Summary

Logan's dealing, okay? No matter what his best friend Virgil says, he doesn't have OCD, he doesn't have a problem, he's fine. The most important thing in his life is passing his classes, even if it kills him.

After being dragged along to help Virgil on his first date, Logan meets Patton. And things change.

Notes

please note that this fic deals quite a lot with obsessive compulsive disorder. while there are no blatant depictions of self-harm, there is behaviour that is not exactly healthy and results in some blood. additionally, there are multiple descriptions of panic attacks. please take care of yourself if any of these things might be upsetting for you!

and please note that these warnings listed apply to the entire fic.
Chapter 1

Virgil was painting Logan's nails a shimmering pearl white. His own were already black, still damp.

“I don’t know.” Virgil said, dipping the tiny brush with care, and holding Logan’s hand against his ripped jeans to steady his only slightly trembling hands. “I mean, I’m flattered. But I don’t know.”

Logan was multitasking. He was working through flash cards on his phone, flicking with his already painted left hand, careful not to smudge, and listening to Virgil’s woes as he got a free manicure. Activities involving his hands calmed Virgil down. Logan was used to it — ever since they’d been made roommates in their freshman year of university.

Now they were both seniors, and they’d continued to room together, getting an apartment and even a cat. The cat was Virgil’s, of course, but Logan was surprised how fond he was of the thing.

(The cat was solid black with very long fur, and wide green eyes. His name was Stump.

“Because of his stumpy legs?” Logan had asked, holding out the fat thing at arm's length, the cat not caring at all and hanging limply.

“Patrick Stump.” Virgil replied.

Logan appraised the cat, named after the lead singer of his favourite band. “Acceptable.” He'd decided.)

“What’s holding you back?” Logan asked, flicking through another flash card, mentally reciting the answer, and flipping it to see he was correct.

Virgil gave a bitter laugh. “What isn’t? It’s stupid. I’m not going to go.”

“Do you like him?” Logan knew Virgil too well to let him give up that easily.

Virgil stuck out his tongue in focus as he did the last swipe on Logan’s pinky finger. He avoided answering for a minute while he capped the tiny bottle. He ventured at last, “He’s out of my league.”

Logan tsked, doing another flashcard. “That’s not what I asked. And the hypothetical problem posed by being quote-unquote ‘out of someone’s league’ is only a hurdle in the initial stages of gaining attention. You already have his attention. He’s asked you out — obviously he does not agree with that assessment of your character.”

Another flashcard. Virgil watched him flick through them, fidgeting. Mouth twisted down. After a moment, he said, “I like him. I don’t know. He’s funny. He makes me laugh. And he’s challenging. Doesn’t just let things happen. Right? I don’t know. We’ve only been in the same class for like a month. I thought he was annoying at first. Except maybe I like annoying.”

Logan snorted. Virgil picked anxiously at the skin around his nails, and Logan said, “Don’t ruin your hard work. Do you still have any thread?”

Virgil snapped his fingers, and hopped up to get it, blowing on his nails as he went. When he returned, Logan stuck out his hand and Virgil tied the thread to his index finger, using him as an anchor to begin a complicated braid with black embroidery thread.

Logan flicked a flashcard, guessed wrong in his head and felt a stab in his chest. Cursing himself for
a second, he tried to find his head again. “So you like him and he likes you. He has asked you out. You said yes, in a panic, maybe, but still yes. Now that he has offered to pick the time and place, you are figuratively chickening out. For what reason? The logic doesn’t follow.”

Virgil sighed. “Do you remember the last date you went on?”

“Of course.” Logan said. “We had pizza. He told me halfway through that I was too much for him.”

Virgil winced. “Jesus. What an asshole. No, that’s not what I meant. The part where you meet up, who meets who? What if I’m late? What if he’s late? And what do we talk about? Do we kiss or keep it casual? Do I have to wear something? Spend money? Is he expecting something from me? What if I don’t behave how I behave in class and he doesn’t really like me? What if—“

“Virgil.” Logan interrupted gently. Virgil snapped his mouth shut with a click and focused on the braid with burning red ears. “I understand that the unknown is frightening. Is there something you could do on the first date that would be more familiar?”

Virgil blinked a couple times, then said, “I hadn’t considered that. Like having the home field advantage... but still, I don’t know how to behave the moment I’m on a date. I feel like dating-Virgil is a completely different person than normal-Virgil. And I don’t like feeling like I’m... pretending. That I’m offering someone who isn’t me. That later they’ll be disappointed by the reality of me. Or that the pretend-person I am isn’t good enough.”

Logan hummed, flicking a card, getting another stab in his chest when it was wrong once again. He tried to focus. “Then you would need a behavioural home field advantage as well.”

Virgil’s fingers stopped braiding abruptly. “L, you’re a genius.”

“Due to the numerous types of intelligence, any form of measurement is inherently flawed.”

“Just using it as an expression — I meant that’s perfect. Something to make me behave normally, or better yet, someone.”

Logan finally looked up from his flashcards. “You want me to come with you.”

Virgil nodded quickly, dark bangs hanging in his earnest eyes. “It’s works, L. If you’re there I won’t be half as anxious. Please?”

“If you wish to make a good impression on your date, I do not believe dragging along your stuffy roommate is a good choice.” Logan said, adjusting his glasses.

“You’re not stuffy— who called you stuffy? But maybe then I could ask if he has a friend or something so you’re not just third wheeling.”

Logan chose not to address the first half of that statement. “Like a double date.” He said, skeptical.

“Yeah. When was your last date with that asshole, anyway, like a year ago? Come on, it’ll be awful, but it’ll be awful together.”

Logan appraised his best friend and roommate. “If I say no, you'll end up bailing, won't you?”

Virgil chewed on his lip. “Probably. Too many frightening variables.”

"Alright. Only as friends though, not a double date. If Roman agrees, I will come. "

Virgil made a new, agonized face. "Oh God, how do I ask that?"
Logan put his flashcards down and together they composed a text. Virgil insisted on being as honest as he could about his reasoning, and the end result looked like this:

**hey roman! thanks for inviting me out again. i'm gonna be honest -- first dates scare the shit out of me. i was wondering if you might want to come to the board game cafe near campus instead, and we could bring a friend each and play some games together. just to take the pressure off? sorry to be a pain.**

"You should erase the last line, you are not a pain for wanting to feel comfortable." Logan said.

"Too late." Virgil hit send. "It's gone. Whelp. I'm gonna go throw myself off the roof now."

"No, you won't do that." Logan grabbed his wrist. "If he's not okay with accommodating your anxiety, then he is definitely not someone you want to date."

"But we're still going to be in the same class for the rest of the semester and it's going to be super awkward and oh my God I'm going to have to drop the class."

"Please stop catastrophizing, he hasn't even read the message yet. We will burn that bridge when we get to it."

"Catastrophizing is my middle name. Shit, he just read it. What if he leaves me on read? What if he--"

"He's typing."

"Shit."

Virgil stood up and began to pace. Logan sighed, and picked up the phone. After a few seconds, the message appeared, and he read it out loud: "Hey Virgil with three exclamation marks. I've always wanted to try a board game cafe, and so has my best friend Patton, so this is perfect, one hundred emoji, clapping emoji, okay-hand emoji, I don't mind at all, I'm just happy you still want to hang out. No pressure, thumbs up emoji, prayer emoji."

"Oh my God." Virgil stood in the middle of the room, ears red, both hands covering his face.

"Should I reply?" Logan asked, thumbs poised.

"No, I need a minute."

"Are you experiencing a panic attack?"

"No. Well, no. I'm freaking out. Kind of. He's sweet. And now I actually have to go. Ah, fuck."

Logan stood up and took Virgil's hands away from his face, pressing his thumbs gently into the pulse points on his wrists. "I will be there."

Virgil took a huge, exaggerated breath. It shuddered. "Okay. Okay. Where's Stump?"

They found the cat laying luxuriously on top of the fridge. Virgil took a picture, and wrote on it with his phone, 'tomorrow at one?'

"Why did you reply with the cat?" Logan asked, curious.

"Because it takes the pressure off. Now he can say, cute cat, and it's not all formal and stuff." Virgil clicked at his phone, ignoring the tremor in his fingers. After a moment, Roman replied, 'we'll be
there. what a cute cat!!!'

"Huh." Logan said, and eyed the cat. Stump yawned at him.

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Virgil fretted about what to wear. Logan was reading his textbook, offering sensible advice that Virgil fretted over as well. He tried ten different outfits, worried about being too casual or too formal.

"I don't want him to think I'm not taking him seriously." Virgil chewed at the skin on his thumb. "But I also don't want him to think that I'm like super eager or serious or arrgghhh--"

Logan snapped his book shut and got up. "Let's trade. You choose my outfit, I will choose yours. Sound good?"

Virgil opened his mouth to complain, realized the opportunity to dress Logan in whatever he wanted, and shut it again with a nod.

Logan chose the first outfit Virgil had offered -- the most sensible one. Black converse, his black ripped jeans, an 'I Prevail' band t-shirt underneath a dark jean jacket. The venue did not require something more formal, it showed Virgil's personality including a band he liked, and it was comfortable.

"You're not wearing a tie." Virgil said over his shoulder, digging through Logan's closet with a critical eye.

Logan sighed. "I've told you a hundred times before, if you dress professionally in an academic setting it improves how your teachers perceive you. But... this is only a board game cafe, I suppose."

"No collared shirt either." Virgil managed to find a blue Henley, made an appreciative face at it, and threw it at Logan. "Grab those good dark jeans you have and borrow my Vans."

"I'm not wearing your Vans."

"Yes, you are, or else I'm going to model ten more outfits at you before we go and you won't be able to finish reading that chapter."

Logan borrowed his Vans.

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Logan was trying fairly hard to not have any expectations. Virgil was anxious enough for the both of them, and while Logan had his own problems, enduring a social interaction wasn’t big on his ‘worried’ list. It was just a chunk of time he needed to get through before he could return to studying.

He’d seen photos of Roman Prince before, back at the beginning of the semester when they stalked his Instagram. He looked the exact same in person — sparkling eyes, a swoop of dirty blonde hair, a charming idle smile with perfect straight white teeth, wearing an outfit that was fashionable and cool. But the way Roman tugged on the end of his sleeve made Logan think he’d spent just as long modelling outfits to get there.

“I can’t do this.” Virgil squeaked, tensing up beside him, gripping Logan’s arm with bruising fingers. Rigid, unable to get closer to where Roman and his friend were waiting outside the board game cafe, chatting.
As much as Logan wanted to let him escape so he could return to studying, it would mean an evening of Virgil angisting over having ditched. He said, neutral, “If it sucks I can fake an emergency.”

“No, it's fine. It's fine. Okay. Okay. You go first.”

Logan didn’t see the logic behind that, because he didn’t know Roman, and Virgil did. But he lifted his chin and strode forward, using the grip Virgil had on his arm already to drag him along with him.

Roman turned and spotted their approach, saving Logan from getting their attention. He lit up like he’d spotted a parade. “Virgil!”

“Hi Roman.” Virgil said, cringing when his voice rasped, ears already gone red.

If Roman noticed, he didn’t say. Instead he turned to Logan. “You must be Logan, I’ve heard so much about you.”

“And I’ve heard so much about you.” Logan said.

Virgil made a noise like he was dying. Logan amended, “Virgil has been enjoying the debates in your mythology class, and I’ve enjoyed hearing about them.”

“Glad to hear it.” Roman winked, and wheeled back to grab his friend by the shoulders and present him with a flourish. “And this is my best friend Patton. We go way back.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” Patton said, and he really sounded like he meant it. He was short, with rounded glasses embedded with rhinestones, and curly hair. He had a bright smile.

“You too.” Virgil said, and Logan inclined his head in agreement.

Roman gestured grandly towards the cafe door. “Shall we?”

Virgil rolled his eyes at the dramatics, and pushed past him to get inside. Roman beamed, chasing after him.

Logan caught the door and offered it open for Patton, because he was raised to be polite. He earned a full force smile with dimples that shone from Patton, and they slid inside and into the lineup where Roman and Virgil were already bickering about coffee choices. Virgil’s hands shook, but his shoulders had relaxed. The hardest part was over.

“Have you ever been here before?” Patton asked him, head swivelling as he looked around at the tasteful decor and bookshelf stuffed with games.

“Yes.” Logan replied. “Virgil likes the coffee and he convinced me to try it since they have aesthetically pleasing chess boards.”

“Ooh, like with the novelty figurines?”

“Precisely. There is a Harry Potter set that Virgil is quite fond of.”

“I’d love to try that sometime.” Patton said, hopping on his heels in idle excitement. The line moved up, and they followed, as Virgil pushed Roman’s arm and said something in a scathing tone that made Roman laugh.

“Are you attending the university?” Logan asked, because his immediate fall back was academia during lulls in conversation.
Patton nodded eagerly. “I’m in pre-vet! It’s a lot of work to get into the vet program, though, and I’m starting to get worried I won’t have the grades for it. I might end up being a vet tech instead. Which isn’t bad! Just... not what I’d always dreamt.” Patton trailed off a little, then snapped out of it and smiled huge. “Are you attending?”

“Yes.” Logan replied. “I am a business major.”

“Oh, that’s cool!” Patton beamed. “Do you enjoy it?”

Logan blinked. Enjoy was not the word he would use. It was a necessary step in his life. “I— the classes can be very interesting.” They could be, but they often weren’t. He ventured uncertainly, “Do you enjoy pre-vet?”

“Definitely.” Patton said, nodding fast. “I’ve really enjoyed the experience so far. Even if I don’t make the vet program, I’ve had a lot of fun and learnt so much.”

Logan didn’t quite know what to say to that. Luckily, they reached the front of the line. Roman had ordered a ridiculous frap-equivalent, and Virgil a cappuccino. Logan asked for a black coffee, and Patton a white hot chocolate.

"What game do you guys want to play?" Virgil asked, when they all had their drinks.

"Doesn't matter to me!" Patton said. Logan nodded in agreement.

"Jenga it is." Roman said, flouncing over to the bookcase and picking it off.

The four picked a table, and they all began pile the little wooden blocks. Logan tried his hardest not to be too obsessive about the shape, but he was still the last one touching to smooth the sides into perfect order.

"I like your nails." Patton complimented, half-reaching for Logan's hand on the blocks.

"Thank you." Logan replied automatically, ingrained politeness making it instinctive, and immediately deflected to, "Virgil painted them for me."

"I like how you make it sound like it was a thing you wanted and not that I stormed in your room, grabbed your hand, and started painting." Virgil snorted, and gave a wry smile.

"You did a wonderful job." Patton said, regardless, and nodded at Virgil's hands. "On yours too. What kind of polish do you have?"

"Uh," Virgil inspected his nails. "No idea. I got them from my sister."

"You have a sister? Is she just as wrong about Greek Mythology as you are?" Roman asked, grinning.

Virgil rolled his eyes. "I'm not wrong, you're the one with very wild interpretations of the myths. Our teacher hates us." He said the last part in a confiding tone to Patton.

"Most teachers do hate Roman." Patton nodded mock-sagely, patting Roman's hand on the table.

"Hey!" Roman said, pretending to be offended for only a moment before winking. "They just can't handle the amount of creativity I bring to my schoolwork. Why hand in a mere essay when I can hand in the Mona Lisa?"

"It's the teacher's fault for having specifications that they expect the students to abide by." Patton
Logan bit his tongue, because he knew they were joking. He knew they were joking and they did not need him to make some stuffy rebuttal about the importance of the syllabus and assignment guidelines. All the scorn he’d ever gotten for being a boring, funless know-it-all rang in his head, and sitting across from these nice people he didn’t want to give a bad first impression.

He suddenly understood Virgil’s anxiety about this particular situation more. Because while he could hold his tongue now, eventually they would see him for the loser he was, and at that point the two new friends he made would not like the real person he was. He’d been so adamant that Virgil act as he normally did, and he was neglecting to follow that advice for himself -- the exception being, of course, that Virgil was truly a great person to be friends with, and Logan was not.

Roman volunteered to play first, drawing a block from the middle, and they went clockwise. Logan watched the structure carefully, looking for the optimal piece with the least weight bearing, and took his turn promptly and silently. He was evidently being too quiet, for Virgil nudged his knee under the table.

Logan merely nudged his knee back in return. Maybe this whole thing was a mistake. He should've been studying.

Virgil and Roman rehashed an argument about Orpheus and Eurydice for the group’s amusement, and the tower of Jenga became increasingly precarious as the blocks were plucked from the middle, until most blocks were one-to-one and teetering. Logan had run out of carefully chosen safe blocks and was forced to tap ones out in dangerous places.

Roman was the one to knock it over, during Patton’s turn, due to a particularly wide hand gesture during his story. Tiny wood blocks went flying everywhere and Patton immediately burst into giggles.

"Sorry Pat." Roman said, hand still hanging in the air.

"No harm done." Patton said breezily, reaching over to pick a couple pieces off the floor.

"Except that you lose." Virgil said to Roman, raising his eyebrows.

"A Prince never loses." Roman replied.

"So what would you call this?" Virgil gestured to the fallen structure.

"A casualty of war." Roman said immediately.

Virgil laughed.

They played Jenga again despite the destruction. Logan tried not to look at the clock, to think about what he was wasting by playing, physically tried to force himself to enjoy himself, but there was an itching underneath his skin. Discontent in a physical way, static fuzz. He’d studied for two hours today. Rounded to two, should he count breaks? If he was to keep his schedule, he needed at least four, and if they were here for most of the afternoon --

"Hey L." Virgil cut over his thoughts. "It's your turn."

Logan took his turn, keeping his face as blank as possible to keep any thoughts from showing on his expression. He pulled a piece, but his brain had shifted.
Who else would have touched this Jenga set? It was a public place, it could've been used by anyone. His hands felt dirty, coated in grime, and he was extremely aware of having touched his own face. Damn.

When they traded games, switching over to Cards Against Humanity, Logan fled to the bathroom and washed his hands, once, then a second time, only precautionary.

So maybe he had... some obsessive tendencies. It wasn't like, debilitating or anything. He didn't stand in doorways and tap the doorknob or anything. He just needed to wash his hands so that he didn't get sick and therefore miss a test. It was completely reasonable.

After he washed his hands, a weight lifted off his chest, and he was in a better mood for the next game, even chuckling at some of the terrible jokes created by the combinations of cards.

They finished around four o'clock, and Virgil decided he was going to continue on with Roman window shopping down the street.

"If you don't mind, I should return to my studies." Logan said.

"All good. I'll see you later." Virgil said, giving a smile that told Logan he was genuine.

Patton sighed. "I should head out too. I've got a shift in about an hour and I need to eat first." He brightened, and said to Virgil and Logan, "It was great to meet you both!"

"You too." Virgil said, warmly, and Logan gave a serious nod.

Logan was stood in the line for Starbucks on campus, using the long wait time to review notes on his phone, when he happened to look up and notice someone familiar sitting on the benches nearby. It took a moment, but then it clicked -- it was Patton. He was wearing a t-shirt for a charity marathon, and frowning at a very large textbook. The crowds of students ebbed and flowed around him.

The frown on his face was very out of place -- the whole time they hung out over the weekend Patton had smiled the entire time, even when idle. The six-inch-thick textbook in front of him reminded Logan that he said he'd been struggling with his classes, and...

When Logan got to the front of the line, he bought a black coffee, and after a moment of hesitation, a white hot chocolate.

Logan didn't have the same anxiety with social interactions that Virgil did, and yet when he approached Patton on his bench his heart beat just a little harder. He ignored it, and said, "Hello Patton."

Patton looked up, and immediately pasted on a smile upon seeing him. "Logan! Fancy seeing you here," he said, and gave a jovial wink. Logan recognized it was a joke -- they attended the same university.

"I happened to notice you while I was in line." Logan replied, tipping his head briefly to the still-long Starbucks line behind him, and offered out the cup. "White hot chocolate, right?"

Patton blinked, and suddenly that smile he had before seemed so fake in comparison to the one he had now. "Oh my goodness, yes! Thank you so much, that is so sweet."

"You're welcome." Logan replied, rote, nodding.
"Please, sit, if you have the time." Patton grabbed his book off the bench and made room, sipping his drink and smiling at it again. "I don't know if you have a class or something, but, uh, yeah."

Logan sat. "I have a few minutes. What are you studying?"

The smile flagged, but Patton managed a warm expression regardless. "Animal science. It's very interesting, but I have a hard time remembering it all. I get mixed up a lot."

Logan nodded thoughtfully. "What are your study methods?"

"I read the materials mostly, it takes me so long to read them that by the time I'm done it's time for the test." Patton sighed, flicking back and forth between his current pages. "I pay close attention in class and stuff but when I sit down to write the test I remember all the wrong things."

Logan was a math tutor -- he'd been for years as his source of income. And he recognized multiple problems at once. Deficient study habits and the possibility of a learning disability. "You have difficulties reading?"

Patton shrugged. "It takes me a really long time."

Logan opened his mouth to ask if he'd been tested, then stopped himself. That was one of those things that made people hate him. He kind of didn't want Patton to hate him. His potentially insensitive advice was unsolicited. He struggled for a moment with what to say instead, and ventured, "If you ever want some help with study habits, I've been tutoring math for a long time, and I've got some tips that could help."

Patton smiled at him. "Oh, I would love that. I'm always down for learning new things. You're so kind to offer, thank you."

Logan wanted to smile back, but he was well aware that smiling made him look terrible -- he'd been told more than once. Instead he nodded. "I usually spend my afternoons in the library, if you are free and wish to join me."

"Sounds good." Patton nodded back. "Do you wanna trade numbers?"

They did. Logan picked up his coffee, an eye on his watch, and wished Patton a good day.

"Thanks again for the hot chocolate." Patton's dimples shone in full force. "You've really made my day."

"You're welcome." Logan merely repeated, inclining his head, and walked away with his heart still pounding just a little too fast. It seemed illogical that his mind was stuck on the charity marathon t-shirt Patton was wearing, the dimples in his smile, and the moment where he stared at the coffee cup like he couldn't believe someone would do that for him.

Logan attended his class, stung his dry hands with the Purrell he carried everywhere, and then slugged to the library to adhere to his rigid study schedule. If he studied a certain number of hours everyday, there was no way he could fail.

He could not fail.

Patton texted him after he'd gotten a couple hours of work done. 'hey! i just got out of my class, if you're still willing i'd love to come hang out. which library are you in?'

Logan answered promptly, 'central library, second floor by the windows.' It was a conversational
floor, not a quiet floor, which he'd chosen in case Patton had decided to come. Ten minutes later, a bobbing head of curly hair came around the corner and spotted him, beaming.

"Hey." Patton said, voice pitched lower in consideration of the library, taking a seat at his table. "This library is nice and bright, I usually go to the one by the Student Union. It's got bean bag chairs, but the lighting is terrible."

Logan inclined his head in response.

Patton unpacked his textbooks, and fiddled with the cover of one. "You don't have to help me if you don't want to, I'm fine to just hang out and study together. Sometimes just having someone else around motivates me to work anyway."

"It's fine, Patton, I did offer."

Patton described his usual routine -- taking notes in class on his computer, reading the textbook before the exam, and often studying mostly the night before because he would run out of time.

"When you're on your computer in class, do you stay on your notes, or do you check other social media?"

Patton sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck. "I try to stay on, but sometimes the prof goes on a tangent, or I get distracted thinking of something I want to Google, and yeah."

"Do you use the computer to keep up, or could you handwrite quickly enough?"

"I haven't tried to write by hand." Patton tilted his head.

Logan nodded. "A good first step would be either to handwrite your notes, which is a more physical action, it imbeds the information more solidly into your memory since you use a motor action to record it. If you find you can't keep up, though, you can try printing the Powerpoint slides to write on them directly. Failing that, using your laptop is fine, but I would suggest shutting off your internet for the duration of the class and using only the word processor so you are forced to pay attention."

"Okay." Patton said, still looking right at him, still listening despite the long teacher-mode lecture Logan had gone on. "I will try that. I -- I probably should've done that earlier, I really am serious about wanting to be a vet, it just kind of feels like I'm... I'm too stupid for this."

Logan shook his head. "There are many different types of intelligence. And I do not believe they are a static, unmoving attribute. There is nothing that cannot be accomplished through hard-work and practice."

Patton smiled, with his dimples poked in his cheeks, a light flush on them. "Yeah, okay. What other ways can I work hard to do better, then?"

That was what Logan liked to hear.

"What are you doing?" Virgil asked.

Logan flinched, caught, and immediately shut off the tap. "Just washing my hands."

The two stood in the kitchen of their apartment. Logan had been studying in the living room when
he'd knocked a pencil on the floor and thoughtlessly picked it up. The floor was where feet touched, and feet touched the floor of anywhere else in the world, that could've touched anything, and was -- at which point he got up and began washing his hands. He kept thinking he was done, but then he got a paper towel to wash his pencil, then had to wash his hands again because he touched the pencil, and washed his hands again for good measure, and -- he'd been there for longer than a normal person would have.

His hands burnt. They were very dry, cracked on the top, and they stung from the scalding hot water he used. He had needed to disinfect them.

Virgil was looking at him with worried eyes, and Logan brushed quickly past him before the interrogation could begin. They'd danced around this for years -- Logan insisted he did not have OCD, he just had a healthy appreciation for hand washing. Virgil thought differently.

"Can I see your hands?" Virgil asked, following him back into the living room where all his textbooks and carefully filled notebooks were spread out.

"No." Logan replied, even though it was impolite. He immediately amended, "I am just a little stressed about this midterm, it won't happen again."

The thing about standing there washing his hands was that it made him feel just like, a little tiny bit better. A tiny bit more in control, because his hands were dirty and he made them clean. A sense of control... even as he uncontrollably washed them again and again. Now he was settling back down with his books, heart pumping uncomfortably hard at having been caught, and all he could think was -- I should just wash them ONE more time.

"They're bleeding, L." Virgil said quietly.

Logan immediately drew his hands away from the textbooks and into himself. Now he could feel it -- the persistent sting, the tell-tale heat of torn dry skin. Unfortunately, that meant he had open wounds on the backs of his hands, an easy access for bacteria.

He snuck a peek -- it wasn't that bad at all, actually. Just two pricks of blood amidst the patchy dry wasteland. He put on an unaffected tone, "Barely. I've had worse papercuts."

"Your hands aren't supposed to bleed." Virgil implored, stepping closer. "Listen, I think we should--"

"We should not do anything." Logan hated to interrupt, but he could not let this terrible conversation resume again. "I appreciate your concern, Virgil, but it is not warranted. I am far more concerned about this midterm at the moment."

Virgil looked away, a fine tremor in his hands that he hid by shoving them in his hoodie pockets.

Logan took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, I didn't--"

"You didn't do anything wrong." Virgil said. "I'm just... being anxious. Sorry. But, just like... know that you can talk to me. If you ever want to."

"Thank you." Logan said reflexively. And hesitated, because the air was still weird, and his favourite thing about Virgil was that they didn't really do 'weird' between them. He needed to fix this. But he needed to study... "Do you want to study with me?"

"Sure, L." Virgil gave a tired smile. "I'll grab my book."
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

if I was without there's just be nothing but bad luck
oh I know I feel it too
it was hard to find so you double down with the paradigms I said
oh I know I'd gotten you
to it again
- bad luck again by the rural alberta advantage

Chapter Notes

one last reminder that the warnings apply to the whole fic!

"I'm pretty sure I mixed up the definitions again during the midterm." Patton said, trying to smile but it was brittle. The two of them were in the library again, set up under bright windows. Patton had brought a package of Sour Patch Kids, and was insisting the Logan have some too. He'd intended on only having a couple, but they were surprisingly good, and now his mouth hurt.

"There are multiple study habits that can improve specified recall." Logan said, rubbing his sticky fingers together under the table and trying really hard not to think about washing his hands. "But they are more helpful when catered to your individual learning style. Do you know about the different types?"

"No, I don't." Patton said. "What are they?"

Logan smiled, because he always liked it when people were involved and wanted to know more, not just bored with his rambling. He quickly suffocated the smile with his sleeve, self-conscious, and continued, "There are quite a few, but the main four are visual, aural, verbal, and physical."

"Okay. How do I know which one is mine?"

"You might be more than one, but in order to figure it out try and think back to the last time you took a test. When you answered the question correctly, what were you remembering? For example, you might be remembering the image from a graph, the words that your lecturer spoke during class, the words that you read or wrote, or the activity you practiced to remember."

"The activity." Patton said immediately. "If we do something in class, like group work to learn a concept, or a task we have to do in order to learn the information, I always remember that stuff. But when I'm reading a book it's like, in one eye out the other, hah."

Logan understood part of the problem now. "So your learning style is physical and likely also social. You work better with people than by yourself. Some of the problems you've been having are because the studying you've been doing isn't compatible with your learning style. Out of curiosity, would you say you remember spoken words easier than written ones?"
Patton nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah. If the professor like, gives a particularly interesting metaphor, I can usually remember her saying that in my head. But if I read it, it's like, whatever."

"Great. We can absolutely work with this to create a better studying plan for you. Um, if you want to, that is."

"Of course." Patton looked very eager. "Thank you so much for helping me, Logan. I really, really appreciate it. If there's anything you need ever, just let me know, I'm totally here for you."

"Thank you." Logan said automatically.

"What's your learning style, by the way?" Patton tilted his head, curious.

"Primarily verbal, as in that I absorb words in both speech or writing the best. My best way to learn is to explain it to someone else. Secondarily I excel with spatial learning, thus why I frequently the use of flashcards in a particular order -- once I have studied them enough, I can mentally flip through them in their spatial order to find the answer I need."

"That's so cool!" Patton said, grinning.

Logan nodded in acknowledgement. "And I believe flashcards would be of benefit to you as well -- it's a more interactive activity than just reading the materials. Though I would advise you take the time to create physical flashcards. I use digital ones on my phone for convenience, but the act of physically writing on the cards would be another way you could use a kinesthetic activity to cement the information in your brain."

"Oh!" Patton looked so excited to get learning, it was the best. "I could get pretty coloured paper and stickers and stuff! And make a game out of my flashcards. That's an amazing idea, because I actually want to do it. Unlike with reading which always kind of makes me want to explode."

"Good." Logan said, pleased. He considered other options, and offered, "For you, I would consider having a study group with your classmates, if you learn best in a social environment and talking together. If you have problems sitting still, another method you could use would be to record yourself reading the notes out loud, and listen to them while performing a physical activity, like walking or running."

"Awesome. Yes." Patton scribbled on his page, and Logan saw that he'd written down each idea. "Thank you so much, seriously. This means the world to me. Is there any way I could help you -- oh! I know. You said you learn the very best when you're explaining it to other people, right? Well you could explain what you're studying for right now to me!"

Logan blinked, and said uncertainly, "That's not necessary, I wouldn't want to bore you. Business classes are not terribly exciting."

"No, no!" Patton was grinning, full force, dimples and all. "I want to. In fact, let's multitask. We've been studying for ages, it's dinnertime. We could go to the caf, get some food to care of ourselves and you can explain the concepts your studying right now. Sound good?"

He sounded so enthusiastic about it, it was almost impossible to say no. So Logan said yes.

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Logan woke up at ten o'clock in the afternoon on a Saturday with a mouth full of cat hair.

It was much later than he usually slept, but he'd finished his last mid-term the day before, and hadn't
slept properly in so long that it all crashed down on him at once. Apparently he had left his bedroom door open a crack, for Stump had let himself in and taken over half his pillow. Logan petted the cat, half-asleep, and tried to catalogue in his foggy brain what he needed to do next.

Technically, he did not have anything immediately due. But if he didn't study at least four hours during the day, his stomach clenched in anxiety at the thought. If he didn't, he would fail. Even if there wasn't something he actually needed to be studying at the moment.

His phone chimed. It was Patton. 'hey lo! what's up? :)' 

Logan mulled over a response for a while. Patton still made him irrationally flustered, even with the time they had spent hanging out recently. He suddenly remembered Virgil taking a picture of Stump, saying it was a no pressure response. So Logan snapped a shot of Stump, sent it back, and added, 'and yourself?'

'i'm good YOU HAVE A KITTY what is their name i love them'

'his name is Stump and he is technically Virgil's'

'i still love him and would die for him. i was just wondering if you wanted to come hang out? apparently virgil and roman are going ice skating, and they asked if i wanted to come, and i thought it would be super fun like last time if you were there too? :)' 

Logan rolled over, picking up Stump under one arm and wandering out into the main apartment. Virgil was not home. Logan vaguely remembered that he'd gone out for a date with Roman the night before, but he'd been so tired it must've not entirely computed. He fed Stump, slopping wet food into his bowl, and thought about how Patton probably didn't want to be a third wheel. But he should study...

Should he? Maybe he could study later. Or tomorrow.

But then panic raced through him, and he thought about the slippery slope, if he let himself get away with not studying one day then another, until he was never studying and failing and...

Logan washed the cat food off his hands. He promised himself that he would study as soon as he got home from ice skating. He liked hanging out with Patton, and he used to love ice skating when he was a kid. He would study when he got home. He washed his hands another time, just in case some got under his nails, and carefully dried his hands before replying, 'where and when?'

He used a paper towel to clean his phone, since he'd touched it before he washed his hands, then washed his hands another time to make up for touching his dirty phone, and then the heat in the nerves in his neck finally died down. Patton had replied with the time and place, and Logan went to get dressed, putting on a black overcoat, and made sure to put his gloves on.

Roman and Virgil were already skating when he arrived at the rink, tearing up the ice as they competed, racing from end to end. Patton was tying on white skates, humming to himself, eyes bright behind his sparkling rhinestone glasses when he spotted Logan.

"Good morning!" Patton cheered, all bright and happy with no hesitation. "How did your last midterm go?"

Since they had been studying together so much in the past two weeks, they were pretty well acquainted with each other's schedules. Logan nodded seriously, and replied, "I believe I performed satisfactorily. Did you finish the assignment you were working on?"
Patton gave double thumbs up. "I did! And I read it out loud like you said to make sure it sounded good. I'm gonna look it over tonight to make sure I didn't mix any terms up again, but otherwise I'll actually be able to hand it in early! I'm so excited."

"Good." Logan said, and went to the counter to get his own skates. He laced up beside Patton, and they stepped out onto the freshly cleaned ice together. There were lights hanging above them, pin-pricked white reflections against the smooth surface, and soft music beyond the laughing echoes of the skaters.

"It's been a while for me." Patton said, going very slow. "Do you skate?"

Logan took only a moment to get his bearings, and began a leisurely glide beside Patton. "I can skate."

Patton giggled, hands floating out at his sides as he tried to remain balanced. "I see that. I never really did any lessons, so I'm really shaky. When did you learn?"

Logan breathed the cool air, that seemed to chase all the thickness deep in the bottom of his lungs from stagnation. "There was a pond near my house growing up. I skated there every winter."

"Oh, I'm jealous!" Patton swung out, legs wobbling, and Logan grabbed his flailing arm to keep him upright. Patton gave a pleased smile, straightening up, and continued, "Did you ever fall in?"

"I broke a foot through the ice once or twice." Logan admitted, releasing him and watching Patton's footwork carefully. It would be not ideal if he fell and hit his head. "But never fell completely in, no. I kept a close eye on the temperature to make sure it was safe."

"Smart." Patton said, and his legs wobbled again. Giving in, Logan offered his arm, and Patton took it gratefully, holding onto his bicep.

"Just plant the foot closest to me." Logan advised, looking down at their feet. "And push out with the other to move forward."

Patton tried that, hanging off his arm, and beamed when they moved forward without wobbling over. "Great! Thanks, Lo! You're the best."

Logan inclined his head, and his heart beat a little too fast. Nervous about them falling on the ice, maybe.

"Hey fellas!" Roman came to a dramatic stop beside them, spraying shavings of ice. He gestured his arms wide with a charming smile. "Glad to see you're upright, Pat! You're a lifesaver, Logan, usually I'm chasing behind this guy with a pillow."

Virgil skated leisurely up to them, hands in his hoodie pockets, and he shoulder-checked Roman as he stopped. "Glad you made it, L. Did you feed Stump?"

"Yes. How was your date?"

Roman said, "It was magnificent."

Virgil said, almost overtop of him, "Roman lit me on fire."

Roman's cheeks flushed, and he fanned out both his hands. "I may have lit him on fire. But never fear! I successfully extinguished the blaze."
"He dumped his drink on me." Virgil translated.

"It worked, didn't it?"

Patton giggled beside him, and Logan rubbed his forehead as he said, "How, exactly, did you light him on fire in the first place?"

"I may have misunderstood how fondue works." Roman smiled, undaunted. "It has been suggested to me many times before that I am not to be trusted around an open flame, and while usually I would proclaim it is because I am hot enough already, this time--"

"This time you lit my sleeve on fire." Virgil said, looking very amused, and pulled his hand from his pocket to show the slight singe. "I think it looks badass, though, so you're off the hook."

Roman blew his bangs out of his eyes in playful relief and gave a breathless smile.

Patton said, "Your sweater definitely looks toasty!"

Roman groaned, and Virgil barked a surprised laugh. Logan took a second too long to compute the joke, and they had already moved on.

"Thanks Patton." Virgil said, giving a weak thumbs up. "Are you guys good, or do you want us to hang out over here?"

"We're good." Patton promised, squeezing Logan's arm. "You kids speed along all you want."

"You're only six months older than me, Pat." Roman said, in a sing-song voice, as he glided away. He had his hands folded gracefully behind his back.

"They're a very important six months." Patton called after him, and winked at Virgil.

Virgil saluted two fingers and chased after Roman. Patton and Logan slowly began to trace the circumference of the rink again, leaning against each other. Patton was a good few inches shorter than Logan and slotted nicely into his side.

“They’re very cute.” Patton said, in a somewhat dreamy voice, watching the two play a very intense game of tag on the other side of the rink, dodging innocent skaters with high laughs and loud dramatics. “I think they stayed up half the night watching YouTube videos. Virgil’s a great guy, I’m really happy Roman found him.”

Logan didn’t know Roman well enough yet, but he hadn’t heard Virgil laugh this much in years, so he said, “I am glad that they are happy. They certainly seem to get along like a literal house on fire.”

Patton giggled, swaying them from side to side a little as they moved. “Roman talked about him non-stop in the beginning, even when Virgil infuriated him. But I know Roman, he loves people who are interesting. It didn’t surprise me at all when he said he’d asked him out.”

Logan hummed in agreement.

“How did you and Virgil meet, anyway?” Patton asked, and he was definitely leaning into the touch on his arm, and Logan’s heart did that traitorous fluttering. Patton’s eyes were forward, rhinestones glittering on his glasses, and when he turned to face him he was smiling like he was just so happy to be spending time with Logan.

Logan didn’t understand it. He didn’t like things he didn’t understand, especially when it made his
neck hot with nerves.

“We were assigned as roommates in first year,” Logan said. “We got along pretty well right from the start and figured why mess with perfection, so we’ve been roommates ever since.”

Logan does not mention the beginning, where Logan pretended he didn’t have a roommate because he thought it would be easier than subjecting Virgil to himself, except then Virgil was struggling with his anxiety so much in that first year Logan found himself peeling his protective distance back in order to talk him through it, to ground him, and eventually get to know him as a person and as a friend. But Virgil wouldn’t appreciate him discussing all the panic attacks Logan had helped him through on their gross first year dorm floor, so he left it at that.

Logan suspected that Virgil had been so insistent that they remain roommates past dorms because he hated change and Logan was a steady constant, and that without that they wouldn’t have stuck together so long. Logan certainly wasn’t a good enough friend on his own to deserve that kind of loyalty.

Watching Virgil skate backwards in teasing circles around Roman with his hands in his pockets, he wondered if maybe his time with Virgil was going to be up soon.

“Aw, that’s awesome!” Patton said brightly, oblivious to the dark clouds lagging Logan’s brain down.

Logan mentally tried to shift himself into being a better conversation partner. “How did you and Roman meet? I remember he said that you go way back.”

Patton looked pleased. “Yes, we do! We met in Kindergarten, actually.”

Logan raised a surprised eyebrow, and Patton smiled with all his teeth before continuing, “Yeah! We weren’t actually in the same class or anything, I found him on the playground. It’s been so long that I don’t remember why, but a bunch of kids were teasing him. So I walked up and pushed them over.”

Logan couldn’t help it — he laughed. He immediately covered his mouth with his hand, looking at Patton with an incredulous expression. “You? Really?”

Patton beamed, practically glowing. “Yup! Yelled at them that they needed to be nice and the teacher came and busted us, and I got in the most trouble since I pushed first. And the next day when those kids tried to come and be mad at me, Roman showed up and kicked rocks at them until they left. Then very solemnly told me that we were bound as best friends for life from that moment on. And we were!”

“That’s a wonderful story.” Logan said. “And moderately violent.”

Patton laughed. “Kindergarten was both a harder and easier time. I can’t say I’ve ever been sorry I did it — Roman is great, and I’ve been really lucky to have someone like him.”

“That’s good.” Logan said, looking out at where Roman and Virgil’s hands were conjoined. Many times in the past, Virgil had confided his fears to Logan about never falling in love. He was thinking about that sad tone of voice, hoping that if Patton spoke so highly of the guy, he couldn’t be too bad.

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“L.” A very light tap at his door.

Logan sat up, rubbing his eyes, “It’s open.”
Virgil let himself in, wearing cuffed sweats and a hoodie, with the hood up over his scattered hair and hands buried deep in his pockets, obviously shaking.

Logan moved over without having to be asked. Virgil climbed on his tall bed and sat beside him, not touching, wrapping his arms around his legs.

Logan grabbed his glasses, because the blurry room made his eyes hurt, and said, “What’s up?”

“I’m scared.” Virgil said.

“Scared of what?”

“Roman.”

The old fear of never falling in love had been replaced. Anxiety was never so easily solved or subdued, and it always found something new to prey on. Logan felt sympathetic for Virgil with how exhausting it must all be, especially since it was 3AM and the bags under his eyes looked treacherous.

“Roman himself or your feelings for Roman?” Logan asked, knowing the answer but needing Virgil to say it first.

“My... feelings. What am I doing? I can’t drag him into this mess.”

“By this mess are you referring to your mental state?”

“My mental state, myself, everything. He’s going to realize how fucked up I am and he’s going to leave me and I’m going to have all these feelings and they’re going to kill me. I’m going to die.”

“Feelings won’t kill you.” Logan said, foremost. “Suppose your blatant catastrophization is true, even if that happened you would survive and get over it eventually. But that is a worst-case scenario, highly unlikely. More likely, Roman will like you for who you are, just like he already does.”

Virgil buried his face in his knees, shoulders trembling. In the calm quiet dark of the room, his breathing was laboured.

“Who would want me, though? All I do is over-think everything and make myself suffer.”

“I don’t know, Virgil, it has been three years and I am still right here. I don’t think you are so unbearable as you seem to.”

Virgil tipped over sideways and fell into Logan. A collision of a hug. “That’s because you’re the best.”

Logan snorted. “No, it’s because I have an ounce of common sense. You are not wholly defined by your mental disorders. To give on you merely because of that would be to miss out on so much more of a person. If Roman is in any way smart, he will know that. If he’s not, then I can just kill him for you. Problem solved.”

Virgil managed a painful laugh, and Logan hid his smile in the darkness.

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‘hey, are you busy at this exact moment?’ Patton texted Logan at lunchtime on Sunday.

‘no. what’s up?’ Logan replied, because he was taking a very quick study break to eat something. So
far it had been yogurt and staring at the fridge.

His phone rang. He answered it, “Hi Patton.”

“Hi Lo!” Patton sung. “Sorry to bother you, but Roman wanted to ask you a question. Hold on a sec.”

Phone transfer noises. Disgruntled hissing in the background. Then, Roman with forced cheer, “Uh, hello Logan! It’s so nice to speak with you. Could I possibly ask you a favour?”

More amused than anything, Logan said, “What do you need?”

“Do you know what Virgil’s favourite chocolate is?” Roman rushed out. “I’m sorry to bother you about something so simple, but I feel badly for lighting his sleeve on fire, and I want to make it up to him, but if I give him chocolate he hates that will only make things worse, and I really, really want him to like me.” He said that all out at once, going plaintive at the end.

“He doesn’t like chocolate.” Logan reported. “But he does like caramels.”

“Oh, thank you, you are a king among men! I owe you my life.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Here’s Patton back.” Roman said, and there was another hiss in the background that sounded like ‘I told you!’, but Logan didn’t know who said it. Then Patton came back on, cheery,

“Thanks Lo! Have a good day, okay?”

“Alright. You as well, Patton.”

A giggle and a goodbye. Logan hung up and thought about how funny it would’ve been if Roman had brought Virgil apologies chocolates that he would’ve hated.

Later that day, Roman stopped by. He had a gift bag and a beaming smile, and though Virgil ragged on him for the dramatic gift giving, he smiled and refused to share his caramels.

“And you!” Roman said, tossing Logan a lime green bag that he caught in his lap. It was Sour Patch Kids. “From me, for all your help. Pat said you liked them.”

“Thank you.” Logan nodded curtly, and his lungs swum with an emotion he could not name.

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Logan’s hands were unbearably hot. Like the skin was inflated with boiling water, aching and bloated and painful. And while he knew the cause, he was still dying to wash his hands again.

It was just. He had touched the tabletop of the library and who knew what had touched it before he got there. And if he got sick right now, he’d be totally screwed, and maybe he should —

Logan hated feeling out of control, and suddenly it was like everything was skittering away from him at once. He snapped his books shut, packed them up quickly, and hurried to the bathroom where he washed his hands six times consecutively. Heart pounding, relief mixed with a building pressure — he hadn’t finished studying, if he didn’t finish studying for at least five hours he would fail, and if he failed he would drop out and lose everything.

Logan left the library with his trachea prickled with tightly wrapped twine, struggling to breathe
normally. He was hit with this overwhelming feeling of: *I don’t know what to do, but if I don’t do something I’m going to die.*

He went home and washed his hands. He rubbed all his books with disinfectant wipes, and his backpack, and his shoes, then washed his hands. Virgil was still in his classes, so Logan cleaned the apartment, head to toe, every inch he could reach, and took a shower with scalding hot water to get everything off. When he dried off, multiple pricks of blood appeared on the surface of his hands, and Logan wrapped gauze around them with antiseptic gel, anxious over getting an infection, and crawled into his bed with his textbooks and studied, arguing with the persistent thoughts that he did not clean his books enough the first time and he needed to go wash his hands again. Except that if he did that, he would have to peel off the bandages now stuck to the burning pain on the back of his hands. Instead he forced himself to stay still and suffer the persistent anxiety. Only the reassuring smell of disinfectant in the air made things a little okay, a small wash of relief against the pressure of his need to study so he did not fail.

It wasn’t until later when Virgil finally came home, with two voices — Roman and Patton.

“Hey L!” Virgil called out, gliding down the hall and knocking on Logan door.

“It’s open.” Logan said, looking up from his book and feeling the eye strain from how long he’d been reading.

Virgil had an easy smile, only a little nervous. “I’ve brought Roman and Patton — Ro’s got to practice lines for a Shakespeare performance assignment and I thought it might be fun to help him. Do you wanna come join?”

A *no* stuck in Logan’s throat. He should study ... but that sounded fun. Virgil was an English major and had opinions about Shakespeare, and Logan always appreciated the classics. Plus Patton was there, and Logan hadn’t seen him since the day before when they studied together, the usual of Patton making colourful flash cards and insisting Logan explain to him his current business projects.

He’d studied for long enough, even though he should continue, it had been at least his minimum five hours...

Virgil’s smile melted with his hesitation, and he seemed to catch himself, looking around the eerily spotless room before finally settling on the white gauze tied around both his hands.

“I will play.” Logan was quick to say, snapping his textbook shut and getting up, hoping to avoid the impending conversation.

“Ohay.” Virgil said slowly. “We’re happy to have you. But, L—”

“It’s fine.” Logan interrupted, picking up a big hoodie he never wore and putting it on so he could pull the sleeves down over his hands, leaving just his burning fingers exposed. “Don’t fret, Virgil. Let’s go.”

Logan strode past him and into the living room. Roman was a standing in the middle of the room holding a fake skull up to the light, clutching his chest. He was a drama major, and Virgil had told Logan all about his lifelong dream of making it to Broadway.

“I thought we were doing King Lear, not Hamlet.” Virgil said, trailing behind Logan.

“I couldn’t resist when I saw your fake skull!” Roman replied.

“Who’s says it’s fake?” Virgil said.
Roman dropped the skull, and Virgil and Patton laughed at his disgusted expression.

Logan took a seat on the couch, tugging on the ends of his sweater sleeves. “You have to memorize King Lear?”

“A scene.” Roman confirmed. “I am playing King Lear himself, of course. My group mates and I practiced together a couple times, but I really wanted to nail it down. Thus, here we are.”

They divided up the roles between Virgil, Patton, and Logan, and began the scene from the top. As Logan suspected, in was entertaining to watch as Virgil was deliberately needling Roman, pacing the room along with him and reading the old Shakespearean without pause, trying to get Roman to corpse. Logan had no problems, reciting calmly, and Patton had specifically requested the role with the fewest lines since he was the slowest reader.

During a break, Roman and Virgil argued over the intended inflection of a line, and Patton fiddled with the edges of his script.

“I’m glad Roman has some more people to practice with now.” Patton confided in Logan, much quieter than usual. “Growing up I was always feeding him lines, but you can hear how bad I am at it, even with so much practice.”

Patton had stumbled over words or read the wrong ones, yes, but he kept going despite that. “Your reading was fine.”

Patton shook his head. “No, I know it’s not. It’s not good practice for Roman who needs snappy comebacks and flowing poetry. I spent thirty seconds trying to pronounce Glou-- Gloucester. And even then, I forgot each time it came up.”

“I’m sure Roman is just happy for the help.” Logan said, even as his brain was running away from him, remembering his initial concerns of his academic struggles. “I have a question, though. Do you have problems spelling too?”

“Yup.” Patton popped the ‘p’. “Without spellcheck I’m always messing up. And I’ll know I’m wrong and try to sound it out but it just doesn’t work. I hate writing things by hand, that’s why tests and exams always go so badly. I mix the terms up and spell them wrong.”

“Have you ever been tested for dyslexia?” Logan asked.

Patton shook his head, looking down. “I’m fine with numbers.”

“Dyslexia isn’t just numbers, it can be spelling. It can also be spatial — can you tell your left from your right?”

“Oh man, no way. I’m forever annoying Roman by telling him to turn ‘that way’. Wait, you think I have dyslexia? I just thought I was really bad at spelling. And reading.” Then, quieter, “And I just thought I was too stupid to learn the difference between words despite reading them a hundred times.”

Logan’s heart softened, like goo, and he leaned their shoulders together. “No, Pat. I’m pretty sure that you’ve had challenges that no one else has had to deal with, and with that in mind I think you’ve actually done pretty well for yourself. You made it to your fourth year, after all.”

Patton was staring in the middle distance, then sat up more and said, “Wait, wait, oh my God everything is making so much sense right now. I just thought I was too ... holy cow, I don’t know what to do with this.”
“I would suggest visiting the accessibility services on campus and being tested. After that, they can make accommodations for you.” Logan advised gently, his gooey heart trying to beat through the way Patton’s breathless expression was like all the puzzle pieces falling into place.

“I can do that.” Patton said, reverently. “Where is it?”

“I’ll help you find it tomorrow.”

“What’s going on?” Roman interjected, looking at Patton who was practically vibrating.

“Lo just helped me figure out that I think I have dyslexia.” Patton said. “And I’m super happy.”

“Pat!” Roman threw his hands up, in immediate verifying excitement, then added, confused, “Why is that good?”

“Because it means there’s something I can do now instead of just being really mad at myself that I can’t read or write properly!” Patton bounced on the cushion. “Everything makes sense now.”

“That’s great.” Virgil said. “I think.”

“It is.” Patton nodded quickly, and turned to grab both of Logan’s hands and look him in the eye. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.” Logan said automatically, even as his hands jolted at the pressure, the burn of pain.

Feeling the bandages, Patton looked down, frowning. “Oh, what happened to your hands?”

Logan withdrew from his grip. “It’s nothing.” He said, heart going hard, solid again, and he stood up and went to the kitchen, pretending like he really needed to get a drink.

“Shoot, did I do something wrong?” He heard Patton ask very quietly.

“No, it’s fine.” Virgil said, tight.

“Don’t worry about it, Pat.” Roman said, easier. “Some people just don’t like their vulnerability being pointed out. Unlike you, being over the moon at being told you’re dyslexic.”

Patton gave a giggle, more like himself. “You’d understand if you were in my head — it’s a relief!”

Logan brought his drink into the room, pretending he hadn’t been listening, and sat back down, not touching Patton. “Are we continuing?”

“Yes sir.” Roman winked, breaking the tension, and they picked up the scripts again. But Patton kept glancing at Logan’s hands, and Logan kept ignoring it.
Chapter 3

Logan didn’t have to, but he stuck around and waited for Patton to finish with the accessibility accommodations office. He sat outside, studying flashcards on his phone, trying not to scratch the back of his hands. He had taken the bandages off, because he needed to wash his hands while in a public place. They hurt like hell, burning and incredibly distracting. The cracks had turned to hard dark scabs overnight, still tacky with blood, but at least not actively bleeding.

Patton came out with a sheet of paper and an absolutely beaming smile that somehow widened when he saw Logan was still waiting for him.

“All good!” Patton said, skipping over and sliding beside him on the bench as Logan put his phone away. “I mean, I’m not certified dyslexic yet, I have to see a specialist guy—” here he waggled the paper, “but they’re fairly sure that I’ll meet the requirements and we talked about what we can do to help, and oh gosh I’m excited!”

Logan nodded, pleased. “What kind of solutions do they have?”

“Well, first of all, audiobooks for my textbooks! I can’t believe I never thought of that! And if my profs give me permission I can record their lectures on my phone, so I can listen to them again instead of only relying on my notes. And they can give me extra time on assignments and stuff, oh and I can write my exams in a quiet room with extra time as well!”

Patton took a moment to breathe in between his rambling, and continued after a moment with just the hugest smile, “They said then I can read the questions out loud if I need to, and some other things like oral exams or tutors but I don’t know if I’d want those, but still! Thank you again Logan! I’m beginning to think I might actually be able to get the grades I need now if I work hard enough. It just seemed so impossible before.”

“You’re welcome.” Logan said, and he was so happy he could be helpful, even if it was just pointing out a pattern.

“I’m going to hug you.” Patton said, then did. Logan’s lungs stuttered, and he took a moment too long to hug back. His heart skipped a beat, and when they pulled back Patton looked so happy. Logan helplessly smiled back, then caught himself, covering his mouth with his hand.

Patton’s eyes flickered down to his hand, and his smile turned concerned. He ventured, gentle, uncertain, “What happened?”

Logan shoved both his hands in his pockets. “They’re just dry.”

“Does it hurt?”

Logan shrugged, looking away.

“I’m sorry.” Patton told him sincere, almost careful.

Logan forced himself to square his shoulders, to meet Patton’s worried eyes. “It’s not your fault.”

“I’m sorry that you’re hurting.” Patton clarified.

That put a rock in Logan’s throat, and he didn’t know what to say. He swallowed against it, painful, while absurd emotions rattled around. He needed to not be discussing this anymore, or he might do
something insane like cry.

“I uh, I need to go study.” Logan said, and tried to clear his throat but the rock stayed there.

“Okay, I actually have to get to my volunteering too, but thank you so much again. You really didn’t have to do all this for me and you did anyway and it means everything to me.”

“Anytime.” Logan said, pulling his backpack on, and getting up. “I will see you later.”

“See you.” Patton replied, voice sounding something wonderful, and Logan definitely needed to go because his heart was doing stupid things again.

Logan had a test in an hour. He was sitting outside of the lecture hall, trying to study his notes, but his brain was pinging around in unhelpful circles, not consolidating properly. His hands hurt, a few days since they last bled, but still pink and inflamed and dry as hell. He wanted to go wash his hands, and settled for the unbearable sting of Purell instead.

There wasn’t enough time before his test, and there was a horrible helpless feeling in his chest, completely out of control, that he wasn’t prepared. He didn’t study enough, he was going to fail. Fail.

He slowly recognized what he really wanted to do: talk to Patton, describe the concepts to him, get a firm grasp on the material through explaining it to someone else. Working with Patton recently had made it his favourite study method, and —

He texted Patton, because it was either that or stand in the bathroom and wash his hands until they lost feeling. He sent, ‘are you busy at the moment?’

‘I’m just riding the bus home, otherwise not busy, :D’

Logan called him. Patton picked up on the first ring, “What’s up, buttercup?”

“Sorry to bother you.” Logan began, then didn’t know what to say next.

“You’re not bothering me, I love talking to you.”

Patton was so sincere and sweet it made his teeth hurt. Logan rubbed his eyes under his glasses and said, “I’ve got my theory test in an hour. And. Would you mind if I just explained the concepts to you? I know it’s boring but—“

“Lo, I would be delighted.” Patton said. “Come on, hit me with them.”

Logan took a breath. It was shaky. He started talking, explaining, rambling, and Patton drove the conversation in a straighter line than his jumbled brain — asked clarifying questions, kept him on track, actually listened to the boring business theory.

After an hour, Patton said, “Times up, Lo.”

“Shit.” Logan breathed.

“You’re gonna do great.” Patton told him, confident. “You know this like the back of your hand. Now go kill it, I believe in you!”

Logan breathed, clutching the phone so hard it hurt his sore fingers, eyes closed, “Thank you
“Absolutely anytime, I’m *so* glad I could help.”

Logan hung up, and joined his classmates pushing their way into the lecture hall. When he finished the test, he made sure to text Patton a picture of Stump in thanks. The cat eyed him lazily, almost judgingly, and Logan pointed menacingly at him, and said, "Don't you start."

Logan liked to listen to music while he studied - classical radio, or dubstep, or remixes of video game songs. He once studied for a Sociology exam while listening to Spider Dance on looped repeat, and to this day when he hears that tune his brain starts rattling off facts about Foucault.

When he wasn’t studying he listened to Fall Out Boy, and other alternative rock bands, with a pretty heavy influence of living with Virgil for three years to give him a music library full of MCR and twenty one pilots. His brain was trained at this point — when he was listening to music with words, it was not study time.

Logan was in the middle of a tiny meltdown. He felt sick, his stomach churning, and he was utterly convinced that he’d caught some illness. If he was sick, he might have to miss class, or God forbid an exam, and —

Patton had advocated multiple times for the bean bag chairs in the library near the student union, where apparently students went to study or sleep. Logan still had another class in the afternoon, so he couldn’t go home yet, but his eyes were burning and his throat was tight and his stomach hurt and he was trying so hard not to freak out about it. Except that he was.

So he claimed a bean bag chair, curled up facing the wall, and put in his music, music with words, trying to tell his body to relax, to uncurl from the tight, defensive posture.

Everything was hazy, distant. His hands hurt, in a constant way, the most annoying background noise. The severity always ebbed and flowed, but recently the dryness was not ebbing away, his baseline a painful one now.

Someone touched his foot, and Logan looked up. Patton was standing there, carrying an empty box and a pink umbrella, with raindrops still on his curly hair. He smiled, and Logan obligingly took out his headphones.

“Mind if I join you?” Patton asked.

“You’re welcome to, of course, but I warn you that I may be ill.”

Patton shrugged, putting down the box and balancing the umbrella on top. “I don’t care. Scoot over.”

Logan moved over. Patton flopped down onto the huge beanbag, kicking his shoes off and drawing his legs in. He said, “I didn’t want to disturb you, but all the other chairs are full, and I figured I could bribe you with muffins.”

“Muffins?”

Patton reached in the box, which looked empty but there were two muffins hiding in the bottom.

“Where did you get these?” Logan asked, because he kind of had a Thing about eating food from places he didn’t know.
“I made them.” Patton said.

Logan accepted the muffin, because he trusted Patton, and said, “What for?”

“Bake sale.” Patton replied, eating the other one. “For the union food bank.”

“That’s nice of you.” Logan said, around the fog in his head. The muffin was good, carrot and orange, and he finished it quickly. Everything was all softened with the atmosphere. The other sleeping kids on bean bags, the rain streaking down the windows, the low lighting of the library. Tinny music still played from his headphones.

“What are you up to?” Patton asked, and the gravity of a bean bag chair was slowly squishing them together.

“Just listening to music.” Logan said, eyes still burning, but at least he’d had some food now. Apparently he had been hungry. “I’ve got a class in two hours but I don’t feel well enough to study right now.”

“A break is a good idea.” Patton told him. “Can I listen too?”

Logan offered a headphone, put his own back in, and settled back down. The thick soup around him engulfed, hazy and unwell, asleep in a disjointed way.

He woke up, emerging to Imagine Dragons in one ear, and some student complaining distantly in the other. He felt very warm, and realized the line of his back was pressed against Patton’s side, the transfer of heat steady and calm.

Patton was awake, tapping his fingers in time with the music, and Logan pulled out his phone to check the time. He had class in fifteen minutes.

“I was just about to poke you.” Patton said, and it was only in that moment did Logan realize Patton had a warm hand enclosed on his ankle, because the touch drew away. “Feeling any better?”

“Not worse.” Logan replied, but it was all an equally dizzying haze. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, looking for where he flicked his glasses off when the arms dug into the side of his head.

“Woof, that sucks.” Patton said. “How long is your class?”

“Hour and a half.” Logan sighed, but started to pack up and pull on his coat.

“Ouch. Well, make sure you get some rest when you get home. And drink lots of water.”

“I will.” Logan promised. “The bean bag is all yours now.”

Patton laughed. “It won’t be the same without you. Thanks for letting me hang out. I liked your music.”

Logan tried not to feel self-conscious, wondering what music played while he was asleep, and rubbed the sore back of his neck. “No problem. I’ll see you later.”

“See you.”

It was hard not to linger on the naked vulnerability of sleep, in a public place, trusting someone close to you. A boy with a pink umbrella and who took the time and effort to bake muffins for charity.

But he lingered on it. Logan hated it when he didn’t understand his own thoughts, and every single
thought he had around Patton seemed so confusing and flustering. Blaming his illness when he barely survived the class, he collapsed into bed as soon as he got home.

Logan still wasn’t feeling great, but he didn’t have time to linger and rest. He was studying in his room, pretending he didn’t have a headache, petting Stump as he read his textbook.

Roman was visiting Virgil, the two of them swearing at each other as they played Mario Kart in the living room. Except then Roman came down the hall and tapped on his door, “Hey specs, do you have the cat?”


Roman stuck his head in. “Virgil is just putting his food out.”

Logan released the cat, who did not move despite Virgil calling his name down the hall. He gave Logan an unimpressed look because he had stopped petting him.

“Food, you dumb Stump!” Virgil called, and the cat lazily got up and sauntered out the door Roman was holding open for him.

“I know you’re probably busy, but Virgil is coming to hang out and watch my rehearsal, and you’re welcome to come as well.” Roman offered, giving a smile that could almost be described as nervous underneath the bravado.

Logan looked at his studying, and thought how he knew very little about theatre itself.

“You don’t have to,” Roman was quick to assure him. “I just thought I offer since Pat usually makes homemade pizza afterwards and, uh, yeah.”

Virgil stuck his head in the door. “Roman is trying to make friends with you.”

Roman’s face turned red. “I just! Logan is very important to you. So yes I am.”

Logan blinked at them both, a little astonished, and there didn’t seem to be any other answer he could give than, “Okay, if you want.”

Roman smiled, charming but now Logan could see the cracks, the insecurity. “Awesome! We’re gonna go in about fifteen minutes.”

Logan took those fifteen minutes to finish his reading, and shrugged on his black overcoat. A tie seemed a little too much, but he kept his collared shirt. Virgil stopped him in the doorway to fix his hair, and Logan obligingly bent his knees so Virgil could reach the top of his head.

Roman had changed into all black, and was excited to show them the rehearsal for the play his theatre company was working on.

Patton met them at the venue, carrying a blue Gatorade for Roman.

“Break a leg!” Patton said. “I’d hug you, but then I’d cover you in cat fur.”

“It’s just a rehearsal.” Roman said, but his cheeks were flushed, and he waved at the three of them to join his crew milling on the stage. They stepped into the seats, where some other friends and family members were watching, which Patton stopped to greet by name.
“It’s a community thing.” Patton said, sitting down and picking the cat fur off piece by piece. “Roman’s been coming here since he was old enough to climb on the stage by himself. They’re all really close.”

Roman was telling a big, loud and dramatic story that involved pointing out Virgil in the seats, who raised a hand in a wave like a deer in headlights.

“He was really excited to bring you guys here.” Patton said, leaning on his palm with a distant smile. “It’s where he feels the most at home.”

Logan looked around, and though it didn’t look like anything special, there was a rather contagious energy. Something he couldn’t describe. Logan certainly never had a place like this growing up.

It was fascinating to watch, but Logan didn’t understand a lot of what was going on. So he asked Patton, since he said he’d been watching these for years, and Patton eagerly answered all his questions about blocking and stage management and even the history of the building.

“Usually they practice the lights too, but the light tech moved away last year.” Patton said, pointing at the huge unused lights. “The stage manager runs them, but she’s busy during rehearsal.”

“Do they have a light booth?” Virgil asked, having been otherwise, watching Roman repeat the same lines over and over.


Virgil shrugged, picking at his nails. “Probably not. My sister used to do lights for the choir, and I always sat in the booth with her during performances.”

“But you saw how she did them, right?” Patton asked, with a glint in his eye that wasn’t from the rhinestones on his glasses.

“Well, yeah. She’d let me run the cues sometimes.” Virgil said. “It was fun, but I wouldn’t say I knew how to do them.”

“One sec.” Patton said, climbing over the back of the chair and striding away.

“What’s he doing?” Virgil asked, nervous.

“If I had to guess, speaking with the stage manager on your behalf in order to run the lights.” Logan replied.

“Why would he do that?” Virgil was a little panicked.

“Because while you may not be a trained tech, they merely need someone to run the lights during rehearsal. At that point, anyone is better than no one, correct?”

“But what if I mess it up?” Virgil hissed.

“It’s a rehearsal.” Logan said, flatly amused. “Roman just accidentally threw a fake chicken across the stage. It’s fine, if you said no, I’m sure Patton would accept your answer.”

Virgil sighed. “But... I did used to love watching from the booth, and helping my sister. And they seem really cool, and it looks like fun to be a part of something like this. And it would mean I could spend more time with Roman.”

Logan merely raised his eyebrow, because Virgil had talked himself into it without his help.
“Shut up.” Virgil crossed his arms.

“I didn’t say anything.”

When Patton brought over the stage manager, Virgil agreed to give running the light cues a shot, and they were super excited to have his help. The stage manager led Virgil up the stairs to the booth, while Patton flopped back into his chair, pleased.

“Why didn’t you offer to run the lights yourself?” Logan asked, curious. Patton was here constantly, he said, but he was only an audience member himself.

“I used to be a background cast member when needed, but I don’t have the time since I started university.” Patton explained, feet up on the seat in front of him. “Between volunteering and school work and everything, if I want to pass pre-vet I had to choose my commitments wisely. This community company is great, and yeah they only meet weekly right now, but leading up to a show it’s a daily commitment, and I don’t want to put them out when I can’t be here for that.”

Logan nodded, watching Roman perform on the stage in a confident stride, gesturing in wide projecting movements, and after a moment a bright spotlight illuminated his figure.

When the rehearsal was over, they all went to where Patton and Roman lived. It was a town house near the university, with a suite basement and some roommates in the upstairs half. They went to the basement, where Patton had home-made pizza shells ready to be decorated and put in the oven.

Virgil and Logan decided to share a pizza between the two of them, because they were both firmly against pineapple, unlike Patton and Roman who took great joy in covering theirs. They put music on and Roman danced and sang loud, and made a big show to make them laugh. He grinned at the attention, and played it up, feigning offence when Virgil critiqued his dance moves.

They had pointed the individual sides of the suite, and Logan inspected Patton’s books, drawn to the bookcase of any room he entered. There was a bunch of young adult novels, all looking like coming of age romances, then a ton heavy animal science and pre-vet textbooks taking up two shelves, and finally some classics like Shakespeare, first aid manuals, and a couple colourful notebooks.

The first aid manuals stuck out to him, because there was five identical books, and he picked one up to flick through it.

“My mum teaches first aid.” Patton explained, coming to his side. “I’ve taken it a couple times. I do life-guarding in the summer so I usually recertify.”

Logan noticed how the drowning and CPR treatment were sticky noted. “I’m beginning to wonder how you have any free time.”

Patton laughed, and swayed to push against him for a moment. “I like to keep busy.”

“And you like to help people.” Logan noted.

Patton’s cheeks flushed. “Well, yeah. What’s the point of it all if not to ease suffering?”

Logan had no answer to that, so he didn’t reply, putting the book back on the shelf.

They checked on the pizzas and took them out, Patton not letting Roman have the knife and insisting cutting them up himself.

“You accidentally cut yourself one time and you’re never allowed to touch a knife again.” Roman
bemoaned.

“We had to go to the hospital, Roman. Let’s leave the knife work to the adults.” Patton said, with a very pretend kind of sweetness.

“You’re only six months older than me, Pat!”

Virgil looked interested. “Where? Did it scar?”

Roman huffed, but held out his hand, showing a darkened line on his palm by his thumb. “Seven stitches.”

“Cool.” Virgil said, tracing the faintly raised line and make Roman shiver. “But Patton’s right, you’re never allowed to touch a knife again.”

Patton gave Virgil a fist bump. Logan tipped his head, examining the placement, and said, “You’re lucky you didn’t damage the nerves in your hand.”

Roman sighed. “That’s what they said. It was just a mistake! I promised I wouldn’t do it again.”

No one gave him a knife. But they did hand out the pizza.

They talked about Roman’s rehearsal as they ate. He was very pleased that Virgil had been doing the lights, joking about all his focus being on him.

“Oh and I need to go find some props for our stage manager this week.” Roman said, happily eating a piece of pineapple. “If you wanted to come, Virgil. I was thinking maybe the day after tomorrow.”

“Can’t. I have plans with Logan.” Virgil replied.

That was news to Logan. He turned and raised his eyebrows at his best friend. “You do?”

Virgil rolled his eyes. “Thursday is your birthday, L.”

Patton whirled to Logan. “It’s your birthday?”

Logan blinked. “It’s November already?”

“Yeah, L.” Virgil laughed, and nudged him with his shoulder. “Every year on Logan’s birthday we go to the movies.”

“That sounds fun!” Patton said.

Virgil gave Logan a silent look of: ‘we should invite them’. Logan huffed, and said, “You two can come if you want.”

“I’d love to!” Patton said immediately.

“It would be my pleasure.” Roman said.

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The problem being, of course, that spending the whole day in class then going out for the evening gave very little time to study.

About an hour before they were supposed to meet up with Roman and Patton, it occurred to Logan
that if he went out, there was no way he could get his required five hours of studying. With this in mind, he approached Virgil, who was quietly swearing over an essay on the couch.

“I don’t think I should attend tonight.” Logan said.

“Attend?” Virgil pulled his headphones around his neck. “L, it’s your birthday. What’s this about?” Logan tried not to fidget, but found himself rubbing his sore hand anyway. “I have too much studying to do to go out.”

“Again, it’s your birthday. Take the night off.” Logan shook his head, because he thought about how he had to study for five hours every day, or he would fail, and lose everything. He couldn’t just not do that. “I have a strict study schedule I need to abide by.”

Virgil put his laptop aside, facing Logan seriously. “Yeah, and isn’t it like, scientifically proven that taking breaks is good for you? And it improves the amount of information you absorb. And once again, can’t stress this enough bud, it’s your birthday.”

The heat on the back of his hand was like a fire. Itchy. “I can’t, there is an optimal amount of study time each day that I need to adhere to.”

Virgil’s eyes narrowed, just a little. “And what do you think will happen if you don’t?”

“I will fail, of course.” That just made sense.

“You’ll fail if you take one night off to see a movie on your birthday?” Virgil said, blankly. “Which I should note we’ve done every year in the past and you’ve never failed.”

“This is our senior year.” Logan pointed out, as the heat in his neck flared unbearably. He needed to go study. And maybe wash his hands. And not have this conversation. “I cannot become lax or my discipline will fail and I won’t pass my classes.”

“It’s time for me to be the one to point this out apparently, and I can definitely see now how you always see it so easily — that’s catastrophization, L.”

“Studying to do well is not blowing things out of proportion.” Logan defended.

“No, but believing that there is a certain amount of time you need to study each day or you will be guaranteed to fail is. In fact, a better word I might use is a compulsion.”

Logan definitely didn’t want to be having this conversation again. “I’ve told you before, Virgil, I don’t have OCD.”

Virgil’s eyes flickered to his folded dry hands, and before he could say anything, Logan defended with a touch of anger. “Studying and washing your hands are normal and necessary activities that everyone engages in, it is important to maintain a study schedule and a proper hygiene routine. There is nothing wrong with me.”

His hands were shaking, and he hid them behind his back, as his heart beat hard in his ears, the anger washing up and down like an unsteady tide.

Virgil swallowed. “I’m sorry. I’m upsetting you on your birthday. Listen. We’ve still got an hour, why don’t you go study until then?”
Logan breathed purposefully, and said, “I still think I should stay.”

“Roman and Patton are coming, do you think they’ll let you get away with that? Especially Patton? You saw him at rehearsal when he set me up with the lights — he knows how to get what he wants. Go on, get as much done as you can in an hour.”

Logan went, the fight draining out of him. He tried and failed to study, and after ten minutes he came back out to see Virgil still sitting on the couch, pulling on his hair.

“I apologize for snapping at you.” Logan said, hands behind his back.

Virgil loosened his fingers in his hair, and shuddered a breath. “I’m sorry. It’s just. I... I worry about you, man.”

“That is unnecessary.” Logan said immediately, then hesitated because this was just getting right back into what they were fighting about it. “But I appreciate it, and considering your anxious disposition I understand why you feel the need to voice your concerns. Please trust me when I say that I am fine.”

“Only if you promise me that you’ll tell me the moment you’re not.” Virgil said, very serious.

Logan gave the request due consideration, and nodded. “I promise.”

Virgil stuck out his pinky finger. Logan flickered a smile at the corner of his mouth, and stepped forward to twine his own together in a binding pinky promise.

“I’ll hold you to that.” Virgil said, some of the tension relaxing out of his shoulders.

Logan didn’t go back to studying, instead he joined Virgil on the couch and thoroughly beat him in Mario Kart, until his best friend was laughing and not frowning like it was a hobby. When Roman and Patton arrived, Virgil was busy beating Logan to death with a pillow for red-shelling him.

“Killing someone on their birthday is terribly rude, Virgil.” Roman said, sounding deeply amused.

Logan pushed Virgil successfully off at last, who collapsed on the floor wheezing with laughter.

“Happy birthday!” Patton said, stepping over Virgil to excitedly hug Logan. It made his heart stutter in that painful way, lungs catching, before he squeezed back. Patton pulled him to arm's length and added cheerfully: “I made you a cake!”

“You made me a cake.” Logan repeated, blankly surprised.

Patton nodded half a dozen times, and took his hand to drag him to their kitchen where a cake was set on the counter. Behind him, Roman was graciously helping Virgil up and following them.

The cake was blue, circular, two tiered. It said, 'Happy Birthday Logan!' And had stars painted on in gold glitter. During a study break in which the two of them had shared crunchy granola and talked about everything under the sun, Logan had gone on a long rant about his love of astronomy, and Patton must’ve remembered that.

“It’s wonderful, thank you.” Logan said, and took a picture with his phone, because the stars were connected in the actual Scorpius constellation and it was so cool.

Patton cut up the cake and shared it, and it was vanilla with whipped cream and strawberries in the middle.
“It’s the only way I can get Roman to eat fruit.” Patton said cheerfully, passing it over.

“Not true. I willingly eat fruit all the time.” Roman said.

“The dried fruit in your cereal doesn’t count.” Patton sing-songed.

Roman made an offended noise.

“This is super good, Patton.” Virgil said, with a strawberry on the end of his fork.

"It's delicious.” Logan added.

“Yes, you are truly a star.” Roman winked at Patton.

“It was my pleasure!” Patton said, and he did look very pleased.

“Oh, and I have a present for you, birthday boy!” Roman dropped his plate on the counter and fetched a sparkly gift bag.

“Shit, me too, hold on.” Virgil disappeared into his room, coming back with something behind his back. “I didn’t wrap it though.”

“It’s fine.” Logan said automatically, taking the gift bag from Roman. Buried inside tissue paper was a royal red tie, soft and pretty. “Oh, I like that.”

“You do?” Roman smiled.

“Yes.” Logan held it up to his throat, admiring the colour. “Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome.” Roman nodded, firm.

“And me,” Virgil revealed his gift — a gigantic package of his favourite type of pens, in every colour.

“Bless you.” Logan said, taking them eagerly. “I’d almost run out.”

“I got you.” Virgil gave double finger guns.

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Later, after the movie, after everyone picked apart the cheesy action flick they’d seen, after they had some more cake and Logan thanked everyone more than once for going out of their way to do something for his birthday, he laid awake in bed.

Two things. Number one: he didn’t understand his friends, why they would insist he celebrate his birthday, go out of their way to get him cake and presents and to get out and see a movie. It didn’t make sense to him at all, that he would be important enough to justify it. That he somehow now had three whole friends who cared enough to do so.

Number two: he had not studied enough, not gotten anywhere near his required five hours. And despite himself, he thought about what Virgil said, about how it was a compulsion. But Logan knew it was only a compulsion if he had to do it, and he didn’t have to. He could just... go to bed without studying. It was fine, it was his birthday, he’d studied for a little earlier.

The longer he laid there, the more the terrible feeling in his chest grew. If he didn’t study, he would fail. He wouldn’t cement the concepts in his mind. He would fall behind on his schedule, he would
lose an assignment, he would fail his finals and lose his scholarship money and lose his degree and not graduate and he would — everything would fall apart, and wouldn’t it just be easier to get up and study? Wouldn’t it just make more sense to study now? Wouldn’t it just be easier, nicer, kinder, a damn relief to just sit up and study so that it was all —

Logan sat up and studied for the rest of the night, until the relief came, until the itch under his skin stopped, and everything was okay again. Even if he barely slept before his morning class, it was okay. It was all okay.
Logan was trying really hard to feel happy for Virgil. His best friend had a great boyfriend who made him laugh and they did tons of stuff together. Virgil, who usually had to be convinced to go to the grocery store, was constantly hanging out with Roman, studying or playing games or getting coffee. And while obviously it was somewhat of a honeymoon period, it still... it worried Logan.

In a purely selfish, defeatist sort of way. That Virgil had found someone better, that he didn’t have a need for Logan as his friend anymore. That he had finally grown bored of Logan, and he was going to leave him.

This was inevitable, Logan knew, but he’d gotten so used to being best friends with Virgil. They relied on each other.

And he recognized it as an alien feeling, one that did not need to be entertained. It was just a sad thought he had when he came home multiple nights in a row to find Virgil already out. And though Logan was studying anyway, he still found himself thinking, okay, this is the beginning of the end. He will leave me soon.

Logan was studying when his phone rang. He was on campus, even though it was past dinner, because Virgil was out with Roman and he didn’t really see the point of making the effort to go back to their empty apartment.

It was, peculiarly, Roman who was calling him. Logan answered, "Hello?"

"Hi Logan." Roman said, rushed, kind of out of breath. "Um. Can you come over? Virgil has asked that you come over, like right now. If you can."

Logan’s eyes narrowed, as his mind provided him with the logical explanations for this call, and landed on the unsettling conclusion that Virgil was having some kind of panic attack and required Logan to assist him. "Yes, of course. I am fifteen minutes away. I would suggest giving him some space."

"Space, yes, I am, um, okay, you're on your way?"

"Yes." He was already packing up his stuff.

When he arrived at the townhouse, Roman met him in the porch and led him to the basement. It was quiet, except that the bathroom door was closed, light on underneath.

"He's in there." Roman said, all jumbled and jumpy, wringing his hands together.

Logan knocked twice on the door, clear and calm. The lock unclicked, and Logan let himself in, and
locked it again behind him.

Virgil was on the floor, arms wrapped around his legs, burying his face in his knees, shaking from head to toe. Logan sat with space between them, knowing Virgil would close the distance if he desired. He didn't bother asking what was wrong -- it was obvious something was, and Virgil would say when he was ready.

"I need you to take me home." Virgil said, muffled.

"Okay." Logan said.

Virgil trembled, but didn't move. Logan ventured, "Do I need to kill Roman?"

"No! No." Virgil shook his head frantically, and gave a weak, hurting laugh. "No, he's fine. I'm the fucked up one. I ruined it. I can't... I have to go. Please take me home."

"If that's what you want." Logan replied.

"Can you like... fuck. I don't know. Go out there and tell him that I'm going and that I don't want to talk or something? I can't... I just need to escape."

Logan stood up, and cracked open the door. Roman was waiting, chewing on his thumb, and looked up with worried eyes.

"I'm going to take him home." Logan said. "And he doesn't want to talk, but I'll text you once we get home. Okay?" The last part he added merely because Roman looked so concerned.

Roman agreed quickly, and Logan nodded, closing the door again and turning to crouch in front of Virgil. "Alright. How are we doing this?"

Virgil sniffed, holding out his hand, and Logan took it tightly to help him up with his weak knees. Then Virgil popped his hood, and hid in Logan's side. Arm wrapped around his shoulders, Logan professionally led Virgil from the bathroom, nodding at Roman as he left up the basement stairs and into the November chill.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Virgil was murmuring. "What the hell is he going to think of me now? I ruined everything. I always ruin everything. I'm so fucking stupid."

"You are in the middle of a panic attack, that is not stupid." Logan told him clinically, not letting him go. It was a bit of a walk home, and public transit seemed like a no, so he pulled out his phone. "I'm going to get an Uber."

He got an Uber, and Virgil didn't speak a word the whole ride back. He let go of Logan except for his arm, which he gripped tightly with both hands.

It was almost dark as they made it back to their own apartment, and once inside Virgil began to pace the room. "Why did I do that? Why did I fucking do that?"

Logan leaned against the kitchen counter, watching him move back and forth, wearing a hole in the floor. He texted Roman: 'we made it home safe thank you for calling'.

"What triggered the attack?" Logan asked out loud, because if he was going to help he needed context.

"God! It's stupid! It's always stupid! Why can't I just have normal reactions to stuff?" Virgil tugged
on his hair. "He just like... he was being super sweet and he called me his boyfriend and I was like oh that's nice and then the implications hit me that he's tying himself to me and he doesn't even know the full extent of how fucked up I am, and how I'm going to drag him into the gutter if he lets me, and now, now, now he definitely fucking knows! Because I locked myself in his bathroom to freak out and made him call you! Oh my God!"

"Virgil, first of all, you need to breathe."

"I can't!" Virgil threw his hands in the air, as he continued to irritably pace. "I cannot breathe! I'm going to die!"

"No, you're not. You've been here before, it won't kill you. But it will make you light headed, so deep breaths from the diaphragm." Logan said patiently, looking at his phone.

Roman had texted, 'is he angry with me?'

Logan replied, 'no. i will get him to text you as soon as he is able.'

Which could take a little bit. Virgil struggled to breathe, feet moving, hands yanking on his dark hair. He said, "That's it. I had a great boyfriend for all of ten seconds and I ruined it. I can't believe myself."

"I do not believe your relationship status has changed." Logan said, putting his phone down on the counter. "Virgil, I understand that your body is in fight or flight mode, but it is very imperative that you breathe properly so we can begin to counter your anxious thoughts with more logical ones."

"There's nothing to counter." Virgil argued, continuing to move frantically. "That's it. I can never go back."

"I think that would make Roman very upset." Logan said. "He is very concerned on your behalf. He believes that he did something wrong."

"He didn't, I'm just a time bomb. It was about time I finally fucking burst. I was just-- I was so happy, hanging out with him, and I was trying so hard not to ruin it with my anxiety but I did. I can't -- I can't do anything right. We were so good before I let this happen."

"You did not let anything happen." Logan said, still patient, still watching. "Your anxiety is as much a part of you as anything else. If Roman is to be in a relationship with you, it should be with the entirety of you. This includes the part where you experience heightened anxiety."

"But he shouldn't have to."

"You seem to believe that your anxiety is a poison you inflict on others." Logan said, tilting his head. "You said, before, I will drag him down into the gutter. Do you believe that is what you've done in other relationships in your life? With your sister, with me?"

"Well if you didn't know me, you wouldn't be standing here wasting your evening talking me down from the stupidest panic attack of all time." Virgil said, kicking at the floor, voice full of bitterness. "So, I mean, yeah."

Well, he really wasn't going to mention this, but... "I do not think you understand your importance to me in my life. You are my best friend, Virgil, and I would not trade you or your anxiety for anyone in the world. Earlier today I was even selfishly being envious of the time you were spending with Roman, concerned that you might find him a better companion than I."
That finally made Virgil stop moving, turning to face Logan. "Wait, you're jealous? Really?"

The word was like a punch, but he was the one who admitted it -- to prove a point. "You are very, very important to me. I have always feared that you would grow bored of my presence."

Virgil stared at him for a full moment, still trembling, and said, mystified, "I could never -- L, come on, you know I ..." he sighed, rubbing his face. "You know I would never leave you. And if I was really someone who was dragging people down into the gutter, then... okay, okay, I get your point, but we're going to discuss this later. I still flipped out when he called me his boyfriend. And that's ... that's really sucky."

"It sucks." Logan agreed, because it did. "But I don't think you've scared him away. I think a good step going forward would be to contact him and explain the extent of your anxiety, so he understands where you are coming from. At the moment, he is in the dark, correct?"

Virgil nodded miserably. "I couldn't explain... I say dumb stuff like, this makes me nervous, or uneasy, or whatever, but I haven't like... told him that it consumes my every waking moment, or whatever."

"So discuss it with him." Logan said simply. "Set up ground rules and boundaries, and then in the future instead of hiding, you can talk to him. Tell him why you're anxious, or even give him tips on how you prefer to be dealt with in a panic attack."

"I'd rather it was you." Virgil said. "I mean it -- I could never replace you, L."

A curious weight off his shoulders. "I appreciate the sentiment. But it is better for you if you have more individuals who are capable of assisting you in times of distress."

"Yeah, yeah. Uh. Thanks for coming, by the way. I was just. Freaking out and I felt super trapped. And the only thing I could think was that you would come and fix it, and you did. I get that you're... apprehensive of me replacing you, but it could never happen, man. You're my best friend."

"I know that." Logan said, and since it was him who brought it up in the first place, he amended. "Logically, I know that. I... I haven't had a best friend before. It is an irrational fear of losing you."

"Definitely irrational, because I'm not going anywhere." Virgil said, and crossed the room to hug him. He squeezed really tightly so all the air oof'ed out of Logan. "Thank you for telling me about your fear."

It seemed silly now. But he was kind of glad he had. "You are crushing my ribs."

"You don't need them." Virgil said, not letting go, and Logan sighed before trying to crush him back.

When they let go, Logan said, "Call Roman."

"I don't want to." Virgil replied, plainly.

"I think Roman experienced a fair amount of panic himself at your reaction. It would be kinder to put him out of his misery and discuss the situation with him. Unless you do not wish to be his boyfriend?"

"No! I do. I definitely do." Virgil rubbed his face again, and looked at his phone. He took a deep breath, murmured, "Like a band-aid." And dialled. It rang only once before Roman answered it. And when they began to talk, haltingly, Logan squeezed Virgil's hand, and left him to it.
Patton and Logan had their usual table in the library, sharing package of trail mix and moved wildly off topic from their studying. It was alright -- Logan had been there all day already, and it was nice to just talk about stuff with Patton.

His study partner talked about how he had been certified as dyslexic and raved about the improved quality of his education since then. The audiobooks especially, which took the hardest part of studying out of the equation, the part where he had to sit down and physically read his textbook.

Which had somehow led to talking about Star Trek. Logan loved the show, having watched almost every iteration when he was growing up, and Patton had gotten into it recently with the newly released movies. They were discussing the differences between the two, which was a particularly engaging topic for Logan. He gestured a lot, speaking in a ramble that he would normally restrain himself from for the sake of his conversation partner.

But Patton was just as involved as him, and was leaning forward in his chair to listen, to ask questions, and stick in terrible jokes. One even was bad enough to make Logan laugh.

Immediate self-consciousness washed over him, and Logan covered his grinning mouth with his hand, forcing down the amusement so it wouldn't show. It was automatic, thoughtless.

Patton's face went from gleeful to a slower, more careful thing, with his eyebrows drawn up. He said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"You just did." Logan replied, because he didn't really want to know what kind of question would come with that expression.

Patton flickered a smile, then said, "Then another. Why do you hide your face when you smile?"

He should've guessed. Logan tapped his fingers together, and shrugged, looking away.

"Come on." Patton coaxed. "I know you must do it for a reason, every time you smile or laugh you always cover your mouth with your hand. What's the problem?"

"There's no problem." Logan defended, and Patton gave him a skeptical look. "No, really. I just... I don't have a good smile."

"Well I disagree entirely." Patton said, prompt and immediate. "I was just asking because I thought it was such a shame you covered it up all the time. It's wonderful."

Logan's neck felt hot, the nerves like electricity. But Patton was wrong, based on previous evidence. He shook his head, "Thank you for saying so, but I have been informed by multiple sources that it is not the case."

Patton's face went rather stony, unmoving. "Who said that?"

Logan shrugged again, neck too hot. "It's unimportant."

"No." Patton sounded a little dangerous, and reached up to adjust his rhinestone glasses that glinted in the bright library lights. "They're unimportant. Anyone who would say that to you is not worth your mental energy."

Logan swallowed, that rock returning to his throat, and he said, "Statistically, I'm inclined to believe them when informed by multiple sources."
"All of them wrong. Do you trust me, Lo?"

"Do I trust you?"

"Yeah."

Logan looked at the boy across from him -- kind eyes, parted lips, brown curls, a jacket with a patch for lifeguarding, and every single sweet thing he'd done for Logan. He had not yet been given a reason not to trust him. So he said, "Yes, Patton. I trust you."

Patton nodded, firm and pleased. "Then trust me when I say you have a brilliant smile that makes me really happy every time I see it. Those people who said those nasty things to you, do you trust them to tell you the truth? Would you trust them even with a goldfish?"

Logan scratched the back of his hands. They itched. His neck was still too hot. But Patton was correct -- he did not trust the bullies he grew up with. "No."

Patton beamed. "Exactly. So, just... keep that in mind, okay? I love to see you smile."

Maybe Logan could smile just for Patton, then. No one else. He said, "Alright."

Later, Logan thought about the conviction in his voice, how Patton went out of his way to make sure that Logan understood how much he cared, and he didn't have to do that. But he did. And those confusing feelings in his brain swirled around, all begging for attention.

He didn't know what it meant. So he pretended it meant nothing at all.

[]

Often things seem to go wrong at once. Logan slept through his alarm, because he'd been up late studying. He had a very important project due date coming up and he was very stressed about it. His bus was late because it had snowed the night before, and everyone had forgotten how to drive, even with only less than an inch of snow. He only managed to catch the bus at the time his class was meant to start, and he realized that he was going to miss it.

Logan never missed a class, not once. What if they said something important during the class? He knew other people skipped class all the time, but Logan didn't. His future was too important to him, if he missed a class, he might miss some vitally important information, something that would mean he would fail without knowing it.

But there was nothing he could do -- by the time he made it to campus, he class was almost over. Panicked, but having another class to attend, he went to the next one. The fear sat on him the whole time. After that, it was the library, except that when he got there he accidently sunk his fingers into something mushy and wet on the chair.

A hundred options ran through his head, but the most prominent was -- *this is some biological material and I need to wash it off right now.* Something contaminated. Even after he inspected and determined it was just something sticky, like food, his brain kept going -- *what if it was something bad, what if it was dangerous, what if you just touched your phone, now it's on your phone, now you're doomed, you need to, you need to --*

That unbearable feeling was back in his chest, like an expanding balloon, except it didn't seem to cease, it only grew bigger and bigger, suffocating him in a shroud of panic. He fled with shaking hands, going to the bathroom and washing them six times before realizing it wasn't going to be enough, it felt like it had coated his skin, the foreign substance could've been on any inch of him. If
he left immediately, he could get home and shower and make it back in time for afternoon class. So he did that, without even hesitating. The only possible way to alleviate the loud and consuming pressure in his chest was with a shower, nerves in his neck bright hot, and it just seemed reasonable to make a quick trip home to calm down and clean himself off.

Except. That he got home and into the shower, and scrubbed under scalding hot water, and got out and cleaned his phone and his bag and put his clothes in the washer, but it felt like since he touched all that stuff again, he should shower again because the contamination could've been transferred from there, so he just quickly got back in. When he got out, he realized since he touched the sink the faucet would be contaminated, so he cleaned that, then the whole bathroom for good measure, and argued with himself about whether or not he needed to take another shower. When he looked at the time he realized with a heart-stopping clarity that he had also missed his afternoon class.

He stood there in the bathroom for a horrible moment, heart pounding in his ears, and absolutely thunderstruck with himself. It occurred to him, in a wild, chaotic way, that he was not in control. That he was sitting in the car and it was careening in heart-stopping circles, wheel spinning, brakes out of order, and he was absolutely helpless.

Logan did the only thing he could possibly do with this revelation. He washed his hands, hoping to get the feeling of contamination off his skin, that he could be free of this helpless feeling. But it only swallowed him back in again, even as his hands screamed, a patchy red engulfing every skin of the abused skin, begging him that he needed to just wash one more time, to be sure, did he get under his nails? Did he touch something new?

There were footsteps in the hall. Virgil appeared, and a rush of shame overtook Logan, but he couldn't stop. Out of control. A slave to the impulse in his brain.

Virgil reached out and shut off the taps. Logan stood there for a second, staring at the soapy water swirling down the drain. His best friend hissed in sympathy at the sight of his hands, which were growing red spots now that they were no longer under a stream of water, exposing a dozen bleeding lines of broken skin. He grabbed a towel and dried them for Logan when he didn't move, and grabbed the gauze and anti-septic. It stung so badly Logan flinched away in his grip, but then they were wrapped and Logan hugged his painful hands to his chest.

"Virgil." Logan said, heart still pounding, mind still begging him to take the bandages off and wash them again, still agonizing over not one, but two missed classes, and the fact that with all this useless washing, he hadn't studied for the required five hours.

"Yeah, L?"

He had made a promise to his best friend, it was time he fulfilled it. "I'm not fine."

Virgil sighed sadly. "No, I don't think you are. Come, let's go sit down. You're shaking."

They went to Logan's room and he carefully crawled on the bed.

"Have you eaten?" Virgil asked.

"I'm not hungry." Logan said, because he was imagining touching food with his hands to eat it, and what if he was contaminated?

"How about a drink? I can make tea."

If he had tea he could avoid touching the lip of the drink. But... he hesitated, feeling ashamed and stupid, but asking, "If you... if you wash your hands first."
"I will wash my hands just once." Virgil said. "If you promise to drink the tea I bring."

"I promise."

Virgil left. Logan tried to breathe. It wasn't really working -- his throat had closed to a pinhole. Everything... everything fell apart at once. He was so fucked. He missed two classes. He hadn't studied. He had washed his hands so badly they throbbed in his lap, distracting and endlessly stinging and hot. Logan didn't so much start to cry as he was already crying and noticed because his glasses began to fog up.

He took them off, putting them on his bedside table, and pressed his palms into his eye-sockets. Pushing hard like it might make the tears retreat. It did not -- it only seemed to make it worse.

It had been an extremely long time since Logan last cried, to the point where he could not remember when that was. He'd never been much of a crier. Even when in pain, he mostly just got frustrated, not teary. He didn't understand why it was all overflowing like this. He didn't understand at all.

Virgil came back, putting the mug down on the bedside table, and perching on the side of the bed. He said, in a lost voice, "Oh, L."

"I'm sorry." Logan croaked, moving his hands to futilely try and wipe away the tears that only seemed to be getting started.

"It's okay." Virgil said, wringing his hands in his lap, staring at Logan with hurting eyes. "Um. What do you need?"

Logan didn't know what he needed. He hadn't cried in so long, he had no idea what helped. If anything did. He said, "I don't know."

Virgil bit his lip, looking a little helpless himself, at seeing Logan's unsteadiness, the broken composure, and said, "Um. A hug? A hug might help."

Logan sniffed, and opened his arms. He figured Virgil wanted the hug, so it wouldn't hurt to give it to him.

Except that it did hurt. Virgil hugged him tightly, close warmth and pressure, and all the loose ends in Logan's mind shuddered and trembled and he pressed burning eyes into Virgil's shoulder. Falling apart in a sliding avalanche, ice off a cliff. All at once.

It was senseless, the sobbing, how it punched his chest and left his fingers swimming with light-headedness. Was crying supposed to hurt this much, or was he just doing it wrong, like he did everything wrong? If it was, Virgil did not say so, just holding on like he had nowhere else to be.

"It's okay, L." Virgil repeated, quiet voice near his ear. "It's gonna be okay."

Virgil didn't know that, but Logan appreciated the sentiment and tried to absorb it, tried to let it take comfort and help with the wobbling chaos inside him. He pressed his crying face harder into Virgil's neck, fingers curling in the back of his shirt. He wanted to believe it, but at that moment it felt more like nothing would ever be okay, ever again.

Logan felt disgusted with himself, gross writhing insides, and pushed Virgil away to furiously wipe at his eyes, angry purely at himself.

"Here." Virgil let him go, and reached around to pass him the steaming mug of tea. "It'll help."
Logan was almost shaking too much to raise the mug to his mouth, but managed a small sip, then another, and it highlighted how thirsty he was when it burnt a path down his throat. He drank about half before he had to put it down, returning to the very futile endeavour of trying to clean his face from tears that wouldn't stop.

"Did something happen?" Virgil asked.

"I suppose." Logan said, and then shook his head. "I don't know. I'm having a very unreasonable reaction."

"Can you explain what you mean?"

Logan struggled through an inhale. Shuddering, wet. He swallowed, and tried to voice his jumbled thoughts, "I missed two classes because I can't control it anymore. I can't. It controls me."

Virgil gnawed on his lip, eyes flickering to Logan's bandaged hands. "Okay. We can email your profs and tell them you were sick."

"I wasn't."

"Mental health counts too. Where's your laptop?"

Logan gave it to him, and Virgil typed out emails to both of the instructed professors, asking if there was anything super important that he missed. He knew Logan well enough that it was his top priority.

Logan finished the tea while he watched Virgil solve his most immediate problem, and then pulled his legs up to his chest and sniffed through the heaviness in his lungs.

"What happened exactly, L?" Virgil asked gently, putting the laptop aside.

"You were right." Logan said, muffled into his knees. "It's... it's a compulsion to study, and to wash my hands. I... I was up very late working, and I slept through my alarm, and the bus was late, and I missed my first class. Then I touched something on campus that I became obsessed with being contaminated, and came home to shower before my afternoon class... except I didn't make it back. I just..."

Logan shuddered. It seemed all so stupid when he said it out loud.

"I'm not happy to be right." Virgil said quietly. "I don't want you to suffer, L. I just want you to get the help you need. And now that's directly interfering with your life..."

"Are you suggesting therapy?" Logan said, raising his head. "Pot meet kettle."

Virgil's ears turned red. "I know. I know, you've been saying for years that I should. Why don't we cut a deal, then? We can both go to the student support center together. Okay?"

Logan struggled with that. "I don't know."

Virgil gently took Logan's sore hands. "It doesn't have to be like this. I know you felt like... that your actions were normal, which they are. Studying and washing your hands are normal, necessary things. But there's too much of a good thing, you know that. It's interfering with your life, actively hurting you, and you can't stop. No control, you said. The idea of therapy is to get back control. Right?"

"It feels like giving up."
Virgil sighed. "I know. I feel the same way. That I've been dealing my anxiety my whole life, I should be able to just keep dealing with it on my own terms. But maybe it'd be good for me to get some better coping mechanisms. If me going to therapy will get you to go as well, then, that is a win to me. Less about giving up and more about, like... working with yourself instead of against."

"Can I think about it?"

"Yeah, of course." Virgil said. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know." Logan replied honestly.

"What do you usually do when you're upset?"

"I don't."

"You don't get upset?"

"I don't do anything, I... push it away. But now I can't."

"Well that sounds healthy. Okay, um, well we're not going to study and we're not going to wash our hands, but anything else you want to do, we can. If it's go to sleep, or watch a movie, or anything."

"I should study..." Logan murmured.

"No, you should not. I will physically not allow it. Try again."

If wouldn't be so incredibly embarrassing, Logan almost wanted Patton there. But he couldn't stand the thought of being seen like this by anyone but Virgil.

He thought about it, about being sick, what he did when it was physical, and hoped it applied to mental. "We could listen to music."

"Sounds good." Virgil took out his phone. "Any requests?"

Logan had none. Virgil played a band he'd gotten into recently, PVRIS. Heart still beating a little too hard, Logan leaned back against his covers and gestured for Virgil to make himself comfortable as well. His best friend leaned against his side, warm and steady, and Logan stared at the ceiling with burning eyes, desperately not wanting to resume crying, but unable to stop the tide of thoughts and the waves of pain in his hands.

But the words in the music distracted him, once he thought to listen, and the pressure in his chest eased increment by increment, until he was shaky but stable. And Virgil did not leave, even when Logan spotted him texting Roman that he wouldn't be able to hang out. Logan tried to feel guilty at that, but only felt relief.

Relief, a much better kind than if he would go and wash his hands to ease the obsessive thoughts. Because Virgil stayed, the relief he brought stayed, unlike the obsessive thoughts which always came back.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

it's all a body can bear
with bad luck in the air
but i'm letting you know, don't go there
- bad luck again by the RAA

Chapter Notes

slides this in right before camp nano starts and takes all my time lmao

Logan did insist on returning to school the next day. He felt entirely off-balance, having not studied at all, and it was only after a long conversation with Virgil did he explain how he felt like he needed to study for ten hours to make up for it, and they logically discussed how that would be an unreasonable thing to do, but it was haunting him. Like an annoying ghost.

Virgil also insisted that Logan keep the bandages on while at school. Normally he took them off so he could wash his hands, but with how much he'd fucked up his hands, it would be detrimental to both remove the protective bandages and wash them more. They settled on a compromise where Logan wore his winter gloves longer than necessary, and used Purell instead of washing his hands.

The uncentered, almost dizzy feeling was sitting on his chest as he studied in the library. He was trying to take it easy like Virgil recommended, but having a hard time following through in the actual moment. That huge project still needed to be finished, and finals were an ever-increasing presence.

Patton arrived with two cups, beaming as he put one down in front of Logan. "I brought tea! I texted Virgil to ask what you put in your coffee and he told me you weren't allowed coffee and to have mint tea."

"Of course." Logan rolled his eyes, but took the tea. "Thank you, Patton."

Patton smiled, and threw down his stuff, sitting across from him. "Why aren't you allowed coffee?"

"Virgil is being overprotective." Logan replied, and when he lifted the cup to his mouth he saw the moment that Patton locked on his bandaged hands.

"Oh." Patton said. "Um."

"It's my fault." Logan explained, pulling his hands into his sleeves, leaving just his itchy fingers exposed. "Don't worry about it."

"I thought you said they were just dry?"

"They're dry because of me." Logan sighed. He was unsure of how much he wanted to explain, but Patton was looking at him with such sincerely concerned eyes, so he said, "I tend to wash my hands
"I'm stressed a lot when I'm stressed."

"Oh, okay." Patton said. "Have you tried washing your hands with cold water?"

Logan hesitated, almost confused by the offering, and said, "Hot water is an important part of cleaning your hands."

"Actually, washing your hands with cold water is just as effective as hot water. And it'll make it so you don't dry them out as fast." Patton explained.

Logan said, "Really?"

"Yeah! It's scientifically proven or whatever, Google it!"

Logan searched it up on his phone. It was true.

"It might not help you actually stop washing your hands," Patton said. "But at least you won't be hurting yourself so badly when you do."

"I will consider it." Logan said, still blindsided by the sincerely useful suggestion. "Thank you, Patton."

"No problem! The summers were way too hot where I grew up, I was so glad when I learned that little fact. Now, drink your tea, so I can text Virgil and let him know that you're staying hydrated."

Logan drank his tea. They talked about their experiences growing up, and though his hands hurt, he was distracted by the prettiest smile with dimples for a little while.

[]

On the weekend, Patton came over when Roman did, and knocked on Logan's door.

"Hi! I'm looking for Stump, and also you. How are you?"

Logan put his book down, and pointed at the cat where it was cuddled against his side. "I'm good, how are you?"

"Just starting to gear up for finals." Patton said, and blew a strand of curly hair out of his face exasperatedly. "Senior year is kind of the worst, even with all the cool new help I have."

"Yes, it is." Logan agreed, because all the deadlines and exams were crowding up at once, and despite his extensive preparation he did not feel ready.

"The three of us are going to have a study party in the living room, do you want to come out?"

Logan found that he really, really did. "Yes."

Bringing his books and the cat, he joined them spread out over the coffee table and couch, with moderately unhealthy snacks and Roman playing Broadway show-tunes off a small portable speaker.

"It's studying." Roman defended, when Virgil complained.

"Studying what, being annoying?" Virgil asked.

Roman pretended to be shot in the chest, dramatically. Virgil stole his phone and changed the song while he was mock-dead.
"Do you have your flashcards?" Patton asked, sitting cross legged and holding his own very large colourful pile. "We could take turns asking each other -- doesn't that sound fun?"

It did sound fun, but Logan was beginning to feel like anything Patton wanted to do sounded fun to him. It was a curious and confusing feeling. "Sure."

In moments like this, when the two of them were taking turns doing flashcards, with Logan encouraging him and making up mnemonics with the definitions, and Patton coming up with puns based off his study terms that Logan knew would get stuck in his head as the most annoying study aides ever, he couldn't help but get stuck on that feeling, that confusing and complicated feeling.

And it wasn't like Logan had never dated before -- he'd tried it a couple times, but it always ended the same way. The guy would tell him he was too much, that he talked too much, he studied too much, he didn't laugh at their unfunny jokes or he didn't respond in the ways he was expected to. Anyone he'd ever liked had maybe liked him back for a little while, but it didn't last, not when they actually spent time with him.

It had never felt like this, like helium in his chest, like having a friend you suddenly wanted to spend all your time with, like someone you wanted to tell everything, show everything, who made your heart stutter and your mind go blank when they smiled with huge dimples.

And most of all, it felt dangerous -- that there was no way Logan could ever be someone Patton liked, like that. That he was only setting himself up for heartbreak by even entertaining the idea for a moment. He shouldn't have let his brain go down the path, but it was so hard, and once he'd gone there it felt impossible to go back. Because with Virgil and Roman beside them, teasing and hand holding and support and push and pull... Logan wondered why he was so fucked up that no one had ever wanted to date him longer than a week.

He wasn't going to say anything. And if Patton was interested, he certainly didn't say either. Yes, he was kind and sweet and almost adoring, but he behaved that way with Roman and (as he grew to know him better as well) Virgil. He was just someone who was open and honest about his feelings, not emotionally stunted and awkward like Logan. He shouldn't be taking his affection as anything deeper than it was.

Yet. When Patton met his eyes and grinned, like it was the best day of his life to be sitting on the floor studying flashcards with Logan, his mind wandered to dangerous places again and again. Trapped in a circle he could not escape without tearing himself apart, or worse yet, his new friendship.

Virgil and Patton decided that the night needed more junk food, and the two of them got their coats on to walk to the 7/11. Roman suspiciously volunteered to stay behind when Logan said the same, so it wasn't surprising when Roman put his pen down almost as soon as they were gone.

"I have a question for you." Roman said.

"I might have an answer." Logan replied.

Roman wrung his hands together, glancing at the door where his boyfriend and best friend just disappeared from. "Virgil spoke honestly with me about his problems with anxiety and I took them very seriously, but I am very concerned that I'm going to mess this up. I really like Virgil, and I don't want to hurt him, but I keep second guessing myself over whether or not I'm doing the right things. Virgil speaks very highly of your ability to help him, and I guess I'm asking... do you have anything I can do to make sure I do right by Virgil?"
Logan smiled, because Roman really was a sweet guy, just like Patton had told him in the beginning. He put his phone down, and said calmly, "Just caring enough to be concerned is very reassuring. The best I can say is ask Virgil what he wants, and do that. Yes, I have methods that are useful, but he might want something different from you, as his boyfriend. As long as you do as he says, you won't have any problems."

"But what if I mess this up?" Roman asked, agonized. "Virgil is ... I'm so happy with him. But I'm not the best at noticing my own faults. I'm worried I will hurt him without seeing."

"Do what he says and you don't lie to him, you'll be fine."

Roman bit his lip, but nodded. "Okay. Okay, I can do that."

"Roman?"

He perked up. "Yes?"

"If it makes you feel better, Virgil is just as concerned with making this work as you are. You are not alone."

Roman's shoulders sagged, and he gave a relieved smile. "Yes. Yes. Thank you, Logan. Virgil's right, you are very calming."

Logan snorted, rolling his eyes a little, and went to pick up his phone for his flashcards again. But Roman hesitated, and said, "Can I ask you one more intrusive question?"

That didn't sound good. "You can ask."

"Are you.... dating anyone?"

Logan raised an eyebrow. "No. But I'm sure Virgil could've told you that."

Roman flushed. "He did. I just. Do you?"

"Do I?"

"Date."

It was almost painful. "I have been known to. Why do you ask?"

Roman rubbed his arms, glancing at the door. "I was just curious."

"With absolutely no other ulterior motives? Likely."

"I'm not trying to set you up or anything." Roman promised. "I just wanted to know where you stood. Some people aren't interested, too focused on their studies, etcetera."

"Right." Logan said, and would pursue the line of questioning further, but it would lead down paths he would rather not go. Because he had a suspicion why Roman was asking in the first place -- the only reason it would make sense. He wanted to know if Logan liked anyone. And Logan was definitely not going to answer that.

The reason why he wouldn't answer that was becoming more and more complicated in his head, and it made it easier to pretend the conversation never happened, because it was rather inconvenient.

Logan did tell Virgil later about the first half of their conversation, because Logan was a loyal man
and Virgil was always his first priority. Virgil's ears turned red when he heard how concerned Roman was, and he pushed at Logan's face when it was suggested how considerate and smitten his boyfriend was, and that someone might have Told Him So.

Patton invited them over for Thanksgiving. He wasn't planning on cooking a turkey, but a chicken, since they were all broke college students and didn't much care for a meal with all the fixings. Finals were nearly upon them, and it wasn't too stressful to spend an evening at their townhouse having chicken and carrots and listening to Roman dramatically list off all the things he was thankful for.

"Hairspray, firstly. Both the musical and the cosmetic." Roman ticked off his fingers. "The invention of waterproof speakers so I can sing in the shower. Light techs, especially the cute ones."

Virgil rolled his eyes at that one, but he was leaning on his hands and smiling.

Roman continued, ticking the fifth finger, "Patton for being so good at cooking that I never had to learn, Logan for the hour-long text conversation about poetry rhythm that successfully distracted me from the world's most boring class."

"You should've been paying attention." Logan said, and only later would he realize this had been the type of comment he'd resisted making in the beginning of their friendship.

But obviously they didn't mind his nerdy, obsessive tendencies, for Roman only flapped a hand and kept going, "I'm thankful for music stands because my arms get tired holding up sheet music, I'm thankful for cameras for taking quality pictures of myself and my lovely boyfriend, I'm thankful for headphones for allowing me to play Waterloo on repeat, I'm thankful for -- "

"Can we limit ourselves to under ten items, please? Or you'll take all the thankfulness." Virgil said dryly.

"How many was that?" Roman asked, because he'd stopped ticking his fingers when he'd gone over five.

"Nine." Logan said.

"And my company and my family too." Roman said.

Patton gave him a double thumbs up. "Great list, Ro!"

"Your turn, Padre."

Patton pretended to think. "Hmm... mostly just you guys! And puppies. Oh! And kittens. Oh! And ferrets. Oh!--"

Roman raised a hand. "Are you going to list ten different species?"

"Okay, all animals under the sun! And not under the sun too. There! Virgil, how about you?"


"I think it's lovely." Patton winked. "Logan?"

"I'm thankful for my friends, new and old." Logan said, because he definitely was. He'd been incredibly lucky this year to meet Roman and Patton, who hadn't grown bored or sick of him yet.
"We're very happy to have you." Patton said, smile all dimples, and those complicated feelings swirled.

Virgil and Roman drifted off after dinner to start some horror movie that Logan already knew both of them would regret watching, and Logan stuck around to help Patton wash all the dishes.

"Here!" Patton said, reaching underneath the counter and pulling out yellow dish-washing gloves. "The water is super hot, and I don't want you to hurt your hands more."

Logan was more touched than anything that Patton had thought of him and his sore hands, which were crusty but otherwise alright at the moment, and put the gloves on. They washed side by side, with a pile of bubbles, while Patton hummed. There was a plant in the window sill and Logan inquired after where he got it, and Patton went on a long tangent of where he picked up all the plants in his apartment.

With the succulents, Logan told him, "I got pricked by a cactus once."

"Oh! What happened?"

"I was on a date with this guy and he took me to this hipster coffee shop." Logan said, rubbing the plate in the hot water with a squeaky sponge. "There were cactuses balanced on the shelf behind me, and server knocked into it. The cactus fell right on my shoulder."

"Ow!" Patton said sympathetically. "Did you have to pull the quills out?"

"Yeah." Logan rolled his shoulder, as if it still hurt. "It was a terrible date anyway."

Patton bit his lip, and looked away. An unusual silence fell between them, and Patton suddenly said, "I've never been on a date before."

"You haven't?" Logan asked, almost curious. They were twenty years old, after all.

Patton shook his head, still chewing on his lip, and said in a much quieter voice. "I've never actually had anyone like me, like that. Hah."

"That doesn't make sense." Logan said, brow furrowed.

"Well, some girls liked me, and while that was sweet, not my type. And all the guys... there wasn't much interest in someone like me, I guess." Patton shrugged, and there was pink on the high of his cheeks. "It's not -- I shouldn't have brought it up. I just.... yeah."

Logan wasn't sure what to say. Whether or not it be that they were idiots for not being interested in him, or that he wasn't missing out on much because Logan only had experienced negative things in the dating scene. Neither option seemed like the right thing to say, so he said nothing at all.

The conversation moved on, but Logan kept thinking about it, wondering. And slowly he became almost indignant on Patton's behalf -- he was one of the most wonderful people Logan had ever met, he deserved to be taken out, to be shown interest, to be told he was great and amazing like Virgil and Roman did, the dating and the lavishing and it all.

And the complicated, confused, heart-racing feeling in his chest told Logan that it could be him, he could do that... but he couldn't. Logan wasn't what anyone wanted in a boyfriend. If Patton wanted him, he would've said so.
"Can I be totally honest with you?" Virgil said.

"I expect it." Logan said.

They were sitting on Virgil's bed, with a tiny bottle of nail polish. Logan's hands were being held hostage, while an anxious Virgil painted them a tasteful midnight blue.

"I think Patton likes you."

Logan tried to feel immediately dismissive to the idea, like trying to punch a hurricane. "What makes you say that?"

Virgil shrugged. He was full of nervous energy, almost brimming with it. Finals season was no longer looming in the distance, instead it was on top of them, and Virgil never dealt well with the pressure. "Just, like, the usual stuff. I'm pretty sure he's flirting with you. I'm just not sure if you've noticed, so I thought I'd ask."

"I don't think he is." Logan said, trying to calm his racing heart, hoping that even though Virgil was holding his hand he wouldn't feel it pick up. "I think that is just what he's like."

"Maybe." Virgil allowed. "But like. Would it be so strange? You guys get along really well. I noticed that you actually smile for him."

Logan's heart th-thumped. "I smile." He defended weakly.

Virgil snorted, carefully dipping the brush, leaning closer to his nails and avoiding his eye. "I'm pretty observant, L. I know you don't really smile. But you do with him. And I think that's great, man. He looks like he's been given the moon when you do. So I'm just... seeing where you stand, I guess."

This was beginning to feel like a similar conversation. "Have you spoken with Roman about this?"

Virgil's ears turned red, not looking up. "Maybe a little. He said Patton is too shy to ever say anything. So I figured it's gotta come from you, then."

"Patton is not shy." Logan scoffed.

"Roman said he has his reasons to be shy."

Logan thought about the admittance Patton made at Thanksgiving -- that he had never dated before. That he felt like no one was interested in him. That... might be a good enough reason to feel shy.

"And you think that I have... feelings."

Virgil capped the tiny bottle and sat up. His own nails were black, with a coat of star-sparkles overtop. He said, slowly, "You say feelings as if it's a foreign concept."

"It's not one I'm comfortable with, no." Logan admitted.

Virgil rubbed his forehead. "So basically, one of you is too shy and the other is uncomfortable with emotion so if there was anything between you, nothing will ever happen because neither of you will act."

Logan inspected his nails. Virgil had done a fantastic job. He said, pretending to be distracted, "That does seem to be the case."
They were quiet for a minute. Virgil was calmer than he had been at the beginning of the nail painting session, but he was still a little shaky and fidgeting, but he was focused elsewhere now.

"Hypothetically," Virgil said, and Logan groaned. Virgil repeated, louder, "Hypothetically, in a perfect universe where there are no consequences and you get what you want... would you want to date Patton?"

"But there are consequences." Logan said. "And there are so many other variables."

"Just... answer the hypothetical question."

"The premise is flawed."

"It always is. Suspend your disbelief for two seconds."

"I don't know. I don't know, okay? I've been trying to figure it out, and I can't. And you don't even know if he likes me, you're just speculating."

Virgil sighed, leaning back and flopping on his dark blankets. "Well, yeah. I just... he makes you smile, L. I've never... I'm just anxious, I suppose. I'm sorry, I shouldn't meddle."

Logan shut his eyes. He took a deep breath, and tried again. "I don't know, Virgil. Dating has never been good for me. I'm not... excited to try again. And there's the fact that I'm the least interesting person on the planet, hardly an exciting choice for a mate. Plus the, uh, obsessive thing."

Virgil was quiet, and Logan opened his eyes to find his best friend staring at him sadly.

"You're a damn catch, L." Virgil said, adamant.

Logan felt the heat in his neck, and shook his head.

"No, really." Virgil grabbed his hands, careful of the damp polish. "I'd say you're the most interesting person I've ever met, in fact. Patton would be lucky as hell to have you."

"You're obliged to say that as my best friend." Logan said, dry.

"I don't lie." Virgil said, vehement, and Logan had no defense to that. Virgil continued, "I don't lie, you know that. And the reason you're my best friend is because you're steady and witty and clever and thoughtful. I have never once been bored by you, and judging by Patton's face when he's with you, he hasn't either. And any problem you have with the obsessive thing, well, just refer to any argument you've said to me when I was worrying about my anxiety with Roman."

Logan swallowed hard. He flexed his fingers in Virgil's grip, but it was strong. His strongest defense came back up, "I don't know. I just... I don't know. And you know me."

"You hate not knowing." Virgil gave a wry smile. "Yeah. I bet. Listen. This doesn't have to be huge. It can be nice. It can be like... just knowing someone is in your corner. Right? Let him in. Not something huge. See what happens."

That was a terrifying prospect, a stopped heart in his chest. He admitted quietly, "It feels pretty huge."

"Try holding his hand. That's not huge, is it? It's just something small. Then maybe tell him a little how you feel. It doesn't have to be all or nothing."

Logan couldn't imagine that. "I don't know."
"You don't have to know." Virgil squeezed his hands. "Do you think I knew? Don't you remember how scared I was on my first date? Do you remember what you said to me?"

"That's different. You'd already established mutual affection."

"You said, what's holding you back? Do you like him? What's holding you back?"

Logan swallowed his tongue.

"Do you like him?" Virgil persisted.

He liked him so much it was an insistent drum beat in his chest, like a second heart in time with his own. Logan nodded mutely.

"What's holding you back?"

He didn't have a real answer.

Logan's hands hurt, and he had obsessively counted how many hours he'd studied, and the bottle of Purell in his bag was almost empty, but all of that faded to background noise when he found Patton crying.

It was finals week, or weeks really, since some exams were spread out pretty far. Logan was walking through the Student Union building and happened to pass the bean bag chairs, only glancing at them out of habit to see if Patton was there. And he was. And he was crying.

Logan stopped in his tracks and stepped aside, feeling his lungs stutter. He didn't know how he was going to help but he absolutely needed to try. There was no universe where he could just walk away and pretend he hadn't seen.

Logan gently touched his foot to get his attention, and Patton turned, eyes widening and hurrying to try and scrub away the evidence on his face. His voice was fake and cheery when he said, "Oh hey Lo! I've just got something in my eye, hold on."

Logan lowered himself down on the bean bag, his much longer legs stretched out, while Patton was a small, cringing ball. "What's up?" Logan asked.

"Nothing, nothing I'm fine." Patton flapped a hand, still pretending to smile. "It's not a big deal, I'm fine."

It certainly seemed like a big deal, at least enough that it upset Patton. "Is there someone you would like me to kill?"

Patton barked a laugh that sounded a little more genuine, and smile melted to something wobbly. "No, it's just me being silly."

Logan shrugged, leaning back a bit, which put him closer to Patton’s warmth, meeting his eyes plainly. "I don’t think it’s silly if it’s upsetting you."

"I’m not upset." Patton defended immediately, with that hurting fake cheer.

He raised his eyebrow, not convinced in the slightest.

Patton deflated. "I... really, it’s fine. I know it’s finals, I don’t really have time for this, and I’m sure
neither do you.”

“I have time.”

Patton stared at him. Logan stared patiently back.

“Okay,” Patton said, timid. “Um. I just finished a final and... I don’t think I’m gonna make it. I don’t think... I think it’s too hard for me. That I’m just not meant to be a vet. And I ... I was volunteering with the shelter this morning and there was an dog getting put down and when I got upset over it the vet tech snapped at me that I had to get used to it. But I don’t think that’s fair! Yes, I know part of being a vet is the dying animals but I don’t think that means I need to get used to it. I don’t ever want to be numb to suffering. I can be sad and know that it’s a necessary action to take, I can be sad and still take the steps to put an animal out of its misery. They’re not mutually exclusive.”

Patton trembled and pressed his palms into his eyes hard. “But it doesn’t matter because even with all the accommodations and the wonderful help I’ve gotten I’m not going to get good enough grades. I can’t... I don’t want to be upset but I am. I am.”

Logan didn’t know what to say, but he offered open his arm. Patton slid forward into the hug, holding on tightly and crying quietly into his chest. Logan never knew the right words to say when it came to appeals of emotion.

But he could provide logical solutions. “If you did not get the grades, you can retake the class. It is not the end yet.”

Patton shuddered, and swallowed hard. “And if I can’t do it again?”

“You cross that bridge when you come to it. It’s not important yet. You don’t even have the marks for this semester yet. Once you do, we can make a new plan.”

Careful breathing. Patton didn’t let go, so Logan stayed right as they were. Patton’s fingers were curled around Logan’s bicep, glasses already discarded on the table, rhinestones dull in the dim lighting.

“I know people don’t think I can do it.” Patton said, very quietly. They were being largely ignored by the studying students in bean bags around them, most having headphones in. But there was still a low level tide of noise, and Logan leaned closer to hear him. “My classmates like me well enough but they’re all smarter than me. The techs at the shelter I volunteer at don’t think I have what it takes. Except for Roman, who is always been telling me to reach for my dreams, you’re the only other person who thinks I can do this. I really... I really really appreciate it. Even if it turns out not to be true.”

“Of course you can do it.” Logan said, because he was a firm believer in hard work, and Patton put his heart and soul in everything he did. “Maybe it won’t be as linear as you thought, maybe you have to retake a class, so what? If this is what you want, then you can do it. Roman and me and Virgil too will be here with you every step of the way.”

Patton sniffed. He said, voice wet, “Thank you.”

He did stop crying, and mopped at his face with his cat hoodie sleeves, and told Logan very seriously, “I’m so glad that we met, Lo.”

Logan’s throat hurt. “Me too.”

“Are you hungry? Do you have an exam?” Patton picked his glasses up and put them back on.
“Not today. We could eat.”

Patton packed up his stuff, and when Logan stood he argued with himself for a moment. Virgil’s voice telling him in his head that it didn’t have to be all or nothing. He could just do little things to show he cared. So he offered out his hand.

Patton beamed, and took the help up, except that when they started walking towards the cafeteria Logan did not let go.

Patton looked at him sideways, smile breaking even bigger under his red eyes when Logan just squeezed his hand. Beaming, Patton gently swung their hands between them.

Logan’s heart thudded, the confusing and complicated feelings growing, adding anticipation, adding a flint of joy.

They separated hands to get their food, but Patton’s mood was a full 180, and he knocked knees with Logan underneath the table the whole time.
Logan ended up calling Patton right before his last final, because his hands were bleeding again and he needed to talk theories with him instead of standing in the bathroom slowly tearing himself apart.

It was a welcome reprieve, clutching the phone and shutting his eyes, back against the wall and long legs out in front of him. After the exam, he was done for Christmas break. In three hours he would be free. He... he wouldn’t have to study.

“What are you doing at five?” Logan said, almost abruptly.

“I’m bringing some donation stuff around town at four, but I should be done at five. Why?”

“We should go to that board game cafe again.” Logan said, and even though he was trying so hard to make it casual, his heart beat way too hard. “We could play wizard chess.”

“That sounds fantastic.” Patton said, enthusiastic, almost breathless. “And a great reward for us finishing our exams! I’ll see you there?”

“Yeah.” Logan said, still holding the phone too hard, his hands hurting, heart hurting, complicated and confused and anticipatory and excited. “Yeah, see you there.”

The exam seemed easy, in the end. Maybe it was all the time he’d spent talking to Patton about it. Maybe it was the lure of freedom. He left the class and put his gloves on, wincing as the fabric caught his ripped dry skin.

Patton was waiting inside the cafe, wearing pink jeans and a beaming smile, already with two cups — one of mint tea for Logan.

“I got the chess board! I warn you, I'm terrible.”

“That’s fine.” Logan said, and he meant it. “I'll help you.”

He peeled off his gloves and they played. Patton was giggling and giving voices to the figurine chess pieces, but his eyes kept catching Logan’s distractingly hurt hands.

Logan decided to address it before Patton could. “I was just stressed. It will get better now that finals are over. The cold water suggestion did help, but... there’s only so much it can do.”

Patton swallowed, fiddling with a pawn he’d stolen. “Is it like... an anxiety thing?”

Logan was about to say no, but remembered that OCD was actually an anxiety disorder. He hedged with, “We’re thinking it’s probably OCD, but I haven’t really done anything about it yet.”

Patton nodded thoughtfully. “That makes sense. But... why haven’t you done something if it’s so bad that your hands are always hurting? That must be really painful.”

Logan shrugged. “I don’t know. I was going to go with Virgil and talk to someone, but school got busy and I... I don’t really want to.”

Patton tipped his head to the side — listening, curious.
Logan continued, hesitant, “I don’t know. And... I don’t really want to stop. Yes, I get obsessive about my studying and washing my hands, but it’s helpful. I get good grades and I don’t get sick. I don’t want to stop.”

"But it's hurting you."

"Yeah. I don't know. The kind of therapy OCD uses is... not fun."

"What is it?"

Logan pulled out his phone and looked it up to be sure. It was cognitive behaviour therapy, specifically, exposure response prevention therapy.

“Like they do for phobias.” Patton said.

“Yes. When I have an obsession, I experience anxiety, and it is the compulsion that alleviates it. This method is suggesting that instead of completing the compulsion, I go in increasingly longer periods of time without engaging, while using relaxation or grounding techniques to help with the anxiety it provokes.”

Patton made a face. “You're right, that doesn’t sound fun.”

Logan thought about the intense suffocating, sitting on his chest feeling he had when he tried to deny himself washing his hands or studying. He didn’t want to go through that willingly.

Which... was a slow wake up call. That his thoughts were so terrible he would rather suffer the out of control, helpless compulsions, rather than go through with the help that would stop them. He breathed through a wind of panic that was wrapped around his windpipe as he thought about this therapy, and said, “I will continue to think about it. Without the stress of finals I should be alright for a while.”

“Okay.” Patton agreed easily enough. “I don’t blame you for not wanting to do it, but maybe you could just try it? Like just go and talk to the therapist for a little, it’s not like you’re signing your life away or anything.”

“Maybe.” Logan said, and he definitely wasn’t sure.

They returned to chess, and bumped knees underneath the table, and eventually he was thinking more about the dimples in Patton’s smile and his terrible jokes than anything else. And his mind wandered to Virgil’s advice again: just little steps. Little things.

“Patton.” Logan said, instead of moving his next chess piece.

“Logan.” Patton replied, pretending to be serious.

“I really like you.”

Patton’s face slowly flushed with colour. And he said, “I really like you too.”

The hot nerves in his neck, and the rioting in emotions in his chest. Logan smiled, and Patton giggled, smiling back with full force.

They kept playing chess. Logan felt light headed. They held hands as they walked back to the bus stop. He wanted to ask if it was a date. He didn’t think he had the nerve yet. Patton was still blushing, swinging their hands between them. Logan felt completely emotionally stunted and a
terrible match, because he should’ve done more than just a grade-school confession. But Patton
certainly didn’t seem to mind.

Without classes Logan immediately found he had too much free time and it made him antsy. Virgil
was antsy because of who he was as a person, and together they collapsed on the couch and watched
all the shows they’d gotten behind during the semester.

Logan had laid awake and thought about the therapy, how it sounded excruciating and terrible, but it
was supposed to work. He wouldn’t have to wash his hands fifty times a day. He could take a night
off studying without succumbing to the crushing pressure. The idea of exposure treatment fucking
sucked but the idea of living like this for the rest of his life sucked more.

“Will you go to find the support center with me?” Logan asked Virgil, the two of them immobile on
the couch for a few hours at that point.

“Yeah.” Virgil said. “I cried in the university bathrooms six times during finals. I think I’m ready to
get some new coping mechanisms, since mine obviously aren’t working that well anymore.”

Logan held his wrecked hands up. “Same.”

Virgil hissed in sympathy. “Okay. We’ll go. Whenever it’s open. It might already be closed for
Christmas.”

“Sounds good.” Logan said, even though it really didn’t.

Virgil’s phone chimed. He picked it up lazily and groaned. “Apparently we’re going skating.”

“We?”

“Yup. Get up, Roman says Patton made cinnamon buns.”

That was a good reason to get up. They put their coats on and met the pair at the skating rink. It was
pretty busy, bustling with people, and they spotted Roman with his bright red jacket.

“Hello my dearest.” Roman said.

“Sup loser.” Virgil replied, and kissed him, pulling back to say to Patton, “Hey Padre. Nice hat.”

It was a handmade Hufflepuff hat. “Thanks! Roman made it for me.”

“You can knit?” Virgil asked his boyfriend.

“You can’t?” Roman replied, immediately.

They rented skates, except for Roman who owned a bedazzled pair of his own. Logan tied his own
quickly and ended up tightening Virgil’s laces for him when he fretted that he hadn’t done them tight
enough to avoid hurting himself. He waited for Patton to be ready and stepped on the busy ice with
him.

“Oh, I forgot how scary this is.” Patton said, hands already out, and Logan offered his arm
wordlessly. Patton latched onto his bicep, and Logan talked him through the procedure once more
until they were slowly and steadily doing laps like everyone else, albeit slow and sticking to the
boards. With the increased traffic Roman and Virgil were having a very dangerous game of tag that
Logan and Patton watched weave through the patrons.
“Lo?”

“Yes?”

“Are we...” Patton seemed to lose his nerve, and trailed off. He shook his head, “Never mind.”

Logan didn’t like the sad little expression that Patton suffocated. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I’d like to hear it, whatever it is.” Logan said, calm and steady.

Patton squeezed his bicep, his shorter self still tucked into his side as they skated. His cheeks flushed. “Are we ... is this a date?”

Logan’s heart skipped a beat. His neck felt hot, and his own face betrayed him as it filled with colour. “Do you... do you want it to be?”

“Lo, I have—“ his voice was shaking. “Like, the biggest freaking crush on you. And I really don’t know how any of this works because I’ve never done it before. Do you... do you want it to be a date?”

Logan was blushing quite furiously, and this was making it rather hard to skate in straight line, heart pounding like a drum. “I don’t know how to do any of this either. I’m not ... good with feelings.”

“You seem pretty good to me.” Patton squeezed his arm again. “I really appreciate that you told me you liked me. I was worried I was just being silly. So, I mean, I like you, you like me. We could date.”

It sounded so logical put like that. Logan said slowly, “We could date.”

“Okay.” Patton said, giddy. “Let’s do that then.”

“Sounds good.” Logan replied, even as his tongue felt entirely too large for his mouth.

They didn’t really do anything different, right away, it wasn’t all or nothing. Small things. It was a tighter grip on his arm, and flushed giggles, and Logan catching himself staring at Patton’s face.

Later, they got off the ice and went to have cinnamon buns. Logan hissed to Virgil that it was a date and got a clap on the back in congratulations. Patton must’ve said something similar to Roman, because Logan got cornered.

“Logan, buddy, just a minute.” Roman stopped him in the staircase on the way out.

“Roman.” Logan acknowledged.

“I’m very happy to hear that you and Patton are trying things out.” Roman said, and he was smiling, but there was an undeniably dangerous energy that made Logan shiver. “He’s been my best friend since Kindergarten, you know, I’d do anything to see him happy. And he’s wonderfully happy when he’s with you, so that’s good.”

“Yes.” Logan said carefully.

“And if I find that’s changed, say,” There was dramatic tone to his voice but it did not deny the steel. “That you have made him unhappy, well.”
Roman smiled with all his teeth.

“I understand.” Logan said.

“Glad to hear it!” Roman said, almost jolly. “Now, since I already have you alone, do you have plans for Virgil’s birthday?”

Logan explained that every year they bought Christmas candy and watched Netflix.

“That won’t do.” Roman said, tapping his chin.

Logan raised his eyebrows. “Virgil hates surprise parties.”

“Of course.” Roman flapped a hand. “But I can still make this better. I have an idea.”

After, when they got back to their apartment, Logan told Virgil about the first half of the conversation. Virgil snorted at the implied shovel talk, and said, “I wouldn’t doubt him, man. Roman is extremely creative — he told me about how there was this girl who made fun of Patton in junior high and Roman filled her locker with shaving cream.”

“Noted.” Logan said, amused. He had no intention of hurting Patton, and it was wonderful to see the loyalty between the two of them. He hadn’t felt the need to shovel talk on Virgil’s behalf — it would be more mortifying for his anxious friend than any kind of productive. (That did not mean Logan would not destroy Roman if the situation arose, but it would be the best kind of revenge: without forewarning.)

Virgil’s birthday was six days before Christmas. Roman had given Logan the task of getting Virgil out of the apartment for about an hour. This was easier said than done, because Virgil’s idea of a good day was one where he never left the house.

But he convinced him that they needed to uphold their tradition of getting Christmas candy, and bundled up to walk through the cold to the grocery store. It wasn’t a surprise party because Virgil knew Roman and Patton were coming, and as they stood in the Target he compared different chocolates, wondering what kind everyone would like. They loaded up on as many caramels as they could carry, and Logan bought them all as his present.

Roman texted that they weren’t ready, and Logan convinced Virgil to swing by the Starbucks down the street, and insisted that they stop and sit in the window to watch the snow fall.

“You’re being weird.” Virgil said, stirring his latte.

Virgil hated surprises, so Logan had told Roman that if he was beginning to get suspicious, he would tell him: “Roman is setting something up in the apartment and I’m keeping us away long enough for him to do it.”

Virgil groaned. “Damn him. It’s not a party, is it?”

“No, he said he knew you would hate that.”

“Alright, I’ll try not to be anxious about it.” Virgil said, already fidgeting. “Do you think Patton made a cake again though? That was really good last time.”

Roman texted it was safe about ten minutes later and they walked back with their coffee. When they
arrived, there was in fact a cake. As well, it was dim, because the apartment was only lit up with Christmas lights.

“Not surprise!” Roman said, gesturing wide.

“I’m so not shocked.” Virgil replied, giving a little smile. “What’d you do?”

Patton popped up from behind the couch. “We made a movie theatre!”

Virgil raised his eyebrows. Logan took in their apartment — they had covered all the windows and hung a giant white sheet over one wall. On the floor in front of the couch was every pillow and blanket they owned, setting up a comfy nest. A projector on the table behind would cast onto the sheet.

“Oh, that’s cool.” Virgil said, admiring it all. He stopped in front of the cake in the kitchen.

Patton hopped over, eager. “It’s caramel covered caramel cake.”

The top read ‘Happy Birthday Virgil!’ and had shiny black spiderwebs dusted on.

“You are a king among men.” Virgil said, and Patton beamed.

Virgil picked the movie, which was watching the entirety of Buzzfeed Unsolved, and they all flopped on the blankets with cake and candy.

Logan kind of felt ten years old at a sleepover, which was an experience he had never enjoyed in the past. But Virgil was smiling and content and wrangling his cat and making his paws dance, in the dark comfort of his own apartment surrounded by friends on his birthday.

Patton was pressed against Logan’s side, and they had held hands almost idly. Patton traced little circles with his thumb, giggling at the TV and hiding his face in Logan’s shoulder if anything remotely scary appeared. Logan squeezed his hand when he did, nerves hot, especially when he felt Patton’s eyelashes flicker on his neck.

Patton got up and started making dinner, as if it was a full course meal instead of Virgil’s requested macaroni and cheese with hotdogs. Logan followed and tried to help and mostly got in the way, Patton laughing and humming along to the radio.

After dinner they played Cards Against Humanity, and Logan tried really hard to laugh without covering it up. This was noticed by Virgil, who smiled back at him all pleased, and bumped their shoulders together. He wanted to tell Virgil that wasn’t that Patton that made him smile, it was Patton who gave him the confidence to do so. Virgil had always been someone in his life he wanted to smile for but felt he couldn’t.

Roman insisted on serenading Virgil after the game, and Patton went to chase Stump down the hall, and it seemed better to follow him than stick around and witness Roman trying to literally sweep Virgil off his feet while he swore up a storm.

Patton had found Stump on his bed, and was cooing and petting the black cat with adoration. Logan joined him, sitting knee to knee, and reached out to pet the cat as well.

“I know I’ve said it before.” Patton said quietly, almost to the cat. Less pressure. “But I’m really, really glad that we all found each other. Virgil is just so lovely and he doesn’t take any of Roman’s shit. And I got to meet you.”
Logan put his other hand on Patton’s bare ankle.

Patton licked his lips and smiled, a light pink on his cheeks. “I remember meeting you thinking you were so tall and so cute and I really wanted you to like me but I didn’t think you would. And then you brought me hot chocolate and helped me study and it was like... I was so dang star-struck and head over heels and Roman was teasing me constantly and I felt so obvious.”

“You weren’t.” Logan said. “I’m not... good at noticing these things.”

“And I felt like I was coming up with the dumbest reasons to hang out with you and that you’d just be annoyed by me.”

“I always wanted to see you. And I thought you’d get bored of me.”

Patton smiled. “You’re better at these things than you think you are.”

Logan’s face flushed. He ducked his head, and when he looked back up Patton was looking right at him.

“I haven’t done this before.” Patton said quietly. “Do people usually ask permission before they kiss, or is it meant to be like a spontaneous thing?”

Logan slid his hand to cup Patton's jaw as he sealed their lips together, kissing sweet and slow, almost overwhelmed with a rush of emotion, before pulling back.

Patton’s face was very red, and had a huge smile with dug in dimples.

“Was that okay?” Logan asked.

“That was probably the best moment of my entire life.” Patton said.

Logan’s heart was beating so hard that it was bruising his rib cage. “Me too.”

“Good. That’s good. I’m light headed.” Patton flopped backwards onto his bed and dragged the cat along with him.

Logan fell beside him, looking up at the ceiling.

“You should get those glow in the dark stars.” Patton said.

“This is a rental.” Logan said.

“Boo.” Patton laughed, and there was a squeal down the hall. “I think Virgil is trying to throw Roman out the window.”

“We should go check on them.” Logan said.

“Yeah.”

Neither of them moved. Patton turned instead and kissed him again, barely a touch, feather light and nervous. Then he hugged Logan around the neck, and hung on tight.

Later, after they hung out with the others more, and ended up back there, Logan's arm was asleep underneath Patton, and he didn't want to move it. Patton was watching Netflix on his phone with half-asleep eyes. Logan was watching him through his lashes, wondering if they were considered boyfriends, and if they were, what that meant.
Eventually Patton tipped his head back, caught him staring, and flickered a drowsy smile. "You're a million miles away."

Logan bit his lip, and squeezed his arm around Patton's shoulder. "Sorry."

Patton paused Queer Eye with a tap, and cuddled closer, nose into his collarbone. He said, sleepy, "What are you thinking about?"

"Lots of things." Logan said, hesitant. He wasn't sure if he should get into this -- and scare him off.

In his head, Logan had that asshole he dated telling him he was too much, his mind stuck on the way his mouth had twisted as he said it. The way Logan felt his heart thud, a dead thing in his chest, when he realized his own words had the opposite effect he wanted -- pushing people away instead of drawing them in. Logan liked to think he was a smart guy, a good learner, and he learnt very well from other people that they didn't want to hear what he was thinking. It was a lesson that was drilled in with flushes of embarrassment and prickles of mortification.

"I'd love to hear." Patton said, because he was always different than his prior experience. His hard-won battle with Logan's smile, the way he only seemed to get more interested the more he knew about Logan, which had never happened before. But he was near-sleep, and it seemed a shame to keep him up with his self-esteem issues.

"Don't worry about it." Logan murmured, turning his face away.

Quiet. Patton made no move to turn the show back on. He buried his nose closer to Logan, and murmured against his shirt, "Wanna hear a fun fact about me?"

Was that even a question? "Of course."

He couldn't see Patton's smile but he could feel it. "Roman says I have to help everyone and everything I come across. He calls me a bleeding heart. So sorry in advance, but I'm gonna keep prying, because I can't help myself. What's up, Lo?"

Logan thought about the volunteer work, the large collection of charity marathon shirts, and his lifeguarding... this was not a surprising fact to hear. He exhaled slowly, resigning himself. He said, "It's almost funny, that I'm dwelling on this. I just recently talked Virgil through a similar problem. But a fun fact about me is that I'm very good at giving advice and very bad at taking it."

Patton snorted, then said, "Sorry, sorry. Yes, I can see that."

Logan felt a small, wry amusement. "Yes. So I'm just... thinking about relationships."

"Ours?"

"Yeah."

"Well. We're dating, right?"

"Yes. What... what does that mean to you?"

Patton hummed, still sleepy, but more awake than he'd been when the conversation had started. "Having a partner in stuff. Whether that's studying or watching movies or anything at all. Just spending time together and like, enjoying being with each other. I guess that kinda sounds like friendship, but it's like... an agreement. To work together, be on the same side. Then the obvious things like getting to kiss you, but that's not really the point to me. That's just the expression of the
larger part of the relationship."

Logan was imagining a future, where he had Patton as a partner, someone to work together with, that he could talk to and be with and it was like a dizzy dream, something wonderful and distant but there, just ahead. Patton fit into the future imagined, what Logan would do after he graduated, where he would be. He wouldn't be alone.

"Yeah." Logan said, and his voice cracked a little. He swallowed, and added, "Yeah, that sounds good."

"Yeah." Patton agreed, warm. "Is there something else?"

"I... I don't know. Are we boyfriends?"

"If you want to be."

"I want to be."

"Then we are." Patton did a bright bursting hand gesture. "Just like that."

Logan gave an almost surprised laugh, and squeezed Patton's shoulders. "I just... nevermind."

Patton reached up and tugged a strand of Logan's bangs. "Come on, I wanna hear it."

"I don't..." Logan sighed. "I don't understand why you wanted to date me."

"First of all, mood." Patton said, laughing. "I thought the same thing. But it's because I really like you, remember? We established that."

"I know. But why do you like me? I'm not exactly warm and cuddly."

"You do alright." Patton said, and he was snuggled pretty comfortably in his arms after all. "I don't need someone warm and cuddly. I'm more than enough for two people. I wanted you because you listened to me, believed in me, because you smile like it's a secret, because you're the smartest guy I've ever met, and... because it makes me happy to be with you."

Logan swallowed, said tentatively, "It's makes me happy to be with you too. I've never... I've never felt like this before."

"It's scary." Patton agreed, quietly. "But we'll figure it out together, right?"


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His grades were posted before Christmas, and Logan had managed to meet his own impossible standards, which had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing his unhealthy study behaviour. Some classes took longer to grade, and Patton had to wait until Christmas Eve to get his. They weren't together at the time, but he texted Logan immediately and said, 'best Christmas present EVER!!! I passed and it's even a few points above the admission requirement!!! I could still do this!!!'

A few days after Christmas Virgil got a text, glanced at it, and turned his phone back over again as his ears turned red. "Idiot." He murmured.

“Roman?” Logan guessed.
Virgil covered his face with his hands, and said with a very particularly lovesick misery, “Yeah, yeah it is.”

“What did he say?”

Virgil groaned. “So like. When I finally gave in and explained all my anxiety shit I happened to bring up that I have this, like, persistent anxiety relating to the fact that people only pretend to like me or put up with me and he ... latched onto that? And apparently has made it his personal mission to reassure me otherwise.”

Logan felt an amused sort of interest. “So that text is a reminder that he likes you?”

Virgil nodded, not moving his hands for a moment, then dropping them with a slump of his shoulders and handing over his phone. “Look.”

Logan looked. The message said, 'btw here’s your daily reminder that I LIKE YOU A LOT, and I am so happy dating you, and your face is so cute that I wanna scream, in fact maybe I will, catch me on the rooftops yelling like an idiot about how much I like my boyfriend’.

And while Virgil had been lamenting, he had received a new text, ‘back to your regularly scheduled roasting: did you really borrow my phone to google ‘where is virginia?’??? how do you not know????’

“You didn’t know where Virginia is?” Logan asked, trying as hard as he possibly could not to sound judgemental, and failing.

Virgil snatched his phone back, hissing, “I’m not a geography major!”

Logan laughed.

"I'm really anxious," Virgil said, his voice frayed threads, the lines of doubts and persistent thoughts.

"Do you need a minute?" Logan asked, hands in his pockets, the two of them walking through the streetlamp illuminated twilight to the now-familiar community theatre. It was New Year's Eve, and they'd been invited to a party with the company.

"Why did I agree to this?" Virgil stopped just outside, wringing his hands, looking at the closed double doors. "I hate parties."

"Because you know the group, you've been running the lights for a few months, and they like you."

Logan said.

"That doesn't change that it's a party." Virgil complained, mouth twisting.

"Roman and Patton are already inside, waiting." Logan said, but added this time, "If you truly don't want to go, we don't have to. Or we can leave early if it becomes too much."

Virgil heaved a huge sigh, and looked anywhere that wasn't Logan's steady gaze. "It's just. It's stupid. I haven't been to a party in forever, and they always suck, and I always wanna leave, and I feel like such a buzz kill. Like I can't turn off my brain for ten seconds like everyone else."

Logan shrugged. "I'm not fond of them either. But this is where Patton and Roman will be tonight, and they expressed the desire to spend time with us for the New Year."
"Time is meaningless." Virgil said.

"Arbitrary revolutions around the sun being marked as significant." Logan agreed.

"We should go home. No, wait. No. Urgh. I don't know." Virgil rubbed the back of his neck, irritated. "I don't know. So many things could go wrong."

"I'm here." Logan shrugged. "If anything goes wrong, I'll fix it."

Virgil gave a wavering smile, and reached over to hug Logan's arm, pressing his cheek against his taller shoulder. "Thanks. Okay. Okay, let's just go in. Let's just go."

The company was mostly already there, on the stage and playing Ninja. Roman was jumping around, foot almost stepping right off the stage, and lit up like a twenty-watt bulb when he saw the two come in.

"Oh my love!" He cried.

"I'm going to suffocate him in his sleep." Virgil said to Logan, as his boyfriend approached at top speed.

"You'd miss him." Logan accused lightly.

"I know, it's disgusting." Virgil said, and was immediately tackled in an enormous hug by Roman.

"I'm so happy you're here!" Roman exclaimed, pulling Virgil to arm's length and giving a charming smile, full of shining teeth.

"I hadn't guessed." Virgil said, dry.

Logan snorted. Roman immediately turned his sights to him, and said, "Oh my bespeckled friend!" and attacked him with a hug as well.

"Hello Roman." Logan pat his back, unaffected.

Roman dragged them over to the stage, where the remainder of the company greeted them both. They cajoled Virgil into playing Ninja with them, his ears red, but Logan spotted Patton over by the snack table and excused himself.

"Looks good." Logan complimented, making Patton look up from where he was single-mindedly piping icing onto a last cupcake.

"Thank you!" Patton said brightly, surprised and pleased, and rushed the final rosette so he could drop the piping bag and greet Logan himself, flinging his arms around his neck. Logan squeezed him around the waist, feeling how it almost swept him off his feet, and he was just really glad he came.

"Do you want one?" Patton asked, rocking back onto flat feet, smiling huge with dimples.

"You made them yourself?" Logan confirmed, because as always he had a Thing about eating food from places he didn't know.

"Sure did. How about blue?"

Logan took a blue one. It was delicious. They hopped up onto the stage, declining to join the game, instead sharing a second cupcake and watching the laughing actors jump around. Patton folded his legs overtop Logan's.
Virgil was still in, and was deliberately trying to tag Roman out. The two of them had wild grins, the competitiveness taking over.

They played other games, with a low level of pop music in the background, the company raiding the snack table and chasing the kids that had been brought around the empty theatre. It wasn't a party like Logan had ever attended. He was enjoying it... but after a few hours Logan caught himself in the bathroom washing his hands. It was easier when he wasn't actively in school, but easier wasn't better. Patton found him there.

"Alright?" Patton asked.

"Fine." He lied.

Patton flickered his eyes up his figure. Logan forced himself to step away from the sink and dry his hands. He turned to leave, but it was a pull-door, and he didn't want to touch the handle because that would negate his whole process, and he went to fumble and pull his sleeve over his hands -- but Patton stepped forward before he could and grabbed the door for him, holding it open.

"Thanks." Logan muttered, trying not to let the prickles of mortification sink into his voice. He made a bee-line across the theatre to where Virgil was sitting with his back to the wall, picking at his cuticles and talking to Roman.

It wasn't quite midnight yet, and Virgil gave a slightly strained smile when Logan slid down next to him. He looked really tired. Logan understood the feeling.

Patton was looking between the two of them, with knowing eyes, and said, "Hey Ro, do you think we could get away with slipping out now?"

"You don't have to do that." Virgil murmured, ears red.

Roman shrugged. "A couple people already left, they won't mind if we do too. Where do you wanna go?"

"If we started walking home now, I bet we'd be outside when the fireworks start." Patton said.

"Oh, good idea, Pat!" Roman hopped up, and dragged Virgil up with him. "Come on, if we go to your place we might be able to see them from your apartment window!"

"You guys don't have to leave your party early." Virgil protested, voice going higher, nervous.

"We want to." Patton assured Virgil, gripping his arm and giving a warm smile. Virgil hesitantly gave one back.

Logan put on his gloves, and held Patton's hand as they walked home. Except that Patton didn't have gloves, so he ended up pulling Patton's hand into the pocket of his overcoat with his.

It was hard to fit on the sidewalk four people aside, so Logan and Patton naturally fell back. Roman had his toned arm wrapped around Virgil, and they were nearly the same height, so when Virgil turned to give a sarcastic smile they were very close and almost eye level. He had a black beanie flattening his dark bangs over his eyes, and Roman's cheeks and ears were pink since he didn't have a hat at all.

Patton took his phone out, and snuck a photo of the two. Then he inverted the camera, and cuddled close to take a selfie with Logan. They almost slipped on the ice of the sidewalk, so Logan gave a surprised laugh, and Patton took the photo. Over-lit by a streetlamp, pink cheeked with the cold,
happy.

It was a good photo. "Send that to me." Logan said.

"You got it, handsome." Patton said, quickly texting it over. The sweet tone of his voice made his heart thump.

The fireworks didn't start on their walk, but by the time the four of them got into the apartment and pulled the curtains all the way back, they could just see the night sky begin to burst with colour.

"Thanks." Virgil said, quietly, as they stood and watched.

"Of course, Virge." Patton said, warm.

Logan had been ready to leave the party as well, so he merely knocked shoulders with Virgil in solidarity.

"Wait, if the fireworks have started, does that mean it's past midnight?" Roman said suddenly.

Virgil swore, and checked his phone. "Uh, yup, it's twelve-oh-three. Happy New Year?"

"Happy New Year!" Roman exclaimed, then held out his hand in offer. Virgil allowed him to dip them in a dramatic kiss.

Patton laughed, and turned sparkling eyes to Logan. "Happy New Year, Lo."

"Happy New Year, Patton." Logan said, steady.

"I don't think we can one-up them." Patton said, amused, to where Virgil was trying to knock them over and Roman was squawking.

"Probably not." Logan said, but obligingly bent his knees so Patton could kiss him without bending his neck. Hands clutching Logan's biceps, pressing lips with a smile, and Logan thought about how time might've been arbitrary, the moment a new year was considered a new year being something random, but he liked that they were together for the moment anyway.

Chapter End Notes

the end is in sight... two more chapters folks
Later, after the fireworks, Patton curled up in his bed and pillowed his head on Logan's chest, and twined their fingers together. He ran the pads of his fingertips carefully over Logan's hurting skin.

"You can tell me if you're not fine." Patton said, soft in the dark of the room.

He couldn't see his face, so it felt safe to murmur, "Sometimes I feel like... if I started saying when I wasn't fine..."

“Yeah?”

“It has a factor in everything I do.” Logan said, mind on the constant filter of obsessions. “And I feel like if I talk about it’s all I will ever talk about. It’s exhausting and annoying enough in my head, let alone to pull you into the frustration as well.”

Patton hummed. “I get what you think you mean, but it doesn’t really work like that. I just want... an honest discussion of you, right? Just not trying to pretend you don’t feel anything at all.”

Logan swallowed hard. He didn’t quite know what to say to that. He wanted to deny it — the emotions. He wanted to deny that Patton genuinely wanted to know his mind.

“The Support Center opens again in a couple days.” Logan said instead. “Virgil and I will stop making excuses and go.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Patton said warmly. “I know it’s a lot to ask of you. To ask of anyone, really. To be open, vulnerable in that way. And this way, with me. My point is I like you, Logan. I like you, and all the parts of you, and I don’t want you to think that you need to be dishonest about how you’re feeling to protect me. Just like I know you wouldn’t want me to do that either.”

Logan remembered Patton crying on a bean bag chair, trying to pretend like he was fine. It was a sharp stab to his chest.

“I understand.” Logan said quietly.

The two of them did attend the Support Center once it opened again, and while they were initially done with the intake session each, it would be a few days before the actual appointments would begin. Logan admittedly felt the intake was a little daunting, but in the end it was just like a questionnaire, and Logan always loved tests that he already knew the answers to. He answered it all calmly and accurately, and was unsurprised that the intake therapist tentatively agreed with his self-assessment of OCD.

Virgil had given a shaky thumbs up in the lobby afterwards, quieter than usual.

It was later than Roman texted him. ‘hey specs if you’re not busy could you swing by our place?’

Logan went without question. Roman met him at the door.

“He’s okay.” Roman opened with, stepping aside and letting him in. “But I thought he might be more comfortable with you here too.”

“Thank you.” Logan inclined his head, spotting Virgil sitting on the couch. His hood was up,
chewing on his thumb, eyes red and mouth miserable. Patton was beside him, leaning close and smiling earnestly.

“Virgil.” Logan greeted, pulling up a chair and leaving Roman to slot back into Virgil’s other side, tucking him under his arm.

“Hey L.” Virgil said tiredly.

“Do you need to leave?” Logan opened with, before they settled down.

“They said I’m not a bother.” Virgil chewed harder on his thumb, avoiding any eye contact. “So I’m fine to stay.”

“Alright.” Logan said, steady as ever. “Did something happen?”

Virgil shrugged one lethargic shoulder. “Not really. Just. We went and talked to those guys and I think I realize how fucked up I really am and talking about it like that was just... a lot. It was a lot.”

Logan nodded understandingly. “That makes sense.”

Virgil rubbed his eyes. “I can’t stop thinking about it and I’m super overwhelmed and I just want to fucking cry.”

“You can cry.” Logan spread his hands.

“That doesn’t seem like a good solution.”

“It’s not a solution. It’s a reaction.”

“I can cry with you, if it would make you feel better.” Roman offered, which was the most bizarrely sweet thing Logan had ever heard.

Virgil seemed to agree, for he choked a laugh, and turned to bury his face in Roman’s chest. His shoulders shook, and Patton rubbed his back in soft little circles.

“It’s okay.” Patton said, in the kindest voice. “You’re gonna be okay.”

“Yeah.” Virgil gasped, fingers tight in Roman’s shirt. “Yeah, yeah.”

Logan offered to make tea, Virgil requested coffee, which he ignored as he hunted for tea bags. He couldn’t help but just be grateful, as he brought over the steaming mug for Virgil to take with shaking hands, that this wasn’t something Virgil would ever have to face alone, ever again.

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Logan was thinking about what to get Patton as his birthday approached in mid-January. What kind of thing would Patton want? They were all broke college students — every year he bought Virgil Christmas candy, after all. There wasn’t a ton of options.

He asked Roman, because no one knew Patton better than him.

“Can you bake?” Roman said, trying to paint a costume piece and covering himself in glitter. “I always get him something store bought but he’d probably puke rainbows if you baked him a cake yourself. Baked goods are like, his usual form of affection.”

“I don’t have any baking supplies.” Logan said, because their apartment kitchen didn’t even have a
cake pan.

“I could take Patton out and you guys could use the kitchen here.” Virgil said, sitting far away from
the glitter and playing on his phone, dark bangs hanging in his eyes. “Roman could make icing and
decorate the top, after Logan makes the cake.”

“A cat cake.” Roman said immediately. “With fondant ears.”

“Twizzler whiskers.” Virgil pointed at him.

Roman clapped his hands excitedly. “It’s a plan!”

It worked out pretty well, since Virgil needed to take Stump to a vet visit and hated going alone, so
he asked Patton if he wanted to come with and help. Even though it was his birthday Patton was
over the moon to be asked, they had earned a couple hours to bake before the two got back.

Logan wished that he was fine with the whole ‘devoting an evening to Patton’s birthday and not
studying’ thing, but in reality he’d woken up a couple hours early and studied. With the new
semester of classes his irrational compulsions reigned again, and even knowing them to be irrational
did nothing to stop them. The early morning study session workaround was not a fix, it was giving in
and letting the compulsion win. If he was stronger, he would’ve taken the day off. He was not.

Baking wasn’t hard, because Logan was meticulous in following instructions. All he needed were
supplies, and Patton had plenty. Logan made chocolate cake, with chocolate chips. Roman choose to
make a huge mess by hand mixing vanilla buttercream icing, and created homemade fondant using
marshmallows. The entire kitchen was sticky by the time Roman finished the icing, working on
moulding his decorations on the big cutting board.

They had hesitantly decided on a cake with two tiers, if only because the two of them stood in the
kitchen looking at the small size of a single tiered pan and decided that Patton deserved better, even if
they fucked it up. Logan washed his hands in between almost every step of the process, but it was
fine, he kept going, pushing through.

The cakes came out of the oven but they were super hot, and they didn’t have much time. Logan
knew from basic thermal dynamic theory that if they put buttercream on while hot it would melt, and
Roman and Logan stood there scratching their heads for a minute before Logan said, “We could just
put it in the freezer.”

There was no room in the freezer, but Roman rolled up his sleeves and said, “I’ll make room.”

Logan took a moment to text Virgil, 'need more time.'

'i figured you would. we’re going to the pet store.'

The final product was passable — a little melted, because they grew impatient with the freezer. But it
was definitely a cat, vanilla icing dyed baby blue, with gum drop eyes and Twizzler whiskers,
fondant ears and mouth. Logan tried to clean the kitchen as Roman decorated with an artist's eye, but
it was still a mess when Patton and Virgil showed up. They were chatting as they came down the
stairs, only for Patton to stop dead in the doorway.

Roman was covered in icing. He threw his hands up, “Happy Birthday!”

Patton’s hand flew to his mouth, and he said, “Oh my goodness!”

Virgil grinned, leaning around Patton. “It turned out pretty good.”
“You guys made this?” Patton asked, still blown away, striding forward to get a closer look.

"Logan made the cake, I decorated it." Roman informed him, chest puffed out proudly.

"You're going to make me cry." Patton said, already sounding teary, and managed to wrestle both Roman and Logan in the same hug. They bonked heads together but laughed.

"Don't cry, Pat." Roman said, getting choked up. "You know if you cry, then I'll cry."

"Too late!" Patton said, crying.

Logan and Virgil both exchanged a smile and an eye roll. They cut up the cake and it was pretty good, if not way too sweet from all the buttercream. Patton thanked them about a hundred times, and thanked Logan specifically with an enthusiastic kiss, breathless with a huge dimpled smile.

Logan was sitting outside his lecture hall, textbook in his lap, trying not to be obsessive about the upcoming test. As always, it was a bit of an uphill battle. So when Patton has texted and asked where Logan was, he willingly told him.

Patton approached him with a skip in his step, in purple overalls, grinning from ear to ear with his bright dimples. Logan couldn’t help but smile in return, moving his bag to give room for Patton to slide down next to him.

“Guess what?” Patton said, beaming.

There were multiple options it could be: since it was their last semester before graduation, Patton was working on his vet school application. He ventured: “I'm assuming good news by your face, did you hear from your references?”

His boyfriend nodded eagerly. “Yes! My prof for my animal science class even offered to write me a letter of recommendation!”

Logan’s heart burst with pride. “That’s fantastic, Patton.” And gave him a big hug.

Patton squeezed tightly, squealing a little in his ear. “I’m so excited! I’m still not sure about my grades but at least I’ve got so much support behind me. It might just happen yet.”

“It’ll happen.” Logan said, sure.

Patton laughed, grinning with all his teeth. “You don’t know that.”

“We’ll figure it out, one way or another.” Logan promised him. “I have faith in you.”

Patton turned very pink, and ducked his head, biting his lip. Logan wrapped his arm around his shoulders and held on tightly. Patton wrapped his arms around Logan’s middle and made a happy humming sound.

“I didn’t mean to distract you — are you ready for your test?” Patton asked.

Logan swallowed against the stab of fear, the obsession begging him to study more. This was a much harder thing to gauge — at what point was he crossing from diligence into compulsion? “I don’t know. Will you help me?”

“Absolutely.” Patton said, almost breathless with ferocity. “Give me the flashcards, let’s do this.”
Logan guessed all the right answers, except for one concept that they discussed right up until the class change began and the hallways filled with students.

“You’re ready.” Patton promised him, tugging Logan up to his feet and fixing his tie, looking up through dusty lashes. “Remember to have fun.”

Logan snorted. “Yes dear.”

Patton laughed, and rocked forward on his toes to kiss him. Sweet, making Logan’s heart flutter, and Patton said on his lips, “Good luck.”

“Thank you.” Logan replied. Stepping back, their conjoined hands falling away reluctantly. And he let himself into the room thinking about curly hair, warm fingers, good luck and have fun.

And when he came out, calm and successful, Patton had decided to wait for him. He put away his phone and beamed, hopping up to kiss him again. This time, without the crowds of class change and the quiet hallway, Logan held onto his overall straps and drank in the way Patton made him lightheaded and terrified and happy.

“I need to get to my volunteer group.” Patton said, reluctant.

Logan needed to study. But it could wait an hour. “I’ll walk you.”

Patton smiled again, and Logan’s heart skipped a beat, and he followed him out of the hallway and into the sunshine.

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“What are you doing?”

Logan drew in another long breath, focusing as hard as he could on the feeling, and after a moment he said out of the corner of his mouth, “Trying to calm myself down.”

Virgil fell beside him, sprawling out on the bed, next to Logan who was sitting with his hands held out in front of him. Like they were foreign entities on the ends of his arms. Virgil sounded worried when he asked, “What’s wrong?”

Another breath, careful and counted, meant to slow his heart rate. His therapist explained that it was physiological feedback loop — if his heart was racing, it only reinforced that he should be panicking. If he calmed it manually, it was easier to relax. Though it was hard to relax with the persistent, begging thoughts in his mind. “It’s exposure.”

“Ohay.” Virgil said, with a note that he kind of didn’t understand, but was too nervous to push for a further explanation.

“I touched something.” Logan explained, after another long breath, counted in his head. The heat in his neck was unbearable. It would all be solved if he just washed his hands. If he just washed his hands, he could get on with his day. Wouldn’t that be nice? To know that his hands were clean? He gritted his teeth, and said, “I’m supposed to wait ten minutes before washing them, and calm myself during the panic period.”

Virgil hummed. “How long have you been waiting?”

Logan checked his watch. “Five.”
“That’s awesome, L.”

It didn’t feel like it. But at the same time, had he ever waited this long before washing his hands before? Maybe a long time ago, before this illness got its teeth into him. When he was a child and didn’t care if he had sticky fingers because it wasn’t even on his mental radar yet.

The two of them had been attending therapy for a few weeks. Logan’s therapist had spent their sessions discussing the complexities of OCD, Logan’s struggles, relaxation techniques, and after enough discussion they’d decided Logan was ready to try the exposure exercises. He was still reluctant. It was just as hard as he thought it was going to be.

“Wanna play Tetris?” Virgil offered.

His hands burned of contamination. “I don’t want to touch the controller.”

“We’ll wipe it after. Come on.”

Logan obeyed and they set up in the living room, Logan still breathing slow. He just, he should just wash his hands. What if he touched his face? What if he touched something else? He’d have to wash all his clothes.

Virgil stuck the controller in his filthy hands. Logan played. Still breathing. Still breathing. After a while, a big smile came over Virgil’s face, but he said nothing.

Then Logan looked up, and it had been half an hour, and the only thing he’d been thinking about was the perfect slotting of pieces into place. And he remembered.

“Oh shit.” Logan said, dropping the controller.

Virgil didn’t say anything, but he bit his lip as he beamed.

He’d actually forgotten. The panic had subsided enough. When he remembered, he got up and washed his hands immediately, heart beating in his throat, but there was... success.

“It goes away.” Virgil said, from where he was leaning on the counter as Logan washed his hands. “Right? The panic?”

Logan nodded mutely. He went to reach for the soap a second time and Virgil took it away before he could.

“Come on, I’ll let you wipe the controller, but I won’t let you wash your hands a second time. They’re clean, I watched you do it, man.”

Logan swallowed against the lump in his throat, but obeyed, following him back to the controller and cleaning it. Then he walked over to his room and recorded in the little book that his therapist gave him. They’d established a scale, from one to ten, describing the amount of anxiety he’d felt. He described this as a 7, but by the end of the exposure it was a 4, though it jumped right back up when he remembered.

Logan felt like skin was crawling from all the attention, so when he returned to the living room he asked Virgil how his own therapy was going.

Virgil gave a really big shrug. “I don’t know. It’s cool to have someone to talk to who doesn’t already know me, I guess. We’ve been discussing cognitive distortions and stuff. I don’t really see how it’s gonna help me, because like... it involves having to logically think through stuff and I’ve
never been very good at that on my own, spontaneously, right? Like I can do it if someone’s talking me through it, but the moment that I’m by myself it’s like I forget how to think.”

“That makes sense.” Logan said, a little more tiredly than he meant to, thinking about his own discussions of cognitive distortions, as they applied to his OCD. The statistical unlikelihood that the things he touched would actually be dangerous, since millions of people everyday went around touching them without washing their hands. And while usually Logan was a very logical guy, OCD robbed him of the ability to think rationally, and the counter offer was — yes the statistical likelihood was like 0.01% but that’s not nothing.

Around and around in circles, until he was dizzy. It was exhausting. And it was always so much more tempting to just give into the impulse to wash his hands, instead of suffering through the anxiety of trying to rationalize his way through the obsession.

“It’ll get easier.” Virgil said.

Logan gave a sad smile. “How do you know?”

Virgil shrugged, picking at a thread on the end of his sleeve. “I don’t. But everyone always says this is supposed to help. We haven’t been at it that long, we’ve gotta... work hard, like studying for a test, right?”

Logan was exhausted from the anxiety he’d willingly put himself through for the exposure, and rubbed his face. “I certainly hope so.”

Virgil bumped his shoulders together. “You still wanna go wash your hands again, don’t you?”

“Yes.” That was another thing — the baselines of what normal behaviour was. Because yes, studying and washing your hands were normal. But not to the extent that Logan did it. Normal people washed their hands once. But the voice in his head said he didn’t do a good enough job. That he needed to go wash his face in case he touched it. It brought up a well of frustration in his throat, suffocating, annoying, almost intolerable.

“Let’s go out.” Virgil said, standing up.

Logan looked at him, almost helplessly. “Where?”

“Anywhere.”

Sighing, he got up too, and they got their coats, going for a walk outside in the crisp air. Logan probably should’ve been studying, and he would’ve said so, except that his hands were still shaking. He shoved them in his pockets.

Virgil talked some more about his own sessions, and it didn’t feel all so terrible and strange when Logan was confronted with the fact that he wasn’t doing this weird process alone. That he was in this with someone — with his best friend. They were discovering the world of improving mental health together. The bumpy, uneven, treacherous road.

Whether intentional or just wandering feet, they ended up heading towards Roman and Patton’s place. They caught a bus the last couple blocks and went to pester them by knocking insistently at the door. It was ten in the morning on a Sunday, there was no guarantee Roman would be awake or that Patton would be home. But they were.

Patton opened the door, and broke into a huge beaming smile. “Hey! Come in! I was just going to go wake up Ro.”
Virgil leaned over to scoop some snow off the ground, and said, “I got it.”

Patton laughed, full of joy, as Virgil skirted past and hopped down towards Roman’s room.

“Good morning.” Logan greeted.

“Good morning.” Patton said, smiling with his huge dimples. “You two are a wonderful surprise.”

Logan shrugged, trying not to feel self-conscious — but it was hard to feel unwanted when Patton looked so dang happy to see him. “We were out for a walk.”

Roman squealed distantly, and Patton laughed again. Logan extended an arm in offer, and Patton stepped into his space, wrapping his arms around his waist underneath his jacket and squeezed.

Logan curled around him, nose in his curls, a bit of heat in his neck, but the good kind, the overwhelming kind that was pleasant and not scary. Okay, a little scary. His affection for Patton frightened him a little. In a very broad way, like the whole universe existed inside of a person, and it this mystical miracle that he could hold and touch and kiss him.

“Are you hungry?” Patton asked.

“I could eat.” Logan said, even though his stomach was still in knots from earlier. He let go, shoving his still unsteady hands back in his pockets, shoulders slouched, offering a nervous smile.

Patton appraised him for a moment, reading the unease written all over him, and smiled, kinder, softer, with the same amount of dimples. “Okay, let’s eat.”

Patton lead them to his kitchen and pulled out a large bowl. Logan sat on the stool by the counter and scratched his hands, wondering if his desire to ask if Patton had washed his hands before cooking was a reasonable thing to ask, or if it was obsessive. Judging by the spiky ball of anxiety in his chest, poking him repeatedly, trying to get him to ask Patton to wash his hands, wash his hands—

He rode it out instead of saying anything, and once Patton pulled out all the ingredients onto the counter he turned around and washed his hands without being prompted. But the anxiety didn’t vanish so easily, hard like a rock. It had been a long morning already.

“Do you want some coffee?” Patton asked, when neither of them spoke, and he began measuring the flour with a practiced hand.

“I’m alright.”

“Hmm, I think we have some juice too, orange?”

Logan shrugged, consciously stopping his hands from where he’d been absent mindedly scratching. Logan hated feeling absentminded, it was like a loss of control. He hopped down, instead of making Patton do it for him, opening the fridge and asking, “Do you want some too?”

“Sure!”

Virgil and Roman appeared, and Logan couldn’t help but snort at their contrast. Virgil was dressed in black on black on black, which looked particularly hilarious beside Roman’s bright pink bathrobe. He had bare hairy legs and fuzzy slippers.

“Looking good, Ro.” Patton winked, from where he was whisking happily.

Roman had only pride, striking a pose. Logan used the opportunity to take a picture of him with his
“Send me that.” Virgil laughed, leaning over and digging his chin into Logan’s shoulder.

Logan did so. Roman turned the radio on and immediately began to sing along, trying to convince Virgil to join in and dance with him, which he did not. Patton did, though, and with Virgil leaning against his side, Logan found himself laughing at Roman and Patton’s improvised dance to Lady Gaga. And that his hands weren’t shaking anymore.

Friends were a support system, his therapist had explained. It was supposed to be something that was the biggest factor in success. Logan hadn’t really understood — it wasn’t as if they could actually do anything to help him fight the thoughts in his head. But... maybe it was more just that there were people around while he did it. Full of love and distractions and food and advice.

Patton sat next to him on their tiny couch to eat waffles, the heat of his body was a line up his side, leaning close and sticking his fingers in the syrup.

It wasn’t... it wasn’t easy. Returning to school for the new semester, he had so much studying to do even if he hadn’t developed an OCD compulsion around it, and his fallback during times of anxiety had always been washing his hands. They’d started attending therapy and suddenly he had to develop healthier ways to deal with his fucked up brain chemistry, and that was, well, hard as fuck. Because the thing about unhealthy coping mechanisms was that they were easy, like dirty tricks, and they won’t take anything from you in the moment because they take it from you down the road.

Trying to do breathing exercises, grounding techniques, analyzing cognitive distortions... it required mental effort in the moment and it was exhausting. The number of times he wanted to just give in was almost embarrassing — he’d always thought he was stronger than that, that he could deal with anything.

And now... it felt like he couldn’t deal with anything at all. But he was trying, trying to find the right study balance, acknowledging his problems, not just shoving them underneath the rug, and it felt like everything had only gotten worse when he got to therapy and realized how bad it was... except that it wasn’t like that, it was just opening his eyes to the reality.

Roman and Virgil didn’t have a class together anymore, but they still managed to get into a very long discussion/argument over Greek myths, the interpretations and intended messages. Patton rolled his eyes, amused, and insisted that Logan join him in the relative peace of his bedroom.

His skin was crawling. He wanted to go wash his hands. It was so stupid, so overwhelming, and it was all he could think about. He sat on Patton’s bed, staring at his hands in his lap.

"Are you doing okay, handsome?" Patton asked, touching his arm.

"Hm." Logan knew he shouldn’t pretend he was fine, Patton had made that quite clear. That didn't mean he had the vocabulary to articulate how he felt.

"Is something wrong?" Patton prodded, gentle.

"I need to wash my hands." Logan said quietly, because he needed to, needed to, right now, he had to. It was the burning nerves in his neck. It was the unrelenting tide of anxiety begging him to do it.

"Okay." Patton said. Not quite understanding.

"I'm not supposed to." Logan replied. "I haven't done something that would require it. It's just a compulsion. I shouldn't do it."
"So it's causing you anxiety... I remember when we read about the exposure therapy and the important part was the relaxation techniques while you do it. If you're really doing exposure right now by not washing your hands, then we need to do a relaxation technique too." Patton pointed out.

Logan bit his lip, and wrung his hands. It seemed so stupid, to have to calm himself in such a purposeful way, when it was something so constant and unending. He was always going to want to wash his hands. Would it mean he was battling against this for the rest of his life?

"Come on," Patton coaxed, squeezing his arm. "Talk me through it. Tell me all about it. What are the relaxation techniques your therapist told you?"

"There's... there's deep breathing. Counting the seconds. There's grounding, noticing things for each of the senses. There's progressive relaxation, tensing your muscles hard then releasing, one by one."

Patton sat beside him, pulling a leg up and hugging it. "Which do you want to try?"

He'd done the breathing earlier, so, "Grounding."

"Okay. What do you see?"

Logan looked at Patton's room. "Stuffed animals."

Patton giggled. "Yes, lots. I have a very impressive collection, they all have names and everything."

That didn't surprise Logan at all. The collection was stacked on a shelf, arranged neatly. His wall had framed paintings, "I see art. Did you make those?"

Patton shook his head. "Roman did. They're beautiful, right?"

"Yes." Logan agreed, because they were.

"What do you hear?"

Logan listened, quiet in the bubble of the room for a moment. "Distant traffic. Your roommates watching television upstairs. Virgil and Roman debating in the next room."

"How about smell?"

"Mm... cherries?"

"I'm wearing cherry lipgloss, so probably."

"That must be it."

"And taste?"

Logan considered it. He tasted the waffles they ate earlier. But instead he leaned over and kissed Patton, because he wanted to, and he could. Then he murmured, "Cherries."

Patton's dimples emerged underneath blushing cheeks. "And feel?"

Logan reached out and took both his hands, squeezing in response.

"Are you grounded now?" Patton asked.

Logan still wanted to wash his hands, admittedly. But the panic had subsided a little during the
exercise. He shrugged. If he could just... not wash his hands, that would be great. He had no reason to. No trigger to avoid. He hadn't touched anything he shouldn't have. He just wanted to, to make sure, to be certain of the cleanliness of his hands. To relieve the anxiety pressing on his chest.

"Do you want to watch something?" Patton asked next, and Logan agreed. They pulled up Netflix on his phone and settled back, and Logan tried for as long as he could to not get up and wash his fucking hands.

But he took full advantage of a loop hole after about half an hour to go to use the washroom, and wash his hands then, at a presumably normal time. It still felt like cheating. At least he could focus when he returned to Patton.

It was all so exhausting. And frustrating. He leaned against Patton as they watched his phone, tired and trying to breathe normal. It was a bad day. And he was so glad he had Patton to spend it with, even if he was prickly and not a very good guest. Patton certainly didn't seem to mind, hugging him tightly around the middle like his own personal teddy bear.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

now in the end
I'm waiting for bad luck again
if you're giving me more I'm gonna end
it's what you're waiting for
on and on
nothing left here anymore
- bad luck again by the RAA

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Logan didn’t frequently go to the mall, mostly because all of them were broke college students and shopping fell on the wayside to studying and sleeping.

But Roman insisted. It sprouted from a conversation about moisturizer and lotion, where Roman cradled Logan’s poor hands and asked what his skincare routine was.

“My what?” Logan said blankly.

Roman pretended that Logan had shot him in the chest. Then insisted they go to the mall.

“Just once.” Roman promised, both bright eyed and dismayed. “After that you can just order your lotion online. But the first time you have to go in person, because you can’t smell it through a computer, and you can’t test if you’re allergic.”

Logan didn’t care about smell, but he did care about potential allergens, so he agreed. They ended up in Lush, a very helpful assistant letting the two of them rub sample spots into Logan’s arm.

“Lotion always stings too much.” Logan told him, smelling each lotion as Roman presented them, even as they all seemed to smell the same after a while. “That’s why I don’t use it. I put it on and I end up washing it off.”

“Understandable.” Roman said, trying a rose lotion. “Have you tried the sock hands thing?”

“The... what?”

Roman laughed, switching the tubs in his hands. “Put lotion on your hands then cover them with clean socks. Go to bed. Wake up with soft hands.”

“I can confidently say I’ve never tried that.”

Roman laughed again. “It might help. Or it might not. But I’d like to grab you a lotion anyway, because it’ll be good to have an option you actually like. So you gotta think hard, my bespeckled friend, and choose one that you’d actually be excited about using.”

Logan had never been excited about using lotion in his life. But Roman was so seriously adamant
that he played along, comparing each sample, ranking them, standing there in the crowded Lush store for a good twenty minutes. They developed a criteria between them, a frank discussion of consistency versus scent, and the thing Logan liked about Roman was that he did absolutely everything at 110%, and he was always so enthusiastic when others did the same. It was like being sucked into a tornado.

In the end, he choose a purple lavender lotion that was not overwhelming, and managed to rub away without leaving his skin greasy. He bravely allowed Roman to rub the sample on his actual hands instead of his arm, and it definitely stung.

“It should subside.” Roman promised. “If it doesn’t I promise you can wash it off.”

Logan stuck it out, as they went to the cashier and purchased it. Roman insisted on paying, since it was his idea, and Logan was happy to let him because didn’t really have the budget for that.

By the time they were on the bus heading back Roman was correct — the stinging did subside. His hands were an angry furious red, the small dry cuts standing out, and he really hoped it would actually help.

“Thank you Roman.” Logan said, rubbing his hands together in a rhythm, catching the easier slide of skin. “You didn’t have to do this.”

Roman dabbed some of the lotion on, humming, “It was a pleasure. I could talk about skin care for days. It’s nice to have something I’m good at to help you with, for once.”

“I appreciate it.” Logan bumped their shoulders together. He was thinking about when Roman invited him to watch his community theatre rehearsal for the first time, how there was the hesitance in his offer, like it might be rebuffed, how Virgil told him that he just wanted to be friends. It emboldened Logan to add, “You’re a good friend.”

Roman practically burst with a smile. “Thank you.”

Logan did try the lotion before bed, though he could not quite bring himself to put socks on. He was hoping with the attempts at reducing how frequently he washed his hands during the day, and the application of skincare, that he might be able to salvage his hands in the foreseeable future. It stung, but the pain went away.

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They weren't really supposed to be backstage, but Roman had insisted. It was the night of his term project performance for his senior level drama class, and the two of them were led through a side door to where Roman was sitting on a milk crate, dabbing golden eyeshadow on.

"Is Patton here yet?" Roman asked, after greeting them with a very plastic smile.

Logan checked his phone. "Last I heard he was just leaving his volunteer group."

Roman swallowed hard, nodding, and turned back to the dusty mirror, trying to apply fake lashes. "Okay. He'll be here soon. He'll be here soon."

Virgil wrung his hands. "Are you nervous?"

"I never get nervous." Roman replied, but it was still the very wrong tone of voice.

"Is there anything I can do?" Virgil asked next.
Roman grabbed his hand, squeezed, and gave a warmer smile. "You're kind to offer. It's all fine. I'm fine."

But the smile still didn't reach his eyes, and he was suspiciously quiet as he turned back to the mirror.

Logan and Virgil exchanged a glance behind his back, Logan raising his eyebrow and Virgil biting his lip.

Stage-hands ran back and forth, and Roman exchanged kind words with his fellow actors, and Logan and Virgil tried to remain out of the way. It began to look like the bizarrely quiet, furrowed brow, and dull eyed Roman was going to have to step on stage when a bright voice came from behind them.

"Look at that beautiful star!" Patton crowed, swanning towards them with a single red rose and offering it to Roman. "Can I get your autograph?"

Roman lit up, and stood to hug Patton, sweeping him up off the ground and spinning them in a circle. "You're here!"

"Of course I'm here." Patton cried, and grinned with bright dimples when Roman set him down. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. I'm so excited to see my favourite actor absolutely kill it on the stage."

Roman flushed red, and sniffed the rose. "Thanks Padre."

"Of course! Don't be nervous." Patton reached out and adjusted the collar of his costume. "I'm not." Roman said.

"I don't see a smile, aren't you excited? Come on, Ro, it's the big day! I wanna see your gorgeous smile."

Roman ducked his head, and with a pink face he gave a sincere smile with all his teeth.

"There's my handsome pal." Patton cheered, brushing non-existent lint off both his shoulders. "I want you to have fun out there, okay? If not, I'll throw popcorn at you until you smile again. You know I will."

Roman laughed, almost helplessly, and when he sat down again to finish his make-up he didn't stop smiling. Patton took the blush and took over, speaking in an enthusiastic tone about the show and how pretty Roman's hair was in that style, until he was called over by the stage manager, and the three of them needed to get to their seats.

Roman gave Virgil a dramatic kiss, all his usual energy returned, a salute to Logan, and one last squeezing hug with Patton, then he bounced off towards the rest of his crew. Patton carefully arranged the rose in front of his mirror, then gestured the two along with the same smile, taking Logan's hand.

"I would've brought him roses too, but they're so expensive." Virgil said.

"Oh, I didn't buy it." Patton said, easy. "I stole it from our neighbour's rose bush."

"What?"

Patton made a shh motion, mischievous, and pulled them ahead to get through the side door and back into the seating area. Logan squeezed his hand, amused with his ridiculous boy.
Roman killed it, of course. Patton spent the whole show leant forward in his seat, watching his best friend perform with sparkling eyes, hands under his chin. Logan's heart beat that funny pattern, because Patton loved so much, and it was wonderful to watch.

"Patton is like your hype man." Virgil observed later back at the apartment, sitting on Roman's lap, stroking his coiffed hair.

"What do you mean?" Roman replied, arm around his waist, staring at him with the world's biggest heart eyes, practically gooey, thrilled that Virgil had thrown himself on his lap.

"You didn't want to go on stage until you saw him." Virgil said, throwing Patton glance. "You hype him up, Padre."

"I always have." Patton said, from where he was trying to braid bows into Logan's hair. Trying and failing, since it was too short. "I'm his biggest fan!"

"Pat's my number one." Roman said. "My one and only, for many years."

"Hush. Everyone has always loved you." Patton said, chiding, and sling-shot a pink elastic at him. "It's more like... a little ritual. I show up and make a big deal, so he's ready to go on stage."

"You're his hype man." Virgil agreed, sling-shotting the pink elastic back, which Logan caught it mid-air. "It's adorable."

"Only because I learnt it from him." Patton said, with a strangely sad smile, and looked at Roman. "When we were kids you always cheered me on for every single thing I ever did, or wanted to do, or was afraid to do."

"Of course I did!" Roman said, winking. "I'm your number one fan too, you know."

"That's so cute I could puke." Virgil said.

Part of his attempt to develop better habits was a conscious effort to reduce the amount of excessive study time, especially when it was when Logan was meant to be doing something else. The biggest problem time being sleep. His therapist stressed that if he was to cut into his sleep schedule to study, then it was no longer a rational choice.

That was easier said than done. He had a test coming up, and stopped studying around midnight and tried to go to sleep. But every few moments his brain would suggest--an intrusive thought--that he had not studied enough during the day, and that he was going to fail, and that he should get up and study. And as much as he wanted to sleep, the anxiety this obsession was causing was making it impossible. And the evil little knowledge that if he gave into the compulsion and studied, he could sleep afterwards.

Logan dragged over his pillow and tried to suffocate himself with it, making a tired and frustrated noise. His head was so loud. Resisting OCD was so fucking exhausting. It was hard to fight a battle against your mind constantly, because normally you could trust your own thoughts, and Logan was beginning to understand that due to the chemical imbalance of the mental illness in his head, he could not trust his own thoughts to be factual. The irrational intrusive thoughts, the obsessions, they presented themselves as so important and urgent and falsely accurate, that he hadn’t questioned it for so long. Of course he needed to wash his hands. Of course he needed to study.

But the flip side: the obsession with theoretical contamination was so prevalent and strong, along
with the paralyzing fear of failure, together to create such anxious thoughts that only the compulsions could ease them. But the compulsions would never ease them. Only confronting the false logic behind his obsessions would release him from the treacherous jaws. And that involved a lot of mental effort, mental torture, to peel back the layers of illusion into his mind that the compulsion was okay, that this was necessary, that this was normal.

To see that instead: he was sick, he was hurting, and that needed help.

Logan got up. His fingers twitched, jaw set, and stood up to go grab his textbooks. Struggled with himself in the doorway, statistical facts about the importance of sleep arguing with the begging obsessive thoughts. He looked instead down the hall to Virgil’s room, and despite the fact that it was now three in the morning, his best friend’s light was on.

He grabbed his glasses, and went to tap lightly on the door.

“Well?” Virgil’s voice called out, in quiet question.

“You up?”

“Yeah. Come in.”

Logan let himself in. Virgil was sitting on top of his desk.

“How’d you know I was up and worrying?” Virgil asked, tugging on the ends of his hoodie strings in a meaningless pattern, mouth scrunched up.

“Because I was too. And your light is on.” Logan sat in the desk chair in front of him. “What are you worrying about?”

“Argh. It’s only like... a couple months until finals then we graduate then we have to like. Go out into the world and get jobs and be adults and I don’t think I can do it.”

“That’s fair.” Logan said.

“Really?”

“We’re seniors. I think all of us have that fear.”

“Sometimes I forget that the anxieties I have might have a place in reality and I’m not just being stupid.” Virgil rubbed his face. The bags under his eyes seem darker than usual. His fingers trembled a little as he pulled them away. “I suppose the next question is: how do normal people deal with this crushing sense of dread and impending doom?”

“We would have to find a normal person to ask first.” Logan cracked a little smile. “You could ask your therapist.”

“I wouldn’t want to bother him with something so silly.”

“You wouldn’t want to bother... your therapist... with your problems.”

“Well it certainly sounds dumb when you put it like that.”

Logan spotted Stump slinking into the room and scooped him up. He put him on the desk so both of them could pet his thick black fur.

“Why are you up?” Virgil asked.
“I can’t sleep.” Logan replied. “I already studied for my test tomorrow, but my brain is trying to
convince me to study more. Whether or not I do it, I can’t sleep.”

“You study more than anyone already. You want to study more because you’re afraid you’ll fail,
right? Have you ever failed a test in your life?”

“No. Because I study enough.”

Virgil hummed. “Did I ever tell you about the time I failed a test in my high school geometry class?”

Logan shook his head.

Virgil squished Stump’s little face. “I just totally fucking blanked. I had a panic attack right there. I
handed it in with nothing on it. And I was a mess, I thought I’d ruined everything. That my life was
over. Except that it wasn’t. I did better on the next test. I asked for some extra credit stuff to make up
for it. I passed the class.”

“But this is college.” Logan licked his lips, dry. “This is our senior year, as you just pointed out.”

“Yeah, but if you bombed a test for whatever reason, they’re not going to kick you out now. You
have an outstanding academic record. You’ve shown yourself to be diligent and hardworking and
that you know the material. If you failed a test, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. You could make
up for it, or even retake the class.”

Logan remembered having a similar conversation with Patton, and thought about his terrible
character flaw of being really good at giving advice and really bad at taking it for himself. He had
one last throw into the ring, one last defence: “If I fail then I’m not smart and if I’m not smart then
I’m not worth anyone’s time. I have to be perfect and intellectual because that’s the only thing I have
going for me.”

It wasn’t so much that failure would mean the end of the world (which it still felt like it would), but
that any failure reflected on him. That he attributed his self-worth to his academic success.

“Do you really think that?” Virgil asked, and he just sounded so sad about it.

Logan had to look away as he shrugged. “I mean. Yes. I always have. My worth is determined by
how useful I can be.”

“I thought I had bad self-esteem. We really are two sad peas in a pod.” Virgil sighed and bit his lip.
“L, I know you don’t have that attitudes towards other people. You’re the one who always says that
intelligence is a flawed measurement. So why would you use it as the internal measurement for
yourself?”

“Because that’s all I have.”

Virgil chewed on his thumb. He was quiet for a minute. The room was dim, the air fuzzy, the late
hour making it all rather unreal and liminal and transient.

“I don’t know what I could say to you in order to convince you otherwise.” Virgil said at last. “It just
seems so obvious to me. You’re my best friend and I pretty much would unhesitatingly die for you.
You... you have so many wonderful qualities and I know that Patton adores you and that Roman
thinks you’re the best thing since sliced bread. Absolutely none of us care if you pass your tests or if
you know everything. Obviously we want you to do well but because it’s so important to you. If you
dropped out now, we would all support you, and none of us would think less of you.”
Logan’s throat hurt. If he didn’t know better, he’d think that he was going to cry. He said, ragged, “Oh.”

Virgil gave a sad smile. “I know it probably doesn’t help much but you’re the only one who thinks of yourself like that. We all just like you for who you are.”

Logan nodded tightly, and wrapped his arms around himself. He said, forever polite, “Thank you.”

Virgil picked up Stump and played with his stubby arms. Logan played the words back and forth in his head for a while. Wondering where he could possibly go from there.

One thing stuck out to him — the two sad peas in a pod comment. Virgil looked so damn tired, just exhausted, and here he was sitting up all night worrying about the future, fretting where he was going to be.

“It’s the same for you, you know.” Logan offered, reaching out to grip Virgil’s knee. “We all love you just how you are. And when the future comes, you won’t be alone. We’ll be with you every step of the way.”

Virgil released a shuddering breath. He nodded, hugging the cat to his chest. “I know. I know. I just think about all the decisions I’m going to have to make and all the things that could go wrong and... I’m terrified. And it’s like this breathless thing, suspended, and it’s hard to sleep because all I can think is the future is going to be too much. And I won’t be able to handle it.”

“And if that’s the case, we’ll still be here.” Logan said. “Roman and Patton and I will all catch you if you fall.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Patton, he’s made you sappy.” Virgil said, sounding wavering.

“Maybe so.”

Virgil laughed a little, then got down from the desk. He said, “I’m going to make pancakes. Do you want some?”

“The ridiculous choice to have pancakes in the middle of the night? I think you’ve been spending too much time with Roman.”

Virgil said, teasing, “Maybe so.”

They made pancakes. Logan didn’t sleep much, but he didn’t study either, and it wasn’t really winning but it wasn’t giving up either.

[]

"Do you think it's helping?" Patton asked.

The two of them were waiting in line at the caf, getting cheap coffee on a mandatory study break. Patton had started them, after discussing ways he could curb his study obsession without hurting his grades. They decided on taking a break after two hours of study, no matter what.

"I don't know." Logan said. Patton was referring to therapy -- if it was helping him get better. "I'd like to think it is, but I don't know. Who is to say the moment I'm out of school and I don't have access to the Support Center anymore that I won't just go right back to where I was before?"
"Yeah." Patton said, a little sad. "But, like, at least right now? Is it helping right now?"

Understanding Logan's need for statistical and logical facts, his therapist had him record every single time he washed his hands. And with the new techniques, statistically he had decreased the amount of times he washed his hands per day since he started therapy. "Yes."

"Are you glad you're doing it?"

"I'm glad I'm trying." Logan said, because it wasn't fun and it wasn't easy.

"Good." Patton said firmly, and they reached the front of the line so they ordered terrible coffee and sat down on the uncomfortable tables with it.

"It's changed... how I think about my mind." Logan explained, trailing the stir stick in the foam, thoughts distant and troubled. "Which is hard to confront, to deal with, but I think it was necessary. I needed to realize that it wasn't okay. So even if going forward, when we leave college and don't have the same resources, the same safety nets... I will know that I need to deal with my mental health, in whatever way I can, instead of just pushing it away all the time."

Patton offered his hand. Logan took it and squeezed.

"I know you can do it." Patton said, surely. "You're the hardest worker I know. Once you apply yourself to your mental health as much as you do anything else, you'll be in such a better place. All I want is for you not to hurt as much."

Logan gave a wavering smile. "Yeah. I hope so. I guess I feel... relieved. Like I'd been carrying something very heavy for a long time, and only now have I been able to set it down."

"Virgil said something similar." Patton rubbed his thumb soothingly against his. "I'm really proud of both of you, you know."

"Thank you." Logan said, he was too. For Virgil, of course, and he was trying really hard to be proud of himself as well. He thought about the conversation he'd had with Virgil in the middle of the night, and said, "There's a lot... of problems with the way I think. With how I perceive myself. I thought... I attribute so much of my importance to being academically perfect. And looking back it only reinforced my behaviour. It was far more important to be successful than happy. It didn't matter that I was hurting because my grades were perfect."

"I get that." Patton said, voice a little rough. "But you know that you're wonderful, right? That we love you so much. And we all care very much if you're hurting."

"Yes." Logan said, and he wasn't lying. "I know that. Thank you... thank you for being here with me as I figured this out. It's been... immeasurably helpful."

"It is my genuine pleasure." Patton beamed at him.

They moved onto better topic for their study break. But they did not let go of their hands across the table.

Chapter End Notes

that's it!!! thank you so much for coming along this ride with me, all of your love and
support have blown me away, this is such a kind and wonderful fandom. i appreciate each and every comment, thank you thank you.

i hope i've written a story you find compelling and healing and honest. as you might've guessed from the desperately personal perspective of this story, both OCD and anxiety are close to my heart. posting this was very hard, kind of like craving out bits of my soul, but my experience with this compassionate fandom has made it completely worth it. i do hope you enjoyed, took something from it, whether it's perspective or warmth or solidarity or anything at all.

logan's story ends here, and of course the journey does not. but rest assured -- he has a lot of love and support. he will be okay. so will you. <3

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