A Brief History of A Lifetime

by shortstackedcheesecake96

Summary

What if Eric never came back from the future? A story about righting wrongs, waiting and how to make 'long-distance' work. Rated M for later on. A huge thank you to nicholelovesyouuu for helping me get this story off the ground!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Nothing could get in the way of Eric Cartman and a plan. Not the law, not stupid sea otters and warring atheists, not even time. And especially not an irritating, robotic canine lackey that he didn't even remember asking for.

"Hello, Eric!" K-10 exclaimed with artificial cheeriness as Eric burst into his dormitory.

"Yeah, hi," Eric muttered, dangerously exasperated. His ungraceful, ten year old self whipped around the room like a hurricane. Storming and stomping, his eyes gleaming with determination, shielding the dread that lay beneath.

K10 just stood there dumbly, not wired to pick up on subtle emotional indicators. "What are you looking for?" He asked, scanning the room himself for anything in particular.

Eric ran a damp palm through his immaculately combed hair. "My time phone, my fucking time phone, do you know where it is?!!" He snapped testily, before he studied the room suspiciously. The storm halting for a moment, "something looks different."

"I cleaned your room while you were gone," K10 replied, his robot tail mechanically wagging like it always did when he completed a task.

A task that Eric hadn't set, by the way.

Eric's eyes flashed with rage. "You cleaned my room?!" He shouted indignantly, he gripped his hair in frustration. "Science damn it, now I won't know where everything is!"

Eric pouted then, stomping his foot.

"But doesn't everything look more organized?" K-10 asked. He was confused, Eric's response didn't seem logical. "Less cluttered?"

"Yes, but-" Eric sighed, closing his eyes. Great, Eric thought, now the dog is gonna give me the same lecture that mom used to. Like I give a shit, besides, focus. "Where did you put my time phone?"

"In the compartment underneath your bed."

Eric stomped over to it, forgoing a 'thank you'. He huffed as he reached under the bed. "Why did you put it there, anyway?" He grumbled.

"You haven't used it in a while."

"And?"

"I thought you had no interest in using it anymore."

"Well, I have! I mean, I do!" Eric shook his head at his blathering. He had to calm down, but this was so important. This needed to go right.

He pulled the time phone out from under the bed, crossing his legs and placing it in his lap. Curled up by the foot of his bed, he was hunched over the phone possessively, that rush of surreptitious
mischief melded with the seriousness of his plan. It didn't feel right.

"Who are you calling?" K-10 asked.

"Myself," Eric mumbled impatiently, setting the date.

"Yourself?"

"Yes, myself! Science damn it!" Eric exclaimed, growling under his breath.

"Why would you want to play a trick on yourself?"

"I'm not going to trick myself…" Eric mumbled, half-listening.

"Then you're using the phone for what purpose?"

"To change some things," Eric replied dismissively, shaking his head. "Make some things right."

"But Eric, that's illegal," K-10 warned.

"Like that matters."

"But you could affect-"

"That's the whole point!" Eric retorted, he wanted to get that damn robot out of here. "I want things to change!"

"But if you get caught-"

"I'm not going to get caught, asshole!" Eric said, his teeth gritted, the phone was ringing. "I need to do this, okay? And you need to be quiet!"

"Very well, Eric."

Eric didn't respond, he just pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes firmly shut. Every ring drilled into his chest, pulled at his insanity, elevated his doubt… No, he wasn't going to regret this. His already damp palms grew slicker and his heart leapt into his throat.

"Hello?" A familiar, unassuming voice. His own voice. It didn't seem real.

"Hi," Eric whispered, in awe.

"Who the fuck is this?!" The startled, defensive question dragged him back to reality.

Eric rolled his eyes, cringing when he smacked a palm to his forehead. "It's you. You're talking to yourself-" Eric bit the inside of his mouth in frustration, he had no idea how to explain this. "Look, it's gonna take way too long to explain, but, basically, you're gonna wind up in the future-"

"What?!" His past-self interrupted. "How the fuck does that happen? Do Stan and Kahl have something to do with it?! Those assholes, I swear-"

"It's not Stan and Kahl's fault!" Eric explained, flustered and pissed off.

"Like I believe that shit…"

It was then that Eric felt a smug, knowing smirk tug at the corner of his mouth. "Kahl isn't all that bad," he said softly, fondly. He didn't want to, but he let out a shaky, vulnerable sigh. "Trust me,
"you're gonna be thinking a lot about him five hundred years from now."

"Is that so?" He heard himself sneering. "And why should I even believe you, asshole?"

"Because I'm you!" Eric's grip on the phone tightened. "I wouldn't fucking lie to myself, would I? Dipshit…"

There was a disconcerting pause, and Eric quickly scrambled to keep himself on the line.

"Look, it doesn't matter if you don't believe me," Eric reasoned. "You just gotta trust me. I'm calling for your benefit!"

"How?"

"Just do as I tell you, and you won't regret it."

Another pause. This time, one of deliberation. Calculation, but Eric had himself hooked, intrigued.

"It'll be very worth your while," Eric added temptingly, knowing that would tip the scales.

"Fine, fucking fine," his past-self yielded irritably. "But you better be right, douchebag."

"It'll go right if you listen to me, cockface!"

His past-self sighed, "I'm listening."

"Alright," Eric began slowly. "You haven't talked to Kahl since Kenny died, have you?"

Eric could practically feel his past-self squirming and bristling uncomfortably. "W-what does that have to do with anything?" His past-self finally asked.

"Just answer the question!"

"I'm gonna hang up…"

"No, you're fucking not!" Eric shouted, baring his teeth. "You're gonna listen to me!"

Silence. But there was no finite, disconnecting beep.

"No…” His past-self was quiet in his tone. It roused a pained familiarity in Eric, it hurt to be an outsider to his own emotions. To see what he was really made of.

"No, what?" Eric tentatively pressed on, wary.

"I haven't spoken to Kahl since Kenny died." His past-self clarified. "He hasn't been in the best of moods, and he's no fun to rip on when he's grumpy. Or depressed."

Eric chuckled under his breath and winced. "I know," he nodded. "And I also know that he goes to Kenny's grave about the same time every day."

"How?"

"Because we used to hide behind the wall until he left, genius." Eric teased, smirking to himself in the pause.

A bitter 'smartass,' was mumbled down the line.
"What you need to do is get there earlier than Kahl," Eric explained.

"What if he sees me?" His past-self asked, worry keening in his voice.

"He won't see you," Eric reassured. "You don't need to stay there for too long, okay?"

"Damn it, okay…"

"You're gonna put flowers on Kenny's grave-"

"What?!

"And leave a note for Kahl inside," Eric continued resolutely. "But don't be a douche."

"Then help me out!" His past-self demanded, although it sounded more like he was pleading. "What should I say?"

"Just… Write how you felt when he hugged you in that hospital corridor." Eric replied, and just the mention of that memory sent him back to that confusing warmth and the emotions that roiled inside him, all because Kyle had actually cared and offered him something he never knew he wanted. Remorse forced its way in. "And tell him how you messed everything up."

His past-self sighed deeply. "I did mess everything up…" stubbornness dripped from his mumbled voice.

"Well… I'm trying to put things right." Eric offered. "If you trust me."

"I trust you," his past-self replied begrudgingly.

Kyle grumbled, his legs ached as he trudged, practically waded, through the snow.

Flakes continued to fall, and the cotton, pregnant sky promised to not let up.

He shoved his bitterly cold hands deeper into the warmth of his jacket pockets, glancing at some of the gravestones half-swallowed by white.

Never had snow seemed so solemn. It made everything look so drained, erased.

A lump rose in Kyle's throat as he approached Kenny's gravestone. If only some things didn't have to be erased, if only time could change.

If only.

Kyle's toes flexed awkwardly, twitching in his winter boots. He had no bouquet to give, and had ran out of words to say. He would cry if he hadn't cried countless times before, and if he knew his tears wouldn't freeze on his cheek.

Kenny's grave was intact. No acts of vandalism, no stolen flowers… It all seemed in order. Kyle didn't know when or why he had appointed himself to be the inspector of Kenny's grave but he was.

A small laugh pressed against his lips, fizzling out when he noticed intriguingly fresh flowers bound together with pretty string and gleaming cellophane. Sincere yellow Chrysanthemums and strange Forget-Me-Nots, fluttered in the still breeze, tempting Kyle to pick them up.

Who could have bought these?
He scooped up the bouquet, careful to brush the snow away and briefly breathed in the flowers' fragrance.

Something sharp poked at his nose, he peered inside and found a small card, nestled between the petals and the clipped stems. It was as almost as if somebody didn't want their words to be read.

Kyle was caught in a snare of curiosity, he felt it was rude of him to pick up the flowers in the first place, it would be even ruder to read the contents of the card. Even if it was completely innocent, reading it would be wrong, an invasion of some sort.

But Kyle had to know. He had to know the words that had been deliberately buried deep within the bouquet.

He fished for the card, cringing as the cellophane crinkled loudly, judgmentally.

Opening it up, he recognized the handwriting immediately. Boyish and unrefined.

'I did care about him, but I'm too much of an asshole. You know that, Jew.'

Kyle read it again and again, hoping to decode its potential, layered meaning. Because he knew he was smarter than Cartman, (well, smart enough to not fall for his bullshit), but God knows he had a slipped a couple of times. A few times, actually.

But he didn't know. He didn't know what it all meant except that Cartman was… Sorry?

Sorry.

All that scrutinizing and rationalization and all Kyle could come up with was an apology.

So what now? Kyle could be cynical, refuse to believe it - which may have been the more sensible option – or he could just accept it.

He remembered Cartman's tears against his shirt, his muffled cries, his familiar scent and how he had come undone for Kyle to see.

And Kyle did nothing but hold him.

So maybe it wouldn't be so crazy to consider that Cartman was being genuine this time, after all, he had been before. Kyle had witnessed it.

He smiled ruefully, placing the card back among the flowers and setting them down on Kenny's grave.

As the day slipped away and made room for the evening, Eric paced his room back and forth. He narrowed his eyes at the goading time phone, an inexplicable anxiety making him terrified of the stupid machine.

He had sent K-10 to do some menial task so he wouldn't be here to get on Eric's nerves. It was nice to have some peace, for once. Everybody wanted something from the Time Child. Spy on that meeting, steal this information crystal, manipulate and betray them.

Eric liked being needed, but he didn't like the feeling of wool over his eyes.

Still, it was worth it to eventually go home. Hopefully, with a few things cleaned up and sorted out.
Wouldn't life be so much better, so much easier, if he and Kyle could just stop these games? It was exhausting, and Eric had learned the value of time. And pushing himself further from Kyle seemed like a pretty big waste of it.

With that thought, the anxiety within him was decimated. He marched over to the time phone, setting the date and punching the number in thoughtlessly, so he didn't have time to chicken out.

But hearing his voice. It's been so long.

I don't know if I can do this.

Eric grumbled under his breath, the phone already ringing and he had no intention of hanging up.

"Hello?" Kyle's voice pricked at Eric's most vulnerable resolve.

Eric smiled quietly, he coughed into his pudgy fist before he greeted Kyle. "Sup Jew?"

Kyle sighed, "God damn it, I'm hanging up…"

"No, Kahl! Wait-"

"How the Hell are you even calling me anyway?" Kyle asked angrily. "Shouldn't you be in juvie by now?"

"What?"

"I said, shouldn't you be in juvie?" Kyle asked, his impatience even made Eric bristle. "You practically kidnapped Butters!"

"You're a fucking drama queen, you know that?" Eric replied indignantly. "I did not kidnap Butters!"

"Whatever," Kyle muttered, before he asked, "where are you calling from, anyway?"

"The police station," Eric lied, "listen, Kahl, I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry."

"Yeah, right…"

"No, I'm seriously, I am really sorry, Kahl," Eric pressed on, wanting Kyle to believe it. He was astonished at how quickly his anxiety had melted away. "What I did was fucking lousy and I'm a jerk, okay?"

Kyle didn't seen moved by Eric's apology. "You're more than a jerk, you're a-"

"I know, I know," Eric interrupted him, wincing. "But I'm sorry. I'm sorry I did what I did, I'm sorry I ruined your birthday."

"You didn't ruin my birthday, asswipe," Kyle retorted. Shit, Eric had forgotten how fucking stubborn Kyle was.

"I didn't?"

"No, because I don't care," Kyle continued smugly. "You gonna take that apology back?"

"No, because I mean it," Eric replied resolutely, expecting for Kyle to yield a little.
"Fine, whatever," Kyle mumbled, before he asked more clearly, "well? Is that it?"

"No," Eric nearly whispered it, his mouth was dry. "I wanted to tell you that I meant what I said."

"I get it," Kyle drew the words out impatiently. "You're sorry."

"No, not just about that…" Eric was fidgeting nervously.

"About what then?"

Eric closed his eyes, the words building up in his quivering, nervous throat. "You do matter to me."

Silence. One that was unattended, Eric clung to Kyle's faint, thoughtful breathing.

"And I think you know that. You're pretty smart." Eric continued, the words out of his mouth before he could stop himself. "So, uh… that's all I wanted to say."

Eric and Kyle lingered for a moment, not knowing what else needed to be said.

"Cartman, wait-"

"Yeah?" Eric replied, a little too quickly.

"I do know that, uh…" Eric's eyebrows shot up in surprise at Kyle's loss of words. Very rarely had he left Kyle speechless, scrambling. "I guess that's why what you did was so shitty."

"I thought you didn't care," Eric smirked.

"Well, maybe I do, asshole," Kyle replied, but there was no bitterness or malice in his voice.

"Well, uh, alright," Eric began shyly, he swallowed. "Happy birthday, Kahl."

"My birthday was last week."

Eric blushed and he rolled his eyes. "I'm trying to be nice!"

Kyle chuckled softly, "I appreciate it. Have a nice time in juvie!"

"Smartass…” Eric muttered, a stupid grin on his face.

They both hung up without a goodbye.

The time phone bounced on Eric's knee fractiously and nervously.

Please don't tell me I've missed him.

Please don't tell me he's left.

Pick up the phone for f-

"Hello?" Butters' cheery voice cut off Eric's thoughts.

"Aw, shit!" Eric snapped, grinding his teeth and running a disappointed hand through his hair. How was he supposed to explain this? God damn it, Butters…

"Hello?" Butters asked again, noticeably freaked out. "W-who is this?"
Eric sighed deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose and ignoring Butters' question entirely. "Nobody," he replied shortly. "Is-" He stopped himself, knowing he would only complicate matters more with his next question. He testily asked, "Is Eric there?"

"Y-yes he is," Butters managed to stutter out, confused. "But we're real busy right now and-"

"I don't care!" Eric interrupted, his face hot with agitation. "Put him on, Science damn it!"

"Science?" Butters muttered under his breath.

Eric's body jolted to attention when a distance voice in the background asked, "who the fuck is it Butters?"

"I don't know," Butters tried to explain. "Somebody who sounds an awful lot like you."

"Well, don't freak out, douche," Eric's past-self chided meanly. "You look like you're about to piss your pants! Just give me the phone and go to the bathroom or something."

Butters must have scurried away pretty quickly, as the next thing Eric heard was an abrupt, blunt question from his past-self. "What do you want now? I'm busy!"

"I know, that's why I'm calling," Eric replied.

"To do what?" His past-self asked suspiciously, *defensively*, even. "To stop me from doing this? Because that's not gonna happen."

"No, not that," Eric shook his head and rolled his eyes. "I need you to do something else though."

"What?"

"Leave a note for Kahl. In his jacket pocket or something."

"What?!" His past-self's question almost came out like a squeak. "Are you fucking crazy? You must know that I don't want that asshole to find out it was me!"

"I do, well, I thought I did," Eric furrowed his eyebrows, his tone resigned with regret. He exhaled shakily and quietly admitted, "Now I realize that was a mistake."

Before Eric could get further entangled in vicious remorse, he pressed on firmly, "You have to do this."

A stubborn, deliberating silence was making Eric antsy. His knee started to bounce again, his heart beating loud over the faint static that his past-self had left him with.

"Are you sure?" His past-self asked, unable to hide the uneasiness pushing its way through.

"Yes," Eric replied, his mouth dry, not sure if his assurance was convincing.

"It's gonna turn out okay?" His past-self asked, tentative trust replacing the uneasiness.

"Yes!" Eric replied, frustrated and desperate. "Of course it is! I told you to trust me for a reason!"

"You better be right…"

"I will be!"
His past self sighed, palpably conflicted. "Damn it. I gotta go," he muttered. "I have a bus to catch."

"Do what I told you…” Eric commanded sternly, before his past-self could hang up.

"I will!" His past-self exclaimed. "Jesus Christ..."

Despite his past-self's infuriating attitude and the phone call ending unceremoniously, Eric flopped back onto his bed with an excited grin.

He had put everything right. Now all he needed to do was finally get back to a different kind of past.

A past where he and Kyle could start over. A past that was free of his stupid mistakes.

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A pothole woke Kyle from his cloud of slowly dissipating unconsciousness. A faint, familiar voice rang through his drowsy mind, but he was too busy adjusting to his new surroundings - and trying not to panic - to decipher the voice ringing in his ears.

A bus. He was on a slowly trundling bus. Its passengers either sleeping or staring silently and sleepily out of the window.

It was then that it occurred to Kyle to take a look for himself.

Mountains. Rural, quiet mountains that replaced the pretty houses and cityscapes that existed before his blackout. But it felt familiar, strangely safe and comfortable.

He knew it, he was going home. But how?

His eyebrows furrowed, and he saw his pale face crease in the window's reflection. His mouth was dry, his head whirring with too many nameless noises, faceless touches and the sensation of his feet leaving the floor. Of being held. But who carried him? His parents?

Shit, his parents! Where were his parents?

His heart stirred to life like a half-awake engine, forced to roar. Cold sweat did laps around his small body, and he whipped his head around frantically. He saw his parents sat behind him. His father's snoring head was resting on his mother's soft shoulder.

A gust of chilly, mountain wind whispered into the opened window, and an even smaller body stirred and shivered beside him. Kyle's eyes slid laxly to his little brother, curled up by his side, knees tucked under his chin.

Kyle took off his jacket, careful not to nudge Ike, when a crumpled note fell from his pocket.

The paper was thin, frayed, even singed at one corner. Kyle unfolded it, hoping to find some kind of clue as to how his family had been saved.

The definite answer only prompted more questions. That handwriting, Kyle wished he didn't recognize it. Only because it made this situation so much harder to understand.

The note simply read, 'welcome home.'

It coerced a smile, and a conspiracy of flutters in his chest.

Suddenly, Kyle wanted to sleep again.
He placed the jacket over Ike's shoulders, but clutched the note tightly.

Leaning against the windows, he stared at the early morning sky. He didn't know exactly what time it was, and he didn't need to. The sky could barely translate it, so he decided not to question it further.

The paper felt more present in his hand, surrounded by the unknown and unanswered questions.

The AAA attacked Ubaleh – the biggest UAA controlled city – and its headquarters just before sunrise.

The wailing alarms and the violent cloak of red Eric's room was swathed in, tore him away from a dream of home.

He knew what was happening before he looked out of the window and saw the AAA zeppelins, oil-colored behemoths that crowded the colourful sky.

Damn otters. They could have at least told me when they were attacking, I would have packed some of my stuff.

Eric was ready to go back to sleep, block out the sounds of invasion and pillages, before his door was broken down. The entrance keypad fixed to the wall was dismantled and crushed under the heavy war boots of the armed otters.

Eric shot up in his bed, suddenly craving the material assurance of his quilt. "You could have at least told-"

He didn't finish his question, a tranquiliser dart plunged into the base of his neck.

Smothered by unconsciousness.

It hurt to open his eyes, his mind trapped by drowsy manacles.

And so were his arms, anchored to a deathly still, floating chair. Natural light from the vast, wall length window spilled into the room. The thousands of glowing bulbs, that usually bobbed attentively a few inches from the ceiling, had withered. Starved and drained of the electricity that nursed them.

The sun was white. Eric had a minor view of the city, and he couldn't distinguish it from the desolate valley it had so valiantly risen from.

"What the fuck is going on?!!" Eric demanded, the question felt like he had vomited it up from his slowly awakening viscera. "Let me go, Science damn it!"

Distress slid through his veins, distress that he was trying so hard to deny.

"Be calm, Time Child…" Blavius stepped into view. The AAA president who remained calculating and regal, even in the midst of a successful, brutal invasion. His clean fur stood out starkly against the matted fur, clotted with blood, of the mute soldiers lining the room.

"Fuck you!" Eric snapped aggressively, rebelliously. "I won't calm down until I know what's going on!"

Blavius didn't flinch, he didn't even blink. Spurring Eric on more to dumbly struggle and attempt
futile escape.

"Surely you're well aware of what's going on Time Child," Blavius spoke evenly. "You've been complicit in all of this have you not?"

Eric was still too tried to reply, retort, and besides, what could he say to deny it? The evidence was everywhere.

"All your traded secrets and manipulation have led to this," Blavius continued, the smoothness of his voice barely trembled zealously. He watched Eric struggle as he spoke. "Our grand uprising, finally putting an end to this war, righting our society's wrongs. Yes, we otters may have stood for peace long ago, learned reason from the great Dawkins, but years of oppression, years of excruciating frustration…"

A clear shade of rage seeped into Blavius' colourless eyes. "They couldn't just expect the new generation to stand idly by? Wait patiently for a solution that would never come so long as our answer to the great question went unheard-"

Eric was growing tired of the discourse that had been drummed into him countless times before. He was familiar with the AAA's gripe. "I don't give a shit!" He spat caustically, "I don't care about this Science damn war! All I want is to-

Blavius nodded and said in exasperation, "we know what you want."

"You said I could go back!" Eric's voice cracked humiliatingly, lethargic tears made his eyes ache. "You promised me!" He tugged fruitlessly, one last time.

Blavius nodded to a silent figure that must have been stood behind Eric, for suddenly, those manacles cooked Eric's skin in a surge of heat. Warning him to stop resisting.

Eric ground his teeth until he felt his jaw nearly dislocate, but he complied. A pathetic, exhausted groan made his entire body slump.

"You see, it's your naïve wilfulness to believe, that betrays you," Blavius cruelly teased, his condescension had the sharpest edge. "It reminds us all that you're still merely a child. How could we let the key to our victory leave us? What will become of the AAA if you were no longer here?"

"What are you saying?" Eric asked, nauseous.

"The deal is off, Time Child."

"No! No, you can't do that!" Eric yelled, lurching forward with incredulous anger. But his skin was singed again, forcing him down. "We had a fucking agreement, you asshole!"

"There is no need to compromise with you anymore, Time Child," Blavius explained, taunted. "We have won, you have won-"

Eric shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to block out Blavius' sickening words. "Don't fucking say that!" He shouted, "This isn't my war! It never was!"

"You are not moral enough to believe that deals can't be broken," Blavius accused. "Your betrayal has led us to this point! Can't you see?"

Eric felt weak, emptied of fight. Stinging tears travelled down his face and he cringed when one splashed on the floating chair. It boiled and evaporated under the probing, waning UV light. "Please,
I, I need to go." He begged, biting back an ugly sob.

"You'd actually beg?" Blavius said through a booming laugh that made his soldiers chuckle sadistically.

Eric shuddered, humiliated and desperate. "Please, I need to go home," he pleaded. "I'll do anything! I may have betrayed everybody else, but I'm loyal to you!"

"We cannot risk it, Time Child," Blavius answered blithely.

"Even if it's not permanent," Eric reasoned, regardless. "Even if it's for one day, please."

An unnerving silence descended on the room.

"You owe me a lot," Eric continued, rousing strength from somewhere that he thought was still out cold. "I'm entitled to something, aren't I?"

Blavius shifted uncomfortably, his eyes boring into Eric because the Time Child had called his bluff.

"Perhaps," Blavius replied, non-committed.

"There's no 'perhaps' about it!" Eric couldn't help but snap indignantly. "Without me you would never have won, and if you otters are all about reason and righteousness, then you'd give me what I'm asking!"

"But why go back?" Blavius asked, changing tact. "Why go back when the present is so much better?"

Eric withheld a scoff, but his skin did bristle and he stubbornly replied, "I don't have to tell you."

"You're the one that is grovelling."

"I want-" Eric decided against it. "I need to see somebody."

"Who?" Blavius asked, his eyes narrowed.

"It doesn't matter!" Eric shouted defensively "It's just someone-" A pain in his chest made him falter. He whispered and stared at the ground, "who I have to go back for." He raised his head and asked, "Can't you understand that?"

"I do understand," Blavius replied, surprising Eric. "But you see our concerns, Time Child."

Eric rolled his eyes, his limited movements only heightened his frustration. "Yeah, I get that. But give me one day! One day! That won't change history forever, right? I know it's possible! I've seen it done before!"

Blavius opened his mouth to speak, before his attention switched to the ear piece he was wearing. Eric craned his neck subtly, to decipher the voice over the crisp static. But he didn't need to know. The look on Blavius' face was enough.

"A squad just inspected your room," Blavius began. Eric's blood ran cold. "They found a time phone."

Eric's body was wracked with shivers, and he forced himself not to tremble. Although Blavius' glare was terrifying.
Blavius addressed the voice in the ear piece once again. "Confiscate it," he ordered.

"You can't!" Eric protested. "That's mine!"

Blavius ignored him, the contempt between him and Eric was palpable. "Bring that robot canine in for questioning too, although I think I know what to do with it."

Finally he addressed Eric, and Eric couldn't even attempt to hide the storm of weak emotion in his eyes. "This will make our negotiation a little more problematic, Time Child."

"I didn't do anything illegal, I swear," Eric shook his head, surprised that even now he was able to lie through his teeth.

"I find that difficult to believe," Blavius huffed derisively.

Eric's lower lip wavered, he wanted to persist, but couldn't find it within him. His head dropped, guilt and defeat twisted grotesquely inside him.


"Science damn it..." Eric whispered, even those words were hard to get out.

Blavius sighed, Eric didn't even bother responding.

"Despite being morally reprehensible, you have done well for us, Time Child," Eric's head shot up then, he felt no shame as he trained himself on Blavius' every word. "And I was so close to granting you your wish, but, owning a time phone? You could have put so much in jeopardy."

"But I didn't!" Eric protested vainly, he was just so tired. Of everything and himself.

"Maybe so," Blavius acquiesced, before something resembling a cruel smirk appeared on his face. "But it appears that whoever's waiting for you back home, is going to be waiting a long time."

It had only been a year (that's how Kyle liked to think of it, anyway) and there was a memorial for him already.

Him, Kyle thought, the infuriating, enigmatic him. Eric Cartman.

Unlike most cases were a child has gone missing, the townspeople didn't panic. Not because they didn't care, not because it wasn't tragically serious, but, because, well, it was South Park. A vortex for the bizarre and chaotic, a place that had slipped through the cracks of normality.

Kyle (arrogantly, he now thought. Deluded, he now thought) didn't panic either. For if South Park truly was the edge of sanity, then Eric Cartman was the kid who would always push it to the brink. He'd come back, because that's what he did. No problem in South Park went unsolved (or at least, that's what everybody convinced themselves). But deciding a conclusion, doesn't necessarily mean it's over.

Eric Cartman's disappearance had proven just that. The memorial in his honour, his remembrance, may have been a defeated, mournful conclusion. But it certainly wasn't the end, the end wasn't even clear.

Kyle thought the memorial was tactless. Missing people are found twenty years after the fact, perhaps even longer. But the town needed a conclusion, a way to wrap it up and forget so that they could deal with the next incident, next disaster that was going to come their way.
But, Kyle thought sadly, the odds of that happening without Cartman around are pretty damn low.

While he continually vocalized his vitriol about the memorial (Stan and Kenny assumed it was some kind of strange grieving process, appropriate for the relationship Eric and Kyle once shared), Kyle still lingered for a moment or two whenever he walked past it. He tried desperately to pluck up the courage to stay a little longer, but he couldn't. Fear and pride had melded into one.

It was a cruelly cold, starless night when Kyle finally marched himself over to the memorial. His hands were buried deep in his pockets and the only time he dared to look up was when he reached his destination.

His eyes were vulnerably wide, and he never thought he'd look at Cartman that way.

Because the memorial was the closest thing to Cartman he had felt in over a year. He couldn't even remember the last words they had said to each other, although he guessed he could paint a pretty clear picture. Still, Kyle was sure that it couldn't come close to what they had really said, whatever those words were. The words that had fallen into a subconscious nook in his mind.

"Can you believe they built a fucking memorial for you?" Kyle asked, his timid voice scared him. He jolted and blushed, checking to see if anybody saw him.

"You'd love it if you were here. Although I guess if you were here, you wouldn't need a memorial," Kyle set his mouth in a firm line, determined not to cry. "I gotta admit, this is a pretty elaborate scheme. I'm dying to know what the hell this is all about. I mean, it's been a year! I didn't think you were that patient." Kyle chuckled thinly, his attempt at humour not diffusing the building pressure in his chest like he hoped it would.

"You're not dead," Kyle stated matter-of-factly, despising the tone of his voice. "You can't be. People are assholes and they're jumping to conclusions, right? I can't wait to get outta here."

Kyle didn't know why he kept pausing, there was nobody to interject, nobody to respond. He was talking to an army of bouquets, handwritten notes and a fading picture of his missing friend. Imaginary.

But maybe Kyle needed conversation, however unresponsive it may be, because when he let the silence of the situation take over, he broke. Burying his head in his hands, he started to sob.

"Shit, Cartman," Kyle muttered, roughly wiping his damp, flushed face. As if he wouldn't start crying again.

"I know you're gonna come back," Kyle nodded, his eyes filling with tears again. "But in the meantime, I'm just... I'm sorry I didn't get to know you better. I really wish I had."

Kyle rolled his eyes and smirked, "I mean, like I've known you for a long time but maybe... Maybe there was something more to you. Something I was too stupid and proud to see."

Kyle wrung his hands together, tangling his own fingers, struggling to express himself. "I guess that's my way of saying I miss you," Kyle blurted out, his voice wavered on the 'you'. He shuddered and sighed heavily. "And that I'm sorry. I'm sorry for being a jerk, like, you're an unbelievable asshole but I'm a jerk. That's what I'm getting at, and, uh, I won't."

Kyle found his eyes drawn to that picture of Cartman, and he gathered enough courage to say, "I'll never forget you, fatass. Even if you come back, when you come back, I won't ever let myself forget you. That's a promise."
Kyle smiled tightly at the picture and turned away to leave, so he wouldn't start crying again.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Warning that there is some pretty heavy stuff in this chapter. If you have night terrors or are perhaps affected by reoccurring dreams, then please tread with caution.

(Two Years Later)

12

"The stars are the window to the past and the future." Miss Castoria stated. Eric raised his eyebrows sceptically at the enthusiastic glint in the otter's eyes. "That's why we must still read them. There is so much to learn."

"But how?" Eric asked. As stifled and down-trodden as he felt under the AAA's regime, he still delighted in pissing off his teachers. Supposed 'authority figures'. "How can something that's already dead tell you anything?"

Miss Castoria chuckled pompously, swiping at her whiskers in a way Eric discovered all otters did when they talked to humans. "Ask any historian," She replied. "You like history, don't you, Time Child?"

Eric shrugged and shifted in his chair.

"I like the stuff I can relate to," he mumbled.

"Well, the AAA curriculum is different from your primitive history," Miss Castoria remarked. If the council didn't have eyes everywhere, Eric would have responded a little less politely than just quietly scowling to himself. "Still, I'm sure there are some books in the Great Library that would interest you. They have an abundance of historical documents for you to peruse. I trust you've been there already?"

Eric shook his head, bored. He was too preoccupied with staring out of the window at the fallen city. UAA slums, AAA propaganda and only a wall of weaponry separating the city and the desert.

"Well, you should!" Miss Castoria exclaimed. "It's a wonderful resource for study!"

"I have my tablet," Eric shrugged, turning his lazy attention to the long, thin device in his hand. "That has everything I need."

Miss Castoria shook her head, beguiled. "Nothing beats the feeling of holding a book in your hand," she argued. "Even your primitive civilization knew that."

Eric tightened his grip around the tablet.

The feeling that swelled in his core made his mind inexplicably wander off to those AAA conditioning sessions.

Those he had to attend with the other human children not long after the AAA had seized control of
Ubaleh, Teaals and Natas. It was then that their armies were slowly moving down what was once known as the plains of the nationless Earth. In those sessions they were shown propaganda and given a basic introductory lesson into the tenants and history of AAA atheism. They were also taught how to 'balance emotion' and repress 'impulsive' ones. An emphasis was put on anger.

Eric realized now, the otters were training them for subservience. Soaking all this information into their pliable, easily absorbable minds before that particular window of opportunity closed. Stifle the generation of today and try to nip that oppression in the bud of the generation of tomorrow. Or rather, make the next generation numb.

Eric knew he was luckier than most. He was protected, at a price.

But he still felt indignant, only now did he truly recognize injustice. When that anger roiled inside him, he remembered the patronizing, menacing voices of those council members at the conditioning program. Those voices that had been absorbed.

Miss Castoria's voice, however, sliced through his thoughts. "They also appreciated the importance of astronomy," She handed Eric her own tablet and an inky black sky seemed to plummet through the screen, the table, the very centre of the earth. An asphyxiating night. Eric peered curiously, to see if he could watch the Earth move. "Now map the constellations we discussed."

Eric snatched the electronic quill from the table and did as he was told. Miss Castoria's observant eyes not phasing him.

"The council has been debating your request to return to the past…"

The words triggered forgotten excitement in Eric. His body jolted, his hand slipping and disfiguring the Gemini. His face flushed red when Miss Castoria chuckled smugly.

"How do you-"

"My sister is on the council," Miss Castoria replied before Eric could finish. "She tells me everything."

"And the president is fine with that?" Eric asked, raising an unsure eyebrow.

"Otters don't punish other otters, Time Child," Miss Castoria replied. "We look out for our own."

"I've noticed," Eric replied rather grimly.

"They say you want to go back to visit a certain someone," Miss Castoria smiled, and Eric detested the emphasis on the word. It reminded him of his wasted efforts and that need he tried so hard to bury.

"No!" Eric snapped, far too defensive. "What does that mean, anyway?"

"That there is somebody in the past who you are yearning for," Miss Castoria replied. "Your mother and father perhaps?"

Eric couldn't help but snort derisively at that. "Yearning for my dad wouldn't do any good…” He shook his head and huffed. "Besides, I'm not yearning for anyone, okay? Gross…”

Eric fidgeted uncomfortably then, worrying that he had perhaps given too much away. He picked up the quill with his hand still lightly quivering from unwanted adrenaline, his body wracked with conflicting emotion. But he couldn't concentrate.
"So your sister is on the council, huh?" Eric asked quietly.

Miss Castoria nodded.

"And she tells you everything?"

Miss Castoria nodded again.

Eric cringed at the sweat collecting on the nape of his neck. "So, um, did she say anything about whether they're gonna let me go back?"

Miss Castoria sighed and her eyes scanned the room as if inwardly deliberating her answer. "They are wary. It's not seen as a… pertinent issue."

Eric frowned, of course it wasn't seen as a 'pertinent' issue. Any excuse to not give Eric what he wanted.

Miss Castoria continued, "But they are very concerned about the regulations, what policies would be needed to put in place if you were indeed granted your request."

"Oh," Eric nodded, disappointment clenching around his heart. "I get it."

He stared at the smattering of stars he had connected on the screen. The half-empty sky filled him with dread and he didn't know why.

"Well?" Miss Castoria chastised. "I want those constellations drawn up, Time Child!"

The haze of sleep Kyle would have been thankful for last night, was instead coming over him during breakfast. Listlessly stirring his cereal was the only thing stopping him from actually falling asleep in it.

"Kyle?" his mom's voice jolted him awake. "Kyle, bubbe, did you hear that?"

"No," Kyle said sleepily, pawing at his tired eyes. "What?"

"I said that maybe we could all go get a burger after your basketball game tonight?" His mom suggested, sitting down at the kitchen table with a black coffee.

"Sure," Kyle nodded, prodding at his cereal with his spoon again. He murmured, "Cool."

Even though Kyle's eyes were trained on his froot loops, he could feel his parents' concerned eyes on him. A prologue to their inevitable, concerned questions.

"Kyle…" His mom began.

"What?" Kyle asked, his skin bristling. He could already feel a huff of irritation in his chest.

"Hon, what time did you go to bed last night?" His mom asked.

"Ten thirty?" Kyle lied. "I didn't wanna be tired for the game."

It was a partial lie. He had reluctantly attempted sleep at ten thirty but that chasm, that dark, inexplicable pit that he never knew existed inside him… Yawned. Ready to devour him, concealing its jaws. Kyle held back tears for the next few hours while his heart drummed loudly, wishing he could sleep. Wishing he could trust himself to.
"You've nearly fallen asleep in your cereal twice-" his father pointed out.

"Which he hasn't touched, by the way." His mom cut in. She leaned over the table and pushed the bowl closer to Kyle. "Eat that up Kyle, I don't want you going to school hungry."

"Eat or sleep?" Kyle attempted to joke, hoping it would steer the conversation away from his parents' interrogation. "Which is that you want from me?"

"Preferably both," his dad replied, his eyes never leaving the laptop, typing continuously.

Kyle watched his mother tap the side of her coffee mug the way she always did when she was trying to figure out the right way to approach a situation. It made Kyle squirm guiltily, he wasn't ready to admit what was keeping him awake.

"Is something going on?" She finally asked.

"What?"

"You're not stressed about anything?" His mom pressed on with her questioning.

"No," Kyle shook his head. Stressed wasn't what he would call it. The fact that it was nameless made Kyle even more afraid, more reluctant to tell anybody about it.

"So what is it?" His mom asked. "Basketball? Grades? Are you having girl trouble?"

Kyle wrinkled his nose, "no," he replied. Although he wished it was something that could be so neatly categorized. "Nothing like that."

His dad actually stopped typing and asked, "Then what is it?"

"I don't wanna talk about it," Kyle replied, running a hand through his curls. An anxious, flustered giveaway that something was relentlessly playing on his mind.

"Aha!" His mom exclaimed, picking up on Kyle's subconscious gesture immediately. "So there is something on your mind!"

"Yeah, there is!" Kyle snapped, pushing his ignored breakfast away. A pressure began to build in his throat. "But I don't wanna talk about it! And you two bugging me isn't making me feel better!"

Kyle watched his parents exchange uncomfortable looks. His mom was too stubborn to apologize first. Kyle knew that, because he had inherited that particular slight.

"We're just concerned," his dad replied tentatively, diplomatically. It was his parents' agreed way of apologizing for being so persistent.

It actually made Kyle feel a tad guilty. Perhaps he shouldn't have snapped at them? Perhaps they were only trying to help? But Kyle didn't need that. He didn't know what he wanted, except to figure this whole thing out on his own and not involve anybody else.

This is nothing, he always tried to remind himself. You'll get over this, no problem. Pretty soon everything will be fine again.

"Well..." Kyle began, searching for an apology of his own. "Don't be. I'll be fine. It'll all go away pretty soon."

"What do you mean?" His mom asked, concerned.
Shit, Kyle thought, I shouldn't have said that last part.

Kyle shook his head and a frustrated sigh escaped. "It's nothing mom, please," Kyle implored. "Don't worry about it, okay?"

"We're your parents, bubbe," his mom replied. She sighed at the full bowl of cereal Kyle had left, picking it up and taking it over to the sink. "It's our job to worry."

Kyle laughed, not because what his mom said was funny, but because it felt good to laugh during a 'rough patch' (what Kyle had clinically deemed these periods as), it was almost like a promise to himself that he would feel okay again eventually.

His father noticed Kyle's brief good mood and grinned.

"Hey!" He chuckled, bumping Kyle's chin with his knuckles, "that's more like it!"

Kyle shrugged away from his father but laughed again, under his breath. He wanted to leave his parents with the impression that he was feeling alright.

His mom was staring at him all the while, the concerned cogs in her head going into overdrive. "You want me to call in sick for you, bubbe?"

"What?" Kyle asked in disbelief.

"I'd rather you be rested than go to school sleep-deprived," his mom replied.

Although Kyle couldn't really pass up the opportunity to catch up on his sleep, he knew it was easier said than done. He didn't want to stare up at the ceiling, wrestling with his thoughts in the quiet. He couldn't dwell on things. It would only make matters worse.

"No, I don't wanna-" Kyle paused, trying to find an explanation that wouldn't prompt further questions. "Going to school would take my mind off it."

"Alright," his mom nodded reluctantly.

Kyle glanced at the clock, thankful that he could finally leave this awkward breakfast behind him. Maybe the walk to the bus-stop would finally get him thinking straight?

Picking up the backpack by his feet, Kyle said meekly, "I better go..." He was walking out of the kitchen before he could get a response.

"See you later, son!" His father called belatedly. "Good luck for tonight!"

"Thanks!" Kyle called back, not turning around and therefore not noticing his mother had followed him.

Kyle felt a tight, maternal grip on his shoulder before he was pressed into a warm, perfumed hug. He couldn't help but smile and roll his eyes.

"You call me if you need to, okay?" His mother's voice softer than a lullaby in his ear. "I'm here. And I'll pick you up if you're feeling..."

Kyle took his mother's loss of words as an opportunity to escape from the hug and look at her questioningly.

"Off," his mom decided on. She squeezed his shoulders, "alright?"
"Cool," Kyle nodded, antsy to leave.

But the way his mother was smiling at him, in a way that didn't quite reach her eyes, belied so much. She wanted to understand, she wanted to help if Kyle would let her.

But he couldn't just take her offer of staying home, getting that few hours of sleep that he needed and waking up just to find her ready to listen to his problems.

Because it was his problem. His issue. His defect. And he didn't need to drag other people down with it or distract himself from the fact that this was his concern alone.

Besides, admitting you need help is just admitting that there is a problem that you can't solve by yourself. Kyle couldn't think of anything worse.

"Love you, bubbe," his mom smiled, the only consolation she could offer him.

"I love you too, mom," Kyle smiled as he headed out the door. Appreciative all the same.

For the first time in his life, Eric was hating the attention.

The 'honour' that was being so unnecessarily bestowed upon him. 'A Soldier of the Truth'; it was enough to make Eric laugh derisively.

Luckily, the spectacle taking place at the glittering, pompous palace in Eric's name, didn't just revolve around him. The birth of Blavius II was still the main talking point, and if the otters weren't praising Eric then they were marvelling and cooing over the little pup who spent most of his time asleep.

Eric was used to feeling lonely, in fact, loneliness was his default position. Even in a crowded dining hall, where the arrogant, high spirits were heady enough to get drunk off, Eric easily submerged into isolation. When he wasn't engaging in meaningless, empty small talk, he was holding his AAA medal in his hands (fashioned from the finest gold the otters could still manage to mine) and thinking deeply.

Resentment, injustice and frustration were leitmotifs to that palpable need. Missed opportunities, his adjustments all made in vain.

It drummed a vicious, white hot ache in his mind and Eric knew he couldn't stay in that suffocating room any longer.

Bowing his head, Eric stumbled out of the dining hall and into the spacious, circular foyer. He looked up and squinted at the rays of the waning sun, seeping through the many windows climbing up the tall walls. The palace reminded Eric of a cocoon, or perhaps a hive.

He wondered how long it would take to climb to the top, if he would be able to find his way out onto the roof and stare at the fallen city and the ever expanding 'empire'.

While it was a tempting idea (and the steep ascent looked rather thrilling), the narrow, dimly lit corridor that seemed to stretch for miles, was tugging at Eric's curiosity.

Sparing one last glance at the winding stairwell, Eric set off in the direction of the mysterious hallway.

As he walked down the corridor, Eric fumbled blindly in the dark for a handle. A door for him to fall
into, and beyond that door he would find something mildly exciting. But there were no doors, only coarse walls, the colour of which were darker than oblivion. It reminded him of decimating, plummeting space.

Why have walls so dark? Why have such little light? Touching the walls was like touching a lifeless, cold arm.

Then a spark.

A chattering of icy fireflies.

A bundle of electric charge. Corporeal lightening.

A pulse.

The point of the corridor's needle.

Eric almost felt it was humanly weak of him, to be drawn to such a sight. But never had he craved light so badly, for an object to suddenly appear on a blank canvas.

The light unfolded the closer he was, spitting out stars, planets, galaxies.

He remembered Miss Castoria's chatter about Blavius' wife investing in an astronomy atrium.

Eric stumbled down a short step, transfixed by the universe surrounding him.

Supernovas rolled across the ceiling like thunderstorms of celestial colour, booming soundlessly.

Majestic planets orbited an invisible sun, and obeyed a chalky moon that glimmered like a polished penny.

And the constellations swam in schools over Eric's head. The room bloated on stars that either latched onto the ceiling or hung coquettishly.

Eric reached out curiously, smirking as stars eagerly rushed to his fingertips, as if he were the sole gravitational pull.

Perched ethereally on the edge of his fingers, the stars quivered. Curiously, Eric swiped at the air and created an uneven line. The stars connected. Constellations.

The stars are the window to the past and future.

The past.

Swallowing the hard lump in his throat, Eric drew a letter. Then three more.

Kyle.

Written into the artificial sky. Immortalising the memory of him that Eric could still recall.

Kyle. Shimmering, hovering, close enough to touch. The closest Eric had been to him in five hundred years. The closest they were ever going to be. Kept apart by time. A concept so unmoveable and entrenched in the universe.

Eric pursed his trembling, lower lip and dug his crescent nails into his palm. But he smiled ruefully, glad that he had pulled a little bit of Kyle into the present. That he had done something to rouse that
familiar feeling once again.

Suddenly, the stars dispersed, bored and fragile. Exploding cruelly in front of Eric’s eyes. As quickly as he came, Kyle was gone. The possibility of him snatched away from Eric once again.

Fallen out of the sky.

"Fuck!" Eric shouted, the noise ringing around the room. It almost seemed to permeate his plexus, into his bones, making him itch.

A broken, defeated noise escaped his mouth as he buried his head into his hands. Sinking until his forehead was shielded by his forearms and his fingers clawed into his hair.

Looking up at the night sky, he swallowed thickly, feeling a sense of composure once again.

A movement twitched in the corner of his eye and he slid his gaze over to the tall, oil black columns that rose like plumes of smoke.

A small, thin boy who Eric guessed was no older than him, met his gaze. His milky eyes almost piercing in the dark of the room.

"What?!” Eric demanded. He fidgeted uncomfortably at the realization his little display had its own voyeur.

The boy refused to answer, his widened gaze being eclipsed by the tall column.

Eric growled, stepping forward just enough to perhaps frighten the stranger.

"What the fuck are you even doing here, asshole?" Eric asked angrily.

The boy tugged at his clothes, an AAA worker’s uniform Eric had seen before, but rarely on children. The uniform was greying and frayed, sitting a little too snugly on the boy’s ankles and wrists.

"I, um-" The boy began to explain, before a booming voice made both him and Eric jolt.

"Time Child!" Blavius exclaimed, the intimidating otter made his way over to Eric. "I've been looking all over, I've been meaning to-"

Blavius stopped at seeing the trembling boy in the corner, glaring at him furiously. The otter ignored Eric and marched over to the terrified child, one swat of his large paw sent the boy to land in a heap on the floor.

Even Eric winced at the loud, smacking impact.

"And what are you doing here, boy?!” Blavius barked.

The boy clutched at his ribs and helplessly began to explain, "Mr President, I-"

"Typical, bone idle humans," Blavius spat. "Concerning themselves with matters they no longer have no place in! Get back downstairs and start serving!

"Y-yes, sir," the boy stuttered, scrambling to his feet and quickly scurrying away.

"Not all humans are like that, sir," Eric mumbled in the thick silence.
"Of course not, Time Child!" Blavius replied, so insincere it was saccharine. "You're the only exception I've seen, but still. Can we even call you a human anymore? You've been honoured as one of us!"

Eric smiled wryly through his simmering anger and nodded. "Yeah, awesome."

He tucked his hands into his pockets, just so he wouldn't have the urge to rip that damn medal from his own neck.

"Fantastic, isn't it?" Blavius' said, staring proudly at the ceiling.

"What?"

"This! This atrium!" Blavius replied, chuckling. "My wife is obsessed with astronomy, the stars... I must say that I find them beneficial. They are often useful political guides."

Eric stared down at his shoes as he replied sadly, "the window to the past and future..."

"Exactly!" Blavius exclaimed, patting Eric on the back. Eric almost retched at the scent of wine clinging to the otter's damp whiskers.

"Look at how far you've come, Time Child. Look at what you've helped to build! And you can't say that you haven't reaped any rewards-"

"I don't really see it that way," Eric replied tautly, edging away from Blavius.

The otter's face fell, both incredulous and riled.

"How could you still want to go back?" Blavius asked. "When things are better now than ever before? More harmonious, more enlightened? Even today, you are part of history! The seed of a new empire has been planted. And you have been honoured! Your quality of life is more so than what you would have had in the past!"

Eric shook his head and exhaled harshly.

"Science damn it, something is missing!" He replied, frustrated. He couldn't even bring himself to say what that something was. "Something has always been missing. And every day that need for it... It just seems to get bigger."

"I don't understand how you could possibly be miserable."

"You know why..."

"Because you didn't get what you wanted?" Blavius asked in a way that made Eric's skin crawl.

"I didn't get what you promised me!" Eric snapped fiercely.

"Promises are often broken," Blavius tried to explain. He inched away, clearly nervous. For a twelve year old, Eric was formidable.

"Even when I did everything you asked me?!" Eric was so impassioned that he almost forgot himself, stepping up to Blavius dangerously. "You tricked me!"

"Be careful, Time Child," Blavius warned.

"No!" Eric shouted. "I'm sick of being careful! Otters look out for their own, right?"
"Time Child-

"And I've been honoured as one of you!" Eric's voice started to crack from the strain of his protest. "So you should look out for me! For once! Give me what I wanted, Blavius!"

Blavius' whiskers twitched, Eric could tell he wanted to swipe at them. But that would give too much away. Sometimes Eric wondered if reading otters was even easier than reading humans.

"Don't forget your position, Time Child," Blavius finally said.

Eric felt the blood rush from his face. His composed, calculating side shooing away the emotional, impassioned side that had taken over.

"I haven't," Eric replied calmly.

"So you'd be willing to negotiate?"

Eric bit back a deliberating sigh and looked up at the artificial night. Imagining that name there, thinking about those adjustments he had made a long two years ago.

He had to know.

"Yes I would," Eric replied.

A starless sky.

It always starts with a starless sky void of answers.

And Kyle is standing in that same spot. Flowers and notes and pictures and candles, at that memorial he came to resent. It feels like he never left, his existence a waiting game. A passive waiting game.

He has never felt so helpless, so pathetic, and so empty.

Because he can't do anything.

It's a cruel taunt.

You can't do anything.

You can't make a difference.

Where would you begin?

You're only a kid.

You're not invincible anymore.

You can't help him.

You can't change the past.

You can't save him again.

You can't save him like he saved you.
Then a voice.

Behind him.

But it doesn't escape a mouth and refract off Kyle's rigid back.

It whips in the air. Like a phantom, like a forlorn memory.

"Kahl."

A shiver rolls down Kyle's spine, disguised as a bead of cold sweat.

Feverish.

Kyle turns around, choking on thick shadows.

Cartman.

A cocky grin and twinned topaz suns.

Playing jump rope with Kyle's heart.

Kyle's sigh is loaded, a heavy tide.

"Cartman, I-"

Cartman is two steps ahead. Two steps left behind.

Lost in translation, Cartman's eyebrows furrow. Kyle feels the hurt on Cartman's face. It escapes his vision.

Cartman speaks soundlessly.

Then another voice.

"Kahl?"

Curious, lost, searching.

Kyle spins around. I'm here. I've found you.

Cartman's curled up at Kyle's feet.

Hunched and defensive.

Like a skittish, prodded animal.

Terrified.

Kyle feels two heartbeats drum madly in his ears.

Thick fingers strained bone-white as he drags them through brunet hair.

Kyle wants to reach out, tell him to stop.

But Kyle can't.
He's the phantom now.

He's the missing thing.

He's the need.

He's the person being prayed to.

Called out for.

He's begging you.

Wherever he is, he's begging you.

Find him.

Another voice.

"Kahl?!

It echoes, bouncing off invisible barriers.

Kyle jolts, alert.

Whereishe?Whereishe?Whereishe?! 

The hopefulness, the security of the voice is smothered by fear.

Desperation.

Bewilderment.

Like the paraselene of a demented moon, Cartman is there.

He appears like static. Shimmering reflection.

Static constantly buzzing in Kyle's mind.

Kyle feels like he's breathing for both of them.

Panting, scraping, drowning.

Around the glistening purple, Cartman's eyes are wide and frantic enough to pierce Kyle's very soul.

They plead.

Those manipulative eyes.

Excruciatingly honest.

Cartman's clothes are ripped and muddied.

He's bruised, cut, trembling.

The punches, the kicks, the pushes, the bites... They crawl on Kyle's skin.

The cruel sensation of an imagined memory.
Who did this?!

Who hurt you?!

Tell me where you are!

Tell me where you are so I can come get you!

*Before Kyle can get an answer, Cartman is kicked down again.*

*And when he falls in a heap, before Kyle can try to help him back up, he falls into the nook of Kyle's subconscious.*

*But not so easily forgotten.*

*And then a scream.*

*A horrifying scream that rips Kyle apart and drills pure terror into his core.*

"Kahl!"

*His heart is beating so violently that Kyle fears the muscle will overload.*

*He tries to reach for it, but there is only thin air.*

*Kyle whips around frantically, desperately.*

*Overwhelming, incurable fear blighting him. Bearing down on him.*

*And Cartman is there.*

*His expression contorted into one of immense pain, desperation. He's utterly petrified.*

*He's on his knees.*

*Hands tied behind his back.*

*More cuts, more bruises, deeper wounds that decimate Kyle's imagined flesh.*

*Kyle screams.*

"Cartman!"

*And, for once, Cartman's words are too clear.*

*They're a haunted, disturbed soliloquy.*

*One last beg.*

*Leaving no room for Kyle to interject.*

"Don't let them take me!"

"I'm scared, Kahl. Please come get me!"

"Come save me!"
"They're gonna kill me!"
"Where are you?!"
"Please, I need you!"
"Kahl!"

And something drives Kyle forward.

He's close.

Close enough.

A breath.

A whisper away.

Cartman's dragged away.

Kicking, fighting helplessly.

"No!"

The word rumbles. A soft earthquake.

Kyle's voice cracks and he gives in.

"Come back!"

A menacing invitation that sends those pleads to return.

Tearing through the air, rattling through Kyle's bones.

They're loud, piercing, screaming, deafening, and hammering against Kyle's skull.

And Kyle begs.

Make it stop! Make it stop! Make it stop!

But the voices are crashing like relentless thunder.

Before finally, they pull together and explode.

Startling white.

An electric shock to Kyle's nervous system.

Lightening through his veins.

And he wakes up, burned.

Kyle choked on his anguished scream. He had learned to suppress the urge to do so after that thirtieth time that nightmare had visited him.

He still hadn't figured out to suppress the terror of it all.
His weak, trembling body was fighting stubbornly, against what, he didn't know. Or, rather, didn't want to think about.

He felt so scared, so alone and so horribly weak.

He curled himself up in defeat. He rested his forehead against his quivering kneecaps, wanting to find solace in the darkness.

His pulse thuddled behind his eyelids, his entire being was throbbling.

Happier memories, crisp, colourful memories were being robbed of their light.

The nightmare had stolen it. And now it was ripe, illuminated. Swirling in Kyle's mind potently.

Kyle brought his glistening arms up, his fingers ensnared in scarlet curls.

Emotions stirred rhythm in Kyle, and he rocked back and forth.

Despair, fear, grief, it all manifested into one thing. Anger.

Often, it proved to be Kyle's downfall.

But he had too many bottled up thoughts, too many carefully made decisions that helped no one, and a stupid obligation to himself. Maybe it would be alright to let it all go.

Grinding his teeth, he turned to his damp pillow.

His body was grappling with futile rationalizing and unchecked adrenaline. His system was battered from lack of sleep and a storm that was getting difficult to ride out alone.

There seemed to be no calm on the horizon.

Hope was dwindling, and that made Kyle's anger flare more than anything.

He punched the pillow. A weak, disappointed noise falling from his mouth when it didn't quell the despair inside him.

So he punched it again, only prompting more frustration.

Questions flooded his mind, not interested in answers. Only in climbing over each other, vying for his attention, all of them determined to make him break. They promised devastating impact on his already questionable emotional state.

Hatred for how he was feeling was all taken out on the pillow, and when that cloud of rage briefly dispersed, his face creased mournfully.

Grief. The quiet force that pushed all this angst to the forefront of Kyle's mind.

The realization made something inside crumble, so he sobbed.

He sobbed loudly into the pillow, still punching it softly.

And he felt ashamed, he didn't know why.

He didn't know how he could let himself fall into these traps. How could he not see them coming? Why couldn't these fucking dark periods have some kind of warning? So he could at least try to
He had no answers, and he was nowhere near close to finding them. It caused him so sob further.

Kyle didn't acknowledge the light seeping into his room until his brother spoke, "Kyle?"

Kyle looked up, with sparkling eyes. He shook his head and continued to cry and punch his pillow.

"Kyle!" Ike gasped, the seven year old ran over to his older brother's bed and leapt to his side.

"Kyle, stop!" Ike begged, bewildered. He grabbed his brother's wrist. "Please!"

Kyle gulped, trying to calm himself down. His wrist jerked under his brother's surprisingly tight grip. But Ike's look of panic and concern was the real catalyst in making Kyle stop.

"Go back to your room, Ike," Kyle replied flatly, struggling to find his breath and regulate his heartbeat.

He gently pried his wrist out of his brother's hold before he added, "it's okay."

"No," Ike protested. He shuffled closer to Kyle. "I wanna stay with you."

Ike moved so he was on his knees, and Kyle returned to his previous seating position. He wrapped his arms around his calves and stared at the blankets in the waning darkness. His breath was still stuttering in his lungs.

"I know you don't like talking to mom and dad about it," Ike began tentatively. "But can you tell me?"

Kyle shook his head at himself, that shame rising like a lump in his throat. Your seven year old brother shouldn't have to see this. Kyle tried to remind himself that he was a kid too, but it didn't make him feel any better.

Tears burned his eyes and he sniffed them away.

"I don't like it when you cry," Ike remarked softly.

Anger warred with every other emotion fighting for dominance inside Kyle. He couldn't shake off the guilt. The guilt he felt that his little brother was the one who was dealing with this alongside him, the guilt he felt for everything else.

Could I have stopped it?

Could I have made things better?

Small fingers grazed Kyle's arm, wanting attention. Wanting answers, wanting Kyle to say anything. Kyle didn't acknowledge them, but he smiled ruefully, hoping Ike could see.

"If you tell me, um, I won't tell mom and dad anything," Ike promised. "If you don't want to me to."

Kyle was so close. So close to opening the floodgates properly, letting out the words he had compressed for so long, tried to make sense of in his crowded, muddled head.

How could he sail through life one minute and then crash the next? It only pushed him further into a corner of confusion and anxiety.
Greif rolled around like a particularly bad winter and Kyle wasn’t sure he could survive it anymore.

"I don’t want you to be upset, Kyle," Ike confessed, his words were sad and yet so naïve. "I know you’re scared."

Kyle tried to take a deep breath through the tears that were approaching.

Ike was right. Kyle was scared, he’d been scared for two years. And he’d be scared for the rest of his life, (or at least, that’s how it seemed).

He was scared of these unresolved feelings. He was scared of an attachment that he never knew existed. He was scared of this strange dependency.

He was scared of grief eating him alive.

He was scared that he may never see Cartman again.

Kyle started to sob without preamble, and he fell into his brother’s arms. Ike almost toppled over from the force of the hug. He struggled to support his older brother's weight, but he tried valiantly.

"Kyle?"

"Yeah?" Kyle sniffed.

"Were you dreaming about him again?"

Kyle nodded, and a foreign feeling of sheer relief came over him.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

A/N: Phew. I apologise for the lateness, April was a very busy month. But I assure you, that future updates will be a lot faster. Thanks for sticking with this story, though! I greatly appreciate it. And I hope this chapter makes up for the *glances at calendar* two months you had to wait. Yikes.

Also, remember when I said this story was going to have 3 or 4 chapters? Yeah, we're probably looking at 10, now. There's a lot more to come!

12

"This is your wakeup call provided by your party leaders. Please rise and report to your stations."

The phantom voice permeated Eric. A splinter of curious sunlight wedged itself into his vision, its rays bouncing off the auric metropolis and seeping into his dormitory.

Eric complied – lest the fractious wires in his mattress scold him with electric shocks. A punishment that befell anybody who didn't heed to the daily wakeup call – and groaned, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his palm.

He stumbled to his small bathroom, padding around his bedroom softly as he brushed his teeth, eyeing the golden silhouette of the great library thoughtfully. He cast one last look at the prepossessing building as he returned to the bathroom, spitting into the sink.

Miss Castoria had given him a tour of the library a week before. Granted, it wasn't as exciting as the astronomy atrium, Eric guessed the life was bound in hardback covers, rather than magnified externally. Ink and paper crawled up the walls like ivy, the polished covers of the various books glowing under the white of the sun.

*The Selfish Gene* and *The God Delusion*, were displayed on plinths in the centre of the room. The influence of Dawkins and the belief that was entrenched in the AAA's regime, was the orbit to the countless other texts lining the shelves.

Miss Castoria encouraged Eric to leaf through the astronomy and physics books in the bountiful science section and passively tested him on the tenants of AAA atheism when they passed the recently added section of texts on the subject. The arts were treated snidely, the 'Human History' section with thinly-veiled contempt.

Eric was only half-interested in the place, until they passed the 'Historical Records', sheltered in tall cabinets. According to Miss Castoria, there were records from the past five hundred years of every citizen who lived in 'The Plains'.

It was then Eric realized, Kyle wasn't connected to him in the future by manipulative stars.

But by simple data. Kyle had left an informative footprint in the present, ready for Eric to unearth if he so wished.
And he wanted to so badly.

Even if he never saw Kyle again, at least he'd know what happened to him. What life he had led, what direction he chose.

If he was happy.

In his more restless nights, he did wonder what happened to everybody else. If his absence was felt, what impact it had.

He concocted stories, sometimes ridiculous, sometimes fond recalls of what he could remember of the personalities etched in his mind and heart.

Eric got dressed with a pit of anxious excitement in his stomach. His curiosity snapping at the dread he hadn't managed to push out of his mind. What if he didn't like what he discovered? What if this was a big mistake? What was that saying about ignorance?

Eric shook his head and slung his light backpack over his shoulder.

He had never ditched Miss Castoria's class before, and he wondered if living under a regime had seeped into his way of thinking. He wished there was a way to cleanse those damn voices from his head, the words drilled into so many impressionable minds.

He squinted at the sun, slouched low in the cloudless sky. He couldn't remember Colorado summers being this hot, and it had been two years since he had seen snow.

Voices from the slums and markets, murmured under the skewed bridge he was walking across. He skimmed his finger along the dusty wall, the bridge was so high up that he wondered if he'd make a mark in the saturated sky by swiping his finger in the air. He reached into his backpack, pulling out a canteen of lukewarm water and took a grateful gulp.

Eric welcomed the cool, airy foyer that led into the library, sparing him from the early morning heat.

Swiping at his wet mouth with the back of his hand, he typed in the entry code and pressed his citizen ID flat to the recognition pad. The scanner studied his photographed face before buzzing consensually.

The doors slid open and Eric made a beeline for the plethora of records tucked at the back.

His footsteps echoed loudly, returning his fractured urgency to his ears and making him cringe. How could he not tremble with anticipation? When he was about to look into the past again, as clearly as he possibly could?

He was surprised that the otters had even kept all these records of a species they spouted to resent. Perhaps it was some macabre symbol of victory? Instead of collecting lifeless bodies, they hoarded identikit profiles distorted to fit the individual 'quirks' of each person? All condensed into small, powerful flash drives?

Eric pushed the thought out of his head, swallowing hard before casting one last, hesitant look behind him.

An hour had passed before he finally cracked the formula for the confusing filing system. The rows upon rows of concealed records and how far their reach extended was overwhelming. But Eric hated that feeling, and always did whatever possible to cut it at its root.
He had narrowed 'The Plains' down to the states they covered, finding the information for Colorado. He then leafed through the counties. Reciting them in alphabetical order under his breath provided a nice metronome to his search.

Park County led him to the towns situated there.

He pressed his tongue to a sharp incisor when he finally found the records for South Park. Along with flash drives on each citizen, there were small, electronic orbs that projected virtual newspapers and yearbooks, from elementary to high school. After calculating the years in his head, he reluctantly snatched what would have been his senior yearbook.

A long desk was perched neglectfully under the window and Eric dropped his now full bag with a clumsy thud. He winced, before emptying the bag's contents and spreading out each remarkable flash drive.

As he slowly took a seat, he eyed the waiting flash drives with sweaty palms and his heart beating uncomfortably fast.

He'd taken his mother's, Stan's and Kenny's.

As well as Butters', Wendy's, Clyde's, Bebe's and Craig's. Maybe his excitement at finally finding what he had been looking for made him a little greedy…

And Kyle's.

Taunting him and pushing him like only Kyle could do. Except now, he was terrified and he wished the feeling would disperse with courage.

He dragged his mother's records closer to him, installing them in his tablet. Bite the bullet softly, he figured.

Mostly newspaper articles appeared on the screen, chronicling his disappearance.

His distraught mother staring blankly into press cameras.

Her frail strength persisting as she campaigned tirelessly for him.

Her thoughtful, sad eyes staring at his memorial. Placing pictures, lighting candles.

A memorial? People missed me that much?

She looked older than Eric remembered.

And while he admired her strength, admired her unwavering love, there was a distant ring of sadness and pity.

He sucked in a stuttering breath as he swiftly swiped his finger across the screen, as if that was enough to cut his sadness at the root. He skipped her birth certificate, various medical records and mortgage details on a house he still called home.

But something made him halt, a marriage certificate.

And a down payment on a house in Wisconsin, for Peter Hollace and his wife, Liane Cartman-Hollace.

Eric imagined his abandoned house, his abandoned bedroom and resentment for his mother squeezed
at his heart and made him grind his teeth. Did this Peter guy fill the void in her life that Eric had left? Could he be replaced so easily? He was unaware that hot, bitter tears had filled his eyes.

With his mouth set in an affronted line, he continued to peruse, swaying slightly when a death certificate appeared before him, followed by an obituary.

Aged 83. Of a long illness. Heart failure.

A solitary tear fell onto the screen. Eric squeezed his eyes shut before dragging his fingers through his hair and burying his head into the darkness of his arms.

He hadn't cried over his mother in a long time. Since his time phone was confiscated and his fate here seemed sealed.

He remembered sobbing and shivering in his searched room, staring out at the early morning carnage of the seized city.

He was half-asleep and emotional and nothing seemed fair or right or made any sense.

Until he imagined his mother's soft, slender hand stroking his back, murmuring comforting words in his ear. He fell asleep to that voice, real enough in the dark.

He dreamt of clutching at her sweater, his pudgy hand making a baby's fist. He cried into her shoulder, her perfume like incense. As he cried, he murmured everything that had went wrong.

And woke up before a flash of familiar freckles could disturb him.

Now, Eric just crumpled without his mother's imagined words to comfort him.

He peeked out, glancing at the other records and he stubbornly sniffed his tears away. He pulled his mother's flash drive out of the USB port unceremoniously, something prickling at his chest when the information seemed to wind down to an infinitesimal zero.

He took a deep breath, hoping to distract himself with information about his old classmates. He was helplessly curious, wondering if they'd become successes or failures.

But all Eric could see were happy, fulfilling lives stretched in front of him.

Butters married a man named Bradley in Hawaii, before moving out there permanently.

Bebe and Clyde had three kids together, Clyde also ran his father's shoe store and Bebe worked at Hell's Pass. She would become the hospital's first ever female Chief of Medicine.

Craig was hailed in one newspaper article as "The New Quentin Tarantino" and moved out of Colorado to L.A. as soon as he had graduated film school.

While Wendy became the youngest senator in Colorado's history, and made it all the way to Washington. But was unsuccessful in her presidency campaign.

Stan went to college in Long Beach to study marine biology, and eventually went on to marry and have two daughters with the girlfriend he travelled the world with.

Kenny went to community college and opened up a tattoo parlour in Florida. But he quit it when his heavy metal band made it big.

All of that and Eric didn't even have to show up at a reunion.
Still, Kyle's information remained unexplored.

Eric thought that his flash drive would have been the first to be eagerly searched through, but Eric hadn't even spared a glance at it since he sat down.

He didn't want to remind himself of how much Kyle occupied his thoughts, appeared in feverish dreams or that he was at the forefront of everything Eric had risked.

And unlike the others, Eric was at a loss with what he would do with the information. Would he be happy? Sad? Angry? He wasn't even sure what outcome would ease the sting, what was the selfish thing to do when Eric had spent these last two years simply wishing for Kyle's happiness.

Maybe I don't just want a good life for him.

Eric's fingers drummed accusingly against the table, chewing his lip hard.

Maybe I need to be there to see it too.

More than I thought I did.

Eric remembered Blavius' offer of negotiation, as he stared at Kyle's flash drive and what it could possibly contain.

Whatever was in there, Eric was sure it would terrify him.

He grabbed the high school yearbook instead, telling himself it was baby steps.

The orb resembled a large marble that spat harmless, static sparks if a finger ran over its surface. Miss Castoria had used similar text books, but Eric was still cautious to activate it himself. It's hostile, volatile shell was repelling him from studying the tempting pages inside, twitching like tadpoles.

Eric placed the orb in the middle of his tablet screen tentatively, jolting when a green triangle shot up from the orb and swelled. It presented a carousel of hologram pages, obedient and patient.

Eric couldn't decipher the murky faces, pixels imitating signatures, or messages of comradery. Not until he touched them. His eyebrows knitted together, his finger hovering impotently in the air. His mind pushed him to a place he wasn't sure he was ready to go, his heart stubborn and refusing to believe it.

Eric blindly dipped his finger into the hologram, rippling the image but not quite piercing it. Surprised that no sparks were roused, no friction was felt.

He wondered if the pixels that conformed to the movements of his finger, would be as cruel as the stars.

The carousel stirred to life under Eric's touch, a small, impressed smirk started in the corner of his mouth.

He swiped at a page and was quickly presented with another one. Just like the page before, he had little interest in what was written.

Because what did this yearbook represent other than an experience he would never relate to? A chapter that once seemed so inevitable, erased from his life?

His nose burned, his eyes stung with the promise of fresh tears, and his chest prickled with infuriating regret. But he was too stubborn to just end this now.
He ignored the smiling, virtual faces of teenage strangers, hoping to spot somebody he knew. Grown up and preserved in one happy, optimistic moment.

Secretly, he was waiting for Kyle. Excitement nor anxiety could be deciphered over the near painful throbbing of his desperate heart.

His clammy hand gripped the desk, a shiver ran down his spine and seemed to eclipse all of his confidence when he saw that name.

Kyle Broflovski.

Calling his bluff, like he had done many times before.

Eric snapped his gaze to his quivering lap, only making his loud heartbeat echo harshly.

God damn it.

He had only caught a glimpse of Kyle's picture. A promise of curly hair and a flash of freckles.

It's only a picture. If you can't deal with that then… What are you gonna do when you meet him again, huh? Just run away?

Eric's chewed nails scratched at the wood.

When did you become such a pussy?

Eric ground his teeth and sighed, compressed, through his nose.

Before he could tell himself not to, Eric returned his gaze to Kyle's picture.

He blinked at what he saw, astonishment infecting every expectation.

He started to reconsider his memories of Kyle. His striking red hair hidden under that worn, green hat, his pale skin that burned embarrassingly pink in the summer, but was smattered with freckles soon enough. Leaves in fall. His dark eyes that glowed, enraged, his nose that touched Eric's occasionally when their stand-offs demolished each other's personal space…

Eric wondered if they were becoming cloudier, slipping away from the truth until pretty soon they'd be thin, hologram memories.

Eric's chest tightened mournfully at the thought, briefly flaking away the surprise that persisted.

Kyle looked grown up, intimidatingly so. His warm smile making Eric flush with both irritation and awakening arousal, fuelling each other. Eighteen year old Kyle Broflovski was the most handsome guy Eric had ever seen. Furrowing his eyebrows, Eric scratched absently at his thigh.

Kyle's dusted freckles, his strong nose and jaw, and trimmed curls, (that in Eric's mind screamed the most vivid red) clouded his mind, and he swallowed around the uneasy lump in his throat.

Attraction to Kyle was something Eric hadn't considered (out loud at least), and maybe inexplicable, confusing emotions that hadn't lost their impact were presenting themselves in a new light.

Too strong, too heady, making Eric sensitive. He chewed at his lip.

Kyle's photographed eyes searched his face, as if he and Eric were looking for the same explanation, some semblance of meaning.
If he had any idea what Kyle's picture would do to him, then he wouldn't have risked it. But who was he kidding? What was one more risk to take? For Kyle.

For the boy he'd never grow up alongside with.

For the boy he hadn't listened to, talked to, looked at in so long. An isolating two years.

Eric closed his eyes, until Kyle's picture was just a memory to add to the others.

Then, the dreaded question that he always pushed to the back of his mind, reared its head: What if?

But with feelings piecing together, and eighteen year old Kyle making his adolescent skin burn with a new kind of heat, Eric couldn't help but entertain the thought…

What if they could be something more?

Could Eric have possibly paved the way for something he never expected?

You've missed so much.

The thought dragged him back to reality, his eyes boring into Kyle's picture as if just staring could articulate the words he was still too scared to say.

"I messed up," he whispered dejectedly.

But I tried.

He rolled his eyes when Kyle's frozen smile didn't waver.

Eric's gaze trailed over to Kyle's file, abandoned and unread.

That thought of losing out, lagging behind, never truly knowing…When the opportunity was in front of him.

Even if he couldn't see Kyle's life for himself, at least he'd be privy to the details. Switching the orb off, he shoved his tablet in his bag, along with Kyle's information.

"… And it's the first time we've been to the cabin since James passed away." Hannah continued, her eyes flitting between the other members of the group.

Kyle managed a small smile when her gaze landed on him, remembering the deeply sympathetic look she had shot him at his first grief counselling session.

Kyle was determined to stay awake. He was exhausted, which wasn't unusual, considering…

"How did you find that?" The sound of the counsellor's voice pulled Kyle away from his drowsiness. Mr Wilson was nice enough, nice in the way counsellors could be.

Hannah thought for a moment, tucking her dark hair behind her ear before she decided on, "Strange."

"But only when I really thought hard," she added, clasping her hands on her perfectly still legs. "There's a lot of memories there, you know? But James wouldn't want us to be sad. I still felt…"

"Anxious?" Mr Wilson suggested.
"Yeah, anxious, I guess," Hannah nodded, giving Mr Wilson a small, grateful look. "But I had a good time, my cousins visited so that was cool. That, uh, was my favourite part of the trip."

"Surrounding yourself with positive, understanding people never fails," Mr Wilson grinned.

The comment roused mild, agreeable chuckles from the other teenagers. Kyle forced a half-smirk just in case anybody glanced at him.

"Definitely," Hannah nodded, her cheeks reddening.

"Well, that's fantastic, Hannah," Mr Wilson replied. "I'm proud, you've made real progress."

"Thank you."

"Alright," Mr Wilson began, his palms smacked together in a single, decisive clap. "Now, who hasn't spoken yet?"

Kyle stared at his jeans, hoping his silence would go unnoticed. He promised himself he'd only ever open his mouth if he had good news. He hadn't revealed too much about Cartman, or how his continuing absence was affecting him. Things become too real if spoken to a roomful of strangers.

Kyle felt he'd be admitting defeat.

When he was feeling better he'd talk about basketball, his friends, his grades. Everyone would nod, pretend to be interested, but all Kyle could feel was their unwanted pity. When he was coping, he even ditched some sessions. Who needed them?

But this wasn't one of those times, evident by Kyle's stubborn silence.

"Kyle,"

Oh shit.

Kyle looked up at Mr Wilson, and he fidgeted uncomfortably at the thought of all the mental notes the counsellor was taking.

"You've been quieter than usual," Mr Wilson remarked.

Kyle sat up in his chair, rising to the expectant eyes boring holes in him.

"Do you have anything to say?" Mr Wilson asked. "To report on?"

Kyle shrugged, even if he did he wouldn't dare tell.

"Nothing has changed," Kyle replied, there was some truth to that.

"Well, that's alright," Mr Wilson offered supportively. "Do you have any feelings or thoughts you'd like to share with the group?"

Kyle bit back an exasperated sigh.

"No, sorry," he tried to reply politely.

"You sure?" Mr Wilson pressed. "It can be anything at all."

Kyle blinked. He was curious, but a part of him remained sceptical. "You mean that?"
"Of course," Mr Wilson nodded. "Positive or negative, it might be good to get those thoughts out of your head."

"Okay," Kyle sighed heavily.

He considered his words, tried to figure out a way to keep his chagrin in check. But he was too tired to think rationally, he needed sleep. Not an hour wasted.

"No offence but," Kyle paused, before continuing resolutely, "I think this place is bullshit."

Kyle saw the offended, confused looks the others were giving each other. Kyle pursed his lips, regret swelling in his chest, but there was familiar fire stirring in his stomach too. When everything felt so lethargic and starched, Kyle wanted to hold onto it.

"Why do you feel that way, Kyle?" Mr Wilson asked, measured as usual.

"I mean, its bullshit for me," Kyle reiterated. "I don't need to be here."

Mr Wilson leaned forward, a crease between his slightly knitted eyebrows.

"Because?" he asked.

A small, defeated noise escaped Kyle's lips and he replied indignantly, "Because I'm not grieving over anybody, how can I be?"

"I'm sorry," A meek boy spoke up beside Kyle, one whose name he didn't know. "I don't understand-"

"He isn't dead," Kyle snapped, and just uttering those words made him grow vicious. "He's just missing, okay?"

"Alright, Kyle," Mr Wilson interrupted Kyle, raising his hands in a pacifying gesture. "Granted your situation is a unique one."

"Sure," Kyle said brusquely.

"But everybody in this room is dealing with loss," Mr Wilson explained. "So are you."

Kyle shook his head and ground his teeth.

"Except he's gonna come back, he's gonna turn up. This isn't permanent!" Kyle retorted angrily, itching to get out of there.

Fuck this place.

"Maybe," Mr Wilson yielded just slightly, "but there's also a chance that-"

"I know! I fucking know there's a chance that he's dead!" Kyle shouted, standing up from his chair and snarling.

He didn't know how he'd managed it, the words were ringing in his ears and his tiredness – coupled with his admission – made his legs weak. He swayed slightly, letting his eyes burn with tears, he willed them to not run down his face.

"There! I've said it! Now what?!" Kyle shouted, his voice cracking, filled with tears. "You can – everybody – can keep telling me that he's gone, but what's so bad in having hope, huh? What's so
bad in believing in him?"

Kyle felt like the words had been pulled from him without permission. He had been wound up to the
point that he could see the truth as the only way out.

But was it the truth? Could he let himself believe it? He didn't fucking know anymore. He just
wanted time to stop. He wanted a lot of things, things he'd never get back.

Thick tension settled over the group. Mr Wilson just looked sobered, possibly regretting pushing Kyle
to this point.

"Nothing is wrong with that," he said sombrely.

"Alright, then just…" All the things Kyle wanted were impossible to get. "Let me believe, okay? God
damn it!"

Kyle chewed his trembling lower lip, feeling the grooves that his teeth had left countless times before.
He felt drained, and he knew he was shaking.

"Kyle?" Mr Wilson asked, concerned. "Are you done?"

Kyle nodded, staring at the wall so he wouldn't have to stare at everybody else, his face burned.

"Alright," Mr Wilson replied.

"I'm sorry," Kyle whispered as he slowly sat back down.

"I, uh, think we'll call it a day," Mr Wilson said, sparing Kyle from being in the room any longer.
"Thanks, everyone."

Kyle kept his head down as everyone left, and he was already forming a plan to get to the door as
fast as possible.

But Mr Wilson had other ideas.

"Kyle, could I talk to you?" He asked.

Kyle nodded, he figured it was the least he could do after insulting the entire group and losing his
temper so spectacularly.

Kyle shoved his hands in the pockets of his hoodie as he timidly made his way over to Mr Wilson.

"I'm really sorry," he sighed, swiping at a stray tear.

"You don't have to apologize, Kyle," Mr Wilson reassured, to Kyle's surprise.

Kyle pushed that surprise to one side when he admitted, "I haven't been sleeping…"

Mr Wilson nodded as he took in the exhausted boy standing in front of him. "Another rough patch?"

Kyle's shoulders hunched in embarrassment at the mention. His 'rough patches' were one of the first
and only things he ever spoke about.

Kyle shrugged, before sighing regretfully, "I shouldn't have said anything…"

"Talking is good, Kyle," Mr Wilson reassured. "Don't you feel a little bit better now that you've
gotten that off your chest?"

Kyle rolled his eyes and smirked ruefully, "maybe..."

Mr Wilson exhaled thoughtfully before he replied, "I do agree with some of what you said, though."

"You do?"

"Yes," Mr Wilson nodded, "the whole 'bullshit' part."

Kyle cringed before he admitted, "No, it's not. This place helps me, it does. I'm just..."

Kyle closed his eyes and continued, broken. "So tired."

"Still, perhaps this isn't the right setting," Mr Wilson reasoned.

Kyle opened his eyes, confused.

"Your situation is unique, and maybe this isn't the best way to address these issues," Mr Wilson admitted.

"So what can I do?" Kyle asked.

Mr Wilson thought for a moment before he answered, "I think it would be better if you started coming to one on one sessions with me, rather than group. So we can work through things more specifically."

Before Kyle could say anything Mr Wilson picked up the briefcase by his feet and placed it on the chair he was previously sat on. Kyle watched him open it and blinked when a letter was thrust into hands.

"Here's a form for your parents fill out," Mr Wilson explained, as Kyle scanned the letter, barely reading it. "You can discuss it with them and if they have any queries they can call me. They have my number?"

Kyle nodded, folding the letter.

"Obviously, this is just a suggestion," Mr Wilson added. "But I think it'd be an improvement. It's worth considering."

Kyle gave him an appreciative smile. "Thanks."

He brushed past Mr Wilson, and as he walked down the deserted corridor, his apprehensions about one-on-one counselling seemed to grow louder.

Breaking down in front of his parents was bad enough, their support did relieve some weight off Kyle's shoulders and when they suggested greif counselling, Kyle was willing to try anything. Anything to make these rough patches less turbulent. Anything to make him feel normal and complete again.

But being in a room, alone with a counseller, for the sole purpose of digging deeper into his feelings on a subject so sensitive? Having to face a possibly terrifying reality he was willing to ignore?

It stirred anxiety so potent he wished he could run away from it.
But what was the alternative? Being fucking miserable forever? Riding it out when that was always so difficult?

Kidding yourself that he's coming back.

Kyle growled under his breath and picked up his pace.

Sitting in that car, next to his mom, and handing her that letter would be like opening a door that he had kept locked for so long.

He wasn't brave enough to see what was on the other side. Or, rather, brave enough to admit to something that had been left complicated and undefined.

Kyle squinted as the double doors swung open and the late June sun ripped through his vision.

He saw his mom in the car, tapping her fingers anxiously against the steering wheel. Kyle stared down at that letter and realized he wasn't ready to make a decision just yet.

He tucked the letter into the back pocket of his jeans, before jogging over to the car, trying to convince himself that he was keeping his options open.

It's too warm for this, Eric thought, slouching in his chair and listlessly waving his fan in boredom. He squinted up at the sun beating down on him and the crowd of civilians below, dirty and sweaty.

He'd much rather be in his room, taking a nap or watching TV, even with all its lame commercials. Or in the library again, an absence of video games made him gain a new found appreciation for reading.

"Are you nervous, Time Child?" A member of the council leaned over and asked Eric.

The otter was clearly excited, Eric could hear the distinct squeak in his voice that not even the most eloquent otter could control.

"Um, not really?" Eric replied. "Why should I be nervous?"

"Well, you have been given such a big responsibility at such a young age!" The otter answered. "The president has faith in you, he says you're different from the others."

Eric glanced down at the people below, they all hated him. Unsurprisingly, Eric knew, since he had aided this revolution, sold his soul.

Assholes. They just don't understand what it's like to be desperate or hopeless like I was. If they were in my position-

"I guess," Eric shifted in his chair.

Eric only agreed to sit on this public trial because he was willing to do anything to be in Blavius' good books, anything to make the impending negotiation work in his favour.

"You are, Time Child!" Another otter butted in. "The AAA doesn't bestow honours to just anyone! Nor do they let just any civilians be on the jury for a public trial!"

"Yeah, about that," Eric began curiously, "what's going to happen to the guy if he's guilty?"

"All law-breakers face the same punishment," the first otter explained. "Solitary confinement and a
reinforcement of the AAA tenants.”

Eric blinked, surveying the crowd and a shiver went down his spine. He knew exactly what that meant. The definition of solitary confinement and ‘reinforcement’ under an AAA regime was infamous, it wasn’t like the passive aggressive, insidious methods that Eric and the other human children were subject to. It was mental torture enough to drive you insane if you were sensitive enough, or permanently batter your nervous system if you were a little tougher.

Before Eric could enquire further, Blavius shouted, "Bring the accused forward!"

His voice sent tremors through the city and the desert wasteland that lay beyond it.

Two large otters – large enough to rouse suspicion that their build was chemically enhanced – marched forward. Their visor goggles emphasising their solemn expression. They dragged with them a boy, whose matchstick legs could barely keep up with their pace.

As he was thrown onto the ground, Eric inspected him curiously, recognition washing over him. It was the boy from the astronomy atrium. Eric could hardly speak.

"The charges?" Blavius demanded dispassionately, glaring at the boy.

"Former kitchen worker," Blavius' aide read off his tablet. "Caught on surveillance stealing food from the pantry."

"Isn't your family's share enough, boy?" Blavius sneered. "Or is this to be expected of greedy, ungrateful humans?"

Eric's eyes travelled to the boy, who was shaking despite the blistering heat, his eyes large and dark on his gaunt face.

Eric gritted his teeth as Blavius' words echoed in his head. Greedy? The kid looked starving, was starving, Eric didn't know how the otters rationed out food but it clearly wasn't enough. Ungrateful? That riled Eric up further, because they were the ungrateful ones! Eric was responsible for their uprising, fundamental to their victory and yet they denied him his wishes, ignored his terms and then acted like they were doing him a favour.

Eric's eyes rose to the crowd, the society the otters had taken over, the marvellous foundation the otters were able to build upon. They didn't create, they stole, and the people they stole from were treated like lice, rats, cockroaches. Parasitic and dangerous, like Blavius was without his army, his weapons. *His Time Child.*

Eric balled his fists, he had never felt so indignant. The disdain he harboured for this place doubled.

"Maybe he's too ashamed to justify his actions in front of the otter he stole from," Blavius continued after an excruciating silence.

"The president, nonetheless," an otter next to him piped up.

"And I thought we had taught their offspring to respect us," Blavius shook his head, his incredulous tone goading to Eric's ears.

"Maybe it wasn't enough," The second otter added.

"Well, I think we're all agreed here," Blavius remarked.
"Forgive me, Mr President, but we still haven't heard from the Time Child yet," The aide reminded him. "Formal procedure dictates-"

"I know what it dictates," Blavius snapped, annoyed that sentencing the boy was being delayed. "Time Child, do you have anything to add?"

"Yeah, um..." Eric began, sitting up in his chair and trying to find a measured tone to his voice. "You said that maybe his family's share wasn't enough, right?"

"Yes,"

"Well, forgive me sir, but if the kid has to steal food then clearly his share isn't enough," Eric remarked. "And, well, when people are really desperate for something, there's not much that can stop them from getting what they want. If they really need it."

Eric ignored the bemused looks of the otters sat next to him, and instead looked out at the sea of people. His stomach lurched as he stood up, his knees grew shaky when he realized his words had festered so much silence.

"The people in front of you aren't greedy or ungrateful, they're desperate," Eric continued. "And there's a reason why they're desperate, because they're not treated fairly. They're being fucked over. No amount of convincing them that you're doing right thing is going to change their minds unless you give them what they need."

Eric sat down slowly, fixing his eyes on Blavius, waiting for him to respond. But the more Blavius' coal black eyes more bore into him, the more Eric had to fight to not sink in his chair.

Blavius eventually turned away from Eric and declared, "The boy must be taken into solitary confinement for a month and his family's allocated amount of food halved."

Eric froze, whatever composure he had learned over these past two years kept him from leaping out of his chair and throttling Blavius.

Maybe it was regret too, dulling the urge to lash out.

His words made no difference to the outcome, and he had probably put his negotiations at risk. No, he definitely put his negotiations at risk.

But he wondered if Kyle could see him now.

"So, hey, how was group, man?" Stan asked, throwing the basketball to Kyle.

"Group?" Kyle laughed, "Stan, it's counselling not an AA meeting."

Stan nodded, rubbing the back of his neck before he quipped, "Sure, only Kenny's parents go to group."

"Fuck off!" Kenny retorted, unable to maintain his anger when Stan and Kyle started infectiously laughing.

On the way home from counselling, Kyle received a text from Stan to meet him and Kenny at the basketball courts. Kyle was glad, anything to distract him from that damn letter (which had since been shut up in his drawer). He could think about it later, during another sleepless night.

"Seriously, dude, did it go okay?" Stan asked once the laughter had dissipated, looking at Kyle
almost imploringly.

"Yeah, I guess," Kyle shrugged, shooting a hoop. "Why?"

"We're not allowed to ask you about it anymore?" Kenny asked, grabbing the ball when it bounced on the tarmac.

"No, it's not that," Kyle replied. "You're just not usually this… Persistent."

Kyle was thankful, counselling was just another glitch in a life he used to be able to handle, and, just like the dark period themselves, he wanted it to remain separate from the life he wanted to live.

"You look a little tired," Stan timidly explained, it was loaded with an overriding question that he had only been brave enough to ask once.

"Oh, that…" Kyle mumbled, shaking his head and trying to smile brightly. "Yeah it's nothing to worry about."

"So counselling went fine?" Kenny asked, stealing a concerned glance at Stan.

"Great…" Kyle beamed, wishing they would both drop it. But he realized that Stan and Kenny knew him too well, and with his defence mechanisms less than sharp, Kyle was unable to hide what was eating him up.

They're only asking because they care about you.

So why don't you just tell them what they want to know?

"Actually, um…" Kyle began, pursing his lips.

"What?" Stan asked quietly.

"The counsellor guy said I should start going to one-on-one sessions," Kyle finished, desperate to talk about something else.

"Are you gonna do it?"

"No, maybe," Kyle sighed at his inability to give his friends an answer. "I've been thinking a little and I honestly don't think it's necessary. If I was grieving over someone then, sure, I'd do it. But it's like I said to the guy earlier, I can't be grieving because Cartman isn't dead."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

One more acute than in the counselling session, one to further the corrosion of his belief system and bruise his charged, nervy emotions.

He saw Stan and Kenny stare at each other like they knew something Kyle didn't, that they were unwilling to share.

But Kyle didn't want to be spared of this knowledge, really, he didn't want to have to be crushed by more cynicism.

He didn't want to feel alone or crazy.

"What?" Kyle asked nervously. "What did I say?"
"Dude," Kenny began despondently, "we haven't heard anything from the police in a long time."

"So?"

"Well, don't you think we would have heard something by now?" Kenny replied, vexed, Kyle wasn't sure what with. "Any leads or something? Shit, I don't know."

Kyle blinked, unaware that his friends thought this way and incredulous that they could just let him go on torturing himself.

Anger swelled in his gut, stubborn anger that he often thought was powerful enough to change things. To make the universe quiver in fear and give Kyle what he wanted, because this wasn't fair. None of this was fair.

But it collided with something else, the cold, numbing stab of betrayal that was making his chest tighten.

Kyle gritted his teeth, his mind boiling.

"What, you guys want him to be fucking dead too?" He shouted, stepping towards Kenny with his fists clenched.

He could hear Stan gasp, worried, behind him, Kyle was undeterred even when he felt his best friend reach out for him.

Only one thing could, and did, deter him, make him remember himself. And that was the devastation that clouded Kenny's face, never had Kyle hurt him like that and Kyle never intended to. But through his delusions, through his pride, he had essentially accused Kenny of wanting his best friend to be dead.

"Of course we don't!" Kenny shouted. "Nobody wants him to be dead, Kyle!"

Kyle stepped back, too ashamed to meet Kenny's eyes, still reeling from what he had said. He was glad when he heard Stan's voice, a comfort he would always rely on.

"Kyle, we're just saying that..." Stan paused, trying to find the right words. "Anything could be true. We just don't know, right?"

Kenny rolled his eyes, and looked up at the heavy, colourful sky. "Yeah, sure, but shouldn't we be realistic here?"

"And what does that mean?" Kyle's anger flared up again and he fought to suppress it.

"That we shouldn't just fucking count on good news-"

"Keep our minds open," Stan interjected, his eyes widened as he stared at Kenny pointedly. "That's all we gotta do."

Kenny shook his head to himself, Kyle could hardly look at him because he bristled and stung every time he did.

He didn't know how his friends could even consider finding peace with the possibility that Cartman could never be coming back. But, secretly, a shameful, selfish part of Kyle wanted to have the same thing.

"Yeah..." Kyle murmured, he could see Kenny looking at him out of the corner of his eye. "Just
An air of uncertainty had settled over Eric's living quarters since the day of the public trial, spiked enough to penetrate the thick, smothering humidity of a boiling plains summer.

An invisible partition had been raised, out of dishonest courtesy to shield Eric from what was being said about him. Backs were turned on the Time Child, conversations were hushed, as everybody wandered what had gotten into him. He was never a hero, just made to feel like one. That was becoming all too evident.

It was true, what Blavius said on that captured day two years ago. Eric was only a child that they were showering with so called honours and freedoms, to keep him pacified.

But he would never be pacified as long as he was here, with his deal purposefully misplaced in the minds of the council.

Still, Eric was indifferent to the speculations that the otters were supposedly gossiping about. There was a reason Eric needed to be pacified and cushioned here, because Blavius couldn't afford to lose him. His position within the elite was secure even if his negotiations were very shaky.

After Miss Castoria's class, Eric would usually retire to his room and blow the rest of the day off.

But today he had a plan.

Making a quick detour to his room to collect the parcel he had spent most of the previous night wrapping to look as inconspicuous as possible, Eric made his way to a place he had neglected for a long time. The ostrich stables.

Only the smallest splinters of sunlight filtered through the stables that were blanketed by shade. The ostriches pecked at the seeds that had been leisurely scattered on the floor, and dipped their warring beaks into the unequally distributed pails of water.

Eric knew to move cautiously, the otters had tamed the ostriches so as to prepare them for battle. Even as they shoved and bristled alongside each other, they barked loudly, jabbed each other in their feather-plumped sides underhandedly with strong beaks.

Eric had been given his own ostrich, one that he had only ridden a handful of times. But he discovered that ostriches were generous with their loyalty, and even after one ride an ostrich would affectionately but your shoulder in show of comradery.

Ostriches weren't given names, but when Eric had accidentally whispered 'Kitty,' to his ostrich she flapped her wings approvingly. And so through a force of habit, the name stuck.

Spotting the rather dirty medallion on Kitty's breast, Eric reached out to her, gently stroking her feathers.

"Kitty…" He whispered and she made a sound of recognition.

Eric grinned, leading her out of the stables. Kitty squawked in complaint as the sun weighed heavily on her. But Eric was quick with the saddle, stroking her neck soothingly all the while.

"Alright," Eric said, getting himself comfortable. Tugging gently at the reins, he added, "Come on."
Kitty took off with a start, Eric cursed under his breath and tightened his grip on the package tucked under his arm.

Eric coaxed her into slowing down as they entered the slums. No air appeared to exist down there, only a thin film of imaginary oxygen, catching specks of dust like a frog catches flies. There was no such thing as breathing, only inhaling the hot, stinging sappy air that crawled down Eric's throat and scratched at his lungs.

He gulped, regardless, the leather of the reins burning against his palm. Maybe it was the attention that was making it difficult to breathe? Eric remembered a time where he would have relished everyone's eyes on him, but this was making him inwardly squirm.

The eyes of the downtrodden citizens never lingered for long. Eric didn't know whether they averted their gaze out of fear or disgust, but he was happy to focus straight ahead, trying to memorise the details of the map he had found at the library.

Kitty came to a jittery halt when Eric tugged at the reins, stopping in front of a house that was difficult to distinguish from the others. Eric could have sworn they were all melting under the pressure.

Kitty dutifully waited as Eric dismounted, and she pecked impotently at the dry ground as Eric knocked on the door.

Eric scrambled for words, words that should have (and used to) come so easily, but his ability to do so was melting, evaporating, cooking under the same omnipresent pressure that was weighing down the slum.

Eric flinched when the door opened and tried to smile. The amylase in his mouth made peeling his top lip away from his gum a little more difficult.

"Hi, um, are you the parents of detainee #1013?" Eric asked, he reached for the package under his arm and brought it to his front, curling his fingers around it.

Confusion crossed the woman's face, before realization sank in sadly.

"Yes," the woman nodded, she had an unhealthy yellow pallor and heavy eyes. But she seemed robust, strong, as if her outward appearance belied a fire not so easily extinguished.

"Would it be okay if I came in and talked to you?" Eric continued. "About what happened?"

The woman stared at Eric contemplatively, sceptically, for a few moments, before she reared her head and glimpsed at the sky-swallowed towers.

She sighed, before replying "I suppose we don't have much of a choice."

"Thanks," Eric mumbled, brushing past the woman, stumbling into the unexpected tininess.

Damp streaked down the bruised walls, as if the entire skeleton of the house was made of newspaper soaked in rain. Hand-knitted blankets were draped over a modest, frowning couch and Eric could make out a light, airy kitchen, soaking up the day like a crucial flower.

A crude passage way revealed a short, wooden staircase and Eric imagined the family sleeping in the attic. Sweating and convulsing feverishly in the summer, shivering and recoiling like springs in the winter months.
The house, like the others in the slum, was hastily built. The otters kicked their way through the city like toddlers and even now people were still cleaning up and repairing.

"I suppose you're not here on government duties?" A deeper, masculine voice asked.

A sweaty, bearded man emerged from the shadows of the small living room, and Eric turned to look at him.

"No, I just came to say that... I'm really sorry for what happened to your son," Eric paused when he noticed the woman offer him a chair. "I mean, there's a jury and all but Blavius has the final word and-"

"You don't need to apologize," She interrupted, Eric blinked and she nodded. "Your words were very inspiring, very honest."

"Okay," Eric replied quietly, he didn't need to be reminded of how he royally screwed his negotiations up. "Thanks."

He noticed the couple curiously staring at the parcel perched on his lap. But Eric didn't want to give it to them just yet, there was more he wanted to say although he wasn't sure exactly what. Swiftly, he drew the parcel closer to him and the couple, in a daze, looked up at him instead.

"I know you think I'm some kind of traitor, and maybe I am, but even someone like me knows that what's happening- what has happened isn't right," Eric began, his selfishness becoming confusingly blurred, and he winced at that fateful day two years ago. "I never thought, actually, it doesn't matter I thought... I messed up and I've never been sorrier."

"Well, that's something at least," the man replied, clapping his wife on the shoulder. "Thank you."

Eric smiled feebly, glancing at the package. "I actually met your son before-"

"Leck,"

"What?" Eric asked.

"His name is Leck," the man explained.

Eric furrowed his eyebrows, thrown slightly off kilter.

"Oh, um, I met Leck before," he continued. "He was hiding out in the astronomy atrium, he might have told you about it. Does he, uh, like science?"

Eric watched Leck's parents exchange surprised glances as he resisted the urge to tap his fingers nervously.

"He loves it," the woman smiled fondly. "His grandfather was a warship engineer. Before he died he would tell Leck stories of fixing ships and Leck would hang on his every word."

A smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, flickered at the corner of Eric's mouth.

"That's pretty cool," Eric nodded, before handing the parcel over. "Look, if you could just give this to Leck when he comes out?"

The woman took the parcel off him, tearing the paper and eyes shining brightly in surprise. The glossy hardback cover of the astronomy book illuminated their faces. Eric had taken a relatively modest one from the library that wouldn't be missed too much.
"I figured since he was hanging out in the atrium, he was interested in all that stuff," Eric explained.

"And he can keep it." He quickly added when Leck's parents noticed the library stamp printed on the inside. "He doesn't have to bring it back."

"That's very kind of you," Leck's father replied, his voice slightly watery

"He'll love it," Leck's mother beamed before she smiled earnestly. "Thank you so much, Time Child."

Kyle sunk his fingers into his knee to stop it jittering, eyeing up the impatient clock with contempt.

Never had silence seemed like such a waste of time.

Never had words been so difficult to grasp. But where would Kyle begin?

This is what you get for not saying anything for two years, you stubborn asshole.

Kyle cursed himself under his breath, trying to move his shoulders in a bid to squash the growing ache travelling up his spine.

He couldn't sit still, he couldn't unwind the knotted ball of stress in his stomach, and he couldn't even sit back in his char. Sitting forward seemed like the perfect exit strategy, after all, he wasn't obligated to stay here. He could leave if he wanted to.

No. You're not running away again.

"Take your time," Mr Wilson advised. A calm presence in the room, as if Kyle were being visited by a shy ghost.

Kyle squinted as he looked out of the window. Washed out blue sky and modest buildings. It made the room so dark.

He spotted a box of tissues and cringed. No, he wouldn't cry. Couldn't cry. He realized the full capability of his nails as his fingers sunk deeper.

"Have you been sleeping well? At all?" Dr Wilson asked, he had probably realized that he was going to have to initiate conversation.

Kyle shook his head and whispered "No,"

Mr Wilson made a small note, Kyle watched the pen travelling across the page, wondered what his counsellor had written.

"I still have that dream," Kyle spoke up, figuring he should at least give him something, shrinking when Mr Wilson looked at him. "The one where he needs me to save him but it's always too late."

Mr Wilson shifted in his own chair, now that Kyle had provided him with questions.

"When did you start having that dream?" He asked.

"Um, six months after Cartman disappeared, I think?" Kyle replied, withdrawing uncomfortably at remembering that horrible time. "I've always had bad dreams, like, night terrors, where I would wake up screaming or crying. But this one keeps coming back. It stops for a while, then shows up again and it's pretty hard to shake off."
Kyle didn't know how he could so calmly utter such a huge understatement.

"You say that you try to save him in the dream?" Mr Wilson asked.

Kyle nodded, thoughts of lost opportunities assaulted his mind and he squeezed his eyes shut. He tried to conceal it from Mr Wilson, bowing his head.

"What from?"

"Whatever is happening to him," Kyle answered, hoping he wouldn't have to get into the details. "I imagine people hurting him. I know that he must be so scared. And I try to save him before it's too late."

"Too late?"

They both knew what that meant.

"What if I find him and he's-" No matter how much Kyle tried to desensitize himself to the possibility, it still shattered him. His voice shook and he forced himself to stop speaking, chewing his lip to prevent tears and ducking his head once again.

"Alright…" Mr Wilson soothed, Kyle hoped they could move on.

"I don't want to let him down," Kyle confessed, shaking his head. "It's not fair."

"Why would you be letting him down?" Mr Wilson asked, furrowing his eyebrows and leaning forward.

"Because this was never supposed to happen!" Kyle replied, his vision fast becoming blurred. "I'm meant to be looking out for him!"

"Kyle, you weren't to know that he would go missing," Mr Wilson assured, Kyle wanted to believe it. That logical, rational side of him did. But his heart was not so easily convinced. "Cartman was never your sole responsibility."

"But who's responsibility was he?" Kyle snapped, indignant. Like this guy knew anything about him, about Cartman, what it was like for them both. "Who else was gonna make sure he was safe? It's my job-"

"Your job?"

Shit.

Kyle softened his grip on his knee, eyes travelling around the room, determined not to land on Mr Wilson, afraid of what else he would get him to say.

That was something Kyle had never admitted to himself, but something he somehow knew. He knew he had a responsibility to Cartman, saw something broken that others couldn't see. Saw an opportunity to repair him.

"Well, no, not my job, but…" Kyle sighed, giving up on his backtracking. Despair won out and he buried his head in his hands. "Why didn't I know? Why didn't I try to stop it?"

"Because you're just a person, Kyle. You're a child." Mr Wilson explained, Kyle looked up from his hands. "Not a… superhero who's obligated to protect people."
"I don't care about that!" Kyle shouted angrily. "I care about letting him down! Because I did! He saved me and I can't even return the favour? What kind of fucking friend does that make me?!

"He saved you?"

Kyle quickly swiped at his damp eyes before answering, "Yes…"

"Can I ask you what, or who, he saved you from?" Mr Wilson enquired.

"He saved my life. My family's life," Kyle replied, he looked out of the window when he smiled ruefully, "we never talked about it but I knew it was him."

"Why didn't you talk about it?"

Kyle pursed his lips and took a shuddering breath.

"Because he wasn't supposed to be a hero," he replied, his face creasing with the promise of exhausted tears. "He wasn't supposed to be my hero but he was."

"Is it possible that you feel guilty?" Mr Wilson suggested, a little gingerly.

Kyle sighed, defeated and nodded. He was unravelling and he wanted it to stop.

"Why can't I just… Miss him like everybody else does?" Kyle asked, frustrated. "Why does it have to be so hard?"

Kyle balled his fists and smacked them against his thighs, the rate of his breathing picking up.

"I'm confused and, and, angry and I feel like there was a part of me that I didn't know about, that only existed because of him, that's gone and I want it back even though I don't know what it is," Kyle continued, crying freely now but he didn't care.

"I feel like my mind is screaming at me to get it back and I just want to tell it to shut the fuck up because I don't know where it is. It's with him, I know it. But what if he never comes back? What if I never feel like myself again? What if he-"

Kyle stopped, the rate of his breaths had doubled, trebled, until his chest tightened with the strain. His heart fought against it too ferociously, pounding in his ears, an overwhelming sense of inescapable dread washed over him.

Mr Wilson was out of his chair immediately, kneeling beside Kyle and coaxing him to calm down.

"Okay, relax, Kyle, take deep breaths," he instructed, grabbing Kyle's shoulder. "Look at me."

Kyle did as he was told, turning to Mr Wilson, trembling harshly and eventually collecting enough breaths to calm himself. But he was still shaken up, he didn't know when it would stop.

"What if he never comes back?" Kyle asked, his voice thin, a gasp. "What will I do?"

"We'll figure it out, Kyle," Mr Wilson promised, and Kyle had no choice but to trust him.
"Four, three, two, one. Ready or not, Ike!"

There was not that many places to hide in a supermarket. Or, rather, there were no creative places to hide other than behind shelves or towers of canned food.

But Ike was crafty.

Kyle knew that his brother would be competitive, and heedless enough of the consequences, to hide in a freezer or perhaps behind the deli counter. No matter how concerned their mother would be, or how much trouble he'd be in.

No, Kyle wasn't going to let that happen. Even if one of those did turn out to be Ike's chosen hiding place, Kyle was going to find him and pull him out of there before their mother could notice.

Kyle started to walk down a random isle – empty if not for the lone, distant woman who seemed miles away from where Kyle was standing – and pushed back boxes of cereal on the shelves to make sure Ike hadn't somehow slotted himself there.

Kyle kept walking, closing the gap between him and the woman. Not like he noticed, in fact, by now he thought she had left to peruse another isle.

That was until he walked into a woollen wall and a familiar smell of face powder and Coco Chanel. But one component seemed to be missing…

Cookie dough, Kyle decided.

But how would he know?

A past life, perhaps?

How can something so indescribable and impossible be so vivid?

"Oh, excuse me," Kyle muttered under his breath, embarrassed and freaked out and wanting more than ever to find his brother.

"Why, hello, Kyle!" The woman smiled, soft, cheery. Melodic almost.

Kyle looked up only to have more surprise knot in his gut.

"Miss Cartman?" He whispered, clearing his throat he said a little louder, "hi…"

"How have you been, dear?"

"Good. Yeah, um, pretty good, I guess." Kyle babbled, wishing he could shut up. "How are you?"
Kyle immediately cringed at his question. One look at Miss Cartman and Kyle could tell she wasn't fine. She looked pale and exhausted, a light burning quietly in her eyes that one more phone call of bad news could easily extinguish. She had a "Find Eric Cartman" badge pinned to her camel coloured coat. Kyle guessed she probably still had the bumper sticker on her car emblazoned with the same plea.

"It's been so long since I've seen you," She smiled thoughtfully, avoiding Kyle's question.

"Yeah, it has," Kyle fidgeted as he replied, maybe it was guilt finally manifesting itself into squirmy, wringing hands.

"How is school?"

"Great," Kyle nodded.

"And the other boys? Stan and Kenny?" Miss Cartman pressed, a listless concern in her voice. "Are they fine?"

"Yeah, they're doing okay,"

Better than me.

"That's wonderful to hear," Miss Cartman sighed, still smiling although the corners of her lips were flushed, pinched, a prologue to tears.

"Kyle, honey, have you seen Ike?" His mom's voice saved him.

"Actually, mom, he was bored so I said I'd play hide and seek with him," Kyle answered, turning around to see his mom approach them with a full shopping cart.

"As long as you find him, bubbe."

Kyle rolled his eyes at his mother's choice of words, trying his subtle best to give Miss Cartman an apologetic look.

"Oh, hello, Liane,"

"Hello, Sheila," Miss Cartman nodded. "How are you?"

"Can't complain, hon, yourself?"

"Well... Good days and bad days, I suppose," Miss Cartman replied, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Or, rather, easier days than others. But I suppose I have to learn to take them one at a time."

"Of course," Kyle's mom nodded sympathetically. "We can't give up hope, can we?"

"That's right," Miss Cartman smiled. Strained, Kyle could see it. It made an appearance in his own reflection so many times. "That's what I try to remind myself."

"Have you heard anything more from the police?" His mom asked, cocking her head to the side like she always did when she had conversations at the supermarket.

"No, no," Miss Cartman shook her head, dismissive. "Nothing yet."

"I'm sure you will, dear."
"Mom!" A younger voice called out, accompanied by the sound of sneakers squeaking against linoleum. "Kyle!"

"Here he is!" Kyle's mom laughed as Ike ran up to them.

"You suck at hide and seek, Kyle," Ike teased.

"No, canuck, I got distracted," Kyle snickered, ruffling Ike's wayward mop of hair.

"Ike, did you say hello to Miss Cartman?" His mom asked, rather, encouraged.

Ike shook his head shyly, like clockwork his fingers became lodged in his mouth. His childish bashfulness was mechanic.

"Hello, Ike," Miss Cartman smiled softly.

"Hello," Ike spoke around the fingers in his mouth.

"My, Sheila, how they've grown!" Miss Cartman gasped, shaking her head.

Her eyes flickered between Kyle and Ike until they grew damp, blurring what could be read, indecipherable. Her breath stuttered and her complexion pined.

"Well, I'll, uh, let you continue your shopping," Miss Cartman said, saving herself. Kyle couldn't blame her.


"You too," Miss Cartman smiled.

"Bye, Ike. Bye, Kyle. It was lovely to see you all." Miss Cartman began to walk away as soon as the words were out.

Kyle's mom sighed, she shook her head and spoke to no one. "That poor, poor woman."

Kyle felt a soft, warm hand blindly search for his. Usually he would have argued that, as a twelve year old, he didn't need for his hand to be held. But he remembered what comfort it provided and didn't protest at all.

After Eric's actions at the public trail, the meeting with Blavius was inevitable. The fear that his negotiations may be in jeopardy drowned out the self-important – increasingly edgy – assurances that Blavius had to give him what he wanted.

Honestly, he was starting to wonder how long the wool had been over his eyes, if it was there from the beginning. If that was the case, how hadn't he noticed it before?

Conditioned.

Just like the rest of them.

Eric was more scared of that thought than he wanted to believe.

"Time Child, for somebody who wants something from the council, you know exactly how to displease me." Blavius finally said after a long, calculating silence.
"I know," Eric replied, he didn't know how he meant it to sound. Bored? Insolent? It didn't matter. Under the otter's cold, hard stare and the pompous yet intimidating portrait that towered over him, Eric just felt frightened.

"Before we even contemplate a negotiation, let me make it perfectly clear that your behaviour at the public trail was irresponsible and foolish and it has certainly affected the council's decision to let you go back to the past."

Like you didn't already know that.

"Yes, sir," Eric murmured, he suddenly became very interested in the hands nervously placed on his lap. "Sorry, sir."

"I like to think I'm an otter of my word, Time Child," Blavius continued. "But circumstances change, minds change and I hope yours will soon enough."

"I'm sure it will." Eric replied, but as long as there was a hunger to challenge everything, living deep inside him, then his compliance would always sound unconvincing.

Blavius dismissed Eric's response and stared out the window instead. Another hot day, surprisingly humid. It coated the air in stray pollen from desert flowers and made the whole city shimmer.

"Maybe you need more coaching…" Blavius thought out loud.

"What?" Eric's stomach lurched.

"The conditions, perhaps, are not right."

"Conditions?" Eric asked, daring to lean forward in his chair. "What does that mean?"

"The council are willing to make you an offer, Time Child," Blavius replied evenly, turning to Eric and resting his paws flat on the ostentatiously wide desk. "I will lay out our proposal, but I should warn you that there is no room for exceptions or alterations."

Eric nodded, afloat but ready to be smothered by waves.

"We believe that you are too young to return the past right now. You are still too naïve, your actions too reckless for the enormity of such a privilege. You could put so much at stake-"

"How can I prove that I'm ready?" Eric asked desperately, he had always hated begging. Especially in front of Blavius. "How old do I have to be?"

"We feel that twenty one would be an appropriate age."

"What?!"

"You'll be a young man then, well-versed in the tenants of AAA atheism and even if I am long gone by then, I will know that the decision to send you back to the past will be a sensible one."

Nine years.

Nine years until he saw Kyle again.

Nine years of loneliness, frustration and impatience.

It barrelled in front of him and made the reality of seeing Kyle again a dim, near impossible light at
"No?" Blavius asked, threateningly displeased.

"No, fucking no!" Eric shouted, standing up and letting anger take control. "You are not doing this to me again!"

"Calm down, Time Child!" Blavius barked, standing up also. Eye to eye with Eric.

"Stop fucking telling me what to do!" Eric snapped, before his voice cracked with tears. "Don't you understand that I can't keep waiting?!

"Do you realize that the council is spending valuable time considering your insignificant, personal whims when we have larger matters to worry about?!!"

"I never asked for that! I never wanted this!" Eric cried, his voice still cutting as it took on an accusatory tone. "You're the ones who keep dragging this damn thing out!"

Blavius shook his head, before he eyed Eric up and down and growled, "Ungrateful. You would have thought we'd schooled that out of you, by now."

Eric ground his teeth, his pudgy fists tensing and relaxing as he deliberated the urge to punch Blavius in the face. But he was smarter than that. Annoyingly, he was too smart to do something so idiotic.

"It's this deal or nothing," Blavius warned.

"No, it's not," Eric ground out, an overwhelming solemnness welled in his already damp eyes.

Blavius' whiskers twitched, a small squeak escaped from the corner of his mouth. As softly shrill as a punctured tire as it gasps for one more breath. He laughed disdainfully and moved slowly from behind his desk, circling Eric as he spoke;

"So naive, Time Child. I know that you will take whatever we give you. What did you say at the public trial? People are desperate and that nothing will stop them from getting what they want if they really want it. And you'll be prepared to wait as long as it takes, as long as you get what you want at the end of it. You'll accept this deal, because you have no other choice. When you do, we will stick to our word."

Although he hated himself slightly for it, Blavius' words had Eric shaking.

Maybe because there was a devastating kernel of truth to them.

With an agitated, despairing growl, Eric pushed past Blavius and stormed out.

"I think it's scary how other people affect us."

"Scary in what way?" Mr Wilson asked, wanting Kyle to elaborate on his statement.

"Like, love," Kyle replied, his hands were knotted at his lap, anchoring his jittering leg to the carpet. "When you love somebody it's like you're sharing a huge part of yourself. Something invisible. Your soul or your heart, whatever."

"That's a pretty good explanation, I think," Mr Wilson nodded.
"When you lose that someone, do you, like, lose your stake in them?" Kyle asked, the questions were like corrosive chemicals, too harsh and unnecessary, stripping away the whitewash. "Do you lose that thing you shared with them or does that come back to you eventually? When your heart is broken, do they get that to keep that piece forever or does it… Grow back?"

"What do you think, Kyle?"

Kyle didn't know, if he knew he wouldn't ask. If he had answers he would be more at peace, not sitting in a counsellor's office and freaking out over a run-in at the supermarket.

"I want to think it grows back," Kyle eventually replied. "Lately, I just don't like the idea of things being permanent."

Kyle took a stuttering breath, before continuing, "Loving people takes up so much time and energy and… Yourself too, right? So does hate. Obsessing over people, and for what?"

Mr Wilson nodded, as if his mind was still processing what Kyle had told him. "Yes, it could be said that hate is a less constructive path—"

"No, I mean everything. It's all the same," Kyle interrupted. "If you put someone at the centre of your universe whether you love them or hate them, then you're going to end up getting disappointed somehow. Emptied."

The faint ticking of the clock was the only response Kyle got.

Mr Wilson took notes, tapping his pen against the paper before he asked, "do you consider Cartman to be the centre of your universe?"

Kyle blinked, cornered, and he immediately dropped his gaze to his lap.

That question put an end to any careful, considerate mulling and ploughed straight ahead to the crux of everything Kyle had dealt with for the past two years. Possibly longer.

He wanted to say no, his immediate reaction. But he stopped himself, as if it would jinx something, infected with dishonesty.

There was evidence to support that Cartman was exactly that, and Kyle couldn't overlook it. But how can somebody who was no longer in his life be the centre of his universe?

Kyle's heart stung at the stark realisation. If Cartman was the centre of his universe then his heart was the axis holding it all in place.

"I was at the store and I saw his mom," Kyle confessed, that was what he really wanted to talk about. "It was the first time I saw her in, well, forever. It seems like, anyway."

"Did you talk to her?"

"Yes."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. She didn't say much either," Kyle replied, he shook his head as it all came back to him. "It freaked me out."

"What freaked you out?"
"How similar she and I are," Kyle replied, he even allowed a small smile to quirk in the corner of his mouth. "It's like we've been diagnosed with the same disease but she's deteriorating quicker than me. She was like a ghost or something, floating and empty and all because the centre of her universe is gone and she doesn't know where to go."

I don't want to end up like her. What if I-

"I never thought I'd compare myself to her," Kyle continued, he could feel the lump in his throat. "I feel bad that I am."

The counsellor's office blurred, Kyle's cinnamon lashes dampening.

"Why am I even crying over this?" Kyle asked, swiping at his eyes. "When did everything stop making sense?"

Mr Wilson didn't answer, and Kyle was glad because deep down he already knew.

Kyle exhaled shakily. "I never thought he could be- I never knew he meant so much to me, that he was such a big deal but he is."

"It's good that you've acknowledged that," Mr Wilson said softly, nodding sympathetically. Like Kyle's mom did whilst talking to Miss Cartman.

"It does feel kind of good to say it loud," Kyle admitted, before chuckling ruefully. "When I've tried to shut it up for so long."

The whitewash was gone, the truth remained and for one exhilarating, naïve moment, Kyle felt relieved.

"It's his birthday soon," Kyle spoke, taking advantage of whatever feeling – that wasn't heavy or foreboding - was welling up in his chest.

"Oh, when?"

"At the beginning of next month," Kyle replied. "The first of July."

Night fell on the city and Eric hadn't left his room since his meeting with Blavius hours before. The sky paled into deep cobalt against the screaming city lights, the moon hardly visible and the stars even less so.

Eric had collected all his anger, counterproductive he realised, since he had nothing to throw it at. Or, rather, nothing to throw it at without consequences following shortly after.

He had no leverage.

No upper hand.

Just final offers.

He had since grown bored of feeling sorry for himself, drained himself entirely of that emotion until he was lapping at colourless, useless drops. Not enough to satisfy or placate him.

Forget conditioning, forget punishment, this was enough to drive Eric crazy. He stared down at the peeled skin of his thumb, ran his tongue along the sore, chewed grooves left in his lip. All in an afternoon's work.
But he's always driven you crazy.

No matter how far away you are.

Eric shut his eyes at the thought of Kyle, memories being sucked into the vacuum of his conscience, and that damn high school photo pierced his mind. No, he couldn't torture himself like that, couldn't get excited or hopeful over that boy when he wasn't even in touching distance.

Eric's eyes trailed over to his slouching backpack. Kyle's file was still in there. He wondered when he had started to make this separation a little more difficult for himself, since he had held off on looking at that thing for so long. Progress, Eric considered, since his impatience was infamous. The reason he was here in the first place, except his agenda had shifted.

I'd forgotten all about that stupid Wii.

That age-old philosophy had caught up to Eric, materialistic whims come second in matters of the heart. No matter how questionable and sour said organ may be. But maybe Kyle was medicine, resuscitation, overall revival.

Eric twisted the bedsheets beneath him, forgoing twisting the abused skin of his thumb between his teeth. His eyes were sore from crying, from staring up at the void of his pitch black ceiling.

The light was there and he just couldn't find it. Ironic.

But the external lights that cared little for an upset, lonely child holed up in his room illuminated, magnified that backpack and implored, taunted. Eric would listen to signs from the universe only if they benefitted him in some way, and if this was a sign he just didn't know.

Or didn't want to know.

He took a shuddering breath and tasted only his dry mouth.

Nine years, it burned a hole in him like he was paper in the sun. Scorched around the edges, like the destruction wasn't over yet. Nearly a decade to go.

Phantom feet met the floor and Eric trudged over to his backpack, fingers surprisingly still as they lifted the bag off the floor.

Eric didn't think as he carried the backpack over to his bed. As he curled up and grabbed his tablet. Controlled solely by the information on Kyle's file and too far gone to be worried or excited. There was only a fixation with Kyle, yearning and exhaustion that Eric wouldn't give up.

He slotted the flash drive into his tablet and there was that light. Glowing in Eric's lap and splashed on his face like holy water.

Kyle's file loaded quickly and a handful of documents appeared on the screen for Eric's choosing. He skipped the birth certificate and everything else up to the point of amnesia. Or that's what Eric liked to characterise it as, anyway. A life that he should have been present in, rather than a distorted timeline and an Eric Cartman-shaped hole in Kyle's life to match Eric's own Kyle Broflovski-shaped one.

Basketball victories recorded in the local paper (victory shots and team photographs), class photos that charted Kyle's transformation from Eric's closest memory of him to a young man who stoked small, innocent fires in Eric's gut.
A picture of him in a senior year cap and gown, with his arms slung around teenagers claiming to be Token, Wendy and Butters.

Next Stop Harvard!

Was the headline above the picture, and below the photograph was the news that the four honour roll students had been accepted into Princeton, Yale, Stanford and, yes, Harvard.

Eric rolled his eyes and chuckled to himself, from preschool it was obvious that Kyle was Ivy League material. He still had a fond, soft smirk on his face when he swiped his finger across the screen.

But it quickly disappeared when he saw the document in front of him.

A death certificate.

A mistake, Eric thought. He must have swiped too harshly and ended up at the end of the file…

But, no, a date trapped him. Working out the math in his head, he calculated.

Eighteen.

Eric flared with cold sweat and his heart screamed, battered at his chest as if it could break out of his ribcage and stop the centuries old injustice from happening. Give Kyle his life back, resuscitate him like Kyle had done before. Not emotionally or spiritually this time, but physically. God knows Eric had done it before.

Saving him and for what? For his life to be snatched away by… What exactly?

Eric could hardly think as his eyes scanned the screen for a cause of death.

Holy shit.

Alcohol poisoning.

It just didn't seem like Kyle, but how could Eric know what Kyle had possibly become? What he had tried to suppress, forget, numb?

Eric supposed it didn't matter, because he couldn't clumsily help Kyle, offer him advice he was still too young to give. Hell, he couldn't be there for the boy he was fighting for, his feelings intensifying for, and who had been untimely snatched away from him by the simple virtue (vice) of knowledge.

That simple fact didn't conjure a storm of thoughts, a chain of frantically made actions, it prompted reactions only visceral.

With his heart pounding so hard that it was almost threatening to take off and abandon its battered vessel, Eric threw himself off his bed with his legs weak and shaking.

Disorientated, and threadbare, anguished whimpers escaped his mouth as he struggled to make his way to the bathroom. Falling to his knees with a loud thud in front of the toilet, Eric heaved and vomited stinging bile.

Purging himself of his foolish impulse, forcing the information out of his body because it was too painful, too dangerous.

Once he had finished, he felt as if it wasn't enough. But he couldn't get rid of everything, since the
knowledge of Kyle's late death was not just a flesh wound. It was a time bomb buried deep within, its ominous tick sure to haunt Eric and detonate at any moment. Every moment.

A memory of Kyle swam in front of Eric's eyes, the image and the sound itself was cloudy. But Eric couldn't let these memories become insignificant, couldn't let Kyle's death overshadow his life. His life that had changed Eric for the better, that made him feel more connected and real than anything else that was so quietly important.

How could somebody like Kyle be taken for granted on this Earth?

The astronomy atrium passed in Eric’s mind. Shooting stars, falling stars, stars that come together and then disperse, Kyle's name being one of them.

Eric's lungs, heart, stomach, everything that kept him living, clenched in mourning. As if his soul – what he had of one – knew what he had lost, and lamented.

He sobbed to the empty room, grateful that nobody could hear him.

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A/N: So, um, thoughts?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Back to the original format for this chapter. This will be the last chapter where the boys are twelve and this latest instalment is a springboard for the events that will be taking place next. While I had a lot of fun writing this (I have fun writing every chapter, but this was one that I just couldn't stop writing. I had to force myself to take breaks from it), I'm a little conscious of whether I've effectively set up the 'springboards' if you will. Because we are heading somewhere and your thoughts and feelings on the story so far are always appreciated. I hope you enjoy!

The sky was a too bright blue. That was giveaway number one that this wasn't real. Hungry for clouds, stretched around the sun. A Plains sky, not a South Park sky. Yet, he was there. Or rather his subconscious was there, his soul on vacation while his corporeal form peered out the letterbox and watched the postcard write itself.

Too quiet, the night had filtered its way in and the phantom voices of imagined figures barely rose above a whisper. The geography was off, significant houses that Eric had moved in and out of so many times, his own house too, were dropped unceremoniously in the middle of Main Street. It was like they were all trying to squeeze into frame.

Citizens, friends, family (his mom) all kept their ghostly distance, identical smiles, and whispered to him. Their lips moved and it was up to Eric to interpret, provide sound. He didn't care.

"Kyle?" His faceless self asked, rather thought, and in reality Eric stirred.

He saw Stan's crooked smile, the acidic orange of Kenny's parka and Butters' lemon blond hair but no Kyle. All comforts, all missed, even if Eric didn't fixate on them he missed them, and sleep reminded him just how much, but-

"Kyle?"

A green hat, a rare, secretive smile that Eric had learned to cherish now he was no longer privy to it. It split the crowd like an act of God and Eric didn't take it for granted, he moved forward and pushed through the foggy crowd. Kyle's name on his lips and so many other words rising in his throat, in his heart, before he turned a corner, tossed away.

Kyle's yearbook picture flashed in his mind, the bolt travelling down into his groin, quietly imploding there and making him arch into these new sensations. Stars littered his vision and he walked through them, looking for that green hat, that smile, those impassioned eyes; purified kerosene in a compass, aiding him in his search.

"Kyle?" Eric called out, more irate. He grumbled sleepily, tossing beneath the sheets in protest.

A disembodied hand at his back. Small, gloved. Kyle. Like he remembered. Eric could have laughed, cried and when he turned around Kyle was there. Or at least the vital components that Eric missed the most.
After discovering what was in Kyle's file, the choice of words tasted sour. Faced with the boy, Eric's reactions slowed. His mind moving too fast, discarding sentences and questions before they could even leave his mouth.

Kyle didn't care, he had waited patiently for five hundred years, but Eric wanted him to talk, since he seemed unaffected by their subconscious meeting.

*Say something. Anything.*

Kyle's lips parted, Eric's breath hitched.

Wait, sirens?

They whinged softly in Eric's ears, growing louder and fretful when splinters of red pierced Eric's eyes, pulling him out of slumber. Out of South Park and away from Kyle.

Eric shot up, his eyes gritty, his mind groggy and trying to process the wailing, crimson sirens and the enraged chants he could hear. He shuffled to the window and blinked at the swarm below his window, jostling and all eager to make their voices heard. Eric could have sworn he heard a bellow of fire, or smashed glass but it was all drowned out by the chanting Eric couldn't quite decipher. If Eric didn't find awe in such things, if he wasn't so shocked by what he was witnessing, he would have felt scared and he supposed he should be since he was still very much apart of the institution these fed up, long suffering people wanted to see fall.

"This is an emergency message from your party leaders. Our security has been compromised. Please report to your allocated safe rooms immediately."

The announcement repeated itself as Eric scrambled out of bed. He wiped at his eyes and stocked his backpack with his tablet and water just in case his stay in the safe room lasted longer than he expected.

It was the first time he ever had to report to the safe room, and he vaguely remembered where it was when he was given a guided tour around his new living quarters.

Luckily, a nervous, whispering family of otters were in front of Eric and he quietly followed them down the winding, emergency stairwell. The safe room was located so far underground that Eric could feel himself growing light-headed, the further they distanced themselves from the world above them. He remembered that feeling from his tour, how air could be so thin, how such a drastic change in pressure can mess with your mind…

Eric briefly glanced at the large, intimidating otters guarding the door to the safe room, and he slipped in once the glass panes parted, allowing entry.

The safe room was crowded with otters, their pompousness, their delusional, conditioned way of thinking left behind as they reassured and lost themselves in more sobering thoughts.

Eric tried to collect his breaths, noticing that the council had taken quick action and were supplying manufactured air into the room. It was thick and cynically cold, but Eric happily gulped and swallowed, sliding down the wall until his body met the floor. Families curled themselves up into balls, fur meeting fur and paws linked. They buried themselves into corners and infested the place with fear. Eric wished he had somebody to cling onto, somebody to look out for and prioritise him.

Loneliness wasn't something he liked to dwell on, but he couldn't help but do it now. After all, most
animals have evolved to live in groups, fight in groups, and just \textit{survive}. Eric couldn't ignore biology, no matter how different he liked to think he was.

Echoes of the action outside filtered into the safe room, prompting a few distressed wails from the cubs, and poorly concealed whimpers and squeaks of fright from the adults. Eric brought his knees to his chin and, although he wasn't in the preferred position to do so, tried to get some sleep.

"Attention," a familiar, authoritative voice caused Eric's eyes to open.

A hologram splayed itself over on the far wall, the light of which tinged the otters' fur with an icy pallor. Blavius exuded a false regal air, his colourless eyes were that of a portrait figure's, judging and commanding everyone at once.

"Do not be alarmed by the mob outside," Blavius began, Eric inched forward. Something was off… "These ungrateful humans are not a threat to us. They are over-excited and delirious, inspired by false hope. They do not understand how our system benefits them and how we live in a society where co-operation is vital. But, tonight they are not co-operating and we will work through this minor blip, what I hope is, a misunderstanding and make sure incidents like this never happen again. Let me assure you, that any human who has destroyed AAA property or harmed an officer will face \textit{severe} punishment and re-conditioning. When the mob has dispersed, you will all be free to return to your quarters. Stay calm, stay strong, and stay staunch in your beliefs. AAA forever."

A stilted silence, before a belated, 'AAA forever' was murmured around the room.

Eric mumbled it to his knees, staring Blavius down and revelling slightly in such a drastic tremor of confidence.

A tell-tale squeak, followed by an anxious wheeze and the hologram retreated, collapsing into a miniscule circle on the wall.

"I think that's got it" Kenny said, crouching besides the firework he was trying to angle just right. "Yep, it's ready… Stand back guys!"

Stan and Kyle didn't have time to reply before Kenny sprung off the earthy summer ground and pushed them back out of danger's way.

The firework launched into the sky, gathering momentum until it could no more, exploding, fizzing, and skimming Technicolor sparks across the waning night. The three boys gaped at the sight approvingly, their eyes reflecting the wayward colours.

Their tent was shadowed by towering conifers, in a move to evade the small town police officers who would have ruined their summer celebrations over technicalities such as possession of illegal fireworks and underage drinking. The boys traditionally spent this night taking advantage of the empty streets but always remaining tethered to Stan's backyard where the annual Fourth of July barbecue was held. Their parents were still attending without them.

But when Stan heard that his uncle was taking another vacation across the border, he knew to expect a souvenir in the form of fireworks, and he hastily made new Fourth of July plans with the guys.

Kyle had been looking forward to cheap beer and a light show in the sky. It was a respite from the triggering date of July the first, a brief detour from what the rest of July entailed; too much time spent in his head and a dependence on weekly meetings with his counsellor.
However, during his last session, Kyle had what he was hoping would be the first of many: an epiphany. It was unexplainable, maybe slightly flawed, but he knew that if he didn't listen to himself he would spend the rest of July regretting it.

He would visit Cartman's memorial. Replace negative, biased thoughts with refreshed memories. But he didn't want to do it alone, couldn't do it alone, and deep down knew that Cartman deserved more than just Kyle there, remembering him.

When Kyle proposed they all visit the memorial on Cartman's birthday, he was unsurprised by the hesitancy Stan and Kenny displayed. Two years is enough time to adjust to an absence, but not forget completely. The Cartman shaped chasm in their lives was still sore and tender, threatening to bleed if it was prodded too harshly. Kyle had learned that the hard way.

Conversation was clunky as they walked to the memorial, illustrating how very strange and difficult they had all perceived visiting the memorial to be. It dropped dead once they finally reached the town square. Forgotten candles, unread messages and photos still soldiering on through rain, snow and sun, challenged them.

Kyle was expecting to be pushed to his limit, for the visit to become a self-imposed, masochistic endurance test to send him running within seconds. But all he felt was a profound, eerily empowering sense of acknowledgement. One he would struggle to articulate in Mr Wilson's office. It anchored in his chest, giving Kyle the hopeful illusion that it wouldn't disappear after one bad night, or a shaky day.

Cartman was important to him.

He did miss him.

There was no point rationalising, pretending or just down right denying anymore.

There was still pain, burrowing into Kyle's heart and mind and reminding him of the void in his life. But he would try to not be defined or swallowed by it, he would just have to live with it.

A pragmatic approach, but an effective one too. So far…

"Hey," Stan passed a couple of beers from the cooler to Kyle and Kenny. He kept a can of Coke for himself.

The cans cracked open, critters rustled in the undergrowth and fireworks (choreographed by Kenny and his strange affinity for anything potentially dangerous), whistled excitedly in the sky.

"To Cartman," Stan raised his can in a toast.

"To Cartman," they said in unison.

Kyle rasped after the alcohol had slid down his throat, not a seasoned beer drinker just yet.

While he did have to learn to live with loss, and still had a lot to figure out what he felt when it came to his Cartman, he supposed on nights like these he could just… distance himself from it all. A shot of amnesia to reset the emotional clock.

And maybe see if the world had something to offer in return.

"Were you alright, Time Child?" Blavius asked. "On the night of the mob?"
"Yes, sir," Eric replied. "I was fine."

He had been called out of his morning lessons with Miss Castoria and told to report to the president's office. Truthfully, Eric wondered what took Blavius so long. No doubt the riots would have made Blavius want to talk to the only human he trusted. Barely, anyway. The relationship between Blavius and Eric was built on betrayal, bargains and desperation.

"Our officers handled it very well, ensured that no citizen was harmed and that troublemakers got what they deserved." Blavius assured.

"Troublemakers?"

Blavius waved his paw dismissively, reclining in his floating chair as if he were about to go downstream. "A few of them damaged public property. Totally barbaric, unsurprising of humans."

"Do you think it will happen again?" Eric asked, trying to coax another unsure look from Blavius, belying how scared the otter really was.

"Well, I've been in meetings with the council discussing the answer to that question. We don't want it to happen again of course, and maybe it is time that we…"

Blavius looked out at the city, relatively unscathed from the riots. The council insisted that the city was merely suffering from shock, reeling and rocking over the damage that could have been, what they believed the humans intended to do. Eric had seen worse, (the night the AAA invaded for example). The damage lay beneath the flesh, quickly bandaged up to stop the bleeding and inspire hope. And the unsuspecting citizens were floating around comatose.

Eric watched Blavius study the city, contemplate his words before it was too late to take them back. Blavius sighed, tinged with a squeak and started again, reaffirmed.

"Maybe it's time that we hear out some of their less radical proposals," Blavius turned to Eric with a more optimistic expression, a sheen to his pitch black eyes. "I believe I am a fair leader, Time Child, and I want to listen to all citizens, even the humans, but still remain staunch in the beliefs of the AAA. The beliefs that keep this society afloat."

Eric plastered a smile on his face, a quick fix to the humorous incredulity that longed to play across his lips whenever Blavius spouted such faded rhetoric.

"The humans…" Blavius' voice trailed off, staring at his desk as if he could make an empire rise from it. "Want us to sink, want to capsize us, if you will, Time Child. I, and the leaders before me, have worked too hard to let that happen. And now that I've reached every single goal that this party sought to achieve, I want to do everything in my power to keep Ubaleh AAA controlled. But I must comprise, I see that now."

Eric's eyebrows twitched. Compromise. He had heard Blavius say that word before, had wanted him to say it so many times.

"For their over-zealous… Reckless… behaviour, I feel like I should give them a consolation prize, something for their efforts no matter how misguided. One example of compromise that won't prove to be a detriment to the AAA, and, well, the members of it who matter. Something that would benefit us, as well, as them. Everybody wins, isn't that right, Time Child?"

"I guess so," Eric shrugged, he had come to the conclusion that vague responses were more covert than bare-faced lies.
Blavius rose from his chair then, dragging his intimidating, cumbersome form with powerful gait. To Eric, he resembled a swarm of thirsty sharks ready to circle and devour him. To snatch and steal from him. To cheat him.

Eric wouldn't dare shrink, couldn't find it in himself because he had become immune. Blavius could take parts of him away, little by little and Eric would build up a tolerance. That frightened him, and the thought of not wanting to let that happen, curdled, since Blavius and the AAA would take that from him too.

"An educational program-"

"A what?" Eric interrupted. That was a consolation prize?

"An educational program for the academically promising human children, well, teenagers," Blavius continued, undeterred by Eric's interruption. "It will boost our economy by creating jobs and while the teenagers enlisted will be encouraged to 'realise their potential', we will obviously keep them under AAA rules and regulations. Also, they will be under government employment when they graduate in whatever field they specialise in."

Glorified lackeys for everyone, then.

"What do you think, Time Child?" Blavius asked, behind Eric now.

"Why do you need my opinion, sir?" Eric responded, staring straight ahead and trying to keep his utter disinterest out of his voice. "Surely you have the powers to sanction it whether I agree or not?"

"Do you not agree with it?" Blavius was trying to trip Eric up for nothing more than mind games. Both were petty enough to want to win.

"It would probably put an end to those riots-"


"But you're right, Time Child," Blavius continued, in the midst of composing himself. "There will be no more mobs. But that's not entirely what this program is concerned with. It's about reassuring the humans that we do live in an equal and fair society that their offspring can reap the rewards from."

Eric raised his hands, laid down his weapons. "If that's what you think they'll want then… Go ahead, sir."

"I'm not looking for your approval, Time Child," Blavius said shortly. "Just trying to gauge your reaction… Since your performance will be more convincing if you agree somewhat with the program."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Eric asked, not daring to blink just in case he missed something.

"You're going to be the poster child." Blavius replied, his fur swished as he stood in front of Eric. Mind games forfeited due to the sincerity scratching at the otter's voice. He chuckled disbelievingly, "Honestly, I thought the humans would despise you after you traded UAA secrets with us, and perhaps they did. But then that public trial…"

Eric knew Blavius was revelling in his averted gaze and regretful scowl.
"You obviously sparked some injustice in them-"

"Are you blaming me for the mob?"

"Of course not, Time Child!" Blavius laughed, as if it the accusation was completely ridiculous. So unbelievably fickle were the AAA.

"Your words were misconstrued, taken out of context, twisted to benefit the humans' selfish, petulant cause!" Blavius chucked, a pleasant, undeniably sour layer over such blatant hatred. "It's what humans do! Really, I should have expected it…"

"And you want me to be the poster child because you think I know what they want?"

"Well, you do, don't you?" Blavius said casually, eyes never faltering on Eric.

*Round 2.*

Eric shifted in his chair. "An inkling, yeah."

"Your lapse in judgement at the public trail could prove to be a blessing! At least with your face on the program, people will feel more at ease with what we're doing. Plus, you'll be enrolled too. Miss Castoria has said you show real academic promise."

"I don't know where she got that idea from…" Eric mumbled.

Blavius laughed. "So, Time Child, do we have a deal?"

"A deal?" Eric inquired. "You mean I have a say in this?"

"Well, of course! Why wouldn't you?"

"Because you've said that to me before, only to then tell me I didn't really have a choice." Eric crossed his arms in a motion that indicated, *your move.*

"Not anymore, Time Child," Blavius shook his head, his low voice attempting to be earnest. "Water under the bridge, isn't that an old saying?"

Eric pursed his lips, wanting to keep his cool when he had stifled and repressed so much for so long. Maybe there was too much water and they were close to suffocating. But Eric wouldn't be the one to drown.

"Do we have a deal?" Blavius clapped his paws.

"For it be a deal there have to be conditions on both sides," Eric pointed out.

Blavius sighed, this had been going on for so long that tiny, nudging hints were no longer subtle. Eric didn't care if they were, pride was a liability.

"I suspected this would happen…" Blavius muttered, before stating very clearly to Eric, "you are not going back to the past earlier than twenty one. That is non-negotiable."

"Then find somebody else," Eric ground out, rising from his chair immediately. How easy it was to walk away when Eric felt like he couldn't fight anymore.

*Never change. Nothing will ever change.*
"Not so fast," Blavius growled, swiftly moving over to Eric.

He growled at the sudden, almost bone-piercing pressure squeezing, no, constricting his shoulder. Eric was as autonomous as a marionette, just as coordinated as one too, as Blavius clumsily spun him around. The otter's paw didn't relinquish its tight grip, even as Eric stubbornly jerked back.

"Refusal to co-operate could put our previous negotiations in jeopardy," Blavius warned (taunted), hollow eyes boring into Eric as if he were scooping the fight directly out of him. A textured tongue swiped at overgrown whiskers. He was clearly so pleased at Eric faltering beneath him, that Eric could have retched. "You're unsatisfied waiting nearly ten years to go back? I'm sure you'll feel differently about the possibility of always waiting. Never getting what you want."

"You son of a bitch!" Eric yelled. Blavius' words stung, an illegal blow in their match.

But Eric retaliated, pushing Blavius off of him, heaving adrenaline. "You said water under the bridge!"

Blavius was unmoved. When anger is at its most potent, masking it with calmness is the most effective tactic. Eric kept that in mind as he glared at the otter.

"Again, you've shown how naïve you really are," Blavius chuckled cruelly. "And together we've shown that we're equally matched in the art of going back on our word."

"I never gave you my word," Eric was seething, his face damp and burning.

Who was he kidding? He couldn't build up a tolerance, never could. And it took one callous, sideways act of dishonesty for him to break.

"But you're under my thumb," Blavius boasted.

"Until you're gone," Eric retorted.

"Sorry, let me rephrase that, you're under the AAA's thumb. And that, Time Child, will outlive both of us."

"Why do you do this, Blavius?" Eric asked, exhausted. "Why do you promise me things just to snatch them away? If I was your enemy, if I was actively plotting against you, I'd understand. Shit, I'd do the same thing. But without me, you're nothing."

Reminding himself of that, seeing how that unshakeable fact could still affect and concern Blavius, made Eric grin smugly. "Without me, you would never have taken control of Ubaleh and without wanting to go back, I never would have traded UAA secrets with you so easily-"

"You were desperate!"

"So were you! You were so desperate that you were willing to give me what I wanted without thinking it through! You think I'd do another thing for you if I knew you would go back on your word?"

"You're missing the point, Time Child!" Blavius replied impatiently, moving closer to Eric, but Eric backed away. "Yes, the AAA is indebted to you, that's why we're letting you go back in the first place! But you have also proven yourself to be deceitful, selfish and heedless! And until you grow up, hopefully into somebody more trustworthy and responsible, then we can't risk it! We can't risk you jumping all over time, distorting and potentially destroying the present!"
All over time?

"Wait…"

Eric thought of Kyle's file. His deal. How they could so narrowly miss each other. Eric's redemption and, more importantly, Kyle's rescued life, a lost prize. Out of time, ironically enough, and out of options.

But if Eric could go anywhere then…

"It could put so much in danger, more than you could comprehend!"

"I can go anywhere I want in time?" Eric pressed.

Blavius blinked, eyed up Eric warily. "Yes…"

"That's…" Eric felt his mouth, his words, jitter like an impatient knee, a nervous tic. "That's really possible?"

"Yes-" Blavius stopped, narrowed his eyes. "What are you getting at, Time Child?"

Eric scowled, collecting his thoughts and his threadbare breaths. How to play this? But what did it matter if he got to see Kyle at the end of it? No, not see Kyle. Not take one last, savouring look at what he had to lose too early. If he could truly go anywhere then…

Eric closed in on Blavius, not much difference in their height. He choked on the sea-saltiness inexplicably clinging to Blavius' fur. Button nose nearly touching an oily black one.

"Fine. I'll be your fucking poster child and I'll keep to my deal," Eric ground out. "But if you and the council go back on your word in nine years time, I will make you regret it."

Blavius simply nodded and escorted Eric out.

But, surprisingly, (Eric suspected for the first time in his life) Blavius kept to his word.

A contract was finally drawn up that said on his twenty-first birthday, Eric can return to an event in the past, as long as it occurred before he arrived in the present (So as not to trick the AAA like they knew Eric was capable of doing, and make it so Eric never arrived in the present at all). And he must wear a time tether that will bring him back after forty-eight hours.

Eric knew where he would go, what he would do. One final, if forever whispered, kind act for Kyle. No, no a kind act. An act to show that while Eric hadn't put a name to his feelings for Kyle (an amalgamation of frustration, attraction, concern, yearning, only just breaking the surface), whatever he felt was boundless, unfathomably deep and true enough that Kyle was imprinted in his flesh, blood, muscle, his questionable heart.

He would go back to that fateful night and save Kyle.

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*Kyle had woken up this morning actually feeling excited that he was visiting Mr Wilson today.*

*He was still recovering from lack of sleep and not just that, but lack of sleep in a sleeping bag, and that epiphany he had whilst watching the fireworks kept chattering excitedly in his ear. If Kyle had a diary he would have written it down, read it when even the slightest splinter pricked at his newly gained perspective.*
He had walked past the memorial recently, intentionally, because he realized he couldn't keep pretending it wasn't there. And he shouldn't dismiss the part of Cartman that was still in his life. A shrine to the boy, almost. Kyle cringed at such phrasing, but appreciated the emotional remedy.

Kyle had been denying himself the simple, natural compulsion to miss Cartman. Just allowing the grief to do its forlorn lamenting would hopefully provide him with answers. There was still work to be done here. A diagnosis for unexplained symptoms; knotted stomach, palpitations, a mind infected with thoughts of Cartman. A heart not broken (like he had feared) but rather unravelling. Strained under the absence of something so vital. A person. Kyle couldn't believe a severance from that boy could have such strong physical effects.

Despite himself, Kyle was hopeful. A picture was becoming clear, with attainable goals in sight. He couldn't wait to tell Mr Wilson that he had survived the mental challenge of visiting Cartman's memorial, on the boy's birthday no less! The 'breakthrough' he had made, all on his own, up in the woods. He would leave out the beers and the fireworks, but recall the brisk air of positivity he was still inhaling for dear life and how he had a great Fourth of July.

"Thomas, I'll pick you up in an hour, okay?" An unfamiliar, feminine voice caught Kyle's attention. A boy his own age was standing by the front desk of the counsellor's office, a woman's hand at his shoulder. Her words were meant to be ones of comfort, but even she looked nervous as she talked to, what Kyle assumed was, her son.

The boy nodded, teeth at his fingernails as he made his way to one of the chairs opposite Kyle. His mother's shoes clacked against the polished floor as she walked away, looking back at her son every so often.

And then there were two.

Kyle shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and avoided eye contact with the clearly anxious boy. Kyle didn't want to frighten him, no matter how well-meaning he tried to be.

"Fuckingshit..." The boy muttered, the expletives melded into one, loud enough in the clinically silent waiting room.

Kyle blinked, ignoring it.

"Bitch, d-d-dumb fucking whore. Making me do this..." The boy's voice was soft, but scolding both his mother and himself. The words came out fast however, like a sneeze burning the nose and wanting to be released quickly.

Unwanted. Unintentional.

Kyle pooched his lower lip subtly, feeling pity for the boy.

He wondered if initiating conversation would put him at ease and relieve tension Kyle had also experienced on his first visit here. Even if he had kept his stubborn, resentful thoughts to himself.

So Kyle looked up, unprepared for the skittish, ashamed boy sitting across from him. Kyle wanted to reassure him, tell him that he wasn't offended and that he certainly wasn't going to make fun of him. Kyle figured he probably had that enough outside of here. The kid didn't exactly scream 'popular and outgoing'. But if he wanted a waiting room friend, Kyle was happy to fill the vacancy.

"Hi," Kyle smiled easily.
"H-hello," The boy replied, a too formal reply. And Kyle watched a tooth snag at his small, sweetheart lip, a tiny, unnecessary punishment. His voice was wired but soft, supple like he didn't participate in conversations often.

Kyle was at a loss from there. Asking what he was doing here was too personal, too invasive. Plus, (even though Kyle doubted that the boy would have the confidence to ask) Kyle didn't want to go into detail of why he was here himself. That was best left on the other side of the door.

Maybe I'm not cut out to be his waiting room friend…

Kyle exhaled through his nose, offering the boy one last genial, tight smile.

"Cute!"

Kyle looked at the boy questioningly, caught off guard and surprised. Even more so when he saw the flush creep up the boy's tan skin, over his freckles. The boy's hazel eyes widened, blown to almost comical proportions. Kyle bit back a laugh, of both flattery and amusement.

"Damn it," the boy seethed, the seriousness of it all sobered Kyle a little.

"I," The boy began, then stopped, but Kyle found himself clinging on. "I'm sorry… You're just, um, kind of cute."

"Thanks," Kyle chuckled.

"You're okay with that?" The boy asked, sinking into his hunched shoulders.

"Yeah, I mean… It's nice to be complimented. So thanks, dude." Kyle shrugged, delighting in how the boy smiled with his teeth and noticeably relaxed.

Mr Wilson's door opened, making Kyle flinch as if he had been caught doing… Something. Why did he feel so oddly out of character?

"Hey, Kyle," Mr Wilson greeted. "Come on in."

Kyle nodded, getting up from his chair. He smiled politely at his counsellor, before casting one last look at the boy in the waiting room, whose eyes were still fixed on him.

Kyle waved awkwardly at him as the door was shutting, and he only saw the boy duck his head shyly.
The last time Eric had been in the palace, only a short while ago, he had worn all black. Before then, he was there to celebrate a birth.

Is that all the palace was? A temple of birth, death, birth, death, birth, death and now, replacement?

The sombre atmosphere that had depressed the palace only weeks ago, the funeral processions still teeming with AAA pomp, had been replaced by gold. Glittering gold slithering over the tall, prepossessing walls, gilded cutlery and crockery, a gold brass band wailing at the inauguration.

Like a fountain of good fortune, wealth and ostentatious tradition had been struck. Injection into a lifeless arm that was now gushing auric plasma.

The spectacle was understandable, or rather, so thinly veiled to Eric’s weary, sceptical eye. Blavius may have been celebrated, got lucky, was willing and shamelessly skilled in the art of double-crossing and ruthlessness, but he was just the instigator of the great empire he envisioned. The perpetrator of the responsibility that he had now heaped onto his son, his young successor.

It was up to Blavius II to make the fleet sail, the troupes charge, the empire to manifest. He was the product, the idea, and creation come to life. Like Frankenstein and his monster.

"Time Child!" Blavius II's booming, eerily familiar voice exclaimed. "Where do you keep running off to? I've been meaning to speak to you all day, but you're so damn difficult to find!"

Eric fought the urge to roll his eyes with perfect, well-practiced poise.

"There is a lot of people here Blavius- Sir." Eric had to watch that. "You could have easily missed me."

"And I have been inundated with congratulations," Blavius II tried to reply causally. "It has been rather overwhelming."

Eric nodded, suddenly remembering. "Oh, yeah, congratulations, sir."

"Thank you, Time Child."

"Is that why you wanted to find me? So you could check me off your list of people who haven't congratulated you yet?"

Eric wanted Blavius II to cut to the chase and put an end to this conversation, so he could take advantage of the buffet. Say what you want about the deluded, overbearing spectacle, but the food was good.

Blavius II's loud, belated laugh nearly made Eric jump.

"My father often remarked that you had a brilliant sense of humour, Time Child," he chuckled. "Wry and witty."

*If that's what we're calling the enraging, completely un-funny exchanges your dad and I had*
"regularly.

"Hmm," Eric decided on, after all, he was under the AAA’s thumb.

"But now that I have checked you off my list of people yet to congratulate me, I can talk to you about something a little more serious,"

"And would that be?"

"Your contract,"

The two words sure to make Eric's neurons declare war and his stomach knot anxiously.

"My father did tell me about it, Time Child," Blavius II nodded, voice soft.

"I'm sure he did," Eric replied coolly. "But why do you need to talk to me about it?"

Blavius II ignored the question, casting familiar pitch black eyes over the chattering, gleeful crowd.

"Maybe we should go somewhere a little quieter?" Blavius II asked lowly, and Eric had no choice but to nod along.

As they walked, Blavius II chatted about the palace and its architecture, recounted anecdotes about his prestigious family and growing up with the council. Eric barely listened as he was led down a corridor he had discovered only four years ago. Still aimlessly dark, still mysterious, but Eric felt like an inward light was guiding him somewhere. Knowledge that he now knew where was going in life. He was going to go back and save Kyle. All that stood in the way was waiting, torturous waiting…

The universe in twilight peaked out of oblivion, an elaborate theatre with an all-star silent cast of millions.

Admittedly, Eric was a tad confused as to why Blavius II wanted to bring him here. The atrium was quiet, private, but far too grand to be wasted on covert conversation and forced pleasantries.

But when Eric stepped inside, all confusion was crushed by the overwhelming beauty of space and the illusion of zero gravity.

"Have you ever been to the atrium, Time Child?" Blavius II asked.

"Yeah, I have," Eric replied. "Four years ago."

"It's a remarkable feat," Blavius II sighed. "My mother is obsessed with astronomy, my father was too. After all, the stars are the window to the past and the future."

The sentence was laced with bittersweet poison, a challenge to Eric’s gag reflex, claws dragging over his heart. The planets too, were like deranged funhouse mirrors, magnifying and ridiculing his injustice, his anger, his loss. The stars, twinkling, tittering at his discomfort.

"How long have you been here, Time Child?"

"What?" Eric replied, slightly irked. The pressure of the atrium and all its memories were close to toppling him.

"How long have you been here with us?" Blavius II repeated, unfazed. "In the future, you might say?"
"Six years,"

"And how long have you wanted to return home?"

"There hasn't been a day where I haven't wanted to go back," Eric answered truthfully.

"Are you not happy here?"

Eric glanced up at the pliable stars, locked windows to the future and scribes of fate.

"I used to tell your dad that something was missing," Eric replied diplomatically, why lie or speak the truth when you can avoid the question? "I can't be happy until I've had one brief moment with what, who, I've been missing."

"Who is that?"

"You wouldn't understand," Eric shook his head, before admitting, "Honestly, I don't think I do."

"But I can assume it's somebody of great importance to you?" Blavius II pressed.

"Great, great importance, yes," Eric replied, fighting with the lump in his throat.

_Don't show weakness. Don't give them any leverage over you, you've learned from your mistakes, right?_

"If this is your way of softening the blow of denying my request to return to the past, then you're doing a lousy job," Eric chided. "If you don't mind my saying, sir. Your dad was a lot better."

Blavius II's lip curled, and he wheezed and squeaked like a trodden on toy.

"Not the case, Time Child," he replied brusquely. "I just wanted you to know that the council are more than prepared to stick to our end of the deal, if you'll do the same."

"What are you talking about?"

"The educational program,"

"You're still going ahead with that?" Eric asked, disbelieving and ever so slightly exasperated. "I thought that was your dad's thing?"

"Yes, it is my father's 'thing'," Blavius injected a fair amount of contempt into the air quotes. "And while I want to establish myself as a leader in my own right, this program was a cause that both my father and I felt very strongly about. I would be doing him a great injustice by not following through with it."

"Fair enough." Eric said dispassionately.

"Don't you have even the tiniest understanding of that too?" Blavius II questioned. "Of doing a great injustice to the former leader?"

Eric shrugged. _Don't give them what they want._

What they wanted was a straight, middle of the road answer that could be used to either glorify or crucify him.

"I don't know what to tell you, sir."
"Our allegiance between the council and yourself, relies on co-operation," Blavius II was growing impatient now. "We'll let you return to the past as your contract states, if you co-operate and continue to be the poster child for the educational program which will be implemented soon."

Eric wasn't going to dignify that with a nod, didn't want to reiterate that he was bound to the AAA and whatever they told him to do.

"And if you don't, well, contracts can be destroyed, Time Child, by accountable parties," Blavius II warned darkly. "The AAA is willing to be very firm with you if you don't co-operate."

"I've done nothing but co-operate sir, no matter how much it cost me," Eric replied, hoping it will be his final word on the matter. "So you don't have to worry about me going back on what I agreed to, I knew what I was letting myself in for when I signed the contract."

"I'm glad, Time Child," Blavius II smiled, pacified. "My father was right, you have become more reasonable. Maybe the waiting is doing you good?"

Eric snickered, he couldn't afford to be bitter.

Kyle's days at the diner were fairly boring. Mop down tables, take orders and man the cash register. Pretty pedestrian, sometimes tedious after nights of studying, gaming or hanging out at Kenny's perhaps longer than he should have.

Small town diners do not promise excitement. They promise regulars, periods of drought where everyone is either busy working or sleeping, and not exactly getting rushed off your feet when the lunch hour crowd rolled in.

Kyle was working a desolate Saturday morning and had followed the protocol of what he was to do when the citizens of South Park weren't biting (quite literally). Take some Magic Eraser to the bathroom, clear the sink of forgotten dishes and report back to the cash register. Luckily, Kyle had his iPod, his headphones and his phone to occupy him before the work day picked up its pace again.

10:30.

Still no sign of life.

The only thing keeping Kyle awake was small talk exchanged between him and the other languid staff, and Hay Day.

10:45.

A group of loud, boisterous guys burst through the doors of the diner. Kyle could almost feel the inward groan of exasperation from his fellow employees; a creak in the diner's cogs.

The group crammed themselves into one of the window-side booths. Their choice of seating – Kyle overheard – was based on the hope that they might spot some 'talent'. Kyle would have rolled his eyes at their idiocy, if he wasn't so distracted by the quieter boy, perched on the end, a basketball under his arm.

Cute basketball players were a rarity around here. Especially interested ones. Or perhaps Kyle was too chicken to ask out a guy, anyway.

Yeah, that's a nicer way to put it than just being afraid of taking a chance on-
Kyle quickly derailed that train of thought. If only he possessed the mental discipline to take his eyes off basketball boy. He felt it was almost hypocritical of him to scorn those guys for ogling pretty girls, when he was practically doing the same thing.

No, this was totally different, Kyle tried to justify it. He looked over at Kyle first! And he was still looking over... Studiously, suspiciously.

Besides, it wasn't just intrigue or mild attraction. Something or someone pretty for Kyle to look at for entertainment, it was a shining spot of memory in a muddled mind. A magnifying glass on an event, a moment that had been swiftly and dispassionately filed away in the recesses of Kyle's conscious.

Kyle's eyes were encumbered with curiosity, a niggling persistent thought of knowing the boy. Quiet, basketball boy. Heavy hazel eyes, tanned skin, freckles that resembled watercolours frivolously flicked on a canvas. Nervous, shy, nail-biting boy-

Nail biting? He's not biting his nails…

The clue wavered briefly in the water before sinking.

So Kyle continued to watch the boy. Rather, they both played chicken. Agitating more than flirtatious, an invisible challenge blocked their way and an arrogant silence goaded them.

Kyle wanted to pull their waitress, (Clara), over and ask her if she could get basketball boy to come over. But this wasn't elementary school and Kyle was too proud and scared. The short walk basketball boy had to make to come talk to Kyle, was plenty of distance for Kyle to change his mind and realise how stupidly he was acting.

In fact, Kyle was relieved when the group finished their meal, inadvertently announcing to the whole diner that they were going to 'shoot hoops'. Clara gave Kyle what the group had paid for their meal and he quickly shut the money up in the cash register, permanently locking away the whole experience.

Kyle ducked his head, determined to dive straight back into Hay Day and put the strange encounter (if Kyle could even call it that), out of his mind. Other customers could come in and distract him, and he was kind of looking forward to it.

"Excuse me?" The voice made Kyle's spine stand to attention.

It was basketball boy, up close and so infuriatingly familiar, literally. It made Kyle so irrationally angry that he wanted to demand an explanation from the guy.

Remember your training, Kyle. You're a professional.

Kyle pursed his lips to stifle an insolent laugh at the voice in his head, before plastering his rehearsed smile across his face.

"Hi, how can I help you?"

"Shit!" The boy said abruptly, blinking tightly.

Kyle didn't even jump, almost like he expected it. His stomach flipped.

"This is gonna sound really strange but, I-I'm sure I recognise you," basketball boy began. Kyle raised his eyebrows, encouraging him to continue, remember. "We met in a, um, counsellor's office? About four years ago? I told you that I thought you were cute?"
"Oh my God, yes! I remember!" Kyle nearly cheered, but his voice was way too loud. He composed himself. "When you came in I knew I'd seen you somewhere before."

Thomas chuckled disbelievingly. "Wow, so how are you?"

"I'm fine, how are you?"

"Good, I guess," Thomas answered.

Now that Kyle had pieced together the familiarities, he could appreciate the differences.

How Thomas no longer needed the support of bitten fingernails or hunched shoulders. How he spoke louder with clarity and natural gait. How he wasn't afraid to let the corner of his eyes crinkle when he smiled, or to show off his teeth. That supple quality had been peeled, sanded down, and Kyle imagined him giving class presentations or talking to his friends with confidence.

He seemed more at ease, more relaxed. Still anxious, his tics still persisting. But he wasn't afraid anymore.

Maybe that's why Kyle's reaction to him had been so strong when he walked in? Why he just had to find out who he was?

Kindred spirits.

"I noticed that your…"

"What?" Thomas asked, before it clicked. "Oh, t-that. Yeah, it's getting better."

"Cool," Kyle smiled. It was heartening to know. "That's really great."

Kyle could feel the tips of his ears burning as Thomas stared deeply at him. Thoughtfully, as if he had never misplaced Kyle, never forgotten him. Nobody had ever looked at Kyle that way before. Nobody had made him feel so small and pliable, and yet so big and remarkable. It seemed impossible that it could all fit into one look.

That first look that was simply exhilarating, Kyle could still recall the milder sensation of being called cute for the first time. Thomas had been responsible for that too, and Kyle (perhaps prematurely) entertained the thought of other firsts to come.

"Ah, fuck, I'm sorry," Thomas said, rubbing the back of his neck apologetically. Kyle could see how tightly he was winding himself up. "I-I can't remember your name."

"It's Kyle. And you're… Thomas, right?" Kyle's voice was gentle.

"You have a good memory," Thomas smiled appreciatively, mildly impressed too.

"I'm not gonna forget the name of the first guy who called me cute."

"Oh, man!" Thomas groaned despairingly, hiding his face. Kyle was amused this time, biting the corner of his lower lip.

Thomas' hazel eyes peeked out of the net of his fingers. "I can't believe I said that! I'm so annoyed at twelve year old me, right now…"

"Cut the kid some slack," Kyle replied. "It took some guts for him to say that."
"More like an uncontrollable tic," Thomas quipped.

Kyle smirked, a feeling that he knew to be affection welled and prickled in his chest. Different and certainly not platonic. No, it was all happening so fast that it had to be the budding of romance, or rather, potential romance.

"See, uh, look at me, I'm making light of it," Thomas smiled fallibly.

Kyle bowed his head, softly snickering to the floor.

"Listen, Kyle, would you- ah fuck. Fuck!" Thomas took a shuddering breath after he had spoken, muttering to himself, "don't mess this up."

Kyle's brow creased in pity for Thomas, wanting to press a comforting palm to his reddening face.

"Sorry," Thomas breathed, before he asked, "Do you have a pen? Please?"

Kyle nodded, spying a pen out of the corner of his eye and quickly snatching it.

"A-and a napkin?" Thomas asked sheepishly.

Kyle wordlessly handed the pen and the napkin to Thomas, but he shot him a small smile.

"Thanks," Thomas said, raking his eyes over Kyle softly before he began to write on the napkin.

The ink disintegrated the flimsy material, fluffing the words and fading them. With an unsure look, Thomas slid the defaced napkin over to Kyle.

'Would you like to go out some time?'

Kyle grinned to himself, reading the question five times in his head. His excitement peaked and dipped at a different word each time, although his answer remained the same. Now this wasn't a first. Kyle had been asked out before and always declined. So mechanic, so predictable, saying 'no' had become a reflex and a defence mechanism.

This was a first in the sense that Kyle was considering changing tact.

Taking a chance, a risk. Trusting someone, albeit slowly. That's what Mr Wilson had told him. Trust was a shaky, terrifying concept for Kyle to face. It had only been six years ago since everything he had ever believed in had crumbled and broken down.

Don't run away from this. This is all too strange and perfect. If you're going to trust anything it should be this. It should be him.

Kyle guessed Thomas was probably growing nervous, since he was still poring over the question, and had yet to answer it. He didn't want to delay anymore.

"Um, I usually get off at seven so maybe you can pick me up on Wednesday night?" Kyle finally answered. "You'll have to give me some time to get changed into my regular clothes, but I'd like to go out with you… On a date, I mean."

Kyle's eyes widened as he replayed the words that had just come out of his mouth. Momentarily doubting himself.

"Or not, maybe just out as friends," Kyle babbled, face nearly as red as his hair.
"A date," Thomas assured him, looking at Kyle directly in the eyes, holding his gaze in a vice grip. "I want to take you out on a date,"

"Awesome," Kyle replied weakly.

Their suspended moment lost its balance when Thomas' friends started to shout, 'Dude! Come on!' and 'Flirt on your own time, bro!'

Crap. They're still here?

"I'm sorry, I have to go," Thomas said to Kyle, exasperated but still smiling. "But I'll see you Wednesday night?"

Kyle nodded, void of any words.

"Bye, Kyle," Thomas said as he turned away.

"See you," Kyle replied, but laughed under his breath and rolled his eyes when he heard Thomas' friends tease him about his 'hot date.'

The AAA moved quickly, Eric had to give them that.

Three days had passed since the inauguration and here Eric was, propped up on a stool with his 'soldier of the truth' medal gleaming from his sternum. A holoprompter fizzed in front of him, almost insidiously, like it was set to explode and silence the chattering crew setting up around him. He was a calm, impassive orbit to such excitable, frantic bodies.

"Is he ready?" Blavius II swooped in, fashionably late for somebody of such prestige.

"Almost," the make-up artist replied, clouds of powder puffed around him as he dabbed at Eric's face.

Eric fought hard to not squeeze his eyes shut or wrinkle his nose, balling his fists at his lap instead. Another otter waltzed around him, spritzing his hair with lacquer that burned his nose.

Don't sneeze. You'll push this excruciating process back another hour if your make-up has to be done again. Plus, I don't think daddy's boy would be very happy if you fucked up the schedule.

"Time Child, you've been briefed on what you're supposed to do, yes?" Blavius II asked, at a rather inopportune time for Eric.

"Read the holoprompter, right?" Eric replied shortly. "I've done it before."

"My father asked you to do a broadcast?"

"No, I've done it back home," Eric replied, relishing the sourness clouding the president's face. "On a teleprompter."

Condescending laughter rippled around the room, a bouncing echo to the booming laugh of Blavius II.

"Oh, how quaint!"

"Ready!" The make-up artist confirmed.
"Alright, places everyone!" Blavius II commanded, slinking away from the hastily made set and taking his place with the council. They were an audience to Eric's one man show.

"Five, four, three, two, and go, Time Child!"

The holoprompter glowed at peace with itself, before purple words drifted steadily upwards. Hypocritical incense from the flames of emotional blackmail.

"Citizens of Ubaleh," Eric began, trying to remove himself from this undesirable situation as much as he could. "At a public trial four years ago I made comments that sparked fire in your humble communities. Disgruntled, incensed voices rose above my naive, light-hearted remarks. I was only a child, with no knowledge of consequence. I was not fully aware of how such a lapse in judgement would affect our great city. When people are desperate, I said, nothing will stop them from getting what they want if they really want it. Riots both now and then have been foolish, dangerous ways of rebelling against a well-meaning system that serves to protect you, that champions equality while also promoting the AAA truth.

"Your beloved former leader was disheartened by you humans' actions, he was indignant of your ungratefulness, but he listened. Wise, considerate leader as he was, he started to strategize with the council after that first riot broke out a mere four years ago. They thought of ways to ensure that your voices were heard, your needs sated, without compromising the integrity of the AAA and maintaining what was then, and still is, an equal and fair society. People cannot topple power, civilians cannot be the leading force behind political change. A structure needs to be established, a hierarchy put in place, to ensure that we as a city function correctly and effectively.

"Then, an answer. One that has been four years in the making. A plan uncompleted by our great former leader, who passed away with a heavy heart that he hadn't implemented his plan. But his son, your new leader, Blavius II, will now nobly carry on his father, and the council's work. A plan that can only perpetuate social progress.

"An educational program, for human children aged between fourteen and eighteen. The program aims to realize the full academic potential of our brightest human minds. When the program ends, your children will then have access to career opportunities within the AAA party. We hope to create a better, brighter, promising future for all citizens of Ubaleh and a more progressive AAA party. Thank you for your time. Further details to come. AAA forever."

Kyle stayed still as the bowling ball rolled down the lane, perfectly centred and promising a strike. His tongue dabbed at his bottom lip expectantly as the ball neared the pins. Closer, closer…

A curve, a change in the air and the ball veered off, knocking over a measly two pins.

"Fuck!" Kyle shouted, forgetting himself. And the family in the next lane over, the kids snickering and the parents glaring.

"Uh, sorry…" Kyle mumbled. Luckily, the obnoxious halogen lights concealed his flushed face.

He tucked his hands in the back pockets of his jeans as he made his way back over to Thomas who was trying to stifle his laughter.

"What?" Kyle asked testily, sitting down next to Thomas who refused to stop laughing.

"What?" Kyle repeated, laughing too now as he nudged Thomas in his side. So damn infectious.

"Nothing! It's just…" Thomas looked up and Kyle's eyes followed. The electronic score board spoke
for itself. "You're lousy at this."

"Hey! That's not the kind of thing you say on a first date!" Kyle replied, he was more comfortable hanging out back here, brief windows of flirtation. "You're supposed to be showering me with compliments or something!"

Thomas chuckled and rose to his feet, the machine in front of them regurgitating Thomas' preferred bowling ball.

"If you had taken me to a basketball court, and we played one on one, I'd be way more relaxed," Kyle said, a little cocky.

"Oh yeah, because that's romantic," Thomas quipped, Kyle could see him rolling his eyes.

Kyle watched Thomas, glancing at the army of pins, almost bouncing the heavy ball in his hand as if it were nothing. He swung his arm back expertly and let the ball go with enviable finesse. Eight pins. Not as good as Thomas' previous strike, but definitely better than Kyle's scores.

"And you wouldn't be relaxed, you'd be just as pissed off as you are now." Thomas finished as he returned to the bench.

"Really?"

"I play basketball too, remember?"

Kyle remembered the basketball tucked under Thomas' arm, that shy smile, quiet eyes, a question written on a napkin.

"Oh, yeah, that's right…"

"And I would kick your ass," Thomas teased.

"Unlikely," Kyle raised his eyebrows. The roles would definitely be reversed on the court.

"So that crosses off basketball," Thomas said. "How are your football skills?"

"You know, most people go to the movies on dates?" Kyle pointed out, this whole bowling alley date was clearly a ploy to impress him. "Dinner?"

"I am taking you out to dinner," Thomas replied, glancing at the fast food restaurant tucked away behind them, just east of the arcade.

~x~

Kyle discovered that, away from the lanes, Thomas was quite comfortable retreating back into his shy shell. But seeing Thomas laugh and make jokes once Kyle had opened up the conversation was encouraging, gave Kyle the weird notion of possessing a sixth sense.

"I only saw you at Mr Wilson's office, like, once…" Kyle remarked, they had finished their meals and were now splitting a basket of cheese fries.

"S-shit," Thomas twitched a little, before asking "yes?"

A sensitive subject, Kyle understood the trepidation.

"Well, I don't know," Kyle shrugged, failing to deflect. "I'm just pointing it out…"
"Why?"

"Because I'm curious," Kyle admitted.

Thomas' fingers inched away carefully and Kyle became nervous. It hadn't mattered when their fingertips occasionally brushed whilst reaching for a fry. In fact, they were often actively meeting, subtle or no.

Kyle glanced at Thomas' face and saw thoughtfulness there, it relieved him slightly.

"Your refusal to elaborate on this makes me think you have a deep, dark secret," Kyle tried to joke.

"N-nope," Thomas tripped over the word. "No dark secrets."

A flex of tanned fingers, vying for Kyle's attention so quietly.

"You wanna know the truth?" Thomas finally proposed.

Kyle nodded, snatching a cheese fry that was so close to Thomas' fingers.

"I only ever visited the guy..." Thomas paused to calculate. "Three times? Maybe, four? I can't remember."

"Why, did you not like him? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"No, you can ask," Thomas assured. "And I did like him. It's just..."

"What?"

"You," Thomas admitted. "I was so embarrassed, and I knew you'd distract me if I ran into you in the waiting room. So I found a different counsellor."

Me? Distracting? Me? I can leave that much of an impact?

The realization was alarming at most, strangely flattering to say the least.

"Wow..." Kyle managed to get out. "Um-"

"I'm kidding," Thomas clarified, with a nervous chuckle.

Kyle blinked, and returned the chuckle, distant and embarrassed. Should he be relieved or disappointed?

"I was just like that with my counsellors," Thomas continued. "I couldn't commit to one, and I'd always freak out around three sessions in."

"Worried they'd start to feel sorry for you?" Kyle empathised.

"No, more like worried I'd tell them too much," Thomas answered. "It drove my parents crazy... Well, it drove my dad crazy."

"Oh," Kyle said impotently, suddenly fascinated with the depleting basket of cheese fries. "I'm sorry."

"Assbitch!" Thomas said abruptly, a deep exhale before he continued, "No, don't be, K-Kyle. It's not your fault."
"But you must have found somebody to stick with, right? Considering your-"

"Yeah, I did," Thomas cut him off. "Long overdue, actually. Mrs Mayner. She was really patient and cool, she didn't make me feel like I had to hide certain things. That I shouldn't be ashamed or angry at myself for something that, well, I didn't ask for."

"How long were you in counselling for?" Kyle asked. "Do you still go?"

"I go to this group thing, but it's not therapeutic or self-analytical like counselling was," Thomas explained, before he joked, "It's like a Tourette's mixer, more than anything."

Kyle laughed, not because what Thomas said was particularly funny, but because his charm was too endearing for Kyle to not smile at.

"But, yeah, I've, uh, been in and out of counselling since I was eight," Thomas said. "It started in elementary school. I'd talk to the counsellor there, but then I felt embarrassed whenever I saw him outside of our sessions. So I started skipping them until my teacher called my parents because she was concerned. Understandably, like, I did completely stop talking. I'd bite my lip and the inside of my mouth and so I had these weird ulcer things-"

"Sorry, that's gross, we're eating," Thomas interrupted himself to apologise, he fidgeted. "F-fuck!"

"I get the picture," Kyle nodded.

"My parents noticed, and seeing me physically hurt myself over this was a wake-up call that I was struggling," Thomas continued. "Add that to the fact I had no friends because I was too scared to approach kids in my class and I'd already established myself as the weirdo."

Kyle's brow creased, Thomas' words clumsily tuning sympathetic heart strings.

"I went to a couple of speech therapists first, counsellors who were trained to deal with kids with Tourette's. And they opened up all these different therapies for me to explore, it's always been some kind of behavioural therapy though, makes sense, right?"

Kyle nodded, although he had no idea.

"After a while, we found out that habit reversal therapy was the best way to go,"

"What's that?" Kyle asked.

"Basically, it's monitoring my tic closely to see if there's a pattern or if anything triggers it," Thomas explained.

"And does it?" Kyle asked, he felt it was something he should be aware of if he was in this for the long run. And right now, he felt like he could be.

"Sure, when I'm scared, when I'm in a new place, when I feel like people are staring at me," Kyle noticed Thomas become increasingly uncomfortable as he listed off the potential triggers. "When people are lying to me - and I know it - I'll sometimes just blurt out that they're being dishonest."

"So it's not just cussing, then?" Kyle tried to clarify.

Thomas shook his head, ever so matter-of-fact.

"So what do they teach you to do in habit reversal therapy?"
"Find alternative, subtler ways to 'relieve the sensations' that a tic would cause," Thomas said, and Kyle found himself smirking at the air quotes.

"Like what?" Kyle pressed, sipping at his Dr Pepper.

"I haven't found one specific thing, right now I'm trying things out," Thomas replied. "Some are more productive than others. Like, writing stuff down is not always useful, neither is self-deprecating humour."

Kyle grinned and Thomas smiled back, shy but pleased and Kyle decided he liked being looked at that way.

Before doubt colored hazel eyes.

"Ah- fuck! Fuck!" Thomas rolled his eyes and muttered. "S-sorry for rambling…"

"Thomas it's fine, you weren't rambling," Kyle reassured.

"I guess I just…" Thomas stopped, pursed his lips and sighed. "I don't know, feel comfortable around you."

His eyes squeezed shut, a tiny convulsion. "Cockshit! Is it too soon to be saying that?"

"No, it's nice," Kyle nodded, wanting Thomas to believe it. "I'm glad you feel that way."

"Thanks," Thomas smiled bashfully. "But I've talked about my counselling experiences too much, um, so how about you?"

"How about me what?"

"How did you end up in counselling?"

The question was inevitable, but too soon. But when was Kyle ever going to be ready? How was he going to keep that part of his life contained and divorced from this side of him? The guy who went on dates, and worked odd jobs, who played basketball and was on the honour roll? Furthermore, how could those two sides of Kyle ever intersect successfully?

Too much questions. And it made Kyle put the cheese fry he was about to eat, back in the basket. His mouth felt like it was padded with cotton wool, his thoughts even more snowy.

"Ah, fuck! Sh-should I not have asked? I'm s-sorry."

"Don't be," Kyle shook his head, after all, Thomas was totally blameless here. "It's just a little difficult to talk about. It's a lot to go into and I don't want to-"

"If you're worried that I'm going to see you any differently, I won't, Kyle," Thomas spoke evenly. "I know what it's like."

Spite snapped at Kyle's mind, fire crawling up his throat and melting all the snow.

"No offense, but I don't think you do," Kyle muttered.

"But if you tell me a little, I'll try," Thomas promised, and his voice was so naïve that Kyle would have felt like a terrible person if he did tell him. Because it would lead to a well-meaning promise being broken.
"And a part of me wants to tell you," Kyle replied honestly, he allowed a small smirk. "I feel comfortable around you too, you know…"

Kyle felt like a bruised, unnecessary storm cloud that soaked in negativity, and here he was, about to encroach on the shining, still fractured rays of Thomas.

But the rays seemed welcoming, they tempered the storm.

"Alright, are you sure you're okay with this?" Kyle asked, and he didn't know who he was directing it to.

Thomas nodded, Kyle saw himself reflected in his eyes.

"I won't go into the details but a friend…" Kyle prematurely choked on the growing lump in his throat. But he persevered, he was good at that. "A friend of mine that I've known since I was in diapers, went missing about six years ago. And I didn't cope with it too well."

Kyle thought it would be good moment to digress.

"To kind of fill you in, before you commit to something here, I am a stubborn asshole," Kyle was surprised when Thomas laughed under his breath, but the seriousness was too persistent. "It's because I'm a stubborn asshole that I denied for the longest time that he was going to come back-

Another digression, a personal one. "It made me deny a lot of things that I'm still coming to terms with."

Kyle shook his head, "anyway, it got out of hand quickly… Can I say something without sounding crazy or stupid?"

"Maybe," Thomas joked, and he shrugged. "I don't know."

Kyle rolled his eyes, but was grateful for the alleviation. A glimpse of sunlight.

"I don't care if you sound like the stupidest, craziest person in the world," Thomas softly declared. "I won't judge you."

"You can't make a promise like that," Kyle shook his head, cynical.

"Then I'll try not to judge you," Thomas compromised. "Is that better?"

And it was.


"A part of me still believes in him, is so idiotically hopeful," Kyle continued. "Maybe it's the same part of me that can't let go?" Kyle shook his head. "Will never let go, because I can't allow that to happen. No matter how many counselling sessions, no matter how many people tell me to move on, I can't, because if I'm not holding out hope, who will?"

Kyle saw Thomas struggling under the weight of the rhetorical question, and intervened.

"But, hey, I am doing way better," Kyle said more cheerfully. "I'm actually coping now, rather than just kidding myself; He's not at the forefront of my mind unless something, I don't know, triggers it. But I can't help that, so…"

Kyle sighed at how quick, how easy it was, to lose his grip.
But Thomas understood, and that was the beauty of their re-union. Of their first date at a bowling alley.

"Do you ever feel unfinished?" Kyle asked.

"Yes," Thomas answered. "All the time."

"Me too," Kyle admitted, relieved and soaring, until he reached a dizzying level of introspection. A birds-eye, omnipresent view of what had just transpired.

"Wow," Kyle whispered to himself, then a little louder. "I can't believe I just told you all of that."

"Do you want me to forget about it?"

Kyle rolled his eyes and laughed, "You can't do that!"

"Sure," Thomas shrugged easily. "If you want me to."

And there he goes with those naïve, well-meaning promises…

"You're ridiculous," Kyle said affectionately. "And I don't want you to forget about it, at least it's all out in the open now."

"A lot of heavy stuff," Thomas remarked.

"Especially for a first date," Kyle nodded.

"What do we talk about now?"

"Let's talk basketball," Kyle suggested. "Do you play for any teams?"

Chapter End Notes

So the boys are sweet sixteen now! How quickly they grow! Also, any information about Tourette's I got from the NHS official website. I like to think that's a reliable source. But if there are any inaccuracies then let me know so I can edit the chapter and obviously keep it in mind for the chapters to come. Another thing, I may have found the perfect song for this fic. 'Untouchable' by Taylor Swift. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eric squeezed his eyes shut, lifting his hips off the sheets momentarily and feeling the swollen vein of his cock against his slick palm. He was close now, stinging with sweat, breaking under the weight of fantasies and the encouraging groans and whimpers falling from his lips.

An imagined mouth, tonguing at his parched, never-been-kissed lips. An imagined, warm body that offered closeness Eric tried to deny.

Eric's toes flexed as his nerve endings sparked and snapped, sensitive, triggered by the melting images flashing in his mind. An unwatched movie in a theatre, private, just Eric's. Just theirs. Except Eric would never know, he would never know what it was like to be kissed by him, touched by him.

Good. The way it's meant to be.

Eric's bitter whisper barely rose above the prepossessing, undeniably alluring scenario that he promised he would never again play out in the privacy of his sheets. But he did. He just kept coming back for more, more, more. Because he was bored, and sixteen, and horny, and in desperate need of release or sexual frustration would kill him, or so it felt like.

Red hair. Cropped, curly. Just like the high school picture. The picture that was colourless and thin as a gasp. But when Eric closed his eyes it bloomed into Technicolor, an artist remembering and recalling Kyle's colours. And when he palmed at himself through his boxers, Kyle ignited. Older than Eric, more experienced, more confident. A wanton pin-up of the young man Eric never knew. But when they met in Eric's fantasies, he was greeted with open arms, open legs, an open mouth to connect with his and make him throb.

An imagined voice at the shell of his ear, as distant as the sea. Soft, reminiscent, but husky and authoritative. A voice to brace him, to comfort him, to command him…

That did it. Eric's balls tightened, and he pumped at his flushed, stiff cock harder. He was nearly there, nearly in heaven, until the usual obstacles tried to throw him off track and brought the confused droves of shame out early.

Childhood memories that Eric could still recall, the void he couldn't fill, and that damn death certificate, cheapening the moment. Eric gritted his teeth, a self-loathing cry still audible. It was suffocating, accusing and Eric opened his searing eyes in hope of finding clarity. But there was none, and had been none for quite some time.

Turning his head, still panting, he caught sight of the yearbook picture that had caused such fervent, unrequited attraction to reveal itself. Burning with arousal and shame, both merciless, Eric closed his eyes once again and focussed solely on the hot, amorous images that were careening to the forefront of his mind.

Eric's uncompleted, desperate chain of moans was like a mantra, pushing him towards his climax.

"Ah! ahh!, Ky-" Eric threw his head back and curled his toes as he came, voice leaving him.

A few weak whimpers followed as Eric rode his orgasm out. His hand was still teasing his softening cock, although as the shame and confusion welled up he wanted to get his hand out of his pants as
soon as possible.

Feeling the last embers of arousal burn out, Eric removed his hand from his sticky boxers. The shower felt like salvation, redemption.

Of course, Eric had his excuses; he had needs, what he was doing was perfectly natural, and what else was he to do to relieve this building tension?

But why did it have to be Kyle? Why did he have to be the object of his desire? Didn't he consume enough of his thoughts already? Motivate enough of his actions?

Eric grunted at this unfavourable situation, still too boneless and breathless to move. Maybe he should have expected this? Maybe this was the natural next step in the evolution of his feelings for Kyle? But where did it end? Eric never imagined as a selfish, naïve ten year old that this is where he'd be in six years’ time; aware that his mission had failed, knowing that Kyle had met an untimely death (that he was still determined to fix, even if he had to remain under the AAA's manipulative thumb) and jacking off to the handsome young man Kyle grew up to be.

Just like those missing years, centuries, the void that would take a hundred lifetimes for Eric to fill, the depths of his feelings for Kyle seemed vast, unknown and honestly, quite frightening.

Eric could have put it down to just the usual growing up process of learning, changing and adapting to the adult world he was becoming a part of. But he had no guidance, and he didn't think he was emotionally equipped to try to map his own way around. There was nobody to reassure him of his powerful, compressed emotions that he feared would have a popped champagne cork effect if he ever lost his grip. And God knows he had come dangerously close before.

Coming to terms with all these realisations, all these unearthed and unresolved emotions for one person was exhausting. Eric had no idea that he was capable of feeling so much, and he was struggling. Caring deeply for Kyle was something he had begrudgingly accepted a long time ago, and he was thankful for it, as it seemed to be the only thing keeping him going.

Attraction had been dormant, creeping closer to the surface of his conscience as the years went on. Although he hated to even think it, that yearbook picture was at the centre of his sexual awakening. Along with shame and disgust, there were also sobering reminders and less than desirable realities to consider.

That while there was an undeniable satisfaction to be had in the vivid fantasies Eric conjured, they had no solid basis in life. They weren't brought about by experience or even face-to-face infatuation, mutual or not. They were brought about by loneliness, yearning and fixation on a guy Eric hardly knew anymore. An ocean of time separated him and Kyle, a lifeline tragically waning, and Eric was tempted by a sultry mirage that he knew didn't exist. And his fantasies then felt like delusions.

Finally throwing himself off his bed, and still cringing at his sweat, his cum, the noises of gratification that he would torture himself with, he made his way to the bathroom, more in need of a shower than ever. Reasons more cathartic, than anything else.

The sound of Eric's bare feet padding across the floor was amplified ever so slightly in the bathroom, his movements still sluggish as he turned the shower on.

As he stripped off, Eric thought of the disconnect between every single thing he felt for Kyle and how none of it added up. After all, how could be attracted to someone he had never met? Who he only remembered as a child? Who had been dead for five hundred years? How was it possible that the immense need to care for Kyle, and the platonic love he had to yield to, had turned into a crush
and possibly a love more romantic than he ever even considered? Everything seemed to be snowballing beyond Eric's control.

Can't you just admit that you love him? Maybe more than-

No, I can't. Because I don't... Do I?

Eric derailed that train of thought quickly, although he knew that admittance would at least be a step in the right direction. It would put an end to the illogical, promise answers, connect what was still disconnected. But Eric didn't want to know what his heart was capable of, and he certainly didn't want to know what the elusive, unattainable Kyle was capable of, or how intense his influence actually was.

Eric stepped into the shower, the cold, frigid water washing away thoughts of Kyle, and any evidence that Eric had been thinking, dreaming and fantasising about him in the first place.

"No more spoilers!" Thomas laughed, driving through the thick, late night darkness that was occasionally broken up by dim streetlights. "You're killing me!"

"Fine," Kyle replied, finally releasing his boyfriend from that torture. "But you have to catch up on those episodes..."

"I will!" Thomas replied, he glanced at the faint silhouettes of mountains. "I'm just busy."

"Doing what?"

Thomas shrugged. "Basketball, homework, hanging out with you..."

Kyle noticed Thomas' gaze on him too late and he shifted in his seat shyly. Two weeks of dating and Kyle still wasn't used to those adoring, dreamy looks.

Thomas continued, "Unless you want to watch them with me"

Kyle furrowed his eyebrows and replied, "But I've already watched those episodes. Besides, you'd only get distracted if I was there, we'd end up making out and then you'd miss everything!"

"Hmm, fair enough," Thomas agreed softly. "I'll just watch them on my own."

A too familiar cloud of disappointment settled over the two, Kyle prayed it was all in his head, another self-imposed obstacle when what he really wanted was to give in and be happy. Or did he? Kyle felt that's what he should want anyway.

He wanted Thomas, he just didn't know in what capacity. Boyfriend? Friend? With benefits? (Although all they had done so far was kiss. Admittedly great hours spent kissing, but still...)

What option was the least scary? The option that was least likely to hurt Kyle?

Would he rather lose a friend or a boyfriend? He already knew how painful the former option was-

It was the end of the night, Kyle couldn't dwell now. All he could do was try to remedy the situation.

He nudged Thomas playfully, "and tell me when you do."

It seemed to placate Thomas. "Alright," he grinned.
The car slowed before coming to a complete stop at Kyle's house.

"So, I'll, uh, talk to you later?" Kyle said, unsure.

Thomas nodded, trying to be a bit more affirmative. "Good night."

"Good night," Kyle smiled.

It feels so easy, sometimes.

Kyle's eyes widened unnecessarily as Thomas leaned in for a kiss. Something they had done before, that Kyle had enjoyed the first time, second time, third time, still enjoyed even now. But not tonight, when his doubts had got the best of him. Not tonight, when he felt like he was trapped in Thomas' darkened car with no way out.

Except to comply.

And it was just a kiss, right?

Kyle's eyes quickly closed as he felt Thomas' gentle, patient lips land on his own. Tender, teasing friction that Kyle was slowly warming to, slowly enjoying, reminding him of why he had kissed Thomas in the first place, those two weeks ago. Kyle let himself forgo his anxiety, his fear, for the simple truth that kissing Thomas felt good and nice and was something he could possibly get addicted to if he wasn't careful.

Careful. For the past six years Kyle had committed himself to being careful. Setback after setback, realisation after realisation. Mistakes made and lessons learned all because Kyle had relinquished his careful control, his careful distance.

He had hurt enough, and it wasn't worth it.

Kyle's fingers ghosted over the handle of the door, fingertips meeting lukewarm metal. Lips inching away from the hot, plush mouth that wanted in.

A small, muffled noise of rejection was powerful enough to crush Kyle with overbearing shame. Thomas stopped the kiss and pulled away, Kyle didn't know if the flush on his face was out of arousal or embarrassment.

"Y-you've been – aw, fuck! – quiet tonight," Thomas began nervously, the emergence of his tic only made Kyle feel worse.

"I have?" Kyle asked, playing dumb. "Oh, uh, I'm sorry. I guess I'm just tired."

A tighter grip on the door handle was a real chance of escape Kyle was dying to take. He pulled, the door opened, he could even feel the cold, snowy air when-

"It's not just tonight, Kyle..." Thomas said strongly.

Kyle's shoulders slumped, his fingers slipped away from the door handle.

Fuck.

It was a strange feeling, being caught out like this. It was breaking a curfew, getting caught cheating on a test, hell, even getting caught cheating on a boyfriend or girlfriend all in one ashamed, unnerving drove of emotion.
The silence was itchy, maddening. Kyle would have broken it if his voice hadn't shrivelled up in his throat.

"What's wrong?" Thomas asked, concerned more than angry.

"Nothing," Kyle said automatically, sitting back in his seat, staring straight ahead because he was afraid to look at his boyfriend.

"Shit!" Thomas snapped harshly, before his voice became softer. "Please t-tell me."

"There's nothing to tell, Thomas!" Kyle half-lied.

"Can you not lie to me?" Thomas asked, frustration bubbling.

"God damn it, I'm not lying, just drop it!" Kyle shouted, agitated and caught.

"W-why are you getting so mad?!!"

"Because you're interrogating me!"

"No, I'm not!"

"Yes you are!" Kyle shouted, his voice raw. "I'm sorry that I can't be happy twenty four-seven! I'm sorry that I'm quiet sometimes-"

"But it's not just sometimes, Kyle!" Thomas interrupted.

Kyle blinked, as if the brightest spotlight had suddenly been thrust in his face. "What do you mean?"

"You're unpredictable!" Thomas nearly cried it, his fingers fidgeting in his lap as his tic tripped him up. "I-I've been trying to be patient, I feel like I – aw, shit! – Owe you t-that much… But… But I r-really like you, and I don't want this to end, so I feel like I should just t-tell you what's bothering me, right?"

The honesty of Thomas' words, the very honesty that Kyle had been denying him, sobered him completely to the situation.

"How exactly am I unpredictable?" Kyle asked quietly, almost mumbling it, a part of him didn't want to know.

One look at Thomas - anxious, despairing, and struggling to speak around his tic Thomas – and Kyle sighed. He wanted to be a good boyfriend, so figured that he should take over the conversation for a minute.

"Damn it, I've never been in a relationship before Thomas!" Kyle tried to be calm, but he was too wound up and irate. "You know that right? And I get why you want to confront me about this and I think I want to be with you too-"

"You…" Thomas interrupted, his voice thick with hurt. "You think?"

Kyle swallowed, replaying what he had just admitted. He was too scared to speak, too scared to even open his mouth. But that fear knotted and spun into adrenaline in his gut, forcing him to talk, because he wanted to save this. He may not have truly known what he wanted, he may not have fully understood, but he knew he wanted to save this.

"Fuck, I didn't mean that!" Kyle quickly deflected. "No, I, of course I want to be with you!"
Thomas stared at Kyle hard, but even in the darkness Kyle could see that his eyes were damp. His shame spiked.

"Cock! S-shit!" Thomas twitched and spat the words out, still trembling when he demanded, "Then why did you say 'think'?"

"I don't know, Thomas!" Kyle answered honestly. "Maybe because I'm under pressure right now!"

"Bullshit, Kyle!" Thomas replied. "Why did you say 'think'?!

"Will you shut up for a second?!"

"No!" Thomas replied, and Kyle flinched at the severity in his voice. "If I'm wasting my time then I'd rather you tell me!"

Kyle rolled his eyes and shouted, "You're not wasting your time!"

"Then tell me what you meant!" Thomas pleaded.

"No!

"Tell me!"

"I'm scared!"

Once Kyle had purged himself of that confession, once he had admitted it to himself, that knot of fear completely disappeared, unraveled, only leaving behind a terrifying, self-aware notion of nothingness.

The weight Kyle had been carrying, long before he even started to date Thomas had been lifted, quick and intense. He started to shake, and sat back in his seat.


Kyle looked out the window, caught sight of his reflection and remembered how difficult it was to run away from this side of him. This side of him that was still grieving, struggling, that unbearably vulnerable side of him, and how hard it was sometimes to keep it contained.

"Nothing," Kyle mumbled.

"No, Kyle, scared of what?" Thomas pressed, gentler than before.

"I don't want to tell you!" Kyle snapped, immediately regretting it when he saw the hurt expression on Thomas' face.

Kyle sighed, stared down at his lap before opening the door again. "I've fucked up enough for one night..." he muttered, as he got out of the car.

Kyle didn't look back as he walked up his path. The cold air stung his eyes, coaxing tears he didn't want to give into.

Another door slammed, and Kyle winced as he heard Thomas call out, "Kyle, come on, I just want to-"
"Can you leave me alone, please?" Kyle replied, voice clear and strong, belying how shaky he really felt.

"But-

"I'll call you, alright?" Kyle interrupted, glancing back and seeing a bewildered Thomas, stranded.

"When?"

Kyle rolled his eyes, he needed to get away, needed to shut himself up.

"It doesn't matter when," Kyle answered, irritated. "Can you please just leave?"

Kyle reached his front door and pulled the key out of his pocket, but he knew Thomas was still there, making it difficult for them both.

Hot, uncomfortable tears welled in Kyle's eyes, he stuttered on an icy breath before he turned around and shouted, "Go the fuck away!"

Kyle watched Thomas leave, as if taunting himself with the chance to make things right. But there was too much devastation, a wound too fresh to heal right now.

Kyle needed time, Thomas needed to give him that.

And Kyle knew he would, because-

He's a good guy. A great guy, actually.

Kyle choked on a small sob, he didn't think he could feel any worse but he did.

Eric kept his head down, and his hands in his pockets as the anticipation in the room became feverish, heavy, and unbearable. Teenagers jostled and conversed, craned their necks to peer at the goings on at the front of the line, their chatter was an incessant, persistent hum in Eric's ear. They all looked so out of place; clothes draped over underfed frames, dirty fingernails and unkempt hair. It was magnified under the pristine, clinical snow globe that was the newly renovated education centre. Once a medical school, and before that, an elaborate network of laboratories, the education center was an arctic white pearl in the middle of the desert, polished and shined up into what Blavius II wanted to convince the citizens of Ubaleh the AAA was.

"Name?" A female otter, with greying fur asked. She was sat at the induction desk, surrounded by disposable pens, important paperwork and a constant database glaring from a tablet.

"Lana Krayle," A tall girl, with dirty blond hair replied.

"Stand still for a moment."

Lana stood perfectly still as a cleverly concealed webcam scanned her face, before it appeared as a hologram on the otter's tablet.

"Here is the paperwork you need to fill out." The otter said brusquely, shoving papers and a pen into Lana's arms. "Once it's completed hand it in to the next check in desk before the program presentation starts. Next!"

Lana stepped aside and Eric moved forward. He looked up at the otter only briefly but even that was enough to warrant recognition.
"Eric Cartman," the otter smiled.

Eric offered a taut smile as she searched for his name on the database.

"Stand still for a moment."

Eric complied, the corners of his eyes momentarily stinging as the scanner ran over his face.

"The paperwork you need to fill out," the otter said, again shoving the papers and a pen into Eric’s arms. "Hand it into the next check in desk before the program presentation starts. Next!"

Eric held the paperwork to his chest as he searched the room for a place to sit and fill it out. Everybody seemed to be sitting with their friends, curled up in cosy corners, like comradery was a damp or fungus plaguing the otherwise perfect building.

He felt a foreign, but very real twinge in his chest. Despite his low level of tolerance for other people, a part of him did miss that bond one would share with friends. A bond he once had, but squandered and took for granted.

Eric spotted a quiet corner and settled there before anybody else could snatch it. Laying the paperwork out on his lap, he began to tick boxes and circle words, barely absorbing what was in front of him.

As much as he thought about his classmates and friends, he never missed or yearned for their companionship. Maybe he had been locked up in his golden tower for too long…

"Excuse me?"

Eric lifted his head to see a boy, maybe around his age, with wide, impressed eyes and a mop of jet black curls. "You're Eric Cartman, right?"

Eric furrowed his eyebrows, hoping the boy wouldn't distract him from filling out his paperwork and getting this whole thing over with. "Yeah?"

The boy stepped back, his scleras a brilliant white against his tanned face, as his eyes widened even more. "Oh my science! You're… You're the time child, aren't you?"

The crease between Eric's brows deepened, despite his (he supposed) infamy, Eric didn't think he'd be recognised by anyone today. Except maybe the otters.

"Sure, dude," Eric nodded, wishing the boy would leave.

But the boy didn't, he just shook his head in disbelief. "Fuck!" He laughed, before calling out, "hey guys! The time child is over here!"

Suddenly, four other teenagers swarmed around Eric, wearing matching expressions of disbelief and awe.

"It's great to meet you!" Eric's original 'fan' exclaimed, grabbing Eric's hand and initiating a shake.

"A real honour!" Another guy interrupted, snatching Eric's hand away.

"Yeah, great," Eric chuckled quietly, still confused as to what was going on.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" The dark-haired boy asked, crouching down in front of Eric, with all of his friends' shortly following suit. "They got you enrolled in this thing too?"
Eric stared down at his half-completed paper work, and nodded, "looks like..."

"We hardly ever see you in public," a lanky boy with sandy hair, remarked.

"I keep to myself," Eric explained, before adding more quietly. "I'm not very popular."

A look of confusion passed between the group, before the dark haired boy said, "What are you talking about? You're a legend!"

Eric blinked. A legend?

Sure, he realised he was a public figure that was paradoxically kept away from the public until he needed to be used as a political pawn, or to fill some AAA 'duty'… But that didn't constitute a legend, did it? Government lackeys aren't legends, backstabbers aren't legends, people as lonely and lost and heartsick as Eric aren't legends, are they?

"I, I am?" Eric spluttered, after a couple of embarrassing, silent minutes.

"Of course you are!" The lanky boy replied incredulously.

"It's just that…" Eric paused, taking a difficult breath. "I thought that everyone hated me, for betraying them-"

An uneasy look, confirming what Eric already knew, was exchanged among the group of friends.

"Well, you weren't popular for a while," a short girl, with cropped black hair said uncomfortably.

The dark haired boy threw a cautious glance behind his shoulder, before he leaned in close and whispered, "But when you stood up for that kid, for us, what was it? Four years ago? You got everybody back on your side!"

The lanky boy joined in, "we knew that whole speech you made in the PSA was bullshit-"

"They wrote it for you, didn't they?" The dark haired boy interrupted.

"We were hoping they did," the girl added.

"Were we right?" The dark haired boy asked, eyes sparkling hopefully.

Eric pursed his lips, an undeniably empowering feeling of smugness welling up inside at being so revered.

He looked around, before answering lowly, "Put it this way, my opinion hasn't changed in four years."

Eric couldn't remember the last time he had been looked at with such admiration, couldn't remember the last time others had been impressed by him, and were seemingly genuine too.

"Wow…" The dark haired boy whispered.

"Ha!" His lanky friend exclaimed, grinning rather goofily. "I knew it!"

Eric smirked before looking down at his paperwork, thinking that maybe this day would go faster than he thought.

Shortly after, when all the paperwork was handed in, the future students all piled into the auditorium
to be given a speech from the program director. Eric knew her to be a stern yet unnervingly charming member of the council.

She walked slowly on stage with formidable yet elegant gait, and posture that most otters couldn't achieve when walking upright. Her eyes surveyed the crowd with judgemental fascination, and if Eric wasn't used to such stares then he would have shrunk in his chair, like what she had reduced some of the more feeble people in the audience to.

"Welcome, everyone, my name is Miss Neron," She began clearly, speaking into the small microphone poised at her mouth. "I am honoured to be overseeing this marvellous program which will, no doubt, tap into and nurture the potential that I can already see in this crowd today. All of you have something to offer the AAA. All of you possess a skill, or have an aptitude for something valuable, important and integral to keeping our great society ticking. Whereas before your talent may have been squandered, overlooked or ignored, now you will be given an opportunity to thrive."

The crowd began to warm, began to feel secure and appreciated. So naïve, so quick to trust, so young. They were only teenagers, teenagers who were never made to feel welcome or important. Eric realised, they were all starving for validation from a society that had shunned them. He could relate to that somewhat, but he still knew better than to be taken in by the AAA's saccharine ploys. Maybe because he was in on this whole thing? Stuck in the middle of a moral no-man's land.

"This program is not just concerned with one particular area or field of work," Miss Neron continued, stalking the stage with her paws steepled. "We want to provide you with careers in education, health, the sciences, politics, the environment and much more. But you will be providing a civil service under the AAA regime, co-operating with us to make this a strong, fair society that you will be proud to serve.

"The paperwork you have been asked to fill in concerns academic ability, and areas for you to specialise in as this program goes on," Miss Neron explained. "Today is merely a taster, a first step in a week-long induction process. There will be workshops, and seminars where you will be able to ask the tutors, and myself, any questions you may have.

"However, you will all be interviewed as well," Eric could almost see the noxious smile beneath her silvery whiskers. "That's our first order of business. This program is not just concerned with academia and skill, but character too. Your first round of interviews will be concerning honesty, loyalty and emotional strength. This program will not be an easy one, and since your career prospects afterwards will involve working very closely with the AAA, we need to know if you are truly dedicated to the party that has provided so much for you. We need to know if you still uphold the values we have tried to instil in you, since you were young children."

Those distant voices drummed in Eric's ears, and he was sure they were being echoed in the minds of many others. A brainwash, a re-programming, just to be safe.

"Your second round of interviews will be after the various workshops and seminars, with the course tutors," Miss Neron continued. "These interviews will be specific to the area you want to study, and will be based primarily on your subject knowledge and your academic aptitude.

"A very busy week lies ahead, but a week that I'm sure you're all very excited for, and a week that will hopefully pave the way for the rest of your lives. Thank you."

A week had gone by and Thomas had kept his distance. He had given Kyle the careful, distant control that Kyle had maintained by himself all these years.
In between hanging out with Stan and Kenny, attending school and basketball practice, Kyle spent a lot of time thinking. He peeled at the skin of his fingers, drummed them against his mattress, stared up at the ceiling and debated what he wanted.

He thought about Thomas too; how he made Kyle feel, how great he was for waiting, for stepping aside supportively in lieu of really being able to understand.

Kyle wondered what he was doing then, why he was hiding away when he wanted to be in Thomas' embrace. He should have been in the arms of someone who treated him so well, who promised to make him happy and already had in their short time together.

But then Kyle thought of losing him, through fate or circumstance or inescapable feelings that would make the foundation of their relationship tremor.

Kyle felt he was a deserving person. He tried to be polite, kind and compassionate. But he wasn't a calm person, an indifferent person. He was passionate and stubborn and he gave so much of himself to the people he loved, to the people he gravitated to, without even realising it.

He hadn't been in a relationship like this before, but he knew how capable he was of feeling. That old adage was painfully accurate; you don't know what you've got until it's gone.

Kyle remembered his time with Cartman with stinging nostalgia, a dream half-lived. His emotional memory was potent, in his mind's eye it was a blur, only to protect Kyle from the heartbreak such clarity would bring.

Fleeting, honest, close-as-you-can-get-to-perfect moments were treasured. But, Kyle, lamented, most of their time together was time wasted, when they could have put their own personal issues aside and just cherished each other. The same way Kyle cherished Stan and Kenny.

And I could have helped him. He could have opened up and told me everything and I would have listened because that's what friends do. I want - correction - wanted, to be his friend.

But what was the point of regretting what hadn't been? What was the point in pondering the could have been? How is it when you lose someone, they're not really lost? And all you're left with is bittersweet recollections and self-doubt?

Kyle was often happy to escape the wilderness of his thoughts, overgrown and too thick to see past. School was an easier, more stimulating distraction. Work? Not so much? But it was something.

That is, until Thomas came in the diner with stiff shoulders and fidgeting hands.

"Oh, Jesus..." Kyle muttered, staring down at the counter.


"Hi," Kyle smiled, lifting his head and looking at Thomas with sad eyes.

A silence as thick as molasses.

"Kyle, I'm not an idiot," Thomas said, obviously wanting to cut to the chase. "You haven't called me, so that obviously means you don't want to talk, but I – aw, shit! Cock! – want to talk to you."

Dread lurched in Kyle's stomach. He wasn't sure if he was ready to talk, if he had something to say that would be even the tiniest bit helpful in fixing this.
"Even if it's just for five minutes?" Thomas asked, adamant. "Then I'll leave you alone."

Kyle sighed, looking back at the kitchen as if it were a viable escape. "I'm working."

"Can I wait for you?"

The question sobered Kyle immediately, made him feel like a flake for even trying to delay the unpleasant conversation with Thomas, for wanting to hide from him.

"No, you don't need to do that, um..." Kyle sensed Thomas' surprise as he took a deep breath. "If you wait outside, I'll come talk to you. Just give me five minutes."

Kyle relaxed as Thomas' face lit up gratefully, his small smile prompting Kyle's mouth to twitch into a weak smile of his own.

He watched Thomas head outside, before rushing to the kitchen and asking the cook if he could whip up a burger and a milkshake to go.

A pleasant, mountain breeze greeted Kyle as he stepped outside, fragranced by the abundance of conifers and the rusty exhausts of old pick-up trucks. He took another deep, encouraging breath before joining his boyfriend, who was perched on the curb.

"Hey," Kyle said, handing the burger and milkshake to Thomas before he could say anything. "This is for me acting like a colossal tool the other night."

Thomas smiled shyly, taking the meal from Kyle and nodding his thanks.

"And for everything else..." Kyle added uneasily.

Thomas looked up from his burger, unnecessary pity evident on his face. "Kyle..."

"No, Thomas, I get it now," Kyle assured, nodding too, just to be safe. No misunderstandings.

"You do?"

"Yes," Kyle replied. "Maybe not all of it, but I realise that you've been so great and patient with me, more than most guys would."

A blush rose on Thomas' speckled cheeks, prompting a flutter in Kyle's chest.

"We haven't been dating that long but I really care about you, Kyle," Thomas said, earnest.

Another flutter, a stronger one this time, one that seized and latched onto that great feeling of being cared for.

"I care about you too," Kyle said, he shrugged, small and apologetic. "Even if it doesn't seem that way sometimes."

Thomas nodded, before replying, "I'll remember that."

Kyle laughed softly under his breath, even if the sentiment wasn't funny.

"I missed you," Thomas said, the words so honest and strong that they prickled in Kyle's eyes, his nose, his heart.

"I missed you too," Kyle smiled, his mouth formed into a more sombre line when he explained, "I
would have called you, but I didn't want to talk to you until I figured some things out..." Kyle trailed off, before he chuckled, "Man, I've been doing so much thinking lately that it's hurt my head."

Thomas just looked at Kyle for a moment, then laughed softly and shook his head.

"What have you been thinking about?" Thomas inquired.

"Why I'm scared."

Kyle's breathing grew shallow. It felt as though he was about to dive or jump, lose his footing and fall, into what he wasn't sure. But Thomas was a comfort that made Kyle push through.

"I'm scared of people leaving me," Kyle confessed, something inside still shaking. "Which isn't some great epiphany or breakthrough I know. I've always been so careful-"

"About what?"

"Keeping my distance, not letting anybody get close," Kyle continued. "The way I see it is, if you give yourself a reason to push people away, then they can't get close to you and then you can't get hurt."

"That makes sense," Thomas nodded. "In a depressing kind of way."

Kyle snickered, a little embarrassed but considerably relieved.

"Kyle?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I ask an uncomfortable question? F-fuck!"

"Sure, what is it?"

"Is this..." Thomas paused, pursed his lips and buried his fingernails into his palm. He clearly didn't want this question to be tarnished by the emergence of his tic. "Does this have something to do with your friend? The one who went missing?"

Kyle blinked, looking down at his lap and then back up at Thomas, who was still waiting for an answer.

Finally, Kyle smirked, "you'd make a good shrink."

"But, I don't know," Kyle, again, half lied. He wished he could stop doing that, but then that would mean admitting to things he was still struggling with. "If that was the case it would make sense, right?"

Thomas shrugged matter-of-factly. Kyle was searching for clarity in Thomas that neither of them possessed.

"I don't know when it'll all be over," Kyle said, softer.

You're offering him an out that he, most likely, won't take.

Kyle looked at Thomas, waited for an indication, or a sign into what he was thinking. Pushing people away is different to letting them go, Kyle reasoned. Being a coward is different to being a martyr.
"Do you still want to date me?" Kyle asked, ripping off the band-aid.

Thomas shot Kyle a confused look. "What? Of course I still want to date you!"

"Even when I'm still dealing with all this stuff?" Kyle said incredulously. "Knowing that you'd have to put up with and deal with it too?"

Thomas rolled his eyes, sighed in exasperation and nodded.

He had turned it all around, Kyle realised, so now Thomas was the martyr.

"You're just… a saint, right?" Kyle laughed in disbelief.

Patient, blind Thomas, following and helping the lost.

"No," Thomas replied, flushed.

"This should make me certifiably undateable," Kyle remarked, staring up at the cotton wool sky.

"Come on, that's a little harsh!" Thomas chuckled. "Not to mention, ridiculous."

"Ridiculous?"

"Yes! Everyone has something about them that makes them 'undateable'." Thomas answered. "But that doesn't erase the good things, it doesn't mean you shouldn't try to make it work."

Kyle found himself staring at Thomas with fond eyes. "Or maybe you see too much of the good in everyone?" He questioned.

Thomas shook his head, a kissable grin on his face.

"Look at me, for example," Thomas explained. "Some people would say that I'm undateable, with my tics and my shyness-"

"No, you're totally dateable!" Kyle cut in. "You're sweet, cool, funny-"

"Ha!" Thomas interrupted, his kissable grin replaced by an arrogant one. "See! You just proved my point!"

Kyle stared Thomas down for a minute, before nudging him and nearly spilling the milkshake on the sidewalk.

"It's not your tics or your shyness that makes you undateable, it's your smugness!" Kyle teased.

"Then I'll try to tone it down."

Unbelievable.

"Are we alright?" Thomas asked.

Kyle glanced at Thomas' lips, his fingers met a warm, soft jaw before their mouths connected. A tiny, hot breath escaped from Thomas as Kyle dragged his lips over Thomas' own flushed ones.

The kiss was slow and tentative, mending and repairing.

"Yeah," Kyle spoke between kisses. "We're alright."
I apologise for that clunky bit of prose at the beginning. The things I must do for the sake of plot development. Poor, conflicted Eric. Poor, conflicted Kyle. Slowly and steadily we're getting there (well, somewhere), just bear with me and try to enjoy the ride. Hope you enjoyed!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Another shake-up in the structure, for obvious reasons as the story goes along. Also, I've left a kind of important Author's Note at the end of this chapter regarding how the story is going to progress from here. Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Kyle thought there was only one guaranteed way to stay warm in South Park when the snow was coming down heavily. And that was breaking a sweat by shovelling three feet worth of the damn stuff, and if you received some money at the end of it, all the better.

But since Thomas came along, Kyle found another way. Shutting yourself away from the snowstorm, making out and goofing around whilst not paying any attention to what's on the TV, was just as effective and definitely easier.

Sadly, that's not what Kyle was doing right now.

"Kyle? Hun?" A melodic voice that transported him back to childhood, a good excuse to take a breather from snow shovelling. "Are you ready to take a break?"

"No, Miss Cartman, I'm fine, thank you," Kyle replied, the laboured, breathless quality of his voice belied that statement.

"Are you sure?" Miss Cartman asked, unconvinced. "You've been working a long time…"

"Yeah," Kyle panted, surveying his handiwork so far. "I'm almost done."

Miss Cartman ignored Kyle's stubbornness and misguided politeness.

"I have some lovely punch," she tried to coax. "And cookies fresh out of the oven?"

Kyle could smell the stinging zest of the punch, feel the warm cookies melt in his mouth. When he was so cold and parched, how could he say no?

"Okay, I'll be there in a minute," Kyle finally gave in. "Thank you."

Honestly, Kyle tried to avoid stepping into the Cartman household as much as possible. Too many emotional traps to fall into, seemingly innocent reminders that were really landmines set to explode and catapult Kyle back to square one.

He'd never go there again, which, in turn, never meant going to Cartman's house again.

He was surprised he even had the courage to offer his shovelling services to Miss Cartman, he guessed going inside for cookies and punch was the next brave step. Although as he silently trailed after her, keeping his head down, he couldn't help but envision bolting to the door, his stomach knotting so tightly that he couldn't even enjoy the undeniably delicious smelling cookies and punch.
"So?" Miss Cartman asked, after handing Kyle a tall glass and a plateful of cookies. "How are they?"

"Delicious, Miss Cartman, thank you," Kyle spoke around the melting chocolate in his mouth.

Miss Cartman beamed, reminiscent enough to start making Kyle remember. He didn't want to remember, too dangerous.

"You're very welcome." Miss Cartman smiled. "So how's school?"

"Great, thanks..." Kyle replied.

"Any thoughts on college?"

"Uh, not yet," Kyle answered, he didn't think daydreaming about Harvard counted. "I want to try to get out of the state, if I can help it."

"Aww, wouldn't your parents miss you?"

Kyle shrugged, a little uncomfortable. "They can always visit. Besides, I think I'd be a lot happier if I was as far from Colorado as possible."

Miss Cartman nodded, before sighing, "Yes, I used to feel that way too."

Kyle remembered then. He didn't recall the many hours he had spent here, challenging Cartman's schemes, rolling his eyes as he bragged about some new toy his mom got him, and just playing with his friends, he remembered that there was a chasm in Miss Cartman's life too.

That she and Kyle and Stan and Kenny and whoever else were tangled in the same unfortunate web.

"Where is my gorgeous fiancé?" A voice boomed, causing Kyle to nearly drop his cookie.

"In here!" Miss Cartman laughed, before adding a little more seriously. "And we have company!"

"Yes, I noticed the driveway was looking a little tidier." Mr Hollace remarked as he entered the kitchen.

From what Kyle had heard from his mom, Mr Hollace had recently moved to Colorado from Wisconsin for work, and apparently things were moving pretty fast between him and Miss Cartman.

"Why, hello there, Kyle!" He grinned.

"Hey, Mr Hollace," Kyle nodded, self-consciously dabbing at his face for stray cookie crumbs.

"How are you, son?"

"Pretty good."

"How's basketball going?"

"Okay, not as good as last year though..."

"You'll have plenty of time to turn things around, I'm sure..." Mr Hollace replied, before his voice trailed off, distracted. "Are those fresh cookies?"

"Yes they are," Miss Cartman smiled.
"Do you mind if I take one?" Mr Hollace asked as he took one anyway.

He closed his eyes, comically indulgent as he ate the cookie, causing Miss Cartman to giggle and swat at his arm playfully.

"Beautiful," he smiled after he swallowed the cookie. "Well, hate to eat and run, but the game is on. You wanna watch, Kyle?"

"Uh, no thanks," Kyle replied. "I still have some shovelling to do."

"Alright, well, good luck with basketball!" Mr Hollace said, departing to the living room.

"Thank you, sir…" As soon as the coast was clear, Kyle leaned over. "Wow, Miss Cartman, I didn't know you were engaged?"

"You didn't?" Miss Cartman asked, playing at being offended. "Not even with the ring on my finger?"

At that, she extended her hand like an old Hollywood actress who had been asked to dance. Miss Cartman had always had that quality though, peeled right out of a storybook, projected onto a larger than life screen from a dusty projector that only showed the classics.

"I guess I'm not very good at noticing things," Kyle blushed, feeling terribly rude for not noticing such a big ring.

Miss Cartman didn't seem to mind, or even notice, she was too busy admiring the rock on her finger.

"What?" She said distractedly. "Oh, Kyle, I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"It was nothing," Kyle waved it off.

"I just can't stop staring at this ring!" Miss Cartman nearly squealed. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Kyle nodded, the diamonds suddenly seemed blinding.

"I just can't believe that after all this heartache, Peter came along and made me feel happy again," Miss Cartman gushed, a small lament. "A little less alone…"

Kyle squirmed, uncomfortable and empathising, relating a little too much.

"Of course, things are still incomplete around here," Miss Cartman continued. "Nothing will change that, but sometimes you have to count your blessings for what you do have, so you can keep holding out hope for the things you don't."

"But what if that's not enough?" Kyle whispered to himself, a part of him wishing he had the courage to speak up.

"Excuse me?"

Now's your chance.

"No! no, I, uh, wasn't talking about you!" Kyle quickly replied. "I was talking a-about me."

Miss Cartman's brows furrowed in concern, shifting closer to Kyle.
"Why?" She asked. "What's wrong, hun?"

The question was an invitation, one that unpicked the lock on all Kyle tried to keep bottled up, tried to sort through on his own. But there was too much noise, too much heaviness weighing down on him, too much to figure out when he couldn't get the answers he needed. When he didn't know the questions he needed to ask, or was too scared to think about in the first place.

Pressure in his chest, prompting tears in his eyes and the inability to talk without breaking down.

"Oh," Miss Cartman realised sadly. "You miss Eric, don't you?"

Kyle nodded, and silently admitting to it was enough to make a lone tear fall, then more, before Kyle was hunched and bracing himself in the chair, trying to conceal his crying.

That didn't deter Miss Cartman, Kyle's nostrils quickly filled with familiar perfume and he took such comfort in warm, caring arms wrapped around him.

"I miss him too," Miss Cartman murmured. "I miss him every day."

Kyle sniffed, cringing because his arms were trapped and he couldn't wipe away the tears now staining Miss Cartman's sweater.

"I was crying every day, floating around empty inside every day." Miss Cartman continued. "Sometimes I still feel like I could. I'll dream about him, think about him, then realise he's not here. And then you start to think 'what if?' and that's the worst thing you can do, it's the most horrible thing in the world…"

Kyle nodded, suddenly thirsty again and drained of energy.

"I needed help, and Peter came along," Miss Cartman said. "I know you probably miss him dreadfully. You two didn't always get along, but he'd talk about you all the time, and all of you had so much fun together…"

Kyle smiled weakly, those once bittersweet memories grew softer, rocking him gently like the comforting arms wrapped around him. Quiet curiosity tilted, unsure where to settle.

Cartman talked about him? All the time?

Was he spiteful? Bitter? Resentful? Or did Cartman feel the same things Kyle could only speculate about now that it was too late? Did Cartman beat him to the punch? Kyle didn't know, but he begrudgingly understood why Cartman didn't say anything. If Kyle was having a difficult time coming to terms with all this, as well as Cartman's absence, then Cartman must have found the whole thing difficult and disorientating too.

"What I'm trying to say, Kyle," Miss Cartman said, pulling Kyle out of his thoughts. "Is that you need to let somebody help you. Somebody who really cares, who makes you happy. And it can be anybody! I'm sure your parents are wonderful, and so are your friends, you all need to help each other!"

Miss Cartman squeezed Kyle encouragingly and he laughed under his breath. He thought about Thomas. Sweet, shy, understanding to a fault, Thomas.

"Because you're no good to yourself alone," Miss Cartman said, sobering. "You can't see through the darkness without somebody guiding you."
Kyle thought of Thomas again, and he shone.

"Yeah, t-that's true..." Kyle said, looking up. "Thanks, Miss Cartman."

"No problem, hun," she smiled. "Eat some more cookies, that'll make you feel a little better."

Kyle chuckled, relieved that things were finally becoming clearer.

Eric sat cross-legged on his bed, eyes on the city as the skyscrapers fell asleep. The lights out process had begun ten minutes ago, starting with the towers standing at the outskirts of Ubaleh before darkness trickled into the centre.

It had only been a few minutes since Eric's lights had flickered out, the AAA not taking into account the prepossessing moon and the remaining stars. Chalky light smearing the sheets and the floor like a lover's lipstick.

But Eric always had a plan.

He stared at the last building that had yet to be darkened, counted the floors being stripped of their light.

*Ground Floor.*

*First floor.*

*Second floor.*

*Third floor...*

So on and so on, until the apex seventh floor went out.

Eric grinned, the plan was in motion.

Spending as much time alone as he did, Eric had to find novel ways of entertaining himself. Acquiring a working knowledge of the advanced technology he was now living with seemed useful. Learning how to cheat, hack and manipulate the faulty, vulnerable holes in that technology appealed to the sly, mischievous side of him.

Figuring out how to disable the lock on his door was his first mission. The bulky lock and it's frankly intimidating appearance belied how simple it was to actually cheat the intricate system.

Tablet in his lap, Eric located the file which held his very own code made to infiltrate it. It wasn't about breaking the lock momentarily, but rather confusing its internal clock and manipulating it with its own routine.

Eric heard the door unlock behind him and smirked, now all he had to do was disable the pesky cameras lining the walls of the corridors and elevators.

Trickier, but a challenge Eric was willing to accept.

One night, after a lot of fumbling in the dark (quite literally), Eric was able to locate the control room's server that had monitors and cameras on record. It was a matter of transferring those records onto his tablet with security being none the wiser. That really put his skills to the test.
But it was worth it, for Eric now had complete control over the cameras in the entire building. Five hundred years down the line, reclaiming control felt so good after being deceived and kept under the AAA’s thumb. Eric guessed it was a taste of his own medicine, but the bitter taste didn't deter him from his manipulative ways.

Especially when he was manipulating the AAA, they didn't give a fuck about anybody, so why should Eric give a fuck about them?

The tablet sliced itself into seven, thin screens. The numbers for each floor pulsed soundlessly in the corner. Eric tapped the screen for the fifth floor and dragged his finger down, effectively drawing the shutters on the camera which would then send an error message to the security otters observing it.

That gave Eric about three seconds to locate old footage of the fifth floor to relay to the security panel, and trick the otters that everything was running smoothly again.

Mission accomplished.

Eric stuffed his tablet into his backpack and left his bedroom. The corridor was swamped in darkness and Eric fished for the small flashlight in his pocket. He switched it on and made his way over to the elevator.

Once inside he pressed the 'basement' button, which would take him outside. For the first time that evening, excitement prickled at his usually indifferent resolve. Tonight, something he never thought would happen was taking place.

Eric was sneaking out to see his friends.

Well, acquaintances, people to keep Eric company whilst he endured the arduous education program.

It seemed that his supposed 'fans' weren't satisfied with one meeting, they trailed after Eric for the rest of the day with Ulesi (the most devoted of Eric's fans so it seemed), commenting that he seemed a little lonely.

Maybe that was true, but Eric was used to it. He'd been alone since he was ten years old, he had grown up here knowing nothing different. He had even told Ulesi that, but he wasn't convinced and instead introduced Eric to his friends.

There was Sam, sandy-haired and smiley, too chirpy for Eric's liking, but a nice enough guy.

Avery, brutally chopped hair and pretty androgynous. She was achingly cool, her voice never raising or dropping an octave and her smile was always relaxed and loose. It was almost intimidating, how composed she was. She would probably roll her eyes or be exhausted by strong emotion.

Ulesi was the complete opposite to her and Eric wondered how they could even be in the same room together, let alone be friends. But maybe their relationship was something they mutually had to put up with?

Then there was Navin, brash, aloof and pretty stand-offish during his first couple of encounters with Eric. He must have had a pretty impressive collection of bruises on his arm from where Ulesi or Avery shoved him and hissed his name whenever he directed a less than friendly comment at Eric.

But Eric didn't need to be protected by people he hardly knew. Besides, he was prepped with scathing retorts to put Navin in his place. He liked a challenge, didn't he? Ulesi and Avery hadn't grasped that yet. He especially liked it whenever Navin flashed him a toothy, congratulatory grin, involuntary releasing butterflies in Eric's stomach that he thought were reserved for one unattainable
guy.

That feeling was soured by guilt and confusion, making it a little easier for Eric to convince himself Navin was loathsome rather than charming… But he was handsome though. Striking amber eyes, brilliant smile, tall…

A worthy opponent to emerald eyes and stunning red curls.

But Kyle had history and timeless, fervent emotion on his side. Nobody could compete with that. It didn't extinguish Eric's crush though, to his disappointment or relief, Eric wasn't sure. Were matters of the heart supposed to be this confusing at sixteen?

Eric rolled his eyes, the elevator doors opening and the cool breeze welcoming him.

Thin clouds of dust burst beneath his boots as he walked to the ostrich stable. He had grown too tall for Kitty, and was admittedly a little choked up when she was taken away. To where Eric didn't know and a part of him didn't want to.

He had a new ostrich now, from the 'advanced' herd Blavius II had acquired. Faster, smarter, stronger, more efficient but less natural.

Eric was careful to step lightly when he entered the ostrich stable, their sense of hearing so acute that even the smallest crunch could wake them up and startle them. He approached his ostrich, stroking its beak gently as to coax it awake rather than frighten it and alert the others.

The ostrich squawked and Eric quickly shushed it. That used to relax Kitty but this ostrich seemed disgruntled and complied only because it was wired to obey its master's commands.

Flicking the latch up, Eric slipped his ostrich's saddle on, equipped with its leash. The moonlight filtering in through the stables was the only guidance Eric was provided. Once the armour was on, Eric led his ostrich out of the stable and into the night.

Eric stepped into one stirrup, hoisting his leg over the saddle and sliding his foot into the other. New saddles had been designed for the herd, genetically modified ostriches meant updated equipment. What they wore now was similar to armour, Blavius II said it was perfect for warding off possible attackers of the AAA.

A navigation chip had been planted into the ostrich's brains - pretty much as soon as they hatched - and it correlated with the similar device on their saddles.

Eric typed in Sam's address and seconds later his ostrich was off, sprinting around a corner so fast that Eric would have fallen off if he hadn't grabbed the reins just in time.

"Stupid bird," he muttered, tempted to kick his ostrich in its meaty side.

The ostrich cantered into the slums that looked even more depressing at night. Eric hadn't been here in such a long time, he kind of wished he could get his ostrich to slow down so he could take a proper look. Maybe his friends would give him a guided tour someday? He huffed at the thought.

Eventually, his ostrich came to a stop at the front of a tiny, sagging house, perched at the end of a street.

Eric hopped off, stroking his ostrich's feathers out of habit rather than genuine like for the animal. Tugging at its reins, he led it to the back of the house, where Sam had told Eric to meet them.
Instead of a group of teenagers, Eric was met with a sparse backyard and the strong, unmistakable smell of liquor.

*Those fuckers have ditched me.*

Eric couldn't allow himself to feel disappointed, he swiftly glossed it over with anger and gritted his teeth. His face felt warm despite the mild night, and he was about to turn around and go home when he heard a voice;

"Up here!"

Eric looked up, directing his flashlight to the roof he saw a waving Ulesi, who squinted at the sphere of light being thrust in his face.

"Hey, Eric!" he added, shielding himself from the light.

Eric chuckled softly, but turned the flashlight off.

"Is somebody else here with you?" He heard Avery ask, only a tad warily.

"Nah, just an ostrich," Eric replied.

"Cool!" Sam laughed.

"An ostrich? Wow!" Ulesi said, "What's its name? Can we pet it?"

"It doesn't have a name," Eric replied. "And I'm pretty sure it'd bite you,"

"Aww…"

"Don't worry, Les," Avery said.

"Does the ostrich drink liquor?" Navin's honeyed voice rippled in the darkness. Eric hated it and the goosebumps it elicited.

"Don't think so," Eric chuckled a little too nervously.

*Try not to be so obvious with this whole crush thing, okay?*

"Who cares if the ostrich drinks?" Avery said, "All I want to know, Eric, is if you do?"

"Maybe," Eric shrugged, he hadn't really drank before. After learning of Kyle's fatal experience with alcohol, he had tried to avoid the stuff when he was younger. But age had made him curious. "What are you guys drinking?"

"My own special invention," Sam teased.

"The best liquor this side of Ubaleh!" Avery joined in.

"Sound good to you, T.C?" Navin challenged. "Or is your palette a little more sophisticated than us slum rats?"

"I wouldn't say my palette is more sophisticated, just better than yours…" Eric returned. A chorus of 'ooohs' from above, well, everybody except Navin. Eric could only imagine the look on his face. The cute, infuriating smirk.
"Is that so?" Navin goaded. "Then come up here and educate us!"

Eric grinned, before climbing up the rope ladder that Sam had thrown down.

~x~

The large, half-empty bottle of liquor was practically jammed into Eric's mouth when he stumbled to the roof.

The liquor was practically void of consistency, had the density of saliva, but damn it if wasn't the strongest and foulest thing Eric had ever tasted. It scorched his nostrils and flared his tongue like a tiny pyromaniac setting his entire mouth ablaze. It dragged its propane nails down his throat when Eric swallowed, and gasped one last torrid breath in his oesophagus.

Eric wouldn't be surprised if Sam was passing whatever was in that bottle off as liqueur, when really he had just gotten his hands on AAA airship fuel.

Embarrassingly, he had spluttered and coughed, and through his blurry eyes he could see the amused grins of the others, before laughter broke out amongst them. Eric didn't care what they thought, he may not be a seasoned drinker like the rest of them, but he knew that to like that drink they must have been liars.

He did flush when Navin caught his eye though, that peerless grin on his face and his eyes creased adorably as he laughed.

"So how are you guys feeling about the interviews tomorrow?" Sam asked once Eric had recovered and the rest of the foul stuff had been consumed. "Are you scared?"

The second interview had been a feverish topic of conversation for days among the students of the education program. It remained shrouded in mystery, an apparently more psychological strain on the interviewees than the lie detector was.

"I don't know," Avery shrugged, not even the flashlight could detect any hesitancy on her face. "The last one wasn't so bad."

"Yeah, but that were easy!" Ulesi interjected.

"What do you mean easy?" Eric argued. "It wasn't easy!"

"All you gotta say is 'yes, sir', or 'no, ma'am'," Navin said. "Easy,"

Eric scowled, but was unable to take his eyes off him.

"Yeah, but this is an emotional endurance test!" Ulesi exclaimed, frustrated that the others weren't realising the gravity of the interviews.

"Somebody is going to have a breakdown," Sam added.

"It's not gonna be me…" Avery muttered.

"But how can you be sure?" Ulesi questioned, eyes widened almost comically.

"Because I'm not a whiny baby," Avery replied.

Eric and the others laughed, while Ulesi folded his arms grumpily.
"What's the worst they can do?" Eric challenged. "Make you cry?"

"Well, we don't know," Sam replied with a small, honest shrug. "I was kind of counting on you knowing more about it than us?"

"Yeah, you're in on all the AAA bullshit, aren't you?" Navin questioned, eyebrow arched and the way he looked at Eric bordered on hostile.

Eric exhaled irritably. As much as he'd like to know all the ins and outs of the AAA and flaunt that information to his new friends, the fact is he didn't. He had a significant advantage than the rest of them, yes, but he had been thrust unwillingly into this system too. Maybe a little more bargaining and blackmail went on, but still.

The council had been keeping schtum on the education program, the interviewing process specifically. Eric had heard murmurings of 'emotional endurance' equating to psychological torture, but he doubted that was the case. Or he was too afraid to believe it.

"Hasn't it occurred to you guys that maybe they think it's best to keep some stuff hidden from me?" Eric gave as an answer, glancing between his group of friends who were clearly displeased and perturbed by Eric's response.

Maybe they needed him to be omnipotent, and even that being a little bit untrue was a too scary reality?

"Anyway," Ulesi continued, and Eric rolled his eyes. "I heard that they, like, tranquilise you or something… Try to get into your head-"

"But what would be the point?" Avery cut in.

"Exactly!" Ulesi answered, verging on hysterical. "I have no idea! Do you, Eric?"

"Science damn it, no I don't!" Eric snapped and they all flinched, even Navin a little. "Look, as bad as the AAA are, something like that… I don't know, it seems pretty extreme. Like Avery said, what would be the point?"

"Thank you!" Avery said, throwing her hands in the air.

Under the white glow of the flashlight and the waning moon, Eric smiled to himself.

"But when did the AAA need a reason to do anything?" Navin asked, the question was flippant, but left the atmosphere unsettled, filled them all with dread.

Including Eric, who knew for certain that Navin had a point.

"Wow, he looks so young in this picture!" Thomas exclaimed, pointing to an old crinkled photograph, nestled between flowers and damp messages.

"Yeah, I think it was taken a year before he went missing," Kyle replied. Every crease made Kyle's heart feel like it was about to fold, constricted.

"You have a good memory…"

But Thomas was blessed relief.

"Hmm," Kyle sighed quietly, he surveyed the memorial. "That can be a bad thing sometimes."
Kyle felt fingers reach for his own, squeezing his hand supportively.

After he had left Miss Cartman's house, Kyle decided it was about time he let Thomas in for good. No more denying, no more pushing him away under the guise of 'dragging him down'. Thomas wanted to be there for Kyle, Kyle needed him to be there and most importantly, he needed to give Thomas a chance to do that.

"So," Thomas began, and when Kyle looked at him he could see that his boyfriend was trying to take it all in. "Do you and Stan and Kenny come here a lot?"

"No," Kyle said, honest and regretful. "It's still a little difficult. We try to come here on his birthday, though. A couple of years back they started lighting candles, and even if we don't come together, we all place a candle for him."

Thomas nodded, a small smile on his face. The sun was shimmering between pregnant clouds, and the day was as quiet as you'd expect a small town to be. Perfect for reflecting, sharing and remembering.

Kyle chuckled ruefully and shook his head, still fixated on the memorial. "Sometimes I wonder what he would think of all this. He loved attention, always wanted to be in the spotlight, he would have eaten this shit up."

Kyle sighed, conscious of getting carried away. "If he could see it, I mean," he added softly.

He was becoming despondent, which in turn made Thomas nervous.

"Aw, fuck! P-piss!" Thomas exclaimed and Kyle squeezed his hand tighter in reassurance.

"Wh-what was he like, anyway?" Thomas asked, palm growing damper in Kyle's. "You don't talk about him that much."

Kyle pursed his lips, the constricted feeling returning because there were so many thoughts and feelings, raw and unable to be articulated because Kyle didn't understand them himself.

Paradoxical, brilliant, infuriating and broken.

Kyle didn't know where to begin...

"Impossible," he finally answered. "That's the only word I can think of."

"Impossible?"

"Yeah, he was just impossible!" Kyle chuckled, he knew it sounded ridiculous. "In every sense of the word. He was so loud and obnoxious and impossible to deal with sometimes. And he had done bad things, to put it mildly. Things I don't think he should ever be forgiven before. But sometimes..."

His chest tightened, overwhelmed and yearning.

"I don't know, I felt sorry for him." Kyle continued. "There was something that made him that way, and even when he was happy I could tell that he was sad on the inside. Sometimes he would redeem himself, show that he cared, and I'd wonder where that came from. Every time that happened though, I used to hope that this would be when he learned his lesson for good, become a better person like I knew he was capable of."

For all my rationalising, I'm still so stupidly hopeful.
"Maybe I put too much faith in him." Kyle shook his head, chiding himself. "Maybe it's stupid but, we'd have these conversations or he'd do something for me, and knowing that I had brought that goodness out of him... It felt great."

The smile on Kyle's face was wide and true, aching at the corners and stinging his eyes. He took a stuttering breath around the sadness in his voice, trying to shoo tears away.

"And if I had to be the one to get him on the right track then that was fine by me, I wanted to help him. I..." When faced with the memorial, faced with the realisation and resignation that Cartman was probably never going to be in his life again, Kyle sobered. "I wanted to save him. Rescue him from falling any further and turn him into a good kid. I don't know if he was deserving of a second chance, but he was capable of one. I felt it, I believed it more than anything."

Kyle had gone from fighting Cartman, to fighting his corner. But maybe he always was? Encouraging and believing in a firm, distant way? Tough love was all Kyle could offer, and even that was hard to stomach. When love and hate were such strong words and none of them could do Kyle and Cartman justice.

Cartman had rewarded Kyle, saved him too, he couldn't doubt that. Nobody could take that away, it was bittersweet but theirs.

"I believed in him," Kyle added strongly. "Despite myself, I really did..."

"Doesn't really sound like a straightforward friendship," Thomas chuckled.

"No," Kyle smiled. "It wasn't."

Friends? Rivals? Opposites sparking friction alongside each other? Or something that was meant to be indefinable?

"Thanks for bringing me here, Kyle. F-fuck! I, I know it must be d-difficult for you, but it means a lot to me that you want to talk about this stuff," Thomas said. "That you can talk to me about him."

"You're welcome," Kyle replied, looking to Thomas and smiling, tight-lipped but grateful.

Their hands were still clasped, fingers linked fiercely and palms dampened.

But Kyle wanted to try something.

His fingers broke free, exposing his hand to brisk air, the breeze that rattled the memorial only slightly.

Once released, Kyle wrapped his arm around Thomas's back, fingers splaying over warm skin hidden under stubborn layers.

"It's chillier than usual today, huh?" Kyle played at being coy, sidling up to Thomas as subtly as he could.

But his boyfriend could see right through him, with a shy smirk Thomas pulled Kyle closer and placed a kiss atop his curls.

The council were going out of their way to make sure no interaction was had between the teenagers on the day of the emotional endurance test.

They were allowed to mingle in the heavily monitored foyer, the conversation watered down to its
most banal as to avoid being chastised. Names were called and the teenagers they required were told to form a single-file line. In silence they were led away, not allowing goodbyes, or good lucks. As far as the council, as far as Blavius II and the malicious Miss Neron were concerned, nothing out of the ordinary was happening today.

Nothing potentially scarring, nope, no trauma here.

Eric was careful not to roll his eyes in utter distaste, mainly because Miss Neron was staring at him from the observation window.

In a twisted way, it was a smart move to build the education center from an abandoned scientific institute. Built-in lecture halls, laboratories that could be easily refurbished into clinical classrooms and observatories on the basement level.

As Eric was fitted and plugged, with electrodes to his head and twin wires, similar to IV tubes (but much less invasive) winding up his arms, he wondered what experiments had been conducted here. Skittish animals poked and prodded until they squealed or produced valuable results.

Already Eric felt agitated with hypersensitivity. Quiet arteries and veins suddenly wanted their presence to be known, blood now moving clumsily around Eric's body, it had never felt like that before. Or maybe Eric's thoughts were now so electric and highly strung that everything that wasn't sharp, fast and focused felt sloppy.

The white of the walls glowed, the black screen yawned and colours any brighter screamed for attention. An echo that Eric never recognised before, had finally opened in his ears, and sounds plunged into the abyss of his mind. Beyond his thoughts, his memories, his perceptions and useless trivia that stuck to the brain somehow, sound thumped lower. A bassline behind his eyes, and he felt rattled, empty.

Miss Neron's eyes glinted like onyx through the black screen. However Eric was feeling, he would show no weakness, because she would show no mercy.

A crackle of an intercom, a hollowed voice swirling in Eric's ears.

"So, Time Child, how are you feeling?" She asked.

"Great," Eric lied, his calm smile not giving anything away. "Thanks."

"You're not nervous?"

"No, I'm ready."

"The others said the same thing," Miss Neron muttered, but if it were accidental, she would have taken her paw off the button.

"Unlike them, ma'am, I'm not lying," Eric replied cockily. "I can handle whatever you throw at me."

"Very well, Time Child." Eric could see her nod.

"Is he ready?" She asked the otters who were decorating Eric like a Christmas tree. Her voice was sharper, all business with no honeyed, manipulative sway.

An otter nodded, shuffling away and the rest followed. Eric could see them filing behind Miss Neron. He was officially alone.
"It's slipped my mind, Time Child… How old are you going to be when you return to the past?" Miss Neron asked.

"Twenty-one," Eric answered.

"Aah, so five more years. How's the wait?"

"It's teaching me the value of patience, ma'am, that's for sure," Eric responded. Usually he was unfazed by faux, friendly small talk. Charm was his speciality, but when his nervous system had been rigged and overly stimulated to a painful point, then he was unable to bring his 'A game' to the conversation. "Can we get started, already?"

"In a minute, Time Child," Miss Neron replied, keen to draw out the process as if she were savouring an expensive cigar. "It's been so long since you've attended any council meetings, I thought I would take this time to have a quick catch-up."

Anybody else would have called it unprofessional, but Eric knew exactly what kind of business Miss Neron was in.

"The prevailing rumour among the council is that you're hoping to visit a certain someone, is that true?"

He thought of Kyle briefly, intensely, and his mind felt charred.

"A, a friend, yes."

"Somebody you must care for very deeply."

"Like I said, they're my friend."

"Only a friend?"

"Why are you asking me this?" Eric questioned irritably.

"Curiosity," Miss Neron answered, as innocuous as possible. "Tell us more, Time Child. Tell us about this captivating human who you yearn for, who you care for so deeply that you would do almost anything to be with them. Including double-crossing us when you were only a child, betraying the otters who took care of you, and making the council and its strong leader bend over backwards just to suit your emotional whims?"

Eric glowered, balling his fists and straining against the wire on his arms.

"With all due respect, ma'am, I don't have to tell you shit," Eric spat harshly.

"Oh, I think you do," Miss Neron goaded. "We all want to know, Time Child! Who are they? What are they like? Give us a name, perhaps?"

"I'm not telling you!" Eric yelled.

Echoed, very telling.

A sigh, sweet and stinging.

"Fine, Time Child. I'll find out soon enough. Let's begin."

"What- What the fuck is that supposed to mean?!"
Eric opened his mouth, but before he could speak he was blanketed by thick drowsiness. His muscles felt like they were softening and shrivelling until his body was a loose, boneless lump… But his throat, fuck, the pressure on his throat. It felt like he had swallowed a dumbbell, but the only sensations he could register were heaviness and choking.

He tried to scream but he was already unconscious, quick and powerful.

"Cartman?"

Kyle's voice.

A defibrillator to jolt Eric awake.

The dumbbell was gone, the drowsiness and looseness had disappeared. It was like the five second coma Eric needed to recharge himself, rather over-charge. Hypersensitive, clammy, his heartbeat was aggressive and ragged, and his insides felt bleached.

But he didn't care, he could pay no attention to his unnatural state of being, his thrumming body.

Because Kyle was standing in front of him, just like he remembered.

Nine years old and smiling.

"Kyle?" Eric gasped, eyes shining and lips pulled into a disbelieving smile.

"Hi, fatass," Kyle said with a small wave.

Eric chuckled, shocked and quickly losing his breath, his mind even, because none of this made sense and was this really happening?

"Kyle, I, I don't understand," Eric managed to get out, although he was tongue-tied, like his internal organs were playing jump rope. "What- how-"

Like all imaginary friends, Kyle was as impish as pixie dust, as artificial stars, disappearing at the first hint of doubt. No questions allowed.

But Kyle wasn't imaginary, Eric knew that even when everything was suspended and crazy. Kyle was rooted in reality, he'd left a mark on the world, had burrowed under Eric's skin and slipped into his heart.

An outside force had taken Kyle away from him merely seconds ago. Eric knew the culprit, a conniving otter bitch who was pushing the buttons.

He glared at Miss Neron through the screen, although it seemed miles away. He balled his fists again, tugged more purposefully at the wires, to defy her and remind himself that this was temporary.

Fingers on his shoulder, squeezing and possessive.

Kyle? 

Eric chuckled under his breath in relief.

"Kyle, I've missed you so much-"

"Missed me?" An older voice, sultry without even trying. "Already?"
Eric whipped his head around, utterly confused and his heart was stomping against his rattling ribcage.

"What the fuck?!" Eric shouted. An older Kyle was behind him, pin-up Kyle, fantasy Kyle. Lecherously twisting around Eric's body, hands at his chest, lips at his ear.

"You saw me in the shower this morning!" He laughed, well, trilled more than laughed.

"No, I don't mean you, I mean- Aah!" Kyle's lips were molten against his prickling neck, he was over-stimulated enough without arousal needling his mind.

But it felt good - ticklish and heady - but good. Eric suspected such pleasure would be short-lived.

Kyle nipped at his earlobe, even that tiny pinch made him surge.

"I, I meant the – th-the other you," Eric tried to finish his sentence. "The one I can remember…"

A voice below Eric spoke up, "But why would you want to talk to a little boy when you have us?" Eric looked down at another Kyle, parting Eric's legs and kneeling in between them, drawing small, coquettish circles on Eric's thighs.

When Eric didn't respond, the second Kyle became antsy, hands travelling upward. More fingers, touches more deliberate and it was almost unbearable. Pleasure so powerful that it was debilitating.

"Are we not good enough for you, Cartman?" The first Kyle accused. His default setting was wanton, something he couldn't escape when he continued to eagerly kiss Eric's searing skin.

"No, that's not it, you're…" Eric paused to moan breathlessly around the crushed glass in his throat. "You're both perfect…" he breathed out, lusty and adoring.

The Kyles had grown lax, their attempts at pleasure simmering now that Eric had admitted to their beauty out loud. But it gave Eric time to remove himself (not literally) from the situation, inch away so he could see through their transparent mission.

Smother him with pleasure, overkill. Distract him with it just enough to then strip it all away and unleash the terrifying, the grotesque.

"But that's the problem!" Eric exclaimed. "You're not real, you don't exist! I want the real Kyle! I want the boy I can remember! Just for a minute, I need to see him! Please! Please let me see him!"

Just like he had suspected, gratification made way for the excruciating. And the more he begged, the more he pleaded, the need for Kyle grew and grew. It was worse than hunger, thirst or suffocation. His body was screaming for Kyle, and his mind was only rallying his neurons, his nerves, his veins, hell, even his fucking skin cells to scream louder.

The second Kyle glared at Eric, his pupils yawning, rather gnashing at that familiar green. He swiftly dug his nails, talon-like, into Eric's thigh, not relinquishing his hold until Eric had cried out in pain.

"Fine!" The second Kyle screeched, neither mirage nor vision, but a nightmare banshee.

He's not Kyle. Not the Kyle I know. Never has, never will be.

Panting, Eric stared at the banshee with contempt as it rose.

Eric felt he had regained some clarity, lucidity outside of this world where heartbeats accelerated and sensations were exaggerated.
He could convince himself this was temporary, a false, mirror world and that in minutes or hours that
seemed liked days this would all be over. He had to ride it out, no matter how difficult it may be.

He would get out, but right now he still needed to be sated. He needed to see Kyle, the real Kyle,
otherwise his body would burn and his muscles would twist sadistically and his mind would be
scrambled.

"Are you sure you want to see him?" The first Kyle asked gently in his ear.

"Yes!" Eric replied, pulling against the wires as if he could rip them free and go find Kyle himself.

"You won't like what you see, trust me."

"I don't care!"

"You heard him!" The banshee yelled. "He doesn't care! Let him have what he wants!"

Eric felt a forceful tug at his shoulder.

"Don't you get it?!" The first Kyle hissed, and once he had Eric's attention he softened. "They want
to hurt you, they want to push you, don't give into them!"

"What is going on?!" Miss Neron shouted, shaken by the havoc the Time Child was causing.

The machines whirred and beeped in distress, the monitor that correlated with the Time Child's
brainwaves was confusing itself.

"S-something's gone wrong, ma'am..." The scientist answered, paws shaking as they scrambled over
the equipment, trying to get a hold of the situation.

"I can see that! But what?! Science damn it, tell me what's wrong!" Miss Neron demanded,
hysterical.

"There's a resistance," the scientist tried to explain. "He's imagining, uh, conjuring a resistance-"

"He's fighting against it!" Another otter put it more simply.

"I know you want to see Kyle again," the first Kyle said, on Eric's side now. "I know you miss him
so much, but you'll regret this!"

A kiss to Eric's cheek, not one of careful seduction or manipulation but one of comfort. "They'll use
Kyle to their advantage! Don't do this! Don't let them do this!"

But Eric knew what he was craving, he would surely die if-

"Show me Kyle!" Eric demanded, too desperate to have any kind of influence or fear over whoever
was controlling him. "I have to see him!"

The banshee stared at Eric hard, eyes boring into him before he disintegrated with a flourish. The
invisible mechanism sucking him up and pouring Kyle, the real Kyle into the room. Colours and
organs and blood and personality cascading, carefully and meticulously choreographed, forming
Kyle.

The real Kyle, or so Eric had to believe.

It tempered the storm devastating Eric, his aching pang, his distress from Kyle-withdrawal.
"Hi, Kyle," Eric grinned, shaky and still catching his breath. "I, I missed you."

Kyle remained silent, eerily silent, Eric couldn't even hear him breathe.

A quiet Kyle was an unnerving one. Kyle was reckless and loud and compassionate and fiery. He wasn't a blank-eyed, passive thing.

"Kyle?" Eric asked, still hopeful. Still stubbornly clinging to his wish. "Can you hear me?"

Kyle stared around the room, fascinated by white walls and invasive lighting, not paying attention to the boy he hadn't seen in years.

"Kyle?" Eric repeated, choking on the disappointment and sadness in his throat.

Kyle's ignorance hurt, and every oblivious moment was a knife twisting deeper in Eric's heart.

"Why won't he answer me?" Eric demanded, tugging at the wires.

Anger glosses over disappointment.

"Kyle, what the fuck is wrong with you?!" Eric yelled. "Answer me!"

Kyle wasn't moved, deaf.

A small cry of defeat fell from Eric's lips involuntarily, and his body slumped with exhaustion and regret. As he breathed, riding out the devastating waves, he felt tears sting at his eyes, begging to be released.

"Come on!" Eric cried, tears sporadically trekking down his cheek. "Answer me!"

"Can't you hear me?!" Eric hit his wrists against the arms of the chair. "How much more do I have to do until I get through to you?!"

As soon as the question was out of his mouth, Eric started to sob. Tears were coming thick and fast now, Eric gulped against the plasma sticking to his throat.

"You have to come home," Kyle finally said.

Eric blinked, unable to wipe the tears away, he let them dry on his cheek.

"I, I am coming home," he stumbled, desperate to keep Kyle talking. "Soon, I promise."

"That's not good enough."

"What?" Eric said, incredulous. "Kyle, I've been trying. I've been trying for years-"

"You have to come home and mean it," Kyle interrupted.

"I don't understand-"

"Stay,"

"I, I can't," Eric said apologetically, and he felt so weak.

Kyle looked at Eric, bored into his soul with contempt and disappointment.

"Then you'll never get through to me," Kyle condemned. "No matter what you do. Because you're
here and I'm there and nothing can change that."

The words were scathing to Eric's ears. He started to tremble, to vehemently deny what Kyle was saying.

"Nothing?" Eric questioned, shattered. "Nothing can change that?"

Unmoved, Kyle shook his head.

"But I love you!" Eric cried, hysterical.

As if that would bridge a few centuries. Wasn't love supposed to be bigger than time? Bigger than space? Bigger than-

"If you loved me you wouldn't have left," Kyle said, as easy as that.

Two seconds passed and as swiftly as he delivered that crushing blow, Kyle was gone.

"No!" Eric screamed, muscles contracting and spasming like he was fighting an invisible beast. Maybe he was, a psychological one. Or maybe he was the monster, frenzied, insane and clearly distressed.

But he was forlorn and heartsick too, and it made him feel human.

"Kyle, wait! I'm sorry! I love you, come back! Please, come back!" Eric begged, the words being ripped from his abused throat. "I was an idiot back then but, b-but I love you now! I'm sorry for every stupid thing I did! I'm so sorry, Kyle! I'm, I'm... I'm sorry I'm not there anymore!"

His apologies, his regrets, every mistake that a time phone couldn't fix, prompted another round of sobs.

_Anger over sadness. Anger over grief. Anger over this insane mental torture._

"Get these fucking things off of me!" Eric yelled, and in rage he found strength and willingness to get himself the fuck out of there.

"Stop this! Let me go!" Eric demanded, begged. He wasn't bound to the chair, just sluggish and possibly drugged, under the illusion of being held down.

But adrenaline was coursing through his veins.

He tore the wires from his arms, expecting more pain or physical repercussions from doing so. But nothing substantial marred his skin, only red marks from stubborn tape.

Purely aesthetic. A charade. A frightening one, but a charade nonetheless.

The wires hung impotently, Eric's visibility on the monitors dropping.

Those damn things on his head, making him feel like a super-conducting magnet, were the next to quickly go. Eric ripped them off, temples throbbing momentarily.

But like the wires, like his presence on the monitors, Eric dropped. He fell to the floor, scrambling in his freedom. There was still a dried trail of tears on his face and Eric quickly scrubbed at them with his wrists. His skin burned, but he didn't care. He was as adamant to get rid of them as a teacher erasing obscenities and lewd doodles from a chalkboard.
Destroy any evidence that this ever happened, that he ever saw Kyle again and that a version of him like that ever existed.

But whether Kyle's words were manufactured, carefully selected to get the strongest reaction out of Eric, it didn't matter. Because there was truth to them.

Linked to the insecurities Eric couldn't allow himself to think about.

And in the middle of drying his tears, Eric welled up again.

For all their underhand, nefarious methods, Eric had been exposed today. Had been brutally honest, he was faced with how he felt about Kyle and that realisation was so overwhelming, Eric had no choice but to cry again.

Nobody came to see to him as he curled up in front of the chair, buried his head in his arms and sobbed.

"I'm sorry, Kyle. I'm so sorry," Eric whispered, still shaking with tears. "I love you and I'm sorry."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so that went from 0-60 real fast. Anyway, remember when I said that this story would be 10+ chapters? We're probably looking at somewhere between twenty five to thirty chapters. BUT (without giving too much away) THERE WILL BE BIG CHANGE HAPPENING SOON. Both structure and plot-wise. I understand that all this angst and back and forth between Eric and Kyle and, you know, them being separated for eight frickin' chapters and this is supposed to be a Kyman story. What the damn hell? May be a little annoying for you guys, but please stick with me because we'll be going somewhere different soon. And that's all I'm going to say without spoiling the story (I hope I haven't). But if you're so inclined, tell me what you think so far? About this chapter or the fic in general? Your feedback is much appreciated! Hope you enjoyed!
"I'm definitely taking that biochemistry class," Sam announced to his friends who weren't really listening. "How about you guys?"

"Pass," Eric replied, studying the sign-up sheets in front of him.

"Come on!" Sam implored, sitting up on the table he was previously lying down on, sheets on his stomach and sunlight splintering his gaze. "I don't want to be on my own!"

"Then don't be such a nerd," Avery spoke up, eliciting a small wave of laughter from the group.

The AAA had allowed the teenagers a mid-afternoon break from their day of various tutor interviews and introductory seminars. Juggling sign-up sheets and their questionable lunches, Eric and his friends retired to the quad, to eat their food and decide their future in the sunshine. For a minute, Eric could have convinced himself he was in a proper high school, that he was a normal teenager.

"Oh yeah?" Sam questioned Avery. "What are you thinking of taking?"

Avery shrugged, unphased and not biting. "I don't know, math?"

"Because that's cooler," Sam pointed out and Eric smirked.

"At least I won't be on my own," Avery replied.

Sam's eyebrows furrowed and he leaned forward, any further and he would have fallen into Avery's lap. "Who else is taking math?"

" Those twins who live next door to me," Avery answered. "Oh, and Ulesi."

Sam huffed. "Really, Ulesi?"

"Yeah," Ulesi shrugged, shrinking into his sign-up sheets. "What's wrong with math?"

"Nothing!"

"He's just jealous because he'll have no friends in biochemistry," Navin piped up, and when Eric looked at him, he was so enviously cool and dazzling in the sun. Eric had to move his sheets further up his lap.

"Maybe you'll make some friends in there?" Ulesi suggested.

"What, like, literally?" Sam asked.

"No!" Ulesi laughed. "But, wait, could you literally make friends?"

"I don't know," Navin shrugged, before he too sat up with a grin. "Maybe the AAA has the
technology but they're hiding it from us. Let's ask our expert and government mole, well, otter…"

Eric flushed and rolled his eyes, stiffening when a warm hand clapped his shoulder. "Time Child, have the AAA perfected cloning?" Navin inquired.

Eric shrugged the hand away but missed the warmth and closeness, despite how pathetic it felt to even think that. "Not to my knowledge," he muttered.

"What are you thinking of taking, Eric?" Avery asked.

"Engineering?" Eric shrugged. "Computer sciences? Something like that?"

"Biochemistry?" Sam hinted.

"For the last time, no,"

"Is there anything I can do to change your mind?"

"You don't have anything I want."

"Fair enough."

"Hey, Time Child, you're taking engineering?" Navin asked.

"Yeah?"

"So am I!"

"Another reason to avoid that class…"

Eric, however was even more tempted to sign up for engineering class now he knew Navin would be there. He was finding it near painful to think about Kyle since the horrific endurance test, so had been distracting himself with thoughts of his crush. The shift was difficult, tentative and weighty with guilt, and Eric knew he would never escape Kyle, would never want to. But he would take guilt over too vivid recollections of what went on in that observatory. Crushes could never eclipse his feelings for Kyle, no matter how handsome of a package they came in, and especially now he knew how deep his love ran. Undeniable, inescapable love that was five hundred years in the making.

"This is giving me a headache…" Sam groaned, burying his head in his hands.

"Yeah," Avery sighed. "Who knew choosing classes could be so…"

"Tedious?" Ulesi offered.

"Thank you,"

"At least it's better than those endurance tests, right?" Navin said, and Eric braced himself, mind and heart stinging from the unwelcome and unexpected topic change.

Nods and murmurs of agreement broke up the group's silence. They hadn't discussed the endurance tests, Eric supposed it was because they didn't want to relive what happened in that observatory. It was meant to be boxed up, sealed tight and tossed overboard. Lost and sunk in the mind.

But… This is what friends do, isn't it? Eric wasn't sure. It had been so long since he had been a part of a group, he had grown used to isolation. But weren't friends supposed to share even the most painful things? Wasn't there supposed to be relief and remedy in doing so?
"Yeah, uh, what did you guys think of those?" Eric asked tentatively.

Silence save for distant teenage chattering, Eric gulped. Maybe he had jumped the gun.

Avery glanced around the group, before she began, "They were unpleasant-"

"Definitely," Sam interjected.

"But they weren't like, terrifying." Avery continued, she narrowed her eyes at Ulesi and teased. "Maybe somebody blew them out of proportion…"

"Yeah, Ulesi!" Sam joined in, as the boy in question sunk into his seat. "Why did you scare us like that?"

"I didn't mean to!" Ulesi argued. "I really thought-"

"We should have suspected it," Sam interrupted. "You are kind of a baby…"

"I'm not a baby!" Ulesi pouted, folding his arms.

"A wuss then," Eric joined in, although his heart wasn't in it. In fact, it was thumping relentlessly to an anxious beat. "Same thing."

It wasn't ridiculous to believe that Eric's treatment differed to the other teenagers in the education program. He had leverage and influence, spent most of his life with the AAA, and was a conscious thought to them unlike the other teenagers, who were numbers waiting to be exploited, always lesser, always patronized.

But like them, Eric was under the AAA’s thumb, perhaps more aware of his situation. As much as he'd like to believe he was capable of manipulating the AAA as best he could, their actions were becoming increasingly muddled. The privilege of Eric's looking glass was wearing thin, becoming murkier.

Eric wanted to know exactly what was going on, wanted to fight, and wanted to best the AAA and its council if only a little bit. He was stubborn and petty enough to find satisfaction in small victories. But for now, all he could do was laugh weakly with his friends and pretend that he was normal.

Like the rest of them, I'm just like the rest of them.

For the first time in his life Eric wanted to be like everybody else.

Eric thought he could act, could pretend, he was good at that, right? Until he caught Navin's eye. His crush wasn't laughing, wasn't ignorant, he was studying Eric with concern that Eric couldn't remember being the recipient of.

Well, except from one person. But it still hurt to think about him.

"Have you asked Thomas to the spring festival, Kyle?" Butters asked. Conversation rearing its head during a sluggish lunch hour.

"Oh, fuck!" Kyle's response to the innocent question made Butters jump. "I totally forgot about that…"

The spring festival was a casual precursor for prom, usually kicked off by a speech from the principal, reminding the juniors that the next academic year would be their final one in high school,
promising further stress and thoughts of the future.

"We never go to any dances," Kenny commented, more fascinated with his macaroni and cheese than he was with his friends.

"I know, but I should go this year, right?" Kyle asked. "Now that I have somebody to go with."

Kenny sighed and shook his head. "I was worried this might happen…"

"What?"

"You're leaving me out!"

"How am I leaving you out?!"

"We never go to dances!" Kenny exclaimed. "It's tradition!"

Kyle wanted to point out that the tradition of forgoing school dances wasn't strictly out of choice. Dances required dates and since Kenny and Kyle had been single for the majority of high school and Stan's relationship with Wendy was on-off, the urge to couple up, throw on a suit and crowd into a decorated gymnasium didn't come easily.

In fact, Kyle was under the illusion that if he even had a date, he wouldn't see the appeal of dances, anyway. But for the past three minutes he had been dreaming up the image of him and Thomas, pressed close and slow dancing under blushing disco lights.

"How about we start a new tradition?" Kyle suggested. "It had to happen someday! You didn't think we'd skip prom, did you?"

"Yes!" Kenny retorted. "Who cares about prom?"

"I do!"

Kenny huffed derisively. "Now that you have a boyfriend?"

Kyle avoided Kenny's self-satisfied smirk, struggling to admit defeat.

"Maybe," he mumbled, conceding the point before his temper could flare. "And I bet Stan wants to ask Wendy?"

"Fine," Kenny pouted, before his eyes brightened with saving graces. "Hey, Butters, do you want to go to the spring festival with me? As bros?"

Butters looked up from his lunch, his cheeks rotund from food yet to be swallowed. He gulped and blushed, dabbing at his mouth.

"Bros?" He finally asked. "I'm your bro?"

"Sure," Kenny smiled breezily, planting a lazy slap between Butters' shoulder blades. "You're my bro. Just like Kyle and Stan are my bros. We're a bro family!"

Kyle tried to snicker discreetly, but Kenny caught him rolling his eyes and glared. Butters had wriggled his way into their supposed 'bro family' in middle school, aided by his increasingly close relationship with Kenny. Kyle and Stan couldn't understand their connection, or even how it came about in the first place. But their friendship seemed genuine and Butters was nice, compliant company. Maybe they were suited to being a foursome? Somebody eventually had to fill the void.
"Okay, I'll go with you," Butters nodded, before chuckling. "Bro!"

"Awesome," Kenny grinned, but then glanced at a spot behind Kyle's head. "Uh-oh, lovebirds, five o'clock…"

"Huh?" Butters asked beside him.

Before Kenny could respond, Stan and Wendy took their seats next to Kyle on the other side of the lunch table.

"Hey guys…" Wendy said.

"Hey," Kyle replied. "Where've you guys been?"

"Waiting for Wendy to come out of her student council meeting," Stan answered.

"It ran late," Wendy jumped in. "We were talking about the spring festival."

"Us too!" Butters chirped.

"What's the problem?" Kenny asked, taking a sip of Dr Pepper.

Wendy sighed and pushed her bangs out of her eyes. "The school board has been nagging the principal - and the principal has been nagging us - about electing somebody to give a speech about Eric Cartman."

The topic that was hardly ever broached. A sure-fire conversation killer. Each boy shuffled or fidgeted uncomfortably, Kyle simply bowed his head and hoped the patterns of his lunch would distract from the twinge in his chest.

Unfortunately, they didn't, but something else did. How Butters flinched and tensed, hands curling and retreating as he bumped his knuckles together.

Kyle hadn't seen Butters do that since elementary school, the tell-tale sign that Butters was nervous. Kenny too, looked so oddly out of character, like the dark cloud to Butters' rainstorm. A friendly yet solemn hand on Butters' shoulder relaxed him a little, broke apart the cloud.

"A speech?" Stan finally asked, the first to actually say something.

Wendy's shoulders hunched beneath her sweater. "Yeah, since if Eric was here he'd be…" An uncomfortable reminder, she started again. "I mean, if he hadn't…" Another messy start. "He'd be in our… grade… anyway, the school board thinks it will be respectful."

"They actually want to elect someone, though?" Kenny asked, fair eyebrows furrowed. "There's gonna be a vote and everything?"

"No, that's how they phrased it but, no, there won't be a vote." Wendy reassured them, eyes flitting between all of the boys to ensure they understood. "I was actually thinking… well… maybe one of you guys would want to do it?"

Another painful jab to the conversation, who knew lunch could be so awkward?

"Come on, you were his friends!" Wendy said, an incredulous laugh slipped out. "You've known him since preschool! You can't blame me for thinking you might want to give a speech about him…"

"Did you say this in the meeting?" Stan asked, a tad warily.
"No, I didn't want to suggest anything until I knew what you guys thought," Wendy replied.

Kyle thought about what Miss Cartman told him, that day with Thomas at the memorial, all the progress and setbacks and what they were good for. He thought about all of them, every person at this table, in this school, in this town and how in a year or two that emotional cluster would be fractured.

Sometimes things have to fall apart to make way for better things, and when you lose things, places and people, you can still miss them and long for them and leave room for them in your heart but you can fill your life up with other things too. That's what makes life worth living doesn't it? Holding out hope and beautiful distractions, but just because they're distractions doesn't make them any less permanent, any less cherished.

And maybe - no matter how much it hurts in the short term – you can find the strength (or convince yourself you have the strength) to let things go.

"I'll do it," Kyle said. Firm, but somewhere inside he was shaking.

It felt crazy, like a bad idea, and judging by the expressions Kyle was faced with, the feeling was mutual.

"What?" Kenny whispered, then a little louder, "really?"

Before Kyle could answer, his best friend voiced his concern. "Are you sure, dude? I thought you weren't even-"

"I am now," Kyle interrupted before anybody else could. "With Thomas. And I'd like to give that speech," he felt a small, confident smile on his face. "I'm good with words, public speaking doesn't make me nervous, so why not? I think it might be good for me."

He finished with a nod, glancing around the group like Wendy had done before. Gauging people's reactions and reassuring them that this wasn't a mistake or crazy.

"Wow," Kenny spoke seemingly to himself before he smiled at Kyle. "Alright..."

Stan was clearly still cautious, Kyle appreciated that, but he was stubborn. "Only if you're sure, Kyle-"

"Yeah," Wendy cut in, "I wouldn't want you to feel-"

"Thanks, but I'm sure," Kyle smiled, beaming, bigger. So much so that it reflected on his friends' faces. Everybody except for Butters, anyway, his frown hidden in his lunch. Kyle didn't care, after all, he was stubborn.

"Sign me up," Kyle said to Wendy, with a small, affirmative nod.

Eric wasted no time in demanding a meeting with Blavius II, his anxiety and overwhelming suspicion that his endurance test had been manipulated somehow, had morphed into incredulous anger.

And it was when he was angry that Eric took action, constructive or not. It had been less than twenty four hours since he had discussed the tests with his friends and he had been restless ever since; collecting his anger, deciding how to best play the situation when he was faced with the president and his lies, but also trying to figure out why manipulation was necessary in the first place.
Did they think Eric was still hiding something from them? Did he have something in his memories, his thoughts, which they could exploit?

He thought of Kyle and their lucid, hostile encounter. Brief but powerful.

In the privacy of his room he had smiled and breathed in the residual happiness he so fleetingly felt when he and Kyle were reunited. But that soured when he remembered Kyle's words, that nightmare reflection of him and how his mind felt scorched and bruised. Memories were murky, but vivid in sensation. Locked in his chest, so close to his heart that it seared. Like muffled, agonised screams behind bolted doors. But a disconnected visual, doesn't grant deafness or lack of imagination.

They'll use Kyle to their advantage.

An electric shock in six words, lightning bolts slithering through the fissures in Eric's mind. Kyle had said it; sultry Kyle, comforting Kyle, the Kyle who was right all along.

But he wasn't real. He was pixelated, smoke and mirrors, a hallucination, whatever he was, he wasn't Kyle. He was Eric, a manifestation of his subconscious. So maybe what had soothed him and tried to distract him was his own intuition? Had it been right?

Eric didn't know, he couldn't piece together the fucked up puzzle, but the solution lay in Blavius II. And Eric was determined to find it.

But he had to be calm, unassuming, it was best to catch the president off guard. He'd be more prone to slip-ups, tell-tale facial expressions that not even the quickest mouth could recover.

So he didn't storm into Blavius II office, grab that otter's throat and demand answers. Instead, he offered a saccharine smile and followed Blavius II's orders to take a seat in front of his father's old desk.

"Honestly, Time Child, when I heard you wanted to see me I was a little surprised," Blavius II commented, reclining in his chair. Morning sunlight yawned, wide and bright, into the room.

"Really, sir?" Eric replied.

"Well, yes!" Blavius II laughed. "Meetings like this are very rare. I assumed it was because there were no issues that needed raising, but now I suppose there are. What is it? Is it the education program? You're not finding it beneficial?"

"No, it's-"

"So if it's not that, what else can it be?" Blavius II interrupted. Eric's eyebrows furrowed at his abruptness, but knew he could also use it to his advantage. "You have no other responsibilities. Is it about your deal? I will repeat what my father told you, Time Child. You have signed a contract and we will follow those terms."

Eric fought the urge to roll his eyes, he was perfectly aware of his situation and didn't need to be reminded.

"I understand, sir," Eric tried to say politely. "And it does have something to do with the education program, you just interrupted before I could finish."

A cocky smirk, just to sour the mood of the overgrown weasel.

Blavius II's whiskers twitched, displeased. "Excuse me, Time Child. What is the problem you want
"to address?"
Eric took a discreet breath.
"The endurance test…"
Blavius II faced the three words like they were a formidable chess pawn.
The otter squeaked, before he countered. "Yes?"
"I was discussing it with some of the other students-"
"You know the council would disapprove of that?"
Incredulity pricked under Eric's skin.
"Pardon me, sir, but when it comes to agreements and sticking to them, the council – and you – have no leg to stand on."
Check.
"And you do?" Blavius II returned, a smirk self-satisfied enough to match Eric's.
Maybe not. Fucking asshole.
Eric fidgeted, smile wiped away and he avoided pitch black eyes. "Th-that's irrelevant."
"No, it isn't," Blavius II said. "Who are these students? What are their numbers?"
Eric thought of his innocent friends and a strange defensiveness came over him. "Why do you need to know? So you can punish them for discussing things that may incriminate the council? I'm not throwing my friends under the bus-"
"Didn't you once say to my father that the notion of friendship is ridiculous?" Blavius II interjected. Still smirking, and now unphased as he dismantled Eric's upper-hand. "And the council would certainly remember how you threw the UAA under the bus to get what you wanted."
"I was just a kid!" Eric retorted, frustration getting the better of him. "And that's not the point! What I want to know is… Was my emotional endurance test different from the others?"
The president hesitated, eyes fixed on Eric before he laughed.
"Of course it was! We're testing individuals, Time Child! Of course each experience is going to be unique!"
Eric huffed derisively and rolled his eyes. "Those kids aren't unique when you're referring to them as numbers and herding them like sheep!"
Heavy paws smacked – no, stomped – the table. A squeak and a growl.
"Don't antagonise us, Time Child!" Blavius II warned, his gravitas undermined by his impatience. "This sense of morality that you've acquired is still new, remember that."
Eric would have sensed defeat in the veering of the conversation, but Blavius II's snide remarks and harsh reminders weren't making him feel in control.
"We get it, sir! I was a fucking prick and maybe I still am! But have the balls to give me a fucking answer!"

"I'm not – I haven't-" Eric stopped his emotional babbling when he saw Blavius II smiling again under those whiskers. "When I did what I did, I, I didn't think this would happen! That this is what Ubaleh would become! Science damn it, I didn't even think I'd fucking be here to see any of this!"

Eric's eyes were stinging and his voice was water-logged. Blavius II did what his father, what the AAA were good at and ignored him. Eric vowed he would never let those assholes break him, even if he was under their thumb, under contract, imprisoned by them for the foreseeable future because as a little ten year old he had underestimated them.

"And you still haven't answered my question!" Eric growled, he was tougher, he was smarter, and he would get what he wanted. "If you have nothing to hide then you'd answer me quickly then tell me to get out, and I'll gladly walk away if you just tell me the truth."

"But I have, Time Child," Blavius smiled. "You asked me if your test differed from the thousands of others we did and it was. That is my answer. You can interrogate me for hours but that would still be it. The AAA has nothing to hide, Time Child. Especially from you. Now that you've got the information you wanted, leave and I hope you won't have reason to come back."

They were both stubborn it seemed. Eric would have refused and kicked and screamed but he was too smart for that. Besides, Blavius II held the power here, not him. As much as Eric loathed to even think it, he had to follow orders.

He'd get what he wanted eventually, surely and stealthily he would know.

"Fine," Eric ground out. "Thank you, sir."

Eric rose from his chair, not engaging in the formal, false obligation of shaking the president's hand and thanking him for his time.

*Why should I thank that dick for anything?*

Eric bit the inside of his mouth to supress a growl as he made his way to the door. Already planning his next move.

"All our dissuading, all our attempts to make you see that you belong here and not in the past… We really thought he would convince you to stay…"

Eric froze, cold stabs of panic plunging into his chest. He turned around to see Blavius II, still relaxed in his chair.

Eric's mind was screaming, overloaded with so many actions and questions that he just stood there aimlessly.

*To their advantage.*

Eric swallowed, audible and giving so much away, but he didn't care. Or he couldn't find it in himself.

Maybe it was intuition after all, maybe he was right, but now that he was faced with the possibility he wanted to be wrong.

"What's his name?" Blavius II asked, Eric felt like throwing up. "Kyle?"
That name, that boy, that sensation. Eric's salvation and downfall, now he felt like the latter. The reason anger was licking flames at any rational thought and making Eric want to charge over to Blavius II and strangle him.

Eric's fists clenched and he lurched forward, but luckily he was easing out of autopilot. Unfortunately, however, the shock and confusion had settled in.

"What…" He whispered, shaking, struggling for breath as he tried to make sense of it all. "How the fuck do you…"

Eric glanced up at Blavius II, saw his hind legs propped up cockily on the desk and that loathsome smile, and decided that he wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Gritting his teeth and bowing his head, Eric stormed out.

Kyle ditched Stan and Kenny to instead take the bus to Conifer and visit Thomas. His optimism over his speech was still at its peak, he feared it would fade eventually and instead be replaced by ever-present doubt. But for now he wanted to make the most of it.

Thomas' mom let him in, surprised since Kyle very rarely visited without Thomas himself in tow.

After making small talk about school and the weather with his boyfriend's mom, Kyle made his way upstairs to Thomas' room.

Two small knocks on the door.

"Come in," Thomas' voice drifted through the wood, and Kyle smiled to himself before stepping inside.

"Hey," he greeted Thomas, who was sat at his desk with study notes and an open laptop in front of him.

Thomas' eyes glinted with surprise and he grinned. "If I'd known it was you…" Thomas paused and glanced at the door Kyle had shut behind him. "You don't have to knock."

Kyle's shoulders hunched and he stared around the room sheepishly. "Okay, I'll keep that in mind next time."

When he met his boyfriend's eyes, Thomas was gazing at him fondly. While Kyle liked being reminded that Thomas had deemed him appealing to look at, he still wasn't used to such admiration.

He didn't know what to do with his arms, how he should stand, where he should look except Thomas' eyes so he could soak up that gaze that made butterflies conspire in his stomach.

"Come over here," Thomas whispered with a small smile, extending his hand.

Kyle smirked, fingertips brushing and he pulled himself forward. Thomas' fingers skidded over his own, wrapped around his waist and snaked up his arm.

The rough skin of his palm rubbed against the hairs on Kyle's arm and made them stand on end. Kyle smiled to himself, he was still discovering the impact of another's touch. Terse and electric – and when it was Thomas – so very gentle.

Another hand tugged at Kyle's shirt and pulled, making him lose his balance and fall into Thomas' kiss. Kyle found purchase on the desk chair, hovering over his boyfriend.
"So guess what?" Kyle said in between kisses.

"What?" Thomas whispered against Kyle's chin, taking his lower lip into his mouth.

Kyle waited for the beat to pass, for the tiny kiss to reach its crescendo, before he spoke again. "The school board wanted somebody to give a, uh, speech about Cartman at the spring festival, so I said I would do it."

Thomas wilted slightly, and Kyle worried in return.

"F-fuck!" Thomas exclaimed, making Kyle flinch. "Ass!"

Kyle daren't move, even though Thomas had shied away from his mouth. This had never happened before, Kyle tried not to think what could have triggered it.

"I mean," Thomas spoke to his lap, before he looked up at Kyle again. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," Kyle nodded, doubt clouding over his optimism a little early. "That's not a problem is it?"

"No," Thomas replied. "Why?"

"It's just... your tic..."

Thomas smiled, and kissed the tip of Kyle's nose in reassurance. "Yeah, the uh, timing wasn't good on that one," he laughed weakly before pressing a chaste kiss to Kyle's lips. "But I'm proud of you."

"You are?" Kyle asked, his palm resting against Thomas' warm cheek.

"Yeah," Thomas nodded, and Kyle could tell he was sincere. "Doing that takes a lot of guts."

"To be honest, I'm proud of me too." Kyle smiled against his lips, before closing the miniscule gap once again. His hand moved from Thomas' cheek to his neck as the kiss deepened, lowering himself on to Thomas' lap and feeling arms around him.

Kyle's fingers met fabric then, both of his hands on Thomas' heaving chest and one hand blanketing a racing heart.

Kyle moved gingerly to the rhythm of the kiss. Teasing fingers, lips and denim friction. Thomas tried to buck his hips, moans muffled.

"Uh, one more thing..." Thomas breathed out when they allowed themselves release.

Kyle was gone, lost in Thomas' freckles and a neck he wanted to bite, but he nodded anyway.

"What's a spring festival?"

Kyle pulled himself out of his thoughts before he could salivate. Not sexy.

"It's like a dance," he explained, voice threadbare. "Do you want to come with me?"

The corners of Thomas' kiss-flushed mouth pulled up in a smile, before he leaned in and placed a kiss on the column of Kyle's throat. Kyle gasped, let the question hang and allowed Thomas to continue kissing and nipping at his neck.

The hands holding Kyle close, grabbed fistfuls of his shirt. Kyle decided that he too could be greedy and pinched a covered nipple. Thomas groaned, lips still at Kyle's neck, as Kyle smiled and rolled the now hard bud between his fingers.

"Another question..." Thomas managed to get out, although what Kyle could feel rubbing up against him suggested Thomas only had one thing on his mind.

"There's more?" Kyle teased.

Thomas chuckled thinly. "Yeah... uh... Do I have to wear a tux?"

Kyle shook his head and grinned.

"No, it isn't like prom." He answered, before whispering in Thomas' ear. "But we could still go all the way."

It was a gamble, and possibly an ill-advised flirtatious comment when sex was a bridge yet to be crossed.

But they were getting there. Kyle was attracted to Thomas, he trusted him and cared for him. Love? Kyle was still waiting, trying to hurry that component along because being 'intimate' with Thomas like this, felt so great already and love would only heighten that... Wouldn't it? Or maybe Kyle was trying to magic up something he didn't really need to rush.

"I'd, I'd like that," Thomas stuttered after a not so comfortable silence. "If you're ready," he added, kisses comforting.

"I think I am," Kyle nodded. "And in the meantime we can always do this."

"Totally," Thomas agreed, a little breathless.

So sweet and kind and understanding... He never asks anything of you. If you're going to lose your virginity to anybody, it should be him, shouldn't it? Or what's the alternative?

"Your door has a lock on it, right?" Kyle asked as his jeans grew tighter.

Thomas nodded, lips parting into a grin as he nipped Kyle's neck.

"Okay," Kyle chuckled softily. "Good..."
Like pliable machines, Eric's body clock had been programmed to fit the AAA's wake up call. Now that he was back into a more traditional routine (rising early because he had a full day of classes ahead of him), he had to take responsibility and set an alarm for himself. Which would have been easy, if he didn't have to get up at seven thirty in the morning, when he had now become accustomed to rising at nine.

And like most kids returning to school from a long break, the night before his first day as a proper student was restless. In the past, Eric had thought divorcing himself from summer vacation was hard, but six years without school made returning arduous.

Boredom and an inability to sleep made him burrow into his thoughts. Overwrought positive ones, like the fact that he had a morning class with Navin all to himself. And unnerving ones, like his meeting with Blavius II and the revelation that the AAA had indeed manipulated his situation with Kyle to get what they wanted… Whatever that was. Eric was still bidding his time, so as not to set off a panic among the council if he moved too quickly.

With so much on his mind, Eric counted the stars until the dusky, desert morning painted his window pastel.

Operating on two hours sleep, he dressed on autopilot and trudged to the education center. He found his way to class early and tried to sneak in a ten minute nap before the other students – and his teacher – arrived. Feeling someone take a seat beside him, Eric cracked his eye open and saw Navin's smirking face. Eric jolted out of his slumber, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand to catch any embarrassing drool.

"Time Child?" Navin's voice, like a hand breaking through foggy dreams. "Time Child?" The question was followed by a sharp click. Eric was coming to, albeit rather slowly.

A kick to his shin snatched him away from slumber.

Eric groaned, blinking his bleary eyes, still a little disorientated…. Until he saw Navin sitting beside him, looking unimpressed, and a projector streaming notes against a large wall like computer code.

"What was that for?" Eric hissed, his shin still hurting.

"I was doing you a favour!" Navin replied. "You were about to fall asleep."

"I don't give a fuck," Eric grumbled, propping his hand under his chin, a makeshift pillow.

"Nice to see you wasting this opportunity," Navin muttered, typing up notes on his own cheap tablet.

"What?"
"Nothing," Navin sighed, before he glanced at Eric once again. But Navin's eyes quickly became fixed on him, Eric fought the urge to blush or look away, subtly bringing a hand to his cheek to see if he had something stuck to his face. Why else would Navin be looking at him?

Before Eric could come up with a casual way to ask Navin why he was staring at him, his crushes eyes fell to his tablet and the sparse notes on the screen.

"Let me have a look at your tablet," Navin said.

"No!" Eric hissed, pushing his tablet closer to him.

"Why?" Navin asked, careful to keep his voice soft. "What's on there that you don't want me to see?"

"Nothing!" That was kind of why Eric didn't want Navin to look at it in the first place. Eric rolled his eyes. "Why do you want to look at it, anyway?"

"Science, what's up with the suspicion?"

"You're one to talk, wanting to snoop around my tablet…"

"Just let me look-"

Fatigue - along with Navin's scent and warmth being in such close proximity that Eric could practically inhale it - caught him unawares. Before he could argue, or press the tablet closer to him, Navin snatched it.

Eric scowled and folded his arms, heat flooding his face as Navin read his pitiful notes. Not like it took him that long.

"Pfft, you are so far behind," Navin said, not even looking at Eric as he slid his tablet back over to him.

"Thanks," Eric replied sardonically. "But that's none of your business."

Moving his stool away from Navin, Eric shielded his tablet and burning face with his arm. He only had twenty minutes left in this class. He could stomach his anger, his embarrassment and his insufferable crush for twenty minutes. And he wouldn't sleep, no, he would take the rest of the notes that were spread across the wall.

"Here," a stern whisper, but another tablet – Navin's tablet – prodded shyly at Eric's elbow.

Eric looked up and saw that not only was the tablet closer, but Navin was too. Invading his personal space in a way that Eric had never daydreamed or fantasised about before. Maybe because Eric was wholly unprepared, sleep deprived and surrounded by bored students and a strict, otter teacher. Not exactly the romantic or sensual setting he usually envisioned when Navin was this close to him.

"You can copy off my notes," Navin offered. "Just try to be quick, okay?"

"Alright…” Eric muttered, his surprised fingers stumbling over the screen belied his nonchalance.

"And?"

"What?"

"Did manners not exist five hundred years ago?"
Irritating and cheeky, making Eric roll his eyes. But why was he fighting the urge to smile?

"Oh, thank you, Navin…"

"You're welcome, Time Child."

"And while we're on the subject, I'm sixteen. I've out grown out of the whole 'Time Child' thing, okay? Call me Eric, everybody else does."

"Except the otters…"

"Well, those assholes never listen to me, anyway," Eric said, even more distracted by conversation now, but so was Navin. "Must be their fur."

A chuckle Eric had never heard before, his heart stuttered.

"Kind of impractical, don't you think?" Navin grinned. "Having fur in their ears?"

"Okay, maybe not fur…" Eric replied, before chuckling. "Hey, they're sea otters! Maybe they have some saltwater sploshing around in there."

Navin laughed into his hand, and Eric wanted to hear it out in the open, strong and genuine and endeared to Eric.

"What, like if you picked one of them up, tipped them upside down and shook them, water would come pouring out?" Navin asked.

Eric grinned at the image, like anybody could pick the otters up, evolved as they were. "Like a garden hose…" Eric added, regardless.

"A what?"

Eric furrowed his eyebrows, but then remembered. It was easy to dismiss the language barrier, or in this case, the time barrier.

"Right, I forgot we're in the future," Eric teased. "The concept of a garden hose goes right over your head, doesn't it?"

"The future?" Navin chuckled, raising an eyebrow. "No, we're in the present. This is my turf…"

"Really?" Eric asked and elbows touched. "Your turf?"

Navin shrugged and smirked. "My century, then."

Eric's laugh was shallow, caught up in a charming smirk and amber… No, hazel. Now that Eric was close enough, he was staring into decidedly hazel eyes. How hadn't he noticed the flecks of green?

"Cartman!" A voice thankfully snapped Eric out of his haze before he fell any deeper. "Shaveck!"

They both looked up to a see their class staring back and the teacher's own gaze boring holes into them.

*Maybe not so thankful.*

"Anything you'd like to share?" The teacher asked. Eric was amazed that teachers were still using lines like that.
"Um, no," Eric replied. "No, sir."

"Then shut up and pay attention," the teacher said sternly. "You can continue your discussion at lunch when you're clearing out the storage closet."

Navin cursed under his breath, but Eric couldn't bring himself to be disappointed. After all, he had more alone time with Navin. Such a handsome distraction.

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It was pretty easy to drown out the principal's speech when Kyle was immersed in his own. He shuffled his papers, made last minute changes in his mind that he hoped he would remember when faced with a gym of his peers and disco lights.

Wendy had given him some encouragement before he slinked off backstage, Thomas, Kenny and Stan too were there with words of support. Crowds weren't daunting to Kyle, but this subject matter... Kyle didn't want to go into too much detail, something better suited for a counsellor's office than a supposedly light-hearted school dance. He didn't want the letter to read like a eulogy, because a fierce part of him defied the notion that Cartman was dead. He didn't know what a better alternative would be, however. He wanted the speech to be optimistic and respectful, but honest. Writing it had been cathartic, his selfish motive all along, the words were sealed with closure. Or the hope for it.

Applause jolted Kyle out of his thoughts and when he looked up, the principal was ushering him onto the stage from his little podium.

Kyle nodded and smiled tightly, stepping out onto the stage and squinting at the harsh lighting. Did cheap fixtures have to be so bright? And hot, Kyle was sweating already. Maybe the damp prickling at his skin was due to nerves, adrenaline, a combination of both as well as the overbearing lighting?

"Th-thanks," Kyle said to the principal, who was now walking off stage.

Shuffling his papers discreetly, Kyle stared out into the muted crowd. He saw Stan waving, Kenny smiling and Thomas looking at him encouragingly. Kyle looked right at his boyfriend as he took a deep breath.

"Some of you may not have known him, but those who did know him will never forget him," Kyle wasn't expecting the crowd to chuckle. Maybe he should have put in breaks for laughter? But this was a student speech not a comedy routine. He continued. "Eric Cartman was a kid from South Park - where a lot of the student body comes from – and he went missing six years ago. We don't know how it happened, we still don't know where he is, but if things had played out a little differently, he would have been in this gym today." Kyle paused to smirk. "He may have been planning some elaborate prank with Kenny McCormick," just like Kyle asked him to, the lighting guy thrust a spotlight on Kenny. The crowd chuckled and Kenny grinned, with Butters barely blossoming in the excess glow. "Or arguing with me about something totally benign," Kyle added.

"Six years ago, I don't think I would have been able to be so light-hearted about his disappearance," The crowd sobered. "Some days are tough even now, and it's hard to see the light through this black hole he's left in so many lives. It seems like a technicality but time can heal, it can't completely fix.

"I had known Eric since I was in preschool, and along with Stan Marsh and Kenny McCormick, I spent nearly every second of my childhood with him. He was a pretty indefinable person, so it makes sense that his relationships with people were hard to explain. And when you're a kid, when the future is just a tiny speck of dust in an already small world, you don't put that much stock in people. You take them for granted because you can't imagine a day going by without them. Your friends or your
family, even the neighbours who you don't really talk to, they're fundamental without you even realising it. Loss is something little kids shouldn't have to deal with, it's too big of a monster to put under their bed. When Eric disappeared..."

Kyle felt his breath catch, heard the sound when the microphone caught it. Kyle glanced at the crowd, his friends sharing his grief and Thomas' eyes shining with worry. But Kyle was defiant, he'd get through this.

"When Eric disappeared," Kyle continued strongly, "I watched this pillar – this admittedly volatile, complicated, sometimes downright annoying pillar – disappear right before my eyes with no explanation, and getting it back was completely out of my control. These pillars, people in my life who were there because I needed to them to be, had been invisible and dependable until one of them had gone missing. Then you start to cling to the other pillars, you start to doubt their sturdiness. They protect you from the bad things, the harsh things, how the real world sadly is. Where things are random and finite and unfair. Naively, as most kids are, I thought that just one thing going missing wasn't a big deal. That it didn't have a ripple effect. Even Eric, who bugged the hell out of me most of the time, was still important to me most of the time, was still important to me and necessary and I cared about him. Deeply. When he was gone, I struggled under the weight of his absence. Despite my stubbornness and my optimism and the other pillars who were suffering like I was, it felt like everything was crashing down. Like the universe was coming off its axis. When you're a kid, forever still seems possible. Time passes slowly when you're bored or upset or scared. And this emptiness, this doubt and confusion and grief, doesn't let up and it feels like you're going down a road that never ends."

Kyle had submerged into thoughts and epiphanies that were six years in the making, articulating and unravelling webs and webs of muddled introspection. He needed to breathe before he moved on to something lighter. He stared out into the crowd once again, saw Stan, Kenny and Thomas smiling proudly, his peers hooked on his every word, and Butters was smiling too, forlornly, with tears in his eyes. It reminded Kyle of his own stinging, and he continued.

"Growing up sucks," he stopped to allow another warm chuckle. "But it makes us tougher, it makes us stronger, it makes us less reliant on our pillars because we can stand on our own two feet," Kyle smiled. "But we love our pillars and cherish them, and a part of us will always need them. Your tiny world, where bruises are like war wounds, opens up to new people and experiences and you suddenly find yourself becoming bigger and smarter. But most importantly, you become braver. Even when you're faced with all new challenges and paths, when you feel like running back to that old world, your bravery and your pillars encourage you to walk or run or however you want to go through life. And for all of us in this room, this is just the beginning." Kyle glanced up at his peers, all of them standing on the same exciting and terrifying precipice. "You gain perspective. Eric isn't here, but his memory is and that's never going away. Eric isn't here, but my other pillars are strong and I will never take them for granted. Eric isn't here, in front of us -" the spoken words ploughed through Kyle's heart more severely than he anticipated. Even with the adrenaline, bravery and support, acknowledging Cartman's absence was like pulling the King of Hearts out of a tower of cards. The words were becoming blurry, cheap lights fluffed up like cotton wool, still, Kyle soldiered on. "But I can still feel him," the words were shaky and clogged with tears. "I can feel him in my thoughts and in my heart. Always." A simple affirmation, to slap a band-aid over Kyle's emotional punctures and he smiled. "And if he could talk to me right now, he'd probably be ripping on me because speeches are lame." Another burst of laughter and Kyle grinned to himself. "Uh, thank you."

Wolf whistles from Stan and Kenny sliced through the thunderous applause, and the lights caught Kyle's wobbly, grateful grin.

~x~
When Eric arrived at the engineering classroom and its vast storage closet for detention (on the first
day of school no less, a new record for Eric), he was met by his teacher’s sadistic grin, Navin's foul
mood and his smouldering expression. Eric had thought him dreamy when he smirked, laughed or
ran a hand through his caramel colored hair, but his earnest eyes and sweetheart scowl.…
Stereotypically handsome admittedly, (unlike another young man vying for attention in Eric's heart)
but it didn’t dull his appeal. Eric had never seen guys who looked like Navin, outside of his
mom's *Playgirls* he had 'accidentally' discovered.

Their teacher presented them with a large box clattered with unorganised junk, and gave them vague
instructions on where each piece of obscure equipment should go, before leaving them to it.

Navin had huffed and set to work immediately, while Eric pulled up a stool and tried to amuse his
grunpy crush with less than respectful comments about their teacher. Eventually, Eric got an
exasperated chuckle out of Navin, oiling the cogs of conversation.

"So if you could invent anything at all, what would it be?" Eric asked, setting yet another screw-like
object into its allocated compartment.

"Hmmm…" Navin pondered, chin tilted and lips pursed. "Something that helps people, feeds them
when rations are scarce. A machine that can distribute food for every family so nobody will ever go
hungry."

Eric smiled, Navin's selflessness was naïve but undoubtedly sweet. For somebody whose immediate
instinct was to put himself before other people, Eric sure had a soft spot for the compassionate.

"Kind of how in the bible when Jesus fed, like, five thousand people with a couple of loaves of
bread and some fish?" Eric asked with a grin.

Navin’s eyebrows knitted together as he sorted through the box. "Uh, I've never heard that story."

"Have you heard of Jesus?" Eric asked, surprised that he wasn't more incredulous. Culture and
religion had been lost in the tidal wave of new ideology.

"Vaguely," Navin admitted. "Who is he, exactly? What did he do? Besides feed people?"

Eric thought back to obligatory Sunday school lessons, sleepy sermons and his own sins. Maybe his
whole predicament, his situation for the last six years was penance?

"I don't think I'm the best person to tell you about Jesus," Eric chuckled, avoiding Navin's curious
face.

Out of the corner of his eye, Eric saw Navin smile and nod in acquiescence.

"So how about you, Ti-" Navin stopped himself, Eric looked up and waited. "*Eric*. If you could
invent anything at all, what would it be?"

Eric knew the answer, his ultimate dream that would right his wrongs more than a time phone or a
brief vacation to the past ever could. Something to unite and correct, the perfect way to start over.

"A time machine that could take me back to the past for good," Eric answered, hoping they could
move on to something lighter.

"But time machines already exist," Navin said. "Otherwise, the AAA wouldn't be letting you return
in the first place."
Eric snickered sardonically under his breath. "But I haven't told you the best part about that deal, have I?"

Navin moved away from the box and drifted closer to Eric. "Which is?"

Eric sighed. "I'm only allowed to go back once. For forty-eight hours. Nice twenty first birthday present, huh?" Another sardonic chuckle, how ironic was it that humour could be relief for disappointment?

Navin nodded and remarked quietly, "seems a little bittersweet…"

Eric shrugged, what more could he do? He had his deal and the AAA were standing by it. If he even tried to fight or negotiate then Eric would lose his opportunity forever. Kyle's life, his chance at life, was more important than Eric's ego, his injustice. It was comforting in a way, that Eric had somebody in his heart who he deemed just as important as himself.

"Still, forty-eight hours…" Navin seemed to speak to himself, before he questioned Eric. "Have you got anything planned? Things you want to do? Places and people you want to see?"

"Yeah, I have somebody I want to see," Eric nodded, he remembered Kyle's file. "Well… Save," He muttered, mood plummeting.

"Save?" Navin had heard him.

Eric had never had to explain his situation with Kyle, his mission, before.

"Yeah," Eric shrugged, avoiding Navin's eyes once again. "Something bad is going to happen to them, and I… I figure that if I'm going back for a little while, then I should do something about it. Maybe it'll make me feel better? Like my visit meant something."

Not to mention I love them, more than I even know.

Eric had figured out the whole 'saving Kyle' part, but he hadn't given much thought to their inevitable separation. The nobility of his mission, he hoped, would soothe the sting a little.

"Wow," Navin whispered, "that's really…"

Navin searched for a word, while Eric studied him with furrowed brows.

"That's great, Eric," Navin nodded, voice strong and sure.

"Thanks," Eric smiled, already feeling the color rush to his face.

"Who?"

"What?"

"Who are you going to save?" Navin clarified.

Eric gulped, suddenly interested in the hardly-depleting contents of the box.

"Why does it matter?" Eric asked. "It's not like you know them…"

Navin rolled his eyes and sidled up to Eric, a sure fire way to break him and he didn't even notice. "Yeah, but what are they to you?" Navin pressed. "Family? A friend?"
"A, a friend," Eric quickly replied, saving them time so they could move on. But pinning that word on his relationship with Kyle… Did it do them justice? It seemed weak and half-true.

"Maybe," Eric added, rattling his brain for a better term when there was none. "I don't know… It-it's complicated. Just stop interrogating me, okay?" Eric burned at his shakiness, inwardly berating himself.

"I'm not interrogating you!" Navin said, understandably indignant. "I'm taking an interest in you! Like friends do-"

"I don't want to talk about it!" Eric interrupted, facing Navin and he saw his wild reflection in Navin's startled eyes. "If you were my friend you'd know that talking about this makes me uncomfortable and you would drop it!"

Navin's eyes darted rapidly over Eric, probably taking in more of him than he ever had before. They simmered, and Navin sighed. "Alright. You're right, I won't talk about it."

"Okay…” Eric mumbled, struggling to decompress like Navin had. He was still riled, still confused. "For the record," Navin began, and Eric had a feeling he wouldn't like what was about to come out of his mouth. "I only brought it up because I'm concerned."

What?

Eric didn't know if he felt figured out or… Pleasantly surprised.

"Concerned?" Eric questioned. "Why?"

"The other day, when we were talking about the emotional endurance test, something was up with you," Navin answered. "We haven't known each other for that long, but I could tell something wasn't right."

"Wow," Eric murmured, "Maybe you should be taking a psychology class."

A small huff of exasperation escaped Navin's mouth.

"I'm not going to let you change the subject," Navin shook his head, and Eric bristled further. "And that has little to do with psychology, I'm just curious-"

"About what?" Eric cut in sharply.

"Did something happen during your emotional endurance test?" Navin asked, his soft concern was resilient against Eric's razored stubbornness. "Did they do something to you?"

"And why do you want to know, Navin?" Eric asked, dodging a straight answer but squaring up to Navin. "So you have another reason to hate the AAA? To antagonise them?"

His response was misguided and transparent, so Eric wasn't surprised when Navin didn't buy it.

"They deserve to be antagonised and you know it," Navin accused. "Or do you?"

Their eyes were locked, bodies taut to overcompensate for verbal blows and slipping masks. But they were close enough that their noses could have touched.

"After what you did six years ago, after you betrayed us everybody hated you," Navin said, and Eric's eyes fell to his lips, no longer kissable but wielding accusations, and bitter truths. "Do you
have any idea how hurt people were by your actions? How you let your own kind down?"

Eric's eyes – and his anger – rose. "My own kind?!!" He shouted incredulously and he lurched forward, bearing down on his crush. "Nobody here is my own kind, Navin! I'm totally fucking alone! So before you call me a traitor, think about what I had to do to survive! To get back home! Where my own kind really were. And if you really want to get into what I did six years ago, then yeah, I regret it. So much. Because it didn't get anybody anywhere-"

"Is that why you made that speech at the public trial?" Navin countered, bringing Eric back down to Earth and to the fault lying in him. "When you stood up for us?"

Eric didn't respond, stony-faced.

"Without even knowing it, you made people believe in you again," Navin continued, and Eric detected bitterness that he suspected all along. "And Ulesi, Avery and Sam… They may be so desperate and hopeful that they cling to you, but I still resent you, Time Child."

An honest blow that caused Eric's face to crease. Confused by how Navin had hurt him so, but also because he didn't know where this argument was heading.

"Where the fuck are you going with all of this?!!" Eric demanded. "Was that something you needed to get out of your system??"

"I'm being honest with you!" Navin answered, a tentative truce. "Because that's what friends do. Regardless of politics or deals."

Eric folded his arms across his chest and turned away, protecting himself from Navin, openness and comradery.

"I want to be your friend, Eric," Navin implored, sincerity settling their fight. "I want you to trust me,"

Eric felt well-meaning fingers on his arm, but they weren't welcome.

"I've made that mistake before," Eric shrugged Navin's hand away and ignored the hurt expression on his crush's face. "And I know that…" he paused, trying to find a reason to put Navin in the wrong, his last defence and his only option. "You can't manipulate people to get them to trust you, not truly. I've tried. Trust is involuntary."

Navin exhaled and Eric's own mean-spiritedness made him sick.

"Then just know that I don't want to betray you," Navin said. "I want to listen to you, and help you and if you ever decide to tell me what happened in that endurance test, I'll listen. Not because I want another AAA scandal to be outraged about, but because getting things off your chest is good."

Navin let his offer hang for a moment.

"Confiding in your friends is good," Navin added, and Eric could tell he was trying.

Trying to be something Eric couldn't handle right now. But why should Eric admit that was his problem? His issue to work through? When he could blame somebody else?

"Friends would know what stuff to leave alone," Eric said, measured, sour, unfeeling although his emotions were running haywire under his façade. "You act so concerned and like you're in the right, like I'm the freak. You say you don't want to manipulate me? Well, that's what it feels like…"
There's manipulation going on, alright. But you know damn well it's not coming from him.

Navin, pursed his lips, projected guilt. Every messy moment was a dagger twisting in Eric's gut. Making him colder, sicker, and disgusted.

He couldn't stay, he had to leave, and that's exactly what he did.

"Eric, wait!" Navin called out as Eric left the room unceremoniously. "Come back! You can't leave me with all this shit!"

Literal or metaphorical?

"Says who?" Eric shouted, voice uneven.

"Science damn it, you're gonna get us in even more trouble!" Navin yelled.

"I don't give a fuck!" Eric cried.

A bare-faced lie, Eric could hardly stomach apathy anymore.

Inundated with praise, and his uplifting words – warmer than sun rays - boring a hole in his pocket, Kyle had spent the evening floating. And showed no signs of touching Earth when Thomas asked him to dance. Kyle had warned Thomas of his lack of rhythm, but Thomas assured him that lazily waltzing to cheesy love songs wasn't too difficult. Besides, Thomas would lead.

Kyle rolled his eyes, played the reluctant date, but he had been secretly looking forward to the inevitable dance.

"How are you feeling?" Thomas asked as they both swayed to the music.

Kyle stared up at the ceiling of the gym as he thought of the right words. "Better, smarter, like things are becoming clearer."

Thomas grinned, adoring and eyes gleaming. The same way he had looked at Kyle when he was wrapped in his arms, after his bedroom door was locked and virginities were lost. Sweet and fumbling the first time, the two weren't expecting fireworks. But the sex was good enough to make them try again, and Kyle was determined to make Thomas feel incredible.

"I'm proud of you," Thomas said, pressing his forehead to Kyle's. He still felt sweaty from the lights, the nerves, but Thomas didn't seem to care.

"Really?" Kyle smiled.

"Of course!" Thomas chuckled incredulously, tucking a curl behind Kyle's ear and thumbing at his cheek. "You're so brave, Kyle."

Surrounded by dozens of other young couples, Kyle blushed and ducked his head. "It was nothing-"

"Not to that little kid you were six years ago," Thomas cut in, Kyle looked up and felt his heart flutter at his boyfriend's earnest expression. "Can you imagine him giving that speech? That he ever thought he could?"

Thomas was right, why should Kyle be humble? What was stopping him from feeling proud? He was always acknowledging that he would never totally be 'over' Cartman's disappearance. But success doesn't have to be found in completion, it can be found in trying, in progress.
"What you did tonight," Thomas continued when Kyle didn't say anything. "It was huge."

Kyle ducked away again, his fingers curling at his boyfriend's sides. "Thanks," he smiled. "You..."

"What?"

"Just- I can be a little hard on myself sometimes," Kyle admitted, corners of his mouth turning down but his eyes still brimmed with gratefulness. "And you give me a break. I mean, help me to give myself a break."

Thomas offered him a tight smile, before he hedged. His gaze sliding from Kyle's eyes, and his lips brushed against Kyle's pinched cheek. "Well, I love you."

Kyle stiffened slightly in Thomas' arms, instinctively tightening his grip. Another first.

"I love you too," Kyle replied, because the timing was right, and that was about it.

Eric hid for the rest of detention, fleeing to the topmost floor of the building, stretching his legs out on the highest step. He fiddled with his tablet to distract from falling asleep. But his mind was miles away anyway, embarrassed and irrationally angry at what happened between him and Navin. Luckily, Eric didn't have to see him until the following day, and he hoped that a brief patch of time would heal the sting.

When he returned to his quarters, Eric fell asleep immediately. His slumber wasn't blighted by dreams of Kyle or his pissed off crush, just murky, grey static. A fog that his alarm lifted immediately.

A confrontation with Navin was looming, and it seemed the day was keen to hurry it along. To perhaps help Eric get it over with, or because their confrontation promised to be as explosive as their fight the day before? Eric didn't want to know, but he knew it wasn't going to be pretty.

An obnoxious buzz midway through the day told Eric it was lunch already. He sighed, packed his bag and dragged his feet across the campus to join Navin in detention. There, he was greeted by a frowning, stubborn Navin and a less than pleased engineering teacher who had heard of what happened yesterday.

Eric had glared at Navin the tattle-tale, only feeling slightly smug when Navin's honesty bit them both in the ass. Another week of detention to make up for their half-completed job. Again, Eric only felt slightly smug because he didn't want to waste his lunch in a storage closet, not with Navin mad at him anyway.

With instructions repeated and a warning "not to run away", Eric and Navin were left to organise the closet of junk.

"I'm sorry, Eric," Navin eventually said, sparing them from more stilted silence. "For yesterday."

Eric's hand froze, clutching a tiny, plastic cylinder. Surprise prickled in his chest, caught in his throat.

"Okay, cool," Eric nodded, avoiding Navin's eyes. "I appreciate it."

The moment passed and Eric put the cylinder in its assigned compartment, returning to work. Now that he had his apology, he was happy to spend the rest of detention in silence.

"Aren't you going to apologise to me?" Navin asked, and when Eric glanced up, Navin was looking
at him expectantly.

Eric swallowed, guilt transferred like a virus. Eric couldn't remember how it felt to be immune. "For what?"

Navin scoffed indignantly. "For leaving me with all this shit and getting us in even more trouble! It's your fault we have an extra week of this!"

"Well, if you hadn't pissed me off I wouldn't have stormed out and gotten us in trouble," Eric countered. "So really, it is all your fault."

He flashed Navin a mean smile, unprepared for the thrumming ache of arousal as Navin pouted and his pupils blotted hazel irises.

*Does he always have to look so handsome?*

Navin exhaled through his nose and he rested his palms flat on the work table. "If I take full responsibility for all this, will you tell me what happened in the endurance test?" he offered, no hint of subterfuge, just an honest deal about ugly things.

Stark, painful things that Eric was reluctant to share. Try terrified to divulge.

"Science damn it, Navin…" Eric grumbled, throwing down a small bolt into its compartment with the others, pleased by its loud, impatient smack. "People tend to get annoyed by persistence, you realise that, right?"

"But it gets results," Navin smiled cockily.

Eric rolled his eyes, averting his gaze. "Not today,"

In a less awkward silence, Eric pondered Navin's proposal, his persistence, and all he had told Eric yesterday. About confiding in others, friendship, honesty, the need to care for people. It should have been clear what Navin was getting at, but one thing still eluded Eric.

The 'why' of it all. Why did Navin want to know so badly if it wasn't for the reasons Eric's was suspicious of?

He turned back to Navin, arms folded and eyes narrowed. "Why do even you want to know so badly?"

Navin shrugged. "I told you, you're my friend-"

"I know that," Eric sighed, not wanting to prompt round two of yesterday's fight. "And I told you that pushing a subject, putting the kind of pressure you put on me yesterday isn't what friends do. In my experience, anyway."

Navin's gaze fell to the floor in defeat, or perhaps unwelcomed truth. Eric saw honesty there, only a brief inch of it. But it was enough. Eric had been isolated and untrusting for so long, it made him unusually pine for a connection.

"But if we're bargaining then…" Eric stopped himself, considered a stubborn out before he pushed on. "You tell me the real reason why you want to know, and I'll tell you what happened during that test."

Navin's wide eyes rose, and Eric wondered if it he was actually being deceived by such blinding
"Sure," Eric shrugged, trying to convince himself it wasn't a big deal when he could feel his stomach knotting. "As much information as I want to disclose, anyway. Deal?"

"Deal," Navin nodded, marred with a smile. As if his smile could tarnish anything.

"Okay," Eric began, unsure how they were to go about this, a cumbersome exchange. "So, why, Navin? Why do you want to know?"

Navin chuckled, scratching at his arm absently. "I told you how I felt about you because I wanted to be honest," he said, gradually easing himself into the seriousness of the conversation and taking Eric with him. "And despite my resentment, despite the fact that I'll never fully trust you… I like you."

Eric blinked, Navin took it as an excuse to pause before he elaborated. "I think you're funny and driven and smart and intolerant to people's bullshit. I respect that."

Eric snickered, ducking his head away from the compliments.

"I want to be your friend," Navin continued earnestly. "Reaching out to you and caring about you and wanting to know if something is wrong, that comes with the territory. That's why I want to know."

"But how can I trust you?" Eric asked, careful not to let the question disintegrate into a whisper. "How do I know you're not going to tell anybody?"

"I'm great at keeping secrets," Navin said, stepping closer to Eric.

"Everybody says that," Eric mumbled, struggling not to break under Navin's oblivious charm.

"I mean it," Navin smiled. "I have a good track record."

Eric looked up, saw his own unsure expression in Navin's imploring eyes. Well-meaning, Eric realised, but there was still pressure there, harder to shake than molasses.

"For what it's worth," Eric said. "I think you're alright too."

Navin smiled warmly, the corners of his eyes wrinkled. "Thanks, Eric."

Light as well as heat shone through Navin's smile, encouraging and tentatively breaking apart whatever was holding Eric back.

Eric closed his eyes in preparation, and began. "I'm not going into detail-"

"I wasn't expecting you to."

The interjection was jarring, but Eric supposed he needed the reassurance. "Okay, so…” Eric knew he was skirting around the subject, he should just dive straight in. "During the endurance test, they showed me a person. This… person I used to know, who I knew my entire life. It was so real, if I hadn't known any better I would have reached out and touched them. Hugged them, even." Eric smiled forlornly, his ten year old self still missed Kyle's embrace. "I was so glad to see them again. After all this time. But they ignored me, acted like I didn't even exist and… Science, it fucking killed me. Then they said- they said that going back wouldn't change anything. That too much had been ruined for me to try to fix-"

"Wait, is this the same person you're going back to save?" Navin jumped in.
Wow, who knew you were so obvious?

"Yeah," Eric nodded, he might as well admit to it. "Figures, right?"

"Who is this person, anyway?" Navin asked, the boundaries and terms of their deal forgotten, replaced instead by concern. "Your friend?"

"I don't know." Eric said tersely, the heaviness and despair of that observatory all came rushing back. "And I guess I never will. I've just got to rescue them and get back here. No conversations about our relationship, what would be the point?"

A bitter, rhetorical question, but Navin looked almost guilty when he couldn't offer Eric an answer, an alternative.

"Eric?" he said instead.

"Yeah?" Eric asked, praying for a change in subject.

"Was this person..." Navin trailed off, reconsidered his phrasing. "Did you have a crush on them or something?"

The line that Eric had drawn up years ago, to protect himself from the upper hand of others had been kicked, whipped up in the desert sand by a persistent guy who made his heart race.

Figured out.

"Why would you think that?" Eric asked, he still had pride, and the ability to lie.

"Because you seem to be..." Navin wasn't so gifted, he stumbled over words honestly while Eric worked hard to keep control. No slip ups, no vulnerability. "I don't know, you don't call them your friend but you seem to have pretty strong feelings for them."

Eric was determined to redraw the line, keep the curtains shut to protect the person who had holed himself up in his pride for so long.

"No offense, Navin," Eric said, and he felt yesterday's coldness return. "But you don't know me well enough to make an assumption like that."

"What do you mean?"

"Friendships have never been my strong suit," Eric explained, better to have Navin distance himself than Eric try to outrun his persistence, or how close he was to the truth, for that matter. "And my past friendships haven't exactly been successful."

Navin nodded, although confused by the volatile nature of the conversation. "I see..."

Eric could indeed outrun Navin, passively dissuade him from pursuing a friendship. After all, manipulation had always been a skill of Eric's, a great survival tactic. But he didn't want to lose Navin, for reasons aesthetic or unnervingly sentimental he didn't know.

There must have been a way to keep him around, but steer him away from what he was trying to find out.

Throw him off the trail. Eric already had an idea without straying too far from the facts.

"Besides," Eric stepped forward, already nervous and exhilarated about putting his plan in motion. "I
already have a crush."

Before Navin could ask who, Eric grabbed him and pulled him close. Squeezing his eyes shut, he crashed their lips together.

"I love you too,"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth Kyle felt his self-imposed walls closing in, no space left in a corner he had backed himself into. The disco lights, a charming, acquired taste had resumed their abrasive, obnoxious stare now Kyle was under pressure once again.

The classmates who had cheered him and congratulated him were now shoving him, pushing him into a reality he didn't want to address when this night had been so amazing.

Even Thomas, who had proven to be the gentle, uncomplicated, beautiful distraction Kyle needed when his head was filled with unanswered questions and grief, was making him claustrophobic. A newly erected pillar to support him, now crushing him with anxious guilt.

Kyle mumbled an excuse and slipped out of Thomas' hold easily, navigating his way through the crowd until he reached the restroom. Empty, thankfully.

Locking himself in a stall, Kyle buried his head in his hands and gripped his curls.

What the hell is wrong with you?

Kyle didn't know. He never thought there was anything truly wrong with him until he just lied to his boyfriend without even blinking, when he couldn't seem to summon up love for such an amazing person. What was stopping him? What obstacle did they need to overcome? Grief? Lack of trust? A neurological disorder? They had ploughed through all of those things. So young and so fast.

It wasn't a pressure to fall in love that scared Kyle, he kidded himself that would love would come if he just allowed himself time. It was the fact that he lied – that he felt he needed to lie – to Thomas, when all that boy ever did was be honest with him. Even when Kyle didn't want to hear the truth, Thomas came straight out with it. Uncomfortable but necessary.

When Kyle was being stubborn or irrational or just plain scared, Thomas was there. Giving him everything, and Kyle couldn't give him love in return?

No, Kyle had given him something. He'd given him trust, the benefit of the doubt, and his care. He did care for Thomas, so much so that he lied in the first place. After all, who would want their confession of love to be rejected? Kyle not returning the words, trying to explain himself in the middle of the dancefloor would have crushed him.

But what would Thomas be more disappointed about? Knowing that you don't love him or that you lied to him?

Kyle ground out a frustrated cry, wanting to kick the wall behind him. That was the infuriating thing about Thomas. Saintly, understanding Thomas. All his life he had wanted a relationship rid of disappointment and embarrassment over his condition, so he refused to let others feel how he felt. No matter what the affliction.

But how much more could Kyle inadvertently hurt him? Kyle was a good person, but Thomas deserved better. The realisation was a heavy ache in Kyle's chest.
Raising his hands and dragging his palms along his scalp, Kyle took a heavy breath and left the stall. He caught sight of himself in the mirror, and offered the sorry reflection a sad smile.

"Hey, Kyle."

"Shit!" Kyle yelped, jumping when he saw a patient – now startled - Butters lingering by the door to the restroom.

"Oh," Kyle sighed shakily, forcing a smile despite his embarrassment. "Hey, Butters."

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Butters asked, edging forward.

Kyle glanced at his reflection, and half-lied. "Yeah, I'm having a great time. What's up, man?"

The storm cloud returned, casting a sad, uneasy shadow over Butters' face. "Uh, I was wondering if I could talk to you. In private."

Kyle stared around the empty restroom. "Right now?"

Butters nodded, eyes wide and hands tucked behind his back.

"Um, okay..." Kyle acquiesced.

"But maybe we should-" Butters gestured to the door.

"Sure..." Kyle mumbled, it felt nice to detach from his heavy heart and go through the motions, letting Butters lead him out the door.

The dull glow of the hallway lights, their blurry reflection on the gleaming floor, was a welcome respite from the starkness of the restroom and the disco lights inside the gym.

"Your speech was... It was awesome, Kyle," Butters smiled as they strolled aimlessly.

"Thanks," Kyle replied.

"It was really uplifting," Butters continued. "I think Eric would have liked it."

"I'm not so sure he would." Kyle chuckled.

Regardless, Butters offered Kyle a tight smile and he came to a slow stop in front of a locker.

"So, what is it that you wanted to talk to me about?" Kyle asked, keeping a comfortable distance so as not to deter Butters from what he wanted to say.

Butters dropped his head immediately, lemon blond bangs falling to his eyes. But Kyle could see his mouth hanging limply open, could see him bump his knuckles together.

Butters exhaled, heavy but shaky too. When he met Kyle's eyes, his brow was knitted. "It's about Eric," he admitted.

Kyle's mood plummeted further. "Oh..."

Butters nodded, head dropping once again. "Yeah." Hardly audible.

Kyle remembered his speech, how far he had come, he would be an idiot to dismiss his own words.

"Butters, it's okay," Kyle tried to sound convincing, adopting the strong tone he had used for his
He stared at Butters, his knuckles forever knocking together and his creased face was disconcerting to say the least.

"Actually," Kyle said tentatively. "I noticed you acting strangely when I volunteered to do the speech in the first place."

Butters' aqua eyes flickered, a good sign. "You did?"

"Yeah," Kyle nodded. "Look, whatever you want to talk about I'll listen."

A smile twitched. "Really?"

Kyle nodded again, he felt like he was holding them both up. Kyle was weak too, but needed to be strong.

Butters' smile glowed and widened, showing off his teeth. "I thought you would," he said. "You've always been so understanding, Kyle. And compassionate. We've known each other a long time too so I thought – And after you made that speech, it made me see things a little differently."

Butters trailed off, the corners of his mouth drooping as the seriousness returned. "I figured I should talk to you. That you'd, um, understand."

"Okay, well, I'll try" Kyle responded, a little uneasy but he was attempting to hide it. "So what is it?"

"I..." Butters paused, closing his eyes and taking a shuddering, greedy amount of breath. When he opened them again, Kyle was still waiting. "I, I know what happened to him. To Eric."

Kyle didn't move, Butters' storm cloud that he had been probably carrying around for years had burst. Not a heavy downpour, but an insidious, sprinkling shower of paralysis. Crawling over Kyle's skin, seeping into his pores.

"Wh-what?" Kyle whispered, his weighted mind was sprinting as best as it could, but he didn't understand. "What are you talking about? What do you mean?"

"Um, I, I know it was a long time ago," Butters began to explain, unnerved by Kyle's reaction. "But do you remember what Eric was trying to do before he disappeared?"

Kyle glanced away, wracking his brain, but how was he supposed to search his memory clearly when one, giant roadblock confession was in the way?

"Yeah, a little... Wasn't he waiting for a game to come out or something?" Kyle answered, exhausted already. He could feel his hands shaking, himself faltering. "Butters, I don't know. I can't-"

"That's right! That's right a game was coming out, a game console was coming out, actually. The Nintendo Wii, remember?" Butters interrupted regardless, forcibly injecting brightness into the conversation. Kyle stared at him resentfully and Butters dropped it. "And he couldn't wait the few weeks, so- so he came to me and asked me to do him a favour."

The painful lethargy had started to consume Butters too as he jogged his memory, recalled that fateful day. But Kyle could feel no sympathy, all he wanted to know was what happened to Cartman.

"I should have said no," Butters despaired, unable to look at Kyle as he wrapped his arms around
"I didn't think, I didn't understand what would – if I had known I would never have, Kyle-"

"Butters, calm down," Kyle instructed irritably, Butters looked at him then and nodded. "I can't understand you and I can't… I can't think right now. What are you trying to tell me?"

Butters took a few more supposedly relaxing breaths, but it was too late. The truth was nearing and both boys were struggling under the weight of it all. "Eric asked me to help him…" Butters stopped, exhaling before nearly spitting the words out regretfully. "Freeze himself, so he didn't have to wait for the Wii to come out. And I did. I did it, I helped him...

Suddenly, terribly, it all clicked for Kyle. When everything else was slowly crumbling.

"I wish I hadn't, Kyle," Butters implored, stepping forward while Kyle didn't even flinch. "You have to believe me, I regret it so much-"

"Then what the fuck happened to him?!!" Kyle demanded, squaring up to Butters and glowering down at him.

"Kyle, please, I'm so sorry!" Butters stepped back, shoulders hunched, and terrified eyes were pleading. "I wish I had never done it! I thought – he told me – and I believed him – there was a, uh, an avalanche-"

"Where?!" Kyle yelled, uninterested in Butters' babbling, not wanting to elaborate on his fragmented explanation because he couldn't trust his imagination. "Where did you leave him?!"

"Kenosha!" Butters whimpered, shrivelling under Kyle's accusatory stance, wounded but powerful. "Kenosha Pass. And I looked! Kyle, I looked for him but everything had changed, it was all different and the snow was so deep and I didn't think he would get hurt if I left him up there! I just did what he told me!"

Kyle's nostrils flared, his lips were pursed and stinging, along with his nose and his teeth as they gritted angrily, holding back tears. He would not sob weakly, he would not break down. He would get the truth out of the boy who had taken so much away from him. Justice, hell, fucking vengeance if need be. Kyle didn't care. Couldn't care, couldn't allow himself to feel anything else because whatever was holding him together would surely snap under the force of stronger, destructive emotions.

"Please, Kyle," Butters' lip was trembling, sweating from his interrogation and also his remorse. "Please understand, I've been feeling so guilty for so long and-"

Kyle couldn't take it anymore, these restraints were too tight and debilitating and he needed to act. Growling, he grabbed Butters by his shirt, throwing him against the locker and pinning him there, not caring when the boy shouted in fright.

"Understand?!!" Kyle roared in Butters' face.

"I'm sorry, Kyle-"

"Why didn't you tell anybody?!!" Kyle shouted, going through the angry motions. Surges of adrenaline had turned Butters into a rag doll, making him easy to shake. "They could have found him!!"

"I-"

"You killed your friend!" Kyle cried, his knuckles strained bone-white as he gripped Butters tighter.
Wanting to crush him, so he knew how it felt. "You realise that, don't you?"

Butters was sobbing now, shaking his head as he blubbered. "No, no, I didn't. I didn't mean to!"

"That's fucking irrelevant now!" Kyle yelled. "Your apologies don't matter! They're too fucking late! Nothing fucking matters because…" Kyle couldn't say the words, and in his moment of silence, free of rash decisions and anger, he loosened his grip on Butters. Instead he collapsed into the boy, still holding him, but his grip was shaky. "You killed my friend…" Kyle said as he began to sob.

"Kyle," Butters breathlessly got out, chest still heaving. "I didn't mean to-

"Shut the fuck up!" Kyle cried as he threw Butters down. "Six years of waiting for him and for what?!!" Kyle bared down on Butters as he scrambled on the floor, staring up at Kyle and trembling. "I've wasted my time being so pathetic and hopeful, hoping he'd turn up! That's he's fine! But now I know that he's never coming back!"

The words returned to Kyle like a kick in his gut, he clutched his stomach and withered.

"He's never coming back," Kyle whispered, as fresh tears ran over the still drying trails on his cheeks. "God fucking damn it!" He cried, and it hurt.

Kyle looked at the lockers, the closed classrooms, the restrooms, anywhere and anything except Butters. Until he turned to him, seething.

"Why did you feel the need to tell me this?!

"Because I thought you'd understand!" Butters cried, getting to his feet although Kyle was sure he would crumble. "Please, Kyle…"

"No!" Kyle yelled, backing away from him before he even had a chance to come close. "Don't, Butters! Just… Just stay away from me, okay? I can't even fucking look at you right now!"

Kyle brushed past him swiftly, still holding himself together, literally and figuratively as he made his way back to the gym. How could he go in there like this? How could he let Thomas see him like this?

Everything felt irreversibly different. What was the fucking point anymore?

"Wait!" Butters begged, his quick footsteps following Kyle.

"Don't follow me, Butters," Kyle croaked, defeated. He had given up. Six years and fucking nothing to show for it.

Forget success, forget the joys of progress. It was all obliterated. Kyle squeezed his eyes shut, but they burned with thick tears.

"Kyle, please-

"Stay away from me, you little fucking prick!" Kyle seethed, jabbing a finger in Butters' direction. "Don't talk to me, don't even fucking look at me, okay? I don't want anything more to do with you!"

Butters slumped, fair brows raised. "But… But Kenny…"

"I don't care!" Kyle shouted, turning on his heel and storming away.

"Kyle, wait!" Butters made one last attempt, and despite the fucking awful circumstance, Kyle turned
around reluctantly, fixing Butters a cold stare.

"I... I thought we were friends," Butters whimpered.

Kyle's battered heart creaked, he felt brittle and numb and...

Unforgiving.

"Not anymore, Butters," Kyle said, shaking his head. "I can't forgive you for this."

Butters slapped a hand over his mouth, eyes glistening. Kyle frowned, all he could manage, and went back inside the gym.

Inoffensive love songs had made way for thumping basslines and the room seemed to be swarming with strangers. Disorientated and shattered, Kyle quickly found it unbearable.

"Hey!" Kyle heard Thomas' voice over the music. He looked up and there was his smiling boyfriend, Kyle offered a weak smile in return.

"There you are!" Thomas grinned as he approached him.

"Oh, hi," Kyle replied, dabbing at his eyes discreetly and hastily mending himself. Superficial, but it had to do.

"Where've you been?" Thomas asked, question laced with concern. He glanced at the gym doors. Kyle waved it off. "Just talking to somebody," he quickly replied. "Can we get out of here?"

"What?"

"I want to leave," Kyle said, the façade was melting and Thomas' worried gaze was unbearable heat.

"I want to leave with you," Kyle continued, clutching Thomas. Because Kyle may have been a good person, but he was selfish too and he needed his crutch. His temporary pillar. "Please let's just get out of here-

"Alright," Thomas cut in, wrapping his arm around Kyle's waist and guiding him towards the doors. "Where do you wanna go?"

"Anywhere I can get drunk," Kyle replied.

Chapter End Notes

Dare I ask for thoughts?
"Hey, Navin, what's that on your neck?" Ulesi asked, as the group piled out of the education center at the end of the day.

"What?" Navin's eyebrows furrowed as he watched Ulesi study his marked neck. Eric smiled to himself, still able to taste Navin's warm skin.

"You've got a little bruise on your neck!" Ulesi said.

Navin pushed his friend away, a blush dancing on his cheeks that Eric hadn't been able to see in the darkness of the storage closet. "No, I haven't..."

"Let me look," Sam said, grabbing Navin and pulling him forward, tugging his shirt down his shoulder as he did. "Hey, there's more than one!"

"What are you talking about?" Navin demanded, before glaring at a smirking Eric, trying so hard to be oblivious.

It had been a week since Eric made the not-entirely-thought-through decision of kissing Navin. But what did he need to think through when Navin had kissed him back? Clutching Eric and readily tonguing at his mouth in a way that made Eric lose his balance and nearly crash into the work table. But Navin had caught him, bracing him in strong arms.

And Eric wanted to be caught again. Evidently, Navin was prepared to do that a second time, as the next day when the teacher was gone and their instructions had been repeated, they flew into each other's arms, mouths meeting immediately.

"Those aren't bruises," Avery joined in. "They're bites."

"Bites?" Ulesi questioned.

"Are you sure?" Eric asked, his question curious to the others but goading to Navin.

"Yep," Avery replied. "Those are clearly teeth marks, see?"

Sam peered at the bite Avery was pointing to. "Damn, they are!" He chuckled. "So what's the story, Navin? You got a girl you're not telling us about?"

"A guy, maybe?" Avery grinned.

"Yeah! You got a boyfriend, Navin?" Sam teased.

Navin fidgeted nervously, and Eric bristled too, because he honestly didn't know what Navin felt for him. Attraction certainly, or so it seemed like to Eric. Or was it desperation? Hook-ups were pretty hard to come by in this environment, so was Navin just taking what he could get in a storage closet? They were both pretty inexperienced; kisses wild and rough out of hunger and imploding arousal rather than well-practiced, chosen technique. Maybe that was it, were they practice runs for each other? But who did Eric need to practice for?

Kyle?

Eric dismissed that delusion quickly. After all, he had missed his chance, and while fantasies were supposedly harmless, Eric also knew that they could be dangerous in isolation. Hence the initial guilt
he always felt when Navin kissed him, touched him, left his own little bites that Eric was wise enough to cover up.

Eric often wondered if there was no room left in his heart for anybody else, when it was fit to bursting with love for Kyle. Admiration, protectiveness, love, both romantic and platonic, Kyle had exhausted Eric's supply. How had he fallen so hard when so alone?

But maybe he didn't need to give Navin his heart. He could give him his attention, his kisses, his undeniable physical attraction, he could give him his all in that department. He was dedicated to Kyle, but that didn't mean he couldn't give Navin clumsy, adolescent rapture. Especially when Navin was willing to return the favour.

And despite his forlorn commitment to Kyle, his strange guilt, being with Navin felt undoubtedly good.

"Shut up!" Navin eventually cracked, shoving Sam away, who was still in peals of laughter. "No, I haven't got a boyfriend."

"So you're just fucking them then?" Sam asked, tinged with genuine curiosity. Ulesi and Avery fell silent too.

"No!" Navin snapped. "I'm not doing that either!"

Navin turned to Eric with a scowl, one that Eric merely shrugged and grinned at. But it seemed to stoke the frustrated fires, wavering Navin's scowl just so.

Kyle awoke to a growling stomach, and his pounding head had drilled a crater in his memory. Face half-buried in his pillow, he tried to recall last night with bleary eyes and through his mind's foggy looking-glass.

The speech, heart fluttering on paper wings. The affirmation before it was dismantled. Kyle blinked, squeezing his eyes shut and forcing the memory out too.

The dance. Soft lights. Soft music. Thomas's soft eyes and touch. And beautiful words. Kyle smiled and his body creaked. He managed to twist around, arm falling and hoping to be caught. But Thomas wasn't there, not pressed against him in his small bed.

Then guilt. Closing in on Kyle in a bathroom stall. Frustration and impatience, but Kyle had cheated, skipped too far ahead. But even if he got he wanted, if Thomas got what he deserved eventually, Kyle couldn't outrun the sour miasma that would plague them.

Kyle grumbled then, twisting his body back around and pulling the covers over him.

Then Butters talking to him. Crushing him, shattering him, breaking his heart. Tears and anger and accusations, all things unforgiveable.

It was then Kyle wished the crater's reach stretched further. The puddle – no, fucking tidal wave – of alcohol that Kyle felt he had consumed the night before, flooded and blanketet until it thinned out at-. Thrumming basslines, abrasive lights and Thomas barely holding him up. He could draw his own bleak conclusions from there; He and Thomas raiding the shelves of the liquor store with their fake IDs, Thomas laughing nervously while Kyle shouted and cackled and dribbled and sucked the neck of a beer bottle like it was a pacifier. And then when Kyle threw up Thomas had probably rubbed his back and kept him afloat with gentle assurances. When Kyle cried for reasons unbeknownst to
Thomas, he probably held Kyle close and offered him empty platitudes. Kyle flirted clumsily, dragged his sopping tongue over Thomas' neck and slurred in his ear, wanting to fuck him just because he could, and maybe an orgasm would catapult him into oblivion. For good, Kyle hoped. But Thomas had tucked Kyle in instead, found his own way home.

Probably for the best. I'll bet he was so disgusted that he couldn't bear the thought of even sleeping next to you.

Kyle groaned, burying his face into his pillow and he succumbed to the sting of his own berating.

Another drilling. This time, it was the sound of his ringing phone vibrating against his nightstand. Possibly the ugliest combination of sound during a hangover.

A grumble and Kyle sat up to retrieve it. He squinted at the picture of a passed out Kenny, eyes shielded by novelty Pineapple sunglasses.

"Hello?" Kyle croaked.

"Kyle, I need you to meet me at Stark's Pond."


Kyle heard a small tut before Kenny replied, "I'll tell you when we get there. It's urgent."

Kyle exhaled, eyes drooping shut. "Dude, I'm really hungover," he said, rubbing his face. "Can't I meet you at sizzler instead? I need coffee and something to-"

"We can't," Kenny interrupted. "I need to talk to you privately, okay? So will you come?"

There was clearly no time for deliberation, but Kyle felt himself sink into a pause and lethargic thought. He trusted Kenny sure, how could he not? But this person on the phone seemed so far removed from the Kenny Kyle had known all his life. He sounded scared, the wrong side of serious and when everything else seemed to be going to shit he suspected what Kenny wanted to talk about wasn't going to be pleasant. Kyle was unsure if he could handle it, alone at least.

"Can Stan come with me?" Kyle asked.

He winced at the silence that followed.

Kenny sighed. "Fine," he said eventually. "I guess he should hear this too… Yeah, ask Stan but nobody else."

"Who else would I ask?" Kyle said, getting a little pissed off, only exacerbated by his hunger and already low mood.

"Just hurry, Kyle," Kenny said, then huffed. "Call Stan and I'll see you at Stark's."

"…Okay" Kyle weakly offered as a response, listening to the abrupt, disconnecting beep for longer than he should have.

Possessive fingers clawing into his side barely jolted Eric out of his increasingly hazy arousal. A resuscitating bolt of lightning, but lucidity was slippery and with Navin's body pressed close and his tongue sparring with Eric's own, it was easy to slide into self-indulgent pleasure.
Eyes softly closed as he gripped and squeezed and kissed hard, Eric nearly forgot himself. And Navin; his burning cheeks only growing hotter when soaking up Eric's own warmth, his teeth a perfect path for Eric's tongue to stroll down if he so wished, and speaking of tongues, Navin was doing a pretty good job of establishing dominance in Eric's mouth. And, science, the muscles on his back, rising and jumping gracefully, enviously fluid like flowing water, always evading Eric's yearning fingers.

The sheer taste and sensation could have rivalled the sight, Eric was sure. If he could keep his eyes open. In the dark, he could speculate, separate the physical and let a weak stream of thought drift and settle wherever…

Would Kyle's shoulders have felt like that?

Eric exhaled irritably through his nose, hopefully disguised as a muffled whimper.

Fuck, he's rough. We're well-suited… Would Kyle be gentler? Would I like that?

A wet, audible moan in Navin's mouth and Eric burned for an entirely different reason. Navin offered an encouraging moan back, Eric nearly sighed in relief at his dodged bullet.

If things had played out differently…

Eric tangled his fingers in Navin's hair, trying to grasp reality.

He could have been my first kiss.

A sobering twinge was too much of a strain on Eric's already racing heart. And with Navin's mouth still pressed hungrily against his own, Eric couldn't breathe, couldn't think when somebody else was clinging to him like this.

He released Navin's mouth, trying to conceal his relieved breaths with unceremonious neck kisses. That warm skin, it still tasted good. Eric nipped and sucked and Navin quickly became used to the jarring change.

"Hey so-" Eric said breathlessly, then another kiss. "Before I make new ones-" a love bite, closer to the jawline. "Try finding a way to cover up those lovebites, huh?"

Eric felt Navin stiffen, a residual sourness from Avery and Sam's teasing yesterday. "Or you could not give me any?" he countered.

"But then how would I drive you crazy?" Eric smirked, he had already won. He nipped at Navin's neck, felt him shiver and heard him gasp.

"Oh, shit…" Navin whispered, sinking into Eric's non-committal hold. "Yeah, that's true. I don't think I could give these up."

"Besides, I found a way to cover mine," Eric said. "I actually care about getting caught."

"You?" Navin laughed, and Eric looked up. His lips were flushed nearly red. "You're, like, a notorious rule breaker," Navin added, fingers weaving seamlessly through Eric's hair.

"I think getting caught would be hot," Navin grinned, pressing his forehead to Eric's.

Eric shook his head and laughed. "It really wouldn't."

"Oh yeah?" Navin challenged. "I'll prove it to you…"
Eric arched an eyebrow at Navin, his sceptical expression decimated when Navin pushed him against the work table and latched his mouth onto Eric's neck. With a short, breathy cry, Eric clung to Navin's shoulders, short, electric storms rolled down his spine as he found himself in Navin's tantalizing thrall.

Navin's hands had become restless, possessing a short attention span that Eric would never have associated with focused, staunch Navin. It was satisfying, to know that he could unveil facets to Navin's personality, perhaps ones that Navin never knew existed.

Master manipulator.

One hand crawled up Eric's stomach, his heaving chest, before a palm pressed against a sensitive nipple. The bud rose to attention immediately beneath Eric's shirt and Navin squeezed a fleshy handful.

Unwelcome and peculiar.

"Don't do that…" Eric mumbled, twisting away from Navin slightly.

"What?" Navin asked, gleaming eyes tried to search Eric's face.

"You don't have to fucking grab my boob," Eric said, shoulders hunching. "I know I'm chubby…"

"Why is that a bad thing?" Navin asked, genuinely curious. Eric blushed and smiled shyly to himself, relieved when Navin pulled his hand away. Not pushing the subject any further, he returned to littering Eric's neck with hickeys and his hands continued their innocent roaming.

Eric closed his eyes, trusting his other senses. But clearly, he couldn't trust his thoughts as they swung back around to Kyle in no time. After all, these were things he had imagined Kyle doing to him, when boredom and sexual frustration got the best of him. A late night expectation, like the stars or the newly introduced city black-out. Before, he could only speculate what a touch to his chest would feel like, what a passionate embrace, a pair of lips on his neck, a lovebite, a… kiss… would feel like. Now he knew the closeness, the warmth, the wetness, the sting. Navin had accommodated him with all that and Eric had returned the favour.

But there was still something missing, an emptiness, a delusion he couldn't fully recognise. Or didn't want to recognise.

He wanted to do all of this with Kyle. Disappointment gnawed at him, only half-immersed in the moment because he didn't just think Kyle looked hot in his high school photo, or that his fantasy had fallen short, but…

Despite how stupid it was, despite how crazy, inconvenient and borderline sad it was, he was in love with Kyle. The idea of him, his memory, the damn photo, how he had always made Eric feel, now steeped in time and perspective.

Kissing another guy? Letting another guy put his hands on him? It was wrong and depressing and if Eric hadn't already made his decision, hadn't let himself get swept away by arousal and his crush, then he would have started crying.

No going back, Eric realised, he had made his bed.

A hand on his thigh, waiting fingers like a key jamming into a stubborn lock.

No, Eric could go back. All he did was manipulate, and in turn he always got what he wanted. Or
"That's what he used to believe."

"Wait!" Eric nearly yelped, batting Navin's hand away.

Now adrenaline was responsible for his pounding heart.

"What now?" Navin snapped.

Eric balked, indignant at Navin's tone but he wouldn't let himself be ruffled. Manipulation was what got him here in the first place, and it would get him out. And that meant not revealing anything, mask on and guard up.

"It's just-" Eric stopped himself, he had to lose the shakiness. "If this is going to go any further - wherever that may be - I don't want it to happen in a storage closet. It's not very romantic."

"Well, where else can we go?" Navin asked, hands falling to Eric's forearms. "We can't do this in my house, it's tiny. Plus, I have five brothers and sisters. We'll definitely get caught."

"I thought you wanted to get caught?" Eric teased, diverted.

"No, I meant the idea of getting caught was hot," Navin clarified, forehead pressed against Eric's and he smiled at him. "Don't try to twist my words."

Eric returned the smile, and it was genuine. Maybe he had panicked? Overreacted? When it came to Kyle, why was Eric so unstable, so volatile and close to crumbling?

"If you don't want me to twist your words then maybe we should put an end to this," Eric half-joked, offering Navin an out regardless of how he felt because why should he have to put up with this mess? This emotional wreck? Even Eric didn't want to be himself right now, why would somebody voluntarily stick by him?

Navin smirked, nuzzling Eric regardless.

"Is it possible to have a straight conversation with you?" he asked.

Eric was careful not to squirm in Navin's hold.

"Yes it is," Eric answered what was probably a rhetorical question. "Let's have one right now."

"Alright," Navin nodded. "Back to storage closet alternatives, we can't go to your place either because of all the security. So, it's not exactly pretty but..." Navin threw his hands up, and Eric glanced around the closet. "This is all we have."

If only Navin knew how condemning and transcendent his words were, Eric stared at him sadly.

He couldn't get what he wanted, not ever in the way he imagined, dreamed about and yearned for. Kyle was a lost cause, a perfect, painful could-have-been. Regretting the past, wishing the future along and dismissing the present, Eric wasn't satisfied with the life he was living, but he could be. If he gave himself the chance.

And maybe he could start by giving the boy in front of him a chance too.

"No, it's not," Eric smiled, reaching out for Navin's hand.

A smile flickered on Navin's face too, he linked their fingers together. "What do you mean?"
"We could go to the ostrich stables," Eric replied, eyes glinting.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes!"

Navin eyed Eric up warily, brows furrowed. "So… This isn't romantic, but that is?"

Eric rolled his eyes. "Yes, Navin!"

"But it's dark…"

"No," Eric smiled smugly, tugging Navin closer. "It'll be secluded and private and the moonlight is bright enough."

"It's cold!"

Eric sighed. "As much as I'd like to see you naked, I'm not expecting you to strip off." He shrugged. "Worst case scenario, your ass gets chilly."

Navin lowered his gaze and mumbled, "I don't want the ostriches to stare at me…"

"For science's sake, they're not going to see anything!" Eric laughed. "There's a smaller stable that was abandoned when Blavius II ordered a new flock. We'll go there, okay?"

Spinning that story to Navin, Eric could have almost convinced himself that the abandoned ostrich stable was the perfect place. The quiet desert night lit by the moon, he and Navin under a cobalt, star speckled sky, holding each other close to keep warm, and a stable? It was like the setting for a Harlequin romance novel, probably out west somewhere starring a wide-eyed city girl and a lowly farmhand… Not that Eric had read those cheesy books before of course, but living one out seemed thrilling.

"Trust me, it'll be great," Eric said softly, but he supposed that somewhere down the line, Navin would regret buying into the first part of that sentence.

Navin smiled lazily as he pondered Eric's proposal, before sighing, "Fine. Rendezvous at the ostrich stable it is, then."

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After Kyle had dragged himself away from the disconnected conversation, he texted Stan. Kenny's urgency was contagious it seemed, and after the message was sent Kyle went about brushing his teeth and getting dressed, hoping Stan would reply as quickly as possible.

Kyle was pulling on a pair of jeans when his phone pinged.

'sure dude :)'

That small smile from his best friend was a worn comfort, but a comfort nonetheless.

"That's all he said?" Stan asked, hands in his jacket pockets. "To meet him here?"

"Yeah, he said it was important," Kyle said as they waded through the snow-covered trail leading them to Stark's. There had been a twilight flurry, and it was early enough still for the clouds to be bloated with powder. Wispy, downy even. But Kyle couldn't think about such pillow-like softness. "And that he had to speak to me privately."
"Privately?" Stan stopped in his tracks, eyes wide. "He knows I'm coming, right?"

"Yes, he knows you're coming! I asked and he said you should hear this too. Though he didn't sound too happy about it."

Stan frowned in acquiescence, trudging through the snow.

"Why are we freaking out, anyway?" Kyle laughed, but he couldn't conceal his shakiness behind the mountain silence. "It's Kenny!"

"I wasn't freaking out until you said he wanted to talk to you privately!" Stan argued. "How did he sound on the phone?"

"You're not gonna freak out and run away if I tell you?" Kyle teased.

"Shut up, dude," Stan muttered, elbowing his super best friend and almost losing his footing himself. "No, I won't freak out."

Kyle had to be honest, he had to let Stan know what he was possibly in for. "He sounded edgy, kinda scared."

"Of what?"

"I don't know," Kyle shrugged, voice and mind weighty. "Guess we'll find out when we talk to him."

"Nothing happened last night, did it?"

Kyle bristled. That was the one thing he couldn't be honest about. His weak, stubborn heart would be crushed by the words coming out of his mouth.

"Well, if it did I wouldn't know," Kyle replied, burying his head in the alcohol-induced black hole instead of facing an unshakeable reality.

"Yeah, about that," Stan began, shifting closer to Kyle. "Where did you and Thomas go last night?"

Kyle sighed and laughed sadly under his breath. "I don't remember... Well, I remember leaving, going to the liquor store and then... Nothing. Although I probably embarrassed the hell out of myself."

Stan nodded, although Kyle didn't want his pity. He wanted last night, these past six years to be a blip, a bad dream that he could recover from.

"Did you see Kenny last night?" Kyle asked, bringing them back to the present.

"Nope," Stan answered. "I hung out with Wendy."

"You were her date, that's to be expected."

Stan smiled good-naturedly, but Kyle knew that this obviously wasn't where he wanted to be on a Saturday morning. Kyle wasn't too excited either. He didn't want to ruin Stan's fun, force him to plummet from the high of what was probably a good night. Kyle was just too busy reeling and breaking and drowning himself in cheap liquor to think about others, even his best friend.

"Did you at least have a better night than me?" Kyle asked, trying to be perky.

"Hey, you could have had a good night!" Stan laughed. "You just can't remember it..."
Kyle rolled his eyes but smiled anyway.

"But, yeah, it was awesome..." Stan nodded distantly. "Fun..."

Kyle continued to smile as they trudged along silently, reaching the sparse treeline to Stark's Pond. Conifers like soldiers sinking in icy mud. The pond a frigid shard of glass. And Kenny, perched atop a bench with shoulders hunched.

"There he is..." Kyle muttered, eyes fixed on his friend in the distance.

"He looks weird," Stan remarked, remaining by Kyle's side.

"He looks pissed," Kyle added, warm despite the chill. An accusing, flooded headlight kind of warmth.

Blissfully ignorant, Stan walked first with Kyle quickly trailing behind him. Kyle adopted Kenny's hunched shoulders, eyes warily trained on his blond friend, as if retreating into himself like a frightened animal could quell the anxiety sloshing and rising in his gut. Seasick and inebriated.

"Hey!" Stan broke the silence as they made their way over to the bench.

Kenny turned his head, face impassive but eyes wide and tired.

Kyle gulped, then spoke. "Hi, Kenny-"

He didn't get a chance to finish his sentence – whatever it was – before Kenny jumped from the bench and stormed over to them. What Kyle first thought was impassivity, was actually a mask disguising anger, and the paint was peeling.

"What the hell did you do to Butters last night?!" Kenny demanded.

The memory of that confession came hurtling back, along with Kyle's anger. It seemed he was dealing with two destructive evils. Decimating anger and crumbling sadness.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kyle offered, emerald eyes boring into sky blue ones.

Kenny huffed and his face creased, disgusted almost.

"Come on, Kyle!" He pressed, unfussy like he was on the phone but so much rawer. "I was comforting the poor guy all night!"

"Kenny, dude," Stan spoke up softly. "Kyle and Thomas left early last night..."

Kyle cringed, squeezing his eyes shut momentarily because Stan's misguided defence stung, like all his actions had in the past few hours.

Kenny had turned to Stan when he said. "I don't think Kyle told you the whole story."

He raked his eyes over Kyle, his nose twitched and he grimaced. "You fucking reek of booze, man..."

"Shut the fuck up!" Kyle yelled, shoving Kenny away. "And while we're on the subject of omissions, maybe you should ask Butters why I had to do what I did in the first place?"

Kenny's eyes simply flashed, his lack of reaction confusing Kyle greatly. He wanted to shove him again, make him plead for the devastating information.
"What did you do, Kyle?" Stan asked, gingerly stepping toward his best friend.

"That little prick got what he deserved," Kyle growled, eyes searching Kenny's face. "And if he had told you everything, you would see it my way too."

"What's going on?" Stan's voice behind the two boys who had suddenly found themselves in a stand-off.

Kenny's blind defence of Butters, his misdirected (or so Kyle thought) anger, left Kyle to assume. But his assumption frightened him, hurt like maggots on an open wound.

"You know something, Kenny..." Kyle ground out, prying rather than pleading.

"Guys!" Stan shouted. "What's going on?!

Kenny glanced at Stan briefly, before turning his attention back to Kyle. "All I know is that you fucking flipped out at Butters and now he's devastated. He told me all that you said..."

Kyle dropped his gaze, shame prickling, crawling acidic-like up his throat.

"Did you really pin him against that locker?" Kenny asked quietly, rage rounded with soft disbelief, disappointment. "He was fucking terrified, man!"

"Tell me what the fuck is going on right now!" Stan demanded shakily.

"You're not listening to me, asshole!" Kyle cried, stepping forward, closing in on Kenny. "All you have is his side of the story! And he's a fucking liar! He acts all innocent and sweet, but he's a lying coward! Go ahead and ask him, if he has the balls to tell you the truth-"

"I know the truth!" Kenny yelled.

Kyle had pressed and prodded and now his assumption broke open, ugly and terrifying.

"You do?" Kyle whispered, pained and creasing his features.

"Yeah, he told me," Kenny nodded, everything was quiet and slow. "I know it was an accident."

Incredulity roiled, a hot storm melting the cold truth, so warm that Kyle could barely breathe.

"And you believe him?" Kyle asked, voice sharp and loud.

"Of course I do!" Kenny snapped. "What, do you really think that Butters meant to leave him up there?"

With his jumbled, resentful thoughts spat back at him, Kyle shielded himself. He wrapped his arms around his chest and bowed his head, holding himself together.

"You need to stop fucking kidding yourself, Kyle!" Kenny jabbed a finger into Kyle's chest, and Kyle looked up, affronted. "You need to stop finding a reason, or somebody to blame! It's not Butters' fault or Cartman's fault, and it's definitely not your fault! Sometimes horrible things just happen!"

Kyle's eyes slowly rose to meet Kenny's, and he saw the wild, imploring urgency there. He turned to Stan, confused and shivering in the spring chill. But they couldn't help him, his two best friends. He had been crushed irreparably and all was left was a feeling of inertia. Like Cartman, he was unreachable.
"Well..." Kyle began, turning back to Kenny, voice as thin and crackly as static. "It's nice to see you've accepted this so quickly. Some fucking best friend you are."

With that, Kyle turned on his heel as best he could now that it was half-submerged in snow. He kept his tight, solitary grip on himself as he walked, he wanted to cry but the sensation simply rattled. Hollow.

"Oh, so now you're gonna blame me?!" Kenny called out, laughing meanly. "Fucking classy, Kyle! But you know what, this is so typical! Typical of how fucking pathetic you've become since Cartman went missing."

Stan sighed. "Hey, Kenny, that's so-"

"No, Stan!" Kenny protested. "He needs to hear this!"

"I still have no idea what's going on!" Stan shouted.

"Fine. Cartman's dead, Stan," Kenny said, and Kyle shook his head and tried to pick up his pace. "He's frozen somewhere on Kenosha Pass."

The pond, the mountain setting, was already close to silent. But something fell, plummeted, and Kyle could tell that something was Stan. Reeling and stumbling, trying his hardest to process the news.

And remembering that he wasn't the only one dealing with a loss, made Kyle feel incredibly selfish. He couldn't feel sorry for himself, he had to do what was right. But there were too many variables, too many wrongs. Now, what felt right was defending Cartman, defending him from his 'best friend', so morbidly at peace and disturbingly not giving two shits.

"Yes," Kyle snapped, anger driving him forward – rather backward – returning for round two so it seemed. "And as you can see its fucking killing his best friend! Look how devastated he is! But of course, being at peace and so fucking pragmatic is easy for him, because if he was honest with himself he'd have nothing more to do with Butters."

Kyle was standing only a few steps in front of Kenny when the accusations had finished spilling from his mouth. Stan had frozen, wide eyes darting back and forth between his two friends. But Kenny was seething, though Kyle knew he was trying to hide it. Eyes stormy and frosty air rolling out of his nose like a bull seeing red.

"Then again," Kyle inched forward even more, not thinking about what he was saying until the words passed his lips. "I guess Butters is an easy lay, and keeping your fuck buddy is more important than doing what's right for your so-called 'best friend'."

His mindless vitriol was cut short when Kenny swung his fist, colliding with Kyle's jaw.

"Kyle!" Stan shouted in alarm.

Kyle stumbled, trying to cradle his jaw though it hurt to touch. A different kind of inertia now, shock and hurt and regret. They all blurred into the color of a bruise, and before Kyle had a chance to explain or apologise, Kenny had shoved him to the ground. Kyle made no effort to get up.

"Kenny, Jesus Christ!" Stan yelled, trying to push him off. "What the fuck-"

But Stan was shoved back too, and Kyle gritted and bared his teeth at his friend on top of him.

"You have no fucking idea, Kyle!" Kenny cried, pinning Kyle to the ground. "Knowing that Cartman
is gone? Forever? It's been eating me up, it's still eating me up…"

"Still?" Kyle nearly spat. "What the hell are you talking about 'still'?"

He watched Kenny seethe and waited for an answer. But Kenny's expression morphed, sad and shaking, the pain refracting and Kyle had to bite back an empathetic whimper.

Kenny softened his hold on Kyle and sat up then, leaving Kyle to scramble to his feet, with Stan rushing to help him up.

Kyle wasn't even standing up straight when Kenny admitted, "Butters told me two years ago."
The mild night was littered with stars, and as Eric sat on the desert floor waiting for Navin, it seemed like the universe was encouraging his romantic night. Imploring Eric to let his inhibitions and whoever else go. Lovely and enchanting as the constellations were, their charm was bittersweet. They stung Eric's eyes, gripped his heart and mellowed the mild excitement stirring in his stomach.

In the glittering horizon, in the stars crawling up the night wall, Eric always saw Kyle. His name scrawled by Eric's clumsy hand in the heavens, a half-closed window to the past. He should've looked away, should've looked in the direction of which he had told Navin to go, waited for him, but the sky was so beautiful. And when Eric was sick with anticipation or fear or guilt, he really had nobody else to turn to but Kyle. His only sure thing, missing for so long. In files and photos and missions, maybe even starry nights like this, Eric remained tethered to him. Connected.

If Eric did... whatever he was going to do with Navin tonight, wouldn't that be Eric effectively severing that connection? He would still miss Kyle, care for him deeply and want to save him. But that love, a love Eric tried to push away and deny for so long because it was so pathetic and inconvenient... Eric had grown fond of it, and if he gave himself to Navin in whatever capacity then it would be evident that his love for Kyle had been cheapened, or sullied.

Eric didn't know if he could carry that knowledge around, weighty and slowly rotting because of what happened here tonight. Something beautiful and imaginary would become ugly and all too real, a reminder of his betrayal. Honestly, Eric didn't know if he could live with himself.

But it wouldn't be in vain, would it? He wasn't throwing Kyle away for just anybody, it was Navin. Charming, handsome, kind, strong Navin. Who Eric had kissed first, who had went along with Eric's plan to meet him here. Eric was the instigator for every action leading them to this point, if anybody was to blame for the messy emotions roiling around inside him, it was himself. Which fucking hurt, because, if this was all his doing then that meant he was voluntarily letting Kyle go-

*Who said anything about letting him go? I don't want to let him go. I can't let him go, it isn't as easy as that. I want this to happen with Navin, but that doesn't mean I want Kyle any less. Love him any less. Maybe that's stupid, since it's not as if-

He would ever get the chance to be with Kyle, anyway.

Stubborn as he was, delusional as he was, he knew he had missed his chance. Eric should've considered himself lucky that he was even allowed to see Kyle, and he counted down every day until that could happen. He was saving Kyle too, no less! Doing the right thing, being selfless, so foreign to Eric that the notion felt immensely powerful. And Kyle would be so proud of him, even if he only got to know it for a day or two, Eric would remember for the rest of his life.

Maybe – although Eric couldn't see it now, lonely and sixteen and in love like he was – that was enough? Saving Kyle was all he really needed? And maybe he had to let Kyle go in a romantic sense, so he could appreciate everything else that he felt for him? And allow space in his heart for somebody else, namely Navin. Didn't he deserve that?

"Hi," Navin's voice cut through the night, Eric's time was up. But he knew what he had to do.
"Hey," Eric smiled, he turned his head to see Navin approaching him, hands tucked in his pockets sheepishly.

Eric's smile flickered and his heart did too, the realisation he had only seconds ago cloaked a part of him in darkness, but Navin coaxed light. Made his thoughts run wild with what could happen tonight, made him braver, and brought him to the present when so long Eric had tried to run from it.

Tonight was baby steps admittedly, and Eric knew Navin didn't have the answers or everything Eric was looking for. Navin wasn't Kyle but that was okay, it had to be okay.

Silence, charged and shy descended upon the pair. Eric remained sat on the ground, watching Navin move towards him with a tiny smirk on his face. It wasn't long before Navin was in front of him, eclipsing the distant view of army tents and stout, government buildings, the oil-black mountain peaks and even the stars. Eric missed those the most.

A twinge at his heart, Eric felt himself deflate, but a hand had extended for him. Navin's hand, reaching out. Eric stopped lamenting for the stars, stopped searching for them behind Navin and looked at his waiting hand instead.

Take it, go inside that stable with him and then what?

Eric didn't know, but he was even more clueless as to what would happen if he didn't take Navin's hand at all.

With a wicked smirk, Eric grabbed Navin's hand and he was pulled to his feet.

"Sorry you had to wait..." Navin said, hand still clasped in Eric's own.

"It's fine," Eric replied, before grinning, "you're worth it."

Navin ducked his head, suddenly shy now that they were about to head into the unknown. But Eric wanted him to be sure, he needed that reassurance, so he tugged Navin forward and brought their lips together.

Both surprised, both pairs of lips cold, but that fear melted soon enough. Navin's free hand cupped the side of Eric's face, angling the kiss and making it so his warm tongue slipped into Eric's mouth with ease. Eric grasped at Navin's shirt, wanting to hold on to the undeniably great feeling of being kissed for as long as he could.

Navin pushed forward and Eric felt the rickety wall of the abandoned stable creak against his spine. He shivered, but Navin tempered the chill soon enough and Eric pulled them flush together. Navin's heart raced against his, but Eric couldn't help but wonder if they were thumping to the same tune.

Their once clasped fingers slipped loose, Navin rested his palm flat against the splintered wall, while Eric chose to cling to him. Eric was attempting to break free from all he had known and was now floating in unfamiliar territory, Navin appeared to be the only thing keeping him buoyant.

They pulled away from each other's mouths with a tiny, satisfactory smack of lips. Eric's felt moist and he could see Navin's shimmering in the moonlight. A nose pressed against Eric's cheek, they were both a tad breathless in each other's embrace.

Navin didn't look at Eric when he said, "we better, uh-"

Eric glanced at the entrance to the stable, smothering darkness festered at the back of the old building with the moonlight spilling through the wide, open doors. Maybe Eric was wrong, the setting looked
rather uninviting from where he was standing, but maybe that was nervousness? He was facing all kinds of fears tonight and there was no turning back, he had to be brave.

"Come on…" Eric whispered, hoping for his command to sound seductive and scintillating to Navin's ears.

He took Navin's hand but the action felt dumb and peculiar as opposed to how Navin had gripped and supported him only a short while ago. Eric tried not to pay any attention, he couldn't let these nerves get the best of him, and he led Navin inside the stable.

Eric was right, the back wall was pitch black. The moonlight carved long shapes on the ground and illuminated haystacks yet to be removed from the redundant structure. Disappointment and anxiety did not mix well together, and Eric felt his palm grow clammy in Navin's own. Fixing a passable smile on his face, Eric turned back to Navin and before he could question it kissed him again. This whole evening had been orchestrated, and like a director wanting to enthral an audience, Eric positioned him and Navin in the centre of the chalky spotlight as they kissed passionately. Blinding, deceitful, almost perfect. Eric winced, but it had to do.

White splinters of light invaded Eric's closed eyes and he squinted, wondering where it could be coming from, it was distracting him from kissing back with the same fervent enthusiasm and finesse as Navin.

So this spot clearly isn't working.

Abruptly ending their kiss, Eric tried to make his way over to the large haystack as purposefully as he could. It was soft and soggy but Eric perched on it anyway, he prayed he wouldn't notice as the night went on. Hopefully Navin would have worked him up into such a state that he would forget about damp haystacks and the pangs of his growing conscience.

In the dark, Eric could barely make out the confused expression on Navin's face, but Eric observed him anyway, waited for him to receive the silent signal. Seconds that seemed like hours later, Navin had strolled over to Eric, an attempt at being casual. He stood between Eric's knees, and it took little effort for Eric to tug at his shirt and reach his lips. Navin responded tentatively at first, before succumbing like he had previously, leaning down and reclaiming control before Eric pulled Navin on top of him.

Unfamiliar closeness, but a comforting one. Superficial mostly, as Eric felt safer in the muscular arms bracing him, and the taut chest he felt rising and falling above his own, than in the boy he had chosen. But he hoped that security, trust that surpassed looks, would come with time. Eric wrapped his arms around Navin, fingers rediscovering specific nooks, muscles arching beneath his fingertips and he accepted Navin's deep kiss. Buried in hay, covered in Navin, but not sheltered from his thoughts.

Eric rose to the cool fingers sliding down his warm, flustered body; he didn't know if was the hay, sweat or nerves, but he felt damp all over. Then there were was Navin's mouth, departing from Eric's lips and following a paradigm Eric had become accustomed to after only a few encounters in the storage closet.

Teeth grazing against Eric's throat, a nip and a nursing kiss. Eric sighed, tipping his head back regardless of what would wind up in his hair. He just wanted to let Navin know he was enjoying this and to ease himself into the situation too. As Navin traced his jawline, breaths like humid precipitation to his ears, Eric's fingers unfurled from Navin's shirt and instead delved underneath.

A poorly concealed gasp from Navin, and the way his body stiffened when their bare skin met for
the first time, was all the encouragement Eric needed. Feather light and maddeningly sensitive, Eric's fingers made whispered, shaky promises to Navin's vertebrae, his shoulder blades, his lower back, his reach was liberal. And judging by Navin's enthusiastic lovebites and sweet shivers, he didn't mind at all.

A pair of wet lips closed over Eric's earlobe and sucked gently, the action eliciting a groan. Eric had always wondered what it would feel like to be nuzzled, to be bitten, and since he fancied himself as a rather eloquent, convincing guy, the idea that a few lewd sentences from a certain person could rouse such fervent pleasure fascinated him.

Often he had imagined his pin-up Kyle, his fantasy Kyle nipping his skin, claiming territory and making sure Eric knew it. Imagined that strong nose buried in his hair, breathing Eric in before ducking down, nose pressed against his ear and lips skimming his jaw. Imagined Kyle whispering, moaning, growling and putting his own well-honed verbal skills to dirtier use.

Eric felt his underwear tighten, a heavy ache between his legs he sought to relieve. He keened to Navin's lips, dragged his fingers down Navin's writhing back and squeezed his eyes shut as tightly as possible to focus on his alluring thoughts.

Eric groaned, loud and unabashed, his mouth and mind loose as he began to whisper, "Ky-"

His teeth sunk into his lip just in time, he prayed to Science that his slip-up was unnoticeable. But while his error had been avoided, it lingered in Eric's mind.

Opening his eyes to escape his thoughts, he saw the stars again. A hole in the wooden roof, beyond Navin's head and shining light on where they had stood and kissed previously.

The stars, they looked so close. Eric felt like he could see them twisting, emitting a great light independent from the moon and they shone on his face. Following him, illuminating him, looking down on him. Inescapable and inexorable. Just like his thoughts, just like his heart, just like Kyle.

But there was a colossal difference in those interlinked things, an odd one out, a kink in the chain. Eric's thoughts and heart were with him, were attached to him always. Kyle wasn't, he was separated by time and mistakes and broken promises. Right now, there was a boy kissing him, a boy who wanted him and was offering a chance to make Eric happy, and here Eric was chasing the impossible.

But isn't that what love is all about? Never quitting? Impulse over carefulness? Feelings over rationality? Believing it can conquer all? Trump anything?

But maybe sometimes you have to know when to quit.

Ignoring the prickling in his eyes, Eric closed them lightly and turned to Navin, bumping his nose against his cheek. Slowly, Navin looked at him, lips flushed and eyes hazy. Shutting out the stars, Eric pressed his lips to Navin's, tongue quickly sliding into his mouth. Navin's grip tightened on Eric's sides, before his hands slid down to his fleshy hips.

Eric's hands meanwhile, moved from Navin's back to his taut, flat stomach, tracing his abs and savouring his pecs. Never did Eric think he would see a body like this in the flesh, let alone touch one. Strong, fit, undoubtedly athletic. He never thought to ask Navin if he played any kind of sport, if they even had sport in the slums. Eric imagined some informal kind of baseball, or perhaps soccer or basketball...

That newspaper article then, a Park County High victory and a photo of Kyle scoring the deciding
basket, another picture of him and his teammates. Eric imagined being there, the crowd cheering and Kyle grinning proudly… And maybe he'd smile at Eric too? A wide, genuine smile that made Eric's lips twitch against Navin's.

If they ever could have dated, maybe Eric would hang around after the game was over? Maybe Kyle would hug him, still sweaty from his triumph and Eric would laugh and protest but Kyle would kiss him anyway, and Eric would love the salty kiss.

Perhaps Eric could've shed Kyle of his basketball uniform? Lifted the flimsy, sweat-soaked vest to reveal a body just as toned and fit as Navin's? Cup and squeeze at his ample rump over those tiny shorts? Or slip a hand under his jockstrap?

Eric moaned, breaking the kiss apart for a minute and cursing under his breath. His hair was drenched with sweat, his body hot and his arousal obvious. Navin smiled, reclaiming Eric's lips. Despite the betraying nature of his thoughts, Eric complied, the molten feeling of lips against his own aided the fantasies making him harder by the second.

His thigh seized as a gentle hand rested on it, and he urged those fingers to travel down the sensitive inside of his leg with a muffled whimper. Navin's damp palm slid down Eric's thigh, seamless and teasing as Eric's legs spread wider and he bucked his hips.

"You're so fucking hot..." Navin whispered in the tiny space between their lips, before he closed the gap again.

The comment sent Eric's eyes flying wide open, though the wings with which he was soaring aimlessly through his lusty thoughts had now crashed into a tumultuous ocean of remorse.

If it was possible, he flushed even further in embarrassment of his worked-up state; the hair sticking to his forehead, the hardness in his pants, his wantonly spread legs and Navin's unassuming hand so close to his zipper. This was taking advantage, wasn't it? Manipulating Navin (for good reason, Eric tried to stress) when they were only making out in a storage closet, with no indication of it going anywhere serious was nothing to Eric, not when he had manipulated and lied and pretended before. But this was different, cheap and insidiously so. That policy of 'what he doesn't know won't hurt him' tasted sour, and Eric didn't want any part of it. It wasn't fair, to the both of them.

Before Eric could make a decision, comprehend the sobering but speedy realisation, he heard a zipper being pulled down. A layer half-way shed. Eric gulped, went to open his mouth to protest, before a hand delved into his open fly and a startled, aroused moan came out instead.

"What do you want me to do?" Navin asked, breathless and voice husky.

Eric felt Navin stroking absently at his clothed erection, waiting patiently but Eric felt sick, indignant even that he had let somebody put their hands on him.

"Nothing…” Eric blurted, his heart racing so fast that it hurt to breathe.

Navin stopped then, but didn't remove his hand. A sad, confused crease in his brow made Eric grimace.

"What?" he asked.

"I, I don't want to do anything!" Eric said curtly, shoving Navin's hand away and sitting up. "I can't do this…"

Eric zipped up his pants, face burning and he was careful not to blink otherwise tears and all the
emotions he had been trying to fight against since this whole thing started would fall out.

"Eric," Navin said limply. "I don't understand-"

"Neither do I..." Eric mumbled, avoiding eye contact as much as he could when he hauled himself off the haystack.

He had already begun to walk away before he realised Navin had not followed him, still left reeling in the hay.

He turned his head and there was Navin, bewildered, and the stars refracted his disappointment.

"I'm going home," Eric offered as a goodbye. "I, I'm so sorry, Navin."

Those were Eric's last words before he rushed out, closing the door on him and Navin.

But that window to the past had been pushed open a little further.

"What?" Kyle asked, shaking but he felt numb. Was that because of the punch to his face, his hangover or Kenny's devastating admission?

Kenny folded his arms over his chest, eyes wide and forlorn. He looked pathetic, Kyle supposed they all did, reeling in the soft morning snow.

"He told me two years ago," Kenny repeated. "We'd been hanging out for a while anyway, Butters always tried to talk to me about Cartman and one night it just came out. He told me everything."

Kyle absorbed the words, too fast, too powerful. It was so much information and Kyle felt like his mind was burning with it, his lungs drowning in it.

He heard a faint crunch of snow, felt a hand at his shoulder that sent a tremor of comfort through him.

"But you didn't tell us?" Stan questioned.

Kenny sighed and shook his head. "No, I promised Butters I wouldn't. He was scared, he's still scared and I don't want to make him feel any worse."

Kyle scoffed, but it was barely audible. "How you can have any sympathy for that asshole is beyond me-"

"Come on, Kyle!" Kenny snapped. "He was nine years old when that happened! Like you didn't do anything stupid when you were that age!"

Kyle winced, turning his head away from Kenny because he was too stubborn to admit that he was right. Kidding himself that Cartman's disappearance was deliberate was a somehow easier notion for Kyle to swallow. Accidents are messy and complicated and there's no real justice. Having a reason and somebody to blame was a strange comfort Kyle was going to cling to even when it made no sense.

"I know you're upset" Kenny began softly, and Kyle felt his anger loosen and melt. "But try to think rationally, okay? You're a reasonable guy, Kyle."

Kyle shook his head. "You just don't get it," he muttered, he looked at Kenny and saw him slump in disappointment. Shrugging Stan's hand away from his shoulder he added, "Neither of you do."
Kyle watched Kenny's indignant eyes meet Stan's, and he folded his arms over his chest stubbornly.

"We don't?" Kenny asked.

"Kyle… Cartman was our friend too," Stan said. "Yeah, there was something different about you two-

"That's why I told Butters not to tell you!" Kenny interjected.

Kyle glared at him. "You knew he was going to tell me?"

"He said he was thinking about it," Kenny explained. "I told him it wasn't a good idea because of how you reacted when Cartman went missing in the first place! You took it harder than any of us expected. But he trusted you Kyle. Butters knows how understanding and compassionate you are. It's difficult but can't you just try to move past this anger? To something… I don't know, a little more constructive?"

But maybe Kyle was tired of being the understanding guy, the compassionate guy. Because it seemed like those guys look out for everybody else, clean up the mess but who's there to protect them? To help them? To deal with them when they're at their angriest, their saddest, their most lonely, and their most desperate?

"Constructive?" Kyle responded, arching an eyebrow. "What would be constructive in this situation?"

Kenny shrugged, a small smile on his face. "That's where you come in, right?"

Kyle took a deep breath, closing his eyes in thought although he knew what had to be done. "Well, first of all, Butters has to tell the police what he did."

"No," Kenny said immediately.

Disbelief needled at Kyle's already fragile emotional state, what the fuck was Kenny talking about?

"No?" Kyle questioned, struggling to keep measured.

"No, we can't tell the police," Kenny said, meeting Kyle's eyes with conviction.

"Why not?" Kyle said, a little louder now. His fists clenched, wound up, it felt like his whole body was pulling together to fight.

"Because that's what Butters has been terrified of all these years!" Kenny exclaimed.

"Why?!” Kyle shouted. "It's not like they can arrest him, can they?"

Kenny shrugged, agitated with his arms folded and lips pursed. Clearly, Kyle wasn't the only one fighting for something, rather, someone. "I have no idea, but he doesn't want to find out and neither do I."

"But if he tells the police we can find Cartman once and for all!" Kyle said, an incredulous laugh trickled out. "That's something isn't it?"

"And then what?" Kenny asked, growing hostile as he edged closer. "Bring him back to life? He's buried in snow not being kept away in some cozy, cryogenic chamber. What would be the point?"

Kyle rolled his eyes, his temper flaring. "The point is that by finding him we can put this whole thing
to rest! It's what Cartman deserves! Right, Stan?"

Both boys turned their attention to Stan, who was lost in thought. His eyes were lightly closed, fingers rubbing the bridge of his nose.

Kyle's eyebrows furrowed, how could Stan still be considering this? What was so difficult? The answer was obvious!

"Stan?" Kyle pressed.

Stan didn't respond, brow creasing and eyes squeezing shut.

Kyle bristled with fear, with the possibility of betrayal. He couldn't bear it, he needed somebody on his side, and that person more often than not was his super best friend.

"Stan?!" Kyle shouted, he tugged Stan's hand away from his face. "Come on!"

"I'm thinking, okay?!" Stan snapped, pushing Kyle away, but the action made him sigh guiltily. "Look, maybe we should just keep this to ourselves."

"What?!" Kyle yelled, he was sure he looked wild right now, frightening even.

You probably scared him away because you can't get a God damn grip on yourself.

Stan whimpered, conflicted before he made his case. "Maybe Kenny's right, Kyle. Is telling the police what happened really worth it if Butters could get into serious trouble?"

"Thank you!" Kenny exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air. But when Stan glared at him, he dropped his arms and nodded.

"Why are we all so fucking hell-bent on protecting Butters' feelings when our friend is missing?!" Kyle said, more enraged than ever.

"Because it's not about protecting Butters' feelings Kyle!" Stan retorted. "It's about protecting him, period! I don't know whether he'll go to jail for this, but it doesn't look good. Plus, he would have to deal with everybody in town knowing what he did! Can you imagine how hard that would be for him?"

Kyle, breathless and quivering, scanned Stan's well-meaning face. Saw what was happening to him in the reflection of dark blue eyes.

"Like Kenny said, what's happened to Cartman is irreversible," Stan added matter-of-factly. "Whether the police find him or not. It's a sorry, fucked up situation but what else can we do?"

Kyle glanced at Stan, then at Kenny, the evidence was right in front of him. He was outnumbered.

"I, I can't-" Kyle tried to speak, but a sardonic snicker came out instead. "I can't believe what I'm fucking hearing right now. We're not going to do anything? Just keep this whole thing to ourselves like it never even happened?!"

"We all know the truth now," Kenny offered. "That's at least something. It's closure."

"No!" Kyle shouted, not above stomping his foot in the snow and throwing a tantrum like a five year old over this. He wasn't going down without a fight. "No, it's not fucking closure! What about Cartman's mom, huh? She has no idea where her son is and she's still waiting for him! I was still waiting for him before I found out about this! She doesn't have closure, does she?!"
Unhinged and defiant as he was, Kyle still looked to Stan and Kenny for a response. They winced, and Kyle couldn't believe they would swallow their guilt in order to keep this a secret.

"God damn it, we're his friends!" Kyle cried. "We should be fighting for him! We should want justice!"

"What justice, Kyle?!" Kenny suddenly shouted, making Kyle and Stan jump.

Kyle's eyes flitted everywhere, searching for an answer and he cringed as Kenny smiled victoriously.

"God, see, this is so fucking twisted!" Kenny said, cornering Kyle once again. "You want justice for what?! So you can have some shitty, weird revenge on Butters? For taking Cartman away from us? From you?! This whole thing is about you! It always has been!"

"Come on, Kenny-"

"Stan, shut the fuck up! You know as well as I do that the reason he's so pissed off at Butters, why he's so adamant to get the fucking police involved in this, is because he can't let Cartman go! He never could!" Kenny accused, the words caustic to Kyle's ears. "Well guess what, Kyle? If we keep this to ourselves or tell the police, no matter how badly you want him back, it's not going to change anything! He's gone and you're just going to have to learn to deal with it!"

Kyle shook his head, willing the truth away although all the barricades were down. No defence mechanisms, no pretending. Kenny was just a blur in his tear filled eyes.

"Fuck you..." Kyle sobbed, swiping away tears that dared to fall from his lashes.

Stan was beside Kyle again, arm tentatively placed around him. "Kenny-"

"What?"

"Apologise to him!" Stan exclaimed. "That wasn't cool, dude!"

"No, Stan, I won't," Kenny said strongly. "It's the truth."

"It's not about me," Kyle mumbled, wanting to bury himself in Stan's embrace. "It's about what's right."

Kenny tutted. "You're trying to make a rock bottom situation less terrible and it can't be done."

Rock bottom, it seemed like Kyle had been there before. He thought he had felt rock bottom so many times, sinking to the lowest he could go before managing to pull himself back up, defying explanation. Whether it be via counsellors, or boyfriends or hope. Beautiful, fluttering hope because somewhere deep inside Kyle still believed. In himself, in his pillars, in Cartman.

But rock bottom meant no way out. A definitive, hopeless end. Kyle should know, for he was there right now.

"So this is it?" Kyle asked, voice still waterlogged. "We're just going to keep this to ourselves?"

Pathetic, wilful hope, making one last rescue attempt.

Kyle glanced up at Stan, and saw his best friend looking at Kenny. It was decided, judging by the way Kenny stared at Kyle, by the way Stan shifted uncomfortably.

And Kyle was decided too, disguising a sob as an angry growl, Kyle threw Stan's arm off his
shoulder and stormed off into the snow.

He didn't care if they followed him, he didn't care where he was going, he just didn't care – couldn't care – at all.

It was rare that Eric was thankful for the suffocating, sinister nature of the AAA regime. But at least the stringent security, and the punishment that befell anybody trying to subvert it, meant Navin would have been a fool for trying to question Eric further on their disastrous rendezvous at the ostrich stable.

A fool? You mean somebody in love?

Eric discarded that thought quickly, Navin wasn't in love with him, lust maybe… But could he tell the difference? It seemed that Eric, for all his skill in reading people, for all his meticulous, best-laid plans, had the two concepts muddled as well. Or rather, arrogantly played with both and slipped up in spectacular fashion. Bested by his own heart and by Kyle it seemed, neither one a rarity.

Still, leaving Navin and the haystack and the star covered hole in the roof wasn't enough. When Eric returned to his room he still had a 'matter' to attend to, neither relieved by Navin nor quashed the devastating night. Eric had cringed and rolled his eyes, slumping against his bedroom door in defeat.

You're sixteen and desperately in love with somebody you haven't got a shot with, what did you expect?

Groaning, Eric had trudged over to his bed, threw himself on top of it and shoved a hand unceremoniously into his pants. He had shivered at sensitive skin, coming into contact with his naked palm. His neurons had buzzed at the touch, chattering Kyle's name feverishly. The whispered name fell out of Eric's mouth too, smiling indulgently at how he could finally say it without any inhibitions.

When he had closed his eyes, another world lit up behind his lids. A world where Kyle was playing basketball, where Eric met him in locker rooms after big games, a world where Kyle was drenched in sweat, saturated with victory and competitiveness and desire; for the sport and for the boy writhing on a lonely mattress five hundred years into the future. Saturated, Eric hoped, with love. In that world, Kyle did love him, was undoubtedly his and Eric happily gave himself over as well, threw himself into Kyle's strong arms.

But Eric's devotion wasn't dreamt up, wasn't something he left behind in fantasies, he acted on it every day. A teenage paramour to an ambivalent lover, a follower to a dazzling, aloof star named Kyle. The realisation, mid-way through his and Kyle's imaginary tryst, chipped away at Eric's lusty bliss, dulled the impact of his orgasm when he eventually came. Feeling weak, deflated, he didn't smother the tears that sprung to his eyes. He set them free, let them roam his cheek, some rebelling and trailing down his jaw, creeping behind his ear. And he sobbed quietly, pitifully for the situation he was now finding himself in. Wasn't what he was doing depressing? Pathetic? Crazy? Was this what love was supposed to feel like? Why did it feel so horrible? Eric could feel himself resenting it more with each passing day.

Trying to preserve his dignity, Eric had dabbed at his eyes with his free wrist before sliding his loosened body off the bed, cleaning himself up in the bathroom.

These ephiphanies, these sudden jarring realities that seemed to appear out of nowhere were sure to drive Eric insane; either by implosion, the noxious contents fit to bursting in whatever inadequate subconscious sac was holding them, poisoning Eric from the inside out. Or Eric would combust in a rain of unrequited love and maddening impatience.
The implications, the side effects of every new thing Eric was learning about himself were surely too dangerous in large quantities. Stored in his head, bustling and withering, but not demising from Eric's suffocation. Perhaps pride, and self-imposed, martyr-like silence was not the solution? Perhaps they couldn't even enter into the equation when love was dominant.

He had to purge himself he knew, like a shoulder riddled with knots that need to be unwound and expelled, so too did Eric need to release the tension building in his mind. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to ride out the next five years.

But how? How to vent when nobody would listen? When nobody understood and Eric didn't trust them to?

He padded back to his room thoughtfully, searching for an alternative. But the cold, sturdy lines and minimal furniture wasn't exactly inspiring, certainly not helpful. He exhaled through his nose, glancing around the muted room nonetheless, until his gaze fell to the tablet on his bed. Not the answer, of course, but a possible gateway to a solution. Although the thought of typing queries involving matters of the heart into a heavily monitored search engine made Eric shudder with humiliation.

You can't afford to be proud when your current emotional state says otherwise.

Eric closed his eyes and sighed, his seemingly only solution didn't thrill or comfort him in the slightest. Opening his eyes once again, he spied his dresser in his peripheral vision.

Located somewhere in that dresser was Kyle's file. Excitement battled with wariness, along with a yearning tug that was demanding him to move forward, as if Kyle's information was a magnet and Eric had found himself sucked into its field.

Look at it this way, you can't sink any lower.

It was with that resigned, but headlong thought that Eric stormed over to his dresser. The first drawer opened with a forceful tug, he had tucked Kyle's file away under piles of clothes years ago, and saw a glint of it often when older, smaller items had to be replaced. But it had been a while, which drawer?

Carefully scouring the drawers wasn't doing any good, especially when he was three drawers in and still without a flash drive. In fact, this method of searching only fuelled the anxious feeling rising in Eric's gut and his hands had started to shake. He resorted to throwing his clothes on the floor instead, hoping to not throw the flash drive out with them. But Eric was prepared to scramble on the floor if he had to, desperation was clearly not a good shade on him.

Beneath a non-descript burgundy t-shirt and a pair of grey cargo pants, Eric found Kyle's file. He almost shouted at the small flash drive, its silvery glint winking at him in congratulations, and he pumped a celebratory fist in the air. He kicked his clothes out of the way as he rushed over to his tablet, but not so happy memories surfaced as he slotted the flash drive into the port.

The file loaded quickly, sped through a short life before documenting it fully on the screen in front of Eric. He chuckled humbly, despite the technology he lived with every day, this informational footprint would always be remarkable to him. And in five years, he would not only be saving Kyle, but reviving him, shaping that footprint and his mark on the world. When Eric felt so lost and low, that incredible guarantee made a shiver crawl down his spine.

He tapped the newspaper article that recounted Kyle's basketball victory, since his recent fantasy – though curdled – was still playing on his mind. Grown up, confident but carefree and Eric could tell
the photo was exuding Kyle's spirit, he could sense it almost viscerally. Dated January, when Kyle was sixteen. Apparently, it was his team's first win of the season. Eric wondered how Kyle and the rest of the team did from there.

The team photo was also featured in the article, and out of curiosity Eric zoomed in to read the captioned list of players. Some he didn't recognise, but smirked to himself when he saw Clyde Donovan and Craig Tucker's names printed.

Eric skipped ahead to the summer of Kyle's eighteenth year, and a spread on the Park County High graduates. The small "Next Stop Harvard!" article featured a photo of Kyle again, forgoing his basketball uniform for the standard cap and gown. The faces of the soon-to-be Ivy League students were captured by a camera lens before the next big phase of their lives, either a beginning or an end. Eric felt a lump in his throat already.

Butters was grinning widely into the camera, his arm slung around an equally bubbly Wendy, who was giving the photographer a thumbs up. Her arm was around Token, his eyes as bright as his smile. Eric smirked a tad bitterly, but slid his gaze over to Kyle.

There he was, holding his high school diploma, with his other hand resting on Token's shoulder. Smiling, close-mouthed and compliant for the newspaper, his body wasn't slouched in well-deserved relief like the others, soaking up the summer before college started. Kyle looked uncomfortable, like a coiled spring ready to unfurl and slip away from the merriment at any moment.

Eric furrowed his eyebrows, he had seen this picture before and though it was a while ago, surely he would have noticed how… odd Kyle appeared, wouldn't he? He had been twelve when he first saw the photo, excited that he finally was gaining an understanding of Kyle's life without him, so blissfully unaware of what he now knew would happen, it was easy to miss, right? Easy to apply the hindsight he had now. And if he remembered the date on the death certificate correctly… This photograph was only taken five months before Kyle had passed away.

Eric didn't know whether Kyle had drunk with intention, or if he had possibly miscalculated his body's limit, easily done he supposed. He didn't know if Kyle was trying to repress or drown or escape whatever had blighted him, which Eric even now wanted to heedlessly protect him from. He had no idea if it was simply a catastrophic error in judgement, a never-meant-to-be cautionary tale.

Eric looked to Kyle, as if he could still provide him with answers. He was always so smart and sure, Eric would never forget those qualities. He studied Kyle's strained smile, his uncomfortable stance and countenance, before he fell into those deciding emeralds. How sad they looked. Piercing but empty, like Kyle had done what Eric thought he would never do. Kyle had given up.

On what? On who? Was Kyle haunted or heartbroken or exhausted or what? What had turned him into this jaded, reckless, defeated boy that Eric couldn't remember? With Eric's help, with revival, could Kyle get better? What could Eric say to him upon their reunion? Was there even anything Eric could do except give him a freak second chance at life? Or was Kyle's situation insurmountable-

No, Eric couldn't think like that. Heaviness pressed down on him, was it the sudden colossal importance (even more so than before) placed on his mission? Or was it despair and grief over who Kyle had become?

He found Kyle's senior year photo, taken a month before his graduation. There, his pose was relaxed and his smile was as genuine and bright as a school photo could be, suggesting to Eric that he wasn't running on empty just yet. Still, his eyes remained the same, belied his positive masque, preoccupied and fading.
To think, Eric had reopened Kyle's file again to make himself feel better, to vent to and find comfort in the one he was yearning for. His symbol of resilience and hope, who he loved so very much. But now, he wanted Kyle to seek comfort in his arms, to listen to his assurances, his promises that Kyle would be okay, Eric would make it so. Somehow, he'd find a way.

Tapping on the photo twice, Kyle appeared as a snowy hologram in front of Eric, and Eric returned his smile.

"Hi," Eric whispered, he bit his lip to stop it trembling. Artificial or not, he wanted this to go right. "Uh, I just, I wanted to tell you that... I miss you."

He paused to chuckle then, the deaf hologram never wavering. "If you could ever believe it. I really do, more than I even thought possible. And... I'm so fucking in love you, Kyle. That's another bombshell I guess, at least it was to me. I love you, and if you never hear it in person, at least I've said it now. Feels good actually, to say it out loud."

Eric smiled wetly, eyelashes damp. "That's kind of why I'm doing this, talking to myself in my room in the middle of the night. To get things off my chest because I don't know what the hell is going on with me anymore. I'm so lonely, I never knew I could need people so much. It's stupid, really, how pathetic we become when we're on our own. I mean, I have friends but they don't know me. Not like I'd let them, which is part of the problem. I'm a stubborn dick, you know that better than anybody."

Eric snickered, rolled his eyes at Kyle's frozen expression. "But I'm getting carried away. My thoughts are all jumbled and I wanna say a million things at once but I can't, so... I looked back at your photos, I've seen them all before. But I didn't notice how miserable you look, Kyle--"

Eric stopped, to press a wrist to his increasingly blurry eyes. "Science, it fucking broke me. I know what happened to you, a little bit. But I just don't get why, though I have an idea. I can't let myself believe it, though. And -- if it turns out that what I don't want to believe is true -- I'm angry that you would do that, that you didn't get help before it was too late, but... I understand how it feels, to be lonely and scared. I can't imagine why you would feel that way, but I guess even people like you aren't immune. And if nobody else helped you then I will, in whatever way I can. So even though I'm talking to nobody, I guess I'm also talking to you before the worst happens. Hold on, Kyle. You won't feel like this forever, I'm gonna be a good friend and I'll help you, make you happy again. I won't let you down."

Kyle was exhausted when he arrived home. Physically and emotionally exerting as what happened at Stark's was, he managed to run all the way to his front door. After all, his mind was already sprinting, darkness he thought he had put to rest was catching up to him, and he needed to get away.

He nearly collapsed at his front door, head resting against the wood as his trembling fingers searched for his keys. Cold, numb raw, Kyle didn't think there was any part of him that felt differently.

He went straight to bed but didn't sleep. When his mom and dad woke up not long after he arrived home, he mumbled an excuse that he was sick, which wasn't technically a lie. His mom brought him a second breakfast, more substantial this time and made with love.

She perched on the edge of Kyle's bed, rubbing his shoulder as she encouraged him to 'eat up'. It would make him feel better. The food, delicious as Kyle knew it was, felt bland and lumpy at first, like swallowing cardboard. But that feeling disappeared quickly, his hangover fuelling his appetite.

Ike sneaked into his room, crawling up the bed and trying to shake his brother awake although he wasn't sleeping. In the spirit of things, Kyle grumbled and tugged a bouncing Ike by his ankle. His
brother not too big to receive a noogie.

Kyle let his brother tease him about the previous night, listened to Ike relay the slurred conversation he had with Thomas that his little brother had eavesdropped on. Kyle buried his head in his pillow and endured Ike's goading of "I know why you're sick," even though Kyle himself was foggy on the details but the shame he felt was still potent. The moments before amnesia still shone with startling clarity. He even played along with his brother's blackmail of "I won't tell mom and dad, but only if..."

Kyle grunted in response, agreeing to do Ike's designated chores for a month, and take him to Stark's pond twice a week so they could practice hockey out on the ice. Kyle hoped that helping his brother practice would take his mind off what had happened at the pond only a couple of hours previously.

After on-the-clock checks from his concerned mom, a brief conversation with his dad and a sporadic (poorly maintained on Kyle's part) conversation with Thomas, evening quickly came. Kyle was still curled under the covers, his quilt shielding him from the bedroom door, constantly pushed ajar. His mind was waging a cruel, restless war and slumber was escaping him.

"Kyle?" A voice that made Kyle freeze. He hunched like a frightened animal trying to protect itself.


Color rushed to Kyle's face, the embarrassed flush of heat more noticeable under stuffy covers.

"And I know you're pissed at me and Kenny right now," Stan added. "You probably hate our guts but, please Kyle. Please try to understand that this is the right thing."

Understanding wasn't the issue. Kenny was right. Kyle was a reasonable guy and though he loathed to admit it, Stan and Kenny's proposal to keep quiet wasn't totally ridiculous, or treacherous, or whatever else Kyle had accused them of.

He closed his eyes then, stinging with regret.

Acceptance was what Kyle was struggling with, he could be so obstinate sometimes. But it was for a good reason, right? If Kyle wasn't pig-headed now and again, then his belief system would come crashing down.

But what do you have to believe in anymore?

Kyle didn't hear footsteps, Stan was waiting for him, still.

Waiting for you to come around.

Kyle twisted his body, squinted at the hallway light spilling into his room. But he smiled weakly at his best friend, and the rueful expression on his face.

"I don't hate your guts," Kyle said, his voice was brittle.

Stan's smile widened and he eased himself into the room. He sat on Kyle's bed, and Kyle enjoyed the dip of the mattress. The weight of another.

"I'm sorry, Kyle," Stan said after a deep breath. "About what happened at Stark's-"

"Yeah, " Kyle cut in, he didn't want to do the apology thing with Stan. He looked up at the plain
ceiling. "I'm sorry too."

"How are you feeling?" Stan asked.

"I don't know," Kyle said, sitting up and looking directly at Stan. "I don't know how I'm feeling. I don't know what to do."

Stan's eyebrows drew together and he pursed his lips in concern, in pity. Best friend or no, Kyle didn't like that look. He broke their gaze and instead talked to the rumpled sheets.


"Hey, you have people," Stan cut in, but it wasn't strong enough for Kyle to meet his gaze. "You have me and Thomas and your family and… And Kenny,"

Kyle had to rise to that one. His arched eyebrow and derisive smile fuelled Stan's unsure expression.

"Kenny?" Kyle questioned. "Can he even look me in the eye anymore?"

Stan sighed. "Yeah, he can. He's just frustrated Kyle, he doesn't want Butters to get in trouble. And neither do you, deep down."

Kyle nodded to himself, studying the room closely although his whole life was in here. He thought he knew it so well.

"No, I don't," Kyle admitted, and Stan smiled sympathetically. "At least wanting revenge would mean something, right? Keep me occupied. I know it wasn't Butters' fault, and I'm trying to believe in the right thing but finding Cartman… I was just holding out, wanting to cling on to hope. I'm scared to let it go, to let him go."

The corners of Stan's mouth drooped, tried to form words but Kyle understood if there were none. He didn't really need a response, just an object, a person to vent at rather than bottling it up and storing it in the recesses of his volatile mind.

"But what else can I do?" Kyle's voice cracked, saltwater trickling into the fissures. "What am I waiting for? I can't get stuck like this but I don't see any other choice. It's just this- this void and I'm staring into it and it's so dark, Stan. And endless. Is that my life? Is that all it's ever going to be? I mean, who the fuck am I? One piece of bad news and I'm done for."

"No!" Stan exclaimed, finding Kyle's hand and holding it. "God no, Kyle, you're not done for! Cartman isn't coming back, but doesn't mean you can't move forward! It's difficult, I get that, but you're so capable Kyle. You're smart and strong and… the world would be a sucky place without you in it."

Kyle sniffed, a semblance of a smile on his face.

"Thanks, dude," he replied, before taking in Stan's pinked face and joking, "You're the best boyfr-ow!"

Kyle was cut off when Stan squeezed his hand tightly, retribution for his teasing.

"I'm being honest here, asshole!" Stan laughed, softening his grip.

When he was sure Kyle was ready, his hold loosened, breaking apart until fingertips brushed
"We'll be out of this town in two years anyway, away from all this," Stan continued. "Remember we used to sit up in that crappy clubhouse in my backyard and we'd bitch about this place, and tell each other what we wanted to do when he finally got out? Going to college, graduating and doing whatever we want to do? We used to get so excited about that! That's your future Kyle, that's what you have to look forward to, not a void. You have so much ambition, Kyle. You always have."

Kyle nodded slowly, recollecting long play dates at Stan's house. When they were antsy and bored of toys and TV shows, they would run to the clubhouse. Once there they would cross their legs or tuck their knees under their chin, and up in the highest branches of that small tree, naïve aspirations bloomed and ripened. Safer somehow, up in the sky.

"Yeah, I remember but..." Kyle stopped himself, pondered the eight year olds that used to hide up in that tree. How would they feel, hearing what Kyle was about to say? "I don't know anymore, Stan."

"What do you mean?" Stan asked, Kyle sensed the trepidation.

"I've been thinking, and with everything that's happened, maybe I should just stay here," Kyle continued. "Like, maybe that will keep me sane. So I can feel him somewhere, somehow."

"Kyle..."

"It's stupid," Kyle said, dismissing the notion but even that made him mournful. "It wouldn't help me, I know. I've just become so used to holding onto things. But that's crazy... I want to go to Harvard, I want to be a doctor. I can't lose sight of that. I can't lose anything else."

That residual stinging intensified, and Kyle ducked his head so Stan wouldn't see him crying.

But Kyle couldn't evade Stan's ability to pick up on these things. It was mutual after all, they were wired to comfort each other. When Stan scooped Kyle up in a hug, Kyle didn't resist, he cried into his best friend's welcome arms.

"You won't lose anything else, okay?" Stan said, drawing invisible circles on Kyle's back.

"How do you know?" Kyle murmured.

"Well, you won't lose me," Stan squeezed Kyle in reassurance. "I promise."

"And a Stan Marsh promise is binding for eternity, right?" Kyle quipped, trying to make light of the fact that his tears were drying on Stan's shirt.

Stan chuckled, warming and easing the sting. "You'll be okay, Kyle."

And in that moment, Kyle clung to faint belief. A temporary fix. Little did he know that would be the last conversation where he didn't resent Stan, resent everybody.

His last conversation before oblivion.

Chapter End Notes

This was the last chapter where the boys are sixteen, there'll be quite a big leap in time
for the next chapter. And also a change in structure! I don't know if this will affect the length of chapters (since they're pretty erratic anyway) or how fast I write them. I've actually just started my second year of university this week so I'll have a little less time on my hands than I did in the summer. But this fic is a lovely challenge that I want to see through to the end, and we should be finished in January, I think. Again, thanks for reading and your thoughts are always welcome!
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

I'm a little nervous about this chapter. And excited. Not to sound too self important but this chapter is a real turning point in the story (in terms of structure as well as plot). I just hope I've done it justice for you readers, who have been so supportive! I hope you enjoy and your thoughts are appreciated!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The wakeup call drifted into Eric's ears like a faint warning flare out at sea, putting an abrupt end to his thin slumber. The witching hour had brought about his twenty-first birthday, and more so than usual, his mind was riddled with feverish thoughts of Kyle, the elusive boy finding his way into the murkiest corners of Eric's conscience.

Before the AAA could scold him in the privacy of his own bedroom, Eric quickly got up, facing the unchanging city morning. In another life, simultaneously boring and pedestrian, Eric relished birthdays. The presents, the attention, a day that glorified him. In this life, birthdays had become merely a marker, a day to cross off on a wider, more crucial calendar.

Eleven years, two presidents, one brief romantic encounter and, it seemed, a lifetime of pining, hurting, learning and soul searching later, Eric was fresh out of waiting. And, as he hurriedly brushed his teeth, got dressed with shaking hands and a stomach so giddy he doubted he would be able to keep any food down, it was clear that, as a painful era came to an end, patience was unbearable.

With every anticipated event, there's always a looming cloud of disappointment. Eric couldn't ignore that, knew that this short vacation to the past was a respite from the life he was living here. Unremarkable, bland, not a scrap of excitement to be seen in the future. He had dreams, yes, and aspirations, but with his mission consuming so much of his time and soul, all his musings about how he could make his life here better paled in comparison to saving Kyle.

Today, he would be a hero. Today, he would be noble and brave and selfless. He never thought he was capable of such things, selfish and petty as he could be. But Kyle had transformed him, through memory and history and rewriteable mistakes, and Eric had faith that when he saw Kyle again, an instinct to protect would kick in. It had before, in his past life, a life it was increasingly harder to get misty and nostalgic about because his sense of time was becoming slippery.

Even if nobody here realised it, he was doing a great thing and he was doing it for the person he loved. Some of the citizens, forced into slums and shoved under a regime, may still have thought him a traitor despite resentful improvements and cries of outrage that the AAA couldn't ignore. Navin, his sorest regret and still charred victim of his teenage heart's own incredible recklessness, was an uphill battle in terms of even trying to repair their friendship. Eric accepted his cold shoulder in engineering class, the frosty detentions spent in agonising silence, worse yet, he was too proud and their relationship had been too surreptitious, for Eric to confide in his other friends. No out-in-the-open truces to clear the air. Eric had to deal with Navin on his own, his martyr complex and the foreign,
heady rush of dealing with the consequences of his actions (something Eric would have skilfully dodged as a child) allowed him to find achievement in his silence. But it paid off, Navin's ambivalence and civility with no further ructions to their group of friends (or, rather, acquaintances) was a mild salve on Eric's still raw mistake.

All of that seemed inconsequential to Eric today. Events and people existed and scrambled on the desert floor, and in the dizzying reaches of space Kyle was Eric's zenith. Timeless and powerful, and right now, Eric felt that way too. Bathed in stardust, his mission reaffirmed and drummed into him with every beat of his heart.

Before tucking his tablet inside his backpack (one of the few things Blavius II permitted Eric to take with him during their recent negotiations), Eric tapped the screen, and the time flashed in white digits before him. Early, but no doubt Blavius II would be waiting outside the lab where the behemoth (or so Eric had heard from his boss at the engineering department) of a time machine was held, wanting to give him some manipulative, unsettling words of 'encouragement'.

His father may have threatened Eric with dismissing his deal all together, making Eric uncomfortably pliable so they could both keep what they wanted, but Blavius II was even smarter than his predecessor. Sinisterly so. Taking the time to literally go inside Eric's mind, find his weakness, his motivation all along and then exploit it. Like his intuition had warned him during that horrid endurance test; they would use Kyle to their advantage. And they had, expertly in fact. Using Kyle to plant doubt in Eric's head, even their knowledge of Kyle's existence disturbed Eric to some degree, made him anxious of what they could do with the information. Eric was cunning and ruthless, but the council knew his tender spot, had leverage. Blavius II and his council cronies had made Eric all too aware of the ramifications of emotional manipulation.

On that note, Eric slung his backpack over his shoulder and headed out the door. Otters leaving their own quarters passed Eric in the hallway, aware that it was the Time Child's birthday, they offered him nods and faint, congratulatory squeaks. Eric responded with a tight, civil smile, not in the mood for pleasantries with strangers as he weaved through the sleepy morning traffic.

Finally, he made it to the elevators that would take him out of the residences and onto the open plan segue that led to the sciences center. A vast building, a shimmering topaz eye in the middle of the desert that Eric had become well acquainted with after he had 'graduated' from his engineering course. He had been on field trips there before, on various employment days held throughout his time in the education program.

Thanks to his ties with the council, he had been granted an apprenticeship almost immediately after receiving his diploma. Initially, his friends were bitter about Eric's easy first step on the rung of the career ladder, so Eric went about his work quietly until his friends came around.

The inventions that had come to fruition after centuries of scientists and their contributions to the field, were kept in the basement of the building. Some had the potential for fatal results if used incorrectly, or if they fell to malfunction, so had to be kept in the safest possible place with the most stringent containment surrounding them.

As Eric descended into the Earth, the space in his throat seemed to close, his head dulling with the change in pressure. He felt more delirious and lucid than when he had to hide in the safe room as a young boy, for fear of revolution.

Eric stumbled a little as he stepped out of the elevator, and onto the flat, grey floor that stretched for miles underground. Long glass panels revealed a different room, startling, magnesium white and clinical. Eric stared at the room in amazement, slowly approaching it like it were a majestic animal snoring amongst thick vegetation. Apprehension kicked in, the room reminded Eric of a surgical
theatre and everything associated with it.

"Time Child!" A familiar voice echoed.

Eric spun around, spotting Blavius II and a couple of council otters.

_How hadn't I noticed them before? Fuck, this place is huge._

Eric coughed into his fist, trying to shoo away any betraying emotion before calmly making his way over to Blavius II.

"Mr President," Eric nodded as he approached him and his lackeys. "Council…"

"Happy birthday," Blavius II smiled.

"Thank you, sir," Eric replied, hands tucked behind his back.

"So the day has finally come, Time Child?" A feminine voice spoke up.

"Yes, ma'am," Eric nodded, turning to the council member.

An otter, the other side of Blavius II jumped in. "We can't imagine how you must be feeling-"

"Nervous, perhaps?" Blavius II suggested, stepping forward but Eric didn't budge.

"Why would I be nervous, sir?" Eric tilted his head slightly and asked, as if goading the mind games he knew were coming.

"What if you go back and it's not what you imagined it to be?" Blavius II asked outright. "You've been waiting for a long time, so I can assume your expectations are grand."

"Well, I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about it but…” Eric paused, trying to make his answer both firm and ambiguous enough so the council couldn't get more leverage over him. "I've also done a lot of planning, I know what I'm there to do."

Blavius II squeaked before continuing. "I'm sure you have, but what if forty eight hours isn't long enough? You haven't seen…" The otter paused, looked to the ceiling for answers he already knew. "Oh, Time Child, his name is escaping my memory-"

"Kyle," Eric answered, careful not to say it with a defensive snarl.

"That's right!" Blavius II exclaimed. "Kyle! You haven't seen him for so long, I'm sure you two will have a lot to catch up on, and we know how much you care for him, Time Child. Is two days enough?"

Eric would not allow his mission to be contaminated by doubt, when he had resisted before. He had been sick with the infliction, but would not let it conquer him, not today.

"If two days is all I have, then… I'll make it work," Eric replied. "I'm thankful for whatever time we can have together."

Bittersweet honesty, for every lie has a vein of truth.

"Very well, Time Child," Blavius sighed. "If you're sure."

With an obnoxious swish of his large tail, Blavius II and the two council members made their exit.
After all, they had tried to get what they wanted out of Eric and failed.

"We'll see you soon!" Blavius II's voice echoed, before Eric took a deep breath and entered the lab.

The lab was indeed reminiscent of a surgical theatre. There was a starched, raised gallery where otters and a few humans in lab coats scurried from one end of the oval room to the other, looking very important. Below that was the machine itself, huge if not the behemoth Eric was expecting, terrifying rather than extraordinary.

Eric came to the conclusion that the machine resembled a hybrid of a hospital CAT scanner (a large, ominous one at that), and something out of a sci-fi dream abandoned in a bygone era. It made Eric chuckle, these ludicrous, magical illusions of the future that had now been confirmed to him as mythical.

Except for today. Maybe I haven't seen everything.

"…And when you step inside, stay perfectly still," the thin, dark-haired scientist, a man Eric vaguely recognised, explained. "If you twitch your leg, or move your arm you could fracture it."

Eric turned his head away from the machine that was demanding his attention. "And what about during the inertia?" he asked. "Can I move then?"

"Well, you'll probably be unconscious-"

"Unconscious?"

"Or in some kind of trance which would render you catatonic… almost. That's how others have described it anyway," the scientist replied. "Don't you remember?"

"No, I was frozen when they found me," Eric said uncomfortably.

"Oh, uh, yes, right," the scientist nodded, more interested in fitting a strange blue band on Eric's wrist, buttons glowing and begging to be pressed.

"What's that you're putting on my arm?"

"The time tether," the scientist said. "You can't take it off."

Eric fought the urge to roll his eyes, glancing back at the machine. "I know, it's in my contract…"

"No, I mean you physically can't take it off even if you wanted to," the scientist clarified.

"Oh…" Eric was now even more fascinated with the little blue band, wondering if there was any way to defy it. If there were a point to breaking it that is…

"The time tether is what brings you back after forty eight hours," the scientist explained. "It has a resonance code with the transporter behind you-"

"Transporter?" Eric interjected. "I thought this was a time machine?"

"No, much more advanced," the scientist allowed a smug, but sheepish smile to appear on his face. "A time transporter allows you to move in space as well as time."

"I thought all time machines did the same thing," Eric mumbled, but no sound could escape the vacuum of the room.
"No, I wouldn't be able to get you to Massachusetts in just a time machine," the scientist said.

As soon as he was introduced to the scientist Eric had handed over the necessary details of his mission. The scientist had nodded nervously upon receiving a date and location, withering under Eric's tenacity. Painful as it had been, Eric studied and combed through the details of Kyle's death certificate thoroughly, to ensure that his mission ran as smoothly as possible. Leaving the rest to technicians and machines that couldn't comprehend the importance of his visit made him almost as shaky as the scientist beside him.

"Is it ready?" Eric asked, glancing at the transporter that had started to hum promisingly.

"Yes, step in!" The scientist said, the doors to the transporter appeared out of nowhere and slid open. They revealed a comforting glow, an artificial warmth, and Eric braced himself with a small, fortifying shrug of shoulders before stepping inside.

"Remember, keep perfectly still, and close your eyes when the doors shut. It can get very bright," the scientist continued, Eric could spot him taking a seat behind the control panel directly opposite him.

That artificial warmth wrapped around Eric like steam from a hiccupsing geyser, or a Nereid mother embracing her child. Thin, fluid, forever evading his grasp. Eric stared around the transporter before it could shine any brighter, shivered at the discomfiting thought of being in some indefinable coma as he clawed his way through the very fabric of time and space. Standing there idly, he felt like he was occupying a discarded cocoon, a womb, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the doors shutting.

He closed his eyes expectantly, floodlights behind his lids. He was left waiting and anticipating for the unknown, before something grasped at him. The universe had sank its claws into his sides and was pulling him backwards; in time, in consciousness, plummeting into the cogs of space, Eric was out cold before he could realise what was truly happening. The universe had bent solely for him and Kyle.

Like water evacuating drowning lungs, Eric instinctively opened his eyes and crashed breathlessly into a party.

He hadn't anticipated the swarm of drunk college students, the bassline of thumping music wriggling in his gut, the darkened room barely brightened by limp party lights and sudden camera flashes, or the disorientation he would feel upon being catapulted into the past.

A shove to his shoulder made Eric stumble, and realise that he couldn't stand in the middle of a soon to be trashed house when he had a job to do and a limited amount of time to do it.

But he didn't even know what time it was, and as he weaved through the crowd of loose limbs attempting to dance, his head was becoming increasingly muddled.

Eric had found himself in the kitchen when he finally located a clock perched lopsidedly on the wall.

1:00

He had three hours to find Kyle.

Shit.

Should he ask for help? But how could he when most of the guests were wasted and he looked like a weirdo who nobody would want to help in a million years? Maybe it was due to the feverish crowd and the sheer volume of people infesting every corner of the otherwise charming house, but Eric was
starting to sweat. He could feel the heavy beads on his brow, the stuffiness under his arms…

He was hoping to look a little more cool and presentable when he finally saw Kyle, but matters like appearance seemed so laughably trivial.

Spotting a group of girls perched on the kitchen island, Eric ran a flustered hand through his hair before approaching them.

"Uh, excuse me?" Eric addressed the group, thankfully the music had travelled softly into the kitchen, meaning Eric didn't have to shout and potentially frighten them off.

"Yeah?" A dark haired girl elected herself to speak, her legs were crossed and her hitched up mini skirt revealed swathes of bronze thigh.

"Do you know a guy called Kyle Broflovski?" Eric asked, eyebrows arched hopefully, prompting the girls almost.

"Broflovski?" the dark haired girl repeated.

Eric nodded, a tooth snagging his plump lower lip.

"Yeah, I know him!" A freckled, blond girl piped up. Her bright, lip-gloss smile elicited a wave of rapturous hope in Eric.

"Thank science!" he exclaimed, his tried body slumping in relief.

The group of girls looked at each other with furrowed eyebrows and laughed at this strange guy and his strange expressions. Eric scowled softly at being the subject of their giggles.

"So, uh, have you seen him here?" He asked.

"Yeah, I saw him by the keg a couple of seconds ago," the freckled girl replied with a small nod.

"Where's that?"

"In the living room," a different girl replied, arching an amused eyebrow.

"Thanks," Eric said, the new information buzzed in his ears, and he went to leave before a hand grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Wait!" The hand softened its hold on Eric, manicured nails skimming the soft, pale underside of his forearm.

"We haven't seen you here before," the girl remarked, smile dazzling and voice silky, tempting to some, Eric imagined, but not him.

"Yeah, I don't go here," Eric quickly said, trying to get his arm out of the girl's grip without being too obvious. "I just need to find Kyle. But thanks for your help-"

"Do you want to have a drink with us?" The dark-haired girl asked, and Eric's eyes flitted between the group disbelievingly, their interest completely foreign to him.

"Uh, no, sorry…” Eric muttered, slipping his arm out of the girl's loose grip and ducking out of the kitchen. He prayed Kyle hadn't moved from the keg since the blond girl last saw him.

Although Kyle's senior photo was ingrained in Eric's mind, there was still an ominous voice (that
sounded strangely like Blavius II) in the back of his head that murmured – even over the pounding music – that Eric wouldn't recognise him. That he and Kyle would incidentally meet in a doorway or outside the bathroom and through loss of recognition they'd miss each other.

Eric couldn't let that happen. The consequences were too dire, too much time and energy had been invested into this one crucial night.

But the clock was ticking and the house was fit to bursting with people and everything was moving so fast that Eric's grasp was slippery.

Now back in the dreaded living room, Eric pushed through the crowd and dodged furniture, Kyle's photographed smile searing his heart and sure to drive him crazy.

Then, a flash of red hair.

A promising flash of red, curly hair.

Eric stopped, resistance against the bodies dancing around him, blood swirling in his ears so rapidly he could taste copper on his tongue.

He peered at the redheaded boy, swaying as he made himself a drink. His eyes were half-lidded, his mouth drawn into a thin line, like he was numb to the music and everybody around him. The lukewarm sweat on his face glistened visibly even from where Eric was standing.

The boy threw his drink back him with such little elegance and grace that it made Eric snicker softly, such clumsiness was uncharacteristic of Kyle, if it even was him. But Eric was enchanted, he couldn't stop staring, so that was something, right? The boy appeared to hiccup and swiped at the slithers of whatever he was drinking that had stuck to his chin.

A small voice, that could have been Eric's instinct, whispered that the boy was Kyle. But something in his mind was struggling to confirm it.

Suddenly, the boy turned and glanced at Eric.

Crisp, verdant eyes collided with caramel gold.

Eric's breath hitched and their surprised, intense expressions mirrored each other. Despite the buffer of inebriated people, Eric felt like the boy was right in front of him. Nose to nose, breath to breath, close enough to touch. And the more he stared, the longer the two remained frozen in each other's eyes, the further the paralysis of confirmation travelled through Eric's body.

*Kyle. Definitely Kyle.*

Kyle's eyes widened when Eric's eyes widened.

Eric's head cocked slightly to the side when Kyle's did.

Their eyebrows furrowed in sync.

Perfectly choreographed and unforgotten after five hundred years.

 Unexpectedly, as quick and as brutal as whiplash, Kyle looked away and Eric's heart faltered. He couldn't let himself be disappointed for too long. After all, he wasn't expecting a reunion of grandeur and passion. That wasn't the note they had left their relationship on and while Eric loved Kyle, it was from afar and Kyle had been as aloof and unassuming as he appeared now. Despite the intensity of
their silent, distant moment, Kyle hadn't seen Eric in years, had no idea what he would look like, why should he recognise him immediately?

It was with those rational, somewhat comforting thoughts that Eric braced himself for his mission. He had located Kyle now, all he had to do was stay close, try to get him alone and then stop him from making a huge mistake.

Easier said than done.

Eric watched a guy approach Kyle, furrowed his eyebrows as the stranger said something in Kyle's ear. Kyle nodded with a smile on his face, letting the stranger pull him away but not without Eric slipping through the crowd, vowing to remain close.

For the next hour, Eric was Kyle's shadow, tense but fascinated. Kyle took every shot, every bottle, and every red cup whose contents were indiscernible, that was offered to him. Eric felt nauseated just seeing Kyle down drink after drink, sick with the disturbing consequence Eric was trying to save him from.

The alcohol acted as a potion that softened Kyle's bones and rendered him elastic; flopping and falling and trying to dance aimlessly to the music though even Eric remembered he had no rhythm. This shouting, bouncing, grinning Kyle was a far cry from the boy who had tried to keep it together for his school photo, to the tense, preoccupied looking boy who had graduated only a few months ago. He was certainly a far cry from the demons that had conquered him, his outward appearance belying and menacingly false to what was really going underneath the plastered over surface.

But centuries apart couldn't dismiss the fact that Eric knew Kyle, perhaps more than he realised. Those eyes, crinkled due to the smile stretched across his face were sad, really. The mask was running, like ink from a newspaper soaked in the rain. It seemed a storm cloud that had been hovering over Kyle for years had finally broken, drenching Kyle and nearly drowning him, but Kyle was too far gone to give a fuck.

But Eric wasn't. Eric was hopeful and determined and he believed in Kyle so much, was all he could believe in.

Kyle slumped on the arm of a sunken coach, probably worn out from dancing. He ran a hand through his hair, peeling damp curls away from his forehead. Eric leaned forward, he had to trust his instinct more than ever and right now it was telling him that something didn't seem right. Kyle leaned over and murmured to one of his friends, before hauling himself off the couch.

Eric quickly followed him, maintaining his distance as Kyle stumbled through the hallway, into the kitchen before nearly falling out of the patio doors.

Sliding the doors shut, Eric welcomed the December chill on his back, the music was now boxed in the house and it felt like he could finally breathe. But his peacefulness was short lived when he heard an ugly retch and the sound of vomit splashing onto the grass.

Turning around, Eric saw Kyle hunched with his back to him. He was swaying too, like a particularly brisk gust of winter wind could knock him down. Eric frowned, eyebrows knitted, the urge to go over and rub Kyle's back or offer him assurances or whatever the hell people did to comfort their drunk friends swelled in Eric's warm chest but he smothered it.

Kyle was in no fit state to be surprised, and the last thing Eric wanted to do was distress him.

Though I guess that's unavoidable.
Eric bit back a sigh and stood there helplessly, waiting for Kyle to acknowledge his presence because in a world where this could only go down roughly, Eric was vying for the easier option.

Kyle spat out bile and faint remnants of the alcohol he had consumed tonight, once he was done he straightened his back and shivered. He groaned softly, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before he turned around.

Pale, clammy and undeniably exhausted, Eric flinched at the sight and felt his courage retreat as Kyle's eyes slowly widened.

"Hey!" Kyle snapped, stumbling forward.

"Hi," Eric blurted, fighting the urge to fidget. "Uh-

"You're the weird guy from earlier!"

"Weird?" Eric questioned.

"Yeah, fucking weird!" Kyle shouted, defensive and confused. "Are you following me or something?!"

"No!" Eric replied, trying to keep his frustration and panic in check. "I-"

"Then why the fuck are you out here?!!" Kyle demanded. "Why were you staring at me?!!"

Eric balked, indignant, and he recognised the memory of an ancient rhythm. "You were staring at me too!"

A weak blush stroked Kyle's cheeks and he pouted, Eric felt a familiar lick of satisfaction in his chest.

"Yeah!" Kyle shouted. "But only because…"

"What?" Eric pressed, that seriousness returning and he stepped forward. The smell of sweat and alcohol and now vomit now just that little bit stronger. "Because what?"

Kyle stumbled back, eyes flashed warily and he stared at the grass before replying, "You reminded me of somebody I used to know."

Hope hit Eric in the way fear usually would, overwhelming and threatening to topple all of his senses. He wanted Kyle to recognise him, it would be much easier on Kyle (or so he thought), and would eliminate the risk of Kyle not believing him. He wouldn't rest until Kyle admitted it, until he said his name.

"Who?" Eric pressed, there was only a couple of inches between them in height but Kyle was vulnerable, his head swimming and Eric was able to tower over him. Mentally as well as physically. "Who do I remind you of?"

Kyle flinched, and his nervousness was palpable, raw.

"Why the hell should I tell you, asshole!" Kyle replied aggressively, over-compensating, clearly struggling under Eric's interrogation.

"Who do I remind you of?!!" Eric again demanded.

"You're crazy!" Kyle shouted in his face, bringing the two of them to an abrupt, slightly stunned
Kyle shook his head, embarrassed and shivering before he muttered. "Leave me alone…"

Wrapping his arms around his chest, Kyle began to walk away from Eric, but the taller boy blocked his path. Kyle nearly walked into his chest before his confused, agitated eyes met Eric's.

"No," Eric said strongly.

"What do you mean, no?!" Kyle replied, throwing his arms to his sides, curling his fists. "Let me go back in, you fucking lunatic!"

Eric made a tiny noise of despair. "I can't!"

"You can't?!"

Before Kyle could get hysterical, or alert the attention of some meddlesome party-goer, Eric grabbed Kyle's shoulders and pulled him close. He ignored Kyle's protesting whimper, the heightened fear in his eyes because he didn't want to scare Kyle or hurt him but he had to make him understand.

"Look at me…" Eric said, as softly as he could.

"I don't want to!" Kyle cried as he ungracefully struggled in Eric's grip. "I want to go back inside!"

"Look at me!" Eric demanded, stinging with desperation. So much so, that he wasn't thinking anymore. "Just trust me, Kyle!"

The tension, the chaotic moment, came to a head as soon as Kyle's name slipped out of Eric's mouth. Unintentional but as powerful as dynamite, Eric's hold softened on Kyle during the decimation. He was panting, while Kyle was left frozen, reeling, eyes as wide as the December moon above them.

"How do you know my name?" Kyle asked, his body warm and shaking under Eric's fingers, they must have felt as hot as fire irons to him.

Fuck, he's trembling. I'm so sorry, Kyle. I didn't-

"Kyle…" Eric whispered, but he was struggling to speak. "Please-"

"Stop!" Kyle cried, mustering the strength to wriggle his way out of Eric's hold. "Stop saying my name!"

"Okay!" Eric snapped, indignation had come over him at how Kyle reacted to his touch.

Don't be a fucking asshole now.

Eric's chest heaved in a sigh. "I'm sorry, just please look at me?"

Kyle glared at him, eyes dark and stubborn, it elicited a faltering twinge in Eric's heart. He could feel himself breaking.

"Please?" Eric pressed, voice wobbly. Hopefully it would stir some sympathy, some cautious trust in the usually compassionate Kyle.

Eric's breath hitched as Kyle took a small step forward. He let his hands rest at his sides to show Kyle he wasn't going to grab him again, or frighten him or hurt him.
Never, never again.

With every measured, regulating breath, something inside Eric creaked. Hope, anxiety, he didn't know what. He just felt like everything was close to unravelling, and Kyle was so unpredictable, and for the first time tonight, for the first time in years of separation, Kyle felt like a stranger.

The way Kyle studied his face, how emerald eyes roamed and how he breathed shallowly through his nose as he deliberated whether he knew Eric at all… It was so intimidating and surreal, unnerving, and Eric's heart broke from the pressure, that inner pleading for Kyle to just know, to please remember.

Then cinnamon eyebrows rose, creating a tiny crease, his mouth crinkled and recognition flooded forlornly on Kyle's face. Like Kyle, Eric was starting to remember again too, could feel the pieces coming together like stars joining, scrawling constellations in the sky. There he was, there was Kyle.

Right in front of you. For the first time in years.

A pair of hands reached up and cupped Eric's face. Lukewarm palms against Eric's cold cheeks, and despite Kyle's limpness, his fragility those hands felt so strong and sure, like they could brace Eric for a lifetime. Oh, that blessed touch, granting small heavens, and Eric couldn't help but close his eyes and gently lull his head, like all his pursuing, all his waiting had come to an end and Kyle was letting him know it.

But Eric forced himself to open his eyes, so Kyle could be undoubtedly sure. When he lifted his head, Kyle's eyes were wide and boring into his own.

"Oh-oh my God," Kyle whispered, his breaths were coming in short, anxious bursts. "No, no it-can't be…you… Cartman?"

Eric's heart folded as he nodded, that name… Science, nobody had referred to him by his last name in so long. A peculiar novelty, but he felt like he was home.

Kyle's fingers slipped away but his stare remained fixed on Eric. And he watched as Kyle's shock and confusion made way for something else… anger.

Before Eric could even try to explain, Kyle glowered and smacked him across the face. Surprisingly hard.

"Fuck!" Eric shouted, tentatively pressing a hand to his red cheek that was stinging viciously. He looked up with incredulous eyes, saw Kyle seething, but there was unavoidable sadness there.

"Kyle!

"What the hell?!" Kyle cried, before he lurched forward and shoved Eric. "What the hell, Cartman?!!"

"Kyle!" Eric barked. "Calm down!"

It was a stupid thing to say, of course emotions were waging war inside Kyle, but Eric just had to tough it out.

"Tell me what's going on," Kyle tried to calmly demand, but he was still seething, and his voice trembled. "Right now!"

Eric rubbed the back of his neck, looking to the stars before he replied, "It's a long story-"
"Everybody thinks you're dead!" Kyle yelled, unable to get a handle on himself. "The whole town thinks you're dead! God, I thought you were fucking frozen somewhere-

"I was! Just let me explain, okay?!" Eric interjected, impatient now, but he had no idea how to make sense of it all either. "Remember- remember how I wanted the Nintendo Wii? Like, really badly? And I couldn't wait the three weeks for it to come out?"

Kyle nodded, a confused, pained expression on his face as he wrapped his arms around himself, clutching his stomach. Eric hoped to Science he wouldn't vomit again.

"Well, uh, I had this plan, right, to freeze myself for the three weeks so the wait wouldn't seem so long," Eric continued. "But it backfired and, and, I've been living in the future for eleven years…”

A bad way to end an explanation, sure to prompt more questions than offer answers, but it was all Eric had.

Kyle let go of himself, still breathing harshly and rapidly, and, like Eric, he looked to the sky as if it could offer him a better explanation. By the look in Kyle's eyes, it appeared that he was pleading for one. Windows to the past and the future they may be, but the stars couldn't hand the two boys answers. Tonight, they only had each other to rely on, to trust.

"But how?" Kyle asked. "How… Cartman, I don't understand…"

"I get that," Eric nodded.

"This doesn't make any sense!"

"I know," Eric replied. "I know it's crazy, and I know I've sprung this on you but… Kyle, it's so important that you trust me tonight. I'm here to help you. You have no reason to, but just trust me. Can you do that? Please?"

Kyle matched Eric's imploring look with one of total bewilderment.

"Cartman," Kyle began, Eric held his breath. "What the fuck is happening?"

Eric exhaled, then chuckled softly. "I'm not sure, a lot of fucked up shit that even I don't understand?" he offered.

To Eric's surprise, Kyle returned the chuckle, drunk and rueful. It warmed Eric up more than a heated house ever could.

"It's- oh God, it's been so long," Kyle said, swaying with the craziness of it all.

"Yeah," Eric agreed. "It has."

A half-smile tugged at Kyle's mouth, and he stared at his shoes, still uneasy on his feet. Like he had done for the past eleven years, Eric waited for him. Kyle lifted his head before slowly making his way over to Eric, his gaze as deep as space.

Unusual silence descended upon them when Kyle stopped in front of Eric. Maybe Kyle had nothing to say, but Eric was itching to fill the void. Clueless however, as to what he could offer.

"You're not gonna slap me again, are you?" he joked.

Kyle smiled tearfully, concealing his laughter behind pursed lips, before he blinked and fat, uncontrollable tears slipped out. Eric returned the sad smile, hesitant to touch Kyle or even say
anything, but it didn't matter when Kyle collapsed into him. His fingers found purchase on Eric's shirt, clawed into his back, before Kyle pressed himself against Eric and held him tightly.

Eric, meanwhile, had frozen, had become something rigid and sturdy for Kyle to hold onto. But if the feeling of Kyle cupping his face was amazing, then this embrace was exquisite; what Eric had been missing for eleven years, Kyle's hugs that he had found so much strength and comfort in. Now he was in love with him, that feeling had trebled, constricting his heart and powerful enough to intoxicate him. And then...

"I've missed you so much…" Kyle sobbed against his chest.

With that, Eric was gone. Forgoing doubt, he threw his arms around Kyle and pressed him even closer, to feel him and keep him safe, close enough that he would be able to vividly cherish this after their time was up.

Kyle readily responded, burying himself in Eric's embrace and twisting the fistfuls of Eric's shirt he was clutching.

"I've missed you too, Kyle," Eric said, resting his cheek on Kyle's hair and relishing the feeling of those lovely curls brushing against his cheek.

*He's here. You're holding him. He's actually here and he's letting you hold him.*

"I've missed you so much," Eric added as his own tears slipped loose, giving Kyle a gentle squeeze.

*I love him, I love him. I love you Kyle, with everything I am. Science, God, stars, whoever is listening, please make this last? Can't I just stay here with him forever?

Kyle lifted his head slightly and croaked, "Cartman…"

"Yeah?" Eric murmured, looking down at the boy he was holding.

"I don't feel so good," Kyle moaned.

"Crap," Eric muttered, the embrace quickly morphed into a supportive hold. Eric's arm wrapped around Kyle's shoulders, while Kyle was still clutching Eric's back.

"Come on," Eric said, leading Kyle to the front of the house via the garden, the party would only be a distraction. "I need to take you to the hospital…"

Kyle nodded, and Eric could swear he felt Kyle's faith in him.

Chapter End Notes

If you're wondering where Kyle's POV is, don't worry, it's coming. This is how the story is going to be structured from now on. Eric's POV in one chapter, Kyle's in another. It just makes sense for how the story will progress, and means that I don't have to sacrifice one perspective for another. We still have a ways to go! Thank you for reading!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I know I've thrown a lot of angst at you already, but I promise this will be the last angsty chapter for a while. Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy!

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Kyle stumbled, plodding along and trying his hardest to keep up with Cartman's steady, deliberate steps.

They had somehow made it to the front of the house, and Kyle squinted up at the stars that had his foggy vision had smudged. The Earth tilted, tangling Kyle's legs and making him crash like cargo in the bowels of a stormy ship.

He had probably bruised Cartman, drooled on his shirt, at least it confirmed to Kyle that Cartman was there, to look at, talk to, hold on to and never let go.

Kyle's eyes had never felt heavier, like the weight of the world, of his own problems were closing in inexorably. Nothing Kyle could do, nothing he wanted to do. Circling the sweet black plughole of unconsciousness. How he longed to turn off the drunken static in his head, make a pillow out of Cartman's chest. Just close his eyes for a little bit…

"Kyle?" Cartman asked, not even a sturdy shake from him could lift the fog of indeterminable slumber.

"Oh shit!" He heard Cartman mutter, but the intensity of his voice had no effect on him. Another rough, panicked shake. "Kyle?!!"

It was Christmastime. So many parties, so many drinks, so many chances to get hammered before he had to go home. He fucking resented that town and everybody in it, he hoped to still be wasted when he boarded the plane heading to Denver.

Kyle was far away from all that now, but he could have fled to the other side of the world, and that town and all it represented would have caught up to him. Look at where he was now, in Harvard, a place he had prioritised above everything and everybody else, his greatest distraction and therefore his greatest achievement.

And he still wasn't happy.

He had only been happy in Cartman's embrace, now he was slowly fading in his arms.

The echoes of vomit splashing into a stranger's toilet were loud enough to drown out the party... Almost.

They were certainly loud enough to drown out Stan's worn platitudes, friendly comforts that had turned sour. Kyle didn't even acknowledge the fingers drawing circles on his back, they didn't make him feel better anyway.
"You should go home, dude," Kyle heard Stan say when he finally lifted his head out of the toilet.

His throat was raw from retching, his breath rank with alcohol and bile. He needed a mint, but he also needed another drink. The only cure for his self-loathing, embarrassment and the unspeakable affliction that was slowly destroying him.

Kyle shook his head, wiping his mouth with as much grace as a lazy housecat swatting a fly.

"Yes, Kyle," Stan said, forgoing gentle strokes for a firm clutch at his best friend's shoulder. "You should. I don't want to stay here either. We can just bail. You can crash at my house, if you want?"

Go to Stan's. Sober up. Get coffee forced down his throat. Idly play video games. Lie awake without the numbing effects of alcohol, leaving him susceptible to God knows what horrid thoughts his mind could conjure.

"No!" Kyle exclaimed, clutching his hair suddenly, terrified. "I don't wanna go to your house! I wanna stay here!"

An exasperated sigh, it made Kyle wince.

"Kyle, seriously man, you've had enough," Stan implored softly. "Let's just go home-"

"No!" Kyle groaned, pushing Stan away from him and he heard his friend smack against the bathroom tiles.

"What the hell?!" Stan asked, his elbow probably bruised. Kyle gave no thought to the marks that were emotional.

"Don't tell me what to do!" Kyle cried, towering over Stan, wobbly and pathetic as he was. "I can't go home, I'm staying here!"

Even inebriated, Kyle was smart enough to know that he couldn't stay here forever. Holed up in some stranger's bathroom, or draining the party of liquor. The realisation, unavoidable, was devastating.

Breaking a shaking hand to his mouth, Kyle slumped once again and started to sob.

Sirens wailing.

Kyle's vision filled with white. Untrodden snow white.

Like the horizon had yawned and was enveloping him. His lungs swelled, it felt like he was screaming but no sound was coming out-

Was he floating?

He was stiff, lethargic, but was he somehow gliding?

The only thing he was aware of was how loud and steadily he was breathing. Rationed but somehow enough.

"- so you haven't been with him for the whole night?"

Kyle slid his gaze over to a paramedic sat beside him, asking a question to somebody who Kyle was yet to register.
"No, only for an hour or so."

Kyle's eyes followed the voice. Familiar, wanted, needed.

Cartman.

Kyle trained his gaze on him, but the boy – man – was oblivious to his now conscious state.

"But he was really drunk," Cartman went on. "He was pale and clammy and he went outside, so I followed him to see if he was alright and that's when he threw up. He told me he didn't feel good, I told him that I'd get him some help. I thought he needed it. He passed out and then I used his phone to call an ambulance."

_He saved you again._

The thought swam against the lofty current of Kyle's mind.

"Oh, I think he's coming to," the paramedic spoke beside him.

"What?" Cartman asked, before unmistakable golden eyes – the ones that had pierced the crowd only a couple of hours ago – collided with Kyle's again.

Kyle's flimsy consciousness refracted as palpable relief on Cartman's face. His smile was as wide and as bright as his eyes, his cheeks flushed.

"Kyle…" he whispered.

Before Kyle could respond (if indeed he could), a palm, rough but undoubtedly resilient pressed against his cheek.

"We're on our way to the hospital," Cartman said, smile stretching. "You're going to be alright."

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_With the blinds drawn, Kyle had lost track of how long he had been studying. The notion didn't perturb him, in fact, it encouraged him to keep reading through the niggling headache he had inflicted upon himself._

_The world, Kyle's world, couldn't stop for a minute, he couldn't stand still, be bored, have nothing to occupy his thoughts. The more intense the distraction, the more numbing, and the more focused, the better._

_Drinking was fun and a strong, liquid fist to punch his destructive thoughts into the recesses of his mind. But Kyle was aware of what would happen if he drank in excess, or rather if he neglected his studies for it. He would never get into Harvard, he would never leave South Park and all its (and his own) problems behind._

_He didn't have to quit drinking. So he quit basketball instead, well, unofficially. The season had already finished and senior year was fast approaching, he just… wouldn't sign up, that's all. Miss practice until his team got the picture. No big deal. And he would drink in moderation._

_Of course there was a fear - like a virus growing impenetrable to an antibiotic's reach – that drinking wouldn't be enough anymore, wouldn't be enough to… Not eradicate the pain, but dull it sufficiently._

_Whilst studying made him feel like he was achieving something, that he was investing in his future like mature, responsible people do (he was still one of those, damn it), it wasn't intoxicating. It was_
Kyle jolted, hunched over his crowded desk when his phone pinged. Another text from Thomas. It was easy to forget that he was still maintaining a relationship somehow. But that love? That Kyle was working towards with a boy who had been so good to him? Out of the question. Kyle felt more annoyance than affection now.

Does he have to text me every five minutes? If it's not him, it's Stan and if it's not Stan it's Kenny and if it's not Kenny it's my parents knocking on my door and dragging me out of my room when I'm perfectly happy-

Liar.

The unexpected accusatory tone of his thoughts made him freeze, made him choke on the sudden lump in his throat.

Because none of what he was doing; the drinking, the excessive studying, the forced isolation, the manic ambition made him happy, it just made him feel even more aimless. He was trying to replace one obtrusive obsession with another, but finally getting to Harvard and graduating from there would be worthless if he didn't start figuring out the shit in his head.

But why figure it out when he could supress it? Fight it? Manage it? But this wasn't managing, was it? This is not the life he thought he'd be living, if his life had begun at all.

Distraction and obsession, that's all it was.

That's all you have.

Kyle disguised his helpless cry through gritted teeth, slamming his fists on the desk before throwing his books to the carpet.

Something was squeezing his upper arm, a firm, scolding grip for all his stupid mistakes.

Kyle tried to move away, squinting and withering due to the clinical lights above him, but he couldn't move. He slid against starched hospital sheets fruitlessly instead, swaddled like an injured bird.

He whimpered and grumbled and tossed and made it all the more difficult for his doctor or nurse or whoever the hell was hovering over him to do their job.

"We have to do this, Kyle…" An assertive but gentle feminine voice found its way into his ears.

But he didn't know what was going on, didn't understand the urgency. All he knew was that his mouth was dry as arid desert, his eyes ached with exhaustion and his head and heart were thrumming with confusion.

Dampness tickled the crook of his elbow, mild rubbing alcohol, but Kyle's nerves were tangled up in knots and he arched and whined, wriggling away from the touch.

The lights bearing down on him, his bewilderment, made him break out in a sweat and he thrashed his head weakly, as if searching-

Where is he?

"It's okay," the doctor assured. "Look your friend is here! He's with you."
Kyle's damp brow creased.

"I-I'm right here, Kyle,"

Kyle turned to the voice immediately, and there was Cartman. Clearer in his vision now than anybody else, he was smiling but his eyes, the lines in his face, were fraught with worry. Kyle whimpered in response, questions tripping over each other in his mind.

"It's alright," Cartman said. "Everything's going to be fine."

Kyle pursed his lips, shaking his head and trying to articulate that he didn't like this, and he was so confused and how did they get here? Cartman could only nod, his smile glimmering or maybe that was Kyle's watery vision? His terrified heart stung.

"Do you trust me?" Cartman asked, taking Kyle's hand. Just the right amount of pressure, warmth, the perfect face for Kyle to believe in.

He was still scared, but Cartman was here and he clutched that comfort close to his heart.

Yes, I trust you.

Kyle tried to say it out loud, but his tight throat couldn't even force those words out.

So he squeezed Cartman's hand as tight and as greedily as he could, and nodded.

Cartman's eyes remained on him, and Kyle wondered what he could possibly be looking at, until something pricked at the crook of his elbow.

Kyle gritted his teeth and closed his eyes as the miniscule sting dulled into a longer, tender ache. Clasped fingers twitched, realigned themselves, Cartman letting Kyle know he was still there.

While the sting subsided and withdrew, the pressure did not, but Kyle had a sturdier, warmer one to counteract it. An alien sensation still persisted in the crook of his elbow, and he whimpered into the bulging pillows as it began its cold, slow invasion.

"Done!" The doctor said, the intrusion sealed with medical tape. "Hard part's over."

Kyle was panting and sweating regardless, still keeping his stubborn grip on Cartman's hand.

Kyle kept his head down as he left Kenny's, the house had been so dark and now he was stepping out into the powdery light and stark reality. Which brought him to the small baggie in his hand. As quickly as he wanted to leave, hop over those train tracks and forget about the transaction with Kevin as quickly as possible, he couldn't help but stare at what he was holding, only feeling slight regret and shame at what he was becoming.

Alcohol had always dampened those feelings, vigorous studying had redeemed him somewhat, and the malicious nature of his thoughts had driven him to a desperate, somewhat apathetic corner. Drinking in moderation didn't grant the invincibility that getting completely wasted did, and he needed a numbing agent to lull him into an obtunded state where thoughts were crushed and unable to catch up to him.

"Hey!"

Shit.
Kyle quickly tucked the baggie into his jacket pocket, trying not to be too unnerved by Kenny's sharp tone.

"O-oh, hey, dude," Kyle said, fiddling with his sleeves. "Where've you been?"

"Butters' house," Kenny replied, coming closer to Kyle while he just stood there in the snow. "What are you doing here?"

"Uh, actually, I was looking for you," Kyle said, a smile wavered on his face and he detested his shaky inflection. "See if you wanted to hang out, but you weren't here, so-"

Kenny was already staring Kyle down sceptically, closing in. "I saw you put something in your pocket just now."

"What?" Kyle asked, he would've dodged Kenny if he knew his persistent friend wouldn't block him. "I didn't put anything in my pocket."

Kenny sighed, his disappointment hung icily in the air. "Don't do that to me, Kyle," he said, shaking his head.

"Dude," Kyle mumbled, avoiding Kenny's face. "I have no idea what you're talking about-"

"Fucking bullshit, man!" Kenny snapped, growling almost and Kyle couldn't stop himself from flinching. "Don't you think that, with all the shit that's gone down these past few months, we shouldn't be hiding stuff from each other?"

Incredulity and well-steeped bitterness gave Kyle a second wind.

"A bit rich, isn't it?" He remarked. "Considering what exactly-"

"Did you come here to see my brother?" Kenny asked, cerulean eyes imploring for the truth.

And Kyle swiftly denied him, glancing at the abandoned train tracks that split the town in two.

"Kyle!" Kenny snapped. "Answer me!"

Kyle's brittle heart chipped away a little more. He wanted to plead with Kenny to go easy on him, though he hardly deserved it.

"I know you have, Kyle-"

"Then why do need to me to admit it?" Kyle turned back to Kenny and asked. "You wanna hear the words come out of my mouth?!"

"Yes!"

"Why?!"

"Because I want you to realize how crazy and stupid this is!"

"I bought some weed off your brother, so what?" Kyle challenged, and Kenny scowled and averted his gaze. "Like we haven't smoked it before! My classes are stressing me out and I thought it would help me relax!"

"Save it, Kyle!" Kenny replied. "I know what this is all about! Come on, man, this isn't you!"
"It's just one fucking baggie of weed!" Kyle cried incredulously.

"No, it's not!" Kenny shouted, bearing down on Kyle just like everything else and Kyle couldn't do anything but barricade himself and take it. "It's you quitting basketball, and, and getting wasted at every party and blowing me and Stan off when there isn't booze involved!"

The ugly truth, projected on to him. Kyle couldn't face the accusing glare, he'd rather die than do that.

"Who the fuck are you anymore, dude?" Kenny asked, softer yes, but painfully raw.

"I don't know!" Kyle cried, throwing his arms up. "I don't know who the hell I am!"

Kyle's lip wobbled, a sign that his defences were crumbling. He had to get out of there.

Kenny frowned, before tentatively edging closer. "Kyle…"

"No, screw this," Kyle muttered, pushing past Kenny and storming off his snowy front lawn.

Surprisingly, Kyle was met with silence.

Maybe they've given up on you once and for all.

"Don't even think about coming back here for more!" Kenny shouted as Kyle walked down the street. "I'll kick my brother's ass and yours, Kyle!"

"I don't care!" Kyle replied, but as soon as the words were out of his mouth his face crumpled with tears.

The IV dripped and mended, machines beeped unnoticed, and Cartman was still by Kyle's side as he sniffled and his lashes wet the pillow.

Their hands remained intertwined. Kyle's arm ached, but he wouldn't let go, not when Cartman was finally beside him, not when his thumb was absently circling Kyle's clammy skin.

"Kyle, it's fine," he soothed. "It's an IV, that's all."

With great effort, Kyle moved his head and looked up. Cartman's eyes were trailing forlornly over Kyle, weak and defeated in a hospital bed. The scene was so quiet, broken but peaceful, and although Kyle felt safe he also felt terrified.

Despite his trust in Cartman, Kyle still had doubts. Gnawing, debilitating doubts that Kyle was desperate for Cartman to put to rest, if they weren't the answers Kyle feared, that is.

"You should probably get some sleep," Cartman remarked.

Don't, please don't-

"You look exhausted," he added, with a short, pitiful chuckle. The noise hollow, not reaching his eyes.

Kyle shook his head, cheek brushing against the dampness of his pillow. Cartman was right, he was exhausted. But he wouldn't go to sleep unless he knew Cartman would be there when he woke up. He needed that confirmation, needed Cartman to make that deal. He wanted to tell Cartman all of that, but his words sunk in the emotional crater, unbearable heaviness in his chest and eyes.
"What?" Cartman asked, picking up on the pathetic syllables falling out of Kyle's mouth.

*Don't, don't leave…*

Two words. That's all it was. All Kyle needed Cartman to know. But he struggled, forcing the words out so hard that a few more effortless tears roamed his cheeks.

"Kyle, what is it?" Cartman repeated.

*Don't go!*

Kyle groaned from the effort, head sinking further into the pillow as sleep prevailed.

"Fuck…" Cartman said, Kyle sensed alarm in his voice. "Do you need me to get a nurse or something?"

Cartman's fingers loosened in Kyle's own, his fear being realised. With a few strained breaths (pant), Kyle recovered his voice.

"Don't leave me again!" He finally cried out. The words clawed into his lungs and he seized, fresh rounds of tears in his eyes.

Although their hands were separated, Kyle could weakly sense Cartman's fingertips, the warmth of another. He reached out, clumsily grasping Cartman's fingers and squeezing them.

"What?" Cartman whispered, the word trembled like Kyle.

"Please," Kyle begged, eyes closing as the weight of the night toppled him. "Please, Cartman, don't leave me again…"

"Kyle…"

Why did Cartman sound so broken? Surely Kyle was the broken one here.

"Stay," Kyle whispered, his last exhausted request. "Stay…"

*Urgency had tricked Kyle into leaving his bedroom, so he could have a "quick talk" with his parents. Like any urgent or serious matters could be solved quickly, Kyle had shut the biology textbook he was hardly reading and went downstairs, finding his mother and father sat in the dining room, staring at him twinned grave expressions.*

*His stomach had lurched, the floor suddenly uneven and he would've given anything for a hard drink or a joint to take the edge off.*

*He had regarded his parents with wary eyes and his mouth set in a thin line so as not to give anything away.*

*It wasn't a coincidence that Ike was at hockey practice, so he wouldn't be a witness to his big brother's mess.*

"Your father and I have been talking and we think it's best that you start going to counselling again," His mother finally said after grey, agonising silence.

"What?" Kyle asked, the notion was frightening as well as insulting to him. "Why?"
His father sighed, before saying. "We've been giving you the benefit of the doubt for the past few months but… We've noticed a change in you, Kyle. You've quit basketball, and we know you said it was because you needed time to focus on your schoolwork and your college applications but-you love basketball so much. At least you used to-

"Plus, we never see Stan or Kenny here, we very rarely see Thomas anymore either. You shut yourself up in your room and when you do go out, you barely talk to us when you come back," his mother continued reeling off the offences Kyle was arrogant enough to believe he had gotten away with. "It's, it's scary for us, bubbe, not knowing what's going on in your head. But we want to help you."

Scary for you? You?! How do you think I feel?! Kyle wanted to shout, but then that would be admitting defeat.

Besides, let's not draw attention to how selfish of an asshole you've become. They've just read you the evidence.

"I, I don't know what to tell you," Kyle tried to say as measured as he possibly could. "I'm fine, just a little stressed."

"You've been stressed before, son, and it's never been this bad," his father pointed out.

"Bad? What do you mean 'bad'?" Kyle asked, it was two against one and he was growing hostile. "What the fuck are you talking about?!"

"Language, Kyle," his mother warned him, and Kyle shot her his usual apologetic look. If only it could solve all of his problems.

"We think you might be suffering from depression," his father said.

The mention of that word was another devastating blow, another slight to Kyle's grimy reflection and he barely registered his back hitting the chair, reeling.

"We did a little research and you're showing all the signs," his mother added, clutching tightly at a tissue.

Kyle looked beyond his concerned parents, to the china kept away in a mahogany cabinet, to the pictures of a happy family that right now, didn't seem like his own. Who was that boy? That seemed so divorced from Kyle now? He had once been him, or was he just pretending? Did Kyle – the one who was drinking and crumbling and who was most likely depressed – steal this husk he was inhabiting? Or was it the other way around? Who could keep track?

"And, and we remember what it was like six years ago, how you were struggling," his mother was still talking, hand shaking as she held a tissue close to her face. "It feels like it's happening all over again."

Kyle shook his head, "No, no it's not," he replied, but he was slipping, falling. "I'm really fine, I don't need to see some stupid counsellor again!"

"You can't sort through this on your own, Kyle," his father said. "You need help-

"Do you really think I have the time for that shit?" Kyle snapped, standing up and all six feet of him loomed over the dining table. "I'm not wasting an hour in a crappy counsellor's office listening to some douchebag tell me stuff I already know!"
"Then how do you expect things to ever get better?!" His father countered, rising as well. "What are we supposed to do? Just leave you to figure all of this out on your own?! God knows what you could do to yourself, Kyle!"

Kyle balked at the assumption, flinching because it was partially true. Sure, he had things barely under control now but what if someday he didn't? What if things got worse? What if-

"I'm not going to do anything to myself!" Kyle shouted. "I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions and pretty soon, I'll be in Harvard, out of your hair, out of this godawful town and you won't have to fucking worry about me anymore!"

Kyle was shaken out of his fury by the sound of his mother sobbing. He glanced at her, face creasing with regret. Should he comfort her? But how could he comfort her when it was his fault she was crying in the first place?

All your fault. It's all your fault.

Kyle grimaced, clenching his fists he stormed out of the dining room before he could do anymore damage.

"Hey!" His dad shouted as Kyle ascended the stairs.

"Kyle!" His dad was following him now, but Kyle chose to be deaf to his footsteps. "Kyle! Come back here right now!"

Kyle stormed across the landing to his bedroom door.

"Fuck off!" he yelled, slamming the door and locking it.

"- definitely alcohol poisoning," the doctor said, a groggy Kyle had woken up and was stumbling midway into a conversation. "You were right to call an ambulance. Sadly, it's something a lot of people ignore in their friends, or obviously don't notice when it's happening to them."

"But he's okay now, right?" Cartman's voice slithered through the canals of his synapses.

Kyle turned his head, his neck stiff and it was like he was buried in pillows. There was Cartman in his half-lidded vision, staring at Kyle nervously.

"He seemed a little scared earlier," Cartman added.

"Confusion is normal," the doctor replied. "He's fine now, he just needs some sleep and time to recuperate."

"He doesn't need his stomach pumped or anything?" Cartman asked.

"No," the doctor suppressed a well-meaning chuckle. "We don't treat alcohol poisoning that way anymore."

"How long will he need to stay here? Because I have to leave in a couple of days."

Kyle would've mewled in protest, but his tongue felt like sandpaper and his throat as congested as rush hour.

"He'll be discharged by then," the doctor answered Cartman's question. "We'll keep him overnight, but he should be ready to go by the afternoon."
"Great," Cartman said, though he didn't sound sure. "Thanks, doctor."

Kyle watched Cartman move slowly to a chair beside his bed, before he sat down, chin in hand. Cartman hadn't noticed Kyle was barely awake, and before Kyle could even try to talk to him, he was being dragged back into slumber.

"What are you doing here?" Kyle asked Thomas, he remained sprawled out on his bed while Thomas stood awkwardly in the middle of his bedroom, fidgeting and hands clasped in front of him. As if Kyle were formidable, like he held Thomas' fate and was regarding him with control and slight displeasure.

Control? Kyle had probably lost that years ago. His sullen expression was a defence mechanism, pathetic and vulnerable and he was angry that Thomas was seeing it.


Kyle coughed, squirming inwardly at his boyfriend's concern. "Well, uh, thanks for checking up on me."

"Am I supposed to leave now?" Thomas asked, an indignant edge to his voice that Kyle found rather intimidating.

Not like he would let Thomas know that, besides it wasn't as if he was one hundred percent clear of what was going on right now.

"I don't mind," Kyle shrugged, hoping Thomas would just leave quietly.

Thomas glared at Kyle, mouth trembling before he shook his head and—

Is he crying?

"God, Kyle!" He exclaimed. "You just…"

"What?" Kyle asked, sitting up now, actually feeling concern. "What's wrong?"

Thomas took a tearful gulp of air, trying to conceal it by covering his mouth. But he quickly dropped his hand, wrapping his arms around himself.

"This!" He said. "This, it's just… it's all gone wrong. I don't know how but — Shit! Fuck!"

Kyle scowled, caught out. He stared out the window at the dull, overcast town. Because he knew what had gone wrong; underneath all the cover ups and distractions and blame, Kyle knew.

"I don't think I can do this anymore," Thomas said, every word painful. "It's too hard, Kyle."

Kyle turned his attention back to Thomas then, caught-off-guard but not totally surprised. It was inevitable that this would destroy them, Kyle was just waiting for Thomas to come to his senses. But he was stubborn and high, so he tried to be oblivious.

"I don't understand," he murmured, hardly convincing.

Thomas sighed, exasperated and hurt.

"It's not you, it's- you know what, fuck it I-I'm – piss! – Tired of making excuses for you!" Thomas said, and Kyle balked at this harsher boy in front of him. "You have a problem, Kyle. The drinking,
and the shutting yourself away and the weed! Fuck, Kyle you're stoned right now!"

Kyle bristled, affronted, but only because he was guilty.

"You think I have a fucking problem?" He asked, lurching off his bed and facing Thomas properly. "Do you?! Like all of this is my fault! You're just like my fucking parents and my stupid friends! You ignore the fact that you could have a part to play in this mess and and so you blame everything on me!"

"That's so not true, Kyle!" Thomas shouted in his face, Kyle could see his eyes glistening, and he saw his own sorry reflection too. "I never did anything to hurt you, and you know it."

"Really? And how would you know that, you noble piece of shit?" Kyle spat. "Saint Thomas, that's what you are, right? But now look at you, bailing when things get rough."

Thomas' face crumpled. "I've been trying, Kyle!" He cried. "I've been trying to get through to you for months! Fu-fuck! Piss! I've been trying to stay positive for months but I, I can't do it anymore! All the faith I had in you has just been sucked into this, this black hole you've become!"

Kyle scoffed, roaming his eyes over Thomas, disgusted.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Thomas," he sneered. "I'm sorry this has been so hard for you."

Thomas' crumpled face tightened with anger, only fuelling Kyle.

"But you know what? My family and my friends they, they have to tolerate me. They've been around a lot longer than you have. You've had the chance to fucking walk for months now and you haven't! It's not my fault you're so stupid!" Kyle continued viciously.

"And if you've been waiting for me to give you an out, if this is what you really came here for, then… This is it," Kyle shrugged like he couldn't care less, he swung his arm out and pointed at the door. "My out. If this is too difficult for you, then leave and make it easier for both of us. No hard feelings. We were never in love, anyway."

Thomas blinked and reeled from the force of Kyle's words, exactly what Kyle was suggesting. How he stood there, fixing his watery gaze on Kyle was torturous, allowing Kyle to replay exactly what he had said and his heart stung with regret.

But he wouldn't take it back, he didn't know if he could. Because Thomas didn't deserve him, he didn't deserve to put up with this. The kindest thing Kyle could do now was let him go. For the first time in a long time, Kyle felt he was doing something right. As cruel as it was.

Thomas bowed his head, trying to hide his tears that Kyle would've (in a past life) swept off his freckles.

Kyle too, turned away, head down and shoulders hunched as he shuffled back over to his bed.

"You think this is easy?" Thomas' voice by the door. "For us? For me?"

Please stop. Just go. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Thomas. I never meant to-

"I loved you, Kyle," Thomas said, voice waterlogged. "And I'm sorry you couldn't ever feel the same way."

Sunlight streaming through the hospital window disintegrated the bits of lingering fog in Kyle's
mind.

But it couldn't shift the blistering headache, stretching across his forehead and pounding behind his eyes that were slowly opening.

Withdrawal already.

Kyle groaned, considering himself lucky that he was even able to think coherently. No longer a groaning, sobbing, inarticulate mess, he was just another college student sober and aching from a drinking binge. Although he supposed winding up in hospital set him apart from the rest.

He creaked as he sat up, tugging at the persistent IV as he did so.

"Hey-"

Kyle jumped and timidly yelped at the sound of another person's voice. New but familiar, and when he looked to his side there was Cartman – looking tired but most noticeably grown up – sitting in an uncomfortable hospital chair and trying to calm Kyle down.

"It's okay!" Cartman said, raising his hands. "Kyle, it's okay!"

He was the silver lining to Kyle's stormy night, and being as drunk and helpless as he was, Kyle didn't bother questioning Cartman too much. He had put his trust in him blindly and unconditionally, because Kyle's heart was screaming so much with happiness and disbelief that it drowned out his common sense. Or perhaps the liquor had done that.

Perhaps the alcohol and Kyle's increasingly questionable mental state had done that too? Manufactured Cartman as some poignant guardian angel? Maybe Kyle was supposed to die last night – as horrible as the thought was – and his brain, the universe, God (if there even was one), had taken pity on him, shown him what he wanted to see before he bit the dust. Except Kyle's luck had changed, he had gotten here somehow and if it wasn't by a corporeal Cartman's doing then who was responsible?

"What's going on?" Kyle asked, he couldn't remember if he asked him that last night. It seemed pretty major now. "What happened?"

"You passed out at that party," Cartman replied. "So I called an ambulance."

"You-" Kyle exhaled, mind racing, trying to slot the pieces together so they made a little bit of sense. "You brought me here?"

Cartman nodded, a small smile quirked in the corner of his mouth and he leaned forward in his chair. His hands were knotted at his lap, awaiting Kyle's questions.

If he's even here. How do I know I'm not imagining him? Have they put me on any medication? I should ask Cartman. But what's he going to know if there's a possibility he's not actually here?!

"How?" Was all Kyle could think to ask.

"What?" Cartman responded unhelpfully. "I told you, I called an ambulance-"

"No, I mean..." Kyle stopped, chuckling to himself although it wasn't funny. "This is so fucked up. How do I even know you're here?"

Cartman didn't answer, he just stared at Kyle, confusion swimming in golden eyes.
"It's impossible that you're here," Kyle went on, breaking his gaze as if the answer was scrawled in starched linen sheets. "It makes more sense that I'm hallucinating you."

"You really think that?" Cartman asked incredulously. Kyle turned to him, and he cringed at the expression on his face. "Fucking seriously, Kyle?"

"I was drunk!" Kyle argued, his voice was still scratchy and it was noticeable when he raised it. "I've been drunk for like, three days, and only now I'm realising it... Shit. I've lost track of time, it makes sense that I would... Dream you up."

Kyle burned as he finished that sentence, eyes lowered. The notion that Cartman was here was terrifying in itself, to see him again was all Kyle ever wanted after all.

"But why me?" Cartman asked, his tone softer now. "Why would you see me?"

Kyle sighed and directed his gaze to Cartman once again, studying a stranger he had known all his life. But was he really looking at him?

"Because I miss you," Kyle confessed, the part of him that was convinced he was speaking to an empty chair, confessed. "I think about you a lot."

Cartman blinked, back straightening as if the confession raced electricity up his spine. He smiled and it illuminated his face, doing a better job than the morning sun did of brightening the room.

Kyle shifted uncomfortably, adding. "And the only reason I'm telling you all this is because there's a good chance you're not actually here."

Before Cartman could respond, a doctor walked in, beaming positively at a chart.

"Hello Kyle," she said, Kyle faintly remembered her face from last night. "Just thought I'd check in, see if you're awake."

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine," Kyle nodded. He remembered now, she was the one who fitted the IV he was so scared of. He nearly grumbled in embarrassment. "Thanks, doctor."

"Great, well everything looks fine too," she smiled after quickly reviewing the chart again. "We should be able to discharge you at noon if you're still feeling well. How are you boys going to get home?"

"Boys?" Kyle questioned, he knew he would find confirmation in the doctor.

The doctor furrowed her eyebrows when she replied, "yes, you and..."

She paused, turning to Cartman whose name she had forgotten.

"Eric," Cartman reminded her.

"That's right," the doctor nodded, addressing Kyle again. "He came in with you, wouldn't leave your side not even to get some coffee."

"Oh," Kyle whispered, the corners of his mouth pulling up into a smile. He looked at Cartman again, blushing and slouched in his chair, Kyle's smile only widening at the sight.

He could've forgotten that the doctor was still in the room.

"We'll, uh, probably take the bus or something," Kyle said, answering her earlier question, albeit a
little awkwardly.

"That should be alright," The doctor smiled, as if she was amused by Kyle and Cartman's stilted interaction. "My shift will be finishing soon but there'll be plenty of nurses on hand if you guys need anything."

"Thanks," Cartman said.

"Yeah," Kyle added. "Thank you."

With a pleased smile, the doctor left. One patient down and Kyle didn't know how many, to go.

He and Cartman were alone again, with sterile smells, lack of sleep (For Cartman, anyway, judging by the grey under his eyes) and bored machines.

But Kyle's hope had been confirmed; Cartman was here. It completely cancelled out his previous fear.

*Was that fear or inevitable disappointment? But he's always been unpredictable, what were you expecting?*

"So…" Kyle said, perhaps creating conversation a bit prematurely. "You really are here…"

Cartman smirked and nodded, only reminding Kyle of his earlier confession. How much he missed Cartman, how much he thought of him.

"Oh God…" Kyle groaned, relief briefly soured by embarrassment as he buried his head in his hands.

"Should've believed me the first time," Cartman teased, cocky as ever.

"Sorry," Kyle said, and it was genuine. He lifted his head out of his hands. "I just-

"What?"

Knowing – truly knowing – Cartman was here, in front of him once again, that he had saved him like he had done before and that he had come through; come through like Kyle always believed he could, despite the odds and the naysayers and all the signs that told Kyle he was crazy and stupid for doing so. Cartman had defied them all, defied the impossible, defied fucking universal laws even! But not Kyle. No, he had simply done Kyle proud.

Kyle's eyes grew heavier with tears, transfixed on Cartman. As long as he had him here, he wouldn't stop looking.

"I can't believe I'm seeing you again," Kyle whispered, letting a thin tear slide down his face.

Cartman's lips pursed and flushed, eyes as glassy as Kyle's. "I can't believe I'm seeing you again either."

Kyle smiled sadly, before swiping his tear away with the arm weighted by an IV drip. "This is so fucking crazy," he chuckled, shaking his head.

"Come on, we're from South Park!" Cartman laughed, tearful shards in his throat. "We should be used to craziness by now."

"Yeah, you're right," Kyle smirked. Why did Kyle need to call Cartman's presence into question
when their hometown had fated the strange and the inexplicable to follow them everywhere?

*Of course, it's like Occam's razor.*

"Are you sure you're okay?" Cartman asked, leaning forward again.

Kyle's brow knitted together when he nodded.

"You don't want anything to eat?" Cartman pressed regardless.

"No, I'm okay," Kyle answered, chuckling.

"What's funny?" Cartman asked.

"I'm not used to you being this attentive," Kyle replied. Cartman had always been so covert with stuff like that, silently manipulating situations that showed he cared rather than being upfront about it.

Kyle sighed, reminiscing about the kid Cartman used to be, reeling over the man he was now.

"You've just changed so much," Kyle said, still astonished, raking his eyes over the six foot three man beside him, well covered with puppy fat and actually rather handsome.

"Yeah, you too." Cartman said, trailing his gaze over Kyle as well, with a fond smirk on his face.

Kyle smiled, before curiosity got the better of him. "So, uh, how old are you, anyway? Eighteen?"

Cartman shook his head, only piquing Kyle's curiosity.

"Well, come on! How old are you?" Kyle pressed.

"Guess," Cartman challenged and Kyle rolled his eyes, exasperated but it was the kind he hadn't felt for so long and he readily embraced it. Natural, easy…

"Why?" Kyle asked, decided to tease. "Are you not proud of how old you are?"

"No, it's not that!" Cartman laughed, furrowing his eyebrows.

"Okay, so you're older than me?" Kyle guessed.

"Yes,"

"Um, twenty?"

"Close,"

"Twenty one?"

Cartman tapped the side of his nose.

Kyle balked, eyebrows arching. "Twenty one?! Oh my God!" He laughed at the blush spreading across those still chubby cheeks. "Eric Cartman, twenty one… You're three years older than me! Old enough to drink legally! Is that why you're here? To lecture me about the dangers of drinking?"

Cartman rolled his eyes, "no."

Kyle chuckled softly, before contemplating a dangerous question.
"Are you here for good?"

"What?"

Kyle felt a lump in his throat already, he mentally cursed himself before he forced the uncomfortable question out, "are you staying?"

That tentative breeziness holding their conversation together had been dismantled. Cartman's eyebrows quirked and his lips pursed, dropping his gaze to where Kyle couldn't reach. But his reaction to the question told Kyle everything he needed to know.

"Oh," Kyle whispered, grip tightening on the quilt beneath him, gaze drifting to the edge of his bed.

A pained breath escaped Cartman's throat, before he said, "Kyle…"

"No," Kyle blurted out, too harsh perhaps. "I get it."

Cartman shook his head. "You don't," and Kyle's eyes widened, intrigued. "If I could come back and stay, I so would. But I can't."

"Why?" Kyle asked, struggling to understand, pissed off at whatever stupid rules inhibited Cartman from staying, whatever circumstance he was in when Kyle had been suffering from it as much as Cartman had. "Because it seemed like the Eric Cartman I knew wouldn't give a shit about what he could or couldn't do."

"You have no idea what it's like-"

"What, in the future?" Kyle cut in spitefully, he remembered that salient piece of information. But he was still unsettled by Cartman's calmness, his resignation.

"Yes," Cartman sighed testily. "There are people – things – that have a lot of leverage over me."

Pity infected Kyle's passive aggressive tantrum, and he soured.

"Seems like you've met your match," he offered as some kind of understanding, a stubborn forfeit.

"Probably," Cartman muttered.

"But you can come back, right?" Kyle asked, Cartman said that they had leverage over him, but it couldn't be that much could it? Nothing Cartman couldn't manipulate?

"Depends," Cartman replied.

"On what?"

"If anybody wanted to see me," he smirked.

"Don't flatter yourself," Kyle joked, before he said more seriously. "You know I would."

"Really?" Cartman asked, a sincere smile creeping on his face again.

"Yeah," Kyle shrugged, as if he could ever be casual about Cartman. "I'd like to talk to you somewhere other than an ICU."

"I don't know, at least it's private in here," Cartman pointed out, glancing around the cornered off room they had put Kyle in.
"But I'm not exactly at my best," Kyle countered, lifting his IV tethered arm and referring Cartman to last night's mishap.

"Whatever that is," Kyle mumbled, he'd forgotten what his 'best' was.

"What are you going to do now?" Cartman asked.

"Change," Kyle exhaled, nodding before his voice became firmer. "Really try to change. I have to, I owe it to you. You went to all this trouble-"

"Kyle, you don't owe me anything," Cartman cut in. "And it was no trouble, I'd do it again, a million times over."

This sincere, tired Cartman was unnerving and strange admittedly, but overall it was affection that constricted Kyle's heart.

"Why?" He asked. "That's ridiculous."

Cartman chuckled, rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe. I've done a lot of stupid things, and most amounted to nothing, but..." Cartman took a small, shaky breath before he held Kyle's gaze in a vice grip. "Seeing you again, helping you, though supposedly stupid, was worth it. You're worth it, Kyle. I never wanted to let you down, and you should do the same. You're so capable, I know you are, you're better than... passing out wasted at a college party."

Kyle blinked, regretfully another tear escaped and he quickly swiped it away. "Thank you."

He believes in you too. It's probably time to start believing in ourselves though, isn't it?

"Now you've put it like that, it doesn't sound so ridiculous," Kyle laughed shallowly, as he dabbed at his face to catch anymore stray tears.

"When do you have to leave?" He asked Cartman, though it hurt to do so.

"Within two days," Cartman sighed. "I still have some time left."

Kyle nodded, attention-seeking sunlight flooded the room, catching his eye.

"You okay?" Cartman asked.

"Yeah, I think I'll be alright," Kyle replied, and he actually meant it.

"Good," Cartman said softly, maybe not meant for Kyle's ears.

"Thank you so much, Cartman," Kyle said, he had already thanked him but his gratitude was limitless. "Not just for saving me but... I was going to say that it's good to see you again, but you being here means so much more to me than I can even explain to you."

Fuck being casual. Fuck dismissing how much he means to you. He's here, so cherish it.

"I, I understand," Cartman replied, and he pressed his wrist to his eyes. "It was good to see you too, Kyle."

The chaos of last night had simmered, Kyle could tell they were both enjoying the peace.

"Cartman?" Kyle said, before his first yawn of the day.
"Yeah?"

"I'm still tired," Kyle replied.

"Then get some more sleep," Cartman suggested. "You still have a couple of hours until they discharge you."

Kyle nodded, eyes drifting shut and he knew it wouldn't be long before he was in a deep sleep. But he had to know one last thing.

"You'll be coming back won't you?" He asked.

Cartman grinned, glanced at his feet before looking in Kyle's eyes again as he delivered his answer.

"Like I said, I don't want to ever let you down," he replied, and Kyle memorised his smile as his eyes finally closed, truly feeling like he could. Because not only did he believe in Cartman more than ever, but he trusted him too.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

While Kyle stole another two hours of sleep, Eric waited in the busy building for him to wake up. Seconds never ceasing as emergencies were wheeled in, catastrophes avoided, deaths and births and time tethers counting down Eric’s return, but still he sat, keeping watch over Kyle.

Nurses drifted in and out, asking Eric more questions about himself than they were about Kyle, who was okay but just tired. Eric was sure Kyle's sleeping face would be etched into his memory for years. During the unclear boundaries of night and day, Eric could see the distress seeping into Kyle's features even when he was sleeping. Medicated, briefly dehydrated and exhausted, Eric tried to calm Kyle's half-asleep whimpers, his sporadic tosses in the starchy bed. But he was worn out himself, accidentally falling to sleep only to be jolted awake by worrying dreams of slipping away from Kyle.

Right now, that felt like his worst nightmare, why he daren't move in the first place. Kyle's words; don't leave me again. A key twisting in the lock of an unmarked door, they revealed just what was going on inside the once elusive Kyle, the terrifying and excruciating gap Eric had in his history. Like the outbreak of morning, things were becoming clearer, melting Kyle's distress visibly as he slept. He looked softer, happier, at peace. Eric had previously felt like he was keeping eye on a bomb set to detonate, in Kyle's case, to self-destruct even further. Now, in their own cornered off part of the ICU, Eric felt like he was staring at a masterpiece. A pale, still fragile masterpiece, but a work of art all the same.

Kyle's eyes had fluttered opened at about eleven o'clock, verdant irises like sour rainforest canopy against his snowy pallor. Eric had flinched, worried that he had been caught staring but realised Kyle's mind was still too cloudy to catch onto that fact. A smile had slid across Kyle's face regardless, loose and clumsy but undoubtedly relieved. Kyle had asked – begged – Eric to not leave him again, and Eric was going to grant him that for as long as he could. How could Eric make Kyle understand that those sentiments were shared with the same amount of fervency? How to let Kyle know in the short space of time they had left exactly what he did to him?

When Kyle had sat up in bed, muscles still sore and body still slow, Eric rushed to his aid. But with a drowsy grumble, Kyle had batted him away. Eric didn't mind, he just smiled knowingly, that stubbornness another thing to add to the list of things he was going to miss when he went back home.

Kyle did let Eric help him get ready to go home however, passing Kyle his sneakers and jacket and nodding obediently when Kyle said he was going to call a friend to have them picked up.

Eric watched from his hospital chair stoop as Kyle paced the room absently, deflecting his friend's worry and uncomfortable questions.

"So what did your friend say?" Eric asked, once Kyle had hung up.

"He said he'll pick us up in half an hour, and take us to McDonalds for breakfast," Kyle replied, good news for Eric's empty stomach, curdled by a strange, bittersweet nostalgia.

"Wow…" Eric murmured.

"What?" Kyle asked, tucking his phone into his pocket, a chuckle in his voice.
"I haven't been to McDonald's in so long," Eric replied, he scratched at his arm, a little embarrassed, "to any fast food place. It's weird."

Kyle fixed him a confused but intrigued look. "They don't have hamburgers in the future?"

"No," Eric shook his head. He thought about the present, the one he and Kyle were sharing and it seemed to be richer than Eric's future. "To be honest, we don't have a whole lot."

Eric could feel Kyle's sympathy before he even had the chance to express it.

"Sounds a little bleak," Kyle remarked.

Eric laughed softly, tucking his hands into his back pockets.

You have no idea.

"I guess you could call it that," he replied, trained to be careful and not do anything to put his plans in jeopardy, when the AAA didn't even exist at this point. "I'll tell you all about it later."

"Cool, I'd like to hear it," Kyle smiled as brightly as he could, though he was hungry, and remarkably, still tired. "On the other hand, it doesn't sound too nice."

There was that pity again, Eric could feel the droves of it rolling inside him, as if Kyle's sympathy was telepathic.

"So you have everything, right?" Eric asked, before the nurse could return and escort them both out.

"Yes," Kyle smirked, exasperated, but that could have been residual sleepiness.

"Need me to get anything?" Eric asked, stepping forward, hands clasped in front of him.

Kyle chuckled, brow creased.

"No, I'm fine," he grinned, before fiddling with the hem of his t-shirt. "You are freaking me out, though."

Eric felt uncomfortably warm then, Kyle's lazy stare suddenly dagger-like. Why did he have to be so obvious about his feelings? Usually he was good at maintaining a mask, now he kept slipping like an amateur.

"Excuse me for trying to be helpful, Kyle," Eric tried to joke, but it came out as a mumble, more offended than he wanted it to sound.

"It's not bad!" Kyle amended, and when Eric looked up, Kyle's soft, honest stare relaxed him immediately.

"Just weird in a good way," Kyle continued, a half smirk and he tried to avert Eric's gaze. "But also kind of exciting for me."

"Exciting?" Eric asked, back to warmth and a heart so pathetically quick to race.

His unsure tone and curiosity obviously deterred Kyle a bit, as he scanned the room and shrugged. "Yeah. I always had this belief that you'd grow out of your old ways, seems like you have."

Well, I stopped only thinking about myself for a change. I thought of you too. You really believed in me that much?
As if Eric would ever be brave or big enough to say those words, or ask that question, so instead he grinned, "Maybe you're speaking a little too soon."

But Kyle didn't falter, their eye contact was taut and exhilarating in the pettiest ways.

"Hmm," Kyle replied. "So I should still count on you being unpredictable?"

"Definitely," Eric said strongly.

The conversation dipped, but didn't completely flat line. It had been fractured and sluggish all morning due to the boys' messy night.

"I'm looking forward to seeing Harvard," Eric started another conversation, he truly was excited to see Kyle in an institution so prestigious.

"Yeah," Kyle nodded weakly, with as much flatness and discomfort as Eric had when discussing the future. "It's a great school."

Eric arched a sceptical eyebrow. "You don't sound convinced."

Kyle wrapped his arms around his chest, shook his head as if wanting to take his words back. "It's not that, I just… I don't know, feel like I've been wasting my time there and it's not what I thought it was going to be. But that's my fault, I clearly haven't been making the most of it," he said, quietly but harshly. He glanced at his unmade hospital bed before turning back to Eric with forced optimism. "But I'm excited about the New Year, it'll feel like a fresh start."

"Probably," Eric nodded, encouraging Kyle's optimism how synthetic it may be. "I hope so."

But he did know that Kyle had to change his ways, had to get help in some shape or form. He believed Kyle was smart enough to recognise that, as well as determined to see it through.

"Thanks," Kyle smiled more genuinely, before asking, "You're okay with sleeping in my roommate's bed, right?"

"You don't have to let me stay there…" Eric said sheepishly, he was still getting used to the fact that Kyle was so eager to keep him around, making things that much harder in terms of finally going back, not to mention the misguided promises he certainly intended to keep. One way or another.

Why did Kyle have to make things so difficult? Although Eric could hardly complain.

"But where else are you going to go?" Kyle asked, tone fussy. "I told you, my roommate went back to Idaho a couple of days ago, it's fine."

"But I didn't really prepare for it," Eric argued.

Kyle tutted and rolled his eyes, adopting a challenging stance. "Well, what do you need?"

"A shower, for a start," Eric said, he had been sitting in that chair for hours but it felt like decades. "Clean clothes, and a toothbrush. I know I'll technically only be here for a day but I just feel gross."

"You can have a shower when we get to campus," Kyle offered with an exasperated smirk. "And I'll find you some spare clothes to wear. At least next time you'll know to bring these things."

Eric nodded, glad that Kyle was so blindly hopeful for future visits when he was yet to figure out a way to obtain them. But he had set a precedent now; he couldn't ever let Kyle down.
"This isn't what I was expecting of a college room," Eric remarked as Kyle lead him into the wide bedroom, minimally furnished except for the basics; Wardrobe, desk, double beds, a small TV and cream walls. Certainly foreign to the box rooms and bunk beds Eric had associated with college dorms.

But they were in Harvard after all, prestigious and exclusive. Still, Eric found the trimmed grass and neat brick buildings quaint rather than daunting, his futuristic existence rendering the university a charming, ancient relic.

"I know, right? It's bigger than my room back home, except my bed is a lot more comfortable." Kyle smiled, they both felt a lot better after their breakfast (fast food, but food nonetheless) and Eric was glad he got to see a sunnier, more relaxed Kyle before he returned home.

"But this," Kyle added as he flopped down on his bed, stretching like he was about to attempt a snow angel, "is a blessing compared to that slab at the hospital. I felt like a cadaver."

Eric offered him a small grin, perching on the bed of Kyle's roommate. "You didn't seem to have trouble sleeping though."

Kyle rolled his eyes, still smiling loose and almost carefree. "I was exhausted."

"Well, don't fall asleep again!" Eric laughed, before reminding him, "You have to help me freshen up."

"Right," Kyle said as he sat up. "And I have to find you a toothbrush. I think I have a spare one in my toiletry bag."

Eric raised his eyebrows, ignoring how typically adorable that was by teasing Kyle instead. "Your toiletry bag?"

"Yeah," Kyle shrugged before getting up and walking over to the suitcase in the corner of the room. "It's what you pack your deodorant and shampoo and toothbrush in?" He explained.

"You're still unpacked?" Eric questioned, following Kyle over to the suitcase. "You've been here, like, three months."

"No, I meant- Fuck!" Kyle turned around, eyes wide and staring up at Eric. "Didn't I tell you I'm flying to Denver tomorrow morning?"

"No…"

Kyle exhaled heavily, shaking his head. "I thought I told you last night! Fuck, I'm so sorry, Cartman. You…"

"What?"

"You don't mind?" Kyle asked, face creasing apologetically.

"You've already bought your tickets," Eric said matter-of-factly. They both had places to be. At least it took the pressure off saying goodbye. "Nothing I can do about it now."

Kyle smirked, so damn contagious and warm that Eric couldn't help but succumb to the infection.

"Is that your way of saying you're cool with it?" Kyle asked.

"Yes,"
"Still," Kyle sighed. "I'm sorry, Cartman."

He didn't need to hear another apology from Kyle, it seemed that he was sorry for a lot and Eric wished Kyle would give himself a break.

"You've got to stop apologising," he said. "Especially to me."

Kyle's smirk morphed into a grateful smile and he mumbled, "force of habit, I guess."

Eric mourned the smirk, that mood Kyle was in that made him smile and stare up at the sky when he stepped out of the hospital, the mood that allowed him to give Eric a brief tour of Harvard as they made their way to Kyle's hall. He wanted to cup Kyle's face, thumb at his cheek reassuringly to coax that smile, that mood again. But that would be too telling, Eric was more than willing to put his feelings aside (easier said than done) if it meant he would never lose Kyle again.

Taking a small, near silent breath Kyle turned around and rummaged through his toiletry bag.

"Such a dork," Eric chuckled, the words bristling against the nape of Kyle's neck and he couldn't help but be curious of the goosebumps that arose on Kyle's skin as he stepped beside him.

"I wouldn't call the guy who's trying to help you a dork," Kyle replied. "Besides, it seems like you could use a toiletry bag right now."

"If it means carrying a little fanny pack around, I'm not interested," Eric teased.

"It's not a fanny pack! It's a toiletry bag!" Kyle argued. "It going be in my suitcase, I'm not going to carry it with me to the gate- aha!" Kyle said as he pulled a small, red toothbrush out of the bag.

"I knew I had a spare one," Kyle said, thrusting the toothbrush into Eric's chest before he continued to rummage through the bag, piling shampoo, body gel and toothpaste into Eric's arms.

"There are towels in the bathroom," Kyle said once he had given Eric everything he needed.

"Aww, were they too big to go in the toiletry bag?" Eric asked, fluttering his eyelashes.

Kyle scowled playfully. "Keep mocking it and I won't let you use my shower."

"Sorry," Eric said, half-serious.

"The bathroom's right through there," Kyle said, pointing to a white door that Eric could have missed. "To turn the shower on, step into the tub and flick the switch above the facet, and there's a dial to control the temperature."

Eric nodded, before Kyle walked away without warning.

"Where are you going?" Eric asked.

"The shower isn't communal, you know that?" Kyle joked.

Eric blushed and rolled his eyes, the last thing he needed was the image of Kyle in the shower, as welcome and tantalizing as it may be.

"I didn't mean that, smartass," he muttered.

"I know," Kyle smiled soothingly. "I'm going to try to find you some clothes, there's a guy on the football team who's roughly the same size as you. I'll be back soon."

"Alright," Eric nodded, "thanks," as he watched Kyle walk to the door.

"Enjoy your shower!" Kyle grinned, as he headed out.

"Yeah, I will…" Eric said after the door had already been closed. Lonely again, like he had been for most of his life.

But standing in the middle of a college room, he felt he was surrounded by Kyle and that he would never be truly alone again.

The shower was… interesting. Eric was thankful to wash the sleepless, chaotic night off him and he wished he could scrub the mantra of: he'll be okay, into his skin so he could truly let himself believe it. The uglier, more distressing parts of the night Eric was glad to watch circle the drain, but the feeling and memory of Kyle's hand clasped in his, his face in Kyle's hands and that embrace would be stored in eternity.

Kyle was a craving as well as a longing, an oasis as well as a zenith, and his company - however low Kyle had sunk, however brittle he was, regardless of Eric's duty to simply care for him – was a euphoric injection into Eric's lovesick veins, and right now he was both high and crashing. His fix was temporary, measured and selfless. Even when the scent of Kyle's shampoo flooded his nostrils, scorched his heart and warmed his simmering libido, Eric resisted temptation. He could have expelled the dizzying high threatening to floor him, released that building pressure that was rising the more time he spent with Kyle.

But this was Kyle's shower, getting caught jerking off would be beyond mortifying and when everything was so tentative and surprisingly easy right now, Eric felt using Kyle's hospitality as a means of getting off would be jeopardising all that Eric was savouring. Even if Kyle never found out, it still felt like he would be jeopardising their relationship.

Ignoring an urge he would have normally sated, Eric continued to shower and pretend to be unaffected by Kyle and his smile and how he felt when he looked at him and the smell of his hair. He was glad to step out and dry himself off.

Ruffling his hair until it poked out at odd angles, Eric wrapped a towel around his waist and shyly returned to Kyle's room, unsure whether Kyle had come back.

"Hey,"

"Shit!" Eric jumped when he saw Kyle laying clothes out on his bed, careful to clutch the towel wrapped around him. "Uh, hi…"

"The shower was okay, right?" Kyle asked.

"Yeah," Eric nodded, voice weak and shoulders hunched. "Awesome…"

Kyle's mouth tugged in a half-smirk, gaze gratefully focused on Eric's face before it wandered briefly, hazy and distracted, making Eric very aware that he was naked right now.

Oh fucking shit.

"So I, uh, got you some clean clothes," Kyle said, gesturing to them with a slight wobble to his voice. "Pants, t-shirt, socks… The guy was even generous enough to loan you a pair of boxers. So you won't have to go commando."
"Cool, uh, tell him I said thank you."

"I'll just, um…" Kyle had turned around before he could finish.

"Sure, okay," Eric responded belatedly, rolling his eyes and inwardly cursing himself.

He stared at the clothes laid out on the bed; a grey marl t-shirt, a pair of navy knee-length shorts, socks and a black pair of boxers. Despite Kyle's back being turned, and knowing that Kyle wouldn't be the type of guy to look (if he even wanted to), the thought of dropping that towel and standing there naked even for a second freaked Eric out, so instead he perched on the bed, snatched the boxers and awkwardly tried to slip them on.

"Are you done?" Kyle asked, when Eric had finally got the boxers to rest on his hips.

"No!" Eric laughed indignantly, grabbing the shorts. "Aren't we impatient?"

Kyle chuckled. "That's a bit rich, don't you think?"

Eric rolled his eyes and scoffed, once he had put the shorts on (that were sitting a little low), he felt confident enough to rise from the bed and slip the t-shirt on, the sleeves pooling a little on his upper arms.

"Okay, I'm done," he announced, still tugging at his t-shirt and inspecting his new outfit when Kyle turned around.

"Cool," Kyle said as he studied him. "How's that?"

"The clothes are a little loose," Eric admitted. "Fuck, how big is this guy?"

"I don't know, six four, six five?" Kyle shrugged. "You look…"

Eric's shoulders slouched and he stared at Kyle knowingly. "What?"

"Modern," Kyle replied, stepping closer to Eric, staring up at him again.

"Like a normal person?" Eric asked with a grin.

Kyle didn't respond, instead he glanced at the open bathroom door and Eric's dirty clothes. "Come on, if we get your clothes washed, they'll be ready for you by the time you go back."

Due to the students returning home for Christmas break the laundry room was empty. Thankfully for Eric who had never used a laundry machine in his life, and had been clutching his dirty clothes to his chest and staring at the machine alongside Kyle for nearly five minutes.

"Well?" Kyle asked, breaking the silence.

"What?"

"Aren't you going to put your clothes in?"

"Sure I am!" Eric said, a little louder than necessary since him and Kyle were standing right next to each other and he wasn't that pissed off… Just embarrassed.

"Then what are you waiting for?" Kyle asked. "Do you not know how to use a laundry machine or something?"
Eric's fists clenched in sync with his jaw, defensive and caught out.

"You don't?" Kyle chuckled.

"I never had to learn!" Eric snapped.

"Then how do you clean your clothes?" Kyle asked, partly curious, partly amused.

"They… they have a service where I live," Eric explained, he wished he didn't have a pile of clothes in his arms or he would have scratched at his neck, ran a hand through his clean hair; done something to ease the frustration. "You put your clothes in a package, send them down a chute and then they give it back to you in a couple of days."

"So nobody ever taught you?" Sympathy thawed Kyle's amusement.

"There was nobody to teach me," Eric mumbled.

He didn't register how sad that must have sounded until he heard Kyle say; "Oh… Oh, well, I didn't realize that."

And not being able to comprehend that fact, being so used to loneliness that he had grown immune to the reality of it, wasn't that just a little sad too?

"I know you didn't," Eric tried to deter Kyle from going down that particularly pitiful route, from apologising again. "And it's not that tragic, okay? There are people who have it way worse, trust me. Can you just tell me how this thing works?"

Eric turned to Kyle then, and he was staring back at Eric with an expression of surprise, pleasant surprise at that. But he was also staring at him the way he did at the hospital when he fully remembered. When everything had clicked. That unnerving, beautiful, near blinding look, so peculiar because nobody had ever looked at Eric that way before. Like they missed him, like they were glad to see him, but there was something else in those articulate green eyes. Eric couldn't place it, but it felt universal, like he may have felt it too.

"Sure," the word fell from Kyle's mouth, before he returned to the task at hand. "First off, put the clothes in."

Eric cautiously opened up the machine and dropped his clothes in, not bothering to separate since Kyle hadn't said he needed to.

"Then you put the detergent in," Kyle said, reaching for the detergent before handing it to Eric, he poured some onto his clothes with Kyle hovering over his shoulder. Curls brushing against his cheek.

The slam of the machine door being jolted Eric out of his haze, but he missed those curls tickling and teasing his skin.

"Alright," Kyle continued. "Now you need to put it on a quick wash, which is here."

Kyle pointed to a dial, which he guided Eric to turn.

"Okay, we need them to dry pretty quickly so they'll need to be in here a while," Kyle explained, and Eric smirked at the boy he was in love with acting like a Home Ec teacher. "See, you can adjust that for a longer spin."
Kyle pointed to yet another dial, which Eric turned with a lot more confidence than the previous one.

"There!" Kyle beamed when the machine whirred to life. "We're good to go."

They both stood there with their arms folded, inspecting their 'handiwork' (if they could even call it that) in silence.

"Easy, right?" Kyle asked, the one to break the silence again.

Even coming from Kyle, Eric didn't appreciate the condescension, deliberate or not.

"I wasn't expecting it to be difficult," Eric returned.

Kyle nodded apologetically, but with that typical, exasperated, "you-know-what-I-meant" smirk that Eric found so kissable.

Dropping his gaze from the admittedly fascinating laundry machine, Kyle chewed his lip before asking, "You, um, said that people have it a lot worse than you in the future?"

"What? Oh, yeah, I mean…" Eric trailed off, not prepared for the jarring change in conversation. He had hoped to discuss this particular topic with Kyle later, so he had a clearer idea of what he was going to say, but if not now, when? "I know I said in the hospital that it's kind of bleak but I am lucky in some respects."

Kyle nodded again, slower and less substantial, more bob than nod. And Eric found himself waiting for a response, Kyle's reaction to that first informational titbit about the future, Eric's life, his situation.

"It's a little unusual to hear you talk like that," Kyle said. "Being very matter-of-fact and sympathetic."

Eric flushed, an uneasy smile on his face, like those traits were something to be embarrassed about.

"I may still be an asshole, but I'm a grown up asshole," Eric replied. "That's an improvement, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I think so," Kyle smiled, fuller and deeper than any smile Eric had ever seen before. "You just keep surprising me."

Eric was glad the sound of the washing machine drowned out his thunderous heart.

"Otters?" Kyle asked, cross-legged on his bed with a sceptical eyebrow raised.

Eric nodded, smothering the laughter bubbling in his throat. His clothes were clean and fresh and when he had slipped his t-shirt over his head, the smell of Kyle invaded his senses once again. It was missing vital components, a scent or feeling Eric couldn't duplicate. Kyle was a lot of things; memory, fantasy, star, person. He couldn't be condensed or assigned to just one thing, but Eric felt wrapped up in Kyle nonetheless. He had something physical now, to recall this time spent with Kyle. And he wanted Kyle to have something too, so Eric told Kyle his story as they sat facing each other.

"You're kidding me, right?" Kyle laughed, eyes widening as Eric's sincerity dawned on him.

"Talking otters? Fucking seriously, Cartman?"

"Kyle, I swear to you!" Eric raised his hands in defence, laughing too since the sound was contagious.
"But how?" Kyle asked, more incredulous than amused.

"The world is weird," Eric shrugged. "That's the only explanation."

"And doomed from the sound of things," Kyle added.

Eric shifted, there were a lot of words he would use to describe the future but doomed wasn't one of them. The world still functioned, but differently. Like the universe had opted for a palette cleanser instead of total destruction. Far from great but far from wrecked.

"Not doomed," Eric said, searching for another word to describe it. "Just not a very nice place to live in if you're a human."

"How does that not sound like doom to you?"

"Guess I'm used to it," Eric shrugged, his nonchalance may have been wary, but he had been living in the future too long to fret over its problems anymore.

"Hmm, little weird, isn't it?" Kyle asked, a smug, knowing smile on his face like he had cracked some sort of puzzle. "How humans treat the Earth and—"

"Oh Science," Eric interrupted, eyes rolling. "If you've become a college know it all hippie, I swear—"

"Shut up and let me finish, okay?" Kyle said, but he couldn't get the words out without laughing. "It's just funny, how humans treat the Earth and before the millennium is up, we're being dictated to by talking sea otters! Karma, don't you think?"

Speaking of…

"Oh yeah, that too," Eric said. "Everybody is atheist in the future."

"What?"

"No religion whatsoever,"

"It's not allowed?" Kyle asked, nearly glowering.

"No, not that," Eric shook his head, though he wasn't entirely sure what would happen if somebody managed to get their hands or paws on a holy book. "It's just atheism, science and logic is all they've ever known."

Kyle's pissed off expression then morphed into one of mirth. "That explains it…"

"What?" Eric asked.

"Why you've been saying 'science' all the time," Kyle grinned.

"Shit, yeah," Eric said lowly, rubbing the back of his neck. "I forgot about that."

Kyle's laughter only stoked the heat on Eric's face.

"Still no religion…" Kyle exhaled, before he asked, "What's that like?"

"I don't really notice it," Eric admitted.
"Oh…" Kyle said, voice lost as he stared at his feet.

"Maybe you'd notice it more than I would," Eric blurted out, it seemed that what he was telling Kyle wasn't what he wanted to hear, and he wanted to make it better. Or at least try to. "But… it does feel like everything is final, that we don't have to rely on some omniscient entity in the sky to have all the answers or look over us. Because we know everything now, we have to look out for ourselves above everything and everybody else. There's no mystery anymore, no reassurance, even if it's something you don't understand. I'm not the most religious guy - I can't be - but… when I felt lonely, it was nice to have something I could believe in."

Kyle was staring at Eric again, the same way he stared at him in the laundry room. Smile deep but lips sealing shut any secrets, inquisitive gaze like Kyle was trying to figure out the next surprise before it could happen.

Eric bet the AAA would have killed for him to be in this position, so willing to be studied. He'd let Kyle into his thoughts, let Kyle rummage through his questionable soul, repairing him rather than breaking him in his wake. If it meant they could both have more of each other.

*What we need is time. I'd give him every minute.*

"Hey Kyle!" A stranger's voice manged to filter through their air-tight silence. "You going out?"

A tall, slim guy with a five o'clock shadow and purposeful bed hair was stood by Kyle's door. Friendly or perhaps overfamiliar enough to walk in without knocking.

"No, I'm going home tomorrow so I thought I'd just hang out here," Kyle replied, obviously as eager to get him out of there as Eric was. "Uh, Eric this is Danny, Danny this is Eric."

"Hi," Eric smiled politely.

"Hey, man," Danny grinned. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," Eric nodded.

"So Kyle, I guess I'll see you after break?" Danny asked.

"Yeah, see you after break," Kyle replied.

Danny glanced between the two boys, seeking conversation where there was none.

"I better go," Danny said, edging out the door. "Merry Christmas, guys!" He called out before disappearing.

"Yeah you too," Kyle replied, regardless if Danny heard him. "I bet it's been a while since you've heard somebody say that, huh?" Kyle grinned at Eric, biting his lip.

"Yeah, it has," Eric gulped, and he looked away before he could get anymore turned on.

"Hey, Cartman?"

"What?" Eric asked, turning his attention to Kyle once again.

"Merry Christmas," Kyle said, still grinning, still adorable, but when was that ever going to change?

"Thank you, Kyle," Eric returned the grin. "Happy Hanukkah."
Kyle raked his eyes over Eric, trailing down his arms until they reached his wrists. Slow and careful as Kyle's movements were, Eric was still surprised and he suppressed a yelp when Kyle wrapped his fingers around Eric's wrist and tugged at his arm.

"What's this little band, anyway?" Kyle asked as he inspected it.

"It's, um, my time tether," Eric replied.

Kyle looked up at him, and Eric found it difficult to keep hold of his focus when he was so close to that startling green. "Your what?"

"It's what brought me here, and what will take me back," Eric explained, dropping his gaze to the time tether. "It's set to take me home in forty eight hours but while you were sleeping in the hospital I took a closer look – since there was nothing else to do – and I figured out I could set it to take me back earlier."

"Did you take it off to shower?" Kyle asked, careful not to touch it. "Is it waterproof or something?"

"Yep, indestructible," Eric said, trying not to sound too disappointed. "Besides I can't take it off, not until I'm home."

Kyle nodded, Eric waited for more questions but none came. Kyle's grip loosened on his arm, but the pads of his fingers still tickled the milky underside. Stubborn, curious Kyle wasn't ready to let go.

"So, uh, you wanna watch a movie or something?" Kyle asked, before dropping Eric's arm and sliding off the bed.

"Sure," Eric nodded, missing the contact.

"And how about pizza?" Kyle suggested, picking up his phone. "I'm hungry again."

Eleven years of living in an atheist society had drummed the notion of heaven out of Eric. But if it did exist, beyond what a telescope or satellite could see, beyond the limits of knowledge or faith itself, Eric was pretty sure this moment was it: He and Kyle, a pizza box between them, watching a movie on Kyle's bed as evening returned.

Most students were either home for Christmas already, or drinking, dancing and making memories they'd soon forget.

"So, how are you doing?" Eric asked, the conversation had wound down when they reached the middle of the movie. Kyle was so used to spending his nights dancing uncoordinatedly in crowds, chasing highs and attempting to outrun lows that Eric worried he was bored by this evening's plans.

"Fine," Kyle nodded, still focused on the movie, before he turned to Eric. "A little tired, kind of edgy."

"Why?" Eric asked, though he knew the answer.

"I'm just not used to this," Kyle sighed. His eyes roaming the darkened room, light only shining from the TV. It illuminated both their faces, rendering them crescent moons. "That party was the first I've turned down since I got here. It's like… I haven't quit the whole partying thing yet but I'm going cold turkey already."

Eric dropped his gaze, he had no idea what to say when he still knew little about why Kyle felt the
need to drink in excess, to blot out, to forget.

"Yeah," Eric said, letting the word linger. "You haven't really talked about that a lot."

"Well, you saw me last night," Kyle replied, his discomfort noticeable as he shifted on the mattress. "Shouldn't that tell you everything?"

"Not really," Eric tried to ease himself in with his honesty. "It doesn't explain why."

Eric felt, rather than saw, Kyle's shoulders slouch. He guessed his gaze was far from the movie, far from Eric, deep into his own past.

"Cartman?" Kyle's voice sliced through the dimness.

"Yeah?" Eric returned.

"I'd rather not talk about it," Kyle said, his eyes glimmering saucers. "Just yet."

"Okay," Eric nodded, it obviously didn't stunt his curiosity, but he understood for now. "That's fine."

"Thanks," Kyle grinned, before his smile softened. "I'll tell you eventually, just not tonight-"

"Kyle, I understand."

Kyle had fallen asleep on Eric's shoulder by the time the credits rolled around. Pizza box discarded on the floor as the movie reached its climax, with Kyle shuffling closer to Eric as Eric tried his hardest not to freeze.

The movie had been great, but Kyle was enthralling. Eric felt his cheek against his shoulder, his curls against his jaw and the still TV screen bathed Kyle in its Technicolor glow. Eric looked at him, fast asleep and peaceful, until his own lids started to droop. Honestly, he could have fallen asleep right there, over the covers with Kyle and his beautiful face the backdrop to his dreams. But maybe that was inappropriate, when Kyle had offered Eric his roommate's bed.

Gently setting Kyle down and placing the quilt over him to keep him warm, Eric then went over to his borrowed bed, still staring at Kyle as his eyes finally closed.

Eric was used to waking up in a lonely bedroom. What he wasn't used to was waking up in a lonely bedroom that didn't belong to him, when the night before he'd had somebody there. Not to possess obviously, but to watch movies with and save and let fall asleep on his shoulder. Simple, but undoubtedly worth cherishing.

It had been the first proper night's sleep he had in a couple of days, noticeable when he didn't rise to Kyle's leaving and how, as he sat up in bed, his body was still weighted with drowsiness.

The suitcase in the corner of the room was gone, Kyle's college bed neatly made and Eric was still lingering. He rubbed at his eyes in an attempt to remove any grit, before getting out of bed and quietly going about leaving.

But a pen caught his eye, resting on a piece of lined notebook paper that had been left on the nightstand. It hadn't been there last night, and it had Eric's surname perched on the top line, scrawled in familiar (albeit now refined) handwriting.

Eric snatched the letter, wondering if Kyle had somehow found a way to articulate these two days
better than Eric could.

**Cartman**

*I'm sorry that I'm saying goodbye to you in a letter. I had to get up early for my flight and I didn't want to wake you. I'm also sorry that I forgot to tell you I was going home. These past few days have been blurry, and I was so happy to see you and hoping that you'd stay, that it totally slipped my mind that you wouldn't be the only one leaving.*

*Thank you. Not just for helping my drunken ass out (God – science – knows I owe you. Who knows what could have happened if you weren't here?) But for these wonderful couple of days. I never thought I'd see you again, but here you are! Sorry if I ever stared a little too much, a part of me is still in shock. I've had so much fun with you and when both our situations are difficult it was great how easy this felt. I felt like I was in my own little world with you and maybe I am.*

*I know things are going to get tough for me, and there are some details I've deliberately left you in the dark about. The time will come someday when I'll be able to tell you everything, but we both have to be patient. Before things get rougher and uglier and possibly darker, I want to thank you for making the beginning – the very beginning – so comfortable and reassuring. I never thought those were words I'd use to describe you, but I have to give you credit. For the first time in years I feel truly hopeful.*

*I'm so excited to see you again! I hope you'll come visit soon. Like I said, I'd rather you see me when things aren't so fragile. But I really want to make it clear that I'm going to be fine, I have my own stuff to work on which should keep me busy for a while. So don't rush or do anything stupid if it meant you got to see me sooner. No pressure! While I'm waiting, I can take comfort in the thought that I'm getting better and that you're alive, five hundred years away and kicking otter ass. That'll be enough, trust me.*

*See you later!*

**Kyle**

The words were like sunlight streaming through a winter window, that first sleepy smile Kyle gave Eric at the hospital. Despite the heartbreak, and the sickness, and the forlorn realisations, Eric had left Kyle with comfort he never knew he could muster, and hope they were both holding out for each other.

Although Kyle had asked Eric to not do anything stupid or reckless in order to see him, Eric knew Kyle had underestimated his effect on him. Nothing could stop Eric from getting what he wanted, not even his common sense. And he wanted all the time he could get with Kyle. Noble as he tried to be, he couldn't deny the feelings that had driven him here. He couldn't underestimate himself either.

Eric folded the letter and placed it in his pants pocket, these two days he had grown rather accustomed to sleeping in his clothes. After he had freshened up (Eric's mouth and heart creased like the folds of the letter when he noticed Kyle had left the red toothbrush for him), Eric wandered the room aimlessly, taking one last look and considering that he may never be in this room again. Where in such a short space of time, little happened that meant so much.

Once Eric decided that he'd had his greedy fill, and with a deep breath, he pressed the small button on his time tether. Like a trap door had appeared beneath his feet, Eric fell… and floated and soared all at once. Gravity and the cosmos and the strings of his soul had snapped or come apart and before he could even question it, some force that was God or space hushed him - his brain, his heart - until he was unconscious.
He hoped that the scientists in charge wouldn't ask him too many questions about what he saw on his journey through the fabric of time, for he saw nothing. And he wasn't sure he was meant to.

Scorching light trickled into his vision, the sensation hot enough that Eric opened his eyes, wide and disorientated just as the transporter doors were opening. The room was out of focus, but he still stumbled into it, *lurching* rather just like his stomach. But he had nothing to vomit up… Well, maybe last night's pizza.

"You're back!" The familiar voice of the scientist Eric had talked to before. "A little earlier than we expected…"

"Yeah, some things came up," Eric managed. He stood up straight as the scientist approached him, blinking in order to regain his vision. "Where is everybody?"

"On break," the scientist replied, taking the time tether off Eric's limp wrist. "So how was it?"

"Great," Eric replied, until the letter in his pocket and the freshness of his visit broke an emotional seal. "Amazing, actually…" Eric added, voice distant but teeming with quiet happiness.

"Thank you," he then said to the scientist, a bit louder.

The scientist smiled sheepishly up at him. "No problem."

*Now would be the perfect time…*

Eric cleared his throat before he said, "Hey, listen uh-"

"Leck," the scientist nodded, and Eric felt dizzy all over again.

"Leck?" Eric asked, his first visit to the astronomy atrium and that trial in the sizzling sun flooded his memory.

*Of course! That's why he looked so familiar!*

Eric knew he had seen those dark, nervous eyes and those slender wrists before.

"…Yeah?" Leck asked, his puzzlement prompting Eric to speak.

*Come on! Before the others get back!*

"Um, how about you and I make a deal?" Eric asked, admittedly not his greatest start but he could turn it around.

"What kind of deal?" Leck asked, as he walked away from Eric and over to his desk. Eric understood his wariness, but followed him anyway.

"I'm not somebody who is fond of sentimentality," Eric began. "But the reason I went back to the past was to save this guy. This incredible guy who I've known forever and I knew it would be difficult to leave him, but I didn't anticipate how great our time would be together."

Leck had been fussing with various tablets that displayed complicated diagrams and charts, while Eric was talking. Eric knew skirting around the heart of the issue wasn't going to gain Leck's attention, or his cooperation. And while he could manipulate the emotional weight this deal carried, he knew he didn't have to. Honesty (not always Eric's strong suit) was what counted here.

"He's… he's the love of my life, Leck." Eric continued, and mahogany eyes met his. "And I'd really
like to see him again, to spend more time with him. Even if those visits are numbered. I have to be sensible with my time, I realise that. So is there any way you would help me?"

Leck's lips pursed, eyes searching the room. In a world where logic and science prevailed, Eric guessed that people and otters weren't used to dealing with matters of the heart. Eric was hardly an expert himself.

"This is really dangerous for me," Leck pointed out.

"I understand that," Eric nodded, smothering a sigh.

"I'm a scientist!" Leck added indignantly. "A human one at that. Do you really want me to waste, no, risk, my opportunity here by overseeing your love affair go smoothly?"

"No, I don't expect you to do that," Eric replied, frustration and desperation were rising to the surface. "But I did say I'd make a deal, and that means there's something in it for you too."

Leck glanced at the entrance to the laboratory. "Like what?" He asked.

"What benefits do you get from the educational program?"

"Not much," Leck replied, leaning forward to ensure their conversation was actually private. "I have an apartment that the AAA pays for until I start earning enough to afford the rent. That's about it."

"How long until that happens?" Eric asked, sensing an opportunity.

"I have no idea," Leck answered. "My salary is steady - low - but steady."

"What if you got promoted?" Eric asked, he couldn't help but smile, luring Leck in.

"Then I'd be able to buy my own place," Leck replied as casually as he could.

"I could get you that promotion sooner," Eric offered, voice low and tantalizing. "I'll just attend one of the council meetings the president keeps inviting me to, put a few good words in and by the next quarter I'll get you your promotion. All you've got to do is stay on your best behaviour when the AAA is looking and help me out when they're not."

Leck blinked, eyes gleaming with fascination and temptation before doubt crept in. "I don't know…"

Eric balked, incredulous. "You don't know?!"

"How am I supposed to trust you, Time Child?" Leck hissed. "When you betrayed us before?"

*Clearly you've forgotten about that astronomy book I gave you. And if it wasn't for me you wouldn't even have a job, asshole. One you get paid for, at least.*

"Hey! I didn't betray you, alright?" He snapped. "I betrayed a party that represented you that quite frankly, if they'd been a little more disciplined and ruthless, could have been just like the AAA."

Leck's small mouth formed a scowl before it opened to speak, but Eric beat him to it.

"And I don't wanna hear that loyal rhetoric you've swiped from your parents," Eric said. "You're a smart guy, Leck. You know I'm right."

"And I only did what I did before, so I could go home," Eric admitted. "I missed my mom and my friends and my house... my pet cat. I'm used to being alone now, to doing things by myself, but I was a little kid back then. A selfish, scared little kid who got screwed over."

Leck looked way, considering Eric's words before he nodded to himself.

"I've learned, and I've apologised and I've tried to quietly make things better, as much as I can anyway," Eric continued, he wanted Leck to look at him. "I'm not going to betray you, Leck. Because I need you. And I know that you should be rewarded for your help. Believe me, I've asked the question of, 'what's in it for me?' a lot in my life. And if what I'm offering you isn't worth it, then I will beg and hope that through the goodness of your heart, I can get through to you."

Leck was still silent. That obvious urgency to get this conversation over with, had disappeared now there were offers and complications to consider.

Leck sighed, Eric's heart creaked hopefully.

"This guy," Leck said, looking up at Eric again. "He really means that much to you?"

"Yes," Eric replied.

"That you'd go out of your way to help me?" Leck asked, he had no idea just how determined Eric was.

"Yes," Eric repeated.

"That you'd put yourself at risk?" Leck asked, changing tact and raising an eyebrow.

"As long as I get to see him again," Eric answered.

Leck's stare remained fixed on Eric, sympathy gleaming in those shadowy eyes before he glanced at the door again, and finally at the huge transporter behind Eric.

"Fine," Leck said. "I'll do it."

Eric could've dropped to his knees and blamed it on lack of sleep, but he managed to remain standing. He chose to sigh deeply and let a smile stretch across his face instead, his preferred method of expressing relief and gratitude.

"Thank you, Leck," Eric grinned.

Leck smiled quickly, strained, before he shifted in his seat and adopted a more serious tone. "But your visits will need to be numbered, alright?"

Eric understood and nodded. "Twenty?" He asked.

"Twenty?!" Leck exclaimed.

"Fine," Eric said quickly, in a bid to quiet him down. "Fifteen?"

"Are you crazy?!"

Eric huffed, but said more firmly, "ten."

Eric exhaled thoughtfully, eight visits seemed hardly enough. Then, he considered, nothing short of infinity would be enough for him, so greedy and enamoured. And if this was Leck's final offer, then the figure would only get smaller from here and then he would run the risk of Leck denying him any number of visits. After all, what did Leck have to lose by alling the deal off? A promotion he would probably get someday? Whether he liked it not, Eric had a lot more at stake than Leck did. Never seeing Kyle again, breaking his promise, letting Kyle down.

He would just have to… Spread his visits out carefully. So from this moment on, Kyle would never have a life without Eric in it. He wouldn't rush, he would give Kyle space. Maybe Eric was done for, but Kyle wouldn't get too attached, would he? They had their own separate lives. Maybe carefully sporadic visits were good, healthy, or was Eric just trying to shed some light on a slightly disappointing turn of events?

Eric closed his eyes, tried his hardest to suck it up, and nodded.

"Are we in agreement?" Leck asked, Eric just wanted to get this over with.

"Yes, fine, we're in agreement," Eric said, opening his eyes and plastering a smile on his face.

"So before the others get back, we should discuss the terms of this," Leck said, taking another slightly worried look at the entrance to the lab.


"The only alone time we can get with the transporter is in the early hours of the morning," Leck explained, looking at Eric seriously when he added, "you can't be late."

"Got it," Eric nodded.

"To avoid getting caught, this is going to have to happen on the weekends only," Leck continued. "If you start missing shifts in… whatever it is that you do, the AAA will start getting suspicious."

Eric nodded again, wanting to show Leck he would abide by his terms and stick to the limited number of visits. Nothing was more important than doing this right.

"Wow," Leck chuckled softly. "You must really love this guy, huh?"

Eric looked at the transporter, keeping him connected to the past and to Kyle.

"He's all I've ever believed in," he replied.

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Chapter End Notes

Before I explain a few things, I need to have a self-critical rant. If I had to grade this chapter, I'd probably give it a C-. I don't know, just with all the angst and drama and futuristic stuff that's come before it, Kyle teaching Eric how to use a laundry machine and them eating pizza together seems a little filler. So I'm sorry if this chapter bored you at all, I'll try to make future chapters more exciting. Now, onto the important stuff!

- I should've clarified this earlier, but the splitting of POVs isn't going to be in any particular order. So, for example, the next chapter is going to be in Eric's POV and the one after that will be Kyle's. The POVs will change depending on the events of the
- I usually indicate a change in age by beginning a chapter with a bolded number. This will continue, but any changes in age will be for Kyle only. Eric will remain twenty-one for most of the story and if that changes I'll be sure to make it clear.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

22

Eric kept his distance from the groups of parents waiting in the hallway of the small elementary school, tucked away in a busy Denver street. While he waited quietly for the bell to ring and the first grade class to file out, the parents chatted amongst themselves about PTA fundraisers and any neighbourhood gossip they were privy to.

Impatience drowned out their conversations, Eric's eyes trained on the clock and its rigid hands. It was pathetic he thought, ridiculous that he had somehow managed to wait eleven years to see Kyle again, but two days in his company had left him an addict in need of a fix.

In the five days he had to wait for his next visit to the transporter, Eric tried to keep his mind busy with work. And with the terms of his deal constantly racing around his thoughts, Eric considered what components would be needed to build a transporter of his own. Since checking out a book or digital file might rouse suspicion, Eric chose to steal an engineering book from the library. Specifically, a book about the mechanics of time machines and transporters.

He finished the entire thing during a more sleepless night. Building a transporter was expensive, not to mention difficult, but Eric understood the most basic stuff and he was a fast learner. If he could pass his engineering class with distinction and acquire the knowledge to hack into the AAA's security system without any guidance, then surely he could learn to build a time transporter from scratch? Especially when the outcome was being able to return to the past for good, to be able to see Kyle without negotiations and curfews. To expand upon something Eric was sure he felt during their last encounter.

Admittedly, a more reckless thought of how his goal could be achieved entered his mind. Something he wasn't exactly new to, but would definitely be a lot quicker and more cost-effective than building a time transporter; tricking Leck and not wearing his time tether. Deceitful it would have been, but Eric was good at that. Besides, it's not as if he'd be around to deal with the ramifications, he'd be in the past where he belonged. Just because he needed Leck, didn't mean he cared about what happened to him.

As much as Eric tried to discard the thought, it was something he pondered even when he was sneaking out of his quarters to meet Leck in the lab. But Leck was smart and understandably wary, slapping a time tether on Eric's wrist before even greeting him.

The hand finally reached twelve, and Eric's hitch of breath was drowned out by the shrill bell and the sound of excitable children rushing out of class. Eric's shoulders slumped and he smiled to himself at the parents scooping up their kids, the little arms wrapped around taller bodies in awkward hugs.

His mother had looked at him like that once, and only through time and distance did Eric realise that. And only through maturity did he realise he should have cherished it while it lasted. Eric's chest ached and his eyes stung, but he sniffed any tears away, wanting to look somewhat presentable when he spotted Kyle.

As children continued to leave the classroom, Eric lingered by the lockers, waiting for Kyle to perhaps make an appearance. If that failed, he'd have to go into the classroom himself.
A taller figure entered the hallway, dressed down to what Eric usually expected teachers to wear. When his eyes roamed upwards to Kyle's smiling, relaxed face he felt the air had been sucked out of him.

Eric was surprised by how different Kyle looked, how noticeable that difference was even from a distance. And although these differences may have been unnerving to some, to Eric it only made him reflect further on how fragile Kyle had been. After all, Kyle had told Eric he needed time to figure things out, that perhaps it was best see each other again when Kyle's life was a tad more stable.

Kyle had filled out, his face rounder than the one of the slim boy shivering in the cruel December chill. His curls were cropped a little shorter, gilded due to the bleaching effects of the sun. And he was no longer fresh-faced, a year older than Eric now. A five o'clock shadow perhaps replaced where a beard used to be, now shaved for the summer.

As if the unencumbered joy of the children was infectious, Kyle seemed brighter, content. Eric imagined Kyle with paint on his clothes, aiding his students in creating a messy, colourful masterpiece, patiently listening and encouraging as they read, and making stories come to life in the way Eric knew Kyle could, always a great speaker. Every morning, his students would be so glad to see him, and Kyle, caring and compassionate as he was, would be glad to see them too. Although when he had reread Kyle's file – stuffing itself with new information before his eyes - Eric had been surprised at where Kyle had ended up. Now he could fully see that he couldn't have been in a place more perfect for him.

Eric's thoughts were so consumed with innocent, lovely fantasies of Kyle that he didn't realise Kyle had saw him too. His green eyes were wide and focused as he made his way over to Eric. He gulped, gaze never leaving Kyle as if he were going to lose him again.

"Hey..." Eric said softly, shrinking back against the locker.

Kyle stared up at him, a mere three inches between them.

"Hi..." Kyle said, smiling wider, before he laughed in disbelief.

"Oh my God!" He chuckled, throwing his arms around Eric's neck.

Eric wasn't expecting that warmth, that inexplicably comforting smell of cologne and playdough, but he was expecting the anxiety and tension of waiting to melt as soon as he was in Kyle's arms. A hand splayed against Kyle's back and Eric pulled him closer, breathing Kyle in and eyes closing in relief.

"What are you doing here?" Kyle asked, stepping back but still close enough for Eric to see every emotion painted on his face.

"Waiting for you," Eric replied, story of his life. "Though I think the question should be what are you doing here?"

Although Eric had checked Kyle's file, he chose to not delve too deep into the past or the future. He wanted to hear about it and see it happen with Kyle by his side.

"Oh, yeah, uh, working," Kyle replied, suddenly bashful. He scratched the back of his neck and glanced at the classroom. "Well, sort of. Training is the more accurate word."

While Kyle was otherwise preoccupied, Eric let a proud grin stretch across his face. "That's awesome, Kyle"
"Thanks," Kyle turned back to Eric with a small smile. "It's so great to see you, that you're here."

Kyle's hands were knotted at his chest now, fingers fidgeting.

"It's great to see you too," Eric nodded, both of them struggling under the overwhelming heaviness of the moment.

"How long have you been waiting?" Kyle asked, and Eric wasn't entirely sure what he was referring to.

"Not long," Eric replied, shrugging. "Ten minutes?"

"Okay, good," Kyle said, letting out a small sigh. "Do you want to get some coffee?"

"Sure," Eric smirked, he had a lot of catching up to do.

One bad experience of coffee as an eight year old had put Eric off the stuff, so he ordered an iced tea instead. Summertime and all. Kyle had smirked at Eric's reasoning, recollecting that experience he had also shared and ordered himself a latte.

"So teaching?" Eric asked, when they had made themselves comfortable around a small table at the back of the coffeehouse.

"Yeah, first grade," Kyle nodded, sipping at his still hot latte. He smiled, and Eric almost missed it behind the cup. "I'm really enjoying it."

"Last time I saw you, you were set to become a doctor," Eric pointed out, trying to not let on how fascinated he was by the change.

"Oh, that totally..." Kyle began before he sighed, setting his cup down and closing his eyes. No use in being blasé. "Once I'd had a long, hard think about stuff, I realised that I was getting into that career for the wrong reasons. When we used to have talks in high school about the future, I always used to say that I wanted a job where I could help people. And being a doctor just made sense to me. I had the grades to do it, and it's saving people's lives, you know? I used to think, what could be more rewarding than that? But the stress of it... My thoughts were so chaotic, my actions so irresponsible, and I was so sensitive. I still am, the thought of a patient of mine dying used to give me panic attacks because I knew I couldn't live with that guilt. Having that level of care and responsibility and becoming attached to people? Only to watch them die? No, I couldn't handle it."

Kyle shook his head, as if trying to shake off the thought before it could embed itself into the conversation.

"But I'm good with kids," Kyle smiled and shrugged, but he was obviously carefully considering his words. "At least, I like helping people who I see as being in need of help. And little kids do need help, don't they? They need to learn how to read and write, they need to learn about the world. I figured I could do that. I didn't know if I would get that real rush of helping people from it, but I do. Every day. Like, seeing a shy kid come out of their shell, or seeing someone complete a math problem they were struggling with, or finally spelling a word correctly, and knowing you were a part of achieving that, it's great and, and humbling." Kyle took a breath, and Eric felt a little giddy too. "My kids."

"Your kids?" Eric smirked, finding Kyle's phrasing both amusing and adorable.

"Yeah, that's what I call them," Kyle shook his head and laughed softly. "They're technically not
mine because I'm a teacher's assistant at the moment. Although things have gotten better for me, it's still a little rough now and then. But those kids are one of the biggest reasons I get up in the morning," Kyle's voice cracked a little, a side effect of caring so intensely.

"I never realised how important having a purpose was until I started doing this," Kyle added, dabbing at his eyes just in case.

"You said things were still a little rough though?" Eric questioned, he had picked up on that straight away.

Kyle looked up, eyes glistening.

"Yeah, but it's fine," Kyle waved off, whilst still trying to be honest. "Since the last time we saw each other, I feel so much better."

"Well, good," Eric nodded, he tapped the glass his drink had been poured into, sheepishly. "I'm glad, Kyle."

Kyle returned the smile, stronger and more secure than Eric's own, supporting them both.

"In fact, I think I'm ready to tell you all the stuff I couldn't before," Kyle said, taking a deep breath in preparation.

"Really?" Eric asked, wariness dampened his undoubtful curiosity. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I am," Kyle nodded.

Regardless, Eric didn't want to pressure Kyle, so he offered him an out. "You don't have to if-

"No, no I want to," Kyle assured him.

Eric nodded silently before he said, "alright."

Kyle looked at a spot above Eric's head, as if the events of the past few years had been retold on the wall in front of him. But he eventually looked at Eric again, and Eric didn't know what else to do but wait silently, to let Kyle know he was ready.

"When you saw me at that party, I was pretty sure that I wanted to die," Kyle began, but his breath shook and he glanced at the table next to them. Eric wanted to step in, to tell Kyle that they didn't have to do this now, but Kyle – stubborn as ever – continued.

"I didn't even realise it at the time, because I was constantly wasted, but I just couldn't see the point in life anymore," Kyle said. "When I was in high school, I suffered with bouts of depression. But I tried to distract myself with basketball, and a boyfriend and Stan and Kenny. Back then, I had hope. Even if it was weak, it was there. I tried to console myself with that. But eventually, it snapped," Kyle closed his eyes and clarified, "I snapped. It was like this huge rock on my back, bearing down on me and nothing and nobody could alleviate the pressure. Nobody could stop these thoughts that just kept attacking me, I had to fight them on my own. But I guess that boulder crushed me and those thoughts they… They devoured me."

Kyle looked at his lap, disguising his face from Eric but yet he still searched for any clue into how Kyle was feeling. If now was the right time to stop.

"So I quit basketball," Kyle continued, looking up again and it was hard for Eric to ignore those deliberate, clipped sentences. "Started drinking excessively and smoking pot on a regular basis,
which drove my boyfriend away. This really sweet, understanding guy who I still feel guilty for hurting like I did."

Another sore spot that threatened to make Kyle crumble. Although Eric felt a fruitless pang of jealousy when Kyle mentioned his high school boyfriend, a guy he still clearly thought about, there was another sadness there. A purer, less selfish ache than simple jealousy; sadness that Kyle was harbouring guilt in the first place.

"And it also drove Stan and Kenny away," Kyle continued. "I mean, fuck, Cartman… they were our best friends, you know? But I was so apathetic and resentful that I didn't want them around anymore. I thought I'd be doing them a favour if I was out of their lives."

*How could anybody's life be brighter without you in it?*

Kyle shook his head and chuckled ruefully. "It sounds horrible now, but that wasn't even the worst. Because I prioritised Harvard and medical school even over my partying. I don't know how the fuck I did it, Cartman. How I pretended everything was fine, how I got all my homework in and my college applications finished, how I got the grades so I was accepted into Harvard in the first place. I can't even remember how I did it. It was as if being drunk or stoned was such a common thing for me, that even when I was studying I just ignored it. My brain somehow found a way around it because getting out of South Park and making something of myself was more important. I thought it would make me happy again." Kyle said that last part softer, as if he was embarrassed by the very idea.

"There must have still been some hope in me," Kyle considered. "Because I had these grand delusions about what Harvard would be like, how I would feel when I got there. It was a great school but with how low I had sunk, with how desperate and awful I felt, it didn't matter. And it was hard to look into the future, because all I saw was darkness. The thought of medical school exhausted me, actually becoming a doctor even more so. And though it scared the hell out of me to even think it, death was…"

Kyle's eyes had slowly begun to glisten, a sad flush pinching his face as he tried to hold his emotion in. His hand was now resting on the table, so tempting, and with Kyle's gaze once again on the floor Eric felt confident enough to reach out-

"I used to think how great it would be if I slipped in the shower and hit my head," Kyle admitted, his head lifted and Eric retracted his hand. "Or even if I passed out drunk in a pool of vomit. I thought all my problems would vanish. They wouldn't be solved, of course, just gone. Nothing to worry about anymore. But… I didn't have the guts to kill myself. I'm glad now. Maybe there was still a hopeful little voice trying to be heard?" Kyle shrugged, a small rueful smile.

"Or maybe you're just stronger than you think you are?" Eric offered, comforting touch traded in for an uplifting truth.

"Thanks," Kyle chuckled. "But… I don't know. I guess we'll never find out. I do know one thing for sure though."

"What's that?" Eric asked.

"You saved me, Cartman," Kyle said, his tone so honest and raw that Eric felt his own eyes sting. "You saved me in every way imaginable. Without you, I wouldn't have faced my problems, mended my relationship with my parents, felt able to come back to Colorado again. I wouldn't have realised exactly what it was I wanted to do, I wouldn't have been able to start over if it wasn't for you. You saved my life, Cartman, but you also gave me a new one. I have to thank you for that."
Eric was glad that Kyle was smiling that contagious grin, it made it easier to ward off tears.

"Kyle, I-"

"Yes?"

"I… you don't know how wonderful it feels to hear you say that," Eric began, his stomach had knotted and the air was tighter. No wonder Kyle was struggling when pouring your heart out wasn't as easy as it looked. "And seeing how happy you are, I would do it all over again."

Kyle smiled gratefully, and before he could say anything Eric continued. "But I can't take all the credit. Sure, I saved you that night but everything after that was all on you, Kyle."

Kyle nodded, he had leaned forward when he expressed his gratitude to Eric, as if he was the only person in the coffeehouse who should be allowed to hear it. Now, he leaned back, considering Eric's comment.

"I understand, but I want you to take some of the credit," Kyle replied, before a knowing smirk underscored the seriousness. "Come on, you used to be such a glory hog anyway."

Eric rolled his eyes and chuckled. "Shut up…"

Kyle had told Eric everything, the dark, painful stuff out in the open now that there was light and healed wounds, and any remaining tension slipped away. Their recent hug had done a good job of expelling some of that, but there had been an emotional barrier to get across as well as a physical one.

"So what about you?" Kyle asked, before taking a sip of his coffee. "I guess it hasn't been that long for you since you last saw me, but you have a job, right?"

"Yeah, I'm an engineer," Eric replied, drinking some of his neglected iced tea.

Kyle's eyes widened, and he set his cup down. "Wow, really?"

"You're that surprised?" Eric chuckled, arching an eyebrow.

Kyle shrugged, before admitting, "I just always imagined you as some kind of ruthless CEO."

Eric smirked, and shook his head. A job like that did sound appealing, but not attainable.

"Well, I'm only twenty one," Eric pointed out. "That could still happen."

"No doubt it will," Kyle smiled. "Still, an engineer… Are you working on anything at the moment?"

"Nothing too exciting," Eric replied, hating to disappoint. "Although I have been inspired lately to start a big project."

"What is it?" Kyle asked, that intrigue returning.

"Can't tell you," Eric teased, or rather, he was still too shy and proud to admit out loud just how much Kyle had affected him. That pretty much everything he did was all for him. "But it's going to be very challenging."

Kyle nodded, undoubtedly impressed and Eric couldn't help but feel cocky.

"Then all the more reason to do it, right?" Kyle grinned.
"I think I have a pretty good reason already," Eric replied.

Unlike his last visit, Eric had come prepared; bringing with him a large backpack filled with everything he needed for his short stay. Kyle had offered him a space on his couch, and Eric stopped listening to Kyle's apologies about his apartment five minutes after he had made the offer.

In fact, Eric felt that Kyle's self-consciousness had oversold the apartment's undesirability. It was small and minimally furnished, but also cosy and clean and without a roommate around, Eric felt at home already in an apartment that was undoubtedly Kyle's.

After giving Eric a very brief tour of the apartment, Kyle moved onto the subject of dinner, and they came to the unanimous decision of pizza and a movie.

"Are you planning on going back home?" Kyle asked, moving onto his third slice of pizza.

"I know I brought a bag with me but that doesn't mean I'm moving in," Eric teased. "I'll be here two days, like last time."

Kyle rolled his eyes and elbowed Eric's side. "No, not- I didn't mean that home," he clarified, his voice softening. "I meant South Park."

"Oh," Eric put down the slice of pizza he'd been eating, his throat felt like it had shrivelled up. He sensed an uncomfortable conversation and yet his words seemed to be failing him. "To be honest, I haven't given much thought to it."

Eric glanced at Kyle, winced at how his shoulders fell, how his mouth opened slightly in surprise.

"None at all?" Kyle questioned, brow creased.

"Well, of course I think about people," Eric said, glancing around the tiny living room in order to avoid Kyle's suddenly scrutinising stare. "My mom, Stan, Kenny, even Butters. Fucking asshole..."

"It wasn't his fault, you know," Kyle muttered. "What happened-"

"Yeah," Eric sighed, cutting in. "I realise that now."

"Me too," Kyle replied, albeit a little resentfully.

"Still a douchebag though," Eric commented, surprised when he heard Kyle laugh beside him.

The beat passed, the movie droning on unimportantly in the background.

"I haven't told anybody back home about you," Kyle said, Eric turned to him. "I didn't think it was my place. In case you were wondering."

"Like I said, I haven't given much thought to it," Eric replied.

While his mind often wandered to his hometown, to his mom and his friends and the information in their files, Eric didn't feel compelled to visit them. Knowing they were okay was enough for him. The same couldn't be said for Kyle though. Eric had always prioritised him, was always fixated with him and was now irrevocably in love with him.

His visits to the past were limited, it was normal for Eric to want to spend those visits with the person he loved, wasn't it? Even if that love was never returned. While Eric had become accustomed to that, time had only rendered it mildly devastating. But maybe that's what love is all about. Inexorable,
idiotic and faithful love. Maybe it was about taking what you can get, no matter what, because just being around that person is exhilarating and fulfilling and satisfying to some portion of your heart.

Besides, it wasn't as if anybody back home was missing him terribly, or yearning for his return. Even his mom was probably partially relieved. No matter how blindly devoted she was to him, as only mothers can be.

"It's not like anybody missed me that much," Eric mumbled, taking a bite out of his forgotten slice of pizza that was now lukewarm.

Kyle frowned. "Cartman-"

"No, Kyle, I see it now," Eric said firmly, even if the edges of his voice were a bit rough and raw. "I was a jerk, more than a jerk I was a – whatever. And yeah, there are some things I haven't grown out of. But if nobody misses me then I'm not surprised."

Kyle stared at Eric hard for a minute, and Eric kept Kyle in his peripheral vision, almost flushing under the intensity but his confusion kept his blush at bay.

"You have no idea," Kyle sighed, resting his head against the back of the couch as if he was exasperated.

"I don't?" Eric questioned, looking at Kyle now.

Kyle met his eyes and asked, "Can I show you something?"

"Sure?" Eric replied, eyebrow raised.

Kyle got up from the couch, walking in front of the TV and going into his bedroom. The two rooms were adjoining, and Eric craned his neck to sneak a peek at what Kyle was trying to find. Unfortunately, he couldn't see much, but at least he had a pleasant view of Kyle bending over in the particularly flattering jeans he was wearing. Eric didn't stare for too long though, he didn't want to look pink-faced and guilty when Kyle came back into the living room.

A few minutes later, Kyle returned with a shoe box in his hands. Eric didn't question it, just waited for an explanation. Sitting down next to Eric, Kyle opened the shoe box that was filled with various sheets of folded paper. Snatching the one at the top of the pile, Kyle then handed the paper to Eric.

"What's this?" He asked as he unfolded it.

"It's a speech I gave about you in high school," Kyle replied shyly.

Eric's heart leapt, he turned the words over in his head just in case he had misheard. He even looked to Kyle for clarification, incredulous and flattered and humbled.

"You're kidding," Eric said, a wide smile wanting to stretch across his face. "You gave a speech about me?"

"Yeah," Kyle nodded, hands tucked between his legs. "Go ahead, read it."

Eric's resolve felt as crumpled as the old paper, unable to stop the grateful smile on his face.

There was Kyle's neat handwriting in front of him, saturated with nostalgia. More refined than Eric remembered, but unmistakable. Swallowing audibly, every lined sentence was a tightrope Eric was teetering precariously on. Falling would mean losing himself to the overwhelming possibility that
Kyle had missed him too, that he had meant more to him as well, that Kyle remembered him with
fondness as well as bitterness for the volatile nature of their relationship.

It should have been everything Eric wanted to hear, to read on a piece of faded paper, and it was.
But only in his wildest dreams, in his most ridiculous fantasies. Hope battled with disbelief and
defiant love battled with the forlorn notion of wishing he had been there with Kyle. The dreaded
what-could-have-been.

But Eric was here now, and that was something. An incredible, monumental something when both
of them had doubted during their separation that they would ever see each other again. It all made
sense... Why Kyle had hugged him like he did the first time they were reunited, why Kyle would
picture him of all people when he thought he was hallucinating at the hospital, why he wanted to
cherish Eric's company so badly now.

Because he had missed him deeply, more than Eric thought possible.

Yes, Eric may have resigned himself to his love never being returned. But knowing that Kyle had
missed him, that he must have harboured some sort of love for him was like the prize Eric didn't
know he was searching for.

"Wow, you really did this?" Eric asked, voice barely above a shaky whimper.

He turned to Kyle, who had been staring at him fondly the whole time, as if he was reading along to
his own words.

"You..." Eric stopped, lips pursing before he continued, "you missed me that much?"

Kyle nodded, his face creased with tears too and Eric wanted to mend those fissures.

"It nearly killed me," Kyle whispered, ducking his head. But Eric wished he wouldn't, so he could
wipe Kyle's tears away.

"Kyle-

"It's fine, Cartman," Kyle said, lifting his head and nodding to reassure Eric. "I'm fine now. Just..."

Kyle shuffled closer and Eric drank him in, seeing Kyle in a different light.

"Don't you dare think that nobody noticed you were gone," Kyle said, his honesty was palpable.
"Don't you dare think that you don't mean something. It's true what they say, isn't it? People don't
realise what they've got until it's gone."

Eric searched Kyle's face, searched his racing mind for eloquent words.

"Thank you, Kyle," Eric smiled, all he could say. "This is amazing, it really is."

Kyle smiled back, showing off his teeth and Eric set the letter down on the coffee table.

"You, um, said earlier that you drifted apart from Stan and Kenny?" Eric asked, changing the
overwhelming subject before it could topple him. "Do you talk to them at all now?"

"Yeah, I got back in touch with them a few months ago," Kyle replied. "Unsurprisingly Stan is a lot
easier to get a hold of than Kenny."

Eric snickered, glancing at his feet.
"So, how are they?" He asked.

Kyle smirked, puzzled, with eyebrows furrowed.

"You knew stuff about me," Kyle pointed out, as he sank into the couch cushions. "Don't you know stuff about them?"

Eric shot Kyle a cheeky look before joining him in sinking into the couch. "I read their files, some of it."

"Have you read my file?" Kyle asked.

Eric nodded.

"All of it?"

"No, some parts I want to keep a mystery," Eric grinned.

Kyle didn't respond, smirking to himself and reaching for another slice of pizza.

"So?" Eric pressed. "Tell me about Stan and Kenny."

"Stan has been kind of like a life coach to me," Kyle replied. "You know he's a marine biologist, right? But he might as well become a therapist. I think that's what his girlfriend does. She meditates a lot. Stan is totally besotted with her, says he finally feels awake or something now that he's met her. Last time I spoke to him they were in Bali."

Eric laughed, Stan becoming a hippie was so predictable but it would never fail to amuse him.

"And Kenny… He's just moved to Florida," Kyle smiled. "He works in a tattoo parlour that's overlooks the beach, though he didn't want to talk about it that much. He wanted to talk about his heavy metal band. He keeps bugging me to listen to their demo but I'm not into that kind of music, he knows that."

"Sounds like you guys have patched things up," Eric remarked, thinking back to what Kyle had told him at the coffeehouse.

"I think so," Kyle nodded tentatively. "It was harder with Kenny, he'd been so tough on me and I hated him a little for it but looking back… He was just frustrated, because he wanted me to get better, that's all. It's taken a while to forgive him, but I have. Stan..." Kyle paused, holding in a breath and then releasing it, like it was something Stan's girlfriend suggested he do. "I missed him so much. I was so happy when we finally started talking again, it was like old times. You know, old times being before things got really bad."

Eric nodded, there was still one other person he was interested in knowing about. But he doubted Kyle knew much.

"Do you, umm…" Eric paused, hating how childish he could still be.

"What?" Kyle asked.

Eric took a deep breath like Kyle had. "Is my mom okay?" He asked.

Kyle smiled, making Eric squirm only a little bit before Kyle nodded and ridded Eric of his discomfort.
"She's in Wisconsin," Kyle said. "Did you know that?"

"Yeah," Eric nodded, before remembering a more surprising thing he had read in her file. "I, um, know she married somebody."

Kyle dropped his once sure gaze, turning back to the movie they had long forgotten.

"Does he make her happy?" Eric asked, all he wanted to know.

"Yeah, he does," Kyle said, looking at Eric again with a smile. "He's a nice guy, Cartman."

"Good, I'm glad," Eric sighed, smiling too. "After putting up with my shit for years she deserves to have somebody normal in her life."

Kyle laugheded, partly exasperated which Eric found funny in itself.

"Right…" He grinned, before he asked more seriously, "Cartman?"

"Yeah?"

"It's totally your decision but… please give some thought into going home?" Kyle asked, imploring Eric. "Into seeing your mom? I think it's at least worth considering."

Eric blinked, not expecting that request. Kyle feeling so strongly about the matter was unexpected too.

"Yeah," Eric nodded, though he wasn't so sure. "Yeah, I will."

Glad to return to their pizza in need of heating, and to the movie they had to catch up on.

And just like before, they fell asleep on the small couch, a blanket and closeness keeping them warm.

Eric realised he was alone when, the next day, he had stretched upon waking and hadn't hit a sleeping body next to him.

Confusion does not mix well with dissipating slumber, and while the blanket was still wrapped around him and the apartment appeared to be in order, Eric felt panic kick-start in his gut.

A loud bang, turning Eric's attention to the door where he saw Kyle, grocery bags in his arms.

"Oh, awesome," Kyle smiled brightly when he had turned around, making his way to the kitchenette. "You're up."

Eric, still half-asleep and a little dazed, watched Kyle place the grocery bags on the counter.

"Breakfast?" Kyle asked.

Eric grinned sheepishly and nodded, another day with Kyle had begun.

Chapter End Notes

I feel happier with this chapter, and I hope you guys enjoyed it too. Thank you so much
for reading and maybe let me know what you thought?
Chapter 17

It had been a while since Kyle had to make breakfast for somebody.

A considerable amount of time had also passed since Kyle had woken up with another person beside him. Like Stan had told him during one of their many best friend catch ups/therapy sessions (that always took place late at night because Stan was in a different time zone whenever he called), with Kyle's mind so muddled he had to get his priorities straight.

Like an abused home, things needed to be stripped back and replaced and mended, and these changes had to be careful, measured. One at a time.

So when Kyle had quit Harvard and switched his focus to the new trajectory of his career path, he decided to put boyfriends on the backburner. Not only so he could concentrate solely on becoming a teacher, but so that he could truly say that he had learned from past mistakes.

Human beings are bad distractions. They get easily attached, are susceptible to heartbreak, and are infectious. Thomas had been Kyle's affliction, no matter how temporarily blissful. Kyle realised it wasn't fair to tug somebody else into the storm with him, to manufacture a pillar when Kyle needed to wobble for a while before being able to stand up on his own two feet.

He had always considered himself to be fiercely independent, how wrong he had been.

A distraction, arguably, doesn't need to be permanent. Sometimes its effects only need to last twenty four hours, or perhaps fifteen minutes contained in a nightclub restroom. But Kyle wasn't a one-night stand kind of guy, when he was sober anyway and planned on being for the foreseeable future. Even when Stan had told him that discipline comes from moderation. And maybe Stan was right, but Kyle didn't want to chance it. Not when everything was going so well in the absence of alcohol.

Waking up on his small couch, limbs tangled and body pressed close to Cartman involuntarily was a little nerve-wracking. His drought of physical comfort had attacked Kyle with heightened symptoms of sexual frustration and, more than that, loneliness: Racing heart, dry mouth, fingers aching to touch and grip and only let go when the pang had subsided.

And to associate these things with Cartman, a guy who – after decades of knowing each other – still did mysterious, questionable things to Kyle's mind, his heart. A guy who Kyle still didn't know fully, would never truly know fully because short visits and long conversations weren't enough to fill the crater of history that had separated them; for his body to react so unconditionally to him was mildly terrifying to Kyle. Not to mention wholly confusing.

Yet when Kyle had unavoidably inhaled that scent of Cartman that didn't really smell or taste of anything, it tempered the persistent, roiling heat that started deep in his gut and found its apex in his heart. Beside him had been a man who Kyle once missed and mourned, who, despite everything, had saved Kyle and come back for him. It was as if Cartman knew how much he meant to Kyle, like he knew that for all these years Kyle had needed him. Still needed him.

It had been cold, despite the blanket, but maybe Kyle needed a different kind of warmth? To be closer still? Face burning, Kyle had buried himself into the cushions and clutched Cartman's sides, tugging at his shirt like he has keeping him grounded. Kyle's heart had raced a little louder in the darkness, battling with the strangeness of holding Cartman like he had. There was so much comfort and security between them, arguably unspoken and unfelt on one end. But a deep, instinctive part of Kyle told him that such a connection could only be right.
He had just hoped to wake up before Cartman, and that their embrace wouldn't seem too weird in the daylight.

"So what are your plans for today?" Cartman asked in between mouthfuls of cereal.

"I'm coaching a basketball game at the school this afternoon," Kyle replied, slightly apologetic for having prior commitments now that Cartman was here.

Cartman didn't seem too disappointed though, smirking before laughing childishly into the back of his hand.

Kyle's brow creased, not exactly the reaction he was expecting.

"What?" Kyle asked, laughter in his voice now too as he poured himself more orange juice.

"Just imagining you giving a team talk to little kids in basketball uniforms," Cartman explained with a grin. "It's cute."

"You think I'm cute now?" Kyle teased. He'd had a lucky escape with that embrace. Cartman had slept soundly beside him and Kyle had awoken hours before he did.

"No!" Cartman snapped a little too loudly, a flush on his face that was noticeable from across the table. He sighed, but the colour didn't dissipate. "I didn't mean that you're cute."

Kyle blinked, unprepared for his joke to backfire. He certainly wasn't prepared for how embarrassed Cartman would be by the implication.

Of course Cartman didn't think Kyle was cute!

Or did he?

"Anyway," Kyle clumsily changed the subject before they could both resemble tomatoes. "I'm sorry that I haven't got anything more exciting planned."

"It's fine, really," Cartman smiled, doing a good job of expelling the tension from the room. "I'll be the cheering section if you're in need of one."

Kyle snickered. "With how vocal some of the parents can be, that won't be necessary."

Another downside to Cartman and Kyle's separation had been that Kyle was now prone to underestimating Cartman more than ever. Often, this resulted in pleasant surprises, other times it resulted in… This.

Cartman being an over-enthusiastic cheering section that Kyle didn't ask for, but found helplessly amusing. Unfortunately, the parents in the crowd didn't quite see it that way, Kyle's laughter always withering when he caught a glance of the disapproving mothers and fathers.

"What's that little kid's name?" Cartman asked, he had insisted on hovering around Kyle for the entire game.

"What?" Kyle replied, trying to stay focused, but there was only so much excitement to be found in elementary school basketball.

"The kid that just scored," Cartman continued, pointing at the beaming, jogging child. "What's his name?"
"Dylan," Kyle said, glancing at Cartman with an exasperated smile.

"Go Dylan!" Cartman shouted, close enough to Kyle's ear that he jumped. "Good hustle, kid! Keep it up!"

Kyle could only slightly hear the kids' laughter over the ringing.

"Damn it, do you have to be so loud?" Kyle muttered, he could feel the disapproval from the bleachers.

"Come on, guys!" Cartman continued, undeterred. In fact, Kyle had probably spurred him on. "Make Mr Broflovski proud! Make your parents proud! Make me proud!"

"You realise that most of these parents probably hate you right now?" Kyle pointed out.

Cartman stepped away from Kyle, feigning disbelief and offense, negated by the playfulness that clouded his face.

"Do you hate me?" Cartman asked, resuming his original closeness.

Too close now. That needy, probably misguided embrace had made Kyle reluctant to consider the definition of their relationship, the state of his feelings.

"Would I let you sleep on my couch if I hated you?" Kyle instead answered with another question, and a smirk that could have given too much away.

"I've missed this," Cartman commented fondly, "pushing your buttons."

Kyle's brow furrowed and he turned his attention fully to Cartman. "Who says you're pushing my buttons?"

"Wait, I'm not?" Cartman questioned, genuinely surprised.

Kyle shook his head, he hated to disappoint Cartman but he couldn't help looking smug about it.

Cartman didn't seem too bothered, instead choosing to reply, "Must be losing my touch."

"We have ten minutes left," Kyle consoled him with a grin. "You could push a couple by then."

Cartman's soft chuckle and familiar, wicked smirk sent Kyle back to earlier in the day, the grey hours of the morning when they had been so close, and Kyle had brought them even closer. Kyle had reached out, touched and silently admitted that he was in need of this man. He needed him as much as he was grateful for him. And he didn't want to just show Cartman his gratitude, but affection too.

He had blamed that pull, that craving, on loneliness, on self-imposed deprivation. But in the middle of a basketball game he was supposed to be coaching, Kyle couldn't stop looking at Cartman. Awake and gazing and smiling at Kyle, unfairly handsome and confusingly endearing. That unreciprocated energy that Kyle had surrendered to, that made him curl up beside Cartman as if to defend himself against the cruel cold, was now being returned.

An opposing force weighed down from golden eyes and a mischievous smile, and Kyle felt sure he would buckle from the pressure; the squeezing of his heart that choked out his common sense, the doubts pushing against the haze and that treacherous arousal that sucked in every denial and inner castigation.

The referee – who had been paying much more attention to the game than Kyle had – blew his
whistle and cut through Cartman and Kyle's locked stare.

_Thankfully._

But when Kyle looked to the court he saw Sarah Tillman crying on the floor. A pinch of guilt to bring him back to reality.

"Sarah!" Kyle and Cartman both turned to the female voice behind them. "Sarah, sweetie, are you okay?!"

Without any complaints from the pre-teen referee, Miss Tillman ran onto the court to comfort her child.

"Shit," Kyle muttered, before he called them over.

Pink-faced and sniffling, Sarah was led over to the side-lines by her mother. Kyle glanced at Cartman, appreciating the sympathetic look he gave him.

"I think a kid on the other team pushed her!" Miss Tillman said.

"My elbow hurts!" Sarah complained.

Kyle knelt down, losing his frown to appear more reassuring. "Okay, let's take a look at it," he said.

Sarah lifted her arm to reveal a pink elbow, a mark that would eventually fade into a bruise.

"It doesn't look too bad," Kyle commented, but he knew what would cheer her up. "But I'll give you a band-aid, anyway."

Sarah smiled wetly up at her mother, before staring at the curious man stood beside her teacher.

"Who are you?" She asked Cartman, Kyle just pursed his lips and waited for his response.

"I'm helping Ky- Mr Broflovski out," Cartman replied, sliding a knowing look Kyle's way.

"That's right," Kyle smiled. "There's some band-aids in that kit bag, Cartman, could you hand me one please?"

"One band-aid coming right up," Cartman said, going over to the kit-bag perched on the otherwise empty bleacher and retrieving the band-aids.

"Thanks," Kyle said when Cartman returned, standing up when he was handed a band-aid.

"No problem," Cartman grinned, Kyle didn't know what was funny but a smirk tugged at his lips nonetheless.

Kneeling down again, Kyle placed the novelty band-aid on Sarah's elbow, his previous guilt assuaged when he saw the delight on her face.

The band-aids were cheap, but also famous among Kyle's first grade class. Present whenever there was a papercut, or a scraped knee when Kyle was on playground duty, and to be a recipient of the amusing little band-aids was considered an honour.

"That feel better?" Miss Tillman asked.

Sarah nodded, beaming at Kyle.
"And what do you say to Mr Broflovski?" Her mother pressed.

Sarah looked up at Cartman, the fascinating stranger, and back at Kyle again before she asked, "Is he your boyfriend?"

Kyle blinked, another question into precarious territory coming from the most unlikely of sources. It was enough to make him anxious. Was that moment, their chemistry so obvious that even a six year old could spot it?

Looking up at Cartman, Kyle saw a flushed, surprised reflection with laughter bubbling at the surface.

"Sarah!" Miss Tillman scolded, colour crawling up her throat. "That is very rude!"

"No, it's fine, Miss Tillman," Kyle assured, trying to be professional although Cartman's concealed chuckles were catching.

"No, we aren't boyfriends," Kyle explained to Sarah. "But we've known each other a really long time."

A simple answer, but the only one Kyle had. The only one he was prepared to be sure of.

"That's nice," Sarah smiled.

"Yeah," Kyle nodded, looking up at Cartman. "It is."

Amusing moment passed, Cartman looked down at Kyle and smiled at him in agreement.

Cartman had failed to push any of Kyle's buttons in the remaining ten minutes of the game, and it didn't seem as if he were trying to.

It was as if their chaste, intense moment had set a new plan in motion, although Kyle had no idea what that was. Unnerving, yes, but Kyle assured himself he was just being paranoid. Besides, Cartman was nothing to be scared of. Not to Kyle, anyway. He had always considered them evenly matched, but every surprising gesture and sign of maturity only served to remind Kyle of their separation, this new mysterious element to their relationship.

"Congratulations!" Cartman said when Kyle returned to the gym, empty save for the two of them.

"Thanks," Kyle smiled, hands tucked into the pockets of his hoodie as he approached Cartman. "The kids were saying that they couldn't have done it without your encouragement."

"I make a pretty good cheerleader, huh?" Cartman smirked, rising from the bleachers and standing slightly taller over Kyle.

"Surprisingly, yes," Kyle returned.

Conversation came so easily and swiftly to them, able to switch from heated argument to their grinning repartee seamlessly. Even when broaching more uncomfortable topics, Kyle felt as if he were gliding above them. There was rocky, unmarked terrain below but they both appeared expert at skimming the surface.

However, there was resistance now, forceful and tantalising.

"So did you have fun?" Kyle asked, trying to keep them on course. "It probably wasn't what you-"
"I'll always have fun with you, Kyle," Cartman answered, initiating that pull.

"Oh, um, great," Kyle replied, a little blindsided. "That takes the pressure off me."

A quiet smile appeared on Cartman's face, one Kyle probably wouldn't have noticed were the gym full of people. But it was just the two of them, trying to remain afloat.

That smile triggered a groggy memory from the hospital, and how even then Cartman's smile had illuminated his face, the entire room. Now it threatened to shine light on something else that Kyle had no problem keeping in the dark.

"Can you believe Sarah thought we were boyfriends?" Kyle chuckled thinly, creased nervously at the edges.

Cartman's smile wavered and he shrugged. Horribly ambiguous.

"What does that mean?" Kyle asked, voice hard.

"Huh?"

"That shrug, what does it mean?"

Cartman blinked and furrowed his eyebrows. "It doesn't mean anything."

Kyle sighed and rolled his eyes. "Well, it must mean something."

"That you overthink things?"

"Cartman-"

"I don't know what to tell you, Kyle!" Cartman said, exasperated. "It means that… little kids are weird? They see things differently than we do."

_They don't see denial, that's for sure._

Cartman looked at the gleaming floor before he mumbled, "Why does it bother you so much, anyway?"

But in the silence of the gym Kyle had heard it.

"It doesn't bother me!" Kyle argued.

"I'm glad!" Cartman returned. "It'd be pretty strange if you were hung up on an assumption a little girl made!"

"I'm not hung up on anything!" Kyle continued to defend himself. "I don't care if anybody thinks we're boyfriends!"

Cartman shot him a smug, challenging look. A look Kyle was smart enough to diffuse quickly. But he didn't, he just stood there, stubbornly refusing to make the next move. He had traded in smarts for courage (or stupidity), realising that if he was going to break through the surface and plunge into whatever was bubbling beneath, then he had to take Cartman's hand and let him lead the way.

"So if we walked out of here holding hands, you'd be totally cool with it?" Cartman asked, smirking, casual.
Kyle nodded wordlessly, not knowing where to look before he settled on Cartman's inviting golden eyes. "Yeah…"

Kyle didn't move when Cartman stepped closer, as if he were the resistance. As if he was in control when Kyle felt neither of them were. Evident by how Cartman's arrogant, playful expression had slipped or split, either way it was lost.

It was swiftly replaced by hesitancy, an imploration, a gaze that delved deeper into Kyle than he was even expecting.

Internal light overcame the proud dark, allowing Kyle to see what he had previously overlooked. A feverish possibility, a vast truth stretched out in front of him like the valley of time that had kept him and Cartman apart. Deaf and dumb and yearning and screaming.

Faced with it, Kyle wanted to shrink back in awe but Cartman's adoring expression, laid bare, was weighted with answers. Conclusions Kyle had been terrified to jump to, that lived within both of them and suddenly that light was burning, blinding, unbearable.

While Kyle stood silent, Cartman sucked in a stuttering breath and placed a hand on Kyle's cheek. An undeniable connection, it tempered the glow.

Kyle had been clinging to Cartman's gaze, and anxiety crawled up his throat when it was released, eyes trained on Kyle's mouth instead. Despite Cartman denying Kyle his expressive eyes, he was still easy to read; Cartman's own lips had parted, there was a threadbare edge to his breathing and a humidity that had encompassed both of them.

Kyle may have left it to Cartman to take the lead, make the first move, but with how Cartman was looking at him… Kyle was aching to initiate what Cartman so clearly wanted.

Cartman's voice was weak and warm when he said, "what if I-

He didn't finish the thought before leaning down and pressing his lips to Kyle's. The kiss, however surprisingly gentle, was enough to steal the breath from Kyle's lungs and make his eyes fly open. But Kyle couldn't hold out, he had succumbed - reluctant and nervous as he had been - before and the soft, moist seal of their bond was so perfect, so inexplicably inevitable, and so right that Kyle couldn't protest it.

He couldn't doubt or deny anymore, at least not right now. Questions could be asked later, when they had breached from this tender, secure kiss.

But as soon as Kyle reached up, Cartman had pulled away. Nose to nose, cheek still in hand.

"Wow," Kyle whispered shakily, in favour of a satisfied hum. "That was-"

"Yeah?" Cartman asked, his palm had grown damp in Kyle's heated cheek.

"Presumptuous," Kyle didn't know how such a big word had come to his swimming mind.

Equally flushed, and hazy eyes still lidded, Cartman snickered. He tried to shyly duck his head away, but Kyle wanted to see his face, to keep them both buoyant.

"Well, I'm kind of on the clock," Cartman explained, and Kyle's libido was thrumming. Were his words always this velvety? "So I could have kept thinking about kissing you, or just done it and…"

Cartman smiled wide, before it crumbled into relieved, giddy laughter. "This feels so much better."
Kyle grinned back at him, cheek swelling in Cartman's palm. For the first time in a long time, Kyle felt drunk and dizzy and heedless, but scared and apprehensive and careful all at once.

"Besides," Cartman continued, "doesn't seem like you're complaining-" 

Kyle interrupted Cartman with another kiss, both of them stumbling from the unexpected force of it but Cartman braced Kyle regardless. The action more reassuring to Kyle than he would ever let on.
Mouth and mind numb, Kyle hadn't been in a lip-lock like this since he was a teenager. Always a
gentler, though more electric high than alcohol or weed. Both tiring now, their lips slid languidly
over each other before tongues prodded, pre-empting an invitation into a welcoming mouth. If their
kiss were a dance it could be described as a close, slow, spontaneous sway rather than a graceful,
scorching assault on the ballroom floor. Content, but encouraging touches, rather than tight grasps
and surrenders to dreams of possession.

It was a departure from the chaste but ravenous kisses they had exchanged in the gym. For every
accelerated heartbeat there had been a peck, safe and secure in their locked, fitted embrace. When
they were finally separated, Kyle had tucked his hands into the pockets of his hoodie, and wished
they could continue their session in the backseat of his car. But that would be terribly inappropriate in
an elementary school parking lot.

Brief abstinence was like a strict teacher over their heads during the car ride home, enforcing silence
on the pair. Still looming over them when they had both jogged up the flight of stairs to Kyle's
apartment.

This indulgent, sporadic kiss was merely a graduation from when Kyle had locked his front door
behind him, turned around and found a sheepish Cartman waiting for him. Two purposeful strides
and Kyle had thrown his arms around Cartman's neck and pulled him to his lips. No waiting, no
pecks, no coyness. Just unfiltered desire that Kyle pinned on sexless months, but knew the blame ran
a lot deeper than that, and was shared in the guy who had returned his kiss with equal fervour.
Cartman had panicked initially – Kyle could tell – his hands shaking and greedy as they attempted to
touch Kyle everywhere.

Their eyes had squeezed shut in preparation for the tumultuous passion that was about to unfold;
razor sharp breaths and glistening, ardent moans that overflowed from heaving lungs and searing
mouths like geyser steam. Kyle's static legs, searching hands and writhing muscles had aided a
thrilled, enlivened body that longed to be pressed and touched and slotted with another, but betrayed
a mind whose stubborn grasp on apprehension and inhibition was slipping.

For the sake of Kyle's living room, he and Cartman kept each other close as they stumbled,
containing the hurricane bottled in their veins.

Panting, flushed and delirious, Kyle had pushed Cartman onto his couch and straddled him. His
fingers had drawn laboured breath from Cartman, his unyielding heartbeat not deterred by the
influence of Kyle's fingertips. Eyes shimmering and smile wobbly, Cartman had reached up and
brushed away a curl from Kyle's forehead, featherweight pressure trickled down Kyle's cheek before
their lips met again, a hot, melting illustration of the storm roiling inside both of them.

Somewhere in between clumsy, futile attempts at exploiting another source of friction (to be found
very south of their lips) and a dip in stamina, they found themselves where they were at the present
moment. Kyle had removed himself from Cartman's lap, sitting beside him instead, though he was
still very much in his arms. Exhausted and breathless, they eased up on the relentless nature of their
kisses; Cartman still clutched and pulled at Kyle like he was about to go somewhere, while Kyle
soothed the hot, stinging skin on the nape of Cartman's neck (a newly discovered source of friction).

Now that everything had slowed considerably, Kyle could feel those once ridded dampeners of
apprehension and inhibition clambering to the front of his mind. It was unwise of him and Cartman
to allow… Whatever this was… To get this far in the first place. And before anything irreversible
and potentially harmful could happen, they needed to discuss some things and answer a hell of a lot of questions.

"We should-" Kyle's first attempt at conversation failed when Cartman stole another kiss. "We, we should talk about this before – if!" Kyle quickly corrected himself but internally winced. "It goes any further…"

Cartman grumbled, pulling away from Kyle's lips but not releasing him from his embrace.

"Damn it, Kyle," Cartman muttered, but it had lost its bite now that Kyle had tamed him. "Can we do this later?"

It was Kyle's turn to grumble.

"No!" He snapped as he stood up, lightheaded and shaky on his feet. "It has to be now! We're on the clock, aren't we?"

Cartman cowed, irritable but still pinked and satisfied and stewed in affection. "Okay, Okay…” He yielded, and Kyle resented his tone.

Maybe Kyle hadn't thought this through, his mind was still gaining coherency and his racing thoughts were only slowing the process down. Folding his arms, his neurons made the connection of Cartman's desirous fingers clutching him, the primal memory of touch.

"So…” Cartman broke the silence, and Kyle glanced at him. "What do you have to say to me?"

Kyle sighed and shrugged. "I can't really say anything to you until I have the details."

Cartman's nose scrunched, he was fidgety and somehow unable to properly meet Kyle's gaze.

"Details?" He asked, trying to conceal his scorn for the word. "Of what?"

Kyle sat down again, careful to keep some distance from Cartman. For both of their sakes, even though Kyle could feel Cartman's resentment of the action. But it was for his own good, he had to realise that.

"In the gym, you said you'd been thinking of kissing me," Kyle began, and Cartman looked at him again, eyes questioning. "So… how long have you wanted to do that?"

Cartman's shoulders slouched heavily and he rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Kyle, do we have-"

"Yes we do!" Kyle interrupted, and Cartman swiftly looked away again. "There's clearly something between us! I thought we were trying to be friends, but randomly making out with each other isn't something friends do! So we need to figure this out and what it all means before either of us gets hurt!"

Fingers continuously knotting at his lap, and eyes on Kyle's coffee table, Cartman didn't admit Kyle was right.

"Tell me," Kyle started tentatively, "how long have you been thinking of kissing me?"

"That's a tough question, Kyle," Cartman replied, gaze returning to the man he had been making out with. "Do you want the long version or the short version?"

"Long version," Kyle decided, he had to be firm.
"Science, you're killing me," Cartman groaned, sinking into the couch in exasperation.

Kyle knew that, but didn't Cartman realise that this was just as awkward and difficult for him? The sooner they both had answers, the sooner they could move on to... Kyle couldn't honestly comprehend what was in store for them without feeling excited and frightened all at once.

"Okay," Cartman finally sighed. "But before I tell you, I need to admit something first."

Kyle nodded for a few seconds before speaking up, "alright…"

"And I don't even know if I can look at you when I say it," Cartman continued.

Anxiety lurched in Kyle's throat, eyebrows furrowed.

"Just tell me," he whispered, daring to edge closer.

"I..." Cartman said, his gaze was on the ceiling again, Kyle wished it wasn't. Cartman took in a shaky breath before he sat up and their eye contact was resumed. "I love you, Kyle."

The confession, combined with the sad honesty that ruled Cartman's face was disintegrating light on what Kyle thought he knew. Those three monumental words; I love you, they should have made him feel so big, so powerful and instead Kyle felt tiny. Unworthy yet flattered, incredulous yet ecstatic. He was glad he had sat down, for he would have surely fallen to his knees, emptied, as the words swirled around his mind; shattering and beautiful and humbling and unfathomable.

"I'm in love with you," Cartman continued, a crease in his brow and a pinched blush at his mouth. "It took me a long time to figure out, to even accept. I was fine with missing you, and thinking about you, and deciding to go on some noble mission to save you. But I didn't consider why I was letting these things happen. Why I was letting you happen. Because it was painful. It hurt me so much, and I thought I was smarter than that. Can you imagine it? Being in love with somebody who you're completely disconnected from? That you may never see again? Let alone have your feelings returned?"

Kyle adopted Cartman's expression, albeit nuanced with sympathy. Or was it empathy?

"I loved you before I even knew what love was," Cartman smiled sadly, sunlight shimmering on a long, wet road. "It's like... You're my definition of it. When I think about devotion and passion and romance, I don't see love hearts, or couples in the rain. I see your face."

Kyle's mind was reeling with this new information, and his heart was fit to bursting with revelations that he didn't know would mean so much to him.

"That's – I -" Kyle didn't know to respond, all he had was further questions. "But how long, Cartman?"

Cartman snickered ruefully. "You're smart, Kyle. You've always known me better than anybody else. Not just because you're shrewd, or thoughtful but because..." His eyes roamed over Kyle, wistful. "You truly paid attention to me. I should have been grateful, but I was terrified. I still appreciated you and feared you and saw you as my rival..."

Kyle nodded absently, trying to picture their childhood through this bright, overwhelming perspective.

"Losing you so quickly, and having to get used to being without you, my feelings were only exacerbated by time and loneliness and my memories," Cartman continued, his tone a lot heavier. "I
became totally fixated on you, so much so that I risked everything to make things right and tried to get back home."

"What?" Kyle asked, the word barely falling from his mouth. "Just for me?"

"Come on, Kyle," Cartman grinned shyly. "There's never been 'just you'."

A damp smile fractured the ache in Kyle's chest. It seemed like nothing could repair what Kyle went through in Cartman's absence, their unfair severance, but knowing that Cartman had tried to get back to him – forever – was belatedly comforting.

"When I was snooping around everybody's files the first time, I saw your high school photo," Cartman explained, half-smirking. "Your senior one."

"What?" Kyle replied, before he covered his face. "Oh God-"

"You're embarrassed?" Cartman chuckled. "Seriously, Kyle you're-"

"Yes?" Kyle asked, removing his hands from his face and rolling his eyes.

"Gorgeous," Cartman answered, and when Kyle looked up at him his smile was unwavering.

"I was miserable back then," Kyle argued, however limp.

Cartman shook his head. "That didn't diminish a thing," he assured.

Kyle gave a tight smile, and Cartman glanced at their separated hands. Reaching out, he carefully tangled their fingers together. Despite the distance he had imposed, Kyle didn't protest.

"This…" Kyle started, distracted by their joined hands, how nice the image both looked and felt. "Don't think this is a pass for you to kiss me again. We're not done yet."

"I know," Cartman nodded with a sigh.

"So?" Kyle prompted, "Go on."

"Well, uh, I was twelve when I saw that photo for the first time," Cartman picked up where he left off. "And to add to the cocktail of all these strong, insane feelings came attraction. Then I read that… that something bad was going to happen… The night we first saw each other again…"

Stilted and fragmented, the uncomfortable words were like shards of glass twisting in both of their hearts.

"It broke me, knowing that I had lost someone like you," Cartman said, eyes on their linked fingers as if to remind himself he hadn't lost anything at all. "After I was done being upset, I became determined to fix what had happened to you. But I didn't do it for me, unlike everything else I had done in my life, I did it because I couldn't bare for what happened – for what I stopped – to come true and… I realised I may have already lost you by then. But the world didn't need to lose you, and with that I realised I didn't just miss you. I didn't just think about you, or care about you or want you in any capacity in which you'd have me," Cartman's gaze slid to Kyle again, tired and bruised. "I didn't just love you, I was in love with you."

Kyle blinked, absorbing every wonderful, devastating word until it was his turn to look away.

"Does that explain everything?" Cartman asked, trying to search Kyle's face.
Vision clogged with tears, Kyle shook his head.

"No?"

"No," Kyle replied, though watery. "No, it doesn't."

"Why not?" Cartman asked, and Kyle couldn't help but be indignant and bitter.

"Because you've made things a hundred times more complicated for me!" Kyle shouted, snatching his hand away though he immediately regretted it.

"Fuck, I'm sorry, Kyle!" Cartman snapped. "Sorry I'm not a fucking robot who can't switch off how much he loves you!"

"Don't give me that fucking attitude, Cartman!" Kyle warned, glowering, maybe he could still push Cartman's buttons after all? "God, you're so impatient! What, you think I'm going to fall in love with you because of how you feel?"

Cartman balked, offended. "Of course not, but you're kind of giving me mixed messages here! You kissed me! You were cuddling me on the couch this morning-"

Kyle's eyes widened, stomach knotting.

Fuck fuck fuck.

"I'm not that heavy of a sleeper," Cartman said with a loathsome grin.

"I wasn't cuddling you!" Kyle retorted, burning as he folded his arms. "It was freezing!"

"It wasn't that cold," Cartman said. "And don't change the subject."

Kyle scowled, loosening his grip on himself. But his thoughts just wouldn't simmer and his insides clenched anxiously.

"So what is it?" Cartman asked, clearly exhausted. "What is this all about?"

"Haven't you been listening?!" Kyle loathed the pitch of his voice. "I don't know!"

"You must know!" Cartman argued. "Even if things are contradictory or don't make sense or scare the crap out of you, you must know what you're feeling! What you want, deep down! You made me talk, so now it's your turn. What are you feeling, Kyle?"

"I," Kyle got the word out breathlessly and ran a damp hand through his hair. "I don't…"

"Even if it's messy and stupid," Cartman implored, shuffling a tad closer. "I want to know what it is." There was that pressure again, crowding around Kyle and pushing him into feelings and considerations and doubts that he always felt were best left hidden. Not to be discussed or dwelled on, just written off because they were ludicrous.

"You…" Kyle didn't even register the word escaping from his mouth.

"What?!" Cartman was only applying more pressure which Kyle didn't need.

"You've had a lifetime to figure this out!" Kyle finally shouted. "I haven't! All I know is that I missed you!"
Cartman shrunk back, Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

"I missed you so much that it changed me!" Kyle continued, not thinking, just venting. "It made me realise how much I needed you! How I still need you!"

A smile trembled at the corner of Cartman's mouth, conscious perhaps that a smile may have been a bit presumptuous.

"When we were kids…" Kyle started, nervous of delving into the past like this. "I was so frustrated by you."

Cartman chuckled, much needed relief to the seriousness.

"I really was," Kyle continued. "You say that I was the only one who paid attention to you? That's because you fascinated me," Kyle could see he had stunned Cartman into silence, so he kept going. "You did, I wanted to know everything about you, what made you tick, so I could unleash the good I knew was there. It's-" Kyle paused, trying to find the right way to express what he was about to say next. "I find it ironic how, without me, you've become so selfless-"

"Yeah, but don't you see?" Cartman said softly. "I couldn't have become that without you."

"Okay, so maybe I did have something to do with it," Kyle yielded, a milder glow in his chest compared to what he felt in the gym earlier. "That's good to know. Thanks."

Their shared smiles were respite from Kyle pouring his heart out, until Cartman said, "I, um, interrupted you…"

"Right," Kyle nodded, admittedly a little dazed. "What was I saying again? Oh, that you fascinated me. Maybe that's just my proud, rational way of saying I was fixated on you," Kyle sighed and murmured, "like being proud has done me any favours…"

Cartman lowered his gaze, but Kyle kept going.

"Because that pride made me totally underestimate how much I would miss you," Kyle explained. "So when I started dreaming about you, constantly thinking about you, not being able to make it through some days without wanting to break down in tears because you weren't there… I panicked," Kyle noticed Cartman look up at him then, shocked and pitying, "I was so scared, I didn't know I could feel that much. I especially didn't know I could feel so much for someone like you. But it all makes sense, doesn't it? How quickly we could adapt? How we could be screaming at each other minute and laughing at one of your stupid jokes the next?" Kyle felt relieved when Cartman chuckled under his breath in agreement. "It's not exactly normal, or healthy but… that was us. You and I. And I needed that, I craved it. Because there was nobody else in my life like you, and I noticed your absence immensely."

Now that his feelings were shared and out in the open, all that was left for Kyle to do was to consider what it all meant and where it all led to. If he was even brave enough to follow that path.

"You want me to tell you that I'm in love with you, right?" Kyle asked quietly, scared of the answer.

"Ideally?" Cartman sighed, "Yeah."

Kyle nodded, appreciating his honesty, proud of it even, but he knew that Cartman deserved that honesty to be returned.

"I can't do that, Cartman," Kyle whispered, he didn't have the heart to say it any louder.
"I get it," Cartman replied. Dejected yes, but Kyle was impressed by his maturity. Then again, Cartman had probably resigned himself to his feelings not being returned. If they weren't so blatantly strong then maybe he would never have acted on them?

And that was admirable really, Kyle couldn't deny that, among other things.

"But I do love you," Kyle assured, he wanted Cartman to have no doubt. "I said I didn't know how I felt. But just expressing all that, how could I not love you?"

"So what does that mean?" Cartman asked, hope skirting the edges of his question. "We've kissed so…"

"I know," Kyle groaned, rising from the couch. He felt so confused that he couldn't sit still. "It's just… I haven't been in a relationship for a really long time. I've hurt a lot of people, and I don't want to hurt you."

"You don't think I've hurt people?" Cartman asked in disbelief. "Just because you've hurt people… Doesn't mean that's your default, you know? That doesn't mean you're not deserving of others."

Kyle's arms were wrapped around himself when he looked at Cartman, at his hopeful, trusting face, and Kyle felt so unworthy of the man this boy had become.

"You- you put too much faith in me, Cartman," Kyle said sadly, shaking his head. "I don't want to disappoint you."

Cartman scoffed. "If anybody's the disappointment in this relationship, it's me."

"Wait, what?"

"Relationship?" The word triggered panic in Kyle.

And Cartman was smart enough to know it.

"Sorry, that was bad phrasing," Cartman said, dismissing his previous comment before tilting his body so he could face Kyle directly. "Look, Kyle, I do put immense faith in you. We've been apart for so long and, and all I had to comfort me were memories of home, memories of you. Yeah, this separation tested me and broke me in a lot of ways, but I like to think it made a part of me stronger too, more hopeful, and I owe a lot of that to you. You may have hurt people, when you were in a bad place, but you've done so much for me. That makes you the most deserving person in the world in my eyes."

It was a testament to how deeply Kyle felt for Cartman, that he could bring him to tears twice in one conversation.

"You're making it really hard for me to say no to this," Kyle tried to say with a little humour.

Cartman's eyebrows furrowed and he asked, "Why would you want to say no?"

And if Kyle needed further proof that Cartman was in love with him, it was this. The blind, bull-headed hope he was exhibiting.

"Because this is ridiculous!" Kyle said. "It's- I – I didn't prepare for this!" Frustration had rose to the surface and was now barrelling out of Kyle's mouth. "I've tried so hard to get my life in order, to have everything planned and you come along – as usual – and throw me off course! It's so sudden and strange but tempting and wonderful and, and I can't resist you, Cartman!"
Kyle only realised what he had so naively cried out when Cartman balked and his eyes had widened.

"Not in that way!" Kyle corrected himself, suddenly stuffy. "It's like, when we were kids and I knew you were about to do something awful. No matter what anybody said, no matter what my common sense told me to do, I went after you! I dropped everything for you! And this is the same! I mean… not entirely… but it's similar!"

"But we are different now!" Cartman exclaimed. "So what's the problem?"

"Are you fucking serious?!"

"Yes! I want to know!"

"I don't understand how this has slipped your notice but you live five hundred years in the future!"

Despite being the shorter of the two, with Cartman sitting down and Kyle standing up, with the release of that undeniable fact, Kyle felt as if he was towering over him, about to devour him and rip apart his heart.

But he didn't want to, he really didn't want to. He just had to be honest, the problem needed to be addressed.

"And of all the excuses I can make, of all the doubts I have, that is something we can't get over!"

Kyle continued, Cartman had hung his head but it was tilted up slightly. Probably so he could challenge Kyle with a single look. "We can't ignore that! Tomorrow you're leaving and I don't know when I'm going to see you again! I can't be in a relationship two days out of the year!"

Cartman looked up at him properly now, and was clearly agitated. "I'm not asking you to do that-"

"Then what the hell are you asking me?!" Kyle demanded. "You want to be with me, don't you?"

"Of course I do!" Cartman shouted as he stood up, making Kyle flinch. "And I'm not an idiot! I know this is inconvenient and crazy, but I still think it could be… fulfilling!" Cartman reached out for Kyle's shoulders, but Kyle evaded his grasp. "I still think we could make it work!"

Kyle was tempted by those promises, but knew they may not be practical. A relationship like this wasn't practical at all, was it?

"I could make you so happy, Kyle," Cartman said, and Kyle allowed Cartman's palm to press against his cheek. Just like in the gym. "I know it. I'll work so hard for it. And we may only be able to see each other for forty-eight hours, but I promise to make every two days we spend together incredible. If you just take a chance on this. If that's what you want…"

Kyle nodded, glad that Cartman wasn't jumping to optimistic conclusions, just letting Kyle's loose, silent tears slither in the fissures of his palm. Kyle took everything in, held Cartman's words and promises and hopes to his heart like they were a teenage love letter. He listened and doubted, trusted and wanted.

"I believe you, Cartman," Kyle said, it felt like the precursory prayer before diving into the unknown. "And I think I could fall in love with you. Being attracted to you…" Kyle thought about strong, bulky arms that had braced him, and wicked, bad-influence smiles. "I obviously never considered it before, but… God, that kiss."

"Thanks," Cartman interrupted with a cocky, slightly juvenile grin.
Kyle sniffled, laughter slightly stunted.

"You want me, and now-" Kyle took a deep breath, before searching Cartman's surprisingly patient golden eyes. "Now I want you. There's no use pretending that I don't."

Kyle could tell Cartman was trying to be measured, but the excitement brimming in his eyes, and the way his hand froze then grew lax against Kyle's cheek was too noticeable.

"We can't be friends," Kyle continued. "But being anything more than that just wouldn't make sense."

That excitement dimmed, and realisation cast a shadow on Cartman's face that Kyle didn't want to take responsibility for.

Palm slowly slipping from Kyle's cheek, Kyle followed its short journey to his own hand. And he watched as Cartman's fingers threaded through his.

"Well…" Cartman said, more breath than it was a word as he guided Kyle to sit back down with him.

"I live in a world where everything has to make sense," Cartman explained. "There's no mystery or doubt or blind faith. Those things just don't exist anymore. The world revolves around reason and logic. And it's good, in a way, to have all the answers. But it feels way better to believe in something."

Kyle didn't say anything, but he hoped Cartman would find agreement in his silence.

"And I've always had faith in you," Cartman went on, his own eyes wet. "You were the only thing I could have faith in. When I was so alone, you were everything to me, Kyle."

Kyle stared at Cartman, speechless, but his awe-stricken, emotional expression must have been encouraging enough for Cartman to continue.

"You always will be," he said. "So what I'm trying to say is… we can't be friends, but I still want you in my life-"

"I still want you in my life," Kyle assured, finally speaking up and squeezing Cartman's hand. "I can't lose you again."

Cartman smiled, lips tight but grateful.

"I'm in love with you, and you say you could love me back in just the same way," he pointed out, Kyle's heart pounded. "We could have something incredible, albeit difficult."

But as hope, sheer wanting – and possibly love – ploughed through doubt, Kyle was up for the challenge.

"Why should we have to deny ourselves that?" Cartman asked, though Kyle was already sold. "When our time is limited, why should we waste it pretending?"

"We shouldn't," Kyle shook his head, before leaning in close and connecting their lips again.

Kyle felt Cartman hesitate momentarily, making up for it when he tilted his head and pushed his tongue into Kyle's mouth, the kiss quickly becoming heated. The same lips, the same chemistry, the same people but everything had changed. Such uncertainty and reckless had been exhilarating
before, and maybe they still lived on, but this wasn't a heedless, shaky fall. This was brave, confident
soaring.

Cartman huffed, their amused grins breaking the kiss as he was pinned beneath Kyle on the couch. Their
defiant, joint hands still locked and placed above them.

"Is that-" Cartman began, but he was still staring at Kyle's lips, and succumbed to another kiss. "Is
that a yes?"

Kyle grinned like a contented Cheshire cat as his eyes roamed Cartman's face.

"A definite-" Kyle kissed Cartman's chubby cheek. "Reckless-" Another kiss, Kyle couldn't neglect
the other. "Wholehearted-" A kiss to powder Cartman's adorable button nose that Kyle had been
dying to press his lips to. Kyle's own nose brushed against Cartman's before he tilted his head and
received Cartman's waiting lips. "Yes," Kyle murmured, an echo to their kiss.

Though Kyle's vision was hazy and half-lidded, he could still see how ecstatic that confirmation
made Cartman, and his smile was crushed when Cartman grabbed a fistful of his hair and smashed
their lips together.

As the kiss deepened and softened, Kyle knocked Cartman's knees apart, for the first time being
braced by thick thighs. The action startled Cartman more than Kyle thought it would, and when he
bucked his hips there was that friction they had sought after. Pressing down when Cartman bucked,
Kyle felt Cartman's body temperature rising beneath his lips. And something else rising below him.

"Kyle-" Cartman separated the kiss breathlessly.

"Hmm?" Kyle responded, still distracted, so much so that he reclaimed Cartman's lips.

Cartman gulped, breaking the kiss again, before he said, "You- y-you should know something."

Kyle's eyebrows furrowed, his upper lip brushing against Cartman's lower one before he asked,
"And that is?"

"I, uh," Cartman could barely get the words out between his apparent nervousness and Kyle's
constant pecks. Until he finally blurted out;

"I'm a virgin."

"...Oh," Kyle said, pulling away but still remaining close. Obviously surprised, but it was clear now
that Cartman's eagerness and roughness wasn't just technique, his tentativeness when things got
really passionate all made sense.

"I just thought you should know," Cartman said as he shifted (or squirmed?) beneath Kyle.

"So you don't want to go any further right now?" Kyle asked.

Cartman rolled his eyes, pinking deeper. "It's not that-"

Kyle rolled his eyes, smiling down at him. "Cartman, the fact that you stopped me from literally
getting in your pants to tell me you're a virgin, suggests you're not one hundred percent ready to have
sex yet."

Chewing his lip now Kyle had released it, Cartman looked away almost guiltily. Kyle couldn't allow
that.
"And that's okay," Kyle assured him, free hand cupping the side of Cartman's warm face, returning the comforting gesture. "Trust me, it should be something you're totally ready for."

"Thanks," Cartman nodded, smiling sheepishly. "It's not you-"

"I know it's not,"

"It's just something I'd like to be prepared for."

Kyle grinned, he couldn't let that obvious one slip by.

"Oh, don't worry," he assured, voice velvety as he leaned in, kissing Cartman's neck before nipping his ear lobe. "When the time comes, I'll make sure you're totally prepared."

Kyle could feel Cartman's hips lifting beneath him when he replied, "you're not helping."

Before Kyle pulled away, he gave Cartman a small nuzzle.

They decided it was time for their intertwined hands to part ways, detangling from each other's embrace before they flopped back on the couch. Kyle's jaw ached from all that talking and kissing, and he didn't know whether he was exhausted or just looser; Cartman's lips and touch extracting months of built up tension.

"It's probably for the best anyway," Kyle elected himself to speak, glancing at Cartman when he noticed he had turned to him. "I haven't… you know, in a while."

"Really?" Cartman asked. "I find that hard to believe."

Kyle responded with a good-natured scoff.

"Someone as hot as you," Cartman added, his knee tapping against Kyle's on the small couch.

_Hot? I'm in my Nuggets hoodie!_

Kyle turned to Cartman disbelievingly, finding his devotion and attraction kind of hot itself.

"For a virgin, you sure know how to turn a guy on," Kyle commented.

"Hey!" Cartman laughed. "Just because I'm a virgin doesn't mean I can't charm you!"

Returning the laugh, Kyle replied, "I see that. But, seriously, there's no rush."

Amusement dissipating but smile never faltering, Cartman nodded.

"So what do you want to do now?" he asked.

Kyle glanced at the clock on the wall opposite him. "Well, I'm kind of hungry," he replied.

"I could eat," Cartman nodded. "What were you thinking?"

_Anything other than pizza since you've probably assumed that's what I live on. But I can't cook for shit so…_

"Chinese?" Kyle suggested.

The conversation was laced with burgeoning domesticity, something they never thought they would have with each other and most likely never achieve. But it was nice to pretend, and they smiled
"Sounds good," Cartman said softly.

"Alright," Kyle replied, lifting himself off the couch. "I have a couple of take-out menus in the kitchen."

Even though his back was turned to Cartman, as Kyle made his way to the kitchen he bit his lip to control his elated – and Kyle realised, unstoppable – smile.

"What does it feel like?" Kyle asked Cartman, both of them close and facing each other in the roomy double bed. "Going back?"

Cartman's eyes softly trailed over Kyle, like the fingers skimming his spine.

"To be honest, I haven't quite figured out the words for it yet," he replied.

"Why?" Kyle asked, a dent in his brow.

"You black out, so that makes it tricky," Cartman answered. "You can't remember much of anything."

Kyle shifted slightly, careful not to disturb their lazy, but satisfying embrace. "Okay, so before you completely black out, what do you see? What does it feel like?"

Cartman snickered at Kyle's persistent questions, before glancing at the ceiling thoughtfully. Finally, he answered: "Falling…"

Kyle knew the feeling.

Although he had tried to warn Cartman that it may take some time for his love to evolve – and to be returned with the same intensity that Cartman felt for him – it was remarkable how quickly Kyle appeared to be tumbling head over heels.

An evening of take-out food in front of a movie was a budding tradition at the point, but trading kisses, linked fingers and nestling into each other's bodies was totally new. They had approached the experience with shy, trusting looks and cautious touches, soon discovering they had nothing to be afraid of.

And the way Cartman had looked at him, played with Kyle's hair as he listened to his anecdotes, or the way he was looking at Kyle now, was an injection of courage into Kyle's veins. It was that very look that made Kyle offer Cartman his bed in the first place (after the events of the afternoon, he would have felt terrible making Cartman sleep on the couch), quickly adding a "no pressure!" when Cartman had initially regarded the offer warily.

But once it had been reaffirmed that those boundaries were to be respected, Cartman happily followed Kyle into the bedroom.

"What time do you leave tomorrow?" Kyle asked, his arm wrapped around Cartman's broad chest. He tried to protect Cartman from the dread in his voice, but to no avail.

Cartman sighed, "In the afternoon. A little before three."

Subconsciously pulling Cartman a little closer, Kyle tried to work up the nerve to request what he'd
been curious about for four years.

"I want to watch," Kyle said, tilting his head up and looking into Cartman's eyes.

Stiffening, Cartman pulled back. "What?"

"I want to watch," Kyle repeated. Cartman's not exactly positive reaction should have perturbed him, but it didn't. "To see what it looks like, maybe when you come back I can fill you in with a little more information? You know, so you can properly describe it?"

Laughter and a smile cracked Cartman's unsure countenance.

"Plus, I'd like to say goodbye," Kyle added more tenderly. "The right way, unlike last time."

Kyle felt Cartman's chest rise and deflate before he answered, "I don't know, Kyle…"

"Why not?" Kyle challenged, that fiery instinct kicking in like it always did when he and Cartman were in disagreement.

"I just think it would make leaving you a lot harder," Cartman replied, turning to Kyle, forgoing bickering for sombre, well-meaning honesty.

It made Kyle fidget guiltily.

"Well, we never assumed this would be easy, right?" He joked, but it fell flat. Resting his head on Cartman's shoulder, Kyle decided to reciprocate his honesty. "It would mean a lot to me if I could say goodbye to you,"

"That's what you really want?" Cartman asked, Kyle could see in his giveaway eyes that he was still debating the matter in his head.

"Yes," Kyle answered, shuffling even closer.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

Cartman nodded, pressing Kyle to him in a one-armed hug, "alright."

Kyle didn't move from Cartman's side for the rest of the night. He had realised this when he finally woke up to a sturdy wall of heat against him, and his drool on Cartman's shoulder.

The only time he would laugh today… Laced with embarrassment, but a laugh nonetheless.

Upon waking, Cartman had lazily grinned too, and Kyle wondered how a smile could look so radiant this early in the day.

Throughout the morning, Kyle tried to preoccupy himself with packing. But not for him, of course. A different storm to yesterday had brewed inside him, this one of obstinate distraction, pushing every thought – withering or otherwise – to one side, as he raced around the apartment. He wanted to make sure Cartman had everything he needed, that he left nothing behind.

No matter how many times Cartman reassured him he had all his belongings, and that they had hours to sort everything out, and asked why couldn't Kyle just relax, Kyle was still sure something was missing. He was terrified that something was missing. Or just terrified, period.
Kyle had always feared relapse. Whether it be falling to recreational highs or unattainable expectations. But Cartman's presence and these exhilarating developments in their relationship over the past two days, were the headiest rush an addict like Kyle had felt in a long time.

Another downside to humans? Attachment to them happens faster than whiplash and is more intoxicating than any narcotic.

Kyle knew better than anyone of the promises you make, the things you boast and exclaim when under the influence. Why was he naive and arrogant enough to believe he actually possessed the strength to watch Cartman leave? Why did he have to insist on it?

2:50

Kyle had stood at a distance from Cartman, having no idea what to expect when they separated.

Cartman had been studying the clock behind Kyle. Although Kyle couldn't bring himself to look, its ticking was bad enough.

"It's nearly time..." Cartman commented, when his eyes had returned to Kyle's face again. Shoulders hunched and voice horribly deflated.

"Okay..." Kyle nodded, feeling and sounding just as hollow. "Do you have everything?"

A smile tugged at Cartman's mouth, "Yes."

"You've double-checked, haven't you?" Kyle asked, chest knotting as well as his shaking fingers.

"Yeah, Kyle, I have," Cartman nodded, smiling, but impatient.

With the conversation crushed by the knowledge of Cartman's impending departure, Kyle's need for a distraction hurried words out of his mouth.

"I feel like I should say something," he said. "Standing here silent feels like a waste of time."

"I wouldn't get too hung up on time if I were you," Cartman shook his head. He tried to tuck his hands into his pockets casually, but his shoulders were still stiff. "It can drive you crazy."

"True," Kyle laughed, the noise feebly rattling in his throat.

That knot of anxiety in Kyle's chest pulled tighter when he noticed the concerned, troubling expression on Cartman's face.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Cartman asked. "You don't have to watch."

Kyle sighed, tried to readjust his body language, to mutate Cartman's translation of it.

"No, I told you I want to see," he said.

"You don't seem so sure," Cartman commented.

"Well, of course I'm sad that you're leaving. I-" Kyle's admission signalled the floodgates to open. But he ducked his head and covered his mouth for a moment, before he said, "I'll miss you."

Cartman smiled, appreciative and glowing. "I'll miss you too," he replied.

Another dip in conversation, but one that was prefaced with lovely, shared truths.
Cartman glanced at the dreaded clock, and when he sighed even Kyle could feel the dread clinging to his lungs.

Looking back at Kyle, Cartman said, "Close your eyes."

"Why?" Kyle asked, even though the command partly relieved him.

"Just trust me, Kyle," Cartman whispered, giving Kyle no reasons not to.

With a stubborn huff, Kyle gladly closed his eyes, heart pounding to the brief, faint steps Cartman was taking towards him.

A damp, shaking palm pressed against his cheek, swelling with a smile, greeting the touch as if it were coming home.

Then a forehead pressed against his, Cartman's nose bumping against his own, hot breath ghosting Kyle's mouth, before a press of lips that was stronger than anything else in this room. Kyle reciprocated the kiss as much as he could, practicing some restraint before his eyes could sting with tears.

When the kiss finished, Kyle pursed his lips, tasting Cartman at the edges, and kept his eyes closed.

"I love you," Cartman whispered, thumbing Kyle's cheek. Trying to soothe his aching heart.

"Come back soon," Kyle replied, hoping Cartman would appreciate his parting words as much as Kyle appreciated his.

When Cartman's presence had become imperceptible, Kyle balled his fists at the tears that sprung to his still closed eyes. But he longed for that palm to still be there, for that thumb to swipe the wetness from his cheek.

Total silence had blanketed the apartment, and Kyle's stomach lurched instinctively. Opening his eyes – filmy as they were – Kyle could see that Cartman was gone.
25

When Eric had grown so used to grand, epic waiting, had resigned himself to the possibility of time grinding down to stagnation, his last visit to Kyle was a shock to his sluggish system.

For so long he had felt lonely, incomplete. Comatose. Kyle was the legendary light at the end of the proverbial tunnel, the lone, bright star in a wide, empty sky. One that Eric wordlessly followed in the hope of salvation, but from what? His mistakes, his pining, his isolation? There had been no clear answers, only Kyle emitting light and coaxing trust. The source of everything in Eric’s tiny universe.

Feeling Kyle clutch to him that morning, ensnaring Eric in ethereal rays was like a star yawning wide enough to become a sun, thinning the darkness out. He had softly stirred, half-asleep, but catalogued the press of Kyle’s fingertips to his warm side, wondering what it all meant.

That secret, encouraging touch was what made Eric bold enough to initiate their first kiss. Although there were many drawbacks to the limited time they had together, one positive was the fearlessness you had to exhibit when on the clock. And it paid off immensely.

There had been a romantic, noble element to Eric’s comatose state, admittedly. But abstract concepts are nothing compared to charged looks, warm fingers that needle the heart almost as dangerously as a fork in an electrical outlet, and molten lips that melt and awaken what had been glacial and sleeping for so long. A dream always pushing at Eric’s synapse doors, had now snapped the hinges and Kyle’s light – rather their fused light – had poured in and flooded his mind.

Eric’s body had reacted as if this new lease of life, light, was only temporary. A respite from his languid reality. Like the tide controlled by the alabaster moon, Kyle’s glow would ebb and flow, eventually being sucked back to its rightful owner; the zenith that Eric was only an observer to, years and lightyears away.

But he had reacted in haste, underestimated his own influence on Kyle. To Eric, their emotional conversation had been like acupuncture on tense, knotted muscles. Uncomfortable but necessary, confessions and heartfelt truths extracting what they had locked away for their own stubborn safety. It was only when they were at their most vulnerable in front of each other, did they feel brave enough to open up, take a chance. Eric thought it was amazing how much courage could be found in shared nerves. And how much elation could be found in hearing the person you adore the most in the world say they love you. Or say that they could. Eric didn’t know how he found it in himself to keep upright, how he hadn’t fallen into Kyle’s arms and sobbed oceans into his chest. Waiting and patience had trained him well, so it seemed.

When he had stepped out of the time transporter upon returning home, despite craving and missing Kyle already, his legs felt more elastic than they usually did upon exiting the inertia. A smirking Leck had questioned whether Eric had drunk anything before he arrived. Eric had shaken his head, a lazy grin on his face that quickly began to hurt his cheeks.

In the bleeding desert morning, Eric had stumbled back to his room, graceful in the way only giddy, in love people could be. He wasn’t tired when he lay in bed, just contented and excited and jonesing, only exacerbated by the beautiful film reel of Kyle playing exclusively for him; Kyle pulling him to his lips, the look on his face when Eric kissed him the first time, Kyle laughing at his bitchy
comments as they watched TV, Kyle staring down at him when he had Eric pinned, Kyle sleeping peacefully beside him, Kyle closing his eyes just before Eric had left him in his living room.

Closing his own eyes, Eric had touched the places Kyle had kissed. His lips, his cheeks, his nose, his neck before his hand delved under the covers, stroking himself until he was whimpering Kyle’s name to the ceiling, fragmented by heated groans.

The film reel ran continuously during the week, was occasionally underscored by boring work, ripening into more alluring shows during the evening when it was dark enough for Eric to imagine Kyle sleeping next to him. Often Eric had found it difficult to keep focus, to stay rooted when everything inside him was vying for the clouds. But unsurprisingly, he was at his most focused when he was combing through Kyle’s file, trying to figure out where and when was best for their next encounter.

One location jumped out at him, more out of surprise than a desire to actually want to go there. This indifference was evident with how impatiently he now stood on the wet London street – not as murky and terrifying as the Victorians made it seem, in the morning at least – waiting by the intercom for Kyle.

A promising crackle, Eric leaned in.

“Yes?” Kyle’s voice, melded with static.

A residual high at the most, but for a starved Eric it was intoxicating enough.

“Hey, Kyle, it’s me,” he replied, calm, innocuous. But with all that had happened recently, the sentence was weighty and his voice sounded scrambled to his ears. “Um, Eric,” he added when he noticed the silence.

Dead air fizzled between them over the worn intercom.

“Kyle?” Eric repeated, trying not to sound too concerned. He wished Kyle was in front of him.

“Yeah, oh my god, hi!” Kyle’s laughter made up for the stilted nature of his words, a grin split Eric’s tense, tight lips. “Just… wait a minute? I’ll be right down.”

“Okay,” Eric chuckled, stepping away from the intercom and staring up at the modern flats fashioned from historic moulds. He wondered which window Kyle was probably rushing in front of.

In the quiet of this cornered-off part of the city, Eric was able to hear the sound of excited bounding down the stairs and he stared and waited for the front door to open. The clunky procedure of unlocking the door mirrored the fumbling pounding of his heart, prompting a lump in his throat. But Eric didn’t know if he wanted to cry, laugh or what.

The first thing Eric saw were pale, slender fingers curling around the door as it was slowly pulled open. Then uncombed, scarlet curls came into view, followed by verdant eyes blinking in the morning.

But these beautiful, individual things were attached to a stunning whole. The door opened almost with the aplomb of a curtain being lifted to reveal modest loveliness, clad in a hastily thrown on sweater and jeans. Eric felt like he should say something, but what do you say when all you’ve ever wanted is right in front of you? Even Kyle, usually so articulate, was struggling to find the appropriate words.

A few seconds must have passed before they collided like inevitable forces or wonderful accidents,
grasping and boring their fingers into each other in an attempt to eternally fit. Their lips hadn’t touched, and they feared what a frantic kiss it would be; grappling tongues, stinging bites, bruised mouths and bruised emotion. Desperation overriding affection.

Eric’s hands eventually migrated to Kyle’s waist, squeezing him and pulling him close. While Kyle had manoeuvred his way around the large backpack Eric was carrying, a hand at the nape of his neck, quickly threading his fingers through chestnut hair.

Eric was in danger of floating, but Kyle kept him anchored, kept him warm too when he nuzzled into his shoulder and breathed him in.

“I missed you so much,” Eric whispered, close enough to Kyle that he felt the goosebumps it roused on pale skin.

“Me too,” Kyle replied, his voice dewy on Eric’s neck. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Eric hadn’t seen Kyle in seven days, whereas Kyle had waited three years for Eric to visit again. The startling asymmetry was yet another dent in their less-than-perfect arrangement, another chasm to separate them when they seemed to be plugging the damn things up all the time. But now they were united again, their embrace crushed the distance.

Eric heard a faint squeak of wheels against the pavement, and felt Kyle pull away from him.

“Oh, sorry Mrs Mitchell…” Eric heard Kyle say, red-faced as Kyle untangled himself from his embrace.

Eric was still a little giddy when Kyle tugged at his wrist, letting Kyle pull him aside so that Kyle’s neighbour could get through the small doorway. A small woman herself, elderly, with a scarf on her head and she pulled a trolley with a Yorkshire terrier print behind her. Her face was mildly bright when she looked up at them, and Eric mimicked Kyle’s own short, polite smile in response.

Like an abruptly ended dream, that special, individual spark of their embrace couldn’t be reclaimed or duplicated. Eric didn’t let himself get too disappointed, and when Kyle turned to him he waited for Kyle to speak.

“So, um, how are you?” Kyle asked, the leap from passionate embrace to small talk was quite amusing to Eric.

“Fine,” he replied, nodding as if he needed to further convince himself. Or somehow play it cool around Kyle when he was the very opposite. “Pretty great, actually. You?”

Kyle had been smiling up at him, showing off his teeth with eyes gleaming.

“Good,” Kyle said. “Really good, I…”

Kyle tried to fiddle with the hem of his sweater inconspicuously, although they were so close to each other that nothing could go unnoticed.

“I haven’t stopped thinking about you,” he admitted.

Eric blinked, thinking of how he hadn’t been able to get Kyle out of his head and how impossible it seemed that Kyle could be in the same predicament. Although Eric had said he would work hard to earn Kyle’s love, he knew he would probably be wearing the same expression he was now when the words eventually fell from Kyle’s mouth.
Kyle raised an eyebrow, studying Eric’s face. “You look surprised?” He asked.

“No!” Eric replied, now painfully self-aware. “I mean, yeah I am a little,” he struggled to meet Kyle’s eyes as he succumbed to honesty. “I just never imagined you saying anything like that to me. That we would be where we are now. It’s so… weird, but in the best possible way. It’s amazing.”

Kyle’s eyes flashed, his whole face seemed to flash with surprise as well, before it mellowed into a ray of contentment and agreement.

“Speaking of places we never thought we’d be…” Eric said, because how could they not yet have acknowledged that Kyle was living in freakin’ England?! “What are you doing here, Kyle?”

Kyle chuckled, staring up at the icy sky, the colour of damp paper, and it was as if he was soaking up the faint mingling of random, city sounds.

“Haven’t you read my file?” He eventually asked, turning to Eric again.

Eric rolled his eyes, but his smirk belied his annoyance.

“Yeah, but the file can’t tell me everything,” he answered.

Kyle considered his response for a moment, before he offered, “well, I’d be more than happy to fill you in over breakfast.”

Eric raked his gaze over Kyle as he replied, “Sounds awesome.”

“A full English?”

Eric’s eyebrows furrowed. “Are we still talking about breakfast?”

“Yes?” Kyle laughed, also a crease in his brow. “What else could I be talking about?”

Eric’s confusion persisted however, and Kyle simply rolled his eyes and shrugged it off.

“There’s this amazing café down the road,” Kyle continued brightly. “It’s a little greasy but the food is delicious enough for you not to care.”

Both satisfied and curious by that description, Eric let Kyle lead him down the strange street.

~x~

Breakfasts in Ubaleh were so bland and shapeless, barely distinguishable as a meal, that when Eric was presented with a plate loaded with colourful food, his eyes had widened to a comical enough proportion to make Kyle laugh into his coffee.

It wasn’t the largest meal Eric had eaten, from what he remembered of the American sized meals he used to regularly consume. But even his appetite had been conditioned to suit the AAA, although he was miles and centuries apart from them.

Stubborn as ever, Eric tried to tone down his enjoyment of that first bite of the breakfast Kyle had raved about. He didn’t want Kyle to know he was right, as usual. But it was delicious, mouth-wateringly so; scrambled eggs cooked to perfection, Eric had never considered mushrooms for breakfast, but he was pleasantly surprised that they worked, a juicy tomato provided a certain zest to the meal, Eric savoured every bite of the golden hash browns and the crunchy toast glistening with butter. Kyle had opted for jam on his, and Eric kept it to himself how adorable he found Kyle swiping away the jam from his thumb. That was another thing, Eric’s stomach was performing more
acrobatic feats than an Olympic gymnast now that Kyle was in his company again. Food was the last thing on his mind.

But he made an admirable attempt to clear his plate.

“Are you enjoying your breakfast?” Kyle asked, before sipping what was left of his coffee.

Eric looked up, swallowing the food still in his mouth. “It’s okay…” He replied.

“Oh?” Kyle laughed incredulously. “You’ve eaten almost all of it!”

“I’m hungry,” Eric retorted with a shrug, unable to escape Kyle’s knowing, probing look. “But alright, it’s good.”

“Except the bacon leaves a lot to be desired,” he added, the only thing on his plate he had avoided after one bite. Despite how long it had been, he knew good bacon when he tasted it.

Kyle rolled his eyes, smile crooked, and Eric decided to move the conversation along to the subject that had brought them to the café.

“So what exactly are you doing over here?” Eric asked, before taking a sip of his tea that wasn’t all that bad.

Better than coffee, anyway.

“Teaching,” Kyle answered, which was one of the few details Eric was already privy to. “After I qualified, this exchange program came up, except it was for young teachers instead of students,” Kyle looked out of the window at the sporadic street traffic for a moment, before he returned to Eric. “I figured I might as well go for it, gain all the experience I can before I get a job back home. There were really cool placements, Rome, Shanghai, Buenos Aires… tons of places. I chose here because I could speak the language, and it’s just one of those places that people always talk about visiting but never go.” Kyle grinned when he said, “I didn’t want to be one of those people.”

Eric snickered, before he asked, “How long are you over here?”

“A year,” Kyle replied. “I’ve still got eight months left.”

“But you’re enjoying it?”

“… Yeah,” Kyle nodded slowly, as if he was waiting for some outside force to give a surer answer. “It’s scary, being so far away from my family and-” Kyle’s green eyes flooded with some strange realisation that Eric wasn’t in on. Denying him a chance to find an explanation, Kyle buried his head in his hands, face pinked. “God, I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“What?” Eric asked, eyebrows pulled tightly together.

Kyle lifted his head out of his hands, expression agonised and embarrassed. “Complaining to you about being away from home for a year when you’re-” Kyle stopped himself again, further tripping the conversation up. “You may never – Things could change I guess, but I don’t know what-”

“Kyle, don’t ever feel like you have to be careful around me,” Eric said, shushing Kyle with a soothing tone and a hand reaching across the table. “I’m fine, alright?”

Despite Kyle’s inability to express himself, Eric could tell what he was trying to be so conscious about. It was sweet, typically compassionate of Kyle, but in their short time together Eric didn’t want
there to be any feelings of discomfort.

“Alright,” Kyle said, his grateful smile as tight as his grip on Eric’s hand. “Sorry,”

Loosening the clasp of their hands in an attempt to lighten the mood, Eric asked, “So you’re homesick, huh?”

Kyle shrugged, a frown appearing but then quickly fading on his face.

“A little,” he admitted, glancing at their hands. “I get phone calls from home pretty much every day, so it’s not that I feel lonely… just alone, I guess. Though that’s kind of contradictory.”

“It isn’t,” Eric cut in. “They’re complete opposites.”

Eric supposed he had found that out the hard way.

“But apart from that,” Eric moved on, “you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m having a great time,” Kyle continued, newly relaxed and sure. “It’s challenging, overseeing all these kids. I’m so used to being supervised that it was nerve-wracking walking into class the first morning. But I told myself to get a grip, that they were just five year olds, and if I wasn’t good with kids then I wouldn’t be doing this job in the first place, right?” He shook his head, as if dismissing that anxious first day. “But I had nothing to be afraid of, the kids are all really sweet.”

“Still, I’d rather you than me,” Eric chuckled.

“You don’t like kids?” Kyle asked, more amused than surprised. “I should have guessed.”

“It’s not that,” Eric shrugged, uncomfortable with the partial lie. “I don’t like most people, no matter what age they are.”

_Let’s call it indiscriminate indifference._

Kyle hung his head and laughed in exasperation, “I know that.”

“I mean, if they were my own that would be different,” Eric thought aloud.

“Do you think about having your own?” Kyle asked, genuine, tentative curiosity that Eric was unprepared for.

“No, of course not!” Eric tried to say lightly, but it came out completely humourless. “I meant, hypothetically speaking, I would love them if they were my own. I could mentor them, teach them everything I know, leave a great legacy.”

As he spoke, he was becoming increasingly warmed to the notion.

“I think you’re alone in that way of thinking,” Kyle remarked.

“It’s a valid reason!” Eric argued. “Why do you want kids then?”

“Because it…” Kyle lingered, and the more Eric waited obnoxiously for an answer, the more Kyle struggled. “I don’t know! The thought of having a family feels nice?”

“Wow,” Eric teased, placing his free hand over his heart. “That’s beautiful.”
“Shut up!” Kyle laughed, trying to kick Eric under the table, but Eric dodged his foot.

“So I see we’re having the baby discussion early, huh?” Eric asked, eyebrows raising suggestively, while Kyle turned away, playful. “That’s cool. Might as well get it out of the way.”

“You started it!” Kyle reminded him. “But, anyway, returning to present matters…” Kyle shifted in his chair, letting Eric know the conversation was taking a sincere turn. “I was hoping you’d visit me when I was over here.”

“Yeah, you can take me sightseeing!” Eric replied, tightening his hold on Kyle’s hand. “I’m sure you’re well-acquainted with this city by now.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Kyle said. “It’s huge!”

“Then it’s a good thing we have the whole day, huh?”

“Definitely,” Kyle beamed. “We have to try to cover as much ground as possible.”

“Do you have a plan for how to do that?” Eric asked.

Kyle looked at their empty plates as he strategized, before his eyes shone and he grinned, “Yes I do.”

~x~

After breakfast, they had returned to Kyle’s flat so Eric didn’t have to carry that heavy backpack around all day. But Eric barely spent a minute there before Kyle was pulling him out the door again, eager to put his plan in motion.

A plan that involved three tube stops (with Kyle holding Eric’s hand tightly as they weaved through the Saturday morning crowd, like he was going to lose all six feet and three inches of him), and a red, open-top tour bus bursting with tourists.

Eric had responded to Kyle’s enthusiastic grin with a questioning look, but let Kyle drag him on the bus regardless. Top deck of course, to ensure they didn’t miss anything. Eric may have been apprehensive at first, but appreciated the view he had of bright Piccadilly Circus, of Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, Big Ben… landmarks he never thought he would see. But he guessed that astonishment was to be expected now Kyle was in his life again, in a way he could only once dream about. In Eric’s opinion, the most astonishing thing of all.

When the bus stopped off at the London Eye, again giving the tourists a chance to walk around and take a closer look, Eric and Kyle stepped off. Kyle hadn’t been on the London Eye yet, and told Eric there was no better time to go on it now they were together. Eric was so flattered that he waited in the two-hour long line with Kyle to get on the damn Ferris wheel. Granted, this wasn’t your typical, rickety carnival attraction.

Eventually, Eric and Kyle were able to step into one of the large pods where they encountered even more tourists. Some were nervously sat on the benches in the center, while the more curious souls placed their hands on the glass and marvelled at the view.

“You were right,” Eric said, he and Kyle were stood in front of the glass pane. “This place is huge!”

“I thought you would have gathered that on the tour,” Kyle replied.

“Yeah, but, you can only see so much on a bus, right?” Eric asked, glancing at the grey Thames below, before lifting his gaze to a city that seemed oceanic in his reach, evading the horizon.
“I guess,” Kyle said, equally as engrossed, before he asked, “hey, remember my annoying cousin from Connecticut?”

A reminiscing grin stretched across Eric’s face, childhood and mountain towns seemed so far away.

“Oh Science,” he laughed in exasperation. “Yeah?”

Eric turned to Kyle, and those green eyes gravitated towards him.

“His mom used to take him to New York during summer vacation, only for a couple of days,” Kyle said. “And I remember one time she sent my mom a letter, with a photo she had taken on top of the Empire State Building. The view…” Kyle looked out at the city for inspiration. “It reminds me of that photo, how far out you can see, how all these buildings are usually so giant and yet being at this height shrinks them.”

As Kyle stared out, Eric wondered if childhood and mountain towns seemed just as distant to Kyle too. He thought about Kyle’s determination to visit the places others could only dream of, the nature of a life that encompasses so many different places and where the necessary roots would lie; in your hometown? In your career? In a companion? As much as he adored the notion of travelling around the world with Kyle, how exhilarating that would be, he found as much exhilaration in the idea of consistency, of accountability. He and Kyle, there for each other always. Even when they physically weren’t.

“Would you like to go there?” Eric asked.

“What? To the Empire State Building?”

“Well, I was thinking New York but if you want to be specific, then yeah, the Empire State Building.”

“Sure, there a ton of places I want to go,” Kyle replied, wistful, before he shrugged, “maybe I will travel someday, but I’d like some company.”

Eric smiled, heart flipping like the pages of a lovesick journal, so quietly joyous was he that they shared similar pipedreams. But then a pang, like that journal being slammed shut, jolting Eric to reality.

“I’d go anywhere with you if I could,” he mumbled apologetically.

Kyle’s eyes roamed over him, sighing. “I know.”

“It’s a shame,” Eric continued, “we could’ve gone on all kinds of adventures.”

So much for no discomfort. Nice one, jackass.

Kyle’s face creased sympathetically, but he smiled and snaked an arm around Eric’s waist, tugging him closer.

“But this is fine,” Kyle assured him. “Wonderful, actually.”

A warm salve on Eric’s sore heart, in danger of melting him.

“You’re wonderful, Kyle,” he replied, and Kyle looked up at him, his smile brighter.

Eric’s gaze couldn’t help but be drawn to Kyle’s lips, they had yet to kiss today.
A craving awakened, and Eric started to close the gap between them.

“I, uh,” Kyle turned away, not looking at Eric when he said, “don’t like public displays of affection.”

Eric ignored the initial sting, but he was still confused.

“Um, I beg to differ,” he chuckled, and Kyle arched an eyebrow at him.

A cocky smirk on his face, Eric reeled off the instances; “Holding my hand in the café, not to mention on the train, then there was hugging me in the street, kissing me in the gym—”

“Hey, you kissed me in the gym!” Kyle laughed, with their bodies pressed close Eric could feel how warm Kyle was. “And that was different because nobody saw us!”

“What about the other instances?”

“Fine, if you want to be specific about it, I don’t like kissing in front of people, okay?”

Eric smirked, before pressing a quick kiss to Kyle’s cheek.

“Sorry, I had to,” he said, when Kyle scowled at him playfully. They must have been the only people in the pod not looking out at the tremendous views.

Kyle then pressed a kiss to Eric’s cheek before he replied, “at least we’re even.”

~x~

They had planned to return to the bus after leaving the pod, until Kyle informed Eric there was an aquarium less than five minutes away. And yes, they had sharks and stingrays. For the first time that day, Eric had tugged at Kyle’s wrist and led him through the crowd, although he had no idea where he was going. Some passers-by shot them strange looks as Eric asked Kyle behind him for directions, and Kyle gave them to him with laughter in his voice.

Since it was late in the afternoon they had avoided the rush, but were informed by a member of staff that the aquarium would be closing in two hours, and to be mindful of the time. They visited the shark tank first, Eric’s hand still in Kyle’s as they both marvelled at the creature, its cold eyes sending a shiver down Eric’s spine.

Naturally, the stingray exhibit was more interactive, and a few kids crowded around the open tank as the guide reeled facts and invited onlookers to carefully touch the stingrays’ backs.

Kyle had giggled beside Eric as he knelt down and peered into the tank, but Eric retaliated by splashing him.

Now they were stood in one of the many glowing tunnels, it would have been just the two of them were it not for the hundreds of tropical fish that swam overhead.

“Thanks, Kyle,” Eric said, he had been content in the silence but felt the need to express his gratitude.

“For what?” Kyle asked beside him.

“Today,” Eric replied. “It was a lot of fun.”

He turned to Kyle, who was still staring at the tank before he met Eric’s gaze, aqua blue reflected on half of his face.
“Well, it’s like you said, you’re only here for two days. We should make them count, right?”

Eric recalled their busy day, how Kyle’s company allowed him to leave so many things behind.

“Right,” he nodded.

Kyle smiled appreciatively at him, before edging close enough to set Eric’s mind and heart racing. “But today has been missing something,” he suggested.

“What?” Eric asked, he already knew but he wanted to hear Kyle say it.

“There’s no one around, it’s kind of dark,” Kyle shrugged, he pressed himself to Eric’s side when he said casually. “I think I can break my rule.”

Like he had no idea how crazy he drove him, Kyle moved swiftly away from Eric, the dim lighting only heightening his elusiveness. Eric’s palms felt slick with arousal and some strange caution.

Fingers sliding across the railing, Kyle positioned himself in front of Eric, his gaze almost hypnotic. “I think so too,” Eric tried to say as coolly as Kyle, but when he placed his hands on the railing, the cold metal alerted him to his palms’ clamminess.

With the glow of the fish tanks and Eric’s shadow over him, Kyle appeared as smouldering and dauntingly beautiful as a siren. Eric felt so giddy that he could’ve forgotten their lips had yet to meet.

Slowly leaning in, Eric confessed, “I’ve been waiting for this all day.”

There was an unnerving half smirk on Kyle’s face when he practically growled, “try waiting three years.”

Before Eric could respond, he was pulled to Kyle’s lips, the kiss happening as fast as drowning in stormy, passionate waters. So maybe Kyle really was a siren? They quickly fell into the memory of each other’s lips, moans muffled and short-lived as they soaked up all that they had missed. Kyle’s hands crawled up Eric’s arms, the beginnings of an embrace, and Eric readily welcomed Kyle, allowing him to come closer before sealing the embrace with his arms wrapped around Kyle’s back. There were only a couple of inches between them in height, but the pressure of their kiss had Kyle on his tiptoes and Eric lifting him to his lips.

In his tempting way, Kyle dragged Eric down but he happily succumbed, both of them breathless when the kiss ended. Kyle’s hands left Eric’s shoulders and were now cupping his face, their foreheads touching as they panted weakly.

“I said it earlier but-” Kyle interrupted himself with a chaste kiss to Eric’s lips, and he whimpered when Eric’s hands squeezed his waist. “I’ve missed you so much, Eric.”

Eyes widening and heart sprinting, Eric thought nothing could break Kyle’s enchantment, but the sound of Kyle calling him by his first name brought him down to brilliant earth.

“You- you called me-”

Kyle grinned at Eric’s speechlessness, but the look in his eyes told Eric that Kyle knew how important this was.

“Yeah, well-” Kyle tried to mellow the initial shock with another kiss. “Things are different now. We are different now.”
Eric nodded, eyes wet and lips pursed at the affirmation. It may have been the smallest of gestures, but with their fleeting moments together everything counted.
Chapter Notes

"Oh, Ky-Kyle! I- ahh, aahh! I'm gonna – oh fuck – Kyle! Kyle! Aah, Kyle!"

Eric's fingers relinquished the tight grip they had on Kyle's drenched curls, the eager pace of his bucking hips winding down, sated and sporadic as he rode his orgasm out. Kyle gagged, removing Eric's softening cock from his mouth before he swallowed, finally allowing air into his throat and a giddy, loose smile to stretch across his flushed face.

For it had been so long since Kyle had heard somebody cry out his name in unadulterated passion, had given anybody pleasure. Although he felt it wasn't something worth bragging about to Eric, he had been so faithful and patient for the last three years. After all Eric had done for him, Kyle felt he'd be an idiot to betray him, to hurt him. No casual tryst – regardless of how satisfying – would be worth breaking Eric's heart. That's not to say this drought was easy, but Kyle supposed that's what his hand and the internet was for… not to mention his imagination. This abstinence was all for Eric, so it was natural for Kyle to vividly imagine the lusty pay-off of that, his fantasies only strengthening Kyle's attraction to him.

And one had just played out, more arousing, more heated, more exhilarating than Kyle's mind could do justice to. Despite knowing how intensely Eric felt for him, despite what feelings Eric roused from Kyle when he looked at him, touched him, kissed him, until now Kyle didn't realise how erotic a creature Eric could be. His endearing, virginal enthusiasm and anticipation was sexier than any well-practiced moves or finessed moans. Although maybe Kyle should have suspected it, since Eric had always been passionate, obsessive… Kyle had experienced it first-hand growing up. As an adult he was now experiencing a decidedly sultrier passion, certainly a more sensual one. Now he had Eric simmering in his sheets. Kyle counted that as some sort of victory.

Drawing out cries and moans, pleads and whimpers, groans and expletives, until Kyle feared he would rob Eric's lungs of breath, hearing Eric say his name, a more precise if not entirely perfect pronunciation of it, redefining it with love and want, and how Eric's body writhed and arched and jolted, keening to the pleasure Kyle had ignited in him but desperate for exquisite release… Kyle found it intoxicating, was still drunk on it, already addicted, but he had also found it so encouraging, empowering. His confidence building along with Eric's pleasure, determined to momentarily wipe Eric's childhood memories of him as a little boy, or anything bittersweet, especially the ache of their separation. The only sensation Kyle had wanted to remain was ecstasy, and if anything or anybody was going to embody that for Eric, Kyle was determined it was going to be him. He wanted to be his best, had brought his 'A game' – Kyle was surprised he could even remember what it was – and it appeared to have worked.

Eric's thighs quivered around Kyle, and when Kyle lapped at small, white beads – weak spurts he had missed – that dribbled from the head of Eric's cock, Eric whimpered quietly, sensitive and seizing. Once Kyle was finally done, Eric sank, spent into the mattress.

"I fucking love you…" Eric whispered breathlessly.

The words made Kyle's chest glow smugly and his eyes sting briefly with tenderness.

Crawling up Eric's body like he was stalking prey he had already ravished, Kyle marked his journey up Eric's heaving, clothed chest with kisses until they were face to face. Eric's cheeks were damp
with tears, his shimmering eyes lidded and his mouth was stretched into a content smile.

_He's so beautiful like this._

Kyle pressed their glistening foreheads together, the scent of sweat and sex tight, humid and delicious between them. Eric blinked slowly, his smile brightening when Kyle was focused in his vision.

"What was that?" Kyle asked, as they rubbed noses. He hadn't misheard, he was just dying to hear Eric say those words again.

But clearly Eric had other ideas, able to break his smile for a minute to give Kyle a gentle, languid kiss.

"I said, I fucking love you," Eric replied, a honeyed murmur against Kyle's mouth before they kissed again; warm, stinging lips, and soothing tongues.

"Hmm, I'm surprised you can even talk," Kyle remarked when the kiss wound down. "With all that screaming you did…"

Eric's eyebrows shot up, his face flushing deeper as he tried to avoid Kyle's gaze. "I didn't scream!"

"Yes you did!" Kyle laughed, typical of a stubborn Eric to deny the obvious. "Are you always going to be loud like that?"

Eric rolled his eyes, smile still on his face. "Give me a break, it was the first time anybody has ever…"

"Don't apologise," Kyle hushed him, lowering his voice. "You sounded so sexy."

Eric reacted so adorably to the compliment – eyebrows knitted and nose wrinkled – that Kyle wanted to kiss him again.

"Sexy?" he questioned.

_Well, maybe not right now. Right now you look so freakin' cute that I want to cover you head to toe with kisses._

But the point still stood, so Kyle nodded, eyes raking over Eric as he recalled the events of this afternoon. "You have no idea how hot you are, do you?"

Eric was still in doubt, still studying Kyle's face for any sign that this was a joke, before he grinned, wrapped his leg around Kyle and used his heel to push them closer. "Says the sex god on top of me…"

Now it was Kyle's turn to be incredulous.

"What?" Kyle laughed. "Sex god?"

Eric nodded, eyes hooded and gaze hungry again. It reminded Kyle that Eric was still half-naked beneath him.

Kyle chuckled. "Did I make you come hard enough to kill off a few brain cells?"

Eric's smile widened again and he shrugged, "Probably…"
Deciding it had been too long since they last kissed, Kyle reconnected their lips.

On a lazy Sunday afternoon, both of them sprawled out on the couch watching TV, Kyle had suggested they go for a walk. It would allow a change of scenery from the morning, a chance to get fresh air, and would be a pleasant break in the day before they went out in the evening. Eric had countered this proposal – rather interrupted Kyle mid-sentence – with a kiss that Kyle was helpless to. Soon, they were locked and tangled in an embrace on the couch, making out as the TV droned on, neglected. In the haze, Eric had sheepishly brought up the topic of 'experimenting' and 'kicking things up a notch'. Kyle had responded by taking Eric's hand and leading him to the bedroom.

Now, as they kissed and both mellowed in Eric's post-orgasm high, Kyle realised that an afternoon in bed was way more fun than a walk.

"Kyle," Eric said between kisses. "I'd uh… I want to…"

"What?" Kyle asked, still rather stewed and honestly not paying too much attention to what was occurring during the interval of Eric's kisses.

"Um, return the favour," Eric continued, and Kyle could feel Eric wincing at his awkward phrasing.

"What?" Kyle chuckled.

Eric grumbled, before he said, "let me suck you off…"

Kyle blinked, a little confused, but his crotch had understood immediately.

"…Alright," Kyle replied slowly, shifting on top of Eric as to not make his arousal obvious. "I'd, uh, like that."

"It's just-" Eric dropped the sentence before he could finish it. "I don't know how."

Kyle furrowed his eyebrows, sympathy briefly overriding arousal for a moment as he moved to lay beside Eric.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Eric's eyes were on the ceiling when he explained, "this is all new to me, and I figure it can't be that difficult. But I just don't know how to…" Eric decided to forgo words for an impatient huff. "What to exactly…"

Kyle hoped his silence was encouraging, prompting Eric to finish a train of thought. Like Eric had said in the café the previous day, in the short time they had, they shouldn't need to feel careful about admitting anything to each other.

"I just want to make you feel amazing, like you made me feel," Eric murmured, trailing his eyes over Kyle shyly. "So how do you do it?"

"You mean… give head?" Kyle asked.

Eric lifted his gaze and nodded. The sincerity in his eyes and the question itself was throwing Kyle. Sighing thoughtfully, he tried to give Eric the best, most reassuring and genuine answer he could.

"To be honest, I've never really thought about how," Kyle started. "I don't think I have a technique or anything."
"Oh," Eric nodded, but he couldn't mask his disappointment.

"I guess my advice would be to not panic?" Kyle said quickly. "It's, it's just me, Eric, okay?" He reassured with a smile, reaching up and stroking Eric's cheek. He was relieved when their expressions mirrored. "There's no pressure. You don't have to do it if you're not completely sure-

"No," Eric interjected. "No, I want to do it."

"Alright," Kyle replied with a nod. "Um, also, don't feel like you have to… dive straight in, so to speak," Kyle cringed at the peculiar expression, but was glad when Eric snickered.

"Take your time," Kyle elaborated. "Go slow if you need to. A lot of people like build up, to be teased."

"Do you?" Eric asked.

*Perhaps if I had blowjobs regularly.*

"Yeah, I suppose," Kyle replied.

"That's not really helpful."

"Sorry," Kyle said, before he took in a nervous Eric beside him. "So do you still wanna do it?"


"Then… I guess… whenever you're ready," Kyle said, with an equal wobble to his voice, reminding him how much time had passed since he had been in a similar position.

Eric nodded and gulped before he sat on his knees, moving to the foot of the bed. Kyle couldn't help but notice that Eric had yet to put his boxers back on, and his eyes were drawn to the uncovered area. Salivating and lips parting at the memory of taking that thick, hard cock into his-

*Holy shit, am I really that horny? I don't know if I'll be able to last-

Eric was at the edge of the bed now, and Kyle's dick was straining against his underwear (he had ridded himself of his sweatpants when their initial kisses grew heated). Still, he tried to maintain some composure, some control, lying flat on his back and tucking his hands behind his head. But he craned his neck to watch Eric move carefully between his legs, his eyes were weighted with lust and nerves and his hands were shaking. Kyle wanted to reach out and touch him, reassure him. But the atmosphere had grown so heavy that words eluded Kyle.

His legs were parted only slightly, and Kyle let Eric spread them even wider. He had opened himself up to Eric before, but never on a physical level. Beneath the tense silence and Kyle's thudding heart, he supposed it felt invigorating.

Head between Kyle's legs, Eric then put his hands on Kyle's thighs, making him gasp and exhale. He had become a glutton to Eric's touch, but it had never felt so nerve-wracking and heady before. But because he trusted Eric, Kyle succumbed, closing his eyes in a final act of submission.

Hair tickled his inner thigh, then hot breath and soft, puckered lips. All familiar sensations, repackaged in the form of Eric. Then, a surprising nip. Kyle's eyes flew open, curious as to what was happening. But when he felt minute suction, he didn't need to look to know that Eric was in the process of creating a love bite. Kyle threw his head back gently and moaned when a nursing tongue laved at the bite, not protesting when Eric decided to pave the route to his arousal with hiccups,
(especially with how sweetly they stung the closer Eric's mouth was to Kyle's crotch). But the bites weren't the only thing responsible for Kyle's jolts and antsy hips. His nerves were raw and charged, skittish as if they had been thrown onto a hot plate, akin to how Kyle had felt during his earlier sexual experiences. Fresh sympathy for Eric welled in his heart.

Eric's lips took a detour when they met fabric, his hands following suit as they snaked from Kyle's thighs to the hem of his t-shirt. A visceral chill prompted a film of goosebumps to cover Kyle's body, when Eric's warm fingers had slid under his shirt and pressed against soft skin. Lifting the material from Kyle's stomach, Eric kissed the pale, scarlet-trailed plain between Kyle's navel and the waistband of his boxers, then grinned as if claiming that territory. He was using his skill of pushing Kyle's buttons to his advantage, compensation for his lack of sexual experience, manipulating that ability to get the best reaction out of Kyle, teasing him mercilessly along the way.

The waistband of Kyle's boxers was between Eric's teeth, but he quickly released it, choosing to instead part his lips and drag them over Kyle's prominent bulge, mouthing at it greedily. Kyle gasped and moaned at Eric's fabulous cruelty, eyes squeezing shut, nervousness swirled in his gut while arousal burned and dominated everywhere else. He felt Eric's humid breath against the fabric, and another triumphant smile. Though his mind was drowning – rather, bubbling and steaming – Kyle cloudily remembered cupping and squeezing at Eric through his boxers earlier that afternoon, to gauge his pleasing reaction. Was this payback, perhaps? Kyle didn't care.

Mouth leaving Kyle's bulge, Eric raised his head.

"Lift your hips," he instructed.

Completely enthralled, Kyle obeyed. He swallowed hard and shaky, eyes fluttering when Eric pulled his boxers off, sliding them down his legs. Before Kyle could even register it, Eric fingers had wrapped around the base of his erection, causing him to whimper in surprise. Using his thumb Eric applied soft pressure, teasing friction on Kyle's throbbing cock. Skin on skin. A segue into something more substantial, that would be enough to bring Kyle to orgasm. He was willing to be patient, despite his libido crying out for immediate, overwhelming release. Like a chef manning numerous boiling stations at once, Eric let a fraction of tension simmer. Kyle wondered if Eric's measured, sparing handling of him was out of an uncharacteristic desire to wait... until Kyle was good and hot enough to eat.

To placate his libido's starved cry, Kyle closed his eyes indulgently, Eric still barely working his cock. A kiss to his balls made him shiver, the sensitive skin drawing tight under Eric's lips.

Kyle moaned long and loud when Eric started to pump at his cock, aware of how desperate he must have sounded, but too turned on to care. Eric laved at Kyle's balls, his hips meeting Eric's mouth and hand greedily, and Kyle's strained groans provided a metronome to their unrequited, lopsided rhythm.

Kyle let a broken groan slip through gritted teeth, before he opened his mouth. "Oh, oh God! Eric... please..."

"Please what?" Eric asked, not bothering to look up at Kyle. His aloof control, was delectable, captivating. "I thought you liked to be teased."

"No, I, – haah – do I just..." Kyle's racing mind tripped up his words, fuelled by Eric's relentless mission to unravel him. "Oh fuck..."

"S-say my name again, Kyle," Eric demanded, dulcet, but that control was fragile. "I... I love it when you say my name."
A simple enough request, since Eric's name was reverberating from Kyle's thunderous heart anyway. Behind his eyelids, Kyle's neurons had transformed his lover's name into a constellation, a sticky spider's web in torrid space.

"Eric!" Kyle begged. "Please, I – ahh... aahh!"

The mattress squeaked with added weight, before a blessed pair of tender lips and a molten tongue on his shaft made Kyle cry out. His eyes opened briefly, and the constellation exploded, magnesium in colour and scorching in sensation. Blinding and brilliant, just like the man they had represented. The shower of stars rained down on Kyle, temporarily paralysing him. Or else Eric's blissful touch was so voltaic that it made lightning rocket through his veins, numbing his nerves and stiffening his skeleton. But Kyle soon softened, rather melted into a thrumming, ecstatic puddle. But he was confident there'd be another surge.

"Is this fine?" Eric murmured, the words rolling and rumbling down Kyle's spine like an arctic storm, before he rubbed the tip of Kyle's cock against his tongue.

"Yes!" Kyle cried, jolting and writhing at the traction. Hot, slippery and tremendous. "Y-yes, that's perfect," Kyle whispered, breathing swift and threadbare as Eric's mouth closed around the head of his erection. His tongue still flush against the collection of quaking nerve endings. "Ke-keep doing that... Oh! Oh, you're so good..."

Kyle threw his head back, groaning loudly and freely as Eric took him deeper. Kyle wanted to look at him, but his searing eyes wouldn't stay open long enough, lulled by pleasure, his arms trembling and palms slick and hot as he approached his climax. It was incredible how sure Eric was despite his initial anxiety, how his confidence had flooded his touches and kisses, how he simultaneously teased and worshipped Kyle. Every coy moment of build-up was deliberate, affectionate, and inquisitive. And on the whole, Eric was cunning and seductive, manipulative and ardent...

And Kyle's.

As Eric's pace quickened and his suction grew tighter, Kyle cursed and thrusted into his mouth. Careful not to startle him, Kyle sat up, propping himself on his elbow – although he was trembling, light-headed enough to crash into the pillows behind him – and grabbed a fistful of Eric's hair, softly tugging at the chestnut locks in encouragement. If his nerves had been charged before, then they were short-circuiting now, spitting sparks and swollen with energy.

"Eric! Eric!" Kyle sobbed. "Oh, oh God, yes! I-I'm- aahh!"

With a hard thrust, Kyle came in Eric's mouth, every muscle in his body constricting and writhing before they unknotted. The only grip Kyle had on anything was Eric's hair, and he released it as he flopped back onto his sheets, needing to ride his orgasm out.

Kyle couldn't open his eyes without a couple of practice blinks, his mind whirring as he floated down to Earth. The aftermath was tranquil and boring compared to Eric's ecstatic, lucid rocket ride to their own personal cosmos; rich, colourful and sparkling.

Though his vision was blurry, Kyle couldn't stop looking at Eric, could feel his scintillating Tiger Eye gaze on him. He was wiping his flushed lips, panting, with darkened, glinting eyes.

*Looks like I managed to steal a star. Rather, a constellation.*

Kyle was trying to catch his breath, but Eric had stolen it already.

"Come here..." Kyle smirked, his breathing laboured.
Eric bit his lip as he crawled up the bed, and when he was looming over Kyle – prepossessing and sultry – Kyle smashed their lips together. Eric's surprised whimper was muffled against the numbing kiss, but he readily deepened it. Giving Kyle a sample of what he tasted like; realised temptation.

"How was that?" Eric asked when the kiss broke.

Kyle was incredulous at the question, but ran his fingers through Eric's hair, stroking the sore spot on his scalp apologetically. Kyle had tugged a bit harder than he meant to when he climaxed.

"Are you sure you haven't done this before?" Kyle offered as his answer.

Eric snickered, suddenly bashful. "Pretty sure."

A smile flooded Kyle's face, he couldn't hide it, he was one hundred percent endeared to this asshole now; who was so cute and sexy and Kyle felt incredibly lucky and content with his lot.

No doubt I'm-

The hand that was in Eric's hair migrated to the nape of his neck, another hand cupped his burning cheek.

"You're fucking amazing, you know that?" Kyle asked, his chest tightened and his brow creased he meant his words so.

Eric snickered again, shaking his head.

"No, seriously," Kyle grinned. "You drive me crazy," he whispered, kissing Eric's nose, then his lips chastely. "But you're amazing."

Eric's eyes were wide, wet, so very telling when he said, "You're amazing too, Kyle. I love you so much."

When they kissed, Kyle hoped that Eric would never change the way he held him, how he always clutched him so protectively. Nothing had ever made him feel so wanted, but more importantly, nothing had ever made him feel so safe.

Pulling away, Kyle's eyes roamed Eric's face, they were both half-naked and currently sporting semis.

"Let me do you again…" Kyle said, trying to press Eric flush to him, now he knew how wonderful it felt for them to be so close.

Eric didn't respond straight away, instead glancing at the alarm clock on Kyle's nightstand.

"Can't," Eric smirked, tilting his head so his damp lips brushed against Kyle's. "Dinner reservations."

An afternoon in bed could've easily turned into an evening, if it weren't for Eric and his surprising restraint. Kyle's lips were stinging and flushed when he finally pulled away from the kiss, the result of Eric's sucks and nips.

With his mouth numb and hot, Kyle felt fulfilled, exhausted... and scared. Maybe he had grown wary of separation? Especially where Eric was concerned, but isn't that an addictive personality's greatest fear? Withdrawal?

When Eric had rolled off of Kyle, reminding him that they had to get ready for the dinner Kyle was
once looking forward to, panic splintered the perimeters of his heart.

Their blissful afternoon, barricaded by sheets and touches and kisses and overwhelming feelings that flooded the mattress – their little universe – like daybreak, had now ended and Kyle mourned for it.

But Kyle couldn't escape their gilded daybreak. When inescapable sunlight soaks into every corner of the Earth, he couldn't evade what was becoming more apparent with every moment spent with Eric, with all the waiting in between. The realisation was scorching and unnerving, no matter how brazenly Kyle welcomed it into his mind. It was something he had hoped for and felt giddy over in theory, but now that confirmation was dawning, he felt wholly unprepared.

Undeserving.

Inconvenienced.

Those words admittedly paled when paired with what Eric and Kyle had created, with what Eric had given to him, but the pulsing vein of truth travelled through the two opposites like a lightning bolt, or maybe a chasm.

Kyle feared what would happen when their shared light dared to push its boundaries with just three not-so-simple words. Eric would be ecstatic, he knew, and that was part of the reason Kyle's mind hummed the words when Eric looked at him, kissed him, held him. Deadlines and unpredictability make you bold, they were a good excuse for Kyle to just tell Eric, already! But it was the cruelty of their situation that made Kyle cautious, that terrified him, in fact.

Saying "I love you" would only make the loneliness and the finite harder to withstand.

And what if they were to get hurt? When everything was so precarious, unclear? When virtually all connections had been shattered, how could they not sustain wounds?

Eric had made sure they were both aware that this wouldn't be a normal relationship, but it was starting to feel like one. Fulfilling, as Eric had hoped it would be, but it was also faithful and caring and vulnerable. Although Eric was the inexperienced one, so hopelessly in love, unaccustomed to such affections, they were both shaking with the knowledge that they could lose each other. Temporarily or forever, either was a possibility.

Both were devastating.

Eric had told Kyle that he was everything to him, a beautiful admission but large enough to crush Kyle. He knew what it felt like to be lost without someone, to be constantly searching. Eric knew too, but Kyle didn't want him to have to re-experience it if they were ever separated permanently. He didn't want to be everything to Eric, he wanted Eric to have the whole world at his disposal, to live his life in a wider scope.

Honestly, he wanted Eric to have more to come back to.

They had just finished their appetisers at the restaurant, trendy and upmarket (since they had been dining on take-out so far Kyle felt Eric deserved a little chivalry), but somewhat romantic, most of the tables occupied by young couples like themselves.

*Though not exactly like us.*

Most people would have relished such uniqueness, but it made Kyle's stomach feel filled with lead.

"Have you given much thought to what we talked about?" He asked Eric, trying to remain casual for
his sake as well as Eric's.

Kyle was praying for an affirmative, but he was willing to discuss things further with Eric if this didn't go the way he was hoping.

"We've talked about a lot of things?" Eric teased before taking a sip of his drink.

Kyle rolled his eyes, light-hearted exasperation masked his nerves. "You know, what we talked about during your last visit…" he said, before mumbling, "about going home."

Eric blinked, smile lost as his eyes roamed around the room, as if the ways to approach this were written on the walls.

_Not the best start._

"Oh," Eric nodded, clearly a few minutes behind in the conversation. "Y-yes. Yes I have."

"And?" Kyle pressed. "Are you going to do it?"

Eric's sigh was drowned out by the mingling resteraunt noises, but Kyle could see his chest rise and deflate, could see the uneasiness on his face.

"No," he answered, gaze not reaching Kyle's eyes.

Another sting of disappointment.

"Really?" Kyle nearly whispered it. "You're not?"

Shoulders lifted, Eric shook his head to his empty plate.

A protective instinct kicked in for Kyle, wanting to reassure the man sat across from him, but it was smothered by frustration that Kyle had to act on.

"Well, why?" He questioned, his tone irate.

Eric's eyes widened incredulously and he huffed.

"What's the big deal?" He returned. "I've made my decision, can we just change the subject?"

"No, we can't, I…" Kyle was trying to be firm and stubborn, but he knew that he and Eric were capable of arguing from dawn until dusk and he didn't want that. So instead, he offered a compromise. "Tell me why you're not going to visit and then we can move on."

Of sorts.

"Kyle, I don't want to talk about this now," Eric said lowly, some may have found it intimidating, but Kyle had the insight to look deeper. He saw discomfort, and that's why the genuine smile on Eric's face made them both crumble. "This weekend has been great, and I don't want to put a dampener on it."

Kyle folded his arms, he didn't want to put this weekend in jeopardy either (what little they had left of it), but if this was a 'real relationship' then there had to be tough conversations and honesty so they could come out on the other side much better for it.

"Can't we just enjoy our dinner?" Eric asked, reaching across the table and taking Kyle's hand. Kyle gladly squeezed back, but his face remained serious. "Can't you just trust me?"
"Don't do that..." Kyle muttered, slipping his hand out of Eric's hold, discouraged again.

"What?" Eric asked softly, Kyle was sure he had heard Eric's heart split and it made him wince.

"This isn't about trust," Kyle explained, looking into Eric's eyes. "I do trust you, Eric."

"Then let's forget about it," Eric was trying not to plead, Kyle could tell.

Kyle shook his head. "Just because I trust you doesn't mean I have to agree with everything you say, or the decisions you make."

Eric looked away, possibly thinking up bids to try to change the subject, or knowing that Kyle was right and their shared stubbornness was keeping him silent on the matter.

"Why can't you tell me?" Kyle asked, brow creased. "You know I'd try my best to understand."

Eric looked up, eyes wide and telling like earlier, but they were also sombre and unsure. Kyle could have held him close or kissed a dozen reassurances all over his face, but he hoped the look in his eyes would be enough to let Eric know that he was listening, that he could still – always - be trusted.

"I'm afraid it might hurt you," Eric admitted, and Kyle's curiosity piqued.

"Science knows I've caused you enough pain," Eric continued, "and I don't want to anymore."

Once again, Kyle had alternatives on how to respond.

He could've reminded Eric of all the great things he had done for him. Eric had saved his life, gave him a second chance at it and was giving him so much excitement and happiness now. He could've told Eric that he would never hurt him, that they would never hurt each other. Or Kyle could've told him the truth, because although it wasn't perfect or maybe what Eric wanted to hear, it was better than brushing the issue aside.

"Well, you hurting me can't be helped, just like I can't promise that I won't ever hurt you," Kyle replied, and Eric was taken aback. Kyle chuckled ruefully, "it's a downside really, of caring for another person so intensely."

Eric nodded, a smile stretching across his face before he chuckled too.

"People make mistakes," Kyle continued. "You can't please everybody all the time."

Eric sighed, hopefully taking Kyle's words in, before he asked, "Why do you even want to know, Kyle?"

The question made Kyle shift in his seat, avert Eric's gaze as he deliberated his answer.

"You have me," Eric then resumed his smile, so naïve. "Who cares about anybody else?"

Kyle thought of South Park, it's unsolved absence, he thought about the event that was probably still playing on Butters' conscience to this day, he thought of Stan and Kenny and the loss they carried around… most of all, he thought of Eric's mom, happy and in love in Wisconsin, but undoubtedly incomplete. It seemed wrong of Kyle, selfish of him, to be so ignorant, to deprive them of the knowledge that their friend, her son was alive.

It was a good angle, simpler and therefore better than Kyle's neurotic, emotional and scared reasoning. So he decided to run with it, let the very real injustice he felt ignite.
"You may not care, but there are people back home who miss you," Kyle said firmly, but he did wobble. "Don't they deserve the same chance I had? To see you again?"

"Maybe if you were like everybody else," Eric replied, with the same conviction. "But you're not."

Kyle furrowed his eyebrows, betraying butterflies in his stomach. "Then what makes me so special?"
He asked.

Eric smiled, so pure that it weighed down on Kyle's heart like a celestial body.

"You're all that matters to me, Kyle," Eric answered, and despite Kyle's fears and concerns, it felt great to hear Eric say that. "I don't need anybody else."

"Yeah... but..." Kyle's voice was trying to keep up as his heart raced after Eric. "They need you!"
He exclaimed, a little louder and harsher than he meant to when he saw Eric flinch. "Don't you realise? You think I'm the only one who missed you?! There's a fucking memorial for you in the middle of town, for Christ's sake! And despite what you say Eric, I can't... I can't just... hoard you from all the other people in your life who miss you and have no idea where you are!"

Kyle was fallible, finite, not enough.

I can't be his everything.

"I can't be selfish!" Kyle continued, close to tears in the silence he had stunned Eric into. "Not again! I just don't understand how you can't see that!"

When Kyle took a welcome sip of his drink, he caught Eric's stony, cold countenance and felt a part of him freeze... But he also saw Eric's conflicted, forlorn eyes, and they thawed him out.

"Because unlike you, Kyle, I can be selfish," Eric admitted. "That's not going to change any time soon."

Kyle was left to ponder those words for the rest of dinner.

While their many attempts at conversation and suppressing the fight they probably should have had, struggled in the resteraunt, the taxi ride back to Kyle's flat was spent in silence.

That wonderful afternoon seemed miles away.

Any opportunities to air out their frustrations were blindly dodged when they arrived home. They got ready for bed though it was still rather early, and Kyle didn't protest when Eric slid into bed next to him and spooned him just like he had the previous night. Quite the opposite, Kyle smiled weakly into the pillows before threading his fingers through the thick ones pressed against his chest.

Five hours later and he still couldn't sleep.

3:15

Their conversation in the restaurant, Eric's irrational devotion and the information he was keeping from Kyle, (apparently in order to protect him), were like a team of tornadoes decimating slumber.

Kyle had drifted off occasionally, weary eyes closing, coaxed by the soft warmth surrounding him before an alarming thought hacked through his fragile, relaxed state and sent him staring at the alarm clock again.
He had to be awake in four hours to go to work and…

*Oh shit! The numbers!*

Leaving work on Friday afternoon, Kyle had mentally set aside another boring Sunday to preparing for class the following day, which included cutting out brightly coloured paper numbers for his math lesson.

But Eric had arrived on Saturday and, as usual, thrown everything off kilter. A blessing really, for the Kyle who tried to be so sensible and organised. A spontaneous Eric reminded Kyle how fun, passionate and happy he could be.

And ironically, how forgetful he could be too.

Ever since those reckless teenage years, Kyle had put great importance into all of his responsibilities. Even if those responsibilities boiled down to cutting out construction paper.

Sighing to himself, Kyle figured he should get out of bed, and find his pair of scissors and sheets of paper. He might as well, he couldn't sleep and he certainly needed to take his mind off what was screaming in his head. Kyle carefully removed himself from Eric's embrace, and then padded into the kitchen.

The numbers one through eight were spread out on the table in peach paper. Kyle was nearly finished and yet the thought of going back to bed still seemed daunting. He was exhausted, but his mind was merciless.

"Hey," The soft voice travelled from the doorway.

Kyle hadn't even heard Eric leave the bedroom.

"Hi," Kyle replied, as the scissors sliced through paper.

"What are you doing up?" Eric asked as he made his way over to Kyle.

"I, uh, remembered I hadn't finished my lesson plan so…"

"A lesson plan? For the first grade?" Eric teased, pulling up a chair.

Kyle snickered and shook his head. "Yeah, well, by lesson plan I mean cutting giant numbers out of construction paper to teach subtraction."

Eric chuckled, infectious, and Kyle couldn't help but succumb.

"I could help you?" Eric offered.

His matured generosity was always a pleasant surprise to Kyle, never dulling even at ungodly hours of the morning.

"Thanks but it's fine," Kyle replied. "Go back to sleep. It's not your fault that I-"

Kyle stopped himself and looked up at Eric, seeing that his eyebrows were raised knowingly.

"Well, it is kind of your fault," Kyle considered with a small smile. He set his scissors down and found Eric's eyes in the dim light. "But I've been waiting three years for a distraction like you to show up."
Eric returned the smile, but due to his weariness and shaky emotional state, Kyle's smile faltered. Before it could weaken any further, Kyle averted his gaze and continued his task.

"Kyle?" Eric broke the silence.

"Yeah?" Kyle asked, scissors travelling up the curve of a figure nine.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Eric asked, and Kyle could've steered off course.

He stopped, scissors in hand but he turned his attention to Eric. "Why wouldn't I be?"

It appeared they were both waiting for each other, perhaps foolishly waiting for what they wanted to hear. Kyle guessed they desired completely different things. He caved in first, returning to the paper.

"You don't think I noticed how awkward it was through the rest of dinner?" Eric asked, loaded enough to bruise Kyle's tired skin.

Kyle sighed and set the scissors and paper down, incomplete, but he didn't care.

"That's why I wanted us to leave that topic alone," Eric continued, and Kyle lifted his head to look at him. "I just want our time together to be perfect and… I've been thinking…"

Kyle blinked, wondering if leaving each other with their thoughts had made Eric reconsider a few things.

"Thinking of what you said about trust and how it doesn't mean we have to agree on everything," Eric said. "But can't you just try to be behind this? And understand that it's all in your best interests?"

"How, Eric?" Kyle asked, his voice sharp but uncontrolled. "How is it in my best interests when I don't even know what they are?"

The questioned sliced into Eric's reasoning, and vulnerability seeped out.

"I can't hurt you again, Kyle," he whispered.

"Yes you can, I'll just have to get over it," Kyle replied, stronger than he had been all night. "Please just tell me, Eric."

Eric pursed his lips, back hunched, hands clasped between his open legs and he decided to direct his stare to the kitchen table. Perhaps he was deliberating, or maybe he was too afraid to meet Kyle's eyes, to face who he had to inevitably hurt.

Maybe Kyle didn't need to be strong? It was a falsity anyway. Like Eric, he needed to be honest. He was willing to be hurt if it meant the truth could come out, but who cherishes emotional bruises?

Kyle took a faint breath. "It's flattering, really, that you want to spend this time with me…"

Eric looked up at him, and a smile spread across Kyle's face as he continued, "I'm so grateful that you're here," he paused to admire Eric's own smile, trusting that he was alright, before he added, "but there are other people in your life, who are special to you whether you want to admit it or not, who would be thrilled to know you're safe… somewhere. They would be so happy to see you again. And, I understand, Eric that you're the type of guy who does what he wants. But this is something I feel you need to do, even if you can't see it. I don't want you to have any regrets."

There was a tiny crease in Eric's brow as he let Kyle's words wash over him, soaking them up.
"It wouldn't hurt, right?" Kyle asked, a little brighter. "To go back to South Park? To go to Wisconsin and see your mom? I don't see what the problem is."

"But there is a problem, Kyle!" He said testily. "You just don't-

"What?" Kyle cut off Eric's excuse. "Eric, what is it?"

Eric sighed, and shook his head, rubbing at the back of his neck as if trying to relieve the burden of responsibilities and people that he didn't know he had to account for. "I can't tell you!"

"Yes you can!" Kyle pleaded, leaning forward in his chair but Eric ducked his head away from him.

Yes, it stung to see Eric essentially recoiling from him, but Kyle knew Eric well enough to understand… Even with his maturity and all the lessons he had learnt, Eric was still afraid of a closeness he couldn't completely control. He was still afraid of people extracting truth from him, of others seeing him in a way he couldn't handle, because he felt it was wrong and pathetic. Kyle needed Eric to know that opening up even the parts of himself he felt should be hidden wasn't any of those things.

"Eric, look at me," Kyle said as he untangled Eric's knotted hands and held them.

"What are you scared of?" Kyle asked quietly, trying to find Eric's gaze though his head was still bowed.

Kyle sighed, before he continued, "Even if this… what you have to tell me… even if it does upset me, I'll be glad you told me the truth."

Eric looked up and Kyle's eyes brightened, shining hope on his face that he prayed would reflect on Eric's.

"You will?" Eric asked.

Kyle nodded, squeezing Eric's hand a little tighter.

"Promise, Kyle," Eric said, his stare was intense, clinging to Kyle. "I need you to be totally sure."

"I'm sure. I promise," Kyle replied. "I want to know."

Eric took a shaky breath, chewing his lip and Kyle tugged at their linked hands, to remind Eric of their connection.

"Okay, um…” Eric began, trembling, and he squeezed his eyes shut and bowed his head again. "Oh science, Kyle, this is killing me."

Eric's distress seemed to shoot from his pulse and through Kyle's fingers. Looking down at their hands, Kyle bit his lip, deliberating whether his next move would be a good idea. But if he made the transition as soon as possible…

"It's fine," Kyle soothed, his own hand shaking as it slipped out of Eric's and weaved through his hair instead. "I'll be fine, I promise."

Eric keened to the touch, staring up at Kyle with damp eyes.

"These visits, they're not… I can't just come and see you whenever I want…” Eric was struggling, but Kyle kept his fixed, patient stare. "I'm not allowed, it's – it's dangerous for me. That's why I have to wear this stupid fucking time tether," Eric glanced at the blue band, scowling. "And… And I
made a deal with this guy, this scientist guy, and they're limited.”

"Limited?" Kyle asked, brow furrowing. "What are limited?"

But his sluggish mind finally caught on, his insides twisting with the dreadful realisation.

"Your visits?" Kyle whispered, chest tight.

Eric nodded, lip trembling and he tried to conceal it.

"So… so how many?" Kyle asked, shivering like he was frozen all over again. He hated how Eric could probably feel it with his hand still in his hair. "H-how many do you have left?"

Tears welled in Eric's eyes.

"Six," he whispered, Kyle could tell he was trying desperately hard not to blink.

"And what happens after that?"

"N-nothing," Eric replied simply, and if it weren't for the promise he made, or the knowledge that these visits were so cruelly limited that made him want to savour every touch, Kyle would have collapsed, reeling, into his chair. Shattered.

"I can't come back," Eric continued, his voice was waterlogged. "I mean, I could if things worked out, if I could find a way and believe me, I'm trying, Kyle," Eric blinked and the tears fell thick and fast, like his rushed reassurances. "I've got a plan, I don't know how long it will take but I'm going to try so fucking hard for you. For us."

"I know," Kyle nearly moaned it, his nose was now stinging, and bitter tears pinched his eyes.

He could've collapsed into his chair but he collapsed into Eric instead, into trembling arms that braced him regardless.

"I know you will," Kyle whispered into Eric's shoulder, closing his eyes and inhaling him.

"You were right, Kyle… as usual," Eric said. Kyle laughed, short and muffled and its fractured echo escaped from Eric's mouth.

"Seeing the guys, seeing my mom, that would be the right thing to do," Eric continued. "And maybe I would regret not seeing them, years down the line but… I only have six shots of this left, and if the worst should happen, I'll… it'll be comforting to know that I didn't waste that time. Because I spent every last second of it with you."

Kyle was sobbing into Eric's shoulder, he clutched him close and wiped his eyes on Eric's shirt.

"Fuck," Eric muttered, pulling Kyle away from him, but he was still holding his shoulders. "I didn't want to make you cry, Kyle."

Kyle tried to laugh, but it was feeble, his tears rushing over the sound.

"Stop!" Eric begged, a hand leaving Kyle's shoulder to brush the tears away.

Eric's touch had proven great therapy before, but his fingers were clumsy and ineffective dams for the rivulets.

"I can't," Kyle shook his head sadly, but he smiled at Eric's efforts.
Hand slowing against Kyle's cheek until it was still, Eric searched Kyle's face. "You're okay though, right?"

"I think so," Kyle nodded, sniffling. "I'll try to be."

When Eric thumbed at Kyle's cheek, he elicited a wider smile.

"Thank you for being honest with me," Kyle added.

"No problem," Eric replied, with a tight smile of his own.

*If he keeps stroking my cheek like that, I could fall asleep right here.*

"So how about it?" Eric asked, smile loosening to reveal gleaming teeth.

"How about what?" Kyle chuckled thinly, lost in his boyfriend, lover…

"We do this together," Eric proposed. "Just us, nobody else?"

Eric made it sound so tantalising, so perfect, now Kyle knew of their bleak, uncertain future.

No, it wouldn't be bleak, it wouldn't be sad, and they wouldn't be miserable without each other, because they would make the most of every moment they spent together. Every encounter would be exhilarating and blissful and undoubtedly satisfying, and nothing would get in their way.

Not uncertainty, not absences, nothing and no-one would come between them. Even if it was selfish.

Kyle may have said that he couldn't be, but he had been regrettably. In the past. This was different now, wasn't it? And if Eric was willing to be so devoted, to be selfish, then who was Kyle to argue?

And he'd been waiting so long, they both had. How could Kyle possibly share?

Realising that he had yet to answer, Kyle nodded, leaning forward and sealing the deal with a kiss.

After the countless kisses they had shared, Eric was still startled by the contact, and Kyle relished how – for a guy capable of such duplicity – Eric could also be so incredibly telling in his actions, in his emotions. Kyle smiled into the kiss, breaking their lip-lock for a moment before his tongue entered Eric's mouth and Eric readily welcomed him with a muffled groan.

"I'm so in love with you, Eric," Kyle said, panting when the kiss wound down.

In his lidded gaze, Kyle saw Eric's eyes clouded with joyous tears. Obviously overwhelmed and not wanting Kyle to see it, Eric pressed his lips against Kyle's once again, the kiss strong and sure and articulating all the things that couldn't be reached at 4 AM.

Despite Eric's attempts to mask his tears, Kyle felt them brush against his own slick cheeks.

"I love you too, Kyle," Eric mumbled, but his voice was fit to bursting with adoration.

"Come on," Kyle whispered, the words tingling in the space between them as he held Eric's hand and lifted them both out of their seats. "Let's go back to bed."

Eric nodded, wrapping his arm around Kyle's waist, hoisting him up and lifting him to his lips. Kyle whimpered and clutched Eric's shoulders as they left a trail of kisses to the bedroom.
Construction paper numbers had been forgone for mutual masturbation, spooning and a few hours of sleep.

Kyle's bed was a lot more difficult to get out of when he had Eric in it. Still, he had begrudgingly slid out of the sheets and trudged to the kitchen, slumping against the doorframe and grumbling when he had seen his abandoned 'lesson plan' on the table.

After finishing breakfast and his project, Kyle went about showering and getting dressed as quietly as he could. His emotions dipped and rose on an unsteady seesaw whenever he glanced at a sleeping Eric; from elated and in love, to disappointed and pining for Eric's return.

But noise wasn't the problem, Kyle realised, not enough to wake Eric up. No, he had woken up when his arm dropped onto an empty pillow.

Kyle watched, amused, as Eric stirred, rubbing his eyes and grumbling.

"You're up?" Eric asked when he noticed Kyle wasn't in bed, voice foggy with sleep.

"Yeah, I have to go to work," Kyle replied, crossing the small room and hovering over Eric. He leaned over and ran a hand through Eric's bed-hair. "Sorry I have to leave you here alone."

"That's alright," Eric said, smiling at the touch. "I'll be leaving in a couple of hours anyway."

Kyle nodded, removing his hand from Eric's hair at the sour thought of returning to an empty flat.

"Well, um, I need to lock up but in the meantime help yourself to food," Kyle replied. "The shower too if you want to use it."

Eric's smile morphed into a wicked grin; morning or night, from Denver to London, Kyle was sure there wasn't a bed Eric couldn't look good in.

"Get over here…" Eric said softly.

Kyle hadn't sat on the bed for five seconds before he was pulled into a hug. How Eric's nose had buried into his shoulder, his warmth, and his imminent departure suddenly overpowered Kyle. It took great effort for him to even wrap his arms around Eric's shoulders and return his embrace.

Kyle closed his eyes and greedily drank in all that which overwhelmed him, vowing to recall every single detail of Eric when the nights got lonely, when those pangs yawned within him.

Opening his eyes briefly, Kyle caught sight of his alarm clock.

"I have to go," he murmured, but clutched Eric tighter.

Eric nodded as he let Kyle go, but Kyle wouldn't let them be separated just yet. He still had a little time. So he trailed his fingers down Eric's arm until they weaved through Eric's digits.

"Thank you so much, Eric," Kyle whispered, an appropriate volume for the quiet morning.

Eric beamed. "Thank you."

"It was wonderful to see you again." Kyle pursed his lips as he watched Eric's face flush and his eyes grow glassy, but the image thankfully blurred.

With their hands still intertwined, Kyle leaned forward and shakily placed a kiss on Eric's forehead, eyes slipping shut and tears travelling down his face.
"I love you," Kyle whispered, eyes still closed as the moment suspended.

"I love you too," Eric replied around the obvious lump in his throat.

Kyle willed for the magic of yesterday afternoon to return, where the bed was their world and time waited for them, but to no avail.

*We both have places to be.*

Kyle stood up, Eric's arm outstretched as they clung to each other. They smirked as each finger one by one dismantled their connection, before they were two separate people again.

"Bye," Kyle smiled, lingering by the bed.

"Bye," Eric replied, still under the covers.

Kyle walked slowly to the door, and he could feel Eric's eyes on him. He didn't know when he would feel the weight of his gaze again.

"Hey, Eric," Kyle said, turning to face him when he got to the bedroom door. "Can you do me a favour?"

"Anything," Eric answered.

"Um, leave me a note?"

"Saying what?"

"When you'll next be visiting me?" Kyle asked, but he kept his focus on Eric, so he could see how crucial this was. "Just so I know?"

Another smile for Kyle to catalogue, spread across Eric's face. "Of course I will," he nodded.

"Thanks," Kyle grinned, and turned away before Eric could see him welling up again.

"I'll miss you," Eric said, sending the hairs on the nape of Kyle's neck to stand on end.

Kyle smiled wetly to himself, before he turned back and replied, "I'll miss you too."

Seven hours later, when Kyle returned home, he realised he had been foolish to believe that the flat would feel completely empty. A bright English day had flooded the flat with sunlight, illuminating Eric's brief presence there.

And on his pillow, Kyle was delighted to find a note:

*May 26th, two years from now. I can't wait to see you again!* 

Neither could Kyle, he was already planning how to best celebrate his twenty-seventh birthday with Eric.

Chapter End Notes

There won't be another update until after Christmas, so happy holidays! And as always,
thank you for reading!
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Sorry that it's taken me so long to update. I've been having laptop trouble lately but we should be back on track now. I know I said a few months back that this should be finished by January, but it turns out I was totally wrong on that one... Anyway, I hope you enjoy and thank you so much - not just for reading - but for being so patient!

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Returning to Kyle a week (and two years) later, Eric found himself where they had started.

An apartment block in Denver.

Bigger than the apartment Kyle had lived in when he was still a teacher in training, with cleaner carpets and fresh paint in the lobby. Eric had the floor and number memorized, but as he walked down the quiet hallway, he couldn't help but feel detached, a little lost. He had read the information in Kyle's file sure, but that was only dates and records. It wasn't conversation or memory or housewarming party. Eric tried to remember that his duty was simple: find out where Kyle was and try to get there... and here he was! So what was the problem?

The problem was he never stayed, couldn't stay. He drifted into Kyle's life like a twister to uproot him; or like flotsam on an ocean as wide as space, making cameos in Kyle's lighthouse glow; or like a ghost of youth's past, wrapping Kyle up in his phantasmal embrace. Cherished, yes, but invisible too.

Eric's fists clenched at the thought, wondering why it even entered his head. How could his love – their shared love – be invisible when it was so obvious? Unavoidable? Something neither of them could escape. Even if they wanted to, because it was so passionate, exciting, urgent and – despite the strange, impossible nature of their relationship – fulfilling. So it was irrelevant if Eric had Kyle for eternity, a day, or a lifetime, right? Eric still mattered to him, had always mattered. They were important, weren't they? And through the madness, the destruction of scientific laws, the utter absurdity, their love was real.

Emboldened and reaffirmed, Eric knocked the door to Kyle's apartment. The stubborn determination swelling in his chest quelled his nerves, his anticipating butterflies.

He heard the door unlock before it opened, and there was Kyle, grinning and tempting right in front of him.

Eric took a deep breath. "Hi-

Before he could finish his sentence, Kyle had thrown his arms around his shoulders and leapt into a kiss. Eric stumbled, but gladly embraced Kyle; one hand at his warm back while another hand crept into soft, red curls.

So very real.
Eric felt a tug at his heart, his mouth as it attempted to smile into the enthusiastic kiss, and also at his neck, Kyle's tight grip pulling him forward. Once inside, Kyle kicked the door shut and Eric jolted in his arms. Kyle's chuckle suffocated in Eric's hot mouth, still melded with Kyle's.

"You'd swear it was my birthday," Eric said when they finally pulled away, panting.

Eyes gleaming and mouth flushed, Kyle chuckled again.

"Happy birthday," Eric murmured, forehead pressed against Kyle's, and both his hands were now fitted around Kyle's waist.

"Thank you," Kyle said, placing a gentle, chaste kiss to Eric's lips. "I'm so glad you're here."

Eric nodded, returning the kiss.

"So..." Eric blurted the word out in the comfortable afterglow of their reunion. "New apartment?"

He then asked, as he studied the living room.

It was minimally furnished and cozy, the blue May morning pouring in.

"It's a lot bigger than your old place," Eric commented.

"Yeah, I love it," Kyle replied, eyes roaming around the room as well. "It's not so close to the school I'm teaching at but..." Kyle's voice trailed off, Eric's attention chased after it and drew their gazes to each other. "When has distance ever got in the way, huh?"

Eric grinned and squeezed Kyle's waist. "Exactly..."

The believing smile on Kyle's face thawed out Eric's faith too. His grin melted into a copycat smile.

"You, um, said you had something planned?" Eric asked.

"Yep," Kyle beamed, tugging at Eric's shirt. "We're going on a trip!"

"A, a trip?" Eric replied, tugging at Kyle's shirt too. Albeit, a little warily.

"I know, you have to go back in two days, but it's all taken care of," Kyle assured. "I've got a sub covering for me today, and we'll check out of the hotel on Sunday. So what do you say?"

Eric disguised his endeared smile by pursing his lips. Of course Kyle would have everything planned, have every possible setback taken care of.

"Yes?" Eric finally answered, kissing the tip of Kyle's nose which made them both snicker. "Thank you. Where are we going, anyway?"

Kyle held his finger up in a 'wait here' gesture, before slipping out of Eric's loose embrace. Eric watched Kyle leave the room and when he returned, he held a brochure that he wordlessly handed to Eric.

Tall, familiar mountain peaks capped with snow and spearing Eric's heart with nostalgia were on the front of the brochure. They barricaded a large, admittedly pretty ski lodge, under a banner that read **Breckenridge Ski Resort's Mountain Spa and Lodge.**

Eric's grip stiffened on the paper. He hadn't exactly packed for that, and he also wondered if Kyle had forgotten their skiing mishap when they were children. But it was undoubtedly a lovely gesture, and it was Kyle's birthday so...
"Skiing, huh?" Eric asked. "I haven't really-"

"No, you don't understand," Kyle interrupted, fingers atop the brochure and pulling Eric's gaze to his own. "We don't *have* to go skiing. But this lodge is supposed to be really romantic and luxurious and... I know our visits are always special but-"

"Kyle, it sounds awesome," Eric grinned now that he was sold.

"Really?" Kyle beamed, reaching up and kissing Eric again. "I knew you'd like it!" He added as he moved his fingers from the brochure, both hands now placed on Eric's chest. Eric's breath stuttered in his lungs under Kyle's electric fingertips.

"I thought it would be a nice birthday present for myself," Kyle said softly.

A segue Eric had been waiting for. He let a smirk tug at the corner of his mouth. "And speaking of," he began, bringing his backpack to his front and severing their connection. Kyle's eyes widened, stepping back and staring at Eric as he fished around his backpack.

Eventually he pulled out a small, crudely wrapped parcel.

"Sit down," Eric instructed, before he and Kyle both sat facing each other on the couch.


Kyle smiled, amused, before he placed the parcel in his lap and unwrapped it. Sitting in the middle of plain, crumpled paper was a glinting, steely star.

"Woah..." Kyle whispered. He picked the tiny star up, holding it between his fingers and letting the sunlight pierce its corners. "What is it?"

"It's a star, welded from scrap metal," Eric explained, watching Kyle study his gift. "I made it at work."

"It's glistening," Kyle gasped, still staring up at it.

"Varnish," Eric replied. "The sparkly stuff was a bitch to find, but you're worth it."

The admission appeared to break Kyle's enchantment, for he neglected the star and looked at Eric instead. A tight, grateful smile was on his face, and his eyes gleamed once again.

Eric wished he could keep that look forever. It was so beautiful on Kyle.

"And I have one too," Eric added, suddenly remembering himself. He reached into his pants' pocket and pulled out his own small star. Kyle gasped and chuckled softly, rousing a small smirk from Eric.

But when he looked down at the star, all that it was supposed to represent, he sighed.

"I couldn't stop thinking about the conversation we had back in London," Eric admitted, trying hard not to mumble. He didn't want to dampen Kyle's birthday. "When I told you about my visits... you took it so well, Kyle."

Kyle blinked, fingers curling around his star.

"Sobbing in my kitchen is taking it well?" He asked with a small, flat laugh.

"Well, at least you were honest," Eric considered. "And brave. Those aren't qualities that everyone
can say they have."

Kyle had been staring at his fist, but he lifted his gaze and slid an appreciative smile Eric's way.

"Not to mention, you made me feel better," Eric continued, and Kyle brightened. "You made me feel relieved and hopeful and... I think it made us a little stronger, you know? We both know what the situation is now and we can make it work together. I don't ever want to lie to you again, no matter what my intentions."

Kyle nodded slowly, absorbing Eric's words, perhaps extracting more strength from them. But his smile never crumbled, never buckled, and it made Eric want to vow to do the same.

"But I guess these stars are also like reminders?" Eric said, shuffling closer to Kyle. "To keep believing, to keep strong... whatever. I just want us to always have a piece of each other."

"Eric, thank you," Kyle said, clutching Eric's forearm.

"You're welcome," Eric replied, his eyes meeting Kyle's.

"These are incredible but..." Kyle stopped again and sighed, shaking his head. "You don't just have a piece of me."

Eric's heart strummed a little faster at the admission he never knew he needed to hear.

"I don't?" He asked, a lump in his throat.

"No," Kyle smiled simply, before kissing his cheek. "You have all of me."

Their room at the Mountain Spa and Lodge decimated the rustic, wood-furnished image of the place Eric had in his mind. For one, it was huge, some would say too big for only two people. Everything about the room seemed to be larger than life, decadent, though still fashionably understated. The walls were tall and cream, housing the type of roaring fire you'd expect to find in a ski lodge. A sunken, black leather couch sat in front of the fire and a king-size bed with metallic covers - padded with matching plump throw cushions - was behind that. They also had a view of snowy mountains dusted with conifer trees from their balcony, so quietly beautiful.

While Eric had been marveling at the plush room, he caught a glimpse of a cross-armed, beaming Kyle who clearly had spared no expense for this special trip.

"You know, I didn't really pack 'romantic evening' clothes," Eric said, now laying out his outfit options on the bed, whilst ruffling his wet hair with a towel. "To be honest, I don't own any."

"Who cares?" Kyle asked, buttoning up the shirt to his suit Eric knew was going to be mind-meltingly sexy. "I mean, most of the diners are still probably going to be in their ski wear."

"Can you guarantee that?" Eric asked, laughing.

It eased his annoyance somewhat. Kyle had put so much effort into every aspect of this trip and it frustrated Eric that he couldn't fully return it. This is why he wasn't exactly fond of surprises.

"No, but, I'm positive you'll look handsome no matter what," Kyle replied, looking up at Eric with a small grin.

"Alright, alright, prince charming..." Eric teased, trying to distract himself from how hot Kyle looked when he grinned at him like that... with his shirt still undone...
Kyle chuckled under his breath and shook his head.

"Do you have cologne I could borrow?" Eric asked, revealing himself to be more unprepared. He could've cringed.

"Yeah, there's some in my toiletry bag," Kyle nodded.

Eric smirked at Kyle knowingly, but when he thought of their first reunion, their first tentative, brittle weekend, his smirk softened with fondness.

"What?" Kyle asked, noticing Eric's smile.

But Eric didn't respond, he simply rolled his eyes and reached for Kyle's toiletry bag on the nightstand. Unzipping the bag, Eric's eyes widened and his steady heartbeat jumped at what he saw.

"Well?" Kyle asked, not paying too much attention to an unresponsive Eric. "Did you find it?"

Eric shook his head, thoughts whirling, before he recovered his voice.

"No," he replied, too shaky, too soft. He cleared his throat and pulled out the surprising items. "But I did find these."

Kyle looked up and froze at the box of condoms and the bottle of lube in Eric's hands, shrinking back as if denying responsibility.

"Shit," Kyle muttered. A flush crawled up his throat. "I forgot about those…"

It was strange, but Kyle's panicked, embarrassed reaction was a calming influence on Eric. So amusing was it to see Kyle like this that it allowed Eric to look past his initial, freaked out haze.

There was a bed between them.

Eric needed to close that gap.

"Kyle?" Eric asked, smiling as he moved slowly from his side of the bed.

"Y-yes?" Kyle replied, struggling to be measured when his face was still burning.

Eric already knew the answer to the following question, but he wanted to hear it come from Kyle's mouth. "What are these doing in here?"

Kyle wrung his hands together, shoulders hunched. "Well, I wanted- I hoped we could-"

"You're ready?" Eric interrupted softly, unable to help it. He was at the foot of the bed, closer to Kyle now. Hopefully that was a comfort.

Kyle nodded, his eyes wide and apprehensive. He had been so sure before… Did Kyle want to bring this up over dinner? Articulating his desire, their love in the way only Kyle could? Did Kyle want to lull Eric with a romantic evening, filled with purposeful touches and lingering looks? And then when they strolled back to their room, hand in hand, collapsing on their bed with melded mouths, tugging at each other's pesky clothes, would Kyle make Eric an offer he couldn't refuse?

Eric had potentially ruined all of that with his discovery. But his disappointment paled next to the knowledge that Kyle wanted him, and that however this next phase was initiated, Kyle wanted it to be special for the both of them.
"Hmm…” Eric dropped the condoms and lube on the mattress.

"What?” Kyle asked.

Eric tried to be graceful, seductive, when he continued his slow, deliberate steps towards Kyle.

"So you wanna fuck me, huh?” He teased, smirk just as velvety as his voice.

"No!” Kyle snapped, flustered. He met Eric's eyes and couldn't deny him. "Well, yeah, but that's not what - that doesn't sound like what I want to do."

"Then what do you want to do?” Eric asked, grinning victoriously when Kyle shot him a shy, knowing smirk.

"Huh?” He pressed, reaching out for Kyle now that he was close enough.

"What do you want to do to me, Kyle?” He held Kyle's wrists, bringing Kyle's hands to his clothed chest.

"You want the details?” Kyle asked, his eyes on his own hands as they travelled to Eric's hips.

Eric bit back a gasp. He was all the more sensitive now he knew what those touches could lead to.

"I'm not that crude,” he replied with a chuckle.

Kyle stared up at him fondly, lovingly.

"Except you totally are,” he teased, squeezing the soft hips in his hands. "You're not exactly a saint, are you?"

Eric thought of their last encounter and pricked head to toe with arousal. "I can't keep that up anymore, huh?” He replied with a faint, humid snicker.

"You never could,” Kyle chuckled, before his hold grew lax and his gaze trailed off. "Unless…”

"What?” Eric asked, a crease in his brow, wondering how and when their flirtatious conversation had veered into this suddenly nervous territory.

"Unless I assumed,” Kyle mumbled, releasing Eric and backing away. "Oh God, Eric, I'm sorry-”

Confusion smothered Eric's disappointment. "Sorry for what?"

"That I brought condoms and lube thinking I was going to need them and I didn't take your feelings into account! If you were ready!” Kyle exclaimed, but he was scolding himself. Glancing at the items on the bed, he winced and ran a hand through his curls. "I mean, this is something I've thought about for a while, but for you this must all be happening so fast. I forgot that! I completely forgot-"

"Kyle, relax!” Eric couldn't help but laugh at a worked up Kyle. He hoped his gentle grip and soft voice would be calming. "I'm ready. I want this."

A dent in his brow, Kyle's widened eyes searched Eric's face.

"How do you know?” He asked. "This is your virginity we're talking about! It's a big responsibility and I'm... I'm more than happy to have that, to have you.” A smile rippled in the midst of Kyle's rambling, and he managed to reach up and stroke Eric's cheek. "But I don't want to rush you, or pressure you, or just idly accept that you want this when you're not entirely sure."
Eric may have found Kyle's worried moment a little exasperating and jarring, but it was also undoubtedly sweet and considerate. It was something a lesser man wouldn't have done. But Eric hadn't fallen in love with a lesser man, he was lucky enough to have fallen in love with Kyle.

"Kyle, trust me, I'm ready," Eric said, trying to be tender but firm. So Kyle would have no more doubts. "Yeah, it's happening fast for me, and yeah, it's my first time…" Eric paused, he thought of those lonely, teenage nights that had projected rich fantasies. So vivid that they had reached this far into the past, that now appeared to be shaping Eric's future. "But I've loved you for so long, I've thought about this for so long too and… if anybody's going to be my first then it should be you," Eric pulled Kyle closer when he smiled wetly up at him. "It feels right, I want you and it feels right."

Kyle responded by pressing himself to Eric's chest, wrapping his arms around him and clutching him tight. Eric smiled into Kyle's hair and folded himself into his embrace.

"So?" Eric murmured into red curls. "Come on. Tell me the details, Kyle."

Kyle lifted his head, and Eric dutifully met his eyes. With a tentative look, Kyle held Eric at arm's length, but it was still close enough.

"We're going to have an amazing dinner, and when it's over I'm going to bring you back up here," Kyle promised, voice quiet but scintillating. "I'll kiss you and hold you and undress you and then I'll make love to you."

Eric's breath hitched and he found himself nodding. Kyle's vow, their evening sounded so wonderful that Eric didn't want to spoil it with a reply.

But he took Kyle's words and let his heart do what it may with them:

In a gorgeous hotel room, with the snow falling outside, the love of his life, his soulmate, his boyfriend was going to make love to him.

Not even the sound of a ticking clock could drown out his happiness.

Dinner was fantastic, though rushed. Eric's stomach was floating under the wings of a thousand butterflies who craved something (rather, someone) other than food. In a move very uncharacteristic of him, Eric had replied an immediate 'no,' when the waiter asked if the pair wanted any dessert. Kyle had laughed adorably behind his menu, reminding Eric that he was the one to savor.

As predicted, Kyle looked unfairly sexy in his suit, and his eyes – already a lush, abundant green – held Eric's curiosity and reverie with care all evening. The kind of care Eric admired and was accustomed to now that he truly had Kyle's affections. Touches were coy, looks were promising and words were weakly veiled distractions for the much anticipated event that would follow dinner.

Kyle's hand was placed on Eric's lower back during the elevator ride, where they chatted about their lovely meal and chuckled at the observations they had made of some of the diners. But those gentle fingers and warm palm reminded Eric that he was Kyle's, and that tonight he was going to give Kyle a piece of himself. Admittedly, it was overwhelming to the point of nerve-wracking. But trusting somebody so deeply was exhilarating and empowering too and he wanted Kyle to see that. He wanted Kyle to see how strong he had made him and, in turn, how strong their union was despite the complications.

The lights lifted automatically when Eric and Kyle entered their hotel room and it illuminated the soft, persistent snow outside. Still in awe of their fantastic suite, Eric found himself staring and wandering into the center of the room without Kyle by his side. When he glanced at the door, he saw
that Kyle was fixing the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the handle.

Eric wondered who would want to knock on their hotel room door at ten thirty at night, but he was grateful for Kyle's caution.

He was still staring when Kyle turned around, their surprised smiles melting into those of gentle excitement; the kind of excitement that glimmers to the surface when your heart is pounding and your nerves are rattling.

"So…" Kyle began, soft voice bubbling eagerly as he took a step forward.

"So…" Eric echoed, because nothing else he could say seemed good enough.

Kyle's smile creased with endearment and his eyes shone with certainty as he made his way over to Eric. The growing intensity of Kyle's expression as he neared him rooted Eric's feet to the carpet, his slightly widened gaze drawn to the twinned black holes Kyle's eyes were morphing into. Kyle had surpassed excitement and was now offering Eric hunger and need, sublime but terrifying and when Kyle had reached up to cup his cheek he inexplicably found himself shaking.

Kyle had stared at his lips, lowered his lids and leaned in to kiss him when Eric blurted out: "I've messed up your plans, haven't I?"

"What plans?" Kyle asked, the only change in his expression was the dent in his brow.

"Come on, Kyle," Eric said with a sigh. He lowered his head. "You probably had something totally romantic planned and I ruined it."

An unhelpful silence, followed by a sigh, before fingers graced Eric's other cheek and he found himself staring into Kyle's – still lusty but imploring – eyes.

"You didn't ruin anything," Kyle promised him.

"Alright," Eric acquiesced; he was finding it harder and harder to deny Kyle. "I spoiled the surprise then."

Kyle rolled his eyes and grinned in exasperation.

"Will you quit it?" He laughed, before his eyes roamed to the light switches on the wall. The corners of his mouth tugged into a smug smile. "Besides, there's still one surprise left."

"There is?" Eric asked, and he could feel those shivers dissipating.

Face still fixed in that arrogant smirk, Kyle practically slithered out of Eric's embrace before he made his way to the numerous light switches on the wall. In the newly imposed distance, Kyle's eyes signaled Eric's like pearlescent moons, encompassing everything else that made up his hopeful, eager expression. When Kyle lowered the lights, that vulnerable glint was the last thing he saw.

The art deco chandelier, huge and hanging low on the ceiling, spat out a projection of supernovas like burst cosmic bubblegum, splattered on the walls in coral, electric blue, fuchsia and neon shades of pink, purple and green. Eric gasped, Kyle's pleased smile was now shrouded in celestial colors as he stared around the room; hologram planets narrowly and steadily dodged the wayward explosion of the giant stars as they orbited… what?

Eric was at the center of the room, so was it him? No, he wasn't grand or important enough, not magical enough. He could've been, with the mini galaxy circling his golden gaze, but something was
missing. There were soft footsteps behind him and a knowing hand at his back, and when he glanced to his side, there was Kyle's beautiful face.

Missing and now found.

Remembered and now cherished.

The only person, the only force in the universe that made him feel powerful, wanted…

*Whole.*

The supernovas combusted in their presence, the planets orbited them because they were so important and they mattered, if only to each other.

"What?" Eric gasped; his ability to speak was slow and uneven when recovering from such awe. "What is this?"

"A space room," Kyle replied, as he joined Eric in marveling at the projections. "The hotel offers tons of themed rooms like this one. Some of them are a little corny but this… I don't know…"

Perhaps distracted and suddenly bashful, Kyle took a moment to think while stars bobbed on the surface of the sky, the walls, like fireflies tethered to a lake.

*Constellations,*

Eric thought of the atrium, of loneliness, of timeless devotion and the exhausting complexities of time itself. He thought of the enormous, random puzzle of time and space that still somehow makes sense and connects everything. Most of all, he thought of Kyle, who represented it all.

Perfectly.

"It felt right," Kyle continued with a relieved sigh, "Like I shouldn't get any other room."

When he hadn't responded, Kyle took Eric's hand and asked, "You like it?"

"I love it," Eric nodded, squeezing Kyle's hand, the stars blurring. "It's perfect."

Eric turned to him, thumbed at this cheek and added, "you're perfect, Kyle."

Eric saw his tiny, starstruck reflection in Kyle's gleaming eyes, hand still on Kyle's cheek as his boyfriend pressed his lips together in a creased smile. Even if it was only temporary, Eric's trembles had disappeared despite the enormity of the night. After all if he could control the movement of the planets, if he could play jump rope with time, then kissing his boyfriend was easy, right?

And it was. Emboldened, Eric guided Kyle's lips to his own, wrapping an arm around Kyle's waist and pulling them closer together. The soft press of their lips, the warm security of each other's bodies and the finesse of their tongues as their kisses grew heated dulled and melted the initial sting of overjoyed tears.

Kyle's hands that had been roaming Eric's back and clutching his sides moved to his own tie; his body hot, eyes hooded and lips flushed when he loosened the strip of material and threw it to the floor. Eric was back on Kyle immediately, lips at his neck. Savoring Kyle, but also rewarding him for taking the first (admittedly chaste) step in undressing.

As he kissed, sucked and nipped at the pale skin, Eric wrapped himself up in Kyle, both of them now pressed flush together; like they were both entangled in the intricate knots of time; like they still
Eric made sure to catalogue the perfect coupling of his lips and Kyle's skin, the feeling of Kyle's fingers woven through his hair and those whispered, lilted moans twice over.

"Shall we, um?" Kyle let the question hang, and when Eric pulled his head out of Kyle's kiss-bruised neck, he saw his boyfriend glancing at the bed.

It was pristine and neatly made, as beautifully cold as the steel, silky sheets.

Eric saw it rumpled, damp and imagined his skin searing against the fabric as he was fucked into the mattress.

A shiver, like a phantom bead of sweat, rolled down his spine and he nodded. Kyle nipped his own lower lip, excitement trembling like green flames in his eyes. Anticipatory giggles, adolescent and warm, conspired between them. When Eric felt fingertips skid against his arm, his eyes fell to the offending digits, slipping into his own and Kyle knitted their fingers together.

A gentle tug and Eric found himself walking backwards, being guided to the bed blindly but he always trusted Kyle. His legs touched the end of the bed and he gave into the comfort of the soft, plump mattress. Kyle stood over him, their hands still intertwined before Eric pulled Kyle forward with a shy, wicked smirk of his own. It appeared he was the one leading them to this new, feverish world.

Their mouths quickly found each other, their reunion hot and deep. Kyle found purchase on the mattress, thighs either side of Eric's hips, keeping Eric anchored to the bed; Eric's own exhilarating force of gravity.

The kiss unwound as Kyle moved to unbutton his shirt, and a disheveled Eric propped himself up on his elbows to watch. He let Kyle pop the first two buttons uninterrupted, but by the third he was antsy, he was so close to Kyle now (to hold, to kiss, to touch) that it ached to sit there idle. Reaching up, Eric pecked at the small window of skin, stamping a kiss on Kyle's thorax. Another button, another affectionate, clumsy kiss. Eric felt the tremor of a wispy chuckle from Kyle, and when another button was undone, he decided to be a bit more playful and possessive, nipping at the skin. Kyle gasped and jolted at the initial sting, but ran a hand through Eric's hair as he made his mark.

But when the time came for another button to be popped, Kyle paused and Eric waited. Eric watched Kyle toy with the button until his infamous impatience flickered and he nosed at Kyle's chest in a silent plea. Finally, Kyle undid the button and Eric's mouth dove to claim the newly released patch of skin.

"Jesus…" Kyle chuckled, tugging at Eric's hair and lifting his head. "Can't you wait?"

It was then Eric realized that he couldn't. Even with the comfort of his mission, even with the knowledge that he needed to be on his best behavior in order to see Kyle again, he never could.

But he didn't need to wait anymore. Liberation swelled in his chest and scorched his lungs like the most purifying light.

"No," Eric's giddy laughter was simmering as he shook his head. He leaned in and pressed a sloppy kiss to Kyle's lips. "I don't want to wait anymore"

"Me neither," Kyle smiled, unbuttoning his shirt and pulling it from his shoulders.
Eric had no time to admire Kyle, before his own shirt was being tugged at, and it amused him that Kyle could be just as impatient as he had been. Lifting his arms compliantly, Eric let Kyle pull his shirt over his head. Shirt removed, Eric blushed and ducked his head instinctively. Kyle's laughter cooled his embarrassment, as did the welcome hand in his hair that slid down his warm cheek.

A whirlwind.

Eric had never thought of Kyle being such a thing before, but he was. Before Eric could even comprehend it, he felt a pair of lips on his own and Kyle exercised his gravity, his pull over Eric until he felt the silk sheets against his bare back. Quickly, roaming hands travelled to their trousers, fingers swift as Eric rid his himself of his pants while Kyle unbuckled his belt and kicked off his trousers.

Eric froze and jolted when he felt Kyle's clothed erection press and rub against his own. The most obvious and pertinent reminder that Kyle was going to fuck him soon, or make love to him, whatever breathless, romantic phrasing they had chosen that had made them so bold. It had gotten them this far; kissing, writhing, near-naked on top of each other.

Eric thought of their previous sexual encounter, on a simple Sunday in Kyle's bed. He remembered how big Kyle was, and how he felt even bigger when Eric's mouth stretched and his lips fitted tightly around him. Of course it felt great, especially when Kyle was sobbing his name and panting into the nearest pillow when it seemed that Eric had completely drained him. But it was also difficult; nervous and inexperienced as Eric was.

Now he had found himself in a similar situation, but with a nerve-wracking role reversal. Control had been transferred to Kyle, leaving Eric exposed, more susceptible to hurt. What was difficult before seemed near impossible now… What Kyle wanted, what Eric had wanted… It was achievable… But not without a considerable amount of pain.

Before Eric could be crushed by mounting anxiety, Kyle — sweet, oblivious Kyle — pressed down on him again with a roll of his hips. Eric groaned, the sound shuddering in his throat as his and Kyle's lips were still sealed. But he lifted his hips, pleading for more of that sensitive cotton friction. Kyle complied, picking up their pace and grinding his hips harder until Eric's cock was straining against his boxers and he wanted to be free of that last, pesky article of clothing. He wanted both of them liberated, to feel all of Kyle.

Somehow, despite their persistent rhythm and fierce closeness, Eric managed to slide his hand between his and Kyle's slippery bodies. It was an awkward move, unexpected but Kyle didn't protest when Eric's clumsy fingertips brushed against his chest, then his stomach and finally his bulge.

"Hmf!" Kyle's muffled noise of surprise signaled the end of their aching kiss and he was panting, trembling when Eric cupped and squeezed at him through his boxers.

Eric reveled at what he had done to Kyle, and balked at the reality of the evening which was fast approaching.

His hazy, hooded eyes were concentrated on his hand that was still teasing Kyle's arousal. But Kyle could only see him, Eric realized this when his gaze rose and he saw Kyle's flushed mouth hovering over his and smoky emerald eyes enraptured with his own. Kyle's stare, the prickling warmth of his body, was so intense that Eric withered. His hand slowed as he realized anxiety had indeed gotten the better of him. For one, it was inhibiting him from admiring the beauty staring him in the face.

Kyle's sweaty, disheveled hair fell into his darkened eyes, and his full, kiss-plumped lips shone, doused in Eric's saliva as well as his own. Eric's heart pounded to a surer beat, strong enough to quell his anxiety. This was all he had ever wanted; no matter how much it scared him.
Kyle shifted on top of him and Eric let his limp hand fall to the sheets. He fixed his gaze on Kyle, that reassuring splendor so close to him that it blurred brightly, like Kyle was indeed the prepossessing star that made their tiny universe possible. Unlike Eric, Kyle was unwavering. Caramel and emerald gazes locked as Kyle pulled down his boxers and slid them from his calves.

A hand rested above Eric's head, fingers sinking into a plush throw cushion. Eric had always been in Kyle's thrall, even before he knew what it meant, but now he could feel it viscerally. He could feel their connection; tight and precarious, strong and desperate, invigorating and debilitating, pulled taut between the two of them. He could feel it constrict his heart and weigh down on his skeleton when he stared at Kyle, bare and beautiful and real. Eric was awed by the sight, in love with the man but still frightened.

He didn't know to what extent, if he even cared to look further, but he supposed that his present fear would not be assuaged until he admitted it to Kyle. Kyle, who was honest with him even when Eric didn't want him to be. Kyle, the most compassionate person to grace a life as fraught with selfishness and severity as Eric's.

But maybe voicing his worries would be enough to convince himself he didn't want to go through with this? When he did, in magnificent, quiet moments like this, he knew he did.

Perhaps they didn't have to time to mull things over? To postpone? When their time together was limited and the future was so uncertain? Despite Eric's determined dreams and Kyle's belief in him.

"Eric?" Kyle asked, a crease in his brow. "Is something wrong?"

Eric had been so immersed in his muddled thoughts that he didn't realize he waswitling down Kyle's confidence.

"What?" Eric responded absently, before it clicked and he shook his head. "No!"

"It's just that..." Kyle began, his gaze wandered to the cushion, fingering the black velvet. "It looked like you had something on your mind."

"I was thinking," Eric replied honestly.

Kyle smiled, reminding Eric just how endeared Kyle was to him.

"About what?" He asked.

Eric sighed, his chest rose and deflated but no sound came out. This was his chance to voice his concerns, to ask the questions he hoped Kyle could answer. But Kyle had gone to so much trouble, and during these short visits all Eric cared about was making Kyle happy. That was his new mission and just like his previous one, he would rather die than abandon it.

So instead he sat up and nestled Kyle into his lap, before resting his palm against Kyle's cheek. It was their recently acquired physical indicator of comfort, of adoration, of love.

"How lucky I am that you're here with me," Eric finally answered. It wasn't a lie, just an omission. "I was thinking how you're the most beautiful person in the universe."

Kyle smiled, and Eric adored the way his cheek swelled in his palm just as much as he adored the smile itself. A pair of soothing hands was placed on Eric's chest as a pair of lips found the crook of his neck.

Again, he was back on that mattress, where he belonged with Kyle, where he knew he wanted to be.
The hands on his chest moved treacherously slow down his body, Kyle applying an adequate amount of possessive pressure until he reached Eric's hips.

"Can I?" The question was humid and stinging in Eric's ear and he nodded.

Kyle was so assured and in control when his fingers hooked onto the waistband of Eric's boxers and tugged them from his hips. His cock was red and stiff when it met the cool air of the room and Kyle's body heart on top of him, and Eric whimpered quietly at the liberation. Kyle slid the now useless, damp material down Eric's thighs, his calves, before pulling the underwear from Eric's suspended ankles. Naked now, save for the blue time tether on his wrist.

Kyle loomed over him, powerful and mysterious in a way Eric had never considered before and he gulped as Kyle spread his legs a little wider, lifted them higher. Charged fingertips skimmed his thighs aloofly.

"Ready?" Kyle hummed the word, inches away from Eric's mouth. His hand reached for Eric's cock while expertly keeping his confident hold on him.

Eric bit back a relieved shout when Kyle's bare fingers touched his bare, pleading flesh. He couldn't speak, couldn't move because he didn't trust himself or his opposing thoughts waging war. He longed to be touched and kissed and for Kyle to bring them together, but he also feared the unrealized outcome of such fantastical expectations. Kyle appeared to believe in Eric. Why couldn't he believe in himself?

"Eric?" Kyle asked, moving his hand and loosening his hold. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I…” Eric gasped. Had his breathing been this labored all evening? "I don't know…"

Kyle's eyes flashed and his brow knitted together. He backed away from Eric to allow him some space, but stayed close enough. Distance was always an all too pressing issue with them.

"What's the matter?" Kyle asked, and when Eric looked up at Kyle concern was painted on his face; sympathetic blush, imploring green irises and the simple sketch of an understanding smile.

"I don't…” Eric began, and then stopped. Kyle didn't need an excuse, he needed honesty. Eric looked to the rotating stars on the ceiling. "I'd feel stupid telling you, Kyle."

Kyle shook his head.

"Eric, that's…” Kyle began, before he looked to the constellations as well. "Whatever's wrong, I want to help you with it."

Eric fiddled with the silvery sheets when he asked with a small smirk, "you won't laugh at me?"

Kyle's smile peeled back a gleaming crescent moon.

"Of course not," he soothed, running a tentative hand down Eric's chest.

Eric nodded at the answer he already knew. Why was he even questioning himself when the faith he had in Kyle was ingrained in his heart, spurring on so many of his actions?
Still, he considered his questions so they wouldn't have to stumble over them for any longer than they should.

"You've – you've been in my situation before, right?" Eric asked, trying his hardest not to cringe.

"What?" Kyle responded, trying equally as hard to mask his perplexity. He chuckled, "well, obviously I've been a virgin–"

"No!" Eric interrupted; a flush steadily crawled up his body. "That's not what I meant…"

Kyle chuckled again, the dent in his brow deepening. "Then what do you – oh…" Kyle's gaze and voice trailed off to the space behind Eric's head.

"Well?" Eric pressed, more eager for an answer than ever. "Have you?"

Kyle took a short breath, looked in Eric's eyes and replied, "Yes…"

"Does it hurt badly?" Eric asked, and he couldn't help but squirm at the possible discomfort.

Kyle's eyebrows twitched and he broke his gaze with Eric to contemplate his answer. After a couple of seconds he returned to the question, but before the words came out of his mouth, Eric cut in:

"And be honest, Kyle," he warned with a smile.

Kyle cocked his head and grinned, "Would I be anything else with you?"

Eric shrugged and smirked, cheeks burning, "I guess not."

"Yeah, it does hurt," Kyle answered.

Eric's Adam's apple bobbed in his throat unexpectedly.

"But when you're with the right person, they'll make sure you're not uncomfortable for too long," Kyle continued, smiling down at Eric. "Once you get used to it, it feels amazing."

Eric nodded, but it didn't shake off the dreadful thought of Kyle's perfectly planned weekend ruined by his inexperience. He wanted to cherish his first time with Kyle, not to forget it.

Evidently, that nod wasn't enough to shake off the unsure expression on Eric's face either.

Kyle's gaze switched between Eric's face and the invisible loops he was drawing on his wide, soft chest.

"You're really that worried about it?" Kyle asked, illustrating the stringy cosmos on Eric's skin.

Eric looked up and Kyle and felt totally torn.

"I… Science, I don't know. Kyle," Eric softly despaired. "Don't get me wrong, I still want to do this and of course I trust you but I'm just… nervous all of a sudden."

"That's not a great start," Kyle responded, and Eric didn't know whether it was meant to be directed at him.

"No, it isn't," Eric agreed with a sigh. He rolled his eyes before bringing his hands to his face. "What the fuck is wrong with me?"
"Hey," Kyle said firmly, uncovering Eric's face before stroking his heated cheek. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with you."

With that reassurance, Kyle thawed out an appreciative smile.

"Eric, I would never want to hurt you," Kyle said, as earnest as his touches.

"I know," Eric nodded.

"And I want to do this right," Kyle continued. "However that may be…"

Eric raised an eyebrow, embarrassment and nerves washed away by intrigue.

"So…" Kyle started, before glancing at the nightstand. "Go into my bag and hand me that lube."

Eric's eyes widened, confounded, and it was difficult to not look at Kyle as reached over, delved into the toiletry bag and pulled out the small bottle of lube. He handed it over silently and Kyle just as wordlessly opened the bottle before he started to apply a generous amount to his fingers.

Eric gulped before he asked, "What are you-"

"Taking a ride on you," Kyle interrupted with a grin to make Eric melt. "Is that alright?"

Eric's enthusiasm and arousal stirred. He nodded and wished he could bite back the smile spreading across his face. But it didn't matter when his wide smile refracted onto Kyle.

He watched as Kyle's hand moved over his abdomen, bypassed his erection and dove between his sweat-slick thighs. Kyle's fingers that had performed manipulations grand and slight on Eric's body drew his gaze to them now.

Eric observed the pads skim and tease Kyle's opening before his digits pressed keenly and vied for entry. Kyle gasped softly, as if his deft fingers and his own desires were independent from his body's responses. His index pushed and Kyle gasped again, as if that one finger was a force big enough to make his spine stand to attention. He then added his middle finger, huffing and squeezing his eyes shut as he began to stretch himself.

Eric had sat up in the meantime, resting his head against one of the throw cushions and watching completely enthralled; fascinated, nervous and turned on beyond belief.

The two fingers moved rigidly at first as Kyle adjusted to their presence inside him, but they continued to make small, tentative thrusts, and Kyle rode out his discomfort. His propulsions eventually quickened, tripled, stroking and thrusting and brushing harder and deeper against the approaching collection of tight nerves while his body seemed to collapse around him; his thighs trembled, his shoulders quivered, his body rocked in time with his hectic hand, his breath escaped in phantom moans from his throat and his head was thrown to the stars. Still, Kyle remained tall over Eric, sturdy and infallible, a stunning, sultry idol for Eric to devote himself to; he'd go crazy if he didn't. He was going crazy just watching him now…

The mattress squeaked as Eric carefully sat up and reached for a condom with shaking hands.

"Kyle?" He asked. His mouth was dry.

A noise of acknowledgement caught between a whine and a gasp left Kyle's lips.

"A-are you ready?" Eric asked, fiddling with the condom in his hand.
Kyle slowed, blinking at Eric with bleary eyes and Eric felt just as dazed. It seemed they were both coming back down to Earth.

Wracked with lust, Kyle nodded.

The short, excited laugh left Eric's mouth before he could stop it, still a little giddy, but he returned Kyle's glowing smile. He tore off the wrapper mindlessly – it seemed easier that way – with Kyle watching him.

"Need any help with that?" Kyle offered as Eric studied the foreign object in his hand.

"No, I got it, thanks..." Eric replied distractedly, clumsily stretching and rolling the condom over his throbbing cock whilst searching his mind for any tips from those hapless Sex Ed classes they'd had in elementary school.

He snickered triumphantly when he stared at his now sheathed erection, and in the silence that followed he noticed Kyle's eyes were on it too.

So what now?

Eric felt the initial stabs of panic in his chest, it slithered like acid on his tongue.

"What do I-"

"Just..."

Kyle didn't finish before he was hovering over Eric, his hands finding purchase on the sheets while Eric's gaze refused to stay still. His eyes flitted from Kyle's placid face to his own cock, and he wrapped his fingers around the base while he waited for Kyle. Unlike sex, Eric was well-versed in that.

Kyle's opening skimmed the head of Eric's cock, a blind, purposeful initiation. Eric shuddered at the brief contact, he didn't know where his libido ended and his mind began and all he could think about was how warm and tight Kyle would be. When he lifted his heavy gaze to Kyle, he could see his concentrated face, his eyes firmly shut and he noticed their labored breathing was synchronized.

They would fit and mesh and achieve their own perfection, just like they had achieved their own universe.

Eric's smile trembled, but when Kyle pressed down on him again – stripped of all reluctance – Eric shut his eyes and raised his hips, encouraging Kyle, enticing him. His head managed to fit in Kyle's – indeed tight – entrance, but not without a whine from the man above him and a rustle of sheets as Kyle adjusted and clung to the fabric.

Slouching his shoulders and tipping his head back just so, Eric moaned and cursed under his breath in surrender. Kyle was slowly engulfing him, and Eric's body pleaded capture, to be held like this always and for them to dually promise to never let each other go.

They had both shut each other away in their vision and when Eric was buried deep inside him Kyle rolled his hips slowly. Kyle's panting was like faraway sea calls in Eric's ears, as if they were bound but separated and that's when Eric knew he needed to open his eyes to look at Kyle. His soulmate, his captor, his star, his boyfriend, his mission, his one true belief, his everything.

Eric blinked a couple of times before Kyle was fully formed in his vision, staring right back at him with hazy eyes and a loose smile. They seemed to be looking at each other with strange, delirious
approval.

"How's that feel?" Kyle whispered, his voice a threadbare, enchanting whisper.

"Good… tight…" Eric tried to breathlessly get out his reply. "You feel amazing, Kyle…"

"Eric?"

"Yeah?"

"Move," Kyle huffed as he rolled his hips hard enough to make Eric cry out and arch.

How could he not obey that command? Eric's thrusts were gentle at first, eyes studiously fixed on his swallowed cock and Kyle's flushed, bobbing erection to gauge his reaction to his stilted movements. But the groans and whimpers that rained from Kyle's mouth, and how his dexterous hips responded to Eric's thrusts were the perfect encouragement Eric needed to fuck Kyle harder and faster. Although admittedly, he was the more subdued and submissive of the two when he had the vivacious, experienced Kyle on top of him.

Drowning in pristine pleasure, exuberant, and sticking to the sheets, Eric's shimmering gaze floated to the man responsible for all of that. He stared, slack-jawed, at Kyle like he was discovering him and his love all over again. His heart drank in the incredible, near celestial scene until intoxicated, because Kyle was above him, bare and glistening and enraptured and moaning and the stars adorned his flesh like diamonds that had to be drawn to him. He was so overwhelmingly, impossibly beautiful that a lump forced its way into Eric's throat and he could've sobbed in the cosmic darkness. And here they were, connected and aching, intertwined and throbbing which meant Eric was just as beautiful in Kyle's eyes.

A coalition or a collision? Coincidence or fate? A hurtling, destructive force or a decimating, explosion to make life happen? Were they in reach of an explanation or simply indefinable? Either way, Eric saw Kyle's name in the constellations and comets scrawling their initials.

"I can't believe you're here…" Kyle moaned, as if spellbound, speaking over his relentless body. "I waited so long for you…. all of you… every part of you…"

That broken, heartfelt sentence was the combination needed to release Eric's tears. The rivulets slid down his cheek silently, as sensory overload deprived him of his ability to speak, to return the sentiment with the same fervency. He hoped his body would speak for him, but he still attempted a sentence

"Lo-love you…" He came up with, it was whispered, and he raised his crushed voice to make sure Kyle heard him. "S-so much, Kyle… I want to…"

"Huh?"

They were both clawing into coherency, as well as hoarding their heightened pleasure for as long as they could.

Eric supposed it was like Kyle's siren breathing all over again. They had traded in words for heated, vibrant conversations spoken in body language, rendering them deaf and inarticulate.

"Kiss you…" Eric managed, and Kyle smiled like he understood completely.

When Kyle's hips wound down, Eric sat up gingerly but it still caused Kyle enough discomfort to make him shout out.
"Shit," Eric gasped, wrapping his arms around Kyle. "Am I hurting you?"

Kyle shook his head, his smile quivering. He gripped Eric's bicep tightly for support and rested his drenched, near exhausted head on his shoulder.

"It's okay," Kyle murmured as he peppered strung-out kisses on Eric's skin. "I'm okay…"

Eric embraced Kyle for a moment, shaking and panting and sweating together.

"Let me kiss you," he whispered.

Kyle lifted his head from Eric's shoulder and smashed their lips together, another glorious ache to add to the others. Eric's hands slid from Kyle's back to his hips, fingers gliding down the lumbar rope of his spine, while Kyle chose to cup Eric's face, Eric's lips at his disposal. As their mouths melded and torrid tongues parted salty lips, their bodies rocked slowly, sedated and indulgent.

"Make me come, Eric…" Kyle moaned.

Another command Eric couldn't deny.

Eric picked up his pace as much as his hips would allow and he wrapped his hand around Kyle's cock that was already slippery with pre-cum. While Eric pumped and thrusted, Kyle's fingers clambered for Eric's broad shoulders and embedded themselves in his flesh. With his climax now hurling, Kyle's hips rolled frantically and erratically as he fucked himself on Eric, crying out and throwing his head back to leave his neck exposed to Eric's teeth and lips.

Eyes a dark caramel, and mouth hungrily agape, Eric dove for Kyle's white neck, kissing and lapping up their mingled sweat and laving at sore lovebites. With Kyle so close to unravelling, it was Eric's duty to keep them both grounded. Still pumping at Kyle's cock, he slid his other hand from Kyle's hip to his ass, cupping a firm cheek and steadying Kyle's pace.

Kyle came first, lurching, and scrambling for purchase on Eric's back, searing his skin with pink impressions of his fingers and spilling all over Eric's hand. Eric came hard seconds later, shouting Kyle's name into his neck and stiffening like a lightning bolt as he held Kyle close and rode his orgasm out inside him. That strong, merciful shout petered off into failing, longing whispers, drowning echoes, and Eric rested his head on Kyle's heaving chest.

They remained tangled and intertwined for a while, in silence. Perhaps they needed time to individually reel. But when Eric nudged at Kyle with a nearly inaudible grunt, and when Kyle turned his head and nosed at Eric's ear, filling it with soft, deep breaths, they both knew they were finished.

Their eyes met at the same time and their mouths fused immediately, kisses sloppy from exhaustion and satisfaction. Kyle's hands glided from Eric's back to his arms, gently guiding them both back to the rumpled bed and they continued to kiss on top of each other as if time came second.

A rare notion in their relationship.

Eric's body was sore, numb and undoubtedly changed, but the constellations still performed on the ceiling and the pretend planets still rotated. Even if, only for a second, Eric could've sworn they had all stopped, like the world had ceased turning.

They continued to kiss until the mess they had made of themselves became difficult to ignore. Cringing at the cooling cum between them and exchanging bashful smiles, Eric and Kyle separated and went about cleaning themselves off.
Away from Kyle, Eric was reeling at what had transpired between them and his sixteen year old self felt like a devoid, lonely memory. Eric had blinked when Kyle reached out for him and touched his hand. When he turned to Kyle, Eric saw he had the most encouraging smile on his face, one that murmured that they should get under the covers.

Eric was now nestled under the sheets, with his head on Kyle's chest, while Kyle's arm was wrapped around his shoulder, fingers clutching and stroking his soaked hair. Conversation didn't disturb their deep, mellowed breathing until Eric asked:

"What time is it?"

Kyle shifted and craned his neck to peer at the clock on the nightstand.

"Twelve thirty," he replied before returning his gaze to Eric. "Are you tired?"

"I don't know if I feel tired or just spent."

Kyle chuckled, "there's a difference?"

"Yeah," Eric smiled, "you can be tired and not ridiculously happy and satisfied."

Eric felt the hum of Kyle's laughter, imagined his amused smirk. Kyle buried his nose in Eric's hair, planting a kiss on his forehead, his chest rising and falling contently and his eyes closed as he just lay there for a minute.

Eric loved knowing he could make Kyle feel so at peace.

"What do we do now?" Eric asked once the beat had passed.

Kyle lifted his head just slightly and fingered Eric's hair. "You mean tonight?"

"The rest of the weekend," Eric clarified, "besides skiing."

"I'm sure there are plenty of other things to do besides skiing," Kyle replied, and Eric tilted his body so he could look at him while he spoke. "They have a swimming pool and a spa and a woodland trail for walking…" Kyle paused then, mischief sparkling in his eyes. "Or we could just stay in bed all weekend, order room service, and fuck each other's brains out?"

Eric's cock twitched, and he imagined what a delicious combination chocolate, champagne, whipped cream, strawberries and Kyle's naked body and tongue would make. Decadent and divine.

Biting his lip, Eric cuddled closer to Kyle. "Give me another couple minutes and we can go again, if you want?" Previous insecurities vanished.

Kyle grinned, resting his cheek on Eric's head. "Mmm, that's what I like to hear…"

But it seemed that exhaustion thwarted their eagerness, both of them asleep within minutes. Eric closed his eyes, under the stars, still sedated by coital contentment.

Before slumber could pervade him however, he made one last wish to the stars that he and Kyle could stay like this forever. And felt a small, sinister pang of reality while doing so.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

I can't believe I've been writing this story for a year, it's crazy! So now would be a great time to thank all you wonderful readers for your support! If it wasn't for your encouragement then maybe the story wouldn't have gotten this far. And I love writing this story, so I'm glad we're this far down the line! I hope you enjoy this new chapter and thanks again!

Kyle had woken at a grey, indeterminable hour of the morning, still aching but drowsy and content.

Half-dreams of inexplicable sobbing – gentle, lamenting peals – had roused him from slumber, and since he wasn't totally convinced of their existence he regarded them with little caution.

Sleep was still his most pressing concern.

He must have rolled out from Eric's embrace in those blacked out hours, and Kyle reached out for his lover next to him with eyes closed. But his fingers met lukewarm sheets, Eric's presence already fading there.

Fear barrelled from Kyle's neurons to his now constricted stomach. His insidious, lurking nightmare (that Eric would disappear too early, without one last kiss or goodbye) felt realised to his irrational, impulsive being. He sat up in bed like a deer jolting when it hears a hunter's death-march.

"Eric?" Kyle spoke to the empty room, it was the first word that came to his mind.

His heart pounded like one saturated with caffeine, paralysing him and trapping under the covers. It seemed the paralysis had travelled to his brain, thoughts sluggish and incomplete despite the world racing around him...

They had left the projections on, waning stars and elderly planets didn't seem as comforting to Kyle now.

Those muffled sobs still rang in his ears, and there was something about their agonising sound that made Kyle both curious and concerned.

He only realised they were coming from his own bathroom when a bright, clarifying light crept under the door. It was then he realised Eric wasn't leaving yet, that they still had another day together. So the person crying in the plush bathroom in their beautiful suite… was him.

Kyle could only imagine what Eric had planned to do in there when his gaze slid to the overturned toiletry bag on his table.

"Eric?" Kyle repeated, worry needling his voice.

His willingness to pursue Eric (in rivalry, in love) overran anxiety and lack of sleep, and Kyle threw his paralysis aside like the covers. He didn't bother to retrieve his boxers, the fear he had once recoiled from now driving him to the bathroom door.
Luckily, it wasn't locked and Kyle squinted when he entered the room lighted by bright halogen bulbs. It took him seconds to find Eric once his eyes had readjusted, and he saw his crying boyfriend, clad in his boxers and curled up beneath the sink.

The scene robbed Kyle of his words, his brow furrowing until he glanced at the tiles; tiny, inadequate razor blades, taken from his bag and scattered everywhere.

"Oh my God…" Kyle whispered, quickly stepping forward and swiping the razor blades aside, before kneeling in front of Eric.

The slate-grey tiles were perishing against Kyle's skin and Eric was flushed, warm and vulnerable in front of him.

"Eric, what is all this?" Kyle asked, thankfully numbed from more hysterical emotions for now. "What have you been doing?"

Eric looked up at him with wide, watery eyes before he flinched, dazed, like he wasn't expecting Kyle to find him.

"Kyle…" He whispered, as if seeing the name in green eyes. "Kyle, I…" He said a little louder, staring around as he attempted to explain.

"Yes?" Kyle said, reaching out for Eric's unresponsive hand and holding it. "Yes, I'm here, just please tell me what's going on…"

Eric stared hard at Kyle's hand. "I was trying…" he paused, sliding his gaze to his own wrist and nearly spitting out the words, "trying to get this stupid fucking time tether off. I thought I could break it somehow… if I tried hard enough…"

Eric had been crumbling around his words and he swiped his hand from Kyle's grip to shield his face. He buried so deep into himself that he was hunched into his forearms and his fingers were gripping his hair.

Kyle frowned. He never thought Eric would shut away from him like that. But now wasn't the time to be offended when Eric was clearly hurting more.

He needed to show Eric that he was safe, that Kyle would always make sure of it. But he also needed to ask questions of the man who had smiled in his arms a few hours ago, but was breaking down on the bathroom floor now.

"Eric…" Kyle said, coaxing Eric out of his hiding place. "I don't understand. Why were you trying to break it? I thought you said you couldn't-"

"I can't!" Eric snapped, he shook his head ruefully as he trembled. "I can't, Kyle! It's never coming off… just like we'll never be together for longer than two days. I can't have that… We can't have that-"

Kyle tried to fix himself a stern, defiant countenance as Eric tore apart their lovely denial; a denial that Kyle had gladly wrapped himself up in.

"Come on," Kyle said weakly. "W-we should go back to sleep…"

Kyle's shivering hand reached for Eric's and he jolted, startled, when Eric batted it away.

"No!" Eric shouted petulantly, fresh tears welling in his eyes. "No, what's sleep going to do besides
Kyle shook his head, face just as crumpled and feeling just as destroyed as a wet newspaper. The man he would've normally turned to for comfort was now breathing tortuously hard, his body draining of colour. Eric looked sick and wild and frightened under the lights.

"Eric, please…"

"I don't want to go back, Kyle!" Eric begged. "Please, I don't want to leave you! I can't leave you again! Please, I, I…"

Kyle's eyes widened when Eric's voice trailed off, submerging into swift, panicked droves of breath.

"Fuck…" Eric gasped. "Fuck, Kyle, I can't…"

Eric clutched his bare chest, slumping against the sink and his face contorted as his lungs heaved.

A familiar experience for Kyle, but not a familiar sight.

"It's alright, it… it-it'll be alright," Kyle shakily assured, taking both of Eric's hands. "Look at me, just look at me."

Eric faced Kyle warily; the scrutiny of his failing gaze not really helpful to Kyle as he tried to remember some breathing tips his counsellor had given him. The remedies for those pesky panic attacks he used to have.

Kyle sucked in a breath, impatiently holding it for five seconds before releasing it for seven. Eric furrowed his eyebrows, his erratic breathing somewhat distracting but Kyle pushed through, nearly sighing in relief when Eric began to mimic him.

"Good," Kyle nodded. "Keep breathing with me, okay?"

Eric returned the nod and their breathing synchronised once again, both on their knees and hands intertwined. Symmetrical were it not for Eric's persistent shaking.

"Don't leave, Kyle, please-"

"I'm not leaving," Kyle interrupted. He softened his firm tone with: "I'm staying right here with you for as long as you need."

Eric nodded quietly, knowing not to question Kyle any further.

"More deep breaths now," Kyle said, adopting his authoritative voice. His job voice. "Count them down in your head. Breathe in for five seconds, out for seven."

Eric nodded again more vigorously, and looked in Kyle's eyes as he copied his breathing. Kyle smiled in response, small and fleeting, but it was encouraging enough for Eric to squeeze Kyle's hand tighter with fondness rather than fear.

But it affected Kyle more than both of them could have guessed. His breath hitched and a lump pressed against his throat. Before Kyle could stop it, his eyes were stinging and he made the foolish mistake of closing his eyes… tight enough for a tear to slip out, it splashed on Eric's hand.

"I promise I'm not going anywhere," Kyle said, in an effort to amend his error. He raised Eric's hand and kissed the spot where the tear had landed, mopping it up with loving lips. "I promise…" he whispered, wanting the vow to seep into Eric's skin and swim in his veins.
Kyle kissed his way down Eric's hand, wishing his kisses were permanent, and he moaned tearfully when his lips pressed against the base of Eric's thumb.

Eric's breathing had slowed now, and Kyle was scared to raise his wet eyes to him. But he did, and he saw Eric's face flooded with sympathy… empathy…

All Kyle could think to do was smile, and Eric huffed before throwing himself into Kyle's arms. Dutifully, Kyle wrapped his arms around Eric's back and they clasped like a cheap necklace; pretty to look at but undoubtedly fallible.

Eric was sobbing again, hot and wet against Kyle's shoulder and shuddering in his embrace. Kyle's fingers found their way into Eric's hair and rocked him gently.

"It's okay… I'm here…" Kyle soothed, stroking Eric's hair. "Everything will be okay…"

The ambiguous truth tasted sour on his tongue.

"I don't want to be on my own either…" Kyle whispered into the crook of Eric's neck, and seeing his fear in front of him was more terrifying than he ever imagined.

Kyle had held Eric's hand and pulled him to his feet before leading him back to bed. Fingers still woven, Eric sniffled like a child behind Kyle as they walked and Eric held him closer than a security blanket.

It was only when they had shuffled under the covers together did Kyle finally recognise the age gap – fairly small but paradoxical – between them. It led him to remember the inconsistences, the anomalies, the restrictions of their relationship, and when he looked at a pensive, tear-flushed Eric he knew deafening passion and love and selfishness weren't enough to quieten those things anymore.

Kyle didn't know what else to do but to press himself against his shivering lover, kissing him down from that terrifying precipice that stood tall over jagged thoughts. He assumed the role of big spoon, a role that Eric usually relished, but maybe he felt too weak and exposed tonight? After all that had happened… Maybe he didn't feel strong enough to protect Kyle anymore.

Perhaps their overwhelming fondness for one another – exacerbated by absence – had weakened them both?

"You're pretty quiet…" Kyle murmured, his voice floated over Eric's shoulder.

The silence was even more discomfiting when Eric had his looming back to him.

"So are you," Eric retorted. Still stubborn, still cheeky…

Still Eric.

Kyle smiled, pressing his upturned mouth to Eric's shoulder and kissing him there.

*He'll always be the man you fell in love with.*

"I just can't stop thinking, Kyle," he despaired, and his body tensed. "About everything."

Eric seemed to turn to stone in Kyle's arms, but Kyle would continue to adore him even if he became as unresponsive and cold as a sculpture. Kyle had waited and yearned and wept for too long, just as passionate as Eric had been.
"We can talk about all that tomorrow," Kyle assured with a squeeze. "But we both need some sleep."

"Tomorrow…" Eric mused; his tone was cutting and cynical.

Kyle was glad Eric couldn't see his face.

But then Eric added softer, sadder, "our last full day together…"

Another rancid truth.

"Don't think about it like that," Kyle implored.

Please.

"How else am I supposed to think about it?" Eric asked, careful not to grumble.

"As just another day?" Kyle suggested, although Eric didn't budge. But he was pliable, Kyle knew he was. He knew Eric was soft and loving and sincere when he had the right encouragement. Kyle murmured in his ear, "another day to spend together."

Kyle smiled when Eric stroked his arm, when he heard that fleeting, stubborn sigh and felt goosebumps tickle his own skin.

"I only have five more visits left, Kyle," Eric said, pulling them back to reality.

But Kyle pouted, still resisting.

"Not…" Kyle paused, interrupted by his own frustrated sigh. "Not necessarily…"

"What do you mean?" Eric asked, and Kyle swore he could make out that caramel gaze sliding his way. He wished Eric would turn to him…

"You said you had a plan, right?" Kyle asked, crinkled with hope and he held Eric closer. "You told me back in London."

"I know I did," Eric replied, shifting beneath the sheets and tucking his hand under his pillow.

"Well, what if those plans came to fruition, huh?" Kyle smiled, squeezing Eric again. "Then we can have everything we've been wanting…"

Silence settled happily upon them this time, as dazzling and drugging as pixie dust.

"You.," Eric said with a smile in his voice, stroking Kyle's arm. He sighed, "always."

"A life together," Kyle added, nuzzling Eric's shoulder dreamily. He tried to fill his voice with as much confidence as he could muster when he said, "it'll work out, Eric-"

"And what if it doesn't?"

Pixie dust curdled into poison and Kyle refused to swallow it, refused to entertain the thought even for a minute that Eric couldn't execute his plans exactly the way he wanted to. He had to, for both of their sakes. In Eric's absence that belief had been Kyle's comfort and he couldn't bear the thought of it being snatched from him.

"Try to get some sleep," Kyle offered as a response, the solution was as exhausted as he felt. "We'll
But while Eric fell asleep an hour later, Kyle remained anchored to the only sure thing he knew; Eric right in front of him (for now at least). And he waited for morning, for answers, like a man possessed.

Eric had stirred when nosy sunlight crept into their room, daytime urging those still sleeping. Kyle had watched him grumble, had watched his fingers flex with consciousness, had watched his eyelids flutter and brushed the hair away that had fallen into his face.

Although Kyle had cajoled Eric into sleep, although he had subdued and braced Eric when his slumber was littered with feverish nightmares that sent him whimpering and pleading for the boy he had saved, he didn't want to be alone with his thoughts anymore.

Kyle had stared at the artificial stars until they gave him a headache, and he whispered to an unconscious Eric that he'd be right back by his side once he had turned the projections off.

Without the stars to stare at, he had stared at that little blue band on Eric's wrist instead. He had regarded it with disdain initially, which eventually drifted into curiosity. When staring at the time tether had made him feel too sad and frustrated to continue, he returned his gaze to Eric; admiring his sleeping form as well as guarding it from intruders. But Kyle had appeared to be fighting a losing battle against them.

Kyle had fixed a tired smile on his face when Eric's eyes finally opened, his attempt at a cheerful expression faltering under the sleepy intensity of Eric's gaze. Relief had swelled in Kyle when Eric's mouth formed a lazy smile. They exchanged 'good mornings' and Eric asked Kyle if he slept well. Kyle nodded; he figured there was more guilt to be discovered in unwanted truths than necessary lies.

But he did admit to Eric that he needed a cup of coffee, and Eric readily agreed to his suggestion of freshening up and having breakfast downstairs in the hotel's 'Sun Room'.

It was aptly named too, the large windows flooded the room with natural light and eyes were immediately drawn to the crisp blue sky and startling white powder outside. The sunlight speckled the silverware, lined the china like varnish and was saturated into the linen tablecloths, even the tiger orange flowers seemed to still be basking in the glow.

Startling, perfect, near blinding and Kyle couldn't help but notice and squirm at how fitting it was that this should be the setting for his and Eric's uncomfortable conversation.

They were part of the last crowd to arrive for breakfast and they looked so different to the other diners; sleep deprived and sans skiing apparel. Kyle made a beeline for the coffee machine while Eric distractedly loaded his plate with food. When Kyle returned to the breakfast table food was the last thing on his mind, but he figured he should at least eat something.

Turned out his swirling anxious stomach had other ideas and everything that passed his lips besides coffee felt tasteless and a chore to chew and swallow.

"You're done already?" Eric asked, when he noticed Kyle had abandoned his breakfast in favour of caffeine.

Kyle shrugged and stared sheepishly at his plate, "yeah, I guess so."

"Aren't you hungry?"
"Strangely, no," Kyle replied, a small dent in his brow. It really was a mystery to him. "My appetite's a little shot..."

Still staring down at his forgotten breakfast, Kyle heard a small sigh and the clinking of cutlery being set down.

"Kyle, I'm so sorry..." Eric said, drawing Kyle's gaze back to him.

"About what?" Kyle asked, a small, puzzled smile on his face. "It's not your fault I haven't finished my breakfast."

"Yeah, except it kind of is," Eric replied, sharp enough to cut the conversation short.

Kyle wasn't an idiot, and he knew Eric wasn't either. He could tell that Eric's apology extended beyond Kyle's lack of appetite, he knew that Eric was reading him in their moments of tense silence and analysing his own impact.

"You don't think I realise my little episode last night might have something to do with it?" Eric said, finally addressing the issue. "I have a lot on my mind too. And even I'm struggling to finish my meal when there are so many thoughts running around my head."

Kyle blinked, of course Eric was thinking about the events of last night too, but it was a surprising comfort to know that it had affected him in a similar way.

Staring at Eric's (once) full plate of food, he remarked, "That is a big breakfast though..."

Eric smiled shyly and rubbed the back of his neck, the seriousness momentarily lifted.

"I know..." He said, studying what was left in front of him. "Here, have something," he pushed his plate towards Kyle. "I'm not going to finish it and you should try to eat, Kyle."

"No thanks," Kyle replied, raising his hand. "I'm fine, really."

"Please?" Eric pressed. "Whatever you want..."

Kyle cocked his head and smirked in exasperation at his boyfriend, knowing damn well how persistent he was. Eric's cocky smirk only confirmed this.

"Fine..." Kyle sighed, raking his eyes over Eric's plate. "I'll have some of that grapefruit please."

Still smirking, Eric stabbed the juicy piece of grapefruit with his fork and put it on the small plate next to Kyle's coffee.

"Thanks," Kyle said. They exchanged smiles across the table; smiles that soothed Kyle's bruised nerves.

"But I am sorry, Kyle..."

Kyle's face creased at Eric's sincerity and he shook it away. "I know you are but you really don't need to be."

"Last night was amazing until I wrecked it-"

"Will you stop talking like that?" Kyle cut in. "I don't care! All I want to know is..." Kyle's reluctance caught up to him and he ducked his head momentarily, before he looked up and continued, "Why you felt the need to do what you did in the first place..."
Eric stared thoughtfully at Kyle as his chest rose and fell without a sound.

"Isn't it obvious?" He replied. "I wanted – I, I was trying to…"

Kyle slumped slightly into his chair as Eric trailed off in defeat, the subject still too sore for further pressing. They had to take this slowly.

"I can't talk about this here, Kyle," Eric muttered.

"Then where do you want to go?"

Eric sighed. "I don't know," his eyes roamed the walls thoughtfully before he said; "you mentioned the hotel had, um, trails? In the woods?"

Kyle arched an eyebrow at him. "You want to go to the woods?"

Eric rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, I want to go for a walk," he clarified. "Maybe the fresh air would do us good?"

Kyle blinked, but knew Eric was right.

"I never thought you of all people would make that suggestion," he decided to answer cheekily.

"Asshole," Eric smirked, trying to kick Kyle under the table but purposefully missing.

"Come on, I just need to get out of here," Eric said as they both chuckled. He added softly, "go somewhere private…"

"Alright," Kyle nodded, beaming as the sun shone on Eric, "let's do that."

They were no closer to answers the further they strolled into the woods. Birdsong and the sound of their shoes crunching against the frosty undergrowth filtered out moments of silence, and Kyle hoped the canopy of giant conifer trees would inspire confessions from Eric.

Eric had pointed out the formidable mountain ranges in the distance, which had then led them to recall those bitterly cold evenings 'camping' at Stark's Pond. Their reminiscent discussion was fading out when Eric confessed:

"I was trying to stay here with you,"

Kyle furrowed his eyebrows, confused by the trajectory of the conversation before it clicked. They had ventured so far that the purpose of this little expedition had stumbled away from him.

"That's all I was trying to do," Eric continued, turning to Kyle and looking into his eyes. They both stopped in the middle of the path. "I just wanted to stay with you."

It was right, what Eric had told Kyle over breakfast, his reasons were obvious. Despite the simplicity of Eric's explanation and despite how admittedly relieved Kyle felt, there were some details that were still foggy and knotted.

"Alright…" Kyle considered slowly and he started to walk ahead, as if movement could propel his mind towards an answer.

But Kyle knew answers lay in the man who was catching up to him.
"Don't you want me to stay with you?" Eric asked, holding Kyle's arm gingerly. His voice was splintered with doubt, pricking Kyle ever so slightly.

"Of course I do!" Kyle replied incredulously. "But I don't understand-

Eric lowered his arm as well as his gaze. "Why?"

"You didn't try this in London, or when we first kissed… You didn't even try it when you spent the night with me in the hospital, so I just don't understand… why now?" Kyle asked. "Of all the visits, why now?"

Eric pursed his lips and tucked his hands into his pockets. His gaze remained low and he slid it to the mountains they had once been admiring, that had stoked childhood memories.

Kyle waited, studying Eric's face and trying to predict his thoughts. Were his flushed cheeks down to the cold air or embarrassment?

"Is it because we slept together?" Kyle asked, a part of him fearing the answer.

Eric's attention snapped back to Kyle.

"No!" He replied, before he shot Kyle an apologetic look and scratched absently at his arm. "At least, I don't think so…"

Kyle took in a shaky, impatient breath, the crease in his brow unwavering.

Eric's eyes wandered down the trail and he began walking again. Kyle followed in pursuit of Eric's admission.

"Before we fell asleep," Eric began, "after we had sex, I was looking up at the stars…" His hands had returned to his pockets, his distant gaze still rooted to the path, but he smiled when he asked, "did I ever tell you about the astronomy atrium?"

Kyle blinked, he had trusted Eric to lead the way with this but he was still unsure of the route. "The what?"

"The atrium, it – it's a kind of astrology lab in the future," Eric explained, twinkling irises briefly shining on Kyle. "The first time I went there I was twelve and it was extraordinary, Kyle. There was a tall night sky on the walls, huge, orbiting planets and stars everywhere, constellations-"

"Just like our room," Kyle spoke softly to himself. Loud enough it seemed, for Eric to acknowledge it.

"Exactly," Eric said with a small grin. "That's why when you asked me if I liked the room I could only say it was perfect, that you were perfect. Like we were meant to be, you know?"

"Yeah," Kyle nodded, but the word felt impotent, not large enough to encompass this awe suddenly sprung on him. "I, I get that…"

"Anyway," Eric said, it appeared he didn't know how to handle it either. "The constellations in the atrium are, uh, well, they're pliable. You can flex your fingers and they just come to you. You can do whatever you want with them. All I wanted, all I could think about even then was you."

Kyle smiled and Eric mirrored it, a magnetic, destined pair.

"I spelt out your name," Eric admitted. "It glittered and hovered in front of me for a few seconds
before the stars dispersed. Combusted, almost, like confetti. I was so angry and upset that I didn't get a little longer with them…” His voice clenched like an angry fist, but there was inexorable sadness weighing down on it, loosening it. "That I didn't get more time to just marvel at your name and remember you for a few minutes longer. Not only in my thoughts or my imagination, but to remember something that was…” Eric sighed, saying the words carefully, "right there in front of me."

"But they were so beautiful, those stars," Eric mused. "When I was lying in bed with you, I thought about the atrium and how ridiculously perfect it was that you were there with me, under the stars again, and that we were reunited in a way that I could only once dream of. I wished we could stay like that forever."

The twinkle in Eric's eyes that the stars had most likely elicited was extinguished by reality, the foul, unforeseen consequence of his wish.

"And then I started to think maybe you were like those stars," Eric continued. "Maybe we were. That despite everything we've been through and despite everything we feel for each other perhaps we are just as temporary and unattainable."

Kyle wanted to say something, to argue, to deny, but how could he dash Eric's perception when it was his worst fear? How could he face it when it had stunned him into perfect, pure silence? When it had made him tremble and cry in the bathroom and when it was smothering him in the woods? Burying him in claustrophobic conifers alongside his sinking lover?

When it had haunted him from day one?

"I couldn't sleep, Kyle," Eric continued, shaking his head, needing him.

*Always needing me, however long 'always' is.*

"I couldn't think clearly," Eric despaired. "The only barely rational thought I had was that this was my fault. I set off this chain of events, so it was my responsibility to make it right, to make sure my wish could come true."

Again, Kyle wanted to speak up, but he was gagged now. And maybe he was too small to fight back against the crushing, looming end. Perhaps he needed to face it and accept it and do whatever he could to challenge it. Not just for him, but for Eric too.

He had tried to protect Eric, had offered him a safety net but Eric had denied it and Kyle had followed.

Because he wanted to be accepting and selfish, reckless and in love with the man he had been waiting for. But maybe those things don't quite mesh.

Eric rolled his eyes and groaned at the story he had just told, laid out in front of both of them.

"And now I'm so fucking embarrassed, Kyle," he admitted. "I know you said I didn't need to be sorry but I don't think I'll ever stop being sorry for ruining this weekend… for ruining your birthday again."

Kyle smiled limply, and it felt like his endearment to Eric was clawing him out of asphyxiation.

"So can't you just forgive me for being stupid?" Eric asked, dejection in his voice.

Kyle rolled his eyes and pressed a kiss to Eric's cheek.
'Hmm,' he murmured in Eric's ear. "I suppose I can forgive your stupidity one more time."

Kyle felt Eric grin before a hand came up and ruffled his curls. They both chuckled before Eric wrapped his arm around Kyle's shoulders.

"Thanks," Eric murmured into his hair.

"Let's just… let's just put this behind us, okay?" Kyle suggested, and tried to make it sound like he wasn't begging. "You panicked, that's fine. But everything has been wonderful so far. Can't we just keep that up for-"

"Whatever time we've got left," Eric mumbled.

Kyle stiffened in his arms, before he replied, as bravely as he could, "yes."

He could feel Eric fidgeting, knew that such bold acceptance and resignation must've been nerve-wracking or alien to him. But maybe this was the only way they were ever going to get through this?

"I know it's scary and devastating, but this is our lot," Kyle said. "And I'm happy with it, for the most part. You make me so happy, regardless of how long I have you for."

One of the only truths Kyle was strong enough to offer.

Eric managed a small smile. It was genuine, Kyle could tell, but he knew that Eric's uneasiness persisted.

He pressed himself further into Eric's side, resting his head on Eric's chest. "You're all I've ever wanted too, you know that don't you?"

Another smile from Eric, one of surprise and brief joy but it lasted longer, was more substantial than the previous smile that had adorned his face. Kyle let himself get swept away by faint contentment as Eric squeezed him softly.

"We're both incredibly lucky," Kyle smiled. "And you've done an amazing thing by just being able to bring us together."

"Even if it's not forever?"

Kyle didn't have an answer, if he'd ever be ready to face the question. But Eric needed confirmation, needed something. So Kyle went with his devoted heart's first swift, eager response.

"Even if it's not forever," Kyle vowed gently. "Besides, who's to say your wish won't come true? That your mysterious plans won't work out?"

They needed to make it out of the words with at least a tiny glimmer of hope.

Eric sighed. "I want them to work out."

"Then they will," Kyle replied, firmer this time.

"How can you have so much faith in me?"

"Because you changed time to save me, Eric," Kyle answered, constricted with honesty. "Is it really no surprise that I think you're capable of pretty much anything?"

"No," Eric shook his head then smiled. "No I guess not…"
Kyle smiled brightly up at him.

"Thank you," Eric added, "again."

"You're welcome,"

They walked for a couple of minutes in silence, and Kyle felt defiant, considerably safer, like he was more confident in his reassurances than he perhaps truly was.

"But wait, what other birthday of mine did you ruin?" Kyle asked, replaying Eric's unnecessary apology in his mind.

"You don't remember?" Eric chuckled incredulously. "Casa Bonita?"

Kyle looked to the bright sky as he recollected.

"Oh my God!" He laughed when the memory came upon him. "How could I forget you running around the place, stealing people's food, being chased by the police… jumping off that fucking cliff!"

"Yeah," Eric replied, rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand. "That wasn't my finest moment…"

Kyle shrugged. "I don't know, jumping off the cliff looked pretty fun. Was it?"

"Extremely fun," Eric grinned.

"I remember you calling from the police station to apologise…"

Kyle would never forget or misplace that memory.

Eric fidgeted again, stroking Kyle's shoulder as if he wanted to remind himself he was holding him.

"Well, I felt bad," Eric replied. "I didn't want to ruin anything between us,"

And Kyle was sure that was doubly important now.

Shedding himself off his coat and scarf when they returned to their suite, Kyle turned to Eric and said, "You know I think that walk made me hungry."

That tight knot of anticipation and concern in his plexus had been unravelled, dismantled and pushed aside for other matters to vie for Kyle's attention. Yes, there were worrisome weeds sprouting in his mind, but they were thankfully buried in his subconscious for now.

"It did, huh?" Eric asked, sounding a little distracted.

"Yeah," Kyle replied, before turning to Eric and observing the hazy mirth in his eyes. "Do you want to go back downstairs or we can order room-"

Kyle was cut off when Eric pulled him to his lips, warm hands and warm lips welcome on his cold body… especially when Eric pawed at Kyle and took his flushed lower lip into his mouth.

"Or this," Kyle said breathlessly when they pulled away, mind whirring. "We could keep doing this."

Due to their proximity and the lusty, debilitating spells Eric was able to cast with the press of his lips
and a swipe of his tongue, Kyle could only make out Eric's shimmering eyes and peerless grin. Perfect, luminous signals in the fog.

Kyle didn't have much time to admire them before their mouths collided again. He couldn't help but think those signals were actually hypnotic siren calls. But Kyle would succumb to any waves if they felt as great as the arms that were bracing him.

"I love you," Eric spoke against Kyle's lips. His words were rough and raw but still as tender as his kisses.

"I love you too," Kyle replied. The declaration rushing out of his mouth, strong and sure, as Eric swept him away.

"Never forget that I love you, alright?" Eric asked before he stamped a pleading kiss to Kyle's lips.

"I won't," Kyle vowed, breaking through Eric's desperate seal.

Eric stared at Kyle's lips before tasting – testing – the devotion there. "Promise me…" he murmured, the prickling words crawling down Kyle's spine.

"I promise I'll never forget," Kyle said, clutching Eric's sides and staring at his mouth. "I love you so much, Eric…" he admitted, before initiating a kiss of his own.

Kyle had been cold before, the mountain air seeping into his bones, but Eric's hot hands, molten lips and frazzling tongue had him burning in the middle of their hotel room. He melted in Eric's arms helplessly when their bodies were pressed flush together and every sultry gasp and humid moan spoke of summer.

And Kyle wanted to be scorched by Eric's heat, to be stripped and feel it on his wet, glistening skin, to be taken as the sunlight streamed through the windows. He wanted to see Eric bare in the daytime, to see the rays pour on his back and make him cry and arch as if they were white hot wax.

But instead Eric was teasing him mercifully; burying his nose in Kyle's damp hair, dragging his tongue up the salty column of his throat, sucking the pouch of his ear and neglecting anything further south. But Eric's method was undoubtedly working; Kyle's tight boxers were proof of that. Eric appeared to be affected too, judging by what Kyle could feel brushing against him.

Although he still just wished Eric would push him on the bed, undress him hastily and connect their boiling, throbbing bodies.

Kyle was continuously discovering the joys of having Eric closer and closer to him, after so long apart.

"Tell me what you want…" Kyle demanded, lips on Eric's neck.

"You," Eric moaned, before his voice hardened, "inside me."

Kyle's heavy lids lifted and he balked.

"Wh-what?" He asked, scrambling for lucidity. "I didn't think you were-"

"I am now," Eric replied, smile breezy as his palm rested against Kyle's cheek.

Kyle could feel the lull of that featherweight pressure, couldn't deny the arousal roiling inside him when Eric had told him what he wanted.
But he looked to the hand at his cheek, tried to find resolution there.

"Are you sure?" He asked, lifting his gaze to Eric's eyes in an attempt to see through the mirage.

Eric nodded, leaning down to press a slower kiss to Kyle's lips. One that was solid and articulate… convincing.

But doubt weighed down on the fluttering of Kyle's heart.

"Promise me you are…" He said, reaching up and cupping Eric's face.

Eric chuckled softly, before he dove into Kyle's eyes.

"I promise I'm sure, Kyle," he said. "I'm sure that I want you to make love to me, I'm sure you're not going to hurt me."

Kyle shook his head, before pressing their foreheads together. "I won't, I'll try my best not to, I swear."


Kyle whimpered before he could stop it, and he flushed when Eric grinned at the tiny, overwhelmed sound.

To expel the anxiety from Eric's body, to deactivate any panic, Kyle had kissed and touched and whispered until Eric was a trembling, feverish, begging mess on the bed. Kyle had no idea how sensitive Eric could be until he had decided to pay this much attention to him, to be studious, yes, but also relentless in his quest.

Eric had still cried out, squeezing around Kyle's fingers when they pushed inside him, but Kyle's mantra of: "it's okay, relax, it's me, Eric…" calmed him immediately. And Kyle ensured that Eric's body was sighing with acceptance before he dared to go any further. He had entered Eric slowly, watching him take every inch all the while placing encouraging kisses on his chin, his nose, his brow, and his cheeks.

Prefaced by a sleepless night and woodland confessions, their afternoon tryst felt more vulnerable than the previous night. Kyle remembered that fact whenever Eric looked like he could be uncomfortable, rushing to soothe him. Eric had touched himself and the closer his climax approached him, the swifter his hand moved and the more freely pre-cum dribbled from his cock, the further Kyle was pushed to the edge. Pacing himself became difficult, and when his name evaded Eric's desperate cries, he stiffened and came, still rocking into Eric's body when he rode his orgasm out.

Eric had followed soon after, sobbing and shaking, Kyle's name finally landing on his tongue in a whisper rather than a shout. He basked triumphantly in the afterglow, whispering Kyle's name as if deliriously gloating.

Kyle left the shadow of a covert smile on Eric's shoulder, heart swelling with fondness before he placed a lax kiss on Eric's cheek, inviting Eric to join him in the shower.

"What time are you leaving tomorrow?" Kyle asked, both under the covers as night grew darker.

Eric had resumed his role of big spoon and Kyle had sank gladly into his arms.

"Early afternoon," Eric replied, Kyle's curls tickling his mouth.
Another day had ended too quickly, a lifetime of separation condensed into a brilliant, impassioned schedule. So promising and tantalising that it would never truly be enough for Eric and Kyle's starved hearts.

But they were greedy, addicted, hopelessly loving and…

Reunited.

Finally.

Wasn't that the root of their ardent denial? Their faith? Their headlong commitment?

"So you're leaving before we check out then?" Kyle asked, stroking Eric's forearm. He hoped Eric wouldn't feel the steely nervousness leaking through his fingertips.

"Yeah," Eric sighed, forlorn where Kyle was anxious, "not too long after breakfast probably."

"Oh…” Kyle nodded, inhaling shakily. "Well, at least I'll have time to say goodbye."

"You want to watch this time?" Eric grinned into Kyle's hair, but Kyle could feel his attempt at humour dampening.

"No," Kyle replied, pressing himself closer to Eric. "No, I don't think I could…”

Eric nodded, goosebumps rising on Kyle's skin when he sensed Eric smelling his hair; symptomatic of their bodies' desperate need to remember and savour.

"I don't think I ever could," Kyle whispered, burying himself deeper into the sheets, further away from tomorrow.

They had exchanged, goodbyes, declarations of love, and kisses as time crumbled around them like the walls of a flaming building.

Kyle had closed his eyes and ducked his head, while Eric drifted away. A slow, gradual departure stung less than imagining Eric slipping away from him like hourglass sand.

If time was as destructive as fire, then the thick, lonely silence Kyle now found himself in was the smoking clawing into his lungs. Kyle was finding it harder to breathe, to think, to practice any type of restraint.

And as if he were inhaling burning air into his ash-filled lungs, Kyle was choking on tears. His vision blurred as he stared around the empty room, still luxurious but a little less beautiful. The room's beauty existed only in his memory now, in what he and Eric had created.

Kyle slipped his hands into his jean pockets and felt something sharp and cold bite at his palm. Retrieving the item he saw that it was his birthday present from Eric.

The bruised, fallen star whose sparkle hadn't diminished.

Kyle's breath stuttered as he stared at it, and raised his hand to inspect it more closely.

Eric had told him it was a reminder to keep believing, to keep strong.

A piece of each other to keep.
A short laugh fell from Kyle's lips, opening the gateway to fresh, rushing tears before he pressed the remaining physical item he had of Eric to his mouth.

The cold metal against soft lips froze a part of him, hardened him, and allowed him to regain his composure.

Kyle's mouth drew into a thin line, he put the star back in his pocket and made his way to the door.

Before he could leave the weekend behind, he stared around the room one last time, unable to shake off the feeling of being completely different to who he was when he had first entered with Eric.

A surreal forty eight hours ago.

He walked to the elevator and once inside stared at his smudged reflection blankly until he reached the lobby.

Kyle evaded the front desk clerk's pitiful gaze, smiling politely as he checked out of the hotel alone.
Chapter 23

Eric was always dazed when stepping out of the time transporter, but his and Kyle's sobering conversation, and his episode in the bathroom sat like lead in his stomach. The violent upheaval of their romantic weekend was already enough to make him feel seasick, but the added strain of time travel had left him stumbling out of the transporter as if concussed.

The stark realisation that his and Kyle's time together was growing more and more finite hit him harder than broken laws of physics.

In his fuzzy – almost drunk – vision, he saw Leck moving from behind the control panel. It was too early in the morning for the sun to even make an appearance, and the tight smile he shot Eric was both polite and sleepy.

Eric didn't respond, regarding Leck wearily before steadying himself on the closed doors of the transporter.

He just wanted to get back to his room and attempt to sleep, if his thoughts could stop churning long enough.

"Hey, uh, you alright?" Leck asked as he moved closer to Eric.

"What?"

"I asked if you're alright," Leck said, eyebrows knitted. "You seem a little, um, troubled."

"No, I'm fine," Eric insisted, of all the times Leck wanted to have a conversation with him... "Since when did you start caring?"

Leck frowned, affronted.

"I don't know," he shrugged, but it was anything but nonchalant. "I'm just making an observation."

"Whatever," Eric sighed. He noticed the time tether was still on his wrist, and after his recent visit it stung like acid on his skin. "Can you just get this fucking thing off of me please?"

Leck scowled but complied.

"You realise it if weren't for me there would be no way you could go back to the past in the first place," he muttered.

"So?"

"I'm not risking my opportunity here just to put up with your shitty attitude," Leck glowered. "So if you want to behave like a dick then take it somewhere else."

If Eric wasn't so drained he would've admired and been somewhat amused by Leck's sudden ownership of some balls.

"Alright, alright, I just want to get out of here," Eric instead responded. It was as close to an apology as Leck was going to get from him.

"Me too," Leck sighed, running a tired hand through his hair once he had removed the time tether.
Free of that horrid blue contraption, Eric pushed past Leck but couldn't stop replaying his words; they held something... something valuable. They had the potential to unlock what had been shut away from Eric for years.

It was true that if it wasn't for Leck, Eric would never have been able to go back in the first place.

But perhaps Leck was also the key to his plans, able to open up his future with Kyle.

There was no more room for trying or thinking, Eric had to just do. And he had to do it now if he was ever going to be with Kyle the way he wanted. The way they both wanted.

Eric sighed, before saying, "I'm sorry,"

"What?" Leck replied, he was packing his things away when Eric turned around.

"I said I'm sorry," Eric tucked his hands in his pockets and made his way over to the scientist. "I shouldn't have been pissy with you. I'm just in a bad mood. I guess it's kind of hitting me now that I only have five more shots left of this, it... it stings a little."

An understatement, but there was little space for complete honesty in deal-making. Eric had learned you need to appear strong and in control, even when you're crumbling and desperate.

"Yeah," Leck nodded, voice a little absent. "Yeah I get why that may be hard to accept. But I can't risk-"

"I know, I know," Eric interrupted, raising a pacifying hand. "But thanks, anyway."

Leck smiled. "You're welcome."

He returned to packing away his things while Eric waited, eyeing up the time transporter and figuring out his pitch.

"Hey, uh..." Eric began, pausing when he had Leck's attention again. "How hard do you think it would be to make one of these things?"

Leck looked at Eric questioningly for a moment before glancing at the time transporter.

"Extremely hard," Leck replied. "But obviously with the necessary time and resources it can be done. Why?"

Eric shrugged, best to start off casual, harmless.

"It's just... I've been reading up on the mechanics of it..."

Leck rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Oh, science..."

"And I think that I could do it," Eric continued, persuasion bubbling in his voice. "I have an engineering degree after all. It'd be great if I could do something worthwhile with it. But I would need some help. It's clearly not a one man job."

"What?" Leck's eyes widened. "Are... are you asking me?"

"Please, Leck," Eric stepped closer. "You've already done so much for me and I would be grateful if-"

"Do you really think this is what I want to do with my time?" Leck snapped, offended.
"This would be my project Leck," Eric assured. "But you know that's it too huge for me to attempt on my own. And you also know that I wouldn't be able to ask anybody else's help on this without the AAA interfering."

"Like I'm exempt!"

"I get that! But Leck you're…"

"What?" Leck demanded, crossing his arms. "I'm what?"

Eric huffed, running a hand through his hair before staring up at the time transporter again… all it could represent… all it could offer.

"You're the only person I can trust around here…" Eric admitted, with as much sincerity as he would allow himself during a conversation like this.

"That… that doesn't matter, Time Child!" Leck replied, too cautious and apprehensive to be swayed by well-meaning admissions. "It's too dangerous! The AAA will find out and they'll throw us both in prison!"

Eric rolled his eyes. "I can get around the AAA."

"How?"

"I don't know how yet but I'll figure out a way! I always do!" A confident smile erupted on Eric's face and smothered his flustered tone. "I just need to get the ball rolling with this thing and then I can deal with Blavius II and the council."

"I… I don't…" Leck eyes wouldn't stay still and his trains of thought were being derailed. "This is insane!"

"I know," Eric agreed, calmer, sober. "But I'm in too deep, Leck. I love this guy so much that I don't care what it takes as long as I get to be with him. That's all I want and I know it'll all be worth it."

Eric's declaration, his dedication seemed to cleanse Leck of his bewilderment, but residual panic still splintered his face.

"But what if it doesn't work out?" He asked. "What if time or expenses or the council get in our way?"

"Well then – wait," Eric stopped, acknowledging the word he'd been hoping for. "Our way?"

Leck shrugged, his smile was small and unsure, definitely unwanted.

"Yeah, I mean, I'm not heartless," he explained. "This clearly means a lot to you," his smile grew wider. "It's kind of wonderful really, that you're still able to fall in love when the world is so merciless."

But the world didn't appear so merciless and cruel when Eric seemed to have found the most compassionate, beautiful part of it. He smiled: just the simple thought of Kyle was enough to quieten all the complications that could keep them apart.

"But you haven't answered my question…" Leck pointed out.

"Right," Eric replied, drifting back to the present. "If all those things get in my way then… at least I can say that I've tried, that I've tried for him. However long it takes, however expensive it is, I'll find
a way and try my damn hardest to give him what he deserves. This isn't just about me, Leck."

Eric was sure that was going to be the selling point. This wasn't just about Eric, this wasn't a vain quest. This was about the happiness of somebody else too. Even though Kyle was a stranger to Leck, Eric knew he was a good person who wouldn't deny somebody of their seemingly unattainable love.

Leck sighed quietly and looked to the transporter, before he turned back to Eric and nodded. "Alright… alright, I'm in."
Halftime had commenced at the Nuggets game and while other spectators milled about to refill their drinks or journey to the bathroom, Kyle was frowning at the pitiful figures on the scoreboard.

"I'm telling you, this is the worst they've played all season…"

"Come on, they've got plenty of time to turn it around," Neil pointed out beside him. He was smiling, and while he made no secret of being amused by Kyle's grumpiness, it wasn't exactly appreciated… especially when the Nuggets were losing.

"I'm sure it'll pick up," he added reassuringly, reaching into his jean pocket.

Kyle rolled his eyes, oblivious. "If they keep playing like this, then that's very unlikely…"

Neil chuckled, eyes glinting. "We'll see…”

"Attention Nuggets fans!" An announcer's voice boomed throughout the stadium. "All eyes on the screen for a very important question!"

Like the thousands of other spectators, Kyle directed his attention to the screen but balked when he saw his own enlarged, bewildered expression staring back at him.

"Neil, what-"

The seat was empty when Kyle turned to it, and it must have been the embarrassment of being the centre of attention and mounting confusion that made him slow to realise that Neil was in fact on the floor, down on one knee, holding a small velvet box in front of him.

Kyle opened his mouth to speak, to demand an explanation, but the weight of countless eyes staring at him from all different directions suffocated his words. None more so than the sheening, hopeful teal eyes of his boyfriend who was handling this moment so delicately, so carefully, that Kyle didn't need to speak.

"Kyle, these two years have been the best of my life," Neil smiled. "You are the brightest, kindest, most loving person I have ever met and you make me so incredibly happy."

Kyle's mouth settled into a creased smile, his heart was trying to force its way into his throat.

"I honestly don't remember my life without you in it," Neil continued. "But I know that I want to make more memories with you and be by your side for the rest of my life. So…"

Neil paused to open the box, revealing a silver band, simple but undeniably perfect.

The ring blurred into startled, crystal tears in Kyle's eyes before Neil asked, "will you marry me?"

Five years without Eric, and Kyle was starting to notice his absence had an emotional trickledown effect, more clear and startling than the muddled feelings he had tried to unravel in his teen years.
It started with sharp, stinging fear and fruitless, crippling worry which then led to depression. Kyle knew the signs too well, could feel it sinking its ebony jaws into his conscience, his very soul, but he had his armour now. He had the knowledge of past victories even when the monster changed tact. Rather than cowering and drowning in its impossibly wide mouth, a pitch black cave that planned to drain every inch of Kyle's being, Kyle carried on and left the monster unnoticed until it were a feral animal gnawing hungrily at his heart.

But despite Kyle's patience, resignation to the formless scavenger residing in his body, that trickledown felt like less of an insidious leak, and more like a powerful, gushing waterfall. Emotions that had burst and Kyle had no way of plugging up...

Without Eric by his side.

Kyle had achieved so much in Eric's absence yes, but he knew that his craving for the man he loved needed to be pacified. It wasn't a sexual pang, rooted in attraction or the passion that accompanies it – though Kyle did yearn for Eric's touch, and thought of him exclusively whenever his bored hand wandered into his boxers –it was a deep, inexplicable, silent longing, swollen with love.

And it hurt.

It hurt to imagine Eric lying next to him in bed, it hurt to think of all their sacred visits and it hurt to be deprived of any information. Kyle tried so hard to not regress to what he had once been, but how could he not when the situation was growing frightfully similar?

Was Eric denied any future visits? Was he hurt? Sick? Worse?

Kyle couldn't bear to mull over horrible, futile answers.

Anger and bitterness blazed from fear. He hated not knowing, he hated what worrying did to him, and he resented Eric for being blind to his torment. Every genuine, kind word Eric had ever spoken to him since their reunion was soured by his absence, rotted with cynicism. Every dreamy look, passionate touch and sincere utterance of love was equally tainted, dulled by their growing separation.

But Kyle knew that this waterfall, this relentless tumbling of emotions stemmed from one unshakeable, pure thing: love.

Despite his loneliness, his longings, his insecurities and anger, Kyle loved Eric until his heart was fit to bursting.

And it had left him battered and drained. Especially today, at his school's "family fair"; kids playing carnival games and eating ice cream with their parents in the June sun.

Kyle was surrounded by people who were happy, fulfilled, who had the object of their affections, whether on paper or just simply beside them; growing, loving, collecting, living. That's all Kyle wanted. He admired those who found completion in themselves, wished he could transform into such a person to flush the sourness from his body... he had thought a long, simpler time ago that he was one of those people.

But as usual, Eric had thrown him in doubt.

Right now, Kyle didn't feel like he was truly living, he was just... suspended, waiting, comatose until Eric reappeared and gave him a kiss of life.

Why did Kyle feel like he needed Eric to save him again? Was that the only way to bring Eric back?
"Hi!"

The eager, flustered voice of a stranger pulled him out of his sinking thoughts.

"Oh, hey," Kyle responded, puzzled. He took in the pinked stranger; tall, with a pleasant smile and the clearest teal eyes that effortlessly drew others in. "Uh, have we met?"

"No, actually," the stranger replied, scratching his arm and dropping Kyle's gaze though he had been staring at him seconds earlier. "That's sort of why I'm over here".

Apparently the stranger was elusive too, as Kyle had only grown more confused.

"Just..." the stranger said. "I saw you standing over here and I thought you were hot-"

Kyle blinked, his brow lifted in surprise, but a chuckle crinkled his smile into a smirk.

"No!" The stranger scolded himself, realising what he had said. "I mean, you looked hot, like, warm and I was wondering if you were thirsty because it's hot and all. You know, the weather," he chuckled anxiously, gesturing to the glowing sun and pale blue sky. "But I also thought you looked friendly, maybe a little bored? So I decided that perhaps a good ice breaker would be to buy a drink for you. Not like a hard drink but maybe a soda or an iced tea? Then I realised that iced tea can be an acquired taste sometimes and I didn't know if it was a drink that... you were... acquired to," as his speech slowed and came to a stop, the stranger looked at Kyle questioningly and Kyle could only snicker in response. "So I got a soda instead, one for me, one for you. So here's your soda."

Kyle took the soda that was handed to him, blindsided and amused by their conversation.

"Thanks..." he grinned, rolling the cold can across his palm.

"And I'm Neil," The stranger said, extending his hand for Kyle to shake.

Kyle's smirk had returned, was practically etched into his face at this point. "I'm Kyle."

"Nice to meet you," Neil said, a little redder.

Kyle nodded, "you too."

"Really?" Neil asked incredulously. "Did you just hear my opener?"

Kyle chuckled, "yes, I did and I liked it. I thought it was funny."

Neil chuckled too, albeit with less humour and more gratitude. "I'm a little surprised you didn't just walk away..."

"I wanted to hear it to the end,"

"Or you wanted it to end?"

Kyle laughed and rolled his eyes before asking, "So who are you with?"

Neil blinked, staring down at his soda and trying to hide a delighted smile. But Kyle saw it anyway.

"Well, no one at the minute," Neil replied. "That's why I came over here, unless I'm barking up the wrong tree-"
"No, I meant who are you with here today?" Kyle clarified, although he was sure flattery and surprise was making him shiver during a sweltering June.

"Oh... oh God, right!" Neil exclaimed, smacking a hand to his forehead but Kyle couldn't help but smile. "Because we're at a school and if I came here alone that would be... um, weird..."

Kyle nodded and teased, "I think I'd have to notify somebody of your presence."

Neil snickered.

"But you don't, really," he assured. "I'm here with my sister and her son."

"Oh, so you're an uncle," Kyle smiled.

"Yeah, yeah, and you're a...?"

"Teacher. First grade."

"Wow, that's great!" Neil grinned. "How long have you been teaching here?"

"Six years," Kyle replied.

"A long time then," Neil observed. "Hey, you've probably taught my nephew? Max Bailey?"

Kyle furrowed his eyebrows as he searched his memory... Max Bailey... A shy boy with a developing affinity for numbers entered his head.

"Oh my God, yes!" Kyle said, smile brightening. "I remember Max! Dark, curly hair, right? He was a really nice kid, kind of quiet..."

Neil chuckled. "Yeah, well, not so quiet anymore."

"Kids like him usually come out of their shell sooner or later," Kyle nodded, whilst thinking back to how many years it had been since he taught that class. "He must be in the fourth grade now?"

"Yep, he's growing up real fast,"

"It's only when you're surrounded by kids everyday do you notice that," Kyle said, his wistful tone didn't belong in a conversation like this, but he couldn't help it. Time had always been a sensitive subject.

Running out of time, rather...

"Well, you know what they say about time, right?" Neil asked, in an obvious attempt to lighten the mood.

Kyle liked that.

"What?"

"It always passes by too quickly," Neil replied, smile simple but sturdy. Not going anywhere.

"Yeah..." Kyle nodded, recollecting Eric's not so recent visit. How time and its cruel limitations had snuck up on them. "Yeah, you're right about that."

Kyle returned Neil's smile, it wasn't as sure or as strong but Neil didn't seem to mind. Their attention
soon turned to Neil's vibrating phone.

Neil pulled it out of his pocket and read the text in front of him while Kyle waited.

"And it seems that mine has run out," Neil joked, putting his phone away. "Sorry, I need to go meet my sister."

"Alright," Kyle nodded, fixing his smile. "It was nice meeting you."

"Yeah, you too," Neil said, shooting Kyle the widest, most genuine smile anybody had directed at him in a long time. "You, uh, don't mind if I have your number, do you?"

"Oh... uh..."

Kyle was reminded then why he was alone, why guys like Neil, however nice or cute or promising had to be kept at bay.

Because Kyle was holding out for something he knew would be incredible, that he would have someday in the indeterminable future, that he could have had right now were it not for time, past mistakes, and distance not geographical.

"Sorry, I get it," Neil said. "I just thought maybe you were-"

"No, no I am, I just..."

"That's okay, I understand," Neil replied, his smile limper. "I guess I'll see you around?"

Kyle nodded wordlessly before he found his voice. "Yeah, yeah, sure..." he stared down at the can in his hand. "Thanks for the soda. How much do I owe you by the way?"

Neil rolled his eyes and laughed. "Nothing, it's on me for putting up with my babbling."

"It wasn't that bad," Kyle assured, exasperated but grinning. "Come on, how much do I owe you?"

"Nothing!" Neil repeated, raising his hands. "Really, your company was reward enough."

Kyle smiled, despite how undeserving he felt. "You're... you're really sweet, Neil."

"Thank you," Neil replied, they were ensnared in each other's smiles again before he was brought back to reality. "I'm sorry, but I need to go."

Kyle nodded, biting the inside of his mouth to stop any protest.

"I'll see you later," Neil grinned.

"Yeah," Kyle nodded, "see you later,"

Neil left and Kyle wondered how he could stop great guys from walking away.

"So I saw you talking to Neil at the fair..." Tracy (Miss Albridge to her students) said, cup of coffee in hand.

She liked to hang out in Kyle's classroom before lessons started, before the kids started piling in. It was a great place for them to have discussions perhaps not suited for the teacher's lounge.

"What?" Kyle asked, slightly distracted as he went about organising his desk, (a ritual that had to be
"How do you know Neil?"

"His nephew is in my class," Tracy shrugged. She had been leaning against the wall but her eyes glinted and she moved towards the desk. "So do you like him?"

Honestly, Kyle had spent most of the weekend trying to subdue his fondness for Neil.

"Sure," he nodded. "He's nice, funny…"

"Cute?" Tracy added, and when Kyle looked at her, he didn't know if he should be amused or concerned with her wide eyes and hopeful grin.

"Yeah," Kyle said slowly, arching an eyebrow. "Cute…"

The memory of teal eyes and a nervous smile suddenly poured into the room along with the sunshine.

"He came over to talk to me before he left," Tracy said, eagerness winding down. "He was asking about you…"

Kyle's stomach sank uncomfortably, like it should've been flipping. "He was?"

"Yeah," Tracy beamed. "Said he really likes you, couldn't shut up about you, in fact."

"Is that so?" Kyle directed his quiet, dry voice to the desk.

"Yes!" Tracy exclaimed, before sighing. "Why do you act so coy and modest all the time? You know you're a catch!"

"That's a strong word, don't you think?" Kyle asked. "So he's interested in me…"

"Are you interested in him?"

Kyle's eyebrows furrowed. "What is it to you?"

Tracy glanced around the room innocently, tapping the side of her coffee mug, before admitting, "He asked me if I could set you guys up."

Kyle shot her a derisive look. Yes, Neil had been flustered and had wanted his number and had smiled at Kyle in a way he needed to forget, but that didn't mean Neil was in love with him, right? No, Neil was just attracted to him. Kyle could deal with that, it was… easier to put behind him.

"That's a strong word, don't you think?" Kyle asked. "So he's interested in me…"

Of course he did.

"I should have known this was part of your 'find Kyle a boyfriend' mission," Kyle said with an exasperated smirk.

"And this is a very promising lead, don't you think?" Tracy asked, well-meaning desperation
"Not really..." Kyle mumbled, he didn't trust himself to be more assertive with his lie.

Yes, Neil was promising and a definite catch who could make some guy very happy but that guy wasn't Kyle, couldn't be Kyle.

"Oh, come on!" Tracy whinged, stomping her feet like one of Kyle's students would. "Why not? Neil is cute and charming and smart!" She set her half-full mug down on the desk with a loud thud. "Give me one good reason why it's not at least worth considering!"

"You don't think I've considered it?" Kyle asked sharply, and he saw the surprise and confusion brim in Tracy's eyes.

He felt too antsy and cheated to remain in his chair so he stood up and moved past her. He hoped pacing the classroom would expel some of the tension knotted between his shoulder-blades.

"I'm interested in him too, Tracy, don't get me wrong, I'm just..."

"What?" Tracy said, voice harder as she moved towards Kyle.

Kyle sighed, showing how wounded he was when he said, "not ready yet..."

In the corner of his eye, he saw Tracy's irate expression crack with a sympathetic frown.

"Sweetie, you've been saying that for years now..."

When their status as friends had been cemented, Kyle felt brave enough to tell Tracy of his relationship with Eric. He left out the time-travel and the sporadic visits and the atheist, sea-otter governed future.

Instead he had said that he was in love with a man. A brave, stubborn, incredible, broken man. They had a lifetime of history together – complicated, painful history in fact – but that didn't stop them from falling in love, from meaning absolutely everything to each other. They both loved each other so passionately, so intensely, so wholly. But they couldn't be together the way they wanted to be. Still, Kyle was also stubborn and broken like him, as well as hopeful to wait until it killed him.

Kyle ducked his head, his voice and eyes full. "Yeah, well, getting over someone you're in love with isn't easy."

Tracy sighed, weighted with that frown. "I know that, but..."

Kyle sniffed and lifted his head, voice prickling defensively. "But what?"

"You're never going to move forward... move anywhere... without taking chances," Tracy said. "I can't imagine how difficult it's been for you, Kyle, but the way Neil talked about you... the way I saw you guys talking to each other it just looked so easy. I don't know where it'll go with you guys, but maybe Neil could be the start of something good for you?"

The start of something...

It seemed like such a fantastical, impossible notion when Kyle had been waiting for so long.

Kyle shrugged, he was suddenly shy.

"It did feel pretty great," he considered. "I'd forgotten how exciting it could be to just have someone
take an interest."

Neil's genuine smile rippled like a white sunrise in Kyle's mind.

"So is that a yes?" Tracy asked.

The possibility of a new, thrilling start seemed tantalising to Kyle. He was curious and hungry and alone enough to at least try it. It didn't have to be serious, or go anywhere, it could be innocent. Going on one date wouldn't diminish his feelings for Eric, right? They were sturdier than that, weren't they?

Kyle was unsure, but maybe that's why he needed to go on this date? When everything was so confusing, maybe he needed to test these boundaries, prove something to himself?

And seeing Neil again was something he had wanted anyway, before the possibility of a date even arose.

"Fine," Kyle replied. "I'll go on one date with him but nothing serious, okay? I don't want him to get the wrong idea. Just something fun, casual..."

"Got it," Tracy grinned.

Kyle's small, uneasy smile paled in comparison.

Mellow, coy conversation was in keeping with Neil's quiet, pleasant neighbourhood. His and Kyle's vibrant, lengthy discussions had been left in the restaurant, petering off into something more languid as the evening faded away.

To an outsider, it would seem as if they were on the perfect date. And perhaps they were. Their meals were great, the conversation had been interesting, and Neil... he was a good listener (maybe too good, as he looked into your eyes so unabashedly when absorbing an anecdote that it was almost distracting), he was polite, and also had a goofy sense of humour that Kyle didn't expect to find so amusing.

But Kyle couldn't help but feel like those qualities were wasted on him. He may have been impressed by and attracted to Neil, but he didn't want him. Not truly. And he felt horrible, selfish and foolish for acknowledging it, but this is what he had signed up for when he had returned Eric's affections (as if he had a choice). He had chosen to be selfish, to view their relationship internally not externally, ignoring outside factors.

And foolishness, well, it comes with the lovesick territory, right?

"This is me..." Neil announced.

They both came to a stop, and Kyle looked up at the charming apartment building Neil called home.

"Alright," he nodded.

"Thanks for a..." Neil paused, glancing bashfully at the sidewalk. "A really wonderful evening, Kyle."

Kyle smiled. "Yeah, thank you. I had a lot of fun."

Despite the nagging guilt, it was the truth.
In the dim evening, Kyle could make out those attentive teal eyes searching for his. He bristled, wrestling with exhilaration and dread as well as trying to figure out what Neil was thinking. He heard soft, near silent footsteps shuffling forward and teal eyes drawing closer. A body, warm breath and imploring eyes nearing him.

Kyle's stomach lurched nervously and he ducked his head. He may have agreed to a date and he may have resigned himself to uncontrollable attraction but he would not kiss Neil.

He would not betray Eric.

He would not lead Neil on.

"I'll call you," Kyle said, gaze still avoiding the man before him.

He heard Neil's soft sigh, could feel him retreat. "Yeah, I'd like that," he replied, and after a few minutes Kyle felt it was safe to look at him again.

Neil was still there, standing outside his apartment so hopefully.

"But in the meantime..." he continued, "do you want to come in? Have some coffee?"

Kyle could have cringed. He wasn't an idiot, he knew what Neil meant. Especially since Neil had hardly drunk anything all night and Kyle had allowed himself his two drink maximum. Stan, it turned out, had been right. Moderation works if you have the right amount of willpower.

Kyle's life seemed to be an exercise in discipline.

Eric was the only addiction he would allow himself.

"I had a cup at the restaurant," Kyle replied.

Neil tucked his hands in his coat pockets and his eyes roamed their surroundings. "Right, I know, but I was just wondering if you were in the mood for another."

Kyle frowned, pitying him.

How long has it been since somebody has wanted you to stay? Don't answer that. You already know.

"No, no, I'm fine, thank you..." Kyle said quietly, guilt was screaming at him.

With an understanding smile, Neil nodded and turned to go inside.

But as he watched, Kyle found that it was him who was having difficulty leaving. He didn't want Neil to go. He wasn't ready for the night to end.

"Neil, wait-"

And because he was wanting so much, Neil turned around immediately." Hmm?"

Kyle studied the situation for a minute or two. Neil clearly didn't mind.

"Where's the closest bar?" Kyle asked finally.

Neil's eyebrows jolted and he smiled. "There's one just down the street."
Kyle returned the smile; sheepish, knowing, a puzzle that he wanted Neil to solve.

"Maybe we could..." Kyle said, glancing down the quiet street.

Neil grinned.

"Yeah, definitely," he said, moving closer. "Sounds nice."

They walked to the bar in silence, smiling all the while.

"Now I've had a few more drinks I can finally ask the question I've been wanting to ask all night..."

Kyle stiffened nervously at Neil's declaration, hoping the sounds of the crowded bar and the poor lighting would disguise it.

"And what's that?" he asked.

Neil leaned forward in their small booth, attempting to trade secrets. "You like me, right?"

Shit.

How was Kyle supposed to avoid a question so blatant? He could handle dissuading Neil's attempts at affection while keeping his feelings intact. But he couldn't lie when he was put on the spot like this, and he also couldn't crush Neil with his honesty.

Move around the question. Keep this night – this admittedly fun night – going.

"What?" Kyle replied with a thin chuckle. "Of course I like you-"

Neil shook his head, frustrated. "No, I mean..." he rubbed the neck of his beer bottle with his thumb while Kyle watched in confusion. "Like like me."

Amidst the inertia, the looming disappointment, Kyle grinned at Neil's endearing goofiness.

"So when you're drunk you start talking like a fifth grader?" he teased.

Neil's eyes widened incredulously, belied by his grin.

"I'm not drunk!" he retorted, laughing. "Alright, what's the grown up way to put it?"

Kyle didn't answer; he let Neil figure it out. If only he could do that with everything.

"Are you attracted to me?" Neil asked.

Kyle gulped, Neil's gaze trained on him.

"Y-yes," Kyle answered, tracing the swirling patterns of the oak table. "Yes, I am..."

"Really?" Neil asked, with enough light-heartedness to make Kyle lift his surprised gaze. "It's okay if you're not..."

"Why don't you believe me?"

Shit, it can't be that obvious..."I don't know," Neil shrugged. Kyle could tell he was embarrassed. "It's just a feeling I have and it's
been bugging me."

The change in body language was hard to ignore. Neil's shoulders had raised; his head slightly lowered; his embarrassed, sombre expression souring the mood of the lively bar, their little booth; Kyle could only remedy it with honesty. The softer, gentler kind. The kind that Neil needed to hear.

"Neil, I do like you..."

"But?"

The word was blunt, throwing Kyle off.

"I like somebody else too," Kyle admitted, and he could feel something deep inside of him wither. "I love them in fact, so much so that the thought of dating another guy kind of hurts."

"Oh..." Neil whispered, shoulders slouching as he leaned back.

Kyle was unsure if he was reeling, or unwinding from the stress of not knowing.

"I'm sorry, Neil," Kyle said. "I should've told you."

Neil shook his head, as if he were still searching for the words. "No, no I can see why you didn't," he said finally.

"I didn't want to hurt you either," Kyle admitted.

A half-smile.

Kyle could deal with that.

"Thanks," Neil replied.

"That's alright..." Kyle said with a sheepish, half-smile of his own.

Silence descended over the booth then, deaf and disconnected from the conversation and laughter of strangers.

"So this guy..." Neil began, shuffling in his seat.

"Yeah?"

"He must be, like, the best guy ever, right?" Neil asked. "If you want to hold onto him so badly?"

Objectively, the very opposite was true of Eric, when Kyle thought about the things he had done in the space of one childhood.

But Kyle's impulsive, battered heart would only see Eric as a hero who did bad things, somebody who was worth loving, the necessary piece in order for Kyle to be whole... a vital pillar.

"Uh, in a way, yes he is... For me, he is," Kyle explained. "He's done so much for me, and I've never felt the same way for anybody else."

Kyle was brought back to the present when Neil glanced at the table, struggling to maintain his smile.

"Sorry, I probably shouldn't tell that to a guy I'm on a date with," Kyle said, his face suddenly hot.
"I think this stopped being a date about five minutes ago," Neil pointed out.

Kyle laughed, he didn't know if it was because what Neil said was particularly funny, or if he was just relieved that Neil had understood… or was at least trying to.

"Maybe…" Kyle chuckled.

Neil's smile was frayed, but it wasn't a half-smile anymore.

"So… you don't mind me asking about him, do you?" Neil asked before he could tread on uncomfortable territory.

Admittedly, Kyle was conflicted. But he supposed he always would be.

"No, not at all," he replied, neither the truth nor a lie. "It's only fair."

"Alright," Neil nodded, before he asked, "Where is he? How did he get away?"

Kyle sighed, he was wondering the exact same thing.

"I don't know," he replied. "He, um… moved… and I haven't seen or heard from him in a very long time."

Neil's eyebrows furrowed, "sounds confusing."

"It is," Kyle agreed.

"And mysterious,"

Kyle laughed, it wasn't an adjective he had pinned on this separation before.

"Is he a spy or something?" Neil asked, eyes glinting.

Kyle smirked. "See, even if he was I couldn't tell you,"

"So he definitely is a spy then."

"I am neither confirming nor denying he is a spy"

Neil laughed.

"You're good," he said, before raising his beer bottle to his lips. "Ever thought of becoming a lawyer?"

"Yeah, when I was a kid," Kyle replied. "My dad is a lawyer and I was at that age when I thought everything my parents were doing I should one day do as well."

Neil snickered, shifting in his seat again.

"Listen, I know you don't want to date anybody right now because you're in love with a spy-"

Kyle laughed and tried to kick him under the table.

"But I really like you," Neil said earnestly. "I feel like we could have a lot of fun. I mean, not that kind of fun…" he paused when Kyle chuckled. "But a lot of laughs, you know?" He continued with a soft smile. "And it would kill me if this was the last time I saw you."
Kyle blinked, but he could sympathise with Neil. It wasn't as if Kyle was crazy about the idea of not seeing Neil again.

"So is it just romantic relationships you're boycotting?" Neil asked, grinning.

"Yes," Kyle said, a firm answer. "I think I could use another friend. But-"

"But what?"

Kyle suffocated a sigh.

"You still like me," Kyle answered, and Neil glanced around the booth as if he had been caught out. "Our friendship isn't going to change that until you move on, meet someone new…"

"What are you getting at, Kyle?" Neil asked with the smallest twinge of impatience.

"Would you really be happy if you knew this could become nothing more?"

Neil pursed his lips and thought.

Kyle watched Neil glance at the table, his beer bottle and then at him, and he could feel himself sinking in teal irises.

"Yes," Neil decided.

Kyle raised his eyebrows. "Are you sure?" he asked, he didn't want to be responsible for hurting Neil.


"But-"

"No!" Neil exclaimed. "Stop with that shit! I'm one hundred percent, absolutely, positively sure that I'm okay with us being friends! I would love us to be friends because I think you're cool and funny and smart and… really, really great."

Kyle let the smile on Neil's face be reflected on his.

"There'll be no pressure, no agenda, I swear," Neil vowed. "I just want to spend time with you."

"I want to spend time with you too," Kyle replied.

Their promise was sealed with twin smiles.

After all, you can never have too many friends, right? True friends at least…


"To friendship?" he proposed.

Kyle smirked and lifted his own drink.

"To friendship," he replied, as glass clinked.

Kyle and Neil started to spend every weekend together:
At restaurants when they were feeling particularly fancy; movie theatres, bars, bowling alleys, even the occasional fairground if the weather called for it; but at each other's places in front of the TV with take-out mostly.

It was a tradition that had stung initially for Kyle, not that he'd show it in front of Neil. Of course, it had been different with Eric. They had flirted and kissed and cuddled, while he and Neil just laughed and ate and provided commentary to whatever they were watching.

As much as Kyle missed Eric and his affections, he was having a lot of fun and Neil made him happy.

So happy in fact that Kyle told himself he could overlook his growing attraction, the sudden shine and allure to Neil's qualities, and the brief, heady moments of chemistry that Kyle knew were reciprocated.

When gazes lingered for longer than they should have and when fingers accidentally brushed together, Kyle let himself enjoy it – in the most measured way possible of course. He knew that gnawing guilt came after the rush, not only betraying his conflicted heart but Neil too.

Neil had been attracted to him since the day they met, it was wrong for Kyle to lead him on. But was he leading him on? He shouldn't just abandon Neil's friendship because he had returned his feelings, right?

Neil had told him he wasn't in this friendship in the hopes that it would one day develop into more. He just wanted to spend time with Kyle, and telling Neil how he felt would only jeopardise things, wouldn't it?

After another great day or night with Neil had ended, Kyle would be left to sort through these dilemmas alone. If his life indeed was an exercise in discipline, then this was his biggest test yet.

He would never have guessed that in maintaining his hope for Eric's return he would also have to battle with attraction to another guy.

If Kyle hadn't learned anything from Thomas then Neil would've been a perfect distraction. But it hurt to think of him in such a way, what Kyle felt for him was greater than that, he couldn't dismiss it.

That's not to say all distractions were bad ones.

The incoming Skype call from Stan when he returned home was a distraction Kyle gladly accepted. His super best friend had been living in Thailand for a year with his heavily pregnant fiancé, which only reminded Kyle of the ceaseless nature of time.

"So I went to a scan with Jessica today…" Stan said, trying to subdue an ecstatic grin.

"And?" Kyle asked. Stan's excitement was contagious. "Is everything okay?"

"Yep," Stan nodded, only slightly smug. "It's all looking perfect so far…"

"It? So you don't know the sex or anything yet?"

"Yeah, we do. Found out today." "Well?!" Kyle asked, noticing his eager reflection on the computer screen. "Don't keep me waiting, dude! Am I going to have a niece or a nephew?"
Stan smirked, biting his lip before he revealed, "A niece…"

Kyle's breath caught in his throat, childhood memories of him and Stan careened to the forefront of his mind until his rushing thoughts finally settled in the present.

His best friend having a daughter.

"Oh my God, congratulations!" Kyle exclaimed when words returned to him. His voice softened, "I'm so happy for you guys…"

Stan smiled sheepishly. "Thanks, dude."

"Thought of any names yet?"

"Jessica kind of likes Storm…"

"… Storm?"

"Yeah," Stan shrugged. "It's gender neutral and strong and linked to nature, you know?"

Kyle smirked. "Except she'll have to spend the rest of her life with everybody knowing her parents are hippies."

"And what's wrong with that?" Stan asked, suddenly affronted.

Kyle still found it amusing to push his buttons.

"Nothing, I'm kidding," Kyle chuckled. "Storm sounds nice. Storm Marsh…"

"Hmm, maybe not," Stan considered. "I like the name Lily-"

"Well, that's natural, right?" Kyle cut in. He was more enthusiastic about that name. "It's a flower, after all…"

"Yeah, I'll think about it," Stan replied. "But anyway, what did you do today?"

"Neil invited me to go paintballing with his friends. It was fun, hurt like a bitch though." Kyle said, glancing at his arms and chest - the places that had taken the most hits.

Stan chuckled. "Should I be worried?"

"About the paintballing thing?" Kyle asked, arching an eyebrow. "Nah, I have a couple of bruises, that's all."

"No, dipshit, I meant should I be worried that Neil is taking my place as your best friend?"

"What?" Kyle asked, chuckling incredulously. "Shut up, dude, nobody could replace you!"

Stan shrugged, a loathsome smirk on his face that pressed Kyle's buttons. "You've been spending a lot of time with Neil lately."

Kyle shifted in his seat, apparently not even a webcam could conceal his attraction. He supposed he did talk about Neil a lot, but that's only because they had been hanging out so much.

"Yeah, because he's fun and – you can't actually be jealous? You have a fiancé, and a kid on the way, your life isn't exactly empty…"
"Who said anything about jealousy? I'm just curious…"

"What?"

"Could Neil be more than a friend?" Stan asked.

Kyle's face flushed.

Why did Stan have to be marrying a therapist? More to the point, why did Stan have to absorb her psycho analysis as readily as a sponge?

Or maybe it had nothing to do with Jessica? Stan knew Kyle just that well that it was obvious when he had a crush on someone.

"That silence is only convincing me further…” Stan teased.

Kyle sighed, wanting to get this uncomfortable topic out of the way quickly. "Yes, I do like him, and he likes me, we both know that-"

"So why not go for it?" Stan interjected. "What's stopping you?"

Kyle hoped Stan wouldn't notice the bob of his Adam's apple, or the way his eyes widened for a millisecond. But he was stuck, trapped. Which truth was less destructive?

Kyle had no idea where his boyfriend was?

He was hopelessly in love with somebody and perhaps had been for longer than he even realised?

That his boyfriend, the one he was so madly in love with, was actually Eric Cartman who – it turns out – isn't dead, but is in fact living five hundred years in the future? A fact Kyle had conveniently kept hidden from Stan, Kenny, Butters, his family, Eric's mom, all these years because Kyle was selfish and their time was limited and he only wanted Eric for himself?

Anxiety was constricting him, his mouth dry, his heart pounding, a panic attack effortlessly shredding seconds away. Kyle remembered the bottle of water on his desk and took a gulp, hoping it would flush out the stress.

Stan was still waiting for an answer.

"I… I wasn't ready for a boyfriend when we met and he promised he wouldn’t let his feelings affect our friendship," Kyle hastily explained, before sobering. "I just didn't take into account that my feelings would. And if we were to go out and things went wrong, I could lose him, right?"

"I don’t know," Stan sighed, but a smile flickered. "There’s always the possibility that it could be amazing and you wind up happily ever after. Have you considered that?"

Astoundingly, Kyle hadn't.

"I think I'm too much of a wuss to have considered that," Kyle mumbled, but Stan heard it.

"You're not a wuss," he consoled. "We both know that."

"Thanks," Kyle smiled. "But I don't think this is something I should rush into… I need to think about it first…"

Stan nodded, understanding.
Alright, but not too much," he warned, his well-meaning advice brightened by a cheeky grin. "Otherwise you won't get anything done. Just promise me that after you're done thinking you'll talk to Neil? Or do something proactive other than just thinking?"

"I-"

Kyle was shot down with a stern, knowing look. He sighed.

"Okay," Kyle said, smile growing wider. "I promise."

"And keep me updated,"

Kyle nodded, "I will."

Stan glanced somewhere behind Kyle's head. Kyle turned around to see what he was staring at before remembering they weren't in the same room.

"I need to go," Stan said apologetically. "But while I think of baby names, you think on telling Neil how you feel, alright?"

Kyle rolled his eyes, but there was no malice there, and nodded.

Stan smiled the type of smile that could only belong to him.

"Good luck, dude," he said, before the call disconnected.

Kyle sighed, slouching in his chair as thoughts of Neil and Eric waged war inside his head, filling the apartment like second-hand smoke.

"Is this why you got into teaching?" Neil asked, as he and Kyle walked, ice creams in hand. "The long breaks?"

Kyle grinned, his summer break was coming to a close, melting like strawberry scoops in the sun. "While that is a perk, no…"

Neil snickered softly, taking a lick of his vanilla chocolate chip. "So what was the reason?" He asked.

"I love helping people," Kyle answered, simple, a smile brightening his face. "Well, guiding people. I was kind of a bossy kid so I think I channel all that into teaching, but in a professional way obviously. It's not like I'm on some big power trip or anything…"

Neil laughed again, catching Kyle's attention when Neil was already ensnared. Goosebumps erupted on Kyle's skin despite the summer heat, and he quickly looked away as if he could shut up that look forever.

"And I, um, love kids," Kyle continued. "I loved being a big brother. I mean, I still do but I can't exactly look after my twenty seven year old brother when he's all the way in New York."

"I've seen photos of Ike," Neil added. "He doesn't need any looking after."

Kyle shook his head, laughing. "Definitely not."

He slid his gaze to Neil once again, it was where his gaze naturally wanted to wander. It felt safe there. But Neil still had that distracted, moony look in his eyes, his soft mischievous smile scanty on
any explanation.

"So you love kids, huh?" Neil asked, lifting Kyle's cloud of confusion momentarily.

Kyle nodded, wanting to push the conversation along, keep it moving.

"Does that mean you'd want some someday?" Neil continued with his questioning.

"… Maybe," Kyle replied with a half-smirk. "With the right guy, obviously."

Honestly, Kyle couldn't see his future without a family in it. Although the figure of his potential husband was infuriatingly blurred, in his more delusional, optimistic days that figure had resembled Eric but now…

Kyle glanced at Neil and caved to that persistent look in his eyes, wanting to decipher and untangle it, no matter how dangerous. But the longer - the further - Kyle looked, the more he was mesmerised by the cool shade, flattered by Neil's undivided attention and mimicking his small smile.

Kyle's eyes wandered until they spotted a cream blob on Neil's chin.

"You have some…" Kyle said, pointing vaguely. "Ice cream on your chin."

Neil blinked, colour rushing to his face. "Oh…"

"Here…" Kyle said, napkin in hand.

Before Neil could say anything Kyle had wiped the ice cream off his chin, leaving him to stare at Kyle amusedly, fondly.

"Sorry," Kyle mumbled, red himself when he quickly tucked the napkin away. "Force of habit when you're surrounded by five year olds."

"It's okay, I don't mind," Neil said with a laugh before his voice softened, "I don't mind you touching me."

It was so shy, so earnest, then why did it terrify Kyle and make his heart race simultaneously?

"Oh…" Kyle said, averting Neil's gaze and determined for them to keep walking on. "Oh, um, alright then."

Kyle could feel Neil's gaze on him like the glare of the sun.

"Kyle…"

Biting back a sigh, Kyle couldn't dismiss the anxiety from his voice. "Yeah?"

"There's something I…" Neil stopped when Kyle looked at him. He gathered himself, before continuing, "something I need to get off my chest."

But Kyle already knew, and it was approaching him as slow and devastating as a hurricane.

"What?"

Neil sighed, ice cream and Kyle abandoned for contemplative glances at the sidewalk.

"I know I said I'd try not to let my feelings affect our friendship, and I still want you in my life in
whichever way you'll have me but..." Neil stopped again, raking his gaze over Kyle and he smiled, "I really like you."

Kyle stopped, words struggling in his defunct mouth, eyes wide. He felt numb, as if he had been swallowed by the hurricane.

"Really, I, I can't stop thinking about you," Neil continued, smile growing giddy now he had taken the nerve-wracking first step of confessing. "I miss you so much when you're not with me. Hell, I'm dreading going back to the office now because I hate leaving you."

The words only weighed Kyle down, helpless.

Neil must have noticed.

"And I know I must be coming on majorly strong, and I'm probably freaking you out," he said. "I've been trying so hard not to say anything, to keep you around but God, you look even more handsome than usual, today," he studied Kyle again. "That's my favourite shirt of yours, you know that?"

This conversation – one sided – was swerving all over the place. Whirring, Kyle furrowed his eyebrows and looked down to inspect his shirt. Plain, cotton, mint.

"This?" Kyle asked, holding out the fabric.

"Yeah, yeah it really brings out your eyes," Neil beamed and then said a little shyer, "Green is a great colour on you."

The crease in Kyle's brow deepened.

"And god, you smell amazing too!" Neil continued, seemingly in awe. "You're so bright and funny and way too smart for me and... is there anything unpleasant about you? I mean, come on it's not fair!"

"Neil, will you be quiet for just one second?" Kyle snapped. He had finally found his frustrated voice.

Neil blinked. "Sorry, I'm sorry, I-I'm going too fast-"

"Yes you are!" Kyle shouted, he felt hysterical, frazzled in the heat. "For Christ's sake, Neil! I told you what the situation was when we started hanging out! I'm still not ready-"

"Will you ever be ready, Kyle?" Neil asked, voice harder. Sympathy was peeling at the corners.

Anger – indignation – bled into Kyle's confusion.

"What? I, I don't know!" Kyle replied. "What happened to there being no pressure or agenda?!"

"I meant that! I meant that, alright?! But it's not so easy to shut off your feelings you know that better than anybody!"

"Exactly! After everything I told you, you go and blindside me with this?" Kyle asked, but maybe this wasn't such a surprise, maybe for Neil it wasn't impulsive at all. "Had you planned this? Is this why you wanted to meet up with me today?!"

"No!" Neil exclaimed, flushed and frustrated. "God damn it, I just... my lunch breaks are usually so fucking dull and – I knew I could have fun with you. I want to be with you all the time-"
"Will you stop?!" Kyle asked, wanting to cover his ears like one of his first graders would during a tantrum.

"No, no I can't stop!" Neil shouted, they were both panting. "I... it sounds like a cliché, but I'm in too deep!"

"Yeah! But I didn't put you there!" Kyle argued. Neil hung his head. "You could've walked away months ago when we were in that bar! I was honest with you because I didn't want to hurt you or lead you on and.... I trusted you, Neil," Kyle said softly, because that was the stinger. "I trusted your judgement..."

Neil blinked again, incredulity and hurt spreading across his face. "You can still trust me-"

"How?!" Kyle demanded, voice cracking. "How, Neil?! How do I know this friendship wasn't just a fucking trick?! Some kind of ploy to get me to sleep with you and, and fall in love with you!"

Neil hardened his expression.

"Because I'm your friend!" he replied.

Kyle shook his head, he bit his lip to stop it from trembling. "No, you never were and you never wanted to be!"

Neil opened his mouth to defend himself, to comfort Kyle... but Kyle didn't care, couldn't hear it. Dropping his ice cream on the ground, he stormed off, wanting to get home as quickly as possible.

So he could lock out the sound of Neil calling out for him, as well as all the other things screaming in his mind.

It took a few hours for Kyle to calm his thoughts down, subdue them and make them pliable enough so they could be arranged and each given proper attention. Kyle knew that if he dwelled on one thing for too long he'd have a breakdown, so flitted from one doubt, one argument, one fear to another, adept as any thoughtful man should be.

He was still working up the courage to call Neil, however. At least that's what he told himself, because he wasn't scared, he was proud. And so while he floated through his days (as if surveying everything in his life from an objective, birds-eye view) he kept a slither of his attention trained on his phone, to see if Neil had more backbone than he did.

Whilst placing grocery bags on his kitchen worktop, Kyle heard his phone buzz and he jolted at the possibility of hearing Neil's voice.

There could have been every chance it wasn't him. It could've been Ike, his mom, one of his friends who he hadn't fought with in public.

Retrieving his phone from his discarded jacket pocket, Kyle saw it was indeed who he had been hoping for.

"Hi..." he said breathlessly.

"You're answering my call," Neil replied, warm and tentative. "That's a good sign."

Kyle laughed, shoulders slumping and eyes slipping shut as tension left his body.

"Yeah, well, one of us had to call first," Kyle grinned, continuing to put groceries away. "And God
knows I'm too stubborn and stupid to do that."

"Only one of those things is true," Neil said, and his good nature appealed to the remorseful side of Kyle.

He frowned. "Neil, I'm so sorr-"

"No," Neil interrupted. "I need to do this first, alright? Please?"

Kyle nodded, suddenly nervous.

"Fine," he said reluctantly. "Go ahead."

Kyle heard Neil sigh.

"I'm really sorry, Kyle. I've been feeling like an idiot and a douchebag since we fought... I can't believe I told you all that I did. I, I didn't know what I was expecting, or what came over me. I guess the pressure of it all got to me a little."

"I understand," Kyle replied, nodding again. "Thank you."

Neil's apology was so bittersweet that it stung, and Kyle knew he shouldn't have to take all of the responsibility for their fight.

"But I'm sorry too," he quickly added. "Like you said, I think the pressure got to both of us and I'm dealing with a lot of stuff right now," Kyle sighed at the admission, Neil's innocence in all of this. "Still, that's not your fault and I shouldn't have been so angry at you. You can't help how you feel."

There was thoughtful silence, as if Neil were absorbing the apology.

"Thanks, Kyle," he said finally. "It feels really good to hear you say that."

Kyle's smile wobbled and he felt warmth at his cheeks.

"Yeah, well, it's good to hear from you again," he replied softly.

"It's only been three days," Neil pointed out.

Kyle's brow creased, how was his sense of time so muddled? It couldn't have been three days, could it?

"It has?" Kyle asked, he tried to sort out the timeline in his head and then realised. "Oh my God, you're right, it just... seems longer."

"Yeah," Neil chuckled, "it kind of does."

Kyle smiled to himself, before another realisation hit him.

"I've missed you," he whispered.

But Neil heard it. Taking a shaky breath, he replied. "I've missed you too."

His back meeting the worktop, Kyle grinned at the confirmation.

"Are you free tonight?" Neil asked.

He was obviously keen to pick up where they had left off.
"Sure," Kyle replied, pulling himself out of his haze. "What did you have in mind?"

"I'm having a drink with some friends from work," Neil said. "You can join us, if you want?"

"Sounds fun," Kyle replied, his smile seeping into his voice. "I'll be there."

"Cool," Neil said, and Kyle could imagine him grinning. "I've got to go, but I'll text you later?"

"Yeah," Kyle nodded, fiddling with his shirt. "Okay…"

"Bye," Neil said.

"Bye," Kyle smiled as he hung up, not denying the butterflies in his stomach.

He could berate himself later, acknowledge the festering guilt, but for now he was just happy he and Neil were speaking again.

In the present moment, that's what mattered.

"Thanks for walking me home," Kyle said, just he and Neil strolling down a quiet street at the end of the night.

"No problem," Neil smiled. "It's the least I can do after my fuck-up."

Kyle rolled his eyes at Neil's inability to let go. When he had walked into that bar only a few hours ago and spotted Neil, Kyle had felt their argument and its supposed importance shrivel up and fade away.

"Come on, I've already forgiven you!" Kyle replied with an exasperated laugh. "You don't need to beat yourself up about it."

Neil nodded, his responses a little blunter and unrefined due to the alcohol.

"Yeah…" he considered. He'd been staring at the sidewalk, but his eyes met Kyle's. "Yeah, you did forgive me…"

Kyle arched an eyebrow, puzzlement melting into amusement.

"Glad we've established that," he chuckled, before he sighed and shifted the conversation into more sincere territory. "Seriously, Neil, I'm just happy everything's cool between us."

There was a small smile on Neil's face when he replied, "me too."

Kyle returned the smile, it was tight as if dutifully containing thousands of words and butterflies.

The two men found themselves in front of Kyle's apartment building. Just like their first date, Kyle felt the disappointed ache of not wanting the night to end.

That craving had led to something wonderful before; Neil's friendship. Would it do so tonight?

But why would Kyle want more when he already had a future to look forward to? A beginning already waiting for him with the man he was sure he was meant to be with?

"Good night," Kyle said, he sighed, his voice creaking with sacrifice.

Neil nodded, measured and grateful, "good night."
The longer the two stood, waiting and watching, the more their shared platitudes were becoming obsolete. Neil's eyes flickered and he shuffled forward, arms nervously extended but so inviting. Kyle sucked in a weak, shaky breath, let those arms envelope him and returned the friendly embrace. The platonic embrace. The apologetic, 'I've missed you', embrace.

Those labels just wouldn't fit, Kyle realised. They melted, perished mercifully under the scrutiny of romantic confessions, mutual attraction and fiery, roaring chemistry. Would he allow anything more to get swallowed by the flames? If he could even control it?

"Kyle?" Neil's voice was humid against his neck.

"Yeah?" Kyle asked, freezing now, guilt trapping him in this moment.

"Would you do it again?"

Confusion was a small tear in the tableau, and Kyle pulled away from the embrace stiffly. Thawing himself out of remorse, but needing the warmth of another. A specific other, in fact. Standing right in front of him.

"Do what again?" Kyle asked.

"Forgive me again," Neil replied. Kyle couldn't avoid his teal eyes. "If I mess up."

A smirk trembled in the corner of Kyle's mouth and he rolled his eyes, exasperation proceeding consideration of Neil's question.

"Neil, I- " Kyle stopped then, considered the implications of his answer. "Well, I don't know. I guess it all depends on what you did."

Neil smiled, simply lost in Kyle, while Kyle was lost in so many things. He was torn and struggling in the chasm of past and present.

"Well," Neil's voice was soft and electric. "What if I did something like this?"

Before Kyle could ask, Neil leaned forward and pressed his lips to Kyle's. It was so gentle, so aloof of a man clearly enamoured that Kyle was too surprised to push Neil away. But it had been five years since he had been kissed, and Kyle couldn't find the defining line between loneliness and attraction and Neil, although he knew that Eric was so far away. He felt more separated, more distant and detached from Kyle than ever when Neil's lips were so close.

"Sorry…” Neil whispered. It was a shaky, premature finish to the kiss.

Kyle lingered, disappointed.

"Sorry," Neil repeated, shaking his head. Maybe he was just as ashamed as Kyle? "I-"

"You're an idiot," Kyle murmured, not looking at Neil.

"I know," Neil sighed.

Kyle had slipped now, hurtling so far into the depths of the chasm that he couldn't distinguish Neil from Eric – or at least it hurt too much to bring himself to. He was truly alone in his selfishness and he was more than willing to resign himself to that way of life.

If it meant being free from guilt and loyalty and heartbreak.
"You never learn," Kyle whispered, clenching his fists at his sides.

"Apparently not-"

Kyle cut Neil off with a kiss that could've silenced him forever. At least, Kyle hoped it would silence whatever was screaming inside him. Neil readily responded to the kiss, unleashed and greedy now that he had Kyle's affections, now that Neil had Kyle in the way he knew he'd always wanted since they first met.

Kyle found himself pushed against a wall so he returned the favour and pushed his tongue in Neil's mouth. He could taste the alcohol he had abstained from, in the mouth of a man he had denied, and despite the enormous guilt threatening to crush him, there was a small thrill to be found in broken promises. And an even bigger thrill to be found in Neil's unabashed, enthusiastic kisses and searing hands pinning him and holding him tight.

"You're... You're kissing me..." Neil reeled when they came up for air. "You're actually kissing me..."

The confirmation stung like a slap, and Kyle could only nod his head childishly. If he didn't utter his betrayal out loud it wouldn't exist, somewhere this wouldn't be real.

But maybe it was more layered than that? More convoluted? When Kyle's mind, his heart, his soul was clinging to discipline, to reality, to Eric and his body was searching for Neil in the hushed night, grabbing him and pressing him close? Kyle didn't know, couldn't think with Neil's mouth and hands on him, didn't want to think because just like the alcohol and weed this was too good of a rush to give up.

There was too much noise, too many promises, too many contradictory feelings for one life. It was remarkable, but not envious.

"I think I'm in love with you..." Neil whispered, now they were the closest they had ever been.

Kyle didn't freeze, or burn or fall.

He shattered, hollow, and so riddled with bad feelings and corrupted good feelings that he couldn't make out the dark from the light.

There was no foresight, or hindsight, just now. It was an impulsive way of thinking, an animal way of thinking, but Kyle didn't care. He just followed his instincts.


He was already broken at rock bottom. He couldn't see how he could sink any further.

"That was amazing," Neil panted with a grin, staring up at the ceiling wide-eyed.

He was sprawled smugly in Kyle's rumpled bed, while Kyle remained shy, modest despite the circumstance.

"You're amazing," Neil continued, twisting his body so he faced Kyle when he spoke.

When Kyle didn't respond immediately, doubt briefly crossed his giddy expression. "It's-it's not just me, right?" He asked. "That was pretty damn good!"

Kyle rolled his eyes; the smile on his face was quiet and accidental. "No, of course it's not just you,"
he replied, reaching out and stroking Neil's smiling face with the back of his hand.

Kyle couldn't help but feel that what had transpired between them, no matter how dishonest and potentially – definitely – hurtful was too great to be called a mistake. Neil was more than distraction or temptation. Kyle would never have done what he did otherwise.

"It was wonderful, Neil," Kyle admitted softly. "Thank you."

"Thank me?!” Neil replied, incredulous. "Thank you!" He laughed, making Kyle blush and then chuckle when he peppered his hand with kisses. "You're incredible, Kyle..."

Kyle smiled wider and his nose stung, Neil's words holding more significance than they ever had before.

Even if you don't deserve them.

The thought settled in Kyle's mind like poison in his gut, as cruel and wretched as his actions. He sank into the pillow, the mattress, as if he were trying to disappear, just so he could stop hurting people. That crushing realisation had turned malignant now, infecting his and Neil's passionate night with regret and disgust, and Kyle suddenly yearned for Eric's touch to repair the damage he had accepted gladly.

He needed Eric to save him again, to remind him that he still loved him even when Kyle had betrayed him. But would Eric do so if he saw him like this? If he saw that Kyle had taken that patient, raw love Eric had given him and conspired with another to cheapen it? Discard it?

No, Kyle would never do such a thing. He cared too much, he cared for Eric and he loved him, damn it, even if the contrary was stark and infested with guilt.

"What's wrong?" Neil asked; his concern needling Kyle's clouded mind.

"Nothing," Kyle lied quickly. "I'm fine..."

Eric.

He needed Eric, and there was only one way his ache could be pacified.

Reaching for his boxers, Kyle slipped them on under the covers, suddenly cringing at his and Neil's nakedness.

"I'm getting a drink of water, do you want a glass?" Kyle asked, not looking at Neil as he shuffled out of bed.

"No thanks," Neil replied.

Kyle detected confusion in his voice, but he was already leaving the room.

Even in the dim light of his living room, Kyle made his way over to his desk with certainty; knowing what he was looking for and where to find it. He opened the second drawer and pulled out a black, velvet box – black as a star-speckled night, appropriate he thought, for the contents. The box opened with a gentle, satisfying click and inside was the shimmering, steel star Eric had made for him.

Eric had said it was something to keep on their person at all times, something to remember each other by when they weren't together. Kyle never would have known back then that Eric would take so long to return to him, that his patience could ever wear thin, or that he had room in his heart for
another. Unable to bear the thought of losing the star when he was outside the house, Kyle kept it in
the box instead; tucked away, kind of like he was doing to Eric as the years went by.

Kyle closed his eyes, letting the tears pool at his lashes and wander down his cheek. The thought of
Eric being something to put away while the rest of Kyle's life moved forward, an experience devoid
of Eric's presence, was too painful.

Kyle had already lived through that, had lived in a terrifying, debilitating state of unknowing. He
didn't want to start over.

Taking the star out of its box, he pressed it to his lips, as if kissing their problems and mistakes
better, if that was at all possible…

As possible as wishes made on shooting stars.

Kyle murmured a broken apology and repeated it until he was shuddering with frustrated, futile
sobs.

But he knew the apology was empty when Eric couldn't hear it, when he was blissfully unaware, and
his transgression would never be forgiven or lessened until he did something constructive.

Kyle looked to the bedroom, and knew he had to talk to Neil. He had to tell him how he was feeling.

He didn't wipe his tears, he didn't force himself to stop crying, and he clutched the star to his chest as
he walked back to his bedroom.

"Hey," Neil frowned, sitting up in bed when he saw Kyle's creased and blotchy face. "Are you
alright?"

Kyle shook his head with a sad smile.

"No," he admitted, and even that felt like a weight lifted. "No I'm not, I… I need to talk to you."

Neil stared for a couple of minutes, before nodding. "Okay…"

"In the kitchen," Kyle said, firmer. "I need some coffee."

Neil continued to nod as he got dressed, his back turned to Kyle as he did the same.

With knowing, equally nervous looks, Kyle led Neil into the kitchen.

"Wow, so he gave this to you?" Neil asked, voice at a soft, astounded volume as he studied the star.
"The guy that… you, um…"

"That I'm in love with?" Kyle helpfully filled in the blank. His heart still felt as if was disintegrated,
and that bits were lodged in his uneven voice. "Yeah, he did."

"Before he left?" Neil asked, looking up at Kyle.

"On my twenty-seventh birthday."

"How did he get it?"

"He made it himself," Kyle answered, before smiling. "He… he was an engineer."
"Not a spy then?" Neil smirked.

"No..." Kyle chuckled, shaking his head.

Neil's smirk faded into a smile, faded into the early morning.

"So it's a one of a kind..." He said, examining the star once more.

"Yeah," Kyle replied, the star's twinkle still so alluring. "I guess it is."

They had approached the kitchen as if it had been an interrogation room, where uncomfortable truths were brought to light and surrender was coaxed gently. Kyle had fought so hard, stubborn as ever, but now he was beaten and exhausted and sorry. He was still in love, after all. Time, uncertainties and Neil couldn't change that.

"I'm flattered that you've shared this with me," Neil said, stopping when Kyle looked up. He smiled, "actually, I'm glad we've shared a lot of things tonight. But I, I don't understand what you're trying to tell me here, Kyle."

Kyle nodded, his shoulders slouching. "To be honest, I'm not entirely sure myself."

"Do you regret what we did?" Neil asked.

A necessary - if painful - question.

"Would you hate me if I said yes?" Kyle returned.

"It would sting a little, but I can see why you would regret it," Neil replied. "You're still in love with this guy. This really lucky guy..."

"I'll always love him," Kyle admitted, possibly twisting the knife deeper into the wound of what Neil already knew.

Neil sighed, trying to relax into the chair and staring at their abandoned coffees.

"But my life can't revolve around him."

Neil's eyes were wide, gleaming and telling and Kyle's still gaze requited them.

"Kyle-"

"No, Neil. I can't keep denying the obvious," Kyle said, eyes closed, determined to rid himself of delusion, no matter how excruciating a purge. "I can't keep overlooking what's been staring me in the face for... God knows how long, actually. I'd rather not think about it. But I have to accept it..."

"What?" Neil asked, obviously confused by Kyle's veering train of thought.
"He's not coming back," Kyle said simply, his heart ripped and he welled up at the severity of such a tear. "For whatever reason, he's not coming back. And I can't hate him for it, it would be impossible for me to, because I'll never stop loving him, or caring about him. I've spent my entire life fighting those feelings, and it felt..." Kyle smiled, his entire body softened as every touch, kiss, and moment he and Eric had shared in love sped by in seconds. "God, it felt so good to give in," he opened his eyes, calmly facing persistent reality. "Now I'm just fighting with hope and faith and patience and... I'm losing. I'm losing so much of my life, pinning my future on the unknown. I can't do it anymore, I can't..."

Kyle's heart not only stung and prickled and burnt for Eric then, it mourned for a life he had lost to waiting.

"Can I say something?" Neil asked.

He had been so patient and silent that Kyle had nearly forgotten he was there.

He smiled and snickered, tired.

"Sure," he said. "Sorry, I've been babbling-"

Neil reached for Kyle's hand across the table and squeezed it, shutting Kyle up immediately.

"I don't know the guy, I don't know what you two had, but it sounds intense and real, like you really cared for each other," Neil said with a flimsy smile, before he sighed. "I'm in an awkward position here, Kyle. Anything I say may come off as selfish, I realise that, but I think he'd want you to be happy... whatever you decide to do, however you decide to do it... and that doesn't have to involve me. I promise, Kyle. I'll be willing to file this night away under 'fantastic memories' if it means I can keep you in my life, and know that you're happy in your decision."

Kyle absorbed Neil's words and stared at their joined hands, something real and present and wonderful he could anchor himself to. He then looked at Neil's face, reliable with enchanting teal eyes.

Kyle shook his head. "You really are unbelievable, Neil."

Neil laughed softly and ducked his head. "I'll, uh, take that as a compliment. Should I?"

Kyle nodded, laughing. "Yes you should..."

Neil grinned, inviting enough for the unattached and reckless to give in to in a heartbeat. But Kyle was neither of those things, he was committed, involved, deeply loving even when most people would have given up hope by now. He was careful, cautious, he tried to be rational. He had tried recklessness before – at the most opportune time for such an experiment, when Kyle had felt he had lost everything already – and it had just been a rabbit hole to the darkest years of his life.

"Neil?"

"Yeah?"

"When we were kissing outside... you said that you thought you were in love with me?"

Kyle hadn't forgotten. The butterflies wouldn't let him forget.

"Oh," Neil whispered, flushing. "Yeah, yeah, I did say that."
"And you meant it?" Kyle asked, face creasing as if preparing for the worst.

"I did mean it," Neil smiled.

"It's just- I think that if I'm going to do this, if I'm really going to move on from-" Kyle stopped, stubborn as ever as the name refused to join the rest of the sentence. Still clinging, Kyle would always be clawing to what he and Eric still had. Neil leaned forward, rubbing Kyle's hand with his thumb.

Kyle sucked in a teary breath and swiped at his eyes with his free hand.

"If I'm going to move on from this amazing, overwhelming, life-changing love, then I can't run to something shaky and uncertain," he continued, searching Neil's eyes. "I need it to be honest, need it to be safe. And I would really like it if I found that place in you... if you'd have me, that is."

Neil blinked, his face brightening with the most excited, content smile, dulled only by incredulity.

"I just needed to know if you were serious," Kyle added a little sheepishly. "That's all."

"I am, Kyle," Neil nodded, holding Kyle's hand tight. "I want to be."

"Slowly," Kyle clarified, reddening at what had taken place in his bedroom earlier and how it hadn't been slow at all.

"I-if you don't mind," Kyle added with a smirk.

Neil nodded, so startlingly sure regardless. "Whatever you need."

Kyle raked his eyes over Neil, unbelievable Neil. "How can you be so understanding?" he whispered.

Neil chuckled, "I'm not."

Kyle arched a wary eyebrow and Neil rushed to clarify.

"Not really, I mean, I still don't understand what you and that guy had."

"Eric," Kyle interrupted. "His name is Eric."

"What you and Eric had," Neil grinned gratefully. "But I care about you, and I'm falling for you, and I want to do whatever I can to make you happy... even if that means doing so while not knowing completely everything."

"Thank you, Neil," Kyle replied gently.

He enjoyed the brief, deep silence the busy conversation had slipped into, until Neil asked, "Is there anything you need me to do now?"

In the new morning, in this new phase, Kyle felt a little bolder and he grinned as wickedly as his tired mouth would allow.

"Kiss me again," he requested. "Now that you're sober."

Neil smiled gladly, sliding his hand out of Kyle's before rising from his chair. Cupping Kyle's face and playing with a loose, red curl, Neil made the grey hour seem so tranquil when he leaned down to kiss Kyle.
Obliging, gentle, stoking mild fires and Kyle indulged in it a little more freely than their first kiss.

Their lips slipped away from each other but remained close and ticklish, the two of them chuckling in the tiny space.

"I'm tired," Kyle whispered breathlessly, stifling a yawn and his head lolled in Neil's hands.

"Me too," Neil smirked, kissing Kyle's forehead. "We should get some sleep."

Kyle nodded and they returned to the bed in silence. Day was breaking out warm, swollen colours, and Kyle felt himself glow as he pressed close to Neil, more comfortable than he thought he would be.

Eating bagels and drinking coffee in the kitchen the next morning, Kyle's initial disbelief had mellowed into a more pleasant kind of surprise at how nice and natural he and Neil felt, and how content he was.

Of course, he realised why he hadn't pursued a relationship with Neil sooner, and that longing and guilt subdued any relief he should otherwise feel in the safety of Neil's arms.

Despite needing something certain, something sturdy, Kyle could still feel a tremor beneath his feet. The path he and Neil were slowly embarking on was still tender. Kyle wondered how they could make their mark on virginal snow, secure themselves on ground untrodden, break in the new phase of their relationship.

"I got a wedding invitation in the mail a couple days ago," Kyle announced.

"Oh, you did?" Neil asked, looking up from his coffee with a smile. "From who?"

"Just a guy I grew up with, I haven't spoken to him in years," Kyle replied, it had been so long since that night Butters had told him what he had done, what Kyle thought he had known about Eric. But now the past and the present seemed to be correlated. "As far as I know – from the reliable source that is my mom-"

Neil interrupted with a soft laugh.

"He moved to Hawaii, opened a dental practice, and according to the invitation he's fallen in love with a guy named Bradley and now they're getting married," Kyle said.


"Yeah… he really deserves to have something like that."

"When is it?" Neil asked.

"Five months?"

"In Hawaii?"

"Yes," Kyle grinned, excited already.

Neil was smirking, knowing, and it made Kyle's grin collapse into shy, soft laughter.

"Are you asking me what I think you're asking me?"
Kyle shrugged playfully, his glinting eyes and creased smile giving too much away.

"The question every new boyfriend longs to hear?" Neil joked.

Kyle turned to him, fixing him a deep, compliant stare. "Neil…"

Neil grinned. "Yes, Kyle?"

Kyle reached for Neil's hand, needing the support when he asked, "will you be my plus-one?"

"I would be honoured," Neil replied, giving Kyle's hand a firm squeeze.

Five months later, on a lush, green lawn in Hawaii, Bradley and Butters were ready to exchange their vows, and Kyle was about to introduce Neil to one of his childhood friends before the ceremony started.

Everything had been going so well with himself and Neil that Kyle felt excited rather than anxious for Neil and his friends to meet. That winding path that he and Neil had tentatively embarked on months ago was well-trodden, and Kyle was now leading Neil, headlong into a future.

Kyle had so much to tell Neil on this trip, quietly, privately, in such a beautiful place and romantic occasion.

"Kyle, wait-"

"What?" Kyle asked, glancing at a shy Neil behind him.

"I'm nervous,"

"Why?" Kyle asked, a small, confused dent in his brow.

"Why?!" Neil said incredulously. "You're friends with a rock star!"

Kyle smirked at the reminder; childhood memories of Kenny and a distaste for the music his band played meant Kyle often overlooked the fact that his childhood friend was now rich and famous.

With a roll of his eyes and a wicked, encouraging smile, Kyle dragged Neil over to Kenny, who had his back turned to the both of them.

Hand still in Neil's, Kyle bit his lip to control his smirk before tapping Kenny's shoulder. "Hey, dude…"

Tall and thin as ever, Kenny turned around with well-practiced breeziness, his face brightening, the whites of his eyes gleaming when he recognised the man in front of him.

"Kyle?! Oh my god!" Kenny's surprise melted into bubbly laughter as he threw his arms around Kyle, severing his and Neil's connection. "It's so great to see you, man, how have you been?"

"Great, really great," Kyle smiled away from Kenny's embrace. "And how are you?" Kyle shook his head at the silly question. "I mean, look at you! You're doing fantastic!"

Kenny smirked and bowed his head slightly. "Thanks," he lifted his chin and rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, it's been a surreal couple of years..." His eyes were fixed on Neil, and Kyle was sure his poor boyfriend was withering under the stare. "Uh, I don't think we've met."
Kenny righted that wrong immediately, extending his hand. Neil, still starstruck, returned the handshake.

"Hi..." Neil said, the word falling from his mouth.

Kyle was so amused by the scene that he belatedly remembered introductions. "Oh, sorry, um, Kenny this is my boyfriend Neil, Neil this is Kenny."

"Nice to meet you, dude," Kenny grinned.

"Yeah, you too," Neil beamed excitedly. "I'm a huge fan!"

"Thanks," Kenny chuckled, slipping his hand out of Neil's and returning his gaze to Kyle, content. "It's great, right? To see everybody again..."

"Yeah," Kyle nodded, his smile tight. "It's crazy."

"It's a shame Stan couldn't make it out though,"

"Yeah, well, Jess' due date is soon and he didn't want to leave her."

Kenny laughed, and his gaze wandered along with his thoughts. "Oh, man... he's having a baby, Kyle. A baby, how trippy is that?"

Kyle sighed. "I know, everything is changing so much. Everything has changed."

"But still, it feels like it's all fallen into place, right?" Kenny asked with a smile, toeing the line between surety and approval.

"Yeah..." Kyle smiled, Kenny's remark sat heavily on his heart but when he glanced at Neil that weight was alleviated. "Yeah, I guess so."

He and Kenny exchanged parting smiles before they took their seats, the ceremony beginning.

"There," Kyle said, red-faced but pliable and fitting comfortably in Neil's arms as the music would down. "One dance, are you happy now?"

Neil bit his lip thoughtfully and raked his eyes over Kyle.

"Yes," he decided on. "Very..."

Kyle couldn't help but return the smile. It was softer, shrinking under Neil's bright, adoring gaze. "Do you like embarrassing me in front of people?" He asked.

Neil rolled his eyes and shook his head, but pulled Kyle even closer. "No, I like dancing with you," he replied. "You're better than you think."

"Don't patronise me," Kyle deadpanned, but he collapsed into chuckles when Neil grinned at him so goofily, so cutely.

His boyfriend adored the sound so much, adored the two of them together that he pressed his lips to Kyle's in the middle of the dancefloor.

The sun was setting, the breeze was gentle and humid, and the colourful sea crashed only a short walk away.
When Kyle still woke up to a world that was lacking in its vibrancy, he would turn to Neil to find light. The guy who opened Kyle's eyes to the positives, the guy who coaxed butterflies with his probing stares, the guy who had been so patient and devoted. Kyle had held his hand all the way through Butters' wedding ceremony and now felt bursting with all the colour and vibrancy and happiness he could ever need as they stood together.

So what was he waiting for?

Don't you mean 'who'?

It was a difficult question with a difficult answer, but Kyle was growing impatient. Despite his best intentions, unyielding affection and gratitude, he wasn't sure how much longer he could hold out. No more denial, no more waiting.

"I love you, Neil."

Kyle had murmured it in the small space between their mouths and Neil had frozen, initiated distance as if Kyle and his confession were a bigger masterpiece to reel over.

The silence was rather discomfiting, prompting an explanation.

"I wanted to take you down to the beach to tell you that. I thought it'd be more romantic, but maybe setting and time isn't important. Not for stuff like this." Kyle thought of the first time he had told Eric he was in love with him; in a kitchen in London. It seemed so far away, but the emotions matched up exactly. "I've been meaning to tell you all day… since we got on the plane… for a long time, actually. I haven't felt this happy for so long, and I love you for it."

Neil stifled a gasp, his smile crumpling and so Kyle couldn't see just how much that confession meant to him, he claimed Kyle's lips again.

"I love you too, Kyle," he smiled when their lips slipped away from each other.

It was scary and misguided, and Kyle couldn't deny that his heart was greedy. But he was happy to be falling if it meant landing in Neil's arms.

A year later, Kyle found himself anxious and impatient at the airport, waiting for a flight from Seattle to arrive.

Even after meeting each other's parents and moving in together, the announcement that Neil was to spend two weeks in his company's Seattle office was the most challenging and terrifying test of their relationship thus far… for Kyle at least.

Arms wrapped tightly around his chest, Kyle was literally holding himself together as he waited. After all, he had learned to take promises of returns with a good amount of caution and although he had come a long way from the scared ten year old he had once been, the thought of being abandoned still caused flames of panic to lick at his insides.

He knew damn well who had spoiled him for that. It was who he had thought about in Neil's absence, who he had devoted the quieter hours of the night to. Kyle would fall asleep half-dreaming that Eric would be at his door, giving him another forty eight hours rid of the outside world and all its consequences.

But Kyle was more mature now, committed and content. He couldn't indulge in such fantasies without the slightest feeling of guilt or embarrassment. Even if those fantasies had been real once,
even if a desperate, burning part of him wanted them to be true again.

They were unattainable as starry holograms; those fantasies, their future. It was becoming evident the longer he and Eric were apart.

It scared him, how much it could hurt. It scared him, how much he wanted it, regardless.

When he already had so much in his life.

Kyle tried to keep his eyes and mind focused on the crowds poring out from various flights. It was easy to get lost, to drown in the sea of people but he eventually saw those buoyant teal eyes and that secure smile, always happy to see him.

And right now, Kyle had never felt so overjoyed at seeing Neil's face.

"Hi!" Neil said with a grin as he made his way over to Kyle. "I-"

Kyle didn't let him finish, throwing his arms around Neil and wanting to hold him closer and closer so he'll never feel alone again. But even two weeks apart had made him yearn for Neil's warmth, his voice, his scent, his comfort.

"God, I missed you," Kyle said, burying his head in Neil's shoulder. "I missed you so much..." he added, muffled.

"I missed you too," Neil chuckled, masking his surprise at Kyle's PDA when he kissed his red hair.

When they still hadn't separated, Neil promised, "but I'm here now."

And for that vow, Kyle had to hold him tighter until it was hard to breathe, just so he could let himself believe it.

Despite all that he had wanted for so long, perhaps Kyle needed to believe in a guy who could simply be there.

"Kyle?"

"Huh?"

"You still haven't answered..." Neil replied, reminding Kyle that his boyfriend was on his knees, a ring in his hand, in front of a stadium filled with thousands of people.

"Sorry," Kyle said, mind foggy with memories, knees shaking with the pressure. "I, this is just so unexpected, um-"

"Well, that's kind of what I was going for," Neil said with a shy grin, and even when he had been thrown into such a random situation, was faced with an enormous decision, Kyle still found it in himself to laugh at his boyfriend.

_Potential fiancé._

_Future husband._

How could those possibilities both feel so perfect, yet make anxiety lurch in Kyle's throat?

"So will you marry me?"
Kyle took the shakiest breath he had ever taken, clinging to his throat like medicine.

*But we've had such wonderful times together, and I want more, I just... he makes me so happy, I could never deny that. I wouldn't want to deny that. I love him so much, I couldn't-*

The music over the sound system and the oblivious cacophony of the crowd confused his thoughts. He squeezed his eyes shut, determined to make sense of it all. He had no idea who he was even referring to in his-

*No. I've had wonderful times with Neil, and I want more with him. I want more than just waiting, I want more than looming disappointment. I want a family and I want that with Neil. For the rest of my life, because I love him... but I love Eric too, I'll always love Eric... but loving him won't make him come back. If only it could, I wish it could. How can I pass up what's right in front of me? A chance to be happy with a man I adore? I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Eric. Why aren't you here?! I love you, I always did and I'm so sorry-*

"Yes," Kyle said, exposing his wet, stinging eyes to stadium lights when they finally opened.

But when the nerves melted from Neil's face, thawing out his relief and unadulterated joy, Kyle didn't care where his tears fell.

"Yes," Kyle repeated, his mouth trembling in a smile. "Of course I will marry you!"

Neil grinned, slipping the simple ring on Kyle's finger effortlessly, and he scooped him up in his arms when the crowd roared.

Still, in that brief, sparkling moment Kyle's happiness was eclipsed by shattering devastation.

Chapter End Notes

So... thoughts?

We're not done yet, guys.

But as far as updates go, March and April are my deadline months for Uni. So whilst I'm writing essays, revising for my exam and pulling my hair out like Tweek, I may not have the time to work on this story. I'll try my best, but the end of April is the earliest I'll be able to update. In the meantime, thank you so much for reading!
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

I'm so happy that I've been able to get this chapter out earlier than expected. The ending to the previous chapter was a bad place to leave the story for a while and I'm not that cruel, ha! I hope you enjoy and thank you for reading!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Eric hadn't shaken this much since his first visit to the past. This new apartment building, on the other side of the city reminded him how much time had passed since he and Kyle were together. It would be easy to forget, since Eric was the one in control, with his weekly visits he could look forward to, dropping into Kyle's life unceremoniously.

Seven years. Eric could only gauge Kyle's reaction by the initial twelve years they were apart. Kyle had been drunk, angry and helpless; touching him in confirmation, smacking him across the face in shock before hugging him, as rapturous as the less then pure scene could've been.

So much had changed since that night, not just their relationship but themselves as individuals, though Eric knew this reunion would be different. Kyle may still be shocked and angry, but his happiness would override that. It was a certainty. Still, after seven years so many things weren't. Eric wondered how much could've possibly changed. But he wasn't anxious, now that his plans which Kyle had believed in so fervently were coming true. It was difficult to rid himself of the startling hope.

Yet Eric was still debating whether to tell Kyle. Despite his optimism and enthusiasm, there was still so much Eric was unsure of, so many obstacles to navigate. What if he told Kyle that his plans were in motion and they eventually fell through? He couldn't leave Kyle stranded in the past… again. And the look of surprise on Kyle's face when Eric reappeared, with no time tether in sight was almost too delicious of an image to spoil with over-excitement.

Eric smiled giddily to himself at the thought as he walked down the corridor, counting the numbered doors down until he reached Kyle's. Music slithered under one door and Eric's smile morphed into a confused smirk when he realised that the door belonged to Kyle.

Keeping his amused expression, Eric knocked on the apartment door louder than usual, so Kyle would be able to hear. A couple of minutes passed and the door swung open, letting the music out and revealing a wide-eyed Kyle who seemed to be drowning in the beat.

"Hi!" Eric grinned.

"Eric!" Kyle replied startled, swiping the grin from Eric's face. He shuffled closer, pulling the door with him. "Eric… I…"

"Sorry," Eric said, suddenly self-conscious. "Is this a bad time?"

Kyle's arm was twitching as he held the door ajar. "Sort of," he replied distractedly, looking back
"I'm having a party," he added, looking up at Eric now.

"What, like a housewarming party?" Eric asked with a faint chuckle, though the scene was more discomfiting than funny. "Since you've moved yet again. You really don't like staying in one place, do you?"

Kyle shook his head quickly and tried to mimic that small chuckle.

"No, I guess not," he smiled, limply. He glanced inside the apartment before ducking his head and sighing, tortured. "God, Eric…"

"What's wrong?" Eric asked, stepping closer.

He felt winded when Kyle timidly backed away.

"I wasn't expecting you," Kyle replied, his head was still down but at least his wide eyes had risen to look at Eric.

He looked into those green eyes and saw the hurt that came with the shock of being reunited. After such a long time apart. Eric sighed.

"I know, it's been a long time and I'm sorry for that," he said. "It's just, during our last visit I really got to thinking about time, and how little we have left, and how maybe these visits should be sporadic, you know? I don't want to use them up all at once-"

Kyle sighed again, as if the party and the music and Eric at his door were suffocating him.

"I wish I had known," he despaired.

Eric furrowed his eyebrows, wanting to hold Kyle close and release the knotted tension.

"Yeah, but I'm here now?" He didn't know what else he could offer, since Kyle seemed to want his distance.

Kyle looked at Eric, deep, unsure and questioning like he couldn't quite believe him, and he nodded again too vigorously. What was distracting him? What was deflecting Eric's words?

Eric lowered his head too, in an attempt to reach Kyle's eyes.

"Are you sure you're okay?" He asked.

Kyle jumped, startled when he noticed Eric standing so close to him.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine…" he replied, averting Eric's gaze and running a hand through his hair.

Eric couldn't have missed that glint of silver, that mocking silver wink.

"What's that on your finger?" Eric asked, voice hard but quiet.

Kyle had the audacity to look perplexed, before his hand slid from his curls slowly and he stared at the ring on his… wedding… finger.

Eric sucked in a scream or a sob - he didn't know what – the corners of his mouth tightened and his nostrils flared while doing so. He grabbed Kyle's wrist and tugged him forward, forcing that
closeness that Kyle had a few minutes ago rejected.

The ring gleamed, lovely and boastful, wrapped around Kyle's finger and offering him the kind of security that Eric couldn't.

"Who gave this to you?" Eric asked, his eyes were still fixed on the band.

Kyle's wrist was trembling in Eric's grip, and his voice was shattered. "Eric, I'm so sorry-

"Kyle, tell me what the fuck is going on right now…" Eric commanded, his insides were frozen and his tone was hard and cold.

Kyle's trembling persisted, but he cleared his throat and perfected a measured, clear tone when he announced, "I'm engaged."

The devastating news thawed Eric out of the stunned cold; his mouth loosened, his fuming breathing decompressed, his eyes widened and his brows drew together as he was dealt the biggest blow of his life.

Kyle was finally looking at him, imploring for Eric's gaze that he had previously avoided, but Eric was transfixed on Kyle's hand. On the shining symbol that represented how little Kyle was his, how little Eric was sure of.

"And this isn't a housewarming party," Kyle felt the need to elaborate. "It's-

"An engagement party," Eric whispered, dropping Kyle's wrist and requiting his demanding stare. "You're getting married?"

Eric's chest tightened, and he watched Kyle's eyes glimmer with guilt, his shoulders hunch, his mouth try to form an explanation.

Finally, Kyle came up with: "I didn't know you were coming back…"

Eric stumbled, he had never been so frighteningly uncertain of the man in front of him. Before he could cry in front of Kyle, he shook his head and stormed off down the corridor.

"Eric!" Kyle called out after him, the door slamming and his voice was on the verge of hysteria. "Eric, wait!"

Kyle may have thought this was a chase, but Eric couldn't run. He brought his hands to his face and sobbed, unabashed and defeated. He knew Kyle was waiting for him, recognising the need to be silent and to let Eric speak. But what could Eric say? Except for-

"How?!" He cried, turning to face Kyle with glistening eyes. "How could you do this to me, Kyle?!!"

Eric's tears had splintered Kyle's resolve, his chest heaving and face creased.

"I'm sorry!" He replied, a broken breath escaping his mouth as he moved closer and reached out. "I'm so sorry, Eric, you have no idea how-

"Don't!" Eric shouted, batting Kyle's hand away. "This, th-this can't be happening, why did you do this, Kyle?!!"

They were both staring at each other with wet eyes.

Kyle stepped forward and a tear travelled down his cheek. "Eric…"
"Why did you do this?" Eric demanded, voice waterlogged and fists clenched.

Kyle's breath stuttered, but he stood defiant, infallible in spite of everything. He begged, "Eric, please, I love you…"

Eric shook his head, rubbing the back of his neck as he tried to detangle his thoughts.

"This doesn't make any sense! Just tell me why, Kyle! How did this happen?"

Kyle's fractured, creased smile drew tight, furiously cobbled together, and something in his eyes hardened. "Not until you tell me where you've been all these years!"

Eric blinked and the longer he stared at Kyle, the more he withered under the glare of Kyle's resentment.

"Kyle-"

"No!" Kyle interjected, pointing an accusing finger at Eric. "No we're both at fault here!" His voice cracked. "I… I know I've done a horrible thing, and I have to take responsibility for hurting you, but-fuck! What was I supposed to think, Eric?!" His voice gained an incredulous, slighted octave. "You've been gone seven years and I had no idea what happened to you!"

Eric was fuming again now, breathing heavily because Kyle's accusations were true and exhausting.

"Alright! I get it!" he admitted. "We both messed up. But at least I had good intentions! You…" Eric's eyes, his heart, stung. He let saltwater rush into the fissures of his voice when he said the words he thought he'd never say, "You've cheated on me, Kyle!"

Kyle's eyes widened, cinnamon brows pulling together as he stumbled. "N-no, I haven't!"

Still stubborn, but the stammer had failed him.

"Yes you have!" Eric argued, indignant. "No matter how you spin it you've cheated on me and betrayed me and, and… broken my heart!"

Another truth to send them crashing.

"And I'm sorry, Eric! I never wanted to do any of that to you!" Kyle countered, before gripping his hair in frustration and crying, "But, God, you abandoned me!"

"Kyle-"

"You abandoned me!" Kyle cried again, clearly they were both tired of excuses. "You abandoned me, and left me confused, and scared, and miserable out of my mind! Even after you knew how crushed I was the first time you were gone! Did you even think of what you were doing to me?!"

Indignation bubbled inside Eric, fuelled by mounting betrayal that pushed his own remorse aside. "Did you think about what this would do to me once I found out?!"

Kyle went to open his mouth, to yell his retort, before he thought better of it.

"Yes," he replied calmly, face placid but he was shaking. "Yes, I did, until it crossed my mind that you may not be coming back at all."

His voice wavered with the weight of his sincerity, and it tugged at Eric's heart.
"And what did that feel like?" Eric asked, wanting to know what had changed for Kyle to be able to go through with this. If anything had changed at all.

"It felt awful…" Kyle admitted, staring down at the carpet briefly before lifting his head again, "it felt …" he closed his eyes as he searched for the word, opening them when he found it. "Devastating. I think about you all the time and don't you dare try to deny that."

Kyle's hard tone was bumpy, fraught with tender wounds.

"I believe you," Eric said, voice scratchy. He gulped down his tears and continued, "But I still don't understand. I still don't understand how you could-"

"I know," Kyle interrupted, his tone was edgy. He sighed, "I know but I can't talk about this now."

Eric sighed too, exasperated. "Then when are we going to talk about it?"

"Tomorrow?" Kyle asked, swollen with hope, it flickered into a smile. "Can I talk to you tomorrow?"

Eric's stony face wouldn't allow a smile; it felt foolish to even do so. Kyle's disappointment made his heart creak, but Eric couldn't be so willing to give Kyle what he wanted, he couldn't be so naïve.

"Do you have a place to stay?" Kyle asked.

"What?"

Kyle closed his eyes, as if the question had been hard enough the first time. Eric knew he was finding this sudden change difficult. So, so much had changed…

"I said, do you have a place to stay?"

"Um, no..." Eric replied, embarrassed he had come so unprepared, in every sense of the word.

"And I suppose you don't have any money either?" Kyle asked, concern creasing his voice.

Eric shook his head, face burning.

"Fuck…” Kyle muttered, studying the wallpaper before he said, "I can set you up in a hotel down the street? I just need to get some money out first. Wait here."

Eric nodded, and Kyle smiled tightly at him before disappearing into his apartment. A few minutes later he returned with a coat on his back and a wallet in his hand.

"Come on…” Kyle murmured, his gaze preoccupied, and they didn't look at each other when they walked to the elevator.

Eric hoped the silence they had imposed would become bearable when they were outside, in the fresh air. But it didn't make a difference, not when he still had questions in need of answering.

Maybe this silence was so difficult because they wanted – needed – to speak to each other, but everything was so uncomfortable and stifling that neither knew what to say.

They could at least try though, and Eric was going to be the one to make the effort.

"Won't your…” Eric paused, forcing the word onto his tongue, "fiancé get suspicious about you
leaving the party?"

Kyle had looked at him when he started to speak, but withdrew his gaze as soon as his fiancé was mentioned. Eric supposed he and this mysterious guy who had stolen Kyle's heart couldn't co-exist, even if Kyle was in love with both of them. But love transcends anything, the exception to every rule; emotional, scientific or otherwise.

"No, I told him I was going to the store," Kyle replied. "To get some more drinks."

Eric was inundated with bitterness, jealousy, indignation. He couldn't keep them at bay even if he wanted to.

"Lying, huh?" He remarked, "A wonderful start to every marriage."

Kyle sighed, bowing his head as they walked but Eric could've sworn he saw him wincing.

"Relax, it wasn't a big lie," Kyle said testily. "It's not as if we're- never mind…"

Kyle picked up his pace, hurriedly making his way to the ATM that was in sight, leaving the end of his sentence – running away from it – with Eric. But Eric caught up to him, knowing what Kyle was going to say and he wouldn't let him forget it.

"I wasn't expecting us to," Eric mumbled, standing next to Kyle at the ATM.

Kyle looked up at him, those green eyes the closest they had been to Eric all evening. They were forlorn, resigned.

"We couldn't anyway," Kyle replied, before glancing at Eric's arm. "Not with that thing on your wrist."

"Or that ring on your finger," Eric countered.

Kyle blinked, his eyes filmy due to Eric's words prompting fresh tears. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat and Kyle swiftly returned his attention to the machine before Eric could say anything.

"This should pay for the room," he said, handing Eric as much cash as he could offer him. "I could walk you to the hotel?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks," Eric replied, taking the money and tucking it in his pocket.

Kyle was still nodding, disappointed when Eric looked at him.

"Alright, well, it's a Holiday Inn," Kyle said, trying to inject some optimism or neutrality into his voice… anything that wasn't mournful or heavy.

"It's only a couple of blocks down that way," he added, pointing Eric in the direction of the hotel.

Eric's gaze followed Kyle's finger and he nodded. "Okay…" he returned to Kyle with a threadbare smile, "thanks."

The smile Kyle offered him was deeper, fuller but it belied his glistening, brimming eyes. They both had a lot to say to each other, but it appeared Eric was trying to repress it, while Kyle wasn't afraid to show his struggle at keeping all those words contained.

"Hold out your arm," he commanded softly.
Eric obeyed, because he still trusted him. He watched Kyle reach into his coat pocket and pull out a pen. Rolling up the sleeve of Eric's shirt, Kyle wrote on his arm.

"This is my number," he explained. "Call me when the party is finished and we can talk about tomorrow."

"What time will the party finish?"

"Not late," Kyle replied, putting the pen away. "Twelve thirty?"

"And what if it isn't over by then?" Eric asked, not caring if he was making the situation more uncomfortable. He felt he deserved to be petulant, unaccommodating.

"I'll answer anyway," Kyle assured, forever rising to him and winning. "I'll keep an ear out."

Eric nodded because, again, he trusted Kyle.

"So…" Eric began, taking another glance down the street, before sighing and looking to Kyle once more. "I guess this is goodbye."

Kyle's smile sank into a frown, but he stepped forward.

"Until tomorrow," he replied, voice steeped in hope.

"Right," Eric nodded, looking into Kyle's eyes when he replied, "until tomorrow."

It coaxed a smile out of Kyle, and Eric reflected it because regardless of engagement rings and time tethers, impatience and errors in judgement, they had both broken a piece of each other.

*Though this is killing me, we're both in the wrong.*

Eric walked away, heading to the hotel while Kyle joined his fiancé in the apartment they undoubtedly shared – among other things. Another devastating blow, but when he turned around, Kyle was still in the distance, waiting for him.

Only then did Eric realise how silly it was, that Kyle should wait when nothing was certain.

Not even love – certain, stubborn, bulletproof love – could change that.

Eric didn't meet the eyes of the front desk clerk when he checked into the hotel, mumbling his words and accepting the key to his room resentfully.

The suite was plain, pale, with crisp sheets, a plump mattress and was sparsely furnished. Perhaps Eric had been spoiled for lavish, themed hotel rooms with light shows and wintery scenes? For romance?

He had looked at the clinical bed bloated with stiff pillows and he felt exhausted… and scared of sleeping alone, without Kyle folded in his arms, rising and falling against him. As if he were the moon controlling the tide, the ebb and flow of their arrangement; natural but unnatural, perfect but complicated, fulfilling but unfair.

But the moon had collapsed into the sea, or the waves had risen and swallowed it whole. The past was a surreal, disturbing place for Eric to be without Kyle, and without Kyle there seemed to be no reason or purpose for him to be there at all.
He then thought of what Kyle told him, before Eric had revealed how little visits he had left, before they had promised to be selfish for each other's sakes... Kyle wanted Eric to have more to come back to, more than a hotel room for one.

Eric couldn't stare at that bed any longer. On the nightstand, next to the phone, were a pen and a stack of cards – so one could leave a note and thank the lovely hotel staff for a marvellous room. Eric wrote down Kyle's number on the card instead, so when he took a shower he would still have the number somewhere if not on his skin. He could watch the soapy, inky water disappear down the drain that reminded Eric of Kyle's engagement ring.

After his shower, Eric lay down on that damn bed and flicked through the channels on the TV. But he was more interested in the clock, the hands dragging themselves to twelve thirty arduously. Eric had done enough waiting, and the stress of anymore was sure to drive him crazy.

Twelve thirty finally arrived and Eric grabbed the phone like it was about to scurry from the nightstand. Picking up the card he had left beside it, he dialled Kyle's number and he could feel himself unravelling with every ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey..." Eric murmured, tracing circles on the sheets below him.

"Eric!" Kyle gasped, hope fizzing in his voice. "Hi! Thanks so much for calling,"

"We needed to talk," Eric reminded him.

"Right..." Kyle's excitement dulled significantly. "You check in okay? How's the room?"

"It's fine," Eric replied with a small smile as he studied the room. "Bed's fine, shower's fine. How was the party?"

"It was nice," Kyle said unevenly. "Though my mind was wandering..."

Eric gulped, Kyle's words constricting his heart, and he stared at the empty space beside him. If he wasn't so distracted and hurt and so infuriatingly unsure of himself, he would've offered Kyle that space, to see him tonight and talk in the morning. But he couldn't bare the rejection, didn't want to test Kyle's loyalty if the outcome wouldn't be in his favour.

"The, uh, hotel has a bar," Kyle tried to revive the conversation. "Did you see it? When you checked in?"

"Yeah," Eric replied, nodding to himself. "I saw it."

"Good. I'll meet you there tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock," Kyle's tone was brisk and insincere. Eric believed Kyle wanted to see him, but he didn't believe that Kyle thought it was so easy. "We can talk as much as we want, you can ask me all the questions you need to ask-"

"You mean that?" Eric interjected, before he could have Kyle's word on anything.

"Yes," Kyle answered, the cracks in his taut masque showing.

"Even if they're questions you probably don't want to answer?"

Nothing.

But Eric was happy to wait in the truer silence, if it meant getting an honest response.
"… Guess that's my punishment," Kyle finally replied, rueful. "Uncomfortable questions."

Eric shook his head, a dent in his brow. How did they get here? From embraces, tenderness, declarations of love, and stars, to separate beds, and resentment, and punishment? No, Eric wouldn't let that happen. He may have been cruel and petty before but he wouldn't love that way, he would never subject Kyle to that.

"I don't want to punish you," he said softly, gentle enough for Kyle to know he meant it.

There was a crackling, grateful pause. "You don't?"

"No," Eric whispered.

Another silence, Kyle could even make those beautiful, make Eric want to listen to nothing all night. Kyle chuckled thinly, as if his amusement was an inadequate band-aid on a raw, swollen scar.

"That's a relief," he said, before murmuring, "I've punished myself enough as it is."

Eric sighed, too tired to face what Kyle had done or what had happened to them. "Good night, Kyle."

"Good night, Eric," Kyle replied, and Eric could hear his smile.

A long, obnoxious beep disconnected them, the noise stretching like a chasm to keep them apart until tomorrow.

Eric tensely studied the swirling, mahogany patterns of the table as he waited for Kyle. His head was bowed and his hand was in his hair as he thought of all the questions he wanted to ask, the things he had to say.

There were already a lot of ways to describe Eric's relationship with Kyle; peculiar, enigmatic, defiant, Eric supposed magnetic was also rather fitting. For when he innocently glanced at the bar entrance that bled into the lobby, Kyle was there, green eyes piercing the room and hitting Eric like a choreographed spotlight.

Despite his perfect aim, Kyle smiled shyly and humourlessly as he made his way over to Eric. When he was close enough, Eric noticed that his eyes were shining perhaps too brightly.

"Hey," Kyle said, pulling up the chair across from him. "Did you get a drink?"

"No," Eric replied, tired from lack of sleep and drained from his restless thoughts. "I don't drink."

"You had a glass of champagne at dinner, remember?" Kyle asked, still smiling, his cheeriness worn. "On my birthday?"

That memory – though bittersweet due to their current circumstance – roused a small smile from Eric, one that spilled onto his face.

"That was a special occasion," Eric replied. "Are you going to get anything?"

Kyle blinked and glanced at the bar behind him.

"No, no," he said, eyes on the table as he shook his head. "I, uh, try to avoid alcohol in situations like this."

Lowered inhibitions and remarks made in the heavy heat of the moment were an even greater cause for regret when Eric and Kyle's time together was already so limited.

"Thanks for agreeing to this, Eric," Kyle said gently, resuming his smile that struggled to reach his eyes.

"You don't have to keep thanking me. I want to talk about this."

"You do?" Kyle asked, he arched his eyebrow before shifting in his seat and chuckling limply, "I'm terrified."

Eric's Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. He appreciated Kyle's honesty.

_Glad it's not just me._

"Alright, no," he admitted with a sigh. "There are other – more pleasant – things I'd rather be doing with my time here, but I can't. We need to do this, Kyle."

Kyle nodded, eyes closed and the emotional cracks were already showing in his face.

"So-"

"I'm sorr-"

They met each other's eyes, abandoning their hasty words.

"No apologies for now," Eric proposed. "Not until I know everything."

Kyle nodded slowly. "Okay," he said, but he didn't sound sure. "Makes sense."

"No, it doesn't," Eric muttered, before raising his now hard voice, an impassioned tone bubbling beneath the surface. "None of this makes sense, Kyle."

"That's your side of it, Eric," Kyle replied, his face passive but his voice barbed. "You're entitled to feel the way you do and though it pains me to admit it… I hurt you badly. I know, alright? But you don't understand what it was like-"

"I don't know what it's like?" Eric interrupted. "I don't know what waiting feels like? What the fuck do you think I did all those years, Kyle?!"

Kyle's eyes flashed warily and he looked over his shoulder. "Will you keep your voice down?" He whispered.

The bar wasn't crowded, the sound of clinking glasses and mumbled, dull conversation was barely noticeable. Besides, what did it matter if it was? Eric didn't give a shit about losing his temper in a room full of strangers, but he supposed Kyle did, and then it all made sense why they had arranged to meet here.

"Oh…" Eric nodded, leaning back in his chair and observing Kyle bitterly. "I get it…"

"What?" Kyle asked, withering like the guilty always do

"That's why you wanted to meet in this bar, isn't it?" Eric asked, his quiet voice dripping with incredulity. "So I wouldn't make a scene? So I couldn't get angry at you, or shout, or cry? Because
you couldn't face that. You keep saying you know how much you hurt me, but you don't want to see it, do you?"

Kyle's eyes widened and he shrunk back into his chair. "I… I…"

"No, Kyle, I know it's the truth," Eric replied wobbly, unabashed in the hurt Kyle was trying to hide from. "I'm just disappointed. I never thought you could be such a coward."

The legs of his chair scraped loudly against the floor and Eric didn't look at Kyle as he stormed out, wouldn't grant Kyle the twisted victory of his crushed expression. The other patrons Kyle had been so concerned about disturbing (a convenient shield), were following Eric's outburst, and they watched Kyle practically leap out of his chair as he went after him.

Eric stormed across the polished lobby, head bowed and resisting tears. Maybe he would give in if the elevator was empty-

"Eric!"

Eric quickened his steps, and so did Kyle, the twinned, frantic echo was maddening.

"Eric, where are you going?!" Kyle asked, his voice ringing through the large space.

The elevator was in sight.

Eric turned around, and in doing so must've set up some invisible force field that a wide-eyed, frozen-faced Kyle bounced off of.

"To my hotel room, and then I'll probably go back home," Eric replied, that force field also acting as a protective bubble. "I wouldn't want to disturb anymore of the happy couple's celebrations."

Kyle's fists were clenched, his brow knitted, and although Eric was bigger than him, he certainly wasn't faster than him, and he quickly blocked the elevator so Eric couldn't step inside.

"No!" Kyle protested, shouting in Eric's face.

"What are you doing?"

"You can't do this to me!" Kyle cried, arms spread and back as straight and taut as a tightrope as he guarded the elevator, protecting what he and Eric shared before he could run away. "You're not leaving me again!"

Shame had split Eric's hard outer shell and he mumbled, "move, Kyle-"

Kyle stamped his foot and looked to the ceiling in despair.

"God damn it, no!" He cried again, his voice tearing and his chest heaving. "I'm coming to your room and we are having this talk!"

Eric stared at Kyle wordlessly before replying, "Then let me get in the elevator."

He could've shrunk away in embarrassment when Kyle's wild, emerald eyes searched his face, and Kyle was still panting when he stepped aside and let Eric into the elevator. They stood at a distance as they rode in silence, daring to look at each other as if they were opponents rather than lovers. But each short, stubborn glance was heavy with longing; a desire for each other as well as a desire to win. Eric supposed romance hadn't dulled the rivalrous edge to their relationship.
He was first out of the confining elevator when they reached his floor, leaving a flushed Kyle to trail after him to the hotel room. Once there, Eric stood by his temporary bed, his back turned to Kyle as his thoughts darted around his head.

"Just tell me how, Kyle, I…" Eric turned to him then, saw Kyle lingering by the closed door, back against the wall. Eric raised his voice but didn't shout. "I don't understand how this could've happened."

Kyle shook his head. "You weren't here," he answered simply. "You weren't here and I was miserable and lonely and, and I needed you! God, it felt like being ten years old and having no fucking clue where you were all over again! But at least back then I didn't love you – not in the way I do now. Eric…” Kyle faltered, bowing his head and saying just loud enough, "I thought you had died…”

"Died?"

Eric's eyebrows rose, and he swayed softly with the sour reminder that although they were such a huge part of each other's lives, they were still so separate, so much so that Kyle could've thought such a thing.

"Or gotten sick, or hurt, or reprimanded by those fucking otters for just trying to be with me!" Kyle added, looking up at Eric and revealing just how desperate he had been, how he still was.

"I was so helpless!" He continued, charged to the point of frazzling before his voice grew soft, "and then Neil came along and… he made me happy. He made me realise that I couldn't keep waiting. I've – we've – been waiting our whole lives for each other, Eric, but is that any way to live? Really?"

A small, disbelieving huff left Eric's mouth. "But… But, I… you…” confusion and hurtling confessions were jumbling his words. "When I told you that I had plans… to fix this huge wrong, to bring us together once and for all, you believed me. You thought I could do it even when I had doubts! Did that guy make you forget all of that? Can he offer you something better?"

Kyle shook his head, folding his arms across his chest to shield himself from Eric's jealousy. "Don't drag Neil into this…"

"No!" Eric snapped, loathing how Kyle was being so protective of the man who had destroyed them. "No, let's, since he's the reason we can't be together!"

Kyle had previously averted his gaze, but now his eyes were boring into him.

"Time is the reason we can't be together!" Kyle shouted, throwing his arms to his sides. "Time! And that's bigger than Neil, bigger than you, bigger than us!"

Eric scowled and turned away from the unstoppable, undeniable truth. It was the truth that resided in both of them, a malignant foe that appeared to have won.

Kyle must have sensed his difficulty in finally accepting such a sad reality. He softened his voice but stayed close to the wall when he said: "Of course I believed in you, Eric. A part of me still does," he sighed thinly. "But what you hope, and what you know are two very different things. And hope, however tantalising and promising isn't substantial. Knowing?... Knowing is."

Eric finally looked at Kyle, wanting to test his new piece of wisdom when he asked, "And what do you know, Kyle?"

Kyle's gaze remain fixed on Eric as he thought, decisive and careful.
"I know that you love me, and that Neil loves me," Kyle replied, unwavering like Eric admired. "And that Neil is here, and you're not. I know that I can have a life with Neil, I can have something dependable… something I wish I could have with you. I know that I've done enough waiting to last me a lifetime and I'm tired…" Kyle took a deep, shaky breath. "I'm tired of not being with you."

Eric blinked, and his throat seemed to shrink as the pressure of the situation crushed his lungs and heart. Their reality – cruel and poisonous – was somewhat bearable when they silently accepted it, tried to overlook it, but uttering the injustice of it out loud was like admitting defeat. When Eric wasn't ready yet.

*I'll never be ready to let him go.*

Kyle continued. "I know I have to live with the guilt of breaking your heart…" he lowered his gaze and muttered, "breaking my own heart…" he composed himself, impressive, almost regal. Eric would never demote Kyle from the stratosphere, he couldn't. "My relationship with Neil, falling in love with him, accepting his proposal wasn't easy, because I was still waiting for you, even when I thought I knew the truth."

Eric furrowed his eyebrows. "What truth?"

Kyle's shoulders slouched with the burden of his answer, with the burden of Eric's naivety. "That you weren't coming back."

Eric shook his head slowly, but the flames of the indignation he had subdued roared thick and fast.

"Science… science fucking damn it, Kyle!" He shouted. "I was always going to come back for you, didn't you realise that?! Did that ever occur to you in the seven years without me?! Kyle, I get that you missed me, and I get that you had no idea where I was but your actions were so reckless!"

Kyle's eyebrows shot up and his mouth hung agape. It seemed like the flames were catching.

"Reckless?!"

"Yeah!" Eric returned. "They were reckless and, and thoughtless and selfish! You've just been selfish, Kyle!"

"Stop it!" Kyle cried, stamping his foot again and clutching the sides of head, fingers tangled in his curls. "For fuck's sake, I'm not perfect, Eric! I get scared and I make mistakes and my actions may hurt you sometimes but that doesn't mean that I don't care about you! That I don't love you!" Face creased, Kyle released his curls but shook his head. "Shit, you've put me on this impossible pedestal and had me there for so long that I can't slip up! Do you realise how stressful that is?! How much pressure you've put on me?! I'm not a star to keep in your pocket, I'm not your universe, or your everything! I can't be! I'm one person and that shouldn't be enough for you, should it?! Why do you think I wanted you to consider visiting your mom, our friends?! Because there's more to your life than just me, there should be more!"

"But there's not!" Eric yelled, his tears were almost as scorching as Kyle's words. "And I don't want there to be, all I want is you!" There was wetness at his cheeks now. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you! T-t-to just be happy and grow old with you! And I thought it was bad enough when it was damn near impossible to give you all that, but knowing that another guy can steal all I've ever wanted away from me just by putting a ring on your finger?" Eric stopped then, shuddering and wrapping his arms around himself. "It's so much worse…"

Bowing his head, Eric almost didn't hear Kyle take reluctant, sympathetic steps towards him until his shadow was at his feet.
"Listen," he soothed. "Forgiving me would be too big of an ask but... can't you at least understand where I'm coming from here?" Kyle ducked his head and tried to reach Eric's eyes when he didn't get an answer. "Eric?"

Eric nodded. "Yes. Yes I can, Kyle, and I'm sorry," he lifted his head, tried to encourage himself with Kyle's hopeful expression. "However good my intentions I shouldn't have kept you waiting that long, or put that pressure on you but... I'm still so confused," he admitted. "The waiting, the fiancé, it doesn't add up. I guess I just thought what we shared – how we felt for each other – was stronger than that. I'll never stop loving you, not even for a second, but that ring..." Eric glanced at Kyle's hand, at torturous silver, "that ring tells me that you can."

Kyle backed away then, but Eric felt too bruised to protest (if he even had the right to).

"Do you hear yourself?! Wait, you must not because it seems like you haven't been listening to me!" Kyle exclaimed. "I still love you! I've always loved you and I always will! Fiancé or no fiancé, time tether or no time tether, I love you, Eric! But now that you can't get your own way, now that you can't have me in the way you've wanted you're acting like the spoiled kid you used to be! Christ, you're twenty-one, you're still a kid!"

Eric could have laughed, but instead he resumed his bitter smirk from the bar.

"A kid, huh?" He questioned derisively. "I wasn't a kid when you were fucking me in that hotel room!"

Kyle huffed, flushing at Eric's crude phrasing. "Will you grow up?!"

"Grow up?!" Eric's voice was on the verge of hysteria. "We're the same age, Kyle!"

"No, we would've been the same age if this fucking time travel crap hadn't happened!" Kyle yelled. "If you hadn't been so selfish and stupid!"

And suddenly Eric was the accused, the guilty, and he wanted to squirm out of it before it ate him alive.

"Stop it!" He demanded.

"No, it's a fact!" Kyle replied, before his voice hardened. "And you want to hear some more? It's been sixteen years since you came back to me the first time, since you saved me-"

Eric shook his head. "Stop."

"It's been twelve years since our first kiss. Twelve years since you told me you were in love with me!"

"I said, stop!"

But Kyle was edging closer, driving the guilt and less than desirable reality forward.

"It's been seven god damn years since you lost your virginity to me-"

"Kyle-"

"Seven years since you cried in my arms because you were just as terrified as I was! Because you're sick and tired of us not being together as well-"

"Kyle, I swear."
"And where are we now?! You're still twenty-one, and I was in my fucking thirties waiting for you! I'm engaged to another man and you're leaving tomorrow, again!"

"That's enough!" Eric roared, fists clenched so tight that he no doubt had dented his palms.

But Kyle was crying – sobbing – carelessly, and Eric realised he wasn't saying all of those things to rile Eric up, to break him down, he was saying them simply because… it was the truth. The unfiltered, unadulterated truth stripped of affection, of stars, of chemistry, of genuine, valiant but heedless love.

"That could've been our engagement party last night, in our apartment," Kyle continued. "You could have a ring on your finger too, one that I gave you. I have a wonderful life with Neil, one I could've easily had with you."

Kyle was right in front of him now, listening to Eric pant, exhausted as they had both been for years… A lifetime, in fact.

"But you weren't there," Kyle said, and Eric hated how their fall had happened so easily. "And that's not your fault. That's history's fault… that's circumstance's fault. It was just a case of the wrong place at the wrong time."

Kyle was smiling sadly, his eyes brimming with tears, looking so fractured and beautiful, for Eric to gently put back together. But long-term solutions were not in his reach yet, and the impatience that had led them here was sure to drive him crazy in the meantime. And short-term, superficial answers, well, with that ring on Kyle's finger they weren't so easily accessible.

Eric’s gaze flitted from that gleaming band to Kyle's forlorn, patient face, he thought of everything else their relationship had defied – for better or worse – and decided an engagement ring was nothing.

Taking two fistfuls of Kyle's shirt, Eric tugged him forward and smashed their lips together. Kyle's mouth initially froze against Eric's, before he melted compliantly. The kiss remained close-mouthed, static but urgent, and Kyle pressed himself flush to Eric, hands blindly wandering Eric's upper arms before clinging to him.

Desperation was keeping them bound together; if they kissed a little harder, held on a little tighter than maybe everything would change. Eric would stay, and hope that would be enough to make Kyle's decision easy; he would leave his fiancé, remove the ring, Eric would remove his time tether, and they would both feel lighter, free, if only.

But that couldn't happen, not now and not easily. A shared realisation and when it both hit them, their kiss seemed prolonged and futile, though a commendable effort. They were panting when it was over, Kyle's body was searing against Eric's, his lips pinked and his eyes were wide, his pupils galvanised ink blots on perfect green. A slip up, a mistake, and Eric could see his tiny, shining reflection. But he wasn't dismayed, since Kyle was looking at him like he wanted to make that mistake all over again.

His hands were still resting on Eric's arms, and Eric's breath caught in his throat when Kyle clutched at his sleeves and dragged him down to his lips. They stumbled from the force of the kiss, and swayed precariously as Kyle tested his decision. But Eric wouldn't let Kyle be discouraged, allow him to believe this was nothing but right. He fitted his hands at Kyle's waist again, holding him close and protecting him from such dangerous things as moral implications.

It seemed that Eric's encouragement eradicated any doubts Kyle may have had when he led Eric
forward, impatient and determined. Spurred on by the loud thud when Kyle's back hit the wall, Eric moved his hand from Kyle's waist to his jaw, tipping his head up and taking Kyle's lower lip into his mouth, their bodies practically fusing. Kyle kept his stubborn grip on Eric's now tensed bicep, his fingers paling due to how tightly he held on, but he slid his other hand over Eric's damp neck and into his hair, tugging as gently as their rough, wild kiss would allow.

"How can you throw this away?" Eric whispered, voice stern but the peck that followed was soft.

Kyle shook his head, eyes hooded. "I'm not throwing anything away."

Kyle returned Eric's peck and it quickly deepened, tongues grappling and lungs heaving as if their whole bodies were conflicted, not just their relationship in need of unwinding and unknotting.

Their mouths separated with a wet smack that just about rose above their laboured breathing. Eric whimpered; face creasing as he pressed his forehead against Kyle's, their noses rubbing together.

"I love you so much," he mumbled.

Kyle was panting, and he petted the back of Eric's head when he replied, "I love you too."

"More than him?"

Kyle's fingers grew limp in Eric's hair, his head thudding softly against the wall before he slipped out of Eric's embrace.

He sighed, "God damn it, Eric…"

Head bowed, Eric murmured, "I'm sorry."

You're an idiot if you thought this would last forever. Any of this.

Eric turned away, rubbing the back of his neck and remembering where Kyle had held him as he walked over to his bed, sitting on the edge. His head remained lowered, but he could feel Kyle's eyes on him, breathing shallowly to himself when Kyle made his way over to him and dropped to his knees.

"Please," Kyle whispered, taking Eric's hand. "Even if you don't understand everything else, can you at least understand that I love you? And I always will?"

Eric's eyes burned. Everything seemed impossible now, he shook his head.

"But-"

"No," Kyle protested softly. "It's simple, Eric. I love you! Even if I can't be with you…"

Eric sniffed. "Even though you're with somebody else?"

In the silence, Eric glanced at Kyle and his chest tightened at how destroyed and desperate Kyle looked before him.

"Yes," Kyle smiled wetly, squeezing Eric's hand before pressing a kiss to it. "Yes of course I love you…"

Eric choked on a sob, lifting his free hand to his face and swiping at any stray tears.

"Please…" Kyle whispered, begging as he kissed each of Eric's knuckles. "Please say it…please say
Eric couldn't help but smile at Kyle, and he pursed his lips as he realised he knew, he had always known.

Kyle's grip was tight, but Eric managed to slide his hand out of Kyle's hold and limply cup his cheek. He felt Kyle stiffen with surprise that he could still be the recipient of their sacred gesture, but he soon keened to the touch and looked up at Eric with a wide, grateful smile.

"I love you, Kyle," Eric said, thumbing at Kyle's cheek. "I even love your mistakes, I love that your imperfect, and I love that you make me love those things."

Kyle pursed his lips, and Eric could tell he was enjoying the touch, that it was the acceptance he had been yearning for.

"And I know, deep in my heart that you love me too," Eric continued, voice thickening. "I'm sorry that I ever doubted you."

Kyle sighed, shattered, and when tears dripped from his lashes Eric quickly brushed them away.

"So..." Eric began, gulping before he continued, "What's your fiancé like?"

Kyle's eyebrows lifted momentarily in surprise, before he smiled. "He's tall, with dark brown hair and teal eyes."

"Teal?"

"Yeah, they're very distinctive."

Eric chuckled, faint but warm.

"And what does he do?" He asked.

"He works in the IT department of a big, multi-national corporation," Kyle replied.

"And he makes you happy?" Eric asked, of all the details he could have of Kyle's fiancé that one was the most crucial. "Right?"

Kyle nodded. "He really does..."

"Good," Eric smiled. "I'm glad of that."

Kyle sniffed, smiling before ducking his head and wiping his tears. He rose from the floor slowly and sat next to Eric on the bed, knees touching.

"Does this mean I need to stop seeing you?" Eric asked, waiting for rejection. But he would understand, and just have to learn to accept it.

"God, no!" Kyle replied, shifting on the bed and stroking Eric's arm. "You think I'd let you out of my life again? Of course you can see me."

Eric should've taken the answer gladly, but the cloud of devastation had lifted and he could see that Kyle was truly happy. Although he had missed him, Kyle was happy and perhaps it was only fair for Kyle to have a chance at this new happiness, even if Eric couldn't see it. Even if it meant keeping his distance for a while.
"It's just that, it may be hard..." Eric explained, "With you getting married soon."

Kyle nodded thoughtfully, staring at the engagement ring. "Right…"

Although Kyle had been hopeful for Eric's return before, it wasn't a substantial hope, a reassured hope. If Eric wanted to leave Kyle anything, it was that. It wasn't as material, or as precious as a star, but it was still something Kyle could hold onto.

"We'll make it work," Eric promised, taking Kyle's hand in his own.

Kyle squeezed back.

"I'm sure we will," he smiled.

In the remnants of their argument, the engagement, of the aforementioned cloud of devastation, Eric couldn't help but wonder if their bond had actually strengthened. If their love had grown a little more selfless.

Not long after, they left the room, and Eric offered to walk Kyle out of the hotel. It was sunny when they stepped outside, but there was a metallic tang in the air like it had been raining. The pavements were glistening, sparkling with sun drops.

It was late afternoon but it felt like the day was still breaking, something was definitely dawning. The city shone with spring, inviting and promising, but Eric and Kyle still remained at the hotel entrance, under the shady, green canopy. Whatever the future held, however content or exciting it could prove to be, they were still so sheepish and reluctant to move forward. If it meant leaving each other, new understanding or not it was still difficult.

Another word to describe their relationship, Eric realised; difficult. But worth every second.

He surveyed the street in front of him. "So-"

Kyle didn't give him a chance to finish, throwing his arms around Eric's neck with a tiny huff. Eric was rigid for a moment, before slowly wrapping his arms around Kyle's warm, welcome body and sinking into the embrace, needing it as much as Kyle clearly did.

"I'm going to miss you so much," Kyle whispered, inhaling Eric shakily.

Eric's smile crinkled when he felt dampness at his neck.

"I'll miss you too," he replied with a soft squeeze.

The pressure of their fortifying hug was released carefully when Kyle moved his arms from Eric's neck, and his fingertips trailing down Eric's arm was a different, blissfully soft pressure. Kyle stopped at Eric's elbows, tracing contemplative circles, not protesting when Eric's hold remained firm, bracing him just as sturdily as he ever had.

And so they stood, for the first time feeling like they had all the time in the world. Or perhaps they were still trying to find it in each other's eyes? Intent, were it not for Kyle's occasional wandering to Eric's mouth, before he reached up and lips met.

Like the embrace, the kiss was sudden and strong and sure, and although Eric's eyes again flashed in surprise, they quickly slipped shut. His body was ruined for Kyle's touch now, one little kiss was enough to melt him.
"I love you," Kyle whispered in the space between their lips. He kissed Eric chastely again before nodding, "and I'm proud of you."

Eric smiled and pressed their foreheads together. "I love you too, Kyle."

Smiling too, Kyle lifted his hand to Eric's face, cupping his cheek. If Kyle's kiss melted him, then that one action made Eric implode, his heart splintering his insides. It could've been seconds or hours that Kyle's hand was on his cheek, all Eric knew was that the warmth was gone too soon, and that Kyle was already walking down the hotel steps.

His feet met the sidewalk, and when Kyle turned back Eric was still there. His smile looked even more dazzling in the sunlight. Eric directed one, short nod at Kyle and watched as he walked back home, back to Neil.

Despite the heavy ache of Kyle's departure, Eric felt lighter: that confused, stressful ball of bitterness and jealousy had unravelling; that dark, despairing confusion had dispersed; because Eric had projected it, and Kyle had helped him see through the envious webs, the heart-wrenching fog.

Still, Eric couldn't help but feel like he had forgotten something…

"Wait!" He called out. "Kyle!"

Kyle turned around, brow creased. "Yeah?"

Eric fidgeted, rubbing the back of his neck. "…Congratulations!"

Kyle's shoulders slouched, and his smile grew wider, so relieving that it made Eric feel lightheaded. He smiled too as he watched Kyle walk away, on pavement that glowed with clarifying, hopeful light.

Chapter End Notes

We're still not finished, but a new phase in the story has definitely started. Let me know what you think, and thanks again!
Chapter Summary

A short filler chapter to keep us steaming ahead. I hope you enjoy and thank you for reading!

"He's engaged?" Leck asked, eyes wide and brows nearly reaching his hairline. "How did that happen?"

Eric shrugged, tired shoulders rubbing against the wall. Although he begrudgingly understood why Kyle did what he had done, he was still struggling to come to terms with the situation. That selfish, homesick ten year old, that stubborn, pining sixteen year old he had once been, still didn't fully comprehend.

But he would have to for Kyle.

For us.

"He got tired of waiting, turns out my whole 'spreading out my visits' idea wasn't a great one," Eric replied, before shaking his head. "He didn't know where I was, or what had happened to me. He was worried sick and…" Eric stared at the floor guiltily. "A-and miserable…"

He hated it, how he could make Kyle so ecstatic to see him, so peaceful in his arms – literally give him life – and yet he could also depress him, and worry him, and make him turn to comfort at the bottom of a bottle… or in the arms of another.

But no, that wasn't Eric's fault, was it? It was his absence and… time. The older Eric became – as young as he still was – the more he was realising the significance of inescapable time. And it seemed nobody felt its impact more than he and Kyle.

"But he still loves me," Eric added, raising his eyes to Leck. "He told me that, and he meant it. I know he did. And I obviously still love him… but maybe I just need to keep my distance. I need to think through some things, things I've got wrong."

"Well, I'm really sorry," Leck replied, rubbing the back of his neck. "I know I was a bit begrudging about it all at first, but I have been rooting for you guys."

Eric shot him a tight, appreciative smile. "Thanks, Leck."

Leck smiled back, mahogany eyes tired but sincere. As sincere as his question of 'are you alright?' had been when Eric left the time transporter more disorientated than usual and fighting back tears.

Eric had nodded, just wanting to get to his quarters and take out his residual frustration and despair out on his room. He didn't want Leck – the guy he had made a crucial deal with – to see him cry. But perhaps he was becoming more than that, more than just a pawn, and maybe that wasn't so bad, when Eric was clearly in need of comforting. In need of company.

"You said you had things to think through…" Leck said, glancing at the large machine Eric had stepped out of.
"Yeah?"

"Does that mean the time transporter?" Leck asked, looking at Eric now. "Do you still want to build it?"

Eric requited Leck's gaze with surprise, before running a hand through his hair and staring at the time transporter too. It still represented something to him, it was still as tempting and formidable as ever. It offered all Eric had ever wanted, and despite his and Kyle's bittersweet talk, Eric was unsure whether to pursue what he so desperately craved. If it was right. Eric's plan was fuelled by promises, not necessarily answers.

"Yeah, I still want to but… I don't know if it's the right thing anymore," Eric replied. "And maybe I need to start thinking about that, you know? When I first went back to the past it was to save Kyle, because I wanted him to live. Yeah, it was a good thing and of course I didn't know then he would love me back but… it was still what I wanted. I'll always want to find a way to go back to him for good. But maybe he doesn't want that anymore? Maybe being together forever isn't a possibility."

Eric was surprised at how easily the admission rolled off his exhausted tongue, but unsurprised at the dull pressure in his chest, his heart rejecting the notion.

"Time Chi- Eric-" Leck quickly amended. "Don't be discouraged okay? Please."

Eric huffed. "I'm trying! But it's pretty difficult when the guy you're in love with is marrying somebody else. He wants me, he wants this Neil, but he can't have us both. Neil has something I can't give him. He has all the time in the world to be with Kyle. And me? I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Leck shook his head. "Not necessarily."

Eric's eyebrows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Ideas about time travel have advanced a lot in the past five hundred years. Now that we have the technology to make it possible." Leck explained with a simple, sure smile. "It turns out that the butterfly effect isn't exactly true. You know, when you change one thing in the past and it completely alters the events of history? I mean, it is true, in a way. Like, if you hadn't saved Kyle then he would have died. But that's a big change. Literally life and death. But the little things? Like stepping on butterflies? Doesn't impact on history all that much."

Eric sat up from his position on the floor, intrigue releasing the aching pressure out of his ribs.

"Then what does happen?" He asked.

"Going back to the past, changing space and time, creates alternate timelines," Leck continued. "The more you go back to the past, the more timelines you create. And you've been a lot, so you've opened up a whole smorgasbord of them. Maybe there is a timeline where you didn't save Kyle, but you haven't been there, so we can never know. But that doesn't stop Kyle from existing in potentially hundreds of others. There is a timeline where Kyle marries this guy, there is a timeline where you didn't come here at all, and there is likely a timeline where you and Kyle end up together. You just have to make it happen."

Eric liked the sound of that, so much so that a smile spread uncontrollably across his face. Although he still needed to unravel questions, search for answers, at least a slew of possibilities had exploded before his eyes.

"Thank you, Leck," he said quietly.
Eric's nights grew restless.

Not because he was pining, or depressed, consumed by the benefit (or curse?) of hindsight, but because his conversation with Leck upon returning home had ignited a new flame of hope. Brighter and stronger and closer than before. A huge, though idle dream was now being shaped into determined reality, a once floating, flickering flame stood rigid and confident with new life. Eric couldn't shut it off or blow it out, even if he wanted to.

Before he had left the laboratory he had agreed to meet Leck in a week's time, to share his thoughts on the time transporter and to discuss the status of their deal. The small smile on Leck's face told Eric that he knew his dream was unmovable, no amount of mistakes or fiancés could stop Eric from discovering that elusive, perfect timeline.

Between studying, sketching and planning, Eric had thought of Kyle. Specifically, he replayed their recent conversation over and over, cross-referenced it with every other conversation they had had, hoping to find answers to what was best for him if that responsibility didn't rest entirely on Kyle's shoulders; Eric hoped it would be buried somewhere in the loop.

Just as if he were going to visit Kyle again, Eric had sneaked out of his quarters during the early hours of Saturday morning. Even in the dark and with little sleep, Eric had found his way to the laboratory he felt he had visited a hundred times before.

"These are all just rough notes and sketches, okay?" Eric said, tense and a little breathless as he placed his week's work on the desk.

"Alright then," Leck chuckled, glancing at the bulging notepads and scattered graph paper. "I'll be sure not to go too hard on you."

Eric flushed and scowled, ducking his head as Leck leafed through his notes.

"Wow..." Leck gasped, eyes wide as they scanned the pages. "These are great, Eric! I mean, really impressive."

Eric scratched at his arm, "Thanks," he smiled.

Such modesty was rare of him, but he had never cared about anything this much.

"We could make serious headway with these," Leck continued enthusiastically, fingers tracing the pencilled lines of rough sketches. He looked up at Eric. "You must have done a lot of research, huh?"

"Yeah, well, I couldn't go into the library without warranting suspicion," Eric replied. "So I had to hack into the database and install all the texts they had here."

Leck arched an eyebrow. "And you didn't get caught?"

"Nope, I figured out a way to do it all anonymously," Eric answered. "I created this code to disable the security."

Leck scoffed incredulously. "You know the AAA has one of the most stringent and impenetrable
Eric glanced at his work, all the information he was able to obtain surreptitiously. "Clearly not impenetrable enough..." he muttered.

Leck shook his head and laughed. "That's pretty remarkable... and kind of scary," he slid his gaze to one of Eric's notes. "You know, you could rule Ubaleh with all that knowledge."

Eric thought of how his ten year old self would've reacted to such a statement, he'd be just as driven to claim that power as Eric was now to reunite with Kyle. It was such a silent, gradual shift in aspirations and priorities. Maturity as well as circumstance, the former had led Kyle to fall in love with him in the place.

He smiled to himself, "I don't think so..."

Leck tucked his hands into the pockets of the lab coat he always put on while in there. "Well, you're not the only one who's been hard at work."

Eric raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yeah," Leck grinned softly, reaching into his bag. "Unlike you, I have proper access to AAA databases – within my field at least – and I came across something."

After tapping the screen and placing the tablet down on the desk, a hologram shot up like a tiny, frozen firework. An icy blue translucent time transporter hovered in the air.

Eric blinked. "Is that a-"

"Yes," Leck's teeth gleamed in the faint glow. "A time transporter built forty years ago by the UAA."

"And where is it now?" Eric asked, gaze fixed on the floating machine.

"Underground," Leck replied. "When the AAA took over the city, most UAA projects were put there."

Eric lifted his gaze to the scientist. "But you can still access it, right?"

"Sure," Leck nodded, "whether it still works is another matter. But if it doesn't I'm thinking-"

"We could use its parts for our own transporter?" Eric asked, trying to bite back a premature, giddy smile. It was exhilarating, knowing their plan was in motion and that they were onto something.

"Exactly," Leck confirmed, with an equally eager grin.

"Then that's what we'll do," Eric nodded, smile tight and confident. "Next time we meet up like this."

He figured it would be another restless night tonight, as that hopeful flame swelled.

"... There were too many bugs, too dangerous, so the AAA had no choice but to shut it down," Leck explained, he and Eric regarded the crumbling time transporter with sombre awe.

"I'm surprised it didn't occur to them to dismantle it," Eric replied, charred silver and burnt steel casting dull shadows in his eyes. "Sure, it was glitchy but parts can always be prepared, right?"
Leck sighed. "You knew Blavius, he thought the AAA could build something better from scratch. Yes, they were arrogant but they did succeed."

Eric nodded, cold in the underground wasteland that used to be the UAA’s scientific labyrinth. Nobody had died in the ransacked maze, only information swiped rather than human lives and yet it still felt haunted; needing life and work and projects rather than sustaining them. The forgotten institution was still very modern, its demise a premature one, and yet with the damp smell, the obtrusive, rotting dark and the acrid atmosphere that turned light into smoke, it felt pre-historic. Fossils made of scrap metal buried in man-made caverns.

Everything down there had been so smugly wasted, a dismissal of the old for a pointed, stubborn new. Eric was reminded why he had placed tentative trust in the otters in the first place, they had the same petulant, douchebag mindset. But they had betrayed him and now Eric had changed, matured. Some childhood traits he may have grown out of, but some had been embedded into his personality permanently. Resourcefulness being one of them…

"And I guess they've helped us out too," Eric shrugged.

"How do you mean?" Leck asked, turning to Eric with knitted eyebrows.

"Well, it had his problems and it's a little rusty but why break this thing apart when the infrastructure is still there?"

"What?"

"We've already got a foundation, a fairly secluded place to work…” Eric's growing confidence took hold of his legs, making him walk towards the machine and away from the observers' balcony. "The parts need to be repaired but they're not dead. The machine just needs to be resuscitated that's all. My notes were promising, you said so yourself! With my engineering skills and your scientific know-how we can get this thing up and running again!"

"Yeah, okay, I get the point!" Leck laughed in exasperation, rolling his eyes. He lifted his gaze to the machine in front of them, and the weight of it drifted phantom-like to his shoulders. "But…"

"But what?" Eric asked, moving towards Leck again.

Leck's gaze was resigned when it slid to Eric. "It could take a while…"

"How long?"

"Well… It took ten years to build this, and that was with a full team and proper clearance," Leck explained." If it's only us, and only secretly then it could take about… fifteen, twenty years, maybe?"

Eric blinked, confidence and enthusiasm waning when he swallowed the heavy reality. Like he was gulping down the earth.

"Oh…” He whispered, looking to his feet and running a hand through his hair. Eric thought of Kyle's words: We've been waiting our whole lives for each other… But is that any way to live?

I don't know. I don't know what my life is supposed to be and maybe I'll never know. But being with Kyle is such a huge, important part of it. It's something I have to do and… I'm good at waiting.

Leck sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Eric replied, lifting his head and shaking it. He let out a short, rueful chuckle. "Nobody
said this would be easy, right? And I've got the time."

Leck appeared to wince, Eric was unsure why. He didn't know if it was because he looked so damn pitiful and tragic, or because Leck needed to hastily squirm out of this deal, if it required sacrificing such a large piece of his own time.

"Do you have time?" Eric asked softly, encouragingly.

Leck's fingers slid from the railing and he wrapped his arms around his chest.

"I like my job. At least, I like my field of work," Leck replied, closing his eyes and taking a quite breath. "Since graduating the education program, I've realised the difference. I enjoy what I do and I'm good at it, but I can't really see it leading anywhere." He met Eric's eyes with small smile. "It'd be nice to do something worthwhile, to know I've made a difference to someone's life."

Again, Eric thought of what Kyle had said to him; how there was more for Eric to come back to, that there were people who cared about him. He may not have recognised it in the past, or his visits to the past, but he realised it now in the present/future.

Eric smiled widely, "thank you."

"No problem."

Jogging back up the steps and standing beside Leck, Eric observed the time transporter, studious and calculating.

"You know our original deal?" He asked.

"Yeah?"

"I have four visits left, right?"

Eric glanced at Leck and the scientist nodded.

"You want to see Kyle again?" Leck asked, returning the glance.

Eric shook his head, dismissing the brief look of surprise on Leck's face.

"No, I want to, uh, make some things right," he explained. "While I still can."
The waiting room of social services was predictably mundane, yet the polite quietness and fading wallpaper only exacerbated the tension weighing down on Kyle and Neil. Anticipation and nerves smelled like citrus cleaner and settled nauseously in Kyle's stomach. Neil remained silent, lips pursed, while Kyle's leg jittered uncontrollably.

"You alright?" Neil finally asked. "Your leg is shaking like you've drank too much coffee."

"What?" Kyle responded distractedly, he had manged to tune out his fidgeting, but he looked down at his leg and tried his hardest to supress its antsy jolts. "Oh, I know, it... that hasn't happened in a while."

Neil sighed. "Well, this is a totally new experience for us both. I guess if it was going to happen at any time, now would be fitting."

"You may have a point," Kyle nodded, gazing at the unremarkable wallpaper.

The 'kids' discussion happened two months into Kyle's marriage. Honestly, he had been feeling broody since the wedding day, with his best man a doting dad to a beautiful – now three year old – girl. A family was always part of Kyle's plan. He felt it was something he had to achieve in his life, along with obtaining a special someone and a fulfilling career. He already had those things, but seeing Stan fit so seamlessly and contently into his own family, and realising how happy and purposeful Lily made him, forced Kyle to address the one thing he hadn't ticked off the list.

He didn't want to dampen his and Neil's honeymoon with a topic so serious, nor did he want to pressure Neil into a development he perhaps wasn't ready for. In the meanwhile Kyle had researched the process of adoption, quizzed his parents on their experience, and discovered that it was a long, winding road to embark on. One he would never have to walk alone anyway, but even being faced with such a difficult path was daunting with no one by his side.

Finally, Kyle broached the subject and Neil's enthusiasm delighted him. Apparently, Kyle's desire to start a family wasn't a secret, as Neil reminded him that they had discussed parenthood before they even became a couple. In a casual, strictly friendly capacity, of course.

Kyle's suspicions proved right. The process of adoption was indeed complex and fraught with setbacks. But he appreciated the virtue of patience, was more than accustomed to waiting, and doubts and frustrations were easily alleviated with a supportive husband by his side. Even when Jessica announced during a rare visit home, that she and Stan were expecting a second child, and served to remind Kyle of ceaseless time. It had been nearly three years, Kyle had gotten older and the adoption process remained stagnant.

Now, sitting in that bland waiting room, subject to further waiting, they were the closest they had ever been to the elusive end of the road.

"Can I confess something?" Neil asked.

"Will it make me feel better?"

Patient teal eyes focused on Kyle, Neil smiled rather absenty.
"I'm a little surprised you're so nervous," he replied. "I was counting on you being the laid-back one, here. I mean, you spend nearly every day with kids."

"Yeah, well, that's different," Kyle argued, shifting in the uncomfortable seat in the hopes it would calm his antsy leg. "They're my students. They have parents; they're only my responsibility for a few hours out of the day. This is... life-changing, Neil."

Neil sighed, dropping his gaze to the polished floor. "I've noticed."

"And besides, it's not as if my students can decide they don't want to come to my class anymore," Kyle pointed out.

"I take it you're not used to dealing with rejection?"

"I am," Kyle replied, nodding. "But like you said, this is... different."

The double doors opened with a faint squeak, quickly followed by the careful clack of modest heels against the tiles. Kyle and Neil turned their attention to the sound, greeted by the sight of a grinning social worker holding the hands of a wide-eyed, dark-haired toddler.

This is it.

This could be the first time you're meeting your daughter.

Kyle tried hard to swallow the lump in his throat, careful not to blink.

"Kyle and Neil?" The social worker asked.

The two men looked at each other, as if after all this time, all these obstacles, they were offering each other one final out. Once the initial nerve-wracking wave had crested, their fortifying gazes were fixed in reassurance. In faith. They stood up at the same time.

Neil elected himself to speak. "Th-that's us."

The social worker grinned then stepped forward to shake the couple's hands. "Hi, I'm Jane Geller. We spoke on the phone?"

"Oh, right, hi..." Neil nodded with a faint, shy smile as he shook Jane's hand.

"It's nice to meet you," Kyle added, hoping Jane was used to anxious, first-time parents with damp handshakes.

"Nice to meet you too," she smiled. "So I guess there's just one more introduction to make."

There was a brief hum of warm, slightly awkward laughter.

"Kyle, Neil, this is Paige," Jane said, and gestured to the quiet little girl beside her.

Neil was silent again, his lips pursed, and if he was counting on Kyle to be the cool one, the confident, assured one, the one who was good at dealing with kids, then that's what he needed to be. Kyle knelt down, under the scrutiny of gleaming, hazel eyes.

He smiled. "Hi, Paige..."

Paige remained silent, her face still young enough to be a blank canvas, and her responses blunt and
sincere. Manners and values yet to be instilled, experiences yet to be shaped by the proud parents lucky enough to have her. She turned her head away from Kyle, pressed herself into Jane's side, timid and not used to strangers.

"She's a little shy," Jane explained a tad apologetically. "Why don't we go to the rec room so you three can get to know each other?"

Kyle stood up, and met Neil's shakily optimistic countenance.

"Sure," he smiled. "Sounds great."

As they made their way to the rec room, Kyle's hand found Neil's.

Meeting shy kids wasn't new to Kyle. He did it every September.

After years of teaching, he had established methods on how to get kids to relax into their new environment, to interact with others, to see that talking to people was nothing to be afraid of. It was his job, and after so long it had become easy, but always rewarding.

School inspections aside, Kyle had never been so heavily judged on his ability to interact with children. It was crucial that Paige liked him and Neil, felt comfortable around them, which was difficult since – as most three years olds would be – she was nervous in the unknown. She just wanted to play with her toys, watch TV, draw… not sit around with her social worker and a pair of strangers while they discussed things she didn't understand.

Kyle tried to listen to Jane as she talked him and Neil through a process he was already familiar with. He was more concerned with Paige, who had her eyes fixed on a colourful piece of paper in front of her. If this meeting didn't go well, if Paige didn't have that necessary chemistry with Kyle and Neil – the foundation for an important bond – then she may very well forget about them. She would look back on this foggy time in her life, and remember Kyle and Neil as hazy figures that had dispersed after a brief amount of time spent together.

Already it broke Kyle's heart, made a protective instinct seize anxiously in his chest. He had done enough research to know that a lot of children fall through the cracks in the system, watch as opportunities for something stable slip them by. It saddened him to think that he and Neil could leave there today, unwittingly doing that to Paige's future.

Pursing his lips, Kyle moved his chair closer to Paige.

"What's that?" he asked her, pointing at her drawing.

Paige looked up slowly, big eyes blinking. "A cat…"

Kyle smiled at the drawing of a round orange cat, with a swirly tail and sharp ears.

"You like cats, huh?"

The conversation between Neil and Jane had faded when they heard the small sound of Paige's voice. Promising…

Paige looked at Jane, that familiar face, and Jane nodded encouragingly. She then looked at Kyle and copied her.

"Which cats do you like?" Kyle asked.
"Babies…"

"You know what baby cats are called?"

Paige shook her head.

"Kittens," Kyle replied with a smile.

Paige stared at Kyle for a moment, expression blank but the cogs in her mind were whirring. And she was trusting, accepting, adjusting tentatively, as though even at such a young age she was used to rejection and broken promises. No, Kyle wouldn't let that happen to her again.

She slid a purple crayon and a piece of paper to Kyle, not knowing how important that simple gesture was. Since they appeared to be on the subject of favourite animals, Kyle did his best drawing of an elephant. Once he was done, he slid the paper to Paige like she had done before. Friendly reciprocation. Kyle saw it every year. Paige studied the drawing, before she smiled with all her baby teeth and giggled.

"What is that, Paige?" Jane asked, grinning. "Can you tell Kyle and Neil what that is?"

Paige turned the paper around and presented Kyle's drawing to a stunned and delighted Neil and Jane.

"El… elfant…" she replied proudly.

"Yeah, that's right it is," Kyle nodded. "You're really smart, Paige."

Paige looked at the drawing again before deciding, "I want it."

"Want what?" Jane asked.

Paige pointed at the drawing.

"Then you can have it," Kyle beamed, a warmth spreading through his chest when Paige looked up at him. "It's yours."

"That's very nice, Kyle," Jane smiled. "What do you say, Paige?"

"Thank you," Paige replied shyly, ducking her head and starting another drawing.

A few weeks later Kyle and Neil found themselves at a meeting with Jane and Paige in a more pleasant, casual setting… a quiet, leafy park.

Paperwork – and the initial awkwardness of a first encounter – was forgotten as Paige played, asking either Kyle or Neil to greet her at the bottom of the slide, or hoist her up and hold her as she explored the monkey bars.

An hour had passed and Kyle had joined Jane on the bench, watching Neil push Paige on the swing.

"Look who's over there, Paige!" Neil said, pointing in the direction of the bench.

Paige's wide eyes scanned the park, before she found Kyle and Jane and giggled, mimicking Neil's wave.

"Hi, Paige!" Kyle grinned, and Jane waved beside him.
Already Kyle felt relaxed, content, like he could get used to this… If he and Neil were to adopt Paige, that is. These types of days-out would be commonplace and blissful, making up Paige's early childhood memories.

"She asked for your drawing to be put on her wall," Jane said softly.

"Aw, really?" Kyle asked, trying hard to not let the warm excitement in his chest spill onto his face. "That's so cute!"

"She kept asking about you after you left too," Jane added, prompting the reaction that Kyle was trying to keep hidden (lest it be premature). "I think she really likes you."

"She does?" Kyle asked, playing oblivious. It was clear that Paige seemed to be happy in their company, comfortable in their presence. "Neil and I have tried not to get our hopes too high. Don't want to be disappointed, you know?"

"I understand," Jane nodded. "I'm supposed to be the impartial one here, but excursions like this are very rare. When Paige responds to you like she has it's hugely promising."

Instead of melting, that excitement in Kyle's chest sprouted rapidly, like a flower basking in the hopeful sun. Words were difficult to find.

"Wow, well, uh, take that on board," Kyle said, nodding when he finally retrieved his voice. "Thanks, Jane."

Scepticism and pragmatism had been a glass pane filtering the sun's rays, stifling hope. But the sun was shining too brightly now and Kyle's hope flared.

"Instead of just watching me cook, you could help me?" Neil asked from the stove, while Kyle perched on the tall stool, elbows resting on the kitchen island.

"Yes, but do you remember what happened the last time I tried to help?" He returned, eyebrow arched when Neil turned to him with a smirk.

"Hmm, fair point," Neil said, before turning his back to Kyle and talking over his shoulder. "We don't want a matching scorch mark on the wall, do we?"

Kyle smiled to himself, eyes roaming the kitchen until he found the offending mark. Small, but jet black and embedded into the paintjob. "No, we don't…"

While Kyle recalled that kitchen mishap that had occurred countless Friday nights ago, an event that had branded itself into the patchwork moments of his and Neil's relationship, Neil had turned around to face him. Letting whatever was on the stove bubble and simmer, so he could gaze at his husband instead.

"And you do look very cute sitting there, fascinated…" Neil smiled with a gleaming wickedness to his voice.

"It smells delicious…" Kyle added, the kitchen seemed more humid than ever with its warm aroma and Neil's adoring, patient stare.

"You wanna help? You can be my taste-tester," Neil said, reaching for a wooden spoon and dipping it into the pot. "Here, try some of this sauce, tell me if it needs more salt."
Neil then crossed the short distance to where Kyle was sitting, thick, red sauce nearly dripping from the spoon. Neil lifted it to Kyle's lips before it could splatter on the cream tiles.

The sauce was hot when it met Kyle's lips and it tingled with flavour on his tongue. Neil was smirking at him and Kyle flushed and batted his hand away.

"It's great but… perhaps a bit more salt." Kyle said, cheeks still pinked.

Neil grinned and returned to the stove. "On it…"

Contented evenings like this, watching Neil cook, should've been perfect. They used to be, when the two of them felt enough. But starting the adoption process and meeting Paige had cast light on the empty space in their otherwise happy lives. How different would evenings like this be if the space was filled? What joys could be found there? What blissful alterations?

Kyle and Neil had been in meetings with Jane, had visited Paige ever since that encouraging day at the park, and while Kyle remained optimistic, he still wasn't sure where this was all leading to. He still didn't know how long it would take before he and Neil had an answer they could be comfortable with, good or bad. Should they celebrate or move on? Make arrangements or regroup and return to square one?

The ringing phone pulled Kyle out from his sinking thoughts.

"Want me to answer that?" He asked Neil, who was rummaging around a cupboard.

"It's alright, I got it," Neil replied, abandoning his search and picking up the phone. "Hello?"

His shoulders slouched and he stared at Kyle, wide-eyed. "Oh, hi, Jane…"

Kyle's frozen expression was marred by the dent in his brow. It wasn't unusual for Jane to contact them of course, but usually she sent an email or called them during the day, not a Friday evening. Naturally, Kyle's mind gravitated towards the worst case scenarios.

Is Paige alright?

Is there a problem with our paperwork?

Can we not adopt her?

When Kyle dragged himself away from those fruitless, panicked thoughts, he finally focused on Neil.

"I'm good, thank you… yes, Kyle is here. Oh, alright… yes… so what does that mean?"

The question prompted a longer pause, Neil's teal eyes darting across the tiles. Then they stopped, and Neil reeled, hand reaching out for the edge of the island to steady himself.

"Really?" He asked. "For sure? Jane, I, we- thank you! Thank you so, so much!" He was grinning now, face flushed and eyes gleaming.

Kyle's heart had leapt into his throat, his fingers shaking. Promising.

"Yep, we'll definitely call you on Monday," Neil said, still grinning. "Thank you, bye…"

Neil hung up, placing the phone down and when he did he held onto the edge of the island with both hands, shoulders trembling beneath his shirt.
"Neil?..." Kyle asked, his voice felt discomfiting to his ears. Anxiety. He reached out and touched Neil's hand. "Honey?"

Neil registered Kyle's palm covering his knuckles and looked up. "Th-that was Jane..."

"Yeah, I know," Kyle laughed nervously. "What was she calling for?"

"She said that... that we can adopt Paige," Neil replied, a smile stretching slowly across his face. "We just need to come in and finalise some paperwork."

Kyle's doubt – his clouded, niggling doubt – collapsed, and hope emerged as reality. His heart stung, his eyes burned, and he squeezed Neil's hand.

"W-w-we have a kid?" Kyle asked, his voice a whisper and Neil a blur in his eyes. "We're having a daughter?"

Face creased, Neil nodded and that confirmation made Kyle fly from his chair and into Neil's arms, where he was greeted by a warm, wet, ecstatic kiss.

"It finally happened, Neil!" Kyle sobbed in between kisses. "After all this waiting... it's finally happening!"

Neil nodded, Kyle's overwhelmed mirror. He cupped Kyle's face and brought their lips together once again.

"I know, I know..." he moaned, their foreheads were pressed together and they searched each other's damp eyes. "You're going to be an incredible father, Kyle."

Kyle pursed his lips but then smiled. "Thank you. So will you, you'll be wonderful, Neil."

Neil bit his lip, humble and loving the man in front of him before he kissed Kyle again. That confirmation, that acceptance, was another moment to weave into their marital memories, more momentous and brilliant than any scorch mark.

"... And she's very excited to move in," Jane said. "If she isn't very talkative, don't be discouraged. She'll be adjusting to her new place, and she'll probably be tired at the end of the day. You have my number and email if you have any questions, and I'll be sure to keep in contact, see if you're all doing okay."

It had been a month since Kyle and Neil received the glorious news, and with paperwork finalised and the necessary decorations for Paige's new bedroom finished, she was ready to move in with her family. And Kyle and Neil? They had been ready for years, just waiting for the perfect time, the perfect match. It had always been Paige.

"Thank you, Jane," Neil smiled, putting the last of Paige's stuff into the trunk of the car.

"You've been so good to us, really," Kyle added, hoping he could blame the wetness in his eyes on brisk spring air.

"It's my pleasure," Jane grinned, hands clasped in front of her when she sighed. "I'm just so delighted that after all these years you're getting the family you deserve. And she's a great kid."

"She really is," Neil nodded, glancing at Paige sat in her booster seat. "We're so excited!"

Jane's grin pulled into a crumpled, overwhelmed smiled.
"Well, good luck!" She said, before hugging Neil and then Kyle.

"Thanks again," Kyle murmured into the embrace, his gratitude felt limitless in the present moment.

"No problem," Jane replied, stepping out of the hug. "Take care of her for me, alright?"

"We will," Neil nodded, beaming. "We promise we will."

Jane smiled gratefully, watching Kyle and Neil get into their car.

"Goodbye, Paige!" She grinned, waving at the little girl.

Paige waved back, along with Kyle and Neil, before they took their daughter home.

Despite Jane's warnings, Paige's first day with Kyle and Neil went better than they could even imagine. She was quiet on the drive home, thoughtfully staring out the window, her eyes wide with wonderment as they drove through the neighbourhood, her absorbent mind bloated on new surroundings.

Holding Neil's hand, she was shown around the apartment and her shyness was momentarily lifted upon entering her room. It was spacious and lilac and minimally furnished, but welcoming. A room waiting to be filled with her toys and clothes and drawings and memories.

Formalities taken care of, Kyle and Neil resumed their tentative bonding with her, sans the watchful eyes of Jane. The once blank kitchen table became crowded with paper and crayons, drawings that would soon be pinned to Paige's bedroom wall. Then that was all set aside to make way for freshly baked cupcakes. Kyle had two, while Neil and Paige had three (and she got to lick the bowl too).

Like most excited three year olds, Paige's energy made way for drowsiness. But she perked up again when Kyle suggested they watch her favourite Disney movie in the living room, on the big TV.

She had fallen asleep between her new parents by the time the credits were rolling. When Kyle looked at Neil he was glad the living room was dimmed, for he didn't want him to see how such perfection had affected him.

Scooping Paige up in his arms, Kyle carried her to bed and Neil helped tuck her in.

Kyle had experienced a lot of pain in his life; fear, heartache, disappointment. But he had also experienced immense joy; passion, excitement, contentment. Standing by Paige's bedroom door; the nightlight casting a glow on her sleeping face; after a day that he had been dreaming about for years; elicited happiness and a joy that was incomparable to the rest. Not in a superior way, or a flawless way, but in a way that was so startlingly different to anything he had experienced before.

"Great day…" he smiled dreamily.

"It really was," Neil replied, his voice warm and bristling. His arm was around Kyle and he squeezed his shoulder. "Just think, this is going to be our life, Kyle."

Kyle still stared at Paige and saw the future on her peaceful face. "I like the sound of that…"

Eric exhaled slowly as he entered the dental practice, the air-con shielding him from the Hawaiian summer heat. The waiting room was predictably silent, conversation stifled by awkward social conventions and faint, disembodied radio.

Businessmen and women tapped at their phones and flipped through week-old magazines, managing to squeeze a visit to their local dentist into their busy day. Nervous children distracted themselves with toys while the pre-teen patients masked their nerves with sullenness, their parents sat silently beside them.

A normal Thursday for Butters, Eric assumed. He would deal with each patients' indifference, moodiness, and anxiety with that persistent cheeriness of his. It seemed appropriate that Eric should throw him a curveball, a spanner in the works, inject a little abnormality into a dull, sunny day.

With one last bracing breath, Eric tucked his damp hands into the pockets of his pants and made his way to the front desk. A pretty receptionist typed Science knows how many words a minute, the screen reflected in her pale green eyes. Her shining, golden hair was pulled back in a slick ponytail, her fringe skimming her plucked brows.

"How can I help?" She asked, finally noticing Eric.

"Hi, I need to speak to Bu-" Eric stopped himself. "Doctor Stotch, please."

"He's with a patient at the moment, I'm afraid," the receptionist replied. Her name tag read 'Sally'. "Do you want to make an appointment?"

"No thanks, I don't need an appointment I just…" Eric closed his eyes briefly, he didn't mean to sound so desperate and testy. This was one reunion he wasn't exactly looking forward to. "I'm an old friend of his and I need to speak to him. Urgently."

Sally blinked, glancing around her desk. "Oh, um, alright. I'll tell him that you're here…"

She reached for the intercom. There was a small beep, a crackle, before a voice Eric faintly recognised drifted into his ears.

"Yes, Sally?"

"Doctor Stotch, you have a gentleman out here that needs to speak with you."

"Oh?" Butters asked. Mature, professional, carefree. "Do I know him?"

"Yes, sir, he says you're his friend," Sally replied.

"What's his name?"
Sally lifted her gaze to Eric curiously.

"Eric Cartman…" he muttered, still debating whether this was a mistake. Had Kyle been right or wrong?

"Eric Cartman, sir."

Silence. Still and heavy, and it sat on Eric's mind, pushing doubt to the front of his thoughts. Under the pressure, he could feel himself sweat as if the merciless sun outside was beating down on him.

Sally was regarding him warily, and Eric half-prayed for her to call security and have him thrown out. He could write off this visit as forgettable, an error in judgement, a valiant attempt at taking Kyle's advice.

There was a promising crackle and Butters asked. "Uh-are you sure?"

Sliding her gaze to Eric again, Sally furrowed her eyebrows and Eric nodded in confirmation.

"Yes, sir," she replied.

Further silence, and it were as if Sally and Eric were patient, hesitant observers to a woodland animal, a creature as shy as Butters.

This has to happen.

No going back.

Eric just hoped Butters would give him the chance, if he could withstand the shock and confusion. It had been so long and Eric wasn't sure anymore, his past analysis of Butters was no longer applicable. So much had changed...

"Sir?"

"Y-y-yes, Sally, th-thank you," Butters replied abruptly, scratchy over the intercom. "I'll be right out…"

Sally stared at the quiet machine for a long time, her parted lips and knitted brow indicating she was still trying to make sense of the uncomfortable conversation. Remembering herself, she looked up and smiled professionally.

"If you'd like to take a seat, sir, Doctor Stotch will be right with you."

Eric nodded, heart thudding. "Alright, thanks…"

He sat down on one of the small plastic chairs and felt big and noticeable, out of place, but he tried to forget that and instead focused on what he was going to say. Startling Butters was a given, and he didn't really anticipate being surrounded by people when he explained himself. He'd have to ask Butters if they could talk privately, convince him that this would be easier one-on-one.

He couldn't deny Butters a head-turning reaction, but he could at least figure out a way to cushion the blow, so to speak.

Ten minutes later a twelve year old girl with braces came through the double doors, letting into the waiting room the noise of feet down the stairwell and the conversation between her mother and Doctor Stotch.
Her mother came into view, smiling politely at those whose eyes she met. She waved goodbye to Sally and hurried her daughter out of the building. Butters was still stood by the double doors, yet to notice Eric, and were it not for his shy, bumping knuckles Eric would never have guessed it was him.

The man dressed in a long, white coat with tanned skin, fair stubble and neatly combed hair (bleached even lighter due to the sun) wasn't the Butters Eric remembered.

But maybe that would make this whole thing easier? If Eric pretended he was meeting someone new? Someone he didn't have such history with, so many things to say to, someone who was present for (and complicit in) the biggest mistake of his life?

Eric stood up, feeling tall, adult, different.

"Hey, dude…" Eric said, it sliced through the waiting room silence and its familiarity grabbed Butters' attention immediately.

Butters' wide aqua eyes, his slackened jaw and his small stumble could've been perturbing. And it was. But Eric wouldn't let it get the better of him. He gulped.

"What's up?" He asked, with a shaky smile.

Butters blinked, looked away, and then looked back at the boy he thought he would never see again. His breathing increased every second his eyes remained on Eric.

But before Eric could step forward and attempt to comfort him, those aqua eyes slipped back and Butters' body flopped, hitting the floor with a loud, wince-worthy thud.

A collective gasp from patients both nosy and otherwise, and Eric was frozen still, eyes fixed on his unconscious friend.

"Doctor Stotch?!" Sally asked worriedly, rushing from behind her desk.

"Shit!" Eric whispered.

Not the greatest start…

Eric managed to get Butters from the crowded waiting room to the privacy of his office with minimal interference from the loyal Sally or the shocked patients. A commendable feat, Eric considered. And with Butters barely conscious and limp with shock Eric had to carry him upstairs like a firefighter.

Though Eric supposed he was pulling Butters from some kind of catastrophe; the catastrophe of being faced with the questions of those bewildered strangers downstairs who underestimated South Park's ability to haunt its citizens… no matter how far they roamed. But Eric guessed the only ghost was him. He was the scientific anomaly, the paradox of a man who drifted into the lives of those he remembered from a past existence. He frightened them, confused them, and in some cases burrowed under their skin and loved them, but never stayed. Never left any trace.

Kyle, as always, had been the exception. Eric had left his mark physically; the lovebites, the stars, but he was also fragmented. Pieces of him had fell away and landed in Kyle's inviting, aloof palms, settled and sunk into a heart just as bruised as his own. But Eric never fretted about what he had lost, what he had shed, because the loss – inconsequential and unnoticeable – was mutual. And Eric felt Kyle in everything he did; motivating his actions and occupying his thoughts.
"Sorry about earlier…" Eric said, watching Butters breathe into a paper bag.

Butters shook his head, the paper crumpling. He lifted his chin so his words were audible – albeit laboured and shaky. "It-it's not your fault I… I just wasn't expecting… this… this can't be right, this isn't right…"

Butters' eyes were widening and he retreated into the paper bag.

Eric sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I know this seems impossible-

"I thought you were dead!" Butters interrupted, voice shrill and eyes wild. "You can't be here! I-I…"

Once again Butters' heaving lungs got the better of him and he clutched at the paper bag for dear life.

Eric rolled his eyes. How were they ever going to resolve things if Butters couldn't look at him without having a panic attack?

"Listen, Butters, I know this is crazy and unexpected but… you need to calm down, alright?" Eric said, he hoped he sounded authoritative yet mildly comforting. "If you want answers you have to calm down and let me talk to you."

Butters had sat rigidly as Eric talked, and his breathing became lighter and more considerate… though still confined to the bag.

"Okay?" Eric asked, trying to meet Butters' eyes. "Will you do that for me?"

Giving Eric one last quiet, questioning look, Butters nodded and slowly removed the paper bag from his mouth. His fingers curled around the coarse paper and its crunch was uncomfortable to both their ears.

"Good," Eric breathed, before fidgeting and offering Butters a tight, grateful smile.

Butters blinked and the smile was shyly returned.

Eric's shoulders slouched.

Better.

"Are you sure you should drive?" Eric asked, shoulders now hunched and hands in his pockets as he followed Butters across the parking lot.

"What?" Butters turned around, Eric's concern causing his typically breezy stride to lag. "Oh yeah, totally. I feel fine now."

Before Eric could question Butters further, his chipper friend was strolling across the tarmac once more and Eric was left to trail behind him.

Butters reached into the pocket of his khaki shorts and pulled out his car keys. The doors opened with two cheerful beeps and Butters walked around to the driver's side.

"Hop in!" He grinned, and Eric reluctantly obeyed.

The heat was even more stifling in the car, oppressing conversation that the air-con struggled to liberate. But with so many questions in need of answering, so many thoughts and regrets and half-truths stewed in deathly silent time, perhaps it wasn't just the temperature weighing down on the car.
Like a popped cork, once Eric and Butters started to talk about what happened up on that mountain there would be no return, the topic ceaseless and well-trodden. Maybe the subject should be broached when they weren't speeding down a scenic highway?

But Eric couldn't take the silence anymore, making him question why he even came here in the first place.

*You know why you came here. Just start small.*

"So… a dentist, huh?"

Butters took his gaze momentarily off the road, before he nodded. "Yep, trained right here in Hawaii."

Butters drummed his fingers contemplatively on the steering wheel and continued: "I was planning on moving back home actually. Not *home* home but Colorado, you know? Boulder, or Denver, or something. But this place… I don't know, it feels like home to me. When I stepped off the plane the first time and breathed everything in, I didn't feel scared. I felt welcome. And antsy. I just wanted to study and surf - which I get to do every weekend now I live so close to the beach – and have a good time. It's funny, because when I told my parents how great it was over here – they thought I wouldn't last a month. Think they had money riding on it…" Butters stared at the road as he spoke, and Eric watched his Adam's apple bob in his throat. "Not that they didn't believe in me, they were just concerned is all. But, hey, that's parents for ya! What was I saying? Oh, right! I told my parents how much I liked it here and they said they used to go vacationing in Hawaii a lot, and I was actually conceived here. Can you believe it? It never occurred to them to even tell me beforehand!"

"Seems like a nice place to live," Eric commented, glancing out the window at the crisp colours of the sea and the greenery. Idyllic and peaceful and splendid.

He was glad that Butters' sunny disposition had found its home here, and hoped that the more nervous, subjugated part of Butters was soothed by the sand between his toes and the waves forever crashing not too far away in his ears.

Eric was convinced that very few things in life were perfect. In fact, he was chastised for believing the opposite, but there was just the right amount of kismet and alignment for Butters' circumstance to be so. Even his profession as a dentist seemed fitting, Eric was only now noticing how straight and pearly Butters' teeth were.

"After I graduated I was pretty sure I wanted to stay here," Butters continued. "Set up my dental practice. But I always had this sure feeling that I would move back one day," he smiled. "Then I met Bradley…"

"Oh, right, your husband," Eric said, his growing comfort momentarily suspending his common sense.

"Yeah…" Butters said slowly, shifting in his seat. "H-h-how do you know that?"

"I have a file on you," Eric replied, as if he were inebriated, slow to distinguish Butters' informational gaps.

The knitted brows, rigid shoulders and widened eyes finally dawned on Eric, making everything click.

"I mean, I don't personally but I was just able to obtain your records," Eric added, flustered.
"What kind of records?"

"I don't know!" Eric snapped, then huffed. "Birth certificates, degrees, marriage licenses, all that stuff…"

Butters gulped, focused on the road and his wrists were too slender for Eric to not notice their quivering.

"Butters, relax. I'm not going to do anything with the information," Eric said, careful not to sound too on edge or affronted. "Hell, I don't even own your file I just looked it up. You don't have to worry about me stealing it or selling it. Besides, that's…" Eric stared down at his lap, shame prickling towards the person Butters remembered him as. "That's now who I am anymore, it's not who I want to be."

He noticed Butters nodding in the corner of his eye, shoulders slouched.

"For what it's worth, I never thought you were bad, Eric…"

Eric blinked, lifted his head and looked at Butters. Sincere and trusting. The traits he would have found both cloying and exploitable in Butters before. But he was grateful for them now. His smile was tight.

"I appreciate it, Butters but I was," Eric replied, done with excuses. "You know I was. We don't have to pretend anymore."

"No, I meant…" Butters paused, and Eric watched him search for his words. "You did bad things and you hurt people but… that was only one part of you," Butters turned to Eric with a forgiving smile. "You weren't totally… rotten. I never believed you were."

Eric mirrored that smile. He may have bene done with excuses, knew he couldn't make them for himself anymore, but a little slack never hurt anybody, right? And if Butters held that belief in him, then who was he to crush it?

"Thanks, Butters,"

"You're welcome," Butters' smile creased.

"It means a lot,"

"I'm glad."

For once, the heat didn't feel so bothersome. It felt comforting, and Eric let his cheek face the sun.

"This Bradley guy… is he nice?"

Butters bit his lip.

"Yes," he said, nodding vigorously before sighing in contentment. "He's the kindest, sweetest, most thoughtful and honest guy I've ever met."

"Wow," Eric said softly, needing to avert his gaze because Butters' happiness was a too painful reminder of a not-so-distant time. "Sounds like you've hit the jackpot."

"Definitely," Butters agreed. "I love him more than anything."

Eric looked at Butters, braved his enamoured glare and knew it was too rare and special to throw
"Butters, this probably goes without saying but... don't let him go, okay?" Eric said seriously.

And Butters' smile wilted when he saw Eric was being genuine. But he was confident in his love for Bradley, Eric could tell, he needn't worry.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Butters replied.

Eric nodded, before asking, "Did you, uh, tell him about what happened?"

"With what?"

"With us?" Eric arched an eyebrow. He could feel his heart rate elevating as he broached the subject; let those formidable two words fall from his lips: "The avalanche?"

"Oh..." Butters whispered, gaze flitting from the road to Eric. His grip tightened on the steering wheel and he answered, "No, no, I haven't. I've kept it to myself for the most part."

"The most part?"

"Well, I told Kenny," Butters added, obviously ruffled. He said quieter, "I told Kyle..."

"Oh..." Eric nodded at the information he already knew. "Okay..."

Bloated silence descended on the car, collapsing their otherwise successful conversation like... well, an avalanche.

"But does Bradley know who I am at all?" Eric asked.

"Yeah," Butters replied. "He knows that I had a friend who went missing."

Eric sighed. "Listen, Butters, I don't want to intrude on your life, okay? I just need to talk to you about a couple things and then I'll leave. You shouldn't have to lie to Bradley and I'm not expecting you to."

Butters was quiet when he said, "he doesn't come home from work for a couple hours, anyway."

"That should be plenty of time," Eric tried to say as confidently as he possibly could. But he had no idea.

Butters smiled at the reassurance (still not entirely convinced Eric was sure), as they kept driving into the Hawaiian afternoon.

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Slowing down as they drove through the beachside suburbs, Eric couldn't help but feel that they had made a wrong turn when Butters' car coolly crept up the wide driveway... that accompanied a large house on the right side of charming. Its maroon paintjob, dark brown shutters, and quaint porch contrasted with the acidic hues of the tropical plants, and it was as carefully and delectably shrouded as a candy house in the woods.

Eric was no expert on real estate, but the spacious house appeared a waste on two people, and – no offence to the happy couple – seemed way out of the price range a dentist could afford.

"Woah!"
"What?" Butters asked as they both got out of the car.

"This is your house?!" Eric exclaimed. "You guys must be loaded!"

Butters chuckled sheepishly and shook his head. "Not really. To be honest, we got lucky with this one. It was really cheap because it needed major renovations. But Bradley's high school best friend has his own building company so we got one heck of a deal."

The hallway was painted a demure eggshell and led into the open-plan living room; Eric could see the ocean from the front door. The sound of an excited pitter-patter drifted into his ears and was eventually paired with a panting, chocolate-coloured dachshund.

"Hey, Blue!" Butters grinned, kneeling down to pet the dog.

Eric stiffened beside him, hoping Butters would be able to entertain the dog for a while on his own.

"Eric, this is Bluebell," Butters said, standing upright while Bluebell's tail continued to wag. "Say hi to Eric, Bluebell!"

Bluebell turned to Eric then, vying for his attention with her loud yap, and her trimmed claws tugged at his pants.

"Cute, ain't she?" Butters asked, when Eric had admitted defeat and petted Bluebell.

"Yeah, sure…" he muttered, tentatively patting the little dog's skull. Trimmed though her claws may be, her teeth were still remarkably sharp. Eric didn't want to have to get a tetanus shot.

Bluebell barked unexpectedly and Eric snatched his hand away with a jolt he tried to conceal.

"Hey, calm down, missy!" Butters scolded, but it was flimsy. "Someone's a little over excited!"

Bluebell ran off, oblivious.

Butters sighed before saying, "now that we have some privacy I was thinking we could talk about… you know…"

Eric arched an eyebrow, smirking. "Where I've been?"

"Yeah, th-th-that," Butters said, half-chuckle, half relieved exhale. He glanced down the hall and murmured, "And some other things…"

Eric nodded, not knowing what to say in the sudden seriousness, "alright."

"Do you wanna go outside?" Butters asked, hands clasped tightly in front of him and his pearly white grin was straining. "We have a lovely view of the ocean. It's quite calming. I always sit out there when I need to clear my head."

Eric responded with another nod and a tight smile. "Sure, man, totally your call."

"Alright, good," Butters said softly, wringing his hands. "Are you hungry?"

"No…"

"Thirsty? I could whip up some Chi-chis for us real quick?"

Eric furrowed his eyebrows. "What are Chi-chis?"
Butters bit his lip, possibly to stop the wickedest grin Eric had ever seen on him from spreading across his face.

In the humid garden Eric filled Butters in on those missing years (the AAA, the time transporter, his deal, saving Kyle and falling in love with him), and Butters processed the information with a slackened jaw and widened eyes.

By the time Eric was finished, his heart was racing with exhilaration and his mouth dry from all the information that had passed his lips. His melting Chi Chi was untouched and although he usually avoided alcohol, he was parched and the drink was tempting.

Taking a sip of the cool cocktail, Eric observed Butters as he reeled from the news (his glass was nearly empty; just ice cube slush and excess cream).

Butters finally blinked and exhaled silently. Eric waited.

"So you've been living in the future all this time?" he finally asked.

Eric nodded.

"Five hundred years in the future? Where time travel is possible?"

"Yes…"

"A dystopian future that's under an evil otter regime?"

Eric paused, fiddled with his straw before nodding again. "Yep," he took a sip. "Told you it was hard to believe."

"Sure is," Butters replied. A wry smile flickered on his face before he furrowed his eyebrows. "But I thought otters were supposed to be nice? They're nice at the zoo."

"Well, they haven't gained intelligence yet. On a level equivalent to humans at least." Eric explained. "But they will and it isn't going to be pretty."

"Hope I don't live to see it," Butters replied, staring out into the horizon where the water met the clouds.

"I think we've got a couple hundred years of relative peace," Eric assured.

Butters returned his attention to Eric when he asked, "And you and Kyle?"

"That's right," Eric replied sheepishly.

Butters' eyebrows quirked and he smiled to himself.

Eric couldn't help but notice the lack of reaction. He furrowed his eyebrows and commented, "You don't look so surprised about that."

Butters shook his head. "I'm not…"

And Eric blinked. "Really?"

Butters' smile turned coy and he shifted in the patio chair.
"No, I always knew you meant a lot to each other," he explained. "Even when we were kids. You used to talk about him all the time, and he was just as fixated as you were. It makes sense that you would go back to see him when you had the chance, and I'm glad you did. He... he missed you so much, Eric."

The weight of Butters' voice, the truth in his eyes, and realising how obvious and fated he and Kyle were forced a lump into Eric's throat. Even mentioning Kyle made him bristle, awakened thoughts and emotions within him that he had tried to put to rest.

"Yeah, we- we talked about that a little," Eric managed to reply.

"I mean, he was distraught, Eric," Butters continued. "When I told him about the avalanche it devastated him. I... I felt pretty bad about that for a long time. I could see him breaking when I told him, I could see his heart breaking..."

Butters bowed his head, a lump in his throat to match Eric's, and Eric remembered what he came here to do. He remembered what he wanted Butters to have, to know.

"He forgives you," Eric said, and he smiled when Butters raised his head, eyes wet. "You don't have to worry about that anymore."

Butters sniffed, his smile crumpled but beaming with relief and gratitude.

"I invited him to the wedding – it was my way of extending an olive branch. And he accepted, so I took that as a good sign. But..."

"But what?"

"There was another guy with him. Did you know that?"

Eric winced, his good mood soured despite the acceptance he had given Kyle the last time they were together.

"Was his name Neil?" he asked.

Head bowed like a misbehaved puppy, Butters nodded.

"Yeah, I know about them," Eric sighed. "To my knowledge, they're engaged."

"Invitation came in the mail a couple weeks ago."

Eric nodded, mouth drawn tight and he swirled the cocktail with his straw. An idealistic part of himself entertained the thought of Kyle not going through with the wedding, deciding that he didn't love Neil enough, deciding that he was willing to wait as long as it took for Eric. All Eric needed to do was show up. And the fantasy was harmless, until the stupidly optimistic part of himself started to believe it.

He wasn't too disappointed. He could handle the localised sting. Thankfully, he was still mature enough to realise that Kyle loving and marrying this man didn't diminish his feelings for him, it was just something he needed to do. Like Eric needed to save Kyle, Kyle needed love and security and companionship.

Eric would've given him that and the world if he could, plucked every star from the sky one by one.

"But what does that mean for you two?" Butters asked.
For the first time today, Eric couldn't give him a definite answer.

"I don't know…" Eric sighed, before delving into that optimistic part of himself, no matter how ridiculous and naïve, because it was also determined. "I want to make it work and I have a plan. But I'm unsure if I can count on Kyle. I mean, I love him and I'd trust him with anything – even if he's engaged to another guy – and I know he loves me. But if he's already happy why would he give that up? He cares about Neil, why would he want to break his heart?"

"Because he loves you," Butters smiled, leaning forward with shining, imploring eyes. "He's always loved you and you two have been through so much together."

"I'd like to think so," Eric responded, Butters' smile refracting subtly on his face. "Kyle said we need some space and – as usual – he's right. I just need time to think it all through."

"Well, I hope it does you good."

Eric's smile turned appreciative, before he added. "Kyle also told me that I needed to think about the other people in my life. The people who I left behind…"

"And that's why you're here, isn't it?" Butters asked with a wince.

"Yeah. I told you I only have a handful of visits left, so I had to pick carefully. Since Kyle and I are trying to give each other space, I didn't want to visit Stan," Eric chuckled, then rolled his eyes. "Kenny's probably halfway around the world on a tour bus, and then I realised that the person I had the most to say to was you."

Butters blinked, eyes widening once more. "Me?"

"You've had Kyle's forgiveness, so I think it's about time you have mine," Eric replied. "Butters, I don't hold anything against you. It was my stupid plan and it was wrong of me to put you into that situation. And after the avalanche hit… there was nothing you could've done. None of this was ever your fault."

Butters listened, his face was placid and his eyes were growing glassy.

"Thank you," he said softly.

"No problem," Eric smiled.

"You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear you say that, or how relieved I feel," Butters added, but Eric felt he had a pretty good idea when a grin stretched across Butters' face.

"You're welcome."

Although Eric was giving Kyle his space, although this visit wasn't supposed to be about him, he couldn't stop thinking about Kyle and Neil being here. Nor could he stop thinking about Kyle's wedding invitation probably sitting on a table in Butters' house.

"Neil was at the wedding with Kyle, huh?" he asked.

Butters nodded.

"Kyle, did he-" Eric fidgeted, trying to withhold another lump in his throat, or any other telling sign of emotion. "Did he look happy?"

"He did," Butters smiled. "I don't see him often, but before we graduated high school he was
miserable. At the wedding he was smiling and laughing and dancing, it was nice to see."

"Dancing?" Eric asked, surprise quickly sank into jealousy. "Neil got him to dance?"

"Yep," Butters grinned. "You can tell he really adores Kyle."

Kyle never danced. It hadn't bothered Eric before, but knowing that Kyle was willing to dance and that he had done so with another, made Eric mourn any opportunity he and Kyle could have had.

He could think of nothing better than holding Kyle close, his head resting in his much-missed curls and slowly swaying to gentle music. In the ski resort hotel room, with the universe revolving around them.

"I'm glad," Eric whispered.

"You are?"

"A little," Eric shrugged, uneasy. "I can't pretend it doesn't hurt when I hear about him with someone else. But all Kyle's ever wanted is to be happy, and now he's got that. And so I'm glad."

Butters chuckled and shook his head. "No, all he's ever wanted is you."

Eric gulped and his eyes stung. Maybe that had once been true, when Kyle thought Eric was enough. But he wasn't anymore, his engagement to Neil proved that he wasn't.

"Happiness and Neil is great, and I'm sure Kyle is content with that," Butters added. "But it's always been you, Eric."

Eric finished his cocktail and watched the sun melt into the sea with Butters before deciding he should go. When he stood up from the patio chair he was surprised by Butters' sudden, parting embrace but he tentatively reciprocated. And when he felt the pressure of a lifetime of guilt and blame being relieved from his friend, Eric didn't mind the hug much at all.

Like Kyle was the first time, Butters was eager to see what the time tether could do, what time travel actually looked like. Eric told Butters to stand back, and Butters watched him calmly fiddle with the time tether, wide-eyed and disbelieving.

The last thing Eric registered before brief unconsciousness and groggy inertia was the utter surprise on Butters' face, the gasp spilling from his mouth. It was a hiccupping memory, before Eric's eyes flew open and he was catapulted into the future again. Or the present. Eric found them hard to distinguish.

"Hey," Leck smiled, despite it being daybreak. "How was your visit?"

"Great, actually," Eric replied, after a couple of seconds of blinking and readjusting to his equilibrium. "I think everything is cleared up with my friend, and he's doing well for himself. He has this great house, and a guy who loves him… and a dog. That's gotta be the whole package, right?"

Leck chuckled and shrugged. "Probably."

Eric offered a genial smile and went to make his exit, but something nagged at him.

In his lonely adolescence Eric was used to solving his own problems, being his own counsel (despite his interactions with a very different kind) and support network. To his credit, Eric managed, even if time was a frustrating, arduous and bittersweet healer.
All his problems had been solvable with just his own judgement, but he couldn't make sense of this particular dilemma. And he needed to, desperately.

_Desperate being the operative word._

"Leck?" He asked, trying his hardest not to squirm.

"Yeah?"

"Can I…" Eric stopped and sighed, stubbornness gagging him. "I'm not used to doing this but… can I ask for your advice on something?"

Leck looked up from the control panel with furrowed eyebrows, and Eric quickly added, "It's about the time transporter."

"Oh," Leck nodded. "Sure, okay. What is it? Are you struggling with the design?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Eric replied, taking a couple of steps towards Leck. "I just don't know what to do with it."

Leck looked even more puzzled. "I thought you wanted to go back? Be with Kyle? That was the plan, right?"

"Yeah, and I still want to do that," Eric answered, frustration already seeping through and he hated it. "But I always thought that when I went back I would go back to the time before I froze myself. So I could be with Kyle for longer, so he would never have suffered, and I could do everything all over again but differently. I could just wipe the slate clean."

Eric looked to the floor, machines softly thrumming in the silence between two acquaintances, partners.

Eric continued. "But talking to Butters-"

"Who?"

"My friend in Hawaii," Eric clarified. "Anyway, he told me that Kyle is really happy with his fiancé. I know Kyle told me he was but I guess I didn't want to believe it then. But now that Butters has said the same thing I have to accept it. And going through with my original plan… It would be selfish, wouldn't it? Yeah, it hurt Kyle when I was gone but he came out on the other side better. And what about Neil and his future? His happiness?"

"But if you went through with your original plan you could be happy too," Leck pointed out, his optimism and sincerity mirroring that of Butters'. "You and Kyle would be together in the way you always wanted. You could give each other that chance."

Eric sighed and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I know but what about Neil, huh? And what if they have a family? It would be wrong of me to take all of that away from Kyle and Neil and any kids they may have, even if technically they would be none the wiser."

"So what does that mean for you?" Leck asked. "For the plan?"

"I'm not sure," Eric murmured, before shaking his head and chuckling. "Science, it was easier being a self-serving little shit."

Leck snickered, with nothing more to say on the matter. It was all on Eric now.
"I'm going to look through Kyle's file again," he decided. "Maybe that will provide some clarity."

Leck smiled in agreement, and Eric was walking away when the scientist said, "And you still have three more visits left, remember?"


When he reached his room Eric didn't catch up on his sleep. He leafed through Kyle's file instead, too obsessive to put slumber before his problems. He scoured Kyle's file manically at first, as if buried beneath the pieces of Kyle's life was the answer he was searching for; the shining solution hidden in abstract clues.

After a couple of hours, when Eric's energy had dissipated and that initial surge of motivation had dulled, he instead perused Kyle's file like they were a stack of postcards from a beloved life he had so enjoyed visiting, being a part of. Even though there was no record of him just yet.

Eric discovered that Kyle and Neil did indeed have a family. They adopted a three year old girl named Paige, and Eric could only imagine how loved she was, how proud and beaming of a parent Kyle had been.

Too soon there was a death certificate, and Eric's pounding heart was deafening. Anger and injustice was the white hot centre to his panic, and he couldn't believe that this was happening again. He even felt nauseated, just like last time.

But he noticed something. A small stamp in the corner of the document that suggested that it was copied, and didn't belong to Kyle.

Taking a closer look, Eric realised it belonged to Neil.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

I apologise in advance for a very depressing chapter...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The view of New York from the Empire State Building Kyle had seen a dozen times in his cousin's childhood postcards. But they couldn't compare to the real thing, couldn't replicate the pleasant New York spring and the busy hum of tourists.

Ike had moved to the city twelve years ago and though Kyle had visited him before (Neil and Paige in tow in subsequent visits), and was taken to nearly all of the attractions and landmarks, there was one he had shied away from. And that was the Empire State Building.

It wasn't a fear of heights that kept him away, but a different kind of vertigo. The memory of him and Eric in one of the pods of the London Eye, the Thames below them and the vast city ahead. Kyle had expressed a desire to travel, and to not be alone in doing so, and Eric assured him that he would've made Kyle's wish come true if he could.

Eric had promised him adventure and companionship, and even though Kyle had had his fair share of the former, and achieved the latter with Neil, he still found himself wondering whether Eric would keep that promise. Kyle had Eric's blessing in the hotel room a decade earlier, but he didn't have an answer. Just like before, he was oblivious to Eric's plan. As a child, he would've found out Eric's schemes and worked tirelessly to prevent them. Now he wanted in for various reasons and yet Eric was keeping him in the dark.

Rather, in the past.

Going to the top of the landmark Kyle had previously revealed to Eric he would love to visit (hopefully with Eric by his side, embarking on those adventures Eric so clearly wanted to have with him), was bittersweet and nerve-wracking. Luckily, he was accompanied by Neil and Paige (Ike having to report to his big, grown-up job. Kyle still felt a surge of pride and amusement seeing his little brother wearing a suit, briefcase in hand), and when Kyle shakily stepped into the elevator he was relieved to find Neil's hand slipping into his own.

"... And look right over there, you can see New Jersey!" Kyle pointed out to Paige, hoisting her up so she could clearly see. "Grandma and grandpa lived there once!"

Paige stared, fascinated. "Can we go there?"

"Yeah, maybe we will someday," Kyle smiled.

"We'll take you anywhere you want to go, sweetie," Neil added.

"I want to go to space," Paige said seriously, taking her dad's invincible word. "Mars or Saturn… or
she fidgeted excitedly. "Like the astronauts did!"

Neil chuckled. "We'd have to give NASA a call first."

Kyle smirked at his husband before saying to Paige, "But maybe you'll go up there all alone someday, if you became an astronaut."

"Yeah, I wanna be an astronaut!" She grinned, and abandoned the spectacular view to look at Kyle. "Do you think I could do it, dad?"

Kyle smirked, in a world where time travel was possible and someday otters could talk then not a whole lot seemed impossible.

"Definitely," he replied, with a more confident smile.

Paige's eyes glittered as she stared out at the city and Kyle noticed Neil smiling at him proudly, contently. Kyle wondered what he was so scared of when he had two people who made him so happy.

"Come on," Kyle said, trying to disguise the sudden lump in his throat. "I want to take a picture of you two."

Setting Paige down, Kyle reached into his pants pocket and retrieved his phone. Neil and Paige had huddled together, waiting expectantly. In the crowded observatory, everyone was clustered, careful not to lose one another and Kyle stepped back to get a clearer picture.

"How does it look, dad?" Paige asked, once the photo was taken.

Kyle sighed as he stared at the photo before showing it to Neil and Paige.

"Perfect," he replied.

A week back home and Kyle quickly regressed into his routine. Paige was excited to see her friends again, to brag about her trip, and Kyle was just glad to be back in their family home. It was more than an apartment to him. It represented a stability he had strove for – yearned for – all his life. Even if the figures in the dream kept changing, even if they were blurred and worryingly hard to reach sometimes, he had finally achieved it.

His first graders had been happy to see him, and while he was away they had made New York inspired artwork with their substitute teacher: skyscrapers made of macaroni; fluffy, wispy crayon imaginings of the trees in Central Park. Before Kyle had even done roll call he was bombarded with questions about his vacation, which he gladly answered.

Lunch was approaching and Kyle was looking forward to catching up with Tracy on any gossip or news she had for him (most of their morning conversation was concerned with Kyle's recent trip).

His phone buzzed softly in his pocket, and although he never took calls during class he couldn't help but check who it was that needed to speak to him. It was usually Neil, his parents, or Stan calling from a different time zone.

This time it was a number he didn't recognise, and he was too curious and (admittedly) worried to let it go to voicemail.

Telling the kids he would be back in a minute, he went out into the hallway to answer the call.
"Hello?"

"Hello, Kyle Broflovski?" A polite female voice replied. "I'm calling from Porter Adventist hospital. We have you listed as the emergency contact for Neil Bailey?"

Anxiety was already flooding Kyle, engulfing him faster than a rickety ship in stormy waters.

"Um, yes, what's happened?" He mangled to ask, wanting to plead with the woman to tell him everything she knew. "Is Neil okay?"

An uncomfortable pause.

"He had a heart attack in work. He's in a critical condition-"

"I'll be there right away, thank you," Kyle interrupted, before hanging up.

After all, he couldn't speak, couldn't bear to listen. He was struggling to breathe too, drowning. The only reason he didn't sink to his knees and sob, or crash against the wall and hyperventilate was because Neil needed him.

That smooth, sturdy foundation that Kyle had wanted and worked so hard for was starting to split. Kyle could visualise it, could see himself fighting to put the pieces together. Although in his mind he was on one side of the chasm and Neil was on the other.

It was too late.

By the time Kyle arrived at the hospital it was too late.

"We'll do whatever we can for you, alright, bubbe?" Kyle's mom assured with wet eyes and a creased, comforting smile. "And you and Paige can stay here as long as you need."

"Thanks," Kyle replied, voice hoarse from crying. He was exhausted. "But… I'd rather go back to the apartment as soon as possible. It's Paige's home, I can't hide from it forever."

His parents exchanged glances from across the table and his dad piped up. "If you're sure-"

"I am," Kyle nodded, still listless. "It's the right thing to do."

Apparently, Neil had slipped away minutes before Kyle made it to the hospital. And when Kyle's life had been an exercise in waiting, in losing, in temporality, and the importance of being in the right place, at the right moment, Kyle missing Neil in such a way only intensified the devastation.

He was unconscious anyway, a kind, newly-qualified nurse had tried to console Kyle, he wouldn't have been able to speak to him.

Their last conversation had been before Kyle left for work. It was mundane, something about dinner. But they had kissed goodbye before Kyle walked out the door and reminded themselves that they loved each other. Simple, unremarkable, but that was the beauty of it. It was a peaceful memory, not blighted by foresight.

As well-meaning as that nurse had been; as grateful as Kyle was that she was compassionate enough to take time out of her schedule to comfort a grieving husband, who had been wandering around the hospital corridor aimlessly and holding back sobs; Kyle couldn't help but regard her assurances with cynicism. He had wanted to ask her if she was married, if she was in a committed relationship, or if
she had ever lost anyone close to her. He had wanted to ask her if she knew how it felt to think that somebody you love so dearly was alone when they passed away? How much it hurt to know that you couldn't be there for them? And that you'll never have the chance to see them again, let alone apologise for that?

But Kyle hadn't wanted to be bitter, or unforgiving. He supposed they were both new at this.

After the nurse had excused herself, and said sorry once again for Kyle's loss he went into the restroom and sobbed. Distraught, angry, terrified sobs. Only stopping when he remembered Paige, and his heart had broken even further then.

He hadn't been able to bear the thought of taking Paige back to the apartment (where Neil's absence would've been felt immensely), and so called his mom and asked if she would be able to drive into Denver and pick her up from school, and if it was okay if he and Paige stayed at their house for a night. In doing so, Kyle had to utter the words he had never imagined himself saying, couldn't force off his tongue without crying again.

His mother of course agreed, stumbling over her words and begging Kyle to come home as soon as he possibly could.

Kyle then had to call the school and inform them of what happened, why he wouldn't be back for the end of the day. It was unfathomable that the world, Kyle's life, was continuing without him when it seemed to have stopped when he received the horrible news.

He had spent two hours in the hospital cafeteria, willing himself to stop shaking so he could drive home. As he sat and waited, he thought of Paige, her reaction and how he had somehow let her down by denying her the happiness she deserved; he of course thought of Neil, all the things Kyle would have to learn to live without, how hollow his very existence felt now Neil was no longer a tangible part of it, how he hoped Neil knew (no matter how unresponsive he was) how much Kyle loved him in his final moments, and how Kyle would have to break the news to Neil's parents when he got home.

But he also thought of Eric. Guiltily as well as longingly, and he hated how inappropriate the timing was. He thought of how safe he had always felt in Eric's arms, how much he needed his embrace and missed it. With Neil gone, Kyle started to wonder if this meant Eric wasn't coming back either. It had been so long, and Kyle was still so unsure, and now he was alone again.

But at least he had Paige. She was the most important person now, and it was Kyle's duty to protect her. He owed it to Neil. Kyle didn't want to be saved (by Eric, or Neil or anyone), he wanted to look out for his little girl.

"Oh, Kyle…" His mom said softly, reaching for his hand. "You're always so sure, sweetheart."

Through the teary haze, Kyle found it in himself to chuckle ruefully. "$I don't know about that," he swiped at his wet cheek. "Nothing makes sense right now, without him..." He dropped his head and exhaled shakily, eyes burning again. "God, how am I going to tell Paige? How can I organise everything that needs to be done when I can't think? When I can't the bear the thought of-"

A lump forced its way into his throat and there was nothing Kyle could do except abandon his sentence and cry.

"Hey, that's what we're here for, okay?" His dad said, and Kyle felt a comforting hand on his shoulder.
"We'll help you with everything," his mom added.

Kyle sniffed and lifted his head.

"I wish this would all go away," he despaired, before saying the words he had been too scared to say out loud, "I wish Neil was here."

Being reminded that he wasn’t, and never will be again, sent Kyle into his mother’s embrace, sobbing into her sweater.

Hadn’t he suffered enough loss in his life? Disappointment? Despair? It was overwhelming, and made him feel pathetic and drained.

"It isn’t fair…" he whispered, and his mom petted his curls.

But Kyle had one reason to keep living, to keep defying the devastation of life. Paige.

The numbness Kyle experienced upon waking the next morning wasn’t totally unpleasant. Emptiness was better than scorching, piercing emotion that wouldn’t let up. He felt like he was wading through the day, through unwanted truths and frightening reality.

Breakfast was spent in tense, stifling silence. Paige still appeared to be none the wiser, but suspicious nonetheless. Understandable, since nobody had told her anything. Kyle felt it was best for him alone to break the news to her, but didn’t know how to tell her and be comforting at the same time.

But the numbness couldn’t last forever, it was just a flimsy veil shielding excruciating loss.

When Kyle finally gathered the courage to talk to Paige, she was sitting on the bed in Ike’s childhood room. She hadn’t spoken much – nobody had – she had remained thoughtful, and placid, and as shy as when Kyle and Neil first met her.

"Hey…" Kyle said softly, standing by the door. "Did you sleep alright, sweetie?"

Paige lifted her head and nodded. "Yeah, fine, I guess."

"Good…"

Conversation usually came easily between them. Then again, Kyle considered, this was a very different and very difficult situation.

"Are we going home tonight?" Paige asked.

Kyle winced, Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. Truthfully, he couldn’t bear the thought of stepping into the apartment; surrounded by the possessions they shared as a family, sleeping on sheets that still smelled like Neil.

"If you want," he replied.

It was the easier approach. Despite the circumstance, Kyle longed for the simpler way.

"Why don’t you want to go home?"

Kyle sighed, tried to hold back tears.

"I heard you talking to grandma and grandpa last night," Paige mumbled.
"Shit. She knows already."

"You did?"

"I was sat at the top of the stairs," Paige replied. "I wanted to know what you were talking about. No one was telling me anything yesterday."

Shame prickled, disintegrating the numbness once and for all.

"We're sorry, Paige," Kyle said, unable to disguise the sorrow in his voice.

"Where's dad?" Paige asked, obviously scared but her voice was firm.

Kyle tentatively moved away from the door, and Paige watched with wide, curious eyes as he sat on the bed. He didn't even know if he could look in her eyes, if he could bear to see her heart breaking from the inside out.

"I had a phone call yesterday," he said. "It was from a hospital and they told me… Th-they told me that dad had a heart attack."

Paige's eyes were darting, as if searching for answers though the case was – regrettably – closed.

"I went to the hospital as soon as I could but by the time I got there…"

Kyle's breath hitched and he pursed his lips. He looked out the window at the familiar mountains, his hometown, not realising that the sun illuminated his upset face.

"Dad's not coming back is he?" Paige whispered

"No," Kyle replied, turning to Paige and shaking his head. He sighed, shattered. "No, he's not… I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

The apology triggered a fresh round of tears, and Kyle watched helpless as Paige ducked her head. She had never liked anyone to see her cry. So stubborn. Neil used to joke, "No surprise where she gets that from!"

Kyle was going to miss him so much.

"Why are you saying sorry?" Paige asked, voice thick. She sniffed, "It's not your fault."

Kyle smiled, tight and rueful before opening his arms. "Come here…"

Paige shuffled closer, before resting her head on Kyle's shoulder and clutching him tight when he wrapped his arms around her.

"It's okay," Kyle soothed, stroking her back as she cried. "It'll be okay…"

"How?" Paige asked. "I just want dad back."

"I want him back too," Kyle said, resting his chin on the top of her head. "But… but as long as you remember him, he's not really gone. And even if he isn't here to say it, he'll always love you and he'll always be proud of you. And so will I. Do you understand?"

Paige moved her head and looked up at Kyle, and when she did Kyle was sure to smile as reassuringly as he could. Because that was his job, what he needed to do.
Paige nodded, before her face crumpled and she buried herself in Kyle's side, continuing to cry.

Kyle kept stroking her back, and placed a kiss in her hair.

"We're going to be okay, Paige," he whispered. A promise more than a platitude.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be in Eric's POV and there will be a big time leap. I'm not going to say how far but… let's just say the end of the story is in sight. For now, I hope you enjoyed this chapter and as always, thank you so much for reading!
Nine years spent apart from Kyle, but closer to being with him than ever.

When impatience, and loneliness, and emptiness and anxiety threatened to get the better of him, that's what Eric reminded himself of. Despite being incredibly lucky that they had yet to be caught, and despite their slow but promising progress on the transporter it was easy for Eric to lose sight, to get weighed down in negative, frightened thoughts.

He often felt he was a fool to deprive himself of Kyle when he still had visits left. But he knew it was wrong to drop into Kyle's life when Kyle was living a perfectly happy, fulfilling life without him. No matter how much it hurt, seeing Kyle when he had a family to consider was not what Eric wanted. Besides, Eric's priority was the time transporter; the solution to their problems.

Still, that didn't stop him from missing Kyle. He could console himself with his new goal, his new mission. He could rely on his new sense of nobility to encourage him that he was the doing the right thing; that his martyr-like sacrifice would be worth it in the end when he would eventually wind up in Kyle's arms. But none of that could fully soothe the ache of yearning for Kyle's touch, his warmth, his presence. When Eric was scared or lost or desperate he ultimately wanted Kyle to be the one to comfort him, to offer him advice.

Although Eric was forced to become independent, if given the option he would choose Kyle's companionship and never look back.

He had made that choice a long time ago, and now he was putting it into action.

Another early morning spent in his and Leck's secret laboratory. Eric's speciality was still engineering, but collaborative hours spent with Leck had allowed Eric to glean some scientific knowledge of his own. Not enough that Eric could take on the whole project by himself, but enough that when Leck was late – like he was now – Eric could make a tentative start without him.

"Eric…"

Leck's shy voice echoed underground.

"Oh, hey, Leck," Eric replied from a control panel. He turned around to face the scientist. "What's up? Didn't you have a date tonight?"

"Y-yeah with Mia again," Leck replied, the mention of his girlfriend giddily melted his shyness. He sighed. "She's… wonderful, Eric."

"You've said," Eric murmured with a wry smile, returning to his work.

"I've never met a girl like her before," Leck continued, walking over to the control panel. "I... I actually think I could be in love with her."

Eric blinked, envy welling in his chest. Although he and Leck were the same age he felt somewhat jaded, jealous that Leck was experiencing that first incredible rush of love. Eric couldn't help but feel
that time had cheated him.

"Wow… wow, well, congratulations, man," Eric replied, brightening despite himself. "Good for you."

"Thanks," Leck said, before glancing elsewhere. "But…"

"What?"

"It got me thinking… perhaps I should re-think some things, sort out my priorities, and maybe she should be the main one, you know?"

Envy was quickly smothered by dread. A dread that Eric was suspicious of, he wanted to at least give Leck the benefit of the doubt.

"You lost me," Eric replied, careful not to stutter nervously.

Leck sighed.

"We've been lucky, Eric," he said seriously. "We've been quietly working for nine years but we're nowhere near finished yet. You know that. Everything is still risky. What if we get caught? What if all our work gets destroyed and we go to prison?"

Eric glowered. He couldn't stop himself. "You gave me your word-"

"Answer the question, Eric!" Leck snapped, clearly not appreciating Eric's sudden sulkiness. "I need to know!"

"Alright! There is a chance that could happen!" Eric answered testily. "I'm not pretending we haven't been fortunate with the project so far. But you told me that you would help me, that it was the most important thing-"

"That was nine years ago!" Leck protested. "I had nothing to lose then! Except for a job…. and Mia…" Leck couldn't stop the smile spreading across his face. Eric could tell. "She's kind and beautiful and intelligent and she adores me. I adore her too. I really think I could marry her, start a family with her."

It sounded so promising, so perfect, it sounded like everything Eric had been working to achieve. And he suddenly felt guilty and helpless and devastated and still very much cheated.

"But you said you would help me," Eric said quietly, hating how pathetic he sounded. "I can't do this alone."

Leck's blissful daydreams were suspended, regarding Eric uncomfortably.

"I know," he whispered, before he huffed and said, "come on, Eric, surely you of all people know what it's like to want to be with someone so badly."

Eric lifted his eyes to the transporter. It was unfinished yes, but it was becoming something. Though he still feared it would end up becoming nothing.

"I do. That's what this is all for," he replied. "But whatever, Leck. It may not happen, anyway…"

Leck's eyes flashed and his brow was furrowed.

"What do you mean?" he asked.
"I've been summoned," Eric replied with a weak, wry smile. "Blavius wants to see me tomorrow."

Leck's eyes widened and he backed away gently, reaching out and clutching the control panel as he did. "What, why?"

"Didn't say," Eric replied blankly. He muttered, "He never does."

Leck gulped. "Do you think he-"

"I don't know," Eric cut Leck off, not wanting to hear out loud what he was so afraid of. "Besides, why do you care? If you were going to bail..."

Leck had the nerve to look incredulous, but before he could retort he must've decided to just give Eric what he wanted.

He stormed out, leaving Eric to dwell on their fight and stew in remorse. Eyes fixed on the incomplete transporter he had never felt so alone.

Eric had learned how to hold his own when it came to Blavius II, (and his father). Even when their topics of conversation became uncomfortably personal, when the matters they discussed were deeply crucial.

But as Eric walked down the long corridor leading to Blavius II's office (the abundant sunlight flowing through the windows reminded Eric – ironically – of church), his palms couldn't help but shake, sting with sweat. He couldn't stop his stomach from tangling in knots, or stop his thoughts from blaring with the worst case scenario.

They know what you've been up to this whole time.

They'll destroy the time transporter.

Arrest you and Leck.

And you'll never see Kyle again.

Eric gulped and willed the thoughts, the sudden hot tears in his eyes away. Once he reached the door to Blavius II's office he took a deep, bracing breath, fixing the most innocuous of expressions on his face.

He pressed the button to signal he was outside waiting, and the doors slid open with an obnoxious buzz.

"Time Child!" Blavius II exclaimed as Eric entered the room.

Any residual fear and anxiety he felt was washed away by – preferable, but still unsettling – confusion at how Blavius II greeted him.

"Although I suppose calling you that is no longer appropriate…” Blavius II added with a thin chuckle.

It hasn't been appropriate for a while now.

Eric managed an uneasy smile as Blavius II got up from his chair slowly, stiffly. He grabbed a walking stick and hobbled, his pitch black eyes were drooping and dull, his skeleton weary under a thick coat of white fur. Eric shoved his hands in his pockets and his awkward smile persisted.
"What should I call you instead?"

Eric arched an eyebrow. "Eric, sir?"

The president nodded.

"Ah yes," he said, "Well, take a seat, Eric."

Still very much confused, Eric sat on one of the round floating in chairs in front of Blavius II's desk. He removed his hands from his pockets and instead clasped them between his legs. He didn't want them to start shaking if the conversation grew intense, though Eric couldn't see anything intense about Blavius II.

"Now… I know what Ubaleh is saying. It is something I've discussed with the council on numerous occasions." Blavius II began, shuffling over to his own grand chair. Once he had sat down, he sighed, "I'm old, Eric. And frail. My health is declining."

"Oh…" Eric whispered, a crease in his brow. He shifted in his chair. "Oh, sir, I'm sorry to hear that."

Blavius II swatted his paw and the chair reclined with a faint squeak.

He replied testily, "I didn't ask you here because I want your sympathy Time Chi- Eric… No, I called you here to talk about something else."

"What?" Eric asked, not caring for this long-winded exchange.

"Succession," the president replied, a sudden, wicked glint in his eyes. "Although I have lived a great life, a long life, I am without a wife, without children. The AAA and Ubaleh have been my sources of pride and contentment. Some may say it was reckless to neglect my lineage but at least this way I can carefully select who will carry on my great work, who will take care of this party. Someone I can trust…"

The crease in Eric's brow grew deeper.

"And who would that be?" he asked.

Blavius II smiled beneath his long, silvery whiskers.

"You…"

"Me?" Eric balked.

"Yes, you!" Blavius II exclaimed, laughing as his eyes grew shinier. "Eric Cartman! The Time Child!"

Eric shook his head. "Sir, I don't understand. I'm a human."

"And?"

Eric would've scoffed if he didn't have so much to lose, no matter how lucky and clever he had been he would always have to be in the AAA's good books. But how could Blavius II be so nonchalant about the possibility of a human leader of the party when for so long the AAA had hated humans? Had tried to push them out of the society? Strip their rights away? Blavius II and his father before him had made it clear that humans weren't to be trusted. So what had changed?

"It's just I thought you would've chosen a member of the council," Eric replied. "An otter."
"Eric, the members of the council are nearly as old as me," Blavius II explained. "They're unreliable and it would be an irresponsible decision."

*I'm sure the council would feel the same way having to take orders from me. No matter how undeniably satisfying it would be to boss those bastards around.*

Eric stuttered. "B-b-but… we…"

"I know we've had your conflicts in the past but… I've always had respect for you," Blavius II admitted. Eric couldn't hide the surprise spilling onto his face. "So did my father. After all, without your help Ubaleh wouldn't have been such an easy city to take. You were a great help in establishing the educational program for your fellow humans too."

Eric processed the information warily, eyes hard and fixed on the aging president, their relationship had been built on deals and deception and a warped dependency even before Blavius II was even born. It was difficult to come to terms with how much older than Blavius II Eric was; otters and their shorter life span and all…

"You're intelligent, Eric," Blavius II continued, with a smile oozing with flattery. "You're ambitious and you're young. You will have plenty of time to look after this city, oversee the council and perhaps marry a nice young woman and continue the line of great leaders yourself, start your own dynasty. After all, you appear to be over your infatuation with that Kyle boy, aren't you?"

Eric felt a mixture of twisted amusement and stewed resentment bubbling up inside him. It was hard not to burst out in sardonic laughter.

"Yes, sir," he was able to reply.

"You're welcome, by the way," Blavius II continued, once again reaching for his walking stick and clumsily making his way over to the large window overlooking the city. "Yes, we held up our end of the deal on your twenty-first birthday but you appeared to be pacified after that. Our endurance test obviously made you realise what a mistake it was to keep pining for him, to want something more when you were inevitably going to wind up disappointed."

Eric ground his teeth, not knowing whether to feel smug pity for Blavius II since his and the council's scheme had so obviously failed, or lose himself in that initial haze of anger he had felt as soon as that oversized furball mentioned Kyle.

Blavius II sighed. "But you understood, and you grew up into a fine young man."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome. Bottom line is, I trust you to keep the AAA afloat…"

Blavius II turned to him, and for the first time Eric saw sincerity.

"We need you Time Child," the president said. "Just like we always have."

*Pricks. I'll give them what they want, not that it would be for the long term.*

Eric nodded, the most genuine smile he could muster on his face.

"I won't let you down," he replied.

Blavius II returned the smile and shuffled towards him.
"You'll attend the next council meeting," Blavius II said sternly. "There, I'll make the announcement that you are to be the new leader when the time comes."

Eric nodded, unsure whether the relief he felt was premature. But for now, he would enjoy it.

"Dismissed," Blavius II said with a wave of his paw.

Eric rose from the chair, only realising how tall he stood over Blavius II. It reminded him of the upper hand he surely had, how he would definitely have it when the president was dead.

"Eric, wait…" Blavius II said just before Eric could leave.

"Yes, sir?" Eric replied, turning around.

"You're an engineer now, aren't you?"

"Yes I am, sir."

"Excellent," Blavius II replied. "And are you working on anything at the moment?"

Eric bit back a smirk and answered, "Modifying the design for the AAA airships, sir."

Blavius II smiled – almost proudly – and said, "that will be all."

Eric left and waited until he reached the privacy of his own room to laugh victoriously.

That night (rather, the next morning) Eric expected to arrive at an empty lab. Following his fight with Leck, the scientist's position in the project remained ambiguous. Instead Eric was greeted by the sight of a shy – though still hostile – Leck, leaning against his desk with tightly folded arms.

"Hey…" Eric murmured, though his voice still echoed.

"Hi," Leck replied with a tight, unsure smile. He sighed and it relieved some of the uncomfortable pressure. "Eric, look, I came here to apologise… whatever it's worth. I did make a promise to you, and you're my friend so I want to help you. I was just scared that's all, scared of what I could lose."

Eric nodded, it was difficult to feel incredulous or indignant when he sympathised too well. He was scared too; he was also in love.

"Thanks, Leck, and apology accepted," Eric smiled, before running a hand through his hair and stepping forward. "But I'm sorry too. It was naïve of me to believe that we were in the clear with all this, that we'd be lucky forever," he chuckled softly and shook his head. "Shit, it was even naïve of me to expect you to put your life on hold for this project."

Leck snickered, unfolding his arms and he held onto the desk behind him, shoulders still hunched.

"But…" Eric sighed, "You don't have to worry about that anymore."

Their gentle reconciliation was clouded with fear, Leck blinked and his smile vanished.

"Wh- what do you mean?" He asked. "How did your meeting with Blavius go? What did he say?"

"Nothing about the transporter,"

Leck nearly slumped in relief. "Thank science…"
Eric didn't try concealing his smug, triumphant grin. "Instead he told me that I'm to be the next president of the AAA when he's gone."

Leck blinked again, eyes wide and gleaming.

"What? Really?" He asked. "Wow, Eric, that's um…"

"Yeah, I don't know what to think either," Eric filled in the silence. "But he made it seem like I don't have a lot of say in the matter."

"I shouldn't think so," Leck agreed. "If the AAA wants something to happen there's no stopping them from getting it."

Eric didn't try to fill the silence this time; he let it be because it was necessary and right. Despite their budding friendship, their eventual understanding, there was so much history between Eric and Leck. Inadvertent history; Eric's hasty, desperate betrayal had consequences that his ten year old self didn't realise he'd have to live with. Of course, the two didn't let it interfere much with their work, but on the rare chance it did Eric figured it was best to accept it than fight it. Although it hurt, Eric realised he had to take responsibility for his actions, no matter how much time had passed or how many excuses he could make.

"So what does this mean for the project?" Leck asked.

"That we can keep doing what we're doing and long before we've even finished it Blavius will most likely be dead," Eric replied, a smile spread across his face. "The only person we'd have to answer to is me."

"Fuck, you're right…" Leck whispered, meeting Eric's gaze with a grin. "That's fantastic!"

"And that's not all,"

"There's more?"

"Since you're still going to be here when I go back to the past, I'll make it so you can't be traced to the project," Eric replied, he was still smiling but when he looked at the machine looming over Leck, he grew serious. "This was just between us, okay? No one needs to know. No one can ever know and when I'm in charge they won't."

"Thank you, Eric," Leck smiled, the quietness of his voice didn't dull his sincerity.

"Hey, that's what friends are for, right?" Eric tried to lighten the mood. "You've helped me with my dream, so I'll help you with yours. You should be happy with Mia without having to constantly look over your shoulder."

Leck nodded, before ducking his head. But Eric had already spied the glassiness in those hazel eyes.

"Okay, well, let's get to work, huh?" Eric asked brightly, joining his friend at the control panel.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts on this most recent development? I hope you enjoyed, and as always thank you for reading!
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

A shorter chapter, but hopefully an enjoyable one. There will be a rather big time leap in the next chapter, we're so close to the end, guys. Thank you so much for reading and I hope you enjoy!

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Eric was present when Blavius II passed away. It was his duty as next in line to be there. The president's death was looming; he had confessed to Eric three years ago that he was frail, his health declining, and in the weeks leading up to his death he had been bedridden.

It gave Eric and Leck time to establish a protocol, where in the event Eric was summoned to the president's chambers (not to his office, but his chambers, which Eric considered uncomfortably personal given their history), then Leck was not to be alarmed (as he often was) but to continue their work on the transporter as much as he possibly could.

He didn't actually see Blavius II, and Eric wondered whether that was because the president was too proud to let Eric see him in such a vulnerable condition. Eric didn't blame him. He would've done the same. Well, if Blavius II already hadn't seen him heartbroken and desperate.

Not even two hours later, a sombre-looking doctor emerged from the president's chambers. His placid eyes and hung head told the members of the council – and Eric – everything: That Blavius II was dead, and that Eric was the new president of the AAA.

The group remained silent for a long time, the otters stewing in resentment and mourning. Eric, meanwhile, was too exhausted to register what the news had brought him: the weight of a responsibility he had never expected, justice from the group that had taken so much away from him, that manipulated him and blackmailed him since he was a child were now under his rule (Eric guessed the irony of the situation wasn't lost on the otters unable to meet his eyes), and victory. While his and Leck's project was better kept between them, with Eric in command there was nothing the AAA could do to him that he couldn't overrule. Science, he was the AAA.

Still, as tempting as it was, Eric was careful not to let his newfound power go to his head. Perhaps he would've years ago, but he had too much to lose now. He had to be measured, humble and, above all, shrewd.

However, it was difficult to remain modest when the last week had been nothing but ceremony. When he was being celebrated and sworn in. If the air wasn't so sinister and those who were welcoming him weren't so duplicitous and saccharine then Eric would've really fallen for their pompous show.

"Time Child!"

A voice boomed into the mingling crowd, when Eric turned around he was faced with an elderly looking otter, beaming as he walked over to him.
"Oh, hello, sir," Eric replied, no doubt about to receive his umpteenth congratulation of the day.

"I believe that's your title now,"

Eric weakly chuckled at that otter's thin attempt at a joke, the jealousy was clear.

"Congratulations on your new post!" The otter added.

"Thank you, sir,"

"But while this is a time of celebration, we mustn't forget to mourn the loss of our leader, Time Child. Wouldn't you agree?"


He couldn't help being petty.

Screw it, those fuckers deserve it.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry, Eric-"

"Eric? Don't you mean Mr President!" Another otter interrupted, quickly turning his attention to the new president. "Congratulations sir…"

"Thank you," Eric smiled at the decidedly more respectful one.

"We were just saying how bittersweet this all is," the first otter said.

"True, but we cannot dwell," the second otter replied, his attention still very much on Eric. "This city will always need great leaders."

"Well, hopefully I can fill Blavius' shoes," Eric said.

"I think so, Mr President,"

"But a new leader also means a new council!" The first otter reminded them.

"Indeed," the second otter nodded. "Have you given it any thought, sir? I know this is all very new to you but-"

"I have given it some thought, actually," Eric interjected, his voice authoritative. "I can't divulge anything right now though. I'd want to make a public announcement first, speak to the city."

Both otters regarded their new president and his response warily, their grips on that condescending mask slipping.

"Yes, yes…" the first otter replied absently.

The second otter flashed Eric a smile beneath his whiskers. "We shall look forward to it, sir!"

Eric nodded, smirking as he raised a glass of the expensive punch to his lips, smugly revelling in how he was going to make things different around here…

And none of those AAA bastards even realised it.

Just like the public trial so many years ago, the announcement Eric wanted to make was held outside
in front of thousands of people and otters – upon Eric's request. Once rumour spread that Eric was to make a public speech the council had fretted and tried to persuade him to instead make a pre-recorded announcement that they would then broadcast to the city.

Their new president – despite the AAA probably thinking so in the past – wasn't an idiot and didn't trust the otters to distort and manipulate his speech or destroy it all together if it wasn't what they wanted to hear. In fact, Eric was confident that what he had to say was the last thing they wanted to hear.

However fun it was to completely disregard the AAA's requests, Eric knew that if he were to ever be a successful leader and ultimately get what he want, then he had to compromise. But that didn't necessarily mean compromising on the larger details. Hence he agreed to have his ridiculous 'Soldier of the Truth' medal altered from when he was twelve years old so he could wear it during his much feared announcement. As if the medal were a token of his twisted loyalty, an obnoxious, sour reminder to the people he had betrayed and who were living with his consequence.

It had been twenty years since Eric's "outburst" at the public trial, and with that sea of people looking up at him again, faces tired and eyes squinting in the sun, he felt more apprehensive about his prepared speech than that improvised one that stoked so many fires.

*You've reached them once without even trying. You can do it again.*

Hands shaking as he placed them on the podium where past presidents had stood, Eric cleared his throat and began:

"Usually the matters I want to address today would be confined to the council's headquarters but… what's the point of new leadership if that leader isn't doing something different to his predecessor?" He smirked awkwardly, pushed through the discomfiting silence. "But the aim of the plan I am about to unveil isn't merely to set myself apart. It is to show that I have learned. I've learned from my time here, I've learned from observing our former president and I've learned from my mistakes, "The chief thing I've learned is that segregation, and the casting aside of voices that do not reflect your own is unjust. One of my first duties as president is to elect a new council. Blavius II and his father before him elected those who they trusted. Confidantes, old friends, otters who had their best interests at heart. But… I like a challenge, and it would be wrong of me to take all I've seen and experienced in this city and let it be in vain."

Clearing his throat once more, Eric continued. Speeches were not easy to make in the desert heat.

"I want a council that is diverse and balanced. I want to work with those who push me sometimes as well as those who, admittedly, would make my life a little easier." There was an unexpected hum of laughter, eliciting hearty encouragement. "The only way to create a future of equal opportunity and peace is to start at the very top. The only way to achieve this type of council is through a fair system, through a democratic system and outlook."

What Eric was about to say filled him with both long overdue satisfaction and inexplicable nerves. It was a tricky combination to manage, but he would have to try.

"So that is why I am completely dissolving the current council," Eric declared, the surprise of the humans and the indignity of the otters settled on the city like stifling pollen. "This is to ensure no complacency or bias. Instead, an interviewing process will be put in place, open to humans as well as otters."

Eric heard mingled gasps and murmurs below, but there was deafening silence behind him – where
the former council members sat. Not so important anymore.

"Details will be released as soon as possible, and I look forward to working with a council which will surely go down in history," Eric finished. "Thank you."

Eric felt his anxiety return tenfold when the crowd remained dormant and silent, but couldn't help but grin when they erupted into almost euphoric applause and cheers.

It was dizzying, and he longed to see Kyle's face in the crowd, vivid and beatific, and he hoped he would be proud.

"Nobody can stop talking about your speech!" Leck grinned excitedly; it was unusual for Eric to see him so animated.

"Really?" Eric looked up from his work with a half smirk. "Hopefully, I'm getting better press among the humans than I am with the otters…"

"Are you kidding? Everyone's ecstatic!" Leck continued, bubbly sorting through alienating computer code and simulations of their unfinished transporter like it was nothing. "Mia and I couldn't believe it! The guys at work couldn't believe it, my family…" Leck glanced at Eric then, smiling softly. "I never doubted for one minute that you were going to change things, be a different leader to Blavius and his father, but you've really outdone yourself, Eric."

"Thanks," Eric replied, his half-smirk stretching into a grin. "I know I said I wanted to be fair, but I honestly don't give a shit if the otters hate my guts." He then muttered, "Let them have a taste of their own medicine."

Although he had tried to play it cool, Eric was relieved that his speech went down well amongst the humans. It was a strange notion to him, seeking approval from strangers without a reward, well, except redemption. Knowing he had done the right thing. It was such a grand, startling relief and Eric was beginning to see now why Kyle had tried to drill the idea into him over the years, even from childhood. It was because Eric would feel so much better in himself, his world would be in balance, and he'd achieve a perspective so clarifying it was scary.

But Eric knew that wasn't Kyle's only reason.

*Why would he have tried so hard, been so persistent, if he didn't believe in you?*

He had so much to recount to Kyle when they were finally together again, and this was a story, a twist of fate he couldn't wait to tell. Imagining Kyle beaming with pride was a daydream so splendid that it made Eric antsy, he willed for it to be reality already. But he already knew Kyle was proud of him.

"So when does the interviewing process start?" Leck asked.

"Next week," Eric replied. "We've had so many applicants, it's overwhelming."

"It's great that you're being so fair," Leck smiled, before shaking his head and chuckling. "Science, it's hard to believe that Ubaleh is on its way to becoming an actual democracy again."

The smirk on Eric's face was uncontrollable.

Luckily he was able to prohibit the excitement from edging into his voice, "Yeah, well, maybe a little favouritism now and then never hurt anyone…."
"What do you mean?"

Eric spun his stool to face Leck, signal enough for Leck to pause his own work and copy his friend.

"How would you like to be science councillor?" Eric asked, beaming as he did.

Leck's jaw hung slack and his already wide eyes resembled saucers.

"What?" He whispered, before asking a little louder, "Really?"

Eric shrugged, still keeping the smile on his face to show he was anything but nonchalant about the matter. "Sure, I mean you're intelligent, brilliant at what you do, you care. You'd be perfect!"

"And you would just give me the job?"

"It's the least I can do after all you've done for me," Eric replied earnestly.

Leck's smile crumpled and he shook his head incredulously.

"Eric, I'm flattered and grateful and it would be fantastic," he smiled. "I'll definitely take you up on an interview?"

Eric arched his eyebrow. "You sure? You don't have to-"

"I'm sure," Leck interrupted, nodding vigorously. "It's the right thing to do."

Leck saying that reminded Eric how important 'the right thing' was. It took Eric thirty three years but he had finally figured it out.

Eric clapped Leck on the shoulder. "Fair enough."
"Ready?" Leck asked, he and Eric both breathless and wracked with adrenaline as if they had ran a marathon.

"More than ever," Eric replied, unable to take his eyes off the huge, glowing, *completed* time transporter.

Everything about the machine was colossal; its design, its thrum, the light it emitted, the overwhelming hope it promised, the purifying, joyous future it illustrated that Eric just wanted to immerse himself in.

But he was so in awe, so giddy that his knees were shaking.

"Hard to believe it's finished, huh?" Leck asked with a smile, a wobble in his voice. "I mean, what do we do now?"

A fair question. They were both young men, barely adults when this project began and now they were middle aged. It was difficult to believe that a pair so naïve and inexperienced were able to pull such a complex, surreptitious plan off. But Eric was headstrong and Leck was committed and Eric knew that his love for Kyle was motivation enough for him to accomplish anything.

Kyle had before made him feel so complete and invincible, and now here he was bending time and space for him. A mix tape, initials carved into a tree, was nothing compared to making a literal stamp on the universe.

Eric answered Leck's question: "I go back to Kyle, and you continue doing a brilliant job in the council, being a great dad to your kids..."

Leck smiled at Eric's confidence and Eric shot him an encouraging grin. Although their plan was still in motion, they had come this far without being caught and it was only appropriate to bask in the glory of it before Eric left for good.

He had faked his own death, and the investigation into what happened to the late AAA president would distract the authorities long enough for Leck to destroy the time transporter. The closer the machine had been to completion, the more disappointment Eric and Leck felt at that stage of the plan. It was a glorious creation, a remarkable feat considering the conditions Leck and Eric had been working in for the past twenty three years. But it would not be a waste, for it would serve its purpose.

Establishing the AAA as a democratic society was a tentative, frustrating process, but Eric was glad that the city had achieved it, and that he had left some kind of legacy there. It also meant that he no longer had to fret about choosing a successor in his absence (although he knew who he would choose in a heartbeat, his friend standing next to him); he could leave it in the hands and paws of the voting public.

Time, Eric discovered, was not linear. It was not a ceaseless desert road but the stars above it. The universe is a pitch black sky that blankets everything and the timelines Leck talked about were the
lone, twinkling stars just waiting to be explored, to be lined up and connected to form constellations.

Windows to the past and future.

Eric's time in Ubaleh would not be in vain. His return to Kyle would not compromise the life Leck had built for himself with his loving wife and children. For it was all necessary and intertwined. Eric was grateful for that, when his life had been ruled by sacrifice. Although time had been cruel to him in the past, it was now proving itself to be generous. Eric was unsure whether it was karma, unpredictable science, or just all that he had invested in his love for Kyle finally paying out. But he definitely knew that none of this could have happened without Leck.

Taking a deep breath, Eric turned to the scientist.

"Leck, it's been a-

Before Eric could even finish Leck had thrown his arms around him in a tight, stubborn hug.

"I know," Leck murmured into Eric's shoulder.

Eric's smile softened his initial surprise and he gently returned the hug, pouring all his gratitude into it.

"Thank you so much, Leck," he breathed. "For everything."

"You're welcome," Leck mumbled, before slipping out of the embrace. He beamed at Eric with wet eyes. "I hope you and Kyle have all the happiness you deserve."

Eric nodded.

"We will, I know we will," he replied, glancing at the machine before his gaze returned to Leck and he confessed, "I'm going to miss you."

Leck's smile creased.

"I'll miss you too," he smirked, his eyes glinting when he said, "Now, let's get you back where you belong."

They gave each other their last encouraging looks before Eric made his way over to the time transporter and Leck took his place at the control panel. Eric was a few inches away from the machine when the doors slid open and he squinted at the startling brightness. He recalled the apprehension he felt the first time he returned to the past, stepped into the AAA time transporter. Grinning, he entered his time transporter with no fear at all. Only anticipation and relief, fixated on the look on Kyle's face when they saw each other again.

"Remember to stay still," Leck said as Eric stood in the centre of chilling lights. "Close your eyes…"

Eric's eyes slipped shut. His last memory of Ubaleh would be Leck at that control panel, in the sleepy hours of the morning, returning him to where he belonged. He was fine with that.

"Goodbye, Leck," Eric said before the doors shut.

The machine started to thrum louder, closing Eric off from his friend, but he heard the scientist reply, "Goodbye, Eric."

It was the last thing he heard before the inertia, but if Eric could've sobbed rapturously then he
would've heard that too.

Eric landed in a peaceful, overcast Saturday afternoon. The last time he was at this apartment it was evening, a pale night, and he had left heartbroken and confused with a guilty Kyle by his side.

That had been twenty three years ago. The last time he saw Kyle he was thirty four, tired of waiting and about to marry a man who could offer him something crucial that Eric couldn't: stability, permanence. But it had transpired that – through no fault of his own – not even Neil could provide those things. Only ten happy years of marriage. Now Kyle was a widower, a single father, and hopefully waiting for the man Eric had become.

Eric's throat tightened and he gulped hard, losing a game of chicken with the intercom to the building. Like every elaborate scheme, he had planned well. He even got the timing accurate enough that his return wouldn't rouse suspicion (as he realised he wasn't just returning to Kyle, but to his mother, his friends, his town). Eric was still an anomaly, a paradox, but his relationship with Kyle wouldn't be. They would be equals who – after years of struggling – finally fitted perfectly.

*The right place at the right time.*

But while he had fantasised, dreamt about this beautiful reunion, he was also terrified. Seeing Kyle again, being in his arms, living their lives together was a sublime, impossible notion that Eric had now made happen. The final step was pressing that button and hearing Kyle's voice, and yet he was letting them both stew in oblivious static.

_Fuck that._

With a self-scolding growl, Eric pushed the button before his anxiety could tackle his fearlessness.

"Hello?"

Kyle's unassuming voice was a deliberate dagger in Eric's heart. He had to stifle a whimper.

"K-kyle?"

Eric clung to the silence. It was difficult to distinguish where his heavy, nervous breathing started and where the crackling shock seeping through the tiny holes in the intercom ended.

"Eric?" Kyle finally responded. The staccato, overwhelmed nature of his breaths only twisted the dagger. "Oh… oh my God…"

"It's been a while," Eric rushed to say. He hung his head. "I'm sorry-"

"No, no, don't be," Kyle interrupted. "I… I can't… c-co-come on up!"

Eric didn't say anything more, grinning goofily when the doors unlocked and that ugly buzz had never sounded prettier. He bounced on his toes, for the first time in his life feeling truly weightless as he entered the building.

His leg refused to stop jittering and his shaking hands would not stay still as he rode in the empty elevator. His grimy reflection stared back at him and even though his face wasn't clear he was reminded of how different he looked, how different the situation was. There was a slither of superficial panic to his elation… would Kyle no longer find him attractive? Eric never considered himself handsome, but Kyle seemed to adore him anyway. Would Kyle like these changes? His skin slightly duller and his sides a little softer…
The elevator dinged, indicating that they had reached their destination and Eric shook his head. Kyle wasn't so shallow, and had aged beside Eric even though he never saw it. He smirked, he could never imagine Kyle's looks diminishing, no matter how many years went by.

Eric remembered the apartment number. Music had drifted through the hallway during his previous visit, now it was quiet save for Eric's pounding heart. He reached Kyle's door and took a deep, bracing breath. But before he could summon the courage to knock, he could hear Kyle fumbling with the chain, obviously waiting for him.

The door opened and Kyle was breathtaking before Eric, word-robbing, and he had captured Eric's heart long ago. Long before this journey had even started.

"Eric?" Kyle whispered, stepping forward.

His curls were cut shorter, his jaw dusted with rough, cinnamon stubble, and his eyes were shining as he drank Eric in disbelievingly. As Eric's vision blurred, those verdant irises remained sharp and clear.

Eric couldn't open his mouth to speak without sobbing, his mouth furiously sealed shut and his tears pooled at his lashes. He nodded, and his hand was still trembling when it reached up and held Kyle's cheek. Eric hoped it would be all the confirmation Kyle needed. The touch felt different, but familiar. New, but timelessly right. It had been so long that Kyle's skin felt like a heady dream beneath his fingers.

Kyle blinked, glancing at Eric's hand and adjusting to his touch. But then his eyes widened and became glassy, and he took a shaky, wet breath, lungs heaving. He whimpered, stammering, as he finally rested in Eric's hand. Trusting him and loving him easily, even after years apart. Eric's smile broke his composure like sun breaking through clouds.

Iridescent, Kyle reflected the smile, his cheeks swelling and tears sliding down his face. Removing Eric's hands from his cheek, Kyle collapsed into him but Eric – however stunned and overpowered he felt by being in his presence again – caught him, strengthened because Kyle had needed and believed in him just as Eric had.

Kyle sunk his fingers into Eric's broad back, buried himself in Eric's shoulder, while Eric's fingers slid into Kyle's curls and held him close. They were both sobbing, warm and damp, shuddering at the force of each other's presence, their reunion weighing down on them. But at least they were crumbling together.

Together at last.

"Th-thank you," Kyle stuttered, muffled into Eric's shirt. He lifted his head, his voice reaching Eric's ears clearly. "Thank you, Eric. I'm so happy you're here…"

He gripped Eric a little tighter, and Eric squeezed his eyes shut.

"Oh science… Kyle, I'm so sorry," Eric replied, stroking Kyle's curls apologetically, savouring every one. "I'm so sorry I kept you waiting this long-"

"Hey," Kyle said firmly, before he sniffed and pulled away, holding Eric at arm's length and beaming up at him. "You did the right thing, Eric. We both needed space and you accepted that. You gave me what I needed no matter how hard it was on you. So thank you, I… I couldn't be more proud of you."

Eric smirked dreamily.
"Oh yeah?" He asked, unable to conceal his excitement. "Check out my wrist."

Kyle furrowed his eyebrows.

"What?" He asked.

Silently, Eric lifted his arm and showed Kyle his bare wrist. Kyle's eyebrows shot up, nearly reaching his curls, the whites of his eyes glimmering. He stumbled, one hand reaching for the doorframe and the other hand was over his mouth, eyes still fixed on Eric's wrist free of a time tether.

Eric shrugged.

"Looks like you're stuck with me," he smiled.

Kyle's shocked, giddy laugh was muffled by his hand, and Eric grinned when the sound was finally released. It chimed and tinkled and Eric adored it, infectious enough to make him laugh too until they were both giggling and gasping and crying together, ridiculously euphoric.

Kyle grabbed Eric's wrist, inspecting it before leaving a trail of kisses from his pulse point to the crook of his elbow. It never occurred to Eric how great it would feel for Kyle to kiss him there, for his wet lashes to brush against the supple skin, or how Kyle would so ecstatically respond to the freedom his bare wrist represented.

Kyle's lips flew from Eric's arm to his mouth, his own arms clasped around Eric's shoulders and Eric pulled Kyle flush to deepen their passionate kiss… He had missed Kyle's lips so much and that pang yawned painfully before it was sated by Kyle's soft lips against his own.

"How?" Kyle gasped in between kisses. "Eric… what did you do?!

Eric was too breathless, too dizzy with too many reeling thoughts to answer. He didn't even know where to start.

Instead, he grinned lazily. "We have a lot to catch up on."

Kyle squeezed the nape of Eric's neck and gazed into his eyes.

"I want to hear everything," he smiled.

"We have plenty of time, right?"

Kyle kissed Eric's stinging lips chastely but deeply again.

"All the time in the world…" he breathed out.

A crease in Eric's brow, he pressed their foreheads together and saw the intensity of his stare reflected in Kyle's eyes.

"I've missed you," he confessed. "Kyle, staying away was the hardest thing I've ever done."

Kyle nodded, his eyes brimming with tears once more.

"I've missed you too," he replied, noses brushing together. "I think about you all the time and…" he shook his head and blinked, tears falling from his lashes. "Fuck, I can't believe you're actually here. That you've come back for good."

Eric's mouth twitched in a half smile.
"I didn't want to let you down," he said softly, welcoming Kyle's kiss.

Eric had Kyle pressed against the doorframe, hands squeezing his hips while Kyle's left hand rested between his shoulder blades and his right was tangled in his hair. They kissed like teenagers, like newlyweds, like they had never been apart. Their passion preluded everything else. A comfort to them both, Eric was sure, that no matter how many difficulties and readjustments lay ahead, their chemistry and devotion would see them through. Flushed, panting and content Kyle had asked Eric if he wanted to come inside, if they could talk. Eric had nodded and gladly took Kyle's hand.

It was the first time Eric had set foot in the apartment Kyle had shared with Neil, and it was undoubtedly different from all the other places Kyle had lived in before. Shoes varying in size were in a little rack by the door, a section of the bookshelf was dedicated entirely to family movies, and more photo frames than Eric could remember seeing before were scattered about the living room. There were people beaming in them that Eric didn't know, but Kyle was happy next to these strangers.

In the kitchen, there were a couple of Father's Day mugs on display, claiming the recipients of the mugs were the 'best dads in the world!' There was a noticeboard with various important letters tacked onto it, and a couple of bright, cute drawings stuck to the fridge by novelty magnets. There was one of a man Eric didn't recognise, an Empire State Building magnet just above his head.

Eric was eager to hear about Kyle's life in his absence, to listen to him craft stories in the wonderful way he could. But the life Kyle had shared with Neil was one Eric had been very much excluded from. It was something he understood, and knew he couldn't replicate.

But the way Kyle had kissed him, chatted to him, looked at him fondly as he made him a cup of tea and himself a cup of coffee, made Eric realise that he didn't need to duplicate anything. Kyle hopefully wanted him, wanted them to have their own adventures and life together. Although Kyle would always cherish the time he spent with Neil, that didn't mean that he and Eric couldn't have something just as precious. And considering how long they had to wait for each other, Eric knew that whatever he and Kyle embarked on would be special.

"So wait, you actually built your own time machine?!!" Kyle asked, placing his coffee mug on the table in disbelief.

"Transporter, Kyle," Eric corrected cheekily. "And yep, my scientist buddy Leck – he's the one who made the deal with me in the first place – he helped me out. It was just the two of us."

"How long did that take you?"

"Twenty three years. We started it after the last time I saw you," he replied. "You were right Kyle, we needed space. We both had things we had to do on our own but even then, you were my motivation for everything. I realise now that I was putting pressure on you, and that was wrong, but… even if you claim to not be perfect, you're still the person I believe in most."

Kyle blushed, pursing his lips although they were desperate to form a smile.

"Thank you," he said softly, an emotional, quivering breath escaped. "For everything. You've done so much that I'll probably be thanking you for the rest of my life."

Eric scratched the back of his neck, blushing himself.

"I'm okay with that," he teased.
Kyle smirked, a wicked glint in his eye belied his sheepishness and he pinched Eric's arm playfully. "Still… it was just the two of you?" Kyle asked after taking a sip of his coffee. "For that long?"

Eric nodded.

"It had to be," he said. "The AAA wouldn't have given me permission. They 'needed' me," he rolled his eyes, glancing at his tea. "Still, we didn't have to build everything from scratch. We found this abandoned transporter that the previous government had built, before the AAA took over. It was damaged, but we fixed it."

Kyle shook his head, intrigued emerald graze absorbing every word. "You could've gotten into serious trouble if you were caught…"

"Most likely,"

"You put yourself at risk like that for me?" Kyle asked, voice crinkled with gratitude.

A small smile appeared on Eric's face, as if attempting to brighten the sober reality, the startling extent of his love for Kyle.

"Prison would've been a better alternative to letting you down," he replied.

Kyle's eyes shone, Eric's admission casting light on everything he already knew, would never forget. His mouth quirked in a quiet half smile.

"Even if you had tried and failed I would be grateful," he said. "I believe in you too, you know."

"Thanks," Eric replied. He took a sip of his tea to mask his bashful expression before he continued. "But after a while the risk was lowered significantly."

"How?"

"Well, it's pretty hard to arrest a president," Eric grinned.

Kyle's eyebrows furrowed, before it dawned on him so comically that Eric struggled to conceal his laughter.

"Wait… you were…"

"President of the AAA. Blavius II gave me the job before he died."

"Oh my God, that's incredible!" Kyle exclaimed, before he glanced at the table and reconsidered. "I think… did you even want the job?"

"No, not really," Eric chuckled. "I mean, it made the plan run a lot smoother. Yeah, I still would've been in trouble if I was caught, the council wouldn't have liked what I was doing. But I was the one calling the shots, there wasn't a whole lot they could do."

"Hmm, I always imagined you being a leader of some sort," Kyle smirked, tracing the rim of his mug thoughtfully. "A CEO or something. But a president… how long were you in office for?"

"Eleven years,"

"Wow, that's a long term," Kyle continued teasingly. "Were you well liked? Do you think your presidency will go down in history?"
"The humans liked me," Eric replied. "The otters not so much, but they never did. They kissed my ass out of necessity, because Blavius and his dad told them to. As for going down in history, well, I was the first human president of the AAA, and I supposedly died in mysterious circumstances – but not so mysterious really, I left because I wanted to be with you."

Teasing smirks and coy grins were replaced by tender, loving smiles that communicated a lot more.

"Oh, and I also re-established Ubaleh as a democracy," Eric added.

Kyle placed a hand to his mouth so as not to spit out his coffee and Eric pursed his lips to contain his bubbling laughter.

"You did?" Kyle asked after composing himself. "That's fantastic, Eric!"

Cheeks burning, Eric smiled shyly and then flinched when he felt Kyle's gentle hand cup his face, reaching over the short distance.

"You've accomplished so much," Kyle whispered.

His thumb brushing against his skin made Eric's breath stammer.

"I, I wanted to make you proud," he replied, a lump in his throat.

"And you have," Kyle confirmed.

Before Eric would wet Kyle's hand with his tears, he grabbed his wrist and brought Kyle's hand to his lips, placing kisses along his knuckles. It was then he noticed that the silver engagement band was still there. Eric paused, not knowing what was appropriate and he didn't protest when Kyle slid his hand out of his grip.

"I read about Neil in your file," Eric began tentatively. "I'm so sorry, Kyle…"

"Thanks," Kyle replied, tears in his eyes too and he sniffled. "These eight months have been rough but it can only get easier, right?"

Eric had no idea. He had dealt with separation before, and the only way he had dealt with death was with determination, by acquiring a sense of nobility. Neither could bring Neil back.

"Hopefully," Eric offered with a tight smile. "He'd want you to be happy."

"I know he would," Kyle nodded, and he sighed. "We had such a wonderful time together, we had Paige..." Kyle hesitated then. "You know I have a daughter, don't you?"

"Yeah, she's in your file," Eric replied, before glancing around the kitchen. The whole apartment was steeped in familial pride and love. "I can already tell you're a great parent, Kyle."

Kyle ducked his head and laughed," I try to be."

"Is she here?"

"She's at soccer practice," Kyle replied. "I tried to get her into basketball but…"

"I can see it now, you carpooling with all the soccer moms," Eric joked.

Kyle rolled his eyes and chuckled.
"Yeah, today is my day off," he teased. "But she has a game Wednesday night, we should go."

Kyle's willingness to integrate Eric so readily into his new life, into Paige's life caught him off guard. But he was grateful, and he accepted.

"I'd like that," he smiled, and Kyle's reaction made him doubly sure.

"You'll love her, Eric, she's an amazing kid," Kyle beamed. "She's sweet, and smart, and funny, and when Neil passed away... God, she was so strong," Kyle sighed. Eric supposed these past few months had been exhausting. "Like nothing I'd ever seen before. It's overwhelming to even think about."

"She sounds like another kid I used to know," Eric said, gazing at Kyle.

Kyle reciprocated the pointed stare, but a buzz by the front door evaporated their fond, flirtatious haze.

Rising from his chair, Kyle left the kitchen to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hey, dad."

Eric heard Paige's voice through the intercom. He gulped.

"Oh, hey, sweetie," Kyle replied. "I'll let you in."

Kyle pressed the button to open the doors and Paige thanked him. He was smiling when he returned to Eric in the kitchen, sparking with anticipation, like a luminous signal to release lively butterflies in Eric's stomach.

"I'm a little nervous to meet her," Eric confessed when Kyle sat back down.

"Don't worry, you'll be fine," Kyle assured, reaching across the table and holding Eric's hand.

Eric squeezed back, their conversation suspended as they waited for Paige. Eric guessed they were both fixed on her approval. They couldn't just take themselves into consideration anymore. They had Paige to think about too. They...

Us.

The very notion was exhilarating, so much so that it made Eric eager to deal with the most uncomfortable and nerve-wracking of situations.

"Hi..." Paige's voice drifted into the kitchen as she let herself into the apartment.

With his own encouraging squeeze, Kyle stood up and led Eric into the living room, the both of them standing nervously in the doorway.

"Hey," Kyle greeted his daughter. "How was soccer practice?"

"It was alright," Paige replied, she was kneeling down to untie her muddied soccer boots. "Corey wasn't there so..."

Her voice trailed off when she stood up and noticed Eric. He had had his fair share of unnerving, distressing experiences in his life, but Eric never knew that a little girl's stare could intimidate him so
much.

Kyle was quick with his introductions.

"Uh, Paige, this is Eric Cartman," he smiled. "I've known him for a very long time, and he's going to be staying with us for a while."

"Hi, Paige," Eric said with a small, friendly nod.

Paige was still regarding him curiously, but Kyle's presence eased the pressure.

"Hi..." Paige finally replied, glancing between her dad and Eric. "Nice to meet you."

Kyle's comforting smile was meant for both of them, Eric was sure. Paige brought her long ponytail over her shoulder and fiddled with it.

"How long have you known my dad?" She asked.

"We met when we were in pre-school," Eric replied more confidently.

"Do you know my Uncle Stan?"

"Yeah, I was friends with him too. We all used to hang out."

"Did you used to live in South Park?" Paige asked, her shyness dissipating. "I go there to see my grandma and grandpa, and sometimes me and dad have snowball fights and build snowmen."

"You do, huh?" Eric grinned. "Has your dad taken you sledding?"

Paige shook her head, Eric could tell she was definitely intrigued by the idea.

"Maybe we could go next time we visit grandma and grandpa?" Kyle offered.

"Yeah," Paige grinned. "That would be fun."

Kyle chuckled. "Okay, now go get out of those dirty clothes."

Paige rolled her eyes but still smiled at her dad. Before she left, she gave Eric a small wave and Eric could see Kyle beaming proudly out of the corner of his eye as he waved back.

"Not long after I visited you I went to Hawaii and saw Butters," Eric said, once Paige's bedroom door was shut. "You know, to patch things up."

"How did that go?" Kyle asked, wrapping his fingers around Eric's wrist and returning them to the kitchen.

"Great, actually," Eric replied as he sat down. "He seems ridiculously happy."

Kyle snickered and nodded.

"He and Bradley are pretty cute together."

"After our talk in the hotel it would've been stupid of me not to take your advice," Eric continued. "I had so much to say to him and although this was all to be with you again, this was never just about you and me. It seems silly that I could have ever thought so. Selfish even..."

"We were both selfish," Kyle interjected, smiling at Eric. "But with good intentions."
It fascinated Eric, how Kyle could be so honest about their actions, recognise the fault lying in each other and yet still have faith in them, cut each other slack. He provided the perfect balance of truth and comfort, which don’t always even each other out.

Kyle truly was Eric's everything. He was everything debilitating and unattainable that weakened him and humbled him; his addiction, his star, his fantasy, his broken heart, his vice. But he was also everything that invigorated him, inspired him. He was spectacular, dizzying epiphany, the earnest catalyst of the life Eric wanted to live, the type of man he wanted to be, and the future he wanted to achieve. He was his faith, his motivation, the love of his life, and his soulmate. All Eric had ever wanted and needed, fought for and saved.

Kyle may have made Eric feel powerful, like the most invincible entity in the entire universe, but that's only because Kyle was his. Kyle was Eric's past, present and future; space and time in tangible flesh and blood; a beautiful heart and dazzling mind that he had shared with Eric. Their devotion, their limitless love reflected like artificial stars, and they saw galaxies in their eyes and their worlds in each other.

"I love you, Kyle," Eric said, holding his hand across the table.

All the other times he had said those words he always felt a pang of fear, of disappointment, of frustration because his departure had been imminent, but now he wasn't going anywhere.

"I love you too," Kyle replied earnestly, squeezing Eric's hand. "I never stopped loving you."

"So will you have me back?" Eric asked with a shaky chuckle, but it was stifled by the enormity of the moment. "I know things are difficult right now. I mean, what happened to Neil must still be so fresh but… I want to make this work, Kyle. However long it takes."

Kyle closed his eyes, exhaling deeply through his nose.

"Eric, taking you back was never an option," he replied, slipping his hand from Eric's grip.

The release stung, raw, the severance leaving Eric shaken.

He had planned for this reunion his whole life, but he hadn't considered this.

"Oh…" he manged to say, ducking his head so as to hide his burning eyes.

What now?

He tried to think of the possibilities, not wanting any tears to escape. His mind was racing so fast that he hadn't noticed Kyle kneeling before him. Eric heard his faint breathing, felt that warmth that he could distinguish anywhere.

He remained still as Kyle's palm rested against his cheek, he would always welcome the touch. Kyle ducked his head, glinting green eyes searching for Eric's gaze.

"How could I take you back, when I never let you go?" Kyle asked with a wobbly smile.

What was once prematurely severed now connected with ease, glowing miraculously. Eric lifted his head slowly, wide eyes blinking as if adjusting to he and Kyle's startling light.

"So let's just pick up where we left off," Kyle added, stroking Eric's cheek.

Nothing sounded better to Eric.
Kyle's touch, his voice, his smile was smoother than velvet.

An uncontrollable smile spread across his face and he sniffed his tears away, not caring how eagerly he was nodding to Kyle's wonderful suggestion.

Kyle snickered, just as endeared to Eric as Eric was to him, and he wanted to capture this brilliant moment somehow, pinpoint the event.

A kiss. A warm, strong, wet, exalted kiss. What better way to seal their timeless commitment? What better way to start their lives – finally – together?

Chapter End Notes

So there'll be one last chapter to wrap the story up. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this latest development, and as always thank you so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed! Finally, guys! We made it!
Whenever they had evening plans, Eric always got dressed before Kyle just so he could watch him get ready. He adored the way Kyle ruffled his wet curls with a towel, even if he had to reassure him that he still looked handsome although his hair was greying. He smirked to himself when Kyle stood in front of the wardrobe in his underwear, deciding on a shirt, and would offer Kyle suggestions from the bed. He anticipated the moment where Kyle spritzed cologne on his slender, firm throat. Kyle had been wearing the same scent since Eric had returned, and Eric loved it just as much at the beginning of the night as he did at the end – when it would prickle with sweat and meld with Eric's own, complimenting each other perfectly. Both variations of the scent were associated with sparkling joy, contentment, just how desperately they needed to be together.

Tonight, however, Eric couldn't partake in what had become a comfortable, blissful ritual for them both; couldn't appreciate the sight of Kyle fussing with his tie in the bedroom mirror. His attention was instead chained to the wrinkled paper in his hands, scarred with scribbled words and brimming with re-drafted sentences. It wasn't exactly encouraging when Eric had to stand up in about three hours and try to sound confident when reading them. He scanned the words for the hundredth time, his back hunched and his mouth opening and closing silently like a broken ventriloquist dummy.

"You've been going over that speech since this morning," Kyle pointed out.

When Eric looked up, Kyle was smiling at his boyfriend's reflection with a pretty combination of fondness and exasperation.

Eric blushed, he didn't know whether he was embarrassed that Kyle had noticed, or just warmed by his smile.

"I know, I just want it to go perfectly," he replied, sighing. "I don't want to fuck up my words or forget them in front of hundreds of people."

"You've addressed bigger crowds before though?" Kyle asked, turning around to face Eric and leaning against the dresser. "When you were president..."

"This means more to me than that," Eric returned as he stood up. He smoothed out the creases in the paper with his thumb. "Besides, I was nervous as hell even then."

Kyle exhaled softly, eyes brimming with endearment and his smile drawn tight with sympathy. "You'll do great, Eric. Everybody attending loves you, and they'll all be raving about your article."

It had been eight years since Eric returned and he had been making headlines ever since. After all, very rare is it that a missing person shows up after thirty years of silence. The media storm that had descended was overwhelming as well as naively unexpected by Eric and Kyle, and there were journalists from newspapers and TV stations alike swarming the apartment building for days wanting to get their exclusive interview with Eric.

After creating a plausible story, Eric finally stepped outside to face the reporters with Kyle by his side. Even Eric was impressed by how effortlessly he recounted his made up tale, and each reporter's uncomfortable questions became easier to answer than the last. On countless cameras
Eric revealed that he would be conducting no more interviews with the press, as he had more urgent, personal matters to sort through. But there was one interview he couldn’t avoid, and that was with the authorities. After Eric insisted he had been in no way harmed and didn’t wish to press charges against any anybody, the police eventually dropped the case.

In the aftermath, a party was thrown for Eric in South Park. When he and Kyle drove into the town, embraced by jagged mountain peaks and his slate as clean as peerless snow, he was glad that he was entering this dream-world with Kyle, to ensure him it was all very real. He felt even luckier when Kyle held his hand as they walked from the parking lot to the decorated community centre. The weight of all those missed years had weighed down on Eric and he felt haunted, the figures in his childhood floating and whispering like phantoms in his mind.

But when those heavy doors had swung open, and the room flooded with applause, and tears, and bright colours that Eric had missed, everything and everyone was alive again, even him: a part of himself that he didn’t know had mourned so greatly for the life he once had.

Eric wasn’t the only one who returned to South Park that night; Stan and Jessica flew from New Zealand with their daughters in tow, Kenny had blown off a recording session in LA to make it, and Butters and Bradley had booked their plane tickets as soon as they heard the good news.

Stan and Kenny were the first to break away from the amazed crowd, nearly tackling Eric in an ecstatic bear hug that Kyle was roped into. The four men shook and cried silently together, murmuring everything sincere that they had bottled up all these years. When the moment calmed, Eric called Butters over and with a surprised flash in his eyes he made his way over to his childhood friends, smile crumpled and head bowed before he was initiated into the embrace.

But when Liane shyly parted the crowd, the men dispersed and silence settled. Despite the wrinkles on her face and her perfectly styled white hair, her shimmering eyes were the first thing Eric noticed. Those eyes were what he remembered most, the physical detail of his mother that always pierced through his murky image of her. She had swayed and smiled, as if her world was finally aligning again, her grown-up son in front of her after she had lost him for so long.

Eric remembered his mother being gentle, but stood in front of him eight years ago she had never seemed more delicate or fragile. She had clutched her failing heart, mending and breaking all at once, and Eric wrapped his arms around her to ease the ache, to let her know that she would never have to live without him again. Despite her frailness, she had sobbed and clung to Eric, not caring how tightly she held on, not caring how strong her son was and how tall he stood over her. Over the raucous applause Liane had whispered in his ear, "for years I dreamt you would come back to me," and Eric burst into tears before he could stop himself, needing his mother to hold him. But Liane happily regressed, shushing him and stroking his broad back like no time had passed at all.

When they were both ready, Liane let go and introduced Eric to her husband. It was a sheepish introduction, but Eric smiled at his beaming mom over Peter's shoulder when his stepfather hugged him. While they talked, Liane and Kyle embraced and Eric overheard her say "all we had to do was believe, Kyle. You're taking good care of him, aren't you?" Kyle had nodded, dabbing at his eyes with his wrist before Liane chuckled and pulled him in for another hug.

A few months after the party, Kyle and Eric announced to their family and friends that they were in a relationship. They were the only ones who were surprised. Apparently the way they looked at each other all evening gave them away.

However keen Eric was to start his new life with Kyle, they both understood that it would be an adjustment for Paige. It wouldn't be fair to expect her to come to terms with her dad's new relationship so quickly, and they didn't want her to come to the assumption that Neil was being
replaced.

So they decided that Eric could stay with Kyle until he got a job and a place of his own, and that they would take their relationship slowly. It was jarring, but Eric figured that time was now on their side and when their relationship had been so bizarre and unorthodox in nature, it felt nice to act like any other couple; going on dates, rebuilding their levels of intimacy and doing things independently as well as together.

When he wasn't spending time with Kyle, Eric was on the job hunt, and enrolling in a community college course in engineering. Eric naturally excelled, and his charisma and skill level quickly secured him a great job in a wildly successful firm. He was then finally able to go on an apartment hunt, but since he and Paige had bonded so well, and since he already had a key to Kyle's apartment and a place in his bed, Kyle told Eric there was no need. That his apartment was Eric's home now too.

Shortly after Paige's fourteenth birthday, Eric was offered a promotion at work which meant he would have to relocate to the firm's Californian division. To Eric's surprise, Kyle was just as eager to move as he was, especially when they found their beautiful, secluded condo in the hills. It had been three years since they made it their home. Meanwhile, Eric had been making waves not just in work but in the scientific community as a whole with his thoughts on and research into the possibility of time travel. They reached fever pitch when Eric was asked to write an article on the matter in a leading scientific journal, and the accolades kept pouring in; one of which was a grant for his firm which he was to receive at a gala honouring advancements in technology.

"Can I see it?" Kyle asked, hands tucked behind his back coyly as he stared at the piece of paper.

"What?"

"Your speech?" Kyle's smile grew wider and he stepped forward.

"No," Eric smirked, folding the paper and tucking it into one of his back pockets. "It's a surprise."

Kyle shoulders slouched and he rolled his eyes. Copying Eric's smirk, he moved in closer and rested his hands on Eric's waist.

Kyle's bold, emerald gaze was trained on Eric. He was simply at mercy to Kyle's teasing

"You don't think I'll go there?" Kyle asked, his hand flying to Eric's pocket and squeezing. The paper crinkled, but Eric suspected his speech was the last thing on Kyle's mind. Kyle pulled him closer, mouth twitching in a half smile. "But if you insist on it being a surprise-"

"I don't want to spoil anything for you," Eric interrupted, grinning down at Kyle and prickling under his touch.

"Then I understand," Kyle replied.

His hand didn't move and his gaze didn't falter, even the smallest of Kyle's actions could make Eric feel incredibly wanted.

"Any excuse to feel me up, huh?" He teased.

Kyle bit his lip, and Eric wanted to sink his own teeth into that full lower lip that he had sampled so many times before. Kyle nodded, his eyes dark and hooded.

"You look gorgeous tonight," Kyle said huskily.
"You don't look so bad yourself," Eric replied, raking his gaze over his handsome, sharply dressed boyfriend.

Kyle grinned, "Still got it."

Eric closed the gap between them and kissed Kyle's irresistible lips. Kyle readily responded, deepening the kiss and moving his hands to Eric's sides, tugging at his shirt greedily.

Many couples the same age as Eric and Kyle had noted how enamoured they both still were with each other (as if depleting passion was a pre-requisite for middle-aged couples). Even when they weren't being physically affectionate, every lingering look and smile and flirtatious comment was dripping with tenderness and desire.

But although they had shared their first kiss decades ago, their relationship as it was now was still very new. They felt so fortunate to be with each other, the notion that they were now able to spend the rest of their lives together was so heady, that they felt it silly to not spend every second loving each other, being grateful for one and other and expressing that gratitude.

Absence not only makes the heart grow fonder, but is also a potent aphrodisiac and their chemistry was still as explosive as ever. Even though they looked different to when they first made love all those years ago, under the stars, what they felt was the same; except for the added security they felt when they braced each other, how their longing touches echoed into the future they would have together.

"Crap, I'm creasing your shirt," Kyle muttered against Eric's lips. He loosened his grip. "Sorry…"

Eric shook his head, their nose brushed together.

"I don't mind," he chuckled.

Kyle still smiled apologetically, and Eric's contented reflection in those green eyes was too tempting.

"Do we really have to go tonight?" Eric whinged, his nerves coming over him in droves. "I'd much rather stay here."

There was a sympathetic crease in Kyle's brow.

Pressing his forehead to Eric's he replied, "Tell you what, when we come home we'll go straight to bed."

Droves of anxiety were quickly replaced by droves of something else.

"Deal," Eric grinned, at least he had something to distract himself with when his nerves threatened to get the best of him.

Kyle's smile brightened his whole face and he reached up to stroke Eric's cheek.

"Tonight will be great, and you'll be brilliant," he soothed. "So don't worry."

"Thanks," Eric smiled, giving Kyle a chaste kiss.

He was the only person who made Eric believe he could do anything. He had proved it, hadn't he?

"… And it is without further ado, that I'd like to present this grant to the brilliant Eric Cartman."
The rush of applause was Eric's cue to stand up and make his way to the stage. He squinted at the spotlight suddenly thrust in his vision as he left the table, Kyle's encouraging smile a buoy in the strident ocean of intimidating strangers.

Once on the stage he shook the hand of the man presenting him the grant (a noted, retired physicist who now dedicated his time to encouraging the younger generation to pursue science as well as financing 'innovators' in the field. He confessed to Eric and Kyle at the bar earlier in the evening that he believed Eric to be exactly that), and grinned down the lenses of the photographers below the stage, press passes looped around their necks.

The applause continued even when Eric took his place at the podium and laid out his crumpled speech in front of him.

"Thank you, sir. It's an honour," he said, catching the microphone only slightly but it was enough to make the gala attendees settle down.

The silence was daunting and Eric's Adam's apple bobbed in his throat, he didn't want to cough awkwardly into the microphone.

"When my article on the possibility of time travel was published, the praise I received was overwhelming," he began. "But some of my colleagues in the more theoretical sphere of the scientific field where sceptical. And rightly so, I was discussing something that had been dismissed by the community as an impossibility. Some of them asked how a lowly engineer could be so confident in his research on the matter, or have anything valuable to say. This, I found rather baffling and certainly frustrating, since this criticism was coming from intelligent minds," Eric paused and smiled shyly when his comment roused laughter, as self-satisfied as clinking champagne flutes.

"Scientific theory and scientific fact are often wildly opposing things, and while we live in an era of rapidly advancing technology, there are still realms of knowledge out of our reach," Eric continued. "Engineering bridges that gap. It is engineers like myself that create the machinery, the computers, the technology that aids everyone in research and discovery."

In the dimmed room Eric could make out a few guests nodding solemnly, and Kyle's intent stare. He glanced at his speech and smiled at his words.

"The human mind is a brilliant thing," Eric said. "It can create and conjure and dream. It is how artists channel inspiration, how mathematicians solve problems and where we discover our aspirations. For example, I have been with my partner for eight years. I love him very much and in my mind I hoped we would end up together. But my hope alone was not enough. The mind is incredible, but the human heart is the strongest force on Earth. It's the resilience of the human heart, the desire it fuels that drives us to achieve our dreams and goals. It motivates us, reminds us of the stakes, and can withstand a considerable amount of pain in order to get what it wants, what it knows we need as individuals."

Eric could feel the affection seeping into his voice, the smile etching itself on his face as he watched Kyle listen to him, his eyes shining brighter with every sentence.

"Without that immense strength," he continued, "scientists wouldn't devote their lives to research, parents wouldn't fiercely protect their children in the most frightening of circumstances, humanitarians would crumble under the pressure of willingly placing themselves in dangerous situations, and I would never have continued my research into a subject that seemed futile, would never have published an article that is influencing the scientific community in ways I never imagined. I also would never have ended up with my amazing, beautiful partner if it wasn't for my optimistic heart… how grateful I am that it never gave up on us," Eric said softly, eyes fixed unabashedly on
Kyle, watching him swipe a tear from his cheek. "Anything is possible in the mind; everything is reality if we trust our hearts make it so. Thank you."

Eric was unprepared for the standing ovation, for the wolf whistles and cheers that rippled through the crowd. But he was glad that his speech had resonated with so many and with one person in particular. Kyle, who was clapping and beaming and letting his tears fall.

Eric's nerves rapidly dissipated following his speech, making the evening decidedly more enjoyable. He discussed his project and research in more detail with the rather intimidating guests who were sat at his table, he and Kyle both answered questions about their relationship and exchanged amused glances when the conversation turned to topics of which they felt very out of their depth; black tie events and vacation hotspots and sports cars. For every notable scientist in the room there were about twice as many millionaire investors who donated generously but cared very little. Eric didn't mind being out of their leagues. He and Kyle were comfortable, yes, but not wealthy, or extravagant with their money. However, it still surprised Eric how little envy or inadequacy he felt when surrounded by such affluence. It often struck him throughout these past eight years how truly happy he was, yet the rush never wore off.

When Eric and Kyle returned home, Paige was still out with her friends. They could've taken the advantage of having a free house to make good on their deal, but they were in no hurry. Besides, they could make the most of having the house to themselves when Paige went off to college next year – however odd it felt to imagine not seeing Paige every day. Eric assumed he would handle the prospect better than Kyle – seeing as he was forced to be independent from a very young age – but he still worried how she would fare, despite the confidence they both had in her.

Upon entering the condo, Kyle had kissed Eric chastely, taking his hand and leading him upstairs so they could begin their nightly routine. Eric had no doubt that once they were under the covers Kyle's hand would find his again, exchanging kisses in the glowing moonlight.

While Eric brushed his teeth, Kyle was probably undressing. But when Eric left their ensuite, the bedroom was empty and Kyle was still in his suit, standing on the balcony and gazing at the view.

"Hey, what are you doing out there?" Eric asked with a smile, before joining him.

"It's a beautiful night," Kyle answered, eyes trained on the glittering pool below and the lively town in the distance.

"Sure is…” Eric murmured, wrapping his arms around Kyle's waist and placing a kiss in his curls.

Kyle relaxed into the hold, head resting on Eric's chest and he turned his attention to the inky sky dotted with the stars that had evaded the snare of the city.

"What's that saying?" Kyle asked. "About the stars? I remember you telling me…”

"The stars are the window to the past and the future," Eric replied, he couldn't help but smile at the bittersweet twinge in his heart.

"Yeah," Kyle sighed, placing his hand on top of Eric's. "I like that."

Staring at the sky, Eric wondered if the stars really were windows, was his past-self looking at him? Weary, and yearning, but ultimately happy with the future he forged?

Kyle twisted in the embrace, wrapping his arms around Eric's neck and Eric's hands moved to Kyle's lower back.
"Why did you mention me in your speech?"

Eric's eyebrows furrowed. "Should I not have?"

Kyle smirked and rolled his eyes.

"No, no, I'm happy you did. I was just... curious," he replied. "I didn't help you write that article-"

"Without you there wouldn't have been an article to write," Eric interjected. "We wouldn't be standing here together."

"I guess so," Kyle nodded, he squeezed the nape of Eric's neck softly. "There's a part of your article that confuses me though."

"And what's that?"

"The alternate timelines that co-exist," Kyle replied, his gaze trailed to the buttons on Eric's shirt, as if he was still trying to figure out the math. "It seems impossible."

Eric smiled. "Well, think of it this way, this would never have happened if I hadn't frozen myself and wound up in the future. But there's still timelines that exist where I didn't do all that. Would I have made that discovery, written my article, nonetheless? Would we have ever fallen in love with each other? Would you have still married Neil and adopted Paige?"

"Possibly in the other timelines..."

"Right, but we're here now. In this timeline, I was young and stupid, and I convinced Butters of my dumb plan. I lost you, lost everything... and you lost me," Eric said the last part a little softer. Kyle winced and Eric swore he felt himself being tugged closer. "But I fell in love with you. You were in trouble, I helped you, and you fixed what was wrong with your life. You found a career you were passionate about, then fell in love with me," Eric grinned when Kyle flushed, but he carried on seriously. "We realised the timing wasn't right for us. But you made me see that I had to fight for you as well as give you your space. You let me find meaning somewhere else, and you fell in love again with a guy who made you happy. You started an awesome family that I'm privileged to be a part of..."

Kyle laughed, eliciting another grin. But Eric then sighed, remembering the next phase.

"Again, you lost someone you loved, while I spent years trying to get back to you. We had to hurt for a while..." Eric noticed that Kyle had ducked his head, pursed his lips. He hooked his finger under Kyle's chin and reconnected their gaze. "But here we are now. It took some time, but by then we were both ready and I was back where I belonged..." Eric moved his hand to place it on Kyle's cheek. "With you..."

Kyle's smile spread across his face as delicate and helpless as stray watercolours, and it burrowed into Eric's heart more than any masterpiece could.

"It's been difficult, and painful, and frustrating, but also humbling, and exhilarating, and unbelievable in the best possible way," Eric continued. "It's ours. Every event is like a star and when you step away and see the big picture it's a constellation. Sure, it's zig-zagging and intricate and a little messy but it's pretty spectacular."

Kyle nodded in silent agreement.

"So for all the lost years, all the heartache, and confusion, and sacrifice, I would never change it," Eric declared. "Because being here, with you now, holding you and the way you're looking at me..."
it was all worth it. What happens in the other timelines is irrelevant, because this is the best I could wish for. Who's to say that in each timeline this is where we'd be?"

Kyle exhaled, glanced at the stars and then returned his gaze to Eric and shrugged.

"Well, if we could fall in love with each other despite five hundred years separating us then we could fall in love in any timeline," Kyle replied. "To me we just seem too destined to be a fluke."

Eric grinned at his stubborn, believing boyfriend.

"Yeah, I think you're right. Maybe we're just a universal truth?"

Kyle beamed, before saying, "Exactly. And it may have been complicated and a long time coming but it was never boring."

"We definitely took the scenic route."

Kyle chuckled, pressing his forehead to Eric and searching his eyes.

"Now… I don't care how long it took," Kyle continued. "I'm just glad that I finally have you."

Eric's gaze grew misty, and he whispered, "me too."

Kyle's mouth tugged in a half smirk before he reached up and claimed Eric's lips. Eric gladly surrendered, he always would.

"You know I'll love you forever, right?" Kyle whispered between kisses.

Eric's heart tightened and his breath snagged on one alluring, shining word. He nodded, his vision blurry.

"Forever…" Eric murmured, before he kissed Kyle again.

Chapter End Notes

Here we are, guys. The end. Thank you all for reading! For all the follows, kudos, and comments I could not be more grateful! This has been a long haul, but without your support I would never have made it. This story has been such a pleasure to write and a wonderful experience, and the encouragement I've received from everywhere has been amazing. I cannot thank you all enough. I have a few projects lined up for the rest of the summer, so expect to see those very soon! In the meantime, I hope you've enjoyed this chapter and the story in general and as always, I'd love to hear your thoughts! You've been fantastic.

End Notes

So there's gonna be either three or four more chapters to do this. In the meantime, I hope you
enjoyed and feedback is always appreciated!

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