Creatures We Find in the Forest
by crazy_like_a

Summary

After Neil runs his mouth on Kathy Ferdinand's show, he strikes a bargain with Andrew and finds out there's more to the monster than he originally thought.

Notes

All credit for characters, plot, exy, and all good things goes to Nora Sakavic. I will be twisting canon a bit (a lot) and I'll be rewriting scenes so things will sound the same/similar. Again, I'm not taking credit. Just having some fun.

Big shout-out to Lauren (you guys can follow her at downthefoxhole.tumblr.com) she's the one that said "vampires" and helped me develop the idea for this. Go give her some love!

There will be lots of blood and some violence (and sex probably- if you read Cartography you won't be surprised)- I will give you a head's up when things get particularly graphic and if you have questions/concerns about upcoming content or possible triggers leave me a comment or send me a message on tumblr @ hopingforcoordinates (if you'd like to be answered privately just let me know!)

Also feel free to message me if you get a bit confused- like I said, I will be changing things up but hopefully I'll get everything across okay.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Welcome to the Show

The Foxes made it back to the Tower after their eventful day at Kathy Ferdinand's studio and the panic ringing in Neil's ears had yet to stop. The words he had said to and about Riko were a bitter film coating his tongue. What the hell have I done?

The longer Neil stayed at Palmetto State, the more he felt like he was making a huge mistake. Ever since he'd arrived at Upstate Regional Airport at the beginning of summer the itch in his feet had grown steadily worse. Run run run run run. It was foolish, idiotic, suicidal to stay there any longer. Kevin had lured him in with praise for his potential, but now he looked at him as if he were barely worth more than garbage found on the side of the highway. Andrew looked at him like he was something to break. The rest of the team either looked like they pitied him or despised him and Neil wasn't sure which was worse.

And then the show had happened. He'd been pulled onto stage with Kevin and Kathy and then blindsided by Riko's surprise appearance. He kept seeing Riko emerging from the shadows over and over again. His mind kept replaying his own voice telling Riko off in front of everyone on live television.

He was standing alone in the middle of the bedroom he shared with Matt and Seth, unable to move. What the hell was I thinking?

His mother would've beat him half to death for even considering that contract. His signature- or rather Neil Josten's- was barely legible because his hands had been trembling so bad. He almost expected her to come storming in to shout at him for being a moron. He could almost hear her voice, feel her fists colliding with his face and ribs, as he stood there thinking about all the foolish risks he'd taken. If her spirit was lurking anywhere out in the universe or the afterlife, he hoped she hadn't seen him on that stage this morning, under the bright studio lights, running his stupid mouth.

He should have run when Andrew first swung his racquet into his ribs. He should have run when Andrew promised to figure him out. He should have run after that awful night in Columbia.

In all his years of running, it was always fight or flight, but now it seemed like his body was stuck in the horrible in-between mode of frozen. He couldn't force his hands to pack his bag. He couldn't force his feet to take him away from the Tower for good.

Neil tried to breathe steadily as he tore off the clothes he'd worn on Kathy Ferdinand's show and stuffed them deep into his dresser drawer. His fingers shook as he pulled on his jeans and a black t-shirt. In the threadbare cotton and the worn denim he felt more like who he was supposed to be, though he could feel Neil Josten's persona slipping away piece by piece. He'd set the script on fire and now all he could do was improvise- lie, evade, hide- until he could burrow back into comfortable oblivion again. He couldn't afford to make himself memorable and now the whole nation had seen his face.

Neil clamped his lips between his teeth as if he could somehow seal his mouth shut for the rest of his miserable life. It wouldn't be long, anyway. Maybe he really could get by without saying another damn word before his father's men caught up to him.

Dimly, he was aware he was taking too long and Matt had already been concerned enough about him earlier. He took a deep breath and left the bedroom.
Back in the main room, Neil sat with the upperclassmen and ate pizza and tried to ignore the awful sickness churning in his gut. The conversation circled the Ravens and Kathy's show like dingy dishwater circling the drain. Eventually, it would have to be dealt with, but Neil was happy to ignore it as long as they were willing to avoid the sensitive topics.

Nicky showed up at the dorm not long later, wringing his hands and working hard to keep the smile pasted to his face.

Neil listened as Nicky asked Matt to fix the window in their dorm. To no one's surprise, Andrew had thrown a violent tantrum after they returned to campus and Nicky was practically begging as he offered Matt three hundred dollars to try to have the window fixed before Wymack came around the next day.

Then, Nicky's dark eyes fell on Neil and he said the last thing Neil wanted to hear. “Andrew wants to see you.”

Neil knew it was almost time for Andrew's next dose, but he expected Andrew would be too tempted to dive sober into his bottomless rage to bother with his next pill. Neil wasn't sure what the pills were, but according to everyone Betsy prescribed them to help with Andrew's mood swings during his first summer at Palmetto State. When he was on the meds, Andrew was always on his way up. When he was off them, no one wanted to stick around long enough to find out which direction he'd go unless he was in the goal.

With a weary sigh, Neil got up and followed Nicky down the hall to the cousins' suite. It was only his second time beyond the door and it was strange, to say the least. Kevin was curled up in a beanbag, either drunk on vodka or zoned out on the sedatives Abby had given him earlier. Aaron was cleaning up in the kitchen, seemingly unaffected. Nicky pointed down the hall toward the bedroom and went to sit by Kevin, taking up the remote for the television to resume whatever movie was paused on-screen.

Neil squared his shoulders and padded down the hallway. He rapped his knuckles twice against the door as he opened it to announce his presence. Two dressers were pushed together under the windows and Andrew perched on the edge of one with his feet dangling. The smell of fresh air wafted in through a hole in the window, bloodstained and surrounded by a halo of jagged cracks. Blood covered one of Andrew's hands and Andrew flexed his fingers slowly to see just how much damage he'd done to himself.

“You could've ruined your hand,” Neil said. He couldn't help it. It was a dumb stunt to pull no matter the circumstances.

“Oh, dear. Can't have that, can we?” Andrew's voice was like smoke, smooth and soft but it'd choke anyone who got too close.

“I don't think Kevin would appreciate you trying to match his injuries.”

Andrew lifted his head and put on a horrible smile. “He's a Raven. Uniformity is what he's comfortable with.”

“Is that why you wear black all the time? Trying to make him feel at home?”

“Ha! Tell me, Neil, now that you've met darling Riko- who wears the color best? Me or him? I vote me, but I'm a bit biased.”

“Are you? You don't seem to care much for yourself.” Neil gave Andrew's bloody hand a pointed
Andrew put his uninjured hand over his heart and when he spoke his voice sounded almost tender, as pretty as a bear trap shining in the grass. “How could I have forgotten about that mouth on you? Silly, silly me. It’s the drugs that make me silly, see. I’m not the only one who took a swing today, though, and I hate stating the obvious, but I feel your oblivious mind might not see it just yet: Riko is going to come after you. You’re too interesting for him to ignore you now."

Neil’s gut clenched with sour nausea. He’d caught the interest of two monsters in the span of only a few months. How stupid he’d been to think he could ever survive without his mother’s ruthless, guiding hand.

“So,” Andrew continued brightly, “did you drink your bravery juice this morning or did you lie when you said you couldn’t risk catching Riko’s eye? Tell me it’s the former, Neil. I do so hate liars.”

Neil shifted his weight and swallowed thickly. “I wasn’t lying. I- I couldn’t just sit there, though.”

“Yes, you could’ve. It’s easier to do nothing than something. No one forced you.” Andrew tilted his head and blinked owlishly at him. “You lashed out against Riko because you wanted to. I won’t guess at your reasons. Maybe you’re just in love with Wonder Boy or maybe you’re addicted to trouble, but you spoke up because you wanted to. Prey shouldn’t poke fun at predators, Neil. Didn’t anyone ever teach you that?”

Neil kept quiet. He didn’t trust himself not to open his mouth without vomiting.

“Little lamb,” Andrew jeered. “So quiet now. Did you use up all your words already? Pity that.”

“You talk enough for the both of us,” Neil mumbled.

Andrew nodded sagely. “On second thought, it might be wiser for you to keep your mouth shut from now on. Not that it’ll save you, of course. Riko will know everything there is to know about you in a matter of days.”

Panic knifed through Neil’s chest, hot and sharp and devastating. Fear crawled under his skin with a thousand legs rolling in sickening waves.

“Why did you call me in here?” Neil asked tightly, barely able to squeeze the words through the knot in his throat. Did Andrew just want to watch him have a nervous breakdown for sport?

“I want an answer.”

“You didn’t ask a question.”

“Hush, Neil. I was getting there.” Andrew tried to look stern, but his face melted into a goofy grin again. “Are you going to run or are you going to stay?”

“Do you really give a shit?”

Andrew opened his arms, turning his hands palm-up, and looked around disbelievingly as if he had a sympathetic audience behind him. “Neil,” he said somberly, “I don’t give a shit about anything. Haven’t in years. I still want an answer, though.”

“Why?”
“I'll give you an answer for an answer. I'm a firm believer in reciprocity.” Andrew's lips quirked back up as if he couldn't keep from smiling for too long. “I promised to keep Kevin safe. In order to do what I promised, I have to convince him to stay here. The problem: Kevin is itching to run back to Riko and beg for forgiveness. You can't blame him for that. He's a little fucked in the head,” Andrew whispered conspiratorially, tapping bloody fingers to his temple. “The solution: give him a shiny toy. You've caught his interest. He thinks he can shape you into a decent Exy player and his obsession outweighs everything else. If you stay, he'll stay.”

“I can't stay,” Neil hissed. “You know I can't. I shouldn't have come here in the first place.”

“You stay, you die. You run, you die,” Andrew sang it almost like a nursery rhyme. “On your own, your odds are shitty, but I'm willing to tip the scales for you, Neil, just this once. Just for a year, I'll keep you alive if you keep Kevin here.”

It was bizarre enough to pull a strangled, bitter laugh out of Neil's throat. “You can't save me from what's coming my way. You're tough, sure, and you're crazy as hell, but you can't protect me.”

Neil managed to take one step toward the door before Andrew was across the room, slamming him back into the wall so hard stars exploded across his field of vision. He could only stare in shock as the goalkeeper leaned up into his face, so close their noses were almost touching. The smell of blood filled his nose and threatened to choke him.

“Think again, number ten,” he hissed before flashing him a shark's smile. That's when Neil noticed that Andrew's canines were a bit sharper than they ought to have been. Slowly, Andrew lifted up his bloodied hand and wiggled his fingers for Neil to see. Under the drying smears of blood, the torn skin had already healed.

Neil's head swam. He remembered his mother raising a stake over the chest of his father's associate, saw the glint of his father's cleaver as it sliced through a fanged woman's neck on the kitchen floor.

“You're a vampire.” He let out a humorless laugh. This was just his luck. “Of course you are.”

It made the pint-sized man the perfect protector. Kevin's choice suddenly made perfect sense.

Andrew actually looked taken aback for once. “Huh, you're taking this rather well. I'll bet there's a fun story behind that. You'll tell me later- well, if you're still here.”

Neil couldn't speak.

“We're going to Columbia at nine,” Andrew continued, curling his fingers inside Neil's collar. “Make your choice by then. If you're staying here, meet us out in the hallway. If you're going to run, you better be gone before I come looking for you.”

“That's only three hours,” Neil mumbled,straining back against the wall as if he could somehow retreat through it. Andrew's sharp eyes darted around his face, grinning at whatever he saw in Neil's expression.

“Run along, little rabbit,” he whispered. “Clock's ticking.”

Andrew backed up just enough for Neil to slip out from between his arms and dart out of the bedroom. He made it out of the suite before his panic stopped him cold. Groping at the wall, Neil struggling to stay upright and in control of himself.

He had a million more questions than he started with. His father's line of work gave him a fuzzy
understanding of the basics at best. Vampires were relatively hard to spot unless you were really paying attention. They could walk around in the sun and eat and drink and breathe like normal humans, but they never tanned, barely aged, and never died from natural causes. A vampire could recover from bullets and all sorts of injuries, but they couldn't recover from being hacked into pieces or burned with an acid that the hunters jokingly called “holy water.” The Wesninskis had an old family recipe for that, but Nathan preferred his cleaver and his ax. Neil’s mother preferred old-fashioned wooden stakes- to Neil's understanding, most of her family did. They'd been hunting vampires in Great Britain for over a century and, according to his uncle, their family thought Nathan's methods were a bit overzealous and barbaric.

Who else on the team knew? Did Wymack know? Neil scrubbed a hand over his face and groaned quietly. Was Aaron a vampire as well? If he wasn’t, it was only a matter of time before he looked noticeably older than his twin and that would mean Andrew was turned somewhat recently. If Aaron was, then Neil had no real way of knowing just how old they really were.

Neil looked back at the door in horror. Was Nicky one, too? How close had he come to biting Neil in Columbia?

Run, whispered his instincts.

But something made him hesitate, reconsider. Andrew had offered him a year of protection and now Neil knew that Andrew could make good on such a promise. He was unstable- Neil had no idea how effective prescription drugs were in a vampire's system, but he couldn't imagine they had much impact on whatever his psychosis was.

He could stay. He could have another year of playing Exy and being a Fox and being Neil. For once, could felt heavier than should.

Neil braced his hands on his knees and sucked in a few deep breaths. Three hours, Andrew had said. He had three hours to decide what his answer would be.
Choices and Consequences

Chapter Summary

Neil goes to Columbia with Andrew's lot. One of the Foxes doesn't last the night.

Chapter Notes

Canon character death in this one!
Also a bit of an Alice in Wonderland reference- not taking credit for that either!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Andrew's exaggerated surprise matched the astonishment in Neil's heart when Neil was in the hallway at nine o'clock that night. Nicky was grinning, but thankfully he kept his hands to himself. Aaron looked completely indifferent and Kevin leaned closer to Andrew to ask questions, but Andrew waved him away.

Muffled music leaked into the hallway from the direction of Neil's suite and, just as Andrew's group turned to leave, the door swung open and a small group of strangers exited with Seth and Allison. Seth was laughing at something while Allison pressed up against him and dug through his pockets. She found only gum and cigarettes. Seth gave her an irritated look, but she kissed his frown away with a laugh.

Matt appeared in the doorway a moment later and relief bloomed across his face when he saw Neil there. “Neil! Hey, man, where'd you go? We thought you got lost.”

“I went for a run,” Neil explained, avoiding Andrew's amused smirk.

“You up for a movie night? Seth's heading out with Allison, but the rest of us are going to get started soon. Renee's going to be back any minute with snacks and drinks.”

“You two are going out?” Nicky asked, pointing at Allison and Seth. “Is that such a good idea? I mean-”

“Fuck off,” Seth barked. “It's none of your business.”

“It's not like you guys are cuddling up on the sofa for a cozy night in,” Allison added with a sneer.

Dan's arms slid around Matt's waist from behind before she peered around him to see who they were talking to. “Neil!” she called. “Come join us! It'll be fun.”

“I'm going to Columbia tonight, actually, but thank you.”

Dan let go of Matt and stepped out into the hallway. “No,” she said. “Absolutely not. You're staying here with us. You don't have to let them tell you what to do.”
“Oh, Dan, don't you worry,” chuckled Nicky, ruffling Neil's hair. “We'll bring him back in one piece.”

Dan folded her arms and narrowed her eyes. “Last time you took him down there he hitchhiked all the way back to campus.”

“I might cry,” Andrew said in German to Neil, smiling so big it hurt Neil's cheeks just to look at him. “Tell Mommy and Daddy that you're in good hands.”

The others looked at Neil questioningly.

Neil replied in German, “I'm not in good hands. I'm in yours.”

“Well, shit,” Aaron said.

Matt said, “Was that German? I thought he spoke French. He was speaking French at Kathy's, right? Am I losing my mind?”

Dan was frowning at him like she might figure him out if only she stared hard enough.

“He speaks German?” Nicky gasped and covered his mouth with both hands. “Shit. Aaron, what have we been talking about the last few months? I can't remember.”

“No much other than what you want to do to his ass,” Aaron answered dryly.

“Shit.”

“Good job, Nicky.” Aaron locked his stare back on Neil. “Were you planning on telling us?”

“No,” Neil answered honestly.

Andrew laughed. “Brother mine, if you want to know shit you have to figure it out for yourself.”

He began walking backwards toward the elevator and crooked a finger at Neil. “Come along, rabbit. We're late, we're late, for a very important date.”

“Neil, you can stay here if you want,” Dan said.

“I'm good, guys. I'll see you later,” Neil replied before following Kevin and Aaron.

Andrew stuffed his hands in his pockets and jangled his keys obnoxiously while they rode the elevator down to the lobby. Neil looked in the silvery doors and found Andrew's blurry reflection in it, quietly dismissing another assumption about Andrew's species. There had to be some way to discern if the others had turned or not.

Nicky was driving that night, so Neil was stuck in the backseat between the twins. On his left, Aaron was sullen with one cheek propped up on his fist. On his right, Andrew was fiddling with his lighter and talking animatedly to Nicky about music and movies, most of which Neil knew nothing about.

An hour into the drive, Andrew took a sip from a small flask produced from his pocket and a few minutes after that his energy began to fade. For the first time, Neil wondered if his lethargy was an effect of withdrawal from his pills or whatever he'd taken a drink of. His comments and questions slowed down until he was just offering a noncommittal grunt here and there. Nicky didn't seem to mind carrying the entire conversation by himself, though. He kept chattering away right until they were pulling into a parking space outside Sweetie's.
Before getting out of the car, Andrew reached under his seat and pulled out a dark plastic bag. He tossed it in Neil's lap and waved his hand— a gesture Neil took to mean that's for you. Neil tucked it under his arm and followed the others out into the night air.

Inside, they found that there were two groups ahead of them waiting to be seated. Kevin walked up to speak to the hostess and Andrew leaned closer Neil's side, tilting his head toward him as if he were about to tell him an important secret.

“You in for dust tonight?” he murmured before breaking out in a sleepy grin.

Neil stared at him blankly and didn't bother softening the irritated edge in his voice. “What, you're actually giving me a choice this time?”

“Different circumstances,” he answered. “You get a choice from now on. You in or out?”

“I will never agree to take mind-altering substances around you or yours,” Neil said lowly. “I don't trust any of you.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and flapped his hand. “Yeah, yeah, we don't trust you either. Go change.”

While Andrew went to the salad bar for packets of crackers, Nicky ushered Neil off to the bathroom. Neil dumped the bag out on the counter and frowned at the pile of black clothing. It was all new and of higher quality than the last outfit. Nicky fussed with his hair for a bit before he noticed Neil's displeasure.

“Problem?”

Neil looked over at him and tried to remember if he'd felt any fangs when Nicky forced those kisses on him. The better part of that first evening in Columbia was still a nauseating blur. He didn't know if a vampire's fangs could retract or not, though, so he supposed it didn't matter anyway. His mother taught him only where to aim the stake and how quickly a vampire's head had to be removed afterward. He regretted not asking more questions.

“I can buy my own stuff,” Neil mumbled.

“Okay,” he said slowly. He dragged his eyes down Neil's body, clad in faded jeans and a threadbare t-shirt that was two sizes too large, and twisted his mouth in a pitying way. “You're ours now, so we can't have you going around looking— well, like that. If you have money, great. If you don't, fine. Take Andrew's gifts while he's still in a giving mood. Don't take his generosity for granted— it's rare.”

Neil blinked. Apparently, Andrew hadn't told his family about the suspiciously large pile of cash Neil had brought to the Tower. He hadn't told them Neil spoke German either. The vampire was giving him gifts and keeping his secrets and Neil didn't know what to do with that.

“Welcome to the family, I guess,” Nicky said, obviously hoping for a better reaction than Neil was willing to give.

“I am not your family,” Neil hissed. He didn't know if Nicky was human, didn't know if Nicky was trying to ease him into a potential vampire clan or if he was just trying to welcome him into an oddly co-dependent group of humans that stuck together for unclear reasons. Either way, Neil wanted no part of it. He just wanted to live and play Exy as long as he could before his father came for him.

Nicky looked wounded for a second before he schooled his features into something resigned and
good-natured. “Yeah, I’ve heard that one before,” he said quietly. “Fake it for me, will you? I'm just trying to keep everyone together.”

“Are you having trouble keeping them together?”

“Trouble,' he says,” Nicky chuckled. “Well, they have that deal, right? So keeping them in the same place is easy, but they barely look at one another. It's been like this since their mom died. Did you know I came back from Germany to be their guardian after that? It was me or my parents and they're... not the most understanding of people.”

“What wouldn't they understand?” Neil itched to just ask Nicky outright, but he had to be careful in case Nicky was human and still in the dark about his cousin's condition. If Andrew was keeping his secrets, Neil supposed he'd return the favor.

For a moment, Nicky floundered before he came up with an answer. “They're both messed up. I mean, who wouldn't be?”

“Right.”

Nicky gave him a tight smile. “You gonna change or-?”

Neil took his new clothes into a stall. He changed quickly into the tight black long-sleeved shirt, made of light fabric that had a subtle sheen to it, and dark jeans. Lastly, he pulled on the heavy boots Andrew had purchased for him, which were adorned with superfluous buckles and zippers. He stuffed his own clothing into the bag and stepped out, carefully avoiding his reflection. Nicky was checking his teeth in the mirror and Neil's eyes were drawn to his dull canines.

Nicky caught him staring at his mouth and turned sheepish. “Um, about last time-”

Neil took a full step away from him.

Nicky dropped his eyes to the floor and sounded like he was reciting a speech from memory. “I know we messed up the last time we brought you here. That- that wasn't okay. Andrew was just trying to make sure you weren't a threat or anything. He has to keep Kevin safe.”

“How nice for Kevin.” Neil didn't wait for him to reply. He flicked his contacts into the trash and strode out of the bathroom to find Andrew's table. Nicky followed a few paces behind, hands stuffed in his pockets and shoulders hunched.

Nicky slid into the booth first so Neil could sit on the outside. Andrew pillowed his head on his folded arms while they waited for their ice cream to show up. Nicky quickly picked up teasing Aaron about the cheerleader named Katelyn. Kevin pulled a plastic orange bottle out of his pocket and shook the pills near Andrew's face. Andrew turned his head to squint up at Kevin with one eye and Neil saw a flash of white teeth as he snarled something low enough that only Kevin heard it.

The ice cream arrived about fifteen minutes later. Nicky and Aaron's bickering was the only conversation at their table while they ate. Neil took a few bites of his coffee-flavored ice cream just to have something to do. Andrew methodically devoured his sundae, topped with gooey caramel and hot fudge and chopped pecans, and somehow he didn't spill a drop. Neil's stomach turned just watching him.

After they ate their ice cream, Aaron left a wad of cash on the table that was too large to be just a tip. Neil knew the drugs were hidden somewhere in Andrew's pockets and anxiety twisted in his gut.
At Eden's Twilight, the crowd waiting to get in was half of what it had been the last time Neil had been down there. Nicky explained that since it was a Saturday the booze stopped flowing at midnight, but reassured him that there was a well-stocked supply at the house. Neil couldn't remember much about the house beside panic and the desperate need to escape. If Andrew truly respected his wishes to stay sober that night he might get a chance to look around the house more.

While Nicky parked, the other four headed inside to find a table, which was much easier this time. Andrew smacked Neil's arm and told him to help him with the drinks. They left Aaron and Kevin behind to watch the table.

Roland was behind the bar again and looked genuinely surprised to see Neil at Andrew's side again. Before he could get a single word out, Andrew cut him off with a harsh, “This one's staying clean and sober.”

Roland nodded and set out a glass with a can of soda before going off to mix drinks for the others. Neil waited until his back was turned to check the glass for residue.

“Paranoid,” Andrew accused.


A few people crowded against Neil's back and nudged him into Andrew's chest, but Andrew didn't move or budge under his weight. The vampire inclined his head and flashed him a bright smile.

“We'll play truth or truth at the house, rabbit,” Andrew said. His warm breath brushed across Neil's cheek and smelled of cigarette smoke. “I'm no good at games before I have my dinner.”

Neil blinked in surprise. “You're going to feed here?” He looked around at the drunken crowd and felt afraid on their behalf.

“I have friends here,” Andrew said, laughing. “Don't look so shocked.”

Neil wanted to ask just what he meant by that, but Roland appeared with their tray of drinks before he could. Andrew jerked his head in the direction of the table, indicating that Neil should go first, and then followed him with the tray held above his head.

Nicky was sitting between Aaron and Kevin when they got back. Andrew tossed the packets of dust onto the table and the four began knocking back shots and taking dust like their lives depended on it. Nicky and Aaron got through their portions first and disappeared down the steps to the crowd on the dance floor. Andrew tapped two fingers to his temple and winked at Neil before he darted off as well, leaving Neil and Kevin alone together.

Neil couldn't see Aaron and Nicky from where he was sitting and he couldn't stop wondering where Andrew was or who he was with. Eventually, curiosity pried his lips apart.

“Does Andrew have any other friends here besides Roland?”

Kevin looked startled and annoyed at being spoken to. His eyes were glazed over from the drugs and drinks and he struggled with his words for a long while before he managed, “He eats with Roland in the backroom sometimes.”

“With?”

Kevin turned to face him, swaying in his seat a little with his eyes narrowed accusingly. “You know, don't you?”
“Know what?”

“About Andrew's... eating habits.”

“Seems like a picky eater.”

“Stop messing around.”

Neil folded his arms over his chest and leaned back. “I'm not going to say it.”

“He's a fucking vampire,” Kevin spat.

Neil looked at the scars on Kevin's hand. “You're still human, aren't you?”

Kevin scowled. “If Andrew turned me, my hand wouldn't be fucked up. You really think I'd play with the wrong hand just to fake an injury?”

“No,” Neil answered. Exy was too important to Kevin for that. “Are there any others?”

“Andrew's the only one. Didn't he tell you?”

“No.”

Kevin shook his head and ran a trembling hand through his hair. “He probably wanted to see if you could figure it out. Or maybe he just doesn't care.”

“So he and Roland-?”

“They have an arrangement.” Kevin snorted and tossed back another drink. “How'd you convince him to keep you?”

“He said I have to keep you at Palmetto.”

Kevin laughed dryly. “You're going to have to work a lot harder to keep my interest.”

Regret soured in Neil's stomach. He drank his soda and wondered if it really was too late to pack up and run.

Not long later, Andrew returned to the table with clear eyes, ruffled hair, and no sign of his usual cheer. Immediately, he grabbed the nearest glass of whiskey and drank it in one go.

“D'you get enough?” Kevin slurred.

Andrew slid a cold look his way. “Time to leave.”

They'd planned to leave after twelve, but it was only eleven-forty, according to the display on Kevin's phone in the center of the table.

“Andrew, it's early!” Kevin shouted over the noise. He shoved his phone at him as proof of the time.

Andrew stared blankly at him until Kevin relented and struggled to his feet. Andrew stopped him from tipping forward with a shove to the center of his chest.

“Ow,” Kevin grumbled, rubbing the spot.

Andrew said nothing more before pivoting on his heel and descending into the writhing pit of
dancers to find his cousin and his twin. Neil stood at the rail and watched the colored lights catch in his pale hair as he made his way through the crowd.

“He's different after he's eaten,” Kevin said with a huge sigh. “Try not to piss him off.” He almost stumbled again, but caught himself on the railing beside Neil.

When Andrew emerged with Nicky and Aaron in tow, Neil and Kevin made their way to the door to meet them. The three drunk men were left under Neil's supervision on the sidewalk while Andrew went to fetch the car. Neil went rigid with apprehension when Nicky leaned into him and pawed at his hair, but there wasn't much he could do without risking Nicky falling. Aaron squinted at the pair of them and looked like he wanted to say something, but didn't. Kevin had his phone out, though he didn't look like he was in any state to comprehend whatever words were on the screen.

When Andrew pulled up to the curb, Neil helped Nicky into the middle of the backseat and then slid in beside him. Aaron sat on Nicky's other side, while Kevin took his usual place up front. After the doors were closed, Andrew shifted into drive and nosed the car back into traffic.

With a clear head, Neil took note of the streets they traveled down so he could remember the route from Eden's Twilight to the house. He was surprised to find it was only a few minutes before they reached a sleepy little neighborhood. Nicky tried to slur his way through a song until Aaron elbowed him in the ribs and grumbled at him to be quiet.

As Andrew turned into the driveway, a phone began to ring.

“Make it stop,” Nicky groaned as Aaron struggled to fish the device out of his pocket.

“Aaron,” Kevin snapped a moment later when Aaron was still fumbling.

Andrew shut the engine off, but they all remained where they were while Aaron finally answered the phone.

“Coach?” he grumbled. “No, no, we're not on campus. He what? Wait, hold on. I can't-” Aaron's arm shot forward between the front seats, his hand gripping the phone tightly. “Andrew, take it. I can't.”

Andrew calmly pressed the device to his ear. Aaron scrambled out of the car and emptied his stomach of all those drinks he'd packed away with determination.

Nicky wrinkled his nose and whined, “Aw, gross, man!”

“What's going on?” Andrew asked lowly into the phone. “Oh, I see. No, we'll be back tomorrow. I'll call you.”

He ended the call and opened his door. Neil and Kevin took that as their cue to climb out as well and they rounded the car to stand by Nicky in a semi-circle around Aaron, who was still hunched over in the grass.

Andrew took his time lighting a cigarette. Then, he carefully pocketed his pack and his lighter, took a deep drag, and said, “Seth's dead.”

Those two words weren't enough to have an impact- especially not in Andrew's casual tone. Neil narrowed his eyes at Andrew and Nicky told him to stop joking around. Aaron groaned miserably before retching again.
With a long sigh, Andrew explained, “He overdosed. Someone found him dead in a bathroom. Call Coach back if you don't believe me.” He held the phone out to them and wiggled it invitingly.

A chill spread through Neil's chest as he absorbed this information. He repeated the words over and over again in his head until his mind accepted that this was real. *Seth died. Seth is dead. Seth is a body going cold.*

While Nicky and Kevin demanded more information- the how and where and why- Neil stared at Andrew's perfectly blank expression. As usual, he felt like there was something Andrew was holding back. Nicky was visibly distraught, which Neil found interesting. Seth had been nothing but hostile toward Nicky, but Nicky still looked like he was on the verge of a panic attack. He paced back and forth across the driveway, taking slow and shaky breaths to keep from hyperventilating. Aaron carefully got back to his feet and sagged against the car.

“But we have a game on Friday,” Kevin muttered.

“Act like a fucking human for once, Kevin,” Aaron grumbled as he carefully got back to his feet.

Neil tried to find a shred of genuine grief for his dead roommate somewhere in his chest, but there was only numb acceptance and the itch in his feet telling him that it was time to move along now. Andrew's eyes snapped to him so suddenly he almost flinched and then a hint of a smirk twitched at the corner of his lips. It was like he could see the ice in Neil's soul and the withered humanity beneath it.

Dimly, Neil noted that it wasn't just the manic grin usually stretching Andrew's face that made him look younger. Side by side and sober, the subtle difference between the twins was evident now that Neil was looking for it.

Andrew motioned for Neil to follow him and together they went into the dark house, leaving the other three to process their emotions outside. Andrew didn't bother flicking on any lights as he navigated the dark hallways. Neil followed the shifting, black shape of him to the kitchen, but no further. He hovered in the doorway while Andrew moved around in the glow of the streetlight seeping in through the cheap plastic blinds. Andrew pulled out a bottle of liquor and a glass from the cabinets.

“That indifference is a bad sign for you,” Andrew commented as he poured himself a shot. “You better learn how to fake tears or something come tomorrow or else the others won't be very happy with you.”

“I don't think the others will really care about my reaction,” Neil said.

Andrew took the shot and poured himself another. “They will if they're smart enough to figure out that you caused this.”

Neil's heart tripped over the words and a bolt of hot horror struck his lungs. “What? You can't seriously blame me for this.”

“Can't I?” Andrew turned and leaned his hip against the counter.

Agitated, Neil flipped the light switch and glared at Andrew in the harsh flood of light. “I didn't force Seth to take those drugs.”

“I know,” Andrew said casually. “For a runner, you're shockingly bad at keeping up.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”
Andrew tilted his head back and hummed tunelessly. “I’ll dumb this down for you: Seth got clean a few years back. He took his anti-depressants like a good little boy, but sometimes he took them with booze and sometimes he took too much of both. I knew this and so did Allison. She never let him get away with that shit when they were together. Now, tell me, Neil, have you caught up yet?”

Neil remembered Allison and Seth, fingers entwined and smiling against each other’s mouths. He remembered Allison checking Seth's pockets and finding only gum and cigarettes. His stomach plummeted.

“He and Allison were fine when we left.”

“And they continued to be fine right up until Riko's little minions got to Seth in the bathroom.”

“You're crazy. There's no way Riko had him killed.”

“You know what Riko did to Kevin out of petty jealousy. You called him pathetic on national television. You can't be all that surprised at how this turned out.” Andrew took another shot and licked his lips. “Although, to be fair, it's partly their fault for leaving the dorms. Renee said they all agreed to play quietly this weekend.”

Neil swallowed but his throat still felt like it was lined with sandpaper. “You saw this coming?”

“I'm disappointed that you didn't. I thought you were smarter than that, Neil,” Andrew said, affecting a wistful tone. Then, he clicked his tongue and continued, “You should be happy, though. Riko got you promoted to starting striker. You talked the talk, now you can walk the walk.”

“No.” Neil stepped back and shook his head. “This is insane. It's a game. Riko wouldn't murder Seth just for a game.”

“Aren't you putting your life on the line for a game? So judgy, Neil. It's unattractive.”

The world was tilting sharply beneath Neil's feet. This was all wrong.

“I can't stay here.”

Andrew pushed off the counter and crossed the few feet of tiled floor between them. Neil felt paralyzed by the intensity of Andrew's eyes, present and focused and more dangerous than he'd ever seemed before.

Andrew dragged a dull fingernail down the side of Neil's throat and his eyes flicked down when Neil's throat jerked around a hard swallow. The light scrape of it left Neil prickling and chilled all over.

Then, he said, “You and I made a deal, Neil, and I intend to see you keep it. You're not going anywhere.”

Andrew held his stare for a long, heavy moment. Then, he pressed something warm and metal into Neil's palm. Andrew didn't explain, but he didn't have to. It was a key to this house, explicit permission into this part of Andrew's world. Neil Josten had a place there. He'd never wanted to hang onto a name so badly before, but a part of him still warned him to run before his demons came calling.

Neil walked back to the main hallway and looked at Andrew's back as he stood in the doorway to watch over his family on the front lawn. Andrew wasn't human, was barely sane most of the time, but maybe he could shield Neil from whatever was coming his way.
Belatedly, he remembered the so-called game Andrew had promised to play that night. He didn't know how much blood Andrew had consumed or how much longer he would be in his right mind, but he'd had enough uncomfortable truth for one evening. Since he was staying, apparently, he figured he had a bit more time to get answers from the vampire.

Chapter End Notes

I edited this in a bit of a hurry- if you guys catch any mistakes, let me know and I'll fix 'em right away :)
Neil caught six hours of fitful sleep in a recliner in the den before a noise jolted him awake. He barely had time to register the shadowy blur coming toward him before Andrew's knees were planted on the armrests and his hands were shoving the backrest downward. The chair reclined with a groan of springs and, suddenly, Neil was lying flat beneath the cage of Andrew's body. Paralyzed by fear, all he could do was stare up into hazel eyes that held just a hint of hysteria.

“It's a recliner, Neil,” he whispered. “You're supposed to recline in it.”

Andrew's face split with a gleeful grin and he leaned forward to rock the chair gently. Neil's lungs wouldn't work.

Andrew leaned forward, tipping the chair back so far Neil's stomach dropped with the fear of falling. Then, Andrew's eyes shuttered and he climbed off as if he'd grown bored in the minute he'd been there. Neil finally managed to take a full breath as he sat upright. He watched Andrew wander to the other side of the room and back with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his sweatpants. His pill bottle was in one of the pockets and Andrew rattled them rhythmically against his thigh as he walked.

“We didn't play our game last night,” Andrew said.

“Seth died.” Neil didn't know who he was reminding. It still felt surreal since they were far away from the dorms and their grieving teammates. From this distance, Neil's mind still entertained the possibility that they could find Seth alive if only they took the correct road back to campus.

“Right,” Andrew drawled, pivoting to face Neil again. “The others won't be up for hours, so let's play.”

Neil crossed his arms over his chest. “And how long does the game last for?”

“Until I get bored.”

His stomach churned. He'd spent the summer hoping Andrew would lose interest and leave him alone, but Andrew was still hellbent on prying honesty out of him. Andrew's attention span was longer than Neil had counted on.

Andrew took three steps closer and tilted his head, studying his expression. “I'm waiting.”
“What do you want to know?”

“Surprise me.”

Neil wracked his brain for something that Andrew would've figured out on his own anyway. The most obvious thing was that Neil knew about vampires before coming to Palmetto, but Neil couldn't explain that without blowing apart the story he'd woven for Andrew just after his first trip to Columbia. He didn't necessarily want to give Andrew his secrets, but he also knew this give-and-take was the only way to get the truth out of Andrew. His curiosity had always been much too big for his own good.

“My mother told me about vampires,” he said finally.

“Bedtime stories,” Andrew guessed.


Andrew lifted a brow. “Family trade?”

“No more. My uncle's the only one left on her side of the family, but he's not a hunter.”

Andrew took a step closer, narrowing his eyes at him. “Uncle? I thought you had nothing and no one.”

“I think it's your turn to share now.”

“Stingy,” Andrew said without any heat. “Here's mine: Aaron doesn't know.”

Neil took a moment to turn that over in his mind. The differences between the twins were subtle, but when Andrew lost the maniacal grin it was easier to spot them. If Aaron ever looked at his brother properly, he would've noticed.

“You must not have turned that long ago,” Neil guessed, watching Andrew's face for a reaction that never came.

“The day after graduation.” Andrew's face was stony and guarded for a second before his eyes lit up with amusement. “I was supposed to be out eating dinner, but instead I was dinner. Funny, huh?”

“I suppose it is to you.”

Andrew let out a little laugh that crackled like embers. “Oh, Neil, everything's funny when you're on the up and up.”

“How much longer do you have before your meds take you up and away again?”

“Oh, dear.” Andrew pulled the orange bottle from his pocket and put on a deep frown. “Huh. They should've worked by now. Maybe I need a bit of a boost.” He twisted the cap off with a flick of his wrist and dumped all the little white pills neatly into his mouth.

“What the hell are you doing?” Neil shouted. He flew at Andrew and tried to pry his jaw open, but Andrew only grinned like it was all a hilarious joke. Andrew crunched the pills noisily and a few shook free of his lips when he chuckled at Neil's horrified expression.

“Spit them out!” Neil shoved at Andrew's strong body, but he wouldn't budge. “Andrew! Spit them out. What the fuck are you thinking?”
Andrew was still crunching away and there was nothing Neil could do besides anxiously wonder what that many pills would do in a vampire's system.

Andrew's eyebrows knit together in mock concern. “Oh, sorry,” he mumbled, mouth still half-full. “I'm being rude. Did you want one?”

Before Neil could react, Andrew plucked a pill out of his mouth and stuffed it between Neil's lips. Neil's mind glitched with memories of cracker dust and the hard push of Nicky's tongue and thorny fear crawled up his throat. Belatedly, Neil realized the pill tasted like spearmint. Andrew started cackling at the look of shock on his face.

“Tic Tacs?” Neil couldn't believe it. He wanted to be furious at the sick prank, but it was hard to cling to anger in the flood of relief. For a moment, he rolled the breath mint on his tongue and watched Andrew laugh at him.

“Aw, little bunny, so funny to be so scared.” Andrew crunched some more of the mints noisily between his teeth. “You should've seen your face. I'll treasure this moment forever and ever.”

Neil's heart was still threatening to pound right out his chest. “The morning after our teammate overdosed? That's crass even for you.”

Andrew was still grinning. “Says the one who got him killed.”

“Is this the first time you've replaced your meds with mints?”

One half of Andrew's smile dropped, twisting his smile into something wry and mocking. “It was Bee's idea.”

“You've been sucking on Tic Tacs this whole time?”

“I wanted M&Ms, but Bee thought that might be a bit obvious.” He held the empty bottle up to one eye and looked at Neil through it like a spyglass, squeezing the other eye shut. “We needed a way to explain the rollercoaster I'm on. Can't ride without a ticket, yes?”

Neil's head was spinning. “So she knows you're a vampire. Does Wymack know?”

“I'm not the first Fox that was out for blood in the literal sense.”

“Abby?”

“Scores me a bag of the good stuff when she can. She's got a friend at the hospital, but, well, they tend to need it to keep the living from dying.”

Neil rubbed at his eyes and forced air into his lungs. “If it's not pills driving you up, what's doing it? You can't tell me that's all hunger.”

Andrew took the bottle away from his eye and tapped his temple, winking. “Good question. Too bad it's your turn to share. I've given you plenty, so you better make this good.”

“What do you want to know?” Neil was still trying to wrap his brain around Betsy's fake prescriptions.

Andrew's wicked grin told him he'd messed up by asking. He'd given Andrew control and he doubted he'd like where the conversation would go now. Neil swallowed the Tic Tac and waited.

“What did your father really do?”
Neil's throat squeezed.

Andrew tilted his head and let out a rough, low laugh. “You can lie like a champ, but you can't control your pulse. I'm a walking, talking polygraph test and you failed.”

Neil's body tensed. His heart thudded. *Run run run.* He clenched his hands into fists and dug his nails into his palms. Staying was a mistake. He'd never been sure if the rumors about a vampire's heightened senses was true or not. All the vampires he'd ever seen were dead before he could ask.

Andrew stepped close enough for Neil to smell the mint on his breath. “What's real, Neil?”

“Why'd you let me stay if you knew I was lying?” Neil whispered. His heart was in his throat and his stomach was in his shoes. Everything was wrong and sickening.

“I'm just whimsical like that, I guess,” Andrew deadpanned. “Stop running. Answer the question.”

“He killed people,” Neil ground out. “Professionally.”

“A hitman,” Andrew said with interest. “Was he any good at it?”

The smell of blood and burnt flesh hung at the back of Neil's throat. He could see spattered red on gray concrete. He could hear muffled screams seeping through the door to the basement.

“Yeah, he was pretty good.”

Andrew nodded and rocked back on his heels. “What sort of people did he prey on? Humans or vampires?”

“Vampires are humans,” he mumbled.

“Uh huh.” Andrew was unimpressed. “Didn't your mother ever tell you it's generally ill-advised to piss off a vampire when you're defenseless and all alone? Man, your heart is pounding. I bet if I slit you open you'd spray all over the walls.”

Neil retreated half a step back, thinking of the knives hidden in Andrew's armbands. Then, he confessed, “My father killed whoever caused problems. It didn't matter what they were.”

“Non-discriminatory murderer. Nice.”

“Yeah, he was a real swell guy,” Neil hissed. “I think my turn for sharing is over now.”

Andrew smiled pityingly. “Oh, no, did I touch a nerve?”

“You're an asshole.”

“Astute observation, Mr. Josten. Gold star.”

Neil felt flayed open and put on display like a hapless frog in a biology class. Andrew was taking him apart just to amuse himself.

Andrew patted Neil's cheek condescendingly and said, “I need to go refill my 'pills.' You stay here and think about your shitty life choices.” He stopped halfway across the room to add, “Oh, and if you're thinking of running, which I wouldn't put past you because you seem a bit thick in the head, you should know I'll find you wherever you go. You can't hide from me no matter how many rabbit holes you go down.”
The front door closed quietly a few moments later and Neil was left alone with the lead weight in his stomach. Too shaken to even think about getting more sleep, Neil ambled into the kitchen and mechanically set up the coffeepot.

Andrew returned eventually, but he went up to his bedroom instead of coming in to antagonize Neil again. Alone, he ate a bowl of cereal and drank two cups of black coffee while he tried to convince his body not to give in to the panic attack that he could feel building just under his heart. The only thing keeping him from dissolving into a shivering pile of fear was Andrew's promise of protection. Andrew was unstable, unpredictable, and he was determined to sniff out the truth about Neil, but as long as he was there Neil could play Exy and continue to live life as Neil Josten.

Kevin was the first one to wake up. He didn't talk to Neil as he shuffled into the kitchen to pour himself coffee. Aaron appeared, squinting and ruffled, when Kevin was halfway through his second cup. Nicky groaned a long string of unintelligible words as he stumbled in half an hour later.

Neil sat silently while the other three ate their breakfasts and grunted at each other through the haze of their hangovers. The air turned somber as they all began to remember the news of Seth's death and what awaited them at the dorms.

Andrew was the only one completely unaffected. He strolled into the kitchen at almost ten o'clock and grabbed a protein bar before telling them it was time to go. Neil dragged himself out to the car behind the others and stared silently out the window the whole way home.
Life After Seth

Chapter Summary

The Foxes try to figure things out after losing a teammate.

Neil spent the next few nights on Wymack's couch.

After a disastrous team meeting that nearly resulted in a fist fight between Matt and Andrew, the two halves of the team were sent to different parts of campus while they cooled their tempers and processed the death of their teammate. The upperclassmen went to Abby's house and Andrew's lot locked themselves up in the Tower. Neil had tried to follow them, but Wymack refused to let him spend the weekend alone in the room that was still full of Seth's belongings.

Neil didn't think it would've had much of an impact on him, but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

After seeing Matt and the girls, the gravity of what happened finally began to sink in. They were grieving him openly and Neil was needled by Andrew's theory that it was probably his fault. He couldn't even look directly at Allison when the team had gathered together.

Wymack didn't push him to talk on Sunday night. They ate sandwiches for dinner and then silently watched Palmetto State's football team win against USC-Columbia on television. Neil went to sleep feeling mentally exhausted. He dreamed of meeting his father on the court and a cleaver cutting through his racquet's strings.

When he woke, Neil lay on his back and stared at the ceiling for at least ten minutes, dreading the week ahead of him, before dragging himself out of his makeshift bed.

He met Wymack in the kitchen for a breakfast of coffee and toast. Watching Wymack's shoulders sag made Neil's stomach feel queasy. Seth had been one of the first players Wymack picked for the Foxes' line-up and Seth was the only one of that original group to make it to his fifth year. The others had used the loopholes written purposefully into their contracts to walk out, but Seth had stayed. He had been an asshole to his teammates and he'd devoted most of his time on the court to harassing Neil about his inexperience, but he'd been a survivor through and through. It was cruel that his death was ruled a suicide. His friends and family- Allison- no one would know that he hadn't ingested those drugs willingly.

Neil was almost grateful when the silence ended and he was pulled free of his thoughts.

"Andrew told me you know," Wymack said gruffly into his coffee mug before he took a drink. "You know about him being a vampire."

Neil's stomach squirmed. "We had a little chat about it."

"Bit of a shock."

"A bit, yeah."

Wymack grunted and took another drink. "He won't hurt you if that's what you're worried about. He's never attacked anyone for blood as far as I know."
“And how far is that?”

“Look, kid, you don't have to take my word for it. I wouldn't blame you if you didn't and you can stay on my couch as long as you like if it freaks you out being down the hall from Andrew, but I trust him with my life and the lives of my players.”

Neil studied the older man's face. He didn't understand how someone who'd been let down by so many players could still put his faith in a man like Andrew Minyard. As the thought passed through Neil's head, he realized he must be just as nuts as Wymack because he was putting his trust in Andrew, too.

Wymack drifted across the kitchen to sit on a stool across the breakfast bar from Neil and he rubbed one hand over his bristly jaw.

After a heavy moment, Wymack asked, “You got any questions? Concerns?”

“He said Abby gets him a bag of blood when she can. How often is that?”

Wymack frowned. “Not often. The blood banks have pretty decent security and they're running low enough as it is, so it's tricky. The last bag came in July. We haven't heard from Abby's friend in a while.”

Neil didn't know much, but he knew vampires needed more than that. Much more. Even with the trips down to Columbia every few weeks to meet up with Roland, Andrew had to be getting blood from another source.

“Is he feeding off anyone else?”

Wymack's mouth twisted into a dry smile. “Andrew's all about reciprocity, as I'm sure you've noticed. He won't take unless he can give something back. He agreed to play on my team if I got contracts for his family. He's got nothing else to trade for a sack of my blood. It's the same with Abby and Bee. He won't ask for their blood unless he's got something big enough to give in return.”

“Abby's friend-?”

“Had a problematic boyfriend. Andrew had a few words with him and, last I heard, the scumbag was moving to Florida.”

The only other two possibilities were Kevin and Renee. Neil's mind leaned toward Kevin, but he still wouldn't have put money on it. It would explain Kevin's half of the bargain that allowed him to live and play Exy at Palmetto State, but Kevin's playing would suffer from frequent blood loss and that wasn't something Kevin would risk. Maybe he fed off both of them as well as Roland. That made the most sense, but something still felt off about his theory. He never saw Andrew going out of his way to do favors for Renee.

Neil couldn't even be sure that Renee knew. A few circles of Christians were aware that vampires existed and, as far as Neil knew, they all were in agreement that vampirism was caused by close contact with the devil and spread through fornication. He didn't understand Renee and Andrew's friendship or whatever it was at all.

Neil asked, “How did you find out what he is?”

Wymack shrugged. “He told me before they moved into the dorms.”
“Just like that?”

“If you want the whole story, get it from him. He doesn't like people spreading his business when he's not around to crack jokes about it.” Wymack stood up and fixed Neil with a grave look. “I need to make some calls. You good?”

Neil gave a half-hearted shrug. He was as good as he could have been.

Wymack shuffled down the hallway to his office to make the phone calls in private. Neil poured himself another cup of coffee and hoped the next days would pass quickly.

They didn't.

On Tuesday, Neil decided to go for a run around campus after lunch to dispel the nervous energy building in his legs. He almost bumped into Nicky on the sidewalk along Perimeter Road and, in spite of Neil saying he wasn't interested in the gossip, Nicky filled him in anyway. According to Matt, who had heard from Allison, Seth's mother signed off on all the necessary paperwork, but didn't show up to the crematorium on Monday afternoon. Instead, Allison was the one who collected and kept Seth's urn. Neil didn't know what she planned on doing with it and he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Nicky talked Neil's ear off for almost ten minutes before Neil was able to extract himself and continue his run. He tried very hard to push thoughts of Allison and the urn out of his mind.

Black ribbons and streamers were spread across campus, making it impossible to forget about what happened. Shrines of photos and cards and flowers were left outside the locked door of the Foxhole Court and in the lobby of the Tower. Students and teachers alike were mourning while Neil could only muster up enough feeling to be uncomfortable at best.

On Wednesday, the Foxes were set to meet in the Foxhole Court's lounge for a talk they should've had on Sunday before the outbreak of hostility. Neil wasn't looking forward to it. Nicky, Aaron, and Kevin swung by Wymack's to pick Neil up in Andrew's car. Nicky and Aaron were still rattled by Seth's overdose and they kept fairly quiet on the drive over. Kevin was anxious about the line-up now that they were down their only fifth-year striker and Neil had to agree with his concerns. Their chances of winning this Friday's game had been slim before and now it seemed completely hopeless.

After Aaron, Kevin, and Neil got out at the Foxhole Court, Nicky wished them luck and drove back over to Reddin to wait for Andrew. In the lounge, Kevin and Aaron made quick work of rearranging the furniture so that Andrew's lot had the couch and two chairs on either side while the other couch and chair were left for the upperclassmen. Aaron sat in the chair that Neil went for first and pointed at the couch.

"Know your place," Kevin said as he sat down on the other end of the couch.

Neil looked from Kevin to Aaron's finger and realized they expected him to sit between the armrest and Andrew. He didn't like the thought of being trapped there, but Neil had a deal to keep and he couldn't keep it by staying on the outskirts of the team. He had to be a part of their fucked up group if he wanted to have any hope of keeping Kevin's interest.

Wymack was down the hall in his office, shouting into his phone about not giving up on the Foxes just because their numbers had dwindled to the bare minimum. Dan came striding in, looking a bit pink around the corners of her eyes but otherwise fierce as ever, and pointed at Neil with a question written all over her face.
“What's going on here?” Matt asked from behind her. Matt looked exhausted and wilted, wearing his grief more plainly than his girlfriend was.

“I thought you didn't get along with them,” Dan said to Neil.

“Still don't,” Neil answered.

Renee sidled up on Dan's other side and gave them all a sad, small smile. “Andrew took him along on Saturday night, remember?” she asked. “Neil's part of the group now.”

The cross hanging from her neck glinted. In spite of what most people believed, crosses didn't do anything to vampires except maybe annoy them. Neil wondered if she didn't know that and wore it as a precaution or if it was just a simple show of her faith.

Matt and Dan were staring at him in that vaguely concerned way again, which made Neil feel guilty about whatever he'd done to make them care in the first place. It wasn't fair to them when he knew his days were numbered. Neil fidgeted and looked down at his hands, hating the attention on him.

Wymack slammed down the phone and walked out into the lounge, jaw set and eyes dull. He and Dan traded a look that spoke volumes. The two of them would keep the team going no matter what.

Apparently, the sentimental speech that Abby had written was resting in pieces in Wymack's wastebasket. Instead of kind words, Wymack told them they would go out on the court and fight like hell because they were Foxes and that's what Foxes did.

Matt had linked his fingers with Dan's and quietly, but firmly stated that they would take Seth's memory all the way to finals that year.

*Words aren't good enough,* whispered Neil's doubt. He was an amateur, Kevin was injured, and their best goalkeeper was a volatile vampire. Looking at the date of their first match against Edgar Allan made Neil's legs tremble with the urge to flee.

Eventually, they all stood and shuffled to their lockers to grab their gear for practice. They changed out and headed to the inner court to stretch before doing warm-ups and running laps for forty minutes.

Nicky and Andrew came back while the team was taking a water break. Andrew strolled into the foyer, grinning and spinning his key ring around his finger. Nicky stepped in after him looking wary of the upperclassmen. Neil watched Nicky cautiously approach the trio with soft words and a softer expression. It was a mystery why he tried at all.

“Hey, hey, Renee,” Andrew sang cheerfully. “Moving back in tonight?”

Renee wasn't quite smiling, but her expression was still warm. “Hi, Andrew. Yes, we'll be moving back in after practice.”

Andrew bobbed his head, accepting her answer, before tossing his keys up into the air and catching them on his way to the locker room.

Nicky asked how Allison was doing and Neil felt a bit like a coward for not doing the same. Matt and Dan scoffed, not believing Nicky genuinely cared. They had a reason to doubt him, after all, none of Andrew's lot had been fond of Seth in the slightest.

Renee told them, “She's grieving, but Betsy will be there to help her when she's ready to talk about
it. She'll be okay.”

Nicky nodded and then slinked away to change out. Andrew gathered up his gear as well and headed into the changing room.

Down the hall, the phone in Wymack's office rang. Muttering to himself about the parasitic press, Wymack went off to answer it. Neil was standing close enough to the hallway to hear Wymack answer, “Coach Wymack, Palmetto State University. No, there's no Andrew Doe on my line.”

Neil's ears perked up. He leaned closer to the doorway and turned his head to try to hear better.

“There is an Andrew Minyard- Andrew Joseph Minyard, yes. Shit, he didn't do anything, did he? Oh, okay, then. One moment.” Wymack stepped out with the handheld phone in his hand, muted it with the push of a button, and called, “Andrew Minyard! Get out here!”

From the changing room, Andrew shouted back, “We're not home right now! Leave a message at the beep!”

Wymack stalked over to the changing room door and said, “It's someone named Cass.”

Aaron stopped stretching and exchanged a look with Nicky. The upperclassmen glanced between the cousins, clearly as lost as Neil was.

The changing room door swung open and Andrew appeared in the doorway in his uniform. The crazed cheer had drained completely from his face, leaving behind a terrifying stone mask. He stared up at Wymack and lowly said, “No, Coach.”

Wymack shoved the phone into his chest. “Look, I'm not being paid to deal with your personal shit.”

Neil saw the phone shake in Andrew's hand before he silently slipped back into the changing room. Everyone waited with bated breath while the low murmur of Andrew's voice rose and fell behind the door.

“Who's Cass?” Matt stage-whispered after a tense couple of minutes.

Aaron sucked in a sharp breath and Nicky shot Matt a look somewhere between pleading and anguished. A full minute went by before Andrew stepped out again. He was back in his street clothes and he looked like he'd been physically struck.

“Everything okay?” Wymack asked, taking the phone back.

“Peachy keen,” Andrew crooned in a thin, brittle voice. “I caught a cold, Coach. I'm gonna sit this one out.”

“Now, wait just a minute-” Wymack tried to grab Andrew's arm as he darted past, but Andrew was faster. Kevin moved to block the doorway, insisting that this practice was too important to skip, but Andrew knocked him aside as if he weighed nothing.

Andrew was gone a second later.

“What was that about?” Dan asked the cousins.

Aaron answered, “That was the woman who wanted to adopt him.”

The cousins traded another dismal look while the rest of them let that sink in. The look on Kevin's
face led Neil to believe he was unaware of this Cass person as well. Nicky promised to explain later if anyone was interested, which was a cheap way to smooth the friction between his family and the upperclassmen. Still, Matt and Dan were too curious to pass that up. Neil was, too, but he remembered what Wymack said about Andrew's business and he wondered how Andrew would react once he found out his personal history was being discussed without him. With a painful past of his own, Neil could only imagine how furious he'd be.

The atmosphere was gloomy and tense as the eight of them assembled on the court. Renee stood in the goal and the remaining two strikers did their best to get the ball past her. Kevin's censure was only made worse by his anxiety, but Neil was too numb to really mind. Kevin wasn't saying anything that Neil wasn't thinking already and Neil knew enough about Kevin now to know that he was harder on himself than he was on the rest of the team. The second son of Exy had fallen from his ivory tower and now he was scrambling with a broken hand to climb back up. His drive was as inspiring as it was irritating.

The others obviously didn't feel as kindly toward Kevin and his barbed words, but they bit back their retorts and pushed themselves to work harder than usual, driven by either anger or grief.

After practice was over, they cleaned up and headed back to the Tower. The spats on the court were seemingly forgotten once they reached the parking lot. In a rare show of solidarity, Kevin and the cousins waited while Matt and the girls unpacked their bags from the bed of the truck. Neil still couldn't think of anything worth saying to them.

There was still no sign of Andrew as they climbed the stairs to the third floor together.

“I hope he's not out there getting himself hurt,” Nicky muttered.

“Probably just fell asleep somewhere,” said Aaron.

Kevin fiddled with his phone, but Neil was close enough to see that there was nothing on it. Wherever Andrew was, Neil knew he would be just fine physically. It'd take a trained hunter to cause him any real harm. The look on Andrew's face and the tremble in his hands, though, had betrayed his mental vulnerability and that's what Neil was more worried about. He hadn't considered the possibility that there was anything capable of wiping Andrew's smile from his face like that.

Matt paused at their suite door and looked down at the keys in his hand for a long moment. Dan slid her hand up and down his back soothingly and leaned her head against his shoulder. On his other side, Renee patted his arm and murmured something to him. Neil stood behind Dan, anxious to get this over with, and the others hung back awkwardly.

“He was such a dick,” Matt said quietly, voice watery and strained.

The girls pressed closer to him and Neil studied his fraying shoelaces.

Matt's key finally scraped into the lock and turned. He was the first through the door and the girls stepped aside so that Neil was the second. Matt looked down at him as they stood together in the heavy silence of the main room and gently put his hand on Neil's shoulder.

“We're just going to go drop our stuff and check on Allison,” Dan said softly from the doorway.

Kevin and the cousins remained just outside while Matt and Neil explored their dorm as if they'd never been there before.

Seth's desk, his bed, his belongings- all had been extracted cleanly like a tumor. Seth's shoes
weren’t thrown haphazardly by the door where Neil and Matt could trip over them. His horrible cologne wasn’t clouding the air in the bathroom. His torn jeans weren't crumpled a foot away from the hamper. Even the coffee grounds that Seth had dumped in the kitchen sink on Saturday afternoon had been washed away. The only evidence that a third person had once lived in that suite was the shapes left in the dust and imprints in the carpet.

Neil's throat knotted. In a few months' time, he would disappear like this as well.

Neil hoped Matt would remember him and immediately felt guilty for thinking it. It wasn't fair to inject himself in their lives for his own selfish reasons only to die on them, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

When the girls returned, Kevin and Nicky stepped into the suite and they all found their places around the main room. Neil sat on the floor and the upperclassmen took the couch. Kevin took one of the desk chairs while Nicky fixed drinks for everyone in the kitchen. After everyone had a glass of either soda or something stronger, Nicky perched on the other desk chair and chewed his lower lip.

“All right, answers now, please,” Dan prompted when the silence stretched too long.

Nicky cleared his throat and pulled one knee up to his chest, looking small and slightly unsure of himself, before he said, “I tried to get Aaron in here to tell it, but I don't think he's in the mood for company.”

Renee's phone chirped in her pocket a moment later. Looking at the message, Renee said, “Andrew's back now. I'm going to go see if he's all right.”

She squeezed Matt's shoulder and got to her feet, leaving another empty gap in their small group. Neil watched her disappear into the hallway and figured she was going off to donate blood to Andrew's empty stomach. Dan blew out a noisy breath and downed the rest of her drink. Matt gestured for Nicky to talk.

Nicky took a long drink, a deep breath, and began, “Aaron was thirteen when he found out he had a twin.”

The story of the Minyard twins was this: once upon a time, a woman named Tilda gave birth to twin boys and regretted it. One boy grew up as a Minyard, the other as a Doe. Thirteen years later, a man named Phil Higgins mistook Aaron for Andrew at a football game in Oakland and Tilda's secret began to unravel. The next day, a woman named Cass Spear called the house for Tilda in hopes of setting up a meeting between the twins. Tilda wanted nothing to do with her other son, however.

After a nasty fight with his mother, Aaron went behind her back and contacted Officer Higgins himself to try to find his long-lost twin. A short while later, Andrew sent a letter to Aaron, telling him to leave him the hell alone.

Cass was sympathetic to Aaron's plight and sent him a letter of her own, filled with condolences and hopes for the future. She urged Aaron to try reaching out to Andrew in the spring, but by the time he was ready to, Andrew had landed himself in juvie. A couple months later, Tilda moved Aaron across the country to South Carolina.

Nicky's father Luther got involved. He traveled to California to meet with Andrew's foster family and then he brought Aaron out for a supervised meeting with Andrew at the juvenile detention center.
After he was released, Andrew moved to South Carolina at Luther's insistence to live with his birth mother and his twin. That December, Tilda died in a car accident. The twins' tentative relationship twisted into something frigid and fraught with tension and, by the time they had graduated high school, they were locked in a cold war with each other.

Neil silently added his own knowledge of what happened to Andrew post-graduation into the story in his head. There were gaps that only Andrew himself could fill and Neil made a mental list of questions to ask the next time they played their little game.

Later, after a quiet dinner of Chinese food and a movie that Dan picked out, Nicky and Kevin finally headed back to their own dorm.

Matt tilted his head back against the couch and said, “This has been one giant clusterfuck of a week and it's only Wednesday.”

Dan looked thoughtful and then she grimaced. “I just thought of something.”

Without looking at her, Matt asked, “What's going on in that head of yours this time?”

She met Neil's eyes and said, “Seth was always picking fights. He was a dick to Andrew's group and he was a dick to the rest of us a lot of the time, too...”

“So,” Matt continued, “with him gone, you think the team might fall back together? Don't get your hopes up, Dan. They're not going to play nice with us just because Seth's dead.”

Dan chewed her lip and stared at Neil. “Hey, kid, not to be The Breakfast Club, but don't you forget about us.”

“Huh?” Neil was lost.

“When the monsters drag you into their lair, keep one foot out on the outside and remember how much you like us, okay? You're going to be what stitches this patchwork quilt together.”

Neil looked to Matt for help. Matt was staring at him like he was just beginning the see the bigger picture Dan was failing to describe.

“Andrew's staking his claim on you just like he did with Kevin,” Dan swept on. “If you dig in your heels hard enough, you can pull the group to you instead of the other way around. Listen, today was the first time ever that Kevin and Nicky stuck around for dinner and a movie with us.”

Neil pressed his lips into a tight line and thought of all the ways this could go wrong. If the upperclassmen knew the truth about Andrew, he didn't think they'd want him any closer than he already was.

Dan raised her eyebrows and smiled hopefully. “Will you try?”

“I'll try,” Neil agreed, though he had nothing but doubts.

They both gave him small smiles and something heavy settled in his chest. He'd be gone by the end of the year, but maybe he could leave something meaningful behind this time.

He frantically tried to squash that thought before it could take root, but it wasn't easily done.
Blood Bags

Chapter Summary

On Wednesday night, Neil tries to get some more answers out of Kevin and Andrew.

Chapter Notes

I'm the Most Awkward about where I split up my chapters haha so this one picks up right where the last one left off.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wednesday night continued quietly.

Matt and Dan stayed together on the couch watching television while they waited for Renee to get back. Neil worked on his homework at his desk and, even though he ached for a distraction from recent events and recent revelations, he still struggled to focus on his English essay. His legs itched to move; his hands felt empty without a racquet in them. He wanted to get to the court and exhaust himself with drills.

Around nine, Renee wandered in. Matt muted the TV and Dan put her feet on the floor to give Renee room to sit next to her. She sank into the cushions with a little sigh and a smile. Neil studied her, but she didn't seem any worse the wear. If she bore a bite mark, he couldn't see it from where he sat.

“How's the monster?” Dan asked dryly.

Renee gave her a chiding look. “He's a little drained, but he'll be at practice tomorrow.”

“Better be,” Dan grumbled.

Matt combed his fingers through Dan's short hair and asked, “Is he coming for Neil later?”

Renee looked over at Neil with a small, knowing smile. “He didn't say, but I think he will.”

The look in her eyes made Neil uncomfortable. Renee was a disconcerting enigma- a Christian sweetheart that spent her time with a man that was monstrous regardless of what he ate. Was she his friend? His girlfriend? His pet? His food?

Were the others lying when they said Andrew was the only vampire on the team?

Even worse, she looked at Neil like she could see straight through the lies he hid behind, like she was shining a flashlight into all the dark corners of his mind where his nightmares waited.

“I bother you,” she said.

Neil started a bit and reflexively lied, “No, you don't. It's just been a hard day.”
Matt and Dan traded an amused glance.

“I don't make much sense, do I?” Renee chuckled and carded her fingers through her pale pastel hair. “It's a simple explanation, really. I am trying to use my second chance to do good things. I can't change my past nor can I hide from it, but I can learn from my mistakes and keep moving forward. I have lots of friends because of who I am now, but Andrew is my friend because of who I was. I understand him better than some people might think.”

“He's your friend?”

“Yes.”

Neil didn't bother hiding his disbelief. “Is it really that simple?”

“Why shouldn't it be?” Renee gave a little shrug. “It's okay if you're uncomfortable around me, Neil, but I'd like us to be friends as well. Maybe we could go for coffee and talk sometime.”

Neil was taught to be wary of anyone who showed the slightest bit of interest in him. He fought against the impulse to make excuses. He wrestled with his mother's voice in his head.

“Maybe,” he agreed finally.

Renee seemed satisfied. “Let me know, okay? I think I'll head back to ours now, Dan. I could use a bath and some good sleep.”

The girls stood together and linked arms.

“You boys can sleep in our room tonight if you want,” Dan said. “We've got a futon you could use, Neil.”

Matt froze halfway to his feet and looked to Neil.

“You should go, Matt,” he said. “I'll be fine sleeping here tonight.”

“Are you sure, Neil?” Renee asked.

“Positive.”

Matt still seemed conflicted. He rose and pressed a quick, firm kiss to Dan's mouth before telling her, “Go ahead. I'll wait with him until Kevin gets here, then I'll come over.”

Dan pulled him down by his shoulder and raised up on her tiptoes so that she could kiss his forehead. “Okay. I'll see you later. Have a good night, Neil. We'll see you tomorrow.”

Renee gave him a little wave and then the girls left together. Matt walked them to the door and then turned to give Neil an awkward half-smile. With just the two of them, Seth's absence was all the more noticeable.

Matt crossed the room to look over Neil's shoulder at all the books piled on his desk and then he frowned deeply. “How many classes are you taking anyway?”

“Six,” Neil answered dully, trying to pin his focus back onto his essay.

“Six? Oh, no. No way. Let me get my laptop and we'll fix that right away.”

“What's wrong with six?” Neil watched him retrieve his laptop from his bag and set it on his desk.
“That's too damn many.” Matt pushed a button above the keyboard before sitting down to wait for it to boot up. “They give us five years for a reason, you know. Come over here and let's figure this shit out.”

Eventually they tweaked Neil's schedule in PSU's online student portal so that he was only taking four classes, which was all he needed to be considered a full-time student. Just looking at the new and improved schedule made Neil breathe a little easier. He would have some more free time to catch up on homework or sleep. Matt laughed at his relieved expression and told him he should've asked for help back in the summer. Neil didn't admit that he still wasn't sure how to do that.

Kevin usually came at ten to collect Neil for their nightly practices, but that night he showed up almost half an hour early. Matt grumbled about Neil being sleep deprived as he followed them out into the hallway so he could walk down to Dan's room.

Down in the car, Andrew was waiting for them. He was scratching at his stomach under his shirt and squirming while Kevin and Neil climbed into their seats.

“Why are we going early?” Neil asked.

Andrew threw the car into reverse and backed smoothly out of the space before replying, “I need a little snack.”

“You didn't eat with Renee?” Neil was surprised. Even with Renee's interesting history, he couldn't see anything other than blood that would make Andrew want her company.

Kevin shot him an annoyed look over his shoulder as if Neil was an idiot for even asking.

Andrew let out a loud bark of laughter. “No, no, she's not my type.”

“You should wait to eat until Friday if you can,” Kevin said.

“Quiet, Kevin,” Andrew cooed.

The upperclassmen had told Neil that Andrew went off his meds for games, but now that Neil knew the meds were a ruse created by Betsy to explain Andrew's wild moods and volatile temper, he figured it must have something to do with Andrew's eating schedule instead. Drinking seemed to even out his mind for a short while, but Neil had to wonder how much he was drinking overall since it never seemed to last that long. He was still trying to figure out if there was another underlying cause to his erratic mood swings.

“Do you know when you'll get your next blood bag?” Neil asked.

Kevin flinched and scowled at him. “Shut the fuck up. We don't talk about it. Jesus.”

“Actually his name is Neil,” Andrew whispered before chuckling at his own joke.

Neil tilted his head. “What's your problem, Kevin? You hound me about my eating habits all the time. I'm not allowed to ask about Andrew's?”

“You don't eat enough vegetables. He eats-”


“I don't like talking about it.”

Andrew leaned forward and pressed his nose against the wheel. “The quick, brown fox jumped
right onto Kevin's last nerve.”

Neil petulantly muttered, “Blood bag.”

Kevin reacted violently. He swung around in his seat and smacked Neil upside the head hard enough that his ear rang for a few seconds.

“Now, boys,” Andrew scolded with exaggerated exasperation, “if you can't behave, I will turn this car around and no one will have any Exy tonight.”

Neil's head smarted, but he found Kevin's reaction interesting.

At the Foxhole Court, Kevin and Neil changed into their practice gear while Andrew disappeared down the hall to Wymack's office. Kevin slammed his locker shut and stormed through the foyer out to the stadium, expecting Neil to follow obediently. Instead, Neil went looking for Andrew. They'd come early, after all, so Neil had some extra time to ask a question that'd been hanging on his mind all day.

He found Andrew curled up in the corner of Wymack's office in the glow of an open mini-fridge. He held a half-empty plastic bag of blood above his mouth with the corner clamped between his lips. As soon as Neil stepped fully into the office, Andrew lowered it and licked a drop of blood from the corner of his mouth.

“Wrong neck of the woods,” he said. His voice was flat and rough as gravel and his eyes were empty.

Neil leaned over to peek into the mini-fridge. There were a few bottles of booze, but nothing else.

“How long will that last you?” Neil asked, nodding at the bag.

“You're wasting your turn on that?”


“Ooh.” Andrew put one hand over his chest and clicked his tongue. “Don't go for my heart, there's nothing there. Hasn't anyone told you that?”

Neil folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorway, waiting. Andrew blinked slowly at him before rolling the top of the bag down and taping it closed. Then, he hid it in the bottom drawer of the fridge in a crumpled paper bag.

“She's looking for something,” Andrew murmured, stroking one hand over his throat in search of his pulse. “Wanted to know if I remembered seeing it.”

“Is that all you're giving me?”

Andrew flicked a warning look up at him. “Don't badger, rabbit.”

“I'm just asking a simple question.”

“Simple question. Complicated answer. You'd have to give me something big in return.”

“Like what?”

Andrew's mouth twitched like he wanted to smirk but couldn't muster up the energy. “A name for a name.”
Neil opened his mouth to lie, but Andrew stopped him with a shake of his head.

“Don't insult me by saying Neil Josten is your real name. Give me the name you're running from and I'll give you the name of what Cass is looking for.” Andrew quirked an eyebrow and tilted his head back against the wall. “I've given you enough. If you're going to chicken out of giving me the truth, run back to Kevin before he comes sniffing around for you. He's already plenty annoyed at you for the little nickname.”

Neil frowned and went over what he'd said in the car. “Is 'blood bag' your nickname for him?”

“Neil!” Kevin's voice bounced off the painted concrete walls. “Where the fuck are you?”

Andrew waved his hand. “Run along now. Playtime's over.”

Neil dragged himself away and went to find Kevin.

Practice that night was brutal due to Kevin's annoyance at Neil and the anxiety they shared about the upcoming game. They ran drills together at first and then separately at different ends of the court. Kevin swung between harsh criticism and icy stretches of silence. Neil discovered the silence was worse than any barbed insult Kevin threw his way. At least when Kevin was shouting at him it meant he was still paying attention. If Neil lost Kevin's interest, he lost Andrew's protection.

Andrew watched them from up in the stands while they scrambled around the court. At one point, Neil glanced his way in time to see him turn sideways and lie down. Neil stopped and stared at the place where Andrew had been just as Kevin stalked over to him, saying, “When you twist like that, you leave yourself open to checking. You're going to get a broken rib if you keep that shit up.”

Neil nodded and then gestured to the stands. “Does he sleep?”

Kevin smacked his helmet. “Focus, Neil. Did you hear what I-”

“Yeah, yeah, I'll watch out for broken ribs. Does Andrew sleep?”

“Sometimes.” Kevin pretended to inspect his racquet strings.

Neil rolled his eyes. “Look, you've been around him for what, eight months? I don't know much about vampires. I'm just curious about what I've gotten myself into.”

“You should've asked before agreeing to a deal with him, then.”

“Kevin.”

“They can sleep, but they don't need to. It's more mental than physical.”

Neil asked, “How so?”

Kevin wandered over to pick up cones as he talked. “When they turn, the venom makes them sharper. Heightens their senses, improves their memory, makes them stronger. Imagine being 'on' like that all the time. Alcohol will take the edge off, but he can't really get to sleep unless he eats.”

“Do you know when he turned?” Neil couldn't risk giving away Andrew's secrets, but he wanted to know everything Kevin knew. Kevin had met Andrew when he and Riko tried to recruit him to the Ravens during his senior year of high school- back when Andrew was still human.

“It was after I first met him,” Kevin answered.
“What was he like back then?”

Kevin glanced over his shoulder at the stands. “He was just as unpleasant, but he didn't smile as much.”

Neil put that on the slow-growing pile of information about Andrew in his head. “Does turning affect personality at all?”

Kevin didn't answer. He changed the subject back to Exy and had Neil running the same precision drills until midnight.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry I've been so bad about replying to comments, but they all mean a lot to me and I really appreciate all of you for reading <3 <3
The Foxes play their first game without Seth.

On Thursday, Allison returned to the team. Grief didn't light a fire in her heart or crack her tough shell- it cleanly and quietly hollowed her out. Even though Neil was still unsure of his role in Seth's demise, he couldn't bring himself to look directly at her while she drifted around lifelessly on the court.

Thursday's practice was almost silent; tension rippled between the remaining Foxes. Dan and Matt quietly murmured to each other during their breaks and Neil could tell they felt guilty about seeing the advantages of having Seth gone. Andrew's mood seemed fairly even that day and he didn't bother antagonizing anyone. He walked laps with Renee during breaks and beamed at her while she spoke to him. Neil was painfully curious about what they were talking about. He tried asking Kevin if he could explain the odd friendship between the two goalkeepers, but Kevin just told him to focus on tomorrow's game instead.

When Wymack announced the line-up for Friday's game, Neil thought he was hearing things because what Wymack proposed was downright insane. Andrew would have to play a full game and Renee would have to sub on the defensive line, which she'd never done, since Dan was the only one who could sub for a striker. Kevin hadn't been challenged to push himself like this in a long time and Neil had no experience playing a full game ever. Allison was mentally checked-out and Neil didn't know if she'd be able to focus at all the next day.

No one liked the plan and more than half of them had no faith in it whatsoever, but they all headed off to change out with the same weary determination that Foxes were used to.

“This is fucking ridiculous,” Kevin muttered to himself just as Neil sidled up to him in the locker room. "Andrew's going to snap out there tomorrow. We'll be lucky if he doesn't kill someone."

Neil pitched his voice low and asked, “Andrew can last a full game, can't he?”

Kevin scoffed. “He doesn't have enough blood for this. Game nights take too much out of him. He uses almost all of his energy just to keep himself from accidentally sending the ball through someone's skull or going into a frenzy and attacking people. That's why he has to feed before and after games- to settle his mind down and then to recover. His supply isn't going to last long enough at this rate.”

The constant tug-o-war with his body must've been exhausting. Neil asked, “Why doesn't he just get more blood?”

Kevin frowned at him condescendingly. “Why don't we just find another striker by tomorrow?”

“What?”

“That's how dumb you sound.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Blood is easier to find than a new striker.”
Kevin might've been too worried about his own physical condition to give Andrew blood too often, but Wymack and Abby were dedicated enough to this team that Neil knew they'd draw their own blood for Andrew's sake. He couldn't understand why Andrew was stubbornly denying himself what he needed.

“Yes,” Kevin scoffed, slamming his locker shut. “Just shut up, Neil.”

Across the room, Andrew took out the orange bottle of Tic Tacs and shook one out into his palm. He threw it into the air and caught it easily in his mouth. With a silly grin and a wink in Neil's direction, he strolled out of the room.

Neil still wanted answers, but he knew he'd never get them from Andrew unless he offered up his own secrets first. Andrew had already gotten more honesty from Neil than anyone else had in eight years besides Neil's mother. He didn't want to give up any more of himself, but he was starting to feel like it'd be worth it in order to satisfy his nagging curiosity.

Nothing about Andrew made sense. He was suffering, starving probably, and all for a game he couldn't care less about. The only reason he was at Palmetto State in the first place was because Wymack had offered his brother and his cousin contracts, but Neil couldn't see anything warmer than total indifference between the three of them. If Andrew didn't care, why did he bother at all?

Neil wanted to know why Andrew accepted blood from a bartender he saw every few weeks instead of the only person who called herself his friend. He'd been wracking his brain for days over what Andrew could possibly be giving Roland in return. He couldn't figure out if Andrew really was getting any blood out of his deal with Kevin.

He wanted to know why Cass's phone call was bad enough to drive Andrew into his stash early.

On Friday, Neil's body was humming with nervous energy. Since it was an away game, the team met at the Foxhole Court at twelve to load up the bus. Neil hadn't thought of any truths he was willing to give up in order to get an answer from Andrew and he hadn't had any time alone with him either.

In the lounge, Neil watched Andrew rattle his keys in his pocket while he babbled excitedly to Abby about something. He figured Andrew's dinner was tucked away in Abby's first aid kit somewhere. He wondered how much Andrew would have to eat to stay focused for the entire game and how much sooner he'd run out with the new playing arrangements. Would Abby's friend send along another bag of blood in time?

Neil shook his head and told himself to focus. First serve was in seven and a half hours and his mind was still circling the confusing goalkeeper. Everyone except Andrew and Allison was on edge. Kevin went over plays with Dan and Renee while Allison sat in a chair staring unblinkingly at the wall. Matt and Nicky tried to talk to her without any luck.

Neil's stomach was in knots. When he saw the chance to get Wymack alone for a moment, he took it. He volunteered to help Wymack pack up stick rack and while they were securing plastic latches, Neil took a deep breath and asked, “Why does Andrew do this?”

“Do what?” Wymack grumbled.

“Any of this. He doesn't care about Exy, so why does he put himself through this? It seems illogical.”

“Take it up with him if you're so concerned,” Wymack replied gruffly. “I don't ask him for his
reasons and I don't care what he gets up to so long as he keeps playing like he promised. Get that end of the rack and let's get this damn thing on the bus."

They loaded the stick rack into the undercarriage and stepped on board. The upperclassmen were seated two to a row toward the front, which left four empty rows between them and Andrew’s group, who all took one row for themselves. Andrew sat in the far back with Kevin in front of him. There was an empty row between Kevin and Nicky and it didn't take much of an intuitive leap to assume that one was meant for Neil. “Know your place,” Kevin had said.

Neil settled onto the cushion and kept himself busy with homework or napping for the entire ride to Tennessee.

They reached Nashville at six forty-five, local time, and after a few more minutes of driving, Abby guided the bus into a fenced-in parking lot near Belmonte University's Exy stadium. It was similarly built to the Foxhole Court, but all Neil could see was the sea of green without so much as a speck of orange. The Foxes were behind enemy lines.

The team shuffled off the bus as Wymack drank a thermos of coffee to wake himself up. Neil took his time stretching and rubbing sleep from his eyes until Kevin shoved his head and motioned for him to follow. They stepped around Abby at the front and Neil glanced back as Abby headed to Andrew's seat in the back with the first aid kit.

Neil looked around at the other Foxes, who were spread out and stretching their legs after their long trip. Nicky was saying something that Aaron was rolling his eyes at. Renee and Dan were sticking close to Allison still. Renee was murmuring soft words of support while Dan looked around the parking lot like she was already daring Belmonte's student body to try her patience. Matt wasn't too far away from Dan and he shot Neil a small, encouraging smile when he caught his eyes.

Kevin stood near the bus's door with his arms folded and a steely scowl digging into his face. Once Neil was sure no one else was looking at them, he shifted closer to Kevin.

“So how often do you feed Andrew?”

Kevin practically snarled at him. “What the hell? Shut the fuck up, Josten. It's none of your goddamn business.”

“I just-”

“No, I signed you to play Exy, not pry into my business. Get your head out of your ass and focus on the game.”

Neil tipped his head back and blew out a large breath as Kevin stormed away. It was foolish to let himself get caught up in Kevin and Andrew's business, but the curiosity squirmed in his chest nonetheless.

“Hey, rabbit,” Andrew teased lowly from behind him. His voice still had mirth shimmering around the edges so Neil figured the blood hadn't evened him out yet.

“Hey, vampire,” Neil returned in a near-whisper.

Andrew scoffed and scuffed his sneaker against the pavement. Abby and Wymack walked ahead of them to round the team up.

“Do the Terrapins terrify you?” Andrew teased.
“Their bite can't be worse than yours.”

“You wouldn't know.”

Neil turned to face him fully. “Did you drink enough to last the whole game?”

Andrew's eyes narrowed with an almost-smile. “We'll find out.”

Wymack called, “Come on, you two! There's a game tonight, in case you forgot.”

The Foxes took up their duffel bags and followed their coach, leaving their bus in the care of a few bored security guards. Inside, they were led to the away team's locker rooms to change out while Wymack and Abby went over a checklist of rules with someone wearing a windbreaker with “VOLUNTEER” printed across the shoulders.

Neil's heart dropped like a stone once he caught sight of the communal showers. Having separate stalls at the Foxhole Court was a luxury he'd grown accustomed to. His skin crawled with dread when he thought of trying to hide his scars after the game and what explanations he might give to deflect his teammates' suspicion.

Andrew's eyes were on him, still faintly amused like he knew where Neil's thoughts were going.

Neil squared his shoulders and told himself he would solve that problem later. For now, he had an impossible game to focus on. Taking his bag into a bathroom stall, Neil wriggled out of his shirt and fumbled with his gear in the narrow space. Then, he headed back out to finish changing since he didn't have many scars on his legs worth hiding.

After he was dressed in his gear and his white away uniform, he tied an orange bandana around his head to keep his dark hair out of his face. He stuffed his armored gloves into his helmet and headed out to the main room, where Wymack and the other Foxes were waiting.

The stadium was a roaring sea of green shirts, jerseys, and Terrapin merchandise. At the first sign of the Foxes emerging from the tunnel, the jeering rose in volume and crashed over the unwelcome away team. Neil let the noise blend together in his head and fall away into the background as he took in the court.

“How should I do this?” he asked Kevin.

He didn't expect an answer, but Kevin turned to him with one anyway. “Pace yourself. Don't try to score unless you're absolutely certain you have it. When Dan comes on for me, go hard until halftime. Catch your second wind and then I expect you to come back on and give me everything you've got. If you're not completely dead on your feet at the end, I'll make you walk home as punishment.”

“Good to know.”

“We have to win this,” Kevin said as if Neil needed the reminder.

“So let's win this.” He glanced over at Andrew, who was sitting on the bench in his bulky goalkeeper's gear. His face was blank, his eyes were empty, but there was something distinctly dangerous about him. At first, he thought it was just his own knowledge that created the predatory aura around Andrew, but he could see the others giving Andrew a wide berth as well. There was no fiddling with zippers or rattling of keys- Andrew was deadly calm and perfectly still. He was the most dangerous thing in this stadium, this campus, maybe even this city. The blood had temporarily stitched his scattered mind back together and all his focus was on the court in front of
him. Neil almost felt bad for the Terrapins who would get too close to his box. Almost.

After warm-ups and a few simple drills, it was time for first serve. Neil watched Andrew carry his massive racquet to the goal, but he paused to say a few words to Allison on his way there. Neil couldn't see any visible reaction past the grate of Allison's helmet, but her shoulders rolled back and her posture shifted into something decidedly aggressive. Andrew got into position and then they all waited for the game to begin.

Since Dan won the coin toss, Allison started with the ball. Neil stood at half-court, poised and breathing slowly while the clock counted down. Muffled screams from the crowd leaked in through the vents. His pulse thudded in his temples.

The buzzer rang out.

Everyone broke formation at once. Allison served the ball to Andrew, who fired it up the court. As Neil passed to Kevin and fought to outsmart his mark, he could feel the hours of extra practice and sting of insults paying off. His feet knew where to go and he was more confident in his aim than he'd ever been.

He took it as easy as he could until Dan took Kevin's place on the court. Then, Neil pushed himself as hard as he could. A risky maneuver left him with a hot flare of pain in one shoulder, but it had resulted in another point for the Foxes. Seeing the wall go red was worth it.

Of course, at halftime Kevin chewed him out for playing off his injuries, gesturing to his scarred left hand during his tirade. Neil glanced at Andrew to see him flexing the hand that Neil had watched heal in just a matter of seconds and, for a moment, he resented the vampire's ability to heal so quickly.

They regrouped and agreed that it was foolish to pace themselves earlier in the game. They needed to fight harder in the first half so they wouldn't have to struggle to catch up during the second half when they were all running on fumes. In spite of the point gap they now had to close, the game was going better than most of them had expected it to. They stretched and guzzled water and tried to psyche themselves back up for the next part of the game, which would undoubtedly be worse.

Andrew stood completely still in the middle of it all, watching them with his head tilted and his mouth twitching upward. His amusement was a bad sign.

For the first time, Neil wondered if vampires could starve to death. He'd never heard of it happening, but that was only because all the vampires he'd seen in person had quickly met with violent ends.

He shook the ugly thought away and turned his mind back to the court.

The first half of the game was a struggle, the second half was an all-out war. The Terrapins sent out fresh players to face the weary Foxes. Andrew was still standing, thankfully, but Neil felt like his own legs were turning to jelly as he waited on the bench for his next bout on the court.

After the buzzer, it was a blur.

The Foxes somehow managed to close the point gap and present a real threat to the Terrapins' chances of winning that night. When Neil went back onto the court, his mind was half-gone and his body ran on desperate pulses of adrenaline and instincts that Kevin had spent weeks engraving into his mind.

One minute before the final buzzer, Kevin put them one point ahead. Those last sixty seconds
seemed to last forever as both sides pushed and fought with every last bit of strength they had. A Terrapin striker got the ball, but Aaron was too exhausted to get to him in time. Neil's heart melted with sick disappointment as he watched the striker make it all the way to the foul line to take his shot.

He was fast, but Andrew was still faster. Dropping his human act, Andrew blurred from one end of the goal to the other just in time to slam his racquet down on the ball before it could cross the line. Neil heard wood crack from where he was. Andrew turned and launched the ball away from his territory just before the final buzzer rang.

Neil snapped his head up to look at the scoreboard.

The Foxes had won.

Matt bellowed triumphantly. The crowd screamed and seethed. Neil's pulse was a bass drum beating in his skull. Heat washed through his exhausted muscles and staying upright was the biggest challenge of the night. Relief was an overwhelming rush.

But then he heard something that ground his joy into dust.

Above the crowd's roar washing in through the vents, above the cries of his teammates, Andrew's cackling rang out as sharp as broken glass. He was on his knees, holding his racquet across his lap, with shaking shoulders and those horrible noises scattering into the hot air inside the court as they tore free from his mouth.

Neil froze in horror, but Kevin marched up to the hysterical goalkeeper. He pulled Andrew to his feet and ushered him quickly off the court, tossing an excuse to the referee and anyone else within earshot. As they passed Neil, Andrew shouted, “Is it fun yet, bunny rabbit?”

Neil swallowed hard and shivered.

Dan crashed into him, laughing and hugging him, and then Matt engulfed them both in an exhausted embrace. The small team celebrated briefly on the court and then helped each other hobble off to collapse onto the benches.

With the furious crowd at his back and his overjoyed teammates around him, Neil was able to temporarily forget Andrew's broken laughter and the fact that he and Kevin were still missing when the Foxes went back out to shake hands with their opponents. The words “good game” fell flat between the two teams, but Neil couldn't care less. They'd won.

Even Wymack was smiling, fiercely proud of his team, when they gathered in the main room. Allison came out, already showered and changed, with a distant light in her eyes. Somewhere in the fog of her grief, she was pleased.

“Renee and I will handle the press,” Dan announced. “Neil, you can shower in the women's room while we're in there.”

Neil blinked. “Huh?”

“The showers don't have stalls,” Matt explained.

Neil hadn't expected them to notice. His face felt uncomfortably warm.

“Breakin' my heart, kid,” Nicky sighed, throwing his arm around Neil's shoulders. “Why do you always look shocked when people are nice to you?”
Neil didn't bother answering that. He thanked the girls awkwardly before darting off to get his bag. Then, he went across the hall to the women's room to take one of the shortest showers of his life.

Dressed in loose clothing and shivering from over-exertion, he finally went off to find Kevin and Andrew. Excited chatter came from one end of the hall where the press was still bubbling with questions for Dan and Renee. Neil took a quick detour to poke his head in and wave to Renee to show that he was finished with the showers. Retreating back into the hallway, Neil saw that the door to the nurse's room was ajar, so he nudged it open and peered inside. Wymack was sitting on the white bed and Kevin was nowhere to be seen. Wymack met Neil's eyes and nodded, so Neil stepped fully inside and shut the door behind him.

Hidden behind the desk, curled up in the shadowy corner, was Andrew. He was still in his bulky armor with his gloves and helmet thrown aside. A bottle of whiskey was clutched between his hands and lifted to his bloodstained mouth. His throat worked hard as he took down deep swallows of it.

“Is he okay?” Neil asked Wymack.

Andrew pulled the bottle away from his mouth and wheezed out a laugh. “By whose standards? Yours or the rest of the world’s?”

“You're coherent at least,” Neil said flatly.

Andrew let out a sharp *ha!* and went back to chugging whiskey.

Wymack said, “We need to figure out a better solution to this, Andrew. You can't do this every week.”

“I'm fine, Coach.” Then Andrew stopped and pretended to think. “Oh, wait, that's Neil's line. What am I supposed to say again? I left my script at home.”

“Has Abby talked to her friend lately?” Neil asked.

Wymack shook his head.

“There's a blood drive this weekend on campus,” Neil said. “We could steal-”

Wymack put his hands to his ears and cut in, “What part of 'I don't want to know what you get up to' don't you understand?”

Andrew lowered the bottle again and smiled coldly. “Didn't your mommy ever teach you it's rude to steal, Neil?”

Anger flickered through Neil's chest. “Haven't you learned by now that this system of yours- whatever it is- is failing?”

“I know my limits, Neil.” Andrew gestured to Neil's trembling legs. “Do you know yours?”
Neil had told Nicky that he could buy his own things, which was the truth, but it didn't mean he wanted to blow through the cash hidden in his safe on something like new clothes. Living a series of lies wasn't cheap and he hadn't planned on changing his wardrobe or his looks until he was ready to put Neil Josten aside for good. According to Nicky, the whole team and Wymack agreed that they'd seen enough of Neil's threadbare clothing.

“It's just so sad,” Nicky had said. “That body deserves better.”

“I told someone you're homeless and they believed me,” Aaron had chimed in.

“If you want to stay, you need to be less embarrassing to be around,” Kevin had added.

He didn't care about his faded jeans or the fact that he only owned six shirts. The point of his attire was to blend in and not catch anyone's interest. It wasn't the first time someone had said he looked like he'd pulled his clothes out of a dumpster, but the shame still burned hotly through him. He was looked down on enough during practice. He didn't need their condescension off the court too.

On Tuesday, they pushed him into Andrew's car, but instead of driving somewhere familiar, they drove to a mall. If Neil had known, he wouldn't have agreed to go along, which is why he suspected they didn't give him any forewarning. Neil stared sullenly out the window as they pulled into a space. In hindsight, he supposed he should've seen it coming.

“The fall banquet's on Saturday. You need something to wear to that, so you might as well get some other stuff too while we're here,” Nicky said with a weak smile and a half-hearted shrug.

“I could just skip it,” Neil bit back.

Andrew gasped loudly. “And be called a coward? No, no, that won't do, Neil. Your honor is on the line, so suck it up, buttercup.”

"Fuck you."

Kevin turned around in his seat to scowl at Neil. “You're going to the banquet and you're going to look presentable.”

All fourteen teams in their district would be there and that included the Ravens. It didn't matter if
he showed up in a tux or a pair of ratty jeans. Fancy clothes wouldn't make the others suddenly take
the Foxes seriously or treat them any better.

Andrew snickered and shut off the engine. They all spilled out into the parking lot and Neil
followed them inside with his hands stuffed into his pockets.

They walked through the main entrance and Neil was hit with the smell of stale air conditioning,
hot pretzels, and some perfume wafting out of the nearby cosmetics boutique. Nicky rubbed his
palms together and strode on ahead of them, already on the hunt for the right shop.

“Rabbit needs a new fluffy coat,” Andrew sang under his breath, bumping into Neil's side.

“Shouldn't you be sucking down Bloody Marys or something?” Neil muttered back, glancing over
at Aaron to make sure he wasn't listening.

Andrew grinned up at him. “Marys do nothing for me.”

“What?”

“Don't hurt yourself thinking about it too hard.” Andrew knocked on Neil's forehead and laughed
when Neil swatted him away.

Nicky decided on a store and shepherded them all into it. The others fanned out immediately,
weaving through the racks and displays. Neil stood helplessly by a table of packaged dress shirts
and watched Andrew take blazers off their hangers just to drop them on the floor. Kevin went
through the racks with his usual single-minded determination. It wasn't long before he was taking
an armful of clothing to a fitting room.

Aaron elbowed Nicky in the ribs and handed him a piece of paper before wandering off to one side
where he could take his phone out without Andrew seeing. Neil figured he was texting that
cheerleader named Katelyn, whom Nicky had teased Aaron about relentlessly after Friday's game.
Aaron denied any interest, but the looks Katelyn had sent his way suggested there was more going
on there than he was letting on. Part of Aaron's deal with Andrew was isolation, but if Andrew
could go off with Renee when he pleased, Neil thought Aaron was justified in seeking out the
cheerleader's company.

Nicky circled back to Neil with both formal and casual clothing draped over his arm and a hesitant
smile on his face. “So, here's some stuff for you.” He shoved them into Neil's chest and backed
away before Neil could shove them back.


“Yeah- oh! And here.” Nicky held up the piece of paper that Aaron had given him. He tried to
shove it into Neil's pocket, but Neil took a hasty step back before Nicky could touch him. Nicky's
face fell a little. “Right, uh, it's just a list of girls. Katelyn wrote down all the info for the single
Vixens who might be interested.”

“I don't need that.”

Nicky's smile brightened, but Neil didn't know why. “That's what I thought,” he said as he pulled
out a second list from his pocket. “You'll be needing this one, then. These are the names of some
cute boys who I know for a fact would be down for some of that action.”

He waved the list at Neil's lower half as he said it and Neil shifted the clothes in his arms as if to
shield himself. Andrew appeared at Nicky's side and swatted his head with an empty hanger. Nicky
gave a short yelp and glared down at his cousin, clutching his hair.

Kevin, making his way back from the fitting rooms, called over to them, “Nicky, it'll be hard enough to get him on a pro team with his shitty attitude. Dating a man will only make it worse.”

“Exy isn't everything, Kevin,” Nicky said grumpily. “Someone's gotta watch out for his happiness and I'm signing up since you assholes are impossible.”

“I don't need a date,” Neil said. “It's bad enough that I have to go to this thing. I'm not going to drag someone else down with me.”

Andrew tilted his head and smirked. “Yes, far be it from you to let others suffer the consequences of your actions.”

Neil swallowed hard and looked away, simmering with anger.

“All I'm saying is,” Nicky cut in, sending his cousin an odd look, “this thing might be less miserable for you if you get your dick sucked in the bathroom before, during, or after.”

“Oh my god,” Aaron muttered.

“Or you could do the sucking,” Nicky amended with a thoughtful look. “Personally-”

“Oh my god!” Aaron repeated louder, striding toward the door with his hands over his ears.

Kevin rolled his eyes and went over to the display of belts.

“I think the only balls Neil's interested in handling are the Exy ones,” Andrew said, leaning toward his cousin conspiratorially. “He could always take Allison, though. Word on the street is she'll be going alone this year.”

Andrew laughed when they both grimaced at that. Neil hadn't spent much time with Allison and Seth, but he'd heard them talking about the fall banquet weeks ago. Allison had wanted to get a hotel room in town and stay the weekend with Seth, but Seth wanted to head back with the rest of the team. As far as Neil knew, that had been their very last fight.

Nicky muttered something about Andrew's insensitivity while he went off to look for some clothes for himself, leaving Neil and Andrew alone.

“How long do you think it'll be before you can look her in the eye again?” Andrew teased.

Neil wandered a few steps away and pretended to look through some dress slacks, shifting the bundle in his arms. “I still don't know if I believe you. It's a solid theory, I'll give you that, but you can't prove anything.”

“Tsk, Neil, you don't want actual proof, do you? The idea alone is enough to make Allison despise you. Do you think your new buddies would stick around if they knew that Seth's cause of death was your big mouth?”

Neil swallowed back the urge to vomit. “Go away.”

“As you wish,” Andrew said lightly before breezing out of the store. Neil watched him go and then accidentally made eye contact with Kevin, who had stopped to listen in on their conversation. Kevin's expression was even more grim than it usually was and Neil was instantly irritated by it. “Are you going to take Allison?” Neil asked bitterly.
Kevin didn't flinch. “I don't have much of a right to speak to Allison right now either. Riko wouldn't have even been interested in the Foxes if I hadn't come here. This all started with me.”

Deep down, Neil had hoped that Kevin would say Andrew was paranoid or insane. If Kevin didn't believe that Andrew was right it would've made it easier to dismiss the guilt freezing his gut. Neil's mind still rebelled against the idea that Riko had sent people to kill Seth because of what, a game? Hurt pride? Neil knew plenty about brutality. His father had spilled enough blood to swim in, but he'd always gone after his targets directly instead of involving their friends or colleagues.

Neil had expected consequences, but he didn't think he'd gambled with the lives of his teammates when he provoked Riko. He was drowning when he hadn't even realized he'd gotten in too deep.

“It's a game,” Neil said. “I don't believe Riko would murder someone over a fucking game.”

Kevin slanted a pitying look down at him. “Be thankful you don't understand how these people think.”

The only thing Neil was thankful for was that Kevin still didn't remember who he really was. He made some noncommittal sound in his throat and looked for the register.

He hadn't intended on walking out with all the clothes that Nicky had picked out for him- he really only wanted something decent to wear to the banquet- but Nicky kept pushing and Kevin had Wymack's credit card before Neil could get a full sentence out.

“I can pay for it myself,” he'd snapped, but Kevin only trailed a slow, judgmental look down his threadbare outfit before handing the card over to the cashier.

After everything was paid for and packed away in shiny plastic bags, they headed out into the mall to look for Andrew. Nicky led them down an escalator and wove through the crowd toward a tall fountain at the very center of the mall. Neil glimpsed Andrew sitting cross-legged on the faux marble wall by the water. Aaron sat beside him with a bag of food from the nearby food court. Andrew was fiddling with a phone in his lap and didn't look up until Nicky plopped down on his other side to see what he was doing.

“Did you buy that or steal it from a museum?” Nicky asked, wrinkling his nose.

Neil set his bags down and looked around at the faces in the crowd. It didn't seem like anyone was watching them closer than they should've, but the back of his neck still prickled at being so far out in the open.

“I had a lot of money riding on this, Andrew,” Nicky went on. “What's he supposed to do with that? It's going to take him a year just to answer a text.”

Andrew snorted. “Who's going to text Neil?”

Neil froze.

“Me, obviously,” Nicky replied with a scoff.

“Good luck with that,” Andrew said sarcastically. He clapped the phone shut and tossed it to Neil, who caught it easily as a reflex.

Neil briefly considered dropping it, smashing it, hurling it into the fountain. Grief squeezed the air from his lungs and suddenly he was standing on that beach in California, alone in the dark with half a mile between him and the bones buried in the dark sand. The phones were the last thing he'd
gotten rid of even though he'd wanted so badly to keep them, to keep some shred of his mother. It was foolishly sentimental and his mother had taught him better than that. He threw a good-bye into the wind and the phones into the waves.

He was shaking before he could remind himself to stay calm.

“No,” he whispered, holding the phone out toward Nicky. “I don’t want it.”

“Oh, Neil, I get that,” Nicky said gently. He approached him carefully like he would a spooked animal. “We need you to have that, though, you know, just in case. I mean, what if Coach wants to tell you something or what if Kevin has some Exy emergency?”

“What if someone tries to kill you?” Andrew added with a large grin.

Nicky shot a glare at him over his shoulder before saying, “It’ll make things easier for all of us if you have a phone, trust me.”

“No,” Neil bit out, thrusting the phone out to him again. “I can’t- I-”

“No,” Neil bit out, thrusting the phone out to him again. “I can't- I-“

“Oh, Neil, okay.” Nicky folded his hands around Neil’s and promised, “We'll figure something out. No worries.”

Neil slipped his hand free, leaving the phone in Nicky's grasp, and picked up his bags again.

Andrew rose to his feet and held his car keys up in offering to Neil as he leaned in close. “Lies suit you better.”

Neil snatched the keys and fled to the parking lot. He didn't even care about the stifling heat trapped inside the car or the layer of sweat it provoked along his hairline. His head was pounding, his hands were shaking, and he was just relieved to be away from Andrew's knowing grin.

When the others finally returned to the car, they ignored him. The ride back to campus was silent and Neil spent every minute of it trying to seal off the chamber of his heart that was flooding with grief.

Back in his suite, he tossed a stilted greeting to Matt, who was studying at his desk, and strode to the bedroom. He focused on putting his new clothes away and breathing.

The issue of the phone was ignored as long as possible. Neil kept his mind focused on Exy and the drills he was supposed to work on that night with Kevin. He almost successfully tricked himself into thinking he wouldn't have to explain his breakdown to anyone until he came back to the locker room, half-dressed for night practice, and found Andrew straddling one of the benches with two phones and a half-empty bottle of rum in front of him. By the looks of the clothing left strewn in front of Kevin's locker, Neil guessed that Kevin had been forced out of the room in a hurry.

“With all your baggage, I'm surprised you fit through the door,” Andrew said. The smile was gone, but his tone was still light. Neil wondered if he'd snacked in Wymack's office again or if his mellow mood was because of the booze alone.

Neil walked to his locker to finish gearing up and said, “I don't need a phone.”

“You're confusing 'want' with 'need.' You don't want a phone. You do, in fact, need one.”

“How good is your hearing? Maybe I could just whistle.”
“I could put you on an actual leash if you'd prefer that.” Andrew's chuckle was low and rough. “You already put a rope around your neck and gave the other end to Riko, so why not? It's not the only game of tug-o-war I'm playing against him.”

“I don't need a leash and I don't need a phone.” Neil shut his locker and went to sit in front of Andrew with the phones between them.

Andrew cocked his head and sighed heavily. “Protecting your dumb ass is going to be enough work for me without you making it more difficult.”

“It's easier to survive when no one can figure out how to get a hold of me.”

“You're not running this year, rabbit. Time to adapt.” Andrew flipped open the black phone and pushed a button before holding it up to his ear. A moment later, the gray phone began vibrating and playing some snippet of a mournful song about runaways. Neil's pulse quickened and Andrew narrowed his eyes at his throat.

“Your phone's ringing,” he prompted.

“It's not my phone.”

Andrew pinned his phone to his ear with his shoulder and opened the bottle of rum so he could take a drink. “Give me one good reason why you shouldn't have this phone.”

“Are we playing our game?”

Andrew snapped the phone shut. “If we have to. You start.”

Neil stole a swig of rum in spite of his better judgment before answering, “My cellphone was the last thing I got rid of after... after I was alone. I wanted to keep it because my mother gave it to me, but it was too much of a risk.”

“Okay.”

“Your turn.”

“I broke my arm when I was ten.”

Neil blinked at him. Andrew blinked back. He couldn't tell if Andrew was so unimpressed with his truth that he'd given him something equally unimpressive or if there was something more meaningful lurking behind his seemingly simple statement.

Andrew opened his phone and called Neil's again. This time Neil answered the call and lifted the phone to his ear.

“You can't go back,” Andrew told him. He hooked a finger under Neil's chin to prevent him from looking away. “Stop running. Stop lying. Grow a spine and remember who promised to keep you safe. This is your home until the end of the year. All you have to do is dig your heels in and stay. I'll take care of the rest.”

Neil stared at him for a long moment, wishing he could coat himself in Andrew's certainty. His insides were shivering with fear and he was sick of it. He was tired of being afraid, of being nothing. He was tired of desperately fighting for scraps of a life he couldn't keep.

Andrew ended the call and tucked his phone away in his pocket. Neil put his phone in his bag and
glanced up to see Andrew studying his face again.

“Did you eat tonight?” Neil asked.

“You gonna rat me out to Kevin?”

Neil shook his head. “Just curious.”

“About my eating habits?”

“You're not eating enough.”

Andrew grinned and took another gulp of rum. “You know how you're supposed to secure your own oxygen mask first if your plane's going down? Well, you're suffocating, pal, so worry about that instead of what I'm doing.”

Neil frowned, but he couldn't really argue. “Does the booze ever numb you enough to sleep?”

“You should get out there before Kevin comes stomping in here looking for you.”

He couldn't argue with that either. Filing away his questions for later, Neil got up and headed out into the foyer and the empty stadium beyond.
The Past Comes Back to Bite You

Chapter Summary

After the disastrous fall banquet, Neil learns the truth about his life.

Chapter Notes

I sound like a broken record, I know, but thank you all so much for reading and leaving comments and/or kudos. You're all lovely and I appreciate every one of you <3 <3

Neil had expected the fall banquet to be a disaster. He had expected to sit quietly and grit his teeth and take whatever insults the Ravens came armed with. He had expected to boil with rage and crave violence and fantasize about taking a knife to Riko's slender throat.

He had not expected to walk out of Blackwell's stadium with bile stinging his throat and his world crumbling down around him.

Riko knew who he was. Riko knew more about Neil's life than Neil did.

“Alex? Stefan? Chris?”

Neil remembered the glass he'd left behind at Kathy's studio, thinking nothing of DNA and fingerprints and only of getting air into his lungs.

“Your father? Oh, no, Nathaniel, it is his master that you should fear.”

Neil had thought his father was a devil in his own right, ruling over a kingdom with rivers of blood and towers of money. He was a butcher, he was a king, he was the unforgiving sun whose orbit Neil was always trying to escape.

But according to Riko, he was a pet. The Moriyama's dog. If the Moriyamas were powerful enough to keep the Butcher at their feet, Neil was as good as dead already. Against all odds, his mother had managed to give him a slim chance for survival and he'd thrown it away because he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

In all his years of running, his mother had never mentioned that his father was owned. She'd never told him that there was more money stolen than the five million they'd run with. Neil had naively thought that things were as bad as they could be, but the truth was uglier than anything he could have imagined.

Neil spent the ride back to campus curled up against the bus window and staring out into the darkness in shocked silence. Behind him, Kevin was passed out and snoring. Andrew was humming something that sounded like a nursery rhyme in the back row.

Neil didn't know if it was better or worse that Kevin knew his real identity now. He had answers,
which Neil was interested in, but Kevin's meltdown once he stared into Neil's eyes and recognized him properly was disconcerting to say the least.

He spent the night on Wymack's couch at Wymack's insistence either because he saw how shaken Neil had looked at the banquet or because he had questions of his own that he wanted answers to. It resulted in a tense conversation over coffee the next morning. Wymack was growing tired of Neil's lies, but unlike Andrew, he didn't seem interested in pushing Neil too hard for answers. Looking at Wymack's haggard face, Neil knew that he understood what it was like to be crushed under the weight of the world.

“Your team's got your back, all right?” he said after it was clear Neil wasn't going to give up his secrets. “But that also means they're in the line of fire when you piss Riko off on purpose.”

Neil felt like his stomach was full of lead when Wymack finally dropped him off at the Foxhole Court to meet Kevin and Andrew. He punched in the security code and let himself inside. With each step he took toward the court, he wished that Kevin would tell him it was all some sort of sick misunderstanding, that Riko had mistaken him for someone else.

While he trekked out to the inner court, Andrew was sprinting up and down the steps high in the stadium, keeping himself at a speed that seemed human. Kevin was sitting on the fox paw logo in the middle of the court, dressed in sweats and a t-shirt. He looked smaller than Neil had ever seen him, in the center of his battlefield without any armor.

Steeling himself, Neil walked out to him.

Kevin looked up when the court doors opened and watched Neil silently as he walked across the glossy floor. He stared like he was unsure if Neil was a hallucination or not until Neil finally lowered himself to sit facing Kevin on the fox paw logo. Whatever Neil had planned to say to him fell away. The air between them was too heavy for Neil to bridge.

Kevin said hoarsely, “Tell me you're not him.”

“I-”

“Tell me you're not Nathaniel.”

Neil tensed. “Don't say that name.”

Kevin looked sick. He rubbed at his mouth and groaned, “Why are you here?”

“I just... I wanted to play Exy. I thought I could get out before you realized who I was.”

“You're a fucking moron,” Kevin spat. “You signed your own death warrant. You realize that, right? You tied yourself to the train tracks. Christ, how could you be so stupid?”

Hot shame licked across his skin, cold dread dripped down the walls of his lungs. Exy was the only thing that made him feel truly alive and his love of the game led him to his death.

He pressed his knuckles into the floorboards to ground himself and asked, “Why did Riko say I was bought?”

“That was the plan before you vanished,” Kevin muttered darkly. “Your father is Lord Kengo's favorite weapon. He's the one who keeps the empire in line. He's the name Lord Kengo shields himself with when the government looks his way. He'll be turned when Lord Kengo steps down and kept as part of his inner circle for the day he comes back into power.”
Neil's heart dropped. "Turned."

"Lord Kengo has been the head of the Moriyama clan for one hundred and fifty years. Things are getting complicated nowadays, though, with technology and everything. Lord Kengo lives a public life and he knows people will eventually catch on to the fact that he's been around too long. Twenty-five years ago, he took a wife and had two sons. Ichirou and Riko have been trying to prove themselves to Lord Kengo because soon he'll choose his replacement and go into hiding with his inner circle for a period of time."

"Oh," Neil said dumbly. "So what- where do I fit in with all this?"

"The Butcher's power was never meant to be passed down. Each man is handpicked and none of them are allowed to have heirs. So, you were either going to be like me- given to the master and trained as a Raven- or executed. The day you met Riko and me was part of your audition."

Neil's mother had signed him up for little league, but she'd always hated Exy openly. After they ran, she made him swear to never touch a racquet again. For one moment, Neil burned with resentment. He could have been a Raven instead of a nobody with nothing. He could have had Exy and a real name instead of constant fear. His eyes caught on the white scars snaking across Kevin's hand then and it cooled his rage a little. He remembered the ashen look on Jean's face. Perhaps life at the Nest wouldn't have been any better.

"How'd the audition go?" he asked quietly.

"You didn't finish. You disappeared after the first day."

Neil nodded. "My mother never said why we ran that night."

"How could she have let you come here?"

"She didn't let me do anything. She's dead."

Kevin stared at him hard. "I'm sorry for that, but you really shouldn't have come here. You should've run the minute you saw me."

"I tried, remember?" Neil hissed back. "I wasn't planning on coming here at first, but- but I was so tired of running. I just wanted to feel real for a little while."

The laugh that broke out of Kevin's mouth was almost hysterical. "And you thought Andrew could keep you safe? Jesus, Nathaniel-"

"Don't call me that." Neil shot to his feet, wrenching away from Kevin when he reached up for him.

"Nath- Neil! Wait," Kevin called after him, jumping to his feet as well. Neil was halfway to the door. "There's more! Wait!"

Neil stopped, seething and shaking, and spun to look at him again. "So tell me."

"You were supposed to be Riko's. He wanted you to be part of his perfect Court and his inner circle." Kevin tapped his cheek. "The marks aren't just for Exy. They're to show who he wants to be turned. He still sees you as his rightful property and he expects you to learn your place. If you can't keep your head down until the master approaches you in the spring, you should run now."

Neil felt choked by it all. He was on a leash, after all, and he'd reached the end of it. He would
either be reclaimed by Riko or murdered by his father. He couldn't decide which was worse.

“I can't run, Kevin. I can't go back to that.”

“You can't stay here.”

Neil stuffed his hands into his pockets. He curled one hand around his phone and the other around his keys. Gifts, promises, anchors. His eyes found Andrew up in the stands and he watched him dart up and down the steps for a minute.

“I'm not going anywhere,” Neil said, sounding more certain than he felt. “If I was going to run, I should've done it back in August before Kathy's show. I missed my window, so I'll just have to deal with the consequences.”

Kevin took slow, careful steps toward him. “You won't survive.”

“At least I'll get to live a little before I die.”

“It wasn't supposed to be like this,” Kevin said softly.

He couldn't handle the regret in Kevin's tone or the feelings threatening to cave in his chest. Kevin hadn't signed him because of his past or because he had something to gain. Kevin had been condescending and grating all summer, but he'd genuinely thought Neil had a shot at Court someday. Neil had wanted that more than anything and the more he learned, the more hopeless it looked. He was doomed since the day he was born.

Clearing his throat, he changed the subject. “Has Riko been turned already?”

Kevin looked down. “He was turned on his eighteenth birthday.”

“And he didn't turn you and Jean?”

“He can't turn anyone without permission from his father. He's... not exactly happy about having to wait.”

Neil narrowed his eyes. “He fed off you, didn't he?”

Kevin's silence was confirmation.

“What's Andrew?” It was out before he could swallow it back. He knew it was a touchy subject with Kevin, but he wanted to know. Andrew was picky about who he accepted blood from and Neil wanted to know why.

“That wasn't part of our deal,” Kevin answered, turning to glance up at the stands.

“So what does he want from you?”

Kevin shifted anxiously and crossed his arms over his chest. “That's not really any of your business. Ask Andrew if you want to know.”

Neil had plenty of juicy secrets to trade for Andrew's now, but the thought didn't make him feel any better. He glanced up at the vampire one last time before trudging off the court. His heart was heavier than it'd ever been and his feet dragged all the way into the foyer.

A way out was always the most important thing to him and his mother. They always had at least two escape routes planned at any given time and they kept themselves prepared to flee at the first
sign of danger. Timing was what kept them alive—knowing when to run and when to hide. Neil had felt that instinctive urge to flee back in April when Wymack first approached him, in June when Andrew's lot took him to Columbia, and in August after Kathy's show. He'd seen the warning signs and stayed anyway.

Now it was too late.
The Future Looks Bleak

Chapter Summary

The Foxes play their first game against the Ravens.

Knowing how grim his future was emptied Neil's daily life of all meaning. Classes were a waste of time since he wouldn't even finish out the school year. Tutoring sessions were dull before, but now they made him irrationally angry. Movie nights and dinners with the Foxes just reminded him of what he couldn't keep.

In an attempt to tune out the buzzing of all his horrible thoughts, Neil pushed himself harder at practices, buried himself under his schoolwork, and stayed away from Exy-related news. Evenings were spent with the upperclassmen and nights were spent with Kevin and Andrew on the court. Soon enough, Neil had run himself too ragged to fixate on the gruesome fate waiting for him in the spring.

Against all odds, things began to get better in small ways after some time had passed. Allison spoke to Neil for the first time in weeks. Later that night, Neil heard her laugh at one of Matt's crude jokes. Her grief was heavy and it was clear that it would linger for a long time, but she wasn't defeated by it. Neil knew she was slowly learning how to keep going and he drew some inspiration from her strength.

Matt and Dan continued to draw out small truths from him and they collected them like crumbs of gold even if they were completely insignificant. Little things began changing around Neil's dorm—there was more fruit in the fridge he shared with Matt after he told them fresh fruit was his favorite thing to eat, the volume of Matt's stereo was kept at a quieter setting once Neil expressed a dislike for loud music, and movie nights became game nights as soon as Neil admitted he didn't like sitting for two hours staring at a screen unless there was an Exy game on it.

Andrew's laughter grew louder and his eyes shone brighter as the blood supply in Wymack's fridge dwindled. They didn't play their truth game as much since Andrew was rarely in his right mind long enough to face Neil seriously. Neil was fine with this—he found he'd rather avoid thinking about vampires altogether for the time being.

The best thing out of all this was that on Fridays, the Foxes played better than ever. Their short winning streak surprised everyone and even if Neil knew he might not live to see finals, he couldn't help feeling warmed by their joy.

The warmth didn't last long, though. How could it when the Foxes were set to play against the Ravens?

The dreaded date arrived quickly and, even though he had mentally groaned at his phone each time the date ticked upward, Neil still felt surprised when he woke up to the unfortunate realization that it was the day of the Ravens game.

The morning stretched on forever. Wherever Neil went that day a hush seemed to follow. The whole campus was watching the Exy team, knowing full well what was going to happen that night. In the elevator and the dining hall, the other athletes looked at the Exy team like they were
marching off to the gallows. Neil felt like they were. Matt, Dan, and Nicky tried to pin smiles to their faces to the keep spirits from reaching an all-time low. Renee was the only one who appeared genuinely calm. Allison and Aaron looked angry, Andrew was cackling at either everything or nothing, and Kevin looked like he wanted to throw up more than Neil did.

Somehow, they got through the day.

It was a home game and Neil didn't know if that was better or worse. He supposed it was a good thing that they'd be able to drag their sorry asses back to the Tower and nurse their wounds in private instead of sitting on a bus together for hours and hours after their crushing defeat.

As always, Andrew was the only one free of giving a fuck. He was a bouncing ball of cheer at Kevin's side, tossing out random trivia and little quips at such a high speed Neil would have assumed he was high on something if he didn't know any better. Nicky was brave enough to ask if Andrew had fiddled with his dosage again, but Aaron's sharp elbow in his side made him drop that line of questioning.

By the time the Foxes were putting on gear and brave faces, Neil was certain he was going to be sick. He almost wished they could forfeit just to save themselves the hours of humiliation they were about to suffer through.

Wymack paced the length of the foyer as the Foxes lined up in the correct order. The vicious roar of the crowd was pushing in through the doorway. Neil's heart was a small, frantic thing rattling around in his rib cage in search of an escape.

As he walked up and down the room, Wymack barked out orders to his team. “Five points tonight,” he said to Neil and then threatened him with a marathon sign-up sheet when he balked. Then, Wymack moved on to Dan and Allison. “Keep the defense line together,” he said. “Offense is on their own tonight. Defense, keep those Ravens away from our goal. Andrew, pretend like you give a shit about this game and do what I signed you to do.”

“We're so fucked,” muttered Nicky.

A warning buzzer went off. Both Neil and Kevin jumped.

Abby stepped up to Kevin's side and put her hand on his shoulder. “Are you going to be all right, Kevin?”

“I can do this,” Kevin said, but Neil didn't know who he was trying to reassure.

Dan straightened her back and hollered, “Let's go, Foxes!”

The sea of orange at their backs was only mildly comforting. On the other side of the stadium was a wall of black-clad fans awaiting their champions. It was like staring into an abyss that thirsted for Fox blood.

Edgar Allan's fight song reverberated in Neil's bones and jarred his heart out of its rhythm as the Ravens stepped out into the open. Riko stepped onto their court like he was taking command of it when he went to meet Dan for the coin toss and Neil hated him more than ever for being a bad memory in his favorite place.

He looked over at Andrew, who was staring up at the ceiling like it was somehow more interesting than the chaotic crowds around him. Neil had tried and failed again to convince Andrew to swipe a bag from the nearby blood bank. He regretted not trying harder to change Andrew's mind. Andrew didn't care that they were facing the Ravens and he didn't care that Riko was a vampire who was
well-fed and therefore stronger.

Seeing Andrew so calm and unaffected helped in an odd way. Neil stared at the side of Andrew's head and watched his jaw work as he chewed a piece of gum that Wymack would yell at him for any moment now. He looked a million miles away. His indifference looked more comfortable than the nervousness shredding Neil's insides. Was being blank better than being ill with dread? Maybe. Maybe not.

Neil inhaled deeply and stared at the plexiglass wall. Instead of staring through it to the Ravens on the other side, though, Neil searched for the reflection of himself and his Foxes. The bright orange was hard to miss. Nine orange jerseys all together, for better or worse.

Dan's voice startled him. “Just... just get through it. Whatever happens, we'll still wake up tomorrow and we'll deal with it.”

“Okay,” Neil said even though this game felt like the end of the world.

“Okay,” she repeated. “Let's do this.”

The Foxes and the Ravens assembled on the court.

Everything after the first buzzer happened too fast or too slow like a dream he couldn't escape. The Ravens moved swiftly and seamlessly, flowing around the Foxes like shadows, and yet Riko still outshone them. He didn't blur from one place to another with that superhuman speed of his, but his superior strength was obvious to anyone who had a clue.

He scored on Andrew faster than anyone ever had. Andrew blinked at the red wall behind him and let out a sharp laugh that sounded too rough around the edges. Something was cracking, but Neil didn't have time to wonder if it was his indifferent shell or the last solid piece of his sanity.

Neil pushed his body to work harder than it ever had before and, when the final buzzer brought the madness to a halt, he was entirely convinced his body had divorced him at last. Everything from the neck down felt fuzzy and vague. He was almost too scared to look in case his body really was gone.

They lost, of course, just like everyone knew they would. The Ravens took an obscene amount of points from the Foxes and they looked bored doing it.

When the Foxes stumbled off the court like dazed newborn deer, Wymack didn't reprimand them for the points they gave away. Instead, he congratulated them for the six points they managed to take in return. Six times they'd managed to sneak the ball past the Raven goalkeepers and that was enough for Wymack to be proud of them. His way of thinking bled into them and infected them with weary, bewildered good cheer.

Kevin stayed behind while Andrew staggered off alone and Neil thought he could almost see Kevin smiling. The words he'd said to Riko on the court still hung by Neil's ears. “I'm satisfied.”

After he showered, Neil went off to find Andrew. His knees felt ready to give out at any moment, but he wanted to confirm with his own eyes that Andrew hadn't dropped dead in some shadowy corner.

There was a trail of discarded goalie gear leading right up the door of Wymack's office. Neil gathered up Andrew's gloves, arm guards, and helmet and dropped the bundle beside Wymack's desk. A few feet away from the mini-fridge, Andrew was sprawled out in a way that made Neil wince. He could see where Andrew's chest padding dug into his throat and where the straps
must've been cutting into his sides as he twisted in a poor attempt to open the fridge door. Worst of all, Andrew was laughing. Wheezing, rattling giggles were gurgling up in his throat. His wild eyes landed on Neil and a brief flicker of terror played across them before the mania swallowed Andrew's mind whole.

“Blood bags, blood bags, everywhere, nor any drop to drink,” Andrew rasped. The more he shook, the harder he laughed.

“Andrew-

“Don’t,” Andrew snarled, finally managing to get one knee under himself. “What kind of a fly waltzes willingly into a web?”

Neil inched closer, but Andrew's eyes flashed again. Genuine anger was fighting through the fog of starvation. Walking closer was stupid and reckless, but so was everything else he'd done that year. At least some good might come of this.

Without getting too close to Andrew's twisted, heaving form, Neil pried open the fridge door and bent to retrieve the bag of dark blood. Andrew lost his patience with his bulky gear and ripped just enough straps to free himself from his chest and shoulder padding. When Neil held the blood bag out to him, Andrew wrinkled his nose at it and grunted, “Ugh.”

“Do you wanna pop it in the microwave for a bit? I won't tell Wymack if you use his mug.”

Andrew made a strangled keening noise through gritted teeth that almost sounded like a laugh. He ran a shaking hand through his sweaty hair and squeezed his eyes shut, clearly in pain.

“Just take it,” Neil murmured, stepping forward.

“Get back,” Andrew warned.

Neil blinked and took a step back. His body was warm and loose from the shower and his heart was still calming down from the game. He hadn't thought about the effect that would have on Andrew when he was in such a state.

He went over to Wymack's desk. After setting the blood bag on the seat of Wymack's office chair, he stood in view of the vampire and gave the chair a firm push to send it rolling over. Andrew stopped it with his foot and then snatched the bag. He gave it another disgusted look as he peeled off the strips of tape that were keeping it closed.

Neil left, satisfied that Andrew was at least drinking now.

In the hallway, he nearly bumped into Wymack, who frowned at him like he was a child caught misbehaving. “Nights like this, it's best to give Andrew some space.”

Neil's temper stirred. “He's starving.”

“So convince him to eat more,” Wymack replied lightly. “Let me know how that goes.”

There was nothing Neil could say that hadn't already been said, so he nodded and went to find the rest of the team. Matt hooked him in a one-armed hug and ruffled his hair. The others were exhausted but still smiling wearily. Abby gave him a sunny smile of her own from across the room where she was checking on Aaron's bruised knuckles.

Once Kevin and Dan finished speaking to the press and Andrew finally appeared to shower and
change into clean clothes, the entire team headed over to Abby's. Everyone except Renee and Neil indulged in either beer or mixed drinks while they snacked on whatever Abby had in her pantry. In the dining room, the upperclassmen tried to teach Abby and Wymack how to play a drinking game involving cards. Aaron and Nicky set themselves up in front of Abby's television to watch late-night reruns of some cartoon show. Kevin sat on the stairs leading up to the second floor with a bottle of vodka for company. After watching Andrew head out the front door with a pack of cigarettes, Neil sat a few steps below Kevin and stuffed his hands in the front pocket of his sweatshirt.

Neil rested against the wall and listened to Dan and Matt's laughter overlapping with Wymack's grumbling complaints about the game they'd roped him into playing. Abby and Renee teased him good-naturedly unlike Allison, who let Wymack know in no uncertain terms how badly he was doing.

The level of vodka in the bottle was slowly dropping as Kevin kept drinking and Neil peeked at him every so often to gauge just how glassy his eyes were. The vodka was lulling the last of his defenses to sleep.

Neil knew it was underhanded, but he put away his guilt and asked, “What did you promise Andrew?”

Kevin groaned and rubbed at his eyes. “He can prob'y hear you.”

“Then he can come in and tell me to stop if he wants to.”

“Neil,” Kevin sighed tiredly, “why are you so obsessed with this?”

“It takes my mind off the fact that I'm going to die in a few months,” Neil said harshly.

“Fuck,” Kevin muttered before taking another drink.

“Come on, Kevin.”

Another outburst of laughter and cheering came from the dining room, followed by Nicky's drunken giggling from the TV room.

Kevin hung his head and answered, “I told him I'd help him build a life after graduation.”

Neil's forehead scrunched. “What does that mean?”

“He's... fucked. He's fucked, Neil. Not in the same way that you're fucked.” Kevin gestured to him with a loose wave of his hand while he babbled. “He's still fucked, though. Aaron and Nicky are gonna leave him after they graduate. Don't look at me like that. You think they won't? Nicky's dying to go back to Europe and Aaron's not gonna want anything to do with Andrew once he finds out about his little situation. He won't stick around to grow old near his identical twin who's stuck at eighteen. Imagine down the line when people start askin' if Andrew's his son- or his grandson.”

Neil put his hand over his mouth and swallowed hard against the hot curl of nausea. He knew what it was like to have nothing, to feel trapped by circumstance, to be completely and hopelessly alone in the world. He couldn't imagine what it was like to stare down an eternity of that.

“Do you think you can do it?” Neil asked.

“Do what?”
“Can you find him something big enough to live for after graduation?”

Kevin took another big gulp of vodka. “We’ll see, I guess.”

Neil would be dead by then, but he didn't feel like pointing that out.
Friday Night Bites

Chapter Summary

The Foxes celebrate Halloween together.

With everything else that was going on, Neil forgot about the fact that Halloween was quickly approaching. He'd never thought much of the holiday- or any holidays, for that matter- but his teammates' conversations soon turned towards costumes and bars and parties, making it impossible to ignore.

A week before Halloween, Neil returned to his suite after shaking off an excited Nicky, who wouldn't drop the subject of Neil's costume, only to find Matt and Dan waiting for him with matching grins.

“What?” Neil sighed as he kicked off his shoes and dropped his bag.

Dan's smile grew wider and she nudged Matt with her elbow.

“So Halloween is this week,” Matt began.

“Is it?” Neil deadpanned on his way to the kitchen.

“And,” Matt continued, following him, “we were thinking that a certain favorite roommate of mine might be able to convince the monsters to let us in on their Halloween fun.”

“For team-bonding,” Dan added.

“You really want to go to Columbia with them?” Neil asked. Matt had explained what Andrew did to him and Neil was surprised that Matt could even stand to be in the same room as Andrew after that.

“It might be fun,” Matt said as if it were a simple matter.

Neil took a drink of water, weighed the pros and cons, and then said, “I can't promise anything, but I'll ask.”

Dan and Matt exchanged pleased smiles and changed the subject to whether they should have Thai food or pizza for dinner.

That night, Neil planned on asking Andrew about letting the upperclassmen come with them to Columbia that weekend, but Kevin was intensely focused on getting Neil ready for the game against Blackwell that Friday. His enthusiasm and his cutting remarks successfully drove all thoughts that weren't strictly Exy-related out of Neil's mind.

Andrew spent the first hour of practice sprinting laps around the inner court, a blur of black cloth and gold hair in Neil's periphery. During the second hour, Andrew disappeared into the foyer.

When Kevin and Neil dragged themselves back to the locker room, Andrew was straddling the bench with his blood bag and his phone in front of him. The phone was vibrating noisily against
the bench and Andrew's hand twitched beside it while he glared down at its black case.

"Who's calling you at midnight?" Neil asked as he rolled down his socks so he could take off his shin guards.

Andrew gave him a wry smile. "It's only nine."

It took Neil a second to put together what he meant: it was only nine o'clock in California. Cass was calling again, which explained his fidgeting. He still didn't know why she got under Andrew's skin like she did, but he knew it couldn't be good for Andrew's mental state for him to just sit there staring at that phone.

"Well, answer it or turn it off," he said lowly, ignoring Kevin's sharp look.

Andrew's smile was more sinister than usual; he was more dangerous after he drank. He said, "Call me when you've got your own shit worked out."


Andrew's next retort was interrupted by Kevin saying, "You shouldn't be drinking. You're barely making it through game nights as it is. What are we going to do when you run out?"

"If I eat the other team, would they have to forfeit?"

Kevin scowled. "This isn't a joke."

"That'd earn you a red card," Neil chimed in.

Andrew winked drowsily and clicked his tongue. "Blood-red card."

Kevin's nostrils flared. "Yeah, keep making jokes. It'll be hilarious when Andrew goes into a feeding frenzy on the court while we're all locked in there with him."

Andrew scoffed and waved his hand dismissively.

Neil stared at him and asked, "Has that ever happened before?"

"Are we playing our game? If so, you have to tell me how your mother died," Andrew challenged.

Neil clamped his mouth shut and went off to the bathrooms to finish changing, leaving the other two to bicker about Andrew's eating habits.

He didn't remember Matt and Dan's request about Halloween until Saturday when Andrew's lot went to the mall to pick out costumes. Eden's Twilight was having a special event on Friday, promising a free round of drinks to anyone who came dressed up. After their first trip to the mall, Neil wanted to swear off shopping with them ever again, but he found himself in the car anyway. He sat in the back between the twins and listened to Andrew and Nicky prattle on about some TV show.

He decided to wait for a natural break in their conversation to ask about inviting the upperclassmen along instead of interrupting and he ended up waiting until they reached a store that was decked out in fake cobwebs, glittery skulls, and animatronic birds that were activated by motion sensors. There were racks of costumes ranging from lewd to downright ridiculous and Neil was momentarily baffled by the thought of people wearing such things out in public.

Nicky ignored Neil's attempts to talk to him while he dug through the racks, more focused than
Neil had ever seen him. Every so often, he held up costumes to Neil's body before frowning and shaking his head. Aaron and Kevin were wandering between racks, casting disdainful looks at the gaudy clothes. Andrew left them to go inspect the tubes of fake blood and face paint near the counter.

While Nicky was trying to see if Neil would look better as a cop or a cowboy, Neil finally said, “So Matt and Dan were wondering if the whole team could go down to Columbia together for Halloween.”

Nicky lowered the costumes and tilted his head. “They want to come with us?”

Across the store, Andrew dropped the tube he'd been looking at and turned toward them, eyes narrowed and smile wide.

Andrew was already on the move when Neil answered, “Yeah, so what do you say?”

“Uh-” Nicky paused when Andrew appeared at his side. “Um, I don't know. I mean, last year we did a pretty thorough job of burning that bridge.”

“With Matt,” Neil guessed. “He seemed like he'd be up for it.”

Nicky chewed his lip and cast a guilty look at his cousin. “What do you say, Andrew?”

“If they get killed, it won't be my doing,” Andrew said, chuckling. “Tell them to come along if they're feeling brave.”

And with that, Andrew went off to look for his own costume. Aaron came up alongside Neil and exchanged a confused look with Nicky.

“What the fuck?” Aaron asked. “The upperclassmen are coming?”

Nicky quickly recovered. “I know which one I'd like to see come, if you know what I mean.”

“Ugh,” Aaron muttered before hurrying away from them again.

“Do you think I'd make a convincing Dracula?” Andrew called from the back of the store before chuckling to himself.

The others had their costumes picked out before Neil did. Andrew settled on a black-and-white striped inmates uniform. Nicky decided to go as a space cadet, Aaron chose a few vials of face paint, and Kevin picked out a headband with devil's horns. Eventually, Nicky took the decision out of Neil's hands, rejecting his idea to come dressed as a student, and threw the blue police uniform in with the rest of their purchases at the cash register. Neil pretended he didn't hear the joke Nicky made about the flimsy pair of handcuffs that came with it.

With that over and done with, Neil pushed thoughts of Halloween and Eden's Twilight out of his mind until after the game on Friday. Their victory bolstered the team's spirits as they headed back to the Tower to change for their night out. When Neil was standing in the bathroom pulling on the fake gun belt around his hips, he felt a creeping sense of dread about the whole evening. Andrew had tried to even himself out with booze after the game instead of blood since he would soon get some from Roland. Neil feared that the upperclassmen would notice the dramatic change in Andrew's demeanor halfway through their night out.

Neil also worried for Roland. Without his usual post-game meal, Andrew was bound to be ravenous that night. It wasn't really his concern, though, so he shook his head and finished getting
ready by squeezing a few eye drops into the corners of his eyes since his contacts had been
bugging him all night.

Nicky gave him a cheeky thumbs up when he emerged from the bathroom and then they all headed
down to Andrew's car. The upperclassmen followed in Allison's convertible and they all made it to
Sweetie's at half-past ten. The nine of them barely fit in the corner booth that Andrew had reserved
ahead of time. They squished together as best they could and immediately picked up their menus to
ignore the awkward silence. Without Exy, they didn't really know what to do with each other.

Andrew had eaten a Tic Tac for show and everyone besides Neil and Kevin assumed his meds
were taking him up and away when the booze quickly burned out of his system and left him
bouncing. His crazed cheer made him chatty and his remarks were cutting and rude. Allison
returned most of them with barbed insults of her own, which amused Andrew to no end. Renee was
the only one who got a civil word out of him.

After their meal was over, Andrew snatched the packets of cracker dust from their hiding place in
the stack of napkins and then the team headed over to Eden's Twilight. Andrew secured VIP
parking passes for both cars and brushed off the bouncer's amused comment about the unusual
number of people in their group that night. Nicky and Allison drove off to park while the rest of
them headed inside.

The club was packed with costumed partygoers and it took the Foxes ten minutes to finally snag a
table and enough chairs for their group. Once they did, Andrew smacked Neil's arm and the two of
them made their way to the bar to get drinks. Andrew elbowed his way through the crowd until
they were finally squeezed together at the bar. He leaned over the bar to look for Roland.

Andrew's arm was pressed into Neil's chest, so when he tensed Neil felt it. It drew Neil's attention
away from the people surrounding them.

“What's wrong?” Neil shouted to be heard above the music.

Andrew turned to him with a brittle smile and empty eyes. “There's nothing to eat!”

Neil frowned and looked at the bartenders busily mixing drinks for their customers. Roland wasn't
among them.

“Does he ever work upstairs?”

Andrew laughed. “No, Roland is much too big a fan of the downstairs action.” He turned and
flagged down the nearest bartender to ask after Roland.

“Some family emergency. He's not here,” was the answer he got.

Neil's heart climbed into his throat.

“You boys going to order or just stand there?” asked the woman.

Andrew rattled off a list of drinks while Neil tried not to panic. In spite of what Andrew might say,
Neil knew he needed blood badly. As soon as the bartender moved away to start mixing drinks,
Andrew pressed his forehead to the sticky bar and guffawed so loudly it rang out above the music
in horrible, broken waves.

Neil leaned in and asked, “Can vampires starve to death?”

“Apparently not!” Andrew cackled and wiped some drool from the corner of his twitching smile.
“What's the back-up plan? Do you have anything at the house?”

Andrew rocked backward on his heels and said nothing. Neil put his hand behind Andrew's shoulders just in case he tipped back too far. The delirious smile stretching Andrew’s mouth was frightening and the vacant, glassy look in his eyes was worrying.

“You don't have a back-up plan?” Neil's anger made his chest hot and tight. “You've gotta be fucking kidding me, Andrew!”

Andrew rubbed at his eyes and laughed.

“Fucking hell!” Neil looked out at the sweaty, writhing mass of dancers on the floor and thought of all the pounding hearts and rushing blood. Andrew sucked his bottom lip into his mouth, his fangs were extending with the instinctive urge to feed. His pupils were wide with feral hunger. Andrew's control was slipping. His instincts were eating away his mind.

The solution was obvious.

Neil was practically vibrating with impatience as they waited for their tray of drinks. Once it was finished, Andrew shouted something absurd to the bartender, who shrugged it off, and then followed Neil back to the table without spilling a drop somehow. The sodas were given to Renee and Neil and the packets of cracker dust were passed out to everyone except Renee, Neil, and Matt. The Foxes downed their dust and drinks in no time and soon enough most of the group was in the mood to dance. Matt and Dan disappeared into the crowd on the dance floor, followed quickly by Nicky and Aaron. Neil turned down Renee's offer of a dance and then watched her drag Allison out to the dance floor as well. Kevin slumped back in his seat and watched the crowd with unfocused eyes.

Andrew leaned his elbows on the table with his face buried in his hands, laughing his ass off at nothing and shivering.

Neil swallowed hard and then said, “Bite me.”

Andrew peeked at him through his spread fingers and chuckled. “Funny, bunny.”

“I'm serious. You need to eat, so... bite me.”

The mania melted into something predatory and intense. Andrew lowered his hands and leaned closer to Neil, eyes dark and breath hot. “Don't,” he growled.

“You need to eat,” Neil repeated.

Andrew knew it, too. “What'll you take in return?”

“Whatever you're willing to give.”

“I'll think of something,” Andrew said. “Kevin, stay here.”

Kevin groaned something in response.

Andrew clamped one hand around Neil’s arm and dragged him away. Neil hoped Kevin was too drunk to figure out what was going on because he didn't think he had the patience to sit through a lecture. He knew that this could affect his playing, but a bloodthirsty vampire with fraying self-control was a more pressing problem.
Andrew led him through a door marked “Staff Only” to a bright hallway. Through the door at the end was a dimly lit stockroom lined with metal shelves that were crowded with boxes and bottles. Andrew pulled the door shut behind them and Neil's stomach twisted nervously.

“Okay, so how do you usually-”

“Take your shirt off,” Andrew said before dissolving into a fit of hysterical, hiccuping giggles. “I've never eaten rabbit before- oh, or should I say pig?” He flicked the fake badge pinned to Neil's chest.

Neil's mind was caught on the first thing he said. “Can't you just bite my neck?”

Andrew patted his cheek with a condescending look. “This'll get messy- although not as messy as it usually does, Officer No-Swing. You don't wanna walk around with bloodstains on your collar, do you?”

Neil thought of the tangled mess of scar tissue covering his torso and his stomach bottomed out. “You just need an artery, right?”

“Just take off your fucking shirt. Jesus, you're so goddamn stubborn. What is it? Scales? Scars? Feathers? What are you hiding under there? Oh, is it a treasure map? Does it lead somewhere fun? I'm awful good at following treasure trails.”

Neil's voice came out hoarse. “I just... I'll deal with bloodstains. The others will be too drunk to care.”

“I don't want to smell it on you all night,” Andrew snarled, shifting suddenly into a vicious scowl.

Neil inhaled shakily and took a step back. He wanted to get this over with quickly, but he didn't want to show Andrew the evidence of his violent past. His fingers fumbled with the fake gun belt and let it drop to the floor before undoing the button and zipper on his pants. Andrew stared blankly down at the dropped belt for a long moment.

“Can you keep your hands to yourself or should I cuff you?” Andrew mumbled.

“Why would I need to touch you? Does Roland have to get cuffed?” Neil kicked off one shoe and shoved his pants down to his ankles, pulling one leg free completely.

Andrew ignored his questions and stared at Neil's bare legs. “You need an artery, so here's an artery.”

Andrew squinted at him like he was the unstable one before slowly kneeling down at his feet. “Ugh, fine. Say stop if you need me to stop.”

Neil leaned back against the hard shelves and shifted his left leg a little so that Andrew had easier access. Andrew's hand slid under his knee and held him up while he searched for a spot to bite. There was a brief flash of fangs, elongated and sharp, and then Andrew pressed his open mouth to Neil's inner thigh. At first, he felt the damp, warm slide of Andrew's tongue and then came the needle-like prick of fangs. The pain was gone a second later, replaced by a dull throbbing, and then Andrew began to drink.

It was oddly quiet in the room save for the small, wet sounds coming from Andrew's mouth as he suckled at the twin wounds. A small grunt escaped Andrew's throat and he pressed harder into Neil's flesh. His hand tightened under Neil's knee and his nose smashed against hard muscle.
Andrew drank greedily and either the sounds or the sensation of his chapped lips and hot tongue working against his skin made Neil's face feel warm. Every now and then Andrew paused to catch stray drops of blood before they could slide down Neil's leg. Neil kept his eyes forward and tried to distract himself by reading the labels on the boxes across from him while he waited for Andrew to finish.

A short while later, Andrew flattened his tongue against the holes he made and pulled away with lips shining. Blood leaked from one corner of his mouth before he smeared it away with the back of his hand. He sat back on his heels, gasping for breath, and Neil glanced down at his leg. The wounds were small and dark, but no longer bleeding.

“Saliva,” Andrew slurred groggily. “Seals it. It'll close up in a little while.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Neil mumbled, shifting away so that he had room to pull his pants back on.

After Neil was dressed again, Andrew raised his head and fixed him with a hard, clear-eyed stare. Neil was almost relieved to see this version of Andrew, sated and somber, after the cackling mess he'd witnessed at the bar.

“Did you get what you needed?” Neil asked.

Rising to his feet, Andrew said, “I took more than I should have.”

“I feel all right, honestly. Are you sure you don't want more?”

Andrew blinked at him.

“How much do you usually take with Roland?”

“Depends.”

Neil cocked his head and studied him. Andrew's mouth was softened into a calm, flat line and his shoulders sagged with exhaustion. Neil looked back up to Andrew's face and was almost startled to realize the vampire's eyes were still fixated on him. Andrew had been studying him, too.

“In the morning, I'll answer any question you want,” Andrew said slowly.

Neil felt oddly uneasy. “Okay.”

As they headed back out to their table, Neil tried to figure out why it felt wrong to accept this from Andrew. A few weeks ago, Neil would have relished in the feeling of having an advantage over Andrew, but now it just made him feel faintly ill. Secrets were heavy, painful things and offering Neil this was like handing him a knife and letting him pick a vein to cut open.

Neil had to wonder: what did Andrew consider valuable enough to give to Roland in exchange for his blood? His secrets? Or something else?

At the table, Kevin was doing shots with Nicky and Aaron and the upperclassmen were still out on the floor dancing. The judgmental look on Kevin's face made Neil's chest buzz with irritation. Nicky grinned widely when he saw that Neil's shirt wasn't tucked in properly.

“Neil!” Nicky cheered. “Did you finally decide to swing? Andrew, I hope you didn't ruin anything for him. The boy needs to have some fun on these trips!”

Aaron jerked his head up and scowled at Neil. “Did you fuck somebody?”


“It's time to leave,” Andrew said. “Go tell the others.”

Aaron and Nicky obediently went out to the dance floor to locate their teammates. Kevin downed another shot and slammed the glass back onto the table.

“You idiot,” he hissed at Neil. “How much did you let him drink? If you pass out at practice-”

“I'm fine,” Neil snapped.

Kevin finished Nicky's drink and pointedly ignored Neil and Andrew the rest of the night.
After leaving the Halloween party at Eden's Twilight, the Foxes split up. The upperclassmen went to a nearby hotel and Andrew's group went to the house. Neil stole a t-shirt and sweatpants from Nicky's room so he wouldn't have to stay in his costume and then he curled up in one of the recliners.

He didn't sleep, though. He just stared at the dark wall, unable to quiet his thoughts. In exchange for his blood, Andrew was going to give him a free turn in their little truth game in the morning. Having an advantage over him was surprisingly uncomfortable.

He could ask about Andrew's foster homes without breathing a word about all different cities he'd spent time in. He could learn about Cass without having give up any secrets about his own mother. He could ask about Andrew's deal with Renee without saying anything about his father's ruined deal with the Moriyamas. He could find out if Andrew really believed Kevin could help him build a life after graduation without revealing that he wouldn't live to see the end of the school year.

But what it came down to was this: Andrew could have taken what he needed by force, but he didn't. Neil could potentially expose Andrew's weakest points, but he didn't want to.

He wasn't sure how to feel about that. It kept him up almost all night.

Shortly after he did manage to fall asleep, footsteps on the stairs jerked him awake. It was almost nine o'clock. Andrew stopped in the doorway of the den to look at him, blank but alert. His clothing looked rumpled and his posture looked almost resigned. He'd come prepared to be cut open by Neil's question and the knowledge of that twisted behind Neil's ribs.

Neil knew what question he was going to ask.

He gestured to the recliner and, once Andrew sat in it, Neil said, “Tell me about game nights.”

“Game nights,” Andrew repeated dully.

“Kevin told me a little, but I want to hear from you how those nights work with you being a vampire and all.”

“This is what you're wasting your free question on?”
Neil shrugged a shoulder.

“Not good enough,” Andrew said. “I don't want or need you to let me off easy. You gave me blood. I'll give you an answer, so ask a better question. I know you've been sniffing around trying to figure me out. Here's your chance.”

“I want to know why the cameras don't pick it up when you move faster than a human should be able to. You've done it a couple times now and I watched the footage, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. How does that happen?”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “I don't actually move that fast. It's a mind trick and it seems to only work on the people near me. I use it to fake out dumb strikers sometimes. Now ask me a better question.”

“Do I have to give you a truth for that one then?”

“Stop fucking around and ask me something.”

Neil huffed and folded his arms. “You didn't specify what sort of question you wanted me to ask. You said I could pick and I did. You held up your end of the deal.”

Andrew's eyes flashed. “You asked me something you could've gotten from Kevin or Google, for fuck's sake. I don't want your pity.”

“You didn't have much of a choice last night,” Neil said. “I don't want your secrets this way.”

“Goddamn it, Neil-”

“Feed off me again,” Neil blurted out. Andrew stopped and narrowed his eyes at him. “Feed off me again- this time of your own free will- and in return tell me about how you got turned. That seems fair to me.”

“You won't think it's fair when you pass out on Monday.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “A little blood loss isn't going to bother me. You didn't even take that much last night. I'm fi-”

“Don't.”

“Worse things have happened to me, I promise. I can handle this.”

Andrew didn't look convinced.

“I'll say stop if I need you to stop.”

Andrew's eyes flicked briefly toward the doorway. “They'll think I'm off my meds.”

“You haven't been starving yourself just to keep up that charade. Tell me you haven't been doing that, please.”

The corner of Andrew's mouth twitched. “Blood from the bags is cold and old and it tastes disgusting. It's not exactly a struggle to stay away from it.”

“Well, you shouldn't pass up fresh blood then.” Neil got to his feet and popped his back before asking, “Your room or the bathroom?”

Andrew's lips tugged downward, but he stood up anyway. Neil followed him silently up the stairs
to his bedroom and he paused in the doorway while Andrew padded over to the nightstand to take a sip from the water bottle there. It was a plain, tidy room without any noticeable personal touches. In Andrew's case, however, the blank walls and empty shelves seemed fitting in a way.

“Most people think vampires are the ones who need to be invited inside,” Andrew said dryly.

Neil met his eyes across the room and took a careful step inside, shutting the door behind him. He felt nervous. This was simpler the night before when everything was hurried and desperate. Without the guiding urgency of dire circumstances, the thought of undressing in Andrew's bedroom seemed more complicated than it should have.

He reached for the drawstring on his sweatpants when Andrew said, “Your arm would work, too, you know.”

His face flooded with heat. Last night he'd been so desperate to keep his shirt on and his upper half completely covered that it hadn't occurred to him to offer his wrist.

“Right. Yeah,” he mumbled, tightening the knot. “Should I sit or...?”

Andrew gestured toward the bed and Neil stepped around him to sit down. The mattress dipped under Andrew's weight as he sat beside him. Without looking at him, Neil held up his left arm in offering.

“Don't give me nerve damage,” he grumbled.

Andrew didn't say anything, but Neil could sense his irritation anyway. Cool fingers wrapped around his wrist and then Andrew's sharp fangs pierced his skin. Neil glanced over once Andrew was busy sucking blood from the small wounds. His eyes were half-lidded and glazed, staring ahead at nothing. His other hand cupped Neil's elbow to hold him still. He was distracted and vulnerable and it was difficult to picture him like this with Roland.

Andrew had mentioned handcuffs the night before, but why would Roland agree to be tied up and bitten? What was he getting in return that was enough for such treatment? He never looked afraid or nervous around Andrew when they came to Columbia.

“Why does Roland have to get handcuffed?” The question fell clumsily out of his mouth before he could think better of it.

Andrew pulled off of his arm with a soft *pop* and he looked over at Neil in annoyance. “I don't like being touched and Roland's bad at following directions when he's horny.”

“Oh, so you-”

“Suck his blood *and* his dick.” Andrew gripped Neil's arm harder and turned it so he could catch a stray drop with his tongue.

Andrew's odd little jokes over the past couple weeks suddenly made sense. Neil tried to wrap his mind around it. Andrew and Roland. *Andrew* and Roland. Andrew and-"Wait,” Neil said just as Andrew was about to resume drinking. “If you and Roland-”

“Get off together,” Andrew supplied blandly.

“Have an arrangement,” Neil finished, “then why didn't he text or call to let you know he'd be gone last night?”
“Same reason I don't bring him flowers. It doesn't mean anything. It's just something we do because he's single with a vampire kink and I get tired of those damned bags.”

“Does he know he's your only source of fresh blood?”

“I thought you wanted to know how I got turned as payback for this,” Andrew said irritably. “Your blood isn't good enough to get you all these answers.”

Neil took that to mean Roland wasn't aware of the horrible position he'd left Andrew in last night. Andrew arched an eyebrow and gazed at him silently for a minute, waiting to see if he was done talking, before returning to his meal.

Once Andrew was satisfied, he flattened his tongue over the wound to seal it and then moved away to give them both some space. Andrew licked his lips and took a few deep, shaky breaths.

“Can you fake being hyper until the blood wears off?” Neil asked.

Testing himself, Andrew tried to smile, but his mouth only flattened and pulled sideways into a strange grimace. His eyelids drooped and his shoulders were slumped. Neil recognized the signs of a body begging for sleep. It wasn't the time, though. Andrew needed something to boost his energy enough to make his family believe he was medicated.

Neil said, “The others won't be awake for another hour or so. Let's go out and see how much candy you can eat in one sitting.”

Andrew stared at him.

“I'll drive,” Neil offered.

Proof of Andrew's exhaustion was in the way he handed over his keys without a single word or warning. They left the house quietly and climbed into the car with Neil behind the wheel for the first time and Andrew curled up in the passenger seat. Andrew was asleep against the door before they reached the main road, so Neil guessed at how to get to the nearest gas station. He remembered the way vaguely since he'd been there once before and after a few wrong turns, he managed to find it.

“Hey,” Neil said once he parked near the door.

Andrew grunted lowly in response.

Neil cut off the engine. “We're here.”

Andrew peeled his eyes open and lifted his head. Wordlessly, he climbed out of the car and plodded inside. Neil pocketed the keys and followed.

Strangely enough, Andrew carried with him a more threatening aura in his current state. When he was starving, his smiles were like magic tricks that kept the audience guessing, his hysteria kept him levitated out of everyone's reach. Like this, blank-faced and dead-eyed, his indifference was laid bare and the truth was chilling. Andrew was a frozen wilderness that would kill anyone who dared cross him. He'd barely notice the body count.

Neil loaded a basket with cans of energy drinks and bottles of soda while Andrew collected an armful of candy and chocolate. It made Neil's teeth hurt just looking at it when they met up at the counter to pay for it all. The cashier looked between them and swallowed nervously as he took Neil's money.
“Halloween?” he guessed.

Andrew stared unblinking at the man while he hurriedly put everything into two plastic sacks. Carefully keeping the bite marks out of the man's view, Neil took the sacks and his receipt with a grim smile.

Back in the car, Andrew pulled one of the sacks onto his lap and opened a bag of gummy bears. Neil watched him eat the colorful candies one by one. He paused after every fifth bear to sip his first energy drink until the candy and the drink were gone. Next, Andrew opened a bag of Skittles and a bottle of soda. The Skittles were eaten in small handfuls and the soda was downed all at once. After that, Andrew tore open a packet of grape Fun Dip. He bit the candy stick in half and dumped the flavored powder into his mouth. His eyes narrowed as he tried to wet the powder enough with his tongue to swallow it. It didn't look comfortable.

His lips were stained purple when he finally opened them to speak. “He wasn't a vampire when I first met him. I don't know how he got turned.”

“Where did you meet him?” Neil asked.

“Foster home,” Andrew replied, staring straight ahead.

“Why did he come after you?”

One side of Andrew's mouth curled upward. “He adored me. Never got bored of me. He was very... well, let's just say 'affectionate.' At nighttime, anyway.”

Neil's blood ran cold. “Did he rape you?”

“Ding ding. Give the boy a prize.”

The prize was a packet of cherry Fun Dip. Neil felt like he was going to vomit.

“Lost track of him for a few years, but he came back to see his baby brother graduate. Caught me alone in the dark out on the porch. Came inside for a drink. All that weight-lifting didn't do shit for me. Once the venom kicked in, though, I ripped his head off.”

“Good.” Neil muttered.

Andrew's head lolled sideways so he could flash Neil a grin that was full of purple teeth. “May he rest in pieces.”

Neil's secrets weighed his body down and sliced his throat like razor blades on their way out. He couldn't imagine being so far gone that speaking of his worst days wouldn't stop him from smiling. Was there any life hibernating beneath the layers of ice in Andrew's soul? Was his pain lost in his mind like a shout in a snowstorm?

A lifetime of this would be a nightmare, an eternity would be hell.

Andrew was oblivious to the awful feeling churning in Neil's stomach. He chugged half a can of Red Bull and then ran his tongue over his teeth. “This'll do. Switch places with me. I'll drive.”
“You're an idiot. You know that, right?”

Kevin was, in Neil's opinion, overreacting. Neil was sitting with a cup of juice in hand while Kevin paced the length of Abby's office when they both should have been at practice with the rest of the team. Neil had stumbled a little on the court and Kevin assumed it was because of blood loss. Practice was halted, Neil was dragged away, and Kevin had been fuming ever since.

“You let him drink too much blood,” Kevin went on. “How could you be so stupid?”

Neil rolled his eyes and took a drink to wash down the mocking retort threatening to come out. Andrew hadn't taken that much blood and Neil didn't feel any different than he had the week before, but Kevin wasn't listening.

Perhaps it had been reckless to let Andrew feed off of him like that, but Andrew was desperate and offering his own blood seemed like the right course of action. It still did. According to Nicky, Andrew spent most of Sunday napping.

It was oddly satisfying knowing he had made a small difference. Andrew had been able to sleep well for a change and it was because of something Neil did.

While Kevin was lecturing him about how it could affect his playing, Neil was already thinking of doing it again- not just because of how it would help Andrew, but also because of how it would help the team. Andrew was a force to be reckoned with when he had just enough blood in his system to take the edge off. A well-fed Andrew would be unstoppable in the goal. Neil didn't want to risk his own ability to play well, of course, but perhaps he could convince Andrew to accept more blood from more sources. There had to be a way to help him.

“Neil,” Kevin snapped. “Are you even listening to me?”

Neil blinked up at him and shrugged one shoulder. “Sorry.”

Glowering, Kevin stopped pacing and leaned against the wall. Neil watched him curiously. His reaction seemed odd at first, but the more he thought about it, the more he thought he understood.
“Did you still have to practice after Riko fed off you?” Neil asked.

“Fuck off,” Kevin spat, which meant yes.

Neil drank more of the juice and wisely kept his mouth shut. He wasn't sure he wanted to know more about what Kevin's life at the Nest had been like.

The door pushed open and Wymack stepped inside with a flat look on his face. He looked at Kevin and jerked his head toward the hallway. Kevin's mouth pinched to one side in annoyance before he left Wymack and Neil alone, pulling the door closed behind him.

Neil stared at his coach, waiting for the admonishment that was no doubt coming.

“You know,” Wymack began slowly, “when I said you could try to convince him to eat more, I didn't mean you should feed him yourself.”

“His self-control was slipping. It was either feed him myself or let him rip someone's throat out. 'Desperate times call for desperate measures' and all that. What would you have done?”

Wymack grumbled something and went over to Abby's desk to poke around at the papers lying there. “I'm not thrilled about Andrew's situation,” he said, “however, I'm not going to put one player's safety and well-being over another's, understand?”

“Yes, Coach.”

“How much did you let him have? Do I need to excuse you from tomorrow's practice, too?”

That was the last thing he wanted. “No, of course not. He didn't take that much, honestly. Probably about a quarter of a pint, if I had to take a guess. Kevin's just... overreacting.”

“Look, kid, I'm not your mother. You can do whatever the fuck you want. Just don't let it fuck you up on the court.”

“Yes, Coach,” he muttered.

“Good. Abby's coming in to check on you again, so keep up this little docile act you've got going on. If you pull a stunt like this again, you better call her immediately to let her know what's up.”

Neil nodded and drank his juice.

“Oh, and by the way,” Wymack said, pausing in the doorway, “we've got another bag coming in for him. Don't worry so much.”

“That's... that's good,” Neil murmured.

The door closed gently and all Neil could think of was that Andrew had said that bagged blood tasted awful. It was better than nothing, at least.

After Abby had once again made sure that he really was fine, Neil went off to shower and change before trudging off to the foyer to wait for the others to finish practice. Kevin and Wymack's concern frustrated him. Andrew was the one who needed it more. Neil wasn't going to survive the school year and he didn't really matter in the long run. Andrew, on the other hand, had a very long run ahead of him.

Neil spent the rest of the night lost in thought. He went downtown for a late dinner with the upperclassmen, but he didn't hear a word they said to each other or to him as they sat in the booth
waiting for their pizza to show up.

Blood loss wasn't anything new to Neil. He and his mother didn't have the luxury of taking days off to recover when they were on the run. They scrubbed their blood out of hotel carpets and ditched bloodstained towels in dumpsters tucked behind restaurants or rest areas. They stitched each other back up and hit the road as soon as the coast was clear. Playing Exy after bleeding a little wasn't a big deal to him and the wounds Andrew made weren't at all painful.

Neil didn't know how much blood Andrew had taken, but Neil figured he could let Andrew drink again in a few weeks, no matter how foolish it was. He was surprised by how much he wanted to. Andrew did everything in his power to keep his family safe no matter what it cost him, no matter how much they might resent him for it, despite having every reason to leave and start fresh somewhere else. Neil had never looked after anyone like that. When his mother told him to run, he did. He left her behind time and time again to protect himself while she fended off attackers. When she parked on the beach and told him to keep going without her, he did.

Next to Andrew, his self-preservation felt selfish.

Matt nudged his arm and asked, “You okay, man? You seem a little down.”

Across the table, the girls were staring at him. Dan and Renee looked concerned while Allison only looked mildly intrigued.

“I'm just out of it,” Neil answered. “Kevin pissed me off earlier.”

Dan, Allison, and Matt all groaned, understanding perfectly. Renee gave him a small, private smile that made him fidget in his seat.

Once the pizza arrived, Neil tried harder to focus on his current company. He appreciated their efforts to include him even though they didn't have much of a reason to. They asked him questions about which pizza toppings he preferred and what his thoughts were on stuffed crust. He wasn't sure why they cared to know about such insignificant things, but he answered them honestly and relished in the feeling of being able to share small truths.

When they returned to the Tower, Renee pulled him aside before he reached the door and asked, “Would you like to join me for a short walk, Neil?”

He waved to Matt through the glass doors and, even though he still felt uneasy around her, he said, “Okay.”

Neil's sweatshirt wasn't thick enough to effectively keep him warm. Shivering, he folded his arms tightly as he followed Renee. They walked along Perimeter Road in silence, wandering in and out of the glow of streetlamps. For the most part, Neil and Renee were alone. Some people were out jogging and there were a few groups of students wandering toward the dorms or the dining halls.

Unless Renee had invited him out to talk about Exy, which was unlikely, there was really only one thing for them to discuss. Neil couldn't get a read on her mood or what she might be thinking because, as always, she kept her serene mask firmly in place. Neil knew that plenty of dangerous things lurked beneath still water and that was what worried him.

The longer she stayed quiet, the more agitated Neil felt. He just wanted to get it over with.

“So,” he started, “what did you want to talk about?”

Calmly, she said, “I tried to invite Andrew out to a movie yesterday afternoon, but he was asleep.”
“And?”

“I chatted with Nicky a little at their dorm and he said he didn't see Roland working on Friday night.”

Neil heard the unspoken *I know what you did* loud and clear.

“I'm not going to scold you,” she added with an airy little laugh. “I was only curious to see how you felt about it.”

Neil flashed from irritated to confused again. “I don't... I don't feel anything about it. He needed to eat, so I let him.”

“Generous.”

“Not really.”

“You don't think so?”

Neil kicked a small stone off the sidewalk into the grass. “It's not a big deal and I feel fine- I was fine at practice, too. Kevin was just being dramatic.”

“I offered my own blood to him after we started to get to know each other,” she said. “He refused and it took me some time to figure out why.”

“He didn't have anything to offer in return?” he guessed.

Renee gave him a small smile. “He isn't one for charity, though that's not what I would have called it. I offered because I saw a person who was suffering and I saw a way I could help.”

“Generous.”

“Not really,” she returned lightly.

“Why not?”

“It wasn't generosity. It was guilt.”

Neil stopped walking and stared at her in the faint light. Renee stopped as well and turned to face him. Her eyes were vacant and her expression was perfectly blank.

“Have you ever wondered why I fit Wymack's criteria?” she asked, barely louder than the wind whispering through the trees.

“Sometimes,” Neil admitted. “You hinted at your past, but you never told me much.”

“My mother liked whiskey more than she liked her children and, as long as she was hitting the booze, she didn't notice her boyfriends hitting me. I knew I needed money if I was going to get out and there weren't many jobs of the legal sort available to girls my age. One of the local gangs took me on as a lookout and a runner.”

“You were in a gang?”

Renee's smile turned crooked and bitter. “Yes, for a few years. I joined willingly, but not everything I did was my choice. If they focus hard enough, vampires can convince you to do or think almost anything. My boss was a very ambitious young woman- or at least she looked young. I
never did find out how old she actually was. She always wanted more territory, more followers. It
got a bit out of hand, I'm afraid. I didn't see how severe the situation really was until after I was
out.”

Neil swallowed and tried to picture Renee like that, younger and ruthless. “How did you get out?”

Renee turned slowly on her heel and resumed walking and Neil followed. There was silence again
for a minute or so before she gave her reply.

“I did what I had to in order to earn her trust and then I waited for the right moment.” Renee huffed
out a quiet, sad laugh. “Did you know they're most vulnerable when they're feeding? After she was
dead, I burned the pieces and then I went to the police. I gave them the names of important gang
members and they gave me a light sentence.”

“You killed her.”

“I did.”

“And you feel guilty about that?”

Renee shook her head. “It's the lack of remorse that bothers me more. I keep waiting for it to hit
me, but there's nothing.”

Neil looked out over the dark, empty stretch of grass known as the Green and turned her story over
his mind, trying to see how it fit against the jagged edges of Andrew's. She'd told him once that
Andrew was more interested in Renee's past, but that made less sense now that Neil knew what
she'd done. Why would a vampire befriend a girl who killed one?

“Did you offer him blood as penance or something?” Neil asked.

Renee hummed and nodded. “Andrew said he wasn't interested in what he called my 'spiritual
nonsense.'”

“Nonsense?”

“Well, I think his exact wording was 'bullshit,'” she said wryly. “Anyway, after I told him about my
past he took my weapons from me because he didn't think I needed to hang on to the symbol of
what I was. I'm not that person anymore. Punishing myself won't change what I did.”

Neil glanced over at her just as she turned away to watch a car drive by. “Why does he keep you
around?”

“He didn't tell me not to tell you, so I guess it's okay for you to hear this. He made a deal with me
about a year ago. I'm sure you've heard about how Aaron and Nicky promised him five years at
Palmetto.” When Neil nodded, she went on, “I promised to help him end his life if that's what he
still wants after he graduates.”

She said it so casually that he almost missed what she was saying. Neil almost tripped over a crack
in the sidewalk. It shouldn't have surprised him, really. Andrew was miserable and constantly in
pain. His years as a human were full of unimaginable suffering and now he was stuck with a
prolonged life that promised to be a lonely one. Something deep down in Neil railed against the
injustice of it all. It was devastatingly unfair that Andrew survived so much damage only to get
trapped in the rubble with no way out.

“And what are you getting in return? A friend for a few years?” He couldn't help the fury leaking
into his voice.

Renee didn't flinch. “I made him promise to think of me only as a last resort.”

Neil wasn't sure if that made it any better. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and turned around to take ten steps away from her. The cool air scraped his lungs as he sucked in harsh, choppy breaths. His thoughts were jumbling together, adding fuel to the fiery ache in his chest. Neil wanted to live; he wanted to live so badly he could barely move under the weight of his longing. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't understand what it was like for Andrew to be so completely exhausted that the idea of living even a few more decades was unbearable.

He didn't want Andrew to die. He knew this with a certainty that rushed through his stomach like acid.

“Neil,” called Renee. “Are you all right?”

Nothing was all right, but he still said, “I'm fine.”
Inviting

Chapter Summary

Nicky gets a surprising phone call.

Chapter Notes

I really appreciate all the kudos and comments, guys! Thank you all so much <3

On Saturday, Matt and Neil were startled by someone knocking urgently on the door. They exchanged a confused look—Dan knew their door was unlocked whenever Matt was home—before Neil set aside his plate to go see who was there. He expected to find someone who had stepped off the elevator on the wrong floor, but he found Nicky instead. His hair was sticking up wildly and there was a panicked look in his eyes.

“My mom called,” he blurted out before Neil could ask what was wrong. “I need your help.”

“Oh—”

Nicky grabbed Neil by the shoulders. “She called to wish Andrew and Aaron a happy birthday.”

Neil narrowed his eyes, confused. “Is that... bad?”

Matt stood up from the couch after he finally found the remote to turn the TV off. “Nicky, you okay?”

Nicky made a strange sound that might've been a laugh. “Well, you see— the thing is, we don't really talk to my family much. They weren't exactly thrilled when they found out Erik and I aren't just roommates. Aaron hasn't spoken to them in forever and Andrew either pretends he's never heard of them or acts like they carry the plague.”

“Okay, so your mom called,” Neil said, still trying to understand what the actual problem was. “Did she say something wrong?”

“Maybe?” Nicky swallowed hard and tightened his grip on Neil's shoulders. “She invited us to their place for Thanksgiving.”

Neil blinked.

Matt asked, “What's the problem?”

“Look, usually my mom only calls me at Christmas to see if I've returned to the 'straight and narrow.' This is huge.”

“So you said yes, I'm guessing,” Matt said slowly.
“No!” Nicky gave Neil another shake. “I hung up on her.”


“Because!” Nicky let go of Neil finally to gesticulate wildly. “They said I can only come if I bring the twins. There's no way in hell that Andrew will agree to that.”

Neil glanced over his shoulder Matt, who was frowning back at him, and asked, “What am I supposed to help with?”

Nicky clasped his hands under his chin and looked down at him imploringly. “I need you to get him to say yes.”

“Nicky,” he sighed.

“You got him to agree to the Halloween thing. I'm sure you could work your magic and get him to agree to this, too.”

Neil shook his head. “I didn't do anything. I just asked—”

“Right, so just ask this time. If anyone could get a yes out of him, it's you. Please, Neil? I haven't been allowed in that house since I came out. This might be a sign that they're coming around. I need to see my mom again. Can you just... try to imagine what that's like for me? Don't you ever miss your mom?”

Grief sucker punched him. Of course he missed his mother. He missed being able to recognize her voice in a crowd no matter what name she called him. He missed the way she always smelled like fruity shampoo, cheap deodorant, and cigarettes. He missed feeling safe beside her.

“I'll ask,” he said roughly, “but I'm not promising anything. If he says no, that's it.”

Nicky's smile was blinding. “Thank you! Holy shit, I can't tell you—"

Neil waved him off, unable to listen to any more. “It's fine. Wait here, okay?”

He slipped out into the hall and headed to the cousins' suite. Nicky left the door ajar, so Neil let himself inside without knocking. Kevin was poring over Exy scores in the newspaper at his desk, Aaron was sitting with a game paused on the television, and Andrew was sitting near the open window with a cigarette in his hand.

“Look what the cat dragged in!” Andrew cried cheerfully, waving his cigarette in greeting. “I think the cat got lost, though. Your room is down the hall.”

Neil stepped around Aaron's beanbag and stopped two feet away from Andrew. “I need to talk to you.”

“You've heard it's my birthday, yes?”

“I didn't get you anything.”

“How about the gift of silence? It's cheap, it's easy, and it keeps on giving. You won't talk and I won't have to kill you. It's a win-win.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “You can't kill me until our deal expires.”

“Can't say I'm not tempted.”
“Can we skip this bit? It's getting old. I just need two minutes.”

Andrew snorted and flicked ash onto the window sill. “Oh, Neil, always desperate for more time.”

“Will you just hear me out?”

With an annoyed huff, Andrew tossed his cigarette out the window and hopped off the desk. He motioned for Neil to follow him as he walked. They went to the bedroom and Neil lightly closed the door behind him. Andrew stopped in the middle of the room and spun around to face him, arms crossed and eyes flat.

“Countdown starts now,” Andrew said. "Make it good.”

“Nicky's mother invited him home for Thanksgiving.”

Andrew shook his head and smiled pityingly. “Since you're the messenger today, tell him not to bother. It's them or Erik. He can't have both. He needs to put on his big kid glasses and see the truth.”

“He can't go unless he brings you and Aaron.”

A laugh bubbled up in Andrew's throat. “Well, that makes it easy, doesn't it? Remind me to ask Abby if she wants us to bring a pie this year. I think I liked cherry back when I gave a damn. What about you? You seem like an apple pie kind of guy.”

“Why do you have a problem with Nicky's parents?”

Andrew's smile widened. “Luther and I don't get along. Besides, he always invites the worst people to dinner.”

“You don't get along with the rest of us, but you still keep us around. Why can't you spend one afternoon around him?”

“Do you not realize how silly this is? A vampire at Thanksgiving dinner? You're asking me to sit at a table with people I couldn't care less about just so I can watch them eat food I don't need.”

Neil saw the opportunity and he took it. “What if you brought a snack?”

“What, the blood bag? Do you think I should drink it from a wine glass or just pop a straw in it and suck it down like a Capri-Sun?”

“No, I meant me.”

Andrew cocked his head. “Little lamb, always so ready to sacrifice himself. Baa-ad idea, Neil.”

“You need all the blood you can get. Maybe if you weren't starving all the time you wouldn't be so miserable.”

Andrew chuckled. “I'm not miserable. My life is a circus that never stops.”

“I was never a fan of clowns,” Neil muttered.

“Your time is up.”

Neil shifted anxiously. He could taste his failure already, but he didn't want to give up just yet. Andrew took a step toward him, obviously expecting Neil to move out of his way, but the memory
of Nicky's heartbroken expression kept him rooted firmly in place.

“Andrew,” he said quietly. “This is important to Nicky. Please?”

In a blink, Andrew's smile was gone. His face was left blank except for a flicker of fury in his eyes. Neil swallowed hard and pressed himself back against the door. He'd crossed a line somewhere without knowing it.

“I let you get away with saying it once before,” Andrew said evenly. “Twice, I'll be nice. Say that word again and you'll spend the rest of the school year in a muzzle.”

“What's wrong with that word?”

“I'm not in the mood for our little game.”

Neil covered the doorknob with his hand. “Kevin will come if you do. You can mess with us instead of bothering with Nicky's parents. I've never been good around religious people, so that'll keep you entertained at least. After dinner, you can feed off me.”

The corner of Andrew's mouth twitched upward again. “Fine, fine. Our little flock shall go to Luther's to give thanks and sit in awkward silence all afternoon. You can tell the cowardly lion yourself and send him back over here when he's done pissing his pants with excitement.”

Neil's heart swooped with relief. He didn't want to push his luck by lingering, so he opened the door and said, “I'll see you later.”

“Don't remind me,” Andrew shot back.
Since Andrew refused to spend the actual holiday at the Hemmicks’, Luther and Maria agreed to have dinner with Andrew’s lot the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Neil didn’t know much about Nicky’s parents, but what he did know gave him a bad feeling about the upcoming afternoon. Luther was already on thin ice with Andrew. If he made one wrong move, none of them would be able to stop Andrew from retaliating. Nicky still seemed optimistic, though, if his latest texts full of emojis and exclamation points were anything to go by.

With a stomach full of dread, Neil put on his nicest jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and a grim smile before heading out of his bedroom to find the others.

At least the day wouldn’t be entirely terrible. Kevin was determined to make the most of the trip, so they were leaving a couple hours early in order to stop at Exites, the only store in all of South Carolina that was devoted entirely to Exy. According to him, it was time for Neil to switch to a heavy racquet. The Foxes had a break that week for Thanksgiving and only one game in December, but it still felt like a risk. Most strikers didn’t bother with the heavier racquets because the added weight proved to be more trouble than it was worth; however, Neil had entrusted his game to Kevin and he’d do as he was told.

Nicky was waiting for him out in the main room, making small talk with Matt on the couch. When they noticed Neil in the hallway, Matt gave him an uncertain smile and Nicky gave him an obvious once-over and two thumbs up.

“You ready for this?” asked Matt.

Neil shrugged. It didn’t really matter if he was ready or not.

“It’ll be fun,” Nicky said, though he fell short of his usual level of cheer.

“Are the others ready?” asked Neil.

Nicky rolled his eyes. “They’re probably out in the hall. We better get going. Bye, Matt!”
“Call if you need anything,” Matt told Neil.

Neil nodded and said, “See you later.”

As Nicky predicted, the others were out in the hall. The twins donned their usual baggy, dark attire, but Kevin and Nicky had both made an effort to look a bit nicer. Together they made an odd-looking group.

The drive to Columbia was agonizingly long. Nicky hummed under his breath and fidgeted in the driver’s seat. Kevin radiated discomfort. Aaron fiddled with his phone. Even Andrew's nonsensical rambling made Neil tense. It wasn't until Neil climbed out in the parking lot of Exites that he felt like he could breathe properly. The sight of the store melted all the tight knots in his back and replaced his dread with exhilaration.

Exites was a four-story monument to the game of Exy and its packed parking lot felt like a love letter. His heart swelled at the thought of all the Exy-related gear, equipment, and merchandise waiting inside.

“Junkie's paradise,” Andrew announced grandly, hip-checking Neil into the trunk of the car as he passed. “Come along, junkies! Time for your next fix.”

As soon as they crossed the threshold, the man behind the register choked on his drink. Neil looked from the red-faced, sputtering man to Kevin and ducked away behind the displays of fan merchandise, still uncomfortable with the idea of being recognized.

Nicky's hand landed on gently on his shoulder. “Kevin's been spotted by his adoring fans. Let's check out the second floor while he's stuck.”

As he was guided to the stairs, Neil tried to drink in as much of the first floor as he could. There were posters of local athletes showing off the uniforms that Exites offered and tables of fan gear for the Class I and II teams around South Carolina; the largest display was dedicated to the major league team, the Columbia Dragons. The bright orange of Palmetto State's table was easy to spot, but Neil was ushered away before he could see if anyone was looking at Fox merchandise.

On the second floor, Nicky and Aaron headed straight for the bargain bins near the rotating towers of key chains and charms. The walls were covered in shelves of court shoes and the floor was filled with other types of gear and gear bags.

Before Neil could get a good look, Andrew turned him back toward the stairs and said, “Keep hopping, rabbit. The sooner we do this, the sooner we eat.”

Neil took one glance at the wolfish grin on Andrew's face and decided he didn't care about the blood he'd lose later or where Andrew would bite him. For now, he had another floor of Exites to discover and somewhere up there his new racquet was waiting to be found.

His excitement wilted as soon as he reached the wall full of racquets on the third floor and realized he had no idea how to choose one. Researching online hadn’t prepared him for this. There were too many options and Neil was lost without Kevin’s guidance. Each racquet felt uncomfortably heavy in his hands and Neil wasn’t experienced enough to know which design would benefit him the most.

As he fiddled with the racquets and studied the placards, he could feel Andrew staring at him. Andrew’s amusement was almost palpable even though he was silent.

“Should I tell Kevin to come hold your hand?” mocked Andrew.
“Fuck off,” Neil replied without any real heat. “Why don't you go bother the others?”

“College rule number one: don’t leave your drink unattended,” Andrew said with a wink. Then, he dug out the prescription bottle from his pocket to shake two Tic Tacs into his palm. He popped one into his mouth and offered Neil the other.

Neil sighed, but he took the Tic Tac anyway after making sure the other customers weren't looking their way. Andrew scoffed at his paranoia.

“I have a question,” Neil hedged.

“I have knives,” Andrew retorted automatically.

Neil ignored his threat. “Do you hate Luther because he brought you out here?”

Andrew cocked his head, mouth stretching into a bemused smile.

“Nicky said after juvie-”

“Nicky said,” Andrew echoed. “Nicky's tricky. Says too much without saying anything worthwhile. Tell me, what use is my past to a man with no future? The present's a gift, Neil, and it's the only one you're getting, so it'd be great if you were grateful.”

Neil frowned at him while he yammered on, eyes too bright and fangs just a tad sharper than normal. “Did you eat last night?”

They’d played against JD Campbell, the team that had sunk into last place now that the Foxes were climbing the ranks. It was the easiest victory they’d had all season and they’d expected as much going in. Neil hadn’t considered until then that Andrew might have skipped his usual game night meal due to the lack of a challenge.

Andrew cackled. “I needed to save room, didn’t I? I’ve got big Thanksgiving plans, you know.”

Neil’s bad feeling about dinner with the Hemmicks got worse. Nervously, he tried his original question again. “Did Luther interfere with your adoption?”

Andrew snorted, low and rough at the back of his throat. “Oh, Neil. You’re so far off the mark I almost pity you.”

“Does he know about...?” Neil gestured to his own canines.

“He knows I have teeth, Neil. You could see these pearly whites from space.”

“You're avoiding the question.”

“It's a boring question,” Andrew said with a dismissive flick of his fingers. He wandered over to poke at the racquets in the goalkeepers’ section. “Ask me if there's life on other planets. That's much more interesting.”

Neil sucked in a breath and tried to keep his irritation at bay. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kevin marching toward them. Time was running out. Quickly, he wracked his brain for anything Andrew had said about Luther that might be a hint as to what happened between them.

Then, he thought of something. “You said Luther had bad taste in guests. Who did he invite over that made you hate him so much?”
A shadow crossed Andrew's face, a dangerous glint that was gone in an instant, before he answered, “Drake.”

Andrew didn't stick around to see if Neil could place the name. Neil didn’t have long to think about it before Kevin was at his side, picking out several racquets for him to try.

“Come on,” said Kevin. “There are practice courts upstairs.”

And with that, Neil was successfully distracted for a short while.

With ill-fitting gear strapped on over their clothing, Neil tested out the racquets Kevin had chosen in one of the two courts on the fourth floor. Kevin watched from the side and called out pointers while Neil tried to take shots on goal. All his shots went wide, but they hit the wall with impressive force. It would take time to adjust his aim, but Neil thrilled at the thought of how powerful his shots would be once he did.

He gave himself a few shots with each racquet to warm up before cycling through them all again. All of his shots felt clumsy and out of control, but slowly he was able to figure out which racquets might work for him and which ones definitely wouldn't. He narrowed the selection down to four before Kevin called for Neil to stop so he could inspect the racquets himself. Neil felt childish waiting for him to make a decision.

“These two felt best,” Neil said quietly, gesturing to his favorites.

Kevin spent a few moments inspecting both of them before he made his decision. He took the racquet over to the employee just outside the court door. Neil heard him say, “We need a plain practice stick, size three, today and we'll order two more.”

Neil gathered the balls and the other racquets from the court floor. He and Kevin hung their gear up on hooks in the dim hallway just outside the court while the woman locked up behind them. Downstairs, they placed the rejects on a rack and followed her to the checkout counter. She pulled out a form from a shelf below the register and said, “Fill this out. I'll go check in the back for your practice stick.”

She disappeared into the stock room and Neil picked up a pen. He filled out the Foxhole Court's address and indicated the right colors before getting stuck on which design he wanted. The brand he'd chosen had four possibilities and Neil wasn't sure if it really made a difference. After a moment, he chose the one that looked simplest and left it at that.

“Good news,” called the woman, breezing out of the stock room with a plain racquet in hand. “Just give me a sec and we'll have you two on your way.”

While she scanned the racquet and punched in some info from Neil's form, Kevin turned and swept his eyes over the floor, probably searching for Andrew. Now that he had his racquet picked out, Neil's mind was free to worry about the Hemmicks and the dinner they were about to suffer through.

His unfocused eyes drifted over the blue counter and he mentally unpacked all the facts he had about Andrew to see where the name Drake fit. Andrew told him that one of his foster brothers had turned him after his graduation. “Caught me alone in the dark out on the porch,” he'd said. “Came inside for a drink.” Neil had assumed the attack happened at the cousins’ house, not bothering to consider the Hemmicks’ due to Nicky’s strained relationship with his parents.

A small what if pricked the back of his mind.
Would Andrew really return to the house he was attacked at almost every weekend?

What if Drake was the one who turned Andrew? What if Luther was the one who invited him in?

If his growing suspicions were correct, it meant Luther had, either knowingly or unknowingly, invited Andrew's abuser into his home and left Andrew alone to deal with him.

The thought made him sick.

Movement to his right made him snap back to the present. Kevin was sliding over the team's p-card to pay for Neil's racquets. When Neil looked up and saw the total, it knocked the wind out of him.

“Are you serious?” he asked lowly in French.

Kevin replied, “You get what you pay for and you're getting the best.”

The woman looked between them curiously.

“Tell her to put this one back, then. I don't need three.” Neil looked at the numbers and saw a ticket to London, an old but functional car, a lifetime’s worth of canned food. He muttered, “This is insane.”

Kevin signed the receipt and looked entirely unconcerned. “You need three, trust me. The custom ones will take a few days at least. You need to start practicing tonight. If Coach has a problem with the expense, he knows where to find me.”

The woman pasted a smile on her face when she wished them a good afternoon. Kevin nodded to her and tucked the receipt and the p-card into his wallet. Neil picked up his new racquet and felt the weight of every penny. He curled his hands around it gently, as if he feared it might shatter.

Downstairs, they found Nicky and Aaron near the entrance, flipping all the magazines bearing Riko's face over in their stands. Andrew was just outside on the curb with a lit cigarette hanging from his mouth.

“Ooh, is this your new baby?” Nicky cooed as he took Neil's racquet from him. He turned it over in his hands and inspected the sleek wooden stick, but Neil could see the seams in his mask. He was nervous. Aaron looked tense as well.

This was a bad idea, Neil thought grimly. He wondered if it was too late to suggest they all just go back to Palmetto.

“All right, let's get this over with and get back to campus,” Kevin said before he headed for the doors.

Nicky tried to give Neil a reassuring smile as he handed the racquet back. “Nice wood, dude,” he joked, but his tone fell flat.

Aaron wrinkled his nose and stalked after Kevin, ignoring Nicky's cry of, “Lighten up, Aaron!”

In the car, Neil kept his racquet across his lap, which meant it was also laying across Aaron and Andrew's legs as well. The fact that neither of them commented on it just made Neil more aware of how tense they all were. Nicky fired off a series of questions about racquets and Neil's choice, which Kevin answered easily. It wasn't interest in Nicky's voice, but growing panic.

The drive to the Hemmicks' house ended too quickly. Nicky parked at the curb, just a few feet from a cornflower blue mailbox, in the heart of a cozy suburb. Neil bent his head to see out the window. From the way the cousins were acting, Neil had imagined the house itself would look unfriendly
and sinister. Instead, it looked normal - not Neil's version of normal, but the sort of normal he saw on TV.

The house had two levels, pale blue siding, and white shutters. Two shiny cars sat side by side in the driveway, one a berry-red sedan and the other a black pickup truck. On the front door, there was a wreath of orange and red leaves with a small felt turkey perched inside it. All it needed was some theme music and a live studio audience. Just like Andrew's innocent smile, Neil didn't trust the appearance of it.

“Maybe we could just go back,” Nicky suggested weakly.

Andrew let out a harsh *ha!* and threw open his door to climb out. “No place like home, right?”

“We're already here,” grumbled Aaron as he took off his seat belt. “Might as well get it over with.”

Neil left his racquet laying across the floor of the backseat and climbed out after Andrew. He glanced down the perfectly straight street lined on both sides with houses identical to the Hemmicks' in varying color schemes. Everything was so tidy and quiet that it felt stifling. The hair on his arms and the back of his neck stood on end.

Andrew walked up the driveway and rapped his knuckles against the hood of the pickup as he passed by. When Neil got closer, he saw the dent Andrew left behind.

Andrew grinned at him over his shoulder and said, “Humility is a virtue.”

Nicky stepped up onto the porch while the others waited on the path and the lawn. For a full minute, Nicky stared at the front door like it might come to life and bite him. Neil watched the front window for signs of movement. Were the Hemmicks lurking behind the curtains, waiting for their son to knock?

“Nicky, just go in,” said Aaron. “It's your own house.”

“No, it's not,” Andrew laughed. “Come on, Aaron, pull your head out of your ass. Not everyone had a happy childhood like you.”

Aaron's apathy sharpened into pure hatred for his brother. The look on his face turned Neil's blood cold, but it only made Andrew laugh.

“All right,” Nicky sighed, more to himself than anyone else. “Here we go.”

He stepped up and rang the bell before retreating back to the edge of the porch. A moment later, a tall woman with dark skin and black hair answered the door. Neil saw the resemblance between her and Nicky immediately. They had the same eyes, but Nicky's had a warmth that hers was lacking.

Her polite smile was so forced it looked painful. “You could have let yourself in, Nicky. I almost didn't hear you.”

Andrew snorted. Nicky's mother barely spared him a glance.

“Didn't want to be rude,” Nicky offered quietly. “I don't live here anymore, remember?”

Her smile twitched before she stepped back to pull the door open wider and let them into the warmth of the house. Neil and Kevin stepped in last, which put them closest to Nicky's mother. She closed the door and looked at the two of them.
“Kevin and Neil,” she guessed. “Nice to meet you. I'm Maria Hemmick. Welcome to my home.”

Neil didn't bother faking a smile.

Kevin blinked and then pulled his face into a friendly expression he reserved for the public.

“Thank you for having us, Maria - may I call you Maria?”

Maria looked somewhere between baffled and charmed. “Maria is just fine, thank you. Why don't you hang up your coats? The closet's just through there.”

Neil yanked open the door she indicated and found several empty hangers pushed to one side of a rail. They all shrugged out of their coats and began hanging them up.

“Aaron, it's been a while,” Maria said to Andrew as he dumped his coat unceremoniously on the closet floor. “How have you been?”

Andrew's smile stretched impossibly wider and he turned to his brother. “Aaron, the woman asked you a question. Do be polite.”

Maria's lips pursed.

Nicky sighed. “Andrew's been on his meds for over a year, Mom.”

“Nice to see you again, Aunt Maria,” Aaron said with a touch of acid in his voice.

“Yeah, Marsha, it's a real dream come true,” Andrew drawled, rattling his bottle of Tic Tacs in his pocket. “Whatever happened to that restraining order you threatened me with? Did you turn the other cheek? Is that what Jesus would do?”

“Andrew,” Nicky hissed.

“Luther's in the kitchen. Right this way, everyone,” Maria said coldly.

Neil hung back to put himself at the rear of the group. Maria led them through the front room toward the kitchen. Neil walked slowly to take in every detail he could. The Hemmicks' home was painted in warm colors, butter yellow and coffee brown, with creamy white trim. The furniture in the front room was done up in matching floral upholstery; two square pillows sat at either end of the sofa. Everything looked uncomfortable - too tidy and clean, too intentionally placed like a trap.

What disturbed Neil most was the number of crosses hanging from the walls between framed family photos, which Neil assumed were taken before Nicky was disowned. The crosses were all different, some wooden and some metallic. Neil counted seven in the front room, making for eleven in total when added to the four in the entryway. Did Luther have a quota to fill or did he have another motive for hanging them?

Nicky caught him looking and moved aside so Kevin and Aaron could walk past him. “Neil,” he whispered, “you okay?”

Neil's head snapped forward. “I'm fine. I was just-”

“Yeah, I get it.” Nicky wrinkled his nose a little and twisted his mouth into a sympathetic smile. “It's a bit much, huh?”

The others had moved into the kitchen. Neil could hear Maria making introductions. They had a few seconds to spare.
“Hey, what did Andrew do to piss your mom off?” Neil asked in a rush.

Nicky's eyes bulged a little. “Oh, uh, it's kind of a long story, but he sort of... lost his mind after their graduation ceremony.” Nicky paused to check over his shoulder to make sure they were still alone and then the rest of the story spilled out in a rush. “Andrew agreed to spend the day here, but he had to be bribed with booze, right? So my dad got him a bottle of something and, while we took Aaron out to dinner to celebrate, Andrew got drunk and went totally psycho. We came home to broken furniture and blood everywhere. Dad made us spend the night in a hotel so he could deal with it. Andrew disappeared for like a week after that. It was so scary. I didn't think he'd-”

“Nicky!” Maria called brusquely from the other room. “Come say hello to your father.”

“Just a sec!” Nicky answered. “Sorry, Neil. We better get in there.”

Neil followed him to the kitchen with his stomach in his shoes. The room was warmer than the rest of the house, clouded with the thick aroma of garlic, onions, and turkey. The tension between the people standing around the kitchen island was at odds with the cozy atmosphere.

Luther Hemmick was a cold, thin tower of a man with only a scrap of graying hair left on his pale head and a well-groomed beard to make up for it. His eyes locked on Nicky for a moment and then snapped to Neil, assessing and judging. Neil's skin crawled with the need to hide.

Why had they insisted the twins come into their home when Luther knew what Andrew was? Something wasn't right.

“Luther, this is Neil, the other friend the boys brought with them,” Maria said quietly. “Neil, this is my husband Luther.”

“Welcome to our home, Neil,” Luther offered with a stiff smile.

Neil could have sworn the temperature in the kitchen dropped. “Thank you, sir.”

A pot on the stove bubbled. Maria stepped forward to lift its lid and stir the contents with a wooden spoon. The clock on the wall ticked, counting the seconds that passed in silence. Nicky looked petrified. Aaron looked uncomfortable. Kevin had clearly checked out mentally, waiting for something interesting to draw his mind back to the room.

Andrew wandered over to the wall, hands clasped behind his back and eyes widened with feigned wonder. He walked right up to a large cross hanging beside double glass doors. Then, he primly placed one finger on it and made a loud *tssss* noise through his teeth.

“Ooh, it burns,” Andrew chuckled.

Luther’s cheek twitched. “Aaron, how are you doing at school? You keeping those grades up?”

Neil found it odd that he’d only ask Aaron that. Maybe he'd given up hope on the other two.

“Yeah, Uncle Luther, school's fine,” Aaron answered.

Andrew snorted.

“The table is out on the deck,” Luther said, gesturing to the glass doors. “Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. Please, make yourselves comfortable.”

Nicky opened the doors and led them out onto the back deck. Half walls, a mesh canopy, and heat
lamps turned the deck into a pleasant halfway point between the heat of the kitchen and the cold of November. The large table was already set with eight places. Neil eyed the plates and wondered if the eighth was put out for the sake of symmetry.

Nicky and Aaron sat on one side with Nicky in the middle seat. Neil sat on one end, across from the mysterious extra plate, with Andrew between him and Kevin. As much as Neil didn't want to be close to Maria or Luther, he knew it was best that Nicky and Andrew were in the middle.

Dinner hadn't even started and it already felt like a disaster. Nicky looked hunched over and small, unable to hold onto his smile. Andrew slouched back in his seat with his arms folded over his chest and a smug grin on his face.

“This is delightful,” Andrew commented.

Aaron looked at his brother coldly. “I'm surprised they got all the blood out of the carpet.”

“They replaced it,” Nicky mumbled, turning his full glass of water around and around. His gloomy eyes were focused on the bobbing ice cubes.

“Blood’s messy, isn't it, Neil?” Andrew nudged his ribs and grinned at him.

Before Neil could make a retort, Luther and Maria stepped outside with steaming serving dishes full of food that Neil no longer had any appetite for. He just wanted to leave. It took Nicky's parents multiple trips to get everything outside. Maria sat at the end of the table near Aaron and Kevin with her back to the house. Luther sat down between Neil and the eighth chair.

Neil's hand was halfway to his water glass when the three Hemmicks bowed their heads and folded their hands together. He froze and stared at Luther, who then began, “Heavenly Father, we thank you for this opportunity to gather as a family and we ask you to bless this meal.”

While Luther carried on praying for his family and the food, Andrew lifted his middle finger toward the sky with the nonchalance of a nonbeliever. Neil caught Aaron's eyes for a moment before Aaron rolled his eyes and looked away again.

After three murmured amens, Luther stood to carve the turkey and Maria began passing steaming dishes around so they could all serve themselves. Neil took modest scoops of mashed potatoes, steamed carrots and peas, and green bean casserole even though he wasn't sure he'd be able to stomach much.

Nicky looked on in dismay as Andrew formed a mound of mashed potatoes and carefully made a deep indentation in the top, which he filled with gravy until it ran down the sides and oozed over his steamed peas and carrots.

“Bad day in Pompea,” Andrew said somberly. He knocked a floret of broccoli into the gravy river with his spoon.

“Neil, would you prefer white or dark meat?” Luther asked, ignoring his unruly nephew.


Luther fit a healthy portion of turkey into the empty space on his plate and then tersely asked, “Andrew, which would you prefer?”

“I don't eat meat,” Andrew deadpanned.
“Kevin?” Luther asked.

Neil kept his hands in his lap and picked at a hangnail while he waited for Luther to finish serving everyone else. His eyes wandered back to the empty plate across from him and his mind went numb while Maria asked shallow, polite questions about Aaron and Kevin’s classes.

The distant sound of the doorbell ringing through the house jolted Neil out of his hazy thoughts. Luther and Maria exchanged a look before Maria got up to answer the door.

Andrew had a dangerous gleam in his eye. “Expecting someone, Luther?”

Luther passed Aaron’s plate back and then asked Nicky what sort of meat he would prefer. Neil thought he heard Aaron mutter “Erik’s” into his water glass, but it was too quiet to be sure.

“Uh, dark meat. Thanks, Dad,” Nicky answered quietly.

Maria’s voice floated out through the kitchen. Neil couldn’t hear anyone with her, but Andrew must have because he went completely rigid.

“Did you do your own decorating?” a second woman asked. “Your home is gorgeous. Richard and I have been meaning to remodel our house for years, but with young ones running around it’s tricky.”

“How’s that?” Aaron asked Nicky with a frown.

Nicky shrugged.

Andrew’s head swiveled slowly to face his uncle. Pure fury was eating away at the edges of Andrew’s gleeful smile and hysteria was bleeding through. “What did you do?” he hissed viciously.

Maria led the other woman through the kitchen and out the doors. She was average-looking, mid-fourties by Neil’s estimate, with cheeks pink from the cold and loose brown curls that were slightly squashed. Next to Maria, she looked plain in her faded jeans and simple blouse.

“Sorry I’m late,” the woman said. “My flight was delayed.”

“It’s no trouble,” Luther replied, rounding the table to shake the woman’s hand. “Pleasure to meet you. Everyone, this is Cass Spear. She’ll be joining us for dinner.”

No one but Neil saw Andrew flinch.

Andrew’s eyes were bright but unfocused and his mouth was twisted into a horrible shape, halfway between a grin and a snarl with his fangs bared. Neil had never seen him look so unhinged.

Cass gave a little wave to the others and, once Luther had gone through their names, she stepped around the table to approach Andrew’s seat. Neil watched helplessly, unable to stop it.

“Andrew?” Cass said gently.

Neil was taken aback - not even Renee said Andrew’s name with that much affection.

It was as if a switch flipped in Andrew’s brain, killing the engine. Andrew’s eyes went flat, his shoulders slouched. He stood up jerkily like a puppet yanked upright, faced Cass, and held still while she wrapped him in a tight hug. Neil stared at the hand she smoothed over the back of Andrew’s hair. The gesture seemed natural and easy, like she’d done it a hundred times before.
Andrew's hands hung limply at his sides and trembled.

Cass pulled away from him and cupped his face in her hands for a moment, murmuring something too quietly for Neil to catch. Neil's eyes darted around, taking stock of the others' reactions: Nicky was gaping, Aaron stared, and Kevin had a neutral expression carefully pasted on but Neil could read his discomfort in his eyes.

“I hope you don't mind that we started already,” said Luther while Maria settled back into her seat.

“Oh, no, I don't mind at all,” replied Cass. She squeezed Andrew's shoulder and then walked to the other side of the table to take her seat in the chair Luther had pulled out for her.

Andrew sank into his chair with a strange giggle.

Neil's heart itched with the urge to run. His mind chugged away, spitting out lie after lie he could use to get them out of there. *Coach texted - there's been a fire at the dorm and we need to get back immediately. Andrew forgot his meds and he's coming up on his next dose. I think I'm coming down with something - the stomach flu's been going around campus.* He'd need to make himself vomit for the last one to work, probably. Just in case, he picked up his spoon and shoveled mashed potatoes into his mouth as quickly as he could without drawing attention.

Aaron stared at Andrew, knife and fork clenched in his hands on either side of his plate.

Nicky cleared his throat and said, “It's, um, nice to meet you, Cass.”

Cass gave him an easy smile as she tucked her napkin across her lap. “It's good to meet you, too, Nicky. Your father told me you lived in Germany for a while. Did you like it over there?”

Cass glanced over at Luther to thank him for the portion of turkey he placed on her plate and then returned all her attention to Nicky, who looked more at ease with this complete stranger than his own mother. His polite smile melted into something real.

Neil swallowed the buttery lump of potatoes in his mouth and watched them.

“Yeah, I love it,” Nicky answered. “I'm planning on moving back over there permanently after I graduate, actually.”

Maria froze and shot her husband a panicked look down the table just as Cass exclaimed, “That's wonderful! How exciting.”

There was a touch of shyness in Nicky's expression. His excitement was a tender thing, waiting to be squashed by his parents, but it seemed clear that they wouldn't voice any disapproval while Cass was present and so clearly on Nicky's side.

“My son spent some time in Europe. He came back with some interesting stories,” Cass went on. She hesitated before asked, “This might sound strange, but did you ever meet him?”

A strangled wisp of a breath squeezed out of Andrew's mouth followed by a hiccup that could have been a laugh. Neil's stomach churned. He could see the pieces coming together. Andrew had once told him that Cass was calling because she was searching for something – someone.

Nicky frowned. “Uh, no, I don't think so. What's his name again? Sorry, I can’t remember meeting any of Andrew’s foster brothers.”

Cass’s expression went flat. “His name is Drake. He, uh, he left home in late April last year and we
haven’t heard from him since. He was always so fond of Andrew; my husband and I were wondering if he made it out for Andrew’s graduation- or… or maybe just a visit?”

Neil couldn’t avoid the truth: Cass’s son was the man who had abused Andrew and eventually turned him into a vampire.

She didn't know her son was dead.

Nicky looked to his parents, uncertain. “I don't remember him.”

To Neil's horror, Cass turned to Andrew and asked, “Andrew, did Drake ever come visit you?”

Andrew's mouth twitched upward, but his eyes were still cold and dead. Instead of replying, he shoveled a bite of stuffing into his mouth. Cass's distress showed in the soft wrinkle between her eyebrows. Neil was sure he was going to vomit. He put down his fork and swallowed thickly.

Nicky and Aaron exchanged a brief look, no doubt remembering that night and all that blood on the Hemmicks' carpet. Neil couldn't tell if they looked suspicious or not.

“How are you still looking?” Andrew's voice was soft, resigned. Almost everyone looked at him with mused surprise.

Cass smiled sadly. “He’s my son. I can’t just give up on him. The police gave up after they hit a dead end, so Richard and I hired a private investigator. He found someone at the bus station who remembers seeing Drake in April and they said he was heading east. We’re not sure where he was going exactly since he used cash, but we… we were hoping that maybe you heard from him.”

Neil dropped his gaze so she wouldn’t see his anger. Cass didn't come to visit Andrew. She came to dig around for clues about her son since Andrew wouldn't take her calls.

Then, inspiration struck.

Squeezing one eye closed, Neil groaned, “Ugh, shoot, my contact!”

“You okay?” Nicky asked.

Neil rubbed at his eye and said, “My contact slipped. Crap, it hurts. Andrew, can you show me where the bathroom is?”

Andrew caught his wrist in a bruising grip and towed him toward the house.

“There are eye drops in the upstairs bathroom,” Maria called after them.

Neil obediently trailed after Andrew with his free hand pressed to his eye. He kept the act up until they were climbing beige stairs up to the second level. He scoffed at a framed quote done up in fanciful calligraphy about family. Andrew batted it off the wall as they passed and Neil was happy to hear the glass crack.

Through the first door on their left was the guest bathroom. Andrew shoved Neil into the edge of the pristine white counter before he sagged against the opposite wall, dropped his hands to his knees, and began to laugh uncontrollably. His shoulders shook and the nape of his neck flushed pink as the broken sounds were ripped out of his throat. A line of saliva stretched from Andrew’s mouth until it broke and landed on the smooth linoleum floor in a shiny drop.

Neil could only watch. He had questions, of course - why didn't he tell Cass what Drake was? Why
not appease her with a lie if he didn’t want to hand over the truth? The answers were right there, though, forming just after the questions popped up. Andrew didn't want her to know the truth and he didn't want to deceive her; therefore, he was trapped in this limbo with only his secrets for company.

“You need to eat,” Neil murmured, barely audible through Andrew's guffawing.

Andrew lifted his head, eyes watery and bright with laughter, but he had to shake loose a few more cracked, shrill laughs before he could get out, “Oh, Neil, you’re such an idiot.” Suddenly, he straightened and his laughter faded. “Ah, right on time.”

Neil frowned. “What?”

A moment later, he heard footsteps on the stairs. He gathered up his lies, ready to say whatever he needed to in order to get Cass to leave, but it was Luther who appeared in the doorway. Neil glared, but he was ignored.

“Andrew,” Luther said sternly.

Andrew tried to mimic his somber expression and tone. “Luther.”

“Neil, why don't you go rejoin the others? Andrew and I have some important matters to discuss.”

“I still need those eye drops,” Neil replied without making a move toward the cabinet.

Luther finally looked at him, dry and flat like he expected obedience, until it was clear that Neil had no intention of leaving. “Andrew, that woman deserves to know the truth,” he said. “I had hoped you would do the right thing for once.”

Andrew snorted. “If you care about the truth so much, why don't you tell her?”

Luther glanced at Neil again.

“He bought the ticket and saw the show already, fangs and everything,” Andrew told him.

“You are aware of what Andrew is?” Luther asked.

“He's a vampire,” Neil stated bluntly and mentally added, and you're an asshole.

Luther looked down on him and lifted one sparse eyebrow. “And you are aware of the circumstances that brought about that change?”

Neil threw back, “The guy you invited out here attacked him.”

“I had no way of knowing what would happen. I didn't know he was dangerous.”

Andrew's smile was all teeth. “Oh, Luther, you and the truth need couples counseling. You knew what he did and you still let him waltz in here. You should thank me for shredding his carotid before he got to Aaron or you would've ended up in pieces, too.”

Neil saw red. Luther had known about Drake when he allowed him to come into his house. He'd known and he'd left Andrew drunk and defenseless anyway. He clamped his lips between his teeth to keep from shouting.

Luther tsk-ed and shook his head. “Destruction wherever you go. Tilda always said you'd bring nothing but trouble. Perhaps I should have listened.”
“Perhaps I should have listened’ should be the family motto. Tilda should have listened to me, too, when I told her what I’d do if she smacked her son again.”

Neil’s heart thumped oddly. He knew Nicky suspected Andrew had something to do with Tilda’s car crash, but hearing Andrew lay it out in the open was still surprising.

Luther looked as shocked as Neil was. “Are you admitting—”

“When you go to the cops, make sure to tell them about Drake. Which pieces did you take care of again? His legs? That night is a bit blurry for me. I don't do well with change,” Andrew said, tapping his temple. When Luther glowered at him, he only grinned, comfortable with the upper hand. It was clear that Luther couldn't take action against Andrew without bringing trouble down on himself as well.

“I will not be threatened in my own home,” Luther fumed. “You will go downstairs and pretend you are human for the remainder of this meal. You will tell Mrs. Spear what happened to her son so that she may have closure and, after you leave, you will never set foot in my house again, understand? You are a parasite and I will cut you out like I should have done years ago.”

Neil's temper broke loose. “You need to pull your head out of your ass and take a good look in the mirror. What you ‘should have done years ago’ is get your sister the help she needed for her mental bullshit and maybe lifted a finger to help your nephews.”

“Excuse me, I-”

“Shut up,” Neil barked. “You did fuck-all to help Aaron, you disowned your own son because of something he can't control, and you handed Andrew over to a rapist. Why don't you try taking responsibility for the shit that you allowed to happen?”

“You are a guest in this house, young man,” Luther said, the warning clear in his tone. “You will be respectful and civilized.”

“Did you give that speech to Drake, too?” Neil spat back.

Andrew cocked his head, amused. “I didn't know we invited your attitude problem, Neil.”

“Enough,” Luther snarled. “You two have five minutes to get yourselves under control. I will not have you upsetting my wife.”

With one last glare, he turned and left.

Neil’s heart was pounding and his hands were shaking with a lust for violence. He wanted to throttle Luther. He wanted to burn this house to the ground.

Andrew was shaking as well, but for other reasons. He dragged a hand towel over his spit-shiny mouth and said, “Let's get back down there, shall we? I'm starving.”

“No.”

Andrew paused mid-step. “No?”

“Let's just leave. You can feed off me at your house and I can drive back to get the others while you nap.”

Andrew’s bizarre smile came back, so wide it must’ve hurt his cheeks. “Aw, shucks, you fuck.
What a gift! It's the thought that counts, though, so you need to think a lot harder.”

“What's the problem?”

Andrew pointed at his mouth just as his amused grin turned feral. “I'm not in the mood to be gentle. Now, shut up and get downstairs. Turkey's getting cold.”

“No, I'm not going back down there. You shouldn't either.”

“Dinner was the deal, Neil.”

“Yeah, we agreed on dinner, not this shit show,” Neil argued. “You're starving. Let's just-”

Andrew cut him off by grabbing two handfuls of his shirt and shoving him backward. His lower back hit the edge of the counter hard. Andrew pulled Neil's face down so they were only a couple inches apart. This close, Neil could see the few faint freckles scattered over Andrew's nose.

“Don't test me,” Andrew hissed, teeth bared.

“You won't hurt me,” Neil murmured.

Andrew scoffed. “You're an idiot. It's a good thing you don't gamble.”

“I wouldn't lose if I bet on that. All you do is protect people.”

Something unreadable flickered across Andrew's face, too quick for Neil to catch it. A few heartbeats later, Andrew loosened his grip on Neil's shirt and stalked out of the bathroom. Neil didn't know if Andrew was heading back to the table or out to the car. It didn't matter. Neil followed him.

Maria must have been waiting in the kitchen. When Neil and Andrew came down the stairs, she stepped out into the hallway with a frown pulling on her mouth. Andrew ignored her and breezed toward the hall closet to retrieve his coat.

“Where are you two going?” Maria asked.

Instead of answering, Neil reached around Andrew and yanked his coat off the hanger.

Maria hurried toward them. “Andrew, I asked you a question. Where are you going? Dinner's just getting started.”

“We left Andrew's meds in the car,” Neil answered abruptly.

With his coat tucked under his arm, Andrew tugged the door open.

“I expect you to come back when you-”

Neil slammed the door shut behind him, cutting off Maria’s next words. He didn't have it in him to be polite to Nicky's parents a moment longer. They didn't have any interest in reconciling with their son: they just used to him to lure Andrew down there.

Andrew strolled down the front path to the driveway and paused near Luther's truck.


Andrew's knuckles left a spiderweb of cracks on the driver's side of Luther's spotless windshield.
The destruction gave Neil a tiny thrill of satisfaction. After he fell into the passenger seat, he took his phone out of his pocket and found three texts from Kevin waiting for him.

*What's going on?*

*Did you two leave?*

*What the fuck?*

Neil replied, *Ran into a problem. We'll pick you up later.*

The tires squealed against the pavement as Andrew made a sharp U-turn in the middle of the street. The passenger side bumped up onto the curb for a moment before Andrew jerked the car back onto the actual road. Neil held onto the door as he was jostled, but he didn't complain. The roughness of Andrew's driving didn't bother him for once; he had the violence in his heart to match. Quietly, Neil fumed while Andrew hummed tunelessly and drummed his hands against the wheel. Andrew's focus was shattered, if the erratic route he took was anything to go by.

Andrew fell quiet so fast that his silence came as a shock. One second, he was giggling at a dirty-sounding street name and the next he was silent as a grave. He cocked his head and gazed out at the road like he was only just now seeing it before making a right turn so sharply the car nearly swung into oncoming traffic.

Before Neil realized it, they were flying up the on-ramp and slipping into a gap between a sports car and a van on the interstate. Neil felt the growl of the engine in his heart when Andrew forced the gas pedal down too quickly. Andrew maneuvered into the left lane and passed several cars with impressive speed. Inertia pushed Neil back into his seat and held him there like a weight until Andrew eased off the accelerator and slipped back into the right lane so he could just barely make the exit. Neil recognized the street name and knew they were close to the house now.

By the time the car pulled into the cousins' driveway, Neil felt almost settled again. His anger had cooled and hardened enough for him to set it aside and focus on other things. The engine shut off. Andrew and Neil climbed out wordlessly and headed inside.

The silence clung to them, stretched between them all the way up the path. Andrew unlocked the door carefully and pushed into the house, keeping hold of the doorknob and stepping aside to let Neil inside. The house felt so still, like the rooms were holding their breath, that Neil froze with his senses alert and heart speeding up. His distrust of such perfect stillness was instinctive. He wanted to check every corner, inspect every shadow. For a moment, his hand itched for a gun.

“So jumpy,” mocked Andrew. He slammed the door and effectively broke the anticipatory feeling enveloping the house. Then, he dropped his coat on the floor and said, “Tell me how your mother died, Bambi.”


“Only fair.” Andrew shrugged loosely, but Neil saw through his nonchalance. “I answered a question for you back at Exites, so now it's your turn.”

How could Neil have forgotten? He closed his eyes and cursed himself.

Andrew chuckled. “Is that a heart attack I hear?”

Neil opened his eyes to scowl at him. “Why do you care about my mother?”
“I don’t,” replied Andrew easily.

“Then why bother asking?”

Grinning, Andrew stepped up to him and tapped two fingers against Neil's throat, matching his pulse. “You put your clumsy little hands on everyone else's business, but you clam up as soon as someone looks at you too closely.”

“I was trying to help,” Neil mumbled, cheeks hot.

“And how’d that work out for you? You pleased with yourself? Are you satisfied? In case you’re still curious, I’ll let you in on a secret: if you go around pulling at threads, things unravel. Best to keep your hands to yourself from now on, yes?”

Neil folded his arms and tried to breathe through the heap of shame dumped down his throat. He knew he'd only made things worse by meddling. It had been selfish of him to chase that warm glow he’d felt when Nicky smiled and thanked him. His desire to leave something positive behind had outweighed his usual policy of isolation.

His guilt chewed away at his pride.

Avoiding eye contact, he said, “My mom and I got caught in Seattle and things got ugly. She took a nasty beating.”

“You got away.”

“We got away,” Neil corrected, wrestling with a surge of adrenaline and grief as that night flashed through his mind, “but she was bleeding internally. I didn’t - I didn't know until we got to California. She parked somewhere and then she was just... gone.”

Andrew's eyes were distant and looked vaguely amused, but Neil knew he couldn't help that. “Not many people at her funeral, I bet.”

“I burned the car with her in it,” Neil heard himself say. “Buried the bones in the sand.”

He could hear the sticky sound her blood-caked arm made when he tried to peel it off the vinyl seat. He could smell gasoline. He could taste bile.

“Huh, so you really do have no body left,” Andrew joked.

Neil felt like an open wound, all raw tissue and exposed nerves, and Andrew was staring at him ready to laugh again at any moment. It was better than pity, though. Andrew only wanted to root around the contents of Neil’s emotional baggage out of pure curiosity. Neil could tell him anything, even his worst thoughts, and Andrew would walk away completely unfazed. It shouldn't have been comforting, but it was.

“You need to eat,” Neil said.

The smile he got in return was practically a snarl. The mania Andrew was trying to tamp down was rising to the surface again, a bubble ready to burst. Neil wasn't afraid.

He shed his coat, dropped it on the floor, and followed Andrew upstairs.

They didn't turn on any lights as they went. Sunlight peeked in from the windows and reached inside, but it hung thinly in the upstairs hallway. Andrew appeared to be more shadow than man as
he listlessly climbed the stairs and then paused, swaying, in the hall as he tried to decide if he would go into his room or the bathroom to eat. Neil stopped on the top stair and waited for him to make up his mind.

Andrew let out a strange, high-pitched *hmmm* and headed into the bedroom, choosing comfort over cleanliness. He hit the light switch on his way in and wandered over to the bed. Neil closed the door behind him even though they were alone in the house. Andrew didn't comment on it; instead, he took off his shoes and tucked them just under the bed where they would be easy to grab.

Neil left his shoes by the door. “You want my arm or my leg?”

“Dealer's choice.” Andrew flopped backward onto his mattress, his breathing fast and choppy. With a choked laugh, he used his sleeve to wipe some drool from his mouth.

Neil could shove up his sleeve, but if Andrew was rougher than usual the mark might linger or bruise. It was possible to keep a bruise on his wrist hidden, but it would be easier to hide one on his thigh.

Neil undid his jeans and pushed them down his legs. Andrew's hand twitching was the only sign that he noticed. Next, Neil took off his socks and padded over to the bed. Andrew's gaze drifted across the ceiling, unfocused and dazed, for a long while before Neil snapped his fingers to get his attention.

Once Andrew's eyes were on him, Neil asked, “How do you want to do this?”

Andrew pushed himself up onto his elbows, took one look at Neil's bare legs, and dissolved into hysterical laughter. His stomach spasmed violently and the corner of his mouth glistened with excess saliva. His fangs had grown longer and sharper; his body was desperate for blood.

Neil waited for Andrew's laughter to die down to ask, “Do you want me sitting or lying down?”

“Hey, batter, batter,” Andrew croaked hoarsely between rough chuckles. He stood up fluidly and gestured to the bed. “Lie down. Let's get this over with.”

As he situated himself, Neil tried not to focus on the fact that it was Andrew's bed and Andrew's pillow. There was no reason for his stomach to feel tight and twisted. Andrew's knee pressed into the mattress by Neil's feet. Keeping his eyes glued to the ceiling, Neil parted his legs and stamped down the sudden wish for a longer shirt or looser underwear. He didn't get why he felt so exposed now. Andrew had seen his legs before. It was nothing new.

Andrew snorted and Neil knew it was because he could hear Neil's unsteady pulse. A spring creaked, the mattress dipped, and Neil's skin prickled. He sensed Andrew's proximity and his body tensed, wanting to run even though his mind had already decided against it. Forcibly, he relaxed every muscle until he was loose and on his way to being calm.

Fortunately, Andrew didn't waste any time. His hand clamped around Neil's thigh to hold him still and, a moment later, his teeth pierced the flesh a few inches above Neil's knee. The pain was sharper than usual, but it was quickly soothed away by the warm, wet slide of Andrew's tongue. The wound throbbed dully, hardly noticeable under the other sensations. Neil's breath stuttered before he settled into the sensation of Andrew's mouth against his skin.

Unfortunately, while Andrew suckled the wound on Neil's thigh, Neil had only his own brain for company. He attempted to distract himself by running down the list of things he still needed to do that day: he had to drive back to get the others, he'd need a decent explanation for why he and
Andrew left so abruptly in case Kevin asked questions, then they’d head back to Palmetto State and Neil would have to start learning how to use his new racquet.

Andrew's grip tightened and pulled Neil out of his thoughts. Bruises were most likely sprouting under Andrew's fingertips, but Neil didn't mind. He didn't know just how strong Andrew was, but he'd wager Andrew was still exercising a considerable amount of control. Andrew prodded the wounds with his tongue for a moment, which was answered by an oddly warm tug just under Neil’s navel. Then, Andrew flattened his tongue over the wounds and held still for a moment before lapping up the escaping drop of blood and sitting up.

Neil lifted his head to frown down at him. “You barely took anything.”

Andrew's tongue flicked out to get the last smudge of blood from his puffy lower lip. “It's enough.”

“You could take more,” Neil argued. After what Andrew endured at dinner, he deserved a lot more than that.

“I could take all of it,” Andrew mumbled groggily. “Maybe that'd shut you up.”

Neil pushed up onto his elbows. “You could take a pint.”

“Put your pants back on.” The command came out slurred.

“I'm serious,” Neil persisted, ignoring the lukewarm glare Andrew tossed his way. “You could take a pint and I'd be fine.”

Andrew blinked slowly.

“Keep drinking, Andrew.”

“Dumb thing to tell a vampire.”

Neil rolled his eyes and dropped onto his back. “Keep drinking.”

“Shall we get out the measuring cups?” Andrew asked flippantly.

Neil didn’t understand why Andrew was stalling. He could make a pint of blood last weeks, maybe a few months if he was pushing it. What would drinking a pint in one sitting do for him? How long would he feel clear-headed and evened out? How many nights would he be able to actually sleep?

Andrew's stare was heavier than his hand had been. It felt like forever before he grabbed Neil's leg again, squeezing and kneading until he found a good angle, and bit down hard enough that Neil grunted at the surprising burst of pain. Neil could feel the scraps of Andrew's control slipping away as he sucked down greedy mouthfuls. Blood flowed more freely since the new wounds were deeper. Neil studied the texture of the ceiling as he listened to the wet sounds of Andrew's throat working and his harsh breathing, which he could feel puffing against his damp skin. Neil's left foot curled against the cool sheets. The faint scent of detergent and cigarettes clung to the pillowcase beneath his head. Neil wondered if he'd be able to smell Andrew's scent on himself later on.

Andrew's rough palm slid up his thigh an inch of two and Neil became painfully aware of the fact that he was half-naked and vulnerable. Lifting his head, he glanced down at the vampire huddled between his legs. Andrew's back was hunched and one shoulder was scrunched up higher than the other, pulling the fabric of his shirt tight across his muscled back. His nose was almost flattened against Neil's thigh; his eyes were closed, eyelashes fluttering.
He looked relaxed, softer and more at ease than Neil had ever seen him, and he looked that way because of Neil. The thought of it put a curl of warmth in Neil's chest. He couldn't protect Andrew in the same way that Andrew protected him, but he could do this. He could give Andrew a few moments of peace.

Suddenly, Andrew pulled back to lap up a messy smear of blood. The sight of Andrew’s glistening tongue against his skin sent a bolt of heat through his groin.

*What the hell?*

That was new.

Neil dropped his head back onto the pillow and swallowed hard.

Andrew pulled away from him again with a horribly loud sucking sound and asked, “Problem?”

Neil froze and then he realized that Andrew could hear his heart pounding. He hoped desperately that Andrew was too distracted by the blood oozing from the two small wounds to notice where else his blood was rushing.

“I'm fine,” Neil muttered.

Andrew tried to scoff, but the noise got stuck in his throat. A moment later, Andrew's lips pressed into the throbbing spot on Neil's thigh. Neil sucked in a deep breath and tried to ignore the pleasurable tension gathering between his legs as Andrew mouthed at the wounds to coax more blood out.

Neil tried counting in every language he knew to distract himself, but suddenly, Andrew grabbed Neil’s bony knee and pushed it down against the mattress. Neil's hips tilted instinctively and his other leg bumped into Andrew's back, but Andrew didn't pay it any mind. He only suckled harder and let out a small satisfied grunt when he managed to get another generous mouthful of blood.

Neil forced himself to take deep breaths and tried once again to pry his focus away from Andrew’s mouth. He thought of nights scrubbing blood out of shirts in stained motel sinks and the hours he spent biting his nails to keep from scratching at his stitches. He thought of sore spots on his forehead after taking naps against bus windows on bumpy roads.

His mind faltered and landed on memories of a sore scalp, clumps of dyed hair on the floor, bloody noses, bruised cheeks- all because of the kiss going stale on his mouth. He could almost hear his mother screaming at him about how idiotic he'd been. Letting anyone near him was dangerous, deadly.

He hadn’t meant to let Andrew get this close.

Andrew broke away from him with a ragged gasp and licked a messy line across the bite mark before pulling himself upright. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and then broke into a wide, slow yawn that made him look watery-eyed and oddly boyish.

Neil carefully maneuvered himself off the bed without touching the exhausted man kneeling in the middle of the mattress. He turned away once he was standing to hide the swelling bulge in his underwear and stuffed his legs back into his jeans as quickly as he could. All the while, he could feel Andrew's bleary eyes on him.

“There's pretzels and orange juice in the kitchen,” Andrew murmured.
After he zipped his jeans, Neil shot a confused look over his shoulder. “I already ate.”

“Eat the pretzels and drink the juice.”

Neil had some time to kill anyway before the others would be finished eating dinner, so he nodded and said, “Okay.”

Andrew nodded once, satisfied, and then he let his body slump forward, his head landing on his pillow. Before he fell asleep, he grumbled, “Keys are in my coat.”

On his way out, Neil shut off the light and closed the door quietly. He felt hazy and weightless as he went downstairs to the kitchen. Sunlight played around the edges of the shadows pooling at the heart of the house. The kitchen blinds glowed yellow from the light outside, but everything still looked gray like a pencil sketch without color.

Neil’s stomach felt like warm, melted caramel and he knew it wasn’t an effect of the blood loss, but he ignored it as he bit into a pretzel.
On Sunday morning, Neil woke up in the den of the cousins' house, cramped and curled up in one of the recliners with a blanket tucked around his body. The argument he’d had with Kevin the night before left a bad taste in his mouth.

As soon as Neil showed up at the Hemmicks' house by himself, Kevin knew that he fed Andrew again. He waited until they were alone on the front lawn of the cousins’ house to launch into a scathing tirade about Neil’s life choices.

Neil still had “What the fuck is your problem?” ringing in his ears as he folded his blanket into a lumpy square. Kevin was angry at Neil for taking risks and he only got angrier when Neil tried to argue that a pint of blood wasn’t that much. He looked ready to throw a punch when Neil suggested they spend the night in Columbia since Andrew was already asleep.

Neil couldn’t forget the vacant look in Andrew's eyes when Cass showed up. He just wanted to let Andrew rest and give his mind a break from it all.

Nicky and Aaron didn't mind staying at the house. In fact, they almost seemed relieved when Neil asked them. He figured they both wanted to have their own rooms for the night and he couldn't blame them. It must’ve been a tight fit back at the Tower with all four of them and their emotional baggage crammed into a single bedroom.

After Nicky got into the liquor cabinet and began mixing drinks, the night got better. The booze smoothed the rough edges of Kevin’s temper and it softened Aaron’s bitter disdain until he was more bearable to be around. After a movie that Neil failed to understand, they all shuffled off to sleep.

Neil scratched at his stomach and padded across the room toward the hallway. The sound of Kevin’s snoring drifted in from the couch in the front room. It was only six in the morning, so Neil figured he had plenty of time to get his thoughts in order before the others got up.

Before his brain could register movement, Andrew was there in front of him, blocking the kitchen doorway. Neil stumbled back in surprise before he got caught in the pull of Andrew's heavy stare and went still. Something leaned against his mind, gently weighing his thoughts down.
Then, Andrew blinked and the odd spell was broken. “I need sugar,” he said flatly.

“Why don’t you just tell people that Betsy changed your prescription? Why bother faking the mania when you don’t have to?”

On his way to the front door, Andrew tossed back, “Children need consistency.”

Neil wasn’t sure if he was allowed to tag along, but he knew if he stepped out of bounds Andrew would shove him back in line. As he put on his coat and shoes, Andrew said nothing. He didn’t even look at Neil as they walked out into the chilly morning together and climbed into the car.

At the convenience store, Andrew made a beeline for the candy aisle while Neil went to the self-serve coffee station in the back corner. He pulled two large cups from the dispenser and poured dark roast into one for himself. Unsure of what Andrew wanted, he filled the second cup with hazelnut-flavored coffee and enough containers of vanilla creamer to turn it a pale, milky brown. Once he snapped lids onto the cups and slipped them into cardboard sleeves, he went to find Andrew.

The vampire was holding the hem of his baggy t-shirt in one hand and filling the makeshift pouch with sugary snacks that made Neil’s teeth ache just looking at them. When he caught a glimpse of some Fun Dip packets, he remembered Andrew’s horrible, stained smile as he told him about Drake and shuddered at the memory.

Andrew sniffed the air twice and then turned to face Neil, narrowing his eyes at the cup of overly-sweetened coffee in Neil’s left hand. Before Neil could ask if it smelled all right, Andrew grabbed three granola bars and walked up to the cashier.

The woman behind the register looked too bored to care about Andrew’s pile of candy. Neil placed the cups of coffee on the counter while she scanned and bagged Andrew’s purchases. She typed in the price of the coffee last and then read Andrew his total, barely glancing up as she took his crumpled cash. Andrew was out the door with his bag before the receipt finished printing. Neil took the slip of paper and the coffee with a polite smile and hurried out to the car.

Back at the house, nothing had changed. Kevin was still snoring on the couch with one arm dangling over the armrest. The bedrooms were still closed. Neil set the cups on the floor to take off his coat and shoes. Then, he quietly went over to the thermostat to turn the heat up a few degrees, figuring the three hungover men would appreciate waking up to a warm house.

He took the coffee into the kitchen and traded Andrew the cup of sweetened coffee for the granola bars.


Andrew ignored him, focusing instead on a package of powdered doughnut holes. Neil bit the end off a granola bar and chewed slowly. While they ate their breakfasts, Neil thought about the upcoming day. Kevin would want to stay longer at the court to make up for the hours they lost and Neil did too. His fingers itched for his new racquet.

“Will you practice with us today?” he blurted out.

Andrew took a long drink of his coffee and studied Neil as if there was a hidden layer to the simple question. Eventually, he said, “No.”

Disappointment flickered in Neil’s chest, but he stamped it out. “Okay.”
Andrew kept watching him, eyes guarded and flat. Anxiety crawled over Neil's skin. He didn’t know what Andrew was searching for and he didn’t know if Andrew found it. When Andrew turned away to open a bag of caramels, Neil felt both relieved and cold.

The morning progressed slowly like it always did when the other three were hungover. From the den, Neil heard Aaron stumble into the upstairs bathroom to shower sometime after nine o’clock. He listened to water rushing through the pipes in the walls and the creaking springs of the other recliner as Andrew rocked back and forth.

A short while later, Aaron's footsteps thumped down the stairs and shuffled toward the kitchen. Cabinets slammed open and shut, the sink cut on and off. A thud followed by a muffled curse came from down the hall, meaning Nicky was awake as well. Soon, Neil could hear Nicky and Aaron grumbling at each other in the kitchen. It wouldn’t be long before their noise woke Kevin up.

Andrew ate three more candy bars before Nicky ambled into the den, bleary-eyed with his dark hair sticking up in every direction and a steaming mug of coffee in his hand.

“Morning,” Neil said quietly.

“Mmh,” grunted Nicky. He sagged against the wall and blinked slowly at his cousin. Once he saw what Andrew was eating, he grimaced and asked, “Did you guys eat any real food?”

Andrew took out his pill bottle and shook out a Tic Tac. “Neil got granola bars.”

Nicky made another face and carefully sipped his coffee.

Another kitchen cabinet slammed and then Kevin's loud groan of pain rumbled through the main floor. The peaceful quiet had been nice while it lasted.

Once Kevin had his shower and got some caffeine into his system, it was time to leave. Aaron cleaned out the coffeepot, Nicky dumped out the last of the milk since it was going to expire in a few days, and then they all trudged out to the car.

In French, Kevin promised, “I won't go easy on you just because you make stupid choices.”

By the time they hit the interstate, Andrew was asleep against his window, twisted up in his seat belt with his arms folded loosely over his stomach. Neil didn't regret anything.

Kevin didn't let go of his anger, but that didn't matter.

After that, their night practices dug deeper and deeper into the small hours of the morning, but Neil wasn’t going to complain. With his new racquet, he went back to square one with the Raven precision drills he’d taken weeks to master back in the summer and he was desperate to get the hang of it. Kevin took out his frustration with Neil on the other goal, firing shot after shot into the box that was left empty night after night while Andrew napped in the stands.

Thankfully, the blood loss didn't have much of an effect on Neil, but it still made Kevin paranoid. He and Andrew both watched Neil's every step as if they were waiting for him to collapse. Neil had pushed himself harder with worse injuries, but reminding them of that didn't change anything. Sometimes Neil caught the haunted look in Kevin’s eyes that told him it didn't matter what he said, Kevin's own ghosts were whispering in his ears.

During their last game in December, Neil was clumsy on the court only because of the awkward weight of his racquet, not the blood he’d given, but Kevin wasn’t convinced. He used every missed
shot and fumbled pass to lecture Neil on just how stupid it was for a college athlete to feed a
vampire. By the end of the game, Neil was almost too irritated to notice that the Foxes won.

Kevin wasn't impressed or pleased by their victory. According to him, they only won because the
other team just so happened to make more mistakes than they did. It was luck, pure and simple.

“I could eat a hundred lemons,” Nicky said theatrically in the locker room, “and still be less bitter
than Kevin Day.”

Matt snorted. Kevin pointedly ignored everyone.

“He's a fuckin' robot. What did you expect?” Aaron muttered as he peeled off his socks.

“Maybe someone should check out his hard drive,” Nicky suggested, wagging his eyebrows.

Kevin viciously shoved his gear into his locker.

Neil was so focused on Kevin's mechanical movements and cold fury that he didn't notice when
Matt sidled up to him until he bent down to whisper, “Hey, is it just me or is Andrew acting super
weird tonight?”

Neil blinked. Andrew was standing in the corner with a startlingly vacant look in his eyes. He
hadn't bothered to fake any smiles that night, either too tired or too irritated to try.

Shrugging, Neil replied quietly, “Maybe Betsy is playing with his dosage. I don't know.”

It was the lie that Andrew had refused to use himself, but Neil wasn't above fibbing. Andrew heard
it, of course, and flicked a sharp look over at Neil.

“Huh. Yeah, maybe,” Matt said before moving away again.

As Neil continued to stare openly at Andrew, a cold smile overtook the vampire's face and it
looked more forced and painful than all the other smiles he'd worn. An answering chill went down
Neil's spine. He gathered up his clothes and hurried off to shower.

He didn't expect his little lie to go anywhere, but when the girls came over on Saturday night the
words were out of Matt's mouth as soon as the door was closed.

“Why would Bee do that, though?” Dan wondered aloud as she settled on the middle couch
cushion.

Shrugging, Matt handed a bowl of buttery popcorn to his girlfriend and flopped down beside her.

Renee perched on the armrest next to Allison at the other end of the couch and turned her eerie
gaze on Neil. Her eyes dissected him as he sat down on the floor.

“Maybe he's the one experimenting with his happy pills,” Allison said, inspecting her freshly
manicured nails.

Dan chewed a mouthful of popcorn and looked at Allison like she'd grown a second head.

“You think he'd do that?” asked Matt. “Nicky said the pills really helped after his psychotic break.”

“He's psychotic all the time. He seems more stable now,” Dan said. “Maybe Bee only just figured
out what's wrong with him and found a way to fix it.”
Anger jolted through Neil's chest. They talked about Andrew like he was something to put in a cage instead of a person in need of help. It must've shown on his face because a small, sharp smile pulled at Renee's mouth.

Unfortunately, Dan noticed. “Renee, spill.”

That attracted Allison's attention. “What do you know? Is the monster off his leash or what?”

Renee lifted one shoulder and said, “I'm not sure. We could always ask him if we really want to know.”

Allison and Dan looked at her like that was the worst suggestion they’d ever heard.

“If you hear anything, will you let us know?” asked Matt.

Belatedly, Neil realized that Matt’s question was aimed at him. “Yeah, sure,” he lied.

Thankfully, Renee changed the subject by asking which movie they were going to watch. Neil let out a small sigh of relief, but his anger was still tangled around his lungs.

Since their fall season was over and done with, the Foxes switched to practicing only in the mornings to leave the rest of their days open for studying. During the next week, there was a definite lull in the Foxes’ enthusiasm on the court since most of them were distracted by thoughts of coursework or the upcoming holidays. They weren’t distracted enough to ignore Andrew’s changed demeanor, though; everyone, including Aaron, watched him curiously.

In spite of the sugar Andrew dumped into his system every day, he failed to reach his old level of cheer. His smiles were too small to reach his eyes, which were sharp and clear without any hunger clouding his mind. Still, he wasn’t ready to drop the act altogether. This new version of Andrew was all wrong and unsettling.

Convinced that Neil knew nothing about Andrew’s mental state, the upperclassmen invited Nicky out to lunch and over for movie nights so they could ask him instead. Nicky was startled but eager to be included in their group, so he accepted their invitations as often as he could. To Neil’s surprise, Andrew didn’t seem to care.

Things were changing in small ways for the Foxes and, in the days leading up to the winter banquet, Neil could almost see the two fractured halves of the team inch closer together. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to give Neil’s hope room to grow.
Neil woke up wearing a wrinkled suit and had no memory of the night before. His head pounded, his knuckles were bruised and sore, his entire body was stiff like he hadn't moved in weeks. He’d slept in his contacts again.

Wincing, he shielded his eyes from the light creeping through the blinds and struggled to sit up in his bunk. Once he realized he was alone for the moment, he took the opportunity to quickly swap out his contacts for a new pair.

His phone told him it was just after ten in the morning on December 17th.

*The winter banquet,* his mind supplied, which explained his formal attire. His memory was still dark; the night before was lost in a murky blur.

Matt pushed open the bedroom door. “Hey, man,” he said. “You okay?”

“Uh, I think so?” Neil couldn't help the trembling of his voice.

Matt gave him an amused half-smile. “You must've been sneaking booze when we weren't looking or something.”

“What happened last night?”

“Riko said he wanted to talk to you alone and I don’t know why, but you kicked up one hell of a fuss until Andrew let you have a few minutes with him. I bet Riko’s regretting that, though. He probably woke up with one hell of a shiner this morning.”

Neil's vision went fuzzy around the edges. “What?”

“Yeah, none of us heard what he said to you, but whatever it was, it was bad enough that you hauled off and punched him. Nice right hook, by the way,” he chuckled, but Neil heard the underlying worry in his voice.

Admitting he had no memory of the night before would only make Matt worry more, so Neil settled for saying, “Riko's a dick.”

“I hear that. By the way, Kevin's out in the main room waiting for you. I tried to tell him to give you a couple hours to get over your hangover, but he's- well, he’s Kevin.”
Neil nodded and grabbed the side of his bunk to pull himself toward the ladder, mentally begging his body to work properly. A pained groan escaped his mouth as he forced his feet over the edge. Matt watched sympathetically as Neil slowly climbed down to the floor.

Neil swallowed back vomit and blinked away the spots in his vision as he ambled across the bedroom to the door, which was infinitely harder with the room pitching sharply to one side.

“Woah,” Matt said, reaching to steady him.

“I’m fine,” Neil grunted.

He was winded and shivering by the time he made it out to the main room. Kevin stood in the center, staring hard at the wall like it was an opponent until he heard Neil groan lowly. He gave Neil a sharp once-over and then said, “We need to talk about last night.”

Neil grit his teeth and leaned against the wall.

“Just give him a sec, would you?” Matt snapped, coming up behind Neil. “He’s in no shape to go anywhere with you.”

Kevin arched an eyebrow. “Fine. You can go, then.”

“You’re kicking me out of my own- you know what? I’m not that surprised,” Matt muttered, stalking over to the door to step into his shoes. “I’ll be at Dan’s. Call me if you need anything, Neil.”

“Yeah,” was all Neil could muster up the energy to say.

Once he was alone with Kevin, he said, “You better have some answers because-”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Uh, getting on the bus? I remember… I remember a little of the drive, I think.” He swallowed hard and croaked, “I punched Riko?”

Kevin’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “Another idiotic move. At least you’re consistent.”

A small memory of Riko, with slick hair and a smirk, bubbled up. Neil remembered feeling trapped by Riko’s eyes, like a fly stuck in a web. His limbs grew heavier just thinking about it. He wanted to run, but couldn’t put his finger on why exactly. The urge was so strong it was frightening; he could almost feel his mother clawing at his hair, snarling at him, “We have to go now!”

“I printed off your flight information for you,” Kevin said.


The somber look in Kevin’s eyes made his stomach drop. Riko’s voice trickled down the back of his mind. A chunk of his memory slid into place. “Andrew is a problem: he’s a mutt with no master and a human twin. Once my father hears of this, Andrew will be killed or Aaron will be turned. If you wish to protect your little friends, you will give me something in return for my silence.”


Fury exploded in Neil’s lungs. He had options, but no real choice. If anything happened to Andrew, Neil wouldn’t be able to live with himself no matter how far he ran. If Aaron was hurt,
Andrew would destroy the world and then himself. The ground between the twins was frozen solid with broken promises and failed communication, but they never lost sight of each other. Neil couldn’t protect one without looking out for the other as well.

“Come spend the holiday with me,” Riko told him with a grin. “We Ravens could use a bit of excitement. Perfection, for all its rewards, can get boring sometimes. Come on, Nathaniel, a bit of your time in exchange for your bulldog’s well-being.”

“I need— I need to—” Neil stumbled back down the hallway and collapsed in front of the toilet just in time to empty his stomach into the bowl. Everything hurt at once: his bones felt cold and hollow, his head throbbed hotly, his muscles screamed.

“I don’t know what Riko told you,” Kevin said from the doorway, “but he doesn’t make idle threats.”

Neil could barely hear Kevin over the roar of his pulse. Spitting into the filthy water, Neil lifted his head and croaked, “Does Andrew know anything about this?”

“No, he was with me until you took a swing at Riko. He wants to hear your side of things.”

“When do I leave for Evermore?”

“Tonight.”

Neil nodded and swiped the back of his hand over his mouth. “Leave the itinerary and get out.”

“Neil—”

“Out!”

Kevin hesitated a moment and Neil could almost hear the warning he wanted to give: Riko was dangerous, Riko was sadistic, Riko would get what he wanted. It didn’t matter. Neil had to do this. He retched again. Kevin left the folded piece of paper on the bathroom counter.

As he sat there, clutching the toilet bowl and shivering, more broken fragments of the previous night stabbed into his brain. The rest of his memories came rushing back: Matt laughing at a joke Nicky told, the rumble of the bus, a fleck of gravy on the tablecloth, his own voice asking Andrew for just two minutes alone with the bastard, Riko’s eyes, Riko’s eyes, Riko’s eyes.

Neil groaned and clenched his eyes shut. His stomach quivered and twisted. He had to get out of there. He wanted to talk to Andrew. He needed a shower.

Once he felt reasonably certain that he wouldn’t vomit again, he flushed the toilet and pulled himself to his feet to wash his hands and rinse out his mouth. With another groan, he began undressing himself with clumsy, fragile fingers.

In the shower, he washed himself roughly and stood under the spray until his panic ebbed enough for him to start planning. He needed a lie to explain his sudden departure and another to smooth over the questions the Foxes would definitely have after the previous night. On top of that, he’d need a way to explain all this to Andrew, who wouldn’t accept what he told the others. Lying to Andrew would be nearly impossible unless Neil found a way to somehow mask his heartbeat.

Neil closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the slick tile wall. A month had passed since the last time Andrew fed off him, but the feral hunger hadn’t returned. Andrew took small sips
from the blood bag in Wymack’s office here and there to soften the edge of his irritability and, as far as Neil knew, he slept semi-regularly. Andrew was stable and level-headed. To think all that progress could be ruined by Riko’s cruelty made him sick.

No matter what Riko had in store for him, Neil decided he couldn’t leave without feeding Andrew again. He probably wouldn’t be in any shape to offer blood when he returned, after all, and Andrew was due for another large meal. It was the least he could do.

Stepping out of the shower, he dried himself off and eyed his wet hair in the mirror. It was almost time to dye his roots again, but he figured that could wait until after he was done at Evermore. Riko already knew who he was and what he was supposed to look like, so it didn’t matter if his natural shade of auburn started to show. Neil shrugged it off and went to get dressed.

One cup of coffee and two glasses of water later, an idea was starting to take shape in Neil’s mind. Andrew would be able to tell if his pulse or breathing was quickened by a lie, but if he went to Andrew fresh from a run...

Running was the last thing he wanted to do in his current condition, but he resigned himself to it anyway and went to change into his running clothes.

Luckily, the hallway was empty so no one could ask questions as he headed out into the cold. His body was stiff and his joints protested every movement. The December air seeped through his clothes, his skin, right down to his bones. A headache pulsed behind his eyes as he stretched on the sidewalk.

With pressure building in his head, Neil ran along Perimeter Road until his heart was ready to burst and his legs turned to rubber. The cold air scraped his lungs raw. White-hot pain pulsated in his chest, lighting up every part of him, but he kept going. He kept going until he was sure his heart would be racing for a good long while.

Climbing the stairs of the Tower made him want to vomit and he had to grip the railing to keep himself upright, but he reminded himself of how necessary it was every step of the way.

Nicky answered the cousins’ suite door and his eyes bulged when he took in Neil’s sweaty, disheveled state. “Uh, are you okay, Neil?”

Neil wiped sweat away from his eye and wheezed, “I need to talk to Andrew.”

“Right now? You don’t wanna shower first or-”

“Right now,” Neil interrupted. “Sorry, it’s just… I’d rather get this conversation over with so I can shower and go back to bed.”

Nicky nodded and smiled sympathetically as he stepped aside to let Neil in. “Andrew’s in the bedroom.”

“Thanks.” Neil tried to smile, but it felt more like a grimace.

He ignored Aaron’s curious look and hurried down the hall toward the bedroom. The door was left ajar and cold air leaked out, which made Neil hope that Andrew was smoking; the nicotine would improve his mood a little. He nudged the door open further as he knocked and, sure enough, Andrew was perched on the dresser by the window with a cigarette between his lips.

Without looking back at him, Andrew said, “Stay over there. You reek.”
Neil closed the door behind him and leaned against it. “I went for a run to clear my head.”

“You seem empty-headed enough to me.” Andrew’s tone was colder than the room. “You continue to make my job harder. I want to know why.”

“You mean last night?”

Andrew flicked ash onto the windowsill and continued to stare out into the gray December day. His stillness made Neil wonder if he drank from his blood bag the night before to prepare himself for the banquet.

“Riko said something,” Neil said. “He said something about you and Kevin and it pissed me off.”

“Talk to Bee about your anger issues,” Andrew warned. “Once our deal is up, your temper is going to get you killed.”

“About that,” Neil began slowly. His heart rate was slowing: he needed to make this fast. “I need out of our deal.”

Andrew turned and pinned him with a heavy look. “You have a good reason for this, I’m assuming,” he said sharply.

“My uncle called,” Neil lied. “He has some stuff my mom left behind in England—cash, names and numbers of her old contacts, stuff like that. I have to go meet up with him to get it.”

“And you need to break our deal, why?”

Neil forced himself to hold eye contact. “I can’t bring you guys with me and you won’t let me go as long as I’m under your protection.”

“Nicky’s off to Germany tomorrow. Aaron and Kevin won’t mind a trip, too.”

“I have to be in San Francisco tonight. I doubt you want to drag Aaron back to California.” The city was a breath away from Oakland, where Andrew had lived with the Spears, and perhaps it was cruel to use it to deter him, but Neil didn’t regret it.

Andrew took a long drag off his cigarette while he thought it over. Then, he blew a thin stream of smoke at the open window, letting the breeze clear away the acrid cloud. Neil waited and swallowed back more excuses and lies that would only push Andrew toward suspicion. He had to be careful if this was going to work.

“You’re willing to risk your neck for some money?” Andrew questioned.

“I’ll need it when my year’s up and I need to run again.” Neil hesitated a moment, then he offered, “If you still want my help with Kevin in the spring, we can renegotiate.”

Andrew scoffed. “Don’t call me when shit hits the fan. You want to be on your own, fine. You’re on your own.”

Neil tried not to look relieved. “Okay.”

“You should get out now.”

“You should eat before I leave.”

Andrew’s glare turned Neil’s blood cold. “My eating habits aren’t your concern.”
Neil knew he was on thin ice, but if Andrew wanted him gone, he’d say so or throw him out. He decided to push his luck a little further. “I’ll trade you some blood for a ride to the airport.”

“Are you masochistic or just stupid?”

Evermore was looming over his head and the memory of Riko’s eyes burned, so he let out a dry, sawed-off laugh and said, “Both probably.”

Andrew stared at him, still as a statue, for a few slow heartbeats and then said, “Bring a towel. You’re not going to bleed on the upholstery.”

Lightheaded, Neil nodded and left Andrew to finish his cigarette in peace. A chill slowly overtook Neil’s body and mind as he returned to his own room to pack his bag. He was unshielded and untethered now that he’d cut himself loose from Andrew’s protection and the knowledge of that blew through him like arctic wind. He was on his own again. He’d almost forgotten how lonely that felt.

He zipped up his bag and then reached into his pocket for his key ring, running the pad of his thumb over the teeth of Andrew’s house key. Without their deal, would Neil be welcome ever again?

It was too late to go back now. He reminded himself that the pain was worth it, that he’d never deserved the deal in the first place, that it would have come to an end in a few months’ time anyway. Andrew’s family, the Foxes, his home- it was all a dream, an indulgence, and it was never meant to last.

He shook himself out of his self-pity. This was nothing new. He’d adjust to it soon enough.

After he showered again, he wandered over to the girls’ suite and let himself in, knowing the door wouldn’t be locked. Dan sat between Matt and Allison in the main room while Renee sat cross-legged on the floor with Allison’s feet resting on the pillow in her lap; she was putting a fresh coat of nail polish on Allison’s toenails from the looks of it.

“Hey, Neil!” Matt called, pausing the movie they were watching. “You survive your talk with Kevin?”

Neil nodded and drifted over to the chair near the couch.

“How’re you feeling?” asked Dan. “Hungover?”

Allison snorted. “I don’t know how much you managed to drink, but it must’ve been a lot.”

Renee shot him a sweet smile as she dipped the little brush back into the bottle of blue polish. “We have aspirin and coffee if you need it,” she offered.

Dan nodded and added, “We’re going out for tacos in a bit. Wanna come with?”

“Last team dinner of the year,” Allison said, affecting a somber tone.

“It’s not a team dinner,” Dan countered with a flat look. “Only half the team is here.”

“The good half,” Allison replied primly.

“Tacos sound good,” said Neil.

“Awesome,” Dan beamed. “We can all take Matt’s truck.”
“Well, then, I call shotgun,” Allison said as she leaned over to look at Renee’s progress. “I’m not sitting in the back with your fat ass.”

“You can kiss my fat ass,” Dan said, shoving Allison’s shoulder.

“Watch it!” Allison squawked. “You’ll fuck up my nail polish.”

Matt pulled Dan into his side and kissed the side of her head, grinning.

The conversation wasn’t anything out of the ordinary and the tacos weren’t particularly good, but Neil was certain it was one of the best meals he’d ever had. He savored the sounds of their laughter and the easy softness of their smiles while he could. Where he was going, there wouldn’t be friendly faces or jokes traded over trays of fast food. He’d need memories of this odd little family to keep him going. He soaked it all up like a sponge and hoped he wouldn’t forget a single detail.

When the girls announced they had to go pack for their flight to Bismarck, he left them to go meet Andrew in the parking lot. He walked away to a chorus of, “Have fun with your uncle!” and “Take pictures of California!”

Neil hoped they’d forgive him for lying.

As soon as he stepped outside and saw Andrew leaning against his car, Neil realized he was just as hungry for Andrew’s flat stare and cold silence. The callous indifference stung, but it was something honest surfacing after months of Andrew being driven out of his mind by hunger.

Andrew didn’t let Neil into his car until Neil showed him that he did, in fact, have a towel with him. Once the doors were unlocked, Neil tossed his bag into the back and slid into the passenger seat. With a turn of Andrew’s key, the engine and Neil’s stomach flipped over.

Andrew’s eyes were hard and fixed to the road ahead. The silence was impenetrable, but Neil didn’t have any words anyway. He watched Palmetto State disappear from the side mirror, swallowing hard against the lump in his throat. Leaving a place had never been so painful: the concept of coming back was still foreign to him. His mother had never let him entertain the idea. “Don’t look back,” she told him. “Don’t slow down. Don’t trust anyone.” Neil didn’t regret failing, though, even with a sickening ache pulsing in his chest.

The drive to the airport was too short. When Andrew slipped into a parking space in the shadowy garage and shut the engine off, Neil felt like he was shaking so badly he’d crumble as soon as he tried to move.

“Well?” Andrew prompted.

“Backseat?”

They moved to the back of the car. Neil shoved his bag to the floor and pulled the door shut behind him. Andrew knelt on the other seat with the door open, waiting for him to get situated. The towel scrunched under Neil’s backside as he worked his jeans down his legs. With his jeans bunched around one ankle, he inched over to balance on the edge of the seat and tried to make enough room for Andrew between his knees. The door handle dug into his back and his neck was at an awkward angle, but he kept his complaints to himself. Andrew didn’t say anything either as he bit down just a few inches above Neil’s knee.

Neil turned his head to stare out into the dim parking garage. Slivers of light reflected in the sleek bodies of parked cars; shadows pooled under bumpers and behind windshields. He listened to the wet sounds of Andrew’s mouth, savored the soft warmth of Andrew’s hands and tongue.
He selfishly hoped that their deal could be remade when he returned, that Andrew wouldn’t turn him away when he discovered Neil’s deceit. It wouldn’t feel like home anymore if he wasn’t allowed back in Andrew’s little family. Neil hated himself for wanting too much, but there was no helping it.

Minutes later, Andrew licked his lips and then flattened his tongue over the wounds to seal them. He caught a stray drop of blood with his thumb and sucked it off before gracefully climbing back out of the car.

Neil took a moment to poke at the small, red marks left by Andrew’s fangs just to feel the dull echo of what could have been pain if Andrew had applied more force. Even angry, even free from his promise to keep Neil from harm, Andrew’s restraint was unfailing.

Andrew stood outside the car until Neil got dressed and stepped out, bag slung over his shoulder. “You forgot your towel,” he said coldly.

“I’ll get it when I come back.”

Andrew tilted his head; Neil wondered if he was listening for signs of a lie. He’d explain when he got back, a silent promise he made to himself.

A few moments passed in strange silence before Andrew turned to get back into the driver’s seat.

“Hey, Andrew?”

With one foot in the car, Andrew paused and asked, “What now?”

“Thanks.”

Andrew looked at him finally and Neil tried to engrave this memory of him into his mind. Eyes clear, cheeks painted a healthy pink, lips reddened.

“Thanks for what?” Andrew asked.

Neil swallowed thickly. He wanted to thank Andrew for all sorts of things: for anchoring him, trusting him, letting him stay. “Just… thanks.”

Andrew blinked and then slid into his seat, slamming the door shut behind him. The engine roared to life as Neil headed for the elevator. He listened to the sound of Andrew’s car speeding away with his heavy heart sagging in his chest.

Inside the airport, the air was fraught with frenzied energy. Travelers rushed to and fro, wheeled luggage dragging behind them over the polished floor. Electronic signs were crammed with rows of information, each one vital to different people. Announcements came on the overhead speakers every few minutes. “Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please...” Each airport looked different, but they all felt the same.

He checked in, handed over his fake ID, and then headed towards the lines for the security checkpoint at his terminal. It was all routine. Pockets emptied, shoes removed, everything laid out on the conveyor belt before he stepped through the metal detector. Pockets stuffed, feet stuffed into his shoes, bag and coat retrieved. Then, he was on his way to his gate.

In a seat by the wall of windows, he waited for his flight and tried to ignore the panic curdling in his blood. His mother taught him how to run away from danger, yet there he was, heading straight toward it. Half of him was itching to flee, the other half was startlingly calm. He was doing this for
Andrew, for the Foxes, for his *family*.

He’d walk through hell if it meant keeping them safe.

Confident that he was doing the right thing, Neil was at peace by the time he boarded the plane. After take-off, he managed to catch a few minutes of sleep here and there, which made the short flight feel even shorter. Soon enough, he was back on his feet and packed into a slow-shuffling line of people in the aisle; everyone was impatient to get out of the stuffy plane and on with their lives.

When he saw Jean waiting for him just beyond the gate, the reality of his situation slammed into him so hard it nearly knocked him off his feet. He was going to the Ravens’ Nest and he couldn’t even remember how long he agreed to stay there.

“You are a fool for coming here,” Jean told him, voice bored and faintly accented.

Neil swallowed back bile. “Riko let you off your leash for the evening?”

“You will follow me and you will not speak.”

“I’ll let you pick one of those, but you can’t have both,” Neil shot back.

Without bothering to respond, Jean walked away from him. Neil adjusted the strap of his bag and followed the Raven backliner through the airport. They passed gift shops, cut through a small food court, and took an escalator down to the entrance of the parking garage.

Jean led him to a black car that looked just as expensive as Andrew’s and ordered him to get in. Neil slumped into the passenger seat and stuffed his bag down into the footwell. He tilted his seat back and put his feet on the dash just to see if he could get a reaction, but Jean maneuvered the car out of the space without a single glance in Neil’s direction. His indifference was almost as impressive as Andrew’s.

After Jean paid the fee for parking, he followed the giant arrows on the pavement away from the airport. Neil waited until Jean was trying to merge into the lane heading toward the northbound freeway to say, “You know, if you want to make a run for it, I could give you a few pointers.”

Jean grit his teeth and said nothing.

“I’m serious. You could head to Canada. You already speak French, that’s a good start. With some cover-up to hide that tattoo and some hair dye, you’d be on your way to a new life in no time.”

Jean’s cheek twitched. “There is a saying: ‘silence is golden.’ Are you familiar with it?”

Neil shrugged. “‘Grass is always greener on the other side,’ ‘birds of a feather flock together,’ ‘a picture’s worth a thousand words.’ There are all sorts of sayings.”

“You are more educated than I expected. How remarkable,” Jean drawled.

The insult didn’t faze him. He put on a sharp grin and said, “You hear the one about bad apples?”

Jean sighed in annoyance and pressed down on the accelerator to finally merge onto the freeway.

“Riko’s out of control and he’s going to take the rest of you down with him,” said Neil. “Why not jump ship while you still can?”

“If your mother had not *jumped ship*, perhaps you would not be so far behind.”
Something cruel uncurled in Neil’s chest. “Do you ever wish your parents loved you enough to fight for you?”

“I once wished for a house made of peanut brittle, but life is not a fairy tale. If you are done babbling like a child, I will tell you how you are to behave at the Nest.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Let me guess: I will do as I’m told, speak when spoken to, and kiss Riko’s megalomaniacal ass.”

“No quite as dumb as you look.”

“High praise coming from you.”

Jean tilted his chin up and sped up to weave through a denser section of traffic. “For the duration of your stay at Castle Evermore, you and I will be partners. My success will be your success, your failure will be my failure. You mentioned bad apples before- I will not let you spoil things with your arrogance or your inexperience. You will work hard, you will keep up with the rest of us, and you will keep your mouth shut.”

For a moment, Neil’s chest was ablaze with indignation. He struggled to keep his next words cool. “Must be tough, being saddled with an amateur after years of being trained by the best. I’d be pissed if I were you.”

Jean didn’t react.

“I get it, though,” said Neil, shifting in his seat. “You do what you’re told, right? Can’t fight that good old fashioned brainwashing.”

Nothing. Not even a twitch.

“There’s something I’ve been wondering about,” Neil went on. “Is Kevin still first in line to get turned by Riko or is that honor all yours now?”

Jean scoffed. “Is that really the best you can come up with?”

“I’ll come up with something better later,” Neil replied dryly. “I’m shy around strangers.”

“Clearly.”

Neil glanced out the window as Jean exited the freeway. The darkness was softened by streetlights reflecting off the thin layer of snow. He asked, “How often does Riko feed off you?”

“You’ll see.”

Neil tried to anchor himself in the heat of his anger, but fear snuffed out the flame. Rationally, he knew that Riko probably wouldn’t kill him since he wanted Neil to be part of his inner circle. He didn’t think Riko would try to turn him either- he needed his father’s permission to do that, which he wouldn’t get for someone like Neil. There was still plenty Riko could do to him, though, and living could hurt like hell.

Suddenly, he wished someone other than Kevin knew where he was going. Kevin wouldn’t say a thing if Neil was never heard from again. Neil really was on his own.

As Jean pulled up to a pair of iron gates, Neil tried to mentally calculate how much more blood he could stand to lose without suffering unfortunate side effects. He didn’t like the answer he came up
with. Andrew had taken plenty, but at least he was taken care of for now.

Jean parked in a neat row of identical black cars with license plates all starting with “EA” followed by four numbers. There was an empty gap where Kevin’s should have been.

With his stomach in knots, Neil slung his bag over his shoulder and followed Jean towards Castle Evermore, a glowering black shape that blotted out the faint campus lights behind it and the starlight overhead. Jean punched in a code to let them in the side door and said, “Enjoy your last breath of fresh air.”

“I’m good, thanks,” Neil mumbled.

Jean paused in the doorway to the stairwell, backlit by harsh fluorescents. “My help or your pride, choose wisely.”

Neil stared back at him, stubbornly silent.

“You will make a bad situation worse,” Jean warned.

“I won’t be here that long. A week or two, tops.”

Jean shook his head. “For you, it will be much longer.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I hope your pride is a good companion,” Jean sneered. “Come with me. He is waiting.”

Neil took a deep breath and followed Jean inside, letting the door slam shut behind them. The stairs descended steeply to another door, which required another code. Jean punched in the sequence of numbers too quickly for Neil to catch, and then he pushed through the door into a hallway.

A chill rolled down Neil’s spine.

This was the Nest.

The ceiling, the walls, and the carpet were the same Raven black. The rare splashes of color were all blood-red. Jean took him past a roomy lounge with pool tables and a bar, three dens with flatscreen televisions and matching furniture, and a couple of kitchens with gleaming stainless steel appliances. Beyond the social quarters, there was a weight room and a long corridor leading to the Ravens’ rooms. Neil looked down Black Hall and Red Hall without being able to tell the difference between them.

“You’ll be in Black,” Jean told him, motioning him to keep following.

The bedroom doors were left open and Neil couldn’t help peering inside. Each one was as large as the suite Neil shared with Matt, but there were only two beds and two desks in each. Neil noted the black sheets pulled taut over the beds, black shelves, black tile floors, black bath towels draped over rods on either side of the private bathroom doors. Only the first five rooms in Black Hall showed signs of being lived in. The empty ones were downright eerie; the shadows were menacing and oppressive. Neil shivered, clutching the strap of his bag tighter. The thought of Jean and Kevin growing up down here made him feel sick.

“In here,” Jean said, stopping outside the room at the far end of the hall.

“Am I rooming with someone?” Neil wasn’t sure he wanted to know.
“Guess.”

He narrowed his eyes at Jean before stepping through the doorway and looking over the room. There were postcards and letters taped to the walls above both beds. Neil walked up to the one on the right to get a closer look and saw pictures of faraway cities and fan letters addressed to Kevin Day.

Neil recoiled, lip curling with disgust. “Has anyone told Riko that Kevin’s not coming back?”

“Kevin knows his place.”

Neil scoffed. “Yeah, well, I’m not rooming with Riko. I’d rather sleep outside.”

“You require close supervision,” Jean said, as if he were reciting from a script. “The master has placed you in Riko’s capable hands.”

Neil couldn’t think of anything to say except, “Fuck you.”

Jean looked at him blankly. “Put your bag down. In the bathroom, you will find what you need.”

“Cyanide capsule?” Neil sneered.

“You need a shower.”

“I already showered today.”

“You stink. Shower,” Jean ordered, pointing to the door at the back of the room. “You have twenty minutes.”

“Or what?” Neil challenged.

Jean gave him an unimpressed look. “Bend or he will break you.”

They stared at one another until Neil made up his mind. He needed to survive Riko, not beat him. Bending was the wiser move even if his temper railed against it.

Neil climbed into the shower and scrubbed himself clean as quickly as he could, feeling on edge and vulnerable. Then, he grabbed a black towel from the cupboard under the sink and roughly dried off. Ignoring the pile of black clothing on the toilet lid, he put his own stuff back on and stepped out into the room.

Jean was leaning against the closed door with his eyes cast down. Riko was in his desk chair with one leg crossed elegantly over the other and a frown tugging at his mouth.

“You aren’t wearing what I gave you,” he said. “You will dress like one of us while you are our guest. Go change.”

Neil inhaled slowly and bit back his retort. Instead of arguing, he went back to the bathroom and dressed himself in the black outfit Riko had left for him. Just survive, he told himself. Get through this and go home.

He knew it’d be easier said than done.
After Neil’s first practice with the Ravens, he was in Riko’s hands once more. His skin stung from the shallow scratches Riko made over his chest after he first arrived and the bruises Coach Moriyama gave him with his cane throbbed between his shoulder blades. So far his temper had got the better of him twice, and twice he’d been punished for it.

“Hold onto the headboard,” Riko commanded lazily, rooting through a black satchel by Neil’s bare feet on the bed.

Neil sighed and obeyed reluctantly. Jean hurried forward without prompting to cuff Neil’s wrists to the top of the slatted wooden headboard; he refused to meet Neil’s eyes.

“You must be awfully attached to the mutt,” Riko mused. Neil could hear him pull something from the satchel, but he stubbornly refused to look. “I find it curious how a thing like Andrew manages to inspire such devotion.”

Riko’s weight settled over Neil’s legs. The sharp tip of a blade nudged Neil’s shirt up. He couldn’t help the way his entire body tensed as it dragged his hem upward to expose his stomach.

“Oh my,” Riko murmured. “Someone got here before me.”

Neil inhaled slowly and held the breath in his lungs for a few beats before releasing it. There was nothing he could do to stop whatever Riko had planned, no fighting to be done, so he tried to force himself to relax.

“You’ve been through so much already, Nathaniel,” Riko went on. “Yet, here you are, offering yourself up for more. Is Andrew really worth it?”
The sound of Andrew’s name coming from Riko’s mouth made him grit his teeth. His fists clenched above his head so hard that his fingernails bit into his palms.

“Don’t be embarrassed. You’re not the only one to go to great lengths for Andrew, and you’re certainly not the first to pay for it.”

Stubbornly, Neil glared at the ceiling and tried not to wince too much when the blade pressed into his flesh. There was painful pressure for a few seconds, and then came the sharper sting as the blade broke through. Riko dragged it sideways slowly to make a shallow cut under his navel. Neil sucked a sharp breath through his teeth and reminded himself that he’d been through much worse, that this was nothing compared to what he’d survived before.

Riko gave a bored sigh and pulled the blade away. “So quiet. I thought you’d at least put up a fight.”

Neil swallowed back every poisonous word he had out of spite. The blade dug into his flesh again, this time scraping roughly against the thin skin over his hipbone.

“You seem so meek,” Riko commented, “like a little lamb. All for a monster, what a waste.”

Fury lit his veins like fuses, sparks chewed their way up to his explosive heart.

“He’s not a monster, you are,” Neil snarled, so roughly his throat burned.

The blade flicked to the left, slicing his skin open.

Riko replied evenly, “What else would you call a man who killed his own family? His brother loved him so dearly and he was slaughtered for it- not that anything could be proven, of course, but rumors of a psychotic break and the poor man’s disappearance add up to murder in my mind.”

Neil lifted his head, tugging at the cuffs. “What the hell are you talking about? Aaron isn’t-”

“Ah,” Riko chuckled. “No, the other twin is safe and sound. I was referring to one of Andrew’s other brothers. Drake Spear. Has Andrew not mentioned him?”

The heat of Neil’s anger dimmed, overtaken by a slow-growing cold horror. Riko moved the blade to the center of Neil’s abdomen and cut a thin line up towards his chest. Hissing at the hot sting of it, Neil dropped his head to the pillow and forced himself to breathe. Desperately, he tried not to think about how the cuts were slow and precise like the ones his father had given him. “Pay close attention, Junior.” He could feel drops of blood sliding over his skin to drip onto the black sheets, which would hide the stains perfectly.

“I don’t appreciate people ruining my plans, Nathaniel,” Riko said slowly. He made another cut running parallel to the last, digging deeper until a strangled noise got caught in Neil’s throat. “Andrew has ruined quite a few. I had a place all ready for him here, you know. It was going to be perfect, and he told me to go fuck myself when I made my generous offer.”

The pain was growing and splintering through him. Neil yanked at the cuffs, unable to hold still any longer. The metal scraped his wrists and made his joints ache.

“I had a back-up plan, though. Even a man like Andrew has strings to pull.”

Neil clenched his eyes shut. The third cut was the deepest one yet and it set his skin on fire. Pain pulsed through him like a fever.
“It was simple, really,” Riko told him smugly. “A few phone calls, a couple bribes, and I discovered a couple odd complaints about the Spear residence that never went anywhere. When I called Drake to ask him about his younger foster brother, he spoke so fondly of him that it was no surprise when he jumped at the chance to come visit him. I may have lied a little about Andrew being here, but what harm is a tiny lie in the grand scheme of things?”

“I don’t need your autobiography,” Neil snapped. “You turned Drake, didn’t you? And then you set him loose as some sort of sick revenge. You’re really fucked up, you know that? No wonder Kevin left.”

Riko clucked his tongue and poked the tip of the knife into the deepest cut. “Hush, Nathaniel. Mind your manners.”

“I’m gonna shove that knife up your ass.”

“Temper, temper,” Riko said warningly. The next three cuts came as quick slashes across his ribs. “Drake had no patience either. I should have turned someone more reliable to help me.”

The words shocked Neil into stillness.

Riko climbed off of him and came to stand by his bedside so he could look at his face. Helplessly, Neil stared up at him and watched his slow, self-satisfied grin bloom.

“He was supposed to turn Aaron first,” Riko whispered conspiratorially. “It would have been perfect: a frightened new vampire compelled to come tour our facilities. The master would have seen the advantage in keeping him. Aaron would have had to accept our generous offer to become a Raven and Andrew would have done the same if it meant staying with his brother. Their high school coach said they were inseparable.”

He brushed the flat edge of the blade across Neil’s mouth, painting his lips with his own blood. Neil’s throat convulsed, but he refused to open his mouth to scream.

“I could have had them both, a matching set.” Riko sighed and nudged the blade tighter into the seam of Neil’s lips. “If only Drake hadn’t given himself over to base instincts and ruined it. Some sloppiness is to be expected with new vampires, of course, but I thought a marine would know how to follow orders.”

Neil wanted to vomit. His coppery blood oozed around the metal pushing past his lips, and the horrifying thought of what could have happened to the Minyard brothers was stuck in his mind. He knew that Riko was right: Andrew would have done anything to protect Aaron, even walk into the Nest.

“I will admit I made one mistake,” Riko said, watching Neil fight to keep his lips shut with a sadistic glint in his eyes. He was slowing his words on purpose to draw this out- Neil would have bet anything on it. “I put too much faith in Drake’s self-control: he was only supposed to deliver Aaron to me and wait for further instructions. I led him to believe he’d get to turn and keep Andrew as a reward, but naturally I planned to dispose of him once he fulfilled his purpose. Seeing his little brother again must have made him… overeager.”

Bile rushed up into Neil’s throat and he forcibly swallowed it down. He thought back to all his father’s sharp tools on the basement wall and how satisfying it would be to cut Riko to pieces. He fantasized about watching Riko’s corpse burn. Finally, the knife was pulled away from his mouth.

“Oh, well.” Riko held up the blade to look it over. “The Minyards were not meant to be mine.
There’s still a chance for you, though.”

“Get used to disappointment,” Neil grit out.

Riko only smirked before he decided where to cut Neil next.

After that, things got worse.

On edge and exhausted, Neil struggled to keep up at the next practice. After clean-up and a late meal with Jean, he was taken back to the dorm room and instructed to lay down once more. Somewhere between laying down and watching Jean fetch the handcuffs, Neil slipped into a shallow sleep—his body was too desperate for rest to wait any longer.

He was ripped back into wakefulness by his own scream of pain and Riko’s teeth digging into his bicep with bruising force. Riko sat back with a red-stained grin to watch Neil struggle; he wasn’t hungry, Neil realized through the wave of white-hot pain, he just wanted to see Neil suffer.

Neil hadn’t played as a backliner in years, but the Ravens didn’t care and they showed him no mercy. Riko’s criticism was sharper than Kevin’s had been back in the summer and his expectations were lead weights on Neil’s back. Jean kept Neil on his feet and tried to help him as best he could, if only to save his own skin; Neil was grateful regardless of Jean’s motivations.

Instead of bending to Riko’s wishes like he planned, he started lashing out during practices and resisting Riko’s orders, which earned him extra beatings. His foul temper was a stubborn thing that was unwilling to die and Neil lost all control of the scorched, ugly words that came pouring out of his mouth. He ignored Jean’s, “Just do what he wants. Keep silent, keep your eyes down,” until Jean was too exhausted to keep saying it. After practices, they cleaned the court together or did chores as punishment for Neil’s poor attitude. With a cold trickle of guilt, Neil noticed that Jean no longer bothered to hide his misery.

On the fifth night, Neil put his hands on the headboard without a fight and grit his teeth. Breathing was difficult, and struggling was out of the question when his whole body was throbbing painfully. His mother sometimes told him to split his focus and think of something besides the pain until the worst had passed, but he’d never been very good at it. Grimly, he thought, At least I’m getting a chance to practice.

Jean stood by his bedside and studied him while he tried to keep his breathing slow and even. He was the least of Neil’s problems, but his stare was still unnerving. Lying there under the weight of Jean’s somber gray eyes, Neil felt like he was awake at his own funeral, staring up at his only mourner.

“You should not have come here,” Jean whispered.

Neil’s mouth flattened into a shaky line before he whispered back, “I can handle this.”

The bedroom door opened and closed.

Jean gave him a long, pitying look and shook his head. Neil didn’t understand why until Riko stepped into view, holding Neil’s phone instead of a knife. Sharp words crammed into Neil’s throat, but he refused to speak because that was what Riko wanted.

Jean turned away and Neil hated himself for feeling abandoned because of it. Riko perched on the edge of the bed. Neil watched him open the phone and rub his thumb over the screen. It was password-protected, but that wasn’t comforting to Neil—especially when Riko started pressing buttons.
“I cannot decide if you are unimaginative or just too sentimental.” Riko showed Neil his phone’s screen once he got it unlocked. “Your mother’s birthday, tsk tsk. I’m sure she taught you better than that.”

In spite of Neil’s best efforts to keep calm, fear quickened his pulse.

“I’ve been thinking,” Riko said, voice velvet-soft and smug. “Your loyalty to Andrew Minyard runs so deep, but does it flow both ways?”

Neil felt cold all the way down to his bones. He couldn’t look away from Riko’s dark eyes.

“He takes good care of his things, doesn’t he?”

“I’m not one of his things,” Neil blurted out.

Riko tilted his head, eyes dancing with amusement. “Aren’t you?”

“No.”

“‘Curiosity killed the cat,’” Riko murmured as he pressed a few buttons on Neil’s phone. When the phone vibrated twice, a pleased smile stretched his mouth open to reveal the sharp points of his fangs. “‘But satisfaction brought it back.’”

Neil pulled hard at the metal cuffs around his wrists, rage burning brightly in his panicking heart. “What the fuck did you do, you piece of shit?”

Riko chuckled and showed him the screen again. Andrew’s name and number were at the top and two messages were shown under that day’s date.

From his own number, there was: @ bus station dwntown please help

Below it was Andrew’s reply: On my way

“I wonder how he and my hunter will get along,” Riko said with a low chuckle.

“You son of a bitch!” Neil roared, thrashing to get free. The metal cuffs gouged deep lines into his wrists; his feet slipped against the sheets trying to get leverage. “I’m going to kill you for this. I’m going to rip your fucking throat out!”

“Don’t be so upset, Nathaniel,” Riko said, lifting his voice to be heard over Neil’s shouting. “I kept my promise. My father will hear nothing of your little friend.”

Neil twisted onto his side, sore muscles forgotten, and slammed his knee up into Riko’s side. Riko grunted from the impact, but recovered quickly with an imperious tilt of his chin. Neil kept fighting, thinking if he could just get free, if he could just get to his phone...

Riko grabbed Neil’s hair and forced his head back, catching him with his eyes and hissing, “Be still.”

The effect was immediate: the words pinned Neil’s mind down and his body went limp. His arms hung slack in their restraints. His eyes were wide, unblinkingly, and locked on Riko’s.

“There, that’s better,” Riko cooed. “Just breathe, Nathaniel. It’ll be over soon.”

A noise twisted at the back of Neil’s tongue, but it couldn’t find its way out.
“Shh, you don’t want to disturb the others, do you?” Riko’s fingers stroked through Neil’s hair. “No, of course not.”

Neil’s brain felt cold and wrong. His thoughts were scattered, heavy, half-buried in clay. A lump of vomit got stuck in Neil’s throat. Without breaking eye contact, Riko handed something to Jean.

“What does our friend have to say?” Riko inquired.

Jean cleared his throat and said, “Mr. Proust says Andrew is there already.”

A bubble of hot fear surged upward, but Riko shushed Neil before he could even think of saying anything. Neil’s mind sank deeper into the inky, icy silence. Numbness started in his fingers and toes and climbed up his arms and legs until he could no longer feel his body. He was only aware of Riko’s eyes and the horrible nothingness enveloping him.

“Andrew won’t last long. Mr. Proust is very good at his job,” Riko whispered, like it was a secret passed between friends. “Jean, remind him to send a picture when he is done.”

No, Neil’s mind begged. The word fell like a penny down a well, echoing forever. No no no no…

All he wanted was to keep Andrew safe, to protect someone instead of run away, and he failed. Remorse turned his stomach to ash. If only he’d kept to himself, kept his head down and kept moving, then this wouldn’t have happened.

He’d never hated himself as much as he did then. He was too heavy to lean on Andrew, and he should’ve known better than to try. People like him weren’t made for homes and families— they slipped from one abandoned corner to another and tried not to leave fingerprints behind.

Riko was talking again, but Neil felt like he was underwater. The words were blurry—something about Andrew’s bite. Where did Andrew feed from? Neil felt his mouth moving, but he couldn’t hear his own voice. His mind flooded with the memory of his last moments with Andrew: the backseat, the chilly look in Andrew’s eyes, the towel he promised he’d get later.

His eyes were dry and heavy; they began to sting at the corners and water. Finally, Riko let him go and he drifted off into a gauzy half-sleep. There was an explosion of pain somewhere on Neil’s horizon, but he was too detached to care.

An eternity later, Jean said, “It’s done.”

Neil jerked awake with a pained whimper.

Riko took the phone from Jean with obvious glee. “It’s so satisfying to have loose ends taken care of. Here, Nathaniel, look.”

In the photo, Andrew’s body was a grainy lump on washed-out concrete. The flash of the phone’s camera glinted off the halo of blood around his stained hair. His armbands were missing—stolen by his killer, Neil guessed dimly. The pale skin of Andrew’s forearms showed bone-white between thick smears of blood. In the end, all his knives and all his strength failed him.

Andrew was dead.

Riko pursed his lips and wiped the outer corner of Neil’s eye with his fingertip. Then, he showed Neil the shiny wetness: a wobbly teardrop. The grief cracking Neil’s ribs was smothered by Riko’s stare until Neil was only aware of the fact that he should have been screaming, should have been in pain.
But there was nothing.

Andrew was dead and Neil couldn’t feel a thing.

Riko’s voice filled the empty chasm in his mind. “You’re all mine now.”

Dark shadows wrapped around him and hours slipped by.

After that, he was vaguely aware of burning pinpricks on his cheekbone, wet hands scrubbing soap through his hair, flashes of hot pain across his stomach and chest and legs, and cold bathroom tiles. He couldn’t move or cry out, which didn’t matter, really. Neil knew, even crushed under the black glacier crawling over his mind, that he deserved this.

“You brought this on yourself,” Riko told him.

He brought this on himself.

The ceiling swam back into view as he blinked. His pain was a far-off forest fire, angrily burning towards him but still too far away to feel.

He didn’t know what time it was anymore.

“You’re tired.”

He was tired.

“You will sleep now, Nathaniel. When you wake, I have some papers for you to sign. We’ll make everything official.”

Neil closed his eyes and he slept deeply.

He dreamed of Andrew: strong hands, hard eyes, smoky voice. The words he spoke to Neil blurred together, which brought frustrated tears to Neil’s eyes. Dreamed words from a ghost in his head were his only comfort when somewhere out in the real world Andrew’s body was going cold.

“Andrew,” he said, his tongue thick and clumsy. “Andrew, I’m so sorry.”

Apologies wouldn’t have impressed the real Andrew. Words didn’t mean anything to a man scarred by the sharp edges of broken promises, but Neil still couldn’t stop the words from spilling out of his stupid mouth.

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

In the shadows of his dream, he was heavy and suspended above the ground. Some old fearful voice in his mind told him he’d fall soon and part of him just wanted to get it over with. He squirmed to free himself, but something was caging him in as he went higher and higher.

His eyes cracked open to see the black walls of the Nest, and then Riko’s voice cut into his brain. “It’s not time to wake up.”

Neil obediently fell asleep again, falling out of the dream’s reach.

Some time later, his eyes peeled open and he saw Jean standing over his bed, telling him to get up.

The Raven routine started all over again.
Every detail was in sharp focus- the kitchen, the locker room, the court- but Neil’s mind was quiet and disconnected. The food was tasteless, the chatter in the locker room seemed to fall short of his ears, and Exy practice made his body as exhausted as his mind.

Neil felt like he was wading through molasses. He couldn’t make his limbs move correctly and he couldn’t make himself care- not even when the master stepped onto the court to punish him. As always, Jean propped him up and forced him to keep going. This time, Neil did what Jean told him to do- pack up the gear, shower, go to the kitchen- and didn’t think too much about it. It was easy, following Jean’s directions. He didn’t have enough energy left to think for himself.

Nothing really mattered anyway.

Andrew was dead and it was his fault.

That night, Riko scratched burning lines into Neil’s stomach and Neil realized the pain was the only thing that felt real. The jagged pieces of his heart dug into his lungs while the blade dragged over his skin.

Riko laughed and called himself a king.

Neil was asleep before Jean got the cuffs off him.

The dreams that came to him were soothing like cool water pouring over a burn. He dreamed of the parking lot outside Wymack’s apartment complex: the air was cold on his face, but his heart was warmed by the sight of it.

He dreamed of the couch he’d slept on for a few weeks at the start of summer; he dreamed of Andrew the way he was the last time Neil saw him alive, clear-eyed and calm.

“You need to wake up,”

The sound of Andrew’s voice flooded his hollow chest with bittersweet longing. Vague shapes moved behind Andrew’s head, but Neil couldn’t look away from his face.

“You need to wake up,” Andrew said.

“You need to wake up,” Jean snapped.

Neil jolted awake, breathless and crushed to find himself still in the Nest, surrounded by black walls with a black pillow under his sore cheek. Groaning, he dragged his battered body out of bed and shuffled toward the bathroom to start another bleak day. On the way, his eyes slipped shut without him realizing it. He bumped into the wall in two places before Jean sighed heavily behind him and guided him with surprisingly gentle hands.

His grief weighed him down like stones in his pockets.

After breakfast, the Ravens filed onto the court for practice. No one batted an eye at Neil’s scarred, bruised, and bandaged body anymore as he changed into his gear. Neil no longer cared about the name on the back of his jersey or the fact that it was the wrong color.

He missed sunlight as he trudged out to the inner court next to Jean. He missed the brilliant orange of the Foxhole Court. He missed his home and his family and Andrew. The thought clogged his throat with aching sorrow.

Neil couldn’t remember how long he’d been at the Nest or how long he had left. Maybe he’d never
get out. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing. Down here, he could pretend Andrew was still alive somewhere. If he returned to Palmetto State, he’d have to stare at the empty space Andrew left behind and figure out how to keep moving.

In the Nest, things were starting to feel normal, which would have been alarming if Neil still had enough energy to care. The Ravens no longer watched him like an outsider. Neil no longer needed Jean to tell him where to go or what to do; he fell in sync with the others as if it were second nature.

The pain of practices and punishments was brutal, but it no longer came as a surprise. He gave up on fighting and let himself break under the master’s cane or Riko’s knives. His mind went dark faster and faster, tumbling down into dreams of dappled light and dizzying colors.

He blinked and saw hazel eyes staring back at him.

“Andrew,” he murmured. His mouth felt glued shut.

“Wake up, Neil.”

Neil’s heart twisted. He didn’t want to leave. “No.”

“Neil-”

“M sorry,” he said, unable to stop it from spilling out. “I’m so sorry, Andrew. I didn’t know. I should’ve-”

Andrew leaned closer, so close Neil could almost imagine the cigarette smoke clinging to his clothing. “Neil, listen to me-”

“Nathaniel, it’s time to wake up,” Jean’s voice dug into his brain like a hook and tugged him away from Andrew.

Neil struggled against it, trying to stay in the dream, but it was useless.

“Nathaniel,” Jean repeated.

Neil rolled away from him, hiding his face against the warm, soft wall. His heart beat unevenly, bouncing off Neil’s ribs. His stomach felt sick and hollow. A sudden chill overtook his skin. He could still hear Andrew’s voice in his ears, saying, “Neil, stop it.”

Blinding, white-hot pain crackled over Neil’s brain like lightning, shocking the breath from his lungs. His chest seized and then he sucked in a ragged gasp.

“Nathaniel,” Jean said impatiently.

Neil’s bones felt brittle and cold. Everything ached. His stomach was full of black seawater, his head was full of sun-baked desert sand. His heart hung between extremes, between worlds.

Frantic and afraid, Neil rolled over to beg Jean for help, but the bed ended suddenly and he toppled onto the floor. His head smacked into the sharp edge of a coffee table on his way down, which was as confusing as it was painful.

There wasn’t a coffee table in Riko’s room.

Or, at least, there shouldn’t have been.

Jean stood next to the coffee table like it was normal. “Get up,” he commanded. “You’re making us
late.”

Neil couldn’t get his mouth to work. Shaking, he pushed up onto his hands and knees and then grabbed the edge of the bed to pull himself to his feet. His knees wobbled and then buckled. He was falling, falling, and then-

He jerked awake in the dorm bed with Riko and Jean standing over him. The coffee table was gone and everything looked back to normal again.

“Finally up?” Riko asked with a grin. “You’re not getting enough sleep at night, Nathaniel. You keep dropping off on me, ruining my fun.”

“Go f-fuck yourself,” Neil muttered, shivering just like he had in the dream. He couldn’t tell if there were any blankets on the bed. Everything was freezing.

“Grieving for the Minyard mutt won’t do you any good,” said Riko. “With him out of the way, Kevin will come home and we’ll all be together just like we should’ve been all along. Everything will be perfect.”

Neil clenched his hand, imagining the weight of a handgun. His heart pulsed thickly behind his eyes.

Riko sighed heavily. “Get him up, Jean. It’s time for practice.”

Jean leaned down to grab Neil’s arms and pulled him upright.

“How long have I been here?” Neil croaked.

Jean didn’t answer.

The days blurred together. Every morning over breakfast, Neil listened to the Ravens have the same conversation about pro teams. The girl with cropped dark hair wanted to sign with the New York City Wasps. The guy with the large, squarish forehead had already been contacted by the Los Angeles Vipers. Jean said the only thing that mattered was making it to US Court.

Neil had the conversation memorized and he was sure they were repeating it on purpose to mess with him.

Practices were equally repetitive. They were brutal, but boring. Neil made the same mistakes during precision drills. Riko’s team always won by three points during scrimmages. Every day, Jean said, “Wake up and move your useless ass. You’ll sleep when you’re dead.”

Drained of energy and willpower, Neil shut off his mind and let muscle memory carry him through the days. On autopilot, time passed more quickly, but each night, as Jean mopped up Neil’s blood and slapped gauze over the shallow cuts, Neil noticed there were growing holes in his memory. He couldn’t remember if he ate lunch or if he showered. He felt the stinging aftermath of Riko’s torture, but had no memory of the torture itself.

Neil blinked and found himself at breakfast, staring down at a plate of eggs.

“If I had my pick, I’d go with the Wasps,” said the girl with the cropped hair.

Neil couldn’t remember if it was Saturday or Wednesday. He couldn’t even remember why it mattered. The Raven machine ran on its own time.
“The Wasps are a joke,” said the guy with the big forehead. “I’m gonna drop out and go to LA as soon as I can.”

Neil looked up from his runny eggs. There were only three Ravens with him at the long table. Narrowing his eyes, he searched the room for the rest of the team, but there was no sign of anyone else.

“US Court is the only team that matters,” said Jean.

“Where is everyone?” Neil asked.

Three sets of eyes blinked back at him. Neil’s head felt like a lead weight. He drooped forward and jerked himself back upright, blinking rapidly. His pulse raced, heart galloping hard and hot in his chest. His stomach filled with acid. Spots danced across his vision as he slumped forward bonelessly.

“Get up, Nathaniel.”

Jean pulled him back up and suddenly the table around him was full of Ravens. Conversation buzzed in Neil’s ears, the smell of steaming eggs and oatmeal and toast filled his nose. He could finally smell the pepper on his fried eggs and the butter melting on his slice of toast. His stomach gurgled with hunger. His skin felt stretched thin over his bones.

“Neil.”

The sharp voice cut through the rest of the noise. Neil lifted his eyes and jerked back in shock when he saw a familiar man with blond hair, hazel eyes, and a disdainful downward slant to his mouth. The Ravens didn’t seem to notice Aaron sitting there.

“Aaron,” Neil whispered frantically, leaning over the table. “When did you get here?”

Aaron squinted at him and cocked his head. “I’ve been here for days.”

“You’re insane,” Neil hissed. “Get the fuck out of here.”

The Ravens finally fell quiet and turned to stare. A cold smile pulled at Aaron’s mouth and that’s when Neil saw his fangs. Horror sucked the air out of his lungs. Andrew was dead and the brother he swore to protect had been turned.

“No,” Neil said.

“Noel—”

“I’m gonna be sick,” he mumbled. His stomach clenched painfully and hot bile rushed up into his throat. He turned away from the table and vomited. Someone shoved a plastic-lined wastebasket under his head and dug their fingers into his hair while he retched.

“Jesus,” a gruff voice said. “Is that a good sign or a bad sign? I can’t tell anymore.”

Neil’s stomach spasmed hard, trying to purge itself of food that wasn’t there. He sucked in ragged gasps of air between bouts of dry-heaving. The hand in his hair held him steady until his body settled enough for him to breathe.

“Wake Abby up,” said a second voice.

The sour taste of vomit stung Neil’s mouth and burned high in his nose. He worked up enough
saliva to spit into the wastebasket before he struggled to sit up. Two hands pushed at Neil’s shoulders to help him.

“Easy,” warned the second voice.

His body was twisted across a couch, tangled in a blanket and grimy with stale sweat. Searing pain burned brightly across his inner thigh and his sides, where he could feel stitches pulling as he shifted. Blinking, he saw that he was in a living room lit by dingy lamps and littered with paperwork and coffee mugs. He could smell cigarette smoke and coffee.

Through the fog in his brain, he recognized it as Wymack’s apartment.

Finally, he looked at the person who had held him steady, the owner of the second voice. They sat on the coffee table in front of him. Neil took in the black clothes, the blond hair, and his foolish spike of hope was suddenly squashed by the memory of Andrew’s body in a pool of blood. The pain was too big for his chest; Neil was sure his bones would break to make more room for it. Heat stung his eyes and his throat clamped shut.

“If you’re going to throw up again, do it in the trash can.”

“Aaron, let me go,” Neil begged. He couldn’t look at him anymore, but the grip on his shoulder was too strong to pull back from. The man in front of him sneered. “Wrong twin.”

The whole world jerked to a halt.

“What?”

“Your breath stinks.” An orange prescription bottle of Tic Tacs rattled in his face.

Neil’s heart fell into his stomach. “Andrew?”

“Not too brain damaged, then.”

“But you’re-” Neil floundered in his cold shock. All of his memories were flat and flimsy. He couldn’t tell them apart from the dreams. He couldn’t remember how many days he’d spent in the Nest. It was all an excruciating blur. His breathing quickened and a dull ache pulsed across his midsection. He clenched his teeth and tried to hold himself still.

“I’m what?” Andrew asked.

Neil’s throat squeezed. “You were dead. I saw... Riko had a picture. You were dead.”

It couldn’t be real. Andrew couldn’t be alive, not really, not when Neil felt the loss of him rooted deeply in his bones. No, this was a mind game or madness. This was Riko stretching his torment as far as it could go.

“Neil, you’re hyperventilating.”

Neil jerked away from Andrew’s reaching hand, the movement made pain flare up all over. “Get away from me. You’re not real.” Panic was unspooling in his head and unfurling through his veins. Riko was doing this. Riko was in his head, controlling him, controlling Andrew-

Andrew grabbed Neil’s chin and forced him to meet his hard stare. “Calm down.”
Air was trapped in Neil’s lungs; he couldn’t breathe or think. He shook his head, babbling, “No, no, this isn’t- Riko’s- I can’t-”

“Here,” Andrew bit out, grabbing two of Neil’s fingers and pulling them up to his pale hair. “Do I feel dead to you?”

Neil went still. Andrew’s hair was soft and slightly coarse beneath his fingertips. In spite of the ache pulsating through his arm, he slid his fingers deeper into Andrew’s hair and then lightly traced the shell of his ear. The bands around his lungs finally loosened.

“Andrew,” he murmured.

“Yeah.”

“You’re not dead.” As he spoke the words, his grief began to wither and fade. Andrew was alive. He was safe. There was no reason to mourn anymore.

“I’m not dead,” Andrew confirmed. His eyes darted away from Neil’s face and his expression twisted into something angry. “Give us a minute.”

Neil couldn’t look away from him.

“Andrew, I need to-” Abby started.

“Another minute won’t kill him,” Andrew snapped. Neil could feel the tremor that went through him.

There was a sigh before Wymack said, “One minute. Come on, Abby. Let’s get you some coffee.”

Andrew finally relaxed, so Neil figured Wymack and Abby were out of sight. When Andrew looked back at him, Neil said, “The photo. How…”

“Lying in a pool of blood for a photo isn’t all that hard- even you could figure it out.”

The pain in Neil’s arm was too much to bear, so he lowered his hand with a wince. Andrew was silent while Neil’s sluggish mind tried to make sense of what Andrew said. He must’ve been laying in the hunter’s blood- where was the hunter’s body? What did Andrew do?

Belatedly, he realized Andrew couldn’t have taken the photo himself.

“I don’t understand,” he grumbled, frowning deeply.

“We’ll talk later,” Andrew told him. “You have things to explain, too.”

A wave of guilt washed over him. “Andrew, I’m-”

“Don’t. Our minute’s almost up.” Andrew stood up and went to the kitchen.

After a quick conversation that was too quiet for Neil to make out, Abby and Wymack came out into the front room. Neil caught a glimpse of Andrew as before he disappeared down the hallway. He tried to sit up, anxious now that Andrew was out of sight, but Abby gently pushed his shoulder until he was flat on his back.

“Careful or you’ll hurt yourself,” she said gently. “Let’s have a look at you. You’re a mess.”

“Now that you’re awake you can tell us just what in the hell you were doing in that godforsaken
place,“ Wymack said harshly.

Neil opened his mouth to protest as Abby lifted his t-shirt with a gloved hand to examine his abdomen, but a glance down made him realize that most of his skin was covered in gauze and tape.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Abby asked, watching him closely.

He remembered lots of things, but he was only sure half of them had actually happened. “What day is it?”

“The twenty-sixth,” said Wymack. “You slept through Christmas.”

“You’ve been sleeping on and off for a few days, but you’ve been really out of it,” Abby elaborated while she worked on checking and re-dressing the wounds on his abdomen. “Do you remember Andrew bringing you here?”

Neil lifted his head to frown at him. “Andrew brought me here?”

“I guess that’s a no,” Wymack grumbled.

“How did he get me out?” All Neil had was empty spaces where that memory should have been.

Wymack arched an eyebrow. “Questions can wait. We’ve got more than a few of our own especially about—” he gestured to Neil’s face—“your new look.”

Neil’s lungs seized in alarm. He couldn’t remember wearing his contacts at the Nest.

“Breathe, Neil,” Abby said. “Just lie back and rest, okay? The other stuff can wait a bit longer.”

“I need to talk to Andrew.” Neil needed to see him again, to reassure his shredded mind that Andrew was still alive. He needed answers.

“After Abby’s done,” Wymack told him. “I’m sure he’s got questions for you, too.”

“Why don’t you go check on him, David?” Abby suggested pointedly.

Wymack yawned, nodded, and ambled down the hallway. Once he was gone, Abby began tending to the grotesque round bruise on Neil’s bicep, marked with two holes from Riko’s fangs. As she cleaned it, it throbbed hotly and burning curls of pain skittered from his shoulder to his elbow. The bruising was deep; Neil could only imagine how horrific it looked. Without a word, Abby taped some gauze over it, and then rolled up one leg of Neil’s loose basketball shorts to check the painful wound on his thigh.

Neil kept his eyes pinned to the ceiling and begged his blearily mind to stay awake, to stay at Wymack’s apartment, even though pain pulsated through every inch of him. He shuddered at the thought of slipping back into the nightmare waiting for him.

“Only a few cuts were deep enough to need stitches,” Abby told him, her voice tight. “Andrew made me promise to wait until you were fully… you know, awake to take you to the hospital.”


“Fine,” she said as she did something that made the wound on his thigh flare up painfully. As he groaned quietly, she tugged the shorts back down and peeled her gloves off. “I’m going to level with you: you look like shit, Neil. First sign that something is seriously wrong, I’m taking you to the ER and you’re gonna keep your mouth shut unless it’s to thank me.”
Neil couldn’t answer through his clenched teeth, but he managed a small nod.

“All done for now. I got you some pills to help with the pain.” Abby gave the bottle a little shake and put it next to a water bottle on the coffee table, within Neil’s reach. As she helped Neil prop himself up on some pillows, she asked, “Do you want me to call Andrew back in here?”

“Yes, please,” Neil croaked.

She gave him a small, sad smile and a careful pat on his shoulder before going off to find the other two. Neil was left spinning in his foggy agony, alone. Sitting up helped somewhat, taking a drink of water helped more, but he still felt like his bones were frail as eggshells and his skin was brittle as a dead leaf. All he could do was breathe, sip water, and swallow hard whenever a wave of nausea climbed too high.

“Was San Francisco your idea or Riko’s?”

Andrew’s voice startled him; he hadn’t realized he’d closed his eyes. Now that Neil’s mind was slightly clearer, he drank in the sight of Andrew and let the relief smooth over the cracks in his heart like a balm. He stood at the other end of the couch, staring down at Neil with an unreadable expression and his arms folded tightly. Neil could barely make out faint stubble spreading over Andrew’s jaw and around his unhappy, downturned mouth. Neil thought he could see blood staining Andrew’s pale hair, but in a blink it was back to normal again. The sudden and odd desire to touch Andrew’s hair again took him by surprise; he blamed it on the part of his brain that still felt like it was submerged in dark water.

“It was my idea,” Neil replied once he remembered Andrew had asked him something.

“Do you remember why you wanted to talk to him at the banquet?”

Neil shook his head and regretted moving immediately.

“I’m guessing that was his doing, then.” Andrew’s voice wasn’t empty exactly: it sounded carefully hollowed out with hard anger around the edges.

“I didn’t know vampires were capable of... mind control or whatever that was,” Neil mumbled. He couldn’t remember if his mother ever told him anything beyond, “Don’t look at them. Stay here and I’ll handle it.”

Andrew’s expression tightened. “Yes, Kevin conveniently forgot to mention that.”

Neil was taken aback. It wasn’t surprising that Andrew hadn’t figured it out on his own, but Neil couldn’t see why Kevin would keep that a secret from the man who promised to protect him. Riko probably tested his power out on Kevin and Jean as soon as he was turned, probably used it on them to get them to submit to his will— did Kevin really expect Andrew to do the same?

Beyond all that, Neil was angry at himself for not reading further into the way Kevin kept his eyes cast down at the banquets and on Kathy’s show. If he hadn’t brushed it off as Kevin being submissive...

“You should sleep.”

Neil ignored the warning in Andrew’s voice. “I’ve been sleeping for days.”

“You were sleepwalking and fidgeting most of the time,” Andrew corrected. “You’re lucky you didn’t give yourself a concussion bumping into walls.”
“I want to talk about this. I want to know what happened.”

Andrew blinked at him slowly, either annoyed or furious. Neil couldn’t quite tell. Then, Andrew said, “I got a text a few days after you left.”

Neil’s stomach flashed from hot to cold. “It wasn’t me, I swear. Riko found my-”

“You’re too stubborn to ask for help, let alone beg,” Andrew said, sharpening the last word. “I knew it wasn’t you.”

“But you still-”

“Went to investigate,” Andrew finished. “Aaron’s been sneaking off to meet Katelyn in Columbia, so he was at the bus station before I got there.”

Neil’s throat closed.

“The hunter dragged him into an alley. I guess he thought Aaron was me. Not the first person to make that mistake. Not the last either,” Andrew added with a sneer that made Neil glance away in embarrassment. “Apparently, it didn’t strike him as odd that he was able to do that in the first place. He didn’t have the chance to do much before I got there.”

Horrified, Neil asked, “Is Aaron okay?”

“Do you care?”

Neil could admit that he didn’t, but Aaron’s safety was important to Andrew. “Was he hurt?”

“Bruised a little,” Andrew replied icily. “And he knows what I am now.”

“Shit.” Neil squirmed against the pillows, agitated. “Andrew, I’m so sorry. I thought Riko would keep his word and-”

Andrew’s lip curled hatefully and Neil went cold down to his core. “You thought? Do you remember that much of the banquet?”


“Did you choose to keep it a secret or did it not occur to you to tell me?”

Neil didn’t see why that mattered. He lied to Andrew, end of story. “I… I had to go to Evermore either way. You wouldn’t have let me if you knew.”

“Explain.”

Neil picked a bit of fuzz off the back of the couch and avoided Andrew’s eyes for a moment. “He said if I didn’t go he’d tell Kengo about you. Kengo would have either had you killed or turned Aaron so people wouldn’t notice that only one of you was aging. I couldn’t just sit back and let that happen.”

Andrew scoffed. “Bold words from a rabbit.”

“I’m not a rabbit, I’m a Fox, remember?” Neil hurled back snidely.

“A nuisance either way,” Andrew replied without missing a beat. “You must’ve gotten turned around somewhere because you have this all backwards. You promised to stay; I promised to
protect you. We had a deal. You either forgot that or you chose to ignore it.”

Neil could hear Andrew’s anger seeping out, and he thought he understood why. The terms of their bargain were simple; the stage was set and their roles were clear. At some point, though, the lines got blurry and then Neil ditched the script entirely.

“I couldn’t let you get hurt because of me.”

Andrew cocked his head and looked down at Neil with flat eyes. “Did you forget what I am?”

“You’re not invincible,” Neil said quietly. Memories of what a person could do to a vampire came rushing in like a dam in his mind had finally given way. Hunters like Neil’s father got off on overpowering such powerful creatures and reducing them to a pile of bloody, mangled parts. Vampire or not, Andrew could still be hurt.

Andrew sneered, “You should’ve voiced your doubts before you took the deal.”

“I don’t have doubts. I know you would’ve done everything in your power to keep me alive, and that’s why I broke our deal. I won’t let you die for me.”

“Stop talking. I’ve heard enough.”

“Andrew-”

“No.”

Neil closed his mouth and forced himself to relax into the pillows. He didn’t have a catalogue of his injuries- all he had was a vague, all-over pain rolling in waves across his body- but he knew if he got too worked up he’d end up making it worse. Andrew’s jaw clenched as he looked away from him, sweeping a sharp glare over the room as if there was something else in there pissing him off.

He twisted the cap off the water bottle again to take another drink. The scummy aftertaste of vomit still coated the inside of his mouth and the water sloshed uncomfortably in his stomach. Although it wasn’t the worst thing he’d experienced, he still longed for the clean feeling after a hot shower and a plate full of food. He settled for stealing a few Tic Tacs from Andrew’s pill bottle and popping them into his mouth while Andrew watched blankly.

Speaking again would probably worsen the already dark mood, and Neil didn’t feel up to picking at Andrew’s frayed temper, so he decided to keep quiet for the time being. He still wanted to know how Andrew got him out of the Nest and what he did with the remains of the hunter, but those questions could wait.

It was unlikely that Andrew would forgive him for what he did, but he was alive and safe for now. That was enough for Neil.
“You are a fool for coming here.”

Neil woke with a start.

Everything was pitch black. He couldn’t see or hear anything, but he knew Riko was nearby. Riko never slept and he was never far away.

Something moved through the darkness. Neil’s fearful heart jumped into his throat as he strained to listen. Neil heard a click before he was blinded by lamplight. His sore arm burned as he threw up a hand to shield his eyes.

“You’re at Wymack’s.”

Neil squinted up at the man standing over him.

“You’re at Wymack’s,” Andrew repeated. “It’s midnight.”

Wincing, Neil rubbed at the gritty corners of his eyes. The painkiller he’d taken earlier was wearing off now and his body hurt all over. The memories came back slowly: eating half a sandwich, dozing off to the sound of Wymack and Abby’s hushed conversation, being faintly aware of someone hovering nearby. He hadn’t been able to tell if it was Andrew or a dream of Jean.

Andrew was still staring at him.

“It was just a nightmare,” Neil said. “I’m fine.”

Another lie. Prickly guilt twisted around Neil’s throat and squeezed.

Wordlessly, Andrew picked up Wymack’s keys from the coffee table and walked out of the apartment, locking the door behind him. The stillness of the room made Neil uneasy. It was too
quiet and the memories of the Nest were too close, gnawing on the edges of his mind. Sleep was out of his reach, so he grit his teeth and pulled himself up from the couch.

Walking was difficult, but not impossible. Shivering, he wrapped the blanket from the couch around his shoulders and hobbled over to the door. A painful wound on his thigh stood out against the soreness of his overworked muscles. Neil hadn’t had the stomach to look at it yet. He hadn’t even been able to look at his face in the mirror. He only lingered in the bathroom long enough to use the toilet and wash his hands.

At the end of the hall, Andrew was getting into the elevator. Neil limped after him as quickly as he could and, to his surprise, Andrew held the doors open until he was safely inside. Out of breath, Neil had to lean against the wall to keep himself upright. He was embarrassed by his own weakness and the stench of his unwashed body. The fact that Andrew didn’t comment on it made him feel more pathetic.

Things were different between them now. In spite of the blanket’s warmth, Neil had ice in his veins that wouldn’t thaw.

When the elevator stopped, Neil wrapped the blanket tighter around himself and shuffled after Andrew into the lobby. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass door and looked away, knowing his father’s eyes would be looking back at him.

Again, Andrew held the door open for him. Neil gave a grateful nod before readjusting his grip on the blanket to make sure it didn’t drag on the ground. Outside, a thick fog hung in the cold air. The chill made Neil’s lungs burn, but he greedily inhaled the fresh air anyway.

Instead of stopping for a smoke on the sidewalk, Andrew strode toward his car. He started up the engine, but kept it in park while Neil slowly made his way over. The doors were left unlocked, which Neil took as a good sign. He carefully lowered himself into the passenger seat and pulled the door shut with a grimace.

It was a few more minutes of uncomfortable shivering before the air streaming from the vents warmed up. Neil sighed in relief and relaxed as heat washed over him.

Finally, Andrew reversed out of the parking space. Once they were out of the lot, Neil softly asked, “Where are we going?”

“I want cigarettes. You need food.”

“There’s food at Wymack’s,” Neil said.

Andrew ignored a stop sign as he made a right turn. “You should’ve eaten it then.”

“I did.”

“Half a sandwich,” Andrew reminded him. “You’ve been living on imaginary food for days.”

Neil clamped his mouth shut and swallowed the I’m fine that rose up. He stared out the windshield at the fog glowing in the headlights. There were a hundred questions heaped in his head; part of him wanted to keep quiet because he knew he didn’t deserve answers, but the other part of him didn’t know how to give up.

“How did Aaron react when he found out?”

Andrew flicked a guarded look at him. “About as well as anyone would have, given the
circumstances.”

“Is he going to tell Nicky?”

“I’m a vampire, not a psychic.”

Andrew pulled into an empty gas station and parked in front of the convenience store. Neil had bought snacks and supplies here a few times, but it took him a second to register that. Everything looked different.

“Wait here,” Andrew told him.

Neil nodded, content to stay put, and settled in to wait while Andrew headed inside. The car’s engine was running, so warm air kept spilling out of the vents. It wasn’t long before anxious thoughts crawled into his head. He was safe, Andrew was alive, but what if his mind couldn’t be trusted? Restless, he craned his neck to look for Andrew through the store windows.

Movement in his periphery caught his attention. Jean was standing next to the car. He leaned closer to the window and said, “Nathaniel, it’s time to wake up.”

Neil froze.

“Have you gone deaf?” Jean snapped. “Get up.”

A knock on the window to his left nearly tore a scream out of him. Andrew had a little furrow in his brow while he gestured at the lock. Shaking, Neil groped at the button on his door to pop the locks. When he looked up, Jean was nowhere to be seen.

Andrew opened the car door and a rush of chilly air made Neil pull his arms back inside his blanket. Andrew tossed a plastic shopping bag down into Neil’s footwell.

“Hallucinating,” Andrew guessed as he got behind the wheel.

It was impossible to hide his panic from a vampire. Neil’s heart was still trying to beat out of his chest.

“I saw Jean,” he admitted.

“Jean’s in West Virginia,” Andrew said as he smoothly backed out of the space. “Food’s in the bag.”

Neil pulled the bag onto his lap while Andrew drove out of the parking lot. He found trail mix, some power bars, and a box of powdered donut holes. His whole body was sore, and he was beyond caring about nutritional value, so he took out the box of donut holes because those would be the easiest to chew.

After he ate a few bites, he finally asked, “How’d you get me out of the Nest?”

Andrew kept his eyes fixed to the road. “Kevin told me the codes and how to find Riko’s room.”

“Riko wouldn’t have let us walk out of there.”

“The hunter’s body is buried somewhere on Edgar Allan’s campus with Riko’s name and address written on his hand. Aaron would’ve tipped the police off from a burner phone if I took too long. I figured Riko wouldn’t want to risk pissing his uncle off with a mess like that.”
Neil looked out his window and processed that. Andrew coming to get him was surprising; Aaron being involved was something else entirely. The mental image of them burying a body together was difficult to wrap his brain around.

“So he let me go.”

“Looked like he was done with you anyway,” Andrew said, taking the next turn a bit too sharply. “They left you on the bathroom floor, stinking of hair dye and blood.”

Neil’s mind whipped from shock to dread so fast he went blank. “Hair dye,” he heard his own voice say.

Andrew looked at him oddly. “You didn’t look in the mirror?”

“No.” He almost asked what color Riko chose, but the answer was obvious: auburn. He inherited it from his father. Riko had started stripping away the layers that made up Neil Josten to get to Nathaniel Wesninski, the one he really wanted.

After a few beats of silence, Andrew said, “Kevin wants to talk to you, by the way.”

“When?”

Andrew shrugged. “Work out the details yourself.”

The conversation would be unpleasant, but it was necessary. Andrew pulled back into the lot outside the apartment complex and parked near the doors of Wymack’s building. Neither of them moved to get out.

Quietly, Neil asked, “Did Kevin ever say anything about Drake?”

The look in Andrew’s eyes put a spike of ice in Neil’s gut. Warning bells went off in his head- this was dangerous ground- but he knew Andrew deserved the truth.

“Riko’s the one that turned him,” he said, forcing himself to hold Andrew’s heavy stare. “He wanted to have you on the Ravens and he thought he could lure you in if he got a hold of Aaron.”

Andrew’s nostrils flared and a muscle in his cheek twitched. “He sent Drake after Aaron.”

“He was supposed to turn Aaron and send him up to the Nest. Riko was going to take Aaron under his wing, give him a place to live and blood to drink. Aaron would’ve been the bait to get you up there.” Neil watched Andrew’s expression closely; he saw Andrew’s anger turn to ice. “You would’ve fought him every step of the way if he just forced you to sign the contract. He needed to motivate you somehow.”

Andrew was willing to do anything for his brother. Riko would’ve had them both if everything had gone according to plan.

“Drake ruined things for Riko when he went after you first,” Neil added softly. “Riko made some bullshit promise, but he was really planning on killing Drake as soon as he had you.”

“Serves him right for putting his faith in a rapist’s self-control,” Andrew muttered darkly. “What I want to know is why he sent the hunter now? It would’ve knocked the Foxes out of spring championships and he never would’ve gotten that rematch with Kevin.”

“I…” Neil couldn’t remember. Some of his thoughts were too muddy to sort through. “He said
Digging into that particular memory made a horrible sick feeling well up in his gut. He shifted in his seat and took controlled breaths as more memories rose up to torment him. The bed, the handcuffs, the pictures of Andrew’s dead body. The spot on his thigh throbbed.

Andrew clamped his hand around the back of Neil’s neck and said, “Stop that.”

His touch was an anchor. Neil dragged himself out of his mental spiral, thinking, *He’s alive. It’s fine. He’s alive.* Gradually, breathing became easier and his heart rate slowed. Andrew squeezed his neck once more before letting go. Neil shivered when the warmth of Andrew’s hand disappeared.

Andrew turned the engine back on, rolled down his window, and lit a cigarette. Neil turned the heat up. He itched for a cigarette to hold, but couldn’t bring himself to ask for one.

Instead, he asked, “Why’d you do it?”

“Do what?” Andrew blew out a stream of smoke and Neil watched it dissipate in the night air.

“Why did you get me out of the Nest?”

“I keep my promises.”

Neil squinted at the side of Andrew’s head. “We called off our deal. You said-”

“You were as good as drunk,” Andrew interrupted, shooting him a sharp look. “If I’d known what Riko could do, I wouldn’t have agreed to call off the deal, so it doesn’t count.”

It should’ve been a relief, but it wasn’t. After the days he spent sick with grief, he knew he couldn’t let Andrew do this. Riko was determined to own him, his father was still hunting him, and if Kengo ever learned that Neil was running around with the Moriyama family secrets, he would be dead for sure. He was starting to see that there was no real way out. The noose was tightening around his neck. He’d either belong to Riko or he’d be dead.

His life was in a free fall. He didn’t want to drag anyone down with him.

“No,” Neil said.

Andrew’s eyes narrowed. “No?”

“Our deal’s off. We agreed. You can’t just go back on that because you feel like it.”

“You continue to reach for new levels of stupidity.” Andrew sneered as he took another drag.

“So let me go,” Neil said. “I’m more trouble than I’m worth, right? I’m in deep shit and you know it. It’s dangerous for you.”

“That is beside the point. We have a deal.”

“Not anymore.”

Andrew inhaled slowly, dangerously tense, and said, “Running isn’t an option for you and, without me, you’ll be a sitting duck here.”

Neil swallowed the lump in his throat. “I know that.”
“But-?” Andrew prompted.

“I don’t want to be what kills you.”

Andrew flicked ash out the window and studied Neil’s face. “Stop looking at me like that,” he said harshly. “I am not something you get to try to save. A no-name runaway like you has no right to attempt heroics.”

The words stung, but they rang true. “I’m not trying to save you. I’m just trying to stand on my own.”

“Fine,” Andrew bit out. “Have it your way.”

Andrew shut off the engine and got out of the car. Neil gathered his blanket around his body and grabbed the bag of food to follow him back into the apartment building.

Andrew strode ahead of Neil, not bothering to wait or hold the door this time, and darted up the stairs. Neil limped into the elevator to ride up to the seventh floor alone.

Wymack’s door was ajar when Neil finally reached it. He stepped over the threshold, and then a switch flipped in his brain.

He was in a tight stairwell. “Come with me,” Jean’s voice hissed in his ears. “He is waiting.”

Black walls closed in around him. This was the Nest. A chill rolled down his spine. “You’ll be in Black.” The strap of his bag dug into his shoulder.

“Neil.”

He could see a long hallway and he knew there was a room filled with Kevin’s belongings waiting for him at the end. “In here,” Jean said.

His head swam.

“Am I rooming with someone?”

“Guess.”

He didn’t want to room with Riko. He’d rather sleep outside.

“Neil.”

A hand pressed against the side of his neck.

“The master has placed you in Riko’s capable hands.”

The faint smell of cigarettes reached him. His mind zeroed in on a callused finger pressing just below his ear. Neil blinked away his blurry vision. The stairs, the Nest, and the dorm melted away.

Andrew’s eyes were sharp. His lip twitched into a subtle sneer as he studied Neil’s face. Then, he scoffed and pushed away from Neil. “Hallucinating again,” he said with a dismissive flick of his hand. “Do Wymack a favor and shower before you get back on his couch.”

“I already-” Neil stopped. I already showered today. That was what he’d said to Jean his first night at the Nest. His days were folded on top of each other.
Thankfully, Andrew didn’t comment on it as he walked into Wymack’s kitchen. Neil dropped the blanket on the couch and took a few deep breaths. His entire body was cold and trembling. A hot shower sounded heavenly.

“Is Wymack here?” Neil asked. He couldn’t hear any snoring from the bedroom.

“He’s at Abby’s,” Andrew answered from the kitchen. He came back out with a bundle of garbage bags, a roll of duct tape, and a pair of scissors. “Tape plastic over your bandages. I don’t need Abby bitching at me because you got an infection.”

Neil nodded and took the items from him. Andrew went to the armchair and turned the TV on with the remote, ignoring Neil as he stooped to get his duffel bag from under the coffee table. Neil bit back a pained noise and found himself a clean change of clothes before shuffling down the hallway to the bathroom.

The bathroom fan didn’t do much to make the small, silent room feel less stifling, but it helped a little. Neil dropped his pile of stuff on the closed toilet lid so he could brush his teeth and rid himself of the grimy taste of sleep and donuts. After rinsing his mouth with water, he finally risked looking in the mirror.

The sight that greeted him was somehow worse than he expected: the dark purple bruise along his jaw and the smear of greens and yellows across the bridge of his nose helped ruin the resemblance to his father a little, but it was still Nathaniel Wesninski staring back at him.

A horrible shudder ran through him. His past was poisoning the present.

Neil touched the square of gauze on his cheek. He had no memory of Riko cutting into his face, which seemed like a blessing. Slowly, he peeled back one corner of the tape to take a peek at it.

He didn’t find any stitches or scabs. There was only a stark black “4” tattooed in the same place that Kevin, Jean, and Riko wore their numbers.

Panic filled his head like a fever.

Riko marked him.

“You’re mine, Nathaniel.”

The face in the mirror snarled at him. He snatched the scissors, blinded by fury, and pulled them open to stab one sharp end into the black ink. His skin burned as it tore open. He couldn’t escape being the son of the Butcher, but he’d never be one of Riko’s playthings.

He hissed through clenched teeth as he frantically tried to cut the number away. Blood slid down his cheek. His mind was a long, unspooling thread of no no no no.

The door crashed inward and a body slammed into Neil. Arms locked around him, pinning his elbows to his sides. Neil fought to get free. His foot slipped on the tile, sending him and his captor stumbling into the wall before they slid down to the floor. A hand gripped Neil’s wrist and the pain forced him to drop the scissors.

“Calm down,” Andrew growled.

“Let me go!” Neil strained against his grip. He didn’t care about the pain or anything else. He just needed to get the number off his face.
“Stop,” Andrew repeated lowly.

“I need to-”

“Neil.”

“There was a contract,” he whispered. “Andrew, there was a contract. I don’t know if I signed it. I can’t-”

Andrew put a hand over Neil’s pounding heart and pressed down. “Stop it.”

Neil deflated, frustrated and half-blind from the pain exploding across his body. Hanging his head, he braced himself against a wave of cold anxiety. He’d ruined Riko’s mark, which was more frightening than satisfying. What would Riko do when he found out?

The solution he came up with was awkward and Andrew wasn’t likely to help him now, but it was worth a shot. “Andrew, could you…” He gestured toward his face half-heartedly.

Andrew’s arms loosened enough for Neil to shift forward and look over his shoulder.

“What?” Andrew asked.

“Your saliva seals wounds.”

He didn’t expect Andrew to agree to it, so it came as a surprise when Andrew leaned in and flattened his tongue over the gashes on Neil’s cheek.

The sting of it made Neil wince. Andrew licked the broken skin a second time; he wiped the rest of the blood off Neil’s cheek and licked his finger clean, not wasting a drop.

Neil moved forward in the bracket of Andrew’s legs and awkwardly got his feet under him. Standing was far more difficult than it should’ve been. He felt pathetic when Andrew stopped him from swaying with a hand on his lower back.

He stood at the sink and looked at himself. His tattoo was crooked with raw lines cut through it, but the skin was holding together thanks to whatever was in Andrew’s saliva. Andrew stood behind him and met his eyes in the mirror.

“I think I broke some stitches,” Neil said. His heart flashed with foolish longing for his mother. She always put him back together when he got hurt. He missed being able to trust someone enough to drop his guard completely.

Andrew leaned closer to sniff at Neil’s side. “There’s not much blood.”

“Okay, I need…” Neil swallowed the sticky words that came rushing up: *I need to sleep, I need to run, I need this to be over.* “I’m gonna get the first aid kit.”

Andrew grabbed the splintered door as Neil reached for it. “I’ll get it. Take your shirt off.”

Neil didn’t have a chance to protest before Andrew was gone. He lightly smoothed his hand down his chest and felt the dressings over his wounds. The choice was between letting Andrew see his scars or attempting to fix his stitches himself. Neither option sounded good, but he knew which one was wiser. In his weakened state, he’d probably just make his injuries worse.

Gritting his teeth, he grabbed the bottom of his shirt and attempted to pull it off. He got it halfway up his torso before the stiff muscles in his upper back locked. The ache sliced down to his bones.
like a hot knife.

Andrew returned while he was still struggling. He dropped the first aid kit on the counter and he pushed Neil’s hands away.

“I can’t lift my arms,” Neil rasped.

“I can see that.” Andrew ran a considering look over Neil’s shirt before he stooped to get the scissors. “Cutting this off will be easier. Don’t give me that look. You’ve got six just like it.”

Neil relented with a quiet, “Fine.”

Andrew opened the scissors and pulled the hem of Neil’s shirt between the blades. There was still blood on one of the tips. Apprehension twisted Neil’s insides as Andrew got started. The *snick, snick, snick* of the scissors was barely audible over the bathroom fan. The higher Andrew went, the harder it was for Neil to look at him.

Once he cut through the collar, Andrew set the scissors aside and pushed Neil’s shirt off his shoulders, letting it fall down his arms. Neil held his breath and stared at the floor.

“Souvenirs from your travels?” Andrew asked mockingly. He traced the sharp V of the burn mark left by a hot iron on Neil’s shoulder. “Where’d you pick this one up?”

“My father.”

Andrew ran his fingers over it once more before moving on to a misshapen circle on the other side of his chest. “What’s this?”

“I got shot.”

“Well, you weren’t lying about being hunted,” Andrew said. “Gold star for honesty.”

Lying was how Neil was taught to survive, but that didn’t mean he never got tired of it. In that moment, the lies he piled on top of himself made him feel smothered instead of safe.


“What?”

“You called me a no-name runaway,” Neil said. “I’m named after my father, so my mother called me Abram when she wanted to shield me from his work. It’s my middle name.”

Andrew stared at him, his expression unreadable. “Abram.”

It sounded like a truce. Andrew let go of the tension in his shoulders and carefully peeled away a strip of gauze taped to Neil’s side. Neil twisted to look at it and saw a cut that wasn’t deep enough to warrant stitches. It must have reopened in the scuffle and now it was glistening with fresh blood. He wondered if Andrew was thinking the same thing he was.

Andrew tightened his jaw and dropped the bloodied gauze in the wastebasket beside the toilet. “It’ll heal faster if I seal it.”

Neil chewed his lip. It would be one less injury, one less thing causing him pain. “Okay.”

Andrew gripped the counter on either side of Neil’s hips. Neil moved his arms out of the way to avoid touching Andrew as he bent down. He held his breath and kept his eyes on the wall. His
abdomen clenched when Andrew traced the cut with his tongue. Goosebumps ran down his arms.

When he was finished, Andrew taped on a fresh bandage and wiped his hand over his mouth. He started to say something, but stopped short when his eyes caught on Neil’s bicep.

Neil followed his stare and flinched in surprise. On the tender underside of his arm was a murky green circle with crimson and purple spots at its center, inside an incomplete oval of scabbed-over teeth marks.

“Messy eater,” Andrew said tersely. “You’re lucky he didn’t hit an artery since he was too lazy to seal it.”

“He didn’t need to eat,” Neil muttered. “He liked watching me bleed.”

He felt sick remembering that night. For a second, he could hear his own screams.

Andrew’s lip curled. “Is that the only place he bit you?”

There was a vague memory at the back of his mind. Voices, his mind pinned by Riko’s stare—“Where does the mutt like to feed from?” Suddenly, Neil couldn’t ignore the pain radiating from his inner thigh any longer. He didn’t want it to be true, but he could remember answering Riko, the words being dragged out of him against his will.

“My leg.” He needed to see it. He needed to know. His hands shook as he pushed his sweats down until they fell around his ankles. He lifted his leg and moved his knee outward.

Andrew’s nostrils flared and he stepped back. They both stared at the ruined flesh. Riko purposefully avoided hitting the artery so Neil would bleed without bleeding out, but it was still too close to the place Andrew usually went for. The wound was larger than the other: aggravated pink scrapes and gouges crusted over with dark scabs dotted the mottled green and purple bruise.

Neil didn’t remember Riko taking his pants off. The hole in his memory was frightening.

Andrew’s eyes were guarded and his voice came out cold. “Did they rape you?”

“I don’t...”

“Did they?” Andrew demanded.

“Not that I remember.” Neil nervously rubbed at his neck, trying to force himself to relax. “I remember the first few days, but things got hazy when Riko sent that hunter. I only have bits and pieces from the time you ‘died’ to the time I woke up here. I’m not... I’m not sore or anything. That’s a good sign, right?”

“You’re sure you remember the first few days?”

Neil nodded. “I think Abby did a rape kit on me. Before she left, she said something about swabs testing negative for semen. I was still pretty out of it, so I didn’t understand what she was talking about.”

“I would’ve smelled it on you if they did it before I got there,” Andrew said, scrutinizing Neil’s leg. “They must’ve bent you over the bathtub to rinse the dye out of your hair. Your shirt was soaked, but your jeans were dry and your leg still had blood on it. They didn’t wash you.”

“Are you sure you would’ve smelled it? How close did we get when we left together?”
“I carried you.” Andrew’s eyes snapped to his, anger simmering beneath the surface. “I would’ve smelled it.”


Andrew nodded stiffly. His eyes darted around the room, scowling at the bags and the tape. Neil watched, frozen, as Andrew began cutting a large rectangle out of a bag. Without making eye contact, Andrew covered Neil’s bandaged front and sides with the plastic and secured it in place with duct tape. Next, he cut a strip to wrap around the bite mark on Neil’s bicep. Then, he did the same for Neil’s thigh.


“I will tape your mouth shut,” Andrew threatened as he finished taping up Neil’s leg.

“I mean it. Wymack gave me a place on the team, you gave me a place in your family- I got to make a home here.”

“This is a halfway house at best, not a home.”

“Maybe, but it’s still the best one I’ve ever had.”

“I should’ve let you run in Millport,” Andrew said snidely. “There is not a single part of you that I don’t hate.”

Neil cracked a small smile. “That’s not true. My blood’s not bad, is it?”

“I told you to stop talking.” Andrew put a hand on Neil’s neck and pulled him into a rough kiss.

The hard press of Andrew’s lips short-circuited Neil’s brain before he remembered what to do. When he pushed into the kiss, Andrew licked into his mouth and held the side of his neck to keep him still.

Of all the kisses he’d had over the years- from a few interested girls and a drunk Nicky- this one made the most sense. Andrew shielded him and held him upright. He was a pillar of strength when Neil needed it most. Of course Neil would want to get closer.

Warning bells started ringing in his head. He’d already gotten too cozy with the Foxes, but this was crossing a line. He knew that, but it didn’t stop him from wanting this anyway. Just this once, he told himself. Maybe he could get away with it; his mother would never know.

A hot thrill rushed down Neil’s spine and he didn’t care that Andrew would be able to hear his heart racing. He held onto the counter behind him to keep from reaching out and kissed Andrew until he felt dizzy. When Neil gave in and gasped for air, Andrew pulled away.

He glanced down at Neil’s lips, licked his own, and shook his head. “You need to shower.”

“Right,” Neil said slowly.

Andrew stepped out into the hall and tossed, “I’m serious. You reek,” over his shoulder.

Neil stared at the empty doorway for a long moment before letting out a little puff of a laugh. His world was falling apart, but it was the most normal he’d felt since the winter banquet.
On New Year’s Eve, there was a knock on Wymack’s door. Neil swallowed his bite of fried rice and asked, “Are we expecting someone?”

Wymack wiped his mouth off and pitched his napkin in the wastebasket on his way to answer the door. Neil muted SportsCenter and sat up straight on the couch. He hadn’t seen Andrew since the morning after they kissed and the possibility of seeing him now made his heart race. As foolish as the kiss was, it had been playing on repeat in Neil’s mind ever since it happened.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” Wymack drawled, stepping aside to let Kevin in. Neil mentally scolded himself for being disappointed that Kevin was alone.

Kevin’s expression was pinched and his shoulders were hunched as he rubbed the brace he wore over his left wrist. It was clear that he was dreading the conversation he and Neil needed to have. Good, Neil thought viciously. Kevin had every reason to be dreading this.

“How are you feeling?” Kevin asked quietly.

“You know what Riko does to people. I’m sure you can guess.”

Kevin’s mouth twisted to one side. He gestured to the gauze on Neil’s cheek. “He marked you?”

“Yup.”
“How’d Wymack take it?”

Neil shrugged. Wymack had responded with his usual muted anger, offering only a gruff, “I’m guessing you didn’t pick out the design yourself.”

Kevin stepped further into the room and cast a glance around at the crumpled sub sandwich wrappers and take-out containers. He paused to watch a few seconds of the highlight reel playing on the television.

“How didn’t you tell Andrew about Drake?” Neil asked.

It was satisfying to see Kevin startled.

“I had my reasons,” Kevin said once he recovered. “I didn’t know what Andrew would do with that information. If he tried to get revenge, the Moriyamas would have torn him to shreds.”

Neil sucked his teeth and hummed unhappily. “Yeah, that excuse might’ve worked a year ago when you first met him, but not so much now.”

“What’s the point in telling him? What good would that do? Knowing won’t change anything and he doesn’t care enough about himself to hate Riko for it.”

“He has a right to know.”

Kevin’s eyes narrowed. “You already told him, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did.” Neil privately hoped Kevin would give him the fight he wanted. As his strength returned, he started craving violence. He wanted the weight of a gun in his hands and Riko’s blood on the wall, but hurling barbed words at Kevin would hold him over in the meantime. “So is that why you came to Palmetto? You decided to make use of your brother’s broken toy?”

“You used to have a higher opinion of me.”

Neil sneered. “Yeah, but then I got to know you.”

“I didn’t come to Palmetto so I could benefit from what happened to Andrew. I came here because of Wymack.”

“And I’m supposed to believe you?”

“What, Jean didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

Kevin scoffed. “Don’t play dumb.”

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

“Wymack’s my father,” Kevin said harshly, like he had to shove the words out. “Jean said he’d tell you if I let you go to the Nest.”

Neil stared at him in numb shock. “You’re lying.”

Kevin’s face crumpled. “You really didn’t know?”

“You’re lying,” Neil repeated, shaking his head. “Wymack can’t be your father. That’s ridiculous.”
“We found a letter,” Kevin said quietly. “It was in the master’s house. He kept a drawer in his office of things from my mother—letters, postcards, mementos. I wanted to look through it, so Riko kept him distracted for me. My mother wrote the master a letter after she found out she was pregnant.”

The rumors about Kevin’s father came up sometimes in the articles written about him. There were a few theories since Kayleigh was allegedly sleeping with a few semi-famous men at the time, but no one ever mentioned Wymack, so Neil never entertained that possibility.

“Wymack doesn’t know,” Kevin went on before Neil could ask. “I’d appreciate it if you kept this to yourself. I haven’t figured out how to tell him.”

Neil raised an eyebrow. “You’re bad at telling people things. I’m seeing a pattern.”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

“You haven’t told Wymack that he’s your father. You didn’t tell Andrew about Drake and you never told him what you know about vampires. You didn’t tell me either, even when you knew I was heading off to Evermore. If you’re looking for a pat on the head and some reassurance, you’re in the wrong place.”

Kevin shifted his weight uncomfortably. “That’s not why I’m here.”

“Why are you here?”

“I just wanted to say that if you wanted to talk about what Riko did to you, I’m here.”

Neil’s mouth twisted with disgust. “You’re offering a heart-to-heart? Seriously? Sure, okay, let’s chat, one blood bag to another.”

“Don’t call me that,” Kevin snapped, eyes flashing. His fists were shaking at his sides. “Don’t ever call me that again.”

Neil stood up from the couch, ignoring the aches in his body. He needed to move to dispel some of the anxious energy crackling in his body.

“I know what he does to people,” Kevin said lowly. “I can guess what he did to you. I shouldn’t have let you go to him. I regretted it as soon as you left.”

Kevin had never seemed so human before. Some hysterical part of Neil’s brain wanted to laugh at him. Neil had been wrestling with flickering hallucinations since he woke up from his trance, but this was what seemed too bizarre to be real.

“You know about the hunter?” he asked after he managed to calm himself down a little.

Kevin nodded.

“If seeing this season through is so important to Riko, why would he throw that all away and send a hunter after Andrew now?”

“I don’t know.”

Neil glared at him.

Kevin held his good hand up defensively. “I really don’t know. It doesn’t make sense. Exy was how he was going to prove himself to his father. Did he say anything to you?”
“Andrew’s a loose end.”

“So am I,” Kevin added. “So are you.”

“He could’ve kept me and gotten you back if he took out Andrew. Three birds, one stone.” Neil stopped pacing to rub at his eye. He felt a headache coming on. “Do you know when his father is leaving?”

“Not exactly. Within the next few years probably.”

“Maybe Riko’s getting antsy. Doesn’t want to wait to get everything in order.”

“Maybe,” Kevin said quietly. “By the way, Andrew said you mentioned a contract, so I called Jean and asked him if you signed it. He told me you didn’t and Riko didn’t have time to force you.”

A flash of hot anger clashed with cold dread in Neil’s stomach. His mind was thrown back to being on the bathroom floor, panicked and desperate to cut the number off his cheek. He could almost feel Andrew’s arms banded around him.

Kevin cleared his throat. “I think I’ll head out unless there’s anything else you wanted to talk about.”

Neil shook his head and curled his toes against the cheap carpet. Kevin lingered for a few seconds before he finally left, letting the door fall shut behind him. Exhausted, Neil ambled into the kitchen to refill his glass with water. His head felt heavy and overstuffed with information. He didn’t feel any closer to understanding Riko’s motives - he wanted to get his inner circle together as quickly as possible, but why the rush? Maybe Kengo was making his move sooner rather than later. If Riko was getting nervous, it would mean trouble for the rest of them.

When Wymack came back in, he poured himself a cup of cold coffee and looked Neil over like he expected to see new injuries. “Have a nice chat?”

“As nice as it could have been, I guess.” Neil felt bruised inside and out. He sighed heavily and scratched at the edge of the bandage on his cheek.

“Well, new year, fresh start, and all that. Wake up tomorrow with a clean slate. One step closer to getting those stitches out.”

Neil looked at him funny. “Is there whiskey in that coffee?”

“Abby’s been on me to be more positive with you fuckers,” Wymack explained. “It’s like she thinks you’re having a rough time or something. Can’t imagine why.”

“I’ll tell her you made an effort,” Neil said dryly.

“Least you could do.”

Neil nodded and surreptitiously studied Wymack’s face while he drank his coffee. There was no obvious resemblance to Kevin, but the more he looked the more he thought he could see a similarity in the shape of their chins, the slope of their noses. He hated knowing the truth when Wymack was still in the dark.

Wymack gave him a look and asked, “Something wrong?”

“No,” Neil lied. He padded back out to the couch and unmuted the television in the hope that
SportsCenter could distract him awhile. The new year would start soon and it would be Neil’s last.
When the Foxes came back to Palmetto, Neil couldn’t decide if he wanted to see them or avoid them. He didn’t want to show them his bruises and his father’s blue eyes, but he needed to soak up every second he could get with them while he still could. Time was running out.

Ideas floated across his mind as he lay on Wymack’s couch. He could grab his bag and make a run for it while Wymack was finishing up some paperwork in his office. He could fake an illness until his bruises faded- at least then he’d only have to deal with the team finding out about his tattoo.

He didn’t know how he would stomach the upperclassmen’s reaction and he didn’t know how he was supposed to face Andrew when he could still feel the weight of his kiss.

Shivering, he pulled himself upright and pressed his hands over his eyes. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. The plan had been to stay on the outskirts, keep his head down, and slip away when the time was right. He was so caught up in this mess that he could hardly tell which way was up.

“You ready to head back to the Tower?” Wymack asked as he came out of the back room. “You’re gonna have to show your face sometime.”

Neil swallowed hard. “Are the girls back yet?”

“Should be. They left the airport a while ago. Am I driving you or is Andrew coming to get you?”

The question stung more than it should’ve. Andrew probably didn’t want anything to do with Neil anymore.

“I could walk,” Neil said.

“Five minutes. Your stubborn ass better be in my car.”

Neil’s first instinct was to argue, but the trip down to the parking lot proved that he was still too sore to make the trek all the way over to the Tower. He carefully lowered himself into the passenger seat and put his hand up to his mouth to try to muffle his harsh breathing. Wymack shook his head, but didn’t say anything.

The grass along Perimeter Road was browned and the trees were bare. The mud beside the road was imprinted with old tire tracks that curved toward a ditch with water stagnating at the bottom of it. The Tower itself looked bleak and faded, but the sight of it made Neil’s heart beat faster. In
spite of his anxiety about facing the Foxes, he was glad to be back. He couldn’t wait to sleep in his own bed again.

Wymack parked in the lot behind the Tower and hesitated with his hand on his keys. “This won’t be pretty. Want me to come up and play referee?”

“I’ll be fine, but thanks anyway.”

Wymack nodded once and took his hand away from the ignition. “Your call. Good luck.”


“Jesus, kid, you’re going to your dorm, not the gallows. Get outta here before you start crying on my upholstery.”

Neil grabbed his bag and headed into the Tower to find his teammates.

When he stepped off the elevator on the third floor, he could hear raised voices coming from inside his suite. Dan and Kevin were arguing and, from the sound of it, things had already turned ugly.

“Where the hell do you get off?” Dan was saying. “You can’t just tell us to chill out because you don’t feel like explaining.”

“I wasn’t a part of it,” said Kevin. “Neil decided on his own to go. That’s his business. Wymack told me to give you guys a heads-up before you see him. That’s all.”

Neil winced and leaned closer to the door.

Dan scoffed. “A heads-up?”

“Why wouldn’t Neil just tell us where he was going?” Matt asked.

“Well, obviously we wouldn’t have let him go if we’d known,” said Nicky.

Renee spoke up. “Why don’t we wait until Neil gets here?”

“A heads-up,” Dan repeated. “A heads-up for what?”

“Is he hurt?” Allison guessed.

“Kevin,” Dan said warningly.

“But Andrew wouldn’t…” Nicky’s voice dropped off. He knew better than to question his cousin in front of the others.

“He’ll recover,” Kevin told them. “His stitches will be out soon, so he should be back on the court in no time.”

“Stitches,” Matt echoed blankly. “Fuck. What’d they do to him?”

Neil’s skin felt like it was on fire. He tried to hide his grimace as he opened the door and stepped inside. Everyone silently took in the sight of him.

Andrew was leaning against Neil’s desk, arms folded and expression perfectly neutral. He stared right through Neil as if Neil wasn’t there at all. For some reason, his indifference was preferable to Matt’s shock and Dan’s outrage.

“What the hell?” Dan shouted. “Why would you go to Edgar Allan? Why didn’t you tell us?”

Neil squared his shoulders and bit down hard on the inside of his cheek to ground himself. “Riko said one of you would get hurt if I didn’t go, so I went and now it’s over. I’ll be fine in a few days. It looks worse than it is.”

“Why didn’t you warn us?” Aaron asked. The words came out as rough as gravel, like he hadn’t used his voice in a while. He was standing off to one side, away from the group, and he was obviously angry. Neil could imagine why.

“I’m surprised the monster let you go,” said Allison. “Isn’t he supposed to be playing bodyguard?”

“I didn’t tell him where I was going,” Neil replied.

“But you told Kevin,” she pointed out.

Dan crossed her arms and frowned deeply at him.

“Jean texted me about it after the banquet,” Kevin cut in before Neil could come up with a lie to smooth it over.

“And you didn’t stop him,” Dan said coldly. “What was Riko threatening to do?”

“It doesn’t matter now. It’s over,” said Neil. “Can we just move on?”

Aaron scoffed and went into the kitchen to help himself to a can of Matt’s beer.


Neil shrugged a shoulder.

Allison gestured at his face. “You’re going to have to explain all that sometime.”

Aaron worked the tab back and forth on his can of beer, which had to be mostly empty by that point with how fast he’d been drinking. “Maybe he matches his wanted poster now,” he muttered.

“Aaron,” Nicky chided.

“I mean, he’s gotta be running from something, right?” Aaron narrowed his eyes at Neil. “Why would a little nobody from Millport, Arizona need to dye his hair and use colored contacts?”

Neil grit his teeth.

“I’m tired,” Matt declared suddenly. “We can finish this later, yeah?”

Dan didn’t look happy about it, but she relented. “Fine. I wanted to take a shower anyway.”

Allison gave Neil a shrewd once-over as she and Renee left with Dan. After they were gone, Andrew pushed away from the desk and walked out of the suite with Kevin in tow. Aaron grabbed another beer before following them.

Nicky stopped in front of Neil and handed him a package that was wrapped in bright red paper with cartoon reindeer all over it. He managed a small smile and said, “Merry late Christmas.”
“I didn’t get you anything,” Neil admitted with a stab of guilt.

“Don’t sweat it. Let’s talk sometime, okay?”

“Nicky,” Andrew snapped from the doorway. The sharp edge of his voice made the hair on the back of Neil’s neck stand up.

Nicky said, “Take care of yourself, Neil,” and hurried after his cousin.

Andrew pulled the door shut roughly behind him. When Neil turned to go to the bedroom, he was stopped cold by the look of concern on Matt’s face.

“You gonna be okay?” Matt asked.

“I don’t know,” Neil said honestly, “but I’ll get by.”

Matt shot him a wry smile. “All right. Well, let us know if you need anything. I think I’m gonna get some food. You hungry?”

Neil was taken aback by how easily Matt accepted his answer. “Yeah, I could eat,” he said slowly.

“Go put your stuff away and we’ll order something.”

Neil kicked off his shoes and carried his duffel bag and the present from Nicky to the bedroom. He heard Matt mutter, “Can’t believe that little fucker stole my beer,” as he closed the door.

Wincing, Neil dropped his bag on the floor and rubbed at his aching shoulder. Once the pain lessened, he carefully tore the paper off Nicky’s present to reveal a black coat with a postcard from Germany tucked inside one of the deep pockets. His arms were too sore for him to attempt to put it on, so he held it in his hands for a minute and rubbed the soft material between his fingertips. The Foxes somehow knew how to give him what he needed, which was far more than he deserved. Neil wondered if their patience would run out someday.
Neil struggled with getting back on the court. His bruises were fading, his teammates were still respectfully avoiding the topic of his changed hair and eye color, and he even managed to jog a couple miles after the first team meeting.

Unfortunately, he was wrong. The first time he stepped onto the court with the Foxes again, everything went black and red. When he came back to himself he was sitting on the bench. The rest of the team was standing several feet away, trying to pretend like they weren’t watching him. Abby’s expression was pinched as she asked him if he knew what day it was and where he was at.

“Go change out,” Wymack told him firmly. He held his hand up to stop Neil from arguing. “I know Abby cleared you, but you’re obviously not all together yet. You can watch UT tapes and help me work on our strategy, all right?”

Deflating, Neil grumbled, “Fine,” and headed off to the locker room.

Their game against the University of Texas Longhorns was in a week. Neil sighed and scraped his fingers through his hair. Kevin told him the effects of whatever Riko had done to him would wear off, but it’d been over a week and his mind was still playing tricks on him. Doubts were starting to creep in. What if he messed up their game against the Longhorns? What if he never fully recovered?

What if he was broken?

On top of that, he had to figure out how he was supposed to explain his tattoo to the team. He was tempted to wear the Band-Aid on his face until the day he died or the season ended—whichever came first. If his sweat didn't almost ruin the adhesive during morning conditioning, he might’ve actually considered it.

Of course, he wasn’t the only one with problems stemming from what Riko did. The silent hostility between the twins had reached a new level. Aaron knew what Andrew was now. He watched Andrew kill a man, and then helped bury the body on Edgar Allan’s campus. The air between them was rife with old resentment and questions that would go unanswered unless one of them cracked.

Neil shook himself out of his thoughts, reminding himself that it wasn’t any of his business anymore even if it was technically his fault.
Onscreen, the 2002 UT team had just scored the winning point against Penn State. Neil only had a few notes for the whole game, so he quickly wrote down a few more lines to make it look like he’d been paying attention. Thanks to Kevin, he already knew the ins and outs of the Longhorns’ playing style.

Wymack came into the lounge and stopped next to the couch Neil was sitting on. He looked from the television to Neil and asked, “What’ve we learned? Anything useful?”

“Team with the most points wins.”

“Fascinating,” Wymack deadpanned. “Everyone else is taking a water break. Drag your sorry ass into the locker room and show ‘em you haven’t dropped dead.”

Neil lolled his head to the side to give Wymack a questioning look.

“You look like a domestic violence PSA,” Wymack said. “You can’t blame them for being a little anxious.”

“I’m fine.”

“You oughta check that word in the dictionary.”

“Well, I’m not dead, am I?”

“There’s a hundred miles between fine and dead. Now go give your teammates some of this delightful attitude.”

Neil dropped his pen and notepad on the couch and went to the locker room. He bumped fists with Matt as he sat down on the bench. Dan and Allison were visibly annoyed. Nicky and Matt looked tired. Aaron sat as far away from the others as he could with his back turned. Renee smiled kindly at him when their eyes met.

“Where’s Kevin and Andrew?” Neil asked.

“Probably killing each other,” Allison replied.

“What’s going on?”

“Andrew’s being a little difficult today,” Matt explained.

“A little difficult.” Dan scoffed. “He spent the last hour aiming at our ankles.”

“A guy’s gotta keep things interesting somehow, ya know?” Nicky joked weakly.

*It’s not my business,* Neil reminded himself. He changed the subject by asking Dan if she had any new ideas for their strategy against the University of Texas next week.

When Kevin and Andrew came into the locker room a few minutes later, Neil couldn’t help watching them. It seemed like everyone felt the chill of their frigid silence. Andrew made a show of shaking out a Tic Tac from his prescription bottle and popping it in his mouth. Kevin was stone cold and imperious as ever.

Neil tried to bury his curiosity and his frustration as best he could.

“I was thinking of going to see a movie this weekend,” Renee said. “Would anyone like to join me?”
Matt asked, “Which movie?”

“Uh, I forget what it’s called, but it’s got Cedric the Entertainer in it, I think.”

“I think I’ve seen the trailer for that one.”

“I’m in,” said Dan.

Allison sighed. “I’ll go if everyone else is going.”

“Andrew, what about you?” Renee asked.

Dan turned away to hide her grimace.

One corner of Andrew’s mouth curled upward. “Me and mine are busy. Ask the rookie.”

Neil didn’t wince at Andrew’s callous tone, but it was a near thing. Being on his own again stung even if it was his decision, even if it was for the best. He told Renee, “I’ll think about it,” and ignored the looks the upperclassmen sent his way.

Once the break was over, Neil was more than ready to throw himself back into studying old UT games.

The hours dragged by slowly. Neil dutifully took notes on UT’s line-up, their opponents’ strategies, and everything he could find about their new assistant coach. Wymack gave Neil’s work an approving nod and said he would type it all up that night before telling Neil to get out.

Neil met the others in the hallway. On the way out to the parking lot, he listened to Dan and Allison bicker about where they should eat and kept his eyes away from Andrew. Renee ended the argument by suggesting a diner that was both decent and inexpensive.

After dinner, Matt drove them back to the Tower. Dan followed Matt and Neil into their suite while Renee and Allison went next door to theirs. Neil passed the evening on the couch with Matt and Dan watching a show about an ill-fated drug dealer.

A few episodes later, they paused to take turns using the bathroom and get some light snacks from the kitchen. Neil returned to the couch in time to hear Dan say, “We’ve gotta get the monsters on our side or else we’ll be out of spring championships in a couple weeks.”

“Sorry I messed that up,” Neil said. Dan pinned her hopes on him to bring the two halves of the team together and he only made things worse.

Matt elbowed Dan lightly and guilt flickered over her face. “It’s not your fault,” she said.

“You okay?” Matt asked. “Things seem chilly between you two.”

“He has a right to be pissed that I went back on our deal,” said Neil.

Dan made a dismissive gesture. “Probably best you’re not too close to the monster anyway. It really looked like he was gonna punch Kevin at practice. I think his meds are acting up again.”

“Maybe we should try asking Kevin for help,” Matt suggested. “Winning is the most important thing to him and he has the most pull with Andrew right now.”

“I don’t get any of them,” Dan said with a sigh. “Nicky obviously wants to hang with us, but he always sides with his cousins. Aaron doesn’t look like he can stand Andrew most of the time and
has been hardcore pining for Katelyn, but he never tries to get away. What the hell is keeping them all together?”

“I don’t think Aaron would want to be friends with us even if Andrew wasn’t a factor,” said Matt. “I had to walk him to class a few times when he was a freshman and he looked embarrassed just to be seen with me.”

Dan rolled her eyes. “He doesn’t like being associated with any of us.”

“He belongs on this team as much as anyone else,” Neil pointed out.

“Yeah, which isn’t something he wants advertized, I’m sure,” said Matt. “As much as we love being on this team, fitting Coach’s criteria isn’t exactly something many of us are proud of.”

“Maybe talking to Kevin isn’t such a bad idea,” Dan mused. She pulled out her phone and tapped at the screen with her thumbs. “If he can’t help, he might be able to give us answers.”

Matt hummed and stretched his arms above his head. “Hopefully you catch him in a sharing mood. He doesn’t strike me as the type to willingly offer up sensitive info.”

You have no idea, Neil thought.

Dan shrugged and kept tapping away at her phone. “It’s worth a shot.”

Just after Dan finished her message and tucked her phone away, someone knocked on the door. Neil figured it was Allison or Renee coming to join them out of boredom, but when Dan called, “It’s open!” it was Kevin that came into the suite.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, glaring hard at Neil.

Neil pointed to the television.

“There a problem?” Matt asked.

Kevin kept his eyes on Neil. “Just because Coach let you miss practice doesn’t mean I intend to.”

“We’re still doing night practices?” Neil was surprised that Andrew would allow that.

Matt frowned. “Is that really the best idea?”

“Abby said he was fine to play,” Kevin replied. “He needs to get back on the court.”

Dan raised objections- pushing Neil too hard now could set him back- but Neil was already getting his shoes on. Kevin understood the mental block he was dealing with. If anyone could help him get through it, it was Kevin.

“You don’t have to do this,” Matt reminded him.

Neil gave him a half-hearted wave and shrugged on his coat. “Don’t wait up.”

Kevin followed him out into the hall and pulled the door shut. He scrutinized Neil for a moment before motioning to follow him. Andrew was waiting for them near the elevator. He didn’t look at Neil once.

In the backseat of Andrew’s car, Neil’s leg bounced anxiously as they sped down Perimeter Road. No one tried to break the silence, which suited Neil just fine. He was tangled in thoughts of Riko
and the Ravens. There were bombs ready to go off in his mind at any moment.

Andrew parked in front of the stadium door. Kevin punched in the code to let them inside. Neil followed them to the locker room and changed in the shower stall as quickly as he could. Kevin and Andrew weren’t there when he got back. Alone, he pulled on the rest of his practice uniform before heading out to the inner court.

His racquet was waiting for him on the bench. Neil left his helmet and gloves beside it and began stretching a few feet away from Kevin. They warmed up and jogged a few laps with Andrew watching from his seat a few rows up.

After they were done, Neil watched Kevin set up some cones in a familiar pattern on the court, zig-zagging over the first-fourth line. He knew that Kevin had been teaching him Raven drills all along, but it was different now that he’d trained with the Ravens themselves. It was no longer a glimpse into the hidden world of the most prestigious collegiate Exy team, it was a reminder of something he’d rather forget.

Neil forced himself to walk onto the court. As soon as he was through the door, memories of Evermore rushed into the forefront of his mind: black uniforms, fangs digging into his arm, a cane hitting his shoulder blades.

Kevin nudged the last cone into place with his shoe and turned to face Neil. “Do you know where you are?”

Neil blinked a few times. Kevin’s jersey flickered orange-black-orange. He licked his chapped lower lip and said, “Yes.”

“Bolt the door,” Kevin told him.

Part of Neil wondered how Kevin stomached his own life, how he could return to the court every day after what he’d been through. Exy was the bright spot in Neil’s bleak year in Millport. It was an indulgence. Now, Neil felt nauseated wearing his gear.

Clumsily, Neil tried to knock the cones down in the order Kevin called out. His racquet felt wrong. The court felt too empty. Everything was strange.

”Again,” Kevin said before calling out three different numbers.

Neil darted after the first ball Kevin served, snagged it before it bounced, and took his shot too soon. The ball smashed into the wrong cone. The second ball knocked into two cones, neither of them the one he was aiming for. Kevin served the third ball and this time Neil took a few extra seconds to position himself before shooting. He hit the right cone, but there wasn’t much satisfaction in it.

“You need to get it together,” Kevin chided as he set the cones up. “Focus.”

Neil grit his teeth and adjusted his grip on his racquet. They went through five more rounds before he started getting the hang of it again. It wasn’t perfect, but it was progress. He tried to ignore Riko’s voice at the back of his mind.

When Kevin stopped to set up the cones after the tenth round, Neil paced up and down the half-court line. He had to get this right. He couldn’t afford to make mistakes with spring championships right around the corner.

Kevin pulled off his helmet and scrubbed a gloved hand over his hair.
"What's the hold-up?" Neil asked impatiently.

“Riko has a knack for ruining things.”

Neil stopped pacing and narrowed his eyes. He couldn't tell if Kevin was trying to criticize him in some roundabout way or not.

“According to him, I can’t meet my full potential as long as I’m just a human.” Kevin flexed his left hand as he looked down at it. "That’s why he hurt me. Turning me into a vampire could’ve fixed my hand and he was certain he'd get permission once the master told Lord Kengo about my injury. Obviously, Riko overestimated how much his father cares about Exy.”

The silence was heavy between them until Kevin quietly said, “I don’t want him to win, Neil.”

“He won’t.” Neil’s voice came out stronger than he expected it to. There was a complicated knot of emotions in his chest that he didn’t want to untangle; he didn’t want to dig to find out whether he believed himself or not. “Just serve the ball already. We don’t have all night.”

Kevin nodded and put his helmet back on, ready to keep going.
The Beginning of the End

Chapter Summary

School starts up again and Neil has some difficult conversations.

Chapter Notes

As always, if I need to add any content warnings, just let me know.

Neil watched the clock while Betsy watched him from her armchair. They’d only exchanged a handful of words since they sat down in her office and Neil felt the silence was like a weight on his back, but he kept his mouth shut. After all his missteps in the past year, he didn’t trust himself not to give something up accidentally.

The minute hand twitched to the next dot. Seven minutes down, twenty-three to go.

“I was trying to find something to watch on TV the other night and I managed to catch some of Riko Moriyama’s latest interview,” Betsy said, watching for his reaction. “He said you spent some time with the Ravens over the break. Is that where you got hurt?”

Neil’s teeth clenched. Someone started a rumor after seeing Neil and Jean at the airport together in West Virginia. Riko looked almost smug when he confirmed it for the press. Whether or not he orchestrated the whole thing, Neil didn’t know. The evidence of his time at Evermore was still lingering on his face: yellow, brown, and green bruises slowly fading and a bandage over his cheekbone.

Betsy brushed something off the notepad in her lap and asked, “Will you tell me how you got hurt, Neil?”

“I play a contact sport.”

“I guess your helmet can’t protect you from everything,” she said mildly, like she caught the lie and chose to let it go. “Did you get to see your parents at all over break?”

“No.”

“Do they worry about you? You must be under a lot of stress with your classes, Exy, and all this media attention.”

“There’s nothing to worry about.”

She jotted something down and the scritch of her pen made him even more tense. “How would you describe your relationship with them?”

Neil glanced at the clock again. “I told you last time that I don’t want to discuss my parents with you.”
“Is there someone that you talk to about this stuff? Someone you trust?”

“Yeah,” he said. It felt more honest than it should have been.

When it was clear he wasn’t going to elaborate, Betsy moved on. “What are you looking forward to most this semester?”

“Championships.” He wanted to finish the season with the Foxes, but he knew better than to really hope for it. If he wanted to live and do so as a free man, he’d have to run. His father wanted him dead, Riko marked him as his property, and there was no way in hell he would risk the witness protection program with the Moriyama empire looming over everything.

“Anything else?” Betsy asked. “Do you have any fun plans or things you want to try?”

“Not really.”

She wrote something else down.

Somehow they made it through the session. She kept attempting to breathe life into a conversation that Neil killed again and again with short, stilted answers until finally their time was up. Then, Neil gave her a lukewarm, “Have a good day,” before making his escape.

As he strode down the hallway, he realized he wouldn’t ever have to see her again. The thought thrilled him at first, but it turned sour once he started wondering just how long he had left with the Foxes.

When he reached the waiting area, Matt stood up and shot him an uncertain half-grin. “Hey, man, how’d it go?”

Neil managed a tense smile and said, “It was fine. You ready to go?”

Thankfully, Matt didn’t press for more. The two of them headed out to Matt’s truck and Neil let himself relax into Matt’s aimless, but constant talking. He listened to Matt’s feelings about the weather, his thoughts on the mandatory counseling sessions, and a quick debate Matt had mostly with himself over what to have for dinner that night. The struggle of deciding between chicken or fish was easier to focus on than Neil’s other problems.

The money would run out. The Butcher’s men would catch up to him again. Riko would come after what he thought he was entitled to. Neil would be alone no matter where he went or who he became.

“You okay, dude?” asked Matt.

Neil looked up and saw that they were parked outside the stadium. Embarrassed, he said, “Yeah, I’m just… tired. Sorry.”

Matt frowned at him, but he accepted it.

They went inside and changed back into their gear before joining the rest of the team. Neil threw himself into practice with the Foxes. Despite his memories of the Ravens, Exy still made everything seem better. He pushed his body too hard to leave energy for his mind. Adrenaline carried him and instincts guided him until Wymack pounded on the wall to signal that it was time to wrap things up.

After they all showered and got dressed, Neil followed the upperclassmen out to the parking lot,
listening in on Dan and Matt’s conversation. She put an end to Matt’s food-related indecision by saying, “Easy. We’ll get both.” They both decided without any discussion that Neil would be joining them that evening, so instead of going out they ordered in and the three of them ate together in front of Matt’s TV.

Neil let himself waste the evening on the couch even though a voice at the back of his head told him he ought to be poring over maps and his mother’s list of contacts. He reasoned that he wasn’t leaving tomorrow, he still had some time to make his plans and pull up the roots he never meant to put down in the first place.

Before he knew it, Kevin was there to get him for night practice. Neil said goodnight to Dan and Matt as he hurriedly pulled his shoes on, and then he followed Kevin down to the parking lot with Andrew, whose silence on the drive to the stadium made Neil wish he’d walked instead. It was his own fault that Andrew wouldn’t look at him anymore, but knowing that didn’t make it any easier to deal with.

Neil didn’t understand how Andrew could kiss him like their survival depended on it one day and then act like they were total strangers the next. Maybe the indifference was genuine, but if there was something lurking underneath it then Neil wanted to dig it up. Maybe he just wanted Andrew to look at him again.

Either way, it made him feel childish and he scolded himself for being so stupid. Andrew keeping his distance was for the best. Neil reminded himself of this over and over as he followed Kevin to the locker room.

Kevin was ruthless on the court, which should have been enough to distract Neil from his thoughts, but every now and then Neil felt like he was being watched. Every time he turned to search the stands for Andrew, though, there was no sign of him.

“Focus,” Kevin commanded. “I don’t care what your problem is. Right now, you’re on my time, so get your shit together.”

Night practice dragged on longer than usual. Kevin’s anxiety about their upcoming game against the Longhorns became more obvious the longer he refused to call it a night. Neil couldn’t decide if he was grateful for the mind-numbing exhaustion or annoyed at being kept out so late. By the time they made it back to the Tower, Neil only cared about getting himself into bed before sleep claimed him.

It was hours before Matt’s alarm went off, but it seemed like only a few minutes. Neil’s body weighed a ton and his mind was completely absent as he dragged himself out of bed to get ready for morning conditioning. It was as if he didn’t sleep at all. Before he poured his first cup of coffee he already had plans for a nap later.

Matt shuffled into the kitchen and yawned so widely his eyes watered. He looked dead on his feet too, which made Neil feel slightly less pathetic. With a groan, he thumped his head against a cabinet and said, “It’s too goddamn early.”

Neil grunted in agreement.

Quietly, they sipped their coffee and struggled to wake up until it was six twenty. Then, they trudged out of their suite to meet the girls in the hallway. Dan made them take the stairs down, promising it would help wake them all up, but Neil still struggled not to fall asleep as soon as he climbed into the bed of Matt’s truck.
The coffee only upset his stomach and the morning air made him wish for a blanket. At six twenty-five, Neil was ready for the day to be over with.

Between Wymack and Dan there wasn’t a single scrap of sympathy for the bleary-eyed and sluggish Foxes. Renee and Andrew were the only ones who didn’t seem bothered by it. Neil did his best to get through his usual routine without nodding off and he was mostly successful. Still, he flinched when Wymack barked, “Time’s up!”

“Just let me die,” Nicky said as he sank to the floor. “Someone tell Erik he’s free to remarry.”

Aaron had dark bags under his eyes. He didn’t seem aware of his cousin’s theatrics.

Kevin huffed in annoyance. “Nicky, get up or we’ll leave you here.”

Neil was so distracted by them that he almost ran straight into Wymack.

Wymack folded his arms and leveled him with a hard look. “If you start feeling funny in the head, I expect you to call me or Abby.”

“I can sit through a couple lectures without losing my mind,” Neil said, absently picking at the loose edge of his bandage.

“If you start with that ‘I’m fine’ crap again-”

“I am fine.”

“Christ, kid, I’m serious.”

“So am I. I haven’t-” he checked around and lowered his voice- “felt ‘funny in the head’ in a while.”

Wymack didn’t look convinced. “Just be sure to watch yourself and if you need something, then ask for it. No more of this lone wolf bullshit, all right?”

“Yes, Coach.”

“Good. Now, get outta here.” Wymack lightly swatted the back of Neil’s head and let him go.

In the locker room, Neil yawned as he gathered up a towel and his street clothes. His vision swam as he stared at the back of his locker and an itch prickled his cheek. A nap was definitely in order. As he turned to go to the showers, he rubbed his itchy cheek against his shoulder and stopped dead in his tracks when he felt the bandage come off.

It landed next to his shoe. Neil stared down at it in dull surprise and he realized he’d forgotten to put on a new one that morning. His sweat and his fiddling with it probably hadn’t helped either. For a second, he thought that the others hadn’t noticed, but then he heard Nicky’s sharp inhale and a, “What the fuck?”

Neil wished this was a bad dream he could wake up from.

“What’s wrong, Nicky?” Matt asked.

Nicky grabbed Neil’s shoulder and turned him roughly. His eyes widened. “Neil, tell me this is a fucking joke.”

Dan was there in an instant, holding Neil’s chin and glaring at the tattoo on his cheek. Matt’s
furious questions overlapped with Nicky’s until Renee raised her voice to be heard over them, saying, “Guys, let’s hear what Neil has to say. Give him some breathing room.”

Matt and Nicky quieted down like scolded children. Dan let go of Neil’s chin, put her hands on her hips, and raised an eyebrow expectantly.

“I didn’t choose this,” said Neil.

“You chose to hide it,” Aaron said from the other side of the room.

Neil turned his head to look at him. He’d almost forgotten the twins were still in the room. Two lockers down from Aaron, Andrew was rummaging around in his bag for something, completely uninterested in what was going on.

Dan shot an accusing look at Kevin. “You knew about this too, didn’t you?”

Kevin replied, “I found out after he came home.”

“Were you gonna tell us?” Matt quietly asked Neil.

Neil shrugged and wrestled with his guilt. “I was waiting for the right moment.”

“Anything else you want to tell us?” asked Allison. There was ice in her voice. “Should we expect to see you in Raven colors next year or what?”

“No, of course not,” Neil snapped.

Dan shook her head and held a hand up to Allison; her patience had obviously run out. “Just get it removed, Neil. You can’t walk around with that on your face.”

“It’s bad enough that Kevin’s still got his,” Allison added.

Neil said, “Riko will retaliate if I do.”

Allison wasn’t swayed. “I’ll give you the money- or Matt will.”

“Yeah, totally,” Matt agreed. “Whatever you need.”

“The number doesn’t change anything,” Neil said. “I’m a Fox, no matter what that asshole wants.”

“Maybe we could cover it up in the meantime,” Renee suggested.

Allison pursed her lips and tilted her head in thought. “I have something that’ll probably work.”

“That’s settled then,” said Dan. “Let’s change out and head back. Neil, you’re coming with us to our suite.”

The Foxes dispersed with some low grumbling. Matt gave Neil another heavy look of concern before returning to his locker. Neil scooped his bandage up off the floor and threw it in the trash on his way to the showers.

Half an hour later, Neil was sitting on the toilet lid in the girl’s bathroom at Fox Tower while Allison smeared some kind of makeup over his cheekbone. Dan watched from the doorway with a pensive frown and eventually she asked, “Why didn’t you tell us about this sooner, Neil?”

Allison didn’t pause in her work, but she arched an eyebrow at Neil like she’d been wondering the
same thing.

“I mean, I get that you have a hard time opening up.” Dan continued. “I feel like we’ve been pretty accommodating so far, but you should’ve told us about this- you should’ve told us about Riko’s threat and Evermore, too. We would’ve had your back.”

“It’s my mess,” Neil countered. “Why should I drag you into it?”

“Because we’re your team.” Her eyes flashed with frustration. “We’re your friends and we give a shit about what happens to you.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t.”

He regretted the words when Dan’s expression went stony and Allison stopped to stare at him. Their silence made him feel small.

“You’re a moron,” Allison said. “You think we’re going to cut you loose just because you want us to? Have you met us?”

“I’m not really friend material,” Neil mumbled.

“We’ve noticed.”

“You fit right in,” Dan added, quiet but firm. “Don’t shut us out next time, okay? Let us be there for you when things get rough.”

Neil’s chest tightened with the urge to argue. His problems were too dangerous, too big for them. “No promises, but I’ll try.”

Soon after that, he left the girls’ suite with guilt in his gut and his heart wrung out like a dirty sponge.

He went next door to his own bathroom and inspected Allison’s handiwork in the mirror. Whatever she put on his face did a good job of hiding the ink, but he still wanted to cover the spot with a bandage just in case. After a few minutes of debating with himself, he decided to trust Allison’s promise that it would last him all afternoon.

On his way to his Spanish class, he checked his reflection twice in the dark screen of his phone to make sure the number wasn’t showing. He checked again once he found a seat in the back of the classroom. Even though the tattoo still wasn’t visible, he kept his head down just to be safe.

When his professor began teaching, Neil took notes more diligently than usual just so he had an excuse not to look up. He wasn’t entirely successful in staying awake, though, and he ended up sleeping through the last ten minutes of class. As soon as his classmates started packing up their things, he jerked awake so hard he flung his pen off his desk. It clattered to the floor and rolled until someone stopped it under their boot.

The girl picked up the pen and offered it back to him with a friendly smile. Neil recognized her immediately as Katelyn, the cheerleader that was supposedly Aaron’s girlfriend. He was uneasy about not having noticed her in the room beforehand.

“You’re Neil, right?” she asked. “My name’s-”

“I know who you are,” Neil said. “Uh, thanks for getting my pen.”
“No problem. I actually wanted to talk to you about something. Do you have time? I’ll buy you some coffee- or tea or whatever you drink. There’s a kiosk in the library we could go to.”

Neil had plans to get himself something caffeinated anyway, so he figured he might as well get it for free. Plus, he had to admit he was curious about what Katelyn could possibly have to say to him. He quickly shoved his things into his bag and followed Katelyn out of the building.

She prattled away endlessly about her family and Christmas as they walked to the library. Neil’s head was full of static. It didn’t matter to him that Katelyn’s cousin was pregnant and that Katelyn had already bought too many tiny socks and onesies. He gave the occasional “Oh, really?” and “That’s nice” to show he was listening, but otherwise tried to tune her out.

Once they had their drinks, they sat on a bench underneath a bare, spindly tree. The weather was ambiguously mild and whether it was chilly or warm was a matter of personal opinion. Some students walked around with their jackets zipped up to their chins while others sported t-shirts.

Katelyn took a whiff of her peppermint mocha and sighed in contentment. “I wish it snowed more here. I love winter.”

Neil sipped his iced coffee. He assumed she’d get to the point sooner if he didn’t add to the small talk.

“I was actually really looking forward to Christmas Eve,” she said. “I mean, I always do, but it was going to be special because Aaron was supposed to meet my family.”

Christmas Eve would’ve been just after Aaron saw Andrew kill Riko’s hunter and found out what Andrew really was. Neil turned his head so Katelyn wouldn’t see him wince and deflected with, “I guess it’s getting pretty serious between you two then.”

Katelyn hummed in agreement. “It was my parents’ idea; they knew I was sort of seeing someone and they wanted to meet him. I didn’t think Aaron would go for it, but he did. He was actually nervous about making a good impression- not that he would admit it- so we met up in Columbia a few times and I helped him pick out clothes and stuff.”

Neil stared straight ahead and swallowed nervously.

“He cancelled at the last minute,” Katelyn said finally. “I knew it was a huge step, but I hoped…. Anyway, we haven’t really talked much since then. He just said it was something to do with his brother, so I’ve been worried.”

“About Andrew?”

“About what Andrew did to him. He must’ve figured out that Aaron was seeing me.”

Neil frowned at her. “I don’t think Andrew would hurt Aaron.”

“They promised each other they’d stick together until graduation- no friends outside their little group or girlfriends. From Aaron’s told me, Andrew takes it really seriously. I have more than enough reason to be scared for him.”

Neil knew that already. He also knew Aaron’s interest in Katelyn was an open secret and that Andrew was aware of something going on between them. Carefully, he asked, “Why did you guys risk it?”

“Aaron said as long as we kept things casual we were toeing the line, but not crossing it.”
“You believed him?”

Katelyn raked her fingers through her hair and blew out a harsh breath. “Not really. He told me what happened when they were in high school.”

“What do you mean?”

“Andrew scared off the girl Aaron started seeing during senior year. He followed her to her job and threatened her in the parking lot. She wouldn’t go near Aaron after that.”

“Aaron went back on his word,” Neil replied with a shrug. “It makes sense that Andrew was angry.”

Katelyn looked horrified. “You can’t seriously be on his side.”

“I just said it makes sense, not that he had the moral high ground. If you knew Andrew you’d understand too.”

“Nothing could ever justify what he’s done to Aaron. I’m sorry if he’s had it rough, but it doesn’t give him a free pass. Did you know that Andrew was furious with Aaron just because he grieved for their mother? Does that make sense to you too?”

It did, but Neil wasn’t going to tell her that. After Andrew went to the trouble of killing Tilda for Aaron’s sake, of course Aaron’s grief looked like ingratitude.

Neil said blandly, “I’m not here to debate with you.”

“Right.” Katelyn scoffed and yanked a folded piece of paper out of her bag. “Can you give this to Aaron for me?”

Hesitantly, Neil took it from her. “Wouldn’t it be easier to text him?”

“I don’t know if he’s been reading my texts. I’m not sure he’ll read this either, but I figured it was worth a try.” She stood up and shouldered her bag. “Thanks for your help, Neil. I appreciate it.”

Neil nodded. “Thanks for the coffee.”

After she was gone, Neil got up to throw his empty cup away. He spotted Andrew and Kevin on the steps of the library. Kevin was distracted by his phone, but Andrew was staring right at Neil and the severe look on his face indicated that he’d seen the little meeting with Katelyn.

For a moment, Neil thought Andrew would come over to say something and he was embarrassed by how his stomach tightened in anticipation. In spite of everything, he was still disturbingly pleased at eliciting a reaction in Andrew—good or bad. The heat in Andrew’s eyes made him feel less like a ghost.

It was the craving for Andrew’s attention that made him drop the note in Aaron’s bag later that day. If Andrew’s anger was all Neil could get then he’d take it.
The confrontation Neil hoped for didn’t come until Friday when the Foxes were waiting at Upstate Regional for their delayed flight. He was by the wall of windows watching heavy sheets of rain beat down on the tarmac and he noticed Andrew out of the corner of his eye. Unsure of himself, he decided to stay quiet until Andrew made the first move. It wasn’t a long wait.

“You’ve been playing carrier pigeon,” said Andrew, “so I’ve got a message for you: stay out of my brother’s business.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “It was one note.”

“From the cheerleader.”

“From Katelyn, yes.”

“Aaron isn’t allowed to see her. He and I have an agreement.” The storm raging outside had nothing on whatever was brewing behind Andrew’s eyes.

“Okay,” Neil said mildly, “but Katelyn never promised to not write notes and I never promised to not stick pieces of paper in Aaron’s bag. I don’t get what your problem is.”

“Get a hobby if you’re bored enough to get this invested in Aaron’s love life.”

Neil said, “I don’t really care about Aaron or Katelyn. I did it for you.”

“Bullshit.”

“A little,” Neil admitted. “I didn’t think of it until later, but this could actually help you. You don’t want Aaron’s mental health to deteriorate more than it obviously already has. If he goes off the rails, he could compromise you.”

“Oh, if only I was perfectly capable of handling my own business,” Andrew said sarcastically. “Stay away from Aaron. I have no patience for people who break my rules.”

Neil checked to make sure no one was within earshot and leaned closer to Andrew to say, “Speaking of which, was kissing me against the rules?”
Andrew’s expression went cold; his walls were going up. “It meant nothing, so no.”

“I still can’t figure out why you did that,” Neil went on. “I was a mess that night and I smelled like death warmed over. It’s odd.”

“What’s odd is that you don’t kiss like you don’t swing- and don’t think I didn’t notice you getting turned on when I fed off you,” Andrew hissed. “Which closet is it, Neil? Are you gay, a vamp tramp, or both?”

“Neither. I’m not into men or vampires. You’re the only-”

“Don’t.”

They stared at each other with only a foot of space between them. Neil had no idea when they’d gotten so close. He could see the hot anger in Andrew’s eyes and part of him thrilled at being the cause, but he was quickly sobered by the realization of what he almost said.

Andrew’s chest rose and fell with a slow, deep breath. “I hate you,” he said. “You’ve been a problem since you got here.”

“Why did you let me stay then?”

“Neither of us is as smart as we ought to be.”

He was right about that. Self-preservation didn’t always come easy when it was wants versus needs. Neil looked away, unable to stand the intensity of his stare.

Outside, the storm seemed like it was only getting worse. Andrew lingered for only a minute, and then he left Neil alone with his confusion.

In spite of the thickening clouds, the Foxes’ flight number was called to begin boarding not long later. Neil ended up in the seat between Wymack and Abby and he stewed in his queasy irritation all the way to Atlanta.

When the plane landed at Hartsfield-Jackson, Neil trailed after his teammates into the terminal to wait for their next flight. They piled their carry-on bags on some seats at their gate before wandering off, leaving Wymack and Abby to watch their stuff. Neil took his notes on UT’s line-up and found somewhere to sit near the bathrooms, far enough away from the other people to give him a modicum of privacy.

From a nearby shop, he could hear Kevin lecturing Nicky about what he was and was not allowed to eat right before a game. Nicky argued back, “Oh my god, Kevin, there is protein in the peanut butter and chocolate tastes good! It’s a morale booster! Let go of me or I will bite you. I’m not even kidding.”

Longing gripped Neil’s heart as he eavesdropped. Somehow he felt lonelier than he had in Millport; perhaps because he knew now what he was missing out on. He reminded himself that it was for the best and turned back to his notes. The Foxes had a game to win in a few hours. The least he could do was make sure he was prepared.

For the next leg of the journey, Neil had the seat between Matt and Wymack in the row in front of Andrew, Kevin, and Nicky. During takeoff, he heard a pen rapidly clicking. The noise was coming from the row behind him. After a minute or so, he turned and craned his neck to see who was responsible for it. To his surprise, Andrew was the one clicking the pen as he scowled out the window. His tense frame screamed discomfort.
Once the plane reached its cruising altitude and leveled off, the clicking stopped. Neil wrestled down the urge to glance back at Andrew again.

After they landed and shuffled off the plane, the Foxes went straight to baggage claim to wait for their luggage. Neil stared at the scuffed belt moving round and round. The same guitar case passed him three times before he started to quietly panic over the possibility of his gear being lost. The others were still calmly waiting, so Neil kept his worrying to himself. He chewed his lip and shifted his weight until Allison’s bag finally appeared. Neil huffed quietly in relief.

They loaded up the twelve-passenger van that Wymack had reserved for them and left the airport in search of food that would be decent but still cheap enough to suit Wymack’s budget. They settled on an Italian restaurant that Abby spotted on a billboard off the highway.

By some stroke of luck, the restaurant was able to seat and serve them without too long of a wait. The Foxes split a few chicken and pasta dishes between them. Neil ate his small portion as fast as he could without giving himself a stomach cramp. He didn’t look up from his plate until Nicky jokingly asked their server for a dessert menu. Wymack lobbed a breadstick across the table and it hit Nicky’s head with a dull thwack. Abby smiled at the startled server and calmly asked for the check.

Wymack drove them straight to the Longhorns’ Exy stadium after that. A security guard led the Foxes’ van at a crawling pace to the spot they were meant to park in before escorting them all to their locker room.

With forty minutes until first serve, the Foxes changed into their gear and followed Dan out toward the inner court. The Longhorns and the Foxes had similar colors, so the whole crowd was in orange and white. The vast majority, of course, was there in support of the Longhorns, but a small section of PSU fans turned up and they cheered when they saw the Foxes come out of the tunnel.

Neil didn’t think his mind could get sucked back to Evermore with all that orange around him. The only thing he worried about was mix-ups on the court. It would be white-on-orange and orange-on-white out there and even the smallest error could cost them points. The stakes were higher than ever, and things would only get worse from there.

After they finished jogging laps, Dan led them all back to the locker room to finish stretching. They gathered their helmets and gloves and followed Wymack back out in a neat line. Andrew and Renee rolled the stick rack to the benches and locked it in place. Abby folded her arms tightly, hands clamped around her elbows, and her eyes kept darting to Neil like she was fighting the urge to check his mostly healed injuries all over again.

On the other side of the court, the Longhorns streamed out of their tunnel and began their warm-ups. They were an impressive team and Neil figured they were desperate to be more than almost-champions, but he didn’t care. They still had next year to try again. He didn’t.

“Okay, listen up,” Wymack said, beckoning his players closer. “These guys almost got a taste of semifinals last year. They want that trophy and they’ll do everything in their power to crush anyone in their way. They’ll come at you hard, so play smart and make ‘em look like the losers they are.”

A sudden burst of excited chatter in the stands distracted Neil from Wymack’s speech. It wasn’t the mascots that got them riled up this time, it was whoever showed up to sit in the VIP section next to the press box. A few security guards blocked Neil’s view while they looked over the crowd for threats and made sure their clients were set. When they moved out of the way, Neil’s stomach dropped at the sight of black hair, black clothes, and black tattoos.
Riko and Jean had come to watch the Foxes play.

Memories of recent wounds flared up across Neil’s body.

“Earth to Neil,” Wymack said, snapping his fingers.

Neil opened his mouth, but a choked noise was all that came out. Wymack whirled around to find what Neil was staring at.

Matt’s voice came low and angry over Neil’s right shoulder. “Why the fuck are they here?”

Andrew came up beside Neil. Behind him, Kevin hissed, “Don’t make eye contact.”

“Could he really mind-grab you from over there?” Aaron asked quietly.

Kevin told him to keep his voice down even though the others couldn’t hear over their own complaints and threats toward Riko. All the while, Andrew was silent and calm, focused on the man responsible for his fate.

“Will you help us tonight?” Neil asked him, staring at his blank profile.

Andrew didn’t take his eyes off Riko. “Worry about your own performance.”

Neil knew deep down that Andrew wouldn’t leave them high and dry that night, not with Riko watching. Riko might’ve been playing a different game than Neil and Kevin originally thought, but the Exy court was still the only battleground they could hurt him on. Andrew knew that.

“I hope he put money on Texas tonight,” Neil said. “I want to see his face when he loses it all.”

“Damn straight,” said Dan. “We got this.”

Nicky chimed in, “And if we don’t win, Andrew can jump Riko in the parking lot. That’d be a decent consolation prize.”

“I’ll help,” Matt offered.

“Simmer down,” said Wymack. “Neil, Kevin, get your heads on straight. There’ll be time to worry about those asshats after the game.”

Neil twisted his hands around the stick of his racquet and steered his thoughts back to the game.

Soon, the captains were escorted onto the court for the handshake and the coin toss. Then, it was time for the starters to take their places. Neil and Kevin positioned themselves on the half-court line and waited with their teammates behind them. Neil’s thoughts went quiet as the seconds ran down on the clock. When the buzzer blared, he was ready.

For the most part, the game wasn’t any rougher than usual. In the beginning, the score climbed evenly on both sides since neither team was able to get a decent advantage. The real problem was the Longhorns’ dealer: she had five inches on Dan and played like her priority was to land someone in the hospital. Dan tolerated it for the first quarter, and then she made a move. The body check was borderline illegal and whatever Dan said right after it was enough to make the other girl throw a punch. Dan took a few steps back, hands raised, as the referees came onto the court. They gave both dealers a yellow card and restarted the game.

Something shifted after that and for the rest of the first half Neil felt like he was fighting for his life. When the buzzer went off, every ounce of his focus and willpower went into keeping himself
upright, which was no small feat considering he couldn’t feel his legs.

“Well, fuck,” Matt said with a breathless wheeze of a laugh.

Neil nodded in agreement, too winded to speak.

In the locker room, Abby flitted between the Foxes, checking up on sore spots and handing out drinks. Neil quickly changed his bandage and put more tape on it to secure it in place. The others paced or stretched and tried to recover before the game started up again.

The Longhorns came at the Foxes with everything they had in the second half. Neil lost track of the score and most of his own teammates for an unnerving few minutes. He thought he heard Dan yell something to him, but it was hard to hear anything over his mark’s incessant stream of insults.

The refs came onto the court at least a dozen times to break up fights or hand out cards- two reds and five yellows went to the Longhorns for their dirty tactics. The Foxes seemed to silently agree that Dan’s yellow card was the only one they wanted to risk getting that night, so they took whatever the Longhorns dished out without retaliating.

It paid off in the end when they won, seven to six. Neil could hardly believe the numbers on the scoreboard as Matt and Nicky crashed into him to celebrate after the final buzzer. Elation soothed every throbbing bruise and scrape. The anger of the Longhorns and the home crowd made it even better.

Once the Foxes filed off the court, Renee made a beeline for Riko and Jean. Neil stopped to watch with mild fascination. With her background, she would be more than capable of taking care of herself, but Neil still felt a stab of fear on her behalf as she talked to Riko. He wished he could get closer to hear what they were saying.

“She and Jean have been texting each other since the fall banquet,” Kevin said.

Neil looked at him in surprise. “Seriously?”

“She gave him her number when Riko was distracted with you.” Kevin eyed the pair with lukewarm interest. “I’m sure Jean’s just humoring her. He knows it won’t go anywhere.”

Something in Jean’s expression made Neil think that Kevin missed the mark.

Renee rejoined the team a minute later and they all headed toward the locker room together. Kevin and Andrew slowed near the waiting reporters, anticipating the flurry of questions directed at Kevin. Neil kept his eyes on Matt’s back, intending to walk right past them until someone called out, “Neil, is it true that Riko marked you for his perfect Court?”

Neil stopped and looked at the reporters. The one who asked the question was staring at his bandage. They all looked hungry for this story, unaware of the poison in it. It wasn’t their fault that they didn’t know, but Neil hated them a little for it anyway.

He pulled the bandage and tape off his cheek, driven by a reckless desire to speak his mind. “If you’re asking about this, then yes.”

A different reporter said, “Rumor has it you spent winter break at Castle Evermore. Do you intend to transfer after the season’s over?”

Neil let out a sharp laugh. “I would rather die than join the Ravens.”
Kevin strained to keep smiling politely even with cold fury in his eyes. For a second, it seemed like he was going to intervene.

“Why get the tattoo then?”

“Lost a bet,” he quipped.

Someone else said, “But you have to know what it means. Riko wouldn’t give just anyone a number. Have you been approached by the national team yet?”

Neil cocked his head and gave the man a funny look. “Riko could tattoo a bird on his ass, but it wouldn’t help him fly. It’s just ink. This number doesn’t mean anything unless I say it does and it doesn’t make me something I’m not. It’s interesting, though, that people take this so seriously. I wonder what’ll happen when the Kool Aid runs out.”

Kevin wasn’t smiling anymore.

“You don’t think you’ll make it to Court?” the first reporter asked.

“Maybe I will, maybe I won’t,” replied Neil. “Either way, it won’t have anything to do with Riko. He’s nothing to me. That’s all I have to say on the subject. Thank you for your time.”

He nodded at Kevin and Andrew before leaving them to field the rest of the questions.

When he got to the locker room, Wymack turned away from the TV and fixed him with a bone-dry glare. “Caught the tail end of that. Do I want to know how the beginning went?”

“Probably not.”

“Right.” Wymack sighed. “I’m sure I’ll get an earful from Kevin.”

Neil wisely kept his mouth shut until the women’s showers were free for him to use. He chose to focus on the Foxes’ victory instead of Riko’s surprise appearance while he cleaned himself up, and then he went back to his teammates to distract himself with their ecstatic retellings of the game’s high points.

Kevin shot Neil a hateful glare on his way into the locker room. Neil felt a cold trickle of guilt that he tried desperately to shake off. His temper brought Riko’s wrath down upon the Foxes too many times already and not everyone had survived. Neil swallowed his bitter feelings and tried to put it behind him.

When Kevin and Andrew were finally ready to leave, the Foxes hauled their belongings out to the van. Security guards stood on the sidewalks and security vans slowly patrolled the parking lot as fans poured out of the stadium doors. The upperclassmen kept their voices down until they were all safely buckled into their seats with the doors locked. Andrew’s lot had nothing to say.

In the front, Abby read off directions to the hotel while Wymack drove and muttered about the traffic around the university. Neil yawned and rubbed moisture from his eyes as he listened to their voices. There was only exhaustion and hunger in the wake of all the excitement. Even though Wymack pulled off the main road to buy everyone a quick meal, Neil was still hungry and he spent the rest of the drive hoping he’d find something decent in the hotel’s vending machines.

Because of the traffic, it took an extra ten minutes to get to their hotel. Wymack let Abby out at the front door so she could check in and continued on to find a parking space.
The Foxes got room keys from Abby in the lobby and split up to take elevators up to their floor. Neil and the upperclassmen wordlessly drifted down the hallway until they spotted their door numbers. The girls’ room was across from Matt and Neil’s. Dan patted Neil’s head, stretched up to do the same to Matt, and bid them goodnight through a large yawn.

While Matt murmured something to his girlfriend, Neil went into their room and dropped his stuff by the bed closest to the door. Matt came in a few seconds later and flopped down on the other bed, saying, “Man, I’m beat.”

Neil nodded in agreement. “I’m gonna find a vending machine. You want anything?”

“Nah, I’m good, but thanks.”

Neil made sure he had his keycard and his wallet and left the room. As he did, Nicky leaned out into the hallway and said, “Hey, Neil, there’s a pool.”

“Don’t have anything to swim in,” Neil said. He winced at his mistake when Nicky laughed at him.

“Go skinny dipping! Live a little.”

Aaron’s sharp retort came from inside the room. Nicky chided his cousin for being a prude and Neil used the distraction to make his escape.

The vending machines were tucked away in a small room with the ice machine and a drinking fountain. Neil fed dollar bills into both vending machines to get a bottle of water and a few bags of snack food. The door pushed open behind him after his last bag of pretzels dropped. Neil was sure it was Kevin, armed and ready with a tirade, so he braced himself as he turned around.

Except it wasn’t Kevin standing there, it was Aaron.

“Give me a second and I’ll be out of your way,” Neil said tersely. He got his purchases from the machine and stepped around Aaron, only for Aaron to immediately block his path.

“You’re going to tell me what you know about Andrew,” he said. His eyes were tired, but angry and his hands were balled into fists at his sides.

“Ask him yourself if you want to know more,” Neil said.

“I’m asking you.”

“Why should I tell you anything?”

“I almost got impaled in an alley and I’m willing to bet it was your fault. Start talking.”

Neil flinched at the mention of the hunter. He would never forget the photos and the bottomless grief he fell into when he thought Andrew was dead. Deflating, he said, “Riko took my phone and used it to text Andrew the night you were attacked. That was the extent of my involvement.”

Aaron looked uncertain. “Does he want Andrew dead because of Kevin?”

“No.”

“A simple no isn’t gonna cut it.”

“It’s all you’re getting.”
Aaron’s lip curled. “Is he the one that did this to Andrew?”

“Aaron-”

“Just tell me, asshole.”

Neil wasn’t in the mood to deal with this. “Have you talked to Katelyn lately?”

“Evading. Should I take that as confirmation?”

“Why did you start avoiding her all of a sudden? Is it because you’re freaked out about the body you helped bury or because you’re even more afraid of Andrew now that you know what he is?”

Aaron scoffed. “You know you’re out of the group, right? You don’t owe Andrew anything.”

“I don’t owe you anything either. Goodnight, Aaron.” Neil shoulder past him and went back out into the hall.

Aaron caught up easily and persisted, “I deserve to know what’s going on. I’m done with being left in the dark.”

“I’m not your therapist. Talk to Betsy- she already knows about Andrew.”

Finally, Aaron let him go with a harsh, “Go fuck yourself.”

The conversation was messy and only half-finished. Neil regretted getting into it in the first place, but he almost wished he could have told Aaron more. There wasn’t any hope for the twins’ relationship as long as they refused to actually talk to each other.

Gritting his teeth, Neil reminded himself for the hundredth time to stay out of it.
Carnage

Chapter Summary

The Tower residents get a nasty surprise.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: canon violence/choking, dead animals, mention of a homophobic slur, discussion of canon character death

On Sunday morning, Neil and Matt were startled awake by someone pounding at their door. Matt stumbled out to answer it and Neil rolled over to try to fall back asleep until he heard Matt raise his voice in alarm. He nearly fell from his bunk in his haste to get down the ladder.

Matt had one shoe on and was rooting around his jacket pockets for keys. Dan stood in the doorway, still in her pajamas and furious. “We have to get down to the parking lot,” she told Neil. “Something happened last night. The cops are here.”

Renee and Allison were waiting on the sidewalk for them, a few feet from a swarm of students that Neil vaguely recognized from around the Tower. There were a few police officers asking if anyone had seen or heard anything during the night.

Neil didn’t understand until he finally saw the parking lot: car doors were dented, windows were cracked, and everything was splattered with rancid meat and raw eggs. Still processing his shock, he trailed after the upperclassmen as they carefully made their way through the chaos to where Matt’s truck and Allison’s convertible were parked next to each other.

Matt let out an anguished noise when they got there and Allison’s hands balled into fists. The extent of the damage done to their cars made it obvious who did this and why— not that there had been much doubt to begin with.

A cold lump formed in Neil’s throat. It was his fault. He decided to mouth off on live TV last Friday and now everyone around him was suffering the consequences. Over the years, he and his mother caused plenty of problems for all sorts of people, but none of it mattered as soon as they skipped town. Neil couldn’t leave the fallout behind this time. He cared too much and there was nothing he could do to stop the guilt from burning holes in his stomach. He could only watch and listen to the growing swarm of students raise their voices in outrage and disbelief.

“I’m sorry,” he offered weakly.

“Shut up,” hissed Allison. “Unless you were out here with a baseball bat and a carton of eggs last night, I don’t want to hear that from you.”

He shook his head. “This is on me. I’m the one the Ravens are pissed at.”
“If you backed down after all the shit they’ve pulled, we’d have to disown you. This doesn’t end until we put those assholes in their place.” She worked her jaw and turned back to her car with her chin tipped up haughtily. “This is pathetic. They’re dead wrong if they think this will hurt us.”

Matt grimaced and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, but I mean it stings a little, you gotta admit.”

Allison leveled him with a harsh glare. “Better our cars than one of us.”

Neil’s last memory of Seth hit him like a punch in the gut.

Matt patted his shoulder and said, “Don’t worry about it, Neil. We’ve got it covered.”

“What about the cousins?” Neil asked, though he wasn’t eager to find out the answer. They weren’t as well off financially as Matt and Allison were and they blew through all of Tilda’s life insurance money already.

“Who’s gonna break the news to the monsters?” Matt asked Dan.

Renee said, “I called Andrew already.”

“Speak of the devil and he appears,” Andrew’s voice said from behind them.

Matt startled and whirled around. “Oh, hey, guys.”

Neil couldn’t bring himself to look at Andrew’s group, so he stepped closer to Matt’s truck and pretended to inspect one of the larger dents. He took shallow breaths, but it didn’t make the stench any easier to deal with.

“Jesus,” Nicky said. “I feel like we should be flattered by the effort. How bad’s the GS?”

“We haven’t looked yet.”

Aaron knocked into Neil on purpose as he passed. The rest of Andrew’s group followed him to the back corner of the lot where Andrew had parked.

Matt touched Neil’s shoulder and asked, “You good?”

“I’m not the one they went after,” Neil said bitterly.

“Those assholes did this all on their own,” Dan pointed out. “This isn’t your fault.”

She was giving him an out, but it was too easy. Neil didn’t deserve forgiveness or understanding or sympathy.

He was thinking about saying so when he heard Nicky cry, “Oh my god! Is that a dead fox? Holy shit. What the fuck is wrong with people? I’m gonna- oh, lord, I’m gonna barf.”

Neil squeezed past Matt’s truck and darted through the next row of cars to get to the back of the lot. When he saw the GS, his jaw dropped in shock. Whoever did this attacked it with a viciousness that the other cars were spared from. The frame was heavily damaged and the hood was practically caved in. Parts of the engine were scattered on the pavement around it along with shards of broken glass from the windows. A three-letter slur was painted along one side; it could’ve been aimed at Andrew’s group in general or just at Nicky. Compost was dumped into the seats and, sure enough, there was a dead fox draped over the steering wheel.
When he took a few steps closer, the smell of it washed over him and almost made him gag. He risked a glance at Andrew’s face; he was sure the blank expression he found there would haunt him later.

“You happy now?” Aaron seethed, marching over to him and jabbing a finger into his chest hard enough that Neil took half a step back. “This is your fault, asshole. When are we gonna stop having to deal with your messes, huh?”

“I’m sorry,” Neil said quietly. “I expected them to target me.”

“Tell that to Seth.”

Neil reeled back, stunned by how easily Aaron threw the accusation out in the open. He didn’t see Allison moving- didn’t even realize the upperclassmen were close enough to hear- until she backhanded Aaron with enough force that his head snapped to the side.

Andrew shoved Neil aside. In a second, he forced Allison onto her knees with her arm wrenched behind her back. Then, he grabbed the back of her neck with his free hand and shoved her face-down onto the pavement. She struggled under his weight, but he kept her down with a knee to the small of her back and a choking grip around her neck.

“Andrew!” Dan shouted.

Renee threw her weight into Andrew’s solid form and tried to push him off. “Andrew, it’s just Allison. Let her go. You’re going to hurt her.”

“That’s the point,” Andrew said blankly.

“Andrew.”

Andrew leaned closer Allison’s head and hissed, “No one touches what’s mine.”

Allison let out a choked noise. Broken glass scraped under her shoes as she fought against him.

“Stay still,” Renee warned her. “Andrew, give her to me. She’s mine to protect.”

“You’re doing an excellent job,” Andrew mocked. “You get a gold star, Renee.”

The others knew better than to intervene for fear of making it worse. Dan was shaking with anger and Matt seemed torn between fear and outrage. Kevin and Aaron both looked half worried. Nicky slowly crouched down to touch Allison’s scraped hand and murmur something that was meant to be comforting.

Neil knew he had to do something. This whole mess was his fault. He knelt down and spoke to Andrew in German. “Let her go. You’ve made your point.”

“I’m not sure I have,” Andrew said tightly. He squeezed harder and Allison made another horrible, garbled sound in the back of her throat.

“If you kill her, the season will be over. The team can’t go on with eight people.”

“Andrew, let go of her,” Renee pleaded.

“This is overkill,” said Neil. “This isn’t you.”

Andrew’s laugh was rusty, but jarring- a warning sign of something far worse yet to come. “Shows
what you know,” he said. His biceps were shivering under the fabric of his long-sleeved shirt. Neil guessed it was because of the effort it took to hold his inhuman strength at bay, which was a good sign. If he really wanted her dead, he would’ve snapped her neck already.

Despite the warning bells in his head, Neil put his hand in front of Andrew’s face to get him to look up. “He’s safe now. You did your job, so it’s okay to let go. You’re not a monster.”

Andrew’s fury broke through the haze of his amusement and the look in his eyes raised the hair on the back of Neil’s neck. He said, “She hurt my brother. I’ll be whatever I have to be to keep the promise I made to him.”

“Andrew, I…” Aaron’s voice came out so small and surprised that Neil wanted to see his expression, but he couldn’t take his eyes off Andrew. Aaron cleared his throat and said, “She didn’t hurt me. Neil’s right. You don’t need to do this.”

“I’ll give you something in exchange for her safety,” Neil added for good measure. Andrew’s laughter meant he needed blood and the sooner the better, but even if he asked for something else Neil didn’t think he’d mind. He was in too deep.

“You’ll give me what?” Andrew asked.

“Anything you want.”

Something flickered across Andrew’s face too quickly for Neil to identify. He released Allison’s neck and fluidly rose to his feet, staring down at Neil with disdain. “A blank check? You’re getting dumber by the day.”

“I never claimed to be smart,” Neil replied. He moved away from Allison so Renee could help her to her feet and guide her away from Andrew’s lot. Matt and Dan both wrapped an arm around Allison’s shoulders and waist to support her as soon as she was within their reach. Renee faced Andrew with a rarely-seen anger in her eyes.


“Go away,” she croaked, her face tucked into Matt’s chest.

“You could have killed her, you fucking animal,” Dan seethed.

“I made my rules clear to you all,” Andrew replied calmly. “The consequences for breaking them should not come as a surprise.”

Dan’s eyes flashed. “It was a mistake recruiting you. We’ve made excuses and allowances for your bullshit, but that ends right now. You don’t strangle somebody over a slap in the face and if we’re being totally honest, you and Aaron definitely deserve-”

A thundering voice cut her off. “What in the hell is going on over here?”

Neil’s heart jumped into his mouth. He hadn’t noticed Wymack making his way over to them through the angry crowd and the mess. Now Wymack stood at the edge of their little battleground and swept a harsh look over the warring factions. “Don’t make me ask twice,” he barked. “Someone better start talking.”

Dan summed it up, “Allison smacked Aaron in his dumb, fat mouth and Andrew went berserk. I think we need to reconsider a few contracts.”
“Hey,” Nicky said quietly. He shrank away from Dan when she glared at him, but he still tried to defend his cousin. “He did warn you guys not to lay hands on any of us.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Matt said. “Don’t make excuses for his behavior just because you’re stuck with him.”

Wymack eyed the cut on Allison’s cheek and the angry red patches on her throat. Then, he swiveled to glower at Andrew. “You are going to listen to what I have to say about all of this later. Acknowledge.”

“I will listen,” Andrew said slowly, like he was indulging a child.

Wymack told the upperclassmen to go wait with their cars, effectively splitting up the halves of the team. The police arrived soon after that and cordoned off the parking lot to keep the press and curious onlookers at bay. It took a long time for them to interview everyone and get statements from witnesses.

Neil stood by Wymack’s side while an officer asked the upperclassmen questions about their cars, where they were that morning, and whether or not they saw anything. Once he moved on to the next cluster of irate college kids, Wymack and Neil went back to the ruined GS, where a different officer was talking to the cousins. Nicky was answering all of the questions regardless of who they were directed at and it looked like the officer didn’t appreciate being ignored by the twins.

After the police, the Foxes had to talk to the insurance agents who showed up to inspect the damage of their clients’ cars. A woman walked confidently up to Andrew’s group and, unlike the cop, she didn’t care that Nicky did all the talking.

By the time Neil’s teammates were done answering questions, a few tow trucks arrived to haul away the cars that were too damaged to be safely driven. The other Tower residents seemed to come to the conclusion that Neil had reached earlier and he could hear them murmuring amongst themselves about all the trouble the Exy team stirred up.

Wymack gathered the team together again and said that the school would get them rental cars for the week. He added, “If repairs are gonna take longer than that, let me know and I’ll take care of the rentals.”

Nicky scoffed. “There’s no way the insurance company will bother covering all this damage. Our car is fucked.”

“So we’ll buy something else,” Aaron said coldly. “It doesn’t really matter.”

“Andrew and I are getting lunch for everybody,” Wymack announced. “Figure out what you want in ten minutes or I’ll decide for you.”

The smell hanging over the parking lot killed Neil’s appetite, but free food was free food and he hadn’t eaten anything yet. It looked like the others were having similar thoughts. Reluctantly, they decided on a restaurant together and Dan typed out their orders on her phone to text to Wymack.

Once Wymack and Andrew left to get the food, the rest of the team stood together in awkward silence. Dan and Matt’s anger had faded into weariness. Kevin kept his eyes on the news vans lurking along Perimeter Road, but Neil suspected he just didn’t want to look at his teammates for the time being.

Allison held her head high and stepped closer to Neil. She ran an appraising look over his face and said, “You and I should talk.”
More guilt flooded Neil’s chest. Cringing, he said, “I know. I owe you an apology—several apologies.”

Words would never make up for what she’d lost because of him, but words were all he had. The weight of her stare told him she knew exactly what he was referring to. She shook her head and said, “We’ll get to that later. I just wanted to thank you for trying to call off the monster.”

Neil rubbed the back of his neck. After months of wanting to avoid Allison, all Neil wanted to do now was explain himself to her.

Dan spoke up before he could think of anything to say. “This is unacceptable,” she said, flicking an icy look between Aaron and Nicky. “We agreed to put up with your bullshit in the beginning and since then we’ve tried to be accommodating, but Andrew crossed a line today. If it ever happens again, we’re done. We’re not going to back you up or take your side or tell Coach to give you more chances. Are we clear?”

Nicky’s shoulders sagged. “Yeah, we’re clear. I really am sorry for what he did, Allison. I wish I could promise that it won’t happen again, but Andrew’s Andrew. There’s no reining him in.”

“How come Neil could do it then?” Matt challenged. “Whatever he said to Andrew back there seemed to do the trick.”

Nicky flicked his gaze toward Neil. “Who knows? He speaks Andrew’s language better than me.”

Neil shook his head, but kept his mouth shut. He wasn’t the one who had any sway over Andrew, it was Aaron. The fact that Aaron couldn’t see it made him angrier than he expected it to. There wasn’t a single doubt in Neil’s mind that Andrew would do anything for his brother.

“Allison, are you all right?” Kevin asked.

Allison was visibly annoyed by his question, knowing full well that he wasn’t asking out of sympathy or concern for her wellbeing. Like the insurance agents, he only wanted to know the extent of the damage so repairs or a replacement could be arranged if necessary. She didn’t give him an answer and let him read whatever he wanted into her silence.

“Let’s go inside,” Dan said with a tired sigh. “I need a shower and a drink.”

Nicky said, “It’s not even noon… but yeah, me too. Aaron, we’ve got tequila left, don’t we?”

Dan ignored him and linked arms with Allison to take her back to the Tower. Matt kept his hand on the small of Allison’s back supportively. Renee brought up the rear, casting a single look back at Neil and the others over her shoulder. Her smile had yet to make a reappearance.

Neil went inside with the other three and they took the stairs to avoid getting stuck with other students in the elevator. The whole way up, Neil thought about how far Aaron’s influence might be able to go, if he could somehow negotiate a truce with his brother and end their cold war for good. Neil couldn’t help wondering if Andrew would still want to end his life if he wasn’t alone, but that line of thinking made his chest too tight to breathe.

Instead of hanging around with the upperclassmen with his souring mood, Neil decided he’d rather go running. There was too much restless energy in his body to sit through lunch and he knew Matt and the girls well enough to trust that they’d put his food in the fridge for him when Wymack got back.

While Matt took a quick shower, Neil went into the bedroom to change. His shirt was halfway off
when there was a sharp knock at the door. He yanked it back down and called, “Come in.”

Allison pushed the door open and leaned against the jamb, eyes guarded and lips set in a grim line. “If you insist on running, try to stay where it's safe and people can see you. You know Riko’s not above murder.”

Neil swallowed thickly and looked down at his feet while he scraped together something to say. “Seth didn’t deserve to die like that. For what it’s worth, I’m really sorry about what happened.”

Allison shrugged helplessly. “I can’t decide if knowing it wasn’t his choice makes it better or worse. It’s so unfair.”

“Did Kevin tell you it was Riko?”

“No, Andrew did. He showed up at Abby’s house and said that I should blame the right person and use my grief for something useful.”

Neil looked away from her, ashamed of how long he spent hoping she wouldn’t find out the truth. He was used to dodging people and his own guilt in order to keep moving, but now it only made him feel like a coward. Allison knew this whole time that he played a part in Seth’s murder and she had his back anyway. He had no clue how he was supposed to repay her for that.

“I don’t care how sorry you feel,” Allison said. “Just promise me that you’ll help us make Riko regret the day he was born.”

Neil nodded and squared his shoulders. “Trust me, I’ll do whatever I can.”
Both twins were missing from afternoon practice on Wednesday. Andrew was at therapy like usual and Aaron called off sick for the first time that year. Neil overheard Nicky that morning groaning about getting Aaron’s notes for him and how difficult Aaron was when he was feeling under the weather.

When Aaron showed up with Andrew and Nicky, though, he seemed perfectly fine. The locker room fell silent as the three of them got their gear and practice uniforms. Nicky’s shell-shocked expression and Andrew’s frigid rage told everyone that something major had happened.

Dan grabbed Nicky’s arm to prevent him from following his cousins into the changing room. “What the hell is going on?” she asked, barely managing to keep her voice at a low whisper.

“Aaron ambushed Andrew,” Nicky said blankly. “I was sitting there reading a magazine and then Aaron came marching in out of nowhere. He went right into Betsy’s office like he owned the place.”

“He said he was sick this morning,” said Kevin. “He missed conditioning and the last hour of practice for nothing.”

Matt gaped at Kevin in disbelief. “That’s what you’re focusing on? Seriously?”

“What’s Aaron doing?” Neil asked. His question was directed more at himself than anyone else. He couldn’t make any sense of it.

Nicky shrugged loosely. “Your guess is as good as mine, man. They’ve barely looked at each other in months.”

Renee commented, “It’d be nice if they were able to have a real conversation.”

“It’d be nice if they both went to the psych ward where they belong,” Allison fired back.

“Well-” Dan scratched her head and made a face- “this should be interesting, I guess. Let’s cross our fingers and hope for minimal bloodshed.”

Matt and Allison traded a look that said neither of them were feeling very optimistic about this.

“Lord, give me strength,” Nicky muttered as he disappeared into the changing room.
Neil didn’t know what Aaron’s strange behavior would accomplish, but at least things between the
twins could get much worse. He watched the two of them for the rest of practice, desperate for
signs of a change.

The twins didn’t seem any different that day or the next, of course. Neil still hoped for change even
if it was slow. Both twins were impossibly stubborn- maybe Aaron had a shot at getting through to
his brother this time.

Neil was so distracted by the Minyards and Friday’s game against Belmonte that he didn’t realize
the significance of Friday’s date until he was brushing his teeth that morning. One moment, he was
thinking about strategies and Terrapins, and the next moment he was staring at his reflection in
shock.

It was his birthday, his real one. Neil Josten would be twenty years old at the end of March,
according to some forged paperwork, but Nathaniel Wesninski was now officially nineteen.

His father’s blue eyes blinked back at him in the mirror. Foamy toothpaste clung to the corner of
his mouth. Everything was too quiet. His birthday wasn’t something his mother acknowledged
outright; however, Neil always knew she remembered when she brought home something special
for dinner, ignoring their daily budget, or squeezed his shoulder in a rare show of affection.

Getting another birthday wasn’t likely, so Neil took out his phone and rubbed his thumb over the
date. With his heart in a vice, he thought of his mother, the woman who fought and died to give
him as much time as she could, and gave himself over to the crushing wave of grief mixed with
gratitude until he could breathe again.

He pocketed his phone, numbly finished brushing his teeth, and let his mind drift back to Exy.

The Foxes beat the Terrapins once already, but they couldn’t let themselves get cocky or
comfortable. They were at a huge disadvantage because of the size of their team and, to make
matters worse, Andrew flashed a deranged smile at Kevin the night before, quick and alarming.
When Neil asked Kevin if Andrew had enough blood to drink, Kevin gave him a scathing glare and
told him to forget about it.

Neil couldn’t forget and he didn’t want to stand idly by without doing anything.

The morning passed in a blur. Neil couldn’t pay attention in his classes or at lunch. After his last
class of the day let out, he headed back at the Tower to review his notes for the game and wait. He
didn’t have the presence of mind to do much else.

When it was almost time to go to the stadium, Neil’s world came back into focus like he was
waking up from a dull dream. He met the upperclassmen by the elevators and they all went down
to Matt’s rental truck together a little earlier than usual.

They made it to the Foxhole Court before the rest of the team, so the upperclassmen sat in the
lounge to wait. Neil claimed he needed to ask Wymack something and continued down the
hallway to the offices. After checking to make sure no one followed, he knocked twice on Abby’s
door and waited for her to say, “Come in!”

She looked up from some paperwork as Neil stepped into the room. “Oh, hello, Neil. What brings
you by?”

“I was wondering if you could help me with something.”

“I’m all ears,” she said and motioned to the chair across from her. “Have a seat.”
Neil sat down obediently. “Would you be willing to draw some of my blood after the game?”

Abby’s eyebrows knit together and her smile faded. “Is this for some sort of blood test or were you thinking of giving it to a certain someone?”

“Is my answer going to affect yours?”

“Neil,” she said with a weary sigh, “I won’t prioritize Andrew’s health over yours. You and Kevin work yourselves harder than everyone else on this team. You shouldn’t take any risks.”

“It’s just a little blood.”

“I don’t want to find out that this is a slippery slope after you hit the bottom of it. Is giving him blood part of a deal? Did you promise him this when he got you out of Evermore?”

Neil glared at her. “I’m not here for permission, I’m here for help. Your way of drawing blood will be less messy than mine.”

Abby pursed her lips and looked down at the paperwork on her desk, thinking it over. “All right. We’ll wait until tomorrow, though, and I’m going to decide how much blood to draw. That’s not up for negotiation.”

“Fine,” he said reluctantly. “Thank you.”

She gave him a tired smile. “You’re welcome, Neil. Good luck out there.”

Neil stepped out of her office and quietly shut the door behind him. He leaned against the wall to take a deep breath. There was a chance Andrew would reject the blood simply because Neil was the one offering, but maybe he’d take it if Neil left the blood unlabelled next to the bag in Wymack’s fridge.

Neil’s phone vibrated to signal an incoming text. The number it came from was unlisted and that was enough to make Neil wary. The message itself was confusing:

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Neil had no idea what it meant, which could only mean trouble.

Just as he was about to turn back to the lounge, he noticed a smudge on the floor outside the locker room. Marks on the tiles weren’t unexpected, but the custodial staff always made sure the stadium was immaculate on game days. The rest of the floor was shiny and freshly buffed.

Walking closer, he saw that it wasn’t the typical black scuff mark. It was half of a smeared shoe print left in what looked like dried blood.

First, there was the bone-chilling fear that one of the Foxes was hurt. Rationally, he knew that it was unlikely: the upperclassmen were out in the lounge and if someone in Andrew’s group was hurt, Wymack would’ve been alerted already.

Then, Neil realized he hadn’t seen Wymack that night and his stomach plummeted.

Frantic, he burst through the door and looked around for signs of violence. There wasn’t a body, only a few more reddish-brown smears on the floor. When he looked up, his heart nearly punched through his chest.

The words “HAPPY BIRTHDAY JUNIOR” were written in blood above the lockers.
Neil’s mind spun out of control. He couldn’t get this cleaned up before the others would see it. The Foxes would know it was meant for him since Seth was the only other one that “Junior” could have applied to.

He rushed to his locker, suddenly worried about his gear. The door resisted at first, and then it flew open with a snap. A gallon-sized bag hanging from the top hook burst and blood gushed over his belongings.

Neil bit back a panicked whimper and scrambled to yank his belongings out, but it was too late. Lukewarm blood stained his uniform. It squished out of his padding, splattered his clothing, and puddled around his shoes. The metallic smell of it filled his nose and gagged him.

The locker room door slammed open and a second later Andrew was dragging Neil away from the mess. Neil put up a fight on instinct, mindlessly pleading, “No, no, no, let me-”

“Enough,” Andrew snapped as he pinned Neil to the wall. “How much of this is yours?”

Aaron and Kevin stood in the doorway, staring at the gruesome scene with horror and disgust. Nicky was out in the hall, shouting for Wymack.

Kevin began, “Andrew, don’t-”

“Don’t what, Kevin?” snapped Andrew. “Eat off the floor?”

Everything was unraveling. Neil sucked in a breath and forcibly relaxed under Andrew’s hands, biting his lip to keep from screaming. He needed to hide the growing cracks in his armor.

Wymack barreled past Kevin and Aaron only to stop abruptly with a rough, “Jesus H Christ. Andrew, what did you do?” He grabbed Abby’s arm as she squeezed past him to prevent her from going any further.

Andrew’s mouth stretched into a wide smile. He held his hands up, took a large step back, and said, “This isn’t my handiwork, Coach. I’m not this wasteful.”

The upperclassmen showed up with their alarmed voices overlapping. Kevin and Aaron were pushed forward and Dan broke away from the group. She froze mid-step, wide-eyed.

“Fuck,” said Matt. “Neil, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Neil cleared his throat and repeated, more clearly, “I’m fine. It’s not my blood.”

Andrew cocked his head, eyes dark and mouth still grinning. “And the Academy Award for best bullshit goes to Neil Josten. Cue the applause.”

“Everyone out,” said Wymack. “I’m gonna get the cops in here and-”

Neil jerked with another bolt of panic. “No. No cops. We know who did this and we know why. Cops will just get in the way and, besides, my prints are the only ones they’ll find on my locker. Riko’s guys are too smart to leave incriminating evidence behind.”

“You’re covered in blood,” said Abby. “This isn’t some harmless prank.”

Flexing his hands, he could feel the blood caked on his skin. “It’s probably not human if that makes you feel better. I’ll clean it up, I promise.”

Andrew laughed. “See, Coach? Everything’s peachy keen. If you need me, I’ll be in your office.”
With everyone else’s eyes on him, Neil was the only one who saw Andrew’s pace quicken as he left the room. Neil hoped there was something in Wymack’s office for him to drink. He saw his own worry reflected on Kevin’s pinched face.

“Coach, are we calling off the game or what?” asked Matt.

“We can’t forfeit,” Kevin said. “We shouldn’t let this be the thing that breaks us. We’ve all seen worse and forfeiting could ruin our season.”

Allison and Matt traded a dubious look. Dan seemed torn.

“We need to rinse those clothes,” Allison said after a long pause.

Nicky blocked Neil’s path when he went for the blood-soaked heap of cloth and padding. “We’ll get this. We’re early, so we’ve got plenty of time. You go shower.”

“I’ll run back to the Tower to get you something clean to wear,” Matt said, already on his way out.

“Renee and I will go look for spare gear,” said Dan.

“Don’t touch that with your bare hands,” Wymack scolded Nicky before he could pick up Neil’s uniform. “Aaron, go to the medical room and get some gloves.”

Abby touched Aaron’s shoulder. “I will get the gloves and rinse out Neil’s stuff. David, get a mop. We can’t have the kids walking through this all night. Everyone else, go wait in the lounge.”

The others got moving at once to follow orders while Neil stood still, dumbly watching them and wondering what just happened. Allison’s voice echoed down the hall, telling Matt to drive fast and avoid campus police. Dan laid into Kevin for being heartless, saying, “I know the game is important, but goddamn if you’re not the coldest son of a bitch I know. He’s literally covered in blood.”

Nicky stopped in the doorway, noticing that Neil hadn’t moved yet. “Better get in that shower. Red’s not really your color,” he tried to tease.

Neil blinked at him and cleared his throat, trying to get the tightness to go away. “Right. Thanks, Nicky.”

“We’re your family. You don’t have to look so surprised when we act like it.” Nicky gave him a strained smile. “Seriously, though, go wash up.”

Neil held himself together until he was safely locked away in a shower stall with the water running. His breathing came in harsh, choppy gasps as he scrubbed frantically at the blood caked on his skin. Red-tinged water washed down the drain at his feet.

The hot water and steam couldn’t melt the icy panic in his chest. It was a living, clawed thing scratching up his insides. Riko was angry at Neil’s rejection so now he was trying to get Neil found by the man who starred in Neil’s nightmares. Neil felt stupid for not having seen this coming.

The smell of blood was stuck in his nostrils, so thick he could hardly breathe even after all the red had disappeared down the drain. The weight of the world was getting too heavy and he wasn’t sure he could keep moving like his mother would’ve told him to.

Everything he left behind had a way of coming back and piling up on him when he least expected it. Suddenly, he was trapped in the shower stall with the names and faces of people he and his
mother swindled, wounded, or worse. Gunfire popped in his ears. Memories of icy water, the crunch of a car frame, and bloodstained gravel swarmed. He was shredded and scattered across every town and city he tried to forget.

Knocking on the door to his shower stall pierced his panic like a hook and dragged him back to the present. When Neil failed to answer the door, the knocking got louder.

Neil cut the water off and dried himself quickly before pulling on his boxers. He held the towel in front of his chest when he opened the door a crack.

Matt was standing there with a stack of folded clothes in his hands. “Got a present for ya,” he joked weakly.

“Thank you,” Neil said. “And thanks for knocking.”

“Yeah, well…” Matt shrugged and handed the clothes over. “You doing okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Matt sighed heavily. “You and I are gonna have a talk about the ‘I’m fine’ thing. By the way, there’s some gear for you in the changing room and Abby should be done with your uniform soon-ish. Anything else I can do?”

“You could hold Riko down while I beat the shit out of him.”

“Right,” Matt laughed like he thought Neil was kidding. “Sure thing, buddy. Give the rest of us a few minutes to finish changing out and then you’ll have the room, all right?”

Neil nodded and shut the door to wait. A short while later, Nicky yelled, “All yours, Neil!”

The pile of padding and protective gear waiting for him in the changing room was impressive. Once he assembled a decent enough set for himself and put it all on, he hesitantly stepped out into the locker room. The floor was still damp and a fair amount of blood had been wiped off of Neil’s locker, but the writing on the wall remained.

Abby came into the room with Neil’s uniform and shoes in her gloved hands. “I couldn’t get this completely dry, but I figured it was better than nothing.”

Neil took it from her and struggled to meet her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Are you going to be okay tonight?” she asked gently. “Maybe we should put the thing you asked me about off a couple days.”

“I’d rather not,” Neil said, sharper than he meant to. “I’ll be okay. Thank you for your help.”

“You’re one of my kids, you know? I’m always here to help.” She touched his shoulder padding and said, “I’ll leave you to finish getting ready.”

The padding he wore only protected him in certain places from the chill of his damp uniform; however, the discomfort was outweighed by the relief of being able to play at all. For the most part, his uniform looked clean or at least not obviously bloodstained. When he slipped his feet into his shoes, he tried not to wonder whether the wet squelch he felt was from water alone.

Wymack was waiting for Neil out in the hallway with a steely look in his eyes. “I want to make some things real clear to you,” he said. “I’m trying to give you space to deal with the shit you’ve
got going on, but if something like this happens again, I will get the cops involved. And if there’s even a second where I don’t think you’re at a hundred percent tonight, your ass will be benched so fast it’ll make your head spin. I am your coach and I will do what I see fit to keep you as safe as I can. If you don’t like that, tough shit.”

Neil struggled to reconcile Wymack’s words with his harsh tone. “Thanks, I think.”

“You’re welcome,” Wymack said gruffly. “Now, come on, we’ve got a fuckin’ game to win.”
The Second Time Around

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the birthday prank, Neil just tries to get through the day.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: mentions of blood

The morning after his birthday, Neil went to the Foxhole Court by himself as soon as he finished wolfing down a couple energy bars for breakfast. He was surprised to find a familiar car already parked in the lot. Embarrassment and guilt formed a lump in the pit of his stomach as he trudged down the hallway to the locker room to find Wymack standing on a ladder with a wet sponge in his hand. Half the word “Junior” was all that was left of the gruesome birthday message.

“I was going to clean that up,” Neil said.

“Well, I got here first,” Wymack shot back without any heat. “Go wait in my office. I want to talk to you about something.”

Neil didn’t like the sound of that. Silently, he withdrew into the hallway and headed toward the offices. He sat in the chair in front of Wymack’s desk with the same tightly wound discomfort he always had when he got held after class by well-meaning school faculty members who were concerned about his behavior or his bruises.

Wymack knew him better than his teachers ever did, which almost made it worse. Grimacing, Neil leaned forward in his chair and clasped his hands behind his neck.

Even though the Foxes won last night, he only felt defeated. Thanks to Riko’s stunt with the birthday message, everyone knew he’d lied to them about yet another thing. Allison was the most visibly angry out of the upperclassmen. It took the combined power of the other three to convince her to back off long enough to let Neil change out and shower after the game. Andrew had prattled on in the background about whatever popped into his head, too hungry to care about Neil’s problems. Maybe he would’ve been indifferent either way, though. Neil was no longer his problem.

The door swung open. Neil jerked his head up and watched Wymack sit down behind his desk.

“First of all, we sent some blood to the lab to make sure it’s disease-free and hopefully not human. Secondly—” Wymack pulled a stack of files out of his desk drawer—“we need to start picking out potentials for next year’s line-up.”

Neil blinked in confusion. “What?”

“Usually, Dan would be helping with this, but she agreed to sit this one out. You need to learn the ropes and you can’t hide behind her opinions if it’s just you and me.”
“Why do I need to learn the ropes?”

Wymack didn’t even look up from the file he’d opened. “Because you’ll be vice-captain next year and captain the year after that.”

He said it so easily. He couldn’t have known the words put a knife in Neil’s heart and twisted.

“I can’t be vice-captain,” said Neil.

“Sure you can.”

“Why not Kevin or Matt? Either of them would be better than me.”

Wymack shoved a file at him. “I know my team, thank you very much, and I know team captain material when I see it.”

“You should get your eyes checked,” Neil muttered.

“You showed real initiative this year. We need someone willing to jump in and get involved when things go to hell because they go to hell on a regular basis.”

“I only made things worse. I’m not the guy you want for this job.”

“Nobody expects you to fix everything,” Wymack said. “Sometimes all people need is someone to give a damn.”

He wasn’t going to budge. Neil resigned himself to going through the files and dutifully listening to everything Wymack told him to remember, pretending he would live long enough for it to matter. Their goal was to find six new recruits for next year. Even though they would still be one of the smallest teams, they’d have some desperately needed breathing room. At first, Neil looked at the files and wondered how they would narrow it down to only six, but after a while, six seemed like too high a number to hope for.

Wymack was unfazed by the impossible task before them. When Neil expressed his doubts, he said, “Look at potential, not necessarily performance.”

Neil replied, “But you need players who perform well. Some of these kids have barely played at all because they were benched or in juvie.”

“And I must be crazy to consider someone with barely any experience, right?” Wymack asked with a pointed look.

Sullenly, Neil slouched in his chair and kept going over the file in his lap.

Hours later, Abby breezed into the office with take-out for lunch just as Neil and Wymack were settling on a fourth file for a potential recruit. She made room for the take-out containers on the desk, ignoring Wymack’s grumbling about his so-called system, and set up a folding chair for herself. Neil opened a container and poked at the pasta inside it with a plastic fork.

“How’s it going, boys?” Abby asked.

“It’s going,” Wymack said with a tired sigh. “I don’t know if we’ll get all six today. Pickings are slim as usual.”

Abby made a sympathetic noise and sipped her Coke. “You’ll find the right ones. You always do.”
Wymack stared at her dryly.

Abby rolled her eyes. “You can put the rest of the decision-making off ’til later. I’m borrowing Neil after lunch.”

“What for?”

“Nothing that counts as your business,” Abby replied.

Wymack made a face and bit into his sandwich.

Abby kept the conversation going while they ate, somehow spinning small talk out of her own anecdotes and Wymack’s occasional grunt or one-word reply. Neil listened to most of what she said, although he didn’t have much to offer in response besides his undivided attention.

When they were done eating, Neil threw his trash away and followed Abby to the medical room. She didn’t bother trying to talk him out of getting his blood drawn, but her expression didn’t hide her displeasure. Neil sat on the table, slipped out of his jacket, and held out his arm for the needle.

After a few minutes, Neil said, “Thank you for your help.”

“Be careful, okay? You should be your own top priority.”

Neil nodded like he accepted what she was saying and remained quiet until she was done. Once the needle was out of his arm, he waved off Abby’s offer of a Band-Aid. He pulled his jacket back on, slipped the vials of blood into his pocket, and thanked her again.

Now all he had to do was figure out a way to give them to Andrew. He wouldn’t accept the blood as a gift and he was even less likely to accept anything that came from Neil, so it would require some delicacy. Aaron disliked Neil too, so he wasn’t an option and anything to do with Andrew’s feeding habits seemed to make Kevin twitchy.

Hiding it in Wymack’s mini-fridge was the only idea Neil could come up with that didn’t seem entirely hopeless, although the chances of Andrew drinking the blood without first tracking down the source were slim.

It was a bad plan, but Neil felt that was par for the course these days. With a darkening mood, he trudged back to the Tower.

Matt gave him a distracted greeting from his desk where he was hunched over his laptop.

Neil hid the blood at the back of the fridge and grabbed an orange from the fruit drawer. “How’s that essay coming along?” he asked as he went back out to the main room.

“I don’t know why I wanted to get this done early,” Matt mumbled. Then, he groaned and scraped his hair away from his forehead. “Fuck it. What’ve you got going on today?”

“Not much. I should probably do laundry or something.” Neil sank onto the couch and started peeling his orange, already planning on putting his laundry off another day. That morning had been draining enough.

“So, speaking of things,” Matt began, coming around to flop down beside Neil, “the girls and I were wondering if you would perhaps be up for a little something tonight.”

“What kind of something?”
“A fun kind of something,” Matt said vaguely. “There might also be cake at some point, a cake which may or may not have candles- oh, stop with the face. You look like I just offered you a root canal.”

“I appreciate the thought and everything, but I really don’t want a party.”

Matt nodded in understanding. “After yesterday, I don’t blame you. If you’re not down for a full-on party at least come help us eat the cake Allison bought, okay?”

Neil blinked at him.

“We’ll eighty-six the candles and I’ll get Dan to scrape off the words. How ‘bout it? Just plain old cake and booze.”

Neil relented. “I guess I could do that.”

Matt grinned at him and nudged his shoulder. “Atta boy. Now, how about I kick your ass at some video games?”

Neil refused to think of it as a day wasted as the hours slipped through his fingers. Homework was pointless, laundry could wait, and the court would be there all night for him to get some practice in later. True to his word, Matt beat him at almost everything they played that day, but Neil had as much fun as he would have had if he’d won.

For dinner, the girls got take-out and came over to Neil and Matt’s room. The giant birthday cake sat on the coffee table until they were ready to cut into it. As Allison handed out squares of cake on paper plates, Neil got another text message. He checked it discreetly with his hands half-hidden under the coffee table and saw that it was an unlisted number again.

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Allison got Neil’s attention and passed him a plate with the biggest piece of cake so far. She said, “We weren’t sure what you liked, but I wanted chocolate, so that’s what we got.”

Neil thanked her sincerely. The cake was too rich and the frosting was too thick and sweet for his liking, but he was determined to eat every bite. He was making good progress until the moment Dan said, “Next year, we should do something more… birthday-ish.”

The cake suddenly tasted like ash. It took Neil three attempts to swallow it. Staying was never in the cards for him, so he knew it was ridiculous to get upset at the reminder of how little time he had left. He couldn’t help the searing ache in his throat, though.

“Paintball,” Matt stage-whispered.

Allison sucked frosting off her fork and waved it at Matt. “Yes. Let’s make it a team thing, so I can shoot Andrew in the balls.”

Dan snorted.

“You might like it,” Renee said. “Worth a try, right?”

“I wanted to do a team thing over winter break,” said Dan. “What if we worked paintballing into
that and then had an actual nice, monster-free birthday party for Neil? He’ll be working extra hard next year. He’ll deserve it.”

Matt frowned. “Extra hard? Why’s that?”

Dan froze for a second like she hadn’t meant to give it away before shrugging. “He’s gonna be vice-captain. I’m not gonna let him slack off.”


“Did I miss Kevin shitting bricks about this?” asked Allison.

“He didn’t shit bricks,” Dan told her. “He brought it up with me and Coach, actually. We didn’t have the heart to tell him we made our decision without him already.”

Matt asked. “You nervous?”

Neil cleared his throat and numbly replied, “It hasn’t really sunk in yet, I guess.”

“Sorry for spilling the beans,” Dan said with an apologetic smile. “I figured we could celebrate that tonight too.”

“Our little rookie, all grown up,” Allison said wistfully. “This calls for more tequila.”

“Amen to that,” said Matt.

There was no point in trying to stop them. When Allison handed out drinks, Neil forced himself to join in the toast to the bright future he’d never see. All he wanted right then was to be alone to nurse his heartache.

He waited until Dan, Allison, and Matt were well on their way to being drunk before quietly excusing himself from the group. He wasn’t lying when he said he was grabbing something from the fridge, but instead of rejoining them he slipped out the door. Renee saw him leave and gave him a little wave goodbye.

With nowhere else to go, Neil went to the court for the second time that day.

First, he headed to Wymack’s office to leave the vials of his blood in the mini-fridge for Andrew to find. Then, he went to the locker room, cautiously searching for any lingering evidence of yesterday’s prank. It didn’t matter that the walls were clean; the gory scene was still burned into his mind. He yanked his locker open, half-expecting to find his gear washed in blood again, and exhaled in relief when he saw that everything was normal.

After he changed out, he grabbed his racquet, a bucket of balls, and a stack of cones to take with him to the court. The solemn, shadowy silence of the stadium made his stomach feel hollow. The loneliness that weighed him down in Millport crept back in.

To get his mind off it, he thought about the two mysterious text messages he received. He didn’t believe in coincidences, so he figured it had something to do with the blood prank. If “70” showed up the next day, he could be reasonably sure it was a countdown to something. According to some quick mental math, day zero would be around April 1st.

Neil frowned at the floor and puzzled over the odds of it just being an April Fool’s Day prank. After the horror show yesterday, he didn’t think anything coming his way was likely to be
harmless. Either way, it didn’t make sense.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Neil walked to the first-fourth line and considered the court itself: its length and width, the transparent walls and gleaming floor. It didn’t make him feel safe exactly, but it made it slightly easier to breathe. Everything about the court and the game played on it was well known to him. For a little while, he could be sure-footed and confident in his movements. He knew the drills he needed to work on, which moves he needed to perfect, the steps he needed to take.

For an hour or two, all that mattered was what existed right in front of him- the ball, the cones, the goal- and he lost himself in the rhythm of it.

Movement outside the court wall shattered his focus.

Kevin opened the door, his helmet tucked under his arm and a scowl on his face, and called, “You could’ve let me know you were coming here early. I looked for you and Matt had no idea where you went.”

“I needed to clear my head,” replied Neil.

“Are you staying for practice?”

Neil absently swatted at a stray ball near his feet.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kevin asked impatiently.

“You told Wymack I should be vice-captain,” Neil blurted out. He pulled his helmet off so they could see each other better. “Why would you do that?”

“You’re the best person for it.”

Neil scoffed. “Go fuck yourself.”

“It’s true,” Kevin said. “I wouldn’t lie to you just to make you feel better. You know that.”

“You’re an asshole for dangling this in front of me when you know damn well I’ll never get to have it.”

Kevin shifted his weight and took his time choosing his next words. “Your life expectancy doesn’t change the fact that you deserve this. You’ll be remembered as someone who had a bright future ahead of him, someone with potential.”

Even an obituary was too much to hope for. With a hard swing of his racquet, Neil sent a cone sliding away from him. His heart felt like an exposed nerve, too raw for him to deal with Kevin’s blunt sentiments.

Neil started toward the door, his decision made. “I’m done for the night. Is Andrew in the lounge?”

Kevin stepped aside to let Neil pass and replied, “Either the lounge or Wymack’s office. I’m not sure.”

The blood he left in the mini-fridge was unlabeled, but Andrew was smart enough to put two and two together. Neil hurried back to the locker room to put his racquet away and change out. He was too unraveled to keep his cool in a confrontation with Andrew. After showering in record time and
getting dressed, Neil cautiously stepped out into the hallway. There was no sound or sign of movement, so he made his escape.

Less than a minute later, Neil’s back was slammed against the wall and Andrew’s hand was pressed to his throat. “Guess what I found,” Andrew hissed as he held up the vials of blood with his other hand. “You’re the one that wanted out, so stay out and stop interfering.”

Neil glared back at him. “You don’t have to completely shut me out just because the deal is off.”

Andrew’s mouth twitched mockingly. “Why would I keep you? You’re nothing to me.”

“If that was true, you wouldn’t be this pissed off,” Neil taunted. “For some reason, you decided to pin me to the wall instead of just throwing the blood away. Seems like I got under your skin.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Neil scoffed. “You know what I think? I think you can’t wrap your head around someone sticking around for something other than your promises and your protection, so you slammed the door on me. I’m still here, though.”

“For now.”

Neil nodded toward the vials in Andrew’s hand. “We could keep up our other deal until I’m gone if you’re interested.”

“I lost my appetite,” Andrew said flippantly.

“I don’t believe you.” Neil wet his lips and leaned forward into Andrew’s space as far as he could without pressing their chests together. “I think you’re hiding behind your self-denial because you can’t admit what you want.”

The hand Andrew had pressed to his throat twitched, but didn’t move away. Slowly, Andrew’s thumb brushed over Neil’s pulse point and goosebumps broke out across Neil’s back. His hooded stare was focused on Neil’s mouth, darkened by a different sort of hunger.

Neil’s heart was hammering away, excited and nervous and confused all at once.

Andrew tilted his mouth up a fraction of an inch and lifted his eyes to Neil’s. “Tell me you don’t want this.”

“If I did, you’d know I was lying.”

Kissing Andrew was even better this time. There was no surprise or trying to remember how it worked. Neil melted against the wall while his world narrowed down to Andrew’s mouth- the bruising pressure of the kiss, the faint scrape of Andrew’s teeth over his bottom lip, the brush of Andrew’s tongue against his own. Neil viciously tamped down the urge to reach for Andrew’s shoulders or his hair, keeping his fists clenched at his sides, but he couldn’t help the hot, fluttery longing for more warming his stomach. He bit back a noise when Andrew’s hand slid down his chest to curve around his hip.

When Andrew started to slow down, Neil tried to deepen the kiss just to keep it going as long as he could. He didn’t know when or if he would get this again, so he tried to make the most of it. Andrew let him have control for a few moments, and then he grunted, “Calm down,” before nudging Neil back a few inches.
Andrew’s lips looked spit-shiny and swollen and knowing he was responsible for it put a hot, fluttery feeling in Neil’s stomach. Andrew wasn’t the first person to kiss Neil, but he was the only one who made Neil feel like this—buzzing with energy and eager for more.

Neil took a shuddering breath and tried to calm down like Andrew told him to, but there was no hiding how affected he was by this.

Gradually, the world slipped back into place around him and the fog of desire thinned enough for him to remember his thoughts from earlier. He had no right to offer Andrew anything without giving him a heads-up.

“Fair warning, I don’t think I have much time left,” Neil said softly.

Andrew’s eyes narrowed. “Turning into a vampire won’t save you, so don’t bother asking.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Neil replied, vaguely taken aback. “Just thought we might as well make the most of the time I do have.”

“I’m listening.”

Neil gestured at the vials Andrew was still holding. “I want you to drink those.”

“In exchange for what?”

“Getting away from this place for a few hours would be nice. Matt and the girls tried to celebrate my birthday. I don’t feel like going back there and dealing with that.”

Andrew nodded once. “Renee said she tried to talk them out of it.”

“Yeah, well…” Neil suddenly remembered they weren’t technically alone at the stadium. “Oh, shit. Kevin.”

“I can drop Kevin off at the Tower,” said Andrew. “Can you wait until he’s finished? Reeling him in early will be annoying.”

“Yeah, sure.” Neil would wait all night if it meant keeping this easiness between them intact.

Andrew cut him a sharp look. “This won’t become a habit. It’s just for tonight.”

Neil accepted that with another nod and was rewarded with a brief, biting kiss that sent a tingling rush down to his toes. He swallowed nervously and said, “I’ll, uh, I’ll go wait-”

Andrew tugged sharply on Neil’s shirt. “Coach has more than one chair.”

It was the closest thing to an invitation that Neil was going to get. Dumbfounded, he followed Andrew into the office and sat in the chair in front of the desk like he did that morning. The silence was comfortable and dreamlike as he watched Andrew drink the vials one by one. Neil couldn’t tear his eyes away from him now that it was okay to look, now that the distance between them was smaller.

“You can have more if you want,” Neil offered after Andrew was done.

Andrew yawned and rested his head on the desk, murmuring, “Not right now.”

They sat quietly for over an hour and Neil didn’t mind a single minute of it. Once Kevin was finally ready to leave, Andrew eventually peeled himself away from Wymack’s office chair and
the three of them went out to the rental car. Kevin seemed to read Andrew’s mood and refrained from asking why Neil and Andrew stayed in the car when they reached the Tower. He went inside alone with only a couple backwards glances. As soon as he was out of sight, Neil took his spot in the front seat and looked over at Andrew’s shadowy profile.

It was just the two of them for the rest of the night. Neil didn't care what they did or where they went; he was content to be by Andrew's side again.
Neil woke up with a start. He was on the couch at the cousins’ house in Columbia and the windows were still dark. It took his disoriented brain a couple extra seconds to realize he wasn’t alone in the room. Andrew was a shadow darkening the open doorway.

“What time is it?” Neil asked hoarsely. His throat was dry, like he’d slept with his mouth open.

“Quarter ‘til five,” replied Andrew.

Nodding, Neil wiped his hand over his face to check for drool. “If we leave soon, I might be able to sneak in before Matt gets up.”

He texted the night before to let Matt know he’d be home late, but he didn’t say he planned to stay out the whole night. Matt would worry if he woke up to find Neil missing.

He didn’t realize how tired he was until he pulled himself upright. By his estimation, he couldn’t have slept more than a couple hours. After they got to the house, they spent some time kissing in the entryway before Andrew went up to his room to sleep. Neil snacked on stale tortilla chips he found in the kitchen until his excitement wore off enough for him to fall asleep too.

Neil tapped his wrist meaningfully. “Do you want...?”

“If I want a drink, I’ll ask,” Andrew said.

“Will you really?”

Andrew didn’t dignify that with a response. He flicked the lights on and walked away, leaving Neil momentarily blinded.

Once the spots cleared from his eyes, Neil used the bathroom and met Andrew by the front door. They left the house in silence. The cold air helped Neil perk up on the way to the car, but the morning light was too soft to keep him awake during the drive. With Andrew behind the wheel, within reach, Neil didn’t need to stay alert or wonder what Andrew was doing, so he closed his eyes and got comfortable.

He didn’t wake up again until they reached the Tower.
When Neil crept into his suite, he found Matt and Dan tangled together in Matt’s sheets, thankfully still asleep. The sound of Matt’s snoring helped mask the creak of the ladder as Neil climbed up to his bunk. He lay on top of his blankets, staring up at the dark ceiling, and touched his fingertips to his mouth.

He didn’t know what he was doing. Maybe it was just that he was in a freefall, hurtling toward his death, and he wanted to snatch up every last scrap of life he could on the way down. His days were numbered, so he might as well spend them lost in Andrew’s touch. Kissing him felt better than almost anything else these days.

Sunday dragged by at a glacial pace. Neil forced himself to do some work for his classes even though it wouldn’t make much of a difference. At the very least it served as a distraction from the memory of Andrew’s mouth against his that replayed on a torturous loop through his head all day.

Neil spent the evening watching TV with the upperclassmen. Out of curiosity, he took surreptitious glances at his teammates to see if the same spark Andrew provoked happened with any of them. He could pick out features in them that were objectively attractive, but he didn’t want any of them like he did Andrew. This realization didn’t come as a surprise, but he didn’t want to dig any deeper into it.

When his phone buzzed, he only looked at the number for a moment before deleting the message. There were seventy days left before he found out what the mystery person on the other end of these texts wanted.

Seventy days didn’t sound like very much time at all.

His resolve began to crumble.

Later that night, he mentally calculated how much money he had left and looked over his mother’s list of contacts by the light of his phone with a desperate maybe gripping his heart. There was a woman in Arizona that could forge papers for him. All he needed to do was get out there, bide his time until his new identity was ready, and then slip across the border to Mexico.

It would be easy: a little hair dye- brown was out, so maybe he’d try blond again- and some new clothing with makeup to cover the tattoo. Then, he’d buy a bus ticket with cash and plan a route confusing enough to make it obvious if he was being tailed. When he finally did settle in a city somewhere, he’d need a way to make money, which might be tricky. His mother had ways to bring in large amounts of money in one fell swoop when they were short on funds and too far away from their next stockpile, but her work was too similar to the Butcher’s for Neil to consider. He already had too much blood on his hands.

Even if he pulled it off, what then? Run, hide, repeat. Forever a rabbit alone on the run. He wouldn’t be able to stand that after finding a home and being part of a family.

His options all sounded like death. At least his father would let him die for real instead of keeping him as a plaything like Riko would. Giving up didn’t come easy, though. His mother taught him better than that.

When morning came, Neil was settled firmly in his decision to stay again and he forced himself to put all thoughts of his fate away to focus on the upcoming game against the SUA Cardinals on Friday instead. That was something he actually had a chance of winning.

When the Foxes gathered at the gym for morning conditioning, Wymack decided to call an impromptu team meeting in the hallway. Neil stood between Matt and Andrew and folded his arms
tight over his chest, hoping this would be over quickly.

“No, that we’ve had the weekend to cool off,” Wymack started, “I figured we oughta have a little heart-to-heart about Friday’s shitfest.”

Neil’s stomach turned over. He avoided eye contact with everyone.

“For starters, we heard back about the blood and, thankfully, it’s not human. Second, Abby got a sample of Neil’s blood and she’s getting him checked out just to be on the safe side. She doesn’t think he’s got much to worry about at this point, though.”

Neil frowned in confusion. Abby never asked him for a sample and she didn’t announce that she was taking one. He wondered if he missed Abby giving him the wrong number of vials or swapping one out for another.

“Lastly,” Wymack continued, “things are escalating with Riko, asshole extraordinaire, and they’re escalating in a disturbing way. I left the authorities out of it on Friday because Neil asked me to, but he and I are not the only ones to think about here. I want to get all of your thoughts on upping security around the stadium and installing more cameras in the public areas.”

“I think we should just call the cops,” said Aaron. “If Junior didn’t want attention, he shouldn’t’ve made an ass of himself on television.”

Nicky elbowed Aaron and muttered, “Don’t be a dick.”

“I don’t think of anyone wants cops poking around in their personal business,” Wymack said calmly. “Does anyone have any objections to extra surveillance or can we get on with it?”

Dan spoke up first. “Extra surveillance couldn’t hurt. After everything we’ve been through this year, I think we should protect ourselves however we can.”

“Anyone against it?” Wymack looked over the whole group. When no one spoke up, he nodded and said, “I’ll put things in motion. Good talk, team, now get back to work.”

Neil kept his head down as he went about his usual business. The Foxes were in danger because of him. There was no guarantee that no one else would lose their life like Seth did. Shoving down his guilt, he let himself get lost in the daily routine of conditioning, classes, and afternoon practice until it was Friday at last. The game was sure to be the high point of his week and Neil could hardly wait.

Early Friday morning, the Foxes loaded up the bus and dragged themselves on board for the eleven-hour drive to Arkansas. In a short-sighted effort to keep himself distracted that week, Neil caught up on all his schoolwork and even read ahead in some subjects, which left him with nothing for entertainment besides conversation with his teammates or going over his notes on the Cardinals again. There didn’t seem to be much use in that, however, since the Cardinals had already lost to two other schools this round. Winning tonight wouldn’t save them from elimination and losing wouldn’t hurt the Foxes’ chances any.

Neil got up to see what the others were doing.

Nicky and Kevin were already fast asleep in their seats; Kevin had the foresight to bring headphones with him. Aaron wasn’t much of an option to begin with and even less so after the vicious look he shot Neil’s way when he noticed him in the aisle. At the back of the bus, Andrew was staring out his window with one hand on the backpack sitting next to him.
“Can I sit here?” Neil asked. From the front, he could hear some chatter from the upperclassmen, so if Andrew turned him down at least he had a plan B.

Andrew moved the backpack to the floor without looking at him. Neil sat down and left half a foot between them on the bench.

Quietly, Andrew asked, “Bored already?”

“It’s going to be a long drive,” said Neil. “Shame that we’re not flying. It’s a hassle, but it would’ve been a lot quicker.”

“If you’re into that sort of thing.”

The memory of Andrew’s agitated pen clicking on their last flight came back to Neil all of a sudden. “Do you not like being stuck with all those people in a cramped space or is it something else that bothers you?”

Annoyance pinched Andrew’s mouth and his eyes briefly slid toward Neil. “I don’t enjoy being thousands of feet in the air in a glorified tin can.”

“Are you scared of heights?”

“It’s not the heights, it’s the falling,” said Andrew. “And the higher you go, the worse the fall.”

“Actually, I think the higher you go, the more likely you’ll die before you hit the ground. In a way, it’s better.”

Andrew didn’t look at all impressed by his logic.

“Why don’t you like heights?” Neil asked.

At first, Andrew didn’t move. He silently stared out the window until he finally said, “I told once that you I broke my arm years ago.”

Neil nodded. He remembered.

“I fell off a roof,” Andrew explained. “It was too dark to see and my foot slipped. I had to ring the doorbell to get someone to drive me to the hospital.”

“Why were you on the roof in the middle of the night?”

“I was hiding.”

The pieces clicked together in Neil’s mind and it felt like a punch to the gut. There was one obvious reason why Andrew would’ve thought the roof was safer than his own bed.

Neil looked down at his hands. There was no response for that, he knew, so he accepted the words for what they were and reciprocated with a story of his own. “When I was about thirteen, I had this teacher- Mr. Landry, I think his name was- and one time, we bumped into each other at the grocery store. I’d walked there on my own and it was raining, so Mr. Landry insisted on driving me home. I couldn’t talk him out of it. He did that thing people do when they phrase everything nicely so that saying no makes you seem like an irrational asshole.”

Andrew was looking at him now, intently focused and listening to every word.

Clearing his throat, Neil went on, “In his car, he asked me all these questions about my relationship
with my mom, like if she ever got angry with me, if she drank, stuff like that. He thought my mom was abusing me because I came to school a few times looking like I got roughed up and he didn’t believe the excuses I gave him. He said something about getting me to a safe place or finding me someone to talk to. I was scared that he was taking me to the authorities instead of the apartment, so I panicked and grabbed my bag and jumped out.”

“While the car was moving?”

“Yeah. I hit the gravel and scraped myself up pretty bad, but Mr. Landry… I saw the car skid and then it crashed into a telephone pole.” Guilt that Neil had buried deep started churning, threatening to come back up. He forced himself not to look away from Andrew’s eyes. “I don’t know if he survived because I ran away without checking on him. My mom and I packed our bags and left town that night.”

Andrew studied him calmly, no trace of surprise or judgement or disgust in his eyes. “Did your mother hit you?”

Neil wasn’t expecting that to be what Andrew focused on. “Sometimes, yeah, when I messed up.”

“So your teacher was right about her being abusive.”

“She couldn’t risk me making mistakes or getting too close to people. Our situation wasn’t exactly normal,” Neil said, a touch defensively. He didn’t like attaching the word to her even if it sometimes felt fitting.

“Obviously her methods weren’t very effective because here you are getting close and spilling secrets.”

“I don’t want to be the guy who runs away without looking back.” Neil held Andrew’s stare for a long, heavy moment and hoped he could tell the words were true. “I can’t spend the rest of my life as a liar and a coward.”

With a scoff, Andrew turned back to his window and dismissively said, “Do whatever you want. It doesn’t make a difference to me.”

Neil didn’t doubt that, but he still felt better just for saying the words out loud. He would never be Nathaniel again and he would never go back to being a nobody. Neil Josten would be the one who stayed until the very end.
A Moment

Chapter Summary

Neil spends a Friday night at the cousins' dorm.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: discussion of death

I'm sorry it's been so long! I've been struggling with a creative block lately RIP.
Thanks for bearing with me and thank you all for reading <3

The Foxes left Arkansas with another victory under their belts. That was what Neil tried to focus on now that he was no longer looking for an exit sign. The first round of championships was over and, despite their disagreements and disputes, the Foxes’ on-court chemistry had never been better. Even the most cynical journalists talked about Kevin reclaiming his place as a champion like it was an actual possible and not just a long shot.

The countdown texts continued. More than once Neil had to stop himself from replying or, worse, calling the number just to see if anyone picked up. He was sick of waiting.

There wasn’t a game to play the week after Arkansas, but the Foxes finally found out who they would be up against for the first round of death matches: the UVM Catamounts. Kevin sent Neil a perfunctory text during dinner commanding him to come to the cousins’ suite to start brainstorming strategies. The upperclassmen decided to celebrate their free Friday night by going to a bar downtown, so Neil had nothing better to do than to comply with Kevin’s wishes.

When Nicky answered the door, Neil said, “I assumed you guys would go to Columbia tonight.”

Nicky made an awkward face and let Neil inside.

Kevin’s voice came from the kitchen. “Andrew is refusing to go because of Aaron’s stunt.”

“Stunts,” Nicky corrected, “as in plural. Apparently, it’s going to be an ongoing thing.”

Andrew was sitting in one of the beanbags in front of the TV, watching a horror movie while slowly eating a box of powdered donut holes and ignoring everyone else in the room.

“Is Aaron here?” Neil asked.

Nicky shook his head. “He’s out. Do you want something to drink before Kevin drags you off to his lair?”

Kevin stepped out of the kitchen and shot Nicky a flat look. “You could review games with us, you know. It wouldn’t kill you to make an effort.”
“It might. I’m too young and pretty to take that risk.”

“Whatever. Have fun rotting your brain.” Kevin motioned for Neil to follow and led him to the bedroom.

“Have fun not having any fun!” Nicky called after them.

Kevin’s laptop was already set up on the middle of Kevin’s bed with the Exy streaming site ready to go. Neil sat at the foot of the bed with his notebook and pen, fully prepared to spend the next few hours immersed in old game footage.

Kevin hesitated by the door for a moment. He wiped his hands on his jeans before pulling his phone out of his pocket and tapping the screen a few times. Then, he carried it over to Neil to show him a text from Jean: 

> Kengo will step down in July. Loose ends must be tied up.

Neil was a loose end, and so was Andrew and Kevin. “What exactly does that mean?” he asked, already dreading the answer.

“Riko will go to his father and formally request permission to turn the people he’s chosen for his inner circle. It also means Lord Kengo will choose a successor to take over until he comes back.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean anything for us. Kengo might deny Riko’s request and there’s no way he’ll choose Riko over Ichirou to take over.”

“Riko has never seen things clearly when it comes to his father. His disappointment will be devastating.”

“Devastating to him or the people he’ll take it out on?” Neil clenched his shaking hands into fists; he wanted to hit something. “What happens if someone doesn’t agree to being turned?”

“They will be executed, or so I’m told.”

“In that case, I’ll cross my fingers and hope Kengo makes it quick.”

“Don’t joke about that,” Kevin said darkly. “You wouldn’t seriously choose death over life.”

“It’s either that or spend the rest of my days being hunted down like a rabbit. You’re not seriously thinking of going back to Riko, are you? After everything he’s done, after what he did to Andrew—”

Kevin cut him off with a harsh, “I know. I get it. I’m not exactly thrilled about this either, but I’ve never had a choice. This was always going to happen to me.”

Riko would always have too much sway over Kevin. They were brothers, after all. Neil couldn’t decide if he hated or pitied Kevin for it.

Kevin began, “If there was anything I could—”

Neil shook his head and heaved an aggravated sigh. “Let’s just focus on next week’s game.”

Deflating, Kevin sat on the other side of the laptop and hit play on the latest Vermont-Maryland match. Neil jotted down observations while Kevin simply sat and watched. It was clear from the start that they would have their hands full with the Catamounts’ solid defense. They waited until after the game had ended to discuss possible strategies. Neil was painfully aware of how inexperienced he was as he listened to Kevin’s thorough analysis. Kevin picked up on weaknesses that Neil missed completely and already had several ideas on how the Foxes’ could get the upper
During the next game they watched, Neil tried to see the plays and movements and angles like Kevin did. He wrote down every half-formed thought with the hope of expanding on it later. Just before the game ended, Nicky barged into the room and said, “It’s Friday. I’m bored. What do you two say to ice cream and a movie?”

Kevin hit the spacebar to pause the video, visibly annoyed. “We’re in the middle of something, Nicky, and you don’t need ice cream. You eat enough crap as it is.”

“Heardly judgemental from a guy who drinks vodka by the gallon. Neil, don’t let Kevin drag you down. He’s a lost cause.”

“Sure, I’m in.” Neil ignored the look Kevin sent him and closed his notebook.

“Awesome. Think about what flavor you want and text me,” Nicky said as he headed down the hallway. “I’ll be back in a bit!”

Kevin pulled a bulky pair of headphones from under his bed and plugged them into his laptop. “Don’t complain when you’re behind on Monday.”

“I would’ve been behind anyway,” Neil replied nonchalantly. He’d studied enough Exy for one evening and he didn’t want to waste his chance to talk to Andrew alone.

When Neil stepped out into the main room, Nicky was heading out the door. Andrew locked it after he was gone and took a detour to the kitchen to grab a beer before returning to his beanbag chair.

The television was on mute. The entire suite was quiet except for Andrew cracking open his beer can.

“How good is your hearing?” Neil asked.

“Kevin told me about Kengo already. I didn’t need to eavesdrop.”

Neil nodded and dropped his notebook by the stack of DVDs near the TV stand. “How long do we have until Nicky gets back?”

“Fifteen minutes, give or take.”

Neil took a few steps forward until he was standing near Andrew’s feet. “We could—” he gestured between them—“one more time, if you want.”

Andrew gave Neil a slow once-over, considering the suggestion. “Is that what you really want?”

“Yes.”

Neil’s brain didn’t register movement until he was falling. Andrew flipped him easily so that he landed on the beanbag with a surprised grunt. Despite being slightly winded from the impact, Neil didn’t mind the manhandling—especially when Andrew crawled on top of him. He pinned Neil’s hands on either side of his head—the request unspoken but clear all the same—and then he pressed his lips to Neil’s in a hard kiss.

A few seconds later, Andrew let go of his wrists. Neil dug his fingernails into his palms to keep himself still; if he moved, it would be over and he needed this more than he thought was possible.
Andrew kissed him like he was desperate for it too, searing and possessive. Distantly, Neil realized that this was precisely why his mother reacted to the notion of Neil kissing anyone with violence. He didn’t understand her warnings about feelings or hormones until he was panting and pliant under Andrew’s body. His defenses crumbled like sand. Not only was he willing to do whatever it took to keep Andrew close, he was eager to do it.

Andrew broke away suddenly, eyes dark and lips reddened. He looked down at Neil’s jeans and said, “Your phone’s going off.”

“Ignore it.” Neil raised himself up on one elbow to press his lips to Andrew’s again. He couldn't afford to waste a moment.

Their fifteen minutes were up too soon. Andrew pulled away from Neil seconds before Nicky’s key scraped against the lock. He took his beer to the kitchen while Neil fought to slow his breathing and wrestled with his irritation at the sudden loss of contact.

Nicky kicked his shoes off once he got inside. “Dude, did you forget how your phone works? I called you twice. You never told me what you wanted.”


“I went ahead and picked something out for you. Hope you still like the same stuff.”

Neil accepted the pint of coffee-flavored ice cream and a spoon and managed a small smile in spite of his searing frustration. “Thanks, Nicky.”

Nicky went to the bedroom to give Kevin his ice cream. Neil adjusted himself in his jeans, hoping his erection would go away soon. The overhead lights turned off a second later, and then Andrew crossed the room to settle into the other beanbag. It was too dark to see if Andrew was in the same state as Neil. The thought alone was more than enough to send one last surge of heat through Neil’s veins.

When Nicky came back to the main room, he sighed in annoyance. “Okay, well, I guess we’re picking a movie in the dark, then. Whatever my hand lands on, we’re watching and you two weirdos better not complain.”

Neil ate his ice cream and kept his mouth shut. He had no complaints about the movie. He could barely pay attention to it with Andrew only a few feet away.
Personal Problems

Chapter Summary

The Foxes make it to March.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: blood, discussion of death and suicide, references to canon drug abuse and a character forcing someone else through withdrawal, sexual content

Thank you to everyone who commented on the last chapter!! You guys are great <3

The Foxes, to everyone’s surprise, continued fighting their way through the rounds of spring championships as January flowed into February. Every practice was grueling, every game was brutal, and Neil loved every minute of it. Outside of Exy, he made the most of his time with his friends. He let Nicky convince him to try out a few video games. He skipped evening runs to watch movies Matt recommended. He accepted every invitation for dinner with the upperclassmen.

He waited for another opportunity to get closer to Andrew. The weeks ticked by and he struggled to be patient. He was certain Andrew would want to feed at some point in the near future, but the longer he waited, the less confident he felt that Andrew would come to him for blood when he needed to eat.

Eventually, his patience paid off. He was in the middle of watching a movie with the upperclassmen when Andrew texted him a single word: Roof.

Neil immediately excused himself to rush upstairs. He shoved past the door with the broken lock and walked outside into the quiet February night. Andrew was standing near the ledge, smoking and staring down at the glowing streets of Palmetto State’s campus with a blank expression.

“I thought you were afraid of heights,” Neil said.

“Fear gets the blood going.”

“Speaking of…”

“Speaking of,” Andrew echoed. “The blood bag is running low and you’re not dead yet.”

“We’re doing this out here, I’m assuming.” Neil took off his coat and dropped it at his feet. The weather was mild enough that the coat was unnecessary anyway.

“What are you taking in return?”

Neil hesitated. “I wanted to propose a new deal.”

Andrew scoffed.
“All I’m asking is that you hear me out. Your time in exchange for some blood.”

“Fine,” Andrew said. “Let’s get it over with.”

A flicker of excitement went through Neil as Andrew looked him over from his neck to his bicep to his thigh, but it was quickly replaced by unease. There was a new scar on Neil’s thigh now in the place Andrew used to bite him, a mark left by Riko out of sadistic spite. Even though Andrew had already seen all the other marks on his body, Neil didn’t want him looking at that particular one, so he offered his wrist instead.

Scar or no scar, this was the wiser option. Andrew’s gaze was enough to make Neil’s blood run hot; there was no way Neil wouldn’t embarrass himself if he had Andrew’s mouth on his bare thigh.

Andrew wrapped one hand around Neil’s wrist and cupped the other under Neil’s elbow to hold him steady. At first, it was just a brush of Andrew’s lips and tongue until he found the right spot to bite. It hurt when Andrew’s fangs broke his skin, but unlike Riko, Andrew didn’t cause more pain than necessary. He only took a few long pulls before sealing the wounds and letting go. Wiping the back of his hand over his mouth, he went back to his spot near the edge of the roof.

Neil rubbed at the drying spit on his arm, unsure of how to phrase what he wanted to say. “I was thinking about your car,” he began awkwardly.

Andrew tilted his head to show he was listening.

“Since I’m not running, I’ve got no use for the money my mom left me and it’d be a shame to let it go to waste. I want to buy you a new GS since it’s my fault the old one got destroyed.”

At the very least, it got Andrew to look at him. “And what do you want in exchange for this oh-so-generous offer? More secrets? Sex? A prolonged life?”

“Have you talked to Aaron?”

Twice, he’d heard Aaron’s shouting from down the hall. If the twins were seeing Betsy together, it wasn’t doing them any good yet.

Andrew said, “After everything that’s happened, you’re still trying to meddle. Somehow I’m not surprised.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I have nothing to say to Aaron.”

“All right. Can I ask for something else or did I miss my chance?”

“Depends on how stupid it is,” Andrew retorted. “Ask quickly. I want to get some sleep tonight.”

“I want you to eat at least once month.”

“You’ll buy me a new car if I promise to eat,” Andrew said flatly.

“Yes.”

Andrew’s expression pulled into a cruel sneer. “Imagine what I could’ve gotten if I’d blown you.”

Taken aback, Neil said, “I’m not doing this just because we kissed a few times, if that’s what
"you’re thinking."

"No, you’re doing this because I told you things about me and now you think you’re entitled to care. Do you think that if you somehow help me then your pathetic existence will gain meaning?"

"If I hadn’t gone with Riko, Aaron wouldn’t have been attacked, he wouldn’t have found out what you are, and you guys would still be going to Columbia every weekend where you could feed off Roland. I’m just trying to fix what I can while I’m here."

"None of this makes a difference to me."

"If it doesn’t make a difference, take the deal. What do you have to lose?"

"I hate you."

"Doesn’t make a difference to me," Neil shot back. "If everything’s settled, I’m going to go back inside."

"Fine."

Neil went back down to the third floor of the Tower, frustrated and unsure of himself. None of it matters, he told himself. Last-ditch efforts to smooth things over with Andrew wouldn’t help him in the end.

February flickered, and then it was over. There was only a month left until the countdown ended. Focusing on anything other than that became almost impossible. He balanced precariously at the top of a slippery slope, knowing one false step would send him tumbling down into full-blown panic.

Thankfully, the beginning of March brought distractions since everyone was suffering through midterms with only caffeine and the promise of spring break to get them through it. Neil left each exam feeling like his brain had been wrung out like a sponge. After the last one, all he wanted to do was sleep for a week, but before he could recover from the stress he had a game to win.

On Friday morning, the Foxes dragged themselves out of the Tower at five thirty. Everyone except Andrew looked miserable and unsteady on their feet. Neil was sluggish despite having two cups of coffee already. With all the studying he did for his classes, he didn’t think there was any brain power left for remembering plays, so he hoped muscle memory would be enough to get him through.

At the stadium, the Foxes quietly loaded their gear and equipment onto the bus and by six o’clock they were on their way to New York.

Neil slept on and off until the bus stopped at a welcome center shortly after crossing the border of Virginia. The Foxes used the restrooms, stretched their legs, and bought snacks from the vending machines. Within twenty minutes, they were back on the interstate.

By the time they stopped for their second restroom break, Kevin had perked up enough to start a discussion with Dan about that night’s game. Some of the others joined in the conversation on the way back to the bus- Matt out of interest and Nicky out of boredom, by Neil’s guess. Instead of rounding up the members of his family, Andrew let them sit up front with the upperclassmen and headed to the back of the bus on his own.

Neil briefly considered joining the others before going to the back row too. He sat down next to Andrew and yawned into the back of his hand.
“You’re tired again,” Andrew said. His voice was flat, but there was an accusation in it.

“I’m behind on sleep. Midterms, you know.”

“Or an iron deficiency.”

“Abby already lectured me about this, but your concern is touching.”

“No one likes an anemic snack.”

“Noted.”

He and Andrew sat in silence while the bus turned onto the on-ramp and accelerated to get back on the highway. There were more cars now than there had been a couple hours ago, which caused anxiety to wind around Neil’s heart like barbed wire. Traffic could cost them precious time if it got bad enough.

He closed his eyes and forced his body to relax. Traveling was always a mixed bag of emotions, whether it was a desperate escape in the dead of night or packing up because his mother felt they should leave. Shaking off a false identity brought relief, not knowing where they were heading next caused uncertainty, and then there was the peace that came from being anonymous in a group of strangers. Nothing compared to the comfortable familiarity of the bright orange bus filled with Foxes.

“Are you going anywhere for spring break?” Neil asked.

“The court.”

That wasn’t surprising. “What about after you graduate?”

“Hell, I assume.”


“I could for a minute or two, and then I’d have to bow out once people start picking up on the fact that I still look eighteen. Give it a little more time and everyone I know will be dead. Then, what? Back to Exy?”

“Kevin might wind up a vampire,” Neil pointed out.

“He’ll be Riko’s pet.”

“What about your deal?”

“The chance of him keeping his promise has always been miniscule and I have always been aware of that.”

Neil turned the words over in his head as he studied the shadow curved under the cut of Andrew’s jaw and the way some strands of his hair glinted like spun gold. “I could see it,” he said quietly. “You and Kevin going pro for a few years and then hitting the road and traveling. You two get along decently and I’m sure you’d figure out a way to get him away from Riko. All you need to do is find him an actual backbone.”

“You can’t build a life around one person.”
“There’s plenty of other stuff in the world.”

“I don’t need a live, love, laugh speech from the man playing ding dong ditch at death’s door.”

“I’m just saying you might not end up as alone as you originally thought.”

“If Kevin is forced into this, he won’t last a decade before he tries to off himself.”

Neil had already pushed far enough. He shook his head and looked away from Andrew, considering his next move. “All right, forget the rest of your life. What are you doing after the game?”

Andrew’s gaze fell to Neil’s mouth, flicked down to his neck, and then came back up again. “Did you have something in mind?”

“Matt’s driving home with his mom tonight, so I’ll have a room to myself at the hotel. You could come see if I taste anemic or not.”

Andrew sucked his teeth and considered Neil’s words. Half a minute later, he said, “Maybe.”

The conversation lapsed into silence, but Neil remained beside Andrew. He didn’t want to be alone and he didn’t like the thought of Andrew being alone either, even though solitude seemed to be what they were both destined for.

He mulled over possible subjects to broach, unsure of which questions would get shot down instantly. Finally, he asked, “What was high school like for you?”

“It was boring,” Andrew replied.

“Was Aaron the only reason you joined the Exy team?”

“Why else would I have done it?”

“You could’ve watched from the sidelines if you weren’t actually interested in playing.”

Andrew didn’t dignify that with a response.

“I wasn’t planning on going to high school in Millport originally,” Neil admitted. “My ID put me at eighteen, so I figured I might as well get a minimum wage job in a city somewhere and keep my head down. I changed my mind when I heard about Millport’s Exy team.”

“A junkie always needs one more fix.”

“Exy was the only thing that felt familiar. The court was as good as home.” Neil rubbed the back of his neck. “The Dingoes weren’t a good team, so I thought it was okay. I wasn’t supposed to get noticed by any colleges.”

“That much was clear, yes.”

Neil remembered the terror he felt that day and the hatred he harbored toward Andrew in the days after. In spite of everything, he was glad Andrew didn’t let him run. He was thankful for the short life he had at Palmetto State.

Andrew nudged the conversation along with, “Aaron and I worked in the kitchen at Eden’s during our senior year.”
“What was that like?”

“Boring. Aaron didn’t appreciate being forced into sobriety, so he tried to make life hell. He lacked the imagination to successfully pull that off.”

“How was he forced into sobriety? Rehab?”

“No, he refused to go to rehab, so I locked him in the bathroom with food and bottled water until he was through the worst of his withdrawal.”

Neil blinked in dull surprise. “Sounds efficient.”

“It was.”

“I can’t really blame him for being resentful. That must’ve been brutal.”

Andrew gestured toward the aisle. “Go and tell Aaron how sympathetic you are. I’m sure he’d love to hear all about it.”

“I’d rather stay with you.”

“Don’t say things like that.”

“Why not? It’s the truth.” When Andrew’s eyes flashed with a warning, Neil said, “All right, new subject.”

They passed the rest of the drive trading stories that wouldn’t have mattered much to anyone else. Neil described various apartments and motel rooms and abandoned buildings he’d lived in. He recounted narrow escapes and explained how the days directly after became an odd limbo between fear and boredom. In return, Andrew told him about Tilda’s funeral, the awkwardness of adjusting to life with Nicky, and the near-overdose that led to Aaron being locked in the bathroom.

Neil was startled by the sight of Binghamton University’s stadium outside the window. Time had slipped away from him while he and Andrew talked.

There wasn’t a speck of orange to be seen amidst the green and white in the parking lot as the bus slowly made its way to the back of the stadium. The sight of police officers made Neil wary, but he reminded himself that they were there to keep an eye on rowdy fans, not hunt down the Butcher’s runaway son.

The bus came to a stop near a loading dock and the door creaked as it folded open. Neil got to his feet and wiped his palms on his jeans. Hesitating in the aisle, he turned back to Andrew. “Will you help us tonight?”

“Will you give me something to make it worth my while?”

“You can have whatever you want.”

Andrew’s eyes darkened. “Don’t be stupid.”


“I’ll think of something later. Now move. You’re blocking my way.”

Neil left his messenger bag on the bus and joined the Foxes outside near the luggage compartment to grab his duffel. Breathing in the smell of bus fumes and cold pavement, he turned all his
thoughts toward the Bearcats.

The Foxes’ spirits were still high from their win two weeks prior, although they were in for a rough night. Binghamton was one of the more well-rounded teams and the Foxes would need at least seven points to knock Nevada out of the running for the next round. Every one of them would have to give it their all tonight if they were to have a chance of pulling it off. Andrew’s vague promise was a balm for Neil’s unsettled nerves.

Kevin fell in stride with Neil as the team followed a security guard inside. Without any prompting, he ran through the information on their opponents Neil had already taken notes on. Neil would never admit it out loud, but it was comforting to hear everything again now that they were in enemy territory with a little over an hour until first serve.

The air in the locker room was tense. Neil could tell he wasn’t the only one eager to get out on the court. Judging by the sharp grins Matt and Dan exchanged and Kevin’s haughty, “We will win because we have to,” he knew it would be a good night.

The next hour felt like only a few minutes. In a blink, Neil was walking out to the inner court with the Foxes, the cheers and jeers of the crowd ringing in his ears. In a heartbeat, warm-ups were over and it was time to play for real.

Waiting for the buzzer, Neil was acutely aware of everything from the air in his lungs to the straps holding his armor tight to his body to the other Foxes and Bearcats spread out around the court.

After the buzzer, everything was a noisy and colorful blur.

Neil nearly broke himself on the Bearcats’ defensive line, driven by his need to win. He barely reined in his aggression in time to avoid getting carded and had enough close calls that Wymack threatened to throttle him during halftime. Behind their coach’s back, Dan gave him a thumbs-up and a nod of approval. Even Kevin was taking foolish risks this game. The Foxes couldn’t play it safe when they were two points behind.

Andrew came on with them for the second half and managed to turn the tide almost single-handedly. He was the anchor that held the defensive line steady, which made it infinitely easier for Allison, Kevin, and Neil to keep possession of the ball. By the fourth quarter, it was the Bearcats that were scrambling to keep up.

The Foxes managed to avoid getting any red cards and, at the last moment, Kevin scored the winning point to save them all from overtime. As the final buzzer faded, Neil realized that a fight had broken out down by the Foxes’ goal between the Bearcat strikers and the Fox backliners. Allison darted off to intervene. Kevin tried to follow, but Neil pulled him toward the door, reminding him that Andrew would get involved if anything happened to him.

The brawl was broken up by Wymack, the Bearcats’ coaches, and the referees. Fuming players were shepherded out to the inner court. Neil guessed it hadn’t been Matt or Aaron that started the fight judging by the fact that Wymack looked only mildly annoyed by the whole ordeal. The Foxes were quick to bounce back to a more celebratory mood on their way to the locker room. They’d managed to bag ten points that night, more than enough to get them to the next round of championships.

Neil and Dan handled post-game press together. She still had the energy to give thoughtful, enthusiastic answers, which made up for Neil’s bland ones. His strength was fading fast. The only thing propping him up at that point was the relief of winning another game. The Foxes only had to survive the rematch against the Bearcats in two weeks and then they would go on to semifinals.
They were so close to achieving what everyone else thought was impossible.

The text message Neil received a short while later as he packed up his gear shot a hole through his good mood.

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Just over three weeks left. Neil was tired of living in fear, tired of the nauseating anticipation; however, he would never be ready to give up his life as Neil Josten. He wanted these next three weeks to be over as much as he wanted them to last forever.

When Neil turned to the rest of his teammates, Andrew was staring at him hard from across the room. Neil managed a small, twitchy smile in response even though Andrew would see right through it.

“If you’re ready, we should head out,” said one of the security guards. “People are pretty riled up.”

Wymack scanned the room and nodded to himself. “All right, Foxes, move ‘em out. Aaron and Nicky, get the stick rack.”

There were no obvious threats outside, but the stadium lawn was crowded with drunk Binghamton fans, who were furious about their team’s loss. The back of Neil’s neck prickled with apprehension and his hand itched for a weapon until all of the Foxes were seated on the bus. He didn’t relax until the bus had finally left Binghamton’s campus behind.

On the way to the hotel, the Foxes stopped at a restaurant for a quick meal. Matt’s mother was there at the table waiting for them. She hugged each of the girls tightly and ignored Neil’s awkward attempt at a handshake to hug him too. “Call me Randy,” she said, pulling away to get a good look at him. “It’s great to finally meet you, Neil.”

Over dinner, Neil learned why the others spoke highly of Randy. Despite being the outsider, she seemed perfectly comfortable with all of them and took a genuine interest in what everyone had to say that went beyond mere politeness. She effortlessly joggled conversations with Matt, Dan, and Allison and still found opportunities to ask about Neil’s classes and Nicky’s plans to return to Germany. When the topic of that night’s game came up, she coaxed Kevin out of his silent brooding by asking a few well-aimed questions.

Afterward, Matt packed his bags into his mother’s car, gave Dan a chaste kiss, and wished everyone a good spring break. He and Randy left to drive back to New York City and the Foxes continued to their hotel.

Andrew didn’t look at Neil in the hotel lobby as Abby handed out room keys, and he ignored him in the hallway two floors up as the Foxes filed into their assigned rooms. Neil went about his usual routine, and then he calmly sat down on the edge of his bed to wait with his heart in his throat.

The knock on the door ten minutes later made him jump. When Neil let Andrew inside, the first thing out of Andrew’s mouth was, “Who was the text from?”

“What?”

“You got a text message back at the stadium. The only people you speak to were in that room, so who was the text from?”

“I didn’t realize you cared that much.”
It was clear from the look on Andrew’s face that he knew what Neil was doing, but he dropped the subject anyway. He took a moment to inspect the room as if it wasn’t identical to all the others, poking around the drawers and eyeing the unzipped duffel bag at the foot of the bed. Neil leaned against the wall and watched him, content to wait. They had all night.

“I kept my word,” Andrew pointed out.


“Stop talking.”

Neil cocked an eyebrow, knowing it would only annoy Andrew more. “Is there something else you’d like me to do with my mouth?”

As expected, Andrew’s glare sharpened. “I’ll take the blood you promised. You can choose where you get bitten and then you can keep your mouth shut.”

“You can bite me here,” Neil said, tapping the side of his neck.

“Fine.”

Neil pulled his t-shirt off and tossed it onto the cheap hotel bedspread. “Don’t want any blood stains,” he explained. “I paid good money for that shirt.”

“One of your best dollars.”

“Actually, I think it was four.”

“Stand over there and hold still,” Andrew ordered.

The coolness of the wall against Neil’s bare skin made him shiver. Andrew stood in front of him to watch the goosebumps spread over his chest and down his arms. He brushed his fingers down Neil’s scarred stomach to the waistband of his sweatpants, and then he pulled Neil’s hand to the back of his head. “Stop me if you need to,” he said.

Neil buried his fingers in Andrew’s soft hair and tugged him closer. Andrew stepped forward- only a couple inches separated their bodies- and curved one hand around the side of Neil’s neck as he leaned in. He found the right spot to bite with an open-mouthed kiss, sliding his tongue over Neil’s pulse point and exhaling hotly. Neil let his eyes fall shut. Next came the familiar pressure and sting of Andrew’s fangs piercing his skin, painful for only a few seconds. When Andrew began sucking blood from the wounds, he put his free hand on Neil’s waist to hold him steady.

The wet sensation of Andrew’s mouth working against the sensitive skin of his neck felt better than Neil expected it to. His body was electrified by Andrew’s touch, sparks skittering in his stomach and a sharp want crackling under his skin. He was half hard before Andrew finished sealing the wounds and they were standing too close together for him to hide it.

“Vamp tramp,” Andrew mocked lowly.

“I’m not- don’t call me that.”

“Fang banger, then?”

With a handful of Andrew’s hair, Neil pulled him back a few inches so he could look him in the eye properly. “It’s not the vampire thing and you know it.”
Andrew held his stare for a few heartbeats. Tucking one finger into the waistband of Neil’s sweats, he asked, “Yes or no?”

Neil swallowed thickly and nodded his consent. Andrew pushed Neil’s sweats and boxers halfway down his thighs and wrapped one hand around his erection without hesitation. Once he figured out the right angle, he stroked Neil experimentally and settled into a quick, rough rhythm. Neil swallowed a groan and, shivering, tipped his head back against the wall.

Sex usually only crossed his mind in an abstract, impersonal way. Masturbating always seemed more time-consuming and messy than satisfying. Being touched by Andrew was different. Neil tightened his grip on Andrew’s hair and squeezed his eyes shut as he tensed in anticipation of release. He was only aware of the wall at his back and Andrew- Andrew’s hand, Andrew’s heat, Andrew’s mouth on his neck.

Andrew’s teeth gently scraped over the tender skin he’d broken and healed. More sparks burst in Neil’s stomach. In the next moment, he was gasping out Andrew’s name and shuddering through his release.

Neither of them moved for what could have been a minute or an hour. Neil turned his head slightly to press his cheek to Andrew’s and, for whatever reason, Andrew allowed it. They stood silently until Neil’s world felt like it had rolled right-side up again and his hazy mind began to clear.

“Would you ever let me do that to you?” Neil murmured. He’d never done anything like that with anyone before, but he wanted to learn. He wanted to watch Andrew fall apart and put him back together.

Andrew roughly pulled Neil’s boxers and sweatpants up and stepped back. “You don’t swing.”

“You’re too smart to live in denial. You know I’m interested in you.”

“That’s your problem,” Andrew replied in a clipped tone. He went into the bathroom to wash his hands, and then he left Neil’s room without giving him another chance to talk.

Neil stared at the door after it swung shut. He was already itching for more of Andrew’s touch. It was a problem, like Andrew said, but Neil didn’t mind having it. He went to bed with a fluttering, anticipatory twinge in his stomach and managed to sleep peacefully for once.
Bargains and a Break

Chapter Summary

Neil spends spring break in good company.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: blood, drug mention, sexual content

Sorry for another long wait!! It was a bad combination of holiday weirdness and creative block. I hope 2019 has been kind to you all so far.

As always, thank you for reading! I really appreciate all the kind words and kudos you guys have left for me <3

Over the weekend, the girls flew to North Dakota together, Andrew’s group moved into Abby’s house for the week, and the other students went their separate ways. As far as Neil was concerned, he was the only one left in the Tower. He hated it, but he told himself he could cope just like he did before coming to PSU.

Wymack ordered Neil and Kevin to take at least twenty-four hours off from Exy, so Neil kept himself distracted by watching a few random TV shows and doing some basic stretches on the main room floor. After he got bored, he went out for a run and picked up some groceries on his way back.

Being alone wasn’t terrible until the sun went down. The silence was worse when the dark of night swallowed the rest of the world whole and pressed hungrily against Neil’s window, like it was waiting to devour him too. Not even TV chatter could fill the emptiness.

Neil’s mind drifted to Millport, and then being in the suite went from bad to unbearable so he bolted. He drifted along Perimeter Road like a ghost until he got to the stadium. The bright exterior lights drew him in and brushed the shadows off his back.

Inside, there was only more silence waiting for him, but something about being there made it easier to breathe. He lay down on one of the couches in the lounge to watch old game footage.

At ten o’clock, he got a text message. It wasn’t from the mystery number like he expected. It was a question from Andrew.

Are you in your room?

Court, Neil replied before he settled back into his chair and firmly squashed the squirming, hopeful feeling trying to take root.

For the next twenty minutes, he was too distracted to focus on the game playing on the screen, too busy listening for movement. When the rattling echo of a slammed door came down the hallway,
he nearly jumped to his feet. Andrew appeared in the doorway a few minutes later and looked from
Neil to the television. “Something told me you’d be obsessing,” he said.

Neil hit the power button on the remote. “I was bored.”

“Consequence of a one-track mind, junkie.”

“Did you come here to criticize me for the millionth time or was there something else you
wanted?”

“You offered me a blank check in exchange for Allison’s neck.”

“I remember.”

“I want a hundred dollars,” said Andrew.

Neil was surprised he’d ask for so little, but he wasn’t going to question it. “Consider it done.”

“We’ll go to your dorm now. Roland’s waiting at the Tower.”

“What? Why is he at the Tower?” Neil asked, but Andrew was already walking away. Confused,
Neil followed him out of the stadium, shutting off lights and ensuring doors were locked along the
way. When they got to Andrew’s car, Neil tried again. “What’s Roland doing in town?”

“Check under your seat.”

Neil did so and found a brown paper sack with a full blood bag inside it. “That’s generous of him.”

“It’s not generosity if you pay for it.”

“Is that what the hundred dollars is for?”

“Yes.”

“How much did he charge for delivery?” Neil asked as he carefully tucked the paper sack back
under the seat.

“Delivery was free since I provided a medical professional and sterile equipment.”

At the Tower, Roland was waiting for them in the lobby. Neil wondered if that was because
Andrew didn’t trust him to be alone upstairs in his room. Roland greeted Neil with a half-hearted
wave and a, “How’s it going, man?”

“Not bad. How are you?” Neil returned automatically. It was strange seeing Roland outside of
Eden’s Twilight, under fluorescent lighting and casually dressed in jeans and a New Orleans Saints
t-shirt.

Andrew jabbed the call button for the elevator and stared at the illuminated arrow.

“Can’t complain,” said Roland. “I just met Abby. She seems cool.”

Neil nodded and stole a glance at the large Band-Aid on the crease of Roland’s elbow. He resisted
the urge to point out that Roland could have done this before, that Andrew could have used his
money to buy blood instead of cracker dust. Andrew wasn’t an idiot. He knew what his options
were.
When they made it upstairs, Andrew told Roland to wait in the hallway and followed Neil into his bedroom. Neil dug through the contents of his safe until he found his cash. Andrew accepted a hundred-dollar bill without a word and left to pay Roland.

The mystery number texted Neil his "21" shortly after. Neil read it, swallowed the lump in his throat, and got up.

Before the silence could smother him again, he hauled the mattress off his bunk and dragged it out to the main room. He slept on and off with the TV playing on low volume until morning. His paranoia wouldn’t let him rest. Part of his brain was convinced that Riko lurked somewhere in the shadows nearby and that made him fear the return of his hallucinations on top of everything else.

When the sky lightened, he put on gym shorts and running shoes and left his suite. His intention was to run until he burned through his restless energy, but that changed as soon as he saw Andrew standing outside the Tower’s front door.

“What are you doing here?” Neil asked.

Andrew replied, “You said you would buy me a new car if I agreed to eat regularly.”

“That offer’s still on the table if you’re interested.”

“Ask for something else, something you actually benefit from.”

Neil shrugged. “I don’t like watching you starve. My motives are self-serving.”

“I won’t owe my health to you. Ask for something else.”

“All right.” Neil rubbed the back of his neck and looked around the empty lawn for inspiration. He wanted to live. He wanted to kiss Andrew again and see the Foxes win finals, but he couldn’t ask for those things as part of a deal. After a minute or so, he got an idea. “Is a new car enough to buy my way back into the group?”

“Aren’t you used to being alone?”

“Being used to something doesn’t mean you enjoy it.”

“So you want company, but not protection,” Andrew said with a hint of scorn.

“That’s right.”

“Fine.” Andrew shook his head and turned away. “Be ready to go to the dealership by ten. Kevin and I will pick you up here.”

Neil went for a run although the strange turn of events took the edge off his restlessness. He did an easy three-mile loop before going back to the Tower to kill time until Kevin texted him at nine fifty-five.

Andrew didn’t say anything when Neil climbed in the backseat of his car, but Kevin turned to greet him with, “We’ll practice longer tomorrow and Wednesday to make up for today.”

“Coach told us not to push it,” Neil said just to be contrary.

“We can’t afford to slow down now, not when we’re so close.”

“So we overexert ourselves?”
“We’re not overexerting ourselves,” Kevin insisted. “We have to get everything right during next week’s game. There is no room for error.”

“I am done listening to this,” Andrew interrupted as he turned on the radio.

The three of them didn’t speak again until Andrew had parked the car outside a Maserati dealership in Atlanta. A row of display models gleamed attractively in front of the sleek building. All of them looked like suitable replacements for what Andrew lost: shiny and expensive, the polar opposite of what Neil and his mother used to look for in a car.

The salesman looked justifiably doubtful when Andrew asked to see one of the newer models, but he instantly became more accommodating when Kevin tilted his chin up and haughtily said, “You have no idea who I am, do you?”

The salesman recited information like he was reading it straight from a brochure while he showed Andrew around the lot. Neil and Kevin trailed behind them. Kevin’s input was unasked for and ignored, as was the salesman’s. Andrew silently looked over each car until he decided on one. The salesman offered a test drive, frowned when Andrew waved him off, and was visibly bemused when Andrew informed him that Neil was the one who would be paying.

The Maserati Andrew chose was obsidian and wicked-looking and, once the paperwork was sorted out, he was allowed to drive it home. He and Kevin sped off in the direction of the highway while Neil drove the cousins’ used sedan at a more reasonable speed. Since Andrew had to stop at the DMV, though, Neil made it back to Abby’s first. He parked by the curb to leave space in the driveway for the Maserati.

Naturally, Nicky and Aaron had questions about why he was there and why he had their car, but Neil waved them off with the assurance that Andrew and Kevin would be there soon with an explanation.

Abby had just started making dinner when Neil heard the rumble of the Maserati outside. Nicky must’ve looked through the front window because he said, “Holy shit. Aaron, get your ass down here!”

“What’s going on?” Abby demanded from the kitchen.

“Andrew got a new car,” Neil called back to her. He followed Nicky outside and watched him run his hands over the car’s frame with a wide-eyed reverence, too shocked to form complete sentences. Aaron hovered a few feet away, torn between awe and resentment.

Kevin rolled his eyes and nudged Neil back toward the house. “Did you get your stuff from the Tower? Andrew said you’re sleeping here tonight.”

Neil’s mouth tightened. He hadn’t thought of that.

“Moron,” Kevin said without any heat. “We’ll stop on our way back after practice. Those idiots won’t mind a little extra time in the new car.”

They went to the stadium a short while after dinner. The weight on Neil’s chest felt lighter as the five of them put on their gear to head out to the court together again. He wanted that night to last forever, but he didn’t begrudge Nicky and Aaron for bailing early. Andrew drove them back to the house and came back to sit in the stands until Kevin decided he and Neil were done. They were both exhausted by that point; Kevin looked almost as peaceful as Neil felt. Neil’s head was quiet and calm all the way back to Abby’s, at which point he realized that he still hadn’t gotten spare
clothes and his toothbrush from his dorm.

Neil began, “I’m gonna walk over-”

“Get out,” Andrew told Kevin. “I’m driving Neil to the Tower.”

Kevin smothered a yawn with his hand and went inside. Once the front door closed behind him, Neil took Kevin’s place in the front seat. Andrew put the car in reverse and backed out onto the road. He drove faster than normal, still testing how the car handled each hard brake and sharp turn. Neil didn’t say anything. The silence was too comfortable to ruin.

Andrew parked in the space closest to the Tower door, ignoring the “Disabled Parking Only” sign. Neil was surprised when Andrew followed him into the building, but he chalked it up to Andrew’s commitment to their new deal. “You don’t have to keep me company a hundred percent of the time,” he said as they approached the door of his suite.

“That’s not what this is about,” replied Andrew.

“What then?”

“It’s about the fact that an empty dorm is better for sex than a house with four other people and no free bedrooms.” Andrew raised an eyebrow at Neil’s surprise. “You can say no if you don’t want this.”

Neil tried to remember the exact words he’d spoken earlier. “I wasn’t angling for sex when we made our deal.”

“I’m gay, you’re ‘interested’, and we have an opportunity. That’s all. You can pump the brakes on your moral crisis.”

“Oh.” Neil’s mouth went dry as he remembered Andrew jerking him off on Friday night. “In that case, my answer’s definitely yes.”

Andrew locked the suite door and pushed Neil toward the mattress in front of the TV. He removed his own sweatshirt first before he got to work on Neil’s clothing. Andrew’s mouth and hands distracted Neil from any awkwardness he might’ve felt at being naked and flat on his back in the middle of the main room. The sound of his harsh, uneven breathing filled the air. The rough noise he let out when Andrew took him into his mouth couldn’t be helped.

Neil lost all sense of time. He had no idea if it was seconds or minutes before Andrew turned him into a shuddering, gasping wreck. With another loud groan, he tensed up and tipped over the edge into mindless, blissful relief. Andrew worked him through it with his hand, knowing by Neil’s shiver when he was too sensitive to be touched. He sat up on his knees, but stayed put until Neil finished catching his breath.

Neil dazedly opened his eyes, adrift in the afterglow, and started, “Do you want-”

“Give me a few minutes. Go pack your bag,” Andrew said.

Neil wiped his stomach off with his sheet and made a mental note to do laundry soon. He pulled on his clothing, went into the bedroom, and packed while trying not to think too hard about what Andrew was doing at that very moment.

When he heard the bathroom sink cut on, Neil took his duffel out to the main room and waited for Andrew to finish washing his hands. Then, they wordlessly made their way back to Abby’s house.
Nicky and Aaron had the twin beds in Abby’s guest room and Kevin was fast asleep on the couch in the den, so Neil curled up in an armchair in the small front room. It was cramped and uncomfortable, but his troubled mind was soothed by the soft sounds of Andrew roaming around the house, rummaging through cupboards and closets as he went. It didn’t take him long to fall asleep.

After breakfast the next morning, Neil went to the court with Andrew’s lot for drills and scrimmages. Nicky and Aaron joined forces to irritate Kevin as payback for making them sacrifice their vacation time. They went back to Abby’s for dinner and ended up in front of the television together even though Nicky was the only one invested in the movie that was on.

It was an easy routine that lasted for the duration of spring break. No one commented on Neil being suddenly welcome in the group and no one asked when he’d be out again. Nicky welcomed him with open arms, talked his ear off most days, and even introduced him to Erik during a Skype session. Kevin seemed to appreciate having Neil there to discuss Exy with. Andrew was largely indifferent to Neil’s presence, but every night the two of them drove back to the Tower to take advantage of the empty suites.

Aaron watched Neil warily. At first, Neil assumed it was because of the unanswered question of how and why the resident runaway bought a Maserati for his teammate. He felt that was fair—he’d given Aaron plenty of reasons not to trust him—but he had no intention of letting Aaron in on any of his secrets, so he ignored him.

On Friday night, Aaron caught Neil alone. Everyone else had gone to bed—everyone, even Andrew, who had taken a few sips from Roland’s blood bag and set up a sleeping bag in the TV room. Footsteps in the hall roused Neil from a shallow sleep. There was just enough light from the street seeping in through the blinds to see Aaron standing in the doorway.

“My chair only has room for one, but you’re welcome to the others,” Neil quipped.

Aaron took a few steps closer to him. “What’s going on between you and my brother?”

It was the tone people used when they were looking to confirm their suspicions. Neil mentally combed through the last few days for anything that might’ve caught Aaron’s attention.

“I asked you a question,” Aaron said, already losing his patience.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Is the truth a foreign concept to you?”

Neil shrugged.

Aaron said, “I’ve seen the way you two look at each other.”

“You’re imagining things. Andrew doesn’t look at me.”

“Exactly.” Aaron leaned out of the room to make sure no one was coming before lowering his voice even further. “He used to watch you like a hawk and rant about how irritating you were. Then he stopped talking about you. Now he barely looks at you even if you’re right in front of him.”

Neil forced a smile. “It sounds like you’re proving my point for me. Thank you.”

“If he didn’t want you around, he wouldn’t let you stay here.”
“Maybe he just doesn’t care.”

Aaron shook his head. “You didn’t see his face when he realized Riko had you. I thought I was going to have to help him bury a second body that night.”

“He’s not the only one who wants to kill that sack of shit.”

“You won’t let him protect you anymore even though things are heating up,” Aaron swept on. “Plus, you just dropped a ton of money on that shiny new Maserati.”

“It’s my fault the other car got trashed.”

“I didn’t see you paying reparations to Allison after you got her boyfriend killed.”

Neil inhaled deeply through the squeeze of his guilt. “What do you want?”

“I want to know what you are to Andrew.”

“I’m nothing.”

“Bullshit. I thought he had something going on with Renee, but she never got him all twisted up like this. He let you walk away from your deal, and then he rescued you anyway. That means something.”

“You’re reading too much into things.”

“You two left together last night and you were gone for hours. Were you feeding him or fucking him?”

“Are those the only options?”

Aaron shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Is he gay?”

“So much noise,” Andrew said as he stepped into the room. The air crackled with an unspoken warning. Aaron began to step away from Andrew before deciding to stand his ground. Andrew stared back impassively. “Is there something you’d like to get off your chest, Aaron?”

Aaron shot back, “Why the sudden interest? You’ve been ignoring me for weeks.”

“Years,” Andrew corrected. “It was a good system too.”

Aaron silently calculated his next move and decided to retreat back to the guest room rather than confront Andrew about whatever was on his mind.

“What do you think he’s up to now?” Neil asked, knowing Andrew probably heard everything.

Andrew told him not to meddle, and then he left the room.

Neil slumped back into his chair, struggling to find a semi-comfortable position. The only motive Neil could think of to explain Aaron’s impromptu interrogation was the terms of the twins’ deal: if Andrew was involved with someone, he was breaking the same rule Aaron was. In theory, it had the potential to level the playing field. In reality, an ultimatum would only make things worse. Andrew would give Neil up in a heartbeat and Aaron would have to do the same with Katelyn if he didn’t want to risk Andrew’s wrath.

Neil hoped Aaron was smart enough to figure that out on his own. He hoped Aaron could find a
way to end that toxic bargain and not lose Andrew completely in the fallout.

*No meddling,* he reminded himself firmly.
On the day Neil’s countdown dwindled to single digits, the Foxes had a rematch against the Bearcats. The Foxhole Court was lit up and alive with a crowd of eager fans. Spirits in the Foxes’ locker room were higher than ever. Neil’s warring excitement and nervousness was almost enough to keep his thoughts in the moment, instead of on the “9” texted to him that afternoon.

Wymack gave his team a short speech and a warning to behave themselves since they couldn’t afford any red cards, as usual. Dan backed it up with a pep talk; she had enough confidence for the whole team. Neil wanted more than anything to do right by them. As he went to change into his gear, he felt ready for the challenge.

He had to work hard to keep his mind from snagging on the realization that, whether they won or lost, it was the last game before his countdown ended.

The Bearcats were out for blood; that much was obvious from the vicious threats they lobbed across the court during drills. Matt looked two seconds away from returning fire, but Dan kept the Foxes focused.

“Let them rack up cards and penalties,” she said once they were all gathered at the bench. “We all know how to take hits and bounce back. We’ll be fine.”

Allison said, “We better have subs to spare next year. I hate playing by pansy rules.”

Matt gestured at her in agreement.

“Whatever,” said Dan. “Keep it clean tonight, all right?”

“We beat the Bearcats once. We don’t need to play dirty to beat them again,” Renee chimed in.

“Exactly,” Dan agreed.

When she went out on the court for the handshake and coin toss, Wymack threatened to sign everyone up for a marathon if they lost. The Foxes were all so accustomed to their coach’s gruff, backwards way of expressing himself that it actually served as encouragement.

Kevin’s silence spoke volumes. He was desperate to win in spite of the Foxes’ poor chances- Neil could tell because he felt the same way and his desperation heightened by the fact that, whether the Foxes won or lost, it could be the last game he ever played.
He wanted to make it a good one.

When Dan came off the court and rejoined the rest of the team, Neil told her, “We’re going to win.”

Dan grinned. Nicky slapped Neil’s back and said, “Hell yes.”

The announcer began to read off the names of the starting line-ups. The noise of the crowd swelled behind Neil’s back and Wymack said, “All right, Foxes, let’s do this.”

Neil put on his helmet and armored gloves. He shrugged off his anxious thoughts and his problems and followed Kevin onto the court. Once the doors were bolted shut, he was no longer a doomed runaway or a loose end or someone’s property, he was just a Fox.

He gave everything he had that night. At halftime, Kevin chewed him out for going too hard and wasting his energy. Abby clucked her tongue in disapproval as she checked Neil over for any serious injuries. His shoulder ached and his wrist was still twinging from a bad fall in the first quarter, but there was nothing to prevent him from playing.

He couldn’t slow down; he wasn’t willing to consider it as an option. When Dan took his place, he paced along the plexiglass wall and shouted at the refs for every lousy call. When he got back on the court, the fear in his head whispering, This could be the last one, pushed him past his limits.

The final buzzer was bittersweet: victory and loss wrapped up together.

They had won the game and, for all they knew, they were going to semifinals. Matt and Nicky’s voices bounced off the locker room walls. Dan was laughing. Even Wymack wore a small smile. I’m sorry, Neil thought miserably as he watched his teammates celebrate. He could only think of all the near-misses he’d had over the years and the scars he bore from close brushes with death and how Riko had sent a hunter to murder Andrew. Neil wouldn’t be able to defend himself against a trained killer.

Maybe it should have been enough that he had a good year with the Foxes. He was grateful for their kindness and friendship, all the second chances he didn’t deserve. After everything, that should have been enough, but when the “8” was texted to him he wanted to rage at the universe, “It’s not fair.” After that, he was no longer able to sleep more than a couple hours at a time without a couple shots of whatever liquor he found in the kitchen to calm his nerves.

He split his free time between the upperclassmen and the cousins. He savored everything, no matter how mundane- trips to the vending machine in the Tower basement with Matt, lunches in the dining hall with the girls, fumbling through video games with Nicky. Around midnight each night, he met Andrew on the roof for a cigarette and some heated kisses.

After practice on Thursday, the Foxes gathered in the lounge at the Foxhole Court to watch the Trojans face off against the Ravens in the first round of semifinals. Wymack ordered take-out for the whole team before heading home for the night. The couches and chairs were pulled into a semicircle and some overturned boxes served as tables.

The game was hosted at Edgar Allan. Neil’s stomach was in knots as the camera panned over the court he played on over winter break. He tried not to tense up or give any sign of discomfort, but every so often he could feel Andrew’s eyes on him.

“Are we gonna bother placing bets?” Nicky asked as he heaped more food on his paper plate.

Dan said, “Choosing between teams might break Kevin’s little heart.”
Kevin rolled his eyes, but otherwise didn’t acknowledge their teasing. It wasn’t a secret that he harbored a deep admiration for the Trojans. According to Nicky, when the Trojans beat the Penn State Lions, Kevin spent half an hour on the phone with Jeremy Knox, the Trojans’ captain, congratulating him and giving him pointers.

“Let’s just not bet on this game,” suggested Matt. “I don’t want to put my money on the Ravens, but I don’t want to lose either.”

“You never know. The Trojans might win,” Dan said.

Nicky tapped his chin contemplatively. “The real question is: can we win?”

“No,” Kevin answered. He ignored the dirty looks Nicky and Dan gave him. “It would take a miracle for us to beat any of the Big Three. Just be thankful that you don’t have to go up against Penn State. I wasn’t even playing for this team and I wouldn’t want to show my face in their city after your humiliating performance last spring.”

Dan blinked and let out a sharp laugh. “Wow. Sometimes I forget what an asshole you are.”

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s amazing we made it this far,” Kevin said, “but we’re not going any further. We exceeded everyone’s expectations and laid groundwork for next year. That’s the important thing.”

“What’s your take, Neil?” Matt asked.

Neil thought of the “3” he’d received from the unknown number and swallowed the cold lump in his throat. “We can’t give up just because Kevin’s a pessimist.”

Andrew was staring at him again, but Neil refused to meet his eyes.

Dan said, “Hear that, Kevin? You need a better attitude.”

“You need to learn how to deal with the truth,” Kevin returned.

“That’s outside Junior’s wheelhouse,” muttered Aaron.

Nicky was indignant on Neil’s behalf, which Neil appreciated, but Aaron’s remark wasn’t exactly off-base. Neil sank into the couch cushions and picked at his dinner, appetite gone.

“All right, here we go,” said Matt. He turned up the volume as the starting buzzer sounded and the game officially began.

Even after everything he’d seen, watching two of the best collegiate Exy teams clash took Neil’s breath away and made him burn with envy. They played on a level that he could only dream of getting to. Maybe if he had more time to train with Kevin, he could’ve gotten close.

During halftime, the cameras showed Jeremy Knox sweaty and slumped on the bench. His team was down by two points, but he was still grinning like he was on top of the world. The Trojans looked happy too. The Ravens seemed like they were waiting to be sentenced by a judge.

Someone asked a question that Neil didn’t catch, but he heard Kevin reply, “That’s pretty obvious. The Ravens might be the best team, but they all struggle to cope once they leave the Nest. They can’t adapt to the structures of other teams.”

“So why would anyone choose to go to Edgar Allan?” asked Nicky.
“Because everyone thinks they’ll be the exception, not the rule.”

Matt said, “They should put a disclaimer in the brochure.”

“Congrats on not going totally psychotic, Kevin,” said Allison.

Renee gave Kevin a sympathetic look. “It must’ve been really hard adjusting to us. You’ve done well.”

Nicky muttered something about charity, which prompted a barbed comeback from Kevin. The two of them traded insults while Matt and Dan began discussing a potentially fatal flaw in the Trojans’ playing style. Allison sighed and pointedly turned the TV volume up. Neil felt a flicker of warm affection for his teammates. They were all too preoccupied to notice his small smile. The Ravens and Trojans might have been the best in the league, but he was glad he ended up a Fox.

The Ravens won, which was as unsurprising as it was disappointing. Everyone in the room had hoped to see them get crushed. Kevin was quiet and sullen as he helped tidy the room and push the furniture back into place.

“We’ll kick all their asses,” Nicky vowed through a mouthful of candy, nudging a chair into place with his hip. Matt voiced his agreement and stole the package of Twizzlers from him.

Kevin grit his teeth, but didn’t bother arguing for once.

Neil didn’t feel like returning to the Tower just yet, so he told Matt he was going for a walk and left on his own. Once again, he felt Andrew’s stare. To his relief, no one tried to follow him.

Palmetto State’s campus was more familiar to Neil than any of the cities he’d lived in with his mother. It wasn’t just the escape routes, meeting points, and memorable landmarks that stuck in his head. He knew which coffee shop served the best breakfast sandwiches and where the best running trails were and which bowling alley the upperclassmen favored. He could find any of the Foxes in a crowd.

In his mother’s honor, he bought a cheap pack of cigarettes from a small nearby pharmacy and went to the middle of the Green to light one. He held the stick between his fingers, watching the smoke curl upward toward the night sky while he ruminated on his circumstances.

He’d broken all his mother’s rules and wasted the sacrifices she made so that he could live. Surviving two years on his own was an accomplishment, he supposed, although he could feel the sting of her anger as if she were right there with him. “What were you thinking?” she would’ve demanded, one hand fisted tightly in his hair. “How could you be so reckless?” Hot pressure built behind his eyes. He tilted his head back and blinked hard to get rid of the moisture.

The minutes it took for the cigarette to burn down to the filter was all the time he gave himself to wallow in heartache.

Everything would be over soon. He tried to find a scrap of relief in that.
The text reading “0” came early Sunday morning, in the first few hours of April. Neil was awake, unable to sleep with his body buzzing with anxiety. Something would happen that day. A prank, an attack, or his murder. He was a loose end Riko needed to be rid of and his father’s misplaced property. The hunters were closing in.

A smarter man would have stayed away from Palmetto State, would have run for the hills at the first sign of trouble, would have done things differently and survived.

But now that he was at the edge of his world, waiting to be shoved into oblivion, he couldn’t bring himself to regret the choices he made. Had he followed the rules set by his mother, he would have missed his chance to be a Fox, to be part of a family, to know and be known by Andrew.

Neil Josten wasn’t just a name on forged papers. He felt almost real, with the beginnings of roots and a reputation.

Matt had decided to spend the night with Dan, so Neil didn’t have to be quiet as he left the suite. He knew sleep wouldn’t come and there was one other person guaranteed to be awake.

He found Andrew on the roof, sitting on the ledge with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. As he lowered himself to sit beside him, Neil asked, “Can I bum a smoke?”

Andrew handed over his pack and his cheap plastic lighter. “Someday I’ll start making you pay me back for the cigarettes you steal.”

“I’ll put a note about it in my will,” Neil said dryly. He shook out a stick and put it between his lips to light it, cupping one hand around the end to shield it from the breeze. The taste of smoke and the acrid smell of it soothed his nerves. He wondered if he would see his mother on the other side of
death, if he might see Andrew again. He didn’t believe in anything, but it was a nice fantasy and, if it was going to be his last day on Earth, he’d let himself indulge.

Neil stared at the trail of smoke. “Do you ever get the feeling that the world’s about to end?”

Andrew’s sidelong glance almost looked annoyed. “Is this your way of saying you’re about to take off?”

“I’m not running,” Neil said honestly. “I’d rather die a Fox than a rabbit.”

“Either way, you’ll die an idiot.”

Neil let out a weak laugh. “What were you thinking about before I came out here?”

“Falling.”

“I don’t think it’d be a terrible way to go,” Neil mused. “Seems like it’d be pretty quick.”

“I’ll give you a push if you want to test that.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Andrew tapped ash onto the concrete between them and met Neil’s eyes impassively. “You sound strangely sure of yourself for a man who makes it his mission in life to be as irritating as possible.”

“I think you like being irritated by me.”

“And what gave you that idea?”

“You need something to break up the boredom. That’s why you play Exy, why you kept me around, and why you sit out here night after night.”

Andrew studied his face, eyes narrowing. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“What else is new?” Neil’s sarcasm fell flat. He cleared his throat and said, “I won’t drag you into my mess. I’ll handle it.”

“Sure you will,” Andrew said dismissively.

As the conversation lapsed into silence, they both turned away from each other to look at the glow of Palmetto State’s campus. Neil felt a rush of fondness for every street, building, and road sign. This place was filled with months of his best memories and inhabited by his favorite people. He wished he could have figured out how to be worthy of it.

His phone vibrated twice. Frowning, he pulled it out to check his inbox. He’d already gotten the last number of his countdown and the only other person who would text him that late at night was sitting beside him.

Time’s up, Junior

The phone number it came from had a Baltimore area code.

Another text message arrived a second later.

Come out to play
“Why is your heart racing?” asked Andrew.

“It’s- it’s nothing. I should go back inside.”

“Neil.”

Hearing the name made him ache with longing. He stamped out his cigarette and got to his feet. “I have to go,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Walking away broke his heart. He resigned himself to letting go of everything he couldn’t bear to leave behind before: the Foxes, Palmetto State, and Neil Josten. When he stepped through the roof access door, he was Nathaniel Wesninski again.

He was halfway between the fourth and third floor, shivering with fear, when the roof access door slammed open and Andrew’s voice called out, “Neil, stop.”

Then the fire alarm blared to life, a shrill wail and a strobing white light.

Andrew’s footsteps thundered down the stairs. “Wait outside,” he ordered. “I’ll get the others.”

Other doors to the stairwell were flung open. Everyone was being drawn outside to where the Butcher’s men were waiting and they would all be in the line of fire. Terrified, Nathaniel practically threw himself down the stairs. He had to keep his friends safe.

An ambulance and a police car were already waiting outside. Two men in police uniforms directed the Tower residents away from the building and a paramedic waited by the open back doors of the ambulance. Nathaniel veered toward the edge of the crowd, trying to get a better look at the officers. The emergency responders couldn’t have gotten there so quickly. They must have been ready and waiting. All of them were on the Butcher’s payroll- Nathaniel was sure of it.

Someone bumped into him, and then there was a sharp pinch on the back of his hip. A needle. Nathaniel whipped around to see a blonde woman in a black hooded sweatshirt. His entire body went cold as ice. He hadn’t seen Lola Malcolm in years, but he’d recognize her anywhere. She was his father’s most trusted accomplice, the one he called to make corpses and crime scenes disappear. She was death itself coming to end his life. Although he’d expected it, the full weight of his loss finally came down on his head.

As always, his first instinct was to run, but he didn’t make it far before he was stumbling on rubbery legs. The drugs in his system worked fast. He felt drunk before he broke away from the crowd and Lola caught up with him easily. One of the police officers appeared to help Lola get Nathaniel into the ambulance. The world rolled as their hands hoisted him inside.

Soon after, everything went dark.

In the murky bog of his subconscious, he saw a figure that he somehow recognized as his mother. He was lying in a snow drift with German on his tongue and the smell of gasoline in his nose. A memory of Switzerland bubbled up and popped before he could see it in full. The Foxes were there too, seatbelts over their uniforms. Nathaniel’s feet felt too cold, then too hot, and then the ground warped beneath him. It was hard like the floor of the Foxhole Court; in his mind, the polish melted and the air filled with smoke and grease and burning hair. His hand twitched, needing to get to his mother’s backpack.

Fingernails traced lines down his cheek over and over. There was a voice too- Lola softly saying, “I know you’re in there, Junior. Open up those baby blues.”
He woke up lying on his side in the back of a cargo van with a plastic tarp beneath him and his hands zip-tied behind his back. Lola sat a foot away from him with a small, unzipped duffel bag tucked against her thigh. “Oh, good. You woke up,” she said, as if she hadn’t expected him to. “It’s been a long time since I had to drug a man without killing him. Wasn’t sure I remembered how and we do want you alive for this next part, believe it or not.”

Nathaniel choked out a noise and squirmed only to discover his ankles were bound too. Through the haze, he knew his life was about to end and that he would never see the people he’d come to care for like family ever again. Grief tore the last piece of his heart out.

The van ran over a pothole and Nathaniel’s head smacked against the floor as he was jostled. Lola chuckled at his pained grunt. She rummaged around in the bag at her side and pulled out a syringe, saying, “Another teensy-weensy dose should do just fine. Stop squirming, Nathaniel. We came all this way to get you; the least you could do is cooperate.”

He couldn’t fight her off as she jabbed the needle into his arm. After the initial pressure-prick-burn of the needle, the drugs rushed into his system. Within minutes, his mind was blurry and darkening.

Time oozed over him. He drifted in and out of wakefulness, unable to reach his thoughts or feelings. He knew his mother would be there soon to save him until he remembered she was charred pieces in a cramped backpack under California sand, alone in the dark where he left her. His stomach rolled with the need to vomit, but he couldn’t move his limbs. He couldn’t even roll over. Tears sprang to his eyes.

All the while, Lola watched him like a viper, ready and eager to strike. There was a gleam in her eyes that told Nathaniel his pain and anguish would be thoroughly enjoyed.

Eventually, the van came to a stop and the doors were thrown open. Nathaniel peeled his eyes open, grimacing. There was duct tape over his mouth, but he couldn’t remember when Lola put it on him. His head throbbed as he rolled onto his back and looked up at the window. It wasn’t the sky he saw, but a wall with tools hanging on hooks and a metal shelf. Someone’s garage, he guessed.

Lola’s voice cut above the others, “We’re not using more drugs, you moron. We’ve only got a couple hours to get this shit done before the boss gets here. Get him inside.”

Nathaniel wished he knew how many hours he’d lost to the drugs. He wondered if the Foxes would bother searching for him, how soon they would accept he was gone for good. His last memory of Andrew played behind his eyes and heat squeezed his throat.

Jackson’s meaty hands grabbed Nathaniel’s ankles and dragged him closer to the open side doors. He hefted Nathaniel’s body over his shoulder and carried him across the two-car garage. Lola led them down some steps and through a heavy door. When she flipped a switch, dim light bulbs flickered to life along the ceiling of a narrow, windowless tunnel.

Nathaniel’s insides seized up with panic. This was the tunnel his father built to connect his garage to the cellar. This was the tunnel Nathaniel and his mother used to escape all those years ago.

He was in Baltimore, where the nightmare of his life began.

When they reached the cellar, Jackson dropped Nathaniel onto a metal folding chair that had its back to a wooden support beam that was wrapped in thick plastic. Jackson and Romero helped Lola cut the ties off Nathaniel’s wrists and ankles so they could cuff his hands behind the beam.
and tape his ankles to the legs of the chair. The two men stepped away as Lola pulled the tape off Nathaniel’s mouth; she smiled when he winced.

The room was exactly like Nathaniel remembered it. The smell of bleach stung his nose; the lights hummed. The walls were padded and the concrete floor sloped down to a drain cut in the middle. There was a large metal sink next to a large meat freezer and locked cabinet where Nathaniel knew his father kept his tools.

Nathaniel’s stomach was in knots. He was sure he’d throw up in his lap or piss himself before this was over. After his father was done with him, death would be a relief.

Lola dropped her bag near Nathaniel’s feet. The metallic tools inside glinted menacingly through the open zipper. “I’ve been looking forward to this,” she said. “Guess why.”

“Because you’re a hateful bitch?” Nathaniel spat as viciously as he could. There was no point in playing nice when there was no chance of survival.

She wagged her finger. “Sticks and stones, little boy. You’ve been a thorn in my side for years, you and that cow you call a mother. I’ll finally get the reward I deserve for all my hard work. Now, we’re going to do a little Q-and-A session before the main event. I’ll get the truth out of you, but feel free to lie if you want to draw this out.”

Lola slowly circled around to stand behind Nathaniel. She left her tool bag in his line of sight so he could see her dig out a number of knives. He heard them clatter noisily onto a table behind the beam he was chained to. He flinched at the sound of a blow torch coming on. He twisted around and felt a rush of nausea when he saw her heating the blade of a knife with the flame.

“Let’s start with where your mother is,” Lola said softly.

A cold sweat broke out across Nathaniel’s body. “She’s dead.”

A single, horrifying second stretched between white-hot metal touching the palm of his hand and the wave of pain that ripped a scream out of his mouth. Nathaniel thrashed violently against the handcuffs, desperate to pull his arms free even if it meant breaking something.

Lola spoke over the noise he was making. “Do not lie to me. Where is your mother?”

“She’s dead!” Nathaniel shouted. “You fucking bitch, she’s dead. She died after we got out of Seattle.”

The hot blade pressed into the tender flesh of his forearm. He cried out in agony, unable to quiet himself down as it felt like he was being shredded by fire. Lola kept asking him where his mother was, pausing between burns to reheat the blade. It was more than Nathaniel thought he could bear. “She’s dead,” he repeated over and over. “She’s dead. She’s dead. I swear she’s dead.”

Lola made it all the way up to his elbow before she decided to believe him.

Head hanging, spit and snot and tears dripped onto Nathaniel’s jeans. The ache in his shoulders was nothing compared to the pulsating burns running up his arm. Nathaniel could smell himself burning, mixed with memories of his mother’s singed remains. He could’ve sworn there was gasoline on his clothes.

He sniffled loudly. His mother had more strength in the hours leading up to her death than Nathaniel could’ve ever hoped to have. Now that it was his turn to die, he didn’t see a point in trying to preserve his dignity. He was terrified and heartbroken and raw.
Lola began, “My next question-”

“Just kill me,” he whimpered.

“-is about your new little friends.” She grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked his head up as she bent to speak directly into his ear. “How much do they know about us?”

Nathaniel squeezed his eyes shut. “They don’t know anything, I swear. I never told them who I really was.”

“What do you think, boys?”

Jackson shrugged at her indifferently. Romero said, “Better make sure. We’re not getting paid for you to cut corners.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Please, don’t-” Nathaniel’s words twisted into a sharp cry as Lola carved a line into his uninjured arm.

She asked more questions and followed up each one with another cut on his arm to see if his answer changed. Nathaniel denied telling the Foxes anything about the Butcher and, eventually, he gave up on forming words altogether. It was too dangerous to talk when his mind was shattering.

Lola stopped when she got to his wrist.

Blood flowed down to Nathaniel’s hand and dripped onto the floor. Trembling and weeping like a child, he tried to drag all his good memories of the Foxes to the forefront of his mind. He wanted to spend his short life thinking of them, remembering everything he decided to stay for.

Lola circled him like a vulture, tapping the bloody handle of the boxcutter against her cheek. “You were very convincing, Junior. I’m almost proud.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“If you’re lying, I’ll find out and I’ll skin all your little friends alive.”

Nathaniel grit his teeth. The ruined skin on his forearms pulsed with heat. “Just kill me and end this.”

“End this?” Lola gave a thick, throaty chuckle. “Oh, Junior, we’re not going to be done for a long, long while.”

It wasn’t a lie. She took her time with him and she enjoyed it.

“Who are your mother’s contacts?” as she carved lines into his palms.

“Why has your uncle returned to the United States?” as she burned the soles of his feet.

“Have you been working with the feds?” before she wrenched his shoulder out of its socket. “Tell the truth or I’ll dislocate the other one.”

Nathaniel screamed through it all until his lungs felt as raw as the rest of his body. He was no longer human, just a broken and sagging thing. Blood seeped from his wounds. Sweat mixed with his tears and snot. Urine soaked his jeans. His brain stuttered through the shock of everything he’d suffered through like a skipping record- too much too much too much.
Then, Lola fetched a crowbar from the corner of the room. “This is just some extra insurance,” she said, aiming at his kneecap. “Can’t have you hobbling away too soon.”

Nathaniel could only whimper in terror before she swung hard. Pain shattered his body, crackling through him like lightning. The sound he made was twisted and guttural, inhuman.

His mind broke away and drifted, too overwhelmed to stay in his body. Everything was too much. The dirty concrete was hell on his ruined feet, but he couldn’t lift them up. Even tensing his leg was unbearable. His shoulders felt like there were knives wedged into the joints, muscles turned to shreds.

He just wanted it all to stop.

There was a voice coming from somewhere else, he realized belatedly. It was barely audible over his ragged breathing.

“You’ve been busy, Lola. What did you find out?”

“The bitch is dead, as far as I can tell. Might be worth asking again later,” she said. “He’s all yours, boss. He won’t be able to fight back anytime soon.”

“That won’t be a concern with the new compound.”

Nathaniel struggled to raise his head. Nathan stood in front of him, barefoot and dressed casually. He wore a mildly displeased frown, as if his son’s torture had interrupted an otherwise pleasant evening at home.

“Making a mess like always.” Nathan eyed the blood pooling under Nathaniel’s chair with detached disdain, and then he slowly walked to the shelves. Nathaniel couldn’t see what he was doing. “I’ve been cleaning up after you for nine years. It’s high time for you to start pulling your weight.”

The words didn’t make any sense. Nathaniel blinked owlishly at Lola, who grinned back at him.

Nathan set a metal bucket down near Nathaniel’s feet; in it was a blood bag with a blank label and a syringe of clear fluid. “The pain you feel right now is nothing compared to what I will do to you if you run again. Is that clear? You are going to be part of that little runt’s inner circle and you will make yourself useful. You’ll start by paying back every cent you’ve cost me.”

“Don’t do this,” Nathaniel begged as a sickening realization began to sink in. A fate worse than death. Horror overrode even the most basic survival instincts telling him not to argue with his father. “Dad, don’t do this. Just kill me. Kill me please.”

“Hold him steady.”

Jackson and Romero were on the move before Nathan finished giving the order. Nathaniel was too broken to even pretend to struggle, too weak to do more than tremble. He heard scissors snipping plastic and Lola tied a piece of rubber around his bicep. “Don’t take it personally,” she crooned, prodding the crook of his elbow to find his vein. “We have to get everything in order before the big day, you know?”

A coppery smell invaded Nathaniel’s nose as the bag was pressed to his lips. Nathan grabbed his chin and ordered him to drink as he tipped the blood into his mouth. It was cold and thick. Nathaniel gagged at the taste, at the thought of what he was doing, but choking it down was his only option. Half of it slid down his chin. His lungs burned for oxygen until he couldn’t take it
anymore. He coughed violently and blood spattered across Nathan’s face. He didn’t stop to wipe it off before forcing another mouthful of blood down Nathaniel’s throat.

A needle jabbed into Nathaniel’s elbow, just above the damage Lola left, and something ice cold trickled into his vein. The chill spread up his arm, through his chest, and then suddenly it was everywhere; it hit his brain like a panic attack. His whole body tensed and his eyes flew open wide, unable to blink. Nathan took the blood bag away, but his lungs refused to draw in air. The lights above him hummed louder. His heart pounded. The venom in his system was overloading his brain with electricity, threatening to short circuit his body. A fire started in his skull and flames licked under his skin, so hot it felt like his muscles were turning to ash and his bones were melting together. Pressure pulsed through his teeth and swelled up behind his eyes, making all the lights warp and dance.

He could hear his own frantic heartbeat, and above it, something else like shouting and gunfire. The smell of blood was everywhere.

A voice said, “Nathaniel? Oh, Christ,” and then the world disappeared.
Chapter Summary

Nathaniel Wesninski is declared dead.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: references to past injuries/abuse/torture

Nathaniel woke up in a hospital. His wrists were cuffed to the bed rails and he was dressed in a thin paper gown. There was cotton blanket pulled halfway up his chest and tucked under his arms. People talked outside the closed door, electricity hummed in the walls, and two people were at the foot of his bed. If he listened hard, he could hear their hearts beating. Belatedly, he remembered that wasn’t normal.

When the people realized he was awake, one of them stood to press a button to raise half of Nathaniel’s bed so that he was sitting almost upright. Nathaniel didn’t like what he saw: two middle aged men in suits with the clean-cut, yet overworked look of law enforcement. They’d chosen metal folding chairs over the couch against the wall or the upholstered chair next to the bed.

“Good morning, Mr. Wesninski,” said the one on the left. “I’m Special Agent Browning, and this is my partner Special Agent Towns. We’re with the FBI.”

“Were all the average agents busy?” Nathaniel croaked out. Panic threatened to overtake him, but it wasn’t the time for that. He had to keep his head on straight.

The pieces of his memory slotted together all at once- the cellar, the syringe, the gunfire. Whatever his father injected him with must’ve taken hold because his senses were heightened and the injuries he should’ve had were replaced by a full-body ache. It was as if he’d been disassembled and rebuilt with upgraded parts, a perfect forgery of himself.

Browning held up a thick file. “You’ve gotten yourself in some real hot water.”

Towns said, “We have no record of you, but the shirt you were found in had ‘PSU Exy’ on it, so we did some digging. Didn’t find a ‘Nathaniel Wesninski’ on Palmetto State’s team, but we did find a ‘Neil Josten’ who looks an awful lot like you. Your tattoo must’ve washed off.”

Nathaniel didn’t know what he meant by that, too distracted by the gross smell of burnt coffee and chewing gum on the agents’ breath.

“Are you aware that your mother’s remains were discovered and identified seven months ago?” Browning asked. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about how she wound up dead, burned, and stuffed in a backpack, would you?”
Towns rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “We’ve got a hunch that says you were there—whether or not you were involved in the actual murder—and then last night you were at the scene of your father’s death. A blood bath if I ever saw one. Everyone shot to pieces.”

“You don’t have so much as a bruise,” Browning pointed out.

“That’s some luck you got there, kid.”

“We’ve only started scratching the surface of everything else you might’ve gotten caught up in, but we can make this a whole lot easier for you if you work with us.” Browning gave Nathaniel a moment to process his words. “We have enough evidence to say with confidence that your father was the man known as ‘the Butcher of Baltimore.’ We also have a list of several of his associates.”

“We also have reason to believe he was working for someone, which is what we’d like to pick your brain about,” Towns chimed in.

Browning nodded. “Does the name ‘Moriyama’ ring any bells?

Nathaniel kept himself blank-faced even though his insides twisted. “Of course it does. Tetsuji Moriyama invented my favorite sport.”

“Do you know anything about your father’s connection to the Moriyama family?”

Nathaniel shrugged.

Towns took the file from Browning and opened it like he wanted to double-check something. “The agents that were on this case before us said you and your mother stopped showing up around Baltimore nine years ago. What happened there? What made you run off?”

“Oh, you know, sometimes you go out for ice cream and forget how to get home,” Nathaniel replied flippantly.

“Right now, we are the only thing standing between you and a cell,” said Towns. “By all means, keep running your mouth, wise guy, but you will land yourself in prison, buried under all this shit.” He shook the file for emphasis.

“The son of a mob boss might find himself low on friends in a place like that,” Browning said.

“Especially if someone were to get the impression you were on friendly terms with the feds.”

Nathaniel flashed a sharp smile. “You two are, like, finishing each other’s sentences. That’s so cute. You been together long?”

Browning folded his arms. “Nathaniel, we’re on the same side here.”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree. I don’t know anything about what my father did.”

Towns held up a grainy photograph of Lola. “You know who this is?”

“Give us something to work with here,” Browning pushed.

Nathaniel stared at them dully. “Why would I know her?”

“Her body was found three feet away from yours last night.” Towns was finally showing signs of annoyance.
“You know more than I do. Maybe I should be asking the questions,” said Nathaniel.

Browning got to his feet and folded his chair against the wall. “You could probably use some time to sort yourself out. We’ll be back to supervise breakfast.”

The word “breakfast” made Nathaniel’s stomach flip over. He knew he’d never be hungry for normal food again and, unbidden, the memory of blood was so strong he could almost taste it. Pushing his disgust aside, he wondered how long it would take for the cravings to kick in.

The agents left him alone in his room and quietly shut the door behind them. Their footsteps carried away down the hallway.

Nathaniel pulled against the cuffs and wondered if he could break them. Part of him looked forward to testing his new limits as a vampire. Life on the run would be easier with heightened senses and a stronger body. At some point, he would be forced to figure out a way to eat, which would be difficult and unpleasant, but at least he could go weeks between meals.

Before any of that, he had to actually escape.

There was no way to know how many agents were at the hospital or if there was surveillance equipment in his room, which made breaking out of his bed too risky. His best bet was to wait until they transported him somewhere and escape en route. With any luck, he’d be able to figure out how to use the hypnosis Riko had used on him. That would be useful.

He refused to think about what he would do with the rest of his life if he was successful.

Browning and Towns returned an hour later with a tray of cafeteria food and the keys to Nathaniel’s handcuffs. Browning freed his hands while Towns warned him about all the agents posted just outside the door in case he got it into his head to try any “funny business.” Nathaniel rolled his eyes and dug into the rubbery fried eggs with his plastic utensils. He was almost surprised to find that food tasted the same to him now, although it settled awkwardly in his stomach—whether that was from being a vampire or his anxiety, he couldn’t tell.

As he ate, the agents peppered him with more questions about his parents and the Moriyamas. Nathaniel gave the same answers. He didn’t know why his mother took him as a child and ran. He didn’t know anything about his father’s work. He didn’t know any more about the Moriyamas than the general public did.

They cuffed his wrists to the bed rails and stopped pretending to be patient. They told horror stories about prison and Browning rattled off a litany of charges some nameless DA was supposedly writing up at that very moment.

Eventually, they shackled his wrists together and allowed him to get out of bed to use the en suite bathroom; however, they didn’t allow him to close the door. Nathaniel’s gown hung open in the back. He grit his teeth and tried to feign nonchalance as he used the toilet, sullenly grateful that he only felt the urge to pee at that point in time.

“That’s quite the collection of scars you got there,” Towns said as Nathaniel washed his hands.

“Something to keep people from looking at my ass,” Nathaniel retorted.

At the last second, he glanced at the mirror and his reflection startled him. The tattooed “4” on his cheek had disappeared. In its place was a faint mark from when Nathaniel attempted to carve the number off in Wymack’s bathroom.
Unsettled, he turned off the bathroom light and stepped out. Browning offered a stack of folded clothing for Nathaniel to put on: cotton pajama pants, thick socks, and a t-shirt that was a few sizes too large. They even allowed him a full minute free of the handcuffs to dress himself.

When he slipped the shirt over his head, phantom pain sliced into his shoulder blade and paralyzed him. It was over and gone in a moment, thankfully.

Once he was in the bed and cuffed to the rails, the interrogation started again. Same questions, same answers. Nathaniel hoped the agents were as bored as he was.

The final round of questioning took a surprising turn. Browning produced a stack of paper from the briefcase at his feet and held each page up for Nathaniel to read, one by one. Phone logs, bank statements, plane tickets, and more photographs. If any of it was real, whoever gave it to the feds was more than likely rotting at the bottom of a river already.

“We’re not asking you to give us a bombshell,” Browning said. “We know what these people are involved in. All we need is for you to nod and say you knew about some of this on the witness stand someday. That’s all. A simple yes and we’ll make sure you’ll be safe and set for life.”

Nathaniel didn’t pause to consider it. “I don’t know anything and I can’t help you.”

“You expect us to believe that, after years of being off the grid with your mother and what happened last night, you don’t have any idea of what your parents were involved in?” Towns asked, frustration almost showing through his mask of professional aloofness.

“No one's ever accused me of being a genius,” Nathaniel threw back.

Browning pulled out his phone and Nathaniel assumed that meant he was going to be carted off to a cell soon. Into the receiver, Browning said, “It’s been six hours, sir. He hasn’t given us any information.”

“Does this mean you two are finally giving up?” Nathaniel asked.

Towns gave him a wan smile. “Not quite.”

Browning ended his call with, “Yes, sir,” and tucked his phone away. As he stood up, he buttoned his jacket and said, “We’re done here. Good luck, Mr. Wesninski.”

After they left, Nathaniel listened to their receding footsteps and tried to pick out words from the various conversations out in the hall. He felt strangely awake and alert while part of him told him he should’ve been tired. There was nothing but boredom and a craving for blood that he wanted to ignore.

He thought about where he would go after he escaped. All of his belongings were still at the Tower, as far as he knew. It was foolish to consider going back there, but he tried to come up with a convincing argument for why it was the most logical choice. Deep down, it wasn’t a matter of logic. He just wanted to see the Foxes one last time, even if it was only from afar, before he left for good.

A hush fell over the hallway and pulled him out of his thoughts. A group of people approached Nathaniel’s door, but only one person entered his room.

An East Asian man in a well-tailored suit rounded Nathaniel’s bed to take a seat in the upholstered chair the agents had ignored. He was lean, average height, and he looked older than Nathaniel, but still young compared to Browning and Towns. He crossed one leg over the other, rested his folded
hands on his knee, and said, “You have been declared dead, Mr. Wesninski. If you are the sentimental sort, I will have my secretary send a copy of your death certificate to your new address.”

Nathaniel stayed quiet.

“The doctor I assigned to you informed me you slept all throughout the turning. I haven’t had many test subjects for the injection, so I’m pleased with this success.” The man studied him with a clinical distance. “You don’t know who I am, do you?”

“I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“I am Ichirou Moriyama.”

Nathaniel’s heart hit the bottom of his stomach. He was face-to-face with Kengo’s firstborn son, an unknown variable in the deadliest equation on the East Coast.

Ichirou tapped a finger to his own cheekbone, and then he pointed at Nathaniel’s. “The tattoo was removed while you were unconscious. Settling into your new identity would be more difficult with such a recognizable mark on your face.”

“New identity?”

Ichirou ignored the question. “Your performance earlier was admirable. Agent Browning told me you gave up nothing.”

“I would never betray your family.” Nathaniel didn’t know what the etiquette was, so he tacked on a hasty, “Sir.”

“You would be wise to pledge your loyalty to me, not my family.”

“I don’t understand.”

“My father, for all his many virtues, was old-fashioned. He believed the vampire population ought to remain small and hidden, which is why he called on people like the Butcher to keep the numbers down. I don’t share his views. I will not spend my years in the shadows like a rat.”

He talked about Kengo in past tense. Nathaniel swallowed hard. “Did you order a hit on my father?”

“Easier to replace an old dog than retrain him. My father and all his men met the same fate last night.” Ichirou brushed a stray hair off his sleeve. The nonchalance with which he spoke of his father’s death was chilling. “You have my thanks for choosing to leave your mother’s remains on that beach, by the way. If her death had not been confirmed, the Hatford family would not have been so keen to make an alliance with me.”

Nathaniel frowned, unable to recall seeing any of his relatives in the cellar. Everything after the injection was a blur. “Can I ask what’s going to happen to me now? What new identity?”

“Your father was promised prolonged life at the end of his first contract with the Moriyama family. He renegotiated the terms of that contract after he married your mother so that she would be turned as well when the time came; however, Lord Kengo was unwilling to extend his promise to you. Mary had already proven herself to be a valuable asset. No one can predict what a child will become. They were supposed to dispose of you.”
Nathaniel wondered if that was why his father wanted to hand him over to Tetsuji; it was the only way he could’ve been turned too. Maybe the plan was for the three of them to reunite someday as a family. It was impossible to imagine the Butcher being that paternal, though. Nathaniel would only ever remember him as the stuff of nightmares.

Ichirou continued, “Since neither of your parents lived to claim their reward and you have shown that you can be discreet, I will allow you to keep the life that was promised. That is your inheritance.”

“Can I go back to my school? I could come up with a way to explain-”

“Solitary vampires are too much of a liability at this point in time. Arrangements are being made for you to join a group that is under my protection. They will make sure you have what you need and that you do not draw attention to yourself.”

Nathaniel’s traitorous heart had begun to hope only to get crushed all over again by the thought of never seeing the Foxes, never being able to say goodbye. His sole comfort was the implication that Ichirou didn’t know there was already a vampire at Palmetto State.

“Is Riko going to track me down? He thinks of me as his property,” Nathaniel said, close to sounding petulant.

“He will not undo my work.” Three sharp knocks at the door interrupted their conversation. Ichirou narrowed his eyes and coolly asked, “What is it?”

A man opened the door and said, “Sir, the young man you asked to see is here,” just before he was violently shoved aside. Shouting erupted in the hall. The sight of familiar blond hair and black clothing made Nathaniel’s heart seize. Ichirou jumped to his feet, ordering his men to stop the intruder.

Andrew fought off the first two guards and dodged the third. A gun clattered to the floor. A punch landed with a thud to someone’s stomach. As soon as Nathaniel’s shock wore off, he grabbed the rails and pushed them away from the bed, snapping the screws holding them in place with a little effort. He was about to throw himself into the fray when Ichirou stopped him with a gun to the back of his head.

“Enough!” Ichirou snarled.

Everything went still for a few heartbeats. Ichirou’s men released Andrew slowly and backed away, indifferent to the murderous glare he sent them. The air smelled like metal. A dark line of blood slid from Andrew’s nose over his top lip. The fury on his face gave way to mute shock when he noticed the broken bed rails in Nathaniel’s hands.

Nathaniel could only stare back at him, quivering with adrenaline and fear.

“What is the meaning of this?” Ichirou demanded.

The man who had opened the door shifted his weight. His brow was furrowed in confusion. “I was under the impression you sent for him, sir. I apologize for my error.”

It was a trick a vampire could pull off easily, but Nathaniel had never seen Andrew do that before.

“You,” Ichirou addressed Andrew, his gun still trained on Nathaniel. “Who are you and what is the name of the vampire responsible for you? Answer me or I will cause Mr. Wesninski a great deal of pain.”
“Andrew’s my teammate,” Nathaniel blurted out. “Riko turned a man named Drake Spear and sent him to South Carolina to turn Andrew too. Riko’s the one you should point a gun at.”

“This will need to be dealt with.” The anger in Ichirou’s voice was barely concealed and dangerous.

Nathaniel said, “My father bargained for two lives, right? That’s my inheritance. Two lives: mine and his.”

“And if I only allow you one?” Ichirou asked. “Whose life would you choose?”

“His.”

Peripherally, he saw Andrew take a step toward him.

“If he was a problem, you would’ve known about him,” Nathaniel added.

Ichirou lowered his gun and considered Nathaniel for a moment. “Two for one and they both come with puppet strings,” he remarked lightly to his men. “Very well. You have my permission to return to South Carolina, Mr. Wesninski. Remember that everything I’ve given can just as easily be taken away. I expect your full cooperation in the future.”

Nathaniel dipped his head, trying to seem respectful. “Yes, sir.”

In a blink, Ichirou was back to being calm and in control. He tucked his gun away, buttoned his jacket. “Nowak, get the car ready. Larsen, tell Browning these handcuffs are no longer necessary.”

Nathaniel’s knees almost gave out from sheer relief. He was almost free.

Andrew glared at Ichirou and his men until they had cleared the room. He stayed silent as Agent Browning came in to quickly remove Nathaniel’s handcuffs. It wasn’t until he and Nathaniel were alone together for good that he asked, “What did they do?”

The low, rumbling warning in his tone pricked Nathaniel’s skin with goosebumps.

“Neil, what did they do?”

Nathaniel shook his head. “How did you find me?”

His avoidance clearly angered Andrew, but he answered anyway. “Kevin found your name on a local news site this morning. According to the article, you were found at the scene of a massacre at your father’s house and you died of injuries at this hospital.”

“Kevin told you who I am.”

“He wouldn’t say why he was upset, so I told him to stop hiding things.” Andrew worked his jaw for a second. “It was more effective than I anticipated. I forgot what I was capable of.”

Nathaniel’s stomach dropped. “Shit.”

“He told us lots of interesting things, and yes, by ‘us’ I mean everyone. Very educational day. Vampires exist, Coach is a father, and you… you were supposed to be in the morgue.”

Nathaniel leaned against the side of his bed, buckling under the overwhelming weight of everything. The worst-case scenarios he’d been dreading had come true. His father found him, the Moriyamas claimed him, and the Foxes learned the truth. Against all odds, he was still breathing.
There was a chance the Foxes would hate him—or, worse, be afraid of him. Nathaniel would learn to accept that. No matter what, they didn’t deserve his deceit.

“I’m going to call Coach,” Andrew said. The tremor in his hands was visible to Nathaniel from across the room. “He should be here in a couple hours with the car.”

“You didn’t drive?”

Andrew had the phone pressed to his ear, so Nathaniel held onto his question until Andrew had finished telling Wymack that they were both alive and relatively safe. At the end of the conversation, Andrew shoved the phone in Nathaniel’s direction.

Nathaniel took it and quietly said, “Hey, Coach.”

“Jesus Christ, kid, you gotta stop scaring us like this.”

“I’m—”

“If you say ‘sorry’ or ‘fine’ I’ll kick your ass myself when I get to Baltimore. You know the news is saying you’re dead, right?”

Remorse throbbed in a tender part of Nathaniel’s chest. “I’ll explain everything,” he offered. “I understand if it’s too late, but—”

Andrew cut him an aggravated look over his shoulder.

“No such thing as too late,” Wymack said. “Try to stay in one piece ‘til we get there.”

Nathaniel frowned. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“Nicky insisted on tagging along so he could waste all my tissues.”

Nicky’s muffled voice said, “Oh, fuck you. Did you seriously expect me to stay home?”

“Are the others– I mean, do they–” Nathaniel stopped stammering to swallow a surge of panic.

“They’re waiting for you back home. I made ‘em stay put to babysit Kevin.” His voice got quieter toward the end. Wymack cleared his throat and swept on, “Look, we got a lotta things to talk over. In the meantime, I’ll have Nicky pass the news along to everybody else unless you want to call ‘em yourself.”

“I’ll call them,” Nathaniel said even though he wasn’t sure he had the courage to.

“I’ll leave you to it then. You and Andrew sit tight until we find you and let us know if anything happens.”

“Uh, Coach, one more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“How did Andrew get to the hospital?”

Andrew’s shoulders tightened.

Wymack said, “From the airport? Unless the turning-into-bats thing is real, I’m guessing he called a cab. Why?”
“Just wondering. I’ll see you soon.”

“Stay out of trouble.”

The line disconnected. Nathaniel set the phone aside and folded his arms over his stomach, eyeing the twitch in Andrew’s jaw. “You hate flying.”

“I hate you.”

His voice was rough, his anger laced with hours-old fear. On some level, in his own way, Andrew cared.

Softly, Nathaniel said, “Thanks for finding me.”

“Stop making me chase you across state lines, Josten.”

Nathaniel bit down a smile at the sound of his name; he was more than ready to be Neil again. He picked up the phone to call Dan so he could tell the Foxes he was coming home.
Homecoming

Chapter Summary

Neil goes back to Palmetto.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: mentions of death and suicide, mentions of blood, references to torture and injuries

Down the street from the hospital, Neil and Andrew waited for Wymack in a fast food restaurant. The thick cloud cover was a small blessing since Neil was still adjusting to his eyes being extra sensitive. As it was, the light was enough to give him a headache. Full sun would’ve been unbearable.

The call to the Foxes was short, but reassuring. Kevin told them about the Butcher and Neil’s life on the run, which somehow wasn’t enough to make them despise him. The relief had gotten stuck in his throat. He couldn’t make himself tell them the final piece of the story, the truth about what he was turned into. As cowardly as it was, he wanted to bask in their acceptance for a few more hours before he risked losing their friendship again.

“I don’t know how to tell them I was turned,” he said quietly. He only wanted to air out his misery.

“So?” Andrew kept his eyes on the straw wrapper he’d been methodically tearing to shreds. His anger was still simmering just below the surface.

Their corner of the restaurant was almost completely empty, so Neil asked, “Should we talk about this? We’ve got about an hour before Wymack and Nicky show up.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Andrew replied coldly.

“I…” Neil faltered, frustrated. “I’m not going to ask you to change your plans for my sake, but on the off chance that you want-”

The fire in Andrew’s eyes turned the rest of Neil’s words to ash. “I don’t want anything, especially from you.”

Neil forced a question through the rocks in his throat. “Can I be with you at the end?”

Deep down, there were still scars where his grief had ripped him open after Riko made him believe Andrew was dead. He wasn’t sure he could stand to watch Andrew die at Renee’s hands, but he owed it to Andrew to respect his decision.

Andrew’s expression darkened for a moment before he went blank with indifference. “You won’t stick around that long, rabbit. It’s in your nature to run.”
“Don’t count on it.”

Nothing was ever easy between them. Andrew leaned back in his chair and looked out the window at the traffic flowing through the intersection. Neil studied the glints of dark gold in Andrew’s hair and counted the faint freckles on his cheek.

Soon enough, they saw a familiar black Maserati stop at the intersection. Neil got up from the table and suppressed a grimace as his knee twinged painfully. He followed Andrew out of the building and across the parking lot to wait on the sidewalk in front of a few empty parking spaces. The Maserati pulled into the lot and parked crookedly near them.

Nicky sprang out of the passenger side and swept Neil into a fierce hug. “Oh my god, we all had a fucking heart attack when you disappeared,” he babbled against Neil’s hair. “Don’t ever do that again. I swear to Christ, you shaved thirty years off my life. Holy shit.”

“Let’s hope Neil’s not injured,” Wymack said pointedly as he rounded the car.

Nicky gasped and held Neil at arm’s length. “Shit. Are you hurt? You don’t look hurt- and don’t you dare say you’re fine!”

“It’s all right. I’m not injured,” Neil answered awkwardly. Nicky’s red-rimmed eyes brought on another wave of guilt.

“From what Kevin told us, we were expecting you to be in rough shape.” Wymack frowned. “And your tattoo’s gone. Does that mean that they…”

“That they what?” Nicky looked from Neil to Wymack in alarm.

At best, the truth sounded insane- at worst, it was terrifying- but Neil didn’t want to keep lying. He said, “My father had me turned into a vampire,” and braced himself.

To his surprise, Nicky didn’t let go of him. Wymack’s jaw clenched hard and he turned to give Andrew a look that Neil couldn’t decipher.

“Shit,” Nicky said. “Neil, I’m so sorry. I don’t really know what all this means, but we’re gonna help you and Andrew, okay? We’ll figure it out.”

Wymack cut in, “Try breathing, Nicky. It’s good for you.”

“Fuck, I don’t even know how Andrew’s been getting blood all this time.” Nicky turned his worried eyes on his cousin. “Does normal people food help you at all? I see you eat that all the time, but have you been drinking blood too? You’re not, like, deprived, are you?”

Wymack clapped a hand on Nicky’s shoulder and gave him a firm shake. “We don’t need you to start hyperventilating again. Calm the fuck down.”

“I just learned about this shit, okay? I have psychological whiplash,” Nicky snapped. He let go of his anger a moment later and sniffled loudly.

“It’s a long drive to South Carolina,” Andrew pointed out.

“Well, let’s get back on the road then,” Wymack said.

Andrew got behind the wheel. Wymack rode shotgun and Neil sat with Nicky in the backseat. Before they got on the highway, Andrew pulled the car into the drive-thru lane so Wymack and
Nicky could get an early dinner. The smell of Nicky’s burger and fries wasn’t appealing, but Neil still felt like he ought to be eating something purely out of habit.

Nicky fell asleep once the excitement finally wore off and Wymack nodded off once or twice as well. Time felt different to Neil; he didn’t get hungry or tired like he used to. The worst part was the sunlight. His heightened senses were jarring. Colors were brighter, details were sharper, and his field of vision seemed wider than before. When the clouds parted, his headache got ten times worse. Neil closed his eyes and shielded his face with one hand for a long time, which was why he didn’t realize they’d crossed into South Carolina until they passed a sign for Spartanburg.

“‘Bout an hour to go,” Wymack announced.

Neil suddenly felt nauseated. Nicky assured him that it would be okay, but he couldn’t help being uncertain. Once the shock of everything wore off, the Foxes could change their minds about him and kick him out of their lives. Wanting to stay and being forced to leave would be a cruel, but possibly deserved twist of fate.

“Have you thought about a new vice captain yet?” he asked weakly.

Wymack glanced back at him. “The hell are you on about now?”

“Why would we need a new vice captain?” Nicky asked. “You’re not leaving us, are you?”

“No, but I’m-” Neil waved a hand over his mouth.

“As long as you’re not biting the unwilling, I don’t see why it should be a problem,” said Wymack.

Neil sighed and looked out the window, mumbling, “Whatever you say.”

Abby was waiting for them outside the Tower. Andrew stopped by the curb to let Neil out and drove away to find a parking space. Neil cautiously stepping into Abby’s outstretched arms to let her hug him. The affection would’ve made him uneasy if he hadn’t been so afraid of rejection. He didn’t want to let go.

“Are you hurt?” she asked, pulling away to check him for signs of injury. She cupped his jaw in her hands and frowned at his cheek.

Neil swallowed hard. “You won’t have to worry about me getting injured anymore.”

“Did Andrew do this?”

“No, of course not,” Neil said, frowning in surprise.

“Right, of course. I shouldn’t have-” She grimaced as if she regretted thinking it in the first place. “How are you feeling? Have you had anything to drink?”

“I had something earlier. I’m okay for now.”

Once Andrew, Wymack, and Nicky were with them, they all went inside and took the elevator to the third floor. In such a small space, Neil’s senses were in overdrive. He could hear hearts beating and the mechanical churn of the elevator being hauled upward. He could smell dried sweat and deodorant and cigarette smoke clinging to clothing. Walking down the third floor hallway, Neil took note of the music and TV chatter playing behind closed doors and, as they got closer to the girls’ suite, he picked out the voices of his teammates. Panic hammered in his chest.
Wymack pushed the suite door open and everyone inside went quiet.

Kevin was perched near the window, slouched and sullen with a pinched expression. Aaron stood alone near the corner of the room. Matt was paused mid-stride, as if he’d been pacing. The girls sat together on the floor with cell phones and tissue boxes and empty cups strewn around them.

Dan was the first to move. She crossed the room in a few long strides and hugged Neil with enough force to squeeze the breath from his lungs. Stunned, Neil reached up to return the hug.

“Hey, rookie,” she croaked. She leaned back to swat his shoulder. “Don’t pull that shit again, okay? Jesus.”

Neil winced. “I’m sorry.”

“Kevin told us about your father.”

“You don’t have to talk about it. You’ve gotta be tired as hell,” Matt interrupted.

“No, I think we need to have this conversation right fucking now,” Allison said sharply. “It’s not like you’ve been hiding a weird fetish or a crazy amount of credit card debt. Your father was a goddamn hitman who wanted to kill you and Andrew’s a goddamn vampire.”

Renee looked pained. “It’s understandable that Neil kept it a secret. We agreed to be patient and keep an open mind, remember?”

Allison pointed a finger at her in warning. “Don’t lecture me right now. You knew we were living next door to an actual vampire for two years and you said nothing.”

Matt and Dan tried to tell her to ease up and Renee started to say something as well, but then Aaron’s voice cut across the room. “Where’s your tattoo, Junior?”

That got everyone’s attention. Kevin’s eyes darted to Neil’s face and widened in horror. As a human, Neil wouldn’t have been able to hear the quiet, pained noise he made.

Dan eyed him warily. “There’s not even a mark. It’s like it was never there.”

“Let’s all just take a seat,” Wymack suggested. “It’s been a rough day, but it’s over now and we all survived, more or less, so no more hysteric’s, all right?”

Abby shot Wymack a chiding look and ushered Neil toward a chair. It felt like the start of another interrogation, except this time he knew he had to be honest if he didn’t want to lose everyone and everything he cared about. Andrew stood like a statue on the outskirts of the group; he refused to look in Neil’s direction, but he wouldn’t have stayed if he wasn’t interested in hearing what Neil had to say.

“I don’t know where to start,” Neil admitted.

“Take all the time you need,” said Renee. Matt nodded encouragingly.

“Kevin says your father is some guy called ‘the Butcher of Baltimore’ and that you ran away with your mother,” said Allison. “Why don’t you start there?”

Neil swallowed hard. The words provoked sickening memories. “My father had a deal with the Moriyamas. He agreed to work for them if they’d turn him and my mother into vampires when the time was right. That offer didn’t include me, which made me a problem for my parents. My father wanted to give me to Coach Moriyama, thinking I could earn my keep as a Raven and be turned
with Riko, but my mother decided to take me away instead.”

Aaron asked, “And where’s your mom now?”

“My father’s people caught up to us a couple years ago. She fought them off and we got away, but she died a little while later from her injuries.”

Nicky put a hand over his mouth. “Jesus.”

“My father wanted to set things right by turning me into a you know and handing me over to Tetsuji and Riko like he promised. He injected me with something, and the next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital. I was told that everyone else at the house last night was killed.”

Allison said, “If Kevin told us the truth, it must’ve taken some giant balls to go after ‘the Butcher’ in his own home.”

“Riko’s older brother took out a contract on my father. A reward from him would be worth the risk.”

Kevin startled, then shook his head vehemently. “No, that’s impossible. Ichirou wouldn’t defy Lord Kengo like that. He would never get away with it.”

“He killed Kengo too,” said Neil.

Shuddering, Kevin stood up and faced the window to hide the emotion on his face from the others. They didn’t understand what a shock it was or what it meant. The Moriyamas were dangerous on a good day, but they could usually be counted on to follow a set of rules.

That was before Ichirou burned the rule book and took an axe to his family tree. There were people all over the world that would fear for their lives until the dust settled. No one’s safety was guaranteed.

“So,” Matt began, looking between Neil and Kevin, “what happens now? Are you- is Coach Moriyama going to come after you?”

Neil replied, “I don’t know what else Ichirou’s planning, but he gave me permission to come back to PSU. Tetsuji won’t make a move that might get him in trouble.”

“What about Kevin?” Allison asked.

Kevin was still staring resolutely out the window. Neil wished he had better news for him. “I’m supposed to get more information soon. We’ll have to wait and see.”

“Maybe Wymack could sue for custody,” Aaron said sarcastically.

Dan glared. Matt and Nicky awkwardly turned toward Wymack, whose face remained blank. Neil’s insides twisted as he imagined the impact of Kevin’s secret. It was in Wymack’s nature to protect people. Finding out that Kevin was his son after seeing the aftermath of the horrors he grew up with must’ve hurt.

Abby sighed. “That’s enough excitement for one day. Neil, I want to see you first thing in the morning.”

“We’re gonna get back on track tomorrow, bright and early,” said Wymack. “We’ve got a game to win this Friday.”
Andrew left without a backwards glance. Kevin, Nicky, and Aaron weren’t far behind him. Wymack patted Neil on the shoulder on his way out and Abby gave him another quick hug. The girls were the last to leave. Dan locked an arm around Neil’s shoulders and reminded him that they were close by if he needed anything.

Neil locked the door after they were gone and looked at the main room. He was almost surprised to see his belongings lying around where he left them; part of him expected everything to vanish like it had after Seth died. His last coffee mug was still on his desk waiting to be taken to the kitchen. The cheap slip-on sandals he only wore for trips down to the laundry room were still by the door. His textbooks and papers were still on his desk.

Returning to a place he already said goodbye to was strangely anticlimactic. In a way, it was like standing in the middle of someone else’s life. He felt out of place and foreign, wishing for explicit permission to settle in again.

It took him longer than it should have to realize Matt was watching him apprehensively.

“You okay, dude?” Matt asked when Neil met his eyes. “I mean, obviously you’re not okay—okay, but...like, will you be okay?”

“Matt, I’m really, really sorry about—”

“Hey, don’t apologize. It’s not like you planned any of this and, yeah, it’s probably the biggest curveball we’ve ever gotten hit with, but nobody blames you for what’s going on.” Matt gave his best reassuring smile. “Full truth, Kevin is the one Dan’s actually pissed at. Nicky told you that Wymack is Kevin’s dad, right?”

Neil winced. “I already knew about that, actually.”

“Oh.”

“Sorry.”

Matt exhaled a soft laugh. “Stop apologizing, man. I think I’m gonna call it a night. You gonna be all right for now?”

“Yeah, thanks. I’ll see you in the morning,” said Neil.

Matt squeezed his shoulder and went to get ready for bed. Neil stayed where he was until Matt was in the bedroom with the light off. Cautiously, he wandered through the main room and kitchen to pick up the pieces of the life he left behind.

It wasn’t long before he was overwhelmed. The memory of Lola’s sadistic work burned under his skin and the future stretched out in front of him like an empty abyss, so he did the only thing he could to keep his thoughts contained in a safe place: he focused on Exy. The Foxes still qualified for semifinals. They would have to play against the Trojans in a matter of days and Neil wasn’t prepared. He hadn’t counted on making it any further in the season.

Kevin never collected him for practice that night, which wasn’t surprising. Neil considered going to the court on his own, but he needed someone else with him in order to gauge how much he should hold himself back to avoid raising anyone’s suspicions.

All night, he sat on the couch alone.

Time was slippery. Hours passed in the blink of an eye without hunger or fatigue to mark its
passing. Whatever internal clock Neil’s body had before was silent now. Morning crept up on him, and soon Matt’s alarm went off to signal it was time to officially start the day. Neil had a cup of coffee with Matt to grasp at normalcy. He needed to get back into his usual routine— or so he thought. The more he tried to force it, the more everything seemed wrong and unnatural.

Abby was waiting for him at the gym. She pulled him aside to ask if he needed blood to drink and it made his skin crawl. Pasting on a neutral expression, Neil told her, “I won’t need any for a while,” with the memory of his father forcing a blood bag into his mouth replaying in his mind.

During morning conditioning, the Foxes looked at him differently, except for Andrew and Kevin, who didn’t look at him at all. In class, Neil struggled to pay attention, but this time it wasn’t because he found the subject boring. It was because his focus was pulled in a hundred different directions. A phone kept vibrating in someone’s backpack on the other side of the room. High heels clicked in the hallway. Dozens of smells combined unpleasantly. He was experiencing the world in high definition and all he wanted was to turn it off. Everything was too bright, too loud, too much.

Neil returned to the Tower and holed up in his dark bedroom until he had to leave for afternoon practice.

Relief swept over him once he was inside the stadium. Exy had been a constant ever since his mother died and he was sure that it was the only thing that could make him feel steady again. Putting on his gear soothed his nerves. Warm-up stretches and running laps kept him out of his own head. Even though he had to force himself to slow down several times, it was good to be back in the Foxhole Court. It felt more like home than anywhere else and, so long as he was within its walls, he only had to think about the hours in front of him, not the years ahead.

He was more than ready to take up his racquet and join the others in a scrimmage when Wymack waved him over to the bench.

Neil frowned in confusion. Wymack had put padding on under his t-shirt and shorts and he had a racquet in his hand. “What’s going on, Coach?”

“You’re with me today.”

Dan led the rest of the team onto the court and bolted the doors shut. Neil’s stomach began to sink. “I don’t understand,” he said.

“As much as I’d love to throw you out there and pretend everything’s normal, I think it’s best if we see where you’re at first. We’ll start with a game of catch and go from there.”

Frustrated, Neil got his racquet from the stick rack and walked down the length of the inner court until Wymack told him he was far enough away. Abby watched from the stands as Wymack shot the ball at Neil with a hard swing of his racquet. Neil caught it easily and sent it back with what he thought was equal force, but it glanced off Wymack’s shoulder before he had time to lift his racquet.

“Whoa, ease up, Neil!” Abby called.

She was halfway to standing when Wymack assured her he was all right. He rolled his shoulder and got another ball from the bucket, saying, “Nothing to worry about. You’ve just gotta adjust, is all.”

Neil grit his teeth and got ready to try again. He knew Wymack was right, but as he failed over and
over, he began to fear he wouldn’t be able to adapt in time for the Foxes’ next game. His stomach iced over when Wymack said, “Maybe we should start thinking about calling this season off.”

“We can’t do that,” Neil protested. “I’ll figure it out in time. I promise.”

Wymack pulled his helmet off and fixed Neil with a look that meant trouble. “It wouldn’t be the end of the world, you know. We’ve still got next year.”

“Give me a couple days.”

“Fine.” Wymack sighed. “We’ll keep at it this week and make our decision at the last moment, okay? Just don’t get bent out of shape over this. The team will understand.”

Neil nodded tightly, burning with anger that was all directed inward. It wasn’t fair to make the Foxes throw away their season because of him.

“Go get cleaned up. Practice won’t take much longer,” said Wymack. He took Neil’s racquet from him and set it on the stick rack.

Alone in the locker room, Neil sat on the bench and laced his fingers together behind his neck. His emotions were threatening to turn him inside out. It seemed like a sick cosmic joke that he survived only to lose. He couldn’t watch the Ravens win, not after everything that had happened—not while knowing about Riko’s role in Andrew’s turning and Kevin’s torture and Seth’s murder. It wasn’t fair. Riko deserved to lose after what he’d stolen from everyone else.

Neil wasn’t the only one feeling desperate. Later that night, Kevin showed up at Neil and Matt’s suite with a flinty look and a clenched jaw. His eyes darted away almost immediately after Neil answered the door and he said, “You have a lot of work to do before Friday. Come to the court with us.”

Neil glanced at Matt, who rolled his eyes fondly. “We can finish our movie another time. Don’t let Kevin get too bossy.”

Kevin waited for Neil to pull his shoes on and grab his keys. In the parking lot, they found Andrew and they drove to the Foxhole Court in silence.
Days passed and the news of Kengo’s death remained a secret. There was no way to tell if Riko knew yet and neither Neil nor Kevin knew what to expect. They watched for signs of his grief like a storm on the horizon.

The fear Neil used to carry at all times was gone with Ichirou’s blessing. Beneath it was a thin, flimsy layer of relief covering a void Neil wasn’t sure what to do with. Everything inside him went cold and numb over the course of the first week of his new life and it all started when Aaron had said, “You’ll outlive the rest of us, and then what will you do?” during a water break at practice one day.

If Andrew had acknowledged Neil’s presence at all since their return from Baltimore, Neil would have told him that in that moment he understood what prompted him to make that deal with Renee. No one really knew the length of a vampire’s lifespan and suddenly the future was as dark and hopeless as that California highway the night his mother died.

On Friday, Neil sat by the window in the main room of his suite and watched the faint morning light creep into the sky, wondering what his life would look like in a decade or a century. He could have a career, a home, and a decent number of years with the Foxes if they kept in touch after college.

*And then what?*

He thought of Andrew, but only for a second. It was all he could handle since he knew he’d outlive Andrew too.

“Bro, how long have you been sitting there?” Matt’s raspy voice came from behind him.

Neil nearly jumped out of his seat. He hadn’t noticed the sound of the bedroom door opening or Matt’s footsteps or his heartbeat. With a little cough to clear the tickle in his throat, he said, “Not long. I was working on stuff for class.”

Honesty would take more practice. In truth, Neil had originally intended to work on an essay after he got back from night practice with Kevin, but time slipped away once he sat down.

Matt yawned loudly. He scratched his stomach with one hand and pulled his phone out of his
pocket with the other to check his notifications. “I keep waiting for Coach to text saying he’s changed his mind about tonight’s game.”

“You don’t think he’d do that last minute, do you? Yesterday he said I was cleared to play.”

“Nah, he’s just got the pre-game jitters,” Matt said dismissively, tucking the phone away again. “No pressure, but are you actually okay to do this?”

Neil wanted to ignore all the things that were hidden in Matt’s voice. It wasn’t pre-game nerves that made Wymack hesitate to put Neil on the court and it wasn’t the stress of championships that was making the Foxes seem skittish. They accepted Neil with open arms, but the reality of his situation put distance between them. He wasn’t human anymore and, understandably, they hadn’t completely wrapped their minds around that yet.

To answer Matt’s question, Neil said, “I didn’t let Kevin boss me around all year just to back out when things got weird. We’re going to beat the Trojans, and then we’re going to beat the Ravens.”

“Lovin’ the confidence.” Matt yawned again and shuffled into the kitchen to make coffee.

Later at the gym, Neil braced himself to hear Wymack say he’d changed his mind about letting him play, but it was all business as usual. Wymack told the Foxes to get their asses in gear and left them under Dan’s supervision while he checked emails on his phone.

Half an hour later, Neil caught Kevin’s caustic glare from the other side of the room, silently scolding him for bench pressing too much too easily. Andrew could get away with stuff like that because Andrew had presumably built up to it. None of the others commented on it, thankfully.

The Foxes cut morning conditioning short and made it to Upstate Regional just after eight o’clock. They were quieter than usual as they waited for their flight to start boarding; none of them strayed too far from the rest of the group.

Neil surreptitiously watched Andrew until he realized that Aaron had taken notice. Since he’d stopped meddling, Neil had no idea if anything changed between the twins. The silence between them was as hostile as ever, so he guessed Aaron hadn’t made any headway. He didn’t like the calculating look in Aaron’s eyes. Neil would have preferred the detachment Aaron once used like a shield if he wasn’t still holding out hope that Aaron might end the stalemate with Andrew.

It wasn’t until the layover at Dallas-Fort Worth that Neil wondered what the two of them thought about returning to California. USC was still hours away from San Jose and Oakland, but it would be the closest either of them got to their previous homes in years.

None of my business, he reminded himself.

While everyone else grabbed lunch from restaurants near their gate, Neil bought a smoothie at Starbucks and drank it alone. It didn’t do anything to soothe the burning sensation in his throat, but it felt good anyway.

Kevin sat down next to Neil at the otherwise empty table. He perched on the edge of the seat like he thought he might need to make a quick getaway and it took him a beat too long to make eye contact. “Are you having second thoughts about tonight?”

“No, are you?”

“You’ve done well the last few nights.”
“Well enough to meet your standards?”

“Nothing meets my standards, not even me.”

“Tetsuji would be proud to hear you say that,” Neil said dryly.

Kevin gave him a withering look. “Have you had any blood since you got back?”

The question came as a surprise; that topic usually made Kevin twitchy. “I’ll be fine,” Neil said.

“The very first drink didn’t last long for Riko. Don’t put this off because you want to pretend you’re okay,” Kevin warned.

“Noted.”

“You could ask Andrew—”

“I’ll take care of it,” Neil interrupted. The itch his throat felt worse, but he told himself it was just his imagination. The power of suggestion. “Have you talked to Wymack?”

“Only about Exy.”

“Would you have told him the truth if you hadn’t been forced?”

Kevin worked his jaw for a moment. “Doesn’t really matter now, does it?”

Curiously, Neil asked, “Are you afraid of Andrew?”

“I’m rightfully cautious.”

Neil worried his lip between his teeth, testing the sharpness of his canines. He remembered his short stay at Evermore, the unending torment of it, and wanted to ask how much time Kevin lost under Riko’s hypnosis.

“You should let me draw your number for you before we board our next flight,” Kevin said, pitching his voice low. “We’ve been lucky to avoid attention this long.”

It took Neil a few seconds to understand what he meant. “I don’t care if people know the tattoo is gone.”

“Riko will be furious.”

“Let’s hope he attacks me. I’ll be able to plead self-defense after I kill him.”

Kevin’s eyes flashed. “You’re not in a position to deal with him. There’s still a hierarchy.”

“I’d be doing Ichirou a favor.”

“Shut up,” Kevin hissed.

Of course, Neil’s threats were empty. He wasn’t stupid enough to think he could take out Riko and live. Ichirou wouldn’t be merciful a second time or else he’d risk setting a dangerous precedent for his new underlings. That didn’t stop Neil from feeling a perverse satisfaction in talking about it.

Kevin’s mouth pinched into a troubled frown. “There’s something else. I wasn’t sure if I should tell Andrew.”
“That probably means you should tell him.”

“Aaron knows about his deal with Renee.”

“What?”

Kevin checked over his shoulder and hunched forward to lower his voice even further. “After Andrew left to get you from Baltimore, I was still… under the influence. Aaron followed me into the bedroom and asked about Andrew and Renee. He wanted to know what exactly they were to each other.”

“And you told him she’s going to help him commit suicide,” Neil concluded. “Shit.”

“Yeah.”

Neil shook his head and shrugged. “If you’re looking for advice, I’ve got nothing for you.”

Kevin scraped his hair away from his forehead and pushed his chair back to get up. “Whatever. I’m going to go talk to Dan.”

He was lying, but Neil didn’t call him out on it. Dan may have been trying to hide it, but everyone knew she was still angry at Kevin for keeping Wymack in the dark for so long. Sure enough, Kevin went to a nearby Asian restaurant to sit with Nicky and Aaron instead of seeking out their team captain.

The next few hours flew over Neil’s head without him noticing and all too soon the team was in California, making their way out of LAX with their luggage in tow. Neil tried to stay tuned in to the upperclassmen’s conversations to keep his mind from going north to the beach where he left his mother’s remains, where someone else had dug them up.

The Foxes piled into a rental van and Wymack drove them to a restaurant for a light dinner. Matt made a joke every now and then to lighten the mood. Dan played up her enthusiasm to hide how nervous she was.

Neil could hear their hearts beat faster when they reached USC’s Exy arena. Fans filled the parking lots, waiting for the doors to be opened to the public. Wymack’s travel arrangements allowed for a bigger time cushion than usual, so the Foxes had ninety minutes to mentally prepare themselves for the monumental challenge they were faced with.

Wymack parked near one of the smaller side doors where a few security guards were waiting. None of the Foxes spoke as they climbed out and unloaded their bags. Dan and Renee grabbed the stick rack, and then they all followed the security guards into the building.

The locker room’s deep red and gold decor made it feel smaller than it really was. Nicky commented, “Well, this is cozy,” as he scuffed a shoe against the floor.

Kevin dumped his duffel in front of a random locker and strode out of the room. Andrew was a few steps behind him. Matt and Nicky traded glances with each other and then turned to Neil as if they expected him to have answers.

“Let’s go check out the court,” Wymack said.

They found Kevin and Andrew standing in the inner court by the bench. Andrew wasn’t impressed, but Kevin had a sharp, hungry look as he took everything in. Despite what he’d said about the Foxes’ chances, Neil could tell he was eager to test himself against the Trojans. The
feeling was shared.

Matt folded his arms over his chest and scanned the empty seats. “What’re the odds we leave with some of our dignity in tact?”

“We didn’t make it to semifinals by accident,” Dan said. “We deserve to be here just as much as they do.”

“Fifty bucks says we don’t score a single point,” said Allison.

“Hey, we’ve got two certified monsters on our side,” Nicky pointed out. “I’m liking our chances. Push comes to shove, Neil can flash some fang and freak ‘em out.”

Neil struggled not to grimace. With every joke, the gap between him and his team felt wider.

Matt scratched the rough stubble on his chin in thought. “What if they’ve got vampires too?”

Nicky shrugged. “Then we’re fucked.”

“All right, enough gawking,” said Wymack. “They’re about to let in the masses.”

The Foxes retreated to the locker room to gear up. The showers there had individual stalls, so Neil locked himself in one to change. For a minute, he braced his hands against the wall and closed his eyes. Imaginary cuts and burns simmered under his skin. Going without sleep made the past week blur together until it felt more like one long day. The night with his father and Lola was right on his heels. He tried to throw his mind beyond the terror to something else, something further back. He wanted to remember his last meal with the upperclassmen as a human, his last movie night with the cousins, his last kiss with Andrew.

Neil needed to win that night. He couldn’t let the Foxes down now.

“And then what?” mocked Aaron’s voice in his head. Would winning this game matter in a decade? In a century?

Yes, Neil decided. It would matter because the Foxes mattered and no amount of time could change that. He wanted to make every second with them count.

He shoved away from the wall and pushed all thoughts of the future to the back of his mind. He focused on what the present moment required of him, changed into his uniform, and went back to his team.

In the locker room, the upperclassmen and Nicky were huddled around Dan, peering at the piece of paper she held with varying levels of confusion written on their faces. Kevin stood a few feet away from the group, eyes narrowed pensively.

“What’s going on?” Neil asked.

Dan handed the paper over to him. “We got the Trojans’ line-up for tonight.”

Neil read it and assumed it was a joke. He checked the back of the paper for the real line-up only to find it blank. “There’s only nine names here.”

“They’re fucking with us,” said Allison.

Nicky made a face. “They wouldn’t give us a fake line-up just to be dicks. That’s not their style, is it?”
“No, it is not,” Kevin answered.

Neil gave the sheet back to Dan. “If it’s not a joke, it’s pity.”

Dan nodded grimly in agreement. “Someone’s gotta tell Coach Rhemann that we didn’t come here for charity.”

“I’ve just had a word with him,” Wymack said as he entered the room. “Seems like they’re serious about this little experiment.”

Allison’s eyes went cold. “I’d rather go up against all twenty-eight of their players then be part of some ‘little experiment.’ If they beat us with more than half their team benched, we’ll be back to being a joke.”

“Yeah, and if we win, people will say it wasn’t a fair fight,” Matt added.

“Oh, fuck that,” Nicky said. He snatched the line-up sheet and shoved it in Wymack’s direction. “Coach, you gotta take this back to them and tell ‘em where to shove it.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t be so quick to dismiss this. I’d like to understand the reasoning behind their decision,” said Renee.

Aaron scoffed. “Who gives a shit about their reasoning? Let’s kick their asses and move on.”

Wymack said, “Might as well roll with it. They won’t change their minds.”

“Shouldn’t we be getting ready for pre-game interviews?” Kevin asked, breaking out of his reverie.

Wymack raised an eyebrow at Dan. She huffed in frustration and gave a dismissive flick of her hand to signal she was dropping the subject. Together, she and Kevin worked on what they would say in front of the cameras and the rest of the Foxes were sternly reminded to be on their best behavior.

When the reporters came into the locker room a while later, Dan and Kevin fielded their questions with practiced ease. Kevin avoided responding to any mention of Riko. Dan gave sincere praise for the Trojans and expressed her excitement for the game ahead. Neil waited for someone to ask about the Trojans’ sparse line-up, but no one ever did.

After the press was gone, it was time to go back out to the inner ring. Now that the stands were filled, the stadium was transformed into a living, breathing beast. The lights were brighter, the air was electric, and the crowd was constantly shifting in Neil’s periphery. For a moment, he was sure the volume of everything would blow out his ear drums. He was so distracted by the noise that he didn’t notice the Trojans’ captain jogging toward them until Kevin called out, “Crossing enemy lines, Knox?”

Wymack glanced up from his clipboard and nodded at Jeremy as he passed.

Jeremy clapped Kevin on the shoulder in greeting. “Since when are we enemies? Took you long enough to pay us a visit.”

“Interesting line-up you’ve got tonight.”

“Hope the crowd sees it that way. We’ve been trying to keep it quiet, but they’ll find out soon enough. If we’re lucky, they’ll forgive us.”
“Are you trying to out-crazy the Foxes?” Kevin asked, on the verge of teasing.

Nicky leaned closer to Neil to whisper, “Has Kevin had a normal human setting this whole time?”

“Call it inspiration,” said Jeremy. “I used to think you guys only needed some more players to have a solid team, but you’ve really kicked ass this season. I talked it over with Coach and we decided to see if we could take you on with the same numbers.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Picked a great night to do it. Not like it’s fucking semifinals or anything.”

Jeremy’s optimism didn’t waver. “High risk, high reward, right? I can’t remember the last time I tried to play a full game. I’m ready for the challenge.”

“This should be fun then,” Dan said with a toothy grin of her own.

“Hell yeah,” Jeremy agreed. “How ’bout loser buys dinner?”

Kevin scoffed and waved him away. “Pass. I don’t do food trucks.”

Jeremy laughed. He walked back to his own team with the usual confidence he displayed during interviews and Neil realized what set him apart from the captains of the other Big Three teams: he loved the game more than he loved winning. Putting the Trojans at a serious disadvantage was worth it to Jeremy if it meant they could all become better players.

“Goddamn, it’s impossible to hate that guy,” said Matt.

“USC is lucky to have him,” Renee chimed in.

Nicky sighed dramatically. “I might actually feel bad when we crush him. It’s gonna be like kicking a puppy.”

“Don’t go all gooey just ’cause he was nice to you,” Wymack said. “They might’ve paved our way to finals, but we’re not there yet. We’ll get our asses handed to us in the first half, so just focus on not falling too far behind. Save your strength and make a comeback after halftime when they lose steam. Everyone understand?”

“Yes, Coach,” most of the team replied.

“Good. Take it away, Dan.”

Dan led the team through the usual warm-up laps and drills. She somehow maintained a calm facade the whole time and held her head up high. On the other side of the court, the Trojans greatly outnumbered them, but it was all for show. Neil winced when he thought of what the fans’ reaction would be.

When the announcer only read nine names for the Trojans’ line-up, the roar of confusion and outrage threatened to bring down the roof. It didn’t sound like the crowd would be as forgiving as Jeremy hoped.

“Lotta people wantin’ their money back,” Wymack said with a rueful shake of his head.

Dan chuckled nervously. “We’re so getting murdered in the parking lot after this.”

Wymack replied, “Worry about that later.”

It was a relief to finally be on the court with the doors bolted shut because it helped muffle the
rumble of the crowd and gave Neil’s sensitive hearing a break. He could focus on the court around him and the players he was about to compete against. Everything seemed brighter and better than ever and he was thrilled to be there in the middle of it.

At the starting buzzer, the Trojans’ dealer served the ball and Neil took off after it. He remembered at the last second to pull back since he’d learned how easy it was to make his movements blur in the eyes of the humans around him with an accidental burst of mental influence. Trying to balance that with his instinct to give everything he had to the game made him feel like a clumsy amateur in the first quarter.

He soothed his bruised pride by telling himself it didn’t make much of a difference since the Trojans kept possession of the ball most of the time, relentlessly throwing themselves at the Foxes’ defense until they carved a path to the goal. They took seven points from Renee and left the backliners exhausted.

At halftime, the Foxes had four points and, despite the fact that they were still behind by three, it seemed like they were doing impossibly well against the nation’s second-best team. Seeing them play up close was even more astonishing than watching them on TV. Neil knew at least one of his points was due entirely to his heightened reflexes.

Kevin gave him a pep talk that sounded more like censure while the Foxes recovered and stretched in the locker room. Neil buried a few coughs against his forearm and did his best to pay attention. His hunger was getting worse.

He excused himself to the bathroom during the last few minutes and peeled one of his gloves down. Desperate, he pressed his teeth to his pulse point. His fangs grew longer, which made it easier to pierce his skin, but the shallow wounds healed over before he could get much blood to drink. The second attempt wasn’t any better. Even so, it was just enough to turn the heat in his throat down a notch so that it was mostly bearable again.

Neil got back to the locker room to hear the end of Kevin’s criticism of the defense. Aaron and Matt were scowling. Nicky had already walked away to get another cup of water.

“We won’t get anywhere by pointing fingers. Simmer down,” Wymack said.

Aaron shouldered past Kevin and sneered. “Listen to your father.”

“We’re only behind three points,” said Dan. “It’s not ideal, but we can catch up if we do this right.”

Wymack looked at Andrew, who was sitting quietly on the bench. “You with us tonight?”

Andrew gave no indication that he heard him.

A warning bell meant their break was over and they went back out to the court. The scales slowly tipped in the Foxes’ favor since they’d saved their energy for the second half. Meanwhile, the Trojans lost steam.

Once they closed the point gap, the Foxes fought like hell to stay in the lead. Neil was finally comfortable in his own skin, comfortable enough to push the limits Wymack and Kevin had been drilling into his head all week. In the frenzy, he knew he could get away with it.

He waited for something to turn the game on its head, for something to go wrong. He expected the Trojans to send out more subs or switch up their strategy, but they never did. They stayed true to their original plan. Through the vents, Neil could hear the furious shouting of USC fans.
At the other end of the court, Andrew shut down the Foxes’ goal like he wanted to win as bad as the rest of them did. Neil wanted to believe that was really how he felt.

When the final buzzer went off, the score was fourteen to eight, Foxes’ favor.

Neil’s body was on fire, his lungs scraped raw, and he was so lightheaded he had to grab onto Dan’s shoulder for support as he stumbled with her towards their other teammates to celebrate their unlikely win. A hysterical laugh broke out of his mouth as Matt yelled in his ear.

The Trojans remained good natured even though they could barely stand up. Jeremy pushed his sweaty hair away from his face and beamed as he shook Dan’s hand to congratulate her. “Next year will be interesting,” he said.

Dan laughed and agreed with him.

Kevin exchanged a few friendly comments with Jeremy before going to Andrew. Neil let himself be swept off the court with his teammates. To the chorus of booing and jeering from the stands, the Foxes packed up their racquets and strode back into the tunnel. In the visitors lounge, there were some reporters waiting. One of them called out, “Did you remove your tattoo, Neil?”

He stopped and faced the camera while the others continued through the locker room door. Only Kevin and Andrew stayed behind with him.

“Why would I keep it?” Neil replied. “I thought I made it clear that it never meant anything.”

“Kevin, care to comment?” the reporter asked.

Kevin answered, “There’s nothing for him at Edgar Allan.”

“And what about for you?”

“I would prefer to stay with the Foxes. At the Nest, there’s a high chance of ‘skiing accidents’-” Kevin hooked two fingers into air quotes- “and I’d like to avoid any more setbacks to my career if possible.”

He left the reporters clamoring for an explanation and disappeared through the door. Neil and Andrew were right behind him.

“Well, that was bold,” said Neil.

Kevin shot him a haughty look over his shoulder. “Your stupidity must be contagious.”

Neil heard the underlying fear in his voice. That one flippant statement to the press required every last bit of his courage.

The Foxes left USC’s campus behind and stopped for a celebratory bite to eat on the way to their hotel. Nicky, Matt, and Dan went over the game’s highlights and Neil listened without much input of his own. The hunger made the world around him slightly warped in a way that made him feel drunk. His heart thudded heavily. All he wanted to do was lie down in bed.

At the hotel, the Foxes waited off to one side of the lobby with their bags while Wymack got their key cards. Neil held his breath for ten seconds at a time to keep himself from coughing or clearing his throat since he was beginning to get strange looks for it.

The elevator opened and out stepped Stuart Hatford. Neil hadn’t spoken to his uncle in a long time,
but the family resemblance between Stuart and Neil’s mother was too strong for Neil to not recognize him instantly. A folded slip of paper dropped onto the floor as Stuart breezed past the Foxes. Neil knelt down and pretended to tie his shoe in order to pick it up without anyone noticing. Uneasiness pooled in his stomach. He didn’t like the idea of his teammates staying under the same roof as mobsters.

Renee and Allison roomed together that night, which left Dan with a single. Matt checked with Neil to make sure he was okay with being on his own all night before taking his stuff down the hall to Dan’s room. After he was gone, Neil opened Stuart’s note and found a room number written above “11:45”. That gave him roughly an hour to sort out what he wanted to say to the man who rescued him from the Butcher.

At eleven thirty, he crept out of his room and took the stairs to the fourth floor. Stuart’s room was at the end of the hallway, next to the elevator. As Neil knocked and waited, he couldn’t help thinking of what his mother would say. She typically avoided renting rooms in places with more than two floors. Staying close to the ground made for easier escapes.

Stuart answered the door and gave Neil an indifferent once-over. “All right, Nathaniel?” he asked as he let him inside.

“I’m fine. How’re you?” Neil’s eyes darted around the room. There was nothing overtly sinister out in the open, but in his experience, Hatfords always had at least one weapon hidden within easy reach.

“Missed your game, I’m afraid, but I checked the score. Well done,” said Stuart. He walked over to the desk and poured himself a glass of bourbon. “Would you like some? You could have a look in the minibar as well.”

“No, thank you.”

Stuart sat down in one of the armchairs and gestured to the other. “Let’s talk, shall we?”

Neil took a seat in the other chair, forcing himself to relax his muscles.

Stuart explained, “I would’ve come to you in South Carolina, but I had some urgent business out this way that needed attending to. Figured I’d catch you tonight. I suppose you’ve got questions.”

“The Hatfords are working for the Moriyamas now?”

“The new boss is cleaning house and wanted an outside crew for the dirty work. With Nathan out of the picture, there’s no more bad blood between our families.”

Neil nodded in understanding. Ichirou had told him as much in the hospital. “What about Tetsuji and Riko?”

“Tetsuji’s played his cards well over the years. Stayed neutral and quiet and kept the money coming in. Little Riko, from what I’ve heard, has made a mess of things.”

“He was trying to impress his father so he could take care of the business during his absence.”

Stuart cracked a small smile and sipped his bourbon. “He got Kengo’s attention with that stunt of his, but he never stood a chance to be steward. That honor was always going to be Ichirou’s. If Riko believed any different, then he was delusional.”

“Broke his own leg.” Stuart shook his head. “Impatient brat. Tetsuji’s lucky Kengo approved Riko’s turning or else he would’ve been kissing a fortune goodbye.”

Neil shouldn’t have been surprised. He knew Riko broke Kevin’s hand with a similar plan in mind. “How will Ichirou keep him in line?”

“In a couple days, Riko will read about his dad’s death in the papers and his uncle will tell him what’s happened. Grief does funny things to people. If he loses the championship game on top of that, it’ll be even easier to frame it all as a suicide. Something for you to think about. Making the boss’s plans work smoother is a smart move.”

“He’s going to kill Riko?”

“A loose cannon like that isn’t worth keeping.”

Neil didn’t need the extra motivation to want to beat the Ravens, but the thought of being rid of Riko for good sent a sick thrill down his spine.

“You need to watch your step carefully,” Stuart added. “Ichirou isn’t going anywhere and he’s got big plans. He’s stuffing his pockets with politicians and snatching up biotech companies. Imagine the future of medicine, all the diseases and ailments that could be fixed with some of your little vampire cells. Imagine what more vampires could mean for the military. Mark my words, Ichirou Moriyama will be handpicking world leaders before the century is up. This is not a man you want to piss off.”

“I understand.”

“Now for the silver lining.” Stuart pulled a business card out of his pocket and handed it over. “This woman works at a blood donation center in Columbia. You’re already on her list. Give her a call and she’ll get you a pint if you ever need it, all right?”

Neil had every intention of calling the woman’s number as soon as he got back to Palmetto. “Thank you,” he said sincerely, “for everything.”

“My number’s on the back of that if you run into any other trouble. For now, I’m afraid I need to cut this chat short. Some of us still need sleep.”

Neil got up and slipped the card into his back pocket. “I’ll let myself out. Thanks again, Stuart.”

“Mind yourself, Nathaniel. Lots of eyes are on you.”

Neil left Stuart’s room and texted Kevin on his way to the stairs: Need to talk. Kevin replied with his room number just as Neil reached the Foxes’ floor.

The door opened before Neil could raise his hand to knock. Andrew’s eyes bore into him, dark and questioning. He wasn’t wearing his armbands and his hair looked like he’d rolled out of bed.

“Neil, what’s wrong?” Kevin asked from somewhere behind Andrew.

Andrew stepped aside.

Neil walked into the room and found Kevin sitting cross-legged on one of the beds. “Kengo’s death will be announced publicly soon. Riko doesn’t know about it yet.”

Kevin went pale.
Andrew asked, “How do you know this?”

“My uncle’s here at the hotel and he told me.”

“Shit, I have to call Jean.” Kevin sprang from the bed and hurried out of the room to make the call in private. Andrew didn’t go after him. He stayed where he was and kept his eyes fixed on Neil.

The itch in Neil’s throat flared up again. Neil worked up some saliva and swallowed hard, but it didn’t make a difference. Eventually, he had to cough and, as soon as he did, Andrew’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re going to starve,” he said.

Neil shook his head and coughed again. “I’ll be fine. Stuart’s got someone in Columbia I can get blood from.”

“How soon?”

“Don’t know. I’m going to call her tomorrow.”

Andrew stared at him flatly for a second, and then he walked away to root around in his duffel bag. He came back with one of his knives.

Alarmed, Neil asked, “What the hell are you doing?”

Without answering, Andrew cut a neat line across an old scar on his wrist and a familiar metallic scent flooded the air. Neil’s teeth ached, his mouth watered, and hunger scorched him down to his stomach. He forced himself not to move. “What do you want in return?”

Annoyed, Andrew said, “Don’t be stubborn. This is going to heal soon.”

Neil’s resolve crumbled. He closed the distance between them and put his mouth to Andrew’s wrist to drink. A memory of his father’s basement flashed behind his eyes, but then Andrew slipped his other hand into Neil’s hair and the world righted itself.

Relief rushed through Neil’s body with the first greedy swallow, so strong it nearly brought him to his knees. Slowly, Andrew’s wound knit itself back together. Neil sucked the last bright red smear off Andrew’s skin and forced himself to back away.

A strange clear-headed calm settled over him. For the first time since Baltimore, he felt warm and heavy enough to sleep.

Andrew examined his arm and wiped Neil’s saliva off with the hem of his shirt.

“Andrew-”

“Don’t.”

Neil asked, “Don’t what? Why help me if you’re just going to push me away again?”

“You’d think someone with my memory would know better by now.”

Neil shook his head, too confused to make heads or tails of Andrew’s moods. “What is your problem?”

“You were supposed to be temporary,” Andrew said. His words were soaked with so much
contempt that Neil couldn’t find the will to respond.

Kevin came back before Neil recovered. He looked ashen and upset and only said, “I warned him,” as an explanation. Luckily, he was too distraught to notice the blade in Andrew’s hand and the tension in the air.

Neil discreetly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “What’s Jean going to do?”

“I don’t know.” Kevin plugged his phone back into the charger and lay on his bed, gazing solemnly up at the ceiling.

Neil wasn’t really concerned with Jean’s fate, but he wouldn’t wish Riko’s wrath on anyone. “We’ll figure this out tomorrow,” he said.

Maybe by the morning he would have a plan or at least an idea of what he should do. Deep down, he knew it was unlikely. In some ways, he was as lost as ever.

End Notes

Thanks so much for reading!!

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