Something, Nothing & Everything

by TheBashfulPoet

Summary

Neil Josten is yet another name in a long list of identities used to hide a boy long since dead from a past blood had been spilled to forget. Essentially, he is and always will be nothing. And yet there has always been one thing that made Neil Josten real: music. After his mother’s death, music and singing were the only things tying him the threads of reality by the strap of a well-worn guitar. Too bad he’s pretty sure that it’s also going to be the thing to kill him. Especially when Kevin Day, international rock star and blast of Neil’s past comes waltzing back into his life demanding he joins the upstart and infamous band EXY as its new vocalist. To make matters worse, Kevin’s unofficial shadow, Andrew Minyard with a rap sheet taller than he is has taken an interest in the lie that Neil Josten and has made it his mission to uncover the bloodied truth that lies beneath.

By all accounts, Neil should just pick up his guitar and disappear like he’s done so many times before, but the chance to be real and seen is almost enough for him to plant his feet for the first time in 11 years he’s been running. Going into the spotlight means certain death, but Neil’s just not so sure that leaving it would mean anything different.
There is a Spotify playlist for this fic [here](https://example.com) that I made for convenience sake, but all songs are linked in the fic itself!
the devil's going to make me a free man, the devil's going to set me free

Chapter Notes

A dedication to everyone who helped me with this fic, whether it be by listening to me gripe about these boys, or looking over my outline or helping me with the song selection. None of this would have been possible (or at least coherent) without all of you! @Lirinchi @metaphoricallytheworst

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A thank you to my artist Ram (@uzea-ke) who not only is extremely talented and amazing but managed to bring this story to life in art in such a breathtaking way. If you haven’t seen it check it out here and shower her with all the love she freaking deserves!!

And of course, the biggest thank you to the mods of this year’s Big Bang and defractum! This was perhaps one of the most rewarding and fruitful experiences of my time in this fandom and I had a blast even when I was tearing my hair out writing this damn monster.

Title song: Broken Bones - Kaleo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil doesn’t know how he got here. Truly. One night he had been at some shitty little bar in the middle of bumfuck nowhere Millport, Arizona and the next he is staring out at a sea of people from a brightly lit stage, the roar of the crowd deafening his ears.

“Looks like the little rabbit is about to run,” a voice mock whispers at his back.

He doesn’t need to turn to know that it’s Andrew, the flat tone and familiar taunt recognizable enough by now, Still, it is not enough to pull his eyes from the crowd even if it did lessen the anxiety building in his chest.

“Neil is not going anywhere,” another voice cuts in, Kevin this time. It’s enough to pull his gaze away or maybe it was the French that followed. “You will do this.”

“Or what?” he replies in the same language.

“Or we are done.”

Oh yeah, now Neil remembers.

Really it never should have been a problem. Neil knew better, his mother had long beaten the lessons into his bones time and time again that his entire body screamed at him to stop. But he couldn’t. He
never could. Even on the run in a thousand different towns with a thousand different names, the stage was always there in some deeply ingrained part of him. He needed it like people needed to breathe, if deprived for too long his lungs screamed and his body ached. For 11 years, he let his body ache — 11 years of feeling like a piece of himself was carved out and bleeding — but he stayed away.

Then his mother died and the only thing left was that deep ache underneath a sea of numbness. Somedays it seemed that the stage’s call was the only thing to keep him afloat in those following months. He stopped running long enough to find a guitar that was a couple strings away from unusable in some rundown thrift store and taught himself to passably play a couple songs. The first strums of the chords had awakened that part of himself he thought was long since buried (or at least he tried to convince himself of that) filling that gaping hole little by little.

But granted, while it helped Neil move past that part of himself that wanted to wallow in his mother’s death, it was never meant to be anything more. He should have known that it wouldn’t remain simple; he wasn’t made to just play music (perhaps if he had, his mother would never have clawed him away from it so hard). No, music to him came in the sound of a voice.

Neil has been many people over the 21 years he has been roaming this earth. Alex, Chris, Stefan, and some twenty-two different identities, each complete with their own backstories, hair color, eye color and even an accent from time to time. Yet the one thing that would never change was the sound of his voice as it slipped into the soft timber of a melody. It was one of his most distinct features (and the only one that was entirely his). And in a life on the run, distinct was as good as a death sentence.

After everything his mother had done to keep him alive — from pulling him out of his father’s grasp at ten years old to bullet wounds to a slow and agonizing death ending in flames and an unmarked grave — going back onto a stage was the last thing he should have ever done. But with her gone and the pain of losing her fresh in every breath he took, it was all that was left getting him up in the morning.

In the first weeks following her death, he crawled into a hole and waited to die (some days he wondered if he should have). It was only by luck that his hideout was close enough to a venue popular among the local musicians for backyard concerts, the vibrations of the drums and bass rattling the earth and shaking his bones as he laid hidden away. The sound of each singer forced air back into his lungs and every beat pounding in his chest shocked his heart into pumping. He found the thrift store a couple of days later. A week before he found a music store with the right string. Two before he was good enough to even think about stepping back on a stage.

So another town and one final name later, Neil Josten graced the stage for the first time in some dingy little bar in Arizona. He only means to play a single night, two if he allowed his indulgence to dictate him a little longer, just enough to get the itch out of his skin. But a couple of nights turned into a week and a week into a month until the next he knew, he was slotted as a permanent fixture in the bar’s entertainment.

The owner paid him a little, mostly in food and a shitty couch tucked in the corner of the employee break room for him to crash on, but he knew it couldn’t last. Staying still for too long left him vulnerable, too easy to be found. Still, he held on for just a little longer, unwilling to carve the stage and music from himself again so soon.

He knew it was a mistake when the youtube video blew up on the internet about three months into his stay. He hadn’t even seen someone pull out a camera, let alone get close enough to the stage to capture his face in startling 4k resolution, but sure enough when he came in the bar the next day, one
of the bartenders had congratulated him.

“Uh, for what?” he asked, pulse kicking up.

“For becoming the next Justin Bieber that’s what!”

He scrunches his brows, “Who?”

“Seriously? The one with the floppy hair that’s now covered in horrible tattoos? Youtube sensation that destroyed all our ears with his falsetto?”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She crumbles, “You killing me, kid.”

Neil shrugs and reaches for his glass of water across the bar. Meanwhile, she pulls out a phone before tapping away at it for a second and sliding it toward him.

“Just look.”

He rolls his eyes but drops his gaze down to the phone regardless. Honestly, he couldn’t tell you what he was expecting to see, but it was not his own face staring back from last night. It was like the floor had opened beneath his feet and the bar around quickly fell away until all he could focus on was the pounding in his chest. If he wasn’t sure that his knees would collapse under his weight, he might have torn out of the bar the moment his eyes landed on his in the video and then on the view count. The bartender wasn’t lying when she called him an internet sensation, it had nearly three million hits in a single day.

“Neil?” her voice is muffled as if under layers of water rather the thin air between them. “You okay? You look a little green.”

“I’m fine,” he bites out, knuckles white in their grip on the bar. His eyes sweep over every exit and every face in the crowd, looking for monsters hidden among the masses and safest way to disappear.

“I have to go.”

“Now? But what about your performance? We’re packed tonight with people who want to see you. It’s the busiest we’ve been in months!”

“I-I can’t.”

Breathing becomes harder and harder as he sees shadows pressing in, the scars so carefully hidden beneath his clothes burning from their phantom touches and knives. It’s too much. He needs to leave, to escape and disappear like he should have done after the first week. He was so stupid, his mother’s voice hissing in his memories and skin throbbing from bruises long faded. The front door is the closest, but with the number of people still pouring in, it would be near impossible to squeeze through undetected, especially if they were coming here to see him. The backdoor was the more likely option, but it opened out into an alley, the easiest place to catch him off guard. His mind races with the possibilities and threats lurking at every twist and turns until his eyes land on the stage and everything silenced.

This is not the same silence that had fallen over his mind the first time, that was a paralysis of everything but fear and anxiety; this is like a calming balm to his rapid heart. It is like everything inside him clicks into place at the sight of the worn wooden stage with a lone stool and microphone that had been his only salvation. He should leave, turn his back on it and slip away into obscurity,
forgotten like he had done so many times before. But his eyes remain unmoved.

*One more song,* his heart whispers, begs, *pleads.* His feet move towards it before he can even tell them not to. He could have this just one more night. Then he would sever himself for good, even if it killed him (especially if it killed him). So, against every bit of his better judgment, against every lesson that had been beaten bloodily into him (that his mother had died teaching him), Neil picks up his guitar and climbs that stage one more time.

When he sits down on the stool and looks around the bar, he notices that it’s a lot more crowded than he initially assessed. It seemed that the moment the first person noticed him gracing the stage, more began to push in, no longer lingering near the entrance or at the bar. It’s enough to make his hands tremble as he slings the strap over his shoulder and reaches for the pick. Too many faces blurred together. Too many places for a knife to lay in hiding before it finds its home in his back.

*One more song.* And then Neil Josten will disappear forever. Inhaling a shaky breath, he closes his eyes and strums the first chord of the last song he will ever play. The piece he had chosen was definitely one of the newer songs in his repertoire, and its irony was not lost on him for its message and somber tone. Yet, if this were to be his last night — to be the end of Neil Josten and the only thing that was *his* — then he could go quietly.

“Hey everyone,” he speaks into the mic, “This is a bit of a slower one, so I hope you don’t mind too much. If you do, well I’m sure there is another bar here in town.”

The crowd chuckles like he was telling a joke, but even the faint spark of annoyance that flares up in his chest at their inability to sense this inner turmoil is not enough to ruin this moment. No, he would play with every last spare ounce he had left. So he opened his mouth and sang.

*Father tell me, we get what we deserve*

Each word tastes bittersweet on his tongue like they are both a promise and a warning of what’s to come. Still, his fingers strum on and this voice croons into the microphone with every tremble and waver it can muster in the song’s mournful tune.

*Cause they will run you down, down til the dark*

Somewhere in the melody, the song transforms itself becoming a lament full of mourning. Grief colored his every word and despair dripped from each chord until he was bleeding with every hope and dream he let himself be deluded into. He knew then, that he wouldn’t survive this a second time. It was all over before it had ever really begun.

*And way down we go. Way down we go*

He drew the note out for as long as his voice would carry it before the air swallowed it whole and he was left with the silence of the crowd and the gaping hole in his chest. When he slides his eyes open, the crowd comes to life once more, a roar of applause and whistles greeting him. The rush of it washes over him, sweeping away the grief and replacing it with the sharp reminder that he was *alive.* If he focuses on it long enough, he could almost ignore the icy depths of disappointment just lying beneath the surface.

His eyes roam over the crowd, trying to sear the sight into his memory in hope that it will be enough (he knows it won’t) when he walks away. Somehow he missed the two figures hovering at the back of the crowd, equal blank looks on their faces in comparison to the cheering crowd around them.

As he hops down the stage and fits the strap of the guitar case over his chest, the sound of his name
catches his attention.

“Neil Josten?”

He looks over his shoulder and stops dead in his movements. Kevin Day stands just right of his shoulder, the number two stark against his pale cheek and arms crossed over his chest. A frown mars his face, distorting him from the media-adored guitarist that graced nearly every music magazine since he was 14 and into the face of the boy he had known for the first ten years of his life. The one who knew the blue-eyed, red hair boy Neil had thought he buried 12 years ago.

He runs.

White-knuckled grip on the strap of his case and an arm pushing people out of his way, he tears off for the back exit. If he could just get there then the alley would open up to the main road. If he remembers correctly it would be crawling with people at this time, easy enough for him to disappear into the crowd and shed-

He never saw the hand coming until it shot out and grabbed his bicep in a bruising hold and sent him sprawling onto the ground. The case of his guitar digs into his spine and the impact of him hitting the floor is enough to drive the breath from his lungs and send the world swirling. He makes the mistake of trying to right himself too quickly, his vision swimming the moment his head lifts off the floor and the contents of his stomach threatening to rise up his throat.

When he finally manages to blink away the dark spots and draw in short shallow breaths, his eyes lock with his assailant. If his heart wasn’t already hammering in his ears, he would be worried that it stopped beating entirely. Looming over him was none other than Kevin’s shadow, Andrew Minyard. His impassive blank stare pinning Neil to the ground is only rivaled by his threatening stance over Neil’s legs, arms crossed and shoulders squared as if daring him to get up. Neil glares at him and moves to sit up anyways. Kevin finds them not a minute later, shoving the people who had gathered around to gawk and stare from his way until he hovers near Andrew’s side.

“How the fuck?!” he growls, “I need him whole and uninjured. What if he landed on his fucking hand?”

Andrew barely flicks him a bored glance, “Geez what did you say to him, Kevin? I’ve never seen someone run so fast away from you. At least not before you’ve had a chance to open your mouth. It must be some kind of record.”

“Andrew-”

“Shut up. I caught your little rabbit for you didn’t I? If I didn’t step in who knows where he would have scammed off to.” He turns a wickedly sharp grin towards Neil, “Not with him running like he’s about to be devoured by wolves.”

Neil could only guess who exactly was the wolf in this scenario. Instead of pushing himself off the ground or making another break for it (the smart thing to do), or even move to punch the bastard, he opens his own damn mouth.

“Fuck you,” he spits because if he’s going down, he’ll be damned if it’s not swinging.

Something flickers across that blank stare but it is too small and too quick for Neil’s addled brain to decipher before it’s swallowed by the man’s impassivity. “Oh look the rabbit has teeth. Too bad, better luck next time.”

Neill does shoot up at that, coming nose to nose with Andrew as the other refused to take a step
Andrew smirks, hand darting for his armband and Neil tenses, relinquishing his ground in their power struggle as he takes a step back. His grin turns feral. It tells Neil he’s right to have stepped away; Andrew is armed. Yet, before he can strike, Kevin shoves his way between them and shoves Neil back.

“What the fuck is your problem?”

“What’s my problem? Are you fucking kidding me? What the fuck is your problem?!” Neil tears his eyes from Andrew to glare at his once childhood friend. “Last I checked, people don’t corner other people when they get off stage or assault them when they try to leave.”

“Neither do they run when someone tries to talk to them,” Andrew quips.

Neil takes a step forward but Kevin shoves him back. “Don’t listen to him, you’re talking to me.”

“I think I was talking to neither of you and was leaving.”

“Yeah, well, you’re talking to me now,” he says it so matter of factly that Neil now wants to punch him in the face (only the thought of Andrew’s hidden weapon enough to stay his fists at his sides).

“Then I repeat my earlier sentiment. Fuck you, why should I?”

“Because I’m about to offer you a deal of a lifetime.”

Neil freezes, knowing all too well why the great Kevin Day would be halfway across the country in nowhere Arizona. Really, Neil didn’t keep many tabs on his former childhood friend, only checking in now and then through the odd tabloid here and there. So the boy he had once known as a child had essentially become a stranger, a celebrity he could admire from afar and be jealous of. That’s how he knows that while Neil spent the last 12 years running for his life in the most literal sense, Kevin had lived in apparent luxury; famous at age 15, Grammy winner at 17, millionaire at 20. Of course, that was before his accident that ruined his dominant hand and effectively ended his career, or so everyone thought. At 22 Kevin reemerged onto the music scene with EXY, a band backed by the infamous Fox Records and composed of the Minyard-Hemmick cousins (a duo with their own bad reputation). Where everyone thought they’d fail, Kevin and EXY quickly rose to mid-level fame, comfortably topping the charts with a few singles from their two albums. Yet, there have been recent rumors that Kevin was making moves to take the band to the next level; apparently one of those moves recruiting another member.

“No.” Because really that’s the only answer he could possibly give, not if he wanted his past to remain buried.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“You want me to play for you. For your band.”

“Ding!” Andrew mocks, “Give the man a carrot.”

Kevin whirls on Andrew, “Shut up.” He turns back to Neil, “You’re going to join EXY and you’re going to sing lead vocals.”

“No.”

“Why not?”
He looms over Neil, nostrils flaring and the muscles in his jaw twitching almost like he’s trying to intimidate him into saying yes. Neil almost wants to laugh at the thought. The only danger Kevin Day presents is the threat of ending this all a little sooner than he would have liked. That and maybe dangling the thing he wanted most but could never have. This deal would never be real. _He_ would never be real.

Yet when he opens his mouth what comes out is, “Because I’m not good enough.”

Kevin snorts, “You’re right. Your guitar skills are sloppy at best and your voice needs more training if it is ever going to be worth listening to.”

Neil bristles, but bites his tongue before he can say anything else. It almost works.

“If I’m so awful why do you want me then? I’m sure your current lead singer wouldn’t appreciate you trying to replace him with a rookie.”

“Nicky is an adequate singer but not anywhere near the level we need to take the band further. He understands that.”

Somehow Neil doubts that.

“And you think I can?”

Kevin looks at him seriously now. “I think that you sing and play like someone who has nothing left to live for besides the music. I think you are desperate for the stage and the high of the performance.”

Neil feels trapped under his gaze, Kevin’s words piercing the most vulnerable places in his chest and bleeding the secrets he’s held inside for so long. For once, words fail him.

“So yes, I think you can help take us there. With a little work and blood, sweat, and tears, you could be exactly what we need.” Kevin takes a step closer, “Give me the answer, Neil. Give me your talent.”

While Neil should open his mouth and tell Kevin to fuck off like he had no issue doing before, he finds himself unable to walk away anymore. Something in the serious tone of his words and the confidence radiating from his eyes, makes Neil pause. He hears the request for what it really is, a promise. A dream. A chance to be real. He could have this. He could play and be Neil Josten for a bit longer.

“I- I can’t,” but his protests sounds week even to this own ears.

“Are you telling me that you rather stay here? Playing in dingy little bars being a nobody?” He sweeps a grand gesture over the bar. “You rather fade into obscurity? Because that’s where you’re heading, one little youtube video isn’t going to change that.”

Being nobody had kept him alive for as long as he could remember. What Keven was offering would mean his death. Neil Josten would become known (if he wasn’t already) and his father would finally find him (if he hasn’t already). But he was so tired. Tired of the running and the multiple names and backstories that all blurred together at this point. Of being alone and having to look over his shoulder every five minutes to make sure he can live to see the next five. He was tired of being nobody.

Kevin takes another step closer, this time wrapping a hand around Neil’s guitar case. “Give me a yes.”
“Okay,” he says because really that’s the only answer.

Chapter End Notes

Forgive any funky formatting things, I was moving across the country during the duration it took me to write this fic and I needed to use Google docs so I could work on it with whatever I had in my hands. So merp. Also any grammatical mistakes still in this fic honestly deserve to be there because my beta looked at it twice, I looked at it three times and grammarly twice and if any survived then they are the true heroes.
and I'll fear no evil because I'm blind to it all

Chapter Notes

Through the Valley - Shawn James

Neil should have known that it wouldn’t be as simple as telling Kevin yes. With a yes came a slew of paperwork and signatures for a person who doesn’t exist. It came with dotted lines that cemented his fate as Neil Josten for a little longer, making him real and committed to something other than his own survival. Most of all it came with his own death warrant, written neatly in this legally binding contract stating mandatory shows and tours that would be broadcasted nationwide and even worldwide at times.

Neil Josten was about to become the face (or perhaps voice) for one of the newest and hottest bands; media would be clambering for a picture, a quote, anything and when they get it, all chance of him fading into the background would be gone. 12 years of running made useless by the glide of a pen across the page. It was almost enough to make him not sign. Almost.

Surprisingly, the moving helped calmed his nerves, packing up his old life and carefully scrubbing away the signs of where he has been oddly therapeutic. He could almost pretend this was another routine identity scrub instead of his last. Then again, the calmness only lasted until he remembered that Fox Records was based in South Carolina, the closest to the east coast he’s ever allowed himself to be since Baltimore — since home. His father would only be a few hundred miles instead of thousands, and while he doesn’t remember his father ever having business in South Carolina, 12 years is a long time for business to have expanded.

Still, one look at guitar resting heavy in his hand was enough to get him on the plane, meager belongings shoved into a duffle hanging on a shoulder and case resting on his back. He could play. He could sing. What was a little death in comparison to that?

Yet when his feet find themselves planted before the doors of the studio, 1944.8 miles from Millport, the urge to run hits him at full force. Oh god, his mother would kill him. Then revive him. Then kill him again. Well, if she were alive that is (though he’s pretty sure that her spirit would haunt him if it could).

Man, this is really how he was going to die.

The door opens before he can make a decision either way and is greeted with something that could be only described as pure chaos. Paper flies every which way, screams heard from the room, and a tall harried man nearly collides with Neil in his attempt to escape. Before Neil moves out of the man’s reach, a hand juts out and grabs his wrist, pulling him into the chaotic mess and slamming the door closed behind him.

If he has any sense left, he would be panicking at the thought of being trapped, but as it is he can only blink up at the man who pulled him in and kept an arm wrapped around his shoulders. He was tall, somewhere around 6 feet or just under if he had to guess, with a rich shade of tanned skin that reminded Neil of the sun-kissed people of South America. A mess of black curls rests against his forehead, wisps of it framing the widespread grin splitting his lips.
“Oh, you’re cute. Please, tell me you’re the new set of pipes. Please oh please” He must not really be expecting Neil to answer, because the moment he opens his mouth, the man is spinning them around to yell over the rest of the room.

“Hi, yes, everyone? Dibs. I’m calling it right here and now before any of you bastards try to swoop in and steal him, I’m talking about you, Allison. Keep your claws off this cutie because he’s mine.”

His proclamation is enough to break Neil from his stupor, yanking himself away from the man’s hold and further into the room. “I’m not anyone’s anything.”

“Hush now,” the man coos, “I’m too busy admiring your cheekbones. Good god, I could cut myself on them.”

Neil just stares at him.

“Right, well let’s get you introduced to everyone shall we?” Once again Neil finds himself pulled flush to the man as he begins to enthusiastically point towards the rest of the occupants of the room. “So over here we have Palmetto, our opening act and fellow foxes here at Fox Records.”

He points towards the couple taking up the love seat furthest from where they stand. The man was gigantic, his tall stature even noticeable despite his form hunched over in the seat and spikey hair adding another inch or so to his height. Neil would guess that he would stand well over the first’s man’s 6 feet, with or without the hair. In contrast, the woman on his lap is more compact, all curves, short black hair, and broad-shouldered with muscles on display from her sleeveless top.

“That’s Dan Wilds — yes that’s her actual last name — lead vocals of the group and possibly the reincarnation of Amy Winehouse.”

Dan smiles at him and nods her head, “Hey, welcome to Fox Records. Don’t let the monsters run you off. If you find that they’re too much, I’m sure we can find you a spot in Palmetto. I saw your video, our voices could mesh well.”

“Hush up!” his captor pulls him closer, “Stop trying to pilfer out talent. Dibs, Dan. That means he’s mine.”

“Again, I’m not your anything,” Neil reminds him.

“Shh. Underneath this snake,” he levels her with a glare that earns him a laugh, “is a gorgeous man that only proves that God made all the good ones straight, except for me of course and Eric. Those he got right.”

The man under Dan throws his head back in a laugh, “Thanks Nicky, but I usually go by Matt.”

He slides out from beneath his companion and strides over to Neil in a quick couple steps (his height even more daunting). Yet, for all his towering stature, there is an easy going nature about him, from the smile stretched across his face to the offered hand for Neil, who hesitantly takes it in a firm grip.

“Matthew Boyd, Matt for short. I’m the lead guitar for Palmetto.”

“Neil,” he answers back, earning him a brilliant smile.

“Remember Neil, straight,” Nicky mock whispers in his ear.
“I’m not gay.”

“Mhm, sure. I know things, Neil.” Before Neil can open his mouth to protest, Nicky is already moving on.

Neil finds himself turned to the girl perched on the arm of the loveseat that Dan and Matt had occupied. She was petite with a lithe body and vibrant hair dyed in pastels mimicking a rainbow. She was dressed quite conservatively, a high collared blouse paired with a knee-length skirt and flats. Upon closer inspection, Neil could see the gleam of a cross resting tight at her throat.

“Next we have sweet little Renee. But don’t let her pastel rainbow hair or innocent smile fool you, this girl packs a punch on the drums. Off them too, if any of the bruises I’ve seen Andrew sporting from time to time are any indication.”

“Neil right?” Renee offers him a smile, but not a handshake like Matt had done. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. We’re all glad you decided to join the studio. I hope the flight wasn’t too bad, however.”

The moment Neil’s eyes locked with hers, alarms were screaming in his head. Something lurks behind those bright eyes and disarming smile, something that reminds Neil too much of the smile Lola would wear when she asked him to play. Right before another scar would be carved into his chest. He doesn’t offer her a smile back.

“It was fine.”

She waits for him to elaborate further, but when it becomes clear he isn’t going to offer more, Nicky awkwardly turns on to the final couple. Where Renee was conservative, this next woman was anything but. She wore clothes that looked more like they belonged on a runway rather than in some gaudy studio in the middle of South Carolina. Her dress was skin tight and a fluorescent pink color that reminded Neil more of a highlighter than a dress, but on her tanned skin and against her sandy blonde hair, it looked like it was made for her. Her partner, on the other hand, looked more like the kind you’d find in a music studio, all dark fitting clothes with a chain hanging on a belt loop and jeans with more holes than fabric at this point. He also had the signature glower of the bad boy rock star, one that dared anyone to say something to him.

“That’s Allison, don’t be fooled by the model looks, she’s as rich as she is bitchy. Oh and I guess she’s okay on the bass too.”

Allison, who has been filing her already talon-like nails, points the sharp file at Nicky. “Watch it Hemmick. I could kick your ass on the bass any time any day.”

“You wish, hun.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Please,” the last guy sneers, “You can barely sing let alone play the bass. It’s no wonder your own band picked up some two-bit guitar player to replace your ass.”

“Fuck off, Seth. You’re just mad that Kevin took one look at your mediocre ability with a guitar and wrote you off as worthless.Oops, did I say mediocre? I meant talentless.”

“I’ll fucking-”

“Enough you two!” Dan jumps in, “You’re not exactly making the best impression on our newest recruit.”
Neil’s impression of them is already pretty low, but he wasn’t about to correct her on the matter.

“He started it,” Seth growls.

Nicky scoffs, “What are you, five?”

They were both pretty juvenile actually. Still, Neil took a step away when he notices Seth stiffen and take a menacing step closer to Nicky. It’s then that the other half of the room finally deigns to join in.

“Think very carefully about that next step, Gordon.”

The room turns to look at Andrew. An unlit cigarette dangles from the corner of his lips while his left hand toys with a lighter, a flame flicking to life and dying over and over again. At first glance, he would be the picture of nonchalance, feet kicked up on the table and head tipped back every so slightly against the couch he occupied. But Neil knew that it was all a facade to hide the stiff set of his muscles and the way his fingers twitched ever so slightly on the grip of the lighter. He wasn’t calm; he was a predator preparing to pounce.

“I’ve already told you what happens when you touch what’s mine.”

The threat hangs in the air, seeping the relaxation from the room and causing everyone’s muscles to twitch in tension. Still, Neil thinks he’s the only one to notice Andrew’s right hand inch towards the black armband. He braces himself for bloodshed (and hopefully not his own).

Luckily, Seth decides to back down (maybe seeing the movement after all) and falls back against the wall he was originally resting on, glowering at Nicky the entire time.

“Good boy. Heel.”

Seth growls.

“Nicky.” Andrew warns, eyes never leaving his lighter.

“Fine, fine,” Nicky waves him off and saunters over to flop himself into the open space between Andrew and the other couch’s occupant, Kevin (who remained completely disinterested in the commotion around him if the large headphone and guitar in his lap were anything to go by).

“I’d introduce you to the rest of the crew, but I think you’ve already met them. Try not to let them color your image of us. Welcome to EXY, Neil.”

Neil looks over all three of them, the psychopathic drummer, a loud and boisterous bass player who doubles as vocals, and the prodigal son of the music industry. And now him, the runaway turned overnight sensation. They made quite a group, didn’t they?

He was so screwed.

In his musings, he catches Andrew’s eye, finally drawing his attention from the lighter for the first time since Neil’s arrived. He almost wishes he hadn’t, but he’s flattered nonetheless.

“What?” he meets Andrew’s flat glance with one of his own.

Andrew’s eyes dip over his body, briefly settling on the case on his back (Neil has to stop himself from shifting it out of view) before meeting his eyes. A slow smirk pulls on his lips and he
reaches out to Kevin, knocking away the headphones.

“Andrew, what the fuck?” Kevin snarls.

“Would you look at that Day, your little pet project made it here after all.”

Kevin looks up at Neil and scoffs, “About time. What took you so long? We lost at least a week of practice waiting around for you to show up.”

“Well excuse me,” Neil bristles, “But picking up your life and moving across the country isn’t exactly easy.”

That’s a lie; it’s extremely easy, especially if one’s had enough practice in doing so. Still. Kevin can go fuck himself.

“That sounds like an excuse.”

“Yeah well, it sounds like you-”

“Okay! That’s enough everyone,” an older man’s voice booms, ceasing all flow of conversation as he strides into the room behind Neil, “Kevin back off the new kid until he can find his feet alright?”

“But-”

“That wasn’t a suggestion. Can it or I’ll tell security to keep you out of the building for a week.”

Kevin grumbles his reply and throws himself back in his seat, pulling his headphones securely over his ears. Neil watches him with a hint of amusement and nostalgia. Even as a kid Kevin was always prone to pouting when things didn’t go his way. Good to know that some things never change (though Neil’s pretty sure the world would have to change for Kevin Day to be any less than the biggest drama queen).

“You,” the man turns his attention on Neil now.

His gruff tone and pointed nature of his words left Neil reeling. Despite all his years on the run — all the years he’s been free — older men still manage to strike that deep instinctual fear from within him. When Neil shifts to face him, the first thing he notices is that he’s old enough to be his father, the same height and muscular build similar enough to the figure of his nightmare that Neil couldn’t help the tense line that shot up his spine and straightened his stance. It doesn’t matter that where his father was slim, this man was all muscle or the fact that this man had tribal tattoos covering his forearms and a rugged appearance, all of which his own father would never have let himself adhere to (only the most sophisticated style was befitting of the Butcher). Neil could only hear the old instructions bleeding in his mind.

Eyes up, Nathaniel. Keep your back straight, sloppy posture is unacceptable. Look me in the eye when I speak to you.

His gaze remains glued to his chin, mimicking eye contact in the best way he knew how without actually meeting his eyes (Neil learned long ago that meeting his father’s eyes — no matter how much he demanded it — only led to pain). He almost manages to suppress the involuntary flinch. Almost.

The man, for all his imposing nature, doesn’t say anything, simply extending his hand and
waiting until Neil carefully takes it in a brief handshake.

“David Wymack, though most of these knuckleheads call me Wymack or Coach — don’t ask. I believe we talked on the phone a couple of times? While squaring away your contract for the studio?”

They in fact had, but seeing as how it was amidst one of his many panic attacks over the issue, Neil forgot about it.

“Yeah Neil Josten,” he quickly shakes Wymack’s hand before pulling it back and carefully shifting away so he is out of the man’s reach (old habits die hard and all that).

Wymack nods, “Good to see you made it out here alright, Neil. Despite what some of these idiots might say, you made it over here pretty damn fast. I’m sure you must be exhausted.”

“I’m fine.”

He raises an eyebrow at that but shakes his head, “Whatever you say, kid. Still, it looks like you just got off the plane and headed over here.”

Neil in fact did.

“You’ve already met everyone here, yeah? Let’s call it a day then and pick it up tomorrow. I’m sure some of these guys will give you a hand with all your things.”

“For sure, man” Matt chimes in, “I’ve got my truck here today so it’s a guarantee that we can do it all in one trip.” He pauses. “Well unless you’re like me and have way too much shit, but then we’ll just make another trip. I don’t mind.”

Neil shifts on his feet, hand tightening on the strap of his duffle, “Thanks, but this is everything.”

“Dude seriously?” Matt eyes the bag, “How do you even fit all your clothes in there? Some kind of master packing?”

“I pack light,” is all he offers in way of a response.

“Okay, what about in terms of lodgings? I doubt you managed to find an apartment in the short amount of time it took you to get here,” Wymack cuts in.

To be completely honest, Neil had not put much thought into where he would be staying. A part of him couldn’t stomach the thought of signing a lease (even if breaking it would be nothing) after already signing his life away with the contract. It was too much too fast. Neil Josten was fake and fake people didn’t sign a lease. So he put it off as much as he could, figuring he would have time enough after checking in at the studio to scouring the town and find a place to hunker down for the night. Or get a motel if it came to it.

Of course none of this he could actually say.

“Actually I-”

“He’s staying with us,” Andrew cuts in, drawing both men’s attention.

Neil blinks, momentarily stunned before the words sink in and panic flutters in his stomach. Kevin may be dense enough to not recognize him now, but even he’s not dumb enough to ignore it.
with Neil living right under his nose. Not to mention that Neil might strangle the man if left alone too long (Neil and Kevin’s friendship always worked better in doses). Being under the same roof as Andrew was nearly just as bad if the way his eyes watched Neil were any hint.

“No I’m not.”

“No he’s fucking not,” Wymack roars in tandem.

“Coach.”

“Coach, nothing, Minyard. Don’t think I didn’t hear about your stunt back in Arizona.”

Andrew turns to Kevin, ripping the headphones away once more. “Aw, did a little birdie tell on me?”

Wymack snorts, “It was on youtube the moment Josten’s ass hit the floor.”

Great. Another video. Did he mention that he was screwed?

“That is hardly my fault. Someone was a bit flighty, some would even say suspiciously so. I was just ensuring that he stayed long enough for Kevin here to get in a word or two.” He sends a bored look at Neil, “Besides, it worked didn’t it?”

“And that in itself is a miracle.”

Or stupidity.

“Some might call it idiocy, but to each their own,” Andrew shrugs.

Wymack, pinching the bridge of his nose as if he could somehow go back in time and erase the decision to sign them all to the label in the first place, sighs. “The answer is no, Andrew.”

Any lofty look of boredom and apathy is lost for one of steely blankness. “Funny how you think you actually have a say in this matter.”

Wymack bristles, “I’d say that I have a lot of say, seeing as how I own your contracts. Contracts that I will shred the moment you think of stirring up another shitstorm like last year.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Don’t give me a reason to.”

The room falls to a hushed tension, no one so much as wanting to breathe lest it turns the ire of the two men onto them. Neil watches on in conflicted caution. Every instinct in him is screaming to run, to flee before Andrew’s piercing gaze sees through his lies and the carefully crafted facade comes crashing down. But he already decided that running is no longer an option, not at least before he’s even touched the stage. Not when he knows he’s caught too much of Andrew’s interest to truly disappear without kicking up a fuss.

No, if he wanted this he was first going to have to play Andrew’s game. He survived and outsmarted his father for 12 years, what was one more and with someone not even a fifth of his father’s caliber?

“Well,” he clears his throat, snapping everyone’s attention back to him, “Not that this conversation isn’t riveting, but I think I’m capable enough to speak for myself.”
He turns to meet Andrew’s eyes, his face blank but the faintest trace of surprise flickering in those hazel eyes before it’s swallowed by apathy once more.

“I’ll stay with you until the end of the week. By then I should have found a place of my own.”

It was Thursday; he could survive 3 days with Andrew and his minions. By then whatever little game Andrew had planned would be long over or one of them would break. Bigger men than Andrew have already tried and fail. He would too. Wymack looks like he wants to argue, but a look between Neil and Andrew tells him it’s a lost cause. Instead, he turns back to Neil and levels him with a finger.

“If he gives you any trouble, you call me. Understand? I don’t care what time it is or where you might be, any hint of being uncomfortable and you pick up the goddamn phone. I, or anyone else, will come get you no questions asked.”

Neil looks around to receive several nods of confirmation. He didn’t have the heart to tell them that he didn’t have a phone. If Andrew did prove to be trouble, he was on his own. “Yes, sir.”

“Don’t sir me,” Wymack runs a hand over his face, “You’ll make me feel old.”

“Uh, sorry si- Coach?”

Another sigh, “It’s a start.”

He turns to leave, “Y’all get out of here. I’m sick of looking at your faces.”

“Aw, Coach, you love us!” Matt chimes in.

“Keep that up Boyd and it will be your contract I’m shredding.”

“And that’s my cue to run,” he strides over to Dan and loops an arm around the back of her knees and around her back, picking her up easily. “Off to home we go to gorge ourselves on junk food and bad movies.”

Dan throws her head back in laughter, looping an arm around Matt’s neck to keep herself steady. “You sure know how to sweet talk a girl.”

She presses a noisy kiss to his lips before swinging her head to look at the rest of her band, “You three want to come?”

Renee smiles and nods while Seth and Allison shrug in indifference. As they all file out, Dan and Renee comment on how nice it was to meet him and Matt even offers to catch up tomorrow and show him around town a little. Neil had no other response to that than a stuttered maybe. Soon the room empties out, leaving just Neil, Wymack and Andrew’s monsters.

“Does this mean we get to keep the cutie? If so I don’t mind sharing my bed with him.”

It wasn’t so much the sound of Nicky’s voice that makes his shoulders jump but rather the fact that he wasn’t speaking English. His chest tightens and it becomes harder to breathe. How could they know he spoke German? Did he let something slip? Do they know more than he originally thought? Run. Run. Ru-

“Enough Nicky,” Andrew replies in the same language, his tone biting and brokering no argument. “He is to be left alone.”
“Unfair!” Nicky whines, “You already have Kevin, you can’t horde all the cute ones! I’ll be gentle I promise.”

“Nicky.”

Nicky pouts and turns to Neil, a small smile playing on his lips despite his cousin’s reprimand. (It’s one that promises of crossed fingers and mischievous eyes.) “Fine.”

Still, the wave of relief that hits him is almost enough to take him off his feet. As it is, his face remains impassive despite his heart pounding in his chest and the blood rushing in his ears. It drowns the next few words passes between the cousins but also gives him time to quiet the urge to bolt.

He’s safe. They don’t know. He can stay. You’re safe. Yet even now he can feel this muscles tense in that familiar preparation of a long run. You’re safe. You can stay. It’s in his mind on a loop until he’s almost convinced himself that it’s true.

When the adrenaline finally fades from his system, he realizes that he cousins have stopped talking and their eyes are trained on him. Andrew’s calculated stare tempered by his blank face and Nicky’s one of pure mischief that has Neil shivering in response. He will have to keep an eye on this one.

Neil raises a brow, “Done talking about me?”

“How do you know we were talking about you?”

“Because you don’t switch languages unless you’ve got something to hide. That or you’re talking shit.” Neil smirks, “To each their own.”

There is the slightest twitch in Andrew’s jaw at his own words being thrown back in his face, but it only serves to makes Neil’s smirk wider.

“Not talking shit,” Nicky winks, “Just admiring how much of a shame it is that your cute ass is hidden in those awful jeans.”

Neil blinks and looks down at the jeans in question. “What’s wrong with my clothes?”

“What’s not wrong with them is the question! Neil, they look like they belong to a homeless person.”

Well technically he’s been homeless for the past year or so, but something tells him Nicky wouldn’t really appreciate that fact. So instead he settles for, “It’s what I have.”

To say Nicky looks in pain would be an understatement. Thankfully, Neil doesn’t have to suffer much more of the man’s ridicule as Wymack steps in to save him.

“I thought I made myself pretty clear,” he crosses his arms and glares at the four men, “Leave.”

Nicky seems to jump at the gruff tone, quickly wrapping an arm around Neil’s and dragging him toward the exit. “Leaving! Come along Neil, you can sit in the back with me since someone is stingy about the passenger seat.”

“How many times do I have to tell you,” Kevin squawks in indignation, “I have longer legs!”

“You’re an inch taller than me Kevin. Your legs aren’t that much longer.”
“Long enough!”

“Keep arguing and you both will find yourself and your long legs walking back home.” Andrew threatens as he shoulders his way past all three.

“Minyard,” Wymack calls just before he can leave. Andrew turns to face him with a bored look. “Remember what I said.”

Andrew doesn’t even bother with a reply, just turning back around and disappearing through the doors, leaving the rest of them to scramble to catch up (Well more so Nicky and Kevin with Neil being dragged along involuntarily).
but I think I know you, I know you, you can break

Chapter Notes

Porcelain - Emarosa

Surprisingly, the drive is uneventful. Besides Nicky nearly talking his ear off and exchanging barbed remarks back and forth with Kevin (who indeed claimed the passenger seat), Neil was able to get through the 20 minute ride in silence, only having to grunt the affirmative noise every now and then when Nicky checked to see if he was listening. Eventually, they pulled up to a modest looking two-story home in a quiet neighborhood. Neil quickly mapped out the quickest escape routes and pathways as the rest of the monsters poured out of the car and clambered their way to the front door. Andrew barely waits for them to shut the car doors before he’s walking up to the front door and unlocking it, stepping in and disappearing from sight before Neil even steps onto the porch.

Not wanting to feel awkward, Neil sticks close to Nicky as they step further into the house and into what appears to be a den of some kind. Of course, that’s where Neil sees Andrew sitting on the couch with his feet propped up and a controller in hand. Or at least who Neil would assume is Andrew if not for the fact that the man stood two feet in front of him leaning against the wall. He looks between the two Andrews and blinks, rubbing his eyes to make sure he’s not hallucinating. (He didn’t lose that much sleep on the plane did he?)

“Uh?” Neil looks to Nicky for help.

“Oh!” Nicky laughs, “This must look really weird. Neil this is Aaron, Andrew’s twin brother. Aaron this is Neil.”

Not Andrew (Aaron apparently) barely peels his eyes away from the screen other than to grunt his greeting. “Why the fuck is he here? You pick up another fucking stray or what?”

Neil already doesn’t like him.

“No this is Neil, the guy Kevin’s been raving about the past couple days? The one from youtube?” Aaron waves him off. “Anyways, he’s staying with us until he can find a place in town.”

“Just great. That’s exactly what we need, sharing our house with another no-name wannabe who fancies himself a musician. Wasn’t Kevin enough of a headache?”

“Those who don’t pay rent or mortgage don’t get a say in who stays in this house or not,” Andrew cuts in, pulling a cigarette from his pack and lighting it in the house. “Neil is staying. I suggest you get over it.”

At this Aaron tears his eyes from the screen and glares at his twin before turning that scrutinizing look onto Neil. His eyes sweep up and down him with undisguised contempt and annoyance before scoffing and turning back to the screen.

“Whatever. Just make sure he stays the fuck away from me and keeps his mouth shut when I’m studying.”

Yeah, Neil really doesn’t like him. Nicky turns and gives Neil an apologetic smile, “Aaron
is in college and generally prefers to remain out of the spotlight. That’s why it’s not publically broadcasted that Andrew has a brother, let alone a twin.”

“Oh,” Neil shrugs, not really sure what to do with that information.

“Yeah, I’m actually doing something with my life instead of running around playing rock star.”

"And yet," Andrew drawls with a long drag of his cigarette, "it's what's putting you through that fancy college of yours to get your degree.” Aaron glares at his brother, the temperature in the room dropping ten degrees as the two face-off (well Aaron does while Andrew looks like he rather be doing anything else.)

“Hey!” Nicky playfully reaches out to ruffle Aaron’s hair and tries to defuse the situation. “I am a rock star thank you very much. Besides I didn’t hear you complaining last week when I took you shopping with that rock star money.”

Aaron swats away Nicky’s hand before growling his displeasure and throwing a glare at his cousin. Neil decides that he’s had enough of the familial teasing and turn to Nicky with the intent of being shown to his room so he can be left alone in peace.

“So where am I staying?”

Now, Neil had thought that was a fairly simple question. He figured Nicky would smile and get all handsy again before dragging Neil off to the nearest guest room where he would have to deal with a bit more pestering before he managed to herd the other man out of the room and then settle in for the night. Apparently, that was too much to ask for, as Neil watches Nicky’s smile falter for the briefest of moments.

“Well, funny story. Actually-”

“The couch.” Kevin cut in, pushing past all of them to settle into the single armchair in the room.

Neil is decidedly not amused by this. “Seriously?”

Nicky looks nervous, but smiles, “It’s a very nice couch! I’ve fallen asleep on it a great many times, granted I mostly was drunk and couldn’t climb the stair to save my own neck, but I’ve only woken up with a crick in my neck like two times tops.”

Neil just levels him with a look before turning to Andrew, “If you didn’t have room why the hell did you argue with Wymack about me staying?”

Andrew takes a drag of his cigarette, blowing a cloud of smoke up in the air before settling a bored look at Neil. “Because I don’t like threats where I can’t see them.”

Before Neil can open his mouth to retort, Andrew stubs the cigarette out against the heel of his boot and trudges up the stairs, disappearing into the room with the sound of a door opening and closing. Huffing (and silently counting down from 10 in every language he’s ever learned), Neil turns back to Nicky who looks like he also rather be anywhere but there at the moment.

“It won’t be that bad!” he tries, “A few blankets and a nice pillow and you won’t even notice the difference.”

It’s not the couch that’s really the problem. Neil has slept a number of places that would
make Andrew’s lumpy couch seem like a paradise; no what bothered Neil the most was the fact that
he would be out in the open, with nothing at his back and exposed to anyone who wandered into the
room. For a man who has been looking over his shoulder for as many years as he had, Neil’s learned
that he will never be comfortable enough to relax — let alone sleep — during his stay like this. Not
until Andrew’s game was over and maybe not even then.

Great. Neil sighs and drops his duffle next to the arm of the couch furthest from Aaron as he
could get. Gripping the handle of his guitar case with a tight grip, he forces himself to drop into the
seat and relax. It must not work well because Nicky takes one look at him before placing his hands
on his hips and frowning.

“Who wants a drink?”

Kevin practically jumps from his seat and beelines for the kitchen. “Oh fuck yes.”

By the afternoon had bled away into evening, Neil finds his skin crawling and the
pinpricks of restlessness traveling up and down his spine. At first, his nervous energy manifested
through the jiggling of his foot — much to Aaron’s annoyance — until his whole body began to
twitch and shift as if he could not get comfortable in his own skin let alone on the lumpy couch.
Eventually, after annoying Aaron and even Kevin, Neil rose from the couch and started making laps
around the house, familiarizing himself with the layout (two bedrooms on the ground with two more
up top and a bathroom on each level) and planning escape routes should he ever need to get out of
here fast. So far he’s planned four.

Still, it’s not enough to burn the excess energy coursing through his veins in the way that he
desperately craves. He needs to get out of the house, feel his feet slap against the pavement and his
lungs expand with air while the world softens into a forgettable blur. He needs to be free. Yet here he
remains, confined to a house whose walls are closing in tighter and tighter by the minute until he’s
not sure he will be able to breathe at all.

See, the problem is that while he would like nothing more than to tear through that front door
and disappear for the next hour or so (two if his body could push it), the weight of his guitar and
duffle hold him firmly in place. With the way Andrew’s eyes had tracked his every movement, no
doubt noting the tight grip he held on both, Neil would never be able to trust the meager possessions
behind lest he wishes their secrets to be divulged. True, his mother taught him well enough to hide
nothing in plain sight, going as far to rip into the lining of his case to hide some bonds and a few
thousand in cash in addition to splitting his emergency ID and papers (and a few more thousands of
dollars) in the song journal he kept stashed in the bottom of his duffle, but they were all the missing
puzzle pieces that composed one Neil Josten (or rather the lack of a Neil Josten).

No, while Andrew might suspect that Neil wasn’t telling the truth, if he found any of those
documents, he would know. And then he would have to leave because as much as Neil wants this,
he wants to live more. So, yeah, a run was out of the question.

“Shit Neil, you look ready to jump out of your own skin,” Nicky whistles when he comes
into the kitchen where Neil has taken to pacing.

He stops, trying to quell the urge to move, but finds himself rocking in place instead. “Sorry,
just feeling a bit antsy. Maybe I just need some air.” And to get the hell away from all of you.
Nicky nods thoughtfully, “Yeah, I can see that. How about you go for a little walk around the neighborhood? Might do you some good to familiarize yourself with the block anyhow.”

Neil shakes his head, “I rather not. I think I’m too tired not to get lost.”

“How about resting on the back deck? There’s not much out there besides a couple of chairs and a fire pit, but it’s quiet.”

“That sounds perfect,” Neil smiles, willing to take anything at this point. And who knows maybe it will be quiet enough to work on a few chords to the song he was learning.

“Great,” Nicky beams, “It’s just through the doors just right of here. They’re big and glass and you can’t miss them.”

With a nod, Neil bids his goodbye and sets off in the direction Nicky has pointed him towards. It doesn’t take long for him to find the door in question before he’s ducking out of the house and into what is actually a pretty spacious backyard. What greets him the most, however, is the breath of fresh air that accompanies the shutting of the doors, lowering the volume of the house until it’s a dull murmur.

Closing his eyes, he draws in a deep breath and lets his muscles sag in relief. The nervous energy is still there, yet instead of shocking his system into movement, it’s a soft buzz that urges his feet forward a few feet until his sneakers hit a patch of grass. The sun is dying, coloring the sky in rich hues of pinks and reds and oranges, clouds peppering in between shades as milky dividers. Neil tips his head back and sucks in another breath of air.

This time it’s tinged with the flavor of smoke and nicotine.

When Neil next opens his eyes he is greeted with the sight of Andrew resting on the roof above the deck, knee bent with an arm casual slung over it and a cigarette dangling loosely between two fingers. He’s sporting what Neil thinks is his trademark apathetic blank face, but it’s harshness if offset by the splash of color the sky tints his pale cheeks and the way his hair is set ablaze in pastels instead of its usual blonde color. It’s a lot more picturesque than Neil thinks the bastard has any right to be.

“Could you be any more of a cliche?” Neil scoffs, turning around to face him.

“Speak for yourself,” Andrew takes a drag, “I’m not the one stretching out in the sun like some cat.”

“And what exactly would you say you’re doing right now?”

“Smoking.” He flicks some ash in Neil’s general direction, “Now shut up and go away.”

The smart thing to do would be to listen, to go back inside and de-escalate the situation before it had a chance to become another argument. But the thing is that Neil Josten is an instigator at heart and this identity has sunken deep in his bone with a tenacity none of his others had before. Maybe because it was his last, maybe it’s because this is the closest name he’s ever chosen to his real one. Maybe he’s just tired of running.

Then again it’s probably because he wants to see that blank look fall right off the man's face.

“I would love to, but you see I didn’t even want to be here in the first place, so I only think it’s fair that you have to suffer with me as I do you.”
Andrew takes a long drag instead of answering, smoke pouring from his mouth when he finally pulls the cigarette away. He thinks he can outlast Neil by saying nothing. He is wrong.

“I stand by my earlier statement,” he finally replies after another moment of silence.

“What makes you so sure I’m a threat? I’ve known you all for what? Three days?”

“And in those three days, you’ve managed to lie about your background, attempted to make a run for it at the mere sight of Kevin, and showed up halfway across the country with your entire life packed in a single duffle bag.” This time he blows the smoke right at Neil, obscuring his vision of the man for a brief second. “If that’s not shady, I don’t know what is.”

Well. He’s not wrong.

“Then why let me stay?”

Andrew gives him a bored look. “I don’t know if you’re actually this obtuse or if you’re trying to get a reaction from me. Either way, I don’t like repeating myself.”

“I’m talking about letting me stay in general. If I’m such a threat why sign me to your band? Why come all the way to Arizona and force me to come here? Surely that’s detrimental to whatever it is you have planned.”

“I have nothing planned.”

“Are you really this obstinate or is it just for me?”

Andrew glares at him, obviously annoyed at Neil’s use of his own words twisted against him. He really could care less; if this is the game Andrew wanted to play, he couldn’t complain when Neil gave as good as he got. He raises an eyebrow as he waits.

Finally, Andrew takes another drag before stubbing it out on the shingles. “Kevin.”

Kevin? What the hell does Kevin have to do with anything? Sure, Neil knew that it was Kevin who pushed for Neil to join the band (read: forcibly made him sign the contract), but from what he could tell Kevin had little sway over what occurred in the band. From the moment Neil touched down in town until now, Kevin has done nothing but follow Andrew’s orders like a slave, no matter how much he may grumble or complain about doing so. In the end, he always fell instep behind Andrew’s lead. So why the hell would Kevin play such a big part in letting him stay now?

“It seems to me that Kevin doesn’t have much sway over what you do in anything.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“So then, what’s the real answer?”

“What did I say about repeating myself?”

“Then give me a straight answer,” Neil huffs in frustration.

Andrew looks him over for a second before lighting up a second cigarette, the flicker of his flame illuminating his face in the dying light. “All you need to know is that Kevin and I have an understanding. One that allows him to recruit whomever he pleases in order to make this little band grow to the level he wants, while I get to cull the weak and the threats.”

“You sound as if you don’t care about the band at all.”
“I don’t.”

That… That doesn’t make any sense.

“But how can you not? Isn’t this your band too? Yours and your cousins? How could you just not care?”

Neil would have given everything to be where Andrew is at. To be able to play music for a living without having to look over his shoulder every fucking minute. To be surrounded by family and practice with Kevin Day, the prodigal son of rock and indie. Anything.

“Easy. Watch me.”

“Then why play at all?” he hedges, trying to understand any of this.

Andrew gives him a cool look, one that betrays the blank mask he so carefully portrays. “I’m afraid you’ve used up your question quota.”

So there’s the boundary. Neil quickly files that away for another opportunity- Wait, why would there be another opportunity? The quicker he can finish whatever this game is between them the better. Then he could slip away into the background of the band for however long it’s safe to stay.

Neil shakes his head, “Then just one more. Where does this leave us then? Obviously, we’re not going to get anything done with you watching my every movement let alone actually practice well enough for our first show in a few weeks. So what do I have to do to end this game?”

Andrew’s second cigarette almost burns to the filter before Neil gets a response. “Tomorrow night we’re going out to a club. You’re coming with us.”

Of all the places Neil’s been taught to avoid, nightclubs were near the top of that list, too many faces to keep track of and too big of crowds to hide in. He didn’t want to think of what could be lying in wait for him in Andrew’s scheme.

“And if I say no?”

“Not an option,” Andrew says boredly.

It really wasn’t. Sure, he could walk away now, maybe even call up Wymack somehow and remove himself from the house altogether, but there was only so much he could do about the band itself. If Neil didn’t take this offer, their game would continue.

“Fine. One night.”

The cigarette reaches the filter and Andrew stubs it away next to the first one. He gets up, dusting himself off as he looks down at Neil still standing in the middle of the grass, sun no longer in the sky and the pink hues slowly fading into the grey of night.

“Careful Neil. Tomorrow night is my turn for some questions. And you better hope I like the answers.”

“Fuck off.”

Andrew smirks before ducking through the open window at his back, to what Neil can only assume is his room. Once the window slides back in place, Neil can feel himself breathing a little
easier. One night. That is the price Andrew has demanded for all of this, one night and some answers. Well, what Andrew doesn’t know is that Neil was taught to lie with the best of them and he’s had to do so with a straight face to much more intimidating people than a midget drummer. One night was nothing.

Besides, what could possibly happen in one night that Neil hasn’t been through a million times already?
champagne, cocaine, gasoline(and most things in between)

Chapter Notes

Don't Threaten Me With a Good Time - Panic at the Disco

A lot.

The answer is a lot. At first, it started off innocent enough, Nicky appearing over his spot on the couch with a bag in one hand and a box in the other. It turns out that neither Nicky nor Andrew trusted him enough to dress appropriately for a “night on the town,” as Nicky had called it and had taken the liberty to buying him an entire outfit that consisted of too tight jeans, an almost too sheer top that just barely hid his scars from view, and a thick pair of black boots that he actually liked (and would consider keeping after all this is said and done). Nicky had tried to corral him in the bathroom to mess with his hair and apply some eyeliner, but Neil drew the line when the man pulled out glitter. Next thing he knew, they were all piling into the car (Neil once again relegated to the back, this time between Nicky and Aaron) and tearing off down the street toward wherever was their destination for the night. Unlike the first time he had driven with the group, the drive was filled with chatter and music, Nicky incessantly wheedling Neil for information about his life in Arizona or arguing with Kevin over how to arrange their next set. Andrew, however, remained completely silent.

Neil didn’t know if he should be worried or not.

Oddly enough, before they reach the nightclub, Andrew pulls up into the drive-thru of some diner fast food joint, called Sweets. He doesn’t even bother asking anyone for their order (not that Neil had much of an appetite to begin with) before ordering 5 ice cream sundaes with extra nuts on the side. Still, no one appeared to disconcerted with the order, not once breaking their conversations to complain. Rather, they all seemed jovial when Andrew passes out the ice cream, but perhaps that’s because of the brightly colored packets that he tosses to each of them along with the dessert. A packet that is decidedly not nuts.

When a packet is tossed in his direction, Neil picks it up by the corner and inspects its contents. It appears to be some brightly dyed powder. He takes a quick sniff only to notice that there really isn’t a smell.

“What is this?” He asks Nicky.

“Cracker dust,” he answers, pouring the contents of his own back down his throat. “Just a little pick me up for the club.”

Neil wrinkles his nose and offers the packet back at Nicky. “No thanks. I don’t do drugs.”

“It’s hardly a drug,” Nicky snorts, “It’s completely non-addictive. Even Kevin here, our resident health nut, doesn’t mind them.”

Kevin turns around, already having finished his own packet, “It’s fine Neil. I wouldn’t do anything that would jeopardize my playing in the long run. It’s safe.”

It seems that Neil and he had very different ideas of safe. Safe didn’t mean being high out of your
mind while you’re surrounded by people you don’t trust. It sure as hell didn’t mean letting go of the bit of control you had over your situation.

“My answer is no.” He drops it in Nicky’s lap and turns back to stare out the windshield. Only then does he catch Andrew’s eyes watching the interaction from the rearview mirror.

“Aw, come on Neil! Live a little,” Nicky prods.

Before Neil can tell him to back off, Andrew’s quiet command cuts in. “Leave it, Nicky.”

It’s not said particularly loud, or with any sort of power (besides Andrew’s just inherent commanding tone that seems to color everything he says), but the car immediately falls silent in its wake. Nicky sighs dramatically but settles himself against the door, while Aaron continues to look bored out of his mind as he stares out the window (almost like he’s the one who doesn’t want to be here). Neil almost waits to see if Andrew will say anything more now that his silence had finally been broken, but the man just turns back to the road and silently turns up the radio until music fills the space chatter left.

It does nothing to settle Neil’s nerves.

The club is exactly how Neil pictured it being, a heavy thumping bass that rumbles through every bone in his body and drives his heart into matching its quickening tempo, lights flashing enough to warrant an epilepsy warning and the air thick with smoke that threatened to choke him with the memories of a sunny California beach.

He hated it.

Hated how bodies pressed into him from all sides as Andrew moved into the thickets of people to make his way to the bar and how they were all left hopelessly to follow behind. Hated how with each brush of an arm or back he would freeze and wonder if it was one of his father’s people finally coming to reclaim him. Hated how that in the sea of people the only person he could lean on was the one he should be worried about the most. Above all, he hated how he was once again dependent on someone else and the last time that happened, they ended up dead (and he hated that he didn’t wish it on anyone else).

When they finally reach the bar, Neil is pressed tightly against the counter with Nicky at his back and Andrew at his elbow flagging down the bartender. Twisting his neck, he can see Kevin and Aaron amble away further into the crowd and making their way towards an empty table on the balcony overlooking the dancefloor, only Kevin’s tall stature allowing Neil to spot the duo in the otherwise faceless crowd. After pouring and handing off a couple of drinks to some patrons, the bartender turns to them with a quick and easy smile.

“Andrew! Nicky! Long time no see, what have my favorite boys been up to?” He greets them, leaning too far into their space for Neil’s comfort.

Andrew, whom Neil would think to be as touchy about personal space as Neil is, doesn’t seem phased by the man at all (something Neil ingrains into his brain for later use). “Roland. The usual.”

For all Andrew’s gruff tone, Roland (apparently) doesn’t seem off-put at all; in fact, his smile only seems to grow. “Blunt and to the point as usual, I see. Can’t you even give a boy a hello anymore?”

“Hey Roland!” Nicky calls from behind, waving a little.

Roland’s eyes quickly snap to Nicky, waving back before his eyes finally catch on Neil. The easy smile transforms to something smaller but no less welcoming.
“And who do we have here?” he asks, voice almost a purr and too low to be heard in this loud of a club.

“This is Neil,” Andrew answers before Neil can say anything for himself, “He’s new.”

Well, that was certainly one way to put it, but Roland must understand his point because the look he gives Neil next is one of curious assessment with just a hint of worry. That was Neil’s first warning.

The second came in the form of Roland asking for his drink of choice to which Andrew answers, “Give him my usual as well.”

The final warning was Roland’s feigned nonchalance as he shrugs and turns around to start mixing the mystery concoction. Neil leaned closer into the bar, watching every dip and reach of the bartender’s hands as they grabbed bottle after bottle to put together what Neil could only assume was a very potent drink.

“Neil, hey Neil!” Nicky pesters at his back, poking his cheek until he finally concedes and turns toward the man. “What, Nicky?”

“You’re going to dance with me right? You just gotta! Andrew and Kevin refuse while Aaron ditches me as soon as we hit the crowd, so you have to! Besides I’m sure you just turn all sorts of heads when you dance. That ass.” Nicky groans and grabs onto Neil tighter, “Say yes, please oh please say yes.”

“No,” Neil carefully removes his hands, “Sorry. I don’t really dance.”

“That’s okay! I can teach you, I’m an amazing teacher.”

Somehow Neil doubts Nicky will be able to stay on his own two feet much longer let alone teach him how to dance.

“I think I’m just going to have to pass on that one.”

Nicky starts whining and leaning heavily on Neil, pushing the other’s back into the lip of the bartop while doing his damnedest to convince Neil otherwise. And if Neil were any other person, he might have given in just to appease the man and get him off, but he didn’t because he saw the tactic for what it really was, a decoy. When Neil had first turned to answer Nicky, he twisted his head so his gaze was directed at him but leaving enough of Andrew in his peripheral to see something gleaming in the light as he passed something to Roland. When he shifted to move Nicky off, he tilted his head to the right to watch in the reflection of an empty tray as Roland upended something into the drink he was making.

He fought to keep his face neutral despite the flicker of rage burning in his chest. Andrew thought he could drugged Neil into submission, well fuck him he was wrong. Roland loads the last of the drinks onto a tray before sliding it across the bar to Andrew. Andrew wordlessly picks it up before shouldering past Neil and pushing his way into the crowd and towards the stairs Kevin and Aaron disappeared up to. Nicky gleefully follows, obviously chasing his next bit of fun either ignorant of Andrew’s plans or not caring. Neil watches them but doesn’t move to join them.

He could run, he thinks. Just disappear through the same crowd he came in and slip into the night forever or perhaps even to somewhere he could call Wymack. But none of that would let him play — let him touch the stage and sing. The only one who could offer that walked away and was swallowed by sweat-slick bodies twisting and bopping to the music. His salvation laid at the bottom
of a drugged drink and at the mercy of someone else’s will.

“Are you joining them?” the bartender asks, eyebrow raised as he pours yet another drink. Neil notices how this one he keeps clean. (He wonders if that makes him special or just stupid. Probably a bit of either.)

He almost wishes it was enough to keep him away.

He pushes away from the bar and follows.

It’s not hard to find them, of the few tables scattered around on the upper level only one contains two tufts on blonde hair next to laughing man whose voice could be heard even over the loud bass vibrating the air around them. They are tucked away in the back corner, giving them an excellent view of the entire club and its entrance, perfect for monitoring who’s coming and going at any given moment without exposing themselves to the same scrutiny. It’s one of the reasons they spot Neil before he can figure out how to thwart Andrew’s attempt at drugging him.

“Neil!” Nicky hollers arm waving nonsensically in the air to hail him over, “Come join us before Kevin drinks everything!”

Neil’s eyes slide to the man in question to see him throwing back several shots of some clear liquid in quick succession. He would be impressed if his own liver wasn’t quivering in the thought of it. Alcohol was never something Neil saw the point in; maybe it stemmed from his own past where its only use was to numb the feeling of the needle through his flesh or made his head spin uncomfortably while his mother hovered about him. Maybe it was because the worst of his father’s abuse — the ones where he was careless enough to leave a visible mark — came with the stench of it lingering in his breath.

No, alcohol never had an appeal. Still, he moves to join them at the table, sliding into an open seat next to Kevin and across from Andrew who sits with his back against a wall and holds a small glass of amber liquid between his fingers.

“T ook you long enough.”

Neil shrugs, turning to look over the crowd trying to spot any familiar faces that could be hiding. He doesn’t see any. Yet. A clink of glass against the table pulls his attention back to the group. In front of him rests Andrew’s spiked drink, a small glass much like his own but instead of a light amber liquid, this one is darkened to a reddish hue. He eyes the drink and then Andrew.

“I don’t drink.”

Andrew pushes the glass closer. “Tonight you do.”

“No, I don't think I do.” Neil inches it away. Andrew’s hand stops the glass before it gets too far.

“I don’t think you understand, I wasn’t asking.”

“And yet my answer remains the same.”

Something dangerous glints across his eyes and Neil has to stop himself from flinching away. It was a look he was all too familiar with, one that promised pain and another scar.

“Remember what I said, Neil. Tonight is my night for answers.”

It takes all of Neil’s mustered bravado to raise an eyebrow and say, “And yet, I haven’t heard any
questions.”

If it were any other person, Neil would be on the ground right now, body writhing in pain and a figure looming over his prone body with a promise of more. Yet Andrew just stiffens into an impossibly straight line, the only movement noticeable is a twitch towards black armbands he has hidden under some sleeves. Neil half expects the cold press of steel in his side in any second now (his mother always did warn him that his mouth would get them killed one day. She probably just didn’t know that they would be two separate days.)

“And since you haven’t asked any, perhaps I will pose one myself.” He slides the glass all the way over to Andrew’s side of the table. “Did you really expect me to be naive enough to trust anything you gave me, let alone a spiked drink?”

Surprise mars Andrews face in the form of a raised eyebrow and a twitch of his lips. Neil has to tamper down the swell of pride that floods his chest at breaking the other man’s mask. He pushes on despite the stillness that had overcome the table.

“I saw that bartender friend of yours slip something into it while he was mixing it. Rookie mistake really. Never drug a drink in the open.” He feels a smile tug on his lips, a cruel and sharp thing that he wants to claw off the moment he feels it forming. His father’s smile. “Tell me what was it? Rohypnol? Zolpidem? Or perhaps a cocktail of the two?”

He leans closer over the table. “Better luck next time.”

Perhaps if he kept his mouth shut, if he didn’t give in to that urge to throw back Andrew’s taunt in his face, he would have seen the moment the surprise died for a fake calm. A calm that was only ever found in the middle of a hurricane. But he didn’t and when he moves to lean back against the seat and an arm shoots out and snags his collar, yanking him out of the seat and splaying him out on the table. He barely has enough time to pull the fabric tight against his chest to hide the scars from peeking into view.

His eyes dart up to Andrew’s who just looks at him bored. “Funny how you say any of that like you have a choice.”

Before Neil can say anything else, the glass is upended into his mouth and a hand clamped over his mouth and nose, trapping the concoction in his mouth and leaving him to choke or swallow.

“Bottoms up Neil.”

The drug him hard, his empty stomach no match for the swirl of drugs mixing with the acid and bleeding into his bloodstream. The lights swirl around him, blurring the world and lightening his head as if it’s filled with helium. When Andrew lets go of him, he stumbles back into his seat, fingers having to grip the edges of the table to keep himself upright.

“Fuck you,” he growls, trying to push himself away but ends up slipping and falling against the table again.

Andrew raises his own glass to his lips, “Nicky.”

“Y-yeah?” his cousin replies, fear and guilt ringing in his voice.

“Take him away until the drug has had enough time to course through his entire system. Hit him with another dose if it takes too long.”

Nicky moves to grab Neil’s arm to maneuver them out of them out of the booth, but Neil weakly
pushes him off and tumbles to the ground for his troubles. “Don’t fucking touch me!”

“Don’t be like that Neil,” Nicky soothes, “It’ll be over before you know it. Let’s dance and have fun.”

Neil takes a wild swipe but hits nothing but air, “I said keep your hands fucking off.”

He tries to scramble away, inching towards the railing and looking for help. Kevin and Aaron all look back to their own drinks, dismissing the plea in his eyes. Andrew looks on in boredom before turning away entirely as Nicky finally manages to pull him up and drag him towards the stairs. He fights, pulling against the hands that hold him and digging his heels into the ground, but it only serves to trip up his own feet and tighten the grip on his arms. Soon they reach the edge of their destination. The dancefloor is packed tight with gyrating bodies and music so loud it pounds in his bones and kicks his heart up into a matching beat until it drowns out everything else.

“Have fun, Neil. Save one dance for me,” Nicky purrs directly into his ear before pushing him forward.

He’s thrust into the heart of the crowd, sweaty bodies pressing against him and choking the air from his lungs. Everywhere he turns and pushes there are more and more bodies crowding him closer and closer to the center. He’s lost sight of Nicky at this point, the man’s tall stature and bouncy curls unrecognizable among the hundreds of others that mimic the style. Neil feels his control start to slipping, the drug hitting his system quick and painless, draining the world of detail and precision. His movements become sloppier and his pushes weaker until he’s at the mercy of the sway of the dancing bodies. He finds himself pushed into person after person, who slide against him, hands fleeting yet suggestive against his skin. It’s enough to turn his stomach.

Of course, that’s when he is thrown back into the arms of his captor. Nicky’s pupils are blown wide until the brown is almost completely swallowed by black and are glazed over in ecstasy. The smile on his face is predatory and sloppy, his hands demanding as they tug Neil closer to his body.

“Neil, buddy there you are!” Nicky leans his weight against him, “I’ve been looking all over for you. You still owe me that dance.”

Neil pushes him off or tries to. “Get off me.”

“Aww don’t be like that! Just one little dance and then we’ll head back to the table.”

“I’m not doing anything with any of you.” He struggles against Nicky’s weight, “I’m leaving.”

Nicky frowns, moving his weight off Neil until he can look him in the eyes. “But you can’t. Andrew will get mad. It’s better if you just let him have his way. Everything is easier that way. If you fight all you’re going to end up doing is hurting yourself.”

But Neil has had enough of people trying to control him. “He can try.”

“I wish you didn’t say that,” Nicky whispers, almost too low for Neil to hear over the music. Neil wonders at what he could mean when the grip on his shoulders tighten and suddenly Nicky’s mouth is on his, tongue sweeping past his lips and coating his own in something sticky and sweet. When Nicky pulls back, Neil’s head fills with static. “Don’t fight it, Neil.”

He’s pushed back into the crowd, Nicky slipping easily behind heads of people and leaving Neil to become adrift once more in the sea of bodies. He can feel his body slowly begin to lose function, coherent thoughts near impossible, and his movements languid and slow. He needed to leave. He needed to run.
With a new bout of aggression, he shoves and squirms his way through the crowd, no longer caring who he upsets in his wake or the string of curses following his back. All he can hear is the pounding of his heart and the endless loop of his mother’s last words. *Never stop running Abram. Never stop. Run. Run. Run. Run.*

And so he did.

He had just managed to break free of the crowd when he collides into a hard and unyielding surface that bears his weight even when Neil cannot.

“And where do you think you might be going?”

Neil blinks his vision clear until Andrew comes into a full focus in an otherwise spinning world. Words weigh heavy on his tongue, as if almost too taxing to let them roll off like they wanted to. Still, he musters a few just for him. “Fuck you.”

Amusement flickers in those blank eyes, “I see the drugs haven’t quite worked their way through you completely. Where’s Nicky? He’s supposed to make sure you’re nice and agreeable before you bother me.”

“Go fuck yourself,” he repeats, words starting to slur together, “You and your touchy fucking cousin.”

Andrew stiffens and Neil’s drug-addled brain wonders what he could have said that time. “What did you say?” he asks deceptively quiet.

“I said go fuck-”

“After that! About Nicky,” Andrew cuts him off.

“Nicky?” his mind swirls, “What about him?”

“You called him touchy. Where did he touch you exactly?”

“I-I don’t-”

“Neil.” Andrew’s voice is ice as he grabs Neil’s shoulders and gives him a shake, clearing his head momentarily. “Where.”

“Just on my body mostly,” Neil rambles, “Kept sliding his arms over me and pulling me close. Then he kissed me.”

If Neil thought Andrew was angry before, that had nothing on the pure wave of fury radiating off him now, the quiet stiff line of his body paired with the firm set of his jaws a tightly pressed line of lips and teeth. His eyes though were the worst, cold and blank and the promise of pain swirling in their depths.

“Stay here,” he grinds out before pushing his way into the crowd and leaving Neil alone.

*Stay here,* well if that wasn’t the stupidest idea Neil has heard. The moment Andrew slips from sight, Neil is pushing through the remaining crowd of people with a desperation that he was only too familiar with. Soon he pushed through the last thickets of bodies and is greeted with a lung full of fresh air. He barely has enough time to push himself to the side before his stomach heaves and empties its contents against the alley wall. Once his body expels what it can of the drug, Neil picks himself up and does what he does best.
He runs.

The last time Neil had been drugged, he was barely 15 and in the middle of Prague, footsteps slapping against cobblestone roads and the dying sun at his back as he twisted and turned into alleyways too small for the grown men after him to follow. This feels pretty much the same, his head spinning in all directions, his shins screaming at the repeated abuse of his feet slamming down on the pavement at a breakneck speed, lungs screaming for air, and blood rushing in his ears screaming at him to keep going. What isn't the same (and could be the reason he doesn’t make it out of this) is the desperation to find a place to hide before his mind slips under.

In Prague, his mother and he had cased the city multiple times, noting every nook, cranny, and hideout they could use in a variety of different scenarios. They ingrained maps of the city, plotting courses they could take in a moment’s notice and disappear in the wind should anyone try to give chase. Here, now, Neil knew nothing. He had let himself grow complacent — careless — allowing Andrew to keep him captive when he should have been out in the town learning its secrets and escape routes. He should have already purchased a map and had at least somewhere to lie low when shit hit the fan (as it so often does in his life) and yet here he is. Running blind through alleyways and people while the world around him blurs into nothingness.

He’s got maybe another 5 minutes or so before his body collapses in on itself and he’s left to the mercy of whatever hiding spot he can muster up. His chances are not looking good, considering the amount of distance he needs to put between him and Andrew. He could be miles from the club or he could only be a couple blocks away. Either way, time is running out fast and Neil needs to make a decision. Luckily his body seems to make one for him, feet finally twisting too hard on a turn that sends him cantering into the wall next to a dumpster. He crumbles, legs too weak to hold his weight any longer.

*Get up!* His mind screams at him, begs, *It’s too soon. He’ll find you. Move. Move. MOVE.*

But his body can’t. Reality is slowly slipping through his fingers no matter how tightly he grasps, darkness filling its void. His eyelids feel heavy and the tongue in his mouth like lead. Every blink takes ages to complete, one second, two, until Neil knows that the next time they close it will be for good. With the last slip of consciousness, he tucks himself into the space between the dumpster and wall and prays that it will be enough to keep himself hidden until he wakes. If he wakes. Darkness claims him then, hiding his form from prying eyes tearing his mind from the conscious world.
did you catch your own reflection in the knife my mother held? or the hell in my father's eyes?

Chapter Notes

And the Snake Starts to Sing - Bring Me the Horizon

Here’s the thing, Neil knows it’s a stupid idea — he knows okay? When he woke up in an alley with the sun blaring in his face through a crack between the dumpster and the wall feeling like death warmed over, it became apparently clear that staying would cost a lot more than Neil was willing or able to give (even with Kevin’s seductive promises still whispering in his ear). So after laying there long enough to stay the bouts of nausea rolling over him and adjust his eyes to the too brightness of the world, he forces his poor battered body into moving back to the cousin’s house for his shit. He already plotted the needed course to hit the closest of his mother’s remaining stashes in order to gather enough money to leave the country (maybe Europe would be better this time around). Blessedly when he did manage to crawl back to the house, it was devoid of any five-foot blondes and their taller conspirators. Unfortunately, it was also devoid of his things.

Really, he shouldn’t be surprised, not after the way his attachment to the items was visible from the beginning. He had kept a too tight grip on the duffle bag and guitar case, and the fact he was never apart from the items for long throughout the duration of his stay was a pretty damn good indicator he was hiding something important in them. With Andrew’s observant nature and natural suspicion, he also knew that Neil would be hesitant to leave them behind. Or well he would if he didn’t already learn well enough to keep three separate stashes.

Neil strolls into the bathroom and reaches for the spare towels folded nicely on a shelf beside the shower. In the third one lies his journal stuffed with the majority of his cash and a handful of bonds alongside the next two IDs his mother had bought them a few years back. Never trust your backup plan to be your backup plan, always have a third for when it comes crashing down; it was the best lesson his mother ever taught him. Tucking the journal under his arm and refolding the towel to obscure his tracks, he walks out of the bathroom and back into the living towards the door. He should have been in the clear, free to disappear while Andrew and his minions wait for a man who wouldn’t exist anymore. Should have been.

And yet, Neil finds that he couldn’t. While everything he needed for leaving currently rests under his arm, Andrew had his guitar. It shouldn’t matter; it was just a cheap thing he bought on a whim. Hell, he could buy another one if he really wanted to. It was nothing. But he here he sits, head tipped back on the couch of an empty Fox Records after having walked from the cousins’ house and waiting for Andrew to piece the clues of his location together. Like he said, it is stupid. So stupid his mother probably turned in her metaphorical grave. Still, the guitar may be nothing, a broken down hunk of wood held together by stubbornness and a little duct tape, but so was he.

Some days it was the only thing he had left that made running worth it. He could live without the stage and the fame, hell he could never touch a microphone again, but losing the music that guitar has brought back into his life — losing his voice the second time around — might be the thing that finally does him in. At that point, he might as well just walk himself back to Baltimore and save his father the trouble. Then, at least, his death would be quicker. Hopefully.
So yeah. Not his brightest plan (hell not even in the top 100) but it was the only one he’s got. Luckily, it seems his waiting had finally come to an end as a series of footsteps slowly move closer to the studio doors, the unmistakable sound of chatter growing louder with its approach. Neil kicks up his feet onto the coffee table and waits.

“Neil?” He picks up his head not to see Andrew at the door but Matt’s towering figure followed by the rest of the members of Palmetto. “You’re here pretty early. Everything okay?”

Neil shrugs a shoulder, “I’m fine.”

If one didn’t count the splitting headache and cottonmouth. Neil didn’t and he doubts it would change their fussing if he admitted it to them.

Matt smiles, moving from the doorway to join Neil on the couch, careful to keep their space between them but still at a friendly distance. “Wait, I know that look. That’s the I-stayed-out-and-partied-all-night-and-now-don’t-know-how-I-got-here look.”

His laughter is rambunctious and infectious. If Neil wasn’t sure his head would cave in, he’d have joined in. As it is, he musters a tired smile for the man. Of all the Palmetto members, Matt was easily Neil’s favorite, the man too genuine and kind even for Neil’s suspicious and distrusting nature to find fault with him. He reminded him of Alex, all easy going smiles and friendly disposition that disarmed just about anyone who came in contact with him; the only difference was that Matt was real. Perhaps that is why Neil finds himself inclined to responding instead of letting the conversation die when it could.

“Something like that. Why are you guys in so early?” He turns to address the entirety of Palmetto. “Just practice or did I miss some memo about another meeting with Wymack?”

“Nope!” Dan waves him off as she plops herself in the seat across him. “We were out at breakfast when Matt and Seth got to talking about rearranging some chords in our newest song and insisted we come over to do it now since we were in the area anyway.”

“It’s what was missing,” Seth insists. “Wait until you hear it and then you’ll know what I’m talking about. Then we can kick those rat bastards The Ravens from number one.”

Neil flinches at the name of one of the industries top selling artists of the past few years. The Ravens started out as a small rock group based in Japan where they gathered a considerable following before deciding to try their hands in the American music market. They took the industry by storm, dominating charts left and right despite a chunk of their music still being mostly in Japanese with English sprinkled in. Within a year they had secured themselves not only as formidable musicians but extremely accomplished ones who held the record for the longest standing single at number one for six months in a row. But it was not their success that caused Neil’s flinch at the mere mention of their name. No, it was who fronted the band, one Riko Moriyama.

If Neil was terrified of Kevin and his connection to his past, it did not hold a candle to the sheer petrifying horror at the thought of running into Riko. Whereas Kevin remained oblivious to all things outside of his music, Riko had always been the more observant of the two, seeking out points of weakness to exploit and use to his own benefit. And with a past just as entangled as with Kevin, there is little doubt Riko would not recognize Neil in a heartbeat. Especially with their shared bloody past and familial ties.

Lucky for Neil, his reaction is overshadowed by Matt’s phone filling the room with an obnoxious ringtone that pulls everyone’s attention from former and to the latter. Matt offers them a sheepish grin before he digs the device from his pocket and swipes at the screen to accept the call.
“Yo, Matt speaking.” A panicked voice fills the other end, but it speaks too quickly for Neil to catch anything to understand. “Woah, calm down Nicky. I can’t understand a word you’re saying and you know I don’t speak a lick of Spanish. What about Neil?”

Neil raises an eyebrow and sits forward. Matt lowers the phone and puts it on speaker so they can all hear Nicky’s voice fill the room. “Have you or Dan seen him? Andrew’s on the warpath looking for him.”

Oh, it looks like someone definitely found the clue in his bedroom. Palmetto collectively shifts back to stare at Neil, eyebrows raised and various looks of worry and shock clouding their eyes as they try to figure out what Neil could have possibly done to piss Andrew off this quickly. Only Renee looks at him with any sort of calculated gaze. (It only reaffirms his initial impression of how dangerous the girl could be.) He simply shakes his head at them and settles back onto the couch wordlessly.

“Isn’t he supposed to be with you?” Allison cuts in. “He is staying at your place after all.”

“We may have, uh, misplaced him?”

“Misplaced him? What the fuck does that mean Nicky,” this time it’s Dan who speaks, voice steely.

“Probably that they ran him off with the amount of psychoticness that must go on in that house.” Seth snickers. “Poor kid couldn’t take it.”

Well, he’s not terribly far off except that part about not being able to take it.

“Jesus is everyone on this call?” Nicky grumbles. “Look, have you seen him or not? I would like Andrew to stop driving this car like he plans to commit vehicle manslaughter with us as accomplices.”

Matt looks at Neil who just shrugs. It is about time his own game begins. “I’m looking at him.”

“You’re what?! WHERE?” There is a screech of tires on the other line. “Jesus fuck Andrew! Signal!”

“At the studio,” Matt continues, “We came in this morning and he was sitting on the couch looking like he was waiting for someone.”

“The studio? How did he - ANDREW! It says no u-turns! Oh god, stop. STOP.” A string of German curses mixed with Spanish float from the receiver. “Jesus. Look, just keep him there alright? Until we get there. Yellow light. Yellow light!”

Another scream of curses.

“If we get there.”

The line goes dead and Matt’s screen goes dim as the room falls to the quiet. It lasts all of two seconds before they explode in a cacophony of shouts and gasps.

“Neil are you okay? Did something happen last night?” That was Matt, accompanied by an aborted motion to ensure Neil was not bodily harmed in someway he missed.

“What did those little assholes do this time? I told Wymack this was a bad idea.” Dan.
“Maybe we shouldn’t jump to conclusions,” Renee’s placating voice, “We don’t really know what happened other than they got separated and are looking for Neil.”

Allison scoffed. “Like that’s likely. This is Andrew we’re talking about here. The little psycho has done enough not to warrant the benefit of a doubt bullshit. I bet my entire fortune he’s up to his old tricks.”

“Are we all just going to ignore the fact that Andrew is pissed? Like utterly raving mad if Hemmick was anything to go by?” Seth turns to Neil with a look that could only be described as pride. “Damn rookie, only two days here and you somehow made the top of the psycho’s shit list. While not hard, getting him to react like that certainly is. Maybe you’re not so bad after all.”

Somehow Neil takes little comfort in that, but instead of acknowledging it, he turns to answer Dan since it was the easiest. “He took me to some nightclub called Eden’s Twilight.”

Another collective gasp followed by a shuddering look from Matt, an explosive glare from Dan, Allison and Seth, and a pained but contemplative look from Renee. Apparently, Neil’s treatment wasn’t an uncommon occurrence. He wonders how many of them received a similar sort of treatment.

“I take it that by your expressions I don’t need to explain further.”

“We know,” Dan growls lowly.

He couldn’t help but think a warning would have been nice but he supposes that they could only guess the extent to which Andrew would go to try and pry secrets from Neil they didn’t even know he had. “Then you know why they’re looking for me. Seems I spoiled their plans for fun last night by giving them the slip.”

Matt quietly speaks up next, “What did they give you?”

Neil shrugs, “Some date rape drug if I had to guess. Can’t say for sure since I only got a glimpse of it before it was slipped in my drink.”

“Fuck,” Matt curses, “And they just left you to wander around after that? You could have seriously gotten hurt or worse.” His face darkens with anger. “I’ll fucking kick their asses.”

“No, let me,” Dan growls, “I still owe them from the shit they put you through.”

This time it’s Neil’s turn to affect surprise, raising a brow in silent question. Matt shrugs. “It was a long time ago. I’m mostly over it by now.”

“Well I’m not.” she fumes, “They could have killed you by giving you that shit.”

“Technically they didn’t give me anything. I took it myself.”

“After they fucking brought you to a place knowing you would be tempted. I don’t fucking care if he left the fucking room, he knew what he was doing the moment he put that bag down on the table and then had the fucking audacity to tell me it was for your own good.”

“It was.”

This had the marking of a long and tired argument between the two, one Neil had no interest in hearing hashed out between the couple for what he is sure is the umpteenth time. He decides to cut in before Dan can open her mouth.
“What exactly did he do?” Matt and Dan’s attention immediately return to him as if they had forgotten he was there. “Sorry, I’m just a little lost here. Did they drug you too?”

“Not exactly,” Matt fills him in. “Long story short, I used to have a major drug addiction and while I kicked it before signing with the label, it really was only a matter of time before I fell off the wagon again.”

“So that psycho thought it would be a great idea to drag him along to Eden’s one night and set a bag of speedballs on the table. When they dragged Matt in a few hours later, he was so high it was a miracle he didn’t OD.”

“You’re forgetting the best part,” Allison sneers, “When we asked him why he did it, he simply said he was fixing the problem since it didn’t look like any of us were going to do it.”

Matt shrugs, “It worked.” He raises a hand before Dan could start up again. “I’m not saying it was right or even the best way to go about it, but you can’t argue with the results. I haven’t touched anything since that night. Rehab was hard enough the first time around, the second time I thought it would kill me.”

Neil lets this all sink in as he turns Matt’s words over and over in his head. It just didn’t make any sense. Andrew operated on a level that if it did not benefit him in some way then it wasn’t worth doing. So why target Matt’s addiction?

“But why?” the question slips out before he realizes it. “Why help you at all? From what I’ve seen so far neither of you are exactly friends.”

“Yeah well, when you figure out how the midget’s mind works let us know yeah?” Seth scoffs. “Until then I’m going to chalk it up to psychopathic tendencies.”

From what Neil’s seen of Andrew, that didn’t quite fit the image he pieced together. Granted, many pieces of the enigma of Andrew Minyard were still unclear or missing from Neil’s picture but so far nothing — nothing — is done without a deliberate cause or logical reasoning (even if that logic is skewed to his own perceptions). Take him for example; Andrew drugged him in hopes of getting the information he deemed vital to the safety of his family and Kevin, information he knew Neil would be reluctant and hostile about sharing otherwise. Neil didn’t like it, but it made sense why. Matt’s addiction didn’t. He called it a “problem,” but a problem for who?

His head span with questions that just didn’t add up and scrambled his understanding of the man further. Almost as if the pieces rearranged themselves the moment he gets close. Just who was Andrew Minyard really and what exactly did he want?

Neil thinks he might just drown in this puzzle but luckily he is pulled from the spiraling when the door flies open, the handle slamming into the wall hard enough to leave a dent and shaking the glass set in the door. Standing in its arch is none other than the man in question, all five-foot-nothing glory coiled in tight fury waiting to pounce. Not a moment later, a frantic and breathless Nicky appears at his heels followed by an obviously hungover Kevin Day and disgruntled Aaron. Andrew takes a step forward towards Neil and it’s like a dam breaks loose, flooding the room with tension and springing the others into action.

Before he can even blink he is shoved behind Matt’s bulk while the rest of Palmetto forms a wall between the two men (oddly enough with Renee near the front instead of the middle like Neil would have placed her). He is floored by their protection and even more confused by their need to do so; they barely know him and he couldn’t say for certain that he would do the same for them if the positions were reversed. Still, it leaves an odd feeling in his chest to see someone willing to stand
between him and danger without a second’s hesitation again. Because the way Andrew’s lot shifts their stance tells Neil that if anyone makes the wrong step the room would devolve into an all-out brawl between the two sides.

Andrew takes another step forward. “Move.”

And really, Neil should keep his mouth shut and let the others defuse the situation while acting as a buffer to dissipate Andrew’s anger. Should.

Instead, he says, “I see you got my note.”

Pure rage burns in those eyes as Andrew moves to take another step closer. His efforts are blocked by Seth who crosses his arms and plants his feet, refusing to give him an inch further.

“Move it, Gordon, before I make you move it.”

Seth scoffs and unfolds his arms, “And how do you plan to do that? Back off Minyard, you’ve done enough damage to the newbie already.”

“I won’t say it again,” Andrew clips, “Move.”

He takes another step and this time Seth shoves him back. “What did I say?”

Neil’s eyes barely catch the flash of metal before Andrew reaches for those armbands and slips free twin blades that slash out at Seth’s t-shirt and torso. Just as fast, he’s yanked back by Renee who calmly takes his place, neatly avoiding the blades. Where the rest of the group explodes in yells, she remains calm in the face of Andrew’s armed anger.

“Move,” he threatens, voice more growl than words.

“You know I can’t do that, Andrew.”

“This doesn’t involve you.”

“You’ve threatened mine, so it does now. You know that.” She explains calmly.

Neil expects Andrew to reply with as much violence as he would any of the others, but to his surprise, he settles. Sure, rage flares in those eyes once more but the blades slide back into their sheaths at his arms and his face shifts back into his usual mask of apathy, body seemingly leaking the tension it once held. Neil wasn’t fooled in the least. He watches as Andrew rocks himself on the back of his heels as he tries to angle himself to look directly in Neil’s eyes.

“I always knew you were a runaway but I didn’t take you for a coward too, Josten.”

“Fuck you,” Neil snarks, his father’s anger flickering to life in his chest.

“Now that’s not very nice.” He mocks, bringing a hand to his chest to affect hurt. “And here I thought we could settle this in a civil manner.”

“I think you threw civil out the window the moment you poured that drink down my throat.”

Andrew shrugs, “To each their own.”

It takes all his willpower to keep his arms from reaching to wring Andrew’s neck. Somehow he thinks that could be counterproductive to what he has planned so he growled another “Fuck you” instead.
“You already used that one.”

“How’s this for something new? You want to settle this, then fine, let’s fucking settle this Andrew. No drug, no threats, no others. Just ask your fucking questions and leave me alone.”

Andrew holds his gaze for a moment, blank eyes flickering over his own trying to access the truth in his words. Whatever he must see seems to satisfy him because he turns to the rest of his group and commands them to leave.

“Go back to the car.”

“But.” Nicky interrupts.

“Now.” His tone has a final edge to it that sends Nicky scrambling to obey, quickly looping an arm around Kevin to drag him along. Aaron flicks a bored gaze over them all before following them, sending a glare to Neil as if this was all his fault. Which. Okay. But Neil maintains that at least 95% of this falls on Andrew. Maybe 85% if you count Neil’s little present back at their house.

When the cousins and Kevin leave, Andrew raises an eyebrow at the remaining group still standing guard between him and Neil. “This isn’t an open conversation. Leave.”

Dan crosses her arms, “If you think for one second we’re going to leave him alone with you after the shit you pulled, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“This is between Neil and me, Wilds. Run away while you still can without any new holes.”

“Is that a threat you little-”

“It’s fine,” Neil speaks up, slipping between them all until he’s at the front of the group. “He’s right. This conversation needs to happen in private if we’re ever going to settle this.”

“Oh let me think about it,” Dan snorts, “How about fuck no? You don’t need to settle anything with this asshole. He’s the problem, not you.”

“She’s right,” Matt nods, “When Wymack catches wind of this, he’ll take care of it. You’ve done enough.”

Neil only just manages to stop from rolling his eyes. While appreciated, their protectiveness is doing more harm than good. It’s not their fault, they are only working with half of the facts. But this starts and stops with Andrew, no matter what Wymack or anyone else might think. That leaves him with only one way to have this conversation if they refused to give them the needed privacy.

“You have my guitar,” Neil turns to Andrew, slipping seamlessly into German. This time Neil catches the surprise in Andrew’s eyes and the slight pull of his mouth in a frown. The rest of their audience falls silent at the switch as well, their surprise more expressive and dramatic.

“Did he just speak German,” Matt mumbles to Dan.

“Oh great another one,” Seth groans.

But Neil pays them no mind, keeping his focus solely on Andrew as he raises a brow in challenge. A dare to match him.

“I don’t like surprises,” comes his eventual response.

Neil snorts, “Well I don’t like being drugged. Call it even.”
“You picked my lock and trashed my room.”

“Man I can’t imagine what a violation like that must have felt like,” Neil deadpans.

Andrew growls, and then Neil does roll his eyes. “You are a threat, Neil Josten. One I’m no longer willing to tolerate.”

“We’ve already established that. I want my guitar.”

“Tell me why I shouldn’t break it and you.”

“Because you’re getting what you want. I’m leaving.”

“Nope.” Andrew shakes his head. “Not good enough anymore.”

A hand strikes out and curls itself in Neil’s shirt, pulling him so they are chest to chest. It’s strangely reminiscent of last night, but this time Neil’s prepared, a hand shooting up to grab at Andrew’s wrist and squeezing on it just as hard. Behind him, he can hear Palmetto kicking up a fuss but he forces them to the back of his mind as Andrew continues.

“See, now you’ve made yourself too interesting. Here you are standing before me when you should be miles long gone. You’ve trashed my room and then had the balls to leave a note telling me to come find you.”

Neil is a little proud of that one. After he had searched the house for any signs of them stashing his stuff somewhere (unlikely but he tried anyway) he decided to rummage through each of their rooms to pay back a little of their invasion from last night. Andrew’s door was heavily locked which meant Neil took extra care when rifling through his things. When he was done he left a scrap of paper on his pillow. On one side it echoes Andrew’s words from their first meeting, Better Luck Next Time, and on the other a simple Come Find Me. Neil thought he was clever.

“Now, does that sound like a scared little runaway to you? Hmm? The numbers just don’t add up.”

“I’m not a math problem.”

“And yet, I’ll still solve you.”

Neil runs a hand over his face, suddenly tired with this conversation as it loops in antagonistic circles. “What do you want Andrew? I already said I was leaving. Threat eliminated.”

“I want nothing. You owe me the same thing as last night, the truth.”

“And why should I give it to you? I don’t owe you anything, Andrew, least of all something you have no right to ask for. Your paranoia about your family’s safety is your own. I pose no threat to them, especially if I’m leaving.”

Andrew pauses, seeming to consider that. “Fine, a trade then. Truth for truth. You answer my questions and in return, you get to ask one in return.”

Neil tugs at Andrew’s wrist and it easily falls away. “That’s it? You ask me a question and you have to answer one as well? Anything I ask?”

“No anything. You will only get something worth your own truth.”

Something tells Neil that what is worth one of his truths will be flexible depending on the
other man’s whims, but he pushes that thought aside for another unspoken thought. “And when we’re done you leave me alone? I can stay or go as I want?”

It seemed too easy. (It always seems too easy.)

“Maybe.”

Neil shakes his head. “Not good enough.”

“Fine,” Andrew concedes. “As long as you do not remain a threat to my family, yes. But I want one now in exchange.”

“What?” The word sticks in his throat more than it should, but he’s so sick of fighting for this. Either he gets to keep it or not. The suspension of indecision whittles away at his resolve every second.

This time when Andrew steps into his space, it’s enough for Neil to see the greens of his eyes and the flecks of gold that swim in the pool of his irises. There is a light dust of freckles sprinkled across the bridge of his nose and cheeks, just barely dark enough to catch the light from this angle. They are a surprisingly soft feature for someone as rough as Andrew Minyard, so-called psychopath and threat. But what interests Neil more is the way in which Andrew stares at Neil; his complete and undivided attention watching his face for any lies that may spill from his lips. It’s been a long time since anyone has looked at him like that. Like he’s really being seen. Not just the mask of tenacity that is Neil Josten or even the anger that simmers below the surface that belongs to his father, but him. The scarred little boy barely clinging to life with a white-knuckled grip and empty eyes.

“Why are you here.” It’s not a question, not really, but Neil finds himself answering it anyways.

More surprisingly he finds himself answering it with the truth instead of the lie he crafted in his head while waiting. “Because I was nothing before that guitar. And I’m tired of being nothing.”

A look flickers in Andrew’s eyes and this time Neil understands it for what it really is, perfect understanding. He holds the gaze for a long time, neither saying a word to break the silence Neil’s confession had brought on them. The moment between them is broken instead by Andrew ending it as quickly as Neil started it, shoving himself out of Neil’s space and out the door. Neil shivers at the cool air in place of the heat Andrew’s body had warmed before and contemplates why that bothered him like it did. He also wonders about Andrew’s sudden departure; was the answer enough? Did he somehow spot a lie that wasn’t there?

His questions are answered when Andrew reappears not a moment later and drops a familiar case at his feet. Greedily, Neil’s fingers snatch it up, sliding his hands over its weathered leather encasing and sliding the strap over his chest. Its weight settles something in him that he didn’t know was stirring. It felt a lot like hope.

Andrew watches only for a moment before he opens his mouth again and announces in a bored tone, “We’re leaving.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Dan sputters. “No!”

“Guys,” Neil tries to placate the others, taken aback by the ferocity in which they are willing to stick up for him. “It’s fine. We worked it out.”

“No,” Matt tugs him back. “It’s not fine. They violated your trust and put you in an extremely unfair and dangerous situation. That’s not okay. You’re coming home with us; we’ve got a pullout
couch you can crash on for the time being.”

Dan nods enthusiastically, “Yeah or you can crash with me and the girls. Our couch is super comfy or you can have one of our rooms.”

“Well, you can have one of their rooms. Mine is mine unless you want to warm my bed,” Allison purrs with a wink.

“Like fuck he will,” Seth growls and Neil really doesn’t understand what’s going on anymore.

Truthfully, Neil doesn’t understand any of the members, not with their open faces and even more open invitations into their own homes when they barely know him (even then only a lie of himself). Why were they so willing to step between Andrew when by all accounts it had nothing to do with them? He wasn’t a part of their band, so why care at all?

“Why?” it slips out soft and small, barely heard above the chatter but heard nonetheless as everyone pauses and turns to him.

“Why what, Neil?” Renee asks carefully, keeping her voice low and calm as if not trying to spook him. (He wonders what his face looks like to cause such a reaction.)

“You barely know me, so why any of this?”

“Well you’re a fox,” Dan says like it’s obvious.

“A fox?”

“It’s what we call ourselves, those of us who sign with Fox Records. You probably know that Wymack tends to sign a certain kind of person who could use a second chance. So yeah, we may not know you very well, but you’re one of us now.”

One of us. Neil never had a place where he belonged — nowhere he’d been long enough to belong — and yet here he was, a part of something bigger than his own survival. The thought both terrified and thrilled him. It made this all seem just a little bit more real. But he didn’t know how to be real, so instead, he stood there frozen, unsure of what to say or do in wake of Dan’s assurance.

“Well as touching as… whatever that was, Neil wants to come with me,” Andrew drawls.

Neil throws a sharp look at the shorter man, trying to remember when he gave the impression. (Oh right, he didn’t.) But Andrew merely raises an eyebrow and dares Neil to contradict his statement. Challenging him to call out his lie and weasel a way out of their new arrangement somehow. Neil says nothing.

“Why don’t we let Neil speak for himself, huh?”

Oh please don’t.

“What do you have to say about this?”

Shit.

“Well, uh,” he stalls.

“What is going on in here?” Wymack voice booms over the rest of them. Neil has never been more relieved at the sound of an older man’s voice entering a room in his entire life. Everyone seems
to lose interest in him in favor of turning to look at their boss.

“Why don’t you ask Andrew,” Dan glares at the boy.

Wymack crosses his arms and turns to Andrew, eyebrows raised and waiting.

Andrew shrugs. “Neil and I had a little difference in opinion and these idiots decided to get in the middle of it.”

“A disagreement,” she seethes, “is that what we’re calling it nowadays?”

“Someone better give me a real answer right now.” Wymack cuts in before Andrew can say anything back.

“Andrew took Neil to Eden’s.”

Wymack’s face grows dark, the muscles in his jaw tightening and his mouth pressing into a straight line. He too apparently needed no further explanation. Again, Neil can’t help but be bitter that no one had the foresight to warn him. Just a simple, hey stay away from this club called Eden’s. Andrew has been known to fucking drug people there. For fuck’s sake.

“What the fuck did I say, Andrew.” Wymack’s voice is pure steel as he looms over Andrew with a fury so strong it makes Neil flinch.

“I was taking care of a threat,” is Andrew’s bored response.

“I don’t give a fuck at what you think you were doing. What did I say?” He doesn’t reply but Neil sees his own body tighten in restraint. “I said that if you pulled shit like this again, you would be done. I don’t care what fuss Kevin kicks up. You don’t get to threaten the safety of my people and walk away. Not this time.”

“I’m fine,” Neil offers, unsure why he’s so willing to help Andrew when he deserves every word Wymack is throwing at him. Later he will tell himself that it’s because he just wanted this to be over and done with — that if he let Andrew get kicked out now, EXY will slip from his hands despite having just gotten it back. But really he thinks it’s because he didn’t like the way Andrew’s eyes blanked when Wymack threatened to follow through with his promise. “Really it was just a misunderstanding. We’re fine now. No harm done.”

“You,” Wymack whirs to him, finger pointed and voice viciously close to a snarl that has Neil instinctually stepping back and out of reach. The older man must notice his reaction because his face drops and he pauses for a second. When he continues his voice is a notch lower and his hand drops. “Shut up.”

“You,” he turns back to Andrew, “Are going to get whatever of his shit is left at your house and drop it off at mine and then leave him the fuck alone until I can decide what I’m going to do with you. Understand?” Andrew doesn’t look like he’s going to reply so he presses harder. “I said, do you understand?”

If looks could kill, Neil’s pretty sure Wymack would be halfway buried by now. “Yes.”

“Good. Then get the fuck out of my sight.”

Without another glance, Andrew turns away and strolls out of the room, taking some of the tension with him. It’s not until Neil can hear the slam of a door and the squeal of tires on asphalt that the rest of the room’s occupants seem to breathe.
“As for the rest of you,” the air stills once more. “Get back to whatever you originally came here to do then leave. I just got here and I’m already done with your shit.”

His words have the desired effect as the rest of them (the foxes his mind mentally corrects) scramble to go about their business, giving Neil sympathetic looks and touches as they disappear deeper into the studio. Wymack watches their departure with a scowl, his back to Neil as the other contemplates what this means for him. Was it all over before it even began?

Eventually, Wymack sighs and looks at Neil, eyes flickering over his ragged appearance and the bags under his eyes. “Come on, kid. You look like you’re ready to blow over.”

He feels like it too, but he’s not sure if it’s due to the event of last night finally catching up or the sudden absence of adrenaline from his system. Either way, he supposes the result is the same: finding it hard to remain on his feet for much longer than he already had. Without protest, he follows after Wymack’s gesture towards the exit of the studio and into his car, slumping against the door the moment it’s closed behind him. The purr of the engine rumbles through him and he almost finds it relaxing (almost like he was in another car on another road with nothing but dirt and sky for miles).

“I want to stay,” he eventually says.

“What’s that kid?”

“I want to stay. With Andrew. With EXY. I want to stay and play.”

Wymack doesn’t look at him nor answer for a long while, but he can see the man’s knuckles turn white against the wheel. “I’ll think about it, but no promises. Andrew might have taken this one too far.”

Neil shrugs but doesn’t say anything for the rest of the ride.
cause I’m a little unsteady

Chapter Notes

Unsteady - X Ambassadors

Wymack’s house is not at all what Neil would expect from a man who appeared to favor rumpled, comfy clothing and had tribal tattoos inked on his forearms. If he had to guess, he would have said the man to live in a nearly empty apartment with only the essentials and boxes of paperwork scattered about the place in lieu of decorations. He imagined a large enough collection of oddly mismatched items to warrant the title of a bachelor pad. In reality, Wymack’s actual home was a cozy two-story craftsman decorated with warm woods and knick-knacks hanging on the walls and tucked away on shelves. It felt and looked lived-in and inviting with plenty of seating like they were expecting to host a horde or people at any given moment. (Something tells Neil that they are and do.)

Then again, perhaps this could all be attributed to his wife Abby whom Neil meets briefly when they first get into the house. She looks to be around the age of his mother but with a softer look in her eyes and small wrinkles at their corners. Abby, he learns, works at the hospital as a nurse which explains why that moment she lays eyes on him she’s coralling him into the kitchen and shoving food before him with a stern order to eat it all. The look Wymack gives him tells Neil that it was better to go along with what she said. For both of them.

Wisely taking his advice, Neil obediently sat at the table and nibbled on the sandwich, sipped on the glass of orange juice, and engaged in polite small talk until she deemed him nourished enough to get some rest. She and Wymack lead him on a small tour of the house, pointing out areas he would need to know during this stay: the bathroom, the kitchen and living room, etc, before guiding him to the room he would be staying in down the hall. The room had little more than a double bed, a nightstand, and a dresser, but he was grateful nonetheless. It was still more than he had back at Millport and even at the house with Andrew and his cousins; at least now he could sleep in a proper bed. He was told that he could stay for as long as he needed to, no questions asked which Neil nodded his thanks in reply.

Thankfully, they left him alone after that and he was able to collapse face first onto the bed (after double checking the lock of course). It wasn’t the most restful of sleep, not in a house full of people he didn’t know, but it was enough to clear the last bit of fog in his mind leftover from the drugs. He looks around the room and judging by the amount of light pouring in through the window (or rather lack of it) he assumes he slept most of the day away. This assumption is further proven right when Abby knocks on his door five minutes later and tells him that dinner is ready if he would like to join them. Neil almost declines but a grumble from his stomach has him pulling himself out of bed and padding back to the kitchen.

Dinner is about as awkward as he would think it to be; Abby is nice and courteous, pulling Neil into the conversation every chance she gets and Neil unable to know how to respond to any and all kindness from an adult. He realizes that says something about the life he’s lived, but really it wasn’t anything he didn’t already know. So he mainly ducked out of the conversation at the first given opportunity and merely nodded or hummed at the appropriate cue. The only time his interest peaked is when Wymack said that Nicky had dropped by earlier with the rest of Neil’s things and that it’s waiting in the living room when Neil is ready for it. Glad for the chance to be rid of the
borrowed clothes, Neil politely excuses himself from the table for a shower. He washes his dishes in
the sink (clean your own mess, Nathaniel. I won’t tolerate a dirty home) and disappears into the
bathroom with his duffle slung around his shoulders.

After what is an excessively long shower, Neil starts to feel more like himself, dressed in a
loose pair of grey sweats and a baggy long sleeve shirt that covers every inch of his torso. He shoveled
the black clothes at the bottom of the bin in the bathroom in a bout of pettiness but keeps the black
boots, seeing the appeal of having a pair of sturdy shoes on hand rather than the in-tatters sneakers he
always wears. He’s reorganizing his duffle to accommodate the new item and to rearrange his tags
(because of course Andrew had rifled through it before giving it back) when a knock at the door
frame pulls his attention. At first glance, all Neil sees is a large male figure looming in his doorway
and for a second he’s back in his childhood bedroom in Baltimore with his father’s voice filling his
ears.

Nathaniel.

Another blink and he’s gone, Wymack in his place with a contemplative look. Neil waits,
unable to unsqueeze his throat long enough to explain or apologize. Eventually, the man must take
pity on him and sighs, crossing his arms and leaning his weight against the frame.

“Look kid, I don’t know about your past or who it was that makes you flinch everytime I
walk into the room, but you gotta know one thing. I’m a loud and gruff son of a bitch who is prone
to yelling and stomping around, but I’ve never laid a hand on someone who didn’t hit me first. I’m
not about to start with you.”

Neil nods but the movement is stiff and adrenaline waits just under the surface of his
bloodstream. Wymack must find his performance as believable as himself because he sighs again
before digging in his pocket for a small envelope.

“Here catch.” He tosses it towards Neil who swiftly plucks it from the air and turns it over in
his hands.

“What is this?” He gestures for Neil to open it. Tearing open a side, he tips the envelope until
three metal keys slide into his palm, one painted a bright orange while the other two have fox paws
on the key head.

“The orange one is for the house while the two others are for the studio.” he holds his hand
out for the keys and Neil easily deposits them on the waiting palm. “This one with four teeth is to get
into the building, while the second gets you in the suite. The practice rooms are usually unlocked but
if they are the studio key works on them as well. There is also a security system by the door that we
change out the code every six months or so. Right now the code is Abby’s birthday so 0508.”

He drops the keys back in Neil’s hand. “Got all that?”

Neil nods, curling his hand tightly around the metal objects until their teeth dig into his skin
and leave imprints of their shape in his palm. They are more than he ever expected. They are hope,
permission to come and go as he pleases. They are access to a stage and microphone that is uniquely
his. They are a promise.

“Thank you,” his voice is hoarse and the words barely louder than a breath but Wymack
hears him anyways.

“Don’t thank me, kid. What Andrew did was inexcusable and I should shred his contract
along with the rest of EXY. But I think you sing like it’s the only thing you have left and you don’t
deserve to be punished for their mistake.” He pauses. “That means next time, you. Will. Call. Hear me? I don’t care how late or for what reason. They try this shit again and they’re done. We’ll find some other way for you to play.”

Neil nods, fist so tight around the keys he thinks they might have broken skin. When Wymack leaves with a nod and gruff good night, his fingers uncurl to reveal tiny dots of blood staining his new possessions. Everything in Neil’s life has always been covered in blood. His father’s hands when he came out of the basement. Lola’s knives as they showed him how to properly hack up a corpse. His mother’s nails after she clawed him from a crowd of people on the run. His own hands when he burned her. But these? These felt like a start to something new.

That night, sleeping seemed impossible to Neil. His skin buzzed with the need to move and his blood sang for him to put to use the keys Wymack had gifted to him. So when he was sure the couple had settled in for the night and the air stilled in silence, Neil slipped from the house and slowly made his way to the studio. By the time he reached the building, the moon was high in the sky and the city around him soft and quiet with the noise of slumber and safety. Fitting that first key into the lock felt like a dream. Turning it and being rewarded with the snick of it coming unlocked felt like a whisper against his ear.

It can be yours, it said. Take it.

And so he did. He pushed open the doors and slowly began his ascent to the studio three floors up. The halls were silent and empty as he made his way, not another soul in the building beside him and his guitar. He put the second key in the door and realized that wasn’t quite true.

Softly drifting in from the direction of the practice booths came the stilted fumblings of a guitar, its melody fast and brutal despite the player’s inability to keep pace for long. Neil is drawn to its playing all the same, feet shuffling towards the booth and hand tightening on the strap of his guitar. He’s not quite sure what he expected, but Kevin standing in the booth with a guitar strapped to his chest and playing with his left hand wasn’t it. Or maybe he was, not knowing anyone else dedicated enough to practice well past midnight at such a brutal pace.

Sweat plasters his black hair to his forehead and paints dark patches in the grey shirt he wears, yet his eyes never leave his hands as they flew up and down the neck of the guitar and strummed. He struggled to switch from note to note and his fingers spasmed against the strings. Each slipped note was jarring to his ears but never enough to pull away from the raw beauty of its sound. Neil had always known Kevin was a skilled guitarist. Even when they were mere children, Kevin had a way of captivating the younger boy and the way his fingers seemed to command the instrument effortlessly and produce such melodic sounds. He remembers listening to him and Riko play together and wanting nothing more than to join them.

Looking at Kevin now it’s apparent just how far he’s fallen. Neil never used to see Kevin struggle; sure the Kevin of his memory still had the same single-minded determination to practice and improve like this Kevin seemed to have, but not once did he struggle like this. The guitar always seemed like an extension of his body, instinctual and able to be controlled with ease. Prodigy, they called him. The next great guitar player to have graced the stage, the next Jimi Hendrix or Van Halen. This Kevin had to fight for his fingers to obey, had to play the same set of notes over and over again to retain the melody and speed. He struggled. And it was beautiful.
Like everyone else, when Neil heard about the accident that ruined Kevin's dominant hand, Neil thought Kevin’s career was over. Standing here now watching him reclaim his “lost” ability and proving everyone wrong sent something akin to pride flickering in his chest. If he were to die, at least one of them would make it out okay.

“Are you just going to stare at him all night?” a voice draws from behind him, causing him to whip around and catch his heart in his throat.

Andrew leans against the wall with his ankles crossed and a lit cigarette dangling from his lips in his usual manner. He takes a long drag before blowing the smoke in Neil’s face. The smell is so devastatingly familiar he has to stop himself from leaning in and inhaling the cloud into his own lungs. He counters Andrew’s question with one of his own.

“Does he always practice this late?”

“Like clockwork. A waste of time if you ask me.” His next puff of smoke is aimed at the ceiling. “He will never play the same.”

“Wrong,” Neil says quickly.

Andrew flicks a brow, “Oh? I didn’t take you for an optimist, Neil.”

“I’m not.”

Amusement flashes in Andrew’s eyes before it quickly disappears. Another drag, another cloud of smoke, but this time Neil closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. It smells and tastes like ashes on a beach but also like the empty roads of Germany late at night. He exhales and he can see his mother’s silhouette at the wheel. When he opens his eyes his mother is gone and Andrew stands in her place. It almost doesn’t hurt.

“So how does it work?” he finds himself asking. “Our game.”

Andrew stubs out the cigarette on the sole of his shoe. "You ask a question, I answer and vice versa."

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“And if I wanted to ask one now.”

Andrew waves his hand in a gesture to continue on. Neil rattles his mind for something to ask, unsure of where to begin in this little game of theirs, unsure of the boundaries yet to be established and crossed. He decides to start with something small.

“How long have you been with Fox Records?”

“Three years.” He answers without a beat. “What color are your eyes.”

Neil’s world bottoms out and his tongue goes dry in his mouth despite the saliva he swallows. He had made a mistake in thinking that just because Neil didn’t know how to start didn’t mean Andrew would be any less ruthless and cunning as he had been previously. Trying to back himself out of the trap he created for himself, he opens his mouth with a tired lie.

“They’re brow-"
Andrew rushes forward and wraps a hand around his neck, cutting off his words.

“*No,*” he warns, “That is not how this works. I ask and you give me the truth. Not some half-lies, no evasions. The. Truth.”

“They *are* brown.”

“The ring around your pupils says differently. Now, the truth Neil.”

Neil tries to pry the other man’s hand away, but its grip just tightens until he can feel air begin to restrict. “Blue,” he grits out and the hand disappears.

“Now that wasn’t too hard, was it? Show me.”


“Don’t be rude, now Neil. Show me.”

“It’s not your turn.”

Andrew tilts his head in a small concession and waits for Neil to ask his next question. He almost doesn’t, knowing that as soon as he does, he’s giving Andrew the perfect weapon to drag another piece of him out in the open. He thinks long and hard about what he wants in exchange for that bit of truth. His eyes dip to the black armbands on display and he remembers the man’s preclination to reach for what lies beneath them.

“How many knives do you carry? And where?”

The muscles in Andrew’s jaw twitches but his answer is as quick as the last. “Six. Two in my armbands, one in my boot, two in my pockets, and one tucked in the waistband of my jeans.”

Neil’s eyes flick over his person, assessing the places in question and adjusting his position where he could see any likely attack from any of the blade while judging what kind of knives must rest where (Lola’s lessons had their uses sometimes). Andrew watches him boredly.

“Show me.”

He doesn’t want to; it feels like something too close to the truth for a lie like himself. Still, he can still feel the fingers at his neck should he try to back out again so he slowly lifts a hand to pluck a contact out. It takes him a couple of tries before the flimsy layer of brown rests between two fingers instead of his pupil. He’s just lucky his back is to the glass so he’s spared seeing the icy blue looking back at him. No instead he looks into twin pools of hazel as they meet his eyes.

Andrew’s hand comes up again, but instead of reaching for his neck, he grabs Neil’s chin in a loose grip between a thumb and index to tilt his face this way and that, giving him a clear view of his blue. Neil has to fight himself from looking away, afraid that he would catch a glimmer of it in the reflection of Andrew’s eyes. It felt like being seen. The sensation so new and foreign it sends a shiver down his spine and stutters his breath. He waits for the familiar disgust that usually follows someone getting a glimpse at his natural color, usually his mother or himself, or the spark of anger like his father used to convey. Instead, he’s met with icy indifference. In a way, it’s oddly comforting.

Finally, Andrew lets go of his chin and retreats back to his spot on the wall, hands digging in his pocket and lighting up another cigarette. He put his contact back in feeling shaken. Neil waits for the pounding in his ears to stop before he asks his next question.
“Why do you play in the band?”

Andrew takes a drag before answering. “It’s a means to an end.”

“But what end?”

This time the silence stretches long before Neil gets his answer, Andrew’s cigarette almost down to the filer and the smell of smoke lingering in the air. “It’s not your turn.”

Andrew flicks the butt at him and walks away, disappearing further down the hall until he’s swallowed by shadows. Neil opens his mouth to call out when the glass at his back rattled with the slam of a fist. He jumps, spinning around to see Kevin’s unamused face.

“Are you going to practice with me or stand there all night? We only have so long to whip you into shape before our first concert.”

Neil spares one last glance into the shadows before tightening his grip on the strap across his chest once more. “Yeah, I’m coming.”

He turns his back on those shadows and reaches for the handle of the booth’s door. This is what he came for, the stage and music. Not to be ripped of his secrets for someone’s amusement. Even if it left him feeling more real than he’s had in a long long time.
It turns out that Neil’s agreeance to join Kevin’s practice that night sets a precursor of Neil’s mandatory presence at all of Kevin’s late night practices. The first time he misses one, Kevin appears in his room and all but drags him into the studio, no matter that he’s still dressed in his PJs and barefoot. Neil wouldn’t mind so much if it weren’t for the fact that nearly every day prior to said practices, EXY also had rigorous practices in the morning in addition to his vocal practices with Nicky in the afternoon. That Kevin was a brutal taskmaster, pushing Neil and the band harder with each coming day closer to their concert until Neil’s fingers bled and the chords haunted his dreams, didn’t help.

Still, the exhaustion he could take — finding the challenge thrilling and fun despite it all. What he couldn’t stand was the criticism that accompanied it. Each mistake or forgotten lyric was met with a harsh reprimand or critique of his worth as a musician and singer. Not good enough and a waste of potential mixed in with the chords and lyrics on an endless loop. Sometimes even in French after Neil lets it slip that he understood and spoke the language (he may or may not have said some choice words about his bandmate not knowing he would understand him. Safe to say that particular practice was especially brutal). It’s during one of these practices that Neil’s patience finally snaps.

“Wrong!” Kevin rips the guitar from his hands, “Your tempo is all wrong!”

“My tempo is fine,” Neil growls moving to grab his guitar back.

Kevin moves it out of his reach. “Fine? Nothing about that performance was fine. This band does not accept fine. It expects greatness and you Neil Josten are not great.”

“I never claimed to be great, Kevin. That honor belongs to you.” He moves for the guitar again.

He pulls it away. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Give me my guitar.”

“No, what does that mean.”

Neil fumes, “It means that no one can live up to your impossible standard. The Great Kevin Day, child prodigy and marked for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame since the age of 16. Well, news flash Kevin, not all of us were born with a silver spoon shoved up our ass. Now give me my fucking guitar.”

“No.”

He counts to ten in every language he’s ever learned to stop his fingers from curling into fists. Kevin, unaware of his impending doom — or perhaps cocky enough to brush him off as a threat — crowds Neil closer to the wall.
“You think it’s easy?” he looms over him, “You think that for one second I didn’t bleed and sweat for my talent and prestige? I’ve dedicated my life to the guitar. What about you? I’ve built not one but two bands up into stardom. I am the best guitarist of our generation. I have countless awards and two Grammys while you, you are nothing.”

Neil stops counting. “Were.”

“Excuse me?”

Neil cranes his head until he can stare Kevin in the eye. “You were the best guitarist of our generation. Now you’re at the bottom with the rest of us talentless nothings. You’re a washed up has been so get off your fucking high horse.” He pushes Kevin off, “Dedication? Don’t make me laugh; it’s obsession. An obsession of reclaiming that former glory you think you’re entitled to. Real dedication is waking up every day to practice a song you’ve never listened to while being screamed at that you’re not enough no matter what you do. Dedication is finishing hours of that and then sacrificing your sleep to endure more of it one on one until the sun rises and then doing it all over again. Don’t talk to me about dedication, Kevin.”

He pushes him again. “So fuck you, Kevin. We’re done here, give me my guitar.”

Kevin’s eyes burn with uncaged fury. “We’re not done until I say we are.”

“I swear-”

“No.” Kevin moves to loom over him once more. “You say you’re dedicated, yet you come into practice half-cocked and fight me every step of the way. You’re pathetic and a waste of everybody’s time with the way you play.”

“Then why am I here Kevin? If I’m so awful and a waste of your goddamn time, then why did you track me down to Millport and force me to sign the contract?”

“I signed the person in that video. The man who played with raw unkempt talent and who sang and performed like they had nothing to lose. That is who I want for EXY, not this cheap imitation.” Neil’s jaw snaps shut. “You’re right, I do want that glory again but you’re wrong in saying that I only want to get it. It will be mine. EXY has the potential to surpass it all, even the Ravens, but only if you give it all to me.”

He holds out the guitar and Neil reaches to snatch it from his hands but when he pulls, Kevin’s grip tightens.

“Give it to me, Neil. You have that potential — that raw power and skill needed to reach those heights. You could have the glory alongside with us, but only if you stop fighting me and do what I say. Give. It. To. Me.”

Potential. Glory. Greatness. What do any of those things mean to a man who is running on borrowed time? He was dead within the next year at the latest, either by his father’s men or from turning his back on all this for a second time. So why on earth should he give away that last bit of himself for something that he would never live to see? He should say no, turn his back on Kevin and walk out of the studio. He should he should he should.

He doesn’t.

He doesn’t because Kevin is looking at him like he sees a future just out of reach. He looks like he sees the light at the end of a tunnel and for a man who has spent his entire life at the bottom of a hole, it’s the most dangerous thing. Dangerous because it begets the kernel of hope that maybe —
just maybe — he could make it out alive too. That his future includes more than pain, death and an unmarked grave. Andrew looked at Neil and he felt that he could be real. Kevin looks at him and makes him realize he wants to be.

“Okay,” he whispers just like the first night they met.

“Say it. Say it out loud, Neil.”

“Take it all.”

Kevin lets go of the guitar and it feels heavy in Neil’s hand. “Good. Now start from the top.”

Neil pauses for a moment, eyes fixed on the instrument and hand tightening on its neck. He slides the strap on and starts from the top.

A week later and worthy or not, Neil is standing on the stage looking at the sea of faces in a crowd far larger than he’s ever played for in his life.

“Did you hear me?” Kevin hisses at him in angry French. “Do this or we are done.”

Neil shrugs him off, moving to slide his guitar over his head and situating it at his side. “Shut up, I know. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Bold words for a Rabbit,” Andrew taunts, flicking a drumstick in his hand. “Let’s see if you can live up to them. Palmetto is almost done and then it’s your time to shine.” He looks Neil up and down. “Or fail.”

“Shut it, Andrew,” Kevin growls, turning his ire on the small blonde. “Neil’s success or failure now reflects on us. He has no room for mistakes.”

As if that took off the pressure. Why did he think this was a good idea again? Oh, that’s right he didn't because it wasn't.

“Knock it off both of you,” Nicky chides as he slides up to Neil and throws an arm around his shoulders. “You’re scaring the poor guy. Don’t listen to them, Neil, you’ll do great.”

Neil offers him a noncommittal grunt and turns back to the stage. Palmetto is gearing up for their final number of the night and he’s interested in seeing how the band finished the set. So far their show had been filled with energy and a ferocity that uniquely fit their image, a bunch of ragtime misfits pieced together to create something no one’s seen before. He watches as Dan, out of breath and glistening with sweat, bows to her cheering crowd before swiping up a glass of water to guzzle down. Half its contents drench the front of her shirt but he thinks she hardly notices as she reaches for the mic once more.

“Man you guys sure are wild tonight!” Renee bangs a quick ba-dump-tsh at the pun and Dan’s smile widens. “Thanks, Renee. Pun aside, everyone is filled with so much energy and love, I wish we could go on forever.” The crowd cheers their agreeance. “Unfortunately we’ve reached the end of our setlist for the night but we’ve got just one more for all of you.”

Neil feels the roar of the crowd’s response in his bones, teeth rattling with its force. Palmetto
shifts about on the stage, readying themselves for the final song while Dan still talks to the crowd. “Now some of you may recognize this song if you’ve been following us for a while. I wrote it a couple of years back when a certain someone couldn’t get out of my head while writing.”

Matt turns and blows her an exaggerated kiss, much to the pleasure of their fans. Dan catches it and clasps it to her chest. “This is Love on the Brain.”

The song starts soft, its beat mellowed and drawn out with only the sound of the drum and guitar filling the air before Dan’s husky voice floats over the crowd. They go silent, enchanted and entrapped in her spell. Neil himself is caught, his nerves falling away in favor of listening to Dan sing her woes of being in love. It’s smokey and soft, a wisp of air brushing your cheek even as the beat builds ever so slightly and her voice grows in power.

She commands the stage much in the same her voice demands your attention, all attitude and authority pouring from every movement and sway of her body. Even when the final note hits, Neil is unable to turn away, shivers running up and down his spine.

“Stop standing around and get ready. We’re on in 5.” Neil turns to see Kevin glowering at his left, guitar already firmly in place across his chest and hair done up in a way that looks purposely messy (which Neil finds contradictory but whatever he doesn’t get “fashion”) to pair with his ripped jeans and tank top.

“They’re good.”

“You’re better.”

Neil doubts that but is wise enough to keep his mouth shut on the manner. Kevin is better (even with his nondominant hand). EXY itself might be better. Not Neil — at least not as he is right now. He pulls his guitar from his side to position it at his front, fingers softly plucking at the strings to make sure the tune is correct and steady. This was only the beginning. The stage, the crowd, and the music. It was all his for the taking. It was real and tangible underneath his fingertips and for the next couple of hours, he would be too.

Turning back, he watches as the final pieces of Andrew’s drums are secured into place and Palmetto clears the stage for good. Well, except for Dan who pulls the mic once more to her lips. “That’s all for us guys, but I want you to give some love to my fellow foxes. Here’s EXY!”

Neil’s legs lock at the cheers of the crowd wash over him, even as Nicky and Andrew move past him and into the spotlight. Nicky waves enthusiastically to the crowd and even gives Dan a hug on her way off while Andrew settles himself behind his drum set and twiddles his sticks boredly. For a moment Neil entertains the idea of running but he’s only allowed a single moment of hesitancy before Kevin is at his back and shoving him forward. He glares daggers at the man’s back even though he clearly lost interest in Neil and breezily continues his way across the stage, much to the delight of the crowd.

In a way it’s the best thing that could have happened, allowing Neil to slip on the stage and into position with minimal attention. Of course, it’s all ruined when Nicky opens his mouth next. It starts out innocent enough, Nicky calling out his greeting to the crowd and riling them up for the band’s show for the night when he turns that attention to Neil. “That’s all for us guys, but I want you to give some love to my fellow foxes. Here’s EXY!”

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“As some of you may know, we picked up a stray a few weeks back.” He walks the stage until he slots himself next to Neil, arm thrown over him and hugging the younger man tightly to his body. “You may even recognize him from a little Youtube video that went viral not too long ago. This is Neil Josten everyone! Give him the EXY greeting!”
A spotlight swings on them just as the crowd goes wild, some fans crossing their arms in an ‘x’ above their heads while others form hearts with their fingers and hands as they try their best to make his ears ring at the volume. They succeed. Unsure of what to do, he meekly waves at them, equilibrium thrown off and hand sweating from its grip on the guitar neck. Nicky gives him one final squeeze before returning to center stage, mercifully taking the spotlight with him.

“Neil is going to be helping us out tonight if that’s alright with you.” They howl their excitement. “I think some of you might recognize this first song. It was one of our first singles and was written at a low in my life, but I wanted you all to know that no matter how bad it gets, dawn will always rise with it comes tomorrow.”

The crowd goes wild with anticipation, both for those unfamiliar with the band and those who recognized the piece coming. “This song is called No More Bad Days!”

Taking his cue, Neil strums the first chords, kicking off their first song of the night. No More Bad Days was probably EXY’s softest melody, the chords simplistic with a light and slow feel. It only had two instruments in the arrangement, a guitar and violin, to accompany Nicky’s vocals. Since Neil could safely say he had zero experience with the classical instrument (and Kevin apparently had learned it on a dare of all things) he was the sole guitarist. The thought should have terrified him, but it didn’t.

I thought we hit rock bottom

And then the floor gave out

The lyrics wash over him and he’s reminded of why he decided for this to be his debut. Sure, the simple arrangement meant it was easy enough to learn in the scant time he had (and to Kevin’s standard, or well close to it) but when he had first listened to it from the list Kevin had given him, he knew that it had to be this song. Nothing else would have fit.

I think the world has a way of choosing the worst day

To knock us down and drag us out

Life has beaten him down time and time again, allowing him to be born to his butcher of a father, ripping away any shred of a childhood he could have had and replacing it with knives, pain, and broken bones. It had taken his mother and left him scrambling to live on. But now — right now, everything rested on his shoulders to make it something more. The melody, the tempo, the emotion to back Nicky’s every soulful lyric. They all needed him to move on, to carry on without a single mistake lest the whole world know what a fraud he was. The pressure would break any other man, but Neil? He thrived on it. He lost himself in the music like he had been denied for too long. For the first time, he truly let himself have this.

I hope for the rain to wash us clean

And make a brand new start.

It was his.

No more bad days
He could have it. For as long as he could hold it.

The final chords strike and fade as it is swallowed by the crowd. Neil’s heart threatens to pound through his chest and a distant ache twinges in his fingers even as they twitch against the neck of his guitar. Even so, he felt nothing but pure thrill coursing through his veins. At this moment Neil Josten ceased to be a part of the obscurity, the forgotten. As he turned to the rest of the band and saw Nicky’s wide smile, Kevin’s begrudging nod of approval and Andrew’s cool look of indifference (with a touch of something extra flashing in those eyes of his), Neil met them with a grin of his own.

The rest of the show goes without a hitch after that, Neil’s inhibitions about being on stage slowly dissipating the more he let himself fall deeper and deeper into the music. He barely recognized anything beyond his guitar and the microphone when he had to join in with the rest of the band for some backing vocals. Nicky took care of the talking, using the time in between songs to address the crowd and keep them appropriately hyped for whatever song came next. Kevin sometimes joined in with a charming smile here or a light joke there. Andrew never said a word. The most he saw the drummer do was wipe the sweat from his brow or guzzle down some sugary energy drink at his feet. Neil can’t exactly say anything, his behavior strikingly similar besides the couple forced answers he’d given when Nicky backed him in a corner with the audience’s attention.

But underneath the bubble of comfortability Neil had made for himself, he could feel his nerves still boiling below the surface as they reached the end of the show, in particular, their last song of the evening. Despite Kevin coming to Neil with the intentions of making him the new voice of EXY, in practice, it was a lot more complicated. They simply couldn’t usurp Nicky from the position (no matter the man’s willingness to step down from it) without expecting some major backlash from their already sizeable fanbase. Not to mention that Neil’s voice didn’t quite mesh with the band’s current sound and his unfamiliarity with their music to being with (a fact Kevin was appalled and personally offended by). So they all came to the decision to gradually mix Neil in throughout the next handful of shows, allowing him the time to find his niche in the band’s dynamic and sound while gauging the audience’s reaction to the change.

It was a risky gambit, but one Kevin was certain would pay off in the end. Which is why he also decided that Neil was going to sing part of their final number solo. Well, he wanted Neil to sing the entire piece (while playing, mind you) but at the end of their practices, he deemed Neil not ready to do it, although not quite said in as nice of words. He thinks his exact words were something along the lines of no way in hell was he letting Neil go on stage with a mediocre performance like that and ruin the reputation he had built for this band. Neil likes to think that the sentiment was there among all the ridicule.

“Wow,” Nicky pants into the mic, his curls plastered on his forehead and chest heaving from their latest number. “You guys are truly amazing, you know that? Just look at all the energy in this place. You can practically feel it vibrating in the air.” As if to prove him right, their screams skyrocket in volume, cheers of I love yous and EXY floating on stage.

“I love all of you!” Nicky yells back. “Which is why I’m so sad that his next song is our last for the night.” A series of boos fill the air. “I know I know. If it were up to me, we’d play until the sun came up. Alas, we’ve all got to get home tonight to snuggle with our loved ones, or for all my long-distance lovers out there, enjoy some good old-fashioned skype sex.”

And just like that, the crowd turns again, sharing in his laughter and cheering once more. It’s
almost magical how quickly Nicky can change the fickle mood with such ease. Neil wonders if he will ever accomplish that too.

“Still, I’m going to make this last one special for you all.” He turns a grin on Neil and he can already feel his nerves electrify at what’s coming. “Neil here has been doing such a stellar job on the guitar for us tonight, but I think it’s just a shame to let that pretty voice sit in the background. So how about Neil and I sing this last one together?”

Neil doesn’t even hear the cheers, the sound of his own heart pounding loud enough to drown it out completely. This was it, the moment he was both dreading and hoping for. Now the question was could he do it.

“Sing along if you know the words!”

He didn’t think he really had the time to figure it out. The beat is quicker than everything else they had played for the night, the guitar and drums creating a quick tempo while they all sang a collection of “oh’s.” Then Nicky’s voice kicked in with the first verse.

“Where I grew up there’s not much to see,” Nicky sings as his fingers strum the bass hanging by his hips, body swaying to the drums and foot tapping along with the beat. “As small town as a boy can be. So carelessly we move through empty streets at night.”

Neil kicks in at the dip in tone, “You held onto me and I will to you; together we can make it through. The smallest minds will think we’ll never make it out.”

“To hell with it,” Nicky slides back in with the chorus.

“To hell with it,” Neil echoes.

And they sing. Their voices blending seamlessly together, dipping in and out of lines through each verse and chorus like they have been doing this for years instead of mere weeks. The crowd goes crazy, screaming every time they manage to flip lyrics without losing beat or screaming over each other. Neil felt invincible. So when the music fell away and the light dimmed on the stage until he was the only one still lit, he let his guitar drop and his fingers grabbed the mic without hesitation.

*In the end I’ll love what I have made*

*There’s nothing that could take that joy away*

The music came back in full force but he didn’t pick up his guitar again. Neither did Nicky come back in like they had rehearsed, leaving Neil’s voice the sole one to bring them home.

*To hell with it*

All his life he had been nothing.

*To hell with it*

An obscurity

*I’m aware of everything I’ve done*

But now? Right now he was neither of those things.

*I’m not done*
Now Neil Josten was seen.

To hell with it

I'm aware of everything I've done

I'm not done

What a thrilling and chilling thought.
The high of the concert follows them all back to Fox Records, both Palmetto and EXY sharing in a sense of revelry and excitement as they drown their bodies in alcohol as a celebration for the first successful show with their newest fox. Neil thinks it’s the only time he’s seen both bands interact with minimal snark and barbed comments. Now they lay strewed about the lounge’s furniture with bottles of beer and hard liquor littering the coffee table and floor and with laughter filling the air that mingles with the soft music playing in the background. Neil looks around at each of the foxes: Dan and Matt on the couch next to Renee, both their heads thrown back in laughter as Kevin drains a bottle of vodka while Nicky chants. Allison and Seth are crammed in that armchair again with their faces so attached Neil wonders how exactly they are breathing. (He doesn’t think he really wants to know.)

Oddly enough, the only one who seems to be missing is Andrew, who Neil was sure would be unwilling to leave his two charges unattended amid all the chaos. Still, one cursory look around the room tells him that the man is nowhere to be seen.

“Neil!” He turns to see Matt stumbling over to him, a giant grin plastered on his face if not a little crooked. “You gotta stop being a wallflower man and come have a drink! Unless that’s not your thing then Renee has some soda in the cooler by the couch.”

Neil gives him a small grin, “I’m good, thanks, Matt.”

“But Neil,” he whines, “I wanna get to know you! And congratulate you because you killed it! Like woah, I saw the video but that was still like woah. Wasn’t it woah, Dan?”

Dan walks over and wrangled in her boyfriend with an arm around his waist before he tips over onto Neil. “It sure was babe. How about you stop crowding Neil before you crush the poor kid?”

“But I wanna talk to him! He just seems so lonely over here by himself. He needs a friend Dan! Neil, can I be your friend? No wait don’t answer that, we’re going to be friends.”

This time the grin that tugs on Neil’s lips is more genuine. “Sure, Matt. We can be friends.”

He says it more as means to getting the man to pull back a little, but it doesn’t prevent the weird twist in his chest that appears when Matt smiles back with that 1000 watt smile and Neil finds he means it. He never had a friend before.

“Awesome! So as your friend, I demand you come have a drink with me.”

“I don’t drink.” Matt opens his mouth to protest, but Neil quickly pushes on, “But I’ll join you on the couch in a bit. I think I need some air first.”
“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Matt beams, “Dan said he’d join us. See, my method always works. We’re keeping him.”

“It sure does babe,” Dan laughs, “Why don’t you grab me a drink before Kevin down them all?”

“Kay.” He plants a wet kiss to her cheek before turning back to Neil. “See you in a bit dude.” With a wave, he ambles back over to the rest of the group, leaving Dan and Neil in a lull of silence.

“He means well,” she breaks it. “Bit of a big lug with an even bigger heart, but he means well.”

“It’s okay,” Neil shrugs. “I’m not quite used to someone being so nice, but I’m not bothered by it either.” He finds that for once he’s not lying.

“I’m glad because he’s decided to adopt you and nothing you can do will change his mind otherwise.” She smacks his shoulder. “Welcome to the family kiddo. Don’t call me mom.”

Neil chuckles, “Does that mean Matt is Dad?”

“I’m pretty sure he’d cry tears of joy if you called him that.”

“Noted.”

She gives him a pat on his head before moving to join her boyfriend and friends. “Don’t leave us waiting for too long.”

Neil uses the moment to slip out before anyone else decided to try their luck at pulling him into their merriment. Once the studio door closes behind him, he’s unsure of exactly where he wants to go, so he lets his feet carry him where they will until he finds a stairwell with a small placard that reads: Roof Access. With a look over his shoulder (never too careful to avoid being followed), he climbs the stairs and approaches the door at the top. At first glance, it doesn’t appear to be triggered to any alarm systems, nor does it appear to be locked (not that the lockpick in his shoe wouldn’t be enough to handle it if it were) so with a twist of the handle the door pushes open to the night air.

It’s a clear night with few clouds in the sky and the city lights twinkle around him in a blur of neon lights and headlights. He pushes the door further open and steps out into the open space. That’s when he notices he’s not alone. Andrew rests just left of the door, back against the brick wall of the building and the burning ember of his cigarette hanging from his lips and illuminating his face slightly in its cherry glow. His eyes are closed but Neil knows that he’s noticed his presence, all the same, the tense line of his jaw betraying the look of nonchalance he was aiming for.

In that moment, Neil is presented with two choices: he could ignore Andrew and turn back down the steps and return to the party he so desperately wanted to escape or he could poke the sleeping bear and see what would happen. He knows which is the smarter of the two options.

He picked the latter anyways.

“I’m surprised you let Kevin and Nicky so far off their leash with a ‘threat’ so close by.”

Andrew doesn’t even turn to look at him. “I distinctly remember someone saying they
weren’t a threat. Is the little rabbit changing his tune so soon?”

“You don’t seem like the type to trust so easily,” Neil scoffs.

“You’re right,” this time Andrew does turn to him, switchblade sliding open and glinting in the pale city light. “Tell me, do I need to begin now or could I finish my cigarette first?”

Neil rolls his eyes, “Are you always this dramatic or am I just a special case?”

“Nothing about you is special.” Andrew’s tone is blase and bored but the knife slips away into a jean pocket as smoothly as it appeared.

“But I’m interesting,” he can feel a smirk tug on his lips when Andrew’s jaw twitches. “Or so I’ve been told.”

It’s a few moments before Andrew answers. “You’re an annoyance. Go away and bug someone else.”

He turns his gaze back over the rooftop, a clear dismissal. Too bad Neil’s always been known to be a little contrary in nature. He lets the door slam closed behind him as he walks over to Andrew and plops down next to the man. It’s uncomfortable and he can feel the roof’s gravel dig into his tailbone, but it’s worth it when Andrew turns back around, face bored and a plume of smoke leaking from his lips.

“Our deal was that you give me what I want to know and I leave you alone. This is the opposite of being left alone.”

“Then are you saying that you have everything you need to know?” He raises an eyebrow in challenge. “You only asked two questions.”

Andrew stares at him for a long time, his cigarette forgotten as it slowly burns down and he crushes it into the gravel before it can burn his lips. He lights another just as fast, taking a few drags before replying. “Are you saying that you want to go another round?”

This time it’s Neil’s turn to pause. He knows he shouldn’t, his secrets were meant to be closely guarded at his chest and his tongue trained to lie to his dying breath before the truth even dares to slip past his teeth. His last experience with this little exchange told him just how dangerous it really was to equip Andrew with such a weapon. He already had his eyes, something so small but in the right hands, all the information his father’s men would need to track him down. It was dangerous. It was stupid. But every truth he gave was like a little bit of him became real. Just in that one moment. Just in this one man’s blank and suspicious eyes. After tonight — after having that taste of being seen — he craved it.

Besides for every morsel of himself that he had to give up, Andrew would give the same. Every truth given with an equal trade. He could just steer the man in the right directions, hint a little here and there to paint a pretty enough picture that it would hide the ugly one beneath its surface. Like that he had lived in an abusive home instead of the one of a mass murdering hitman and his crime syndicate. That his mother was a scared beaten wife trying to get her son to safety instead of the daughter of another crime family that had gotten in way over her head and was too prideful to ask for her family’s help. That Neil was a boy who loved music and not one who needed it to live anymore. With each half-truth given he could further piece his picture of Andrew Minyard, hoarding everything he could about the man who puzzled him without tearing himself to pieces for it. It was for research; know thy enemy and all that. Hadn’t his mother taught him to assess any and all threats?
He almost believed himself.

“Yes,” he answers.

“Why?” Andrew’s eyes get that suspicious glint again.

“Is that your question?”

The muscles in the other’s jaw tick and it feels like a victory.

“Why were you in Millport? How did you get there?”

Neil thinks about pointing out that was technically **two** questions, but after turning them over in his head a few times, they seemed harmless enough to let it slide. “It was mostly by chance. I drifted from place to place working the odd job where I could find it for extra cash when I needed it. Millport was just the last stop among many. The only difference is that it had a comfy gig and the owner would let me crash in the staff room most nights.”

“And where were you before Millport?”

Flashes of a burning car and a sunset coast fill his mind as he feels his throat go dry. He sees blood stained hands, hears the horrible rip of his mother’s skin against the vinyl seats, and the haunting taunts of his father’s voice echoing in that damned warehouse.

“Seattle.”

The answer must satisfy Andrew because he nods in acquiescence and signals Neil’s own turn. This time Neil doesn’t start with something small. “You went to jail and have a record.”

“There a question in there somewhere?”

“What for?”

Andrew looks at him like he’s an idiot. “I assume you’ve seen the tabloids or at least did a google search.”

Oh, Neil had. He had done countless amounts of research the moment Kevin Day and Andrew Minyard has barged into his life. Not just on them but all members of EXY and Fox Records. He couldn’t afford not to. Hence why he knew that Andrew had gotten in trouble with an assault charge the night of his 18th birthday that landed him in jail for nearly a year and in court-mandated therapy for another two. He saw the photos of the men he beat up and the headlines that painted him a psychopath — a monster — that deserved to be locked away for the rest of his life.

It’s why there was such a controversy over Kevin signing him to Fox Records with EXY. No one knew what to do with a child prodigy suddenly associating with an ex-con to form a band together. The news blew up even more when they found out that the lead singer turned out to be Andrew’s cousin. Months passed before they could talk about anything else; so yeah, he knew what the media and Google **said**. Didn’t make it true. He wanted it from Andrew’s mouth because according to the media Neil’s own father was an upstanding businessman. Count his faith in their ability to know the truth pretty damn low.

“Oh, are non-answers acceptable now? Because then I’d like to fill in all my future answers with: because, my many issues, and fuck you.” The glare Andrew gives him is glacial. “Look you’re the one who proposed this game. A truth for a truth; don’t get mad at me for making you hold that up.”
“And how do you know what they said isn’t the truth?”

Neil snorts. “Do they ever? They paint Kevin like he’s some kind of saint.” He shifts so he can fully face Andrew. “I’ve barely known the man for a month and I’m ready to strangle him the moment he opens his mouth.”

Andrew doesn’t laugh or chuckle or even sigh, but there is just the tiniest flicker at the corner of his mouth and it feels like Neil’s saw something few have seen before. If it felt like winning before, it was like the world was cheering at his feet.

“You’re not the monster they make you out to be.”

“And how do you know?”

“Because I’ve seen the monsters.” Monsters like Lola who smiled in delight as her fingers were stained red in his blood. Like Romero who Neil only saw truly happy when he was pulling the bat out of someone’s caved in skull. Monsters like his father who could go from smiling one minute to turning around with a hot iron the next. But Andrew knew none of that and Neil planned to keep it that way. So instead he says, “I may not know exactly who you are yet, but I know at least that much.”

At first, Neil doesn’t think Andrew is going to answer. The wind and the bustle of the city below fill the air with silence that sits between them, only the occasional drag of Andrew’s cigarette breaking it. Eventually, Neil picks himself off the ground and moves for the door. It creaks open when Andrew finally speaks.

“They got it right, mostly anyways. I did get slapped with an assault charge for beating up those four men. What they don’t say is that it was nearly an attempted murder before a lawyer got involved.”

Neil lets the door close, but he doesn’t move to sit down again, something in Andrew's bland tone telling him this was better said with distance.

“They jumped Nicky outside a club he was working at. I came to pick him up after his shift. They didn’t like what I said about touching what’s mine.”

Neil lets that answer sit for a minute. “Did you set out to kill them.”

“Would you believe me if I said I didn’t?”

Neil doesn’t answer.

“No,” Andrew lets the word spill out in a cloud of smoke. “But it would have made no difference to me if I did kill them.”

He turns to Neil now and blows the next cloud in his vicinity. The smell swirls in the air until it reaches his nose and chokes him. Neil says nothing. He opens the door again.

“So am I the monster they make me out to be?” Andrew calls out, taunt hanging on his lips like a cruel smile on his otherwise expressionless face.

“Would you believe me if I said you weren’t?”

Andrew doesn’t have anything left to say to that so Neil slips back through the door and back down to the party where Matt claps him on the back and Nicky loudly cheers his return. He lets them
pull him into their fun and shouting, laughing when prompted and smiles along with the rest of them when Nicky cracks a lame joke or Kevin gets in another drunken tirade about their performances. He ignores it when Andrew finally reappears in the room and hauls away his lot without even a second glance in his direction. And when the party ends, he lets himself be dragged back to Matt and Seth’s to crash on their couch despite his many protests that he was fine with walking back.

Yet, his mind keeps going back to the rooftop and Andrew’s silhouette against the city light with smoke spilling from his lips at every word. He hears the words monster and psycho and tries to mesh them together with the story he’s been told and the one everyone as already accepted as being the whole truth. No, he didn’t think he knew exactly what Andrew was (still too many unanswered questions and doubts floating around for him to ever be sure) but he thinks he is starting to.

Neil turns over on the couch and lets himself fall into unconsciousness.
they say it's what you make, I say it's up to fate it's woven in my soul (I need to let you go)

Chapter Notes

Demons - Imagine Dragons

Neil woke up knowing that today was going to be one of those kinds of days. It started out with the slight pounding behind his eyes from the restless sleep he can get from an unfamiliar place with surrounded by strangers (or practical strangers he supposes). Then there was a kink in his neck from the way he had to curl up on the couch to be comfortable only made worse by Seth who decided throwing a shoe at him was an acceptable way to wake him up. At least Matt had made him coffee and breakfast as an apology. Too bad that was ruined when he informed Neil of the time and the day’s plans.

“Let me get this straight,” Neil drains the rest of his coffee, “You woke me up at 4:30 in the morning because Kevin has some interview for the Kathy Ferdinand show in D.C. that we’re all invited to.”

“Yup,” Matt replies in that obnoxious chipper tone only morning people seem to have. Or in this case, having been up long enough to ingest three cups of coffee.

Neil sets his mug on the counter and rises from his seat. “I’m going back to bed.”

“No! Come on Neil, it will be fun!” Neil levels him with a look. “Okay, it will be mildly interesting at least. We can make fun of Kevin’s fake media smile and count how many times his jaw ticks when he has to say something nice about us.”

Neil sighs, “I don’t have much of a choice in this, do I?”

“Sorry, buddy.” Matt ruffles his hair, “Boss man’s orders. We all go.”

Great. Just one of those days. And the day only seemed to get worse when they all piled into the small tour bus packed with grumpy and hungover adults for a 6 hour drive. Neil couldn’t even fall asleep, his body too keyed up around so many unfamiliar people with no walls at his back beside the cushion of a couch. And since no one else seemed to have this problem, he was left with no one to talk to since his only options were Renne or Wymack, who was driving. Safe to say he spent the entirety of the journey staring out the window until they finally pulled into a parking lot behind some concrete looking building.

Out of habit, Neil quickly scans the lot but besides a few news vans and a couple more cars, it was empty. Turning his attention back inward, he watches as the rest of his fellow riders rouse from sleep and blearily blink around at their surroundings. With amusement (and curiosity), he watches as Wymack throws a wallet at Andrew who startles awake violently. It’s funny until he catches the wild look in his eyes as he looks around the bus trying to sink in where he was at; it was a look Neil was sure had his graced his face anytime something unexpected woke him up on the run. It was not an expression or feeling he would wish on most.

The amusement came back however when he watched Andrew then turn to wake Kevin by
The funny part was that it was barely enough to rouse the man. It seems that is another thing that had changed about Kevin in the years since they’ve been apart. The Kevin he knew would have curled up on the floor and remained asleep. Still, with the last of the foxes awake and moving, Wymack proceeds to kick them all from the bus where they are met by a woman whose smile looks too painted on and shark-like to mean anything but trouble for Neil’s already shit morning.

“Kevin, darling! It’s good to see you again! I feel like it has been ages since we’ve last talked. It’s an honor that you chose my show for this exclusive interview.” The woman greets, enveloping Kevin in a hug and pressing kisses to either of his cheeks.

“The pleasure is all mine Kathy. You know your show has been nothing but kind to me so really it’s the least I could do.” Kevin turns up the charm with a wide smile, all traces of his morning grumpiness gone. “Though I do have to wonder if you’re punishing me for my long absence by choosing such an early recording time.”

“I would never!” Her smile says that she definitely would.

“Now,” she turns to the rest of them, “I’m so glad the rest of Fox Records could make it as well. We have refreshments backstage for you all and reserved the first couple of rows just for you. Do please make yourselves comfortable. We’ll be filming in 30 minutes or so.”

She turns to Neil and he really doesn’t like the glint in her eyes and that too sharp smile pointed his way. “So are you ready for your first big day on camera? No need to be nervous, I promise to go easy on you.”

Neil really hates it when he’s right.

“I’m not-”

“He’s fine. I’ve been prepping him all week,” Kevin interrupts, drawing her attention once more.

The fuck he has. “What are you talking about? I’m not doing an interview.”

“Neil.” Kevin’s tone is one that brokers no argument, but it is a pale attempt at power he doesn’t have.

“No. No fucking way. I was not informed nor was my consent asked for. Well, this is me not consenting.”

Kathy looks considerably confused at the exchange, that perfect smile cracking with the furrow in her brow. “Uh, I’m sure it’s just nerves sweetie. This is going to do wonders for your career and you won’t even have to go on stage alone! Kevin will be right by your-”

“I said no.”

Her eye twitches at his tone, “Look kid, people would kill to be in your shoes. This could make or break your career, meaning the difference between a long and successful one or fading into obscurity the moment people lose interest.”

Her tone implies more a threat than the careful wording aims to hide, but it misses the target considering obscurity is exactly what Neil wants for this whole thing. “Then give it to someone else. My answer is still no.”
That wipes all traces of the smile from her face, but before she can open her mouth to damage her chances further, Kevin yanks his shoulder until he spins to face him.

“You will do this,” he spits in French.

Neil feels his own hackles begin to rise, so he swats the man’s hands away and levels him with a glare. “You don’t own me, Day. So don’t make the mistake of ordering me around like you at practice.”

“Oh but I do.” Kevin crowds closer so Neil has to crane his neck to meet his eyes. (Damn his height.) “I owned you the moment you gave yourself over to me. Your guitar, your voice, your image, it all belongs to me now. So if you still want a place on our stage and in this band, you will do this interview. Or we are done.”

“Fuck you,” he says in English because it never sounds as powerful or with as much hatred as it does in French.

“What will it be Josten? Are we done or will you get over your childish petulance and do the interview”

Neil can feel his resolve beginning to slip. He still isn’t ready to give this all up, but another part of him — the one that kept him alive after all these years of near misses — is screaming at him that if he gets on that stage in front of all those cameras it really will be the end of Neil Josten. Even his father could not ignore his face plastered all over television.

“I can’t.”

“You will.”

Neil holds Kevin’s eyes for a moment longer before dropping them to the ground. Kevin returns his attention to Kathy who had been watching the conversation with undisguised interest. “He’ll do it.”

Her eyes sparkled with triumph. “Excellent! I’ll go tell the staff so they can begin prep now!”

She scurries off back into the concrete building where a couple more people rush out to herd the foxes to their appropriate places. Neil can feel some of their eyes on his back, but he shakes them off and lets himself be led away from them with Kevin.

“Where’d your spine go, little rabbit?” Andrew calls out, “I remember you having a lot more teeth than that.”

The door swings closed on the middle finger he offers in way of a reply. He swears he sees Andrew’s mouth tick upward for a just a second.

Neil really really hates it when he’s right. Because honestly he knew this woman was going to be trouble; from the predator’s smile to her forcing him on to her show after being shoved into a suit and having people pull on his face and hair for 20 minutes only to be ignored when he finally comes on stage while she focuses the questions and attention on Kevin. He literally cannot see the point of why he was there in the first place other than to parade him around like some piece of eye
candy. Of course, it only got worse when she decided to bring on her “extra special guest star” that no one had known was coming. That special guest, of course, being one of the last people Neil ever wanted to see again in his short (admittedly getting shorter) life, Riko fucking Moriyama.

It’s now more than ever that he wishes he listened to his gut feeling that warned him that going on this damned show meant death. Because if Kevin Day was a threat to his safety then Riko was a sign of the apocalyptic end of his life. Then again he really should have known better; where there was Kevin, Riko was never too far behind.

He watches now as his last and final childhood friend saunters down the aisle between the crowd, a fanfare of guitar and drums and his discombobulated voice singing of when he was king following his wake. He looks at that smug smile that hasn’t changed a bit from the 10 year old boy that used to lord his talent and power over him and Kevin. He sees the changes the years had given the man, rounded cheeks of childhood youth replaced with the chiseled jaw of a man, piercings through his eyebrow and ears, and previously unblemished skin permanently stained with black ink of tattoos on his temple, cheek, and arms are also covered with sharp and intricate designs that stand out against his pale complexion.

Yet there were still much of the things that he remembered, namely his signature crown with his R initial below it having made the transition from sharpie to ink and the sparkle of cruelty in those inky eyes of this that promised nothing but pain and submission. But no of that accounts for the feeling of pure fear that races through him and freezes the blood in his veins. No, that belongs to the look of recognition that flickers briefly in those eyes the moment they meet his.

“Riko! Baby! Hunny!” Kathy croons, jumping from her seat to envelop her newest guest in a light embrace. “It’s been too long!”

Riko gives her a polite squeeze and a peck on the cheek. “Too long indeed. You’re as lovely as ever, I’m honored to be welcomed on your show.”

“Oh stop it, you! You’ll make me blush. Sit, sit! We have so much to catch up on!”

Riko settles himself on the couch next to Neil, sandwiching him between the two pieces of his past with no escape. At least there was enough space on the couch that he could lean so they weren’t touching.

“Now Riko, Kevin was just telling me that the two of you haven’t spoken since the accident that ruined his hand. Tell me that isn’t true! The two of you used to be thick as thieves!”

“Unfortunately it is,” the crowd awws sadly and Riko affects a look of regret and remorse that would be almost believable if not for the flick of his gaze at the two of them. “I know, I know but his accident was hard on the both of us. What with reconstruction surgery and physical therapy, for a long time we weren’t even sure he would be able to write let alone pick up a guitar again.”

He reaches over to pat Kevin’s knee, his fingers digging in a little too deep to be friendly but small enough for the camera to miss. Neil catches the glint of steel from the audience before he raises his gaze to see Andrew being restrained by Wymack and Matt on either side of him with Renee perched in his lap and braced on the seat to keep him there. He flicks a curious brow at the display, unsure what could be the cause of such a violent outburst. (Sure Kevin was uncomfortable, but Riko never harmed Kevin.)

“And when he left Moriyama Music and the Ravens, I’m just afraid we just found it easier to let the silence grow. I think we were both ashamed.”
“Ashamed?” Kathy prods. “Ashamed of what?”

Riko looks almost predatory before it flickers back into his mask of remorse. “Ashamed that we failed what we set out to do. Ashamed that we let our fans down. We started this when we were merely children, no idea of the pressure and expectations that would come from being at the top of our industry. And when the accident happened Kevin simply cracked. Unable to play at the level he could and the level he needed to be for the Ravens was simply out of the questions.

“We didn’t want to admit it then, but we know that was the end of the Ravens we created. The end of the great Kevin Day and Riko Moriyama duo as we had become accustomed to.”

Kathy pats at her eyes with a tissue and sniffs loudly. “That is absolutely heartbreaking, isn’t it everyone?” The crowd murmurs their agreeance, a few loud sobs heard coming from the group. “To think that such young boys would experience such tragedy this early in their career. Did you feel the same, Kevin? Is that why you left your record label and band? Because you know you never would the same level again?”

Neil watches as all the color drains from his friend’s face and the first cracks appear in that media perfect mask which had remained firmly in place since this morning. He sees the twitch of his mouth and the slight shaking of his hands as he subconsciously cradles his left in his lap. Kevin opens his mouth and he knows with something deep in his bones that he is about to bend to Riko’s words as he had when they were children.

Fuck that.

“What utter bullshit,” he cuts in before Kevin can speak, drawing everyone’s attention. “If you really cared about Kevin then you wouldn’t write him off as a lost cause.”

“Neil!” Kathy chuckles, “Sorry dear, didn’t mean to forget about you there. Neil Riko, Riko, Neil. Neil here is the newest member of Kevin’s band EXY.”

“I know who you are,” Riko turns a sharp smile on him, “I saw your youtube video. I’m sorry what was your name again? Alex? Chris? Stephan?”

Each name makes his blood run colder, the last identities he had both used and discarded before Neil Josten came to be. That Riko managed to track each of them down and trace them back to him shows Neil just how prepared Riko came to this fight when he himself had nothing.

“Nathan?” Riko’s grin is downright bloodthirsty at the final name. Neil feels it cut. Though perhaps that is Kevin’s fingernails that have found themselves embedded on his right wrist hidden at their side.

“Neil actually,” despite his fear, he can feel his father’s smile slide into place. “But call me whatever you like. It doesn’t matter much to me.”

“Oh?” Riko arches an eyebrow.

“I’ve seen how you treated your self-proclaimed brother so excuse me if I’m not interested in having any sort of relationship with you after this. Therefore it’s of no consequence if you learn my name or not.”

The audience is dead silent as the two boys stare at each other and Kevin looks like he’d rather be anywhere but. Even Kathy sits flabbergasted a few feet away, unsure of what to say and unwilling to pass what is sure to be the hottest news of the gossip column.
“And what would you know of Kevin and I’s relationship? You’ve barely known him what a few weeks? What is that in comparison to the years we’ve had together?”

“And yet it seems I’m the only one not putting him down.” he twists in his seat to better face him. “Cracked under the pressure? Never going to reach the level he once was at? You act like he lost his hand entirely not just broke it.”

“He might as well. Kevin knows he will never be the same.”

“And since when does same equate to lower? It sounds like to me you’re the one hoping that Kevin never recover because it would just go to show what a better musician he was in comparison to you.”

Riko’s look turns dark. “Watch it.”

“Why? Am I hitting a nerve?” Neil’s smile grows, “I’m sorry the truth hurts.”

“Now you listen here-”

“Nope. You listen. Since Kevin had broken his hand, he has gone on not only to sign with a new label but create a new band that rapidly climbed the charts faster than the Raven’s ever did and is still climbing. He had to relearn the guitar with his nondominant hand and still managed to play at a level that leaves millions in the dust. You treat Kevin and EXY like trash, but they are comparable to the Ravens you cherish so much.”

Riko scoffs, “Are you saying that your meager band is somehow on the same level as my Ravens? Don’t let your pride get the better of you.”

“No, we’re not at your level. Not yet.” Neil wants to claw the grin off his face. “But we’re coming for you. You may be the self-proclaimed king of Rock, but you’ve gotten complacent on your cushy throne. Careful or you might just find yourself deposed.”

“Is that a threat?” Riko slants his eyes in challenge. “Do you honestly think you and the rest of your foxes actually have what it takes to be the top?”

“It’s a promise.”

The crowd cheers at his declaration, the foxes the loudest ones of them all. He spares them a quick glance to see that Andrew is now free of Renee, Wymack, and Matt and is staring at him with a look in those eyes that Neil can’t quite place but makes him nervous all the same. Luckily, Kathy’s voice pulls his attention back to the stage.

“Wow, powerful words Neil!” she laughs nervously. “How do you feel Kevin? Your bandmate just challenged one of the biggest names in the industry and your former band to boot.”

Kevin’s fingers dig tighter into his flesh but his mask remains firmly in place with no new cracks in it. His voice doesn’t even waver when he says, “I think… that my goal has always been to take EXY as far as it can go, pushing myself and all its members to be the best. That still stands.” He smiles. “I guess it always meant a bit of a challenge didn’t it?”

Kathy returns the smile, “Well I for one am excited to see how both your bands develop in the coming years. But unfortunately, that’s all the time we have for this morning. Kevin, Riko, Neil it was an absolute pleasure to have you all here.” She turns to the audience and cameras. “Stay tuned for our predictions for this years top 10 Grammy nominations. I’m Kathy Ferdinand and this is the Kathy Ferdinand show. See you soon!”
The camera tilts down and the crew gives her the signal that their clear for time being. She gives them all a wicked smile, “Thanks a million boys. Today’s ratings are going to skyrocket. Keep the clothes as a thank you.”

Neil doesn’t bother with any pleasantries, rising from the couch and pulling Kevin backstage before Riko could do any more damage, which his instincts were telling him that he would. Lucky for him, Kevin is all too ready to follow him away from Riko anyways to resist Neil’s pull and they manage to get halfway to the exit when his friend pulls them to a stop.

“Na- Natha-” Kevin stutters, the revelation hitting him now of all times.

“Really, Kevin? You want to do this now? We need to keep moving.”

There are at least two exits they could make it to before Riko catches up with them, his brain supplies. If they ran, perhaps they could even be on the bus when he finds them. At least there too many witnesses would be around for him to do anything major. But they needed to run. Run. Run. Run. Each word sounding more and more like his mother. Run Abram and never stop. Promise me.

“B-but-”

“Now.”

Thankfully when Neil pulls him again, he goes willingly. He carefully leads them to the nearest exit, dodging crew members and PAs alike in their mad dash for freedom.

“You were supposed to be dead,” he hears Kevin whisper at his back.

“I know,” is all he can reply.

They round the corner and Neil stops so hard Kevin collides into his back, almost toppling them both over. Leaning against the wall just before the door leading to their escape, smug smile and all, is Riko. Run. Run. Run. Run. Each word sounding more and more like his mother. Run Abram and never stop. Promise me.

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Riko is not a tall man, only standing a handful of inches taller than Neil himself and dwarfed by Kevin’s height, yet one would think he well over 6 feet by the confidence he exudes in his wake. Neil though is not so easily impressed.

“Haven’t you heard? I go by Neil now.”

“And why exactly is that?” His smile grows sharper, “tell me, Junior, where is your daddy these days?”

The old nickname stings much in the same way a slap across the face would, sharp and quick and just enough to catch you off balance. He hears the name in the soft drawl of his father’s voice, in Lola’s taunting purr as she digs steel into flesh. Kevin whimpers at his back and it’s enough to kickstart his brain back in action. Against every instinct in his body, he turns his back to Riko and pushes Kevin back a couple of steps.

“Go find Andrew.” At first, the command doesn’t register in his eyes, looking at Neil like a ghost and then like he’s crazy. “Kevin. Go find Andrew. I’ll be fine.” This time the man’s gaze flicks between Riko and Neil. “Go ahead, Kevin. I’ll be right behind you.”
“Listen to Nathaniel, Kev.” Riko smirks, “I’ll be back for you another time. I think it’s time Nathaniel and I had a little reunion.”

Those too sharp and cruel eyes fall back on him and he could almost hear Kevin’s sigh of relief followed by a whine of guilt. Still, he only hesitates for a moment longer before he turns and runs down the hall. For a few seconds, both men simply stare at each other listening as the receding footsteps grow distant and fainter before disappearing altogether.

“Nathaniel, Nathaniel, Nathaniel.” Riko tsks, “Whatever am I going to do with you?”

“Go fuck yourself, Riko. I’m not any of your business.”

“Oh?” He moves quicker than Neil could have imagined, pinning him to the wall in a flash with an arm pressed to his throat and hoisting him an inch or so off the ground. “That’s where you’re wrong, Nathaniel. You very much are my business. Anything doing with sweet poor Kevin is. Not to mention our little family connection.”

Neil claws at the arm, his breath stuttering in his chest as it cuts off his airway.

“So imagine my surprise when I hear that Kevin’s gone and signed some little upstart nobody for his trash of a band and that nobody turning out to be my long lost childhood friend Nathaniel Wesninski. Tell me did Kevin hunt you down or did you run to him first? I’m hurt really, I always thought I was your favorite, then again I think I should be really surprised that even your father doesn’t seem to know where you are at.”

“Leave my father out of this.”


If his father heard that comment, Riko would have been slaughtered in a slow and painful way. As it is, Neil is a bit inclined to tell the man himself just to see it happen. “If you think that last part then you’re a fool.”

Rage burns in those eyes. “Do you know how much business we’ve brought to your father? How much money we’ve lined his pockets with? I can damn well say what I please.”

Neil strains his face closer against the hold at his neck. “If you think he wouldn’t turn on you in a second the moment someone comes with deeper and better pockets then I pity your delusional life. The Moriyama’s are clients, not keepers. Do your best to remember that Riko.”

Riko slams his head against the wall and Neil sees stars. “Or what Wesninski? You’re powerless here.”


He presses harder, cutting off all air this time. “Now now, don’t be rude. I just want answers. Why Kevin?”

Neil had to claw the wall for enough purchase to pull in a barely enough gulp of air before he slipped once more. Realizing that it would be impossible to get the answer he wanted, Riko eases up just a bit, but only after Neil’s vision starts to black out.

“D-didn’t f-find Ke-vin. Found me. Didn’t recognize me.” he manages to cough out between gasps of air.
“You expect me to believe that Kevin didn’t recognize you? That he forgot?”

There is a crazed look in his eye. Neil says nothing, letting the air fill his lungs instead of saying something stupid already poised on the end of his tongue.

“You know Kevin. Always stuck in his own little world. Kind of like you, you megalomaniac piece of shit.”

Kind of like that.

Whether the shock of Neil’s words or the very idea of Neil still defying him even now, the arm falls away completely and air rushed back into his chest at full forces as he falls to his feet. The reprieve is short lived. A hand cracks against his face, knuckles and rings scraping along his cheek and nose with a force strong enough to send his head careening straight into the wall at his back with a sickening wet smack. The world flares in blinding white before it swirls and spins before his eyes, spots dancing in the corners of his vision and the smell of rust filling his nostrils and mouth.

He clamps his lips against the rolling nausea threatening to rise from his stomach as he turns his head to look back at Riko, his chest is rising and falling in short bursts and muscles in his face tick with barely contained rage. Neil smiles a bloody smile and spits in his face. His only regret that his aim hadn’t been better. As it is, the bloody glob of saliva lands on his cheek — just below that ridiculous tattoo — and slides off to the floor. For a moment neither of them move, Riko’s fury cold and blazing simultaneously and Neil’s world too dizzy to do much more than stare. All at one the movement breaks and Neil is shoved to the wall once more, only instead of an arm at his neck, there is a cool and familiar press of steel.

“Careful now Nathaniel, you forget your place.”

Neil can’t help it, he laughs, the movement enough to dig the blade in deeper to allow a small dot of blood to race down and greet it. “What place is that Riko? We’re not 10 anymore. You don’t scare me.”

That same wild expression twists his face and for a moment Neil expects the blade to slash him open. But it never does. Riko’s face becomes calmer, the tension that had adorned his features, bleeding away into understanding and absolute smugness. He leans in, the damp warmth of his breath skating over his face.

“You might not be afraid of me, Nathaniel, but don’t forget that I know what you are afraid of.” He moves his lips to the shell of his ear. “Or should I say who? I know where your father is. Tell me, do you?”

Neil can feel the blood drain from his body as he goes utterly still under Riko’s knife After Seattle, his father disappeared into the wind as much as Neil did. No rumors of where the famed Butcher had gone, nor murmurs of Lola or her brother Romero slinking across the country on a hunt. Nothing. It paranoid Neil more than when he’d known the man was hot on his heels. That Riko knew and could conceivably contact him changes everything.

“What, no snarky comeback now?” The smirk on his lips was almost as sharp as the blade.

“Now Riko, what have I told you about touching things that were mine?” Both pairs of eyes snapped in the direction of the newest voice. Standing just a few feet to the right Andrew waits casually, hands shoved in his pockets and a slouch in his shoulder. “You know I don’t share.”

It was the last thing Neil would ever expect in the presence of the 5-foot blonde menace, but
the moment his eyes landed on Andrew’s figure he felt undeniable and utter relief. The knife went away and Riko stepped away to brandish it at Andrew instead, leaving Neil to sag under his weight until the only thing keeping him up was the wall at his back.

“Walk away Minyard. You already got Kevin for now, this one doesn’t involve you. He was mine long before he was yours.” Riko snarls.

Andrew stalks closer, hands still in his pockets but his body drawn to his full height. Despite being under seven inches shorter, he still cuts an imposing sight. Andrew could be called a lot of things, but weak and soft were something he would never be. His body rippled with hard muscle and moved with the grace and confidence that screamed he knew what he could do with them and had the ability to do so.

“I’m not interested in the past, little birdie. It does little to change the present.” he stops just shy of the knife’s point. “I won’t repeat myself a third time. Move. Away-.”

Riko strikes before the final word leaves Andrew’s mouth entirely, slashing at the air near his face, but Andrew is too fast, moving to the left of Riko’s lunge and knocking the blade away with a hand that wraps viciously around his wrist. He twists and pulls until Riko’s arm is contorted behind his back and the blade clatters to the floor at their feet. With a swift kick to his knee, Riko crumbles to the floor and Andrew towers over him.

“Riko, Riko, Riko,” Andrew tsked, “When are you ever going to learn?” Riko snarls and struggles against his hold but Andrew doesn’t give an inch. “Here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to let you go just this once because you’ll eventually be more of a pain dead than alive. Then you’re going to hobble off to whatever hole you crawled out of today and leave me and mine alone because next time I cannot guarantee that dead won’t be the easy choice.”

He kicks Riko forward until the man is forced on his hands and knees. “Leave before I change my mind.”

For a moment Neil doesn’t think Riko is going to comply, but after a second the man rises to his feet and growls a warning. “I will remember this.”

One thinks the words might have been pointed at Andrew, the malice dripping from every letter formed on this tongue, but Neil knew they were truly meant for him. The piercing gaze of fury only confirmed it. “And you will pay.”

What he really heard was and you will die for it. Because death was the only thing waiting for him in his father’s hands. Riko was his keeper and the leash a simple phone call that could end his life in seconds. Neil feels himself go numb with the certainty that this will be his death, that joining the foxes and walking on this stage truly meant the end. All of this and it would be gone before it even really began. He had to leave tonight.

“Tell someone who cares,” Andrew drawls, shoving his hands in pockets once more.

Riko only smiles as he turns and leaves. Neither of them dares to take their eyes off him until he disappears behind a corner and even still for a few moments then. Once they’re sure he’s gone, Andrew turns back to Neil.

“Pick yourself up. We’re leaving.”

Neil should listen, keep his mouth shut against the torrent of thoughts already storming through is mind and let Andrew guide him back to the rest of their group, but he finds the question
on his lips too tempting and desperate. “Why did you say I’m yours? I’m not yours.”

“You’re right,” Andrew’s hands reemerge from his pockets, this time carrying a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. “But he doesn’t know that.”

It was a perfect non-answer but Neil was tired of other people’s games for today. He was done playing. “Why.”

Andrew lights up and takes a deep drag. It’s only when he breathes does the answer come twirled with smoke and the taste of ash. “Why did you tell Kevin to leave?”

A question for a question. A truth for a truth. That’s how Andrew operated, but Neil couldn’t give any more truths away right now. Not when the biggest of them all bubbles just below the surface. Not when the actual truth was poised on his tongue. So Neil said nothing and got nothing in return. Something almost like disappointment — no that wasn’t quite right, perhaps resignation — crosses Andrew’s face but he turns as quickly as it appears and starts walking away. Neil follows him out, his own resignation hanging over him as his thoughts swallow him whole.

_Run_. This time he planned on listening to his mother.
can't say yes, can't say no there's things out of my control (it's hard to explain it)

Chapter Notes

Die Trying - Michl

The bus ride is thankfully uneventful and besides a few worried questions from Dan and Matt, Nicky’s bemoaning about his pretty face being marred by the bruise already, Neil is left in relative peace as he nurses an icepack and huddles away in the corner of the bus. He says relatively because a nervous panic ebbs away at his control, it being fed by the quick glances Kevin keeps shooting his way every time he thinks Neil isn’t looking and he’s not doing his best to drown himself in the flask Neil didn’t even know they had onboard. At least he wasn’t the only one left off-kilter from Riko’s sudden reappearance in their lives. Unfortunately, it was of little consolation when those nerves bled into his own and made him feel jittery and frayed. Andrew’s knowing gaze on the two of them did nothing to help.

Kevin knew that much was obvious. From Riko’s taunts to the familiarity with Neil too blatant for even someone as dense as Kevin miss it. The fact he could not look Neil in the eye told him just as much. But Andrew… it looked like he knew too even though that should be impossible. The Kevin Neil knew was a coward, willing to let Riko get away with anything because it was easier than fighting against him. From what he saw now, it looked like nothing had changed, meaning he would not tell Andrew the truth of his identity lest he put himself in the crosshairs. Yet the weight of that stare is heavy and Neil wonders if that maybe he is wrong. Maybe Kevin is more afraid of Andrew than he is of the Butcher and his son and let out more than he should have.

Because Andrew knew. And that was almost terrifying as his father closing the distance. While Andrew had proven that he could see the lie beneath Neil Josten, now he saw the boy he once was too. Neil shudders. It was too much. Too too much.

So when the bus pulled to a stop in the parking garage of Fox Records, he barely waits for the wheels to stop turning when he tears himself from his seat and bolts for the door. His feet hit concrete seconds later, hit its running and don’t stop until the slap of his shoes against pavement is the only thing to fill his ears. There might have been calls at his back, worried exclamations from Matt or Nicky or even Wymack, but they were all lost to the thrum of his blood racing in his veins and the pounding in his chest while his mother’s voice screams at him from the grave.


Phantom fists and claws fuel the momentum that keeps him going, ghostly reminders of the pain that promises to come if he would get caught — if his father ever found him with his knives and dark basements. They were distractions to his already throbbing head and muscles. He runs faster, harder.

The moon is high in the sky when Neil finally arrives back to Fox Records. His body is heavy with exhaustion and his clothes stick to his skin with sweat. He had gotten eight miles out of town before his body had collapsed and the exertion kept him down. By then the sky had only just begun to darken but it was another few hours yet before he could orient himself long enough to get
back to Wymack’s. As like before, his things were gone and a little note on his empty guitar case told him exactly where they were.

Another hour passes before he can drudge himself over to the studio and up the three flights of stairs it takes to reach the suite. Andrew waits for him slouched on the couch with Neil’s guitar slung across his knee and his duffle back on the floor by his feet. Neil doesn’t even have the energy in him to be surprised. He flops down in the chair across.

“Do you play?” He asks because it was better than waiting for Andrew’s game. “The guitar?”

Andrew raises an eyebrow, “Are we playing now?”

He means it as another jab towards Neil’s silence from earlier in the day but Neil doesn’t rise to the bait, simply shrugging in answer. “If we need to.”

“No. I only play percussions.”

At that Neil sits up, “As in plural? Which ones?”

“Most kinds of drums, the piano, and a bit of the xylophone.”

There is something almost absurd about picturing Andrew sitting at a xylophone, an instrument Neil equates more with tiny children rather than a fully grown adult man. Then again he did have the height of a small child so maybe it wasn’t so absurd as he thinks. (It’s nice being able to make the short jokes for once.) He must not do a good job of keeping his face blank because Andrew’s eyes squint in a dare for him to laugh. Neil just nearly manages to keep it in.

“My turn. Are you leaving?”

And just like that, all amusement drains from his body at the reminder of why he’s here. “Yes.”

Andrew grips the neck of the guitar, fingers tightening so hard the wood beneath groans from the pressure and Neil has to stop himself from ripping it away. His eyes have that same intensity they always do when he’s trying to figure Neil out and the lies coming from his mouth. Only this time there is nothing to figure out and no lies being told. Just the truth.

He expects Andrew to nod, to let his guitar fall from his lap as the man gets up to leave, to be glad to finally be rid of his “problem” like he wanted. Instead, what comes from Andrew’s mouth is, “Stay.”

The word hurts as much as Riko’s slap, pulling the air from his lungs and tearing the earth right from under his feet. Because it’s not at all what he would expect yet it’s the word he yearned to hear the most. It was everything he cannot have.

“I can’t,” he whispers because he doesn’t think his voice could handle anything more.

“Why.” Andrew’s voice hard and unforgiving, his hazel eyes even more so. “What does Riko have on you that makes you tuck tail and run when you finally have what you want? When even I couldn’t run you off?”

Neil meets that gaze with his own. “He knows my name.”

And just like, that it all spills from his mouth like a waterfall, albeit a slightly edited waterfall
because even in his most impulsive of moments his mother’s lessons of deceit still hold his tongue.

“My father wasn’t a good man.” His scars ache at the understatement. “And he got himself involved in a lot of shady business with even worse people, one of which were the Moriyama. They were one of his favorites. That’s how I know Riko and Kevin; we used to play when we were little.”

Andrew’s eyes harden at the revelation, but otherwise makes no moves to interrupt him.

“We grew up with each other, hanging out whenever our parents would do business, even played music together in our own little band. Said we would be the next Beatles or something.” Neil almost wants to smile at the fond memory. “We didn’t know what was going on with our parents at the time.” Lie. Neil always knew, but he wanted to forget. “But when I was 10 I knew it wasn’t anything good. Whatever it was eventually got my father killed when it didn’t go his way.”

If only.

“When that happened, I knew it was only a matter of time that whatever took him out was going to come for me, so I took whatever I could carry and enough cash to disappear for a long, long time and ran.” Neil laughs bitterly, “Well at least that’s what I thought would happen. Turns out that stealing nearly 5 million from someone makes it a little personal. They’ve been hunting me ever since.”

He watches Andrew for a reaction, a twitch in his jaw, anything, but as usual, only finds the intense blank look he always gets. Somehow it eases the tension in his own chest as if unearthing his entire life (even edited) mean little to the man. As if it changed nothing.

“How long?” is Andrew’s only questions.

Forever. A decade. Two years. He doesn’t know anymore.

“Since I was 10. I’m 22 now.”

At that Andrew’s eyes flicker with suspicion. “12 years on the run all by yourself?”

“No.” it’s quiet and broken but still squeezes past the tightening in his chest. A flash of blonde hair, raised fists, cigarette-stained teeth and clothes, and a burning car on a forgotten beach. “My mother took me.”

He doesn’t offer any more than that and for once Andrew doesn’t pry for more. The two boys stand under the weight of Neil’s confession, one struggling to pull himself from the depths of the memories threatening to choke him and the other an impossible blank puzzle giving nothing away. Their silence is cut by the snick of a lighter and the tell-tale sign of a pack of smokes being pulled free. For a moment Neil is torn between blind panic at the smell of smoke and the need to ground himself in something familiar. Some of his struggles must show on his face because just as Andrew bends to light his smoke, he flights the lighter closed. Neil is both grateful and disappointed.

“I can’t stay,” Neil eventually repeats. “Riko knows my name and will tell them where I am.” He looks Andrew square in the eye. “And when they do find me, no matter how fast or how far I run, they will catch me and I will die. Slowly and without mercy.”

Andrew says nothing. And then, “Ask me what my deal with Kevin is.”

“I don’t-”

“Ask me.”
He pauses then asks, “What deal did you make with Kevin?”

Andrew steps forward until he is nearly chest to chest with Neil. “Protection.”

*Protection?* But what exactly would Kevin Day, guitar prodigy extraordinaire ever need protection from? Riko? But the boy was cruel in words and power, but in his memories never so towards Kevin, always just Neil and anyone else unfortunate to cross paths with the duo. Had that changed with Neil gone? Had Riko turned on his brother after all?

“What do you know about Kevin’s broken hand?”

Something like dread sits low in Neil’s belly. Never Kevin, right? “It was a skiing accident. He broke it going down a slope too fast and hit a hidden rock and landed on his hand wrong.”

“Nope.”

Oh god.

“Riko. He couldn’t — he *wouldn’t*—”

“He did,” Andrew’s words are a sneer. “It doesn’t matter that Kevin was his *brother* or some other bullshit. He got jealous of Kevin’s talents and decided that he would be better off a cripple instead.”

Neil freezes. It all makes sense, the terror on Kevin’s face when Riko first graced the stage, the tremor of his hand as he gripped Neil. The willingness to flee at whatever cost. He had just thought it fear at seeing his former partner so well above him now, at knowing that Riko would lord that power and prestige over Kevin like a bat until the man was mentally broken down. But this…

“They were brothers, family,” because that is all Neil knew of the two little boys in his memories. Them against the world no matter what, even if it meant against Neil. And then Riko just *broke* Kevin’s hand. Shattered it until he could never pick up a guitar again. Neil was going to be sick.

A cruel smile grace Andrew’s face. “And since when has that mean a goddamn thing?” His scars murmur in agreement. Neil says nothing. “So when Riko crushed his world, Kevin came crying to the only person he had left, a secret father his mother only told him about in a letter after she had died—”

Wait what? *That* was definitely new information.

“—And subsequently in my lap. He wanted to crawl out of the hole his brother had buried him in, but he couldn’t do it without help — someone to watch his back lest he tries to crawl back to them. So I gave him my word that his back was mine and I would keep Riko and whoever else was dumb enough to try something away while he formed his little band.”

Andrew reaches out and curls his fingers around Neil’s neck, pulling him to eye level. Hazel crashes with muddy disguised blue and it’s like everything burned away under his intensity. “And now I’m going to offer you the same deal. You stay and give your back to me.”

Stay. Stay. *Stay.* the word echoes like a promise and taunt.

“If I can’t.”

The fingers tighten, “You will.”
“No. You can’t protect me from this. Not them.” Not his father.

“Nothing is invincible Neil Josten. Even monsters bleed.”

Neil shakes his head, “I won’t let you die for me.”

Anger flashes in those too bright eyes. “Shut up.” The words are little more than a growl. “You let me worry about that. Give your back to me.”

“No.”

“I thought you were sick of being nothing.”

“I am.” He was so so tired of it.

“Then stay. Give me one year. One year where I watch your back from whatever it is on your trail and you stay.”

He wants to say yes — god how he wants it — but nothing ever came free, especially from Andrew. “And what would you get in return? Why protect me?”

“Because you keep Kevin occupied. He says you’re needed to take this fucking band of his further and the more he focuses on that the less he spends spiraling back into that pit Riko wants him in. You stay and keep him busy and I’ll protect you in exchange.”

It’s a flimsy reason — too easy of a prize for something so demanding as his life. But oh how he wants to agree. How he wants to cling to this life and Neil Josten for just a bit longer. But that would mean putting Andrew in the crossfire between him and his father for just a few more months of this life. One person already died for him to keep running, he wasn’t sure he was worth another.

“On one condition. When it becomes between your life and mine, this deal is over and I leave.”

Andrew’s jaw tightens. “No.”

“Then no deal.” Neil reaches for his guitar and gently tugs at it. “You don’t get to die for me, Andrew. I’m not worth it and you’re worth more than that.”

Fury. Pure undisguised fury burns in those eyes as the fingers dig so hard in his skin he’s sure they will leave a bruise. Finally, he lets go of Neil and shoves him back, the guitar slipping free at last. Neil almost finds himself missing the heat of those fingers anchoring him.

“Fine. We have a deal.” Andrew grits out. “One year. For one year you’re mine.”

“One year,” Neil agrees. It’s like a death sentence and salvation. “Or until it’s too dangerous to stay.”

Anger flick in those eyes again before their flame is snuffed under that blanket of nothing. Andrew takes one step back and then another. Neil finds himself unbalance off his feet now that his space is his own again, almost as if he was leaning into that support Andrew had subconsciously offered with his touch. He shakes his head. He couldn’t allow himself that support, not when it would mean Andrew’s damnation and death.

This time he’s really thrown off balance as his duffle bag hits him square in the chest and falls at his feet.
“There is a shower next to Wymack’s office. Go take one, you reek of sweat and desperation.”

Neil resists the urge to flip him off, especially when he becomes all too aware of the gritty feeling of dirt coating his skin and the ripe smell lightly tickling his nose. A shower sounded lovely actually.

He picks up the duffle bag and sets the guitar next to the armchair he had occupied. As he turns to leave, a thought strikes him and he pauses in the doorway of the hall. Andrew has long since dismissed him, reaching for the discarded lighter and cigarette.

“Andrew?”

“What now?” the words are muffled around the stick in his mouth as he tries to catch the light.

“You said you made a deal with Kevin. You gave him protection, but what did he give you in exchange?”

Andrew pauses in his ministrations to stare up at Neil once again. “A promise.”

The words are heavy like they mean so much more than what they appear. So Neil asks, “A promise of what?”

A careful blankness. “Something more.”

Neil nods at the answer, not understanding but knows that was all he was likely going to get without offering something else of himself up for exchange. He gave away enough for one day he thinks, so he leaves. It’s not until the hot spray of the shower is raining down on his face and chest that the full weight of his promise and deal hits him. He could stay. Maybe not indefinitely or even for very long, but he could stay. Until Riko made good with his threat, he couldn’t touch Neil. And in exchange, he only had to keep Kevin occupied and happy with him and EXY to distract from Riko’s threats. But Kevin knew who he was now and may not want anything to do with him. His chances were already slipping away.

Shutting off the water, he moves to grab a towel and clothes. He needed to find Kevin.

When Neil reemerges from the shower the lounge is empty save his guitar leaning against the chair where he left it. He slings it over his shoulder and looks around the room. Any trace of Andrew is gone besides the faint smell of smoke that clings stubbornly to the air. For a moment Neil thinks that he is well and truly alone as he reaches for his guitar when a soft melody of guitar chords trickles in from his and Kevin’s usual practice booth.
He looks at the clock and notes that only two people could still be playing at this late (or perhaps early) hour of the night, and he was standing right here. He moves to the booth’s door, hand hovering at the handle. The conversation that awaits him beyond the door is one that he had hoped to never have — to keep this lie between them until long after he was gone. But now the truth awaits both in its ugly and scarred glory whether they want to face it or not. And as much as Neil would rather avoid it for just a night longer, Andrew’s deal hinges on him not running for once in his life. Might as well start now.

Neil pushes open the door and is greeted by a haggard and distracted Kevin. In all their nightly practices, Neil has never seen him this unfocused, not even bothering to practice with his left hand but listlessly playing with his right as the notes loop endlessly. He doesn’t look at Neil when he walks in, eyes downcast and dark circles ringing them that one might attribute to the late hour or even the copious amount of alcohol he had consumed only a few hours prior, but Neil knew that look far too well; he often saw it mirrored on his own face when the world and its cruelty proved too much.

“Kevin,” he says thinking maybe it will be easier to get it done quickly. He knows he’s wrong when those dazed eyes find his own and fill with fear.

“Nathaniel.” The melody stops and his voice is a whisper as hands clutch the instrument to his chest like a ward to keep Neil back.

“It’s still Neil,” he answers softly because he had to be Neil to keep the pieces of his mind together.

“You’re supposed to be dead. They- They said you died when you were 10. There was a funeral and everything.”

“Nathaniel is dead.” Neil shrugs, “He died the moment his mother took him and ran. 12 years ago.”

“How?” His eyes search Neil for an answer to how he can be standing here alive and so unlike the boy they once knew. Neil sometimes wondered himself.

“I ran. I survived.”

Kevin shakes his head. “How could I be so blind? You sound just like him- you- whatever. And I just thought — I thought I was being given a second chance to use that voice, to do what we never could as children. And now...”

His eyes meet Neil’s. “You need to leave.”

The words are like a punch to the gut. “I can’t.”

“Bullshit.” Now Kevin is angry. “I know who you are. Riko knows who you are; it’s only a matter of time before your father recognizes you too, if he hasn’t already.” His face goes white. “Oh god, the show. There’s no way Kathy’s show didn’t go viral the moment it was aired. Your face is going to be everywhere. You need to leave.”

“I can’t.”

“You will,” he growls. “When you first went missing your father was livid. He tore apart everything looking for you. People died Nathaniel. Died. And when he catches wind that you were alive all this time, he’ll kill you.”
“I know.” With a bone-deep certainty. “But I still can’t leave.”

“Why? What is so important that you would risk everything to stay?”

It’s a question he’s found himself asking time and time again to himself the moment he signed that contract, the moment he stepped on that stage and opened his mouth to Riko, the moment he allowed Andrew to watch his back just so he could be here a little longer. “Because I’m tired of running from the only thing I’ve ever wanted.”

Kevin stares at him like he’s a ghost. “You’re insane. This is insane.”

Neil offers him a weak smile. “So is learning to play the guitar with your left hand again.”

For a moment both boys stare at each other trying to reconcile the child they once knew with the adult standing before them. Both uniquely different and yet still the same at the core of their being. Still, the same two little boys who had foolishly dreamed of stages, lights, and cheering crowds.

“Will you still teach me?” Neil’s voice is cracked and soft as he asks the question they both hear but cannot say: will you still teach me even if I’m going to die?

Kevin looks at him, eyes shining with the grief of every dream they both had as children and the future he had hoped for as adults. “Every night.”

Words clog his throat and threaten to choke him, so Neil chooses to nod and swing his guitar so it rests on his chest. He sets his duffle on the ground by the stool and starts plucking the melody Kevin had been playing earlier. Kevin joins him not too long after and they settle into a mournful tune as they kissed the future away. Neil thinks he hears the faint sound of a clock beginning to tick.
and I know, and I know we only get better

Chapter Notes

Better - SYML

If Neil thought that his impending doom would convince Kevin into taking it easy on him, he was sorely mistaken. Nearly a month since the Kathy Ferdinand show and Kevin has since tripled the number of practices they’ve had. Not only are his nights and mornings gone but vocal practices in the afternoon have doubled in length with Nicky and evenings before dinner are set aside for an extra band practice. Kevin pushes him further and further each time, giving him more songs to memorize both vocally and instrumentally on top of assigning him complex guitar pieces to learn for the heck of it.

It was maddening and frustrating and exhilarating. Neil could feel his fingers glide quicker over the notes, deftly hitting them with ease and speed he never known before. Lyrics felt more natural and smooth as the flowed from his tongue and into the microphone. At night, he often found himself humming their songs over and over again as his fingers tapped notes on his knee or phantom across an invisible guitar neck. Mentally though he was exhausted yet didn’t mind. Being exhausted meant he didn’t have to think about his father or the clever hanging over his neck. Didn’t have to worry about that invisible clock ticking away.

Didn’t have to think about Riko. It’s funny, for all the loud threats and declarations he made, the man was oddly quiet in the recent weeks. Neil could tell it bothered Kevin as from the nervous energy radiating from him or the number of times the man showed up with a flask attached to his hand. (perhaps he should say something to him. At this rate, Neil might outlive him.) Even Nicky seems to have picked up on the tensions, his jokes coming a bit too often in an attempt to dispel the mood and his smiles a little too strained to be completely genuine. The only one who appears completely unaffected is Andrew who remains as painstakingly calm as usual.

Speaking of the drummer, Neil has the distinct impression that he’s being avoided. Well maybe avoided is too strong of a word seeing as how he spends countless hours with the man both during the day at practice and at night as he observes Kevin and Neil in the studio (though never playing himself). But something was definitely off. For one, their game had come to an abrupt end despite having just made a deal that would tie them closer. If anything Neil expected the questions to increase in frequency (and intensity) not drop off entirely. He was left with radio silence. Hell, he hardly even looks in Neil’s direction.

Perhaps he should just focus on the millions of other things he has going on, like his practices and the fact that something was still off about the band. Because something had shifted the moment Neil and the other realized he was going to be a permanent figure in EXY for the time being. It’s hard for Neil to pinpoint exactly what changed, however. One moment they will be going through a song and the next it will all just fall apart. They had gotten out of sync — noticeably so if Wymack’s face was any indication when he popped in on one of their sessions.

The problem was that Neil didn’t know why they were out of sync. Kevin and he had practiced together so often that they were almost always on tempo and able to switch parts on a dime. His harmonies with Nicky during vocal training and practice were okay and barely stumbled over
each other these days. At first, he thinks it could possibly be Andrew, the only member of the band Neil hasn’t worked with individually but he quickly throws that idea out on the account that Andrew’s playing is the only consistent one time after time. No, the problem must lie with the remaining three.

It doesn’t help that with Neil in the mix, Kevin is quickly losing patience with Nicky and any mistake that may occur with either of the vocalists or that Neil and Kevin are just as likely to be at each other’s throats as they are to be on the same page musically. Again Andrew seems to be the only one unaffected if not for the fact the man ranges from perfect beat to wildly erratic depending on his mood and how loud Kevin is during practice. Neil thinks that’s more because Andrew likes pissing off Kevin more than he cares about any sort of band practice. More than once their practices have been cut short by screaming matches and Wymack stomping in to kick them from the studio for the day. Weeks pass and it’s not getting any better when it should, especially when they have a concert coming up next month.

His mind wanders to Palmetto and their near seamless dynamic Dan rules over with an iron fist. Theoretically, they should be as dysfunctional if not more so; their group is as diverse as EXY’s with just as volatile personalities like with Allison and Matt being billionaire heirs, Dan a former stripper, and Renee and Seth having as colorful backgrounds as Andrew. So why did they run like a well-oiled machine and EXY like they were missing a few cogs? It’s this question that leads Neil to taking up one of Matt’s many offers to get dinner with him and Dan.

“You’re asking me for advice on band dynamics?” Dan raises her eyebrows in surprise as she lifts her pint glass to her lips.

Neil shrugs, “I’m at a loss at what to do. We’re not working well together and we need to. Palmetto does just fine, so I’m guessing I’m missing something.”

“Aw rookie!” she reaches over to fluff his hair. “You’re adorable, but sometime you can’t force these things to work. Just give it time.”

“We don’t have time. The show is coming up and we can barely get through a song together let alone a whole damn set.”

Dan sets down her glass, “Look, Neil, I like you so I’m going to help you out.”

“Oh yes! It’s time for some Dan Tips™! Better get your pen out Neil,” Matt elbows him good-naturedly with a grin plastered on his face. Dan throws a fry at him for his antics.

“Hush you. Dan Tips™ are amazing. They’ve kept you animals in check for this long haven’t they?” She turns back to Neil. “It seems that what you’re missing is some good ol fashioned team bonding.”

“Team bonding.” Maybe he was better off asking Wymack or something.

“Don’t give me that tone, mister.” She points a warning finger at him. “It’s more important that you think, especially when working in a new member like y’all are doing. You are off balance because you’ve been trying to force a bond that just isn’t there instead of letting it develop naturally.”

“But aren’t we bonding every time we practice? Shouldn’t that be enough for us to find some medium?”

She hums, “Not always. I’m not sure how EXY works but I know that practice is always a high point of tension with us. Everyone has their own opinion of how something should be done and
it can be easy to step on toes. That’s why I like to take everyone out to do something outside of practice. Then there’s no pressure to be better or more; we can all simply be and mellow out.” She furrows her brows. “Does any of that make sense?”

“Sort of,” he turns her words over, “Basically we need to figure out how we work together outside of a band before we can do anything more?”

“Exactly!”

“Okay, but how? I’m not sure if you’ve noticed but Kevin lives and breathes EXY while Andrew is uninterested in everything other than what is required of him. Nicky might be receptive but he’d never go against Andrew.”

Matt shrugs, “You could always join us on one of our karaoke night? That way it’s like practice but with fewer rules and alcohol.”

“You’d let us crash your bonding night?” Neil flicks a brow up, “Isn’t that against your feud or whatever?”

“Please,” Dan snorts, “There is no feud, at least not on our part. It’s the monsters who put themselves in self-exile from the rest of us.”

Neil bristles. “Well maybe because you refer to them as monsters.”

Dan tips her glass in resignation, but it’s Matt who speaks up. “What she means is that we’ve tried to get them to come out before, but the answer was always no. But maybe that will change with you.”

“What makes you think I’m so special?”

“Because who can say no to that face?” Matt wraps an arm around his neck and ruffles Neil’s hair with his knuckles. “It’d practically be a crime!”

Somehow, Neil doesn’t think Andrew would really have a problem with it (in fact Neil’s almost sure he would revel in doing so). But he laughs along and playfully pushes Matt off all while he tries to think of how he was going to convince Andrew into agreeing to put in more effort — or more accurately, what he was going to have to trade for it.

He’s still puzzling over it long after dinner is done and he absent-mindedly wanders the streets after saying goodbye to Dan and Matt. Kevin was right (not that he’d ever admit these words to the man) they had the potential to be great — to be amazing. And Neil wanted that. He wanted it with a fierceness that he hasn’t had since all those years ago when his mother first sang a soft lullaby in his ear and he knows that he wanted to sing too. And it could be theirs — be his — if they would just get their shit together long enough to cultivate that potential.

Dan’s advice rings in his ears as his feet come to a stop. Somehow he needed to get them to that karaoke thing if only to give them a fighting chance before they sink under the pressure. He looks up at the destination his mind had unconsciously led him, the cousin’s front door. Well wasn’t that terribly convenient. Or maybe unlucky since even though he may have come to some sort of conclusion about the next step, he had no idea how to execute it. The lights were on and Andrew’s ridiculous expensive car parked in the driveway, leaving little doubt that the house was occupied by its owners. There will be no avoiding his reasons for being there, especially since he is appearing out of the blue and well into the evening on one of their few nights off. There will be no avoiding Andrew…
Neil shakes his head. He only has time for one problem at a time and right now EXY takes precedence. The show is ticking down and they have little time to waste on their hands, so Neil knocks. Nicky must have been nearby because the door opens almost as soon as Neil is done knocking. His eyes widen in surprise for a moment before that easy, ever-present grin settles on his face.

“Neil! Come in!” He waves him in with an enthusiastic hand and gently closes the door behind them. “What are you doing here? Not that I mind or anything, but it’s rare that you pay us a visit.”

He never visited. Never returned after that night they went to Eden’s.

Stuck on what to say, he decides on the first thing that pops in his mind. “I’m here to see Kevin.”

“Oh,” Nicky seems almost disappointed, that bright smile dimming for a second before returning. “Well, he’s in the kitchen making one of his health smoothies or whatever. If you love yourself, say no when he offers you some.”

Neil doesn’t really know what to say to that so he just nods and follows the man back into the living room so he can cut through to the kitchen. It seems he interrupted some sort of family movie night because both twins are sprawled out on opposite ends of the couch with bowls of popcorn strewn about and some unknown film paused on the tv. Andrew doesn’t even bother to look up while Aaron only gives him a bored glare before returning his attention back to the phone in his lap. Well, it seemed that Andrew was still ignoring him. Great.

Rather than linger, Neil continues on to the kitchen to find Kevin leaning against the counter as he inspects some mushy green concoction in the blender. He looks up startled to see Neil standing there and furrows his brows in confusion.

“It’s not time for practice just yet,” he frowns.

“No, it isn’t.” Neil agrees unsure of what to say now that he’s actually here.

“Then what do you want?”

Neil twitches at his tone but forces himself to bite his tongue and count to five (in three languages). He listens to the faint trickle of noise coming from the living room, soft explosions and yelling muffled by the walls but enough to drown out this conversation if he spoke low enough. He decided to do it in French just in case.

“We’re not good enough.”

Kevin scoffs, easily slipping into the language. “I’ve been telling you that for weeks. Why now?”

“Because we don’t have time to waste anymore and because I have an idea of how we might fix it.” He summarizes his thoughts for the last few weeks and what he thinks their problem is along with Dan’s solution. By the time he’s finished, Kevin is looking at him with exhausted disbelief.

“You want to take advice from some second-rate band on being better?”

“That second-rate band can play circles around us at the moment. I’ll take what I can get,” Neil huffs, “We don’t function like a band, Kevin. We’ve each got our own agenda and it’s killing all our chances at moving forward.”
“And you think that a night spent drinking and playing in some cracked up karaoke bar will fix that?”

“I think,” Neil bites out, “That it is worth trying. Your methods aren’t working so why not try hers?”

Kevin shakes his head. “It will never work.”

“And how would you know?”

“Because I’ve been doing this a lot longer than you, Nathaniel,” Kevin growls.

“And yet, what do you have to show for it?” Neil growls right back. He regrets it when he sees Kevin’s face shut him out and go steely. Nel sighs and tries a different approach. “Look, what harm is there in trying? At worst we spend the night drinking and nothing changes. At best, we fix this thing between all of us. What do we lose?”

“A night of practice for one,” Kevin points out.

“Then use the night to sing some of EXY’s songs. Win-win.”

He can see Kevin breaking as he turns Neil’s point over in his head. “Andrew will never agree to it.”

Ah, and there’s the crux of the matter. Even if he can sway Kevin it means nothing if he can’t convince the same of Andrew. “Leave that to me,” he says because he needs Kevin’s support anyways before he even tries to tackle Andrew. “Will you go?”

Kevin mulls it over, “If you can get Andrew to agree, then yes. But it’s impossible. I’ve been trying to get him to do more for this band for years now. He won’t do it; he doesn’t care.”

Neil thinks of Andrew’s playing, of his ability to slam the notes out with pointed perfection and clarity at such a rapid tempo that he doesn’t think anyone who played like that could not care just a little. “You let me deal with that.”

Kevin rolls his eyes but turns back to his smoothie and flips on the switch until it whirls to life and drowns out any chance of further conversation. Neil rolls his eyes and decides not to push his luck (or he might end up strangling a certain guitarist) and turns on his heels to move back into the living room for the other half of his problem. Only, when he enters the room, the right side of the sofa where Andrew had been seated before is empty. He looks at the screen to see the movie is still playing, meaning that wherever he went the others didn’t expect him to be back or at least not any time soon. Great, there went his chance to get this all done in a night.

Still, part of him felt almost relieved at being able to put it off; he wasn’t sure how he was going to face Andrew after weeks of nothing or even if he would be willing to listen to what Neil has to say.

“Howing out already?” Nicky asks from his spot on the armchair. “Why don’t you join us for the rest of the movie?”

Neil shakes his head, “It’s late and I should get back home.”

“Oh, well, then why don’t you ask Andrew to give you a ride? I’d hate for you to be out in this city in the middle of the night.”
“I’m fine,” he answers automatically. “I rather not wait around for Andrew to show up anyways.”

At that Nicky waves him off, “No need. He’s out on the porch smoking. Just head out and tell him I said you need a ride home and that if he won’t do it, I will.”

Rather than argue, Neil nods his head and ducks out of the living room and moves for the front door. Sure enough, when he opens it, Andrew is there balanced on the railing, one knee propped up with an arm thrown over it and the other dangling off the side. He’s got the usual cigarette loosely between his fingers in the hand dangling and his head it tipped back with his eyes closed and throat exposed as if basking in the yellow light of the lamp post a few yards in front of them. While the color dances on his skin and sets his blond hair ablaze, it also casts him in striking shadows.

It’s peaceful and Neil immediately feels like he’s intruding. He could leave, turn back inside and pretend he forgot something long enough for Andrew to come back inside. Instead, he stares.

“Staring,” Andrew drawls bringing that cigarette to his lips lazily and cracks open an eye. Neil drops his eyes but doesn’t make a move to leave. “What do you want, Neil?”

Neil opens his mouth to say nothing, an automatic response, and retort to the countless times Andrew had answered the same thing, but what comes out is, “Why did you stop the game?”

Because as much as the lack of questions should have come as a relief — that his secrets were safe from being forcibly ripped from his chest — it bugged him. Why stop? Andrew is silence for a long while before he tilts his head at Neil.

“I didn’t. It’s your turn.”

With the words comes an almost immediate relief of the tension Neil didn’t even know his body was holding until it was gone. Yet as immediately as the relief hit, it was washed away by sheer confusion. That didn’t make sense since Neil was almost positive he initiated the last round between them. He decides that he doesn’t care.

This time when Andrew blows a cloud of smoke in his direction, Neil gives in to the temptation and breathes it in, letting the smell cement him in the moment rather than let his mind spiral. Andrew raises an eyebrow but says nothing, instead, holding out the pack for Neil to take one. He does, but instead of taking a drag once it’s lit, he lets it dangle from his lips to inhale the scent.

“Don’t you know how to smoke a cigarette properly?” Andrew quips.

“I don’t really smoke,” Neil shrugs in lieu of an answer. Then he takes his turn. “Why won’t you let Palmetto interact with EXY?”

The only thing that betrays Andrew’s lack of interest is the subtle twitch of his fingers. “Never said they couldn’t.”

“Then it wouldn’t matter if we all tagged along for a night out, say to a karaoke bar?” Neil pushes on.

“Never said that either.”

“Stop avoid my question.”

Andrew stabs the cigarette out and flicks it off the railing. “I’m not. You asked why I’m not
letting Palmetto and EXY interact and I told you that I’m not doing anything. They choose on their own to stay away.”

“Yeah because they think that if they even try to ask they might get a knife for their efforts.”

He shrugs, “That may be, but that’s hardly my fault. You know what they say about assuming.”

“We both know that’s a bold face lie. Cut the horse shit, I’m not in the mood for these games. If you’re not giving me the truth then I’m going home.”

He bristles at that, “The truth doesn’t change simply because it doesn’t suit your favor, Neil. I thought you knew that.”

“Yes, but we both know that you’re letting the whole truth remain silent. So what’s the real reason, Andrew?”

“Nope, my turn.” Andrew cuts him off. “Why do you care? Our deal is that you keep Kevin occupied, not try to get us all to sing Kumbaya.”

“Why do you pretend like you don’t care?”

“I don’t,” Andrew says simply and it angers Neil all the more.

“Bullshit.”

He shrugs, “I don’t care if you believe me, my answer is the same. Answer the question, Neil. Why do you care?”

“Because we could be great.”

“You sound like Kevin.”

“He’s not wrong.” Andrew just stares at him. “He’s not completely wrong.”

Neil drops his cigarette and crushes it beneath his foot. “Look, you told me to hold Kevin’s attention and doing that means making sure EXY succeeds. You know it and I know it, but we can’t do that if we don’t function. Something needs to give and I think hanging out with Dan and her band will give us some sort of an idea on how to do that. If not then we’ll just be proving Riko right.”

“And why should I care what that prick thinks? My life isn’t so pathetic that it starts and stops with his opinion.”

“Because Kevin does,” Neil smirks as Andrew pauses, knowing he has the man caught. “And you need Kevin to stay to fulfill his end of that bargain.”

Andrew glares at him for a long time, caught and not liking how Neil knew it — knew it and so cleverly did it.

“If not that then because you are as invested in this band as the rest of us.”

Something flashes in his eyes. Almost like amusement. “Am I?”

“You haven’t quit yet.”

He is silent for a moment. “Fine, but I want something in exchange.”
“What?” Neil asks already having expected this.

“Come to Eden’s with us Friday.”

Neil freezes, the memories of his last visit already too fresh. “Why?”

“Because I asked.” When Neil still hesitated to answer he adds, “There will be no more drugs this time, at least none you don’t say yes to. I give you my word.”

At first, Neil wants to spit out how much his word is really worth in the face of experience, but he holds his tongue because Andrew had never really broken his word. He promised to leave Neil alone after their trip, not before it. He said he’d get the truth, Neil was just naive to think it would be through savory means. In truth, everything Neil has seen up until now has shown that Andrew is a man of his word, especially when it comes to his deals.

So he says, “Yes, but the answer is no to drugs and alcohol now. If you even try to slip me something, our deal is over and I’m leaving.”

“Deal.”

Neil sighs and it feels like a weight has been lifted off his chest. They finally stood a chance now; he just hoped that he wouldn’t waste it. He joins Andrew at the railing and leans by the man’s feet.

“I want to take another turn,” he says after a moment. Andrew inclines his head in a go ahead.

“What did Kevin promise you?”

Andrew goes still, so still, Neil’s not sure he’s still breathing until he turns to find Andrew’s eyes boring into his own. And for a moment Neil stops breathing too.

“He promised me a life worth living, one where I don’t plan on dying at 25.”

And then Neil really stop breathing. Because he could never imagine not fighting to live, to see life so meaningless and empty that death was a better option. His mother beat the importance of every future breath into him that to give it up was… impossible.

Why, he wants to ask. He says, “Do you think he will be able to keep it?”

For some reason, Andrew’s look changes at that, his eyes flashing. “That has remained to be seen.”

Neil nods and closes his eyes, tipping his head back into the night air. Silence falls over them once again, but unlike all the previous time this one feels less tense and more like a comfortable pause he could breathe in.

“What are you still doing here,” Andrew asks feigning annoyance despite the blank tone of voice.

“Waiting for you to take your turn,” Neil opens an eye. “That’s how this works isn’t it?”

“And if I want to save it?”

Neil shrugs, “Save it then.” His lifts his head up and shoves his hands in his pockets waiting for Andrew to decide.
“Who taught you to pick locks?” he finally asks.

Such a simple question shouldn’t hurt as much as it does. “My mother.”

“Where is she now?”

Neil almost chokes on the memories. “Long gone.”

Andrew nods and leaves without another word. The silence that lingers behind is both comforting and haunting. That night he walks home with his mind filled of smoke and ash and bone.
It’s the ends of the week and Neil finds himself once again staring up at the cousin’s house. This time, however, he opted to leave his guitar back at his apartment rather than bring it along (just in case), though the lack of its weight made him twitchy.

Matt and Dan weren’t too pleased to hear of his plans to return to Eden’s with Andrew and his crew, but after realizing that they weren’t going to convince him out of it, they forced him to promise to call if anything was remotely wrong. He couldn’t find it in his heart to admit that he still didn’t have a phone. Still, he didn’t think he would need them; Andrew gave his word and for once Neil was inclined to believe him. With a last glance over his shoulder (and a fleeting thought of running) he knocks.

This time it’s Aaron who answers the door and the only reason Neil knows it’s him at first glance is because his face twists into a sneer before he walks away leaving the door open. Yeah, Aaron still wasn’t his favorite twin; he’s pretty sure Aaron reciprocates the sentiment. He walks in and shuts the door behind him just as Nicky flutters in accompanied by a bundle of fabric and a sea of glitter falling off his curls.

“Neil! You’re late,” he tuts, “We’ve been waiting forever for you to show up.” He shoves the bundle into Neil’s arms. “These are for you, go change.”

Neil looks down at the clothes and the black boots resting on top. “You really don’t need to keep buying me clothes.”

“Hush, now. I don’t trust you to dress yourself. Besides, Andrew bought them not me and between you and me, Andrew is never generous. Let it last while you can.”

Somehow the bundle seems heavier.

“Oh! Before you go, mind giving me your number If you’re going to be joining us on these excursions from now on it’ll be easier if I can call you with times. That and we’re in the same band. We’re practically family.”

“I don’t have a phone,” Neil shrugs. “And I don’t this will be a common occurrence.”

Nicky gasps so loud one would think Neil just admitted that he killed their dog. “You don’t have a phone?! What do you mean you don’t have a phone. It’s a phone! In the 21st century! How do you survive??” he lowers his voice in a whisper, “How do you snapchat?”

Neil tilts his head, “What the hell is a snapchat?”

The noise Nicky makes is inhuman. “WHAT IS SNAPCHAT?! Ay Dios Mio!”

Before Nicky can launch into whatever rant he was working himself up to, Andrew comes
down the stairs that exact moment. “You’re late.”

Neil rolls his eyes, “You know people keep telling me that but can you really be late if there was no set meeting time?”

Andrew just stares at him like he would very much like to break their deal just so he could bury his knives in his face. “Get changed.”

Neil smirks and gives Andrew his signature salute. Of course, Neil should have known that Andrew would only let so much slide.

“Oh and Neil,” he calls out as Neil reaches the top of the steps. “Ditch the contacts.”

Neil stops but Andrew has already turned away and disappears through the front door. He sighs; it was going to be that kind of night.

Since Neil showed up so late there wasn’t any time to stop at Sweeties for dinner (which was fine by Neil who ate with Palmetto earlier that night, hence why he was “late”) but Nicky strolled in for a milkshake for Andrew and their usual rounds of cracker dust. True to his word, when Neil turned down the dust Nicky merely shrugged and tucked away the extra packets in his pocket. When they showed up to the club, it was the usual fanfare of pounding music and pulsating lights with people packed in like sardines dressed in leather and chains. Again, they skip the line for the door with a little more than a nod to the bouncers and a handshake with the doorman before they were inside once more. The already blasting music doubles in volume to the point were Neil seriously begins to worry about his hearing by the time they will leave. Nicky yells something about finding a table while Andrew splits off and beelines for the bar. Neil hesitates, watching as Nicky disappears in the crowd followed by Aaron and Kevin and Andrew shoves people out of his way. He decides he’s better off sticking with Andrew rather than chancing Nicky starting up his lecture about a phone again like he had in the car. Yet, as soon as he takes a step in Andrew’s direction a man cuts into his path.

“Hey there, I don’t I’ve seen you here before. With eyes like those, I’d definitely remember.”

Neil flinches at the mention his natural eyes while he tries to fight down the sense of panic that yells at him for agreeing to this. “No, we’ve never met. I don’t come here often”

“Then it must be my lucky night.” The man grins as he leans in closer. Neil can smell the alcohol lingering in his breath. “Can I buy you a drink?”

“I don’t drink.” Neil takes a step back only to run into someone else.

“Oh come on don’t be like that. A pretty guy like you must be getting drinks all night. At least let me be the first.”

“I said I don’t drink. Fuck off.”

Apparently, the guy must not be used to rejection because his smile drops for a look of anger. “Don’t be so stuck up. I’m just offering you a free drink.”

Neil scoffs, “And I’m supposed to be impressed? I said no, twice and still you act like you’re
owed something. Tell me does the entitled asshole schtick actually work or do you bully everyone into getting a drink with you? Because I gotta say both are a little creepy.”

“Why you little shit!” He reaches forward and grab’s Neil’s arm in a bruising grip to drag him closer. “You should be thankful that I’m even giving you the time of day you half-pint twink.”

“Oh great, we’ve devolved into name-calling and physical assault. Wow, you’re such a winner.”

Rage contorts his face and he reels back a fist. Neil sighs and closes his eyes as he waits for the inevitable. (He really should learn to shut his mouth at least when in a fight he can’t win.) When it doesn’t come he opens his eyes to catch the glimmer of a knife pressed to the man’s throat.

“I suggest that you take your hands off what’s mine,” Andrew states calmly with a firm press of the knife. “Now.”

The man releases Neil and carefully takes a step back; the knife follows.

“Good now, you’re going to turn around and scurry off to whatever sewer you crawled out of because if I see you again, I’m going to bury this knife in your flesh without the warning this time. Especially if I see you ever look in his direction again.”

The man sneers, “What is he your boyfriend or something?”

“Ah, ah. That’s enough from you. Get lost. Now.”

With another sneer, the man turns and disappears into the thickets of the crowd. Andrew doesn’t put away the knife until all traces of him disappear. The tension in his body stays when he turns back to Neil.

“Not even 10 minutes here and someone already tries to punch your teeth in.” Andrew raises an eyebrow. “A record even for you.”

Neil shrugs, “What can I say, I’m talented. Next time should I go for 5?”

“What you are is a pain in my ass. Just because we have a deal doesn’t give you free license to run your mouth.”

“Please,” Neil snorts, “The attitude problem was here before you offered that deal.”

Instead of snarking back like Neil expected him to, Andrew freezes for a second before he flicks the knife back into its sheath under the armbands. His face is carefully blank when it meets Neil’s gaze again., “I don’t like that word. Don’t use it.”

Neil pauses, “What, please?”

“Yes.”

Something is so serious and foreboding in that one word that Neil only nods in response. “I won’t.”

Andrew doesn’t acknowledge him further as he turns on his heels and heads for the bar. Although Neil notices that he goes slow enough to make sure he can follow easily. And if when they get to the bar to order Andrew cages him with arms on either side of his back then Neil chalks it up to Andrew holding up his end of the deal. Still, Neil feels something tighten at the heat that ripples
from the unwavering solidness of Andrew’s body provides like a shield against the rest of the pressing bodies at the counter. He felt like he could let himself lean against him and he wouldn’t buckle under the weight of his lies and issues. But that’s unfair of him so he won’t and doesn’t. Instead, he grabs the drink tray when it comes and holds it up while Andrew makes a clear path for them to the rest of their party.

It doesn’t take long for their companions to empty the tray of its drinks and swallow their small packets of yellow dust before they slink off to the dance floor, even Kevin going willingly when Nicky pulls him. With just Andrew and Neil left to watch the table, Neil attempts another round of their truth game.

“Can we play a round?”

Andrew lowers the show he just rose to his lips. “Again so soon? And here I thought you wanted to horde your truths.”

“Yes or no Andrew?”

Andrew sets the glass down fully. “Fine, but it is my turn first.” Neil waves him on. “How many cities have you been to?”

“I don’t know,” Neil shrugs.

Andrew’s eyes harden, “You know that’s not how this works.”

“It’s the truth,” he shrugs again, “If we’re talking lived in for longer than a month the number is probably in the high teens. If you count just one day stop, I’ve lost count a long time ago. A lot. Hundreds.”

Andrew hums, “I see that runaway was an apt term then. That’s quite a lot of cities little rabbit.”

“Well, 12 years does give you time to move around. Especially when no one place is safe for too long.” Andrew down the shot and nods his acceptance of the answer. “How about you? How many cities have you lived in?”

“About 10, mostly in California, but a couple in Germany when we first lived with Nicky and his fiance.”

Neil nods and takes a sip from his own drink (a sealed can of coke that he double checked for any hole or residue on the can). Andrew decides to take another turn instead of letting the game end. “Who taught you to play the guitar?”

“No one. I learned myself through some books I picked up in thrift stores and just messing around. Took me quite a while before I was good enough to play on stage.”

“Not surprising. Your temp was always sloppy at best and you tended to stop playing when you really focus on singing.”

He shrugs because it’s true. Kevin told him as much by this point that there is no point in denying it. “In my defense, it was always Kevin’s instrument, not mine.”

“Then why pick it up?”

“Because it made me different but allowed me to start singing again. That’s what I really
“Pathetic.”

“It’s the only thing I had left worth holding on to. Without it, I don’t know where I’d be.”

At that Andrew doesn’t say anything so Neil takes it as a sign that it’s his turn. “You have an eidetic memory don’t you?”

Neil had noticed that Andrew never missed a single note at practice, even when he only look over of the sheet music once before tossing it away on the floor. Pair that with his uncanny ability to throw Neil’s own words verbatim against him at any given moment made him suspect of something along the lines of eidetic memory.

“I’m surprised you noticed.”

Neil quirks an eyebrow, “It’s not like you hide it.”

“Ah, but you’d be surprised how often people look over things just because they don’t want to see them.”

“They’re idiots. I’m not.”

“You’re an absolute moron,” Andrew flicks his fingers at him, “But you’re also a paranoid one so that makes you observant at least.”

Neil smirks, “I’m solving you just as much as you are me, don’t forget that.”

Andrew’s eyes find his, the hazel muddier in the flashing neon light, but the intensity still all the sharper and commanding. “Many have tried. No one’s done it so far.”

“I like to think that I’m special.”

“You’re nothing.”

“All the same, I’ll solve you anyways.”

Amusement tugs on Andrew’s lips and Neil feels like he just ran a marathon at the small twitch. Before they can continue their game any further, Nicky comes crashing back at the table with Aaron in tow demanding another round of drink before last call comes around. Eventually, Nicky and Aaron disappear back on the dancefloor but Kevin remains behind, effectively putting an end to their game for the rest of the evening until it’s time to go home.

Somehow Neil once again ends up on their couch after a very drunk Nicky admonishes him for even thinking of walking home. As he stares up at the ceiling, letting the quiet settle over him, his mind is inexplicably drawn back to their conversation at the club and the way Andrew felt at his back. When his mind finally slips into the unconsciousness, he can’t help but think that Andrew isn’t nearly the psychopath everyone makes him out to be.

*People overlook things just because they don’t want to see them*

If Andrew wasn’t the psychopath he pretended to be, then who is he really? Neil falls asleep before he can answer that question.
Neil shoots awake when something heavy lands on his abdomen with enough force to empty the air from his lungs and shock his system in fight or flight. He’s halfway crouched and posed to run when his brain catches up and notices the book at his feet and Andrew standing over him behind the couch. Oddly enough it’s enough to calm him down instantly.

“Get up and get dressed. We’re leaving in 10 minutes.”

The world right itself as Neil’s body sags to the floor in the absence of adrenaline. “What?”

“Get up.” Andrew orders once more before disappearing into the kitchen where Neil hears the telltale signs of the coffee pot gurgling.

Dragging a hand down his face, Neil peels himself off the floor and reaches for his duffle bag. After the quickest shower of his life, Neil is dressed and ready to go in a fresh pair of contacts and his own clothes. He pokes his head in the kitchen to see a lack of Andrew standing there and a lack of coffee in the pot. With a sigh, he resigns himself to a tired morning as Andrew drags him wherever it is he’s taking them. Slinging his duffle over his shoulder, he heads for the front door, making sure the bottom lock is closed behind him as it shuts. In the driveway, Andrew leans against the driver side door with his lighter in his hand but no cigarette accompanying it. As Neil descends from the porch, his gaze flicks to Neil in a bored assessment of his bland disguise; Neil notes that he lingers quite a bit on his eyes.

Neil is almost about to open his mouth — no doubt to make some smart remark about Andrew’s staring — when Nicky leans over from his seat in the back to lay on the horn and roll down the window.

“Get in losers, we’re going shopping!” Neil’s confusions must show because Nicky sags in defeat. “Nothing? That was prime use of Mean Girls, Neil. I’ll never get a more perfect opportunity.”

“Mean girls? Is this another snap chat thing?” Neil really didn’t get it.

“OH MY GOD NEIL WHO LEFT YOU UNDER A ROCK ALL YOUR LIFE?!”

“Enough,” Andrew opens the door and pushes Nicky’s head back. “We’re leaving.”

“And where are we going?” he asks as he climbs into the back seat next to a sullen Aaron and ecstatic Nicky.

“To the mall!” Nicky informs him with a too wide grin and something wicked gleaming in those eyes of his. Neil has the very distinct feeling that this was going to go really poorly for him.

Of course, he couldn’t know how poorly until they arrived at the mall nearly 20 minutes later only for Nicky to immediately accost him in order to go store to store trying on nearly everything in sight. Apparently, Wymack had tasked him and Kevin with “updating” his wardrobe into the 21st century where he doesn’t look like a homeless child (Wymack’s words apparently right before he handed Kevin the company card to fund the whole excursion). With Aaron and Andrew leaving almost as soon as they arrive, Neil remains at the mercy of his two bandmates. The only reason he manages to slip away is because Nicky and Kevin start arguing over what his “aesthetic” should be, whatever the hell that meant.

He’s wandering the food court in search of either twin — though preferably Andrew — in hopes of hiding out a bit longer. It seems that luck is not on his side at all today because he finds Aaron first, sitting alone at a table with food and his nose buried in his cell phone. He tries asking if
he’s seen Andrew at all, but is just ignored in favor of typing away on his phone or slurping loudly at his finished drink. When it appears that Neil’s not going to leave (honestly a little intimidated at being by himself in such a crowded and concentrated place), Aaron gets up and walks away without a glance or word.

And really they call Andrew the unsociable one.

Not wanting to stand in place, Neil begins his search anew. This time when he comes across one of the twins, it’s the right one, though Neil is almost mistaken since Andrew comes out of the store preoccupied with a phone in his hands. The only reason he knows it’s the right twin is the sight of those black armbands peeking beneath the sleeve of his shirt.

“There you are,” Neil breaths as he jogs to catch up with the drummer. “I’ve been looking for you. Kevin and Nicky are out of control.”

Andrew doesn’t bother to look up as he replies. “Well maybe if you knew how to dress, you could have spared us all the headache.”

Neil looks down at his clothes, just a grey hoodie and an old pair of jeans and some trainer that he admits are on their last leg. “What’s wrong with my clothes? They’re fine.”

At that Andrew looks up but only long enough to give him a look that they tell him exactly what he thinks of that statement before his attention return to the phone. Neil really doesn’t understand the obsession with the things. Sure they’re handy in an emergency and he’s had several over the last decade or so of his life but they’ve always just been a burden tying him to something. First his mother and then his father every time he managed to track him through it. After his father’s men tracked him the second time, he ditched the things for good. He can’t say he really misses them.

“Think fast.” The words come seconds before Andrew lobs the device in his direction. It’s only thanks to his quick reflexes that it doesn’t end up shattered on the floor.

“Is there a reason you’re tossing around your phone or do you just trying to hit me with random objects?” Neil holds the phone out but Andrew ignores it.

“Easy enough, it’s not my phone it’s yours.”

“I don’t own a phone.”

“You do now.”

Suddenly the device grows heavy in his hand despite its thin design. “No.”

Andrew looks at the phone and then at Neil. He shrugs, “You don’t get to say no.”

“I just did.” He shoves the phone at Andrew. “Take it back, I don’t want it.”


It takes Neil a minute to unstick his throat, “Are you taking a turn?”

“Do I need one? Yes.”

“Why does Aaron act like you’re a stranger at the best of times and ignore your existence at the worst?” He asks instead because the truth of this was something Neil couldn’t give for nothing.

He chooses Aaron because he’s noticed the strange dynamic between the twins for a while
now, taking note of the careful looks of distaste and dismissal every time they’re together or the other is brought up in conversation. It’s perplexing for two people who share the same face to despise it all the same on the other.

“Because we are strangers,” Andrew answers easily enough like it doesn’t throw Neil for another loop.

“How is that possible? You’re twins.”

“Not your turn. Why?”

Neil sighs, seeing no way out now. “Having a phone means I’m traceable — it means that they can find me and finding me means I’m dead. So,” he presses the phone closer into Andrew’s space, “take it back. It’s not worth dying over.”

Andrew eyes the phone before he reaches for it and curls Neil’s fingers around the device. “Whatever issues you may have about this, I suggest you get over them quickly because as far as I’m concerned this is a part of our deal. You want protection? Well, I need a way to ensure it without chaining you to my ankle. I have one child to look after 24/7, I don’t need another.”

He pushes the cellphone back into Neil’s chest. “So you will keep this one you at all times, charged and ready for when you need it — and you will need it with that mouth of yours — and then you will call me. Understand?”

Neil opens his mouth to protest but Andrew presses harder against him. “This is a yes only question.”

“Fine,” Neil huffs. “I’ll keep the damn phone on me.”

“Charged.”

Damn.

“Yes, charged.” Maybe he could dump the thing out and feign losing it. The look Andrew gives him says he knows exactly what Neil is thinking and promises death if he tries.

He sighs and looks down at the device. It’s sleeker and newer than any model he’s ever owned (though he normally sticks with flip phones when he did). “I have no idea how to use this.”

Andrew shrugs. “Ask Nicky for all I care.”

As if speaking his name summoned him, Nicky and Kevin arrive, both of their arms loaded with bag after bag of clothes and what Neil spies as several boxes of shoes. His face pales at the amount (and the sure cost of it all).

“That can’t be for me.”

“Yup!” Nicky pops the ‘p.’ “We had to build an entire wardrobe from scratch. This is only what we could only carry not to mention what’s going to be delivered in a couple of days.”

“Delivered?!” There was no way all of that was going to fit in his duffle bag.

“Is that the new iphone?” Nicky’s eyes zone in on the device still in Neil’s hand.

“Wha- uh, yes?”
“Oh my god Andrew did good! Now we can get his poor baby caught up with the rest of society. First, we gotta set up a twitter oo no, an Instagram! No snapchat! Snapchat should be the first thing on every phone.”

Nicky starts listing item after item until Neil’s head is spinning and already starts hurting.

It takes Neil about a week or two before he finds a comfortable rhythm with his new phone. That is to say, he ignores most if not all the various social media accounts Nicky manages to sign him up for and he no longers jumps when it pings from the constant stream of text coming from the foxes. He’s not quite sure how the rest of them got his number — nor how he somehow had all their numbers — but once it’s out, Neil finds himself in constant contact with both Matt and Nicky and the occasionally Dan and Allison and the rare message from Renee.

Mostly he doesn’t respond and if so never more than a couple words here or there, the idea of being always contactable weird and foreign as the idea of having people who wanted to always contact him. Because as he learns the foxes are always in contact be it several group chats (of which Neil somehow ends up in almost all of them) or tagging each other on social media. It seems that being a Fox meant joining a close-knit group that was always in your business and in turn you in theirs. As much as he isn’t used to the idea, he can’t help but feel anchored in a way like he was finally a part of something bigger than his own survival. It should make him anxious, just more things to eventually be ripped from him when his father came or for Riko to use against him, but he couldn’t imagine cutting himself off from it either.

It is also why he finds himself drawn to the one app Nicky installed that lets him catch glimpses of their lives when Neil isn’t around. At first, he was annoyed by this “Instagram” as it usually meant Nicky shoving a camera in his face and telling him that it was for his fans and that he needed to “pose for the public.” Neil absolutely does not which ends in Nicky pouting for hours until Neil gives in just to get some peace. Though once he got over his initial annoyance and let his curiosity drive him into clicking open the app, he realized that he quite liked scrolling through the various pictures the foxes posted, all as varied and unique as the individuals who posted them.

Dan’s page is often filled with pictures of the studio and with Wymack as they work on some project or another. Others feature her and Matt on their dates or of Palmetto at various stages and venues. It is like a timeline of her work and passions while also showcasing those she holds dear to her heart. Somehow Neil managed to gain a picture or two with him usually squished between her and Matt, a shy smile in comparison to their giant ones.

Allison’s is something Neil would think belongs more in a magazine rather than her own personal account, all clean pictures and model-like poses. He thinks he heard her refer to it as an aesthetic insta, but the words meant little to his ears and even less to his brain. The pictures were always beautiful though and uploaded in a high resolution according to Nicky.

Speaking of, Nicky’s Instagram reflected the complete opposite, a chaos in the making and a hodgepodge of everything from images of Germany that his fiance had sent him to food to the cousins and even a few shots of Neil at various moments throughout the day. Of course, there was also the numerous selfies that Nicky seemed to post every time he left the house (and even then in whatever room he happened to spend the day in). If Neil had to describe Nicky’s page it would be the manifestation of Nicky’s personality in images and witty captions that Neil often doesn’t understand with their gratuitous use of emojis.
Kevin’s page is more subdued in comparison (though anyone’s is compared to Nicky’s), all business-like with pictures almost strictly relating to EXY and Fox Records. Promotion ads littered his feed for all their upcoming shows alongside snippets of clips from their practices or of various songs they are still working on. Upon occasion, there will be a photo of himself or other members of EXY posted or glimpses of Eden’s Twilight and a table full of drinks, but mostly Kevin’s page could often be mistaken for the official EXY page.

Matt’s is probably the most normal of the foxes, simply filled with pictures of him at the gym or at practice in the studio and hundred pictures of Dan. Somehow in the recent weeks, there has also been a steady increase of his photo appearing in the feed alongside Dan, though he doesn’t understand why. Matt says he likes posting pictures of Neil which did nothing to clear his confusion. He tried to ask him to stop, but the sad puppy eyes he got in response were too much for even him to handle so he eventually gave in. (The smile Matt gave him almost made it worth it.)

Seth’s Instagram was more of a confession to how much the man parties than a glimpse of his life. Picture after picture shows the man drinking or smoking in some dimly lit place with faceless people in the background. Occasionally Allison would make an appearance, often dominating his feed for periods at a time before dropping off to nothing and some random girl taking her place. Neil noticed that those pictures always coincided with their “off” moments and were a favorite argument they liked to scream over.

Renee’s was a dedication to how much of a saint the woman was, countless pictures of her volunteering at various shelters or taking pictures with some fans she happened to meet while out walking or doing errands. The only thing out of place was the occasional video of her at the gym showing her viciously attacking a hanging punch bag as Andrew is shown filming in the mirror. Neil hadn’t even known they talked let alone were gym buddies if the steady schedule of the videos were anything to go by. It makes Neil think twice about Renee and place her higher on his threat scale.

Of all the Instagrams, Neil’s favorite is Andrew’s. Not because it was the most insightful nor the most plentiful of the all the foxes, but because it surprised him. When he learned that Andrew had an account, he couldn’t help but do a double take, not thinking he would be the type to bother with informing the foxes about anything in his life, let alone the public. And yet Neil finds his account tagged in one of Nicky’s numerous posts and is immediately drawn in. There aren’t a lot of pictures, in fact only a handful having ever been posted in the three years since he’s had the account, and even then only pictures of him smoking and high vantage points. There is never a caption, no explanation or tag of where he was at or why. Neil likes them all because he knows it will annoy him.

He’s looking at one of Andrew’s photos obviously taken from the roof of Fox Records when his phone starts vibrating in his hands and it pings with a text from Matt.

Neil! Buddy! What are you up to?

Nothing why?

Do you want to get drinks with us tonight? There is this karaoke bar we go to that does Karaoke Friday with half off on drinks if you sing.

Neil thinking about it. He doesn’t have any plans per say, especially since Andrew hasn’t said anything about going to Eden’s again this week despite Nicky asking him what to wear. This could also be the perfect opportunity to get Palmetto and EXY together to try out his theory.
Can I bring Andrew and the rest of them?

Hold up let me ask Dan, but it should be ok

Yeah she’s cool with it. Sweet!

I’ll ask. What time and where?

Eight. I’ll text you the address

-Matt shared a location with you-

See you there dude!

Yeah. Bye.

:)))

Neil immediately switches over to his conversation with Nicky

Hey do you guys want to do something tonight?

The little blue bubble informs Neil that Nicky read his message as quickly as ever and is already replying despite it being a second after he hit send. It starts and stops a couple of times before his phone starts blaring the obnoxious song Nicky set as his ringtone and the screen fills with a picture of the man’s face. Neil reluctantly accepts the call and raises it to his ear, although at a slight distance.

“Do my eyes deceive me or did Neil Josten not only text first but invite me out on some mysterious plans.”

Neil rolls his eyes. “It’s not a mystery. Dan invited us to drinks and karaoke. I’m just relaying the invitation.”

“Singing and booze? My two favorite things,” Nicky sighs, “But no way will Andrew go for it. It’s Eden’s night.”

“He already has.” Or will once Neil texts him.

“What?!” Nicky screeches so loud even the distance couldn’t spare Neil’s ears. “No fucking way.”

“Ask him.”

“Nuh-uh. I’m not falling for that trick. You ask him.” Before Neil can say anything else rustling fills the receiver followed by a knock on a wooden door. It’s another minute before a muffled “what” could be heard and Nicky’s voice filters back in. “Neil wants to talk to you.”

“No I don’t,” Neil points out fruitlessly as the phone is handed off.

“What.” Andrew’s voice is bored.

“Dan invited us to karaoke tonight at 8 at this bar.”
“And why should I care?”

“Because I went to Eden’s with you.”

Andrew is silent for a beat then, “Fine. Text me the address.”

He hangs up not a second later and Neil is left blinking at his phone. Well, that went better than he expected. He’s about to put it away when his phone buzzes and pings with a new text message.

???????? HOW?!

I asked.

Nicky’s next text is a slew of emojis he couldn’t even begin to understand and opts to text Andrew the address rather than try. After he sends another text to Matt letting him know that they were going to be joining for sure before shutting off his phone and falling back on his mattress. As he stares up at his ceiling he can’t help but worry if this was a good idea and what was going to happen with all of them stuck inside a bar together.

The bar Matt texted to him is not unlike the one he used to sing at in Millport, both having seen better days but all the more charming for it. Neil had apparently arrived before the rest of his bandmates — not that he really expected anything different from Andrew who would be late just because Neil told him a time — and it gives him time to sit and relax with Palmetto in a large corner booth just next to the stage where people went up and down to sing a song or two. At first, Neil was wary of being so out in the open and performing nonetheless, but Dan assured him that they came here so often it wasn’t a surprise anymore and anyone who came in was respectful of their privacy besides maybe the odd question of a photograph or picture. Generally, they were left to their own devices and could let loose.

And let loose they did. At the table, glasses of Tanqueray (apparently it was a karaoke night tradition to partake in gin shots) litter the surface in between the baskets of fries and chicken tenders Matt had ordered at the start of the night for everyone to share and the two lone glasses of soda both Renee and Neil had ordered to drink. Laughter fills the air as stories from each other’s days are traded back and forth and they reminisce about past karaoke nights with ridiculous performance (both by themselves and others who had come in). Neil sits back, his glass of soda resting in his hands and watches their excited chatter while keeping an eye on the door. About an hour in, his efforts are rewarded as he spots Andrew walk in followed by his usual entourage of Kevin, Nicky, and Aaron. Neil watches the way his eyes scan the bar before catching Neil’s gaze.

“Looks like the monsters are here,” Allison announces to the group before Neil can do it himself.

“Be nice,” Dan chides. “Tonight is about getting along, not picking petty fights.”

Seth snorts, “Anyone give them the same memo or are we supposed to be the bigger men?”

“Not hard,” Allison adds.

“Enough.” Dan’s tone flattens all room for argument. “Be polite or shut up.”
“Dan’s right,” Renne cuts in before Seth or Allison can get another word in. “It will be nice to have everyone together for a change.”

“Yeah!” Matt grins, “Besides just think of how much fun it will be to beat them at karaoke.”

“It’s not a competition.”

“Five buck says Kevin’s the worst,” Allison tosses in.

“Ten on Andrew,” Matt counters.

They all quickly dissolve into a series of bets, all thoughts of non-competitiveness lost in their need to gamble on everything. Only Neil and Renee refrain from taking part with Neil instead using the moment to wave Andrew and the others over. For a second, it looks like Andrew is going to walk right back out the doors, but Nicky’s loud greeting forces his hand.

“Neil!” he makes a beeline for the table, “There you are! Sorry we’re late but Andrew had to smoke first and he had to pry Kevin’s guitar from his hands.”

“I don’t understand why I couldn’t bring it.” Kevin grumble, “I could be practicing.”

“Hush, no practicing tonight. This is about drinking and having fun.”

“But Neil said-”

“Leave me out of this,” Neil points a finger at Kevin, “All I said was that you could sing EXY songs for all I care.”

“But-”

“Enough.” Andrew cuts him off. “I don’t want to hear the words EXY, practice or guitar from your mouth for the rest of the night or I’ll make you walk home.”

Kevin dutifully shuts his mouth and sinks into an open chair with a pout. Nicky rolls his eyes before sliding into the open spot next to Renee in the booth while Aaron looks between the remaining seats next to either Neil or Kevin and promptly take the one by Kevin. Of course not before making a disgusted look Neil’s way before sitting down (really he wants to know what he did to the guy to warrant this. At least when people look at him like that, it’s because he actually did something). Andrew for his part looks neither put out nor pleased as he takes the last available seat.

Once everyone settles, an awkward silence falls over them, neither one sure how to approach these unexplored waters between them. It’s odd thinking that people who work for the same tight-knit label and have a commonality in shared trauma could be so diametrically opposed to one another. Lucky for them all Renee is an actual saint.

“Andrew,” she smiles at him, “It’s good to see you again. I hope things are going well?”

“As well as they can be surrounded by these pains in my ass,” Andrew replies coolly reaching out to take a fry to nibble on.

Nicky squawks offendedly, “Excuse you, I’ll have you know that I’m a fucking delight.”

“Yeah maybe in a gay bar,” Seth snorts.

“As a matter of fact, I am.” he turns on Seth, “Unlike you who most people wouldn’t touch with a 10ft pole.”
“Say that to my face you little f-”

“Finish that sentence and I’ll remind you what happened the last time you used that word,” Andrew warns, nothing but pure steel in his voice and a deliberate flick of his wrist to give a peek of the armbands still hidden by the sleeve of his leather jacket.

“Okay boys, that’s enough.” Dan slams her glass on the table. “New rule, if you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” Seth opens his mouth. “Especially you Seth. I already warned you once tonight, I won’t do it again. You too, Neil.”

“I didn’t even speak,” Neil narrows his eyes.

“Yes, but we all saw just how much you like to run your mouth.”

Yeah, well. That’s fair, he guesses.

Seth sits back with a scowl and reaches for his glass, the silence that follows no longer awkward but tense. Neil wonders not for the first time if this was a mistake after all. He had no idea how he was supposed to bridge the gap between the two bands enough for them to learn from each other. This time the silence lasts until a waitress comes around and takes the newcomers’ orders. It’s only after drinks start trickling in that conversation starts up again.

At first, it’s a bit strained, neither side sure what will set the other off or how to hold a decent conversation besides small talk and work, but with Matt’s easy smiles and Renee’s efforts to include everyone, they reach a happy middle without tearing out anyone’s throats. Once everyone had finished their first round of drinks, Dan decided that it is finally time to begin their festivities for the evening.

“Okay, listen up everyone!” She claps her hands to command everyone’s undivided attention. “While all this awkward stiff conversation is fun, what we all need to do is loosen up. Next round of shots is on me, hope you like Gin because it’s karaoke tradition. If you don’t, well suck it up.”

“Sounds like someone has been spending too much time with Wymack,” Matt whispers into Neil’s ear.

“I heard that,” Dan glares at her boyfriend. “Now you get to come with me and carry them.”

Matt exaggerates a frown but it is ruined by the upturn of his mouth. Neil and Andrew scoot out of the booth to let them get the drinks. Within moments they’re back with a large tray filled with shots that Dan distributes evenly to everyone who is drinking but slides Renee and Neil two soda shots to feel included. She waits until everyone has their glass in hand before tapping the table with the bottom before raising it up.

“Bottoms up!” Simultaneously they all raised their glasses and downed the liquor and set them back down on the table with a clink. Neil was almost impressed. Dan smacks her lips, “Damn that’s good gin. Okay, now time for some karaoke: Palmetto style.”

“What’s Palmetto style?” Nicky perks up, “Some kind of special rules or challenge?”

“Exactly!” Dan smiles, “Rule number one: everyone sings. Everyone.” She slides her gaze back and forth between the two Minyards. “Even you, Aaron.”

The twin flips her off.
“Rule number two: Pairs are okay if you are uncomfortable with going alone because I’m not awful. Rule number three, and this is the most important one, singers can’t sing.”

“What?” Nicky whines, “But how else can I woo all the hot boys here tonight if I can’t show off my pipes?!”

“Aren’t you engaged?” Neil asks.

“Happily. Eric says to send him any pictures of the extremely hot ones. He really liked the one of you by the way.”

Neil… Neil doesn’t know quite what to say to that so he opts for nothing.

“Anyways,” Dan continues, “if you would have let me finish, singers can’t sing in English. This bar has a lot of foreign songs in the machine for the odd tourist or drunk person.”

Nicky’s eyes light up mischievously, probably thinking of utilizing his skills in the two other languages he knows.

“Or in a language you know,” Allison cuts his dreams in half. “You don’t get an unfair advantage just because you’re multilingual.”

Nicky’s smile falters and pouts, obviously upset at being caught in his plans and denied the chance to upstage the others. Neil, on the other hand, is thinking if they’ll happen to have any songs in a language he doesn’t know. Somehow he doubts they will have Urdu or Kirundi songs….

The order in which they were to go was decided by straws once the pairs for duets were settled with Matt drawing the shortest straw. He and Seth are the first to grace the stage once its clear of the other patrons and greeted with a large applause from the audience along with a few whistles of recognition and excitement. Of course, the foxes were the loudest of them all.

Matt picks up the microphone and the bar falls silent. Neil waits for the music to come on but Matt picks up the microphone to his face and looks seriously into the crowd, face stern and eyebrows raised. “Who you tryin’ ta mess with esse? Don’t you know I’m loco?”

The music kicks in immediately, a mismatched beat of a garbage can drum with a small screech mixed in periodically. Both Seth and Matt start moving around the stage in exaggerated swaggers, bumping fists when they cross paths and equal grins splitting their faces. Matt dives into the first verse, his voice quick terse and clear as he raps the words into a steady rhythm that follows the beat. Seth kicks in for the second verse his tone harsher and angrier than Matt’s had been but seamlessly fitting in despite that even as they start jumping around at the chorus screaming about being insane.

It’s not a genre he had expected from either man but seeing them now so skillfully weave the words together so they themselves are the beat, Neil couldn’t be anything other than impressed. Lyrics do not work the same way in his mind, each turn of phrase accompanied by a lilting melody that flows into the next and that without it could fall flat to his ear. Matt and Seth do not share that same limitation. Immediately Neil can see the possibilities of melding the two styles together, Matt’s short rhythmic words and his voice shifting in pitch to weave between them. He’s so lost in the thought that he almost misses their exit off the stage; a thunderous roar of cheers and applause
crashed over him as the two men bow, both sweaty and panting from their performance with identical grins.

When they join the table again, they are greeted with pats on the back and wet smacking kisses on cheeks from their respective girlfriends. From there their order is lost in a free-for-all chaos in an attempt to upstage the last. Allison is the first to pry herself from the group and head for the stage. She tries her hand at a Korean song that she butchers beautifully. Let it be known that even when mispronouncing every third word of the lyrics, Allison Reynolds is an absolute star, face not giving away a single hint of doubt or anything besides the confidence of a runway model and a bonafide superstar. Honestly, she sells the performance just as much as the original singer and is met with applause and whistles when she bows.

Nicky goes next and picks a French song that Neil can barely understand with his rough pronunciations. He maybe gets every $\frac{1}{5}$ words or so which Neil mostly attributes to his ability to speak Spanish. Though, Neil can’t be sure if he’s actually getting the words or if he’s somehow managed to repeat a bunch of words over and over again. Still, Nicky gives an exaggerated and wild of a performance as he does any of their other shows, all wide hand gestures and grand flourishes with lyrics that are all wrong. Everyone claps and cheers for the attempt. Kevin does not, choosing rather to drown his groans in a glass of vodka.

Thankfully their ears are spared when Nicky bullies on Aaron next. At first, he tries to refuse but when Nicky starts threatening to come back on stage with him, he grabs the mic and glares balefully at his cousin until he backs away to the table. He browses through the song selection for a few seconds before settling on some rock tune Neil’s never heard of and gives some half-hearted performance that Neil doesn’t get — even with it being in English. Something about blurry faces and being super stressed? Apparently, the bar patrons aren’t put off by his scowling face and lackluster performance because they cheer just as heartedly and loudly as they had for all the rest when he steps off. Neil is beginning to think that it doesn’t matter what kind of performance they give.

Aaron passes the microphone to Kevin next, who is somehow already well past tipsy, and the man saunters onto the stage with all the arrogance he normally would. Nicky follows him too on the stage and sneakily chooses the song for Kevin after plying him with promises of shots waiting for him back at the table when he’s done. This time it’s a pop song by the artist Nicky is always listening to before practice and trying to get Neil to join in with him, Swift something if he remembers correctly. The beat is catchy and fast paced which contradicts Kevin’s serious face as he bounces and bobs along with it, singing about “shaking off” his haters. The sight is too much that even Neil manages to crack a smile, several other foxes howling around him. Tears fill Matt’s eyes as he clutchles his stomach and deep rumbling laughs shade the glasses on the table. Dan is curled into his side in a similar state while Allison and Nicky both have their phones out and pointed at the stage. They have wicked gleams that promise Kevin will regret coming out tonight after all. Especially since Neil catches the familiar interface of Snapchat open on Nicky’s phone. (Maybe this would be worth it just to see Kevin’s face in the morning.) Kevin doesn’t even bow when the song lends, just drops the mic and walks off stage to wolf whistles calling after him.

Renee goes on next and everyone’s surprise (especially Neil’s) she is accompanied by Andrew. He slinks onto stage silent and sullen, face giving away nothing as he settles behind the drumset still sitting on stage from a previous night’s performance. As Renee flips through the song catalog, he twiddles with the drumsticks, nodding his head or turning down options Renee throws out at him.

“Okay, pay up!” Dan smacks the table.

“No way that hardly counts as proof of anything. We all know the monster has a soft spot for
Renee.” Allison flips her hair, “You need definitive proof to collect any reward.”

Neil arches a brow, clearly lost at the turn of conversation.

“I don’t know,” Nicky drawls, “I mean he did get on stage with her and he wouldn’t do that for just anyone. I mean, we have a hard time getting him on stage and that’s literally our job.”

“Ha! See!” Dan grins, “Pay up!”

“I feel like I’m missing something here,” Neil speaks up, “What’s the bet?”

“If Renee and the monster are secretly dating, which they’re not,” Allison answers pointedly with a clawed finger at Dan.

“You mean are.”

“Prove it.”

“Disprove me.”

“I don’t think we have to. Why would Renee date the monster of all people?” Seth adds.

“Because clearly she has taste,” Nicky sniffs. “My cousin is a hunk, unlike someone.”

“Please shut up,” Aaron groans. “Never refer to him as a ‘hunk.’ We share a face for god’s sake.”

“Are you saying you are not a hunk, Aaron? Because I thought I raised you to love yourself and accept all parts of your body. Especially your hunkiness.”

Aaron dissolves in a series of sputters before cursing in German while Nicky laughs. Neil tunes them out and turns his attention back on the stage at Renee and Andrew. True, of all the foxes, Andrew acts the most comfortable around Renee — that is to say, he doesn’t directly antagonize her as much as he appears to enjoy with the others. Maybe it is the darkness that Neil catches glimpses of since their first meeting that drew him in. Maybe it’s the looks of understanding he sometimes sees between them. Maybe it’s her easy smile and the way she goes out of her way to talk to him despite all her friends calling him a monster. Neil could see why everyone would assume they were dating — hell even he was pressed to believe it (he had never been one to pick up on those particular social subtle cues) — and yet there is a twisting in his stomach when he follows the thought for too long.

He shakes his head and focuses on the music slowly filtering in from the speakers as Renee finally settles on a song. A lone sound of a guitar fills the room, its sound grainy and a bit echoey before Andrew comes in on the drums, smacking the snare several times before creating a steady beat. He carries the melody for a bit before Renee’s voice comes in low and gritty and haunting. She’s not the most powerful of vocalists (nothing in comparison to Dan or Nicky) but there is a rawness to her voice that captures everyone’s attention. Renee gives her all to the song, belting out the chorus with all the power she can muster and Andrew a steady and unwavering force at her back as he bangs out the beat and occasionally harmonizes with her in an odd verse or two.

When the song is over, Renee bows politely at the loud applause even as Andrew gets up and walks off much like how he came up. As he sits, he meets each of the foxes stares and dares them to say anything even as he lifts his glass of whiskey to his lips. Wisely they say nothing.

Dan is the last to go on stage, choosing a song Neil is actually familiar with, though he’s pretty sure most would know its English counterpart than the German one she settles on. He has to
say, she gives it her damnedness to twist her tongue to pronounce the words before the bubbliness of her drink finally hits her head and she crumples into laughter. The bar whistles and laughs right along sided her as she gave up halfway and starts singing in English despite the German lyrics still being projected on the screen in front of her. The foxes sang the loudest along with half of the bar. By the time the song was over, the bar is filled with cheering.

It takes a few moments before it dies down enough for Dan to step off the stage and return to the table, Neil sinking further in his seat as he tries to avoid the knowing glance Dan gives him as she makes her way over. He wonders if his seat would do him the pleasure of swallowing him whole just to avoid what he knows is coming next. It didn’t matter to him about going up to sing, he’d done that plenty of time in countless of places just like this, but it would be harder to explain why he knew so many languages. (Maybe he could find a mandarin song, that language was always a little tricky for him when learning so maybe he could purposely butcher lyrics here and there.) It didn’t and Dan saunters right over and holds out the microphone to him.

“You’re up, kid.”

Logistically he knows there is very little possibility that he will be able to get out of this (short of sudden combustion or death) especially since all eyes turn to him with the same hungry, eager expression. And yet he opens his mouth to say, “I’m really okay with just watching.”

“Sorry buddy,” Matt pats his head, “Rule number one.”

“Damn right! What’s rule number one foxes?” Dan call out.

“Everyone goes.” They all mimic back at him. Even some of the bar patrons echo it. Traitors.

She pushes the microphone firmly in his space. “Good luck rookie.”

He begrudgingly takes the microphone and slides out of the booth. As he approaches the stage, much like one would the gallows, Nicky and Allison trail after him with identical mischievous grins. When he arches a brow at them, Allison shrugs and moves to the console with all the songs.

“We’re picking your song for you,” Nicky explains, joining Allison. “This one! This one! I need to see him sing this song.”

Allison snorts, “Too easy. This one.”

She taps the screen and saunters off stage once more, giving Neil a signature smirk and flip of her blonde hair. “Good luck short stack, you’ll need it.”

Neil scowls but hops on stage to see the selection nonetheless.

“At least it’s in Spanish?” Nicky offers. “You must know some Spanish from living in Arizona right?”

Neil looks at Nicky and shrugs, not willing to give away just how much Spanish he does know. Nicky pats his shoulder, giving him a little thumbs up before hopping off the stage to join the rest back at the table again. Neil looks down at the console and hits play, seeing no reason to change the song since it was one he is already sorta familiar with.

It starts soft, only the strumming of a guitar playing through the speakers as the crowd murmurs hush in anticipation. When the lyrics kick in Neil lets himself slip easily into the language even if it sounds a bit off hearing the lyrics in Spanish. He gets so lost in the memory that he forgets he is supposed to be purposely missing lyrics.
He first learned the song when he was around 13 and him and his mother were studying French. Despite his mother’s abhorrent hatred for all things music, even she couldn’t deny that it was the fastest way he would pick up the language, the unfamiliar words working in tandem with his instinctual talent for singing and music. He remembers those were one of the few times music would grace their life on the run, a series of classic hits static hums on a half-busted radio of whatever car they had stolen until he mastered the language. Once he had, it would be ripped away until they had a need for it again. It hurt just as bad as the first every time.

Neil learned a lot of languages in those years.

Just as he thinks the song is a hitting a low, the lyrics switch, molding into the tongue of its original source. The change trips him up, words falling flat on his tongue as his brain switches from Spanish to French. It takes a moment but he finds the flow of the melody again and it’s almost like he’s back in that car again, nameless long stretched road flying by him out the window, the faint smell of smoke and cigarettes lingering in the air, and a crop of blonde hair blowing in the wind at the driver seat.

He closes his eyes at the image, willing himself to focus on the lyrics as the song builds to its climax. The guitar drops off for a second, leaving Neil’s voice the only thing echoing in the near silent bar until it picks up ever so slightly; it’s barely heard as Neil sings the last lyric and lets the final note trail from his lips before dying in the air.

The applause is instantaneous, whistles, claps, and cheers erupting from the crowd alongside his friends stomping their feet in excitement and howling. Awkwardly he does a little bow before sliding the mic back home in its stand and jogging off the stage and back to the foxes’ table. Unlike their cheering just a moment ago, they all stare at him in varying levels of shock and even a hint of surprise flashing in Andrew’s eyes before he turns away to resume drinking. Oddly enough, it’s not Andrew’s reaction but Nicky’s that catches his attention the most as the man lets out a muffled high pitched screech before exploding entirely.

“SINCE WHEN CAN YOU SPEAK SPANISH?!” He scrambles from his seat to stand next to Neil. “You can speak it almost better than I can, what the fuck??”

Neil shrugs, moving to step out of the man’s reach, but something must click in Nicky’s mind because his hand just shoot out to grab Neil and give him a little shake.

“Oh my god, you can speak Spanish.”

This close Neil can smell the alcohol lingering in his breath, so he just attributes the redundancy to lack of mental cognition. “Yes?”

“I have so many plans.” He shakes Neil again. “So, so many plans. We need to get to the studio. Quick, how sober are you because I can’t drive. Kevin, Andrew how long will it take you to learn a new song?”

“Now hold on one minute,” Allison interrupts, “He’s not going anywhere. He cheated and now he has to go again.”

Neil looks at her in horror. “No.”

The grin she gives him could only be described as bloodthirsty, “Thems the rules kid. Right, Dan?”

He looks to Dan for any sign of mercy. He finds none.
“Sorry, kiddo.”

Neil groans.

Luckily Dan decides to take some pity on him by coming up on stage with him, dragging both Renee and Allison along. Since it turns out that he really did know all the languages offered, they settled on some old English pop song Neil can vaguely recognize but the girls loved if they way they practically screamed at each other to tell “them what they really want.” The performance must satisfy both Allison and Dan (or maybe it was the alcohol that created a flush along their cheeks and noses) because Neil finds himself squeezed back into the booth not too long after. This time conversation flows easier over the table as they bicker and tease each other about their performances. Even Aaron and Andrew engage with a few words here or there when directly engaged (Andrew) or a chance to present a biting comment appears (Aaron).

Neil sits back and watches them, thinking that perhaps tonight wasn’t as much as a failure that he feared. He could already see the bridges beginning to appear between them, unsteady and new but there all the same just waiting to be crossed and fastened.

Karaoke must be over for the night because no one claims the stage and music begins to flow throughout the bar low and soft as it blends into the usual chatter of conversation from a crowd this later at night. The song must catch Dan’s attention because she starts humming it softly.

*Where did you go when things went wrong baby?*

*Who did ya run to?*

Her voice is smoky and raspy, eyes slipping closed and a smile stretching across her lips as she lets herself add more into the song. It doesn’t take long for the rest of the foxes to hear her before they start joining in, Matt, Renee, and Seth beating a steady beat into the table, Allison and Nicky harmonizing vocals and echoing off of Dan’s voice in the chorus.

*Stay with me baby*

*Please, stay with me baby*

Soon the whole bar was listening in as they played along in perfect harmony. Neil watched in entrapped silence. There. Right there.

He could see it. Just for a moment, he could see it in the melody, in the synchronization, their harmonious voices and rhythm. *There.* He looks to Kevin who had gotten the guitar from the stage and strums out a melody to accompany the rest, to Andrew who subtly taps his glass against the table to give the beat more dynamic and depth, to Nicky who starts getting more creative with the harmony and Neil *tastes it.* He *hears* it. What they’re supposed to sound like, how they’re supposed to be.

For a moment he can see that great band of legend from Kevin’s dreams and he wants it. And now they finally have a chance to take it.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, I made edits of everyone’s Instagram while avoiding writing this fic. Check
them out here
Somehow at the end of the night, Neil finds himself at the cousin’s house once more. Though he truly shouldn’t be that surprised, ever since his second night out with them to Eden’s he’s found himself splitting his time between the studio and there more than his own apartment these days. Still, instead of strolling off to his own place, he finds himself lingering as Andrew corrals his drunken companions into their respective rooms, waiting to see if he will reemerge or retire for the evening himself. Andrew chooses the latter, raising a brow at Neil’s appearance as if he expected him to be long gone by now. Neil’s not quite sure why he isn’t.

When he gives no signs of leaving, Andrew inclines his head towards the direction of the kitchen. Neil shrugs and follows him in, watching as he makes a beeline for the fridge and pulling out a carton of ice cream. He fumbles around in the drawer next to it and pulls out two spoons, one of which he shoves at Neil before moving to sit on one of the stools at the island counter. With a pointed look at the seat next to him, Neil takes the hint and slides onto the stool. Neither speak as Andrew pops the lid and digs a spoon into the untouched surface of the ice cream (some vanilla, chocolate swirl monstrosity with what looked like chunks of fudge and drowned in caramel), a glob so big it had no business fitting on the spoon being lifted to his mouth.

Neil watches on in horror, his stomach aching just at the thought of the amount of sugar Andrew ingested in one mouthful. Andrew’s eyes dare him to say anything. Neil for once decided to keep his mouth shut and reaches for the second spoon for a vastly smaller portion. It is still just as sickeningly sweet as Andrew’s looked. He must make a face because Andrew scoffs.

“If you don’t like it don’t eat it. More for me.”

“How do you eat something like that?” He scrapes his tongue along his teeth in hopes it will erase the taste. “It’s so sweet.”

“That’s the entire point.” Andrew punctuates this by taking another large helping.

“Is the point to also rot all your teeth out and get diabetes by the time you’re thirty?”

“Okay Kevin,” Andrew drawls, “not all of us can live off of kale juice and weeds.”

Now Neil knows he makes a face. “That sounds even worse than this.”

“Don’t let Day hear you or he’ll start you on a smoothie diet.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Is that a promise?” Andrew licks the spoon clean.

“Aren’t you supposed to protect me?” Neil baits, “I’m pretty sure letting Kevin murder me via vegetables violates our agreement.”
“I hardly think a vegetable is merit of protection. Even in the hands of Kevin Day.”

“All vegetables should be considered hazardous materials.”

“Boy,” Andrew deadpans, “You must have had a fun childhood.”

Neil shrugs, “Not much room for vegetables in your diet when you’re on the run, though I’m not complaining. Those I do remember having were at home where I wouldn’t be allowed to leave until my plate was completely empty.”

He shivers at the thought, remembering that his father in delighted in having vegetable heavy dinners and Lola piling hers onto his plate. Sometimes he would be at that table late into the night.

“Oh Neil, oh so tragic.” Andrew mocks with a wave of his spoon.

“Isn’t that why I’m a fox? I thought tragic backstory was a requirement for enrollment.”

“How given.” He stabs the spoon into the carton so it stands up in the middle. “And yet most of our backstories don’t lead to us being a multilingual runaway.”

Neil shrugs, “Not my fault you all are left uncultured.”

Andrew lifts a brow and Neil smirks, knowing his joke amused him if only just a little. Turning around, he rests his back against the counter, elbows supporting his weight and head lolling back just so. He can feel Andrew’s eyes on him.

“Besides,” he continues, ignoring the gaze, “being multilingual is essential to being a successful runaway. You need to be able to blend in with the locals wherever you end up; speaking the language only sells the act.”

Andrew stares in silent question.

“I speak nearly 10 languages fluently and another 5 enough to get by.”

Andrew nods, undoubtedly tucking the information away for later use. Neil oddly doesn’t mind the nugget of truth have been given away for free.

“I learned German in high school. Nicky said it would be an easy pass since he was around to fix any issues Aaron or I ran into. The fact that he would slip into the language constantly while drunk was also annoying.” He pushes the carton away. “Though it seems that it has given him permission to switch back and forth when he pleases like he’s back in Germany.”

Neil hums, thinking Andrew’s annoyance isn’t as genuine as he would have others believe, his trademark blank mask too perfectly fixed in the way he has it when deliberately trying to throw someone off. He thinks that it probably had something more to do with gaining a way to plan behind someone’s back while also letting his cousin have that slice of home. The more Neil learns about Andrew, the more he’s sure that his family (blood or otherwise) is the main motivator behind all his actions. He suspected as much when he learned of the reason behind his arrest, the fact he learned another language for the same man only cements it in his mind.

“I never stayed in one school for very long. Always moved around too much for any one class to stick.” Neil replies, “I remember a few here and there but none that I could say I enjoyed or liked. Well, maybe math. Calculus was a bit of fun from what I remember.”

Andrew stares at him blankly. “Calculus.”
“Yeah, you know derivatives, functions, and all that?”

“You liked calculus? No one likes calculus. Not even Aaron who’s major had a lot of mathematics.”

“Why not? It’s simple logistics. No need for guessing and they give you all the necessary information.” Neil frowns.

“And they call me the monster,” he mutters as he shakes his head. “Who knew that Neil Josten was a nerd.”


Silence.

“Oh my god you were a band geek,” he whispers in disbelief. “Do you have pictures of the uniform? Tell me they exist.”

“Shut up.” Andrew bites out.

“They do. Where are they? Nicky would never let you destroy them all.”

“If you ever try to find them I’ll murder you in your sleep.” He motions to his armbands for good measure.

Neil holds his hand up in surrender, but then an image of a prepubescent Andrew wearing that ridiculous uniform and hat (no doubt with the characteristic blank scowl on his face as he stands in line with others smiling) pops in his head and he loses it. The laugh is belly deep and is so loud and jarring that it startles him as much as it does Andrew. Yet once it’s out, there is little he can do to stop it as his eyes water and his stomach twists in discomfort from the lack of oxygen making it through the rest of his system. He can hear his laughter bouncing off the walls in the otherwise quiet house, so bright and unburden and wonders when the last time he had laughed like this. At all.

Andrew watches with a scowl that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. He tolerates it for a few seconds before he nearly pushes Neil off the stool. It's only years of quick reflexes that he manages to catch himself just in time.

“So,” he coughs awkwardly, “do you keep your band geek past a secret or it just me who doesn’t know?”

Andrew sighs like he cannot believe his life has come to this. Neil’s smile only grows. And then it wavers a bit as his mind wanders back to the bar and the foxes bet about Renee and Andrew’s relationship. He doesn’t know why it’s suddenly at the forefront of his mind or what even compels him to care (he doesn’t) but it taunts his thoughts anyway.

“What about Renee?”

Neil shuffles, willing himself to just let the matter drop. “What about Renee?”

Andrew pauses in earnest. “What about Renee?”
“Does she know?”

“Renee.”

“Yeah,” why the hell is he still talking? He should be walking out of the room. Maybe the house. 12 am was a good time for an impromptu jog right?

“Why would I tell Renee?” Andrew asks carefully.

Neil goes for nonchalance. “I don’t know, the two of you seem pretty close.”

“Close.”

“I mean she did get you on stage tonight. I think close is an apt term.”

Andrew is silent for a long moment and Neil finds that his body itches to move. He settles for bouncing his leg up and down. Finally, Andrew says, “Why do you care?”

“I don’t.” He says then winces at how fast it comes out. Andrew arches a brow. “Some of the foxes have a bet going on about the two of you.”

“What kind of bet.”

Neil feels his face heat, “If the two of you are dating or not...”

Another bout of silence. “And what did you bet?”

“Nothing,” Neil scoffs. “I have enough going on in my life to avoid that hole.”

“So why do you care?” Andrew’s gaze is all consuming and piercing. Neil finds himself unable to look away.

“I don’t,” he mumbles.

Andrew hums before he hops off the stool and reaches for the ice cream. He removes the spoon and dumps it in the sink along with Neil’s which he hadn’t touched after the initial bite.

“Renee and I aren’t anything,” he says after a moment. “I’ve told them as much countless times and yet they still feel the need to bet.” He shrugs. “Not my fault they waste their time and money on something that will never come to fruition.”

Neil nods and then pauses. “Never?”

Andrew looks like Neil just said that the sky was blue. “Yes, Neil. Never.”

“Why? She seems nice?”

Andrew snort, “And what does nice mean to people like us.” Neil doesn’t know how to answer that one. “Besides, she’s on the wrong team.”

“Wrong team?” Neil’s face twist in confusion before the pieces click in place. “You’re gay.”

“Is that a problem?” Andrew looks him square in the eyes.

“Should it be?” Neil shrugs, not really seeing what difference it makes in who Andrew shared a bed with.
“Some would disagree.”

“Fuck those people.” Neil answers automatically. Then a pause. “Does anyone else know or?”

“Renee knows,” Andrew shrugs, “And Aaron suspects but would rather ignore it than pretend to actually care enough to ask. I don’t really care what the others think or know.”

Neil hums, slowly unpacking that statement and deciding to offer a truth of his own. “I don’t. Swing that is.” He adds when confusion flicks in Andrew’s eyes.

“At all?”

“Never had the want. I’ve kissed a few people but it was all rather bland and messy that it wasn’t worth my mother getting wind of it.”

It was much easier to ignore the looks people gave him during school or on the streets. He didn’t think he was really missing out on much, to be honest. After all, look where relationships led him to be in the first place. Much easier to not swing in either direction.

“You’re asexual.” Andrew comments.


Andrew stares at him for a long time after that, his eyes holding Neil’s as something swims in those hazel depths. He must not find what he’s looking for because his lips twitch in a minuscule frown before going blank again. Neil tilts his head as Andrew shoves the ice cream back into the freezer and moves past him towards the living room.

“I’m going to bed. Don’t wake me up when you leave at the ass crack of dawn like you always do.”

Neil blinks at the whiplash, “Uh, I won’t.”

Andrew doesn’t bother with a nod or any other confirmation that he was heard and continues through the room and toward the stairs. Neil watches him go in utter confusion at what just happened to cause the shift in mood.

“Good night to you too, I guess,” he mumbles under his breath,

As he settles on the couch for the night, his mind plays back their conversation. It dawns on him that neither of them had asked a single question that night — had taken a turn in their game of truths. For once anything they had given was voluntary. Neil thinks that means something, even if he doesn’t exactly know what right now. When his eyes begin to close, he hears the telltale signs of a melody beginning to form in his head.

*And I never really thought about it*

When Neil does slip from the cousin’s house he does so silently and quickly (though slamming the door did cross his mind just to spite Andrew). From the house, it’s probably a 25 minute walk — or 15 minute light jog as he usually prefers to take it — back to his apartment. He
had moved out of Wymack’s house as soon as he was able, the older man’s presence (no matter how different from his father) enough to put him on edge the moment he walked in. The apartment wasn’t anything special, a simple one bedroom packed with the essentials and nothing else. The most personalized area of the place was the living room, and even then only so because of the music sheets on the coffee table and his guitar case resting next to the couch. He still brings it with him most places, often too uncomfortable without its weight, but more so for practice and ease rather than being prepared to run on a dime. Still, the most important pieces of his escape are kept in it just in case. The rest of it is hidden in a small safe under a few floorboards.

Quickly letting himself in, he heads for the shower to wash away the previous night’s grime before redressing and heading for the door once more. This time his guitar is slung over his shoulder and the sheets of music are rolled and stuffed into his back pocket to free up his hands while he reaches for his keys. His apartment was never meant for him to linger in, just a safe enough place to lay his head when he needs to sleep and allow him a bit of privacy when he needed it. Lately, he’s been finding that he had other options for both, options he preferred more.

As per usual, Neil ends up at the place that does consume most of his time. Ducking past security, he lets himself into the studio with the keys Wymack gave him and settles himself in the empty lounge. It’s still early enough that he’s the first one to be in, which he uses to his advantage by starting the beginning notes of the melody that struck him last night. He must be at it longer than he realizes because Wymack appears with a grunted greeting before disappearing in his office. Matt follows not too long after. Like usual, the two of them fall into an easy pattern of trading notes on guitar techniques and offering opinions on things they could improve on. They’re in the middle of this when the door slams open and both their eyes shoot to the sudden noise.

“Great you’re here!” Nicky greets as he strolls into the room. “I don’t understand why you can’t answer your phone once in a while. If you weren’t such a creature of obsession I’d have been looking for you all day.”

Neil pulls the aforementioned device from his pocket to see its screen black even as he hits the power button. Looks like he forgot to charge it… again. He holds it up for Nicky to see. “It’s dead.”

Nicky snorts, “Yeah I figured that. Andrew said that he won’t warn you again by the way.”

Neil tries to hide his flinch. Damn.

“Anyways,” Nicky flourishes with a grand gesture as he closes the distance between them, “How much do you remember from last night?”

“All of it,” Neil frowns, “I wasn’t the drunk one last night Nicky. You were.”

Matt nods, “Yeah you got so bad that you challenged Kevin to a battle of shots. Kevin. I’m surprised you’re even vertical.”

“Superior liver. Besides, vodka has nothing on tequila in Mexico. Drunkest I’ve ever been that I can’t remember.”

Neil lifts a brow and Nicky shrugs.

“I may have also had a shot this morning to tide me over.”

That Neil believes.

“We’re getting off topic. Neil get in the booth.” He actually pulls Neil from his spot, guitar
and all, and starts steering him in the direction of the booth they sometimes used for singing practice.

“What’s going on?” Neil asks as he lets himself be dragged and shoved into the booth.

“We’re learning a new song for the show next week.”

“Okay, but *what* song Nicky?”

Nicky shoves a handful of papers into Neil’s chest before slamming the door to the booth closed in his face. Neil barely catches the papers in time to prevent them from being blown away, still entirely confused about how his morning turned into this.

“Will you just explain what’s going on,” Neil asks through the glass where Nicky settles himself at the mixing table.

Nicky must take pity on him because the microphone cuts in and he finally gives him an answer. Well, sort of.

“How good is your Spanish?”

“Passable,” is Neil’s immediate answer, still trained to underplay his ability in anything when asked. Especially his ability to speak 20 languages when from nowhere Millport, Arizona.

“Bullshit,” Nicky waves him off. “Neil you put Shakira to shame last night. Wait no, that is sacrilege; you were almost as good as the queen.”

“Nicky.”

“Just look at the title,” the singer rolls his eyes.

Neil does just that, his brows scrunching together as he reads. “What the hell is a *despacito*?”

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Neil’s entire body thrums with excitement and adrenaline, the stage lights blinding his eyes, his body drenched in sweat as his hair sticks to his face and his chest heaves for air. They are a bit more than halfway through their set for the night and they’ve never played so hard. Neil’s parts are longer and more demanding than their previous shows, needing the bulk of his attention while he sings simple backing vocals for Nicky. The others push themselves as well, rising to meet the ferocity and intensity that Neil pours into his own performance. He even sees a line of sweat break out on Andrew’s brow, a sign that the drummer was trying a bit more than usual despite the same blankness to his face. As Nicky introduces their song, Neil grabs his drink, downing its contents in preparation for the next number.

“So as some of you may know, last week we found out that Neil here is quite talented with his tongue.”

The crowd cheers and whistles at the implication of Nicky’s words. Neil wonders if it would be considered rude if he throws a bottle at the back of the singer’s head. Surely the press wouldn’t catch wind of it? He puts it down before he can give in to the impulse.

“Not like that you nasties! Though I wish,” he adds with a wink, inciting another volley of whistles.
Andrew pounds the bass drum a couple of times and gives Nicky a look.

“Alright, alright. I’ll just let this next song explain what I mean. And unlike a certain white boy, we actually know the lyrics for it.”

At the recognition of the upcoming son, the crowd loses their control and starts screaming their approval. Taking this as his cue, Neil kicks in with his acoustic guitar, volume spiking over the noise of the audience. The starting melody is distinctly recognizable of the Latin genre, soft but with fast overlaying notes. Nicky kicks in with English first, grin easy and body swaying with the beat.

Come on over in my direction

So thankful for that, it’s such a blessin’

Turning every situation into heaven

Nicky winks at the crowd as he moves closer to the edge of the stage, reaching his hand out to links hands with the fans closest to the stage. Neil waits until he’s pulled back before he cuts in, voice pitched a bight higher and a smirk placed firmly on his lips instead of the seductive grin Nicky sports.

My sunrise on the darkest day

Got me feelin’ some kind of way

Make we wanna savor every moment slowly

Nicky harmonizes on the last note, effortlessly pulling the intro back to him so he can finish the verse before sucking in a break and seamlessly switching into Spanish on the exhale. He doesn’t miss a beat and the crowd explodes. When it reaches the chorus, they all join in on harmony for the melodic “oh yeah,” all eyes turn to Nicky waiting for next line. It surprises them again when it comes from the right of the stage where Neil stands leaning into the microphone. The lyrics nearly get drowned in the volume of their exclamations.

The song continues much in the same pattern, Nicky and Neil weaving in and out of each other’s verses as they trade off lines here and there and harmonize others. Occasionally Kevin and Andrew would jump into the harmony on the chorus, putting to use the repetitive pronunciation sessions Nicky forced them all into to perfect the chant later in the piece (Neil’s not even a little surprise that it goes without a hitch). Eventually, the song nears its finale and Nicky starts petering off until Neil’s voice leads them home in the final verse, one in English and the last in Spanish.

When the final note hits and his voice is swallowed by the applause, Neil feels a grin threatening to split his face. In that moment he knew they had it. For just one song they harmonized and co-existed in the melody without any of the tensions and disjointedness that plagued them before. He knew that they found this new version of EXY needed to push them over that line. And Riko should be terrified because now that they have, Neil wasn’t letting it go. He would take this and cultivate it until it was ready. They were coming for him next.
It seems Neil wasn’t the only one feeling the high from a successful show seeing how as soon as they managed to pack away their equipment, they piled into the car and headed for Eden’s Twilight. Aaron had driven himself over so they met him at the door before slipping past the bouncers and into the usual thicket of the pulsating crowd Eden’s seems to attract no matter the night. A quick stop to the bar and they procure their drinks for the evening before settling down at a table close to the balcony on the second floor. The spot gives Neil an unobstructed view of the dancefloor below, which puts him at ease despite not worrying about who may be in that crowd.

Forgoing cracker dust for the night, Kevin, Nicky, and Aaron, hit the drinks harder and faster to chase their desired high, the tray empty and refilled twice before they are satisfied and slink off into the dancefloor to lose themselves in the mass of gyrating bodies and pounding beats. Neil remains firmly in his seat, leaning against the railing when Nicky tries to cajole him into dancing. He doesn’t even bother asking Andrew. When they are finally alone, Neil turns his attention fully to Andrew’s profile. He studies the slope of his nose and the curve of his jaw that seems sharper in the contrasting shadows and lights of the nightclub.

“Staring,” Andrew remarks in his glass, draining the last of the amber liquid.


Andrew stiffens at the question before setting his glass down with a small clink and turning to meet Neil’s gaze. “Are you taking a turn?”

“Sure,” Neil shrugs, wondering what about the question was deep enough to elicit the need of their game. In the weeks since that night in the kitchen smaller pieces of information could be given freely.

“Cass used to have a piano in her house. She thought it would be nice to learn something together. I picked up the drums later on when I learned the piano couldn’t give me what I wanted.”

“Who is Cass?” Neil’s brows furrow. He doesn’t remember hearing that name before, either from Nicky nor Andrew.

The blankness in Andrew’s eyes is enough of an answer that Neil know that whatever Andrew is going to say is worth more than he had to give in exchange. So he’s surprised when Andrew gives it willingly, even if it’s partial and cryptid. “The closest thing I had for a mother for a long time.”

Neil nods, content with the amount he was given and grateful for the answer at all. He too knew how deep scars ran with mothers, his own running long and deep both physically and not. That’s why when Andrew turns the question back on Neil, he absentely rubs at the scars on his shoulder.

“My mother used to sing when I was little,” he explains. “Sometimes it would be lullabies, other times classic rock hits hummed at low volumes as she cooked or cleaned. She used to crank up the music and belt out entire performances as she danced around the living room.” He almost smiles fondly at that. “That’s the oldest memory I have of her, singing while washing dishes with the radio on low and sunlight pouring in over her face.”

She was beautiful in that memory, face bright and happy and unmarred by the burden of years on the run from a man that relentlessly hounded her every move and a 10 year old entirely dependent on her for survival. He could see her blonde hair shining in that sunlight and see the brown of her eyes sparkle as the corners crinkled with her smile as she caught him trying to sing along.
He also remembers his father storming in, drawn by the noise and smashing that radio to pieces on the kitchen floor. He remembers him beating the music from her over and over again until it became despised and hated.

Andrew stares intensely as if he can see the memories playing in his eyes.

“I guess it sort of just stuck with me,” Neil finishes weakly, trying to shake himself out of his head.

Andrew says nothing, instead digging in his pocket before throwing something on the table in front of him. It hits the surface with a small clang and slides until it is a hair’s breadth from his fingers. He plucks the object from the table to see that it’s a key. The metal almost burning into his skin. He doesn’t let go.

“I’m sick of locking up after you. Do it yourself.”

He says it nonplussed as if he is commenting on the weather and not giving Neil complete and total access to the place he calls home. As if he didn’t just hand Neil a physical reminder that he belongs somewhere — that he has permission to belong.

“It’s just a key,” Andrew says flatly when Neil doesn’t answer, but his eyes blaze with a dare to say he’s wrong.

But he was. “You know it’s more than that. With people like us, it will always be.”

People who didn’t have homes growing up, who had to fight tooth and nail for everything they had. People who knew what a key really meant to another like them. Neil traces the pattern into the flesh of his palm, memorizing its teeth like he had done with the studio keys Wymack had given him.

“Thank you.”

“It’s just a key,” Andrew dismisses.

Neil doesn’t get the chance to argue because Nicky chooses that moment to reappear, sweaty body leaning heavily on Neil’s shoulders as the and smiles down at him as he tries to wheedles him on the dance floor once more. Andrew is up and gone before Neil even has the chance to stop him. He watches as his back is swallowed by the crowd, the metal of the key searing into his bones.

_Cause I’ve been made to walk alone_

_All the way through my life_

_And I never really thought about it_

Chapter End Notes

I would like it to be known that I had chosen the song before the fucking meme became a thing and nothing irked me more than knowing that I'll never be able to erase the sheer cringe I feel when it comes on

Cause I've been made to walk alone

All the way through my life

And I never really thought about it
A few days later Neil walks into the studio to see that it’s filled with all its members despite the relatively early morning hour. Matt, of course, is the first to notice him (other than Andrew who gives no sign beside a slight pause) and gives him his trademark enthusiastic grin and greeting.

“Neil! I’m surprised you were the last one here, especially seeing how Kevin of all people beat you. It’s not even 9.” He nods his head to the man in question who is suspiciously awake for someone Andrew usually had to pull out of bed to get moving.

“Uh,” he reaches for his phone and checks the screen for notifications, “Did I miss a message about a meeting or something?”

“Nope,” Dan assures him, “We’re in because a song hit me last night and I wanted to get a jump on it while it was still fresh.”

“And I,” Nicky jumps in, “was hoping to rope you into some more duet covers. You’re either out running or here so I decided to take my chances.”

Today it happened to be both. Neil had been out on a jog to the studio this morning to perhaps practice vocals for a song. Seeing how he wasn’t about to do that any time soon, he shrugs and moves for the mini fridge tucked into the corner of the room for a water. He manages to uncap it and swallow a few gulps before Wymack walks in and takes notice of them all. But instead of grunting a greeting and disappearing into his office (to “get away from all their melodramatic bullshit”) he folds his arms across his chest and nods.

“Good, you’re all here, saves me the trouble of hunting you misfits down. I’ve got news for the lot for the lot of you.”

Everyone perks up. Everyone minus Kevin who Neil quirks a brow at but doesn’t meet his gaze.

“What’s up coach?” Dan asks, taking lead.

“We’ve been booked for two shows in New York City. Madison Square Garden to be precise.”

“New York?!” The foxes gasp, the only ones remaining silent being Andrew, Neil, and Kevin.

“Oh my god. Oh my god!” Nicky explodes. “This is big — no this is huge! Madison Square Garden!”

“Both of us?” Dan asks and Wymack nods eliciting a squeal from the singer as she throws herself into Matt’s arms. “Holy shit!”
Everyone around them bursts into excited chatter while Kevin remains stock still frozen in his spot on the couch. Neil isn’t the only one to notice. Andrew turns to Kevin, face blank but shoulders tense.

“You knew,” his terse tone cuts through the chatter until it peters off.

“Yes.”

The muscles in his jaw ticks. “Oh Kevin, you know our deal doesn’t work if you withhold information from me. Why should I bother to keep up my end when you don’t yours?”

“That’s enough. I only told him yesterday.” Wymack butts in, “I wanted to run it by him in case there would be any problems.”

“That’s a whole 24 hours, Kevin.” Andrew ignores Wymack. “24 hours where you hid something from me that I needed to know.”

“Andrew please-”

A knife presses to Kevin’s throat faster than Neil could blink. He pushes off the wall and strides towards the two of them, not getting involved just yet but close enough that he could if needed. Wymack tenses but doesn’t take more than a step closer. The other freeze, unsure what will set Andrew off next.

“I told you never to use that word.”

Kevin pales, “I’m sorry. Coach just called and told me he was going to break the news this morning. I didn’t think-”

“And therein lies the problem, Kevin. You never think. Here’s a tip: if something comes up like this, you tell me then. Not the next day, not weeks from then. That exact moment. If you can’t do that then we’re done. Understand?”

Kevin starts to nod before thinking better of it when the blade digs deeper into his skin with the motion. “Yes.”

“Good.” The knife is gone as quick as it came and Andrew flicks a gaze of annoyance at Neil before leaning back in his seat like nothing happened. The room remains silent as he digs for a cigarette and lights up.

“Okay, does someone want to fill us in on why New York is bad?” Allison snaps.

When it doesn’t look like either man is going to answer, Neil shrugs and offers, “Riko.”

If the grimaces that crossed their faces were clue enough, Neil would say that the foxes knew just exactly what that meant for Kevin. Not only was New York his home for a long period of time, it was also the place his one-time brother still calls home. Everyone knows that New York is Moriyama Music domain and nobody played in the city without them knowing about it. Especially not on such an iconic stage as Madison Square Garden. If they got an invite to play there was no way Riko wasn’t involved somehow nor was there any clue as to what exactly that means. Not anything good that’s for sure. By the way Kevin rubs at his scarred left hand, Neil thinks he agrees.

Yet even with Riko’s plot still largely unknown, Neil can’t help but think that it was the least of his worries. Not when New York was too close to his father’s stomping grounds. Not when Neil knows that the man’s business often brought him to the city at any given time. Suddenly Kevin
wasn’t the only one pale one in the room. Andrew looks at him before pulling out another cigarette and handing it to Neil along with a lighter. He immediately takes them.

“You’re not allowed to panic right now, My quota is full at the moment,” Andrew quips lowly in German so no one but Neil hears.

Neil scowls and lights the cigarette.

“Since when do you smoke?” Wymack arches a brow.

“I don’t,” Neil shrugs and lets the smoke ground him.

He gives him a look like he’s about to say something more but decides against it with a shake of his head. “Right. Look we’ve already agreed to do it so go pack your bags before your asses are being shipped to New York by the end of the week. Got it?”

He waits until everyone echoes a yes coach before moving on.

“Great, now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go into my office and contemplate why I thought signing any of you were worth the fucking headache.”

When he leaves, a heavy silence sits in the room.

“Oh come on guys!” Nicky tries to rally them all, “We’re going to New York. Screw Riko, he probably won’t even be there. You know how much the Raven’s travel. And if he is then he can get a front row seat to us showing his ass up in his hometown.”

“Fuck yeah!” Matt smiles, “He won’t know what hit him.”

“I mean it would be kind of perfect doing it on his stage too,” Dan agrees wicked smile on her lips. “Okay, I’m in. Riko will hate the day he said anything nasty about us foxes.”

“Please,” Allison flips her hair, “New York was my bitch long before it was his. They are going to beg us to stay when we leave.”

“See! That’s the spirit!” Nicky claps, “Plus think of all the shopping I can get done! And the rooftop parties we could crash. New York is going to be awesome.”

Neil thinks Nicky night have jinxed them all — more than they already were. This was Riko after all.

Neil had sequestered himself away once the foxes broke apart to work on their own projects for the upcoming shows. With Kevin still in a near catatonic state about the mere possibility of running into his brother, EXY practice was all but canceled until he pulled himself together. Neil expects that their night practice will be one of the worse ones and resigns himself to a night of being cursed at in French and English. That’s why he decides to use some of his time now to flush out more lyrics for his song.

He’s managed to get the basics of the melody but is struggling with the right words. The floor of the booth he’s in is littered with crumpled bits of paper and his fingers are stained black with the ink of his pen resting in his mouth. Another line scribbled out and Neil is ready to call it quits for
good. It doesn’t help that New York and his father linger in his mind, the risk he’s taking by agreeing to the city choking him on the edge of panic. Memories of his last visit, near the beginning of their escape with his father’s men hot on their trails and his mother’s nails digging so hard in his arms they would leave crescent moon scars. Her voice fills his head as she drags him along to run, to keep moving Abram! His body vibrates with the need to move but he keeps himself planted because he recognizes the need as one that won’t be satisfied until he was halfway across the country. The moment he gives in is the moment he knows going to New York will be impossible and he didn’t want to break his deal with Andrew, not if he could help it.

“If you start choking, I’m not going to help you,” a familiar voice drawls from the doorway.

Neil sits up, confusion twisting his face until the pen in his mouth falls from the movement and he stares as it rolls on the floor towards Andrew’s black boots. His eyes trail up the other’s legs and rest on his face, hazel eyes bored and an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. Suddenly Neil’s fingers itch for his own, so he asks, “Roof?”

Andrew contemplates this for a moment before shrugging and turning around to the hall leading to the roof. Neil follows closely behind, only stopping to grab his journal from the stand and picking up his pen on the way out. When Neil pushes open the doors, Andrew has already settled himself near the edge and lit up, a steady trail of smoke leaking from the cherry of his cigarette. He claims the seat next to him and leans over the lip of the roof as much as he dares, drawing in a breath of fresh air and the smell of smoke. It’s odd how calming it is when he should probably hate the smell after everything.

“You must be suicidal tonight,” Andrew remarks. “Do I need to call a hotline for you?”

“Not high enough to kill me. I think I might break a few bones at most.” Neil shrugs.

“So you wouldn’t mind if I pushed you off then.”

Neil smiles, “I’d drag you down with me.”

Andrew huffs and blows a cloud of smoke in Neil’s face. Instead of it being as comforting as before, his mother’s face flashes in his mind and he remembers the throbbing in his arm from the scars still resting there. Something must cross his face because Andrew stubs the cigarette out after that. Neil is at once grateful and disappointed at its loss. They are quiet for a moment before Andrew breaks the silence.

“I know why Kevin is near hysterics about New York but I can’t seem to figure out why you are about two steps from a panic attack as well.” Those hazel eyes stare into his. “It’s not Riko, you never did have the self-preservation needed to fear him.”

Neil snorts. “Riko may be Kevin’s demon, but he’s sure as hell not mine. I have bigger issues to worry about than him.”

“It’s not the stage.” Andrew pushes on as if Neil hadn’t spoken, “Your face is everywhere after Kathy’s show, so anyone who was looking in the right place would already know where you are.”

Neil freezes at the reminder; unwilling to follow that train of thought for very long lest he really does want to fall into a panic attack, Neil lets that comment go without reply. Because it’s getting really hard to convince himself that going to New York while his father potentially knows where his location is anything more than a death sentence.
“So what are you afraid of Neil?” Andrew concludes.

*Knives*, his mind immediately supplies. *His father’s cold eyes, Lola’s wicked gleaming smile, Romero’s cold indifference. Fire. Never being good enough. Leaving.*

“What are you afraid of?” He asks instead.

Andrew’s reply is immediate, “Heights.”

The answer is so jarring and ridiculous that Neil can’t stop the sharp laugh that bursts from his lips. Then he notices Andrew’s rigid posture and the too tight grip his hands have on the ledge now that they are not occupied with a cigarette and Neil notices that he’s being serious.

“We’re on a roof!” he swears incredulously.

“And whose fault is that?” Andrew clips. Neil can’t help it he laughs harder. “I really will push you off.”

He gives Andrew a wide grin that slowly slips from his face as he remembers the answer means his turn is due.

“That none of this is real,” he admits in a quiet voice. “That one day I’m going to wake up back in Millport and be nothing again.” That Neil Josten will never have existed and all he’d ever be is nothing.

Andrew is silent for a long time before he relights his cigarette and releases a cloud of smoke in the air above them.

“What if you never left that piece of shit bar in Arizona? What if Kevin had a fucking backbone? What if the world explodes and there is a zombie apocalypse?”

Neil’s mind scrambles to keep up with the new line of conversations, unable to see the sense in Andrew’s questions to the admission of his own fears. Andrew turns to him then and stares even as smoke trails from his nose and mouth.

“The world is full of hypotheticals, Neil. A bunch of what ifs that don’t mean a goddamn thing. Sunrise. Pain. Death. Those exist. Those are the only truths of the world. Stop worrying about the rest.”

He barely pauses for the words to register in Neil’s mind before he flicks the cigarette over the edge and stands to leave without another look in his direction. Neil stares blankly at the door as it slams shut behind the drummer and he’s left alone once more with his thoughts. He returns his gaze towards the city before him, Andrew’s words rattling in his head on repeat mixed with his own fears. Truth and real. Knives and pain. Hypothetical and nothing. Soon they start melting with the melody in his ears and he picks up his journal and starts Writing.

Despite having nearly two weeks to prepare, Neil felt like they were all scrambling to finish everything, leaving everyone’s nerves frayed. Kevin alternated between brutalizing taskmaster, demanding every song tweaked until it held to his above perfect standard (Andrew almost embedded one of his drumsticks in Kevin’s eye when the guitarist threatens to knock them away) and a
panicking mess, his body more alcohol than blood at any given point of the day. Andrew’s fuse was cut shorter than normal, even the slightest annoyance enough to earn his ire and risk a knife pointed in your direction. Kevin’s nagging and relentless late-night practices only wore it down more and more as he was forced to stay awake to watch over him and Neil in the studio until the sun rose.

And Neil, Neil was running on fumes stuck trying to appease both while nightmares plagued the few hours he did manage to get to sleep and carried on into his conscious mind. His old scars ached from new phantom pains of years past and he had gotten so little sleep that bags have taken permanent residence under his eyes and his patience worn so thin that he was ready to start stabbing people himself.

Safe to say that everyone gave them a wide berth, walking on eggshells lest they be the one to finally set them off like the ticking timebombs they were. Even Nicky for all his unshakable enthusiasm and easy going nature could be seen with a strained smile and crack in his facade. The only one who seemed unconcerned by it all was Aaron, who bitched about being dragged along despite having some sort of test he needed to study for. (Andrew predictably didn’t care, unwilling to leave Aaron behind where he couldn’t see him even if just for a weekend.)

The only positive side of it all was the rise in popularity EXY seemed to accrue in the time leading up to the concert. Their videos of the prior concert had gone viral thanks to Nicky’s call out to some pop star or whatever and more people started listening to their music and buying tickets for upcoming shows. It had gotten to the point where music media outlets were predicting that their latest single would climb the charts with the possibility of surpassing the Raven’s number one hit that had reigned for weeks. (When Neil had seen the article he smirked, knowing that it had without a doubt sent a certain Raven into a jealous fit.)

Otherwise, Neil kept his head down and gritted his teeth against it all in silence. He barely interacted with anyone outside of practice and his late-night sessions with Kevin, preferring what little free time he had falling apart in privacy or running. Even his game with Andrew seemed to hit another pause though less by choice and more because of lack of opportunity. Every time they had found themselves alone neither had the will or want to tear themselves open with the truth; so instead they opted for smoking in companionable silence while their feet dangled off the roof and their eyes lingered on the city below. Sometimes it was the best part of Neil’s day.

But then Kevin would come barreling in or Nicky would start blowing up their phone with new possible songs for the setlist and the moment would shatter. They would stub out what’s left of their cigarettes and return to reality without a word or look behind at the peace they somehow carved out.

If the concert wasn’t enough of a headache for Neil to deal with, what little of his mind not occupied by setlists or nightmares was filled with a persistent melody that has been there since the karaoke night. It had only grown more persistent after his conversation with Andrew, the lyrics fully fleshed out in a bit of inspiration and the music tweaked to accommodate them. By all accounts it was done besides a few minor tweaks he was bound to make and yet it still haunted his thoughts just as fiercely as it always had.

This is not the first song he’s written since music had reentered his life, not even the first among his time with the foxes, his journal filled with countless melodies and lyrics both half finished and not. Usually writing it down would be enough to calm his mind, to stay the need to scream out and play but not this song. Something about this one in particular was not content to remain unsung on a nameless page. Perhaps he would have to sneak into the studio one late night after Kevin had gone and try it out on the studio mics. Mabe then it would finally leave him be. But he can’t think about it now. Now his mind is filled with the waiting crowd just beyond the stage as they prepare to
go out for perhaps their biggest show of late.

Wymack walks across the stage behind the screen that hides them all from view. “Alright, Punks. Two minutes until showtime. Get a fucking move on it!” he stops in front of Kevin and produces a bottle of vodka from the bag at his side. “You’ve got 10 seconds. Go.”

The rate in which Kevin ingests the liquor is damn impressive even if Neil wonders about the futility of the man’s liver Wymack has to pry the bottle from Kevin’s grip even though he managed to down a quarter of the liquid inside.

“Listen because I’m only going to say this once. Forget that little smug bastard and focus on putting the show of your life out there. Impress the hell out of that crowd so you can rub it in his little snot nose the next time he opens his mouth about us go it?”

Neil and Kevin nod while Andrew does a little two-finger salute from his seat at his drums. Nicky grins and gives a thumbs up. “Like we planned anything different coach!”

“Good now get out there and show them what it means to be a fox.”

And they do. They go out on that stage in front of thousands of people both standing and sitting all around them and they play like it was their first and last show. Neil’s fingers ache and his throat feels scratchy but with every note, every chord, he pushes himself further faster and better. Kevin is right alongside him, the alcohol loosening his limbs from the tense grip of fear that held them and that media perfect smile coming out to play. Nicky outshines them both, coming on the stage with such energy and movement that Neil is amazed the man is still able to stand on his feet from all the running and jumping he has been doing across the stage. Even Andrew’s face twists with concentration rather than his usual blank mask, sweat running down his brow and darkening his blonde locks as they stick to his forehead. The crowd ate it up, their cheers growing louder with every passing song and leaving Neil’s ears ringing.

Then he spots Riko in the crowd.

He is just off the center of the stage, enough to leave himself in the blind spot of both Nicky and Andrew but in plain sight of Neil and Kevin when they twist just right. The smug bastard gives him a grin when Neil catches his eye, all bared teeth and a predatory gleam in his eyes. He had the gall to fucking wave at Neil and it’s almost enough for Neil to throw his guitar at him. And then there is a sharp jagged note in the air and Neil’s head snaps to see Kevin break a guitar string the moment his eyes find Riko.

Nicky pauses mid-lyric and looks in surprise at Kevin, following his eyes to Riko as well, Unlike Kevin, however, Nicky doesn’t react besides the slight widening of his eyes. He cracks a joke about Kevin playing so hard that the guitar up and quit on him to draw the audience in a laugh rather than stare as Kevin stood petrified on the stage. They pick up the song where they left up but Neil notices that Kevin’s playing lacked the finesse it had prior and picks up the slack by strumming in during Kevin’s segments to balance it out. It’s their sloppiest performance of the night and when it ends, the crowd is significantly more subdued than they had been and Riko’s smug grin wider.

Kevin immediately unstraps his guitar and moves backstage under the guise of restringing his instrument, but from where Neil stands is slowly struggling to regain control of his breathing. Neil knows that he won’t be able to play the closing number. Nicky must realize this as well because he starts chatting up the crowd and thanking them for such an amazing opportunity to grace this stage before all of them. Neil tunes him out as he drones in favor of glaring down at Riko who meets his gaze head-on with a raised brow. He wonders how it would look if he just dived off the stage and wrapped his fingers around his little neck.
Nicky’s arm around his shoulder brings him back from the thought. “And that’s why we decided to end this show a little different from all our others. Neil here will be giving you all a little something special!”

Neil’s head snaps to his in confusion. “What?” he hisses low so the microphone doesn’t pick it up.

“Just sing something as a distraction. We have no choice,” he whispers back, sending a quick glance at the now empty drums behind them.

Neil looks to see Andrew standing in front of Kevin, shoving a familiar bottle in his hands as he glares out in the crowd trying to spot Riko from his vantage point. The murderous look in his eyes has Neil believing that Riko is one lucky son of a bitch that he can’t see him.

“Neil Josten everybody!” Nicky announces before ducking off the stage as the crowd goes wild, throwing an apologetic smile over his shoulder as he leaves.

Neil stands frozen in the spotlight for a second, unable to process everything happening at once and mind racing with every song he’s ever played that could work. When the silent persists for too long, he gives the crowd a weak chuckle and asks if it’s okay that he closes the night for them. Their screams buy him a moment longer to scourer his brain for anything to play. Most of EXY’s songs that he knew well enough couldn’t be pulled off solo besides Nicky’s No More Bad Days, but the song was so personal to the singer that it felt wrong to use it now. In his panic, he looks to anyone for help. Riko looks smug, Nicky gives him a strained thumbs up, and Kevin ignores him completely. Then he meets Andrew’s eyes and the words ring deafeningly clear in his mind, slighting through the rising panic and doubt.


He turns to the mic, “I’m going to sing you guys a little something I’ve been writing lately. It’s a bit rough still and different from the usual style we play, but I hope you will like it all the same.” He slides the electric guitar from his shoulders and replaces it with his acoustic one.

Taking a deep breath, he strums the beginning notes. Letting his fingers readjust to the tune, he leans into the microphone and sings.

She said I really don’t mind if you have to leave my side
Cause I’ve been made to walk alone all the way through my life
And I never really thought about it

Neil can’t help but this of his mother, how she would feel seeing him on the stage and wonders what her eyes would look like now. If they would have been clouded over in anger like they had while on the road or if they would sparkle like they had in that kitchen when music was still so much more to them. He knows the answer but he hoped deep down she would understand why he chose this.

It’s because of you that I believe in my for the first time

He thinks of Kevin and Nicky and Matt and Dan who all pushed him to be better. Who believed he could take them all to the next level and belong. Who gave him the stage again and told him it was okay to sing. And he wanted it.

I know
Love’s always been sink or swim so I won’t

Say it’s over just as it begins

So tell me it’s real

Just tell me it’s real

Don’t let him wake up and find that this was all just a dream. Let him hold onto this for a bit longer. Let him soak in the stage lights and bleed his fingers dry on this guitar. Let him sing until his voice cracks and breaks. Let this be real. Let him be real.

He plays with everything he has, fingers flying across his guitar as he croons his prayer into the microphone. It feels like telling his truths with Andrew — like the whole world can see past his contacts and cheaply dyed hair and tattered clothing that hides all his scars. It is being seen as the broken mess he is. The music slows, the notes long and drawn out in the silent crowd.

Yes, I’m broke

Thinking “What if we never meet again?” and I froze

What if heaven doesn’t let me in?

Oh tell me it’s real

Just tell me it’s real

When he kicks back in he can hear the accompaniment of a soft beat of a bass drum and a rhythmic tambourine. He tilts his head to see Renee smiling at the drums and Nicky with a tambourine at his side. Shooting them a grateful smile, he turns back to the crowd and pushes the tempo to its crescendo, hand flying up and down the strings with reckless abandon.

Cause I know eventually

It’s all gonna happen how it’s meant to be

He knows how this ends. He knows. But even so, he just wants to hold on a little bit longer. Hasn’t he earned at least that much? Can’t he have this for just a while more?

You showed me what it feels like to be free

I know eventually, won’t you tell me?

He drops the guitar, it swinging wildly until it slides behind his back and his hands reach for the microphone. His hopes and fears. His salvation and his damnation. Everything cuts out and he squeezes what little of his heart is left into the final lines.

Tell me it’s real

Tell me it’s real

Tell me it’s real

The note dies in the silence of his breath, eyes closed and body drained over everything he had left to give, everything he had left to say or hope for. When he opens them, the crowd is stunned still before roaring into life and screams. The stage rumbles and Neil staggers at the weight of their
cries when it hits him full force. Everyone, standing or sitting, jumps to their feet and hollers their adoration. Unable to breathe, he stands shell-shocked and immobile as his mind races to catch up. He almost forgets about Riko entirely until he catches the Raven storm off, face twisted in a livid snarl and disappearing into the thicket of the still screaming crowd. Neil smiles like he’s won.

As Neil walks backstage, he is immediately swept in a hug by Matt and Dan.

“Oh my god that was amazing!” Matt grins, squeezing Neil harder.

“I knew you could sing but I didn’t know you could do that.” Dan shakes her head and ruffles his hair. “You’re going to be something kid. I just know it.”

Nicky pushes his way between them and pulls Neil to him. “That. That needs to happen again. All the time. Every time.” He stammers. “You need to start closing the shows. No, you will. Play that song, play more of your own stuff, sing fucking covers for all I care, just do that again.”

He starts shaking Neil, listing all the things he could do, how they can start reworking more of their songs to incorporate his style and give him more solo parts, but when Neil catches Andrew’s eyes, one of those intense gazes that twist his stomach and leaves him a little breathless for some reason, the words mute to a dull mumble. Nothing else matters at that moment besides that hazel meeting his hidden blue and the feeling of being perfectly seen. He smiles, easily and truly and this time he sees the way Andrew’s jaw ticks and his pupils darken ever so slightly before he turns away.
you’ve drunk it down and now you’ve spat it out (nothing tastes like the things you had)

Chapter Notes

Someone to Stay - Vancouver Sleep Clinic

No matter how many times Neil closes his eyes that night, sleep remains elusive, his body still thrumming from the adrenaline of playing and the cheers echoing in his mind despite it having been two days since that night on the stage. Perhaps it was the repeat performance the night before on their last night in New York or maybe it was how his fingers still itched from the song even after he put his guitar away for the night. Either way, he sits here now unable to sleep and the quiet choking around him. It’s odd that for someone who had lived his whole life in relative silence — where silence was key to survival — that he finds the quiet so choking now. Maybe it was another side effect of becoming a fox, his fellow foxes never quiet for long, either filling the room with chatter, laughter, or softly humming a song as they went about their day.

His apartment in comparison seemed like an empty graveyard, no signs of life and all piercing quiet he couldn’t drown out even with the soft murmur of a radio he had bought. It makes his skin crawl the longer he spent in the place which is why he only ever stopped long enough to shower and sleep most days. Concert nights made it worse. Tonight more so.

He throws off his blanket and reaches for a discarded pair of sweats and his shoes. If he wasn’t going to sleep then there was no point in laying around pretending he was. Pulling his sweats on and slipping his feet into the shoes, he pats his pockets for his keys, phone, and wallet before striding for the front door. In the corner of his eyes, he catches the late hour. Two in the morning means the bars would be emptying out and the streets would be flooded with people finding their ways home both drunk and not. Another face among the crowd wouldn’t raise any suspicions, though he’d have to be careful to avoid those hiding in the crowds just like himself. His eyes linger on the guitar resting by the couch as he turns to leave, but ultimately decides to leave it behind; the instrument would only serve to weigh him down as he slips out the door and heads for the street.

The murmur of the streets immediately puts his unease to rest, the lingering silence melting away from the jovial laughter of drunken men or women as they clamber into ubers and taxis to go home for the night. Neil weaves between these people for half an hour before the streets empty and it becomes too suspicious to linger any longer. The silence of the night still awaits him back home, so instead, he turns path towards the only other place he could go so late at night.

When he lets himself into the studio, he is alone, too late even for Kevin to practice and the security content to sit in their office rather than patrol the halls for criminals and runaways like himself. He slips into the practice room, fingers drumming over the guitars lining a wall, even now the familiar itch in his digits to pick one up and play a tune and maybe sing into the microphone. His hand slides to the drums next that occupy a corner or the room, fingertips brushing against the cool metal of the cymbals and the smooth plastic of the drumhead. He wonders if Andrew ever feels the impulse to just play when he touches a set of drums like Neil does with guitars.

He pulls out his phone and decides to ask.
By the time his thumb hits send, he’s reminded of the late hour and that even Andrew would be asleep by now. With a sigh, he tucks the phone back into his pocket and decides to leave the practice room. He settles himself on the loveseat in the lounge, his head lolling back on the sofa as his eyes skip over the too orange wall and the many photographs Dan had taped to the wall over the years. Every fox was featured on there, past and present, the wall acting more as a timeline for all the artists ever signed with the studio and tracking their successes and failures. Most he doesn’t recognize, artists before his time and no longer with the label, but others showcase a younger Dan and Palmetto. He can see every moment the band grew into what they are now, faces becoming slightly older and less round with childhood. He can see the moment EXY signs with the studio. A few weeks ago Neil’s own picture joined them. He realized at that moment that he would be forever immortalized as Neil Josten with that single photo, even long after he is gone.

His phone buzzes and he pulls it from his pocket to see a reply from Andrew.

*Why the fuck are you texting me at 2:30 in the goddamn morning*

*Couldn’t sleep.*

*So you thought texting me was a better alternative?*

*No I went for a walk and had a question*

*Which you didn’t answer by the way*

It’s a long time before Andrew answers so Neil figures he’s been ignored and the man went back to sleep. He’s about to slip the phone back in his pocket when it buzzes in his hand halfway in. The reply is only one word.

*Where.*

The phone goes silent again and Neil figures that’s that and puts the device away. He pulls out a pack of cigarettes, next, sliding one out and lighting it so the smoke can curl around him the air and fill his lungs. Not 15 minutes later Andrew strolls into the lounge looking sleep-rumpled and annoyed in a pair of oversized black sweats and a too big hoodie that swallows his hands. The glare that meets Neil’s eyes promises a slow death before the man settles himself in the open seat next to him. He takes the cigarette from Neil’s fingers for good measure and pulls a long drag.

Neil smirks in amusement. “You didn’t have to drive all the way here. A simple no would have sufficed.” Andrew blows the smoke in his face and his eyes water. “I was fine.”

He gets a withering look in response. “Yes.”

“Yes?” Neil snags the cigarette back and takes a drag of his own.

“The answer to your question. Yes.”

Neil is even more confused. “Then why did you come?”
“Is that your question?”

“No,” Neil lets the smoke drift between the two of them, twin tendrils floating in the air and obscuring his view of Andrew’s face just slightly. “When did you start smoking?” he asks finally.

“Juvie. Hoarded them like the cash they were for favors and trade and eventually got curious enough to try one.” Andrew takes the remaining butt and smokes it just before the filter. “Decided I liked the taste.”

“How old were you?”

“15.”

Neil nods, “I started when I was 16.”

“Why do you like the smell so much?” He stubs it out on the sole of his shoe and flicking it to the table.

“It reminds me of my mother,” Neil says softly, the smoke gone and yet lingering on his tongue and in the air. “It was the only thing that stayed constant.”

They went through hundreds of names, hair colors, accents, and eyes, but the faint smell of cheap cigarettes would always linger on her clothing even after a shower. The scent used to mean he was safe that someone was at his back that he could trust to keep it safe (safe as he could be anyways). Then it came to be a reminder of her fiery death, the smell lingering for days in his hair and skin no matter how much he scrubbed himself raw. Sometimes he could still smell it.

“What happened to her?”

Ashes. The sound her skin made as it ripped off the vinyl. Flames swallowing metal. The smell of her flesh cooling and the weight of her too hot bones in his hand.

“We had a run in with some of the men after us. We made it out but not before they landed a blow that would kill her.” His voice chokes up and he has to pause. “I-I didn’t know until we were almost to California and there was just so much blood and I couldn’t-”


“I burned her body in the car and buried her bones on a beach,” he finishes because if he continues any further then he’s not sure the words would come.

Thankfully the answer satisfies Andrew as he nods and leans back again the armrest, face bored but eyes with a hint of understanding and lack of judgment he would expect most would have after hearing such a story. Andrew remains unwavering and unaffected and it calms Neil’s nerves enough for his body to relax against the opposite arm.

He decides to ask the question he’s been unable to puzzle together since that first night at Eden’s. “Why are you and Aaron strangers?”

Those hazel eyes go blank. “Because we only met a few years ago.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Neil points out, “You’re twins.”

“Just because we’re twins doesn’t mean we grew up together.”

Of all the answers he expected, this was never one of them. “How?”
“My mother was never meant to be a mother. Got knocked up by some guy she couldn’t even remember and when the news came she was pregnant with no money for an abortion, she decided that she wasn’t quite ready to be a mother. She gave us up for adoption the first moment she could.”

“So then—”

“I’m not done. She gave us up but I guess the guilt must have been too much so she decided to go back,” Andrew’s eyes met his with a hard gaze. “For one.”

Neil’s stomach drops with the understanding of Andrew’s words. “She chose Aaron.”

“Give the man a prize,” Andrew drawls.

“Andrew.”

“Yes, Neil. She chose Aaron and I got shipped off to foster care to a slew of shitty homes and a handful of worse ones between brief bouts in juvie until I was 16. Then Aaron found out and decided he wanted to be a family so he tracked me down.”

“And that’s when you met?”

“No,” Andrew’s eyes grow hard. “I wanted nothing to do with his bullshit idea of brothers and family. I told him to leave me the fuck alone.”

“But you’re here.”

“So I am.”

“What changed?” Neil asks, wonders how much further Andrew is willing to give.

“Nicky’s god-fearing Christian parents somehow found out Tilda, Aaron’s mother, had another child and pressured her into claiming custody of me. My last home had just fallen through there wasn’t much of a choice between her or staying in juvie. I chose the prison with fewer bars.

“Too bad it wasn’t much better than the foster homes.” Neil’s brows shoot up in question. “You see Tilda had a bit of a drinking problem which turned into an anger problem which of course turned into a hitting problem.”

Anger floods Neil’s system and he sits up. “Did she hurt you?”

“Once,” Andrew shrugs like it doesn’t matter. “Before I let her know that laying another hand on me or Aaron would end in her regretting it.”

“Did she listen?”

“Well she’s dead so what do you think?”

Neil pauses. “Did you kill her?”

“Yes.” He says it with as much inflection as he would anything which is to say none at all. Neil doesn’t even blink. “Good.”

Andrew raises an eyebrow. “Careful Neil, some might think your casual acceptance of murder indicates a lack of a conscious.”
He shrugs, “Why? You warned her what would happen and she didn’t listen. She was a threat and you kept your word.”

“Some would think that makes me a monster.”

“I think it means that you keep your word. Not your fault they don’t know what that means.”

The gaze turns heavy and hot, hazel meeting blue with such an intensity Neil is afraid to blink in fear of breaking it. Andrew is the first to do so, tearing his eyes away to dig two cigarettes from his own pack in the pocket of his hoodie and lighting them both. He silently passes one to Neil and they sit in the silence of the studio, Andrew dragging in long deep drags and Neil letting the small tendril drift from his fingers before disappearing in the air. Eventually, both burn to the filters and Andrew stands to leave but instead of disappearing through the doors without another look like Neil has come to expect, he lingers until Neil stands and follows him to the car.

The drive back to Neil’s apartment is as quiet as the studio before save for the quiet directions Neil gives as Andrew drives. In less than 20 minutes Andrew is pulling up to Neil’s apartment complex with a small grimace twitching on his lips as he takes in the neighborhood. When those eyes meet his again something dark and dangerous flashes in them.

“You’re making my job harder;” he grounds out, fingers holding the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip.

Neil shrugs, “It was cheap and available.”

It must be the wrong thing to say because Andrew’s eyes narrow further. “No more late night excursions. If you feel the need to get up at two in the fucking morning, don’t.”

“You’re not my keeper.” Neil bristles. “I’m not Kevin, you don’t dictate when I go and where.”

“I don’t care. You made a deal and I’m holding up my end. The late night walks end. Now.”

Neil folds his arms across his chest and leans against the door. “No.”

“Too bad because if I find you out again, I’m going to chain you to the fucking bed.”

He is almost tempted to say kinky. Almost. Somehow he doesn’t think the joke would go over so well with Andrew at the moment.

“I don’t like being in there,” he admits. “It’s too quiet.” Too empty now that he’s been around the foxes for so long.

“No one is making you stay. Move out if you hate it so much.”

“And go where?” Neil scoffs, “I don’t exactly have time to go apartment shopping with Kevin’s practice schedule and that doesn’t exactly solve the problem anyway.”

“You have a key don’t you?”

Something twists in Neil’s stomach and his hand immediately flies to the key in his pocket, the metal seemingly burning at the touch. Sure, having the key meant he was free to come and go as he pleases, but showing up uninvited and moving in were two entirely different things. Even if for the slightest second Neil wanted to say yes.
Instead, he shakes his head, “I can’t just stay on your couch forever, Andrew. That’s not fair to you or your family. I’m fine. Really.”

Andrew’s jaw tightens and he pops the locks. “Get out.”

Neil unbuckles his seat belt and pushes himself out the car. The door barely closes before Andrew is peeling out of the lot and down the street. Neil only shrugs before returning to his apartment and falling asleep the moment his head hits the pillow.

It’s nearly a month later before Neil even thinks of their conversation in the lounge and Andrew’s strange reaction. Neither he nor Andrew brought it up again in the conversations after and soon it just slipped from his mind entirely. Instead, Neil threw himself into EXY, working day and night on what apparently was going to be their new single.

He can still feel the dizziness from when Wymack had sat him down in his office and asked if he wanted to record his song and release it as an official EXY single. At first, he’d thought the man joking until Kevin cornered him in the studio that night and berated him for not giving Wymack and answer already. It had been a few weeks into the process already and Neil still feels like the rug is about to be pulled out from under him. Pair that with Riko’s silence and Andrew’s scarcity outside their practice sessions and late night smokes and Neil’s nerves are beginning to fray at the edges.

Still, he pushes on, willing himself to take every opportunity he can before he finally does fall. It’s another of those days filled with studio work with Matt and Wymack when Kevin saunters in and picks up a pair of headphones to listen to the newest mix.

“Not bad but still has a long way to go,” he critiques. “The vocals at the end are sloppy and you’re not playing the guitar hard enough during the crescendo.”

Neil rolls his eyes. “Thanks, Kevin, I really appreciate the unwanted opinion.”

“If this is going to have my name on it and be the first track of our new album then it needs to fit the standard.”

He stumbles, “What?”

“Don’t act surprised. What did you think you were recording this for? Shits and giggles?”

“Wymack said it was a single.”

Kevin looks at him as if he answered his own question. Neil doesn’t make the connection. “What are singles but ways to promote upcoming albums.”

“That...” Neil feels his head grow light, “I don’t know how I feel about that.”

Kevin remains unimpressed. “You’re the new voice of EXY. Get over it.” he pulls off the headphones and drops them back on the table. “Now get up and come on. We’re leaving.”

Neil slides his own pair off, confusion transforming to wariness. “And where are we going?”

“Don’t know,” Kevin answers as he strides out of the room. “Andrew is waiting in the car.”

Neil pushes himself out of his seat and gives Matt and Wymack apologetic looks which they
“Don’t worry about it. We’ve been at it for a while a break might do us some good. Dinner later?” Matt smiles.

Neil throws a glance at the door. “I’ll text you and let you know.” He didn’t know what Andrew had planned and didn’t want to make additional plans without knowing where he was going and for how long.

“Awesome,” Matt holds out a fist and Neil bumps it before hurrying after Kevin out the door.

He’s not in the lounge so Neil guesses he must have headed down without him. Grabbing his guitar from its spot next to the couch, he heads for the stairs leading to the underground parking structure. Sure enough, Andrew’s sleek black Maserati is waiting in the spot closest to the stairs and Kevin in its front seat. One look through the back window and Neil can see Nicky and Aaron also in the car. It only adds to his confusion when he gets into the car and Andrew doesn’t spare a word before revving up the car and throwing it in reverse. He shares a look with Nicky who shrugs in response, not having any more information than Neil did. Cutting his losses, Neil watches the mirror for Andrew’s eyes but they remain impassively on the road as he weaves through traffic and merges onto the highway. Maybe this was the day Andrew decides to murder them all. Or at least Nicky whom he doesn’t have a deal with as far as Neil knows.

“Uh, Andrew?” Nicky pipes up. “Where are we going?”

Andrew turns the radio on max volume in response and all four of them exchange looks. Something tells Neil that wherever they’re heading it can’t be good. At least not for the four of them; somehow Neil doubt Andrew would let them drag him down with them.

When the car finally pulls to a stop it’s not in some field in the middle of nowhere like he had been expecting but rather in a small little suburb with green lawns and wide windows. The house they pull up to is a two-story grey building with a stone path leading up to a wide wrap around porch and a front door tucked in the side. Above that looks to be a balcony connected to two of the upstairs rooms, both with wide glass door and angled to give a slight view into the other room if standing at its opening.

Andrew pulls into the driveway and switches off the ignition of the car. He doesn’t say a word to any of them as he unbuckles his seatbelt and exits the car. He’s halfway up the path before any of them manage to scramble out of the car after him. Andrew waits for them bored as they exchanged hesitant and confused glances among each other as they approach him on the porch. Once the last of them climb the steps, he produces a set of keys from his pocket and proceeds to unlock the door.

“Where the hell are we,” Aaron pipes up for the first time in 30 minute drive it took them to get here.

Andrew flicks a disinterested eye his brother’s way before he pushes the door open and steps out of the way to give them all a view of an empty room. He lights a cigarette as he leans against the wall. “There are 4 bedrooms to choose from. Three on the second floor and one on the bottom. First come first serve. Go.”

Neil watches as all three of his companions freeze at his side, eyes darting amongst themselves before they rush into action in the next breath. They shove and push each other to be the first through the threshold and scramble through the empty space in search of the coveted target. Neil watches on in undisguised amusement even as confusion weight heavy on his mind. The yelling
begins a second later.

Andrew turns his head to Neil. “Aren’t you going in.”

“Should I be?” Neil returns his gaze. “I don’t entirely know what’s going on besides that your family is weirdly competitive.”

“You say that as if you’re not.”

Neil shrugs, “Besides the point. Why are we here Andrew?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Andre raises a brow. “We’re moving.”

“And?”

The look Andrew gives him is unimpressed. “Does a little rabbit need its ears checked? I said we as in all of us.”

Then it clicks. “You sold your house.”

“Obviously.”

“And bought a new one.”

“As one does when they sell their old one.”

“With an extra room.” At that Andrew says nothing, pulling a deep drag from the smoke. “Andrew-”

Neil is suddenly reminded of their conversation, the dangerous look in Andrew’s eyes when he caught glimpses of Neil’s neighborhood for the first time, that white-knuckled grip when Neil refused to stop his late-night excursions, the odd way Andrew had seemed to drop the matter when he didn’t get his way. And now this. Andrew had sold his home and bought a new one with room for him because he said he couldn’t inconvenience his family by staying on their couch (not that this wasn’t an inconvenience but one he had no control over.) He is offering Neil a place in his home — a space that is entirely his but also theirs. Andrew had done all of this and Neil was going to be gone at the end of the year. He was going to be dead and Andrew would have done this all for nothing. It was the nicest thing anyone had probably done for him and it was too much.

“Breathe, Neil.” Andrew’s voice cuts through the haze of his thought and he finds that he can’t.

His lungs can’t expand large enough to pull in the air her needs without his chest caving in under the weight of Andrew’s revelation. Too much. It was all too much for a boy meant to die by the end of the summer.

“I said breathe,” his voice commands, a palm reaching around his neck and fingertips curling themselves at the base of his skull.

Slowly he draws in his first breath. After a couple of more his breath falls into its own pattern, slowly releasing the hold it had on his lungs and letting them fill with oxygen once more. When he can stop the shaky breaths, another hand reaches for his and pushes a metal key into the palm.

“This means nothing other than a way for me to shorten that leash of yours. If you’re so
determined to get yourself killed before our time is up then you need to be in sight at all times.” Those fingers force his to curl around the key and the one as his neck squeeze for a moment before pushing him toward the house. “Go.”

His feet carry him in on a mental daze, mind still reeling from the lack of oxygen his panic had robbed it of and the heat still buzzing in his skin from where Andrew had touched. He registers the three other occupants still congregated outside the door of the sole first-floor bedroom, all locked in what appears to be a heated argument, before he moves to the stairs and continues towards the three remaining bedrooms. Vaguely he remembers the balcony and the room attached to it and his feet point him in the general direction he thinks the furthest of the two rooms would be. If he remembers correctly the room should give him a vantage of the street, his mind already supplying the tactical advantages of the room. It would give him a view of who comes and goes while also not being easily accessible from the ground floor. The balcony would also prove useful if he needed to make a quick escape from the second floor, allowing him to decrease the risk of injury if he needed to jump.

He tries the door and notices that it’s locked. His mind rattles with what Andrew said that there were four bedrooms to choose from but by his count, there were five. Perhaps Andrew had already staked his claim before the rest of them had even arrived. Unbothered, Neil moves for the door next to it. He would lose the easy sight, but he could still see quite a bit of the street and have that escape option. When he tries the handle of this door it turns under his hand and the door swings open. It’s a decent size room, bigger than the one he currently resides in, easily fitting in a queen bed and still leaving enough room to walk around in. There is also the wide sliding glass door that allows sunlight to pour in and cast the room in a soft glow; it also gives him a gaze into Andrew’s room which he sees is already filled with a few boxes. Turning around in the space, Neil decided that this is the room he wants.

Of course, that’s when Aaron’s voice carries up from the stairs accompanied by the sound of loud stomping. “Fine! Keep the room. If that’s the case then I want the one with the balcony!”

He reaches the doorway and surprise flickers across his face at the sight of Neil before it twists into disgust then anger. “What the fuck are you doing?” he snarls, his whole body twisting in such a way that Neil can’t help thinking of Andrew’s own blank one.

“Choosing a room,” he answers simply because it’s the truth and he knows it will piss him off more.

“The fuck you are. You’re not living here.”

Neil’s hackles rise, “Really and you are the sole decider of this?”

“ Shut up. This is our house. Family only.”

“And Kevin is family?” Neil snorts.

“More than you, you fucking freak.”

Neil shrugs, willing his face to remain blank despite the itch of his father’s smile threatening to pull lips. “Whatever problem it is you have with me staying take it up with your brother. He’s the one who gave me the key and told me to pick a room.”

Aaron lunges for him and Neil only just manages to move out of the way in time for the fist flying for his eye to miss. The commotion must be loud enough to draw the others’ attention because in the next moment Kevin and Nicky are in the doorway. They get one look at the scene before them
before they dive in to pull the two of them apart and Nicky starts yelling for Andrew.

“Andrew! Get up here quick!”

“Let go of me, Nicky!” Aaron struggles against his cousin’s hold on him. “Let me smash those fucking teeth in.”

Neil pushes Kevin’s arm out of the way it had extended in from of him as a means of separating the two, not restricting any of Nei’s movement. Maybe it’s because Neil isn’t struggling to get at Aaron with as much fever as he is to him or maybe it’s because Neil’s face is cracked with his father’s bloody grin.

“I don’t know what your problem is with me and frankly, I don’t care. But I’m not afraid of your brother so why the fuck would I be afraid of you?”

Aaron growls and pushes harder against, Nicky, almost managing to slip free before Kevin rushes to help restrain him. “I’ll fucking kill you, you piece of shit.”

“That’s quite enough of that,” Andrew drawls from behind them, “Don’t make me put you two in time out.”

Neil snorts, “It’s him that has the problem, not me.”

Andrew slides a bored eye his way, “And yet you continue to antagonize him.”

“He makes it too easy,” he shrugs.

Aaron leaps forward again but only manages to get a couple of inches. Andrew moves further into the room, coming to stand in the middle between them.

“What exactly is the problem here? Besides Neil’s mouth starting fights he can’t finish that is.”

Neil snorts but otherwise remains silent at the glare Andrew gives him. He surrenders with a huff. As if Aaron would ever be a challenge, even with his muscle mass similar to his twin’s.

“He’s not staying here,” Aaron bites out, sending a scathing look in Neil’s direction.

“Yes he is.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.” Andrew offers in that annoyingly final tone.

Aaron seems to recognize the futility of arguing that subject further because he switches tactics in the next breath. “Then he can’t have this room.”

“And why’s that?” Andrew turns to face Aaron fully. “Did I not say to go choose a room? Did I not say first come first serve? Well, it looks like he chose and he was first.”

“Fuck you,” Aaron spits in his face.

Andre remains impassive. “Don’t blame me for your lack of hearing abilities.” he steps closer into Aaron’s space. “And don’t try throwing another punch because you won’t like what happens the second time.”
Surprise flashes on Aaron’s face before confusion and fear takes its place. “You won’t do a thing. We have a deal,” he says with mock bravado.

At that Andrew’s blank face shatters and twists with pure rage. The fear in Aaron’s face is reflected in the two holding him as they quickly let go and flinch away. “You’re right, but that doesn’t mean it negates his. So try something again and I’ll let him have a shot at you in return.”

Aaron’s eyes dart to Neil’s and he smiles at him, more teeth than mirth. Aaron’s lips curl into a growl before he looks back at his brother. “Fine, your freak can stay. But keep him the fuck away from me.”

“Trust me, the feeling’s mutual.”

Aaron levels him with another death glare before shoving past him on his way out the door. All four of them watch him go in silence. Andrew looks at the remaining two. “Anyone else have a problem?” Neither say anything. “Then get in the car; we’re leaving.”

They all pile back into the car wordlessly, Nicky subtly slipping into the backseat between Neil and Aaron in case they feel the need to continue their little spat from earlier. Andrew drives them all back to their (now) old house and tells them all to get out and start packing their shit because the movers would be there at three. He waits until Neil moves to the front seat before pulling off the curb and starts his way to Neil’s apartment.

Deciding this may be the best (and worst) time for their game, Neil asks, “What’s your deal with Aaron?”

Andrew looks at him briefly before directing his attention back to the road. “Same as yours, protection.”

“And what do you get in return?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because this all seems detrimental to your end of the deal. You gave us both protection and yet insist on sticking us together when Aaron would rather chew his own arm off. Or mine. Probably mine.”

“I promised protection, not comfort. If either of you have a problem that’s on you, not me.”

“It’s going to end in bloodshed you know that right?”

“As long as it doesn’t end in permanent damage.” He drones not looking once.

Neil huffs, “You still didn’t answer my other question.”

“And why should I?”

“Because I answered yours.”

His jaw tenses and jumps. “He has to listen to what I say, no matter what it is or why. He follows my word to a T. Though he seems to think that there is room for interpretation to those rules.”

The dark look that crosses those eyes tells Neil that this is a long-standing argument between the two brothers, and that even he cannot begin to understand the intricacies of their relationship.
Neil decides to leave it at that.

“Buying a house goes beyond our deal.”

“I didn’t buy a house because of our deal.” His tone is flat and warning, but Neil doesn’t listen.

“Oh yeah? Then why did you buy the new house?”

“Because the rooms are bigger and it has a balcony.” The answer sounds prepared and it makes Neil want to tear his hair out.

“Andrew I’m serious. This is too much. We agreed you’d watch my back in return for occupying Kevin. Making sure I’m not walking around at night and providing room and board goes beyond that.”He sighs frustrated. “I don’t have anything left to give and I refuse to let you continue to give me something for nothing. That’s not fair.”

“And when has life ever been fair?” Andrew sneers, yanking the car over in a sharp lane change.

“Andrew.” His eyes snap to his, cold fury in those hazel orbs as they stare into his own.

“I hate you,” he bites out. He turns back to the road without another word.

The words are as full as venom as they usually are, the stiffness in his shoulder and jaw showcasing the barely kept anger at bay, and yet Neil can’t find himself believing in them all the same. It’s almost enough to tug a smile on his lips which he quickly hides behind a hand as he turns towards the window the stare out at the passing by cars.
you said you, read me like a book but the pages all are torn and frayed

Chapter Notes

I'm Not Okay (I Promise) - My Chemical Romance

It appears that moving houses is more complicated than Neil’s ever considered before. For him it had always been easy to move from place to place, everything that he could possibly need fitting into a single bag at his hip and now a guitar on his back. This is apparent when Andrew and he went into his apartment to pack up his stuff and it only took 10 minutes or so before Neil had gathered everything he needed to go. In the end, Neil had his duffle bag, guitar, and the few bags of clothes Nicky had bought (still largely unworn) in his hands as Andrew leans against the doorway.

When asked about the furniture, Neil shrugged and said that it came with the apartment and could stay. He could see about getting an air mattress or something when he got settled in, but the floor would hardly be the worst place he’s slept in and honestly probably just as comfortable as the bed he had been using. Apparently, Andrew was unimpressed by this idea and decided that their next stop would be a furniture store where he was forced to purchase a full bedroom set or have it purchased for him no matter his protests in the matter.

Once their purchases were squared away and delivery dates set for later that evening or tomorrow morning, they finally drive back to the house where the other three are in complete chaos trying to get everything into boxes and bags as men lift bigger pieces of furniture into moving trucks. Nicky curses in German as he shoves row after row of dishes into a box while Kevin loots around in the fridge and decides what to toss and what is salvageable. Andrew heeds none of them any mind, especially not Aaron who shoves him aside into the kitchen to hand Nicky another box. Instead, he climbs the stairs and makes for his room, Neil following at his heels rather than staying behind amidst the chaos.

When he unlocks the door Neil sees that the room is almost completely empty save for a few boxes resting on the floor next to the door, which, upon closer inspection, Neil sees the word “books” written in a loopy scrawl. He raises an eyebrow; he didn’t take Andrew for much of a reader but looking around the room to spy three very large empty bookcases and the number of boxes labeled books he thinks that reader might be a bit of an understatement. Andrew doesn’t comment on Neil’s perusal, moving to shift one of the boxes into his arms with a grunt and taking to downstairs to the car. It takes another three trips to clear the room (even with Neil’s help) and another four before the car is packed to the brim and the five of them load up for the new house. From there it is a whirlwind of boxes, people, and music as they work around one another to fill the empty space with furniture and make it feel like a home.

After all is said and done, Neil shutters himself away in his new room, a newly built bed and mattress sitting against the wall right in front of the sliding glass door. It was the sole piece of furniture in the room, the only one Andrew was determined to have delivered the same day. He drops himself on the mattress, it soft beneath his hands and dipping slightly under his weight. His fingers run over the quilted texture of the white comforter and dig into its softness. At his feet is his guitar and duffle bag in addition to the several bags of new clothing that Nicky demanded he put away in his closest or else they would go another shopping excursions altogether. (Something tells Neil that it’s an inevitability either way.)
His head thumps against the wall and he turns his gaze to the sliding door. For the moment, the evening air is still, the sky bleeding from red to orange to pink as the sun slowly sinks under the trees. A movement catches his eyes as he sees the door to Andrew’s room slide open and its occupant moving out towards the balcony railing with a lit cigarette in his fingers. Neil moves to join him, lingering in his own doorway in case Andrew protested to his presence. When none comes, he slides his door shut behind him and moves closer to his side.

Andrew lights another cigarette and hands it to Neil who murmurs his thanks. They stand there in silence for a while, watching the sun sink and the smoke dissipates in the air while the hushed sounds of their housemates (Neil still isn’t quite used to the idea) from within the house, Nicky’s music emanating from his room downstairs and the general hustle and bustle of boxes shuffling around.

“Did you finish unpacking?” Neil asks after his cigarette ashes to the filter.

“As much as I can be bothered for the time being. Still need to load the bookshelves again.”

Neil hums, “I didn’t know you were such an avid reader.”

“Not much to do in jail besides reading and exercising and they only allow you so much time to do one.”

“So you picked up the habit when you were in jail?”

Andrew levels him with a look as he blows a couple of smoke rings. “Are you taking a turn?”

“Sure,” he shrugs.

“No. I picked it up as a kid. One of the foster homes used to kick us out for hours on end and a library was a good place to be without raising suspicion. Read through the entirety of its children’s fiction section by the time it was off to the next home. The habit stuck.”

Neil nods and slides down the railing to rest his back against it and drapes his arms over his knees.

“What’s your favorite book?” Andrew asks.

“No idea,” he answers honestly. “Was never much of a reader and books were too heavy to carry with us. The closest thing I had was a sketchbook and even that my mother tried to ditch on multiple occasions.”

“Why?”

“Because I would use it to write songs in even after she tried to beat the music from me.”

Andrew’s eyes go hard and his muscles tense. “She abused you.”

He weighs his answer carefully, knowing how his relationship with his mother appeared to others (and wasn’t entirely wrong either) and its more complex nature to himself. The answer was never easy. “Yes and no,” he settles on. “It’s complicated.”

“Abuse is abuse no matter the intent or reasoning behind it.”

Neil nods his head in acceptance of Andrew’s reasoning but know that it could never be so
black and white to him, not when it sometimes was the only thing that kept him alive.

“You don’t agree.” It’s not a question so Neil doesn’t answer him.

“What about you?”

“What about me, Neil? I thought I made my relationship with my mother pretty clear.”

“Do you write songs,” Neil clarifies.

“Yes.” Andrew stubs his cigarette on the railing.

“Really?” He slides his eyes closed and draws in a breath of that lingering smoke before it floats off. “I’d like to see them one day.”

Andrew says nothing to this, shifting his weight to rest on the railing while the last of the sunlight sinks with the sun. Neil doesn’t know how long they stay like that, the silence comforting and relaxing enough to cause his head to droop and his breath to even out. He must fall asleep because the next thing he knows Andrew is crouched before him and calling his name.

“What,” he mumbles, words sticky on his tongue from sleep.

“Go to bed.”

“M’fine.” He rubs at his eyes.

Andrew gives him a blank glare. “I’m not carrying your ass to bed when you fall asleep outside like a moron. Go to bed.”

Neil grumbles but picks himself up. “Fine. I’m not even tired.” He thinks it would have been more convincing if it wasn’t interrupted by a yawn. Andrew raises a brow and dares him to argue further. “Yeah yeah. Alright, I’m going.”

Neil waves him off as he slips back into his room. He’s asleep the moment his head hits his pillow, fully clothes and shoes still on his feet. He can’t be sure but he’s pretty damn sure he felt Andrew’s smugness radiating from the other room.

If Neil has learned one thing in the two weeks at the house, it is that living with Andrew and his family is weird. Perhaps weird was the wrong word, lively is a more apt term for the near constant chatter present at any given time. Nicky was the biggest source of it all, constantly and loudly talking to everyone he came across in the house no matter the hour, blasting music when he cooks or showers, and demanding anyone in the living room to join him for a movie night. Neil finds that he doesn’t mind as much, way less than the others who have perfected the skill of ignoring the man after living with him for so long. Nicky found a willing victim in Neil.

Kevin, on the other hand, seemed to think that living together means that Neil is available for nonstop practices. He has to sneak out of the house in the early morning (way early for even him to be up) to get in his daily morning runs as it was the only time of day that Kevin was guaranteed to leave him alone. Otherwise, he finds himself combed into the den as they pour over song after song until someone rescues him; most of the time it’s Andrew who pulls Neil away for a smoke break to
spite Kevin, not that Neil minds in the least.

The only one who seems to leave him alone is Aaron who fluctuates between pretending he doesn’t exist or antagonizing him every time they are in the same room. Neil cannot begin to count the amount of time things have almost come to blows between the two of them only to be stopped by a cool look from Andrew or Nicky and Kevin’s direct intervention. Neil’s inability to be quiet around Aaron doesn’t help but the alternative is letting his smug smile hang in the silence and really Neil’s always been a bit of an instigator.

All in all, Neil finds himself liking the changes the move has brought to his life, most of all the late night smoking with Andrew on their shared balcony. It is the only thing that has remained constant if not increasing in frequency. Sometimes they continued their game of truths, trading little things back and forth like their favorite color (black and grey) or their preferred genre of music (alternative rock and folk). Sometimes they don’t ask any questions at all, freely giving truths to the other for nothing, like the places Neil’s seen or the different cities in California that Andrew had lived in. But more often than not the two of them would sit in companionable silence, neither feeling the need to fill the air with anything other than smoke and breathing. On those nights Neil would bring his guitar.

Things remain relatively calm for a while, another few gigs played here and there when they can squeeze in the time, mostly small venues like bars or clubs. Neil does start closing the shows at Nicky’s insistence, singing more of his own songs or covering ones he heard on the radio and particularly enjoyed. Their shows start selling out more and more as their popularity skyrockets, nearly tripling their revenue with no signs of slowing down. And then Neil’s single drops.

He had been working with Kevin to put the final touches on it in the last weeks before the latter finally deemed it worthy enough for the EXY name. Wymack releases it the following day. The response is instantaneous and bigger than anyone could have expected it to be. It tops the charts within hours for most played song digitally, beating out the Raven’s latest single by millions. Neil would be smug if he wasn’t so shocked. As it is, Neil handles his surprise much in the same way he handles everything else that overwhelms him; he runs. Well, he goes to the gym to run since Andrew remains adamant about his “no running at stupid hours of the night and in neighborhoods he doesn’t know alone” rule. It seems they reach a compromise with Neil joining a 24 hours gym with an inside track.

He’s at said gym on a rare afternoon that Kevin hadn’t commandeered when the paparazzi accosts him the moment he walks out the doors. Cameras are shoved in his face as a series of flashes go off and blind his vision with glowing white dots and swirls. He raises a hand against them but the light surrounds him as bodies move closer, entrapping him in a circle with no exit. The worst is the shouting.

“Neil! Neil over here! How does it feel to be considered one of the hottest upcoming artists?”

“Neil! What does Tell Me It’s Real really mean? Who were you singing to?”

“Are you single? Is there a secret Mrs. Josten we don’t know about? The world wants to know!”

Neil tries to push onward, ignoring their heated and fervent questions as he ducks his head and makes toward the sidewalk. They push harder against him, tightening their ranks until he can’t move without touching them. He can feel his chest tighten and his blood spiked with adrenaline. If he doesn’t get out soon, he’s going to start throwing punches or break down into a panic attack.
Probably both. His fingers curl into a fist and he tenses for the first blow when a reporter cuts through his thoughts.

“Josten, what do you have to say in defense of the rumors of the ongoing feud between you and Raven lead singer Riko Moriyama? Is it true that Kevin froze at the show in New York because he was there?”

He should ignore it. Treat it like all the other nonsense questions that were being directed his way. Should.

“The only thing that happened in New York is that jealous piece of shit showing up in hope of throwing us off our game.” He levels a cool glare at the reporter. “As you can clearly see it didn’t work.”

“Are you saying you’re not afraid of Riko?”

“I’m saying that I don’t have time for his petty games. He has something to say to me then he can say it to my face. If not he can fuck right off. I’m here to play music.”

“And if he challenges you to a battle of the bands?”

“What is this the early 2000s? We’ve already got our shows booked, thanks.”

He pushes forward using the distraction of his argument to break free from the circle at last. The moment he’s through, he can feel the need to escape overpower nearly every other instinct he has except for survival. And right now they seem pretty much on the same page. Still, it’s not enough for him to pull away without giving the pack of wolves one final parting word.

“Besides, I told him we were coming and it looks like we’re here.”

He gives them his father’s smile and forces himself to leisurely stroll away. The second he’s clear from their gaze, his feet hit the pavement like his life depends on it. It’s hours before he stops.

By the time his body collapses from sheer exhaustion, his hair is plastered to his skin from sweat and his legs wobbled under his weight. He finds himself on a bench in some park he doesn’t recognize and alone without another person in sight. For a moment he sits there, letting the adrenaline leave and his body shuddering in its cool wake. Breathing is laborious but even and after a moment it’s enough to allow his body to be pushed upright.

His phone buzzes from his packet and he absentely pulls it out and is met with a barrage of notifications. The bulk of them from Kevin, a flurry of missed calls and a text demanding to know what he did. Among them, Neil sees a single missed call from Andrew, a couple of text from Matt that claims Neil is his hero, and a video from Nicky that looks to be of Kevin hyperventilating before chugging a bottle of vodka. He decides to respond to Andrew first.

The phone rings a couple of time before the other end of the line picks up in silence. For a second there is nothing more than their breathing.

“Where,” comes the eventual reply.
Neil cranes his neck for a street sign before he rattles off the closest cross streets he can find. “I’m sitting on a bench.” He adds.

“Wait there.” the line predictably goes dead and Neil lets the phone fall into his lap as he waits.

Andrew doesn’t make him wait long as a recognizable sleek black car pulls up to the curb and a familiar mop of blonde hair steps out. He barely has enough energy to raise his head at Andrew’s appearance let alone get up. As Andrew closes the last of the distance between them, he crosses his arms over his chest and stares down at Neil. To most, he would look bored but Neil sees the stiff set of his shoulders and the flicker of dark anger in those eyes. He thought Neil had run and was pissed.

“I didn’t run,” he finds himself reassuring, uncomfortable with the idea that Andrew had thought he would and did. Andrew raises a brow and Neil huffs. “Okay I ran but it was more of a running off my general panic rather than running to start a new life kind of way. I even called.”

Andrew’s face remains blank.

“I wouldn’t do that to you, not now.” He frowns. “I wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye.”

It shocks him by how much that’s true. And it shakes his very core. He shoves the thought down to deal with later (or never). Something flickers in Andrew’s eyes and replaces the look of anger which Neil is not sure is better or worse.

“I hate you,” he growls, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“No you don’t,” Neil smirks. “You wouldn’t be here if that was true.”

“I hate you 90% of the time,” Andrew answers coolly.

“And the other 10% ?”

Andrew says nothing and Neil decides to let it go and lifts himself from the bench with a grunt. Andrew watches but makes no move to help. Once Neil is upright and steady on his feet, Andrew’s eyes roam over him inspecting for invisible wounds that aren’t there.

“I’m fine,” Neil offers.

Anger fills those eyes once more. “92%.”

Neil laughs and it’s almost enough to throw his balance over again if not for Andrew’s hand that shoots out to steady him. When he’s sure Neil’s not about to brain himself on the sidewalk, he pushes the runner towards the car and they climb in without another word. Neil watches as Andrew seamlessly starts the engine and slides the car back into traffic in one move. After a few minutes, he can see the familiar signs of their neighborhood begin to form. He remembers what came to mind during his run.

“No,” he says carefully. “Not home. Take us to the studio.”

Andrew flicks him a look in questions but wordlessly changes directions for the studio. Neil pulls out his phone and dials Nicky; the answer is almost immediate.

“Noel, where the fuck are you?! We saw the video from those reporters and everyone was
worried when you didn’t answer the phone.”

“I’m fine.” He can hear Nicky scoff at the answer. “Andrew picked me up and we’re heading for the studio. Look can you meet us there? And text everyone to do the same.”

“Uh sure Neil I can, but what’s up?”

“I’ll tell you when everyone gets there.”

“Okay...” Nicky says skeptically. “See you soon I guess.”

“Bye Nicky.” Neil hands up the phone and taps it to his chin in thought. The world thought they were afraid of Riko and his Ravens — thought the foxes were beneath them and he intended to prove them all wrong.

When they arrive at the studio, everyone is gathered in the lounge waiting for their arrival. Matt is the first to notice their appearance, jumping from the couch to envelop Neil in a bone-crushing hug. “Dude you scared the shit out of us! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Neil shrugs.

“Ha!” Allison jumps up. “Pay up Boyd.” Neil furrows his brows as he watches Matt groan as he slips a 20 dollar bill from his wallet and hands it to Allison. She grins wildly at him. “Thank you for being so damn predictable.”

Neil decides that it’s better if he doesn’t know.

“Great you two are here, now will someone explain why I’m here and not in my office dealing with the shit show you already created today?” Wymack bellows over their chatter.

Instinctually Neil takes a step back and finds himself bumping into Andrew who looks unbothered by it. He notices the way Nicky’s eyes widen at that ever so slightly. Neil allows himself only a moment of comfort at the solid force at his back before taking a deep breath and stepping further into the room.

“I want us to put on a show. All of us. Not as EXY or Palmetto\ but as Fox Records. I’m talking about a full-on collaboration on songs, music, and even solo acts from anyone who wants to do it.”

The chaos erupts almost immediately, both sides jumping to their feet in loud protest at the preposterous idea, the loudest among them Seth, Allison, Nicky, and Kevin.

“No way and I working with that megalomaniac,” Allison sneers with a wave at Kevin.

“As if I would sully myself with your mediocre playing and singing,” Kevin dismisses.

“Watch your mouth Day,” Seth growls. “Don’t act like your piece of shit band is so hot now that you got a single hit.”

“Please, and how many hits do you have? Oh, that’s right, not a single one.” Nicky scoffs.
“Careful Hemmick,” Dan warns.

“Guys, I think we all need to step back and take a break,” Renee tries to placate both sides.

“Why we’re not the one who think they’re too good for us.”

“We are leagues above you.”

“Say that to my face you-”

“Enough.” Neil’s voice is sharp and loud, an edge to his tone that has never been there. “This, this is why everyone thinks Fox Records is nothing but a joke. Because you all are too worried about tearing yourselves down instead of uniting and facing the bigger picture.”

Everyone goes silent in shock.

“Do you know what they say about us? That we’re nothing but a bunch of worthless criminals that have no business being in the music industry. Every day, every damn day people like Riko or those reporters are out there putting us down and I’m fucking sick of it.”

“What do you know,” Seth gets in his face, “You’ve been here what a few months? What the fuck do you know about being a fox?”

Several cries of protest rise up at that but Neil pushes on undeterred. “That’s right, Seth. I’ve only been here a few months and I can already tell what a dysfunctional mess you all are so what the fuck is stopping you all from noticing it as well and fixing it?” No one has an answer to that. “Well, I say fuck that. Fuck proving them right. They think they can fuck with us and push us aside like trash? Fuck That.”

He grits his teeth in a growl, looking in each of their eyes to see his anger reflected in all of them. “I want a show that will leave them at our feet begging us for more. I want the venue to be rattling with their cries for our name. I want the whole world to be aching for more. I want to show them what it means to be a fox.”

He pauses, sliding his eyes closed and taking a breath to calm the rising rage in his chest. “So what will it be?” He asks the heavy silence. “Will you help me show them?”

No one moves and for a second Neil thinks that he has failed. Then Matt places a hand on his shoulder and squeezes, a wild smile on his lips and his eyes bright.

“Hell yes.” He swears with conviction.

He is joined by Dan who places her hand on top of Matt’s, same bright eyes and feral grin. “It’s about time the world began to fear us.”

“Ah shit, Neil after a speech like that how is anyone supposed to say no?” Nicky teases as he slings an arm around Neil’s neck. “I’ve got your back.”

He looks to the rest.

Renee smiles. “I’m in.”

Allison smirks, “As if I’ll let you all show me up on the stage.”

Seth glares until Allison elbows him. “Fine. I’ll play the fucking show.”
Neil turns to Kevin who stares at him intently. “*Riko won’t like this,*” he says in French.

“*Fuck Riko,*” Neil answers in English. “*He’s held us back enough. Time to show him that he didn’t break us. That he didn’t break you.*”

He gives a pointed look at Kevin’s hand and watches as his friend clenches and unclenches it. When he meets Neil’s eyes again, he nods. The foxes cry in triumph and Neil feels himself sagging under the relief. His eyes track over them all as they excitedly begin to plan possible song choices and lineups before he looks to Andrew, who meets his gaze in direct stare into his own. His face remains impassive and blank as he stands apart from his jovial fellow foxes and watches on with disinterest. Neil wants to go over and say something when Wymack’s claps thunder over the room.

“So we’re all in agreement then.” The foxes nod. “Great, I’ll get started on booking a venue then. Something big enough to fit all of your egos and your fans. Now get out of my studio and start getting to work. I still have a storm to weather.” He glares at Neil who shrinks back.

“Sorry Coach.”

“If I actually believed that I would be better off,” Wymack sighs. “Go. Be gone all of you.”

He turns on his heels and stalks back into his office to awaiting phone calls. Multiple if the incessant beeping was anything to be trusted. Neil catches Andrew’s eye and the latter angles his head to the roof. Neil nods and slowly extracts himself from the room and follows after the drummer.

As they settle themselves on the room, two cigarettes lit and four feet dangling from the edge, Andrew finally speaks.

“What are you planning?” His tone is flat but Neil can hear the slight tinge of curiosity.

“I’m tired of Riko thinking he can do whatever he wants just because he’s talented. It was old as a kid and it’s old now. He crashed our show, talks down on us every chance he gets and terrorizes Kevin at our own show. I’m done.”

Andrew hums, taking a deep drag and turning his gaze away. “That is remarkably unrabbit like for a supposed rabbit. It makes my job harder when you start painting a target on your own back.”

Neil doesn’t back down. “Be that as it may, I’m not going to be silent any longer. It’s time Riko got a heavy dose of reality. Besides, I’m done running remember?” Andrew turns to him at that and Neil smiles. “Didn’t you tell me that? At our first show?”

Andrew’s eyes flash, jaw tightening as he works out his next words. “93%”

“Will you help me?” Neil pushes on.

“What do I get in return?”

“What do you want?”

Andrew’s eyes dip before rising again to meet his gaze, anger mixing in with something Neil can’t name. “I want nothing.”

“I’ll owe you then,” he offers because he knows Andrew will never do it for nothing and trusts him to not ask for more than he can give.
He seems to think it over, smoke lazily falling from his mouth as Neil waits in patient silence. “Fine.”

The smile that threatens to take over his face is both something entirely new (different from his father’s usual grin that mars his face) and consuming. That same something flickers in Andrew’s eyes before he pushes Neil’s face away from him.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m your answer. I’m not and you sure as fuck aren’t mine.”

Neil nods, unsure what Andrew means by that last part. He isn’t anyone’s answer. That would require him living long enough to mean anything. Still, he can’t help but feel that Andrew is wrong about the first part. He is going to be a big part in taking Riko down, even if he doesn’t know it. Neil smiles, laying back against the gravel and staring up at the sky. Riko thinks he’s untouchable — that he’s safe on his throne.

He doesn’t know how wrong that is, but Neil’s more than willing to show him.
While Neil had started out enthusiastic about this endeavor, he was quickly learning that things were far more complicated in practice than they were in theory. The date had been set for two weeks from now and things were tumultuous at best. Neither side was sure how to go about working with the other. It reminded him of that night in the bar what seemed like ages ago than the month or so it really was. The conversation is stilted and awkward, more prone to arguments and biting comments than constructive criticism or anything remotely productive. What’s worse is the fighting between either band created infighting among the members, each taking the opposite of an argument and dividing them further. Three days in and there seems to be no sign of either letting up.

To say Neil was stressed out would be an understatement. Stuck between acting as a mediator and working with Matt on a new song on top of trying to write his own new one, he felt himself being pulled in so many directions it was only a matter of time before he broke. The icing on the shitty cake is that he can’t even run to relieve any of the stress, paparazzi hounding his every moved in hopes of enticing him to give another sound bite, something he would gladly give if not for the fact that Wymack banned him from all future media outlets for the next century. The only thing keeping him sane is Andrew’s quiet presence at his side as they smoke or when he sits in the corner of the studio and watches everyone fight. It’s a touchstone for his own mind to climb out of the chaos and discord among the foxes and allows him a moment to breathe and collect himself.

Another rough day with him getting into it with Kevin about Allison’s remarks over changing the arrangement of one of Kevin’s songs (it’s a good suggestion but Kevin refuses to see it purely because Allison rubbed it in his face) and Neil decides he’s had enough. He storms out of the practice room, ignoring Kevin’s indignant demands for him to come back, and flops himself on the couch next to Matt who is spread out with papers littering the surface of the coffee table. Pushing the heels of his palm to his eyes, he groans.

“My condolences,” Matt chuckles, ruffling his hair.

“If I said that I was going to kill Kevin would you help me hide the body?”

“Without questions,” he nods, “But I think we’d have a bigger trouble with Andrew.”

“I could say that it was a new training exercise. He’d never know the difference.”

“I’m not sure he’d fall for that.”

“We don’t know if we don’t try.”

Matt laughs nervously, “While I would totally help you with this plan, I don’t think Kevin’s done anything that bad to warrant murder.”

Neil raises a hand to give him a deadpan look. “He came in to bitch about the changes
Allison made to a song which then proceeded to him berating my song which led him to berating me.”

“Okay,” Mat winces, “I’ll get the shovel.”

At that Neil cracks a smile, a small and tired one but a smile nonetheless and sinks deeper into the cushions. “I just don’t know what to do. It feels like nothing I say or do is enough and the concert is in two weeks and nothing’s done.”

“Woah, deep breath there buddy.” Matt waits until he draws in a long full breath of air before continuing. “You’ve got to stop beating yourself up for things you can’t control. Palmetto and EXY don’t get along on a good day so suddenly forcing them together was bound to end in some fighting. Give it some time and they’ll find their equilibrium. They always do.”

“But we don’t have time.” It was the one thing Neil found more and more that he didn’t have enough of.


“I trust you,” Neil mumbles, “It’s the others I’m worried about.”

“They’ll come around. But for now, why don’t we focus on something we can actually work on instead? I have this song I could use your opinion on.”

“A song?” Neil perks up, “For the show? Are you going to solo?”

“That was the plan. After we got started on our first song, I got inspired and started on another.”

“Do you have a lot done? Can I hear it?”

Matt smiles, “Yeah actually that would be amazing. I’m struggling with the second verse; nothing I write sounds good enough so maybe you’ll be able to figure out something better.”

He starts shuffling around the papers on the table when he pauses and gives Neil a sheepish grin. “Far warning, this song is kind of… personal. I wrote it about a time in my life when I was at a real low. I had just quit using for the first time and was struggling not to fall into it again on top of my mother’s disappointment and father’s indifference. I… I wasn’t alright.”

Neil reaches out a hand and puts it on Matt’s shoulder, unsure and unused to being the one to offer comfort (and frankly a little afraid he was doing it wrong) but willing to give Matt a fraction of the comfort he’s given Neil since they met. “I don’t mind. If you want to share it with me, I’ll listen.”

Matt practically beams, “Yeah, I do.” He squeezes Neil’s hand in thanks before picking up a couple of pieces of paper.

The words are melodic and drawn out slightly, more closely aligned with singing than Matt’s usual rap style.

I’ve been on the low
I’ve been taking my time
I feel like I’m out of my mind
Every word is packed with emotion and conviction, Neil witnessing as Matt bares his souls to him with every lyric, ever scar torn open for him to see in perfect clarity and ugly truth.

*I don’t wanna be alive
I just wanna die today*

Neil’s heart clenches, his him warring with itself to mold these woes of a man so far broken by life with the Matt he knows today, the man who smiles so easily and so full of life. The man who offered him friendship when he didn’t know what that meant.

*I never had a home, ain’t nobody callin’ my phone
Where you been? Where you at? What’s on your mind?
They say every life’s precious but nobody care about mine*

The sound shifted to a faster verse, Matt’s words rapid fire of pain and harsh truths before switching back into the chorus. When he stopped. Neil was both destroyed and wanting for more.

“And that’s where I start running into trouble.”

“That..” Neil starts.

“Was beautiful,” another voice finishes from the other end of the room. Both men’s heads snap to see Nicky standing in the doorway with his arms wrapped tightly around himself and tears in his eyes. “You wrote that?”

“Yeah,” Matt nods, “Depressing I know.”

Nicky shakes his head, “No it’s… it’s real.” He crosses the room and joins them on the couch. “I struggled a lot with depression and suicide when I was 16. I had just come out to my parents and they sent me to a conversion camp for six months. I spent every day being told that everything about me was an abomination and wrong until I started to believe it too.”

He pauses, taking a shaky breath before wiping away the stray tears that had fallen. “So I get it. You said you were struggling with the second verse?”

“Mhm,” Matt hands over the papers to Nicky. “I kind of wanted to shift it about coming out of that pit, but every time I try to word it, it just seems… wrong.”

Nicky bobs his head as his eyes read over the lyrics Matt had written. “Ah, can I try something?”

“Of course. Need me to repeat the chorus for you?”

“Yeah,” Nicky’s face breaks out into a determined grin. “That would be perfect, thanks.”

Matt obliges, jumping back into the chorus with as much pain as the first time, but this time when his voice fades out Nicky’s kick in bright and light compared to the previous tone of the song.

*It’s the very first breath
when you’re head’s been drowning underwater
And it’s the lightness in the air*
It a complete turn from Matt’s lyrics, an airiness to them that creates a spark of hope that at the end of the tunnel they’re staring down is filled with light. That the pit swallowing them whole isn’t forever and that one day they will be strong enough to pull themselves out of it. That they can breathe and know that it will be better tomorrow. That they will be better.

When Nicky finishes the verse tears fill both his and Matt’s eyes. Neil watches on, feeling a bit like an intruder on something so personal for the two of them yet unable to fully connect with himself.

“Yes,” Matt smiles, wiping his tears. “Exactly like that.”

“Glad I could help though sorry it came with the waterworks.” Nicky laughs self deprecatingly. He moves to hand the pages back to Matt.

He pushes them back to Nicky. “Sing it with me. On stage.”

“You want to collab this? At the concert? Doesn’t this song mean a lot to you? I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“It’s important to both of us. I can hear it in your voice.” Matt shakes his head, “Besides this show is about the foxes. Sing with me.”

“Okay,” Nicky beams, “I’ll do it!”

Matt jumps off the couch with a laugh of triumph before he picks up the remaining sheets of paper and starts running through them with Nicky to see what else they could add and improve. Soon Dan wanders in and starts giving her input as well, pointing out places they could harmonize or add in some interesting vocal patterns to change the pace here and there. Not long after that, they are rushing into a booth to run through it all together. Neil looks at them in contemplation and satisfaction as the first piece begins to fall in place. Maybe the could really pull this off.

Nicky and Matt’s collaboration turned out to be the spark needed to ignite everyone else to start working. The fighting was still there bubbling under the surface but instead of arguing over every little detail, the arguments turned more productive often over the pros and cons of different setlists or who takes lead when. He could see a sort of pecking order fall into place, Dan, Wymack, and Kevin all near the top for their respective expertise and general positions of power at the label. Oddly enough Neil also fell somewhere along with them despite having neither of the two qualities the others possessed; yet when arguments would break out it was him they’d turn to in hope of settling it. He’d be flattered if it wasn’t the slightest bit overwhelming.

As it is, Neil revels in the productivity in the week since he announced his idea. Matt and he are working through their second revisions for the opening song of the show while also working with Dan and Nicky to put the final touches on their collab. Seth had decided that he wasn’t going to do a solo piece as well once he heard that Matt was rapping and roped in Allison to help with harmony and vocals.

While Neil wasn’t privy to the exact details of what they were working on but the tidbits he’s heard in passing lead him to believe that it will be something they’ve never seen from the angry
guitarist. Truthfully Neil’s just happy they are working and weren’t actively antagonizing Nicky and Kevin anymore. Though it did appear that Kevin needed no prodding in being a pain in the ass as it was his natural proclination. Perhaps Neil should be happy that he at least works towards improving the quality of all their songs even if his methods leave something to be desired (though if he yanks Neil’s guitar from his hands one more time, he’s punching first and saying something later). Overall he’s happy with everyone’s progress; it’s his own that is the problem.

With everything the foxes have been producing for the show, his own solo need to be up to par, which it just isn’t. His words feel jumbled and ingenuine in the face of their pain and hardship, especially when he had to hold back part of himself to keep Neil Josten separate from his past. He thought of performing his single but it felt overplayed at this point and he wanted something fresh — something new.

He’s on the balcony tearing page after page out of his journal with scribbled out lines and half-formed verses that never satisfy him the way he begged to be. Another page crumples to the floor and Andrew’s door slides open with a slam. Annoyance twists on his face in a rare show of emotion and Neil notices he’s dressed for bed in a pair of black sweats and his armbands and nothing else.

“Shut up.” He growls.

Neil blinks at him and then at his phone to see that it’s a little past one in the morning. He groans and lets his head fall back against the railing. He had been at this for three hours now.

“Sorry, I just...” he waves vaguely at the mess of papers at his feet. “Yeah, I’ll go back inside.”

Andrew stares at him blankly for a second before he spins around and disappears back through his door. Neil picks himself off the floor and starts gathering his things, kicking his failures in the general direction of his room when Andrew reappears with a hoodie on and his pack of cigarettes in hand. This time when he offers Neil one, he begins to smoke it in earnest.

“You want to explain why you’re out here groaning and cursing over that notebook of your instead of sleeping like a normal person?” Andrew drawls after a few drags.

“I can’t write.”

“It’s easy Neil. You just pick up a pen and paper and -”

“Fuck you,” Neil growls. “The song. I can’t write the song. Everything is just off or too fake and I’m ready to scream.”

Andrew hums boredly, “And why are you killing yourself over it? If you can’t write it why not just drop it or sing a song you’ve done before? No one is forcing you to write a completely new one, moron.”

“Because,” he huffs, “Nothing I’ve done is good enough. Dan, Nicky, and Matt are all doing this emotional piece and Seth is doing his own thing, hell even Kevin is reworking new chords for the set. I can’t be the only one not giving it something of my own. It was my idea.”

He drags a hand through his hair, fingers snagging on the curls and yanking them. “I need to do better. If I want this to succeed, I must do better. I owe at least that much to them. To you. Everyone.”

Andrew stares at him for a moment before he takes a deep drag of his cigarette before
releasing the puff of smoke in a steady controlled stream. “Stay.”

He ducks back into his room and reappears with a black book in hand which he unceremoniously drops in Neil’s hands. Confused, Neil turns it over to find no outside marking indicating what it contained. Flicking a brow up at Andrew, he cracks open the book to find pages filled with a familiar loopy scrawl alongside some bars of music. He nearly drops the book in his surprise at what he’s holding.

“This is your songbook.”

“Is that a question?” He drones.

“Why?”

“You said you needed a song but can’t write one. Take one of those or don’t.” He shrugs. “I don’t really care as long as you shut up and let me sleep.”

He says it with a bored nonchalance Neil would almost believe if not for the fact that Andrew handed him a physical part of himself he’s pretty sure few know exists. That he was trusting Neil with it even if he won’t say it aloud. Neil cradles the book gently, almost afraid that if he holds on too tightly he would hurt it somehow.

“Are you sure?”

Anger fills those eyes briefly. “Don’t ask dumb questions.”

“It’s not a dumb question,” Neil snaps back. “Yes or no?”

Andrew is silent. Neil offers the book back but Andrew doesn’t move to take it, instead meeting Neil’s gaze in a heated battle of wills.

“Yes or no, Andrew?” He says softer because he can’t do this if Andrew wasn’t 100% okay with the idea. Neil knew from his own journal that what lies insides could expose more than he was ever comfortable sharing.

“Yes,” Andrew looks at him with pure hatred and crushes his cigarette in his hand.

Neil nods and brings it back to his chest. “Is there anything you don’t want me to use?”

Because he had to ask.

It seemed to be the final straw that broke Andrew’s patience as his hand shoots out to grab Neil’s shirt and haul him the few inches until they were nose to nose. “I. Don’t. Care.”

He lets go of Neil and spins back around to his room. Neil watches as he stomps the few feet to his door, shoulders tense and body rigid with anger, before he pauses in the doorway, not looking back as he says, “Don’t use anything with piano.”

Neil holds it tighter to his chest. “I won’t. I promise.”

Andrew says nothing as he closes the door behind him. Neil waits until the curtains sway slightly to obscure his view of the room before deciding to turn for his own room, Andrew’s journal tucked safely under his arm with his own. He trashes the pages he had torn out of his journal before depositing the book on his desk and crawling into his bed with Andrew’s. He almost doesn’t want to open it, feeling too personal even with Andrew’s explicit permission to learn these truths. Feels
wrong in learning them for nothing in return. But he knows that if he were ever to bring it up, Andrew would deny it all, unwilling to admit to the vulnerability even if they both knew its significance. With nothing to do but accept it, Neil opens the black book in his lap.

He starts at the beginning, looking over the songs Andrew had obviously written many years prior, the handwriting sloppier and a little young but the music complex and the lyrics ringing with the pain of a troubled childhood different from Neil’s own but just as bad. His chest squeezes as he moves deeper into the journal, the pain and desperation only growing the older he gets, the steadier the hand grows and the more layered the melodies become. He sees Piano notes mixed in with drum ones, all fast-paced and harsh that screams of Andrew’s particular style of playing as well as a few softer melodies that Neil only just managed to read without rushing to Andrew’s side. He almost shut the book after a piece simply titled C. when he flips the page and lands on the song.

He reads it once. Then again. After the third time, he sets it down, knowing that this is the piece before picking up his guitar and starting the first chords.

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On the day of the concert, everything appears to be working against them. The venue is trashed from the previous night’s performance and the cleaning crew understaffed for the day, meaning that by the time the foxes arrive for set up the floors are sticky and confetti litters their stage. It takes all of them pitching in before it’s even moderately presentable but not before they lost a good hour and a half of prep. Then one of the stagehands nearly drops some of the sound equipment leading to them tripping over the wires which of course ripped out the cords on one of the mics (which coincidentally the venue lost their spares).

But what takes the cake for the day is the near constant hounding of the paparazzi wherever they go. When news of the concert first broke out there was excitement and chatter as to why they had decided to put on such a show (and after Neil’s outburst no less) but even then they were not as rabid and hungry for a scoop as they were now. As always, at the heart of lied Riko. Two days before the concert was set for, some reporters managed to corner Riko after a Raven concert and proceeded to bombard him with questions about his thoughts on the Foxe’s show. Riko, never one to pass up an opportunity to tear them down, turned to the camera with a feral glee and called it a “circus act by a bunch of criminals sullying the industry trying to get attention away from the fact that they are little more than one hit wonders.”

Neil almost broke his phone when he saw the interview.

Of course, after that people were hungry for their response, namely Neil’s, who had quickly garnered a reputation for his brash mouth and unapologetic attitude problems (much to the dismay of Wymack and their PR team). Lucky for them, Neil was under a strict no running rule and thus was never alone long enough for another impromptu interview. Andrew may or may not have threatened to cut his tongue out if he dare try.

So Neil ducked his head and gritted his teeth along with the rest of the foxes and baited his time until the concert where he wouldn’t be silent any longer. He looks out at the crowd from his spot backstage, as how has become his tradition per show, and eyes the enormous wave of people that fills the venue. It is by far one of the biggest venues they have ever played in, rivaling the size of Madison Square and every seat is full. Every inch of the standing space packed tight with cheering bodies. A certified full house.
Neil lets the curtain fall back again, cutting his view of the crowd and turns to the foxes. Everyone is geared for the opening song bar Andrew who is sitting out until later in the show. He catches each one of their eyes and nods.

“10 seconds!” Wymack bellowed.

Neil shifts into place at the head microphone, for once the one spearheading the introductions. Just as the curtains go up, Neil smiles wildly at them. “We have this.”

He turns back as the lights brighten and the curtains raise to the roar of cheers from the audience. He can’t see them, but he knows the foxes are grinning right back. Stepping closer to the mic, he slides it free from its stand and wanders towards the lip of the stage.

“How’s everyone doing tonight?” The cheers grow louder. “You know today has done everything it’s can to keep us from getting up here tonight, but much like what I have to say to everyone who tries to take this stage from us,” He looks directly into the crowd, into the camera hovering by his feet. “Fuck that.”

He nods to Renee who is positioned at a piano and jumps directly into their first song.

We’re broken people now

Neil and Matt had worked back and forth on the song for the entirety of the two weeks. They wanted to create an opening song that not only managed to perfectly blend Matt’s rap with Neil’s voice but to encapsulate everything the foxes were. This would set the tone for everything to come and show the world that while the foxes might be “broken” they’d be damned if they were done.

Broken we ain’t beaten

There’s no glory in defeat

We won’t fall in the cracks between our streets

When the song ends the crowd is screaming for more and they deliver with everything they have to give. Dan sings the song from the bar, Allison, and Nicky both joining her on the stage for vocals with Kevin, Matt, and Renee for instrumentals. Next comes the song Renee and Andrew performed, Renee’s scratchy voice carried over the audience through the speakers with Andrew’s mixing in for the chorus, Seth takes the stage next, Neil interested in seeing the final piece for the first time since Seth announced it. It’s raw and angry, much like the man who created it but paired with the haunting voice of Allison it takes on a ringing melody that paints a picture of the man behind the anger and aggression. The one Neil is pretty sure no one besides Allison knew existed. As they leave the stage, an eerie silence hangs in their wake until the crowd finds themselves again and screams their approval and astonishment.

After that they spend a few songs doing covers of those that brought them into the industry, telling tales from broken childhoods made bearable by radios and guitars, of found families in beats and lyrics much warmer and caring than their own. They tell the audience of the orange wall filled with photos that had come to mean home in a way they never thought they would have. And when Nicky, Matt, and Dan take the stage for their song, every audience member far as the eye could see is weeping with tears and cracked voices screaming along as Nicky helps with the lyrics. EXY comes together to play a few of their hits from before Neil’s time and Palmetto treats them to a few new songs that have yet to be released.

But soon the stage clears and Neil is left alone on a stool with nothing but his guitar on his
knee and a microphone angled towards his lips; a picture perfect parallel to the night that led him here.

“This is going to be the final song for the night,” he speaks into the mic. “I know we’ve been going pretty strong all night but I was hoping to end on something a little more mellow.”

The crowd cheers for him and he runs a hand over the guitar, not really playing anything but warming his finger for what’s to come. “This song was entrusted to me so forgive me if it’s a little different than it’s meant to be.” He smiles to himself, unable to resist. “I hope they don’t hate it too much.”

His fingers switch gears and the notes start pouring from his guitar. At first, Neil struggled with how the melody should sound, the song one of the few to be purely lyrics with no accompanying instrumentals. He poured and poured over different arrangements and paces until after the 5th draft he decided a softer sound was best, pulling the focus from his playing and more to the words. That, of course, what more important than anything he could play.

What doesn’t kill you makes you wish you were dead

Got a hole in my soul growin’ deeper and deeper

When Neil first read this piece something inside him stopped and stood still with attention. It was like that moment Andrew first looked into his eyes after Eden’s, an innate and perfect understanding of the pain a person can go through right before they break. After years of trying, Neil has been waiting for the tipping point, the moment his father would succeed in finally breaking him after so many years of coming close. This song was Andrew’s.

I’m not okay and it’s not alright

Won’t you drag the lake and bring me home again

He doesn’t know what it was that made him break, nor does he think he has a truth big enough to trade to ever find out why, but he understood. He understood with everything in his being.

And I can’t take one more moment of this silence,

The loneliness is haunting me

And the weight of the world’s gettin’ harder to hold up

It was the moment his father pressed that iron to his shoulder and he knew he would never have his love no matter how obedient and quiet he was. It was Lola guiding his hand, blade curled in his fingers into the flesh of that pig carcass. It was his mother averting her eyes everytime he wasn’t wearing colored contacts. It was how she never said I love you even with her dying breath. It was the fiery flames of the car that finally took her from him.

Who will fix me now?

Dive in when I drown?

Neil had lost everything and everyone until he was the only one left in this world keeping himself from being adrift.

Who will make me fight?
Drag me out alive?

And that was the truly terrifying part because it was always more tempting to let go.

Save me from myself

Don’t let me drown

Neil gave himself over to the song because he knew. He knew what it meant when Andrew wrote it. That he felt as lost as Neil did before Andrew and Kevin found him. Before the foxes saved him from himself.

‘Cause you know that

I can’t do this on my own

So he sang this song in hope of letting Andrew know he understood. That he wasn’t alone anymore. That Neil would dive in for him despite it being against every instinct in his body telling him no. Despite his mother’s phantom fists and his father’s cruel eyes and Lola’s menacing grin. He would dive in because Andrew had for him. There is something significant in that. A change so profoundly deep that Neil can’t even begin to imagine what it means for either of them now.

His hand strums the final note and Neil slowly sets the guitar down and thanks the crowd, though it’s lost in their cries for an encore and chants for one more song. It still continues even as the curtain falls. When he turns to the foxes their faces are a mixture of sad and proud, reaching out to envelop him in a hug he tentatively returns (he’s learned it’s best to live with their tactile nature). Through the spaces between their bodies, he is able to meet Andrew’s stare, those hazel eyes with that familiar and unrecognizable intensity that warms his chest and confuses him to no end. As he breaks away he realizes then there is another set of eyes on him, these ones belonging to Nicky who studies him contemplatively, a look so unlike what he normally sees on the man it makes Neil stop and stare back. Before he can open his mouth to ask why he’s looking at him that way, Dan peeks out the curtain to the still chanting crowd.

“They’re not going to give up. The lights have come on yet not a single one of them have left.” She turns to give them all a wicked look. “I say we give them what they want.”


She shrugs, “I figured the one who made them all stick around should have the honors of sending them home.”

“Me?” He shakes his head. “No way. This is all of our show. We should all go on.”

Matt nods, “I’m game. Any idea on what song?”

“Something upbeat,” Allison suggests.

“And something to really stick it to the haters,” Nicky grins shark-like.

Neil mentally catalogs all the song he’s learned over the past year and only a few stick out that meet the criteria. He’s about to ask if anyone else knows a song when the perfect one flashes in his mind. Oh yes, that one will work just nicely.
When he steps on stage he is joined by Matt, Kevin, and Andrew, the only ones to know the song Neil suggested well enough to play it on the fly. The crowd stomps and screams their glee at their cries being answered and push closer to the stage with fever. Neil picks up the microphone and everyone falls silent.

“I want to thank everyone for making this show possible because it allowed us to send a message to the rest of the world. You see none of us have ever been given something; we had to fight for it. Our label. Our sound. Our music. Everything. They may judge us all they like about our past, what we say, who we love, or how Fox Records is our home, because they are going to look back at this show and know they are wrong.”

The crowd roars.

“And to anyone who thinks we’re nothing but a bunch of criminals sullying this industry, well, you’re right. We are changing this industry. And they should be afraid.” He looks to Matt and Kevin who nods their heads at their readiness. He looks to Andrew who gives him that little two-finger salute. “This one’s for Riko.”

This time when they leave the stage the stadium is shaking.
we'll find we can meet in the middle (bodies and souls collide)

Chapter Notes

**You and I (Stripped) - Pvriss**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The foxes were in full party mode by the time they made it back to the studio, a high racing through their veins only fueled further by the alcohol flowing endlessly in their red cups and countless beer bottles. Everyone is in some level of disarray: Kevin wavering between mental wreck over Neil’s blatant attack on Riko and a fierce pride at how they all played tonight; Matt completely gone and red in the cheeks as he affectionately professes his love of Neil and how he roasted Riko with the sickest burn in centuries (He told him to choke, Dan. **CHOKE! In a full song. Name something more iconic.**)

The only one seeming not to partake is Andrew who remains nowhere in sight. After circling the room thrice just in case, he decides to look in one other place he would be. As he moves to the door, Nicky intercepts his path, face grim and completely sober.

“Neil.”

He freezes instinctually, mind racing with exits and escape routes at the tone (too much like his father’s just before he strikes.) “Nicky? What’s up?”

“Can we... Can we talk?”

Neil wants to do nothing of the sort but the determined gleam in the singer’s eyes tells him that whatever it was he wouldn’t let it slide until he’s said his piece. So he says, “Sure. Here or?”

Nicky grabs his hand (lightly as to ensure Neil can pull away if he wants) and leads him outside in the hall where the revelry drops to a muffled hum. When he turns around to look at Neil again he looks almost afraid.

“What’s going on between you and Andrew?”

“Me and Andrew?” Neil blinks, “I… what do you mean? We’re all in the same band. We live together.”

“But it’s more than that isn’t it?” Nicky shakes his head. “He talks to you. Tells you things he’s never told anyone, hasn’t he.”

“I’m not sure what you mean. Yes, we talk but I hardly think Andrew tells me anything-”

“I know that he gave you that song.”

Neil stops, even more confused. How could the song be important? Sure it’s from Andrew’s journal but there are hundreds in there and how would Nicky even know it was Andrew’s? As far as he knows, Neil is the first to see it in however long it’s been since Andrew wrote it. Wasn’t he? Some of the questions must fall from Neil’s lips because Nicky flinches with guilt.
“I wasn’t supposed to see it,” he answers feebly. “I didn’t mean to see it but it just fell open and-” he cuts himself off and looks to the ground.

“Nicky, I honestly have no idea what you are trying to say,” Neil admits, completely thrown for a loop.

“Bee. I’m talking about Bee. It all starts with her.”

“Bee? Are we talking about an insect or...” The further his conversation gets the more lost he becomes. “What is Bee, Nicky?”

“No, Neil.” Tears fill his eyes. “The song is for Betsy. She died in a car accident two years ago.”

Neil stops. “His therapist?”

Nicky nods, “She was court mandated after he got out of jail. I don’t really know much about what they talked about or if it even helped but I know that of all the people Andrew had in his life, she was the one he let in the closest.”

“More than you?”

Nicky looks at him sadly. “Especially me.”

“So what does Betsy have to do with this?” Neil shakes his head, “Did she give the song to Andrew is that it? Or did she help him write it?”

“No, Neil.” Tears fill his eyes. “The song is for Betsy. She died in a car accident two years ago.”

It’s like the final piece clicks into place, the mysterious final straw to break Andrew’s back. And Neil almost shatters along with him.

“I saw it when Andrew passed out on the couch a week after her funeral.” Nicky continues, “He wasn’t talking for weeks, just staring emptily at the wall as he drank bottle after bottle of whatever alcohol we had on hand. I only caught a glimpse of it when it fell as I covered him with a blanket, but what I saw...”

Tears pour freely now. “I knew Andrew never had the best childhood. I knew he was troubled, more so than even myself and Aaron, but that song — those words — I never knew how much he was hurting until then. And hearing it now-” He had to pause long enough to gather his breath. “I don’t know what is going on between the two of you for him to not only entrust that notebook in your care — when I’ve never even seen it again — but to sing that song... it’s serious Neil. Whatever it is, it’s serious.”

“I- I don’t.” Neil flubbers, not sure what to say in the face of such a truth nor unable to deny its validity when he knew the exact same thing the moment Andrew gave that book over without a truth of his own in exchange.

Nicky looks at his flustering with a sad fondness, reaching a hand out to steady him on the shoulder. “You don’t have to answer me now, Neil. I don’t think Andrew would appreciate either of us saying anything more than what we’ve already let slip. Just... just don’t hurt my cousin alright? He’s been through enough.”

Unable to say anything more, Neil just nods as Nicky leaves. Reeling, Neil stumbles further down the hall, too unbalanced to return to the party and too unhinged to do more than stagger
towards his original destination before Nicky pulled the world from under his feet. His body carries
him up the stairs and through the familiar metal door where the source of his confusion sits with his
back to him, two unlit cigarettes in his hand and a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue sitting by his side.

Don’t hurt his cousin, Nicky had said, but Neil didn’t think he really had that power in the
first place. After all, Andrew was the one with the power to end his life.

“Aren’t you a bit of cliche?” He taunts, searching for something familiar under his feet.
“Ditching the party to come up here alone to drink your sorrow away?”

“And yet you’re here too. What does that make you?” He replies without looking back.

“I’m nothing remember?”

Andrew turns to him then. “You’re pretty damn annoying for nothing.”

Neil smiles, relief crashing over him at the response. Nothing was different. Nicky was
grasping at straws; he couldn’t possibly think that this was anything more than what it was, an
exchange, a moment of silence and breathing for either of them. Nothing.

He lets the door slam shut behind him as he joins Andrew at the ledge and takes one of the
sticks from his hand. Andrew flicks his lighter to life and holds it out to Neil who leans in. Once his
is lit, he brings it to his own cigarette now poking between his lips. As per usual, neither of them say
anything for a long moment.

“I didn’t use a piano piece,” Neil breaks the silence. “Though I’m not sure if that one was
okay to use either.” After Nicky’s explanation, he was beginning to regret not running his choice by
Andrew first.

“If I didn’t want you to use my songs I wouldn’t have given you the book, simple as that.
As long as you heeded my rule, I don’t care which one you chose.”

“So you’re not mad,” Neil hedges because Andrew loves his cryptid answers, especially
when Neil wants to know.

“I will be if you keep asking stupid questions.”

Neil accepts the answer and moves on. “Then why are you up here?”

“The foxes are annoying and Boyd gets a little too handsy when this far gone, regardless of
warnings. It’s either come up here or he ends up with a few more holes in him.”

Neil snorts, “Yes that would ruin the mood, wouldn't it?”

“Nothing says party quite like bloodshed and possible murder.”

“I mean all the ones I’ve been to usually end up in one or the other. Sometimes both.” He
shrugs.

“Oh Neil, Oh so tragic. You’ll make me cry,” Andrew delivers with a flat tone and ever
flatter face.

“Well I’m a fox,” Neil grins and Andrew pushes his face away with two fingers as he
laughs.

Silence falls over them once again and Neil’s mind begins to wander back to the hall with
Nicky. He can’t help but feel that same sense of unbalance when Nicky walked away like he hadn’t
given a piece of his cousin to Neil that he had no idea existed. It felt like cheating, like he had gone
behind Andrew’s back even if it was involuntary. He turns his head back to stare unabashedly at
Andrew’s profile and decides that he only has one truth that may come close enough to exchange in
return.

“It was her birthday,” he whispers almost too softly. He only knows Andrew hears because
the latter turns himself slightly. “The day at the bar, the one that let you and Kevin find me.”

Digging into his pocket, he pulls out his phone and taps a few icons until a video of him fills
the screen. (It was the first thing Neil had Nicky teach him to do.) It’s paused on a still of him
standing on that stage in Millport, hair shaggy and face gaunter than he remembers. Hesitantly he
taps the screen and the video animates with life, the steady strum of his guitar filling the night air.

“It’s funny,” he continues over the video. “If you asked me any other day what her birthday
was, I wouldn’t have been able to tell you. Too mixed up in the details of too many identities with
too many dates. Nothing about her seemed real anymore.”

He can feel that hole in his chest tear open just a little as the smell of smoke begins to taste
acid on his tongue. He brings it to his lips for another drag.

“But that morning I had woken up and it felt like the only thing I could grasp onto. Like it
was the only truth I had left of her.”

He listens as his voice filters through the speakers, it raw and raspy from the disuse of the
day and his eyes closed as he pours the turmoil into the microphone.

Baby be a simple kind of man

Oh won’t you do this for me, if you can

“She used to sing this song to me when I was young, back before we left.” When the pain
was too much to keep his sobs muffled from his father’s ears in the stillness of the night or those rare
moments when they first ran and she needed to keep them awake behind the wheel. “It was the
strongest memory I had left of her.”

Before her fists started replacing the melody to calm his tears.

“So I walked into the bar that night. Stood on that stage and sang the only thing I could.”
He takes another drag but it only tastes like ash. “She’d kill me if she knew that was what finally got
me caught. Beat me black and blue before pulling me away before making me swear to never do it
again.”

And you can do this, oh baby, if you try

All I want for you my son is to be satisfied

He tilts his head to meet Andrew’s eyes. “Tell me, does it makes me a fool to wish for that if
only to see her again?”

Andrew doesn’t answer for a long time and when he does it is nothing in relations to Neil’s
question. “Why are you telling me this?”

Neil shrugs, “Because you gave me a truth in those songs, even if you won’t admit it.
Because Nicky told me what that song meant to you.” Andrew’s eyes flash with anger but Neil
pushes on, not wanting to get the man in trouble for only trying to help (no matter how misguided his attempt). “That’s how this goes right? Truth for truth? Well here’s my truth in exchange. If it’s not enough then take my journal too.”

Andrew crushes his cigarette, unkempt fury now ablaze in those hazel eyes. “96%”

Neil shrugs and turns away, a small smile tugging on his lips that will do nothing but push that number higher. So he turns and waits in silence for Andrew to decide.

“She was my 13th therapist. The unlucky one to be assigned my case after the other 12 couldn’t make it past the first handful of sessions.” Andrew tears the cigarette from Neil’s fingers and smokes it to ash and the lights another and then another. “She said there was more luck in 13 than what people gave it credit for, after all, she was born on a Friday the 13th.”

“Andrew..” Neil starts because this wasn’t what he meant but what Andrew wanted.

“She said damn like it was her favorite word, right next to fuck though you would never think it by looking at her. She had OCD and collected near a hundred of these damn glass figurines that covered all of her shelves and desk, which she would spend hours arranging if one got out of place.”

He blows a cloud of smoke in the air and turns to Neil.

“You would have hated her. She was nosy and persistent to the point that you had a better chance cutting your own tongue out than being able to lie to her.” He pauses. “Then again maybe that’s why she was the only one to stick around for as long as she did.”

Neil swallows. “How long?”

“Two years,” he answers blandly. “She was my therapist for two years before some drunk driver ran a red light and t-boned her in the middle of an intersection.” He looks dead in the eye, his eyes blank voids of green and amber. “I canceled our session at the last minute an hour before.”

Neil stomach drops and his hand shoots out as if to touch his, but stops an inch before their skin can meet. Andrew stares coolly at the hand for a second before moving his away. Neil lets his drop in the space it left, not reaching out again.

“After the funeral, I wrote this song because it was either that or slit my wrist or go back to jail for murder.” Andrew finished simply, coldly. “A year in a cell was more than enough the first time.”

Neil sits in silence, mind connecting the lyrics with a woman from the story Andrew had told him and the truths Nicky had inexplicably shared. He tries to think of the sorrow and anger Andrew felt as he wrote it down drunk and empty.

“Will you show me?” He asks after a couple of tries of words sticking in his throat. “Will you show me what it’s supposed to sound like?”

They manage to sneak into a booth past prying eyes and nosy ears, far away from the party that still rages down the hall but doesn’t pierce the walls around them. It’s so quiet Neil thinks that
they could be the only two people left in the studio at all. He watches as Andrew settles himself behind the drums and twirls a drumstick in hand as the other twists, tweaks, and turns the drums to his liking.

Neil settles himself on the wall, giving him a clear view of Andrew and the drums without hovering over him. Andrew gives the instrument a quick little tap before nodding to himself and diving right in.

It starts with an explosion, his arms coming down and slamming home on his snare and ride cymbal before snapping out to hit his tom and crash, arms powerful and quick. This version of the song is so different from the one Neil played it’s a wonder the two are the same at all. When Neil first saw the lyrics, they were soft and mournful to his ears, an echo to his own pain and grief. And that was his fatal error.

Neil made the mistake in thinking that just because Andrew was often quiet and contemplative (to the point of being called introspective by those who didn’t know better) his grief would be too. Because at the base of it all, that’s what it was a grief for someone he had loved and what little chances he had left in life because of that death. The truth is that little about Andrew is actually soft and silent.

His rage and fury were twin uncontained forest fires, all-encompassing and consuming until soot and ash are all that is left standing. His grief was not a dying whisper, it was screams of rage and hate, a fight and plea against the unfair hand life had given him again and again. The way he played was a reflection of that. Each drumstick slamming its home on the drums unapologetic and loud for all to hear. His movements were sharp and strong, face twisted in concentration and release as his foot beat a steady and rumbling rhythm at the heart of it all in the bass.

Neil watches as his arms twist and turn, weaving together in a deadly dance of music and pain at such a speed the sticks were hopeless blurs to the eye. And the sound.

It was heartbreaking. It was raw and real. It was beautiful.

He was beautiful.

Oh.

Oh.

Don’t let me drown.

Chapter End Notes

Did y’all really think I’d never explain what was in that video from chapter one? In this monster music fic? Please.
Contrary to popular belief, Neil actually understands the basics of attraction, romantic, sexual or otherwise. He might not be the quickest to recognize it in others beyond their tendency to pay a bit more attention to him (the only thing useful to note in a life like his) but he recognizes it in himself fairly quickly. Normally.

He remembers the signs, the too tight feeling in his chest, the slight need to gravitate towards them as if they had their own magnetic field. He knows what it feels like because before he didn’t swing, when his body first fluctuated and rebelled with puberty he experienced attraction with a variety of people. He also knew that it only ended with his mother’s fists. But his mother was gone and even though it’s been years since there was even a hint of attraction to be found, he knows without a doubt that this is what has bloomed between him and Andrew. Attraction in its simplest form and all the more powerful after years of disappearing.

And with its resurgence comes the blinding sense of crisis in how he has absolutely no idea of how to move on from here. What do you with an emotion he thought was beaten out of him by the time he was 15? He can’t ask anyone for help either; Nicky would never shut up about it nor be able to keep the pity from his eyes like he couldn’t last night. Matt would be nearly as bad, no doubt giving Neil those sad puppy dog eyes he can’t handle as he comes to the conclusions Neil already knows himself. Nothing would ever come of it.

He couldn’t let it, if not for Andrew’s safety when his father finally comes then because Andrew thinks little of him outside their deal or game. They were nothing, just like he had told Nicky. And it would stay that way. But even with that conviction set firmly in his mind, it was still impossible to bottle back his newfound attraction.

He began to notice more and more things about Andrew everytime he walked into a room or they were alone together. The lean line of his body as he braces himself on the balcony railing when they smoke. The way his muscles work in his back as he reaches for something in the cupboard. The sleep rumbled clothes and cowlicked hair when he stumbles down for breakfast, hand scratching his stomach and giving him a hint of the soft wisps of blonde hair trailing down to-

It’s become a problem. Maybe he should just text Matt; it couldn’t be any worse than the situation already is. He decides to go for a run instead, barely calling out his farewells before he’s pulling on his shoes and racing out the door. Andrew was going to be pissed, especially since not even 15 minutes into his run he notices that he’s being followed.

Panic floods his veins as he ducks in the closest alleyway in hope of shaking them off his trail, alternating between sharp turns at random. For a moment he thinks he’s lost them after turning into yet another alley and he can feel his heartbeat slowly recede from his ears. Of course, that’s the moment he is cut off by a motorcycle, a lone male figured dressed in all black with a tinted visor mask blocking his only escape.

“God, what's with all the black leather? It’s like 80 degrees today,” he pants unable to help
himself even now.

The figure says nothing, portraying quite the menacing figure to Neil’s small lithe body that is currently flushed red from the run and panting as he tries to recover enough air to take off again. He has no weapons, no phone, nothing. Andrew really was going to kill him… Well if this man doesn’t first. (Silver lining?)

He watches as the man lets go of the handlebar, body tense and poised to run, his hand goes to the visor and lifts it. The moment it clears his eyes, Neil’s body drops in exhaustion because it’s not his father’s men who hunted him down (much too young even for his father) but Riko’s. He can tell by the trademark “R” stamped below his left eye.

“Get on,” he commands in a thick French accent.

“Yeah, that sounds like an awful idea. I’m going to have to say no.” Neil sighs, resting a shoulder against the wall.

“You say that like it was a request. You are wrong. Get on.”

“Give me one reason why I should.” Neil challenges, “Riko doesn’t scare me and this is too public for you to do anything too incriminating. So unless you give me a definitive reason as to why, I’m going to pass, thanks.”

The French man sighs heavily, looking to the sky for patience. “Riko has a message for you and your little disgrace of a band. This is him doing it the nice way.”

Neil snorts.

“Deny and I promise that who or what comes next will be unpleasant.”

“You say that as if you are pleasant.”

“In comparison with what Riko is capable of? I am.” He tosses a helmet at Neil. “Now get on and let’s both get this over with.”

Neil stares at the helmet in his hands before sighing and slipping it over his head and climbs on the bike.

Fuck, Andrew was going to kill him.

When the motorcycle finally comes to a stop, they are on the highest floor on an empty parking garage. He pulls off the helmet and looks around, noting that it was the perfect place to take him out if Riko so chose. He looks over the edge; well almost perfect.

“If you wanted to throw me off you’re going to need a higher building.”

The man pulls off his own helmet and stares at him blankly. It is so devoid of emotion he could almost give Andrew a run for his money. If not for the slight twitch of his eye. “You know Riko warned me of that mouth and yet I’m still taken aback by how willfully stupid you are.”

Neil shrugs, “Attitude problem. I’m working on it, I swear.”
“Somehow I really doubt that.” Neil just grins, a bit of his father mixed with Lola. The French man sighs. “Riko is not pleased and does not take kindly to being insulted, especially on such a wide broadcast much like that spectacle of a concert was.”

“And you expect me to care about Riko’s feelings?” he scoffs, “Tell Riko that we’re not six anymore. If he really wanted he could have come to the show himself and been insulted. We saved him a seat up front.”

“You should care.” he points out venomously. “You treat this as a game but you forget that Riko has been playing it much longer than you have. He has climbed to his throne and kept it. That is not a mistake.”

Neil clenches his jaw but says nothing, waiting for the man to finish so he can go. If this is all Riko’s warning is then he could go fuck himself on that throne. He has bigger problems to worry about.

“He’s giving you one final warning: Back off Nathaniel or suffer the... consequences of your impertinence.”

“What consequences?” he asks because the way the man hesitated on the word rings the warning bells at the back of his mind.

“I... I don’t know,” he answers truthfully. “But I know that it is easier to bend to Riko’s will when he deigns to give a warning. Because when he does it means that whatever comes next will be worse. That I promise you.”

He watches as a haunted expression flashes across the other’s face and wonders if he knew that from personal experience after so many years by Riko’s side. Either way, his answer remains the same. “No. Riko can take his best shot; he won’t break me. He doesn’t know how.”

“Don’t be so sure of that Nathaniel,” he mutters as he lifts the helmet over his head again. “But my job is done regardless of your answer. If you choose to ignore it then you’re even more of a suicidal idiot than I thought.”

“Some call it having a spine. It’s Neil by the way.”

The bike’s engine roars to life. “So be it.”

He kicks the stand up and starts to drive off, leaving Neil alone on the roof a parking stuck with no idea where he’s at.

“Have a nice walk back,” the man calls out in French.

Neil throws the spare helmet still in his hand after him. “Go fuck yourself you righteous prick!”

The sound of his laughter floats up as the engine disappears below the levels and down the street. He looks around once more before running a hand over his face.

Fuck.
The sun is already high in the sky by the time Neil manages to find his way back home. He is covered in sweat, dehydrated, and in desperate need for a shower which is why when he walks in, he’s immediately bombarded the moment he steps through the door. He is justifiably annoyed by it.

“Where were you?! Practice was an hour ago, Neil.” Kevin snarls in his face. “Just because the last show was decent doesn’t mean we can slack off now.”

“Decent!” Neil scoffs, pushing past him toward the stairs.

“Do not ignore me!” Kevin reaches out to stop him but Neil whirls around with a deadly growl.

“Don’t.”

They stare off in a battle of wills before Nicky coughs, “I think what Kevin was trying to say is that we were worried about you. You kind of tore out of here in a hurry and no one knew where you’d gone.”

“Sorry,” Neil takes a deep breath and turns from Kevin. “I didn’t mean to be gone for as long as I was. It just… happened…”

“That is most certainly not what I was trying-” Kevin interrupts annoyed but Nicky quickly slaps a hand over his mouth before he can piss Neil off more. Much to Kevin’s muffled displeasure.

“It’s alright Neil. No harm, no foul. Just maybe take your phone next time?”

Right. He sighs and wonders how long he has before Andrew makes his appearance from wherever he was lying in wait. Maybe he could squeeze in a shower if he was quick enough.

“Yeah, sorry.” He concedes as he moves towards the stairs again. This time no one stops him. He even makes it all the way to his door before the door down the hall opens and he kisses his shower goodbye.

Andrew stands in his doorway with his arms crossed at his chest and a familiar looking phone clasped tightly in one hand. Of course, it is the locked jaw and fury filled eyes that concern him the most. But instead of going for him, like Neil braced for, he stood there staring him down. That’s when Neil notices his other arm raised to his ear, phone pressed to it. He only catches the tail end of the conversation before Andrew is hanging up.

“I don’t care,” he deadpans. Whatever the person on the other end says next must push past his patience because the next time Andrew opens his mouth his answer is vehement. “No.”

He hangs up the call and tosses the phone back into the room behind him. When he turns back to Neil, he knows he’s screwed.

“You have one minute to explain where you were and why you didn’t have your fucking phone.” He moves to close the space between them in an even slow pace that sets Neil on edge. Too much like a predator stalking towards their prey when they know they have it caught.

Neil forces himself not to take a step back (knowing how badly that always ends). “I was lost.”

Andrew’s fist whips out and yanks him down so hard by his shirt, Neil hears it rip slightly. True fury fills those eyes now. “The truth.”
Neil feels his own anger begin to boil as he pulls against Andrew’s grip to gain an inch of space. “I was lost. Just not in-this-neighborhood lost.”

He lets go. “Explain.”

And Neil does, giving a basic rundown of how Riko’s man tracked and trapped him in an alley before whisking him away to an abandoned location to give him a vague warning about Riko being up to something. He could see Andrew’s jaw grow taut as he keeps talking and by the time he was done he didn’t even spare Neil a glance as he turns for the stairs and stalks down. Neil gives a lingering glance at his door before there is a crash downstairs followed by Kevin’s cry of displeasure and he knows he’s following Andrew.

He is down just in time to see Andrew barge into the kitchen after Kevin and corner the man near the sink. “Why would Moreau be sent to deliver a message to Neil?”

Kevin pales, “Jean? You saw Jean?”

He turns to Neil who shrugs. “About yea high? Black hair, R tattooed on his left cheekbone? Real right French bastard?”

The look he earns is halfway between terrified and exasperated. Andrew looks faintly amused. Kevin turns back to Andrew. “What did he say? Riko never sends him out unless it’s serious.” That same haunted look on Jean’s face crosses Kevin’s. “Not unless he knows he’s already won.”

“He hasn’t won shit,” Neil snaps, “He’s scared, that’s why he sent this Jean, along with some warning that basically said submit or else.”

Kevin is obviously more cowed by this than Neil was, his left hand shakes as he cradles it to his chest. “We need to—”

“We don’t need to do fuck all, Kevin.” Neil roars, “This is what Riko wants, for you to turn into a sniveling mess so you bend to his will like you did when we were kids. So grow the fuck up and stop being a god damn coward.”

He’s sick and tired of Kevin’s meltdowns, sick and tired how after having everything Neil could have ever wanted in life and he was so willing to give it up because Riko told him to. He’ll be damned if he lets it go on any longer, not after everything he’s done to help EXY reach the level Kevin promised him they could have. Not after the blood and sweat he poured into their night practices no matter what he did the day before. One of them had to make it and he’ll be fucking damned if Kevin sabotages that.

Kevin’s eyes snap to him, anger and hatred bright in those green eyes. “What do you know, Neil? You left. You knew Riko for four years, I’ve known him for twenty. Don’t presume to know what he’s capable of anymore. He’s changed, we all have.”

“Naive?” Neil leaps for Kevin then, willing to show him just how much he’s changed — show him how much of monster he had become in the years he’d been gone. Maybe then he would know better than to call him naive for not bending to Riko. But before his fingers can reach even a stitch of clothing or skin, Andrew is there between them as an immovable wall pushing Neil back.
“Enough,” he says simply but with an edge to his voice.

“You want me to make sure he stays? I’ll break his fucking legs so he can’t even crawl back on his knees like the coward he is.” Neil only sees red, voice a snarl and his body pumped with the fight.

Andrew easily pushes him back again, face not amused. “I said enough. Go cool off.”

The look Kevin gives him screams smug and Neil leaps at him again, the movement jarring enough to wipe it away.

“No.” Andrew shoves him and this time Neil complies.

With a final glare at Kevin, he stomps up the stairs and makes for the shower. He only just manages to get the door closed and the water running before the bottled up scream claws past his lips. The water turns to ice by the time he leaves. It does nothing to simmer his anger. When he finally steps out of the bathroom and back into his room, he immediately reaches for his guitar and Andrew’s notebook before sliding out onto the balcony. Maybe working on a song will help more than a shower.

It almost works.

He’s in the middle of reworking one of Andrew’s unfinished songs with a few verses of one of his when the sound of a door sliding open pulls his concentration. Andrew walks onto the balcony with a too bored look and Neil’s phone still in his hand. Neil sighs and closes the journals with a thump.

“Is Kevin’s breakdown over already? I thought I had another hour at the least.”

“He’s drunk and has shut himself in his room, but that’s beside the point.” Andrew tosses the phone in his lap. “I believe I asked two questions.”

Neil sighs and picks up the device. Its screen is littered with notifications. “I thought it was in my pocket.”

“And when you noticed it wasn’t?” Andrew pushed because he knows Neil.

“I thought it would be fine. I was only out for a run.”

“And how did that work out for you?”

He grimaces, “Alright, you’ve made your point.”

“I don’t think I have.” He crouches down and pushes the phone sharply into his chest. “So let me make this clear. This stay on you all the time, charged and ready or else I stick a tracker in you.” His eyes harden. “I won’t repeat myself a third time.”

“I was fine,” Neil points out, putting the phone in his pocket.

“And next time?”

He’s right so Neil doesn’t bother arguing. Instead, he nods his head in concession and picks up his guitar. Oddly Andrew settles next to him instead of going back inside like Neil expected. There is a too familiar snick of a lighter and he turns to see Andrew take a long drag before offering the pack of cigarettes to Neil. Gesturing with his guitar, he declines more than satisfied to savor
Andrew’s lingering smoke in order to keep working. Andrew doesn’t say anything as he tucks the
pack back into his pocket, the space around them falling into a similar silence save for the soft puffs
of smoke, Neil’s sporadic strumming, and the scratch of pen on paper. When he notices the second
journal at Neil’s side, he raises a brow in silent question.

“You had an unfinished song,” Neil shrugs putting the guitar down so he can hold the journal
for Andrew to see. “I think I have a couple of verses from one of mine to make them both complete.”

He points to a couple of lines, “See they mesh together well. I just need to get the tempos
right.”

Andrew blows a huff of smoke in the air between them. “Junkie. Barely a day after a concert
and you’re already working again. You’re as obsessed as he is.”

Neil tilts his head, “But these are really good. Why wouldn’t I want to get started on them
right away?”

“Now you sound like him too.”

Neil hums, “Well sometimes Kevin knows what he’s talking about. When he’s not too busy
cowering under Riko.”

“Everyone has their demons, Neil. Don’t blame him for Riko being his.” Andrew drawls.

“We have bigger things to worry about.” he grumbles, “For instance what are we going to do
about whatever it is Riko has up his sleeve? If it’s as bad as Kevin fears then we need to be
prepared.”

“Not your problem.”

Neil turns to him incredulously. “How exactly is that not my problem?”

“You gave your back to me. Focus on keeping your side of the deal and let me worry about
mine.”

“But then who is going to watch your back?”

He looks up to meet Andrew’s eyes and it met with that look. Smoke lingers on his lips as
those eyes flash. “97%”

Neil smiles, knowing he made his point. He picks up his guitar and starts humming. To his
surprise, Andrew stays.
A few days have passed and Neil has yet to solve either of his problems. Riko’s plan still remains largely elusive with no further word from the self-proclaimed king or his lackeys either in person or through the media grapevines. It doesn’t help that every time he tries to bring it up Kevin gets that far off look in his eyes or Andrew shuts him down the moment Riko’s name leaves his lips. Without being allowed to vent his problems and runs on yet another ban, Neil is left to stew in his thoughts and worries until he feels like he’s going to scream.

And his other problem, well that one made him feel like screaming too. Andrew remained as frustratingly distracting as he was ever since that night in the practice room. To make matters worse, he is always there when Neil turns around: at the kitchen counter when Neil walks in for an apple, spoon poking out of his mouth as he reaches for the tub of ice cream; walking out of the shower when Neil goes for his; and of course on the balcony everytime he needs a bit of fresh air. 

Everywhere. He’s not sure if their schedules have always been so synced if Riko’s latest stunt had made it so but Neil feels himself unable to tear his eyes away more and more the longer it goes on.

That’s why he finally gives in and texts Matt for help and his friend suggests a lunch. They are halfway through their meal before he finally decides to broach the topic.

“I just don’t know what to do.”

Matt hums, “Why don’t you start from the beginning? I feel like I’m missing something here. There’s this person that you like?”

“I-just-” He lets his head sink into a hand, “What do you when you learn you’re attracted to someone but also know that nothing can come of it?”

He seems to think this over for a second, “Can nothing come of it because they told you it won’t or because you yourself don’t want it to? Or because you think that they don’t. Because those are three very different things that come with their own pep talks.”

“I don’t know? The first one? Maybe the second?” Neil groans, falling back in his seat.

“Is that a question or an answer?” Neil glares at him and he grins apologetically. “Look I’m just trying to figure out which pep talk to give. Did they explicitly tell you they don’t want anything to happen?”

“No,” Neil meekly mumbles.

“Well do they want something to come of it then?”

“I don’t know, no? I never asked.”

“Are you telling me that you haven’t even spoken to the person yet? Okay, pep talk chosen. Go talk to them.”
“I can’t. I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do with these feeling myself let alone throw their thoughts into the mix. Besides, they probably don’t feel the same so what’s the-”

“You can’t know that,” Matt points out, “You haven’t even talked to them, so you can’t know.”

Neil lets his head roll back. “This is not helping.”

“I’m sorry buddy,” he laughs, “But there’s your biggest problem. You’re working with half of the information, no wonder you’re at such a loss. From one guy to another who’s been in your shoes, you might find yourself surprised by the answer.”

“But what about how I feel about it all?”

Matt shrugs, “You know you like them, yeah? And I assume that they’re a decent enough person if you’ve opened yourself up enough to let them in like that, so really I think you know how you feel about it all. Maybe you’re just scared.”

“Of course I’m scared! What do I even say? Hey I know I haven’t been attracted to anyone since I was like 13 but I am to you; that’s just weird, Matt.”

“Wow, 13 really?”

“Sorry sorry. How about a simple I like you? Works better than most people think.”

Neil snorts, yeah he could just see how well that would go if he pulled that on Andrew during one of their smokes. Yeah, remember how I said I have a criminal organization on my tail and almost certain death waiting for me by those same people you said you’d protect me from? Well, I also like you and was wondering if you maybe liked me too. He’s pretty sure that will end in a couple new stab wounds.

“Neil,” Matt says seriously and the singer meets his eyes in a steady glance. “I’m not going to push you into telling me who it is or even what makes you so sure, but I know that the worse thing that could happen is you tell them and they say they don’t feel the same. And if they do then they suck because you’re perfect and they can’t see a good thing if it slapped them in the face.”

It’s so ridiculous and Matt says with such conviction that Neil can’t help the small chuckle that the man always seems to pull from him. Matt smiles right alongside with him and thankfully lets the matter drop after that. Neil still isn’t quite sure about his next move (the niggle of doubt still heavy on his mind) but Matt’s words at least give him a possible direction to go in.

He’s still stewing over it even as the day goes on and he finds himself sitting in practice with Kevin later that night. Admittedly he is a little distracted but not nearly enough to warrant snatching his music sheet from the stand and waving it in his face. “Why are you even here if you’re not going to give me your all?”

Neil rolls his eyes, “I was.”

“You weren’t. You messed up the first bar three times in the last 10 minutes. You’re distracted.”

“I’m fine,” Neil argues. “Give me the sheets back.”
“No,” he moves them out of reach. “If you’re not going to be serious then leave.”

“Oh, now you’re just being dramatic. Give me the papers.”

He reaches for them again but Kevin remains true. “You said I could have your talent. All of it. Do not waste my time with only giving me half.”

“I wasn’t,” he growls behind his teeth.

“Your sloppy playing says otherwise.”

“You know what, fuck this” He gets up and packs his guitar. “You want me gone then I’m gone. Fuck your shitty attitude.”

He ignores the vicious French curses flung at his back as he leaves and slams the door behind him. For a second he thinks of walking back home just to be petty but he knows Andrew was already pissed enough with him that he wouldn’t want to push his luck further. He entertains joining the other one the roof (the place Andrew can most often be found during their little night sessions) but considering the line of thought his mind keeps going back to, he quickly rules that option out as well. Instead, he heads for the empty recording room down the hall as far as he can get from Kevin without leaving the studio.

It’s one of those that are set up for the whole band rather than a single booth Kevin and he frequently use but it’s just as quiet so he decides he doesn’t mind. He settles himself in a corner and pulls out his guitar and journal, flipping to his latest project. Most of it was done, having reworked both of the verses to better fit together and found a matching temp but something still felt like it was missing. He’s pouring over the chords one more time to see if the problem lies there when the door opens just a crack and Andrew slips in, phone in hand and fingers typing away at the screen. When he’s done he pockets the device before looking up and down Neil’s crouched form.

“Kevin finally decide you’re worthless huh?”

Neil snorts, “More like if we stayed in the same room any longer you would have to break one of your promises.”

Andrew hums and lights a cigarette despite Wymack having been getting on his case lately on smoking in the studio. Neil watches it curl from his lips before tearing his eyes back to the song. He goes through it once, twice, three times before he throws the book from his lap with a nasty snarl in every language he knew. Andrew watches with faint amusement but doesn’t ask.

“Something is missing,” Neil answers anyways.

At that Andrew stick his cigarette between his lips as he strides over to pick up the book. He peruses the writing for half a second before scoffing and tossing it back at Neil.

“What?” Neil asks immediately looking for what he may have missed, but there’s nothing.

Andrew doesn’t answer, instead lifting the sole of his boot to put out his cigarette before walking over to the drumset. He plops himself down and stares at Neil. Neil stares right back in shock for half a second. Andrew was going to play? He never plays at these practices no matter how much Kevin yells or threatens. When all Neil does is look blankly back, he pointedly twirls a drumstick, waiting.

“Well?”
“Should I get Kevin?” Neil hitches a thumb back towards the door because he’s a little shit.

Andrew’s eyes narrow in slits, “Do and I leave.”

He doesn’t manage to keep the smile from his lips in time for Andrew to miss it. His lips twitch in exasperation and he moves to get up when Neil quickly scrambles for one of the electric guitars rather than his acoustic one (having decided that the sound would better suit the lyrics but unable to compose with one all the same.) When he’s strapped up and plugged in ready to go, he shoots a quick look at Andrew who merely waves him to begin.

Hesitantly he does so, starting with a low rumble of a hum, letting a single chord or two reverberate for as long as they could along with his voice. Just as he’s about to begin on the first verse, Andrew kicks in with his drums, loud and explosive dying into a steady thump as Neil begins to sing.

When I was a child, I heard voices

Some would sing and some would scream

Something came alive with the thumping beat and occasional crash of a cymbal or slam on his snare, both steady and unwavering as his guitar weaved between them. It gave depth to Andrew’s words that kicked opened the song and steadied Neil’s as they poured in for the second half of the verse.

When I was a child, I’d sit for hours

Staring into open flames

Two tragic childhood blended seamlessly into a single tale of demons, loneliness, and pain. Both unfinished on their own and only completed as it met the other. Neil’s not sure what that means in relation to them as adults now (already having been told that they are not each other’s answers) but it felt exciting and dangerous all the same. Something kind of like hope.

As the final beat fades, Neil can feel that familiar high from playing on a stage and he turns to Andrew, a smile so wide it feels foreign to his face. “How did you do that?”

“The words were crafted with a drumbeat in mind.”

“But there wasn’t any music next to them unlike some of the other pieces.”

Andrew shrugs, “The words themselves were the drum patterns.”

“That’s amazing.” Neil breathes and Andrew get that intense look but it’s gone before Neil can be sure. “Can you play it again.”

Andrew considers this for a moment before picking up the sticks and waiting for Neil to begin. They continue like that until Kevin starts calling both of their phones complaining about leaving hours later. As they leave the room to meet him in the lobby, Neil is struck with the thought that the longer he remains quiet about what he’s thinking, the more complicated it was going to become.

Because the moment Andrew had picked up those drumsticks again he felt another piece fall into place for a picture he couldn’t see.
Another week in from Neil’s little trip with Jean and Riko finally decides to make a move. Neil is relaxing in the living room with Nicky and Aaron as the two play some videos game when Nicky’s phone pings with a new alert. It’s not uncommon and most times they ignore the various noises that come from the device (of all of EXY Nicky is by far the one most plugged into social media) but what is not common is the squawk of anger and the way he bolts up from his seat, game abandoned.

“That rat!” He hisses, furiously typing away.

Neil looks up from the journal in his lap, eyes curious but knowing better than to rush Nicky before he gets to the tale in his own time. He’s surprised when he ditches his usual fanfare of dramatics and quickly moves to show Neil the phone. “Neil you need to see this.”

He shoves the phone in his face, and Neil has to crane his head back to see that it’s some article or whatever about Riko with a video embedded in the middle. He’s tempted to roll his eyes and look away but Nicky taps the video and Riko comes to life, smug smile facing the camera as he proceeds to tear down Fox Records yet again, paying particular attention to Andrew’s criminal record and Kevin’s “inability” to play. Neil really does roll his eyes, uninterested in his posturing and spewed insults and begins to push the phone away.

“Just wait,” Nicky stops him, turning up the volume.

Neil flicks him a look but quietly turns his attention back to the video. That’s when Riko gets to their concert.

“Honestly, I’m ashamed that such a spectacle was even considered a concert. If you ask me it sounded like a cry for help. Were any of you even listening to the songs they played? Suicide, depression, abuse? Those are obviously the chosen songs for the deeply disturbed.” His grin turns positively gleeful. “Especially that last song Josten had sung solo. He claims that it wasn’t his song but how true can that really be? Maybe he was too ashamed to admit it. Are you okay, Neil? I have to say I’m worried about what playing is doing for your mental health. Maybe you should take a break until you can get yourself sorted out and fixed.”

The video cuts to a room full of reporters talking back and forth about their opinions about Riko’s message, some calling it harsh while others wonder about the validity to them. Neil cuts them off with another tap to the screen. Anger simmers under his skin as Riko’s words loop in his head, as he listens to him berate the foxes for songs they bled for, for a show they gave their all to.

“How do I respond to this?” He asks because he told Jean and Andrew that he was done bending.

“Oh no,” Nicky reels back his phone, “I’m not telling you nothing! Coach would have my ass. And that’s only if Andrew doesn’t beat him to it. I’m too pretty to die Neil.”


“Nope. No way. Nuh-uh. The last thing we need is you going on some twitter rampage or something. The media would have a field day! The PR team would probably just quit!”

“Twitter? That’s the blue bird thing right?”

“Yes! Good job!” Nicky beams before continuing on his rant, “Though I suppose even you
couldn’t do too much damage with a character limit.”

Neil hums, already pulling up his phone and reaching for the little bird icon Nicky had installed weeks ago. He’s never used it before but the interface seems easy enough to navigate and open a new post. His fingers start clicking away at the screen when Nicky finally stops and realizes what he’s doing.

“Neil, buddy, that wasn’t a challenge. Please don’t.”

Neil stops and frowns up at Nicky. “You know Andrew doesn’t like that word. He’ll be pissed if he catches you saying it.”

“You’re right, but I’m pretty sure he’s going to kill me anyway if you don’t stop what you’re doing right now.”

“It’s fine.”

“I’m beginning to think that you don’t know what that word means.”

Neil hums and hits the send button, which immediately sends another ping on Nicky’s phone.

You know I get it

Bloop.

Life must be so hard. Always a commodity but never actually worth a damn. Not even to your own family.

Bloop.

I see those daddy issues of your haven’t gone away in the recent years. Tell me when is the last time your dad even bothered to call you? Kevin told me how you used to cry about it.

Bloop.

But just because your life is miserable doesn’t mean the rest of us need to be pulled down into it.

Bloop.

So instead of saying shit about us and our music, how about you actually put out something worth listening to?

Bloop.

Because all I’m hearing is the ranting of an insecure little kid throwing a fit because they aren’t the focus of attention anymore.

The room goes silent as Nicky look on in abject horror at his phone. “Andrew is going to murder me.”

Neil shrugs and picks up his journal to resume doodling in the margins of his and Andrew’s song as he tries to think of a name. He knows when shit really hits the fan the moment Kevin’s door slams open upstairs and the sound of stomps approach the stairs and comes down. It’s really bad
when Kevin doesn’t even look his way as he beelines for the alcohol cabinet in the kitchen. Neil can’t find it in himself to care.

Adding another flame to the corner he ignores the look Kevin sends his way as he sinks in the opposite chair and pointedly uncaps a bottle of vodka. Nicky looks desperately between the two as if afraid something will snap the moment Neil opens his mouth. It’s not a concern Neil shares (he already said his piece). Andrew strolls in a bit later, his face a familiar calm mask and Nicky freezes. He watches Andrew’s every twitch as if he would find a knife in his face the next second but it never comes. Andrew doesn’t even spare Nicky a single glance as he climbs the steps. For a moment Neil thinks he hasn’t seen the blowout yet when the sound of a bedroom door slamming reverberates throughout the hall and shakes the pictures on the wall. Both Nicky and Neil wince at that.

“Someone’s in trouble,” Aaron sing songs and Neil glares daggers at him.

Nicky looks cautiously at the ceiling, “Maybe give him a few minutes to calm down.” Another door slams open followed shortly by the slamming of another. A picture falls off the wall and breaks. “Or maybe a few hours.”

“He should run while he still has the chance,” Kevin mumbles, “It’s the only way he’s going to survive this.”

Neil slams his book shut and stands up. “I already told you, I’m done running.” his eyes lower int a glare, “When will you be?”

Kevin’s eyes dance with fury and pain until eventually, pain wins over and he sinks into his seat. Neil sneers and leaves him to his cowardice. As he opens the door to his room his phone buzzes in his pocket with a lone text from an unknown number.

**Wow you’re an idiot. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.**

Neil barely looks at it before tossing the device on his bed and stepping out onto the balcony. It was better to face this now rather than later when Andrew had time to stew and think up his vicious remarks. At least this way Neil still had a fighting chance. Mostly.

It takes about half an hour for Andrew to join him and even then the other says nothing until Neil breaks the silence with a huff. “It wasn’t that bad.”

Andrew gives him the flattest stare (which is impressive with his already blank look), “You’re trending.”

“I…” Neil furrows his brows, “I have no idea what that means.”

If looks could kill, Neil’s pretty sure he’d be dead three times over. “When are you ever going to learn to keep that mouth shut.”

“Never,” Neil smirks. “I think we both know that I’m physically incapable of not opening my mouth. It’s a character flaw.”

Andrew stalks over until he is chest to chest with Neil, eyes consumed with how little he is amused by that remark. “98%”

“That’s getting awfully close to 100. What happens when I hit the max?”

“I push you over the fucking rails.”
Neil, feeling mischievous, looks Andrew dead in the eye and leans a little too far over the rail. Andrew’s hand yanks him back with his fingers curled into his sweater, pulling him a safe distance but also eliminating the space between them completely.

He leans forward until the wisps of his hair brush Andrew’s. “I’d bring you with me,” he reminds him.

The fury in those hazel eyes are only tempered by a hint of shock but he doesn’t see any hint of uncomfortability so he doesn’t move.

“99%”

Neil smiles and for the first time, he sees unbridled confusion flicker in those eyes. Confusion and the barest hint of those pupils dilating as they dip ever so slightly. He thinks for a second that maybe Matt wasn’t so wrong after all. That maybe it wouldn't be so bad to tell Andrew. Then Andrew’s eyes shut down and he takes a step back, leaving Neil cold and remembering how foolish that would be.

Andrew doesn’t say another word as he turns on his heels and storms back into his room with a slam. Neil takes a deep breath and then another before his skin stops vibrating long enough for him to walk back to his own. On his bed still lies his phone and he can’t help but think of Jean’s warning and wondering if Riko really is as dangerous as he thinks he is and what the consequences there will be for underestimating him.
Another week has passed and once again Riko has elapsed into utter silence. Neil’s nerves fray as he doubts his previous dismissal of Jean and Kevin’s warnings, Jean’s text weighing heavy on his mind alongside Kevin’s increasing worried look every day that that passes without word from Riko. But it’s forced to the back burner as their upcoming concert takes precedence. It’s a hometown show which means that while there isn’t any traveling involved, things feel sluggish as they all drag their feet without a sense of urgency.

They are packing up some of their home equipment as backups (the prior show teaching them to never put too much faith in a venue’s supply) before driving over to meet Wymack and Palmetto at the venue. The entire process is further slowed by Aaron’s complaints about being dragged along on order of his brother and cousin since it’s rare for them to perform locally. He only ceases his complaining when Nicky promises a trip to Eden’s after the show ends and a quick shrug from Andrew marking his approval of the plan. With that settled, they are able to move the last of the equipment into the car and Neil is left to do a final sweep of the house. He’s almost out the door when a phone starts ringing from the end table just next to the door. One look tells him it’s Andrew’s phone, the latter having must set it down as they were moving things. He finds it odd since the device has strangely been attached to the man as of late. The screen tells him it’s Wymack calling so he decides to pick it up and answer, figuring it must be him asking about their whereabouts.

He is instead meet with yelling. “Why the fuck is Oakland P.D. calling me asking about you? What did you do?”

“Uh, hi Coach? Andrew is loading stuff in the car.” Neil explains when the man finally seems to calm down.

“Well get that fucker on the phone now.”

Andrew, as if summoned, walks in through the door at the moment and looks to see what’s keeping Neil. When he sees the phone pressed to his ear, he goes still.

“It’s Wymack,” Neil lowers the phone and offers it to Andrew. “He’s asking about why Oakland P.D. would be calling him.”
The phone is immediately torn from his hands. “I’ve got nothing to say to that pig. If he calls again tell him I said as much.”

He hangs up and for a moment, Neil thinks he’s about to shatter his phone. “Andrew,” he starts, but is interrupted by his own phone ringing. Thinking it’s probably just Wymack calling back, he pulls it out and answers it without looking. “Hello?”

“Hi, is this a Neil Josten?” an unknown male voice filters in.

Neil looks down at the number to see a California area code. Not one to believe in coincidences, Neil looks to Andrew and asks, “Who is wondering?”

“This is Officer Higgins with Oakland P.D. Sorry to bother you but I asked David Wymack for the number of the person most likely to make Andrew listen, I hope that’s okay.”

“I don’t think it matters what I think,” Neil retorts. “What’s this about?”

“Drake.”

He says the name like it’s supposed to mean something to Neil. It doesn’t so he asks Andrew. “It’s that Oakland officer. Higgins. He says it has something to do about a Drake?”

And if Andrew was angry before it doesn’t hold a candle to the anger radiating off him now. He rips the phone from Neil and snarls into the speaker. “Listen well Pig Higgins because I’m only going to say this one more time since it seems the ignored calls didn’t get my message across. Leave me the fuck alone. I helped you once already and look where it got me. I’m done. Whatever it is, whatever he’s done now I don’t. Care. Fix your own mess.”

This time when he hangs up he does shatter the phone. Neil only just manages to suppress his flinch as it explodes into pieces at the wall near his head. He waits as Andrew struggles to contain that rage under his mask of indifference, mouth twisted in a soundless snarl, chest heaving, and eyes wild. It takes him a few tries.

“Andrew-” Neil starts, confused and worried about what that phone call meant and who exactly was this Drake.

“It’s not your turn.”

It was, but Neil was not needlessly cruel enough to take it now, so he lets the matter drop and follows Andrew out the door to the car where the rest of their friends look on in confusion and worry at the blow up they no doubt heard. Neil catches Nicky’s eye and shakes his head in silent warning to let it go.

The drive to the venue is punctuated with a tense silence that hangs over the car and too sharp movements from Andrew’s reckless driving. Nicky, Neil, and Kevin brace themselves against whatever they can as they trade silent prayers that they don’t crash. On the upside, they make it to the venue in record time. The moment the car slams to a stop by the back door of the bar, Nicky, Kevin, and Aaron pile out as quickly as they can, sparing Andrew worried glances as they gather everything they can hold and disappear through the door. Neil stays back and watches the way Andrew’s hands clench and unclench the steering wheel as his gaze remains pointedly forward.

“Did you forget how the door works?”

Neil doesn’t take the bait, “Meet me on the roof after sound check?”
“And why should I?” Andrew sneers.

“You don’t have to. It was an offer, not a demand. Come or don’t,” Neil shrugs and pops open the door.

Andrew doesn’t follow him inside, nor does he come to soundcheck much to Kevin’s displeasure and irritability at having to calibrate it himself (something he must be familiar with seeing how quickly and effectively it gets done). Once Neil’s guitars are tuned and set up, he manages to slip Kevin’s notices and jogs down the street to the nearest liquor store. He buys a pack of Andrew’s cigarettes and nearly clears an aisle of candy since he didn’t know which ones Andrew liked (much to the cashier’s confusions ringing up 20 different chocolate bars and candy packets alongside a single pack of cigarettes).

Laden with his new purchases, he quickly makes his way back, again carefully avoiding Kevin’s notice — who is now screaming for Neil — and finds the stairs leading to the roof. By the time he climbs the last steps, Andrew is already there on the edge staring into an empty carton of cigarettes with stubs littering around him. He sets the bag down between them and joins him on the ledge, new pack of smokes opened and offered.

Andrew slides out two and lights them, offering Neil the second. They don’t say anything, Andrew waiting for Neil to ask and Neil searching for something more. Eventually, he starts prattling about the setlist and the last minute changes Kevin tried to make in order to “improve” them not an hour before they’re supposed to go on. He talks about his plan to play their song as a closer tonight and asks his thoughts on maybe switching a few verses next time depending on how they go this first round.

At that Andrew looks to him unimpressed and says, “Why would I care?”

“Impress your brother?” Neil smirks cheekily.

Andrew scoffs, “Again I repeat, why would I care? Aaron can fuck right off for all I care.”

“And yet you made him come anyway.” Neil points out. Andrew gives him a look that warns him of what will happen if he opens his smart mouth again. He then shifts his eyes to the bag between them for the first time.

“What’s in the bag?”

Neil moves to open it, “Candy.”

“That’s a lot of candy for someone who doesn’t like sweets,” he remarks as he leans over the bag.

“No, but you do.” Neil shrugs. “Though I’m sure Dan, Matt and them will eat whatever you don’t want.”

“Sugar before a show? What on earth will Kevin say at you enabling my poor dietary habits?”

Neil grins, “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Andrew stares at him for a few moments before pulling out a single chocolate bar and unwrapping it. They continue on like that until the sun starts to sink and the bag lies half empty with more wrappers than candy. He misses the rest of soundcheck and undoubtedly the extra practice Kevin somehow squeezed in, but the way Andrew’s shoulders loosen little by little makes it worth it.
He may not know what the business with that officer was about nor how Drake figured into it, but he knows that if Andrew wanted to tell him then he would. If not then Neil had his own secrets and could hardly fault Andrew for keeping some of his own.

Kevin eventually finds them and, when he spies the wrappers sitting between them, proceeds to lecture them about consuming so much sugar before a set and threatening them with death if they even think about crashing before the show is over so help him god. Neil and Andrew share a look and Neil can’t help the laugh that throws his head back.

By the time the concert rolls around, Neil thinks that the worst of it was over. Andrew, while not anything close to happy, seemed more relaxed and focused rather than sporting that shut off look in his eyes and brimming with barely checked rage. Their show is better for it, the awkwardness from the car gone and easily sliding into the usual groove the moment they start playing. They even do a few requests from the audience towards the end of the night, though not the song Neil had dedicated to Riko, despite the screams for it. (Andrew had glared at him when he even considered it.) As always, they ended with Neil doing a solo segment where he decided to play his newest song with Andrew. It was almost worth it seeing Kevin’s face when Andrew voluntarily went on stage after Neil, though the crowd’s loud cheer felt almost as good too.

All in all the show went off without a hitch, something Neil was only mildly concerned about in the face of Riko’s silence. Yet, Neil saw no sign of either the man himself nor his French companion, any hint of interference nonexistent. So Neil let himself relax as the others sweep him off to the green room for some post-show greetings.

Palmetto is already sprawled among the space having settled in after their opening set for the night and is mingling among each other and a few fans lucky enough to get one of their new backstage passes. They usually don’t bother with such things — each of the foxes valuing their privacy — but the publicity team pushed for in light of their… aggressive behavior as of late. Wymack only gave the okay after running it by all of them first. Neil can’t say he was thrilled by the prospect, but it was nice to see the foxes in their element and interacting with children and teens alike. Everyone that came up explained how their music had helped them somehow, a feeling Neil could relate to.

A handful of people come up to him at first but they slowly trickle off to other members of EXY and Palmetto when he settles himself on the couch next to Andrew. He’s got his guitar in his lap as his fingers strum a random tune to the lull of the conversation and post high of the show still rolling over him. Andrew plays with a lighter but the cigarette behind his ear still untouched due to the teens still lingering around the room. Neil smirks at him which earns him a finger his cheek as the drummer pushes his face away with a murmured “Junkie.”

A knock at the door draws their attention as one of the roadies they often use sticks their head in and searches for Andrew. “Uh, Andrew?”

The man flicks him a bored gaze.

“There appears to be a problem loading your drums. It was told to get you so no one damages them.”

“Get Wymack then.”
“I’m afraid he’s busy with the venue manager currently. That’s why I was sent for you.”

Andrew glares at the man for second before tapping Neil’s shoulder to move the guitar so he can get up. He watches as Andrew moves the cigarette to his mouth and lights it. Raising a brow he silent asks if he wants Neil to join him, but receives a small shake in response. Accepting the answer, Neil settles back into the couch, feet coming to rest in Andrew’s spot and watches as Andrew follows the stagehand out.

At first, Neil returns to his music, strumming and humming away to whatever song or melody catches his attention the longest when he begins to notice that the fans have begun to trickle away and the foxes prepare to pack up and Andrew has yet to come back. He figures the problem must be bigger than originally assumed to be or maybe he had gone to the roof for a smoke since he couldn’t before, but the more time that passes by Neil feels himself start to get antsy and paranoid. He can hear Jean’s voice warning him and tickling the back of his mind, could feel the weight of Riko’s silence and the dread it left in his stomach. Another minute and he decides to check the problem himself.

He swings the guitar over his shoulder, waving off the others when they ask where he’s going. He starts for the stage, turning left down the hall to where they had left the drums in the first place, but quickly turns on his heels when he realizes that they would be more towards the loading area. It’s only because of that sharp turn of direction that he catches the glint of silver down the dark alcove tucked away before the stage. He stops to get a closer look and what he sees freezes his blood.

Andrew is pushed to the wall, hands pulled behind his back, bloodied face shoved into brick, and a looming male figure pressed against his torso. Those hazel eyes are dazed as he weekly struggles against the man’s grip, likely concussed from the obvious blow to the head and blood loss as the wound pours a river down his brow and chin. That’s when Neil notices Andrew’s pants have been shoved down and the man’s hand is fumbling to undo his belt. Neil sees red.

His body moves, rage slipping the guitar from its strap and bludgeoning the man’s skull with its body. The wood shatters, spraying them in splinters and string and knocking his grip away from Andrew. But he’s not done. He tackles the man to the ground, not caring of the fact this man was nearly 10 inches taller or double his weight. After all, gravity worked the same for everyone and right now it was pulling them down, down until they hit the concrete flooring with a shake. Neil straddles him by the torso, knees pinning his arms down and his fist coming down repeatedly on the man’s face until his knuckles are split and sprayed red. He can feel the man’s blood splatter on his face and teeth, but he doesn’t care. The sound of flesh beating flesh in the same steady rhythm in his chest more than satisfying.

He tries to defend himself, weakly squirming to buck Neil off, but the blow to the head drained him of complex and powerful movement, making him slow and easily predictable. Neil reaches for a shard of his guitar and presses it to the artery at his neck, it’s place seared into memory from his many lessons as a child. It doesn’t pierce the skin, not yet, but enough so to get his point across and for the man to still beneath him.

“Give me one reason. One as to why I shouldn’t bleed you like a pig.” He hisses into the man’s ears, not recognizing the dark rumble of his own voice. “Why I shouldn’t let your blood paint this floor.”

The man groans, wiggling despite the shard placed at his neck.

“Neil.”
His name pierces through the red haze and his head snaps to the direction of its source. Andrew is still crumpled on the ground, not 5 feet from where they are, blood still a steady stream down the side of his face and his eyes wild. The sight grounds him back to reality, his father’s smile (that he didn’t even realize was on his face) falling from his lips as the horror of what he interrupted takes its place. The shard moves from the man’s neck but before he gets the idea to struggle free, Neil grabs his hair and slams his head into the ground with a hard enough hit to make him lose consciousness.

One he’s sure he will remain down, he quickly climbs off and stumbles to Andrew who is trying and failing to push himself off the ground on two shaking arms that can’t hold his weight. He looks more vulnerable than Neil thought was capable of him, the once immovable and indestructible wall in shambles beneath him. His clothes are still pulled and ruined from the man’s ministrations so Neil quickly shrugs off his jacket before carefully covering him. Even though Neil doesn’t touch him once, Andrew still jumps at the weight of the garment against his skin. Neil’s chest twists.

“Andrew?” The man’s dazed eyes try to focus on him but they can’t for long. Neil crouches down so they are almost face to face, careful to keep their distance. He needed to check for signs of a concussion and how bad of one it was but the last thing Andrew needs to more unwanted hands on him so he asks, “Can I touch you?”

Those hazel eyes shudder. “No.”

“Okay. That’s fine but I need you to answer some questions for me alright?” He grunts. “Are you feeling dizzy or nauseous?”

“Yes.”

“What about seeing. Can you see clearly or does the light bother you?”

“No. Yes.”

“Shit,” he curses, “I think you have a pretty severe concussion, Andrew. We’re going to need an ambulance to move you. Do you still have your phone on you?”

“No, left it in the car.” the words begin to slur together and Neil mentally curses.

He cannot leave Andrew alone like this, not with his attacker still on the floor next to him, despite being unconscious and being too vulnerable to any threats still remaining around them. He could rifle through the man’s pockets to see if he has one, but he’s almost afraid that if he steps away Andrew will collapse entirely. He opts for yelling for help.

“Nicky! Matt! Kevin! ANYONE! Get over here now!”

Feet pound down the hall, one skidding to a stop at the front of the alcove. Nicky is there first, a horrified sob slipping past his lips as he takes in the scene of the bloodied man unconscious to Neil’s right and his cousin and Neil crumpled next to him equally as bloodied.

“Oh my god, what-”

“Call 911. Now.”

“But-”

“NOW NICKY!” Neil screams at him and the man runs off for his phone presumably.
Aaron takes his place next and the same horrified expression that graced his cousin’s face crosses his now but under that is a dark anger Neil had seen on his twin more than once.

“Drake,” Andrew mumble and Neil’s stomach drops.

*Oh god.*

Before he can spiral too deep into the thought, Neil realizes why Andrew had spoken his name, the man — Drake apparently — was beginning to rouse to consciousness. Aaron notices at the same time as Neil and that anger twists his face into a furious snarl as he takes a step forward.

“No!” Neil shoots up to stop Aaron mere inches from Drake’s prone form.

“Get the fuck out of my way,” Aaron roars trying to shove Neil aside.

He holds strong, “Not now, Aaron. Andrew needs you. You are studying to be a doctor right? Well, he’s got a serious concussion and is losing a lot of blood from a head wound. Deal with that.”

It must be the right thing to say because his face breaks as those twin hazel eyes slide toward his brother. He stops fighting and kneels by his brother’s side, hands hovering at the wound at Andrew’s temple unsure of what to do. The police and EMTs flood the space in the next breath, a flurry of shouting and exclamations as they take in the scene and move towards the four men.

Neil and Aaron are pushed aside as they move toward Andrew to assess his injuries. Andrew fights back, snarling at their hands and weakly pushing himself away despite his unsteady arms. Neil shoves his way between them until he can shield Andrew’s from their sight.

“You need to go,” Neil whispers in German. Andrew’s eyes go bright at the language, so Neil pushes on. “You’re hurt and I can’t help you so you have to go with them. Will you?”

Andrew stares at him for moment, those hazel eyes searching his before he slowly nods and slips the armbands from his forearms and shoves them into Neil’s chest. He clutches them tightly before sliding them under his shirt to hide them from prying eyes. It’s then that Neil sees the pale skin of his arms for the first time and the criss-cross lines that mar them.

“Andrew-”

“Not… your… turn.”

He holds his gaze until Neil nods and moves aside to the EMTs can reach him now. They hesitate for a moment making sure Andrew wouldn’t struggle further before continuing forward. Neil slips away from them and moves to Aaron who is just off to the side hovering. He watches the police from the corner of his eyes as they look over Drake and the smashed guitar. When he’s positive they aren’t looking, he takes the armbands with their hidden blades and pushes them into Aaron’s stomach.

“Take these and go with them in the ambulance. Andrew will need them the moment he gets released.”

Aaron’s eyes burn with hatred. “Fuck you. Who do you think you are to order me around because you and my brother-”

“Not now,” Neil growls, his temper breaking free once more. “This is now about you or me right now. This is about Andrew and what he needs. So shut the fuck up and take these and be there
for your fucking brother.”

“And where exactly are you going?”

“The police station.”

The officers put the pieces together from the broken shards of a guitar to the blood splattered clothes and face to the man, more dead than alive, and slam a pair of cuffs on his wrist and throw him against a wall.

“You are under arrest for attempted murder.” One officer barks before reading his Miranda rights.

Neil can hear the foxes voices shout in protest at the sight but they are drowned out by the buzzing in his own ears as he watches the group of EMTs and what they’re hiding from sight. As they pull him away and lock him inside the back of a car all he can think of is the weight of Riko’s silence and Jean’s voice telling him that whatever comes next will be worse.

He closes his eyes and lets the guilt swallow him whole.
Much to the police’s dismay, Neil remained completely silent as they attempted to interrogate him after he explained what happened the first time. They barraged him with question after question in hopes of tripping him up or finding a hole in his story but the truth always remained the same. Andrew went out to deal with a problem regarding his drums, Neil went after him, he saw the attack and retaliated in Andrew’s direct defense. It doesn’t matter if Drake was beaten to nearly an inch of life with a shattered nose, two black eyes and a crack in his skull or even that two of Neil’s own fingers were broken in the encounter. The truth remained the same.

Andrew was attacked and it was Neil’s fault.

When it became clear he would not play their games, they slapped him with a hostile witness label and threw him in a cell for the night. Neil goes willingly despite his whole being screaming at him to run — to not let himself be trapped where he cannot escape. But it’s a dull moan in comparison to the all-consuming truths the officers had given in hopes of breaking him. How the man was Drake Spear, longtime foster brother to Andrew Joseph Doe until the age of 17 when Andrew accused his foster brother of raping him repeatedly since he returned home from military service. How after that Andrew was removed from the home of Cass and Richard Spear, his longest foster parents and who had put in the adoption papers just a week prior. They tell him of the trial Andrew was forced through and how Cass had attacked him after he took the stand, accusing him of lying. They explain how Drake was only given probation with parole but somehow managed to slip the state without anyone knowing.

Each truth felt like a new scar carved into his flesh as the final pieces of Andrew started falling into place to make a picture almost as broken as he was. He bears them in silence, both a vow to destroy Drake if he makes it through the night (another thing they liked to taunt him with) and Riko for being coward enough to attack him through Andrew.

He sits in his cell and waits either for them to let him go on a charge they could never make stick or for his father’s people to finally come for him now that he was vulnerable. All night he sits like this and waits, clock ticking away the seconds but they never come. Instead, a lawyer arrives in the front of his cell and informs him that she was hired by “Miss Reynolds” to work on his case and that she would have him out within the next hour. Neil barely nods his understanding before allowing her to guide him to a car to escort him home where the foxes were waiting for him. He almost declines the ride, but his body is too heavy from lack of sleep and guilt.
that he’s not sure he could hold his head up much less run the 5 miles home. So he accepts the ride and sinks into the passenger seat of a complete stranger’s car and closes his eyes when his head hit the window.

The living room is filled with the foxes when he walks through the front door, all equal images of exhausted and upset. Nicky is a mess, dried tear tracks down his face and eyes red, a mirror to both Dan and Abby who are huddled on the couch next to him. Matt hovers nearby, face grim and a far-off look in his eyes. Kevin anxiously paces back and forth to the obvious annoyance of Allison and Seth who look unaffected besides the glimmer of hate and anger in their eyes and twisting their mouths in frowns. Aaron is also angry but his anger is more directed at Neil as he enters the house, the only one to notice his appearance so far.

Renee, at first nowhere to be seen, comes down the stairs looking as tired as Neil feels with a dark look in her eyes that he has only seen a handful of time since he’s known her but never so close to the surface and never so dark. “Neil. I’m glad you’re home safe.”

The others’ heads swivel to him (all except Aaron who turns in disgust) as they clue in to his arrival. Suddenly they are all in motion, jumping from their seats to wrap him in their arms, Matt is the first there to crush the smaller man to his chest and readily lifting him off the ground.

“We were so worried, man. It’s bullshit they took you away.” He mumbles into his hair.

“Fucking cops,” Seth sneers in agreement. “Never do their fucking job right.”

“That’s why I put Sylvia on them. Bastards deserved the hellfire she’s about to reign on them.” Allison scoffs.

“Not before we get our hands on them,” Dan says darkly. “They don’t get to mess with us. Not a single damn one.”

They all nod in agreement, not letting Neil go until Nicky pushes his way through the group to stand in front of him. He stares at Neil for a beat too long before those tanned arms snake out and crushes him in a tight embrace. “Thank you,” he sobs, tightening his grip. “Thank you for saving my cousin.”

Neil stills in Nicky’s arms, unable to return the gesture and feeling completely unworthy of his thanks. After all, how can he be thanked for “saving” Andrew when he’s the reason it all happened in the first place. Caught between what to do, he does nothing as the older man cries into him and holds him tight. Seeing his unspoken plight, Abby moves to take Nicky from him, cradling the singer in her chest as she tries to soothe his sobs while guiding him from the room. An awkward silence follows their departure, leaving everyone tense and unsure of how to continue. Neil’s fingers clench at his side causing him to wince as he remembers the two splintered fingers on his right hand. Of course, the reaction draws Kevin’s attention to the injury who immediately grabs him to inspect the damage.

“They’re broken. How will you play?”

“Jesus Christ Kevin, really?” Matt growls. “That’s what you’re worried about? Him playing?!”
“Have a little respect,” Dan growls.

“I’m fine,” Neil pulls his hand back. “The doctor said it will be fine in a couple of weeks.”

They all look at him in disbelief. “Neil...”

“I’m fine,” he repeats in a tone that warns them from pushing this further. He decides to leave before they even get the chance, sliding past them and into the kitchen, for peace and maybe a little coffee. He is gifted with one of the two.

Wymack is in the kitchen by the coffee maker, face tired as he watches the machine gurgle and pours a fresh pot. His eyes slide to Neil as he walks in, only momentarily surprised before he sighs and runs a hand down his face. “Shit, I was supposed to go with the lawyer to pick you up.”

Neil shrugs because he doesn’t really care. “What did I miss?”

Wymack reaches for the half-filled pot, pouring them both a mug before sticking it back in to resume. He slides it Neil’s way before he starts the recap. “Not much besides the shitshow that was the aftermath of you getting arrested. We had to battle reporters and paparazzi before we could even follow either of you to the hospital or station. Andrew was held for an examination and police report which went as well as you’d assume. They wouldn’t even let us see you when Matt, Allison, and I left for the station after. Allison had to threaten a lawsuit for them to even admit that you were being detained there until they could process the charges against you.”

Neil nods along and takes a drink of his coffee. It tastes bitter and hot, settling in his stomach uncomfortably but it is better than the numbness that had filled him after the anger had fallen away.

“Andrew?” he asks, a part of him burning to know while the other dreads the answer.

Wymack shakes his head, looking impossibly older than he could ever be. “Hasn’t said a word since the hospital and even then it was only single word answers. But other than that, the doctor and Abby said he should be okay physically. The concussion he had was nasty but no internal bleeding or brain damage was found so he was released under Abby’s supervision. He’s up in his room now.”

Neil says nothing, raising the mug to his lips for another bitter sip. Wymack looks at him with assessing eyes.

“I take back what I said earlier. He did speak, only once. He asked about you — well more like demanded your whereabouts, but that was before they carted him into the ambulance.”

Neil hums but keeps his silence otherwise.

“When did that happen by the way?” Wymack pushes on.

He looks up, “When did what happen?”

Wymack looks at him in disbelief before he sighs and shakes his head. “You know what? Never mind. I don’t get paid nearly enough to get involved in that.”

Neil looks at him in confusion and opens his mouth to ask further but Kevin storms into the room with barely a nod to Wymack before he grabs Neil and drags him off into the garage through the connecting door. It slams shut behind them.

“You were a fool,” he hisses in French.
Neil goes very still. “About what exactly.”

“I told you what would happen if you pushed Riko. If you’d just listened—”

“You mean if I’d bowed?” Neil snaps, “if I gave into his will like you did for years? Tell me where did that get you?”

“But you’re not the one who had to pay the price were you?”

Neil drops his mug with a crash and reaches for his collar. Hot coffee splashes his feet and shards of glass fly across the room but he doesn’t care. His temper finally breaks, the numbness falling to rage once more (his father’s temper his mind whispers). He slams Kevin against the metal shelving.

“Say it again. Say it.”

“You know I’m right.”

“What you are is a coward, Kevin. Just like Riko. He thinks going after Andrew will make me bow but he’s wrong. Now I’m angry. Now bowing is the last thing I will ever do. I’m coming for his head next time.” Neil swears, “I’m going to make him regret ever being born.”

The door opens and both their heads turn to see the intruder. Neil drops Kevin and his chest tightens as he looks at Andrew’s figure darkening the doorstep, his already pale face paler and mared with dark circles under his eyes and purple bruises blooming at his temple. He is dressed in a pair of loose sweats and a baggy shirt, his arms once again covered by those black armbands that hid more than just knives Neil now knew. His feet are bare against the polished concrete, giving him a rumpled look as if having been in bed. He looks battered and bruised and dangerous. Not saying a word, he stares at the two of them silently, those hazel eyes too blank for Neil even as they seem to skip right over him.

“I want food,” he eventually announces to the room, digging his keys from his pocket and tossing them at Neil. “Go get some.”

He doesn’t even wait to see if Neil catches them before turning around and disappearing out the door once more. Neil and Kevin look at each other before turning to the door in silence, their fight knocked out of them and both too tired to pick it back up.

“He’s not done,” Kevin warns, left hand curled to his chest.

“I know,” Neil agrees, fingers curling into the keys. “Neither am I.”

By the time Neil returns from a food run, Andrew is nowhere in sight which means Neil still has his keys in his pocket (Something Nicky cooed over since even he wasn’t allowed to touch Andrew’s car. Ever.) and Aaron glared at him for it. He couldn’t find it in himself to care about either of their reactions and climbs the stairs to his room after dropping off the food in the kitchen for the others to devour. The door closes behind him with a soft click and for a second he lets his back rest against the wood to keep himself upright. His eyes trail around the room to the sparse — but used — furniture Andrew made him purchase, a couple of unopened boxes sitting on his dresser that he must have yet to get to, to the custom-made desk Matt had helped him build when he complained
about not having a place to write that won’t hurt his back, to the bright orange wall Nicky had painted in hopes of brightening the space. All of it, reminders of the life he had built here with the others, a life Andrew had made possible by giving him a promise — a set of keys and permission to stay and be real.

Now it only served as a reminder of who can be used against him if he continues to defy Riko, of who has already been used. The room becomes suffocating, a vice around his throat choking the breath from his lungs as he stumbles for the balcony. Fresh air hits him like a ton of bricks, drawing in one breath and then two. He drops to his knees on the ground, head falling against the wall next to his door and he lets his mind count the breaths into a steady rhythm. Of course through it all his eyes drift to the other sliding door, its black curtains drawn to hide the room from view as well as its occupant.

At first, his body itches with the need to go over and knock, to see Andrew again with his own eyes to ensure he was okay (as okay as the two of them could be). But Andrew chose to lock himself away for the night and Neil can only wait until he decides to come out once more. He owes him at least that much. So he waits, pulls a cigarette out from his pocket and light it. And then another when the sun rises and then falls lower into the sky. Another as the blue sky fades to black and then back again. He waits but no one comes.

As the sun rises on the next day Neil picks himself up and returns to his room long enough to grab himself a change of clothes, his stiff and grimy with the events of the last two days, and heads to the bathroom. His eyes itch from the old contacts so he pulls them off and flushes them down the toilet, eyes too tired to care about putting in new ones when everyone here had already seen them (the foxes had left some time late last night). He crawls into the shower and lets the water run cold enough to shock him awake, despite his lack of sleep trying to do the opposite. Blood and dirt circle around the drain as he washed the last traces of Drake from his skin but knows it will never be enough to truly be gone, not with the twinge in his fingers still throbbing and Andrew’s crumpled form seared behind closed eyelids. He stays under the stream long enough to start shivering.

When he does reemerge, he dresses in the soft sweats and long sleeved shirt he brought with him and shoves his old ones deep in the trash, happy to be rid of them forever. His hair drips water on his shoulder so he slings his towel around them and exits the bathroom. Not wanting to go back to his room, he turns for the stairs to make breakfast and coffee. He is pulling out a pan for eggs when Nicky shuffles out of his room and joins him in the kitchen.

He looks tired, which Neil empathizes with, dark circles and red-rimmed eyes still present but his cheeks free of the tear stains that had adorned them before. A blanket is wrapped around him despite the relative warmth of the kitchen now that the flame is going, which he holds tightly to himself as he settles himself on a stool.

“I’m surprised you beat me to breakfast, but I have to say that I’m even more surprised by the fact that you know how to cook.”

“Eggs are easy enough,” Neil shrugs.

“Need some help?”

Neil nods his head and Nicky joins him at the stove, pulling out another pan to cook some bacon to go with the eggs. The work in silence around each other, periodically switching out to put some toast in the toaster and make a fruit smoothie in the blender. When all is done, they move to set the table, an unspoken agreement to make this a family breakfast even if they were unsure of who
would join. Five placements are set, all with accompanying utensils and glasses and plates that Nicky distributes around the table. When he passes the seat Andrew usually occupies, plate half resting in his palm and half on the table, he freezes. Neil looks up from where he is bringing the dishes filled with eggs and bacon to see his brown eyes fill with tears. The plate clatters on the table and Nicky laughs at himself as he braces against the back of the chair and brings a hand to his mouth.

“Oh look at me being a clutz. I could have broken it. Imagine how mad Andrew would be then.” His words are choked by sobs as he crumbles into the chair. “Oh god, Andrew.”

Neil sets down the dishes on the table and awkwardly moves toward Nicky. He still doesn’t know what to do or say — the concept of comfort still so innately foreign to him. So he stands there and lets the other spill out everything he has because it’s all he can do to lessen the pain.

“This is my fault. I should have been there. How could I not have been there?”

The words come to him then. “It’s not your fault Nicky.” It was his. “You didn’t do this to Andrew.”

Nicky gives him a watery self-deprecating grin. “Did you know that I’m legally the twin’s guardian? I took custody of them when I was 21 when their mother, my aunt, died. It was either that or let them fall into my parent’s grasp.” his eyes shudder as tears spill over. “They are cruel people, Neil. Nearly destroyed me when I was only 16. I couldn’t let them do the same to Andrew and Aaron, even if I was never that close to Aaron and barely knew Andrew. They were family and I’d be damned if I turned my back on them.”

His sobs grow louder, but Neil pushes on. “It’s not your fault. Blame me for not being fast enough. Blame the man who attacked him. Blame the police for not locking the bastard up in the first place. Blame anyone you fucking want, but this isn’t on you.”

They sit there like that until the tears run out and Nicky sniffles as he wipes his eyes. “It’s not your fault either, Neil. You saved him when none of us knew he was in danger.”

Neil nods but can’t find it in himself to agree. He knows the part he played in it all.

“I’m serious,” Nicky pushes, reaching out to put a hand on Neil’s arm. “I’m glad Andrew has someone like you watching his back. He’s lucky to have that. Have you. We all are.”

He opens his mouth to say that Andrew doesn’t want him that he can’t want or have a lie when Aaron storms into the kitchen. “Lucky to have him?” the blonde seethes. “None of your fucking business,” Neil barks back in the same language, not because they are anything but because he doesn’t like the tone Aaron used like he was disgusted by the idea.

Both men stare at him shocked, mouths open and surprise etched on their faces. It clicks that he’s never spoken to either of them in German before, despite the two having used it around him before. It was never important enough to respond in like, often a request among the three men to pick something up or the sly remark from Aaron behind his back as he left the room. But it never had occurred to him that they didn’t know he spoke it; he figured Andrew would have told them. Evidently, he was wrong.
“Since when the fuck do you speak German?” Aaron growls.

Neil looks at him boredly. “Since always.”

“Oh shit,” Nicky pales. “Quick what have I said in German for the past two months?”

But both men ignore him. “And you’re only just telling us now? After you’ve been eavesdropping on us all this time?”

“Andrew knew,” Neil shrugs, “And you’re hardly worth eavesdropping on. Your insults are awful by the way.”

Aaron freezes before he scoffs. “Of course Andrew knew.” His voice drips with disdain. “Tell me what else does my brother know about you? Does he know that you’re a liar.”

Yes, but he’ll be damned if he ever admits it to Aaron. “I don’t know or really care what you think is going on between Andrew and me, but it’s still none of your business.”

“Like hell it is!” He moves into Neil’s face. “He’s my brother. His business is mine.”

“But that’s not the case is it?” Neil sneers cruelly. “What do you know about his business? When was the last time Andrew ever trusted you with anything?”

Aaron flinches and suddenly it all becomes clear. Why Aaron hated him so much, why he was so obsessed about who Neil was to Andrew.

“That’s it isn’t it?” he smirks as he sees Aaron’s eyes burn. “This isn’t about me or Andrew. This is about the fact that your own twin doesn’t trust you. That he trusts me more than he ever could you. What, are you upset that you can’t earn it or do you just want him as miserable and alone as you are?”

For a moment the room is still, Aaron frozen as Neil’s words hit home and Nicky looking on in disbelief at the two. The next Neil is falling back as his head slams against the kitchen tile, his vision burning white before becoming dotted with black. He barely registers the first blow of Aaron’s fist to his cheek but the tang of blood fills his mouth and stains his tongue as another quickly follows. Distantly he can hear Nicky yelling for him to get off but to doesn’t break through the murderous lust of violence in Aaron’s eyes. Another two blows before Neil weakly starts trying to push him off. But Aaron is built like his brother and it becomes clear that it’s futile, so he moves his arms to shield himself against the raining fists instead.

Nicky starts calling for Kevin and Andrew then, running from the kitchen to rouse them from their rooms. It distracts Aaron long enough for Neil to get an arm under him and bat away his fists.

“Hit me all you like,” Neil smiles a bloody smile, “it won’t change the fact that you’re a shitty brother.”

“Shut up,” he snarls.

Neil doesn’t. “Won’t change the fact that you’re ungrateful for everything Andrew has sacrificed for you. You don’t deserve anything from him.”

“And what do you know about it?” Another punch. “What the fuck do you know!”

“Everything,” Neil laughs. “Your mother, Nicky, jail, the deal he made with Kevin and you. He told me it all.”
Aaron halts, fist poised to hit but frozen in place and shaking as a multitude of emotions cross his face. Neil laughs and laughs because he doesn’t think he can stop. “What’s wrong Aaron? Can’t handle the truth?”

The taunt seems to be the tipping point as it shakes the blonde from his stupor as he winds the fist back to finish the blow. Nicky and Andrew come barrelling in not a second later, the former gasping at the sight of a bleeding Neil laughing on the floor under Aaron and the already blooming bruises around his eye and mouth.

Andrew closes the distance in two swift steps, much faster than he should have been able to move with his battered body, and yanks Aaron off of Neil, throwing him to the ground closer to the sink.

“What the fuck did I say about touching what’s mine?” Andrew growls. “I warned you once, I won’t do it again.”

“Fuck you,” Aaron snarls right back. “He started it.”

“And I’m finishing it. Back down.”

“No!” Aaron scrambles up to be level with his twin. “I want him gone.”

Andrew’s eyes burn and his jaw goes tight. “No.”

“He violates our deal!” Aaron throws back. “You promised safety and he’s a threat to that. A threat to us all!”

“Your deal does not negate his,” Andrew sneers. “Try again.”

“But.”

“Why don’t you tell him what this is really about, Aaron?” Neil taunts as he lets Nicky help him to his feet. “Go on tell him the fucking truth for once. Maybe he’ll be kind enough to do the same.”

Aaron lunges for him but with Andrew between them, he never makes it to Neil. “Fuck you. I’ll fucking kill you, you piece of shit,” he roars, crashing himself against Andrew over and over again.

“Get in line.”

Andrew’s attention whips to him that anger burning brighter and solely directed his way. Neil’s breath catches at the sight of those hazel eyes finally seeing him. What he says next knocks it from his chest.

“Get out.”

The words couldn’t have hurt more if Andrew had carved them into his stomach. He felt gutted and exposed and more surprisingly, hurt.

“Andrew,” Nicky speaks up, “He’s hurt, let me—”

“Out. Now.”

Aaron watches on in undisguised smug glee as Neil stands there for a second longer before turning on his heels and exiting the kitchen. He doesn’t hear Nicky’s protest for him to wait, or
Kevin’s groggy yell about what was going on, all he hears is the ringing of Andrew’s voice telling him to go. So he slips on his shoes at the door and leaves without a glance goodbye. It feels like being untethered. It feels like being alone.

He’s nearly a block away from the house when he realizes that he has no idea where he’s going. He doesn’t have his keys or wallet and his phone is still in shattered pieces in the trash somewhere. For the first time since he’s come to South Carolina, he feels utterly and truly alone.

Eventually, his feet carry him to Fox Records, it still early enough in the day for the foxes to not be around but late enough in the day for security to be around to let him in. He climbs into the elevator, too tired for once to take the stairs and watches as the numbers climb until he reaches the third floor the studio occupies. As he predicted the lights are off but the door buzzes as he enters this month’s code. He slips inside, not bothering to reach for any of the lights, and instinctually lets his feet carry him to one of the couches in the lounge. He sinks into its cushions and curls in on himself, letting the guilt and loneliness swallow him until his mind blanks and he finally slips into the unconscious.

He dreams of fire, smoke, blood, and Drake.

When he opens his eyes next, the lights are blaring down on him and Wymack’s face hovers in his peripheral. Neil frowns and throws an arm over to shade himself.

“You look like shit,” the older man comments.

“Feel like it too,” Neil replies.

“Nice to see that whatever this is hasn’t affected that mouth of yours. Want to tell me why you’re asleep on my couch instead of your own bed?”

“Can’t. Got kicked out of the house.”

Wymack looks surprised at that but Neil doesn’t elaborate further. “Need a place to crash for the night?”

He thinks about the finality in Andrew’s tone and Aaron’s smug look as he got what he wanted. “Yeah. Maybe. I’ll let you know.”

“Well you have a key, just let yourself in or I’ll take you when I’m done here.”

“Thank you,” he says earnestly.

“No need to thank me, kid. You look like you’ve been through enough for the past couple of days.”

“I’m fine.”

Wymack levels him with a look that explains how much believes that but it is quickly eaten away but that same look from their kitchen, the one that aged him beyond his years and spoke of too many horrors seen happen to those he loves (Neil’s just not sure when he became included in that group).
“Kid between me and you, I don’t think you’ve ever been fine.”

Neil chuckles softly. “You’re probably right, but I’m not dead or dying so fine is as apt a term as it can get.”

Wymack looks like he wants to disagree but shakes his head instead. “Sure kid. Get some rest while you can. I already called the foxes and told them not to come in today. That means you should have a good few more hours before they are brave enough to defy me. I’ll be in my office if you need me.”

Neil nods and watches as the man departs, grumbling under his breath about stupid tragic kids and being too old for this anymore. He feels bad for ever thinking Wymack could be anything close to his father. In the short months that he’s known him, he’s proven to be more of a father figure than his own ever was, infinitely more patient despite the numerous hangups Neil’s traumas have caused and kind in the face of Neil’s wariness. He decides to heed the man’s advice and tucks back into the couch to catch a few more hours of rest, but as he shuts his eyes he only becomes more aware of how his body aches and throbs from the hours it already had twisted on the furniture.

His fingers feel crushed and there is an unmistakable throb between his eyes from the likely small concussion Aaron must have given him when he knocked Neil to the ground. The fact that he hasn’t really eaten probably wasn’t helping much either. With a groan, he pulls himself into a seated position, eyes squinting under the brightly lit room as he looks around for the time. The clock on the wall tells him it’s a little past 1 in the afternoon, so he probably got a good 5 or 6 hours of sleep which only does a little against the 36 he was up. He waits until he can open his eyes fully before pushing himself off the couch and making his way towards the mini fridge in the corner. He helps himself to a yogurt cup and granola bar he stashed in there for after runs and snags a bottle of water as well. When they are gone he feels marginally more like a human being.

Deciding he has nothing better to do, he takes off for a practice room, figuring he’d run through some songs since he was still a part of EXY as far as he knows. But when he enters the room and his fingers reach for the guitar always hanging on his back and grasp nothing but air, he remembers that his guitar is in pieces on the floor at that venue or bagged away in some police lockup as evidence. He feels the throb of its loss deep in his chest and in the ache of his fingers, but he can’t help but decide he doesn’t regret it either. Letting his hand drop to his side once more, he turns to the guitars that line the far wall, picking up an acoustic one near identical to his own except for its black finish and shiny body.

He plucks a few chords, adjusting the pitch and tightness as he goes along but it never feels the same. Putting it down he tries an electric one but it doesn’t help either except make the pain in his fingers more pronounced. Hours pass until he is forced to stop playing or risk injury to his fingers more. He can hear Kevin’s voice admonishing him for his recklessness but it does nothing to curb his own frustrations at not being able to play. At all. Dropping the instrument back into its stand, he turns from the practice room and head for the roof, deciding silence and smoke is exactly what he needs.

Neil pushes open the door at the top of the stairs and marches for the edge, settling himself as close as he dares, feet dangling over the lip and hands braced to keep him from tipping over. He digs in his pocket for the pack of cigarettes he knows he bought, only for his fingers to grasp lint and aid. Then he remembers that he never took them from the pocket of his other pants. The ones still covered in Drake’s blood.

He flops back onto the ground, rocks digging into his skin and cementing him to the now. His fingers press into it until he can feel the prick and point of every rock resting beneath his palm. Closing his eyes he tries to breathe. That’s how Andrew finds him an indiscernible time later, eyes
shut, breaths even, and fingertips curled into rock and stone. The heavy weight of something lands on his stomach and he shoots up, eyes frantically searching for the source of the attack. They land on Andrew’s bored form.

“What did I say about that?”

Neil looks down at the object that had fallen into his lap as he shot up. It’s a phone but obviously not his, nor Andrew’s if the shiny new sleek screen was any indication.

“This is not mine.” Neil points out hand the device back to Andrew.

He makes no move to grabbing it. “It is now. You would have known that if you bothered to look around your room for once.”

Neil tilts his head in confusion until he remembers those boxes on his dresser. He never bothered checking what was in them. “Oh,” is all he offers, tucking the device into his pocket. “I didn’t think it really mattered anymore anyways.”

Andrew looks livid, “And why the fuck not.”

Neil shrugs, “You told me to leave.”

At once it’s like Andrew’s anger disappears and in its place stands exhaustion. “The kitchen.”

“What?”

“I meant get out of the kitchen. Not deciding to fucking disappear out of the house for nearly 10 hours with no one knowing where you were and probably with a concussion.”

“Oh,” he repeats, dumbstruck because yeah that had made more sense but even now a voice whispers to him saying that he’s lying. That he was really meant to leave.

Not knowing which to be true, Neil remains silent. Andrew sits down next to him, producing a pack of cigarettes Neil had been missing. He lights two and gives one to Neil. They both let the smoke linger.

“Why weren’t you at the hospital?”

“In jail,” Neil answers evenly, skin still itching from being in the cell. “They didn’t like the way I told them what happened.”

“So you opened that mouth of yours and pissed them off enough to detain you longer than necessary.”

“Not my fault that they didn’t like the truth.”

“And what would that be?” Andrew asks as he eyes flick to Neil’s. It’s only when they settle on his that he remembers the lack of contacts. Somehow he can’t find it in himself to worry since it’s just Andrew.

“That I’m not sorry for what I did and that I hope the bastard chokes on his own blood.”

Andrew hums, turning away. “Yes, I can see how well that went over with them. Cops do tend to frown over explicit death wishes after all.”
“I thought they were supposed to hate child rapists more.”

Andrew freezes and the cigarette crumbles in his hand. It’s the only thing remaining of his surprise when his face goes carefully blank. “Ah, I see someone has been talking when they were not supposed to. Tell me what it Pig Higgins? Did he call the station to talk?”

“As far as I know, no. The officers tried tempting me with the information like I had somehow planned to get Drake here so I could kill him.”

“They do love a good complicated lie over the simple truth don’t they,” Andrew drawls lighting a new cigarette.

Neil hums in agreement. “As if I would be stupid enough to do it in such a public place with too many variables.”

At that Andrew arches a brow. “You sound as if you have it all planned out.”

“There was a lot of time to think and no books to read.”

“Maybe they should have kept you locked away.”

“Probably,” Neil shrugs and inhales a cloud of smoke drifting up from his own cigarette.

Silence lulls over them once more as their cigarettes burn to the filter and they light new ones. Neil’s eyes drift over Andrew, taking in the bruises and bags under his eyes, though both seem a little lighter than the day before. They flick to the bandage at his temple where the bruising is the darkest and the white gauze is stained with a spot of blood. Neil hopes it won’t scar, already too aware of how often the sight of one can trigger the memory at the slightest glance. Unconsciously his eyes dip to the armbands and he wonders if Andrew remembers every moment of them like Neil does his own.

The thought jars him back from his thoughts, tearing his gaze away before Andrew can see or he’s dumb enough to voice what he’s been thinking. Unfortunately, he’s not quick enough and when his eyes meet Andrew’s, they are hard and blank.

“Sorry,” Neil ducks his head, turning away fully before he does something stupid again.

“Ask.”

Neil’s head whips back. “Andrew you don’t have to.”

“Ask,” he says more forcibly, anger now flickering to life.

“It’s not my turn,” Neil shakes his head.

“We both know it is. Ask.”

But Neil can’t so he doesn’t.

“Fuck you,” Andrew snarls, standing with his fists clenched. “Ask.”

Neil breaks. “Why?” It’s barely a whisper but it’s all Andrew needs.

“I was 16 and had lived in shitty home after shitty home where I was beaten, starved, and raped time and time again before they dropped me off in the custody of Cass and Richard Spear, two model citizens who had fostered countless kids before me. At first, I didn’t care about them, biding
my time until I was 18 and could finally get out of that fucked up system.”

Neil can feel his chest caving in but Andrew continues onward unaware or uncaring of his plight.

“But the longer I stayed the more I saw how different they were from all the other families. They didn’t care that I was quiet or rude, they gave me a bedroom filled with new furniture, they cooked me breakfast and plied me with sweets. Richard never looked at me too long or in an inappropriate way. Cass baked me a cake on my birthday and taught me to play the piano.”

Neil wants him to stop because he knows how this all ends. In blood, broken skin, and vacant eyes. But Andrew wants him to know so he shuts up and listens.

“Then Drake came home and I realized that it was all fake. I ignored the too long lingering looks and the way he hovered too close when we were in the same room because Cass and Richard were perfect and maybe I was too fucked up to accept that. Then Drake came to my room at night and I knew it was a lie. He left me broken in a pile of my own sheets stained with my blood. Cass didn’t even question it when I brought them down to wash the next morning.”

Neil burns with a dark anger. Anger at the woman who Andrew clearly cared about and yet turned a blind eye to his suffering. Oh, how he burn.

“But I didn’t care, I wanted to stay. They wanted me. Andrew Joseph Spear. That’s what she told me as she showed me the paperwork. I would have a family — a name that meant more than an unidentified corpse at the morgue. So I let Drake come into my room every night and rape me for almost a year while the paperwork was finalized and sliced my own wrists to feel something other than his hands all over my skin.”

A strangled moan slips past his lips before he clamps down hard enough to make them bleed and he asks the final question. “What changed?”

Because here he stood, Andrew Joseph Minyard, not Spear. Because Cass had attacked him in court and he ended up at Fox Records with a twin brother and a cousin.

“Why did you leave?”

“Aaron,” Andrew answers simply, like it was obvious. “He wrote that damn letter when we were 16 and Drake found it later on. The night he did, he came into my room and told me how sweet it would be to have twins under him. I went to Pig Higgins the next day.”

He gives Neil a cool look. “We both know how that ends.” Neil nods, the same anger simmering from the first time he heard it. “Drake had the nerve to come up to me afterward to brag. I attacked him and got myself locked back up in juvie the next day. The rest you know.”

Neil lets the weight of the words choke him, cigarette long forgotten between his fingers and burning uncomfortably close. He lets it drop, the silence thick and heavy.

“Was it worth it?” he asks at last, unsure of what else to say, It wasn’t a judgment or pity, just simple curiosity.

“Were all those years on the run worth it?” Andrew counters with a long drag of his cigarette.

Neil automatically wants to say yes, that he is still alive and kicking despite everything. But then he thinks of the scars that litter his body and how some days it feels like he’s only being held together by stitches.
“I don’t know,” he answers eventually because it’s the only truth he has to give.

Andrew nods like that was the answer he had expected. Maybe it was his truth as well. Neil is silent, his mind a mess of truths, lies, and everything in between. He thinks of everything he wants to say to Andrew in that moment. That he’s sorry they broke him, that he wishes he stuck that piece of wood in Drake’s throat and watched him bleed out, that he’s glad he didn’t just so he could make sure he died a slow and painful death.

He chooses the first thing on his mind. “I want you to break our deal.”

Andrew turns to him wildly, anger brimming in those eyes. “No.”

“Yes,” Neil stands until he’s at full height, just a little above Andrew. “I’ve done what you asked, Kevin’s still here. Riko has been throwing brick after brick at us but Kevin remains and EXY is stronger than ever.” His eyes soften, “There is nothing left for me to do in exchange, so break the deal Andrew.”

“No,” his jaw ticks and those hazel eyes burn him alive. “If you have nothing then give me something else.”

Neil shakes his head. “I don’t have anything left to offer.”

“No,” comes his stubborn reply.

“Break the deal,” Neil pushes, pleads.

“Why,” Andrew growls, “Why are you so eager to break it? Tell me that Neil.”

“You know why,” is his quiet reply. “I won’t let you risk yourself for me any longer for nothing. Not for me Andrew. Never for me.”

Andrew burns, fingers curling in the fabric of his shirt as he pulls Neil down so they’re at the same height. “You’re a fucking pipe dream.”

Neil’s face twist in confusion. “I’m not a dream.” He’s real (at least as real as a person like him could ever be). Andrew made him so.

Andrew scoffs and shoves him away. “You’re a delusion. A hallucination brought on by insanity.”

“What are you talking about?”

But Andrew ignores him. “Why did you break your guitar?”

“Wha-”

“Shut up. I’m taking my turn. Why did you break your guitar? It was easily the most valuable thing among your meager belongings, at least sentimentally. You carried it everywhere and growled at everyone who even breathed on it wrong. So why break it?”

Neil blinks, dumbfounded and lost. “You know why. Drake was on you and there was nothing else around strong enough to knock him loose.”

“So?”

It’s such a bored tone, on that makes Neil realize just how little that counts for anything in
Andrew’s mind. That him being in danger wasn’t a good enough reason. He snaps.

“Fuck you,” he explodes. “Just because you hold yourself in such little contempt doesn’t mean the rest of us do the same. You think it was a hard decision to smash my guitar over Drake’s head? I’d do it again in a fucking heartbeat. Every time without hesitation. So don’t you fucking dare dilute the truth because you’re too self-hating to want to hear it.”

It scares him how true that was. Even more so that Andrew doesn’t see it. Andrew goes completely still and Neil thinks that maybe he had finally crossed a line.

“100%” The words barely leave his mouth before that hand tangles itself in Neil’s shirt once more and yanks him forward. It takes him a second to realize that it doesn’t stop with him an inch away but fully flushed against him until his lips crash against his.

It was harsh, nothing more than lips mashed against lips but it was enough to short-circuit Neil’s brain with fact that Andrew is kissing him and it feels like everything. It was new and confusing and consuming and Neil finds himself wanting to kiss back. So he does and suddenly Neil was burning too.

The kiss only lasts a few moments but it’s enough to steal every bit of breath he had left to give in his lungs. He feels a heat so strong that it burns oxygen the moment it leaves his lips to trade with Andrew’s. But Neil would gladly give it all away. Then Andrew rips away as if Neil was the one to burn him. Now Neil feels like he’s really did something wrong even if his chest is heaving in a mirror to Andrew’s own, their lips shiny and red and faces flushed.

“Sor—”

Andrew glares at him before he can even finish. “Don’t.”

Neil shuts his mouth with a clank. It clicks. “You like me.”

Awe. Disbelief. And something that feels a lot like hope.

“I hate you,” Andrew replies without hesitation.

Flashes of hurt and disappointment.

“Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t blow you.”

He can’t even begin to interpret the emotion that flows through him at those words. It’s enough to break a smile across his face. Andrew pushes it away with a disgusted snarl, but it isn’t enough to wipe it away. When it’s clear that it wasn’t going to disappear any time soon, Andrew turns on his heels and leaves. Neil still stands there too shocked to move.

He gets to the door and pulls it open but instead of walking through and disappearing like he had done so many time before, he hesitates. “You coming or are you walking back?”

Neil doesn’t hesitate as he turns to follow him. It feels a lot like coming home.
but when I'm near you I feel flames (I touch the fire I get burned)

Chapter Notes

Flames - Tedy

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Neil wakes up in his own bed to the sunlight streaming in his face and the thought that something was going to change. Even now he can still feel the press of Andrew’s lips to his own and the scorching heat that accompanied him. He never knew a kiss could feel like that, something more than a wet press of mouths against mouths and more like the first breath of air after drowning and your lungs are starved. Like it felt right…

Sure, when he realized his attraction for Andrew something deep in him knew that this was different than all the other times he had experienced it, something bone-deep that was never there before. It should scare him — it does scare him — but he can’t help but want to pull it closer and discover more about it. For so long he had denied himself, first by command of his mother and then for fear of disobeying the ghost of her. But these months have taught him that while he may have been alive thanks to her, he was never going to live. And he wanted to. His father was closing in quicker by the day and Riko lurked in the peripheral with promises to only speed that along, and he’s just now realizing that he will die without ever having lived. He was going to die and never live. It took Andrew’s kiss to make him realize that.

His face heats at the thought of the other man, of the words he said to him in the aftermath of their kiss and in the soft pants of their breaths. Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t blow you. Where does he even begin to unpack that statement? He barely knew what to do with the knowledge of his own feeling let alone finding out that Andrew returns them. Sort of returns them. Possibly?

Groaning, he shoves the pillow to his face. He needs to talk to Andrew about this—this whatever that is between them now — if anything is between them. Maybe it was all a mistake, an irrational bout of action brought on by their tempers. Maybe Andrew regrets it. Neil tries to ignore the way his stomach twists at that thought.

It’s better if that’s the case, he tries to reason. His father would jump at anything to make him weak, something to make him compliant and obedient. After all, Riko already saw through it, how long would it take for his father to come to the same conclusion? Andrew deserved better than that fate; he didn’t need to be used as a tool in his father’s war against him. So if — when his father comes, Neil will leave before that could ever happen. The conviction leaves him hollowed and tired.

But what if he doesn’t? A small traitorous voice whispers at the back of his mind. What if Andrew doesn’t regret it.

Then… then he would still leave. That is the only solution that doesn’t end with Andrew’s death in addition to his own. Even if it means that Andrew hates him for it.

He picks himself off the bed, done with the existential crisis his mind decided he needed first thing in the morning. Blearily he reaches for the phone at his nightstand to see the time. It’s a little past 10:30 which comes as a surprise not only because he slept for so long but because he was left
alone to sleep for so long. Usually by 9:30 (if he was lucky) Kevin would be pounding at his door in
demand that Neil practice with him. Yet an hour later than usual and no hint of a whisper of his
friend. Maybe he was still asleep as well.

Deciding to push his luck, he tries for a shower. Turning from his nightstand to his closet for
an outfit, he catches a glimpse of something out on the balcony. At first, he pauses thinking it’s
Andrew (Neil not ready for that conversation just then) but the moment his eyes focus, he realizes
that it’s too small to be the drummer. Sliding open the door, he pokes his head out to investigate, only
to discover a hardshell guitar case resting at the railing across from his door. Neil’s eyes immediately
snap to Andrew’s door but the black curtains remain drawn. Heart in his throat, Neil carefully
approaches the case.

It’s a sleek black case that is smooth and cool to the touch when he runs his fingers over it, a
step up from the flakey faux leather one he had sported before. Expensive too if the gold engraving
of the brand curved along the base of the case was any indication. He flips the latches and slowly
tugs open the case, a soft lush lining brushing his fingers and protecting the guitar inside. The
instrument is beautiful, the body a flamed maple with a black border surrounding its edges, gold
accents on the knobs and brass saddle, two f’s carved into either side of the sound hole, and black
pickguard lined in silver.

His fingers reach to touch but stop inches from the body, almost afraid it will stain the
instrument and all its glory. Its name catches his eyes, engraved on the saddle reading: Super 400. At
once Neil feels the world emptying out from under him. He knew this guitar, its name impressioned
on him by Kevin in one of their many late night conversations. The older man would constantly
berate his choice in guitar and refusal to buy another despite having the funds to do so. He
remembers nothing more than a volley of names each with ridiculous price tags attached. The Gibson
Super 400 was near the top of that list.

Neil didn’t even know Andrew was listening let alone close enough to commit it to that edict
memory of his (though he shouldn’t really be surprised by now. Andrew always tended to listen
more than people gave him credit for). But to not only replace his guitar but with one of such prestige
and value — a torrid of emotions flow through him, excitement, confusion, happiness, wariness, and
an unmistakable bit of affection at the realization he had to get up early enough to get this before he
woke up. His fingers touch the cool metal as they trace over the wires, strumming the barest hint of a
song.

What if?

That night Neil waits for Andrew on their balcony, new guitar in his hand (where it hasn’t
left since he dared to pull it from the case) and two unlit cigarettes at his side. Andrew appears a little
after the sun sinks low enough to coat the balcony in shadows but still visible enough to paint the sky
hues of oranges, pinks, and reds. He doesn’t say a word when Neil offers him a cigarette nor when
he gestures for the second one for himself. It’s clear that he is waiting for Neil to make the first move,
so he does.

“You kissed me.”

It’s not a question but Andrew answers it anyway. “Yes.”
“Do you regret it?” Neil asks because he needs to know.

“I don’t believe in regret,” he drawls, “it implies that I care enough about the consequences.”

“Consequences?”

“Yes, Neil. Consequences.”

“What are you talking about?”

Andrew slides a bored look his way. “You tell me.”

It clicks. “I don’t… Andrew, there are no consequences for kissing me.”

“How can you be so sure of that? I kissed a man who doesn’t swing. Unless that too was a lie.”

Neil thinks about that. Thinks of the burning in his stomach even now as he looks upon Andrew, but how he didn’t look or feel the same when he saw Aaron today (unless you count burning hatred) or even Nicky or Kevin. Nor did he think of Dan or Allison or even Renee. It was only Andrew.

“I don’t,” he agrees. “Swing that is.”

“My point exactly-”

“But,” Neil interrupts, “I do for you. It’s, I don’t know is there a word for that? When you only feel and want for a single person?”

Andrew’s eyes flare with that intensity he never could have named until now. It was the same feeling he felt just before their lips touched. Want. “I don’t believe that you know what you want.”

Neil shrugs, “You may be right, but it doesn’t change my truth. I don’t know what this is or why I’m feeling this way only for you but I do know that I want to try.” He sets down the guitar and moves closer to Andrew until they are a hair’s breadth apart. “With you. If you want that too.”

“I want nothing.”

Neil smiles. “Well, it’s a good thing I’m nothing then.”

Andrew looks like he could kill him. Instead his hand curls around the back of Neil’s neck, fingers tightening enough to leave bruises that Neil almost welcomes.

“Yes or no?” He says harshly.

“Yes,” Neil breathes.

“Don’t touch,” Andrew warns and Neil is rewarded by the press of Andrew’ lips against his own once more.

The fire consumes him as quickly as it did before, starting from the place their lips meets and erupting from the touch of those fingers on his neck. His hands throb with the need to connect them further, to reach out and touch and see if his touch burns Andrew as much as his does him. But those aren’t the rules to this game; Neil only gets what he is given and Andrew told him not to touch. So he buries his nails into the meat of his palm and pushes back against Andrew’s lips in a desperate fever to match Andrew’s own.
When he breaks away, Neil is heated and unbalanced, having to brace himself on the rails lest he collapses or leans on Andrew. Even so, he can’t help the smile that pulls on his lips when he sees Andrew’s own flushed face and inflamed mouth. He wants to lean in and kiss him again, the thought making him giddy and dizzy. Now he understands why his mother tried to take this from him. It was far too dangerous to be allowed.

Andrew shoves his face away and brings the forgotten cigarette to his lips. “Don’t look at me like that. This is nothing.”

Neil smiles wide but lets him turn his face. He looks at the shiny guitar resting at their side. “Thank you for the guitar.”

Andrew is quiet then, “103%”

Neil scoffs, “That’s not possible. Time is a finite quantity.”

“105.”

“Do I get a prize if I hit 200?”

“Death.”

Neil’s laughter fills the air.

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Despite the whirlwind of events that had led them here in the weeks that came to pass, Neil found himself inexplicably, undeniably happy. There was a silence that had fallen over their lives, giving them all the moment to breathe without fear of another shoe dropping when they least expected it. Drake had become the echoes of a nightmare that may threaten to remerge the moment they closed their eyes (and often did) but remained little more than a niggle in the back of their minds during the day.

Neil could see the lingering haze of horror and regret beginning to leave the eyes of Nicky and the other foxes as they began to rebuild themselves in the face of tragedy like they had time and time again. True, the scars remained — neither willing to stray too far from the others lest another attack or strangers now kept at an even further distance when they learned Drake got in through a backstage pass. But their laughter also returned bright and filling, Nicky’s movie nights began yet again, this time with more attendants squished on their couches. He even began to see Andrew stake steps to move past it.

He never spoke more of that night nor of his life with the Spears (of broken dreams and scarred arms) not even to Neil, but in the wake of his silence came a quiet solace. No longer did he seclude himself in his room save for food and the bathroom but rather would seek Neil’s silent company on the balcony in the late hours of the night or early hours of the morning. Sometimes they would smoke quietly, others Neil would curl up next to him on the ground (close but never touching) and whisper to him truths of his life with his mother and after it. He told of the places he’s seen, the dangers he encountered no matter where he went, the languages he learned and how. Sometimes words weren’t right for either of them and Neil would fill the air with music instead.

But Neil’s favorite nights were the ones that would end in stolen kisses in the wake of a yes or no. He never asked, content to let Andrew start and stop the moments as he saw fit (as he needed
them to be) but never failed to whisper his yes into those lips as the met his. Andrew’s kisses tasted like cigarettes and candy, something too sweet and entirely addicting. They made him feel like he would gladly burn to ash if it meant never doing without them again. It never moved beyond kissing, Neil’s hands never granted access to bridge the space between them, but it still left his body thrumming like he had just played a show and his fingers itching to write it down in music despite how he doesn’t think he had the words to describe it. It was nothing, undefinable and new, something of Andrew’s creating within him yet at the same time it was everything, all-consuming and something more that Neil wasn’t quite sure meant just yet. But time denied him the moments needed to sort his mind and sift through his emotions enough to decipher it.

Instead, time became an insignificant blur as it whizzes by them. Neil’s finger began to heal enough where he could play with little more than a stiffness after too many hours which in turn led to Kevin resuming their night practices and frankly ridiculously frequent band practices. Then again, the foxes had been quiet too long, the media in a tizzy with rumors and false information about their supposed fall. The concerts resumed, both as EXY and Palmetto separately and together as the Foxes; each of them met the media and paparazzi head-on with masks of defiance and determination to show the world that they were not broken. They sang louder, played harder and faster until all that mattered was the undeniable rise in sales for their tickets and the roar of the audience everytime they took and left the stage.

Eventually, somehow, another couple of months had passed and Neil wakes up one morning to the fact that it was his birthday. Or rather it was Neil Josten’s birthday, his own having passed in January with as little fanfare as it usually does except with a tightness in his chest that it was another year he had lived longer than his mother. Lived at all. He stares at the date, March 31, and notes that today Neil was 23 years old, an age Nathaniel was likely never to see himself.

Not letting himself think too long on that, he throws off the covers and proceeds about his day. After all, he had a concert to worry about instead. He lets the day pass like any other, dividing his time between helping Wymack with the preparation, letting Kevin drag him into last-minute practices and indulging Nicky in whatever cover he wanted to do for the night (usually some foreign language or another that he was just dying to do). Eventually, they are all gathered backstage in the few moments before Palmetto goes on for the first set when Nicky gasps after looking at his phone.

“Oh my god, how could I forget! Neil, we need to change our cover and do a tribute to the best man in music history for his birthday!”

Neil stiffens for a second, hoping Nicky didn’t remember his birthday (he had gotten lucky so far with no one knowing yet) “Who?”

“Bach obviously,” Kevin scoffs. “Though I’m not sure how Nicky plans to do a full orchestral piece with just us.”

Matt rolls his eyes, “That’s because he’s obviously referring to Angus Young, rock god, and legend.”

“Wrong both of you,” Nicky points out, turning his phone to show a picture of some man. “I’m obviously talking about my second husband Ewan Mcgregor, hottie mchottie and musical goals.”

Everyone in the room groans, instead throwing out their own suggestions for musicians to play tonight, much to Nicky’s indignation. Somehow this leads to each of them looking up which famous musicians they share their birthdays with and inevitably leads to someone turning to Neil and asking him.
Seeing no reason (or rather no easy way to lie) he tells them the truth. “Apparently, Bach, Angus Young, and Ewan Mcgregor.”

Everyone stops, mouths hanging open as they stare at Neil as if he just told them he was actually the son of an infamous mob boss. Which…. Yeah…


“Dude!” Matt groans, “Why didn’t you say anything?! I had like plans for your birthday. Thoughts and ideas man!” Several other foxes voice their agreement. Andrew remains impassive.

“It’s just never been a big deal?” Neil hedges. “To me, it’s just another day.”

“Nope. Unacceptable.” Nicky declares. “I’ll be damned if I sit here and let you get away with hiding your birthday.”

“I wasn’t hiding-”

“Hush. The adults need to talk now.” He gathers the foxes together and starts a huddle just a little off of where Neil stands. Their voices are too soft for him to overhear, but he feels a bubble of worry in his stomach.

It’s the end of their setlist and Neil is gearing up for his solo for the night when Nicky grabs the microphone and calls out a greeting to the crowd. “How’s everyone doing tonight?”

They cheer.

“Now, I know we usually close the night out with Neil here singing but a little birdy told me that it’s actually his birthday so we’re going to do something a little special. I’m going to need your help for the first part alright? On the count of three, I want you all to join us as we sing happy birthday. Think you can?”

They roar their agreement, the wave of it hitting Neil even as he tries to wave Nicky off. He is ignored as the rest of the foxes come on stage and surround him with a cupcake adorned with a single candle. Nicky begins the countdown and on three the stadium fills with thousands of voices singing happy birthday in a harmonious sync with Nicky and the other foxes leading. When the song ends and it comes times for him to make a wish, he’s barely able to blow the candle out from how floored he is. But it doesn’t stop there.

“We got one more thing for you,” Nicky announces as everyone starts moving towards their instruments, much to Neil’s confusion. “I don’t know about you all, but I think my girl Taylor Swift made this song with Neil in mind.”

Nicky turns a wild grin on him, “So for your birthday Neil, we dedicate this last one to you.”

The music kicks in and Neil is left standing there on stage as Nicky starts serenading him along with the rest of his friends, all different tones fawning over his apparent gorgeous face. As hard as he tries he can’t help the roar of laughter that burst from his lips as he throws his head back, tears threatening to fill his eyes.
It’s probably the best birthday he’s ever had.

After the show Nicky demanded the foxes go out for a proper celebration to which the others readily agree (despite Neil’s protests on not having to) which is how Neil finds himself once again squished in a too crowded table at Eden’s while music vibrates the air and the foxes lose themselves in celebration and alcohol. They tried to get the club to sing happy birthday to him again but were only met with moderate success via the staff; still, it got them a free round of shots so maybe it was more of a success than Neil gave them credit for.

After much cahoodling, Matt and Nicky manage to convince him to do one shot with them (that he quickly switched with an empty one at the last second) before trying to pull him on the dancefloor. Still not too keen at the threat large crowds pose, he politely begged them off and watches as they drag the remaining foxes with them instead minus Renee and Kevin who were charged with holding the table. Kevin is halfway to oblivion which means he’s asking about Renee’s drum techniques and interrupting with large tangents on the history of drums and their part in rock music. Neil would feel bad if it wasn’t his birthday and Andrew wasn’t standing near the balcony railing far enough away to grant them a bit of privacy. He deserves a little birthday gift to himself, doesn’t he?

Throwing an apologetic grin her way, he moves from the table and slides into the open spot at Andrew’s right. Here, the lights don’t hit them so harshly, enveloping them in shadows but still giving them a clear enough view of the rest of the club and their friends. A cigarette rests between Andrew’s fingers so Neil plucks it and takes a long drag, savoring the way Andrew’s eyes follow the movement and flash when his lips wrap around the filter.

“Give me a reason why I shouldn’t push you over for that?”

Neil chuckles, “Think of it as a birthday present.” He deposits the cigarette back.

“Why? It’s not really your birthday is it?”

“You’re right, it’s not,” Neil admits, not surprised Andrew had guessed correctly. He knew just how much of a lie Neil Josten really was. “It was back in January.”

“When?”

“The 19th. I think we were moving around then, but I’m not entirely sure.”

“You don’t remember what you did for your own birthday? Tragic.” Andrew deadpans.

Neil shrugs, “Never really celebrated them before. I think this is the most anyone’s ever done for me. Well not counting birthday parties when I was younger, but those were more of a show than any celebration.”

Filled with prettily wrapped boxes that contained nothing and promises of pain and scars if he didn’t sit still enough or smile big enough. He much preferred the foxes loud celebration even if he wished they had just let the day go by in silence.

Andrew lifts the cigarette for a drag. “Cass baked me a cake the first time my birthday came around. She let me help and eat the leftover batter in the bowl and on the spoon. Drake came home
unexpectedly from a friend’s house.”

A familiar wave of anger flows through him at the mention of Drake and he struggled to keep it from twisting his face in a snarl. “If I wasn’t already being investigated for attempted murder, I’d slip into that bastard’s prison cell to finish the job.”

“Careful Neil, your monster is showing.”

“Fuck it. Maybe I should just do it anyways.”

Andrew ashes the cigarette and turns to Neil. “Yes or no?”

Neil raises a brow and looks around. “Here?” It’s private enough sure but any of their friends could see if they just turned to look.

“Yes or no?” Andrew’s hand slides behind his neck and squeezes.

“Yes.” Neil answers because it’s the only answer. And well it was still his birthday for the next hour or so.

Their lips meet and Neil loses himself in the sensation, granting Andrew access when his tongue licks at the seam of his lips. He can’t help the moan that slips past the moment his tongue wraps against his, startling both him and Andrew apart. His face heats as he ashamedly ducks his head away. Andrew just stares, eyes intense and a hint wild. Then his eyes drift to the left and the expression hardens into one of murderous anger.

“What?” Neil turns to follow Andrew’s gaze to see Jean standing at Kevin’s side at their table, Renee nowhere in sight and the two men locked into a heated argument.

“Stay here,” he growls before pushing his way through the small crowd that separates them from the table.

For once, Neil decides to listen. Where there is Jean, he’s learned, there’s Riko and he would like to not ruin the only good birthday he’s ever had (even if it’s not his actual birthday). But when has he ever gotten what he wanted? The moment Andrew slips from view another voice is at his shoulder.

“Nathaniel, Nathaniel, Nathaniel. Don’t you know better than to be alone in dark corners?” He presses up against Neil’s back. “You just never know what will happen to you.”

He turns around and shoves Riko back. “Fuck off Riko. We both know you’re not the scariest thing in the dark. You don’t even crack the top 100.”

Riko smirks viciously, “And where does your father rank, Wesinski?” Neil freezes, and Riko knows he’s got him. “You know I tried to invite him along tonight but well you know how busy the man gets. He’s across the country for business I believe, but he sends his regards.”

He feels like he can’t breathe. His father knows where he is. He needs to leave, no. Run. Run. Run.

“Oh don’t look so scared, he doesn’t know exactly where you’re at just yet. Apparently, he’s been too busy to keep up with news so he’s unaware of someone running around with his sons face splashed on every music media station, though he has heard of the infamous Neil Josten.”

Runrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrun
“Don’t think you’re safe though, I made sure to tell him I might have a few leads on where you might be hiding. Though we both know how close I really am.”

“What do you want?” He hates how small his voice sounds.

“You know what I want, Nathaniel. I want you gone. I want that guard dog of yours and Day’s to be muzzled and put down. I want your joke of band disbanded so Kevin will finally come home.”

“Home?” Neil sneers, anger bubbling to the surface at the ridiculous of that notion. “You mean back to the person who broke his fucking hand? Because he was jealous of his talent? The place where he could never be anything more than your shadow?”

“Careful now Nathaniel. You are trying my already low patience.”

“Fuck your patience,” Neil snarls. “And my name is Neil.”

“You’re so quick to snarl and attack me, but are you really prepared for the consequences, Nathaniel? For your father and his men?”

“Go ahead and tell my father, Riko. I’ll fucking call him myself and do you know why? Because he doesn’t scare me anymore.” Lie. “And you never did. He wants to kill me? He’s tried for 20 years and he couldn’t.”

“And what about the rest of your foxes? Can they say the same?” Neil tries and fails to hide his flinch. Riko’s grin widens into something bloodthirsty. “Oh they don’t know, do they? Not the monster you came from nor the one they let into their ranks. Absolutely priceless. And to think they’ve already begun to pay the price for your mistakes. Especially that drummer of yours.”

The world stills dangerously. “What did you just say?”

He knew. He knew it was Riko the moment those cell doors had slammed in his face, but a small part of him — a naive and hopeful part him wished that maybe, just maybe, he was wrong. But he wasn’t. Neil wasn’t wrong and Riko was standing here flinging it in his face like he hadn’t broken the last of Neil’s patience. Like he hadn’t just signed his own death warrant.

“Oh liked that treat did you? I have to admit it took me quite a bit of time to grease the right palms but it was worth it for the family reunion no? You know I’m a sucker for brother’s reuniting after so long.”

Neil doesn’t think as he lets his fist fly into Riko’s jaw, the sound of flesh pounding against each other the sweetest sound he’s ever heard. But it’s not enough; he reeks his fist back again for another punch and then another. But Riko is not Drake, he isn’t dazed or caught extremely off guard which is why that when Neil scrambles to pin him down, he manages to flip them and deliver his own blow to Neil’s temple and cheek. Neil bucks him off and they begin to roll, trading blow after blow as they smack into other patron’s legs or tables. Eventually, several sets of hands curl around his torso and tug him away to keep him from lunging at Riko who struggles against his own captors.

“I’ll fucking kill you,” Neil promises. Riko snarls back at him, leaning closer by a few inches. Neil almost swipes out to reach him when he’s tugged back.

“Neil calm down man, I know he’s a prick but this is not the place to do it,” Matt commands in his ear, arms going tighter around his body.

“Let me go! I’ll fucking rip his goddamn throat out!”
“Jesus that’s dark,” Matt mumbles. “Seth I need your fucking help!”

“I say let him do it,” Seth growls but comes to Matt’s aid regardless.

“Yeah because we need a murder charge on top of the attempted murder one already.”

Neil roars, pulling against their hands. He needs to get his hands on Riko, needs to make him pay for what he’s done. Damn the fucking consequences. He throws his head back and makes contact with Matt’s nose which causes the man to curse and lighten his hold and Seth to back up in surprise. Neil ducks from their hands and charges for Riko, arms outstretched and a need for blood in his veins. He almost makes it to him before crashing into a brick wall.

“No, let me go!” He battles against his newest barrier but it doesn’t budge.

“Enough,” Andrew growls.

“I’ll fucking murder him!”

“I said enough Neil,” he commands in German, the switch in languages enough to pull Neil’s attention away for a second. A hand comes to rest at the nape of his neck and squeezes. “Stop.”

Neil slumps against him, the fight dropping out of him but not the anger. “He’s a dead man.”

“You let me handle that.”

Of course, Riko chooses that exact moment to pipe up. “Hiding behind your dog again, Neil? I thought you were don’t hiding.”

Andrew whips around and Neil doesn’t need to see his face to know that the look he turned on the man was murderous. Riko pales. He turns back to Neil and roughly shoves him back towards Matt. “We’re leaving. Get the rest of them.”

Matt scrambles back down the steps to gather the rest of the foxes while Andrew forces Neil forward, hand never leaving his neck even as they wait at the front doors for the rest of the foxes to emerge.

“Why are we leaving so early? It’s not even one yet!” Nicky whines, leaning heavily against Aaron who turns to shove him off.

“Neil punched Riko,” Matt says as he steps through the doors with Allison, Dan, and Renee. “It was amazing.”

“What?! Riko was here and Neil punched him? No fair I missed it! Go back and do it again.”

Andrew growls.

“Or not,” Nicky backtracks. “Not works too.”

Allison taps on her phone, “Don’t worry it’s already up online.”

“Seriously?” Nicky gasps, “Show me!”

Neil groans and lets his head fall back against Andrew’s hand. Fucking perfect.
The moment they walk through their front door, Andrew pushes them all aside and beelines for the staircase. Neil moves to go after him, no doubt knowing the other is biding his time until they are alone to rip into him when Kevin’s fingers wrap around his wrist.

“We need to talk,” he murmurs in French, the alcohol making his accent thick and the words awkward.

“Can it wait?” Neil looks up at the stairs, “I’m already due for one lecture tonight so I rather be spared another.”

“Nathaniel,” his voice is somber and tense. “It’s important.”

Neil turns to look at his friend, green eyes surprisingly clear despite the sway of his body. He nods, motioning towards the kitchen where they would be far enough away from prying ears to speak in private (not that anyone else in the house spoke French, but it never hurts to be too careful). He waits patiently as Kevin follows him in and settles himself at the island to wait out the nervous energy the man is putting out.

“What’s this about Kevin?” Neil asks when five minutes pass and there is still no response.

His friend twists his fingers together before pulling out his phone and sliding it Neil’s way. “Riko texted me after we all left. He… he said to show you this.”

Neil lowers his eyes to the aforementioned text message.

You show this to Nathaniel or else I’m coming to finish the job on that hand of yours.

That was your last chance, Wesninski. I’m through with your insolence. Say hi to your father for me.

Neil feels the ground open at his feet. His father was coming for him. There was nowhere left for him to run, no more names to hide behind, no more cities to disappear in. This was the end of the line because even if he tried there were too many things left tying him here. Too many people to be used against him. He can hear his mother roaring from her grave.

“What did he mean, Neil?” Kevin asks shakily, but one look in his eyes tells Neil that he already knows the answer.

“It means that I just ran out of time.” Neil turns the phone over and swallows.

Kevin’s eyes go wide. “You need to leave. If he catches you here…”

Neil shakes his head, “I can’t. Not now. He knows who I am, seen how long I’ve stayed and what you have come to mean to me. If I leave now he’d just use that against me.” Kevin looks paler than before, mouth opening and closing like he wants to argue but can’t. Neil slowly gets up and hands him back his phone. “Besides, we both knew how this ended.”

With his death is left unsaid but heard by them both. Tears fill Kevin’s eyes until they are shiny. He reaches for the phone but lets his hand linger on Neil’s.

“You were going to go all the way.”

Neil’s chest tightens on the “were” because they both knew it was really over now. No more
childhood dreams to carry onto.

“You’ll just have to make it there for me instead.”

A fierce determination flashes across Kevin’s face as he nods, drawing back his phone and putting it away. Silence hits them as they mourn the loss of what they created. Of what could have been.

“Promise me something?” Neil asks,

“Anything,” Kevin says it like there was no question to it, no hesitancy to be found.

“Don’t tell them,” Neil whispers. “Whatever happens, don’t tell them.”

Kevin falters. “I- Neil- I can’t-”

“Please,” Neil begs. “If you tell them then they will only try to help and they can’t. No one can, Kevin.”

He is silent for a long second before softly whispering, “Andrew will never let you go.”

“He will.” Because this was nothing and he had to. Even if Neil had to make him.

Kevin shakes his head. “No, he won’t. Not while you have this deal. Not when there’s this whatever it is between the two of you.”

“It’s nothing.” is Neil’s automatic answer.

It earns him a look of pity and exasperation. “I’ve know Andrew for years and I’ve never seen him this way with anyone but you. Whatever it is that’s going on, it’s not nothing.”

But he’s wrong; it is. It has to be or else Neil might never be able to walk away. (Or maybe it’s why he’s walking away.)

“He will,” Neil repeats and Kevin shakes his head.

“I hope for your sake and his that he will,” is all he says as he leaves the kitchen and Neil to his thoughts.

Neil looks to the empty spot where Kevin once stood. He will. But he’s not sure who he’s trying to convince anymore.

When Neil finally slips onto the balcony it’s been twenty minutes and Andrew is already on what Neil assumes to be his third cigarette — the other two crumpled in an ashtray balanced on the rail. He barely even looks at Neil when he slides into the spot at his side.

Neil sighs, “I would like to point out that for once this was not my fault. I stayed exactly where I was. Riko came to me.”

“Did he also throw the first punch?”
Neil remains silent at that. Andrew really does look like he’s about to throw him over the balcony. Neil would almost let him. Instead, he says, “I want you to break our deal.”

Andrew scoffs. “No.”

“Why not? I think I’ve proven that I can watch my own back.”

“You think that just because you go into one fight proves that you’re not a man with a death wish? I’d say it argues the opposite.”

“Andrew-”

“Yes or no?” the other man cuts him off.

He should say no, should make Andrew listen to him and break this fucking deal, but he already had such little time left and he’d be lying if he said he wanted to waste it arguing instead of him taking as much of this nothing as Andrew was willing to give. So he whispers, “Yes,” and closes the distance between them for the first time.

Andrew holds him at arm's length, at first the only contact between them being their lips, but gradually Neil can feel the tension slipping from his body as a warm calloused hand comes to rest on his, pressing their faces closer and deepening the kiss. His body sings with its heat and he pushes back harder into the kiss, daring his tongue to breach that line between their mouths so it can explore Andrew’s.

A different kind of heat begins to consume him now, one that pools deep in his lower belly and makes him all the more aware of where his blood is rushing too. He tries to angle his hips away, not wanting to make Andrew uncomfortable or bring attention to just how much Neil likes kissing him. To his surprise, Andrew’s other hand reaches to grip Neil’s hip to keep it in place and slides a knee between his legs. The friction is causes against his jeans is delicious and delirious enough to pull a wretched moan from his lips as he breaks the kiss.

Andrew’s eyes dilate further. “Yes or no?”

“Yes,” Neil gasps and Andrew’s knee presses firmly against Neil, eliciting another moan.

Tentatively Neil finds himself grinding against the firm press of muscle between his thigh, the motion shocking but fluid as if his body knew what he was doing even if his mind didn’t. Neil is a squirming mess, voice caught between breathless pants and moans as he seeks more of that friction. hungrily he searches again for Andrew’s lips to seal the noises away, content in letting them pour into his mouth for his ears alone. When they break away again, Andrew’s eyes are almost black. Neil’s not sure his are much better.

“I want to blow you, yes or no?”

Neil almost chokes on his surprise but squeaks out a yes. Not quite sure what Andrew expects him to do next, he lets himself be bullied into his room and pushed down onto the bed while Andrew goes and checks to make sure the door is locked and the sliding door is shut behind them. Once satisfied no one will disturb them, Andrew returns to Neil and captures his lips in another searing kiss. Neil loses himself in it, hands fisting into his sheets to keep them from reaching out. Andrew’s hands don’t have that same constraint. They reach touch and explore all of Neil’s body, his hair, his face, arms, and chest until they come to rest at the hem of his shirt and his fingers brush slightly on the bare skin there. Neil jumps and jerks at the touch, Andrew backing off immediately.

“No come back,” his voice is husky and raw, “It just surprised me that’s all. It’s okay.”
Andrew stares at him intently for a second but still moves back into his space, hands coming to rest on the edges of Neil’s shirt. “I want it off. Yes or no?”

Neil hesitate and Andrew removes his hands again. “If it’s not a yes then it’s a no.”

“It’s a yes. It’s just...” Neil bites his lip unable to meet Andrew’s eyes. “It’s not pretty.”

That didn’t even begin to describe the horror story he bore on his body, but it was all he could think to say without giving too much away. Andrew tilts his face up again. “Yes or no?”

“Yes,” he whispers and lets Andrew tug the garment up and over his head and lets it fall to the ground besides them.

He’s not sure what he is expecting Andrew’s reaction to be, but it’s not the near-blank expression he always wears at everything; it immediately puts Neil at ease. Andrew raises a hand to hover over one of the long scars that run from his belly button to his ribs. Lola had given it to him when she caught him in Germany.

“You can touch if you want.” Neil offers quietly and Andrew’s eyes flash when they meet his.

Warm calloused palms slowly meet skin and Neil feels like the touch burns him in the sweetest way possible as goosebumps break out across his chest and arms. Andrew slowly — painstakingly — traces each of the scars on Neil’s lower belly and up his side to his chest. He could tell him the story behind each and every scar in full detail but right now he can only feel the heat of Andrew’s fingers and the way his breath hitches in his chest. They come to a stop at the small pucker of a bullet wound he had gotten when he was 15. It had just missed his vest.

“Someone shot you.” There is something under that bland tone of his but Neil’s mind is too dizzy to figure out what.

“I told you someone was after me.”

“This,” Andrew’s palm comes to rest on the iron mark on his shoulder, fingers splaying across the perfectly circular holes, “is not from a life on the run.”

“Life wasn’t too great before we ran either,” Neil admits. He swears he sees a flash of anger in his eyes but it’s gone before he can confirm for sure.

“Yes or no?”

The yes is barely out of his mouth before Andrew captures his mouth once again, tongue easily slipping past his lips to brush Neil’s. There is an intensity behind it that draws a moan from his belly and makes his fingers dig in so deep to the sheets he’s sure he’s going to tear them. Andrew takes his hand and gently lifts them to his own head.

“Just here.”

Neil nods and buries his fingers into those blonde locks and curls them around the soft tufts of hair but careful enough as to not pull too harshly. It anchors him in a way he didn’t know he needed until now even as Andrew resumes their kiss. He finds that it is easier to press Andrew closer to him this way, savoring how he can guide this kiss deeper and harder. Soon Andrew’s lips begin to trail down his neck and into the crook where it meets his shoulder, just above the bullet wound.

“I want to leave a mark. Yes or no?”
Neil thinks about the hundreds of other marks that marred his body and how he never had a choice in a single one of them. He likes the idea of Andrew creating the very first one he chose. “Yes.”

There is a flash of teeth as Andrew nips at the skin there before it is quickly replaced with the lavishing of his tongue and the soft pressure of the skin being sucked by his lips. The moan that escapes him then it guttural and loud enough that he’s positive it rang throughout the house. Andrew released it with a wet pop, his lips shiny and red and eyes circles of black. Neil tugs that mouth back to his own, but the kiss is broken short as Andrew drops to his knees in front of him, hand pausing at the button of his jeans.

“Yes or-”

“Yes.”

He swears there is a smirk on those lips before it’s wiped away by his usual mask of indifference as he makes quick work of Neil’s jeans and boxers until they are halfway down his thigh. His cock bounces free in the cool air. Andrew’s eyes meet his once more, making sure of Neil’s answer, which he reassures with a nod, before licking a stripe up the underside of his cock with the broadside of his tongue. Neil barely has enough time to register the flush of heat before Andrew is devouring his cock. Then Neil is on fire.

Head thrown back, another moan rips from his body as Andrew’s head bobs up and down his length in a slick heat that he thinks is going to burn him alive. Fingers curl tighter in blonde locks and he can feel that heat build and build until he can’t handle it anymore.

“A-Andrew,” Neil warns and Andrew lets him go with a wet pop just seconds before he spills himself against his bare stomach.

It’s sticky and warm and just a little gross but Neil finds he doesn’t care, going boneless with his release as his body shakes in its wake. He lets himself fall back on his elbow since his arms shake too much to hold his weight. It’s then that he notices that where he is warm and pliant under Andrew’s touch, Andrew remains rigid and stiff above him.

“Andrew?” he carefully removes his hand from his person.

“Shut up,” he bites out, fighting for control. “Don’t touch me.”

Neil nods and goes stiff. “Do you want me to leave?”

Andrew is silent before he nods jerkily. Neil carefully manages to wiggle out from underneath him, careful not even to allow the barest touch of skin as he slips off the bed and retrieves his shirt. Andrew says nothing as he dauns the material and quickly unlocks the door before sliding out and closing it behind him. Neil falls to the ground, wood solid at his back as his knees bend and his head hits it with a thunk.

His mind is a swirl of thoughts and flashes of what just occurred, his body growing hot at just the memory. He taps them down as he remembers the way Andrew held himself over Neil. He wonders if maybe they had gone farther than they should have so quickly.

He’s not sure how long he sits there but his cum had dried sticky against his skin until it became uncomfortable and he was forced to go to the bathroom for a washcloth to wipe it up. When he comes back his door is open and Andrew is sitting in the doorway of his sliding door with a cigarette between his lips and another in his hand. Neil joins him wordlessly and smiles when
Andrew holds out the second for him.

As always they don’t say anything, but Neil feels something different in the air. Something more charged. And if they sit a little closer than usual to each other, well no one needs to know. Eventually, Andrew leaves to go to bed and Neil is left alone in the night air. He watches as his cigarette burns down to nothing before he turns back to head to bed himself. He goes to plug in his phone for the night when he sees a new message greeting him from an unknown number. It has a Baltimore area code. He taps open the message to see the number 35 staring back at him.

His time is up.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact this fic was partially born because I just needed to have them sing Gorgeous to Neil on a stage in front of hundreds
“waitin' out the fist fight between a love and my heart in my head

Chapter Notes

Reaching Out - Ricky Smith

Two weeks have passed since that first text message and Neil is still no closer to getting Andrew to break their deal than his first attempt. Every time he tries, Andrew shuts the conversation down by either walking away or refusing to acknowledge Neil until he drops it all together. The times Neil does manage to get Andrew to respond, he is met with a hard no that Neil dares not cross but fears he may have to if he can’t find another way.

The days are ticking down quicker and quicker and Neil can feel himself beginning to unravel right along with it. Each day is met with a reminder of his fading time and a creeping fear that comes with knowing the exact day he will die. It’s a concert day funny enough. Binghamton didn’t look like much of a city but it was as good as a place to die as any he supposes.

So rather than focusing on all the horrible things his father will do to him the moment he catches him — the pain he will inflict and the joy he will take from it — like the person texting him wants him to, he focuses on the time he does have left. He spends time with Palmetto and Matt, often letting them rope him into their plans without hesitation or second thought. He pours himself into practices with Kevin, helping the other write more songs for EXY and the new album. He sings with Nicky as they cook dinners or wash dishes.

He spends the evenings with Andrew, sometimes on their shared balcony, other times on long drives with no destination in mind and only a direction they choose at random to just go until they need gas or have to turn back in order to make breakfast. They steal kisses and truths in shared whispers and breaths, giving away parts of themselves they haven’t given to anyone before. Sometimes they go further, Andrew’s hands encroaching under Neil’s clothes and Neil’s allowed to roam the plains of Andrew’s shoulders and back. Other times they sit side by side memories too close for anything more. Neil cherishes all of those days.

But the weather starts heating up as they slip from early spring to the approaching summer and the neighborhood around them starts coming alive with children in the yards and the telltale signs of the brave slipping into pools. It seems with the heat also comes a rise in tempers, Aaron more prickly than ever at Neil’s existence. He taunts and prods Neil more and more in hopes of sparking another fight between them despite Andrew’s prior warning. But Neil doesn’t have time for his petty drama and snide remarks no matter how much he might want to reply. When it becomes clear that words would not be enough to provoke him, Aaron starts moving on to even pettier actions like moving Neil’s running shoes or eating the last of the fruit he bought for his post-run smoothies. Once he even deliberately tripped Neil down the stairs, he only just managing to catch himself on the banister in time. Nearly at his limit, he jokingly turns to Andrew one morning to see how far his deal with his brother stretches.

“Would it be breaking your deal if you just so happened to look away when I hit him? Then you can convincingly say you had no idea or way to prevent it.”

He doesn’t even look up from his book, “Leave Aaron alone.”
“Tell him that! He’s been pushing me all week trying to get me to throw a punch first and I’m just about ready to do it. Not to mention he keeps muttering under his breath about us. How else am I going to get him to stop?”

“There is no us.”

It’s not the first time Neil has heard this, from the start Andrew was very clear on what this was and wasn’t between them — nothing — and Neil accepted that. But even so, something makes him pause here, a slight tightening in his chest he tries to rub away.

“Try telling your brother that,” Neil jokes but it falls flat.

Andrew puts his book down and looks him in the eye. Hazel crashes with blue (he’s stopped wearing his contacts after the night Riko punched one out and the rest of the foxes — and the world — saw his natural color. Not like it mattered much now anyway) in a hard look that mimics the blankness of his face.

“There is no us. This,” he wiggles a finger between them, “is nothing. It will always be nothing no matter what my brother or any of those nosy foxes of yours may think. Best get that notion clear now before you delude yourself into thinking it is anything more.”

It hurts, Neil realizes. Because he knows that this was nothing — that it was safer for it to be nothing for Andrew and himself. Hell, he doesn’t even know what he would do if it was something, still too inexperienced and confused on how to feel about it all. But he also knows that saying it was nothing to him was a lie. That it can’t be nothing even if he knew it should be.

“And if I want more?” He shouldn’t ask, but it’s that same little voice that had whispered what if.

“Then it ends.” Andrew picks up his book and Neil is left to figure out what that means for him.

Hours later Neil remains unsure of how he should feel about his conversation with Andrew. On one hand, he feels foolish for even entertaining the idea even subconsciously; he was going to die in less than a month and any chance of “more” would die with him. It was not only unfair to Andrew but futile. They were nothing.

Yet, it hurt just as much. Neil may not know a lot about the thing between him and Andrew — hell he wasn’t even sure it could be called a thing — but something inside him whispered that it was more than physical pleasure. In part because until now Neil hadn’t thought he was capable of physical pleasure, not like this, not from another person, but he was. For Andrew. Only Andrew. He’s not sure if it has something to do with the fact that Andrew was the first person who told him to stay or they way he made Neil feel so many things (like safety and stability and hope and fear) but it was all so tied so closely together with his pleasure that he doesn’t think one could exist without the other.

Maybe, he comes to realize, that this “nothing” is only nothing for Andrew. Maybe Andrew’s nothing is Neil’s something. His chest tightens much in the way it does when he thinks about Andrew and leaving, a cold void in place of the usual fire the drummer makes him feel. He wonders if this is what others call heartbreak.
He shakes his head at the thought. Because while this may be something to him, it is still nothing. Andrew does not owe him anything different because he’s gone and fooled himself into delusions like Andrews had said. It’s his fault for wanting something that wasn’t possible in the first place like a damned fool. Still, his chest tightens more in that cold void.

It’s late evening, too early for Neil to join Andrew on the balcony just yet (not that he’s sure he can without spewing the traitorous thoughts in his head) but late enough that most of the others have trickled off to their rooms for the night. So he’s genuinely surprised to see Nicky in the kitchen at the stove making hot chocolate. The man takes one look at Neil’s face and reaches up in the cabinet (the one too high for either the twins and Neil and Kevin never goes near) and pulls down a bottle of Baileys. He knows, Neil’s not sure how, but he does.

Nicky smiles softly, “Why don’t you come join, Neil? I feel like it’s been forever since I’ve had some company for hot chocolate.”

Wordlessly, Neil sits at the island and watches as Nicky hums to himself while stirring the last of the hot chocolate together, tossing in a bit of Baileys as well. When he’s finished, he splits the contents into two mugs and slides one Neil’s way. Not wanting to be rude, he takes a small sip of his, the flavor too sweet on his tongue and the bite of alcohol rushing through his body with a small heat. He settles it between his hands instead.

Nicky hums as he takes a drink of his before leaning over the island to rest on his elbows. “You want to tell me what’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Not really,” Neil admits, “but I’m not sure I could if I wanted to.”

“Hm,” Nicky pauses for a moment thinking. “How about I talk and you see if it helps you any. Deal?”

Neil nods because he’s at a loss on his own.

“Do you know I used to live in Germany with my fiance Eric for a few years right?” Neil nods. “Well I first went there on a student exchange my school was doing and ended up staying with Eric’s family. That’s how we met in the first place.”

A fond smile tugs on Nicky’s lips. “It was like love at first sight but I was so confused. For years I had people telling me that I was wrong or unnatural — that I was going to burn in hell for what I felt for men. But then I met Eric and I couldn’t understand how anyone could think that when it felt so right like I had found a piece of me that was missing. The day I graduated is the day I picked up everything to move and spend the rest of my life with him. He proposed the moment I got off the plane.”

He twists the golden band on his left hand, it’s simple and less flashy than some of the other accessories Nicky tends to wear from time to time, but it’s the only one that is constant. His most cherished.

“When my aunt died and I came back for the funeral only to find my parents trying to take them in, Eric and I decided that it was best for me to become their guardian. It was only supposed to be until they finished high school but then Andrew got arrested for protecting me and I knew I just couldn’t leave them like that.”

The fond smile slips from his face and something more akin to sadness and longing takes its place. His grip on the gold band tightens.
“Eric, the absolute saint he is, understood and supported me, saying that he would always love and be there for me even if we had to do it long distance for a while. We try to make it work with everything we have, taking every holiday off to visit, long phone calls, and skype dates, but sometimes it is just so hard.

“It was hard then and it’s gotten even harder when Kevin created EXY and asked us to join. Don’t get me wrong, I love this, love the show, music, and attention, but it makes it so hard to find time for Eric sometimes. I have more money than ever but that doesn’t mean a damn thing if I can’t find two days to fly over there.”

He looks at Neil, a guilty smile as he fiddles with the mug. “That’s why I was so glad when Kevin said he wanted to bring you in as an eventual replacement for vocals. I thought it’d give me some time to take a break and go back home for a while. Maybe a year or so.”

Neil grips his mug so tight it’s a wonder it doesn’t crack under his hands.

“No pressure or anything,” Nicky laughs. “I’m just being honest. Though, any time you do feel like taking the wheels let me know so I can book a ticket.” He winks at Neil but he can’t find it in himself to give one back. He feels too guilty to smile.

“I guess what I’m trying to say,” he continues, “Is that no relationship is going to be without its hardships, no matter how right it feels or how happy you make each other. There will always be lows with the highs and vice versa. Actually, I wrote No More Bad Days during one of our worst lows. I missed him so much and every time we talked it just ended in another argument, but one night I had just sat down and poured all my thoughts on a page. The next morning I sang it to him over the phone and it was like the wall between us had fallen apart. We talked for hours until we were able to figure out something that worked for the both of us.”

That smile is back again. “I love that song, no matter how many times I have to sing it. It feels like I’m singing directly to Eric everytime I do. And in a way, it helped me figure out the thoughts in my head that my mouth could never quite form on its own.”

Those brown eyes rise to Neil’s again. “Did any of that help?”

Neil thinks it over, thinks of Nicky’s hope for him, the truths and struggles he had bared for Neil for nothing more than wanting to help. He thinks it might have, but maybe not in the way that he was hoping. He was still not a step closer to figuring out what to do with Andrew but he felt that maybe it was okay not to know quite what to do. That maybe it was better to enjoy what they could have now even if it was nothing.

“I think so.”

Nicky beams at him and they finish their drinks in silence. Later Neil finds himself at his desk staring down at the final few blank pages of his journal and picks up the pen and just writes. It helps a little more.

With 10 days left on Neil’s countdown, he finds himself grasping at straws to keep his sanity together. Each day closer he finds himself jumping at the slightest shadow he catches in the corner of his eyes, wondering if the countdown was a lie meant to lull him into a false sense of security. Of course, that only made him stress out.
Andrew and his deal is still in effect despite everything Neil has done to get him to break it, nothing short of getting on his knees and begging, though he’s getting desperate enough to try. Aaron’s antagonism has increased tenfold to the point that the moment Andrew leaves the room he is shoving him against a wall or snarling vicious insults in his face. It’s obvious that he’s desperate for a fight but he can’t figure out the why. He doesn’t have the time to either. 10 days looms quicker than he wants, not even two weeks and then he would die. Nothing 12 years on the run could prepare him for this. Because while he had always known he would die it was entirely different to walk towards it willingly. He felt himself slipping. To top it all off Nicky keeps giving him worried looks and trying to offer advice (which he appreciates, sorta, but remains largely unhelpful) while Kevin is determined to fill every last waking hour with guitar practice.

It all keeps building and building until he feels like he’s going to snap. Running doesn’t help (though his muscle ache from his attempts to try), music feels stilted and wrong no matter the song he plays, and even during moments with Andrew his brain never seems to shut down. Every time he closes his eyes he sees those double digits staring back at him. He’s getting back from another of his runs when it all finally comes crashing down. Almost literally.

Having just pulled out a water to guzzle down, he turns to leave to find Aaron standing in his path blocking the exit. Neil is already done before it even began. “Not today Aaron.”

He moves to shove past the man only to be pushed back. “Too fucking bad I’m sick and tired of your games Josten.”

“Not. Today.” he grounds out, moving to step around him again. Another push. “I swear if you put another fucking hand on me, I’ll-”

“You’ll what?” Aaron scoffs, “Call my brother? Hide behind him like you’ve been doing all month?”

“That was you not me. Let’s be clear. It wasn’t me who’s been sneaking around Andrew’s back just to get in some petty jabs and pushes.”

“Because you sic your attack dog on me the moment I even so much as look at you wrong. When anyone looks at you wrong.” he snarls.

“I don’t sic Andrew on anyone. I have a deal just as you do. Don’t be mad at him for keeping it just because you’re shitty at keeping yours.”

“Fuck the deal. He broke it as much as I did. Nobody but the two of us? Do what I say and I’ll protect you? Don’t make me fucking laugh. I can’t live my own fucking life! I get dragged along whenever he wants or told to obey or who I can or cannot date but then he goes around and fucks some know nothing liar behind all of our backs.”

Neil stops, “What did you say?”

“You fucking heard me,” Aaron gets in his face. “Tell me what kind of sick fuck takes advantage of someone after they were almost attacked by a sick son of a bitch who used to rape him? Tell me what’s the difference between that sick fuck and you?”

Neil doesn’t think, he just swings, but Aaron sees it coming and it misses. Aaron’s doesn’t and it hits harder. Neil reels at the impact and then another before his world burns white and everything ringing in a high pitched whine. When everything snaps back into focus, the world is spinning and he feels like his head is splitting in two. He raises a hand to press it back together but his finger comes away sticky and red.
Oh, he thinks, a head wound. That would make sense. It also explains why Aaron looks like he grew. For a moment Neil thinks he sees horror on his face before the clatter of feet draws their attention to the door. Andrew and Nicky storm into the kitchen to see Aaron standing over a prone Neil sprawled across the kitchen floor with blood pouring down his face and smeared on the ground and counter. Nicky immediately rushes to Neil’s side, grabbing a towel to dab a the gash on the side of his face.

“Jesus what happened here?!” Nicky gasps.

“M’ fine,” Neil mumbles as he tries to push himself up.

“You’re bleeding all over the kitchen floor. I’m pretty sure that is the opposite of fine!”

Andrew turns to Aaron. “What happened.”

The horror is wiped from his face instantaneously, settling into one of contempt and boredom. “He fell.”

It was the wrong answer. Andrew jumps at his twin, knocking him against the fridge and pinning him there. Nicky scrambles to his feet and dives for the twins, managing to yank back Andrew just in time before his fist meets Aaron’s cheek. Aaron stands stupified as if he cannot fathom that Andrew would attack him. No matter the reason. Andrew starts thrashing against Nicky’s touch, and the older man lets go immediately, sliding himself between the twins. Aaron is still standing in shock while Andrew looks three seconds away from fratricide.

“What happened.” Neil can tell he’s at the end of his control, so rather than wait for either Aaron or Nicky to say something to push him over, he decides to step in and save their asses.

“A disagreement. I hit him first.” Or well tried to anyway. Andrew stiffens, but his eyes never leave Aaron.

Sick of being the shortest in the room (something he’s had the privilege of not being since meeting the Minyards) Neil moves to push himself up once more only for his hand to slip in the smear of blood causing him to crash with a grunt. The world spins too much for him to try again. Nicky gasps and steps to help, but is stopped by a snarl from Andrew. No one moves after that.

“Will somebody help me up?” Neil asks anyways because he’s really tired of sitting in his own blood.

Andrew looks to him then, hazel eyes filled with undeniable fury and rage. For a moment he thinks that rage is directed at him, but it's not his eyes he’s focused on but the gash. Absently Neil thinks that it matches the one Andrew had. He moves to pick Neil up, roughly slinging an arm around his shoulders and supporting Neil’s weight with an arm at his waist. He has to fight a wave of nausea that comes with the jarring movements.

“Should we really be moving him?” Nicky worries, “Isn’t a bad idea to move people with head injuries?”

“I’m fine,” Neil tries but it comes out more of a slur.

“If that was an ‘I’m fine’ I’m going to leave you on the floor,” Andrew growls.

Neil says nothing because he’s pretty sure that wasn’t one of Andrew empty threats and lets himself be hauled out of the kitchen. Before they leave, Andrew turns to his brother and gives him a warning.
“This isn’t over. I’ve warned you about touching what’s mine.”

Aaron pales but Andrew doesn’t spare him a single glance as he drags Neil from the room and into the downstairs bathroom, slamming the door behind them. Neil finds himself dumped on the closed toilet seat as Andrew starts rummaging around Nicky’s cabinets for a first aid kit. His body is still tight with anger as he rips open a package of cotton balls and unscrews the cap of disinfectant to start cleaning the wound enough to inspect it. He waits until Andrew has put down the bottle before deciding to try his patience.

“I really am alright. Head wounds just bleed worse than they really are.”

Andrew presses the soaked cotton ball into the gash, drawing an involuntary hiss from Neil’s lips. “Shut up before I decided to finish the job my brother started.”

Neil wisely remains silence while Andrew cleans the wound and starts reaching for a bandage after deciding that it wasn’t severe enough to need stitches like Neil feared it might.

“I’m taking a turn,” Andrew says as he pulls out a large bandage. “What happened in the kitchen.”

“I told you, a disagreement. Aaron picked a fight like usual and I snapped. End of story.”

Neil answers in a carefully bland tone.

“You snap and yet you’re the one with a mild concussion?”

“Everyone gets their lucky hit. Next time it will be mine.”

Andrew’s eyes flash. “There will be no next time. If he is stupid enough to try this a fourth time then it will be I who deals with him.”

“And what about me? I hit first remember? I do believe that warning was for the both of us.”

“You never hit Aaron,” Andrew says it like a fact even though there was no way for him to actually know. “Aaron was untouched and he’s been trying to get to you all month. It’s unlikely he would break you after all that.”

“You’d be wrong,” Neil mumbles under his breath.

“What did he say.” His tone is more order than question.

Neil waves him off. “Nothing much worse than what he’s already said.” There was no way in hell he was going to be the one to repeat Aaron’s words to Andrew. Not when they barely managed to stop him from killing Aaron in the kitchen — not when Neil was too dizzy and concussed to follow if he stormed off.

“No lies,” Andrew snarls.

“I’m not lying.” Neil sighs, exhausted. “He said more shit about me and you and I snapped.”

“Why.”

“Because I’m fed up with his shit.” Neil snaps, some of that anger coming back from earlier.

“And for the rest of the week?”

Neil blinks, “What?”
“Your shit mood,” Andrew explains breezily like it should be obvious. “First with the running, then with you looking everywhere like some scared rabbit and now this. Is Aaron behind all that too?”

He’s tempted to say yes but knows Andrew would see through the lie the moment it leaves his mouth. So he settles for the truth instead. “Nightmares.”

“Of?” he slaps the bandage on rough enough that Neil flinches. Andrew’s fingers turn soft as it smooths out the edges.

“Being caught. Dying.”

“We all are dying.”

Neil nods, holding his tongue from pointing out that some faster than others. “I’m aware. I’m handling it.”

“Not well.”

“Yeah well fuck you too,” Neil swears he sees Andrew’s lips twist in a hint of a smile. It almost makes getting concussed worth it.

He resumes watching Andrew work, moving on from the wound to cleaning Neil’s face of blood while searching for other sources of it. The fingers at his chin are rough and true, holding him in a tight grip as he moves his face to different angles. Yet the hand that dabs the cloth to his cheek is as soft as a caress, enough pressure to know it’s there but never so much as to cause pain or discomfort. He thinks about how that’s the perfect encapsulation of who Andrew is, rough and harsh with a touch of gentle. It was a side most people weren’t privy to and it makes him honored to be allowed to witness it first hand.

“Yes or no?” he breathes, leaning in closer to Andrew’s touch.

He lowers the cloth and meets Neil’s eyes. “You’re concussed.”

“Barely. Yes or no?”

“No.”

Neil backs off immediately, a small smile playing on his lips. “The next time someone calls you a monster I’m going to fight them.”

“And end up back here? Save me the trouble,” he deadpans.

Andrew bullies him into a shower next, staying long enough to make sure Neil doesn’t slip and kill himself before walking out to get him a change of clothes and “burn the old ones.” Neil almost protested that it was the last of the original clothes he had brought with him from Millport but he thinks that would just make him more likely to throw it out all the same. When he exits, Andrew is there by the door playing on his phone as he waits. He puts it away as soon as Neil comes into view and starts herding the singer upstairs and towards his room.

“I’m not tired,” Neil complains. “It’s only 5!”

“Did I ask your opinion? No.” He pushes Neil into the room. “Now go to bed before you fucking fall over. You look like shit.”
Neil curses some awful things at him in French. It’s lucky he never bothered to pick the language up, really.

“I’m going to assume that was a ‘you’re right Andrew, I’m an idiot.’”

He curses some more. “I’m not going to bed at 5, Andrew.”

Andrew crosses his arms and lifts a brow, an unspoken try me emanating from his stance and silence. Knowing it was a lost battle — and the fact he was a little woozy on his feet — he complies and moves to the bed. The stare stays until Neil slips under the covers.

“Happy?” He sneers.

“Never,” Andrew drones, moving closer to stare down at Neil. “Don’t bother coming down for dinner. The others have already left.”

“What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

But Neil did. That’s where this whole mess began. He worries about Andrew too much to make any of this easier. He worries what will happen if he doesn’t manage to break their deal in time. He worries about what leaving will do to him. He worries that it’s all slipping by too fast.

“I don’t want to waste the day sleeping,” is what Neil says instead because none of that will help either of them.

“It’s only a day, Josten. Stop being such a drama queen for a second. There’s more time for your obsession tomorrow.”

But he doesn’t have “more time.” He has 10 days and now 9 and it’s not enough. It was never going to be enough. He’s not sure how or when but at some point he had begun imagining a future here, one that didn’t involve countdowns or death but quiet days filled with music and laughter. Days with Matt and Dan dragging him out for dinner and karaoke, Allison making him accompany her to the mall with Seth and Renee, Nicky’s movie nights, and Kevin’s late night practices. He saw the stage at his fingertips and his guitar strapped to his back.

He imagined a life with Andrew, of quiet nights with smoke-flavored kisses, long car drives, and calloused hands roaming his skin as he was set on fire. He saw the dark circles of Andrew’s eyes ringed with hazel and those shiny red lips from where Neil kissed them raw. He felt the beat of Andrew’s drums in his chest as he sang and saw the concentrated look he got whenever he played a piece too difficult or fast. He saw a future.

And now it’s all gone.

Andrew turns to leave but Neil reaches out to grab his sleeve. “Don’t go.”

He whispers it because it feels like he’s drowning and untethered. It feels like the day he lost his mother, a grief so huge it was going to swallow him whole. Andrew stares at him for a long time before settling on the bed next to Neil without a word. He doesn’t lay down or turn to talk to him but it’s enough. The weight of him besides Neil grounding him just a little longer. He falls asleep still clinging on.
with so many light years to go, and things to be found

Chapter Notes

The Final Countdown - Europe

When Neil had woken up, Andrew was gone and the spot he had been sitting in was cold. He wanted to say he was relieved at the fact, not quite sure how to face the vulnerability that had come over him, but the sting of it was still there when he opened his eyes to find his fingers empty. Luckily for him, when he sees Andrew the next morning, neither breathe a word about it and fall back into their usual pattern as if it never happened. Neil is both relieved and disappointed, but time offers not a moment of pause as the days trickle by. 10 days turns into 7 and then 5 until the number 3 greets him on his phone Wednesday morning.

The single digit taunts him as relentlessly as the person behind it. (If he thinks about it, it’s probably Lola; she was always fond of mental mind games before she caught her prey.) He’s tried texting back, calling, or even ignoring it, but the response is always the same, silence with a guaranteed lower number the following day. Sleep has become impossible, nightmares turning into night terrors into day terrors until there are moments where he’s not sure whether he’s awake or dreaming anymore. Dark circles became a permanent resident on his face and he has to seek Allison’s advice in hiding them with makeup just to keep the others off his back. But Andrew sees.

He’s there every time a nightmare drives him from his bed and onto the balcony, no matter how early or late the time. Sometimes it’s with a disgruntled offer of a cigarette and sometimes it’s a quiet yes or no. It’s always a yes.

The only thing that appears to get better, surprisingly, was Aaron. After their last fight in the kitchen, the blonde has gone back to his original tactic of ignoring his existence, antagonistic remarks only saved when Neil was actively in his way. He brings this up to Andrew who only responds with a vague, “I took care of it.”

He would worry more if it didn’t mean he had one less thing to be worried about. As it is, the clock was ticking faster and Neil’s deal still in place. He thinks that he may have to break it, just pick up and run in the dead of night without a word to anyone and head for his father himself. But he promised Andrew that when he left he would say goodbye and found that if he needed to break his word then he at least wanted to leave him with that. Maybe then he wouldn’t hate Neil as much when the truth came to be. Maybe he’ll even learn to forgive him one day.

Somehow he doesn’t think he will.

Zero. Neil stares at the number longer than he had all the others in part because this one came earlier than all the rest (appearing the moment the clock ticked over to the new day) and mostly because he thinks if he stares long enough that he may feel something.
When the countdown had first begun he felt dread and in the days after panic and fear that he couldn’t do anything to protect the foxes from the fallout. He always figured that the moment the last text came in it would be met with the same but so potent it would render him immobile. Instead, all he felt was a pit of nothing, a numbness that swallowed him whole and coated the world in a muted grey.

It’s the day of their concert — his last concert — which means he should be brimming with nervous excitement and buzzing from adrenaline at the prospect of going on the stage, but he remains quiet and still. Everyone around him moves unaffected, their usual levels of rowdiness and glee intensified by the idea of a show. Laughter is in the air as they joke around and load the bus with equipment, their shoulders light without the weight of the world and their morality sitting heavy on them. One would think he would be jealous of such ease, but he isn’t.

He watches them from a wistful distance as he tries to engrave the picture to his memory, noting every wrinkle at their eyes or dimple in their cheek to create a picture perfect capture of how they look as they laugh together. He commits the sound of the rumble of their voices or breathy pitch as they gasp and tease and laugh. It dawns on him that he realizes that he doesn’t know how to say goodbye to them, so he doesn’t. He smiles and laughs when they throw a joke his way, lets them pull him into embraces and small touches and pretends that nothing was different from any other day. He tells himself that it’s okay it feels fake under it all, after all, he was fake too, but for them, he could lie just this one last time.

The only one who doesn't buy into the act is Andrew. He sees the slip of the smile every time the foxes leave or turn their backs, notes how Neil keeps looking at his phone with a far-off look in his eyes. Andrew had always been the one to see when his pieces never really seemed to match together. So really, Neil’s not surprised when the drummer pulls him aside before they all load up in the bus.

“You want to tell me what’s going on in that head of yours or am I going to have to knock it from you?” He says it with the usual brand of bland tone and blank face but Neil can see the flash of apprehension in his eyes as they meet his.

For the first time in a long time, Neil lies to Andrew. Truly, utterly, completely, lies.

“You want to tell me what’s going on in that head of yours or am I going to have to knock it from you?” He says it with the usual brand of bland tone and blank face but Neil can see the flash of apprehension in his eyes as they meet his.

“Another nightmare. This time I can’t seem to shake it off.” Neil smiles weakly as he raises a shoulder.

“And you keep looking on your phone because.” Andrew’s eyes narrow in suspicion, trying to find the lie in Neil’s words like he knows it’s there. Too bad Neil was taught to lie with the best of them. “Because when I remember my mother I like to watch that video.”

Andrew stares into his eyes for a moment longer before turning away and disappearing into the bus. Neil should feel relief that he dropped it. He doesn’t.

Hours later they pull up to their venue and the foxes pour out to gawk at its large stage and expensive sound system, but Neil hangs back, taking his time to adjust the strap of his guitar case and revel in the weight of it on his shoulder. He lets his eyes roam over the tour bus that, despite its gaudy orange accent, had come to be calming and fond, a separate sort of home away from the studio or Andrew’s house. Breathing in a deep breath, he allows himself a minute to bid it goodbye.

As he moves to the exit, he spots Andrew resting on its lower steps with a cigarette in his hands. Neil sits just on the step above, careful to keep his knees from brushing against him. When Andrew hands the pack and lighter to him, he doesn’t hesitate as he slides one out and lights it up. The taste is bitter on his tongue but its smell immediately calms him, but not in the way it used to. He wonders when the smell had come to mean Andrew instead of his mother.
“Are you going to tell me what’s the real problem?” Andrew says in a cloud of smoke.


Andrew turns around, cigarette crushed into the step at his feet and eyes intently focused on his own. He braces one knee on the step between them and a hand on the step Neil’s seated on. At this level, they are almost the same height and their lips are perfectly aligned. Which is just as well because the next thing that leaves those lips is a “Yes or no?”

His answer has never changed but he breathes out a “yes” anyway.

The kiss is grounding in a way it always has been and yet so much more. His fingers slide into Andrew’s hair as his come to squeeze at the nape of his neck, both anchoring points to a reality Neil felt himself drifting further from. As they back away, chests panting and their breaths intermingle, Neil presses his forehead lightly to Andrew’s.

“Break the deal,” he whispers.

Andrew tears away furious. “Shut the fuck up.”

Andrew moves to turn away but Neil’s hands shoot to stop him, coming to bracket his face without touching. “You don’t get to walk away because you don’t want to heat it.”

He has to listen because Neil’s out of time and Andrew was in danger.

“Let me go, Andrew. I’ve done everything you’ve asked: I made sure Kevin stayed; I helped push EXY to the next level like he wanted; I even mended the bonds between EXY and Palmetto to the point where you can all work together without killing each other. There is nothing left for me to give you anymore.”

Andrew’s jaw remains locked and those eyes burn with silent fury. He is not swayed by Neil’s argument but Neil can’t give up.

“You told me to stop running,” he whispers, leaning close so their noses brush ever so slightly. “And I want to — I have. Riko has come at me time after time and I’m still left standing.”

“For now,” Andrew growls, hot breath fanning over Neil’s face. “Who is to say you will be the next time.”

“I’m not afraid of him. Let him try, but let me face it on my own. I can’t stop running if I’m still hiding behind you.” He brushes their noses closer together, just a brief press of skin against skin. “So let me go.”

“You won’t survive.”

He won’t but Andrew doesn’t know that, not for sure. “Maybe, maybe not. Let me figure it out on my own. You’ve done enough and I already gave you what you wanted for it.”

“Give me something else,” Andrew grabs his neck once more, fingers digging into his skin. “I’ll think of something.”

Neil smiles weakly. “When you do then let’s make a new deal.”

Andrew’s grip burns and Neil waits in baited breath.

“110%” He finally answers and lightens his hold but doesn’t remove his hand. “Don’t come
to me when someone finally comes for that smart mouth of yours.”

Neil smiles, genuinely for the first time all day. “You like my mouth.”

“115%”

“Yes or No Andrew?”

“Yes.”

When their lips meet all Neil can see is that zero and feel how fucking relieved he is.

They join the others without a single word further between them, but he can’t deny that his mood is lighter and the smiles come easier when the foxes coax one out of him. It’s not all gone, the anxiety is still low in his stomach like stones and panic creeps on the edge of his mind with the constant state of vigilance he maintains to catch his father before he catches him first. So far, Neil doesn’t notice anything different, but years of experience have taught him that isn’t always the case (eyes were fickle creatures and his father a master at deceiving them). Still, practice and setup have come and gone and Neil was still standing.

It seemed that they were kind enough to give him this last show — more like deemed the risk too great to take him before, but Neil can’t find it in himself to complain. If this was going to be his last night, he wanted to give it to the stage. His mother always said it would be the death of him so it’s only fitting it will be his grave too.

The show begins with an explosion, both bands shooting up from below the stage and crashing together to play a hybrid of two of their most popular songs. When they finished EXY exits off the stage to let Palmetto finish out their solo setlist, Nicky and Neil occasionally joining on stage to help with their collab songs. Palmetto closed with a cover of EXY’s latest single (which had even Kevin smirking as he mouthed his criticism at their playing) before welcoming them back on stage.

Neil pours everything into his playing, his vocal chords straining in his throat and fingers threatening to cramp under the stress he’s putting them under, but he only pushes harder, pushes his voice louder, letting desperation and joy fill the lyrics even as his chest caves in. They were on their last song of the setlist just before Neil’s solo portion when he spots Riko lingering in the crowd, hidden so he only just hovers in the corner of Neil’s peripheral. A flush of rage hit him and his grip on his guitar tightens. Riko smiles once he realizes that he’s finally caught Neil’s attention, a wicked and fearsome thing that matches the gleam in his eyes as he nods his head towards the center of the crowd. Reluctantly, Neil follows his gaze, dread pooling in his gut as his eyes roam the faces for a patch or red hair and blue eyes that are twin to his own.

Instead, he catches on dyed blonde roots, two amber eyes, and a smile that had been haunting his dreams just as frequently as his father’s since he was five. Her face had aged over the years, wrinkles in places he didn’t remember being there before and a new scar that ran down her right cheek from his mother the day she died. (He feels a sick twist of satisfaction at seeing that, knowing that she didn’t leave that day unscathed either.) But the same twisted smile rested on those perfectly painted red lips and those twin amber voids of nothingness stared up at him. That had always been the most disturbing part of Lola, how she could smile as she cut you up but her eyes were dead. She raises a finger to her lips and Neil flinches, slipping up a note in the final bridge.
Kevin throws a glare his way but he shakes his head and quickly recovers, not wanting to draw more attention to himself and what distracted him lest he leads Kevin to discovering Lola. When Kevin turns his attention back to his own playing, Neil sneaks another glimpse at Lola. She nods her head at Neil’s back and he angles his guitar so he can peek under his lashes at where her partner in crime and brother Romero lurks in hiding. Sure enough there he stands disguised as a roadie behind Andrew, his eyes catching the slight glint of a pistol tucked away in the waistband of his jeans.

Neil’s heart plummets but he wills everything into finishing out the song. He can’t draw attention to himself. Not now. Not when his every movement is being watched so closely for any sign that he was going to try to expose them. Not when the wrong move could mean the foxes getting hurt. When it would mean Andrew gets hurt. He could do nothing but play. So he does. When he looks for Lola again, she is gone, along with Riko as they both slipped into the sea of people where it would be impossible for him to see them but they could still watch him.

Knowing he only had moments left, he looks to his friends. He watches as they smile and heave from a song well played, even Andrew not without a sheen of sweat on his forehead and arms as he stares blankly at Neil for his next cue. Originally they had planned on ending with their song, Neil wanting the last thing he ever played to be something with Andrew at his back as steady as always, but when he shifts the guitar in his hands to gear up for the first notes, he can’t.

It hits Neil then that he is completely out of time, no more shows, no more laughs and kisses, nothing. He can’t help but feel that it wasn’t enough; he still had so much left to do, so much to say. To the foxes. To Nicky and Kevin. To Andrew. But there isn’t any more time. Only enough left for one more song.

He turns to the band as they gear up to support Neil’s solo song but as he watches them prepare for the song he’d chosen the words stick in his throat and he knows that he won’t be able to play it, not with his thought swirling with words unsaid and emotions he never had time to explore fully. So instead he decides he will say goodbye the only way he knows how.

With a small shake of his head to Andrew, he approaches the microphone and turns to the crowd. They scream at his arrival, the power of it enough for him to feel it in his bones. He wonders if Lola is screaming along with them (he doubts it).

“Wow you all are amazing, thank you for coming out. Truly.” he shifts to removes the microphone from its cradle. “You know I never expected something like this to happen in my life. I was nothing, a nobody playing in some small bar in a town no one knew the name of and now I’m here on this stage playing for hundreds of you.”

The crowd roars, claps, and stomps.

“Thank you for letting me share my music with you.” He turns to Kevin. “Thank you for finding me and teaching me that I could have this.”

To Nicky.

“Thank you for the support and advice.”

To the foxes.

“For giving me a home and a family that I’ve never had before.”

He turns to Andrew and the moment blue meets hazel, it’s almost enough to swallow the last
of his words. But he promised him a goodbye and he’ll be damned if he’d break a promise now.

“Thank you.”

For making him feel things he forgot he was capable of. For the kisses traded on a roof and balcony that set him on fire and grounded him to earth. For the keys and a home that gave him permission to stay for the first time in his life. For the truth that made him real even just for a little while. For him.

“You were amazing.”

Surprise flicks in those eyes before that careful mask hides it. Neil looks away, turning his back on him once more and giving himself to the crowd.

“Originally I had planned on singing Arsonist’s Lullaby for you all tonight, but I was wondering if you wanted to hear something new. Something I wrote just a few weeks ago.”

The screams of approval ring in his ears and he smiles, looking over his shoulder to his bandmates, to Andrew. “Don’t worry, I’ll take it from here guys.”

He waits for Kevin’s brief nod and Nicky’s bright smile paired with a ruffle of his hair before they wander off the stage. He waits for Andrew to stand, eyes intently on his own before he gives that little two-finger salute mockingly and turns to follow his cousin and Kevin. Giving himself just a moment longer to wallow in their absence, he reaches for the guitar Andrew had bought him to slide it on and slip the microphone back to its home. Taking a deep breath, he lets his fingers strum the first notes and leans in eyes closes. He opens his mouth and sings.

I am tired of this place, I hope people change

I need time to replace what I gave away

He had taken Nicky’s advice that night almost four weeks ago, had taken a pen to paper and poured out every secret thought and emotion he had bottled up and spilled it into the ink as it stained the page. The product was something that made everything a bit clearer but would never see the light of day. At least that’s what he originally intended.

And my hopes they are high, I must keep them small

Though I try to resist I still want it all

It was every hope and dream he had for the life Neil Josten had created for himself. It was the memories and laughter of his friends and family.

I see swimming pools and living rooms and aeroplanes

I see a little house on the hill and children’s names

I see quiet nights poured over ice and Tanqueray

But it was just that, a dream. And now he was left with the reality of it all.

Everything is shattering and it’s my mistake

He couldn’t have this life. Couldn’t have a future made for someone that wasn’t even real in the first place. No matter how much he may have wished it was. No matter how many times he told himself he could be Neil Josten.
Only fools fall for you, only fools

His eyes pool with unshed tears that he refused to let fall. Refused to show Lola just how much this was hurting him to leave. The melody drags and he gives what is left of Neil Josten into the lyrics, his hopes, his fears, his joy, and laughter. He opens his eyes and finds Andrew. His love.

Oh, our lives don’t collide, I’m aware of this

He wasn’t supposed to feel that, wasn’t supposed to figure out what it was that had been burning itself in his chest and making him mend together when he should have been broken. Wasn’t supposed to let Andrew know. But he is drowning and in his last breath of air, he wanted to tell him just once — just this once.

I don’t give a fuck, I’m not giving up

I still want it all

Because he did. He wanted and wanted. Even when he shouldn’t. Even when he couldn't. Neil wanted everything Andrew would give him, even if it was nothing, even if it meant walking off this stage and into Lola’s arms having always been nothing. He wanted this. And he’d do it all over again in a heartbeat.

He looks at Andrew and sings the last of the lyrics, the melody gone almost entirely as he croons into the microphone and whispers the last lines like he wished he could whisper them into his lips.

Only fools fall for you

Only fools do what I do

Only fools fall

The audience goes ballistic the moment the final note fades and Neil turns his gaze back to them. Feet are stomping and hands reach out as if they could touch him, their screams frantic and longing. His chest heaves from the empty pit that sits there after pouring himself out. He raises a hand to his ribcage to keep his heart from breaking through and maybe to hold the pieces together just a little longer. The final song is over and done so he only had to hold on for just a moment more.

He looks to his foxes, their eyes brimming with tears and bubbles of laughter on their lips as they cheer and clap right along with the crowd. They whistle and scream his name like they can’t do anything but and Neil can’t help but smile right alongside them, even if it makes the tears harder to hold in. He finds Andrew, a silent stone in the sea of their joy, too many emotions playing in those eyes for Neil to decipher a single one. At his back the crowd grows manic and frenzied, the sound of their pleas clawing at his back and begging him to turn around for one more song he couldn't give. The smiles start to slip from the foxes’ faces, flickers of worry and confusion taking over but Neil doesn't see it. He only has eyes for Andrew as he takes a step closer.

Something cracks at his back and instincts rip his eyes around to the incoming threat. He sees the horde of people pressing harder against the security barricade, the guards stationed there growing increasingly panicked as they are overpowered by the sheer number of them. Turning back he looks wildly at the foxes as they scream his name, but it’s too late. He hears the moment they break.
Fans storm the stage and the last thing Neil sees is Andrew’s furious expression before hands and fingers claw and pull him deeper into the heart of the crowd. People pull at his hair, clothes, and skin, making his eyes water and choking him until he can pull free from their grasps. He tries to fight his way out, moving towards where he had last seen his friends and where he can faintly hear them screaming his name when a cool press of metal slips between his clothes and pricks his skin.

“You’re all grown up, Junior,” a familiar voice cooes in his ear. “And looking so much like your daddy too.”

Neil flinches under her touch. “Lola.”

“Bingo!” She leans further against him, wrapping an arm around his waist while pressing the knife closer. “Now why don’t you be a good boy and follow me.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You know how this game works,” she sighs as if reprimanding a child. “Either you come or this blade finds a new home between your ribs. Or maybe in one of those friends of yours. The little blond one looks like he’d be a scream.”

Neil struggles against the hold not caring that it digs the knife deeper into his flesh. “You leave them alone,” he growls.

“Aw Junior, you care! How pathetically stupid of you. I should just kill them on principle for that.”

Neil stops struggling. “No.”

He can feel Lola’s grin grow at his cheek. “Beg for it.”

“Please,” he obeys with no hesitation.

Lola laughs brutally. “I forget how sweet you sound like that. Do it again.”

“Please don’t hurt them.”
“Again.”

“Please. I won’t fight anymore, just leave them. Please.”

“Ah, that’s what I want to hear.” She slides the knife home and covers his mouth when the pained scream comes as she twists it in him. “This is going to be a fun trip home, I can already tell. Start moving sweetie. We have a long drive and daddy is waiting.”

She pushes him forward and he stumbles, only barely managing to catch himself on her bruising grip and the back of a distracted fan. Being steered towards a back exit, Neil digs in his pocket to rid himself of his phone and keys, dropping them in the sea of people in hopes that they will find them and know he didn’t just leave them. His guitar had been ripped away when he first entered the crowd, lost somewhere in the hands of rabid fans trying to claim it as their own. He hopes it survives the night (at least one of them should). Lola drags him along after her, kicking open the door and shoving him through a second later. There, a second set of hands wrap themselves around him as Romero hauls him further down the hall and towards the parking lot where they have a van pulled up to the curb with its back doors wide open. He’s lifted off his feet and thrown in, knife still protruding from his body as he hits the metal floor. The last thing he sees is the blinking light of a streetlight and Lola’s smiling face with those dead eyes before the world goes black with the slam of the doors and the click of a lock.

The world becomes a series of flashes and pain and bouts of darkness that he wasn’t sure he could wake from. The first begins with a sharp bright light followed by the drag of a knife down his right cheek, a mimic to Lola’s scar. She drags the blade down two more times until he felt like the entire right side of his face was in ribbons.

The second flash comes from the cherry red circle of a dashboard lighter as Lola takes her time burning intricate patterns up and down his arms and fingers, the smell of his own burnt flesh filling his nose and his screams echoing in the back of the van.

The third belonged to the harsh scent of chemicals and a burning on his head so intense that he was sure Lola had set his hair on fire. She hushed him softly and cooed about how much he looked like his father.

The fourth was a darkness so thick and suffocating, Neil wasn’t sure if his eyes were open or
shut. His body ached and burned and he could feel his breathing slow to jagged wheezes that told him he might have punctured a lung. He hopes it killed him before the blackness took him again.

The last came from the glint of his father’s smile reflected in his trusted cleaver, rows of white teeth perfectly straight and bored as he stares down at his son with the blade raised to fall. Neil spits every insult and curse he’s ever wanted to say to the man even as his heart slams in his throat and his mind begs him to stop. He sees the rage they cause and the stillness to his father’s shoulders that let him know they hit harder than his father estimated for, even as he promises to make this last. His blade begins to fall, but before it can cleave his hand free from his arm (the thing his father knew he loved most next to his voice and legs and would still keep him squirming in pain) when the basement door is kicked in and a hail of bullets rain down on them, and he wrenches himself from the butcher’s grasp and blade. He lays in a puddle of his own blood as he watches the uncle he hadn’t seen since he was a child bury a bullet in his father’s head and splatter him in his blood. The bubble of laughter that comes from him is demented and panicked but he can’t stop. Tears flowed down his cheeks burning in his wounds as salt mixes with blood and his body trembles and he can’t stop.

He remembers the soft lilt of a British accent asking him if he wanted to stay or go. It was a dumb question. He’s only ever wanted to stay. The last thing he feels is two strong arms curling him into an equally strong chest as he’s lifted from the basement and carried out of his nightmare.

When he wakes again, he is left feeling groggy and heavy, his limbs like lead at his sides and head so full of cotton it takes a couple of minutes before he’s aware that he’s in a hospital and two men are at his side waiting for him to wake up. The first introduces himself as Agent Browning from the FBI and explains that they found Neil bleeding out on the front lawn when they came to storm his father’s house. He tells Neil that he’s in a hospital in Baltimore and that he had been missing two days before they received an anonymous tip calling them into the mess they found in his father’s basement. Neil blinked and processed the information as the man told him how his father, Lola, and several other members of the butcher’s inner circle were found dead at the scene but other key members like Romero weren’t found.

Browning badgered him for information on the event of what happened in addition to the 12 years he had been missing and presumed dead before turning up with a new name and image as Neil Josten. When he’s done asking, Neil looks at him blankly.

“Where are the foxes?” His voice cracks from overuse and raw vocal chords. “Where is my family?”

Browning looks confused for a moment before the agent at his side mumbles in his ear. “You mean your bandmates? They are still in Binghamton refusing to move until they have you back.”

“And they’re okay?”

“Besides a few scrapes and bruises from that mob rush, they are fine. But they aren’t the
priority here Mr. Wesninski. We need your testimony to bring down the last of your father’s empire and to move you into protective custody.”

“No.”

“No?” he asks, taken aback. “What do you mean no?”

“I’m not saying anything or going anywhere until I’ve seen my family. Bring them here.”

A dark look crosses over the agent’s face. “I don’t think you understand the situation you’re in.”

“I think I’m perfectly aware, Agent.” Neil scoffs. “You need more to fill in all the little holes in your case that you can’t without some sort of a key witness. Someone who knows every partners' name and face, who knows where they buried the bodies and the accounts they stashed the money in. You need me and I’m not going to do a damned thing for you until I get something in return. So you can go get my family and bring them here or we can sit here in silence until you do.”

“I could make you talk.” He growls. “You think you’re in any position to bargain? I’ve got you on multiple counts of theft, possession of false identities, forgery, and not to mention accessory to all of your father’s crimes. You think you can bully me around? I can throw your ass so far in prison that you’ll never see the light of day again.”

“Try it.” Neil snarls with a brief moment of absolute clarity. “My answer doesn’t change. Either you bring them here or me to them or you get nothing. See how long your charges stick then.” He bares his teeth at them in a parody of his father’s smile. “I’ve lived the first 10 years of my life with the infamous Butcher of Baltimore. He couldn’t break me and you sure as fuck won’t.”

He settles himself back against this pillow, body straining and stiff from the small movements already. “Now if you excuse me, I have a concussion and am suffering from blood loss so I’m going back to sleep. You can fuck off now.”

The agents fume but angrily stand to go once it’s clear Neil is done talking.

“Oh and Agent Browning?” He calls out just before the door can close. The agent stops and turns. “My name is Neil. Not Nathaniel, not Mr. Wesninski, Neil.”

The agent slams the door and Neil finds himself slipping back into that blackness. He dreams of blood, cleavers, and Andrew.

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It takes two days of Neil’s silence for the agents to realize he was not bluffing. They yell and threaten him with jail for various crimes he apparently committed from the age of 10 until now (which goes to show how useless the government is if they knew what he did and when but only just managed to catch him after his father did) but Neil only gave them a blank stare before turning in his bed to get more sleep. Eventually, they decided it wasn’t worth fighting him over and started preparations to move the foxes to him in a discreet manner as to avoid media finding them as well.

Originally the plan had been to transport him to some undisclosed location where he’d only be allowed 20 minutes or so with his family until Neil’s doctor got wind of it and promptly put her foot down. Apparently, his wounds were substantial enough to require constant supervision and
moving him in such a condition was downright stupid, which she gladly berated the agents for considering it. Neil got to watch. It was amazing. Though in his own judgment, he was fine. All his fingers still moved (although stiffly as the skin still healed from Lola’s ministrations) and his legs remained in working order save for a bruise from where his father had stomped down on it when he tried to squirm away. He was lucky it didn’t snap the femur he was told, but really he was just glad it meant he could still run. His nightmares weren’t so kind in that aspect, often featuring a reality in where he hadn’t been so lucky and was trapped as that cleaver found it’s home. Like he said, he’s fine.

On the fifth day, Neil’s usual nap is interrupted by the slamming of his room door. This startles him for multiple reasons, one being that the room has been under constant guard in case any of his father’s men decide to try to eliminate him before he can testify against them and the second being that Browning and his doctor — his only visitors since he’d been admitted — had already stopped by earlier that morning. So when the door flies open with a crash loud enough to jolt him from sleep, Neil tries to scramble from his bed, yanking wires out of machines so they go haywire and nearly pulling his arm out of its socket from where he had been handcuffed to the rail (apparently he was deemed a flight risk. They weren’t exactly wrong). He is in a crumpled pile on the floor next to his bed when the world halts in perfect silence.

Andrew’s stockily built form fills what seems the entirety of the doorway, one hand clasped tightly on the metal frame and the other a fist balled at his side with his carefully blank mask shattered with undisguised unrepentant rage. He does not bother to hide the conflict of emotions simmering in those hazel eyes, nor the tremor in his hands or stuttering rise and fall of his chest. It’s the most emotion Neil has ever seen visible on the man and it was tempestuous and beautiful. Even if it was directed at him.

For a moment they just stay there, the world falling into chaos around them with the screams of various medical machines and the commotion of several angry voices at Andrew’s back coming closer in volume. But Neil doesn’t care, he only sees Andrew. He takes an unconscious step towards him.

“Andrew,” his name is a quiet whisper, a disbelieving prayer and the undeniability of hope blooming in his chest. He is yanked back once more, the metal of the cuffs slipping to dig hard into a wound on his wrist, pulling a curse from his lips as a sharp flare of pain fills him and dots his vision with black circles.

The noise is enough to draw Andrew into movement because one moment he’s still in the doorway and the next he is crouched in front of Neil, scooping him up and dropping him back on the bed. The world crashes back on them the second his weight hits the mattress, agents and nurses rushing into the room to investigate the noise and pull Andrew away from the bed, hands wrapping around those black-clad arms and shoulders trying to haul him away from Neil, who latches on to the fabric and holds no matter how much his fingers scream in protest. Next comes the foxes headed by Wymack who bellows his protests and tries to pull the agents from Andrew who is beginning to look wild and clings just as desperately to Neil.

“That’s enough!” Agent Browning’s voice booms over them all, stilling the chaos as it bounces off the walls. He stalks further into the room and moves to Andrew. “I told you that if you couldn’t behave yourself then you didn’t get to stay. Get out.”

A soundless snarl begins to form on Andrew’s lips but Neil beats him to it, gripping tighter onto Andrew’s shirt. “He leaves and we’re done.”

“That’s not how this works. We brought your friends meaning our part of the deal is done.
Now you fill yours.”

“The deal was that I see and talk to my family,” Neil bites back. “That means everyone. Especially Andrew. Try to take him again and I promise you your case will fall apart because I’ll give you nothing.”

Browning stares down at him for a tense silence before sighing and waving off his agents. “Let him go.”

They drop their hold on Andrew and immediately back off. Andrew remains tense where they pulled him.

“You’ve got 20 minutes,” Browning warned.

“Fuck you,” Neil responds very maturely. “Stop wasting them then.”

It looks like he wants to say something back but must see the pointlessness of it because he shakes his head and leaves with his men at his heels. The nurses that had come into the room moving about rehooking him to the machines and making sure he didn’t tear anything open again in his struggle to escape. With quick chides about overexerting himself, they file out of the room as well, closing the door behind them and leaving just the foxes and Neil remaining.

“I see that the attitude problem was real at least,” Andrew drawls, “but what else was, Nathaniel.”

Neil flinches, his gaze immediately darting to Kevin who won’t look him in the eye and sported a ring of bruises around his neck that Neil could see to be caused by fingers. “He told you.”

It was a whisper of horror and betrayal.

Andrew laughs, bitterly, darkly. “Imagine my surprise when it turns out our little rabbit was actually a wolf in rabbit skin.” He switches to German. “The Butcher of Baltimore and his long-lost son Nathaniel Wesinski. Tell me does the most notorious hitman this side of the country sound like some back alley shady figure to you? Did he sound as dead as your mother?”

“He is now,” a dark look fills his eyes as he sees the gun go off and his father’s brain splatters on him and the ground. It was too quick a death than he deserved.

“Good.”

Silence hangs over their necks and Neil gets a good look at Andrew, circles lining his eyes and a bruise blooming just below his left, the blood vessels shot and red. Any closer and it could have blinded him. Neil’s fingers hover over the bruise but never touches.

“I wanted to tell you, but I couldn’t. You never would have let me leave and would have gotten yourself killed trying to uphold your end of the deal. I wasn’t going to let you die for me.”

“That wasn’t your choice,” Andrew growls.

“It was,” his voice firm. “I told you before, my life isn’t worth yours.”

Andrew’s eyes burn and his fingers move, coming towards the various bandages that litter his face and arms, ripping them off to reveal the damage underneath. He can hear the foxes gasp and cry at the sight. Andrew’s face remains impassive as he reaches for the last on Neil’s face, a small rectangle that hid the burn marks Lola had pressed into his cheek. The bandage stuck as he tried to rip it off.
“Wait-” Neil hisses but Andrew yanks it free. Searing heat floods his face and his breath stutters in his lungs for a second until he can blink away the involuntary tears. Andrew lets the bandage flutter to the floor with the rest, eyes taking in the full extent of the damage done in those two days with Lola and his father. The golden specks in his eyes turn to burning embers in molten green pits as fingers press into the skin just next to the mangled scarred mess that was now his face. An unasked question swims in those eyes.


A loud sob rips from Nicky’s throat and Neil is suddenly reminded that he and Andrew weren’t alone nor the only ones to speak German. He shifts to look at him, unknowingly moving to give the foxes a closer view of the injury as well. Several more gasps ring out in the air along with muttered curses.

“Neil,” Dan sobs.

Matt steps forward, hand out for him but for a moment all Neil sees is the crowd of people clawing for him and he flinches back, yanking on the cuffs once more. Andrew whirls around to snarl at Matt. “Take another step and I’ll slash your fucking throat.”

This, of course, brings about cries of outrage and disbelief among the other foxes, but Neil shifts to box in Andrew’s face, slowly guiding his eyes back to him. He follows willingly.

“It’s fine, Matt,” Neil says keeping his eyes trained on Andrew’s. “I’m-

“If you finish that sentence with either fine or any other variation of it I’ll finish the fucking job and kill you myself,” Andrew yanks their foreheads together.

Neil brushes their noses against each other. “I’m sorry.”

It turns out the phrasing is just as bad a the first. Andrew’s fist shoots up and dives toward Neil, only stopping a mere inch from the side of his face. The hand shakes in the air as if it takes every last ounce of Andrew’s control to hold it there. “Say it again. I fucking dare you.”

“I wanted to stay,” Neil whispers instead. “That night on the stage, I wanted to stay but Lola was there and Romero had a gun trained on you all. I-I couldn’t.”

He lets his eyes close. “I wanted to say goodbye at least.”

Andrew is very still then. “Make a new deal with me.”

A bubble of laughter chokes in his throat as his eyes slide open to meet hazel. “I still have nothing to give. All my truths are out.”

“I know what I want.” The grip tightens on his neck. “Stay.”

And after everything, it’s almost enough to make him break. “They want to take me away,” he confesses. “They are going to put me into witness protection so I can testify against the remaining parts of my father’s circle.”

Andrew stiffens before rising to full height. What he says next is in perfect English and loud enough for all the foxes to hear. “They cannot have you.”

“Have him?” comes Dan’s confused mimic. “What like take him away? For what?!”
“Neil’s not going anywhere,” Matt growls.

“Yeah fuck that I just drove how long to get his ass?” Allison glares at Neil like it’s his fault. “I’m calling Sylvia. Let them fucking try to take him.”

Neil listens to them all argue for his sake and he feels a little part of himself crack in the face of their kindness. “You want me to stay?”

They all turn to look at him like he spoke in Latin. “Of course we do!” Dan throws up her hands.

“But,” his voice cracks, “but you don’t even know who I am.”

Allison scoffs, “You’re right and I damn well better get the full story.”

“What she means Neil,” Renee clarifies, “is that we don’t care. We all have pasts.”

“It’s what makes us foxes,” Wymack grumbles. “Besides I signed Neil Josten not whoever this Wesninski fellow is.”

And then Neil actually breaks. “Thank you,” he whispers.

When the FBI agents come in at the end of 20 minutes, they are greeted by the angry protests of the foxes claiming they cannot take Neil away no matter their case. It ends in a long argument with the agents threatening to charge them all with obstruction and other nonsense the foxes don’t buy in the least and several lawyers are called in to defend either side. The conclusion remains the same, they could not force Neil into the program nor to testify since he was legally an adult and they could not prove most of the charges held against him, meaning the choice was in Neil’s hands.

He looked to the foxes at his side, his family, and felt the warm weight of Andrew’s hand on his nape and told them he would not leave but that he would tell them everything. While obviously unhappy, Browning accepted his answer and immediately pulled him from the hospital and into an interrogation room where he spilled every truth left about his father and mother, the abuse and killings he witnesses from his father’s empire as a child, and the years on the run in the years after until he was caught again. Andrew remained at his side the entire time, no more than a few feet away since the hospital room. He owed it to him anyway, so he spoke until his throat was dry and raw and in as much detail he could remember until the words ran out and the story was done.

At the end of it all, they presented him with forms and document to make Neil Josten real in the eyes of the law, providing him with both an authentic license, birth certificate, passport and social security card along with a firm warning that if he tried to change identities again he would be jailed with no chance of parole. But Neil had no desire to be anyone else; he just wanted to be real and now he could.

It was early in the morning when they finally released Neil, a bag of prescription antibiotics and painkillers tucked under Andrew’s arm and what little items he had on him from when they found him in a bag hanging off his wrists. He tossed it in the first trash can he passes outside. Someone had left a rented car parked in the station’s parking lot so when they got out they could
drive back home without waiting for the rest of the foxes. They wordlessly slipped into the car before peeling out of the lot and starting their long journey home.

Andrew doesn’t speak the entire time, focusing on the road rather than Neil. He doesn’t mind much, it lets him drink in Andrew’s profile and the way the sun hits his face and eyes. Halfway through the journey, Neil remembers that he still has a debt to pay.

“Can I borrow your phone?” Neil asks, shifting in his seat to sit up straighter.

Andrew doesn’t reply but digs out his phone from his back pocket and tosses it Neil’s way. The phone unlocks with a quick tap of his finger before his hand returns to the wheel. Neil opens the call menu and taps in the number he’s had memorized since a child and had carried with him to this day. The phone rings for a solid two minutes before the line picks up.

“Who the bloody hell is this,” comes the angry voice of his uncle.


“Nate? Is that you? Shouldn’t you be in a bloody hospital or under FBI watch?”

“I was released.”

“Then you’re okay, yeah? You were a nasty sight when we came in. Wanted to take you to our doctor but there was no time and you wanted to stay.”

“I did, thank you,” Neil says softly, meaning it.

“Anything kiddo. We’re family.” Stuart goes quiet and Neil knows what’s coming next. “Mary… she- she’s gone isn’t she?”

“Yes,” he whispers back. “She died almost two years ago.”

“Was it him?”

“Yes.”

He swears, “The bastard died too easily.”

“He did,” Neil argues.

They are both quiet for a moment. “Look Nate, I’m happy to hear from you and I want you to feel like you can call me anytime, but I get the feeling that isn’t quite a social call, yeah?”

It wasn’t. “I need a favor.”

“What kind of favor?”

“I need a number,” Stuart asks whose. “From the person who brought my father to my doorstep. I want the number of the top snake.”

Stuart hums, “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

“Like I said Nate, we’re family. Keep in touch, yeah? We miss you back home.”
**Home.** Neil had never once thought of Stuart’s house back in London or his family’s estate there as home; his mother never let him, not when they had to leave so soon each time. Maybe he could learn to see it as one now (another home at least).

“I will. Bye Uncle.”

“Cheers, Nate. I’ll be in touch soon.”

The phone line disconnects and Neil wordlessly hands the device back to Andrew. The drummer raises an eyebrow but doesn’t voice his questions. Neil decides to answer it anyway.

“Just keeping a promise.”

Andrew turns away and they finish the last of the journey much like the first part.

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As they walk in through the door, Neil is immediately hit with a feeling of deja vu as his living room and kitchen are filled with foxes. It’s almost like the time he returned from the police station after Drake, but instead of an oppressive air of misery and tension in the room, it is filled with a quiet exhaustion and relief at Neil’s appearance without any further harm upon his person.

“I guess I owe you all the truth,” he fidgets nervously.

“That would be nice- ow!” Dan hits Allison.

“You don’t have to tell us now. You must be tired.”

He was exhausted, but if he didn’t tell them now he wasn’t sure if he could later, so he shakes his head. “No, I do. I just.. I don’t know where to start.”

“From the beginning?” Dan offers.

So he does, spilling himself open once more, this time including his background with Kevin and Riko and how Riko is responsible for both Drake and the riot that led to Neil’s kidnapping. By the time he was done they were vibrating with anger and tears as they cling to Neil as if afraid he would be taken from them again. He clings right back.

That night instead of disbursing separate ways for the night, they push the furniture to the walls in the living room and fill the space with blankets and pillows they piled around him, creating a bubble of warmth and safety in which Neil is the center of. Matt claims his left, curling around Neil’s back with Dan closely wrapped behind, both their arms thrown over his middle. Next to them Allison and Seth were wrapped in each other’s arms as Seth’s back rests against Dan’s, Renee curled up somewhere near their feet. His other side is claimed by Andrew, who barricades his back with pillows to keep his cousin and Kevin at arms length (and undoubtedly trying to prevent Nicky from cuddling him in his sleep). Even Aaron remains downstairs, settling himself near the feet of his cousin and brother. Neil’s heart swelled in his chest as the foxes began to drop off to sleep around him. Closest of all was Andrew, whose hazel eyes stared into his own and whose hand gingerly came between them to rest on Neil’s neck. The touch was grounding and burning. Neither said a word as Neil’s eyes grew heavy and Andrew’s face blurred before unconsciousness claimed him once more.
It felt like coming home.
Neil wakes in a tangle of blankets, fingers, and knives pinning him to the cold ground beneath his side. When he opened his eyes he saw the cold black walls of his father’s basement and the glint of his father’s smile in the reflection of that cleaver. He thrashes, fighting against Lola’s hands and his father’s both and trying to move away before they can deliver more pain. But their grips are iron tight and wrapping around his neck to choke the life from him until he’s gasping—

He blinks and the basement is gone and he is alone in the middle of the living room, blankets wrapped tightly around his legs and fingers digging into his arm to claw away invisible hands. His heart slams in his chest and his body aches with a pain he hasn’t felt in days but makes his head dizzy and stomach sick with it. A whimper escapes his lips before he can stop it and Andrew is at his side in seconds, seeming to metastasize from thin air. Batting Neil’s hands away, he carefully removes the blankets with a few quick tugs and pulls Neil into a seated position. When it becomes apparent that Neil can’t hold himself up for very long, he lets Neil’s head rest on his shoulder as he inspects Neil’s bandages for any sign that he torn anything loose.

Neil tries to push himself off. “Nothing ripped, just a nightmare.”

Andrew carries on regardless, silently finishing his assessment until he’s satisfied with his own conclusions. He pulls Neil back up to look him in the eyes. “Your next dose is due any time but it says you can’t have it without eating. The rest of them went out for food. Do you want to wait for them here or take a shower and get dressed?”

“What time is it?” Neil squints his eyes and looks around the room, taking in the sunlight streaming through the wide windows to the left and guess it somewhere between late morning and early afternoon.

“10. Shower yes or no?”

Neil thinks of the smell of the hospital still sticking to his skin and the grime of the police station and nods his head. Andrew steadies him against a pile of pillows to keep him upright as he stands and leaves the living room only to return with a couple of trash bags, scissors and a roll of duct tape. Careful to avoid any burned skin, he methodically wraps and tapes the bags over his bandages until his hands are completely encased up to his elbows and two squares are taped on either of his cheeks.

He stands and looks down at Neil. “Can you get up?”

Neil mentally catalogs his injuries and the dizziness still lingering. “Not well,” he admits.

Andrew extends a hand, “Yes or no?”

“Yes,” Neil slips his hand in Andrew’s.
He carefully lifts him from the ground and shifts him so he can balance his weight with an arm around Neil’s waist and Neil’s arm around his shoulders. Neil slumps into him as much as he dares, not wanting to smother Andrew but grateful for the lack of weight on his leg. Together they limp up the stairs and into the bathroom. Andrew leaves him on the toilet as he turns on the shower and adjusts the temperature. Neil struggles to remove his clothes, fingers throbbing and unable to get a good purchase on any of the clothes through the plastic. He manages to kick off his socks before Andrew has to help him with his shirt and pants, asking yes or no before he touches either article. Soon Neil is left bare before him as the room starts to fill with steam and he awkwardly moves toward the shower, slipping under the hot stream as it pelted his skin. It felt heavenly.

The rustle of clothing fills the air and before Neil has time to question it, the curtain is pulled back with Andrew stepping into the space at his back, still dressed in a t-shirt and sweats but his armbands nowhere in sight. Neil sputters at the intrusion; Andrew ignores him in favor of reaching behind him for a bottle of body wash.

“Yes or no?”

Neil’s answer has never changed and it does not now. His yes is soft and slow much like Andrew’s fingers as they lather his body with soap before reaching for a washcloth to gently scrub the skin clean. Guiding him under the spray, no care for his own clothes becoming plastered to his skin from soap and water, he carefully runs his fingers through Neil’s hair.

“Red. I never pick you for a ginger though it explains the temper and attitude.”

Neil’s eyes snap open (even though he didn’t remember closing them) and he immediately flinches from Andrew’s touch. It’s not the first time he’s come to realize that he’s been rendered back to his true appearance, the first being in the hospital when a nurse helped him shower and he caught a glimpse in the mirror. He panicked so hard he almost tore open his stitches at his side. They covered the mirror after that.


Andrew says nothing as he replaces the body wash with shampoo. He holds it up, eyebrow raised until Neil settles his head back into Andrew’s hands. Those careful calloused fingers run through and scratch lightly at his scalp. Neil sinks into it.

“You look like the rabbit you’ve always been. Now just without the cheaply dyed fur and awful contacts.”

Neil chuckles, “I thought we were done with the rabbit remarks.”

“Well, you’re a moron so that doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

Another laugh rumbles in his chest and Neil leans in, bringing their foreheads together and sliding his nose alongside Andrew’s. “Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

Andrew captures his lips in a bruising kiss, fingers still tangled in his hair and Neil’s own resting on the tile at his back. Carefully, Andrew lifts them and drapes them on his shoulder.

“Just here.”

Neil nods and leans in to meet those lips once more. They remain like that until the soap and water trail down their cheeks and turn it sudsy and bitter. Andrew backs them into the spray and they
cling tighter as it washes away and douses the flames flickering in their chests. Instead of feeling cold and empty, Neil feels warm and complete. Neil’s forehead drops to Andrew’s shoulder, lungs gasping for air but not wanting to be too far. He can feel Andrew’s pulse beating against his nose, a steady reminder that he was alive and here — that Neil was alive. Unable to keep his lips way, he presses a soft kiss to the skin, relishing in the way Andrew’s grip tightens and a shiver runs through him.

“You like that,” Neil breathes against the skin, kissing it again. “I like that you like it.”

“200%” but instead of pushing him away he pulls Neil closer.

Neil kisses the skin all over his neck, moving to the underside of his jaw to the spot by his ear, cherishing each hitch of breath and shudder it rips from Andrew’s control. Eventually, his lips move back to Andrew’s which hungrily devours him whole, tongue sliding in to explore and dance with his.

They stay there entangled with each other until the water grows cold and commotion filters from downstairs, signaling the foxes’ return. Reluctantly Neil lets Andrew disentangle their lips and shuts off the water. He helps Neil out of the tub and dries him off thoroughly with a towel before slipping out to get them both new clothes. When he comes back he is dressed head to toe in black like usual, those armbands back in place as he hands a pile of clothes to Neil. The pants are a little short and the sweatshirt slips on his shoulders meaning they must be Andrew’s, but they are soft under his fingers and smell faintly of Andrew’s cologne so Neil pulls them on.

After removing the plastic from his body and double checking to see if water slipped through, Andrew opens the door and leads them downstairs to the dining room where the foxes are settled with a buffet of food and warm smiles as they greet the two. It feels like something a normal family would do, so Neil smiles and sits himself down while the other fuss about him and pile his plate with way too much food. Andrew is silent at his side, only moving to fill his own plate and to hand Neil a couple of pills after he’s eaten something. Neil gives him a grateful smile before turning back to everyone.

He wonders if this is what it feels like to have a future.

That night the foxes leave for their own home, each lingering just a little longer as they say goodbye to ensure he was safe from disappearing on them again. It takes a few reassurances and a couple of biting remarks from Andrew but eventually the last of them leave and the house falls into silence. Nicky, Kevin, and Aaron all mysteriously absent, and probably having already turned in for the night. Neil had taken his night dose of the pain medication so his body was loose and pliant even as his mind remains cognizant and aware (he’s glad to be off the morphine drip). He thinks about lingering downstairs for a while longer but the space is beginning to feel stale and confining from the amount of time he’s already spent down there so he decides to head up to his own room and maybe play the guitar (Andrew had miraculously found it undamaged and brought it back). The doctor may have warned against it, but surely one song couldn’t hurt right?

Not as sore as he was this morning, he’s able to hobble up the stairs without Andrew’s support, though the other follows him closely up the steps just in case. His hands are shoved into the pockets of his pants and his face is bored but Neil knows he’s watching his every movement for any signs of trouble. Neil manages to clear the stairs with only one stumble (that he would have totally
caught himself on without Andrew’s assistance). Once on the landing Andrew brushes past him and start forward with purpose. Neil shrugs and limps to his own door, reaching for the handle as his eyes flick to Andrew’s expecting to see the blonde slip through and close it behind him. To his surprise Andrew lingers in the door frame, eyes intently staring into Neil’s when they meet before sliding into the room, leaving the door wide open.

He swallows, tongue too big in his mouth and saliva gone at the thought of what the invitation meant. It was a dare, Neil realizes, the glint in Andrew’s eyes before he went in, a gauntlet thrown between them waiting for Neil to pick it up. Well, Neil’s never been one to turn down a challenge, especially not from Andrew. His hand slips from his door handle as his feet slowly pull him away and to Andrew’s. The door hangs open, giving him a rare glance into Andrew’s room that he only got in glimpses before from the balcony. Now he is greeted with a full view.

The walls are the same barren gray his were before Nicky got ahold of the orange paint, but where Neil’s room is only filled with the bare essentials and little else, Andrew’s is filled with an array of knick-knacks and pieces to match his personality. In the corner to his left are two large wooden bookcases that stretch from floor to ceiling, the shelves lined with books and a couple of photo frames of his family and one of an older woman with kind eyes and laugh lines. (Neil wonders if that was Bee.) Under the light switch is an end table with another stack of books lined up in a small book stand, large tomes on musical theory he’s pretty sure he’s seen Kevin read from time to time and an abandoned pair of glasses next to them. To his right is a supple leather chair more commonly found in a prestigious library rather than a bedroom, an industrial lamp tucked in the corner behind it and a throw blanket draped over one its arms. It looks well worn and creased like Andrew spent a lot of time in it probably reading one of his many books.

The other half of the room is occupied by Andrew’s king-sized bed pressed in one corner with the foot of the bed facing a dark wood dresser with a mirror hung on the wall. The bed is dressed in a surprising amount of blankets, the linen almost entirely black save for the red plaid quilt peeking from underneath the knitted comforter (apparently someone disliked being cold). A plush rug sits under it all, also in black, that is soft under his toes as he steps further into the room and closer to Andrew who is seated on a bench at the foot of his bed, hands folded together as his cheek rests on them and his eyes watch Neil.

Neither of them speaks, Neil shifting from foot to foot unsure of what he’s supposed to do next but not wanting to sound idiotic or unsure by asking. Andrew watches him squirm for another few seconds before fluidly rising from the bench and moving to meet Neil in the middle. Neil can feel his breath hitch when Andrew stops a few inches from him, enough to feel his body heat roll off him but not enough to touch. It drove Neil wild.

“Andrew.”

“I’m going to shut the door. Yes or no?” Neil nods his head and the other moves past him to close the door, flicking the lock after throwing a glance in Neil’s direction in silent confirmation. When he comes back, he’s at that infernal distance that Neil struggles to keep himself from closing. “I want to blow you again. Yes or no?”

Neil’s pulse jumps. While they’ve been trading kisses and soft touches for sometimes now, neither of them have ventured that far since their last time. Heart pounding in his ears and pupils slightly dilating, he nods. “Yes.”

Andrew leans in and brushes their lips together, a feather-light tease with none of the pressure Neil has come to crave. “Yes or no?”

Neil can feel his eyes begin to droop as he moves closer until there is only a sliver of air
between them. “Always.”

Anger flicks in those eyes. “There is no always. It’s a yes or no.”

Neil resists the urge to roll his eyes. “Then always yes.”

Andrew pulls away and Neil nearly whimpers at the loss of him. “We’re not doing this if you will not take it seriously.”

“I am,” Neil huffs. “You asked and my answer was yes. It will always be yes with you, Andrew. Haven’t you figured that out by now?”

“Nothing is always Neil. Time moves and people change too often for something as frivolous as always.”

Neil moves closer, slowly to give Andrew time to step away as he raises a hand between them. “You don’t need to lecture me on things not lasting, I’m very familiar with what it’s like to have everything ripped from your hands time and time again. Just like you. But I’m telling you right now that I want this. Your kisses, your touch, all of it for as long as I can have it. So always.”

Andrew opens his mouth to argue, defiance stirring in those eyes and muscle tensing for a fight, but Neil cuts him off. “But if you need to keep asking me that’s okay too. My answer is yes.”

Andrew’s jaw tightens, “Unless it’s a no.”

“Oh, Unless it’s a no,” Neil concedes.

He remains still, waiting for Andrew to pick it up again or end it there for the night instead. It takes two long moments of silence before he steps past that small barrier between them and closes the space at last, lips pressing against Neil’s like burning flames. He’s swallowed whole, completely engulfed by the time that tongue sweeps the line of his bottom lip and hand come to rest on his neck to pull them closer.

“Head and shoulders only,” Andrew breaks the kiss to talk and Neil’s hands immediately come to rest in those blonde locks.

He pulls Andrew as close as he dares, the pain in his fingers nothing compared to the electricity coursing through him at the feel of Andrew’s hair and skin, every nerve a livewire that feeds the inferno in his chest. Eventually, Andrew’s mouth begins to move south, sliding over his jawline and neck until it hits the juncture where it meets his shoulder, the flesh exposed from the too big fit of Andrew’s shirt. A hand grasps his hip and he’s pulled flush to Andrew, the hard line of his erection evident against the muscle of Andrew’s abdomen. The other drops from his neck and tugs at the collar of the shirt, exposing more skin for him to lavish and suck at before tugging on the hemline.

“Yes or no?”

Neil has to swallow his always to breathe a “Yes” before raising his arms as best as he can to help Andrew pull it off. He steps back to view the expanse of exposed skin, every scar both old and newly formed looked over with hazel ringed eyes. After a moment’s debate, Andrew reaches behind his head and discards his own shirt giving Neil a view of the toned pale skin speckled with tiny brown dots he never knew existed until that moment. He kind of wants to kiss them all in greeting but refrains from moving forward like he wants to.

Instead, he says, “You don’t have to.”
“Shut up.” Andrew mashes their lips together, hand tightening on his hip and the other coming to grip his neck once more.

Tongues dance and fingers explore bare skin with featherlight touches and kisses where they were allowed. Neil kisses softly at Andrew’s neck like he had in the shower, glad to see the same shiver of pleasure ripple through him like before. It pulls a soft moan from his lips that he buries into Andrew’s skin, sliding his tongue over the areas he kissed as he moves upward toward his ear. Daring to try something new, he sucks in the lobe and nibbles at it lightly before kissing it. The choked off groan it pulls from Andrew is sweeter than any song. He does it again a couple more time before Andrew roughly shoves him toward the bed.

Neil lands with a soft bounce, the mattress surprisingly cloud-like and pliable under his weight as to not aggravate his wounds despite the rough landing. He rises onto his elbows just in time for Andrew to crawl over him, knees resting on either side of his thighs and arms by his head to keep his weight off him. His lips find Andrew’s before Andrew trails them down again, kissing every scar on his chest with deliberate care and attention until Neil’s head is spinning. When he reaches the band of Neil’s sweats, those hazel eyes look up, judging his reaction as his hand comes to palm him through the material. Neil hisses in pleasure and shifts his legs a little wider.

“Yes o-”

“Yes.”

The hand disappears beneath the band and calloused fingers brush his sensitive cock. They wrap around the base and give it a few pumps before he lets go, drawing out a whine before the sweats are tugged down. His erection bobs free and Neil lifts his hips to help Andrew slide them down over the swell of his ass and further down his thighs until the cool air brushes his entire length and his groin is flush to the bare skin of Andrew’s stomach. His breath hitches into another moan when a hand wraps around him, forcing him to muffle it into his arm to keep it from being heard. Andrew pumps him a few times, using the precum dripping from the tip as lubricant until his palms were slick and glided over him easily. He gives a little twist at the wrist that has Neil seeing stars and swearing in every language he knows.

Andrew’s mouth slides lower again, kissing his stomach then hip before hovering over the shiny red head of his cock and blowing on it before pressing a light kiss there. The moan that slips then is obscene and too loud to be muffled away. Andrew licks a broad stripe up the underside, eyes focusing on the length until the tip hits the top when they flick to Neil’s before swallowing him whole.

“Andrew,” Neil moans, gripping the blankets in his hands as tightly as he could. “Andrew.”

The fire builds as tightly as he paws at Andrew’s shoulders, desperate for the taste of his lips on his own. He lets go with a wet pop, hand coming to pump Neil’s cock even as he complies and meets Neil’s mouth with his own. Andrew’s tongue tastes bitter and vaguely salty but all Neil cares about is the fire coiling tighter and tighter as Andrew’s tongue sweeps over his, moans spilling into the other’s mouth.

Neil comes in thick ropey stripes that coat the top of Andrew’s hand and splashes against their stomachs. His body trembles through the aftershock as Andrew continues to pump him through it and his teeth sink into his lower lip. When pleasure turns to pain and overstimulation, he whines and squirms under Andrew’s hand until he releases him with a teasing touch. Once his mind has returned to his body, he removes his hands from Andrew’s body to avoid triggering any memories lurking in the back of his mind. He presses light barely there kisses to his lips before pulling back to speak.
“Do you need me to go?”

Andrew stills above him and for a second Neil thinks he is going to say yes but he shakes his head and captures Neil’s lips in a more demanding kiss. Neil lets him take control, letting Andrew pull and guide him where he wants, teeth biting into his lips and nipping at his tongue when it glides past them. When his faces buries into Neil’s neck he notices the movement to the left of his leg and the hand that had disappeared in Andrew’s own pants. Neil can feel that fire rekindle at the sight but he quickly pulls his eyes away unsure if he’s allowed to see.

He busies himself instead with peppering kisses to Andrew’s shoulder and neck where he could reach, biting at his earlobe when it nuzzles his nose. He can’t help his own moans at the way Andrew shudders against him. Words spill from his mouth and into his ear in unrecognizable hums and murmurs meant either as encouragement or echoes of his own pleasure. Andrew growls but the noise is choked off by a groan that he tries to bury into Neil’s neck. It’s not long after that Andrew goes still before his body shudders and jerks slightly against him. Neil keeps murmuring until Andrew stills once more and slowly pushes himself away.

Neil lies there, mind blissed out and body boneless as he listens to Andrew rustle about the room, A drawer opens and shuts at his side and tissue is dropped on Neil’s stomach.

“Clean yourself up.”

With a chuckle, Neil wipes up the mess on his stomach and cock before balling it away and tossing it in the small bin tucked under the nightstand. He slides his sweats back up before sitting up and searching for his shirt. Not recognizing the difference between the two on the floor, Neil shrugs and grabs one, carefully sliding it over his head and pulling it down. He sits on the bed and watches Andrew watching him. For a second Neil wonders if he should be embarrassed or awkward but finds that he’s neither so he simply waits for Andrew to make the next move.

“I’m going to bed,” he says boredly.

Neil nods and pushes himself off the bed. Andrew watches as he moves towards the door without question and heads for his own bed. He gets to the door before Andrew speaks up again.

“Can you stick to one side of the bed?”

Neil feels his heart stutter. “I don’t move in my sleep.”

Andrew nods. “Turn off the light.”

He scoots back in the bed until his back hits the wall, peeling back the blankets and tucking himself in regardless of Neil’s decision. Neil smiles and flicks off the lights, silently making his way back to the bed in the dark and slipping in beside Andrew.

“Thank you,” he whispers into the night.

“250%”

Neil smiles even if Andrew can’t see it and lets the lull of sleep pull him under, hand resting between their bodies in open invitation. He almost doesn’t feel it when Andrew’s rests next to his, fingers tangling together.
It turns out that long seeded trauma and violent nightmares are not a good combination for two boys equally as scarred as the other. The start is Neil jerking away from another dream of his father, body shooting up and ripping away his hand where it still lied entangled with Andrew’s. This, of course, wakes Andrew who is unused to having another weight in his bed and lashes out at the thought of past demons, fist striking home in Neil’s chest and fingers reaching for his hidden knives. It ends with Neil pinned under Andrew with a knife at his throat and pain radiating throughout his body.

Moments pass in baited silence as clouded eyes begin to fade and recognition settles in. The knife lifts and slips away and the pressure keeping Neil pinned abates, allowing him to rise. He decides not to push his luck and remains still as his heart restarts and his breathing returns. Andrew crawls back into his corner of the mattress. He doesn’t offer an apology nor does Neil expect or want one; Andrew is allowed his share of traumas even if they clash with Neil’s. He thinks maybe he’ll just lay there for a couple more seconds until he can stop seeing his father’s face.

“Maybe we should wait until my nightmares are gone before we try this again,” he attempts to joke when his heart calms.

“Your nightmares never go away,” Andrew deadpans, voice thick with sleep.

“I think you underestimate my powers of compartmentalization and suppression. Give me a week maybe two and I’ll be good to go.”

Andrew glares at him, “What makes you think I want you back in my bed?”

“Because I’m irresistible and you like me.”

“I hate you.”

Neil smirks, “I still don’t believe you.”

Andrew shoves his face away but his fingers linger at his neck where the knife was held, a feather-light brush against the skin that Neil thinks is as close to an apology that Andrew is willing to give.

He nuzzles against the hand. “This was nice, I liked it. Thank you.”

Andrew pulls his hand away and says nothing, instead choosing to crawl over Neil for a smoke. Neil doesn’t follow him out, instead lying back in bed to enjoy the early hours of the morning (surprisingly they managed to make it through most of the night without nightmares). His eyes almost droop closed when something vibrating catches his attention. Turning his head slightly to the left he sees a phone buzzing against the nightstand, it’s screen lip up and a familiar number flashing.

“Uncle Stuart,” he greets as he picks it up.

“Nate,” his uncle greets back, “I’ve got your number for you.”

He jolts up and scrambles to find a pen and paper. “Already?”

Stuart scoffs, “Wasn’t the hardest thing to find even with the bastard’s status. Still, you should be careful kiddo. We already know he’s willing to get rid of those in his way.”

“I’m counting on it.”
He laughs, “You’re a Hartford alright, Mary through and through.” Stuart’s voice wistful at the end so Neil stays quiet, not sure how to comfort someone for whom he had a hand in killing. The silence ends when Stuart clears his throat with a gruff cough. “Call sometime, yeah? Maybe come home for the holiday. You can even bring that band of yours, see a place where real rock and roll comes from.”

Neil rolls his eyes, “I’ll try.”

Stuart rattles off the number which Neil ends up writing on the palm of his hand before saying his goodbyes and hanging up. He stares at the 10 digits scribbled in black ink on his skin and resists the urge to clench his fist over them. Throwing off the blankets, he moves toward the sliding glass door, the chilly morning air nipping at his cheeks and the faint smell of smoke filling his nose as he steps out to join Andrew, phone still clenched in his hand and palm open to dry the ink.

As always a cigarette is waiting for him unlit in Andrew’s fingers as he smokes his own. Neil takes it gratefully and waits for the flick of the lighter before he bends down to catch the flame. The first drag tastes like ash on his tongue so he opts to hold it in front of his face instead. With his other hand, he dials the number and raises the phone to his ear. It’s still early enough in the morning that it rings for several seconds before a gruff sleep thick demand fills the receiver. It’s too young to be Kengo or Tetsuji so he assumes it to be the eldest Moriyama son; Ichirou if he remembers correctly. He wonders when he had succeeded his father.

Neil ignores his demand in favor of shifting the phone to his other ear so it’s closer for Andrew to overhear. “Ichirou Moriyama.” Andrew’s eyes snap to Neil’s. “As I’m sure you’ve heard by now your favorite butcher is dead.”

Silence paired with the quiet rustlings of someone sitting up in bed. “And is this his successor speaking?”

Neil nearly scoffs, “I’m sure at one point my father expected me to be something as such but I’m afraid my mother was rather set against the idea.”

“Ah, the young Wesninski child. I did hear rumors about the butcher’s long lost son being found at last. Tell me did you escape your father’s wrath before or after he was gunned down?”

“Does it matter?”

Ichirou hums, “Perhaps if it relates to why you saw fit to track down this number and call me past business hours.”

“I called to help you and to give a warning.”

“Oh?” His voice is deadly still, “Pray tell Wesninski what do you have to warn me about.”

“Your brother.”

“Explain.”

“Unlike you, Riko is sloppy with his dealings. Just this past year alone he has caused a commotion on live television, associated himself with a known criminal, and tied himself to another by having long-term communications with him.” Neil pauses, letting the information sit in the air.

“Now I’m not stupid, I know what kind of deals you had with my father, the relationship between your family and mine, and frankly I could care less. I also know that you’re a smart enough man to burn any sign of a trail of that relationship, but can you say the same for your brother?”
Neil looks into Andrew’s eyes, drawing strength from the intensity. “The FBI already knows my father’s men managed to grab me from the concert. How long do you think it will take them to find out that Riko was also there that night as well and led them there? How long before they realize Riko is not as sane or clean as people think he is? How long before they train that same eye on you?”

Because no one would be fool enough to believe that Riko’s actions weren’t some indication of Moriyama Music’s own shady background. Riko was the face of the company and known for his deep involvement in the business even if it was only surface level in actuality. And no matter how cold the trail may be, it could always be found with enough people on it.

“And what would you have me do?” comes Ichirou’s eventual response.

“Cut all ties while you still can come out on top,” Neil shrugs boredly. “Back a winning label.”

“What like your Fox Records?” the man scoffs. “Moriyama music is worth ten times your pathetic label.”

“Maybe so, but what better way to renounce your ties with Riko than by backing his biggest competitors and most outspoken enemy?” Neil feels his father’s smile split his lips. “Frankly I don’t care who you back, but stay with Riko and your empire will fall. You along with it.”

Silence, then, “Was that a threat Mr. Wesninski?”

“No,” Neil answers seriously. “As I said earlier Mr. Moriyama, I could care less about your label and whatever shady business you had used to build it, but I did promise to ruin your brother. I figured it was only polite to give you a warning before you get caught up in the collateral. Unlike Riko, I don’t like involving others in my war.”

“I see,” he hums. “I shall take it into consideration then. And Mr. Wesninski? I suggest you learn to curb that tongue of your before it leads to enemies much more dangerous than my brother.”

“I thank you for the advice.”

“Somehow I think it will not be heeded nonetheless.”

“Good night, Mr. Moriyama.”

“And to you Mr. Wesninski. I suggest you hope not to hear from me again.”

With that, the line goes dead and Neil slumps against the railing, phone falling from his hands and clattering to the ground. His knees shake under his weight and he sinks to the ground. Andrew stares down at him, fists clenched tightly at his side and cigarette crushed into the railing.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t kill you now and spare the Moriyamas the trouble?”

“What? I think that went pretty damn well.”

“You threatened him.”

“I gave him a suggestion and a warning.” Neil sighs, “Both of which I didn’t have to do.”

“Why call him at all?” Andrew steps closer until he’s looming over him. “All you did was paint another target on your back.”

Neil shakes his head, “I wiped one off. With my father gone there is a power vacuum in his
place, one that people will be looking to fill. What better way to prove that than by killing the reason
the butcher is dead or doing the one thing he couldn’t do?”

“And throwing Riko under the bus with his brother does what?”

“It gives them a new target. I’m not the one who led the butcher to his downfall if Riko is.”

Clarity and understanding shine in those eyes. “You’re using him as a scapegoat.”

“I’m giving him his due credit.”

“And when they figure out that you’re the real key? That you spilled everything to the FBI
and your father’s circle realizes the information could only come from one source? What happens
when Ichirou finds out that it’s not his brother that led the FBI to them but you?” Andrew hedges
unconvinced.

“I didn’t lead them to Ichirou. The dealings I saw were mostly Kengo and Tetsuji. I didn’t
even know Ichirou had succeeded his father until he picked up the phone. As far as I and the FBI
know, he has nothing to tie himself to my father except his name.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

Neil doesn’t have an answer for that so he remains quiet.

“I’ve never met someone with such a fucking deathwish on something as meaningless as
revenge.”

Anger spikes through Neil. “This is not meaningless revenge. I warned Riko that if he so
much as breathed another word that I would end him. What better way than by doing it through the
thing he loves the most?”

Andrew scoffs, “So you’re doing this for spite?”

“He broke Kevin’s hand because he was jealous. He tried to defame and discredit the foxes
because they came from lives where they had to work for what they had. He brought Lola and my
father back into my life because I wouldn’t back down. He tried to break you by bringing your
fucking rapist to one of our shows.”

Andrew stares long and hard at him. “You say that as if he’s the first to try or even the
worst.”

“He fucking deserves to rot for ever touching you.” Neil spits. “His problem was with me
and he decided to attack you like a coward. You didn’t deserve to bleed for my mistakes.”

“And when do people like us ever get what we deserve, Neil?” Andrew snarls, bending
down to haul him off the ground. “What makes you think life’s fair.”

“Fuck life and fuck what it and others think we deserve. We’ve bled enough already and I
refuse to let us give another drop to it. We deserve that.” Neil growls, fingers clenching at his sides
with the need to reach out and touch and reassure. His voice goes soft. “You deserve that Andrew.”

Anger, pure unadulterated anger burns in the hazel and Neil can’t help the smirk that pulls on
his lips knowing his words pierced that carefully crafted shell.

“300 percent?” he asks because he’s a little shit sometimes.
“They haven’t invented a number high enough yet for the amount I hate you.”

“I guess I’ll just have to stick around long enough until they do then,” Neil smiles. Andrew frowns and Neil’s eyes dip to his lips. “Yes or no Andrew?”

There is no answer, just Andrew slamming their lips together and Neil closing his eyes to lose himself in the feeling.

It feels like being alive.

Nathaniel has never had a life where the future was a plausible thing. His father groomed him to be a killer in a world that taught you to look behind your back every second or someone was going to put a knife in it. Between that and the abuse and torture, it was a miracle that he lived until he was 10 under that roof. In the years after, as Chris, Stephan, Alex, or any of the others, the future consisted of the next hour or another day if he was lucky, a threat never too far behind and lurking at every corner to rip it from him. Neil Josten has a future, one with a home, friends, and family, and a career that he loves.

But the thing is that Neil has never lived a life with a future and doesn’t know where to begin with having one. The foxes help; Nicky slowly starts commandeering his room, filling the empty spaces of his walls with photographs and shelves for an assortment of knick-knacks Nicky had acquired for him over the months but never knew how to give. Kevin gifts him a new journal with hundreds of blank pages to fill and a silent promise of getting back to work. Matt and the other start coming by more often, much to the displeasure of the Minyards and Kevin (Nicky adores having more people to entertain) opting to spend time with Neil on the living room couches or surrounded in the kitchen they commandeer to make some recipe Renee has come across. On the days they attempt sweets, Andrew would quietly slip in with them, a silent observer at Neil’s side whom he’d slide his portion to. Neil liked those days the best.

Today was one of those nights where the foxes had come in claiming they were going to make an authentic Mexican dinner, which of course drew Nicky in who bullied his way into the head chef position and guided the rest of them on how to “properly” do it. They are around the table having just finished eating with their bellies full and bodies lazy as they remain seated around the table. Conversation is traded back and forth easily, not a single sign of the awkwardness that used to plague their conversations in the beginning months of their partnership. They talk of vacations for the upcoming break Wymack is forcing them all on, new ideas for a future collaboration between the two bands, and general tidbits from their day. Neil sits back, content to let it wash over him, throwing in a comment here and there when prompted but otherwise silent and calm. Eventually, he slips away for some air on the back porch, sitting on the bench swing with his feet kicked up and slowly rocking back and forth. He wonders if this is what peace looks like.

It feels like it, like everything has finally found its place and is calm. It’s surreal, almost like it’s a dream he will wake up from the second he blinks. Sometimes he wonders if he actually died in that basement and this was his idea of heaven. The back door opens and he half expects it to be Andrew with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, but instead, it’s Matt’s towering figure with a wide grin and two bottles of coke in either hand.

“Up for some company?”
Neil offers him a small smile of his own. “Of course.”

Matt plops down on the swing next to him, offering a bottle that Neil accepts. For a while they just rock back and forth, letting the night air rustle their hair and the faint hum of music floating in from next door mixing in with the buzz of insects.

“This is nice,” Matt echoes Neil’s exact thought, sitting back and bringing the bottle to his lips. “Night like this, together with the foxes. I don’t know why we didn’t do them more often.”

Neil snorts, “Because you all couldn’t stand each other?”

“I like to think that it was because we didn’t understand each other,” Matt hums, “At least not until someone showed us differently.”

Matt nudges his shoulder playfully and Neil huffs. “All I did was force you into a karaoke night together and rope you all into a vendetta show against Riko.”

“Yeah okay, but first off that was an awesome show and secondly you gave us a common ground.”

Neil thinks the foxes would have eventually gotten there on their own with or without him. The only reason it happened as quickly as it did is that he was on a time crunch. “You all would have been just fine.”

“We will be now,” Matt smiles, “And you gotta stop using that word, man. Because like you don’t know what it means.”

Neil shrugs, “I think I do now.”

Matt raises his bottle in a toast, “That I’ll take.” Neil clinks his bottle to his and they both take a small sip.

Neil moves to cradle his in his lap when Matt turns to face him a little more head-on. “How are things though? Like all things considered. I noticed you spacing out during dinner. Is your medication still messing with your head?”

“No,” Neil shakes his head, “Just a bit caught up in some thoughts.”

“Penny for them?”

“I don’t know, I’m happy I guess? This doesn’t feel real, that I get to keep you, the foxes, EXY, any of it. Sometimes I wonder if I even deserve it.”

“You do,” Matt says fiercely.

Neil smiles, “Thanks. I guess I’m still learning what it means to have a family that isn’t trying to kill me or pulling me across the world. It’s new.”

“You’ll always have us to help you, you know. Nicky, Kevin and Aaron as well.” Neil scoffs. Somehow he thinks Aaron wouldn’t be too happy to know that he was included in that list. “And Andrew, of course.”

Neil looks up at Matt confused, but the man just smiles at him.

“What you think things are still a secret about the two of you? After that display in the hospital? Or when we all saw Andrew literally attack Kevin to get the information he knew about
you missing?” he snorts, “Allison says thanks for making her richer by the way. She said she’ll take you out shopping with some of the winnings.”

Neil scrunches his face. “Tell her that she can just keep it for herself.”

“No can do dude. She said it was non-negotiable and that if you tried to get out of it she would just do it alone. Bright colors.”

Suddenly his father’s basement was looking a little more appealing. Maybe this was actually hell instead.

“So Andrew, huh?” Matt segues awkwardly. “Is it safe to assume that he was the one you were talking about all those months ago?”

Neil feels his face heat. “Yeah.”

“I’m happy for you,” Matt knocks their shoulders, “You guys fit together. He obviously makes you happy and well he’s different when you’re around. I don’t think we would have made it through the door if we tried this back before you.” He shudders. “Still scary as fuck though. But like to everyone but you, then he’s a little softer I think. It’s a little weird if I’m honest.”

Neil laughs, “He’s not all that bad once you get past his whole tough persona. Truthfully he’s made up of 90% sugar and ice cream and the other 10% dry sarcastic remarks to hide how much he cares.”

“I’m just going to have to trust you on that one. I still have a few scars from those knives of his.” Matt chuckles, “But you’re happy right? He treats you right?”

Neil thinks of the gentle way Andrew’s hands tape up his bandages before a shower, the soft caress of fingertips in his hair to rub in the shampoo, and the kisses pressed to the scars on his body like he wants to erase them with his lips.

“Yeah,” he whispers softly, “I’m happy.”

Matt smiles and sits back again, pushing the swing in a gentle motion once more. Neil fidgets, a question bubbling on his tongue but unsure of how to ask. “Matt?”

“Yes buddy?”

“Is that how you feel about Dan?”

Matt smiles a knowing smile. “Yes. Some days she makes me so happy that I’m not sure how I was ever happy without her. Like I could be having the best day ever and then I would see her and then it’s just better. In the highs and lows, she just makes everything better.” Matt tilts his head. “Is that how Andrew makes you feel?”

“Sort of,” Neil answers honestly. “It’s more like that he can see every ugly part of me and my past and just shrugs like it doesn’t matter. Like he can see me and make me feel real instead of the lies my mother and father made me.”

Matt thinks, “Do you love him?”

Before Neil can open his mouth to say what he doesn’t know (the truth still too new and confusing to say aloud but a lie tasting bitter on his tongue) a door slams closed above them, making both men jump and Neil’s pulse skyrocket. Because he knew the sound of that door; it was the twin
of his own. His stomach drops as he wonders just how much of their conversation Andrew had overheard. Though a part of him knew the answer already. **Everything.**

Neil’s suspicions are confirmed when Andrew slowly starts receding after that night. It begins with not showing up on the balcony after everyone had left, despite Neil waiting out there for hours. Then it’s Andrew mysteriously disappearing in the mornings without a word to anyone, leaving Neil to figure out showering on his own. Then he wouldn’t speak a word to him, let alone acknowledge his existence when they were alone in a room. He was beginning to panic, not sure how to fix it this time. It’s not like he could unsay the words; even if they were never intended for him to hear, it doesn’t make them any less true nor that Neil would take them back. He told Matt the truth, he just wishes it didn’t mean losing Andrew for it.

Three days pass like this and Neil is wondering if he should just suck up his feeling and apologize to Andrew, to explain that just because he felt a certain way didn’t mean he expected anything more than what Andrew would give him. He practiced the speech over and over again until the words lose the desperate edge to them and he can say it without feeling like his chest will cave in once they leave his mouth. He decided to tell him that night, climbing the stairs to knock on his door. Unfortunately, he runs into Aaron first.

He stops Neil at the foot of the stairs, the unbalance in height making him tall enough to stare down at Neil for once. Neil tries to sidestep past him, thinking the man would ignore him like he had been doing, but he shifts to block his path.

“Not now, Aaron,” Neil sighs.

“Don’t act all tough just because you got your way. He did me more of a favor than you anyways.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about nor do I care.” Neil tries to moves past him again.

Aaron blocks him. “Oh fuck off with the innocent bullshit. We all know how much of a liar you really are.”

“Look,” Neil moves up a step so they are at least level with each other. “I don’t know what kind of delusional shit you’ve concocted this time but if you do not move I will make you and this time it won’t end in my blood. Damn your deal with Andrew.”

Aaron blinks, “Deal? Shit, you really don’t know do you?” A bark of laughter rips from his chest as he shoulders past Neil and continues down the steps. “Andrew broke our deal a month ago. Looks like we’re both free men now.”

Neil is left gaping at him as he continues out the door, mind racing a million miles. Suddenly Andrew’s words make a whole lot more sense when he told Neil that he “took care” of his brother. Neil had just assumed he probably threatened him into obeying, not broke their deal entirely. Somedays, Neil thought that deal was the only thing holding the twins together and that without it they would drift apart where neither of them could reach. But it had been broken and still they remain orbited around the other even if at a slightly bigger ring. And what did Aaron mean by Neil getting his way? What does their broken deal have anything to do with him?

He needed to find Andrew. Climbing the stair two at a time, he dashes to his door, of course
closed like it has always been. Tapping three quick knocks on the wood, he shifts from foot to foot waiting for an answer. He gets silence. Another knock and it’s the same. Pressing an ear to the door rewards him with nothing either, meaning either he was really ignoring Neil or he wasn’t in there. He pulls out his phone (model # 3 this time) and types a quick text asking where he is. Usually, he gets no response, but today one word glares back at him a second later. Studio.

At first, Neil checked the roof, expecting to find him sitting on the ledge with smoke trailing from his lips and eyes scanning the horizon. He finds nothing but empty skies and gravel. His next thought is the practice room with the drums, but that too is empty. Circling back to the lounge (also empty) he’s starting to think that perhaps Andrew had left despite having to know that Neil was on his way. Then he thinks of the one place Andrew could be that he hadn’t checked.

At the very end of the hall lies a practice room Neil has only ever been in a handful of times with Dan or Nicky for some vocal training. It was set up as a solo booth much like the one he and Kevin used but instead of a microphone setup and stool this one holds a single grand piano. Neil pushes open the door and sure enough, Andrew is seated on the bench, the cover flipped up and his eyes trained hard on the ivory keys. There are a million things Neil wants to ask in that moment, about Aaron, about why he was ignoring him, about why here and now in front of the instrument that held so many memories. Neil asks none of them as he silently closes the door and slides onto the bench next to him. The quietness of the room settles over them like a familiar blanket but Andrew’s hands never rise to touch the keys.

“I talked to Aaron today,” Neil starts, willing to take that first step. “He told me you broke your deal; Blames it on me like always.”

Andrew doesn’t look up.


“Why does your brother think your deal ended because of me?”

“Because it did,” comes the bored reply.

“Andrew.”

“Are you taking a turn?” He turns to look at Neil now.

“Must I?” Andrew says nothing. “Fine. Yes. How am I at fault of your deal ending?”

“Because my brother seems to think that you’re as much of a violation of our deal as his incessant whining is.”

“Was it?”

“I suppose,” Andrew shrugs. “If you took it in the most base literal sense. I said it would be the two of us for as long as the deal held.” His eye met Neil’s. “You complicated that.”

“Me but not Kevin?” Neil swallows, trying to keep his voice even as his mind whirls at the
implications. “Why?”

“Not your turn.”

Neil shuts his mouth and waits patiently, knowing rushing Andrew would get him nowhere. Instead, he runs a finger over the keys lightly. He never learned to play, seeming too complicated when he was a child and already content with the guitar and microphone later on.

Eventually, Andrew takes his turn. “What was going to be your answer to Matt’s question?”

“You heard.”

“If you wanted a private conversation you should have done it in a place where people couldn’t listen.”

“Or you could just not eavesdrop.”

Andrew levels him with a glare. “Well?”

“Well what, Andrew?” Neil sighs, “What do you want me to say?”

“The truth,” the words are a hit Neil can’t even muster a flinch to.

“Don’t ask for truths you don’t want to hear,” Neil softly answers. “Especially ones you already know the answer to.”

Andrew remains silent and looks at the keys.

“Why are we here Andrew? Why this room?” Neil changes the subject, giving Andrew an out.

He can see the muscles in his jaw working as he clenches and unclenches his teeth and hands at his sides. Eventually, that burning gaze turns back on Neil. “I want to do something. Yes or no?”

“The answer is always yes,” Neil reminds him.

Anger burns in hazel but it’s gone a second later, replaced with an intensity that Neil doesn’t dare name. Andrew’s hands rise to the keys. The melody is quiet and soft as if Andrew is relearning the keys and music they create like a too painful memory of a time loved and cherished. It’s no more than a couple of keys but Neil watches with captivity and focus as if his hands were flying over them.

Andrew had once told him of the connection he shared with the piano, how the instrument was so closely tied to the life he almost broke himself over with Cass. He also inaudibly told Neil of the pain it still held for him with the way he never touched or mentioned the instrument and warned Neil away from ever touching the songs associated with it in his journal. Because the piano would always mean something more; it would mean vulnerability. Neil doesn’t know what it means that he is baring that vulnerability to him now (he does but he doesn’t want to hope. He couldn’t hope.)

And then Andrew opens his mouth to sing and Neil can’t contain that hope anymore. It floods his chest and kick starts his lungs while making the whole world dizzy and light.

_I found it where it wasn’t supposed to be_

_Right in front of me_
He sings the word it like it means something more, a something disguised as a nothing that he desperately wishes wasn’t true. Because Andrew Joseph Minyard wasn’t supposed to feel like Neil Josten wasn’t supposed to be real. But he did and he was. As much as neither of them knew what to do with that, it didn’t change the terrifying and thrilling truth of what burns between the two of them and how Neil feels about it. Of how Andrew shares those feeling.

Neil listens to the soft lilt of Andrew’s voice and even softer melody of the piano dancing in the air around them and waits. The song hits a fall and swells again and this time Neil lets his voice slowly melt with Andrew’s in the final chorus. When his voice drops away, Neil leans in close to whisper it into his ear.

And I found love where it wasn’t supposed to be

Right in front of me

Talk some sense to me

The piano trickles off and Neil gently turns Andrew’s face to his, brushing their foreheads together and sliding his nose next to his own.

“Yes or no?” He breathes against Andrew’s lips.

“Yes,” Andrew breathes right back and Neil leans in to press their lips together.

It’s a feather-like touch and tender in a way neither of them knew they could be but scorching and deep as if they were pressed together to share the very air from their lungs. Hands come to hold necks and cradle cheeks until Neil wasn’t sure where one of them ended and the other began. He wasn’t sure he cared.

The kiss tasted like a promise of time and a future. Neil didn’t think anything tasted sweeter.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Six months pass and Neil’s father and empire are buried with as little fanfare as possible. News of the Butcher’s demise had flooded every major news outlet but with the FBI’s tight-lippedness over his identity and how they finally managed to take him down via a “confidant,” Neil was able to remain away from the spotlight. Sure, they needed an explanation for his sudden shift in appearance and scars that littered his arms and face, but most of it could be explained away with the mob attack on the stage that many of the foxes had been injured in. It helped that no one spoke out otherwise and that Neil was the first one to be caught up in the break of the crowd. The official story is that he was knocked off the stage and fell into various electrical equipment responsible for the light show.

They explained away the burns even if his were a little too circular and methodical to ever be an accident, but Neil long since knew that people saw what they wanted to anyways. He had wanted to say it was a skiing accident, but neither Kevin or Wymack were very amused by that suggestion. Turns out that it didn’t really matter what their story was because it was quickly overshadowed with the news of Riko’s apparent suicide a couple of months later after his label cut him for slander and public misconduct. Neil doesn’t know how real that suicide may or may not be, nor does he want to know. The night the news breaks, Kevin spiraled on a bender and Neil smoked a pack of cigarettes by himself on the balcony. It felt like a grim satisfaction knowing Riko couldn’t hurt his family anymore despite darkening his soul in a way he knew would make his father proud. It took one look at Andrew’s calm face as he smoked at his side to decided that it was worth it anyway.

Of course, the aftermath of Riko’s death shook them almost as hard as the actual death, the infamous Ravens disbanding with the fall of their “king” and Jean joining Fox Records as an alternative musician much to Kevin’s joy and Andrew’s annoyance. The biggest change, however, was the monetary investment from one Ichirou Moriyama who has left his father’s company to seek a “smarter” investment in light of the company’s “willingness to abide by his brother’s actions.” Neil tried very hard not to smirk at the press conference when it aired on TV. From the way Andrew shot him a glare, he doesn't think he did a very good job.

With more money, Fox Records suddenly found the means to start expanding out at a monumental speed, signing new and upcoming artists and managers to help foster and grow the talent (though Wymack still oversaw both Palmetto and EXY fulltime) and EXY was in the middle of planning a international tour in Europe to expand their market and give Nicky some much needed time with his fiancee. Last Neil heard they were planning to have the wedding when they made it over to Berlin.

As for Neil, his hands and fingers recovered well enough for him to hold a guitar even if they still got stiff and ached after a few hours. His guitar had survived the mob with little more than a couple of scratches on its surface that Neil thought mirrored the scars on his cheek. He liked to run his fingers over them when he was lost in thought, grounding him in the present when his mind wanted to trap him in the past. Andrew pulled his hand away and replaced it with one at his neck every time he caught him doing it.

Speaking of Andrew, despite both of them discovering and admitting how they felt about each other, neither said anything more about the subject. To everyone else, their “nothing” was odd, something they couldn’t understand or comprehend but worked just as well for them. Maybe one day
they will be okay enough to say the words out loud for the world to hear but there was no real rush. Neil heard it in every touch or kiss or the soft yes or no Andrew would still ask him, even if it was becoming less and less. They had time.

“Hey junkie,” Neil looks up from his spot on the couch, guitar sprawled on his lap and journal balanced on an arm, at Andrew who hovers above him with a small package. “Mail.”

He drops it unceremoniously in Neil’s lap and waits for Neil to rip it open. Rolling his eyes, Neil tears an end off and upends the package until a cd slides out and into his hand. Looking down, he sees his own face staring back at him, or well what he knows to be his own face.

Kevin insisted that Neil feature on the new cover since it was to be his debut and the album people will most remember him from (which he thinks is stupid, but whatever) and bullied Neil into a photo shoot that took way too long and left his face sticky with too much makeup. He hated it and of course, because he did, it took only that much longer for the photographer to pick a photo he liked. The final product, and the one currently sitting in his hands, is the one Andrew intervened on, giving Neil a drag of his cigarette and tell him to blow. Smoke billowed from his lips in a steady stream, curling to obscure his face slightly from the camera lens as his head leaned against the wall in a relief of comfortability. The photographer captured the picture not a second later.

The title of the album rests dead center of the photo, a single word Neil had gotten to choose typed out in a simple font: Nothing. Funny how a single word could come to mean so much in about a year. How it could mean, something, nothing and everything all at once.

He flips the case over to see several of his songs listed alongside a few of EXY’s original hits that he had redone with Nicky. The last song on the album was Andrew’s piano piece he had sung for Neil in the studio. He titled it I found. Neil’s finger brushes over the track and he looks up at Andrew, blinding smile already settled on his face like it belongs there. Andrew pushes it away but Neil only snuggles into the touch.

“Infinity,” Andrew drawls but doesn’t remove his hand.

Neil pushes himself up, so their lips are lined. “Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit it's done. I only needed to write 15k for this fic and yet here we are 140k words later with a giant ass plot, a shit ton of songs, and months of crying and screaming and typing until I thought my fingers would fall off and we're here. Again, holy shit.

Thank you again to everyone who had a hand in this fic from my amazing betas to the team running the AFTG Big Bang. If you haven't already go check out the rest of the fics put out because everyone is so talented and kind and produced such amazing works that I'm honored that I could be among them! And Again a huge huge thank you to Ram for making my dream come true and giving me my first ever fanart for one of my stories!!

Okay, it's late, I'm going to bed. Come yell at me on tumblr @TheBashfulPoet. You can
scream about the fic, check out the *instagram edits* I've made for this fic (when avoiding it) or even give some prompts!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!