All Under One Roof

by Me_aGlorifiedPigeon

Summary

It's been fifteen years since Patton has seen any of his family in person, he has a twelve year old son, almost no money, and is moving in with the baby brother he abandoned at four years old.
And of course, circumstance has led all his brothers into the same boat, unfortunately.
Well, no matter, they're brothers! Through thick and thin, right?

In which I decided to write a sitcom, but like... less funny, I guess. And a lot more gay. And I don't know what I'm doing.
I don't know what I'm doing, hahaha, enjoy!
"You're really moving in?" Patton's younger brother was only nineteen years old, a whole seven years younger than the twins. He'd been a surprise birth, Virgil Sanders, and had also been raised solely on his brothers' hand me downs. Up until he hit six feet tall and stayed impossibly thin, that is, and they had to start buying him his own jeans so they didn't fall right down his bean pole legs, Mom's words. Now his style was less a scraggly hodgepodge of his older brothers and more like the revenge of his repressed middle school self expression. He was standing amidst the boxes that Patton and Thomas had spent all day unloading from the car. Not that there was much- Thomas' mother had kept most of the furniture after the divorce.

"I wasn't joking, Virge," Patton Sanders huffed, placing the toaster oven on the kitchen counter with a heavy grunt. Thomas popped up from behind the counter and waved at his uncle.

"Heya, Uncle Virgil!" Thomas called.

"'Sup, Squirt," Virgil said, jerking his chin in acknowledgment. He turned to Patton, coming closer, and lowering his voice. "Aren't you worried about the others?"

"What're you talking about, Virgil?" Patton asked, confused. He shifted his glasses before bending down and taking the silverware out of the bottom of the box in two large handfuls.

"Our brothers, Pat," Virgil muttered. "You said you didn't want Thomas around bad influences."

"Why would Remus and Ethan show up now, of all times?" Patton asked, raising one eyebrow. Virgil opened his mouth, but the doorbell rang. Patton's not-so-little brother huffed, then hurried off to go answer it.

Patton placed the silverware on the table, seeing that Thomas had already put the toaster oven next to the fridge and plugged it in. Now he was standing by the kitchen doorway, examining a few etchings along the door. Patton smiled and made his way over.

"What caught your eye, kiddo?" Patton asked. Thomas snorted.

"You were shorter than me at twelve," Thomas said, pointing at a mark that went up to his nose.

"Yeah, I guess I'm not the quickest grower in my family," Patton chuckled, also studying some of the marks he hadn't seen before. "Do you want me to add your measurements?"

"No. I didn't know you had so many brothers, though," Thomas said, looking at the six separate colors of marks on the wall. Their parents had always been fans of color coding.

"Sorry about that. Your mom didn't like them very much," Patton said, placing one hand on Thomas' head.

"Why?" Thomas asked.

"You mean Patton-cake is here too!?" A loud, boisterous voice exclaimed, and Patton was thrown back to days in high school when the twins would shout at him as he walked home and they were still in their last recess. He turned to see none other than his baby brother Roman Sanders, one box under his arm and one suitcase trailing him, as the theatre nerd looked right at him.

"Roman!" Patton exclaimed enthusiastically, rushing to hug his little brother. Roman tossed his
box onto an empty armchair and left his suitcase beside it, rushing to accept Patton's hug.

"Oh my god, don't you ever go radio silent again! I thought I'd only hear from you if your wife died or something, Dios mio!" Roman cried, pulling away just far enough to examine his older brother in full.

"You're taller than me!" Patton laughed. "And you're so tan, what happened?"

"I studied abroad in Peru, then decided to stay for a few years!" Roman explained. Then his face lit up even brighter. "Oh, Virgil told me forever ago you had a kid! What's his name again, something really white, right? John?"

"It's not nearly as bad as John," Patton defended. He turned back to where Thomas had yet to leave the kitchen doorway. His son was looking very much like a deer in the headlights as he stared up at Roman. "Come on, Thomas, say hi to your Uncle Roman!"

"Oh my god, he doesn't look anything like your bitch wife," Roman gushed.

"Language," Patton scolded playfully. Thomas tentatively came over, pressing himself shyly against his father's side.

"Hi." Thomas said shortly.

"Hey! I love your hair, purple suits you," Roman grinned, and he tousled the violet locks.

"Uncle Virge picked it," Thomas said, trying to get attention off of himself. Roman barked out a laugh.

"Of course he did. Virgil once tried to go a whole year not wearing any hand me downs unless they were black or purple. Mom and Dad damn near forced him into Patton's old bright blue bomber jacket on snow days," Roman teased, looking at his baby brother with a huge grin. Virgil rolled his eyes and looked away, his hands going into his jean pockets.

Thomas, meanwhile, looked like someone had told him angels were going to come and give him a chocolate cake made out of rainbows and stars. "It snows here?"

Immediately, Roman turned back to Thomas, gasping. "You've never seen snow? Another reason to hate your mother. As soon as it starts to snow in the winter, we're going to have the best snow day, you and I. Don't let me forget, nephew of mine!"

"Maybe after you shovel out the driveway," Virgil snorted.

Roman placed his hands on his hips and stuck out his tongue. "You can't give me chores, Dark and Stormy, I'm an adult."

"Living for free in my house," Virgil teased. The mood dried up immediately after that comment and Virgil coughed. "Uh, sorry."

"No, it's fine!" Roman said, forcing a smile. "I just… need to find a job."

"Oh, what happened?" Patton asked. He knew why he asked Virgil if he could stay. He'd been a house husband for so long he wasn't sure if he'd be able to find a job good enough to support him and Thomas. Living with Virgil would just mean pitching in for groceries now and then, or helping cover electrical and water bills, rather than trying to pay for a whole monthly rent. And Virgil, along with the house, had inherited the family business. Seeing as he'd been living at home, Mom
and Dad had taught him the ins and outs of running the flower shop. It was currently being renovated, but once that was finished Patton would begin working there as a cashier for his baby brother.

"Well, apparently, not all dreams come true on the first try. Or the second. Or the third," Roman laughed. He pursed his lips. "Mr. Haverhill was right, I needed a backup plan."

"With our family, you have a built in backup plan," Virgil reminded.

"I don't know anything about flowers," Roman argued hotly. "I'll look into waiting tables, I don't know. But I'm glad you extended this offer to me, Virgil, and I'll pay you back as soon as I can."

"You don't have to, Princey," Virgil said. "Through thick and thin, and whatever."

Patton smiled at his two younger brothers, remembering the family phrase the older siblings had come up with as children to help them connect despite their age differences. They'd always seemed larger when they were kids, but when Virgil was born it was pretty evident they were rather small in comparison.

"Thick and thin?" Thomas piped up.

"It means we'll always stick together," Patton explained.

"Yeah," Virgil chuckled uncomfortably. "And um. I might have, just maybe, also let Ethan and Remus move in-

"What!?" Roman and Patton exclaimed in near panic, for two separate reasons.

"-but only until Ethan can get back on his feet, and only because Mom told me to make sure Remus doesn't get hooked again!" Virgil immediately defended.

"Virgil, my son is living here!" Patton protested.

"Remus nearly got me and him killed, Virgil! He's incredibly unhinged!" Roman argued. Patton stared at him in shock, not having known about that at all.

Virgil scowled. "Oh like you'd even know, Roman! He's changed, he's gotten better! He's just as freaked about the accident as you are! And Patton, you've ignored most of the family for over a decade, I don't think you get much of a choice in the matter!"

At that moment, the partially open front door swung further open, revealing yet another of Patton's little brothers, a suitcase in one hand and a briefcase in the other, a rolled up blanket tucked under one arm.

"You really should close the door if you're going to be loudly discussing someone who might arrive at any moment," Logan Sanders stated, bending down to place his suitcase on the floor.

"Logan! At last, someone sane," Roman lamented dramatically.

"Dad," Thomas muttered, now that Roman and Virgil had turned to the second person he was unfamiliar with. Patton leaned a bit to listen to his son. "Who are Remus and Ethan?"

"They're my younger brothers," Patton explained. "They... aren't very good people."

"You don't like them?" Thomas asked, and Patton winced.
"We'll talk about it later. Let's go meet your Uncle Logan." Patton placed one hand between
Thomas' shoulders, pushing him forward to the door.

"Is that all your stuff, L?" Virgil was asking, taking Logan's briefcase.

"Yes, I'm afraid Caelum took everything else," Logan explained, clearing his throat.

"I told you that boyfriend of yours was a shi- uh, a bastard," Roman noticed Thomas coming over.

Patton was surprised. "Logan, you're gay?"

"Patton," Logan looked as surprised as he felt. "You're here? Oh, and this must be Thomas. Salutations."

Thomas snickered. "Hey."

"Oh, sorry, that was rude of me, just asking that out of nowhere- it's so good to see you, Lo!"
Patton grinned. Logan smiled.

"It is good to see you, as well. I hope it is under good circumstances for you?" Logan asked.

"Janice didn't hit him or anything," Virgil commented lowly, and immediately Roman looked more
relaxed. Patton glanced at him in worry. Why would Roman be so tense about that? Of course
Janice didn't hit him.

"That doesn't mean she didn't hurt him," Logan muttered. Patton looked at his brother bewildered.

"I'm absolutely fine, guys! We divorced on good terms," Patton explained.

Logan and Roman turned to Virgil with doubtful expressions. Virgil looked down at Thomas, then
back at them. "I'll talk to you guys about it later. Do you want me to set you up in your old
bedrooms, or what?"

"My old bedroom should suffice," Logan decided.

"No way! I'm not sleeping in the same room as Remus when I don't have to," Roman scowled.

"Oh, where is Thomas sleeping?" Patton asked. Virgil scratched his head.

"Uh, you and Thomas can take Roman and Remus' old room, Roman can take mine. I've already
moved my stuff into Mom and Dad's," Virgil explained. Patton knew for a fact that Virgil had
moved into their parents' old room because it meant interacting with the rest of them less, seeing as
it had its own bathroom. He might not know him very well, but he'd gotten to know him alright in
the past three years they had been talking over video calls.

"Is the decor still the same?" Patton asked, wondering if he was about to take his son to a bedroom
with a clashing Christmas scheme to it. Not only that, but Remus had a lot of taxidermy on his side
of the room, for a kid from a family that hated harming animals.

"Nah, I went and put all the personal effects of our cringe-worthy childhoods into boxes. If you
want any of that stuff, it's in the attic," Virgil said. "I repainted the walls white too, so just ask me
for tarps if you wanna do anything to them."

"Even mine?" Logan asked, sounding a bit put out. Virgil laughed.

"No, I couldn't bring myself to paint over the constellations. Your walls are fine," Virgil reassured.
"Come on, let's get you guys all settled. Thomas, wanna help? I'll show you your room, too."

"Okay, Uncle V!" Thomas grinned, and he rushed up the stairs with Roman and Logan. Virgil smiled towards Patton, who nodded back and began to put away the silverware he'd left on the counter.

Patton sighed as he placed his silverware with that of his deceased parents. They'd lived rather long at least, Mom dying at seventy five. She could've lived longer still, but she had never been very healthy. Dad died of old age, so there wasn't much to do about that. He'd been eighty two, longer than anyone in his family had ever lived. Patton himself was currently thirty four, but he felt like that wasn't too incredibly far off from seventy five. Funny though, his son would probably be thirty four when he was seventy. Wasn't that weird to think? Thomas was so far from being thirty four, but Patton wasn't so far from being seventy? That didn't make any sense. But that's how feelings could be, sometimes.

After Patton finished putting away all the things he’d brought that belonged in the kitchen, he began to sort through the rest of the boxes. Most were books, or clothes, and one was just Thomas’ electronics. After a moment, he’d found the one stuffed with photographs, and begun unpacking that one.

Patton had very few recent photographs of his family. His wife had never liked his parents, because they made her feel unwelcome, so he didn’t keep in contact with them very well over the years. He sent them any news he felt was important enough to validate bothering them, and he’d paid attention whenever they told him any big news. But the fact was that he was living with his wife in Florida, halfway across the country from them, and she didn’t even like him calling them in the first place.

The most recent photograph Patton had of his family was when Thomas was born. His family had gotten together, almost all of them, and taken a photo to use as a greeting card. Patton had shown it to Thomas once, and that was when he found it behind another photograph, where he’d hidden it from his wife twelve years prior. So, Thomas’ first time looking at this photo was only a few weeks ago.

Patton sighed guiltily, placing the picture frame on the mantel. “Sorry, Mom and Dad.”

“I’m going to go pick up Remus from the center, don’t wait up!” Virgil hollered over his shoulder, sprinting out of the house as he tugged his jacket. Patton chuckled as the door slammed behind his brother. He’d only been talking to Virgil over video messaging for the past three or so years, and he was constantly entertained by how wild of a person he was. Sure, he was the most subdued of the brothers, but he could be quite dramatic when he wanted to be.

Patton returned to the photographs. He’d only kept the ones with Thomas and himself, leaving Janice with all the rest. He spotted a picture on the mantle of Virgil, dressed in the gold robes of his high school graduation. Patton smiled, remembering when he and Janice had walked the stage in their gold graduation gowns. He couldn’t wait until Thomas walked the stage too, maybe even in the same gold now that they lived in Patton’s home town.

Finally, Patton began moving boxes upstairs. He placed Thomas’ box of electronics in the bedroom first, when he heard laughter down the hall. He made his way over and laughed at the sight he saw.

“Dad, Uncle Roman can carry me on his shoulders!” Thomas exclaimed, looking for all the world like he was a much younger child. It was something of a miracle that Roman could carry Thomas’ twelve year old weight on his shoulders without breaking a sweat.
“I could carry you and Logan too, if you guys want to join in the fun,” Roman boasted. Logan snorted looking up from where he was carefully folding his clothes into drawers.

“I don’t see how hanging over your biceps as you twirl violently to show off your strength is fun,” Logan stated blandly, a smirk on his lips.

“I dunno, Lo, it could be fun,” Patton debated.

“Ha!” Roman cried out triumphantly.

“After all, I doubt he’d get us very far off the ground, and wouldn’t that be funny?” Patton finished, and Roman spluttered out several offended noises. Logan chuckled, shaking his head.

“You know, I had been worried we wouldn’t ever get to see each other again,” Logan said. “Especially after you missed the funeral.”

Patton pursed his lips, and the mood in the room plummeted down to somber. “I didn’t want to totally drop off the radar, you know.”

“Welp, Thomas! Let’s go raid the fridge to see what snacks Virgil’s got stocked up,” Roman announced, hurriedly escaping from the room to let Logan and Patton talk in private. Thomas laughed and cheered as he bounced on Roman’s shoulders, ducking under the doorway.

Logan smiled gently. “Thomas is a bright boy.”

“He tries his best,” Patton said. “He’d be glad to know you think so.”

“I do wish you’d tried to contact us sooner,” Logan said, leaning against his dresser. He twisted the handle a bit in his grip. “We could have spent so much more time with him, after all. Something could happen to any of us at any point, and we’ll barely have just met him.”

“I’m sorry, Lo,” Patton sighed.

“I don’t blame you in the least,” Logan argued. Patton got the impression that he was blaming his ex-wife. “I never liked Janice. I was glad when Mom and Dad told you they didn’t like her either, because I thought that meant she would leave our lives forever. I admit, I was a bit naive at the time.”

“You were a kid,” Patton reminded.

“I was sixteen.” Logan folded his arms. Patton blinked at him, curious. Logan had been fourteen when Patton and Janice had started dating. “When you married her, I mean. I was sixteen, and you were barely scraping nineteen. But you said that you couldn’t leave her to raise your baby by herself.”

“And I didn’t,” Patton agreed.

“Then suddenly there was no baby, and I shamefully admit that I was so excited to learn that. I hoped you’d start coming home on the weekends again,” Logan explained. Patton looked at the ground in shame. Logan looked out the window. “Then Ethan was in the hospital and accused of arson, your apartment building was on fire, and Janice was going to move to go to college across the country.”

“Logan, I really am sorry.”
"You picked Janice. I understand now, I think. It's easy to get distracted when something new comes into our lives," Logan explained, pushing away from the dresser. Patton wasn't sure he could understand, seeing as Patton himself wasn't sure what made him let Janice take over his life. "I just wish it didn't take this long for us to talk again."

"I know, Lo," Patton murmured, putting a hand on his brother's shoulder. Logan shuddered, a tear slipping down his cheeks.

"I was so scared when I heard what happened," Logan said, trying to suppress a sob. "I thought you might be hurt, or burned, but you never called, and no one could ever get in contact with you. Patton, you're my only older brother. I was lost without you."

"I'm sorry," Patton apologized yet again, tugging his little brother into a hug. He knew an apology would never be enough, but he was here now. Logan wept, clutching his older brother close.

"I'm not typically one for hugs," Logan laughed wetly.

"Too bad, tears get hugs," Patton insisted, rubbing circles into his brother's back. Logan pulled away first, dabbing at his face with a handkerchief he kept in his pocket. He wiped his lenses before putting them back on his face.

"I believe you asked me about my sexuality before?" Logan questioned. He was changing the subject.

"Only if you feel comfortable talking about it," Patton assured.

"Yes, thank you. I do feel as though I should explain now, as you would be the only one of us out of the loop on such regard," Logan pointed out. "So in the interest of full transparency, I believed I was asexual, but upon getting to know Caelum, I discovered I was demisexual."

"Oh," Patton furrowed his brow. "What's that?"

"It means I don't experience sexual attraction until a certain point in a relationship. I am homoromantic, however, so technically I am gay," Logan continued.

"I'll have to do some looking into that, I've never heard of it before," Patton commented.

"Oh, I'd always recommend looking into LGBT topics. If you'd like proper sources, I have several that I typically recommend to people looking for their identity," Logan offered. Patton grinned. "I'd like that, Lo."

There was a crash down the hall, and Patton heard Thomas burst out into laughter. It seems the boys had already had their fill of snacks. Patton and Logan glanced at each other, and then Roman shouted, "Logan! You're good at fixing dressers, right!?!"

Logan sighed. "It seems I'm being summoned. I'll give you those sources by the end of the night?"

"Don't worry about it, we've got a lot to do today, and plenty of time to handle that stuff," Patton assured. Logan smiled, ever so slightly. He turned down the hall, and Patton sighed happily.

Then the front door burst open and a voice loudly announced, "I'm back!"

Patton went to the tip of the staircase, where he could see Remus standing in the doorway chewing loudly on a stick of gum. Virgil came up behind him almost sulkily and slipped under his arm to
enter the house. He had a backpack slung over his shoulder.

"I'll go put this in your room," Virgil said. Remus raised an eyebrow.

"Am I staying in the Twin Den?" Remus asked, his voice gratingly obnoxious.

"No," Virgil stated flatly. "You're taking Patton's old room."

Remus looked up the stairs, then grinned. "Patton! You're alive and well, looks like!"

"I guess I could say the same of you," Patton awkwardly responded. His smile felt more like a grimace.

"Oh, yeah! Good ol' Worrywart won't let me die! As long as he's looking out for me, I'm functionally immortal!" Remus cackled, as he skipped up the stairs beside Virgil. Virgil grimaced at him.

"Please tell me you've developed a sense of self preservation at the center," Virgil pleaded.

"Well, I won't be sticking any forks into electrical outlets, if that's what you're asking," Remus grinned. "I'm still gonna try to track down that wild raccoon that eats our garbage though! I'm gonna fight it with a stick!"

"Remus, please," Virgil groaned. "Please do not fight the raccoons."

"Does he fight raccoons often?" Patton asked.

"Once, I got rabies!" Remus bragged. "You would know that if you stayed around at all."

"Most nineteen year olds leave home," Patton huffed, folding his arms.

"Sure, but they still visit," Remus snarked.

"Remus, can you not? Right now? We can talk this out later, when we're all settled in," Virgil interrupted. Remus heaved a groan.

"This isn't over," he said to Patton, sticking one slightly yellow fingernail in his face. Then he sauntered down the hall towards Patton's childhood bedroom. Virgil smiled apologetically at Patton.

"Sorry, you know how he is," Virgil shrugged.

"Oh, hey Roman! Oh, is this my nephew?" Remus' voice carried quite easily through the hall. "Hi! I'm the uncle who's only cautionary tales!"

"Don't stick metal in an outlet, you'll end up like Uncle Remus," Roman immediately responded.

"Don't do drugs, you'll end up like Uncle Remus!" Remus joined in.

"Don't jump off the roof into a pile of leaves with a cat hiding in the bottom, you'll end up like Uncle Remus!" they managed to say in unison.

Patton looked to Virgil, who shrugged. "At least they aren't being bad influences."

That evening, surprisingly enough, they had managed to unpack all of their collective things. Which was, apparently, only Patton's boxes and a single case of trophies from Roman's community
"Did you order the pizza, Virge?" Roman asked, tuckered out as he fell onto the couch beside his twin. Remus immediately snuggled into him, seeing as old habits die hard. Logan folded his legs as he sat in the armchair, and Patton leaned in his own armchair to rest his chin on Thomas' head, the twelve year old sitting on the floor in front of him.

"Yeah, like ten minutes ago," Virgil snorted. "I'm good at this planning shit, Ro."

"Virgil, language," Patton scolded.

"You should implement a swearing jar, Dad," Thomas suggested. "Whenever it's full, you buy me a video game."

"Would if I could, Thoma-llama-ding-dong. This is Virgil's house though, so his word's law," Patton reminded, switching his chin for his cheek so he could talk easier. It was so strange to be saying that about the brother whom he'd last seen in person as a toddler.

"Great," Virgil grinned. "New house rule, no one can wake me up before three in the afternoon."

"Vetoed," his older brothers all chorused immediately. Thomas laughed, covering his mouth with his hands.

"I thought this was my house," Virgil grumbled.

"You're still the babiest brother, though," Roman mocked.

Just then the doorbell rang. Virgil moved to get off the floor, but Patton stood up first. "I'll get it, Virge, you can just stay there."

Virgil settled back into the carpet, and Patton moved around his son to get to the door. He stopped and grabbed his wallet out of his jacket first. Then he opened the door and promptly dropped his wallet.

Ethan Sanders stood on the doorstep, the left side of his face horribly burned, his left eye nearly shut. More burns continued down his neck and under his shirt only to appear, in full force, down the length of his left arm. He grinned, stretching the healed pink skin. "Hey, big brother. It's been about fifteen years, right?"

"About," Patton managed to say.

"Aren't you gonna say hello?"
Virgil Handles It

Chapter Summary

Virgil's the baby. His older brothers are supposed to know their shit, or something.

He starts worrying about everything anyway.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Virgil was four years old the day Mom and Dad took him to the hospital to check on Ethan after the fire. Roman and Remus were eleven, and they were utterly silent the whole car ride to the hospital. Sixteen year old Logan was in the middle row, sitting next to his car seat.

"Patpat?" Virgil was a boy of very few words, but Logan always seemed to get what he was trying to say.

"Patton is living with his wife now, Virgil," Logan murmured gently. He pushed up his glasses and pursed his lips, but Virgil was too young to understand what his tense shoulders meant beyond fear.

"Scary?" Virgil mumbled, reaching out for Logan's shoulder. Logan laughed hollowly.

"Yeah, Virgil. It's really scary. He won't talk to us, so we don't know if he's okay," Logan said. Virgil keened miserably, and Logan's expression blanked. Logan tugged Virgil's tiny hand into his and said, "Virgil, I promise Patton's going to be okay."

"'Than?" Virgil whined. He didn't know what was wrong, but he knew fire was bad and scary and it hurt, and Ethan was in one. He wanted to know if Ethan would be okay.

"Ethan's gonna be okay, too," Logan promised. "We're all gonna be okay."

And for once, Remus didn't add any qualifiers. Roman didn't screech about how horrible he was. Logan didn't mutter about how it was wrong to promise what he couldn't control. Virgil could almost believe Logan, if it weren't obvious to his four year old mind how scared his older brother really was.

But he was four, and it wasn't his place to challenge Logan, so he said, "Okay."

Ethan stayed home from school for the rest of the year. He spent that year doing all his class work online and watching recorded footage of his teachers' lessons. He also spent it looking after Virgil in place of a sitter.

Sometimes, he'd drop the sippy cup, or a bowl of cereal, and he'd stand there trying not to touch his burns for a really long time. Sometimes he'd be picking at the damaged skin until it bled.

One day, Virgil grabbed his brother's wrist as he reached to pick, and looked up at him. "No."

"You're four," Ethan scowled. "You can't boss me around."
"Blood," Virgil countered, and Ethan looked down at his scarred arm as if he was seeing it anew. Then he grinned, though Virgil could tell he didn't mean it.

"Sorry, baby bro. I'll try not to pick anymore," Ethan said.

Virgil could tell he was lying, but he was four, and it wasn't his place to challenge Ethan. "Okay."

Remus and Roman were supposed to take care of Virgil while Mom and Dad took Ethan to his community service at the library. Logan was too busy with studying, and he had also gone to the library. It'd taken him a bit of convincing to let Mom and Dad leave Virgil with Roman and Remus at home.

The thing is, because Virgil was so quiet, the twins tended to forget that he could understand and speak english.

"Patton won't answer my calls," Roman announced while he filled Virgil's bowl with cheerios. Remus came back with a supply cup full of orange juice.

"Mine either," Remus said with a grin. "Do you think he hates us?"

"He doesn't hate us," Roman snapped. "It's probably his wife. Why can't he just have married Prince Charming? He'd let him call us."

"Patton doesn't like princes," Remus said. "I don't see why, though, they're so strong."

"And handsome," Roman agreed. He placed the bowl of cheerios in front of Virgil, a spoon tucked inside. Remus put the sippy cup next to the bowl.

"What if she's hitting him?" Remus asked, an out-of-place grin on his face. Virgil whimpered, but neither of his brothers noticed.

"What!? If she hit him, he'd come right back home, Remus! Don't be stupid." Roman snapped.

"Jenny Carmichael's dad hits her mom, and she doesn't leave," Remus challenged, jutting his chin out.

"Jenny Carmichael's mom isn't Patton!" Roman snapped.

"Janice would just apologize and Patton would say 'oh, well it isn't a habit, I forgive you' and then she'd do it again and he'd still find a reason to forgive her," Remus taunted. Virgil whined, but neither of his brothers noticed.

"Patton would come home if she hit him! It's better here, he'd know that!" Roman argued.

"Or he'd stay," Remus contradicted. "He only married her 'cause of their baby. What if she has a healthy baby to trap him and then she starts hitting him?"

"He could just bring the baby here! It'd be safer for them anyway," Roman protested.

"But Jenny Carmichael's mom stayed for her baby," Remus pointed out. Virgil wailed, and finally his brothers took notice. Roman panicked.

"No, Virgey, it's okay! Everything's okay, Remus is just being mean! Patton's okay! He's just fine, I promise!" Roman cried out. He looked to Remus with wide eyes.

"Don't look at me!" Remus exclaimed.
"Patpat!" Virgil screamed, his voice filled with an incredibly painful anguish that made both the twins feel like rolling over and dying.

"Call Patton!" Remus snapped his fingers.

"What, and get ignored again?" Roman demanded.

"Do you have a better idea?" Remus scowled. Roman tugged Virgil off of the chair and balanced him on his hip with all the grace and poise of an eleven year old who'd only done it once or twice before. He and Remus hurried to the living room, where Roman handed a bawling Virgil to Remus and picked up the landline.

Remus held Virgil out in front of him, his expression alarmed as the child he carried screamed.

Roman dialed Patton's cell number, hoping that this time he'd finally, finally answer.

"Hello?" Patton's voice came from the phone like a ray of sunlight after a harrowing storm.

"Patton!" Roman cried out in relief.


"You're okay!" Roman bawled.

"Ro, are you okay? What's going on?" Patton demanded. Roman pressed the speaker button and held the receiver between he and Remus.

"We were so worried, you weren't answering our calls!" Roman sobbed. Remus was starting to cry too.

"We scared Virgil, and we don't know what to do!" Remus explained.

"Patpat," Virgil sobbed. Then he reached for the phone. Remus finally brought him to rest on his hip, pulling him away from any buttons he might press.

"Virgey, I was just in the middle of a big move. I'm okay, I promise," Patton said, in that warm soothing voice he used so often to calm down baby Virgil. It was warped from the phone, but Virgil still began to quiet down.

"Where did you move to?" Roman asked, wiping his face.

Patton was quiet for a bit. Then he said, "Florida."

"Florida!?" Remus and Roman cried out. Virgil hiccuped and Remus tried to bounce him on his hip.

"Yeah, Janice wanted to go to college here. Get away from the pain of the miscarriage, and all that," Patton explained.

"Are you going to visit?" Roman asked in a small voice.
Patton was quiet on the phone. Remus and Roman held their breath, and Virgil hiccuped twice more. Finally, Patton said, "I'll try, boys, but Janice really needs me right now. Losing our baby girl was really hard on her."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry," Patton said. "I gotta go, but now that I have my cell phone again, I'll be sure to answer your calls as much as possible, okay? I'll call home every week!"

Virgil watched as his older brothers shuffled awkwardly and said, "Okay."

They waited until they heard the disconnecting click, before lowering the phone into its place. With a sigh, Roman went and grabbed snacks out of the pantry and placed them and Virgil's cereal on the coffee table. Remus lowered Virgil to the floor, and Roman turned on Mulan.

The twins washed Virgil's face, apologized profusely, and sang along to every song in sillier and sillier voices until Virgil laughed. But he could tell they were still worried.

When Virgil was five years old he decided it was time to stop being stupid. If his brothers were going to deny how worried they were, then fine! But it didn't need to dictate their lives. Though, he was five, so he didn't know the word dictate. He had only recently started kindergarten.

It was on his fifth birthday that Patton called and said he wouldn't make it to Christmas. Christmas. The entire family seemed absolutely distraught. Even Ethan, who got angry when someone mentioned Patton, was upset he couldn't come to Christmas. So, Virgil stood up and said a full sentence.

"Mommy, I'm scared of fire. Do we have to have a bonfire this year?" Virgil mumbled. Ethan stiffened and looked at Virgil with raised eyebrows.

They cancelled the bonfire, as Mom and Dad realized how bad Ethan might respond to the tradition after his incident, under the guise that Virgil was scared.

Then, "Mommy, are we going caroling? We always go caroling."

"Oh, but honey, Patton isn't-"

"Dear."

Roman loved caroling, even if Virgil would really rather not.

"Can I decorate the tree with Logan?"

Logan was all about systematically organizing the ornaments, but he'd admitted he had more fun when Patton decorated a bit more spastically. Virgil made it his job to try and decorate as much as possible all over the base, where he could reach.

"Daddy, I'm gonna make presents. Will you help me?"

He had to show his brothers how much they mattered to him. He crafted personalized cards with silly puns and stick figure drawings. He made them in their favorite colors, and splashed a bit of purple to go with them too.

"I wanna make peppermint hot cocoa!"

Patton always made the cocoa, and he made it masterfully. He would stir in peppermint extract and
put a candy cane in every mug, like the genius he was. Virgil was going to do his best to do the same. He added whipped cream and red sprinkles to the shopping list when Mom asked him what else they’d need, though.

"Wake up, wake up! It's Christmas!"

Virgil had never spoken more than he did during the sixth Christmas of his life, just a few days after his fifth birthday. He was loud, for the first time in his life, and he tried his very best to fill in Patton's hole in his own way.

He kept it up, too. He wasn't copying his older brother. He wasn't that kind of a kid. But he covered up Ethan's burns when he caught him picking, and kissed the bandages. He pulled Logan away from over studying by asking him to help him with his own, much easier, schoolwork. He watched Disney marathons with the twins and mumbled along to every villain ballad.

Virgil couldn't challenge his brothers. But he could take care of them, and he would do that to the best of his ability. Virgil cooked beside his Mom, built things with his Dad, and learned the names and meanings to every flower in the Sanders Flowershop.

Virgil was seven when Patton emailed Mom and Dad pictures of his new son Thomas. By then, Virgil could make lasagna (though only with Mom watching, he wasn't allowed to use the oven by himself), build a birdhouse (with pre-cut wood, Dad wouldn't let him use any blades yet), and craft a perfect bouquet. Thomas was a tiny, pink, thing, and Virgil wondered if he'd looked like that as a baby. He also wondered if Thomas would like flowers, too.

Ethan, now sixteen and very much a grouch, scowled at the photograph of his nephew and stormed out of the house. When he came back, he had been escorted home by a police officer. Apparently he'd set a fire at the high school.

Logan came over from his college dorm, to help prepare a gift for Thomas. Roman and Remus had another loud argument, this time in the privacy of their bedroom, about whether or not Patton would come home if Janice started to hurt him at all. Virgil was feeling overwhelmed. He didn't know what to do.

A couple of weeks later, their gift had been returned to them in the mail. Mom and Dad were incredibly upset, but Patton called and said Janice didn't want any charity. Charity.

Over the years, Patton's calls came less and less. Logan moved to California, and he came to visit every Christmas and called every Sunday at three. It was like clockwork. Ethan moved away as well, but he called periodically every week too, from different payphones across the nation. He also asked Mom and Dad for bail money now and then. Remus didn't move away so much as gain a horrible addiction to several drugs and self harm. He was so deeply suicidal at one point, that he drove directly off the road and down a cliff while Roman was in the passenger seat. They both survived, but Roman had hated cars ever since. He moved via plane to Manhattan, and when he called he would brag about the exercise he was getting walking everywhere. (He had also lived in South America for three years, and would later continue to make trips there until his funds started to get a little too tight for frequent air travel.)

Virgil was fourteen when he finally looked around and noticed that he was cooking meals for only three, he wasn't fixing as many bookshelves and dressers, and he wasn't replanting the house gardens as often anymore without anyone around to tear them up.

"Hey, I think I want to try childcare," Virgil said one day at dinner.
"Well, the Sinclaires next door have an eight year old," Dad said, as he tucked into Virgil's signature baked bean casserole.

"Oh, they were looking for a new sitter, weren't they?" Mom asked, digging into the shredded chicken he'd cooked into it instead of ground beef. Mom and Dad had to lay off the red meat these days.

Jeremy Sinclair was a little monster, but he was only a year older than Virgil's nephew, and that meant Virgil kind of saw the kid as an honorary nephew. He went by Remy and absolutely hated being called Jeremy. Of course, his parents called him that anyway. He babysat Remy almost daily for a few weeks before he bumped into him outside of babysitting.

His mom and dad had taken him to the park at the same time that Virgil was there for his photography project. Remy came over to him with a handful of wildflowers and a ring pop.

"I'm gonna marry you someday," Remy announced, and Virgil's face had practically exploded.

"That's- that's incredibly sweet, Remy, thank you, but you're like my kid brother," Virgil blurted.

Remy opened his mouth to insist, but his parents rushed over. Mrs. Sinclair apologized for Remy's behavior, and Mr. Sinclair began to tug him away. At Remy's insistence that he would marry Virgil someday, both his parents froze and looked at Virgil. He wanted to sink down and die. He didn't get invited back to babysit Remy, and he didn't try to babysit for anyone else. Instead, Virgil threw himself into working that summer at the flower shop.

That wasn't the last he saw of Remy, though, and a few days later he found the eight year old climbing the fence between their backyards. From then on, Remy became a staple to see around the house. Virgil would help him with homework, teach him how to cook (he would never successfully manage to cook anything without burning it), and even watch movie marathons with him.

Remy convinced Virgil to get some form of social media, and that was what opened the door to his reunion with Patton. Virgil, currently sixteen and incredibly anxious, asked Remy for help.

"What do I do?" Virgil exclaimed, holding his phone out to Remy. Remy snorted.

"Just say yes. He wants to be friends on an app, it's not like he wants to attack you," Remy teased. He studied the account in question and raised his eyebrows above his shades. "Sanders? Is he related to you?"

"He's my brother," Virgil explained. "We haven't spoken since I was younger than you."

"Weird. Accept his request, then! Maybe you guys can get to talking again," Remy suggested. Virgil heaved a breath and hit yes.

Then Patton sent him a message. Virgil responded. It went on like that for an hour during his movie marathon with Remy. Finally, Patton asked if Virgil wanted to talk again another time.

"He wants to talk to me again," Virgil whispered, interrupting Rapunzel's song when he paused the film.

"Your family needs therapy or something," Remy stated, rolling his eyes. "Which brother is this? The jailbird?"

"Ethan calls the house every Wednesday," Virgil corrected. "This is Patton."
"Oh, the one with the wife," Remy said. He studied the profile picture. "He doesn't look like a straight guy at all."

"You are ten years old, what do you know," Virgil huffed.

"I'm also your best friend, so what's that say about you?" Remy snorted.

"Two years ago, you wanted to marry me," Virgil mocked.

"Something must have been horribly wrong with my mind. You're a huge dork, not even cool in the slightest," Remy joked.

Virgil tossed a pillow over Remy's head and smothered the boy's laughter in it.

*Sure, Pat. We can video call?*

*Oh, Kiddo, I'd love that!*

So they did. Virgil called every week on Friday afternoon. Thomas would be doing homework in the living room, and Patton would insist on the both of them getting to know one another.

Thomas was fascinated with the theater, just like Roman was. Thomas had the highest grade in his science class, like Logan when he was younger. Thomas had tried to convince Patton to let him adopt a stray cat. Thomas had tried to teach himself how to throw knives after watching the teenage mutant ninja turtles.

Virgil loved getting to know his nephew. What he didn't love was the frequent arguments he had to awkwardly sit through with his nephew.

Patton and his wife had just exited the room to have a private discussion for the sixth time in the past two months, when Thomas ran his hands down his face. "Mom's really mad about these calls."

"I thought she might be," Virgil huffed, folding his arms. His fingers twitched with the need to reach through his webcam and comfort his nephew.

"I don't know why she's so upset," Thomas muttered. "I mean, the kids at school get to visit their aunts and cousins and all that stuff over holidays, but I didn't even know I had any extended family other than Aunt Patty."

"Uh, Janice's sister?" Virgil guessed. He still wasn't totally familiar with Janice's family. After all, he'd had no reason to speak to any of them for the past twelve or so years.

"Mom's aunt. She's more of a Grauntie," Thomas corrected. Virgil nodded, though he felt utterly lost.

"Well, I'm sure Patton and your mom will work it all out soon," Virgil lied. He knew Janice didn't like him and Patton reconnecting, but he didn't care. He wasn't about to stop calling his brother every week. He wouldn't do that to Thomas, even if he thought Patton maybe a little bit deserved to be iced out. Which he didn't think, that'd be mean.

"If you say so," Thomas sighed. "But they argue about this all the time."

"Really?" Virgil asked, grimacing.

Thomas nodded emphatically. "Dinner's been so stressful lately, I can almost smell how angry they are at each other."
Three years, one divorce, and five surprise fraternal reunions later, and dinner was just as tense as any dinner Thomas had described to Virgil.

They'd been quietly eating pizza since it had arrived, shortly after Ethan did. Even Remus was quiet, but he kept bouncing his eyes between Patton and Ethan with an expectant grin. Remus thrived in conflict, after all.

Finally, Logan spoke up, "Thomas! Why don't you share with us some of your interests?"

"Huh? Oh. Um, I like singing," Thomas said, taking his eyes off of the ground to meet gazes with his uncle. "And, um, I've always wanted to do theater."

"You absolutely should!" Roman exclaimed, latching onto the topic with a delighted desperation. "For all the people who don't get into sports, theater provides the perfect sense of community and teamwork that they lack! It really helps you break out of your shell and find yourself."

"It helped Roman find his way out of the closet," Remus cackled.

"Oh yeah?" Thomas asked, and Virgil noticed him picking at the edge of the coffee table. "Um. How'd you know?"

"That I liked men? I got a raging crush on the guy playing Gaston in my theater camp's rendition of Beauty and the Beast," Roman explained. He smiled fondly at the memories. "He was kind of quiet offstage, but he didn't have any trouble throwing himself into character. During our improv warm ups, he'd always come up with the goofiest characters. At the end of the summer, I gave him a sunflower I found all by myself, and he told me-"

"Thanks, pipsqueak! Hope to see you here again next summer!" Remus quoted loudly, obviously mocking his twin. Virgil laughed at the familiar story.

Roman laughed too, long since having gotten over the mortification of his puppy crush. "See, I was between the second and third grade, if I remember right. I played Chip."

"Wow, you knew that early?" Thomas asked.

"Everyone else knew way earlier," Remus interrupted. Ethan laughed.

"Yeah, Roman never once wanted to be Prince Charming when he was little, he wanted to be the princess," Ethan explained, and Thomas looked at him briefly before looking towards Patton. His dad nodded with a small smile.

"It's way less interesting than how Virgey found out he's gay!" Remus announced, and Virgil flushed, mortified at the very idea of explaining his story.

Patton blinked, and looked directly at him in surprise. Virgil had been dreading this exact look since long before he'd given it to Logan earlier in the day. Virgil cleared his throat. "We don't have to get into that today."

"But I wanna know," Thomas piped up.

"Oh, it is not a child friendly story," Roman chuckled. Virgil glared at him. Why couldn’t his big brothers just shut up when he wanted them to?

"I'm starting the seventh grade this year," Thomas insisted with a pout.
"Well, that would be up to your father," Logan said, finally. Virgil could kiss his brother right now. Logan leaned forward in his armchair. "Though I'd be willing to share how I knew I was homoromantic, if you'd like."

"Is that different than gay?" Thomas asked. He was still picking at the coffee table, Virgil noticed.

"I don't experience physical attraction the same way most people do, but other than that no," Logan assured. Thomas pursed his lips and nodded. Logan smiled. "It started with a boy in my college psych course. I was taking it for the credits, and also because after certain... incidents... in the family, I felt it'd be best to understand the mind at least somewhat."

Thomas nodded, drinking in the story with rapt attention. Virgil pursed his lips. Was Thomas... questioning his sexuality? Did Patton even know? If Thomas was in fact trying to figure out if he liked men, then it was all the better that they got him away from Janice.

"He was, admittedly, a bit of a goofball. I'm not usually interested in those who behave like children, but he was good at being silly in a good way," Logan explained, his face as clinical and blank as ever. Then he grimaced. "Of course, then he turned out to be, in no uncertain terms, a jerk. It was a short lived crush, but one long enough for me to realize I wasn't just uninterested in romance."

Thomas cringed, and looked down at the table. Ethan cleared his throat. "I have my own story."

"You do?" Patton scoffed.

"I do. Believe it or not, I've got a life beyond what you think you know," Ethan snapped.

"Let's not fight, please," Virgil requested. "We can sort our issues out after everyone's settled in."

"Speaking of issues, how long is Roman staying?" Remus asked. "I thought he'd have hit his big break by now."

"How dare you-"

Virgil slammed his foot against the couch, causing the twins to fall silent and glare at him. "I said we can sort them out when we've settled in. Just give it a month, then you can tear each other apart like the wild animals you'd obviously prefer to be."

"Poetically phrased, Virgil," Logan nodded. "For now, I do agree that we should stray away from any controversial topics."

Ethan scowled at his elder brother. "I didn't even get to-"

"Thomas, tell Logan about school! He's really smart, Lo-lo, reminds me of you!" Patton piped up, sounding all too bubbly. Ethan grumbled, but he let the topic change.

Logan, always one to talk about education, eagerly began to discuss academics and science with his nephew. Thomas was awkward and brief in his responses, but he was slowly beginning to warm up to his uncle. The twins merely glared at each other and quietly muttered the occasional insult under their breaths. Patton sat proudly behind Thomas' perch on the floor, and Ethan stared at the ceiling as he moody munch on some pizza at the end of the couch. Virgil was unsure of what to do, but maybe calling it a night would help?

"Hey, Ethan, I'm sure the bus ride tired you out," Virgil announced, and Ethan looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Want me to help you unpack any of your things before you crash for the night?"
Something that was nearly fondness passed over Ethan's face. "Oh, no, that's alright Virgil, I've just got the one bag."

"Well, I'll bring it up for you," Virgil offered.

"I'd rather take it up myself," Ethan insisted, standing up and pulling the bag over one shoulder.

"If you're sure," Virgil muttered, scooting across the floor so Ethan could head upstairs. "Have a good night."

"You too," Ethan said, waving his hand distractedly as he went up the stairs.

"Good night, Uncle Ethan!" Thomas called, and Virgil saw Ethan freeze on the staircase. He looked down and smiled.

Far more sincerely than he'd said to Virgil, the third eldest Sanders brother said, "Good night, Thomas."

Then he disappeared up the stairs, and the room was silent again. Suddenly, Patton stood up, looking at his phone. "Oh wow, it is late! Thomas, let's go get you into bed, yeah?"

"I'm not tired," Thomas groaned.

"Yeah, but it's late, and summer's almost over," Patton insisted.

"Growing boys need their rest," Logan chimed in.

"Have sweet dreams!" Roman called as Patton began to herd Thomas up the stairs.

"And hopefully not dreams about all of us naked!" Remus tacked on, and Thomas squeezed his eyes shut in disgust, as if that would wipe away the thought.

"Remus, why?" Roman demanded, as Patton ushered his son out of sight. Remus shrugged.

"Just 'cause." He grinned.

Virgil sighed. "I'm going to my room. You guys know where you're sleeping tonight. Don't bother me until noon."

"I'll see you for breakfast," Logan contradicted. Virgil couldn't even be annoyed.

As the twins muttered arguments to each other, and Logan went to the kitchen to put away the remaining pizza, Virgil went up the stairs. The hallway was set up in such a way that the master bedroom was at the very end, and the other bedrooms were lining the walls. There were five, then the bathroom. The rooms were all about the same size, but one of them was slightly larger-
growing up, that had been the twin's bedroom. Mom and Dad had never dismantled any of their childhood bedrooms, so it was all up to Virgil to clean them out after their deaths. It was a lucky thing that he'd gotten rid of the rotted out mold farm Remus had apparently cultivated in his dresser before Patton had moved in with Thomas. He'd just burnt the whole thing and built a new one out of scrap wood from the back shed.

A light switch was flipped on in one of the bedrooms and Virgil halted much like a deer in headlights. He stared as Ethan blinked back at him.

"Were you standing in the dark for no reason just now?" Virgil asked.
"I'm not sure which answer will halt this line of questioning faster," Ethan admitted.

"Dude, why?" Virgil asked, bewildered.

Ethan laughed, gesturing at the walls. "I wasn't sure if you'd painted over my teen angst or not. I was a little scared to look."

"Afraid of a little throwback?" Virgil teased with a smirk. Ethan snorted and looked over the plain white walls.

"Is everything up in the attic then?" Ethan asked, going over to the freshly made bed. The sheets were plain. Virgil had gotten plain sheets because he desperately wanted to hide the remnants of their obsessive teen years. Really, Roman's bed had some old boy band plastered on it, for god's sake.

"Yeah, everything's squirreled away. If you want something, you'll have to get it yourself," Virgil informed.

"Nah, this is fine," Ethan assured, sitting down on the bed and testing the firmness.

"Good," Virgil smiled. He glanced down the hall towards Patton's closed bedroom door. "So, you met our nephew today."

"He's a good kid, Virge," Ethan said, sensing the unasked question. "Reminds me of you."

"Really?" Virgil asked, raising his eyebrows. He leaned against the doorframe and folded his arms.

"Yeah, you were always kind of like that as a kid. I don't think there's anyone else in our family I'd rather him be like," Ethan said, rather decisively.

"But, why?" Virgil asked, shocked.

"You care so much, Virge." Ethan smiled. He gestured around them at all the bedrooms. "Hell, you're letting us live in your house, almost for free. You don't have to do that."

"You're my big brothers," Virgil said. For him, that explained everything. He could see why Ethan might not see it the same way, but family mattered to Virgil in a way that didn't necessarily have to make sense to his brothers.

Ethan laughed. He got to his feet and crossed the room, placing his hand on Virgil's shoulder. "And here you are, acting like the oldest and making sure we're all okay. It's not your job to take care of us, you know."

But he liked taking care of them. He told Ethan as much, but his older brother merely laughed again.

"I've met a lot of people, in my line of work, Virge. None of them have been like you," Ethan explained. "You and Thomas are a rare breed."

"I can't imagine you'd meet many pleasant folks in the forgery business," Virgil snorted. Ethan nodded with an amused little smirk. He waved Virgil out, in an almost shooting motion.

"Go be an angel elsewhere, mind you, I'm going to try and actually get some sleep," Ethan teased. Virgil took two steps backwards towards his bedroom.

"More like a fallen angel," Virgil joked, snapping his fingers and shooting finger guns at his
brother.

Ethan shook his head. "A guardian angel."

Virgil blushed and coughed. "Um. Good night."

"'Night," Ethan said, and he sounded incredibly amused. He shut his bedroom door, and Virgil stood alone in the hall for a few more seconds. Then he spun on a dime and bolted to his bedroom at the end of the hall.

Once Virgil had shut his bedroom door and belly flopped onto his bed, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and opened up his email. He didn't really like to sign up for that many things, but he'd signed up for the weekly newsletter from the mental health office. He'd only signed up because the therapist down the hall wrote them. He wasn't interested in any of the group therapy offers often advertised in them, but Dr. Picani always wrote them with his very own brand of flair.

Virgil opened the new newsletter hoping to giggle at Dr. Picani's charming references to cartoons, when a particular phrase caught his attention.

Family Sessions run by Dr. Roberts will be moved to adjust to a new schedule starting in August! If you're already attending regular sessions, Dr. Roberts will contact you separately for rescheduling. If you'd like to sign up, new time slots will become available in August.

Family therapy, huh?

Well, maybe he'd bring it up, but Remus would probably refuse immediately. Besides, Logan and Ethan were really weird about their feelings, and Patton would probably insist he didn't need it. If it were individual sessions, Roman might agree, but he had a weird strength complex where he couldn't look vulnerable in front of his brothers. Virgil could probably push, and they'd cave, but he'd rather they all go of their own volition. Besides, he was only nineteen.

It wasn't his place to challenge his brothers like that.

Chapter End Notes

I am both immensely in love with this chapter, and incredibly unsatisfied with it, but I can't even begin to think of what to alter, so like....

ENJOY!
Logan Tries His Best

Chapter Summary

Logan should have been smarter. It's the story of his life, really. He should have been smarter fifteen years ago, and he should have been smarter three weeks ago.

At least he's got his brothers to distract him from "should have".

Chapter Notes

I don't know why, but I absolutely refuse to write in their parents.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Logan was fourteen, Janice Hughes asked his older brother on a date. It was Valentine’s day, and Janice had sauntered across the entire outdoor lunch area and shoved three more timid and cowardly girls out of her way. Janice had placed the stuffed bear in front of Patton, tucked a box of chocolates shaped like a heart into its arms, and she’d said, “Will you be mine, my sweet Valentine?”

Of course, Patton, who had never been able to say no to his romantic prospects, had giggled and said, “What a rhyme! Sure thing, Janice.”

Logan was fourteen, and it was his first Valentine’s day at the high school. Patton had promised it would be the two of them that day, since Logan always felt uncomfortable during this holiday. Janice had other ideas, and she whisked the older boy away in a flurry of suggestions for their first date. Patton tossed a mouthed apology over his shoulder and that was that.

Though, perhaps if that had truly been the end of things, Logan wouldn’t have worried as much for his brother. No, instead Janice spent every moment possible clinging onto Patton. She hung off his shoulders during lunch, she draped herself over his arms during passing period. She had him walk her home after school. And it wasn’t simply her clinging to him. Logan knew when his brother was using a smile to cover up discomfort.

Janice Hughes was forcing herself onto him, and Patton wasn’t even going to do a damn thing about it. It became too obvious during spring break that same year. “What do you mean you aren’t coming on the annual lake trip?”

“Janice wants to spend time with me. She says we never get any time to ourselves, and she misses me,” Patton explained.

“She’s crazy, you spend every weekend with her!” Roman protested.

“Yeah, you missed out on our save the snails parade!” Remus pouted.

“She can’t just expect you to drop everything for her all the time, doesn’t she have her own
family?” Ethan scowled, bouncing Virgil on his hip as the tot tried to tug at his hair.

“I’m sure she’s just nervous about me going so far away for the first time during our relationship.” Patton reassured his younger brothers with a soft huff. “It’s natural to be uncomfortable with that sort of thing at first, and if it’ll help soothe her worries, then I won’t go this year.”

“And Mom and Dad are just alright with letting her control you like that?” Logan demanded.

Patton coughed. “Uh, when I brought it up to them, I might have branded it as more my own idea than Janice’s, but- well, it’s fine! You guys can have fun without me, right?”

“Patton,” Ethan grumbled. “You can’t let her walk all over you like that. You matter in the relationship too. If you’re going to feel bad about missing out-”

“I won’t! I genuinely want to spend time with Janice, and I want you guys to have fun even when I’m not around, okay? I mean, I’m almost an adult, I’m not going to be around all the time,” Patton reminded, and the boys all reluctantly conceded.

Logan wished they’d argued harder. He wished they’d told their parents that Patton had lied to them. He wished they’d done something then, when Janice was still a brand new girlfriend. A passing fling that could easily be gotten rid of.

Unfortunately, Logan listened to his brother and allowed himself to ignore the signs. And what could have been a passing fling became a burr trapped in the shoelace that was Patton’s life.

Logan was holding Virgil on his hip, and the twins were bouncing in the seats on the other side of the room. Mom and Dad were outside of the hospital room, talking to the doctors and a police officer. Ethan was crying silently in his cot, tears streaming down his right cheek, a damp spot growing around the bandages on his left side.

“I fuckin’ hate her,” Ethan mumbled, though he was barely conscious. Logan could barely hear him through the oxygen mask.

“Don’t aggravate your burns, Ethan,” Logan advised. Ethan shook his head and grabbed Logan’s sleeve with his good hand.

“I hate her, Logan, I want her dead and gone, she fucking deserves it,” Ethan snarled. Logan shifted Virgil in his arms, trying not to wake him, and grabbed Ethan’s hand.

“What did she do, Ethan?” Logan questioned, but his brother didn’t answer, clearly having expended his limited energy. He fell unconscious muttering about how much he despised her. It wasn’t hard to guess who, but why he was muttering about that sort of thing now was beyond him. Ethan was thirteen.

Logan held no good will for his… sister-in-law. He never had, and he suspected that he never would. However, now she was out of the picture. Imagine Logan’s surprise when he discovered this through Virgil, who had told everyone that divorce negotiations were going on in the Sanders-Hughes household.

“Apparently, she tried to pull a divorce threat as a control tactic, and Patton got fed up and just agreed. Then she threatened to waive financial support for Thomas, and Patton got pissed,” Virgil gossiped over the phone, like he was talking about how someone tore into a particularly bigotted customer at one of the cafes he frequented. “I wish I saw it, Thomas says he’s never seen him so angry.”
Now, sitting at the breakfast table nearly a year later and watching Patton fuss over his son, Logan could see even more plainly than before why Patton would have gotten so mad.

Patton finally sat down, having set plates of food at every seat around the table. Ethan and the twins had yet to join them for breakfast, but there was plenty of time for that. “Thanks again, Virgil, for letting me stay. I honestly can’t thank you enough.”

“Hey, it’s all good,” Virgil insisted. “I’m here to help, really.”

“Exactly, Patton. When Mom and Dad left the house in Virgil’s care, they did so with the intention that we could count on him if ever we needed to,” Logan explained, and he poured himself a glass of orange juice. “After all, I’m sure they gave you the same speech when you moved out about how this house will always have a bed for you to ‘crash in’.”

“Yeah, Pat, what Logan said. You can always count on me in a pinch,” Virgil agreed, nodding.

“Virgil is so dependable,” Ethan mused from the doorway, and Logan watched Patton stiffen at the unannounced presence of the brother he got along with least. Patton smiled tightly.

“Good morning, Ethan.”

Ethan smiled back, and Logan sighed heavily. So it was to be false kindness, then. Very well.

“Good morning, Patton, did you sleep well?”

“I did. And you?” Patton asked as his brother sat down to Logan’s right.

“Like the dead,” Ethan informed with a wide grin. He turned to Thomas, his smile softening a bit.

“Good morning, Thomas.”

“Good morning, Uncle Ethan,” Thomas murmured, his eyes bouncing between the two tense adults. Patton speared a sausage on his fork with a bit too much enthusiasm. Thomas winced nearly imperceptibly. “Uh, Dad made breakfast today.”

“How droll,” Ethan drawled.

Logan cleared his throat. “Virgil, how are the renovations coming along, for the flower shop?”

“Oh, they’re done. Just gotta finish repainting the place, and work will start back up again next week,” Virgil informed, eagerly snatching up the new conversation.

“Oh good, when can I start?” Ethan asked, and Patton spat out his orange juice.

“You’re working in the flower shop!?” Patton exclaimed. Ethan looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes? I did time for two years, it would be incredibly difficult for me to get a job now, and Virgil offered to employ me in the family business. I’d be hard pressed to find a better opportunity, and it came to me from my adorably generous baby brother,” Ethan explained, and Logan steeled himself for the oncoming disaster. Ethan smirked down at the scarred fingers of his left hand. “How could I possibly refuse?”

Thomas bit his lip and looked between his father and his uncle uncomfortably. Virgil was very specifically not looking at either of them.

“Virgil, why didn’t you tell me I’d be working with him?” Patton demanded.
Virgil groaned and ran his hands over his face. “Look, I didn’t say anything because it shouldn’t matter. You’re my brothers, and I don’t know what that means to you, but it means a whole lot of shit to me. Look, Pat, Ethan needs my help. So I’m gonna help him. Through thick and thin, right? I won’t abandon him—”

“Well, that was harsh, Virgil, we don’t need to be drawing lines in the sand,” Ethan snarked. Patton scowled, getting to his feet, and Virgil grimaced.

“That is not what I meant, and you know—”

“Excuse me, I didn’t abandon anything—”

“No, you only took off to Florida as soon as possible—”

“Could you two please stop fighting—”

“Janice needed me, I couldn’t just let her suffer—”

“I needed you! I nearly died—”

“You guys never listen—”

“You’re the one who burned down my apartment—”

“I don’t care what the police thought, I didn’t—”

“Enough!” Logan shouted, and his brothers immediately fell silent. Logan turned to Thomas, who had shrunk down in his seat and began picking at his scrambled eggs. “Thomas, are you alright?”

“I’m okay,” Thomas said meekly. Logan sighed and tapped the table with his palm. “Now, we’re all going to sit down and have a civil meal. None of this bickering is solving any of our issues. While I don’t think we should just stew in our negativity, I also don’t believe fighting is beneficial to anyone.”

“Maybe we’d fight less if Patton didn’t marry the devil,” Ethan spat as he sat down.

“She isn’t that bad!” Patton argued.

“She divorced you and practically disowned Thomas just because you were considering coming to Mom and Dad’s funeral,” Virgil muttered, picking up his fork and sliding some eggs onto it. He didn’t notice Thomas’ cringe.

“We divorced on good terms. She’s just misguided,” Patton insisted.

“Patton, she is overly controlling,” Logan stated. “Surely, you can admit that much. Why do you keep defending her?”

“Because she’s not as bad as you guys keep insisting she is!” Patton protested. He sighed and stepped away from the table. “I need some air, excuse me.”

As Patton left the kitchen, Roman and Remus entered, Roman looking incredibly annoyed and Remus grinning like the cartoon Cheshire cat. Roman slumped into the empty seat beside Thomas, while Remus sat down between Virgil and Logan. He placed his chin in his hand. “I heard yelling, did anyone get stabbed?”

Virgil rolled his eyes. “Surprisingly enough, no. Logan just played referee in a Sanders family
dispute."

“Aw, did I miss it? I guess I should have skipped out on Roman time this morning,” Remus pouted.

“Yes, you should have,” Roman snapped, pouring himself some orange juice.

“Roman time?” Logan asked, though really he wondered if he even wanted to know.

“He threw my makeup bag out the window and switched my toothpaste for acne medicine,” Roman huffed, glaring at Remus. Remus cackled. Logan heaved a sigh.

“Remus, please return the toothpaste to its proper place once you’ve exhausted the joke,” Logan said. Remus grinned up at him.

“I always clean up after myself, Logan, you know that!” Remus assured.

“Good, then you can also retrieve Roman’s makeup from the bushes in the yard for him,” Logan said with a smirk, and Remus scowled.

“Fine. But only if I get to use his body glitter!”

“What?” Roman protested. “No deal, what do you even need my body glitter for?”

“I’m going to the club tonight,” Remus announced. Virgil looked up with wide eyes.

“Uh, no you aren’t, I’m supposed to keep an eye on you,” Virgil contradicted. Remus grinned and slung an arm around his baby brother.

“That’s a great idea, now Virgil and I both need the body glitter!” Remus proclaimed.

As Roman and Remus entered a playful argument about the body glitter, Virgil chimed in with the occasional protestation, and Ethan engaged Thomas in a pleasant conversation about his hobbies, Logan excused himself from the breakfast table. He moved over to the living room, where he spotted Patton sitting out on the porch swing through the window. With a sigh, Logan stepped out to join his older brother.

“Patton,” Logan greeted. Patton’s head snapped up like he was surprised to be addressed.

“Oh, hi Logan,” Patton smiled awkwardly. “What’s up?”

“The twins are surprisingly good at forgetting they’re supposed to be irreparably mad at each other,” Logan chuckled. “They’re arguing over body glitter.”

“They’re supposed to be irreparably mad at each other?” Patton asked, and he moved aside to make room for Logan on the swing. Logan sat down beside him.

“Roman swore years ago to never forgive Remus for growing dependent on drugs,” Logan explained, and Patton’s brow furrowed.

“That doesn’t sound like it’s very fair of him,” Patton said.

“In fairness to him, Remus did almost get the both of them killed. He wasn’t in a healthy mindset even without the addiction, and he’d been… attempting for several years already. This time, he almost took Roman with him. It was a terrifying ordeal, but I know Roman and Remus were the most frightened of us all,” Logan explained.
“Oh, that was the car accident? Dad called me about that.” Patton said.

“It wasn’t an accident,” Logan corrected. Patton pursed his lips and looked at his hands in his lap. Logan sighed. “You know, Patton, it’s never too late to try and reconnect.”

“Ethan hates me,” Patton muttered. “Virgil barely knows me, even if we’ve been talking for the past three years. Roman might act like he’s not upset with me, but I know I disappointed him. And I never know how to deal with Remus.”

“Ethan doesn’t hate you. He might seem mad at you, but all he ever wanted was to spend more time with you,” Logan assured. “And about Remus, you don’t deal with him. He’s not something to deal with. Just get to know him. He likes a lot of the same things as Roman, you’ll find.”

“Does he?” Patton asked, wrinkling his nose.

“Well, you could find out for yourself,” Logan suggested. Patton laughed.

“You’re so smart. I should never have stopped listening to you,” Patton muttered.

“Oh?”

“When we were kids. A few weeks after Janice first asked me out, you told me to end it soon because she was obsessive,” Patton chuckled self deprecatingly.

“I remember.” Logan hummed thoughtfully.

“You were right, you know. At breakfast. She is controlling, and I don’t know why I feel like I have to defend her. I guess- I guess it’s because I chose her. And if I defend her, I’m defending my choice. I’m defending myself,” Patton continued, his fingers plucking at a loose thread in his knit sleeve. He looked up at Logan with watery eyes. “I just don’t know why I can’t just agree with you guys. She was bad for me, and I know she was, but you bring it up and I just- I can’t agree.”

“Patton-”

“Besides, she’s Thomas’ mom. And Thomas is just- such a great kid. He’s the best thing that ever happened to me, Logan. Thomas is smart, and kind, and brave, and- and she raised him too, you know? How can I say she was bad when we made such a good kid?” Patton buried his face in Logan’s shoulders, his glasses digging uncomfortably into Logan’s collar bone. Logan pulled his brother’s glasses off his face and held him close, resting his chin on his dark hair.

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“Patton, listen to me. I know you must be feeling a lot of conflicting things, but I need you to understand that Thomas is his own person. You and Janice may have raised him together, but he had to form his own opinions on things, people, and actions. Her influence on him is likely there, though I’m not entirely sure in what manner, but a good son does not have to equal a good mother,” Logan insisted, trying to hug the words into his brother’s very bones.

Patton sobbed into Logan’s shoulder, returning his tight grip with an even tighter one. Logan wasn’t usually one for hugs, but he knew Patton needed the comfort. He wasn’t about to let his older brother suffer in silence, either.

After a few minutes, Patton pulled away, wiping his face dry with his sleeves and grabbing his glasses back. He put them on his face with a sigh and smiled, fragile and sad but grateful. “Thanks for letting me cry it out, Logan. Sometimes I just need a shoulder.”

“Well, I don’t mind offering mine. I just want it to be known that Ethan and Virgil would also offer
their own shoulders in a heartbeat,” Logan said. “Roman and Remus too. We are all in this emotional mess together, 'thick and thin' and what have you.”

“Yeah, I guess the Sanders family just has bad luck, huh?” Patton chuckled. Logan contemplated his own luck for a moment.

It wasn’t as though he hadn’t thought Caelum might be bad news in the beginning. The pair of them had met in a bar, Caelum ordering him a drink and he'd just reeked of trouble. Logan had accepted the drink, but later that evening when Caelum invited him home, Logan declined.

They met again another day, while grocery shopping. Caelum said he had thought Logan was interested, to which Logan confessed that he identified as asexual, but he was certainly romantically interested. Caelum had grinned his terribly dangerous grin, and Logan had fallen hard and fast.

Caelum wasn't a scientist, but he knew the name of nearly every star in the sky. He could list the constellations and point them out at the drop of a hat. Their first date, Logan told him that many of the stars could quite possibly be dead, and they wouldn't know for centuries. Caelum responded, "Then we'd better enjoy them while they last, huh?"

They dated for nearly two years, Logan discovered more about himself with each day, and their relationship grew and changed with them. When Logan got a job offer at a leading biological engineering institution, he bought a ring. Of course, it had never been the right time to propose. Logan was a bit of a perfectionist, and he wanted to wait until the perfect moment.

When he got home from his parents' funeral, it became quite clear that Caelum had emptied his apartment, drained his bank account, and left only the engagement ring. The box was open on the kitchen table when Logan walked in, and a note was left underneath it.

I'm flattered, babe, but I've met someone else.

At first, Logan was devastated. When the landlord came and informed him he was late on his payments, he was enraged. But with nowhere left to turn, Logan called Virgil. Yes, it seemed the Sanders family had incredibly poor luck, especially seeing as Logan was now living over a thousand miles from the facility that had employed him.

"Indeed," Logan sighed in agreement with Patton, resting his head against the chain of the porch swing.

The brothers sat in silence for a long minute.

"We really did divorce on good terms," Patton muttered. "We might have suggested the idea when we were angry, but once things calmed down, we talked it over and agreed it was for the best."

Logan blinked at his brother. He wasn't sure how to admit that the described situation still did not sound like "good terms".

"She's not so bad, really," Patton murmured. Logan disagreed, but he didn't say as such to his brother. Patton could believe what he wanted about Janice, as long as he didn't end up going back to her.

"I almost proposed to Caelum," Logan admitted. Patton raised his eyebrows in surprise. Logan nodded. "Only Virgil knows. He helped me sell the ring for nearly the full price I bought it at."

"I thought he stole all your stuff," Patton stated, the unasked question hanging quite obviously in
"I don't know if he felt guilty taking it, if he ever actually felt anything for me and it made him hesitate. I can't imagine our relationship having been anything other than another rung on the ladder of his, ah. Long con. But he left it behind with a note saying he met someone else," Logan explained, and he took a sharp breath. The moment was still jagged and painful, and even talking about it shifted the shards in his chest. He had really thought that he and Caelum were in love, and the note had broken his heart quite effectively.

"Oh, Logan," Patton whispered mournfully. "I'm so sorry."

"It's alright," Logan said. "Virgil has since told me several times that Caelum is a scumbag, and if I want, we could ask Ethan to track him down."

"Track him down?" Patton asked.

"It seemed he wanted well and truly to get away from me. He disconnected his phone number, deleted his social media accounts, and there weren't any employment records of a Caelum Zales at his last place of business when I checked in," Logan explained. He ran his hands through his hair, still feeling the remnants of the stress. "Ethan is quite the expert in false identities, so Virgil thought he could help."

"But Ethan was still in prison when this was happening," Patton stated, his entire face telegraphing his confusion. Logan nodded.

"I was puzzled as well, but Virgil insisted it wasn't an issue. I think he was aware of some of Ethan's more underground connections," Logan confessed. He shook his head. "It doesn't matter now, I didn't take up the offer, and Caelum is most likely out of my life for good."

Logan looked to his brother and found that Patton was studying him with a blank expression. "What is it?"

"Hm? Nothing, forget about it," Patton said, breaking out into a smile. "It's his loss, anyway, you'd have made a great husband."

"Thank you, I suppose," Logan said with an amused smirk.

"Besides, he betrayed your vulnerability. You gave him so much of yourself, and he paid you back by robbing you. You don't have anything to feel ashamed about," Patton stated. How he predicted Logan's feelings around the matter, he had no idea.

"I haven't thought about it much. This has all been a quite disturbingly fresh wound, after all," Logan reminded. He'd only sold the ring three weeks ago. Fifteen thousand dollars was a lot of money to carry in his briefcase, but he didn't trust his bank account anymore. He only had about sixteen hundred left after paying for hotels and plane tickets and sustainable food, but it was enough to start up a new account. If he could just get over this ridiculous fear of doing so.

Patton opened his mouth to speak, but then something behind Logan caught his eye.

"Hey Logan!" A voice greeted, and Logan looked up to see Virgil's young friend, waving as he came up the steps of the porch. "Who's the stranger?"

"Remy, this is Patton, my older brother," Logan said. "Patton, this is Remy, a brat who likes to steal our food."
Logan had met Remy only twice before. Once at the funeral, where Remy had lied to the ushers and called Mom and Dad his grandparents, and again before that at the last Thanksgiving he'd been able to share with both his parents. Remy studied Patton with the same judgemental expression he did everything.

"Hi, my name's Remy. If I play my cards right, I'll be related to you someday," Remy greeted, smirking and offering his hand to shake. Patton spluttered.

"Excuse me, what?" Patton asked.

"Ignore him, Patton, he's referencing the crush he used to harbor for our youngest brother," Logan informed, as he too had had quite the reaction when Remy had introduced himself as his future brother-in-law.

"Oh. Um, how does he know Virgil?" Patton asked, standing up to accept the handshake.

"He can answer that question, if asked," Remy spoke up.

"Virgil babysat him for a time," Logan explained.

"Oh. Oh! You're the friend that's only a year older than my Thomas," Patton said warmly, clapping Remy's hand in both of his and shaking it eagerly. "Hi! I'm glad to meet you."

Remy extricated his hand from Patton's grip. "Yeah, yeah, just let me get inside to eat some of your leftovers."

"Oh, of course, go ahead," Patton assured, moving out of Remy's path to the front door.

"The door is unlocked, though if I remember correctly, you have a key anyway," Logan commented.

"Yeah, well, Virge didn't want to mistake me for a burglar," Remy joked, and Logan couldn't help a wry smile in response. Remy was quite sharp witted for his age, even if he was also inconceivably illogical.

As Remy wandered inside, Patton and Logan fell into silence on the porch, looking at one another. Finally, Patton broke out into giggles.

"I guess serious talk time is over, huh?" Patton asked.

Logan smiled indulgent at his brother. "It seems so. Are you ready to try and keep civil with Ethan when we go back inside?"

"I'll do my best," Patton agreed. Logan nodded and went over to the door, but Patton grabbed his arm and halted his progress. "Hey, we have the same glasses!"

"What." Logan didn't see why this mattered at all.

"It's just- you know, we've been apart for so long, and we're together again, and we've got the same glasses. I don't know, I think it's just kinda neat, like we were always connected even when we weren't," Patton shrugged. "It's something I just noticed, is all."

Logan snorted. "You really are incredibly sentimental, Patton."

"Aw, thank you!"
Chapter End Notes

Logan is difficult to write.

I don't know if you've noticed at all, but I really don't know what I'm doing with this fic.
Roman Sees the Red Flags

Chapter Summary

Remus used to be an okay brother, for all his faults. Roman has learned that he was not so much a good brother as he was a good student, son, and friend. It's an adjustment he's still learning to deal with.

WARNINGS: Discussion of drug abuse, discussion of bullying in terms of suicide, destructive suicide attempts, self-destructive behaviors, mentions of underage sexual activity

Chapter Notes

This chapter got real heavy, real fast, and now I'm reconsidering having Remus' chapter happen right after Roman's. I also struggled with this one a lot, actually, because I couldn't figure out the tone I wanted vs the tone that was just... appearing. HEED THE WARNINGS IN THE SUMMARY, Remus gets up to some shit in this chapter. It's not super dark for Remus, but it's super dark for me, so.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Roman was ten the first time someone told him he couldn't do it. What was "it"? Well. Anything. It just so happened that up until he had turned ten years old, Roman had never been told he couldn't accomplish something if he tried. His parents never said "can't", and his siblings were only ever encouraging. Remus may have been the worst brother to have ever, but he never said Roman couldn't do something. No, see, Remus and all his other brothers were of the opinion that Roman could do anything if he set his mind to it.

Roman was ten years old when Jenny Carmichael laughed through her tears and told him, "You can't make me feel any better, Roman."

After that, Roman was determined to prove her wrong. He fought off her bullies, he shared his lunch with her, he even taught her how to build a proper fairy house. It was his job to succeed, after all, and he would not fail.

People told Remus he couldn't do things all the time, though. He couldn't draw mutilation on the desks, he couldn't play hangman with curse words in the margins of his workbooks, he couldn't catch pigeons in the schoolyard and release them in the cafeteria. It created a juxtaposition between the twins early on.

Remus was the bad twin, and that made Roman the good twin. Remus was the rule breaker, and Roman was the star student. It was no wonder Roman didn't notice his brother's worsening spirits.

They were twelve when Roman was outed to the entire school. He'd asked Winston Peters to the school dance and Winston had mocked him for it in front of everyone. The twins were now seated together in the principal's office, Roman sulking in his seat and Remus grinning under his bloody
nose like it was a sign of triumph.

"Roman, I hope I don't have to explain what you did wrong here," Principal Fickmen said.

"I didn't do anything wrong," Roman stated boldly, though he felt more like crying.

"Your parents are on their way to pick up your brother, and when they arrive, I'll have to discuss with them your poor behavior. I don't want to see you continuing to do things like this, you're a bright young man," Principal Fickmen continued.

"What poor behavior?" Roman demanded.

"Yeah, exactly how did Roman screw up?" Remus added, a scowl now gracing his face. Roman didn't know when the smile dropped.

"Roman, you made young Mr. Peters very uncomfortable by asking him to the dance. It's not appropriate behavior for school to... act so shamelessly," Principal Fickmen explained. Roman saw Remus twitch violently in the corner of his eye.

"Not appropriate," Roman repeated blankly. Remus burst out into laughter that neither Roman nor Principal Fickmen joined in on.

"Sorry, you weren't joking?" Remus asked, bewildered. "How was Roman asking Winston quietly and in private more inappropriate than when Sally Higgins asked Ronnie Durham? She disrupted schoolwork with ten hired singers, a marching band, and what practically amounts to a small parade. I don't remember anyone scolding her for setting classes back by an hour."

Principal Fickmen looked incredibly uncomfortable. "Young boys like yourselves can't be asking other boys to dances. It's unheard of, and unbecoming."

Roman felt his face burn, and Remus snarled, slamming his palms on the desk. He practically vibrated in his seat for a moment before taking a deep breath and leaning back, grinning widely at the principal. "You know, Stu, can I call you Stu? I'm calling you Stu. There comes a time in every boy's life when he has to decide if he wants to deal with people like you. I think the time for me to decide has arrived, don't you?"

Remus was promptly expelled for threatening Principal Fickmen with a pair of scissors. Mom and Dad arrived at around that time too, and after hearing out their principal, they pulled Roman out of that school as well. The commute to their new school in the nearby city was ten minutes longer than before, but a school bus drove through their neighborhood and straight into the city.

Their new school had a GSA, though it wasn't officially referred to as such. The students all called it the Gays and Friends club, and the school had it registered as simply an "LGBT youth resource group". Their new principal? Very much involved in the community, and clearly besotted with the woman who headed the theater program. Suffice to say, Roman felt he'd been swimming through murky waters for years, and he had finally come upon his Atlantis.

Remus started to grow more distant, now, but so was Roman so he didn't think twice about it. Roman was busy auditioning for each musical that came up, and Remus seemed to be making more friends than at their old school, so what did it matter?

The school was K-12, with each age group being in a separate building. The theater was between the two higher levels, and Roman was still in eighth grade when he discovered the notice on the door.
"Miss Peggy, they can't shut down the theater program!" Roman exclaimed, taking the sign of notice all the way to her.

Peggy Larson, the greatest woman in the world in Roman's opinion and an open bisexual to boot, smiled at him softly. "It's sweet of you to care, Roman, but Hannah told me the superintendent came to this decision, and she can't go against it."

"But why? They can't cut theater!" Roman insisted.

"Budget cuts are brutal. They're also cutting the sports fund, so I'm not the only one to be upset about, you know," Peggy pointed out.

"I'm not an athlete, I'm a thespian," Roman scoffed. Peggy smiled.

"Well, Roman, whatever it is you wind up doing once I'm gone, I'm sure you'll do great," Peggy assured. "Let's make our last musical a great one, okay?"

"How can I fix this?" Roman demanded. Peggy shook her head.

"You can't."

Roman tried so hard to prove her wrong, but when you can't do something, you can't do it. It's the hard truth sometimes. In the adult world, anyway, there were things you could try so hard to accomplish, and they wouldn't come to pass. He would always remember Peggy Larson fondly, of course, and one day he would come across her in a cafe and learn of her engagement to Hannah Ticktin, the principal of his old school. But for now all he could feel was the crushing disappointment of losing the theater program.

"It's not like you can't just do theater in college," Remus said from his side of the room. He was lying on his belly, painting his nails black and occasionally stopping to sniff the brush.

"You don't get it, Re! I won't be able to act in high school! How am I supposed to be scouted for acting if there are no opportunities to act!?" Roman demanded.

"Try community theater," Remus suggested, and he put the brush down in the bottle and stared at his hands for a minute.

"You didn't paint the last three finge-"

"Shut up, Roman," Remus snapped harshly, and Roman fell silent in surprise. Remus' hands were shaking.

"Are you oka-"

"Oh, so now you care? Don't even bother, Ro, I'm going out." Remus scowled, and he stormed out of the room, toppling the bottle of nail polish as he practically leapt off his bed. Roman hurried to pick it up, and he took a tissue and wiped off the blanket. He looked to the door and wondered what crawled up Remus' ass.

Roman did take his advice, though. He spent the next several hours looking into nearby theater companies. He almost didn't notice when Remus came back in, disheveled, wearing a shirt he definitely didn't own, and looking in a much better mood than before.

"Remus, hey, thanks for- did you have sex?" Roman stared in shock at his twin.
"Hm? Oh, no, not really," Remus said blithely, a wonky grin on his face. "Jake said he only had a couple minutes, so we didn't really have time."

"What the fuck- Re, have you had sex before?" Roman demanded.

"Um, yeah? So what?" Remus snorted. He looked a little more annoyed than he had been before.

"When the hell were you gonna tell me you had a boyfriend?" Roman scowled.

"I don't," Remus huffed. "Can we drop this, I was feeling pretty great before you started yelling at me."

Roman was more than alarmed to be learning of any of this. They weren't even fourteen for another two months. "Remus, what the actual fuck?"

"Look, the guys and I just sorta get high and do whatever's fun," Remus groaned. "Can you drop it now, or do you still wanna pretend we actually care about each other for a minute?"

"Wait, wait. Are you high right now?" Roman demanded.

"I was, but you're killing it," Remus groused.

"Remus-!"

"No, you know what? Fuck this. I'm gonna sleep on the couch, don't bother talking to me," Remus announced, and he walked right out of their bedroom with a slight stagger to his steps. Roman just watched, horrified. He tried to put Remus and his mess out of his mind, returning his focus to the local theater company with an upcoming play he'd decided to audition for.

Virgil was the best little brother. Why was he the best little brother? He was pretty good at critique. Why did this make him the best little brother? Because of how he picked apart Roman's performance. Sure, it was a little disheartening at first, but Virgil always followed up all the bad points with all the good points, and Roman was a good actor so there were plenty of those as well.

"How'd I do?" Roman asked, after he finished his monologue.

Virgil shrugged. "You're trying too hard to make it sound philanthropic. I think he's more self righteous, and bit self absorbed. He's thinking more about how his deed will make him look than how it'll help other people."

Virgil was well spoken for a seven year old. It had to be his and Logan's influence, and maybe a bit of Ethan's. Roman loved seeing his baby brother use big words like that. Still, the words were clunky on his tongue, and carried that adorable childlike stumble.

"When he says I will be revered as a savior among my people, he should sound more relishing, more wanting," Virgil explained.

"Do you have any other notes?" Roman asked, a little amused. Virgil looked up from the script.

"Learn the monologue? I don't know, you've already fixed everything else. Now you just need to get off script," Virgil shrugged, flipping the page to the song behind it.

"Very well," Roman hummed. Virgil put the pages down on the table.

"I heard you and Remus fighting a few days ago," Virgil piped up. Roman froze.
"About what?" Roman asked. He really, really didn't want to explain sex and drugs to his seven-year-old brother.

"About Patton," Virgil said, and Roman let his muscles relax again. "Do you really think Janice would hurt him?"

Roman studied his younger brother. His shoulders were up by his ears, his knuckles white on his knees, and his feet were tucked under the stool he was perched on. He was staring at the lamp beside the couch, too, rather than looking at Roman.

"I don't know Janice very well," Roman confessed. "But I know Patton. He'll come back if Janice hurts him at all."

"Okay," Virgil sighed. He seemed to ponder that for a few moments before his gaze caught on the script again. He gave Roman his typical shy little smile. "Do I get to watch you audition?"

"Yes, but you don't get to insult me afterwards," Roman allowed with a playfully haughty tone.

"And we'll get ice cream after, right? We always get ice cream after an audition," Virgil reminded.

"Of course! Why would it be any different just because the audition isn't for school?" Roman snorted. He loved the tradition just as much as Virgil did, after all. It helped soothe his nerves and he got to bond with his babiest brother.

Roman failed his third driver's test in April, two months before his seventeenth birthday. Remus had passed his with flying colors months prior, and had been driving Roman places all year because everyone else was busy or Virgil.

"I hate this," Roman muttered.

"I hate it just as much as you do, Romano," Remus snorted. Roman glared at his brother.

"Why are you so insufferable?" Roman demanded.

"Hey, I'm not the one who whines like a little bitch all the time! I'm driving you to your stupid college tour, aren't I? God, what's up your butt today?" Remus scowled.

"If you're asking what's wrong, Mr. Haverhill failed me," Roman muttered, dropping his forehead against the dashboard.

"Mr. Haverhill? You mean the math teacher?" Remus asked. He sounded a little distant now, as if he were elsewhere and barely paying attention to Roman.

"Yeah. He took me aside after class and said if my head stayed in the clouds, I'd never amount to anything," Roman scowled. He noticed Remus scratch at his elbow, where under his sleeve Roman had once spotted track marks. His scowl deepened. "Are you seriously thinking about getting more fucking dope, Remus?"

"I'm not thinking about it, I'm definitely going to," Remus snapped.

"What the hell is your problem? Do you even know what that shit's doing to you?" Roman demanded.

"What is my problem? Bitch, what is your problem!? I haven't seen mom or dad digging their noses into my business, so clearly you haven't said anything. I wonder why?" Remus snarled. Roman
clenched his fists.

"You're the one who told me to keep out of your business!" Roman scowled.

"Why would you listen to me, I'm high off my ass half the time!" Remus demanded. Roman couldn't come up with a good response to that.

"Why do you even do drugs, I know you're not just injecting!" Roman scowled.

"Fuck you, Roman, you don't know anything!" Remus shouted.

"I know you came home with bruises on your wrists and five hickeys after Homecoming! Why don't you talk to me, I can help if you're in trouble!" Roman screamed.

"I'm not in trouble! Stop pretending you even care about me!" Remus was practically screeching now.

"I do care about you, you're my twin brother and I love you!" Roman argued, his own words getting unbearably loud.

"That would have been nice to know five years ago!" Remus snapped. "Where were you when everyone was telling me to kill myself?"

"How was I supposed to know people were hurting you if you didn't tell me?" Roman cried out.

"I always knew when people were hurting you!" Remus shouted.

"Well then, I'm sorry!" Roman hollered. Remus screamed wordlessly, slamming his foot on the accelerator. Roman's heart started racing, and he grabbed the sides of the car. "Remus!"

"I don't want your apologies!" Remus shrieked, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I just want to stop caring!"

"Remus!" Roman screamed, throwing himself at the steering wheel and trying to turn the car before they went hurtling off the side of the road. Unfortunately, Remus had a much stronger grip. According to the doctors, they were lucky they survived, though Roman couldn't remember any of it. The car careened down the hill, flipped three times, and slammed straight into a tree.

Roman was glad he couldn't remember the flipping, or crashing, but he was not glad that he had panic attacks when he tried to get into a car. Also, his leg was broken and he had to drop out of the play he'd been working on. Luckily for him, he would make a full recovery, and he could get back to dancing after learning some physical therapy stretches once it was all healed up.

Roman did not want to see Remus after the accident. He didn't want to call him, or visit him at the rehab center, and he didn't want to even hear about his painfully, achingly slow progress.

Virgil kept saying he should go see him, and so did their parents, but Roman couldn't bring himself to do so. It wasn't that he blamed Remus at all for what happened.

Okay, he kind of blamed Remus. But honestly, Roman blamed himself as well. At the end of it all, he just couldn't face his brother. He was angry, he was miserable, and he just wanted to not think about it. Which is why he was secretly relieved that he and Remus had fallen into old habits so quickly once they'd been reunited.

It wasn't incredibly pleasant, but Remus jumping on his bed and singing the assumption song
right in his ear to wake him up was much better than the screaming fest he kept expecting. It was almost like Remus didn’t want to think about it either. That was… probably unhealthy, but comforting nonetheless. It didn't mean their little fights didn't bother him a whole lot extra on top of everything, though.

Things were rough in the morning, Roman could tell. He and Remus had narrowly missed what was probably a pretty bad argument. After all, Patton was the softest puff ball Roman knew, and he'd been storming out of the kitchen when he and Remus went to breakfast.

Things were finally calming down between Roman and Remus and their heated debate about body glitter, when Ethan asked Thomas to show them a musical he’d been in. Roman watched his nephew wilt a little, his smile taking on that tight false look that Patton’s did so often before he ran off with Janice.

After Thomas explained that his mother kept him from chasing his dreams, Roman had demanded they find his old musical tapes. Well- they were discs, but Roman preferred how the word “tapes” sounded. Roman had brought down a small box with about twenty discs inside, then popped a random one into the DVD player and fiddled with the television. He pressed play, and the opening lines of Into the Woods filled the room.

Sometime during Roman’s quest to find the DVDs, Virgil’s friend Remy had come in, shortly followed by Patton and Logan. Remy had immediately gone to the kitchen, though he’d stared blankly at the family for a rather long minute before he actually moved. The eldest Sanders brothers, however, merely sat down and joined the rest of them for Into the Woods.

“Which one are you?” Thomas asked, his eyes scanning the young boys onstage. Roman laughed.

“I’m not any of these characters. You’ll know me when you see me, I get a rather nice dramatic entry,” Roman said proudly.

“He’s the witch,” Remus blurted.

“Remus!”

“And the prince,” Virgil added.

“E tu, Virgil?” Roman pouted at his baby brother, who only smirked at him.

And the play went on in this manner, Patton asking Roman about details from this time in his life, Remus butting in with crude commentary, Logan pointing out flaws in the story, whilst Ethan watched Thomas with an almost fond smile.

When the movie ended, Thomas spoke up, "What was it like growing up together?"

There was silence in the room, and Roman heard Remy cough. Virgil looked up at his friend with a raised eyebrow. "You wanna say something, Sinclair?"

"Just trying to break the silence," Remy teased. "You're acting like Thomas just hurled a grenade in your direction."

Roman chuckled uncomfortably. "Uh, well I like to think we were rather close growing up."

"Closer than we are now, anyway," Ethan muttered.

"Much closer," Logan agreed, adjusting his position in the left side armchair.
"I don't really remember the time when Patton was around, but I think the rest of us were pretty close too," Virgil commented. "At least, I was close with everyone."

Roman spotted Patton's wince and cleared his throat. "Well, I mean, closeness is relative! Remus and I were practically attached at the hip, but we have always been emotionally distant."

"Well, that's just downright not true," Remus snorted.

"What are you talking about? I could never figure you out," Roman huffed.

"Maybe so, but I can read you like a book, always could," Remus announced, his tone becoming a bit holier than thou.

"Well, Roman did just say closeness is relative, and while I'm usually disinclined to agree with him, he makes a valid point this time. Two views of the same relationship may in fact be quite the opposite," Logan lectured. Roman huffed again, annoyed with his older brother.

"What's your point?" Roman snapped.

"I was actually quite finished, Roman, thank you so much for demonstrating your immaturity once again," Logan sneered.

"Please don't fight," Virgil groaned, rubbing his temples.

"He started it, I-"

"Oh, now who's being immature!"

"Hey!" Remy shouted, clapping his hands to draw everyone's attention. "I call Guest Law!"

Remus and Ethan both groaned, and Virgil smirked.

"Guest Law?" Patton echoed, sounding confused.

"Mom and Dad made Guest Law when Virgil was having his first and last public birthday party," Roman explained. "Around that time, Remus and I were constantly fighting, and Ethan kept arguing with Mom and Dad all the time, so Guest Law was the three rule plan to ensure no fights broke out while guests were over."

"What are the rules?" Thomas asked.

"I never learned rule one, but rule two is no complaining about what Mr. and Mrs. Sanders decided while the guests are in the house," Remy said.

Virgil grinned. "Great, that means no complaining about the fact that any of us are here!"

"I think that rule should be updated," Logan muttered.

"The only logical change is to say that no one can complain about what Virgil decides," Remy pointed out with all the snark a thirteen year old who wore shades indoors could carry within them. Logan grumbled, and Roman laughed.

"Well, rule number one is that Remus and Roman are only allowed to talk to each other if they have something nice to say," Logan reminded, and Roman scowled.

"Wishing my brother had a Broadway role isn't something nice?" Remus asked, and Roman snarled
"It is a sensitive subject, Remus, though I wouldn't expect you to know anything about sensitive," Roman scoffed.

"I know it's about sensitive subject, Roman, why do you think I brought it up?" Remus mocked.

"Hey!" Virgil huffed. "Guest Law."

"What's rule number three?" Patton asked, and the room fell silent again.

Roman cleared his throat. Someone had to tell him, after all. They couldn't keep dancing around the subject. "It's, uh. It's 'nobody mention Patton'."

Thomas' eyes widened and he looked up at his father in surprise. Patton, meanwhile, blinked rapidly and took in a deep breath. "Oh."

"Only while the guests are around, just to, uh, lessen the arguments!" Roman exclaimed, eager to ease the sting.

"And only when Mom and Dad called Guest Law anyway, it wasn't like we never talked about you," Virgil pointed out.

"It would have been detrimental to just pretend you never existed," Logan continued.

"Though some of us would have preferred to," Ethan stated emotionlessly.

"We brought you up a lot, actually," Remus piped up.

Patton smiled but something about it was cracked and broken. "Um. Okay."

"But anyway, that rule needs updating, too, so uh, we're going to change it to nobody talking about Janice or anything to do with her. Is that cool?" Virgil hastily decided. His older brothers all agreed, though Patton was a little late. Thomas acquiesced, and Remy clapped his hands again.

"Fantastic! Okay, so hi everybody, I'm Remy Sinclair. I'm Virgil's only friend, and his future husband," Remy introduced himself. Thomas immediately fell onto his back in giggles.

"Virgil! My brother, a cradle robber!?" Remus exclaimed, pretending to look scandalized. He was grinning too much, though.

"He's joking!" Virgil insisted, his face glowing bright red.

"Hello, Remy, I'm Ethan. What do you plan on doing to prove you're deserving of my brother's hand?" Ethan asked with a smirk. Virgil squawked, and Roman couldn't help but cackle.

"Don't know yet, but I'll think of something," Remy decided.

"You really want in on this family?" Remus snorted. "We're kind of a disaster."

"It's worth it. My parents are way worse than you guys." Remy flopped down on the arm of Virgil's chair.

"How romantic," Roman joked.

"Isn't it just?" Remy grinned. Roman found himself liking Virgil's pint sized pal once again,
remembering the few interactions they'd had. He didn't usually have enough money to fly home for any holidays, but he'd met Remy through video calls and at the funeral. Remy had claimed he was their nephew, and the three of them who had attended just rolled with it.

"Well, hey there, I'm Remus," Remus announced, waving frantically. "I like long walks through creepy woods, ax murderers, and zombie films."

"I'm Thomas, Patton's my dad," Thomas piped up, and Remy perked up.

"You're twelve?" Remy asked, and Thomas nodded. "You're gonna like Alexandros Middle, it's maybe the one school that doesn't suck ass."

Roman snorted derisively, and Remy glanced up in surprise. "Sorry, it's just- Remus and I went there for a year."

"We did?" Remus asked.

"You threatened the principal with a pair of scissors."

"Oh," Remus mused.

"Is Fickmen still principal, by the way?" Roman asked. He hoped not, that man was genuinely a monster living inside human skin.

"No, but the rumor is he quit after his eyes were gouged out by scissors," Remy said, and Roman blanched. Remus, next to him, burst out cackling. The rest of the family couldn't seem to keep from laughing either, and even Thomas and Patton were chuckling along to the good humor in the room.

"I love the rumor mill!" Remus decided, throwing his hands up above his head. Roman couldn't help but laugh once again at his brother's antics.

Yeah, it was much nicer when they could just be brothers with each other.

Chapter End Notes

Can you tell that I sat on the finished chapter for, like, three days?
Remus Protecc and Attacc

Chapter Summary

Remus knows he isn't usually people's favorite person, and that fucked him up bad. Even Patton doesn't like him much, which, honestly, is fair. But if Virgey is going to bother caring about him, he might as well try his best to care about him back. Thank god for Virgil, really.

WARNINGS: Mentions of depression and depressive moods, discussion of familial favoritism, suicidal thoughts? Definitely suicidal tendencies, I also describe a car crash in this chapter, and basically tread with caution. Also, allusions to non-consent for past underage sexual activity, and an OC gets real gross to Virgil. Also, Patton kind of acts like a jerk in this chapter, but it's while he's a teenager so he can't be expected to be perfect.

Chapter Notes

So I decided to put the Remus chapter next anyway, because the pacing of the story requires that Thomas go last in these first seven chapters, and Ethan reveals some important factoids that Remus would only gloss over if I wrote his after. HEED THE WARNINGS OF BOTH THE LAST AND THIS CHAPTER, and if I missed anything, please be sure to let me know! Again, it's not all that dark for Remus, but it is dark for me.

Remus knew he wasn't Patton's favorite brother. Logan was praised by the older boy as incredibly smart, Ethan was praised for being charming, Roman was always called talented. The most Remus ever got was a forced smile and the sentence "oh, that's so... creative..."

Remus knew Patton scolded him more than anyone else in their family, constantly getting chewed out for throwing rocks at birds or pouring water into gopher holes. He was scolded for fingerpainting on Roman's face in his sleep, scolded for wiping his boogers on the wall, scolded for rolling around in the mud whenever Patton complained about the lack of dogs. He was under no illusion that he was held in any warm regard by his eldest brother.

Remus was the older of the twins, almost three hours older than Roman, which really meant nothing except that for the first eight years of their lives Remus was bigger and stronger than his twin. His hours of age over his once smaller and more delicate looking twin made him overprotective, almost. Remus found himself barking ferociously when a sound scared Roman at night. Remus would grab the scissors and threaten any monsters under the bed. Remus snarled and snapped and growled when someone tried to pick on Roman. Naturally, this led to more scolding from Patton.

"You have to learn to be more friendly, Remus, you can't keep acting like a wild animal," Patton
"Patton!" Mom exclaimed. "Don't compare your brother to wild animals!"

"I wouldn't if he didn't act like one!" Patton defended, with all the air of any defensive teenager.

When Remus was nine, he bit Janice Hughes when she came to meet the family for the first time. After all, he knew near instantly that he didn't like her. Janice screeched, Mom and Dad panicked, and Patton was livid. Patton had shouted at Remus for what felt like ages, before finally ending the lecture with, "I hope Virgil grows up knowing how much of a monster you are!"

Remus had cried, and Patton actually got in trouble for that one. But it didn't change the fact that Patton said it, even if he apologized later. No matter how much Patton said he was sorry, he still thought of Remus that way. And he brought up Virgil, who was still only two and barely speaking, as if he were some sort of weapon to wield how Patton saw fit.

"I'm glad you bit her," Roman confided that very same evening. "If you didn't, I would have. I don't like her."

"Thanks, Ro," Remus grinned, resting his head on his twin's shoulder. Roman just sat there, staring at the ceiling and letting Remus sniffle on his shoulder.

The next time Janice came to visit, Patton let her hold Virgil while he went to the bathroom. It was okay for all of five seconds, when Virgil started screaming. Remus saw red, and practically attacked her. He kicked her shins and snatched Virgil away, hurriedly calming his baby brother down.

Janice made it sound like Remus attacked her over nothing, because "obviously" Virgil was just being fussy, and that didn't warrant his anger. Patton scolded him, took Virgil away, and made him go to his room.

Janice stopped coming over after that, and Remus thought that was the end of it. He'd never have to hear about her again. But no, Patton kept dating her. He just never brought her back to see the family. Remus hated it, and the worst part was that he couldn't do anything about it.

It wasn't just Patton that disliked him, of course. The rest of his family might have been patient and understanding, but the kids at school were every bit the same as Patton. It was probably the fact that everyone else was so bad that made Patton's behavior seem so painful for Remus.

"Remus is scary."

"I don't want to play with Remus, he's the mean one!"

"I heard he doesn't wash his hands, ever."

"He stuck crayons up his nose in reading class."

"Now, children, be nice. Remus is just a bit of a special case."

A special case, the teachers said to the students. Disturbed, the teachers told his parents. Odd, when they wanted to be polite. Remus wasn't talented, or good, or charming, like Roman. He wasn't anything but-

Monster.
Remus starting attempting when he was eleven years old. The first time, he tried to jump off the school roof. He chickened out before he could climb the fence to even stand on the ledge. He didn't want to fall to his death, he just wanted to die. Then Roman found him in the bathroom and shouted at him that Ethan was in the hospital.

The next time was in the bathroom, when he was twelve, but Virgil came and caught him slitting his wrist. Or, well, almost caught him slitting his wrist. Virgil didn't seem to notice anything except for the cut itself, and Remus managed to concoct a lie about scratching himself on the corner of the sink. The next day all the corners were covered in rubber bumpers. Virgil kept a closer eye on him after that though, as if sensing the lie.

That was around the time when Remus met Jake and the guys. He got hooked, and for the first time he didn't feel the crushing misery that made him want to end it all. At least, not while he was high. It was also the first time he sucked a dick, though the less said about that experience, the better.

Years passed in a haze of drugs, depression, attempts to take his own life, and gratuitous sex. He and Roman grew further and further apart, but despite that Virgil kept taking care of him.

When Virgil was ten years old, and he was taking care of Remus' self harm cuts, he said, "These are too uniform for accidents, Re. Why won't you tell me what's wrong?"

There Virgil went, sounding just like a little Logan Jr again. Remus snorted. "You know what's wrong, Virgey, I'm what's wrong."

"You aren't wrong," Virgil protested, and he pulled the cotton away from the cuts to dip it in the isopropyl.


"You aren't a monster, Re," Virgil huffed, and Remus saw him glaring at the scars as if they were all the people who'd said those things about his older brother.

_I hope Virgil grows up knowing how much of a monster you are!_

"Okay, Virgey, whatever you say," Remus grinned.

Only a year later, he got a chance to prove his monstrosity when he drove his car off the road with Roman in the next seat.

The crash was devastating, and Remus couldn’t remember the spaces between being on the road wrestling with Roman over the steering wheel, and waking up hanging upside down in his seat, his leg pinned and entirely numb, something hot and sticky on his face.

“Rom’n?” Remus slurred. He reached for the passenger seat, and his hand met- oh god, oh god, that was a lot of blood. “Roman ?”

His brother groaned, but he didn’t answer. Remus was suddenly incredibly too alert, seeing broken glass, pine branches, and crumpled metal everywhere. Roman still wasn’t waking up, and Remus was getting way too much blood flowing into his temples and down the side of his head.

“Roman, wake up!” Remus exclaimed, shaking his brother’s shoulder. Roman whimpered, but he didn’t so much as twitch an eyelid. Remus was beginning to panic, rooting through his pockets for his cell phone. He had to- they were in the middle of a long road to a college in the middle of nowhere, he had to call an ambulance or Roman would- oh god-
“Roman, listen, listen to me, Roman?” Remus tapped Roman’s shoulder again when he found his phone. Roman made another quiet whimpering sound, but he still didn’t stir. “Roman, are you awake?”

Remus was dialing already, but he had to know if Roman was gonna be okay.

“I crashed my car, I’m with my brother- he won’t wake up, and we’re stuck and I’m scared-”

It was all a blur after that. The woman on the line kept him talking, asking him to update her periodically on Roman’s condition. Remus was steadily growing wearier, but pretty soon there were sirens, and lights. They went for Remus first, but he screamed at them to get Roman. He passed out somewhere during the part where they were sawing through the car door to get Roman out.

When he next woke up, Mom and Dad were standing over him, Virgil was asleep against his shoulder, and Roman was in surgery. Remus didn’t remember much of that either, but according to Virgil, he woke him up screaming about how much he couldn’t stand existing on like this.

Rehab was a messy kaleidoscope of memories Remus didn’t bother to fit into the right, proper order. For a while, he could remember getting videos from Virgil, as well as holiday care packages, birthday gifts, and home videos of the family. He got weekly visits from them, during which they dropped off their goods, and the rest of the week was working through his addictions and issues. Every week.

According to Virgil, Remus had blown up at him over a video in which he compared the story of the Snow Queen to Roman and Remus. Remus couldn’t remember it at all. There were a lot of things Remus couldn’t remember, but there were more he could, so he didn’t think about it much. Remus did remember the aftermath of his little explosion to Virgil, which was basically a near relapse- as in, he craved some heroine or something for a solid month and a half, but there wasn’t any to be had. But he came back.

Sure, Virgil didn’t send him videos of him telling stories anymore, but he didn’t once stop visiting every week. Even Mom and Dad started busying themselves with the flower shop more often, but Virgil came every Friday. Sometimes he’d even do his homework with Remus nearby, and Remus would help him out. Virgil came back visit after visit, and those were the times that Remus could remember the best.

One of the rehab caretakers said that it was probably a symptom of his depression, all the days just sort of blending, and some of his memories not even factoring in. It made sense, but at least he was getting better. He was able to remember most of his week now.

Then Ethan got arrested a week before they were gonna send Remus home and he tried to hang himself in the bathroom. They replaced his shower curtains with a sliding plastic door and told him they’d be helping him through this a bit longer. Six months later and Mom and Dad were too sick to keep visiting, but Virgil wasn’t!

Virgil kept coming, every week. He’d do homework, he’d talk about how the family was doing, he’d write up work emails for the flower shop, and he did it all with a brave face around Remus. But Remus had good big brother senses from being twins with Roman.

Virgil was falling apart. Virgil will fall apart. It was absolute prophecy, and Remus was sure of it. He just wasn’t sure if he’d be able to pick up any of the pieces when Virgey did.
“Shut up, Remy,” Virgil scoffed at a joke Remus didn’t hear the tiny teen make.

“What’s Remy shutting up about?” Remus asked, looking away from the mirror, where he’d been studying his liner to make sure it was just as bold as he wanted and no more or less. Bolder, and it’d look sloppy, but less bold, and it wasn’t as eye-catching.

“I was just talking about how Virgil finally looks like he’s trying to pick up a guy,” Remy commented with a sly grin. Remus snorted and grabbed his baby brother’s chin, turning his face into the light.

“Not bad, Virgey! Not bad. But not good, either, too understated.” Remus decided, flipping his liquid liner in his hand and leaning forward to fix Virgil’s makeup.

“I like understated! I’m understated! Re, let go,” Virgil huffed.

“Close your eyes!” Remus sang, and Virgil relented with a groan. Remus hummed, pleased, and began to swipe the pen over the small wing his baby brother had drawn in. “Remy, do me a favor and pick a lipstick color out of Roman’s box. Preferably something dark, it goes with Virgey’s aesthetic.

“Lipstick? Remus, come on,” Virgil groaned, but Remy darted over to the box Remus had taken from Roman earlier that day. He came back with two black tubes.

“Purple, or maroon?” Remy asked.

“Purple,” Virgil immediately stated. Remus snorted and took the tube with the little purple sticker on it, before returning to Virgil’s wings.

“Are you going for cat eyes?” Remy asked. Remus nodded.

“Virgey’s good at scaring off cute guys. Something like this’ll be sure to draw one in long enough to try and brave the spikes,” Remus explained proudly.

“I want to scare people off, Remus,” Virgil muttered darkly.


“Perfect idea! Virgey, you’re weird adolescent friend is my new son, I’ve adopted him,” Remus proclaimed.

“Aw, don’t ruin my plan to marry into the family,” Remy pouted, and Remus couldn’t help but cackle. He adored this kid!

“I can’t wait to call you my brother in law,” Remus decided, accepting the palette Remy handed him. Virgil heaved a sigh, and relinquished his control over the situation to Remus with a tilt of his head. Remus grinned and moved onto the second eye.

Virgil was gonna knock ‘em dead.

Well, alright, so it took a bit to find a suitable outfit in Virgil’s wardrobe, but Remus quickly just shoved him into the darkest colors he owned, then they were out the door and taking a cab to the nearest, gayest club in the city.

Remus immediately jumped to dance, dragging Virgil along with him. It really was Virgil’s own fault he was stuck in the crowd with Remus, having elected to keep a close eye on Remus for the
first thirty days after his release before the center sent someone to check in on him. See, this was sort of a probationary period. If Remus got hooked again in thirty days, they still had a spot for him, and would resume charging Virgil for Remus’ stay.

Remus danced and danced until Virgil tugged him out of the crowd away over to the bar. Remus, eager to loosen his inhibitions, opened his mouth to order a drink, but Virgil beat him to it.

"Two sodas, whatever you've got that doesn't taste like cola," Virgil requested, and the girl behind the counter nodded before moving to the drinks. After a minute, two Italian sodas in a bright pink color were slid their way.

As she moved to serve other patrons, Remus turned to his brother, spinning so his stool faced the dance floor. "Okay, so, see anything you like?"

"Not really," Virgil said, not even bothering to observe the room. Remus narrowed his eyes at his baby brother.

"You're not even looking," Remus pouted.

"Don't need to, nobody compares," Virgil muttered. Remus slumped. His brothers were the worst when they were into people.

"That's depressing to think. Well, I for one see dozens of pretty ladies and gents-" Remus stopped cold as his eyes fell upon a familiar face at the end of the bar.

"Not everybody's as eager as you are, Re, maybe I'm not looking for casual sex," Virgil huffed, but it sounded so far away to Remus. The music and the lights and everything felt so incredibly distant he almost couldn't breathe.

Jake Gribbin turned and caught Remus' gaze, and Remus gasped, tearing his eyes away, breathing desperately. Virgil looked at him in surprise. "Remus?"

Remus grabbed his brother's arm. "Need to leave. Now."

Virgil got up in surprise, stumbling a bit as Remus tugged him to his side and fumbling to leave money on the bar. "What? I mean, of course, but I thought you wanted-"

"Maybe I don't always want what's best for me! We need to leave, right now!" Remus looked back at the bar to see if Jake was still there, but he was gone. Remus felt his mouth go dry. He walked faster, trying to get Virgil to leave quicker. Virgil hastily shoved his wallet back into his pocket.

They had just exited the club, and Remus thought they were home free, when someone grabbed his shoulder and turned him around. He came face to face with Jake.

"Well, well, I thought I saw your face." Jake smirked. "Remus Sanders, best lay I ever met."

Remus coughed at the pungent stench of alcohol on Jake's breath. Virgil's hands wrapped around Remus' arm, and he seemed to gather all his courage to say, "You're drunk. Leave us alone."

Jake's eyes turned onto Virgil, and Remus' stomach plummeted into his shoes. Jake grinned, predatory and cruel. "You're a pretty cute thing. Long legs too. Bet they look real pretty spread apart."

"Shut the fuck up, Jake," Remus snapped, shoving the man away from his baby brother. "He's a kid, leave him alone."
"Pretty little thing like him can make his own choices, can't you doll?" Jake asked.

"Leave me alone," Virgil muttered, huddling close to Remus' side.

"Aw, come on, baby, don't be like that," Jake said, and Remus felt utter seething rage blaze up within him. So many times Jake had said those words to him, so many times Jake had fucked up his life to control him, well *not tonight*, and *not to Virgil*. He didn't realize he'd thrown the punch until after Jake was on the floor shouting at him, blood on his lips and one of his teeth on the floor.

"Don't you even *look* at my baby brother," Remus snarled. He was glad he'd worn rings, as he wailed on the man, blood rushing so loudly in his ears he couldn't hear when angry shouts turned into pained pleads. Years and years of anguish, pain, and utter seething rage flowed through him. Finally, arms were yanking him off of Jake, and suddenly his arms were restrained.

"*Remus, enough, he's down!*" That was Virgil. Virgil!

Remus didn't bother to pay the unconscious form any mind as he turned to his baby brother, cupping his face in bloodied hands. "Oh my god, are you okay? Were you scared?"

Virgil's eyes were locked onto the mess behind Remus. "N-no. Yes. Re, what was that, you could've killed him!"

"Shit. Oh shit!" Remus laughed hysterically. He grabbed Virgil by the wrist and ran down the street. "We should probably go!"

"Remus!" Virgil exclaimed, as Remus pulled him along.

It was a few streets over that Remus decided to answer his baby brother's question. "I didn't want him to touch you. He was gonna try, that's how he is."

"How do you know him?" Virgil asked. Remus studied his baby brother for a long moment, the shaky breaths coming from between his lips, the concerned furrow between his brows. This was gonna keep Virgil up all night if he didn't get any answers out of Remus right now.

"He got me hooked," Remus stated shortly, and Virgil's eyes widened as he put together the pieces. He scowled.

"Can I go back and get some hits in, too?" He asked.

"Nah," Remus shook his head. "Someone's gonna find him soon and call the cops."

Virgil leaned forward, letting out a few hysterical gasps and chuckles. "Oh my god, you nearly killed a man! Oh shit, we can't tell the others, we'd be fucked."

"Like they have any right to tell us what to do," Remus snorted. "You're the only one with your shit together, anyways."

"I can't believe you did that," Virgil huffed, sitting on the curb. He was looking increasingly nervous as the seconds ticked by. Remus plopped down beside him.

"Come on, Virgey, he was trying to force himself on ya. I'd have castrated him if I had my old knife on me," Remus commented idly. Virgil snorted.

"You won't get sharp objects without supervision for the next *century*," Virgil stated.

"Oh? And where's that rule coming from?" The center certainly didn't say anything about that, and
they made sure Remus understood all the probation rules.

"The Virgil Sanders Guide to Keeping an Eye on Suicidal Brothers, that's where," Virgil stated, and Remus frowned. He looked at Virgil and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. At least he was starting to look a little calmer, but he still looked worried.

"Virgil, you know you don't have to worry about us, right? We're big boys, now," Remus reminded, studying his baby brother's face. Virgil shrugged.

"I like worrying about you guys," Virgil said. Well, that wasn't true in the least, now, was it? But Virgey didn't even seem to notice he was lying. Remus sighed and looked towards the street just as a car drove by. After a long moment of silence, Virgil said, "It's not as though I could stop worrying, if I wanted to."

That… that was fair.

Remus clapped his younger brother on the back. "Let's just head home, it's late and I didn't get to fuck anything."

"Remus!"

Chapter End Notes

I'm still not sure what I'm doing, but I've got a vague idea.
Ethan Cries Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

Chapter Summary

Ethan has spent his life living like a liar and a delinquent. It all folds back onto one accident in his youth, and for that he carries a likely unhealthy level of justified rage.

Now Patton's back, and he's a bit salty.

Warnings: vague trauma reactions, implied gaslighting? I think? I'm always fuzzy on the details of what is and isn't gaslighting, but I'm pretty sure some of the content in this chapter implies gaslighting in the context of Janice and Patton's relationship.

Chapter Notes

Let me know if I was right on the gaslighting thing, that'd be good to know.

The truth of the matter was that Ethan knew better than anyone how easily one could fall in with the wrong crowd. For him, he’d started spray painting the walls in his room- thankfully, he had good ventilation, and a mask- but eventually he’d run out of space in his bedroom to hash out his issues with the world. So, Ethan took to the streets. His mask covered most of his face, and his black hoodie shadowed the top half quite well. It was dark too, good for hiding.

He bumped into a couple of delinquents who were laughing about something they’d done earlier that night, and were tagging the wall with a large snake. One of them noticed him and scowled.

“Hey, kid! This is Serpent territory!” One of them called. The other two looked over and noticed him too. They were all wearing the same yellow rhombus on their jackets, the silhouette of a two headed snake inside. “Who do you think you are?”

“The name’s Darius,” Ethan lied smoothly. “M just passin’ through.”

“Passing through, huh?” Another one sneered. “There’s a toll for passing through Serpent territory.”

“Really?” Ethan commented. “I don’t have any cash on me.”

After that, things quickly unraveled into blows, though Ethan didn’t get hit once. Once the third and tallest of the Serpents managed to actually catch him, of course, the fight was over. The first one, who was the largest in width, though the stoutest, had lifted a fist to punch Ethan in his now vulnerable stomach, but the second one had grabbed his wrist.

“We should take him to the Head,” she said. Ethan had managed to dodge a punch that had ended up landing on her boob, so he didn’t know why she was defending him. “They’ll be interested to know about this kid. He’s a scrapper.”

“A scrapper? All he did was weasel outta hits,” The first one scoffed.
"Exactly," the girl returned, and she looked at Ethan before looking up at the tall skyscraper of a thug. "Put him down, Beanstalk, he ain’t gonna run if he knows what’s good for him."

Beanstalk, or whatever his name was, dropped Ethan unceremoniously. Ethan did, in fact, know what was good for him so he didn’t try to run down the alley. The girl turned to Ethan and snorted. “This is Beanstalk. He’s the quiet type. If he talks to ya, means he trusts ya. Remember: he don’t trust ya. He won’t. Ever. Big dumb brute is Brick. He’s got a mouth on him, but he’s funny. He’s also strong, which is the only reason we keep him around.”

“Oh, fuck off, Blades,” Brick snapped. The girl, possibly Blades, rolled her eyes.

“I’m Blades. You don’t wanna know why. Darius, was it?” Blades asked. Ethan nodded. Blades nodded in return, then put her hand on his shoulder. “Let’s go introduce you to the Head.”

The Head, as it turned out, was actually two people. They called themselves the Twins, though they didn’t look related in the slightest. They introduced themselves to Ethan as Castor and Pollux, though Ethan was sure those names were as fake as Blades, Brick, Beanstalk, and Darius. Even so, they accepted Ethan into the fold after a surprisingly easy initiation, though the less that was said about such incriminating things, the better.

Being with the Serpents was almost like being back at home. It was just-better. No one expected Ethan to be upfront or honest about his feelings, because that wasn’t what this family was about. This family was a brotherhood (and sisterhood, and—there had to be some sort of more inclusive term for that) forged in fire, comprised of all the misfits and outcasts of society. Ethan wasn’t Ethan Sanders here, he wasn’t the teen that drove his brother away and broke the family. He was Darius “Fibs” Colde, named for his penchant for lying and sniffing out liars.

The day his parents got a call from Patton about his new son was the day Ethan stalked out of the house, tied up his yellow bandana that covered most of his facial scarring, and waltzed into the Serpents’ base with a contagious rage. “Anyone interested in burning down the high school?”

Blades jumped at the chance—she’d only barely graduated from there, and she wanted to say a big ‘fuck you’ to every teacher employed. Junker also joined in, bringing along her welding torch. Pint Sized came along as well, despite their miniscule figure they were quite the dangerous Serpent.

As they were pouring out some gasoline on the blacktop, Blades asked, “So, kid, what’s got you in a tizzy? Pretty sure you’re afraid of fire.”

“My brother had a baby with his devil spawn wife,” Ethan said. Blades’ face softened.

“Aaw, Darry, I’m sorry,” Blades sighed. “I know a thing or two about bad partners. Had a couple myself.”

“I remember. Brick and you were bad,” Ethan muttered.

“Dude got as much as he gave. I’m okay now, Darry,” Blades reassured.

“It’s not their first baby, technically. That’s how she got him to marry her, she said he got her pregnant,” Ethan explained, folding his arms. Blades scowled.

“And what happened? You said 'technically'.”

“She did one of those at-home abortion kit things,” Ethan growled. “Made it look like a miscarriage. I hate her, Ari, I wish she died doing it.”
“Did- did you say anything? Why did he stay with her?” Blades asked, her eyes wide.

“I have a reputation for being a liar at home, too. He told me I shouldn’t lie about something so tragic, and that she was hurting so I wasn’t allowed to pick on her. Then she effectively cut me out of his life forever by framing me for burning his apartment down, and I got stuck inside, so yeah!” Ethan didn’t care that his voice was raising. “Yeah, I’m a little ticked off at them! And I hate her! And they had a kid together! A fucking son, his name’s Thomas, isn’t that just absolutely fucking precious!?”

“Darry,” Blades murmured mournfully, her hand on his shoulder.

“Ethan. That’s my real name, it’s Ethan Sanders,” Ethan muttered. Blades smiled suddenly.

“Arianna Draco.”

“I already knew that,” Ethan chuckled.

“Oh, but when someone introduces them self, it’s only polite to pay it back. Darius knew who I was, and now Ethan gets to officially meet me as well,” Blades teased. She pondered the information he’d dumped on her for a moment, then said, “I’m gonna keep calling ya Darry, okay?”

“Fair enough,” Ethan allowed.

“I’m lighting it up!” Junker announced, after Pint Size signalled that they’d thrown gasoline up the wall. Junker lit her blow torch and touched it against the gasoline, letting it catch fire.

The flames, once they’d gotten to an impressive height, had Ethan paralyzed in his fear. He’s sure the others would have stayed to help him through it, if they didn't hear sirens, and seen red and blue light flooding the school grounds.

Mom and Dad practically screeched at him when he got home, still in his Serpent gear. They were angry he joined a gang, angry he tried to burn down the school, angry he'd been acting out for so long. But eventually, Mom and Dad went to cook dinner, and Ethan found himself alone in his bedroom, staring blankly at the spray paint cans on his dresser.

"Ethan?” And what a sound for sore ears. Ethan managed a smile for his baby brother, and Virgil shuffled awkwardly into his room.

"You're afraid of fire," Virgil reminded. Ethan barked out a laugh.

"Yeah, yeah I am." Ethan sighed heavily. Virgil sat down on the floor right in front of his big brother, despite plenty of space on the bed to either side. Virgil rested his head on his knee.

"Are you okay?" Virgil asked.

"If I wasn't, what would you do?" Ethan reflected the question.

"Help," Virgil insisted, and he looked up at Ethan with the biggest and most determined doe eyes he'd ever seen. Ethan felt his anger melt. Sure, he might always be mad at Patton, and Janice, and even his goddamn parents, but Virgil? Virgil was the world doing things right for once.

"I'm okay, Virge. I just had to take a break for a while," Ethan reassured. Virgil didn't believe him, and that made sense. Virgil had the best built in lie detector he'd ever seen, though it often called false alarms, too. Ethan had seen him call Mom a liar for telling him he cooked a good meal.
"Are you angry about Thomas?" Virgil asked, and Ethan scowled. Of course Virgil would immediately discover the truth behind his ranchor.

"Fine, yes. I'm livid, alright?" Ethan snapped. "She didn't even want the first child, and now we find out we're uncles just because it's convenient for her!"

"What do you mean she didn't want their daughter?" Virgil asked, and oh. Oh, he hadn't told his brothers or his parents yet. He didn't plan to either.

"For all Patton claimed she was devastated, Janice didn't seem very upset that she had an unfortunate miscarriage, now, did she?" Ethan demanded. Virgil shrugged. He'd been four, and most of his memories of that time were fuzzy, if not completely gone. "Then take my word for it. She was incredibly too excited to go to school in Florida once the option was available again."

Virgil's face when he was thinking about something didn't scrunch up like Remus, or pout like Roman. He didn't touch his face or even close his eyes like Logan. And he definitely didn't stick his tongue out like Patton. No, Virgil just sort of stared at nothing, kind of like a cat might, and thought. It was the cutest, most adorable thinking face Ethan had ever seen. Finally, "I trust you, Ethan."

Ethan could have cried.

The problem with that is that Virgil trusted him to take care of himself, too. All Virgil ever did was keep him from picking at the edges of his scars, he never expected to babysit Ethan the same way he practically did the twins. But Ethan was too good at getting into trouble.

Blades- or, uh, Arianna left the gang and moved out of the slums. She married some guy, and left Ethan her cell number if ever he needed to get out of a sticky situation. She called him occasionally to make sure he was still alive, but he felt too awkward calling her first. After all, he was a Serpent. A past she was trying to leave behind.

After Arianna left, the Heads started getting intense. At one point, they were stocking and selling drugs- he thought he'd seen one of Remus' friends buying off of Brick on the same street corner he'd met the trio in four years prior, but Ethan brushed it off as seeing things that weren't there. Later, he'd regret not asking Remus about it, but at the time he doubted it. He called it a trick of his own paranoia.

When Ethan was eighteen, he dodged a bullet. Darius "Fibs" Colde became at large, as did all the remaining free members of the Serpents. The Heads had been arrested, and revealed to be a married couple living in some seriously swanky digs. Ethan threw his Serpents jacket in a dumpster, packed his bags, and off he went to wherever the fuck.

Ethan didn't have anywhere particular in mind. He rented an apartment in Full-of-shit-cago under the name Kevin Johnson, got a job as a waiter under the name Dante Castellon, joined a new gang as Cecil Davis, and even became a tag artist known simply as Deceit. He didn't stay in Chicago, naturally. He traveled all over the country, and got arrested a few times as various false names and identities, for minor crimes. He was setting himself up for destruction, and he damn well knew it.

See, he knew that it would be a bad idea to piss off the Boss. He knew the moment Kevin Johnson outed Mrs. Carson as the mob leader, she'd have it out for him. Especially when she immediately recognized his face.

Ethan Sanders, at almost twenty four, was arrested for three counts of identity fraud, forging legal documents, gang activity, and defacing public property. His parents were disappointed, but when
weren't they disappointed in him? Patton called him in prison, after the dust had settled, and they just fought over the phone. Logan had offered legal help, but Ethan had assured he didn't need it. Remus didn't contact him, but according to Virgil, he was trying to.

Speaking of Virgil, he was the only person who flew all the way to Chicago in order to see him in prison. Ethan had stopped getting visitors by then, all his various friends unfairly upset about how not knowing his real identity meant they didn't know him. It was Winter break, and Virgil had argued for months to visit Ethan for the holidays by himself.

Apparently, Mom and Dad had come along too, but they didn't want to see Ethan in the jumpsuit. Virgil tried to make light of it, "I mean, it's not like orange was ever your color, so I kinda get it."

Ethan smirked and said, just to silence his brother's sad attempts at humor, "Merry Christmas, Virgil."

"Merry Christmas," Virgil said with an awkward grin. He was newly seventeen and frighteningly tall. Ethan wondered when he grew that whole extra foot of height. Virgil fumbled with the phone in his hands and moved it to his other ear. "Are you okay?"

"I understand that our parents don't want to be faced with what I've done, but it's not as if I did anything incredibly heinous. How are they spending this Christmas?" Ethan asked, ignoring the question. He was as okay as one could expect, but he was Virgil's big brother. He was supposed to keep him from thinking about the bad stuff.

"They're using this opportunity to put the presents on the table under the tiny desk tree. They like to pretend I still believe in Santa," Virgil huffed, with a tiny smile. "Are you okay? Is there anything they'll let me give you?"

"Don't worry about it, Virge," Ethan dismissed. "You know, Mom and Dad get that from Patton. As long as he had baby brothers, he pretended to believe with the utmost enthusiasm."

"You hate talking about Patton," Virgil huffed, frowning at him through the glass. "Why are you trying to avoid letting me know if you're okay?"

"Because I'm not okay, Virgil!" Ethan snapped, and his little brother flinched. Ethan immediately forced himself to take a deep breath. He lowered the phone and watched Virgil widen his eyes. Oh, like Ethan would ever cut off their time together. Then he lifted it back to his ear. "I'm in prison, Virgil. I'm going to stay in prison for two years minimum, and it's a prison two hundred miles away from my home. I'm not okay."

"Relatively, though," Virgil mumbled, and Ethan barely caught it. "Relatively, cause like. I know how shitty the prison system is. Than, it's all we're talking about in US history right now. Relatively, I need to know."

Ethan smiled and placed his hand on the glass. Virgil immediately placed his palm over his brother's. "Relatively, I'm fine. As good as I can be, I think. I love you, Virgil, you're a good kid."

Virgil sniffled and pinned the phone between his shoulder and his ear to scrub and his eyes. "I'm gonna worry about you so much."

"You always worry about stuff. Maybe if you're worrying about me, you'll be too busy to worry about anything else," Ethan decided. Virgil laughed hollowly.

"I'll worry about everything anyway, and you know it," Virgil proclaimed.
A week after Virgil returned home, Mom and Dad got ill at the same time. Ethan wasn't sure of the details. Virgil always sounded stressed during his weekly calls. He updated him on Remus' condition, on Logan and Roman, and on Mom and Dad's condition. Sometimes, he'd bring up Thomas, but he never said anything about Patton. Eventually, Virgil was swamped in hospital bills, in business letters, in college pamphlets, and in other family affairs. Ethan made sure to give him contacts to a couple of the more trustworthy people he’d met, just in case he needed the help.

Ethan still couldn't believe how strong his baby brother had been for two whole years, keeping the business, the family, and himself afloat practically alone. Even if he had forgone college, he was still far more adult than Ethan had ever been.

Ethan was due to be released a month after the funeral. Virgil apologized for not waiting, but Ethan insisted it was alright. The sooner the better. And wasn't it just tragic that Ethan had to tell Virgil it was alright he couldn't plan their parents' funeral on a later date? As if Virgil were the eldest, were the adult. He was nineteen, for crying out loud!

It was fascinating to see all his brothers so low that they so easily accepted letting Virgil take them in and take care of them. Ethan knew he would be dependent on his baby brother, but hadn't he always been? Seeing Logan and Roman finally stepping off their soap boxes and crawling to Virgil for help was thrilling in a way nothing else could be. And Patton? Hah! If you told Ethan at thirteen years old that his older brother Patton would one day lean on his baby brother as a crutch, he would spit in your face and call you a horrible liar.

And yet here they were, the two of them quietly sitting together on the backyard verandah, Patton working on some knitting and Ethan watching Logan and Thomas get roped into helping Virgil and Remus garden. Ethan had a book open on his lap, the paperback kept open by his thumb and pinky. Patton kept glancing at him through a side eye.

Yesterday evening, Remus and Virgil had returned after Patton had gone to bed and encouraged Thomas to do the same. Logan had also turned in for the evening, but Ethan heard his keyboard clacking as he passed his bedroom door. Roman, meanwhile, had spent the evening lying on the couch and lamenting that he couldn’t find a single local theatre group that was hosting auditions this week. He crashed an hour before Remus and Virgil returned, and Ethan was the only one up and available when Remus came home with bloody, scraped knuckles. Thank god, someone else might have made a scene.

This morning, however, when everyone woke up, Patton had stared as Ethan had swapped Remus’ bandages for something less bulky so he could help Virgil in the garden and not get snagged. Ethan was still waiting for Patton to demand answers, but neither of the younger men had told Ethan much, so he wasn’t sure what he’d be able to say to Patton anyway.

Finally, Patton spoke up, “Do you fix up injuries a lot, Ethan?”

That wasn’t exactly what Ethan had expected. “Not exactly. One picks up a few things when they don’t want their baby brother fussing over them so much.”


“Roman’s off in his own little world most of the time. I love him, but he’s a tad self absorbed. I meant Virgil. His mother henning didn’t start with letting us all move in, you know,” Ethan pointed out. He lowered his book pages down onto the table. If Logan spotted it, he’d probably lecture Ethan on proper book care. Thank goodness his older brother was busy trying to get Remus to spit out a millipede.
“Huh,” Patton murmured, looking up from his knitting to look over to Virgil. “How did it start, then?”

“Oh, Virgil started practically right away. I can’t remember a time he wasn’t rubbing lotion on my burns and covering them up with bandages,” Ethan explained. Then he chuckled bitterly. “You know, except for when I didn’t have any burns at all.”

Patton grimaced and looked back at his knitting. “Those weren’t my fault.”

“Mine either,” Ethan said coolly, but Patton scowled.

“The police said all the evidence-”

“I didn’t do it,” Ethan snapped. He picked up his book. “I don’t want to argue with you right now. Believe it or not, my life doesn’t revolve around you, and it never has.”

“I can’t believe you. Lying about it even fifteen years later,” Patton scoffed, tossing his knitting onto the table between them and folding his arms.

“I can’t believe you, taking your liar wife’s word over your own brother’s,” Ethan muttered, trying to focus on the sentence he’d left off at.

“She’s not a liar,” Patton insisted. “You’re the one who was literally diagnosed by a psychologist with mythomania.”

“I might be a compulsive liar, but you are an idiot. What reason would I have ever even had to burn down your home? To chase you out to live with the woman I never wanted you to marry? She warped your mind, Patton, even before you two got married,” Ethan scowled. He dog-eared his page and closed the book.

"She-"

"Wasn't that bad? Patton, she was an abuser," Ethan stated bluntly, watching his brother squirm in his chair at the word. "She isolated you from your family and friends, she held her emotional state over your head like it mattered more than yours, she used divorce as a control tactic and when that didn't work she tried to use your son's well being instead. She was an abuser."

Patton grimaced, his hands fidgeting. "She didn't isolate me."

"Oh really? Who were your friends in Florida?" Ethan asked.

"Most of our friends were mutual friends, Ethan," Patton informed.

"Did she introduce them to you, or the other way around?" Ethan asked.

"She to me, but I was a househusband, Ethan, I barely left the house," Patton huffed. Ethan rolled his eyes. As if Patton couldn't have easily charmed any passerby into friendship with just his smile.

"Nevermind," Ethan grumbled. He folded his hands and rested them on top of his book. He crossed his ankles and tucked them under his chair. “You really are just buried in your own denial, aren’t you?”

Patton frowned and picked up his knitting again. “I don’t think you should talk to anyone about lying to themselves.”

“Again, I don’t want to argue with you,” Ethan scoffed. “I just want you to be honest with yourself.
Pretending that Janice isn’t what she is will only hurt Thomas, and you.”

Patton stood up abruptly. “I’m going to get started making lunch.”

Ethan scowled as his older brother walked back inside. He lifted his book and opened it back up, flattening the corner he’d bent down. After a few moments of rereading the same word over and over and still constantly focusing on the conversation with Patton, he growled and dog-eared the page a second time, dropping the book on the table and marching inside.

“You know what, Patton? No, I do want to argue with you. You think you're so above this, don't you? You think you're all that and a slice of apple pie!?” Ethan snarled, storming into the kitchen.

“What are you talking about?” Patton exclaimed, holding a pan he'd taken out of the cupboard.

“You waltz through life thinking you're completely faultless! Everything bad that happens to you isn't your fault, right!? It can't possibly be, you're Patton fucking Sanders—"

"Language-"

"And THERE it is! You do not have the moral high ground here, Patton! I might be not even a month out of prison, but you are no better than me!” Ethan snarled, slamming his fist into the counter. Patton flinched, and glared at him. He lowered the pan onto the stove.

"I haven't done anything wrong,” Patton huffed.

"Oh, you haven't, have you?” Ethan scoffed.

"Not since I was still Virgil's age. I've done nothing but my best since then, Ethan, and I'm not at fault for anything that's happened since,” Patton stated frostily.

"Sure, that's why we didn't find out about Thomas until months after you and Janice were already expecting him. That's why you ceased casual contact with Mom and Dad after four years. That's why Thomas didn't even know we existed until he was nine years old. Tell me, did you tell him about all of us when you started calling Virgil, or did you leave a couple of us out of the Picture Perfect family you created in your mind?” Ethan sneered. Patton winced, and Ethan felt a grim satisfaction curling smugly in his gut. "I knew it. How much forewarning of my existence did you give him about me, huh? A day? An hour? I hope you mentioned me to him, at least."

Patton looked away. "Virgil told him."

"Wow,” Ethan chuckled. "I knew you were trying to pretend your life was a fairytale, but to avoid me that much? I'm impressed by your cruelty."

"It's not like that,” Patton snapped, glaring at Ethan. "I didn't do it to be cruel."

"Then why?” Ethan demanded. It wasn't just a question of why Patton didn't bring him up, and they both knew it.

"I was scared,” Patton confessed, and his voice was wet and low and sad. "All the time, I was so scared of how anyone would react to anything- Janice just seemed to have everything under control, I trusted her."

"Are you crying?” Ethan asked, feeling frozen to the spot.

"Second time in two days,” Patton laughed miserably as tears streaked his face. "I'm three brothers
off from winning Emotional Talk Bingo.”

Ethan glared at the ground. "You know I'd never lie to you, don't you Patton? Somewhere in your head, you have to know that's true."

"You lie sometimes. It's a fact of life," Patton muttered, leaning over the counter and wiping his face with his sleeve.

"But I'd never lie to hurt you," Ethan said. He hated how desperate he sounded. He hated how desperate he was. "You have to believe that, Patton. As much as I'm angry at you, I still love you. You're my brother."

"I know," Patton sniffled. "I'm sorry, Ethan."

"For?" Ethan pressed. "I won't accept a vague apology."

"I'm sorry I pushed you all out of my life just because of Janice. I'm sorry it took me so long to talk to you or even acknowledge you again. I'm sorry we're on such bad terms," Patton murmured.

Ethan pursed his lips. "I'm sorry, too."

"Oh?" Patton murmured, and Ethan nodded at his brother's back.

"I'm sorry that I can't accept your apology. I'm sorry you feel bad about where our relationship stands today. And I'm sorry you don't even seem to know where you really went wrong," Ethan snapped. He spun on his heel and stormed out of the kitchen, fuming.

He warned him. All of them warned him. Janice was bad news and even their parents could see it, and yet…

Ethan collapsed onto the staircase and choked back a sob. He buried his face in his hands, his nails scraping over the scar covering the left half of his face. Scars of a past he couldn't move away from, a history that painted itself across every action he'd taken since. He was so angry, at Patton, at Janice, at Mom and Dad, at the entire fucking world, and he didn't know what to do about it.

"Oh, Ethan," Patton's voice was soft and sweet and broken, the way it always was when he used to find his baby brothers crying like this. Ethan reached up for his older brother, craving one of his hugs suddenly, the need arising from a feeling he thought long dead: an admiration for his elder brother that never truly went away.

Patton's hugs had always been magic. Not any real magic, obviously, but he was six years older than Ethan, and thus had always known how to give the best hugs. A hug from Patton was a hug from the universe. And as Patton wrapped his arms around Ethan for the first time in fifteen years, the poor man let himself shatter in his brother's tight embrace.

Patton's hands rubbed his back comfortingly, and his words murmured into his ear. "I'm sorry, Ethan. I'm here. I'm not leaving again."

Ethan cried, and a little bit of the wound in his heart began to scab over. It would be a long, perilous journey to healing, but at least he'd started it.
Thomas Observes His Family's Dramatics

Chapter Summary

Thomas isn't stupid. He knows his family isn't the best one there is. He's just not sure what he can do about it.

Then he meets his Uncle Virgil. Things still blow, but a bit less though.

Chapter Notes

WARNING! Poor descriptions of anxiety attacks!
Also there's a lot of emotionally charged yelling.
Also Thomas is so sweet, I love him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thomas wasn't stupid. Not at twelve, and not at five. Everybody at school had parents just like his. A mom and a dad. Well, maybe not everybody at the school, but everybody in his class did! They did a My Family project, and that's how he knew. But other kids had grandmas and grandpas that they visited or were babysat by. Thomas just stayed with Dad.

Sandra was a girl his mom kept trying to get him to make friends with, but he didn't like her. She had a mom and a dad, just like him, but her parents were both doctors. She spent her day with her Aunt Gigi.

The only kid Thomas actually enjoyed spending time with was Enrique. Enrique had two moms, who weren't even married, so Mom didn't like him spending time with him. But Enrique had all the coolest toys, and he got to wear his hair long, and Thomas really liked his smile. Enrique was in the other class, but they hung out during recess.

It was Enrique who asked him about his grandparents. "How come you don't ever talk about your grandma? You know all about mi abuelita."

"I don't think I have a grandma?" Thomas shrugged, with all the care of a five year old child who didn't really get it. "I probably did once, but they probably both died or something."

"That's sad," Enrique said. Thomas shrugged again. Enrique merely nodded and said, "You can have my grandma. Abuelita would love to have you."

"Thanks!" Thomas grinned. But then he frowned again. "My mom doesn't want me hanging out with you though. I don't think she likes your moms."

"Why?" Enrique asked.

"I don't know," Thomas sighed. Adults were weird. Just because he wasn't stupid, doesn't mean they made much sense to him.
Thomas was seven when he switched schools because he'd finally gotten off the waiting list for some Christian school his Great Aunt Patty had suggested when he was five. Thomas hated it. Sure, he believed in Christian ideals just fine, and they made sense to him even, but the school was awful. He and Enrique stopped hanging out, and no one at this new school was anything like him.

When Thomas was eight, his dad took him aside after school one day. "You know, Thomas, if you ever want to bring a friend over, that's okay with me, got it?"

"I don't really have any friends," Thomas shrugged, and Dad's face got all pinched and pouty.

"Not even one kid from class you like spending time with?" Dad pressed, sounding nervous.

"Of course he does!" Mom proclaimed. "Why, Gina was telling me he and her daughter Rachel get along swimmingly! We'll have her and her parents over for dinner this Friday."

"But."

"Oh, that sounds great! Isn't that exciting, Thomas?" Dad looked so relieved that Thomas merely agreed quietly.

He didn't like Rachel. She followed him around, grabbed his arms, and gave him too many flowers. He didn't like her, but she definitely liked him, and he didn't like it. She'd been doing it the entire time they went to school together, and after the dinner she'd been even more insufferable.

Thomas remembered hearing Rachel's dad laugh and say, "He's a ladies' man already, huh?"

"He's going to make a lady very happy one day," Mom agreed with a happy laugh.

Dad frowned. "He's eight. We have plenty of time before we should be worrying about that."

"Patton," Mom hissed, and Dad sighed and went back to being quiet. Thomas wasn't stupid, but he still couldn't tell what that meant.

Thomas was two days to turning nine years old when he came home to find his dad laughing in the kitchen over a bowl of brownie batter. He was laughing at his laptop, another strange discovery, and on his laptop screen was a teenager who looked a bit like Dad.

"Dad? What's going on?" Thomas asked.

"Oh, kiddo! Come meet your Uncle Virgil! He's my little brother," Dad announced, and Thomas felt like the world had been shaken like an etch-a-sketch. He gaped at his father.

"You have brothers?" He blurted. The boy onscreen pursed his lips, and Dad laughed kinda like a horse.

"Uh, yeah. This is Virgil, he's the baby of the family," Dad continued, and he waved Thomas over to him. Thomas settled next to his dad, under his arm, as the webcam was adjusted. Virgil grinned.

"Hey, Thomas. I'm Virgil," The teenager on the other side of the camera said, smiling and waving awkwardly.

"Hi," Thomas returned. They both stared in awkward silence for a minute or two.

"Thomas, tell Virgil about your project for school," Dad suggested and Thomas nodded as the man moved away, taking the brownie batter to a pan waiting beside the oven.
"It's a birdhouse. We have to make them for a faith lesson," Thomas said, and he watched as his... uncle snickered.

"Faith? What does that have to do with birds? What's your birdhouse look like?" Virgil asked, and Thomas grinned.

"It's red and blue! And I get to add whatever details I want, but when I asked Rachel for the glitter, she said it wasn't for boy birdhouses," Thomas explained. Virgil chuckled.

"Sounds like Rachel doesn't know what she's talking about. Glitter is for any birdhouses. Besides, birdhouses don't have genders," Virgil said, and Thomas was elated.

"I know! Rachel's stupid, so I told her so. I got in trouble with the teacher, but I got to use glitter, so there you go," Thomas announced proudly.

"Wha- Thomas! I thought Rachel was your friend?" Dad huffed, putting the brownies in the oven. Thomas grimaced, and Uncle Virgil coughed.

"Uh, I call my friend Remy stupid all the time. As long as your friends know you like 'em, and you don't actually think they're dumb, it's not hurtful or anything," Virgil pointed out.

"But I don't like Rachel. I'd like her better if she left me alone," Thomas muttered, though Virgil didn't seem to hear him like Dad did.

"Thomas… why don't you get started on your homework? Maybe Virge can help you out with stuff! I mean, he grew up with Logan as a big brother, and Logan's the smartest guy I ever met!" Dad suggested.

"Is Logan another uncle of mine?" Thomas asked, and Dad winced.

"You seriously didn't tell him anything?" Virgil asked, and Dad frowned.

"Janice doesn't like to talk about it," Dad muttered to the camera, and it was obviously not meant for Thomas to hear. Virgil merely rolled his eyes and slumped in his seat. "Just get working on your homework, Thomas, maybe we can get it done with enough time to go to the park."

"Trying to ditch me?" Virgil teased.

"Never," Patton responded sincerely.

Two days later, on his birthday, Mom tried to fill up the entire day with activities. He didn't get much of a chance to talk to his uncle again that day, but Dad managed to sneak in a few seconds for Uncle Virgil to wish him a happy birthday.

A week later, Dad handed Thomas a box that Virgil sent him, the side of it reading Happy Birthday! in a jagged, messy handwriting. Thomas tore into the little package and couldn't keep from grinning as packets of glitter tumbled out, along with a note.

For you to show Rachel that glitter is an everyone kinda thing. I'd suggest putting some in her desk or sprinkling a packet into her backpack, but I'm not sure if you're the type for that kind of vengeance.

Thomas did exactly as his uncle suggested. Rachel was shaking glitter out of her backpack until fifth grade graduation.
Speaking of fifth grade graduation, Thomas went back to regular public school in the sixth grade. Mom and Dad were arguing more and more now that Uncle Virgil had mentioned that he was getting Logan to sign off on taking Grandma and Grandpa off of life support.

"Janice, all I want is to be there for my family! If it were your parents-"

"It isn't my parents! My parents adored you, they called you 'son' and everything! Your family hates me, your brother bit me, and your other brother wouldn't stop screaming at me!"

"He was a baby, they both practically were! You don't even have to come, I just want to go take care of my family and see my parents before they die!"

"If you think I'm just going to lie down and let them poison your mind against me, then we might as well just end the marriage now!"

Thomas blinked, wide eyed, at his mother's suggestion. There was utter silence in the house, and Thomas had to press his ear to the door to hear his dad say, "Okay."

"Excuse me?" Mom demanded.

"I said okay. We'll get a divorce," Dad agreed. Thomas' heart was racing. What?

"Okay," Mom echoed, and Thomas felt like maybe the wind had fallen out of her sails. "Okay. Well, don't expect me to take care of Thomas when you're gone, not after your brother tainted him-"

"How dare you!?" Dad demanded, and Thomas flinched. "How could you be so entirely heartless as to- what kind of a mother-!? Is Thomas just a project to you, Janice!? A mind for you to mold, and if it starts to go wrong, oh, just toss him aside! That's not how parenting works! That's not how life works!"

"Patton-"

"What, Janice!? What could you possibly have to say that would make what you just said any better!? Can you imagine if he'd heard you!? What would he think of you? What do you think of yourself? What kind of a person could even say that!?" Dad was screaming now, and Thomas was terrified. He'd never heard his father so mad. He scrambled away from the door, letting the shouting be muffled by distance, but he could still hear the words faintly.

Tears stung in Thomas' eyes. Mom and Dad had been arguing for ages since the calls to Uncle Virgil had started, but this? This was different. Thomas curled up on his bed, shoving a pillow over his head and groping around for his phone. Once he'd grabbed it, he tapped on Virgil's contact.

"Hey, Thomas? What's up, you don't usually call while I'm working on the store?" Uncle Virgil asked, and Thomas cried.

"Mom and Dad are yelling again," he gasped.

"Shit. Um, give me a sec, and I'll help you out I promise. Toby! I'm going for dinner, handle the renovators, okay?" Virgil called, his hand cupping the receiver. Then, "Okay, Squirt, I need you to focus on my voice, can you do that?"

"Mhm," Thomas muttered.

"Okay, good, good. Do you want me to distract you first, or do you want me to help?" Virgil
"Help first," Thomas whimpered.

"Okay. Okay, then I need you to breathe in for me to okay? Four seconds, come on," Virgil instructed, and Thomas turned onto his back and took a deep breath.

"Okay. Good. Um, hold it for seven, you can do this," Virgil encouraged, and Thomas did so, his shoulders tensing at the practice. "Out, eight seconds. Good job, let's do it again."

Thomas followed the instructions three more times before Virgil awkwardly chuckled. "Okay, distraction time now?"

"Yeah," Thomas agreed.

"I'm in a McDonald's waiting to buy a burger right now. I don't normally eat their stuff, but it was the closest food place that wasn't some bougie café. I'd go to those more often if their menus weren't so confusing, you know? I can't read any of that shit, and I don't exactly want to hold up the line. Embarrassing, huh?" Virgil rambled.

"Nah," Thomas chuckled. "I'm the same."

"You feeling better?" Virgil asked. Thomas nodded, even if his uncle wouldn't see it.

"Yeah. Thanks, Uncle V," Thomas sighed.

"So what's up?" Virgil asked.

"Mom and Dad are getting divorced, I think," Thomas muttered. He could practically hear his uncle grinning.

"Oh yeah? What's got you so anxious, then, you know I've got a roof for you and your dad if you need it," Virgil offered.

"Dad got mad when she said she wouldn't take care of me," Thomas murmured, and once again he could almost hear his uncle's scowl.

"Pardon my french, but fuck her," Virgil growled. "Look, Thomas, your dad loves you. He only ever talks about you whenever you're at school."

Thomas frowned. "He loves you, too."

"Maybe," Uncle Virgil huffed. "But he loves you the most, Squirt."

So, yeah, no, Thomas wasn't stupid. He knew his mom was kind of not so great, and he knew his dad had… issues. He wasn't expecting issues like what he discovered in the first three days of his living amongst his uncles.

On the third night, as Dad was puttering about the room, fixing photos on the dresser, and reselling books in a new order, Thomas finally spoke up. "What were Grandma and Grandpa like?"

Dad stopped and looked at him. Then he smiled and sat down. "Your grandparents were incredibly supportive people, Thomas. I mean, all you have to do to know that is to look at the boys they raised. Mom fought for her boys to be accepted and recognized for their wonderfulness all the time. Dad was like a safe haven from the storm of reality. They broke away from gender ideals, raised us to be as accepting and kind as possible, and here we are!"
"Okay," Thomas sighed, looking at the ceiling. Dad pursed his lips.

"Thomas, do you miss your mother?" Dad asked.

"Not really," Thomas shrugged. He'd mostly been relieved since they left Florida. He felt a little guilty about it, but he didn't miss his mom at all.

"Do you miss any of your friends?" Dad asked. Thomas shrugged again.

"I didn't really have any friends," Thomas stated, and Dad got that pinched, unhappy look again.

"You know I don't care who your friends are? You can bring anyone over as long as you like them enough," Dad assured. Thomas raised his eyebrows.

"You don't care? But I thought you and Mom-"

"Your mother and I have very different opinions on what makes a suitable friend, Thomas. I just want you to know, you can hang out with anyone as long as you let me know what you're doing, okay?" Dad looked nervous, kind of, and his eyes were big. Thomas nodded.

"Okay, Dad. I'll try to make some friends when school starts," Thomas agreed.

"You don't have to wait," Dad huffed. "I start work tomorrow, and you'll have a whole weekend before school. You can go hang around town, if you want."

Thomas blinked, surprised. "You'll let me? Just, by myself?"

"Well, kind of. Your uncle, Roman, is definitely going to be nearby!" Dad said decisively. "He wants to get to know you."

"Okay," Thomas agreed. "I wanna get to know him."

"Good. Good. Um. Sweet dreams, Thomas," Dad said, with a nervous grin.

"Good night, Dad," Thomas said. "I love you."

Dad's nerves seemed to ease at the words, and his posture relaxed. "I love you, too, kiddo."

The light switched off, Thomas turned over in his bed, and Dad shuffled over to his own bed. The night passed on in silence, as did the morning just before breakfast, as Dad began to cook up some eggs and toast. He'd already been brewing coffee when Thomas woke up and came downstairs.

Logan came rushing in with a thermos and poured his cup of coffee inside, pocketing the jar of Crofter's jam and snatching his toast off the plate Dad was still making for him.

"Oh! Logan, where are you going?" Dad asked, surprised.

"The lab, I finally got my transfer filed, and the new commute is only an hour and a half, if I leave now. Good morning, I love you, have a good day at the shop, farewell!" And Logan was back out the door.

"Oh, he took the jelly! But he hates jelly," Dad muttered, looking at Thomas with a perplexed expression. Thomas could only shrug. Dad turned back to the stove, humming a bit distractedly as he continued to cook. Then Uncle Roman came crashing down the stairs, followed by Uncle Remus. Thomas peeked out from the kitchen to see Uncle Roman shoving Uncle Remus off of him. He ducked back into the kitchen and continued to pick at his eggs.
"You're a nightmare, I swear!" Roman snapped. "Goddammit, Remus! You just had to shove me down the stairs, huh!?"

"Cain instinct!" Remus cackled, and Roman scowled as he appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Good morning!" Dad said, smiling awkwardly as he and Remus crowded into the kitchen and perched in seats at opposite ends of the table. Roman sat himself right next to Thomas, while Remus perched next to the Head of the table.

"Morning, Patton, Thomas," Roman greeted, an easy smile coming onto his face.

"Morning Tommy, morning Patty!" Remus shrilly crooned, wiggling his body in an odd way.

Dad slid some eggs onto both their plates. "Did you boys want some toast?"

Remus sulked as Roman nodded. Thomas frowned as Dad went over to put some bread in the toaster. "Hey, what's up, Uncle Remus?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just hoping for some of Virgey's oatmeal this morning," Remus sighed. "Patpat's cooking is all well and good, but Vee was always talking about how he was gonna make me a feast when I got out of rehab. It just feels like I'm not really home yet until I've had some of his cooking."

"Virgil cooks?" Dad asked.

"Do flamingos sleep with one leg up? Of course Virgil cooks!" Roman laughed. "But hoping he'd wake up early enough to make breakfast was kind of stupid, Re. Virgil never wakes up before ten."

It was at that moment that Virgil stumbled into the kitchen like a zombie with a broken ankle. Roman gasped in overdramatized shock, and Remus did the same.

"The rare purple striped emo is deviating from its regular pattern! Could it be ill? Could it be frightened by some sort of more dangerous predator?" Roman whispered.

"It's very clear that this purple striped emo has some kind of major change in its life, causing it's typical patterns to become erratic and confused," Remus chimed in.

Virgil glared at them and both twins fell silent. Then Virgil grabbed the pot of coffee and chugged it.

"Oh, Virgil, don't do that!" Dad protested, and Virgil pulled the pot away from his lips, now almost empty.

"Why not? I'm already the tallest in the family, I don't think I'd need to worry about stunted growth," Virgil commented.

"Well, you've got anxiety don't you?" Dad asked. Thomas couldn't remember when Virgil had said that, but it made sense. "I read somewhere that coffee makes anxiety worse, or something. Hyperactive, maybe?"

"The positives balance out the negatives," Virgil said with a sigh. He looked around the room. "You didn't have to make breakfast, Pat, I could've done that."

"Oh, no, I just want to contribute something, Virgil. You're around ready working so hard on everything else," Dad insisted.
"Well, that's my job isn't it?" Uncle Virgil stated, and everyone made uncomfortable sounds. Thomas glanced between all four of his family, wondering what would happen next, as all four of them immediately began avoiding each others gazes and trying to busy themselves with other things.

Suddenly, "Wait, hang on!" Uncle Roman looked up. "Dark and Stormy, where is the Crofter's?"

"Should be a jar in the fridge," Virgil shrugged, turning to check.

"Since when do you like jelly, Roman?" Dad asked. Virgil straightened, closing the fridge door again.

"You sure you didn't just miss it?" Uncle V asked.

"I'm sure! And Pat, you have to try this brand. I'm not normally a huge jelly guy, but Crofter's is irrevocably delicious," Uncle Roman sang the last two words, placing one hand at the base of his throat and holding the other out as if to catch the notes.

"Yeah, Logan's pretty obsessed," Virgil nodded.

"And no one ever lets me have any!" Remus pouted.

"You know why no one lets you have a jar of jelly, Remus, don't play innocent," Virgil snorted.

"Oh, wait- I think Logan took the jar with him!" Patton exclaimed, snapping his fingers. Roman gasped dramatically.

"That bitch," Roman huffed. "How am I supposed to enjoy butter and jam on my toast if I have no jam?"

"Like half and half?" Thomas asked, wondering how one would eat toast with both of the spreads.

"No, stupid," Remus snorted. "You put the jam on top of the butter."

"Don't call Thomas stupid, Re," Dad mumbled, placing one hand in Thomas' hair. Remus narrowed his eyes at the eldest Sanders brother.

"It's fine, Dad, it's not like he's saying it to be mean or anything," Thomas assured, looking up at his father. Dad bit his lip.

Remus leaned forward and folded his arms, smirking smugly. "Yeah, Patty. I don't mean it."

Thomas felt his dad's nails scrape against his scalp as his fingers curled. Dad smiled tightly, and his hand eased in Thomas' hair. "I know that."

Thomas stiffened as Remus snarled at that. Then his uncle stood up, his hands on his hips. "Oh, so you know that, huh?"

"That's what I said," Dad said, almost frostily.

"Now, Pat, Re, there's no need to get hostile," Roman spoke up, holding up his hands placatingly.

"Hostile? Hostile!" Remus scowled. He shoved his plate and glass to the floor, along with anything else in its path, porcelain and glass shattering as it hit the floor. Thomas flinched and sank into his chair. Remus looked like hellfire. "How's that for hostile, Mister and Mister Holier than Thou!?”
"What is wrong with you!?” Dad demanded.

"What's wrong with me? What's wrong with me? Ha! What's wrong with me! He asks this like it's not definitely his fault!"

"Remus, your problems are your problems, Patton didn't do anything to you!” Roman snapped. "So don't you drag him into your shit, like you drag everybody else!"

"Oh, no more niceties, then? Good! I prefer it when you aren't pretending you're not a raging narcissist with a douchelord complex!” Remus spat.

Dad jumped right back into the fray at that comment. "Don't you talk to him like that—"

"Oh, shut up, Marshmallow Mania! You don't even know anything about us!” Remus glared at him, and Dad's jaw clicked as it shut.

"Lay off of him, he's trying his best!" Roman hissed.

"Too little, way too late! He can't just walk into our lives and pretend he never left!"

Thomas squeezed his eyes shut and tried to shove the sound out of his ears, his hands clamped down firmly on either side of his head.

"People change in fifteen years!” Remus shouted.

"Apparently they change in eight, too!” Roman yelled.

"Not enough, you're still an asshole!” Remus screeched.

"Don't call him names, Remus!” Dad hollered.

"And there you go again, Pattycake, choosing his side just like always! I get it, you never liked me, but would it kill you to listen!?” Remus demanded.

"Listen!? If you want me to listen to you, you could try healthily communicating like any normal person."

"Remus is trying here, Patton! You both have to give as much as you take—"

"A normal person? Again with this shit? God, it's like you never even grew up—"

"ENOUGH!"

And suddenly all Thomas could hear was his own heartbeat, flooding his head. He couldn't breathe, his vision was spotting with bright colors from screwing his eyes so tight, and his fingers were pulling at his hair.

A shadow fell over him, and a voice said, "Thomas, can you hear me? If you can hear me, I want you to follow my breathing, okay? Breath in for eight, you remember, right?"

Thomas nodded.

"-seven, eight, good. Hold for seven, come on; one, two, three—"

Thomas reached out and grabbed one of Virgil's hands, taking comfort in his uncle's physical presence. The older teen stumbled on the next count, but he kept going.
"-five, six, seven. Out for four, come on, Thomas. One, two, three four. Two more times, come on."

"N-no, I'm fine," Thomas insisted. His uncle's hand squeezed his.

"Do you want your dad? I sent him and the twins to the living room." Uncle V asked. Thomas shook his head.

"C-can we just hug?" Thomas asked, and he was immediately engulfed in the cotton of Virgil's hoodie clad arms.

"I got you, Thomas, you're gonna be just fine," Virgil sighed, as Thomas let himself look around. Sure enough, the kitchen was empty, though there were still broken do she's on the floor.

"You guys need therapy," Thomas muttered, burying his face in his uncle's jacket.

"Yeah. I think the only reason they didn't freak me out is 'cause I knew you were freaking out, kid," Virgil muttered, his head curling to rest on Thomas'. "I don't know if they'll go for therapy."

"They should. You should try, anyway," Thomas muttered. Virgil groaned, like it was a chore. Thomas couldn't help but smile.

"Fine, I'll do it. Before I have to take the drama llamas to work, though, let's all stop by Linette's," Virgil suggested.

"What's Linette's?" Thomas asked.

"Ice cream place. Family favorite. You'll love it, Thomas, they've got everything," Virgil explained.

"Ice cream for breakfast?" Thomas snorted.

"You deserve it," Virgil assured, ruffling Thomas' hair. Thomas wrinkled his nose, but he didn't protest. He liked how natural it felt to be close like this with his Uncle V. Like he'd always been around.

Like it should have been.

Chapter End Notes

I'm unhappy with this chapter, but I can't even begin to wonder what to fix, so I'm just gonna post it, scream into the void, and hope you all enjoy it.
Linette's was nice. The owners had bought the building next door and connected them, making room for way more table space. This meant there was a corner booth the seven of them fit in nicely. Patton was staring in awe at the menu, as was Remus. It had updated quite a bit since Roman last came, but they'd expanded it about a week before he moved to New York City, so it wasn't too surprising. The issue was the silence.

Ethan was doing a good job of pretending to be clueless to the fight that had taken place that morning. That, or he was a heavier sleeper than Roman remembered. He flawlessly acted like nothing had happened. He politely greeted them all, agreed to join them to the ice cream shop, asked Thomas how he was feeling, and hadn't bothered to converse since. He'd helped Thomas pick the biggest, best sundae, and offered to share.

Remus was almost never quiet, but he and Patton were both firmly keeping their mouths shut and their gazes averted ever since Virgil had kicked them out of the kitchen. The only time they spoke was during the transaction with the cashier.

Roman himself had gotten a regular ice cream cone of mint chip, while Virgil had split a chocolate fudge sundae with Remus. Halfway through, both of them had given up, the chocolate far too great in quantity. Roman had eagerly finished it off for them. Patton ate his ice cream in a cup, covered in all the available toppings.

So Linette's was nice. A bit of a blast from the past. Then Virgil foisted Remus onto Roman and Thomas before running off to show Patton and Ethan the ropes at the flower shop.

So Roman took Remus to the park. Oh joy.

"You know, this place used to have a swing set," Remus observed, looking around the playground to one side of the park critically.
"Oh yeah? What happened to it?" Thomas asked. Oh, poor sweet Thomas.

"They found Jenny Carmichael's body hanging from the bar by her neck when we were sixteen," Remus stated. Thomas paled.

"Remus, that is not a child friendly anecdote," Roman sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Remus cackled.

"I'm not a very child friendly adult, Roro! Now, what're we doing at the park?" Remus asked.

"Dad said I should try and make some friends," Thomas explained, looking around at the children playing in the play structure. "I don't really see anyone my age."

"Friends your own age are overrated! Vee's only friend is a baby. I could adopt him, that's how baby he is," Remus stated boldly. Oh god, Remus would be a horrible father.

"You're already thinking paternally, Remus? I thought you'd rather work the field for a bit longer," Roman questioned.

"Oh yeah, definitely! Just meeting Tommy-wommy has me feeling all wistful," Remus grinned, ruffling Thomas' hair with gusto.

Thomas smiled a little. "Can we go lie in the grass for a bit?"

"Sure thing, Thomas, let's go cloud watch for a while!" Roman gasped in delight. Remus squealed.

"I love cloud watching!" Remus exclaimed, rushing off to hurl himself into the muddy lawn at the soft slope of the nearby hill.

"You guys like to cloud watch? But you're so…" Thomas trailed off, biting his lip. He clearly didn't want to accidentally insult anyone.

"We're quite the energetic pair, that's true, but Remus and I have always enjoyed cloud watching. It was something Logan started to do with us quite often after your Dad left for Florida," Roman explained. He could look back right now and remember fond afternoons, little Virgil curled up beside Logan's leg. The science book all about clouds would be spread out between them. Though, Roman and Remus never cared about the science.

Roman couldn't care less about which clouds were cumulonimbus, and which weren't. Weren't cumulonimbus the, uh, storm clouds? Damn, he couldn't remember. No matter, Roman cared more about the shapes he could find in the sky. He and Remus had told many a story together out of shapes they saw while Logan was trying to impart his cloud wisdom upon them. A knight fighting off a rabid hare monster, a princess riding into the sunset with her girlfriend the Loch Ness monster, and even a young man coming home from a long voyage and greeting the family he had missed while he was away.

They did a surprising amount of venting through cloud watching when they were younger.

"So, what did you do at home for fun?" Roman asked, about five minutes into watching the clouds shift and slide in the sky. Remus had already moved on to hunting for anthills.

"Video games, cartoons, sometimes I sing," Thomas said. "I don't have a lot of talents."

"That's the fun thing about talent, Thomas the Dank Engine, you can always learn a new craft. I'm thinking of taking up painting, you interested?" Roman asked, watching his nephew sit up and prop
himself on his arms.

"That could be fun," Thomas shrugged.

"You start school on Monday, though, right? We can paint on the weekend," Roman offered, and Thomas opened his mouth to respond.

"HEADS UP!" A kid shouted from across the field, just as a Frisbee hit the back of Thomas' head. Roman sat up, as Thomas reached for the victimized spot.

The kid that ran up had black hair tucked lazily under a beanie, and an apologetic look on their face. Running up behind them was another kid, with brightly pigmented locks in pink and blue, and black glasses.

"Sorry! I said heads up, though," The kid with the beanie said. Thomas stood up, holding out their Frisbee to them.

"It's fine, I wasn't paying much attention, anyway," Thomas said.

"Hey, it's no big! Joan shouldn't have thrown it this way anyway, I was in the opposite direction," the smaller kid with the colorful hair said, raising their hand.

"I'm no good at coordination either," Thomas chuckled, and Roman smiled at the three of them.

"Hi, I'm Roman Sanders. This is my nephew Thomas," Roman explained, getting to his own feet and resting his hand on Thomas' shoulder.

"I'm Joan, this is Talyn. They/them for the both of us, please," Joan said. Roman smiled and nodded.

"We're both cis, so he/him for us. Sorry for forgetting to ask," Roman said.

"It's fine, kids our age aren't expected to know this stuff," Talyn shrugged. Roman chuckled awkwardly, feeling almost as though he'd been called out for making an assumption. He kinda did, didn't he? Oh boy. He hated coming across like a jerk.

"Um, I don't know this stuff," Thomas stated. "What's cis?"

"We can talk about that later, wanna join us for a game of frisbee?" Joan asked. They shook the frisbee in their grip. "We don't usually invite people, but we did kind of hit you in the head."

"To be totally accurate, Joan hit you in the head," Talyn corrected.

Thomas looked up at him nervously. Roman laughed. "He'd love to join you. We just moved into town recently, so he doesn't have any friends yet."

"Well, I can fix that, I'm the best friend," Joan snorted, puffing their chest out proudly.

"But in all fairness, they did hit you in the head, so if you like me better, I'll totally get it," Talyn said, waving their hand at themself.

Roman watched as the two tweens took off with his nephew, looking for a spot to throw their Frisbee around. Then he frowned. He was supposed to be watching Remus.

Shit. He scanned the grass for any sign of his brother being an absolute goblin, when suddenly he heard his voice.
"Oh, I'm not Roman! You must have me confused for my twin, my name is Remus, sir," Remus was saying. Roman turned and saw him talking to a very familiar man, and Roman gasped in delight.

"Larry Johanssen, is that you!?" Roman exclaimed, rushing over and throwing open his arms, gesturing at the man. "My god, you're looking amazing! How old are you now, twenty eight?"

The man laughed, throwing back his head a bit. He was likely well into his forties, but Roman didn't care. "Roman Sanders, you flatterer. I don't believe I've ever met any of your brothers, you said your name is Remus?"

"That's me!" Remus grinned, tilting his head in an unsettling manner. He pointedly ignored Larry's offered handshake.

Larry chuckled awkwardly. "Roman! It's been a hot minute since you've been in town. What brings you back?"

"Ah, my lack of a plan B, actually. My bank account is on its last legs, so I thought I'd move back home for a bit," Roman explained. Remus grumbled and walked towards and bench before flopping into it.

"Oh, so you're looking for a job?" Larry asked. Roman nodded. "Well, it's good we bumped into each other! I'm interviewing new stage managers for the company, since Dot is moving on to teaching more advanced grades."

"Oh, is she done teaching elementary?" Roman asked.

"She got an offer for running the drama department for the school district, so not entirely," Larry corrected. He placed his hands on his hips. "But if you want the job, I'm doing interviews at the theater on Monday."

"Thanks a lot, Larry! I'll be sure to blow your expectations out of the water," Roman assured and the pair shook hands.

"Well, have a good afternoon, Roman, Remus. I gotta catch a few more rays before the missus is gonna agree that I actually got a workout this morning," Larry said, waving goodbye.

"Have a good day!" Roman called after him.

"You done talking boring, now?" Remus asked, and Roman sighed.

"You know what, I'm not surprised by this. Yes, Remus, I'm done 'talking boring'. How about you, what are you up to?" Roman asked, settling his hands on his hips.

"I'm kind of bummed I wasn't let out around fall. That's the best season for dead stuff," Remus sighed. Roman grimaced at his brother.

"You're so weird, I swear."

"What? I'm clean about it! I just want to restart my bone collection!" Remus pouted.

"I bet if you asked Virgil, he'd tell you he repurposed your bone collection into, like, a curtain or something," Roman commented. He shuddered at the idea of an bone curtain. Remus, though, looked starstruck.
"A bone curtain!" Remus whispered, cupping his cheeks in awe. Roman rolled his eyes and turned to make sure Thomas was still in sight.

Thomas was collapsed in a pile of laughing tweenagers, and Roman smiled fondly. "Remus, look."

Remus did as Roman bid and cooed. "That's sickeningly adorable."

"Yeah. We should take pictures for Patton!" Roman pulled out his phone and jogged over to get a better shot. He stopped far enough away so the kids didn't notice him and snapped a couple of photos. He noticed the time and frowned.

Roman pocketed his phone and called out, "Thomas! It's time for lunch, say bye to your new friends!"

"Coming!" Thomas called back, and Roman watched him awkwardly exchange farewells. He smiled, sure that there would be a strong friendship there in only a matter of days.

"Why are we leaving?" Remus asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"It's lunchtime. We gotta get some food to our boys at the flower shop," Roman joked, batting his eyelashes and heightening his voice. Remus snorted.

"Well, you're not cooking, and I'm not cooking, so what's the deal?" Remus asked.

"McDonalds," Roman proclaimed, just as Thomas reached them.

"We're getting food?" He asked, perking up.

"Yeah, and some for your dad and the guys," Roman repeated. Thomas grinned, a spring in his step as he followed his twin uncles to the curb.

It wasn't as if Roman hated the flower shop. It wasn't like Roman didn't like flowers. He loved flowers. But he couldn't bring himself to like their family flower shop. It wasn't anything personal, he didn't think. In fact, his dislike of the flower shop probably extended from the fact that it was so boring to be there when he was younger.

The point being, Roman had never gone to a flower shop outside of the one his family owned. He gave gifts in the form of stuffed animals or chocolate, congratulated people with edible arrangements or singing telegrams, and brought brightly wrapped wine bottles instead of bouquets to any party he was invited to.

Roman didn't like flower shops. He didn't dislike flowers, but his stigma against giving them as gifts seemed to give the impression that he did. He rarely got bouquets as a gift from people who knew him in New York. Roman loved flowers.

Roman hated how in the flower shop, they could just die. Mom and Dad would bundle up the flowers in lovely little arrangements, put them out as premade bouquets, and if no one bought them, they would eventually wilt and die. And not only that, once they sat inside and range men's vase, they weren't going to last very long. Sure, their job was to make the flowers last, but they died so quickly it was almost depressing.

When Roman, Remus, and Thomas burst through the store door, they were shocked to find that all was peaceful. Well, Roman was shocked, and Remus had laughed. Thomas just began curiously browsing the flowers- most of them potted. That was new.
Behind the counter was a teenager Roman didn't recognize. He looked about Virgil's age, curled over his cell phone and scrolling through a webpage. He glanced up at the ring of the doorbell, then put on a customer service smile.

"Welcome to Sanders Florals, how may I help you?" He stated.

"I'd like your biggest bouquet of dried roses from the back please!" Remus snorted. The teen raised one eyebrow, his gaze jumping between them.

"Oh, you're Roman and Remus Sanders. The boss's older brothers," the teen stated.

"That's us," Roman chuckled. "Who are you?"

"October Sanchez. My friends call me Toby, I'll let to know when we get there," the teen explained, pocketing his phone and dropping his chin into his hand. "You looking for the other half of the Sanders gang?"

"That's right, we've got lunch," Roman hefted the McDonald's bag. October nodded.

"They're with the boss in the office, he's probably just stressing about them, because I haven't seen them since he took them inside to talk about the expectations," October stated, his eyes locked onto the counter, where there was a pricing guide under some glass. "Dried bouquet?"

"Yes!" Remus grinned. October nodded, moving into the back of the store.

"I'll let the boss know you guys are here." And October vanished behind the door leading into the back. Roman glanced around the store, taking in the differences. For one, Virgil had repainted the walls a pretty lavender color, with dark purple flowers and pale green leaves decorating the borders. The front window was painted too, with more pretty purple flowers. The layout of the store was entirely different from how Roman, bigger and with the counter to the side, instead of the back. Not to mention all the flowers were potted, except the ones placed in vases in the front window.

In the next minute, four people were exiting the back room, and Thomas perked up. "Hey, Dad! Uncle V, Uncle Ethan!"

"Hey, Squirt," Virgil greeted, moving to stand behind the cash register beside October, who was carrying a bundle of dry roses. Remus perked up.

"You actually keep dried flowers?" Remus asked.

"People like to buy them for their potpourri. We also sell our own potpourri if you'd like," Virgil bent behind the counter and held up a small jar. Roman blinked.

"Since when?" He asked.

"Since I took over," Virgil snorted. "That's, uh… two years?"

"Two years, boss," October nodded.

"Thanks, Toby. Re, you can have the dry roses, but you owe me five bucks," Virgil offered. Remus snorted.

"Okay, Vee. Ro, can I have five bucks?" Remus asked. Roman rolled his eyes.

"Maybe consider getting getting a job," Roman huffed.
"Thomas, how was the park?" Patton asked, as Remus scooped up his dry roses and pressed them against his face. Virgil looked relaxed standing next to October, and Roman quickly tugged Remus off to the corner.

"Do you think Virge and October would make a good couple?" Roman asked, keeping his voice down.

"I think Virgey already has a crush on somebody," Remus said, raising asked eyebrow. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm already setting sail on the SS Virgtober, I can't help it," Roman squeaked.

"Uncle Roman bought us all McDonalds!" Thomas announced, and Roman remembered the large sack in his hands. Right, lunch.

"Yes, I bought lunch!" Roman announced, heftier the bag in the air. Ethan narrowed his eyes at him.

"What were you muttering about over there?" Ethan asked.

Roman coughed. "Not anything you need to worry about. It was twin stuff."

"I found a rat behind the McDonald's and wanted to double check that I wasn't allowed to grab it and keep it as a pet!" Remus proclaimed, and Roman stared at him in disgust.

"Yes," Roman said slowly. "I told him no, because it's likely feral and rabid."

Virgil and Ethan both looked suspiciously at them, but they turned their attention to lunch instead.

"Well, guess that's a store-wide lunch break, then. You can head out for lunch, Toby, I'll close the shop until two," Virgil offered, and October nodded, grabbing a satchel from behind their counter and heading out of the store.

"See ya at two, Boss!" October called.

"Can you run a business like that?" Patton asked, as Roman handed out burgers.

"I guess, I'm not violating his rights as my employee. Besides, I pay him for every minute he's scheduled to work, outside of his thirty minute lunch break, if he's here or not," Virgil stated.

"Can you afford that?" Ethan asked. Virgil shrugged.

"He was my only employee. And it's not like I'm strapped for cash, or anything. I can afford to do the same for you guys, too. It's fine, and Toby doesn't take advantage of it or anything. I give him a bit of trust, and it goes a long way, so." Virgil shrugged as he plucked a burger from the pile Roman had bought. Ethan grabbed some fries and popped them into his mouth.


"We're not friends. He probably thinks I'm a weirdo, he's been working here since I took over, and if you haven't noticed, I'm kind of a mess," Virgil explained. He bit into his burger.

"Don't say that, Virgil, you're a fascinating person! I'm sure if you try, you'll find a friend in October, no problem," Patton assured, grabbing his own burger. The group settled down on various stools throughout the shop, dragging them a bit closer to the counter.
"I dunno," Virgil shrugged. "People didn't really like me in high school, and I'm pretty sure I saw him in the halls a couple times. He's only a year younger than me, so there's that."

Okay, it'd be lying to say Roman didn't spend much of the rest of the day plotting his little brother's whirlwind romance with his young employee. There was the itty-bitty issue of his being his boss, but surely Roman could work around a little issue like power dynamics! He was Roman Sanders, Matchmaker Supreme!

Virgil shooed them out at two, and put October in charge of training his brothers. Then, he followed them home, claiming that he'd put in his hours already.

Thomas got to play some of Virgil's video games, and Remus went rifling through their garbage for wild animals. Virgil disappeared into his bedroom.

That left Roman all by himself to get lost in thought, and get lost in thought he did! He planned out how he would determine October's opinion of Virgil without being too obvious, how he might garner Virgil's opinion of October, and how he could plot out their path to romance depending on multiple sets of variables. He thought it was all very well planned, but there were several gaps and holes in this "genius plan" that didn't exactly account for the two of them preferring to stay out of a relationship.

Dinner was a pleasant affair that evening, everyone conversing freely. Thomas talked about his new park friends, Logan blabbed on and on about his new work on something science-y. Remus recounted the number of rats he found living under their house (a fair few, Patton suggested a few humane rat traps). Ethan even chuckled at one of Patton's jokes, a miracle for how angry he was at the older Sanders man.

It was after dinner that it suddenly hit Roman. The morning's argument had been tucked aside in his mind the whole time he'd been going thrush the day, trying to block it out. But, as he stared at a photograph of he and Remus and sixteen, side by side holding up their learner's permits, Roman realized something.

He walked down the hall, finding Remus sprawled on his bedroom floor, looking through an old box labeled Remus' Bones.

"Hey, Re," Roman muttered. Remus looked up at him, then back into the box of bones.

"Hi, Ro," Remus stated as Roman came and sat next to him. "You look somber. Did you lose something?"

"No. I just realized that we haven't really talked about that day," Roman commented. Remus narrowed his eyes, looking back at him.

"What day?" Remus asked suspiciously.

"The- the crash," Roman stated. "We haven't talked about it."

"You're the one who ignored me for nearly ten years," Remus pointed out, and he pulled a small skull out of the box.

"I didn't know how to talk to you. I was so scared when it was happening, and so angry when it was over. I thought- I don't know, I thought if I ignored you, the problem would vanish," Roman muttered, curling his knees into his chest. "I ran off to New York, then I ran off to Peru, and I only came back when I was desperate. Because I didn't want to think about it."
"Neither did I," Remus muttered. "But all I could do, sometimes, was just think about it. Time has no meaning when you're locked in your own head," Remus scowled, placing the skull back in the box.

"We should have talked," Roman sighed.

"The last time I saw you before this week, I think thought you were dead," Remus snapped, and Roman startled.

"What?" Roman asked.

"I was in the driver's seat, hanging upside down, and you were next to me, but you wouldn't wake up," Remus explained, his voice shaking and eyes watering. "I thought you were dead, but then you made a sound, but you weren't waking up. I was so scared - and then I never saw you again. You know what I thought, Roman!?"

"I'm sorry," Roman tried, his voice strained and hoarse.

"I thought you died! Until Mom and Dad said your leg was broken and you wouldn't get to be in your play, I thought you were dead! I thought I killed my baby brother, the same baby brother who fought so hard to be alive in the first place!" Remus sobbed. He wiped his dripping nose on his sleeve and looked away. "Three hours after me, Roman. You were born three hours after me. I'm supposed to take care of you, and I almost killed you."

"We're twins, stupid," Roman sniffled. "I'm supposed to take care of you, too, and look how many times you've tried to kill yourself."

"Yeah, whatever. I'm the messed up twin, so that's okay," Remus chuckled bitterly.

"I don't think you're actually that narcissistic. I just wanted to hurt you like you hurt me, and to do that I blamed you for not seeing what I was purposefully hiding from you, and I did it before too, and I'm sorry," Remus blubbered, squeezing Roman tightly. Roman squeezed back just as tightly, trying to hug his apologies into his brother.

"I should've paid more attention, though, you were right that I was ignoring you. I couldn't see anything except the expectations forced upon me, and I'm sorry," Roman whined.

"Stop apologizing, stupid, I'm the one who's sorry," Remus laughed wetly.

"Not sorry-er than I am," Roman teased. He went to pull out of the hug, but Remus hugged him tighter.

"Please don't let go. I'm not exaggerating when I say that the last time I saw you, you looked dead. I'm not ready. Please don't let go," Remus whispered.

Roman's heart ached. "Do you wanna share your bed? We can let go in the morning."

"Do we have to let go at all?" Remus' voice cracked.

"Maybe not," Roman acquiesced. "Tomorrow's Sunday, after all."
I renamed the chapters just so I could have a fun, interesting quirk, so yeah. This chapter is making me hella anxious just by existing, tbh. It's probably not my best work, but it's kind of transitory. I "introduced" hella character though, to better populate my world, so I hope y'all enjoy that!
Chapter Summary

Ethan doesn't exactly know how to feel. He's angry- or he was- and now he doesn't know how to stop being angry. He's been angry for so long.

Then Virgil gets angry.

Chapter Notes

Possible Fic Subtitles: Virgil is the Dutiful Son trope and he's freakin' bitter.

Ethan wasn't usually one for fluffy, cutesy, kind words. That was more Patton's deal than his. And yet, yesterday he'd managed to formulate an apology worth a million diamond encrusted crowns, thank the Lord for his ability to string beautiful words together.

What was that apology for, you ask? Patton. Well, specifically, to get past all the negative emotions between the both of them, according to Virgil. Their boss. Which wouldn't have been so bad, on its own, but the only other employee was a year younger than their baby brother, and yet: Still their boss.

Since their fragile glass apologies and forgiveness in Virgil's office, right before he lectured them on how to do their jobs, the two had been uncomfortably dancing around one another. Well, just as much as they had been since Ethan bawled into his eldest brother's arms like he was still a six year old child looking for validation and acceptance in a twelve year old. It was honestly embarrassing.

The words he had uttered still floated in his head whenever he looked over at Patton to see what he was working on. Currently, Patton was mixing dried flowers and other ingredients into a few empty jars for potpourri. Ethan's own work was organizing the sample bouquets for the upcoming meeting with a wedding planner. Virgil would be the one actually attending the meeting, but he didn't work Sunday mornings, so they had to be done by someone else.

"You're doing a pretty good job, Sanders," October called from where he was placing a fresh pot of roses into the display in the storefront window.

"Thanks!" Patton said, at the exact same time as Ethan. They looked at each other briefly. October laughed.

"Sorry, my bad," October snorted. "I'm used to referring to people by last name. I was talking to Gloomy, but you're doing pretty good, too, Sunshine."

Patton smiled. "I mean, the recipes are all written out. I just mix them."

"Same with the bouquets," Ethan shrugged. "All the instructions are right here."
"Yeah, the Boss is thorough, like that," October nodded. "He overworks himself, too. His days off are Sunday and Monday but he insists on coming in anyway to mix more potpourri, or meet with wedding planners, or whatever. It's a habit he's picked up since about a year ago, when your guy's parents were starting to look pretty close to kicking the bucket."

"I'm sure he just needed something to occupy his mind," Patton said. Ethan doubted so, if he was coming into work on the day the store was closed. Mondays, really? "Maybe he'll start to wean off doing those things."

"Well, he hired you two," October shrugged. "Maybe that means he's ready to relax for once."

"When are your days off?" Ethan asked.

"Monday and Friday. You guys have Mondays off too, and another day that should be on your work schedule," October stated.

"I've got Saturdays," Patton informed.

"Wednesdays," Ethan huffed.

"Oh, cool, you've already taken a look?" October asked.

"Yes? This is a job, after all," Ethan reminded, tying a baby blue ribbon around the third bouquet.

"Yeah, a job in your family shop, under your baby brother," October commented. "I don't know, I just think I'd have trouble taking it seriously if I were you guys."

"Well, you're a teenager," Patton shrugged. "Those sorts of things seem more important when you're younger. Right now, Virgil is the only Sanders brother with a good job, a nice house, and a steady income."

"He means to say, Virgil lectured us for two hours yesterday on how and why we should take this job seriously," Ethan snorted, and Patton huffed a laugh.

"That too," Patton agreed warmly. Ethan looked at his brother with furrowed brows.

"Why are you behaving like this?" Ethan asked, opening the scissors and measuring out the next length of ribbon.

"Behaving like what?" Patton asked.

Ethan huffed. "Like we're on good terms."

Patton frowned. "Aren't we?"

"No."

"Then I'll work to get us on good terms. I don't want to be angry with each other anymore," Patton explained, and Ethan scoffed while tying the ribbon into a cute little bow. Patton mixed some ground cloves into the potpourri.

"One breakdown and a hug does not make fifteen years of hurt go away," Ethan muttered setting aside the floral arrangements. He'd finished the sample bouquets, so it was time to put away the tools he'd been using.
"I didn't mean to say it did," Patton said evenly.

Ethan grimaced and placed the rest of the tissue paper back into the box. "I'm serious, Patton. I'm not just going to go back to being your adorable little acolyte."

"I'd hardly compare our relationship as children to something like that," Patton said, pursing his lips as he closed the full jar. Ethan rolled his eyes.

"Whatever. The point is, I apologized in front in Virgil, but the truth is, I don't believe that I have anything to be sorry about. I might not be perfect, but I can guarantee I never hurt you," Ethan finally snapped. Patton frowned tightly, and dropped some dry flower petals into a new jar.

"We promised Virgil we'd take this job seriously. No arguments," Patton reminded icily.

"It's not an argument," Ethan stated. "I'm declaring my intent. At work, I'd like to avoid speaking as much as possible. If you address me, it had better be an emergency. At home, we don't need to get under one another's feet! We don't like each other, great. It can't be too hard to avoid being in the same room. I won't take my anger out on your son. Thomas seems like a bright boy. I'll support him. We don't need to work to get on good terms if we're on no terms at all."

"I can't agree to that," Patton huffed.

"You did for fifteen years," Ethan sneered, and finally October stepped in.

"Gentlemen, this conversation can and should be had at another time. You're in the workplace, and I'd rather not have to report you both to the Boss on your second day." October's expression was far more serious than it had been all during the time Ethan had known him, and it was a little strange. October seemed to be such a relaxed, nihilistic person. Patton turned back to the jars of potpourri with a plastic smile.

"Sorry, October!" Patton said. "Just one more jar for this batch!"

October nodded, and leaned on one of the tables covered in potted flowers. "Ethan, could you take the bouquets to the back? I'm going to check the online orders."

"Will do," Ethan said, delicately placing the bouquets in a small wooden case.

Patton didn't try to bring back the topic of conversation during the rest of the work day. Sunday, the store was only open for the morning, the rest of the day reserved for private meetings or order filling. Today was a meeting day, so Ethan helped clean up, greeted Virgil on his way in, then left.

But he didn't want to go home.

It was like his teen years all over again. Home meant returning to family that barely understood him. No matter how much his brothers tried to smooth everything over, things always ended up trailing back to the awkward discomfort of blaming each other for everything.

Logan blamed himself, Ethan blamed Logan and Patton, the twins blamed each other, and though Virgil would never say it, Ethan could tell he blamed them all. And what did they even blame each other for? Nothing. Everything. Little things. Big things. It was awful, and Ethan hated living in that house.

As soon as he had enough money, Ethan was moving out. Maybe not too incredibly far. Thomas was a sweet kid, and Virgil was always nice to have nearby. But he wasn't going to stay in that house for longer than necessary.
Ethan flopped down on the couch once he got back to the house, then stared at the photographs underneath the mounted television on the mantelpiece. Virgil had packed away every little trace of Mom and Dad that wasn't furniture or photographs. None of Mom's handmade doilies, or Dad's carefully crafted wooden figurines. Ethan wondered if it was a healthy mindset to be so numb to their absence.

"Fuck you, Mom," Ethan growled as her voice echoed in his head, chastising him for even thinking he might not be sad that she was dead. He glared at the wooden coffee table.

Abruptly, Ethan stood up and stormed out of the house, only to bump into Roman.

"I thought you and Remus were spending all day tangled up together like you'd never left the womb," Ethan sneered. Roman laughed.

"We did, Ethan. It's almost six," Roman said, and he hefted the bags. Ethan didn't even notice so much time passing around him. Come to think of it, Patton and Thomas had come in and out nut several times, and he actually had seen Roman head out for snacks. Huh. Roman entered the house and squeezed past Ethan before shutting the door. "I went out for some junk food, wanna join me and Re? We're going together watch our old Disney collection."

"Aren't most of them on VHS? There's no player." Ethan gestured towards the mantel.

"Remus is in the attic looking for it. You simply have to join us! We'll even watch Pinocchio, you love that one!" Roman gasped in delight. Ethan winced.

"Actually, can we not? I honestly can't think of a movie I'd want to see less," Ethan commented, and Roman furrowed his brow at him, as he settled the three bags of snacks on the table.

"When did that change?" Roman asked.

Ethan shrugged, leaning against the front door and folding his arms. "Maybe when my brother decided lying was my entire identity."

Roman's expression shuttered. "Patton does his best, Ethan. He can't be expected to handle everything with the same aplomb."

"I suppose he can't," Ethan said sharply. "I won't be joining the Disney marathon, I'm afraid. I have pressing business in my bedroom."

"I found the VCR!" Remus announced, hopping down the staircase two steps at at a time, hoisting the large black player over his head.

"Oh my god, Remus don't carry it like that, you'll break it!" Roman cried out.

"What's going on, gu- Remus! Put that down!" Patton exclaimed, coming out of the backyard with a broom in hand. Thomas came down the stairs after Remus, an amused grin on his face.

Ethan sat in the armchair closest to the front door as the rest of his family settled down to watch some Disney. Remus had insisted they watch the animated Dumbo, because Thomas hadn't seen it. It was an older film, and as Ethan remembered it, not particularly interesting. It was solely about the misfortunes of one abnormal elephant calf, and the ending was a last minute turn of mood that bored Ethan to no end. Remus only liked it for the incredibly disturbing hallucination scene, but arrived soon arrived the movie was mentioned, Patton and Roman agreed that it had to be first.

It was during this scene that Logan arrived back home. He took one look at the screen, sighed, and
rubbed his temples.

"Is dinner ready?" He asked, and Patton gasped.

"No, I forgot! Sorry, kiddos, I'm gonna get started right away!" Patton assured, and ran off into the kitchen. Ethan looked at the time on his phone, wondering where Virgil was.

Once dinner was on the table, and Roman had reluctantly paused Sleeping Beauty, Ethan's question was answered. Virgil came in through the front door, looking utterly exhausted.

"I'm home," he called, and wandered over to the staircase.

"Oh, Virge, I actually made dinner! We were about to eat, want to join us?" Patton asked. Virgil looked down asked them from the stairs, then nodded.

"Sure. I should probably talk to you guys about this sooner rather than later, anyway," Virgil commented, and he came back down to join them for dinner. Ethan felt a knot form in his gut.

Dinner was quiet as everyone served their plates and passed around dishes. Even Roman and Remus were silent, warily looking towards Virgil every now and again. Logan and Thomas didn't seem bothered, but neither of them tried to break breathe silence.

Finally, Virgil looked up as he began to scoop up a spoonful of potatoes. "I was at my therapist's office today. I talked through some of my thoughts about the past week and all, and she recommended group therapy. So I signed us up for a family session on Friday."

The kitchen was eerily silent as even Ethan's thoughts turned to fuzz. Therapy?

"What?" Patton stated dumbly. That seemed to set something off.

"I'm not going to another shrink after I just got out of fucking rehab, Virgil, no wau!" Remus scowled.

"Since when did you think I wasn't handling this all well? I am perfectly well-adjusted, you can't just sign me up for therapy without my consent!" Roman protested, waving his arms wildly.

"I refuse to be lumped in with the lot of them, I can actually handle my emotions like an adult," Logan huffed.

Ethan still couldn't manage more than working his jaw up and down and staring at his plate of peas and potatoes.

"Oh, please, Mr. Roboto! Pretending you don't feel isn't handling your emotions like an adult, dumbass!" Roman scowled.

"It would be Dr. Roboto, I didn't earn a doctorate for no reason. And I am not the one pretending not to have a clear cut case of post-traumatic stress disorder," Logan scowled.

"Logan!" Patton exclaimed, shocked.

"I'm not hiding anything! I just don't think I need someone else to tell me how to manage my anxiety! I'm not that pathetic!" Roman spat.

"Roman!" Patton and Remus both exclaimed, and Ethan saw Virgil physically flinch at the words.
Ethan's eyes went wide as he saw his baby brother's fists clench in the table cloth.

Roman's face paled. "I didn't mean-"

Virgil laughed, but it wasn't a good laugh. This laugh hurt, and cut deep into Ethan's soul. Virgil locked eyes with Roman. "Fuck you. I have been here for you- all of you- since I could string together five words."

"Virge, I-"

"I don't want to hear it right now. I'd hear you out literally any other time, but I just- wow. Wow."
Virgil shook his head and stood up, taking his plate with him. "I worked my butt off to try and help all of you when I was a kid. I don't even know if you noticed. Clearly not, given how fast you all wanted to get the fuck away from me!"

Logan raised his hand in a placating gesture. "Virgil, that's not-"

"Not how you all meant it, I get it! Believe me, L, I fucking get it. I'm the little brother, you can't depend on me forever, but I have always been here. I was here when Patton left and you all couldn't even figure out what to do next. I was here when Logan moved to California, I was here when Ethan joined a fucking gang, I was here when Roman and Remus almost died, and I was here! You always told me growing up that we were supposed to be there for each other, and none of you have ever been there for me! Thick and thin, you all said, thick and thin just like Patton used to say, well, good fucking job! You followed his example pretty damn well, because you only came back home because I'm here and you need me. Then you're all going to disappear your own separate ways again, and I'll still be here."

The silence was suffocating as Virgil scrubbed at his face with the sleeve of his free hand. He carried his plate to the doorway. "I'm going to eat in my room. Don't wake me up until noon."

As Virgil left, Patton finally reacted. "Hey, Virgil, wait!"

He moved to get up, but Logan grabbed his arm, shaking his head. The rest of them ate in silence for a bit.

Ethan heard Remus say, "See, I knew he was gonna crumble," and felt his heart wrench.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter was so late! A week overdue, actually. October appears to be an incredibly busy month for me, it seems.
Virgil Feels Shitty

Chapter Summary

A day in Virgil's shoes!

Also the chapter where I finally admit defeat and confess that this is as far away from a sitcom as it could possibly get and I'm sorry.

It started Sunday morning. It wouldn't have been so bad, maybe, if Virgil woke up early. He had October take up the responsibility of opening the store, now that Virgil had more employees, and that meant he could sleep in for once. Too bad his body hated him for doing that. Great. His body hated him for waking up early, his body hate him for sleeping in, what didn't his body hate?

Once he was awake, he looked to the wall, where sat his enormous fish tank. It was about 55 gallons, and he'd taken care over the years to decorate it beautifully. Originally, he'd wanted an octopus. He was missing his big brothers' loud presences and Remus loved octopi. Babysitting hadn't worked out as a solution to his loneliness, so maybe a cephalopod?

Mom and Dad helped him out with the supplies, but after they ordered the tank, Virgil panicked about not knowing how to care for an octopus. Despite all the research he'd done, Virgil's fears had him refusing to get an actual octopus. So Mom bought him thirty zebrafish and a beautiful castle for them to swim around in, as well as several cleaning plants. It was an underwater paradise for Virgil's nameless little school of fish. He called them Legion, but he didn't name them individually.

When the first one died, Virgil panicked and quickly fished them all out and into a suitably prepared pitcher he kept nearby at all times. Then he carried them into the bathroom and held a short ceremony before flushing the poor fish away. In his most dramatic voice, modeled after Roman and quite good if you asked Virgil, he had proclaimed, "Legion, it seems you are one lesser in number. Your might shall still be known!"

He was nineteen now, and he didn't have any more zebrafish. They only lasted about five years, so three years ago Mom bought him a lovely betta in a deep purple and black color. He loved him, and called him Anxiety. Why did he call him Anxiety?

"Anxiety, tell me why I should leave my room," Virgil whispered to the tank, as his betta swam up to the side and fluttered his colorful plumage at him. Virgil pursed his lips and lowered his voice. "You have work, Virgil, Mrs. Carson wanted to see the sample arrangements you have. If you don't go, you'll miss the meeting, she'll leave a bad review, and you won't have any customers ever again, forever."

Virgil smiled wryly at his fish. "Yeah okay, Anxiety. Meal time."

He reached below the tank, and Anxiety immediately swam to the surface and began mouthing for food. Virgil chuckled and sprinkled a healthy amount of pellets into the tank. He was supposed to use Anxiety as more of a coping mechanism than a motivator, a way to be able to reason his way through his way anxieties and whatnot. Well, his therapist didn't have to know how he got himself to leave his room.
I mean, unless she asked directly. He'd tell her if she asked. She'd probably suggest he find another method, but hey: if it worked, it worked.

Virgil got dressed for the day pretty quickly. A lot of his clothes were the same, dark jeans and dark shirts. He had the occasional crop top and a few bits and bobs of jewelry, but he almost never wore them. He'd probably have to get his lip re-pierced if he wanted to go back to wearing jewelry. He paused and turned to the mirror, inspecting his lip as best he could. Yeah, a re-pierce would be necessary. He grimaced at the idea of sticking another needle through his lip, but if it had gone right the first time…

Virgil swiped some eyeshadow over his eyes, and then he was off, looking like the emo disaster he felt like. He heard Roman and Remus complaining about morning breath from Remus' room. He peeked inside and saw the twins lying on the floor cuddling, neither making any move to actually go brush their teeth. Virgil smiled and continued on down the hall.

Sitting on the stairs was Thomas, playing on a handheld game console of some kind. Virgil laughed.

"Hey, Thomas, what's the deal?" Virgil asked.

"The uncle squad's occupied," Thomas said distractedly. "So I'm just sort of killing time."

"I'm sure Ro and Re wouldn't mind if you crashed the cuddle party," Virgil offered. He watched as a game over screen appeared on the console.

"I dunno, it just seems like this is twin time, you know?" Thomas shrugged, and Virgil nodded.

"Yeah, I get that. They've always kinda been really insular. Hey, if you want, you can watch Anxiety swim around some. He's in my room," Virgil offered, and Thomas perked up.

"You have a fish?" He asked.

"Yeah. He's not any fun to play with, but he likes to show off his pretty colors, so there's that," Virgil snorted. He pulled his hoodie tighter around him, a sudden chill pebbling his arms. Where was it coming from? "Do you feel a draft?"

"Yeah, but it's not too bad. It's hot outside," Thomas shrugged.

"Not right now, no, but in the winter that draft is gonna be a bitch and a half," Virgil muttered. "Another thing on the to-do list, I guess."

"How long is the to-do list?" Thomas asked, probably picking up on Virgil's tone. Virgil snorted.

"You want the length that it feels, or the number of tasks?" Virgil asked.

"Gimme both for comparison," Thomas requested.

"It feels like I'll never get it all done. Like the list is a sand dune, where every step just slides back down the side. There's only five actual tasks, though," Virgil explained. Thomas wiggled his pursed lips from side to side, obviously mulling over the statement.

"Maybe try to write out the steps?" Thomas suggested. Virgil blinked.

"That's good advice, squirt. I'll try it," Virgil said, playfully shoving Thomas' head down. His nephew laughed.
"Have a nice day, Uncle Virge!" Thomas called after him as he took the stairs down two at a time.

The walk to work was uneventful, but he found himself panicking and worrying the entire time. It didn't help that Mrs. Carson turned out to be managing the wedding of a bridezilla. Kelsey Loring, the bride, threw a fit over how the bouquets were blue and yellow, rather than pink and lavender.

"You ordered blue and yellow arrangements," Virgil informed, trying his best not to snap at the woman.

"Well they're hideous! My wedding has to be perfect, and I'm paying you over five hundred bucks, you can't make one decent arrangements option!?" Kelsey demanded, and Virgil but the inside of his cheek.

"Kelsey," Mrs. Carson sighed. "Please take a step outside, and I will speak to Mr. Sanders about redoing the arrangements."

"Like I'm going to listen to a kid tell me what to do for my wedding! Where's the real boss, I want to discuss this with him," Kelsey demanded, and Virgil glared at her.

"Excuse me, ma'am, if you're going to throw a tantrum in my store, I think you're the child out of the two of us. I've been running Sanders' Florals since it came into my management two years ago. I sell to to a great number of customers, many of which leave happy. I run a fucking business, and you're whining because your big day where you walk down an aisle dressed like the virgin princess you most certainly aren't isn't going to a have purple and pink flowers. So fuck you very much, and let the adults discuss the flowers."

Suffice to say, Kelsey Loring dragged her wedding planner out of the store and Virgil curled up behind the front desk to have a panic attack.

That's where Remy found him about an hour later.

"You know, you should really invest in locks on your doors," Remy commented, noticing Virgil needed a distraction.

"I have a lock," Virgil said breathlessly.

"It's a junker. I picked it in less than a minute," Remy stated blandly.

"Funny, I didn't lock it after Mrs. Carson and her bridezilla left," Virgil snorted.

"Damn, you cracked my code," Remy joked, leaning over the counter to look at Virgil from above. "Do you wanna come over? Mom and Dad are on a business trip, so you can sleep on my couch."

"We're neighbors, you're not gonna make me go home?" Virgil asked. He wasn't even going to bother asking why Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair were on a business trip the week Remy was starting school again.

"Nah. You've had a stressful week now that the house ain't empty," Remy pointed out, and Virgil let out a shaky sigh.

"I'll come over after therapy. Or you can wait for me in the office and we can head out together after, go get some food first," Virgil offered, checking the time. His therapy session was at three, and it was only a half hour until then.

"Sure thing," Remy agreed with little argument. "Anywhere you wanna go in particular?"
"There's an In-N-Out on the edge of the city," Virgil said, recalling the restaurant set between the more suburban outskirts of town, and the urban clusters of three story buildings and small sky rises. Remy perked up.

"Cool! Got the car?"

The drive wasn't long, and the burgers were delicious, but therapy was daunting. He didn't want to talk much, not today. But he was the one who had signed up for therapy. Maybe if it turned out to be too costly now that there were more people in the house he could drop it.

"Good morning, Virgil," Laney Wilcox greeted from behind the reception desk. "Hi, Remy."

"Morning, Laney. Is Dr. Ria in?" Virgil asked. Laney nodded.

"You can just head on in, and Remy, we got the new teen vogue in, if you wanted to talk cute pop stars with me," Laney offered. Virgil smirked as he headed into the hall of offices, hearing Remy delightedly roasting some of the actors in the magazine.

The first door was labeled Picani. Virgil couldn't help but smile as he passed this door, glancing at the pictures of cats pasted on the wood. If Virgil remembered correctly, the one with all the flower stickers around it was the recently deceased Binx. He photographed shockingly well for a black cat, it seemed.

The last door on the left was the one labeled Ria.

Dr. Helena Ria was nice enough. Warm, welcoming, used to his mental breakdowns and anxious brainstorms, all that good stuff. She knew when Virgil just needed some peace and quiet to think before he spoke, and she knew what it meant when he started picking at loose threads in his horribly disastrous hoodie- not that he’d worn that since it practically fell apart on him the day Mom died. The next morning when the hospital called and told him Dad died in his sleep six hours after her, he’d been busy trying to calculate how much fabric he’d need to buy to put the damn thing back together.

(It still sat, worn down to pieces, in a pile next to the fish tank.)

So, naturally, Helena let Virgil mope in silence for half the session, before speaking up. “Last week you said your family was going to move in with you?”

“I did. They did,” Virgil managed shortly. He felt wound up like a ball of yarn, tightly wrapped around its center so that it wouldn’t unravel and tangle too easily. Maybe he actually was that ball of yarn, trying so hard to keep from tangling up his family in his issues, trying so hard not to fall apart.

“So, is Patton anything like he is over the phone?” Helena asked.

“Yeah, he’s- he’s like sunshine. He’s always seeing the best in people… except maybe Ethan and Remus,” Virgil ammended.

“Oh?” Helena asked. “Would you say that his perception of those two is a source of tension for you?”

“Of course it is, we’re all living under the same roof. They’re all mad at him, I can feel it. But Roman and Logan keep acting like it’s in the past and there’s no reason to be upset, while Ethan and Remus seem to want to pick a fight at any moment,” Virgil scowled. “And no one seems to care that Thomas keeps getting stressed out, and- and- I don’t know.”
Helena’s eyes softened. “Tell me a little more about Thomas. I know you’ve always had a soft spot for your nephew. How does that translate into living with him?”

“The kid’s a good one. Patton did a good job. I just- he gets nervous, I can tell. He used to have panic attacks sometimes, and he’d call me? And I’d help him out. Yesterday he had a panic attack and I calmed him down. He’s a hugger, I think. I don’t normally like being touched when I’m panicking, but he went limp, like a cat. I think he’s lonely, though,” Virgil described, running his hand over his sleeve. Helena nodded.

“Do you think maybe you relate to him?” Helena asked. Virgil blinked.

“I wasn’t abused growing up,” Virgil stated. Helena shook her head.

“No, you weren’t, but you focused primarily on his anxiety and his loneliness when you just talked about him to me. Those are two feelings you know very, very well,” Helena reminded. Virgil’s face heated up.

“I’m not projecting on him,” Virgil said defensively.

“Maybe not, but you relate to him. And that’s good,” Helena assured. Virgil blinked.

“Okay.”

“Besides, whether or not he was abused doesn’t matter here. I think it just makes the both of you very strong, and that’s another thing you have in common,” Helena said.


“You work hard for your family, through the bad and the good. I’m sure if you asked any of your brothers, they’d agree with my assessment. You have a strong will, and a strong heart,” Helena assured. Virgil snapped his jaw shut, and stared hard at her desk.

If that was true, why did he feel like he was coming apart? If that was true, why did he feel overlooked, abandoned, even forgotten? Virgil was too young to remember when his first brother left. He was thirteen when his last brother finally jetted off to go become a successful adult.

Virgil felt like a paper mache recreation of himself, living in a house of cards, silence rising up from beneath his feet like a flood, tearing away at the fibers of his being. He was drowning in it, dissolving in it, and there wasn’t anything to be done.

At the end of his session, he didn’t feel much better. He managed to get a group session scheduled with Laney for his family, on Dr. Ria’s suggestion. The drive to Remy’s was utterly silent. Well, Remy had turned on the radio, but noiselessness just buzzed in Virgil’s ears. He spent several hours at Remy’s, until his best friend finally nudged him with his shoe.

“You should go home, Virge.”

And he blew up. The ball of yarn finally tumbled out of the basket and rolled away, unraveling and getting tangled all over the place. A priceless vase somewhere had tumbled off a table and shattered into a thousand pieces and those pieces were Virgil’s entire being.

In his bedroom, he put his plate down on his dresser. Then he pressed his head against his fish tank and sobbed, letting Anxiety flutter his colors up against the glass.

He pursed his lips and lowered his voice, “You made everything worse, Virgil. They’re going to be
mad at you now.”

Then he dropped his face to the surface of the shelf under the tank and sobbed.
Chapter Summary

Thomas hangs out some more with his new friends! Some thoughts get thought, some sayings get said, and some jokes get joked!

Roman has a good day, but an unfortunate incident occurs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mondays were the bane of Thomas’ existence, and not just because today was particularly bad. Though it was. It was awful. No, it was also because today was school time. Oh joy. He’d been looking forward to it Sunday morning, when he realized he didn’t have much to do while all his family was out and he was still new to town. But now that the day had come along, he was dreading his classes.

It was also an entirely new school, and the only people Thomas would even recognize were Joan and Talyn. Remy, after all, was a grade above. Thomas hoped Joan and Talyn would let him tag along with them for lunch. Maybe they'd be willing to show him around a bit too?

"Morning, Nephew in Law," Remy announced, slinging his arm over Thomas' shoulders. Thomas grimaced.

"Can you not, when we're at school?" Thomas asked.

"What, talk to you? I figured you'd be psyched to get a tour from somebody who knows where all your classes are?" Remy snorted. Thomas pouted.

"I mean joking about marrying my uncle. It's weird," Thomas stated. Remy raised an eyebrow over his shades. Why did he wear those things? Thomas still didn't know.

"Does it make you uncomfortable? Because I do it just to tease Virgil, but if it's making any of your family uncomfortable I'll stop," Remy said, taking his arm off of Thomas' shoulders. Thomas just a little bit missed the warmth and weight of it.

"I mean- it's fine at home. It's kinda funny. But we're at school, and, you know…” Thomas shrugged. Remy nodded.

"Okay, so that joke will stay at home then. I can be conscientious, don't worry," Remy said, tracing an X over his heart with his finger. Thomas smiled.

"What have you got on your schedule?" Remy asked.

Thomas handed his schedule to his neighbor, who snatched it up and started looking over the list. He began to offer him advice about different teachers, and Thomas took it all in with nods of his head. He liked having Remy here to help him out. It made the morning not seem so bad.

In his third class, he sat next to Joan, who perked up upon seeing him enter the classroom.
“Thomas! Tommy Salami! Oh, gross. I’ll just be never saying that again.”

“That’s fine, it wasn’t awful,” Thomas grinned, sliding into the desk next to them. Joan rolled their eyes.

“Sure, you’d think so. You’re the dork in this friendship,” Joan proclaimed. Thomas shrugged.

“I mean, if you can’t be dorky with me, who can you be dorky with?” Thomas asked. Joan nodded.

“Fair point, fair point. Well, if you like it so much, Tommy Salami it is,” they said decisively. They drummed an odd little beat on their desk. “Excited for a whole year of English with your new best friend?”

Thomas couldn’t help but grin. This year was looking to be great. Even if his home life wasn’t looking as good as school was.

The rest of the day went wonderfully, all the way to lunch. Joan invited him to sit with them and Talyn, who had changed their hair to a brilliant orange over the weekend apparently.

“I like your hair,” Thomas commented, unpacking his lunch. Dad had made it special, complete with two cat shaped PB&J sandwiches.

“Thanks, I did it myself yesterday,” Talyn said, and Thomas stared at them wide eyed.

“Wow, you do it yourself?” Thomas asked.

“When the fancy strikes me,” Talyn shrugged. Joan snorted.

“They're good at makeup too. Ever want to rock a fabulous look, talk to them,” Joan informed. Thomas blinked, eyes wide. He couldn't imagine his mother being alright with him wearing makeup, but his dad didn’t have any problem with his uncle’s wearing it at all. “Is that okay?”

“Oh, dude- it's more than okay!” Joan assured, and Talyn nodded.

“If you have any questions I can give you tips, but I'm partial to intense looks,” Talyn offered. Thomas grinned. He didn't think he’d ever have the bravery to wear makeup, but… it was nice to know his new friends would be willing to help him if he wanted to.

“Hey, Thomas!” Remy called, and the teenager slid onto the lunch bench next to him. “How were classes?”

“Oh- um, they were fine. Thanks for the crash course tour this morning,” Thomas said, scooting a bit to the side to make more room for Remy. Remy responded with a slight smile and an adjustment of his seat.

“No problem, babes, it’s what I do. Who are your new friends?” Remy asked, and he casually saluted to the two sitting across from Thomas.

“This is Joan and Talyn,” Thomas said, gesturing at his new friends. No one had really talked to him about preferred pronouns like Roman implied he would, but when he’d been home alone all Sunday morning, he’d done some reading into the subject. Apparently figuring yourself out was a lot more complicated than gay or straight. “We met at the park on Saturday. They’re both they/them.”
“I’m Remy, this kid is my best friend’s nephew,” Remy greeted. “He/him.”

“Best friend’s nephew, huh? I figure that means that you’re going to be looking out for him?” Joan asked, a grin on their face.

“Of course! V would want me to,” Remy snorted. A voice called over, and Remy looked up with a raised eyebrow. “Oh, my friends are calling me. I’ll join you for the walk home after school?”

“Oh, sure thing!” Thomas agreed. Remy slid off the bench and sauntered off to join his friends. Thomas glanced at his friends, both staring at him with knowing looks.

“So,” Joan started. “He’s cute.”

Thomas coughed. “Um, I guess he is?”

“Are you into him?” Talyn asked.

“Wha- him? No! He's just- nice, besides I'm not- I mean, I don't think.” Thomas cut himself off, his face feeling like it was on fire.

“Dude, it's fine. We're twelve, so it's not like we expect you to go make out with him,” Joan commented. Thomas groaned and dropped his face beside his lunch.

“And if you don't think you're into guys, that's fine too,” Talyn supplied.

“It's not that, I… I don't know what I like,” Thomas huffed, propping his chin up on his arm.

“And that's fine. It's all valid, Thomas. We're still kids,” Joan reassured, patting Thomas' head across the table.

“My uncle knew he was gay when he was a kid. He was, like, five,” Thomas huffed.

“Well, that's good for him, but it's also incredibly naive to expect everyone to figure themselves out like that,” Talyn commented. “You have your whole life to figure it out. Don’t worry so much.”

Thomas smiled at his friends and let himself feel comforted by their words. The rest of the school day went rather well, and at the end of it all, he found himself in the reverse situation of the morning. He was suddenly dreading returning home.

He’d dreaded going home many times in the past. Or at least, he dreaded his mother coming home. But Thomas had never before dreaded seeing his Uncle Virgil. Today, he was admittedly terrified to see what mood his uncle was in. Would it be like Mom, where she would stew on the fight for days and days, snappish and unpleasant the whole time? Thomas didn’t really want to find out.

But, Dad pulled up in his car, and Thomas sighed and climbed in. He was just about to close the door when Remy caught it.

“Heya Patton, heya Thomas, mind if I catch a ride with you two?” Remy asked.

“Oh! Sure, Remy, you can join us,” Dad said. Remy grinned and Thomas felt a little queasy. The older boy climbed into the back seat. Once he was buckled up, Dad began to pull onto the road.

“So how was school?”

“It was okay,” Remy shrugged. “Not looking forward to homework this year.”

“I liked it. My teachers seem nice. I saw Joan in my English class, and Talyn and I are in the same
elective wheel,” Thomas explained.

“That’s fun,” Dad said with a smile. “Anything your boys are excited for?”

“Graduation,” Remy said, and Thomas laughed. Dad nodded.

“That is exciting. High school is quite an adventure, you know,” Dad informed. “Janice and I were high school sweethearts.”

“Oh, ew,” Remy muttered, and Thomas couldn’t help but snicker. Dad rolled his eyes.

“She wasn’t always that way, for your information. She was really fun and nice. She took me to the beach once for spring break, we had a long walk along the shore at sunset. Very romantic,” Dad informed with a soft smile. Thomas frowned. He’d never really heard of how his parents fell in love, or fell out of it. Honestly, he’d just assumed they never actually loved each other.

“You guys went to the beach for spring break?” Thomas asked. Dad nodded.

“She wanted to make up for making me miss out on a family event, so she drove the two of us all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico. It was amazing, really,” Dad smiled softly. Thomas frowned and looked out the window.

“That’s a seventeen hour drive from Omaha,” Remy commented.

“We had a lot of energy,” Dad chuckled. “I’d have to make rest stops if I tried that trip again.”

“Can we?” Thomas piped up, and his dad looked at him curiously as they came to a stop at a red light. Thomas cleared his throat. “Can we go to the Gulf? As a family.”

“You and me, kiddo?” Dad questioned.

“All of us,” Thomas corrected, and Dad’s face lit up.

“Of course, Thomas. We can go on all sorts of family trips,” Patton assured. He smiled. “Maybe we’ll even go to the lake as per spring break tradition!”

“Sounds great,” Thomas said with a smile. Tradition. He didn’t think he’d ever heard anyone but Aunt Patty talk about traditions in their family, and Mom despised most of Aunt Patty’s traditions.

Dad pulled over outside a weird box shaped building. “Welcome to the local community theater, boys! We’re here to check in with Uncle Roman.”

Thomas and Remy hopped out of the car and trailed hesitantly after Dad like awkward ducklings. Remy popped a piece of gum into his mouth, grabbing Thomas’ attention easily. He raised his eyebrows. “Can- can I have some?”

“Sure thing, babes,” Remy allowed, tipping the small gumball container and dropping one piece into his palm, offering it to Thomas. Thomas popped the piece into his mouth, and watched Remy make a tiny bubble out of the watermelon gum. It popped pretty much instantly, and Remy’s tongue swiped out to collect the remains back into his mouth. Thomas wondered, ever so briefly, what French kissing might be like. He glanced away and jogged a bit to keep pace with his father.

Dad sat down on a bench outside a pair of double doors. "This is theater B, that's where Roman said he'd meet us."

"Oh, okay," Thomas nodded, sitting down next to him. Remy hummed a long note and sat at the
opposite end of the bench, pulling out his phone and slowly working on another new bubble.

Thomas just sort of sat in awkward silence for another minute. Suddenly, Remy elbowed him.

"Do you have an insta?" Remy asked. Thomas shook his head. Remy gaped. "Well, babes, that just won't do. Gimme your phone."

"I dunno if I should," Thomas said, and he looked up at his dad.

Dad frowned thoughtfully. "As long as you're safe about it, Thomas, I don't see why you shouldn't be allowed to have social media."

"Great, thanks Dad Sanders!" Remy cheered, making grabby hands for Thomas' phone. Thomas snorted a laugh and offered the teen his device.

"Please, Dad Sanders was my father," Dad joked, and Thomas couldn't help but grin as Remy groaned. It was odd though. Only last year, Dad had told him he was too young for social media.

Maybe that had something to do with mom. Remy leaned over and turned the screen towards him. "Go on, sign up, it's your account not mine."

Thomas blushed and grabbed the phone, inputting his email. He'd set one up early in the divorce on his mother's suggestion so they could keep in contact. Dad hadn't demanded he not, and the lawyers agreed to this communication, so he was permitted to email her pictures and the like if he wanted. He'd recently been using it more for subscribing to his favorite YouTube channels, then for any actual emailing his mother. It had only been a few weeks since he last saw her, really. About a month now, actually. He didn't have anything he felt was worth sharing with her.

For a password, Thomas thought for several moments before tapping in his uncle's birth date. Then he held his phone out to Remy, who snorted. "Sure, babes, I'll break in your baby account."

Remy did some furious typing before switching to the camera and tugging Thomas into a headlock-hug combination. "Smile, it's for the future!"

The camera flashed and a door opened down the hall, and Uncle Roman skipped down the hall with a happy spring in his step and a grin on his face. The leather satchel at his side bounced on his hip, and he gasped delightedly when he saw the three of them.

"Patton, you'll never believe it!" Roman cheered, and Dad laughed.

"Did you get the job?" Dad asked.

"We'll find that out tomorrow, this is more important news!" Roman exclaimed, twirling in a circle like he was a Disney princess in a gown.

"More important than your livelihood?" Remy snorted.

"Far more important, you sassy little gremlin," Roman huffed. He gestured to the theater beside them. "It's inside here, come on, come on!"

He pushed open the theater doors and practically ran down the aisle towards where a man was pouring over some papers. He was dark skinned with short and curled hair. Dad followed Roman, a bit hesitant, and Remy and Thomas trailed after him.

The stage curtains were open and a few people were working on set pieces, but what was finished
looked utterly beautiful, a castle with a balcony in the center of the stage, some stage workers hiding a ladder beside it with fake vines of ivy.

Uncle Roman was chatting with the man in the audience. “Chris, you’ve gotta let me sing just one number.”

“I go by Christopher-Thomas, with a hyphen, now Roman, and absolutely not. You’re in your tacky babe jeans, you’re not taking a single step on my stage,” the man said, flipping his scarf over his shoulder.

“These are not tacky “

“They’re white , honey-“

“One song, please? My older brother’s here!” Roman pleaded, and the man perked up and looked towards Dad. Then he frowned and lowered large, circular shades over his eyes.

“I thought you meant the hot one. Let me think- no, Roman. I’ve got actors coming through for tech week in a half hour, do show yourself out before rehearsals.” Christopher-Thomas stated. Roman opened his mouth to argue his point some more, but the man merely raised his hand.

“Speak no longer, and waste my time no further, good bye, Rome- no .”

Roman huffed, then jogged back to the others. “I was going to sing a song from the first play I did here at the community theater. This is the same set, they’re doing the same show.”

“Well, that’s fun!” Dad said with a smile. “When did you start doing theater with this company?”

“Uh, about thirteen years ago, maybe? Almost as long as this one’s been alive,” Roman laughed, shoving Remy. Remy snorted and shoved him back. Thomas smiled watching them.

“That is a long time,” Dad commented. He looked deep in thought.

“I was only with them for five years,” Roman pointed out. “As soon as I graduated, I was off to New York!”

Once they got to the car, Uncle Roman halted, looking at the car with a weird expression. Dad stopped too, halfway into the driver’s seat. “Roman? Everything okay?”

“O-of course! Everything is great, I’ll just sit, um. In the back,” Uncle Roman announced.

“Oh, rad, shotgun!” Remy said, and he went into the front seat. Thomas frowned, but he joined his uncle in the middle seats of the minivan.

The drive went alright for about ten minutes. Remy and Dad chatted, Thomas shared a statement or two, and then a comfortable silence fell in the car. Or at least, as comfortable as it could be when Thomas could so clearly see his uncle’s white knuckled grip on the armrests of his chair, and his thousand yard stare locked on the rear view mirrors.

Thomas frowned and grabbed his uncle’s hand, and Roman gasped sharply and jerked away from him, grabbing the car door handle. “Stop the car, stop the car, stop the cAR -“

Dad slammed the breaks, and the door slid open, Uncle Roman stumbling out of the car and onto the road. They’d reached the suburbs. The street was empty. Uncle Roman sat on the ground, staring pale faced at his shoes.
Dad spoke up, “Roman, are-“

“I’m sorry,” Roman blurted.

“Don't apologize,” Dad said. "Is this what Logan meant? About the-"

"I don't have ptsd!" Roman snapped. Dad shut his mouth. "Look, I'll just get back in the car, we're almost home."

"I'd rather walk. It's a sunny day," Remy announced, hopping out of the car and walking around to Roman. Thomas scooted out the way Roman fell out and offered his uncle a hand.

"I think I'll walk too," Thomas said decisively. Dad smiled.

"Would you walk with them, Roman? I'll meet you guys at home." Dad offered. Roman sighed and got to his feet. His white jeans were a bit smudged with dirt now.

"Okay, see you soon, Padre," Roman conceded. As Dad drove off, the doors automatically shut, Uncle Roman flushed with shame. “I’m not suffering from ptsd.”

“Of course not,” Remy said, pulling out his phone. “It's not like you were distressed in the car due to a traumatic accident in your past.”

“Don’t worry about it, Uncle Roman,” Thomas interrupted. “Ptsd isn’t anything to be ashamed of. You survived, and you’re coping. It’s all good.”

The look Uncle Roman gave him made him think he didn’t exactly get through to him. Well. Hopefully the group therapy would.

Chapter End Notes

Not happy with the ending but I didn’t wanna stretch it out too much further.
Chapter Summary

Remus does some chatting with his brothers, and it’s all well and good—until it isn’t.

So Sunday had been a disaster. The day had been alright for most of it, he and Roman had chattered each other’s ears off curled up in bed, reminiscing about their childhoods. They’d cuddled until late in the day, when they split up briefly to fetch supplies for a movie marathon.

Then dinner went south and things got out of hand.

Monday morning, after everybody had left the house, Remus slunk over to Virgil’s bedroom door at the end of the hall. He’d made this trek many times as a child.

Mom and Dad used to share the master bedroom at the end of the hall, and Remus would dart down the hall in the middle of the night, crack open the door, and peak in at his sleeping parents. Then he’d just stand and stare until one of them woke up to put him back to bed. He stopped doing it after a while, but making this walk now made him feel like that child again.

Remus cracked the door open and peeked inside. Virgil was fast asleep. Remus slid through the door and crept into his brother’s bedroom. He noticed the fish tank and smiled at the memory of Virgil raving about Legion. The death of the last of those zebra fish had been kind of rough on Virgil. Remus couldn’t remember what Virgil said he named his betta, but he was a beautiful little creature with the loveliest little plumage.

There was a pile of fabric beside the fish tank. Curious as ever, Remus plucked the thing off the ground, and discovered Virgil’s old hoodie— in five pieces. It was so worn the forearms had fallen off the rest, and the shoulders had gaping holes. The right side of the chest, with the zipper, was hanging off from the rest and trailing on the ground. How this much wear and tear had happened, Remus could only guess. Bear mauling was out, Virgil would’ve been in the hospital.

Virgil stirred in his bed, and Remus scurried out of his bedroom, carefully closing the door behind him. Once he was satisfied that Virgil wasn’t waking up, Remus took another look at the hoodie in his hands. Virgil loved the damn thing. He’d bought it for himself when he was fourteen, his first non-hand-down. He wore it everywhere, like a second skin. Remus almost hadn’t noticed Virgil’s current hoodie was a different one.

Remus frowned and wandered over to the living room. He looked up and spotted Logan in an armchair. “Logie? What are you doing here?”

Logan looked up, and grimaced. “Roman was right.”

“About what?” Remus asked, tentatively perching on the arm of the couch. He placed Virgil’s torn up hoodie in his lap. Logan sighed and adjusted his glasses.

“I didn’t actually get a job transfer to a nearby lab. I was lying because I didn’t want to seem inept,” Logan explained.

“What does that have to do with what Roman said?” Remus questioned, not following Logan’s
train of thought.

“I put up a cold front to keep you all from asking questions about my emotional state. I mean,
Caelum and I were very close. And my job was my dream, and- it affects me more than I let on, is
all,” Logan explained, fiddling with the end of his tie. Remus slid onto the couch from his perch.

“If you don’t have a job, where have you been going?” Remus asked.

“The library,” Logan huffed. “It’s the one place the rest of you never really thought to go very
often, so I thought I could try my luck hiding there until I found a new job.”

“You know we’d never judge you for losing your job, Logan,” Remus reminded.

“I don’t know if you realize, Remus, but I’m practically the eldest. I love Patton, and I’m sure you
all do as well, but I’m the one who went to college first. I’m the one who got a successful degree, who got a
good job- I don’t want to minimize Patton’s achievements, but Patton
is not who our parents bragged about to guests,” Logan explained. He furrowed his brows and
looked at his knees. “I can’t fail. Especially not now that our parents are gone. It’s- it’s
unprecedented.”

“Hey, you’re not failing, Lolo,” Remus snorted. He shuffled around the pieces of Virgil’s hoodie in
his hands. “Ethan and I? We’re the failures in this family. You’re already doing much better than
us.”

“That is part of the issue. Your supposed failures put my successes in such a light where if I were to
fail, it’d be assumed that I will follow the same path. It’s a slippery slope fallacy, but an easy one to
believe,” Logan argued. Remus rolled his eyes.

“Well, since you’re lying about it, maybe you could end up like Ethan. But you’re too smart for
that,” Remus assured. “Heck, if you killed a dude and wrote your name out of his intestines, you’d
still be able to weasel your way out of suspicion, I’m sure.”

Logan chuckled. “If only. I don’t think such an obvious clue could be overlooked.”

Remus gasped. “What if the murderer was passionately in lust with you, and was killing people to
get your attention, so he was writing your name out of the intestines of the victims!”

“Well, I most certainly won’t be charmed by that,” Logan huffed. “Imagine, the police at my door
due to an unwelcome suitor.”

“Does he have to be unwelcome?” Remus asked.

“After Caelum, I think all suitors are from here on out unwelcome,” Logan said decisively. Remus
blinked. Right, yes. Logan’s ex-boyfriend who stole all his money and forced him to come home at
the same time Remus was discharged from the center.

“I’m glad for Caelum,” Remus stated. Logan looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“You’re glad for the scammer that weaseled his way into my life for two years before robbing me
blind while I was mourning our parents?” Logan demanded.

“Yeah. He’s the reason we’re together again. I really missed you. It’s been a really long time since
we were together,” Remus explained. Logan blinked owlishly.

“Surely I visited while I was in town on holidays?” Logan asked.
“Not once,” Remus said. He had a poor memory of his time in the center, but he remembered almost every in-person visit. They helped him keep track of time, when Virgil would come to visit, when Mom and Dad would ever so rarely accompany him. He hadn’t been visited by anyone else, but Ethan had always put aside some time to call him. It was nice to know he wasn’t forgotten entirely as soon as he was shipped off to rehab.

Logan looked troubled over the revelation though. “I- I’m sorry, I definitely meant to-“

“It’s fine!” Remus assured. “I wouldn’t have wanted to see me like that either.”

Remus didn’t remember all of his time at the center. He had gaps in his memory courtesy of dissociation and his own now waning depression. But he remembered how pathetic he looked in the early days. Tired, angry, touchy. Eventually he was getting better, definitely. But he’d emotionally relapsed enough times that they kept him there for eight years. It was only in his last two years there that he was totally incident free.

Remus was doing better now. He was taking his antidepressants without any reminders, he was dealing with his shit almost by himself, and he hadn't broken a single one of the probation rules. "I'm glad we get to be together now, is all, Logan."

Logan smiled. "Even if I'm not the successful brother you all thought I was?"

"Hey why would I care?" Remus snorted. "You're still Logie-bear."

Logan groaned at the old nickname. "Remus, don't!"

"Aww, come on, Logie-bear! You loved this nickname!" Remus exclaimed.

"No, I tolerated it because you were a child," Logan laughed. "I never liked it."

"Somebody's telling lies again," Remus proclaimed. "I have video evidence that you liked being Logie-bear !"

"There's no such footage," Logan denied. Remus tossed the scraps of hoodie fabric at his older brother.

"Is too!" Remus cried out, and Logan's laugh came to a halt as he examined the fabric.

"What's this? Isn't this Virgil's?" Logan asked.

"Don't change the subject," Remus pouted. He wanted to keep teasing his older brother.

"This is in pieces," Logan commented, lifting the hoodie into the air by the shoulders and watching bits of fabric fall off of it.

"Yeah, guess he wore it out," Remus relented, studying the edges of the torn pieces.

"It looks more torn apart than worn apart," Logan muttered quietly.

"But it's worn out, too. It's really thin, kinda threadbare," Remus pointed out, running the fabric between his fingers and letting cotton fluff come loose.

"Did you find this in the trash?" Logan asked.

"Nah, it looked more like Virgey was gonna try to fix it. I was actually looking for the sewing kit-"
"I'll do it. I'm not very skilled at apologies, so perhaps this will help me make a good attempt," Logan suggested. Remus grinned.

"Okay, sure thing. Didn't realize you knew how to sew," Remus teased.

"Oh, and you do?" Logan snorted. "I'll do my best, though I'm under no assumptions that my work will be expert level."

Remus stared as Logan began shifting the pieces into place. It wasn't like he needed to be the one to fix Virgil's sweater. Logan could fix it and it'd probably end up the same way. But Remus felt almost territorial over the task, for reasons he couldn't figure.

Logan laid out the pieces on the coffee table and got up to find the sewing kit. Remus huffed a frown and looked at the mantel place, focusing on the photographs he'd displaced the previous evening to put the VCR there. It was still there, six of the older Disney movies stacked on top of it. He made his way over and shuffled through the photo frames.

There was one of Virgil when he graduated, and a couple photos where he was younger, with Mom or Dad, or occasionally Roman or Logan. There was one picture of Remus and Virgil sharing leftover turkey and pumpkin pie. Then, in the back, a photograph that made Remus pause.

It was a picture of Mom and Dad standing with the rest of them, Virgil only seven years old, and Ethan scowling at the camera. Logan was wearing a college sweater, and Roman had his nose buried in a script. Remus remembered when they took this photo. Roman had been ignoring Remus that week, too busy focusing on his first community theater show. Virgil had been the one to tell him about Thomas, and Roman had been gobsmacked. He'd demanded to know why Mom and Dad didn't say anything, but Virgil just said they did.

Remus smirked. He was pretty sure Roman was still bitter about his own inattentiveness at the time, seeing as many things had happened that year. Though, they'd all been a bit blinded by their own issues. Remus knew it wasn't just Roman who had trouble seeing his brothers.

Sometimes, Remus felt more like he was only related to Virgil. He wondered if the others felt the same way. It would make sense if Patton thought like that. He was the only brother he talked to before this month.

Logan placed a large box of sewing supplies down with a thud, and Remus whirled around to see his older brother already pulling out folded up fabrics.

The first fabric was a soft, maroon crushed velvet, and Remus raised his eyebrows when he saw it.

"Mom didn't make stuff with crushed velvet," Remus commented.

"She also preferred light colors," Logan commented, pulling black and purple fabrics out of the box as well. Remus smirked.

"Oh, I see," he huffed. "Our little emo was a vampire last Halloween. I remember him complaining about the store costumes."

"He didn't just turn to the internet?" Logan muttered, folding the crushed velvet back into a neat square.

"You know Virgil." Remus shrugged. "He's gotta do everything himself."

"I have noticed he seems uncomfortable eating Patton's meals, and has been reluctant to share his
task list with us," Logan admitted. Remus raised an eyebrow.

"When have you noticed these things, Mr. Fake Job?" Remus demanded. Logan rolled his eyes.

"I'm not gone all day. I got back at nine both evenings. And before that I was just sitting around the house, what did you think I was doing?" Logan pointed out.

"Oh, was Detective Logan snooping !?" Remus gasped delightedly. Logan frowned.

"It's not exactly snooping if Virgil left his phone open for anyone to see, is it?" Logan sighed.

"When was this?" Remus asked, pursing his lips and trying to remember when it might have happened.

"I got a good look before you started trying to eat the bugs in the garden," Logan said with a roll of his eyes.

"Oh, just before Ethan and Patton started yelling in the kitchen," Remus muttered to himself. He grimaced, remembering how awkward that had been, all of them in the garden hearing muffled shouting from the house. It was good that it hadn't lasted all too long.

The door opened, and Logan stiffened beside Remus. They both looked to the door, and saw Patton returning from dropping off Thomas. Patton looked surprised to see them.

“Good morning,” Patton greeted.

“Waddup?” Remus said with a casual salute. Logan merely nodded.

“It truly is a good morning, the temperature is just warm enough to feel comfortable, but still cool enough that you’re sure it’s morning. Brisk, I’d say, even, but goodness, is that a breeze? I think perhaps the insulation might be broken, I’ll have to fix that, or who knows how stressed Virgil could become? You know what, I’ll go to the hardware store now, no need for anyone to be concerned, this will all be repaired in a minute-“

“Logie, cool your motor mouth,” Remus interrupted, and his older brother snapped his jaw shut with an awkward nod.

“Are you off work today, Lo?" Patton asked, as he put his sweater on the coat hangers by the door.

“Ah, in as much a way as you could say so,” Logan babbled.

“Logan, that sentence made no sense,” Remus snorted.

Patton frowned, glancing between the both of them suspiciously. “What’s going on?"

“Oh, it’s hilarious, Patty, you’ll love it!” Remus snorted. Logan sighed, and lifted his arms a little.

“Well, I had to quit my job to be able to have a roof over my head, Patton, if that clears anything up at all,” Logan announced. He placed the lid back on the sewing box. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I will be in my bedroom listening to classical pieces and doing my best to repair this sweater.”

Logan grabbed the scrappy sweater off the table, and hefted the box under one arm, before making a hasty retreat up the staircase. Remus grinned at Patton, who was looking absolutely gobsmacked.

“Why would Logan lie about losing his job?” Patton asked.
“Well, just think about it, Patpat! Who was the first in our family to graduate college? Then he went and got his big boy job with his big boy salary—damn, I’d be pretty embarrassed too!” Remus laughed. “But don’t worry, Pat. Logan’s the best of us. He’ll find a job quicker than you can say ‘a goldfish in a condom’!”

Patton just grimaced at him, before walking away. Yeah, Remus wished he could do that sometimes too. He blew hair out of his face before turning back to the television and popping in Pinocchio. Too bad Ethan didn’t like the movie anymore, it was a wild one. Remus’ favorite part was when the children turned into asses.

How the world had ever let cartoons become a children’s thing was beyond Remus. The wild and disturbing animation common to the fifties and before were some of his favorite things to watch.

He was halfway through the Bee Movie, trying to ignore the sound of Patton vacuuming upstairs, when Virgil finally came down, looking freshly woken and yet still incredibly exhausted.

“Good afternoon, Virgey!” Remus greeted, perking up in his seat. “Wanna watch the Bee Movie with me?”

Virgil glanced at the screen. “No. You want lunch?”

“Sure thing!” Remus chirped. Then, the door opened, convenient as ever, and Ethan sauntered into the house with a plastic cup in his hand.

“Did you know cafes are practically empty at this time of day? An hour before the lunch rush, I mean,” Ethan announced. “Virgil, you’d love it, you sulky wallflower, you.”

“You’re in a good mood today,” Virgil commented, and Ethan laughed.

“I went out to clear my head and bumped into an old classmate. I’m sure you both remember Anton Reeves?” Ethan bragged, and he sat down beside Remus.

“Ex-boyfriend Anton Reeves?” Remus asked with a grin.

“Douchebag Reeves? That Anton Reeves?” Virgil asked.

“Anton Reeves, the notorious pigtail puller, yes. Well, he took me out for tea and apologized for his toxic behavior in our school days. He said he’d like to reconnect and he’s really changing his life around,” Ethan explained, a wide grin on his face.

Remus smirked. “Are you blushing?”

“I am not!” Ethan protested.

“You’re totally blushing,” Virgil snickered, the good mood in the room bringing a smile to his face.

“I’m totally not, you little gremlins,” Ethan insisted.

“Okay, I’m gonna go make some lunch, but after you are totally spilling the tea,” Virgil proclaimed.

“You spend too much time with Remy, you’re talking just like him!” Ethan accused.

“I spend too much time with my only friend?” Virgil challenged.
“What, you aren’t friends with Toby?” Remus teased, and Virgil glared at him. He didn’t deign to answer, just walked into the kitchen and began rummaging through cupboards. Remus and Ethan looked at each other and laughed.

Logan and Patton came to join them for lunch. Conversation lagged and limped, but once Logan managed an apology, Patton quickly jumped to offer aide to Virgil. Remus and Ethan sat in silence as Virgil rejected his offers.

If they remembered right, Patton was stubborn. He’d keep trying to help around the house until Virgil relented. The issue was, Virgil was also stubborn. It was a case of an unstoppable force and an immovable object.

However, eventually Patton sighed and stood up. “I’m going to go pick up Thomas from school.”

He cleared his dishes and placed them in the sink before heading out. Ethan lowered his knife and fork down on his plate and leaned back in his chair.

“L, you wanna join us for a movie?” Virgil offered. Logan smiled.

“No thank you, Virgil. I’m working on something in my bedroom. Thank you for the meal, it was delicious,” Logan said. Virgil smiled and nodded.

“No problem. I was happy to make it for you,” Virgil assured as Logan cleared his plate like Patton had. Virgil bit his lip. “And- Logan, I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to blow up at all of you like that.”

“It’s quite alright, Virgil. We’ve been putting a lot on your shoulders. You’re still a teenager,” Logan assured.

“Yeah, but there’s a lot on all our shoulders,” Virgil huffed. “You think it’s easy rebuilding your life?”

Oh. Oh that was right.

Remus was distracted for the first half hour of the next film, even with the grounding presence of his closest brothers on either side of him on the couch. They were watching Shrek, which was typically Remus’ favorite thing to watch. But he couldn’t focus on it now.

Rebuild. That’s what his brothers were doing, wasn’t it? They’d all experienced a loss, so close to the losses of their parents as well, and now they were here. To rebuild. Remus wasn’t sure why that hurt to think about, but somehow… somehow he hadn’t realized that they really were going to leave again someday.

Remus had earned his high school diploma when he was eighteen in the center’s built in homeschooling system. He’d taken some college courses, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to earn a degree there. He’d kind of imagined that he would never really have a normal life to actually experience, so he hadn’t thought it important anyway. Remus had nowhere to go but back to Virgil.

But the others… they really did have lives. Roman was working at the theater, eventually he’d get onstage again, maybe go on a few tours. There was no way Ethan would be staying in the same house as Patton for long. Logan would get all successful again no problem.

Would Virgil even put up with Remus freelading off of him?

What could he even do?
Go back to school?

Outside of all his hardships, who was Remus?

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