of his mouth. Of course he would use an outdoor scene as an excuse to smoke on the job. It was almost enough to put a flicker of relief in Neil’s chest, if it weren’t for the grip the officer still had on his arms.

“Let them go, officers.” Andrew said, firmer this time, a lick of danger on the edge of it that was oddly comforting to Neil’s frazzled nerves. In any case he was grateful that it caused the officers to release him and Kevin with muttered apologies, scurrying back to their posts. With the bodies no longer at his back, Neil finally felt like he could breathe again.

“What are you doing all the way out here?” Andrew asked sharply, striding quickly over to them. His eyes darted back and forth between them but he was standing in front of Neil.

“Trying to plug a soft spot in the universe.” He said, then froze – did Andrew know? Andrew was
never an easy person to read, but Neil had a feeling he wouldn’t have let something like that slide if it bothered him, and he’d barely reacted beyond a blink.

“Kevin’s filled you in I take it.” Andrew said, a confirmation. Neil nodded. Andrew jerked his head back toward the lights flashing through the trees. “This way.”

They were almost to Renee and Wymack when a shot rang through the trees.

After that it all happened very fast. Tires squealing as Jones’ men pulled up in their cars, armed guards covering them with fast fire as they set up the large piece of black equipment at what had to be the center of the soft spot. Andrew shoved Neil and Kevin back away from the clearing, and Neil cursed under his breath. They were much more than ten yards away now, and ten yards was well within range of a halfway decent marksman. He willed himself not to clench his hand too tightly around the exposed innards of the plug device in his pocket.

Jones stepped from his car in the middle of everything, grinning smugly and adjusting his coat.

“Agents!” he called cheerfully over the shouts, lights, and the ringing silence of halted gunfire. His soft British accent reminded Neil uncomfortably of his uncle. “So nice of you to come witness me making history. I do hope you haven’t come with the intention of stopping me, because I simply can’t allow that to happen. My mission is too important.”

“Killing Riko Moriyama?” Andrew had risen to a crouch, ignoring Neil’s hissed warnings. Across the clearing, Renee watched them with sharp, wary eyes. Jones turned and fixed his attention on Andrew. And then he let out a laugh that ran like ice water down Neil’s spine.

“Minyard, isn’t it? I wondered if I’d see you here. One of David Wymack’s new little wayward birds. Ah yes, I keep tabs on the people who might ruin my plans. And where are your little science protégés, if I might ask? Day, and what’s the little one’s name – Josten, is it?”

Neil couldn’t see Andrew’s face, but he saw his left hand curl into a loose fist at his side, his right hand start drifting toward his gun.

“I can’t let you kill Moriyama, Jones.” Andrew said steadily, ignoring his taunts. “He has too much to answer for. Why don’t you just leave him to us?”

“Tut tut, Agent. Didn’t anyone ever teach you not to jump to conclusions? I don’t want to kill Riko. I work for him.”

It felt like Neil’s heart stopped beating.

“What?” Andrew spat.

“I know you heard me, Agent. I’m not opening this portal in spite of Riko, I’m opening it for him. He has his own, of course, but it’s rather…specially attuned. Not just anyone can cross through without rather unpleasant consequences, myself included But this portal any of our people could cross through, without any ill effects! Rather marvelous, don’t you think?”

Jones was holding Andrew’s gaze like they were the last two people on earth. Andrew wasn’t backing down, but it wouldn’t be enough.

“There’s a war on, Agent. Consider this your first piece off the board.”

“You’re mixing metaphors, Jones.” Neil interjected, standing. “Sure Riko hasn’t fucked with your head?” Jones was killing time, waiting for his portal device to fire up. Neil could just hear Andrew’s
strangled hiss to get down, but if he was going to shut the portal he needed to get closer.

“Ah there his is. Neil Josten, Riko’s new favorite mystery.” Jones said, “Sure he hasn’t *fucked* with your life? Or yours, Agent Minyard?” Neil felt a chill go down his spine. Riko’s interest in him was very bad indeed. It was a shame, really, that Jones wasn’t interested in killing him after all. Neil just might have let him get away with it.

As it was, Neil needed to get closer, and he needed to get there now. Keeping Jones distracted by his own arrogance seemed like as good a strategy as any. Unfortunately, Neil wasn’t going anywhere with Andrew’s hand like a vise around his ankle, even that small grip completely unyielding.

“I’m not frightened of some rich asshole scientist with daddy issues.” Neil sneered. “And I’m not frightened of you. But if you don’t get away with this you better hope we kill you, because I don’t think Riko will take your failure kindly.”

“I am his right hand man.” Jones snarled. The portal was flickering to life behind him, just barely. Neil was still trying to shake the hand at his ankle, but to no avail.

“You think that means anything?” Neil laughed. “You’re nothing but a pawn, Jones. I would have think you’d have learned from Kevin how much Riko’s so-called brotherhood means.”

Andrew’s pulse was a drumbeat against his ankle. Or maybe that was Neil’s. It was awfully hard to tell. Hisuddled mind frantically scrambled for some way to make Andrew let go. He thought about just stepping on his wrist, but that had inexplicable alarm bells going off in his head, and anyway he wasn’t sure even a fractured radius would make Andrew let go.

“If only.” Neil pitched his voice a little louder than necessary, nudging Kevin with his free foot where he was crouched on Neil’s other side. “If only Kevin could tell you what’s really going on.”

Jones frowned slightly, but thankfully Kevin seemed to have gotten the hint, shuffling to Andrew’s other side and whispering rapidly in his ear.

“Don’t be a child.” Jones was saying. “There’s a war coming. If any of you knew what was best for you, you would join us rather than fight us.”

Finally, finally, Andrew’s grip loosened on his ankle. Neil stepped forward.

“Join you?” Rage was a hot spark beneath his skin, igniting, spreading. Neil stalked forward, hand gripped loosely around the device in his pocket. Hoping it hadn’t been crushed. Hoping his sweating palms didn’t damage the circuits.

“You? An aging has-been clinging to the nephew of his old boss? And Riko, some rich kid who’s been spoon fed every so-called discovery he’s ever made, and never had to have an original thought in his life? At least our team has a little ingenuity. At least we don’t fucking try to murder our own colleagues. Join you? I’d rather die.” He spat.

“Not frightened of death?” Jones asked.

A reckless, bloody grin split Neil’s face open. It felt just like his fathers.

“You have no idea how to frighten me.” he promised.

The window was shimmering in the air. Jones was smiling, walking to it. Andrew shot.

Nothing happened. There was no way Andrew had missed, not at that range, but Jones didn’t so
much as flinch.

“I’ve walked between universes a few times, teleported a few more. It makes my physical makeup a bit…unstable. Unpleasant at times, but it has had a few unexpected bonuses.” Jones said.

The truth hit Neil like a freight train. The bullets were passing right through Jones.

“David Robert Jones, do not move.” Wymack’s voice boomed across the clearing. He and Renee were both approaching now, guns raised for all the good it would do them. Jones didn’t even spare them a glance.

“It has been a most interesting meeting, Agent Minyard.” Jones said. “I must say, I’d rather expected more.” He continued walking backwards toward the window, predatory smile still on his face. Andrew fired again, uselessly. The shots that came back from Jones’ men, however, were a very real danger. Neil felt a woodchip graze his cheek as it flew by.

Neil hadn’t made it quite in range. Jones was going to make it. He was going to walk through that portal, and even if Neil could get close enough to close it, how did you stop a man who was effectively bulletproof? Jones wasn’t just one lone madman bent on revenge. He was working with Riko. They wanted a permanent open doorway under their control, to god knew what end. Jones said there was a war on – would they bring soldiers? Weapons? If that was true, and if Jones remained in control of this technology, there was no telling what he would do, how many innocent lives would be lost like in his attacks on New York and-Providence.

Neil didn’t give Andrew any time to react. Neil ran for the window, feeling more than hearing the renewed gunfire ring out around him, the startled shouting from both sides. Neil didn’t slow down. The timing had to be perfect. Jones watched him for a few brief seconds, his expression unimpressed, and than he turned around and began to walk through the portal.

It would be his final mistake. Neil held his breath as half of Jones body disappeared through the window, the edges of the charged air rippling around his leg and torso. Neil jammed down on the button of the plug device in his pocket, his brain shouting out a delirious prayer that he was in range. He had to be.

He was.

The portal slammed shut with a blast of energy that knocked Neil off of his feet. When the air cleared, just half of Jones’ body was still on their side. The closing of the portal had sliced it clean in two.

Jones’ men tried to scatter into the woods, but they didn’t get far before being rounded up by local police. Soon, it was only their team left at the scene, and Andrew was waving Renee off, telling her he would drive Neil and Kevin home.

It was over. They had done it.

Hysterical laughter bubbled in his chest, but Neil pressed it down. A pair of heavy black boots came into his vision – Andrew’s. Oh, he was still kneeling on the ground. Neil looked up at Andrew’s face, strangely ethereal in the last remnants of flashing lights and the shifting shadows of the trees.

“What did you do?” Andrew demanded. Clearly, Kevin hadn’t had time to be thorough in his explanation. Neil was glad it had been enough. He pulled the device from his pocket and held it out. Andrew took it, turning it over in his hands.
“That was the stupidest thing I have ever had the displeasure of witnessing.” Andrew informed him.


Andrew just glared. “Can you get up?”

“Yeah. Just give me a sec.”

Andrew waited a beat until Neil got a foot under himself, then turned on his heel and walked back toward the bungalow, leaving Neil to scramble up to follow.

Neil caught up to Andrew standing at the edge of the lake, looking out over the still water. Kevin had gone home with Renee after all, something about stopping at a proper diner to eat instead of Andrew’s inevitable McDonalds run. Neil got the impression it was actually him Kevin was avoiding, but wasn’t offended. Kevin might not like being alone, but actually opening up to someone was probably even higher on his list of dislikes, and Neil had been forced to push at a lot of those boundaries today. He didn’t begrudge Kevin the space.

It was quiet on the shore. Neil hadn’t been fond of beaches in a long time, but this one was surprisingly okay. There was no wind whipping at tall cliffs. No smell of salt and blood and gasoline. It was almost peaceful. It was almost possible to stare at that blank expanse of still, black water and forget the mess of bullet holes they had left in the trees behind them, the mangled body being carried from the dirt.

“Another universe, huh?” Neil said with all the lightness he didn’t feel, accepting a cigarette and lighter from Andrew. Andrew just shook his head.

“It could have been cruelty, but coming from Andrew it was something else. Just a question. Neil didn’t answer, but… another universe. It was bizarre, impossible to wrap his head around if he thought about it for more than two seconds at a stretch. Neil had seen a lot in his months with his new team – the Foxes, he’d begun to call them, in the privacy of his mind, after the name of their division – but nothing that had prepared him for this.

Neil tried to imagine another version of this world, another version of himself. Was he Neil, over there? Had he found a life in one of the other twenty two names? Was he still Nathaniel, cowering before his father’s knives? Had he taken them up himself? Of one thing Neil was sure: in no version of this world was he anything but the Butcher’s son. He thought about déjà vu, about little changes, things that might be different in the life of Other Him. Mostly, he thought about a world that allowed that kind of cruelty to exist twice over.

“Do you think it’s better, over there?” Neil couldn’t help asking. Andrew wasn’t an optimist, but while his view of the world was hard, it was rarely wrong. Neil was interested to know what Andrew thought.

“Do you think you’re even still alive, over there?” Andrew shot back. Neil thought he hid his wince, but he had to admit that Andrew had a point. He sighed at the landscape before them, at the cold of winter just beginning to crack its way into early spring.

“Now that you mention it… probably not.” Neil admitted. There were too many close calls in his past. Any one of them could have been the death of Other Him. He felt himself make a hollow sound, not a laugh but a bad echo of one. “I keep thinking of him as Other Me. Not other Neil, you
“I was named after my father.” Neil continued quietly. “For some reason, I keep hoping that over there, I don’t even have the same name.”

“I knew you were pathetic, Josten. But honestly,” Andrew said, not even looking at him. It shouldn’t have been comforting, but Neil leaned into Andrew’s apathy like it was a physical thing. Like it could hold him up.

“I wonder if I could have kept her, over there.” Andrew said, sounding like he was spitting poison from his mouth. It was a truth unprompted, something Andrew had never offered before, and it shook the ground beneath Neil’s feet. Maybe that was why Neil thought it was finally a high enough price.

“Nathaniel.” Neil said, almost a whisper, before he could reconsider, and Andrew’s head snapped around, his eyes narrowing in on the single word. Neil couldn’t tell Andrew his father’s name – there was no way an FBI agent wouldn’t have heard the name of the Butcher of Baltimore, no way Andrew wouldn’t put the pieces together. But he could give Andrew this much. “My name was Nathaniel.”

Andrew didn’t repeat the name back. He didn’t try to fit the syllables to the shape of Neil. He just looked, eyes inscrutable as the surface of the lake, and Neil felt far too seen despite the darkness.

“What about you?” Neil asked, desperate to break the silence.

“Do I think I’m alive over there?” Andrew asked. There was something wrong with the way he said it. His voice was always emotionless, but there was something deliberate about it this time that made Neil’s stomach turn. He didn’t have anything to say to fix it. He waited. At long last Andrew shrugged.

“If I’m not dead here, I don’t see why I would be there.” he said, stubbing out the last of his cigarette and turning away. “Come one. Time to go home, Neil.”
Chapter Summary

Andrew's POV

Chapter Notes

Warnings for descriptions of a car crash

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5: Riko Moriyama

It took an hour of hard driving to shake the raw buzz from under Andrew’s skin. The word Nathaniel was reverberating like a curse inside his skull. The way Neil had gone completely still as he’d said it, the way it had slipped from his lips like a single drop of blood. It was both him and it wasn’t, both too big and too small for the impossible collection of scorn and scar tissue that made up Neil Josten (and oh, Andrew was willing to bet there was a lot more where that iron mark had come from beneath all those thick loose shirts.) It made sense that it had been someone else’s name first. Andrew tucked the name away in the space in his chest all Neil’s secrets went these days, and wondered idly when it was he’d begun keeping them there.

Somewhere between the mountains and the city, Andrew pulled them into the parking lot of a 24 hour Wal-Mart. He left Neil in the car with his spare gun and strict instructions not to shoot at anyone who didn’t try to kill him first. He didn’t add because I know you won’t use the knife, even though we both know it’s still in your pocket, but Neil heard it anyway, if the guilty look that flitted across his face was anything to go by. Andrew ignored it and went into the store. This needed to be done, and it would be easier if Neil wasn’t there for it.

The phone Andrew chose from the electronics section was among the most basic his plan would support. It was a near-match to his own, which would make setting it up for Neil simpler. It was easy to program in a few numbers – Wymack’s, Renee’s, his own. Plus, he knew this model was reliable, sturdy. Neil’s outbursts were more prone to verbal violence than physical, but Andrew could attest to this phone’s ability to hold up to being thrown against the wall in anger. Andrew sat down on the bench outside the bathroom and made the call to the service center still open halfway around the world so he could add the phone to his own plan. (Josten could pay him back later – god knew he would never activate the thing if left to his own devices.)

Andrew didn’t bother picking a phone out for Kevin. Day had actually already been talking about getting one and was probably an iPhone acolyte anyway, which Andrew didn’t give a shit about but still wouldn’t enable. He would take Kevin shopping later in the week if he needed to. For now, Neil was the priority.

Only when the phone was all set up did Andrew go back out to the car. And even then, he waited until they were back on the highway before throwing the small bag into Neil’s lap. Andrew kept his
eyes firmly on the road while Neil cautiously opened the bag. And if he kept the car going a bit too fast for Neil to duck and roll safely, it was mostly a private joke with himself.

“I don’t need a phone.” Neil said, sounding a little like he was choking. Andrew spared him a sideways glance – Neil was looking at the phone like it was a brick of c4 rather than cheap plastic. Like it was about to explode in his hands.

“Today’s events suggested otherwise.” Andrew said.

“No.” Neil said firmly, and quickly shoved the phone into the driver’s side cup-holder. When Andrew risked a glance at him again, Neil had his arms folded tightly around himself, staring mutely out the window.

Andrew had never been prone to panic attacks, but Nicky had. When they’d been younger, they’d been loud, messy affairs. Wheezing, shaking, blabbering for comfort. Things had changed as they’d gotten older. Nicky had gotten a little better, yes, but he’d also learned that the world didn’t take kindly to grown men blubbing on the floor. His panic had changed its form, gone stiller, black rather than bright red. It looked, in other words, an awful lot like Neil looked now.

Andrew pressed the brakes and jerked the car over to the side of the road, parking on the shoulder and unbuckling his seatbelt so he could turn to face Neil across the gearshift.

“How did you manage to run a business in Shanghai without a phone?” Andrew said, without anywhere else to start. It was a valid question.

“Email.” Neil said, eyes flickering a touch more alive. Get him talking the voice in Andrew’s head reminded him from the times with Nicky, you have to breathe to talk. “Harder to trace, easier to keep over long periods of time. Less suspicious than a burner.”

“You can’t email me in an emergency.” Andrew said. Neil frowned, and Andrew ignored the fact that Neil’s weight had begun to lean subtly into his palm.

“I can take care of myself.” Neil said stubbornly.

“I promised to protect you. And I don’t have time for your weird technology issues.” Andrew said, digging his fingers in a little harder. Neil blinked.

“It’s not- The last time I had a phone was when I was on the run with my mom.” Neil admitted. “They were only for emergencies. Even then we’d use a pay phone or a hotel phone if we could. Harder to track. After- after she died, I held onto hers. She would have killed me herself for putting myself in danger out of sentimentality, probably, but I couldn’t let go of that last thing. Then one day it rang – one of my father’s men, promising to find me and kill me. I don’t know how they got the number. I haven’t carried one since.”

Andrew didn’t think he liked the sound of Neil’s mother very much. But that was a problem for another time. It didn’t change the fact that Neil was being an idiot.
“Fine.” Andrew said. “I don’t have time for your weird abandonment issues.”

“What?” Neil gaped at him. Andrew shifted his grip, sliding along the edge of Neil’s jaw until he had Neil’s chin firmly in hand.

“Listen to me, Neil Josten. Your parents are dead. You are not okay. But you are in the middle of an international scientific conspiracy that apparently involves the existence of a goddamn parallel universe. So you will take this phone.” Andrew picked up the phone and shoved it into Neil’s pocket, watching the flicker in Neil’s eyes at it knocked against the knife that was already there, as he understood was Andrew was asking for. A promise for a promise.

“I don’t care if you use it today, or tomorrow, or the next day. But one of these days you will need it, and on that day you will have it, and you will use it. Understood?”

Neil swallowed heavily, then seemed to gather himself, yanking out of Andrew’s grip and leaning against the cool glass of the window, staring out the windshield.

“Got it.” he muttered. But he didn’t stop breathing again, and he didn’t try to hand back the phone, which was all Andrew had been looking for anyway. Andrew put the car into drive and got them back on the road, ignoring the phantom beat of Neil’s pulse throbbing against the palm of his hand the whole way home.

Late the next morning, Andrew woke in his apartment to his phone ringing. Unknown caller. Odd. Anyone who had any chance of calling Andrew was already programmed into his phone, including Neil’s new number. Andrew wasn’t in the habit of picking up unknown numbers. Anyone who really needed to get ahold of him could leave a voicemail. But there was, unfortunately, a little voice at the back of his head echoing from the night before.

*We always used pay phones or hotel phones. Harder to track.* Andrew doubted he was calling already but… it would be just like Josten to use his new cell as a glorified address book. Andrew picked up the phone.

“Who is this?”

“Agent Minyard.” came the sharp female voice from the other end of the line. Allison Reynolds, back in her prime. Nicky had stayed back at the lab the night before so that one of Reynolds’ assistants could come and fix her arm, so apparently she was back to her old self. “I’m calling to hold up my end of our deal.”

That made Andrew sit up and pay attention, grabbing for his things before he realized he didn’t actually have any details yet.

“Where and when?” he asked.

“Kyo Ya, four o’clock. There will be a parking spot for you outside the building. Don’t be late.” She said.

“I’ll be there.” Andrew said, already looking for his shoes.

“You’re welcome.” Reynolds said, a trace of dry amusement in her voice. Andrew hung up on her.

Kyo Ya turned out to be a Japanese restaurant in the East Village, small and unassuming from the outside, almost hidden, but the whole inside oozed with an air of quiet luxury. A quick glance at the
menu told Andrew a basic meal could easily run over $100. He supposed Riko liked the sense of exclusivity. At least Reynolds had held to her promise of holding a parking spot outside the building. He didn’t want to know how she’d wrangled that. He pulled the car in and went inside, where there was already a table set aside with his name on it.

A waiter came over, but Andrew informed the overly-polite man that he was waiting for someone. He didn’t order. If Riko was interested in ponying up for Andrew to have a hundred dollar lunch when he got there, Andrew wouldn’t complain. But he wasn’t buying it himself.

An hour later, when the wait staff was clearly irritated by his presence but too mindful of his violent glares to come near, Andrew decided he had had enough waiting. He felt like a target, and despite the half-underground location of the restaurant, he was all too sensible of the shots through the high windows, and the fact that his specially-reserved table put him perfectly in view from the street. Andrew begrudgingly threw twenty bucks on the table to thank the waiter for his time, and left the restaurant.

He climbed into his car, took a moment to relax his muscles after the long, tense public waiting, and pulled out onto the street, letting the snarling distraction of New York traffic put his mind back in order. Irritatingly, there was really only one route from the restaurant from the highway, what with all the construction in the area, so the choke of cars was even worse than usual.

Andrew fought his way through the choke of late afternoon traffic, and focused on getting home. Nicky had been bothering him about getting dinner with Kevin and Neil, and maybe some of the others. Andrew had been avoiding it, and he wasn’t sure if his conversation with Neil on the lake made him more or less keen.

Figuring out Neil was starting to feel less like an itch and more like an infection, something festering he needed to fix or tear out, and soon. He had found his way beneath Andrew’s skin, beneath his armor, in a way maybe only a man made of nothingness could, and that was the most frustrating things of all. Andrew had built his life on honesty even when it was to his own detriment. Neil was made of lies, but he had offered truths to Andrew he didn’t seem to offer anyone else. And worse, Andrew had started to give him pieces of himself in return.

Lost in thought, Andrew saw it a split second too late. It was a half of a breath before the car made contact with his front bumper, a heartbeat before everything shattered into a brilliant flash of white light.

He was in an elevator. He had been in a car and then – had the car hit him? Andrew couldn’t remember. He was in an elevator, and this didn’t feel like a dream. Andrew always dreamed in memory, and this was not one of his. The elevator had gleaming white walls and a shiny black marble floor. There was no panel to indicate what floor he was on, just a quiet hum and his internal senses telling him he was going up. The doors opened.

“This way.” Said a well dressed blond business woman, gesturing to him. Andrew’s face pinched at the gentle command – he didn’t like to be ordered around, especially when he felt like he had just been teleported. Had he been teleported? Who the fuck could even say. Until he figured that out, Andrew figured following some woman in a mid-price pencil skirt probably wouldn’t be the worst decision of his life. He walked after her.

“Here you are, Mr. Minyard.” The woman said. Andrew almost asked her how she knew his name, but the door in front of him was opening and she was already disappearing down a hallway off to the side. Andrew stepped forward into the darkness of the open doorway.
“Sorry about the wait.” A voice said from the darkness. Without Andrew touching it, the door clicked shut behind him, and Andrew whipped around but there was no handle on the inside. He wasn’t sure there had been one on the outside, actually. When he turned back around, a small lamp on the desk had clicked on, and a man was staring at Andrew through the thin yellow light. They had never met in person, but it didn’t matter. Even if his face hadn’t been recognizable from dozens of television interviews, the 1 on his cheekbone would have been more than enough.

“Riko.” Andrew said. Any patience in his voice was all survival instinct. He had no idea what was going on. “And where are we, exactly?”

Riko offered him an unconvincing smile, waving a hand as the lights came up in the small room. Bookcases and velvet drapes surrounded the mahogany desk Riko was seated behind, illuminated by soft recessed lighting.

“You are in my office, Andrew.” Riko said, offering his first name the same bite Andrew had afforded his. “in New York City.”

“Was kidnapping me really necessary?” Andrew asked. Now that he was trying to get his bearings in earnest, his head felt like it had through a washing machine, his brain shaken and dripping. “I told Reynolds I would meet with you alone. I don’t break my word.”

“Of course you don’t.” Riko purred, smirking. “That’s what makes you so devastatingly fun. And irritating, of course.”

“Did you bring me here to flirt with me or kill me, Riko?” Andrew spat. Riko’s mouth pulled sourly, and Andrew hoped it was at the implication of Riko’s interest – Andrew wasn’t about to pass up a reason to punch him in his smug mouth.

“Neither.” Riko said, tone brittle. He seemed to take a moment to force himself to relax. “Actually, I brought you here because I think we would work well together. I’ve lost one of my better men recently, as it happens. You may have heard? His name was Jones.”

Andrew almost wish Neil were here with one of his fiery retorts. His brain felt like cooked pasta, and no words would come. All he could do was curl his fists and snarl.

“Agent Minyard.” Riko continued. “I’ve had my eye on you, you know. Such a quick rise through the Bureau. A sharp mind, good instincts, good in a fistfight. I could use a man like you on my team at Massive Dynamic, you know. We pay much more generously that the government.”

“Pass.” Andrew said. “I’ve picked my side, Riko.”

“Have you?” Riko said, looking suddenly gleeful. “I wouldn’t be so sure. You know, I wouldn’t be asking this of just any agent who got a few above average marks. You’re special, Minyard. I don’t think you know it yet, but you can do things no one else can do.” Riko stood, palms down on his desk. He was taller than Andrew, but Andrew knew he more than outweighed him, and Riko didn’t look like he’d swung a fist outside a gym in years. If Andrew was right, he had more than enough people to do that for him these days.

“There’s a war coming.” Riko said. “And if you weren’t the person I thought you were, you wouldn’t be standing here right now. You wouldn’t have survived the journey.”

Despite himself, Andrew felt a chill pass down his spine. Something was very, very wrong.

“What are you talking about? Where is here, Riko?” Andrew asked. With a vicious smile, Riko reached behind himself and tugged open the heavy velvet drapes.
They were in New York City all right. But one glance had the bile rising in Andrew’s throat – it wasn’t his New York City. There was only one place he could be. Only one place where dirigibles were still docking at the highest buildings while bright billboards flashed video ads down below. Only one place where Andrew could be standing on the top floor of an impossibly tall skyscraper, facing another solid tower directly to the north. He was in the South Tower of the World Trade Center.

He was in the other universe.

“Why am I here?” Andrew bit out, wrenching his gaze back from the window. He felt horribly out of control, but there was nothing to strike out at, except for Riko himself, and Andrew couldn’t risk getting stuck here.

“Because you’re one of the few who can survive crossing over.” Riko said. “You won’t start to disintegrate like poor Jones.”

“Why?”

“Ask Kevin.” Riko said, black eyes boring into Andrew’s own. “I’m sure he’d be more than happy to fill you in on all the details. And if I’m not wrong, he will need to soon.”

“I don’t understand what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“I told you, there’s a war coming.” Riko said. “And like it or not, you will have a key part to play. If you stay and fight with me, we could be a glorious team. We could run the universe, Agent Minyard. You would have everything you ever dreamed of and more. A place to belong, an adoring public, an army at your command. Anything you wanted could be yours.”

Riko might have thought his words grand, but to Andrew they were nothing more than the ravings of a madman, and they slid from his armor like so much mud. An adoring public? An army? Who did this guy think he was?

“There is nothing that I want,” Andrew said. “so there is nothing that you can offer me to make me work with you. But I have a place. And if you aren’t looking to get shot or stabbed, you will send me back there, right now.”

Riko stared at him for a long moment. “What did you say?”

“I said no.” Andrew said. “Send me back. Now.”

Riko’s mouth tightened into the thin hard line. For a moment Andrew was sure he was going to try to start a fistfight, but maybe he realized he would lose. Instead, Riko reached out and pulled a large decorative bell towards himself, gripping the rope hanging from it lightly in two fingers.

“You will regret speaking like this to me.” Riko said. “And you will regret allowing your pet Josten to cost me one of my top lieutenants.” Andrew was silent. “Well, since there is no convincing you, I guess I will send you back to witness the war from the losing side. Fortunately, the journey will not be enjoyable for you.”

If Riko was waiting for Andrew to ask the question he was clearly trying to lead to, he had to have been disappointed, but he only smiled wider. “I pulled you from a moving car to bring you here, Minyard.” He said, and let Andrew put together the rest. It wasn’t difficult to guess what he was getting at.

Riko tugged on the string, and the bell gave one resounding clang! before the room shivered around
Andrew, dissolving like sugar crystals in water. And then all there was was a cacophony of indistinguishable sound, that same screaming white light, and then darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!

comments make my heart grow three sizes, or you can find me on tumblr @ a-case-for-wonder

Up Next (the final chapter of Part 3):

“Stupid bastard.” Kevin whispered. “We told you. We told you not to fuck with him. God, we-” Kevin hung his head, collapsed over his own knees, shaking in what was probably less grief and more fear. Neil understood; Andrew Minyard was the most unbreakable person Neil had ever met. What were they going to do now?

The first thing Neil was going to do was get the hell out of this hospital before Aaron showed up.
Part 3, Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Neil's POV

Chapter Notes

warnings for semi-graphic descriptions of accident injuries, a panic attack in a hospital, and some fighting.
Also, we deal with Renee's back story a little in this chapter, so there are very brief allusions to sexual assault and murder. I think her story is slightly off from original cannon, but I thought it worked best with her character in this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 6: Physics is a Bitch

“Come alone” had been Reynolds’ directive to Andrew with regards to his meeting with Riko Moriyama, and Andrew had obeyed. To an extent. He hadn’t been stupid enough not to tell both Renee and Neil where he was going, and the two of them were smart enough to follow at a discreet distance, taking the train to the city and the subway the rest of the way to the Lower East Side.

It felt like a set-up. The half-buried restaurant with its one little door and high little windows made the inside of the place a near-perfect shooting target. Neil and Renee took up post in a café across the street, but the afternoon light and the darkened interior of the restaurant meant they couldn’t see in very well. (That didn’t mean someone with a rifle and a better vantage point wouldn’t be able to, though.) Neil sipped miserably at his tea while Renee worked her walk calmly through a decaf cappuccino, her smooth city-woman façade all hard focus underneath.

Neil was glad Renee had agreed to his presence. He still didn’t like her – or rather, she was impossible not to like, but he didn’t trust her. Didn’t trust her perfect bleached bob, her makeup routine that appeared to be nothing but impressively sweat-proof mascara and colored chapstick, the silver cross around her neck, her brutally short painted fingernails, the knife scars across her knuckles. He couldn’t figure her out, how someone with her beatific smile and her scarred hands could wind up an FBI agent, much less partnered to Andrew Minyard.

Even so, he was glad to be with her, because something was wrong with this whole meet-up scenario, and for all the things he couldn’t figure out about Renee Walker, the one thing that was glaringly obvious was the one thing he needed from her: she looked good in a fight.

“Do you really think this is a hit job?” Neil muttered. Renee frowned worriedly.

“That’s a little obvious.” she admitted quietly. “I mean, an overpriced Japanese restaurant? A reserved table?”
“Reynolds isn’t playing a third side, is she?” Neil asked – Renee had to have been thinking it too. If Andrew were taken out now, it would certainly look like Riko. But it had been Allison who had set up the meet. Who was to say Massive Dynamic’s second in command wasn’t planning a takeover?

“I know what you mean, but I don’t think so.” Renee said. They could just barely see the top of Andrew’s head through the windows. He appeared to be alone.

Neil stuck his hands in his pockets and his fingers closed around the phone still settled there. He would have to take it out and look it over eventually. Probably. He’d told Andrew he would keep it charged, but the battery would last a couple of days since he wasn’t even using it.

He took the phone out of his pocket – just to check how the battery was doing, that was all. But once it was out in his hands he found that familiarizing himself with the various menus and buttons – a lot had changed in cell phone technology in the last five, almost six, years, even if this one was obviously a dinosaur – was a convenient distraction against Andrew’s predicament and the presence of Renee across the table from him.

“I make you uncomfortable, don’t I?” Renee said, her voice quiet but startling even in the hubbub of the café. Neil looked up at her.

“What makes you say that?”

She smiled gently at him. “Andrew told me you looked like you wanted to throw that phone out the window when he gave it to you. Now you’re looking at it like it’s the most fascinating thing in the world. I’m guessing it’s mostly to avoid talking to me.”

Neil didn’t think his honesty with Andrew was required to extend to his partner, but somehow he knew trying to lie to her wouldn’t be met with any more success.

“You don’t make sense to me.” he admitted.

“Is it these?” She held up her hands, wiggling her fingers, and he knew she didn’t mean her fingernails. He nodded. “I wasn’t always the person I am now.” She said seriously. “I grew up in Detroit, with a foster mother and a string of her heavy-handed boyfriends. By the time I was fourteen I’d become a runner for one of the local gangs. They taught me how to fight with knives, how to defend myself. But there was a man in the gang…who stared coming after me. He liked pretty young things, you know? I wasn’t the first.”

Renee wasn’t smiling anymore, and Neil was glad. He didn’t think he wanted to see how a bitter smile looked on her face.

“I killed him, and then I went to the police and gave them everything I had. They took me away from the woman I was with, and that was when Stephanie Walker found me.” Renee looked down, gently fingering the cross around her neck. “She gave me a new name, a new faith. She made me believe I could be more than my past. I’m still not sorry for what I did, although I know I should be. I’m working on it.”

“It doesn’t sound like you need to be sorry.” Neil said honestly. And Renee laughed, a surprisingly bright sound.

“That’s what Andrew said.” She told him, then she leaned in conspiratorially. “Did you know, I’m the one who taught him to fight with knives?”

Oddly, that wasn’t surprising to Neil. “I don’t think many people would thank you for that.” She laughed again.
“I’m sure they wouldn’t. I could teach you, if you want.” She offered, and Neil could hear the honesty in her voice, but his stomach rolled. He couldn’t tell her he was already plenty good in a knife fight, and he’d found be much preferred a gun.

“I’m good.” he managed. Renee watched his struggle with calm curiosity, a catlike look that reminded Neil too much of Andrew. Then both of their gazes turned to the window as across the street, the door to the restaurant opened and Andrew stepped out. Neil glanced at his watch. It was precisely 5:00. “He got stood up?”

“Something’s not adding up.” Renee agreed as they watched Andrew climb into his car, expression irritable, and settle himself for a few minutes before starting up. Neil took a moment to be lightly amused by the thought of Andrew fighting his grossly expensive car through New York City traffic. It was properly rush hour now, and with the construction- oh no.

“There’s only one route to the highway,” Neil said, eyes widening. It couldn’t be an accident. Renee’s expression turned grim as she caught his meaning.

“He’s being funneled. Come on.”

They didn’t have a car, but they had dressed to look like joggers, and set off at a light pace, keeping the Maserati in view as best they could. Renee pulled out her phone but didn’t dial, just gripped it tightly in her hand as they both struggled not to sprint after the car, even as it turned a corner ahead of them and traffic trapped them on the other side of the street.

It had just disappeared from view when from around the corner there was the unmistakable sound of a crash. Now they ran. Neil forgot about letting Renee keep up even though she was the one with the gun. He forgot about everything but getting around that corner as fast as possible, legs burning from the lack of warm-up. He just had to get to the car. He had to see.

It had been a head-on collision. The Maserati was a crumpled wreck. Neil thought he might vomit at the sight of it. The man in the other car was being carried away on a stretcher, but that didn’t make sense did it? How had the ambulance gotten here so quickly? Neil looked up and realized the crash had miraculously – or perhaps intentionally, although that hardly made sense – happened right next to a hospital. Someone inside had heard the crash too, and had rushed out prepared for the worst.

“Do you see Andrew?” Renee asked, pulling up beside Neil. But Neil didn’t. Andrew wasn’t anywhere in the crowd, wasn’t on a stretcher being carried into the hospital like the other driver. Wasn’t anywhere in sight.

The front seat of the Maserati was empty.

Renee flashed her badge at the cops and pedestrians who had begun to gather, explaining tersely that the car had belonged to a fellow agent, and directing the police to question the driver who had been taken inside. Stepping around her, Neil opened the driver side door and reached inside. The driver’s side seatbelt was buckled in place. The seat was still warm. Neil stepped back and closed the door.

What the fuck was going on?

“Check the surrounding area.” Renee was saying behind him, giving Andrew’s description to the police, but Neil had a very bad feeling that it wouldn’t be any use. Riko had something to do with this. Neil’s hand clenched tightly around the phone in his pocket. A wild part of his brain was telling him to call Andrew, to demand where he was, what had happened. Another part was telling him that this was the beginning of the end, that Neil should run now while he had the chance, while Andrew wasn’t here to stop him.
Neil was still staring at the empty Maserati, trying to make up his mind, when he blinked, and Andrew’s body was crashing out of it through the windshield.

They were right outside a hospital, but Neil’s only thought as they rushed Andrew away on a stretcher was that it didn’t matter. Neil knew what a dead body looked like, and Andrew – obviously dislocated hip, hands and face scraped raw, bleeding from a gash on his temple, pale as the dirty new york sky – had looked horrifyingly close. He’d been unresponsive at the scene, and the radio silence from the hospital staff on his condition was doing nothing to still Neil’s nerves.

Run. His mother’s voice hissed in his ear, harsh and commanding. Connection is dangerous. Trust is deadly. See what becomes of the people who try to stand and fight? The only way to survive is to keep moving.

But it was already too late for that. Neil needed to know if Andrew was going to be okay. If there was anything he could have done.

Finally, a doctor came out to see them. He looked grim, and when he spoke, Neil felt the world go static at the edges.

“I’m afraid your friend’s injuries were too severe. We were unable to restore brain function. Patients who suffer this extent of brain damage…they simply don’t wake up.” The doctor was saying.

Nicky collapsed into his chair, weeping quietly – He’d driven up with Kevin and Wymack as soon as Renee had called. Aaron was still en route from DC. Renee went to comfort Nicky, blank in the way of people who had shoved their own grief aside for later consideration. Wymack was a study in hollow steadiness, aged a decade in a moment.

“Simple. Reductive. Absurd.” Kevin snarled from beside Neil. He hadn’t spoken a word since arriving. He turned to Neil now, desperate and sickeningly hopeful. “Life and death, these are relative terms. Contextually defined, dependent on cultural specifics.”

“Kevin-“ Neil tried to interrupt, feeling Nicky’s eyes on them, feeling his own unexpected grief threatening to drive a wedge out from between his ribs. But Kevin would not be deterred.

“He is undoubtedly indulging in primitive diagnostics. Andrew is not dead. He’s not dead.” Kevin insisted.

With a sigh that threatened to break him open, Neil turned to the doctor.

“Could we see him, please?”

The doctor eyed them both warily, but eventually gestured for them to follow. Andrew looked every bit as dead as he had on the street, stuffed with wires and tubes, a revolting mirror image of his own brother from months before, when this had all begun. Kevin checked the monitors and charts obsessively. Neil knew he was looking for loopholes, for any sign that this was something Andrew might come back from. When he collapsed into a chair beside the bed, still at last, Neil knew he hadn’t found any.

“Stupid bastard.” Kevin whispered. “We told you. We told you not to fuck with him. God, we-“ Kevin hung his head, collapsed over his own knees, shaking in what was probably less grief and more fear. Neil understood; Andrew Minyard was the most unbreakable person Neil had ever met. What were they going to do now?

The first thing Neil was going to do was get the hell out of this hospital before Aaron showed up.

Wymack found him in a bar, seeking comfort in darkness and white noise, nursing a soda so that at least it looked like he was drinking. In reality, getting drunk was the last thing on Neil’s mind. He’d
gone through a brief bought of drinking-to-forget about a year after his mother had died, but waking up still drunk with a gun pressed to his spine had reinforced her old lessons enough that these days he only kept a bottle around for when he needed to stitch himself up in a hurry. Unfamiliar grief might be a knife in his chest, but Neil knew the value of keeping his wits about him at a time like this.

“Scotch, double.” Wymack said gruffly to the bartender, who handed one over with an easy smile. Neil was reminded suddenly of the bartender from Eden’s Twilight – Roland, wasn’t it? He and Andrew had been friends, or at least friendly. Would someone tell him Andrew was gone? Perhaps Nicky would. Neil squeezed his eyes shut and shook the thought out of his head forcibly.

“How did you find me?” Neil asked after a while.

“I work for the FBI.” Wymack said simply. “Where’s Day?”

“I think he drank the whole minibar in our hotel room at a go.” Neil said. “Renee’s looking after him so Nicky can stay with Andrew. Aaron here yet?”

“Got in an hour ago.” Wymack answered. “If I were you, I wouldn’t go back there alone unless you’re looking for a fistfight.”

Neil shrugged. It was no more than he had expected. That was why he was here instead of camped out in the hospital waiting room. There was another long silence, and Wymack had finished his drink and ordered another before he spoke again.

“They’re talking about shutting us down.” He said, and Neil jerked up.

“What?”

“F.O.X.E.S. Division. I’m going to Washington in a few weeks to hash it out. They’re saying our failure to deliver usable results is unacceptable, we’re a waste of resources. And now with Minyard—“ Wymack cut himself off with a press of his lips.

Neil couldn’t stop the awful, hollow laugh that escaped his throat.

“What were we even doing, anyway?” He said. “Sitting around, waiting for somebody to die some grisly, macabre death, or for the entire fabric of the universe to come shredding apart. We’re the clean-up crew, sent in to mop it up and make sure it’s all neat and tidy for the file. We’re always too late anyway.”

Wymack turned on him. “Hey kid, it’s not over til it’s over, okay? And we are more than a clean up crew. This team does some of the best damn work in the Bureau, it’s just hard to see when you have to cover it all up for the suits.” He clapped a hand to Neil’s shoulder. “I don’t know your story Josten, but I know you’d make a hell of an agent. You’ve done some damn fine work with this team. We haven’t always been too late.”

“We were too late for Andrew.” Neil said, harsher than he’d meant to, or maybe he had meant it.

He never should have come to Boston.

“You shouldn’t have come back here.” Aaron growled at him, late the next morning. Neil had crept quietly to Andrew’s room once visiting hours had opened, only to find Aaron standing guard outside the door. Neil could just see Nicky through the small window, half-dozed in the chair beside
Andrew’s bed.

Aaron meant the hospital, just now, not Neil’s idiotic return to the east coast after years on the run, but Neil still just said “I know.”

There was nothing else to say. ‘He had a living will.’ Renee had said on the phone that morning. ‘No life support. They’re taking him off this afternoon.’ Her voice had cracked a little at that, unnerving in contrast to her usual steadiness. ‘You should come and say goodbye. He was fond of you, you know that? I know he doesn’t show much, but he was. I’ve never seen him open up to someone so fast.’

Neil had wanted to say that Andrew hadn’t really opened up, that their deal and their truth game was mostly a distrustful and strategic unwrapping of the things that made them dangerous to each other—but was that even true anymore? He remembered the unasked-for truths Andrew had shared on the shore of the lake, the unspoken trust as he tossed him his car keys and allowed Neil to retrieve Kevin alone. Neil wouldn’t have used the word fond, but there was something between them, warm and kicking with life.

Except now Andrew was dead, or as good as. They’d already turned off the life support, removed the myriad of plastic tubes that had fed him, helped him breathe. He had just enough brain function that he was still mostly breathing on his own, his heart still beating. It would, the doctors had warned, take him several hours to die. But he was dying, and Neil was just watching.

“This is your fault.” Aaron said. “You and Day. If he hadn’t brought you here he never would have been dragged into this mess.”

“He did that to save you, asshole.” There was something nasty spiking inside of Neil. It reared up, and when he opened his mouth again, he could feel the poison dripping from his teeth. “You know, I asked him if you would have done the same for him. He said no. Looks like you’ll never get the chance to prove him wrong.”

Neil barely felt the fist meet his face, his knees hit the floor. He did nothing to fight back, just looked up with blood dripping down his chin. “You brought this mess to him as much as I did. He was about to walk away before you showed us that tape. I told him the Moriyamas were dangerous, it’s not my fault he didn’t listen.”

“I’m going to kill Riko Moriyama myself.” Aaron spat. Neil opened his mouth again, and almost let out a string of terrible secret words, about two young boys covered in bruises and a car crash that was never an accident.

“Remember that feeling.” Neil said instead.

Andrew had said Aaron had never understood why he had done it, had always believed Andrew was merely taking revenge on Tilda for abandoning him, or recklessly angry about the one or two times she had struck out at him. Aaron had never understood the bone-depth of Andrew’s promises and it was stupid, but Neil hated him a little for it. Irrationally, he thought maybe this will make him understand.

The door to Andrew’s room opened, and for a split second Neil expected to see Andrew standing there, unbreakable as ever. It was just Nicky, of course. Nicky looked wearily between them, scrubbing a hand over his face.

“You should both come in.” He said quietly. “He doesn’t have much time left.”

“I’m going to get a coffee.” Aaron said abruptly, turning to his cousin. “Want one?” Nicky nodded.
“We’ll talk when I get back.” Aaron said, and walked away.

Nicky offered Neil a tiny, watery smile. “I think he means-“

“I know what he meant, Nicky.” Neil said. When Aaron got back, Neil had better be gone. Wordlessly, Nicky stepped back into Andrew’s room, holding the door open for Neil. Neil picked himself up off the floor, wiped the blood from his split lip, and followed him inside.

Andrew looked so small like this. That was Neil’s first unbearable thought. Without his usual hard expression, his pale, slack features looked stupidly young against the white of the hospital sheets. Stupidly fragile, the top of his skull wrapped in gauze bandages like a bad Halloween costume. Neil’s gaze travelled to the shunts in Andrew’s hands and arms, got stuck on the masses of old, scarred flesh there, the calendar of white lines that could only be one thing. Neil wrenched his eyes away. Andrew hadn’t agreed to show him those, Neil wouldn’t look more than he had to.

Neil knew this was it. There was no place for Neil in Boston anymore. No matter how much Nicky extended offers of friendship, inviting Neil out with other agents from the Bureau he was friendly with. No matter the offers of Renee teaching him to fight, or Kevin’s occasional quiet praise, or Wymack’s fierce pride and protection of his own. No matter that the house in Cambridge was starting to feel like home, that since his and Andrew’s months-old truce after the Valerie Boone case Neil had been getting oddly…settled. Neil didn’t get to have a home. It wasn’t his lot, he’d known that for years. Funny, how fast Andrew and the other Foxes had made him forget. Well, no more. Two more words, and Neil would be gone for good. He stepped close to the bed.

“Andrew.” Neil said, a near whisper. “Goodbye.”

He was about to turn away when Andrew’s eyes snapped open.

“Einai kalytero anthropo apo ton patera toy.” The words spilled from Andrew’s mouth like so much blood, and Neil was frozen in place. Then, Andrew’s whole body jerked in a silent scream as he sat bolt upright, gaze scattering around the room like a trapped animal. He eyes locked on Neil’s, the little flecks of green in them bright against the bloodshot whites, and his hands shot out.

Neil forced himself not to move or flinch as Andrew’s hands latched onto him, climbing from his wrists upward, until they were gripping almost painfully tightly at Neil’s shoulders. Andrew’s blank gaze was staring at his own left hand where it was clenched around Neil’s right shoulder, unseeing.

“Andrew?” Nicky said from across the bed, disbelieving. Andrew twitched slightly, but didn’t respond. He was in the grip of something, untethered from the real world in a critical way and looking for something to hold onto. Probably Neil had just been the closest thing, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t do something about it. Neil kept his gaze on Andrew’s unseeing eyes, careful not to touch him, as he tugged on his own shirt until the worn collar slipped down, out from beneath Andrew’s grip and over his shoulder, until Andrew’s cold hand was clasped directly over the old iron scar, skin to skin.

Something shivered in Neil at the contact, and he almost pulled away. Then Andrew blinked, and the next second he finally looked human. His knuckles were white around Neil’s shoulders, sure to leave bruises, but Andrew was frowning at him and not letting go, and Nicky was sobbing and laughing and dialing his phone to call the others.

“Hey.” Neil said. “Welcome back, Andrew.”

Andrew squinted up at him.
“Neil.” he said at last, voice dry from disuse, and giddy relief flooded overttop of the wariness, the fear, the dread. Andrew was alive. He was going to be okay. And if his grip was anything to go by, he wasn’t letting Neil go anywhere.

It looked like Neil was staying in Boston after all.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!
Love and comments always appreciated <3

This marks the end of Part 3 "More Than One of Everything"
If you're a Fringe fan, you might notice that takes us through "season 1" of the show.
I'm planning roughly 3 parts per seasons 1-4 (season 5 is fine but I cut that plot line entirely so BYE.) So. With that in mind, on to season 2!

Up Next: Part 4 "New Day, Same Old Demons"

“You’re going to think I’m crazy.” Greg Leader said softly. Andrew leaned back in his chair, quirking an eyebrow. Four months ago Leader may have been right. Now, Andrew highly doubted it.
“Try me.” he said.
“It was like the office was-“ Leader cut himself off. Breathed. Started again. “Like it had filled with monsters.”
Chapter Summary

Andrew's POV

Chapter Notes

Part 4 is based loosely on Fringe S2E5, "Dream Logic."

warnings for brief allusions to Andrew’s past abuse, descriptions of sensory overload episodes, some instances of gore/death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 4: New Day, Same Old Demons

Chapter 1: Coming Back (Like a Bad Dream)

The pain was there when Andrew woke up, like it just was now, crawling its way through his hip and up his spine, wrapping like a fist around his brain, leaving him tense and wrung-out even after a full night’s sleep. He knew if he called out of work neither Wymack nor Renee would bat an eye. Still, the prospect of milling about the same 500 square feet he’d spent the last two weeks trapped in, after a week confined to a hospital room, was enough to get him out of bed despite his body’s complaints.

That, and the noise. It had started some time after the accident: moments where it felt like the volume of the whole world got turned up. Andrew could hear a fly on the windowsill from two rooms away, the clock ticking by the entranceway, a cacophony of footsteps from floors above and below. His own heartbeat was a war drum in his own ears, his breathing the raw scrape of wind on a rock face.

It was so, so loud, even with his hands over his ears, even with his pillow over his head. Even with his head under the water in the bathtub. The only thing that helped was moving. So when Andrew woke up and thought just the sound of the heavy rain outside would drown him, he got up and moved.

Andrew snatched up the sturdy black cane beside the bed – he could mostly hobble around the little apartment without it, but there was no sense tiring himself out early today – and made his way into the kitchen. He snatched a cinnamon roll out of the tray Nicky had brought by a couple days before, and started the coffee. By then the noise had, thankfully, already started to fade. A short episode, then. Better than nothing. He made his way back to the bedroom to get dressed.

It hadn’t been until walking had become a problem that Andrew had noticed how many loops around his apartment were involved in his morning routine, but damn it if he was going to change it just because of one little dislocation.
And, okay, so it was a little more than a dislocation. He’d torn two ligaments right through when his body had smashed against the New York asphalt, with a hairline fracture to his pelvis to boot. Thankfully the wonders of endoscopic surgery meant they’d been able to fix the ligaments without cutting his entire hip open, which had cut down his recovery time considerably.

Doubly thankfully, the doctors had done most of their work before he’d even regained consciousness. Hashing out tense allowances and boundaries with the physical therapist had been bad enough – the accident had basically ripped his groin open. There were days when the stubborn ache of it still had him heaving over his kitchen sink, unable to crouch low enough to throw up into the toilet. He didn’t want to think about what it would have been like to have been prepped for that surgery with even a hint of delirious awareness.

Andrew was just about ready when the doorbell rang, indicating Renee’s arrival.

“How are you feeling this morning?” She asked by way of greeting, stepping into the kitchen, and seemed unperturbed when she got only a grunt in response. She’d been around enough in the last weeks to know the general state of his recovery.

Renee had insisted on driving him to work this morning. And well, it wasn’t like Andrew had a car he was interested in driving, anyway. The Maserati had been thoroughly totaled by the accident. He had a rental, for now, some shitty sedan with an automatic shift that took turns like a pig. At least he could operate it without his left leg, but he didn’t enjoy it. Renee was welcome to drive. He watched her pick up his cane and twirl it experimentally, like a staff. She grinned when he caught her eye.

“Just looking for the hidden sword.” She winked at him.

Andrew rolled his eyes at her. “Not covered by insurance, unfortunately.” he said. She handed it over with a shrug.

“I’m afraid I have bad news.”

“What?” he asked, picking up his bag.

“You’ll need your weekend bag.” Renee said. “We just got a new case, and it’s in Seattle. You’ll be taking Kevin and Neil.”

The bag slid heavily off of his shoulder to the floor as Andrew trudged back inside. He left it where it fell. When he got back with his other bag, Renee was still waiting patiently by the door.

“Why not you?” He asked, trying and likely failing not to sound petulant.

“Allison is coming into the office to go through some case files with me.” Renee said serenely. “I’m just driving you to pick up Kevin and Neil. And to the airport, if you need.” Andrew snorted.

“I see how it is. You get to stay behind and hang out with your crush, while I get to take the cross country flight with the science idiots.”

“She is not my crush.” Renee insisted with a small laugh, fooling neither of them. “Besides, the three of you work well together. It won’t be a problem.” It was half reassurance, half command.

“This had better not be you meddling, Walker.” Andrew said.

“It’s not meddling.” She said, calm and serious again, letting herself out the door and waiting for Andrew to follow. Her umbrella was black with pink polka dots. “Chief Wymack is just putting us where we’re needed most. You know that.” Andrew did. It didn’t mean he had to be happy about it.
He hitched the bag a little higher on his shoulder as he fumbled for the lock, still not quite used to the shuffle of bag-keys-cane-door as they went to leave, shielded by the polka dot umbrella.

He tossed Renee the keys when they reached the car, hoping for some peace and quiet before he had to deal with Kevin and Neil. He was almost immediately disappointed.

“Oh, speaking of Allison.” That was never how Andrew wanted Renee to start a sentence. She reached in to her purse as she drove and dug out a business card, buttery yellow cardstock with curling black writing. “She wanted me to give this to you.”

The name ‘Debby Tessono’ and a nine digit telephone number were written on the front. Nothing else. Andrew flipped it over but the back was blank. There was something familiar about it, but trying to figure it out was already giving him a headache.

“Explain.”

“According to Allison, she had some trouble adjusting when she first got her cybernetic arm.” Renee said. “Something about the way the circuits had to interact with her nervous system throwing her out of whack. I haven’t told her anything about your condition, obviously, but she seemed concerned that something about your ordeal would…effect you, possibly long term. She seemed to think this woman would be able to help.”

“I already have a psychiatrist.” Andrew reminded her. Renee shrugged serenely.

“My impression is that that is not…quite what this woman is. And I know you haven’t done anything about the migraines or—“

“And I do not have much reason to trust Reynolds right now.” Andrew cut in sharply. Renee accepted that with a nod.

“That’s true. But you did save her life, and I can tell she’s upset that she put you in a position where you ended up getting hurt. I think…It’s not my place to tell you her story, but she’s suffered at Massive Dynamic, her assistant Jean even more so. We’ve been talking about ways to keep them both safe there until we can get things figured out, but in the meantime I think this is her genuinely trying to help.”

Andrew stuffed the card in his back pocket. He didn’t say he’d think about it, but if that was how Renee chose to interpret the gesture, that was her call. Right now Andrew didn’t have time to think about the migraines or the weird episodes of sensory overload that had plagued him since the accident.

Right now, he apparently had to go to Seattle, Kevin and Neil in tow. He was none too happy about it, but that was life. Renee offered to drive them all to the airport, but she had work to get back to and they both knew it. If Andrew caught the flicker of blank surprise on Neil’s face when Andrew tossed him the keys, or the tiny smile on Renee’s, Andrew pretended not to notice.

Two hours later, he was wiping wet feet on inexcusably loud carpet and contemplating faking a terror alert just to get out of this damn trip. Andrew was put off by airports on the best of days, with their crowds, metal detectors, and weird sterility. Not to mention that at the end of it all you got rewarded by getting into a tiny metal death tube that rocketed you thirty thousand feet into the sky. Today, with the ache spreading along his left side and a pinch somewhere behind his eyes threatening to turn into another goddamn migraine, Andrew was positively sour.
He was standing by the windows, watching a plane take off in the downpour outside, when Neil found him. He watched as Andrew tracked the plane down the runway, up into the sky. Andrew’s hands clenched, which was probably the giveaway. That or Neil could actually read minds.

“You’re – you’re not actually afraid of heights, are you?” Neil asked. “Andrew you can’t be. What are you always doing up on the roof?”

It was a question Andrew had asked himself before. Maybe the answer was, the same thing he was doing staring down the planes as they took off in the deluge. He raised one hand and felt for his pulse in his neck, tapping along to the too-fast rhythm of his heart. “Feeling.” he said. Neil frowned.

“Feeling…fear?” Neil asked slowly, “or trying to feel anything at all?”

In truth, Andrew wasn’t sure himself.

“It’s just an old habit.” Andrew said, and left it at that.

“Well if it makes you feel any better, fewer than twenty planes crash every year and it’s not always due to the weather. Sometimes pilots are just unreliable. I'm sure it's a quick death either way.” Neil said, smirking a little. Then, “Don’t worry, if we start to go down, I’ll help you with your oxygen mask.”

It was a joke, clearly. But the chill damp of the day had wormed its way deep into Andrew’s bones. Everything hurt, and Josten’s stupid fake brown eyes had the audacity to be teasing, like he even had any idea what that was, with not a lick of pity to be found in them, and Andrew hated his entire life.

“Like I am ever going to trust you, Nathaniel.” he snapped.

Neil’s face turned to stone in an instant. He rounded on Andrew, putting his body between Andrew and the window until he was all Andrew could see.

“Don’t.” he whispered. “Don’t you fucking dare Minyard. That is not my name.”

“Neither is Neil Josten.” Andrew stage-whispered back. This wasn’t the time or the place for this, but in his current state he could hardly bring himself to care. He was expecting Neil to lash out, maybe inviting it. Andrew hadn’t had a proper sparring session in a month, and berating Nicky had lost its appeal years ago. He was itching for a fight.

To his surprise, Neil didn’t give it to him. Instead, he took a few calm, deliberate breaths, then reached down and grabbed Andrew’s carry-on bag, slinging it over his free shoulder. Andrew realized the mechanical voice on the loudspeaker was calling their flight to board. Kevin had reappeared at some point, hanging off to the side, probably sensing a conversation he didn’t want to intrude on. They were on the plane in minutes, and Andrew pushed the argument aside in favor of keeping hold of himself as it began to move down the runway.

Andrew was a master of external calm. He had tics and vices like anyone, but they were few and his control was excellent. He knew his features remained as still and blank as ever as they got up to speed, but his pulse was still jack-rabbiting against his collar.

Of course he had gotten the window seat, trapped furthest from the exit if anything did go wrong. And the seat was terribly uncomfortable, his hip already complaining from his awkward, stiff posture. And it still looked like a waterfall outside and Andrew didn’t know how the hell they were supposed to take off safely in rain like this but the plane was already canting into the air and-

“Abram.” Neil said. His voice was soft but his eyes were sure where they were turned on Andrew’s
stiff frame. And this name wasn’t a drop of blood, but a single flower, plucked from somewhere inside of himself and held out in offering. “It was my middle name. It’s what my mother used to call me, the name she used to sign me up for sports teams when I was little so the coaches would let me play. It’s the only original piece of myself I was ever allowed to keep.”

Abram. An unexpected name, but it fit him somehow. Andrew smeared a hand across his own mouth against the impulse to try it out, to wrap his own tongue around the syllables.

“Ask me something,” he said instead. Neil looked at him curiously.

“I don’t have any good questions,” Neil said.

“It doesn’t have to be a good one,” Andrew told him. What Andrew wanted was the distraction; he wanted balance against the weight of what Neil had just given him.

Neil considered that for a moment. “Did you play any sports, when you were younger?”

“Exy,” Andrew admitted, shifting in a futile attempt to get more comfortable in the seat. He fought the impulse to take it back the minute he saw the way Neil’s eyes lit up.

“Really? That’s what I played when I was little. Were you good?”

It was a better question that ‘did you like it,’ anyway. “It’s what got me through college.” Andrew said. “Aaron, too. We both went on scholarship.”

“What position did you play?”

“Goal.”

Neil nodded in that immensely irritating way of his, like something about Andrew’s answer had solved a piece of some puzzle. “I was a backliner.” Neil said, as if Andrew had asked. “But I think if I could go back I’d like to try striker. What’s your favorite team?” For Neil, he was practically gushing.

“I thought you were supposed to be a nerd, Josten.”

Neil just shrugged. “I mean, I haven’t played since I was, ten, maybe? I like sports though. They’re like numbers – the same anywhere in the world.”

Andrew didn’t have a response for that, but Neil seemed perfectly happy to keep softly blathering about the games he’d seen oversees, which slowly transitioned to countries he’d been in, bars he’d been kicked out of – random, pointless stories about life as a nameless vagrant. At some point Andrew’s exhaustion dragged him unwillingly into sleep, and eventually Neil must have slept too, both of them only waking up when the soft sound of the seatbelt light indicated their decent into Seattle.

Funny, the skies were clearer here than they’d been in Boston. If only they weren’t there to see about a murder.

Renee had sent them the video surveillance from the incident, and they sat down to watch it together in the waiting room of the hospital where they would be interviewing one Greg Leader. Because of course Andrew’s first case back would require not one but both of his least-favorite locations. At least he’d finally been able to get a smoke break in. Neil had left him alone at it for once, too focused
on steadying Kevin, who was no more at ease in their environment.

The surveillance video wasn’t pretty. It was footage from a conference room of a nearby office building, men and women in crisp, pressed suits gathered around a long glass table. Leader showed up and began the meeting, waving easy greetings as everyone got settled. It wasn’t until about ten minutes in that things got really, truly weird.

“Drugs?” Neil murmured. On screen, Leader was looking twitchy, staring around at his coworkers like a trapped prey animal. A moment later he attacked like only a cornered thing would, grabbing something – a pen or a letter opener, maybe, it was hard to tell from the video – and went on what could really only be described as a murderous rampage. Within minutes, half the room had fled, the other half was a bloody heap, and Greg Leader was passed out cold on the tile floor.

“Locals think it’s more than that.” Andrew said. “Or at least if it is a drug, it’s nothing they’ve seen on the streets before.”

“The onset is unusual” Kevin agreed. “He clearly doesn’t take anything during the meeting, but he’s overcome so suddenly. Almost like something triggered it.”

Kevin batted around different ideas with Neil for awhile. It turned out chemistry really wasn’t Neil’s strong point, though, and somehow Kevin turned the conversation to Andrew instead. Andrew wouldn’t have thought the day would come where a personal experience with unpleasant intoxicants would feel like a useful skill, but here he was.

“A voice called them from the swinging doors. The man introduced himself as Detective Greene, ushering them through the doors and down the halls toward Leader’s room.

“I want to thank you guys for coming out.” Greene said as they walked. “We brought Mr. Leader here around six last night. Haven’t managed to get anything out of him.”

“He isn’t cooperating?” Andrew asked. “Any reason for that?” Greene gave a rueful shake of his head.

“I’ll say. We only just managed to get him to wake up.”

“He’s been asleep for sixteen hours?” Neil asked incredulously.

“Dead to the world.” Greene said agreeably. Andrew firmly ignored the twitch the words put in his spine, though he didn’t miss Neil’s furtive look. “Like he’d been drugged. Docs only got him to wake up a few minutes ago, so you’ll be the first to get a crack at him.”

They’d reached Leader’s room. Andrew could see him on the bed through the small window, haggard and clearly still coming out of the grips of a long sleep. He could also see the heavy Velcro straps around his wrists and ankles. Oh, this day just kept getting better and better.

“He’s restrained.” Kevin said, edging away from the window, looking suddenly spooked.

“Kev, he went berserker on a room full of his coworkers less than a day ago.” Neil said. He’d stepped carefully between Kevin and the window – Andrew recognized it as the same move Neil had used on Andrew just hours before. Unfortunately, Kevin had close to a foot of height on him, so all the positioning did was direct Kevin’s gaze over his head and focus it on Leader, strapped to the bed.

“He was clearly under the influence of some kind of drug or-“ Kevin began.
“And it could still be in his system.” Neil cut him off. “It’s been less than 24 hours. It’s for his safety as much as ours.”

Kevin froze. Andrew grabbed Neil by the arm and hauled him away from the window without thinking, paying for it with a twinge through his side that had him suppressing a hard gasp.

“Wrong thing to say, Josten.” he said darkly. Neil looked surprised, then confused, then bit his lip as slow, stupid understanding began to trickle in. Neil didn’t know much about Andrew’s medication and subsequent hospitalization, but he knew it hadn’t been pretty, and he was probably realizing how many people had told Andrew much the same thing at the time – that it was for his own good. Probably Kevin’s experience had been similar.

“Sorry.” Neil whispered. Andrew let go of him, shoving him away a little and going back over to Kevin.

“You don’t have to go in.” Andrew told him. “Josten will wait out here with you. I won’t be long.” He didn’t know that, but he didn’t like those straps staring him in the face either. Andrew shifted a tighter grip on his cane and let himself into the hospital room without waiting for either of their replies.

Leader was surprisingly rational as they sat down to talk, for a man who had stabbed several of his coworkers just the day before. He seemed a bit resigned to the whole situation, nervous but too tired to really do anything about it. That was the main thing. Leader looked tired, like he hadn’t slept properly in weeks. Andrew tried to recall if he’d looked this tired on the surveillance tape, but the image had been too small to really tell.

“Tell me what happened, Mr. Leader.” Andrew said. Leader fidgeted idly with the rails of his bed, not making eye contact.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy.” he said softly. Andrew leaned back in his chair, quirking an eyebrow. Four months ago Leader may have been right. Now, Andrew highly doubted it.

“Try me.” he said.

“It was like the office was-“ Leader cut himself off. Breathed. Started again. “Like it had filled with monsters. And Carl – my boss – he was the leader. He had this awful snarling red face, and these horns. Like a demon or something. Sounds nuts I know, like something out of my nightmares, or…” he trailed off, eyes drooping, his hands slacking on the rails.

“Mr. Leader?” Andrew prompted. Leader’s eyes were unfocused, hazy, his head beginning to loll back onto the pillows. “Mr. Leader. Greg.” Andrew jammed a thumb on the intercom button. “I need a doctor in here, now.” he barked, shoving himself upright and backing away from the bed. Leader’s eyes rolled back in his head and his whole body seized. Once. Twice. Three times. Andrew watched with barely-believing eyes as all of Leader’s hair turned a bright, shocking white, and he collapsed limply onto the bed, his heart monitor crying one long, mournful tone.

The doctor and nurse rushed in seconds later but it was already too late. Andrew glanced back to see Neil and Kevin staring wide eyed through the window. Andrew shook his head grimly in response. Leader was dead.

Chapter End Notes
heeyyyy airport scene. Yeah, the next several chapters have a good number of lifted AFTG scenes, or obvious stand-ins, and also some Fringe-y stuff that isn't necessarily from this episode. Cue the feelings! (And the pining. Lots of that too)

Up Next:
“So what did you find that was so important you had to subject me to your presence in your pajamas?”

Neil ignored the jab – there was nothing wring with his shirt or his shorts – and handed the journal over for Andrew’s perusal as he began to explain.

“His wife was right. Leader’s sleepwalking and nightmare episodes basically stopped about a month ago. According to this journal, he was getting eight or nine hours of sleep a night. He was probably the most well-rested person in that office building.” Neil said.

“So how did he die of exhaustion?”
Chapter 2: Dream Diary

Neil felt more than a little stupid as he stood watching Andrew interview Greg Leader through the small window of the hospital room. Andrew hadn’t explained himself, but he hadn’t had to. They told me what they did to me was for my own good, too had been clear as day in the hard lines of his face and shoulders, his white-knuckled grip on his cane and Neil’s upper arm. And as for Kevin, well, Neil really should have known better. But the filter between his brain and mouth had never been his best quality.

“It’s okay.” Kevin said quietly after a while. Neil looked at him in surprise. Kevin was shifting uncomfortably, still watching Leader through the glass. “I know you didn’t – what happened to me isn’t the same as what happened to Leader. I know they probably are trying to help him but…”

“You don’t need to explain yourself, Kevin.” Neil told him shortly. He was wondering if maybe he should offer Kevin an apology too, despite how poorly his last one was received, when there was a commotion inside the room. Greg Leader was seizing, and a minute later he was dead, collapsed on the hospital bed with hair as white as snow. Well. Things had just gotten a lot more interesting.

The autopsy room at Washington General Hospital was cool and clean, the surfaces slick and shiny and the equipment up to date. It was perfect but Neil couldn’t help but feel out of place there. The lab at Harvard had become his home, a room where he could exist without worrying about his place in the world. Here, with only a flimsy visitor badge and Andrew hanging back in the hallway as Kevin examined Greg Leader’s body, Neil was blisteringly aware of the fact that he didn’t really fit in much of anywhere.

A local doctor named Wilson who was helping with the examination bustled into the room.

“Apologies for the wait, gentlemen.” Wilson said. “We’re still waiting on the full toxicology report. We do have basic blood work back though, and the CBC is, well…”

“Severe thyroxine deficit, curiously high levels of adrenal hormones.” Kevin said thoughtfully, prodding at Leader’s body. “Odd, he’s still quite warm. Should be cooler by now.” Wilson frowned, looked down at the chart in his hands and then back at Kevin.

“Yeah it is weird uh – how did you know that?” he asked.
“Simple.” Kevin said, back to his usual arrogance now that he had a corpse under his hands. “Shock-induced achromotrichia, hyperkeratotic skin lesions, and clear signs of dehydration.” He pointed out the relevant bits of Leader’s body as he spoke. “It seems that this man died of acute exhaustion.”

“Humans can’t die of acute exhaustion.” Wilson argued. Neil had to agree. If they could, he doubted he himself would still be alive. Kevin just shrugged, as though the laws of nature and the whole history of medical science was no obstacle against the evidence in front of him. Knowing Kevin, it wasn’t.

“Not that we know of. It’s been observed in rats.” Kevin said dismissively. “I’ll need this body transferred back to my lab in Boston for further analysis.”


“I’m sure they have whatever you need here, Kevin.” Neil said slowly. Kevin was playing at superiority, but he was getting that spooked look about him again, the same one he’d had when he’d seen Leader’s restraints in his room. Kevin crossed his arms, the imperious look on his face undermined slightly by the way one of his hands immediately abandoned the position and went to his face, his thumb rubbing incessantly on the tattoo again.

“Give us a minute, would you doctor?” Neil said, and dragged Kevin to the far side of the room.

“I can’t work here.” Kevin said as soon as they were relatively out of earshot, both arms now folded tightly across his chest.

“Why not?” Neil demanded. “Kevin, this is a perfectly good lab. Why can’t you work here?”

Kevin squeezed his eyes shut and let out a shuddering breath. “It feels like being back there,” he said, a harsh exhale. Neil didn’t have to ask where he meant. “Fuck, I just- can’t they just send the body back to Boston? You stay here with Andrew, it’s fine. I’ll – I’ll be okay. Just let me go back and work on the body from home.”

He looked one hard shake away from shattering. Neil looked through the window of the autopsy room to where Andrew was waiting in the hallway, lounging against the wall, eyes boring through the glass like he could hear every word. Neil jerked his thumb between Kevin and the body and mouthed Boston? Andrew sighed visibly and rolled his eyes, but then his gaze moved to Kevin and he nodded.

“Okay.” Neil said. “We’ll find someone to accompany you and the body back to Boston. Nicky or Renee will meet you at the lab. You sure you’ll be okay by yourself?”

“According to what we know, Riko is in another universe. Knowing that…helps.” Kevin said. “I’ll be okay. Thanks.”

Once Kevin was safely packaged on a plane back to Boston, it was time to get back to the case.

With Leader dead, the next person to interview was his wife. They met her at her home in the suburbs. It was a quaint sort of place, grey siding on the outside and warm beige walls on the inside, little shelves littered with knick knacks and framed photos of Greg Leader and his wife, Julia. She greeted them nervously at the door, ushering them to a sofa and offering them coffee in mismatched mugs. Neil sipped gratefully at his, and even though the coffee was black, even Neil barely caught the flicker of a grimace as Andrew drank his, too.

“Greg used to call me every day at lunch.” Mrs. Leader – Julia, she’d insisted – broke the silence at a whisper. “When he didn’t call yesterday, I knew something was wrong.”
“Julia, had there been any changes in his behavior recently? Illnesses? Hallucinations?” Andrew asked. He was leading the interview. Neil’s job, as per Andrew’s instructions, was to observe, to take in everything he could that might be of use to them later. Julia shook her head, dabbing at her eyes.

“No no, nothing like that. I mean, he’d been a little more tired than usual, I suppose. But it was just work. I can’t- I can’t believe he’s gone,” she sniffed.

Neil continued to scan the room, avoiding looking at her tear-stained face as much as following Andrew’s instructions. His eyes fell on a row of books next to an overstuffed armchair, a dent in the cushions that looked too big for the slight Mrs. Leader.

“Julia, did your husband have any sleep issues?” Neil asked, ignoring the glare Andrew flicked him at the interruption. “I see you have a lot of books about sleep disorders.”

“He used to sleepwalk,” Julia said, smiling a little tearfully. “Sometimes he’d wake up in the kitchen having cooked a full meal. Nightmares too sometimes, although that was less frequent.”

“Was he ever violent?” Andrew asked, laying a hand on Neil’s arm when he opened his mouth to ask another question. It wasn’t thanks but it was an acknowledgement. It was I’ll take it from here. Neil took a sip of his coffee and focused on Mrs. Leader rather than the heat of Andrew’s palm through his sleeve.

“No, not at all!” Julia protested. “And he was cured! He’d been seeing some specialists, and they finally found something that worked. He hadn’t had an episode in over six months. I really thought the worst was behind us.”

Neil shifted uncomfortably. Yeah, he thought. Everyone always did.

“Julia, did your husband keep a sleep journal?” Andrew asked, surprising Neil. Neil had kept a sleep and dream journal, at one point in his life. He was surprised Andrew was familiar with the concept – he didn’t seem the type to dwell on the musings of the subconscious.

“He did actually, yes. Would you like to see it?” Julia asked.

“Yes.” Andrew said. Neil shook off his arm, stretched his mouth into something like a reassuring smile for the tearful woman across the couch from them. It made his face feel like plastic.

“Please.” Neil added.

Once they’d interviewed Mrs. Leader, there was little they could do until Kevin got the body back to Boston and could do a more thorough examination. Until then, Andrew decided that the best thing for them to do was go back to the hotel and try and get some rest. There was no way Neil was going to sleep any time soon – his nerves were a mess after watching both Andrew and Kevin circle the drains of their own self-control all day, but Andrew was getting pale in the face, his leg dragging more every hour.

Luckily, the hotel had a fitness center. Slipping into sweats, Neil went down and found it blessedly near-empty. He killed an hour running his legs to ribbons on the treadmill, pushing away images of Leader’s seizing body, his tearful wife, the flickering echo of Andrew in a bed just like that, staring up at him with eyes that didn’t see. He ran like he’d been running for the last three weeks, like he’d been running for his whole life – like something was chasing him. He ran until all he could feel was his own breath and the slap of his own feet, until his mind finally started to go quiet.
“Needed to work off some steam, huh?” a stranger in the fitness center said when Neil finally switched the treadmill back to a walk to cool down. Neil barely spared the man a glance, but he looked impressed and maybe a little disturbed by how long and hard Neil had managed to push himself on the machine.

“Sure.” was all Neil said in reply, and then he was out the door.

Back in his room, he showered and slipped into sleep clothes, but sleep still wouldn’t come. To distract himself, he picked up Greg Leader’s sleep journal. Andrew had left it in his possession, something about making himself useful and not talking to anyone, and Neil figured this was as good a time as any to look through it. He opened it up and began idly paging through, doubting it would be much help. Fifteen minutes later, he was out in the hallway, knocking on the door to Andrew’s room.

Neil heard the sound of the deadbolt and the chain lock disengaging before the heavy hotel door finally opened to reveal Andrew. Bizarrely, the first thing Neil noticed was that he wasn’t wearing black. Andrew’s long-sleeved t-shirt was a dark blue that was oddly striking against his complexion, with a cartoon owl and ‘W’ printed over the breast pocket.

When Andrew turned around and headed into the room, limping a little without the cane, Neil saw the ‘MINYARD’ printed in bold white across his shoulders, ‘03’ below it. And then, in lines of thick black marker faded from years of washings, a word scrawled diagonally across the back. ‘Monster.’

“Nice shirt.” Neil said, because it turned out he couldn’t help himself. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

Andrew flicked him a bored glance over his shoulder, then raised a hand, waving the toothbrush clutched in it in silent explanation. Then Andrew’s eyes fell to Neil’s chest.

“You too. Although at least in my case I actually graduated,” Andrew said dryly, tossing the toothbrush through the open bathroom door without looking before making his way slowly around the bed and turning to face Neil. Neil glanced down in confusion, only to realize the shirt he was wearing had ‘MIT’ printed in bold letters across the front. “I would normally assume you got it to impress girls, but—” Andrew left that sentence hanging, the conclusion obvious.

“Yeah, I got it at a thrift store in the area. It was more of a blending-in thing.” Neil admitted. Andrew gave him an odd look for that, then shook his head slightly, shifting on his feet. He’d grabbed his cane for a second, then abandoned it in favor of leaning heavily on the desk next to the bed.

“What have you got?” Andrew said. “I assume you didn’t come here just to be irritating.”

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“What have you got?” Andrew said. “I assume you didn’t come here just to be irritating.”

“Yeah, Greg Leader’s journal. There’s some stuff in here you should—” Neil cut himself off as Andrew shifted on his feet yet again, his face pinching just slightly before smoothing out again. 

Coming from Andrew, it might as well have been a shout. “Jesus, lie down or something. You don’t have to stand there,” Neil told him.

Neil felt as much as saw Andrew square off with him for a brief moment, and then Andrew rolled his eyes. “Yes, Nicky,” he muttered, and pushed himself up onto the bed with a grunt. He didn’t look relaxed – Andrew never really did, Neil was realizing – but at least the color started to return to his face. It was definitely an improvement, except for how it left Neil standing awkwardly in the middle of the room.

“Stop being useless Josten, grab my bag and bring it over here,” Andrew said irritably, breaking the silence and smacking a hand down on the bed beside himself. Neil snatched up the bag and dropped it on the bed before hopping up himself on the other side of it. Andrew unzipped the bag hastily,
rooting through it until he found his prize – a small bottle of scotch. Neil watched him down two drink’s worth, easy, before he asked,

“Hey, are you supposed to be drinking with your pain meds?”

Andrew paused with the bottle still by his face.

“Pain meds? Don’t be boring,” he said, taking another solid swallow. He held it out to Neil with a quirked brow, but when Neil shook his head he just shrugged as if to say your loss, and tucked the bottle away.

“You’re not taking anything,” Neil realized, amazed and a little horrified. He’d seen Andrew’s body hit the ground in Manhattan. He’d also seen his medical chart, and he knew the recovery timeline of those kinds of injuries more intimately than he would have liked to. Andrew ignored the implied question, twitching his fingers at the journal still clutched in Neil’s hands.

“So what did you find that was so important you had to subject me to your presence in your pajamas?”

Neil ignored the jab – there was nothing wring with his shirt or his shorts – and handed the journal over for Andrew’s perusal as he began to explain.

“His wife was right. Leader’s sleepwalking and nightmare episodes basically stopped about a month ago. According to this journal, he was getting eight or nine hours of sleep a night. He was probably the most well-rested person in that office building.” Neil said.

“So how did he die of exhaustion?” Andrew mused, nodding slightly without looking up.

“Exactly,” Neil said, pulling his legs up under himself so he was sitting cross-legged on the bed. “And that’s not all. Leader was also using the journal as a dream diary. Before the nightmares stopped he was having them a couple of times a week. And they all featured-“

“Demons.” Andrew finished for him. He tapped his finger against what must have been a relevant page in the journal. Then he closed it with a snap, and finally eased himself back until he was lying down, staring up at the ceiling. “Not a bad puzzle. So our victim was hallucinating demons from his nightmares. You think this was, what, some kind of extreme sleepwalking?”

Neil shook his head, then added “No” when he realized Andrew might not have seen the gesture. “No, sleepwalkers are rarely violent. They’re far more likely to hurt themselves than anyone else. And unlike Greg Leader, they don’t remember their experiences. I, uh, know a bit about dreaming,” Neil added lamely.

“Did you learn that at MIT?”

“Did you- did you just make a joke?” Neil asked, slightly thrown. But when he looked over, Andrew’s eyes were closed, his arms crossed loosely over his chest, for all appearances asleep.

“No,” Neil said after a while. “My mother actually.” A small furrow between Andrew’s brows was the only sign of his increased attention. “When we first ran, I used to get these awful nightmares. Night terrors, really. Obviously a boy who wakes up screaming isn’t exactly…subtle. I guess even my mom knew it wasn’t something she could beat out of me, so she taught me a mantra instead. I won’t dream tonight. I won’t dream tonight.”

“How generous of her,” Andrew said dryly. “Did it work?”
Neil gave a small, noncommittal hum. “You can’t actually stop yourself from dreaming. But I guess you can stop yourself from remembering.” Andrew made a weird, cut-off noise at that, but when Neil glanced over his face was as blank as ever. “Yeah, it worked. From the age of- well, from then until about five, six years ago, I don’t remember a single dream. No more nightmares.”

“It didn’t work so well after she died.” Andrew observed, putting it together as Neil had known he would. Letting Andrew figure out his truths was becoming a bad habit. He was starting to do it even when Andrew hadn’t asked.

“It did not,” Neil agreed quietly. But thinking about his mother stirred up another thought, one that he had buried weeks ago for convenience’s sake, but was now burrowing its way back to the surface. “Hey I need to ask you something. It can- it can be a round, if you want. I think it’s important though.”

Andrew opened his eyes a crack, glancing at Neil sideways. His right hand had drifted and was drumming softly at a spot above his left hip.

“What?”

“Einai kalytero anthropo apo ton patera toy.” Neil enunciated carefully. “You said that to me, just after you woke up after your accident. Do you remember it?”

“No.” Andrew said. “The first few hours are fairly blank. Latin?”

“Greek.” Neil corrected.

“Why does it matter?”

“I’m not sure.” Neil hesitated, but there was no backing out now. He’d started it. “Actually, it’s something my mother used to say to me.” He admitted.

Andrew struggled up onto his elbows, alert now.

“Excellent. This really needed to get weirder,” He said. “What does it mean?”

“It means – ‘be a better man than your father’,” Neil said, looking down. “To her I think it meant, it would be better to die than to let him control us.” He realized he’d been unconsciously tracing one of the largest scars through his shirt, collarbone to waist, over and over. He hesitated, but the words were already halfway up his throat, and he would choke if he didn’t let them out. “I think it was as close to ‘I love you’ as she knew how to get.”

Andrew made a face like Neil had said something distasteful.

A soft vibrating sounded from the bag between them. Andrew struggled to sit up the rest of the way, gasping out a rough sound halfway there that had Neil reaching out without thinking to steady him.

“Don’t.” Andrew snapped, a second before Neil’s hands reached him, and Neil snatched his hands back like he’d been burned. Andrew got himself the rest of the way up and grabbed his phone out of the bag, flipping it open to take the call.

“Minyard.”

A second later Andrew was shoving himself the rest of the way off of the bed, grabbing his cane and using it to flick his discarded day clothes up off the floor and onto the bed, the phone still to his ear. “We’ll be there.” Andrew snapped the phone shut and turned to Neil. “Get dressed, Josten. There’s
been another incident.”

Chapter End Notes

mystery words revealed! more mystery! Also Neil is definitely wearing those stupid cut-off sweat-shorts things, just so we're clear.

Up Next:

“It’ll be buried in the thalamus, the part of the brain that controls sleep. It’s in the midbrain, so I’d suggest doing a full brain removal rather than just digging in from the back,” Kevin said.

“A full brain removal,” Andrew echoed flatly. A piece of plastic nudged him in the arm, and when he looked around Neil was holding out a face shield, wearing one of his own and holding up- yes, that was definitely a bone saw.

“Ready, Agent Minyard?” Neil grinned.

It was a very good thing Andrew wasn’t bothered by gore.
Chapter Summary

Andrew's POV

Chapter Notes

warnings for descriptions of auditory overload

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3: One Nightmare After Another

Sometime between their return to the hotel and the call from Detective Greene, the pacific northwest weather had finally caught up with them. There was a light drizzle falling, but the slick wet streets said it had been harder earlier, and the air was thick with the promise of more to come.

Because all bad things came in threes, the scene was a car accident; a tiny, poorly-lit road on the outskirts of the city. Andrew pretended not to notice the furtive, assessing glances Neil kept sending him as they made their way through the wet street to the center of the flashing lights.

“Victim’s name is Ellen Rosiello.” Greene informed them as they arrived. “Age thirty five, local. According to her husband, they were in the middle of a phone call when he heard the crash.”

“The call wasn’t a factor?” Andrew asked.

“Not as far as we can tell.” said Greene. “She had a hands-free system. And actually it’s what she started saying to her husband right before the crash that’s the reason you got the call.”

Andrew had a feeling he knew what was coming, but he gestured for Greene to continue.

“He says she started yelling about monsters.” Greene said, tugging at his belt loops and looking thoroughly out of his depth. “She was screaming that there were monsters chasing her. She lost control of the vehicle and crashed in the middle of an empty street.”

Around when Greene finished, Neil wandered back over from where he’d been talking to one of the crime scene techs, trying to gauge if there was anything unusual about the crash itself. A loud, jangling ringtone cut through the night air, and Andrew winced slightly at the throb it put in his head.

He elbowed Neil in the side, satisfied with the small *oof* it produced.

“That’s you,” Andrew said meaningfully. Neil looked down at his own pocket as though Andrew had told him there was a live scorpion in it. Andrew rolled his eyes, grabbed the phone out of Neil’s pocket, and held it out for him, palm up. Lab was displayed on the small screen. When Neil still didn’t move, Andrew grabbed his cuff and pressed the phone into his hand firmly. “They don’t ring forever, you know,” Andrew said, and that seemed to jolt Neil back from wherever he had gone. He scowled down at Andrew, but at least he picked up the phone.
“Hello?”

Andrew couldn’t make out the words on the other end of the call, but he could hear enough of the voice and cadence to guess that it was Kevin. Andrew glanced at his watch – apparently Kevin was feeling insomniac; it was quite late back in Boston. He glanced back up when Neil suddenly straightened, darting off to where they were loading Ellen Rosiello’s body into the transport vehicle. Andrew followed behind.

Ellen Rosiello’s hair was snow white despite her relatively young age, just like Greg Leader’s had been. But apparently that wasn’t what Neil was looking for. And because he was an idiot, he immediately pushed through the techs in charge of the body and began unzipping the body bag the rest of the way. Some of the techs – EMTs, actually, firefighter crossover types with biceps bigger than Neil’s head, just about – immediately grabbed at him to pull him away, which Andrew would have approved of expect for the way Neil immediately began fighting in their grip.

“Let go of me, asshole, I need to turn her over,” Neil snarled, still holding the phone between his chin and shoulder. It was probably the only thing keeping him from starting a fistfight.

“Sir, this body is being transported to-” one of them began, just as Andrew shouldered his way between all of them and the body.

“He’s with me,” Andrew said firmly, making sure to meet Neil’s eyes. “Excuse us, he’s not very well socialized.”

“I’ll say,” one of the EMTs muttered, but they let Neil go and stepped back, and Andrew jerked his head at the body, giving Neil permission to continue whatever the hell it was he was doing.

“I need to turn her over,” Neil said again, calmer this time. “Get her feet?”

Andrew grimaced but he could do this much. He grabbed Ellen Rosiello’s feet and helped Neil turn her over on the stretcher. Neil’s hand immediately went to the base of her neck, fingers probing around under the unnaturally white hair.

“Where did you find it, the thalamus? – Because it makes sense, Kev. – Yeah, there’s a scar.” Neil said. It sounded like a confirmation. Then Neil’s hand was reaching back to his pocket, and Andrew caught his sleeve in a flash, leaning in close when Neil turned into him.

“If it involves a knife,” Andrew said quietly, “it waits until she’s in the morgue. I didn’t give you that thing so you could cut up dead bodies with it.”

They were close enough that Andrew could feel the breath Neil huffed out on his cheek. He backed up but kept glaring until Neil backed reluctantly away from the body.

“Looks like nine stitches, yeah,” Neil said into the phone. “Yes. – Andrew says we have to take her to the morgue to check the rest out though. – Yeah can it-“ Neil yawned into the phone, stretching his free arm up like a cat, like he was standing in the hotel room instead of in the middle of a crime scene, like he hadn’t just nearly had a panic attack five minutes and a fistfight within the last five minutes, all that adrenaline just buried, buried when he should be shaking with it- “can it wait until the morning? – Yeah I know. Ask Nicky, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind. – Okay. – Yeah, sure. – Bye.” Neil hung up the phone.

“Ask Nicky what?” Andrew was curious about that one.

“To stay over,” Neil said, frowning. “I’d forgotten about that part, actually. I knew he’d have people with him in the lab. I forgot about at home.”
Something weird stirred in Andrew’s stomach at the sound of Neil calling his house ‘home.’ Well, his old house. He didn’t live there anymore, he reminded himself. It belonged to Neil and Kevin now.

“You’re right. Nicky will be thrilled,” Andrew said, shaking the other odd thoughts out of his head. “What about the stitches?”

“Apparently Leader had the same thing.” Andrew had guessed that much. “And he had something embedded in his brain. Like a computer chip.”

That Andrew had not guessed. That was interesting, indeed. Well, they would see about it tomorrow. For now, Andrew was going back to his hotel room and shutting his brain down, with the rest of his scotch if that’s what it took. He was not thinking about the case. He was not thinking about Neil-Abram-Josten and his hair-trigger body, and his eyes that said I know what it is to dream of demons, I know what it is to have them follow you when you wake, and his stupid pajama shorts. Andrew was just going the fuck to sleep.

They decided to go to the morgue in the morning and video chat Kevin over the autopsy so they could compare the bodies. Fortunately, Kevin’s late night in the lab meant he didn’t get back in the morning until 9. Unfortunately, that meant Andrew and Neil had to be at the morgue by 6, with the time difference. Also, it seemed Neil was a habitual early riser, and his unreasonable cheer as they made their way down to the basement of Seattle General to cut open a dead woman was not exactly ingratiating.

Neil left him to set up the computer when they got to the lab. When he returned he was holding two steaming to-go cups. He held one out to Andrew.

“What is it?”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Sweetened milk, but I had them put some coffee in it for you.” As if anyone who looked equally happy with black rest stop gasoline and dollar store green tea had any right to mock Andrew for his coffee order. Andrew snatched it from his hands with a glare and took a sip. It was, unfortunately, perfect.

The computer trilled with an incoming call, and Renee’s face filled the screen.

“Hello Andrew! Good morning, Neil!” She said cheerfully. She’d died her hair, Andrew noticed. The tips appeared a grey-ish color that Andrew suspected was actually a very subtle lavender. “How is Seattle?”

“Wet,” Andrew said. “I didn’t expect you on this call.”

“Allison is here, too,” Renee said, backing up a little and turning the camera so it took in more of the room. There were quite a lot of people there, actually. Renee, Allison, Kevin, Wymack – and the resident giant, for some reason.

“Boyd, too? What’s the occasion?”

Boyd must have heard his name from across the room, because a second later he was striding over, grinning into the camera.

“Minyard! It’s been too long – I didn’t realize this is where you’d been hiding,” he said, gesturing around to the lab. “Sweet gig, man.”

“It’s been passably interesting,” Andrew allowed. They weren’t friends. But Boyd and Nicky were,
which meant they saw enough of each other on forced group outings for him to have gotten used to Andrew’s brusque nature, and he had never seemed fazed by it.

“High praise from you,” Boyd said, and Andrew saw Neil raise his eyebrows across the autopsy table, a cocky expression that made Andrew’s skin itch. “Actually, I’m just here filling in for Nicky. He had some stuff on an old case come up, and I met Kevin when we went out for drinks a couple of weeks ago, so he asked me to hang around for a while in case the rest of the gang had to go anywhere. Kevin said the extra pair of hands couldn’t hurt.”

“Did he now?” Neil cut in, coming around the table and nodding a brief hello. Andrew knew the two of them had met in passing, but not enough for Neil to have really warmed up, even to someone as apparently easygoing as Boyd.

“I said he could help if he could manage to be competent,” Kevin called from across the lab. Neil snorted quietly. Yeah, that did sound more like it.

“What’s the deal, Day?” Andrew asked before the banter could go any further. Honestly. Renee needled him about his apathy toward their job, but at least he knew how to focus. Kevin held up a small piece of metal, barely more than a filament by the look of it.

“You’re looking for this,” he said. “It’ll be buried in the thalamus, the part of the brain that controls sleep. It’s in the midbrain, so I’d suggest doing a full brain removal rather than just digging in from the back.”

“A full brain removal,” Andrew echoed flatly. A piece of plastic nudged him in the arm, and when he looked around Neil was holding out a face shield, wearing one of his own and holding up- yes, that was definitely a bone saw.

“Ready, Agent Minyard?” Neil grinned.

It was a very good thing Andrew wasn’t bothered by gore.

They did find the filament, buried where Kevin had said it would be in Ellen Rosiello’s midbrain. Andrew held it up to the light but it was too small to really make anything of. It looked a bit like resistor.

“What is it?” Andrew asked, and Neil crowded around the computer with him to hear the answer, removing his face shield and stripping off gloves globbed with blood and bits of brain. Reynolds slid into view.

“It’s a bio-chip. Well, technically a B.C.I. Brain-computer-interface. Both victims had them surgically implanted.”

“So it can- what? connect the brain to a remote computer?” Neil asked, taking the device from Andrew and inspecting it for himself.

“That’s right,” said Reynolds. “I’ve been looking over it with Kevin here, and from what we can ascertain, we think it works a lot like a pacemaker. It monitors sleep cycles and, when necessary, stimulates the Thalamus, which induces a deeper sleep state. There is a researcher in Seattle who has worked on several prototypes like it. The man is a genius. Massive Dynamic been tracking him for years.”

“Just tracking him?” Andrew prodded. He needed to ask. Riko had been tied up in too many of their cases lately. It didn’t mean he was involved in this one, but it was certainly worth checking.
“As far as I am aware, yes,” Reynolds said seriously. “I’ve sent you his file.” She paused, rubbing at the glove over her glass wrist. “Look, Agent Minyard. I know your trust in me isn’t very high right now. And this isn’t a conversation I really want to have over video chat but- we are on the same side. You’d see that if you could just stop being an asshole for like, ten seconds.”

“Don’t they always say to be yourself?” Andrew drawled, and felt Neil huff slightly beside him. “I believe you for now, Reynolds. If only because Walker is vouching for you. Do your people have any idea how this is causing our victims to hallucinate monsters while they’re awake? Or why?”

“She doesn’t,” Kevin broke in imperiously. “I do, though. The device plugs directly into the thalamus. Not only does the thalamus regulate sleep, it also works as a relay tower to the cerebral cortex, which controls motor-function. I think it’s very likely some kind of mind control. I’d need to run some tests of my own to figure it out, though. Not enough information, and this lab is mostly medical. We don’t have the tools to analyze tech this small.”

Andrew opened his phone to the email from Reynolds marked minutes ago. Dr. Laxmeesh Nayak. Local. A glance through his file made him look pretty ordinary, although if Massive Dynamic had an interested in covering anything up, Andrew knew he wouldn’t be able to tell. Still, Dr. Nayak looked to be an upstanding sort of guy, as it went. If they leaned the right way he would probably hand over schematics for the devices without too much fuss.

“Day, if I can get you internal schematics, can you run a test to see if these things can go full Cyberman?”

“Full what?” Neil and Kevin said at once. Andrew ignored them.

“Can you see if they are capable of mind control?”

“Oh. Yes,” Kevin said. “But I would need a to be able to replicate the neural environment for the chip in order to get it to work.”

“He means he needs a live test subject.” Neil said, then turned to the computer. “Kevin, you can’t just put up a sign for student volunteers.”

Kevin seemed a little disappointed by that, but he posited that he could connect the device to a brain via a neural net, so that it could be quickly turned off and wouldn’t involve any actual brain surgery. Andrew was quietly relieved. He had been on the receiving end of Kevin sticking things in people’s brains. It had been necessary, but it had been far from pleasant. Still, there was the matter of a live subject. Neil probably would have volunteered, idiot that he was, but luckily he was stuck in Seattle. Reynolds would never and Renee couldn’t risk it, which only left-

“It’s me, isn’t it?” Boyd said, sounding cheerfully resigned. He grinned at Wymack. “Hey chief, if I do this, do I get a better Christmas bonus?”

“Not in your life,” Wymack said, but then considered, and offered “I’ll talk to Wilds’ boss, make sure you can match up your vacation days this year.”

“Done.” Matt pumped his fist in the air. He turned and pointed a finger at Kevin. “All right, scientist. I’m all yours.”

As long as Andrew and Neil could track down plans for the device. Renee chose that moment to steal back the computer, and Andrew wrapped up the call with her after confirming that Neil had no more questions. She promised to call, and secured a coffee date as soon as they got back, probably to talk about things Andrew had no interest in talking about, like Reynolds’ change of heart and
Andrew’s own recovery, but she would drop things if he asked. It was why they got on as well as they did.

With the call ended, Andrew and Neil signed off on everything at the morgue and helped the nurses clean up the mess they’d made. It was less gruesome than Andrew had assumed it would be. Very clinical. It had been interesting, to see a whole, undamaged human brain. When they inevitably had to cut Andrew open after his death, he wondered if his own would look quite so good. No matter, though. They had a doctor to see.

The office of Dr. Laxmeesh Nayak was tidy and boring, but at least it was warm and dry, two things the morgue had not been. The doctor himself was exactly what you would expect from a man who had decided to spend his life studying sleep: plain and bookish looking, dressed in a plaid button down and rumpled khakis, with warm creases in his face that other people might have called ‘fatherly.’ His handshake was firm and dry, and he looked genuinely confused as to why the FBI wanted to talk to him.

“Dr. Nayak, are you familiar with Greg Leader and Ellen Rosiello?” Andrew cut to the chase, holding out pictures for the doctor to see. He didn’t even need to glance down at them.

“Of course, they are patients. Has something happened?”

“They both recently committed homicidal attacks and then died, apparently of exhaustion.” Andrew informed him, and watched the blood drain from his face.

“Oh god, that’s awful.”

“Dr. Nayak, we found bio-chips embedded in both of their brains. Was that-“

“Yes, yes of course, I put them there.” Nayak said hurriedly, gesturing them back into the building, away from the exam rooms and into a hallway lined with offices. “Greg and Ellen were both part of a study.”

“So you’ve implanted those chips into other people?” Neil asked. Nayak paused in the hallway, looking stricken, as though he had just considered the implications of that.

“Yes, it was a large scale clinical trial,” he said. “Sixty four in the control group and eighty two with the chips, I’m afraid.”

Eighty two. That was, well, worse than Andrew had imagined. But at least the victim pool was coming out of some kind of official study, and not being implanted with possible mind-control devices without their knowledge. That was a start.

“We’re going to need those names, Doctor,” Andrew said.

“Of course.” Dr. Nayak led them through a door and up a staircase, talking as they went. “I’ve been working on this chip for years, I’ve tested it extensively. I can’t think of any malfunction that would cause the kind of symptoms you are describing. Even if the chip shorted out, for example, it should remain benign- oh my.”

Nayak had opened the door to his office. The place had clearly been ransacked, not recklessly but with an emphasis on time, drawers left hanging open and folders shoved out of place on the desk, loose papers scattered about across the floor. The old-fashioned computer tower had been simply but efficiently smashed. Andrew tried to tell him to wait in the hall but he had already hurried inside, making a bee line for a drawer in the desk and letting out a strangled noise at what he found.

“The patient files – they’re gone,” Nayak gasped. “Physical and digital.” He took a deep breath and
pulled a business card form his pocket, scribbling something on the back and handing it to Andrew. It was a string of letters and numbers, along with what looked like an IP address. “The password for the remote server,” Nayak explained. “I made a backup of the patient files. Hopefully whoever did this didn’t get to them, too. In the meantime, I’ll have my assistant Zach gather up the nurses; we’ll give you as many patient names as you can remember.”

Andrew put in a call to Detective Greene to have some officers secure Nayak’s office as a crime scene, and then he and Neil left them to it, heading to the waiting room. Neil had spotted a Chinese takeout place across the street and went to get lunch, frowning when Andrew waved away his request for Andrew’s order. He had only been gone for a few minutes when the noise came back.

The noise episodes were never pleasant, but at least within the confines of his own apartment the sounds themselves were benign. The sleep clinic was not so kind, with beeping machines and fingers scrabbling at keyboards and the incessant movement of the elevators. A chair scraping nearby felt like nails being dragged directly across his eardrum, or maybe the inside of his skull. It was getting heard to tell. Andrew clutched at his cane and shoved himself to his feet, forcing himself to pace in the small waiting room.

He didn’t go outside – it would be louder, and he’d found out the hard way that smoking only seemed to make it worse. The dull thump of his cane on the tile was a cell door slamming shut, over and over, but he forced himself to keep moving through it, breathing steadily. From the outside, he probably only looked mildly impatient.

“Andrew?”

Neil hadn’t spoken loudly, probably, but it stabbed through Andrew’s head like a knife. He turned around to see Neil standing there, a paper bag clutched in his hand and a small frown on his face. “Are you okay?”

“Shut up.” Andrew muttered as quietly as possible. “Go eat.”

Neil did as he was told, for once, and Andrew returned to pacing. Eventually the volume of the world eased back down toward normal, and Andrew determinedly eased himself back into his seat rather than collapsing. A moment later, there was a small white carton dangling in front of his face. When he sat up Neil was looking wryly between him and the container hanging form his own finger.

“You look like shit. Eat.” Neil dropped the container and didn’t bother to watch Andrew catch it, the warmth seeping into Andrew’s hands through the thin cardboard. He opened it suspiciously – sweet and sour chicken, the kind that came breaded and fried with the dipping sauce separate. Neil hadn’t handed over the sauce, but the chicken pieces were small enough for Andrew to pop in his mouth whole, and he was suddenly dizzily aware that he’d only had coffee for breakfast.

Andrew picked steadily through the chicken, ignoring Neil as he worked through whatever mess of noodles he’d bought for himself this time. He was still picking when Neil put down his food.

“Really though, are you okay?” Neil said, infuriatingly sincere.

“I thought I told you to shut up,” Andrew reminded him around a piece of chicken. Neil sighed, looking away, and settled back in his chair.

“Right. Well, sorry about your car, anyway,” he said out of the blue.

“What the fuck are you sorry for?” Andrew snapped. Neil cocked his head but still didn’t look at Andrew. He was clearly uncomfortable, but he bulled on anyway.
“I’m not apologizing. I’m- Okay maybe I am, a little. I was just thinking about it and- I don’t know exactly how Riko is mixed up in this, I know you don’t remember, but I know he is, and I know Kevin and I are somehow at the center of it, and I feel like we dragged you with us. I should have left as soon as I knew Riko was involved, and I didn’t.”

Andrew hadn’t told him, but Neil had apparently begun to put it together anyway, the bastard. This was really the moment for Andrew to keep his mouth shut, but Neil must have been rubbing off on him, because for some reason he found himself saying “Oh, but I do remember.”

Neil startled, whipping his head around and staring. “What?”

He’d been recalling his time on the other side, in Riko’s office, slowly over the last three weeks. Piece by piece. He just didn’t want to tell anyone until he was sure.

“My standing with FBI psychologists is delicate at best. It’s not worth the risk of stories getting out of the agent who thinks he was kidnapped to another universe by the CEO of Massive Dynamic,” Andrew said. If that happened it was game over, for his career and his case. So he’d kept quiet, but he was remembering.

“What do you remember?” Neil demanded, like he was owed that information for some reason.

“I remember Riko saying, ‘You will regret allowing your pet Josten to cost me one of my top lieutenants,’” Andrew sneered. He expected Neil’s recoil, or at least maybe resignation, but the look he gave Andrew was equal parts determined and thoughtful.

“That car was ten years old, the insurance won’t give you enough for a proper replacement. Let me cover the difference. You know I have enough for it,” Neil said.

“I am uninterested in your pity or your charity,” Andrew informed him. He would have been surprised, but this was Neil all over. If Andrew’s life was a series of deals Neil’s was a series of transactions, everything a delicate balance between what will this cost me? and what will this buy me?

“You know it’s not pity, and it’s not charity either. It’s revenge,” Neil said, unbothered. “I told you my money was all stolen from the Moriyamas anyway. You’d be buying back what Riko destroyed with his own cash.”

“Revenge is for the stupid.” Andrew would know. He had been stupid more than once in his life. It had cost him more than it had gotten him, in the end.

“Just take the damn money,” Neil said, sounding frustrated. “You bought your last car with someone’s death, buy this one with someone’s life – my life.” And all at once there was something else entirely creeping up the underside of Neil’s words, and Andrew couldn’t hear it. He didn’t dare. “That money was going to buy my next identity, my next life. But if I’m staying, I don’t need it anymore.”

He didn’t mean it the way it sounded, staying. He meant until he died, because Neil Josten was quietly sure that even if they managed to beat Riko it was going to end in his death. But he had decided to see it through anyway. A blaze of glory, maybe, for the man who had always been nothing. He didn’t mean permanent. The same way no one else ever had either.

But maybe he’d come closer than most.

“Make a new deal with me,” Neil said, because he saw paying for Andrew’s car as Andrew doing him a favor.
“What would you take for it?” Andrew was curious.

“What would you give me?” Neil was oblivious.

Dr. Nayak emerged from his office, accompanied by Detective Greene, clutching the list of patient names they had been able to come up with and a flash drive containing the device schematics. Andrew stood. “Don’t ask stupid questions,” he said, because he refused to lie but couldn’t tell the truth, and trusted Neil would never figure it out.

Chapter End Notes

pining is fun, guys. Am I doing it right?

Up Next:

“Kevin, are you trying to tell me that these chips are stealing dreams?”
Part 4, Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Neil's POV

Chapter Notes

warnings for descriptions of a drug overdose

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4: Electric Dreams, Electric Demons

Dr. Nayak offered them an empty office to work out of while he and Detective Greene worked on tracking down more patients. He and the nurses had come up with twenty six names, all of whom were being brought in to have their bio-chips removed, just in case, but that still left fifty-odd patients unaccounted for. Andrew had sent the information for the remote server to Renee for her to look into, as well as sending the schematics for the bio-chips to Kevin. Neil had been video-chatting with him on the laptop as they figured out they familiarized themselves with the device, combining Neil’s knowledge of circuitry and Kevin’s more thorough understanding of the brain until they felt they full understood what they were working with.

It only took a couple of hours before they felt they were ready to test the device. The crowd in the lab had dwindled to just Kevin, Renee, and Agent Matt Boyd, a six-foot odd gentle giant Neil had met in passing on a couple of occasions. Neil didn’t know much about him other than that he was good friends with Nicky and Renee, he worked mostly white-collar cases but had been helping Wymack out for years, and he was apparently engaged to the undercover cop Neil had met on the Valeria Boone case. Still, he seemed harmless enough. He was friendly but subtly sharp, and kind in an unassuming way that none of the other agents Neil had met had been yet.

Now, Matt and Kevin were sitting across from each other in the lab, a small computer and control panel in between them. They were both wearing “neural nets” as Kevin called them, helmets of wires and electrodes that looked like something out of a bad sci-fi movie but Neil knew to be a pretty effective method of delivering and receiving electronic transmissions to and from the brain.

Because Kevin had a better understanding of how the control panel worked, and because he was a pompous ass who refused to be the subject of his own experiments, Matt was going to be the one with the bio-chip connected to his brain, “implanted” via connection to one of the neural nets. Kevin would be attempting small feats of mind control, such as moving Matt’s fingers or toes, by way of his own neural net. Matt had complained good-naturedly about it for a bit, but in the end accepted that it was probably safest to leave control of the technology in Kevin’s hands.

“Ready, Day?” Matt grinned across at him. Kevin turned his head to the side and looked at Neil and Andrew through the camera.
“Finally, someone who understands that science should be exciting!” Kevin said. He wasn’t smiling, but his eyes were bright and determined even through the video chat. It was nice to see, actually.

“Good to see you made a friend, Kevin,” Neil told him. “Now get on with it.”

“Okay,” Kevin said, turning to Renee “Turn it on.” Renee did.

For a few minutes nothing happened. Kevin fiddled with the dials a bit, and explained out loud which parts of Matt’s body he was trying to get to move. Renee looked back and forth between them attentively, but nothing was happening.

“Okay,” Kevin said after a few minutes. “I’m reversing the signal flow.” He flicked a switch on the control panel, and slowly turned the dial that controlled signal strength up.

“I’m concentrating on his hands.” Kevin said. Neil watched Matt’s hands carefully. They didn’t move. But Kevin’s face had shifted. He was frowning uneasily.

“Kevin are you okay?” Renee asked gently. Neil saw Kevin nod. Matt had closed his eyes, and he was frowning too, but none of his extremities were moving. Something was wrong.

“Andrew, I think maybe they should-“ he started, but Andrew shoved him back, leaning in toward the screen as the next second, Kevin gasped, his eyes blank.

What was more, Matt had also gone very pale. He looked positively queasy as he turned to Renee, eyes still closed, and said “Turn it off. Now.”

Neil could only watch as Renee hurriedly disconnected them both from the device. Both Kevin and Matt were breathing heavily, each with a slightly different flavor of panic etched in their faces.

“What happened?” Andrew asked bluntly. Kevin’s head turned to face the camera. He was still slightly wide-eyed, hands grasping at the arm rests of his chair a little too firmly. He squeezed his eyes shut. Opened them again. Shook himself and looked carefully back at where Matt was slumped tiredly in his own chair.

Matt ran a hand through his hair and signed deeply, rubbing at his arms, but found his voice first. “It definitely messes with your perception of reality,” he said slowly. “I couldn’t even tell you what was different about the lab, but I knew it was wrong, somehow. It was pretty unnerving.” He looked across at Kevin. “What happened to you, Day?”

Kevin’s hands were folded together and pressed against his lips, and he was taking slow, deliberate breaths like he was staving off panic. Neil noticed he was shivering slightly. Matt must have noticed too. “Day, are you all right?”

“Renee, any progress on the database?” Andrew asked, drawing Neil’s attention away from Kevin. She shook her head.

“It’s been wiped, too. We tried tracing the hack but it turned out there was no hack. It was wiped by someone with password access,” she said.

It was looking more and more like someone from inside the company. But to what end?

“Kevin?” Andrew prompted. Kevin turned toward the camera again and slowly lowered his hands from his face. The panicked look had mostly receded, replaced by something more thoughtful and serious.
“I think I know what’s going on,” he said. “The chips aren’t receiving commands, they’re transmitting data. Massive amount of it.”

Neil frowned, confused. “Kevin, that’s what they’re supposed to do, they monitor sleep cycles.” But Kevin was shaking his head before he’d even finished.

“That may be their prescribed function, but in practice they are transmitting every bit of sensory data that passes through the thalamus. Every sight, sound, and smell. Every picture while we sleep. And someone is accessing that data.”

It was Andrew who broke in now. “Kevin, are you trying to tell me that these chips are stealing dreams?”

It sounded crazy at first, but actually that made perfect sense. “Greg Leader’s sleep journal,” Neil realized, “he was getting eight hours of sleep a night, but he never had a single dream.”

“I think they were siphoned off before they ever reached his consciousness,” Kevin said. “And no dreams means no time for the brain to recharge, leading to—”

“—death by exhaustion.” Neil finished for him.

“Exactly. And, I think if the devices were signaled while the person is awake, it can confuse the waking and dreaming state, causing the kinds of hallucinations we saw in our victims.”

“But Kevin, why?” What use could anyone possibly have for poking around in other people’s dreams? It couldn’t be for intelligence – dreams might be the mind’s way of processing the events of life, but they did so in notoriously unreliable ways. There wasn’t any useful information to be gleaned there.

“I think whoever it is is using them to get high,” Kevin said.

“What?” That was Matt, looking surprised. Then he laughed. “Is that what that look on your face was?”

“Explain, Kevin,” Andrew said, leaning in closer. Neil backed out of his way as carefully as he could while still being able to watch the screen.

“Think about it,” Kevin said. “Think of your most vivid dream, multiply that feeling tenfold, all main-lining through your Cortex in a few seconds. It’s really quite something.”

Andrew’s hands clenched so hard on the edge of the desk the wood creaked.

“Are you saying we’re dealing with an addict?” Neil asked Kevin, trying to move the conversation away from the subject of their own dreams.

“Not just any addict,” Kevin said. “If someone got a real, full taste of this, they would never feel like their brain was fully turned on again. They would become its slave.”

Matt gave a low whistle. “Hey Day, I take back what I said about letting me be at the controls. This way you and Minyard don’t get stuck with my rehab bill.” He said it like a joke, but there was genuine relief buried under there. Neil filed that information away for later consideration. They knew what they were dealing with now. It was time to re-confront Dr. Nayak.

They were on their way to the office when Andrew’s phone rang. He picked it up, listened for a few seconds, and then said “What’s the name?” and hung up.
“There’s been another attack,” Andrew said.

“Should we go to the scene?” Neil asked. He was driving, and Andrew was taking advantage of this by reclining the passenger seat as far as it would go without the seatbelt getting in the way.

“Our addict is escalating,” Andrew said, “Time between attacks is shrinking, which means he’s chasing his fix more often.” Neil understood what he was getting at – given his way, their addict would keep burning through patients until it killed him or there were none left, whichever came first. And god forbid his system somehow fell into someone else’s hands. And someone else’s after that.

The clinical trial was nearly up, and rumor was it was a shoe-in for approval, set for wider distribution in mere months. With its success, it could be in the heads of thousands of patients by summer. They needed to shut this down, and they needed to shut it down now.

They found Dr. Nayak walking out of an exam room, having just completed the removal of one of the last devices they had a name for. The first thing Andrew told him was about the newest incident, a woman named Diane Lamia. He seemed to sag.

“Diane suffered from night terrors,” he said. “She was just in for a consultation last week, excited to have finally put it all behind her. I called her to come in but she said she couldn’t get time off of work until tomorrow.” Nayak sank heavily into a nearby chair. “What have I done?”

“We need to make a public announcement,” Neil murmured to Andrew, who nodded and looked back to Nayak.

“Doctor, we’re going to make a public announcement to the local media. Is there anything else you know that would help us find whoever is doing this?”

Nayak suddenly sat up straighter, pale and stricken.


“My assistant, Zach. He didn’t come in today.”

Neil was following Andrew out the door as soon as the words were out of Nayak’s mouth.

They had the employee files on the laptop, so it was a matter of minutes before Andrew was reading off Zach Miller’s address into the GPS unit and Neil was pressing his foot down harder on the gas. He couldn’t have said what inspired the sense of urgency – there had been an attack only minutes ago, there was no precedence for assuming there’d be another one so soon – but it was there and neither of them were willing to ignore it.

It took them close to an hour to reach Miller’s house on the outskirts of the city. They crept toward the porch in silence. There were no lights on in the house that Neil could see at first, but after a moment he caught a low flicker of blue across the grass. A basement window, nearly obscured by low bushes. He crept over and peered inside, and felt his heart stop in his throat.

Neil was on his feet again in an instant. “We need to get down there. Now.” Andrew shoved his cane into Neil’s chest, who caught it in confusion until he realized Andrew was picking the lock.

They made their way into the house in near-silence, pausing as Neil quietly opened various downstairs doors until he found the one that led down into the basement.

“Can you-“

A sharp jab in Neil’s lower back from the rubber foot of the cane was the answer to Neil’s whispered
question, at least the only one Andrew was willing to give. He slipped down the stairs and took in in person what he had seen from the window.

It was even worse from up close. Zach Miller was wearing his own version of a neural net, and he looked practically catatonic except for the twitching of his hands on a couple of dials, ghostly lit by the large, glowing screen in front of him. His eyes were blank and there was drool running out of his mouth and onto his chin, but it was the screen that was the worst part.

At first Neil had assumed it was merely a view of whatever dream Miller was watching, but then he realized. Miller had been stealing people’s thoughts while they were awake, and anyway it wasn’t quite late enough for many people to be asleep. No, this wasn’t a dream, this was a live broadcast of the actual sensory input of whoever Miller was plugged into.

And it was the cockpit of an airplane.

“Turn it off!” Andrew whispered harshly, jolting Neil into action. He had a vague idea of what Miller’s set-up probably was thanks to Kevin’s experiment. He ran forward, grabbing the keyboard out from under Miller’s unresponsive hands and typing furiously, trying to shut down the program.

The frantic voices of the man Miller was plugged into and whoever his copilot was crackled from the screen as on it, the view of plane suddenly swiped broadside, heading back toward the Seattle skyline and a port docked with cruise ships. “Jack. Jack! We have to get up in the air! Jack! Hey, November 8-2-2, pilot in distress! Jack!”

“Come On,” Andrew hissed.

“I think I have to try and try to disable the server,” Neil said breathlessly as the plane continued to careen out of control on the screen. The cockpit was up in flames and Neil hoped desperately that that part was just the nightmare.

“Can you do it?”

“I think it’s locked,” Neil half-shouted, flipping at every switch on the server panel that seemed like it might do what he wanted and shut the damn thing down.

“Jack! November 8-2-2, seventy-seven hundred!”

“Stand back,” Andrew said suddenly, and Neil shoved himself back out of the way just before something came smashing down on the main tower. Once, twice, three times, until the server lights blinked out.

On the screen, the flames in the cockpit blinked out of existence. The screaming co-pilot got through to the pilot – Jack – just in time, and Neil watched with a long sigh of relief as the plane righted itself in time to get up above the cruise ships, up above the skyline and safely into the night air.

Andrew was watching the screen with the most openly horrified expression Neil had ever seen on his face. In the hysterical adrenaline of the moment, he very nearly laughed. At this rate, he would be lucky if Andrew didn’t make them drive back to Boston.

As it was, Neil reached over and shut off power to the screens, causing Andrew to blink and look at him, then down at his hands, which held the splintered remnants of his black cane.

“Huh,” he muttered, “no sword required.”

Whatever that meant.
Neil turned back to Miller. He was barely conscious, so it was no problem leaning him forward onto the desk so Andrew could limp over and cuff him. They waited in silence for the police to arrive, and Neil slipped upstairs while Andrew was going over things with Detective Greene, returning with a crutch he’d nabbed out of the back of the ambulance. He would have offered to just help Andrew back to the car himself, but he knew how well that would have gone over.

Neither of them said a word on the drive back to the hotel. But when Andrew pulled out his cigarettes, he handed Neil a lit one without being asked.

That night, Neil dreamed.

It was nighttime, and Nathaniel was young. Small. He could tell by how knobby his knees were, and by the scar that was missing from his left hand where he’d slipped with a knife when he was nine. One of the only scars he’d ever made on himself. His bedroom in the dorms below Evermore Academy was quiet, quiet, and dark. There was no window to let in the moonlight.

There was a small rap at the door. Nathaniel crept to it, standing on a chair to peer through the peephole. Kevin, probably he had a nightmare again. He didn’t know Nathaniel knew about them, but Nathaniel knew it was no coincidence that the nights he heard strangled screaming from down the hall were usually the nights Kevin knocked on his door and asked if he wanted to break into the cafeteria and steal fruit pops from the freezer.

So it was a surprise when he opened the door to find not one boy but two: Riko was there. Did Riko even like fruit pops? Nathaniel wasn’t sure. Kevin looked nervous. He was sweating and looking over his shoulder, so maybe it had been a really bad nightmare this time.

He wasn’t wearing his normal pajamas. He was wearing snow boots, and his hair was all wet. So was Riko’s.

“Come on,” Kevin said, and Nathaniel followed them.

They didn’t go upstairs to the cafeteria. Instead, they took the stairs deeper into the basement, toward the Master’s labs. Nathaniel shivered – the walls down here were too dark. They were closing in on him, trapping him. They didn’t want him to escape – was he trying to escape? Kevin pushed open the door to a lab. Nathaniel wasn’t sure where they were but he definitely wasn’t allowed to be here. There was something terrible in here, he could feel it in his bones.

Nathaniel turned, tried to run. Riko’s hands on him were claws, were talons, dragging him through the room. Kevin’s voice was a desperate, dying gasp, or maybe that was Nathaniel’s. The walls were getting closer. The whole world was a closing fist, a taunting mouth saying don’t run, Nathaniel. And he wanted to cry that he wasn’t even trying to, what was going on? Where was his mom?

“Time to go home, Nathaniel,” a voice said from somewhere.

Kevin’s hands around his wrists were dragging how forward, Riko’s pushing on his back, and he was stumbling towards the middle of the wide room, where a black hole was howling like a portal into Hell itself.

“Mom!” Nathaniel cried desperately, “Mom!” but he was already dead, already sucked in and he was falling, falling-

“NO!” Neil woke with a strangled cry, pulse slamming through his body, the bed sheets tangled around his legs, his t-shirt soaked with sweat. He ran his fingers through his hair, tugging just a little
until the world re-oriented itself around him. He was about to strip the sweat-cold shirt off his back when there was a knock at the door.

Fighting the horrible wave of déjà vu, Neil rolled out of bed, went to the door and looked through the peephole. He’d recognized the knock, but he had to check anyway. With a small sigh, he undid the locks and opened it for Andrew, his heartbeat already slowing. Andrew had pillow lines on his cheek and hair mussed from sleep, frowning at Neil from across the threshold. He seemed barely half-awake, his eyes heavy.

“Nightmare,” Neil said lamely, stepping back automatically to allow Andrew to enter. Andrew did, stepping past Neil into the room. The door shut with a soft click behind them, and Neil leaned against it, one hand resting lightly on the handle. “It happens pretty often.”

“Do you often scream like that?”

“No,” Neil admitted. Andrew just stood there, silent and unmoving. Neil wasn’t sure why he suddenly wanted to tell Andrew about his nightmare, just that it seemed like the thing to do. “but then, usually Kevin and Riko don’t push me into a black hole in the basement of Evermore.”

Andrew’s eyes never left Neil’s face. It was like he was waiting for something, a breakdown or a demand or a confession. Finally, it occurred to Neil that maybe he was waiting to see if Neil needed anything.

“I’m fine,” Neil said.

“I didn’t ask.” Andrew said.

“Right.” Silence.

“Do you have nightmares like that?” Neil blurted out. The question hung in the air between them, loud in the muffled atmosphere of the dark hotel room.

“My brain does not need to invent terrible things,” Andrew said finally, which meant no but also meant yes, and it made Neil unbearably sad for a brief moment, to remember that Andrew, too, had enough real monsters in his past that he didn’t need to conjure new ones in his sleep.

“Right,” he said again, then sighed. He opened the door and held it. “Go. Sleep.” Andrew didn’t say anything in response, but he brushed his fingers across Neil’s shoulder as he passed, a strange, sleepy movement he himself barely seemed to register. And then he was gone, and Neil closed the door, and was alone again.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next:

“Oh. It’s all right, Andrew. I’d prefer if you didn’t shoot me.”

Andrew couldn’t remember reaching for his gun, but it was pointed at the woman in the doorway and it wasn’t shaking.

“Where am I?” he demanded.
Part 4, Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Andrew's POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 5: Unexpected Allies

Twenty planes go down a year, and it’s not always due to weather. Sometimes pilots are just unreliable. I’m sure it’s a quick death either way.

A quick death was all Andrew had ever really managed to hope for for himself, so that was all right, he supposed.

He was watching the planes take off again, less an attempt at feeling than it was an attempt at beating a wound until it went numb. It was maybe the opposite of proper exposure therapy, but it was something.

“Clear skies,” Neil said, coming up beside him, steady like he hadn’t woke screaming in the night. Andrew ignored his lame attempt at comfort.

Instead he asked “have you decided what you want?” meaning for the money. He didn’t like asking things twice but Neil had forced his hand and he needed the distraction right now.

“I want you to stop doing dust.”

For a second Andrew was sure he’d heard him wrong.

It was the last thing he had expected Neil to say. Honestly, Andrew was surprised his dust habit was even still on Neil’s radar, though maybe he shouldn’t have been. Neil hadn’t come on any subsequent Eden’s trips, but Nicky and Kevin were never particularly subtle about their hangovers, so of course Neil always knew.

“Afraid you’re going to let something slip next time?” Andrew said lightly.

“There won’t be a next time,” Neil said. “You did what you did because you thought I was a threat to Kevin. You know I’m not now, I trust you won’t have to take those measures again.”

He was right, but Andrew wasn’t obligated to tell him so.

“What is it then? Is Neil Josten secretly a righteous man?”

“You know better than that.” Andrew did. “No, but what we’re up against with Riko is too important to afford distractions. If even one of you gets caught, FOXES Division gets shut down and we never get him. If you stop doing dust, Nicky and Kevin will too, and that’s one less thing that can be used against us.”

None of that was a lie, but something about it still rankled at Andrew.
“Besides, it hardly even affects you. It’s an unnecessary risk. You already have drinking and smoking, you don’t need a third addiction.”

“I don’t need anything,” Andrew said flatly, then saw Neil’s smirk and realized he’d played right into his hands. Bastard.

“Right. Well, it’ll be easy to give it up then, won’t it? Take the deal Andrew.”

He was getting cocky, and it looked traitorously good on him. The thing was, it would be easy. And that, Andrew realized, was the problem. It was such a stupid thing to ask for, it was almost like Neil had wanted not to ask for anything at all. It didn’t add up.

But if there was one thing that could be said for Neil Josten, it was that, high or low, he’d always told Andrew the price upfront.

Neil let him stew in silence for a minute before he said “I’ll get you the money when we get home. Come on, it’s time to board.”

So it was.

Takeoff was no worse than it always was. Andrew stared out the window until his stomach threatened to exit out of his throat, and then a little longer after that.

It was like this: Andrew had known how to be afraid, once. But the fears he had locked away in his childhood were ugly gifts foisted upon him; they were not his own.

No one had given Andrew his dislike of heights. It was just his. It was perfectly sensible, as dislikes went – a three story fall could maim a man, a four story one could kill him. There was something clean about it, the fight against the physical rebellion of his brain and body as he stared at the receding city, and he reveled in the battle because it was untainted. It was just millennia of survival instincts and Andrew, squared off and refusing to blink.

His resolve held for hours, even as the headache he’d been fighting off since that morning began to bloom into a full blown migraine. Then they hit a patch of bad air somewhere over Ohio, the seatbelt light blinking on in the darkened cabin as the plane lurched.

Then the noise started again.

Of all the fucking times. He closed his eyes. The plane was still rocking so even if he’d felt like arguing with a flight attendant about it Andrew likely wouldn’t have been able to stand anyway. What’s more, the noise was pinning him to his seat, the roar of the engines and the cabin air filters oppressive like an ocean, and he was debating just vomiting to be done with it when something jerked at his sleeve.

The automatic swing of his fist met a warm, calloused palm, and when Andrew opened his eyes Neil was shaking out his wrist, holding something out to him. Andrew couldn’t really make sense of it over the noise but at least he saw it coming, and didn’t flinch when Neil reached out and slipped something onto his head.

Oh. It was a set of over-ear headphones. Cheap ones, the kind they gave you for free in business class – which they were not in, so Neil must have bribed an attendant for a pair. They didn’t cut out a lot of noise, but enough that Andrew could mostly hear his own heartbeat, his own breath as it returned to him. Neil didn’t try to touch him again, but the weight of his stare was unwavering.

It wasn’t dry land; it was barely a piece of driftwood to cling to, but it was enough to keep Andrew
from going under until the noise faded. By then the seatbelt light had turned off, and Andrew shoved wordlessly past Neil to the toilet, retching into the tiny metal bowl and rinsing his mouth with metallic sink water. When he got back to the seat Neil was feigning at sleep. Andrew let him, all the way back to Boston.

Andrew didn’t even put up a fight when Neil kept the keys to the rental car as he took his bags inside the house in Cambridge, returning with just the keys and a hilariously unsubtle brown paper bag. Andrew threw it in the passenger seat without looking inside.

“Not going to count it?” Neil asked.

“Not planning on keeping your word?” Andrew challenged. Neil shrugged, then jumped a little as his phone buzzed in his pocket. Andrew felt his own phone go off at the same time, which either meant they were getting hauled in by Wymack, or Nicky was up to something.

It turned out to be the latter.

“Your cousin is throwing you a welcome back party,” Neil informed him with a smirk. “Tomorrow night at the lab.”

“Good for him.”

“Renee’s already offered to drive you.”

He wouldn’t accept the ride, but that was when Andrew knew it was a fight he had already lost, and that was how he ended up back in the lab the following night, the stupid stolen crutch in one hand and a flask in the other.

It was still the lab, but it had clearly been set up for a party. Someone had brought the cushion back down from the emergency landing and put it back on the couch, and all the equipment had been cleared off of one of the lower counters, mismatched folding chairs and stools pushed around it. Someone had provided a variety of snacks, including admittedly tempting chocolate cupcakes, and an even larger variety of booze, and Nicky had something poppy but unobtrusive playing over a borrowed set of speakers.

It seemed they’d invited the whole gang, security clearances be damned. Well, at least it meant they wouldn’t be talking shop too much. Nicky’s husband Erik was there, as were Allison Reynolds and Wymack. Even Boyd was there, with his fiancé BPD Officer Dan Wilds, who doubled over in laughter when she recognized Neil.

“You!” She cried with a grin, pulling a startled Neil into a handshake. “Oh man. You know, I had a feeling I’d see you again. Dan Wilds, good to finally meet you properly.”


Boyd clapped him on the shoulder. “We don’t get new faces around here too often, so it’s great to have you on the team, Neil. So, where are you from?”

Andrew left Neil to his floundering, grabbing up two cupcakes and a beer and heading to where Renee was sitting quietly on the couch, tapping away on her phone, a light twinkle in her eye as whoever it was chimed in response.

“I thought your crush was here,” Andrew said, sitting heavily next to her and offering a cupcake. She took it with a small smile.
“I’m not texting my crush. Actually it’s Allison’s assistant, Jean. I’m asking him to keep us apprised if anything should come up at Massive Dynamic tonight, while Allison is away.”

“Shouldn’t Allison do that?” Jean was her assistant, after all. Renee tucked a lock of hair behind her ear – Andrew’s suspicions had been right, it was indeed a subtle lavender, and Allison Reynolds had matching stains under her fingernails.

“I thought it would be nice if Jean and I developed a rapport,” Renee said, like she had never heard the words *ulterior motive*. “He’s a sweet man, but he’s been under Riko’s thumb for a long time, and he hasn’t had Kevin’s years of distance.” She looked equal parts sad and serious. “He knows things are getting out of hand, but he’s scared. I just want him to know he has a friend here.” Typical Walker.

“Let me know how that works out for you,” Andrew told her, getting up as he noticed Neil breaking away from Dan and Matt and heading toward Wymack. He had a look of intent, enough that Andrew followed him to where Wymack was leaning in the corner, scrolling tiredly through his phone and working on a plastic cup of something undiluted.

“Chief Wymack.”

Wymack looked up and Neil reached into the pocket of his sweatshirt, pulling out a small bag. Andrew shifted closer, watched Neil’s back tense and then relax as he registered Andrew’s presence. In the bag were two things: one of the bio-chips, and the hard drive from Zach Miller’s computer. Neil held it out.

“What’s this?” Wymack asked, taking the bag with a frown.

“An offering for the vultures,” Neil said.

Of course. Wymack was going to Washington in just a couple of days to try to convince the higher-ups not to shut FOXES Division down, that they were worth the financial investment.

“This is the tech that let Zachary Miller kill all those people,” Wymack said with a frown.

“It was never designed to be used the way Miller was using it, and that is why it killed people, and nearly him,” Neil said deliberately. “But with some tweaking, it could be used to stream the sensory input of whatever person it was in, to anyone. I’m sure one of your bosses could find that useful.”

Neil didn’t suggest pointing out that they had saved over seventy people when they shut Miller down, Andrew noticed. He knew better. At the end of the day, their division didn’t exist just because people were dying. It existed, and continued to be supported, because the government had an interest in the cutting-edge technology they often dealt with, and in using it for their own interests. Neil was clearly aware of that, and willing to use it as a bargaining chip, no matter how cold that bargain was.

Wymack was staring at Neil oddly. As if he was seeing him in a new light. Or maybe like he was finally beginning to have proof of something he had suspected all along.

“Thanks Josten, I think,” Wymack said, tucking the bag away in the pocket of his coat. “Hey, come around the office in the morning, would you? I’ve got some payroll paperwork I need you to fill out. Travel stipends and things.”

Neil, who knew nothing about the internal payroll workings of the FBI, didn’t see through the lie. Andrew, who did, shot Wymack a glare over Neil’s shoulder.

“Nothing nefarious,” Wymack finished. He held Andrew’s gaze while he said it. Whatever.
Andrew checked his watch. It was just past 8PM. Time to get going. He shot off a text to Renee and let her deal with the others, and was driving away before anyone realized he was gone.

The little buttercream business card was like a stone in his pocket for the whole drive. He’d already called the telephone number and was given nothing but a pleasant, female electronic voice that read off an address for a building in a quiet commercial district and advised him that their operating hours were 6PM to midnight, walk-ins welcome.

Andrew didn’t know why he was bothering. He had a psychiatrist. He even had a physical therapist, much as he loathed it. His hip was slow to heal, since it was impossible to really rest it short of a wheelchair, but it was healing. He’d fought bigger fights than this and won.

Except the migraines and the noise episodes weren’t going away. It was dumb luck they hadn’t seriously impeded the last case. Plus, there was something about their odd nature that told Andrew they weren’t a result of the crash. They were the result of crossing between universes. Reynolds had implied the same thing, and for all the ways Andrew didn’t trust her, he didn’t have many other options on this one.

It was 8:30 when he pulled into the small strip mall. For a brief moment he was sure he had the wrong address, but his memory hadn’t been affected by the accident. So the address really did belong to a no-name shop with ‘Psychic Readings’ glowing neon in one window, and a heavy curtain pulled across the other.

The bell over the door tinkled gently as Andrew entered. The place smelled heavily like incense, and the walls were hung with the sort of trite, faux-tribal tapestries that made ordinary people feel like they were in the presence of something mystic. There was a young woman covered in tattoos behind the desk, and she smiled at Andrew as he entered – a sure sign of bad judgment.

“Hello! Can I help you?” She asked brightly from behind the book she’d been reading. She had a hoop through one lip and too many rings on her fingers, but her clothes were more bad bohemian than bad-ass.

Well, he had come this far.

“I’m looking for Debby Tessono?”

The girl straightened up immediately, putting her book down and standing. Her whole manner had gone from relaxed hipster chick to office professional in an instant, though the clothes didn’t really help with the latter.

“Right this way, she’ll meet you in her office,” the girl said, and led him through a beaded curtain and through an unmarked door off a dimly-lit hallway. “Make yourself comfortable, she’ll be right with you.” The girl offered him another warm smile and closed the door behind herself. Andrew didn’t hear it lock.

The room itself was a complete departure from the rest of the shop. The walls were the same crisp creamy yellow of the business card, and the floor was covered in short, plain carpet. Furnishings were sparse, comfortable but practical: a desk in warm wood with nothing on it, a matching chair. A grey couch with smooth lines. there were built-in wooden cabinets behind the desk rather than bookshelves, and instead of hanging artwork there was a mural of grasses and subtle flowers painted around the lower half of the walls. The whole place unsettled Andrew. Not in its strangeness, but in its familiarity, though he knew he had never seen it before. He was trying to figure out what the connection was when the door opened.
“Oh. It’s all right, Andrew. I’d prefer if you didn’t shoot me.”

Andrew couldn’t remember reaching for his gun, but it was pointed at the woman in the doorway and it wasn’t shaking.

“Where am I?” he demanded. Because this didn’t make sense, this couldn’t be right, and the only conclusion he could come up with was that he was somehow over there again.

“You’re still in Boston,” the woman said gently, stepping into the room. “Your Boston,” she added. “You haven’t been taken anywhere, I promise. I can walk with you back outside, if you would like.”

“Who are you?” Andrew switched tactics. Her smile was so familiar his whole body shook with the impulse to stop fighting, but he swatted it aside and kept his gun raised. “You’re the other one, aren’t you?”

“No,” she said. “I’m the same one you know. I understand this is confusing for you, and I am sorry that I didn’t have a chance to warn you. But I have reasons to keep these parts of my life separate.”

She walked a little closer. “Please trust me, Andrew.”

Suddenly, it clicked. Andrew lowered his gun and sank heavily onto the couch. She walked further into the room, her precise low pumps soft on the carpet, and came around to lean up against the front of the desk, facing him.

“It’s just me, Andrew.”

“Is it, Debby?” He asked, cocking his head to the side. Her smile was a little rueful. She went around the desk and unlocked one of the drawers with a key from around her neck, pulling a few items out onto the desk.

“It’s an anagram,” she said as she worked. “Surely you’ve worked that out by now.” Andrew had. It was the only reason he didn’t still have his gun out. He took in the woman in front of him: on the short side even in her heels and genially plump, with a soft brunette bob, knee-length wool skirt, a chunky plastic necklace, and a blue-ish cardigan he’d seen dozens of times before. Andrew rubbed at his temples and tried in vain to think of a way his life could possibly get any weirder.

“So, Bee, when were you going to tell me you knew there was a parallel universe?”

Doctor Betsy Dobson handed him a mug of hot chocolate and smiled. He’d seen her just days ago; since the accident he’d been meeting with her weekly so that she could monitor his progress and ability to return to work. It had been – difficult, trying to sort through what had happened to him while leaving out the most important details.

“If it hadn’t become relevant to your life?” Bee shrugged one soft shoulder, taking a sip of her own hot chocolate. “Never. Actually, I wasn’t aware that it had until Allison asked me for a card to give you. It seems you still know how to keep secrets from me after all.” Her tone held no judgment, but the words still stung a little.

“What if I hadn’t come to see you here?”

“I hadn’t decided,” she confessed. “I know you need to work through such a huge challenge to your worldview, not to mention the trauma of your experience there, but I was afraid springing it on you when you weren’t expecting it would do more harm than good. For the time being, I was satisfied we continue our work together as normal, and hoped your friends could help you through the rest.”

Andrew snorted slightly into his hot chocolate at the word ‘friends,’ but that explanation was Bee
through and through. Her unwavering approach, and her unwillingness to force Andrew to talk about things she wasn’t certain he was ready for (not that she avoided difficult topics, on the contrary,) were the reason Andrew was still working with her after so long. They didn’t see much of each other these days, once a month or so until the accident, but he’d never felt the need to find anyone else.

“So what is it that Debby Tessono does, then?” Andrew asked. “Reynolds said you weren’t a psychiatrist.”

Bee nodded. “I wasn’t, to her.” She carefully packed the hot chocolate items back into the drawer before leaning back in her chair thoughtfully.

“Tetsuji Moriyama and Kaleigh Day were not the first to discover the existence of the other universe,” she said, “just the first to prove it. The old soft spots have always existed, and there has been…lore, shall we say, for centuries. I was raised with the knowledge of that lore. In this practice, I seek and reach out to people who are dealing with problems related to the soft spots and other – inexplicable phenomena. I try to use my knowledge to guide people through it.”

She folded her hands and smiled at him again. “In a way, I suppose I am much like your FOXES Division. I help people through problems no one else knows exist.”

Andrew had never believed in fate, but sometimes he wondered if maybe he should start.

“How did you meet Reynolds?” he asked.

“My work eventually led me into contact with the Moriyamas,” she said carefully.

Andrew felt himself stiffen. “You’ll understand if that makes me suspicious of you,” he said slowly. He didn’t want believe the woman he’d let into his head for ten years was in bed with the mob, but he had never been one to question the evidence of his own eyes and ears.

“I do,” she allowed. “But I was never involved with them. There’s a text, called the First People’s Book, that contains most of the lore surrounding the universes. The Moriyamas have been passing a bastardized version of it through their own circles for centuries, the group you now know as ZFT.

“I was never a part of ZFT. They took the First People’s Book and perverted it, turned it into a pseudo-religion, a cult text, something it was never meant to be. When things with Tetsuji began to spiral out of control, Kaleigh found me. She wanted to see if there was someone who could talk sense into him, pry him out of the grasp of ZFT.”


“So I did. Perhaps my greatest failure. But as to your question: since then I’ve…kept tabs on the Moriyamas, on Evermore and later on Massive Dynamic. Allison Reynolds’ injury wasn’t directly related to a soft spot or a warp in the universe, but it was similar to the sort of issues I deal with – as well as unusual enough that an ordinary doctor wasn’t going to be much help to her. I offered my assistance, and together we helped her navigate the use of her arm.”

It was a lot to take in at once. If she had been anyone else, Andrew would have dismissed her out of hand, maybe hauled her in for questioning on sight. But it was Bee. One of the very, very few people Andrew had allowed to almost-know him. Someone he had trusted enough to allow to help him, and she had.

Bee had helped him cling to the shreds of his humanity, find worth in them when he had supposed there was none, once before. If anyone could help him do it again, it was her. The hot chocolate had
gone cold, but he drank the rest of it to give his hands something to do, to fill the silence.

“T’m glad you decided to come,” she said eventually, when it was clear Andrew didn’t know where to start. “Especially considering you didn’t know it was me. You took an independent step towards seeking out your own recovery. I’m very proud of you, Andrew.”

But then her soft smile dropped, and her face took on a more serious cast. She unlocked a different drawer and removed a yellow legal pad and a cheap black pen. Yes, that was the Bee he knew. “That said, I know you wouldn’t have done it if things weren’t dire. Tell me what’s going on.”

This was what Bee did best – didn’t demand, didn’t try and see two moves ahead of him, just pointed him in a direction and shoved a little, needled him gently until it was more work to go back than forward, bit by bloody bit.

Slowly, haltingly, Andrew told her about elevator ride, about Riko’s office and the impossible sight of Other New York. He told her about Riko saying there was a war coming, that there was a place being held for him in it, somehow, and about the un-memory of his crash back into their reality. He told her about the scattered sensation of coming back to life in the hospital. About the aches and the migraines. He told her about the noise, the way it wouldn’t stop, no matter what he tried.

It was weird as hell, talking to Bee about alternate universes, but a decade of experience had taught Andrew what it felt like when something was going to help. This felt like that. It felt like relief.

It was 10:00 by the time they were done, and Andrew had never talked so much in his life. He wasn’t normally one for spilled confessions, but Bee had hardly interrupted or prompted him as he’d laid out the misfit pieces of his story. They didn’t talk about strategies. Andrew was exhausted and it was obvious that Bee could tell. She glanced down at the slim watch on her wrist and locked her pad of paper and pen back in a drawer.

“That’s enough for tonight, Andrew,” she said warmly. “If you’d agree, I’d like to merge this conversation into our regular sessions going forward.”

Andrew nodded mutely, suddenly too wrung-out for words now that he had stopped talking. He grabbed his cane where he had dropped it when he’d gone for his gun, two hours and a world ago, and got to his feet. She saw him out of the office, past the front desk where the tattooed girl was still paging through her book. They were out on the pavement by the time Andrew found his voice.

“Why the psychic’s?” he asked.

“Haven’t you figured it out, Agent Minyard?” She returned, eyeing him sharply but brightly. Oh, Bee. She never let him get away with anything.

“I have,” he said. It made perfect sense, actually. Ordinary people rarely came to see psychics, yet no one ever questioned the presence of such shops. And when people did come to see them, it was when they were facing challenges the regular world left them unable to explain. Sure, a lot of those people would be cooks, but those who weren’t…

“Sara directs relevant sounding cases my way,” Bee confirmed. They’d reached the rental car. “Get home safe, Andrew,” she told him.

“See you, Bee,” Andrew said.

He was dead on his feet by the time he got back to his apartment and collapsed into bed. One talk with Bee wasn’t a solution. It was barely even a start, but it was the best night’s sleep Andrew had had in weeks.
Beeeeeeeee (I love her)

Up Next:

“What is going on?” Andrew demanded.

“I can’t-“ but that wasn’t fair. And Neil wasn’t even sure what he wanted to tell Andrew anyway. He took a shaky breath and said “I’m at the office. Can you pick me up?”
Chapter 6: As Many Times as it Takes

Neil wasn’t sure what to expect from Andrew’s ‘welcome back party.’ But Nicky had been prodding him more than usual lately about joining him and the others on social outings. Neil had no particular desire to go back to Eden’s Twilight with them, so a party that didn’t require him to go anywhere other than the lab seemed like as good a place as any to start.

Someone had provided a table full of snacks and drinks, everything from carrots to cupcakes and sodas to full bottles of liquor. Neil grabbed a soda for himself and then stalled out, unsure where to start. There were more people here than he had expected: Allison Reynolds was there, chatting with Wymack but shooting looks Renee’s way, Nicky had brought his husband Erik, and Matt was there, with a woman Neil belatedly recognized as the undercover cop from the chop shop he’d visited back in February.

It turned out Neil didn’t need to start anything for himself, because as soon as she caught sight of him she burst out into a full-body laugh.

“You!” she exclaimed as Neil walked over, smiling sheepishly. She introduced herself as Dan Wilds, and apparently she and Matt were engaged. They were both so warm it was a little stifling, but it was also nice. Matt didn’t blink when Neil stuttered and gave evasive answers about his past, and Dan lit up when she heard he’d lived in Shanghai. It turned out she’d done a cultural exchange program in college, and she was immediately grilling him on his favorite local cuisines and recommending the most authentic restaurants in Boston to find any of the foods he might be missing.

Nicky and Erik joined them at one point, and Erik was equally if not more delighted to find that Neil had spent time in his native Germany.

“But are you a sports man, Neil?” Erik asked. “Rugby? Football?”

“I don’t think they let you stay in Germany if you don’t like football,” Neil said, making Erik laugh delightedly, “but actually I mostly follow Exy.”

“No way,” Matt broke in suddenly. “Neil, do you play?”
“Not since I was a kid,” Neil said, wary of the bright enthusiasm on Matt and Dan’s faces.

“Well, if you’re ever interested in picking up a racket again—” Dan started

“We play in a rec league,” Matt said in a rush. “There’s a gym downtown with a court. I coach kids’ boxing there on the weekends sometimes, that’s how we found out about it. Dan and I joined about a year ago – we could use another striker, actually, to round out scrimmages.”

Neil thought public gyms were a bit of a nightmare, honestly, with their lack of privacy, but – he could use something to take his mind off of work between cases. And hadn’t he just been telling Andrew he’d wanted to try playing offence? Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. He glanced back to where Andrew was in conversation with Renee on the couch, working on a cupcake with a frankly obscene amount of frosting on it.

“Andrew ever play with you?” he asked. Matt looked confused.

“Andrew plays?”

“He played goal in college,” Neil said. He thought back on Andrew’s t-shirt in the hotel room, ‘Monster’ written across the back in faded black marker, “I think he was good, too. Wait, how do you not know this?”

“You’re right, how do I not know this?” Matt said accusingly, turning on Nicky, who put his hands up in surrender.

“It never came up?” Nicky suggested weakly. “Come on, man, it wasn’t worth going down that road. Andrew played because it paid his scholarship, but he never cared about Exy. He hasn’t touched a racket since his last game, no matter if he was the top ranked goalkeeper in their district.”

“He was what!” Matt practically spat out a mouthful of his drink, then groaned theatrically. “The things you keep from me Agent Hemmick.” He turned to Neil. “Seriously, I’ve known Andrew for years, you’ve known him for four months. How did you know this and I didn’t?” Matt didn’t seem genuinely hurt, and Neil wouldn’t have known what to do if he was anyway, so he answered honestly.

“I asked, I guess.”

“You asked,” Matt deadpanned. “And Andrew…answered?”

“…yes?” Neil didn’t mention their truth game. It felt suddenly private, precious in a way he couldn’t name. Matt just laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Well buddy, if you ever feel like asking him to join us, we could always use a fresh face in goal, too.”

“I…right,” Neil said awkwardly. He glanced around and saw that Wymack was now alone in a corner, and the weight of what was in his pockets seemed to increase tenfold. “I’ll think about it if for sure.” He offered something like a smile to Dan and Erik. “It was really nice meeting you guys. Excuse me.”

He made his way over to Wymack. The bio-chip and the hard drive were the best pieces of solid evidence they’d gotten from a FOXES case. What was more, Neil knew that the people Wymack worked for would do anything to get their hands on tech like this. It wasn’t that Neil particularly liked the idea of them having it, but the moral high ground was usually a tactical shithole, in his experience. He needed the Foxes to beat the Moriyamas once and for all, and maybe drag his father
down with him before it killed him. If that meant handing obscenely powerful tech over to shady
government research groups for the time being, so be it.

Neil felt Andrew’s presence behind him as he handed the bag of tech from Zach Miller’s basement
over to Wymack. And there was something strange in Wymack’s stare – for a moment Neil was sure
he was going to refuse to take the bag, but the he reached out and took it, sliding it into his pocket,
saying something about coming by in the morning to sign payroll paperwork. Neil could tell he was
looking at Andrew when he said “nothing nefarious.”

By the time Neil turned around to ask what that had been about, Andrew was already gone.

Neil let himself get hauled back into the ‘party’ after that, even managing to drag Kevin with him.
Kevin had been hanging on the fringes, or arguing with Allison, for most of the evening. It was
obvious that being around so many people made him want to put back up his smooth, interview-
perfect front from back in his Evermore days, but the comfort of being in the lab was enough for
something realer to seep out through the cracks.

“Hey, you ever play Exy, Day?” Matt asked when the conversation had lulled. “Josten said he might
be up for dropping by our rec league. Apparently Minyard used to play, too – who knew, right?”

Kevin looked a little offended at the thought.

“We did not have time for useless pursuits like athletics at Evermore,” he said staunchly. Matt shook
his head.

“Come on, man,” he said good-naturedly. “Get the test tube out of your ass and join us sometime.
Doesn’t matter if you haven’t played. I bet the refs could use an extra hand. You’re good with rules,
right?”

It was a little funny, watching Kevin squirm and try to find his way out of it. Neil elbowed Kevin
lightly in the ribs.

“I’ll consider it,” Kevin said. “if the case isn’t taking up too much of our time.”
It was the most they could hope for, and the group seemed to know it. Conversation drifted after that,
to stories of drunken antics and complaining about politics, the kind of small talk Neil had never had
any practice navigating. But he found it was oddly soothing to let their chatter float around him,
pulling him in every now and then and letting him go again.

“You’re one of us now,” Renee murmured at his side, smiling around at the group at large.

“One of the Foxes,” Neil said before he could think better of it. He’d been calling them all that in his
head for so long sometimes he forgot the designation wasn’t real. He felt himself flush slightly but
when he looked at Renee her eyes were sparkling.

“Indeed,” she said

“Wait, did you just call us the Foxes?” Nicky broke in. Neil stuttered in embarrassment but Nicky
waved him off. “No, dude, that’s awesome. It’s perfect. It’s – oh my god. I just had the best idea.”

Before Neil or Renee could say anything Nicky was dashing off, returning minutes later with a sheet
of printer paper written on in marker, which he proceeded to tape up above the swinging doors of the
lab.

“Ta Da!” Nicky crowed. Written on the paper, in precise block lettering, was ‘Foxhole Lab.’
Something bubbled up and burst in Neil’s chest, filling his insides with warmth. Foxhole Lab. Home of the Foxes. He could only imagine what Andrew would think when he saw it, but Neil could barely keep his eyes off the flimsy piece of paper the rest of the night. By the time they said their goodbyes, he had already decided it was never coming down.

The next morning, Neil took the train to Wymack’s office. Nicky and Erik had stayed over in the extra room rather then drive back to their apartment the night before, so there would be familiar faces in the house when Kevin woke up.

“Chief Wymack?” Neil called, knocking on the plain office door. He had been here once or twice before, but it hadn’t gotten any more confortable. The cool, clean fluorescence of the FBI offices were the opposite of the easy, chaotic sprawl of the lab – the Foxhole Lab. Neil thought fondly, remembering Nicky’s sign from the night before – it wasn’t a place where Neil fit in.

Wymack opened the door and stepped back to let Neil into the office.

“You said you had some payroll paperwork for me to sign?”

“Right, here you go.” Wymack handed him a single sheet of paper as Neil sat. It just detailed his plane, hotel, and food expenses from the trip to Seattle. Neil glanced it over and signed at the bottom when everything seemed right, but hesitated as he handed the paper back to Wymack.

“I couldn’t have done this over email?”

Wymack shifted a little in his seat, then leveled an appraising look at Neil. “You’re right, you could have. There’s actually something else I wanted to talk to you about.” With that, he pulled two manila folders out of a haphazard pile on his desk and slapped them in front of Neil.

“What is this?” Neil asked nervously. He felt suddenly trapped in the small office space. Wymack seemed to sense that, and pushed his own chair back against the wall to give Neil as much space as he could, then pointed at the folders.

“One on the right is an application for you to become an official, full-time consultant with FOXES Division. Right now you’re operating on a case-by-case basis, which means lower pay for you and more paperwork for me, and frankly I’m sick of it. This makes it easier for all of us. Hell, you can even get health insurance through it if you want.”

Neil felt himself starting to sweat. A full time consulting position. It sounded too good to be true, because it was. Neil Josten was one of the best, most expensive identities he’d ever created. But. He had no guarantee that it would continue to hold up under any further scrutiny from the FBI, which accepting a full time position would almost definitely require.

“I don’t know if I can, Chief.” Neil swallowed and pointed to the other folder before Wymack could say anything else. “What’s this one?”

“That one,” Wymack said, leaning forward and tapping the folder with one blunt finger, “is an application for our agent training program at Quantico.”

“What?” Neil practically shouted, jumping a little in his seat.

“Hold onto your pants Josten, it’s a bit of paperwork, not a blood oath,” Wymack said gruffly. “I know you’ve got some things hidden up your sleeves, but I’ve taken on plenty of agents with checkered pasts before. You might have noticed your team is made up of them.”

“You don’t even know who I am,” Neil said, a little desperately, uncaring of how much that was
giving away. He trusted Wymack not to betray the trust he was giving him.

“Look kid, you showed up here knowing how to field dress a bullet wound but without a cell phone. There aren’t too many people out there like that, so trust me when I say I know what I’m getting into. I vouched for Walker and both Minyards back in their training days, not that they ever knew about it, because I could see the same thing in them I see in you now. You’re smart, Neil. You’re a clear head in a crisis, and what’s more, you’re good for this team.”

Wymack folded his arms across his chest, and Neil tried not to feel like the little office was collapsing on top of him.

“The agent application is just an offer, and they aren’t due for another nine months anyway,” Wymack said after a while, when Neil could only fidget with this sleeves. “It’s just me letting you know that if you want it, I’ll go to bat for you. I’ve built this team out of people who needed second chances, third chances, hell, how ever many it took if they deserved to be here. I won’t force it on you, but I won’t give up on you, Neil. However—“

Neil knew there would be a catch. There was always a catch.

“The full-time position is not optional.” Wymack said, like he wasn’t signing Neil’s death sentence. Like Neil would still be around in nine months when agent registration rolled around. “I’m tired of filling out so much goddamn paperwork for you idiots, and I want to know you’ll be there when my team needs you.” Wymack shoved the folder at Neil as Neil stood on shaking legs. “Budget’s coming around. You have one month to get that back in my hands, no longer. Now scram.”

Neil made it as far as the concrete steps in front of the building before his legs gave out. He wanted to run, but he was afraid if he ran now he would never come back. He had made up his mind to stay in Boston, to not run away from this battle. He just hadn’t known yet what the cost would be. He pulled his jacket tighter around his body, feeling the bulky contents of the pockets shift against his sides.

He barely registered making the decision to take the phone out of his pocket until it was ringing in his ear, and then the static click of the other end picked up.

“Neil?” Andrew’s voice came crackling through the earpiece, but Neil’s lungs were too tight, he couldn’t get a breath in to form words. He clutched the phone so tightly the plastic creaked. “What is going on?” Andrew demanded.

“I can’t—” but that wasn’t fair. And Neil wasn’t even sure what he wanted to tell Andrew anyway. He took a shaky breath and said “I’m at the office. Can you pick me up?”

There was no response, but the line didn’t click dead for almost ten minutes. Five minutes after that, Andrew’s black rental car rolled to a stop in front of Neil. Neil’s bones felt like lead. It was a monumental effort just to lift his head when Andrew’s black boots stopped in front of him, staring down at him impassively, the overcast sunlight glowing mutely through his hair.

“Get up,” Andrew said.

Neil finally moved, joints creaking, pins and needles rushing to his feet, and followed Andrew to the car, sliding into the passenger seat and collapsing there.

“You’re lucky I wasn’t farther out,” Andrew said, the complaint falling dead in the air between them. A few minutes later they were on the highway, and Neil realized they weren’t headed back to Cambridge. He couldn’t really bring himself to care. He focused on the rumble of the road beneath
the tires and on memorizing the route they took, just to keep his mind occupied.

He didn’t really think about where Andrew might be headed on his first proper day off until they pulled into a luxury car dealership outside of Springfield. Andrew undid his seatbelt and twisted slightly in the seat to face Neil.

“Ready to spend some blood money?”

Neil had never bought a car before, and certainly not from a luxury dealership, where they had trays of cookies and a little coffee bar inside just for while you were waiting. Neil sank into a leather chair and sipped quietly at the tea Andrew shoved in his hands while Andrew made his deal. Neil had no idea what he was asking for, just that it would be whatever was at the absolute top of his budget.

It took less time than it seemed like it should have, considering the amount of money that was exchanging hands, but Neil was used to deals like that, was familiar with the greasy ease hard cash – or at least a substantial down payment – brought to such transactions. Barely two hours after they’d arrived, Andrew was palming the keys to what appeared to be the newest model of the car he’d totaled, plus a few upgrades to boot.

Andrew tossed the keys to the rental to the salesman and nodded for Neil to get in the passenger seat of the new car. It smelled like leather cleaner and vanilla air freshener, and Andrew lit a cigarette as soon as they were back on the highway. Neil took one for himself and smoked more of it than usual, and before he knew it they were back in Boston.

“Do you want to go home?” Andrew broke the hours long silence. Neil blinked at him. He really should. But when he thought about returning to Kevin and the house in Cambridge, he still felt a little sick to his stomach.

“Lab?” Neil said quietly. Andrew rolled his eyes, but he jerked the car into a turn and a few minutes later they pulled into the parking lot of the lab. Neil got out numbly, following his own feet on instinct until he realized they were taking him to the roof. He could hear Andrew following behind him.

Neil sat down near the edge, focusing on the feeling of the cold, pebbly concrete through his jeans. It was spring properly now, mid April, but the overcast skies meant the previous night’s damp chill still hung in the air. He shivered a little, staring out over the Harvard campus and the skyline of greater Boston beyond it until he felt a tug at his fingers.

Andrew was pulling at the manila folder still clutched in a death grip between Neil’s hands. His grip went slack at the reminder of its existence. Andrew took it from him and leafed through the papers briefly before shutting it and setting it down on the roof behind them. He held something out to Neil, flat on the outstretched palm of his hand. Neil just stared for a moment, uncomprehending, until Andrew snorted and tossed it into his lap.

It was a car key. A match to the one Andrew had used to drive here. Of course the dealership had given him two but-

“Issues,” Andrew noted wryly. “It’s just a key, Neil.”

Neil picked it off his lap and dug the small ring out of his pocket, slipping the new key on beside the others: the building, the lab, the house in Cambridge, and now the new Maserati. All gifts. All tiny, toothed anchors that dug into his palm when he clenched his hand around them.

“You know it isn’t,” he said.
Neil stared down at his closed fist, struggling to put words to the tearing feeling in his chest. “Shanghai was the longest I’d ever lived somewhere since I was a little kid,” he said quietly. “But even that never felt like home. I moved apartments every couple of months, I gave other fake names to anyone I wasn’t explicitly doing business with. I never – I’ve never been allowed to get close to anyone. It’s always been too dangerous. But this team, you, you’ve given me a place. A home. I’m not – I don’t think I’ve ever really had one, before.” He finally dared to look up and meet Andrew’s eyes, flat and steady beneath the cloudy sky.

There was a spark of anger underneath Andrew’s blank mask as he turned toward Neil, but when he spoke he mostly sounded tired. “I can’t be your answer, Josten. And you sure as fuck can’t be mine.” Neil couldn’t figure out what Andrew meant by that, but he struggled on anyway. “I don’t need an answer. Just…” Neil was so lost. Everything that was falling into place would only fall apart in the end, and he couldn’t figure out how to breathe through it anymore. But there was Andrew, solid and serious, and somehow Neil knew he wouldn’t turn away no matter how ugly the truth was as it spilled from Neil’s mouth. “…a reason, maybe.”

“There are no good reasons,” Andrew said. Neil’s mouth twitched wanly. “It doesn’t have to be a good one,” he said, a little recklessly. Andrew frowned, stubbing out his cigarette on the concrete. “Yeah,” he muttered, almost to himself. “Yeah, okay.” And then he was leaning in.

Oh.

Neil hadn’t been kissed since he was a teenager, but he was sure it had never felt like this. Those had been hesitant, half-hearted things in alleyways and behind stadium bleachers, motivated more by curiosity or obligation than any sense of desire. They had been underwhelming, and totally unworthy of the beatings his mother had given him in retaliation.

This was something else entirely. Andrew’s hands were firm at the back of his neck and the side of his jaw, and his breath was hot where it spilled across his lips and over Neil’s cheeks, into his mouth. Even with just those points of contact, the weight of Andrew’s attention was all-encompassing, the feverish pull of his mouth the starting point of a bloom of warmth that raced through Neil’s body until he was restless with it. He reached for Andrew’s face in return but pulled back at the last second, remembering Andrew’s aversion to touch, stuffing his hands into his pockets and hanging on for dear life.

The movement was enough of a distraction that Andrew broke the kiss, panting a little where he was holding too tightly to Neil’s face. “Tell me no.”

“Why?” Neil couldn’t help asking. Why, when he felt like he was on top of a mountain right now, gasping and triumphant?

It was the wrong answer, apparently. Andrew shoved him away roughly, pulling out his cigarettes before changing his mind and sending the pack skittering across the roof, folding up on himself and rubbing at his temples.

“Why do you want me to say no?” Neil said, because why can’t I say yes was too desperate, too vulnerable to breathe into open air. “I want-“

“You don’t know what you want,” Andrew said sharply, and truthfully, Neil wasn’t sure how he
had intended to finish that sentence. “You’re in the middle of a goddamn nervous breakdown.” Andrew got up jerkily and limped over to retrieve his cigarette pack from where he had thrown it. He fished one out this time and lit it, working halfway through it rapidly before he turned back to where Neil was still sitting on the surface of the roof.

His eyes flicked away again as he said “I won’t be like them. I won’t let you let me be.”

There were a lot of holes in Andrew’s story Neil hadn’t filled in yet, but he was smart enough to guess, and his heart sank like a stone as the truth rippled through him. But Neil knew more than anyone how useless pity was, so he focused on Andrew, the stiff set of his shoulders and the cagey look in his eyes. He thought about one key, and then another. He thought about a knife and a phone and a voice on the other end of it. He thought about shared cigarettes and peeled-back layers of armor, of secrets laid out between them in equal measure, vulnerable as spring. And suddenly everything made a lot more sense.

“You like me,” Neil said, a little awed. Andrew gave him a disdainful look.

“Accuse me of that again and I will push you off of this roof,” he threatened. But Neil was already fighting off a smile.

“I’ve already told you, I’d just pull you down with me,” Neil said.

Andrew dropped his cigarette butt and ground it beneath his boot. “I am not driving you home,” he said flatly. Neil accepted that with a nod – there was no use pushing if Andrew wanted space, and Neil could always take the train.

Neil picked up Andrew’s new cane where it was lying on the rooftop beside him and held it out. Andrew walked over to grab it and then caught Neil’s chin roughly in one hand, forcing his head up and searching his face. Neil wasn’t sure what Andrew was looking for, or if he found it, because Andrew let go as abruptly as he’d grabbed on, without a word, and a moment later was gone from the roof, leaving Neil alone.

Neil lay back on the cold cement and emptied out a long, slow breath, watching the clouds drift languorously above him. The kiss didn’t mean anything – it couldn’t. Andrew might be more interested in Neil than he’d previously let on, but Neil was a dead man walking. They both knew it. Andrew was right, neither of them could be an answer for the other.

Still, it was hard to shake the feeling of Andrew’s calloused fingers on his neck, Neil’s heartbeat thudding dizzily against his palms. It might not be able to mean anything, but that didn’t mean Neil couldn’t hold the feeling of Andrew’s mouth on his close to himself, cradle the memory like something precious between his palms; couldn’t lie in bed that night with the weight of Andrew’s kiss still pressed to his lips, heavy and heady and more comforting than it should have been, until he fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

It Happened! And it only took 24 chapters and like 100,000 words! Anyway, this chapter concludes Part 4: New Day, Same Old Demons

Also Also: this fic is a monster, but I'm about halfway through writing it! That said, if anyone is interested in throwing a prompt my way, I'm itching for some shorter one off
ideas. Any majorish AFTG pairing, pretty much anything but straight-up smut, which I am awful at and no one wants to read. Hit me up!

Up Next:

Part 5: Time Spent in Los Angeles -

“Holy hell Minyard!” Boyd called from up the court when their scrimmage came to a stop. He and Wilds were wide-eyed and laughing behind their helmets, as if Andrew’s ability to keep a 3-inch rubber ball away from a wall was somehow more impressive than his ability to stop terrorist attacks from the realms of science fiction. Typical.
Part 5, Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

This chapter "Time Spent in Los Angeles" is based on Fringe Episode 2.14

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

I just want to say your comments on the previous chapter (and all previous chapters!) meant the absolute world to me. They keep me going through this absolute monster of a story :) This has probably been my favorite Part to write. I'm so excited for you guys to read it!

warnings this chapter for a good amount of gore/body horror

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part 5: Time Spent in Los Angeles

Chapter 1: Merger

Andrew couldn’t believe he’d let himself be dragged into this nonsense. Unfortunately, he knew exactly how it had happened: he’d made the fool mistake to mention it to Bee. Just a throw-away complaint in the midst of their five minutes of sit-down small talk, but she’d latched onto the idea, encouraged him to accept Neil’s stupid invitation. Something about it being good to get some gentle exercise outside of the mandated stretches, to help his hip get strong again.

Also, we can tend to isolate ourselves in the aftermath of physical injury, when we feel we are vulnerable. She’d said knowingly. Time alone for reflection and recovery is valuable, but it’s important not to let that impulse get the best of you too often. I think this could be a valuable opportunity. The gall. Well, it was what he paid her for, but still.

And then she’d had the nerve to lean back in her chair, to smile gently at him with that same sharp, appraising look in her eye that had convinced him to stick around when he was eighteen and still high out of his mind.

Besides, it’s just a rec game, and none of your colleagues played at the level you did, correct? I’m sure you could manage it without putting too much stress on your injury.

It was both a warning and a gentle challenge, both things Andrew had never known how to back down from. So that was what had finally tipped the scales. And now here he was, leaning on a borrowed racket in a stale-smelling community gym, playing Exy, of all things. Because Bee said it would be good for his recovery.
His presence had nothing to do with Neil, no matter what Renee thought. Not the fact that Andrew thought he still kind of owed him for the whole new car blood money thing. Nothing to do with Neil’s irritating insistence that this would be fun. And certainly nothing to do with the prospect of watching his most irritating colleague as he raced down the court in a combination of ratty gym clothes and borrowed gear that had no business looking half that good, forgetting for once to smother a savage, toothy grin as he slammed a ball towards Andrew’s goal.

Obviously, Andrew had insisted they play against each other. Obviously, Andrew denied the goal – Neil had an interesting bit of raw talent, and he was athletic from all the running, but he hadn’t played since he was a child, not counting the last few weekends. His strength was decent but his aim was shit, which meant it was obvious, which meant Andrew barely had to move to block the shot. Neil only grinned wider. Christ.

“Holy hell Minyard!” Boyd called from up the court when their scrimmage came to a stop. He and Wilds were wide-eyed and laughing behind their helmets, as if Andrew’s ability to keep a 3-inch rubber ball away from a wall was somehow more impressive than his ability to stop terrorist attacks from the realms of science fiction. Typical. “Where have you been hiding this?”

“Where and how has it ever been relevant?” Andrew couldn’t help asking. Boyd just shook his head in amazement.

“You.” He pointed at Andrew. “You need to start coming out with us more. We don’t know like, anything about you, dude, and we’ve worked together for years!”

They didn’t know anything about Andrew because none of Andrew’s stories were the kind they wanted to hear. Drunken escapades or weird teen fashion phases or whatever the hell they thought they were missing about him. Andrew didn’t have stories like that.

“Andrew.”

Neil had jogged over to him, stripped of his helmet and half his padding but hanging back while the others changed. His grin was gone, replaced by something more serious but still more alive than he normally seemed. It was similar to the way he looked when he was an hour deep in some case problem and just starting to have a breakthrough.

“Neil.”

“That was incredible.” Neil ran a hand through his own sweat-darkened hair and let out a breath like he’d been holding it for hours. He was practically glowing, the bastard. “I’m glad you decided to come.”

“I’m not,” Andrew deadpanned, folding his arms tightly across his chest before he did something incredibly stupid, like ask to kiss Neil again.

“I think Kevin’s glad he came,” Neil said, ignoring him. About that, he probably wasn’t wrong. Kevin had been paired with the refs, and had, as expected, took an immediate shine to pointing out everyone’s mistakes as soon as he had learned the rules. The real surprise was the shine he had taken to one of the backliners, a woman named Thea.

“She’s trouble,” Andrew said darkly. He’d immediately recognized her as a fighter he had seen back in the Dungeon – the Raven, she’d been called. He’d watched her fight Reynolds. He knew Riko was connected to the fight scene somehow, but he hadn’t figured out how just yet. He couldn’t be sure Thea wasn’t connected to him too.
Andrew’s first instinct had been to grab Neil and Kevin by their collars and drag them from the building as soon as he’d spotted her, but the Dungeon had a reputation as a clean club, and apparently Thea just worked for some pharmaceutical company for her day job. Still, he knew he would have to keep an eye on her, especially when Kevin couldn’t seem to keep his eyes off of her as she played.

“Possibly,” Neil allowed. “She could break his heart. Or maybe his ribs, with her biceps. But I don’t think even Riko’s good enough to plant someone months in advance at a rec Exy game he couldn’t have known we would go to, on the off chance Kevin would develop a crush on her.”

He was probably right. That didn’t mean Andrew was letting his guard down.

“Don’t you have to get changed?”

Neil’s eyes darted to the door to the locker room and he shifted on his feet.

“It can wait,” Neil said, too causally. Andrew rolled his eyes. He was about to give up and go change himself when there was a chorus of buzzing from jackets left on the bleachers. Too many at once to be a coincidence. Andrew went over, biting down on a small grunt when his hip complained.

He had just about gotten rid of the cane, but there was a fold-out one begrudgingly tucked in his bag for emergencies. He ignored it as he grabbed his phone, ignored the string of ignored calls from Aaron from the last two days, and clicked on the missed call from Renee.

“Congratulations!” She said brightly when she picked up. “You’ve won an all-expenses paid trip to New York City!” That was certainly one way to say they had a crime scene to get to.

“I thought I told you people to take me off your list,” he said, and saw Neil shoot him a curious glance.

“Well it says here you’re a fan of fine dining and excitement, so…” He could hear the teasing smile in Renee’s voice, and resolved not to ask her what had put her in such a good mood.

“Do you have a supervisor, anyone I could speak to? This has to stop.”

“Did I mention there’s excitement?”

Andrew groaned and gave up. “Text me the details.” He snapped the phone shut and turned to Neil.

“Change in the shower if you have to,” he told Neil. “I won’t spend three hours in a car with you if you still smell like a gym locker.”

“Where are we going?” Neil asked. Andrew stopped in front of him, head cocked to the side and determinedly just out of reach.

“We’ve just won an all-expenses paid trip to New York City.”

“An earthquake in Manhattan,” Kevin mused, hours later as they drive through the New York streets to the scene. “Possible, but highly unlikely. Perhaps a small comet?”

Neil snorted from the back seat – Kevin had claimed shotgun, so Neil and Renee were sitting behind. “I think a small comet would have affected more than one building, Kevin.” Andrew didn’t know anything about the effects of small comets. What bothered him was the way first responders had
described the scene as being like the site of an earthquake – but no quakes, not even microquakes, had been reported in the city.

Wymack met them at the scene. “Witnesses?” Andrew asked.

“A few reported feeling the ground shake, just before the incident, but no one knows what to make of what happened next,” Wymack said, gesturing with his chin up at the building. Andrew could see immediately what he meant.

The whole thing looked – rearranged. Like someone had torn apart a picture of the building in to tiny pieces, and only managed to put the edges back together right. Doors on the outside hanging open to empty air; windows that didn’t line up; a section of fire escape attached upside down. It was disorienting to look at.

“Extraordinary,” Kevin whispered.

“What about the people inside?” Renee asked, directing the question at Wymack.

“First responders have sealed the place off, and they’re scouring for survivors as we speak,” he said. His weary tone didn’t bode well.

“How many have they found?” Renee asked cautiously.

Wymack kept his eyes locked on the building when he said “Zero.”

They went inside. Andrew could feel Neil practically holding his breath beside him. “Don’t suppose you lot have any brilliant ideas about what could have cause this?” Wymack asked.

The scene that had been waiting for them inside the building was horrible and bewildering. Couches sunk halfway through floors; steel beams twisted up on each other, groaning in the middle of rooms; the smell of dust and spilled food; the smell of blood. Because then there were the bodies. Zero survivors hadn’t meant zero people; the apartment building had been nearly fully occupied at the time of the incident, and they seemed to have met the same grotesque fate as their surroundings.

Bodies stuck out of walls, were crushed beneath furniture and chunks of loose concrete, blood pooling around them. Everywhere, the air was full of dust. Neil and Kevin exchanged a weighted glance.


“What does that mean?” Wymack demanded. It was Kevin who answered.

“A sudden, momentary disturbance of an entire object or area at a subatomic level,” Kevin said, staring at the shattered remains of a glass coffeepot. “The energy disperses at a subatomic level, literally tearing the fabric of reality itself. It all takes place within a quantum moment, so everything returns to a probabilistic location, but it doesn’t always align with our previous known reality.”

Kevin went back to staring around the room, apparently satisfied with his own explanation. Andrew caught Neil’s eye and raised an eyebrow. Neil shrugged.

“Some kind of disturbance causes all the atoms in everything to come apart. But when they reassemble, they come back together all wrong,” Neil clarified.

“That’s what I said,” said Kevin distractedly. “Isn’t it?”
They were spared any argument on that front by a voice calling loudly from a room away. “We’ve got a survivor!”

The man was sitting propped against wall, and there was a 6-inch steel beam lodged in his chest. He looked up at them, wheezing, mouth dripping blood.

“He says his name is Ted Prachett,” one of the paramedics said, shifting out of the way so that Wymack could crouch down in front of him.

“My wife,” he gasped.

“Please sir it’s important that you not move,” the paramedic said. Then she looked at Wymack. “I don’t know if we’re going to be able cut this beam out of him, he might not survive.” Wymack accepted that with a grim nod.

“Okay Mr. Prachett. We’re going to do everything we can to get you out of here safely and home to your wife, okay? This here…” Wymack looked around at the lot of them, turning to Andrew, then seemed to think better of it. He got up and gestured for Renee, who took his place gracefully. “This here is Agent Renee Walker. It would be very helpful f you could answer any questions she has.” Then Wymack muttered “I’ll call this in,” and walked out of the room.

“Mr. Prachett?” Renee waited for Prachett’s eyes to focus on her before continuing. “Ted? Agent Wymack is going to get in touch with your wife. In the meantime, it would be very helpful if you could describe for us what happened here.”

Prachett’s breathing was loud and irregular. He squeezed his eyes shut, and Renee laid a land gently over his in the dust.

“Just the tremors,” he said hoarsely after a moment. “The micro-quakes. The same little ones as before, and then a really big on that kept getting worse.” He wheezed. “So thirsty.”

The paramedic suggested he could have some ice chips, and Neil offered to go in search of some.

“Did you see anything unusual this morning?” Renee prompted gently. “Anyone or anything in the building that shouldn’t have been there?”

“No,” Prachett whispered weakly. Across the room, Andrew noticed Kevin examining a painting, the canvas of which appeared to be half-unraveled. “No, just the same things everyone saw. Yesterday all the dogs started howling. Then all the little tremors.”

Neil returned with the ice chips, and while the paramedic carefully fed him some, Andrew pulled Neil and Kevin aside.

“Did either of you hear anything about quakes in New York over the last couple of days?” Both shook their heads. Andrew hadn’t either. And all the dogs howling? With the 24 hour news cycle being what it was, surely that would have been a story. But there had been no reports. Just then Wymack returned and came over to them.

“Ted Prachett doesn’t have a wife, never did,” he said. “Must be delirious from the incident, I guess.”

“No,” Kevin said. “I think this is something else entirely.” He made his way over to Renee and the dying man, and Andrew shook his head to keep Neil and Wymack from stopping him. Andrew wanted to see where this was going.
“Mr. Prachett?” Kevin said. “I need to ask you a few questions, if that’s all right.” When Prachett just blinked dazedly, Kevin swallowed and forged onward. “Mr. Prachett, can you tell me what year it is?”

“2012.” Prachett answered roughly.

“Yes, good,” Kevin said. “Okay, do you know who the president of the United States is?”

“Obama.”

“Great. Okay, can you-“

“What is the point of this?” The paramedic broke in in a harsh whisper. Kevin silenced her with an imperious glare before turning back to Prachett.

“One last question Mr. Prachett. I’m sorry but – on September 11th, 2001, what buildings were hit in the terrorist attacks?”

Andrew felt himself go cold. Suddenly, he understood where Kevin was going with this all too clearly.

Prachett frowned. “The Pentagon…and the White House,” he said at last, a weak, shuddery exhale. His eyes glazed over. When the paramedic reached for his pulse, she only sighed. He was gone. The paramedic left the room.

“I think I know what happened here,” Kevin said. Yeah, Andrew was starting to think he did, too.

Then, something else happened. Something moved under Prachett’s shirt, an amorphous lump where his stomach should have been.

“Kevin what is that?” Neil asked, having moved closer. Slowly, Kevin reached out and lifted up the fabric.

Andrew was the only one who didn’t flinch in some way, and even that was a near thing. Every time he thought he had seen it all, this goddamn job insisted on proving him wrong.

Protruding from Prachett’s stomach was…Prachett’s face. A second one, mouth open and gasping for breath. It only lasted a second before that head, too, succumbed and died. Renee quietly reached out and closed both sets of eyes, whispering a soft prayer.

“My original theory was wrong,” Kevin said, standing. “This wasn’t an ordinary quantum tectonic event. We are standing in two buildings right now, one of which came from the other universe.”

Andrew could feel Neil’s gaze darting from Prachett to Kevin to him, and was gripped by a sudden, uneasy certainty that a lot more of Fringe cases were going to be directly related to this other universe business until they got it solved. Well then, they would just have to pick up the pace, wouldn’t they?

“Come on,” Andrew said, tugging lightly at Neil’s sleeve as Renee stood and brushed off her pants. Neil followed the motion, turning toward him until they were almost shoulder to shoulder. He blinked and his gaze steadied. He looked a little more like the Neil from that morning, all fierce determination in the face of danger. “Let’s get the body back to the lab. We have work to do.”
“Christ Kevin, it’s not that bad,” Nicky laughed. “I’m sure it’s perfectly-“

“I know what happened,” Kevin interrupted. He stripped off his gloves and strode over to Andrew, tugging the car from Andrew’s somewhat unwilling grasp and staring at it. “and I know what’s going to happen next.”
Chapter 2: More Than One Way to Cut Up a Body

It was evening by the time Ted Prachett’s body had been laid out on the autopsy table back at the lab. Renee and Wymack had stayed behind in New York to follow up on any developments there, while Neil and Andrew had gone with Kevin back to Boston.

Nicky met them in the lab. He’d become a sort of unofficial assistant to Kevin over the last months. Neil seemed to be getting dragged off to crime scenes, interviews, and lead-tracking excursions with Andrew more and more, so it was good to have someone to stay behind and help Kevin work. Nicky didn’t have Neil’s science background, but he never seemed bothered by Kevin’s natural abrasiveness, and he could roll with a punch with the best of them. The arrangement had stuck, and both parties seemed perfectly happy with it, most days.

This was not most days.

“Kevin,” said Nicky weakly, squinting down at the corpse – or rather, corpses – of Ted Prachett like he was trying not to see them. “I have put up with a lot of shit in this lab, but this? I think I might be sick.”

“Don’t vomit on the body,” Kevin instructed. Then he sighed a little and looked up at Nicky pityingly. “Fine. Go look through the personal affects collected from the scene, see if you find anything useful.”

“Thank Jesus,” Nicky said quietly, and went to do that.

“Neil, come help me with this body,” Kevin called. Neil groaned – he really should have seen that coming. He wasn’t particularly squeamish, but Nicky was right. This was – it was a lot. The second Prachett head protruded like an awful tumor from the first Prachett’s stomach. If they wanted to do a proper autopsy, they were going to have to extract it.

Andrew had taken up post at the foot of the autopsy table, watching with what might have been vague curiosity.

“Gonna help at all?” Neil couldn’t help asking. Andrew didn’t even look up, just kept staring at the body, one finger tapping lightly over a spot just below his own ribs.
“No.”

“Pay attention, Neil,” Kevin snapped, beginning to cut around the edges of the second face with a scalpel. With a grimace, Neil carefully dug gloved fingers into the incisions, lifting the face away slightly so that Kevin could continue slicing away the flesh below. It was without a doubt one of the more gruesome cases they’d encountered since Neil had joined the Foxes, and that included the case with the mutant, giant rhinovirus slug.

Holding the head while Kevin cut wasn’t much of a task, so Neil took to watching Andrew while he did it.

It had been nearly a month since the day Andrew had kissed him on the roof of the lab. They hadn’t talked about it since: Andrew hadn’t brought it up, and Neil hadn’t pushed. He wasn’t sure where to start. The kiss had been… it had been good, he thought, not that Neil had much to go by in comparison, but he didn’t quite know how to feel about it.

Neil hadn’t been lying when he’d told Nicky he didn’t swing. Maybe it was a life of social isolation, or lip gloss-tacky kisses followed by his mother’s fists, or maybe it was just the way he had always been, but it was the truth. Kissing Andrew hadn’t changed that, he didn’t think. He had never wanted (and was this want?) anyone else, and he still didn’t, as far as he could tell. His interest didn’t extend to Nicky, or Kevin, or Renee. He’d wondered for a fraction of a moment if maybe he just had a very, very narrow physical type, but then his mind had flashed to Aaron and he’d shuddered. No, that wasn’t it.

It wasn’t that the particulars of it would have mattered to him, really. But in this case they mattered even less, because Neil couldn’t be anything for Andrew – not an answer, not a reason – not when he was such a danger to the team as it was.

Not that any of that had stopped him from occasionally thinking about kissing Andrew again. He tried not to think about it, but then sometimes he caught himself looking at Andrew – at his serious, quiet face, the way his hair was always neat in the morning and a scrubbed-over mess by lunch, the certainty and economy of his movement – and well, not thinking about it was difficult.

Andrew glanced up and saw Neil looking, and his mouth tightened into a line.

“Eyes on the prize, Josten,” Andrew said in quiet German, looking back at the grotesque thing clutched in Neil’s hands. Indeed, Kevin had just severed the last of the flesh attaching it to the body. Neil lowered the thing into an organ tray.

“What exactly am I supposed to be looking for here?” Nicky asked from across the lab, head buried in the cardboard box of affects.

“What exactly am I supposed to be looking for here?” Nicky asked from across the lab, head buried in the cardboard box of affects.

“Oh, I found a silver dollar with Richard Nixon on it, does that count?” Nicky asked.

“Anything unusual,” Kevin said with a shrug, beginning to slice open the rest of Prachett’s abdomen. He appeared to have been left with multiples of some organs, none of them in quite the right place.

“I found a silver dollar with Richard Nixon on it, does that count?” Nicky asked.

“That is disturbing,” Andrew said. Apparently his interest was piqued, because he went over to look and started picking through the box with Nicky. He pulled out a small, strange toy car. It was a, old-fashioned family sedan, but it appeared to be double-decker. “Do the idiots over there actually drive this garbage?” Andrew asked scathingly. Kevin glanced up from where he was separating Prachett’s organs. He frowned at the car for a moment, and then his face shifted into something more like dawning horror.
“Christ Kevin, it’s not that bad,” Nicky laughed. “I’m sure it’s perfectly-“

“I know what happened,” Kevin interrupted. He stripped off his gloves and strode over to Andrew, tugging the car from Andrew’s somewhat unwilling grasp and staring at it. “and I know what’s going to happen next.”

Nicky let out a nervous chuckle. “And that’s that, drama queen?”

Kevin shook the toy car slightly. “Ten or eleven years ago, there was an incident at Harvard. A car-“

“Yeah, I know this story!” Nicky piped up. “A group of MIT students fused a car to the statue of John Harvard. It was a prank. They ended up having to cut the car away, no one could ever figure out how they’d done it.”

Andrew snatched the car back from Kevin, spinning the wheels with his thumb. “It wasn’t MIT students, was it?”

“No,” Kevin said. “It was me and Riko, an experiment. We’d known about the other universe nearly our whole lives, but opening a portal, like the one Jones used, is unstable and dangerous. It can have unintended consequences.” A shadow passed over Kevin’s features, then he shook himself and continued. “We wanted to see if there was an easier way, something more instantaneous. What if we could just…shift things, if you will. Phase them between one universe and another. I warned Riko it would be dangerous, but he was never one for consequences.

“Our first test was on a friend’s old car. It did not go well.”

“First times are always sloppy,” Nick said sagely. Kevin glared at him.

“We succeeded in sending the car to the other universe. Then, eleven minutes later, a car of the same model from the other universe appeared in ours, wrapped around the statue.”

It was an impressive story, Neil had to admit. But he wasn’t a fan of the implications.

“How do you know it didn’t just get pulled form around the block?” Neil asked.

“It was a ten-year old car, but it had an auxiliary input. Those weren’t an option twenty years ago in our reality,” Kevin said.

“Assuming the parallel you are drawing is applicable,” Andrew said, drawing an indignant huff from Kevin, “why? What made the car appear?”

“The universe needs balance,” Kevin explained. “We took away a car, it gave one back. The same thing is happening now, except it was started on the other side, we assume by Riko or at his instruction. A building from that side appeared here. The means that a building will be taken from our Manhattan in…by my estimates, no more than 48 hours.”

That proclamation was greeted with resounding silence. Neil felt a small spike of worry in his gut. 48 hours, and an entire building would be sucked into the other universe. If it went anything like the previous one, it would kill everyone inside. Hundreds.

“How do we know which one will disappear?” Neil asked.

“We can’t!” Kevin said, with something like hysterical laughter. “It could be any building within a reasonable radius – I mean we could do the calculations, but probably half of Manhattan. It’s random. It’s nature. We can’t predict it.”
Into the silence was the sound of Andrew’s phone ringing. Neil watched as he wrenched it from his pocket, glared daggers at the caller ID, then took the call.

“What, Aaron?” he snarled into the receiver.

Neil stared. He knew Kevin and Nicky had their eyes on Andrew, too. He had shook a knife out of his sleeve and was twirling it between his fingers as he listened to whatever Andrew’s brother was saying.

“Another what? – where? – I don’t know what the fuck that has to do with- Aaron. Aaron shut up right now. No you are not. No. Send me everything you have.” Andrew snapped his phone shut and took a slow breath. He looked around at the three of them, expression unreadable, before his eyes locked on Kevin.

“What the fuck is Cortexiphan?” Andrew spat. Kevin’s eyes widened, and he went pale.

“Cortexiphan is… It was a drug Tetsuji invented. Mind-expanding. Or mind strengthening, maybe. He thought it would allow people to access powers their brains had naturally grown out of, like telekinesis. Or interacting with the other universe.”

Andrew looked like he wanted to throttle Kevin. The knife was still dancing in his fingers, and Neil wondered if he was going to have to intervene.

“Neil,” Andrew said at last, and set off towards the doors. Neil knew without being told that they were going to the roof. His stomach rolled nervously. It couldn’t have been good news.

“Do you remember the tape from our first case?” Andrew asked once his cigarette was lit. Neil lit his own before answering. Something was very wrong – he hadn’t seen Andrew this out of sorts since – well, since their first case, actually. When Andrew had been watching his twin die on a gurney.

“Sure. The tape of the experiment, Tetsuji Moriyama trying to make some kid turn lights on with his mind.”

Neil didn’t mention the name Nathaniel. If Andrew hadn’t put that together yet, Neil wasn’t risking it. And anyway, even though it was way too much of a coincidence, Neil couldn’t help being confused by it. He had no memory of the events on the tape. He had been young, sure, but it seemed like something that would have stuck.

“Aaron’s found another one,” Andrew said. “Or rather, some kids in Los Angeles found more tapes, and turned them over to the police, but refused to say where they found them. Some of them are even videos.”

“That seems suspicious,” Neil said, wondering where the story was headed.

“True, but currently irrelevant,” Andrew said. “What matters is that these tapes were more complete than the last ones. They’re labeled with patient names, dates. The police were able to start to piece together possible identities of the children.”

Neil still didn’t understand Andrew’s unease. “That’s good news, right?” he asked. Andrew took a long drag on his cigarette and shut his eyes, clenching his empty fist.

He said, “One of them was me.”

Neil stared. He knew he probably shouldn’t, but he couldn’t help it. A thousand questions were freefalling through his head, but most of them (Did you know? Who could have done this to you?
Are you okay?) were far from helpful. Somehow, the question that made it out of his mouth was “Did you ever live in Los Angeles?”

Andrew lit another cigarette. He only ever smoked more than one at a go when something was under his skin.

“When I was eight,” Andrew said quietly. Then, in response to Neil’s unasked question, “The dates line up. Andrew Joseph Doe, eight years old. Cortexiphan trials. Aaron didn’t know me yet, of course, but he still has a good idea what I would have looked like, doesn’t he?”

Neil startled. Andrew Joseph. AJ. Had they met before? Neil shoved the thought aside as useless.

“That’s why you were asking? They drugged you? When you were eight?”

“Apparently,” Andrew said shortly.

Andrew didn’t remember it, Neil realized with a shock. Andrew’s memory was near-perfect, Neil had seen the evidence of it with his own eyes. He never read anything twice, never lost his keys, never missed a turn even on the winding streets of Boston.

Of course, if the drugs were anything like Kevin had described, it made sense that Andrew might not remember. Mind altering drugs in an eight year old brain? Andrew was lucky he wasn’t a vegetable. Still, it must be unsettling, for someone with Andrew’s past, Andrew’s memory, to find out something so awful had happened to him, and he had just…forgotten. Or maybe his mind had just never formed the memory at all.

“We need to tell Kevin,” Neil said after a while. Andrew didn’t say anything, but at least he didn’t object outright.

“This isn’t a coincidence,” Neil continued, aware he likely wasn’t saying anything Andrew hadn’t already realized for himself. “Kevin said the drug was supposed to help people sense the other universe. We have a case that involved buildings traveling between universes with no apparent motive, and some random kids just happen to turn tapes over to the police implicating you as a subject? Riko’s playing us, I just don’t know how yet.”

The lights of the nighttime campus shone yellow in the distance. Andrew just sighed, as much of an affirmation as Neil knew he was going to get.

“Come on,” Neil said. “Kevin says we have less than 48 hours before this thing disappears. Let’s at least see if he knows how they might be connected.”

Part of Neil hoped that Kevin would laugh off the idea – would tell them there was no way the two events could be connected. What he was really hoping wouldn’t happen was for Kevin to go paler still, and drop into a chair with a soft “fuck.”

He looked up at Andrew with a hopeless expression on his face. “I know where they got those tapes. There’s an abandoned military base outside LA. For a while, Tetsuji was running the Cortexiphan trials out of an old daycare there. And there’s something I remember him saying… they had this collection of objects they’d taken from the other universe. Kids’ toys and shit. Knick knacks, things that wouldn’t kill people when the balance shifted. There was a test… some of the children who had been given the drug were able to tell which objects were from the other universe. Apparently they sort of…glimmered.”

“Go on,” Andrew said, looking at Kevin intensely. He had to know where this was going. Maybe he just needed to hear Kevin say it.
“If you were tested,” Kevin said slowly, like he didn’t want to be drawing his inevitable conclusion, “if you were a successful patient, you would have been able to see those objects. I think this is a test. If a building is being pulled into the other universe, it would give off that glimmer. If you were able to see that glimmer, we might be able to evacuate the building in time.”

It was absolute madness, all of it. But the pieces were falling together in Neil’s mind, and he could tell the same thing was happening to Andrew. Andrew had told Neil a little more about his meeting with Riko in the other universe – about how Riko had said he was special, that there was a place for him in the coming ‘war.’ Maybe this was Riko trying to show that to Andrew, trying to force his hand.

“I’ve been staring at shit from over there for hours,” Andrew said, gesturing at the box of personal affects. “None of it has glimmered, Kevin.”

Kevin’s expression was pained. He sucked in a breath through his teeth, his thumb pressed white against his cheekbone as if it was the cause of his hurt.

“I think I know what to do, but I don’t want to do it, okay?” Kevin said, eyes clenched shut. “We’d be playing right into Riko’s hand, but… I think the reason you can’t see the glimmer is because you haven’t been dosed in over twenty years. If you were to go through the procedure again…” Kevin left the sentence hanging.

“No,” Nicky said immediately.

“Nicky,” Andrew warned.

“No!” Nicky shouted. “Andrew you are not doing this, not again!”

“It worked last time.” The words looked like they tasted like mud in Andrew’s mouth, but his tone was cool. Last time. When Kevin had pumped Andrew with psychedelic drugs and put him in a rusty tank with a probe in the base of his brain. True, they had saved Aaron, but this was even more uncertain.

“Do you have what you need to do it here?” Andrew asked. There was something tired about his tone, like he already knew the answer.

“No,” Kevin said apologetically.

“We’re going to Los Angeles, aren’t we?” Neil realized with a sinking feeling.

“I’ll call Wymack from the car,” Andrew said. Before anyone could stop him, he was already out the door.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: I've made a couple of edits to this chapter to try and shore up the timeline of this fic and its backstory. If you're re-reading this chapter, the date of the Car Incident and Andrew's age during the Çortexiphan trials have changed to make the timeline work properly. Onward!
Thanks for reading!!

Up Next:

'Andrew watched the red liquid snake down the plastic tube, felt the cool shock as it began to seep into his veins. And then the world faded out into blackness.'
Part 5, Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

warnings for experimental drug use, nightmares, and references to some of Andrew's childhood trauma

chapter title from Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," honestly I might have to do a whole one-off fic about Andrew and this poem someday. We'll see.

EDITS: for those of you who read updates weekly (oh my god I love you guys so much,) I sat down with myself and really nailed down the timeline.

I'll probably be posting a little side-thing under the FOXES series that will lay out the whole timeline with ages and stuff in more detail, but it will have to wait until at least the end of this 'part' because, well, spoilers. Anyway, thanks for reading!! Ask me questions about things I'm horribly unclear about in the comments! enjoy!

EDIT AGAIN: The timeline exists now! Check out the other work in this series for exact dates on the formation of Massive Dynamic, the discovery of the other universe, and more general timeline info to help this mess make sense lol :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3: Miles to Go Before I Sleep

“A building in Manhattan is just going to disappear?” Wymack asked incredulously. Andrew didn’t blame him, but he didn’t have time for doubt.

“That’s what Kevin believes, yes.” *He’s usually been right before* didn’t have to be said.

“And Kevin thinks you have some kind of…ability, that will help, but it can only be triggered inside a daycare facility in Los Angeles.”

“Listening to my own echo is getting tiresome, Chief.”

“And dealing with you lot is putting me into an early grave,” Wymack growled back. “What makes him think whatever he needs is even still there?”

“When he needed a place to conduct the first trials, Tetsuji bought the daycare center and the whole military base it sits on. The media cover was it was going to be a satellite university, but it never panned out.” Andrew paused, gritting his teeth. “Also, I believe the discovery of the tapes implicating me in the trials is not a coincidence. Riko wants-“ He couldn’t bring himself to finish the
Riko wants my abilities to be activated. It was equal parts laughable and repulsive. “Riko is obviously setting a trap, but I don’t think we have any choice but to go along with it for now, until we figure out what building needs to be evacuated.”

There was quiet on the line. When Wymack spoke again, his voice was gruffer, quieter. “You sure you want to do this Minyard? Let Day experiment on you again?” Andrew never knew what to do with this side of the Chief, almost paternal in his rough care about his agents.

“We don’t have a choice,” Andrew said honestly.

“Okay,” Wymack said. “What can I do to help?”

“Ted Prachett said there were warnings in the other universe. Micro-quakes, dogs howling. Kevin thinks the same thing will happen here, and we can use that to tell us when it’s going to happen,” Andrew told him. It wasn’t much, but it was all they had right now.

“I’ll get in touch with Allison Reynolds, have her put Massive Dynamic’s Geologic Division on tracking, see if we can’t come up with something,” said Wymack.

“That will do,” Andrew said.

“Hey Minyard?”

“What, Chief?”

“Be careful out there, huh? Need you to keep helping me keep these assholes in check.”

“If you were any good at your job, you could do it on your own,” Andrew said, meaning I will. The fact that Wymack hung up without arguing meant he understood.

They were in the air less than six hours later. The way Neil kept glancing at him made Andrew’s skin itch until he finally had to say something.

“I got through plenty of plane rides before I met you,” he bit out in tight, quiet German. Kevin was already asleep in the aisle seat, leaving Neil in the middle – Andrew didn’t like the window, but a wall on one side was better than a body on each any day.

It was a long enough flight that it was being treated like an overnight – the cabin was dark, and most of the passengers had put themselves to sleep like Kevin. The crew wouldn’t be back around for a couple of hours.

“You’ve done a lot of things,” Neil said in the same language, seemingly convinced that was a perfectly reasonable response.

“Then stop looking at me like I’m – like I need something,” Andrew hissed. Neil rolled his eyes, then leaned back in his seat and closed them. His upper body was still angled slightly toward Andrew though, so Andrew wasn’t surprised when he kept talking.

“Speaking of…are we ever going to talk about it?”

There was no need to ask what he meant. Of course he would bring it up now, when they were trapped with want of distraction and Andrew had little reason to beg off. They both knew he wouldn’t sleep, and there was no in-flight wifi.

It wasn’t that Andrew had been avoiding talking about it, it was just that there wasn’t anything to
say. He had been thinking about kissing Neil for months, and the idiot had looked so unsteady it was like his whole being might flicker out of existence, and suddenly Andrew had been struck with the urge to do something, anything, to hold him in place.

He didn’t want to want Neil, but he did, and anyway want was better than the alternative, which was – which was impossible. So, a kiss it had been. That was all.

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

Neil didn’t open his eyes, but his face pinched a little.

“I disagree.”

“That’s because you’re stupid.”

Neil huffed a little. “And what are you, five?” But then his face smoothed back out. “Really, Andrew. I don’t – Neither of us did anything wrong, so I’m just trying to understand what happened.” Why Andrew had stopped, he meant. Or maybe why he hadn’t tried again since. It was interesting that Neil wasn’t worried he’d done something wrong. Probably he knew that if he had, he would have gotten a lot worse than simply stopping.

He clearly wasn’t going to shut up about this, so Andrew gave him the only answer he could.

“You said you don’t swing,” Andrew said flatly. He’d been firm on that, and Andrew had never noticed any evidence to the contrary. Neil might not have wanted to stop, in that moment, that day, but Andrew was right in that Neil hadn’t been in control of himself. Andrew was right.

Neil’s brow wrinkled, apparently in consideration. After a while he shrugged.

“I didn’t,” he said simply. “I don’t. I’ve never been interested in anyone, the way other people are. I’ve kissed people, but I never felt any particular way about it.”

In a way, it was a relief to hear out loud. The kiss had been a mistake, but it wouldn’t mean anything to Neil, it wouldn’t hurt him. It didn’t make Andrew like-

“But you-“ Neil said softly, opening his eyes and derailing Andrew’s chain of thought completely. “- I don’t know why it feels like something, with you, but it does. I can’t tell you the rules because I don’t know them yet. But if you’re interested, I think I’d like to try to find out?”

The last bit came out like an unwilling question, but Neil held his ground and didn’t look away. There was something defiant in there, bulling its way through the uncertainty. Something that was Neil Josten through and through, all the way down to Abram, underneath.

“I do have rules,” Andrew said quietly, because it was the harshest true thing he could think of to say. Neil just nodded.

“I know,” he said. “I’m hoping you could tell me them in advance, though. If we – would there be anywhere on you I could touch?”

“Christ, Josten.” There was no reason for those bald words to send a hot shock through Andrew’s veins. He clenched his fist where Neil couldn’t see it, more thankful than he’d ever been in his life for the relative privacy the German afforded them.

“I’d like an answer,” Neil said, placid in the low, cold light of the darkened cabin. He had one elbow draped on the armrest between them.
“I’d need a yes I could actually believe,” Andrew said.

Neil’s head tilted, just barely, a bit of light from the cracked window cover cutting a line of blue across his chest. He didn’t move any more than that, but suddenly he felt much closer.

“Yes,” Neil said, quiet but firm.

Andrew, despite all his better instincts, believed him. He reached out and caught Neil’s chin, his skin warm and stubble-rough between his fingers. It was a very good thing Andrew’s control was as good as it was, because the soft blue of the cabin felt almost private, almost enough to lean in and take Neil at his word.

Instead, he just said “Not here, Josten,” then settled firmly away from Neil, leaning against the side of the window.

Neil hummed in something like agreement and settled back into his own seat, closing his eyes again and finally giving Andrew some goddamn peace. Andrew wrenched open the window cover and stared through the dizzying emptiness just to distract himself. There wasn’t time or space to consider what was going on with Neil, (nothing was going on with Neil,) not now. Not with what was waiting for them.

LA was as dry and awful as Andrew remembered, not that that was a surprise. He hadn’t expected it to change since he’d been gone, and his memory was perfect, after all. Unrelentingly so.

Except, was it? Apparently something had happened to him here, but however he tried his brain refused to recall it. He’d called Bee from the airport back in Boston, and she’d agreed with Kevin’s suspicions that the drugs themselves were probably to blame. She’d also cautioned him strongly about reintroducing the drug to his system, since it had apparently had such an effect that last time. Andrew knew she meant well, but what he’d said to Neil and Wymack was also true. They didn’t have a choice.

“Creepy,” Neil muttered as their rental car rumbled down the dusty drive and pulled up in front of the daycare facility. He had a point.

The building was old white stucco, the cheerful paintings of cartoon animals that adorned the outside greyed out by years of sun and dust. There was a playground beside it containing nothing but a wind-emptied sandbox and one double swing set, the rusted joints of the chains rattling in the slight breeze. The chain fence squeaked as they let themselves into the lot.

There was a combination padlock on the front door. Andrew was about to offer to pick it when Kevin turned the pins smoothly and the lock clicked open. He looked back and seemed surprised by the way Andrew and Neil were both staring at him.

“What?”

“How did you know that?” Neil asked with barely-concealed suspicion. Kevin spun the lock pins in his hands nervously, but Andrew had already put aside the idea of Kevin laying some kind of ambush. He didn’t have it in him. It was probably just a lucky guess – maybe Kaleigh’s birthday or something.

“It’s the date they discovered the other universe,” Kevin said. Of course. Pride, not sentiment. It was more fitting. They went inside.

The interior of the daycare was more unsettling than the exterior, and Andrew could tell Neil and Kevin agreed. Kevin walked straight through the first room and went to check on the lab they knew
to be in the building. Andrew continued to look around the children’s room. It was too normal. The floor was linoleum and cracking in places, with a few brightly-patterned rugs scattered around. There were child sized wooden tables and chairs at one end, and at the other a set of shelves with books and toys surrounding what was clearly meant to be a play area.

There was a child’s height chart next to the door, a carton giraffe with the words ‘I’m so big!’ in colorful letters above it. Up the neck were little tick marks and names written in childlike handwriting. Andrew snapped a picture on his phone – the names might be useful if they wanted to track down other victims – before his eyes caught on one of the lowest ones.

AJ, it said, in green crayon. 4’0”.

“So you were always short,” Neil said, coming up beside him. Neil reached out and tapped at the scribbled letters. It was then that Andrew noticed the name just below it. Nathaniel.

Andrew caught Neil’s wrist tightly and forced his finger into the name. “Is there something you’re not telling me?” He looked at Neil intently. Neil was staring at the name like it would unlock some kind of secret, but eventually he shook his head. That wasn’t good enough.

“Josten, you had better not be lying to me,” Andrew warned.

“I’m not,” Neil said. “I don’t remember being here, and my mom definitely would have gotten me out sooner if I was a part of some experiment. If you were eight, I would have been seven, right? Eight at the most, depending on the month, I guess. I definitely wasn’t in California when I was seven or eight, I remember where I was.” Neil didn’t specify where, exactly, he remembered being, but Andrew supposed it was enough.

Across the room, Kevin had gotten back from checking over the equipment and was gathering toys and bringing them over to set on one of the little tables. He explained that some of them would be from the other universe. Once they’d re-introduced the cortexiphan into Andrew’s system, he should be able to notice the ‘glimmer’ on the ones that were from the other side.

He couldn’t see anything yet, and according to Kevin the lab was ready to go, the cold-storage unit with the vials of Cortexiphan still running on a battery of Kaleigh’s invention. Andrew didn’t have time to stall even if it had been in his nature. There was nothing left to do but what they’d come here for.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Neil asked.

To his credit, it was the first time he’d asked. It would have been Nicky’s fiftieth. Andrew sat himself back in the slightly-small exam chair. He didn’t have an answer for Neil. He pushed up the sleeve of his sweatshirt and rolled down the top of one arm band, laying it purposefully on the arm of the chair. Neil looked a little sad.

“Can’t do this yourself, right?” Neil said, an echo of the last time they had been in this position. Andrew held his gaze so that he wouldn’t have to look at the bag of strange red fluid Kevin was attaching to the IV stand. Cortexiphan.

“Just get on with it,” Andrew told him. Neil’s fingers were cold but quick as he tied off the tourniquet and slipped the needle into Andrew’s vein. Andrew didn’t even blink at the sensation.

“Okay, from what I understand, the Cortexiphan awakens your consciousness by eliciting some kind of extreme emotion – anger, love, fear,” Kevin said. “It does so by presenting your brain with some kind of obstacle. When you’ve reached the proper heightened state, I’ll pull you back out. I don’t
know what that obstacle will be, though.”

“Only what I take with me,” Andrew muttered, then rolled his eyes at the confused looks on Kevin and Neil’s faces. “Star Wars? Luke, in the cave?” he prompted. Nothing. Useless, both of them. “Whatever, let’s get this over with.”

He watched the red liquid snake down the plastic tube, felt the cool shock as it began to seep into his veins. And then the world faded out into blackness.

The forest was dark and smelled of moss and damp, but it was the height of the trees that told Andrew this was California. He had only ever been to the forest once, on an ill-advised charity camping trip that had packed too many twitchy foster kids into too-few donated camp tents. The trees had seemed impossibly big back then. The ghost stories were stupid – didn’t the counselors know they were all haunted already? But at least the black dirt was easier to clean out of split knuckles than asphalt.

He’d gotten into a fight on that trip when another kid had found him smoking stolen cigarettes and threatened to tell the counselor, but he’d wandered away from the campsite in the first place because the darkness of the trees had been unexpectedly peaceful. The feeling sat uncomfortably in him, and he’d wanted to see if there was more, out there. He had moved homes not long after that, ended up back in a concrete jungle somewhere near the coast. But he had never forgotten the forest and its impossible sense of permanence.

The forest Andrew was in now did not feel peaceful. It felt dangerous. There was a flurry of cracked twigs and rustling leaves off in the distance. Andrew’s head snapped around at the noises, and after a moment he followed them.

There was another rustle. The shape of a small child darted through the trees, pale hair glinting in the moonlight.

“Hey, wait!” Andrew called, running after him. What was going on? His breath was picking up in his own ears, but not enough that he couldn’t hear the ragged, stifled sobs of the running child, small feet tripping over the undergrowth. He was fast. He took turns like a ghost, but eventually Andrew caught up with him.

The child was crouched in the crook of an enormous tree, his small body practically hidden by the large, gnarled roots. He was too skinny, tiny and pale. He reminded Andrew of the children they’d hauled from that end-times cult, drawn up on himself with his face hidden against his knees.

“Hey,” Andrew said, walking toward the child uncertainly, out of his depth. He usually let Walker deal with this shit. “Hey there.”

“Please. I don’t want to do this anymore,” the child whimpered from behind his arms. Andrew frowned, inched a bit closer and crouched down a couple feet away from the child.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do,” he said, aiming for gentle but not entirely succeeding. “Hey, listen to me. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

The child’s shoulders shook once, a hard shudder clamped down on with force. “Make them stop it. Please make them stop it,” he cried. Andrew refused to reach out and touch him, even if he knew that was what other people might try.

“What’s your name?” he tried instead. The child’s head snapped up, and Andrew’s blood went cold at the sight of too-familiar features, his mirror image at ten or eleven, waxy skin and an ugly bruise
blooming across one cheek.

“Aaron?” he choked. The child got up and ran. “No!” Andrew ran after him, desperate. “Hey!”

He caught his brother’s wrist at the next turn, pulled him in by the shoulders until the child-Aaron was shaking against him, crying and clutching at the hem of his shirt. It seemed like the boy could hardly stand, so Andrew lowered them both to the ground.

“It’s all right. I promised I’d protect you, remember? I promised.” Somehow the child had ended up curled against his chest where Andrew knelt on the ground. He was still shaking. Andrew scanned the trees for any sign of help. His voice was coming out strained. He didn’t understand what was happening. “It’s going to be all right. I promise, okay? I’m going to keep you safe, Aaron.”

The child looked up at him with wide eyes. “Who’s Aaron?”

Andrew’s heart stopped dead in his chest. He looked down.

The child was covered in blood. It was everywhere, soaking through his own shirt. So much he couldn’t tell where it was coming from. The child was staring up at him with wide eyes.

“My name’s Andrew,” the child said, reaching up with bloody hands, bloody arms, clutching at Andrew’s face where he was frozen to the spot.

“ANDREW,” said a voice from everywhere at once, obliterating his senses, and then the whole world shook at its foundations. There was nothing Andrew could do but throw himself forward over the boy, shielding him as the ancient forest collapsed on top of them.

He’d been sitting in the dusty corner with his eyes closed for half an hour when the click of the door told Andrew that Neil had found him. Neil didn’t speak – probably waiting for Andrew to start, but the joke was on him, because Andrew had nothing to say. There wasn’t a single useful fucking word in his entire head right now, and maybe if he just sat here in silence, Neil would figure that out.

“Wymack’s scheduled our flight home.” Neil said. Then, when he was only met with silence, “You didn’t have punch Kevin.”

Andrew ignored him. He didn’t even remember what Kevin said when he’d woken up still in the haze of the drugs, in all honesty. Only that he’d gotten too close, tried to stop him when Andrew had needed to get away.

He felt rather than saw Neil take in the room they were in as he waited out Andrew’s silence. It could have been a very small office, or an exam room, but it was completely empty. It felt more like a cell. That wasn’t what had drawn Andrew to it when he’d spotted it through the small window in the door.

He had been drawn to the burn patterns. They stretched across two walls, the floor, and the ceiling, the agreeable white paint scorched black and bubbled. The linoleum was melted to the subflooring, the sound-proof ceiling tiles reduced to ash. It was a scene of devastation, except that in the lower corner of the room, right where the origin point should have been, there was a perhaps four-foot circle of pure white, completely untouched by the burns.

It was where Andrew was seated now, and he could imagine the picture it made, but he didn’t much care. Maybe it was appropriate.

“What is this place?” Neil asked after a while. Andrew opened his eyes. Neil had seated himself on the floor a few feet away from Andrew, facing him, looking around at the fire damage that radiated
out from the white spot in the corner.

“Me,” Andrew said. “Aaron saw it on the tape,” he elaborated, when Neil looked confused. “Apparently the first time I saw the other side, I got so scared I started a fire with my mind. Scorched the place.” He gestured vaguely around himself. “Of course I had to lose the useful skills along with the bullshit memories.”

Neil snorted, but there was no trace of amusement on his face. There was also no surprise, no fear upon registering the fact that Andrew was, or at least once had been, capable of goddamn pyrokenesis.

“It isn’t your fault,” Neil said seriously, “that you can’t do it anymore.”

Andrew leaned his head back until it thunked heavily against the corner, staring at the destroyed ceiling tiles.

“I could do it then, apparently, and I was just a fucking kid.”

“Exactly,” Neil said. Clearly, he had some thoughts on the matter.

“Spit it out, Josten.”

Neil shifted where he was sitting. “You were just a kid, you were scared,” he said at last. “Kevin said it was probably the fear that triggered the abilities, at least at first. But you’re not afraid anymore. You found a way to protect yourself from all the shit in your life, channeled it into anger, forced yourself to not be afraid, not to feel as all. It’s what kept you alive, and it’s what makes you so good at your job.”

Neil was looking at Andrew like he was something to be admired, even though every word out of his mouth was a death sentence to a building full of civilians in Manhattan. Worse, he was looking at Andrew like he thought he understood him, and maybe he did. Maybe that was why it was so unbearable.

Neil sighed deeply. “But without that fear, I don’t think you’ll ever be able to see the other side again. So what do we do?”

“I don’t know,” Andrew said. He looked at the scorch marks on the walls and wondered how he could have forgotten this. Tried to figure out whether or not he was grateful. “I’m not afraid of anything anymore.”

When Andrew’s phone rang in his pocket, it was a welcome distraction. “It’s starting,” Wymack said on the other end of the line. “Just got a call from Reynolds. Dogs are howling in Manhattan.”

It was starting, and they had no idea what to do next.

“We’ll figure it out when we get back to New York,” Neil said when Andrew told him. “We still have time.”

They had to have time. They had to.
Oof. Okay.

Up Next:

'It had been fifteen years since Neil had seen Jean Moreau in the flesh.'
Chapter Summary

Neil's POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Chapter 4: Try, Try Again**

Wymack met them at the airport when they arrived. He’d had them fly to New York rather than Boston – apparently they were going right to Massive Dynamic rather than back to the lab. Andrew quickly claimed shotgun, leaving Ken and Neil to share the back seat.

“The quakes are increasing in frequency,” Wymack said tightly as he drove. “Four in the last hour. The last one was a magnitude two point six.”

“Fuck,” Andrew muttered. It was first thing Neil had heard him say since they’d left LA. Wymack glanced at him sidelong.

“Hey, you didn’t send that building over here,” Wymack said.

“So what’s Plan B?” Neil asked. He hoped Wymack, Nicky and Renee had come up with something while they were gone.

“We’re compiling data,” said Wymack. “trying to see if we can predict the point if the next incident. Quake sites, weather patterns, satellite images. We’re throwing everything we’ve got at this, Josten. We’ll find something.”

Wymack always sounded so certain, it was easy to want to believe him, but Neil knew it wasn’t that simple. He watched night descend over Manhattan, the darkness cut through with fewer bright lights here than he would have expected, and wondered if they were finally going to be too late. He’d meant it when he told Andrew it wasn’t his fault he couldn’t activate his powers, but he also couldn’t help be a bit disappointed, and a bit curious.

There was something about Andrew that was just – special. Neil could feel it in his bones when looked at him. He didn’t want Andrew to push himself over the edge, but he didn’t want him to just give up either. Still, in the end, it wasn’t up to Neil. It was Andrew’s choice, would always be Andrew’s choice. He had been denied it too much in the past to take it form him now.

“Want fresh eyes on that data?” Neil asked, catching Wymack’s eyes in the rearview mirror as they pulled into a parking spot miraculously close to the building. Wymack nodded. They trooped out of the car and through the front door, following Wymack past the front desk and through a side door – apparently Allison had given him the passcode.

“That would be great,” Wymack said. “You and Kevin can meet up with Reynolds’ people. I’m sure Moreau would appreciate the help.”
Neil nearly tripped over his own feet, and he felt Kevin grind to a halt beside him.

“He’s still here?” Neil whispered in frantic French. Kevin looked anxious, but sad, too.

“He has nowhere else to go,” Kevin said softly.

“You two gonna fill us in at any time?” Wymack broke in irritably. Neil glanced over to Andrew, who was looking back and forth between him and Kevin with intent. Neil shrugged. He didn’t even know how to begin explaining their history with Jean. All he knew for sure was it was far too complicated a conversation to have in this hallway, and they couldn’t afford to be wasting time.

“Jean Moreau?” Neil asked, just to be sure. Wymack nodded, frowning more deeply. “It’s fine Chief, it’s just that Kevin and I know him. He was at Evermore the same time we were.” It wasn’t a lie, even though it cut out every possible truth. Wymack looked almost sad for a moment. Then he turned away and kept walking.

“I figured as much,” he said, leading them through another door. “Only so many explanations for that number on his face.”

The reminder sent a bolt of guilt through Neil – for all he had been through on the run with his mother, he knew he’d been lucky in some ways to get out of Evermore when he had. They paused at a door marked “Data Lab – Geological Division.”

“This isn’t gonna be a problem, is it?” Wymack asked. Kevin shook his head.

“No, Chief,” Neil offered. He didn’t think he managed to sound very convincing.

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” Wymack said, looking between Kevin and Neil warily. “Minyard, you’re with me.” He walked away, and Andrew followed him without so much as a backward glance.

It had been fifteen years since Neil had seen Jean Moreau in the flesh – they’d been children when Neil’s mother had stolen Neil away from Evermore in the night. They were of an age, a handful of years younger than Kevin and Riko, but even at twelve Jean had been worn-down, aged beyond his years from half a lifetime under Riko’s thumb. He’d been a thing of bones and shadows for as long as Neil had known him.

At twenty seven, Jean’s dark hair was already greying at the temples, but he no longer looked like he survived on scraps. He’d ended up tall, for all Kevin’s teasing. Taller than Kevin, actually. Nothing about his frame suggested he would be easy to beat in a fight, and he moved around the lab with a weighted kind of grace. Neil wondered if that change had anything to do with the way Allison had apparently taken him under her wing, or if the ease in his frame had more to do with Riko’s prolonged absence in the other universe.

Still, there was a taught edge to Jean’s bearing, a deliberate sort of restraint visible even with his back turned to them. Neil recognized the posture intimately – he saw it every day in the mirror.

Jean turned and saw who had stepped into his lab. His grey eyes sharpened, and Neil finally got a look at the tattoo on his cheekbone. A tiny, perfect three in jet black ink. The sight of it made Neil’s stomach turn. There was a single long, white scar along the left side of his face that Neil didn’t remember either. There were yellowish remains of bruises along the right side of his jaw, his left wrist, and none on his knuckles.

“When your chief told me I would be working with Kevin Day, I wasn’t sure how it was possible,” Jean said when he’d reached them. His whole frame was tense, but his tone was more curious than anything, with a dry edge of amusement Neil didn’t remember from their childhood. He was looking
at Neil like he wasn’t quite convinced he was real. “I should have known you were involved, somehow. You were always too good at getting in trouble.”

Neil couldn’t take his eyes off of the tattoo, the bruises, the grey strands of his hair. What was there to say? They had been friends, once, or something like it. Confidants, when Kevin had been too drawn into Riko’s world. They’d protected each other when they could from the worst of Riko and Tetsuji’s wrath, huddled with Kevin on the floor of their dorm rooms or in the darkened cafeteria, Neil and Kevin learning French in hushed tones. For years, it had felt unnatural to speak the language at full volume. Even now, when Neil was long-fluent, the words still came easier in the dark, at a whisper.

What was there to say? They had known each other once, but now they were strangers, except for in all the ways they never really could be. He reached out a hand. “Hey. I’m Neil Josten.”

Something sad flickered across Jean’s face as he accepted the shake. “Ah,” he said, accent softened but still present after all these years, “That does explain it, yes. Neil. Of course you are.”

“How are you, Jean?” Kevin blurted out, twitchy and nervous where Jean was completely still. His right hand was rubbing nervously at his left shoulder, and Neil suspected it was to keep that hand from drifting to the black mark on his own cheek. Jean held his gaze a little tiredly.

At last he said “I’ve been worse, Kevin.”

Kevin flinched a little at that. Neil shoved a hand against his shoulder, steering them all further into the room and turning back to Jean.

“How can we help?”

The set up and goings-on in the lab were basically as Wymack had described them. Jean and his team were turning over every piece of data they could think of – weather patterns, geothermal levels, quake hotspots, ground structure. There seemed to be a different map on every screen. None of it seemed to be telling them anything.

“We’ve been mapping the epicenters of all of the micro-quakes,” Jean explained as he led them through the lab to one of the largest maps of Manhattan. Colored circles of different sizes were blinking all over it, coded by strength and time of the quakes. There didn’t seem to be any discernable pattern. “We’re trying to see if there’s any pattern, if maybe we can triangulate a central location or-“

“It won’t work,” Kevin cut in harshly. He was staring at the map like it had personally insulted him, ignoring the cool look Jean sent his way.

“We tried that the last time,” Kevin went on. “We ran every variable we could think of, but we never figured it out. Why that one? Why eleven minutes? Why the middle of the quad?”

“The middle of the q-“ Jean started, frowning, but Kevin barreled onward over him.

“It’s useless! Trying to make order from chaos. There was no reason at all it was that car.”

But there was something, tickling on the edge of Neil’s consciousness where he couldn’t quite reach it. Before he could make any sense of it, his thoughts were interrupted.


Kevin’s mouth snapped shut, and he looked suddenly guilty. The pieces fell together, and Neil
groaned in exasperation.

“You used Jean’s car?” he said, right as Jean said

“You mean that was you?”

“Oh, who else would it have been?” Kevin snapped.

“You’re right,” Jean shot back, slipping into French like a suit of armor. “No one else could have been so arrogantly stupid. You sent my car into another universe! Did you even bother to ask why? Or were you so caught up in being Riko’s right hand man instead of his whipping boy that you didn’t even question it?”

Kevin was staring at Jean in confused horror, but it had taken Neil only seconds to understand. They would have been in grad school when the experiment had occurred, finally testing the waters of adulthood. It would have been getting trickier for Riko to keep another human being as his pet, to keep Jean completely under his control. To get rid of his car in the guise of a reckless, youthful experiment wasn’t coincidence, it was calculation.

“You were still so blind to him, even then,” Jean said.


“You don’t know anything about being bound, Day,” Jean spat, “You were a coward who thought you could change the world. But you knew nothing of the weight of it.” Jean’s cheeks were flushed but his eyes were hard. Neil couldn’t remember him ever looking quite like this.

Then suddenly, the idea that had been jostling at the edges of his mind clicked into place.

“That’s it,” Neil said in English. When neither Jean or Kevin looked at him, Neil reached out and snapped his fingers between their faces. The twin expressions of indignant fury might have been amusing, on any other day.

“Hey, you can finish this later. I figured it out.”

“What?” they both said at once.

“Weight,” Neil said, and almost laughed at the confused silence. “Well, not weight. Mass. Kevin, you said the car that reappeared in the courtyard was the same model as Jean’s. You said the universe wants balance, right? It’s about mass. It wouldn't have helped you with figuring out what would show up then but now-”

It took only a fraction of the second for the seed to plant and bloom, the excitement of it like a sunburst in Kevin’s eyes.

“Yes,” he said intently. “Yes, the building will be the same mass!” He turned to Jean. “Fuck earthquakes. New data set: we need to start compiling lists of every building of comparable mass. We’ll need plans, building materials, layouts.”

Jean was focused in, but not yet caught up like Kevin. “For... every freestanding structure in Manhattan?” he asked dubiously.

“Well I think we can rule out the Empire State Building.” Kevin said airily, rushing off to the nearest computer. Jean turned and stared at Neil, who sighed.
“Yeah, he hasn’t changed much. But…” Neil hesitated “He understands more than you think now, about Riko. You know he’s never been any good at apologies.”

“None of us are,” Jean said. Then he shook his head, glancing at where Kevin was typing madly at his work station. “Every building? Really?”

“No,” Neil said. “He’s just being dramatic, as usual. The one that disappeared was modest sized, right? 10 stories, average build. We can start by eliminating anything under 5 stories, and anything over fifteen.”

“That still has to be hundreds of buildings.”

“Probably. So narrow it down by building style from there. Smaller lofts can go, but bigger ones stay. Most industrial centers are probably out, as are warehouses. It’s a place to start.” Neil paused when he took in the bemused way Jean was looking at him. “What?”

“I’m trying to figure out whether or not you’ve changed,” Jean admitted. Neil didn’t have anything to say to that.

“Figure it out later, Moreau. We have work to do.”

They left each other to the work, after that. It went on for hours, but eventually the supercomputers were doing all the work, and there was little left for them to do.

“There has to be something,” Kevin insisted. Neil understood his growing sense of frustration, but there really wasn’t.

“Shut down all non-essential power functions,” he suggested. “Might make the programs run faster.”

The lights dimmed in the lab as Kevin did so, but then they were still left waiting.

“Kevin,” Jean said after a beat. Kevin looked up at him, clearly not expecting to be addressed. The corner of Jean’s mouth pulled a little – with what emotion, Neil couldn’t tell. “Let’s go get a cup of tea.”

For a moment Kevin looked surprised, and then like he was going to refuse. But then he looked around at the computers and relented. “Yeah, okay.”

Jean asked Neil along, but Neil turned him down. Jean and Kevin had things to work out. If nothing else, they would likely continue to need Jean’s help from within Massive Dynamic. It was no small feat they were pulling now, using Riko’s own lab and equipment in an attempt to thwart him. Jean was taking a huge risk by working with them, and Neil had a feeling that they would need his relationship with Kevin to be stronger if they were going to survive the coming months.

He left them to it, making his way through the back hallways of the building, stopping to examine the little maps by the elevators. On instinct, he took one up to a floor marked ‘observation deck.’

The huge room took up half the floor of the building, with glass walls, and a door leading to a balcony that stretched around all four sides of the building, leaning out high over the city. As he’d suspected, that was where Neil found Wymack and Andrew.

“Any progress?” Wymack asked.

“We’re down to a hundred and twenty seven buildings stretched out across all of Manhattan,” Neil told him. “I’ve sent the list to your phone. The supercomputers are crunching the numbers as fast as
they can, but—" he gestured around at the expanse of the city beyond the glass walls “—the forty eight
hours is just about up. Kevin says it could happen at any time.”

Andrew wasn’t looking at either of them. He was standing at one of the glass walls, fingers gripping
at the black chair rail, staring out over the city like he could will the building to manifest itself. Of
course, Neil realized, that was exactly what he was trying to do. He’d probably been up here since
they’d gotten back, trying to find the building’s ‘glimmer’ despite the apparent failure at the lab.

“The NYPD has a standard evacuation protocol,” Andrew said, still facing the glass. “With our help
they could clear most of those buildings—“

“The list includes three hospitals, a cancer treatment center, and a nursing home,” Wymack
interrupted. He had finished scrolling through the list on his phone. “The evacuation would likely kill
more people than it would save. Not to mention the panic on the streets that might kill thousands
more.” He looked immeasurably tired. “The largest building has, what, five hundred people?”

Now Andrew did turn to look at him, his eyes flat and dead as he processed what Wymack was
saying. It hit Neil at the same moment, and he felt a little sick.

“You’re saying we should just write those people off?” Neil demanded. “Just let the building
disappear? Let five hundred people just disappear? Let them die?”

“Sometimes the only choices you have left are bad ones, Josten,” Wymack said. But he was looking
at Andrew when he said it.

And Andrew, Andrew who only seemed to care for getting jobs done so it would get someone off
his back; who acted like he only used work as a distraction from the boredom of his own existence;
who treated most cases like interesting puzzles rather than human lives hanging in the balance, was
suddenly across the room and had a hand pressed up against Wymack’s chest. Neil couldn’t see, but
from how still Wymack was holding himself, he would have bet his life there was a knife in it.

Another Unit Chief, another agent, would have shouted. Would have drawn his gun on Andrew
without a second thought. Wymack just stared at him.

“You’re better than this, Minyard,” he said.

“Damn right I am,” Andrew said. “Better than your fucking shitty plan. Now leave so I can think of
a better one.”

Wymack stepped back from the knife, and Andrew let him.

“We are talking about this later,” Wymack said. “you and I, got it?” He didn’t wait for Andrew to
answer before storming out the door.

Andrew tucked the blade away calmly, then turned and let himself out on the balcony, already
pulling out his cigarettes. Neil took it as invitation to follow, holding out a lighter once they were
leaning against the glass and metal railing, a dozen stories above the New York streets. It was hard
not to stare at Andrew, even at a time like this.

“It’s not too late,” Neil said. Andrew let out a hollow huff. His cigarette was barely half gone but he
stubbed it out angrily on the edge of the railing.

“I thought you were done lying to me, Neil,” he said. He turned to face Neil and Neil mirrored him,
meeting his flat gaze. “I failed. And I’m meant to be the one who can do this.”
“We haven’t failed,” Neil insisted, unwilling to let Andrew, self-destructive to the last, bear all the blame on his own. “not yet.”

He hoped Andrew could see the honesty and determination in his face – the fierce, foreign hope that only Andrew’s own steadfast strength had truly allowed him to embrace. He wasn’t lying. They hadn’t failed yet. They had always found a way, and this time would be no different. It couldn’t be. It wouldn’t be.

“Andrew, I have never met anyone who can do the things you do. I’m not letting you give up on yourself,” Neil whispered. “But you can’t close yourself off this time.” Andrew was still staring at him impassively.

“Come on, you told Chief you weren’t going along with his plan, so don’t. Fight, Andrew.” Neil took a step closer, letting Andrew steal the still-burning cigarette from between his fingers. “I want to see you lose control.”

Chapter End Notes

_Boy. _also, Jean! :D

Up Next:

Andrew squeezed a little harder, just for a few seconds, just to see if Neil would react. But all Neil did was relax a little more in Andrew’s grip. Andrew wasn’t stupid – the move was intentionally contrary, a challenge: _You can lose control around me. I trust you not to hurt me._
Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

no specific warnings for this chapter, I don't think. Please let me know if I am wrong.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5: Glimmer

“I want to see you lose control,” Neil said, like he had any idea what that meant.

Andrew couldn’t do this for Neil. He couldn’t because he didn’t know how. He’d taught himself to stop feeling by the time he was nine years old, re-forged that promise when he was thirteen.

Feeling was weakness. Letting people in was inviting them to hurt him. It was inviting him to hurt them. It was an unacceptable risk either way. He’d made a bargain with himself in his own blood, and he didn’t know how to go back on it now even if he’d wanted to.

“You’re such a moron,” Andrew spat. The cigarette he’d stolen from Neil fluttered over the railing as Andrew reached out and grabbed Neil’s face in both hands. Andrew wrenched him closer, one of his hands fisted tightly in Neil’s hair, the other slipping down to his neck, Andrew’s thumb digging into the hollow of his throat. It was an incredibly vulnerable a position, but for some reason Neil didn’t seem even mildly concerned about it.

“And you’re a stubborn fucking asshole. Come on.”

Andrew squeezed a little harder, just for a few seconds, just to see if Neil would react. But all Neil did was relax a little more in Andrew’s grip. Andrew wasn’t stupid – the move was intentionally contrary, a challenge: You can lose control around me. I trust you not to hurt me.

It was a trust Andrew had no idea how he’d earned, but now he had Neil relaxed under his hands, pressed against the glass wall of the building while the city moved obliviously far below them.

And Neil’s eyes kept dropping to his mouth.

This really wasn’t the time or the place, but when would it be? Andrew had let a month go by waiting for the right moment to come around, a minute when they had time to breathe, when they could both stop and actually think straight. Maybe that wasn’t in the cards. Maybe his time with Neil would only ever be this: too-still moments in between frantic action cuts, blood all over the negatives.

“It’s still yes,” Neil said into the tiny space between them. And then Andrew closed that space, and kissed him.
They backed into the wall of the building, Neil’s fingers clutching uselessly at the smooth glass as Andrew leaned against him, momentarily giving in to the desire to just hold Neil in place, their bodies pressed together from thigh to chest. Neil’s lips were soft as they were destructive. His body was warm even through layers of clothing as, against all reason, he relaxed beneath Andrew’s touch. The kiss was inelegant, but the stutter in Neil’s breath the moment Andrew made contact was so unbearably honest it made Andrew’s stomach twist in return.

Andrew pressed in harder, moving his hands from Neil’s neck, pressing them down the length of his arms and feeling Neil shiver in response, holding his wrists lightly in place against the glass, feeling Neil’s pulse race against his palms. He let Neil gasp lightly into his mouth, relished in the honesty of his unpracticed aggression, the clumsy, hot swipe of Neil’s tongue over Andrew’s bottom lip that threatened to burn right through him.

It was perfect, it was impossible; Neil was impossible – strange and bright and devastating and Andrew had thought he’d known better than this by now. He needed to stop now before he could do anything else stupid, like bite down on Neil’s lip to see what sounds he would make or- Andrew pulled away.

*I want to see you lose control* Neil had said, face so serious and startling it hurt to look at him.

“The last time-” Andrew started.

The last time, Andrew had put four men in the ICU and himself on three years of drugged delirium. Or, the last time, he had nearly killed himself trying to hold onto something he could never keep. But maybe it was already too late.

“I don’t care,” Neil told him, still gasping a little, his hands still pinned against the side of the building by Andrew’s own, his eyes bright with that same unearned trust. “I’m not afraid of you. Andrew. Come on.”

Couldn’t Neil see what he was doing? Couldn’t he see how aware Andrew was of his own failure? He had failed the team tonight, and he was going to fail Neil too, because Neil wanted him to let him in, it was clear as day on his face even if he would never admit to it, but Andrew knew all too well how that road ended.

“I-“ Andrew started again, then stopped abruptly.

It was like he couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t remember the last time he had felt like this, like the world was crumbling away at the edges and he was scrabbling pathetically after it on his knees. And then he realized.

Andrew shoved away from Neil, ignoring the concerned look on his face, and raced to the corner of the building. It felt like his body was trying to turn inside out. He leaned over the railing at the dizzying distance, retching a little as he let it take him over.

But then he looked and – there. A building that didn’t look like the others. Eight stories at most, somewhere downtown, one building stood out.

The building *glimmered.*

Andrew gasped raggedly, clutching at the railing. “I see it.”

There was a long moment where time itself seemed to sag with shock and relief. He could see it. There, in the distance, just a few blocks from the river. Glimmering.
And then they were moving. Running back into the building, down the stairs rather than waiting for the elevator. Wymack grabbed Neil at the entrance to the building and tossed Andrew the keys to his car – Andrew barely spared them a glance as he caught the keys, and Wymack pulled Neil after himself into the nearest police car. They tore off toward downtown. Andrew punched in Neil’s speed dial without looking as he drove.

“Where?” Neil said as soon as he picked up.

“West Village,” Andrew told him. “Near the Hudson, I think. Stay on the line, I’ll let you know if I see it.”

“Near the pier?”

“I think so.” Andrew snarled as he fought his way through traffic, crowded even at night. He shut out every thought about the last time he’d driven through these particular streets and pressed harder on the gas. “Tell me this thing has lights.”

Thankfully Neil had had the presence of mind to put him on speakerphone, because Wymack’s voice answered.

“Bottom right under the wheel.”

Andrew’s hand found the switch, and seconds later cars were moving out of his way, the satisfying flash and wail cutting through the night.

“Any other landmarks?” Wymack asked, the siren on his own car tinny and crackled over the line.

“Buildings nearby?”

“The new tower,” Andrew answered, squinting down the darkened street. There weren’t as many lights in this part of town. “Near the elevated tracks.”

“The Highline,” Wymack supplied. A loud rustle indicated Neil pulling out their map of potential matches, looking for the area he’d indicated.

“Still too many candidates,” Neil said. The loud cry of a truck horn blared over the phone, and Andrew left himself stop breathing. A second later Neil and Wymack cursed in unison, but there were no sounds of a crash. They were still driving. “Andrew we need to narrow it down fur-”

“I see it,” Andrew said. He’d just glimpsed it around a corner, through a gap in the buildings, but that had been it. The glimmer. He wracked his head for a mental map of the surrounding streets. “It’s on Washington.”

“What’ve we got on Washington?” Wymack asked Neil. Another rustle of papers, a string of nonsense curse words in a combination of languages Andrew couldn’t even begin to unravel, and then-

“Got it! There’s a hotel,” Neil said triumphantly. “The Brayson, 13th and Washington. It’s right there. We’re almost there. That’s it Andrew. That’s it!”

Both cars screeched to a stop in front of the building. Wymack snapped at him to call the Fire Department while he ran inside and flashed his badge at the front desk clerk, demanding an immediate and complete evacuation of the hotel.

Soon people were pouring into the streets in their pajamas. He and Neil were helping where they could, but Andrew wasn’t sure they were going to be fast enough. A strange wind had picked up.
Something about the glimmer had changed. It was like it was getting stronger, like the hotel was getting blurrier in front of his eyes. There was only one explanation: it was about to disappear.

“Come on!” He yelled, pushing people across the street away from the building. Inside, the desk clerk was helping an elderly woman shuffle across the lobby through the crowd in agonizing slow motion. A little girl tripped over the threshold and suddenly Neil was there, dragging her into his arms and carrying her across the street and depositing her with her parents.

There was something off about Neil, his overloaded brain thought for a moment, but before Andrew could make sense of it he was lost in the crowd again. A torn-loose signpost came crashing down beside him, jolting Andrew’s attention back to the hotel.

“Is that everyone?” Andrew shouted at the clerk over the wind, as he finally made it out of the door with the old woman.

“I think so!” the clerk shouted back.

And then it happened. The hotel seemed to flash in Andrew’s vision, the whole building lighting up blindingly white. It flickered once, twice. And then it vanished.

It was like a whirlpool of air, a vacuum. They had still been standing too close to the building and suddenly Andrew felt himself being dragged forward toward a gaping blackness, unsure what would happen if he was sucked in. Beside him, the clerk was being dragged in as well. He couldn’t see where Neil or Wymack had gone. He grabbed the clerk’s jacket in one hand and a nearby lamppost in another and held on as the gale pulled them closer, closer.

It felt like it would never end, and then it did, as suddenly as it had started. The wind settled and all that was left was a stories-deep hole in the Manhattan sidewalk. The clerk collapsed heavily on the ground next to Andrew, head in his hands. After a few minutes, he managed a tiny, weak “…what?”

“Looks like you got the rest of the night off,” Andrew told him dryly, and walked away to find his team.

Wymack was standing by the police car he’d gotten there in, deep in discussion with the local police chief and a couple of other suits Andrew was willing to bet were already orchestrating a cover story. Probably a gas explosion. Or maybe a ‘surprise but planned demolition.’ Predictable, but it was amazing what the public would believe when the alternative was a threat to their world view.

Neil wasn’t with him.

Neil wasn’t with the huddled masses of patrons, helping them or otherwise. He wasn’t with the other police officers. He wasn’t across the street getting horribly bitter coffee at the corner store, he wasn’t waiting in Andrew’s car. What the hell? What an asshole, wandering off at a moment like this.

For a dreadful second Andrew wondered if Neil had run. If it was finally too much, too weird. He’d taken in the sight of Andrew retching over the balcony, seeing things no one should be able to see, and gotten the hell out of town. Idiot. Andrew couldn’t protect him if he ran. If he got himself into trouble over this Andrew would kill him himself, just to teach him a lesson. He pulled out his phone and dialed.

The jarring sound of Neil’s ringtone blared from across the street; a stupid song, a bad joke from when he had given Neil the phone that had become far too real in recent weeks. Andrew’s eyes searched for Neil and landed on the tiny square of light of the phone’s screen, lying in the rubble on the sidewalk, just inches from the gaping mouth of the hole where the Brayson Hotel had been. The
Andrew had given Neil was beside it. Neil himself was nowhere to be seen.

Andrew wasn’t sure he could feel his body anymore. Everything was numb but the press of the knives beneath his armbands and the ringtone harsh in his ears.

Andrew went to the phone. Picked it up in a shaking hand, flipped it open to cancel the call. There were rescue workers already on the scene, shining flashlights into void, but there was no one at the bottom. Neil wasn’t at the bottom. Which left only one option: he’d been sucked into the blackness, through to the other universe along with the building. And Andrew had seen what had happened to the people who had gone through the last time.

The ache in his hip flared sharply as Andrew’s knees hit the sidewalk, exhaustion catching up with him all at once. Panic was shoved deep and locked away in favor of complete detachment, because if Andrew allowed himself to feel anything more right now, he would cease to function.

There was no sense staying here. Neil wasn’t going to reappear, and Kevin would be here soon. Andrew forced himself to stand, and as he did, a glint of metal caught his eye. Neil’s key ring. It must have fallen from his pocket along with the phone, except – except there was one key missing.

The key to the house in Cambridge was gone. There was no way that could have happened unless Neil had taken it off on purpose. Andrew’s heart was racing. If he had done that, if Neil had had time to do something like that, he hadn’t simply been sucked into a black hole of nothingness.

He had been taken. He hadn’t gone willingly, because if he had the key wouldn’t be gone. Neil knew how to run; even a sentimental bastard like him would never take a key for somewhere he didn’t want to return to.

He wouldn’t have kissed Andrew just to disappear on him.

So he’d been taken. And while that was still very, very bad, it meant Neil just might still be alive.

“Andrew what’s wrong?” Kevin had arrived on the scene, looming over him in the dust, staring uncomprehendingly down at the objects clutched in Andrew’s fist. “Where’s Neil?”

Maybe hearing his name out loud was the trigger. Maybe Andrew’s brain had just needed time to catch up. Whatever the reason, it was that moment that it clicked into place, what Andrew had seen in the seconds that Neil had been by his side in the tumult, the odd brightness about him, there-but-not, the way Andrew hadn’t been able to quite look at him straight on.

“He glimmered.” Andrew said, putting a hand over Kevin’s mouth as his eyes widened to keep him from interrupting. “I saw it. Neil glimmered, Kevin. Neil is-” Andrew didn’t know if he could bring himself to finish that sentence. He dropped his hand when Kevin looked like he was about to be sick.

He’s from the other universe.

“I know,” Kevin said.

By the time Wymack and Renee – and when had she gotten here? – pulled him back, there were dark bruises already blooming around Kevin’s throat. Kevin was gasping. Wymack was growling in his ear, threatening something about probation. None of it mattered. All that mattered was the dreadful look of understanding that had flashed in Kevin’s eyes, the decades of regret buried in that single ‘I know.’

“Kevin,” Andrew said through clenched teeth. “You have some explaining to do.”
Chapter End Notes

So I really didn't mean to leave the previous chapter on a cliffhanger, honestly. But I really wanted this stuff to be in this chapter because having the second kiss be Andrew's POV was important to me. So there.

Up Next:

'The end came suddenly and totally, like waking up from a bittersweet dream.'
Part 5, Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Neil's POV

Chapter Notes

Warnings for violence including very brief torture.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 6: The End

The end came suddenly and totally, like waking up from a bittersweet dream. One moment Neil was herding patrons from the hotel, scooping up a girl who had fallen and sprinting her across the street to her frantic parents’ arms. The next, there was a cold hand on his wrist, pointed acrylic nails pinched against the nerves there, and everything just stopped.

One moment the future had been before him, short and uncertain but there. There, in Boston, with the Foxes, beating Riko at his own game, making a home for himself no matter how temporary, no matter that it had always been on borrowed time. One moment he knew it would eventually end, and the next it had.

One moment he was still Neil Josten, and the next he wasn’t, soft and sudden as the end of the world.

The end came amid the smoke and the dust, slammed him against a brick wall until his head spun, with matching saw-tooth smiles and whispered assurances that they would take out his whole team if he didn’t come quietly. His eyes searched frantically through the crowd for Andrew, Wymack, even Kevin, but he saw none of them.

While they only had him by one wrist, he slipped a single key off of his key ring, one he had memorized by touch. Romero caught him fiddling and yanked his hand from his pocket, then emptied them himself. Phone, keys, and Andrew’s knife scattered in the dirt. It didn’t matter, the message was sent. He would go, but he wouldn’t let the Foxes think he had just disappeared. He wouldn’t let Andrew think he’d run.

It felt too quiet, after that. It seemed like he should be screaming, maybe. Like there should be gunfire, knives flashing. Like he should be throwing up or sweating blood. But instead everything just felt…dead. His body was cold, paralyzed. Lola’s oil-slick voice poured into his ear like poison.

“Come on, Junior. Daddy’s missed you, it won’t do to keep him waiting.”

“He’s in jail,” Neil insisted. (Neil, because even at the end of the world, he wouldn’t be the other name, and he wouldn’t bring Abram here. He wouldn’t.) He barely fought against her grip and her brother’s. Jackson was there too, opening a door in a building just down the street. They had planned
this. It had been a trap after all, just not the kind the Foxes had thought.

“Not anymore,” Lola told him. She sounded almost pitying. They were shoving him down a short, dark hallway, to a door with a complicated looking electronic lock. Jackson entered in a long code and the thing clicked open. Romero’s elbow jammed into Neil’s back and Neil lurched forward into a room no larger than an elevator.

Lola was lying. She had to be. Neil kept an eye on his father and with good reason. If he ever got out of prison Neil would have to run again. So Neil was very, very sure that Nathan Wesninski was still locked up tight on drug charges in Seattle, not even a probation hearing for the next two years while the authorities struggled to build a case against the Butcher of Baltimore (everyone knew who he was, that was the way of organized crime, it was just that nobody could prove it.) He told Lola as much, but she only laughed.

“Rome, wait til we tell him their version is too stupid to get himself out on probation,” she said to her brother. “Pitiful, really. No wonder the brat’s still alive.” Neil’s head ached. Her words were making less and less sense. What version?

The door to the room slammed shut, leaving them all momentarily in darkness. Romero had a death grip on his wrists, wrenched up behind his back so tightly he could barely move. Then another panel lit up on the opposite wall. Jackson pressed his palm to it. The wall slid away, and Neil was shoved out into a hallway almost exactly like the one he’d just left.

The world was swimming at the edges, but Neil fought to stay conscious, stay focused. The likelihood of him surviving an encounter with the Malcolm siblings, and Plank to boot, was nonexistent. He was a dead man walking. That didn’t mean he would pass up a chance to take them with him if he could.

They opened a door and hurried him into a plain black car with tinted windows. The license plate designated it as Baltimore PD, but they were definitely still in New York. Neil would have thought it was the same alley they had just left, same dust in the air and flashing police lights, but there was no crowd. It was dark, still, so He hadn’t lost time, but even with the low lighting of the West Village, Neil could tell that something was wrong.

Neil’s head slammed against the edge of the car door as he was shoved inside. His hands were handcuffed behind the seat, his feet to the ankle rail.

“Don’t worry Nathaniel,” Jackson grinned from the driver’s seat. The name stopped his breath, shoveled dirt into his mouth, buried him alive. “You’ll be seeing him soon enough. But I doubt he’ll have the patience to do much more than kill you, and that’s not the whole job, so you’re going to answer some questions on the way there.”

“What job?” Neil demanded. No one answered. The car started to move.

Lola was sitting behind him like a nightmare made flesh, nails scratching a deadly foreplay up his arms, practice for her favorite dance of knives. Neil writhed in place, tearing the skin of his wrists viciously on the cuffs, but it was no use.

“First question,” she said, the tip of a blade just resting against his skin. “How was your Agent Andrew Minyard able to active his abilities?”

He hadn’t been able to find Andrew after the building had gone, before Lola had found him. Neil hoped Andrew was all right. He wished he had been able to say goodbye.
“I have no idea what you are talking about,” Neil said resolutely, and braced himself.

The slice across his arm was agony. “Wrong answer, Nathaniel,” Romero said. He sounded amused.

The car had made it around the block, turning around to head back toward the highway. Neil trained his gaze out the darkened window again, looking for any focus point. Any distraction. A massive shape drifted overhead, much too low and quiet to be a plane. It passed slowly over them, larger than life.

Before his fritzing mind could figure out what it was, they passed the flashing lights again and Neil’s gaze caught on something else. An eight story building with a distinctively rearranged look to it, where there should have been a massive hole in the ground. It was the Brayson Hotel. Or rather, it was two of them, where only one should have been. And then it clicked into place – where they had taken him.

Lola saw where he was looking and laughed again, a harsh, ugly sound.

“Welcome home, Junior,” she said. “Pity you won’t live to see much of it.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the short chapter, and that cliffhangers are apparently a thing I do now. Yeah, it's gonna be a whole other chapter before we catch back up with Neil, sorry. Anyway, that concludes Part 5 "Time Spent in Los Angeles."

Up Next - Part 6 "Can't Go Home Again":

“Start at the beginning,” Andrew instructed.

Kevin took a breath, downed half the drink, breathed again. Clenched his hands around his knees.

“Neil’s real name is Nathaniel Wesninski,” Kevin said, and winced at the expression at Wymack’s face.
Part 6, Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Andrew's POV

Chapter Notes

lota plot things stuffed into this chapter. Probably there are holes. Forgive me, it's tricky to avoid when you can't go back and change things from the beginning, whoops.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 6: Can't Go Home Again

Chapter 1: Destroyer of Universes

How they all managed to get back to the lab in Boston in one piece Andrew didn’t think he would ever know. All he remembered later was that Wymack had pressed the car keys into his hands and told him to get them all home, and a few hours later they were pulling into the Harvard parking lot, Renee stumbling tiredly from the back seat. Andrew didn’t miss the way Kevin hung back as he emerged from the other car, carefully keeping Wymack and Renee in between them as they headed inside.

By the time they were back in the safety of the lab, Andrew was over it. He drew himself to an abrupt stop and turned on Kevin.

“You should not have kept that from me,” he said, perfectly still and even, all the fury and fear from earlier brutally cut from his tone. Forming complete thoughts was a struggle, let alone sentences, his brain overblown with panic, but he had no choice. Kevin took a small step back, but Renee at least seemed to sense and trust Andrew’s change in tone, and excused herself gently.

The bruising around Kevin’s neck would be ugly, but it wouldn’t linger. After all, even in the heat of the moment, Andrew had never been trying to kill him. Kevin should have know that. Kevin should have realized that if Andrew hadn’t meant for him to live, he wouldn’t have. Kevin opened his mouth to speak, but Andrew cut him off.

“I cannot protect you if I don’t understand the full picture. But more importantly, you should not have kept that from Neil,” Andrew continued. “I’m assuming you never told him.” Kevin grimaced but he didn’t deny it.

“Tell Neil what?” Wymack asked, frowning between them. He hadn’t gotten any answers out of Kevin on the long drive back, then. Andrew had managed to relay that Neil had been abducted, but beyond that had offered no details, not that he really had any.

But if they were going to get Neil back, they needed to get down to business. Andrew snatched the
bottle of whiskey and plastic cups he’d stashed in a cabinet and jerked his head silently toward the beat up couch, and the little seating area that had accumulated around it.

He took the couch for himself, stretching out for a minute just to be irritating but instantly feeling too exposed and tucking his legs up instead, his chin resting on his knees. He glared at Kevin, collapsed into a gross chair that Neil and Nicky had rescued from the sidewalk, then poured him a drink. The plastic cups were stupid but necessary; Andrew could accept the need for liquid courage at a time like this, but if he handed Kevin the bottle he was going to be too far gone to be of any help fast.

“Start at the beginning,” Andrew instructed.

Kevin took a breath, downed half the drink, breathed again. Clenched his hands around his knees.

“Neil’s real name is Nathaniel Wesninski,” Kevin said, and winced at the expression at Wymack’s face. Andrew was pretty sure his own face had remained blank, but it was still a small shock even with what he knew about Neil. Wesninski as in-?


Wymack scrubbed a hand across his face and snatched the whiskey for himself, pouring a cup but then just sitting with it between his hands. Andrew had known bits and pieces about who Neil was, so it wasn’t entirely surprising to find that he was the son of an infamous gangster, especially one connected to the Moriyamas. Wymack hadn’t known nearly as many details. He probably suspected Neil had once had gang affiliations. He had almost definitely not expected this.

“That explains more than I would like it to,” Wymack said tiredly.

Andrew thought about ice-blue eyes he had only seen once. He thought about packets of brown hair dye, and pictures he had seen of the famed Butcher of Baltimore, and everything did make a bit more sense. He wondered if Neil’s hair was the same ruddy color underneath.

“Oh we are not nearly at the good part,” Andrew said, shaking himself out of his own distraction, eyes firmly on Kevin. “Come on, Day. There has to be a lot more to go.”

Kevin swallowed and nodded.

The story went like this: Nathan Wesninski had not been the best father, and anyway he had decided, despite his family’s historical servitude to the Moriyamas, that his empire would not be passed down by blood. In a compromise, Nathaniel – not yet Neil – was given to the Moriyama branch family as a tribute when he was eight years old. He was already a promising student, and would be given four years of private tutoring, after which he would apply for a spot at Evermore Academy. If he passed, he would have continued to be educated by Tetsuji, and any subsequent intellectual property he created would have belonged to the Moriyamas, with any profits being split between the two families.

“And if he’d failed?” Wymack asked, when Kevin paused there.

“Then he would have been killed,” Kevin said. Of course.

“So he passed?” Wymack guessed, but Andrew had already figured out this part of the puzzle. It explained a few of the odd holes in Neil’s story, especially the discrepancies in the dates of the articles tucked in his binder.

“He didn’t take the test at all,” Andrew supplied. Kevin shot him a surprised look, which Andrew
just rolled his eyes at. He was a goddamn FBI agent, he could put a few pieces together, after all.

“Right,” Kevin said. “He and his mother Mary disappeared the night before the test. I guess she wasn’t willing to risk his failure. He was twelve at the time. I hadn’t seen him since then before he showed up in St. Claire’s five months ago.”

There was an awful lot to be said about those fifteen years, most notably how Neil had managed to worm his way back into Kevin’s life, seemingly with nothing but a good set of fake papers and sheer determination to keep Kevin from Riko. But then, Andrew could relate to that. And in any case, it wasn’t the important part of the story right now.

“I think you skipped a bit there, Day,” Andrew said. His tone was casual but he could still feel the tension buzzing in every part of his body. “Tell Chief the good part.”

It took Kevin even longer to gather himself this time. Finally Andrew huffed and went to stand in front of him.

“Kevin. We don’t have time for you to panic right now. However it happened is how it happened. I don’t care. They’re not going to get to you. What matters now is that the Chief and I know the story so we can start figuring out how to get Neil back.”

Kevin nodded silently, and Andrew went back to the couch, though he settled closer to Kevin this time, seated on the edge with his elbows on his thighs. “Talk.”

“The portal that Jones tried to use at Reiden Lake, the Master invented it around the time that Neil arrived at Evermore. We were forbidden from playing with it, of course. I don’t think he and mom had even decided if it was safe to try and cross through it. They worried it would destabilize their molecular structures. But Riko wouldn’t listen to caution. He thought if he went to the other universe and brought something back, his father might notice him; he was obsessed by the idea.”

Of course. Riko had been trying to get into Kengo’s good graces his whole life, it was obvious. But second sons were second sons. Andrew suspected it was why Riko was so adamant about being number one compared to Kevin – his whole life had been defined by his second place birth. Andrew shifted in his seat. Across in the chair, Kevin looked lost in his memory.

“So one night we started up the portal and went through. I don’t really know what Riko planned on taking. Something we would prove was from over there, maybe. A newspaper or something. But then-“ Kevin paused, stared up at the ceiling, whether seeking for forgiveness or waiting for damnation, Andrew wasn’t sure. “Neil followed us through,” Kevin finished.

Wymack swore. Kevin finished his drink in one dismal swallow.

“He was just this bright little kid. He was curious. It was January. He wanted to go outside.” Andrew saw where this was going. He glanced sideways at Wymack, but Wymack hadn’t seen what Andrew had seen. He didn’t know what was coming, so he hadn’t put it together yet.

“There was a pond in the park behind the school,” Kevin was almost whispering. “It had been so cold at home it had been frozen solid for weeks. I guess it hadn’t been quite as cold in the other universe. He – he fell through the ice. Cracked his head on the way down-“ Kevin’s voice was barely audible “-drowned.”

The rest of the story was painfully obvious – Wymack had a look of horrified understanding on his face – but Andrew needed to hear it anyway.

“We couldn’t let the Master find out. We went back inside and found the other Nathaniel’s room.
Brought him to the lab, pushed him through the portal before he could figure out what was going on. Told him it was a prank.”

Andrew remembered Neil’s words, whispered in a voice rough from sleep and shouting as he told Andrew about his nightmare. *Kevin and Riko don’t usually push me into a black hole in Evermore labs.*

*My mind doesn’t need to invent terrible things* Andrew had told him in return, a dismissal and admittance all at once. But it turned out the dream hadn’t been an invention after all. It had been a memory.

“And he never figured out what happened?” Wymack asked incredulously. Kevin was shaking from head to foot, but he managed a small shrug.

“I think there were small differences, but he was eight, he had only been living at Evermore a few months, and no one ever told him about the other universe. What would you believe if you were a kid in a position like that – they you’d just forgotten there wasn’t a bathroom on the third floor, or that you’d somehow been kidnapped and dropped into an alternate reality?”

Wymack grumbled, but it was a decent point.

“And…after a while,” Kevin continued quietly, “we just stopped thinking about it. They were so similar. Practically the same person, really, and we hadn’t even known him that well yet anyway. It was easy to forget that he wasn’t the same kid who had originally come to us. He was just Nathaniel. That was all, for four years. And then when I saw him again, he was Neil.”

“You still let an eight year old boy die, Kevin,” Andrew said bluntly. Kevin cringed, hands tightening involuntarily around his plastic cup.

“I know that,” he bit out in a fierce whisper, not meeting Andrew’s or Wymack’s eyes.

There was silence between the three of them for a long moment. Then Wymack looked between them and said seriously, “As a senior agent for the Bureau, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but we can’t focus on that right now.” Kevin looked up at him, eyes wide. Andrew turned his head with badly concealed intent. “So Neil’s from the other side, but he’s also the Butcher’s son over there.”

*I keep hoping that over there, I don’t even have the same name.*

Andrew hadn’t fully understood what Neil had meant until now.

At than moment Renee walked back into the room, tucking her phone away in her pocket.

“Nicky just called, he’s been going over CCTV footage with Matt,” she said. “Cameras spotted Lola and Romero Malcom near the Brayson hotel hours before the event.”

“The Malcoms are in prison,” Wymack said with a frown, then groaned, muttering something unintelligible but probably quite relatable into his cup. “Our Malcoms, anyway.”

“Yes, that’s what I was thinking, too,” Renee said.

Neil had been taken by the Malcom siblings. The Other Malcom siblings. Which meant he had been taken by his real father - The Other Butcher. The other universe.

“Riko,” was all Andrew said, but it was all that was needed. Riko had a complicated set of plays in motion, but all of them came back to this: Riko wanted power, and the Foxes were the ones keeping
him from it. Kevin was their main asset, but Riko couldn’t get to Kevin with Andrew and Neil in the way. He’d already tried to get Andrew onto his team, and nearly killed him for refusing. It seemed he’d figured out he would have no better luck with Kevin’s other protector, and instead turned him over to perhaps the only force capable of destroying Neil Josten: his father.

They filled Renee in when she returned, but then they were stuck. What to do? None of them, Kevin included, knew how to safely cross over to the other side. They’d already ruled out a portal like Jones – too risky, too much energy required, and too difficult to defend if hostile forces came around. They didn’t know how Neil had been brought over, but if Riko had engineered a portal of his own it was no doubt already destroyed. They ordered in food and coffee and Kevin fussed with equation after equation, flipping through notes of his mother’s he’d brought back from Reiden Lake with fervent energy, but to no avail.

“And no one ever figured it out?” Renee asked after a while. She didn’t direct the question at Kevin, but she didn’t have to.

“I don’t think so,” Kevin said. Then he frowned. “At least, no one on this side.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Andrew demanded. Kevin seemed to have frozen in place, staring at no place in particular in the lab, frowning like he had forgotten something important. Andrew went over and shook him by the shoulders. “Kevin.”

“Eight years…the drugs in St. Claire’s…they fucked up my memory a bit,” Kevin admitted. “Sometimes I’m not sure whether the shit I remember from Evermore was real or just a really strange nightmare.”

Andrew wasn’t sure where Kevin was going with this, but he had a bad feeling they needed to find out.

“Let’s assume it’s all real,” Andrew told him. “What did you just remember?”

Kevin got up, walked to unused office area at the back of the lab, and began rifling through the drawers. He emptied four of them with increasing frustration before yanking another out entirely, throwing its contents haphazardly aside.

“Kevin,” Renee began cautiously, but stopped when Kevin gasped. There was a folded piece of paper taped to the underside of the drawer. Kevin unfolded it with shaking hands, staring down like he didn’t believe it was real. And well, Andrew supposed, until that moment, he hadn’t.

“I was eighteen when this showed up for me in the mail,” Kevin said, voice hollow. “To this day, I don’t know how he did it. There was a letter. I burned it years ago. He – he said he figured out what I’d done. He was the one to find the body and – there was a scar, apparently, that was missing.”

The hot iron scar. It was distinctive, and Neil had said it was from his father. Andrew had no proof, but he would have bet a lot that that particular mark had only existed on one Nathaniel Wesninski.

“He didn’t seem mad. He didn’t threaten me, or threaten to tell.”

“Who, Kevin?” Wymack asked. Kevin offered him a slightly wild half-smile.

“Me.”

Renee was the first one to fully catch on, and fully recover enough to say “You mean the you from the other side?”
Kevin nodded. “He wanted to warn me. I guess over there, the Master was more inclusive with ZFT, so that Kevin knew a lot more about it than I do. He had come across this in a ZFT file, and he sent it to me to warn me.”

“Warn you about what?”

Kevin held out the piece of paper. Andrew walked over and snatched it from his hands.

It was a photocopy of the page of an old book. Most of it seemed to be schematics for an indecipherable machine. There was almost no text except for a few letters and numbers pointing to various bits of the mechanisms, and strangely faded strings of letters all across it like a watermark; A, G, C, T.

None of that seemed important, though, in comparison to the drawing of the man. It was a portrait of a man’s face, head titled back as though looking skyward. It appeared sketched, probably pencil, the detail degraded after several rounds of photocopying. But there was no mistaking the smoke and fire pouring from the man’s mouth and eye sockets. Just as there was no mistaking the look and shape of Neil Josten.

“He told me he hid the body, so that everyone would think Nathaniel had just gone missing. He said if they found the other Nathaniel, they would figure out what had happened, like he had. This way, they wouldn’t know where to look for him. He told me I had to make sure Neil never went back. Because if he ever crossed back into that universe, it would bring about the end of the world.”

It was Renee’s idea to call Reynolds, and it turned out to be a good one. The moment Kevin held up the paper to the computer, her camera-perfect face had drawn into tight, serious lines.

“The schematics look like Tetsuji’s work,” she said. “Either his or the person he learned from. Whatever it is, though, it’s never been made at Evermore or Massive Dynamic. I personally oversaw the records overhaul when Riko hired me, and these labs have never built anything like that.”

She paused to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, perfect purple manicure flashing in the light. “That looks like Neil, doesn’t it?”

There was no denying it. Andrew didn’t understand how it was possible, but he would figure it out. He was an FBI agent. He was a Fox. He was the man who said he would keep Neil Josten safe for as long as he could, as long as it took them to bring Riko Moriyama crashing down.

They talked it over for a while, tried to hash out where the drawing could have come from, why and how it could look like Neil when it so obviously predated him. They talked about what Riko could want from Neil. They wondered if Neil had been taken by Riko’s men or Nathan’s.

They talked and talked but they were getting nowhere and Andrew knew it. He was getting impatient, the need to get Neil back was like a burn beneath his skin, hot and furious. He could feel Renee eyeing him, watching his fists open and close, his hands rub at his forearms, pressing the shapes of the knives into his skin.

“There’s no time to sit around trying to figure out why,” Andrew broke in when he couldn’t take it anymore. “Neil has been abducted into the other universe. Whether they are going to strap him into a doomsday machine or just let the Butcher slit his throat is irrelevant. We need to figure out how to get there and bring him back.”

“We don’t have a way to cross over,” Renee said.

The way Kevin had explained it, crossing between universes was…tricky. The good news was that
the law of balance of mass didn’t seem to apply to humans, for whatever reason. Technically anyone could do it if they had a portal, like the one they had seen Jones use, but those were dangerous, unstable, and strategically difficult to defend. They also had a tendency to destabilize your atomic structure if you used them too much.

Of course, Riko had always been a bit too reckless to worry about such things; he seemed to have perfected portal travel, as much as it could be done. It was how he traveled himself, and was likely also how he had arranged for Neil’s kidnapping. But the Foxes simply didn’t have the tech.

Andrew felt Kevin throwing him badly-hidden uneasy glances. Kevin had hinted that Andrew’s exposure to Cortexiphan might give him the ability to safely cross between universes without a portal, but this wasn’t an operation that could be accomplished by one person. Even Andrew. They would need something more.

“I might,” Reynolds said suddenly.

“Excuse me?” Andrew said.

“I think I have something that will help you,” Reynolds said, eyes scanning blankly in a way that told Andrew she was looking something up on her computer rather than looking into the video chat. She nodded a moment later in confirmation. “Yeah, I think this will work.”

Her eyes looked back at the camera, and she looked almost apologetic. “It won’t be easy,” she said. Andrew had been hearing that far too much recently. It was usually code for it might kill you, but that was irrelevant. Neil was over there, alone, taken by the only people who could really make him afraid, the people he had been running from nearly his whole life. They had him and every second they were doing god knows what and it was Andrew's fault. Andrew's fault for dragging Neil to Boston in the first place, forcing him out of his hermit hole in Shanghai and then making him stay.

“It never is,” Andrew told her. “Will it work?”

“Yes.”

Neil had already been gone for hours. Hours and all Andrew could think about was the weight of him leaning fiercely back into that last kiss, so alive it hurt, and the selfish thought that he hadn't wanted it to be their last. If it would work, then that was all that mattered.

“Get here as soon as you can.”

Chapter End Notes

Up Next:

'Neil wasn’t stupid enough to think he’d get to breathe fresh air again before he died, but he couldn’t stop himself from glancing longingly at the high little windows of the garage door at the black night outside, the dim glow of far-off street lights just peeking through. He wished, absurdly, he could see the moon. He wondered if it looked the same here.'
Chapter 2: Baltimore

It was a two hour, thirty minute drive from New York City to Baltimore. Neil knew that because he knew the major highway routes between most major cities on the eastern seaboard, and because he’d spent four years of his childhood in New York, at Evermore. Even when his father had knowingly sent him away, up into a less crushing circle of Hell, Neil was always aware of how fast the devil could show back up if he wanted to.

Two and a half hours. That was how long his car ride with his father’s people should have been. In truth, Neil quickly lost track of time in the haze of pain and fear and sweat. Maybe the police lights Jackson turned on when he got annoyed with traffic got them there faster. Maybe they were taking a circuitous route, drawing out the time to try cut their answers out of Neil.

He’d told himself he wouldn’t talk. He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t. Not out of pain or fear, not out of desperation. Certainly not out of self-preservation. He wasn’t sure he had any of that left to spare. He’d used it up running from the Butcher of Baltimore for fifteen years. In the end, he’d been caught just the same. But he wouldn’t answer their questions.

Everything in his head was swimming.

“I’m going to ask you again, Junior,” Lola’s voice was dangerously low. “How did Minyard activate his powers?”

Neil bit down on his cheeks until he tasted blood. He had already broken his promise to Andrew – he had left Kevin, left before Andrew could get his answers, before they could take Riko down. He wouldn’t let Lola make him add to that betrayal.

He lost track of the exact questions they asked him – bits and snatches about Andrew’s abilities, Kevin’s inventions, Renee’s knowledge of the underground fight scene. Neil pleaded ignorance, fed them half-truths he prayed sounded real enough to protect his team, closed his mouth or just screamed in agony when there was nothing safe left to say.

Lola hardly seemed to care what his answers were. Her knife found his flesh either way, cut lines
across his palms, down his fingers, made a hatch-work of the tender skin of his arms. At some point she reached around the seat and plucked the contacts from his streaming eyes.

“How did they switch you?”

It was the first question that broke through the haze, because it made even less sense than the rest. Neil should have known better than to ask questions, but he couldn’t help himself. He was hanging onto control by a bloody thread.

“What are you talking about?” he rasped.

There was silence in the car, and then Romero burst out laughing. The others followed. It was surreal, like something out of his worst nightmares. Neil, bound and dripping blood onto the upholstery, and his father’s men like creatures dragged straight from hell just for him, the sounds of their demented laughter shattering against the confines of the car, the shrapnel of it burying into Neil’s body, reducing him to rubble.

“What the fuck are you laughing at?!” Neil was nearly screaming, snarling and thrashing against his restraints. Lola was back on him in an instant, one hand around his throat, her knife pressed to the skin of his cheek, hard enough to draw a paper thin line just beside his eye.

“Behave, Nathaniel,” Jackson said, still with a horror show grin tugging at his mouth. In the low light of the highway, it looked a little like his face was melting. He glanced at Neil sidelong from the driver’s seat and let out a low whistle. When he spoke, his voice was still edged with awful laughter.

“You really didn’t know, did you?”

“They didn’t tell you you didn’t belong, Junior?” Lola whispered into his ear. “Why should they have? What’s one scarred eight year old brat for another, hm? Bet mommy dearest didn’t even notice the difference. They told us she ran away with you, in your world. Bet you thought that meant she loved you, huh? But she never even noticed she was caring for the wrong son. God she was a stupid cunt in both universes.”

Neil was thrashing against the cuffs again before he could stop himself, the knife at his cheek forgotten until it was cutting so deep he could taste steel. He pulled himself off of the blade, but then there was a click beside his head, and a bright orange light sprung up in the corner of his vision. The cigarette lighter from the dashboard of the car was clutched in Lola’s left hand, just beside his cheek.

“I think you were told to behave, brat,” she said, the purr of her voice a contrast to the sharp words. The knife on his other cheek pressed closer again. There was nowhere for him to go.

“Fuck you, bitch.”

The lighter disappeared behind him. A second later it came down just below his elbow, and Neil’s whole body spasmed with the revolting pain of it.

“Oh no, Junior,” Lola laughed. The lighter moved to his other elbow.

“You don’t to do that.” Left wrist. “You don’t get to provoke me into killing you.” Right wrist. There were tears streaming down his face, stinging in the open wounds on his cheek. He thought he might be screaming. He wasn’t sure.

“I’m not going to kill you brat.” The lighter dragged across his knuckles. His fingers didn’t feel real,
there was only the hot bright pain. His stomach was rolling with the smell of burning flesh.

And then the heat was by his face again, less a threat than a promise this time. “Now, let’s try this again, shall we? Start back from the top? How did Minyard activate his abilities?”

“Fuck you.”

The lighter made contact, the heat searing right through to his cheekbone, and Neil figured it out – it was definitely him screaming.

“I’m not gonna kill you, Junior,” Lola whispered. “I’m going to let your father do it. And by the time he’s done, you’ll wish it had been me.”

It took two hours, thirty minutes to get from New York to Baltimore by car, but Neil had no idea how long it had been by the time the car pulled onto a darkened suburban street. The house looked the same as the image engraved in Neil’s memories – the just-worn green siding, the white shutters, the tidy front lawn with the apple tree out front. Neil’s heart sank when he saw it, pieces of truth and lies beginning to slot into place. He’d seen pictures of Nathan Wesinski’s house in the papers and on the internet, in his years keeping track of him from on the run. It had matched up almost exactly with his memories, but he’d always wondered if he’d imagined the apple tree.

Then they were rolling into the garage, the door closing behind them, shutting out everything but the smell of gasoline, concrete, and blood. Neil wasn’t stupid enough to think he’d get to breathe fresh air again before he died, but he couldn’t stop himself from glancing longingly at the high little windows of the garage door at the black night outside, the dim glow of far-off street lights just peeking through. He wished, absurdly, he could see the moon. He wondered if it looked the same here.

They hadn’t blindfolded him, and Neil was just trying to figure out if there was a way he could fight back when they left him alone in the car. Were they going somewhere else? Were they going to wait there for his father to show up? Lola’s face was smug through the tinted glass as she pressed a small button on something in her hand. A sweet smell hit Neil’s nose, and then everything went dark.

Waking up on the floor of the basement didn’t feel like panic. It wasn’t so much the world ending as the sinking felling of reality righting itself – Neil had been given a reprieve from fate, for a while. For nearly twenty years he’d been away from this house. For five months with the Foxes he’d had a place to belong, and Neil had wanted it so badly he had almost allowed himself to forget what was after him, the destiny that was his birthright always just a few steps behind.

“You’ve got a stubborn streak, I’ll give you that, brat. And you really do look just like your father.”

The words were a knife through the chest, one of the few places he wasn’t already bleeding, but they were also the flick of a switch. His mother’s voice, grim and determined as she dyed his hair and poked contacts into his watering eyes; as she stitched his wounds with dental floss and hauled him to his feet to keep running; the last words she’d said to him as she sat, bleeding out in the seat of the last of a string of nearly broken-down cars on the California cost.

Einai kalytero anthropo apo ton patera toy.

He thought of the same words spilling from Andrew’s mouth in one messy gasp, words that had hauled him inexplicably back from the dead, eyes seeing nothing but hands locked on Neil like he could hold Andrew in place, like one or both of the would disappear if he didn’t.
Neil thought of his family of Foxes, the way they banded around each other, made up for each other’s scars and flaws. He thought of dinners and drinks with Nicky, Exy with Matt and Dan, arguments on scientific philosophy with Kevin when neither of them could sleep.

He thought of Andrew’s hands holding him safe against the side of a building, hundreds of feet about the Manhattan streets, pressing down the length of his arms like he wanted to memorize the feel of the muscle and bone underneath, his touch heavy but never demanding. He thought of it’s still yes breathed into the tiny space between their faces, the way Andrew had crossed that space like it was an ocean, a universe – and maybe it was, in a way – just to kiss him.

Be a better man than your father.

“Einai kalytero anthropo apo ton patera toy.” Neil whispered slowly to himself, and made a decision.

He was not going to die here.

They hadn’t put the cuffs back on, Neil noticed. He wasn’t really surprised. Lola and Romero both had guns trained on him, Jackson probably upstairs getting- Neil forced himself to his feet.

There was an industrial sink against the far wall. Neil stumbled to his feet and began rinsing out the cuts and burns on his arms an face. He had to stop midway through to retch, the pain blinding and nauseating, but he kept at it. His whole body was shaking with the effort by the time he was done.

“Making yourself presentable? You know you’re going to be dead before infection can set it.”

“Mind your own business,” Neil managed, leaning heavily against the sink as the world blotted out at the edges. He took in the room properly - he hadn’t been in the Butcher’s basement in twenty years, and despite a penchant for escape routes he didn’t trust himself to navigate it by memory.

There were two exits. One at the back of the room was where they’d brought him in, a tunnel for dumping bodies that led up to the garage. The other, at the top of the stairs, led to the rest of the house. Before Neil could calculate a way to get to it without being shot, that door creaked open to reveal a too-familiar face, one that featured in Neil’s mirror and all his worst nightmares.

The Butcher had arrived.

Nathan Wesninski was a simple man, or so he liked to say. Maybe he wasn’t lying. His house, his network, and his parole were all testament to his success, and he had built that success on the back of two basic principles: a man is only as loyal as he has to lose, and if he breaks that loyalty, kill him. It was a system that had made him a ruthless king in Baltimore as well as, as Neil had only come to find out later, such an effective enforcer for Kengo Moriyama.

That simplicity was reflected in his appearance; a grim and severe workman-like countenance that hadn’t faded with age or imprisonment. He was barefoot, dressed in a denim button down and plain pants, the cuffs of each rolled up. His ruddy hair was combed back and streaked with grey, but the length of it and his short beard did little to disguise the similarity to Neil’s own features. The only unfamiliar part was the high-tech cuff on his ear, similar to the ones he’d seen on Jackson and the Malcolms.

Neil watched his father descend the stairs, frozen in place. Plank and Nathan’s bodyguard DiMaccio were right behind him. Neil tried to focus on the edge of the sink digging into his back, the sharp cold of the metal, but his body was a mess of fear and pain he could hardly make sense of when those cold, familiar blue eyes turned on him.
“Nathaniel.” His father’s grin was a terrible thing, possessive and cruel. “I knew you’d be returned to me eventually.” He paused at the landing halfway down the stairs. “Come here, boy.”

It was like he couldn’t help it, the old command took over Neil’s body before he could think to stop it, and he walked to the foot of the stairs.

“Look at your father when he’s speaking to you, Junior.” Nathan’s voice was a whip crack, and Neil’s head jerked up, his gaze locked on those terrible eyes, paler with age but no less cruel for it. “Don’t you have anything to say to me?”

Neil’s throat was stuck together with fear and blood. His father was still walking toward him.

“Hello.” It was barely more than a whisper. Then his father’s fist met the side of his face, right over the burns, and Neil crumpled to his knees, screaming.

“Stand.”

It was that or die here and now. Neil stood.

“What a delightful family reunion,” Nathan sneered. “You owe me an awful lot for the years you’ve been gone, you know that, boy?”

Neil tried to hold his gaze, knew what the punishment would be if he failed, but his eyes kept drifting to the knife in DiMaccio’s hands – a cleaver, bright and shiny, sharp as the last day Nathan had wielded it, no doubt.

“Why?” he managed.

“You cost me a good deal of money and trust when you went missing. You weren’t to officially belong to the Moriyamas until you were old enough to enroll in school, but the contracts were already drawn up. You were going to make us a lot of money, Junior. Money that I was expected to repay.”

The knife was in Nathan’s hand now, swinging in taunting circles, close enough that Neil could feel the air parting around the blade. There was nowhere else to go. There was nothing left to do but die. That, or try to run one last time.

*Be a better man than your father* a voice whispered in his ear. He wasn’t sure it was his mother’s.

Neil ran.

He didn’t get far. He felt the knife slice against his shoulder blade, saw guns fly to the ready around the room as he sprinted for the door, and then there a deep, hot pain in his calf and he was on the ground, spitting dirt form his mouth and fighting to stay conscious the incredible pain shot through his ruined palms where he’d caught himself. He spared half a second to assess the blade buried in his leg – not deep enough for pulling it out to do worse damage than leaving it in, he didn’t think. He yanked it out with a shout and threw almost-blindly at whatever body shape was closest. An enraged curse said it had been Lola.

And still he wasn’t fast enough. There were iron hands around his ankles, dragging him back across the floor, scraping his chin and the points of his hipbones raw on the concrete, and then he was being slammed bodily against the stairs, the twisted face of his father filling his vision entirely.

“Well for that, I’m not going to kill you quickly,” he said with a snarl, the knife pressed against the skin of Neil’s throat.
“Please,” Neil gasped. “Please you don’t have to – just send me back. I won’t cause you any trouble. Please, just send me back.”

“I can’t do that, Junior,” Nathan said. “You’re causing too much trouble for the boss in that godforsaken place. He told me where to find you, and I was only too happy to oblige.”

“Please,” the word was a ragged, whispered sob. Neil fought the urge to try and lift the knife from his own throat—he knew he would only lose his fingers for the trouble. “Please just send me back.”

“Go get the rest of the knives, Lola,” Nathan instructed, eyes never leaving Neil’s. “and the blowtorch.” Neil whimpered uselessly, trapped beneath Nathan’s weight, his hands bloody dead weights at his sides.

“No,” he whispered. Tears stung horribly in the burns on his face, and the stairs felt like they were breaking his spine. He took the deepest breath he could around the knife at his throat. Tried again. “No.”

“What’s that, Junior?” His father grinned. “Still got a spine after all? Guess I’ll have to cut that out of you too. But first I think your fingers…then maybe your legs?”

“Fuck you.”

The knife opened a line of red across Neil’s throat, and for a horrible second Neil fought the urge to press up into it, to end it right now, before it could get any worse. His ruined hands gripped the stairs to keep himself down, and Nathan laughed, a sound that had been following Neil in his nightmares for twenty years.

Lola made her way up the stairs, closed the door behind her. There was the sound of a single gunshot. A loud thump. Then the door opened again, and all hell broke loose.

Gunfire rained into the room from above as men swarmed the stairs. Nathan’s weight was off of Neil in a second and Neil rolled himself into a ball. He heard the sounds of bodies falling, didn’t look up until the gunfire was quiet. When he risked a glance, his father was at the center of a circle of guns, his face a mask of snarling fury, his men dead all around him.

The sound of leather soled shoes clicked on the wooden stairs, and Neil looked up into the face of Stuart Hatford.

“Nathaniel?” His voice was dry and startled. He looked old. That was all Neil had room to think. He managed a weak nod. Stuart was frowning at him, and then he shook his head. “Bloody little king, always with the triple play.”

Neil’s mind was still failing to make sense of that as Stuart stepped past him and brought his won gun up, aiming squarely at Nathan Wesninski’s head.

“Change of plans, men,” he said, voice clipped and calm. “It seems we won’t need my dear brother-in-law here as a hostage after all.”


“Are not as loyal as you imagine them to be,” Stuart said simply. “That’s the thing about crime families, Nathan. The crime usually comes before the family.” He spared Neil a single glance over his shoulder. “Don’t look, kid” he offered. And then he lowered his gun and shot once, twice, directly through the heart. The Butcher of Baltimore let out a single, strangled gasp before collapsing, dead.
It was like a dream. Neil didn’t understand what was going on. Had Nathan really just died? What on earth was Stuart doing here? His uncle was walking toward him now, crouching in front of him.

“Nathaniel,” Stuart’s voice sounded so far away. Neil squinted like that would help him make it out, and groaned at the pain in his face. “the police will be here soon. I don’t know who will come for you, but I have a feeling tonight’s events involved more sides being played than I was aware of. I’m not sure how you fit into it, but I think you’re going to be all right. Just—” Stuart laid a brief hand on Neil’s shoulder, than stood. “It’s fucking good to see you again, Nathaniel.”

A second later he was up the stairs and gone, and Neil was left where he lay, staring at the growing pools of blood spreading from Nathan Wesninski’s body, and the bodies of his men. These monsters that had haunted Neil across universes, dreams, decades. Gone. Dead. His father was dead.

“My father is dead,” Neil whispered hoarsely. He gripped the edge of the stairs and focused on the dizzying pain. “My father is dead.”

*Be a better man than your father.*

Neil had never been entirely sure what that was supposed to mean to him, but now his father was dead, and it meant only one thing. Survive.

Neil nearly collapsed the moment he stood as white heat shot through his calf, but he hauled himself down the steps, limping, eyes streaming from the pain, uncaring of the ragged sound of his own gasps in the graveyard of the basement. He almost didn’t make it past Nathan’s corpse, afraid of a familiar hand around his ankle, but he forced himself not to give it a wider berth than necessary. He didn’t stumble. If he fell he wouldn’t be able to crawl, wouldn’t be able to get up, so he didn’t stumble. He limped all the way to the door, down the tunnel to the garage, and out into the streets of Baltimore, where the steady sound of sirens filled the air.

“Hey! We got a survivor!” A voice shouted across the lawn. “Hey you, keep your hands where I can see them!”

Neil crashed to his knees, keeping his hands by his head and away from the ground. An officer was by his side in a minute, hauling him to his feet as Neil retched into the grass, shaking all over. “Hey, are you all right? Hey, where’s your Show-Me?”

When Neil just blinked at her, unable to figure out the question, she elaborated “you got any ID on you?” Neil shook his head – Romero had stripped everything else out of his pockets in the car. “What’s your name?”

“Nei- Nathaniel,” Neil gasped between convulsions he could no longer identify as retches, laughter, or sobs. Maybe it was all three. “Nathaniel Wesninski.”

The officer’s grip tightened on his arm.

“Cap!” the officer called across the yard. “Doe! Get over here, Sec’s gonna want to talk to this one!”

Neil wasn’t processing words very well anymore, so he tried to focus on the officer’s badge, to figure out if she was BPD or FBI. If it was the former, Neil was in trouble – Nathan had had a lot of them on his payroll. Instead, he found an unfamiliar symbol, a gold badge in the shape of an animal head, with a bold, black ‘F’ at the center.

Someone – the person the officer had called over, Doe, had it been? – stopped in front of them, and Neil fought to lift his head and look him over on instinct, checking for potential threats as always. He was short, shorter than Neil, even in heavy black boots, but his hands looked strong and brutal. He
was wearing the same odd badge as the officer holding Neil, but it was his face that made Neil catch his breath.

“Andrew.” It was a face Neil knew as well as his own, by now. Giddy relief washed over him, nauseous and overwhelming, blocking out all sense and reason. Andrew had found him. The Foxes had found him. It was going to be okay. They were going to get out of here. “Andrew, thank God.”

Andrew stiffened, his hands balled into fists, his blank face pulled into a frown that verged on a snarl.

“Who the fuck are you?” Andrew demanded.

And that was when Neil finally noticed the small earing, and the tiny scar on his cheek that Neil didn’t remember, and that the hair peaking out from under his hat was black rather than blond, and realized his mistake.

“Oh,” he said weakly. “Oh, no.”

And with that, he finally lost his battle with consciousness, and slipped into the dark.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, oh yes.

Up Next:

'Andrew met Kevin’s tense, frightened gaze with determined steadiness.

“We will get Neil, and we will all come back,” he said firmly. “I will not let them have either of you, do you understand?” It took a minute, but eventually Kevin let out a small, shuddering breath and nodded.'
Chapter 3: Over There

Ultimately, Reynolds didn’t come to Boston. Instead, she would meet them in Baltimore, where Andrew and Wymack agreed Neil had probably been taken. But not until the morning. Wymack had put his foot down, and while Andrew was willing to keep going as long as it took to get Neil back, he was already run ragged from the last 48 hours. There was no telling what would be waiting for them on this rescue mission, and Wymack was refusing to just ‘send them over there to get themselves killed,’ as he put it.

Silent consensus found the lot of them at the house in Cambridge for the night. Despite the minimal drinking, Andrew was surprised he didn’t have to help Kevin up the stairs. They’d decided that the team to cross over would be Andrew, Renee, and Kevin – they needed his tech expertise in case something went wrong – and Kevin had agreed but was not taking it well.

It wasn’t like Andrew was particularly surprised. Riko was Kevin’s villain, the brother-monster that still haunted his dreams. The last time Kevin had been to the other side, a young boy had died. And now they were asking him to go back, possibly into a trap set by Riko himself. Somewhere under the annoyance at putting up with Kevin’s panicked chatter and trembling, Andrew was vaguely impressed that he was still standing at all.

“You can, uh, have your old room. If you want,” Kevin said to Andrew as they stood in the front hall, gesturing to the top of the stairs.

“How do you know which one was mine?”

“Really?” Kevin snorted. “The smallest one with the overpriced lock on the door and the best view of the street?” He rubbed a hand at his cheek. “It’s, um, Neil picked it, too. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

Of course Neil had chosen Andrew’s room. The bastard apparently wouldn’t be content until he’d contaminated every aspect of Andrew’s life. Well, Andrew hadn’t let good sense come between him and a good night’s sleep before, and there was no point in starting now.

“I picked it because it’s closest to the kitchen,” he told Kevin, and hauled himself up the stairs. Andrew dropped onto the familiar bed without taking off more than his boots – he needed the weight of his knives against his arms tonight. He pulled the old blanket up over his body and tried to ignore the way the sheets smelled a little like Neil’s soap, a little like his sweat. He dug his spine into the wall and pretended the scent of Neil in his – not his, this – bed wasn’t equal parts unnerving and comforting, strange and right, until the weight of exhaustion finally pulled him into a fitful sleep.
Andrew drove them to Baltimore the next morning. The ride was silent, Kevin white-knuckled in the passenger seat and Renee calmly texting Reynolds from the back. They met Reynolds in an abandoned warehouse not far from the overpriced Victorian home that sat empty in its Baltimore suburb beside a bit of the Gwynns Falls, which Andrew thought was a stupid name for a river. They would make their cross from here.

“I know that you all know I’m a genius who could probably make this ancient piece of junk work on the moon if you needed me to,” Reynolds glanced up from where she was unpacking the heavy case she’d brought with her from Massive Dynamic. “But explain to me why we are setting up a priceless and touchy piece of scientific equipment in a dusty abandoned warehouse instead of, oh I don’t know, literally anywhere else? I know for a fact that there’s a decent FBI safehouse not far from here.”

“You shouldn’t know that,” Renee said mildly.

“Once we’re on the other side, even the FBI will probably consider us hostiles. And the Butcher operates in plain sight,” Andrew said. “At least, the Butcher in this universe did. Most of his kills were right in his basement.”

“I know I said our counterparts are really similar to us, but why are you assuming Wesninski will have the exact same base of operations?”

Andrew crossed his arms and debated how much to share – he didn’t like giving away Neil’s truths, especially ones given in confidence, when no one else had traded properly for them. But Neil’s life was on the line. If he wanted to be pissed at Andrew later for it, so be it. Once he was safe.

“Neil panicked the first time he came into the Lab at Harvard,” Andrew explained. “I asked him about it later, and he told me he doesn’t like basements.” Didn’t like had clearly been something of an understatement, although Andrew hadn’t pushed.

Reynolds raised a skeptical eyebrow. Clearly, this explanation was a bit thin for her tastes. Andrew didn’t budge, didn’t explain further. Neil, for all his appearances, didn’t frighten easily, Andrew had learned. Maybe it was stupidity, maybe something else, but if Neil was frightened by basements, then the Butcher of that universe had operated out of his, of that Andrew was certain.

“Just explain how this ancient piece of junk is going to get us over there,” Andrew said shortly. Renee and Kevin gathered around as Reynolds finished putting the device together.

Assembled, it looked like the middle column of some kind of spinning amusement park ride, with too many pipes, wires, and flashing lights to be entirely real. It looked like it had been put together in someone’s garage. Kevin said as much, actually, for once his arrogant, disparaging nature lining up exactly with Andrew’s thoughts.

“It’s a prototype,” Reynolds explained testily. “An amplifier. Or that’s what you’ll be using it as. Tetsuji designed it before he invented Cortexiphan, as a way of channeling the brain’s natural energy to make accessing the other universe possible. It didn’t really work, at least not well. But I’ve made a few modifications, some of my own tech and things that didn’t exist yet when this was made. The Cortexiphan in your system, Minyard, theoretically gives you the ability to safely move between universes. This should act as an amplifier for that power. You’ll be able to lead Kevin and Renee through to the other side.”

It didn’t seem like even Reynolds was quite clear on the mechanics – vibrational frequencies or something, Kevin had offered. It wouldn’t be like the buildings crossing over, which had had to be totally atomically dispersed in order to make the journey. If this worked, Andrew – and his team –
would literally meld from one universe to the next, seamlessly and, theoretically, without injury.

“How likely are we to all die from this?” Renee asked serenely. Reynolds glared, pointing a hot pink nail her way. It was the same color as the tips of Renee’s hair, currently.

“You are not allowed to die, Walker. You still owe me dinner,” she said sternly. Then she gave a small sigh. “Honestly, I don’t know. Getting over there should be fine, but it will take a lot out of Minyard. And assuming you rescue Josten, you’ll have an extra body to bring back with you.” She met Andrew’s eyes then, hands on her hips. “No offence, but no one has ever tried this before, and I have no fucking idea if you’ll be able to get everyone back.”

It wasn’t an instruction to leave anyone behind, not that Andrew would have taken instructions from her anyway, on anything beyond how the equipment operated. It was just honesty, and that much he could appreciate, even from Allison Reynolds.

“I’ve been told I’m tenacious,” Andrew said flatly, ignoring Neil’s voice in his head (I think I said ‘stubborn fucking asshole,’ actually) and left it at that.

It was almost two o’clock by the time they were ready to cross over. Andrew let Reynolds walk them through the last steps of running the device on last time, and then he, Kevin, and Renee were stepping up, putting their hands on the thin ring of aluminum that went around the top.

Andrew met Kevin’s tense, frightened gaze with determined steadiness.

“We will get Neil, and we will all come back,” he said firmly. “I will not let them have either of you, do you understand?” It took a minute, but eventually Kevin let out a small, shuddering breath and nodded.

Renee pressed a button, and the whole device began to hum, the lights growing brighter and brighter, and Andrew had had no idea what to do until suddenly he did.

It was like – like a sixth sense, maybe. Like knowing someone is outside your door even when they haven’t made a sound. Like diving to block a feigned goal before the striker has even moved. Like sensing an open stairwell in the dark. He couldn’t see the other universe, but he could feel it – a whole phantom reality, just out of sight.

It wasn’t a matter of travelling anywhere, Reynolds had explained. The universes existed on top of one another, practically speaking. Andrew could feel that to be true. He focused with everything he had on that feeling, on the faint glimmering vibrations of a world just out of reach.

“One three,” he gritted out. He’d closed his eyes, at some point, so he couldn’t tell if Renee or Kevin had nodded.

“One.” Andrew tightened his hold on the device. “Two.” He gathered as much of the glimmering to him as he could, feeling the places where it poured against the edges of their reality like a waterfall, like an ocean beyond invisible glass.

“Three.” He willed himself through the tide.

For a moment it really was like being under water, cool and freeing and pressing at all sides at once, and then they were gasping for air, falling to their knees in the dirt of the warehouse, and Renee was asking “did it work?”

Reynolds was gone, as were the boxes of equipment the device had come packaged in. But the real clue was the wave of dizzy exhaustion that dragged through Andrew’s body like mud. A car horn sounded in the distance, recognizable but undeniably off somehow.
“We made it.”

Renee was the first to gather her wits and peek out the small dirty windows to the street.

“That so similar,” she said quietly, almost awed. “Some of the buildings are different colors, I think, but…” Andrew peered out next to her. She was right. It was almost eerie, how alike the streets were.

“Don’t get complacent,” Andrew warned, mostly directing the comment back at Kevin. “We’re the enemy here, no matter how friendly the streets look. If we get in trouble, the FBI is more likely to lock us in a hole in the ground forever than help us, once they figure out where we’re from.”

“Well, we won’t let them figure it out then, will we?” Renee said, as if it was simple as that. But there was a steely look of determination on her face that said she was prepared to fight bloody for it, and Andrew was as glad as he ever got to see it.

There wasn’t anything more to say. Andrew nudged open the door with his gun, but where they weren’t met with an immediate volley of fire, he led the three of them carefully out into the street before tucking his weapon away. Renee followed suit behind him. Maybe FBI badges looked the same over here, maybe they didn’t. Andrew wasn’t interested in meeting any police long enough to find out.

It was nearing noon by the time they made their way across the small bridge separating the warehouse district from the private cul de sac where they thought the Butcher lived. Andrew and Renee had tuned their FBI jackets inside out and taken them off for now. Luckily, the May weather was warm enough to go without them.

They rounded the corner of the correct street and Andrew’s stomach sank like a stone. There was police tape across all the doors of the Wesninski residence, muddy tire tracks crisscrossing the perfect lawn. Something had happened here, something ugly, that was certain. And they were too late.

Kevin was staring at the house, dumbfounded and slightly panicked. If Andrew had been capable of feeling anything other that sheer determination in that moment, he might had felt similarly. As it was, all he felt was cold. That, and the slight warmth of Renee coming to stand just a few inches behind him, solid and steady, as steely as he was, and reassuring for it.

“It doesn’t mean he’s dead,” she said quietly, though they both knew how likely it was. “Come on, let’s take a closer look. Use those old breaking and entering skills, huh?”

They had crossed the universe to find this place. They wouldn’t give up so fast. They went.

There was blood all over the basement floor and walls, in smears and skids and spurts. Knives and guns, probably, from the looks of it. There was a large, smeared pool of blood at the foot of the stairs where someone had clearly bled out. It was too much to hope that it had been Nathan, maybe, but Andrew hoped grimly anyway.

Andrew took out a small digital camera – they’d had no guarantee their phones would work, but ordinary, non-data-powered tech seemed safe – and took instinctual snapshots of everything. He tried, for once, not to remember the sorts of injured these patterns were likely from. He tried not to imagine that any of them had been Neil’s. His insides were lava, were stone.

They spent less than an hour in the house before giving it up as a bad job. There was nothing else to find.

“Where next?” Kevin asked, looking between Andrew and Renee. He had hung nervously on the fringes of their investigation so far, offering an uncharacteristically small amount of input. Of course,
he wasn’t there for his expertise in blood spray patterns, and he wasn’t an agent. He was looking to them for direction. Andrew, shaken through with exhaustion and the scent of blood that was all too likely Neil’s, looked to Renee.

“We need the news, I think,” she said. “This doesn’t look like it was kept quiet, we should be able to find something if we look. Do you think they have internet cafes here?”

The last question was directed at Kevin, who shrugged. “We can look,” he said. There was nothing else to be found in the Butcher’s basement. They ventured back into the outside world.

They weren’t destined to get far. Gunfire echoed from the street. Every shot missed, and it took only a moment for Andrew to realize it was intentional. Their attackers weren’t aiming to kill – not yet anyway.

“Who are you?” a female voice shouted. A woman rounded the corner, bright strawberry curls glinting in the light. Andrew could just glimpse her from around the side of the house where he was mostly hidden. Her demeanor screamed “Fed,” but the badge on her breast pocket wasn’t anything Andrew recognized. A black “F” on some kind of gold animal head.

Possibly she was with the good guys, the police or whatever that meant over here. Andrew didn’t care. If they were caught, this woman would prevent them from rescuing Neil, and that was all that mattered. He fired from around the corner before stepping out. He kept his gun up, expecting to be immediately fired upon. What he didn’t expect was for the woman’s eyes to pop open in surprise, her pink lips forming a perfect ‘o,’ her gun drooping just slightly in her hands.

“Aaron?”

There wasn’t time to consider what that meant. There just wasn’t.

“Wrong,” Andrew said, and shot her neatly in the right arm.

The flurry of motion and shots after that was too fast to remember, even for Andrew. There was Renee, emerging from her hiding spot at the sound of Andrew’s voice. The sound of sporadic gunfire – two guns, besides the redhead clutching at her arm on the sidewalk, Andrew thought – and shouts in familiar voices. Renee’s voice, but why was Renee shouting? Renee didn’t shout.

Two figures rounded the corner just as Renee stepped up beside him, and he heard Renee’s breath catch minutely beside himself. Really, it was only weary years of exposure that kept Andrew’s own face neutral when a mirror of a face in a black skull cap rounded the corner, staring at him over the shining barrel of a government-issue gun.

It wasn’t Aaron, of course. That was clear because the multiverse didn’t make quite so little sense just yet, and no Aaron in any universe would have died his head black, or pierced his ear. Which meant this was –

This was him. Andrew Minyard, or whatever last name this universe had seen fit to stick him with. In the split second of time he had, Andrew squinted at the name tag below the odd badge. “Doe.”

Huh. Interesting.

The woman beside him was clearly Renee, although her hair was a nearly-black brown that must have been her natural color, and fell around her ears in an even shorter bob that he was used to. There was still that familiar silver cross around her neck, and she looked every inch as brutal as Andrew would have expected.

“We haven’t come to make trouble,” his Renee said, holding up one hand in a placating gesture
without dropping her gun. “Our friend was brought here, and he’s in trouble. We’re just trying to help him.”

On the ground, the red haired woman gasped. “The one with the sec-“

“Shut up, Kate,” Andrew cut her off without looking at her. He walked a little closer, also not lowering his gun. “They might look like us, but that doesn’t mean they’re worthy of our trust. Remember what you’ve been taught.”

Other Renee just sneered.

“They told us you might say something like that,” she explained, and fired.

Once the firefight had begun in earnest, it didn’t let up, sots pinging off nearby cars and buildings. Andrew felt a bullet graze his arm and whipped around, looking for Kevin. He found him crouched behind the open garage door.

“Run!” Andrew shouted, and then lead the way.

They couldn’t afford to let the other team get close. If they were anything like Andrew and Renee themselves, they would excel in close combat, and Andrew didn’t know what kind of unknown tech they might be carrying.

It was too quiet for a gunfight – but then, it always was. Nothing like the movies, his stupid brain had informed him the first few times. No swelling, harsh background music. No jump cuts between the bloody bits. Just your breath loud in your own ears. Just your feet carrying you as fast as you could, as far away as they could get you, as out of sight of your opponent as possible.

Andrew jammed a thumb against the walkie button at his shoulder, throwing up some kind of not-prayer that radio waves, at least, still worked over here.

“Walker, Day, locations.” He had lost sight of them sometime in the fight. He had lost sight of the other team as well, but that didn’t mean he was safe. A second later, the walkie crackled to life.

“Heading back toward the warehouse!” came Renee’s voice. “I’m losing ground and I don’t see Kevin!”

“Coming up on your right, Walker,” came Kevin’s voice over the channel, before Andrew could respond. So they were all still alive, for now.

“Warehouse, both of you,” Andrew instructed. They were in unfamiliar territory in more ways than one, and while the warehouse was the only real rendezvous point they had, they couldn’t just lead the other team right to the device.

The bridge was right in front of him when that unnaturally familiar face stepped into his path.

“No you don’t,” the man who wasn’t him said calmly, sun glinting off the gold badge on his chest. But he was frowning warily, like he wasn’t quite sure what to make of Andrew.

“Get out of my way,” Andrew snarled, skidding to a stop a few yards away and holding up his own weapon in turn. “We’re on a fucking rescue mission, but don’t think I won’t kill you.”

The man’s face twitched, some old wound howling open for a split second before closing back up like it had never been.
“You can’t rescue anyone,” the man said, as certain and honest as Andrew always was. But there was no time for argument.

“Speak for yourself,” Andrew told him, and fired.

Maybe his double was bleeding out on the Baltimore ground. Maybe Andrew had missed. Either way, a second later he was running across the narrow bridge, Renee and Kevin finally catching up. A knife whistled past Andrew’s ear and he barely flinched.

Andrew wasn’t sure what possessed him to do what he did next. All he knew was that taking out the bridge was the closest thing to a tactical advantage they would be able to get. That, and the supports were wooden. He reached inside of himself and ripped open every wound he could find, dug his fingers deep into the one labeled Neil Josten is dying and tore until it felt like he might choke, let himself be overcome like he had on that Manhattan balcony, except instead of fear this time it was rage.

“Run!” he yelled as loudly as he could to Kevin and Renee, and then he looked at the bridge and thought BURN.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next:

“Hello again, Nathaniel,” Tetsuji Moriyama said coolly, pulling a chair closer to the bed and sitting on the edge.


The man he had once known only as the Master smiled down at him, cold and arrogant.

“Neil,” the name dripped derision on his tongue. “Of course. It has been a while.”

“Nineteen years,” Neil agreed,
When Neil closed his eyes, the world was night-black except for the flashing police lights. When he opened them, the world was white.

_Hospital_, he realized quickly, blinking through a slight haze that was probably painkiller on top of the exhaustion.

He automatically moved to assessing injuries, at least what he could feel without moving his head too much. Ribs, definitely wrapped. It didn’t hurt (much) to breathe but that was probably something in the drip. Still, there was no pull of stitches no matter how deeply he inhaled so – cracked, maybe, but he probably hadn’t punctured any internal organs. There was a dull throb in his right calf when he flexed his feet, and his arms felt…weird. Tingly and just mildly painful, like the skin was a little too tight. There was a similar feeling in his face.

How much time had he lost? His brain scrabbled to come up with the reason he was here. It seemed just moments ago he had been with Andrew in Manhattan, hustling the patrons out of the Brayson Hotel before it went-

Into the other universe.

The last night’s events hit Neil like a car crash, a slow-motion memory of knives and fire and his father’s eyes. His father’s eyes as he had- as he had died.

Unbidden, Neil felt a wild laugh build in his chest, tumbling from his mouth before he could think to stop it. It was hard to breathe, for some reason. Was there something around his ribs? But he laughed anyway, until he was gasping, tears streaming down his face.

“What’s so funny, you?” a friendly female voice said. When Neil turned his head there was a nurse in pink scrubs. The cheerful stitching on her breast pocket said ‘Alice.’ He blinked at her. Funny? Oh, right.

“My father is dead,” he said, and it felt like being born all over again, excruciating and exuberant. The nurse’s eyebrows pinched together slightly, but then her eyes scanned the length of his body, finding either scars or bandages – Neil hadn’t had the strength to look himself just yet – and apparently drew the appropriate conclusion.

“Well I’m certainly glad you’re awake and feeling good,” she said.

“What time is it? How long have I been here?” Neil asked, suddenly worried how much time he had
lost to unconsciousness.

“Just about 10AM, sweetie,” Alice informed him. “They brought you in around midnight. I’m surprised you’re awake so soon. Actually, now that you’re up I should get the doctor to-“

“I will take Mr. Wesninski from here, ma’am,” a cool voice said from the doorway, just out of range of Neil’s vision. He saw Alice turn and frown more deeply.

“Mr. Secretary,” she said. “This patient has barely been here ten hours and has suffered a severe-“

“I was at the scene, yes,” the man cut her off. “But the doctors assure me he is quite stable, and I would like a moment to speak with him, if you don’t mind.” The man’s voice was cold, and left little room for argument. With a slightly worried glance in Neil’s direction, Alice nodded, and then left.

There was silence for a long moment after the door closed behind the nurse, but Neil knew the man hadn’t left.

“Would you mind coming over where I can see you?” Neil asked testily. “I’m having a few range of motion issues, as you might imagine.”

Precise footsteps made their way to the bed, along with another sound – a hard tap. A cane. Not the soft, rubber tread of a medical device, like Andrew’s had been, but something showier. Something more dangerous. Neil knew who he was about to meet even before the man’s face came into view.

“Hello again, Nathaniel,” Tetsuji Moriyama said coolly, pulling a chair closer to the bed and sitting on the edge.


The man he had once known only as the Master smiled down at him, cold and arrogant.

“Neil,” the name dripped derision on his tongue. “Of course. It has been a while.”

“Nineteen years,” Neil agreed, because once he had accepted that Lola wasn’t lying about him being from this universe, it hadn’t been that hard to put the pieces together.

It was the name on the wall on L.A. he didn’t remember writing. The weird changes in Evermore he’d assumed he’d imagined but always remembered, even from eight years old. That strange dream of Kevin and Riko. His mother going to stitch up a wound in his side and finding the hot iron scar – where did this come from? – she’d hissed. He did it, don’t you remember? She’d left him alone for a whole day after that. She said she’d been meeting with a contact, but he wondered, now, if she’d realized he wasn’t her real son. If she’d considered leaving him behind.

“Age suits you, Tetsuji,” Neil said, watching him carefully. The nurse had called him ‘Secretary,’ and Neil doubted it was in reference to an administrative assistant. He was someone important here.  “Did you know you’re dead where I come from?”

“You come from here,” Tetsuji said harshly. “And now that you are back you will have very important work to do. You eluded me for too long, Neil. Did you know I was already consulting with Foxes Division from Evermore at the time of your disappearances? Back when it was still a division of the FBI. You were one of my first cases. My first failures. I won’t have you slip away again.”

Neil finally took a moment to look down at himself as a distraction, and found fewer bandages than he was expecting. It seemed like medicine here was a little ahead of what he was used to. His ribs
were definitely wrapped, as was the knife wound on his calf. His hands still had bandages over the worst cuts and burns, but his arms were bare. When Neil looked at them, the patterns of lines and burns and scattered stitches turned his stomach. They would scar, badly. Distinctively.

“This universe hasn’t left the best impression on me, honestly,” Neil said, meeting Tetsuji’s eyes again. “What makes you think I have any interest in staying and working with you?”

Tetsuji leaned forward over his knees, his eyes intent on Neil’s face.

“You have a destiny here, Neil,” he said urgently. “There are more pieces at play than you can possibly imagine. Over there, you were just another grunt in the FBI machine, running after petty villains, cleaning up the messes they left behind. Here, you will change the world.” His hands were clutched tightly around the cane in his lap. “Here, Neil, you will fulfill a prophecy.”

Neil stared at him, mostly wondering if reaching for the call button would get his hands on the wrong end of that cane. In their already fragile state, he wasn’t willing to risk it just yet.

“You know in the other universe, Riko is the crazy one,” he said, a little disbelievingly. “I guess here it’s you. Hey, how come he hasn’t managed to kill you yet? Did he actually get Kevin here?”

Tetsuji’s frown went from black anger to confusion.

“Neither I nor Kevin have anything to do with Riko or his…family,” Tetsuji said with emphasis. “You will do well to remember that, Neil Josten, if you wish to remain in my good graces. And since I run the Department of Defense, and the entirety of Foxes Division, I can assure you, you most definitely do.”

Defense Secretary, Foxes Division. The pieces were slotting into place. But none of that had anything on the other information Tetsuji had hinted at.

Riko’s family, Tetsuji had said. As though it wasn’t his own.

“Riko’s a first son here,” Neil breathed. That was very, very bad. “Well, that does explain a lot. It also means you’re crazier than he is if you think I’m staying here.”

Now the black anger was back. It had been fifteen years since Neil had left Evermore, and the man he was facing was not the same Master he had left, but they were similar. And oh, Neil was starting to see just how.

“You mistake your degree of choice in the matter,” Tetsuji said. “I can have you arrested for a multitude of things, Neil Josten, from the use of false identification, lying to a federal officer, right up to tying you into your father’s crimes. Do not think I do not have the power to do so.”

Tetsuji leaned back in his chair, his cane swinging out to tap idly against Neil’s bed.

“But I do not wish to resort to such unsavory measures. I told you, I have important work for you here. Work that I believe only you are capable of doing. And I believe I have the proper incentive to convince you to stay and do it.”

Neil didn’t take his eyes off the end of the cane. It would hurt like hell to grab it and shove it at an eye socket, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t try if it got any closer.

“What’s that?”

“Your mother is alive here.”
If it weren’t for the fact that he was actually hooked up to a heart monitor, Neil would have sworn his heart stopped beating. As it was, his pulse definitely picked up, the persistent beep growing faster in his ears, and a cold sweat broke out at the back of his neck.

“Where?” he managed. His mouth suddenly felt like it was full of sand.

“We don’t know for sure.” Tetsuji admitted. “She ran shortly after your disappearance. Our best intelligence is that she’s currently somewhere in western Europe. But the Butcher never managed to track her down. Without a small boy in tow or the debt he represented, Nathan didn’t expend quite as many resources looking for her here as he did where you were. She’s alive. We could help you find her, if you wanted.”

Neil felt dizzy and sick in a way he suspected had nothing to do with his injuries. His mother, alive. His – his real mother, apparently. Not the woman who had run with him, kept him alive for ten years. Not the woman who had held him in one arm at night and a gun in the other, beaten him bloody and stitched him up. A different Mary Hatford.

It sounded far too good to be true. Maybe it was. Right now, the main thing in Neil’s mind was that he would need someone with a real ID to sign him out of this hospital, and if he went with Tetsuji, at least he would have a chance to get his bearings. And some clothes.

His team would be coming for him. Kevin would find a way to cross over. Reynolds and Renee would help. Nicky would do whatever he could, he was just like that. Andrew, Neil was certain, wouldn’t rest until Neil was safe, even if it was only so that he could kill him himself. Andrew wouldn’t let them leave him behind. They would find him, but Neil had to survive until they did.

Neil looked again at the man with the face of the one who had terrorized him for four years, and wondered how much he suspected. Wondered how much damage he was about to do by agreeing.

“Okay,” he said.

It took a while to get Neil fully released from the hospital. He still ached all over, and his skin stung to the touch even where bandages weren’t strictly necessary. He pulled the plain grey sweats he was offered on with as little wincing as possible, though – the pain was better than a stranger trying to help him, here – and was relieved when they gave him back his jacket. He pressed one hand against the pocket lining, feeling the small, cool bit of metal tucked in the corner, and breathed a little easier.

Eventually, they were on their way.

Neil had assumed they would be going to Massive Dynamic, and hadn’t been looking forward to the long car trip back to New York. But it turned out that with no Riko in the lab to sabotage Kevin and kill Tetsuji, the scientific conglomerate had never come to be. Instead, Evermore University and Science Academy continued to thrive, their graduate and affiliate labs doing some of the most advanced scientific research in the world. That apparently included a satellite campus right in Baltimore, which was where they were headed now.

It wasn’t Evermore, but it was modeled to look like it, and that was enough. Walking through the wide glass doors to floors tiled black and red felt like stepping back in time. For a moment, Neil was eight years old again, the burn on his shoulder still covered in bandages, stupidly, naively hopeful about being sent somewhere out of his father’s clutches. He was nine, getting lost on the third floor again, stealing popsicles from the cafeteria with Kevin, teaching Kevin the code even though he was pretty sure Kevin had taught him in the first place.

He was ten, learning French from Jean by flashlight, saying ‘tell me the names of the constellations again’ while he cleaned Jean’s cuts with pilfered antiseptic.

Tetsuji lead Neil down the too-familiar hallways to a row of labs, opened a door and gestured Neil inside silently.

He was eleven, bruises careful under his clothes, and Riko was tracing the felt-tip numeral on his cheekbone with the bare tip of a knife.

“The Master says you’ll be good enough to stay” Riko was whispering, neither the knife nor the words quite sharp enough to cut. “If you make it, you can be number four. I’m building an army, Nathaniel. I’ll need smart soldiers. We’re going to change the world.”

So the Evermore aesthetic hadn’t changed much in the time since Neil had left, but Neil had. People changed a lot between the ages of twelve and twenty eight no matter who they were, of course, but Neil thought that his time on the run with his mother had made his adolescence perhaps more revelatory than most.

As a child, he might have looked at what was in the room with something like wonder, like it was a play-set, or a game he long to learn the rules of so he’d be allowed to play. Now, with a little more context, he felt a wariness that bordered on fear.

“What the hell is that?” he asked.

It was a machine. Of what kind, Neil was completely unsure – he had never seen anything like it. Large and black, it was made up of unfamiliar components that appeared to have been manufactured over the course of decades, if not centuries. Some were shiny and silver, with gleaming digital screens. Some parts had lights and knobs like old nuclear control panels, and Neil thought he spotted some old memory panels that wouldn’t have been out of place on the earliest space shuttles.

Still other pieces were so old they were rusted – mechanical levers and dials that seemed to barely post-date electricity itself. Neil had no idea how the hell such disparate parts were supposed to form some kind of cohesive, functioning whole.

Tetsuji’s mouth drew into a thin line, no doubt at Neil’s disrespectful tone, but he walked toward the machine, reached out a hand and touched a panel with something like reverence.

“This is the destiny of our world,” he said, looking at the thing rather than at Neil.

“It looks like a piece of junk. Or maybe some kind of art statement piece?” Neil couldn’t help himself. Tetsuji’s cane was against his throat a second later, a warning Neil knew instinctively he would only get once.

“The Machine is the heart and soul of ZFT,” Tetsuji said. “We have been building it for generations, preparing for this day. It is finally ready.”

Tetsuji lowered the cane, turning back to the machine and tapping at a panel thoughtfully. “Or, it is almost ready. There are still some…kinks to be worked out.”

“What does it do?” Neil asked, his scientific curiosity taking over despite himself.

“It saves the universe,” Tetsuji said. Then, with an appraising look at Neil, “But not right this minute. We will talk further this evening, but for now one of my agents will get you settled in the dormitories. There are suites set aside for graduate students you should find suitable.”

Neil took a moment to appraise him, rubbing idly at an old scar through his shirt – one had had
gotten at the end of a cane much like the one in Tetsuji’s hands. He knew he was probably on thin ice as it was, but he couldn’t resist prodding—testing the threat. “You know, the Tetsuji Moriyama I knew would have just locked me in a cell and beat me ‘til he thought I would comply,” he said casually.

Tetsuji smiled coldly. “Consider your treatment preemptive gratitude for your cooperation, then,” he said, barely bothering to disguise the threat in his voice. “There’s no need for harsh treatment so long as you come willingly, is there?”

“I guess not,” Neil allowed. The silence that followed was broken by a sharp knock at the door. Two sharp, firm sounds that had Neil’s shoulder’s almost relaxing for a fraction of a second, before he caught sight of the black hair in the small window and corrected himself.

“You’ll come with me for now,” the man who wasn’t Andrew said lazily, eyes scanning the bandages still scattered on Neil’s face and hands, flicking briefly to the machine and then back again. He jerked his head and didn’t turn to see if Neil would follow, just headed down the hallway without another word. Neil followed.

Not-Andrew led him to a different building that housed the larger dormitories, and into what was basically a small apartment. Neil took a moment to show himself around. It was two rooms—a bedroom just big enough for a bed and chest of drawers, and a kitchenette that connected to the living room, plus a bathroom with a shower. Someone had left a pillow and a plain set of linens on the bed, and a hotel-style toiletry kit on the bathroom sink. The clock on the bedside table told him it was almost two in the afternoon.

When he returned to the door, Not-Andrew was still waiting there, arms crossed and leaning against the doorframe. It was difficult not to stare a little.

“You know me,” Not-Andrew said, and for an impossible second Neil was sure he had been right the first time—the changes to his hair were a disguise, it had been Andrew all along—and then, “You recognized me, so you must know him, the other me, in your world,” he clarified. Neil waited for him to elaborate.

“Was there a question there?” Neil asked when nothing was forthcoming. Andrew cocked his head slightly, narrowing his eyes.

“Are you stupid?” Neil had to bury the bizarre impulse to laugh. Instead he shrugged.

“I mean, you do look just like him,” Neil said, and then frowned to himself. “I mean, I guess you hear that a lot, but not just the way you look like Aaron.”

It was strange, when he stopped to think about it, that Neil had taken one look at this other Andrew and never guessed he might be his twin. Neil couldn’t have said what it was about him, but even in another universe, even with the dyed hair and the pierced ears, even without him saying a word, Neil had still known.

Not-Andrew’s hands clenched suddenly, his frame going tense. “You…know Aaron?”

“Saved his life on my first case, it’s why Andrew recruited me in the first place,” Neil said casually. “He works mostly out of a different office though, so I don’t know him well. He punched me in the face once.”

“I have no doubt that you deserved it.”

Neil inclined his head, unable to really disagree.
“So, do you have to stay here and babysit me?”

“I’ve been told not to let you out of my sight. You know, you’re a bit of a celebrity here. Your disappearance was quite the famous case in our world.”

Neil raised a skeptical brow. “So I’m the Lindbergh baby.”

“The what?”

“Never mind. If you can’t leave at least come sit down. And do you have a cigarette?”

He didn’t really expect any courtesy from Not-Andrew, so he wasn’t particularly surprised when Andrew took a seat by the window and lit a cigarette he did indeed have, but didn’t offer one to Neil. There wasn’t anything to do – like hell was Neil going to sleep in a dangerous stranger’s presence, despite his exhaustion, but it wasn’t like he had brought a book. Instead, he rummaged around in the cabinets for the things to make coffee, taking his small revenge on Not-Andrew by pointedly only making one cup.

Neil knew he should just ride out the silence, but he found himself growing restless, and curious. Eventually, he broke the quiet.

“Why did you seem surprised I knew Aaron?” Neil asked. Andrew just stared at him, stone. When it became clear he wasn’t going to respond, Neil took a chance. “M- the Andrew I know, we have this – game, I guess. A truth for a truth. You tell me something true, I tell you something true.”

This finally seemed to get Andrew’s attention, though he looked thoroughly unimpressed. “You would willingly allow yourself to be interrogated by your enemy? Christ you really are stupid, how the hell are you alive?”

“Only when my enemy is letting himself be interrogated in return,” Neil said simply. “Do you want to play or do you want to sit here in silence for the next hour?”

Neil wouldn’t have been surprised if he had chosen the latter option, really. But after a while Not-Andrew said, gaze turned firmly out the window, “My brother is dead.”

“Oh,” Neil said dumbly, and waited to see if there was more. Usually there was more, at least a bit. But maybe not with this Andrew. Maybe not about this.

“It’s your turn,” Andrew said after a minute. When Neil looked at him in confusion, he lit another cigarette and elaborated “You already answered a question of mine, before.”

Neil hid his double take at the unnecessary honesty, and tried to think of a good question. There was so much he was curious about. But he knew better than to mistake this for talking to the Andrew he knew. He couldn’t ask things they hadn’t built up the trust for him to ask, and he wouldn’t try to use this Andrew to find out things the other was unwilling to tell him yet. Also, he couldn’t really ask much about his work, not unless he wanted to be asked in return. Neil reminded himself that this was a careful dance they were playing at – a game between enemies to pass the time.

“How did he die?” Neil finally asked.

“Shot,” Not-Andrew said flatly. “Line of duty. Wrong place wrong time, freak thing. Little over a year ago.”

“Oh,” Neil said again, because an apology wouldn’t have been the right thing for either of them. Not-Andrew finally turned his gaze back to Neil, looked at him for a long moment.
“What’s he like?”

“Aaron?”

“Me.”

Neil stilled. His brain instinctively reached for a lie, but even here this game felt sacred, and Not-Andrew had honored it so far, as far as Neil could tell. Instead he looked at this Not-Andrew, assessed him. The armbands were there, heavy enough to hold knives. Neil wasn’t arrogant or stupid enough to think that told him everything, not by a long shot, but it told him a lot.


Neil waited out the glare for a while. “What, hoping other you had a better life? Yeah, I hoped the same thing about me when I found out.”

“The world is cruel in every universe,” Not-Andrew said dully.

“The world,” Neil said, mostly to himself, the déjà vu almost dizzying. “and the people in it.”

It was then that the radio on Not-Andrew’s shoulder squawked a series of loud beeps. Andrew tapped at the cuff on his ear and frowned, listening. His eyes snapped to Neil. “On my way,” he said, and tapped the cuff again.

“What was that about?” Neil couldn’t help asking.

“A high priority identity was caught by monitoring cams in the warehouse district near your father’s house.” Not-Andrew said. There was something off about his bearing. If Neil didn’t know better, he would have said Not-Andrew appeared almost unnerved.

“Who?”

A pause.

“Me.”

Chapter End Notes

Up Next:

'[Andrew had] already gotten a good look at Doe back at the Butcher’s house, seen the earrings and the black hair. Now, without the cover of his official Foxes jacket, he saw the armbands too, and it was like looking in the ugliest mirror he’d ever seen.'
Chapter 5: Andrew Doe

Something flashed, bright and unstoppable in Andrew’s chest, searing out through his brain, through every limb. The whole world blinked out white with the force of his fear, his rage, his intent.

*BURN.*

Twenty feet away, the supports of the bridge burst into flames, like the fire in his mind had jumped directly to the wooden beams. The force of the fireball threw the three of them into the dirt, but Renee was dragging Kevin back to his feet the next second. Andrew forced himself up, ignoring the drag of tiredness that tore through him as he rose, and followed as fast as he could.

“What was that?” Renee asked the moment we were back inside the warehouse. Andrew shook his head, leaning heavily against a support beam – he didn’t fully know himself, and didn’t have the energy to try to explain.

“I won’t be able to do it again,” he said instead. Not if he wanted to be able to get them all back to their universe. Renee seemed to accept that for now, and Kevin hadn’t said anything.

Actually, Andrew was surprised Kevin wasn’t talking his head off with a thousand questions. Then he looked at Kevin’s face. He was dead white, green around his mouth and eyes. That was when Andrew noticed the trail of blood dripped across the floor of the warehouse, ending at Kevin’s shoes.

“I think I got shot,” Kevin said weakly.

“No shit dumbass,” Andrew snapped, shoving him onto an old crate and staring at the dark, pulsing wound in Kevin’s thigh. He yanked the jacket tied around his waist off and pressed it hard against the wound.

How had everything gone to shit so fast? They had only just gotten here and already he had exhausted himself and one of them was bleeding out.

Andrew cursed himself for not coming up with a plan for this. Of course the FBI – or whatever the hell that badge was for – would be in Baltimore. Surely the feds on this side would be interested in a bloodbath at Nathan Wesninski’s house. Of course they would be nearby.
Andrew watched Kevin’s blood begin to soak through his jacket and wildly thought that if Neil had been with them, he could have fixed it. Neil might not be keen on autopsies but he knew his way around a bullet wound better than anyone but an army medic should. Of course, if they had Neil they wouldn’t be here in the first place but- Andrew shook his head, snapping himself back into focus.

“Renee, IDs?” he asked. This had been part of the plan they’d come up with before. Andrew was in charge of keeping Kevin safe, Renee would re-con, stealing them money, IDs, clothes; anything that might let them move more freely.

She hadn’t let them down. With a grim nod, she reached into a pocket and produced one of the strange gold badges the agents after them had been wearing, and a clip of paper money.

“Got it off the redhead,” she explained. “I couldn’t snag my – her, the other me, whatever – her ID, but hopefully we have the same fingerprints, if it comes to that.” She paused. “We only have a few options here, Andrew. That’s a serious wound, and Kevin needs real medical attention. There’s a hospital less than a mile from here. St. Agnes. We can take him there and hope to be mistaken for our doubles, and hope that whoever Kevin is here he’s not supposed to be locked up somewhere and won’t trigger some kind of search and rescue, or we can go home and come back for Neil later. Tomorrow.”

“He could be dead tomorrow.”

“He could be dead now,” Renee said, her voice patient. “But you’re right. The longer we wait, the harder it will be to find him even if he is alive.”

Andrew hadn’t taken his eyes off of the blood slowly working its way over his own fingers, the itchy, sticky feel of it against his skin.

“Hospital,” said Kevin. When Andrew looked up, Kevin’s face was all pale determination. “Use the badge to get us in, and sneak me out as soon as I’m stitched up. It’s not like the paperwork will have time to catch up with us. Renee can find out where they’re keeping Neil.”

“Yes, I can,” Renee agreed.

Kevin’s blood was pulsing weakly through Andrew’s fingers, sand through an hourglass.

“I want him back, too,” Kevin said quietly.

It was – it was a good plan, or at least it was the best plan they had. At least the walkies still seem to work, and they had a range of ten miles or so, so hopefully they wouldn’t lose contact.

“I’ll let you know the moment I find him,” Renee promised, pressing the badge into Kevin’s palm since Andrew’s hands were occupied. She looked down at it thoughtfully. “Foxes,” she said.

“What?”

“Foxes Division,” she said, tapping the badge with a finger. “If you need the badge to get into the hospital, say you’re from Foxes division.” Now that she mentioned it, the shape did look like a bit like a Fox. Then she frowned. “You should have an ear cuff. All the agents had them, I think they work like coms. I was going to grab one but I thought it might risk being tracked. You should probably look like you lost yours in the fight.”

Andrew didn’t miss her point. He tilted his head to the side. “Get it over with and get out of here, Walker.”
She pinched the shell of his ear hard between two fingernails and pulled, scraping hard enough to draw blood. Andrew barely flinched as a wet drop rolled down his ear and onto his neck. She met his eyes apologetically, but now wasn’t the time for apologies, less to for pity.

“Get out of here,” he repeated, and she didn’t waste another second. Andrew tied the jacket off around Kevin’s thigh.

They couldn’t get to the main road by way of the suburb now that the bridge was out, and Andrew knew the team would be closing in soon. There wasn’t another bridge for miles, but they would have cars and Andrew did not, and they had already wasted too much time debating their next course of action.

Andrew reached into his bag on the floor, rifling through until he pulled out the spare collapsible cane he was still carrying around. He could have used it now, in all honesty, but Kevin needed it more.

“Why’d’you have to be so tiny?” Kevin slurred as Andrew hauled him to his feet, hunched awkwardly over Andrew’s shoulder and the too-short cane.

“Save your breath,” Andrew recommended, grimacing slightly under the weight of the contact, and started them toward the hospital.

“Gunshot!” Andrew called as they stumbled through the doors of the St. Agnes emergency room. The receptionist head jerked up, her eyes widening as she took in the blood flowing freely from Kevin’s leg. Andrew had stuffed the jacket that had been tying off the wound in a trash can outside — their proximity to care would have to be enough. He wasn’t sure the FBI existed in this universe, and they couldn’t risk being caught.

The receptionist rushed forward with a little scanner even as a nurse with a gurney came through the swinging doors and started loading Kevin onto it. She pressed Kevin’s fingers to the screen, punched a few buttons. Her eyes, if possible, widened even further.

“You’re in good hands, Mr. Day,” she told Kevin reassuringly as the nurse took him away. Well, that answered the question about fingerprints. The receptionist turned to him.

“And you are?”

Andrew held out the badge clutched in his hand, and remembered the name he had seen on the small brass tag earlier.

“Andrew Doe,” he said, the name sour in his mouth, like he was saying it at five again, at nine, at thirteen. “Foxes Division.”

The woman held out the scanner with a firm little shake, her gaze intent and unimpressed, and Andrew scowled. Nurses were irritating. They meant so well, and were so unflappable, and they would hold you down while your world spun apart on its axis if they trusted the doctor more than you, which they nearly always did. Andrew reminded himself he was here to keep Kevin from dying, and then to rescue Neil, and pressed his fingers to the screen.

“Thank you, Mr. Doe,” she said. “You may wait here. I’ll let the nurses know to page me when we have word on Mr. Day’s condition. He’s in the best of hands.” Her calm, stern smile never faded. “Will you be needing to contact Secretary Moriyama?”

Andrew barely blinked, but it felt like his insides went up in smoke.
“I can set you up with a secure line,” she went on, mistaking the source of his confusion.

“That won’t be necessary,” he cut her off. “Just let me know when I can see Day.”

He went to sit in one of the chairs, leaning on the cane a bit now that he had it back from Kevin. Secretary Moriyama? They were in government here? Which branch, and which brother? Apparently things were more different here than they had imagined. Andrew heaved himself to standing and walked to the door, deliberately pulling the pack of cigarettes from his pocket into view before stepping outside.

“Renee,” he called over walkie once he was around the corner, lighting up and leaning heavily against the brick of the hospital while he smoked. He needed to keep an eye on the door anyway, in case their doubles came looking for them here.

“Andrew? How’s Kevin?”

“They seem confident he’ll live,” Andrew said truthfully, and wondered if medicine was that much more advanced over here, that a gushing thigh wound would be greeted with little more than a reassuring smile. “I need you to look into something. Apparently this universe has a Secretary Moriyama.”

“That’s a bad sign,” Renee said, and Andrew hummed a brief agreement around his smoke. “It’s also a good place to start looking for Neil,” she added, echoing Andrew’s own thoughts. “I’ll look into it. Keep me updated. Out.”

Andrew worked through the cigarette and debated lighting a second, but at that point it was a toss up whether it would make the shaking better or worse. He went back inside to wait.

“Mr. Doe?” Andrew’s head snapped up from the magazine he’d been pretending to read, belatedly realizing it wasn’t the first time the nurse had said that name. His name, at least for here and now. “Your colleague is out of surgery and should be awake soon. The bullet missed the bone, so recovery should only be a few days. You can follow me to his room, if you like.”

Andrew followed without speaking. A few days? Even for a non-critical bullet wound, even one that had hit only muscle tissue, that was too fast. What kind of medicine did they have over here? He focused on mapping the route they took to the room and any other exits they came across. Hopefully the meds were good enough that he could sneak Kevin out quickly, ideally not in a wheelchair.

Kevin was awake by the time the nurse and Andrew got to his room. Other than the hospital gown, it didn’t look at all like he’d been shot just a handful of hours before.

He didn’t look well either.

He was staring at the television mounted to the wall. A local news station was playing, and a reporter was standing outside – fuck – outside the Butcher’s house.

\textit{Gunfire yet again disrupted this quiet suburb this morning, this time with an unexplained explosion, when a team of unknown assailants opened fire on Fox Agents keeping watch over the residence of Nathan Wesninski, otherwise known as the Butcher of Baltimore. The reporter was saying. Just last night, this quiet front yard was the scene of both a blood bath and a miracle, as the Butcher was found dead in the basement, but his son Nathaniel Wesninski, missing and presumed dead for almost twenty years, was found injured but alive at the scene.}

Andrew’s jaw was clenched so tightly it hurt, but he didn’t dare loosen it. If he did, the first gasp of air out of his mouth was going to be Neil’s name. Injured but alive. Alive. Neil was alive. Or he had
been last night.

...Sources tell us that Nathaniel Wesninski was taken in to custody by the Defense Secretary Moriyama himself...

Kevin wasn’t able to conceal a bad startle at the name. The nurse – Alice, said the stitching on her obnoxiously pink scrubs – smiled from where she was checking his IV, totally misinterpreting his response.

“Big night for your boss,” she said knowingly. Kevin just started at her blankly, and Andrew hoped she took it for exhaustion from being shot. “Secretary Moriyama,” she continued. “He had the Wesninski kid case back in his rookie days, didn’t he? Back when there was the, what was it, the FIB?”

“FBI,” Kevin murmured, and Andrew had to stop himself from slapping him. “That’s right, FBI!” The nurse smiled. “They never did catch the bastard that took that kid. I mean, it had to have been a bastard, even if his daddy did turn out to be a mob boss. Kidnapped from Evermore, right out from under the Moriyama’s noses! What a scandal! You were probably too young to remember, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” Kevin in said vaguely, before seeming to summon some of his old Evermore charm. “Glad we found the kid, anyway.”

“And in the nick of time! Poor dear was just a sopping bloody mess last night!” The nurse paused and looked around, seemingly realizing she’d said something she shouldn’t have, then shrugged.

“Well. I shouldn’t say more, but I’m sure you know more about it than I do anyway. being the undersecretary and all…you all right, dear?” she asked as Kevin covered another startled sound with a small coughing fit. He waved her off. Andrew glared at him meaningfully from behind the nurse’s back. If Kevin had clearance and the nurse knew it, they might be able to get more information out of her without her noticing – but only if Kevin asked the questions.

“Er- I’m sure you patched him up well,” Kevin said when he had cleared his throat. The nurse smiled proudly.

“As good as anyone could. He’ll make a full recovery. The scars won’t be pretty, but sometimes that’s the price of survival, huh?” She shook her head. “We probably could have done more to fix them, but the Secretary insisted on getting him out of here as soon as possible. I was surprised he collected him himself.”

Kevin was too, and badly scared by it, Andrew could tell, though he hoped the nurse couldn’t.

“We shouldn’t keep you here any longer either,” Andrew cut in smoothly, drawing her attention away from Kevin’s impending breakdown. “I’m sure you have other patients to see to.”

“Should be on my lunch, actually,” the nurse said with another easy, tired smile. “I’ll leave you to it though, press the call button if you need anything, dear.” And then she was gone, and it was just Andrew and Kevin, the news thankfully turned to something else.

Andrew reached over and shut the TV off, then he pressed his walkie.

“Renee, the Moriyama is-“

“Tetsuji” her voice came crackling back.
“I was going to say, he’s the Secretary of Defense, but that’s good to know, too,” Andrew said. Tetsuji was the most manageable demon of the lot, though that wasn’t saying much.

“You saw the news footage too? I’m working on figuring out a location now. How is Kevin?”

“Better than he’d be if he’d been…home,” Andrew decided on, still unsure if they could be overheard. “We’ll get out of here as soon as we can. Walkie when you get a location. Out.”

Andrew was just starting to look around for Kevin’s clothes when a robotic voice crackled over the intercom.


“Panic later, Kevin,” Andrew advised, already removing the IV lines as quickly as he could without hurting him. “We have to get you out of here. Now.” The Foxes had found them.

The stupid collapsible cane really was too short for Kevin, but they made do. Andrew threw clothes at him as soon as all tubes and wires were detached, then snatched them back and dressed Kevin himself when Kevin took too long, mindful of the gunshot wound itself but not necessarily of the pain it caused. He didn’t have time to coddle Kevin, not if they wanted to live. Luckily, Kevin seemed to understand that, and gritted his teeth but didn’t complain as Andrew shoved his clothes on with brusque efficiency.

They ran into a few orderlies on their way down the hall, who tried to yell at them to get back in a room, and a few who seemed to know that they were the reason for the lockdown. Nurses were irritating, but he aimed his blows to incapacitate, not to kill. No reason to give the people following them more ammunition. Miraculously, they were alone when they made it to the back door.

It was a good thing the locks on the emergency door were the kind that could be picked, Andrew thought vaguely. And a good thing the intruder alarm was still going off, covering up the beep of the emergency light over the door, faint in comparison. Andrew shoved Kevin quickly out the door and made sure it locked behind them, calling Renee over the walkie to giver her their location.

Small miracles, Andrew thought, shoving Kevin down onto a bench when they reached a relatively secluded park, wiping the blood from his knuckles and a split lip. He had just caught his breath when Renee found them – their Renee, he had never approved of her distinctive hair so much in his life.

“She asked.

“He’ll live,” Andrew answered without waiting for Kevin to reply. Kevin was too busy still getting his breath back anyway. “Any progress on Neil? A nurse at the hospital told us Tetsuji took him this morning.”

He’s alive he’s alive he’s alive.

“I think I know where he might be then,” Renee said. Kevin’s head snapped up from where he had been staring at the ground.

“Where?”

“Evermore University has a satellite campus here in Baltimore, and some of the labs are top secret clearance only.” Andrew thought he saw where she was going. “The Butcher might have wanted to kill Neil, but if Tetsuji has him it’s because he thinks he’s an asset. There’s a lot of weird strings being pulled in this game, and I don’t think we have the full picture yet. But I’d be willing to bet that
Neil is somewhere on that campus.”

Andrew was willing to bet she was right. The question was how to get to him. If the labs were top secret clearance only, they would barely make it past the front door of the building. No, they needed to be smart about this.

In the distance, the intruder alarm of the hospital stopped ringing, and Andrew had an idea.

“Renee, you take Kevin back to the warehouse. Make sure nothing harms that device. Kevin, I need you to see if there’s anything you can do to that thing to make it stronger. Getting home is going to be a bitch, and we’re going to need all the help we can get. Got it?”

Kevin nodded. Renee asked “what are you going to do?”

Andrew was peering through the trees at where a few black cars were peeling away from the hospital, one just a bit flashier than the rest.

“I’m going to impersonate a federal agent,” he said calmly. Renee’s eyes snapped to follow his gaze, and she nodded seriously.

“Be careful,” she said. She brought the roll of cash she’s stolen of the Foxes agent and split it between them, then reached out and hovered a hand over his shoulder, barely touching. “and bring him home.”

She knew he would. Andrew tucked the cash in his pocket and turned away. He had to trust her with Kevin, and getting the device ready again. He had a doppelganger to chase down, and a runaway to rescue.

Stealing a car wasn’t the best way to remain inconspicuous in hostile territory, but neither was hailing a cab and telling him to follow someone. In fact, it might have been the less conspicuous of the two options. Also, Andrew hadn’t hotwired a car since his teenage years, and he was vaguely curious to see if his old methods would work on the theoretically more advanced vehicles of this universe.

They did. Andrew cut his way carefully through the relatively sparse traffic of outer Baltimore, careful to keep a distance between himself and the Foxes agent.

Doe, he’d been calling him in his head. Because somehow even ‘Not-Me’ was too much like ‘Me,’ and he needed something to call him. So Doe it was. One lane over, three to four cars behind, he watched Doe’s car, keeping track of what he knew of the streets of Baltimore in his head to see if he was taking odd or unnecessary turns. He didn’t seem to be, which hopefully meant he wasn’t aware he was being tailed.

When Doe’s car stopped in front of a block of apartments, Andrew forced himself to drive at a normal speed past it, then parked a few blocks away and crept back on foot. The door was locked – Andrew expected nothing less – but the shiny metal of it looked different than the ones on the surrounding duplexes. In fact, he realized with a start, it looked familiar. A match to one he’d purchased for his own place, bought online specifically because it was supposed to be hard to pick.

There was no way. Even the same model of lock would have individual units, the keys wouldn’t work for them all. Barely breathing, Andrew took his own key out of his pocket, and slipped it into the lock. It turned.

He didn’t expect to slip in unnoticed. If this universe had also made Neil the Butcher’s son, there was
no reason it should have been kinder to Andrew. He already had his gun raised, and was unsurprised for his entrance into the small living room to be met with an aimed weapon in turn. Frankly, he was surprised he wasn’t immediately shot.

Finding himself without any sudden bullet holes, Andrew took a moment to assess his opponent. He’d already gotten a good look at Doe back at the Butcher’s house, seen the earrings and the black hair. Now, without the cover of his official Foxes jacket, he saw the armbands too, and it was like looking in the ugliest mirror he’d ever seen.

“I need you to take me to Nathaniel Wesninski.” Andrew said firmly.

Doe seemed to consider that for a minute.

“He says his name is Neil.”

Andrew’s heart stuttered in his chest, and he took a halting step forward without quite realizing it. “You’ve seen him? Take me to him.”

“Why?”

It was what he would have asked, Andrew supposed.

“I need to speak with him. He doesn’t realize how much danger he’s in here.”

“And you’re the one who’s going to save him,” Doe guessed. “Haven’t we had this conversation already?”

They had, but Andrew hadn’t really understood it until now, eyes flitting around the apartment, spying the corner of a distinctive triangular case on an upper closet shelf, and remembered the female agent’s shocked Aaron?

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” Andrew realized. Doe’s twin brother. This universe’s Aaron Minyard, if Tilda had kept him here, too. “Line of duty?”

Doe had followed his eyes to the case in the closet. “Obviously.”

“Better than overdosing.” Andrew wasn’t sure why he said it. It wasn’t like this man deserved his sympathy, if Andrew had had any to give, and he wouldn’t respond well to it. It was just something true, and Andrew wasn’t in the habit of not saying obviously true things, even when they were likely to get him in a fight. Maybe especially then.

“Shut the fuck up,” Doe offered in return.

“So will you help me?” It was such a strange thing to ask, to feel his mouth making those words, but there was no other way to put it.

“Put your gun down first.”

“You too.”

They lowered their guns slowly, the two things skittering to meet on the wooden floor of the room between them. He wanted to demand Doe take the armbands off – he knew there were bound to be knives in there – but he couldn’t risk Doe demanding he do the same.

“So. Neil.”
Doe’s head tipped to the side. “Color me curious. What’s he to you?”

Andrew’s lips pulled in a silent snarl. *I don’t know*, his brain cried desperately. He didn’t, not really. *He’s nothing*, he wanted to say, but that was a lie through and through. Neil was bright, he was fierce. He was an alien to the human race and the most familiar person Andrew had ever met. They had only kissed twice, but he’d taken root in Andrew’s insides long before that, somehow. It had only taken his disappearance for Andrew to realize it.

“He’s my responsibility,” Andrew said at last.

Doe shook his head slightly in disbelief, a derisive snort slipping past his lips.

“He was right. I don’t know what you are, but you’re nothing like me. At least I don’t lie to myself,” Doe said, then tapped a hand against a black cuff on his ear. “Call Foxes, this is Doe, I have a fugitive at-“

Andrew was across the room and body-checking him to the floor before he could get the rest of the words out, and then they were fighting.

After, Andrew would consider that it had been maybe the strangest fight of his life. He’d been sparring with Renee for years, but even she didn’t know his tells like Doe seemed to, didn’t go for the same strike at the same moment and leave the two of them twisted up and scrabbling.

Fists moved, knives flashed, heads slammed heavily against the dark wood floor. It was luck alone that got Andrew the upper hand, that and maybe desperation, cuffing Doe’s hands behind his back and tying his feet. He rooted around in a kitchen drawer for some duck tape, but paused and held it up before his still-gasping opponent.

“Do I have to do this, or can you keep your mouth shut?” he asked Doe where he’d propped him in a sitting position against the wall, tying his arms with an extra length of rope and looping it securely through a nearby railing. He didn’t want to be showing this speck of consideration, wouldn’t have done it for anyone else, but well – it was him. He couldn’t just un-know what he knew. Doe clenched his jaw with a glare that might have murdered anyone else. He looked woozy, a thin trail of blood creeping down his temple, but the way he was pulling at the cuffs said he wasn’t done fighting.

Andrew grimaced as he pulled off a length of tape and stretched it over Doe’s mouth, watching his eyes go just a bit further away before he remembered how to breathe again, and told himself this was no time for guilt. Andrew had recovered from worse. If Doe was anything like him at all, he would too.

Andrew yanked the cuff off of Doe’s ear and placed it on his own. He tapped it experimentally as he found the bathroom and began rifling around for a first aid kit to clean his own cuts. He thought about contacting Other-Renee, but she was too dangerous, too sharp, almost guaranteed to notice he wasn’t who he claimed to be. He thought back to the scene at the Butcher’s house. “Kate?” he hazarded.

A moment later a female voice sounded back in his ear.

“Doe? What the hell was that last call about?”

“I took care of it,” Andrew said truthfully. “Listen, I got new orders from the Secretary. They want us to move Wesninski to a safe house. We’ve got to pick him up.”

“The campus isn’t secure enough?” the voice – Kate – asked, which confirmed Andrew’s
suspicions about Neil’s location. Andrew finished wiping at a cut on his face just as his eye caught on the cardboard box of black hair dye tucked in the cabinet. Perfect.

“Apparently not. Meet my at my place, two hours,” he said, “I’ll drive.”

“Obviously,” said Kate. “Okay, out.”

The hair dye kit came with gloves, which took care of everything except – fuck. Except the earrings. Neither his hair nor Doe’s – thank fuck their haircuts were similar – was long enough to cover his ears, but it wasn’t cold enough to reasonably hide them in a giant scarf or hat. Andrew’s eyes fell on the needle in the first aid kit dubiously, and wondered if Doe had done his own himself. He would have put money on it. Andrew supposed he should at least be thankful Doe didn’t have gauges, or something.

With a grim sigh, Andrew Minyard removed the cuff from his ear, pulled on a pair of gloves, and set about becoming Andrew Doe. Again.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next:

"Human interface, subset of one. He thought vaguely, taking it all in. And then he fully began to process what he was looking at, and his stomach sank like a stone.

He understood what the Machine did. He understood how it worked. He understood why he was here. He understood. It took his breath away.”
Part 6, Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Neil's POV

Chapter Notes

Fringe fans, a note: there is a "plot twist" in the original show where Other-Olivia uses this section of plot to take real Olivia's place in the primary universe and seduce Peter. I want to say up front that I am NOT using that plot, partly because it revolves mostly around the shapeshifters story line, which I cut, and also because I don't think it works with Andrew and Neil's characters. So breathe easy at the end - it's our Andrew.

Chapter 6: Home Again

Neil couldn’t shake the feeling that this was all some terrible dream: Not-Andrew standing across from him in the dorm room of an Evermore that was somehow in Baltimore, like the universe had wanted to make sure the entire concept of 'home,' and of safety, could never make sense to Neil again. And then Not-Andrew was dragging him back to Tetsuji’s lab and leaving, running after some intruders in the suburbs and Neil was trying not to let his heart run away with him but he had said me. Andrew was here. For real, this time. His Foxes had found him.

Now Neil just had to survive a little longer. If that meant playing along with Tetsuji’s mad scientist games for a little while, so be it. Maybe Neil could learn something that would give their team an advantage. Something about this…machine.

And then there was the fact that despite everything, the Machine itself seemed to be calling to him, a strange metal siren he couldn’t stop thinking about getting his hands on, peeking under the hood to see what made it tick. A dangerous thought, but he needed something pass the time, and Tetsuji was offering a neat solution that would keep Neil out of harms way until he could figure out exactly where Andrew was and how to get to him. As long as he didn’t actually help Tetsuji, there would be no harm done.

“So what's wrong with it?” Neil asked as he got settled in a rolling chair next to the Machine. There were schematics spread out on nearby tables, and a scattering of books and tools. He rolled himself closer to one of the drawings, wincing a little at a spike of pain through his calf. Whatever meds they had given him in the hospital had worked nothing short of miracles, considering he had been there less than half a day, but there would be no quick recovery for the kind of damage his father had wrought, and there was really no replacement for sleep. His body was tired.

“It doesn’t work,” Tetsuji said simply.

“Yeah I had figured that much out when I asked what was wrong with it,” Neil said, ignoring the
warning look sent his way. “I don’t even know what it’s supposed to do. What about it doesn’t work?”

Tetsuji pursed his lips and stared at the mechanical monstrosity in front of them rather than Neil.

“Kaleigh Day and I did not so much discover the other universe as we did prove its existence,” Tetsuji began, with the droning tone of someone settling in for an important story. “These drawings have been being passed down for generations,” he said. “Bits and pieces of knowledge gleaned from the brightest minds of those times, carefully recorded by ZFT scholars. The design has always had an element of… inspiration to it, shall we say. It actual function has been clouded by inconsistencies in the historical record, though its purpose has not.”

“And what is it’s purpose?” Neil asked, now holding up one of the drawings to the Machine. It was clear it had been added to over time, old parts replaced with new, updated versions, and some things added that couldn’t possibly have been dreamed of when the original designs had been conceived.

“It’s going to save the world,” Tetsuji said, and bristled at Neil’s’ skeptical look. “Our universes are set on a collision course, Neil Josten,” he said. “In the side you were on, you know them as soft spots. Places where reality is warped and strange. Over here, the damage has been much greater. Soft spots have consumed entire cities, black holes have swallowed homes. Changes in atmospheric conditions have affected water systems, plant growth, the changing of the seasons.”

“Has anyone told you guys about global warming?”

The pain registered across Neil’s shins before the blur of the cane did, and he gasped, fighting off a wave of panic.

“Insolent child! Do not speak of that which you do not know. The universe is collapsing on itself as it collides with yours. It has been ever since your disappearance and-”

“Wait, since my disappearance? You mean my kidnapping? I mean, you know I didn’t just waltz into the other universe by myself when I was eight, right? People from the other side came over and took me, using the portal you invented. Well, other you. That’s what fucked up your universe. The portal, not me leaving.”

“Whatever the circumstances,” Tetsuji spat, “that was the catalyst. Our worlds have been decaying ever since, but this machine will stop the collision. It will allow our universe to heal.”

“And what about the other universe?” Neil asked. Tetsuji shrugged dismissively. “It would be unaffected, as far as we know. But that is not the issue at hand. The issue is that we know what the Machine is supposed to do, and by all accounts how it should function.”

Neil had an idea of that as well – it seemed like the Machine was designed to somehow stabilize the vibrational frequency of its surroundings, at least that was his best guess. How it was supposed to affect the whole universe, he wasn’t sure. Maybe it had to be started inside a soft spot?

“So what’s the problem, exactly?”

“We can’t figure out how to turn it on.”

Neil had nearly laughed out loud when Tetsuji had said that, but hours later, alone in the lab with nothing but the Machine, a security camera, and the reinforced steel door, Neil had to admit he wasn’t much closer himself. Despite the hodge-podge nature of the thing, there was an almost… living quality to it.
“Organic interface,” he murmured in a hushed, awed voice. Neil couldn’t go anywhere, but he didn’t think he should be heard, either.

Once he realized what he was looking at, the Machine took on an extraordinary quality. It was designed to interface with an organic host. Neil delved deeper into the coding on the digital components. He stroked a finger over a small touchpad and was surprised when it lit up and let out a small, bright hum.

Human interface, then, specifically. Neil frowned at the coding, looked back and forth between the screen and his hand, still resting on the bright touchpad. How had no one noticed this before?

The more he looked, the more the reason became clear – the Machine wouldn’t just interface with any organic host, and not even any human. In fact, it seemed to be programmed to only interface with a tiny subset of human DNA sequences.

Neil glanced sidelong at the camera high on the wall, then carefully scooted his chair so that his back was between the lens and the touchpad. Slowly, he laid his palm more firmly on the touchpad, and barely restrained a bad startle at the bright sound the Machine made, and at the small lever that swung down over the back of his hand, lightly trapping it against the glass.

Neil’s breath felt stuck in his throat. He thought fiercely, and found that he was able to gently slide his hand out from under the lever. It swung back up out of sight as he did.

“Subset of one,” he said quietly. He had no proof, but he would have bet his life on it.

Neil could feel with weight of Riko’s meddling, a puppet master quietly twitching strings from high above. If this universe’s Riko was a first son, what power might their Riko have wielded by impersonating him? Slowly, Neil put the pieces together.

It wouldn’t have been terribly difficult – criminals were mostly predictable at the end of the day, and the Butcher’s men and Tetsuji both counted in that lot. Neil wasn’t sure what level of contact Riko and Tetsuji would have, in this situation, whether Riko would have been able to take advantage of his uncle’s position in government. If he had, he had played a more multifaceted game than Neil had been inclined to believe him capable of, leading Stuart to Baltimore just in time to save poor little lost Nathaniel, and deliver him to Tetsuji and ZFT.

Or maybe Riko had ordered Nathan to extract information, to torture to his heart’s content but not kill, and he hadn’t known about the Hatfords at all. If that was the case, Neil’s survival had been dumb luck. Maybe he would never know which was the truth.

But somehow, quietly, quietly, everyone got what they wanted, no matter if it killed them. Nathan got his son, Stuart got Nathan, Tetsuji got his perfect test subject. And Riko – Riko got a soldier, and he got Andrew and Kevin vulnerable.

Warning bells were clanging anxiously in Neil’s mind as he counted Riko’s win, win, win, win-s. If all of this really had been orchestrated, then Riko would expect Andrew to come after him, would have expected him to use his newly-activated powers to cross the universes to find Neil. Andrew had walked into a trap, and it was entirely Neil’s fault. And now Neil was trapped in a high-security lab in the bowels of Evermore 2.0, all because he hadn’t been able to resist the lure of seeing his mother again.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Angry and worried and in pain, Neil barely noticed his own palm smacking down on the touchpad
again, the thing lighting up and chiming, the lever coming down to press against the back of his hand. When he did notice, his fingers twitched in disgust.

“How do you work?” He said out loud. “What do you even do?”

It was a machine, and not an entirely advanced one in many ways, so it seemed impossible that it had understood him. But the screen in front of him flashed, and suddenly Neil felt like he was surrounded in numbers. Surrounded in purpose and clarity and light.

Human interface, subset of one. He thought vaguely, taking it all in. And then he fully began to process what he was looking at, and his stomach sank like a stone.

He understood what the Machine did. He understood how it worked. He understood why he was here. He understood. It took his breath away.

There was a knock at the door, and Neil quietly slipped his hand back out from under the lever, breathing deeply. The knock was a courtesy – the door was locked form the outside. A moment later Not-Andrew was back in the room with him, this time with a less-familiar face – the red-haired female agent who had first hauled him to his feet outside his father’s house. He didn’t think he had ever gotten her name.

“Hello,” Neil said, standing up and trying to mask his nervousness. Play along, he reminded himself. “How can I help you guys?”

Not-Andrew held out a piece of folded paper. Neil stood and took it curiously, keeping his expression carefully neutral as he unfolded it and looked it over. It was a schematic of the Machine, one Neil had seen before. But next to it was something different – a man’s face, smoke and flames pouring from his nose and mouth. And the man looked an awful lot like Neil.

“What is this?” He asked carefully, eyeing Not-Andrew. He could feel the agent’s eyes on his bandaged face. There was something different in his bearing, something quietly furious.

“Mr. Josten,” he began. Why did his ears look so red? “We believe you are in danger in your current location. We have been instructed to move you to a safe house.”

Neil looked back and forth between the agents. Where Not-Andrew was stiff, the woman just looked a bit confused. Neil shook the paper again.

“Agent Doe, what is this?” The man’s fists clenched, and a muscle twitched in his jaw, a tell Neil knew so well it hurt to look at.

“It’s from an old friend of yours, Kevin Day,” he said slowly, carefully.

“Kevin?” Now Neil really was bewildered. He hadn’t seen this universe’s Kevin Day since he was eight years old, and even then they had only known each other for a few months.

“He gave it to me, as a warning,” Not-Andrew continued, “of what would happen if you returned here.”

“What’s going on?” The female agent asked, looking thoroughly lost.

“He wanted you to know,” Not-Andrew went on, and suddenly Neil caught a whiff of an odd chemical smell, one he recognized from bathrooms and hotel rooms on the run with his mother. Fresh hair dye. His eyes widened. “that your friends are here, and that they have come to keep you safe.”
“Doe, what the hell is going on?” the other agent demanded, her eyes sharpening. Without a moment’s warning, Andrew swung one heavy fist at the side of her head, and she crumbled to the floor.

Neil blinked, eyes focusing on the face of the man in front of him again, on the tiny white scar that was on his lip instead of his cheek and-

“It’s me,” Andrew said. Andrew.

“Yeah, I had just about figured that out,” Neil said, suddenly dizzy. He barely noticed that he was gasping until Andrew was crouched in front of him, one hand on the back of his neck forcing him down, head between his knees. He was on the floor. When had that happened? It was all too much. The kidnapping, the car rides, the hospital. This Evermore look alike and Tetsuji’s cold stare and the Machine, The Machine- 

“Breathe,” Andrew commanded, with no anger but no gentleness, just complete certainty that Neil would obey. Somehow that was enough to disrupt the rhythm of Neil’s hyperventilating until he slowly, slowly, started to breathe again.

He looked up into Andrew’s face, impossibly hard and blank against the riling sea of Neil’s emotions. “I didn’t know,” he said finally. “Andrew I didn’t know. Tetsuji told me it would heal the universe, but it was never about healing this one. It was always about destroying yours.”

He felt like he was pleading for understanding with a stone wall. And maybe that was what Neil deserved. But then Andrew just said, flat as ever, “Neil. I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“The Machine,” Neil said urgently. His bandaged hands were gripping at the edges of Andrew’s t shirt sleeves. “He says – he says the universes are colliding. Only way to save one is to...destroy the other. Wants me to operate the machine to do it. I’m…it’s made for me. Fuck, it’s like it was made for me, I’m the only one who can-”

Neil took a rattling breath and pulled his arms back into his lap. Andrew’s hands held him in place, one on his shoulder, the other still around the back of his neck. “I won’t, though,” he said firmly. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to let them destroy your world, Andrew.”

“I don’t think they can,” Andrew said. “Not without you, anyway. Neil, we have to go. You don’t belong here.”

Neil felt himself shudder. “I know,” he said hoarsely, nearly a whisper. “He said...he said mom-“

Neil felt his voice crack, the word breaking his mouth wide in a barely-contained cry. He gathered himself and started again. “He said my mom was still alive here. But that was probably a lie too.”

“Probably,” Andrew agreed. “Neil, we have to get going. Kevin and Renee are waiting for us.” The thought of the other Foxes put a painful jolt in Neil’s chest. How close had he come to dooming them all?

“I don’t-” Neil squeezed his eyes shut. “I know I don’t belong here, but. How could they even want me back, knowing who I am? I don’t belong there either.”

“You do,” Andrew said.

“Why?” The word slipped out desperately before Neil could stop it.

Andrew’s face was a blank mask over a storm of anger. His hands were heavy on Neil’s neck and shoulder, but his fingers never dug in.
“You are a Fox,” he said, like it was that simple. “You have to come back. You belong in our universe. You belong-“ Andrew’s hands clenched on Neil’s skin, his eyes squeezing shut briefly. The words trembled dangerously in the air between them, stealing the oxygen from the room. “I can’t protect you if you stay. I won’t let them have you, Abram. Come home,” Andrew finished fiercely.

Neil reached out a hand, unable to find words. He watched Andrew’s eyes follow the movement all the way to his own face, gently touched the dark bruises blooming along Andrew’s jaw. “Yes,” he whispered.

Andrew’s answering look was thunderous, but the hand that was still wrapped around the back of Neil’s head was as careful as he had ever been as he drew Neil in. It wasn’t even a kiss, really. Just Andrew’s mouth pressed hard against his as they breathed against each other – an affirmation, a promise.

“Can you walk?” Andrew asked when he pulled back. Neil frowned.

“Of course. I’m fine,” he said, and registered the slip a second later at Andrew’s murderous glare. “I can walk,” he amended. “They have really good medicine here.” That seemed to convince Andrew. He got to his feet and watched closely as Neil did the same. Neil was careful to bury the wince as he put weight on his injured calf. “Let’s get out of here.”

They made as little fuss as they could on their way out, but Andrew told Neil he was probably being traced through Agent Doe’s ear cuff. They would lose it when they got closer to the warehouse, but for now it made Andrew look more like his official counterpart, and they needed all the help they could get.

For once, luck was one their side. It seemed Andrew had been successful at incapacitating the Foxes agents, and apparently Renee and Kevin had been able to do something remotely to the cameras at Not-Evermore, buying them some time before Tetsuji returned, found Agent Kate’s tied up unconscious body, and realized Neil was gone.

The fastest route back to the warehouse was past the Butcher’s house, Neil knew. At least until Andrew told him the bridge was out.

“Out how?” Neil asked from the passenger seat of Agent Doe’s car, but didn’t push when Andrew didn’t answer. If there was a story there, clearly this wasn’t the time. Mostly, Neil was grateful for the excuse to go another way.

Seeing Renee and Kevin in the warehouse was like another piece of reality sliding back into place in Neil’s chest. Kevin appeared to have a bandage around one thigh, and was learning on Andrew’s spare cane, but Renee looked fine beyond a few scrapes and bruises. Neil was vaguely surprised to find the worry and relief in their expressions matched by his own.

“Neil, your face-“ Kevin started.

“Story time later,” Andrew cut him off harshly. “They won’t be far behind.” Indeed, there was already the sound of sirens in the distance. It wouldn’t be long before they turned to gunshots.

“Kevin, any luck with the device?”

Andrew had explained tensely on the drive over how they had gotten to the this universe. The explanation had left Neil a little awestruck, and a little worried. Andrew looked exhausted. He hoped they would be able to get back.

“I did what I could,” Kevin said seriously. “Renee was able to purchase a few things at an
electronics store, but considering what I really needed was a nuclear particle reactor-“

“It will have to be enough,” Andrew said, cutting Kevin off again. They took up positions around the ring as shouts began to sound from outside. Neil was standing next to Andrew, Renee and Kevin across from them. He wondered is anyone else could see the slight tremor in Andrew’s hands.

Neil turned his head to the side, meeting Andrew’s eyes, not looking away as he slowly moved one bandaged hand to cover one of Andrew’s, felt the bones of if through the cotton gauze, felt the trembling ease, just slightly. “Ready?” he asked. Andrew offered a smile that was mostly a baring of teeth.

“Stubborn fucking asshole, remember?” he said, voice tight.

From outside there was the loud banging of a fist on the metal door.

“All of you in there, come out with your hands up! This is your last warning!”

“I remember,” Neil said.

“On three,” Andrew said to Renee over the sounds of a battering ram; her hands were already switching the buttons. “One, two, three.”

The sound of the metal door crashing open was overtaken by the sensation of suddenly drowning, and then Neil was gasping, coming to to the sight of Allison Reynolds and the complete absence of gunfire. The relief was so strong he could barely move. They had made it.

They were halfway back to Boston, he and Andrew in the back seat of the Maserati, when Neil turned to him and said in quiet German, “My father is dead.”

Andrew turned and met his gaze for a long moment, his expression unreadable, then focused back out the window. “He is.”

“Andrew, I was going to tell-“

“Later,” Andrew said firmly, and the sudden sensation of having time again settled over Neil like a heavy blanket. He slept the rest of the way home.

He woke to the sensation of the car stopping. They were at the house in Cambridge.

“My key,” Neil remembered suddenly as they reached the door. He reached into his jacket pocket with trembling fingers, feeling around for the tear in the lining he’d cut open with the little metal teeth, down to the very corner, where the small key rested against the seam. He hadn’t lost it. He pulled it out, running his thumb along the familiar ridges before unlocking the door. Home. He was home.

He let Andrew lead him inside by the sleeve, then up the stairs to the larger bathroom, next to the bedroom Neil had been sleeping in.

They stood together in the harsh light of the bathroom. Neil wasn’t sure what Andrew was waiting for. Eventually Andrew let out an annoyed sigh and pressed Neil down onto the seat of the toilet by the shoulders, pushing the jacket off of him as he went, then dug around under the sink, pulling out a first aid kit. Neil didn’t fully understand what he was doing until Andrew’s hands reached for the hem of his shirt.

“Neil?” Andrew had noticed the way his whole body had gone still. They needed to check his
wounds. They would need to be cleaned, the bandages changed. Neil knew that, he did, but-

“I told you it wasn’t my only scar,” Neil managed at last. Andrew nodded solemnly.

“I believed you,” he said. He watched Neil for a few breaths longer in silence. Then, in two short, decisive motions, Andrew pulled off his armbands.

Neil’s breath caught in his throat as Andrew reached out with one bare forearm to clasp Neil’s chin in his hand. It was implicit permission to look, at least a little. Andrew knew Neil had seen these scars before, of course. In the hospital. But it hadn’t been Andrew’s choice then. This wasn’t Neil seeing the scars, it was Andrew showing him, and it slowly clicked that that made all the difference.

It was like their game, in a way. A truth for a truth. A vulnerability for a vulnerability. Mutually assured destruction, or something else entirely.

“Okay,” Neil said quietly, and allowed Andrew to help him pull his shirt over his head, and then to unwind the bandages on his ribs, exposing every inch of scarred flesh.

He watched Andrew’s eyes map out his battered torso, a strange rage carefully checked behind his gaze. Andrew reached out slowly, settling his fingers first over the iron scar, where he had touched Neil before. When Neil didn’t pull away, his hand skimmed quietly over more smooth patches and harsh ridges: the thick ropey line that cut across Neil’s collarbone all the way to his waist; the star shaped bullet wound on his chest.

When he reached the wide swath of mottled skin on Neil’s side from where he had been forced to jump from a moving car, Andrew pressed his whole hand flat against it. He left it there meditatively, thumb skimming lightly over the texture of it, pressed along the bottom of Neil’s ribs just over his diaphragm, like he was feeling Neil breathe.

“The bruising’s on the other side,” Neil said quietly, reluctant to break the spell.

Andrew’s hand moved slowly across Neil’s ribs, prodding at the wide bruises with cool, clinical fingers, until he was satisfied they weren’t broken. Neil bit back his wince and the instinct to remind Andrew he had just been in a super-advanced hospital; strangely, he understood Andrew’s need to check the damage for himself.

Andrew wiped at scabs with an alcohol pad, then stood, pausing when he caught sight of what had been the deep slash across Neil’s shoulder blade. His hand reached out to rest near the stitches, a question in his gaze Neil could have ignored, but found he didn’t want to.

“My father’s knife,” he said simply. “When I made a break for it.”

Andrew nodded in something like satisfaction. Neil kept silent as Andrew cleaned the wound and re-bandaged it, re-wrapped his ribs, then moved on to his face.

The cuts were already healing, thanks to the hospital, but the burns were still an ugly mess. “Dashboard lighter,” Neil volunteered softly, stomach wobbling a little at the memory, and breathed though his nose as Andrew applied the burn cream with steady hands.

The same treatment went for his arms, and the mess of his hands. Neil nearly stopped breathing again as Andrew unwrapped them to reveal the damage. Andrew let go completely, but leaned forward until their foreheads here resting together. “Nothing’s broken,” he said flatly. “The rest will heal.” Neil nodded shakily, and Andrew stayed there until Neil gathered himself enough to pull back and let Andrew finish.
“Legs?” Andrew asked.

“My right calf,” Neil answered with a nod, allowing Andrew to push up the hem of his sweats to his knee, to clean and re-bandage that wound as well, jaw clenched at the sight of the deep, ugly bruising from the damaged muscle.

Neil was shaking and nauseous by the time it was done. His head was heavy, and he wanted nothing more than to sink into bed and not get up for days, but his body still felt shivery and unfocused. Unclean.

“I want to wash,” he said. Andrew shot him an unimpressed look.

“You are covered in cuts and burns, and you are about to fall asleep. It can wait until tomorrow.” Neil shook his head.

“I feel…I just want the dirt of that basement off of me,” he admitted. “I don’t feel clean. I want to wash.”

Andrew’s hand had come to rest against the right side of his face, where there were fewer injuries to be mindful of. “Turn to the side,” he said shortly, gesturing at the sink beside the toilet.

“What?”

“Hair,” Andrew said, and Neil understood it was an offer. A question.

“Oh. Okay. Yes.”

Neil shifted on the toilet seat, turning his body so he sat sideways on it, and Andrew helped guide his upper body back onto the sink’s edge, stuffing a towel under his neck as he went. Neil closed his eyes.

He was silent as Andrew turned on the faucet and grabbed Neil’s shampoo from the shower. The position was hell on his sore ribs, but the hot water on his scalp was heavenly, and Andrew’s methodical hands rubbing the soap through his hair weren’t a bad second. Neil sighed gently as Andrew rinsed out the suds, and wiped the rest of the dirt and sweat from his face with a damp rag. When he looked up, he found Andrew watching him closely.

“Hey,” Neil said quietly. And that was a question, too.

Andrew answered it the way Neil had hoped he would, cupping his face in one wide, wet palm and leaning down to kiss him soundly. It was everything they needed all at once: a battle declaration, a lullaby, a homecoming.

Andrew’s hand was cool against Neil’s scraped jaw, but his kiss felt hot enough to melt, like the sun was setting bright pink in Neil’s ribs, sinking into his stomach and leaving calm, glowing water behind. Neil kissed back feverishly, pushing up with his mouth until Andrew got the hint and helped pull him upright. When Andrew leaned back, the harsh bathroom light catching the line of his jaw, his throat, Neil leaned forward and kissed him there too, relishing the beating pulse beneath his lips, hiding a tiny smile in the soft skin when he felt Andrew’s shiver.

Andrew pulled back more fully, lightly grasping Neil’s bandaged wrists. Neil was momentarily worried he’d done something wrong, but then Andrew was carefully lifting Neil’s hands to frame his face, resting against his hair.

“Nowhere else,” Andrew said, and Neil’s heart surged as Andrew kissed him again. He dug his
bandaged fingers into Andrew’s hair, inhaling the scent of rubbing alcohol and cheap dye that lingered on his skin, and let himself be kissed until he could hardly think anymore.

When Andrew finally let him go, Neil found himself missing the warmth. He dried his hair with a towel and excused himself to change in the bedroom, but even with clean hair and clean clothes, he still didn’t feel quite—settled. He sat on the edge of the bed and tried to ignore the fear jarring under his skin, the strong desire to not be alone. He wasn’t alone, he reminded himself. Kevin was in his room downstairs, and Renee was crashing on the couch. Andrew would probably spend the night in the other bedroom.

“Get some sleep,” Andrew said from the doorway, jerking Neil out of his thoughts. Andrew was looking around. “This was my room, you know.”

“Do you want it back?” Neil asked dumbly. Andrew just rolled his eyes, but suddenly Neil couldn’t quite get the idea out of his head. “Do you want...to stay?” Andrew took a step into the room and stopped, a slight crease in his brows like he hadn’t meant to move.

“Andrew,” Fuck it, Neil really didn’t want to be alone tonight. Not when his father’s ghost was waiting in every shadow. “I’d like you to stay. Yes or no?”

“You’re going to have nightmares,” Andrew said.


Andrew left, and Neil told himself he wasn’t disappointed. He could get through the night alone. Andrew had done enough already, he didn’t need to put up with any more of Neil’s issues just now. But then Andrew returned a few minutes later, with an armful of blankets and a pillow, which he proceeded to drop on the floor next to the bed.

“I don’t like to be touched in my sleep,” Andrew said; an admission and an offer. He couldn’t stay in the bed with Neil, not while they were both still so on edge and Neil likely to wake up screaming. He’d seen Andrew lash out with his fists when woken accidentally from a nap—he knew Andrew’s caution was probably for Neil’s own safety, as much as for Andrew’s peace of mind.

Andrew couldn’t stay in the bed, but he would stay with Neil. Because Neil had asked. And maybe because he didn’t want to let Neil out of his sight any more then Neil wanted to let Andrew out of his.


“There is one more thing.”

“What?”

Andrew sat down on the edge of the bed. “Wymack called while you were asleep in the car. He had to tell the Bureau about your identity.”

Neil was on his feet before he quite knew what he was doing, but somehow Andrew’s steady, unbothered gaze just managed to hold him in place.

“Relax. He told them your identity,” Andrew repeated, tugging on the edge of Neil’s shirt to pull him back down to the bed before moving his hand to the back of Neil’s neck. “and he impressed upon them how vital you have been to this team, and how valuable your insight might continue to be, both in spite of and because of your identity. His words.”

Neil gripped his hands into the sheets painfully and willed down the edges of panic from his mind. In
“The higher ups agreed it would be too risky to have a consultant Wesninski running around,” Andrew said, and Neil didn’t miss the way he avoided Neil’s other first name, “but they’ve agreed to take on Neil Josten, in exchange for information.” Andrew’s hand squeezed tighter at the back of Neil’s neck. “You tell them what you know about the Butcher, help them take him the rest of the way down, stay and help the Foxes, and they will make you Neil Josten. For real and for good.”

Neil Abram Josten. For real and for good. It sounded too good to be true, but Andrew had never lied to him before, and Neil certainly didn’t think he had started now.

“Okay,” Neil said. Then, “Do you want to be there? It’s the story I should have told you months ago.”

“I think I have to,” Andrew said. “I’m not sure I trust you not to disappear right now.”

There was just enough energy left in Neil’s body to smile, and definitely not enough to hide it. “When do we start?” he asked.

“After we get some sleep,” Andrew said, standing. He paused at the side of the bed, and Neil smiled just a bit more.

“Yes,” he whispered, and let Andrew kiss him one more time before settling down to sleep. He watch Andrew arrange himself under the blankets, lying on his back, closed eyes facing the ceiling, and thought about how exhausted he must be, after dragging his team to another universe and back. But still he’d found the energy to help Neil see to his wounds. To wash his hair with almost gentleness. To kiss him soundly when it was the only thing left that mattered.

“Staring,” Andrew muttered, though he couldn’t possibly have known. Neil closed his eyes and let himself drift with less fear of the shadows.

Neil Abram Josten. For real and for good. He could get used to that.

Chapter End Notes

So! This is no longer the end of this fic, as the hiatus is over! This is, in fact, the official halfway point. (yeah the chapter count went up. for the last time, for real) The third act, so to speak, begins in the next chapter! Thanks for reading!

Up Next:

“It’s a weird one,” Neil called from behind the police tape as Andrew and Kevin approached. Andrew arched a brow. They were Foxes Division. When was it not?
Part 7, Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Andrew's POV. Warnings for brief descriptions of dead bodies.

Chapter Notes

This Bitch is Back!! It's only been like 9 months, but I finally got back in the saddle with this monster over Christmas, so here we go again!

It's been a hot minute, so if you have no idea what the fuck is going on anymore, you can check out FOXES Division: a Timeline, which I've posted in this series for easy reference. Lol.

So if you were with me for the whole first half and are back for more: Holy Shit! thank you so much and welcome back! If you are reading for the first time and somehow made it this far: Holy Shit! Thank you so much, and I hope the journey remains worth it. Here we go!

Part 7: Little Boxes bring us to the third quarter of this fic, and is partly based on Fringe S3E2 "The Box."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 7: Little Boxes

Chapter 1: Welcome Back, Andrew Minyard

The bell over the glass door tinkled cheerily as Andrew let himself into the empty front room of the unnamed psychic’s shop. The smell of incense surrounded him, familiar now, if still cloying. Under that, the faint, sharp scent of bleach. At least there was AC. June in Boston wasn’t unbearable, but it was uncomfortable, especially in Bureau-approved clothing.

“Hey Andrew!” a voice called from nowhere. Andrew fought an instinctive flinch before spotting the source of the greeting, half buried in a coat closet and partially obscured by the beaded curtain that blocked the hallway. The rest of her popped free a moment later, grinning and triumphantly clutching a lurid pink scarf in her fist.

“Oh man, LaLa is gonna love this.” Sara emerged fully from behind the beaded curtain. “Or hate it. Either way, fun Saturday.”

“I do not want to know,” Andrew said. “Also, I don’t have an appointment scheduled.” How did you know it was me? was the implied question. He’d only just called Bee before heading over when she said she had an hour free.
“Psychic, remember?” Sara said mischievously, rattling her armful of bracelets for effect. Then she laughed. “I’m joking dude. I heard your beast-mobile pull up, that’s all. I’ve been keeping my ears peeled lately, because the gang is coming back soon!” She flopped theatrically into a nearby chair, the violently pink scarf now draped around her neck.

“Ugh, it has been so lonely around here! LaLa’s been visiting family out in Cali, Jay’s been overseas on some sort of research and recon mission.” She pointed an accusatory finger at Andrew. “You, Mini-man-yard-”

“-Do not call me that-”

“-you have been the most regular face around here besides the good doc herself for months, and you’re zero fun!”

“What a tragedy for you,” Andrew said, when it seemed like she was done. Or at least paused. “Is she here?”

“Out running a quick errand, she’ll be back in a few. You can let yourself in,” Sara waved a hand toward the curtained hall. Then, adopting an outrageously fake British accent, “Feel free to put the kettle on!”

She let him glare at her for an impressive ten seconds before groaning. “Come on, Double-O Half-Pint, we’re on the same side here! We should be friends!”

“I really never agreed to that,” Andrew said dryly.

“Is that how you make your friendships? Formal agreement? Yeesh, dude.”

“I-“ Andrew ground his teeth to keep himself from saying something unnecessarily cruel. Bee seemed to like this woman, for whatever reason. Andrew could be civil. “I am going to see myself into the office now.”

“I’ll let the doc know. Ta!”

With that, Andrew was allowed to escape into the sweet quiet of Bee’s second office. They’d been meeting here most of the time since he’d first met ‘Debby Tessono.’ It was easier, for some reason. It felt too weird, to talk about preternatural abilities and alternate universes in the same suburban office where he’d fretted about his sexuality and what the hell he was going to do after college. So instead they met here, and talked about everything.

Andrew did ‘put the kettle on’ before getting settled. Bee had given him the key to that particular drawer the last time he’d been here, so he pulled out the supplies for cocoa and got the electric kettle going. Bee showed up just as the water was boiling.

“So,” Bee said, once they were settled in with their drinks and had exchanged pleasantries. “Three weeks. How are you feeling? No cane today, I see.”

Andrew had gone back to the collapsible cane for a bit when pure exhaustion had rekindled his hip injury, but he hadn’t used it in a couple of days now.

“I think the warmer weather is helping,” he said. He took a moment to consider everything else.

Three weeks After. That was how he’d been thinking about it in his head. After; capital A. Three weeks since Andrew’s entire world had been turned inside out. Since Andrew had been injected with a super drug. Since Neil had been kidnapped. Since Andrew had travelled into another universe
to get him back.

“I’m back to my normal amount of energy, I think. And I think I’ve…processed everything. Mostly. It doesn’t feel like my brain is trying to panic all the time anymore. I have another two weeks mandatory medical leave, and an optional one afterward, but I don’t think I’ll need it.”

The first few days had been rough. Once they had gotten on that plane to Los Angeles, everything had happened so fast none of them had really stopped to breathe. Andrew had gotten Neil back, gotten him through his official FBI statement interviews, and then they’d both crashed. Hard.

Andrew had spent most of that first week back on a suspiciously new air mattress Nicky “lent him,” on the floor of Neil’s room, with Neil alternating between sleeping restlessly and going out to pace the house for hours at a time. Andrew had felt like he should help, but he was too tired. Half the time it had felt like he could hardly move. His mind flipped randomly between racing spirals and static, and everything hurt. Bee had made house calls. Nicky had made soup. Renee had set a grim watch at the top of the stairs with a walkie talkie paired to one on Neil’s bedside table. They’d gotten through the week, somehow.

Every day after that was a little easier. It would probably be a long time before anything really felt right again, but that Andrew was used to. He would take what he could get.

“I am… I’m all right, Bee.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Bee said. “How is being back in your own apartment?”

Andrew had moved back out of the house in Cambridge five days ago. He’d stayed on that air mattress on Neil’s floor until one night Neil had murmured, with something that wasn’t quite a kiss but wasn’t quite not one pressed to the tips of Andrew’s fingers, “you don’t have to keep staying, if you don’t want to.”

Andrew didn’t do anything he didn’t want to do. Then again, he wasn’t sure he knew what he wanted, but he did know he needed a real bed again eventually. He’d moved his things back to his apartment the next day. He’d been surprised by how uncomfortable it had been at first, to go to sleep again without the sound of Neil’s breathing just a few feet away.

“I get a little paranoid, being alone,” he admitted. “But the quiet has been nice. I still see plenty of Neil and the others without living with them. It’s what we need, for things to get back to normal.”

“Can they?” Bee asked mildly.

“What do you mean?”

“You and Neil. Your relationship-“ Andrew scoffed, but Bee held up a hand, asking for his patience. He folded his arms, nodding for her to continue. “Your relationship with Neil, whatever that may be at this point, has changed. There is no back to normal. There is only whatever comes next, creating your new normal. I want to encourage you to think about what it is you want, and talk to him about it, so that you can move toward that future on purpose.”

That was something he and Bee had talked about a lot, back in his college days. Making his life on purpose.

“I’ll think about it.”

They talked a bit more about Neil, and the others, and some new focusing exercises Bee wanted him to try.
“Is there anything else you wanted to talk about, Andrew? You called me for a session rather suddenly, and I get the sense we haven’t really gotten to it yet.”

Bee never did miss anything. Andrew shifted in his seat, hands rubbing over his forearms. He wished he still had a warm mug in his hands, but more cocoa would probably make him sick at this point.

“Cortexiphan.”

“Ah,” Bee said softly, setting down her notepad. She laid her pen precisely across the top, then settled back in her chair, folding her hands.

“I assume what you want to talk about is the idea of taking it again. The idea Kevin had about a regimen to create a permanent presence of it in your system?”

She didn’t sound judgmental. But then, she hardly ever did. That didn’t mean she approved.

“Yes.”

“I still don’t know a lot about it,” Bee admitted. “I’ve read through all the research Allison Reynolds and Kevin were able to give me. But it’s full of research biases, little of it is anything approaching long term, and none of it is on adults. We can extrapolate, make educated guesses, but we have almost no data that could tell us how your body and mind might react to long term treatment.”

She paused meaningfully. “And the little data we do have is not a ringing endorsement.”

She meant, of course, Andrew’s own recent dosing, and his subsequent crash. And nightmares. And hyperawareness, and the occasional migraine, and a host of other tiny annoying symptoms that they might or might not be connected to the Cortexiphan at all.

“I think,” Andrew said slowly, “A lot of that was from the shit I did while on the Cortexiphan, not the drug itself. The crazy rescue mission crap. Pushing myself past my limits.

“And looking back the thing is...Before all that, before the hotel, even before I had the breakthrough, there were these few hours of...clarity. Like the world was coming into focus.” Andrew scrubbed a tired hand through his hair. “I probably felt more clearly in those few hours than the last few years of my life.”

Wasn’t that what all these years of fucking therapy were supposed to be for, anyway? To make him function properly, feel and act like a normal human being?

When he looked up, Bee had her thinking face on. “You know I’ve never felt your mental illness presents like any of the traditional models of depression,” she began carefully. “I’ve told you it more closely resembles the depressive aspects of bipolar disorder-“

“Except I’ve never had any of the other aspects,” Andrew interrupted. Yeah, they’d had this talk before.

“Exactly,” Bee agreed. “I wonder, now, if your childhood exposure to Cortexiphan might explain that. The drug is meant to expand the mind. Your brain forged new, unusual pathways while you were on it, connected parts of the brain that don’t work together that way in most people. But when you left the trial and the drug left your system, those pathways suddenly became blocked. It’s like your brain hasn’t been able to communicate with itself the way it taught itself to, to act as a whole the way it should.”
Andrew stared at her, slightly disbelieving. “You’re saying starting and stopping that shit…what, gave me my mental illness? And that starting it again might just…fix me?” His voice came out stupid. Raw and uncertain. Bee smiled sadly.

“You know it’s not that simple, Andrew. And you know how I feel about the idea of us having to ‘fix’ you,” she chided gently. “No, you had an extremely difficult childhood. Abandonment, abuse, neglect. That kind of trauma would leave a mark on anyone. And you may have a genetic predisposition to these kinds of issues, we don’t really know.” Thanks, Tilda-and-Unknown-Minyard.

“That said,” Bee continued, and Andrew sat up straighter at her tone, “It’s possible that reintroducing Cortexiphan into your system allowed your brain to reopen those old pathways, to act as a whole the way it wants to. It won’t fix you, but it might… remove some of the roadblocks that have been in the way of your healing.”

Huh.

“Plus I might become an X-Man.”

Bee laughed lightly. “It seems that is also a possibility, yes.”

Well, what harm was there in trying? How much more fucked up could his brain get, anyway?

“Sounds worth a shot to me.”

Andrew didn’t end up taking the extra week leave, because they got called in on a case, but maybe he should have.

He got the text from Neil at noon on a Saturday two weeks later -five weeks After- and it was almost a relief from pacing a hole in the floor of his apartment. He hadn’t been sleeping well since they’d started the Cortexiphan. Doses were every other day, and even though the worst of the unpleasant high wore off in a few hours, it never felt like enough time for Andrew to get back to normal. He always felt like he was feeling too much, and it left his brain racing at night, trying to figure out how the hell to rest. Bee suggested he was adjusting to a new emotional and sensory baseline. She was probably right, but that didn’t mean Andrew had to like it.

So the case was a relief, but it was also going to suck, because Andrew was exhausted. Well, nothing he hadn’t worked through before. He grabbed his gun and keys and headed out. Neil had apparently been in the lab going over a new case flagging system with Wymack when the case call had come in, and taken the bus to the scene. Andrew met him there, swinging by the house to pick up Kevin on the way.

“It’s a weird one,” Neil called from behind the police tape as Andrew and Kevin approached. Andrew arched a brow. They were Foxes Division. When was it not?

They scene was a small house in the suburbs, completely unremarkable in every way. White siding, blue shutters, pink impatiens getting too much sun in the window boxes. Neil, who had clearly used his temporary contractor’s badge with eagerness, had already gotten the story from the officers on the scene, and led them down to the basement.

It wasn’t the most gruesome scene Andrew had witnessed by any stretch of the imagination, but Neil was right. It was extremely odd. The house, according to Neil, belonged to the Smethwick’s, family of four. All four – mother, father, and two teenage children – were present in the basement. Their hands and ankles had been tied, and they were seated against the far wall. All four were dead.
They weren’t the only bodies in the basement. There were two more, and they were fairly obviously the ones who had tied the Smethwicks up in the first place. They were ugly men, hired thugs by their variety of old scars, faded tattoos, and cheap clothes. They were collapsed at the opposite side of the room from the Smethwick family, one on either side of a freshly dug hole in the dirt floor.

“Weird, right?” Neil said from next to Andrew. Andrew offered a small assenting hum in response. There were no obvious signs of violence on any of the bodies, other than the rope around the family’s hands and feet and a nosebleed on one of the kids. No one had reported gunshots, and neither of the hired thugs were carrying knives. It could have been poison, Andrew supposed, or some kind of gas, but if that was the case, the thugs had somehow gotten caught in it too.

Andrew approached the side of the room where the thugs’ bodies lay and crouched down by the hole. It was small, maybe a foot deep and a little more than that wide, but Andrew’s eye caught on the texture at the bottom of it.

“There was a third man,” he called out to Neil, gesturing him over with a jerk of his head. “The dirt at the bottom of the hole is packed flat,” Andrew continued, pointing when Neil was close enough to see. “It’s much too smooth to have been made by a shovel. And look, you can just see the indents of corners.”

Neil crouched down and leaned close over Andrew’s shoulder, enough that Andrew could just feel his body heat but not close enough to touch. Andrew shifted himself to the side, a little pointedly. Neil backed up a few more inches, eyes still on the hole in the floor.

“You don’t think these guys were trying to bury something. You think they were digging something up,” Neil said, “Some kind of box?”

“And,” Andrew prompted. Neil frowned, but then his head jerked up to meet Andrew’s gaze, his eyes slightly wide. Andrew’s stomach clenched a little.

Since their return, Neil had given up the drab brown contacts and hair dye he had been covering himself with for years. With his real father dead, and the case against the other Butcher growing stronger by the day with the evidence Neil had provided, he had finally allowed himself to stop hiding, at least in this one small way. Andrew was pleased, but sometimes seeing those eyes up close, blue as a promise, still knocked the breath out of him.

Andrew stuffed his hands in his pockets to get a hold of himself. They were at a crime scene, for god’s sake.

“And if there was something buried here, but it’s not here now, someone must have taken it,” Neil said, a satisfied expression spreading slowly across his face. “Therefore – a third thief. I guess that’s probably who killed everyone too, then.”

“Maybe.”

That had been Andrew’s thought as well, but he didn’t like to jump to conclusions, especially with Foxes cases. He stood to dust the basement dirt off the knees of his pants. Kevin was across the room, examining the bodies of the family, and Andrew went to see if he was having any luck.

“We’ll need to take these bodies back to the lab,” Kevin said from where he was crouched down by Mr. Smethwick, as though Andrew didn’t already know that.

“All five?” he asked, just to be a shit.

Kevin narrowed his eyes. “If we don’t examine all five, we could miss important pieces of evidence!
I don’t want to draw conclusions based on an incomplete data set, if we make mistakes, who knows what could-“

“Shut up, Kevin,” Neil offered cheerfully from behind them. “You’ll get your corpses. Techs are dusting for prints, but so far nothing. You find anything useful so far, Kev?”

Kevin huffed, but he tucked the swab he had been using on the husband into a small plastic sleeve and stood as well. “I won’t know the extent of the damage until I can get them back to the lab. But so far I don’t see signs of poison or weapon trauma. Maybe some kind of gas, but I’d need to run samples.”

Andrew took a last look around the empty dirt basement. There was nothing more for them to find there. He checked his watch.

“Kevin, if you want to go to the lab you can get a ride with the crew. Renee or Nicky will meet you if you need them to,” he said.

“Why, where are you going?”

Andrew gestured with his watch. “Saturday night. Got a hot date with a syringe full of psychogoop. Gotta keep the schedule regular, right? I’ll be at the lab tomorrow morning.” He threw a glance at Neil, standing next to him. “Neil, need a ride?”

“Shotgun,” Neil said solemnly, already turning toward the door. Andrew was pretty sure Boyd had taught him that one. He’d taken to saying it recently, even at times like these, when he was going to be the only other person in the car. Andrew refused to admit he found it endearing.

Neil paused at the bottom of the staircase, leaning into Andrew’s space. “Hot date huh?” he murmured.

“Shut up,” Andrew said, shoving past him, and led the way up the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

Making up terrible nicknames for Andrew is my favorite thing. Ok.

It’s been an age and a half since I’ve worked on this fic, but it is so gratifying to be back. I hope to be able to keep up with a regular update schedule, probably posting on Saturdays or Sundays in the future, and bang the rest of this baby out! The year and a half-ish I’ve been writing for this fandom has honestly been life changing, so I hope you’ll stick out this story with me. It means the world. Thanks for reading!

Up Next:

‘...when their mugs were empty, there was nothing left to do but get down to business. Dose seven out of ten.’
Chapter Summary

Neil's POV. Some descriptions of needles, but nothing graphic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2: Welcome, Neil Josten

The car ride back to Andrew’s apartment was quiet. Peaceful. Neil followed Andrew up the stairs in silence. After two weeks of this, there was a routine to it all. Every other day they went through these motions. Neil went over the Andrew’s apartment. Andrew brewed two cups of decaf coffee while Neil got the little insulated bag and med kit out of the locked cooler tucked in a bottom cabinet, purchased just for this. The cord that plugged it into the wall trailed awkwardly out of the cabinet and up to the outlet next to the sink. Neil kept the only key; Andrew had asked him to.

Neil had gotten good at his part of their routine. By the time the med kit was prepped and sitting on the living room coffee table, the coffee was only half done brewing. Neil returned to the kitchen, leaning against the counter as the two of them listened to the coffee maker bubble and drip. Andrew stepped in front of him. He looked more tired than he should have from just a few hours of being on the job. Maybe they both should have taken that extra week after all.

Andrew reached up a hand and laid it on Neil’s burned cheek. The skin was half-numb, and Andrew’s hands were always cold, but the pressure of the touch still felt like it warned him through. Neil leaned down just enough to bump their foreheads together, and let Andrew bridge the remainder of the gap between them.

This was a part of the routine, too. Familiar and welcome. Andrew kissed with an earnestness belied by his habitual apathy, hot and insistent and present in a way Neil knew they both sometimes struggled to feel. It was impossible to disconnect, with Andrew’s mouth on his. It was impossible not to feel every inch of his body that was touching or close to touching Andrew’s. It was impossible to feel anything but real. Neil let himself melt into it as the kiss gentled, slipping careful hands into Andrew’s hair, rubbing one thumb over the fragile skin at his temple.

Eventually, the soft beep of the coffee pot drew Andrew back. His cheeks and lips were pink as he turned to pour their drinks, carrying their mugs to the living room with Neil trailing behind. They settled in their usual spots. Andrew sat sideways in the corner of the couch where he could still see the door over the half-wall separating the kitchen. The stand holding the IV bag of red fluid was already next to his spot. Neil got the other end of the couch, facing the windows. Andrew’s gun went on the coffee table beside the neatly arranged med kit.

They drank their coffee with minimal conversation. Mostly Neil shared stories about what Andrew had missed at the house since he’d left. He had gone back to the community exy game last week, Kevin managing to tag along even though Neil hadn’t mentioned he was going. It hadn’t been the same without Andrew, but it had still been fun. Kevin was working up the nerve to ask Thea on a date. Andrew promised to do a background check - or threatened to, maybe. With Andrew, they
were often one and the same.

Then, when their mugs were empty, there was nothing left to do but get down to business. Dose seven out of ten.

Andrew shrugged out of his work-approved button down and rolled down the top edge of one armband. Neil privately thought it was the most human he ever looked, or maybe just the most vulnerable, in just an undershirt still tucked into his slacks, his sock-covered toes curling into the couch cushions. It felt like a privilege, getting to see him like this. Neil didn’t take a second of it for granted.

Neil snapped on a pair of sterile gloves before tying off the rubber tourniquet and wiping down the translucent skin of Andrew’s elbow with an alcohol pad. He had a funny urge to press his lips there, where the blue veins were peeking through. Someday, he thought. Someday, perhaps. Then he wiped down his own gloved hands again for good measure before prepping the syringe.

“Ready?” he asked quietly.

“Whatever.”

“Andrew.”

“For fuck’s sake Neil.”

They did this every time. Neil didn’t know if it was a test or not. He wasn’t even sure Andrew knew. Eventually, like always, Andrew sighed. “Yes. Go ahead.”

Neil pricked the needle carefully into Andrew’s vein. He held still just long enough for Neil to attach the tubing before slumping backward into the corner of the couch. Andrew’s face pulled tight at the sensation of the cold liquid rushing into him, and then went slack. He was asleep in moments. Neil packed the med kit away as quietly as he could before settling back down in his corner of the couch. Now there was nothing to do but keep watch.

Neil pulled out his phone and tried to distract himself with a game, but trying to lose himself in Tetris or Candy Crush or whatever just made him feel more restless than before. He went over the flagging system he’d worked on with Wymack again for a bit, and made a few notes for later, but eventually gave up and tucked the phone away.

Andrew was deeply asleep now, snoring a little from the awkward angle of his neck. His hair, slightly too blond and a bit fried despite Renee’s best efforts from dying it back from jet black, was going to be a riot by the time he woke up. Neil smiled just thinking about it. (Renee had done Neil’s hair at the same time as Andrew’s, though that was at the insistence of the Bureau. They wanted him to look exactly like himself, never mind that that was the last thing Neil wanted. Even though he wasn’t running anymore, the sight of reddish hair in the mirror had still sent him into a panic when she’d first done it. And for a few mornings after. The solemn way Andrew had touched it had helped a little. The serious way he’d said Neil Abram Josten, as he’d done it had helped a little more.)

It had been five weeks now, since everything, and it had felt like the longest month of Neil’s life. When they’d made it back into this universe, Neil had scraped secrets he’d held in for decades out to the FBI like so much guts, and then he’d hit a wall. The week that had followed was hazy at best in Neil’s mind, but the memories he did have stank of sweat and paranoia, barely eased by the ability to turn and see Andrew a few feet away. Not exactly the ideal conditions to being a relationship. Or whatever this thing was.
“What are we doing?” Neil had asked one night, shivering weakly in Andrew’s arms in the upstairs bathroom of the house in Cambridge, his face tucked into the curve of Andrew’s neck. The stitches in his shoulder were now out. Andrew had done the job, though only after walking in on Neil dripping blood onto the bathroom tile trying to remove them himself. Andrew had re-bandaged Neil, and then he’d kissed him, their first real proper kiss since the last time in this bathroom, Neil’s shirt puddled on the cold tile floor.

Andrew’s hands trailed absent patterns over Neil’s back. He was quiet for so long Neil wasn’t sure he was going to answer.

“I don’t know,” He’d said eventually. “Do you want…” Neil had felt Andrew swallow beside his ear. “Do you want to stop?”

“No,” Neil had whispered, hands tightening where they were curled in the hem of Andrew’s sweater.

“Oh,” Andrew had said. But that had been the last night Andrew had slept in Cambridge. They hadn’t talked about it since.

And that was fine. They didn’t need to talk about it, really, it was just – Neil hadn’t ever done this before. He didn’t think Andrew really had either, but Neil hadn’t done any of this. He’d been certain for years that he just wasn’t built for feelings like this, desires like this. He wasn’t sure why Andrew was different, and didn’t particularly care, but there was a part of his brain that understood that this wasn’t something that was going to happen for him again anytime soon. Whatever he had with Andrew, it was unique. Special. He didn’t want to fuck it up. The problem was he wasn’t really sure what it was he was trying not to fuck up, which led to an awful lot of guesswork.

He wanted to kiss Andrew all the time. Be near Andrew all the time. Maybe that wasn’t surprising. Nicky had once called him an ‘angry, touch-starved kitten.’ But it wasn’t about sex, or even touch, not always. He and Andrew had, somehow, simply been caught in each other’s gravity, pulled like stars into a binary orbit Neil was helpless to break from, and didn’t want to. It was horrifying by every metric he’d been raised on. It was the safest he had ever felt.

Andrew stirred back awake around 6 pm.

“Hey,” Neil said, reaching out to remove the needle from Andrew’s arm. The drip only lasted twenty minutes or so, but he knew better than to try to take it out while Andrew was sleeping. Deftly, he held a gauze square over the small puncture with one thumb as he slipped the needle out, then secured it down with a bit of med tape. “You’ve been out for an hour and a half. How do you feel?”

Andrew blinked sluggishly up at him – at some point he’d slumped down until he was lying almost horizontal, his head resting on the arm of the couch. He rubbed one hand over his jaw, then flapped a vague hand in Neil’s direction. Forming words was difficult for Andrew in this state, Neil had learned.

“How do you feel?” More blinking. Something that might have been an attempt at a shrug. “You should sit up and drink some water. Come on.” Neil held out his arm. Andrew glared weakly, but grabbed on and allowed Neil to help haul him into a sitting position and pass him a bottle of water, already uncapped.

“How do you feel?” Neil asked again, when the bottle was half empty. He knew Andrew sort of hated the questioning, but it seemed pertinent, all things considered. Andrew leaned his head to the side, sagging into the couch. When Andrew spoke, his voice was stilted, heavy.
“You know when you go to the eye doctor and they dilate your pupils?” Neil did not know. Andrew seemed to work that out from his silence. “Never been to an eye doctor, have you? ‘Course not. Have you ever been to any doctor?”

Neil assumed he had gone to a pediatrician at some point, for vaccinations if nothing else. But he didn’t have any memories of it. “I was in a hospital just last month.”

Andrew prodded him hard in the side with his foot for that one, which Neil supposed he deserved. “I recall. Well, it feels like my whole brain is dilated. Just, blown wide open. Too much coming in at once, even for me.”

Somehow, Andrew’s feet had nudged their way into Neil’s lap. The weight and feel of Andrew’s bony heels digging into his thighs was unfamiliar, but not uncomfortable. The only problem was what to do with his hands. Neil hovered one hand out, looking at him in question. When Andrew just closed his eyes tiredly, Neil took that as his answer, resting his hand over Andrew’s ankle and the top of his foot. Andrew let out a long breath, but otherwise didn’t move. Something warm bubbled up in Neil’s chest.

They stayed just like that until the world called on them, which in reality was just a few minutes later, when Neil’s phone pinged with text from Chief Wymack. He frowned as he read the message on the small screen.

“What is it?” Andrew asked.

“Chief wants us to come in.”

Andrew hummed. “Chief knows I just had my brain juiced, right? He knows I shouldn’t work for twelve hours afterward.” They’d discovered that quickly. Fresh doses of Cortexiphan meant the threat of sensory overload, not to mention easier access to Andrew’s more unnatural abilities. Andrew hadn’t caused any serious damage, that first time, but the couch still had an unpleasant burned smell to it.

“He has the schedule, yeah,” Neil agreed, muttering to himself as he read through the rest of the message. “Kevin; brain something something something; ear canals something; security cam footage, flags on– oh.”

“Oh?”

Neil nodded, still scrolling. “Kevin thinks he knows how the Smethwicks died. That's not all though. You know that face flagging system I was working on with Wymack yesterday?”

Andrew didn’t say no, which Neil figured was the closest to an affirmative he was going to get right now.

“It’s designed to look for cases relating to the Machine. Apparently, we aren’t the first people to have a case involving a box like this. They’ve been cropping up for months. People die, different ways every time, but always the same pattern. Boxes, about a foot square, dug out of the ground. The boxes always disappear.”

Neil felt a wave of unsteadiness. There was only one explanation he could think of. “I think the Boxes are parts of the Machine.”

Andrew sat the rest of the way up and swung his feet onto the floor, grimacing. “You’re driving.”
There was the sound of shattering glass, and then fragments of fluorescent tubing were fluttering down from the ceiling, only visible through the flashing of the weak emergency lights.

Andrew’s head hurt. His hands hurt, too, which was weird. Then he looked down at them.

“Shit,” he muttered.
Part 7, chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV, warning for descriptions of mental distress (sensory overload I guess?) and some light gore

Chapter Notes

Holy shoot thanks so much for everyone who has come back to this fic or found it for the first time :) Your encouraging comments and kudos mean the world to me, and have made me so excited about writing and sharing the rest of this story!

Part 7, Chapter 3: Turned Tables

There was a reason Andrew didn’t do this. If Andrew had felt like his brain’s reception had been turned up too high in his dim, calm, quiet apartment, it was nothing on being in the lab after dark. The fluorescent lights were too bright. The air smelled of blood, guts, and ammonia, despite the ventilation system running at full. And the ventilation system was loud.

All six bodies were laid out on their own tables, and Nicky was taking pictures with his usual green expression. Wymack was standing awkwardly off to the side, hands clasped in front of himself. He was clearly trying to look official and stern instead ofgrossed out, but mostly landing somewhere in the range of constipated. Kevin removed the final brain, pulling it from the skull it belonged to with a disgusting squelching sound and settling it in a metal bowl.

“God I really hate that sound,” Nicky muttered, then brightened when he saw Andrew and Neil had arrived. “Oh thank goodness, Andrew can you take over camera duties? I found an amazing Mexican place at lunch and I’d really rather not ruin the memory by hurling it onto this table.”

Smoking was probably a bad idea right now anyway, with the headache the lights and sound were already giving him. At least taking pictures would be something to focus on. Focusing helped. Andrew held out his hand silently and accepted the camera.

“Thank you thank you thank you thank you,” Nicky exhaled in a rush. “Okay. I’m gonna go get a ginger ale from the vending machine or something. Be back in a few.” With that, he was dashing out the door.

“Thanks for coming in, Josten. Minyard.” Wymack said into the silence that followed. Neil probably said something in response. Andrew thought he heard a him ask a few questions, and Wymack give a few answers. Andrew just waved the camera in Wymack’s direction in acknowledgement, and focused on the task at hand.

Andrew held up the camera and peered through the lens. Breathe in, breathe out, snap picture.
“So Kev, what’s with the rush?” Neil asked, coming back over as Kevin continued to slice into the throat of one of the victims. The smell of congealing blood was heavy, from this close. Even when Andrew tried to breathe mostly through his mouth, he thought he could still feel it on his tongue.

“I think I know how they died,” Kevin said. “Or, I have a theory. All of these bodies were bleeding from their ears. I had to get inside the skulls to confirm, but all six seem to have acute trauma to the inner ear, along with hemorrhaging in areas of the brain.”

Breathe in, breathe out, snap picture. In, out, snap.

“What does that mean?” Neil asked. “They were killed by—what, a sonic boom?”

“No,” Kevin scoffed.

Andrew paused long enough in his picture taking rhythm to glance up and see that Kevin and Neil had already reached their routine impasse. It happened whenever Neil drew what Kevin considered to be a layman’s conclusion. Neil didn’t like admitting he didn’t know something. Kevin was trying not to belittle Neil quite so much for his lack of education, but wasn’t particularly gifted at positive reinforcement. Or non-insults in general, really. It had only gotten worse in recent weeks.

“What killed them then, Kevin?” Andrew prompted when he was bored of the standoff.

“It was sound,” Kevin admitted. “But not a sonic boom. That would have been heard by the whole neighborhood, and we would have found shattered windows at the scene. I think this was an ultrasonic frequency pulse of some kind. Much higher than the human ear can hear, but extraordinarily destructive.”

Andrew lowered the camera. “Even if that was the case, wouldn’t something like that have also caused other noticeable destruction? Messing with electronic systems, that kind of thing?”


“Unless the call was coming from inside the house!” Nicky burst back through the doors, ginger ale in hand, voice ricocheting painfully against the stone walls. Andrew winced. Nicky rolled his eyes at the confused look on Neil’s face. “Come on, Kevin, way to bury the lead there, huh?”

“Explain,” Andrew said tersely. He was getting nauseous. He could feel Wymack eyeing him.

“Well,” Nicky said, hopping up on the nearest empty counter and putting on what Andrew recognized as his “conspiracy theorist” voice, “We know it seems like everyone in that room was killed by like, a killer dog whistle, right? And it seems like a sound that dangerous should have done other damage. Unless…the sound came from inside the basement.”

It made sense. The basement walls would have insulated the rest of the neighborhood from the effects of the pitch.

“So, some kind of sound weapon?” Neil posited. “That must be what’s in the box. Most of them have been deadly, apparently. But then, how did the third thief escape?”

They’d confirmed that the security system at the Smethwick’s house had only registered the door opening and closing twice that morning: once for the thieves to enter, and once for whoever had escaped to leave. So it wasn’t like someone could have come in after the weapon was deployed. Whatever had happened, the missing thief had been there for it.

“Well we- wait. Most of them?” Nicky cut himself off. “There are more?”
Wymack stepped in and helped Neil explained to Nicky what the flagging system had found: a half-dozen or so unconnected cases from around the country - and he suspected there were more around the world that weren’t being picked up by their system - had been appearing in recent months. They had always been buried. They always seemed to cause death. They always seemed to go missing before the authorities could figure out what to do with them.

“So, the box is probably some kind of sound-based weapon. Or at least it’s acting like one in its current state. But what about the third thief?” Neil repeated, steering them back on track.

“We haven’t actually figured that out yet,” Nicky admitted. Andrew twitched in growing irritation. His head was pounding thickly. He didn’t want to be here. He wanted to be at home in his apartment, sitting in the dark, maybe with Neil by his side. He curled his hands around the edge of a counter to keep them from forming fists.

“This is what you dragged us out here for?” he demanded. The lights were flickering now: had the weather picked up? He closed his eyes against the flickering. Goddammit, why was the world intent on making his night hell? “To tell us the victims ear canals were ruptured and they might have been killed by a sound weapon, which might have been inside the basement, which might have been somehow wielded by the third thief? How the fuck was that not something you could have relayed over the phone?”

“Minyard, I know this was your night off,” Wymack said sternly, his voice echoing like a church bell around Andrew’s skull. “But if you have a problem with being called in you take it to me, you hear? Kevin isn’t-”

“It was in important development in the case!” Kevin interrupted insistently. Andrew’s head felt like someone had taken his spine and twisted it like a wrung out rag. He tightened his hands around the cool edge of the stone counter, just holding on, fighting to keep his breathing deep and even. He could still see the lights flickering through his closed eyelids; what the fuck was wrong with them? And why wouldn’t Kevin just shut up? “The intricacies of scientific discovery can’t be relayed properly over the phone, who knows what we might miss if we just-”

“Kevin,” Neil’s voice broke in, low and tense, “shut it.”

But apparently Kevin wasn’t feeling cooperative.

“No, Neil. Just because you want to spend the night in doesn’t mean we get to shirk our duties to science! What if we treated all our cases with this kind of lackadaisical attitude? If we’d treated your case that way, who knows how long it would have taken for us to find-”

Kevin didn’t get a chance to finish that thought. Andrew saw bright red behind his eyelids as the lights flashed. There was the sound of shattering glass. Darkness, and then fragments of fluorescent tubing were fluttering down from the ceiling, only visible through the flashing of the weak emergency lights.

Andrew’s head hurt. His hands hurt, too, which was weird. He opened his eyes and looked down at them.

“Shit,” he muttered.

His hands were a mess. There were gouged cuts and raw patches across his palms; his knuckles were scraped and oozing, dripping onto the stone floor. The blooded was welling up through a layer of fine grey dust. At his feet, chunks of crumbled black granite – the lab counter. Which Andrew had apparently broken, crumbling like it was clodded mud rather than polished stone.
“Andrew.” Neil appeared in front of him, frowning in concern. Like there was something he should be doing to help. Andrew didn’t meet his gaze, focusing instead on the burns in his cheek, which were...moving? That couldn’t be right. He didn’t bother checking for Wymack, Kevin or Nicky’s expressions. He didn’t want to know.

“I am going,” Andrew said with finality. He hadn’t even taken his jacket off anyway. He turned toward the door without waiting for argument. He heard the muffled sounds of Neil and Kevin arguing behind him, but no one tried to stop him. Why would they?

“Andrew.” Neil again. Somehow he had gotten between Andrew and the door. How long had Andrew been standing there? Andrew blinked at him, and Neil held up one hand. The keys to the Maserati were dangling from his finger. “I drove, remember?”

Right, Andrew needed the keys. He held out his hand. It was oozing vaguely, for some reason. Neil scoffed incredulously. “Like hell, Andrew,” he said. “I’m driving you home. Come on.”

Andrew felt his hackles rise halfheartedly at Neil’s tone. He really should argue with that, he knew he should. He just couldn’t remember why. The inside of his head felt like ringing white screen at the end of a tape, too blank and painfully loud at once. So eventually he gave up, and let Neil lead him home.

Andrew woke up the next morning to the sun already fully risen. The clock, when he managed to roll over and find it, told him it was already half past nine. His phone was on the bedside table, blinking with unread message notifications. He reached for it to turn it off – and found hands wrapped in neat white gauze.

What the hell had happened last night? Andrew sat up and flexed his fingers experimentally. There was pain, but all of it felt surface level. No structural damage, as far as he could tell. He would have to take the bandages off to get a better look. That, however, would have to wait until after coffee. At least his head felt clearer. There was still a headache threatening to resurface at the back of his skull, but it no longer felt like the whole structure was about to go full Scanners on him. He dragged himself out of bed and went to get coffee started.

He was halfway to the kitchen when something moved in the corner of his vision. His hand flew to his hip, searching for a gun that wasn’t there before-

“Morning.” Neil was sitting up on his sofa. Actually, now that Andrew looked, there was already coffee in the pot, and a bag of what smelled like delivery breakfast sandwiches on the counter.

“I don’t remember giving you a key to this place,” Andrew said. Neil stared.

“Yeah, no I- I spent the night here?” Neil looked slightly uncomfortable, but ready to hold his ground. “You were pretty out of it last night. I thought about just bringing you to Cambridge but I figured you’d rather wake up at home. And I know you didn’t really give me permission to stay here but I don’t know I just...didn’t want to leave you like that.”

He was looking at Andrew like - like Andrew needed to be worried about. Like he deserved to be worried about, or even if he didn’t Neil was going to do it anyway, out of sheer stubbornness if he had to. Andrew couldn’t handle being stared at like that anymore. He turned away to pour himself a coffee, taking too long to stir in the excess of sugar and cream. Even when that activity had been stretched to its extreme, he stood facing the counter rather than Neil, sipping the hot coffee slowly. The warmth of the mug seeped through the gauze wrapping his hands. He couldn’t avoid facing this much longer.
Begrudgingly, Andrew returned to the living room and sat himself in the armchair, facing Neil, his coffee mug raised like a shield between them.

“I suppose I have you to thank for these?” he asked, wiggling his wrapped fingers around the mug. Neil nodded.

“You scraped them up pretty badly on the counter. Kevin’s not sure how you didn’t tear anything, actually, but it seems to be all surface damage. I helped you get them washed and wrapped last night.” He frowned. “You don’t remember?”

The events Neil was describing didn’t sound…unfamiliar. He thought he remembered blood, discomfort, and Neil’s voice, softer than usual. But it was a vague feeling, like déjà vu, or trying to remember a particularly chaotic dream. Andrew wondered if this was the same thing that had happened to him as a child, the reason he didn’t remember any of the experiments that had been done to him.

“I believe you,” Andrew said, for want of any better response. His hands curled more tightly around his mug, and he thought about the moment his mind had gone blank, like a circuit in the middle of being flipped, when his hands had cracked through the granite counter top like it was nothing. “You did not have to stay.”

Neil shrugged. “Your couch is probably more comfortable than that air mattress.” Andrew didn’t want to think about what he meant by that.

Andrew grabbed the egg sandwiches from the kitchen and pretended not to watch Neil as they ate. He’d been pretending not to watch Neil for months, of course, but this was different. It was different since they’d come back. There was something about Neil that had changed, and he couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

Neil had returned from the other universe a battered, frightened mess. It had been a long month since then, but many of the scars from Neil’s time with his father’s people would never fade, Andrew knew. His arms were covered in long lines and overlapping circular burns. His knuckles were misshaped and there were strange folds in his palms where the deepest cuts hadn’t been able to heal cleanly. Sometimes, alone in his apartment with a bottle of whiskey between his knees, Andrew thought about trying to read them.

Neil’s face had taken perhaps the worst of it. The knife work wouldn’t go away, but it would fade with time, become subtle. The burns would not. They were forever, and there were still days when Neil covered them with bandages even though he was long past needing them. On those days, Andrew gripped a little tighter at his own armbands, and didn’t say anything.

But the changes in Neil were more than just physical. Andrew couldn’t have named it, but when he tried to pick apart the details, he decided that maybe Neil was a little louder. Maybe his posture wasn’t as curled. Maybe he’d argued a little less than he would have once when Nicky dragged him out clothes shopping, returning with an armload of shirts in his actual size and a few pairs of pants that looked presentable enough for someone who was officially a consultant with the FBI.

Maybe he would stay overnight in a place that didn’t feel like home out of some misguided notion about keeping Andrew safe.

Neil still didn’t smile much. But he never had, really, except those strange little ones, mostly to himself when he was deep in some science problem, or the grins he only let loose from behind the safety of a helmet grill at community exy games.
Whatever it was, Andrew decided, it looked good on him. Neil was finding himself. And it was completely unfair that it was happening at a time when Andrew felt like he was unraveling. Andrew had given up wanting to be another person a long time ago. First out of an utter lack of hope, and eventually because Betsy had helped him see that he didn’t need to become a different person to become a better person. But for the first time in years Andrew looked at Neil and almost wished he was someone else. Someone this new Neil deserved. Someone who could kiss him the way he wanted, touch him the way he wanted. Someone who didn’t accidentally break granite countertops with their bare hands.

“We should head in,” Andrew said eventually. “Kevin will be ready to tear our heads off for being this late.”

“Fuck Kevin,” Neil said easily. “But yeah, we should head in. You want to drive?”

Andrew snatched the keys off of the coffee table where Neil must have dropped them the night before. “It’s my car, isn’t it?”

Neil just rolled his eyes, but his face had brightened for some reason.

“Shotgun,” he said.

Despite everything, Andrew almost wanted to smile.

At least when they got to the lab it turned out Kevin wasn’t there. Neil, didn’t seem displeased by that turn events either. There were actually only two other people in the lab when he and Neil arrived. Pleasantly, one of them was Renee. Unpleasantly, the other was Alison Reynolds, who Andrew was currently holding a grudge against not only for working for an abusive megalomaniac (he was willing to acknowledge, to a degree, that Alison was probably a victim as well in this regard) and contributing to several instances of bodily harm against his person, but also for hoarding Renee. Renee, who was probably the closest thing to a friend Andrew had ever admitted to having.

Reynolds swiped Neil as they arrived, dragging him off to look at some diagram she had drawn up for something or other. Andrew was extremely suspicious of their apparently budding friendship as well. There was no way anything good would come of two over-smart loudmouths becoming friends. At least it just left Andrew with Renee. They settled on the old couch and Renee pulled out her tablet so they could go over what they had so far. She had that look on her face, the one that said she wanted to ask how he was doing but was sensible to the fact that he probably didn’t want to be asked.

“I’m sure Nicky already gave you the play by play,” he said when she glanced at his hands. She nodded, turning to the tablet to pull up the case files.

“I get the sense that he didn’t really have the whole story.” She looked up, and her gaze was as firm as her fighting stance. “But you don’t have to tell me any of it as long as you can tell me this. Are you safe?”

She could have meant a lot of things by that. Probably did. Andrew had enough respect for her to do her the courtesy of actually considering it.

“As much as I can be. Surface damage only,” he said. Then for some reason added “Neil slept on my couch last night.”

Renee smiled. “I’m glad he’s looking out for you too,” she said. She tapped the tablet. “Now, how about this murder?”
They’d managed to get an ID from the prints of one of the thieves overnight. One Joseph Albers. Texas native, had been on the east coast for the past few years of his life after a string of petty crime had put him in too bad of a position with the local law enforcement. He hadn’t done much better since arriving, signing on with a getting fired from a half dozen convenience stores and racking up a string of petty criminal charges across New England.

“What databases have you run the prints through?” Andrew asked.

“Everything federal, most of Massachusetts.”

“Run the other set through Texas.”

“Tried that already.”

“Any known associates who might not have been printed? High school buddies, guys he worked with at the stores?”

Renee considered that. “Maybe, but without prints it might be hard to get a positive photo ID. Still, it’s worth a shot. I’ll have Nicky get a search running, he’s good at setting those things up.”

Andrew didn’t want to talk about his cousin just now. “What is Reynolds here for?”

Since Riko had fucked off to live as a first son in the other universe, Reynolds had been the de-facto head of Massive Dynamic. Tired of all the extra work and no pay bump, she’d gone to the company’s board of trustees and had power quietly transferred to herself. She’d used her newfound power as CEO to turn the technological force of the company against its founder, assisting with FOXES investigations wherever it seemed like their know-how might be relevant.

Today, she was here on business, helping with a security camera grid search, trying to pick out if any suspect characters from previous FOXES cases had turned up near the scene. Which didn’t really explain what she wanted with Neil.

“The autopsies are finished, and I suggested he might be more interested in working with Allison and Jean than with Kevin,” Renee explained when Andrew asked.

Neil had been avoiding Kevin. Andrew hadn’t been avoiding talking to Neil about it, exactly, but since he had his own reasons not to be keen on Kevin’s presence at the moment, he hadn’t actively pursued the subject.

He and Renee returned to combing through suspect pools and case information. It was little more than busy work at this point in the case, but it wasn’t terrible to do something easy for a while, especially with Renee. Even though Andrew no longer felt like the human embodiment of a blown fuse, he was still out of sorts; sluggish and twitchy. He wanted a cigarette and maybe a drink, bad an idea as that was. He needed sleep. His eyes felt gritty staring at the little screen of Renee’s tablet.

He was about to suggest a coffee break when Reynold’s voice rang through the lab. “Yo nerds, we got something!”

“You are definitely also a nerd, nerd,” Renee called out, definitely fondly, as she levered herself up off of the couch and headed to where Reynolds and Neil were now huddled around a monitor.

“Oh I definitely am. The queen nerd.”

“I thought you were the queen bitch,” Neil fired back without looking at her. Reynolds flipped her sleek blonde ponytail over her shoulder.
“I can be both. Queen Bitch Nerd.”

“What have you got?” Andrew cut to the chase. Reynolds nodded at him.

“Cams picked up one Thomas Newton meeting with your identified thief, Alber, two days ago. Newton is a known associate of Riko’s. He’s been involved in some of Massive Dynamic’s shadier dealings. Shadier as in even I don’t know many of the details about what those two were cooking up together.”

“So Riko is almost definitely involved,” Andrew said. Reynolds closed out of the window on the monitor with a sigh.

“Looks like it. Though how exactly is hard to say. Like I said, I don’t know much about Newton. All I know is Riko considered him an expert in rare objects and technologies, and he was among those who were in the know about the existence of the other universe.”

“Shit,” Neil muttered, his expression pinched.

“What?” Reynolds said. “You think you know what’s up?”

Neil nodded. Andrew thought he knew where this was headed, too, and he didn’t like it one bit.

“An expert in rare objects and tech who knows about the other universe? Digging up boxes hidden in random basements? Mysterious deaths associated?” Neil’s hands were wound tightly together.

Andrew wanted to untangle those fingers with his own, bandages be damned. He settled for taking a step closer to Neil, drawing that serious blue gaze. “He’s gathering pieces of the Machine.”

Afternoon found Andrew with Neil up on the roof of the building, a cigarette burning down slowly between Neil’s limp fingers. All signs pointed to Neil being right about the Machine. Reynolds had called a priority one grid search on Newton, and Nicky was still working on finding the identity of the second thief, which would hopefully lead them to the identity of the third. But without any new intel, they couldn’t actually do anything.

The smell had never been what Andrew sought from smoking. He liked the ritual flick of the lighter, the meditative rhythm of breathing and expelling smoke, the hot tight feel of it in his lungs. Also, he was very addicted to nicotine. The point was, Andrew’s thing wasn’t cigarettes, it was **smoking**. But despite the fact that he hadn’t had one in almost 24 hours and was definitely craving it, Andrew knew by now what kinds of anxiety smoking would settle, and what kinds it would make worse. So here he they were.

Actually, fuck it. Andrew really hated waiting.

He plucked the cigarette from Neil’s fingers, took one greedy drag, and stubbed it out on the pavement. The *heat-pain-relief* feeling of the smoke flooded his lungs. He jimmed his own pack out of his pocket, took a slow breath, then pulled one out and lit it. Flick. Breathe. Burn. Two long drags. He handed the new cigarette back to Neil, who accepted it with only a mild look.

“What I can do?” Neil asked. Andrew shook his head, frustrated. God he was fucking tired.

“No.” Or maybe- “Just-“ Andrew leaned sideways, twisting toward Neil and grabbing onto his sweatshirt with one hand. He pressed his face briefly into Neil’s sweatshirt-covered arm, feeling Neil tense and then relax under the contact. Andrew sighed and let himself lean there, his forehead resting heavily on Neil’s shoulder. He closed his eyes.

He lost track of how long they sat like that in the waning afternoon light. Eventually Neil ground out
the butt of the second cigarette. Andrew felt the shoulder he was resting on shift as Neil moved his arm, and then there were gentle, sure fingers scratching lightly at the base of his skull. Andrew never wanted to move again. But eventually the real world called the way it always did, Andrew’ phone buzzing to life in his pocket, Renee’s name flashing on the screen.

There was a crick in his neck as he sat up. “Minyard.”

“The weapon’s been used again.”

Well, at least waiting time was over.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Andrew. <3 Sidenote: the most interesting thing about writing this set of chapters has been having Neil and Andrew have to navigate that weird early relationship period, where they're no longer just silently mooning over watch other but they're not quite "comfortable established relationship," especially since the physical aspect of things is moving slower than it might for others. But I'm a sucker for earnest, fumbling affection, so I've giving it my best shot on this rather unique pair. I hope I'm doing it justice :)  

Up Next:

“I don’t-“ he started, left hand twitching at his side. He raised it to hold the gun steady with both hands. I don’t want to do this. Neil heard him loud and clear.

“I know,” Neil said. “That’s why I trust you. Now come on, we don’t have much time.”


Andrew shot.
Part 7, Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Neil POV, warning for gunshots and gore

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The second scene was a subway car, and it was both similar to and different from the scene from the Smethwick’s basement. It looked like the box had detonated near the far end of one train car. Passengers along about three quarters of the car were as dead as the Smethwicks and their would-be robbers, but passengers further away weren’t…quite as dead.

“The weapon we’re tracking lets out some kind of sonic pulse,” Neil told one of the paramedics, who was currently helping stretp an unconscious young business woman to a stretcher. “So they’re probably all permanently deaf.” She grimaced over her shoulder at him.

“They’ll be lucky if that’s the worst of the damage,” the paramedic told him. “These people aren’t just deaf, they’re catatonic. Completely unresponsive.”

“I don’t suppose any of them could be made available for cognitive interviewing?” Kevin butted in. The paramedic looked vaguely horrified. And that was without hearing Kevin’s explanation of just what “cognitive interviewing” of unconscious subjects entailed.

“I’m sorry, who are you?”

“He’s with us,” Neil said. He pushed Kevin back by the chest, turning to glare up at them. “Let’s see if we can get anywhere with regular methods before we try re-traumatizing the victims and their families, huh Kev?”

Kevin frowned, clearly in the mood to argue, but Neil didn’t feel like humoring him today. He turned his back on Kevin before he got the chance to protest.

“Is this a state you’ve seen people recover from?”

“’Fraid not,” the paramedic told him. She waved at her partner to start wheeling the woman up to the street. “Though to be honest, I’ve never seen anything like this at all from just a sound. There’s some literature about sound causing paranoia, hallucinations, and obviously hearing loss, but nothing like this. We’ll have to do full scans to figure out what the damage actually is, of course, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up for witness statements if I were you.”

That sucked, but it wasn’t anything Neil wasn’t expecting.

“We’ll let you know if we figure out anything else about how this weapon works, hopefully we can help,” he offered.

“Thanks,” She waved him off, clearly eager to get the rest of the still-marginally-alive patients up to the street and to the hospital. He stepped back to let her by, and soon the whole medical team was gone, leaving just the FBI, a dozen dead bodies, and no weapon. Kevin had only poked his way
through half the corpses so far, but he was familiar enough now with the Foxes’ auxiliary team that he didn’t need Andrew and Neil to babysit him all the time. There wasn’t really any need for Neil to be underground anymore.

“I’m going up,” he told Kevin, and headed up the stairs to where Andrew and Renee had set up a small workstation across the street.

He knew they had a case to solve, but Neil had inwardly cursed Renee Walker when Andrew’s phone had gone off on the roof. There was always a case to solve. Always too many dead bodies and not enough information.

What there wasn’t always was Andrew’s breath warm against his shoulder, the slope of his spine more relaxed than Neil had seen it in days. Andrew, leaning on him, like maybe Neil could hold him up for a change. The way his weight had sagged into Neil just a bit more when Neil had rubbed at the back of his neck, touching him the safest way he knew how. Neil wanted to bottle that moment, tired and grimy as it was; to keep it safe.

Instead, death had come calling the way it always did. Neil crossed the street to see if Andrew and Renee had made any progress on solving it. Renee was on the phone when Neil reached them, so he turned to Andrew for the update.

“BPD released the security cam footage from the station.” Andrew told him, handing over a cup of steaming black coffee. Neil accepted it gratefully; early summer nights in Boston were still quite cool. “The cameras inside the cars just take still pictures, but we’ve got what looks like a man with a box in his lap about the size of the one that should have come out of the Smethwick’s. No identifying features from the cameras, useless things. We haven’t figured out where he got on yet, but no one gets off that train car when it arrives at Kelly St. Whoever he was, he used the box and changed cars somewhere in between stops. Reynolds and Nicky are going through footage now.”

“That’s got to be thousands of people to scan through, and all we know is we’re looking for a box,” Neil grumbled. He took another long drink and stretched out his neck, trying to clear his head. “I can help them when we get back, you should get some rest.” At least there was coffee if it was going to be a long night.

Andrew, the bags under his eyes throwing their own shadows in the streetlamp light, crossed his arms mutinously. “It’s barely seven o’clock, I am not leaving yet.”

Renee hung up the phone and turned back to them.

“Allison found Thomas Newton on the security cam feed,” she told them.

Neil perked up. “In the subway?”

“No. Loitering outside an apartment building, actually. His name isn’t listed for any of the units, but you can see him ring one of the bells.”

“Accomplice?” Andrew suggested.

“Maybe. Someone worth talking to, for sure. Wymack wants us to head over. Unless someone needs to stay with Kevin?”

“He can ride back with the bodies. He prefers it anyway. Nicky will be at the lab when he gets there.” Neil could feel Andrew’s assessing gaze on the side of his face. “Come on, let’s check out that apartment.”
The apartment Newton had been seen at didn’t look like much. Dead in the center of a run down neighborhood a couple miles from the site of the subway incident, the building clearly hadn’t been properly cared for in years. Cheap shingle siding; peeling paint on window frames that looked painted shut; faded stickers in the windows for a security firm Neil was pretty sure had gone out of business a decade ago. It looked like a determined breeze might bring all five stories toppling into the Boston street.

“Somebody get the info on this place to Wilds,” Andrew muttered as they approached. “It’s got slumlord written all over it.”

Neil was inherently suspicious of cops getting involved in people’s living situations, even though he knew Wilds’ team was better than most at driving out slumlords without also putting their impoverished tenants out on the street. This was, after all, the kind of place Neil had stayed a hundred times. The kind of place people went when they had no where else to go. When they couldn’t afford better, or couldn’t maintain better, or simply didn’t want to be found.

It wasn’t the sort of place with an office, or a live-in superintendent. But there was a cheap security camera by the door that pointed right at the buzzer panel. A little hand-written sign on the door announced *Units available! 1 br, $1000/mo. No credit check! No fees!* with the landlord’s office number. $1000 a month. The place barely looked like it had running water, and Neil very sincerely doubted there was internet access. Andrew called the number. A few threats and thirty minutes later, a very disgruntled middle aged man was showing them to the door of 3A, home of one Kenneth Gower (no license photo on file.) The door was standing ajar.

“We’ll take it from here, Sir,” Renee told the man. He eyed her beadily.

“Don’t go doing any damage to my property now. I’ll charge the city! Don’t think I won’t!”

“You should think hard about whether you want anyone from the city inspecting this building for damage,” Andrew said flatly. “Now go. If someone is in there with a gun I will not be responsible for you getting shot, no matter how much of a better place it might make the world.”

“I’ll be waiting down the hall,” the man said petulantly, when he was done sputtering. “Don’t try anything funny.”

“I’m never funny,” Andrew said, and pushed open the door to 3A.

Warnings flitted down Neil’s spine as they made their way inside. The place smelled like death, though if someone had actually died here or if it was the combination of the tenant’s grimy possessions and the mold growing on the walls was anyone’s guess so far. If this was a “one bedroom,” Neil reflected, that was an extremely generous description. The whole thing was maybe 300 square feet, with a tiny kitchenette squashed in the corner of the ‘living area’ and a bedroom the size of an ambitious closet that didn’t even have a door. The window in the bathroom let out onto a fire escape. Two windows in the living area looked out on a brick wall. Not exactly homey.

On the other hand- “Not a bad place for someone worried about being watched,” Neil observed.

“Two someones,” Andrew said, pointing to the futon in the living area, which was indeed stretched out with a bed pillow and a crumpled sheet on top.

“Not anymore,” came Renee’s somber voice from the bedroom. Neil followed Andrew in and, well, that answered the question about the death smell. There was a man lying on the other side of the bed. Shot in the head, from the looks of it. Practically still warm. In fact, the timetable was awfully suspicious.
“Newton killing him fits, time wise,” Andrew said, like he’d read Neil’s thoughts. He couldn’t actually do that - Neil had asked. “But who is Kenneth Gower? How does some nobody fit into Newton’s scheme?”

Renee had knelt down and was rifling through the man’s pockets. She extracted a phone from one pocket and, grimacing slightly, used the dead man’s thumb to unlock it. She opened a few apps and scrolled through them. Then she pulled out her own phone and punched in a number, holding it up to her ear. She shook her head and hung up after a few seconds.

“Well, I don’t think this is Kenneth Gower, at any rate,” she said, standing and leading them out of the room so they didn’t half to talk crouched over a corpse. “That name is listed as a contact on this phone, and when I called it this phone doesn’t ring. So either he’s paying two separate phone contracts, or this man is someone else entirely.”

Neil was just about to duck out to the hallway to grab the landlord – as unknowledgeable as he seemed, he was the best source they had at the moment – when his own phone rang in his pocket. Nicky, the screen said.

“What’s up?”

Nicky sounded slightly hysterical when he answered. “Neil! Buddy! Weird question. I’ve been charged with looking through the personal affects of our various dead people. I was going through the things from our two thieves when, uh, one of their phones started ringing? I tried to trace the number but it’s really well-blocked which is super creepy and-“

“Nicky, stop right there,” Neil said. “When exactly was this?”

“Like, thirty seconds ago, dude. Why?”

Neil jerked his chin at Renee. “Call it again,” he mouthed at her. She nodded. A second later Neil heard a shaky breath come over the line.

“Neil…bud…it’s ringing again. The same number. Oh god it’s still ringing. They’re not hanging up this time. Should I try to run a trace? Oh god.”

Neil couldn’t help himself. “Pick it up,” he suggested.

“You’re literally in the FBI Nicky. You have a gun. You’re even good at shooting it. Just pick up the call. See if anyone says anything,” Neil raised an eyebrow at Andrew, who was watching with a tiny, expectant smirk in the corner of his mouth. “You can stay on this line with me.”

“Okay. Okay I’m picking it up.” From slightly further away, he heard a muffled “Hello?”

From right in front of him, a spark of humor in her eyes, Renee said “Hello, Agent Hemmick.”

It took several rounds of gasping, panic, explanations, and probably more laughter than was entirely professional, all things considered, to calm Nicky down so that Neil could hang up. But at least now they knew who Kenneth Gower was. He was the second thief, the one who had died in the Smethwick’s basement alongside Joseph Alber. And that wasn’t the only discovery that call lead to. When Renee lowered the phone after the call, the three of them did a double take at the screen – it had been transcribing the conversation as they went. The phone had TTY turned on.

“He’s deaf,” Renee said. She looked up at them. “This is our third thief, the one who escaped with
the weapon from the basement, and the train. That’s how he was able to escape the blast zone without getting hurt. He’s completely deaf.”

Of course. Neil couldn’t believe they hadn’t thought of it before. It would have to be a particularly complete kind of deafness, of course, but it was possible that this man’s ears and brain were attuned (or un-attuned) in just the right way that they didn’t even pick up the supersonic pulse of the weapon.

With a little more digging, they were able to determine the man’s identity. Eric Gower, brother of the second thief, and his roommate too. They speculated that the team had been hired to retrieve the Box from the basement by Newton. Probably they hadn’t known what was in it. Possibly they had set the weapon off by accident. Whatever the reason, the remaining Gower’s working relationship with Newton had clearly gone sour. Now, both Gowers were dead, and presumably Newton was now in possession of the Box.

They called the crime scene techs in to haul the body to the lab, but cause of death was pretty clear. Even Kevin seemed to have little interest in the body of Eric Gower, except to see if he could find any physical abnormalities in his ear canals that might explain his particular invulnerability to the supersonic Box.

Just when Neil thought they might get to go home and rest after all, Allison called to say they’d found Thomas Newton again. Or, they’d found security footage of him again. The man himself was as good as a ghost, slipping through the cracks in Massive Dynamic’s security network like he knew exactly where they were, which he probably did. What they’d found this time was more troubling than the body of a dead thief. Footage outside a convenience store showed Newton giving money to a homeless man to hold onto the box for him, and the man slinking away into a subway tunnel, the box clutched in his gloved hands.

It was full dark by the time they met Wymack and Kevin at the tunnel entrance. There was a police cordon half a block out, but no one had any idea how far into the tunnel the man had gotten.

“There’s an abandoned junction about half a mile in,” the local police chief told them. “It hasn’t been so active since the weather’s warmed up, but we do get some folks taking shelter in there, so we assume that’s where he’s headed.”

The MBTA had called a signal halt between the surrounding stations so that trains wouldn’t run through the affected tunnel, but every moment that passed was another moment the man with the box got further away. Or, worse, a moment closer to him getting curious and opening the box, with who knew how many people nearby.

“We need to go in there and get that thing now,” Neil insisted. The policeman nodded.

“I’ve got a team assembled. We’ve got the ear protection we give out for firefights so-“

“It won’t work,” Kevin broke in. For once he sounded more distressed than condescending. “The frequency we are talking about isn’t audible to the human ear. It’s much higher than our range, and that much more deadly. No one has built hearing protections capable of blocking out these kinds of frequencies.”

Neil could practically feel the Box getting further away as they spoke.

“Well, do you have any other brilliant suggestions?” The policeman demanded, “or are you just going to shoot down everyone else’s professional advice?”

“Your professional experience means nothing in the face of tech like this,” Kevin said. “If you send
your men in there unprotected the only thing that’s coming back out is more dead bodies. This pulse will kill unless the inner ear is completely disabled. So unless you have any deaf officers . . .”

“We could,” Neil said suddenly. It was probably a terrible idea. Then again, those were Neil’s best.

Everyone stared at him. It was Andrew who broke the silence. “Are you suggesting we deafen someone on the team?”

Neil waved a hand irritably. “Not someone. Me, specifically, and not permanently,” he said. Shouldn’t that have been obvious? “Just, you know . . .” he tapped a hand at his hip. Andrew frowned, but when he mirrored the movement his hand hit his own gun. He went completely still.

“No.”

“It . . . could work,” Renee said hesitantly.

“I said no.”

Neil appreciated being on the receiving end of Andrew’s protective instincts, he really did. But they were running out of time. He stepped closer to Andrew, met his blazing glare. “We need to get that box out. I am the only one on this team who had seen other pieces of the machine. I have the best shot at being able to disarm whatever it is.” He looked over Andrew’s shoulder at Kevin.

“How long would I have?”

Kevin rubbed at his cheek anxiously. “Of complete deafness? Ten minutes, at most. Seven if we’re being safe.”

“Not long enough,” said Andrew. Neil turned back to him. He knew Andrew was strained, and exhausted, and worried. But Neil also had a new ID card in his pocket that said he was Neil Abram Josten, Consultant, FBI. He knew he had a job to do.

“I’m fast. You know I have the best shot at this.” Neil paused, bowing his head slightly and lowering his voice. “You know I’d rather it be you, because I trust you, but I will get someone else to do this if I have to.” He stepped back. “Come on then.”

Andrew just stared at him for a long moment, nakedly furious. He didn’t move until Renee sighed and started to reach for her own weapon. Then he shoved past her.

“Fuck off,” he snarled, and then Neil was being dragged through the crowd by the lapel of his jacket, Andrew shoving on his own ear protection as he went.

When they were in a safe spot, Andrew backed up a few steps. He never took his eyes off of Neil as he upholstered his gun, clicked off the safety, and raised it until it was pointing just to the side of Neil’s head. Andrew’s face was still, but his skin was white. His mouth was a hard pressed line.

“I don’t—” he started, left hand twitching at his side. He raised it to hold the gun steady with both hands. I don’t want to do this. Neil heard him loud and clear.

“I know,” Neil said. “That’s why I trust you. Now come on, we don’t have much time.”


Andrew shot. First one side of his head, then the other. The loudest thing Neil had ever heard, and then the whole world was bright, ringing silence. He flashed Andrew a thumbs up, ignored the wild
unsteady gallop of his heart, then turned toward the tunnel and ran.

The inside of the tunnel was dark and damp. It was unnerving, not being able to hear the sound of his own pounding feet and breath. He flicked on his flashlight. The policeman had said half a mile. He could be there in four minutes, three if he pushed it. He thought about Kevin saying ten minutes at most, and pushed it.

Neil had been running for just over two minutes by his own count when he saw him – the homeless man from the security footage, the Box clutched to his chest. He had squatted down and appeared to be examining the catch.

“Spotted,” Neil muttered into his com. The man looked up when he heard Neil’s voice, his face startling in the bouncing light of Neil’s flashlight beam. His mouth moved silently, but his hands were clearly warning Neil to stay back. Unfortunately, Neil couldn’t listen.

“Don’t open it!” Neil yelled. His voice was a vague vibration in his own head, but he had only muscle memory to guess how loud it was. And because every person Neil dealt with these days was apparently a contrary asshole, that only made the man reach for the clasp.

“No! Don’t!”

It was too late. Neil was still running as the lid opened, the lights of something shining out from underneath. Neil couldn’t hear a thing, but he still felt the shockwave as it came, like a fist squeezing tight around his brain. The man screamed, loud enough that Neil almost thought he felt the vibrations of it in the air, and his head burst open.

Neil skidded to a stop, dry heaving and gasping for breath. “Box is open. Box is open,” he wheezed into his com, hoping he was speaking clearly. “Fuck. The guy’s head just fucking blew up. God I- okay. I’m okay. Going to check it out now.”

Neil forced himself to step up to the body. The damp smell of the tunnel mixed with the stench of fresh blood, making his stomach roll. Panic threatened to rear its head and take hold, but Neil pushed back at it. Later. He could freak out later. Cold sweat broke out on the back of his neck, and the ringing in his ears was starting to add to the feeling of nausea. He picked up the box and peered inside.

“Looks like it emits a pulse every thirty seconds,” he said into the comm. It had probably been three minutes now.

The tech inside the box was a tangle of tiny buttons and wires. Neil hadn’t seen this configuration, but the sensibility of it was similar to some parts of the Machine. Parts he had been drawing and studying from his scattered memory since they’d returned, in hopes of figuring out a way to counter it.

Neil forced himself to slow down as he examined it. He was right about the pulse rate. Every thirty seconds, another shockwave tore through the air, squeezing him a little harder each time. At least he wouldn’t lose track of time. But he knew he only had five minutes or so to figure this out before he was at risk for permanent brain damage, if not death.

*Just shoot it, idiot. It’s not a bomb. Destroy the fucking thing.* Neil could practically hear Andrew’s voice in his head as his fingers gingerly picked through wires searching for a safe way to disconnect what he thought was the power source. Instinct told him they needed to preserve this. Having a piece of this tech was going to be important. He couldn’t destroy it. He just had to-
“There!” he yelled triumphantly, yanking out a wire and watching all the lights go dark. The world was still ringing, but Neil counted out a careful thirty seconds, and there were no more shockwaves. “I got it. It’s defused or whatever. I’m just gonna take a breather for a quick second, and I’ll be back out. You’re gonna need to send in someone to get this guy.” Neil looked sadly over at the bloody remains of the body a few feet from him. The body of a man who had just been trying to survive, and had been taken advantage of at the cost of his own life.

“Sorry man,” Neil said, still breathing heavily. “We’ll get Newton. He’s going down, I promise.” A dead body would hardly care, but it was the most Neil could offer. He leaned his head back against the damp stone wall and released a long breath. Okay. Time to get out of here. He started walking at a measured pace back toward the entrance of the tunnel – no need to risk tripping and falling now.

“Coming back now,” Neil said.

There was a vibration at his shoulder. Someone was trying to call his com. Neil frowned down at it. He still wouldn’t be able to hear at all for a few more minutes, and not well for several hours. But he would be out of the tunnel soon enough. Maybe someone knew ASL; Neil could stumble through enough of the basics to get by. If not, he wasn’t exactly opposed to not talking to anyone until tomorrow.

The adrenaline was draining from his body, leaving Neil weak and shaky. He was halfway back. Just around the next corner, he should be able to see the light at the entrance soon. Then Neil’s foot met a small rock and his wobbly legs stumbled. He just managed to catch himself on one hand, palm squishing grossly into sodden dirt, the box still clutched in his other arm. He paused in the middle of pushing himself to his feet.

Had the ground of the tunnel always shook like that?

Chapter End Notes

oh boy ;)

Up Next:

'...something on the edge of the tunnel entrance caught his eye. A light. A green light....

“What’s going on?” Renee broke in.

Andrew pointed at the light. “Train.”'
Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

no warnings?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 7, Chapter 5: Runaway Train

Andrew checked his watch. Almost three minutes. Neil was fast. The policeman had said the junction was only a half mile in, he should be there by now. Andrew’s hand clenched on his com. He wanted to check in, but of course Neil wouldn’t be able to hear him. Of course, Neil could still speak, and was perfectly capable of doing his own check-ins, but that was only if he bothered to remember. Just when Andrew was reaching for his lighter just to distract himself, Neil’s com channel opened with a rush of crackling air.

“Spotted,” Neil’s voice said. Andrew only had a second to be relieved though, because the next moment Neil’s voice was yelling “No! Don’t open it!” There was a horrific buzz, and then the signal cut out.

Andrew couldn’t move. He was staring down at his com. It was Renee who put herself in his field of vision and said “if the device went off, it could have interrupted the com signal. But Neil should still be protected. His still has a good five minutes before he’s in real danger. He’ll figure out how to disarm it.”

There was no point pondering the alternative.

A few seconds later, the com crackled weakly back to life. “…like it em…ulse…thirty sec…” The pulse must have damaged the com, but it still worked a bit in between individual pulses, which Neil seemed to think came every thirty seconds. Okay. That was something.

Andrew felt Renee watching him. In fact, he would bet Kevin and Wymack were watching him too. Fucking busybodies. Didn’t they have their own shit to be dealing with right now? Couldn’t they let Andrew definitely-not-worry in peace?

Five minutes. Six. How much of Neil’s deafness had worn off? How close was he to being at risk from the device again? There was only another minute before he was beyond Kevin’s margin of safety. From there he went to risk of brain damage on to certain death.

“There!” Neil’s triumphant voice, and Andrew’s heart skipped a beat. There was more garbled message after that, confirmation that Neil was indeed safe and the device was powered down, though the man who had brought it into the tunnel was certainly dead. “Coming back now,” Neil’s voice said.

He’d probably made it nearly the full half mile, which meant it would take him five minutes or so to
walk back. Andrew lit a cigarette to pass the time, ignoring annoyed looks from the local cops. He was only a few slow drags in when something on the edge of the tunnel entrance caught his eye.

A light. A green light. Had there been a light there before? Had it been green? Andrew whirled around to the nearest local uniform.

“What does that light mean?” he demanded. The uniform looked up and their eyes widened.

“That’s the tunnel open light,” they said, sounding horrified. “But we haven’t made the call to resume train service, the electronic system isn’t engaged, it shouldn’t-“ they were babbling.

“What’s going on?” Renee broke in.

Andrew pointed at the light. “Train.”

“The pulse must have disabled the electronic block,” she realized.

There was adrenaline coursing through Andrew’s veins, but every muscle in his body felt like lead. There was a train coming. There was a train coming and Neil was still in there, unable to hear a goddamn thing. “Renee I-“ She was staring at him intently. *I can’t make it; I’m not fast enough; I’m too tired.*

*I can’t lose him.*

She took off without a word.

“Hey!” Wymack and a policeman yelled at the same time as Renee dashed past them into the mouth of the tunnel.

Time froze in place as Andrew watched Renee’s back disappear down the tunnel. Twenty seconds. There was yelling everywhere, but Andrew was detached from it, a marooned rock in a wildly eddying current. Wymack stormed over, yelling and looking like he was barely restraining himself from shaking Andrew by the shoulders. Forty seconds. Everyone was being shoved out of the way of the train tracks. Andrew backed up and hit wall. The ground was vibrating. He turned and saw a light approaching out of the opposite tunnel. Sixty seconds. Sixty five seconds.

WHOOSH. The train blasted by them and into the tunnel where Renee and Neil had disappeared. Wymack flinched. Kevin gasped. Andrew held himself perfectly still, and didn’t stop counting.

Seventy seconds. Seventy five. Eighty.

“Minyard-“ Wymack began.

“We’re okay,” Renee’s voice burst through their coms, a knife cutting the last thread holding Andrew up. He slid down the nearest wall until he was sitting on the sun-warm asphalt. His head thunked heavily back against the concrete wall. *We were able to take cover in a service doorway. Making our way out to you now.*

They made it out in just a few minutes, Neil with one shaking arm slung over Renee’s shoulders, both of them covered in dust and mud. Andrew watched Wymack take one look at them and decide the berating could wait until tomorrow.

Something nudged very lightly at Andrew’s shoe, and he startled upright. He hadn’t even realized he’d closed his eyes. But Neil was standing over him, dusty and probably foul smelling from his crawl through guts and subway mud, but very much alive. Alive and smiling that tiny smile of his,
the one that was mostly in his cheeks, like Andrew was the best thing he’d seen all day.

“Okay?” Andrew asked, a second before remembering Neil was still mostly deaf. Neil nodded, but then he was moving his hands.

It took Andrew a minute to realize Neil was using ASL. He was asking “Do you sign?”

“Yes,” Andrew responded in kind, suddenly grateful for that extra language requirement back in college. “Some.” He’d never gotten a good handle on the grammar dynamics, but his memory meant he had a decent enough catalogue of individual signs to get by.

“Come on, Renee’s giving us a ride,” Neil told him, then reached out an arm for Andrew to grasp to help haul him to his feet.

By that he meant ‘Renee is driving your car back to the Harvard lab.’ Andrew should have known they weren’t done yet. Newton was still in the wind, after all, and then there was the matter of the sonic lobotomizer they’d brought back with them.

Technically the Newton thing was Andrew’s area, so he brewed the strongest coffee his stomach could handle, dumped in enough sugar to make it bearable, and settled himself on the lumpy couch to go over more security footage. The creaks and groans of the building above them, the hum of the HVAC system, and clatter of Neil and Renee and Kevin settling in settled familiarly around him, almost comforting.

Andrew still hadn’t found hide nor tail of Newton when he was drawn out of his working daze by Neil and Kevin’s bickering. At least, he realized that’s what it was when he looked. Neil still couldn’t hear, so what it really was was a lot of aggressive paper shuffling and thwacking of hands on lab counters.

Andrew closed his computer and set down the long-cold remains of his coffee. Kevin and Neil were standing on opposite sides of Neil’s lab station, squared off across the chipped counter. The Box was open between them, guts and a few weakly blinking lights spilling out. Andrew pushed himself to his feet and shambled over to the them, leaning into the space between them. He caught a glimpse of one of their last notes, Kevin’s neat but hurried penmanship beside Neil’s wild scrawl.

“…wouldn’t have had to risk it at all then, what if?...”

“What were we supposed to do?”

“Probably would have taken care of itself by how things went.”

“That’s how you solve all your problems isn’t it? Cover them up? Let them take care of themselves?”

“What is going on?” Andrew said. And then, when both of their mouths opened indignantly at once, he reached out and placed a palm flat over each of their mouths. “No, I am not dealing with this tonight. One at a time.” Toddlers, the both of them. Andrew sighed. “Neil first,” he said.

Neil looked entirely too smug at that, so Andrew glared until he straightened out his expression into something more serious. “Kevin wants to destroy the box,” he signed. Andrew waited, but apparently that was all Neil had to say. He removed his other hand from Kevin’s face.

“Now you.”

Kevin huffed. “Neil is being stupid. The box is dangerous! We have to destroy it, it’s the only
responsible thing to do. We don’t know how it works and we can’t risk having it turn back on and kill us all because he wanted to run some kind of test on it!”

Andrew considered that for a second. “I don’t know Kevin,” he asked, quieter, “seems a bit lackadaisical to me, hm? What about the intricacies of scientific discovery?” He watched Kevin remember his own words and squirm, took pleasure in it for a few seconds before rolling his eyes.

“Neither of you is getting anything done, and neither am I.” He told them both. “The box will be here to fight over in the morning. Let’s just get some goddamn sleep.”

Walker drove them again, this time back to the house in Cambridge. She thought she was so clever. Especially when she pulled him aside and said

“I’ll take the couch, you need the spare bed more than me.”

She wasn’t even wrong, was the thing. So Andrew had no choice but to resign himself to staying in Aaron’s old room, right next to his old one, where Neil now slept. He showered, got the spare sheets straightened out, and lay down to try to sleep.

Of course, once he was actually laying in bed, sleep felt elusive. His brain wouldn’t turn off, just like fucking always now, and he kept getting distracted by the sounds of Neil shuffling around in the next room over. He couldn’t help the loop in his head that was replaying the day’s events over and over. His gun beside Neil’s head, blue eyes all trust; Neil running, disappearing into nothing down that dark tunnel; Neil’s com going out; Renee squeezing his hand before dashing in after him; the train rushing past and the seconds of awful silence when Andrew had been sure he’d killed them both.

He’d been like that for over an hour when he heard the sound of Neil’s sigh from the next room, followed by the distinct sound of a rolling chair being pushed back. Resigned, Andrew got out of bed, then stalled out in front of Neil’s locked, closed door. He reached out and jiggled the nob. Once, twice, three times. He stepped back seconds before it jerked open a crack, Neil’s suspicious face appearing in the crack before he saw who it was and stepped back to let Andrew in.

Andrew hadn’t been back in this room since he’d moved back to his own apartment weeks ago. Maybe he should have.

The inside of Neil’s room looked like the set of a movie about a serial killer, if the killer had been targeting ancient mechanics manuals. Drawings, charts, and sheets of paper covered in scribbled notes were tacked everywhere on the walls- it was clear they’d started in an area over the desk, but had spilled out to cover the surrounding areas as well, until Neil had apparently started using the walls as a sort of organizational tool to categorize his…whatever this was. Andrew thought back to the days he’d mostly spent resting at his own place and talking to Bee. Recovering. During that time, Neil had been doing This.

“Staying the night?” Neil asked, still signing, feigning at nonchalance. His hearing, assuming there was no permanent damage – and that was no sure thing, honestly – wouldn’t be fully back until morning. He could probably hear the world around him, but talking at a low volume would be difficult. “Renee convinced you huh? I figured she’d have more luck than me.”

“You didn’t ask me to stay the night,” Andrew told him. Neil shrugged. Andrew took a step closer. “Were you afraid I would find this?” He waited for an answer that didn’t come. “Neil, what is all this?”

Now Neil’s nervousness showed. It was obvious really, that he’d been trying to figure out more about the Machine, the one from the other side that was apparently going to destroy the world.
Andrew couldn’t tell if he’d gotten anywhere. The diagrams were mostly hand-drawn, probably from memory, and were covered in cross-outs and corrections. Other pages were photocopies out of old books and manuals, pages of notes, bulleted lists of questions only half-answered, arrows pointing to other sheets and dotted with notes like “the thing from March,” and “east wall.”

“I need to know more about it.” Neil insisted. “I need to figure it out before they do, but I don’t have all the pieces yet. The Box is the next piece, I need to figure out how it fits.”

Neil hadn’t ever been working on this when Andrew had been around Cambridge, or when Neil had been at Andrew’s.

“Have you been sleeping?” Andrew demanded. Neil looked guilty.

“Enough.”

“Somehow I don’t trust your judgment on that.”

“I know my limits,” Neil’s face was petulant. Andrew narrowed his eyes.

“Do you? Maybe I wouldn’t have had to send Renee on a rescue mission today if you’d had your full wits about you.”

Which really wasn’t fair at all and Andrew knew it - saw the hurt that flickered across Neil’s face - but he was angry.

“Fuck you.”

And yeah, Andrew knew he wasn’t making this…whatever it was they were doing, easy on Neil. But the thing was, it wasn’t easy for Andrew either. He didn’t know how to talk about it, any of it, how to describe the terrifying way he’d dug out a space for Neil inside his life, his insides. How empty that space had been when he’d gone, a vacuum that had threatened to suck in all the light around it and leave Andrew in darkness. He had Neil back, and he was doing everything in his power to keep him here, but he wouldn’t be able to do that if Neil was hiding things from him.

Andrew was tempted to slam the door and leave Neil to his self-made suffering, but Andrew also knew a thing or two about needing to protect everyone but yourself.

Instead, he took Neil by the wrist and led him out of the room, into the next one, where the walls were free of paper. Where it was just the old black sheets on the bed, and Andrew’s armbands and towel tossed in a heap at the foot of it. Neil held his gaze as he shut the door behind him, closing the two of them in together. Neil’s yes was whisper-warm in the air between them, his posture softening as Andrew reached out to pull him in by the hip. His other hand cupped around Neil’s jaw as Neil leaned in.

Andrew had left his bandages off after his shower. His hands looked a mess even next to Neil’s skin, bruised and scabbed, and he felt his fingers tighten before he could quite stop himself. Neil pulled back, a silent question in his eyes.

“Too much?” Andrew started. Stopped. Neil stepped back fully, dropping his hands to his sides, all acquiescence.

“You know you don’t actually have to stay, right? I know Renee is crashing on the couch but I’m sure she would drive you home if you wanted.”

Andrew shook his head, because that hadn’t been what he meant. Breathed. Reminded himself he
had worked for this, this vulnerability. This honesty that was more important than anything else.
Maybe it made it a little easier that he didn’t have to say the words with his mouth this time; he
closed his eyes so he didn’t have to see them as he signed, “I can’t keep almost losing you.”

There it was, the ugly truth, between them now like Andrew had spat a glob of blood onto the
carpet. Neil tapped lightly on Andrew’s hand, prompting him to open his eyes again. But then,
instead of backing away like he should have, Neil stepped forward again, reaching out and brushing
a hand through Andrew’s hairline.

“You don’t get to control that,” Neil said. Andrew blinked dumbly. He’d been expecting platitudes,
useless reassurances that Neil wasn’t going to die on him. Instead Neil’s mouth was quirked up
sadly.

“I’m a real person now,” Neil reminded him. “I have a real job, a real responsibility to this team. I
want to help, and I won’t keep myself out of danger just to make you feel better if it means other
people get hurt.”

Andrew felt his shoulders curl in. He wanted to close his eyes again, but he didn’t. “I wouldn’t ask
that of you,” he said. Even though he sort of already had.

“I know,” Neil said, regardless. “So here’s what I can promise. I promise not to run. I promise to
keep you in the loop. I promise to be as safe as I can be. And I promise that even when I can’t be, I
will always fight to get back home. Here. To you.”

Neil reached one hand back into Andrew’s hair, a question of a touch. And, well, what was there
really to do then but kiss him? Kiss him, and get Andrew’s hands on him, fingers brushing skin at the
edge of Neil’s shirt, pushing all the way under when he gasped, ribs finally healed enough for
Andrew to hold on tight. He pushed Neil back against the taught black sheets and Neil went
willingly, pulling Andrew down over him by his collar. Then it was just Neil and Neil and Neil; yes
and yes and yes.

Andrew was half-asleep by the time Neil extracted himself from the tangled sheets and slipped from
the room. But he was awake to see Neil haul his own mattress through the doorway and
unceremoniously beside Andrew’s bed. He was awake to feel the way Neil took his hand and
pressed his lips to Andrew’s fingertips before flopping down and slipping under his own sheet, both
of them safe in this room. Andrew tucked that hand back under his pillow with the vague, sleepy
idea of protecting that kiss. When Andrew did sleep, it was better than he had in weeks.

Chapter End Notes

So I've read that when writing ASL conversations, the convention is to just use "said"
once you've established characters are signing. I tried to stick to that, but it got a little
tricky be some characters switch between? Let me know what you thought if you have
any feelings on the matter?

Side-note: I feel like I haven't been very good at introducing ideas at the right places in
this story (example, Neil and Andrew suddenly both know ASL, for realistic but very
plot-convenient reasons! Imagine that!) but y'all, it's Hard when you're only ever
working about 6 chapters ahead at any time, which has been my general strategy. So
apologies for the occasional deux-ex moment, I'd go back and fix it if I could.
Additional side-note: I will probably never write a fic w above a T rating because I am
incapable of writing smut of any shape or form. Fade to back all the way, baby!
Anyway.

**Up Next:**

“You could, you know.”

Neil wasn’t sure why he said it, but once it was out he wasn’t going to take it back. Andrew glanced at him sidelong.

“Could what?”

“Live here.”
Chapter Summary

Neil POV

no warnings?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 7, Chapter 6: (Come Back, Come Back)

If Andrew woke when Neil slipped out of the room for his morning run the next day, he didn’t make any sign of it. Neil ran one of his usual loops, which he ran in a random rotation, just in case, but he let himself take his time. Boston really was pretty, now that it had come back alive. He’d gotten here in winter, and he’d forgotten how nice the northeast could be when the first warm winds of summer were just beginning to blow through the trees. He stopped by a little coffee shop he’d noticed before but never gone inside and bought one for himself and Andrew and, as a begrudging afterthought, Kevin. Then he realized he was still almost two miles from the house, and he couldn’t exactly run back with a full travel tray of hot coffees. So he took the rest of his route at a walk, and by the time he got back Andrew was up, sitting out on the porch with his phone in his lap and an almost-burned-out cigarette still between his fingers.


“I can hear again, actually. Thanks though.”

Andrew accepted the coffee in silence, and it occurred to Neil that maybe he just hadn’t felt up to talking yet. Or at least, talking to Neil. Neil suspected from the phone and the cigarette that he’d had a phone session with Betsy Dobson. Neil passed by him and dropped the third coffee on the kitchen counter beside Kevin, then went back out front.

“Mind if I sit?”

Andrew took a long sip of coffee. “You live here, not me.”

Neil took that for assent and sat a few feet away, leaning sideways against the porch post. The coffee was lukewarm at this point, but it was good. The pastries in the case at the shop had looked good, too. Neil would have to keep that in mind. They sat together in companionable silence until Neil’s was almost gone.

“You could, you know.”

Neil wasn’t sure why he said it, but once it was out he wasn’t going to take it back. Andrew glanced at him sidelong.

“Could what?”
“Live here.”

Now Andrew turned to look at him properly. “Live here,” he repeated.

“Yeah.” Neil was a bit flustered, but he pushed onward before he lost his nerve, trying to sound casual. Like he hadn’t been thinking about this since the day he’d opened his stupid mouth and Andrew had gone back to his own place, probably thinking Neil was kicking him out.

“I mean, you spend half your time here anyway. You waste too much gas driving back and forth between here and your apartment. And there’s the spare bedroom, so you’d still have your own space or- whatever. And it’d be easier to, you know, make sure Kevin and I haven’t been killed in our sleep or something.” Neil paused, not sure how far he dared push. In the end, he decided it was worth trying. “Maybe you’d sleep better,” he said quietly.

Neil watched Andrew consider that and wondered if he was being selfish. He knew he needed someone other than Kevin around to pull him out of his own head sometimes, but he knew it wasn’t Andrew’s responsibility to be that person, no matter what his promises had been. But Neil also knew that sleeping on an old mattress on the floor with Andrew a few feet away, he’d slept better than he had any night since Andrew had gone. And if he was a betting man, he’d have put money on the same being true for Andrew.

“Not for free,” Andrew said eventually, rolling his coffee cup between his hands.

“What do you want?”

“The answer to a question.”

That was less steep of a price than Neil had anticipated, actually. “Sure.”

Andrew eyed him for a minute before taking his shot. “Why are you avoiding Kevin?”

Neil almost laughed. “I really thought that would be obvious.” When Andrew’s face revealed nothing, Neil realized it hadn’t been. “He killed me.”

Andrew’s fingers tapped against his cup. He didn’t look angry or dismissive. Curious, maybe. “That is incorrect.”

“Okay, he didn’t kill me maybe but…he let me die. Or. The other me. The me I thought I was? Does that make any sense? Like I spent most of my life thinking I was this one…this one Nathaniel Wesninski. And it turns out I wasn’t even my mother’s son. Not that my real parents were any better, obviously but. My life doesn’t feel like it belongs to me anymore. Like I’ve just been living someone else’s life for twenty years. Also the whole not telling me I was from another universe. That feels like kind of a big one, honestly.”

Neil was on a roll now. “And then after all that, after he doesn’t tell me who I am and I get kidnapped and Tetsuji wants to use me as some kind of doomsday machine engineer and you all barely manage to get me back alive, he thinks we should just destroy the one piece of the machine we’ve managed to find! He’s a goddamn coward but somehow everything’s always my fucking fault, even though he’s the one who let some stupid kid who should have been me die because he couldn’t stand up to Riko, even as a kid!”

Andrew considered that. “When we were in the other universe, he chose to risk walking to a hospital with a gunshot wound in his thigh so we would have a better change of rescuing you,” he pointed out.
Neil huffed, crumpling his coffee cup between his hands. “Probably couldn’t take the guilt of letting another one of us die.”

“Probably,” Andrew agreed. Which finally gave Neil pause. He knew Kevin felt guilty. But Neil had only been able to see that as evidence of his, well, guilt. He hadn’t stopped to think of it as a good thing. As evidence of a growing moral center on Kevin’s part.

“Ugh,” Neil sighed, leaning his head back against the post and watching the sky. Andrew made a sound that might have been amusement.

“Your life if still yours, Neil,” he said. “It doesn’t matter who was supposed to be living it, it was still you. Your choices. Your survival. Your stupidity.” Neil looked back at him and yeah, that was definitely amusement in his eyes.

“I guess.” A pause. Andrew was clearly waiting for something. “So…that’s it then? You’ll move into the house?”

Neil was already second-guessing himself. Was this too much like asking Andrew to move in with him? It had been Andrew’s house first, but maybe it was too soon. They had only been together, or whatever, for a month or so, really, so maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe this was-

“Yes. You can help me move the bed later.”

Which- “What?”

“You and I both know staying in adjacent rooms isn’t going to last. But neither of us is staying on a mattress on the floor, air or regular. Your room is bigger, I think we should be able to fit both in there. Your machine-killer decorating scheme can go in the other room, if you must keep it.”

Neil blinked, a feeling of warmth growing in him. Then he grinned. “Deal.”

They moved Andrew into the house that afternoon.

It started with Neil telling Nicky. Well, really it started with Neil telling Nicky that he had something to tell him, and if Nicky made a big deal about it or made it weird he wasn’t helping Nicky with his crosswords or Sudoku for a month, at least. Then he told him Andrew was moving back to Cambridge, and tried not to laugh as he watched Nicky struggle to maintain a pleasantly supportive expression instead of immediately gathering him in a crushing hug and running off to babble to Andrew about how proud he was. Then they told Kevin, who was mostly indifferent but seemed to see an advantage in having most of the team in one place.

Then they went to Andrew’s place to get his things.

“Is that everything? It doesn’t seem like much.”

Neil was holding the little cooler that held the remainder of the Cortexiphan vials. He placed it carefully in the backseat. The trunk and remainder of the back were already full with a few suitcases, Andrew’s two go-bags, and a couple small boxes of personal items.

“That’s everything,” said Andrew.

It really wasn’t much, but then, Andrew wasn’t moving most of his stuff. He was coming to live in Cambridge, but he would still have the apartment. His furniture was all staying, as was everything in the kitchen except the coffee maker – apparently superior to Neil’s – and a couple of mugs. Also staying behind was probably half of his clothes, books, and the other assorted personal items that
came from living in one place for years at a time, even among people who lived as sparingly as Neil and Andrew.

“I still have the lease for another six months,” Andrew said as they shoved his packed suitcases into the Maserati, maybe following Neil’s train of thought.

“So you’ll have somewhere to go if the house burns down,” Neil said easily. _Or if you decide you can’t stand me after all._ “Well, let’s go then.”

Neil’s room—which-had-once-been-Andrew’s was indeed a bit bigger than the spare bedroom. It did have the good lock on the door and the best view of the street, and it was also technically closest to the kitchen. So Neil had taken his notes down and moved them, in neat stacks at least for now, into the spare room, and they had hauled the spare bed into his. They now sat side by side in the room at the top of the stairs, two fulls separated by a bed table. Like a married couple from an old black and white movie, Andrew had said dryly before disappearing to start hauling up boxes, leaving Neil alone to turn bright red in peace.

By the time they were done, it was time for Andrew’s Cortexiphan dose. It was strange, not being alone in Andrew’s apartment for that. Instead they brewed coffee in the kitchen and Kevin demanded a cup as well, complaining about the uselessness of decaf. They didn’t kiss while it brewed, but Andrew pressed himself close to Neil’s side until Neil got the hint and leaned into him, resting his cheek lightly on Andrew’s hair, and that was nice too. Plus, once they took their coffee upstairs, there was plenty of time for kissing while they waited for it to be cool enough to drink.

“You know,” Andrew said conversationally as Neil was tying off his arm, “one of the things I talked to Bee about was if I should even keep doing this.”

Neil’s hands stilled inches from Andrew’s skin. “Do you not want to?”

“Already did seven out of ten. And I know, sunk cost fallacy, et cetera but.” Andrew looked at the little red bag hanging on the stand. Neil could guess what Andrew’s fear was. He’d lost control in the lab after his last dose. He’d done something dangerous, hurt himself and nearly hurt people he cared about. What if the next doses made it worse?

“Bee thinks it’s just my brain adjusting to having these pathways open all the time now. Like, anyone can run really fast if they’re in danger, but not everyone can run a marathon, right? It’s building muscle memory. Brain memory. Brain Muscle. Whatever. Plus, if my brain has started running on a permanent supply of psychic boost juice, cutting it off now might mess me up worse than before.”

“Might,” Neil said, suddenly unsure. Were they doing the right thing here?

Andrew shook his arm. “I made up my mind, Neil. I’m going to do this, and then I’m going to learn to control my abilities, and I’m going to use them to help bring down Riko Moriyama. That’s my decision.”

And that was really all that mattered, wasn’t it?

“Okay then.”

Neil wiped down Andrew’s elbow with the alcohol wipe, then his gloves, then unwrapped the needle and prepped the bag.

“Ready?”
For the first time, Andrew didn’t bat an eye at Neil’s double checking.

“Yes.”

This time, when Andrew stirred awake just under two hours later, Neil smiled down at him and signed “Hi. How are you feeling?”

Chapter End Notes

There it is, the last chapter of Part 7!

Up Next:

Part 8 - Ghost in the Machine

Andrew wiped absently at the sweat on the back of his neck as he focused on the cup.

*Tip*, goddammit he thought fiercely. He imagined it every way he could. He thought about the sound it would make, the vibrations of metal hitting metal. He tried to pull it. He pretended to reach out as though with an invisible hand and push it. He should probably have worn a mouthguard what with how hard he was grinding his teeth. *Tip, tip, tip, TIP!!*
Part 8, Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

this whole Part really kicked my ass, it's pretty plot heavy and I'm trying to set up a bunch of stuff for the later arcs. Hopefully it came out okay?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part 8: Dangerous Frequency

Chapter 1: A Case of Forgetting

“Are you sure you shouldn’t be doing this with…what was her name? Debby?” Kevin asked for the thousandth time. Or probably the third, but Andrew had never been fond of repetition. Maybe it came from having an identical copy. He thought the impulse predated his knowledge of Aaron’s existence though, so maybe not.

“Shut up,” Andrew offered, and went back to concentrating on the cup on the counter he was trying to tip over. The cup was small and metal, and sitting in a metal basin on the metal autopsy table. They’d tried a paper cup at first, because Kevin thought something lighter might be easier, but Andrew had accidentally set it on fire. He hadn’t been able to face trying again for three days, but when he’d come back to the lab Kevin had found less flammable set up, and they’d been working with it ever since.

Andrew thought back to what it had felt like, back in the other universe. That strange, bright throb when he had looked at the bridge and thought burn. But while the memory was clear, re-creating it was less straightforward. It was like the ability was stuck behind the wall of his long-practiced apathy, and he’d only been able to access it all when he was practically broken down, exhausted and bleeding more emotion than he had been able to control.

“I’m just saying, if you need to-“

“I don’t need anything,” Andrew cut him off sharply, turning to meet Kevin’s glare, the spine he only seemed to find in this room. “I promised I would protect you, and in turn, you promised you would help me solve these cases in order to take down the Moriyamas, yes?”

“Yes but-“

“But nothing.” Andrew’s hands were itching for his knives, but he’d left them in the glove box of the car, wary of weapon so close to his skin during this experiment. “If I can do this, it will help me do both. Now hold up your end of the deal and teach me.”
“I don’t know how!” Kevin half-shouted. His eyes widened, and a second later he was shrinking back, arms wrapped tightly around his own torso, eyes squeezed shut tightly enough to look painful.

“Kevin—”

“Andrew, I was twelve when this was done to you, and my mother was already dead. Probably because she disapproved of the experiments. I have a few of Tetsuji’s notes, what I was able to dig up in LA and some things that survived the lab fire, but I don’t actually have any practical experience in this.”

He was right. Andrew really, really hated when he was right. Bee probably would have been more helpful, and Andrew was loathe to dwell on exactly why he didn’t want to bring her into this. It was just, she already knew so much about him, held so many of his vulnerable pieces. Maybe he didn’t want to hand over this new one, not while it was still so young and raw in his chest. Not yet.

“Figure it out,” Andrew told Kevin without looking at him, and went back to looking at the cup.

They’d been at this for weeks now, since Andrew had finished the doses of Cortexiphan, and progress had been agonizingly slow. Late spring had bloomed into proper summer at last and now July marched onwards, the heat in the basement lab oppressive despite the cool stone walls. Andrew wiped absently at the sweat on the back of his neck as he focused on the cup.

*Tip,* goddammit he thought fiercely. He imagined it every way he could. He thought about the sound it would make, the vibrations of metal hitting metal. He tried to pull it. He pretended to reach out as though with an invisible hand and push it. He should probably have worn a mouthguard what with how hard he was grinding his teeth. *Tip, tip, tip, tip, TIP!!*

With a slow, unnatural teeter, the cup fell. The clang of metal on metal was both a jolt of electricity and a flood of relief. He’d only managed it a dozen or so times since they’d begun this, but movement was movement.

Kevin barely looked mollified. “What’s got you in a piss mood this morning anyway?” Andrew asked.

Kevin caught himself in the middle of going to rub at his cheek. He folded his hands together, shoulders jostling each other in an uneven effort at a shrug. “It’s...nothing.”

“Day. Come on.”

“We’re missing the exy game,” Kevin groused at last, hunching defensively. “I was gonna ask Thea for coffee.”

Andrew squinted at him. “Weren’t you going to do that a month ago?”

“I’ve been waiting for the right moment.”

“No such thing,” Andrew said, already focused on setting the cup back up, then groaned internally when he realized he was *offering relationship advice to Kevin. Jesus fuck,* that was almost weirder than the existence of another universe. Whatever. He didn’t care enough to check for Kevin’s reaction. He focused on the cup again. *Tip. Come on, tip.*

“I will,” Kevin said, after a few minutes. Andrew pulled his focus back up with effort.

“What, ask out the backliner?”
“No, I—well, maybe. What I meant was, I will figure it out. All of this,” Kevin clarified. Andrew was surprised by the certainty in his voice. When he looked back up, Kevin’s face was as hard and sure as Andrew had ever seen it. “You will, too. Maybe you haven’t been able to repeat what you did in the other universe, but just the fact that you’ve maintained the amount of control on your abilities you have is incredible.”

Andrew flexed his hands beneath the table, not looking at the smattering of fresh scars from his run-in with the granite lab counter. They had talked a little bit about that, about control. Apparently, a lot of the original Cortexiphan subjects had gotten themselves either committed or killed when their abilities overwhelmed their faculties, unable to balance their powers, emotions, thoughts, and bodies. Kevin suspected it was Andrew’s ingrained emotional control that had prevented him from being completely overcome by his own abilities, especially since they were apparently quite strong. On the other side of that coin, the kind of cultivated apathy that was Andrew’s emotional baseline made using his abilities difficult in any situation, let alone in a calm, laboratory environment.

Andrew picked the cup up and set it back down, like some kind of fresh start. Tip. tip, tip, TIP!

Nothing. He couldn’t even get a handle on what it felt like when it worked. That was the stupidest part of all of this. Life had saddled Andrew with his curse of a memory, but it couldn’t even be bothered to work when it really mattered. The moments where he managed to use his abilities felt blank in his recollections, fuzzy skips like wrinkles in a tape. He couldn’t seem to recapture them no matter how hard he tried.

Andrew managed to tip the cup over one more time that morning. That made twice in one day, which was actually a record, depressing as that was. At any rate, he was relieved when the clock finally ticked to ten am, Andrew’s signal to pack up and leave.

“Need a ride?” Andrew found himself asking. Kevin waved him off.

“Chief’s gonna be in with Nicky in an hour or so to go over equipment inventory. I’ll stay.”

So Kevin stayed, and Andrew went. It was ten on a Saturday morning, the summer sun already threatening to roast the streets of Boston, and there was a seat in a diner three blocks from the community gym with his name on it.

Neil was already at the diner when Andrew arrived. It was a funny thing, seeing him almost from the outside like this, the ways he blended in and the ways he didn’t. The Neil Josten who Andrew had met back in January went unnoticed because he was the kind of person people didn’t want to notice. Dirty, scrawny; a little too young, a little too sharp around the eyes. No one wanted to see people like Neil, so they didn’t. The contacts and the hair dye helped keep his father’s people off his tail, but it was his ratty clothes and hollow gaze that had really made him disappear in a crowd.

These days Neil was as physically striking as it was possible for one person to be. At least, Andrew thought so. But in moments like this he blended into his surroundings for the opposite reason as before. He looked so content, so utterly comfortable, that you couldn’t imagine a single place where it wouldn’t look like he belonged, scars be damned.

Andrew didn’t imagine he himself stood out from a crowd, but that didn’t stop Neil’s gaze from snapping up, finding his unerringly through the glass of the diner. His eyes were so bright they were almost a smile on their own.

Neil pushed a coffee across the table as Andrew sat.

“I already ordered. You missed a great game, you know. Our highest score yet. Well, Dan was in
goal for Matt’s team, and she’s great but defense really isn’t her strong suit, so I guess it’s not really a surprise. Allison’s turned out to be a hell of a dealer though.”

Andrew nearly choked on his coffee. “You got Reynolds playing with you?”

“Well, once we got Renne it was only a matter of time, at least on weekends she’s in Boston. You should have seen that coming.”

All of his friends were jocks. Why. “Why does everyone I know have to be a jock.”

Neil looked a little disbelieving. “You literally went to college on a sports scholarship. You were top of your division!”

“I retired.”

“Hm. Well, Allison was on my team anyway, so—” Neil made a dismissive gesture Andrew didn’t completely follow. “Anyway, how’d it go with Kevin?”

Andrew was saved from answering immediately by the arrival of their food. Neil had the same two-eggs-and-toast as always, and had put in Andrew’s habitual order: whole wheat waffles with chocolate chips. Whole wheat because apparently that was what getting old did to you. Chocolate chips because he put up with the whole wheat. But even buttering, cutting, and pouring enough syrup for Neil to wrinkle his nose on the waffles was only a temporary distraction.

“I don’t see why I’m bothering training with him,” Andrew grumbled. “He knows fuck all about how this all works anyway, when you get down to it.”

“No one knows anything about it,” Neil pointed out. “At least he’s actually got a background in experimental biology.”

“That should not even be a phrase.”

“You really think it’s going that badly?”

Andrew took a bite of waffle to delay answering. “I knocked over the dumb metal cup twice today,” he admitted eventually. Neil brightened a stupid amount.

“That’s great! Literally 100% improvement.”

“Don’t use math to try to make me feel better,” Andrew told him. “I still don’t know how I did it either time. It still always feels like luck when I get it right. Not exactly a dependable resource.”

Andrew returned to his waffles in earnest.

“Hey,” Neil said. His voice was quieter, serious.

His face had gone all soft around the edges, something Andrew still wasn’t quite used to seeing on him. It shouldn’t have looked natural on someone as sharp-edged as Neil. Somehow though, it was as right as anything Andrew had ever seen when Neil looked at him like that from across their shared bedroom each night, or in the sleepy early hours of the morning, or at moments like this.

“The thing we were most worried about was you losing control, right? You haven’t. You haven’t had even a slip in weeks. You haven’t been consumed like the others. You’ve already got the hard part down. The abilities would be a cool bonus, but they aren’t a necessity. You’re a good agent just as you were.”
They had the house to themselves for a whole hour when they got back. That was good, because the
too-soft way Neil had looked at him in the diner made Andrew itch. And the only thing he knew to
do about that was to kiss Neil until he couldn’t think properly anymore. Until neither of them could,
actually.

They were laying in Neil’s bed, a few inches apart but Andrew’s arm slung heavily across Neil’s
stomach, when the call came from Wymack telling them that they had a case.

They two of them met Wymack at the residence of Bertrand and Lin Woomer. The Woomers lived
in a nondescript brick apartment building on the edge of Boston’s Chinatown, the kind of place that
screamed “mid-century urban renewal.” The lobby was unmanned and there were cracks in the old
tile floor, but the Woomer’s one-bedroom was bright and dry and what Renee or Nicky would have
called “cozy.” It was the kind of place people ended up when they shot for the American Dream and
nearly, almost made it.

Mr. Woomer (“just Bert is fine,”) was a tall, thin white man in his late thirties. He was an anxious,
people-pleaser sort, the kind of man who could shake your hand firmly with a smile but go back to
fidgeting with his glasses with one hand and his cardigan with the other right after. Andrew didn’t
have any use for people like that in his personal life, but they did make convenient witnesses. Mrs.
Lin Woomer was a short, plump, Chinese woman currently six months pregnant with the couple’s
first child. Also currently not present, on account of her being in the hospital for forgetting the last
fifteen years of her life.

“It happened around 10:45,” Bert explained, hands turning over and over each other in front of
himself. “Everything was completely normal, and then all the sudden Lin stumbled out of the
bedroom asking where she was. Asking who I was. We’ve been married for eight years, agents! And
she looked at me with just- no recognition. Like I was a complete stranger.”

The situation was this: 15 cases up and down the east coast. All reports indicated incidents taking
place at about 10:45 the previous evening. All 15 victims suffered sudden, acute retrograde amnesia.
The cause was unclear, but one curious thing all 15 victims had in common was that they were all
using shortwave radios at the time of...whatever it was that had happened to them.

“Is this her radio in here?” Neil asked, darting into the bedroom down the hall.

“Do not touch anything!” Andrew called after him, nearly running after him, mind already flashing
to Neil flicking some switch and having his memory erased, forgetting Andrew, forgetting his time
with the Foxes, forgetting himself.

When he got into the room, all he found was Neil peering closely at Lin Woomer’s radio set-up, still
snapping on a pair of nitrile exam gloves. He rolled his eyes at Andrew’s approach.

“I don’t need to turn it on, I just wanted to see what frequency it was tuned to,” Neil explained, like
he had never made a habit of ambling recklessly into danger before. “6995.9 kHz. It’s not a
frequency that I know. Not military, coast guard, air traffic, or common ham radio chat frequencies
that I can remember. I wonder what she was listening to.”

“She was a part of some listening club, they would all listen to the show together and then switch
channels and chat about it afterwards.” Bert told them. “She called it The Numbers. I’m hopeless
with technology, so I mostly left her to it. I think it was some kind of game show? Or puzzle show,
maybe. She would talk about how they were trying to solve the puzzle. I think she thought they were
close, too. She was so excited about last night’s broadcast, she was adamant that I not interrupt her
until it was over.”
“What time was that supposed to be?” Andrew asked.

“10:30 pm.”

Bert didn’t have any other useful information, and neither did his home. Lin Woomer’s radio set-up didn’t seem likely to hold much more physical evidence they could use. She’d recorded the broadcast, but the broadcast had also given her amnesia, so it wasn’t like they could just switch it on and listen to it. Andrew had it sent to the lab. Hopefully Neil and Kevin would be able to make something of it. He took a moment when they got back outside to light a cigarette, letting Neil stand just close enough to breathe it in.


Chapter End Notes

Up Next:

“They say that when Marconi invented his radio, the first thing he heard was the Numbers. Like they were just floating out in space, waiting for someone to hear them.”
Part 8, Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Neil POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 8, Chapter 2: The Numbers Station

They were having a team meeting back in the lab. The late afternoon sun was hot on his back, but Neil had never minded the heat. It was the cold that got into your bones, stole the money from your wallet, got into your soul. Plus, he had lived in plenty of places hotter than Massachusetts. This was nothing. In fact, this was welcome. Andrew went to park the car while Neil went ahead inside. Still riding the high of that morning’s exy game, a good brunch, and a case that for once didn’t threaten to expose him to many bodily fluids, Neil made his way into the basement of Harvard Medical with a spring in his step, almost smiling.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

Neil stopped dead in the doorway of the lab. Kevin was there, standing by one of the tables, pale and furious. Beside him was the Sonic Box from their case in July, the one that had deafened and killed a couple dozen Bostonians, including one notable head explosion, before Neil had managed to disable it. It had taken him a few weeks to be sure enough of his own research and schematics to start tinkering with the thing itself, but he had started running some preliminary tests the week before. He was hoping it would give him some insight into how the Machine - of which it was almost certainly a component - did what it did. Which, if Neil was to believe his own intuition, was save one universe by destroying the other.

Maybe he should have warned Kevin that there was a piece of the Machine just sitting out in the lab. On the other hand, Neil was constantly being surprised by Kevin’s odd and unpredictable experimental while. Once he’d had a chunk of what he thought was innocent leftover omelette slapped out of his hands, only for Kevin to inform him that he was using it as an incubator for a brain tissue regrowth experiment. So really, he didn’t think Kevin had any right to look as upset as he did now just because Neil had been running a few tests-

“I can not believe you were experimenting with this behind my back!”

Behind his back seemed harsh. Without explicitly telling him, maybe.

“I wasn’t aware I had to get every bit of research I want to do cleared with you,” Neil snapped. It really had been a good day, he didn’t want it ruined by Kevin and his shitty attitude.

Kevin wasn’t about to let him off with just that, apparently. He looked shaken, more out of sorts than Neil had seen him since that first case, when he’d almost been sent directly back into Riko’s clutches.

“Do you understand how irresponsible this is?” Kevin demanded. Okay, Neil had had about enough of this conversation. He made his way into the room and down to the lab floor. Walked until he was
inside Kevin’s space, close enough that if he were Andrew, Kevin probably would have started worrying about knives.

“You really don’t want my answer to that question, Kev. So stop getting twisted up about this. We need to know more about this tech. I know what I’m doing.”

Kevin bristled. “Know what you’re doing? The people who have been building this thing for centuries didn’t know how to turn it on! You don’t know what you’re dealing with - you might as well be building a nuclear bomb in this lab! Maybe you’re used to this kind of recklessness, with your background but-”

“-Kevin.” Andrew was standing in the door of the lab, regarding the two of them coolly. Neil wondered how long he’d been there. “The rest of the team will be here in a couple of minutes.”

The rest of the team, for this meeting anyway, meant Renee and Allison. Allison hadn’t left town yet by the time Wymack had called her, so she was in the lab helping set up a video conference link back to Massive Dynamic in person. Now, the five of them crowded into the seating area with one of the monitors on a rolling stand. Kevin seating himself as far away from Neil as possible. It was mutual, really.

“I don’t actually know a lot about these radio broadcasts; it’s not really my area,” Allison admitted as she finished connecting the computer. A few clicks later a video stream window popped up on the monitor screen. “We do have an expert on hand though. It’s your lucky day.” She stepped back as a serious, grey-eyed face appeared on the screen.

“Jean?” Kevin startled.

Neil had only seen Jean Moreau in person one time since re-meeting him while trying to stop a building from getting sucked into another universe. It had felt like a pretty big deal at the time, seeing him after all those years. But getting kidnapped, tortured, kidnapped again, rescued, made into a new person (sort of) and all the fallout that had entailed had kind of overshadowed the minor magnitude of seeing an old sort-of friend. The only time they had seen each other was just weeks ago, at the press conference where Allison had officially and publicly announced that she was taking over as CEO of Massive Dynamic. Kevin hadn’t made the trip, too nervous about drawing Riko’s ire even from across universes, so Neil and Jean had gone for tea, not catching up so much as meeting all over again. They’d mostly made small talk about science, but Jean had mentioned that Allison had a friend in Boston - besides Renee, that was - who she thought Jean should meet, if he was ready. He was hoping to visit soon.

On the video screen, Jean offered no more response to Kevin’s incredulity than a small, wry smile.

“They’re called the Numbers Stations,” he began without preamble. “There have been any number of them, coming and going over the years. The broadcasts are series of numbers, read in an artificially generated voice of some kind. The Department of Defense has had us investigate them several times - there are rumors that the numbers are code used by drug smugglers or traffickers, but it’s never been proven. We’ve never been able to triangulate the source of the signal. The number sequences are read several times per broadcast, and the broadcasts themselves come in short bursts at seemingly random intervals.”

“Seemingly random or actually random?” Renee asked sharply. Jean nodded in acknowledgement.

“Not actually random, no. But difficult enough to figure out that only the most dedicated or obsessed ever manage to tune in more than a couple of times, let alone catch every broadcast.”
“Which they would have to do in order to figure out what the code was,” Neil realized. “It must be some kind of code, right? If the broadcast times aren’t random, then neither are the numbers.”

“That’s right,” Jean said, then made a face like he was considering taking it back. “Well, we assume that’s right. But if there is a code, I haven’t been able to crack it. And neither has anyone else in the last hundred years, so—”

“Wait, stop,” Andrew cut in. “Hundred years? How old is this Numbers Station?”

Jean’s shrug was almost invisible, since his shoulders weren’t really in the shot, but Neil got the impression of it forming the slight bob of his head. “They say that when Marconi invented his radio, the first thing he heard was the Numbers. Like they were just floating out in space, waiting for someone to hear them.”

“That was in 1894,” Neil said, a little numbly. He was just getting used to life with the FOXES these days, the way the tech they ran into always seemed like it should only work in theory. He wasn’t sure he was prepared to think about some signal that had just brain-wiped a bunch of people in Boston had existed before the Chicago World’s Fair.

“Are you telling me that this radio broadcast has existed for longer than man has known how to send one?” Andrew demanded, as close to incredulity as he ever got. “Come on, Moreau.”

“Our records from that time are inconsistent, as you can imagine,” Jean allowed, slightly testily. “But that doesn’t change the facts, broad scale. We have definitive records going back to at least the 1920s. So yes, one hundred years, at least.”

“Is there any precedent for the kind of effects that we are seeing in our victims?” Renee asked.

“None that I’m aware of,” said Jean. “I’ve been studying these stations for years. I told you we investigated them officially, but I started looking into them in college. I became a little obsessed for a while. Looking for a bigger picture, maybe.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Never found it. Maybe it’s all a hoax after all, I don’t know.”

“Well someone is clearly invested in it,” Renee reasoned. “It doesn’t really stand to reason that the station itself would exist for a hundred years just to cause a bit of random brain damage. No, someone was trying to make people forget that last broadcast, which means that person believes it contains the key to figuring out the code. That’s an awful lot of work for a hoax.”

Someone clearly believed in the Numbers. So even if it was just a hoax, it was now one that had a victim count.

“That’s my belief as well,” Jean said. “And another note of caution: according to my best information, there is going to be another Numbers broadcast tomorrow night. I’ve never seen two broadcasts so close together before, so there is something different about this one. I don’t know what it will contain, or if it will be sabotaged like the last one, but I would be prepared for the worst.”

“We’ll work as quickly as we can,” Renee assured him.

“I’ve been told you have a recording of the most recent broadcast. Do you have a plan for recovering the numbers sequence from it? Kevin?” Jean inquired.

“What do you think, Neil?” Kevin spat disdainfully. “Maybe we should just go ahead and play the recording for everyone! Right now! Time is of the essence right, and what’s the worst that could happen? When has messing around with interuniverse tech ever gone wrong for us?!”
Kevin got to his feet and stormed from the lab. Everyone was staring at Neil, like Kevin throwing a tantrum was anything new, or somehow his fault. Neil determinedly crossed his arms and said nothing.

“I’ll go check on him,” Renee said after a minute. “I’m sure you can all catch me up later.”

She threw an apologetic glance in Allison’s general direction and slipped out the lab door after Kevin.

Allison passed a pointed look between Neil and the swinging lab doors, but Neil stubbornly stayed silent. He could keep his private issues with Kevin Day out of a full team meeting, thank you very much. She put her hands up. “Okay, I guess I don’t want to know.”

“Kevin is mad at Neil because he believes Neil is being reckless by running experiments on the Box we recovered in June,” Andrew said, sounding bored. Neil cut him a look, but he continued in the same tone. “Neil refuses to deal with the argument at all because he’s still mad at Kevin for the whole universe switching business.”

“Hey,” Neil said indignantly. While Neil usually appreciated Andrews brand of blunt honesty, he wasn’t sure he needed the whole team to know his personal business. And it was more universe stealing than universe switching, if you asked him.

“What? This spat of yours has been going on for a month. The sooner it is resolved the sooner we can get back to solving the problems at hand.”

Personally, Neil didn’t think Andrew had much of a leg to stand on when it came to resolving interpersonal issues. He hardly ever spoke to his own twin brother. On the other hand, he might have had a point. Maybe. A little bit of one. Even if he did, Neil wasn’t about to admit it then and there. Instead he turned back to Jean and Allison.

“Do you have a record of the numbers from the previous broadcasts?”

Jean confirmed they did, going back to around the 1940s. “Would you mind sending them to Nicky Hemmick?” Neil asked. “He’s a pretty good crack at codes, I’d like to see if he can make anything of them.”

Allison agreed that they could hand over their records. Jean, in that dry way of his that was a much-gentled version of the bitterness of his youth, said to send along his best wishes of luck. They were just wrapping up the meeting, Allison still chatting idly with Jean, when a call came in from Wymack summoning Neil and Andrew to another scene.

Allison snagged Neil’s elbow before he could quite get away. Andrew paused in the middle of putting on his jacket, but Neil waved him off, and he left to get the car.

“Listen,” Allison said seriously when he was gone, “I know you and Day aren’t on he best of terms right now, but you need to talk him around. We need to know everything we can about what Tetsuji and Riko are planning. The best way to do that is to learn as much about this tech as we can. Figure it what makes it tick”

She meant that figuratively of course. What literally made the machine run Neil already knew- it was him. But that was beside the point.

“He won’t listen to me. He doesn’t trust me enough,” Neil told her.

“I am not sure that’s really the problem,” Jean broke in, making Neil jump - he hadn’t realized the
“Sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear,” Jean continued, then paused thoughtfully. “I could try talking
to him, if you want. We share more history with Riko than you, and he has better knowledge of my
scientific expertise. We have been on...better terms lately. It might help.”

Well, that was better than nothing. Neil thanked Jean, said his goodbyes to him and Allison - she
promised that the next time she was in town for an exy game they were switching teams, and she
was going to own him - and went to meet Andrew in the car.

They met Wymack at a radio tower just a few miles from the bay in Dorchester. Local police had
already cordoned off the surrounding area. It was a little cooler away from the press of the city, not
near enough to the water to hear or smell it, but near enough to feel a difference in the air. Night had
fully falled by the time they arrived, and the whole place was lit in the harsh glare of portable
fluorescent work lights and the blue flashes of the police cars. There were two ambulances standing
my as well, but they had no lights running. In cases like this, that was almost never good.

“Homeland Security managed to trance the most recent broadcast,” Wymack informed them as they
approached the radio tower, ducking under police tape. “When they tried to contact the tower, they
got no response. Crews got to the scene around thirty minutes later and found - this.” He stepped
through the doorway and stepped to the side.

“This” was, apparently, two dead bodies, a man and a woman. The man was lying in a pool of blood
on the floor beside a floor-level access hatch, presumably to some system or other that needed regular
maintenance. The woman appeared to have been killed second, getting a running start on her killers.
She had fallen and died wedged between two rows of electrical racks.

“The break in seems to have happened sometime between 10:00 and 10:30 pm,” Wymack
continued, making his way carefully past the corpses, toward a door to a small set of stairs. He began
to climb. “Security system in this place is state of the art. Whoever did this, they were professionals.
In and out in no more than 45 minutes. And that’s not all.”

Wymack showed exchanged nods with the officer standing guard at the top of the stairs. The officer
opened the door and allowed them to step through.

“Oh,” said Neil.

In the room was a cube. A cube unlike anything Neil had ever seen. It was about a foot square and
 glowing with a soft green light. Below it, a small panel covered in electrical circuitry was attached by
a few cables. Transmitting equipment. But the strangest thing about it was definitely that it was
floating, hovering about three feet off of the ground, directly in the center of the room.

It was Andrew who broke the silence first.

“Is it actually floating?”

Wymack laughed. “Well, depends on your definition I guess. It is actually suspended in the air, yeah.
But probably not, no, not in the way you mean. Techs say it’s some kind of magnet.” He turned his
upper body half-out of the room and boomed “Hey Lucas! Can we get this thing powered down?
I’ve got a home-cooked dinner to get to!”

A few seconds later there was the sound of a loaded circuit powering down, and the cube and its
transmission panel lowered gently to the ground, where Neil now noticed there was a small square
mat that must have been providing magnetic resistance. Neil approached it once given the all-clear,
snapping on his gloves with emphasis. Andrew rolled his eyes and told him to just get on with it.

Neil peered closely as he could at the cube without touching it. The actual cube was made up of a delicate metal frame and what appeared to be smooth plates of clear crystal. Lab-grown, obviously, but really fine work. Kevin was going to be impressed, if he could stop being an angry coward for long enough to pay attention properly. Neil leaned down further to get a better look at the transmitter panel, when he was struck by an idea. He looked up at Andrew, grinning.

“Get the fingerprint kit,” he said, triumphant. “There’s no way to do this kind of microelectronics with gloves on.”

Once the fingerprints were dusted for - and there were several excellent ones, as Neil had suspected there might be - it was finally time to pack up what they could of the scene and head home. The bodies and the cube transmitter were sent to the lab. Neil decided the day had been long enough.

“Any more hours are going to be less help than more. We can deal with this in the morning,” he said.

Late that night, the door to the spare bedroom jiggled three times before opening. Neil didn’t bother to look up from his desk to see Andrew standing in the doorway, watching him.

“What was that you said earlier about working more hours today?” Andrew said casually. Neil ignored him. Andrew walked over and kicked at the base of his chair. “It’s past eleven.”

“Then go to sleep,” Neil said. He was still mostly absorbed in the diagram in front of him. He hadn’t been able to do much work on the Sonic Box in the lab, but he thought he was making good progress on recreating the Machine diagrams from memory, and he was comparing his notes on the construction of the various components. Maybe something here would even tell him something about the mysterious transmitter cube they’d found in the radio tower.

“I don’t want to be woken up when you come stumbling in like an elephant at two am,” Andrew said. “Come on, you have been at this for hours. Come back to it tomorrow.”

Neil sighed and carefully taped the diagram he’d been fiddling with back up on the wall beside the others. He spun in his chair to face Andrew, who was already in his pajamas and looking at Neil with unconcealed impatience. Neil didn’t regret for a moment asking Andrew to come back to live in Cambridge, but the arrangement had its disadvantages. For one, Andrew actually paid attention to Neil’s sleep schedule now that they slept in the same room, and seemed to have decided it was his duty to correct Neil’s apparently heathenous sleep habits. Well, Neil supposed he had been at this for hours, and his eyes were starting to feel dry from staring through the yellow lamplight. It probably wasn’t worth fighting.

“All right,” Neil relented, and followed Andrew to bed.

When Neil did head to the lab the next morning, it was alone. Andrew had gone with Renee to interview Lin Woomer, who had been released from the hospital, though she hadn’t regained much of any of her memories. Nicky and Kevin were already at the lab when Neil arrived. Nicky was still trying to figure out the code Jean had sent over, the numbers from the previous broadcasts of the Numbers Stations.

“Morning Neil!” Nicky called out cheerfully as he made his way into the lab. Kevin’s head jerked up, and there was a second where his whole expression wiped completely clean, before rearranging itself into the kind of nonchalance Kevin had always been terrible at faking.

“Hello Nicky. Kevin. Nicky, any luck with the code so far?”
“None!” Nicky declared with a frustrated groan. He was slumped in his chair, head lollled back to stare at the ceiling, turning in lazy circles with his feet.

“Maybe if you tried looking at the numbers,” Neil suggested.

Nicky hauled his head up to blink at him. “Was that a joke? Kevin, did Neil just make a joke?” he sniffed, faux wiping at his eyes. “They grow up so fast!”

Neil rolled his eyes, but he didn’t feel the tight discomfort their easy back and forth would have once given him. He had grown fond of Nicky’s teasing, really. It was nice, having friends.

“The numbers, Nicky?” he prompted.

“Yeah, absolutely zero luck,” Nicky said. “This code isn’t like anything I’ve ever seen. The numbers are a code. The space between the numbers is a different code. The spacing of the broadcasts is a separate code on top of that. The whole thing is like a mess of five different cyphers stacked on top of each other, but I’m missing some kind of key. Like—” he made a futile grasping motion with his hands—“like, a kaleidoscope. Like right now it’s all just a jumble of information, and I need the right mirror to make it into a picture.”

“Don’t kaleidoscopes make a bunch of different random pictures?”

“Exactly!” Nicky said. Neil was pretty sure one or both of them had lost the grip of the metaphor.

The lab lapsed into awkward silence. Finally Neil turned to Kevin.

“How are you doing on the recording?”

“Well, actually. I believe the cube recovered last night was the source of what wiped the minds of our victims, not the broadcast itself,” Kevin said. “I think I’ve figured out a way to separate the two signals so we can listen to the broadcast, using this soundboard.”

“Oh.” That was really good news. Neil was impressed, actually. At least, he was impressed right up until he took a closer look at Kevin’s set up.

“Kevin, is that the soundboard I was using to run tests on the Sonic Box?”

Kevin bristled. “Yes. And this is a much better, safer use for it! Look, if you look at this print out you can see the two separate signals being broadcast on—”

“-Kevin,” Neil said warningly.

Nicky stood up from his chair. “It’s about mid-morning coffee time, isn’t it? I’m going to go get us some coffee. Coffee for everyone. Wow that might take awhile okay well I’ll be back cool bye.” he said in one breath, then practically dashed out the door.

Neil and Kevin both watched the doorway Nicky had disappeared through for several seconds.

“I hope he actually does bring back coffee,” Kevin said.

Neil was tempted to tell Kevin exactly where he could shove a fresh hot cup of coffee, but they were on a timetable. If Jean was right, there would be another Numbers broadcast tonight, and if they didn’t figure out how to stop it they would be left with another batch of amnesiacs on their hands, or worse. The Sonic Box wasn’t the top priority right now anyway. Neil shoved what he could of his anger aside, and they got to work.
They made reasonable progress on the broadcast. With Neil’s extra input, Kevin was able to completely separate the two signals Lin Woomer had recorded and listened to. They now had the broadcast of the numbers station, whose origin remained unknown, and the signal that had been traced to the radio tower. The radio tower signal was the pulse sent by the cube device, and that was what had somehow caused its listeners to develop amnesia. They still couldn’t figure out what the cube was, or how it worked, but at least they were able to get the sequence of numbers that had been the last Numbers Station broadcast.

Nicky quickly added that set of numbers to what he had from Jean in hopes it would work as a kind of decryption key, but they weren’t quite so lucky. The code remained stubbornly un-solved, no matter what obscure cypher structures Nicky put it through.

Things were tense and uncertain, but progress was progress. And there was one solid piece of good news, delivered by Wymack that morning - the fingerprint from the radio tower had come back from the lab. They had a match.

Chapter End Notes

I promise Neil and Kevin will be friends again eventually. But they've understandably got some shit to work through.

Up Next:

"...I look around at this home, these pictures, and they’re telling me I made it. But I can’t remember any of it. I still feel like that girl who’s holding on by the skin of her teeth, waiting for the other boot to drop. I don’t know what to do.”
Part 8, Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 8, Chapter 3: Memory Lane

They’d gotten the call from the lab while in the car enroute to the Woomer’s: the fingerprint from the transmitter cube had come up with a match. One Lucas Felles, a petty criminal. Andrew noted the similarities to their case the previous month with the Sonic Box. Like the Gowers and their accomplice Alber, Lucas Felles was a drifter. His last known address was in Milwaukee, but that was ten years ago. He’d been off the map since, only resurfacing in the form of a couple of fingerprints on a transmitter board, one thousand miles east. His record was mostly small b&e’s, with a couple instances of armed robberies that had avoided fatalities. This was his first crime with a body count.

Bert Woomer greeted them at the door when they arrived for their second interview. The first thing Renee did was show him a photograph of Lucas Felles, but Bert claimed to have never seen him before. Andrew would have liked to ask Lin, but her memory was still stuck fifteen or so years in the past, and wouldn’t be much help. Bert showed them into the living room where Lin was seated nervously on the edge of an armchair, her hands folded carefully over her pregnant belly. Her smile was rather uncertain as she shook Andrew’s hand, but she relaxed a bit as Renee introduced herself. Most people did.

“I’d like to ask you a few questions, Lin, if you don’t mind,” Renee said, seating herself gently on the sofa a few feet from Lin. “We have a doctor on our team who is something of an expert on unusual brain injuries. He couldn’t make it here, but he’s given me a, well it’s a sort of diagnostic, I suppose. To see where you’re at, and to help us figure out how this radio signal might have done what it’s done.”

Lin threw a nervous glance in Bert’s direction. He was nodding encouragingly, but she wasn’t quite seeking reassurance or approval in the way another person might of their spouse. She was just reading the room, or trying to. It was clear she didn’t think she had much real agency. Renee must have sensed that too.

“Bert, would you show Agent Minyard to the bedroom? I know he wanted to take another look around.”

Bert seemed unhappy to be letting his wife out of his sight, but Renee generally looked sweet and trustworthy enough that he was willing to lead Andrew away. The apartment was small enough that they could still mostly hear what was being said from the hall.

“I’m glad. Just remember, this is entirely up to you, we can stop at any time,” Renee’s voice said. “So. I’m going to tell you three words, and at the end of our conversation I want you to recall them
for me. They are elephant, lollipop, and plate. Got it? Okay…” their voices dimmed a bit as Andrew followed Bert fully into the bedroom.

“Well, here it is,” Bert said uncomfortably, gesturing toward the table by the window which had held Lin’s shortwave radio set up. Not for the first time, Andrew was glad he looked like the opposite of the sort of person people wanted to confide in or blather to. Bertrand Woomer seemed like the confiding and blathering type. Instead, he just shuffled in place while Andrew picked through the small piles of books and belongings around the desk.

There was a whole stack of nearly identical cheap spiral bound notebooks, all full of numbers. The numbers had been shuffled and half-translated into nonsense, crossed out and underlined and rearranged ad infinitum, but it didn’t seem Lin Woomer had gotten any closer than Nicky to actually cracking the code of the Numbers Stations. He collected them carefully in an evidence bag, but didn’t have much hope they would be the key to cracking the case. Mostly he was killing time, letting Renee conduct her interview in relative peace. Eventually, though, there was just nothing else to look at.

“I think I’ve found everything I can,” he told Bertrand, pulling off his gloves.

Bert checked his watch, seeming surprised by the time. “Shoot,” he said. “I’m supposed to be meeting with the super. We’re getting home assistance until Lin’s back on her feet, I have to sort it all out with him. Do you mind if…?”

“Go ahead,” Andrew told him. “I will stop by the office when Agent Walker is finished interviewing your wife and we are ready to leave.”

With a rushed thanks, Bert was out the door. Wary of spooking Lin in the middle of Renee’s interview, Andrew made his way slowly into the living room. But Renee waved him in easily enough, and Lin looked less nervous than she had before, so he went ahead and took a seat himself. Renee was handing Lin a piece of paper.

“I want you to read this and then do what is says,” Renee told her, calm in a way that reminded him of Bee. Lin took the paper.

“Stand up, then sit down,” she said carefully, reading. She placed the piece of paper on the arm of the chair beside herself. Then she stood up, then sat back down.

“Wonderful,” Renee told her, smiling. “Now, what were the three words I told you at the start of our conversation?”

“Elephant, lollipop...plate.”

“Excellent. Really well done, Lin.” Renee watched as Lin reached out, picking up a small bit of knitting in a delicate pattern, still on the needles. “That’s beautiful work,” Renee said.

Lin stroked a finger over the texture sadly. “I don’t remember knitting this,” she said. “I suppose I must have been making it for the baby.” She suddenly sounded on the verge of tears. “That man, Bert, is the father I guess. I don’t recognize him! I look at all these pictures, and I see myself in them, but I don’t recognize him, I don’t remember us having a life together.”

And then she said something even worse. “I had a...difficult childhood. We were poor, and my parents died when I was very young. Illness, you know? The kind of deaths that would seem absurdly preventable these days. Life after that…it was a miracle that I made it to college. But that’s the last thing I remember. Being in college. I look around at this home, these pictures, and they’re
telling me I made it. But I can’t remember any of it. I still feel like that girl who’s holding on by the skin of her teeth, waiting for the other boot to drop. I don’t know what to do.”

Andrew fought the urge to shift uncomfortably in his seat. He pushed his hands into the scratchy couch fabric, focusing on the feel of it against his palms. He watched Renee lean forward, placing a hand lightly on Lin’s knee.

“The human brain is a remarkable organ,” she said gently. “A miracle, really. It holds onto everything you’ve ever know. Ever seen, smelled, tasted or touched. And yours is already healing. Those memories will return to you, Lin. And then you will continue to remember them, as you build your life with your husband and your new child, even when those events have long since passed. It’s going to be alright.”

It was a miserable car ride back to the lab. The sky was gathering in on itself, grey and threatening, readying for a big summer storm. The air was too heavy and hot for Andrew to consider sacrificing air conditioning for a smoke. Renee was unusually fidgety in the passenger seat, scrolling through her phone too quickly to be really seeing any of it, crossing and uncrossing her legs every thirty seconds.

“What is it?” Andrew asked when he couldn’t take it anymore. She put the phone down with a sigh.

“Just thinking about memory,” she said softly. That wasn’t really a surprise, Andrew had been thinking about it too. “There are so many things in my past it would be easier of I could forget,” she continued, “but now - the life I’ve made, the people I’ve helped, I’m glad those are things I get to remember. I can’t imagine what it would be like to have those things taken from me, to feel like all my progress had been erased.”

Andrew swallowed down a bitter retort about his own infallible memory. Because it turned out he had forgotten some things, hadn’t he? None of it, the remembering or the forgetting, Renee’s fault and anyway, what she remembered was bad enough. Half of it would have been.

“Yeah.”

Renee turned up the music without a word, even though it wasn’t the station she liked. Neither of them spoke until they were almost back to the lab. Andrew glanced at the clock. It was just shy of 1 pm.

“Gym’s pretty empty this time of day,” he said. He didn’t take his eyes off the road as he waited out her consideration.

“I’ll get lunch if we don’t do the burger place again,” she said.

“Thai?”

“Deal.”

The AC in the gym wasn’t nearly high enough, but the sweat felt good. Earned instead of forced. “You’re going easy on me,” Andrew accused, halfway through their sparring match. Renee grinned down at him.

“Bold words for a man lying on his back on the mats.” She offered him a hand, which he ignored in favor of shoving himself to his feet with his hands on his knees.

“Christ you act like I’m some kind of old person.”
“Or like a person who suffered a nearly life altering injury, almost died, then nearly put himself in an 
exhaustion coma rescuing someone only a couple months later?” she said serenely. “Of course I’m 
not pushing you as hard as I used to, Andrew. I’m not actually trying to kill you, you know. That 
would be fairly counterproductive to our friendship.”

Andrew ignored her, just like he did every time he used the word friendship in reference to the two 
of them. Not because he thought she was wrong, but because he could. He could ignore her and 
ever say it himself and she wouldn’t stop saying it, because she was Renee. Maybe that was taking 
avantage, or maybe it was just a gift he chose to accept over and over. Maybe that’s all being 
friends was anyway. It wasn’t like Andrew would know.

“One more round before lunch,” he told her, setting his water bottle to the side and moving the the 
center of the mats. “No weapons this time. Come on, Walker.”

“Only because you know I’m better with a knife than you are,” she teased. He shrugged - no reason 
to deny what they both knew was true. She squared off. “Loser buys coffee? I’m feeling a really 
fancy latte.”

“You’re on.”

Renee was giving, at most, half her maximum effort. Even Andrew wasn’t at full. They were still in 
the middle of the work day, after all; there was no point in pushing themselves to the brink. They’d 
fought like that before, all out, back when they’d just started working together and were racing to 
figure out each other’s weak spots first. Now they just needed to shake off the ghosts that had been 
clinging to their shadows since the interview with Lin Woomer, get back in the present moment. And 
what better way to stay in the present than a good old fashioned fist fight?

Even at half strength, Renee was hell on the mats. Faster than Andrew would ever be and using 
every inch of her height for these few fights where it actually meant something. Andrew hit harder, 
lower, blunter. He was more difficult to move but Renee never stopped moving, a blur of fists and 
feet and hands that weren’t afraid to grab and haul him around. They’d both gotten past that years 
ago, and this wasn’t a gentleman’s spar so much as a vaguely friendly brawl that ended with 
Andrew’s lip bleeding fat down his chin. Renee apologized, she really hadn’t meant to hit his face, 
she’d been aiming for his shoulder and then he’d ducked, but she was laughing a little as she dabbed 
a damp paper towel at the split, and Andrew didn’t mind.

They showered, dressed, and took their time at the little Thai place across the street, debating the 
merits of the gym as an apocalypse stronghold. (Showers, weapons, and plenty of heavy stuff to 
block the doors, Andrew argued. No access to resources, Renee countered. And too many 
windows.)

They stopped by a coffeeshop on their way back to the lab and Renee insisted on buying his anyway 
as an apology for bloodying him. As an afterthought, she added good coffees for Neil, Kevin, and 
Nicky as well. She refused to let Andrew help pay, pushing away his money and filling his hands 
with the drink trays instead. As they left, he fished the crumpled ten back out of his pocket and 
stuffed it in the tip jar. Renee either didn’t notice or was pretending not to have, but it seemed like the 
sort of thing she would appreciate.

The storm broke over Boston late that night, sending waves of warm summer rain and loud cracks of 
thunder over the city. The wind howled against the thin walls and old windows of the house in 
Cambridge. Across their room, Neil was burrowed into his blankets; Andrew could just make him 
out in the next bed. The nighttime lights of the city shone weakly through the blinds, casting the 
room in warm, muddy hues, occasionally cut through by bright flashes of lightning.
Andrew had come to appreciate their sleeping arrangement. It had been hard, at first. Harder than he’d expected. Neil was prone to awful nightmares that could spike during difficult cases. He often woke Andrew in the process of thrashing himself into wakefulness. It didn’t escape Andrew’s notice that on those night, Neil’s eyes sought him immediately, and that it seemed to help him to see Andrew there, staring back at him across the little space between their beds.

Andrew’s sleep troubles were less theatrical - he tended toward either insomnia or the kind of nightmares where you woke still and silent, afraid to breathe. Even so, he could admit to himself that he too sometimes stared at the bed across the room, and took comfort in Neil being there, alive, safe. An anchor for Andrew to cling to until the world settled.

On the worst nights, the nights when Neil’s dreams left him too paranoid and shaken to go downstairs to make tea, as was his usual habit, sometimes Andrew would do it for him, if it seemed like Neil could bare to be left alone. If not, sometimes Andrew would simply crawl into Neil’s bed and curl around him, Neil tucked into a ball against his front, Andrew’s palm at the back of his head; a loose, still sort of cradle. On those nights, with Neil shivering and sweating in his unmoving embrace, Andrew would sometimes imagine falling asleep like that, curled into each other. A more peaceful version of this. Someday, maybe. And even when Andrew returned to his own bed, he could hold onto the memory of that closeness until he fell asleep again, or at least until morning.

That night, neither of them were getting much sleep. Andrew could hear Jean Moreau’s warning in his head - there was another Numbers broadcast tonight. They hadn’t figured it out in time. And now they were just waiting, helpless to stop whatever was coming this time. Andrew hated it intensely.

“Do you think it’s stupid?” Neil whispered across the darkness, apropos nothing. Andrew rolled slowly onto his side to face him.

“What are you talking about?”

Neil shifted himself onto his side as well. “This whole thing with Kevin,” Neil clarified. So that was what had been eating at him all day. Andrew nearly laughed.

“You are both always stupid. It is not anything new.”

“Right.”

Neil rolled back onto his back, staring silently up at the ceiling. Andrew watched him through the flashes of lighting. The still way he held himself, the resignation that had been in his tone, like he shouldn’t have expected more from Andrew than that.

Andrew turned onto his back as well. It was easier to speak like this, sometimes. Trying, he reminded himself tiredly. You’re both trying. When he spoke, it was slowly, testing every word for truth.

“What I meant was - you are both wrong, because you are both right. You deserve to be angry, but Kevin also deserves to be scared. I think, you are both angry about the same thing, really, and the only way to resolve it is to talk to each other. The longer you avoid it, the harder it is going to be to put back together.”

Andrew wondered if it would occur to Neil that he was speaking from experience.


Andrew closed his eyes. “Just go to sleep.”
“Alright.”

They got the news early the next morning. Not even from Wymack, but courtesy of an alert that had just made headlines at every breaking news organization on the eastern seaboard: a plane had gone down just outside Boston, crashing nose first into the bay, killing almost everyone on board. Only the co-pilot and a single passenger survived. The last recorded communication over the radio before it hit the water was the captain’s voice, confused and panicked, demanding “What’s going on? Where am I? Who are you? Where am I?”

Neil was sent on ahead to the scene of the plane crash to help Wymack and the team recover any tech they might find. Andrew was told to go babysit Kevin and Nicky and continue trying to rundown leads on Newton. Andrew might have groused on the phone about Wymack asking for the science consultant rather than the agent, but privately he was relieved. There were only so many mysterious plane crashes he could investigate in a year and have Wymack expect him to continue getting on them, and he’d already overreached his threshold.

The news was on in the lab when they got there. Andrew ignored it. Which meant he listened to it while being extremely irritated, because the only way to properly ignore something was to do something else instead, and there was precious little for him to actually do.

...The small twin engine plane went down just metres from land in the Bay last night, barely missing a water landing. The only survivors are one passenger and the co-pilot, who is being hailed as a hero for steering the place away from a row of homes and restaurants lining the beach where the plane crashed, avoiding even more casualties. What makes this co-pilot’s feat all the more remarkable is that both he and the pilot, along with the surviving passenger and presumably everyone else onboard the plane, were all apparently struck with sudden and complete amnesia just before the crash. When paramedics spoke with the co-pilot at the scene, he professed to have no knowledge of ever learning to fly a plane. Or indeed, any knowledge of his life for the past twenty years. There is only wild speculation at this point as to how such an event...

Andrew didn’t bother to pay much attention to the details of the plane crash. The team and Wymack agreed it had probably been a fluke - an accident of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The bad weather over the area the previous night had caused interference in the pilot’s radio communication. It seemed he’d been scanning through frequencies trying to stay in touch with control when he’d scanned over the Numbers Station, just for a few seconds. It had been long enough though. Long enough to wipe his memory and send the plane careening toward its doom.

Andrew focused on trying to chase down Newton instead, but needed a break from that too after a couple more fruitless hours. Reynolds suspected he was slipping away to the other universe between jobs, and Andrew was beginning to believe she was right. At a loss, Andrew decided to rifle through what little other evidence they’d accumulated, just in case they’d missed something.

He was going through Lin Woomer’s notes when one of the beat up notebooks caught his attention. It turned out, this one wasn’t full of code notes at all. Instead it appeared to be an address book. It contained perhaps fifty names, all in Lin Woomer’s neat, squat penmanship. What made it odd was that beside each name, rather than a street address or telephone number, instead had been written things like “Minnesota” and “outside Burgundy, France,” sometimes a particular shortwave frequency, and the odd identifier such as “with the two daughters,” or “ice cream factory!” Andrew surmised that these were people Lin had been in contact with over the years through her shortwave radio.

Andrew flipped through it, pausing when a familiar name caught his eye. “Boston!” read the little description beside the name. “A fun girl!”
Andrew pulled out his phone and typed out a quick text to Neil, letting him know that Andrew wanted him to come along to do an interview as soon as he got back.

Chapter End Notes

**Up Next:**

“So let me get this straight. We’re going to do a witness interview...with your therapist?”
"So let me get this straight. We’re going to do a witness interview...with your therapist?"

“I am hoping it doesn’t come to that,” Andrew said, not taking his eyes off the road as he drove. “That would probably qualify as a conflict of interest.”

“You think?”

Andrew shot him a sharp look. “We are going to interview her receptionist.”

Neil nodded, settling back in the passenger seat. He pulled at the collar of his shirt, annoyed at the way it made him itch and sweat in the summer heat. He hadn’t worn a button down in years, but Nicky had insisted that they could be “hip and fun,” as though ranked anywhere in Neil’s wardrobe priorities. He saw Andrews hands twitch on the wheel, and knew he was probably restraining himself from slapping Neil’s hands down.

“And we are going to see her because her name was in Lin Woomer’s contact book,” Neil said, for clarity.

“Yes.”

Andrew didn’t seem particularly tense or upset about the prospect, so Neil let it go. It would all shake out soon enough.

Neil didn’t know a lot about Dr. Betsy Dobson, aka Debby Tessono, aka Bee. He knew Andrew had started seeing her in college. He knew he had stuck with her afterwards, and had gathered from context and observation that Andrew considered her influence crucial to his recovery and continued progress. He knew she had a second office, through which she helped patients afflicted by problems outside the realms of traditional science. Actually, Neil thought Andrew might have given referrals to a few victims in some of their cases.

The fact that Andrew trusted Dr. Dobson with his brain said a lot, Neil knew. But anyone who made a living digging around in people’s secrets was going to be a tall order to trust, in his book. Particularly if that person also dealt in extra-universal knowledge. He was glad they were only meeting with the receptionist.

Andrew pulled the car off the road on the edge of the suburbs, in the parking lot of a rundown little strip mall. Even in the middle of the day, it seemed like there were only a few stores open: a diner, a drug store, and an unnamed shop with curtained windows and a single blinking neon sign reading
“psychic readings.” Andrew hadn’t specified the address they were heading to, but this also wouldn’t have been the first time he had taken an unannounced snack detour. Neil expected him to head toward the drugstore. Instead he started making his way to the psychic’s shop.

“I thought we were going to Dobson’s second office,” Neil said. Andrew glanced back at him with his hand on the door.

“We are,” he said, and pushed his way inside. With no other real options, Neil followed.

The inside of the shop was at least cooler than the summer heat, but the air was oppressive with the smell of incense. There were dyed scarves and shapes of strung beads hung up on the walls, interspersed with oversized candles, crystals, and the kind of pseudo mystic symbols always found in these sorts of places. Neil had been in any number of shops like this in his time on the run. A good percentage were fronts, and almost none were run by anyone who considered themselves to be an honest-to-god medium. That didn’t mean they weren’t clever. Neil knew a good con when he saw one, and this place - a little understated, a little obfuscating to the senses - was particularly slick.

There were three people gathered in the front room of the shop, all younger adults, around Neil’s age: a tallish woman covered in jewelry and tattoos; a short, brown skinned woman wearing a lurid pink scarf; and a thin black man with a soft, scholarly look that was a bit at odds with his bleached blond mohawk. They all stopped talking and turned as Neil and Andrew entered the shop, the bell over the door tinkling into the abrupt silence.

“Minyard?” It was the tattooed woman who spoke, stepping away from the others. That made her Sara then, Neil supposed. “Doc’s not in right now. Did you need to make an appointment...for yourself or your... friend?” She threw a quizzical look in Neil’s direction. Andrew took a step toward her.

“This is actually more of an official visit. We need to talk to you about Lin Woomer.”

Sara’s face dropped from confusion to concern. “I haven’t spoken to Lin in years,” she said. “Is she in trouble?”

Neil looked pointedly at the other two, still watching them and well within hearing distance. Andrew must have done the same, because Sara said “Jesus that was creepy in sync.”

“This is a sensitive issue.” Neil began, only to be interrupted by Sara. She addressed Andrew when she spoke.

“Look, MI-.5, if this is about Lin and you found my name, that means it’s about the Numbers Station. And if it’s a Numbers issue, it’s an FPO issue. These two not only can be here for this conversation, they probably should be.”

Neil had no idea what an FPO was - or, more importantly, how this Sara could poke fun at Andrew without appearing afraid of being stabbed - but Andrew seemed to be considering. Eventually, rather to Neil’s surprise, he nodded assentingly.

“Do you have somewhere private we can talk?” he asked.

Sara grinned. “Knew you’d see the light, Minyard. Come on, we can use the lounge in the back.”

She gestured for her companions to follow, and lead the way through a heavy beaded curtain to a short hallway. They passed one unmarked office door, one marked “records,” and eventually arrived at an open door frame with a little plaque next to it marked “employee lounge.” A pink post-it note reading “Chill Zone” had been taped up next to it.
The lounge was significantly more plain than the front room. It was decked out with a typical break room kitchenette set-up, a small seating area, and bookshelves stuffed with a mix of board games, packaged snacks, and actual books. The furniture looked like it had been transplanted directly out of someone’s living room in approximately 1995. There were a handful of charts, maps, and lists tacked up on one wall, but Neil didn’t get a close enough look to see what they were tracking.

Sara clapped her hands briskly once they were all seated on various lumpy furniture. “My dearest chucklefucks,” she said, (talking to her companions, Neil could only assume) “meet Mister Special Agent Andrew Minyard, FBI. He knows the Doc.”

“Mister Special Agent Andrew Minyard is an awfully long name,” Jeremy said, smiling, like it was a joke they were already in on.

“Agent Minyard will do,” Andrew said shortly.

“Sure sure,” Sara waved a hand. “You are here on business, after all. With your...partner, then? Agent...?”


If Sara noticed his discomfort she gave no sign of it. He supposed she would be used to dealing with all manner of personalities, in her line of work.

“Cool cool so that’s you two. Okay, Neil. Hi, my name is Sara Alvarez. You can call me Alvarez, literally everyone does. I work for Dr. Dobson at front desk here in the shop, and I’m the house medium. I do psychic, tarot, palm, and aura readings.

“These are my co-workers.” She pointed at the man and woman who had taken seats on either side of her, “They’re more heavy on the FPO work than me, but they help out in the shop sometimes as well.”

“Jeremy Knox,” the man said, extending his hand with a wide, bright smile. He radiated so much positive energy Neil could tell he was the kind of person you’d be hard pressed not to like, but Neil sensed he was sharper underneath than he looked.

“And I’m Laila Dermott,” the other woman said, shaking hands as well. “And it’s not my fault I don’t work front end much anymore, racist idiots keep asking me for the mystical secrets of the East. I can only take so much.” She directed that last part more towards Sara - Alvarez, Neil supposed, - but it had the tone of an old argument worn nearly into fondness.

“Now that that’s out of the way,” Alvarez said, “what would you like to know?”

“The Numbers Station,” Andrew said. “What do you know about it?”

Alvarez leaned back into the couch, staring up at the ceiling as she thought. “That it’s old as dirt? I dunno, it was a hobby, for a while. I met Lin and a bunch of others through the radio, and we would chat about the Numbers.” She shrugged. “This was well before I fell in with the Doc, actually. There is no coincidence, only fate, right?” She said it with a vaguely mystical air, smiling and wiggling her eyebrows.

“Sure,” Neil offered.

“Anyway. I was young, looking for answers, all that bullshit. I found the Numbers. Banged my head against that wall for a few years and then gave it up as a bad job, you know? I haven’t listened in years, why?”
“Over two dozen listeners, including Lin Woomer, have been struck with acute retrograde amnesia from listening to recent broadcasts,” Andrew said. “We believe the amnesia was induced intentionally as a means of preventing listeners from obtaining the last piece necessary to unlock the code of the Numbers and discover whatever information they contain.” Jeremy gasped softly. Alvarez and Laila both looked horrified

“Like I said, I stopped listening ages ago,” Alvarez said. “And it wasn’t until a couple years later that I found Doctor Dobson and the FPO.”

“FPO?” Neil asked. It was the fifth or sixth time that abbreviation had been used, and Neil still didn’t have the slightest idea what it meant.

“First People’s Order,” Laila explained. “You do know about the First People’s Book, right?”

“I know of it.”

He stopped, considering how much to say. Andrew had shared what little he knew about the text that had inspired ZFT. He hadn’t explained how he knew, just that he had a trusted source and Neil would have to trust him on this one. Neil understood now that he’d probably gotten the information from Dr. Dobson in the context of one of his sessions, and hadn’t felt comfortable divulging the circumstances.

Still, Debby Tessono knew about a lot of things, but that didn’t mean her employees did.

“I know it contains stories about the existence of multiple universes.”

“They all know, Neil,” Andrew said. Alvarez laughed, and Neil suspected it was at his expense. He folded his arms, glaring at Andrew a little petulantly.

“You could have told me that to begin with,” Neil said. Andrew appeared unbothered.

“Okay nerds,” Alvarez said, and this time it seemed like she was talking to him and Andrew, “This is a bit beyond my area of expertise. Lala and J here are the real artifact aficionados; they’ll be able to help you more than I will. I really do spent most of my time doing palm readings.”

“You pay the bills, babe,” Laila said reassuringly, patting his arm a bit. She turned to Neil. “Come on, let’s go to the records room.”

They followed Laila and Jeremy back up the hallway to the door marked “records.” The entryway was slightly cramped, but past it was a long room full of metal shelves lined with rows upon rows of books and neatly labeled boxes. All appeared to bear small stickers with strings of letters and numbers, presumably some kind of cataloging system. It reminded Neil of the few times he’d been in the old case file storage rooms at the FBI, except that the contents of these shelves seemed to be organized by subject rather than date. There was an old fashioned computer on a small desk along one wall, another pink post-it taped to it, this one reading “Reference Catalogue. Password is the fear represented by your most recent bad dream.” Neil had no clue if it was supposed to be a joke or not.

Laila lead them straight to the far left end of the room, stopping at the closest end of the shelf and putting her hands on her hips, staring upward. “You’re up, J,” she said. Jeremy laughed.

“I swear, you only keep my around to reach the tall shelf,” he said, reaching up and pulling down a lockbox from the very top right hand corner of the shelf.

“You know perfectly well I can and will climb this shelf to reach things. I just wanted to be a little more dignified in front of our guests.”
Jeremy lead them back to the little desk, setting the lockbox down on it. It was the size of a large shoe box and looked thick-walled, with a 4 digit padlock built in to one side. Jeremy keyed in the code and popped the top, pulling out a plexiglass box just smaller than its holder. He then pulled on a pair of white cotton gloves procured from a drawer in the desk before carefully removing the lid and pulling out the box’s contents: a single thick book, cracked and yellowing with age. On its cover was written, in just legible faded type, “The First People’s Book, collected and composed by Elizabeth Robbesone.”

“There was only one addition ever printed,” Laila said. “This is one of the last remaining copies in the world.”

“And this has the answers to the Numbers code?” Neil asked, confused. He turned to Alvarez, who was standing behind them. “I don’t get it. If you’ve had the book all this time, why haven’t you solved the code?”

“Well, first of all, I didn’t have all the info. If you’re right, you can’t solve the code without the complete set. I haven’t listened for years, and the final numbers were only just broadcast. And second... it’s not really a solution,” Alvarez said. “More like, an idea? How much do you actually know about what’s in here?”

“Not much.” Neil admitted.

“First People. That’s like, what, Adam and Eve?” Andrew asked.

“Before that,” Laila said. “Before everything. Before Neanderthals. Before dinosaurs. This book tells the story of a great advanced human civilization from the dawn of time. We think the Numbers came from them. So it stands to reason that if there is a way to solve this code, it’s somewhere in this book.”

Neil looked at Andrew. Andrew was staring at Laila with a stony intensity. “Before dinosaurs?” he said at last.

It was Jeremy who responded. “That’s...a tricky one, yeah. I mean, obviously the archaeological record suggests that humans evolved pretty late on earth’s time scale. But the book is very clear on that point. The First People created an entire civilization on early earth, and then they disappeared without a trace.”

“Whoever these people were, they were incredibly advanced,” Laila interjected. “They discovered the Vacuum.”

“The appliance?” Neil asked.

“No, the Vacuum. As in, the source of all matter and creation.”

“...Right.”

Jeremy broke back in. “The best we’ve been able to come up with is that the original pieces of this text somehow slipped through from another alternate universe...or, like, universe system? Dimension? Whose timeline isn’t aligned with ours...but that’s just a guess.”

“So to summarize, the First People’s Book slipped through a hole in time from another reality along with the Numbers, and therefore contains information that the Numbers can’t be decoded without,” Andrew said.

“That...accurately describes our best guess, yeah. That or maybe time travelers?” Jeremy said with an
apologetic smile. “But please, you’re welcome to take the text with you if you promise to treat it well. I actually just got back form a trip where I was able to track down a couple more of the last remaining copies, so you won’t be leaving us totally empty handed.”

Jeremy placed the book back in its plexiglass case and replaced the lid. Neil took it carefully in his hands.

“Kevin and I will look after it,” he promised. “Let us know if you think of anything else that might be helpful.” He held the book tightly. He hoped it had the answers they were looking for.

Something occurred to Neil on their drive home.

“Sara Alvarez. Is she...actually psychic?”

Andrew shrugged. “You know, I’ve never actually asked.”

The interview with Sara Alvarez and her associates was certainly illuminating, but it wasn’t like it immediately broke the case. Neil paged through the First People’s Book for a few hours, looking for any information that might tell them more about the cubes. All he found was enough calendars and diagrams to give him a headache.

At least he and Kevin could work separately for a while - they’d discovered that there was some signal still coming out of the cubes, and putting them too close together produced a horrible kind of feedback sound. That had been a promising discovery at the time, but nothing had come from it. Eventually Neil closed the book, abandoned his own cube, and reluctantly went to see how Kevin was doing.

“Find anything new?”

Kevin shook his head from where he was hunched over his cube, seemingly trying to figure it how to dismantle the crystal plate sides. There were small metal dots that might have been fasteners, but they were flush with the surface and apparently not readily removable.

“The answer must be inside this damn thing,” Kevin muttered. “The transmitter board is completely ordinary, any idiot with a diagram could have put it together.”

“If it’s that familiar, that could mean it was built in this universe,” Neil suggested. Other universe tech always had a peculiar arrangement to it, familiar but not. “Are there any parts we could trace back to a buyer?”

“They are barely a step above Radio Shack,” Kevin said with a contemptuous sniff. “I mean, you could have put this thing together.”

“Kevin.”

Kevin looked up, and when he met Neil’s eyes he looked weirdly sheepish. He turned back to the cube.

“Sorry,” he muttered as he continued focusing. “I just meant, there’s absolutely nothing about the components that tells us who built this or why.”

That might have been the first time Kevin had apologized to Neil for...anything, ever. Maybe Jean really had gotten through to him. Neil didn’t quite know what to do with that except ignore it. He peered more closely at the cube, still frustrated by their lack of progress.
“I was hoping this thing was going to unlock some mysteries,” he admitted. “But it feels like it’s just creating more. I mean, what the fuck is even up with the whole floating in mid-air thing? Like a bad magic trick, just using magnets to- wait.” Neil stood up straight, nearly knocking Kevin back a step. “I have an idea.”

Neil hurried back to his own workstation and rummaged around in it, pulling out a little tool about the size and shape of large marker.

“I want to see,” Nicky said, wandering over.

“I put this together when I was working on the Sonic Box,” Neil explained. “I think I’ve seen fasteners like this before, on military tech in Shanghai.”

“As a federal agent I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” Nicky said. Kevin just looked impatient.

“What does that do?”

“It’s an electromagnetic screwdriver.” Neil held it in front of one of the flat metal dots and switched it on. A small light pulsed at the end, and slowly the dot began to turn, and turn, until a tiny threaded rod emerged from the crystal plate and dropped with a clatter to the lab counter.

“Holy shit,” Kevin said.

“I can’t believe you actually invented a sonic screwdriver,” Nicky said.

“It’s electromagnetic,” Neil corrected. “It doesn’t use sound at all.”

Nicky patted him on the shoulder.

Neil applied the tool to each of the fasteners until all the crystal plates could be removed and the innards could be seen. As they’d suspected, it appeared to have been built in the other universe, everything constructed in that particular same-but-different arrangement.

“That’s more like it,” Neil said. He felt himself beginning to smile as he picked through the wires and circuit boards. He gave Kevin the EM screwdriver so he could disassemble the other cube. Now that they could see the insides, they could begin teasing out what they were looking at.

Kevin hadn’t even finished taking the sides off the other cube when Neil spotted it: tucked beneath a few strands of black wire, a little flash of silver. A transistor, but one that didn’t look quite like the rest. It only took a few moments to give Neil a strong hunch: this piece had been replaced, and it had been replaced in this universe.

What’s more, this was no ordinary resistor. The cube’s innards were much more than a step above Radio Shack. If they had been built by Tetsuji’s people on the other side, they had been built with military grade tech. The replacement part was no exception, and Neil recognized it as Russian military make immediately. Expensive, but not hyper-restricted. You wouldn’t find it at your local electronics store, but you also probably wouldn’t go through the trouble of buying one lousy resistor on the black market. You bought it from the source, and the source usually wanted to verify your identity, so they made you give a name. More importantly, they usually made you give an address.

Andrew and Renee weren’t due back from lunch for another hour, but Neil had other numbers he could call these days. He pulled out his phone and dialed.

“Neil! Bud! You never call! What’s up with you on this fine day?”
Matt Boyd always sounded genuinely cheerful, even at the office. Neil had no idea how he did it. “Hey Matt, it’s a work thing actually. I need a favor.”

“Sure thing man. What’s up?”

“I need a trace on a piece of military tech. I need to know who the buyer was.” Neil read off the serial number.

Chapter End Notes

The Trojans! Did I manage to keep that a surprise or did everyone already know? And have I mentioned that my favorite thing is having people in Andrew’s life make up embarrassing nicknames for him to combat his edgelord aesthetic? I would normally use Allison, but they have a slightly different relationship here. So instead the delightful mantle goes to Alvarez and y’all, I am having too much fun with it. I think “MI-.5” might be my favorite one yet.

Also, I’ve started writing Part 9, and I think it might be my favorite story arc I’ve written for this piece yet. I can’t wait to share it with you in a few weeks!

Up Next:

Cortexiphan had ripped his brain in two, left his barely holding the pieces together for months, and after all that he couldn’t so much as tip a metal cup? Bullshit, that’s what that was. Why couldn’t it just tip? With a groan, Andrew flopped back heavily against the arm of the couch.

clang.

Andrew opened his eyes. He didn’t dare sit up until Kevin spoke. “Um, Andrew? I don’t...think that was me.”
Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Part 8, Chapter 5: Moving Forward**

“Are we allowed to have Monday morning brunch at 4pm?” Andrew asked as he slid into a diner seat across from Renee. “And does it really count if it’s just our dinner hour?”

Monday mornings were supposed to be brunch mornings. Like many parts of their odd relationship, that particular tradition had started off as something like a bad joke. Andrew had been complaining that the FBI was always ruining their weekends. Renee had suggested they make their own weekend, on the most un-weekendish day of all. And then, like sparring and weird coffee orders and making plans for armageddon, it had become a habit. Nearly every Monday since they had met at the same diner, a little place run by two ancient sisters that served breakfast all day and nearly all night. The coffee was hot enough to scald and the hash browns were greasy enough to coat your arteries on contact. Despite a total lack of effort on Andrew’s part, the waitstaff knew them by name.

This morning had been rudely interrupted by the news of the plane crash, but even special agents had to eat some time, so here they were.

“It counts,” Renee said with a small smile. “Saving the world has to come first, but Tuesday brunch is absolutely second. It can’t be missed.”

They’d been here nearly every Tuesday for the last four years. They’d brunched with black eyes, broken ribs, wounded spirits, and stacks of case notes beside them. They’d been here when Aaron was still in the hospital, when Andrew had still been having temporal migraines. Renee had gotten a carry-out tray of his favorite pancakes the week they’d gotten back from the other side, and they’d eaten with Neil, grouped on the air matress on the floor.

In all that time, Andrew had never seen Renee look quite like she looked now.

They worked through the usual small talk over initial cups of coffee and through placing their orders. But by the time their food arrived Renee was distinctly fidgety. It wasn’t a usual look on her. Andrew gave her three bites of her meal and half a fresh coffee before he broke the silence.

“What is it?”

“Hm?”

Renee was a good liar, but after this many years Andrew knew what few tells she had, including the ones where she was trying to hide her usual tells from him. Her hand clenched more tightly around her fork and she rolled her neck slightly, clearly itching to reach up and tug on her necklace. She was nervous. Andrew waited.
“I got a job offer,” she said at last.

Andrew continued shoveling eggs into his mouth to cover the way all his insides had frozen over. Eventually she got the idea that he wasn’t going to respond without a little more information. She pushed a piece of strawberry through a puddle of maple syrup with her fork.

“Wymack suggested it, actually,” she said, speaking carefully and more into her plate than usual. Andrew put down his own fork. Renee was always direct with him, it was the foundation of their relationship. It was the primary principle on which Renee Walker existed - a commitment to the truth of things.

“Renee.” She met his eyes. “What did Wymack suggest?”


Fuck.

“Why?”

“Massive Dynamic, mostly,” she admitted, which was as much as he had suspected. “He wants me to be their dedicated liaison while we work out the whole Moriyama mess. I would also be point person for FOXES type cases in New York and Washington. We’ve been getting more cases farther and farther south, probably because the other universe Moriyamas are using Baltimore as a stronghold.”

“It will help to have someone closer by,” Andrew said, because that was true. It was true, and it was kinder than what his mouth wanted to say, which was mostly a lot of unpleasantness about the blonde business suit who ran the company she was going to liaise with. He wrapped his hands around his coffee mug, letting the warmth seep into his fingers. The coffee really was unreasonably hot, it was almost scalding through the ceramic. He held on a bit tighter.

“You know this isn’t about Allison, right?” Renee said plaintively.

“Renee.” He tolerated a lot from her, but he had never abided lies. “There is no way in this universe or the next that this is not about Allison Reynolds.”

“Well,” Renee couldn’t seem to help the tiny smile on her face. “I guess it couldn’t be entirely not about her,” she admitted. “But I really think I could do so much good in New York. And now that Neil’s been taking on more responsibility with the team, it just, it feels like it might be the right time, you know?”

Andrew wanted, in a way he rarely wanted anything, to tell her she was wrong. That this was a terrible time. Neil was still a puzzle Andrew was only halfway through solving. Nicky and Kevin had become fast friends when he wasn’t looking and hardly needed him anymore. Aaron spoke to him less and less since both of their brushes with death.

He’d had stability, before all this. Maybe not quite happiness, but contentment. He’d worked hard even for that much, and his friendship with Renee sometimes felt like the only piece of it he had left. Sappy or not, he was loathe to lose it.

“It might not be forever, Andrew,” Renee said quietly. He shook his head.

“You’ll want it to be, though.”

“It’s...possible.” She speared a strawberry carefully. “I know you didn’t think much of her Andrew,
but I do love her. I do but-” she reached out a hand until her fingertips were just pressed into the edge of his sleeve. Her face was soft, serious. “Even if I do this. You aren’t going to lose me, Andrew. I will still be your friend, always.”

There were worse things it could have been. She could have been sick. It could have been a move to DC. Los Angeles. Spain. Comparatively, New York was ludicrously close, just a few hours by car.

Andrew had never been in the habit of letting others make his choices for him. He wasn’t about to start trying to do it for someone else.

“When do you leave?”

She finally gave in and wrapped one hand around her necklace. The other was still pressed gently up beside his sleeve. “As soon as I say yes.”

Renee didn’t return to the lab with him. She had to meet with Wymack, she said. She didn’t have to say what about. It was clear she’d made up her mind, whether she’d know it or not, and had only been waiting until she’d told Andrew to make it official. She was leaving.

Andrew buried himself in his tablet, where he was combing through bad tip line tips about Newton and fruitless leads on the other Boxes that had disappeared over the past months. This kind of broad information synthesis was what had made his career as a beginning agent - finding connections no one else could find because he could remember miniscule details and recognize their importance when no one else did. It was what had gotten him on Wymack’s radar, and what had let them stop David Robert Jones. But this time he was getting nothing. His brain felt more useless than ever. Thomas Newton was a ghost, and so were all the damn boxes he had presumably stolen away.

Their phones all went off at once.

“Yes!” That was Neil, from the corner of the room where he’d gone back to scribbling notes on diagrams copied out of the First People’s Book.

“The transistor came back with a buyer,” Nicky reported. “We’ve got an address for Lucas Felles.”

“Great. We can arrest whoever built this thing, but I still can’t figure out what it does.” Kevin groaned.

“Yeah bud, that’s why we’re gonna ask him about it when we arrest him,” Nicky said.

Kevin, poking at the exposed innards of the cubes, ignored Nicky’s teasing. He’d been running tests on it all day, but all he seemed to have accomplished was cluttering up the counter. Remnants of previous projects and abandoned ideas poked out of tools, bits of wire, and more kinds of calculators than Andrew had previously been aware existed. Machines beeped feebly from behind glass and beneath napkins. The little metal cup and plate from Andrew’s “telekinesis” practice hadn’t even been put away. He eyes them distastefully.

“Have you made any progress?” Nicky asked, clearly trying to sound positive from where he sat a few tables down, buried in sheets of calculations and notes on the First People’s Book as he tried to decipher the Numbers Code.

“Nothing useful,” Kevin says. “I’m still not entirely sure how it’s powered, or how it’s programmed. I’ve detected a second intermittent signal, but it doesn’t seem to have been a part of the recording from the Woomer’s so it’s can’t have anything to do with the attack. I just don’t know what it does. Is it just a byproduct of the thing’s operation? Who even knows?” He slumped down dramatically.
“You know what we need?” Nicky said, brightening, “Music!” Andrew considered putting an immediate stop to whatever synth pop nonsense was about to be assaulting his senses, but Nicky looked exhausted enough he decided to just let him have it. Andrew had noise cancelling earphones, if it came down to it.

To his surprise, what came over the modest lab speakers was an orchestral piece, something with a quick melody and slow, rolling movements, complex and soothing. Still slumped over the table, Kevin’s shoulders seemed to relax more fully. Nicky rubbed his shoulder a bit before heading back to his own seat. “Come on. Let’s give it another hour and we can go get fancy coffee, okay? Or, I’ll get fancy coffee and you can get one of those awful smoothies. Whatever you like. My treat.”

Kevin, slowly and grumblingly, hauled himself back upright and got back to his calculations. Andrew, his concentration on Newton broken probably beyond for the evening, stared at the little metal cup beside Kevin’s elbow.

**Tip, he thought. He stared a little harder. Come on you stupid bastard. Tip over. He tried closing eyes. Tip. TIP.**

Nothing. Ugh. It was just a stupid metal cup. Cortexiphan had ripped his brain in two, left his barely holding the pieces together for months, and after all that he couldn’t so much as tip a metal cup? Bullshit, that’s what that was. Why couldn’t it just tip? With a groan, Andrew flopped back heavily against the arm of the couch.

**clang.**

Andrew opened his eyes. He didn’t dare sit up until Kevin spoke. “Um, Andrew? I don’t...think that was me.”

When he did sit up, he found Kevin, Nicky, and Neil all staring. The cup was on its side in the little metal dish, still rolling back and forth slightly. “Yeah. I think that was me. But I wasn’t even trying anymore. I’d just...” he stopped.

“Kevin,” he said quietly. “Set it up again.”

Andrew thought about how it had felt the last time, really thought about the sensation of it for the first time. he realized with a start that there had been a sensation somewhere between his chest and brain that felt – that felt like tipping. Maybe that was it. Maybe he had to feel the thing he was trying to do, a kind of phantom, sympathetic sensation. He focused on the stillness of his body, closed his eyes, breathed.

**Tip.**

**Clang.**

Andrew’s eyes snapped open. The cup was on its side in the tray, the lab ringing with the echo of metal and stunned silence. Kevin was staring at the fallen cup, a tiny smile on his face. Nicky looked vaguely tearful. Neil was grinning like a fool.

“All right, that’s it. Coffee,” Nicky declared. “Let’s go out on a high note. Come on,” he cut Andrew off to the side as they were headed out the door, “if you let me say I’m proud of you, I’ll buy you one of the good glazed donuts.”

Andrew considered. They were good donuts. “Two.”

“Deal,” Nicky said, sounding a bit watery. He took a deep breath. “Andrew. You are gonna to
incredible things, dude. I’m so, so proud of you.”

Andrew didn’t meet his eyes while he said it, but at least he knew Nicky wouldn’t expect that of him. He never quite knew what to do with his cousin when he got like this, soft and almost parental. That it meant something to him was something he’d had a long time to come to terms with. What it meant to him was something he was still figuring out. They stood in silence until Kevin popped his head back through the door.

“You two still coming or?”

Andrew glanced at Neil, still gathering up his things. “You go,” he told Nicky and Kevin. “We’ve got a suspect to bring in.”

The car ride was silent, which was how Andrew generally preferred it. But Neil must have picked up on some of Andrew’s lingering discomfort from the strange day he’d had - that or he was fighting down the urge to babble about the whole metal cup business - because he was staring with more open curiosity than usual.

“How was Monday brunch?” Neil asked eventually, like he’d just needed say something.

Andrew responded by holding out a hand in the direction of the glove box. Neil lit him a cigarette and passed it over. Andrew relaxed a bit as the smoke seeped into him, settling back into the seat, his free hand relaxing on the wheel.

“It was Monday brunch,” he said at last.

Just Monday brunch. And oh by the way it might have been the last real Monday brunch with Renee he ever had. He tossed his cigarette out the window. Without quite meaning to, he added, “I enjoy them.”

It wasn’t long before they were pulling up to the address listed for Lucas Felles. It wasn’t long after that that they found Lucas Felles’ dead body.

“We’ll need ballistics to confirm, but that’s the same caliber bullet wound as Ken Gower.” Andrew rubbed at his temple as they peered down at the corpse. “Newton?”

“Makes sense,” Neil said. Newton was connected to the Boxes of Machine tech, and one had to assume that the business of the First People’s code and the cubes were somehow related. “Newton would have hired Felles to set up the cubes, then killed him to cover it up. Just like with the Gowers.”

It was a neat bow on the mystery of the cubes, Andrew supposed, but it felt anticlimactic, somehow. They knew - more or less - the what and how of the amnesia-inducing pulses, but they hadn’t quite figured out the why. They knew the Numbers Station was hiding encoded information. But until they knew what that information was they wouldn’t fully be able to understand what this was really all about. Newton was still untrackable. Riko seemed to have moved universes with no intentions of returning.

“What is Newton after?” Neil voiced the questions Andrew was thinking as they drove home. “Why is the code so important it’s worth wiping the memories of random civilians who would probably never crack it anyway? If Riko is the one giving Newton orders, we needed to figure out what the bigger plan is. We can’t afford to be taken by surprise.”

As if Andrew had any more of an answer to those questions than he did. “People keep secrets Neil. They like them to stay that way, that’s what makes them secrets.”
Neil slumped back in his seat and groaned. “Okay, you’re being twice as cryptic as normal. Sure, fine. It’s important that it’s a secret because if it wasn’t it wouldn’t be a secret anymore. Excellent detecting, Agent.”

“We’ll know when we find out,” Andrew said. Neil closed his eyes, put his sweatshirt over his face, and slept the rest of the way to the lab.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next:

“When I touched the machine on the other side, it came alive in my hands. Organic human interface, DNA recognition protocol, subset of one. I’m supposed to just ignore that?”

“Of course not! And that’s why you’re going to play right into his hands!!”

Neil froze. “What are you talking about?”
Neil didn’t blame Andrew for taking an immediate rooftop break as soon as they got back to the lab, but he did feel like he could have used some backup. Kevin had clearly been on an experiment frenzy while they were gone. Which wouldn’t have been a problem except that he seemed to have taken half his parts from Neil’s workstation, where he was still tinkering with the Sonic Box and a few other bits he’d constructed from what he remembered of the Machine drawings.

“Kevin.” Neil took a deep breath. “We’ve been over this so many times. I’ve asked you not to touch my projects. Why did you dismantle what I was working on?”

“I needed something to amplify the signal coming from the cubes, and I needed the soundboard to safely translate it,” Kevin said defensively.

“And you couldn’t have found those parts anywhere else except my project? Really Kevin?”

“I was focusing on the case at hand, not your wretched experiments. And if you don’t mind, I should get back to work on it!”

“I’ve asked you to stop interfering with my work,” Neil said, fighting to keep his voice even. “Kevin-”

“And I’ve asked you not to work on that cursed, infernal thing in my lab! Why are you being so stubborn about this?!” Kevin was doing a worse job at keeping from shouting. As a result, Neil found his control slipping as well.

“They’re working on it over there! If we’re going to stand any chance of stopping this, we need to know what we’re dealing with!” Neil clamped his mouth and eyes shut, taking a deep breath through his nose. He could feel his hands clenched at his sides. “When I-” he stopped, breathed again until it didn’t feel like his throat was sealed shut. “When I touched the machine on the other side, it came alive in my hands. Organic human interface, DNA recognition protocol, subset of one. I’m supposed to just ignore that?”

“Of course not! And that’s why you’re going to play right into his hands!!”

Neil froze. “What are you talking about?”

Kevin took a shuddering breath. Neil used the moment he took to compose himself to lower himself into Nicky’s abandoned chair. “Kevin, play right into whose hands?”

“The Master’s,” Kevin whispered brokenly. Hearing his fear, Neil began to appreciate for the first time how difficult it must have been for Kevin to make the cross into the other universe, to where his greatest childhood abuser was not only alive, but thriving. Kevin’s hand was rubbing incessantly at
his cheek, turning the skin red and bothered. Neil reached out and took him by both wrists, coaxing
him down into his own chair.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s built as much of the machine as he can,” Kevin said plaintively. “He needed you to finish it.
Of course he would want you to keep working on it here! He probably has spies in this universe, like
that Newton! Do you think he would have given you the blueprints to his life’s work if he thought
you could turn it against him? No! He gave them to you because he knew you would be compelled
to figure this out, even if it costs you your own life!!” On the desk beside Kevin, Neil spotted the
drawing he had dug out of the drawer all those weeks ago. Neil’s face beside a matrix of letters and
machine parts, smoke pouring from his eyes and mouth.

Kevin was shaking from head to foot. His eyes were red, almost tearful. “I know the cost of this kind
of pride, Neil. You know that. The last time I fooled with technology of Tetsuji’s that I did not
understand, it was at the cost of a child’s life.”

“My life,” Neil said quietly. He hadn’t been able to get himself to think of it any other way. Kevin
nodded miserably.

“Your life,” he agreed. Neil let go of his wrists. He reached past Kevin and picked up the drawing.
Then he folded it neatly into quarters and stuck it in his own pocket, out of sight.

“It’s a drawing, Kevin. Not destiny. You don’t know that this is the only outcome,” he said firmly.
He cast a critical eye on Kevin, who was shaking slightly less than he had been a moment before.
“You know, I looked up to you. When we were little.”

Kevin stopped staring at his knees and actually met Neil’s eyes.

“And I kept following you for years even after I ran, keeping track of the things you’d discovered.
One of the things I-” Neil paused, cleared his throat.

“One of the things I...admired, I guess. About you. Was you were always willing to push forward.
You understood that the future wasn’t going to wait. That the only way to beat it was to get ahead of
it. Someone is always going to, so it might as well be you, right? That’s why you got recruited to this
team in the first place. Don’t lose that on us now.”

Kevin made an aborted movement like he’d been reaching for his tattoo again, then wound his hands
together instead. “Okay,” he said at last.

“Okay?” Neil checked. He couldn’t quite believe he’d gotten through to him.


“Awesome.”

Someone sniffled tearfully. It wasn’t Kevin. Neil whipped around toward the door and saw Nicky,
giant tray clutched in his hands. His eyes were suspiciously bright.

“Did that hurt a little?” he teased, voice wobbly but his face split in a grin.

“Fuck off Nicky,” Neil said easily. He pushed his chair back and stood. Kevin was looking steadier,
almost back to normal. “Come on, we’ve got work to do.”

“Yeah we do. Hey Neil, catch!”
Neil shot his hand up in time to keep from being hit by something that came flying at his head from the side. It squished slightly in his hand. When he looked, he saw that he was holding the remains of an oatmeal cookie.

“Aw,” Nicky said, from where he stood. Neil now saw that the tray he was holding was heaped with identical cookies. Nicky hurried over to Neil’s workstation and handed him two more un-squished cookies on a piece of paper towel. “Okay, that could have gone better. Here, here. There’s been a bunch of turnover at the hospital so Abby’s been stress baking again. I’m sure there’s an ungodly amount where this came from.”

Neil picked up a cookie and took a tentative bite, hiding an instinctive grimace at the overwhelming taste of brown sugar. At least there were raisins. “Thanks, Nicky,” he said.

“Thank me when I’ve cracked this code,” Nicky said as he sat himself amongst his own wild piles of papers. “I feel like I’m trying to translate something written by aliens.”

“I know what you mean,” Neil said, flipping idly through his own notes. “Whoever wrote this book was writing from a completely different paradigm. I don’t think they even experienced time the same way we do. I mean, nine days in a month?” He sighed as he worked through another unsatisfying bite of oatmeal cookie.

“Nine days? At that point why bother? Just like, make longer weeks,” Nicky said. He was spinning in his chair again. Neil hadn’t seen any evidence that it actually helped Nicky think, but maybe it made him feel like he was doing something.

“Well they aren’t all nine days. That’s actually the weird part, they’re all different lengths. Nine, seventeen, forty three, twenty six-”

“-Nineteen, thirty three?” Nicky broke in. He’d stopped spinning abruptly. “Neil. Time. That’s the key. They experience time differently. Read me those numbers again.”

Neil did. And as he did he realized what Nicky already had - they were the numbers from the last Numbers Broadcast. The one that the pulse from the cube had specifically made people forget.

“I thought you already tried using that set as a cypher, though,” Neil said. Nicky nodded.

“Yeah, but that was before I knew they were units of time. They aren’t a cypher key. I think they’re a whole...cypher system somehow.” He held out his hands gleefully. “Gimmie that book and go back to your cubes, tech wizard. I’ve got a code to crack.”

The only sounds in the lab for a while after that were Nicky’s music and the frantic scratch of his pen. Andrew wandered back in at some point, setting himself back up with his computer on the old sofa. Neil tried to continue examining the cubes with Kevin, but he could barely stand the tension in the room as Nicky worked, his pen and calculator working at a furious pace, his eyes alight with excitement.

“I’ve done it! Holy fuck you guys I did it! I cracked the code!” he practically shouted. Neil didn’t even have time to get a question in before Nicky was rushing on with his explanation.

“They’re coordinates,” he said excitedly. “Or, that’s half of what they are. That was the part I got first, map coordinates for locations all over the country, but concentrated mostly on the eastern seaboard. And get this, one of the locations was the Smethwick’s house.”

“They’re coordinates for finding the boxes,” Neil realized. “For finding the pieces of the machines.”
“That’s not all,” Nicky said. “There’s a second set of numbers, a string of five numbers for every set of coordinates. You know how when you put the cubes next to each other they make that awful sound?”

“Like a feedback loop.”

“Not just like. It is a feedback loop. Both cubes are putting out a tiny amount of shortwave radio signal. I didn’t want to turn our Sonic Box on to check, but I’d bet the farm that each one of these Boxes puts out a small amount of a unique radio signal. We can use it to track the rest of the missing Boxes!”

“You said the locations are concentrated on the eastern seaboard?” Andrew asked, materializing at Neil’s side.

“Seems like it. I’ve only worked through a few so far but-”

“What’s the nearest location?”

The sun was long set by the time Andrew and Neil pulled up to a dig site on the outskirts of Augusta, Maine. Stands of mobile work lights shone harshly into a patch of raw, dark earth as heavy machinery dug a pit deeper and deeper into the forest floor. Wymack had authorized digs as soon as Nicky had begun churching out coordinates, so this team had already been here for hours.

“We’re going to find all of them,” Neil said, handing a coffee over to Andrew as they approached the edge of the site, standing up on the small ridge that looked down into the pit below. “What happens then?”

Andrew was staring intently down into the pit, running a finger over the sharp plastic edge of the travel cup lid. “You’re the expert in that, I think. You tell me.”

“I think we have to build it,” Neil said reluctantly. “Tetsuji and Riko are going to figure out how to finish theirs, one way or the other. Now that they have the original First People’s Book, they’re going to get there sooner rather than later.”

Jeremy Knox had called while they were driving and delivered that particular bit of news. One of his recent jobs with the FPO had been tracking down remaining existing copies of the book. In his travels, he’d noticed a mysterious buyer had been hunting down the remaining copies as well. He’d finally realized it was none other than Thomas Newton, lackey to Riko Moriyama.

“I’m not sure if they can do anything with it without...me. But I don’t think we can take that chance.” Neil said.

“You are putting a lot of faith in a couple of old drawings,” Andrew said. Neil nodded. He’d said much the same thing to Kevin. They were just drawings, they weren’t destiny. But it wasn’t just the drawings he was thinking of.

“When I was over there,” Neil began, and felt Andrew’s focus shift more tightly to him, “I- you know Tetsuji had me look at the Machine. You know I said it reacted to me. Like my DNA was the trigger that allowed it to turn on. I think that now that it’s on over there, they might not need me to do...whatever it is they want to do.”

“Which is what?”

Neil hesitated only briefly. If there was anyone who could bear this with him, it was Andrew. “Destroy a universe,” he said quietly.
Far below them, diggers were shouting and waving over site managers - they’d found something in the dirt. Something that was responding to the radio signal they’d been given.

“Tetsuji told me that our universe and theirs are colliding, essentially. He told me that the Machine would separate them, fix the collision. But he was lying. I think the Machine destroys one of the universes.”

The workers below had begun digging by hand. Andrew had turned from watching them to watch Neil instead. “Which universe?” he asked.

Neil shrugged. “I control the Machine, so. Whichever one I choose, I guess.”

He took a long, bitter drink of coffee. “I know the soft spots cause damage, worse in that universe than this one. According to Tetsuji, and the First People’s Book, it will get worse and worse until parts of the world are uninhabitable, destroyed.” He turned and met Andrew’s flat gaze. “But is this really worth it? Destroying an entire universe just to save our own skins?”

“If the options are this universe or that one, I can’t see how that is really a choice at all.”

“I’m from that universe,” Neil pointed out.

“Nathaniel Wesninski was from that universe,” Andrew argued. “Neil Josten is from this one. There’s no choice.”

Workers were beginning to attach chains and slings to something in the deepest part of the hole. They would have this piece free in moments. Within a week, they would have all the pieces gathered, if all went well. They would start assembling the Machine soon after that. The end of the world - a world, at least - had a timetable now.

Neil’s life had had a timetable for a long time. He had only just gotten out the other side of it. He didn’t relish the thought of inflicting that on an entire reality.

“There has to be a third option,” he said. “The people over there don’t deserve to be obliterated just because...because I live here. There has to be a way.”

Andrew reached out a hand and grabbed lightly onto the edge of Neil’s jacket pocket, running his thumb over the flap consideringly.

“I hope you find it,” he said at last.

“Yeah,” Neil said. “I hope so too.”

Far below them, the workers pulled a tall, black cylinder from the earth.

Chapter End Notes

That's a wrap on Part 8! Writing the second half of Part 9 has been kicking my butt, but I'm so excited to finished it and share it with you, it's one of my favorite sections of this story in some ways and I've really been looking forward to it.

Up Next:
Part 9: Ghost in the Machine

'Andrew tried to take stock of himself, but where that mechanism usually was there was only static. He wasn’t hungry even though he couldn’t remember what or when he’d last eaten. He was - tired wasn’t the right word, not with how still he’d been holding himself for hours, at perfect attention, but - paused. Freeze-framed in the moment before something unspeakably awful, waiting for the moment to shatter, to see which way the wave would break.’
Part 9, Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

This Part, "Ghost in the Machine" is based on Fringe Episodes "The Last Sam Weiss" and "The Day We Died."

Folks, its gettin real again. I hope you love reading this part as much as I enjoyed writing it. The last parts of this series are turning out to be so much fun for me to write. As always, thanks for staying on this crazy ride with me!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Part 9: Ghost in the Machine

Chapter 1: A Final Box

Andrew hadn’t spoken or moved in six hours. Others had come and gone - Renee, Nicky, Wymack, even Boyd and Reynolds. Kevin had stuck around the most, hovering uselessly, wringing his hands and muttering about brain waves and shock trauma. His hair was limp and unkempt, and there was a bandage on his left cheekbone covering where he’d accidentally scratched himself raw over his tattoo. He was sitting now, and at least he was finally being quiet. Still, Andrew could tell that the sterile white confines of the room were starting to get to him; he was pale, and his hands had been shaking for the last ten minutes.

“Go find Nicky,” Andrew said, when he managed to find his voice. Kevin was taking up too much space in the room, but at the same time it felt like andrew was speaking to him from the end of a long hallway, hopping his voice would reach.

Kevin startled at Andrews sudden speech, but he stood automatically. He was at the door, hand in the knob when he paused, looking apprehensively back and forth between the door and Andrew. Andrew pulled out his phone, scrolling through the previous strings of unchecked message previews. He thumbed past useless check-ins from well-meaning co-workers, updates from Wymack, and queries from Aaron about the weird storms in Boston, until he found for the most recent text from Nicky.

“Cafeteria,” he said to Kevin, who nodded jerkily before stalling out again halfway out the door.

“Andrew. Are you...Do you...coffee? Anything?”

Andrew tried to take stock of himself, but where that mechanism usually was there was only static. He wasn’t hungry even though he couldn’t remember what or when he’d last eaten. He was - tired wasn’t the right word, not with how still he’d been holding himself for hours, at perfect attention, but - paused. Freeze-framed in the moment before something unspeakably awful, waiting for the moment to shatter, to see which way the wave would break.
“Coffee, sure,” he said when he realized Kevin was still standing half out the door, apparently determined to wait for an answer. “No rush though. See if Nicky and Renee need anything first.”

Finally the door clicked shut behind Kevin. Then it was just Andrew. Well, not just him. Just Andrew and, silent and still as death on the bed in front of him, the unconscious form of Neil Josten.

Outside, lightning cracked through the cloudless sky.

It had happened like this: It hadn’t been as easy as Neil had predicted to gather and assemble the pieces of the Machine. Some had been in difficult to access terrain, some were buried on private property, and others still had been discovered in one way or another and spirited to separate locations. One of Wymack’s auxiliary teams managed to find the stash of the Boxes Newton had stolen, but it was still close to three weeks before everything was found, and over a month before it was assembled, assessed, and tested with as much thoroughness as was humanly possible.

Completed, it was a monstrous thing. Old and new at once, it looked to Andrew like some kind of Eldritch Mech, right down to the very human-sized space in the middle. The very Neil Josten sized space in the middle.

They’d realized fairly quickly after that that Neil wouldn’t just be operating the Machine. He would actually be getting inside it. Suddenly, the drawing of Neil’s face beside the diagrams - now understood to be an excerpt from the First People’s Book, somehow - seemed a lot more ominous. Kevin argued for more tests, more time. Renee counseled caution. Nicky fretted. Wymack watched everything with grim eyes, out of his depth. Neil argued that with every day that went by they risked the Moriyamas beating them to the punch, figuring out a way to use their Machine without Neil, and losing any hope of Neil’s “third path” idea.

In the end it was Allison who agreed with Neil, and for that Andrew would probably never forgive her. She was back in New York now, which was wise, but she’d come to Boston for the set date. The date when Neil would step into the Machine, and start it.

Neither Andrew or Neil had slept the night before. They’d lain, still and silent, curled like commas toward each other in Neil’s bed, beneath the weighted blanket Renee had bought him as a belated birthday present. The whole world had been narrowed to that one small space, warm with their shared body heat despite the air conditioner Kevin kept too high, compact. Safe. Andrew hadn’t been able to find words for what he felt about the coming day, but for once Neil seemed struck dumb as well, his eyes just tracking over Andrew’s face over and over, like he was memorizing it.

It was near dawn when Andrew had watched Neil’s eyes close for a brief hours’ rest. Andrew closed his own eyes, but he didn’t sleep. He just held himself still and listened to Neil breathe, and waited for the inevitability of morning.

Andrew found his voice as they were dressing in the semi-dark. “No matter which universe you choose, you are going to survive,” he told Neil. Neil looked taken aback, and then vaguely horrified, as though the idea of surviving on in the other universe hadn’t occurred to him. He brushed a feather light touch over Andrew’s jaw.

“Some comfort for you.”

“It is,” Andrew admitted, and went to start the coffee, leaving Neil standing with his hand still raised.

Now there were no more tests to be run, no more equations to be solved, no more hedging their bets. There was only Neil, and a monstrous mechanical god destined to swallow him whole, and ferry him safely through the destruction of a universe, to whichever place he decided was home. They’d stood
side by side in front of it in the lab, and Neil had looked...ready.

They didn’t hold each other. They didn’t kiss or squeeze hands. They didn’t touch at all. Neil had simply said, “See you on the other side. Well, this side, hopefully,” with that terrible crooked smile, and walked into the embrace of the Machine.

Or, he had tried to. He got as far as stepping up onto the platform, but the moment he’d put his hands on the hand pads, the whole contraption had lit up like an electric fence, sparking hard enough to douse the lights in the lab, and throwing Neil across the room like a ragdoll.

Neil had been rushed to the hospital unconscious, bleeding, and burned. Again. The bleeding and burns had been easy enough to stabilize, and his brain activity wasn’t quite “coma,” but almost a day later he still hadn’t woken up. So here Andrew had sat, at his bedside, waiting. Because until Neil woke up they wouldn’t know what they were dealing with. Until Neil woke up, Andrew didn’t know how bad the damage really was. Until Neil woke up, Andrew was frozen in place and time, waiting for the wave to break, one way or the other.

Andrew only realized he’d fallen asleep when his phone ringing woke him. For some reason, in that strange place between sleep and wakefulness, he’d seen the name on the caller ID and actually answered.

“Minyard.”

“I know it’s you, dipshit. Why haven’t you answered any of my texts?”

Andrew considered hanging up. For some reason, he didn’t. “You have a masters degree. You can check a weather report, Aaron.” He heard his brother sigh in frustration and shuffle around on the other end of the line, along with a weird background noise Andrew couldn’t place.

“Yeah, I’ve seen the weather reports. Freak lightning storms in Boston. Just static, lightning striking in weird patterns without any rain or even clouds. Have you checked the weather reports, Andrew? Because if you had you’d know it wasn’t just happening in Boston.”

That weird noise happened again over the line, and this time Andrew was alert enough to recognize it. It was the sound of distant thunder.

“It’s all the way to Washington?”

“It’s not as bad here as it is over you, seems like, but yeah. We’re on the edges. Look. I didn’t call about the weather, Andrew. I… Nicky told me. About Neil.”

Andrew had crossed the bridge from committing acts of violence against his cousin to committing them on his behalf years ago. That didn’t mean Nicky didn’t continually test that boundary. “Nicky is an insufferable gossip.”

Aaron laughed hollowly. “Yeah, I’m sure it’s all just gossip that the scientist you kidnapped to save my life now sleeps in the same room as you in our old house.” He barely gave Andrew time to get angry before continuing. “I don’t give a shit, okay? You don’t have to like, come out to me or whatever. If you don’t want. But just- Nicky told me he got hurt working on an experiment, and that he’s in the hospital. I know I’m not exactly emotional support material, and I punched him in the face the last time I saw him, but I just wanted to say I could. I could come up, if you wanted. Even if you just needed someone to housesit.”

Aaron always did decide to try to be a family at the most inconvenient times. “I do not need a housesitter,” he ground out. The thunder cracked, the sky flashed, and the lights of the hospital room
dimmed briefly before surging. All around Andrew, alarms tripped by the power started ringing. “You can help me by staying in Washington and staying out of this.”

By the time Kevin was back with his coffee, Andrew had stretched his nicotine withdrawal to its limits. Luckily Kevin had returned with Renee in tow, and he left them posted at Neil’s side while he took his smoke break in the charged weather outside. Wymack stopped by, standing a few feet off of Andrew’s elbow for the length of a cigarette.

“Abby’s promised to check in whenever she’s on shift,” he said. It was a nice offer, probably. It solved nothing. Wymack dropped his butt in the ashcan and rolled down his sleeves. The unnatural wind whipped at his tie. Heading back to the office, then. Presumably to try to keep this mess from blowing up his whole department.

“Alright,” Wymack said, not quite looming over him. “Hang in there, okay? He’s gonna want you ready to take these bastards down when he wakes up.”

Andrew closed his eyes against a nearby flash of lighting. “Go do your job, Chief.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Everywhere Andrew turned, people kept trying to comfort him. Reassure him. Nicky brought takeout that Andrew took three tasteless bites of and let go cold. Even Renee couldn’t seem to help herself, quietly suggesting he might take a break to call Bee, or even see if she could come to the hospital to meet with him.

“I’ve spoken with the doctors,” she told him and Kevin over their umpteenth coffees, though he suspected she’d started getting them decaf a few hours in, “they want to keep him sedated for another twelve hours or so, but his vital signs are all stable. They’re hopeful that means he’ll come out of this without any permanent damage.”

“They can’t know that,” Kevin insisted, fraught. “Neil interacted with a machine of incredible power. A surge like that could have disrupted his neural patterns, created memory deficits... aphasia...god knows what else.”

“We’ll have to wait and see,” Renee agreed. “But I think we have strong reason to hope.”

Meanwhile, the lightning was getting worse. Andrew heard shouting in the hallways as nurses rushed patients to burn wards that were inexorably filling with victims of the storms. Renee took a call with Wymack, then turned to them both with a grim, set expression.

“The most recent strike cluster outside Dorchester had twenty five victims. This has something to do with the Machine and we all know it,” she said seriously. “I know what Neil means to you, but he is in good hands here, and we cannot help him like this. Outside? That is a FOXES case. That is how we need to help. We need to work it.”

Andrew really, really hated when she was right.

He looked at Neil, pale and lifeless, the utter antithesis of the loud-mouthed runaway who had made a home with him against all odds. Andrew wasn’t even talking to him, there was nothing he could do here to help. Still, he was loathe to go back to the lab, where the horror that was the Machine lay waiting, the drawing from the First People’s Book taunting them-

Andrew stood abruptly, pulling out his phone.

“Andrew?” Renee asked, standing as well. “Do you have a plan?”
“Yeah. I’m calling Bee.”

Two hours later, Betsy Dobson had cleared enough of her schedule to be standing beside him in the basement lab, eyeing the Machine over the top of her reading glasses.

“It was never meant to be like this,” she said. “Not in any version of the text I ever saw.”

“I thought there was only ever one version.”

“One completed version,” Bee said vaguely. “There were notes, ideas, possibilities scattered across time. I’ve studied every one I’ve been able to find, and this was not in any of them. It was not foreseen.”

Bee started making her way toward the machine, her sneakers squeaking gently on the floor. Andrew thought this might have been the first time he’d ever seen her in pants. He hadn’t expected the cargos. At any rate, she was dwarfed by the Machine as she approached it. It had looked foreboding before the business with Neil, but now it looked positively threatening, lights flickering in scattered patterns across its many panels. A low hum was emanating from it, setting Andrew’s teeth on edge.

“What I don’t understand,” Andrew said, following her, “is, the Machine was built specifically to interact with Neil, right? Why would it reject him?”

Bee looked up at it thoughtfully. “You said the Moriyamas in the other universe have likely completed their Machine, and that Neil believes they may be able to operate it without him because he has already interacted with it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, the good news is that I suspect Neil is partly wrong. Tetsuji will not be able to operate the Machine without Neil physically in his universe.”

Bee took another step forward, and the Machine crackled as though in warning. It wouldn’t actually hurt her, of that Andrew was fairly certain. Kevin had run numerous tests on it since its sumerel rejection of Neil, and it had allowed his handling. It was only when Neil had tried to access its interface that it had reacted with violence. Still, Andrew was relieved when Bee stepped neatly back, looking at it sternly, as though it were a patient trying to lie to her rather than an instrument of unimaginable destruction.

“What is the bad news?”

“The bad news is that Neil was also partly right. The Machines are connected. Tetsuji, by getting Neil to interact with an incomplete version of his, has been able to turn his on. He’s hot-wired it, you could say. It believes Neil is already inside of it. As such, it won’t allow anyone else in to take control.

“The Machines are fighting for control. That’s likely what is causing all of these atmospheric abnormalities.” Bee adjusted her cardigan, and then her necklace, tracing a light hand over the key that hung on a cord around her neck.

“That brings us to the other bad news,” she said, turning to look Andrew in the eye. “Like Neil, I am not certain that it is the sole purpose of this Machine to destroy a universe. But it is certainly capable of that. Both of them are. If we are unable to gain control of this Machine and get Neil inside of it, I believe the tension between them might be rather...apocalyptic.”
It didn’t take FBI training to figure out what she meant. “You’re saying it could destroy both universes.”

“Yes,” she said gravely.

If Andrew were a normal person, he might have cared about the idea of an entire universe of lives, loves, dreams, being horribly destroyed by his own negligence. Maybe. Maybe that was how normal people felt about those things; he wasn’t sure he would know. On some level, he could appreciate that humans generally deserved to live. He respected survival. He wouldn’t have been any good at his job if he didn’t want to help people, even if it was just to prove he could. But he’d had trouble seeing the whole Machine issue from Neil’s point of view. As far as he’d been concerned, allowing the Machine to destroy the other universe was a matter of self defense. Extreme and unfortunate, but unavoidable. Not use crying over the inevitable.

The idea that just doing nothing could cause both universes to...implode? The mechanics weren’t clear, but certainly they would break down into nothingness. That was intolerable. What was more, it was something that could be faced. A problem that Andrew could help solve. Hopefully.

“Do you have any solutions as to how we could prevent that?” he asked Bee.

Finally, she smiled. “I’m glad you called to ask for my help, Andrew. I’m very proud of you, and I know Neil will be too. As it happens, I think I might have a solution. There’s something we’ll need, but luckily, it’s not too far away.”

Bee explained that they needed to get to an old archive room deep in the bowels of the Harvard campus, one that hadn’t been added to or even really used in decades.

The problem was that the archives building was all the way across campus from the old medical building weatherm and the outside seemed to be worsening by the minute. Andrew might have risked the trip on his own, having his long-time therapist in tow changed things. He wasn’t sure how to make it there, but something Bee had said had sparked something in his memory.

Apocalyptic. That was the word she’d used. It brought Andrew back to the very first case they’d worked in this lab. In an effort to distract him, Renee had struck up a conversation about the lab’s relative merits as a stronghold for the apocalypse. She’d argued they wouldn’t be cut off from resources because of-

“Steam tunnels.”

“Pardon?”

“The old steam tunnels. They connect every building on this campus.” They’d even drawn up a map one day, during a particularly slow moment. “We can get there without having to go outside.”

And so they went, crawling through a hatch Andrew unscrewed from behind a grate in one wall just down the hall from the lab. Once inside, they found themselves in a tunnel just tall and wide enough to crouch uncomfortably in.

“I feel like I have to say that I understand this crosses a lot of boundaries in our doctor patient relationship, and I am deeply sorry about that,” Bee said apologetically from behind him. And true, Bee wouldn’t have been Andrew’s first choice for a covert recovery mission either, but he was working with what he had.

“We can worry about that after we stop the end of the universe,” he said, shining a flashlight down on the rough pencil map. “Come on, I think it’s a left up here and then it should be a straight shot to
the archives building.”

They made their way through the damp, musty tunnels, navigating by flashlight, until they reached the door that, according to Andrew’s map, was their exit.

“This should be the archives,” he told Bee, pulling out a screwdriver and getting to work. “I doubt the building still has power, so I hope you know where you’re going.” He pulled the grate off the wall with a groan, and then they were crawling out into the weak, pulsating glow of emergency lights.

They were definitely in the right building. Rows of densely packed mobile shelving units crowded toward the high ceiling. Glass cases along the walls held prized objects, or maybe just the prettiest ones. Jars of pigment, animal skeletons, rare books. Something had to be on display for when donors came through on tours, Andrew supposed. Every once in a while, the hanging fluorescent lights surged with a hum of power before sinking back into a muttering darkness, clanking ominously on their chains, as if the storm had somehow made its way inside the building.

“What are we looking for?” Andrew asked, scanning over the perfunctory number labels on the sides of the shelves. They didn’t tell him anything about where to begin. Luckily, Bee seemed to have a better idea of where they were headed. She scanned her flashlight along a few labels before heading all the way to the back of the room, where another door opened to a set of descending stairs.

“A crowbar,” she said.

“Must be one hell of a crowbar.”

“I’m not sure that it’s a literal crowbar.”

Andrew stopped on the stairs, and she looked up back at him, her calm face eerily lit in the dark of the stairwell. “You don’t know what we are looking for?”

“Oh.” She turned and continued descending the stairs. “I’m sorry I wasn’t clear. We are looking for a box. The crowbar, whatever it is, will be inside the box. I’ve never seen the crowbar, but I don’t think it’s going to be literal. The text is a little uncertain in the description. Whatever it is, its use will be to pry a gap in the shield the Machine has built around itself so that Neil can get inside.”

Like a crowbar. “So you’ve seen the box, but never what’s inside it?”

“That’s correct. I’ve never unlocked it. No one has.”

They’d arrived at the bottom of the stairs. The room beyond the doorway there didn’t even have emergency lights. Their flashlights cut narrow beams through the darkness beyond. Upstairs, static electricity crackled through the air, sending objects crashing off shelves. Bee lead him into the room, turning the crank to open a shelf and marching directly to a single white drawer whose tiny manila label read “Robbesonne.” She pulled it open and shined her light inside.

It was, indeed, a box. Small, oblong, and made of intricately carved wood. It looked positively ancient. Bee stared down at it, something almost reverent in her gaze. “There’s something I need to tell you,” she said.

The static upstairs was getting worse. Something heavy teetered and crashed onto the floor above them. “Can it wait until we are somewhere safe?”

Bee snapped the drawer shut, tucked the box under one arm, and nodded. “Lead the way, Agent Minyard.”
They managed to make it back to the lab with only a few close calls with the now-indoor lightning. When Andrew peeked out a window, the sky was terrible to behold, purple like a bruise and crackling with energy. He was glad they were in a basement - for now, underground seemed to be the safest place to be. He spared a single moment to worry about Neil, alone in a hospital, before wrenching himself back to the present. He poured cups of too-strong coffee for himself and Bee and they settled across from each other on the mismatched furniture set.

“What do you need to tell me?”

“It’s difficult to find where to start.” She smiled wryly, hands soothing around her mug. “This is a bit of a roll reversal now, isn’t it?”

“Bee.” Time was of the essence. They could discuss how very fucking weird this all was later. “Well, the first thing you should know it that Dobson isn’t my family’s original surname. It was changed when we emigrated to America.”

“Okay.” Andrew wasn’t sure why she would be bringing that up.

Bee set the little wooden box on the table between them. In the generator-powered light of the lab, he could see the carvings more clearly. Among a pattern of flowers and leaves was a name. “Elizabeth Robbesone.”

“My great grandmother,” she said. “Well, that’s the easy way to say it. She’s actually about ten generations back. Or perhaps farther back than that, we don’t really know. She’s the first one who we don’t have record of receiving the box from someone else, but that doesn’t mean she didn’t.”

“Elizabeth Robbesone,” it clicked as he said it out loud. “She wrote the First People’s Book. I thought you said it was ancient.”

“No, technically that was the fourth Elizabeth Robbesone,” Bee said, taking a small sip of her coffee. “Her predecessors spent their lives gathering all the information, all the writings of the First People they had discovered, and she was the one who eventually compiled it into the book we have today.”

“So you’ve been, custodians of this box? For hundreds of years?”

“If not thousands,” Bee agreed.

“And no one has ever opened it?”

“No one.”

“Do you-” Andrew didn’t really want to ask, but he had to. “Do you know how to open it, Bee?”

She laughed, reaching up a hand and unlooping the key that hung on the cord around her neck. “I had rather hoped your friend Kevin would be here for this part,” she said. “Do you think this lab has any concentrated hydrochloric acid?”

If you had told Andrew ten years ago that he would one day be an FBI agent, standing in a basement lab while his psychiatrist dissolved the key she’d worn around her neck for as long as he’d known her in a beaker of HCL, so that they could unlock an ancient box that held a mystical crowbar...well. He didn’t know how he would have even begun to tell you how stupid every word in that sentence was. And yet, here they were, Bee carefully extracting the little copper key that had apparently been hiding inside the aluminum one and rinsing it off. She held it up to the box.
“According to the book, this is a bit of a pandora’s box. Not that it contains horrors, just that the key will only work once. Once it’s opened, it can’t be closed again.”

As if the day hadn’t been ominous enough. “Yeah, that seems like the general pattern of things lately,” Andrew said. “Let’s get it over with. We don’t have much time.”

Bee stroked a hand softly over the lid of the box once more, then inserted the key into the tiny keyhole in the front edge of the lid. They key broke off inside as she turned it, and for a moment Andrew thought their plans had been ruined. Then the lid lifted up, revealing its centuries-old secret: a single piece of paper, rolled into a small scroll. Bee’s hands were actually trembling as she lifted the paper out and unrolled it. She gasped as she saw what was on it.

Andrew didn’t gasp. He didn’t feel much of anything, really. Just the leaden tug of the inevitable. On the paper was a drawing, much like the one that depicted Neil’s burning face beside the schematic of the Machine. Only this one didn’t depict the machine, or Neil, or any of the other diagrams from the First People’s Book. This one depicted a single face, staring from the center of the page.

Andrew looked at the paper, and his own face looked back at him.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next:

The last thing he remembered was the smell of metal and the sensation of pain. Then there was just darkness, broken slowly by a flickering white fog.
Part 9, Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Neil POV

Chapter Notes

Can you believe we're on chapter FIFTY? Yowzers folks. It's an honor that literally anyone it still with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 9, Chapter 2: Waking up at the End of the World

The last thing he remembered was the smell of metal and the sensation of pain. Then there was just darkness, broken slowly by a flickering white fog. Babbling voices broke through next, followed by the sound of alarms.

He woke knowing he was in a hospital. The sounds, smells, and the feeling of stiff cotton told him before he’d even opened his eyes, before he was even properly conscious. Which was odd, since he hadn’t ever been in a hospital before - had he? Well, if he was in one now, something very bad had happened. He’d never had a wound one of them couldn’t stitch up before. He needed to take stock of his surroundings.

In the safety of feigned sleep, he checked himself for injuries. He could breathe without restriction. He could move all of his fingers and toes. His head ached in a way that was definitely being dulled by painkillers, but he could roll his neck from side to side. Whatever had happened to him, he either couldn’t feel it or he had been here so long he’d healed. With that terrifying thought rising - how much time might he have lost to unconsciousness? - he finally opened his eyes.

He was definitely in a hospital. A private room even, which presented opportunities and challenges in terms of escape, which he was probably going to have to do. A woman in bright pink scrubs walked past the door and he snapped his eyes shut, his heart racing for a reason he couldn’t quite place. All he knew was something was very, very wrong. He couldn’t be found. If he was found, someone was going was going to make him...make him...he couldn’t remember, but he knew it was awful. Impossible. They were going to make him choose. That was as much of the thought his mind could conjure.

He needed to find someone who could help, but he could count people he could trust on one hand with the thumb chopped off. Still, he had to try. Maybe then he could figure out what happened to him. Figure out what he needed to do. Because that, too, was an instinct he felt down to his marrow. He needed to get out of here because there was something he was supposed to do, but he couldn’t remember what. Right now all he could recall was a bright light, the smell of hot metal and burning skin and - and then he remembered.
His mother was dead.

Oh god, his mother was dead. How could he have forgotten? The weight of sudden grief threatened to crush him where he lay, but he’d promised her. He needed to run. He’d promised her he wouldn’t stop running. So he forced himself upright against the tidal weight of that memory, and started to plan his escape.

The machines started beeping as he began to detach himself from the various tubes and wires that had been tracking his body and keeping it alive, but there was too much other commotion in the hospital for anyone to take immediate notice. Some part of his mind registered vaguely that there was something bad going on here, something beyond his own problems, but he couldn’t be bothered to figure out exactly what. There were voices shouting as he pulled half-familiar clothes out of a black backpack that had been left in the corner of the room. His arms had been burnt more badly than he remembered in the fire, so it was lucky there was a heavy black sweatshirt stuffed in beside grey sweatpants and a pair of beat up sneakers that didn’t quite fit. None of his sneakers ever quite fit though - that’s what you got from buying them at second hand stores. His fingers were having trouble fumbling the laces, so he left them untied and headed for the door.

Outside the relative safety and quiet of the private room, the hospital was in chaos. Orderlies were rushing by with gurney after gurney, and he thought he heard someone yelling about an overflow in the burn ward. He managed to make it as far as the ER intake. Chaos was good for him. It would make him harder to track, make it easier for him to slip away unnoticed. His mother’s voice was in his head, choked with blood, reminding him to run, run, run. He was paused to get his bearings and trying to plan his next move when a nurse was suddenly standing in front of him.

“Sir?” It sounded like maybe she’d been saying that for a while. “Sir are you alright?”

He opened his mouth to speak. It took a minute for him to figure out what to say. Too long. “I...I need to get a cab,” he said. He needed to go. She would know where to find a cab right?

She was looking at him intently. Her eyes dropped to his wrist and he realized too late what she would find there.

“Sir, are you a patient?” Her demeanor changed, subtly but immediately.

“I…” He just needed to lie, he was good at lying. Why couldn’t his brain think of a lie? The nurse’s face was growing softer.

“What’s your name, hun?” she asked. And at least that was a lie he already had an answer for - except. Except he didn’t. He’d forgotten to check. What had he told them his name was when he’d gotten here? Did he even have one? Did his bracelet say John Doe? Did it say...did it say...what was his real name anyway?

“Chris…” there was another voice in his head, trying to remind him of something. Not his mother’s voice, but a safe voice nonetheless. “...Abrams?”

She look she gave him wasn’t disbelieving. But it was more deeply concerned. From down the hall, more voices shouted about incoming burn victims.

“I have to go help, but I will be right back,” she told him. “You just stay right here, okay honey?”

He nodded. As soon as she was out of sight down the hall, he bolted for a side door.

He emerged onto the street to find it storming, but not raining. Shops were closed, their rolling fronts left half open as though their owners had all left in a great hurry. The corner store directly across the
street had two broken windows, a neon sign advertising fruit popsicles flickering weakly in the
daylight. The air smelled acrid, burnt, and his stomach rolled. He breathed through his mouth, rubbed
at his pounding head, and tried to think of anywhere he had left to go, anyone he had left to turn to.
His mother was dead, and there was no one in the world who could tell him his name.

He managed to hail a cab, scrambling awkwardly into the back seat and rattling off the first address
that came to mind. The driver punched the address into his GPS, then turned back to him with a
frown.

“Buddy, you sure that’s the right address?"

“I’m sure.”

“It’s just… We’re in Boston, Buddy. Massachusetts? Helluva drive.”

He fumbled in the black bag, thankfully finding a wallet inside containing an official-looking credit
 card. He handed it up to the driver. “I’m good for it,” he promised. The driver, if anything, only
looked more concerned, actually twisting in his seat to squint at him in the back, pushing his card
away.

“I’m sure you are, kid, but that’s an eight hour drive, one way.”

His mind scrambled to rearrange his plan. He just had to- to- “Can you take me to the airport?”

The cabbie finally accepted his card. “That I can do.”

He let himself lean against the dirty window of the cab as they drove, watching the streets of Boston
- apparently - wind past as they made their way to the airport. He tried to formulate a plan, but every
survival plan he’d even made had counted on his mother being there with him. Eventually
exhaustion took over, dragging him into unwilling sleep.

He woke when the cab pulled to a stop in front of the departure gates. There was a moment of panic
before he remembered getting into the cab himself and telling the driver where to go. Brain
scrambling to catch up a bit, he scratched at an itch on one wrist and realized he was still wearing his
hospital bracelet. He should really take that off. He slipped the bracelet from his wrist and turned it
over to read.

It turned out he’d had a name after all. In fact, when he checked, that name also appeared on the
Massachusetts state drivers license tucked into the wallet where he’d found the credit card. He
couldn’t remember giving it, but there it was, plain as day. And it felt familiar, warm in a way none
of the other aliases his mind had dredged up for him did. Neil Abram Josten.

_for real and for good_, a voice echoed in his head, breaking through his mother’s mantras for just a
second, but it was gone before he could place it. Instead he made his way into the airport, dug out the
driver’s license, and bought a ticket.

He’d managed to get flight that left in just an hour. By the time he made it to the gate the plane was
already boarding. Tucked into the cramped airplane seat, Neil Josten leaned his head against the
window, and tried to figure out what the hell he was going to do once he landed.
Don't detach yourself from hospital equipment, kids.

**Up Next:**

“Oh fuck off.” Seriously, that was what Kevin was going to try on him, some leap of faith bullshit? “I believe in your wonder drug just fine Kevin, but this Is. Not. Working.”

“Not in the drug, you idiot, in yourself!”
Andrew had called the team ahead to tell them he was bringing Debby Tessono, expert in the First People’s Text, in as a consultant. So they were prepared for her to be there. That didn’t stop Nicky from stopping dead as he walked into the lab and spotted her, Kevin and Wymack nearly tripping over themselves as they crowded through the doorway behind him.

“Hello Dr. Dobson,” he said. Wymack and Kevin looked at him in confused unison.

“Hello. Nicholas, isn’t it? Or it’s Agent now I suppose. It’s good to see you, are you doing well?” Bee asked, walking over to shake his hand warmly. Andrew wanted to sink into the floor. Just because he didn’t forget didn’t mean things didn’t slip his mind and this - of course Bee knew Nicky. Not well, of course. Andrew hadn’t started seeing her until college. But he’d met her, and he’d ended up accompanying Andrew to exactly three sessions. She’d helped them begin to hack through the tangled threads that surrounded Nicky’s assault, the attack that had caused Andrew’s probation, and the violent homophobia in both of their lives that had wound itself insidiously into the bedrock of their relationship. Bee had actually ended up referring Nicky to a local colleague who he’d seen for a few years afterward.

And now here she was, in the lab, knees streaked with mud and hair slightly frazzled with static electricity, shaking his hand again. “Nicky is fine,” he said, looking wildly between her and Andrew like he hadn’t quite solved the problem of her being there yet. “I’m doing well, Dr. Dobson. Or-” Nicky’s eyes widened as he put it together. “It’s an anagram, isn’t it? Dr. Tessono? Betsy? What should we call you?”

“I’m a psychiatrist. I answer to pretty much anything.” Bee smiled. “But Dr. Dobson will do just fine.”

Wymack and Kevin introduced themselves, and they made a bit of small talk after that. Bee actually got along with Wymack a bit too well for Andrew’s taste - it turned out she and Abby had known
each other briefly in school, and fallen out of touch. Bee hadn’t realized she was in Boston. Before Andrew knew it he was watching his boss make plans to have his therapist over for dinner.

For a strange, painful moment, Andrew wished Neil could have been there. He wanted Neil to meet Bee like this: working with them, helping save the world. It was an uncomfortable realization, that he wanted Neil to like Bee, despite Neil’s inherent distrust of her profession. Bee was his doctor, not his mom. He knew that. She’d always been a complete professional. At the same time, she’d been a constant in his life for longer than anyone except Nicky. She’d seen his worst, helped needle out his best, and she was proud of him. Genuinely proud, as incomprehensible as that seemed. It made Andrew oddly protective of her, and he found it meant something, the idea of what Neil would think of her.

He shook himself out of those thoughts as Wymack turned the conversation back to the task at hand. “So what do you two think we’re up against here?” he asked. “Is there a plan?”

Bee explained her theory about the Machine being connected to its counterpart in the other universe, and that it had been “hotwired,” which was what had prevented Neil from connecting with it. Kevin agreed that was likely what was going on, adding bits of his own knowledge about the Machine that corroborated her theory. Then it was time for the big reveal - what they had found in the archives. Bee explained her family history, showing them the little carved wooden box and what remained of the copper key. Then Andrew pulled out the scroll, unrolling it and smoothing it flat on the lab counter between them.

“No way,” Nicky breathed, looking completely disbelieving. Kevin had gone pale, his tattoo standing out raw and bothered on his cheek. But it was Wymack’s face that held Andrew’s attention. He looked so old for a moment, his whole frame slumped in on itself as he stared down at the little piece of paper, and Andrew’s face stared back at him.

“You kids are gonna be the death of me,” he said, shaking his head. He rubbed one hand through his almost nonexistent hair and sighed heavily. “Agent Minyard, what the fuck have you got to do this time?”

“I’ve been studying the First People’s Text for my entire life, Agents,” Bee said. “My family has been doing so for generations. We are information gatherers; we were never meant to interfere, to try to change the course of fate. To use the crowbar is to challenge the way of the world.” She adjusted her glasses. “But I think it’s time. All the lore we’ve been able to interpret says that this crowbar, this...ineffable wedge, if you will, is the only way to disrupt the workings of the Machine. But honestly, that is all I know. Anything more we will have to figure out together.”

Kevin stepped forward, picking up the drawing and turning it in his hands. Nicky peered over his shoulder worriedly. “But what does it mean?” he asked plaintively.

“It’s clearly a companion piece to the drawing of Neil,” Kevin said consideringly. “The answer to why must be in the drawing. Otherwise, why draw it?”

It was indeed a strange little drawing. Andrew’s face stared out of the middle of it, with strings of letters and numbers surrounding the page, like on the drawing of Neil. Rather than flames or smoke, there were static-y lines blooming from each side of his face. “Brain waves,” Kevin muttered. Then he took the drawing and rolled it sideways, connecting the lines on each side with each other. “Ah.”

“What have you got, Day?” Wymack asked. Andrew had a bad feeling he already knew.

“The drawing is clear,” Kevin said. “Andrew can bend things with his mind. He is the crowbar.”
“You don’t mean-” Wymack began.

“No,” Andrew said, at the same time Kevin said

“Telekinesis.”

For a second that single word just hung in the air between all of them; a knock at the door no one wanted to answer.

“That...could work,” Bee said tentatively. “But Andrew have you ever-”

“He has done it before,” Kevin said hurriedly. “He’s been getting better.”

“At knocking over a metal cup, Kevin,” Andrew reminded him. “Not whatever the hell this would be.”

“This would be more advanced, yes, but not entirely different,” Kevin reasoned. “Well, there would be something else. Because the Machine that’s turned on is on the other side, that is the one you would have to act on.”

“You aren’t seriously suggesting he has to cross over again?” Nicky demanded. Even Wymack looked ready to protest, but Kevin was already shaking his head.

“The parts of your brain that allow you to cross over and the parts responsible for your abilities are related, connected,” Kevin told Andrew. “They should be able to work in tandem.”

“Control the Machine over there, from over here?” Bee asked.

“In theory, yes.”

“Sure in theory,” Andrew said, unable to keep himself from sounding irritated. “But manipulating this Machine is a lot different from knocking over a fucking cup. Not to mention how much more badly it could go wrong.”

“It would require more finesse, yes, obviously,” Kevin said. He stopped, looking struck by a moment of inspiration. “Which is why you’d need to practice.” With that he was already hurrying away.

“Um,” Nicky said. But before any of them could come up with alternative arguments, Kevin was already hurrying back. And in his hands was...a typewriter. But not an ordinary one. Above the scrolling paper was a small mirror, angled down at the keyboard. Except when Nicky waved his hand over the keys...it didn’t show up in the mirror.

“Kevin, where did you get this thing?” Nicky asked nervously.

“It ah, I borrowed it from Jean,” Kevin admitted. “To study. It is one of the ways he and Allison used to communicate with Riko on the other side.” He turned to address Andrew directly again.

“It has a partner, over there. Like the two Machines, it is quantum entangled with its counterpart. When someone types out a message on the other typewriter, this typewriter will produce it as well. All you have to do is look at the keyboard in the mirror. Reach out to it with your mind. That is the keyboard you will have to trigger. You will know you’ve succeeded when this typewriter relays your message to you.” Kevin stepped back from the typewriter, clearly gesturing Andrew to take his place at it. “Here. Just, just try.”

And Andrew did dry. Goddamnit but they didn’t have any better options right now so he did try. He
imagined how it would feel to press those keys under his fingers, willed them to form words. Any words. But his mind was full of static and there was just nothing. He pushed away from the counter with a frustrated noise, getting as far as the door before turning back, pacing.

“It won’t work,” he said. He didn’t want to look at anyone’s faces, but he forced himself to school his features into blandness. “I am sorry but I do not think I can do this.”

Wymack looked at him, and then at the typewriter, and then at the Machine, buzzing angrily on the far side of the lab as the storms increased in intensity outside.

“Kevin, Nicky? You’re with me,” he said. “We need to find a better way of protecting folks from these storms. Minyard, you do what you’ve got to. Call me if there’s anything you need. Anything, you hear me?”

Andrew nodded mutely, still pacing, now at the base of the emergency stairs and itching for a cigarette. Soon it was just him and Bee in the lab. She poured them each another cup of coffee, stirring a bit of milk into hers - Andrew confirmed it wasn’t the Experiment Milk - and sugar into his. They drank in silence.

“I’m afraid I really shouldn’t stay,” she said. “I’m needed back at the shop. These storms are troubling, and Sara’s having trouble with her readings. Will you be okay alone here?”

Andrew didn’t let his heart sink. “I’ll be okay, Bee. I’ve got your number. And everyone else’s.”

“You’ve got a good team, Andrew,” she said as she rinsed her cup.

“I know,” he told her. It had taken him a while, but he did.

And then she was gone, and it was just Andrew, the Machine, and a typewriter he was supposed to control from another universe. Why the hell not?

Andrew of six months ago would have said his was the stupidest idea he’d ever heard of. Three months ago he likely still would have refused on principle. But the summer was ticking its way through August and Andrew had learned the hard way that in this lab, on this team, the normal rules of the world didn’t apply. So he sat in front of the typewriter and tried again. First by himself, and eventually while Kevin fussed over meteorological charts in the background.

The hours dragged on. He tried, but he wasn’t succeeding. “We need a better plan. One that will actually work,” he said, reaching for another cup of coffee. Renee wasn’t there to switch him to decaf - she’d gone back to New York as soon as they were sure Neil was stabilized, to help her new office deal with the effects of the storm however she could. Or whatever. He thought about calling her, but the idea of letting even more people on to witness his failure was more intolerable than wallowing alone.

“Why can’t I just wing it again? Shove my brain at the Machine til it busts? It’s worked before.”

Kevin pushed himself back from his own work, rolling closer to Andrew’s station.

“It’s the only plan we have,” he said plainly. “But you can’t use a sledgehammer on this one unless you want to break the universe in the process. Give it time. It takes focus, like meditation.”

Great, because meditation was something that Andrew excelled at. Definitely hadn’t given that one up as a bad job back in college when Bee had realized he had a tendency to just dissociate instead of actually calming down. Sure he needed to focus, but he didn’t need to relax.
“Maybe if you gave me another shot of Cort-”

“No.” Kevin cut him off seriously. “It’s a complex psychopharmaceutical, not a sugar high. I can’t just give you a boost because you feel like it.”

As if Andrew didn’t know all about complex “Do not treat me like a child, Kevin,” he warned.

“I’m not,” Kevin said, earnest now. “Everything Cortexiphan is capable of doing to you it had already done. It’s all there in your brain, waiting. All you have to do is allow yourself to unlock it. It is only your lack of belief that is holding you back now.”

“Oh fuck off.” Seriously, that was what Kevin was going to try on him, some leap of faith bullshit? “I believe in your wonder drug just fine Kevin, but this Is. Not. Working.”

“Not in the drug, you idiot, in yourself!”

Andrew stared at him coolly, but internally the exclamation had stopped him cold. What the hell? When Kevin spoke again his voice was lower, surer, but no less urgent.

“Andrew, I spent years in a mental institution believing I was broken beyond repair. I was sent there on false charges but I was not well.” His face twisted in half a smile. “My brain was fucked. Still is, probably. I know you think yours is too. Maybe you’re right. But in all my studies of Cortexiphan patients, you’ve exhibited more aptitude and control than any patient I’ve read about.

“Something about you is special, Andrew. You’re- you’re a natural. You’ve proved that much already. Accept it, use it, hone it! But you have to believe in it and you have to put in the work!”

“We don’t have time for that!”

On the counter, the typewriter teetered onto two feet, tipped, and crashed onto its back. Kevin didn’t even blink. That was because he hadn’t felt knives twitch too close to his skin, where Andrew had forgotten to take them out of his armbands.

“I can’t make us more time,” Kevin said. “But you are still our most promising option. What can I do to help?”

Andrew pulled the knives out and set them carefully on the counter, running his hands over his forearms to reassure himself there was no fresh damage. He couldn’t bring himself to actually look, at them or at the tipped-over typewriter.

“Give me something else to work on. Just for now.”

Luckily - depending on how you looked at it - there was plenty of other work to go around. Soon enough Andrew was elbow deep in charts, maps, lists, and all other manner of meteorological data, trying to figure out what the hell was up with the static storm, and if there was anything they could do about it. The biggest problem Kevin was having was the sheer amount of data. The storm was enormous, and they had readouts on nearly every aspect of it. Even he had seemed to hardly know where to start.

Kevin had been hesitant about Andrew’s assistance, but as Andrew pointed out, he didn’t have a whole lot of other options. Besides, Andrew may not have known much about weather, but he might not need to. Right now they were just combing through raw data, looking for patterns. That, Andrew could do.

“Is there anything weird about this storm, from a scientific perspective?” Andrew asked, trying to
make at least some sense of reams of data on barometric pressure, temperature, humidity, strike density and coordinates. There was something there, he could tell. He just couldn’t quite see it yet.

“Other than there being no front to speak of, no rain or even cloud cover, and the unprecedented geographical spread?”

Those things were obvious but irrelevant, apparently. “Sure, other than all that.”

“Not that I can tell,” Kevin said. He sounded frustrated and a little helpless. “There’s above average instances of repeat strike zones, but with the duration-”

“Repeat strike zones? I thought lightning didn’t do that.”

“That’s a myth,” Kevin said, a bit more patronizingly than Andrew felt was necessary. “In a normal storm the probability is low, sure, but with this size storm and how long it’s lasted, you are going to get repeats.”

“But this is more than you think we should be seeing,” Andrew pressed.

“Well the data points are hardly exact so-”

That was it. “Exactly.”

That was it, it had to be. Andrew crowded over Kevin’s shoulder where he was peering at a map of the storm on his monitor. The belt of it stretched from Virginia to Maine, consuming half the east coast in its vengeful path. “Can you adjust the data filters on this thing? Show only repeat strikes?”

“Sure.” Kevin adjusted a few menu bars and the map changed. There were fewer data points now, a galaxy rather than a glaring stream, but still too much to make sense of.

The map had a point on it for each recorded lightning strike, but the coordinates would only be so exact. “What’s the tolerance on repeat strikes?”

“Five meters.”

“Make it ten. And increase the numbers of strikes to make a repeat zone.” Kevin was right. In a storm of this size and duration, there were bound to be doubles. But increase that to four or five and…

“That’s it,” Kevin said. And indeed, there it was. Clear as day, clusters of strikes aligned like iron filings, pulling between two points on the map. On in Boston and the other- “Holy shit.”

Of course the storm stretched all the way to Washington. The other point was Baltimore. “Andrew do you realize what this means?”

Oh, he did. “It means we need to call Chief.”

“What piece of heaven and earth do you need me to move for you this time?” Wymack has asked over the phone. Then he nearly hung up when Andrew told him. Two hours later, a crew of techs was at the lab, very carefully figuring out how to load the Machine onto a truck and drive it halfway down the coast to Baltimore.

The tension between the two Machines was what was causing the storm. If they could get them in the same spot - differences in realities aside - they could control the area of damage for however long it took to find an actual solution.
“It’s an eight hour drive in good weather,” Wymack said as they watched the workers.

Andrew did not look back at the still tipped over typewriter. “Chief, this is more than an eight hour problem.”

It was a mark of just how desperate they were that Wymack had agreed to this at all. It was as much of a logistical nightmare a Andrew had known it would be getting the thing packed for transport, and they didn’t know what would happen when they got the thing to Baltimore. For all they knew, the intensity of the storm would increase in the direct vicinity as the Machines fought through the fabric of space time or whatever. But at least it would narrow the circle of destruction. Buy them some time.

As soon as the truck was on the road, Andrew and Kevin would follow by car. Flights were down along most of the coast at this point, for which Andrew was approving and almost grateful. It would only do them so much good to get there ahead anyway.

It was just. It was far. It didn’t really hit him until then how far from Boston he would be, for however long it took to figure this thing out. How far away from Neil, probably still unconscious in his hospital room. Neil, who was going to wake up alone, injured and afraid again. Neil who couldn’t be at Andrew’s side as he tried to use his abilities, not this time.

“Hey, Chief, any word from Abby?” he found himself asking.

Wymack shook his head. “Sorry kid. No updates in the last couple hours. Things are pretty crazy over there with all the storm victims.”

Of course. Abby had a hospital to help run, she couldn’t waste her time personally checking up on every patient she had a tangential relationship to. Andrew knew that. But he and Kevin were both going to Baltimore, and Renee was in New York. That just left Nicky, and Andrew trusted him but he was only one man.

“Want me to give her a call?” Wymack asked. His voice was weird, like he was trying to be gentle. Andrew shoved his hands into his pockets, annoyed that he was being so obvious.

“Yes.”

Andrew watched Wymack make the call, say hello to his wife, ask how things were going. He did his best not to look impatient. From the look of Wymack’s face, things at the hospital weren’t spectacular, so he was sure Abby had her hands full. Finally Wymack asked about Neil, and Andrew couldn’t help watching his face for any hint of what the news might be. That meant he was watching as all the color drained from Wymack’s face, the knuckles on his free hand going white in a tight fist. Andrew’s gaze was locked on his.

“I’ll call you back,” Wymack said quickly, hanging up before Andrew could snatch the phone out of his hands and demand answers for himself.

“Chief-”

“It’s not a worst case scenario,” Wymack said. All that meant was Neil hadn’t died in his own bed. There were plenty of other options on the table. “But. Neil is missing.”

The deja vu nearly knocked him off his feet. At least they knew this universe’s Butcher was firmly incarcerated along with nearly all his upper circle cronies. The likelihood that this was some kind of mob kidnapping was nearly nil.
There’s no indications of foul play,” Wymack said, reading his thoughts. “Looks like he woke up from sedation and spooked. One of the oncall nurses thinks she saw him dressed and wandering the hallway, said he seemed pretty out of it, couldn’t seem to remember his name. But he slipped away during an emergency rush.”

For a moment, anger threatened to overwhelm him. Neil had promised. He’d looked Andrew in the eyes and he’d promised he wouldn’t run.

Andrew picked up his knives from where they were still lying on the counter by the typewriter, sliding them home in his armbands, the weight of them comforting, grounding. He had promised. Neil was a liar, a thief, a cheat when he had to be. He was a survivor above all else. But he knew the value of a promise. If he had run, there was a damn good reason. Now Andrew just had to do his damn job and figure out what that reason was.

Andrew opened his tablet and started looking for him. There had to be something. A camera or an incident or - bank transactions. If Neil had escaped the hospital on anything other than foot - and he would have had to if he was trying to disappear - it would leave a money trail. Andrew had pilfered the contents of his wallet for hospital coffee, so he wouldn’t have had any cash, just the FOXES credit card. Andrew pulled up the recent activity feed. There. A cab fee, enough to get him in a twenty mile radius of the hospital, probably. And - oh.

A plane ticket. Oh fuck. Andrew’s stomach dropped, flipping in the bottom of his gut like a gasping fish as he looked up the flight information. He was slamming his tablet shut and grabbing his phone and keys between one breath and the next, hauling Kevin toward the door by the sleeve of his shirt.

“We are leaving now,” Andrew said.

“What’s going on?” Wymack demanded.

Andrew forced his feet to stop to answer. “Neil is in Baltimore.”

Wymack and Kevin both gaped at him. It was Kevin who managed to sputter “What is he doing there?”

Like Andrew had any clue. “He’s still half fucking sedated, and he got his brain struck by lightning less than twenty four hours ago. I don’t think he knows. But he got on a plane and it landed thirty minutes ago but now all flights are cancelled and we need to go.”

At least he got no more arguments. Kevin followed him to the door, Wymack catching up just as they were leaving.

“Minyard.”

Andrew ground his teeth at the delay.

“It’s an eight hour drive in good weather.” Andrew did not need the reminder, or to waste more time. “We need to call this in so that someone can look for him. Let me get on the phone with the field office, maybe you can think of some places he’d be.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?” Wymack demanded.

“I have it covered,” Andrew said, pulling out his phone and waving it in Wymack’s direction. He would not send some stranger to collect Neil when he was alone and confused. That would be
putting both parties in danger. Andrew pulled up the history to the most recent incoming call, took the space of a breath to curse everything, and pressed the call button.

“Andrew? What’s going on, did something happen?”

“I have a way for you to help. I need a favor.”


Andrew took a reluctant, steadying breath. “Neil is missing. I need you to go to Baltimore.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next:

He might have sat there for hours. The storm worsened, lighting cracking through a nearby lamppost and send it groaning into the Harbor. He let himself burn, let himself be at peace despite the screaming in his head. His mother was dead. The world was ending and there was nothing he could do about it, and he was alone, the closest to and furthest from home he had been in twenty years. He really might have died there. He thought he might be ready.
Neil exited the plane staring straight ahead, not daring to meet anyone’s eyes. He stumbled down the steps into the stormy sunlight and considered making a run for it right there on the tarmac. But that seemed likely to get him hauled off by security and possibly arrested, and anyway there was probably no one that had it out for him randomly milling around in arrivals, so. He followed the line of passengers in through the sliding glass doors. Inside the arrival gate, a gaudy red white and blue mural on one wall declared Welcome to Baltimore, the Birthplace of the Star-Spangled Banner!

What the hell was he doing in Baltimore? His mother’s static screams ran like electricity through his veins as fought against freezing in place, staring at the wall as if it might change if he waited long enough.

The best and worst thing about airport crowds was there was a pattern to them. You could slink into them when you needed to disappear, but you could also get stuck in them. Neil tried not to fidget as the line of passengers shuffled slowly past gate checked bag pick up, through the empty arrival gate, and up the long escalator toward baggage claim. He felt like a doll in an arcade game, just waiting to be corralled into the perfect spot for someone to take a shot at him. He was hoping at least, to be able to get lost in the less organized sprawl of the baggage claim, but even before they made it up the escalator, the unnatural quiet told him something was wrong.

The wide, grimy, tiled room was nearly empty. It seemed to echo with the footsteps of the few passengers from Neil’s flight as they made their way toward the one sluggishly spinning conveyor belt. A departure and arrival board told Neil that the flight he’d been on had been the last not to be cancelled, in or out, due to the weather. The rest of the airport was practically deserted, but everyone who was left seemed afraid to leave. Neil made his way as casually as he could manage through the mostly empty room, slipping out the doors into the storm.

The air outside smelled of ash and ozone, and Neil’s stomach cramped as he tried to take a deep breath. The taxi stand was abandoned, and the street was empty of cars as far as Neil could see. Beyond the concrete overhang of the airport complex, lighting cracked at odd intervals through the
suffocating sky. He considered trying to call for a ride, but was unsurprised when he patted his pockets and found his phone was missing. That was probably for the best - harder to track him that way. He turned onto the sidewalk and started walking.

His mother was dead, so it made sense that the world was ending. But Neil couldn’t shake the feeling that he was supposed to do something about it. So he did what he knew he had to do anyway - he kept moving, sneakers dragging through the sun-baked dust on the little-used pedestrian sidewalks of the airport roads. He flipped the hood of his sweatshirt up; it was hot, but at least it kept the glare of the sun and lightning strikes off of his neck, and it would keep his face relatively hidden. He felt rubbed raw from the inside out as the last vestiges of the meds and sedatives from the hospital seeped from his system, sluggish and twitchy at once. The heat radiating off of the asphalt threatened to suffocate him. He flinched every time a flash of lightning cut through the sky, but he didn’t dare slow down.

He trudged on until he found a lonely looking strip mall a couple of miles from the airport, on the outskirts of the nearby suburbs, clearly meant to cater to visitors just getting into town. As good a place as any to shake anyone who might have picked up his trail. Neil spotted a supermarket and slipped inside, sighing as the refrigerated air washed over his overheated skin. As long as he was here, he should pick up some supplies right? He still couldn’t figure out the itch at the back of his head, that un-voice murmuring below his mother’s warnings, below the other voice asking why he was running, why he wasn’t going home. Too many memories all trying to tell him things his brain was refusing to process.

Neil leaned his head against the cold glass of a freezer case. Supplies. Right. He didn’t want to use the credit card anymore for fear of being tracked, but a few unsuspecting pockets later he had more than enough cash for some first aid things and little food, with extra. He would get some supplies, and then he would figure out what he was supposed to be doing.

He lingered in the supermarket for as long as he dared, picking odds and ends off the shelves as they struck him as important. Running was about balance. Move too often, you risked tiring yourself out, your movements being easily traced. Stay in one place for too long you could end up found and pinned. Eventually, the store made the decision for him: they were closing up because of the storm. Neil made his way back outside, letting his feet move him. It was the best plan he had.

His backpack a little heavier, Neil walked until the run-down suburbs near the airport gave way to the city of Baltimore proper, the old squat buildings rising into view. He flagged down a lone cab and gave the first address that came to mind, a cross-street that turned out to be near the Inner Harbor. He was sweating from more than the heat as they neared it, the itch under his skin spreading like fire. He barely acknowledged the driver in his rush to get out of the cab, clutching the straps of his backpack and peering up at the industrial buildings, certain that whatever he was here for, this was where it was. Right Here. Right...here.

But there was nothing. The corner was the same as any other he could see, just a collection of old converted warehouses that now housed shops, taxi companies, tourism centers, bars, and restaurants. Most doors were closed, windows shuttered and steel grates drawn down in deference to the storm. Some looked nice, some even looked interesting. But there was nothing here for him. In the same way Neil knew to his core that this was where he was supposed to be, he also knew that whatever he was looking for was missing. He didn’t know how that was possible, but he knew it was true.

Exhausted and confused, Neil made his way to the riverfront, sagging onto a bench and leaning heavily onto his knees. Out over the water, lighting flashed among white capped waves like some ancient sea god come to wipe the city from the earth. It would be well deserved, as far as Neil was concerned. Maybe it would take him too. He had always known he was going to die sooner rather
than later. Maybe recently he’d begun to forget that, begun to live like he wasn’t just waiting to die. He’d dared to live, and now the world was laughing in his face, tearing itself apart as if to say none of those efforts had mattered.

He’d always been destined to be here. To witness the end of the world from a cold bench in Baltimore. His brain was a hot, restless buzz. He didn’t particularly feel able to move.

He might have sat there for hours. The storm worsened, lighting cracking through a nearby lamppost and send it groaning into the Harbor. He let himself burn, let himself be at peace despite the screaming in his head. His mother was dead. The world was ending and there was nothing he could do about it, and he was alone, the closest to and furthest from home he had been in twenty years. He really might have died there. He thought he might be ready.

“Neil?”

Neil didn’t jump, but he did freeze for a second solid before whipping around toward the source of the voice. He really must have been zoned out to not notice someone approaching on the practically deserted streets. Stupid, stupid, someone could have gotten the drop on him and-

“Are you okay? What the hell are you doing out here?” the man said. Short, blond, and a tired look about his face. In that moment something came rushing back, a tide of memories and feelings Neil hadn’t let himself remember or feel; months of them. A name he could almost place. A set of features that was familiar—but-not, sharp and focused on him entirely.

“Andrew?” he guessed. It didn’t sound right, but it was the closest he could come up with. The man’s face pinched.

“Wrong twin,” he said. “Your boyfriend couldn’t get down here in time to rescue your ass, so he called in a favor.” Neil didn’t respond, and the man who wasn’t Andrew looked at him more closely. “It’s Aaron, remember? You helped save my life last January? The last time we met I punched you in the face? Seriously, are you okay?”

Neil rubbed a hand over his face. “Aaron… Minyard.”

That was right. Aaron’s arrival was a shock to his system, a jolt that dropped a missing lens back into place, the world coming closer into focus again. “Right. There’s two of you.” He looked up at Aaron. “I think I’ve been confused,” he admitted.

Aaron’s sigh was long-suffering. “Come on,” he said. “There’s a field office not far from here. I’ll drive. Andrew’s on his way but he’s gonna be at least six hours. You can stay there until he gets here.”

“I can’t go,” Neil said. Aaron looked at him like he was crazy.

“Why the fuck not? It’s the apocalypse out here, Neil. You need to get inside.”

“There’s something here I need to do,” Neil insisted. “I don’t know what it is yet, but it’s right here, I can feel it.”

“There is nothing here, Neil.”

“There is!” Neil flung his arms for emphasis, and Aaron’s eyes widened.

“Shit.”
“What?”

“Your hands, Neil. What the hell happened to you?”

Neil looked down at his palms, and his stomach turned. Had they looked like that before? They were a terrible shade of red, blistered and oozing in a few places. Lightning. There had been lightning. The smell of burning metal.

“The Machine.” Neil remembered. He looked around and tried to remember his dazed trip to Evermore. “I know what’s going on,” he said. “This is where the Machine is in the other universe. I touched the one here, in Boston, and it burned me.” Wait, fuck. “Um. Do you know about that?”

“The existence of a second universe? Yeah, I’ve been updated.”

“Cool,” Neil said vaguely, feeling himself fading again. He went to rub his face again and for the first time hissed at the sting in his palms.

“Neil, come on. I can look at your hands once we’re safe inside.”

“What are you, some kind of doctor?” Neil asked suspiciously.

“Technically, yes. I have a medical degree. Now let’s go before you do something that turns you into one of my regular patients.”

“Who are those?”

“Dead people,” Aaron said flatly. “And since I don’t feel like being murdered by my brother when he gets here, I’d really appreciate if you didn’t become one of them. Now Let’s Go.”

“Fine,” Neil snapped. If only to make his nagging end. He stood up from the bench, swinging the backpack back up onto his shoulder, and was surprised when he stumbled as he tried to walk. A hand grabbed at his elbow and Neil jerked back, looking up to find Aaron already backing up a step, hands raised.

“Come on, man,” Aaron said, voice much gentler than it had been before, like he was talking to a spooked animal. “My car’s a block away. You made it this far, right?”

There was a part of Neil that was aware he was being handled, but the exhaustion was finally catching up to him, and he couldn’t find it in himself to keep arguing. The Machine wasn’t here. He had no better plans. He managed to follow Aaron to his car without falling again, but he nearly collapsed into the passenger seat.

“He’s alive. Exhausted and disoriented.” Neil blinked in and out of a half-doze to hear Aaron talking on the phone. “Not quite memory loss, but it’s like he’s scrambled a little... No I don’t have a diagnosis, I’m not a neurologist... He’s not in danger. I’m taking him to the local office, you can meet us there... Yeah sure... Okay. See you soon.”

By the time they reached their destination, Neil was fighting to keep himself awake, but he still managed to run cold with fear when he realized where they were.

“You brought me to the FBI? I can’t be here!”

Aaron stared at him blankly. “Neil. You work for the FBI.”

That...that was true, wasn’t it? Still. “This is Baltimore. Do you realize how many local law
enforcement men my father had on his payroll?"

Aaron sighed again. It seemed to be his thing, the way glaring stonily was his brother’s. “Yes. It was a lot. We had do go on a hiring spree after your testimony. The place is full of fucking newbies, but no one in this building has it out for you, Neil. Except maybe me if you get me struck by lightning out here.”

Neil wasn’t entirely convinced, but the storm was only getting worse. It wouldn’t be long before remaining outside would be nearly impossible, and he didn’t have anywhere else to go. He followed Aaron inside.

Instead of an office he found himself shepherded into an elevator that went too far down to be headed anywhere but the morgue. Aaron hustled him through a double set of sliding glass doors into a too clean room and shoved him brusquely toward a low steel table.

“Sit,” Aaron said, already walking away toward a cabinet labeled “First Aid.” There weren’t any chairs, so Neil slid himself uncomfortably up onto the table, the metal cold through his thin sweatpants.

“Hands.” Aaron was back, tearing open an alcohol wipe, tugging on the edges of Neil’s sleeves when he didn’t get with the program quickly enough. He stopped short of actually grabbing Neil’s hands to clean them. “Hey asshole, I need you to look at me. You still up there?”

Neil’s hands hurt too much to flip him off, but he managed to meet his eyes. “’M fine.” Aaron snorted meanly.

“Why do I feel like you say that a lot? Look, I gotta get your hands clean so they don’t get infected and then I have to break out the bone saw, okay? It’s gonna hurt.”

“Didn’t hurt at the hospital,” Neil muttered.

“The hospital had painkillers. This is a morgue.”

Seemingly satisfied with Neil’s awareness of the pain he was about to cause him, Aaron took his hands and wiped down the blistering, burned skin, applying a bit of cream and wrapping them efficiently in clean gauze. It did hurt, but not nearly as much as other things Neil had been through. Plus, he suspected the fuzziness in his head was dulling some of the pain.

Aaron didn’t say anything about or even really react to the older damage on Neil’s hands. Neil supposed he’d probably heard the stories, in one form or another. At least this set of burns wasn’t deep enough to scar. When Aaron was finished he pulled a pen light out of his pocket and shined it in Neil’s eyes.

“Hey!”

“Gotta check your head,” Aaron said, grabbing Neil’s chin. “Come on, eyes open. Neither of us likes this, I promise. You know what year it is?”

“2018.”

“Your full name?”

“Neil Abram Josten.”
“And I am?”

“Aaron Minyard. Andrew’s brother. You really did punch me in the face, didn’t you?”

“Yep. Headaches, nausea?”

“A little of both?”

“Give me a pain scale, 1-10. Be honest. Have you thrown up?”

“4? And no. Mostly tired.”

“Okay.” Aaron put down the penlight. “The fact that your confusion is going away means it’s probably temporary. That’s good. Water and rest is probably all you need. And when’s the last time you ate? I don’t really keep snacks stocked, but there’s a vending machine upstairs.”

“My bag,” Neil said, remembering. The supermarket. He’d gotten- “supplies.”

Aaron picked up the bag, opening it up himself and rifling through it, pulling things out of the plastic bag stuffed inside. “Gauze, neosporin, hey good for you I guess. And-” He frowned, reaching in and pulling out a soggy, sweet-smelling cardboard box by two fingers. “A box of popsicles?”

Or it had been. Damn it. Aaron dropped the box into a nearby trash can. “If that’s what you want, I think there’s an ice cream vending machine in the caf on 3. Up for a road trip before you crash? There’s a couch in my office, but I’m probably not supposed to leave you alone.”

So they made their way to level three, and Aaron begrudgingly fed the machine a couple of dollars when Neil admitted he was out of cash, pushing some buttons for some kind of popsicle like the ones Neil had bought. Neil unwrapped with fumbling fingers as they arrived back into the basement, taking a greedy bite.

The next thing he knew he was heaving over the morgue sink, his stomach cramping around air as the world seemed to sag in time for a moment, his memory screaming incoherently.

“Hey. Hey, hey.” Aaron hovered a few inches from his shoulder, tugging the popsicle from his hand and depositing it in the garbage. Fuck.

“Was that the nausea from before or something about the popsicle?” he asked.

“Popsicle, I think,” Neil said hoarsely, accepting the paper cup of water Aaron held out for him. “Sorry. Haven’t had one of those in a while I guess.”

Neil gathered himself while Aaron muttered about glucose drips and food reintroduction protocols. Neil waved him off, wiping his mouth and rinsing it with water from the tap, leaning over the sink until his breathing was under control. Suddenly the only thing he felt was unbearably exhausted.

“You said there was a couch?”

“You really should eat,” Aaron said, but even he sounded unsure.

“I’m not gonna starve to death in the next five hours.”

“Fair. Yeah, this way.”

Aaron’s office was cramped, windowless, and smelled as much like a morgue as the rest of the place, but in that moment, the old worn couch was the most inviting thing Neil had ever seen. Aaron
followed him in, locking the door before taking a seat at his computer, opening some program, and apparently forgetting Neil’s existence entirely. Neil was asleep in moments.

He slept for over five hours. When he woke, the world had righted itself a bit more, repositioning him in the present moment and universe. He knew he was in Baltimore, with Aaron Minyard, waiting for Andrew to get here. He knew the storms outside had to do with the Machines, both the one they’d built in Boston and the one he’d been trying in vain to access in Baltimore, drawn like a magnet through the veil of the universes. He knew that his mother had been dead for years, and he’d been Neil Josten for months. He accepted a peanut butter sandwich Aaron had gotten ahold of somewhere, and ate while Aaron explained that Andrew and Kevin were bringing their Machine to Baltimore in an effort to reduce the effect of the storms.

It was late evening by the time Andrew arrived, smelling of smoke, car exhaust, and heat. Aaron excused himself as soon as he saw him coming, and they spared only the briefest moment to pause together in the doorway.

“We’re even,” Andrew said. Aaron laughed.

“Sure, no problem. I’ll go help with the unloading.”

Then Aaron was gone, and Andrew was standing in front of the couch, looking down at Neil. He looked as tired as Neil felt, but when Neil took his hand and tugged him gently down onto the couch beside himself, it was like a final piece slotting into place. He felt solid again. They sat in steady silence for a long time, until Neil’s rapid heartbeat slowed into something steady.

“I can’t believe you sent Aaron out to rescue me,” Neil said. He was aiming for light, joking, but Andrew’s face only went tighter.

“You ran,” Andrew said quietly.

And that was the heart of it, wasn’t it? He remembered now, the voice asking him where he was going, why he wasn’t coming home. Andrews voice. He remembered standing in the dark together, promising to stay with a gunshot still ringing in his ears.

“...I didn’t mean to.”

“I know.”

Neil leaned his forehead on Andrew’s shoulder, still holding onto his hand. “When I woke up, I-” he tried to think of a way to explain, where to even start. “My mother died in August,” he said eventually. There were details of this story he hadn’t told the FBI. “I burned her body in our car on the coast of California. That night, there was this thunderstorm...I woke up in the hospital and I couldn’t remember who I was, or how I’d gotten there, or what had happened. The only thing I could remember was that she was dead.”

Andrew’s hand tightened in his own. Neil sniffed, lifting his head just long enough to drag a bandaged hand over his face.

“So,” he said to the soft fabric of Andrew’s t-shirt, “Tell me how we’re gonna save the world.”

Andrew explained. It wasn’t much of a plan, not that Neil blamed them. He certainly didn’t have any ideas. “I wish we had something better,” Andrew said. “But we are running out of time.”

“What do you mean?”
“Moving the Machines closer together has narrowed the circle of the storms, but they’ve gotten more intense,” Andrew said.

It made sense that Neil wouldn’t have noticed. He’d been three levels underground for hours, and the morgue had a multiple redundancy generator to keep the bodies, sensitive chemicals, and lab specimens cold.

“Most of the city is without power, and now we’ve started picking up microquakes. It’s only going to get worse.”

“And Kevin’s sure you have to use telekinesis?”

“He and Bee are in agreement, and their best guess is as good as ours,” Andrew said, shifting slightly in frustration. “But it’s not working. I’ve tried meditation. I’ve tried Bee’s focusing exercises. I’ve been focusing on a single phrase, like Kevin suggested. Nothing.”

Neil ran his thumb in what he hoped here soothing circles over the back of Andrew’s hand, which had come to settle over Neil’s knee. “What was the phrase?” he asked out of curiosity.

Andrew’s answer was cut off by his phone ringing in his pocket. Neil didn’t move as Andrew picked up the call, putting it on speaker when he saw it was Nicky.

“What is it Nicky?”

“Hey Andrew? Um. It's, um. It's working.”

Neil sat up, staring down at the phone. “What is working?” Andrew demanded.

“The typewriter. I was just doing some paperwork when all the sudden it started clacking away. It's just typing the same phrase over and over.”

Neil’s gut tightened. Andrew’s hand had a death grip on his knee.

“What’s the phrase Nicky?”

“Be a better man than your father.”

Chapter End Notes

It’s very important to me that Aaron Minyard is both a prickly asshole and a very competent medical professional that genuinely cares about people’s wellbeing.

Author Update!!!: I remade my tumblr. It was for a number of reasons but basically I combined a couple of blogs I was juggling and now fandom, writing, and fun are all in one place! On tumblr at a-case-for-wonder, come talk to me!

Up Next:

“You are so…” Andrew didn’t have words to describe Neil. How alive he was, against
all odds. The way watching him learn to live filled Andrew with light and hope, reluctant as he was to accept it. The way he smiled like there was blood in his teeth. How beautiful it made him. “Ridiculous.”
Part 9, Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 9, Chapter 5: One Last Night

Setting up the Machine in Baltimore wasn’t an instant kind of task. Even with crews working around the clock, it was going to take most of the night to clear a space in the nearest available warehouse and get the thing set up in a stable enough way for Andrew to attempt to get Neil inside of it. Most of the city had been evacuated, and it was getting dangerous to go outside anyway, so Neil and Andrew were assigned an empty basement office and a pair of camping cots for the night. Kevin and Wymack were technically in the room across the hall, but Andrew suspected Kevin would be at the warehouse all night supervising.

The office air was stale and sterile. The emergency lights hummed low and incessant from the hallway, casting an eerie cold glow even through the drawn blinds of the office window. There were no windows to the outside, a blessing only in that Andrew didn’t have to watch as the city tore itself to hell while he had to just lay there, uselessly trying to sleep. He turned uncomfortably on the cot for minutes or hours, resisting the urge to stare at Neil as he dozed fitfully, to make sure he didn’t disappear.

“Not sleeping either?”

Andrew swiveled his head to the side to see Neil, staring at him across the space between their cots, perfectly awake and lucid. Apparently he hadn’t actually succeeded at sleeping either.

“How could I?” Andrew asked. As if to emphasize his point, a microquake chose that moment to roll through the earth surrounding the field office, shivering the glass of the window and rolling a few pens off the desk.

“Yeah,” Neil said softly, hands twitching at the thin covering of the cot. He kept looking between his hands and Andrew, chewing at his bottom lip.

“What, Neil?”

“What, Neil?”

“Could you- could you be closer?”

It wasn’t what Andrew had been expecting him to ask, but he couldn’t deny that he’d had that impulse as well. He eyed the width of the camp cots, debating trying to just climb into Neil’s, but eventually got up and dragged his over so they were butted up side to side. Neil stretched out one bandaged hand and Andrew took it. If his grip was light, it was in deference to Neil’s injuries rather than his own desires. For once he wanted contact more than it scared or repulsed him, needed it more than he needed his own space and escape routes. He reached his other arm around Neil’s back and drew him closer, as close as they could get with the metal bar of the cot edges uncomfortably
between them, their knees knocking. Neil leaned their foreheads together. His skin was still hot, reddened and windburned from his walk to the airport. When Neil’s other hand reached out to curl into Andrew’s collar, his fingertips brushing over the skin of Andrew’s throat, they both exhaled. Andrew felt some of the tension he’d been holding since that morning seep out into the static-charged air.

“We’ll figure this out,” Neil whispered.

Andrew didn’t say anything. Didn’t ask what if we don’t. He knew Neil would hear it anyway.

“And if we don’t,” Neil continued, “the world ends, and we don’t have to worry about it. We’ll just be like, ghosts. No more taxes.”

Andrew let out a surprised scoff. “That’s what you’re going with? Taxes?”

“Worst part by far about having to be a real person,” Neil said seriously. “Filling out tax paperwork.”

“Are you sure? I would argue for the possibility of eight hour road trips with Kevin Day.”

“Mm. Fair.” Even if their faces hadn’t been pressed so closely together, Andrew would have been able to hear Neil smiling in the dark.

“You are so…” Andrew didn’t have words to describe Neil. How alive he was, against all odds. The way watching him learn to live filled Andrew with light and hope, reluctant as he was to accept it. The way he smiled like there was blood in his teeth. How beautiful it made him. “Ridiculous.”

Neil laughed softly, a sound Andrew was profoundly grateful he would remember forever, however long that was. “Yeah,” he said. “Kiss me?”

So Andrew did, pressing gratefully into the give of Neil’s mouth, letting his warmth envelope him, comfort him. The kisses they traded that night in the dark had their moments of just-tempered desperation, but mostly they were the softest Andrew had ever experienced, sleepy and earnest in a way that ached. Andrew thought that this one night, he would have slept curled protectively around Neil if he could have, but the narrow cots made it impossible. He settled for staying as close as he could, one hand still clasped in Neil’s as they got what little rest they could, and waited for morning to come.

The warehouse where the Machine had been set up was overheated and underventilated, but it wasn’t the environment that felt suffocating as a pressing stone. It was the Machine itself, huge and new-ancient, towering over them, cast in wavering light from the walls of thick old glass windows. Here in this rusted, dirty room, it really did look like a resurrected god. It glowed and buzzed, raw energy crackling over the surface as Andrew and Neil walked closer, closer. Neil was barefoot.

Outside, the unnatural wind howled against glass and steel.

“It’s a set up as it’s gonna get,” Wymack said, stepping up to meet them. Kevin was on the other side of the room among a bank of monitors, going over readings with Moreau by satellite phone. “You two ready?”

“Ready as we’re gonna get, Chief,” Andrew said. Neil nodded.

“Well, if anyone can sort out this mess, it’s you three,” Wymack said gruffly. “Good luck.”

A monitor let out a series of trills as a rumble rocked through the building.

“Exponential microquakes,” he said. “Models are predicting a major tectonic event in minutes. I believe we are running out of time. It’s now or never.”

Another person might have asked what if I can’t? Questions like that were useless, so Andrew didn’t give them voice, but that didn’t stop the doubt clawing at his stomach. Kevin turned toward him seriously.

“Andrew, your face on that drawing was not an accident. They believed what I do. You will not fail.” With that, he hurried back to the monitors. Neil drew Andrew’s attention back to him with a light tug on his sleeve.

“Ready?” Neil asked, jerking his head toward the mechanical monster before them.

Andrew had never been one to lie. “No. You?”

“Nah,” Neil said with a shaky grin. “Let’s do this.”

Andrew took a step closer to the Machine and closed his eyes. He could still feel Neil’s grounding presence beside him, his fingers still pinched to the edge of Andrew’s sleeve. Just think of it as a giant typewriter, Kevin had told him the day before. He took a few measured breaths, counting slowly on the inhale, hold, exhale, like Bee had taught him. He reached out with his mind and-

There.

An energy unlike anything he’d ever felt. And then, beyond it, beyond a veil like a heavy curtain of water, something else. Somewhere else. Andrew breathed, and he reached for it. Sympathetic feeling. That was what triggered it. Andrew planted his feet on the dirty floor, slipped his fingers through Neil’s, and let himself fall open.

There was a snap like a steel cord breaking. A flash of light. Neil gasped, his fingers tightening in Andrew’s grip. Wymack shouted something at Kevin, who was shouting over the phone to Moreau. Andrew opened his eyes.

The Machine looked calm. Still huge and menacing, but no longer like it was at battle. Outside the storm raged on, but Kevin was yelling about readouts and when Andrew’s mind came back online enough to process his words, he realized Kevin was saying it had worked.

“You did it,” Neil breathed.

Andrew swallowed heavily. “Looks like it.” He felt raw all over, like the wind outside was howling through his body, his soul as he held himself and the Machine open.

“Hey,” Neil tugged at their joined hands until Andrew turned to look at him. His eyes were so bright, blue as a stormless sky and crinkled at the edges. He raised one hand slowly and brushed a knuckle over Andrew’s temple, the touch leaving a trail of fire in its wake. If he’d been meaning to say something else, the words were lost before they could reach his lips. He squeezed Andrew’s hand with a final smile.

And then he was slipping out of Andrew’s grasp, walking with straight shoulders and sure steps, into the waiting arms of the Machine. Andrew watched as Neil placed his bare feet on the platform, his hands on the touch pads at his sides, closed his eyes.

Andrew watched as Neil burst into a column of shining white light.
Up Next:

He was in an apartment. A fat orange cat twined around his ankles, yelling to be fed. Photos of Neil’s team hung on the refrigerator, older than they should have been. The door opened and Neil nearly jumped out of his skin, knocking a glass of the counter with his elbow. It never hit the floor, stopping at knee height, hovering for a moment before lifting back onto the counter.
Part 9, Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Neil POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 9, Chapter 6: The Day We Died

“Sir! Sir!”

“Sir!” Neil’s head snapped up and he immediately began coughing. The air was choked with dust. The sky above him was an angry, smoking grey. A man in a military uniform leaned over him, shouting over the sound of gunfire in the distance.

“Sergeant Josten, Sir! We’re evacuating the area! You need to get to safety!”

Sergeant Josten? Neil struggled to sit up only for a sharp bolt of pain to cut through his side. When he put his hand on it, it came away wet with blood. He squinted through the smoke at the badge on the man’s jacket. It was a round green and orange patch that read “FOXES Unit.”

“FOXES Unit?” he muttered blearily. “Sergeant?” His vision was going fuzzy at the edges as the pain in his stomach grew worse. The man was still yelling, trying to pull him to his feet as the unmistakable sound of a missile whined overhead.

The scene shifted.

He was in an apartment. A fat orange cat twined around his ankles, yelling to be fed. Photos of Neil’s team hung on the refrigerator, older than they should have been. The door opened and Neil nearly jumped out of his skin, knocking a glass of the counter with his elbow. It never hit the floor, stopping at knee height, hovering for a moment before lifting back onto the counter.

When Neil looked toward the entryway, Andrew was there, looking mildly amused. He’d filled out some, a bit soft around the belly but no less strong in his shoulders. There were streaks of grey in his hair. He rolled his eyes at what must have been the shocked look on Neil’s face.

“You fed the mongrel yet?” he asked. Neil shook his head mutely. Andrew shrugged and pulled a bag of cat food out of a cabinet, flicking on the television as he passed. On the screen, a newscaster was reporting live from West Virginia.

“Another so-called “soft spot” collapsed today, this time opening a whirlpool in the Ohio River. Authorities are advising residents to give the area as wide a birth as possible, but are unsure if the normal protocol of encasing the area in a molecular amber matrix quarantine will be possible over running water.”

Andrew made a disgusted noise at the television. “Amber quarantines. We’re putting bandaids over bullet holes. How was your day?”
He made his way over to Neil and cupped his face in one hand, leaning in and kissing him, full and warm. The motion of it was so easy it felt like they’d been doing it for years, and suddenly Neil knew that they had. He still felt out of place, but he understood this world. He remembered helping Kevin invent the amber quarantine matrices. He knew that this was a future in which he had chosen to destroy the universe he had been born in, in order to save the one that was his home. He knew that somehow, despite that, the world was decaying at the edges, soft spots opening into voids of nothingness while the Foxes tried to patch the holes, always two steps behind.

“Strange,” Neil admitted, the word murmured almost against Andrew’s lips. There was a scar through his eyebrow Neil didn’t remember. The cat wound around his feet and Neil wanted to stay here, right here in this decaying world, if it meant he got to keep this. But practically as soon as the thought had crossed his mind, the world slipped away, shifting again.

The scenes changed more quickly after that, blurry and hiccuping like old tape re-recorded over too many times. Neil saw unfamiliar armies marching through Baltimore streets. Jean Moreau had fallen back into the clutches of Riko Moriyama, who had slipped back into their universe in the nick of time, only to rage at the destruction of the world where he had been a first son. Jean had become a terrorist on his behalf, leading a group called the End-of-Dayers, destroying the Foxes’ attempts at quarantines and setting off devices that ripped fresh holes in the fabric of spacetime. He saw Kevin imprisoned as Riko successfully laid the blame for the initial damage to the universes at his feet. He saw Renee run for governor and lose, and he saw her as the face of the Rebellion, the streaks in her hair bright red in the posters slapped on lampposts and brick walls.

But it wasn’t just tape. He didn’t just watch those scenes pass by, he lived in them. Felt them. A world where Neil managed to track Jean down in an attempt to plead for mercy, only for Andrew to be shot dead at Riko’s hands. A world where Neil stood shaking at a podium, unable to cry as he delivered the eulogy for his husband - his husband, god - that tore him in two. He couldn’t even tell if he was living this, or foreseeing it, or just remembering or what the fuck was going on but he needed it to stop. He was supposed to be fixing this.

STOP, Neil thought desperately. STOP!

And the world did. Slowed to regular pace, the way those moments had felt with Andrew in their kitchen, the cat begging at their feet. He was with Kevin, who they’d gotten furloughed, temporarily released so they could try to stop Moreau from destroying the amber matrix covering the wormhole that had threatened to swallow Patterson Park.

“Even if we are successful,” Kevin was saying, wringing his hands, “we can’t stop the inevitable. The course of this world was set the day we triggered that machine. I didn't understand until it was too late that our... two worlds were inextricably linked. Without one, the other simply cannot exist. When their world was destroyed, that was the day we sealed our fate. For all intents and purposes... that was the day we died.”

Neil wanted to scream at him. Instead he focused on the monitors in the room, all scrolling readouts of various biological events the FOXES teams were trying to keep track of.

“Maybe. But right now you’re here because there’s enormous amounts of Kappa radiation at risk of pouring out of a wormhole in Patterson Park. We need to figure out how to disarm the devices Moreau is using before the whole city gets sucked in.”

“Kappa radiation?” Kevin frowned. “That kind of radiation shouldn’t be coming through a wormhole. Not unless it’s a wormhole in time.”

“Well that appears to be what it is. So unless you want Baltimore getting sucked back into the
“Wait,” Kevin said. “Maybe that’s exactly what we need.” He was staring with wide eyes at a corner of the room. A corner of the room containing a heavy vault door, behind which, in pieces and packed in a hundred different boxes, were the pieces of the Machine.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Neil asked. Kevin’s eyes were bright in his sallow face, and he began gesturing excitedly as he spoke.

“I always wondered how the Machine parts were buried. Clearly they were constructed in the future! I’ve figured it out though, it’s a paradox! A time loop!”

Neil tried to interrupt, but Kevin was rushing onward. “Neil, I was wrong. It's not too late. You can save both worlds. We can do it all over again. We already have. This time, you just need to make a different choice, and if something goes wrong, Andrew will be our fail-safe.”

“Kevin stop! Andrew is dead!” Neil forced out, fighting back a flood of fresh grief.

“But he won’t be!” Kevin insisted. “Not...not then.” He was looking meaningfully at the vault door again. Neil felt the world slow even further, but this time it was only his own emotions and brain grinding their gears, struggling to keep up. With every passing moment it was getting harder to remember his strange trip to this moment. He was becoming ingrained in this future. He really had lived every moment up to it.


“Yes!” Kevin exclaimed. “And all the time I sat in prison, I - I - I couldn't figure out where it came from. I knew the pieces were buried thousands if not millions of years ago, but how did they get there, so deep in the past? And where did the book come from? But now I understand. I sent them there. The wormhole in Patterson Park -- I sent them back through time. Neil, we can stop the destruction before it happens!”

Neil had caught up. He felt almost dizzy with the implications, his heart racing threadily in his chest. “But then what if you- just don’t send it back?” He suggested. “Then we never discover it, and none of this ever happens.” But Kevin was shaking his head before he’d even finished.

“It doesn't work that way. I’ve already done it, so I have to do it again.”

“Kev that doesn’t make any sense,” Neil said desperately. He’d been so sure he’d found the solution.

“It does! It's a paradox. I can't change what happens because it's already happened,” Kevin said. “But you can make a different choice within what happened. All I need to need do it to find a way to bring your consciousness forward to now so that you can witness what will happen if you make the same choice. Neil, for all I know, it could be happening already!”

Neil rubbed a hand over his temples as a flair of pain shot through his head. “Yeah, you know what?” he said, “That sounds kind of familiar, Kev.”

“Don't you see? We can fix everything! We can cheat the rules of time!”

Neil took a heavy seat in the nearest chair. “We have no idea what the repercussions might be,” he reminded Kevin. “Isn’t that kind of what got us into this mess in the first place?”

“Maybe,” Kevin said with a shrug. “But really Neil, could it get any worse than it is now?”
Neil had to admit, he had a point there. He stood back up. “What would I need to do?” he asked. The world went fuzzy, and then whitied out completely. A babble of voices filtered unevenly through the white light of his consciousness.

“Kevin. Kevin, what is happening to him?”

“I don’t know. His pulse is going up. 156 and climbing.”

“Sir. Sixty seconds ago, something started happening with the Machine!”

“Fool! Get me Andrew Minyard.”

“What’s going on? The soft spots are getting bigger!”

“It’s been sixty seconds. How long are we gonna let him stay in that thing?”

“He’s interfaced with the machine at a biological level. Taking him out prematurely could kill him.”

“Fix this Minyard! The drawings suggest you are involved! That you can turn it off!”

“They outsmarted you, didn’t they old man? Figured out you’d turned on our Machine and put Neil in theirs, and now it’s our universe that’s gonna get destroyed.”

“No. Something’s wrong. We’re getting him out of there. Come on, move!”

There were hands on his wrists. Neil thrashed wildly in their grip, but then one wide palm pressed hard around the back of his neck and it felt like he could maybe breath again.


Neil opened his eyes to see Andrew staring down at him, face ashen. But when he looked around, that wasn’t all he saw.

The warehouse had changed. They were now in a wide, dark-walled room with clean fluorescent light. At one end sat the Machine, huge and dormant at last. Along one wall stood Neil’s team - Kevin and Wymack, side by side. But along the other wall. Along the other wall stood the team from the other side. Not-Andrew. Not-Renee. The agent called Kate. Tetsuji.

Riko.

As soon as they locked eyes, Riko snarled wildly.

“Why you little-” he started, raising his gun.

BANG.

Riko crumpled to the floor as Neil’s ears rang. Andrew kept his run raised at the other agents, daring them to make a move. “Stay back!” Andrew snarled. Without taking his eyes off the other team, he muttered “Neil, what the hell is going on?”

“I figured it out,” Neil said, struggling to sit up. “Kevin. Kevin, I understand now. I know what the Machine is, and what it’s capable of. I know where it came from.”

“The First People?” Kevin asked.
“Yes,” Neil said excitedly. “Except the First People are us. You, specifically, but probably Nicky and Jean too, maybe others I - I don’t know. I don’t know who actually was able to send the Machine back in time, or the book, but we did it. And I know something else, too.”

Neil struggled to his feet, turning so he could address both teams at once. “I've seen Doomsday, and it is worse than anything any of you could possibly imagine. This isn't a war that can be won. Our two worlds are inextricable. If one side dies, we all die. So I've torn holes in both the universes and they lead here, to this room. A bridge so that we can begin to work together to fix --”

“How dare you!” Tetsuji spat. “After all the deaths your side has caused! After you start all of this in the first place by stealing a child like he was a broken vase! After you kill my nephew!”

“That was an accident! What you’ve tried to do you’ve done on purpose!” Kevin pleaded.

“Also, that wasn’t your nephew,” Andrew offered, sounding bored. That at least make Tetsuji blink.

“What?”

“Oh yeah,” Neil told him. “That was our Riko. He’s a second son over here, like you, never liked it much not being able to be the absolute center of attention. He actually killed your counterpart on our side and framed Kev here for the homicide. Then he went to your universe, found out he could be a special First Boy, killed your real nephew and took his place. So, I wouldn't lose too much sleep over that at least. Not a great loss.”

Tetsuji looked distastefully down at the body slumped before him, then back up at Neil. “Go on,” he said slowly.

Surprisingly, it was the Andrew who broke the silence. “Whatever you’ve both done,” he said. “We’re all here now. I’m guessing it’s past time we start trying to fix it.”

Neil had looked at him, smiling gratefully. “Hey,” he whispered, the words he’d meant to say before he’d gone finally forming on his tongue. They hadn’t felt right before, too much like a goodbye. “Thank you. You’re amazing.”

The world went fuzzy at the edges again. Then everything disappeared into blackness.

Chapter End Notes

That brings us to the end of Part 9, and in a sense, closes the "third act" of this fic. We're 3/4 through, baby! Technically, because I'm always a full story arc ahead in my writing, I only have 6 tiny weeks left of writing this fic. How crazy is that?? Thanks so much for all the love. Next week will bring us into the last quarter, which will be the rough equivalent of Fringe Season 4. For those of you who know what that means...get ready I guess lol. The angst is coming.

Up Next:

Part 10: Start Over, Begin Again

’.when a face swam up from the hazy darkness of his bedroom, Andrew knew he was dreaming. And he knew it was a familiar face. His mind didn’t invent people. It certainly didn’t invent young men with impossibly blue, impossibly earnest eyes, and a
face full of terrible scars

“Who are you?” he tried to ask. His voice didn’t make a sound in the darkness. “Who are you? Why won’t you leave me alone?”
Part 10: Start Over, Begin Again

Chapter 1: Hard Times and the Other Side

One of the many unfortunate downsides to a perfect memory combined with decades of trauma was excruciatingly realistic dreams. Andrew Minyard’s dreams were never particularly mysterious to him. They weren’t full of mythic ideas or Freudian symbolism. There were no snakes in long hill grass, no falling through an endless abyss, no losing his teeth to a sink that was actually another mouth, that was actually a pit of sand, et cetera, et cetera. There was only his life, past and present mashed badly together into hellscapes he was helpless to break free from.

The funny thing was, Andrew was often at least partially aware that he was dreaming. It didn’t really help matters, but it was a fact of his life he was accustomed to. So when a face swam up from the hazy darkness of his bedroom, Andrew knew he was dreaming. And he knew it was a familiar face. His mind didn’t invent people. It certainly didn’t invent young men with impossibly blue, impossibly earnest eyes, a face full of terrible scars and a mouth that always seemed to be on the verge of saying Andrew’s name.

“Who are you?” Andrew tried to ask. His voice didn’t make a sound in the darkness. It never did. “Who are you? Why won’t you leave me alone?”

This wasn’t the first time the man’s face had invaded Andrew’s dreams. And while it was better than his nightmares by a mile, the face’s visits were horrible in their own way, soaked through in a loneliness so profound it lingered long after waking.

Help, the man’s lips said, his eyes beseeching. Help me, where am I?

“Where are you? Where am I? I don’t know who you are!” Andrew tried to shout. “Who are you? Who are you?!”

It’s me!
The face kept trying to say that - *It’s me, help, it’s me!* - only for it to be swallowed up by something else. Something even stranger, and entirely new.

A ball of blue light bloomed in the darkness, and though Andrew knew he was still asleep, it illuminated his bedroom as though he’d been sitting up in bed the whole time. The window beside his bed was cracked open a few inches, the curtains fluttering in the breeze. When he checked the clock, it read 5:59 am, one minute before his morning alarm. The light grew bigger, stronger, brighter. A rattling sound started on Andrew’s left. When he turned, he saw the knife and the good pen on his nightstand rumbling, starting to move slowly toward the light as though it was drawing them in. They weren’t the only things moving. Everywhere in the room, metallic objects were being drawn in by the light, rising from their surfaces and floating toward it. Andrew’s heart picked up as his whole bed frame squeaked against the floor-

His alarm went off, blaring into the silence of the morning. Except when Andrew opened his eyes, awake from the dream at last, the light was still there. Still hovering menacingly, gathering objects to itself, growing brighter and brighter, stronger and stronger. Andrew grabbed desperately for his gun before that could be dragged off too, pointing it at the light as though that would do any fucking good, waiting to see what the hell it was trying to do-

His alarm went off. The blue light shuddered and winked out, the metal objects held aloft in its force clattering suddenly to the floor. He was alone in his bedroom in Cambridge. On the table, the clock was still beeping, blinking 6:00 am.

Andrew reached out and smacked the buzzer off, then put the gun down with a slow breath. He pinched one leg, hard. No change. He swung his feet onto the floor, flexed his toes on the cold hardwood, and ran through a couple of grounding exercises Bee had taught him. It was five minutes before Andrew was absolutely certain he was awake. He looked around the room, half-hoping that the evidence of the strange event would have vanished while his eyes were closed, but knives, pens, coins, and an assortment of other metal objects still lay in cluttered heaps near the foot of the bed, irrefutable.

Well, if his own life was going to become a fucking FOXES case (again,) he might as well head in to the office. He gathered himself and dressed. He ran an absent hand through his hair as he brushed his teeth, trying not to look at the towel that hung over the mirror in the bathroom. He checked the house for Kevin and found a note explaining that he’d gone in early with Nicky - which usually meant he was conducting some experiment that didn’t have to do with a case at all. Andrew wondered what the hell it would be this time.

Alone in the house with no worries about having to prod their resident mad scientist awake, that just left breakfast. Andrew spent a minute contemplating the dish cloths that covered the coffee pot and the toaster before deciding it would have to happen on the go. He hadn’t been to the old diner as often since Renee had moved to New York; he was overdue for some heart attack hashbrowns.

The walk down the driveway took him, inevitably, past the old Maserati, sitting peacefully under its dust cover in the driveway. He felt the weight of his keys in his pocket, but refused to take them out and stare at the little plastic fob still stubbornly hanging with them. It was only half a mile to the train, and it was still unseasonably warm for early December. He could walk.

Andrew pushed past the tacky tinsel wreath Nicky had already hung up on the lab door and stopped in his tracks, starting. He had walked into the lab in the basement of Harvard Medical to some unusual sights in the past. They’d run the gamut from odd to gross to horrifying, but what he walked in on today was probably a strong contender for most inexplicable. Kevin and Nicky were both there. Nicky was perched up on his desk next to his computer, holding a bowl of peanuts he was
snacking on intermittently. Kevin was in the middle of the lab, a large space cleared out to make room for a circle of about a dozen cameras equipped with mirrors and what appeared to be motion detectors, all pointed at each other in a circle. Kevin stood just to one side of this strange arena, looking in at it intensely. He was also holding a bowl.

“Okay,” Kevin said, not even noticing Andrew had entered. “Get ready to pull up the displays, Agent Hemmick. One, two, three!”

On “three,” Kevin tossed a single peanut into the center of the cameras. They went off in rapid succession, clacking like a mob of paparazzi. Now that Andrew was looking for it, he saw the floor of the lab was littered with peanuts and shells. Apparently they’d been at this for some time.

He cleared his throat pointedly, and Kevin whirled around.

“Andrew! You’re just in time!”

Andrew hung his coat up and made his way down into the lab. “Just in time for what? What are you trying to do?” He looked at Nicky first, since out of the two of them he sometimes provided more reasonable explanations, but Nicky just shrugged, popping another peanut into his mouth.

“I’ve devised an experiment to try and capture an image of the apparition that has been haunting you!”

Oh. Right. The apparition.

It had started in late August, not long after the bridge had appeared in Baltimore connecting their universe to the other side. That strange, earnest man’s face. It had started in the dubious safety of his dreams, a face swimming out of a lonely darkness, calling for help. The man was young, and scarred, and beautiful, but Andrew had no idea who on earth he was. But it was fine. It was fine as long as he stayed in Andrew’s subconscious. It was better than most of his regular dreams anyway.

Then he’d started appearing in the real world. Images of him anyway, materializing in mirrors and televisions, still calling out for help. Andrew knew he wasn’t always right in the head, but he’d never been one for hallucinations before then, and it had freaked him right the fuck out. The apparition was the reason Andrew had been slowly covering every feasible reflective surface in his life for the last three months. He knew - he’d had more talks about this with Bee than he could count - that it was only a temporary solution, but he’d had too much else to worry about, what with helping draft and organize the peace treaty between two universes and all.

But now it had been over three months and the apparitions showed no sign of going away, and Andrew was beginning to lose his cool about them again. It stood to reason that Kevin would have noticed. Andrew had recruited him in the first place because he was more into impossible science shit than any human had a right to be. And it stood to reason that he was trying to help. Goddamn him, but Kevin usually was trying to help.

With that in mind, Andrew didn’t follow his immediate instinct, which was to tell Kevin to mind his own goddamn business and leave Andrew to his haunting in peace. Instead he eyed the camera set up carefully. “What exactly is this set up supposed to do?”

“I think the apparition, this man you are seeing, might be out of phase with our reality. And for that reason, he isn’t visible from all directions. Instead, he’s visible only from one specific angle, which is why you can see him and no one else can. So. Multiple cameras taking pictures from multiple angles. When he shows up again, we’ll have maximized the odds of capturing his image.”
“It sounds really science-y, but he got that idea from watching the Matrix last night,” Nicky put in, hopping off the counter. Ah, Andrew had thought something about that had sounded familiar. “Not that that means it couldn’t work, Kev,” Nicky added, patting Kevin consolingly on the arm as he passed by him, crossing the lab toward the coffee machine.

“Is Aaron in today?” Andrew asked after him.

“He left for the bridge last night,” Nicky said. “He’s assisting on a case on the other side.”

“What about the Bowman case?” Andrew asked, irritated. He didn’t like loose ends, the mysterious transformation of civilian Marshall Bowman into a chimeran beast in the middle of an crowded train the week before was like a hair he couldn’t get out of his eyes. Kevin had discovered some kind of designer drug in his system, components of which could be traced to Massive Dynamic, but that was as far as they’d gotten before everything had gone cold.

Even their new deal with the Other Foxes team hadn’t proved fruitful - either Marshall Bowman was never going to die by designer drug transmutation in their universe, or it hadn’t happened yet. As far as they could tell, their Bowman was a perfectly ordinary obscenely rich banker. They didn’t have any clues that might have probed deeper into the mystery.

“Hey, you’ve made as much progress on the Bowman case as the rest of us. And this case seemed serious, something about a serial killer over there who’s a psychology professor over here? Aaron’s seeing if they can use knowledge of our version to help crack the guy’s mojo.”

“And let me guess, he’s working with the redhead?” Andrew snorted.

“Her name is Katelyn,” Nicky said patiently, pouring coffee into two mugs. As if Andrew had forgotten. “But yes. He’s just trying to help, you know. She’s in between partners at the moment-”

“-and her old partner was their version of Aaron. And also he’s mooning over her and terrible at hiding it. I know.”

One thing Andrew and his twin had apparently always had in common was their terrible sense of self-preservation. Hopefully Aaron wouldn’t be gone too long this time. It hadn’t even been a year, but Andrew had gotten begrudgingly accustomed to having his brother on his team, within arm’s reach. He didn’t like how often Aaron had been out of his sight since the bridge had opened and they’d started working with the other side.

“Have you had any more dreams? Apparitions? Visitations?” Kevin asked eagerly, pulling Andrew from his train of thought.

Andrew slid himself up onto one of the low autopsy tables, accepting a cup of coffee from Nicky and digging an egg sandwich out of his carry-out bag. Kevin was convinced that the man wasn’t a hallucination, at least not in the traditional sense. He was convinced that Andrew was seeing something real, just not in a way anyone else could see. Maybe it had something to do with the old C-brain, maybe not. Who the fuck knew?

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Same as always. Wants to know where he is. Keeps asking for help, keeps saying it’s me, but can’t or won’t tell me his actual goddamn name.” He took a few bites of his sandwich, chewing over how to continue. “That’s not all though. Something else really weird happened this morning.”

Andrew explained his weird dream-but-obviously-not to them. “Do you think it’s just me causing this?” he asked Kevin when he was done. “Just another weird C-brain thing popping up for some
“It’s possible,” Kevin said thoughtfully. “We’ll do a DNA scraping, see if anything shows up. And you should go back to the house, take some readings from your room. I’ll need atmospheric samples, radioactivity levels. Anything we can get.”

What the hell, he didn’t have anything scheduled at the moment, since things had stopped moving with the Bowman case, and Andrew wasn’t keen on wallowing in thoughts of the ghost man haunting his mirrors.

“Sure.”

Nicky drove them back to the house. Andrew wasn’t about to make them take the train, but he did spend the whole ride pretending to sleep so as to avoid having to look in the mirrors. Soon enough they pulled into the driveway of the old house in Cambridge, right back where Andrew had been only a couple hours before.

They called Kevin over video chat as Nicky unpacked the bag of various instruments and began taking readings. Luckily Andrew hadn’t taken the time to clean up the mess the incident had left in his bedroom, so the scene of the crime was still intact.

“Get closer to those metal objects,” Kevin instructed over the phone. “Any change?”

Nicky whistled as he took the readings. “I’ll say. Two whole rads higher at this proximity,”

“Is there a window open?”

“Yeah, the bedroom window is open.”

“Andrew?”

Andrew ducked his head over the phone. “Yeah Kevin?”

“Go to another room - the bathroom maybe. Find any large metal objects and test to see if they’ve been magnetized.”

Andrew nodded and went. He left the bedroom and bathroom doors open behind himself. Even as he looked around for likely objects for testing, he could hear Nicky and, slightly more garbled, Kevin over the phone.

“What was that?” Nicky asked.

“...some kind of feedback...”

The speakerphone connection was overrun with static. And then, almost too fuzzy to hear through the connection was a voice that was undoubtedly Andrew’s shouting Nicky! Followed by Nicky’s shouting Andrew!

“What’s going on over there?” asked a garbled Kevin’s voice.

“Kev, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the Nicky in Kevin’s bedroom said, calm but with growing concern. “What-”

Andrew had just turned to head back to the bedroom to see what the hell was going on when the bathroom door slammed shut in front of him. He tried the knob but it seemed to have locked itself. And then the window began to fill with a ball of gathering blue light. Fuck. Fuck!
“Nicky!” Andrew shouted, rattling the door.

“Andrew!” he heard from the other side. Inside the bathroom, metal objects were rolling off of the counters, flying out of the closets through the air toward the light. The faucet taps turned and started running full blast. A razor flew past Andrew’s ear close enough for him to feel it parting the air beside him.

And then, as abruptly as it had started, the blue light winked out, and the metal objects once more fell, clattering to the tile floor. There was a tiny click, and then Nicky was busting into the room. “Andrew! What-” Nicky stopped and took in the scene. “Shit,” he said. Indeed.

They went over the video feed back at the lab.

“So what you’re saying,” Nicky said, “is that your phone was somehow recording the event...before it happened? Is that even possible?”

Kevin was frowning at a freeze frame of the image, a collection of metal objects cluttered on the bathroom floor. Andrew recognized that look. “What are you thinking, Kevin?”

“I’m not sure. It didn’t have the exact same effects I don’t think but. Maybe.”

“Spit it out.”

“There was another patient in the Cortexiphan trials.” Andrew’s heart sank. They’d found a couple of other patients from the Cortexiphan trials in the nine months since he’d been recruited to the Foxes. It had never ended well. “He had the ability to astral project, and his abilities often manifested with magnetic force.”

“And what, you think this guy’s after me for some reason?”

Kevin shrugged, still peering intently at the screen. “I don’t have any better ideas at the moment,” he said.

“Okay. So what was this guy’s name?”

“I don’t remember.”

Of course he didn’t. Andrew pinched his eyes shut, curling his fists in his pockets. He reminded himself that Kevin had been 13, a kid himself, during the Cortexiphan trials, and he’d lived at Evermore. He’d spent little time at the center in Los Angeles where the trials had mostly been held. Not to mention the way his years at St. Claire’s had fucked with the memories he did have.

“Is there anything you do remember?”

Kevin looked so lost in thought Andrew wasn’t even sure he’d heard him, or thought maybe he was just being ignored. Then suddenly Kevin sat up straight.

“I think. I think he was Subject Six.”

Chapter End Notes

...Hey, where's Neil?
Up Next:

"For a long time there was only darkness."
Part 10, Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 10, Chapter 2: Neither When Nor Where

For a long time there was only darkness. Or rather, there was only nothingness, a vacuum, a void that lacked light, sound, and sense; it existed without the boundaries of concepts like darkness, sound, silence, loneliness. As first there was not even a sense of being. It took eons for the gathering of scattered atoms to coalesce, knitting themselves together across the empty (not empty, just nonexistent, void) places in time where they had been floating, pinpricks of existence in the very places where nothing should have been able to exist at all.

Eventually, after an expanse unmarked by measurable time, he Became. Or started to. His Togetherness was a confusing thing. For a long time, he wasn’t even a conscious he, just a vast network of molecules and suggestions of thought drawn to each other by forces outside this realm of comprehension. Eventually, he was together enough to be something akin to conscious. He still wasn’t him, exactly, but he understood that he was one; a uniform being that existed apart from the void of his surroundings. For an era after that, he simply existed. Not anywhere or anyone, even, just something that was.

He didn’t understand himself. He didn’t yet have concepts like human and born, but he knew he had been created by forces mostly outside his own control, and he knew intuitively that if there was a Now, then there had once been a Before. This was the beginning of this concept of time. And if he had been created Now, he must have been something Before. The question - when he could finally articulate it to himself - was if he had been the same something. If he had been created or re-created.

Another paradigm passed before he had an idea of what the answer might be. In that time, he realized he was moving through the void that surrounded him. There were no visual markers, but there was a feeling. Just outside his realm of perception, a kind of...babbling. A vibration, maybe. And by the changes in that vibration, he could tell that he was moving.

He wasn’t trying to move. He couldn’t sense the path he was on, or what lay ahead. He wasn’t in control. Which meant that something was drawing him toward his destination. Which meant that he wasn’t the only thing in existence. Something - or someone? - else was out there. Possibly they had helped call him into existence (re-existence?) in the first place.

That moment - the moment when he was able to contemplate the existence of another being, another togetherness of molecules and ideas - was the moment he understood he was alone. And that combination of knowledge, the knowledge that he was alone and that something unknown was drawing him to itself, was another new moment. That was the moment he learned fear.

He knew time, but he had nothing to mark it against. He had no concept of hours, days, weeks. He only knew that it was for what felt like an eternity that he knew nothing but all-consuming fear. The kind of fear that would have gotten into the marrow of his bones, if he’d had any. Fear of what was next, what was beyond. He began to understand that he was trapped, somewhere and sometime outside the bounds of reality, but that there was a whole somewhere beyond, just out of reach of the void that was his existence. It was that somewhere that he was being drawn to. He didn’t know who or what waited for him there. He didn’t understand the tidal pull on his very being that dragged him inexorably toward the edge. Eventually, he found it didn’t matter.
If the force that drew him in meant him harm, he would fight it. Maybe he would win. Maybe it would kill him. He understood now that he was not dead, though he wasn’t alive, and that real death would be something altogether different and more permanent. But he would fight. It would be worth any price to be more than this incorporeal mass of thought. He wanted to be real.

He bided his time. He tried to figure out just what was on the other side. He pushed up against the veil of the void, peered through it and began to comprehend the world Beyond. People, objects, societies, objects, the natural world. But still he didn’t understand his place in it, why he was being drawn to it out of nothingness. He pushed to the edge, again and again-

And then. And then one day, he saw a face. A man’s face, more distinct than anything else he’d seen yet. The man was short, blond, and serious looking. The man was watching something out of range of his view. He watched the man for a while. He watched the sturdy set of the man’s shoulders, the drumming of fingers in idle patterns on arms. He watched, and he was startled to discover that the man seemed familiar. Just vaguely, but not in a way that was frightening. In a way that was almost...comforting. A way that simply was.

He was careful to watch the man from a distance for a while, but eventually he was certain. He was certain that whoever the man was - whoever he himself was - that was what was calling him. Finally, one day, he saw the man turning toward him and didn’t flicker away. He held still. He wasn’t even sure if he had a face, but if he did, he willed the man to see him.

The man’s eyes went wide. His jaw went slack. The man’s gaze locked with his and-

Andrew.

Like a bolt of lightning, he knew the man’s name, and it was Andrew. And then, like the opening of a floodgate, he knew his own name. Neil. Neil Abram Josten, the final name in a lengthy string of bad shells that had all led him here, to Andrew, the man who was staring back at him.

The next second Andrew’s arm moved, and his - Neil’s - view of the world went dark. Neil steadied himself as much as was possible without an actual form. He didn’t know what had happened to him. He didn’t know why he and Andrew had been separated. His memories of being real were still fuzzy, washing over him like a river he was trying to see from underwater. But he felt it now, the pull between them. He felt it, and it wasn’t fear or danger at all. It was something else entirely, something warmer. Something that had lifted him like a tide, drawn him back from the very edge of nonexistence.

In that moment, Neil made up his mind. He wasn’t going to be content to watch Andrew’s world from this side anymore. He was going to break through, or die trying.

Chapter End Notes

;)  

Up Next:

"Cameron James lived in a neat, nondescript duplex at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac on the outskirts of Providence, near the warehouse district. Or, he presumably did - there was no one home when Andrew and Kevin arrived, and the mail stuffed between the doorframe and the door was addressed to one B. Gordon."
Part 10, Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

warnings for oblique references to Andrew’s past/abuse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 10, Chapter 3: Oh, Something's Haunting Me

“I’m sorry, Mr. Minyard-”

“-that’s Agent Minyard, Miss Reynolds.”

“...Agent Minyard. But I simply cannot release any files related to the Cortexiphan trials without Mr. Moriyama’s signature. I know we’ve been through this before. And since Mr. Moriyama is out of the country on business for the next two weeks, I’m afraid I simply don’t have any options for you.”

Andrew paced back and forth across the floor of the lab, twirling his phone in his hands as he spoke, ignoring the pop and snap from the cameras across the lab and Kevin and Nicky continued their experiment, trying to capture the strange apparition that had been haunting him on film.

“The most powerful tech company in the world, and you cannot get a signature of approval over email?”

Reynolds tutted. “We at Massive Dynamic know better than anyone how fallible even the most cutting edge technology can be, Agent. The Cortexiphan files are highly sensitive. They are kept only as physical copies, along with all remaining samples of the drug, in a safe which only Mr. Moriyama has access to. Either wait until he is back in the country, or seek your answers elsewhere.”

Andrew hung up on her without bothering with goodbyes. They needed answers, but all Kevin could seem to remember about the supposed Cortexiphan patient with astral projection abilities was that he’d been “Subject Six.” Andrew wondered if he’d known him. It wouldn’t have made any difference of course - the period of the trials was the one stretch of time that remained stubbornly blank in Andrew’s memory, no matter what tricks Kevin or Bee tried with him.

Frustrated and irritated by the noise, Andrew left the lab and climbed the stairs to the roof, lighting a cigarette before pulling out his phone again. Before he could even make the call, it began to ring in his hand.

“How did you know I was just about to call you?”

“I know you, Andrew,” Renee said sweetly. “Also, Allison and I are having lunch. She filled me in, and I figured you’d be calling me sooner or later, so it might as well be before our food gets here.”

“Then you know what I need.”
“I do. And you can fill me in on the details if you want, but I know the kinds of restrictions Allison is working with. I have to deal with them all the time now. I really don’t think you’re getting that file.”

“What is the point of an official Massive Dynamic liaison if they refuse to liaise with us?”

“You know it isn’t like that,” Renee said.

“Like what,” Andrew couldn’t help asking. “Like that your girlfriend can’t grasp the fact that her boss is the bad guy?”

There was a tense silence over the line. He heard Renee take a deliberate sip of her soda before answering. “That situation is extremely delicate right now and you know it,” she said sternly. “She and Jean could both be in danger if they make too many waves. They are doing their best to help us, but until we have a better exit strategy you’re going to have to deal with a lot of official company lines.” she paused. Andrew could hear her and Reynolds murmuring indistinctly over the line. “At least over official company phones. Hold on.”

There was the sound of a phone jostling between hands.

“Hey, Mini,” Allison drawled.

“I have absolutely never given you permission to call me that.”

“Oh, I know. Anyway, just wanted to make sure you understood that when you call my office phone, you get my office answers, yeah?”

Andrew had no soft feelings for Allison Reynolds, but he still found her out-of-office self - the part of her he thought of as the White Fox, and the realer part - infinitely preferable to deal with than her corporate persona.

“Are you saying you aren’t actually a huge bitch?”

He could practically hear her grin curling over the phone. “Oh I absolutely am that. I’m just saying. That menu that says your call may be monitored? It isn’t kidding. There is every chance that Riko or someone up his ass will hear those conversations. I gotta give you the party line.”

Andrew mulled that over. It made sense, that the official lines in and out of Massive Dynamic would be tapped. Riko was exactly that brand of controlling and paranoid.

“So what’s the unofficial line?” he asked. Allison sighed.

“Unfortunately, it’s the same this time, just with fewer ‘Mr. Moriyamas’” she said, voice lilting meanly on the name. “The files from the Cortexiphan trials really are all paper copies, all stored in the Moriyama family vault, which can only be accessed via a biometric lock keyed to Riko’s palmprint. You know I’ll help any way I can, but I can’t get you that file. You and Day are gonna have to crack this one on your own.”

Andrew didn’t like it, but after six months of working together he had a begrudging respect for Allison Reynolds. At a minimum, he had a respect for Renee’s judgement. Renee had taken an assignment in the New York office, ostensibly to be a liaison between Massive Dynamic and other tech companies whose technologies were involved in FOXES cases. And she did do that, part of the time. Her real assignment was working directly with Reynolds to build a case that would bring Riko’s empire crumbling down.

So if Reynolds said she couldn’t get him the file, he would have to accept that. Maybe Kevin would
have a better idea.

“Any progress on the Bowman file?” he asked, just as long as he had her talking.

This time, he sensed genuine hesitance “Not on the drug Day found in system. There are a few old research memos that mention a doctor called Jones, but he seems to have fallen off the grid years ago.”

“But?”

“But, I did some quiet asking around - Marshall Bowman was a regular at the Dungeon until six months ago. There were rumors he was trying to make a comeback.”

Andrew mulled that over. It was certainly a lead. “You think the drug was some kind of performance enhancer?”

“I think Marshall Bowman probably thought it was.”

It was certainly something to think about. Andrew asked Renee to keep looking into it, since she was most in tune with the fight scenes in both Boston and New York. In the meantime, he had an old acquaintance to find.

Kevin, as it turned out, also hadn’t managed to dig any new or useful information from the dregs of his memory about Subject Six. He thought he had been in the same trial group as Andrew, which made sense if they were connected somehow, but beyond that all he remembered was that the boy had a strong leaning toward telekinesis and astral projection.

“There was an incident with a toaster, I think,” Kevin said vaguely. “Does that sound familiar at all to you?”

“It does not.”

Kevin looked disappointed just for a moment, and then he got an expression on his face Andrew knew all too well. It was his experiment face. “What is it this time?” Andrew asked.

“Do you remember that case you and Agent Walker took in Seattle? With the neural implants?”

How could Andrew have ever forgotten? It had taken every trick Renee knew to get him on a plane home rather than driving all the way back from Washington. “I hope you know, letting you put something in my brain was a once in a lifetime thing.”

“Oh I don’t want to use the implant itself,” Kevin assured him. “But remember the neural net experiment I did with Agent Boyd? It could be adapted to stimulate the hippocampus in your brain, feeding the information to me. Memories can’t be erased, Andrew, only blocked. Even if you can’t access them.”

“-there is a chance that you could,” Andrew finished for him. “Combine my memories with yours, and you get a complete picture of Subject Six.”

“At least enough of one for an ID, hopefully.”

It was an insane idea. But then again, all of Kevin’s best ones were. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

It took Kevin entirely too little time to recalibrate the old BCI equipment and set up the neural nets. Within a couple of hours, he was putting the final touches on a set-up similar to the one Andrew had
observed Kevin and Boyd sitting down to over video chat during their case in Washington. Two
exam chairs faced each other across a small table holding a computer monitor and some more
indecipherable scientific conglomerations. There was also an old-fashioned needle readout not unlike
a polygraph that would tell them when their brains were in sync or...something. Resting innocuously
on each seat was a single neural net.

Kevin sat himself down eagerly in his own exam chair, slipping the neural net onto his head and
prepping the machines for the experiment. He glanced up at Andrew, pausing in adjusting a set of
dials.

“We’re almost ready. Do you need help positioning your net?”

Andrew picked the net up with two fingers. It was heavier than it looked, and he could feel the cold
of the wires and electrodes through his hair when he slipped it on. A cold feeling crept down the
back of his spine as the weight settled against his skull. He considered the smooth, slick upholstery of
the exam chair, running a finger along one arm. “If we do this, are you just going to be wading
around in my memories?”

Kevin actually did him the decency of considering that. “Not really, I don’t think. I’ll probably
receive a lot of them, yes, but I’m going to focus on the Cortexiphan trials. Anything outside of that
will be like white noise. Present, but not intelligible.” He paused before continuing carefully. “It is
possible, however, that I will be able to interpret memories about the trials outside of those about
Subject Six. Those about your own experiences.”

Andrew hesitated. The idea of someone rooting around in his thoughts was unpalatable on his best
days, and worthy of homicide on his worst. But if it had happen, there were worst people than Kevin
Day, and there were worst things in his past than a few mad scientists sticking needles into him and
asking him to turn on a light with his mind. If it would give him an answer to what had happened
that morning, it was worth it. He planted his feet and leaned against the edge of the table. “Ready.”

“You really should sit,” Kevin told him seriously. “The sensation may be, um, strange.”

Andrew folded his arms firmly across his chest, settling himself more firmly against the table. “I
prefer to stand.”

Kevin shrugged and turned back to the dials. Apparently he’d learned his lesson when it came to
arguments concerning Andrew’s safety.

“Okay. If you are ready. Activating the signal in three, two - go.”

Kevin was the one receiving data, as he had been during the experiment with Boyd. But like Boyd
had mentioned, it wasn’t a totally sensationless process on Andrew’s part. At first, nothing happened.
Then there was a hum, like reality had started vibrating, almost too subtly to be noticed. Andrew’s
stomach curled, and he concentrated on the feeling of his feet planted on the floor, his hands
wrapped firmly around his own armbands.

“Now,” Kevin said, like he was speaking from a trance, “focus on the Cortexiphan trials. Any ideas
or flashes you might recall. Focus on the idea of that time in your life.”

A wave of nausea rose in Andrew’s gut, heat flashing over the back of his neck. He reached for the
emptiness of his memories of that daycare in Los Angeles. Nothing. Nothing, but the sense of that
nothing overlaid itself on the world that surrounded him, a veil that felt like looking through two
camera lenses at once; a double exposed image that didn’t quite match.
“There’s nothing there,” he told Kevin between locked teeth.

“Keep trying.” Kevin sounded strained. “Anything you can recall about the center, the experiments, anything you might have felt. I just need a starting point.”

Well, Andrew did have some memories of the center, they just weren’t from when he was eight. He thought back to that trip to Los Angeles, when this trip through hell and back had only just begun. He saw it not only in his mind’s eye, but a vague essence of it was woven into the air around him as well. He thought he understood how the victims from their case had hallucinated the monsters from their own dreams while going through this. He thought of that dusty white building with the creaking swing set out back. The thin carpet and the shelves full of books and toys that had been for tests more than play. The too-small exam chairs and the height chart on the wall in the shape of a smiling giraffe. The windowless rooms of-

“The height chart!” Kevin gasped. “Andrew, focus on the height chart!”

Andrew pictured it as clearly as he could. Slick yellow and orange paper, rounded letters proclaiming “I’m THIS Big!” Goofy eyes and elongated tongue flopping out between overlarge cartoon teeth. Twelve names, one for each of the participants in Andrew’s study group. He focused on the fuzzy memory of them - he’d written them down at the time, meaning to send them to Aaron to help identify more kids off the video tapes, before Massive Dynamic and its blood money had buried the whole file.

“That’s it!” Kevin said suddenly. “Okay, take a deep breath. I’m turning it off.”

The vibrating buzz dulled further and further until it had dissipated completely, leaving the lab just as it had been before. Andrew slipped the neural net off of his head, relief washing through his body when the weight of it was gone.

“You got it?” he asked Kevin, pushing himself unsteadily off the edge of the table, already making his way toward the emergency stairs for a cigarette.

“I did. We need to find a Cameron James.”

Cameron James turned out not to be an easy man to find. Eventually though, between the Bureau databases and some subtle help from Reynolds, Andrew was able to track their Subject Six down by following the address linked to the small trust fund account that had been awarded to each Cortexiphan patient in exchange for their participation. Cameron James’ account had been closed for years, but Andrew couldn’t find any bills of sale on the small house listed as his address. Even luckier, the address was in Providence, less than an hour’s drive away. In no time at all, Andrew was herding Kevin away from his camera project and into the car, and they were on their way.

Cameron James lived in a neat, nondescript duplex at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac on the outskirts of Providence, near the warehouse district. Or, he presumably did - there was no one home when Andrew and Kevin arrived, and the mail stuffed between the doorframe and the door was addressed to one B. Gordon.

“Should we come back later?” Kevin asked nervously. He didn’t like coming on witness interviews. He preferred the safety of the lab, an environment he knew and could control. Nicky was Andrew’s usual partner for such ventures these days, since Renee had left for New York and doing interviews with Aaron tended to unsettle people. But today Andrew needed someone who knew Cortexiphan, and Kevin was the only one who fit the bill.

The thing was, the answer to Kevin’s question was probably ‘yes,’ but Andrew had had his own
home violated twice over in the last twenty four hours. He needed to get to the bottom of it. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he leaned casually against the doorframe. He reached out with his mind. Years of practice picking with actual hand tools meant he knew exactly what to feel for as he felt inside the lock, pushing at the pins until one by one, they each turned into place. With a quiet snick, the door swung open a few inches, unlocked, the letters fluttering to the floor.

“Looks like the door is ajar,” Andrew pointed out. “Someone could be in trouble.” With that, he shouldered his way inside.

The interior of the house was as boring as the outside. Comfortable but barely lived-in. Belongings were sparse and practical, though of good quality. Even the bedroom looked hardly touched, like things had rarely been moved since the first day they had been arranged.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Kevin asked in a low voice. “It's not even the right name on the letters.”

“So our guy’s got a cover identity,” Andrew said with a shrug. “This is the right place.”

“How do you know?”

Andrew swept a hand out, indicating the room at large. “Look around. Not a single thing in this place is made of a magnetic metal.”

Other than that confirmation that they were - barring some very strange coincidence - indeed in the right place, there wasn’t much to discover in Cameron James’ (B. Gordon’s?) house. They did manage to talk to a neighbor, an elderly woman who confirmed that “Mr. Gordon” was indeed the sole resident of his address.

“He’s a good young man,” she told them, in the stern sort of tone old women use when they don’t think you’ll think so. “He helps with the yardwork since my husband passed. He drives a truck, so I get his mail for him sometimes when he’s on the road. I keep an eye on the place.” She pinned Andrew and Kevin with a meaningful look. “Watch out for snoops.”

Andrew almost liked her. “You said he is a truck driver. Is he on a work trip right now, and do you know when he’ll be back?”

She crossed her arms suspiciously. She was exactly eye level with Andrew in her house slippers, which was never a situation he was fond of being in. “Why should I tell you?”

‘Because I’m a federal agent’ felt like the wrong move in the moment. So Andrew settled for a different version of the truth, a trick he’d learned from Nicky. “Ma’am, I just want to talk to him. We went through some things together when we were kids. I don’t want to get him in any trouble, I just think he might have some answers to some questions I’ve had for a while.”

She considered him, then nodded as though in approval. “All right then, son. I guess you’re not just gonna go away anyhow. He’ll be getting back from his trip late tonight. Don’t you come knocking at all hours. That young man deserves his rest.”

Andrew managed to assure her that they wouldn't bother Mr. Gordon until morning. It was getting late anyway, there was no sense waiting around just to bother a man who was going to be too tired and irritable to give them any proper answers, even if he did have something to do with what was going on.

“Come on, Kevin,” he said. “Let’s head home.”
Nights in the little house in Cambridge were quiet in a way Andrew had never quite gotten comfortable with. Not in the years he’d lived there with Nicky and Aaron, and not in the months he’d lived there with Kevin. His old apartment had been on a perfectly nice street, the kind with doormen and well-maintained sidewalks and too many cars, but close enough to downtown that there was always a bustle somewhere nearby. It was a comforting babble; the white noise of a city that didn’t really wind down until well past the time the trains stopped running. Tucked into a run down street well off the main roads and surrounded mostly by retirees, the house in Cambridge was pervaded with the kind of silence any realtor would have raved about but left Andrew tossing and turning, listening for sounds that weren’t there.

By midnight he knew it was going to be a bad night. By half past, he was pretty sure he wouldn’t sleep. Now that an orb of magnetic light had attacked him twice here, every moment he spend prone in his own bed was another moment waiting for it to show up. His ears and eyes strained for any sign of approaching danger in the dark, shoulders tense and fingers digging into the mattress.

When he realized he was listening for the sound of approaching footsteps, he gave the whole night up as a bad job and pushed himself out of bed. He grabbed his laptop off the dresser and trudged down the stairs in socked feet and rumpled sleep clothes. Kevin was in the living room, asleep on the couch that had been pushed up against one of the tall front windows, his headphones still over his ears. He would be complaining about his neck all morning, but Andrew knew better than to try to shepherd him back to his room. He slipped past Kevin into the kitchen.

He made a beeline for the coffee maker. If he wasn’t going to sleep, he might as well be properly awake. Nicky always wondered how Andrew never seemed to have to do paperwork at the office. Andrew rather enjoyed lording that over him, but he never let on the truth that most of his paperwork was done in hours like these.

He paused at the sight of the ugly patterned dish towel covering the glass of the coffee pot. He decided he was done with hauntings for the day. No need to take any chances. He dragged a chair up against the counter to dig Nicky’s old enamel kettle out of the upper cabinet and set about making tea instead. It wasn’t his favorite, but it was caffeinated and palatable with enough milk and honey. The water was just about boiling when there was the sound of shuffling behind him. Andrew turned to see Kevin standing in the doorway, blanket around his shoulders and headphones down around his neck, blinking at Andrew blearly in the mostly dark kitchen.

Kevin’s eyes flickered between the steaming kettle and the box of tea set out on the counter. Nodding to himself, he shuffled over the cabinet and got out a second mug, setting it down beside Andrew’s. Andrew set a tea bag into the mug and poured the water into both in comfortable silence. This wasn’t a routine of theirs, but something about it felt familiar anyway, like he’d done it in a dream. Or maybe someone else’s dream. He shook the thought off and took his tea to the living room. As long as Kevin was going to be up too, he might as well work somewhere comfortable.

At least in these strange, late hours they sometimes kept, Kevin didn’t usually feel like talking. For a while the only sounds in the living room were the clinking of mugs, the light tapping of Andrew’s keyboard, and the occasional scratches of pencil as Ken alternated between staring out the windows and scribbling idly in a notebook of ideas and equations. Andrew tried to work through a set of expense filings Wymack had been nagging him for, but his mind kept drifting back to the cloth-covered coffee pot, the reflective glass shielded so it couldn’t haunt Andrew with that strange, scarred face.

Finally, he gave in and pulled up the facial construction software on his laptop. He’d been avoiding doing so for weeks, sure that if he had ever seen such a distinctive face before he would have clearly remembered who it belonged to. But maybe he was slipping in his old age. Or maybe it was
something deeper in his past, an old face from the Cortexiphan trials buried behind a wall of trauma and drugs, only revealing itself now that he was using his abilities more. If it was connected to the trials, it could be connected to this case. That was as good a reason as any to figure out if there was any record of the man in the system somewhere. He plugged the features carefully into the system. A thin face, young but with weathered skin and sharpened features. Average sized nose with at least one old break. Reddish brown hair in a rough sprawl. Sharp, narrow jaw ending in a pointed chin, stubble lighter than you would have thought it would be. Those scars; a set of ugly puddled burns on one cheek and knife slashes on the other, one extending high enough to tug just slightly on the lower lid of one eye. His eyes; blue enough you thought they might be the sky from another dimension.

Andrew set his cold mug down heavily. He closed his eyes and tilted his face to the ceiling, fighting the urge to smash the lid to his computer shut. Why did his brain keep trying to describe this man like some kind of bad teenage poet? He was a stranger. He was a face Andrew’s brain had concocted from nothingness, for no discernible reason. He didn’t exist. Even as Andrew dutifully sent the feature profile through every database he had access to - which was a great many, now including databases from the other universe - Andrew knew in his gut it was true. Wherever this face had been conjured from, it wasn’t anywhere in this world or the next. And still the face stared back at him from his screen, awkward and uncanny in computerized render, insistent upon its own existence.

Andrew shut the laptop. Kevin looked up from where he’d been scribbling in his notebook again. “Done for the night?” It was past three in the morning. If Andrew didn’t want to be dead on his feet tomorrow, he should at least try to lie down.

“It’s no use,” Andrew said with a shrug. “He’s not real. I don’t know why I thought making a- a Sim out of him would make any difference.”

“Can I see him?” Kevin asked cautiously.

Andrew hesitated. For all his frustration, there was something that felt oddly personal about this face that was haunting him. Private, almost. But there was no good reason for that. Nothing logical he could come up with that should prevent Kevin from seeing this face of a man that didn’t exist. He opened his laptop, pulled the image back up, and turned it to face him.

Kevin, who had been halfway through a sip of his own fresh mug of tea, lowered it slowly, squinting at the image on the screen. He looked... uncomfortable. Or. Unsettled, was maybe a better way of putting it.

“Kevin. Do you recognize this man?”

Kevin took another slow sip before answering. “No,” he said eventually. “No I don’t think so. But there’s something.” He made a frustrated noise. “There’s something just a little familiar about it. I can’t place it, but there’s something.” He stared for a few moments longer before waving a hand and going back to his notebook. “Probably a coincidence. There are only so many human features in the world. I am sure there’s just something about that face that is a bit like-”

*Ding.*

Kevin jumped as Andrew’s laptop pinged. Then pinged again. And again.

“What the fuck?” Andrew muttered, turning the computer around to look.

It was the facial recognition search he’d put through. It was returning results. A lot of them. Whoever’s face he was seeing, apparently they were wanted by just about every organization the FBI had ties to. Heart beating fast, he clicked one open.
He laughed hollowly.

“What?” Kevin asked.

“I know why he looks familiar,” Andrew said, turning the screen back around to face Kevin. On it were over a dozen alerts, all displaying the same face. Less scarred than Andrew’s creation, a little broader in the jaw, but undeniably similar. That same hair. Those same clear blue eyes.

“Apparently I’m being haunted by the ghost of Nathan Wesninski.”

That revelation wasn’t exactly going to help Andrew sleep. He suspected it was even worse for Kevin. Kevin wouldn’t have ever met the infamous Butcher of Baltimore, but he’d grown up close enough to the Moriyamas that he would have heard stories. A boogeyman who lived a little too close to home.

“But why-”

Whatever Kevin was going to ask was interrupted by a tinny sound. Metal on porcelain. Andrew’s spoon was rattling in its cup.

“Goddammit,” Andrew said.

There was a disturbance from across the wide, formerly empty room. Formerly because over the shabby old carpet near the stairs was gathering a ball of shining blue light. It grew as Andrew watched, rattling metal objects, picking the spoons out of their cups and drawing them flying through the air to itself. It grew brighter, stronger. And then it did something new. It started to move.

It started to move toward Andrew.

“Move move move move move!” Andrew leapt up, tossing his laptop to the ground only for it too to be drawn into the magnetic storm. There wasn’t any time to watch in horror. He grabbed Kevin by the wrist and hauled him out the front door and out into the dew-damp street. They’d barely made it to the other side when the orb, still drawing toward Andrew like he was a magnet himself, came crashing through the front picture windows in a spray of chipped wood and shattered glass. Andrew shoved Kevin down into the grass as shards of glass scattered through the night air. The blue light was still coming, still coming-

There was a rumble and a double beam of light cutting through the near distance. As Andrew continued to stumble back down the street, trying to draw the thing away from Kevin, trying to stay out of its way, wishing he hadn’t left his gun upstairs, he realized what it was - a car was coming down the street.

“Stop!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “Hey! Stop!”

There was never any trouble on this street. He didn’t know what elderly person was trying to come home at ass o’clock in the morning, but if they were anything like his neighbors they were nightblind and half deaf to boot. He shouted and waved, but in the end he could only watch in horror as the car met the orb head on, drawn to it, colliding with it as though it was a physical wall, crumpling and coming to a stop, deployed airbags filling the interior. And then the orb was gone as if it had never been, and there was only the car in the street, alarms cutting through the still of the dark suburban night.

Chapter End Notes
Up Next:

“Help!” Neil Josten tried to shout through the void of his empty reality. “Help me!”
Neil Josten tried to shout through the void of his empty reality. “Help me!”

Sometimes he tried to say Andrew’s name instead, or his own. Something stopped him every time, the half-existent particles of his being refusing to shape themselves around the syllables, as though his mind was trying to deliver knowledge his body wasn’t allowed to have. The man on the other side of the veil almost never turned to look. Neil began to understand that he couldn’t be heard. Sound doesn’t travel in a vacuum, a voice in his head said. But light did. Light did. So Andrew could see him, if Neil pushed hard enough, but he would never hear him. Not from here.

He couldn’t stop himself from trying. Each passing moment seemed to bring more of his life back to him. A childhood cowering from a monster who wore his face, and then again from a man in a white lab coat with a metal-tipped cane. An adolescence on the run, one knobbly wrist pinched too tightly in his mother’s thin-boned hand, dragging him from city to city, country to country, name to name. The death rattle of her breath, blood bubbling past her lips from the driver’s seat of a car on the beach in California as she begged him to keep running and never stop.

His young adulthood, still running. Narrowly escaping his father’s men in Tokyo. Disappearing in Shanghai, building something that was almost a life there. Making deals in seedy bars over cheap vodka and in bright conference rooms over priceless cognac. Switching apartments every few months. Burning whatever he couldn’t take with him. Discarding names like old pairs of shoes whenever the holes started to show. Chris, Henry, Stefan, Louis. Alex Williams.

Abram. Hours on the road. Reading every book he could find about the nature of the world. Unlocking the secrets of this universe and the next, number by number. Fixing broken down cars with coat hanger wire. Building computers out of scavenged parts.


Andrew. “Help!”

Neil felt himself drawn toward the barrier again and again. And whenever he was, he threw himself
against it, trying as hard as he could to break through. To make himself seen. To make himself exist. But on the few times it seemed like Andrew did see him, he seemed afraid, or angry. Whatever portals Neil was managing to appear to him in were quickly shrouded, until everywhere Neil was drawn to the edge of the veil was a darkened dead end. And still he could not stop being drawn there. He could not help pushing against the barrier, longing to touch the reality of the other side.

There were a few times he thought he came close. At the foot of the bed in a darkened bedroom, Andrew turning in his sleep just a few feet away. That same room, brightly lit, and the bathroom nearby.

Each time he felt space and time warp around himself, trembling and straining as he was both drawn and pushed himself toward this Real World. Each time Andrew turned toward him, only for Neil to be met with a horrified, frightened gaze.

A living room, in darkness again, with old worn furniture and wide windows leading out into the street. A spoon rattling in a porcelain mug. Objects flying toward the warp as he pushed headlong into the pull reaching for him through it. Andrew’s face again. There was another man too, this time. The scientist. Kevin. Fruit pops and French and arguments over physics. Neil pushed harder. Andrew pulled Kevin by the wrist, out the door and into the street. Neil screamed as the pull yanked him forward, crashing through the heavy old picture windows, frightened shouts in the distance, bright lights cresting over the darkened street-

This time as with each other time, something shattered the moment like glass, breaking Neil’s concentration and sealing him back inside the void he was trapped in, screaming, beating non-existent fists against an ephemeral concrete wall. Each time he remembered a little more of when he’d been real. Pouring over a dream journal in a hotel room in Seattle. Matt’s delighted laughter as he slammed an Exy ball up the court. Late night tea with Kevin, sharing the darkness together. Picking out the weirdest doughnut and coffee flavors with Nicky. Renee pushing him back against a rough dirt wall as a train shot past them in ringing silence.

A key tucked deep in a jacket pocket, reached for with bandaged fingers. A bedroom with two beds, a heavy lock, and a good view of the street. A piece of printer paper taped over a lab door, Foxhole Lab written in messy black scrawl. An ID with his name on it, legal and real and right.

He would have shouted himself hoarse if he’d had a real throat. Instead he just strained and strained again. Forward and forward and forward, leaning into that inexorable pull as hard as he could. He would get through. He would get to Andrew and the Foxes again.

He would be real again. He would.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next:

'I do. My name is Andrew Joseph Minyard. Used to be Andrew Doe. I was subject three.”

Gordon stared in confusion. Then his eyes widened, tracking over Andrew’s face as he put together the pieces. “Holy shit”'
Part 10, Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

Dear, dear, impossibly lovely readers...it's been a rough few weeks. I've been going through some life stuff, some bad and some just occupying, and I haven't made as much progress on this story as I would have liked. I didn't want to skip a week though, so this week and next will just be single chapter updates. Hopefully Part 11 will pick up with your regularly scheduled double updates. For now, each of these chapters is meaty enough, I think, to be enjoyed on its own. Much love, and thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part 10, Chapter 5: Subject Six/Confrontation

Andrew hadn’t intended to end his all-nighter by creating a crime scene in front of his own home, but by the time the sun rose there they all still were. Both he and Kevin were still in their sleep clothes. At least they’d been allowed to go back inside long enough to put shoes on and for Andrew to grab his badge.

“I will tell you one more time, my name is Andrew Minyard, I am a federal agent, and I am taking jurisdiction over this case.”

The detective who had been called to the scene looked down at him tiredly. “I know who you are. Look, we’ve got a lot going on here. We’ve got reports of a bomb going off or gunshots fired or something coming from the house of a federal agent - that’s you - a street full of scared elderly witnesses, and a driver who barely survived a crash with a solid wall of light. Maybe I’d be more inclined to give you the time of day if you could kindly tell me what the fuck is going on here, agent.”

Andrew was growing very tired of this conversation. “I don’t know either, detective. But as I told your officers, I can handle it from here. So we will need the case files, witness statements, and also any security footage you have.”

“Before we discuss the handling of evidence, you’re gonna need to explain exactly what your jurisdiction is here,” the detective bristled.

Andrew reached into his pocket and dug out the copy of his orders Wymack had faxed over during the early hours of the morning. “Here. At the top you will see my division chief, David Wymack. Underneath that you will see his boss. I’m sure you recognize that, hm?”

The detective blinked down at the name of the director of Homeland Security for a few seconds
before shoving the paper back in Andrew’s direction with a grunt.

“Blanket authority, huh?” He pulled a think manilla envelope out from under his arm and passed it over. “I sure hope you people know what you’re doing.”

“It’s only killed me once, so far,” Andrew deadpanned, then walked away before he had to deal with the detective for any longer.

He found Kevin waiting on the steps, hands curled around a cup of coffee. Andrew nudged at him with a foot. “Come on, let’s go get dressed. I want to get to Mr. Gordon’s before the neighbor has time to tell him we’ve been there snooping.”

They made it to Gordon’s a little after ten. Indeed, there was an old pickup parked in the driveway that hadn’t been there the night before. Hopefully the man hadn’t already crashed into sleep, if he’d been driving all night. Andrew walked briskly to the door and rang the bell.

The first moment he laid eyes on the man, Andrew understood the way the neighbor had been speaking about him. At least at a glance, Gordon wasn’t what you would be tempted to think of as “a good boy.” He was tall and pale, with strong arms and chapped, calloused hands. Andrew caught the thinnest flash of track mark scars on the insides of his elbows, clearly old but still visible. He was about Andrew’s age, of course, but his bony face looked aged beyond its years beneath a head of close cropped hair, his pale, deep-set eyes peering suspiciously down at Andrew from over the threshold.

“Mr. Gordon?”

“Who’s asking?”

“I’m special agent Minyard, FBI,” Andrew said, pulling out his badge and flipping it open for the man to see. “My colleague and I would like a word with you.”

Gordon glanced around behind them, like he was waiting for a SWAT team to pop out of the bushes. “A word about what?”

“Well, we are actually looking for Cameron James. We need to talk to him about something he might have been a part of as a child.”

Andrew watched as Gordon froze in place. His eyes flickered back and forth between Andrew and Kevin. Then his gaze froze a few inches over Andrew’s shoulder, and Andrew knew he would have found Kevin’s tattoo. It would have been marker back then, of course, but distinctive nonetheless.

“You,” he spat viciously. He turned on Andrew. “What the fuck would I want to talk to him for? You know what his people did to me? You know what that Moriyama fuck put me through while his precious little boys got to watch and takes notes like we were a fucking science project?”

He looked angry, ready to boil over and bolt, but he didn’t look dangerous in the way Andrew understood people could be dangerous. Whatever Gordon could do, if he was behind these attacks, two minutes told Andrew he wasn’t doing it on purpose. He raised his chin and met Gordon’s gaze squarely.

“I do. My name is Andrew Joseph Minyard. Used to be Andrew Doe. I was subject three.”

Gordon stared in confusion. Then his eyes widened, tracking over Andrew’s face as he put together the pieces. “Holy shit, AJ?” he breathed.
The name hit Andrew like a slap across the face. He barely kept from wincing. “Andrew is fine, but yes,” he said. “I was part of the trials. I know you were too. And I think your abilities may be causing strange things to happen in my life. May we come in?”

Gordon cast an untrustworthy glance at Kevin. Andrew sighed. “Mr. Gordon - is that your real name or your fake one by the way? - I’m sure Kevin was an asshole when he was thirteen. God knows he’s still one now. But we are all survivors of the Moriyamas abuse and violence. He has been helping me for months. He can be trusted.”

Gordon sighed and extended his hand. “Alright. And it’s my real name. You can call me Seth. Come on in.”

Gordon - Seth - led them back into the duplex, which Andrew tried very hard to pretend he had never seen before. “Cameron James was my step-dad,” Seth explained as they made their way into the living room. “He made me use his name for all the Cortexiphan stuff so he could get direct access to the shitty trust fund they gave us. He died when I was nineteen though, so I got it back, for whatever that’s worth.”

Andrew didn’t have any kind of trust fund, shitty or no. Then again, he’d been Andrew Doe when he’d gone through the trials. He didn’t suppose a bank account from an under the table scientific experiment on children would have managed to follow him through the foster system.

“Seth doesn’t start with a B,” Kevin mused.

Seth glared darkly. “It’s my middle name, okay? First name’s Bryan if it bothers you that much.”

Issues with multiple father figures then, if Andrew could read the man at all. He’d be at home with the Foxes if he’d had any useful skills.

They seated themselves around the neat living room. “I uh, do you guys- coffee?” Seth asked, directing the question at Andrew. He still seemed to be uncomfortable with Kevin’s presence, but whatever memories he had of Andrew seemed to be reassuring him. Which was curious if he was behind what amounted to para-physical attacks on Andrew and his home.

“Coffee would be appreciated,” Andrew told him. “We have had a long night.”

Seth paced the small living room floor as the pot dripped, only returning to his seat when he had three full mugs resting on the coffee table. It was strong, and it maybe spoke to Seth’s practiced solitude that he didn’t think to offer it anything but black. Kevin struggled to hide a grimace at the bitterness, but Andrew was too relieved for the extra caffeine to be bothered, just this once. He sipped from his mug in silence and waited. Seth Gordon didn’t seem like a verbose man. But even men of few words would often run their mouths if they didn’t have anything else to go on. Andrew hadn’t given away why they were here just yet, and he didn’t intend to be the one to show all his cards first.

Finally Seth put down his own mug and blew out a long breath. “Jesus, I never thought I’d- Andrew Doe. Who the hell would have thought?”

“It’s Minyard these days, actually.” The correction slipped past his lips before Andrew could quite stop it. But it was a matter of procedure, of course. Seth ought to know the name on his badge. Seth’s eyebrows raised curiously.

“Good for you I guess,” he said. “And a Fed no less. Not a future I would have guessed for you, based on what I remember.”
That made two of them, Andrew supposed. “I am afraid the Cortexiphan affected my memory,” he admitted. “I don’t actually remember much about the trials at all, or you.”

“You remember Agent Minyard from your time there?” Kevin broke in. Seth’s gaze flickered quickly to him before settling back on Andrew. He tilted his head slightly, eyes sinking back into memory. Andrew found himself oddly apprehensive of what he was going to say.

“As much as I remember anyone from that time I guess You were a tough bastard for an eight year old, more so than the rest of us. You didn’t cry. You’d get scared and things would burst into flames but you’d just get...quiet. Think I thought you were some kinda weirdo, at the time.”

Andrew scoffed a laugh. That followed.

“But enough about the past,” Seth said, draining his mug and folding his arms against his chest, “What are you here for? Wasn’t like we were friends back then.”

Andrew considered the best way to broach the subject. He didn’t want to put Seth on the defensive. On the other hand, Andrew had never been much other than blunt.

“Over the past few days, I have been attacked three separate times in my own home by a ball of light that attracts magnetic objects and manipulated space and time. Kevin tells me when you were in the trials you had the ability to astral project.”

“Especially when in strong emotional states. Once you blew up a toaster because the bread had raisins in it,” Kevin supplied.

Seth cast him a cool look. “Have you ever had raisin toast?” He turned back to Andrew. “And you think what, I’m behind whatever’s going on with you somehow? Man, the only ability I have left is making metal go haywire whenever I get too stressed. But I haven’t had real magic powers since the day they stopped sticking needles in my arms.” He smiled bitterly. “Not that that stopped me from trying to find some myself. What about you? Still starting fires?”

“No,” Andrew said honestly. “Though I do know a thing or two about bad medicine.”

“The Cortexiphan created unique pathways in your brains, pathways that may even be linked to each other in ways we don’t fully understand,” Kevin said. “It’s possible you could be causing these attacks without even realizing. If you’ve been having strong emotions in the last few days-”

“I haven’t,” Seth cut him off with the beginnings of a glower. “I’ve been on the road. That’s the whole reason I took up truck driving. It’s alone, simple, kinda meditative, you know? I’ve never had an episode on the road.” He turned back to Andrew. “Look, I’m sorry something’s been messing with you but dude, I don’t see how it could be me. I didn’t know you still existed until an hour ago. So with all due respect, I think you should go.”

Short of calling Seth in for official questioning, there was only so much they could do here anyway. Andrew stood, straightening his jacket as they made their goodbyes.

He turned back one last time on the porch. “You didn’t know exactly who I was, but you did remember me,” Andrew pointed out.

“Yeah I remember you, weirdo. I remember - there was this little girl. Even younger than us. Everyone thought she was kind of a little twerp you know? Real loud mouth, blonde ponytails, the works. But after the tests she would get so scared, and she’d always find you. And you acted like you didn’t even know the rest of us existed, but you always let her hang out with you for as long as she needed to. The rest of us couldn’t ever figure you out, I guess.”
It would have been impossible for Andrew to describe the feeling of having his own lost memory described to him. All he knew was he didn’t like it one bit. “How many of us do you remember?”

“I remember all of us,” Seth snapped. He pressed his lips together and took a slow breath through his nose, eyes shut as though against a bad memory. “I’ve tried to track a few of us down over the years.” He opened his eyes. “As far as I know, you and I are the only two still alive.”

It shouldn’t be possible to feel the loss of people you couldn’t even remember, people who for all intents and purposes didn’t exist, but somehow it was a blow for Andrew to hear anyway. He was trying to figure out how the hell to respond to that statement when the sound of wind chimes came clattering unnaturally through the still morning air from the neighbor’s porch.

“Andrew,” Kevin said urgently.

And then Andrew saw it - the blue ball of light gathering in the yard. He turned to Seth, who was watching it with wide, wild eyes.

“This isn’t me,” he said without taking his eyes off of it. “I swear to you, this is not me.”

The ball of light seemed to be whipping an unnatural wind around itself, growing larger than Andrew had seen it before, now almost as tall as Kevin. “Stay back!” he shouted to Seth. He didn’t want another civilian getting hurt by this thing. On instinct he reached out with his mind - and found himself on his back on the wet ground, tossed as though he’d been electrocuted. He picked his head up to see the light barrelling toward him at full speed, brighter and brighter.

“Do something!” Kevin shouted.

Andrew didn’t know what he was expecting until Seth shouted “STOP!”

The light vanished in a wink and a whirl of magnetic wind.

Andrew pushed himself unsteadily to his feet, staring at Seth. “I thought you said it wasn’t you.”

“It wasn’t,” Seth insisted. “I didn’t make that thing I just-”

“You just destroyed it.” That was Kevin, grinning from ear to ear. “Mr. Gordon, I believe that you are indeed not responsible for these attacks. But if you are willing to help Andrew here, I believe you may have the ability to help stop them.”

Seth looked back and forth between them, then back at the house behind him. He checked his watch and sighed. “What the hell, I’ve got a few hours. What did you have in mind?”

Like most brilliant scientific plans Kevin came up with, the one he concocted to fight the ball of light that was attacking Andrew was absolutely bat-shit insane. Hopefully, that meant it would work.

“Okay, walk me through this again,” Seth said from the back seat as Andrew drove. “Just so I know how likely I am to die today.”

“I think,” Kevin said, wringing his hands slightly as he spoke, “that the magnetic field that has been attacking Agent Minyard is not the root cause. It’s a side effect. It is not the source or intention of the attack. The electromagnetism could be because of field distortions in time.”

“Distortions in time,” Seth repeated blankly.

“Yes,” Kevin insisted. “Linear time as we perceive it, anyway. Just yesterday we captured the
phenomenon on video. But I received a video stream of the even before it actually occurred. I witnessed effect before cause. Agent Minyard described something similar happening during the first incident.

“If your reflexive magnetic discharge dispersed the energy event, then this thing, whatever it is, does not create magnetic fields. It – it -- it distorts those that already exist around us, focusing them, tearing them open.”

Seth settled back in his seat, seemingly chewing that over. Andrew wasn’t an empathetic man by nature, but he felt Seth’s pain in that moment - digesting Kevin’s logic took some training.

“To what end though?” Andrew asked. “Distortions in time, what purpose could that serve?”

“I don’t know,” Kevin admitted, growing more and more fretful. “But I'm afraid it's going to keep returning until it's demolished, growing so large that it will consume everything in its path.” He was staring around the car almost wildly, like he was waiting for the ball of light to appear out of nowhere and attack again.

Andrew reached out his right hand and grabbed his chin without looking, tugging until Kevin was looking sideways at him. “Hey. Lucky you, that’s what we’re here to do. We’ve even got a plan for the destroying part, right?”

Kevin took a few breaths, calming some. “Right.” When Andrew let go, he twisted slightly in his seat to talk to Seth. “You have the ability to collect and disperse electromagnetic power. That’s what causes the strange events when you are under stress. But you can control it, as long as you focus your emotions. You did it just earlier, on the porch. It’s like the toaster, on a grand scale. All we need is enough energy to disperse this thing permanently.”

“This ought to do it,” Andrew said as he pulled the car to a stop and got out, just outside the gates of a power grid terminal. He pulled his jacket more tightly around himself. Above them, the metal towers loomed, creaking and whistling in the cold wind.

“What do we do now?” Seth asked.

“We wait,” Kevin said. He seemed a little steadier now that they were at their destination and he could focus directly on the task at hand. “We know now that this thing is drawn to Agent Minyard in particular, not just his home. The attacks have been frequent, so it should follow him here before long.”

Kevin set himself up a little ways away and began scribbling notes to himself again, absorbed in the shifting numbers and formulas. Andrew was on edge. A little ways away, he could tell Seth was too. When Andrew glanced over at him, Seth jerked his head to the side a little, a request for conversation.

Seth had his hands stuffed deeply into his pockets, ostensibly against the cold, but there was a discomfort to his posture that didn’t sit well on him. He was a man who had learned that control of his own environment was paramount to his continued survival. Now here he was, throwing himself back into this because - what? Because he and Andrew had some kind of shared past trauma? Because he felt bad, or guilty, or lonely, or all three? Because for once when something bad had happened, it hadn’t been his fault? Because there was a chance he was special after all - if he could fix this, would the suffering have been worth it? Frankly, Andrew didn’t want to know. Still, he went over.

“Can I ask you a question?”
Andrew shrugged. “I guess I’ve asked you quite a few. Shoot.”

“You said you don’t start fires anymore. You ever experience any other side effects from the trials?”

Andrew took a moment to figure out how to answer. “Some,” he said eventually.

Seth just looked at him for a long moment before he seemed to realize that was all Andrew was going to offer. Andrew decided to throw him a bone.

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s just...When I first started having side effects, I thought something was coming after me too.”

Ah. That explained the cagey attitude. “I promise you, I would know if this were me,” Andrew said. They stood together in awkward silence for a few more minutes, listening to the wind in the towers, waiting, waiting.

“You said there’s no one else left?” Andrew found himself asking.

“No one,” Seth confirmed. “Twelve of us in our group, and I tracked down most of them over the years.”

“All the result of the trials?”

“Directly or indirectly,” Seth said with a shrug, “Drug overdoses, drunk driving accidents. Lots of the side effects made it hard for people to hold down a job, so they ended up homeless, broke. Couple of suicides, it looked like,” he finished quietly. “But yeah, it’s just you and me left, weirdo.”

Twelve. For some reason Andrew hadn’t imagined there had been that many. Twelve children he had lived with for months - all forgotten. Now, apparently, all dead but for him and one lonely, surly truck driver.

Deeper in the power terminal, between two of the taller central towers, a spark of blue light spun to life.

“It starting!” Kevin shouted, running over. “It’s happening now!”

The ball of light gathered quickly, blooming into a sphere at least six feet tall and wide, moving toward Andrew like it was honed in on him, intent.

“Focus on the energy around you, Seth!” Kevin instructed. “Pull it in, focus it, and send it back out. Use it to disperse this thing! You can do it!”

Seth’s face pinched in concentration, his whole body going tense as he focused on the ball of light. All around it, a strange wind had picked up; the metal fence groaned and heavy wires dragged across the dirt toward it as the magnetic field grew stronger. Andrew’s gun rattled in its holster, and he put a hand on it to keep it still. And still the ball grew. Larger and larger, closer and closer, brighter and brighter-

“Push!” Kevin shouted. Seth grunted in exertion, and the ball of light halted in its tracks, wavering just feet away from Andrew. Whatever Seth was doing, it seemed to be working. The light was beginning to waver at the edges, breaking up, dispersing. “That’s it! More!”

And then Andrew saw him. The face from his dreams. The apparition that had been haunting him for weeks. Except this time it wasn’t just a face but an entire man - young, thin, and seemingly straining
against something, hands pressed up as though against a sheet of glass. He was staring right at Andrew. Those scarred cheeks. Those blue eyes, bright as the glowing air around him.

In life, or whatever this was, he still bore the features that the computer had recognized as Nathan Wesninski, but the overall resemblance was less striking. More than the scars or any other particular part of his face, that might have been down to his expression - vulnerable, earnest...hopeful?

*It’s me!* He mouthed, like he always did. His form was becoming more solid. Seth’s eyes were closed in concentration. Even Kevin seemed to be shielding his eyes from the brightness of the light. Andrew’s eyes were watering, but he couldn’t look away. And then the man mouthed, “*It’s me! Andrew, it’s me!*

Andrew.

Seth’s efforts were working. The edges of the light were breaking apart quickly. Where the man had been growing more solid he seemed to begin breaking apart, shivering like a corrupted recording, flickering all the way through. His bright blue eyes were desperate, his deeply scarred palms pressed up against whatever was keeping him trapped in that ball of light.

“*Andrew! Andrew!***”

“*Stop,*” Andrew whispered. He wasn’t even sure who or what he meant at first, but as the flickering grew more intense, he made up his mind. “*Stop. Seth, stop!*”

Seth didn’t seem to hear him, too deep in his own concentration. But if he kept going, he was going to break the ball of light. Andrew knew, suddenly and without a doubt, that if that happened the man would be destroyed. His hand was still on his gun. The man’s bright eyes watched him as he pulled it out, aimed it at a bare patch of ground, and fired.

**BANG.**

The shot broke Seth’s concentration. A shudder went through the light and with a last silent cry, the man winked out of existence once more, leaving them all standing in silence and stillness.

They brought Seth back to his house with few words spoken between them. Their only goodbye was Seth’s curt nod when Andrew handed over his card. Then they turned and left the only other survivor of Andrew’s trial group alone once more.

It was a long drive back to Boston. Not because of traffic, but because Kevin would not shut the fuck up. “I’m telling you, Kevin, I was not seeing things,” Andrew said tersely. “You know I do not like repeating myself.”

“And it was really him? The man from your dream? The man you have been seeing?”

“Yes.”

Kevin made a frustrated noise. “Then why did you stop Seth from destroying it? These apparitions have been terrible for you, don’t you want them gone?”

“I don’t know.” In truth, Andrew couldn’t even explain it to himself. “I just had an instinct that -- that he didn't want to hurt me. That he wanted my help. Letting Seth destroy the light would have killed him.”

The wheels crunched over loose gravel drive as they pulled up a diner. If he was going to deal with this, he needed a smoke break and preferably a plate of French fries the size of his head. Andrew cut
the engine to the car and got out, lighting a cigarette as he walked. He leaned against the car as he smoked. His phone rang with a call from an unknown number. Andrew ignored it.

“Do you think we destroyed it, Kevin? Do you think it's gone?”

Kevin sighed irritably. “I don’t know. What you did may have compromised Seth’s ability. He may have just displaced it, put it somewhere else for the time being.” He looked down at Andrew. “You are aware that you acted against all reasonable agreements and expectations. You behaved irrationally, with regard to only your intuition and instincts.”

Andrew blew out a long breath of smoke. “Sure. I guess I did.”

“When I do that, people say I'm crazy. I guess I've learned that crazy is a lot more complicated than people think.”

Andrew ground out the last of his cigarette and headed toward the diner. “I have been called worse things than crazy.”

They were just pulling into the drive in Cambridge when his phone rang in his pocket. Wymack said in the screen. Great. He always called more when Andrew had to take Kevin out on a case.

“Why can’t he just call to check up on you himself like a normal father?” He wondered aloud to Kevin, then relented and picked up the call before it could go to voicemail. “Minyard.”

“You two still in Providence?”

That wasn't good. “We just got back to Boston.”

“Well you’re gonna have to turn around. We’ve had a disturbance in the Providence River. You can leave Kevin, but I need you over there now.”

“What's going on, Chief?”

“Some boaters pulled a man out of the water. Seemed confused, didn’t know where he was.”

Andrew heard Wymack take a breath, probably also around a cigarette. Probably he was doing that thing where he shuffled his papers around without actually looking at them. “Details are sketchy, but apparently whoever he is knows a lot of classified information -- things no one outside this division could possibly know. What's more... he claims to know every one of us.”

Chapter End Notes

Once again, that’s all for this week. Next week will also be a single chapter so we can round out this Part. Thanks for reading, comments and love are much appreciated! Also, I know I've been promising Angst...next week :)

Up Next:

Later, he would only remember flashes: a phone in his hand; a line that rang and rang and rang. He was spitting out river water. He was pulling on institutional sweatpants. He was saying something into the phone. He was fumbling with the keypad. He was drowning. He was drowning. He was-
He was lying on his back, staring up at a flat grey ceiling.
Part 10, Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Neil POV

Chapter Notes

I’ve been picking this chapter apart for Weeks, and it has gone through more changes than any other chapter in here I think. I literally just decided on a major scene shift last night. I’m so excited to share it with you.

I know I promised you angst this chapter...I hope I’ve delivered :)

Part 11, Chapter 6: Who the Hell is Neil Josten?

Neil burst into the living world like being birthed from a monster made of void, sputtering and gasping in dark, brackish water. The world was so bright it was nearly blinding, and it was so, so cold. So loud. He tried to put his hands over his ears, but his legs were too weak to keep his head above water without paddling, and he nearly sank beneath the current again before he took his hands down, squinting against the sun and heaving heavy breaths of wet, icy air.

He didn’t know for how long he simply thrashed. The rush of sight, smell and sound overwhelmed his senses, and his mind shut down in defense. Hands gripped his upper arms too tightly and hauled him up from the water, voices making exclamations he couldn’t understand. Something was wrapped around his shoulders and he realized he was naked. He began to shiver, teeth chattering uncontrollably, his breath clouding up in front of his face.

He was on a boat. There was a man crouched in front of him, asking what the hell he’d been thinking. He tried to focus - he was Neil Josten. He was back in the real world. He needed to get back to the Foxes; who knew how long he had been missing?

He was in a car, heaters blasting in his direction. Why was he so cold? Hadn’t it been summer just a moment ago? Someone was handing him clothes. Oh. He was naked. Wait, he’d already known that. He put them on with trembling hands. He needed to call someone. Wymack, Kevin, Andrew. He needed to call Andrew.

Later, he would only remember flashes: a phone in his hand; a line that rang and rang and rang. He was spitting out river water. He was pulling on institutional sweatpants. He was saying something into the phone. He was fumbling with the keypad. He was drowning. He was drowning. He was-

He was lying on his back, staring up at a flat grey ceiling. He had a vague memory of finally getting through to someone at the FBI, but the details were fuzzy, lost to the haze of adrenaline that had soaked through...whatever that had been. Wherever this was, it was clear his team hadn’t gotten to
him yet. But they would find him, of that he was certain.

While Neil waited, he took stock of his surroundings, and of himself. He was in a cell. One cot, one
sink and toilet, walls that had been painted inside of the last couple years. At first, he assumed he’d
been taken in by local police who thought he was a suicide attempt or something. But something
about that solution seemed...off. There was a noticeable lack of rude graffiti in the cell, and a lack of
other noise. It was the quiet that settled unpleasantly in Neil’s stomach. Prisons weren’t quiet.
Psychiatric facilities weren’t quiet. What were quiet were interrogation rooms, and secret holding
cells. The kinds of places you put criminals you didn’t want anyone to know you’d gotten ahold of.
Not quite a black bag, maybe, but something close.

Neil estimated he’d been awake for about an hour when the door in the hall opened, and David
Wymack stepped through. Neil’s heart soared - his team had found him. Wymack looked more
disheveled than Neil remembered him, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up and his tie hanging loose
around his neck. He was carrying a stool, which he placed directly in front of Neil’s cell and sat
himself down on, staring at Neil all the while.

“Wymack.” Neil forced himself to stand on still-weak legs, walked to the front of the cell and
wrapped his hands around the bars. Like this, he and Wymack were eye to eye in a way that would
almost have been unnerving, if seeing a familiar face after so long hadn’t been such a relief.

“Thank god. I was starting to worry I’d been black bagged. You need to get me out of here. I need to
talk to Andrew and Kevin about this, we need to figure out what happened with the Machine.”

Wymack’s face twitched at the mention of Kevin’s name, and his hands tightened in his lap. Other
than that, his facade remained impassive. He let the silence linger, like he was waiting for Neil to
start speaking again. It was weirdly reminiscent of an interrogation technique. Worry pricked at the
back of Neil’s neck.

“I’m sure we’ll get to all of that, kid,” Wymack said slowly, frowning.

“Does Andrew know I’m here? I tried to call him but he didn’t pick up. I know he doesn’t always
pick up unknown numbers but-”

“-I called him,” Wymack cut him off. “He’d just gotten back to Boston, but he’s coming straight
here. Why don’t you start by telling me what you remember?”

Neil walked him through what he had put together for himself. Stepping into the Machine. Seeing
flashes of the future. Tearing a hole in each universe to create the bridge between the two universes
rather than destroying one or the other. Months - he found out that it was early December - and
months, alone in a void of nothingness until he’d been pulled, gasping, into the light.

He didn’t quite tell Wymack all of it. He didn’t mention that it was Andrew who he’d always been
drawn to, from the moment he had regained something resembling consciousness inside of the void.
He estimated it had been weeks that he’d pressed himself against the veil, looking for any opening he
could find, only to have each one shrouded whenever Andrew had seen him. He didn’t mention
being called into being at a power terminal, how he’d come so close to shattering apart completely by
whatever force was being operated against him. How he’d held Andrew’s gaze, shouted his name in
silence, and Andrew had raised his gun and shot, and then Neil had been free.

The details concerning Andrew felt private, too personal, and not entirely necessary for Wymack’s
case notes. Neil figured he would go over the details with Andrew, when he got there. Instead, he
wrapped up with what he remembered of his re-emergence from the darkness: being pulled toward a
blinding light and then snapped like a rubber band into reality. Coming to in a cold, dark river.
Wymack was silent for a long time when Neil finished. He checked his phone. Sighed. Put it back in his pocket. Looked back up at Neil.

“That’s a hell of a story, kid,” he said.

“When will Andrew be here?”

“Hold your horses, he’s here. I’m just about to go let him in.”

There was something wrong. Something about this whole situation. The cell, the interview style, Wymack’s whole demeanor. Had Neil somehow come through into the other universe? Or was there something more nefarious going on, some pressure on Wymack that was preventing him from being open with Neil. Were they being watched?

The door closed behind Wymack and for a moment Neil was alone, and afraid. Maybe there was nothing nefarious going on at all. Maybe he’d just been fired, the Foxes deciding he’d disappeared one too many times. He’d already run on Andrew so much, even after he’d promised he wouldn’t. What if this was one time too many? What if disappearing like this was simply unforgivable? Maybe they thought Neil had been playing them all this time, using them to help the other side or, or - who knew what.

Maybe Andrew was going to walk in and tell him to cut his losses and leave. That he was off the team. That they couldn’t trust him, and he’d better go finding a home somewhere else. He’d always said he wouldn’t be Neil’s answer.

The door opened. Wymack entered first, his height practically filling the doorway. Andrew was almost hidden behind him, but soon enough he was there, right in front of Neil. In the flesh, looking right at him.

“Andrew,” Neil breathed. His chest felt full to bursting, his eyes wet and hot as relief shot through him at the sight of those familiar, still features. It took only a glance to know this wasn’t the other universe - everything about Andrew was exactly as he remembered, down to the tiny scars on his face and knuckles. Neil was shaking so badly he couldn’t stand, sinking to his knees against the bars and taking deep, gasping breaths. “Andrew I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

There was only silence and the sound on Neil’s breath, loud in his own ears. When Neil finally looked up, it was to Andrew staring down at him, stony faced, almost contemptuous. Neil felt himself growing cold. Andrew hadn’t looked at him like that since the day he’d discovered Neil’s binder.

Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong. Andrew kept his feelings close to the vest, but Neil had prided himself in being able to read the little ticks of emotion he allowed to slip through the cracks. Now, where there had once been shielded warmth, there was only cold indifference, contempt, and a hint of genuine bafflement. Neil’s stomach twisted, his fingers trembling around the iron bars.

“...Andrew?”

Finally, Andrew opened his mouth to speak. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Is this...some kind of joke?” Neil struggled to his feet. “Some kind of punishment? Hi, I’m Neil, we live together, you asshole?”

Andrew narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know what kind of game you are playing with me, but I have never met you before in my entire life. And I would know.”
“But I-” Neil stuttered, “We-”

“We nothing,” Andrew snapped. “You are no one to me. Stay the fuck out of my life.”

When the door shut behind Wymack and Andrew, leaving Neil alone again, he finally broke down and let himself cry.

They kept Neil in the cell for days. As living situations went, it was far from the worst place he’d spent that long living. It was dry and warm. They brought him food that didn’t leave him sick or starving. He was even allowed to shower every second day, and the clothes they handed him afterward were thin and ill-fitting but always clean.

“What is the earliest FBI case you have knowledge of?” Wymack asked him on what Neil thought was the third day of his internment.

“That I have any knowledge of or that I worked?” Neil was expecting the disapproving frown that always came when he mentioned “working” for the Foxes, but that didn’t make it any less frustrating.

“You didn’t work any of them,” Wymack said firmly. “You appeared out of thin air less than a week ago. I don’t know where you were before that but it sure as hell wasn’t on my team.”

“Whatever. Which one?”

“Sure. Let’s say oldest that you have any knowledge of.”

“My own kidnapping,” Neil said blandly. “In 1998, Kevin Day and Riko Moriyama opened a portal to another universe. Nathaniel Wesninski wandered through it and died. In order to avoid suspicion, they kidnapped his double from that universe - me. I lived here for twenty years not knowing it wasn’t my home before Kevin admitted the truth.”

They weren’t interested in his past, really. Neil had tried before to explain who he was, to remind them. He’d been invariably met with either incredulity or outright dismissal. At any rate, the dirty secrets of Neil’s childhood were not the reason he was being held by the FBI in a windowless cell for days on end. They didn’t care about his sob story. They wanted to know how compromised they were, how many secrets Neil knew, how much damage he could do if they let him back out into the world. Sometimes Wymack seemed agitated by the number of details Neil knew. Sometimes he would just look befuddled, like the cases Neil described hadn’t happened at all. Today was something of a mix of the two.

“Mr. Josten, I don’t know what kind of game you think you’re playing, but I’m telling you right now that these fabrications are going to do you more harm than good.”

Neil’s heart sank. Even Wymack’s anger and frustration at Neil’s knowledge of FBI secrets was more bearable than when this happened. “It’s not a fabrication,” he said, but it was with resignation.

“There was no Nathaniel Wesninski kidnapped from Evermore Academy. There was no Nathaniel Wesninski at Evermore Academy. As far as we know, there was no Nathaniel Wesninski, period.”

“Then who was taken?” Neil demanded. “Whose death upset the balance? You wouldn’t be having soft spot events at all if it wasn’t for that, so who was it?”

Now Wymack looked angry. “You don’t ask the questions, Mr. Josten. You may be under the delusion that you worked for this organization but you have no ID, no alibi, and no fucking clearance. And if you ever want to get out of here, I’d think long and hard about starting to tell the
truth.”

Not all of the interrogations went like that. Sometimes Neil was asked to pick a random case from memory and start talking. Sometimes he was given a particular range of dates, or a few harmless details, and asked to fill in the blanks.

“Valerie Boone,” Wymack prompted one morning.

“Wife of Dr. Nicholas Boone,” Neil intoned, on his back on his cot, staring up at the ceiling. He didn’t feel quite able to sit up that day, for some reason. “Infected with a modified form of syphilis by members of ZFT when he tried to leave the organization that effectively turned her into a spinal fluid vampire. Hunted primarily at a nightclub called Eden’s Twilight. We were able to cure her using a transfusion of modified spinal fluid, but Dr. Boone died as a result of his donation, probably as some kind of guilt suicide. His final message lead us to understand that Riko Moriyama was the de-facto leader of ZFT.” He rolled his head to the side, catching Wymack in his periphery. “Did I miss anything?”

“That’s about the run of it,” Wymack said tersely. Neil rolled his head back up. A moment later the sound of the hallway door told him he was alone again.

He couldn’t stand it. Nevermind things like physical safety and creature comforts, being trapped and unable to run was Neil’s worst nightmare. The need to be able to escape was so engrained deeply within him it might as well have come from his marrow. Every time the door to the call opened his heart picked up, not knowing who it would be. Every time the armed guard marched him to the showers he forced himself not to bolt.

He needed to be smart about this. He’d known from the moment Andrew had looked at him with those blank eyes that something had gone wrong in his return. He didn’t know what yet, but he knew for certain that the most likely place to find his answers was with the Foxes. So he stayed. He mapped, and planned, and fretted, but for now he stayed.

“Tell me about the Grayson Hotel.”

It wasn’t always Wymack who interviewed him. Sometimes it was Matt Boyd, or Nicky, or an agent Neil was less familiar with. He preferred the strangers. It was easier to bear the indifference, incredulity, and scorn when it wasn’t from the faces of people he considered friends. People who’d known him in a way he hadn’t let people know him for most of his life. Now they looked at him with open suspicion, as much of an interloper as he had been the first day he’d stepped foot in the basement lab, but less needed. At least it was never Andrew. Neil wasn’t sure he was ready for that, or that he’d ever be.

Today it was Nicky, perched on a stool outside Neil’s cell with a veneer of nonchalance thin enough for Neil to see right through. “Come on man. The sooner we know what you know, the sooner we can get you out of here.”

Neil laughed bitterly from where he was sitting on the floor near the bars, legs folded up to himself on the thin blanket from his cot. “Come on, Agent Hemmick, we both know better than that. Every case I tell you about just adds another ten feet deep to the hole you’re gonna bury me in.”

“Hm,” Nicky said, head tilted slightly. He stood, pushed the stool to the side, and sat down on the floor as well. Neil followed the movement out of the corner of his eye.

“I hope that isn’t how this turns out, Neil,” Nicky said, and damn it, he sounded so sincere Neil actually wanted to believe him.
Then Neil considered something. The way Nicky had mirrored him, gave a little to get a little. It could just be an interrogation tactic. Nicky had more people skills than the rest of the Foxes put together when he was really trying. But Nicky had also helped raise Andrew, and continued to work with him. It was possible that an element of the give and take was genuine, and something Neil could use to his advantage.

With more effort than it should have taken, Neil turned his head to meet Nicky’s earnest gaze.

“I’ll tell you,” he said, “but I want something in return.”

Nicky chuckled uncomfortably. “I’m afraid that’s not really how this works, buddy,” he said. “If I started giving government secrets to every pretty face that came through here, I wouldn’t have this job for long.”

Neil shook his head a little. “It wouldn’t be a secret, I don’t think.”

That seemed to give Nicky pause. “Huh. Okay. You first, then I promise you a question in return, provided it isn’t classified.”

A verbal agreement shouldn’t have meant much, but again, Nicky knew Andrew. Hopefully he’d absorbed some of his cousin’s respect for promises.

Neil closed his eyes and leaned his head back tiredly against the cool cinder block wall. “It started when we were called to the scene at an apartment building in Manhattan…”

He walked Nicky through the case, pausing to let him ask questions and prod at different points in the story. Apparently what Neil remembered (what Neil had lived) was a bit different from…reality. They’d managed to find the testing facility in Los Angeles, but according to Nicky even with the initial Cortexiphan dose, Andrew hadn’t been able to see the glimmer of the hotel. They hadn’t known what building would go until it was gone.

“No,” Neil insisted. “We got everyone out. Andrew saw the glimmer. That’s how he knew it was going to the other universe. It’s how he knew I was from the other universe. We got everyone out just in time.”

“We didn’t, Neil. I get that that’s hard to hear but we didn’t. The building disappeared with everyone still inside it. Over four hundred people were lost.”

Neil could only stare in horrified silence.


“I don’t know.”

“Because you weren’t there, Neil.” Nicky’s voice was gentle, still emotional from his recounting of their failure at the Grayson Hotel. Somehow that was what did it.

Neil thunked his head back against the wall in frustration, twisting his hands together, memories flooding back like his brain was creating them anew. “No,” he said, chest getting tight. “No I was kidnapped from the scene. My father’s people…” His arms were burning. His face was burning. Dust clogged his throat. He could hear Lola’s laughter in his ear like poison, soaking into his brain.

Something touched his shoulder and Neil jerked away, gasping. His eyes flew open to Nicky’s hand reaching through the bars, his face etched with worry.
“Neil? Neil, breathe, man. Just breathe.” Was he not breathing? Oh god, he wasn’t breathing. He couldn’t breathe. He clutched desperately at his own hair, the back of his own neck, trying to find something to ground himself. “Look at me, Neil. You’re okay. You’re safe, Neil. All you gotta do is breathe for me, okay?”

Eventually, the panic ebbed, and Neil was able to take several ragged, measured breaths, sagging over his knees. He waved off Nicky’s further attempts at comfort, mumbling into his own lap.

“What was that?”

“My question,” he managed.

“Oh. Uh, we don’t have to do that now if you don’t want. I won’t rip you off, promise. You need some time to yourself, man? I can come back later.”

Neil shook his head. “Need to know.”

“Okay. Okay. What do you want to know?”

“Mary Wesninski. The Butcher of Baltimore’s wife.” My mother. “Is she alive?”

Nicky simply looked at him in blank confusion for a long moment. “I...I don’t know. Nathen Wesninski is dead, but the details were buried, I think. Insider witnesses, need-to-know only, that kind of thing. I don’t know.”

Neil didn’t have any words to respond. Eventually Nicky stood, awkwardly patting the bars. “I’ll let you get some rest, man. Chief’ll see you again tomorrow.”

Neil didn’t manage to get any words out before the hallway door closed, and Nicky was gone.

Every day was the same. Eating, sleeping, getting questioned. Trying to stay alive. Trying not to run. He ran laps in his tiny cell instead. When that got too maddening, he switched to push ups, crunches and whatever other training he could manage with 80 square feet and his own body. He did hours of math in his head, but it was hard to keep the numbers from slipping without anything to write them down on. He didn’t ask many more questions, no matter how much he wanted to. He asked after Andrew exactly once, but when Wymack asked why he wanted to know, he found he couldn’t bear to say.

About a week in, he convinced Matt to allow him a notebook and a few cheap pens. If Wymack wasn’t going to give him his answers, Neil was going to work them out for himself. He filled it front to back with equations in less than two days. Wymack asked to see it when Neil asked for a second notebook. Neil stood stubbornly a few feet away and fanned through it so Wymack could see pages and pages of numbers and scrawled notes, but didn’t let him get close. Wymack just raised a brow and tossed another notebook through the bars of the cell.

“I need to speak to Kevin.”

It had been three days since he’d gotten the second notebook, and Neil was finally starting to feel like he had an idea of what was going on.

“I keep telling you, you don’t call the shots around here, kid.”

Neil glared at Wymack. “You can’t keep me in your secret halfway house forever. Eventually you either have to arrest me, let me go, or shove me in a hole somewhere. I know you work for Homeland Security so don’t try to pretend that last option isn’t on the table.”
“If you thought I was going to arrest you, you should be asking for a lawyer.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “I don’t exist, Chief. No lawyer in this reality is going to be able to help me. The only person who might be able to wrap his head around this is your lead scientist, so I need to speak with him.”

Wymack fiddled with his rolled shirt cuffs, shooting an aborted glance toward the hallway door. “Dr. Day is not an agent, he’s a scientist, like you said. He doesn’t do interrogations.”

There was something about the way Wymack said it that was strange. More protective than Neil was used to seeing him be with Kevin. He wondered what was different about their relationship in this universe.

“Look kid, just give me the notebooks, and I’ll ask Kevin if he wants to take a look, okay?”

Neil clutched his work more tightly to his chest. “I want to trust you, but I don’t. How do I know you won’t just throw them away the minute you walk out of here?”

“Because, you self righteous twerp” Wymack huffed, “that crazy pile of numbers you cooked up there is the best information you’ve given us so far to let us know how much of a risk you might be. If it’s a pile of nonsense, you’re some kind of stalker who’s convinced he was one of us in a past life or some shit, we get a psychiatric evaluation and go from there. If it’s legit… I’ll be willing to have a more serious talk with you about just where it is you think you come from.”

Neil started to hold out the notebooks, but held them back at the last minute, just out of reach of Wymack’s fingers.

“You told me once - the you that I knew. You told me you vouched for Renne Walker and both Minyards when they were coming up through the academy.”

Wymack’s eyes narrowed. “Where the hell-”

“You didn’t want picture perfect agents, you wanted people who could get the job done. A clear head in a crisis. Whoever was good for your team. What I’m saying is, I trusted you with my life and you didn’t let me down. That’s the only reason you’re getting these. I guess I’m just hoping you’re as good as the man I remember.”

He let Wymack tug the notebooks from his grasp.

“You’re a strange man, Neil Josten,” Wymack said.

“I’ve been told, yeah.”

No one came to see him for three days. Sometimes Neil heard muffled sound of arguing from the other side of the hallway door, but he couldn’t make out who they were, or what they were saying. He did more equations in his head. He exercised until his whole body was straining and he felt ready to pass out. He took so long in the shower the guard threatened to drag him back to his cell naked. More muffled shouting. Slamming doors in the distance. Silence like the inside of a tomb.

Maybe this was it. Maybe he’d revealed too much, and now they really were going to leave him here, locked up in this single cage until he died. That was what he got for trusting someone just because of a familiar face, a memory he couldn’t even prove was real. This was what he got for giving more answers than he got in return. This is what he got for not running.

The sound of the hallway door creaking open startled him from restless sleep. Wan light from the
hallway through the crack in the door barely illuminated the clock across the way, telling him it was
past three am. Neil watched through slitted eyes as a tall shadow loomed, then entered the hallway,
padding as though afraid to make a sound, and came to a stop in front of Neil’s cell. A long few
seconds later, the door closed softly behind, the hallway going mostly dark again. Neil tensed in the
darkness. This was it. They were coming to kill him, or to take him someplace he’d never be found.

“Mr. Josten?”

Neil lurched into a sitting position at the sound of the voice, his eyes flying open. Kevin was
standing at the front of his cell, pressed practically right against the bars. The weakest light that
diffused from the emergency lights on the other side of the small door window was just enough to
make out his features.

“Kevin,” Neil said dumbfounded. “What are you doing here?”

There was the sound of fluttering paper, and Kevin held something up in the darkness. The
notebooks Neil had given to Wymack.

“This math,” Kevin said, a near whisper. He sounded as disbelieving as Neil felt. “Did you come up
with all of it yourself?”

“No,” Neil admitted. A lot of it had been based around the concepts of how the two universes
flowed in and out of each other. That was work Neil had been gifted months ago, in a cabin on
Reiden Lake. “I had help. A friend taught me some of it. And he had another teacher, someone more
brilliant than both of us put together.”

“My mother.” Kevin’s voice trembled over the words.

“Yeah.”

“How-”

“It’s all there.” Neil pushed himself to his feet, swallowing a groan at the protest of his exhausted
muscles. “I think when I fixed the Machine where I was from - when I was from - I got stuck outside
of time. Apparently in this timeline, I never existed. But in my timeline, I worked with you. I was
part of Foxes Division.” He searched for a way to make Kevin understand, to help him believe.

“When David Robert Jones tore a hole in the universe, your mother’s math helped me finish the
portal plug you started and stop him.” Neil clutched at the bars and Kevin backed up half a step,
staring down at him with wide eyes. Neil hung his head, leaning on cool, hard iron. “You’d only told
me about the existence of the other universe that afternoon. I didn’t know how to believe you. But
when you showed me Kayleigh’s calculations, I realized what you were saying had to be true. It was
all right there in front of me, the most beautiful numbers I had ever seen.”


Neil sighed. “It did to me.”

“I want to believe you, Neil,” Kevin said quietly, and the hope that rose in Neil was dizzying, but he
fought to tamp it down. “But if what you are saying is true, that you were displaced by time, how did
you get here?”

Neil thought about a face in the darkness, a pull through an endless void. Blond hair and serious
features. A flat, unknowing stare. “I don’t know,” he said.
Neil nearly banged his head on the bars with how quickly he looked up. Another shape stepped forward, seeming to materialize out of the darkness in the corner. Andrew stepped forward into the dim light. He was wearing that familiar leather jacket, the same one he’d shoved into Neil’s hands the night they’d taken down Valeria Boone. Neil could still imagine the warm weight of it around his shoulders. The look on his face was nakedly suspicious.

“If you won’t tell us everything, why should we let you out of here?”

Neil opened his mouth but no words came out. He wanted to scream. It wasn’t like the vaguely disorienting feeling of being around the Andrew from the other universe. Every one of Neil’s instincts was insisting that this was the Andrew he knew, the Andrew he - he didn’t know what. Cared for. Understood. Trusted with his life. But it wasn’t. He was wrong. He couldn't bear it. He closed his eyes just so he could speak.

“Because I am on your side. Even if you tell me I can never be in contact with anyone on this team ever again, I am not going to use anything I know to hurt you or anyone else.”

“I do not believe you. You are not an acceptable risk, Neil Josten.”

“Augh! I know!” Neil yelled in frustration, his eyes still squeezed shut. “I know. I know you can’t believe me. I know that from your perspective, I am a giant fucking hazard to the people you promised you would protect, Kevin and Aaron and the others. After what you went through, I know how much those promises-”

Neil was cut off by a hand around his throat, cutting off his breath.

“Kevin, wait outside,” he heard Andrew say. The hallway door opened and closed. The hand tightened around Neil’s throat. “Look at me,” Andrew snarled.

Neil opened his eyes helplessly. Andrew’s stare was black with fury. “Listen to me, Neil Josten. You don’t know fuck all about me, do you understand? I don’t care where you’re from, or what kind of past life you think you lived. I don’t know you, you don’t know me. Got it?”

His hand loosened just enough for Neil to speak, and Neil wished desperately it didn’t register in his brain as being so close to a caress, so close to being pressed to the side of a glass building with Manhattan traffic rushing by below them. How the hell had he ended up here? He let go of the bars and stepped back. Andrew let him. Neil laughed bitterly.

“I wish I could,” he said honestly. “Thank your alternate timeline self for telling me too many of his secrets.”

“I don’t tell anyone my secrets,” Andrew said, folding his arms, but some of the hostility had faded, and he was looking at Neil with a bit more curiosity. That was familiar. That, Neil could maybe work with.

“You do if they give you enough of their own in return. So tell me why you’re really here. I know it can’t have been just to babysit Kevin.”

If Andrew was surprised by being read, he didn’t show it. He rubbed one hand around his own neck, considering.

“Marshall Bowman,” he said eventually. Neil blinked. Whatever he’d been expecting, it wasn’t a routine case interrogation.
“Can’t we do this during normal business hours?”

“Humor me.”

Neil thought back to the case, which had happened around his second or third month working with the Foxes. Sometime between the Boones and the dream case in Seattle.

“Marshall Bowman. Former member of a defunct bioterrorist group. Was dosed with a designer drug that altered his DNA, and another drug to control the transformation process. He misdosed himself, causing him to transform into a chimeric beast onboard a crowded train, crashing it and killing over two dozen people. Line up so far?” Andrew nodded, watching Neil intently.

“Okay, so we found the needle marks between his toes, talked to his wife. Turned out he and some members of the old group had formed a kind of splinter cell based on radical transgenics, hybridization. Guided mutation of the human form. The next phase of evolution of mankind. The wife had no idea he’d actually started dosing himself. He had an associate though, him and his wife were also dosing, helping their transformation along by consuming massive amount of fat stolen from plastic surgery waste dumps.”

Andrew continued to watch him in silence. “So? Did I pass?” Neil prompted.

“What was the name of the associate?”

“Uh, let’s see...I’m not the one with the perfect memory but...Hicks? Daniel Hicks. That’s right.”

“Was this Hicks the leader of the group?”

Sometimes Wymack did this too, asked questions to intentionally try to mislead Neil, to poke holes in his stories. Sometimes the details were just mixed around. “No, he was just a rich asshole who wanted to be superman. The leader was a man named Conrad Jefferson. So?”

Andrew didn’t answer. He turned on his heel in silence and left, letting the door slam shut behind him. Despite his exhaustion and how late it was, Neil couldn’t get back to sleep, Andrew’s voice saying his name echoing through his head for hours.

For two days after, it was back to the old routine. Wymack’s questions, then being left alone for hours. He was given a fresh supply of notebooks and pens, but found he didn’t have much more to write. He doodled little pictures from old cases and bits of his old life in Boston - Kevin’s favorite tea mug, Andrew’s reading glasses, his favorite well-worn running shoes. The passing of the hours still itched, but he held on. He was good at surviving.

On the third day, Andrew walked back into his cell, dragging Wymack’s customary interrogation stool behind him, and perched himself at the front of Neil’s cell.

“Chief finally had enough of me?” Neil asked, wondering what the change was about.

“You were half right,” Andrew said. Neil frowned.

“Right about what?”

“Daniel Hicks.”

“Sure, didn’t you already-” Neil stopped, eyes widening as he realized what had happened, how he’d been played. “You didn’t know. It was your current case.”
“You probably saved his life, and others,” Andrew said. “We were able to get to him in time to counteract the drug. No one else was hurt.”

“There was another incident,” Neil said. “At a clinic. Fifteen more people were injured. Five more died.”

“Not this time,” Andrew said simply.

Neil perched on the edge of his cot, thinking. He hadn’t considered that cases he and Wymack disagreed on might have just happened in a different order in their timelines.

“You said I was half right. What’s different?”

“The name you gave us for the supplier. Conrad Jefferson. He died over a year ago.”

Neil took a moment to digest that. “Huh. Okay. Glad I could help, I guess. But like, you should know this isn’t gonna be an infinite resource. I was only with this division for like, seven months? Eight? And it seems like at least seventy five percent of our cases have already lined up. So my being able to help isn’t gonna be consistent, long term.”

The sat in silence for a while. Neil tried not to stare, but it was hard not to. Impossible maybe. Andrew seemed to be mulling something over.

“Do you have any questions?” Andrew asked. Neil was surprised, right up until he wasn’t. Of course Andrew would ask that. In any version of reality, Andrew Minyard lived by the law of equal give and receive. But he wasn’t aware of the actual set of the balance between them - that Neil knew so many of his secrets, while Andrew knew precious few of Neil’s.

“Who died when Riko and Kevin crossed over from Evermore in this timeline, if it wasn’t me?”

Andrew’s mouth twisted, but it wasn’t all distaste. There was curiosity there too. “You are an interesting man, Neil Josten. Let me rephrase. Do you have any questions not confidential in nature?”

Fine, Neil could do this. Every moment with Andrew was like a wave of vertigo and deja vu, but he could do this. He could work with this, with Andrew’s interest, even if it tore him apart. “Do you ever play Exy with Boyd and the others?”

For a second Neil couldn have sworn he’d caught Andrew off guard. “No. Why?”

“You’re good,” he couldn’t help saying. “You should play. And you should take Kevin with you. He won’t play, but he’ll get a kick out of reffing, and there’s a backliner named Thea who he’ll want to ask for coffee.”

Andrew stared at him in disbelief. “You want me to play Exy with my colleagues so I can set Kevin up on a date?”

“We all deserve a little happiness, don’t we?”

“You are an idiot.”

“I thought I was interesting.”

Andrew sneered, standing and grabbing up the stool. “I will be taking over your interviews from Wymack. I would try to stay on my good side if I were you.”
“Don’t worry, I already know you don’t have one,” Neil said with a forced, cheery smile. “See you tomorrow, Andrew.”

Neil wasn’t sure how long he’d be able to stand it, exchanging questions with Andrew like they’d just met. But maybe it was necessary. Maybe he just had to begin again. He didn’t particularly like doing it from a jail cell, but still. As much as it hurt, talking to Andrew was better than not talking to him.

Christmas and New Years both passed as Neil sat in his cell day after day, exchanging secrets in careful, measured doses. Andrew told him about case details that differed from what Neil remembered. Neil told him about growing up the son of the Butcher of Baltimore, his childhood in Evermore.

“So that’s what you meant,” Andrew murmured, when Neil told him about how his father had died in his timeline, about that bloody basement he’d crawled from like emerging from the grave.


“Be a better man than your father,” Andrew said.

Neil froze, his pulse sluicing in slow motion through his veins. “I never said that to you.” He was sure of it. He’d carefully avoided any details that alluded to the nature of his and Andrew’s relationship, not wanting to spook him.


“When did I tell you that?” Neil asked.

“In a hotel room in Seattle,” Andrew said, rote, like he didn’t believe the words coming out of his own mouth. “Josten, what the hell is going on here?”

Neil shook his head, heart racing. “I have no idea.”

Chapter End Notes

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That brings us to the end of Part 10.

**Up Next: Part 11: Back to Where You've Never Been**

Kevin leaned toward him and said “it happened again, didn’t it?”

“Shut up,” Andrew advised, already heading toward the stairs, determinedly not looking at the door to the empty guest room.
“You can’t just-” Kevin called after him, but Andrew slammed his bedroom door. He didn’t need to hear it.

The memory was so real.
Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

Part 11: Back to Where You've Never Been

Chapter 1: Shake Me Down

Grey skies threatened snow as Andrew pulled into the drive outside the house in Cambridge. Nicky’s car was sitting beside his own, which either meant they’d been called in on a case or Andrew was being roped into yet another “family outing,” the likes of which had become entirely too frequent since Aaron had moved back to Boston. Nicky hadn’t relented no matter how many times Andrew pointed out that they worked together, so they really didn't need to keep hanging out afterwards. Andrew crunched through the messy layers of snow, ice, and slush on the drive and up the steps, pausing to spare a contemptuous glance for the decorative wreath still hanging on the front door.

Renee may have bought the gaudy, lime green tinsel wreath with oversized cartoon letters reading “Welcome to Mt. Krumpet,” but it was Nicky who had insisted on hanging it somewhere every year since. Andrew snatched it off of its hook as he went inside. He slung his gym bag onto the floor beside the door and made his way into the kitchen for coffee. There he found Nicky, sipping at his own mug while Kevin watched lectures on his laptop.

“What is the occasion?” Andrew asked.

“I came by to deliver mine and Erik’s Christmas cards in person,” Nicky said with a bright smile. He spotted the wreath in Andrew’s hands and his eyes widened dramatically. “Are you packing away your holiday spirit already?”

“It is literally the second week of January, the holidays are over.” Andrew rolled his eyes, going to pour himself a cup. “Next year I’m putting up my wreath,” he grumbled.

He turned back around with his coffee to find Nicky looking confused. “You have another wreath? You literally hate Christmas decorations on principle.”

“It’s not that I- whatever. Yeah, the...beach bum Santa one, or whatever. You know, from the weird all year Christmas shop in the cape?” Andrew mumbled, vaguely embarrassed.

Now Kevin was staring too. “When did you go to the Cape?” he asked. Andrew frowned.

“July, weren’t you-” he stopped himself, memories tripping over each other in his head. “Never mind, maybe that was another year.”

“Must’ve been,” said Nicky, getting up to rinse his mug in the sink. “Well, I’m heading into the
office. See you two fools in a bit - unless you want a ride, Kev?"

“I’ll ride with Andrew,” Kevin said. Andrew didn’t like the way Kevin’s focus was on him. It meant he was thinking about something.

Andrew was proved right the moment the door closed behind Nicky, when Kevin leaned toward him and said “it happened again, didn’t it?”

“Shut up,” Andrew advised, already heading toward the stairs, determinedly not looking at the door to the empty guest room.

“You can’t just-” Kevin called after him, but Andrew slammed his door. He didn’t need to hear it.

The memory was so real, just like they always were. He could smell the cloying pine and cinnamon scent of the year-round Christmas shop, feel the heat of the July sun baking his neck as they looked in the display window. He could remember the laughing voice by his side saying *we have to have that*; turning to the side and watching the sun catch on red-brown curls.

Later that morning, Andrew stood on the roof of Harvard Medical, grinding out the remains of a cigarette as he watched a familiar car pull into the lot below. He pulled the pack out of his pocket but didn’t open it, content to wait and watch as two people emerged from the vehicle - one tall and broad, one small but by no means slight. Wymack clapped Neil Josten on the shoulder as they made their way inside, and Andrew just caught the flash of white as Neil’s eyes flickered upward just before he passed out of view. Andrew waited, turning the pack over and over in his hands, only opening it to pull out a fresh smoke when he heard the telltale sign of the rooftop access door creak open behind him, light footsteps on tar paper coming toward him.

He held out a cigarette for Neil Josten without bothering to ask, or even look at him. Neil took it deftly, pulling out his own lighter to light it and then just holding it beside his face in that odd way of his. Andrew tried not to notice the way the light caught on his thin, scarred hands.

“Cape Cod,” Andrew said, once he’d lit his own cigarette and steadied himself. He didn’t look at Neil, but he saw out of the corner of his eye Neil’s head cocked to the side in thought.

They’d been doing this since before Neil had been released, even. Ever since they’d realized Andrew was somehow remembering things from Neil’s timeline. Andrew would tell Neil what he’d remembered, and Neil would tell him whether the memory matched up with his own experiences. If Neil was being honest - and Andrew, for some reason, knew that he was - they had matched up every time.

Kevin had been furious when he’d found out. He was convinced that Neil’s presence was somehow poisoning Andrew’s mind - that Neil was projecting his own memories into Andrew’s head somehow, subconsciously trying to turn him into the person from Neil’s timeline, the Andrew Neil remembered. Andrew understood his concerns, but frankly didn’t think his memories were any more of Kevin’s fucking business than they ever had been. It was his brain, and he would decide how to deal with the weird shit it did, just like he always had. If for now, he was choosing to deal with it by spending a lot of smoke breaks on a roof with Neil Josten, well. That was his choice to make.

“We went in July,” Neil confirmed. “What do you remember?”


Neil laughed, more softly than in Andrew’s memory. He always seemed like he was being careful when they talked about Andrew’s strange flashes.
“The beach bum Santa, yeah,” he said. “We bought it because it was on sale for five bucks for Christmas in July.”

*We,* he said. *We bought it.* Neil didn’t seem like he thought he’d said anything strange, but it wasn’t the first time he’d made a slip like that. Andrew hadn’t become an FBI agent for his inability to pick up on subtext.

“Neil.” Andrew said his name firmly, prompting Neil to turn toward him, smoke still trailing up from the cigarette held loosely beside his cheek. He forced himself not to hesitate. “What was I to you, in your timeline?”

Andrew had only known Neil Josten for about a month, though he’d known his face for slightly longer. Still, in that time, he’d learned a remarkable amount about him. That tended to happen, when you locked people in windowless cells and interrogated them about their history for hours a day, he supposed. At any rate, Neil’s attempt at impassivity may have fooled someone else, but not Andrew.

Eventually Neil answered, even more carefully than before. “I am— I’m what you remember me being. A friend. You were the first person on this team to trust me both as a person and a scientist. That trust is what gave me a place here. A home.”

Neil sighed, dropping his cigarette and rubbing hand across his face. “Wymack’s clearing me for consulting work,” he said, and Andrew didn’t call him on changing the subject. “He wants my help tracking down David Robert Jones, in particular. Conditions are that I let Kevin study what happened to me.”

Andrew knew that. Wymack had spoken to him and Kevin about it at length, and they’d agreed that wherever Neil Josten had come from, he wasn’t conning them, at least not intentionally. Jones was the biggest loose end they had right now - the solution to the unanswered questions about the Marshall Bowman case and so much more. From what Neil had told them, he was one of Riko Moriyama’s closest lieutenants. When they’d looked back into their case files, they’d found traces of his presence scattered through them. He was a part of the Pattern and always had been. But they didn’t know where he was hiding, or what he was going to do next. Neil was going to help them figure it out.

It had been about a week since they’d unlocked Neil’s cell door and let him walk mostly free. He’d been staying on Wymack’s couch under the Chief’s watchful eye for that time, until they could figure out exactly what to do with him. Whatever had happened to him, in the here and now he was more of an asset than a threat, and it made sense that Wymack would want to mine an asset like that for all it was worth. It had taken a bit more work talking Nicky and particularly Aaron around, but they’d done that too. All that was really left was for Neil to agree.

“Wouldn’t be the first time you made a deal for your identity,” Andrew said.

“So you remember that, too?” Neil was looking at him strangely, almost with trepidation.

“I remember the hearing,” Andrew told him. Which was true. He remembered the windowless private office where a bruised and battered Neil, half his scars still fresh and oozing, had spilled his guts to a team of stone-faced agents, desperately trying to make a good enough bargain to keep his name, keep his place on the team.

“Anything else?” Neil asked lightly, but Andrew could tell he was fishing, if casually.

The thing was, there were other things Andrew remembered in half-formed flashes: blood and dirt swirling down a bathroom sink; restless nights spent on an air mattress; running over cracked
pavement with guns firing at his back. He just wasn’t sure how those things were connected yet. He wasn’t sure he was ready for the answers.

“Something about a bathroom, and a lot of blood. You got into a lot of trouble, didn’t you?” Neil’s eyes went unexpectedly wide. “Does that mean something?” Andrew demanded.

“I- well,” Neil stumbled over his words. “It’s just-”

Before he could get to the end of his sentence, there was a low rumble that bounced the bits of loose tarmac off the roof. Andrew was from California - he knew what was coming.

“Earthquake. Down!” He yanked on Neil’s sleeve, crashing both of them to the roof as a long, low roll shook the earth of Boston.

Andrew started counting. Five seconds. Ten seconds. Fifteen. Neil tried to stand up, but Andrew yanked him hard back onto the rooftop by the hem of his jacket.

“We are on a roof! We need to get down!” Neil shouted, already starting to get up again.

The world was still shaking. Andrew didn’t let go. “Do you want to be inside the stairwell if and when the building goes?” That at least made Neil stop fighting to get up, but he looked like he was holding himself still by force. Andrew kept counting the seconds.

It was over a minute before the tremors stopped, leaving only the blaring of horns and car alarms and the babble of panicked voiced from below; only Andrew’s heart galloping in his own chest, shaking his whole body.

Five seconds of stillness. Andrew stood, Neil shooting to his own feet beside him, and headed to the door. “Come on, if we were close to the epicenter there could be an aftershock any minute.”

In the event of a normal earthquake, it could be anywhere from hours to weeks before aftershocks hit. This was not a normal earthquake. There were no active fault lines under Boston. This did not happen here.

“Not again. Why is it always earthquakes?” Neil whined as they hurried down the narrow staircase. Whatever the fuck that meant. They only slowed when they’d made it out the front door of the building. Wymack, Nicky, Aaron, and Kevin were gathered a few feet apart from the crowds of panicking students and faculty that had flooded the parking lot and lawns.

They reached the group. There was relief on their faces that everyone was accounted for, but worry, too. Everyone suspected that whatever had just happened, it hadn’t been natural or normal. That suspicion was bolstered when Wymack’s phone rang, someone higher up the ladder than him telling them that there had been similar, nearly simultaneous events across the country and globe. Andrew recognized many of the locations as known soft spots.

Wymack pocketed his phone. “Well, looks like we’ve got a case. And it’s all hands on deck for this one.” He looked more grim than Andrew had seen him since that first night at Logan.

“What is it Chief?”

“The quakes weren’t just on this side. They also occurred in the other universe. Same places, same time, exactly.” Well fuck. A case, indeed.

“What are your thoughts, Aaron?” Wymack asked. As the agent on their team who spent the most time working on the other side, Wymack tended to defer to him with questions like this.
“That can’t be a coincidence,” Aaron said seriously. “Events tend to line up from here to there, sure, but not everything is a perfect match. An event of this magnitude, there would be variation in time and place. An exact match... this was a targeted attack. By someone with agents in both universes.”

“That was my train of thought as well,” Wymack said. He jerked his head toward the parking lot. “Well gremlins, let’s go do our fucking jobs.”

Despite Kevin’s protests, they decided to temporarily move their base of operations to the actual offices of the FBI, which weren’t nearly as “homey,” as Nicky put it, but were newer and less likely to leave them trapped in a centuries-old basement in the event of more quakes. Wymack managed to secure them a lab with a conference room and a small attached office, so they would have an undisturbed place to work until they figured out what the hell was going on and could return to the basement lab safely.

Rather than stay and listen to Kevin complain about the numerous inadequacies he was sure to find in their new workspace, Andrew got back in his car and drove home. The house hadn’t exactly been held up on toothpicks, but it was old, cheap, not particularly well cared for, and hadn’t been built to withstand when had apparently been a magnitude 3 earthquake. He wanted to make sure it was still standing.

Just the drive between the office and the house told him he was right to worry. The air was full of dust, and Andrew passed more than one cheap modern modular collapsed in on itself from the shock of the tremors. The first aftershocks had hit about an hour after the initial quake. Andrew predicted a couple more waves in the next couple of days, but it looked like the worst of the damage was probably over.

The house was still standing. Andrew didn’t probe too deeply at the relief he felt upon laying eyes on it, whole and unharmed. Probably a few smashed dishes and mirrors inside, but nothing that couldn’t be easily replaced. He made his way up the front steps, intending to do a walk through just to make sure the stairs hadn’t collapsed or something, but he stopped dead on the porch.

The front door was ajar. Fucking petty criminals taking advantage of the chaos to loot homes. Just what he needed to deal with. Andrew drew his gun but kept it lowered, carefully edging around to the side of the door and trying to peer through the narrow crack. He couldn’t see movement, and he couldn’t hear anything either.

“I’m a federal agent, show yourselves,” he called. When he didn’t get an answer, he pushed quickly through the door. The next thing he registered was immense pain as something impacted the back of his skull. The next thing after that, was waking up tied to a chair.

His wrists were handcuffed low behind his back, and when he tested them he felt the pull that meant they’d been secured to a metal loop at the back of the seat. There was a rope around his chest and shoulders, and another around his ankles. His head was pounding, the pain emanating from the back of his skull where he’d been bludgeoned into unconsciousness, and there was an uncomfortable sensation against his right elbow. When Andrew twisted far enough around to look, he registered the wad of gauze taped to his arm with a wave of nausea. He’d been injected with something.

Andrew squinted through the pain and took in his surroundings as best he could from his compromised position. He was in a brightly lit white room with plain cinder block walls, empty but for a single table with an additional chair on the other side of it. A large pane of glass dominated the opposite wall, but whatever was beyond it was darkened. One way glass, he realized. He was in an interrogation room. Or some kind of observation room, at least. There were several things that could mean, and Andrew didn’t like any of them.
The most dangerous thing in the room was that piece of darkened glass. He had no idea who was behind it, or if he was being watched. With that in mind, he worked at his bindings as carefully and unobtrusively as he could. He didn’t get much of anywhere. Whoever had taken him must have done a pat down, because they’d stripped off his jacket and armbands, leaving him weaponless and, frankly, cold. They hadn’t checked his boots at least, so the knife tucked into the left one was still there, but he would never be able to get to it like this.

He tried using his mind to manipulate the ropes, but his head was pounding too much for him to concentrate. He thought he got his legs a bit looser, but that was as far as he got before he nearly blacked out, gasping and nauseous from the pain.

The door clicked open. Well-made leather shoes clicked softly on the cement floor. Andrew raised his head to see a middle aged man lowering himself into the seat on the opposite side of the table. He had sallow skin and pale, beady eyes. He smiled at Andrew, all thin teeth.

“Hello, Agent Minyard,” the man said. His voice was soft, with a lilting British accent. “I’ve waited a long time to meet you.”

Andrew remembered. He remembered a dark forest at the shores of a lake. Shooting through the glare of searchlights. The man who sat before him, leering at the gate of a portal to another universe, Andrew’s bullets passing right through him.

“Dr. Jones. We have already met, actually.”

Jones’ smile wavered for only a moment. “I’m afraid you have me at a bit of a disadvantage.”

Just being in the room with Jones seemed to be unlocking more and more of whatever these memories were. Andrew curled his lip, straining forward against the rope around his chest. “I watched you die. I am looking forward to doing it again.”

Jones leaned back in his chair, folding his hands lightly on the table. “Perhaps the dosing has resulted in some confusion, hm.”

The bandage on his arm. “Dosing with what?”

Jones waved an idle hand. “Nothing that’s never been in you before. Just not for a long time.”

Fuck. There was only one thing that could mean. “Cortexiphan.”

Jones blinked as though in surprise. “Indeed.”

Andrew’s mind raced, memories and flashbacks tripping over each other in their rush to the forefront of his mind while he scrambled for answers. Jones thought Andrew hadn’t been dosed with Cortexiphan since he was a child - of course he didn’t. After the disaster that had been the Grayson Hotel, Andrew had been determined to do anything possible to increase his ability to fight against Riko Moriyama’s schemes. If that meant breaking into an abandoned daycare facility in Los Angeles and stealing vials of a secret psycho-pharmaceutical, injecting himself with it for weeks under Kevin’s fretful watch, enduring weeks and months of migraines, strange outbursts, and exhaustion, he’d been willing to take that risk. Riko had wanted a soldier, and he’d gotten one - just not one for his side.

If Jones had dosed Andrew with Cortexiphan, it meant Riko hadn’t given up. Jones was working for him, and they were trying to get at Andrew again.

“Now, Agent. I think we are going to get along quite well. I just have a few simple requests of you.”
Jones reached into his bag and pulled out a small wooden box. He flipped it open. Inside were six neat rows of tiny LED lights. Andrew didn’t need to ask what that was all about. He didn’t even need a flashback - he remembered perfectly well from his own life, hearing Tetsuji’s voice on an old tape from his Cortexiphan records. He could still hear the voice telling Andrew *just turn them on. I know you can, AJ. Just make them turn on and you can go. This can all stop and you can go home, just as soon as you make the lights turn on.*

“I am pretty done with being your lab rat, actually.”

Jones tapped a finger beside the box. “It is in all of our best interest to work with me here, Agent Minyard.”

“I thought your boss would have given up after how well last time went. And anyway, why should I give a shit about what is in your best interest?”

Jones considered him for a long moment with an intensity that made Andrew feel like he needed to shower to get it off. Then he shrugged. “The Grayson was a loss, indeed. We were gravely disappointed. But perhaps you are right. Perhaps the problem wasn’t you, Agent Minyard, perhaps it was us.”

Another memory that wasn’t his own rose up in Andrew’s mind. In it, the Grayson Hotel disappeared from the streets of Manhattan. But in this version, everyone who had been inside was crowded out on the street, terrified but safe. In this version, Andrew watched the hotel glimmer, and was able to get there in time.

But in Andrew’s reality, it hadn’t gone that way. He’d been too late. “Are you trying to tell me you’ve realized killing four buildings of innocent civilians was a little steep for a few mind games?”

Jones laughed as though Andrew had told a joke. “Oh no, Agent Minyard. I simply mean we were wrong to try and provoke you by threatening the lives of strangers.” He smiled a polite, poisonous smile.

“To answer your question, you should care about my best interests because they are the only interests that matter. The world is ending, Agent. Haven’t you noticed? Now, luckily for you, I have a way to survive. A safehouse, if you will, to hunker down in. A way to travel to what’s next.”

Andrew stared. “The earthquakes. You and Riko are causing them.”

“I knew you would be a quick study, Agent. You are going to help us do great things indeed. All you have to do is turn on a light.” He pushed the box toward Andrew.

Andrew thought fast. He could fight, he could argue, he could drag this out all day. None of that was going to convince Jones to let him go. He was too caught up in his own ego, convinced that all Andrew needed was to be talked around. But if Andrew could convince him he was useless...he might have a shot.

“I can’t,” he snapped. “Like I said, you tried this once. But I haven’t had magic fucking powers since I was eight years old.”

“That was also the last time you were dosed,” Jones said, incorrectly. “You didn’t have the tools you needed last time. Now everything is in place.”

“You think one lousy shot of Cortexiphan is gonna change that?” Andrew scoffed. “That’s looking at an auto parts store and calling it a car. Tetsuji gave the Cortexiphan to children because their minds were still being formed. Surely you’ve read my file. My brain is old, stubborn, and broken as shit.
This isn’t going to happen, Jones.”

Jones was getting angry, and he wasn’t good at hiding it. His fists clenched, his face growing red, his lips pulling back in a snarl. Then he paused. Collected himself. Smiled again, just as horribly as before.

“Very well. I was hoping you wouldn’t force my hand quite so soon but...I was prepared for your stubbornness. Given your history, I had a suspicion that waking up your powers would take something a little more...personal”

With that, he raised one hand and snapped his fingers. Across the room, a light flicked on behind the glass, letting Andrew see into the room beyond. It was plain, like the room he was in. White painted cinder block walls, cement floor, fluorescent lighting. There was a man standing off to one side, smiling the vague empty smile of those who can commit violence without question or feeling. He was not alone in the room.

There was what looked like a metal mattress frame propped up in the center of the room, attached to an array of boxes and electrical dials is what could only be an impromptu torture rack. And that wasn’t the worst part.

In a chair just beside it, thrashing against her restraints, was Renee Walker.

Chapter End Notes

Hittin' the ground running with this one I guess. :) 

Up Next:

“Help.” he whispered hoarsely, to whatever forces might be listening. The figure came closer, dimly side-lit, coming closer and closer, reaching out toward his trapped legs. “Help. Help!”
Part 11, Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Neil POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 11, Chapter 2: New Old Places

Neil woke up screaming, swimming in darkness that seemed to be working its way down his throat, into his nostrils, choking him and swallowing him whole. His legs were bound to keep him from running, and he couldn’t seem to get a grip on anything around him. There was only the black of the void, and the sound of something terrible thundering toward him through the darkness-

“Josten. Josten!” A voice boomed, making Neil flinch hard to the side, coming up against something cool and hard, nearly knocking his head in his haste. A flood of light nearly blinded him as he scrambled back over the uneven ground away from the hulking figure that had suddenly come into view.

“Help.” he whispered hoarsely, to whatever forces might be listening. The figure came closer, dimly side-lit, coming closer and closer, reaching out toward his trapped legs. “Help. Help!”

The figure stopped moving. Then one arm reached out to the side, slowly. Another light flickered on, and Neil squinted as he was finally able to take in his surroundings. He was on a couch. His back was up against a plain, painted wall. His legs hadn’t been able to move because they’d gotten tangled in the blanket he’d been sleeping under. He was in the Wymacks’ living room, and David Wymack was the figure who had been silhouetted by the kitchen light, visible now that the light in the living room had been flicked on as well.

Neil gripped his fingers into the pillows and forced himself to breath. He tried to kick the blanket away from his legs, but only succeeded in making more of a mess of it.

“Josten, hey, slow down kid,” Wymack said. “Just hold still a second okay?” He reached out, getting far too close for a brief second, and then with a sharp tug the blanket was gone, leaving Neil free on the sweat-soaked couch. They eyed each other in the light of the lamp.

“Thanks,” Neil muttered eventually, pushing himself against the cushions so he was sitting up properly.

Wymack sighed, tossing the bundled blanket in his hands onto the arm of the couch and backing up to lean against the wall near the doorway. “Don’t mention it, kid. My wife is an ER nurse. Kevin stayed here for a while, when we first got him out of that psychiatric hospital. You know what I do for a living. Trust me when I say, you are not the first person to have nightmares in this house.”

Neil fussed with the blanket for a moment, not in any particular hurry to lie back down, but also not keen on having a heart to heart with his former boss at ass o’clock at night. At least Wymack had given him a conversation point to latch onto other than his own nightmares.
“I’ve actually been meaning to ask. In my timeline, I was the one who got Kevin out of the hospital to help save Aaron. We knew each other as kids, and I’d had myself declared his medical proxy to try and keep Riko from messing with him. If I wasn’t here, how did you guys get him out?”

Wymack looked suddenly sheepish, glancing away and rubbing a hand at the back of his neck. “Ah. Minyard did some digging and...did you know I knew Kaleigh Day, back in college?”

Even for Neil’s terror-addled brain, it didn’t take long to catch on. “You’re kidding me.”

“Afraid not. Turns out Minyard’s mad scientist recruit was my kid.”

“Shouldn’t he still be staying with you?”

Wymack shrugged. “Legally he’s still under my care, since we weren’t able to get the charges cleared. But I didn’t want to smother a thirty year old, and Minyard’s a mother pitbull when he gets the idea to be. I think the arrangement has been good for both of them.”

“Right.” Neil was still wrapping his brain around the idea of Kevin being Wymack’s son. He was curious if Kevin had already known, but it didn’t seem like the moment to ask.

Wymack lingered for a moment longer. “Well as long as I’m up, I’m gonna go put a pot of coffee on. You want some?”

Neil glanced at the clock. “It’s barely after four.” Neil had been derided for being an early riser, particularly by Andrew, but this seemed unnatural even to him.

Wymack raised an eyebrow. “Working hours are wasting, Josten. Come on, you told me you were a Fox.”

With that he turned away, lumbering toward the kitchen, clearly expecting that Neil would follow along soon enough. Behind his retreating back, Neil couldn't help but smile.

Later that morning, he was reminded what working in Foxes Division really meant, as he pressed himself against the roof of the lab building, Andrew’s hand curled in the back of his jacket as Boston shook apart around them. When the quake finally ended, everyone but Andrew trooped to an empty lab in the FBI offices proper. There, they went over what they knew, which was precious little: over two dozen earthquakes had occurred in this universe and the next, all at the same time and same places. They had occurred at soft spots, rather than along active faults, suggesting that both their cause and purpose were artificial in origin.

“Why is it always earthquakes?” Neil complained as they tacked up maps of seismic data. Aaron, who was currently underneath a desk trying to hook up one of the computers, poked his head out.

“What are you talking about? There literally hasn’t been an earthquake of this magnitude in Boston, ever.”

Now it was Neil’s turn to stop what he was doing in confusion. “What are you talking about? What about August, the quakes from the Machine? It was literally all earthquakes and thunderstorms when I left.”

“Well thanks for bringing them back. So glad to have you on the team,” Aaron said sourly, before ducking away again. Out of everyone, Aaron was least amenable to Neil’s intrusion into this Foxes team. Neil wasn’t really surprised by that. At least in this timeline, neither of them had had the chance to punch the other yet. Small blessings.
“We didn’t get any earthquakes here,” Nicky offered. “One day we were digging up pieces of the Machine, and then when we put it together the bridge just opened. We figured that was just how it worked.”

That explained how Riko Moriyama was still alive even though Neil had watched Andrew shoot him. Those few moments in the bridge together had been erased along with Neil’s existence. Too bad.

They spent a good part of the morning just getting the new lab up to speed. Neil and Nicky helped Kevin with equipment calibration while Aaron and Wymack talked with the team from the other side. They hadn’t yet figured out a way to make wifi work across universes, but the other team was able to Skype in from a holding room on their side of the bridge. They gathered that the other side didn’t have much more information than they did, at least not yet.

Kevin spent the first hours of set-up complaining about the equipment, as Neil had known he would. He found himself reaching for a phone he didn’t have and realized he’d wanted to text Andrew about it. He shook the thought off. He didn’t even have a phone anymore. It was strange to realize he wanted one. It seemed like yesterday he’d been in the passenger seat of the Maserati on the road back from Reiden Lake, holding a Walmart flip phone between numb fingers like it would explode if he moved too quickly.

Nicky sidled up to Neil while he was setting up a bank of monitors. “I know what you are doing,” he said.

“Back up,” Neil hissed, discomfort prickling up the back of his neck from the way Nicky was crouched over him. When Nicky did, he stood to face him. “What do you mean?”

“Andrew. I know he’s been getting memories of your timeline. He won’t talk to me or Kevin about it, but he keeps slipping up, talking about things that never happened. This morning he remembered a whole vacation to Cape Cod he never went on.”

Neil wasn’t in the habit of blabbing about things he and Andrew had discussed in confidence, but he knew he couldn’t pretend to be completely in the dark. “I know, he’s asked me about it a couple of times,” he admitted. “But what do you mean, you know what I’m doing?”

Nicky folded his arms and leaned in close. “Kevin has a theory that you’re somehow projecting your timeline into Andrew’s head. The only thing he can’t figure out is why. But I’m not an idiot, Neil. I’ve seen the way you look at him.”

Neil’s stomach sank. He supposed this had been bound to happen sooner or later, he’d just hoped it would happen at a more convenient time. Then again, this was Foxes Division. There were no convenient times. He carefully straightened the last monitor. “I need a cup of coffee for this.”

The nice thing about being in actual FBI offices as opposed to a basement in Harvard was that there was a cafeteria designed for working adults rather than harried undergrads. The food was nearly as bad, but the coffee was better, and there were tables set up in such a way that you could have a relatively private conversation without having to resort to locking yourself in a broom closet somewhere.

“The first thing you need to know it that I’m not going to tell you much,” Neil said as soon as he and Nicky sat down. “Even if the team I knew isn’t here, they still deserve my confidence. That said. What do you want to know?”

Nicky took a deliberately slow sip of his coffee, holding it up to his face as he asked “Are you in
love with him?”

Neil wished he could have said he was surprised by the question. At least it was better than being accused of being a spy for the Moriyamas. He wrapped his hands around the burning heat of his flimsy paper cup. If he’d been asked that back in August, before he’d disappeared, he wasn’t sure he would have known how to answer. That he didn’t know what that meant, maybe. That he wasn’t sure it was something he was cut out for. But then he’d felt himself be pulled out of nothingness, guided by little more than Andrew’s face and his own indomitable will to survive and get back to him. If not love, what else could he possibly call it?

“Yes,” he whispered.

Nicky’s eyes were sharp on him as he took a deep breath and continued. “But. Look, I was. That is. I know that I’m in a different timeline. But. Yes, I...I loved him. Love him. And sometimes, everything about this timeline is so similar, it’s like the only difference is that I was never there, and it’s hard to remember. But I know the...the Andrew I knew, is somewhere else.”

“See, that’s my concern here, though,” Nicky said. “Kevin can’t figure out why Andrew would be getting your memories, but I think it’s pretty clear. You want him to be your Andrew. I mean, come on man, tell me I’m wrong.”

“Of course you’re wrong,” Neil stood, frustrated. “I don’t. Yeah, sure, I sometimes wish he was the person I knew. But it’s more like I wish the person I knew was here, not that I wish he was someone else, you know? I don’t want to change this Andrew. That’s—”


“Yeah.”

Nicky nodded, a touch dubiously. “I believe you. At least, I believe you aren’t doing it on purpose. But I’m keeping an eye on you. Of all people, Andrew deserves not to be manipulated when it comes to love.” He tossed his empty cup in the trash can and stood. “Come on, Wymack’s gonna want to call a team meeting pretty soon. We should get back.”

As if he hadn’t been the one to drag Neil into this conversation in the first place. Oh well. Neil got up and followed.

It turned out Wymack had called a team meeting while they were gone. It also turned out that Nicky and Neil weren’t the last ones to arrive. Andrew was also still gone, despite the fact that it had been over four hours since he’d parted ways with them to check in on the house after the earthquake. Traffic was bad, but there weren’t any bottlenecks bad enough to account for the amount of time he’d been gone. What was more, he hadn’t even checked in to say he’d be a while.

“He’s not picking up his phone,” Aaron said, flipping his own nervously between his hands.

“Maybe he just doesn’t want to talk to you,” Nicky said, but his voice betrayed his own nervousness. “Here, I’ll try.”

Andrew didn’t answer Nicky’s call either. The atmosphere in the borrowed lab was getting tenser by the second when Wymack’s phone rang in his hand.

“What?” Wymack said, and Neil caught the edge of panic in his voice.

“Hello? No Ma’am I haven’t- no. No we haven’t heard from her have you—” Wymack cleared his throat. “Have you heard from Agent Minyard at all in the last few hours? Right. Thank you, I’ll keep you updated. Of course.”
Wymack pocketed his phone grimly. “That was Allison Reynolds. Agent Walker has been missing for at least six hours, possibly as long as twelve. Something is wrong here. The earthquakes will have to wait folks, I’m officially putting finding Renee Walker and Andrew Minyard at the top of our priority list.”

He turned to Aaron. “You, take Josten and check out the house. Hemmick, get in touch with Boyd, he’ll help you with the missing persons effort. I’m gonna go knock around a few heads, see what shakes loose. Call me the moment you find anything.”

Aaron looked like he’d rather hang himself. Frankly Neil didn’t disagree. “Chief.” Aaron started.

“I don’t want to hear it, Minyard. We need all hands on deck for this one, I’d hope you agree. You’re gonna look for any signs that this is interference from Riko or someone on the other side.” Wymack turned to Neil. “Josten, look for anything that reminds you of this Jones character. He’s our only other loose end right now and I want to make sure he isn’t tied up in this. Are we clear, both of you?”

“Crystal, Chief,” Aaron said. Neil nodded.

“Great. Now all of you get out of my sight. I don’t want to see you not working this until we’ve got our people back.”

It was the one thing not even Neil and Aaron could disagree on.

The house didn’t exactly have “abduction took place here” written in glowing letters on the front door, but the signs were all there: a chipped ceramic bowl that had been knocked from the entryway table and rolled across the hall; drag marks across the front porch and steps, almost obscured by other foot traffic through the mix of winter slush. Aaron spotted a single drop of blood near the threshold that turned Neil’s stomach. Neil took a look at the lock, borrowing a spare key from Aaron to test the give. Sure enough, the whole thing felt off on the inside. He would have bet his place on the team it had been picked.

“They were waiting for him,” Neil said as he stood and handed the key back. “They broke into the house, probably during the earthquake or soon after, in the commotion.”

“So whoever took him also had something to do with the earthquakes, if they were able to time it,” Aaron said. That was what Neil had been thinking too, and he didn’t like it. “You see anything that looks like, what was his name, Jones?”

“Not specifically. But an ambush like this and the earthquakes means someone who’s organized, tactical, has access to both universes, and doesn’t care about collateral damage. And that has David Robert Jones written all over it.”

“It also sounds a lot like Riko Moriyama,” Aaron pointed out.

“In my timeline, they were working together. It wouldn’t surprise me if Riko was involved.” Neil rubbed at his arms. “He definitely wasn’t above abduction.” He went back to looking for any other clues Jones’ men may have left behind.

Something had caught his eye on the ceiling. Something about the smoke detector was off. Neil walked toward it, peering at the ceiling to try to figure out what was wrong.

“What the hell do you get out of all this anyway? Pretending to be a federal agent?” Aaron asked, while Neil tried to actually work. “You say you’ve been displaced from your timeline, whatever, that’s your deal. Why throw yourself in the middle of this mess for a bunch of people you effectively
“Goddamn him. We knew someone was behind these earthquakes. He never should have gone alone,” Neil heard him mutter fretfully to Nicky as he carefully hooked up the camera’s chip to the computer. “Then we could be focusing on the scientific problem at hand, rather than fishing in the dark, trying to pull a palimpsest out of that old chip.”

“I thought we were looking for evidence. What’s a palimpsest?” Nicky asked.

“We are,” Neil said, exasperated.

“A manuscript page from a scroll or book from which the text has been scraped off, which means it can be used again,” Kevin explained over him.

“Oh. Like taping over an old VHS.”

“A bit, yes. But the first layer of text never comes off entirely. There are indentations, imperfections. What was underneath bleeds through.”

“If you would stop philosophizing and start helping, we might actually be able to get this to work, you know,” Neil snapped.

In the end Neil was right. With a little help from Kevin and the computing power of the FBI, he was able to strip back the layers of recorded-over data. “It’s digital, but it’s still a recording, like film,” he explained as he showed the team. “Imprints of the old data get left behind. If we strip back enough of
the layers, we get back to the time Andrew was abducted. It’s not exactly HD but…” he pressed play.

The little camera that had been hidden inside the smoke detector had been pointed at the front door. Clearly whoever had taken Andrew had wanted to get a sense of the routines of the people who lived in the house. If Neil stripped back about six hours, he found it: the door knob wiggling as the lock was picked, then opening to let in a group of five men. David Robert Jones wasn’t among them, but Neil hadn’t really expected him to be. Riko had enough people on his payroll that he wouldn’t have risked a top lieutenant on a grab. But maybe, if they were very lucky, they could find something in the video that would tell him where they’d gone.

“There!” Nicky shouted suddenly. “Can you zoom in?”

“Not...much,” Neil admitted. The quality of the video had already been pretty compromised by how many times it had been recorded over, and it hadn’t been designed for definition to begin with. Still, he saw what Nicky was getting at. One of the men was wearing a jacket with a logo on the shoulder. He zoomed in, and even with the bad quality, it didn’t take a room full of geniuses to realize what it was.

MD. Massive Dynamic.

They got Allison Reynolds back on the line quickly after that. There were several Massive Dynamic employees of varying levels and departments who hadn’t shown up for work that day, but the man’s face had been obscured in the video. It was impossible to say which ones were legitimate excuses and which might have been brought in on a plot to kidnap and restrain multiple federal agents.

“I don’t understand why he would need Massive Dynamic employees at all,” Nicky said. “Why not just hire a group of thugs? Why leave a connection back to the company? Surely scientists aren’t the best kidnappers he could get.”

“Unless they needed to be able to operate some kind of proprietary equipment,” Aaron suggested. “Reynolds, has anyone checked out equipment in the last few days? Anything… I don’t know? Torture-y? Apocalypse-y? Anything?”

“Apocalypse-y” Allison repeated over the line, sounding unimpressed.

“Just check.”

There were a few moments of silence before Allison came back. Neil knew immediately it was bad news. “There isn’t anything unusual in the equipment logs, though that doesn't mean no one just took something without logging it. But there’s something else. Remember how the Cortexiphan vault can only be accessed via biometric scan from Riko’s palm? Well I checked the electronic logs for that vault, and it’s been opened twice in the last week.”

“I thought Riko was hiding out on the other side,” Nicky said. “Has been since before the bridge opened.”

“He has. That’s where it gets worse. So I realized that while I’d checked the logs for the door, I hadn’t checked the actual access codes. So I did that, and I went back into the history and. Well. Turns out that Riko changed the access codes in September. Weeks after the bridge opened. The biometric lock now contains two possible signatures.”

“Who’s the other?” Neil asked, even though he already had a bad feeling that he knew.

“David Robert Jones.”
So Jones and Riko were after Andrew for his Cortexiphan abilities. That was nothing new, at least to Neil. He told the team what he knew, what he remembered from the case at Reiden Lake when he’d first met Jones. The motive behind Renee’s abduction still wasn’t entirely clear, but it was too much of a coincidence not to be related. They knew who had Andrew. Now they just needed to find him.

That was where Allison came in useful again. According to some records she dug up, Massive Dynamic still owned the property rights to several scientific facilities around the northeast, including ones in Boston and Providence. Soon enough Wymack was dividing them into teams and sending them back out. Neil was paired with Aaron again and sent to the facility in Providence. Wymack pulled him aside as they headed out the door.

“I’m trusting that you can hold your own out there, kid. I know you want to help, and I’ll take every hand I can get right now, but I can’t give you a gun. And if this goes tits up, it’s gonna be hard for me to get you out.”

“I understand,” Neil said. “Don’t worry, I’m not completely unarmed.”

“I do not want to know about it.”

The facility in Providence looked more like an abandoned dentist office than the nefarious lair of a bunch of scientists hell bent on world destruction, but appearances could be deceiving. There were a few cars parked out back when Aaron circled the block, and Neil spotted a light on inside through the gap of a closed blind. “I think this is the place,” he said.

They parked a few blocks away and made their way carefully toward the building, approaching from the side in order to avoid notice as much as possible. Neil would have preferred the cover of darkness, but they didn’t have the luxury of waiting. Somehow they made it to the front door without being seen. The door was locked, but that only stopped them for a few moments, Niel picking the lock while Aaron kept anxious lookout.

Then they were in. The hallway in front of them was long and empty. It had once been white, but time and circumstance had left it grey and dirty. It seemed the place had been under ronnovation when it had been abandoned, leaving holes in the walls with wires still poking out, and piles of construction rubble on the floor. It was dark in the entryway, but there were lights on further down the hall. Neil crept forward behind Aaron, who was advancing with his gun out and low at his side. At the first split in the hall they parted ways, looking to cover more ground as quickly as possible. They were so close Neil could taste it. All they had to do was find out which room Andrew was being kept in.

A muffled shout and the sounds of a scuffle from the direction Aaron had gone made Neil whip around in alarm. “Aaron!” he hissed.

“Well, well, well.” Before Neil could react, something slammed into his back, knocking him forward and pinning him to the ground. A knee dug into his spine, a heavy booted foot coming around to dig into his neck, preventing him from turning as someone locked a set of heavy cuffs around his wrists. “What do we have here?”

Chapter End Notes

Me, trying to squeeze a season's worth of plot into eighteen chapters: can someone uh, give these guys a break? (...nah. The answer is nah. Well, maybe in a few chapters.)
Up Next:

Andrew stayed perfectly still. He forced his gaze back to Jones. “Stop.”

“That’s entirely up to you, Agent. Simply turn on the lights.”
Part 11, Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 11, Chapter 3: Nightmare on Memory Lane

Renee was struggling against the ropes tying her hands behind her back, but it was a show of will more than anything - it was clear she wasn’t going anywhere. Andrew fought against the urge to lash out, smothering it with the well-practiced apathy he would never quite forget. He met Jones cruel stare coldly.

“Whatever you intend to inspire with her presence, you will fail. She has nothing to do with this. All you have done is added to your own prison sentence.”

“We shall see, I suppose,” Jones said lightly. He leaned into the microphone on the table before him. “Guard, I’m going to give our guests some time to mull over their new situation. You can bring Miss Walker in here for the time being.”

With that, Jones got up and left. A moment later the goon guarding Renee was dragging her chair through the door into the room Andrew was in, closing them in together, and alone. The light in the next room went dark, the viewing window an inscrutable wall of glass once more.

“Andrew.” Renee was the first to break the silence.

She looked ragged, as would be expected of someone who had clearly been abducted along her morning commute. Her hair was in disarray, the deep red tips of it sticking to her cheeks like blood; there was actual blood oozing from a crack in her bottom lip. She wasn’t tied quite as securely as Andrew, just her hands around the back of her chair, but tightly enough that Andrew could see she wasn’t going to be able to get herself out.

For a fraction of a second, all he wanted to do was scream. The recent dose of cortexiphan was wreaking havoc on his emotions, like it had left every nerve ending raw. The apathetic wall he’d put up in front of Jones was trembling with every uneven breath that sounded in their silent cell. But he had to remain in control. If he let anyone know he had access to his abilities, the charade was up.

“Walker.”

That was all he could manage. He didn’t want to look her in the eye. It was because of him that she was here. They wanted to use her as leverage against him, that was more than clear.

“Do you know where we are?” Renee asked.

“Not really. They knocked me out. I don’t think they took me far though.” Andrew had enough familiarity with how it felt to come down from a cortexiphan dose and enough of an understanding
of his own levels of exhaustion to guess he hadn’t been taken more than a few hours ago.

“It’s Riko, isn’t it?” Renee said worriedly. “They haven’t told me much.”

“It’s Riko. He’s working with David Robert Jones. That’s who is holding us here.” Andrew shifted against his bindings, trying to loosen them without it being noticeable to his captors. There weren’t any cameras in the room that Andrew could see, but that meant little when it came to the likes of their current captors.

Andrew thought about what to say next, how to try to explain what was going on to Renee without giving too much away. They had to assume they were being both watched and listened to. “They brought me here because they want to activate my Cortexiphan abilities,” he said carefully.

Luckily, Renee caught on immediately. “But you don’t- you haven’t been able to do any of that since you were dosed, when you were a kid.”

“Hadn’t been dosed up until about an hour again,” Andrew jerked a little to gesture to his bandaged elbow. Then he shook his head. They couldn’t keep talking about it.

Renee inclined her shin in a tiny nod. “How is the team?” She asked instead. “What happened during the earthquake?”

That, Andrew felt he could safely fill her in on. He knew they were just killing time, that Jones was toying with them, but they were also using it to keep each other sane. To hold each other steady, like they had done so many times before.

“Most of the team was in the basement when the earthquake hit. Neil and I were on the roof. Everyone got out safely.” He couldn’t tell her about the alternate lab in case the rest of the team was still being targeted, but he could say that much. “They’ll be working the case.”

“And how is Neil?” She asked. Despite their dire situation, she said it with a hint of a knowing smile- Andrew had made the mistake of telling her about his smoke break chats with their most mysterious team member.

“Infuriating. I keep getting these flashbacks, memories from his timeline, but they feel like they are my memories. And he is in nearly all of them.”

“That makes sense, if Kevin is correct and Neil is somehow projecting his memories into you.”

That wasn’t the issue. It hardly mattered where the memories came from. What mattered was that they were in his head, and they felt so real. “The memories feel like mine,” he said emphatically. “And you know, theory of nurture and all that; we are built by our experiences. And now my brain thinks it’s had all these experiences and Neil is always there and-”

Andrew forced himself to stop and breath. Fucking Cortexiphan, he hadn’t rambled like that since he was nineteen.

Renee was watching him keenly. “In your memories,” she asked carefully, “what is Neil’s relationship to you?”

As usual, Walker had got it in one. Because that was the whole question, wasn’t it? The only thing Andrew sensed Neil wasn’t being quite honest about.

“According to Neil, we were friends. We trusted each other. But I think-” There were gaps. Important ones. A lot was missing from Andrew’s piecemeal glimpses into Neil’s timeline, but he
remembered waking up from his Cortexiphan doses with his feet in Neil’s lap, Neil’s fingers rubbing slow circles into his ankles. “I think he may have been underselling it.”

Renee raised one dark brow. “Hm. I can see why that would make things feel complicated for you.”

Andrew’s hands were starting to go numb behind his back. He wasn’t sure how long Jones had been gone, but he knew they wouldn’t be left alone indefinitely. Jones would be back soon, and the implication of Renee’s presence was clear: either Andrew complied, or she got hurt. He turned his head away from the window as much as he could, in case they were being watched.

“Enough small talk, we need a plan,” he said, moving his mouth as little as possible and speaking lowly.

Renee mimicked him, focusing back in immediately. “Whatever happens, you can not let them have your abilities. You can not.”

“I know,” he said. “But when—“

The door opened behind them, and two armed goons marched in behind Jones. They immediately began dragging her chair toward the door. She fought against her restraints, but Andrew could tell she was holding back. Enough to resist them, and to put on a good show, but not enough to risk encouraging them to just shoot her.

“Leave him alone assholes!” She shouted as she was dragged away. “He doesn’t have any fucking mind powers, just let us go!”

The door slammed shut, muffling her shouts, which only Andrew could tell were theatrical, a reminder for him as much as a plea to Jones. He didn’t have any mind powers. Andrew turned to his captor. His words were dry in his throat, but he needed to say something. He needed to do something to get them out of this, and right now words were the only thing he had left. He thought about what Neil might have said.

“Look Jones, it was me you wanted. You have me. Congratulations, you abducted the most paranoid agent in the bureau. You’re the fucking big man on campus, you win. Leave Walker out of it.”

Jones laughed his terrible, polite laugh. “Oh, I couldn’t possibly do that. Every horse needs a carrot. Every mouse, a piece of cheese. Incentive, Agent Minyard - all creatures need an incentive to perform tasks.” He pulled the small box back out of his shoulder bag and placed it on the table. “Let’s give you a little better view, shall we?”

The wall of glass on the opposite wall suddenly lit up once more. On the other side of it was Renee and two nasty looking henchmen. These weren’t Massive Dynamic scientists. These had Moriyama goon written all over them. That wasn’t the worst part. Renee was no longer cuffed to the metal chair she’d been dragged from the room in. Instead she was strapped spread eagle to the metal mattress frame, and among the various instruments of torture of the tray beside her was something that looked an awful lot like jumper cables.

“You sick goddamn son of a bitch,” Andrew snarled.

“Now, I realize I didn’t take the time to explain this properly before. This first test may take some time—” Jones started, opening the box.

“I already know what you want,” Andrew cut him off before he could get going. “You want me to turn the lights on with my mind. Tetsuji made me to do it when I was a kid.” Andrew had listened to the experiment on the tapes Aaron had found. “It was supposed to increase my ability to cross into
the other universe. But since you can already do that for yourself, I’m not sure what the fuck this is about.”

“Patience. Whatever you know, Mr. Minyard, whatever you think you know of your abilities, I assure you... your potential is... far greater. You felt that earthquake this morning? That was us, and it was only the beginning. We are going to construct a new world order, and you have the power to help us shape it.”

Behind the glass, the goons shoved a rag into Renee’s mouth. She bit down what must have nearly been hard enough to draw blood, but she didn’t shout. She didn’t try to cry any last messages to him. She knew what this was. They both knew.

Jones, who had been watching the proceedings with a bored, idle eye, turned back to Andrew. “You need convincing, I understand. Alrighty, then. Let's begin, shall we? Now, if... as you seem to believe, you've done this before, then turning the lights on should not be any problem, should it?”

Andrew stared him down, not even looking at the lights, but not looking at Renee either. “I told you, I haven’t had any abilities since the day I left those trials. I can’t.”

Jones looked irritated for a moment, then seemed to shrug it off. “Like I said: carrot, stick. Perhaps this will help you get started.” He raised one hand and snapped his fingers. On the other side of the glass, the goons attached the jumper cables to the mattress frame, and flicked a switch. Andrew couldn’t look away as Renee’s body jerked, the electricity coursing through her, paralyzing her muscles, her face slack around the gag in her mouth.

Andrew stayed perfectly still. He forced his gaze back to Jones. “Stop.”

“That’s entirely up to you, Agent. Simply turn on the lights.”

“I can’t. Now stop and let her go before you torture a federal agent to death. I doubt even you could weasel out of that one.”

“I’m not sure that’s going to be a winning attitude, Agent.”

Fine, if Andrew had to pretend to try to turn on the lights, so be it. He looked at the box. Carefully, he made sure not to reach out to the circuits with his mind. With all the pressure he could feel them there, at the edge, the glimmer of an object from the other universe begging to be noticed. He ignored it. He stared as hard as he could at the box, letting his eyes slide out of focus, his hands clenching behind his back, his shoulders straining. Every ten seconds the lights didn’t turn on, the goons delivered another shock to the rack Renee was strapped to. After a minute, her eyes were barely open.

“Just stop, Jones.” There was could sweat pouring down Andrew’s back.

“Gladly. Just turn on the lights, Agent.”

A false memory flashed into Andrew’s mind: flickering fluorescent lights, a flash of protective rage, his hands sinking through granite countertop like sand. He collapsed back into the chair as power surged through his body, squeezing his eyes shut. Shut it down, he told himself. For once, just be the monster. Don’t feel this. Don’t feel anything. Thankfully, the lights stayed unlit.

“I am-” he searched for a way to get them to stop with Renee. “I’m too tired. I’ll never be able to do it like this. You kidnapped me in the aftermath of a goddamn earthquake, I need to rest.”
Jones considered him, clearly trying to work out whether or not he was being tricked. Eventually he closed the box and stood. “Very well. I will let you get some rest. We will pick this up again in...say, an hour?”

Renee was completely limp when they shoved her back into the room, struggling just to hold her head up off of her chest. Her hair was stuck in sweaty clumps to her face. He caught her eye and shrugged one shoulder meaningfully. She squinted, expression unfocused.

“Just-“ he made the motion again. She frowned, but after a minute she weakly mimicked him. While her head was down, he carefully reached out with his mind and pushed some of her sweat soaked hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. She smiled in thanks, her face still pale.

“I don’t have a plan,” he admitted.

“That’s okay, Andrew. I’m okay.”

“They are going to come back. They are not going to stop. “

She was quiet for a long time. Andrew let her be.

“Do you remember our first case together?”

Even without an eidetic memory, Andrew didn’t think he could have ever forgotten. “The cult. Of course I do.”

“Clint Blackwood, the cult leader. I was alone for some of the infiltration. I saw things in that compound that I never told you about. Things I told no one but a case report and an accredited bureau psychologist.”

Andrew eyed her apprehensively, unsure where she was going with this. He only hoped it wasn’t some kind of confessional. She deserved a priest, if that was what she was looking for. And anyway, she wasn’t dying. “Things like what?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Renee shook her head. “What matters is that Clint Blackwood deserved to die. He deserved to choke slowly on poison, writing in pain on his own church floor.”

She paused, clearly gathering herself. “I was the first person to make it to the doors of the church hall, where the ritual was taking place.” Andrew knew this. He’d still been fighting his way toward the compound prison when he’d heard the gunshots. “No one else was there. I saw him through the door, raising his cup. I could hear him through the walls - we were there to corrupt them, he said. Better to go now, lest they be forever tainted. Thirty more seconds, and he would have drank that poison and died like he deserved. But a whole church full of brainwashed parishioners would have died with him.”

“I don’t understand your point,” Andrew said. “Do you feel guilty for letting him live? Or for wishing he hadn’t?”

“That wasn’t the only chance I had to kill him.” Renee pressed on without answering. “He pulled a gun on me the moment I opened those door. Luckily he was an awful shot. But I’m not, and I would have been well within my rights so put him down.”

“Okay. What stopped you?”

“That church full of people. I realized that without Blackwood’s testimony, their children would likely have all been taken from them. No one would understand how they had been manipulated. So
I let Blackwood live so that a judge could see just what kind of man he was. Just how much power he’d managed to wield over those people. And sure enough, most of those families got to stay together."

“And Clint Blackwood will spend the rest of his life rotting in a cell, without so much as visitation rights,” Andrew said. “What is your point, Walker?”

She used her shoulder to wipe a drop of blood from her still-oozing lip. It left a streak of rusty red on her blouse, across her chin. “My point is that sometimes you have to do wrong by one person to do right by the rest of the world. I had it easy, I had to let a bad man live. Your situation is more difficult, but you have to hold your ground. You cannot give up.”

Andrew could have torn the ropes from her wrists with his mind from the sheer snap of rage he felt when he understood her meaning. “I am not going to let them kill you, Renee.”

“They aren’t going to,” she said plainly. “Not except as a very last resort. I’m more valuable to them alive, and in pain. But if Jones is behind these earthquakes, and it does have something to do with Cortexiphan, the whole world is going to need you. You can not let them have you.”

Her feet weren’t bound like his were. She reached out with one and tapped the tip of one toe against his. “Our team will find us. We just need to hold out until they do. All I am saying is...I can do this if you can. I promise.”

Renee knew what promises meant to him. She hadn’t broken one to him yet, not in all the years they’d been working together. For that reason, it was easy to believe her, with their toes pressed together and no one else in the room. In that moment, Andrew knew they just had to hold out a little longer. Their team would track them down, they would take out Jones, and then they could get back to saving the world.

It was easy right up until the moment it wasn’t, which was the moment they took Renee away again, into the other room, and Jones came in and set the light box down in front of him once more. On top of the stress of the threat to Renee and not lighting up the box, just being in the same room as Jones seemed to be unlocking more and more memories from Neil’s timeline. Within minutes Andrew could hardly think straight, caught up in a barrage of strange memories only half his own: the glimmer of a distant hotel collapsing into a hole in the ground. A Machine of incredible power roaring to life. A typewriter coming to life hours away from a basement office in Baltimore.

“I can’t do it,” he spat through the pain and confusion. “How stupid are you? Afraid Riko’s gonna kick you to the curb if you can’t deliver on your promises? I’ve never been able to do this on my own anyway, Neil was always there.”

Before Andrew had realized what he’d said, the buzzing of electricity from the other room had stopped. When Andrew raised his head, Jones was looking at him curiously. Over Jones’ shoulder, Renee’s eyes were wide and wild.

“Neil, you say? And who might this Neil be?”

Andrew put his head in his hands. “No one. He doesn’t exist.”

“Hm. I do hope you aren’t holding out on me, Agent.”

“Me?” Andrew offered up a grin that wasn’t his own, his face stretching like plastic, like it hadn’t since the last time something had forced it that way. “Jones, I’m hurt.”
The blow landed directly on his right cheek, snapping his head to the side. Jones was standing, towering over him, once-calm face red and snarling.

A buzzer sounded in the room. A tinny voice came through the PA speaker. “Boss?”

Jones straightened up, smoothing the lapels of his jacket. “What?” he asked irritably.

“We got an intruder. Found him in the front hallway prowling around. Feisty one.”

Andrew’s guts went cold. “Bring him in,” Jones said. The door to the room Renee was in pushed open, and in stepped a third goon, shoving a handcuffed, gagged figure in front of himself by the wrists.

Andrew should have denied it, he knew, but even he could hide the jolt of recognition when Neil came into view. Jones’ terrible smile only got wider, sicker.

“Yes this is quite the turn of events isn’t it?” Jones leaned into the mic that fed into the other room. “Neil, is it? Whoever you are, thank you so much for joining us. I think you might be just the thing we needed.”

“Fuck you,” Neil spat. His voice was muffled by the glass but his words were perfectly clear. “I killed you once. I look forward to doing it again. That’s a promise.”

“Yes that seems to be going around,” Jones mused. “Get rid of the woman,” he instructed the goon. “We will finish dealing with her later. Let’s have our new guest have a lie down.”

Renee was so dazed there was hardly any fight in her as the goons unstrapped her from the metal frame and shoved her back into her chair, her head lolling heavily on her chest. Neil, on the other hand, wasn’t about to be tied down without a fight. The guards had to briefly uncuff his hands to bring them over his head, and he wasted no time coming out swinging.

If Andrew fought like a street brawler and Renee like a dancer, Neil fought like a cornered animal, all raised hackles and teeth. He kicked and threw punches. He head butted a guard who was stupid enough to get too close, sending him reeling backwards toward the rack. When he turned and caught Andrew’s gaze through the glass, there was blood running from a split in his eyebrow, mixing with sweat and running over his eye, settling in the delta of his knife-scarred cheek.

And all at once, like a resurrection, Andrew remembered.

He remembered Neil on his knees in a lab in another Baltimore; in a dirty warehouse; in a bathroom in Cambridge, those scars still fresh and seeping. He remembered holding Neil against the side of a building and kissing him like an open wound, tearing himself open to try to save the world, because Neil had asked him to try. Because Neil had believed he could, he could let go of control without destroying. He remembered everything: kisses stolen in between gunshots and breaking the laws of physics; a key to a house, a car, a soul; a bedroom with two beds, and hours spent together in just one of them, beautiful and impossible and safe. He remembered everything they had gone through to get that far. Andrew remembered Neil Abram Josten. As he watched the blood run down Neil’s face, he didn’t know if the memories were real or not, but he knew one thing with certainty; he would not allow Neil to be hurt again.

“Oh,” Jones said, looking down at the table. Andrew looked and saw that the box of lights had turned on, glowing brightly. “Well well-” The lights overhead flickered. A low hum filled the air like a coming swarm. “-what are you doing?”

“I’m doing what you asked.” Andrew lurched forward toward the microphone, locking eyes with
Neil through the glass. “I’m turning on the lights.”

The ropes and cuffs flew from Andrew’s body, snapping against the Jones hard enough to knock him from his chair. Glass rained from the ceiling as the fluorescent bulbs burst in their casings, throwing the building into flickering shadows. In the other room, the buzzing grew louder and louder, the window between them vibrating as, next to the bed frame, the untouched voltage dial went up, up, up.

“Now!” Andrew shouted, and pushed. The window shattered, spraying glass in every direction. Andrew felt it cut into his forearms as he raised them to shield his eyes. Screams filled the room as Neil took advantage of the distraction to throw two of his attackers against the electrified rack.

The feeling of victory was short-lived. The guards on the rack were screaming but Neil was still fighting a third guard when an exhaustion unlike anything Andrew had ever felt swept through him, bringing him to his knees.

“Andrew!” Neil shouted from across the room. “Look out!”

From the other side of the table, Jones was getting to his feet. He snarled, pulled out a gun, and aimed it at Andrew’s head.

BAM. BAM. BAM.

In front of him, Jones collapsed to the ground. Andrew blinked, somehow finding the energy to be surprised he wasn’t dead.

BAM BAM. The man fighting Neil collapsed, and through the doorway stepped Aaron, dust smeared across bruised cheeks, a bloodied cuff still dangling from his right wrist, his left hand limp, swollen and wrong-looking at his side.

Aaron immediately made his way through the now open pane between the rooms to crouch in front of Andrew. “Reinforcements won’t be far behind. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Sure,” Andrew said, standing. And then his knees promptly gave out from under him.

Chapter End Notes

Ayyyyy

This update was Not brought to you from a doctor’s office waiting room, because my new doctor actually saw me in a timely manner. lol. Sidenote...Y’all, do you ever get like...the writing version of senioritis? Like now that the end is in sight you just want to lay down and sleep, except pushing through to the end is gonna be the best part? I’m so close to done writing this monster. I’m getting there.

Anyway, on with the end of the world...

Up Next:

“Aren’t you a doctor? Do something!”
Chapter Summary

Neil POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 11, Chapter 4: Escape from Providence

“Fuck. Fuck, Andrew, what’s happening?” Neil shouted when he looked through the window and saw Andrew collapsed onto the ground. He struggled across the shattered glass on the ground to where Aaron was already crouched. Andrew lay on the ground, shaking.

“He’s seizing, asshole,” Aaron shouted just as desperately, stripping out of his jacket and stuffing it under Andrew’s head.

“Aren’t you a doctor? Do something!” From up close it looked even worse, Andrew’s whole body shuddering and shaking, his eyes glassy and his mouth slack.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Aaron snapped. “Shut up. I’m trying to count.”

Eventually the tremors subsided. Andrew’s eyes fluttered closed, and when they opened again he seemed to be present. His gaze locked on Neil, and Neil’s stomach lurched with the memory of the last time Andrew had come back to him like this, like he was using Neil as an anchor point to haul himself up from the brink.

“Abram,” Andrew said hoarsely.

“Yeah, yeah I’m right here,” Neil said, leaning over him. The intimacy of the moment, of that name, caught up with Neil too late, but Andrew was already nodding, reaching up to tug at the front of his shirt.

“I remember,” Andrew said. Neil’s heart gave a conflicted, stuttering leap in his chest. “I remember all of it.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Neil promised. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

The lights continued to flicker wildly in the old building as the four of them made their way through a maze of hallways from the interrogation rooms. The broken glass on the floor wasn’t entirely the result of Andrew’s power burst. The building they were in had been in the middle of a renovation when it had been abandoned - bits of construction materials still littered the halls, and the signs of disuse, decay, and vandalism were everywhere around them. Beer cans lolled in dusty corners alongside scraps of wire and piles of cardboard. Graffiti and even more unpleasant markings lined some of the walls.

Aaron was supporting Andrew while Neil helped Renee. Neil had sustained his fair share of injuries in their struggle - in addition to a myriad of cuts and scrapes, he could feel one eye swelling, and
he’d wrenched one of his shoulders painfully while pulling away from a guard. Renee seemed struggling just to stay conscious. Neil wasn’t sure how long she had spent on Jones’ improvised torture rack, but it looked like every movement hurt her. Even so, he was surprised by the amount of her weight she let him carry, one arm slung heavily across his better shoulder. Ahead of them, Aaron and Andrew struggled forward in a similar fashion, Andrew slumped almost more heavily against his brother than Renee was on Neil. The effects of using his abilities had apparently taken nearly everything he had.

Aaron hadn’t asked if anyone knew the way out, so Neil had to trust he could lead them. The whole building felt too quiet, with only the sound of their ragged breathing and the flickering hum of whatever lights hadn’t shattered in the blast. They were moving as quietly as they could despite their exhaustion and the uneven ground underfoot, but every crunching step was setting Neil more and more on edge. He was about to risk whispering to ask Aaron how much further there was to go when there was the sound of pounding footsteps from down the hall. Shit, the guards Aaron had escaped from. Among the four of them, Aaron was the only one with a gun, and Neil had no idea how many shots he had left.

Andrew stumbled to his knees as the footsteps rounded the corner, nearly bringing Aaron down with him.

“Stop right there!” A guard Neil recognized as one of the men who had kidnapped Andrew rounded the corner, gun drawn. Neil watched as Aaron raised his weapon and tried to fire, only to be met with with a dead click. The guard grinned a slow, sickening grin. The next moment he dropped, a knife sticking grotesquely out of his stomach.

Andrew hauled himself back to his feet before Aaron could even react, not bothering to straighten the pant leg where he’d apparently pulled one undiscovered blade from his boot. “Come on,” he rasped. He threw a look back and Neil and his eyes widened. “Neil!”

Neil turned in time to see another guard bearing down on them. For a second he was frozen in place, unable or unwilling to react with the only weapon he’d managed to keep on him. Then he grit his teeth, reached into his pocket, and pulled out the familiar knife he’d snatched from Andrew’s drawer. He held it up so the light caught on the edge of the blade, and the guard skidded to a stop a little ways away.

“Don’t come one step closer,” Neil warned. The guard just stood there with his arms at his sides. Apparently he’d either never had a weapon or had lost it in the chaos. “Unless you want to end up like your friend over there. I promise, I have very good aim.”

The guard reached inside his coat, and apparently Neil had been wrong, because what he started to pull out wasn’t a radio. Neil was releasing the knife in his hand before the revolver was even all the way up, blood spurting across the dusty white hallway as the blade buried itself in the guard’s shoulder. The guard dropped to the floor with a cry. Well, Neil had warned him.

Neil let Renee lean against a wall while he forced himself to collect the knives from the guard’s bodies. They weren’t quite dying, so he tied each one’s hands with some bits of construction materials just to ensure they wouldn’t be getting up before backup arrived. Luckily, one of them was still holding Aaron’s radio. He delivered it to Aaron, put Renee’s arm back around his shoulders, and nodded to Aaron and Andrew. “Let’s go.”

They struggled onwards. Within a few minutes they rounded a corner and the doors of the facility came into view. Neil could see daylight through the small windows. They were almost to the doors when Andrew stumbled to his knees again.
This time, Aaron did go down with him. “Fucking-” Aaron started, then stopped as Andrew began to shake again. “Andrew?”

“What can I do?” Neil asked, heart in his throat.

“Keep him off the ground,” Aaron said, pulling his radio back out with shaking hands. “There’s fucking glass everywhere- support his head, I don’t know, shit. Shit.”

There was broken rubble everywhere. Andrew was still in just a t-shirt. Leaving Renee again, Neil knelt on the floor and pulled Andrew’s tremoring upper body into his arms as well as he could, wrapping one hand around the back of his head and counting the seconds as they ticked agonizingly by.

“Nicky?” Aaron called into his radio. “Nicky we need backup, now. Tell the paramedics they’re gonna need diazepam.”

Then, like Andrew’s seizures had been some kind of precognition, the world began to shake again. It was another earthquake.

Neil had been chased, shot, tortured, abducted and imprisoned, but the most terrifying thirty seconds of his life were spent on that dirty floor, helpless to do anything but wait for it to stop, wait for Andrew to come back to them as the very earth shook with them. Eventually, the earth did still, but Neil only breathed again when Andrew came back too, blinking into awareness, limp, pale, and sweating in Neil’s uncertain embrace.

Andrew tensed as he came around and took in his surroundings. “What?” he managed.

Neil was suddenly excruciatingly aware of how much of his and Andrew’s bodies were touching, not to mention the presence of Aaron and Renee. Andrew had said he remembered everything, but Neil had no idea what the implications of that might be. It certainly didn’t mean Andrew would be comfortable in such a vulnerable position.

“You had another seizure,” Neil told him. “Paramedics are on their way.” He paused, not sure how to proceed. Andrew barely looked alert enough to speak, let alone stand. “Do you want to get up? I didn’t- there’s glass on the ground so we just- uh,”

Neil stopped as Andrew started to shift. Andrew’s left arm was draped across his chest, and he moved his right hand over his left, two fingers extended, blinking up at Neil blearily. It took Neil a moment to recognize it as a clumsy rendition of the sign for “sit.”

“Right. Yeah, of course.”

Neil kept his touch as light as he could as he helped Andrew out of his lap and into a sitting position against one wall. Outside, the sun was getting low in the sky, casting long, thin shadows through the front windows of the facility. Backup arrived only minutes later, lights and sirens blaring.

The second earthquake had barely lasted twenty seconds, but it caused enough destruction and commotion that it took them an hour to get to the hospital, even with lights and sirens. Luckily Andrew didn’t seize again in the ambulance, though he’d been exhausted nearly to the point of unconsciousness by the time he’d been loaded in. Nicky, Kevin and Wymack met Neil and Aaron at the hospital, where they waited together while Renee and Andrew were processed and given initial treatments. It would likely be a couple of hours before any of them would be allowed in to see them.
“What happened?” Nicky asked.

Neil let Aaron do the talking. Aaron explained the basics of what they knew: Jones had abducted Andrew in order to activate his Cortexiphan abilities. His purposes were unknown, but he was also behind the earthquakes, so it seemed the two were somehow connected. Andrew’s seizures had been caused by a sudden overexertion of his abilities.

That was what they thought. Neil sat quietly, and wondered if the truth wasn’t worse. What if Andrew’s seizures hadn’t been caused by the Cortexiphan at all, but by Neil? By the memories? What if Nicky was right? What if Neil’s very presence in the wrong timeline was corrupting Andrew’s brain, wreaking havoc on his nervous system? A handful of weeks ago, Neil would have been thrilled to have Andrew look at him like he had back in the facility - like Neil mattered to him, meant something to him - and tell him he remembered. But now he wasn’t sure it had been worth the apparent cost. Neil had fought so hard to make himself real again, but every step further he took in this timeline just seemed to cause damage, especially to Andrew.

Neil tried to focus on the problems at hand - David Robert Jones, the earthquakes, - but his mind kept circling back to one terrible question. What if the Machine had erased him because the world - Andrew’s world - was better with him gone?

Chapter End Notes

:)

You wanted Andrew to remember, right? This was what everyone wanted? :)

Up Next:

“I believe that I have discovered David Robert Jones' true intentions,” Kevin said.
Part 11, Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 11, Chapter 5: A Tale of Two Gordons

Waking up in a hospital never got any easier. That itching feeling of being suspended in time amidst endless beige and white hallways, cheap curtains, and formica cabinets. The way the lights never went all the way out even in the middle of the night, and the air always smelled of a strange mix of bleach, plastic, and iodine. The banality of it all, clashing against the immediacy of the pain in his body.

At least this time he was still in his clothes. That, combined with the bustle outside his door, told Andrew he hadn’t been taken too deep into the bowels of the hospital. In his experience, that meant they thought he was probably going to be okay.

Nicky was sitting with Renee by his bedside when he opened his eyes. “Hey, bud! You’re awake!”

“Evidently.” Andrew struggled into a sitting position, grimacing a bit at the twinge of the needle taped securely into the crook of one arm. He looked around. “Where is Neil?”

“He’s fine,” Nicky assured him, which was decidedly not what Andrew had asked. “A few cuts and bruises, but he got out of there better than the rest of you.” Shit. The facility. David Robert Jones. Andrew groaned as it all came back in a rush.

“Aaron?” he turned to Renee. “You?”

“I’m okay,” Renee said with a small, tired smile. There were deep bruises under her eyes, and an IV still taped into one of her elbows. “They’re holding me for observation but there doesn’t seem to be any major or permanent damage.”

“Aaron is okay too,” Nicky added. “He’ll be in a cast for a while, is all. Broke his thumb breaking out of his cuffs to get to you guys, the little heroic bastard,” he said proudly, wiping a fake tear from his eye.

That was good, of course, but it still hadn’t answered Andrew’s original question. “Where is Neil?”

“Oh.” Nicky frowned slightly. “He, uh. He went back to the lab with Kevin, to try and work the earthquake situation. I told you, he wasn’t hurt.”

Right. Neil wasn’t hurt, so of course he wouldn’t be at the hospital if he didn’t have to be. And yet, it wasn’t a memory so much as an instinct that told Andrew it should have been Neil sitting by his bedside when he’d opened his eyes. Well. If it was an instinct, it wasn’t one of Andrew’s better ones, apparently.
“Hey, are you okay?” Nicky asked.

“I am—fine.” The words felt like sour fruit in Andrew’s mouth as they tripped out, uncomfortable and familiar. “What do I have to do to get out of here?”

The answer to that question turned out to be “entirely too much paperwork.” Andrew had had multiple seizures in the space of an hour; it wasn’t entirely surprising that they wanted him to stay and be observed for at least twenty four. It was also unnecessary. As far as Andrew was concerned, nothing they could do for him was anything Kevin couldn’t take care of in the lab, if it came to it. He had work to get back to. It was a particularly frustrating argument to have with a bunch of harried but well-meaning hospital staff, but eventually they did let him go, after a lot of stern talking to and signing of waivers.

Wymack was even less impressed when Andrew showed back up in their borrowed lab, a fretful and exasperated Nicky trailing behind.

“The only reason I’m not sending your ass packing is because I know you’d get yourself into more trouble out there than in here. So here are the rules. You can work the case from here. You step one foot out of this lab, I am benching you for a month,” he warned. “I am not compromising you so that you can play hero. You are on desk duty only, do you understand?”

“Bench me? Gonna stop the apocalypse without me, Chief?”

“Don’t make me have to try, agent.”

Luckily for Andrew, there wasn’t time to waste being continually berated; there was too much work to do. He joined the team at the other end of the lab, where Kevin was pointing dramatically at a set of earthquake maps. Neil and Aaron were crowded around, though keeping their distance from each other, both looking worse for the wear. There was indeed a light cast around Aaron’s left hand, and Neil had at least one solid black eye blooming in addition to the cut on his forehead, but they both looked determined. Ready to keep going. Nicky joined them as Andrew reached the group.

“I believe that I have discovered David Robert Jones’ true intentions,” Kevin said once they were all together. By now, Neil and Aaron had filled him in on the basics of what had happened in the facility in Providence. Apparently Andrew’s brief hospital stay had been long enough for him to come up with a theory.

“I believe that Jones is trying to collapse our universes in order to create a gravitational singularity,” Kevin said gravely. “As our worlds contract... the force becomes greater and greater, and as matter and energy are compressed to a point, the density is so great that it has no recourse but to rapidly expand outwards again... creating a Big Bang. Mutual destruction. Both universes at once. Our side, and theirs.”

“And he would do all of this, why?” Andrew asked.

“Because he’s a megalomaniac sonofabitch,” Neil muttered darkly.

Kevin tugged at his shirt cuffs. “To create a third universe. His universe. Well, his and Riko’s. One in which the laws of nature and physics are controlled by them.”

“That’s a...pretty grand theory there, Kev,” Nicky said nervously.

“It fits with your version of the Marshall Bowman case though,” Neil put in. “Genetic chimeras. The next phase of the evolution of mankind. They could have been creating different types of hybrids. Maybe even testing them in the underground fights Riko is involved with. Creating a new race for
“It is not just a theory,” Kevin insisted. “I have proof.”

Kevin led them over to a table full of evidence boxes. Some, Andrew knew were items collected from the epicenters of nearby earthquakes. Some seemed to have been randomly pulled from old cases, including a box from the Grayson Hotel case that Andrew knew contained objects from the other universe. From the array, Kevin selected three boxes.

“I asked myself, what is an earthquake? Answer - a vibration!” he said, pulling a bundle of items from his pocket Andrew recognized as a set of tuning forks. “This reminded me of something Riko and I discovered back at Evermore. This universe and the other have unique harmonic signatures. The very molecules that make them up vibrate at different frequencies. This universe-” Kevin plucked a shoe from one box, “vibrates at a frequency of 261.6 hertz. The key of C. And things from the other universe,” he put down the shoe, plucking a small stuffed animal from the second box, “at 392 hertz, a G.”

“That’s what causes the glimmer,” Andrew said, realizing. “That is what I was seeing, at the Grayson Hotel.”

Kevin’s brow wrinkled. “Well, that is what Riko was hoping you would see, yes.”

Right. Because in reality, Andrew hadn’t been able to activate his abilities yet, then. He’d failed. It was only in his new memories that he’d succeeded. He determinedly did not look at Neil. “Go on.”

“But these things,” now Kevin pulled a few items from a third box, one Andrew knew contained items salvaged from the epicenters of the recent earthquakes, “vibrate at 329.6 hertz.”

“The key of E?” Neil asked.

“Precisely. I think I know what he is doing now. Jones is trying to tune the two universes to vibrate at a common frequency. The earthquakes aren’t the mechanism so much as a side effect of it. It’s the vibrations of this...tuning, that are creating the earthquakes. And.. I suspect that we will see many more as the vibrations weaken the barrier between our two universes. Too many more and they will collapse entirely.”

It painted a picture uglier than even Andrew had dared imagine. “Given what we already know about Jones’ fanaticism, it’s not out of the realm of possibility. He’s dead, but if he was working with Riko we should assume the threat is ongoing.”

“Uh,” Aaron shifted from foot to foot. “About that.”

“What?”

“Crews went through the facility where you guys were kept,” Nicky jumped in. “All the other guards were still there, but Jones was gone. All signs point to him having just got up and left once the coast was clear.”


Neil was shaking his head. “Jones has been traveling between universes for years using Riko’s portals. It’s not nearly as safe as the Bridge. In my timeline, all that travel had made him so molecularly unstable that bullets passed right through him. You may have temporarily stunned him or he may have been faking it, but it is not outside the realm of possibility that he got up and walked away.”
Worse and worse then. “Okay. Let’s say Kevin is right. Jones is still alive, and he and Riko are trying to collapse the two universes to create a third one. What now?”

“Has anyone on the other side made any progress?” Kevin directed his question at Aaron, who shook his head.

“Not that I know of, but I haven’t been able to reach Kate in a few hours. She’s not answering calls.”

“So it’s Kate now, is it?” Nicky teased.


Andrew instinctively looked toward Neil to commiserate over his brother’s mooning, but Neil wasn’t looking at him. Neil hadn’t been looking at him since he’d gotten back from the hospital, Andrew had noticed. In fact, it was more than that. Neil was not-looking at him, specifically, avoiding him in a way that was at odds with all of their previous interactions, both in the last few weeks and in Andrew’s new memories. It grated at Andrew more than it should have.

Aaron promised to keep trying to get in touch with the team from the other side. They didn’t have much else to go on in the meantime. It turned out none of them had to wait very long. Bare moments after disbanding their meeting, the doorbell to the office lab rang shrilly through the room. When Nicky got the door, there stood Agent Katelyn, apparently far from home.

“Kate?” Aaron whipped around, rushing toward the door. “What are you doing here? I’ve been trying to call for hours.”

“I’m sorry for not giving you a heads up,” she said, “but I didn’t think this was something we could do over the phone. It took me a while to find you guys here. I got us on the first plane I could.”

“Us?” Aaron asked.

“I found a witness. Or well, he found us. Mr. Gordon?” A man stepped around the edge of the door frame.

“Seth?” Andrew stepped toward the doorway.

The tall, thin man beside Katelyn looked down at him and his eyes widened. “Uh. I don’t think-”

“-Mr. Gordon is from my place,” Katelyn interrupted, which raised just as many questions as it answered.

“Why did you bring him here, agent?”

“We should sit down,” Katelyn said, already pushing past them into the lab and leading Other-Seth toward the makeshift seating area. “I think you’re going to want to hear this.”

Apparently, Other-Seth had had a vision. He hadn’t been doing anything in particular at the time, he said, just relaxing on his couch, when suddenly he’d been standing in the epicenter of an earthquake, watching it happen. He claimed that at the time, he hadn’t even known there had been any earthquakes. He’d dismissed it as an odd dream until he’d turned on the news an hour later and saw a video of the destruction he’d witnessed firsthand.

Andrew’s mind was racing as he listened. He had an idea where all this was going, but there was only one way to be sure. He pulled out his phone and dialed Allison Reynolds.
“Minyard? Is Renee okay?”

“She is still under observation, but she’s fine. She will probably be released in a few hours of there are no complications. That is not why I’m calling.”

There was a beat where Allison let out a quiet breath of relief, then re-focused. “What do you need?”

“Security footage of the Boston quake, as close to the epicenter as you can manage. I need you to run facial recognition on the crowds.”

Reynolds paused again. Andrew wasn’t sure if she was working or considering. “Okay. Who am I looking for?”

“The man’s name is Bryan Seth Gordon.”

Confirmation didn’t take long. There he was, standing in the middle of the street looking like he was sleepwalking, right at the epicenter of the tremor. Staring at the footage, it all became terribly clear. Other-Seth hadn’t been a Cortexiphan patient himself, but his counterpart had. Jones was using Cortexiphan patients as focus points, energy cells to power the collapse of the universes.

“It’s horrible and deranged, but you have to agree, it’s really quite ingenious,” Kevin mused when Andrew shared his idea. “Jones is using the Cortexiphan subjects’ abilities to psychically link with versions of themselves in the alternate universe. Mr. Gordon here and the others are drawing on their alternate’s frequency to change the vibratory nature of the area that they’re standing in. Effectively, they are merging the two universes together.”

“And that is what’s causing the earthquakes?” Nicky asked.

“And the eventual collapse of our world,” Kevin agreed, more somberly.

Neil got up from his chair and started pacing. Andrew could tell he’d been chewing on an idea for several minutes but was hesitant to spit it out. Finally, it seemed he couldn’t find any more reasons not to speak.

“Kevin... could the connection between our two universes be what’s facilitating this psychic link?”

“It could,” Kevin said. Neil hesitated again. Andrew’s stomach sank, already sensing where this was going.

“What if we severed it?”

“You aren’t suggesting-”

“I am.”

They stared at each other for a few minutes, a contest of wills Andrew might have been vaguely interested in seeing the outcome of, on any other day.

“For the group,” he prompted.

Neil glared, folding his arms, but there was defeat in his posture. Trepidation. “We close the bridge. Cut off the link between Cortexiphan subjects and their doppelgangers.”

“Would that work?” Nicky asked.
“In theory,” Kevin said. “But we don’t know if we would ever be able to start it again.” He threw a nearly apologetic glance in the direction of Agent Katelyn.

“The Bridge is what was allowing our universe to heal from the soft spot damage,” she said, chewing worriedly on a thumbnail. “What would happen if we closed it?” Andrew pretended not to notice as on the cushion between them, Aaron put his hand lightly over her wrist.

“Most likely?” Kevin waggled his hand in a so-so gesture. “The healing would stop. The damage wouldn’t get any worse, but it wouldn’t get any better, either.”

Andrew knew that the other universe had taken the brunt of the damage caused by the slow decay of the soft spots between them. The Bridge that the Machine had created was allowing it to come back into balance, to heal. If they cut the connection, that progress would stop. Still, if the alternative was both being destroyed…

“I don’t see how we have any other option,” Neil said.

“Easy for you to say,” Katelyn said, though it was with more resignation than heat. Aaron’s hand squeezed hers and she sighed. “I know, I know it’s just… even the atmosphere is starting to heal. The way light refracts off of water… it’s changed. We haven’t seen a rainbow in twenty years, not since I was little. I was starting to look up after it rained again. Hoping for… well, just hoping.”

“There’s one more option,” Aaron said. “We find Jones, and we stop him before he can stage another attack.

“Sure, but how?” Neil asked.

Andrew stood up. “I have an idea about that.”

His idea was this: there was obviously a connection between Their-Seth and Other-Seth. Other-Seth had seen a vision through the eyes of his double, but he didn’t know how to access that connection on his own. There was also probably some kind of connection between Their-Seth and Andrew, by virtue of the Cortexiphan, and Andrew did have experience forging those kinds of mental connections. Therefore, if Andrew and Other-Seth put their minds together, perhaps Andrew could see through Their-Seth’s eyes, and they could find him and prevent him from engaging in the next attack, perhaps preventing it entirely.

It took a little convincing, but eventually they had everything situated. Andrew and Other-Seth, sat in opposing exam chairs, the cold vinyl almost clammy through the back of Andrew’s shirt and at the back of his neck. Here they were again. Luckily, because of the link formed by the Cortexiphan between both Seths and between Their-Seth and Andrew, this wasn’t even going to require the full neural nets, just a few electrodes stuck precisely to their temples. They would be able to do the procedure even with the more limited resources of the temporary lab.

“And you’re sure this is safe? It won’t hurt me?” Seth asked again. Katelyn patted him gently on the shoulder.

“Shouldn’t,” Kevin said, prepping a syringe, which even Andrew knew wasn’t a particularly encouraging response. Katelyn patted Seth again. “It may not do anything at all. But if we are lucky, it may help Agent Minyard see into your double’s eyes, and catch our man.”

“Think of it this way,” Neil put in. “If it works, you’re the guy who saved two universes.”

“Oh one last question,” Kevin said. “Have you ever done LSD?” He held out the syringe.
Reaching out for Seth’s mind was like wading through deep, murky water, swimming slowly up toward the surface. He pushed through the muddy half-light, squinting as the world slowly started to come into shape around him.

“It's... it's hard to make out,” he said aloud. Nearby, he knew Nicky was on a radio, ready to relay any useful information he found to support teams around the city, all ready to take Their-Seth in. “Everything is blurry. But... I see brick buildings. It's older, like it's outside the city. Okay, he's... he's passing a -- a train station. Rockport.

“That’s Salem,” Nicky said. “Guys, he’s in Salem.”

“We’re on our way.” That was Aaron’s voice. “Let’s move.”

Andrew struggled to maintain focus. He was seeing through Seth’s eyes as he made his way through the streets of Salem. Hands emerged in his field of vision, unfolding a wide piece of paper. “He has a map. He's looking for something. I can make out people. Young, in their early Twenties. Salem Bay University. He's on campus.”

“Aaron, he's on campus. Available units, subject Bryan Seth Gordon is currently on campus at Salem Bay University.” Nicky relayed.

“It’s a big campus. What else do you see?” Kevin’s voice asked.

Andrew twitched in his chair, frustrated. Everywhere he looked - everywhere Seth looked - it was just more and more brick buildings, all practically the same. He couldn’t make out anything distinctive. “Nothing specific,” he said.

“Fan out, search the campus,” he heard Nicky instruct. “Non-lethal force only, this guy may not be acting under his own will or power.”

Suddenly Andrew’s field of vision tilted down, a hand coming into view again. “He's looking at his watch.” It was a strange looking thing, like a smartwatch but with no logos Andrew recognized, and a bit heftier than typical models. 01:00, said the readout. Which wasn’t right. It was well past one in the afternoon.

00:59, said the readout, one second later. Shit shit shit. “No, it’s a--it's a timer, and it's counting down. It's gonna happen again. He's gonna trigger another earthquake.” Andrew watched as Seth positioned himself in the center of a wide swath of open ground surrounded by identical smooth brick buildings on all sides. “The Quad,” he realized. “He's in the Quad.”

“The Quad!” Nicky relayed urgently. “Andrew, how long have they got?”

“About thirty seconds.”

Andrew watched with detached horror as the red numbers on Seth’s wrist ticked down in his vision. 49. 48. 47. 46. He wanted to close his eyes, but found himself stuck in the connection, unable to quiet tear himself away. 20. 19. 18. 17.

His view of the quad went sideways as Seth Gordon was abruptly tacked to the ground, his hands dragged apart to prevent him from doing anything to trigger the quake.

“They got him,” Andrew said. “Get me out.”

Kevin must have hit a switch, because Andrew’s connection to Seth faded even before he started removing the electrodes from his temples. He allowed himself a small breath of relief. Then, across
the room, a bank of monitors started beeping read alert.

Nicky rushed over to it.

“We may have gotten him, but we didn't stop anything,” Nicky said in a strained voice. “It's starting. Seismic activity in Tulsa, Vancouver, Florence, Bogota....Fuck.”

The news didn’t get better. When they got Seth Gordon into custody, it was to discover that his watch, which had flickered into darkness, had turned back on. And it was already counting down again.

Chapter End Notes

Whoo. Getting this update in under the wire. Now I really have to finish the first leg of my Big Bang...

Up Next:

Neil hardly knew where to start. That changed everything. “I think your theory about Andrew’s memories is wrong.”
Part 11, Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Neil POV

warnings for passing mention of a suicide and drug addiction

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 11, Chapter 6: Cut Connection

With every report from the 26 quake locations around the world, plus the 26 on the other side, the situation only seemed more dire. They’d stopped one quake with Seth Gordon, but with so many others the effect had been negligible. Neil had been harboring a sliver of hope that perhaps the quakes wouldn’t go off at all unless everyone was active, but they’d had no such luck.

Kevin was running calculations like he could somehow save the multiverse with his calculator, but Neil had taken one look at the math and seen what no one wanted to admit: they were out of time. One more set of quakes and the barrier between the two universes would crumble, collapsing the two into each other and leaving only devastation behind. They’d stopped one single event. It wouldn’t be enough.

What Neil wanted more than anything was to talk to Andrew. Actually, that was a lie - what Neil wanted more than anything was to go back. Go back to the night before he’d stepped into the Machine, when he’d slept amidst the static storms, safe as he’d even felt with Andrew curled beside him. Working with the Foxes, Neil had gotten used to being able to hope for impossible things. This time though, there was no fixing what had been broken. There was no going back. In fact, Neil wasn’t even sure he was going to be going forward much longer.

This time, he couldn’t have what he wanted. He couldn’t go back in time, and he couldn’t talk to Andrew. The look in Andrew’s eyes when he’d lain, weak and shivering in Neil’s grasp, saying he’d remembered everything...Neil had never seen Andrew so vulnerable. Not even when he’d been as good as dead. Until Neil figured out exactly what he’d done, he couldn’t take comfort in Andrew’s presence. He didn’t dare.

It was Kevin who found Neil, curled in an old armchair in a small office space off the side of the lab. Andrew and Nicky were interviewing Their Seth Gordon, trying to figure out if he had any information that would lead them to Jones. Kevin was probably looking for solitude, too, judging by the way he stiffened in surprise when he spotted Neil hunched in on himself in the dark.


For a moment it looked like Kevin was considering turning around finding somewhere else to mope. Unfortunately, there weren’t many places in their borrowed laboratory to hide; neither of them wanted to be too far in things went from bad to worse. Kevin stepped the rest of the way into the room and closed the door behind himself. The blinds were drawn over the interior windows of the small office space. What little light leaked through them cast the room in murky shadow.
“I’m not hiding,” Kevin said. “There’s just nothing else to be done unless we can find Jones and prevent him from setting off the last round of quakes. I figured I should get some rest in while I could.” He took a seat in one of the rolling chairs. “I suppose I don’t have to ask who you are hiding from.”

Neil shrugged. What did this Kevin know about him after all? Kevin scoffed at his silence. “Come on. You used to stare at him like you were waiting for him to disappear. You haven’t been able to look him in the face since you got back from the facility where Jones had him. What happened?”

Neil had been expecting accusation, like he’d gotten from Nicky. But Kevin seemed - uncharacteristically, in Neil’s opinion - to be reserving judgement, at least for the moment. Neil had nothing to gain by lying now.

“When he woke up from his second seizure, he told me he remembered everything. He called me…” Neil hesitated. He didn’t know how to explain this without feeling like he was giving away all of Andrew’s secrets. He’d already confessed his feelings to Nicky - it didn’t seem right to go around telling more people about them before he’d even properly told Andrew. Not that he planned on doing that. Still.

“We had a relationship, in my timeline. I haven’t told Andrew, here. It doesn’t seem fair. But he remembers all of it now. And the way he looked at me this afternoon. It was like he wanted all of that to be real for him, too. I’ve never seen him like that.”

Kevin nodded, seemingly to himself, but he still looked perplexed. “So you are avoiding him because you think he has begun to return your feelings based on these new memories?”

Neil thought back to the look on Andrew’s face as he’d lain, limp and exhausted, in Neil’s arms. The expression of dawning realization, yes, but also the feeling of...safety. A kind of vulnerability Neil had only been lucky enough to experience in brief moments.

“It felt wrong. And if you’re right, it’s my fault. I did this to him,” Neil said. He took a deep, focusing breath. “I told him, once, I wouldn’t let him let me hurt him. I’m not about to go back on that promise just because it would be convenient for me.”

That seemed to satisfy Kevin somewhat. “I would be more concerned about what this influx of memories is going to do to Andrew’s mental state in general,” he said. “I gather some of the things you went through were traumatic. Him burning down a bridge, meeting his double while rescuing you from Evermore-”

“-Wait, stop.” Neil sat up with a jerk, eyes widening. “He remembers those things?”

“Sure. He’s mentioned them in passing, and in briefings with Wymack. Why?”

Neil hardly knew where to start. That changed everything. “I think your theory about Andrew’s memories is wrong.”

Kevin rolled his chair closer to Neil on the couch. “Why?” he repeated.

“Because,” Neil explained breathlessly. “When the bridge burned, and when Andrew met his double, I wasn’t there. I wasn’t there. I was already in the hospital, or maybe at Evermore. Either way, I have no memory of Andrew getting to Baltimore, getting in a firefight with the other Foxes Team, or burning the bridge.” He reached out urgently, grabbing onto Kevin’s knee. “If I don’t remember it, it means the memories can’t be coming from me.”

“Then where is it coming from?” Kevin murmured, almost to himself. He was staring at the closed
“A palimpsest.”

Neil let go of his knee and sat back. “What?”

Kevin reached behind himself and grabbed a spare notepad and pen off the desk, already scribbling notes to himself as he spoke. “If Andrew is having his own distinct memories of this timeline, it means that you have not simply jumped from one to the other. I suspect the Machine in fact...overwrote the old one, so to speak. Just like the tape you discovered. And just like on that tape, the impressions of what was recorded over remain, beneath. Your presence is drawing the impressions of that erased timeline up to the surface.”

“What-” Neil felt like the world had turned itself on its head, and then turned over again, only to not look the same as it had when it started. “-what does that mean?”

Kevin shrugged. “It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just the truth.”

That was when Andrew ducked his head through the door, scowling at them, to tell them Wymack had called a team meeting. This discussion point: shutting down the Bridge.

The team was gathered into a video conference room, the group of them both solemn and unwieldy as they crowded around a screen broadcasting from inside the central room of the Bridge, which mysteriously was able to broadcast signal into both universes. The Seth Gordon from the other universe was with them in the room.

This universe’s Gordon - the one who had been a Cortexiphan patient, and who had been involved in the earthquake - was in a holding room while the FBI’s lawyers tried to figure out what the hell to do with him. He hadn't been able to provide any useful information about Jones’ whereabouts. According to him, he’d been blackmailed. He’d received letters revealing knowledge of his participation in the Cortexiphan trials, his previous drug addiction, and the fact that he’d received the Cortexiphan funds under a false name. If revealed, he could have lost thousands of dollars as well as his job. He couldn’t afford either, and all he’d been asked to do was stand at a certain intersection at a certain hour. He’d been sent the watch along with one of the letters, told it would be used to communicate with him if need be. He said he’d assumed he was running drugs, but didn’t ask more questions than he’d had to.

“And then I got there,” he’d said, voice a horrified whisper. “And I looked at the watch and it just said ‘focus.’ So I did and I just...I don’t know man. I haven’t put a needle in my arm in over five years, but this felt better than any high I can remember. In that moment, even if I’d known what I was doing was breaking the universe in two, I don’t know if I would have stopped. It was like being awake for the first time since I was a kid. I’d follow that feeling anywhere. If everyone else out there is like me, there’s no stopping them.”

So now here they were. On the screen, Tetsuji Moriyama was flanked by his Agents Walker and Doe, both stony-faced in their uniforms, gold badges glinting from their chests.

“Our scientists are in agreement with yours, Agent Wymack,” Tetsuji said gravely. “We do not think the boundary between our universes can withstand another round of earthquakes. If the countdown on your Mr. Gordon’s watch is correct, we have mere hours. We agree to shut down the bridge before this can get any worse.” Tetsuji’s eyes drifted as he scanned his own screen. “Mr. Gordon, I want you to know you have our Agency’s deepest thanks. You actions have helped to save our world, and we will not forget that. The same goes for you, Agent Turner. My apologies.”
Neil didn’t grasp what he meant until he heard an unsteady sniff from the back of the room. “It’s alright,” Agent Katelyn Turner said, her voice wobbly. Her hands were stuffed deeply into her own pockets, and she seemed to be using the wall to hold herself up. Oh.

In light of the frequency of the earthquakes, air traffic had been grounded along the eastern seaboard. There was no way to get her or Seth Gordon back to Baltimore in time. Beside Katelyn, Aaron shuffled a little closer, propping a shoulder against her arm. She offered him a watery smile that she then turned to the screen, her boss, and her home. “I understand. I’ll be okay here.”

In the end, the moment their universe lost contact with the other was underwhelming. Nothing more than a screen going dark. A single dry sob before Aaron quietly led Katelyn from the room. Silence.

“I think I might miss them,” Nicky said softly. “In a weird way.”

“It’s a damn shame, that’s for sure,” Wymack said gruffly. “All right, pack it up people. I think we’ve had about a long enough day here. We’ll start dealing with clean up and get back to tracking down Jones tomorrow. For now, get some sleep.”

Neil lingered in the room as it emptied. He knew Wymack would be hanging around the office for at least another hour doing paperwork, which meant Neil had to hang around until then, too. Without anything better to do with himself, he went back to hiding in the spare office to try and get some rest. It was there, half an hour later, that Andrew found him, a lighter already twirling in his hands.

“Kevin told me,” was all he said before turning on his heel and walking away. He didn’t need to say another word for Neil to get the message - Andrew wanted to talk, and he wouldn’t tolerate Neil’s avoidance maneuvers any longer.

They didn’t have roof access to this building, but there was a weird wraparound patio that stuck out from the empty second floor staff cafeteria. Andrew had jimmed the door to let them out onto it. Or maybe he’d used his abilities. It was still strange to Neil to see him use them so casually, stopping a beaker from being smashed by Kevin’s wayward elbow, or picking his lighter up off the floor when he’d dropped it. It made Neil ache with a weird nostalgia, a sadness that he’d missed witnessing Andrew coming into his own in this way, taking something that had been put on him as a burden and owning it, making himself more for it.

The sky, which had been clear only that morning, looked heavy and grey with the threat of snow. It still seemed wrong to Neil’s brain that it was January already. The cold wet air seemed to cling to his skin. Beside him, Andrew lit himself a cigarette, then held out the pack and his lighter. Neil took both gratefully, lighting one for himself, holding it meditatively while he gathered his thoughts. He understood intuitively that Andrew had made the first move by bringing them here. Now, it was Neil’s turn.

“Well, the Bridge is closed, but at least I didn’t disappear again,” he said lightly.

Andrew looked at him sharply from where he was leaning against the balcony railing. “Was that a possibility?”

Neil shrugged. “I mean. The Machine is what erased me in the first place. Even though I made it back, I don’t really belong here. It was possible that once the Machine shut down, it could have taken me right back with it. And it would have been permanent. No coming back from that. No way of knowing though, really.”

Neil said the words as casually as he could, but he still hadn’t entirely shaken the thought from his mind. The strange shock of still being here. His mind kept going back to his conversation with
Kevin. Palimpsest. Maybe this was the proof he’d been looking for. If he’d hadn’t only been tethered to existence by the Machine, if he continued to exist without it, that implied that maybe this was his timeline. Or it had been, once.

“You did not think to mention this before?” Andrew asked. Neil could sense his anger, but it was almost comforting. He knew it wasn’t directed at him. It wouldn’t hurt him. It couldn’t.

“With two universes hanging in the balance? Come on. One life isn’t worth that, certainly not mine.”

“Martyr,” Andrew muttered. He was on edge, that much was clear, twitching in his own skin. He stubbed out his cigarette roughly on the railing, turning toward Neil and grabbing his chin in one fluid motion. Neil let himself be handled, waiting to see what Andrew was looking for.

With his other hand, Andrew reached into his pocket, grabbed something, and stuffed it into Neil’s hand without looking. Neil’s fingers curled around it instinctively, and his eyes widened as they found the familiar ridges of metal, skin-warm and familiar as his own heartbeat. The key to the house in Cambridge.

“Andrew I-”

“Shut up,” Andrew said. “Just- Let me-” he made a frustrated noise, dropping his hand from Neil’s face and stepping back. His hands went to his pockets, but his posture was rigid, all fight. “I know I am not the person you were hoping I was. I know we aren’t...anything. Just. You don’t need to keep sleeping on Wymack’s couch if you don’t want to. The other bedroom is yours, if you want it.”

Neil closed his hand tightly around the key, feeling the familiar ridges bite into his skin. “That isn’t what I was going to say.”

Andrew’s face was the same studied blank slate he habitually wore, but Neil had known better for a while now. There was calculation in the pinch of his brows, uncertainty in the defensive rise of his shoulders. Neil couldn’t afford a misstep now. Nothing but absolute truth would do.

“There is nothing I want more than to go home with you. There is nothing I want more than you, period. But,” Neil said. “That isn’t fair. To either of us.”

“I’m not asking you to sleep with me, Neil,” Andrew ground out from behind clenched teeth. “But I remember. I remember you.”

“I’m not supposed to exist!” Neil said, voice straining. “Even if Kevin is right, and I’m some kind of, of bleed-through echo of an old timeline, I don’t belong here. The Machine erased me for a reason. Whatever you remember, the universe is better off without me.”

“Fuck you,” Andrew spat, his mask cracking open for just a moment. “I remember being happy.”

The words hit Neil like a punch in the gut, knocking the breath from him. He was helpless to do anything but watch as Andrew gathered himself taking several measured breaths, turning away from Neil as he lit another cigarette. When he turned back, he seemed to have collected himself, but Neil could sense the fury still barely tamped underneath.

“Nicky told me when you first arrived, you asked about your mother, Mary Wesninski. Why?”

Neil blinked, thrown by the change in topic. “In my timeline, she went on the run with me when I was twelve,” he said. “My father caught up to us when I was twenty one and killed her for her betrayal. You, uh, know all this now, I guess.”
“I do.”

Neil waited for Andrew to elaborate, but after a moment of silence it became clear he was still waiting on Neil. Neil cleared his throat and continued.

“I guess. At the point I asked Nicky, I’d realized I wasn’t in the right timeline. That this was a world I hadn’t ever existed in. Saving me from my father got her killed. I guess I was hoping that maybe that meant here, she survived.”

Hopefully Andrew hadn’t had enough time to sort through his new memories to remember exactly how he’d felt about Neil’s mother. It wasn’t an argument Neil was particularly keen on having at the moment. He’d just needed to tell Andrew the truth. Andrew took a long, intent drag on his cigarette before speaking.

“Mary Hatford-Wesninski has been dead for years,” he said blandly. A fresh wave of grief cut through Neil. He hadn’t realized quite how much he’d been holding out hope until just then.

“How?”

“Murder-suicide,” Andrew said. Neil felt himself go still with surprise. “She’d turned on him just days before, spilled on his whole inner circle to the feds, brought them a stack of paperwork a foot high. They were about to put her in wit-sec. Instead, she shot Nathan in their bed, then turned the gun on herself. She was twenty-eight years old.”

“She had me when she was twenty-seven,” Neil said, a little numbly.

Andrew shrugged one shoulder, but his gaze was intent. “Not here,” he said.

Neil didn’t know what to think. Twenty-eight. “I’m almost twenty-nine.” It was less than a week until his own birthday. In this timeline, he was older than Mary had ever been.

“I can’t imagine what kind of mother the wife of a serial killer could have been, but for whatever it is worth to you, it seems to me that you kept her alive, not the other way around.”

Neil shook his head slowly as he let Andrew’s words sink in. Having a child had kept Mary alive, given her something to live for. But it had also made her even more selfish, too afraid of losing him to risk turning Nathan over the authorities. So instead she’d stayed, and failed to protect any of them, and even when she’d run it was with the knowledge that they’d never stop being chased, never be able to rest.

Neil didn’t know how to wrap his head around it. He’d spent so long carrying the guilt for his mother’s death, mourning her in city after city, cigarette after cigarette, it had become a part of him. He wasn’t sure who he was without it. He wasn’t sure he knew how to set it down. But here was Andrew, who Neil trusted more than anyone in any timeline, telling him he could try.

Here was Andrew, telling him his existence wasn’t something that could be erased without consequence. He wasn’t nothing to the universe, and he never had been.

“Abram.” Andrew reached up slowly and ghosted the pad of one thumb over Neil’s lip. Neil’s eyes fluttered shut at the touch. “Come home.”

Neil clenched his hand more tightly around the key. Desire was a language both of them had learned late, clumsily and with too many sharp edges, but they had learned before. They could learn again. He opened his eyes.
“Okay,” he said. “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

That's Part 11! Next week begins the last arc of this story!!

Up Next: Part 12, Brave New World

“All those plans for the apocalypse, we never planned on earthquakes designed to collapse the universes,” Renee mused. “And I was really counting on zombies.”

“Well, the world didn’t actually end, so you might get your wish yet.”
Part 12, Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

Here it is, folks! This is the start of the last arc of this fic! We're down to the final six chapters!
This Part is based around Fringe s4E21&22.

Part 12: Brave New World

Chapter 1: Apocalypse Part Two

Andrew woke from a nightmare sure that the world was ending. A tsunami; earthquakes; lightning striking from empty skies. Cold sweat dripped from his back as he struggled to disentangle himself from damp, twisted sheets. He got his bare feet on the floor, flexing his toes into the cold wood, and leaned his head over his knees. He focused on breathing.

It was morning. Early, not even sunrise, but morning. Andrew could already hear the blackbirds in the trees waking up, and a damp, gentle breeze blew through the cracked window near his bed. It had been an early and unusually warm spring so far this year. Now, near the end of March, the world was already coming back into bloom.

Andrew grabbed his armbands off the nightstand and pulled them on, feeling a little rush of relief at the soft, familiar pressure. Outside his door, light footsteps squeaked by, paused, then backtracked. Another pause, then a quiet knock. Andrew sighed, running one hand uselessly through sweaty, bed-snarled hair.

“Come in.”

The door cracked open. Warm light spilling in from the hall, framing Neil in the doorway. He was dressed for his usual morning run, his posture loose and curious as he peered into Andrew’s room. He looked at ease, for all the world as if he wasn’t fazed by Andrew in nothing but ratty pajamas, still trying to get his own pulse under control.

“It sounded like you were up- did I wake you? I think the door slammed a little on my way in.”

Maybe that had been what had woken Andrew - often even in the grip of a nightmare, it was only the screech of his morning alarm that broke the spell. But he had always been a light sleeper, so it made sense that an unexpected noise could have done it. He flapped a vague hand in Neil’s direction.
“Don’t worry about it,” he said. Neil had been living in the house for over two months now, not
counting the extra memories sloshing around in Andrew’s head. He should be used to the noise of
his morning routines by now.

“Allright,” Neil said easily. He started to move, then stopped again. “There’s coffee downstairs. Just-
holler if you need something.”

Oh god, he’d picked that phrase up from Nicky, for sure. It tumbled out of him in awkward
fragments, annoying and endearing at once. If it weren’t for the threads of exhaustion still tugging at
him, Andrew might have laughed. As it was, he managed to sit up enough to raise an eyebrow in
Neil’s direction.

“I will be down in a minute. Go shower or something.”

Neil smiled, and Andrew was as weak for it as ever. “Good. Don’t forget, we have plans today. If
you’re still up for it.”

Ah yes. It was Saturday, which meant Neil was playing Exy with the rest of his jock friends at the
community center. He still hadn’t come up with a good enough reason for Andrew to actually join
them, but he’d whined and prodded about “team bonding” for long enough that Andrew had agreed
to at least meet them all for brunch afterward. In reality, that meant he’d agreed to sit in the gym and
watch the game as well.

The gym was just as cramped, stale, and sweaty as Andrew had known it would be. Banners in the
deep blue of the local high school team hung between the high, thick windows. How Neil and his
co-workers took any pleasure in playing here, Andrew couldn’t fathom. The whole place put him on
edge. The decrepit air system was already struggling in the mild spring heat, and anyway there
wasn’t even enough space on the half-court to get a really proper return shot.

Andrew tucked himself high in the ancient wooden bleachers, crunching through one of a handful of
lollipops he’d stolen from Renee’s gym bag. She was in town for the weekend, definitely because of
vague family obligations and not to check up on him. The promise of post-brunch milkshakes was
half the reason Andrew was here, watching a bunch of cops and suits play stickball early enough in
the morning that he should have still been in bed.

The gym court may have been overused and underserviced, but the sounds of pounding sneakers and
ricocheting balls amid the jumbled shouting of voices could only ever be familiar. Andrew’s hands
curled in his lap, almost expecting to find a stick in their grasp, a phantom limb he’d put down years
ago, unable to quite lose the muscle memory.

Sharp, raucous laughter rang out from behind the grate of Neil’s helmet as he went streaking past up
the undersized court. Andrew remembered playing Exy with Neil, of course. On the inside of his
head, it felt as real as anything else, despite the fact that it had, technically, never happened to him.
Still, remembering wasn’t the same as experiencing, and watching Neil play was nothing if not an
experience. Andrew couldn’t see Neil’s face from where he was sitting, but he could read the lines of
his body almost as well as his own. Neil at play was a remarkable thing to witness, all focus but no
tension, all fight and no fear.

Eventually the game broke apart. Neil skidded to a stop in front of the bleachers, waving up at
Andrew with a lopsided grin. Andrew refused to acknowledge way that grin made his chest bloom
with warmth. He refused to acknowledge that all he ever wanted when he saw that smile was to drag
Neil in by the collar and kiss if off of him, to feel the awkward fumble of Neil’s teeth against his
mouth as Neil struggled not to grin through the kiss, all earnest pleasure. He remembered doing that.
It hadn’t happened, but he remembered it.
“You’re still coming to the diner, right?” Neil called up.

“Would I be here otherwise?”

Neil shrugged, absently stripping out of his gear. Andrew wanted to close his eyes. Instead, he got up and made his way down the bleachers.

“Maybe you just wanted a change of scenery,” Neil suggested.

Andrew gave a pointed glance to their surroundings. “If I wanted a change of scenery, I would not have come here.”

By the time Andrew was standing right in front of him, Neil had most of his gear hanging in one hand, but he didn’t appear to be in any hurry to go change. Likely he was waiting for the locker room to clear out a bit. Andrew remembered he’d hung around like this before, on the morning before everything had really begun, weeks after Andrew had kissed him for the first time.

“Where would you go?”

Andrew blinked. “What?”

“For a change of scenery. Where would you go?”

It took a minute for Andrew’s brain to catch up to the change in subject. “Anywhere, I guess. I’d just drive.” Sometimes he did just that, got on the highway and drove wide loops around Boston before letting the street signs guide him slowly back home.

“A road trip?”

“Maybe.” Andrew hadn’t ever considered actually going anywhere before. “South, maybe. I would like to see the mountains, I think. Not California.”

“No,” Neil agreed quietly. “Not California.”

Andrew wondered if he was the only one who felt like somehow in the slip of a moment, they’d stopped having idle conversation and started making plans.

Post-Exy brunch was a noisy, crowded affair. Andrew picked at his plate of pancakes and hashbrowns and exchanged knowing glances with Renee across the table, but otherwise resigned himself to sitting back and watching the group. Which of course turned into watching Neil. It had been a struggle for Neil to re-integrate himself with broader circle of their colleagues, including Matt Boyd and Dan Wilds. They were investigators by nature and trade - of course they were curious about where Wymack’s newest recruit had come from. Neil had gotten away with a series of impressively evasive half-truths, claiming to have found the team through “a friend of a friend” of Kevin’s. It helped that he still had a bit of a tragic look about him, and Wymack had a reputation for taking in stray things. For that matter, Andrew supposed, he did too, now.

When brunch mercifully ended, Andrew drove with Neil back to the house. Kevin, for once, stayed on his own. Another player named Thea had finally taken pity on Kevin’s obvious mooning and asked him to coffee herself just that week. He knew that later in the day Kevin and Neil were planning on returning to the lab with Nicky - Kevin was in the middle of some experiment using Cortexiphan to regrow brain tissue. They thought its regenerative properties were part of what was allowing Andrew to contain so many extra memories without his mind imploding, but it was hard to see the physical effects when they were on the inside of Andrew’s skull. Andrew had been vaguely intrigued at first, but the last time he had asked, Kevin had been baking a piece of brain matter in an
omelette under a heat lamp, so he’d decided there were some things he didn’t need to know. At least Neil and Kevin seemed to have found a groove of living and working together, by whatever strange means.

Andrew spent most of the afternoon at the gym, still trying to shake the buzz of his nightmares from under his skin, but nothing he could do on his own seemed to help. He missed having a sparring partner. Nicky said he didn’t miss Andrew and Renee showing up to work with matching bruises, but fighting with Renee had never really been about the pain. Or at least, it hadn’t been for a long time. It was about focus - nothing distracted your mind from your troubles quite as effectively as Renee Walker’s fists coming at you with no mercy.

He didn’t get to fight Renee, but at least he did get to see her. They’d scheduled a Tuesday Brunch while she was in town, in addition to the group brunch. They met downtown at an ice cream shop and got milkshakes bigger than their heads. Renee’s hair had changed again in the time since they’d seen each other last, this time back to a soft lavender it seemed she was growing to prefer. It was warm enough even at sunset to sit outside, so they found spots on a nearby bench and watched the traffic go by.

“How are you doing?” Renee asked, like she always did. They didn’t see each other often these days, and she knew better than to try to pry for personal details over text, but he knew she worried. Cared. Whatever she wanted to call it. Andrew thought about it. Not even the chocolate cookie dough milkshake was quite managing to wash the bad taste of his nightmare from his mouth, but he felt as solid as he ever had, comfortable with the setting sun on his face.

“I am adjusting,” he said truthfully. “It will take more than a couple of months to recover from the end of the world, I think.”

Renee hummed in agreement. “All those plans for the apocalypse, we never planned on earthquakes designed to collapse the universes,” she mused. “And I was really counting on zombies.”

“Well, the world didn’t actually end, so you might get your wish yet,” he pointed out. “How are you doing?”

“My position in New York is difficult right now,” Renee admitted. “The paperwork finally came through, we got approval to track down the remaining Cortexiphan patients from the other trial groups and bring them into temporary protective custody, if need be. We may have wyalaid Riko and Jones’ plans for the apocalypse, but they won’t have given up entirely. Allison is lobbying the board to name her CEO in Riko’s absence. It’s Jean I’m worried about. He’s been doing well in Riko’s absence, but he doesn’t belong at Massive Dynamic. It will always be too much like Evermore, I think. But with everything he knows, I don’t think he knows where else to go even if he could.”

“Get him in touch with Bee, if you can,” Andrew advised. “I think- in my new memories, she was going to take him in, before. She knows about the universes, and it seems like she gives her people...purpose. It might be a good fit.”

“Thank you,” Renee said. She chewed on her straw for a moment. “Speaking of your new memories, how are you doing with them? And how is Neil?”

There it was, the question he’d been dreading. The one he had, frankly, been avoiding thinking about himself. Andrew closed his eyes so he didn’t have to watch Renee watch him.

“What am I doing, Walker?” he asked woodenly. “He lives with me. Am I- I don’t know what is happening. I don’t know what to do about him.”
“What to do about him, how?” Renee prompted gently.

“You know how I told you I thought he was understating our relationship? I was right. We were living together. And not just- He had his own bed in my room. Our room. We were- he was-”

Andrew’s hands twisted on thin air. He needed to say it. If he didn’t let it out the fire in his chest was going to turn him to ash. He couldn’t form the words.

“Did you love him?”

Andrew’s jaw snapped shut reflexively, cracking through his straw. It wasn’t just the lumps of cookie dough from his milkshake making it difficult to unstick his teeth. “Does it matter?”

Instead of answering, she gave him another question. “Neil said that in order to create the bridge, the Machine erased him from time. No trace of him remained. And yet, he came back. Why? How?”

“How should I know? What am I, a goddamn X-man?” Andrew said. “Your Bible have anything to say about people coming back after being scrubbed from time, Walker?”

“Hm,” Renee hummed serenely. “Actually, it does have a thing or two to say about people coming back from the dead.” When Andrew turned to glare at her, there was a teasing sparkle in her eye.

“It also,” she continued, more seriously, “has a thing or two to say about love. So I’ll tell you what I think, if you want.” She took a deliberate sip of her milkshake to give him time to respond.

Oh, what the hell, he’d asked, hadn’t he? “Go on then.”

“I think you loved him,” she said simply. “I think you loved him so much that even when the universe tried to erase him, you-” she tapped a delicate finger against her own temple “-couldn’t forget him. That’s how he found his way back. It could erase him everywhere else, but not from you.”

Andrew wanted to get up and pace. This was why Andrew had built his relationship with Renee on fist fights and zombie defense plans. Left to her own devices, she did...this. He rolled the condensation covered milkshake cup between his palms, trying in vain to distract his body enough to let his brain just think.

“I am still not- the person he wants me to be.”

Renee shook her head slightly. “Maybe you are making assumptions about what he wants you to be.”

She let him swallow that, hope like uncomfortable shards of candy in his throat. Maybe a milkshake had been a bad idea after all. The mess of sugar was a solid lump in his gut, going sour by the minute.

“It doesn’t matter.” Neil had been right, that night after they’d shut down the Bridge, when Andrew had given him his key. It wasn’t fair. Andrew wasn’t the man from his memories, or Neil’s, no matter how much either of them might want that to be so.

Renee placed one hand beside his on the tabletop, the tips of their pinkies just touching. “If Kevin is right, those memories are yours, if you want them. It’s up to you. It matters if you want it to.”

Andrew felt drained, like he was the one who had spent the morning running up and down an Exy court. He didn’t want to think about this any more.
Luckily, the universe - or more likely, someone in it - didn’t make him. Because at that moment, mere miles away from where he and Renee were sitting, like a bad UFO tractor beam effect, only horribly real, an impossibly bright, impossibly huge beam of light shot down out of the Boston sky.

Chapter End Notes

Y’all. We made it. Not only am I posting the final arc of this fic, but I can say that the whole thing is actually WRITTEN. I just finished Part 12, Chapter 6 this morning and I am so excited to share the last part of this story with you. Thank you so much to everyone who has stuck with this story all this way, I’m literally giddy with joy over seeing it come together at last and getting to share it. Onward, to the end!

Up Next:

“What do you mean, it’s the sun?”
Part 12, Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Neil POV

Part 12, Chapter 2: Turn off the Sun

“Oh my god, that smells terrible,” Nicky complained, as Kevin popped a tin out of a small makeshift oven Neil had helped him construct just days ago. “What is it?”

“Lemon cake,” Kevin said, grabbing a small spatula and popping it out of the tin and onto a lab counter before carefully slicing into it. “Well, lemon cake laced with pig brain.”

Kevin had been in unusually high spirits all afternoon, since getting back from his coffee date. Neil didn’t know much about Thea Muldani other than that she was a hell of a backliner, an inch taller than Kevin in bare feet with the physique of a professional athlete. Apparently in this timeline, too, she worked for a pharmaceutical company when she wasn’t moonlighting as a cage fighter. Neil was both impressed by and vaguely terrified of her. Kevin was utterly smitten. He hadn’t shut up about some conversation they’d had about drug interactions, of all things, until he’d been distracted by his own experiment.

“Sorry, did you say pig brain? In lemon cake?” Nicky asked, sounding scandalized.

“Well, it’s the perfect incubator,” Kevin explained, slicing into the cake as Neil and Nicky looked on, extracting a small piece of paper from inside. “And it was easier to get pig brain than human on short notice.”

“Right,” Nicky said faintly, still looking squeamish at the frankly awful combined odors of lemon, sugar, and overheated brain matter. Neil leaned in to look more closely at the thing Kevin had extracted from it. He’d helped Kevin formulate the experiment, but he hadn’t actually gotten all the details of what Kevin was using it for.

“Is that a letter?” he asked.

At the same time, Nicky said “Oh god, is that evidence?”

“It was sent to Marshall Bowman,” Kevin confirmed. “Detailing the dosing of the drug that would transform him into a new breed of human. We know David Robert Jones was associated with the original sequencing of the drug, but I believe Riko was behind the larger scheme. I tried scraping this letter for DNA, but of course he was too clever for that.”

“Oh Riko might not have sent it at all,” Nicky pointed out, dubious.

Kevin pursed his lips in irritation. “I know you need proof. That is why I have conducted this experiment. I am utilizing a little-known side effect of Cortexiphan: temporary tissue regeneration. I’d been working with it to see if it might have affected Andrew’s memory when I realized there was a perfect application for it right here in our case! Heated between eighty and ninety degrees, the Cortexiphan I have added to the pig brain should cause at least partial regeneration of all biological
matter on the sheet of paper. Voilà, fingerprints!

The three of them leaned in closely to the paper. The typed letter had no signature, just a brief set of instructions and a little sigil - two half-rings with a dot in the middle. There were certainly new marks on the paper that hadn’t been visible before, but they were crowded over each other, smudged and smeared enough that they would be nearly impossible to identify individually.

“Although...identifying Riko’s prints from anyone else’s who may have touched this paper may prove more difficult than I anticipated. Damn it.”

Neil was so focused on the letter he didn’t immediately know why Nicky had suddenly gasped.

“Uh, Kevin? What the fuck?” Nicky said. When Neil looked, he was pointing at the lemon cake. As they watched, the slit Kevin had made in it to pull the letter out slowly knit itself back together, until the top of the small cake appeared smooth and whole again. Neil had known it would happen, at least in theory, but he had to admit it was still rather uncanny to watch in person.

“Like I said. Temporary tissue regeneration,” Kevin said casually. “You still shouldn’t eat it, though.”

“No shit,” Nicky murmured, now eyeing the cake even more distrustfully. “I think I need a break guys, I’m gonna go grab a cup of coffee from the caf upstairs.” Nicky walked away. Neil turned his attention back to the letter.

“What’s this weird brown mark?” he asked, nudging toward it with the end of a pencil.

Kevin picked up the paper and sniffed at it. His eyes widened. Then, to Neil’s absolute horror, he swiped a finger across the mark and licked at the residue.

“Kevin what the fuck.”


“I don’t understand,” Neil said, failing to see the connections.

Kevin clapped his hands together in excitement. “Of course, this wouldn’t have happened yet when you knew Riko. Or maybe it never did, I don’t know. Anyway. When we were older, Riko became obsessed with Chilean almonds. He even had an agreement with a wholesale importer. He must have been eating them when he printed this letter.”

That proved it. That proved that Riko was at the top of the human hybridization experiments that had killed Marshall Bowman and nearly killed Daniel Hicks. Chimeric DNA, the next stage of human evolution. Trying to collapse the universes to create a third, one where nothing could stop him, where he would be god.

“Well, we closed the Bridge,” Neil said, thinking as he spoke. “So even if he was behind all of this, we stopped him, right?”

“Maybe,” Kevin said nervously. “But after the lengths he’s already gone to, do you think he’s just going to give up?”

That was when Nicky got back from his coffee run. He wasn’t holding any coffee. Instead, his face was drained of color, and his hands were trembling.

“Uh, guys? You need to take a look outside,” Nicky said faintly. Neil hurried to follow him back out
the door, Kevin close behind.

The first thing that struck Neil was that it wasn’t as dark outside as it should have been. Then he saw it. Mere miles away and far too close for comfort, an incomprehensibly bright beam of light cut down from the darkening sky over Boston, crashing into the earth below. Fuck. Neil had a feeling Kevin’s question had just been answered in the worst way possible.

“What do you mean, it’s the sun?” Andrew demanded over the phone.

Neil flailed an exasperated hand even though Andrew couldn’t see the gesture. Across the lab, Kevin looked up in concern and Neil waved him away. A few work stations over, Nicky was on the phone as well, the receiver wedged between his chin and shoulder while he typed furiously at his computer. It was fortunate that they had been in the lab already when the beam had come down.

The beam was in the Beacon Hill neighborhood of Boston. It was intensely bright and hot, and seemed to be burning its way into the dirt of the city. To what end, no one knew. Andrew was in the car now, getting to the lab as fast as he could.

“Well, the sun is still up there, in the sky, even though we can’t see it,” Neil said, “It must be being reflected off of something.”

“Like a disco ball!” Kevin shouted from over his own hurried calculations. Neil winced.

“Like a disco ball,” he relayed. “Or like when you use a magnifying glass to start a fire.”

“How is it being done? And who is doing it?”

“We don’t know. Nicky’s working on the how. The who is your job isn’t it?” Neil pointed out. “I have some ideas, though.”

“You think it’s Jones,” Andrew said.


The world had been too quiet since they’d closed the Bridge in January. They’d had cases in the two months since stopping the apocalypse, of course - a man who’d created a time bubble to save his dying wife; a killer who’d hunted with pheromones; having to hunt down that gross giant rhinovirus slug again. But there hadn’t been a whisper from Riko Moriyama or David Robert Jones, and it was making Neil anxious.

“If you are right, why is he doing it? It looks like he’s trying to burn a hole to China.”

“Technically it would be India, I think.”

“Neil.”

Neil raked a frustrated hand through his hair. “I know, I know. I don’t know why he’s doing it. I don’t know why I’m so sure it’s Jones. I’ve just got a very bad feeling about this.”

The line was silent for long enough that Neil would have thought Andrew had hung up if it weren’t for the distant hum of traffic through the line. Finally, he spoke again.

“Yeah. So do I.”

There wasn’t much they could do without data. Neil went to help Kevin and Nicky source and sort through whatever they could find, trying to make sense of where the beam had come from and what
its purpose might be. Andrew arrived at the lab just as Nicky was getting off his phone. Kevin 
rushed over to his station as Neil flagged them down.

“Satellite imagery?” Kevin asked, leaning over the computer.

“Yeah, I just got access to the system,” Nicky said, hands still flying over his mouse and keyboard.

“Radio waves?”

“Just came online.”

“I need geological data of Beacon Hill.”

Finally Nicky’s hands stopped, and he took a minute to glare at Kevin. “Which one of those things 
do you want me to do first?”

“All of them,” Kevin insisted.

Neil turned away from their conversation toward Andrew. Apparently Renee was already racing 
back towards New York to help run the liaison with Allison and handle any resulting crisis there. 
“Wymack is on site evacuating the area?”

Andrew nodded. “Aaron is with him. They’re evacuating within one square mile of the beam.”

“Okay, the geologic data is printing,” Nicky said, pulling their attention back.

Kevin was the first to reach the maps and charts spilling out of the printer, spreading them across a 
nearby counter. Neil watched as his eyes skipped back and forth over the data, his frame growing 
more and more tense the longer he looked. “Shit,” he whispered. Then slammed one palm abruptly 
on the countertop. “Shit!”

“What is it?” Nicky asked.

“I knew I’d read something about this,” Kevin said tightly. “A few months ago, a subterranean oil 
reserve was discovered below Beacon Hill.”

Nicky pushed his chair back from his computer, the soft sound of the plastic wheels the loudest thing 
in the suddenly silent room. “And uh, what does that mean, Kev?” he asked nervously.

The knot of dread in Neil’s stomach only tightened as Kevin spoke. “The beam is burning through 
the ground. If it reaches the reserve...Imagine putting a match to a can of lighter fluid. Unless we stop 
this soon, the sunbeam will essentially set fire to Boston from below.”

Neil looked to Andrew. Andrew was staring intently, not at Kevin but at the maps of data spread out 
on the table before him. Neil could see the rapid wheels spinning behind his gaze. Andrew reached 
for the com at his belt and raised it to his mouth without looking away.

“Aaron? Tell Chief we’re gonna need to evacuate a lot more than one mile.”

“How much?” Aaron’s voice crackled back over the comm.

Andrew still hadn’t looked away from the maps. “All of it.”

“All of...what?”

“Boston.”
The crackle of the com spoke volumes. “I’ll call you back,” Aaron said. Then the line cut off.

Neil twisted his hands together, willing himself to focus. So someone - probably Jones or Riko - was trying to blow up Boston in their newest quest for universal domination. What else was new? What was one explosion to two universes of deadly earthquakes? They could fix this.

“Nicky, were you able to get a trace on any unauthorized radio frequencies?” he asked.

Nicky snapped to attention, rolling back to his computer. “Yeah, you were right. There’s a frequency not owned by the government that’s transmitting on the S-Band.”

“What is it?” asked Kevin.

Nicky peered at his screen. “2202.518. Wait, actually, there’s two frequencies. Also .520.”

“Oh,” Neil said. He and Kevin locked eyes as the rest of the group looked on. “Fuck, of course.”

“He was always brilliant,” Kevin said, distressed. “A bastard, but brilliant.”

“Will someone explain what is going on?” Andrew cut in.

“We can figure out where the satellites are being controlled from,” Neil said.

“What satellites?”

Right. Andrew hadn’t been here for that part. Neil explained their theory: someone, likely Riko, had launched or at least commanded two private satellites. They were the mirrors that were bouncing the radio signal around the planet, shooting a beam of sunlight at Boston consistently even as the earth spun and rotated. But now that they had the frequencies, they would be able to triangulate the signals and figure out where on earth they were being controlled from.

“According to the data, that’s…” Neil turned the map in his hands, the numbers feeling like fish slipping through his grasp. He paused to take a deep breath. Looked again. “The 1600 block off Beech street.”

“Interrupt the signal, and you shut off the sun,” Kevin said. Then, at everyone’s looks, grumbled “well, you know what I mean.”

“Right,” Andrew said, snatching up the map. “Kevin, keep doing whatever you’re doing. Nicky, work on any leads to track down Riko and Jones. If they are behind this it means they are in this universe. We need to find them. Neil, you’re with me.”

“Where are you two going?” Nicky asked.

Andrew snatched his keys off the counter. “To shut off the sun.”

Neil’s stomach felt like a cement mixer as they drove toward Chinatown, a never ending roll with something heavy and foreboding sloshing around at the bottom. In the driver’s seat, Andrew’s hands were tight around the wheel. Ahead of them, the beam of light burning down against Boston shone like a deadly beacon, too bright to look at straight on. They fought against traffic as the streets crowded with people in cars and on foot trying to get away, out of the city, away from the beam.

Andrew had herded Neil into the Maserati rather than an FBI vehicle. Neil understood the impulse; driving in his own vehicle was comfortable for Andrew. It was a known quantity. It was also fast and nimble, but did have the drawback of not technically being an official government vehicle. They
kept being stopped by security checkpoints, even with the dashboard lights on, Andrew growing
testier with each time he had to explain who they were and why they were heading into the
evacuation zone rather than out of it.

Finally, they reached the 1600 block. Andrew pulled the car haphazardly into a nearby drive and
Neil scrambled out into the street before it had even stopped moving properly, nearly tripping over
his own feet in his haste. He quickly recovered and scanned the surrounding rooftops.

“Andrew,” he called urgently. “Do you see anything?”

“There,” Andrew said, pointing toward a nearby roof. “There’s an antenna. Could that be what is
controlling the satellites?”

Neil squinted upwards. At least the giant beam of sunlight made it easier to see; it was practically
midday in Chinatown. He saw what Andrew was pointing to. A long, shiny antenna, clearly new,
projecting out from one of the rooftops, incongruous against the old fashioned television satellite
discs and small metal chimneys.

“Could be,” he said. Then something else caught his eye. Another antenna, one roof over. “Look,
there’s a second one. This must be it.”

Andrew went back to the car, retrieving a set of radios from the trunk and passing one over to Neil.
“You take one, I’ll take the other. You have a knife, right?”

Neil reached into a pocket and pulled out the small knife he’d nabbed from Andrew’s drawer.
Andrew frowned at it.

“What happened to the one I gave you for your birthday?”


“Oh.”

“Forget it, come on. You take one roof, I take the other?”

Andrew’s resolve hardened on his face. “Let’s go.”

Making sure to keep checking in with Andrew over the radio, Neil crept carefully toward his own
building. Taking a running leap from the end of the alley, he just managed to catch his fingers on the
bottom rung of the fire escape. With that purchase, he quickly scampered up to the first landing
before pausing to catch his breath. The rest of the climb was easy, so he took the time to move
quietly in case there was any unwelcome company. Time was certainly of the essence, with a beam
of light burning steadily toward an underground oil reserve, but all the haste in the world wouldn’t
do them any good if they were stopped now.

“I’m almost at the roof, how are you?” he murmured into his walkie when he reached the last level of
the fire escape. He held it close to his ear with the volume down low to listen for Andrew’s reply.

“Me, too. Let’s go.”

Neil carefully peeked his head up onto the rooftop. It looked clear. He made his way up and over to
where the antenna sat like a beacon. Across the street, he could see Andrew doing the same. He
turned his focus to the instrument metal box beside the antenna. There was a small access panel
covering the controls, but it was easy enough to pry open with Andrew’s knife.
“Tell me when you’ve got the panel open,” Neil whispered into his walkie.

There was the sound of a few scrapes and grunts over the channel as Neil watched Andrew make the same quick movements with his own knife, popping the metal panel free.

“Got it.”

“Okay,” Neil said. “Look for the dial marked ‘transmission amplitude.’ That’s the one you’ll need to turn all the way down.”

“Okay, I see it.”

Neil kept turning to scan the rooftop he as he worked, as well as Andrew’s. Through the hazy light, he just saw Andrew reaching for the dial in his own box.

“Not yet!” he said urgently. “Uh. Sorry, it’s just. We have to do this at exactly the same time or things could go haywire. The beam could go off kilter, cut a swath across Boston.”

“Right. Like don’t cross the streams, but in reverse.”

Despite the tension of the situation, Neil felt himself smile. In his old timeline, Andrew had insisted that if Neil was going to be a “sci-fi cop,” as he’d put it, he had to have at least seen Ghostbusters. “Hey. I get that one.”

“Yeah,” Andrew said. “I know. Tell me when.”

Neil placed his hand on the dial. “Okay. On my go. Three. Two. One. Go.” He turned his own dial all the way down. On the other side of the city, the beam of light winked out.

“We did it,” he murmured into the still-live walkie channel.

“We did,” Andrew agreed. “Well done.”

With the beam gone, night settled comfortably over the city once more. Stars winked into existence in the darkened sky. It felt almost peaceful.

That was probably why Neil didn’t see it coming when, a moment later, something thin, cold, and hard impacted with the side of his temple, knocking him prone on the rooftop with little more than a sharp oof! The remaining light of the city was just enough to make out the snarling face of David Robert Jones as the sole of his boot descended toward Neil’s face.
Part 12, Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

warnings for fairly graphic descriptions of a physical fight

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 12, Chapter 3: Trust and Other Battle Strategies

“Augh!”

Andrew’s head whipped around at Neil’s cry, and his heart stopped in his chest at what he saw. Jones was on the roof, his foot planted against the side of Neil’s face, smiling down at him smugly, a crowbar dangling loosely from one hand. Neil seemed to twitch beneath him, and for a moment Andrew feared the worst, but then Neil was shoving Jones back by the ankle and leaping up, the snarl on his face visible even in the fresh dark of the night.

Neil was back on his feet, his stance unpracticed but steady, his fists raised, by the time Jones recovered enough to attack once more. From where Andrew was standing, they were barely more than a dark tangle of limbs now, fists flying and feet scrambling for purchase on the tar paper roof. Jones had half a foot and at least fifty pounds on Neil, but Neil was fast and what was more, used to fighting from the losing side. He gave as good as he got, fists connecting with Jones’ body and drawing out grunts and cries. Andrew was grimly pleased to note that Jones’ loose molecular structure, while it may have let through a bullet, seemingly did nothing to lessen the impact of a well-thrown punch.

For a moment it looked like Neil was gaining ground. Then Jones raised the crowbar again, swinging wide and making contact with a sick thud. Neil screamed, his left arm going limp at his side as his shoulder dislocated. Andrew pulled out his gun and aimed.

“Jones!” Andrew shouted, hoping to draw his attention away from Neil. But they were still too close together, and too far away. Andrew couldn’t get a clear shot without risking hitting Neil. He watched as Neil stumbled backwards, clutching his shoulder, Jones following him with every step.

“Hey!” a voice shouted from behind Andrew. He barely twitched, too focused on watching Neil struggle to stand, continuing to fight and fend off attacks with his one good arm. “Hey! Security!”

“I am with the FBI,” Andrew called without looking.

“Sir, drop your weapon.” Behind him, Andrew heard the distinctive click of two guns at the ready, no doubt trained between his shoulder blades. He stepped to the side enough to get the two guards into his line of sight without having to take his own aim off of Jones.
“I can show you my badge in a goddamn minute,” Andrew snapped.

One of the guards stepped forward, serious in his stupid over-starched uniform. “Sir. I need you to put the gun down. Now.”

Andrew didn’t have a good shot on Jones, and he didn’t feel the need to die in quite such a stupid way as getting shot by a couple of rent-a-cops. He didn’t have fucking time for this. He tossed his own weapon onto the roof. If only they would put their own fucking guns down, too.

To his surprise, there were two identical clatters a second later as the guards’ own guns fell to the ground from limp hands. When Andrew risked a moment to look, they were both staring at him with wide eyes, backing away slowly.

“How did you-” one started, but Andrew had already turned away. Across the street, Neil was losing ground. His dislocated shoulder hung useless and wrong-looking against him, throwing his whole body off balance as he struggled to fend off even Jones’ inexperienced blows. Andrew was furious. If only they had switched buildings. Neil had scrap, but Andrew knew how to fight properly. He knew how to avoid damage rather than just take it with gritted teeth. He knew exactly where to hit to hurt. Against a clumsy fighter like Jones, even with the size difference, he might have stood a chance. But he was here and Neil was there and there was nothing-

There wasn’t nothing. There was...whatever it was he had just done, with the guards. Commanded them? Controlled them? Andrew didn’t know. Frankly, the thought of it made his stomach turn. But if the choice was going into Neil’s mind or letting him die, well. He’d made this choice before, with Aaron. He’d risked not being forgiven once, he could do it again. He could do it as many times as it took. Still, he wished there was a way to let Neil know. To ask.

There wasn’t, of course. You can’t take over someone’s mind and limbs without asking, or by way of asking, and there was no way to convey the complexity of this idea across the distance between them, with Neil in the middle of a fight for his life. But this was more than stepping into someone’s dreams. He had to try something.

So Andrew did the only thing he could think of. He jammed the talk button on his com, held it up, and shouted loud enough that Neil might have been able to make it out without the walkie at all.

“Neil! Yes or no?”

His heart was in his throat. Neil was struggling in Jones’ grapple. Maybe it had been a stupid idea. Maybe this was how he was going to watch Neil die.

“Yes!”

Andrew didn’t give himself any more time to think. He tore open every memory of Neil he had. Every look, every word, every promise, every touch, and he reached out across the gulf of air between them. Neil’s mind shone like a beacon, and Andrew latched on with everything he had. Then he moved.

Andrew jammed his right elbow up into the air. Across the street, Neil’s elbow jerked upward, slamming into Jones’ face. Andrew could scarcely believe it. It was working. Jones let go of Neil abruptly, stumbling back with a cry as blood spurted from his nose. Neil turned to stare over at Andrew, but in the dark Andrew couldn’t read the expression on his face. Then he heard Neil over the com again.

“Yes. Do it.”
There was only one way Neil was winning this fight, and it was with both arms working. Grimacing in sympathy, Andrew reached for his own left shoulder, grabbing it in his hand and rolling it sharply. Neil screamed as his shoulder rolled back into place, but then he seemed to gather himself. Andrew could feel him opening his mind, staying calm, letting Andrew help. Jones was getting closer. Time to finish this.

Andrew got himself into a proper stance, and started fighting. It was weird, not feeling his fists connect with anything but him mind, but it was satisfying enough to watch as Neil’s swings connected with Jones’ flesh over and over, beating him back toward the edge of the roof. And suddenly Andrew understood that they needed to end this, here and now. Jones was too dangerous, too clever. He couldn't be allowed to walk away.

But how? Neil was gaining ground with Andrew’s help, but he didn’t have enough mass to get Jones over the edge of the roof, not with how tired he already was. And they knew from experience that shooting him would do no good. His molecular structure was too unstable.

“How do we kill him?!” Andrew shouted, across the com and the air, as he slammed one of Neil’s fists into Jones’ kidney. One punch. Two. Three. Jones was struggling to stay on his feet, his hands clutching his sides.

“Uncross the streams!” Neil shouted.

Andrew was so surprised he almost dropped out of the fight. He couldn’t have heard right. Neil couldn’t mean that. Except- except it was a perfect idea of course. Still swinging, Andrew backed up toward the electrical array that controlled the antenna. If they turned both on at once, the beam pointed straight up, balanced between the two antennae. But if they only turned on one…

Andrew swung one last punch and followed it up with a vicious kick to Jones’ stomach. He watched as Jones stumbled toward the antenna array on Neil’s roof. Neil backed away as Jones caught himself on the panel, shouting “Go!”

Andrew turned the knob on his array all the way up.

A beam of white hot sunlight shot out of the night time sky. Jones’ body burst into flames, his unstable molecular structure bursting apart at the sudden influx of heat and energy. Andrew forced himself to count slowly, methodically to ten, then turned the beam back off before it could burn a hole in the roof. When the light died, there was nothing left of David Robert Jones but a pile of ash.

Shaking with adrenaline and something more difficult to name, Andrew carefully withdrew his power from Neil, leaning on his hands on the rough surface of the roof. Across the street, Neil stumbled a few steps on his feet, but didn’t fall. He stared at the spot on the roof where Jones had been, and then out across at Andrew. Even in the dim light, Andrew imagined he could make out the blue of his eyes from there.

Neil raised his com to his mouth, his voice finally coming in clearly. “He’s gone.”

Relief shuddered through Andrew. Whether it was at Neil’s confirmation or simply the sound of his living voice was impossible to say. Andrew almost asked ‘are you sure?’ but he had seen it with his own eyes. Jones was gone. Again. For good.

What Andrew really needed was to make sure Neil was okay. He needed to make sure Jones hadn’t harmed him too badly. He needed to make sure Andrew hadn’t harmed him too badly. Exhaustion was following hard on the heels of relief, dragging through his system like his limbs were being filled with sand.
“Hey,” Neil’s voice came across the coms again. “Let’s go home.”

Andrew didn’t bother working up the energy to respond. He headed toward the fire escape. No one stopped him; the security guards had apparently realized they were in over their heads and had clambered away sometime in the chaos. He headed down.

Neil was waiting for him by the car. He looked... better off that Andrew had been imagining, at least. There was an ugly bruise blooming unevenly beneath the scarring on his left cheek, and a hash of shallow scrapes over the other from where Jones’ boot had mashed it into the rooftop. There was blood clotted on a split in his lip, scrapes across his knuckles, and god knew what other bruising lurking beneath clothes, but he was standing. He was breathing freely, and his eyes were bright and too-knowing as ever as Andrew approached.

They needed to get going, but Andrew couldn't help stopping in front of Neil, searching him like he was checking for cracks. “Hey,” Neil said, mirroring him and spreading his hands a little at his sides. “I’m fine.”

In another lifetime, Andrew might have kissed him. In this one, he still wanted to, but he settled for looking. He felt his jaw stick as it fumbled around for the right words. “I am sorry. For that.”

Neil’s mouth quirked, a drop of blood rolling down his chin as a fresh scab cracked open. “It’s alright. I mean it was weird, not gonna lie, but like. Holy shit. You’re incredible, you know that? You saved my life. We killed Jones. That was incredible.”

He wiped the blood from his lip with the pad of a thumb, grinning just a little now. “And to think,” he said, “I used to think we’d never be able to work together. Just look at us now.”

Look at them now indeed.

It was well into the night by the time they got back to the lab. Nicky and Kevin had already gone home, and now that the immediate crisis was over Andrew was tempted to do the same. The lab was as much a part of him as any of them, after so long, but right now it was cold, the buzzing lights too bright for the late hour. It stank too, apparently from whatever experiment Kevin had been running earlier. According to Neil, it had been at least somewhat case related, but the only thing Kevin had managed to divine from his frankenstein easy bake oven project was that Riko still had a predilection for imported nuts. Andrew settled with his laptop on the lumpy couch with an internal sigh. He wanted to go home and sleep.

Neil though, couldn’t seem to calm down. He’d been twitching with anxious energy for the whole ride back, and had gone immediately to the computers once they’d arrived at the lab. Andrew had managed to herd him away just long enough to wipe the dirt out of the cuts on his face and get his freshly-relocated arm into a temporary sling, but that was as much ‘fussing’ as he’d tolerated before pushing away. Now he was back at his workstation, scanning world geological data maps over and over, scrutinizing apparently every crumb of data he could find.

The fourth time he saw the same set of maps go by on the computer, Andrew decided he’d had about enough. “What are you looking for?” Andrew asked, getting up to stand near Neil at his station.

Neil didn’t even look away from the screen. “We’re missing something,” he muttered. “That couldn’t have been the whole plan. An oil fire under Boston? Riko needs an energy source for something. That’s always the key - an energy source. He hasn’t given up on his plan to create his own universe. There’s got to be a backup plan. There’s got to be something else going on somewhere. We just have to find it.”
So it was going to be that kind of night. Andrew knew there was no use trying to talk Neil down right now. If he tried to keep this up all night, there would be time for intervention if necessary. For now, there was an electric kettle in the corner and a haphazard collection of mugs and tea stashed away just for occasions such as these.

“Can you track that on the tablet? Just set some of the other alerts good and loud?” he asked, when he came back with two steaming mugs in one hand and his cigarettes in the other.

Neil bit his lip, then nodded, grabbing up a tablet. Andrew considered heading to the roof, then decided that on second thought, that could wait for another night. Instead he lead Neil up the emergency stairs to the perch on the upper landing. He cracked open the high little window and Neil set up the tablet on a lower step where he could see the glowing maps and still hear any possible alerts from down below. Andrew passed over a mug, and Neil seemed to settle a bit as his fingers wrapped around the warm ceramic, leaning back against the wall with a soft sigh, surveying the lab from above.

“Thanks,” Neil said quietly, gesturing with the mug. Andrew nodded silently; he could have stayed just like that for hours, smoking quietly out the small window with Neil beside them, the lab silent and still below them. It was almost peaceful.

Of course, it was never meant to last. Their silent vigil was interrupted by the ringing of the lab phone, shrill against the silence. Andrew got to his feet and pushed past Neil down the stairs, grabbing up the ancient corded phone near the door.

“FOXES Division.”

“Hello. I’m looking for Dr. Kevin Day?” The voice was female, and sounded slightly anxious.

“This is his lab. He’s home at the moment.”

“No, he isn’t.”

Andrew frowned at the receiver. “Who is this?”

“My name is Thea Muldani. I-“

“I know who you are, yes.” What was she doing calling the lab? And did she mean she’d been to the house? “Kevin has a cell phone. I’m sure if he wanted you to call him at all hours, he would have given it to you.”

“Listen, you.” her voice turned suddenly sharper. “I’m not a stalker, I’m just a friend, so you can get off your fucking high horse, whoever you are.” Underneath the fresh ice in her tone, concern ran like an undertow. Andrew took his own phone out of his pocket to check for any new messages - nothing. Huh.

“I am his friend too,” Andrew said coolly. “And I would like to know what you want since you’ve apparently been banging on the door to my home.”

He heard a huff of frustration over the line, and could just make out the distant din of traffic. When she spoke again, some of the coldness had leached from her voice, but none of the urgency. “This is Andrew then? Look, I need you to listen to me. I work for a pharmaceutical company. I...found something. At work today. I need to speak to Kevin about it, but he’s not answering his cell phone, he’s not at home, and apparently you don’t know where he is either. Something is not right.”

It could have just been that with the late hour Kevin had just gone to crash at Nicky’s. But he usually
let Andrew know when to not expect him home. Their jobs were dangerous enough it made sense to keep tabs on each other. Something wasn’t right, indeed. Andrew put the receiver on his shoulder and called up to Neil.

“I need you to get in touch with Nicky. Find Kevin. If you can’t reach either of them, call Chief immediately.” He turned back to the phone in his hand. “Ms. Muldani, I think we need to talk, in person. How quickly can you get to Harvard?”

Andrew knew it was typically a twenty five minute drive from the house in Cambridge to the lab. Thea Muldani made it in less than twenty. In that time, Neil had already confirmed the worst - Nicky and Kevin were both MIA, not answering phones and not at any of their usual haunts. The last place either of them had been seen was this very lab, by Andrew and Neil themselves, before they’d left.

Thea blew into the lab like a whirlwind, all urgent energy. Andrew had only ever seen her in a fighting ring or on an exy court, in muted athletic clothes and with her dark, dense hair pulled back severely. Seeing her in casual dress - cropped green cargo pants with an oversized sweater in warm yellow, her hair a loose bundle held back with a scarf, eyes widened behind elegant glasses, through him for a momentary loop. But the focus in her eyes was as sharp as he remembered. She shook hands with Neil, grinning momentarily when she recognized him from exy games before growing serious again. They sat on the little couches and Thea rubbed her fingers at her temples, accepting a mug of fresh tea from Neil.

“The last place I should probably be talking about this is the FBI,” she said slowly. “But it’s all connected somehow.”

“What’s connected?” Neil asked. Andrew already knew.

“The fighting rings,” he said. Thea’s eyes widened, then narrowed. “I am right, aren’t I?”

“What do you know about it?”

“One of our agents spent some time among you,” Andrew revealed. “Renee Walker, otherwise known as the Phoenix.”

Thea sat back as she absorbed that information. “The Phoenix? Huh. Well.” She stalled, clearly trying to figure out how to move forward. It was Neil who leaned in, drawing her attention.

“Thea. We’re trying to stop Riko Moriyama from destroying the world as we know it. I can’t speak for the whole Bureau, but I couldn’t care less about a few illegal fistfights. Tell us what you know.”

She straightened her shoulders. “You’re impressive, for a little guy,” she said. “And you’re right. This is too important.

“I’ve been fighting in the Boston circuit for a few years now. The clubs I fight at, the guys who run them are mostly clean, but there’s always an underbelly to the underbelly, you know? People bet on fights, and any time there’s money involved someone is trying to rig the game. The Moriyamas - the real family - they’ve had their fingers in it all for years. So Riko starts sponsoring fighters for them, and those fighters start winning.”

She shrugged. “We all figured he was doping people. Guys like the Shotgun who had no right to be as good as they were. One of his fighters got nearly killed on the mats one night - rumor had it she was refusing to dope up.”

“Reynolds,” Andrew swore. He’d known there was more to that story.
Thea nodded grimly. “She came back raving about that hand, but you could tell it made her sick. But things died down after that. It was just normal backroom business.

“Then, about six months ago, I started hearing new rumors. Some kind of new drug that wouldn’t show up on any kind of test. Not a regular steroid, something else. Something that actually altered your DNA, like some kind of fucking super soldier serum. I never fought anyone who had taken it. The few guys who seemed like they’d gotten close to the source always seemed to disappear.”

She leaned back, drumming her fingers against the sides of her mug. “I was actually introduced to the fight scene through a couple of guys at work. Our company lost a few employees over the last months. Management said they’d been moved to other offices, but I knew the pattern because I knew the guys. They’d all been attached to the fight scene. And they’d all been talking about the drug. Chimera, they’d been calling it.”

“Marshall Bowman,” Andrew guessed. Thea didn’t even seemed surprised.

“Yes. Him and a couple of others. This sleazebag named Hicks.”

“Daniel Hicks, yes. We met him.” They’d known or at least surmised most of this over Renee’s time investigating the fight scene, but they hadn’t had concrete conformation of the Moriyama’s involvement before. The story of Reynolds’ injury was particularly sickening. “What did you discover?”

“So Hicks was transferred, right? But he was still showing up to fights. And he was strong. Scary strong, and fast, even though he looked like he was gonna be sick all the time. And then a few weeks ago, he stopped showing up to fights. I figured he’d finally moved, whatever. It wasn’t until today we cleaned finally out his office. When we did, I found...this.”

She removed a folded piece of paper from her purse and held it out to the two of them. Neil took it from her carefully, unfolding it. It was a short, typed letter. He read it aloud.

Mr. and Mrs. Hicks,

The war is almost over. The time to forge your path into the new world is upon us. You will be notified on the day in question - there will be no doubting that our time has come. We will meet at the harbor. Your new home is waiting for you.

ZFT

“I don’t know what ZFT is but-”

“We do,” Andrew told her. He held out his hand for the letter and Neil passed it over.

“There will be no doubting that our time has come. The beam of light. It wasn’t just trying to start a fire, it was a signal. All the people that ZFT gave the Chimera serum to. They’re followers, recruits. They’re going to follow Riko into the new universe.”

“Excuse me. The new what?” Thea asked. Andrew ignored her, engrossed in the letter. It was obviously some kind of code; he just needed to figure out what it was saying.

“Your new home is waiting...the harbor...” A memory swam up from the depths of his subconscious, one he hadn’t had a few months ago. “Chilean almonds,” he said quietly.

“What?” Neil and Thea said at once.
Andrew was already standing, crossing the room to grab his coat. In his mind’s eye, a shuttered glass door in a warehouse near the harbor. “I know where Kevin went.”

Chapter End Notes

Up Next:

“Agent Hemmick?” Andrew called back. “Are you all right?”

A nervous chuckle, a too-wet sound that hitched oddly at the end. “I, uh. I think I fucked up, bud. I’m - look I’m supposed to tell you to walk toward my voice, but slowly. Just- slowly.”
Part 12, Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Neil POV

warnings for mild descriptions of gunshot wounds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 12, Chapter 4: Imported Dry Goods

Neil hardly had time to grab his coat before Andrew was dragging him from the lab by his good wrist, hurrying toward the parking lot. They saw Thea Muldani out of the building, Neil offering an apologetic wave and a vague promise to let her know when they’d found Kevin, and were racing through the streets in minutes. Andrew took the wild turns of Boston with even more unnerving speed and aggression than usual, his expression set and grim.

“Where are we going?” Neil asked, for the second time. The first time he’d been met with silence, but this was one of those circumstances where he felt entitled to press.

“Imported dry goods,” Andrew said, leaning into a sharp left turn that had Neil pressed against the passenger side door. For once, Andrew had forgone style for speed and opted for a Bureau vehicle equipped with full lights and sirens, and he was making the most of it. Neil tried to remember if that was the name of a place they had been together before. If it was, Neil had forgotten about it entirely.

“I don’t think I’ve been there.”

Andrew’s head shook once, an abrupt movement more like a twitch than anything. “Nicholas Boone, the lab with the vials. It was close to the harbor. There was another warehouse next door that sold imported dry goods.”

Finally, the pieces slotted into place. “Chilean almonds. Kevin said Riko had an agreement with the wholesaler. But I thought that warehouse was empty when you found it.”

“My guess is, it is not anymore.”

It only took a few more minutes to get to the harbor. Andrew switched off the lights and sirens a few blocks away from their destination, pulling silently up to the old building where Nicholas Boone had led him so many months ago.

The blinds were drawn across all the windows. Neil peered at the warehouse as the car rumbled softly into the wide parking lot. He had never been here, but he remembered Andrew’s descriptions of it. One half of the building, an innocent imports business. The other half appeared abandoned, but was in actuality a lab and stronghold of ZFT. Zerstörung durch Fortschritte der Technologie, the twisted, pseudo-religious bioterrorist cult headed by Riko Moriyama. Even with the blinds drawn across all of the windows, a few slivers of light peeked through on the supposedly abandoned side.
The parking lot wasn’t empty either, despite the late hour and the relatively remote location. There were several cars clustered near the left side of the building, and several shipping containers laid out in a neat row just to one side. Then, Neil spotted it: Nicky’s car, parked in a far corner of the lot, so deeply cloaked in shadow he’d almost missed it.

For the briefest of moments, Neil considered asking Andrew to call for backup. Then he remembered, they were backup. Kevin and Nicky were in danger. There wasn’t a moment to lose.

“Let’s go,” he whispered, slipping out of the car and out into the open air. Andrew followed, catching him by the wrist as he headed for the door.

“You still have that knife?”

Neil’s fingers curled instinctively around the blade in his pocket, the shape so familiar now it almost felt more right than wrong to hold onto. “I’ve got it. I’d still rather have a gun.”

Andrew managed a baleful look even in the low light of the parking lot. “As long as you are a scientist and not an agent, that is still not going to happen. Come on.”

The door wasn’t locked. That was the first sign that they were in trouble, really. A locked door could mean many things, but in this case an unlocked door left only two options: either they were too late, or someone was waiting for them.

Andrew took the lead as they crept quietly through the front hall and into the main warehouse space. It wasn’t at all abandoned. The entire interior was filled with a maze of heavy crates, and there was a smell in the air like the must of a badly kept zoo. Rounding a corner in the tight maze of crates, Neil suddenly heard fierce whispers. Then a single whimper, so quiet he almost missed it, but audible enough to make Andrew stop in his tracks, square his shoulders, and raise his gun a little higher.

“FBI, show yourself!” Andrew called. He was met with silence. He stepped forward, slowly but without making any effort to be quiet. One step, then two. Then, just as they were about to round another corner, a voice called back.

“Andrew?”

Neil’s heart stopped at the sound of Nicky’s voice. He might have taken off running if Andrew hadn’t held an arm out in front of his path. Andrew held one finger up, a request for silence and patience neither of them wanted to give. Neil could see him taking deep, slow breaths through his nose.

“Agent Hemmick?” Andrew called back. “Are you all right?”

A nervous chuckle, a too-wet sound that hitched oddly at the end. “I, uh. I think I fucked up, bud. I’m - look I’m supposed to tell you to walk toward my voice, but slowly. Just- slowly.”

Nicky’s voice sounded strained. Andrew was so tense he hardly looked real, more like an action figure than a man.

“Okay,” Andrew said. He put both hands back on his gun, but lowered it to his side. Neil guessed he felt it wouldn’t do them any favors to come around the corner barrel-first. “I am coming around the corner now. Josten is with me. We are approaching slowly.”

And approach slowly they did, almost painfully so. They came around the corner and reached a sort of clearing amidst the stacked crates. There were two figures. Nicky was standing in the center of the room, his face pale and his eyes red. He was facing Andrew and Neil as they came into view,
standing perfectly still, hands at his sides. Behind him, looking much calmer than the last time he’d interacted with FOXES Division, pointing a gleaming black gun squarely at Nicky’s back, was Daniel Hicks.

Neil hadn’t interacted much with Hicks in his own timeline, but he hadn’t liked him then and he cared for him even less now. He was everything Neil would have expected of a corporate shill who had decided he would feel like more of a man if he joined an underground fight club: sallow and unfeatured, with a muscular frame that still somehow came off as weak despite his posturing, or perhaps because of it. He was sneering at Andrew, and his gaze only got more contemptuous when he caught sight of Neil.

“Set down your weapon,” he said, jerking his chin at Andrew. “Slowly.”

Andrew didn’t raise his weapon, but he didn’t drop it either. “What are you doing?” he demanded.

Hicks grinned. “I’m sure you must be quite stymied by our situation, Agent Minyard,” he drawled, lisping slightly around what was probably an old broken jaw and several missing teeth. Neil wondered if he’d lost them in a fight or simply in his body’s own revolt against his chimeric tampering. “So used to having the upper hand over us regular folk, with your badge and your suit. But none of that matters here, and none the little thoughts racing through your head right now are as important as what I am about to say, so pay attention. If you ever want to see Kevin Day again, and if you do not want me to shoot this agent where he stands, you will put your gun down.”

Andrew, who took commands from no one, took one look at his cousin and tossed his gun to the floor.

“You’ve been working for Riko all along,” Neil said. The letter had indicated as much, but only seeing the fervor in Hicks’ eyes did he truly begin to understand what that meant. “You weren’t just a test subject. You’re an acolyte of ZFT.”

“Got it in one...whoever it is you are,” Hicks said. His focus didn’t stay on Neil for long, sliding back to Andrew. “Dr. Moriyama is building a new world beyond this one. I have been chosen to be a part of it. He told me about you, about how you rejected his offers to work at his side. I wasn’t so stupid. I have become more than human, and I will become more than you could ever dream of being.”

“Then what are you doing here?” Neil asked, while Andrew simply stared, stony-faced. “Babysitting a couple of measly federal agents while your Doctor populates Eden without you?”

Hicks snarled. “Do not speak to me that way! I am one of the Adams of the next evolution of mankind! You are nothing. Dr. Moriyama sent me here to tie up a few loose ends, that’s all. Squash a few last troublesome gnats.”

Andrew strode forward, flicking a knife into each hand before Neil could even think to stop him.

BANG.

The gun fired, and Neil gasped, but no bodies fell. There was only the clatter of a single knife falling to the floor, loosed from Andrew’s grasp. A few feet in front of Neil, Andrew was standing with one palm raised. And just in front of that - floated a single shining bullet, floating in midair.

Hick’s eyes went wide, and he turned his revolver toward Andrew. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. He emptied the chamber in rapid succession, but Andrew stopped each one like it was the simplest thing he had ever done.
“Wrong.” Andrew’s voice was ice cold as Daniel Hicks stared at him, too dumbfounded to fumble with reloading the revolver he’d just emptied onto Andrew, only to have Andrew stop each bullet in mid air. “He sent you here to die.”

Andrew drew back his hand and seemed to fling the caught bullets forward as fast as they had come, punching a perfect, bloody star in the center of Hicks’ chest. Hick’s whole body flinched from the impact. He gave one terrible, gurgling gasp, and then collapsed on the floor of the warehouse. Dead.

Andrew barely seemed to spare him a glance as he fell, bee-lining instead for Nicky, who was still standing in the center of the room, now visibly swaying in place. Andrew caught him roughly by the shoulders and Nicky flinched hard, sucking in a gasping breath that had Andrew backing up in a hurry, only to look at his cousin with, if possible, even more intent.

“What happened?” he demanded.

Nicky’s face sagged further, his eyes wet and mournful, frightened. “We just came looking for evidence, just to talk to the place next door. But there were these weird sounds coming from in here and we came to investigate and...I never should have taken him with me. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry, Andrew.”

“Nicky.” Andrew snapped his fingers in Nicky’s face as he started to ramble. “Apologize later. Explain now. What. Happened?”

“Ambushed us.” Nicky’s voice had dropped to a whisper. “Riko was here. He took Kevin.”

“Ambushed you?” Neil stepped forward, and it was only once he was a few feet away that he saw the dark stain spreading down the leg of Nicky’s pants, and his ragged breathing made sense. He hurried past Andrew and yanked Nicky’s jacket to the side. Low on his hip was an unmistakable gunshot wound, pulsing weakly. Nicky looked down at it, then back up at Neil, his eyes hazy and unfocused.

“I fucked up,” he whispered. “I’m sorry.” Then he fainted.

Getting Nicky to a hospital was the most important thing, of course. But by the time the ambulance was on its way, Neil was already grabbing Andrew’s phone and making another call. This one to Allison Reynolds.

“This isn’t Agent Minyard,” she said sharply when he said hello.

“No, this is Neil Josten. I’m with Andrew now. Nicky Hemmick has been shot, Kevin’s been kidnapped, and we need your help.”

He could practically hear her focus dial in as she processed the news. “What do you need?”

He knew Allison Reynolds in this timeline had only met him in passing. She had no reason to trust him, and less given what he was about to ask for. But their need was stronger than his uncertainty, so he threw caution to the winds.

“I need to speak with a dead man.”

By some feat of engineering, wealth, and pure force of will, Allison Reynolds was standing in the lab in Boston less than two hours later, helping Neil unpack a complicated contraption that looked like something out of a horror film, all robotic angles and spidery arms. Beside it, the body of Daniel Hicks was laid out on a table, wrapped in heat packs and mostly covered by a thin white sheet.
Wymack came back to the lab to observe the procedure, having finished dealing with ending the city-wide evacuation. Aaron had gone to the hospital to be with Nicky, who had made it out of surgery safely but wasn’t getting out of bed anytime soon. Neil could tell it set Andrew on edge to be in the lab rather than at his cousin’s bedside, but finding Kevin and stopping Riko had to be their top priority.

“Someday,” Allison said to Neil, “I am going to have to ask you how you know about this technology, you know.” She picked up a small nail gun off the instrument table and, turning to the corpse, drove a nail dispassionately into each of Hicks’ temples. She began settling the contraption around the bolts. “Watch his body temperature. We need to maintain around eighty five degrees.”

While Neil fussed with the heat packs, Allison turned to speak to Andrew, who was hovering nearby, rubbing idly at the side of his head. “Renee wanted to be here, but I needed someone around to handle things in New York if the world really does start ending. But I will do everything in my and Massive Dynamic’s power to help you stop this. If this man knows anything about where Kevin is, we will find out.”

Andrew nodded. “Whatever his mission was, Riko was willing to let him die for it. Jones too, and he was one of his top lieutenants. Riko is playing me, I can feel it. First kidnapping me to Providence, but that plan failed. Then the oil fire, then they attack Neil, then they threaten Nicky. And always, I am the one asked to step up and stop it.”

Neil realized what he was getting at before he’d even finished speaking. He paused in adjusting a heat pack on Hicks’ body. “The focus is on you. On getting you to use your abilities. But why?”

“That is the apocalypse stopping question, isn’t it?” Andrew said. He was staring at Hicks’ head like he could read thoughts off of the dead flesh of his brain.

“I know it’s not my place to say but,” Allison said, “records indicate that you were one of the most successful patients in the Cortexiphan trials. Tetsuji practically raved about your abilities. Riko has clearly latched onto that. Whatever it is he wants, it must be something he thinks only you can provide.”

Hopefully Hicks would be able to offer some answers. Or at least a direction to start in. The only sounds for a few minutes were the quiet clicks and scrapes of Allison finishing hooking Hicks up the equipment. Wymack asked a few questions about the procedure, but seemed disturbed enough by what little Allison was able to explain to him to not push much. Finally, she curled her hand around the main electrical switch of the machine, black shiny nails tapping against the plastic.

“Here we go.” She threw the switch.

A low hum of electricity filled the air. Then, Daniel Hicks’ eyes opened. It was a grotesque thing to witness. The eyes themselves lacked focus, titling at separate angles as he stared at nothing, mouth opening to take a slow, rattling breath.

“I can’t-” Hicks - or his corpse - began to speak. His voice was unnatural and strained, like in this half-living state he hadn’t quite retained the muscle memory of forming words. “I can’t feel my arms. Can’t feel my legs.” Hicks’ eyes spun more wildly, his rattling breathing picking up pace, even his hands twitching slightly as panic seemed to set into him. “Oh god. Why can’t I feel anything?”

Neil ignored his panicking, leaning over until he was sure he was the only thing Hicks could see.

“Where if Kevin Day?”

“What did you do to me?” Hicks demanded. Then he gasped, and seemed to fade out of
consciousness, although his eyes remained stuck open.

“What happened to him?” Wymack asked. “Did he faint?”

“He’s a dead body, he can’t faint,” Allison said. “Give it a minute.”

Hick’s eyes began rotating again, his mouth working for several seconds before he managed to speak. “Mom. Mommy? Mommy? Mommy where are you?”

Goddamnit. They didn’t have time for this. Neil tried again. “Daniel. We need you to tell us where Riko Moriyama is.”

“Ding, ding, ding. My bicycle. My bicycle is blue and has a little chimey bell on it. Ding, ding, ding. My bicycle is blue and has a little chimey bell. I left it in the rain, and it rusted.”

Neil growled in frustration. “He’s lost in him memories or something. We need him to tell us where Riko is.”

Allison reached out a hand and snapped several times in Hicks’ face. Hick’s head lolled toward her on the table, falling unnaturally far against the cold table. “Daniel. Daniel, look at me,” she said sharply. “Riko Moriyama. Where is he?”

“Hm.” Hicks’ voice sounded far away now. “All wet, I expect. And a bore. A man-” his voice took on an almost sing-song quality, like reciting an old nursery rhyme. “-a man must be blind or out of his mind, to go out to sea once more…”

The sea. All wet. The harbor. It all fit together somehow, it had to. “He’s on a boat,” Neil realized. “Probably close to the warehouse. Augh, this is taking too long.” He reached out and grabbed Hick’s corpse by the chin, shuddering with revulsion at the clammy deadness of the skin, forcing Hicks’ head back in his direction. “Daniel! Is Riko Moriyama on a boat?”

Hicks’ eyes suddenly snapped into uncanny focus. “Riko Moriyama is a great man. A brilliant man. More than a man. We will give birth to a new world born of collapse.”

Andrew crowded over Neil’s shoulder now. “Daniel, how is he going to give birth to a new world if we closed the bridge between the two universes?”

The monitors attached to Hicks were beeping in time with the electrical impulses keeping him in suspended animation. Now, they began to noticeably slow. The connection was beginning to fade. Hicks’ face took on an almost dreamy quality.

“I’m afraid we don’t have much longer,” he said. A corpse shouldn’t have been able to look or sound smug, but Neil would have sworn Hicks pulled it off.

“How is Riko going to collapse the universes?” Andrew insisted. Neil backed away as Andrew crowded into the corpse even further, demanding its complete attention.

Hicks’ eyes were spinning again, that awful little smile still stretched on his dead mouth. “He needed an energy source.”

“What energy source?”

“We’re all expendable in the wake of creation.”

“Daniel, how is he going to do it?”
That same rote, sing-song tone. “Noah was a righteous man, and he brought onto The Ark every creature to populate the new world. Two by two.”

Andrew reached out and grabbed the corpse by the shoulder, shaking it. “Damn it Hicks, what energy source?”

The hum in the room grew abruptly louder, a loud buzz filling the space for a fraction of a moment before several circuits blew at once with a series of loud pops. The lights on the machine dimmed and sputtered out. Daniel Hick’s body gave one last monumental spasm and then lay still, for good this time. When Neil peered closely, he saw that the nails in his skull had fused with the wires attached to them, the acrid smell of charred flesh and melted plastic wafting up from the table.

Andrew backed up several steps, staring back and forth between the body, the machine, and Allison. “What just happened?”

Neil had a bad feeling he knew. He turned to Allison. “Help me find the Gauss Meter. I think I know what’s happening.” He could sense the wheels starting to turn for Allison as well. They dug up the meter in a few moments, and Neil waved it slowly over Andrew’s body, watching at the needle spiked up, up up.

“What does that measure?” Andrew asked warily.

“Electromagnetic fields,” Allison said. “And the force you are giving off is...extraordinary. I’ve never seen anything like it anywhere, let alone on a human being.”

Allison seemed unwilling to be the one to entirely spell it out for him, but Neil saw the moment it clicked for Andrew. “I am the energy source,” he said. “It’s me. Riko is going to try to use me to collapse the two universes. That is why he has been working so hard to make me use my powers, to activate me. I am his battery.”

“Yes,” she said. “But. I have an idea. You are giving off an extremely strong electromagnetic signature. If Riko is using you as a power source-”

“-the frequency Andrew is giving off will be the same frequency at the heart of Riko’s interdimensional haven,” Neil finished for her, catching on. “Assuming Riko wants to survive the collapse, that’s where he’ll be. At the exact place where the universes overlap. The eye of the storm.”

Wymack stepped forward then, looking between the lot of them before focusing on Allison. “I don’t suppose you know a way to...turn it off?”

“Not a way where Agent Minyard lives,” Allison said bluntly. Andrew turned and walked toward the door of the lab without a word.

Wymack turned to watch him go. “Hey shrimp!” Wymack shouted after him. Andrew paused in his tracks, but he didn’t turn around. “We’re not gonna let that happen, you hear me? We’re gonna fix this. You, me, and this team.” Andrew’s shoulders drew up slightly, then he kept walking, the lab doors swinging behind him as he left.

Wymack sighed, turning back to Neil and Allison. “No time to waste folks. Let’s find this sonofabitch.”

It was almost an hour later that Neil finally made his way up to the roof of the lab. He found Andrew where he expected to, sitting near the edge. There were cigarette buts littered around him, some only
partially burnt and crumpled like they’d been stamped out in frustration. He was facing out toward the city, rather than over campus. To the east, the faintest beginnings of light were beginning to glow over the horizon.

Neil made his way over and sat down a few feet from Andrew, pulling his own knees up to his chest, his left shoulder protesting from its sling as he tugged his arms into his body. The dew-wet cold of the rooftop seeped through his jeans. For a long time they just sat in silence, staring out over the city together in the pre-dawn dark, the smell of cigarette smoke heavy in the damp spring air. It scarcely seemed possible that less than twenty four hours ago Neil had been getting home from a peaceful run through these same dark streets, his biggest concern waking Andrew with the slamming door.

“Did you find Riko?” Andrew asked at last. His voice was rough from smoke. He wasn’t looking at Neil.

“Not yet,” Neil said, watching him. “But we’re close. They think they’ve figured out what he’s on - a cargo ship that left harbour in the late afternoon and fell off the grid moments after launching. There’s a squall around eighty miles off the coast that they’re narrowing the search to. It won’t be long.”

Neil paused, unsure if he should share the other bit of news they’d gotten from the geological team. Apparently he wasn’t good at hiding his hesitance though, because even without turning to look at him Andrew just said “spit it out, Neil.”

“Three microquakes,” Neil said quietly. “Albany, Waterville, and Worcester. All within seconds of each other. It’s starting. The universes are colliding.”

Andrew’s fists clenched so tightly his knuckles turned white, old scars standing out against pale, taught flesh. Neil wanted desperately to reach out, to run his hand over that skin, to offer some kind of comfort. But Andrew had rarely touched him since their conversation on the balcony, months ago now. Tugs on his wrists or brief shoves to get or direct his attention, but nothing more. Nothing like it had been once, when Andrew’s hands had lingered like they didn’t want to break contact. Even though they lived together now, Andrew still held himself apart from Neil. Maybe Neil had been holding himself apart, too. Neil couldn’t decipher whose benefit it was supposed to be for anymore.

“Andrew. Hey. It’s-”

“Don’t,” Andrew cut him off. He finally turned his head and looked at Neil. His face was gaunt and pale with exhaustion, his eyes red from smoke. He looked older than Neil had ever seen him. “Don’t say it. Don’t be that stupid.”

Neil offered him a sliver of a smile he barely felt. “Can’t help it,” he said. “You know that. Come on. We’re gonna figure this out.”

“I’ve seen this team do the impossible, Neil. But this time? This time, I really am not sure we will.”

Andrew turned away again, shaking his head. “I remember almost nothing about the Cortexiphan trials. But I have seen the tapes. I know I was...scared. Alone. It has taken everything I had just to make it this far and now - I am right back where I was.” He slapped one palm hard against the cold pavement of the roof. “Nothing has changed. I am still just that stupid kid, still with a fucking Moriyama doing experiments on me.”

Maybe it didn’t matter which one of them had been holding back, or whom it had been for. The time for it was past. Neil slowly extended one hand and placed it gently on the ground between them, not
quite close enough to touch. Andrew didn’t turn to look, but Neil knew he saw. He only hoped he would understand. “You’re wrong. Something has changed. You’re not alone this time.”

Chapter End Notes

*wipes away a single tear* two more chapters y'all. Can you feel it?

Up Next:

Neil was grinning. “I always said I’d pull you down with me. Come on, all you have to do is jump.”
Part 12, Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Andrew POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 12, Chapter 5: Zerstörung durch Fortschritte der Technologie

Andrew was in freefall. He’d described it to Bee that way, once, back when he’d been bouncing
between medications in college, high and dead inside by turns. Half of his brain was in a frenzy,
beating at the walls of his skull with bloody fists, screaming for him to move, to strike, to draw blood
from something for god’s sake. The other half: dead, shut down with the ease of a lifetime of practice
dealing with things he couldn’t bear to feel in the moment, refusing to process or react to any of it.
Somehow he was in both states at once, and the combination was so...so out of control, the only way
he could describe it was that he was falling. No idea where the ground was or when it might come
rushing up to meet him. The only certainty that he needed to find something to grab onto, fast, but he
didn’t see anything around but empty air.

Then Neil Josten held out his hand. Andrew didn’t want to take it. He didn’t want to drag Neil with
him by mistake. Neil was stupid, a martyr and an adrenaline junkie who hadn’t been properly afraid
of death even before he’d somehow survived being erased by time. But. But. Neil was also strong,
more resilient than Andrew had once given him credit for, in another lifetime or this one. He was a
survivor, against all odds, baring a bloody smile at the universe and daring it to wipe it off his face.

If Neil could do all that, maybe Andrew could get up off of this roof, just once more. Hell, if they all
died today, it wasn’t like he’d have long to be worried about it. His muscles felt like wood as he
stood up, fighting off a wave of dizziness from exhaustion and nicotine. He held out a hand down to
Neil.

“Come on then. Let’s save the world again.”

Neil took his hand with his good arm and allowed Andrew to help haul him to his feet. For a
moment they were almost nose to nose, and Andrew could feel a balance somewhere between them
tilting, tilting, as he stared into those shock wave eyes.

“Save the world,” Neil said, like he was reminding himself. “Then, I think you and I should talk.”

Andrew didn’t suppose he was going to be able to get out of that one. “Fine,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Andrew slammed the doors open as they made their way back into the lab. Andrew felt Wymack’s
assessing look, but he didn’t slow as he made his way to the bank of computers, where Reynolds
was spearheading the effort to track Riko’s ship by satellite and electromagnetic transmission.

“What do we have?”

“We’re tracking areas of electromagnetic frequency in the area of the storm off the coast,” Reynolds
explained. “Looking for areas that aren’t giving off the right signal, to try to find the place where this universe overlaps with Riko’s safe zone.”

Something pinged on one of the screens, and the technician seated at it sat up straighter. “We’ve got it,” he said. He turned and called toward Wymack. “We’ve got it sir! Eighty three miles due east from Nantucket.”

Wymack was already pulling out his phone. He pointed a finger at Andrew, and at Neil beside him. Given the circumstances, what he said next wasn’t the worst thing possible, but it was fairly high on Andrew’s list.

“I’ll call the chopper. You two, suit up.”

Andrew had always been fond of his fear of heights, but that fondness was an abstract thing in the face of the reality that was being in a fast moving helicopter, dozens of feet above the open ocean in the middle of a storm. The universe really was running out of bad jokes to play on him if it had resorted to this. There were four of them total in the helicopter: Andrew Neil, Wymack, and the pilot. They’d been circling the same patch of empty sea for close to ten minutes now, but so far Andrew hadn’t spotted even the vague outline of a ship.

Andrew turned away from the windows, breathing heavily. Someone else could find the damn thing. He tried to focus on Neil and the interior of the helicopter, but it did little to dissuade his stomach from trying to exit his body through his esophagus.

“Where is it?” Andrew asked the pilot, over the sound of his heart beating in his own ears inside his headset. The pilot turned to him, looking confused.

“According to the signal, we should be right over it.” the pilot said. “I don’t know where the fuckin’ thing is hiding.”

Neil was staring between the two of them, looking bewildered. “What are you guys talking about? It’s right there.”

“What do you mean it’s right there?” Andrew turned his head back toward window, his stomach flipping again at the sheer drop to open water.

He saw Neil’s lips moving, but didn’t hear any sound as Neil began to mutter to himself, looking stymied. He looked back and forth between the window, the pilot, and Andrew, brow furrowing in apparent confusion. Then he suddenly straightened.

“I think I know what’s going on,” he said urgently. “Riko’s pocket is creating a unique electromagnetic signature, right? It’s going to be vibrating at a unique frequency. I think it’s already out of sync with this universe. But at least for now, it’s still in sync with the other side. I’m from the other side, which means it’s still in sync with me, so I can see it.”

Wymack frowned, leaning in. “If the boat is on the other side, we can’t get to it.”

Oh, if only that were true. Andrew took a deep breath, ignoring his growing nausea. Freefall. What a bad joke indeed.

“I can get to it.” he said. He knew it was true. It was how he’d gotten Neil back, in another lifetime. “My abilities allow me to cross unassisted between universes. I can get us there.” He swallowed roughly and turned to Neil. “You just have to tell us where to jump.”

To Neil’s credit, he didn’t hesitate. He stood, walked to the pilot, and said “Circle in tighter to the
signal. We’re getting ready to jump.” Behind him, Wymack was already opening the cockpit door.

Andrew walked toward the opening, the wind howling in his face. Neil stepped up beside him, his gaze intent on something below that no one else could see. “I knew you’d be the death of me, but this isn’t really what I pictured.”

Neil was grinning, the wind plastering his overlong hair to his cheeks, his eyes more electric than the storm. “I always said I’d pull you down with me. Come on, all you have to do is jump.” He yelled back to the captain, “A little further to port!” He reached for Andrew’s hand and Andrew took it unthinkingly, unhesitating. “On my count. Three. Two. One.”

“Jump!”

Andrew leapt out over the empty ocean, Neil’s hand in his.

He landed hard on the deck of a ship. It materialized in Andrew’s vision about ten feet before they hit, giving him just enough time to keep from landing on a small stack of crates. It was a rough landing, and Andrew had to concentrate to avoid shouting out as pain from the impact shot through his feet and shins, but he stayed standing. Neil, with only one good arm for balance, wasn’t nearly so lucky, crashing to his knees and barely keeping from face planting on the wet deck. Fortunately, the howling of the storm nearby should have covered the noise of their arrival. Andrew took a deep, steadying breath of briney sea air. They’d made it. They were on the other side - or perhaps somewhere else entirely.

They’d landed in the eye of the storm, but that didn’t mean things were calm. In the center of the boat, stacks of shipping containers creaked and groaned in the wind, and spray from the rough current sloshed saltwater up over the deck in rushing waves before draining away again off the sides. The smell of the sea was everywhere here.

As Andrew took a moment to collect himself, Neil gotg to his feet, shaking off the fall and- pulling something out of his pocket.

“Is that a pistol?”

Neil had the decency to at least feign sheepishness as he looked over the small weapon held in his hands. “Got it off the pilot,” he admitted. That followed - the thing looked like it was practically an antique, someone’s father’s war weapon or what have you, more sentimental than offensive. But if it was loaded, it was still certainly deadly. “You can’t be the only one who gets to have a gun all the time.”

Andrew could have argued that as the only one with an actual badge and a goddamn firearms license, he most certainly could be. But the truth of the matter was that they were heading into unknown territory, and miles of paperwork was tedious, but Andrew would take it over a dead teammate any day.

“Are you good with it?” he asked Neil seriously.

Neil shook out his shoulders, wincing only slightly, and when he stood up all the way Andrew could read an ease in his posture and grip that spoke of a familiarity Andrew knew well. It was the way he felt with a knife in each hand.

“I’m good,” Neil promised. Well then. In for a penny, in for a pound, right?

“All right. Just follow my lead.”
Neil tipped him a roguish two-fingered salute, and together they crept forward toward the door that lead into the ship.

The door opened into a narrow hallway, all grey painted steel. The first thing that struck Andrew was the quiet. Well, it wasn’t quiet, exactly. There was a muffled quality to the world inside the thick metal walls of the ship, the sloshing of the sea a distant rumble beneath the slow creaking of the hull. It was dark inside, just a little thin light leaking through the thick glass of the portholes. Further down the hall, a few scattered bulbs flickered in caged sconces. Andrew gestured for Neil to follow, and headed toward them. They did a quick tour of the upper floor: mess hall, a small office, and a lot of machinery. Not a single person. For all appearances, they had landed on a ghost ship.

Once accustomed to the ambient sound of the ship, Andrew’s ears began to pick up other noises. Strange noises: low growls and strangled yips amid the unmistakable shuffling of bodies. *Something* was living on this ship. What it was, they were going to have to go further down to find out.

Neil pointed toward a small, steep set of stairs leading down into the hold. Andrew nodded and lead the way, creeping as quietly as possible down. It was impossible to be silent, really, but if he moved in time with the rocking of the current, the sound of their steps was mostly masked by the noise of the ship. Andrew paused when he reached the landing, waiting for Neil to step off the last step before gesturing down the hall in front of them. At the end of it, a door with a single square of light shining through the window; at the other end, darkness.

The animal sounds were coming from somewhere beyond the darkness. Neil threw a questioning glance in the direction of them, and Andrew nodded. Better to know the full scope of what they were up against. They made their way toward a dark room. The door was unlocked. Andrew steeled himself and pushed inside.

Andrew had seen it all and more in his years with the FBI and over a year with the Foxes. He was utterly unprepared for what they found in that ship. He heard Neil’s soft gasp from behind him, felt Neil press just a little closer as they took in the room - this must have been most of the hold of the ship, a hundred meters long and twenty feet high. The low light from the hall and the sweep of his flashlight beam revealed walls lined floor to ceiling with cages. Inside the cages were animals the likes of which Andrew had never seen. Hulking things, twisted things, glistening things, tanks of uncanny fishlike monstrosities. They rattled at the bars of their cages as Andrew’s flashlight beam swept over them, snuffling and growling, and he stepped back quickly, dropping the room back into darkness.

“What the fuck is this?” Andrew whispered. Even though he already knew.

Neil leaned in over his shoulder until he was practically whispering in Andrew’s ear, and confirmed what Andrew had guessed. “I think it’s his arc.”

This was what Riko had been creating, with the serum and the cage matches and the arrogant rich men like Marshall Bowman. He was building creatures like this, monstrosities of spliced DNA with which to populate his new universe. It made Andrew nauseous just to contemplate. He backed the rest of the way out of the room and closed the door, taking a moment just to look at Neil in the dim light of the hallway, to read the horror mirrored in his face.

“What do we do?” Neil whispered.

There was only one thing to do. “We are going to get Kevin out, and then we are going to sink this ship to the bottom of the ocean,” he said.

Neil swallowed, then nodded. “Good.”
Andrew hugged the right wall of the hallway as they moved toward the door. Beyond it, he could hear the sounds of muffled voices. One was contentious, distressed, the other hardly a murmur through the walls. He reached out and wrapped a hand around the cool metal knob, taking one last glance back at Neil, who had backed down the hall after him to cover their rear. His other hand settled onto the gun at his hip. He counted to three in his head while he held Neil’s gaze, gave a sharp nod, and slammed the door open.

“Hands up!” Andrew shouted as he pushed his way into the room. “FBI!”

“Andrew!” Kevin’s shout was one of surprise and relief, but Andrew only saw him out of the corner of his eye. He was focused on the figure perched in a chair on the opposite side of the room, eyeing Andrew the way a cat eyes an irritating bird, arrogant and cool with a hint of snarl at the edges.

“Andrew Minyard,” Riko drawled, a smug curl overtaking his mouth. “You made it. And I see you brought your little pet along.”

They were clearly in Riko’s personal quarters. The size of a spacious office, the room was entirely different from the rest of the ship, with polished wood furniture, bookshelves, and drapes covering the walls. If it weren’t for the metal floor and the muffled sound of the ocean, you might not have known you were in a ship at all. Riko himself was seated off the side of a desk, in a tidy wingback armchair that wouldn’t have looked out of place in the oval office, which Andrew supposed was the point.

“Kevin, are you okay?” Neil asked from behind him, already going to him where he was leaned against one wall, pale.

Kevin waved a weak hand and submitted to Neil checking him for injury, but he didn’t seem obviously hurt so much as deeply shaken.

“Dr. Day is just fine,” Riko said, contempt in every syllable. “He should consider his presence here an honor. You all should, really. I hadn’t planned on letting humans into this world...but I suppose you’ve earned your place here, haven’t you? Andrew Minyard, the man who powered the end of the world. Neil Josten, the man who escaped time. You will bear witness to the birth of a new world. It’s going to be magnificent. As soon as I finish making it.”

“Riko, you can’t do this.” Kevin was pushing out of Neil’s grasp. Riko stood and turned on him, his face going from calm and smug to snarling in an instant.

“It’s already done, Kevin. The final piece has been set into motion. I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to! And why should I want to? Minyard here is a living uncertainty engine. Every breath he takes brings us closer to Nirvana. Every beat of his heart tears the world from its hinges.”

He strode forward, grabbing Kevin by the shoulders before Neil or Andrew could get to them and shaking him. “Come on now! As scientists, we’re taught that fate is nothing more than...than the convergence of a set of probabilities into one potential outcome... that there’s no such thing as divine intervention. And yet I’d be lying if I said that you being here to witness this with me, my brother, didn’t feel like the hand of god.”

“You’re a lunatic, you know that?” Neil asked.

Kevin was white as a sheet, and looked close to vomiting, but he met Riko’s eyes. “There was nothing divine about it, Riko,” he said. “I found you.”

Riko smiled slowly, letting go of Kevin’s shoulders and stepping back. “Yes. You did, didn’t you?
Well, like I said. Providence."

“But why?” Kevin was holding it together but it was clear he was close to unraveling, and Andrew was tempted just to shoot Riko in the face to get this over with, but they needed him alive to tell them how to stop this. And, Andrew had to admit, he was curious about the answer as well.

“This was your idea, Kevin. Don’t you remember?” Riko sat back down in his chair, spreading his hands. “You were so angry when your mother died. What kind of god would make a world that required so much pain, you asked. I used to think you were foolish, naive.”

“I was,” Kevin said. “I was naive. God didn’t kill my mother, your uncle did.”

“No, progress killed your mother, just like it killed my uncle, hm? Necessity killed them. The future killed them. I realized you were right. I understood. If God made us in his image, than we are capable of being gods. It is our destiny.”

Andrew raised his gun, pointing it square at Riko’s chest. Riko just grinned manically. “Shoot me if you like, Minyard. It won’t stop what you and I have begun together. Go ahead. I will not be the first god martyred for his creation.”

There was a soft click as Neil raised his own gun and pointed it at Riko. “I think we’ve heard about enough from you,” he said.

Riko looked coldly amused. “Do you, vagrant?”

“I have,” Neil said, chin up. “You know, I always knew you were a piece of shit, but this is really something else. I mean really, were your daddy issues really so bad you had to father a whole race of mutant freaks just to not feel impotent?”

“Neil,” Andrew murmured in warning, impressed despite himself, but Neil was apparently on a roll.

“None of this science is even yours! Testuji and Kayleigh discovered the other universes. Kevin built the equations you used to make the third. I’ve seen his notes! You couldn’t even figure out how to open a portal without splicing your lieutenant into dust. You needed Jones to develop the chimera drug for you. And you couldn't even figure out how to power your little collapse without Andrew. You think you’re a god, but you’re nothing but a selfish, small-minded puppeteer so incapable of making anyone like you that you had to erase humanity just to get rid of everyone who hates your guts.”

There was a moment of stunned silence in the room as Riko blinked and absorbed...that. Then his face twisted into a grotesque snarl, his hand reaching into his jacket for what could only be a gun. Andrew moved without thinking. The shot was deafening in the enclosed space of the quarters, followed by heavy wet gurgle of Riko’s dying breath.

“Holy shit,” Kevin said shakily, looking around the room as though searching for an exit. As though even if they got outside the ship they wouldn’t still be trapped in a goddamn pocket universe. “Holy shit you. He.”

“He’s dead, Kev,” Neil said, still staring at Riko’s now unmoving body. “He’s in hell where he belongs.”

“But how do we stop this?” Kevin said, growing frantic. “He must have known a way, he must have been lying. There has to be something we can do. If we don’t act quickly, the process will have gone too far to reverse, and both universes will be destroyed.”
Inside the hull of the ship, things were almost peaceful. But outside, Andrew knew the raging storm was a mere portent of things to come for their own universe. Back home, the earthquakes would have started in earnest, the earth shaking itself apart as Riko’s third universe collapsed the other two and overtook everything. Total annihilation. Forget riding out the apocalypse. If they didn’t stop this now, there would be nothing left to go back to. It would all be gone.

It would all be gone, and it would be Andrew who had done it, no matter who had started it. And there was nothing they could do. He tried to focus, tried to feel for the place where his energy was being pulled into Riko’s mad creation, to see if he could turn it off. All he felt was a buzzing, everywhere, his own energy being robbed from him to create this sick world even as its god sat dead on his throne.

“Andrew.”

Andrew must have closed his eyes, because he couldn’t see the voice that was speaking to him, but he knew it to be Neil’s. He could feel Neil step closer, until he was just inches away.

“Andrew, look at me.” He opened his eyes. Neil was staring at him, more earnest than Andrew had ever seen him in this life, standing nearly chest to chest in the belly of this twisted arc. “We can fix this.”

“We can’t,” Andrew said. “I’m the battery. I don’t know how to make it stop.”

“We can fix this,” Neil repeated, his mouth set, quivering but grim in his pale face. From Andrew could count the emerging scatter of freckles across the bridge of his nose.

“Neil—” Kevin started from across the room.

“Shut it Kevin,” Neil said harshly. His eyes never left Andrew’s. “Do you trust me?”

It was just about then that Andrew noticed the gun Neil had stolen from the pilot of the helicopter was still clutched in his hand. “Neil—”

“Do you trust me?” Neil repeated. His eyes were wet, as close as Andrew had ever seen them to pleading. “Yes or no?”

What options did Andrew have left? In what reality could he say anything else?

“Yes.”

Neil’s breath hitched and shuddered. He reached one hand up and brushed a thumb over Andrew’s lip, a mirror image of the gesture Andrew had given him months before. As vulnerable as a kiss. Andrew closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Up next, the final chapter.
Part 12, Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Neil POV

Chapter Notes

warnings for fairly graphic descriptions of someone being shot and the bullet being removed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part 12, Chapter 6: The Bullet that Saved the World

BANG.

Neil hadn’t shot a gun in over a year, but his aim was true. Andrew’s body crumpled to the floor as the bullet hit him square in the forehead. His eyes never even opened as he fell.

“What have you done?” Kevin cried, seemingly too shocked to move as Neil rushed forward, sliding on his knees across the floor of the ship from where he’d backup up to shoot, to get to Andrew’s side. “What have you done?”

“You know fucking well what I did,” Neil said. He forced himself to reach out and grab hold of Andrew’s lifeless body, turning him gently as he could onto his side. There was no time to for hesitation. “Now get over here and help me finish it.”

“There’s not even an exit wound,” Kevin said as he hurried over, shaking and pale. “Shit. Shit, there’s no exit wound.”

“So we make one,” Neil said grimly. He pulled Andrew’s knife from his pocket, the blade glinting dully in the flat, dim light of the ship hold. He pressed it carefully against the base of Andrew’s skull, just below his hairline, aiming for the soft spot where skull met spine.

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?” Kevin asked.

Neil didn’t look away from where the tip of his knife was pressed to the pale skin of Andrew’s neck, right over the tiny, year-old scar there. “I know for it to have any chance of working at all, I need to do it fast. Find me something long and thin. Now.”

Then he pushed, fighting the urge to vomit at the feeling of the knife giving way into flesh, cradling Andrew’s head on his knees as well as he could as he carved out a path toward the base of his brain. Kevin returned, holding out an old fashioned lecturer’s pointer he must have scrounged from Riko’s desk. Gritting his teeth, barely breathing, he inserted the tip into the sluggishly dripping wound in Andrew’s forehead, pushing in and in until it met with the metallic resistance of the bullet. Thankfully, it seemed to be all in one piece, and nearly all the way through. He eyeballed an angle to
get the tip of the pointer to the exit wound he’d cut and, holding the pointer steady with one hand, gave it a sharp, strong whack with the other.

With a sickening squelching sound, the bullet popped free as the pointer drove through the exit wound like a stake through soft earth, rolling a thin bloody trail across the metal floor. Neil pulled the pointer back out through the entry wound, still not breathing again until it too was free, then discarded it on the floor in favor of taking Andrew’s still face in both his hands. Then, he waited.

For an unbearable moment, nothing happened. The waves bumped and rocked the hull of the ship, Neil’s pulse beat deafeningly in his own ears, and Andrew lay still in his arms, dead.

Then, slowly, the wound in Andrew’s forehead began to regrow, healing from the inside out. It shrank, smaller and smaller, until it was just a red divot, then a pink dot, then nothing. Gone, as if it had never been. Neil slipped one hand down to the back of Andrew’s neck to feel for the wound he had cut, but there, too, the skin was smooth. And still, Neil waited, unsure if it would be enough.

“Come back,” he whispered, stroking his thumb along one pallid cheek. “I’m asking, so- come back, Andrew. I don’t have anything to trade this time but. Except myself, I guess.” Neil’s voice trembled. “I’m yours, Andrew. Not- not your answer, not your reason. Just yours. And…” Neil felt Kevin’s presence a few feet away, staring in suspended horror. He thought of Nicky and Aaron and Renee, of the loss none of them could bear. “There are so many people who need you. Who love you. Just come back.”

When the helicopter team, suddenly able to see the ship that was no longer in a separate universe, burst into the room a few minutes later, that was how they found them. Neil, on his knees on the cold floor of the belly of the ship, Andrew’s head and neck cradled in his lap. Andrew’s eyes were still closed, but he was breathing. When Neil grabbed up one wrist he could feel Andrew’s pulse, weak but steady, beating in his veins. He was alive.

It took three days in the hospital for Andrew to be awake for more than a few minutes at a time. In that time, the unholy contents of Riko’s ship were systematically exterminated, iced, and locked deep in storage where only a very few people would ever know how to find them. The FOXES team was honored by the director of Homeland Security - there was a tiny ceremony that only Wymack, Kevin and Allison actually attended. Wymack got a medal he begrudgingly allowed to be pinned to his suit at the ceremony, then immediately locked away in a drawer in his office before getting right back to his paperwork.

Neil stayed with Aaron and Nicky at the hospital, hashing out an alliance of shifts to keep watch by Andrew’s bedside. Neil hated each time he had to leave him, but he saw the same reluctance in Aaron and Nicky’s faces whenever their turns were up, the same relief each time they returned to lay eyes on him, still breathing, so he didn’t argue.

Neil was given official paperwork welcoming him to personhood for the second time in his life. He argued until the agents let him do the interviewing and signing in a spare room in the hospital, so that he didn’t have to go far. By the end of the second day in the hospital, he was Neil Josten again. And what was more, he was a Neil Josten who, according to this world, had never been the son of Mary and Nathan Wesninski. It didn’t change the reality of Neil’s past but...it was something. He thought maybe he liked it.

When Andrew woke up on the third day, lucid at last, the first thing he did was reach for Neil’s hand. Neil took it and held on.

“Hey,” Andrew said at last, voice hoarse. It was the first thing he’d said since that last moment before his death, and Neil’s heart shattered with joy at the clarity in his eyes.
“Hey.”

Andrew was silent for a few minutes more, just looking at Neil, eyes searching his face like he was memorizing him, staring in the way he’d reprimanded Neil for doing so many times before.

“Guess I’m the mess this time,” he said finally.

Neil hitched a laugh. “My fault, I think.”

“Yeah,” Andrew’s eyes narrowed in thought. “You shot me.”

Neil winced, but there was no malice in Andrew’s expression, and he hadn’t made any move to withdraw his hand. “Sorry about that.”

Andrew, typically, appeared unmoved by the apology. “It worked?”

“Yeah. Without the connection to you, the process couldn’t finish. The third universe just...stopped existing.”

“Good.”

Others filtered back into the room soon after, back from getting coffee and snacks in the hospital cafeteria or summoned by text or call, and soon the tiny hospital room was full of chatting and tears that were altogether too boisterous for either Neil or Andrew’s tastes, but comforting all the same.

Nicky of course did most of the crying, and he kept kissing Neil on the head, seemingly whenever the emotions simply became too much for him. Kevin kept asking Andrew detailed questions about how he was feeling, nose in his chart, until Wymack ushered him away with a dry chuckle and a handshake for Andrew, welcoming him back to the land of the living.

“We would have missed you, kid,” he said gruffly.

Renee shared her own good news - in recognition of the Foxes’ work, they were being granted the status of a full-fledged science division, headquartered in Boston, and she would be returning to join the team. Even with Riko no longer meddling, there would always be anomalies along soft spots between the universes. There would always be people pushing at the boundaries of science and falling off the edge. And now, there would always be a team to go after them. Allison had already been tagged to head it up, with Kevin serving as lead research scientist and Wymack still involved with the investigative arm. Jean had been given an offer as well, but Neil had a feeling he wasn’t going to take it. Jean deserved to find and make a life away from the ghosts of the Moriyamas, and that meant a life away from Kevin and Allison as well, at least for a while. He’d been in touch with Betsy Dobson though, and apparently she was interested in taking him on as one of her own researchers. Neil hoped it would be a good fit, but only time would tell.

The crowd in Andrew’s room took a while to thin. Aaron, with whom Neil had shared many hours of oddly companionable silence in the last three days, stayed long enough to make sure his brother was really on the mend, asking almost as many medical questions as Kevin before making his goodbyes. He was heading back to DC; he and Agent Katelyn Turner were being set up with their own team there. Nicky made him swear up and down he would visit. Nicky had somehow become fast friends with Katelyn already, so Neil was sure they hadn’t seen the last of them.

Eventually though, the novelty of Andrew being awake wore off, and Andrew himself was nearly too exhausted to keep his eyes open as the others made their goodbyes and filtered out of the hospital room. Then it was just Andrew and Neil and the quiet beep and hum of the monitors again. Andrew glared up at the screens in disdain.
“Don’t see why I have to stay here,” he grumbled. “I could sleep at home.”

“Just a day or two more, probably,” Neil said. He knew he would be feeling the same way in Andrew’s position, but he couldn’t help having sympathy with the doctors; wanting to be sure. “You’ve been kind of a confusing case since uh, we couldn’t exactly tell them I put a bullet through your brain.”

“What day is it anyway?”

“April 2nd.”

Andrew’s face scrunched tighter. "Missed your birthday," he mumbled, so indistinctly Neil wasn't sure he was even meant to hear. He squeezed his hand anyway. Neil had almost forgotten that Andrew knew Neil Josten’s birthday, not Nathaniel’s; it was surprisingly good to be reminded.

"I’ll have another one next year."

That stopped the both of them for a minute, then Andrew nodded. "Damn right," he muttered.

Neil could tell Andrew was fading fast but fighting to hold on to wakefulness. “Hey, go back to sleep. I’ll still be here when you wake up.”

Andrew rolled his eyes, but then he gestured Neil to lean down, reaching out when Neil was within reach to pull him closer, until their faces were mere inches apart. His jaw worked for a moment, his hand tensing hard around the muscles at the back of Neil’s neck. Beneath his furrowed brow, his eyes were serious and honey-warm.

“‘There are a lot of people who love you, too.’

“I-” Neil nearly jerked back in surprise, his eyes widening.

“-Neil.” Andrew held him in place. “Yes or no?”

Neil grinned. “Yes. Always yes.”

If it didn’t feel like it was the first time Andrew had kissed him, it was because it wasn’t, not really. It wasn’t at all like the first time they had kissed before, frightening and exhilarating and just this side of desperate. This time, as Andrew drew him in, both of them alive in spite of the odds, in spite of time and the universe and everything that had come before, it was simply sure. It was simply right. It was simply coming home.

Chapter End Notes

I just noticed that one of my original tags on this fic is "Andrew does the shooting and Neil does the science-ing (and also sometimes the shooting.)" And that technically, though he helps out as an agent, Neil doesn't actually shoot a gun anywhere in the fic...until this last chapter. lol @ me for accidentally playing the long game on that one.

So uh. Hey, that's a wrap y'all. 19 months, one hiatus, 72 chapters, 260,000 words later, FOXES Division is finished. I hope you enjoyed this final set of chapters, and that you find the ending satisfactory, and that you can imagine our grumpy science detective squad continuing to solve grumpy science mysteries well into their futures.
This story was written in break rooms, locker rooms, buses, a whole lot of trains, a couple of emergency rooms, at least three states, and across at least 6 full notebooks. It owns an inordinate amount of my heart, and I cannot tell you how much it means to me that so many people have read this fic that has been my monster child for the better part of 2 years of my life. For those of you who waited until it was done or nearly done, thanks for finally taking a chance on this weird beastie! For those of you who have been reading since the start, and those of you who have been commenting throughout this journey, oh my god thank you so much. You comments are what gave me the motivation to make my way through this story, and I really cannot thank you all enough for the encouragement, excitement, and occasionalanguished screaming :)

I learned so much writing this story (that dialogue punctuation in the early chapters...oof) and it's given me something to come back to through a lot of ups and downs, and it will always be special to me. Thank you to everyone who read it, left a comment or a kudos, for making it special. I honestly cried when I finished it. And now you've finished it too!

I'm sure I won't be able to stay away from these characters for long so - see you soon! (and now that there's no chance of spoilers, if you haven't already - watch Fringe!)

<3<3<3<3<3 - Melissa

End Notes

Thank you for reading!

<3 yell at me on tumblr @ a-case-for-wonder

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!