Things That Go Bump in the Night

by ennu_ephemera

Summary

Neil inexplicably comes back to life after being seven months dead and buried. He has no memory of how he crawled out of his grave, or even when he died. He has a heartbeat, he needs to breathe and eat and sleep, he's irrefutably alive, but that should be impossible. But he doesn't have time to dwell on it, because some very weird things start happening to him, and they all seem to revolve around Neil's mysterious reappearance and a certain countdown to Halloween.

Notes

Hello! This is the first of three Halloween fics I have planned and I am super super excited! I also have a moodboard for this fic found right here!

I'll be updating the tags as I go along, but trigger warnings for this chapter are: References to Neil's death and very brief descriptions/implications of what happened, depictions of depression and grieving, mild violence and threats.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The Foxhole Court was completely empty when Andrew arrived with his group in tow. They’d all received the alert from Coach Wymack that gray morning, Andrew’s phone had lit up with the text notification but he hadn’t bothered checking it. He only knew what the message contained when Kevin had shoved his own phone in Andrew’s face as they piled into the Maserati.

Someone had broken into the court. But whoever it was, they were long gone by the time the rest of the Foxes had filtered into the foyer where Wymack was waiting for them.

The rest of the Foxes were already there, piled onto the couches and armchairs. the Upperclassmen had taken the couch furthest from the door while two freshmen had claimed the armchairs, the rest perched on arm rests or stood nearby. The second couch was left empty for Andrew’s group to squeeze onto. He didn’t bother taking a seat.

“I already talked to security,” Wymack was saying as Andrew walked past. Dan threw out an arm to try and stop him, but Andrew ignored her. It didn’t matter to him if some teenagers broke into the Exy court and vandalized it. He had thought of doing it only so many times himself. Smashing in the windows with a metal bat, taking a spray can to the orange and white paint, if only to make it slightly less of an eyesore. Andrew found himself hating the Foxhole Court more and more these days.

Wymack let him go, nodding in Andrew’s direction as he promised to check the security cameras while everyone geared up.

Andrew thought about that, on the way to the locker room, why Wymack let him get away with so much. Andrew hardly stayed to listen to the pre-practice huddles anymore, Kevin always had to fill him in later. Wymack usually let him be as long as he came to practice, but usually no one was excused from his lectures.

Andrew preferred to get a head start in the locker room instead, gearing up before anyone else had even come in yet. It wasn’t that Andrew was so eager to play Exy, he was far from ever looking forward to such a thing, but he was already lacking about two days’ worth of sleep and his stomach was cramping from too many missed meals. He simply did not have the energy to deal with his teammates.

Rubbing his eye with his thumb, Andrew put in his locker combination and stared blankly at his Exy gear. He didn’t look at the locker directly behind his, it was easier to pretend that it was empty, that it had always been empty.

The thing about grief, Andrew found, was that it never truly went away. It nagged at him, ate a hole in his gut like acid on metal. The ever-persistent ache in his chest was rarely soothed, even on the days that seemed a trickle brighter than the last.

It had been over half a year since Neil died in Baltimore, seven bleak months where Andrew drifted untethered from his own life and carried around that acidic hole in his side. He always claimed that Neil was nothing, that he didn’t care what happened one way or the other, but Neil’s death knocked him back the few steps he had taken since his return from Easthaven. Betsy had called it a relapse during one of their sessions in the weeks where Andrew spoke to her or not at all. Apparently, losing someone important will do that to you.

Even now, months later, Andrew felt the ragged hole in his chest where a certain mouthy redhead
had once squeezed his way into. The ache of it never left him since Neil had come home in a closed casket, Andrew left with the realization that perhaps he never should have broken off their deal after all. At the very least, he should have known something was up with the way Neil looked at him in that damn locker room, the way this *thank you* dripped off his tongue like it was something precious, like it was the most important thing Neil could say in that moment.

As if it had meant everything.

Andrew really hated him for the way he had been split open and bled out in the months after the Foxes returned from Baltimore, one striker down. Neil had been his undoing, and Andrew had handed over the knife that sliced him open.

Blinking away the fog from his brain, Andrew grabbed his gear and changed out.

Since Andrew was the first one in the stadium, the lights hadn’t been turned on yet. The only thing illuminating his path came from the narrow windows above him, sharp blades of sunlight that barely penetrated the gloom. All he could make out was a small section of alternating orange and white stands and half the outer court before the rest was obliterated by darkness. He couldn’t see the inner court at all, the goals and the big screen lost behind curtains of black.

Something wet squelched under Andrew’s feet. Pausing where he stood, Andrew crouched down and inspected the floor. It was too dark to make out much of anything, so he fished his phone out of his pocket and used the light from the screen to see what he’d stepped in.

Mud. Tracks of it, leading from one of the access doors that led outside to the closest inner court door. Stuffing his gloves into his helmet and setting it by the home bench, Andrew followed the trail right up to the plexiglas wall. He found dirt smeared across it, smudged handprints dragged from door to handle. Andrew could barely see anything past the wall, but the dirt trail looked like it led further into the court.

“*The fuck*,” he muttered, wiping at a spot of mud with his thumb. He grabbed the doorknob and dirt crumbled under his fingers, falling to the floor with the rest of the mess.

The locker room door opened behind him and Andrew turned to see Wymack with a strange expression on his face. His brow was furrowed, his mouth pursed in the way that it did when he had bad news to deliver.

“Coach,” Andrew said, alerting him to the mud on the floor.

Wymack’s mouth thinned to a flat line. “Get the lights,” he ordered to someone behind him. A few minutes later the lights powered on with a hum, revealing one section of the stands at a time before the entire stadium and court was lit. Dan came around the other side of Wymack to squat down next to the mud trail.

“How did security miss this?” she asked, but Wymack didn’t answer. His eyes were fixed on something behind Andrew in the inner court. Andrew turned, following his gaze. It took him a moment to realize what he was looking at, but when he did, unease pricked at his skin.

There was a body on the court. Slumped over the giant fox paw in the middle with their back turned away so their face was hidden. They were dressed in jeans and a hoodie that was so covered in mud, Andrew could barely make out what color they were. He couldn’t see if the figure was breathing from where he stood, but they had to have been the one to track in the mud all over the stadium as there was only one set of footprints.
“Call security. I want everyone out of the stadium,” Wymack commanded. His voice left no room for argument.

Andrew didn’t turn to see who he was talking to, but he heard a set of footsteps run back into the locker room. He hesitated, staring through the plexiglas, squinting at the figure on the court. Wymack’s gruff voice sounded behind him. “Come on, Minyard.”

Andrew still had his hand on the doorknob, but he let it fall away when Wymack called him back again. There was something familiar about the figure though; the slight frame, the way they curled in on themselves, arms hugging their body tight. Andrew hesitated; something wasn’t right. His eyes flicked from the figure’s clothes, old and worn and covered in mud, to their head. He froze.

It couldn’t be, it was a trick of the light. Andrew had finally lost it. A hallucination, like Andrew had claimed all those months ago. A pipe dream.

“Andrew, god damnit!” Wymack yelled when Andrew wrenched the door open so hard it swung back and hit the wall. He tore off down the court, ignoring the voices yelling at him to stop, to come back. Someone followed after him, grappling at Andrew’s shoulder to pull him back. He threw them off, swinging his arm around as hard as he darted around them. He heard Kevin let out a heavy oof as his elbow met his stomach.

Kevin yelled something but Andrew couldn’t make sense of his words over the blood rushing through his head, his pulse beating in his ears like a wayward drum. “Move,” he said, or maybe he shouted it, he couldn’t tell. All that was going through his mind was the glimpse of auburn hair, almost covered by a layer of mud and grime. He skidded to a halt by the figure, dropping to his knees.

Pallid skin and gaunt cheeks, Neil’s was pale and scuffed with tiny scratches marking his hands and face. Blood was smeared under his nose, already dry and flaking off in patches. Andrew scrambled over to him and pulled him half-way onto his lap. Neil’s head lolled to the side, limp as a rag doll. Andrew gripped the back of his head and pressed two fingers to the side of his throat, feeling for a pulse along his clammy skin. He was soaked through and slippery with sweat, but Andrew probed around his neck until he felt it. Faint as it was, he felt a heartbeat struggling under his fingertips.

“Is – that – ” Kevin stumbled beside Andrew, his face drawn with shock. He tugged the hair at the top of his head with fidgety hands as he stared at Neil, wide eyes glued to Neil’s slack face. “That’s not possible.”

“He’s alive,” Andrew said instead. He didn’t care about what was possible, he didn’t care about anything except the flicker of Neil’s eyelids when Andrew gripped his chin in his hand and turned his face upwards. There were scars on his face, still pink as if they were only just starting to heal. Andrew traced his thumb over the circular scars on the left side of Neil’s face, where his tattoo used to be. Andrew realized with something like a sick jolt to his stomach that it had been burned off.

Fury pulsed through him. He didn’t know what he was mad at, not yet. Everything maybe. Neil, for disappearing and coming back when Andrew was just starting to get a grasp on his life again. Himself, for bleeding so openly then, and now with fresh wounds and new pain lancing through him as he took in Neil’s sorry state. But mostly the anger that surged through him was for every goddamn person who had ever laid a hand on Neil and gotten away with it.

Andrew’s fist clenched in the collar of Neil’s hoodie. It pulled down, revealing a rope of scarring around his throat. It was thick and ragged, nothing about it clean-cut. Andrew moved his hand
from Neil’s head to the back of his neck, feeling how far the scarring went. His fingers followed the line all the way around his neck. Andrew ignored the implications in favor of the dangerous thoughts circling his brain for whoever had done this to him.

“What the hell, Minyard,” Wymack said, coming up behind Kevin. “Why don’t you listen for once in your goddamn life – ”

He stopped dead in his tracks when he realized who Andrew was holding. His mouth moved soundlessly as the rest of the Foxes circled around them, staring with mixed expressions of shock and horror. Andrew ignored their gasps and their mutterings and tilted Neil’s face away.

“Is he…?” someone asked. Nicky, Andrew’s mind supplied. His hands tightened possessively in the fabric of Neil’s hoodie. It was the same gray one he’d been wearing when he disappeared in Baltimore, the one he’d always refused to give up, no matter how much Nicky had prattled at him to throw it out. Andrew didn’t ever think he could miss it so much.

Recovered from shock, Matt made a pained noise and reached for him.

Andrew had a knife out of his armband before anyone could blink. Stumbling backwards, Matt snatched his hand back like he’d been burned. Voice vicious and tinging on desperate, Andrew leveled them all a glare that could turn a man to stone and said, “Back off.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Allison hissed from where she stood in front of a fretful Nicky. Dan had one arm braced against Matt’s chest, the other wrapped around his waist, holding him back or comforting him after almost being stabbed, Andrew didn’t care.

Matt’s face twisted. “You have no right,” he started. Dan tightened her grip but she looked outraged. Andrew ignored her and watched Matt struggle through his anger as the rest of the Foxes argued around them. “He was our friend too, asshole,” he spat.

Andrew’s self-control was in tatters but he couldn’t bring himself to care, not when Neil was alive, not when Andrew had his fingers twisted in his hair, his head laying in his lap. Not when he had already lost Neil once. Andrew flashed danger; he wasn’t going to let that happen again. “Get the fuck away from us.”

A hush fell around the Foxes. A pin could drop and everyone would hear. Renee was the only one brave enough to break the silence. “Andrew,” she said in a soft voice, “we just want to make sure that he’s okay.”

“He’s fine,” Andrew snapped. But looking at Neil, it was obvious he wasn’t. He was feverish and sweaty, and his chest rose and fell with shallow breaths. And he had been dead for seven months.

Sliding his knife back in its sheath, he scooped Neil up with one arm under his thighs and the other under his shoulders. He was lighter than Andrew expected, and he hunched up on himself when Andrew moved him, curling in towards Andrew’s chest with a pained groan.

The Foxes scrambled around him. Matt made another wild grab and Dan pulled him back before he could be used as a chopping block. Nicky pleaded with Andrew to wait a minute, but Andrew didn’t stop until Wymack stepped in front of him and blocked his path. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Get out of my way,” Andrew said, voice pitched low.

“Like hell I’m moving.” Wymack pinned him with a severe look. “You answer me or you won’t see Neil until he’s out of the hospital.”
“No hospital,” Andrew said immediately.

“Answers. Now.”

Andrew let out a frustrated sigh, more of a hiss of air through gritted teeth. “I’m just getting him off the damn floor,” he said and shoved past. Wymack and the others followed close behind as he made his way to the foyer and laid Neil on the couch.

“I need pillows, a blanket,” Wymack said. Andrew instructed Nicky to get his keys from his locker and drive to Fox Tower to get anything Neil needed. Wymack barked orders to the rest of the Foxes but Andrew stayed where he was at, standing motionless beside the couch as the others bustled around him.

Wymack typed something into his phone and stuffed it in his pocket. He inclined his head toward Andrew. “Did you do this?” he asked, chin jerking down at Neil. His voice quiet enough to cut everyone else out of the conversation, but Andrew saw Aaron shoot them a look from across the room. Andrew bristled at the accusation.

“If you’re asking if I dug Neil up and sewed him back together again, then no, I didn’t,” Andrew said. Wymack’s stern expression annoyed Andrew to no extent. His jaw clenched. “Trust me, Coach. If I was planning on raising someone from the dead, you would have been the first to know.”

Wymack regarded him with suspicion. “If I get a call from the police saying that you were arrested for messing with the dark, I’m benching you for a month.”

“Oh, terror. What would I do if I couldn’t play Exy,” Andrew said in a flat voice. He would have rolled his eyes at Wymack’s unimpressed look if he already wasn’t so exhausted. He flicked his fingers in dismissal. “If I had the capabilities of playing necromancer, I would have done it months ago. Now stop fucking staring at me like that, and do something useful.”

Wymack straightened. “Neil didn’t crawl out of that grave himself. Someone had to have helped him.”

“Ask him.” Both Andrew and Wymack looked to Neil’s prone form. He was sunken into the couch, his arms curled protectively around his ribs. Andrew felt the overwhelming urge to cover him from prying eyes or take him somewhere safer, away from everyone else.

“He shouldn’t even be here,” Wymack said quietly. “It’s not possible.”

Not even Andrew could wrap his mind around it. Before he could respond, Abby appeared in the doorway, her face pinched with worry and her travel kit tucked under her arm.

“David, what’s going on?” she asked. Her eyes roamed the gathered Foxes until it landed on Andrew in the center. Her eyes slid down to Neil. Shock flashed across her face, warring with disbelief. She covered her open mouth with one hand and gave a tiny shake of her head. “Neil,” she breathed behind her palm, as if spoken any louder he would disappear.

Abby only gave herself a moment before she rallied with a deep breath, face clearing as she steeled herself and nudged her way toward Andrew and Neil. Andrew’s face tightened but Abby either didn’t notice or didn’t care. She propped her first aid kit by the couch and kneeled beside it. When she reached for Neil’s wrist, Andrew’s hand shot out and stopped her from touching him.

Abby tore her eyes from Neil’s various cuts and bruises and met Andrew’s hard expression with a calm one of her own. “I need to see him,” she said, her voice level. “He’s hurt, Andrew.”
Andrew knew that. He also knew that taking Neil to the hospital was about the worst thing they
could do right now. Neil was supposed to be dead – and he was dead. There was no way he could
have survived what Nathan Wesninski had done to him. The world knew Neil Josten as dead and
buried, it wouldn’t be possible for him to be alive seven months later. Handing Neil over to the
hospital would be handing him over to the authorities. It only put him in more danger and Andrew
would never allow that to happen. Reluctantly, he backed off so Abby could take a look.

Abby gave him a grateful nod and shooed everyone out of the room to make space for her to work.
Andrew planted himself where he stood, but Wymack snapped his fingers in his face and told him
to get his ass moving. Andrew shot him a furious look but Wymack was having none of it.

“If I have to pick you up, I will,” he threatened as he opened the door and motioned Andrew to go
first. With a scowl, Andrew conceded and went through with one last look over his shoulder.

“How are you doing?” There were footsteps crunching the gravel behind him. Once upon a time,
those footsteps had belonged to Neil.

Andrew didn’t spare Nicky a glance. He’d followed Andrew to the roof when everyone got back
from the court, clearly waiting for a moment to open up where they could speak. Andrew had
mostly ignored him as he smoked through a cigarette, looking over the cars scattered in the parking
lot, but Nicky’s concerned gaze on the side of his face had quickly grated his nerves.

“You should be asking the one who was dead for over half a year.” Andrew flicked ash from the
butt and watched it scatter in the wind. When Nicky didn’t respond, Andrew took another long
drag and found it unsatisfying. He threw the half-finished cigarette to the pavement below.

“He’s still asleep,” Nicky said, voice dim. “And I’m worried about you.”

Andrew slanted him a look.

He’d never told Nicky the extent of what Neil had meant to him. He refused to talk about Neil to
anybody but Betsy, and on the rare occasions, Renee or Coach. But even then, it was like drawing
blood from a stone. Nicky didn’t know why Andrew broke so badly in the aftermath of Neil’s
death, but he’d been the one to hold Andrew’s crumbling pieces together in the spaces between
therapy appointments. During nights so late the rest of the world was asleep, when Andrew felt the
fissures cracking all over again, Nicky was there with two cups of hot chocolate and a listening ear,
even if Andrew never talked.

Seeing Neil all these months later was like shattering again. The moment Andrew saw him spread
out on the court, he felt himself falling through the air and the concrete coming up to meet him
fast. New blood from old wounds, a knife he had almost gotten unwedged from his ribs twisting in
a new angle. Andrew caught himself gripping his left arm, fingers tightening until it hurt, and
forced himself to stop.

In the corner of his eye, Nicky sat with his knees pulled up to his chest and his chin propped on his
knees. Devoid of his exaggerated cheer, he looked years older than he actually was. “I know you
have Betsy to talk to, but I’m here for you too, okay? I need you to know that.”

Andrew dropped his gaze. He felt suddenly exhausted just thinking about trying to talk about any
of what happened in the last twenty-four hours. Andrew itched to get into the Maserati and drive
somewhere very, very far away where he didn’t have to think about any of this.

Pushing up from the ground, Andrew shook gravel off his hands and left Nicky outside. He sailed
right past his dorm and took the stairs down to the first floor. He didn’t bother texting anyone that he was leaving; if they needed him, they could call. He drove for hours, merging onto the interstate and heading in no particular direction until the gray September sky turned to a dusty sunset.

When it was too dark to see without headlights, Andrew’s phone rang. He pressed answer and put it up to his ear.

Wymack’s voice on the other end had Andrew swerving off onto the next exit and turning around without a thought for the blaring horns he left behind. Two words: “He’s awake.”
Neil barely picked at his food. He supposed he should have been hungry since he’d hardly eaten anything since last March, but the chicken Abby made tasted like sawdust in his mouth, and it had nothing to do with her cooking.

He sat alone in the living room, watching the images flash across the television screen and wishing he could be at the court instead of Abby’s house, with nothing but the TV and the storm raging outside to keep him company.

Torrents of rain pounded against the window. A sudden flash of lightning illuminated the room, catching the rain pouring outside before it went dark again. The resulting boom of thunder nearly swallowed the voice from the television announcing another point for Breckenridge. Neil watched as Dan rallied the team as they took their places in the middle of the court with six minutes left of fourth quarter on the clock. He couldn’t hear what she said over the roar of the crowd, but she had that familiar look on her face, grit and determination to hold out until the end of the game, no matter how far behind they were.

Her words from two days ago echoed around Neil’s head, as loud as the thunder outside. You were dead, Neil. For seven months.

Not unconscious, not in the hospital recovering from his injuries. Dead.

Neil always knew that his father would be the one to kill him. On the run especially, he felt the tick of the time counting down until he would finally be on the other end of Nathan’s axe and cleaver. But he felt it as a kid, too. His father’s hairpin temper, an inferno in its own right. It was only a matter of time that Neil got burned.

He didn’t remember dying. Everything that led up to it, the phone call, the kidnapping, the lighter and the chloroform and the vicious gleam in his father’s eye as Neil scrambled away from him, he recalled perfectly. It played in a loop in his head, a backdrop to everything he did and thought since he woke up in Abby’s spare bedroom last Wednesday. He may not remember dying, but from the scars wrapped around his neck and each of his limbs, different from the circular burns and long slashes from a knife on his face and arms, it was clear that the Butcher had took his time carving Neil up. Had enjoyed it.

Nausea swirled in the pit of Neil’s stomach. He pushed the images away, the sound of an axe whistling through the air to meet its mark. He didn’t want to think about this anymore, so he focused on the game.

Kevin took a shot on goal and land it, putting the score to 5-7, Breckenridge’s favor. By the time the red faded from the goal lines, two of the freshmen were already fighting. One swung a punch and caught the other in the jaw, but a ref shoved them apart before the other could retaliate. Neil watched the squabble with bland interest. Infighting was common with Foxes, so Neil wasn’t
surprised. Especially with how the game was going so badly tonight. But he didn’t know those faces; if it weren’t for their orange jerseys, Neil wouldn’t have even known they were Foxes. They weren’t his Foxes, anyway.

Dan shouted at the striker who instigated the fight, shoving her finger in his face as Wymack switched him out for the other freshmen striker. Neil squinted at him, at the name and number on his back, wondering if he was one of the players he and Kevin and chosen last year. His last name seemed somewhat familiar. Jack, Neil’s mind supplied. He was the striker Kevin had chosen.

Neil ached to be on the court with them. He missed his Foxes, even if he was the one avoiding them and not the other way around. Perhaps it was easier this way, easier for Neil and for them. Neil knew that the Foxes were better off forgetting him, that they should have handed Neil over to police as soon as he woke up like he recommended. But Foxes were stubborn and Neil didn’t understand it, but they wanted to hold onto him.

Since he woke up Tuesday night, he’d spent most of his time drifting in and out of consciousness. This was the longest he’d stayed awake since he found out he had died in Baltimore after explaining everything to the Foxes.

There wasn’t much else to do besides sleep. He couldn’t go outside in case someone spotted him, and going to the game where there were live cameras filming every inch of the court was out of the question. It didn’t help that he felt exhausted, his limbs too heavy, his eyelids drooping with sleep if he so much as laid his head down. Before now, the only time he had felt completely awake was when he caught the first glimpse of Andrew, hovering in the back, silent as he listened to Neil’s story.

Abby told him that Andrew showed up on Tuesday night to see Neil, but he was already out like a light. Neil didn’t even remember it; he didn’t remember anything. One moment he was evading his father’s cleaver in a blood-stained basement and the next he became aware of a lumpy mattress, a blanket tucked tight around his body.

Andrew hadn’t said a word when the team had gathered around him, and he hadn’t tried to see Neil afterwards like some of the other Foxes had. Neil found himself missing his steady presence like an ache in his chest, a dull pain under his diaphragm every time he breathed.

The camera panned down the court to the home-side, where Andrew stood in the goalie box, leaning on his racquet as he watched the teams fight for the ball. He looked bored as ever, but he stood solid on the court. The last line of defense, unyielding and just as unforgivable. Neil felt another pang in his chest.

It was easier this way, Neil repeated to himself. He had lied to Andrew – to all of them – and had put them in danger. He knew about the riot, of course he did, and Dan had filled him in with details about who was injured and who had to be taken to the hospital. If Neil had never gotten himself mixed up in their lives, all to live in a fantasy where he could play Exy and not have to worry about the mob, then no one would have gotten hurt.

He felt another stab of guilt in his stomach.

The buzzer went off, announcing the end of the game before either team could score another point. Breckenridge fans cheered for their win as the teams lined up at half-court and shook hands. Dan and Kevin had reporter duty, Neil watched as they met the reporters in the outer ring and gave their pieces.

“There’s some kinks to work through, but the Foxes played well tonight,” Kevin said. Neil
recognized the Kevin’s expression though, the twitch in his camera-ready smile, and knew that the team was in for a verbal lashing as soon as the cameras were gone. “We won’t let one game keep us down.”

“Watch for us next time, will you?” Dan added, unclasping her gloves and stuffing them in her helmet. “We’re coming back with a vengeance.”

The reporters asked some final questions but Neil was hardly listening. Kevin and Dan followed the rest of the team to the changing rooms and the screen cut to the sports announcers, discussing Palmetto’s prospects for the coming season. Neil thought it was still to early too call, but the announcers seemed intent on ripping the Foxes to shreds.

He didn’t bother watching the rest. He turned the TV off in the middle of one announcer’s assessment of the Foxes cohesiveness with the new people on the team.

Abby would be home in an hour or so, as soon as the Foxes were done showering and getting checked for injuries, but Neil didn’t wait up. He scraped the rest of his food into the trashcan and left his plate by the sink before retreating to the bedroom. The curtains were drawn over the windows, but Neil pushed them aside and peered into the night. He couldn’t see anything past the downpour and his own reflection stared back at him. Neil yanked the curtains back in place and crawled into bed without changing his clothes.

The storm didn’t let up until well into the night. Hours went by until the rain turned to a slow drizzle as the storm clouds passed. When Neil finally fell asleep, he dreamt of a cleaver flashing through darkness, a sharp smile, and the screams that could have only been his own.

By the time Monday rolled around, Neil was ready to climb out the window just to have something to do. When he wasn’t watching reruns of past matches, he borrowed Abby’s computer to see what he’d missed these past months. He found his face plastered over every sports news site and a few articles from publishers like the New York Times and the Vox; the son of an infamous mobster, a rising Exy star, murdered.

At least his father was dead. There wasn’t a whole lot of coverage on what happened, but Neil was able to piece together that the Butcher was killed in a fire fight shortly after Neil’s own death. None of the articles he could find were clear on who else was involved and Neil was tired of seeing his father’s face, so he gave up looking.

A knock at the door disrupted Neil’s lax attention on the USC match against UT playing on the TV. Hitting the off button on the remote, Neil called to Abby that someone was at the door, but whoever had knocked was already pushing their way inside. Neil tensed, expecting trouble, but relaxed once he caught sight of Matt’s gel-spiked hair.

He suppressed a grimace when he noticed the concerned expression on Matt’s face.

Matt ambled in, watching Neil with that look in his eye like he wanted to ask if Neil was okay when everyone knew that he wasn’t. “Hey, buddy,” he said, too light. His smile was strained at the edges. “How are you feeling?”


“‘Fine,’ he says.” Matt stuck his hands in the pockets of his jacket and leaned against the far wall. He looked considering for a moment. “You can tell me if you’re really not fine, you know?”

Neil sighed, glancing at the TV remote he had abandoned on the couch cushion beside him.
While this past week had been boring, it had also been one of the weirdest of his life. He didn’t mean to avoid his teammates, but he couldn’t help feeling removed from them. He was gone for months and he wasn’t supposed to come back. The Foxes had surely moved on from him. There were hundreds of questions about how Neil was here, how he was alive, but he didn’t have answers for any of them.

Wymack had shown Neil the security footage of him bypassing the guards and passing out in the middle of the court hoping it would rejog his memory, but Neil didn’t remember any of it. It was unmistakably him in the video; it didn’t show his face or his hair with the hood pulled up over his head, but there was no one else it could have been.

Neil had broken into the Foxhole Court himself, the video showed him and him alone. There was only one set of footprints tracking mud through the building. No one knew what to make of it, least of all Neil, who was still adjusting to being dead and resurrected again. It was easier to avoid the questions he couldn’t answer and looks of concern altogether.

That didn’t change the fact Neil was climbing out of his skin with restlessness.

“Actually,” Neil said, standing from the couch. Matt perked up, eager that Neil was actually talking to someone after days of silence. “Can you help me convince Abby to let me go to the court? I haven’t been able to practice a long time.”

Matt’s eyebrows pulled together. “Practice?” he said with uncertainty.

“I know I’ve been gone for seven months,” Neil said quickly. “but I don’t expect to be part of the team again. I just need something to do. I’m going crazy cooped up in here.” He clenched his fists in his lap, imagining the weight of an Exy racquet in his hands. He wanted to feel the smooth handle, feel the rebound of an Exy ball through his arms when he swung at the goal.

Matt pushed his hand through his hair, mussing up the spikes as he thought. Then he smiled, and Neil felt himself sigh with relief.

“You’re still part of the team, no matter what,” he said. “I’m sure Coach won’t mind. Have you eaten dinner yet?”

“No, he hasn’t.” Abby appeared in the entrance way, rifling through her purse for her keys. She was dressed for the day; jeans and a loose white t-shirt, brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. Neil noticed the first aid travel kit in her hand. He scowled, realizing she was about to head over to the court for practice without him.

“We can grab something on the way,” Matt said, but he didn’t sound confident. He turned to Abby as if asking for permission. “I think I have some granola bars that Dan left in my truck.”

Abby’s mouth flattened into a thin line. Neil opened his mouth for another argument but was cut short at Abby’s nod.

“Fine,” she conceded. She turned to Neil. “But you’re going to take it easy. I still don’t know how any exertion is going to affect you.”

Neil nodded, but he didn’t think practice was going to be too much. He was brimming with energy he needed to get out, thoughts that only a few laps around the court could help him work through. He grabbed his shoes by the door and pulled on one of the spare shirts Abby had given him and followed her out the door.

“Neil, one more thing.” Neil stopped in the doorway when Matt called him back. He turned and
was met with two big arms around his torso, lifting him off the ground in a massive bear hug.

“Stop avoiding us,” Matt said against the top of Neil’s head. “We’re your friends, okay? We want to make sure you’re alright.”

Neil didn’t know how much he needed to hear those words until that moment. He still wasn’t comfortable with hugs, and maybe he never would be, but he nodded in appreciation all the same. Matt gave one last squeeze and let him go.

Practice didn’t start off well, to say the least. As soon as Neil walked into the foyer with Matt, the freshmen exchanged incredulous looks and whispered behind their hands. Jack looked Neil up and down, contempt dripping from the action.

“I didn’t know we were in zombie land today,” he said loudly. “Why is –”

“Neil!” Nicky ignored Jack’s remark as he bounded over. He slung an arm over his shoulders and squeezed. Neil wiggled out of his grasp but Nicky didn’t seem to mind. “I’m really glad you’re here. I was beginning to think we’d never see your pretty face ever again. Abby’s been keeping her all to herself, so selfish. A real shame.”

Neil shrugged uncomfortably. Abby wasn’t the one preventing them from seeing him, he’d told her to keep them away. Though the Foxes didn’t seem to care. Dan welcomed him with a pat on the back and Kevin nodded in his direction. Renee smiled at him and even Allison stood to properly inspect Neil.

Eyes sliding past the fussing, Neil found that Andrew wasn’t there. He turned an alarmed look to Nicky.

“He goes to the locker room before everyone else,” Nicky said, guessing what Neil was thinking. “It’s not you, he’s been doing that for months. Come on, I hear you’re joining us today.”

Nicky led Neil to the changing rooms, but Andrew wasn’t there either.

It got better once Neil had a racquet in his hand. Abby gave him orders to take it easy, but every thought in Neil’s mind disappeared once he was on the court.

The Foxhole Court looked the same as it always did, and Neil had missed every orange and white inch of it. He was the first on the half-court line, taking his place with a scrimmage. Allison knocked her stick against Neil’s as she raised the ball to be dealt.

The first couple matches went relatively smoothly, but the calm never lasted forever with the Foxes. Jack and Kevin had switched spots so Jack was to Neil’s left. His focus should have been on the ball but he portioned his time with searing remarks and nasty looks, usually directed at Neil.

“Problem?” Neil snapped half-way through practice. There was a lull in the match. Kevin took a shot on the goal and Andrew blocked it, rebounding it across the court. Wymack took the time to call for a water break.

Jack sneered at him. “Just wondering how hard Coach must have hit his head to allow Frankenstein on the court,” he said. One of the freshmen backliners, a girl who’s name Neil couldn’t remember, snorted. “Did he tell everyone to not check you too hard in case your head falls off?”

“Jack,” Dan warned, making her way toward them.

Jack pretended not to hear her. “Come on, it’s suspicious how you show up out of nowhere and
expect a place on the team. You don’t deserve to be here.”

Rolling his eyes, Neil elected to take the high road and ignore him. But when he walked away to take his spot on the half-court line, Jack grabbed him by the elbow and spun him around.

“Hey, I’m talking to you,” he said, jabbing a finger in Neil’s chest.

Neil wrenched his arm out of his grip and shoved back. Jack made another grab for him but was stopped by a racquet thrust between them.

“I don’t think Neil wants to talk to you,” Andrew said slowly. His voice was quiet and bland, but there was a sharpness to his expression. Jack made to get past him but must have thought better of it when Andrew took a warning step towards him.

“Whatever,” Jack said, brushing him off. “You two can be freaks together.”

“Thanks,” Neil said quietly when he left. Andrew slid him an impassive look. His face was blank, but Neil drank it in every line of it anyway. Andrew held his stare for a moment longer without saying anything. Neil wanted to say something, wanted to know where he stood with Andrew, but Wymack ordered them back to their spots on the court before he could think of anything.

Andrew slipped away to the goalie box and Neil watched him go, wishing he would keep looking at him for a little bit longer.

After practice, Neil stayed behind and let the others have the locker room first. He busied himself with collecting the Exy balls and shutting down the goals with Kevin. They worked in quiet tandem, but Neil could feel the tension radiating off of Kevin. Neil knew Kevin had something to say so he waited, but Kevin remained quiet.

Once the team had cleared out from the changing rooms, Neil took his extra pair of clothes to the shower stalls and locked the door behind him. He showered quickly, scrubbing the sweat from practice off of his skin. He thought about the mud when he had woken up, how it had taken two showers for him to feel completely clean. Neil shook his head and turned off the water.

He avoided the mirror when he left the shower stall, but somehow his gaze still caught.

His reflection was distorted in the foggy mirror; he could only see a blur of his tanned skin and hair, dark from the water dripping onto his shirt. Without realizing what he was doing, Neil found himself reaching out and wiping at the mirror with his sleeve. His face stared back at him, blank and strange in the glass.

Neil’s skin pricked as his vision narrowed to his eyes. Steely and cold, his father stared back at him. Neil felt his hands drop to his sides. He wanted to tear his eyes away, cover his face, anything, but he couldn’t. He stayed rooted to the spot, staring until his vision blurred. He thought he saw movement in the mirror that didn’t belong to him. A twitch of his lips, a gleam in his glacial eyes.

The shower faucet dripped somewhere far away. Everything else in the locker room faded until the only thing Neil could see was his face in the mirror. The ground tilted under his feet and Neil felt himself falling sideways. His fingers curled around the edge of the sink, hands gripping tight in an attempt to anchor himself.

He leaned forward without realizing it. The sink dug into his stomach as Neil’s breath ghosted across the glass, his face mere inches away from the mirror. He wasn’t even sure what he was
looking at anymore.

A bang sounded behind him and Neil startled, breaking out of his trance. He flipped around to find Nicky grimacing apologetically.

“Sorry,” he said. “You were taking awhile so Andrew sent me to fetch you.”

“That’s okay.” Neil said faintly. He had his back turned to the mirror. He didn’t want to turn around and see his reflection and risk getting caught again. It disturbed him, more than usual, and he didn’t know why.

Oblivious to Neil’s disconcertment, Nicky lead Neil out of the locker room to the parking lot where two cars waited. Neil rubbed at his eyes, deciding that he was just tired after a long practice. His mind was playing tricks on him.

“Well, goodnight,” Nicky said. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Neil replied, not quite loud enough to be heard. Nicky didn’t seem to mind. He waved and disappeared in the back of the Maserati idling at the curb.

“Are you okay?” Abby asked when Neil approached. Neil felt her hand on his shoulder but the sensation was far away. It took everything he had not to flinch from it.

“Yeah,” he repeated. “Everything’s fine.”

Abby didn’t look convinced but she unlocked the car with a click of her key fob. She didn’t say anything else on the way home, but Neil could sense her glancing at him. He knew they would be having a conversation about this in the morning, but for now Neil went straight to bed. His head had cleared up a bit on the ride, but he couldn’t shake the feeling of someone else’s eyes watching him.

31 days until Halloween...

Chapter End Notes

and that's chapter two, i hope y'all enjoyed!!

big thank you to everyone who left comments and kudos on the last chapter, i read every single one and it really means so much to me!!

thanks for reading <3
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

i’m super excited for this chapter, i woke up at 6am and couldn't fall back asleep again sjkhdsk enjoy! :)  

TW: dissociation, brief mentions of violence, mentions of baltimore, neil has a nightmare where he almost suffocates

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Palmetto had a home game against Belmont on Thursday night. Although he had attended every practice and gym day with the team, Neil still wasn’t allowed to go. He didn’t expect to be allowed to play, not during a game, never again, but he wanted to at least be there. Still, Wymack said it was too risky and Abby had agreed.

Instead of being at the one place he wanted to be at most in the world, Neil was planted on the cushion of Abby’s old couch, watching the Foxes warm up from the wrong side of the screen. Before she left, Abby had left him some dinner keeping warm on the stove, some sort of stew with potatoes and carrots. Neil prodded at a particularly large piece of carrot and pushed it around the bowl rather than eating it.

The Foxes were only half-way through warmups when Neil’s mind began to wander. Ten minutes until the coin-toss and Neil set his empty bowl on the coffee table, head turned to the window where the sun was beginning its descent in the sky outside. Drawing his socked feet onto the couch, he plucked at the worn threads of his oversized hoodie as he thought.

It had been almost two weeks since they found Neil, and since then he hasn’t had any problems. His scars were already healed, no risk of infection, and he had no open wounds that would pose any sort of problem. Not even so much as a sprained ankle or a sore shoulder. If he went out for a run tonight, just to let off some steam, Neil was sure Abby wouldn’t mind.

Neil checked that the game was set to record and turned off the TV right as the whistle blew for the game to start. He thought about calling Abby to tell her that he was going out, but he didn’t have a cell phone and Abby would be too busy watching the Foxes and tending to any of their injuries to check her phone. And anyway, Neil would be back before the game ended and Abby got home.

The road was deserted when Neil stepped out. He wasn’t surprised; there wasn’t much to do on a Thursday night, not unless you were already at the stadium to watch the game. Occasionally a car would pass by, but none lingered. Just in case, Neil pulled his hood over his head, shielding his face from any prying eyes.

Light from the setting sun caught the leaves above him, yellows and browns dangling from branches and drifting to the ground below. Neil started on a slow jog around the block to warm up from the chilly air. He picked up pace after his first lap around the neighborhood when he could feel the tips of his fingers again. He chose a direction that led away from Palmetto and ran until he couldn’t hear his thoughts over the slap of his feet over the pavement.
The houses were starting to blur together when Neil stopped to catch his breath. He didn’t have a watch to check the time, but the last tendrils of light were fading from the sky and soon enough it would be too dark to see without the streetlamps on either side of the road. His hoodie was starting to stick to him, so Neil checked to make sure he was truly alone and shoved the sleeves of his hoodie up to his elbows when he found the coast to be clear. He tugged at the strings of his hoodie and turned around to head back to Abby’s house, deciding not to press his luck in case the traffic leaving the game was lighter than usual.

He came back to awareness some indeterminable time later, walking along the side of the road, head down and feet certainly going in the wrong direction.

It was well into the night now; the waxing moon was hardly more than a sliver, a cut in the dark fabric of the night sky. Clouds blocked the stars, and the streetlights that lit the road flickered when Neil walked under them. Neil thought he heard the screech of a bird, but on second thought it sounded more like the squeal of tires on asphalt. He looked up and down the street but there was no one.

No cars. No people. Nothing.

None of the houses that lined the road looked familiar. Most of the windows were dark, curtains drawn or fluttering from unseen hands pulling them back. Cold washed over Neil. He didn’t know if it was paranoia or if someone was really peering at him from one of those dark windows.

It was clear that Neil was lost, but he wouldn’t knock on any of the doors to get directions, so his best bet was to retrace his steps and find a road that would take him back to Abby’s house. It took five minutes of walking for Neil to realize it was futile; he couldn’t remember a thing about how he ended up there or how long he had been going in the wrong direction.

After another ten minutes of wandering around the suburban streets, Neil sat on the edge of the curb, indistinguishable from the countless other curbs on the other streets Neil had walked up and down. For once he almost wished he had a phone. At least then he would have a way to contact someone to come find him.

He was about ready to give up, elbows draped over his knees, hand cradling his chin, when bright headlights turned on the road and pointed directly at Neil. He hadn’t seen any other cars driving around since he first started his run.

Neil shot up, scrambling to his feet, and ducked behind a couple overflowing trashcans abandoned on the side of the road. His heart kicked up a furious beat and his mother’s voice in his head whispered run. Neil watched the car approach at a crawling pace, too slow to just be passing through. Whoever was in the car was looking for something.

Neil was about ready to hit the ground running when the car pulled into the circle of light from the streetlamps. The dark bulk of the car turned to a sleek monster Neil recognized and he felt himself relax when the window of the Maserati rolled down to reveal Nicky’s face in the passenger seat.

“Thank god,” Nicky said as the car slammed to a stop inches from Neil’s tattered running shoes. “We’ve been looking for you for hours, where have you been?”

The interior light turned on and Neil could see Andrew at the wheel, leveling him an unreadable look. Neil felt at once dizzy and relieved. “I got lost,” he said, eyes sliding back to Nicky. “I didn’t realize I was out for so long.”

Shaking his head, Nicky motioned for him to get in. “Well, come on,” he said. “I need to text
Wymack and tell him we found you.”

Neil slid into the backseat and Andrew drove off before he could even get his seatbelt buckled. Neil let his eyes wander over him but Andrew kept his head turned firmly to the road. It took Neil a moment to realize Nicky was watching him with a frown, turned completely around in his seat so he was looking at him over the headrest.

“We were really worried,” he said when Neil noticed him. He ticked off his fingers. “You didn’t tell anyone you were leaving, you could have been hurt, or kidnapped, or – ”

“I’m fine,” Neil interrupted, exasperated with Nicky’s fussing. Andrew snorted from the front seat but said nothing when Neil shot him a look. “I just went for a run.”

Nicky folded his hands around the headrest and narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Right.”

“Sit in your seat the right way or walk,” Andrew said tonelessly. Nicky threw his hands in the air and turned around, buckling his seatbelt once he was sitting properly.

“You can’t pretend you weren’t concerned too,” he grumbled, slumping against the leather. “You practically dragged me out here to look for him. I would have anyway, of course I would, but you didn’t have to be so – ”


It took fifteen minutes before Neil began to recognize any of the surroundings, even with Andrew driving above the speed limit. The time displayed on the dash told Neil that he had been walking along the road for hours before Andrew and Nicky found him. Unease crawled across his skin, he didn’t like the idea of so much time passing with Neil noticing.

Andrew pulled into the parking lot of Fox Tower instead of going straight to Abby’s. He stopped out front, car idling across three parking spots. “Get out,” he said.

Nicky didn’t question it, he unbuckled his seatbelt and left without another word. Andrew turned a look on Neil in the rear-view mirror. “Front seat.”

As soon as Neil had sat down in his new seat, Andrew was reversing out of the parking lot again. He didn’t say anything the entire time to Abby’s. He didn’t return any of Neil’s looks, either. When they got to the house and Andrew killed the engine, Neil stayed in his seat.

“Andrew – ” he said. He cut off when Andrew reached over and grabbed him by the chin, turning his head so they were face to face.

“You weren’t trying to run.” He said it as a statement, voice dull with no inflection, but Neil heard the question all the same.

“No,” Neil said. “No. I wouldn’t leave.”

“You’re still a rabbit, Neil Josten.”

Neil closed his eyes. He knew he missed Andrew, missed his voice and the feel of his hands on him, but he didn’t realize how much until he heard the sound of his name on Andrew’s tongue. He swallowed the growing lump in his throat.

“I’m a Fox, too,” he said softly. Andrew made a small sound in the back of his throat. It could have been anything; agreement, disapproval, Andrew simply clearing his throat. Neil opened his eyes
and noticed that Andrew was frowning, face turned away.

Neil tilted his head until they were eye to eye again. Slowly, Andrew met his eye. “I’m here to stay,” Neil said.

Tension Neil didn’t know was there bled from Andrew’s body. His shoulders dropped and his hand on Neil’s chin relaxed to the side of his neck, palm calloused and warm against Neil’s skin. He looked undone in all the little ways; the small crease between his eyebrows, the twist of his mouth. Neil wanted to reach out, wanted to see how much between them had changed, but he didn’t dare move until Andrew gave the sign that he wanted him to.

“Andrew,” Neil said again, almost a whisper. He was sure it was the only thing he was capable of saying in that moment. A part of him still marveled that Andrew would ever let his guard down around Neil.

Andrew moved then, but he didn’t pull away like Neil thought he would. His head dipped until his face and the micro-expressions that Neil was beginning to relearn were safely tucked away. Andrew didn’t touch him except for the hand still cupped on the other side of Neil’s neck, fingers brushing the hair behind his ear. But Neil could feel Andrew’s hair tickling the underside of his jaw, Andrew’s nose brushing the racing pulse in his neck, so light Neil was sure he had imagined it.

Almost touching, but not quite. With Andrew so close like this, Neil was sure he could hear Neil’s heart pounding in his chest, the drum-beat rhythm that gave away just how unraveled he was. Neil tipped his head against Andrew’s, soft enough to be an accident.

“Don’t do that again,” Andrew said, voice low. His breath ghosted across the sensitive skin of Neil’s neck and Neil suppressed a shiver. Andrew must have felt it anyway, he was too close not to. He dropped his hand to Neil’s shoulder, falling down his back. Neil’s mouth went dry.

“I won’t,” he promised, breathing in a shaky sigh.

He reached for Andrew’s hand and caught hold of his sleeve. Neil turned his head into him, he didn’t know what he was going to do, but the porch light turned on and Abby stepped out with Wymack behind her before he could figure it out. Andrew released him, smooth mask firmly in place. He looked as if nothing had happened, as if Neil’s heart wasn’t still racing from his touch, as if he hadn’t just hidden his face in the crook of Neil’s neck.

“Columbia tomorrow,” Andrew said without looking at him. He fidgeted with the back pocket of his jeans until he had a pack of cigarettes and a lighter in hand. He stuck one in his mouth but didn’t light it. “I can pick you up after class.”

“I don’t have any club clothes,” Neil said. “I’ve been wearing whatever Abby has on hand.”

“I noticed,” Andrew said drily. He turned the key in the ignition and the Maserati roared to life. “I’ll bring something.”

“Okay,” Neil said. Abby was on her way over, so Neil got out to meet her. Andrew held his stare through the windshield and pulled out of the driveway, headlights flashing on in a wash of white light.

Neil expected a lecture from Abby and Wymack, at the very least a few stern words and maybe a ban from practice for a week, but Abby just ushered him inside and closed the door behind him. They waited for Neil to talk but Neil didn’t know what he could say.
“Did we win the game, at least?” he asked when the awkward silence stretched for too long.

Wymack’s mouth twitched. “We smoked ‘em,” he said. “Did you watch it before you went gallivanting into the night?”

“I recorded it.”

“Good, you can watch it when you’re done running the twenty laps I’m assigning you in practice tomorrow.” Wymack jabbed a stern finger at him. “Next time you leave the house, you tell me or Abby. Otherwise I’m signing you up for the longest marathon I can find. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach,” Neil said automatically. They both knew it wasn’t much of a punishment. If anything, running was more of a reward, but Neil knew Wymack’s rough brand of concern when he saw it. He almost appreciated it.

“Now get to bed. I’ve had enough drama for today.”

Neil gave him a sarcastic salute, the two-fingered one he learned from Andrew so many months ago, and went upstairs for a shower.

Wymack’s gruff voice followed him but Neil didn’t turn around. He couldn’t shake the bad feeling turning his stomach to a rock. The mirror incident was easy to brush off, nerves and tiredness. But this, losing track of time, hours passing without Neil so much as knowing, was something entirely different.

All Neil could do was hope that it wouldn’t happen again.

When Andrew picked him up the next night, Abby made him promise he would keep an eye on Neil at all times. Neil distinctly felt like he was being babysat, but Andrew agreed and they left as soon as Neil was dressed in his new club clothes Andrew bought him.

The shirt was made out of a black fabric, with long sleeves and thumb holes that would prevent them from sliding up and revealing Neil’s scars. Even in a dark club like Eden’s Twilight, they wouldn’t be too hard to spot. Neil didn’t want them to ride up in the slick heat of the hundreds of dancing bodies and let anyone accidentally see them. Despite the shirt being tighter than what Neil was used to, it didn’t leave him feeling constricted. The black jeans were similar, with rips up and down his legs. Neil noticed that none of the rips showed the scarring on his knees and ankles.

“When did you have time to go shopping?” Neil asked Andrew, tugging the turtle-neck collar of his shirt higher so it wouldn’t expose the ugly rope of a scar across his neck.

Andrew shot him a sideways glance before returning to the road. “I had Nicky pick up the jeans. The shirt used to be mine but it doesn’t fit anymore.”

Neil smoothed his hand down the shirt, suddenly reverent. It was soft and light and Neil wished he could have seen Andrew in it. He didn’t feel uncomfortable for wearing someone else’s clothes – he’d worn second-hand clothes from thrift shops all over the world for almost half his life – but the thought of Andrew owning this shirt and wearing it made something wordless buzz under his skin. He wanted to pull it over his nose and see if it still smelled like him too. He didn’t, because Nicky, Kevin, and Aaron were also in the car and Neil didn’t want to be weird.

Eden’s was packed when they arrived. Neil glanced around as Andrew cut through the crowd to find a table. It was only a week into October, but the place was already decked out in fake spider webs and glowing skull décor and every other song pumping from the speakers seemed to be
Halloween-themed. The bartenders wore tight shirts with ghosts made of flashing silver sequins or red glitter accompanied by devil horns. Neil even spotted fake vampire fangs when the bartender serving them flashed a smile and began making their drinks.

“Is Roland here?” Nicky shouted over the heavy crunch of the music. He elbowed his way to the bar, craning his neck to see into the bar.

Andrew shook his head, loading the various mixed drinks and a can of sprite onto a serving tray and hoisting it onto his shoulder. “He’s off tonight.”

Neil’s eyes dropped to the floor. He didn’t know why that put a stone in his stomach.

He knew Andrew and Roland used to hook up but he didn’t know if that was still an ongoing thing. The fact had never bothered him before, but images of them meeting in storage-room closets at the back of the club, all fast-hands and burning kisses made something curdle in Neil’s stomach. He shook his head, shooing the thoughts away. He didn’t know how to feel, and he certainly didn’t want to think about it.

Neil didn’t have a stake on Andrew, and he wouldn’t pretend that he did. Andrew was his own person and Neil knew when getting involved with him that what they had was strictly physical. It was nothing, and after Neil had died seven months ago, he couldn’t expect Andrew to not get off with another man ever again. It wasn’t fair to him, and Neil would never want that for him either.

Still, Neil couldn’t shake the squeezing feeling in his chest as he made his way to the table Aaron and Kevin were saving.

“Earth-to-Neil.” Neil blinked to find Nicky hovering in front of him, snapping his fingers in front of his face. Nicky hooked a thumb behind him at the writhing crowd on the dancefloor. “We’re going dancing. Wanna come?”

“No thanks,” Neil responded. When Nicky pouted at him, Neil opened his can of sprite and waved it at him. “Sorry, have to drink this before it gets warm.”

Nicky rolled his eyes but downed another shot and disappeared onto the dancefloor without complaint.

Neil sank into one the seats at the table. He and Andrew were the only ones there. Aaron had left as soon as everyone else arrived and Kevin followed Nicky into the crowd shortly after.

Andrew had three shots lined up in front of him, his finger circling the rim of the shot glass, amber liquid clinging to the side of his finger. Neil averted his eyes and forced himself to look at anything other than Andrew, but he was magnetic and Neil was inevitably drawn to him.

They sat in silence until Andrew finished his second shot. No awkward tension hung in the air but it was far from comfortable. Neil couldn’t stop squirming in his seat, the stickiness from beer spilled on the table clinging to the fabric of his shirt.

“Question, Neil,” Andrew said suddenly, setting his shot glass down with a loud thump. Neil’s eyes jumped to him, relieved that he had something to do other than sip at his soda and try to avoid looking at Andrew. The relief was short-lived.

“Tell me, why were you so adamant about breaking off our deal?” Andrew said. Andrew didn’t clarify, but they both knew they were referring to the bus ride to Binghamton.

“You knew you were going to die.” The accusation hung in the air but before Neil could confirm
or deny, Andrew folded his arms across the table. “I want to know the truth.”

Neil exhaled a long breath through his nose. “Yes,” he said, resigned.

Andrew’s jaw clenched as he leaned back against his seat. He said nothing as he regarded Neil with an expression too steely to be bored. Neil’s eyes dipped to the sweating soda can in front of him, beads of condensation running down the side.

“I was going to tell you,” he tried to say.

Andrew only continued to stare at him.

“I was.”

“A little too late for that, hm?” Andrew said, voice almost mocking. Neil flinched and something shifted in Andrew’s eyes. Neil could have imagined it, but he thought Andrew’s voice was a shade softer when he said, “Why didn’t you?”

“I wanted to tell you everything but they were in the locker room,” Neil said. He shook his head miserably. The fear that washed over him when he received Lola’s phone call was nothing to the break he felt in his chest when he realized he would never get the chance to explain to Andrew. When it hit him that he’d never see him again. “Somebody could have gotten hurt if I started spilling the truth and I didn’t want to risk that. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t fucking apologize,” Andrew snarled. Neil could see the anger in his expression, hidden in the line of his mouth and the tightness of his shoulders, but he didn’t think Andrew was angry at him. This rage was directed inwards. “You’re such a fucking martyr.”

It was Neil’s turn to say nothing. Andrew glared at the table, fingers flexing with agitation around one of the empty shot glasses. When he looked back up at Neil, his expression was furious. It was the most emotion Neil had seen out of him since last January, when Allison had slapped Aaron across the face and nearly got a broken neck for it.

“I’ll kill them. All of them.” Andrew slammed down the glass. His fiery eyes could have burned holes through the sleeve of Neil’s shirt and Neil knew he was thinking about the scars hidden underneath them. “I never should have let you out of that deal. You were bound to get yourself killed when you left my sight.”

Neil wanted to say that it wasn’t Andrew’s fault, that Neil’s death was never on him, but he didn’t. “Most of them are already dead,” he said instead.

“Not good enough,” Andrew responded.

Silence lapsed the table again. The music was loud in Neil’s ears, the hot air sticky in his lungs. For a moment, he couldn’t breathe. His eyes darted to the nearest exits and he debated leaving to get some fresh air. He didn’t move, there was one last thing he needed to know.

He took as deep of a breath as he could. “What happened afterwards?” he asked. “After – ”


Andrew’s mouth flattened into a grim line as he picked up the last shot. Instead of drinking it, he traced the rim with his finger. Neil was beginning to notice a pattern. “We stayed in Baltimore for a few days when you didn’t show up in any of the hospitals,” he said. “I – the others thought you just weren’t cooperating with the authorities again or you were taken to a hospital a little farther away
and that’s why we couldn’t find you. No one wanted to leave until we got answers.

“Some pig named Agent Browning called to confirm your death the second night we were there.” Andrew’s throat bobbed. He went quiet for a long time, his finger continuing the distracted motion on the glass as he watched with a distant expression. With each second that passed, the wrinkle between Andrew’s eyes grew more pronounced.

“Andrew?” Neil prompted in a whisper. He didn’t think Andrew could hear him over the music, but Andrew blinked twice and slammed back the shot.

“We held a funeral in Palmetto,” he said, voice rough from the whiskey. “Then your uncle took you back to Maryland to be buried and left without telling us anything. I had to get the answers from Kevin.”

Neil scowled. “He told you everything?”

“What he could.” Andrew waved around Neil’s irritation. “I would have choked the life out of him if he hadn’t given me anything,” he said, nonchalant. “Kevin always did have a strong survival instinct. Stronger than you anyway.”

Neil stared at him in shock. “What about your deal?”

Andrew shrugged. “I didn’t care in the moment.”

Neil studied him, but Andrew was staring out across the dancefloor, bored expression back in place. He had seen first-hand the fierce lengths Andrew would go to protect Kevin. If anyone had so much as laid a hand on him, they were at high-risk of losing it completely. For Andrew to violate his deal with Kevin so extremely was unthinkable.

For the first time since Neil got back, he really considered what might have happened to Andrew in his absence. He always assumed Andrew was only attracted to him physically, after all that’s why Neil allowed himself to want Andrew in the first place, it had never occurred to him that Neil had meant more to him in the way Andrew had meant more to Neil. The lines had changed on both sides and Neil hadn’t even noticed.

Neil hated himself in that moment with an intensity that felt like a knife twisting in his ribs. Despite missing Andrew so much the past two weeks, he never wanted Andrew to get hurt from his inevitable death. Neil attracted death like a fruit to flies and Andrew was supposed to be the one safe from it.

He thought about running again. Leaving before Andrew could get hurt. Old instincts die hard, only this time, Neil wouldn’t be running to save himself.

As if he could read his mind, Andrew straightened in his seat, his spine going straight as a rod. He reached over to grab a fistful of Neil’s shirt. “Don’t you dare leave again,” he said, giving the shirt a soft pull. “Or die. You’re not allowed.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Neil said, hoping Andrew would believe him and wondering if he believed it himself. “I just got here.”

Andrew searched his face for several long seconds before relaxing in his seat again. “Good,” he said, and Neil wondered how he ever thought he could leave him.

The first dream happened on Tuesday night, exactly two weeks after Neil woke up in the middle of
the Foxhole Court.

At first, he didn’t realize it was a dream. It didn’t feel like one, so vivid and intricate were the details. If anything, it was closer to the nightmares that plagued him for as long as he could remember. Before he died, even before he ran when he was ten, nothing but a duffel on his shoulder and his mom keeping a tight grip on his wrist.

But this, this was something else entirely.

The first thing Neil was aware of was the mud, filling his mouth and eyes, choking him. He clawed at it, gasping for air but only getting more dirt in his mouth for his struggles. His fingernails were broken and bloodied as he dug his way through the dirt. He couldn’t feel his legs, not yet.

It was dark and cold and all Neil could do was dig and hope he wasn’t digging himself into a deeper hole. He couldn’t remember why he was in this hole, or who had put him there, all that mattered was getting to the surface again. Every direction was wrong. Neil didn’t know if he was right side up or completely upside down. His lungs screamed at him. Mud fell in his eyes, his nose, his mouth. He needed air.

Cold flooded his body and his head pounded in his ears. Just when he thought he was going to pass out and suffocate, Neil’s hand breached the surface and air flooded his tiny cavern. He choked with how hard he gasped; his lungs desperate for the fresh air. A hand curled around his wrist and he –

He woke up.

24 days until Halloween...

Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading!

i haven't had the time to respond yet with life being so busy, but i read each and every comment and appreciate them so much!! thank you <33 it makes me so happy to know y'all enjoy reading this as much as i enjoy writing it :D
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

TW: lots of mentions of Neil’s scars, dissociation, nightmares

The temperature plunged that night, and Neil woke up in pain. He sat up, a small gasp escaping his
lips, and checked the alarm clock. He had just enough time for a shower before he and Abby would
be leaving for practice, but when he swung his legs off the bed, it hurt so badly he curled in on
himself. He squeezed his eyes shut, gritting his teeth until the pounding in his head began to fade.

It was his scars that hurt, one big aching throb all over his body. The new ones hurt the most, the
ones his father had carved into him in Baltimore. The snaking lines around his wrists and the
creases of his elbows, jagged by his ankles, and the curving ragged scars around his calves and the
base of his neck were the worst. Neil rubbed his wrist, but his fingers did little to assuage the
horrible ache.

It was a little easier the second time Neil eased himself back up, but the pain made him slow. A
shower would have to come after practice, then.

With a grunt, Neil pushed himself the rest of the way out of bed and fished a clean t-shirt and jeans
from the dresser. Abby had scrounged up a few pairs of clothes that he could wear since all of his
were long gone, but most of them were old and didn’t fit him right. He didn’t necessarily mind
them, but Wymack had told him more than once that he needed to get more than five shirts and
two pairs of jeans.

Neil held up the shirt, the baby blue fabric soft in his hands, and pulled it over his head with as
much grace as he could manage when it felt like someone had just taken a hammer to all of his
joints. The jeans were a different affair, and after struggling for several minutes he decided to just
go in the sweats he was already wearing. He grabbed his hoodie off the floor and tied it around his
shoulders, deciding it was a problem for after breakfast.

Abby noticed his stiff walk when he made his way to the kitchen. She was sat at the table with a
steaming coffee mug cupped in her hands, a plate with the remnants of breakfast in front of her.
She set her mug down on her plate when Neil ambled in.

“Where do you hurt?” she asked.

Neil loaded a plate up with eggs and sausage and carefully lowered himself into the seat across
from her. He had learned a long time ago that lying to Abby was useless, she’d get the information
out of him eventually and it was easier to just be forthright. “Everywhere,” he said through his
teeth. “It happens when it gets cold.”

Abby hummed. “I have heating packs in my first aid kit and I’ll get you some compression pads on
my way back from practice. Until then, you should take it easy and –”

“I’m going to practice,” Neil said. He sent his fork skidding across the table when his hand jerked
forward, almost of its own accord. Neil eyed it warily.
Abby handed the fork back to him with an unimpressed look. “You’re supposed to rest when you’re hurt,” she said. “Not keep going until your body gives out.”

“I got eight hours of sleep last night,” Neil argued. “I’m just sore.”

That wasn’t strictly true. While he had eventually fallen asleep after he woke in the middle of the night, covered in sweat with his lungs heaving for air, it had taken him hours. He didn’t remember the dream that woke him, but he couldn’t shake the feeling of an unforgiving grip around his wrist and the taste of mud filling his mouth.

Abby set her empty mug on her plate and got up to put them in the sink. “You push yourself too hard,” she said on her way back. Neil scowled, glaring at the floral table cloth underneath his scarred hand. He yanked the sleeve of his hoodie over his knuckles so he wouldn’t have to see the ugly scarring anymore.

Abby was staring at him but Neil wouldn’t meet her eyes. He pushed his eggs around the plate, mashing them with his fork instead of eating them.


Neil shook his head, frustrated with himself. He considered saying nothing, stewing in silence until Abby let him be, but the words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.

“I don’t want to be left behind,” he said quietly. “I don’t want them to forget about me.”

He still felt seven-months jetlagged despite having weeks to find stable ground again. He was lagging behind the rest of the world, and if he didn’t keep up, it would leave him in the dust. Every day Neil still spent figuring out what had happened after he died, hours parsing where he stood in tandem to everything else. He wondered if he should even be here, or if this was all a huge mistake and he belonged in the ground again.

Abby placed her hand over Neil’s and waited until he looked at her. “They’re not going to forget you, Neil. You are a Fox. Family. We don’t leave behind family, no matter what happens.”

Neil nodded, his eyes dropping back to the table cloth. Abby let his hand go with a warm squeeze and Neil tucked into his breakfast. Neil ate the sausage and a few pieces of toast, but decided to leave most of his mashed eggs unfinished.

Abby did let him go to practice in the end, but with a strict warning to take it easy and sit out when he needed to.

Neil’s body hurt throughout practice, but the aching let up a bit once Neil was able to stretch out his muscles during warm-ups. Kevin barking orders at him and the rest of the striker line didn’t help.

Since the schedule was released and Palmetto was to play Edgar Allen in a couple weeks, Kevin was relentless, in practice and out of it, and he expected the same from the rest of the team. The Ravens had taken a huge blow after Riko’s death and Jean’s transfer to USC, but they were coming back with a vengeance after narrowly losing to USC the year before. Neil understood why Kevin was being more demanding; the Ravens would be craving blood by the time the Foxes played them and Kevin wanted them to be prepared, but Neil’s temper was wearing thin.

It boiled over half way through practice when the Foxes filed onto the outer court for a water break. Kevin took Neil to the side, pulling his arm for him to follow. Neil was glad he had worked
out some of the soreness in his body, Kevin’s grip was like iron and made the throbbing in his
scars flare up again. Luckily, Kevin didn’t notice or he’d bench Neil for the rest of practice in a
heartbeat. Neil was already all too aware of Abby checking up on him every few minutes.

When they were a sizeable distance away from everyone else, Kevin rounded on Neil.

“Focus,” he said, snagging his fingers in the grill of Neil’s helmet and giving it a shake. “Instead of
slacking off, show me that you know this.”

Neil batted his hands away. He felt anger rising up in his chest, his temper a hairpin away from
exploding. It was bad enough that he was struggling through an aching body riddled with scars, he
didn’t want to have to deal with Kevin on top of it. He succinctly summed up his entire thought
process into a firm, “Fuck you.”

Kevin eyed him haughtily. “Drop your attitude and put actual effort into practice before I decide to
stop teaching you. You’re seven months behind and we don’t have time for,” Kevin made a
circular motion this his fingers, “this.”

That brought Neil up short. He shook his head instead of trying to figure it out. “What does it
matter? I’m just here to practice, and it’s not like I’ll ever play with the team again. And we’re not
even going to night practice anymore.”

“No yet,” Kevin corrected. “As soon as you’ve adjusted to practicing with the team, we can start
up night practice again. You don’t mesh well with some of the freshmen, which is a problem. We
need a cohesive team for this to work.”

“For what to work?”

“Integrating you back onto the team.”

Neil stared at him. Kevin didn’t seem to see the problem with what he just said. Neil decided to
spell it out for him. “I’m dead, Kevin. At least to the rest of the world. I’m never going to play on
the team again, and I’m never going pro. You might as well just kiss that fever dream goodbye.”

“You will play with me again,” Kevin said. When Neil opened his mouth to interject, Kevin cut
him off with a sharp jerk of his hand. “I don’t care how we do it, but I’m not done with you yet.
I’ve put in too much time and effort for you to just give up.”

“I’m not giving up,” Neil said. Abby’s words from this morning echoed in his head. He hadn’t
actually believed her then, but Kevin’s faith in Neil playing again was almost infectious enough to
put a small seed of hope in his chest.

Kevin straightened. “Good,” he said. “Get some water and then get ready for drills. Dan has
something planned that I think will be beneficial to you.”

The rest of practice went much smoother after that. Wymack called time and Neil felt his shoulders
droop. Exercising felt good, and while the stretches Neil had done before practice helped the ache
in his scars, he was drenched in sweat and every part of his body burned when he followed the
others into the changing rooms.

Neil was just about to find Abby for a ride back to her place when he was intercepted by Andrew.
Neil stopped shoveling his gear in the closet and blinked at him, curious what he wanted.

“You’re limping,” he said.
“I’m fine,” Neil said but Andrew didn’t move. When Neil tried to slide past him, Andrew blocked his path and Neil was pushed up against his chest.

Andrew grabbed a hold of Neil’s t-shirt and tugged. “Tell me why,” he said.

“Scars.” Neil took a step back but he was still close enough to see the droplet of water in Andrew’s eyelash from his shower. “They hurt a bit.”

“On a scale of one through ten.”

Neil considered. “Six,” he decided.

“Does this happen a lot?”

“Sometimes. Usually when the temperature changes. It’s worse now, since I got back.” Since he nearly doubled his scars.

Andrew hummed in understanding and stepped back the rest of the way, letting his hand fall to his side. “You’re coming with me. I told Abby I’m bringing you back later.”

At Fox Tower, Andrew led Neil up to the suite he shared with Nicky and Kevin. Over the summer, Aaron had somehow convinced Andrew to let him room with Matt. Neil had no idea how he had managed that, since Andrew had been nothing but overbearingly protective of Aaron since he’d met them. Still, Neil didn’t complain when Andrew motioned for Neil to follow him into the bedroom. Neil caught the look Nicky sent Kevin before he closed the door behind him, but neither said anything.

Andrew ordered him to sit on the edge of one of the bunk beds and then slipped out again. Neil took stock of the bedroom while he was gone. He didn’t know who’s bed he sat on, but the blankets were soft and plush under his hands. A USC poster was tacked onto the wall next to the loft bed, so Neil assumed that one belonged to Kevin.

Even with one less person taking up space, the room was still crowded. Two desks were shoved into the space between the beds and was piled high with various textbooks and loose pieces of paper. Neil plucked up a pen from the floor and played with it, clicking it twice and twirling it through his fingers. He had to stop when his fingers started to ache.

Andrew came back a few minutes later with a large jar of what Neil thought was hand lotion. He handed it to him, and Neil rubbed his thumb over the label on the front. He turned the scar cream over in his hands and sent a questioning look at Andrew, but Andrew only shrugged.

“It was Kevin’s,” he said. “For his hand.”

Deciding not to press it any further, Neil unscrewed the top. The cream inside was white and cool to the touch, it didn’t have a smell when Neil sniffed it. The scars that hurt the most were tucked under his shirt, but he still wore his hoodie overtop. Carefully, Neil wiggled out of it and began to rub the cream over the old burns on his arms. Andrew watched with keen eyes.

Last January, Neil had shown Andrew his scars. His eyes had traced them then, and they did the same now, his expression as unreadable as it had been months ago. The scars lining his arms were new, though, so it made sense why Andrew wanted to see them. Neil didn’t really mind Andrew seeing his scars and he knew that if he asked Andrew to leave, he would.

It was a struggle to reach higher than his elbow. His body was already stiffening up again and each
movement sent another bolt of pain through him. He didn’t know why it hurt so much; it had never been like this before. If Neil had to guess, it had something to do with how he was raised from his grave. He knew what happened to him, knew what the scars around his limbs meant. He may have not known how to wield the dark as much as his father had, but he still knew that death was hard on the body, and reanimating it with so little left couldn’t have been an easy feat.

Neil was half-way through his other arm when Andrew moved. He put his hand out for the cream and, confused, Neil gave it to him. Andrew tugged on the hem of Neil’s shirt, careful not to touch any skin.

Andrew tugged again. “Yes or no?” he asked.

“Yes,” Neil said immediately.

Andrew helped Neil out of his shirt and discarded it on the floor with his hoodie. He stepped out of his shoes and kneeled on the bed behind Neil, his knees resting on either side of him, close but not quite touching.

The first press of Andrew’s fingers to his skin made Neil shiver, and it had little to do with the coolness of the cream. Andrew worked methodically, rubbing the lotion into each of Neil’s scars, his touch both firm and gentle at the same time. Neil bowed his head when Andrew started on his neck, hands kneading into his shoulders and up, circling around the scar that hurt Neil the most. He massaged the area until Neil could hardly even feel the ache anymore.

“Better?” Andrew asked. Neil nodded, not able to find the right words when each lingering touch massaged Neil’s aches away.

He continued to rub Neil’s back, his hands lingering over the muscle of his shoulders, the lines making up his back. Neil didn’t have many scars there, but he didn’t want to point it out in case Andrew moved away. He didn’t want him to stop. When Andrew’s fingers skimmed his ribs, Neil’s breath hitched. Andrew was too close to not have felt it.

“Andrew,” he said, voice strained. He didn’t know what he intended to say, he didn’t even know why he had said anything.

Andrew’s hands stilled, waiting for Neil to go on. Neil swallowed, blinking open his eyes and wondering when he had closed them, and turned his head over his shoulder.

Their eyes caught, and Neil tried to remember how to breathe. Light came in from the only window in the dorm, illuminating Andrew’s hair into a blonde halo. It reminded Neil of the bus ride to Binghamton, one of his last memories that were so light and soft, filling Neil with a warmth similar to the sun before everything devolved into terror. Andrew’s hands dropped to Neil’s waist and Neil leaned against his chest.

Neil didn’t know who moved first, just that one moment he was distracted by the hazel-turned-gold in Andrew’s eyes, and then the next Neil had his back pressed to Andrew’s chest as they kissed.

Andrew’s lips were soft as they moved over his. Neil felt drunk on it, relieved and drowsy all at once. He shifted so he was properly facing Andrew, the top of his knee pressed against Andrew’s thigh, and Andrew caught his hands and brought them up to his hair. Neil twisted his fingers in the soft strands and deepened the kiss.

Every anxiety dissolved. Every bad thing that had happened to Neil since he came back didn’t seem so horrible anymore. At least while Andrew kissed him, Neil didn’t have to think about a
thing except for the feel of Andrew’s lips against his and his fingers splayed over his back.

It was almost too much, Andrew’s hands moving over the knobs of his spine and the planes of his shoulders, Andrew opening his mouth to him again and again and again. It was too much, it wasn’t enough, it was perfect. Neil drank in every second of it.

His fingers flexed in Andrew’s hair but before he could press closer, a knock on the door interrupted them. Andrew pulled away first, but it took a moment for Neil to gather his thoughts. They stared at each other. Both of them were out of breath and Andrew’s hair was mussed from Neil’s fingers. The tips of his ears were flushed pink and Andrew’s eyes, dark on Neil’s, sent a thrill through him.

The knock came again and Neil realized it was coming from the front door, not the bedroom. Andrew let go of Neil and grabbed his shirt off the floor. He dumped it in Neil’s lap and got up to see who was knocking while Neil redressed.

Matt stood by the couch when Neil left the bedroom. Kevin and Nicky seemed to have vacated the dorm. Neil thought about the looks they had exchanged before and hoped that they hadn’t gotten the wrong idea. Judging from Andrew’s irritated expression, they must have done exactly that. It was a safe bet that the rest of the team knew about it by now.

Matt’s face brightened when he saw Neil. “Hey, buddy,” he said. “Nicky told me I might find you here.”

“You were looking for me?”

“Yep. The girls’ and I are hosting a movie marathon over at their dorm,” Matt said, thumping Neil on the shoulder. Neil noticed that it didn’t hurt as badly as it would have this morning. “You can help choose what we watch, although you might have to fight Allison for it. She’s a fiend with the DVD player.”

Neil hadn’t said he would go, but Matt already seemed to think he would. He thought about saying no, having Andrew drive him back to Abby’s to spend the rest of his night by himself, but a movie night honestly didn’t seem so bad. He liked spending time with the Foxes, and a part of him was afraid something would happen again if he were alone.

“Give me a minute and I’ll be over,” Neil said. Matt cheered and pumped his fist in the air.

“I’m gonna go help Dan with the snacks,” he said on his way out the door. He waved over his shoulder. “See you soon.”

“Bye.”

Once they were alone again, Neil expected the air between him and Andrew to be awkward and grow stagnant, but it didn’t. If anything, Neil felt even more comfortable around Andrew, as if whatever tension between them had broken and they could go back to how they were before.

Neil paused. Could they go back to the way they were before? The thought had never before occurred to him, but the possibilities seemed endless. Instead of dwelling on it, Neil grabbed his hoodie from Andrew’s bedroom and slipped it on.

“Are you coming with?” Neil asked, adjusting the strings so they were even.

“I heard snacks,” Andrew responded, although he didn’t sound all too enthused. “How are your scars?”
“Good, thanks to you.” Neil gave Andrew a meaningful look. “I wouldn’t mind doing that again.”

Andrew rolled his eyes, but his fingers brushed along the small of Neil’s back as he passed by to grab his keys from the counter. “I’ll give you the scar cream. Kevin doesn’t use it anymore and you need it more than anyone.”


Andrew nodded and they walked over to the girls’ dorm together.

It was an away game on Friday, which was the only reason Neil was allowed to go. He had to sit in the stands instead of the outer court with Coach and Abby, his hood up to shield his face from any cameras or fans that might see him. He wore a nondescript gray hoodie and one of Andrew’s beanies just in case.

He left the Foxes to find his seat in the audience. He was sat near the front, a few rows up from the court. Somehow Allison had scored him last-minute tickets near the benches on the guest side, close to where the Foxes not on the court would be cheering on their teammates. Neil assumed she must have known some higher-up or paid someone off from the Belmont faculty, but when he asked her, she only smiled and told him not to worry about it.

Neil did worry though, when the stands started to fill up and every other spot around him was taken by excited fans. Neil spotted patches of orange and white among the sea of Belmont’s colors. He kept his hood over his face, but if someone got a good enough look at him, they’d still be able to recognize him. But soon enough the rest of the stands were full and no one had so much as sent him a sideways glance.

Soon enough, the refs signaled the end of warm-ups and the teams lined up on half-court. Belmont won the coin toss so they had first deal. As the Belmont dealer held the ball and prepared to serve, Neil held his breath like he was getting ready to sprint down the court with the rest of the team. The ball was served with a great swing from the dealer, and the game kicked into action.

Neil should be playing alongside the rest of the Foxes. He should be racing across the court with his teammates, his heart pounding in his chest as hard as the ball rebounding off the walls. Kevin’s words in his head, you will play with me again, was too much to hope for, but Neil closed his eyes and let himself imagine it.

The buzzer going off made Neil’s eyes fly open. Kevin had scored with three minutes on the clock. Neil craned his neck to see the instant replay flashing across the giant screen above the stadium. Kevin sidestepped his backliner mark, caught the ball Dan aimed at him, and fired on goal in a matter of seconds. Neil’s breath caught but he joined the fans around him in cheering as loud as he could.

He was on his feet in moments, when Belmont got possession of the ball and zig-zagged down the court. One of the strikers took a shot on the goal seconds before Matt plowed into them. They both went down, but Andrew had deflected the shot with so much force that the ball flew up court like a bullet and the rest of the players were left to chase after it.

A fight broke out almost immediately, the Belmont striker threw the first punch but Matt caught his arm and shoved him backwards. Another punch had the striker on his ass before the referees could get there to break it up. Both players were given yellow-cards and Matt was subbed out for Aaron.
By half-time, the Foxes were ahead by two points but Belmont fought them step by vicious step. Neil bounced on his feet, elated with the Foxes performance and the energy of the thousands of people in the audience around him. It was almost enough to make up for the fact that Neil wasn’t on the court like he wanted to be.

Belmont came back with a vengeance in second half, and the score was tied for so long Neil was worried they would have to go into a shootout, but with two minutes on the clock, the freshmen striker scored a goal for Palmetto and the rest of the game was spent in a battle over the ball. In the end, Belmont never recovered and Palmetto won with seven points.

Neil cheered the loudest as the last buzzer rang out, and his excitement buoyed him all the way to the locker room where he waited for the Foxes to get out. Matt and Wymack met him outside and Neil shared a large grin and several pats on the back with the both of them.

He was half-way through his recap about the best moments in the game when he saw them, two reporters approaching behind Matt. Neil’s hood had fallen off when Coach and Matt came to collect him, and he was right in the line of sight of the cameras they held.

Wymack saw them before Matt did. He snatched Neil’s hood and threw it back over his face. Matt turned around, alarmed, and quickly shuffled Neil out of view when he noticed their company. He kept him shielded from the cameras and ushered Neil into the locker room with a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Neil heard Wymack arguing with the reporters about how they had to wait in the lobby with the rest of the press. “You can’t be here,” he said right as the door swung closed.

“Shit, Neil. Did they see you?” Matt asked.

“I don’t know,” Neil said. “We got away pretty quick but they already had their cameras out.”

If Neil was caught on tape, and someone recognized him, it would be a disaster for him, but also for the rest of the Foxes as well. He shared an anxious look with Matt.

“Coach is talking to them,” Matt said in an attempt at reassurance. “He’ll figure it out.”

Neil really hoped Matt was right.

Wymack came back in a few minutes later. Neil felt himself relax when he saw the calm look on his face and Wymack confirmed that Neil hadn’t been recognized, that the cameras hadn’t even been on. Neil let out a sigh of relief.

With the crisis averted, Neil met Andrew in the back of the locker room. He was already showered and dressed, his hair dripping onto his black shirt. He imagined Andrew on the court, remembering the way he had played tonight with a fierceness Neil rarely saw out of him. When Andrew spotted the look on Neil’s face, he quirked an eyebrow.

“You were amazing,” Neil said as he stopped in front of him. “I wonder, if I asked you to shut down the goal, could you do it?”

“Not for free,” Andrew said.

“But could you?”

Andrew tilted his head to the side, his eyes remaining on Neil’s. “Yes.”
Neil felt the smile curl across his lips. With some satisfaction, he noticed Andrew tracking the movement. He tapped his finger on Andrew’s racquet leaning against the locker. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Toweling the remaining water from his hair, Andrew rolled his eyes. “Junkie,” he said and bent to yank the zipper shut on his duffel bag.

“Only for a few things,” came Neil’s retort. His smile widened when Andrew slanted him a look for that. Andrew collected the rest of his things and then the team left the locker room as a unit. Neil had to cover his face again, but he was well hidden behind Matt and Kevin’s bulky mass as they made their way to the bus.

He didn’t get to play, and he almost got spotted, but Neil couldn’t help the curl of happiness in his chest.

Neil had three days of relative quiet before the second dream came. He’d had remnants of the first dream all week, the mud and desperation, the sound of a shovel plunging into the damp earth.

This dream was different. For one, he was already out of the ground.

Neil staggered upright, unsteady on his feet, and looked around. It didn’t take long for him to realize he was in a graveyard, that he had just quite literally crawled out of his grave. The headstones were neatly arranged in a plot around him, moonlight glinting off of them. They didn’t look old, the grounds well-kept and new, but it was dark and the full moon was high above his head, casting long shadows across the ground that shook with the wind.

He saw his shadow, and another. A branch cracked around him, and Neil turned around. There was someone standing a few feet away, their face obscured by the gloom.

“Who are you?” Neil called, his voice a dull rasp in his throat. The figure moved and Neil’s skin crawled. There was a flash, another crack, and then Neil’s eyes flew open, his heart beating in his chest.

With some horror Neil realized he was suspended above his body, watching his own chest heave after the nightmare. His body stilled and his eyes opened, revealing a terrifying blankness in them. Neil tried to move, tried to get back to his body, but he couldn’t. It was like he had been pushed out of it.

Panic crashed through him in waves, but before he could figure out what to do, his bedroom door opened and light flooded in.

“Neil?” Abby’s voice called. Neil blinked and he was back in his own body, drenched in sweat. He flexed his hand, making sure it really was his own. Abby approached and knelt down beside him. “I heard a noise, are you alright?”

“Yes,” Neil said. “Just a bad dream.”

Neil sat up. He wasn’t going to fall asleep, and dream or not, the out of body experience made him uneasy. He didn’t want to be alone, in case he drifted off and it happened again.

“I’ll make tea,” Abby said and disappeared into the kitchen.

Neil watched her go with eyes that were still stretched wide with fear. He willed himself to calm down, eyes darting around the room for anything that could help him.
The window was open a crack, curtains fluttering in the breeze. Neil hadn’t been the one to open it.

16 more days until Halloween…

Chapter End Notes

ahhh i finished it!!! ngl folks, i almost didn't get this done to post today

this was the longest chapter so far and also a ton of fun to write. i hope y'all enjoyed!!
thank you so much for your comments on the previous chapters <333

three more chapters to go!!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

TW: mentions of nightmares, very brief mention of dismemberment, talk of dark magic, panic attacks, mentions of drugs and addiction

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was just enough light from the stands for Neil to see each Plexiglas wall around him from where he lay in the middle of the court. Andrew hadn’t bothered turning on the main lights that illuminated the inner court when they came in, but Neil didn’t mind. If he turned his head to the right, he could see the outline of Andrew’s profile as he stared up at the rafters rising dizzyingly high above them.

It was late, well after the hour Neil and Kevin usually called it quits and packed up after night practice, but Andrew had picked him up immediately after he called, with nothing but two water bottles and a blanket they had spread out on the court. They didn’t talk, but Neil was content with just being with Andrew, feeling his heart beat a calm rhythm in his chest, so different from the frightened race his heart ran when he woke in a cold sweat for the second time that week.

The nightmares were getting worse and Neil was getting less sleep each night. He hadn’t told anyone about them, didn’t know what to say or how to explain. Sometimes he dreamt about crawling through the mud, sometimes he was scrabbling out of the half-dug grave to a figure’s feet across the other-wise empty cemetery, dirty fingernails broken, mind somewhere else as he dragged himself across the ground. He never saw the figure’s face in his dreams, only their muddy boots or the glint of their eyes in the dark. Lately, Neil had been dreaming of the night sky, darkened by clouds except for the moon, bright and orange in the sky, growing and shrinking like the pulse of an exposed heart.

Neil sucked in a deep breath, not wanting to think about it. Andrew was a calm, steadying presence, enough to take Neil’s mind away from it. He stared unabashedly at Andrew while Andrew sneaked glances out of the corner of his eye and pretended not to.

They were untouching but close, laying in opposite directions of each other so Neil’s eyes were level with Andrew’s lips. If Neil tilted his chin just right, he could press his lips to Andrew’s. He didn’t, but Andrew’s eyes still slid in his direction when Neil moved to get a better look at him.

Andrew didn’t look away then, instead keeping his gaze fixed to Neil’s. He looked relaxed, legs stretched out in front of him and arms resting at his sides as his chest rose and fell with even breaths. Their noses brushed when Andrew turned his head. It was a long moment before he said, “Staring.”

“You too,” Neil pointed out, voice quiet between them. They were alone, but the vastness of the court around them seemed to swallow any other noise. They were in their own bubble, where nothing moved, not even time, except for them.

Andrew made a sound of agreement. Neither of them looked away or gave a signal to move back. Andrew inched closer and Neil’s fingers curled an infinitesimal amount around his hand where it rested against his stomach. Fingers on Neil’s jaw tilted it upwards, and then they were kissing.
No matter how many times Neil felt Andrew’s lips against his own, he never grew tired of kissing him. Each time made sparks ignite in his stomach, his heart stir in his chest. With each press of Andrew’s lips or a finger stroking against his jaw made goosebumps run down Neil’s arms, like lightning striking close enough to make his hair stand on end. Even in such an awkward angle with Andrew facing the wrong way, Neil felt a shiver down his spine as Andrew caught his lip between his teeth and pulled.

They parted and Neil rested his head in the curve of his neck as they breathed together.

“Nicky wants to go shopping tomorrow,” Neil said after a few moments of Andrew’s fingers brushing up and down Neil’s cheek, tracing the scars with such a reverence Neil’s breath hitched. “He wants us to pick out Halloween costumes.”

Andrew moved his head back but his hand stayed put. “Does he know that Halloween is still two weeks away?”

“Does anyone know that dressing up and pretending to be someone else to get candy is for children?” Neil asked. “You don’t seem to have a problem with that.”

“You pretended to be someone else for nearly a decade of your life,” Andrew countered, quirking an eyebrow at him.

“But I didn’t do it to get candy.”

Andrew pressed another kiss to Neil’s lips. Neil had the sneaking suspicion he did it to quiet him, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care when Andrew nudged his mouth open and slipped his tongue in Neil’s mouth. Neil made a noise of approval, but too quickly, Andrew pulled away again.

“We can go to the mall after practice,” he said. “But you need to get some sleep.”

“I don’t want to go,” Neil mumbled. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to leave Andrew, and he didn’t, but he mostly didn’t want to be alone again. Abby would be there, but she was asleep and had spent most of the night before up with Neil. He couldn’t ask her to do that again.

But whenever he was alone, when it was just him and no one else around to center him, Neil tended to lose himself. The mirror incident and the time his run took an unplanned turn had just been the beginning. Neil knew that it was only getting worse. He didn’t want to tell anyone in case he was just imagining things, but he had caught Andrew watching him with an expression Neil couldn’t name more than once.

Andrew looked at him that way now, eyes squinted and head tilted. It looked strange upside down, but Andrew pushed himself up and offered a hand to Neil to help him. When they were both standing, Andrew grabbed the blanket and folded it. “Come with me,” he said simply.

Wondering if he had heard him correctly, Neil blinked at him. “Abby will wonder where I am,” he said.

Andrew fished his phone out of his pocket and tossed it to Neil. “Text her then. Or don’t. You can come back to the dorms with me or I can take you back, the choice is yours.”

He didn’t even have to think about it. “You,” Neil said and flipped Andrew’s phone open to shoot Abby a text.

The air was almost warm for mid-October, so Andrew drove back to Fox Tower with the radio off
and the windows down. He had one had hanging out the window as he steered with the other one, and Neil found his eyes being drawn to him again and again.

Kevin and Nicky were asleep when they arrived, so Neil kept his footsteps quiet as he followed Andrew to the bedroom. Andrew slipped off his shoes and threw his jacket in the general vicinity of the closet. Neil did the same, but then he hesitated.

He and Andrew had never shared a bed before, and the twin mattress would leave little space between them, but Andrew turned toward him with an outstretched hand. “Yes or no?” he asked.

With a small smile twitching at the corner of his mouth, Neil whispered a quiet yes and let Andrew pull him to the bed.

Neil was right, there wasn’t a lot of room on the mattress, but Andrew scooted backwards until his back was pressed against the wall and pulled the blankets over both of them. Their knees knocked together, and when Neil rested his hand between them, Andrew’s brushed against his when he linked their pinkies in that sliver of space.

Neil didn’t know what was worse; shopping for Halloween costumes with grown adults or the unwanted attention Neil’s sleeping in Andrew’s bed seemed warrant. All throughout the store, Nicky peppered Neil with questions ranging from when he and Andrew got together to how he feels about his cousin. Neil deflected all of them, but it was harder to ignore Aaron’s unfriendly looks thrown in his direction.

“Neil – ”

“No,” Neil said, cutting Nicky off. He found it was quicker to shut down Nicky’s questions that try to direct his attention elsewhere.

Nicky seemed to disagree. “You didn’t even know what I was going to say,” he complained. “I was going to ask if you found a costume you liked yet.”

“I don’t want to dress up,” Neil said, eyeing the costumes hanging from the racks. His eyes caught on what looked like a red nightgown. Upon further inspection, Neil realized it was a ketchup bottle.

“Oh, come on. Stop being so boring.” Nicky ran his fingers through the costumes and plucked one of the racks. “You can go as a gladiator.”

“Absolutely not.”

Nicky let out a put-upon sigh. “Why are you so difficult? We do this every year and you are not skipping out on that. Even Andrew’s dressing up.”

“What’s he going as?” Neil asked, hoping the question distracted Nicky enough for Neil to make an escape.

It worked. Nicky looked thrilled at having caught Neil’s apparent interest. “I’ll ask him. Maybe you can do a couple’s costume! You stay put, and I’ll be right back.”

Once Nicky was gone, Neil found himself alone in the aisle. A chill went down his spine, something becoming more common place whenever he was alone. Rationally, he knew there wasn’t much that could happen in a crowded department store, but Neil’s fingers twitched, his leg jerked, and Neil had the distinct feeling his body was disobeying him again. He studied the nearest
display, determined to not space out and find himself somewhere else completely when he came to.

Footsteps up the aisle almost made Neil jump out of his skin. He flipped around, looking for the source of them. Aaron regarded Neil with a look of distaste and turned on his heel to leave again, but Neil stepped in front of him.

“Wait,” he said. He didn’t feel like dealing with Aaron’s animosity, but something had been bothering him since he woke up floating above his body the other night. Neil needed answers, and unfortunately, aside from the Butcher and his men, Aaron was the only person Neil knew that had dabbled in the dark.

Aaron’s lip curled but he made no move to step past Neil. “What?” he snapped.

“You were involved with the dark,” Neil started, but Aaron shoved past him before he could get another word out.

“Fuck you,” he spat over his shoulder.

“Wait.” Neil threw out his arm to stop Aaron from leaving but Aaron’s hand shot out and wrapped around Neil’s wrist.

Before he had met the twins, Neil had heard Aaron oft referred to as the non-violent brother, but Neil knew that if he pushed Aaron enough, he would end up with a broken arm. Or at the very least, a punch to the face.

“I don’t care about your addiction,” Neil said, measuring his words carefully. He’d really rather not get punched. “I just have a question about the dark. How I came back after – ”

“Getting dismembered into tiny pieces?” Aaron’s grip tightened and Neil squeezed his hand into a fist. “I fucked around with the dark but I never messed with necromancy. I wasn’t that stupid.”

“But you know enough about it, right? In essence, it’s all the same. Just different rituals,” Neil said. He knew from Nicky that Aaron had mostly dealt with euphoria, dark rituals that focused on the self and was similar to physical drugs. It was the most addictive out of all the forms of the dark, but just as dangerous as the rest.

Aaron hadn’t dabbled since high school, but Neil knew that he had to know something about it. He held Aaron’s gaze until his grip loosened enough for Neil to reclaim his wrist. He’d rubbed more cream into his scars that morning, but Aaron’s rough handling made his scars throb.

“You know you can google this shit, right?”

“Not without attracting suspicion.” Which was the last thing Neil needed right now. “Humor me.”

Eyes narrowed to slits, Aaron scrutinized Neil for a long moment before relenting. “I get to ask a question afterwards,” he said.

“Fine,” Neil said impatiently. Before Aaron could change his mind or ask for more, Neil asked, “Are there side effects? I know there’s withdrawals for the person performing the rituals, but is it possible that the…subjects are affected as well?”

“What kind of side effects?” Aaron asked. His anger had somewhat abated, replaced by an analytical sharpness to his expression that Neil recognized as him trying to solve a problem. He’d seen the same look when Aaron poured over his textbooks, studying medical terms and diagrams of the human body.
Neil didn’t think it would be wise to tell Aaron everything, but a little bit couldn’t hurt. “Spacing out, losing track of time, strange dreams. Things like that.”

“And these things are all happening to you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Those all sound like normal symptoms of PTS,” he said.

Neil ground his teeth. He wasn’t coming to his least favorite person in the world for help just to receive a non-helpful answer. He was about ready to walk away and find something more useful when Aaron continued.

“But there’s a sort of…residue after someone attempts a ritual. Dissociation is common, so are nightmares. It can last hours or days, depending on the intensity of the ritual. At least in my experience.”

Aaron looked distinctly uncomfortable then, but Neil pressed forward, voice low with caution. “And what about losing control?”

“Mind or body?”

Neil considered the question. “Both.”

“I guess it’s possible,” Aaron said after a beat. His face scrunched in thought or irritation, Neil couldn’t tell. “But like I said, I never messed with necromancy. I don’t know if whatever’s happening to you is what happened to me.”

Neil wanted to ask how Aaron had gotten involved in the dark in the first place, but decided he had already pushed his luck enough for today. He was about to find out where Andrew and Kevin had gotten off to when Aaron cleared his throat. Neil noticed his usual glare was back in place.

“I still have my question,” he said. Neil motioned for him to get on with it and Aaron’s gaze sharpened. “Are you fucking my brother?”

Neil choked on air. “That’s none of your business,” he wheezed, stifling a cough in the sleeve of his shirt.

Aaron took a step forward so close Neil needed to take a step backwards. “If I find out,” he said, jamming a finger in Neil’s chest hard enough to send him back into the shelves behind him, “that you’re messing with him, or taking advantage of him, I’ll kill you. I don’t give a fuck how much you have Andrew wrapped around your finger, I’ll make sure nobody will ever be able to dig you up and put you back together again. Got it?”

Neil believed him. Still, he bristled at the accusation that he would ever hurt Andrew. “I really don’t think that’s necessary.”

“And I really don’t care what you think,” Aaron said, voice dangerously low. “Watch yourself.”

Nicky appeared in the aisle the next moment. He glanced between Aaron and Neil, his expression turning uneasy. “Everything okay here?”

Aaron finally stepped out of Neil’s space. He reached behind him and grabbed one of the Halloween costumes from the rack. “Just picking out my costume,” he said calmly. He cut one last warning glare at Neil and disappeared to the back of the store.
Nicky still looked concerned. He inclined his head until he caught Neil’s eye. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Neil said. “Aaron just wanted to make sure we didn’t choose the same costume. Serious business and all that.”

“Right.” He didn’t look convinced. Instead of trying to explain, Neil turned to the shelves of costumes. He perused the racks and grabbed one at random.

“I’ll get this one.” He showed Nicky the front of it. The costume was in a bag but the picture on the front showed a man in a white shirt and a long, black cape with fangs and fake blood. Nicky’s face brightened.

“Dracula. Nice,” he said. “It doesn’t look like the fangs are included though, but I saw some up front. And we’ll have to get one in your size since this one is too big. Follow me.”

Relieved that Nicky seemed to have dropped the subject for now, Neil pushed the conversation with Aaron to the back of his mind and trailed after Nicky. Once Neil had everything for his costume, they met up with the others at check out. Aaron didn’t say another word to Neil, but he gave him a long, pointed stare when Andrew fell in step next to him. Andrew quirked an eyebrow at him in question, but Neil shrugged and he let it go.

Disaster struck on Friday, right after the Foxes won their home game. Neil didn’t see the reporters coming until it was too late. He was halfway to the locker room, he saw Matt’s large frame hanging by the door waiting for him, but then cameras were flashing in his face, and about three different microphones were shoved under his nose, jostling to get in front.

Neil’s stomach sank. He tried to pull the collar of his hoodie over his face, but everyone had already gotten a good look and even with the scars, his face had been plastered on every sports tabloid and channel for months. He was too recognizable. Everyone talked over each other, yelling as they clambered to get a statement. He couldn’t hear a thing anyone said, but he picked out his name and his father’s name more than he would have liked to.

Panic flashed through him in waves. He was completely surrounded by journalists and reporters and backing up only made him bump into more. Luckily, the commotion caught Matt’s attention and he made his way over to see what was going on. He saw Neil, his face contorting with the same panic Neil felt, and forced his way through the sea of reporters to pluck Neil out of the middle.

“No comment,” he said, batting a camera away when a man shoved it in his face. “We’re not saying anything to you.”

Matt steered him inside the safety of the locker room. Wymack met them on the way in, and the look of their faces had him cursing up a storm.

“What happened?” he asked. “Don’t tell me I have a swarm of people who would kill to get a word from Neil out there.”

“Sorry, Coach,” Matt said, looking to Neil. “That’s exactly what we have.”

Wymack cursed again and rounded on Neil. “What happened?”

Every inch of his body shaking with adrenaline and panic, Neil shook his head. It took a couple times before he could get the words out. “I don’t know. They were just there. I think they were waiting to ambush me.”
Wymack cursed a third time. “There must have been a leak. I want everyone in the foyer in ten, I’ll clear out the reporters as much as I can. I’ll call security if I have to.”

He went out to the lobby and immediately, cameras started flashing again, people shouting over each other. Matt turned to Neil and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Neil hardly heard him. He curled his hands into fists to stop the shaking but it did little to help. They’d attracted the attention of the rest of the team by now. Neil couldn’t handle their staring, no matter how worried most of them looked. He didn’t want anyone to worry about him right now; their concern was well-meaning but Neil already felt crowded. His eyes flicked to the corners of the room, looking for the exits he had already memorized ages ago. An old habit, but one Neil very much needed right now.

A loose hand on his wrist made Neil’s head jerk up. Andrew stared back at him with a calm expression as he curled his fingers in the fabric of Neil’s hoodie and tugged. The locker room had cleared without Neil even realizing, he and Andrew were alone. He noticed that jerseys and equipment were still laid out on the benches, lockers were left half open, and someone’s shoe was lying on the floor with the pair no where in sight. Andrew must have kicked everyone out in the middle of dressing and putting everything away.

“Look at me, Abram,” Andrew’s voice was quiet but firm. Neil’s eyes drifted to his cheek. “No, look at me.”

He looked Andrew in the eyes and Andrew moved his hands so they were resting around his neck, not tight enough to restrict airflow, but with just enough pressure to be an anchor. His hands perfectly hid the scars around Neil’s throat.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” Andrew said. He’d backed Neil up so that his back pressed to the lockers behind him. Neil lifted his hands and hooked his fingers around Andrew’s elbows, drawing as much comfort and strength from him as he could.

Neil sucked in a long, shaky breath. “Every one in the world will know I’m alive by tomorrow. They’ll know I’m here.” Neil’s chest jerked. “Andrew, I’m so fucked.”

“Did you think you could hide forever?” Andrew asked. It seemed like a genuine question, no hint of mockery in his voice. “This was always going to be a possibility.”

“I wasn’t ready,” Neil said. His breathing quickened and Andrew touched his forehead to Neil’s, his fingers brushing the hair at the back of Neil’s neck.

Tapping a finger against Neil’s ear, Andrew said, “Listen to me. You cannot erase what just happened, but what comes next is up to you and I will not let anything happen to you. I promise you that. I will be right behind you, okay?”

A long minute later, Neil nodded. “Okay,” he said, voice barely above a whisper. Andrew squeezed the back of Neil’s neck once and let go.

“I told the others to wait outside and deal with the vultures. We can go out back.”

Andrew shoved his gear into the locker and grabbed his bag. He stayed behind Neil as they made their way outside to the backdoor of the locker room, his shoulder pressed into Neil’s. There were no reporters or fans waiting outside, and Andrew was able to sneak Neil to the car in the parking lot with little incident.

They left without waiting for anyone else, and Andrew dropped Neil off at Abby’s house. He
stayed until she and Wymack arrived, looking harried and tired.

Nodding at Wymack, Andrew left after they made sure Neil was in one piece. Abby asked if Neil wanted some tea, but Neil shook his head and went straight to bed. The thought of doing anything else was too exhausting.

He slept fitfully that night, dreams filled with cameras flashing and graveyard mud, the orange moon blinking above him. When he woke, he didn't wake in his bed.

8 days until Halloween…

Chapter End Notes

woo two more chapters left!! i'll be posting them on wednesday and thursday next week, so y'all will have two chapters in one week! i'm super excited for the ending, it's gonna be pretty exciting i think

i don't want to speak too soon, but i'm pretty proud of myself for sticking with the posting schedule and updating on time, something i'm pretty notorious for not doing. october's been so busy! i really don't know how i did it y'all jskdhsk

thank you so much to everyone reading, i really hope you liked this chapter!!!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

last chapter before the final one!

TW: dissociation, talk of neil's scars, and it gets a bit nsfw in this chapter but it's not explicit. if you'd like to skin the nsfw bits, stop reading at "yes or not?" after the eden's scene and pick up at "he pulled away after the tremors had stopped"

i hope y'all enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the first couple days after the world discovered Neil Josten’s return from the grave, Neil was once again confined to Abby’s house. His teammates visited between practice and classes, but Neil mostly occupied himself with checking every news tabloid and sports website he could find. Unsurprisingly, his scarred face was immortalized on all of them, his expression surprised and lit with the glow of flashing cameras.

Thursday marked Neil’s return to the Foxhole Court. There were a couple reporters waiting outside but Neil was not spotted taking the backdoor in. According to Matt, reporters have been camping outside of the court and dorms since the drop, and Wymack even saw a few cameras aimed at his apartment when he left for practice this morning.

Although he hated it, Neil could understand. It wasn’t every day someone came back from the dead.

Wymack intercepted him before Neil could make his way to the locker room. His face was creased with worry, and he waved his cellphone in the air as he beckoned Neil to him.

“I just got off the phone with the FBI,” he said. “They want to talk to you.”

“Do I have to?”

“According to the agent on the phone, you’re in deep shit. So yes, you have to.”

Neil bit back a groan. He reached for the phone in Wymack’s hand, but Wymack shook his head.

“You don’t have to talk to them right now,” he said. “I told them I wouldn’t let them speak to you over the phone so they’re coming in two weeks.”

“Why wait so long?”

Wymack shrugged. “Agent Browning said they’re busy and that means you’re not very high-up on their list. I guess if they waited eight months, they can wait a bit longer. And I may have told them to fuck off until we got you settled.”

He couldn’t just tell the FBI to fuck off, especially in a situation that involved the dark and one of the deadliest serial killers in recent history, but Wymack was doing his best to keep Neil from drowning. He knew that Wymack did it for his benefit. This way, he could somewhat prepare
himself for what sounded like hours of interrogation. He didn’t think they would try and arrest him, but like Coach said, he was in deep shit and they’ll want him in custody.

The FBI most likely wanted information on his father’s syndicate, and while Neil was prepared to give it to them, he wouldn’t make it easy. He knew there was a high-likely hood they’d try to put him into the Witness Protection Program, at least until after any sort of investigation. And if Neil was spilling info on his father, the Moryiamas might come up. He didn’t know if he wanted to implicate them yet, not until he knew where he and Kevin stood with them. Having a couple weeks to prepare himself on what to say and bargain for almost made the knot in Neil’s chest ease somewhat, but it didn’t do much.


“Not today,” Wymack said. “They don’t get a piece of you until the FBI gets your story first. You don’t have to say anything to anyone. I have security patrolling outside.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Neil said, grateful, but Wymack waved him off.

“Don’t thank me. I don’t like those vultures any more than you do.” He clapped his hands. “Now get changed out. I don’t want to keep the rest of the team waiting.”

Neil grabbed his gear from his locker and took it to the bathroom stalls to dress out without anyone spying his scars. He snapped his chest piece and shin guards in place with rapid succession, yanking the strands so they were snug but not restrictive on him. All the wanted to do was get out on the court and push himself until he couldn’t focus on anything other than standing upright.

Neil hooked his neck guard in place and grabbed his helmet and racquet before making his way to the outer court. No one else was there except for Kevin was Neil arrived, Kevin seemed to be waiting for him.

He rounded on Neil as soon as he entered the ring. “What did Coach say?” he asked.

Neil stepped past him to the bucket of Exy balls under the bench. He counted to make sure they were all there and said, “That I’m fucked and the FBI want to set up a meeting.”

Although he asked, Kevin ignored what he said. He snapped his fingers and when Neil looked at him, he looked almost excited as he paced in front of the benches. “This is perfect.”

Neil stared at him. “How is this a good thing? Did you not hear the part where I said that I’m fucking?” he asked, pushing the bucket over to Kevin for him to carry. “You do realize they’ll try to put me in WITSEC right?”

Evidently, he didn’t, because Kevin nodded and said again, “This works out.”

Neil thought he must have lost his mind. “How, exactly, does the FBI wanting to talk to me factor into your plans?” he asked, pushing the bucket over to Kevin for him to carry. “You do realize they’ll try to put me in WITSEC right?”

Kevin waved him off. “Everyone already knows you’re back so there’s no point in trying to take you away again. You’re ours for good. And if you’re worried about not being allowed on the team again, don’t be,” he said. He hoisted the bucket over his shoulder and walked over to the inner door. The rest of the Foxes were already filing onto the court, but Kevin paid them no mind. “You’re a decent striker, anyone with eyes can see that. Coach will convince the board to let you sign with Palmetto again and when you graduate, it’s a straight shot to Court.”

Neil stared at him. He didn’t want to get his hopes up, but.
But Kevin spelled it out for him perfectly. “What exactly is stopping you from playing Exy for real again?”

It reminded him of what Andrew said last year, about how the spotlight made it harder to make someone disappear. As soon as he got the FBI off his back and dealt with any extraneous details that he could figure out on the way, he could join the team again. Kevin pointed at him when he realized Neil got it.

“Exactly. This is your ticket, Neil.”

“Fuck,” Neil breathed. His eyes roamed the Foxhole Court, every white and orange inch of it. This could all be his again.

“Are you two done?” Wymack interrupted. “We don’t have all day.”

Neil snatched up his Exy racquet and hurried after the rest of the team. He took his place on court and clacked sticks with Dan on the way by. A smile crept across his face behind the grill of his helmet. Despite all the horror and uncertainty that had plagued him these past couple weeks, Neil felt as if things were actually starting to come together.

He wondered, just for a moment, if he could have a life again.

Dan started the team on warm-ups, and while Neil pushed away all of his worries and put his concentration into practice, he couldn’t help the hope creeping in his chest, nestling between the space where only fear and pain had been before.

He was so caught up with everything else happening these past couple weeks that he’d almost forgotten about the game against the Raven’s. Though, the Foxes’ stress level coming to a breaking point with Kevin yelling more than he usually did while Dan struggled to get the team under control during their last practice before the game was a harsh reminder.

Neil wasn’t even playing, he was barely allowed to go, but Kevin worked him just as hard as the rest of the team. By the time practice was over, Neil was bent over his knees and gasping for air as sweat dripped off his face. A hand on his shoulder pulled him upright again and Neil was met with Dan scrutinizing him.

“You going to pass out on us?” she asked, holding him up with a gloved fist in his jersey.

“No way,” Neil said between breaths, straightening back up. “I was just getting started.”

Dan gave him two hard pats on the cheek. “Atta boy. Shower and get some water, we have a big game tomorrow and you’ve done enough today.”

“Aye-aye captain.” Neil saluted her. His hand jerked, twitching when he tried to control it, but Neil chalked it up to him being tired.

Since the team had to wake up early in order to make it to the Edgar Allen stadium in time for call, Neil took his things to Fox Tower and passed out in the monsters’ dorm. He slept on the couch, which was far less comfortable than Andrew’s bed, but he didn’t have time to dwell on it when he was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Although they didn’t win, the Foxes scored eight points to the Ravens’ ten, and the team was barely out of the stadium and onto the bus before they started celebrating.
They’d rented a couple rooms out of a nearby hotel for the night and Wymack had stocked up on the alcohol. It was too cramped to stay in one room while they partied, so they spread out across the four they’d rented much to their neighbors’ chagrin, Neil was sure. Some of the freshmen wandered off to one of the other rooms with a couple beers and a bottle of vodka, but Dan left them to their own festivities. She was tucked against Matt’s side, nursing a tonic with a smile on her lips.

“Who knew a loss could be so exciting?” Matt said, lifting his beer above his head in a cheer. “To the Ravens, and to their worst season yet.”

He was met with scattered cheers and shouts. Neil shot him a small smile. He wished he could have played with them, but it was hard not to get caught up in the rest of the team’s jubilance.

Despite the amount of alcohol Wymack brought, only about half of the team was drinking. Andrew stopped after a beer, and Renee and Neil stuck to sprite. Surprisingly, Kevin stayed away from the vodka and sipped from a can from his place at the table with Coach and Abby. He seemed calm despite the loss, and Neil didn’t think it had anything to do with the alcohol.

“Kevin’s not drinking so much,” Neil observed when he found Andrew leaned against the wall in the living room. Someone had turned on a recap of the game, but no one was really paying attention except for Neil. On screen, a Raven striker raced across the court, passing back and forth between their other teammates before being denied a goal by Andrew’s heavy racquet slamming it back up court. Neil turned his attention back to Andrew. “I’d thought he’d be halfway to plastered by now.”

Andrew shook his head. “He stopped drinking so much over the summer,” he explained without looking at Neil. “As far as I know, he hasn’t touched vodka since Riko offed himself.”

“Good,” Neil said. “He looks like he’s doing better.”

Andrew hummed in agreement. He and Neil lapsed into a comfortable silence, broken by the sound of their teammates around them. On the television, Kevin bagged a goal, putting the score at 3-4.

“I shut down the goal.”

Andrew played last quarter, blocking shot after shot the Raven strikers tried to make against him. It was amazing. He gave Neil a pointed look and Neil tamped down a smile when he realized what he was after.

“And what’s your reward?” he asked.

“Not a reward,” Andrew intoned. “A transaction.”

Neil snorted. “And what’s that?”

“Columbia tomorrow.” Andrew pushed off the wall and set his half-empty cup of room-temperature beer on the coffee table. He turned back to Neil and looked him up and down. “You’re dressing up with us.”

“You all are ridiculous,” Neil said without any real heat. “Do you want me to wear fake fangs too? Or will just the cape do?”

“Smart mouth. Do what you want.”

Neil smoothed away another smile. When he got his face under control, he asked, “What are you going as, anyway?”
Andrew didn’t answer. He leaned in so close that Neil could see the light from the lamps dancing in his eyes. Neil didn’t think it had anything to do with the alcohol, since Andrew had barely drunk any. He pressed a hand to Neil’s chest and pushed until Neil’s back hit the wall. Neil was sure Andrew could feel his heartbeat pick up underneath his palm, but his face didn’t twitch. Someone wolf-whistled but they didn’t pay whoever it was any mind, they only had eyes for each other.

Neil lifted his chin. He was aware that people were probably watching, but they already knew and Andrew didn’t seem to care.

“Guess you’ll have to find out,” Andrew said and backed away with his eyes still on Neil’s. He collected his beer and took a drink. Wrinkling his nose, he glared down at it disappeared in the direction of the kitchen, leaving Neil staring after him with the memory of his hand, warm and solid, pressed to his chest.

A zombie greeted them outside the nightclub. The undead bouncer called out a cheery hello when he saw Aaron and Nicky approach and exchanged intricate handshakes and backslaps with them. When they’d finished and the bouncer ushered them inside, Neil didn’t think he imagined it when his eyes lingered on him. He was used to the stares, though, so Neil didn’t put much thought to it.

Neil followed Aaron and Nicky to a table near the dancefloor, elbowing past people in costumes that ranged from goofy to bloody. Eyeing a man wrapped in yellow caution tape and wondering about his life choices, Neil found his seat next to Kevin and waited for Andrew to return from parking the Maserati.

“Nope, no way. I’m not allowing this to happen.” Nicky shook his head when Neil sat down. Neil sent him a questioning look, and Nicky tugged on his cape with one hand and slapped at Kevin’s shoulder with the other. “There’s no way I’m letting you party poopers sit here all night. We’re going to the dancefloor.”

“I don’t dance,” Neil said but Nicky wouldn’t accept that as an answer.


“I don’t see how that makes a difference.”

Nicky clucked his tongue and kicked Neil in the shin until he stood. “You may not dance, but I hear Dracula has some great moves.”

Neil exchanged a longsuffering look with Kevin. He looked around for something to distract Nicky but found nothing. But his eyes snagged on a masked figure standing near the edge of the dancefloor. They were motionless, unaffected by the chaos of other dancers twisting around them, and Neil had the distinct feeling they were looking directly at him. Neil frowned, but he blinked and the figure was gone. Luckily, Andrew took that moment to reappear and Neil grabbed the lifeline where he could.

“I’m going with Andrew to get drinks,” he said, slipping out of Nicky’s grip. Nicky looked indignant and began to protest, but Andrew silenced him with a look.

“Tell Neil to go dancing with me,” he said. When Andrew didn’t respond, Nicky pouted. “You aren’t the least bit curious?”

“I don’t control what Neil does,” Andrew drawled. “If he doesn’t want to dance, I can’t make him.”

“You two,” Nicky said, shaking his finger between Andrew and Neil, “are the worst. Come on,
Kevin opened his mouth to complain, but Nicky was already hauling him off to the hundreds of other people on the dancefloor. Andrew barely spared them a glance. He was dressed in a long black robe with a hood over his head that he threw back when he sat down. The gloves he wore were fingerless, and the fake leather plate over his chest was embossed with a silver dragon. The only thing missing from his executioner’s outfit was the large axe, which he wasn’t allowed to bring into Eden’s.

“How long do you think it’ll take for Kevin to lose Nicky?” Neil asked. The masked figure made him unsettled, and he couldn’t shake the feeling of eyes watching him. He looked out across the crowd, but no one stuck out to him.

“Depends on how quickly Nicky gets distracted by something else,” Andrew responded. He checked the time on his phone. “I’m getting drinks.”

He didn’t ask, but Neil heard the invitation in his statement. After making sure Aaron stayed to save their table, Neil followed Andrew into the throes of monsters and masked villains, devils and glow-in-the-dark skeletons. He hooked a finger around one of the leather loops in Andrew’s studded belt so he wouldn’t get pulled away from him and let him lead the way.

It was nearly midnight by the time they got home. They would have stayed longer, but Aaron drank too much and puked all over Nicky’s shiny costume so Andrew herded everyone into the Maserati and drove them home.

Andrew hopped in the shower when they got to the house so Neil waited for him in his bedroom. He’d lost his cape at some point, pulled away from him during one of the trips to the bar, so all that was left of his vampire costume was the white shirt and jeans Neil was sure wasn’t what Dracula had actually worn. He sat on the edge of the bed and undid the sleeves, rubbing at his wrists when they were free of the fabric. He was working on unbuttoning the shirt when Andrew walked in, toweling the water from his hair.

Neil had meant to ask if he could borrow a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants so he wouldn’t have to sleep in the tight skinny jeans, but his mouth went dry when he saw Andrew shirtless with his sweatpants hanging low on his hips. Andrew ignored his staring for all of ten seconds before he tossed his towel somewhere to the side. He stepped closer until he was standing right in front of Neil and leaned in close, hands flat on the mattress on either side of Neil.

“Yes or no?” he asked, voice low. He was close enough that his lips almost brushed Neil’s when he talked. Neil suppressed a shiver and nodded distractedly before closing the distance.

The kiss sent fire through Neil’s body, waves of heat straight to his stomach. Andrew nudged his legs open and pushed until Neil was leaning back on his elbows. He didn’t touch, not until he had Andrew’s permission, but his fingers flexed in the sheets underneath him as Andrew deepened the kiss.

It was tantalizing, the way Andrew’s mouth pressed against his, again and again and again, always coming back for more. Neil’s head spun, his thoughts dizzy and out of reach. Andrew adjusted the angle of the kiss with his hand on the side of Neil’s neck and Neil couldn’t stop the sound he made before it was already past his lips.

They moved at once, Neil scooting backwards so his back hit the pillows at the head of the bed and Andrew crawling on top of him, keeping an inch between their bodies. When Andrew gave the signal, Neil twined his hands in Andrew’s hair, still damp from the shower and dripping down his
“You can touch my shoulders,” Andrew muttered against Neil’s lips. “Don’t go lower than that yet.”

Eagerly, Neil splayed his hands across Andrew’s bare skin and groaned when he felt him shudder against him.

“Andrew,” he said, but Andrew was already undoing the rest of Neil’s buttons and pushing his shirt off his shoulders. With the shirt out of the way, Andrew’s hands roamed Neil’s broken skin, fingers tracing scars and pressing until there was barely any space between them.

They kissed for what seemed like hours, each touch hot and laced with need. Andrew pressed against him and Neil gasped, throwing his head back as Andrew bit at his neck. His hand on the front of Neil’s pants made his breath hitch in his chest.

“Yes?” Andrew asked, his fingers pausing over the zipper.

Neil couldn’t nod fast enough. “Yes,” he said.

“Lift your hips for me,” Andrew said and helped Neil out of his jeans.

Neil didn’t feel bare in front of Andrew like this. A part of him thought he should be embarrassed, but Andrew had seen Neil’s scars countless times before and he’d never flinched away from them. His hands on Neil were rough with desire, but when they passed over Neil’s scars, it was almost tender. It felt the same now, even when Andrew’s body was so close to Neil’s, close enough that Neil could feel the heat of him.

Andrew leaned away and Neil chased after his lips, but he placed a hand on Neil’s chest and Neil fell back against the mattress. He took Andrew in, his flushed cheeks and chest, his eyes dark in the low light. Neil drank in every detail of Andrew’s face and felt settled for the first time in days.

Instead of leaning in to kiss him again, Andrew reached for Neil’s hand and placed a kiss against the inside of his wrist. It was featherlight and he kept his eyes on Neil’s while he did it but Neil’s breath left him.

Andrew kissed a path to his elbow, where he hesitated over the thick scarring from his father’s axe, then continued to Neil’s shoulder and brushed his lips against the outline of a hot iron that had been melted into his skin so many years ago. The cream Neil had rubbed into his scars this morning had nothing on the gentle way Andrew pressed his lips to them. Andrew kissed the scar around Neil’s neck, lips soft and reverent as he lingered there.

Neil watched as Andrew did the same to his other arm, taking his time to press his lips to each of his scars, new and old. He was already a shuddery mess by the time Andrew moved down his chest until he was laying propped up on his elbows between Neil’s legs. He flicked a look up to Neil and curled his hand around one of Neil’s knees before he pressed a long kiss to the scar there. Neil couldn’t breathe in the best way possible as Andrew traced a path to Neil’s thigh with his mouth, where the kisses turned biting. He pressed open-mouthed kisses to Neil’s inner thigh and sucked marks Neil was sure would be visible tomorrow.

“Andrew,” Neil said breathlessly, fingers scrabbling at the sheets with nothing to hold onto. Without stopping to respond, Andrew reached up and guided Neil’s hand to his head. Neil tangled his fingers in Andrew’s hair and held on as Andrew teased him.

“Yes or no, Neil?” Andrew asked, his voice just as wrecked as Neil felt under his hands. Neil had
only enough air in his lungs to answer with an insistent yes.

As Andrew worked him with his mouth, Neil curled his leg around Andrew’s shoulder, his heel pressing into Andrew’s back, and pressed him closer. Andrew held his hip down until Neil finished and waited until the waves had stopped crashing over him before he pulled Neil’s boxers back into place and pushed off of him.

Before he could get himself off, Neil reached out and stilled his hand. He hovered his fingers over Andrew’s, not quite touching, and asked, “Can I?”

Andrew was still for a long time. Neil was about ready to take no for an answer when he nodded and shifted so he was straddling Neil’s hips. Neil sat up to make the angle easier and hooked his thumb in the waistband of Andrew’s sweats. Andrew didn’t let him take them off, but Neil didn’t have any trouble slipping his hand inside.

He kissed Andrew’s neck and Andrew’s fingers curled in Neil’s hair. Andrew never lost control, but he was close enough that Neil felt the small puffs of air against his skin, felt when Andrew’s chest hitched when Neil twisted his hand in a certain way. Afterwards, Neil pulled his hand back and Andrew kissed him fiercely on the mouth as he came down from it.

He pulled away when the tremors had stopped. He seemed calm enough, but Neil knew better than to reach for him again. When Andrew was a safe distance away, Neil pushed himself off the bed and went to the bathroom to wash his hands. Andrew was already dressed in a clean pair of sweatpants when he returned, and he gave Neil a t-shirt and some pajama pants to borrow.

“You can sleep in here,” he said as he passed Neil on the way to the bathroom.

While Andrew washed up, Neil settled amongst the sheets and thick blankets. He felt suddenly drowsy, eyes heavy and drooping. When Andrew returned, Neil watched him with sleepy eyes as he popped open the window screen and perched on the sill to smoke a cigarette.

Neil fell asleep with Andrew’s arm thrown over his waist, comfortable against his chest and the many pillows on Andrew’s bed.

Neil expected to wake up next to Andrew, but he didn’t.

It took him a moment to realize where he was. He blinked, the cold air stinging his face. Neil looked down to find his fingernails were broken with tiny splinters wedged underneath. Neil panicked, thinking of the coffin and the mud and the full moon above him, but then his eyes adjusted to the dark and he recognized the Maserati sitting in the driveway.

The door opened behind him and Neil flipped around. Andrew poked his head out and fell to Neil, still laying on the cold ground. Neil felt caught, but he didn’t know why.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked, eyes scanning the area around Neil. He saw the deep gouges in the wooden porch the same moment Neil did. Neil tried to hide his scuffed hands behind his back, but the damage was done.

“What is that?”

“I – ” Neil’s mouth opened and closed soundlessly. “I don’t know”

Andrew pinned him with a look and turned on his heel, leaving the door open behind him. Neil followed the silent demand with his heart in his throat. Kevin was passed out on the couch and he
didn’t stir when Neil and Andrew went past. Andrew didn’t speak or turn around until they were in upstairs bathroom.

He made Neil sit on the counter while he dug around in the cabinets. He didn’t speak while he cleaned the dirt and splinters from Neil’s hands, careful where the wood and cut into his skin.

“Tell me what’s going on.” Andrew said, without looking at Neil. He turned Neil’s hand over and scrubbed the dirt away from the cracks in his palms.

“Just sleepwalking,” Neil said. He didn’t know what else he could say. Whatever was going on, Neil was just as clueless about it when he asked Aaron about rituals last week. Neil had suspected for awhile that something else was up, but he didn’t know how to go about figuring it out.

“How long has this been happening?”

Neil hesitated. He didn’t mean to keep this from Andrew, but it was so ingrained in him to keep quiet, and he didn’t want Andrew to worry. But Andrew already knew something was up, and playing dumb would only make him more tense.

“The sleepwalking’s been happening for a couple days,” he said.

Andrew’s eyes went cold. He closed the distance between them and curled his fingers in Neil’s thin t-shirt. Neil let him look, let him see the truth. He didn’t know if the expression in Andrew’s eyes was anger, or something else entirely.

“I need to know about these things,” he said. “If you’re sleepwalking, or whatever the fuck, I need to know.”

His entire body was rigid. Neil grit his teeth and met Andrew’s eyes. He finally placed the unknown emotion he’d detected in Andrew’s eyes. It was hardly anger at all; it was fear. Fear for Neil, fear of losing him again. Something in Neil crumbled, knowing he had been the one to cause that fear.

Andrew deserved the truth and Neil wanted to give it to him. No matter how hard it was, Neil made a promise. He felt weighed down from keeping everything a secret the past couple weeks. It scared him, what was happening, and he didn’t know how to stop it.

Neil told Andrew everything.

Andrew stuck to Neil’s side in the following days after that. When he wasn’t at class, he was keeping Neil company and keeping an eye on him. Neil appreciated it. He’d figured out that the “episodes” still happened when someone else was around, but Andrew was always there to anchor him when Neil began to drift. It was nice, even when Neil knew it was because Andrew didn’t want to lose him again.

After practice on Wednesday, Andrew and Neil went back to Abby’s house after running to the dorm. Andrew grabbed an extra pair of clothes to sleep in and borrowed Kevin’s laptop from his desk. Neil wasn’t sure if he had asked first, but Kevin wasn’t around to complain about the theft.

A drowsy afternoon watching movies on Kevin’s laptop turned into night. Abby made dinner and Neil washed the dishes while Neil dried them before going back to Neil’s bedroom to watch another movie.

Neil was tucked against Andrew’s side, his shoulder pressed flush with Andrew’s. Andrew had the
laptop propped up on his stomach and one arm around Neil as he curled a strand of hair around one of his fingers. They were about half-way through watching Monty Python when Neil fell asleep with his head pillowed on Andrew’s shoulder, the sun setting in a veil of gold.

When he got up again, Andrew didn’t wake.

Neil left the house, the dark shrouding everything in a gloom. His eyes were open as he walked down the street, but they were unseeing and his mind was elsewhere. He was a zombie, an empty shell waiting to be filled. His feet followed the silent call beckoning him, followed the tether for miles without waking up from his haze.

He walked along the road for hours until he diverged from the path and came to a clearing. It was far from any city, miles out from anyone who might stumble across it. Gravel crunched under Neil’s feet and scraggly bushes hugged the edge of the clearing, the only light to see by was the unblinking moon above him.

There was a circle of white rocks in the center of the clearing and five unlit candles resting at each point of a star painted on the inside of it. In the middle rested a large jar – an urn, plain and unremarkable. A tall post was hammered right next to it, with a long length of rope waiting at the base. If Neil were in control of his own body, he might have shivered. He might have run.

Neil was aware now, but he still couldn’t move his own limbs, no matter how hard he struggled against the invisible restraints. The candles lit all at once, flames burning high in the air before dying down again in the dead wind. A figure stepped out of the boundary of darkness and Neil’s stomach plummeted when he recognized her. Panic curdled in his veins and he tried desperately to wake up, hoping that all of this was just another nightmare.

Red painted lips, a cruel smile. The blade danced between the woman’s fingers and caught the glint of the moonlight against its sharp edge. He didn’t wake up, because this wasn’t a dream.

“Hello, Junior.”

0 days until Halloween…

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading! the last chapter will be posted tomorrow!!
Neil Josten had been afraid many times in his life. He felt it keenly, fear. Like a slim blade sliding against his skin, all threat of violence and pain. Fear was the most familiar thing he’d felt since it was the backdrop to his earliest memories of growing up in the Butcher’s house.

Neil knew fear, knew panic, but when Lola Malcom tied his unresisting wrists behind a wooden post hammered into the ground in the middle of a ritual circle, he thought this must have been the most afraid he’s ever been in his life.

“There,” Lola said, yanking the last knot until it was tight against Neil’s wrists. He still couldn’t move his body, but even if he could he wouldn’t be going anywhere. Lola’s smile was mocking. “Just in time for Halloween.”

Neil didn’t respond. He couldn’t, not when his tongue was heavy in his mouth.

“You know,” Lola began. The knife was in her hands again, spinning through her fingers as she played with it. “You were a hard one to find, Junior. But once I managed it, you were a lot easier to watch and control.”

At first, Neil had no idea what she was talking about. But then he thought of the masked person and the bouncer at Eden’s, all the empty eyes trailing him that night. They hadn’t been watching him, not really, but they’d been trained on him. And every time Neil’s hand jerked across the table or he woke up some place he didn’t belong, all of it, was Lola’s doing.

Tapping on his cheek with her finger, Lola said, “I suppose I should have known you would crawl back to your friends when you escaped. After this is over, they will be the first ones to go. The Butcher will make sure they scream loud enough for you to hear, wherever you end up.”

Neil’s heart clenched. He wanted to scream but he couldn’t. He felt it pushing up through his throat and past his lips, but all that came out was a dull whimper. The more he resisted, the more he more he struggled, the harder it was to move. A heavy weight seemed to press into him on all sides, he was doing everything he could to not implode from the pressure.
Lola’s smile widened. “Oh don’t you worry, Nathaniel. You won’t miss a thing, but you won’t be the one doing the killing. Not exactly.”

Lola turned away and walked to the edge of the circle, nudging any errant stone back in place with her boot. All the candles were lit, they flickered and cast long shadows across the clearing, catching the urn next to Neil’s feet and making it glow a sickly red. Neil had a sneaking suspicion he knew what was in there.

When Lola returned, she grabbed Neil’s chin in a tight grip and pushed his head against the post. “They killed your father, did you hear? Shot him in the chest and turned him to ash to prevent me from bringing him back. But they underestimate me. I can’t bring his body back, no. But I have a perfectly good body here, and one so willing to be filled.”

Neil’s hand twitched from where it was bound behind his back. It was the most he’d been able to move since he came to clearing. He managed to force his mouth open enough to say through hissed teeth, “Fuck…you…”

Lola laughed, a harsh throaty cackle that seemed to split the air. “When did Junior become a fighter? You certainly didn’t get it from your coward mother. Must be the Wesninski blood.”

She grabbed a fistful of Neil’s hair and wrenched his head back. Neil felt a pop and a bolt of pain shoot down his spine. He sensed before he felt the cold steel of the knife pressed against his throat. His hands were shaking now, whether from terror or from the strain of him pushing his body to move, Neil didn’t know.

“I’d love to slit your throat and watch you bleed out across the ground,” Lola said conversationally. She dug the knife into the base of Neil’s neck until he felt something wet and sticky trickling down his skin. “But unfortunately, I need your body to stay intact until the Butcher can possess it.”

Lola dug her finger into the tiny cut she made on his neck and collected blood in a small jar she pulled from her coat. She held it up, the dark blood catching the light from the sliver of the moon in the sky, then she dragged the knife down Neil’s face, not quite pushing in enough to make him bleed. Neil’s breath stuttered in his chest and his eyes grew wide with panic when the blade trailed dangerously near.

She circled him a few times, looking his body up and down. “It would be better if there was a full moon, like when I raised you. I would have done the ritual during the Harvester’s moon, but you slipped your leash. Halloween is better though, since the dark is so much stronger, all mine for the picking. I have you to thank for that, Junior. And this time, you won’t be getting away.”

Neil wondered why she was stalling. She had him tied up, and she already had his blood. He didn’t understand why she was dragging this out, unless it was to taunt him a little longer. His suspicions were confirmed when she leaned in close and whispered what exactly the ritual entailed, what she was going to do to him. Neil’s stomach rolled. He’d rather her slip the blade underneath his skin and get it over with than have to listen to her set out the bloody details like a feast on a table.

Then she stopped, smiled.

“It’s the witching hour,” she said. “Shall we begin?”

Lola bent down and picked up the urn. She screwed off the lid and threw it out of the circle. Then she popped the top off the jar filled with Neil’s blood and poured it inside. She swirled it, staring inside of it, and set it at Neil’s feet at the very middle of the circle. Nothing happened, but then Lola took out a battered book from a hidden pocket and flipped to a page that was bookmarked and
tattered.

From where she squatted at the edge of the circle, Lola began to read, muttering the words to herself, so quiet Neil couldn’t hear. The urn began to shake and Neil thought something was trying to crawl out of it until he felt the tremors traveling through his legs and into the rest of his body. Nothing else was moving, Lola was motionless with the book in her hands and the rocks were still.

A noise rose in his head, a high-pitched whistle that turned into a roar that threatened to make his eardrums burst. Neil squeezed his eyes shut. He was sure Lola couldn’t compel him to stay still when she was reading the words for another ritual, but his mind felt like putty and he couldn’t even think enough to try to move his limbs. The trembling was in his head now, the vibration in his teeth turning his vision white.

Over it all, a voice that Neil had feared for so long.

*Junior…*

Neil choked when he heard it, reverberating in his head like it was caught in an echo chamber. Stars burst in his mind’s eye, bright pops of color that Neil couldn’t focus on. He felt like he was being taken apart, torn limb from limb and reconstructed again. Everything hurt, his entire body throbbing as the static in his head grew, but still not loud enough to drown out his father’s voice calling to him.

The only he could hold on and grasp the little control he had left, was to think of the Foxes. He thought of Andrew, massaging his scars when they hurt and kissing them with so much tenderness, the thought of it made something ache inside of Neil. He thought of his Foxes, his *family*, and hoped against everything that they would be alright, that Neil would be able to keep enough control to stop his father from hurting them.

Just when Neil felt like he was burning from the inside out, his mind turning to goo and leaking away as *something else* crept its way into his body, it stopped. Neil slumped forward, prevented from falling to ground only by the post he was still tied to. A hand pressed to his shoulder and his body twinged at the touch. Neil’s head pounded so hard in his temples that a low groan escaped from his lips.

“Neil.”

Neil couldn’t place the voice; he couldn’t even think. His head still felt like it was stuffed with cotton, too fuzzy and far away for anything to get through. Whoever was holding him up slipped behind him and cut the rope tethering him to the wooden post. Neil would have fallen but they caught him with an arm around his shoulders to keep him from sliding to the ground.

Cotton brushed his cheek as Neil leaned against them, and Neil finally managed to open his eyes. He knew this person, knew them more than he knew anyone else in the world. Something in him shook at the sight. “Andrew?”

Andrew stood solid beneath him, holding Neil up until Neil was able to regain the use of his limbs again. He kept one arm around Neil’s shoulders while he held him against his chest, and the other carding through his hair. Neil still felt the remnants of the vibrations like shockwaves in his arms, but at least he could stand.

“How did you find me?” Neil asked.

“I followed you.” Andrew replied. “Did you think I would just let you leave?”
Neil shook his head. He was still so dizzy. “Where’s Lola?”

“I hit her with a rock. We need to go.”

Andrew guided Neil out of the circle with an arm around his waist. Lola was sprawled across the ground, her face shrouded with darkness. Neil shuddered and was about to look away when she twitched.


“No.” Andrew squared his shoulders and drew a knife from his armbands. He pulled Neil behind him but Lola was already on her feet. Blood was smeared down her face from an ugly gash in her forehead, but she payed it no mind as she whipped out her blade.

Neil saw the knife arcing through the air, saw it spiraling around itself like it was suspended in time. He tried to push Andrew out of harms’ way, but it was too late. The knife hit and Andrew crumbled to the ground like a sack of rocks. Neil felt a scream rise up in him.

He was moving before he even realized it. He didn’t know where he got the knife, maybe he picked it up when it slipped from Andrew’s slack fingers, but he lunged at Lola and slashed it at her. She parried easily and threw him backwards. Neil stumbled, falling back into the circle and kicking the urn with his feet. It teetered and fell on its side, spilling its contents of ash and blood across the painted lines of the pentagram.

“No!” Lola screamed. “What have you done?”

Neil rolled out of the circle while Lola leapt into the middle of it, hands outstretched for the fallen urn. In her haste to get it, she knocked over one of the candles with her foot and the flames from the remaining candles seemed to ignite at once, flaring higher than any candle should have been capable of. The candles never touched her, but her scream turned strangled as the flames engulfed her with a guttural wail. Neil squeezed his eyes shut at the brightness, but the heat singed his face and he had to scoot backwards to avoid getting burned.

When the candle flames subsided to just barely-flickering sparks, Neil pushed himself to his feet, ignored the pounding in his head, and staggered over to Andrew.

Andrew’s eyes split open when Neil fell to his knees beside him, but his skin was leached of color and was already taking on a gray sheen. He had his hand pressed to his stomach, where blood bloomed red against his t-shirt. Lola’s knife lay a couple feet away and Neil thought of his mother’s voice, reminding him to never take the knife out if he was stabbed. You’ll bleed out. You’ll die.

Neil cursed and pressed his hand against the stab wound in Andrew’s stomach. He’d already lost so much blood, but Neil could feel it slick under his palm as more trickled out. Andrew’s fingers curled around Neil’s wrist in a weak grip. Neil could feel him shaking.

“Neil,” he said quietly. He was having trouble keeping his eyes open, they focused in and out on Neil’s face as he looked at him. “Promise me something.”

Neil hissed through his teeth. He didn’t understand how Andrew could be talking about promises while he was bleeding out across the ground.

“You have to take care of them,” Andrew murmured, his voice growing fainter with each word. “My family. Promise me that you’ll keep an eye on them when I’m not there. I can’t do it anymore.”

He felt like his chest was cracking open, his skin falling apart at the seams. It was so much different than before, when Neil was being torn apart while his father’s spirit possessed him. This was worse. Lola was dead and Neil was finally in control of his own body again, but everything was still falling apart around him.

Andrew’s chest heaved with the effort to talk. “Neil, promise me.”

His fingers tightened around Neil’s wrist, but he was too weak to grasp it properly. His chest was moving too fast, short gasps of air that did nothing to relieve the pain contorting his face.

There had to be something Neil could do. He wasn’t going to let Andrew die, not like this. Not when Neil had just gotten his life back. Not when they were supposed to have a future.

Before his grief could choke him, Neil looked wildly around to find something to help. His eyes jerked to the ritual circle with Lola’s body still collapsed in the middle of it. She wasn’t burned like he expected it to be, she seemed completely untouched by the flames. Her body was broken, her head bent at an awkward angle so her eyes stared unseeingly into the sky, but not an inch of her skin was charred. Her book of rituals lay abandoned beside her.

“No,” Neil said.

“No –”

Neil pulled away and Andrew tried to reach for him, but Neil had already launched himself towards the book, grappling at it with bloody fingers and flipping through the pages to find what he needed.

It was a simple trick, barely even a ritual. His mother had used it a couple times on him when they were on the run, when she was desperate enough to evoke the dark. Neil had never attempted it, but this was his last chance at saving Andrew’s life. The ritual required nothing but the blood of the dying, and there was plenty of it around Andrew.

Neil scrambled back to Andrew, who was already starting to fade, beads of sweat dripping down his face and mixing with his blood. Neil pressed both of his hands to the open wound in Andrew’s stomach and muttered the words on the page. Warmth flooded through his hands and Neil pressed until he felt dizzy, until he felt the life draining out of him and into Andrew.

When he was done, he pulled back his hands and watched with desperate eyes to see if the healing ritual worked. Andrew’s skin was knitted back together, pink and new but otherwise closed, but his face had gone slack, his mouth open in a silent cry of pain. His body went impossibly still.

Neil sat with his knees pulled to his chest and his arms draped across them as the first rays of dawn began to chase the night away. The ground was slick with red, and Lola’s mangled body hadn’t been moved from the circle. He thought about burying it, burning it. But he left it there.

The blood on Neil’s hands was starting to flake off, but he didn’t have anything to wash them with. He felt itchy and antsy, and all he really wanted to do was go home.

“Help me with this,” Andrew said behind him. Neil turned to him. His shirt was still stained with his own blood, but he was standing with ease, and the color had returned to his skin within minutes after the ritual. The sunlight behind him seemed to ignite his hair and the lines of his body, and anyone that looked at him would never have known that he’d been stabbed hours prior.
“Leave it,” Neil said when he realized Andrew was kicking the white rocks out of formation. “The police will want it untouched. More evidence against Lola for performing a botched ritual, and less against us.”

Andrew nodded and moved to sit next to Neil. He was close enough that their shoulders brushed. Neil leaned into him.

When the police arrived fifteen minutes later, they came with an ambulance in tow. It was unnecessary. Aside from the cut Lola had made on his neck, Neil was hardly injured except for a couple minor scratches and burns, and Andrew’s knife wound had completely healed into a pale, star-burst shaped scar. They hid that from the police. They didn’t need to know how Andrew got it, and how Neil had healed it.

The officer that took their statements gave Neil and Andrew a ride back to Palmetto once they were cleared by the paramedics. Neil gazed at Andrew the entire hour it took to drive back, unashamedly relieved that Andrew was alive, that he was next to him and solid and breathing. The sun hit Andrew’s hair and spun it to a fine gold, and when Andrew met his eyes, he grabbed Neil’s hand, intertwined their fingers, and squeezed.

“It’s over,” Neil whispered, his words for Andrew’s ears only. Now that Lola was dead, she couldn’t play puppet master whenever Neil was caught unawares. There was no one else to raise Nathan Wesninski from the grave. No more sleepwalking and no more terrifying moments wondering if he had moved or if someone else had moved him.

Neither one of them let go of the other until the Foxhole Court was in sight, until they were finally home and safe.

Chapter End Notes

the end!!

i stayed up until 2am last night to finish writing this and i edited it this morning between studying for the art history midterm i have in a couple hours and let me tell y'all it was wild. the whole experience of writing this fic was wild really fbdkijs there were SO many times i was super burnt out and just wanting to give up on it, but i didn't want to leave y'all hanging! i'm just really glad i posted everything on time :D

thank you so so much to everyone who has read, commented, and left kudos on this!! it really meant a lot and is what kept me going when i wanted to give up. i really hope y'all enjoyed reading this as much as i enjoyed writing it (most of the time dsjks) thank you!!!

and happy halloween!

End Notes
This fic is going to be following a countdown and will have a schedule, so I'll post every week on Tuesday leading up to Halloween! (Hopefully, if everything goes well, that is hkdsjs)

My tumblr is knox-knocks so hmu if you wanna chat or if you have any questions!! Thank you so much for reading! <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!