The Unkindness of Ravens

by crazy_like_a

Summary

After Kevin publicly announces his intention to play for the Foxes, Riko sends Nathaniel Wesninski to convince him to return to the Nest. Unfortunately for Riko, Nathaniel has other plans.

Notes

As always, credit for the characters, plot, Exy, and wonderfulness goes to the talented Nora Sakavic!

This fic will be a little darker than the other stuff I've done and there will be a bit of graphic violence and explicit sex scenes later on in the fic. I'll give you guys a heads up when things will get graphic and if you need other trigger warnings, let me know. Also, feel free to hit me up on tumblr @ hopingforcoordinates if you have questions about the content so you can be prepared.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Come on, kid, you gotta wake up now.”

Neil didn't know where he was. His head throbbed. His forehead was resting against something cool and fiery pain pulsed in his cheek. Tape and stitches tugged at the sore skin of his abdomen as he shifted in his seat. Aches flared across his shoulders and soreness spiked hotly down his stiff legs. With effort, he peeled his eyes open and blinked up at the man leaning over him.

His first thought was, Why is it taking me so long to wake up? His second was, Where the hell am I?

His tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth and his throat felt like it was coated in glue. Crust clung to his eyelashes and the world wobbled as he tried to take in his surroundings. Neil recognized the familiar hollow feeling that followed a night spent under the influence of whatever drug Riko wanted to watch Neil experience. That answered the first question at least.

“Kid?” the man asked again, his voice too loud and impatient.

“Where?” was all Neil managed to mumble.

The man frowned at him. “This is your stop. You have to get off here.”

“Where?” Neil lifted his heavy head, peeling his sweaty forehead from the window, and looked out into the misty night. Where the hell am I? He squinted blearily and his heart iced over when he caught sight of an orange neon sign across the street that said “The Fox Den Tavern.” Memories filtered back to him. A flame melting the tattooed skin on his cheekbone. Riko's voice. Jean's hands.

They'd put him on a bus to South Carolina- to Palmetto State University of all places. Disowning him wasn't enough, apparently. Riko wanted to humiliate him as well.

There was something he was forgetting. He could feel the memory rustling under the thick fog lingering from his drugged sleep.

“Uh, you need me to call someone for you?” the man asked.

Neil patted his pockets and felt the familiar hard shape of his cell phone. “No, I'm fine.”

He unfolded his battered body from the seat and ambled down the narrow aisle under the flickering overhead lights that were dotted with dead flies. The man wished him luck as he stumbled down the steps onto the sidewalk. On the other side of the street was a row of bookstores, sporting goods stores, pizza parlors, fast food restaurants, and coffeehouses. Everything screamed orange and Foxes, Foxes, Foxes. Neil thought he was going to be sick and not because he could still smell his own burnt flesh.

As he stood there trying to process what he was seeing, the bus door hissed closed and the man drove away into the night.

Neil was alone for the first time in eight years and he was far from everything he knew. A thrill of terror shook through him, but he walked forward anyway.

He filled his lungs with fresh air like he used to dream of doing and it almost hurt. The stale air conditioning in the Nest had been all he breathed since the night he was handed over to the master. The smell of wet concrete and damp earth filled the air and a drizzling rain turned the streetlamps
The coolness of the spring night cleared his head a little, enough for him to take stock of his injuries: bruises on his back, a long wound stitched closed across his belly, and a melted patch of skin on his left cheek.

Looking down, he noticed there was a large smear of bright orange paint across the front of his black long-sleeved shirt and it made his blood boil. The red patch of ruined skin on his face and the orange paint sent a clear message: Nathaniel Wesninski was no longer a Raven. Once the news of this spread, his life would be over.

Neil stopped under the awning of a closed bookstore and pulled out his phone. Shock kept his mind pleasantly numb, which eased the mortification he was sure he should have been feeling as he found Kevin Day on his contact list. He hit “call” and held the phone to his ear, staring blankly at a group of girls crossing the street while huddled together under a white umbrella littered with orange fox paw prints.

Three rings later, Kevin's frightened voice crawled into his ear. “Nathaniel?”

“I need a place to stay,” Neil said flatly.

“What's going on? What do you mean?”

“Kevin, shut the fuck up,” another voice grumbled in the background.

“I'm in Fox territory,” Neil explained. It sounded bizarre to his own ears.

“What?” Kevin's horror was apparent.

“Did you lose your hearing, too?” Neil hissed. “I'm somewhere in your godforsaken town and I need a place to stay tonight.”

“Andrew, get up. Andrew! We have to go,” Kevin said away from the receiver. “Nathaniel, can you see any street names? Stores?”

Neil inhaled slowly through his nose, trying to ease the fury in his chest. “I'm outside a bookstore called... 'Foxfire.'”

“Okay. We'll be there in ten minutes, just stay put.”

Neil ignored the “we” and rolled his eyes at Kevin's instructions to stay there. It wasn't like he had anywhere else to go. The call disconnected and, as he pulled the phone away from his ear, he noticed there was a new message in his inbox.

From Jean, there was a simple text that said, You are no longer my concern.

Harsh words, but Neil knew what was behind them. It was Jean's way of saying good-bye, saying that Neil should worry only about himself. He stopped and waited for the panic to set in, but there was nothing besides faint echoes of Jean's softly accented voice in the cavernous void in his chest.

It was almost midnight, almost Sunday, and it had been approximately forty hours since everyone heard the news that Kevin Day was signing with the Palmetto State Foxes as a striker instead of an assistant coach. Neil squinted down at his shoes and tilted his head a little. His body was sore, but nothing was broken luckily. Friday night's beating had been relatively light since Riko had been more focused on the long-term plan rather than the short-term fun.

Once Riko got it in his mind that Kevin had started to outgrow him as an Exy player, Riko became
desperate to keep him in line. Last December, Riko cured his fear of being bested on the court by breaking Kevin's hand, but then Kevin vanished and that hadn't been part of the plan.

As furious as Riko had been to lose Kevin, it was nothing compared to his wrath now that Kevin had announced his intention to step back onto the court as a striker. Riko had tried to take Exy from Kevin and now Kevin was reaching out to take it back, which was a surprisingly bold move. Neil had been impressed for all of two minutes before Riko turned on him.

Neil clenched his eyes shut and let the waves of nausea and horror pass over him like heavy water as he remembered vividly. Riko had burned off the tattooed three from Neil's cheekbone, dragged his favorite blade across Neil's stomach, and let Neil try pathetically to stop the bleeding with his hands while Riko brought a knotted rope down heavily against his back until Riko got bored of watching. Jean barely had time to stitch Neil up before Riko came back with a glass of water that tasted salty and wrong. Neil drank it obediently only because it was better than being forced.

Neil couldn't remember who put him on the bus, but Riko's last words to him came rushing back.

“Kevin is your ticket back into Evermore. Bring him home and we'll find you a good plastic surgeon for your face. Doesn't that sound nice, Nathaniel? No one has to know you left the Nest at all.”

Neil opened his eyes and forcibly relaxed his shoulders. The promise of a panic attack whispered along the wobbly edges of his mind and he was almost relieved to be feeling anything at all. Even crippling panic was better than the mental abyss he sometimes lost himself in after a particularly brutal night.

An expensive-looking black car screeched to a crooked halt at the curb a little ways down the street from where he was standing. Neil watched the doors open and his pulse quickened as his former teammate stepped out. Kevin wore a thick coat and flannel pajama bottoms that were tucked into his sneakers. He looked haggard and shell-shocked as he took in the sight of Neil from the short distance. He didn't approach him, though, until a shorter, black-clad man with blond hair stepped lazily out of the driver's side and yawned into his fist. Neil knew this was Andrew Minyard, the one Riko had wanted to bear the number five. It was almost funny that Kevin had ended up on a team with the goalkeeper they'd wanted after all.

Andrew rounded the front of the vehicle and crooked two fingers toward Kevin to signal him to follow. Neil frowned at this. He'd hoped Kevin had become a free man instead of finding himself a new master.

“Nathaniel,” Kevin greeted.

“Kevin,” Neil returned dryly. He gestured to Andrew and affected ignorance. “And this is-?”

“Andrew Minyard, our freshman goalkeeper,” Kevin explained with a note of disapproval in his voice. He had spoken of Andrew's potential so much that it would've been impossible for Neil to forget his face or his stats.

Andrew took Neil in with a bored stare and then yawned again. “So this is Nathaniel.”


Kevin winced. Neil had adopted the nickname on his first day at the Nest. “Oh, you wanted me to kneel? I thought you were just calling me Neil. My bad.” He'd earned a broken nose for being cheeky, but he still fought to keep the new name. It annoyed Riko to no end and that alone was worth the temporary pain.
“Not everyone, apparently,” Andrew observed, rocking back on his heels.

“Riko called him Nathaniel,” Kevin explained. He still looked like he couldn't believe Neil was there in front of him. “He sent you here, didn't he?”

Neil arched an eyebrow and switched to French. “Do you think I'd come here by choice?”

Because of Kevin's mild obsession with the goalkeeper, Neil knew Andrew had taken German at his high school after he was released from juvie and moved to South Carolina. He was fairly certain Andrew didn't speak any other languages.

Kevin followed his lead, thankfully, and answered in French, “If you're here to try to get me to come back-”

“You are not the center of my universe, Kevin. I don't give a shit what you do.”

“What are you going to tell Riko when you go back?”

“Nothing. I'm not going back.”

Kevin gaped. “If you don't go back to the Nest-”

“I'm not going to put myself back in a cage.”

Andrew flicked a lazy stare between the two of them and said, “I'm bored. Fly home, little bird, this ain't the place for you. We're leaving, Kevin.”

Panic surged into Neil's throat, but he forced himself to keep still and swallow back his words. He wouldn't beg anyone for help, let alone a Fox.

Kevin looked more distressed than Neil felt, which was surprising. “We can't just leave him, Andrew. Let's take him to Wymack's for the night and we'll figure it out in the morning.”

Andrew reached up and twisted his hand into the collar of Kevin's coat, using it to pull Kevin's face a little closer. “Don't be a sentimental idiot. It makes it more difficult to keep you alive.”

“But-”

“I just need somewhere to sleep for the night. I'll leave in the morning,” Neil interrupted.

Andrew looked over, still holding Kevin by his collar, and gave Neil a look that almost seemed amused. Amusement made Neil uncomfortable. It was never a good day when Riko was laughing.

“You're not going to try to talk me into going back with you?” Kevin asked, narrowing his eyes.

“No.”

Andrew scoffed. “Nice attempt at a trick. I give it three out of five stars. Tell Riko to try harder next time, will you?”

Neil bristled, but turned his attention back to Kevin. “Are you going to help me or not? It's a simple question and I'd rather get an answer sooner than later.”

Kevin and Andrew exchanged a look and then Kevin said, “Get in the car. We're going to Wymack's.”
Neil followed them to the vehicle and climbed into the backseat as the other two sat in the front. The interior smelled like leather and cigarette smoke and the seat was much softer than the one on the bus had been. The engine growled to life when Andrew turned the key in the ignition. Kevin hunched against the window in the passenger seat while Andrew threw the car into gear and wrenched it back into the road. Neil caught himself against the door when Andrew took a turn too sharply and he glared at the back of his head.

Kevin twisted around to look back at him and gestured to the bandage on his face. In French, he asked, “Why are you hiding your number?”

“It fell off.”

Kevin clucked his tongue in annoyance. “Fine. Be that way. Listen, though, the coach doesn't know that he's my father. I would appreciate you not mentioning it while you're in his home.”

Neil returned his gaze to Kevin's pleading expression and felt only a hot coil of anger tightening in his chest. The only reason Kevin fled to this pathetic excuse of an Exy team was because he knew Coach Wymack was his biological father and now he couldn't even tell him the truth. How utterly pathetic.

“I don't care enough to say anything,” Neil said dismissively, turning to look out the window. Droplets spattered the glass and some of the larger ones raced down in blurry lines. The town was dark save for illuminated neon signs and streetlamps. Some groups of students were wandering around the sidewalks, laughing loudly as they tried to keep each other upright. There weren't many cars on the road, which allowed Andrew to drive as fast as he pleased.

Everything was wrong and Neil didn't know what to do. He was exhausted and he wished more than anything that he would wake up in his own bed to find this was all a dream.

He swallowed hard and mentally stepped back from the panic rising in his chest. He would find a way to survive this. He would figure something out. He didn't have a choice.
Andrew pounded on Coach Wymack's apartment door for about thirty seconds before a gruff voice shouted, “Hold your fucking horses!”

Heavy footsteps approached. Neil thought he was prepared to meet the coach of the most underwhelming team in NCAA Class 1 Exy, but he still took a step back when the door swung open and a middle-aged man filled the doorway. In a white wife beater and boxer shorts, Coach Wymack was just about what Neil expected of the man responsible for the Foxes. There were pillow lines on his face and tribal flame tattoos covering his bare arms. Kevin nudged him sharply with his elbow and that's how Neil knew his disdain was showing.

Wymack was too busy scowling at Andrew to notice. “You let yourself in the front gate, but you couldn't be bothered to open the fucking door for yourself?”

Andrew turned his hands palm-up and shrugged. “Seemed rude to just walk in.”

“Yeah, it's much more polite to wake up the whole goddamn building with all your noise. The fuck do you want, anyway? You miss my couch already, Kevin?”

Andrew tilted his head toward Neil and Wymack's bleary gaze followed.

“Tell me you didn't kidnap someone, Andrew,” Wymack said with a long-suffering sigh. “I will not deal with this shit.”

“I was sleeping, not napping,” Andrew quipped. “This little Raven seems to have fallen out of the Nest.”

Disbelief smoothed away the irritation on the older man's face. “Raven?”

“His name is Nathaniel Wesninski,” Kevin cut in before Wymack could say anything else. “He needs a place to stay tonight. He won't cause any trouble.”

“Ravens are nothing but trouble. All right, well, don't just stand there like idiots. Come on inside.” Wymack stepped back and let them pass. The front room smelled like coffee and old books. There was a lumpy, stained couch pressed against one wall and a television on a simple stand across from it. The coffee table in the middle of the room was lost beneath papers, crumpled napkins, and dirty mugs.
Andrew inserted himself between Kevin and Neil and folded his arms over his chest. Neil shifted away and then went perfectly still as the other three studied him. Even Kevin looked like he was thinking it'd be easier to toss Neil out on the street and be done with him.

“Jesus, how old is this kid?” Wymack asked.


“A freshman? I haven't heard your name before.”

He'd only just earned his high school diploma in January and wasn't set to start his freshman year at Edgar Allan University until the fall, but the less these people knew about him, the better.

Kevin opened his mouth, but Neil cut him off. “I wasn't a junkie or in juvie, so I'm not surprised you haven't heard of me.”

“Maybe Ravens spend their first year training to be assholes instead of playing Exy,” Andrew said dryly.

“At least we're trained to score points, not give them away,” Neil shot back nastily. “Do the other teams send thank you cards after you let them win?”

Andrew's mouth twitched upward, a cold hint of smile that was anything but friendly.

Wymack's eyebrow arched. “Tell me, Mr. Wesninski, why are you here instead of at your own school? I'm sure they miss your sunny personality.”

“Thought I'd come down to brighten Kevin's day,” Neil deadpanned. He could almost feel Riko's switchblade digging into the corner of his mouth as he said it. “A smart mouth on a very stupid boy.”

For a moment, all Wymack did was stare at him and soon it was a struggle for Neil to hold his gaze. He was about the right age and he was male and that was enough of a resemblance to Neil's father to turn Neil's knees to liquid.

Slowly, Wymack said, “You don't have much room to be running your mouth, kid. Tell me why you're really here or I'll turn you over to the cops and let them figure out what to do with you.”

Neil's chest tightened. “I was just passing through, but I got a bit turned around. Kevin's the only one in the area that I know.”

For a moment, they all stared. The lie was out and all Neil could do was wait for them to accept it or not. Andrew's eyes, distant and bored, never wavered, but Kevin looked from Neil to his coach to his bodyguard. Kevin walked with grace and arrogance, but he always looked to someone else to make decisions.

Finally, Wymack sighed and said, “You can sleep on the couch, but I don't want to hear a fucking peep out of you until I drag my ass out of bed tomorrow morning, understand?”

“Yes,” Neil answered.

“We're leaving,” Andrew announced, turning toward the door.

Kevin hesitated and said in soft French, “We'll talk in the morning.”

“We have nothing to talk about.”
“Nathaniel-”

“I believe your little friend said you were leaving.”

Kevin crossed his arms stubbornly. “I'm doing you a favor here. You could at least pretend you're not a total asshole for two seconds.”

Wymack and Andrew studied the pair of them as they glared at one another. Even under Riko's boot, Kevin still had the world at his feet. Everyone at the Nest treated Kevin like a prince. Unluckily for him, though, Neil had never been one for bowing and there was no one around to force him.

“Are you going to break my fingers for talking back?” he challenged with a wicked smirk. A hot, smug thrill went through Neil's chest when Kevin flinched.

“Are you two done?” Andrew drawled. He snapped his fingers in front of Kevin's face. “Leaving now, Kevin.”

Neil watched them go and didn't look back to Wymack until after their footsteps faded down the hallway outside. His chest was full of crackling, fuzzy static as panic built around the edges of his mind. He was in pain, in a stranger's apartment, and he had nothing but the clothes on his back and the phone in his pocket.

All in all, it was a rather bad night.

“Riko's marked you for Court, huh?” Wymack gestured to the bandage on Neil's face. “That's impressive for a freshman.”

Neil braced himself against the ugly feeling clawing at his heart.

“Kevin didn't get away from the Nest until he got hurt, so how'd you get a ticket out?” Wymack asked.

“It's spring break.” Neil mumbled.

“Uh-huh. Well, I don't buy your little story, but I don't really expect honesty from you, either. If you're in some kind of trouble, though, we might be able to help. That's kind of our thing.”

“I am aware,” Neil grit out, “but like I said, I'm just passing through.”

“Okay. I'll get you some blankets and... something to sleep in.”

He turned and disappeared down the hallway. Neil ran his hand over the patch of dried paint across his chest. The panic attack was coming, bubbling up in his chest and promising to boil over soon. He breathed deeply and planned his next few moves while he waited for Wymack to return. All I have to do is wear whatever he brings me, rinse my mouth out, get on the couch, and go to sleep.

It didn't lessen the tension winding tighter in his chest. He would have to spend the night locked in an apartment with a man old enough to be his father and it terrified him. His lungs shriveled. He was running out of air.

Carefully, he visualized the house in the mountains his mother used to describe to him to take his mind away from the pain. He went slowly, building the wooden stairs one weathered plank at a time. Then, he imagined the deck that wrapped around the house and thought of cool, clean air filling his lungs.
Wind chimes hang from the eaves and there's a blue pinwheel stuck into the pot of hydrangeas by the door.

He could hear Wymack rustling around in hall closet.

The front door is open already and, inside, the house smells like rain and pine trees.

Wymack emerged with a sheet and a blanket draped over one arm and a bundle of clothing in the other. Detached, Neil watched as he dumped it all on the couch cushion.

“Bathroom's down there on the right,” Wymack said gruffly, gesturing down the hall. “There's a spare toothbrush in the drawer under the sink. Help yourself to food and whatever in the kitchen. Just try to be quiet about it.”

“Yes,” Neil managed to get out. His mind was hundreds of miles away.

Wymack gave him a funny look and shuffled away again. Down the hallway, a door shut and the sound of it jarred Neil out of his thoughts. He shifted his weight to his left foot, then his right, and then he stepped forward to grab the clothes.

He used the toilet and then washed his hands without looking at his reflection. Since he had no appetite, he brushed his teeth, keeping his back to the mirror. He spit, rinsed, and then traded his black clothes for the large flannel pants and baggy t-shirt that Wymack had given him. His stitches pulled as he changed, but he bit back the groan of pain. “Don't make a sound,” Jean's voice whispered through his memories.

It was all wrong. The bright yellow shirt hung halfway down his thighs, the collar was stretched enough to leave the plump scar looping under his collarbone exposed. The hems of the green pants pooled around his feet. The colors of the clothing bothered him more than the sizes, though. It was the first time he'd worn something other than black and blood red in eight years.

His hands shook.

His thoughts shrieked like a steaming tea kettle. Wrong wrong wrong wrong.

Neil clenched his hands around his own folded clothing and left the bathroom to make his way back to the couch. Trying to keep his mind empty, he covered the lumpy cushions with the sheet and put a throw pillow at one end for his head. He spread the blanket loosely and didn't think about his own bed. He counted the steps to the light switch and, once the room was dark, he retraced them.

He crawled under the blanket and listened for any sounds coming from Wymack's room. Everything was quiet and still. He was safe for the time being, so he forced his body to relax and let his mind get sucked under the weight of his fear.

The burn on his cheek flared with pain as he prodded the bandage. He'd lost his place in the world, lost his purpose. He wouldn't be able to live with himself if he dragged Kevin back to the Nest and he'd die a painful death if he stayed out there.

Invisible hands were wrapping around his throat. His panic was bubbling over, splashing and burning his insides.

Somewhere in the world, Neil had an uncle named Stuart Hatford and the only thing he knew of Stuart Hatford was that his mother had trusted him when she was still alive. It was Stuart Hatford that she'd called the day before they attempted their escape. It was Stuart Hatford's property in Washington, D.C., that they were supposed to run to first. “He'll help us,” she'd said ten minutes
before bullets ripped through her chest.

Finding him would be almost impossible, but Neil still wanted to try. It was his only chance at freedom- or the closest thing to freedom he'd ever know. The only problem was that he didn't know how to find his uncle or if his uncle was even still alive.

Logically, he realized there was enough air in the room, but none of it was getting into his lungs. The invisible hands pressed harder. Even in the dark, he could see a black “1” scrunched by a sadistic smile. “Don't make a sound. You know that only makes it worse.”

The silence was worse than screaming, in Neil's opinion. Screaming meant there was still a soul somewhere in the breaking body. Silence was surrender, obedience, death.

*Jean isn't dead,* he reminded himself forcefully. *I can't hear him because he's not here.*

With great effort, he forced his mind back to the cabin in the mountains like his mother taught him.

He imagined his bare feet climbing the smooth wooden steps, feeling the grooves and nicks beneath his soles. He pictured the wind chimes and tried to hear the sounds they would make when the breeze pushed them. In his mind, he opened the door and wiped his feet on the rug. He inhaled and imagined he could smell the damp, fresh air sighing through the house between open windows, filling and spilling out of white curtains. The floorboards creaked beneath his feet and overhead he could hear his mother moving around in the loft. Gray light filtered through skylights. Birdsong drifted in with the senseless tune of the chimes.

As he moved through the house in his mind, his body unlocked and let air back into his lungs. His hands unclenched. His muscles relaxed.

Gradually, Neil fell asleep.

As usual, he only slept a few hours and when his eyes opened, everything was dark and wrong. He could sense that the room was too large, the ceiling too high. The air wasn't stiflingly close like he'd grown used to. It took him a few moments to remember why he couldn't hear Jean's breathing and why there were lumpy cushions beneath him instead of a hard mattress. His back and shoulders were miserably stiff as he sat up.

His stomach clenched, empty and famished. Anxiety trickled down his arms and prickled his heart. A litany of should be's flooded his mind. He should be at the Nest, he should be eating breakfast with Jean, he should be getting ready for another day of practice. There was a routine he'd been locked in since he arrived at the Nest. Every day was the same except for minor variations here and there- a trip to the infirmary for the odd broken bone, a private audience with the master at his home after a particularly large mistake, a tumble down a staircase he'd never been allowed on before. Even with the odd mishap here and there, every day followed a general pattern that was almost soothing. He didn't need to think or worry, he just had to stick to the schedule and keep moving.

He forced himself away from thoughts of what Jean was doing at that moment and what Neil should be doing as well. There would be time for panic later, but for now he needed to find some money and get the hell out of that apartment.

Moving silently was a skill he'd mastered long before he was handed over to the master. He stood carefully and counted the steps to the wall to cut the lights on. Squinting, he let his eyes adjust for a moment before padding to the kitchen in search of something to eat.

Wymack's kitchen was a far cry from the pristine kitchens of the Nest. The sink was full of dirty
dishes and there was burnt coffee at the bottom of the coffeepot. Inside the fridge, Neil found three
grease-stained take-out boxes that smelled disgusting, half a head of wilting lettuce in a drawer, five
bottles of beer, a carton of milk, and a few sticks of butter. Neil pressed his lips together tightly and
shut the door, fighting his irritation. In the cupboards, there was a bag of hamburger buns and boxes
of microwave popcorn. While he rummaged around for food, he checked the dusty canisters and jars
for any secret stashes of money, but came up empty. He checked the drawers as well, but there was
only a can opener, coupons, and some spare twist-ties in one and spotty silverware in the other.
Under the sink, he found a bundle of empty grocery sacks and a caddy full of cleaning supplies that
he doubted Wymack used.

Eventually, Neil decided on the hamburger buns for breakfast. He ate two buns plain, washing them
down with a glass of water, and then crept back into the living room. For a moment, he looked
around at all the scattered paperwork and dirty mugs and tried to figure out where a man like
Wymack would hide extra cash.

Then, he remembered the third door in the hallway, next to the bathroom and across from the room
Wymack had disappeared into earlier. It had to be either a second bedroom or an office and it was
Neil's best chance of finding something.

With his pulse thumping hard in his ears, he stole down the hallway. Through the door of Wymack's
bedroom, he could hear the sounds of Wymack snoring. Neil held his breath and tried the doorknob
of the spare bedroom. It turned easily and Neil pushed, hoping fiercely the door wouldn't squeak. He
opened it just enough for his body to slip in, not willing to risk anything further. After he closed it
behind himself, he flipped on the light.

The clutter in the living room was nothing compared to the clutter of Wymack's office. There was a
desk pushed up against the far wall, with a bookshelf on one side and a small window on the other.
Papers spilled out of manila folders stacked haphazardly on the floor. On the left was a cabinet that
held three locked drawers and all over the walls were cork-boards covered with lists, schedules,
receipts, scraps of paper with notes scribbled across them, and photographs.

Neil picked his way across the messy floor to the bookshelf and began rifling through the paperbacks
and textbooks, judging each title silently. He'd never read pulp fiction, but he could guess at each
story's contents by the garish covers, and he wasn't surprised in the slightest to find tomes on
addictions and abuse victims. He flipped through the books quickly, checking the pages for spare
bills, but found nothing except a tattered bookmark.

After he'd searched the bookshelf, he moved on to the desk. He was careful to remember the
senseless placement of each paper so that he could leave the office exactly how he'd found it- not that
he expected Wymack to notice if anything was moved.

The door across the hallway opened.

Neil's body froze and his mind filled with lies- I got lost on the way to the bathroom. Couldn't sleep
so I wanted something to read. I was curious about Kevin's new team- but they all shattered and
scattered as soon as Wymack threw open the office door and fixed his grumpy gaze on Neil. Fear
coiled around his throat like barbed wire and every second they spent staring at each other pulled it
tighter.

"I don't keep cash in my office,” Wymack said.

Neil's ears were filled with “Junior, what are you doing out of bed?” He still bore the scars from the
night he spent kneeling on the shards of the plate he'd broken.
He swallowed hard, trying to work up enough spit to loosen his tongue.

“Come on,” Wymack told him with a flick of his hand. “Put those papers back where you found ’em and you can explain yourself over coffee.”

As soon as Wymack turned away, Neil's body unlocked and the blood drained from his face. At the Nest, he knew what to expect- a cane to the face, a switchblade digging under his skin, a racquet to the ribs. Here, he hadn't any idea what Wymack would do to him. He wasn't one of Wymack's wayward Foxes. He was simply a troublesome guest who'd crossed a line.

As Neil marched himself back to the kitchen, he wondered if Wymack would hand him over to the police. He was eighteen, so they couldn't treat him as a runaway child anymore, but the Moriyamas owned men everywhere. Had Riko told them already that he'd run?

Wymack was yawning into his fist and staring at the gurgling coffee maker when Neil finally drifted into the doorway, feeling paper-thin and crumpled around the edges. His fear pushed him to speak first.

“Look, it's nothing personal, but-”

“You were going through my personal belongings in my home. It feels pretty personal to me.”

Slimy dread dripped into Neil's stomach.

“You know what kind of people I recruit,” Wymack went on, “so I'm a little insulted you think I'm dumb enough to leave money around my office.”

Wymack took a step closer and Neil flinched back before he could stop himself. Wymack stilled and gave a grim, knowing smile. Neil scowled at his bare feet and felt like he'd given something away.

“I'm going to ask you a question and I want you to answer honestly because I'm in no mood for bullshit.”

Neil forced himself to look up.

“Is your home a place you can go back to?”

Neil didn't answer.

Wymack's mouth twisted. “Kevin doesn't talk much about what goes on at the Nest, but it doesn't take a psychiatrist to see how fucked up that boy is. I can see why you don't want to go back to school either. If you need a place to hide out for awhile, we won't say anything to the press about you being here. They're too distracted by Kevin anyway as you've probably heard. And if you need money, I could figure out a way for you to earn some.”

Neil's lip curled. “I'm not interested in being your new assistant coach now that Kevin's got it in his head to play Exy again.”

Wymack feigned surprise. “My god, it speaks. I was starting to think you'd forgotten how. You can start by washing cars, cleaning up- simple jobs that won't get you noticed by anyone sniffing around campus for a good story. Just keep that tattoo covered.”

“I don't need your charity.”

“It's not charity if you work for it.”
Neil swallowed hard. “I can't stay here.”

“You're not going to get very far without money.” Wymack turned away from him to pull out a couple of mugs from the cabinet. Dimly, Neil thought about the number of dirty mugs out in the living room and wondered just how many he owned. Perhaps he never washed them and just continued to buy more.

While Wymack poured two cups of coffee, Neil took out his options and weighed them. He wasn't safe there, but he wouldn't be safe anywhere. His father was getting out in a year and three months, but his goons would start sniffing around for him before then. They'd keep him alive until their boss got out to deal with Neil himself.

Neil still had a small hope of finding his uncle, but he didn't even have a phone number or an address for Stuart. He couldn't very well go running around Washington, D.C., and hope to bump into the man.

Wymack was offering him time to think, a place to hide, and a way to earn some desperately needed cash. As much as he hated it, this was his best option.

“What will Kevin's little dog say about this?” Neil couldn't help asking.

Wymack shrugged and said, “Don't care. It's my house, my team, my rules. Just don't let him corner you in any dark alleys.”

He held out the second cup of coffee and Neil eyed it warily. His heart was strung up high in his chest by apprehension and his mind was a jumble of half-baked lies and tangled plans.

After a long moment, Neil accepted the coffee and Wymack's offer.
Visitors

Chapter Summary

Kevin and Andrew's lot visit Wymack's apartment for a little chat with Neil.

Chapter Notes

This one picks up right where chapter two left off

Wymack drank two more cups of coffee before going off to shower, leaving Neil to nurse his own coffee and think. He turned to his left with a smart remark poised on his tongue and blinked in surprise when he remembered Jean wasn't there. If Neil turned his head and bent his mind he could almost see Jean beside him, standing tall with relaxed hands and gray eyes softened in amusement.

Since he was alone, Neil dug out his phone from his black jeans and turned it back on. The display said it was just after five. No new messages. His battery was still slowly losing power and, without a charger, he would soon lose his last connection to his team. The thought was nauseating. He held the power button until his phone turned off again.

For eight years, Neil had been a number and nothing more. Without his tattoo or his team, he was only an error awaiting correction, a penciled answer soon to be scrubbed away.

Would they even bother putting a name on his grave?

Neil didn't even know if his mother had been buried properly. Had his father buried her in the garden like he'd threatened? Or had Lola made her disappear?

He was shaking before he could yank himself out of that line of thinking. The memory of the tunnel leading out of the basement in Baltimore rose up around him. He could smell the mildew and concrete and his mother's perfume. Gunshots cracked through the air, deafening him and cutting down his mother. Her blood pooled around his shoes. A fallen flashlight cast long shadows on the wall. His father's grip had never felt so heavy as he dragged Nathaniel back toward the house.

Wymack's voice was enough to drag him back to the present.

“All right, Neil, brace yourself!” His heavy footsteps thumped down the hallway. “Kevin and Andrew's lot are on their way over. Told 'em not to come, but pigs'll fly before they listen to me.”

Neil looked down at the baggy shirt hanging off his torso. He'd rather wear last night's clothes than be seen in this.

Wymack didn't stop as he passed Neil on his way to the kitchen. “You like toast? 'Cause that's all I got unless you want leftover chow mein for breakfast.”

“Toast is fine,” he mumbled. Neil didn't remember what chow mein was or if he liked it. He picked up his clothes and strode off to the bathroom to change before Wymack could say anything else.
His head was pounding as he slid the flannel pants down his legs. Half-naked, he had to stop for a moment just to breathe. He felt cotton-stuffed and heavy. He needed water and clean bandages. He needed to check his stitches. He needed ointment for the burns on his face.

He needed this to be a dream. He needed to wake up from this.

Neil looked into the mirror at his face, haggard and bandaged. His exhaustion hung in dark bags under his father's eyes. Swallowing thickly, he reached up to tug at the corner of the mirror experimentally and it popped open to reveal the medicine cabinet behind it. Crowded on the shelves were crumpled boxes of Band-Aids, tubes of antiseptic cream, slightly rusted tweezers, and an orange prescription bottle of painkillers. Neil took out a box of large, rectangular bandages and pulled one out.

Once he finished changing back into his black clothing, he quickly pulled the tape off the square of gauze on his cheek. Neil swallowed back a small whimper as some of his skin peeled off with the gauze and then he forced himself to look at the damage. The skin that had once been smooth, that had been a crisp contrast between pale flesh and blank ink, was hideously raw and blistered. Riko had promised him plastic surgery, but Neil couldn't imagine this ever being fixed.

He quickly unwrapped the Band-Aid and pressed it over his ruined cheek. The searing, white-hot pain brought up a choked noise in his throat, but he forced himself to breathe through it. The pain was better than letting the others see. Once word got out that he'd been disowned, his father's eye would be drawn back to him and Neil wasn't going to paint a target on his own back.

The front door opened and Andrew's voice rang out through the apartment. “Morning, Coach!”

“Jesus, Minyard, tone it down. It's too early for that shit.”

“Would if I could! You can thank Kevin for this. He's been up and at it for like an hour.”

Neil swallowed hard and took his time folding the borrowed clothes.

Kevin's voice was quieter, but hard. “Is he still here?”

“Yeah. He's in the bathroom.”

“Any trouble?”

Neil wanted to roll his eyes at Kevin's ugly tone, but he flushed hotly when he remembered being caught in Wymack's office looking for money to steal. He held his breath and waited to be ratted out, for Kevin's gloating at being proven right.

“No trouble other than him waking up at the ass-crack of dawn.”

Another man's voice chimed in, “I still don't get what he's even doing here.”

“I don't get what you're doing here, Nicky,” Wymack shot back. “If this is some attempt to intimidate him-”

“Aw, Coach, you always think the worst of us!” laughed the man.

“That's because I know you.”

“Rude.”

Kevin cut back in, “Where the fuck is he?”
Neil stepped toward the door and recoiled when Andrew's voice purred through the crack, “Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

“Andrew!” Wymack barked. “Get away from there. Fuck's sake.”

Neil yanked the door open and was met with Andrew's grinning face. He stared coolly back and waited for him to move out of his way, but he didn't.

“Eavesdropping? Tsk, tsk, didn't they teach you manners at the Nest?”

Neil flashed a little smile. “They taught me all sorts of things at the Nest.”

“You're awfully chipper for someone about to get a knife in the gut. Just how fucked in the head are you?”

“Perhaps there's some sort of pill to even me out. What was it they put you on again?”

Andrew laughed and spun on his heel. “Come along, Nathaniel. Don't keep your visitors waiting.”

Neil squared his shoulders and followed him out to the living room. Standing in the middle with Wymack was Kevin, looking somber and disdainful as ever. Sitting on the couch was Andrew’s identical twin, who was half-asleep and dressed in all black like his brother, and on the armrest was a taller, darker man whose smile seemed genuine as far as Neil could tell.

“Hi,” said the man on the armrest. He stood to stick out his hand for Neil to shake. “I'm Nicky. I'm Andrew and Aaron's cousin.”

Neil stared at his hand, but made no move to take it.

“I won't bite,” Nicky laughed. “Unless you're into that sort of thing, of course.”

“Gross,” muttered Aaron.

Andrew rubbed his hands together and stepped between Neil and his cousin. “Well, Kevin, you wanted to see him and here he is.”

Kevin frowned at him before sliding his gaze onto Neil's face. In French, he said, “Tell me you're not planning to run.”

Neil blinked slowly.

Andrew leaned forward to squint at Neil's face. When that failed to get a reaction, he waved his hand in front of Neil's eyes. Neil pulled back and flicked a cold look toward him.

“What'd you do, Kevin?” The grin never left Andrew's mouth. “Did you power him down or something? What'd you say? I want to try.”

Wymack grunted, “Enough, Andrew.”

“I need to talk to him privately,” Kevin said with a scowl toward his bodyguard, who snickered in return.

Andrew nudged Neil with his arm and said, “You did a good job of getting his interest. I didn't think playing hard to get would work on him. I guess you must know him better than I do, hm?”

“Does he always talk this much?” Neil asked Wymack.
“Well, that's just rude,” Andrew complained, though Neil could hear that he was still smiling.

“God,” Aaron groaned. “Can we go?”

Nicky flapped his hand at him. “Shh, this is interesting.”

Kevin clenched his jaw and scowled at the pair of them. Nicky gave him a thin smile and wiggled his eyebrows. Apparently, Kevin's authority didn't have as much weight out here as it did inside the Nest. Even the older Ravens bent to Kevin's wishes so long as they coincided with Riko's.

Wymack shook his head and went off to the kitchen, muttering about how it was too damn early for all of this. Neil didn't like the way Andrew's manic glee seemed to grow as soon as their coach was out of sight.


Neil looked back to Kevin and said, “Go fuck yourself.”

Nicky snickered into his hand while Andrew cooed at Kevin with fake sympathy. Aaron scrubbed a hand over his face and checked the time again.

Kevin stared at him hard and continued in French, “I want to help you because I know that you-”

Neil bristled. “Shut up.”

“Nathaniel, I remember what you did.”

“I didn't do anything for you. Shut the fuck up.”

Andrew turned to his twin and his cousin and said in German, “I feel left out. Nicky, go see what Coach is eating.”

Neil didn't let himself react to his speaking German. He wondered if Kevin mentioned to them that he learned the language in high school. It seemed that Kevin had gotten awfully chummy with this lot.

Nicky blew out a large sigh and trudged off to the kitchen.

“Now, one more time in English,” Andrew said, waving his hands at the two of them like he was conducting an orchestra.

Neil was aware of Andrew and Aaron's eyes on him, but he kept his focus on Kevin. Talking about the night Kevin left was the last thing he wanted—especially with an audience. Thankfully, Kevin dropped it.

“What are you going to do?” Kevin asked, using English like Andrew had requested.

“Yes, what are you going to do, Nathaniel?” Andrew echoed cheerfully, circling around Neil's back. “Kevin kept us up last night with all his pacing and fretting, so we're all quite eager to see how this will play out, I assure you.”

Wymack shuffled back into the room with Nicky at his side. He shoved a plate of buttered toast into Neil's stomach and Neil fought hard to control his wince as the plate hit too close to his wound. Kevin narrowed his eyes at him.
“Neil is going to be working for me for a while,” Wymack announced, sinking onto the couch next to Aaron. He had another cup of coffee in his hand. “Odd jobs here and there. Just until he gets on his feet and gets on his way.”

Kevin looked from Wymack to Neil, horrified. “You can't be serious.”

Andrew's mania finally dimmed. “Oh, Coach. No, no, that's not happening.”

“I don't remember asking you.”

“There's no fucking way this Raven is staying here,” Andrew snarled.

Wymack slurped his coffee and stared at Andrew, unfazed.

Nicky settled back on the armrest and plastered a nervous smile on his face. “Might be fun having one of Kevin's old buddies around,” he said weakly.

“Shut the fuck up, Nicky,” Aaron growled.

Kevin was visibly agitated. “Andrew.”

“Nicky, Aaron,” Andrew said as he curled his arm around Neil's, “go wait out in the hall.”

Aaron rolled his eyes, but they both obeyed without any protest. Everything in Neil's body screamed at him to run as he watched the door open.

“That's better, isn't it?” Andrew crooned once the door was shut again. “Where were we? Oh, yes, Nathaniel was just leaving.”

Wymack blew out a gusty breath. “I already offered to let him stay, Andrew. I'm not taking that back just because you've got your undies in a wad.”

Andrew's hand tried to wrap around Neil's wrist, but Neil finally shoved away from him and went to lean against the wall instead. His toast was left untouched.

“I'll buy you a ticket back to Evermore,” Kevin said. “I know it won't be easy for you, but it's better this way.”

Neil's temper flared. “No.”

Kevin glanced at Andrew and switched back to French. “If you go back now, you'll recover from whatever he does to you in time for summer practice and preseason interviews. The longer you stay the worse it'll be. Just go back and get it over with.”

“It's no longer any of your business,” Neil hissed. “You're a Fox now.”

“No, this all sounds rather exciting,” Andrew cut in. “Speak English or I'll have to start guessing. My patience is wearing thin.”

Kevin shot him a glare and continued on in French anyway. “At least at the Nest you would live. Once your father hears you left, he'll kill you.”

Neil knew this, of course, but Kevin was his only ticket back into the Nest. The choice was between dying at his father's hands, living as Riko's property for the rest of his miserable life, or running. His mind was already made up. He'd leave Kevin here with his pitiful team and he'd try to find refuge with his uncle. A life on the run would be grueling, but it was worth a shot.
“A few weeks,” Neil said in English, shooting a sour look at Andrew, “and then I'll go.”

Andrew hummed and pretended to consider this. “How about a few hours instead?”

“If you're worried about dear little Kevin, take him back to whatever hole you live in. He and I have nothing more to discuss.”

Andrew bounced on the balls of his feet. “Great. Superb. Let's go, Kevin, shall we?”

Kevin stared at Neil for a long moment before relenting. Andrew gave a cheery wave to his coach before dragging Kevin out into the hallway and letting the door slam behind them. Neil strained his ears to listen to the sound of their footsteps traveling down toward the elevators before letting himself relax.

“That went well,” Wymack said dryly.

Neil sucked in a slow breath and counted to ten before asking, “Will the rest of your team swing by to gawk as well?”

Wymack shook his head. “Nah, they all scurried off for spring break. Didn't want to stick around longer than they had to with the shit show about to start. Speaking of, I got a text that we've had our first bit of vandalism. You start working tomorrow.”
Neil and Wymack stood side by side looking at the words “DIE VERMIN SCUM” painted in large, sloppy letters on the sidewalk across the street from the Foxhole Court. Neil had to squint just to read the blood red message due to the harsh glare of the midday sun bouncing off the concrete. A headache was already rumbling in the back of his skull and the heat was baking him through his dark clothing. He supposed he was grateful that Wymack had forced him to slather sunscreen all over his face and neck back at the apartment.

Wymack asked, “What do you think?”

Neil thought the hateful words were less distressing than the hideously bright shade of orange Palmetto State had picked for the trim and fox paw logos on the outer walls of the Foxhole Court.

“I think it's a bit uninspired,” Neil answered dryly. “I could have come up with something better.”

“Noted. Here you go,” he said as he handed Neil the end of a long hose that disappeared into the grass toward the shorter utilities buildings, where Neil assumed it was hooked up to a spigot somewhere. There was a spray nozzle attachment on the end of it with a trigger to release the water. At Neil's feet was a large bottle of drinking water and a bucket containing a pair of rubber gloves and a few scrub brushes.

“Hose it down and then scrub. Rinse and repeat 'til it comes off. Shouldn't take you too long. I'll be back with some lunch later. You got anything against cheeseburgers?”

Neil wrinkled his nose. “Do you let the Foxes eat cheeseburgers?”

“That's irrelevant. I'll let you get to work now. Have fun and stay hydrated.”

He waited until Wymack drove away before looking around for any others. The Foxhole Court stood on the outskirts of campus and it was fairly quiet that day since it was spring break. Neil was glad. He didn't want to be seen out there in his paint-smeared shirt, scrubbing graffiti off the sidewalk.

For a moment, he got lost in staring out into the open spaces surrounding him.

Back in January, around Neil's eighteenth birthday, he and Jean were taught to drive by a private tutor the master hired. The lessons took place at night and they took turns slowly guiding the car
around Edgar Allan's campus, just enough to learn the basics. Neil thought they would get to leave the Nest to take their tests, but that wasn't the case. Once again, money paved the way. A couple weeks after their last lesson, their driver's licenses arrived in the mail. Riko locked them away in his desk drawer and told Jean he would have to wait a little longer for Neil to catch up. Neither of them were allowed to drive until Neil started classes.

The world had looked smaller and safer from the inside of a car in the dark. Under the sun, it was dizzyingly vast and brimming with sickening possibility. Everything was big and bright and too much. The soaring blue sky and the roar of a nearby highway and the towering stadium all overwhelmed his senses and swallowed his mind. His hands shook and his heart pounded. He wanted to go inside. He wanted Wymack to come back. He wanted to go home.

He was alone. He was alone. He was going to disappear.

Neil reached to his left and found only empty air. Jean's name died behind his teeth.

“Breathe,” he mumbled to himself. The sound of his own voice knocked him out of the downward spiral. Gulping down air, Neil told himself firmly that he only had to focus on the task at hand and then he would be able to go back to the apartment.

“Just breathe.”

Neil squeezed the trigger on the spray nozzle and narrowed his focus to the water and the words. Squinting at the sidewalk soon gave him a splitting headache. After hosing a generous section of the sidewalk, Neil bent down carefully to set the hose aside and pull on the pair of gloves. Kneeling on the wet sidewalk hurt his knees and dampened his jeans. His bruised back was stiff and sore, his skull throbbed, and his stitches were itchy and uncomfortable under the gauze. Miserably, he scrubbed at the letters as hard as he could manage.

Sweat gathered in his hair and ran down his back. His body begged for sleep. Because of the Ravens' sixteen-hour days, the previous day had stretched on forever; he'd fallen asleep on the couch shortly after dinner and startled awake when Wymack came out to announce he was going to bed. He'd been unable to sleep again until the small hours of the morning. He could barely keep his eyes open now.

The roar of his pulse and the building fatigue drowned out the sound of a car slowing to a stop behind him on the street. Neil didn't realize he wasn't alone until a cheery voice sliced through his mental fog.

“Hey, princess! Miss the castle yet?”

Neil sat back on his heels and scowled up at Andrew. The manic Minyard looked comfortable covered in black with dark shades over his eyes and a cigarette poking out of his awful smile. Neil wasn't sure what he believed in regards to higher powers and the nature of the universe, but this certainly felt like a punishment.

“I hear shit like this builds character.” Andrew gestured to the brush in Neil's hand. “Do you feel like a better human being yet?”

“Shall I assume, then, that you've never cleaned anything in your life?”

“Ha!” Andrew barked before dropping to a crouch in front of Neil. He pushed his sunglasses up into his hair and took a drag off his cigarette.

“What do you want?” Neil asked.
Andrew blew smoke into Neil's face and grinned when Neil turned away from the cloud. It stung his eyes and tickled his nose, but the memories it dredged up were far worse.

"Why are you here?" Neil tried again, scrubbing at the nearest letter. His abdomen throbbed dully and he hoped the wetness he felt was sweat instead of blood.

"Just came out for a little chat," Andrew said. "Kevin's still pitching a fit."

"I don't care."

Andrew held his cigarette between two fingers and pointed at him. "There's something you two aren't telling me. I can feel it."

"Ask Kevin."

Andrew tilted his head and leaned closer. "I did ask him and he immediately reached for the booze, which makes me all the more curious about you, Nathaniel."

"You should get back to him before he starts chewing the furniture."

"There's too much about you that doesn't add up, but I'll get the math right eventually. Since you're staying, we've got plenty of time." Andrew gave him another grin and then stood up. "Put your back into it, Cinderella, or you'll never make it to the ball before midnight."

He tapped two fingers to his temple and knocked the bucket over with his foot as he walked away. Neil sat back and watched him go, trying to even his breathing and ignoring the sudden deluge of memories involving the balcony of his mother's private study where they'd sit together, her with a cigarette and him with a box of markers and a notepad.

Neil kept scrubbing at the the words stretching down the sidewalk and eventually they were nothing more than shapeless, faintly red smears. He wiped his forehead off on his sleeve and stood to hose it down once more. He swayed unsteadily on his feet as he stared at the specks of sunlight catching in the water splashing off the concrete. When he heard Wymack's voice calling his name he thought at first that he'd imagined it.

"Not too shabby!" Wymack came to stand beside Neil and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Pack it in, kid. It's lunch time."

Neil swallowed twice, trying to work up enough saliva to wet his dry throat, and let Wymack take the hose from him. While Wymack went off to put the hose away, Neil peeled off the gloves and dropped them and the scrub brush into the bucket. The bucket was carefully placed on the floor of the backseat of Wymack's car and then Neil shuffled around the front to climb into the passenger seat with his water bottle clutched in his hands. His heart finally settled down once he was safe inside with the doors closed.

His jeans were wet from the knees down and his shirt was soaked through with sweat. He hated the thought of wearing Wymack's t-shirt and pajama pants for the rest of the day, but that was better than being smelly and damp.

He chugged water until his lungs burned for air and then he rested his head against the window, catching his breath. The interior of the car smelled like warm, greasy food, but Neil couldn't find it in himself to turn his nose up at it. He hadn't eaten enough the previous day- his discomfort around Wymack killed his appetite- and he was feeling it now.

The driver's door opened and Wymack fell in behind the wheel. "Jesus," he said, "you've only been
out here a couple hours and you look fit to keel over. We'll save the other stuff for tomorrow.”

Neil grimaced. “Why is it so hot?”

Wymack snorted and put the car in drive. “It's only March. It's not that hot. Are all Ravens this delicate?”

Neil groaned quietly and tucked an arm over his sore abdomen.

“You gonna be all right over there?”

“I'm fine.”

When they stopped at a red light, Wymack reached behind Neil to grab a plastic grocery bag from the backseat. He dropped it on Neil's lap and said, “There's your first paycheck.”

Frowning, Neil rooted through the contents of the bag and found three pairs of shorts, four t-shirts, a package of white boxer briefs, a package of socks, and a stick of deodorant. None of the clothing was black, which was a problem. If he bled, it would show.

“I guessed on the sizes, but that should tide you over for a short while. You can pick more out for yourself after you clean all the shit off the Tower doors.”

“Say thank you,” Riko's voice hissed in his ears. Neil could almost feel the heel of a boot pressing against his windpipe.

Neil fought back the words and mumbled, “I don't think the work I did is worth all this.”

“Don't worry, I got you the cheapest shit.”

Back at Wymack's place, Neil took his new clothes into the bathroom to change and inspect his injuries. He cleaned himself up awkwardly in the shower, standing just out of the water's reach and wiping carefully around the gauze still taped across his abdomen. Then, he toweled off, swiped on some deodorant, and replaced the bandage on his face. Neil stared at the shelves for a moment before taking the dusty bottle of aspirin and swallowing two tablets dry. After that, he dug out a pair of blue shorts, a gray t-shirt, and the package of underwear. Thankfully, it all fit decently enough. He was too tired to care that it was all unwashed; he was just glad to be in dry clothing that didn't stink of body odor.

Neil took the rest of the new clothes out of the bag and put his dirty clothes inside it, keeping them separate. He padded out to the kitchen, where Wymack was already tucking into his unhealthy lunch.

Neil waited until he was noticed and then held up the clothes in a silent question.

“I'll show you the laundry room after we eat. Come over here and sit down before you faint.”

The clothes were left in a little heap on the floor and Neil ambled over to the breakfast bar. He climbed onto the high stool across from Wymack and unwrapped the cheeseburger waiting for him. Wymack handed him a glass of water and a to-go cup from the fast food place. Neil took a careful sip from the to-go cup's straw, hoping it was ice water, and recoiled when fizzy, sickly-sweet soda hit his tongue.

“Never met a kid who didn't like Coke before,” Wymack chuckled.
“It's been a while since I've had it,” Neil said before running his tongue over his teeth. He couldn't remember if he'd liked it as a child. He swallowed a few mouthfuls of water before taking a bite of the burger and trying to ignore all thoughts of grease and calories he wouldn't burn off.

As he ate, Neil noticed that the pounding in his skull had quieted and the ache in his stomach was fading slowly. He still felt a bit woozy and fatigued, but he could manage.

“So,” Wymack said, “what position did you play?”

Neil wiped some ketchup from the corner of his mouth and replied, “Backliner.”

“What made you pick that?”

“I didn't pick it,” he answered honestly.

Wymack gave him a long look, considering his words. “If you could pick, what would you play?”


Wymack lifted a bushy eyebrow. Neil shrank in his seat, prickled by the knowledge that this man was giving him shelter, food, and clothing in spite of all the reasons to kick him out onto the street.

“When I was younger, I wanted to be a striker,” Neil admitted. Neil didn't understand why his mother insisted his little league coach put him on the defense line until his audition at Evermore. It was Exy or execution and the master had no interest in raising a third striker.

Wymack took another bite of his burger and looked thoughtful. “You know,” he paused to swallow, “we're looking to sign a new striker.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Speaking of, I'm going to be flying out on Wednesday to offer our striker-to-be her contract, so you'll be at Abby's that night.”

Neil froze. “What?”

“It's not because you tried to rob me. It's just with you fresh out of the Nest, I think it's best not to leave you on your own for too long- you know, just in case you need something.”

“Who is Abby?”

Wymack looked up. “Oh, that's Abigail Winfield, our team nurse. She has a house not far from here. Kevin and the cousins are staying there this week because they can't be bothered to make their own food, but they shouldn't be too much trouble with Abby around.”

The thought of staying in the same house as Andrew Minyard overnight made his stomach drop.

“And how long do you expect to be away?” Neil asked.

“I've got a flight back Thursday morning, so just keep to yourself and try not to set Andrew off.”

Neil shook his head. “My existence sets him off.”

“Can you survive one night?”

“I'll try not to get blood on the carpet, but no promises.”
Wymack rolled his eyes at Neil's tone and crumpled up the empty burger wrapper. "All right, smart-ass, let's go get your laundry done."

Neil gathered up his clothing and Wymack showed him the hall closet where he kept a spare mesh bag, his laundry detergent, and a zippered pouch full of quarters for the machines. Neil stuffed his clothes into the bag while Wymack grabbed the detergent and the pouch. Together they headed off to the elevator.

In the basement, there were three washing machines and three dryers in a room that smelled like dust and mildew. Two long fluorescent lights ran parallel to each other in the middle of the ceiling and hummed noisily once they flickered to life.

"You ever do your own laundry before?" Wymack asked as Neil looked around the dingy room.

"I used to," Neil murmured. During his first two years at the Nest, he and Jean had been made to do Riko and Kevin's laundry as well as their own. It was Riko's way of establishing their places at his feet.

"Great. Here are the washers. Follow the directions on the lid. Set a timer for an hour when you get back upstairs. Those are the dryers. Do not forget to clean the lint trap out. Drying usually takes about an hour and a half. Don't forget your shit down here, okay?"

"Hard to forget when this is all I have," Neil said.

Wymack nodded and waved him over to the nearest washing machine.

Neil inserted quarters into the slots and waited for the water to start running. He measured and poured the detergent before stuffing his clothes around the agitator. He'd left his cell phone powered off and tucked under a couch cushion, but he checked the pockets of his jeans anyway before putting them in. He shut the lid and turned back to Wymack.

"Gold star, Mr. Wesninski," Wymack said dryly as he headed back out to the elevator.

"Now what?" Neil asked around a large yawn.

They stepped into the elevator and Wymack hit the button for his floor. "You look like crap, so try to sleep that off. I'll get your laundry today, but don't get used to it. Next time you're on your own."

"Yes, sir," Neil mumbled as he leaned against the wall and let his eyes droop.
The Importance of Being Fine

Chapter Summary

Neil tries to cope with long days and a close proximity to Kevin.

Chapter Notes

More unpleasant feelings and panic attacks in this chapter! If you guys need better warnings for things let me know!

Once again, thank you guys so much for the kudos and lovely comments!! <3

The days seemed to last forever. Neil managed to hide his discomfort whenever his stitches pulled or itched, but there was no masking his lethargy. His body felt too heavy and his mind struggled to adjust to his new surroundings and the loss of his daily routine. Wymack attributed it first to dehydration and hounded Neil to drink more water during the day. When he dropped Neil off at a dormitory to scrape the message “#2 IS SHIT” off the front doors on Tuesday, Wymack gave him a cooler full of water bottles and sports drinks and then he gave Neil a stern scolding when he returned to find most of the bottles untouched.

Tuesday's task earned Neil a pair of sunglasses and new tennis shoes that were, unfortunately, white and blue instead of black and red. If Wymack noticed Neil's displeasure, he didn't comment on it. After a late lunch of sandwiches and salad from a nearby diner, Wymack announced that Neil's only job for the afternoon was staying hydrated before he retreated to the back room to finish some paperwork. Neil was left to his own devices.

He turned on the television and kept the volume low so that Wymack couldn't hear him flipping channels every few minutes, too restless and indecisive to pick a program to watch. Anxiety crackled under his skin. He tucked his shaking hands between his knees and tried to keep his mind off of what he knew Jean was doing back at the Nest. He should have been there. He should have been practicing with the rest of the Ravens and then helping Jean with his classwork afterward.

Back in August, it had taken Neil weeks to dig the jealousy out of his chest after Jean started classes at the university. He was allowed to leave the Nest on a regular basis with Martin and Gabe. He was finally allowed to play in games with the other Ravens. The outside world knew Jean Moreau's name and face while Neil was still living in the shadows. Without Jean, Neil was forced to spend his time with whoever happened to be around the Nest. The older Ravens regarded Neil with the same indifference they held for Riko's favorite chair. They wouldn't use or damage him without Riko's approval, but he was nothing more than property all the same. Even so, their company was preferable to Riko and Kevin's.

The television wasn't enough of a distraction to keep Neil from settling into a cold, bitter state of mind. The easy pace of the last few days let him slow down enough to finally look back and what he saw made him crave violence, but his body was paralyzed by the weight of his sorrow and grief and rage. How was it possible to lose so much- his mother, his dignity, his freedom- and not cease to
function altogether? Sometimes he resented his own heart. It carried on endlessly, beating and beating and beating and completely deaf to his soul crying *please, stop*. While his body was stitched back together over and over, there was no suture or splint to keep his mind in one piece.

Neil was crumbling or perhaps he'd broken long ago and was only just now seeing the jagged fragments.

Neil's chest wasn't large enough to contain all of his hatred. He hated his father, his master, his king, and himself. “*You made your choice, Nathaniel. I gave you what you asked for.*” He hated Jean for being the point of weakness in his armor and he hated Kevin for folding himself into his place as Riko's second. He hated Wymack, too. Neil knew if he stayed there in the shelter of Wymack's mercy he'd be too soft to leave when the time came.

Fatigue came as a blessing. It slowed his thoughts and dimmed his anger. The tension in his body unwound and his mind drifted into a shallow place where he was only aware of the sunlight playing across the wall and the colors on the television screen.

By the time Wymack emerged to ask what Neil wanted for dinner, Neil could only grunt something noncommittal and entirely unhelpful. He was barely aware of Wymack making a call. Sometime later, the smell of food woke his appetite and he dragged himself into the kitchen to eat whatever Wymack put on a plate for him. Afterward, he stumbled back to the couch and fell asleep curled around a throw pillow.

On Wednesday morning, Wymack and Neil ate scrambled eggs and toast in tense silence. There was no cleaning for Neil to do that day since Wymack was set to take the ten-thirty flight to Detroit, where he would find some girl called Janie Smalls and attempt to sign her as the Foxes' new striker. Neil was either seen as too untrustworthy or too unstable to be left on his own, so Wymack made plans for him to stay at Abby Winfield's house until he returned.

Neil forced food down his throat even as his stomach protested. He'd wanted to avoid Andrew and Kevin as much as possible and now he was about to spend a whole night under the same roof as them.

“Don't look so grim, kid,” Wymack said. “Abby's sweet, but she can keep those assholes in line. It'll be all right.”

Neil didn't believe him, so he didn't reply.

One advantage to staying the night at the team nurse's home, Neil supposed, was the likelihood of there being medical supplies lying around. He'd been taking Band-Aids from Wymack's medicine cabinet almost every day since his sweat from working out in the sun loosened the adhesive. He hoped to find some burn cream for his cheek and some gauze to replace the strips over his stomach, which were beginning to smell.

At nine-fifteen, Neil stuffed two clean changes of clothes into a plastic sack along with the spare toothbrush wrapped in a sandwich bag and his stick of deodorant. His cell phone, still powered down, was tucked carefully between his t-shirts. He changed the bandage on his cheek and risked a glance at the rest of his face in the mirror before heading out to meet Wymack by the door.

Neil put on his sunglasses before they stepped out of the lobby onto the sun-drenched sidewalk. He was still getting accustomed to sunshine and the sunglasses helped a little, he found, but they didn't prevent headaches altogether. He wondered how Kevin had fared after his flight from the Nest before he remembered that Kevin hadn't been kept underground- he'd traveled abroad several times for interviews and meetings with international teams. Kevin had seen the world, so he probably
hadn't found it all so jarring when he was out of the Nest for good.

If he hadn’t witnessed the horror that Kevin lived through it would have been easy to think that Kevin was fortunate and hate him for it.

Wymack drove them to a small neighborhood of gently winding streets with young trees spaced evenly along the sidewalks in front of houses that all looked similar. Near the end of a cul-de-sac, Wymack turned into a driveway and parked beside Andrew's car. The pale yellow house was modest, two stories, and seemingly well-maintained. A small garden was beginning to bloom around the little walkway leading up to the porch and the vibrantly green lawn was neatly trimmed.

“Should I tell you to mind your manners?” Wymack asked as they unbuckled their seat belts.

“You can do whatever you like,” Neil replied.

Wymack grunted something that Neil didn't catch. The two of them walked up to the front door, but instead of knocking, Wymack used one of his keys to unlock the knob and the deadbolt. He pushed the door open and stepped into the entryway. Neil followed and quietly shut the door behind him before removing his sunglasses. To the right was a small sitting room furnished with chairs and a coffee table by the windows and bookcases against the opposite wall. To the left was a set of stairs leading up to the second floor. Straight ahead, Neil could hear pots and pans being moved around on a stove accompanied by someone humming softly. The smell of bacon and fresh coffee wafted through the air.

Wymack walked down the hall and disappeared around a corner. A moment later, a woman laughed, “David! Lord, you almost gave me a heart attack.”

Footsteps thumped overhead and then Andrew appeared at the top of the stairs with his deranged grin. “Nathaniel! Good of you to show up.”

“Neil,” Wymack called, “come meet Abby.”

Neil glanced back at Andrew before toeing out of his shoes and following Wymack. Andrew clumped noisily down the stairs and walked closely behind him. The back of Neil's neck tingled, but he forcibly kept his shoulders relaxed.

The kitchen was separated from the dining room by a high breakfast bar and was fitted with stainless steel appliances that glinted in the bright sunlight pouring in through the window above the sink and the glass door that opened out onto the patio. On the far side of the room, Abby Winfield and Wymack were standing together while Abby sprinkled salt and pepper into the pan of eggs. Wymack leaned against the refrigerator door and said something that made Abby laugh before she turned and noticed Neil standing in the doorway.

Her smile dimmed a little and her eyes went to a spot just over his shoulder. Shaking her head, she scolded, “Andrew, leave our guest alone. Go tell the others breakfast is ready.”

“We'll get to know each other later,” Andrew whispered, close enough for his breath to hit Neil's ear, before he padded away to find his family members and Kevin.

Abby wiped her hands off on a checkered towel and told Wymack to watch the bacon as she stepped forward to offer Neil her hand. Awkwardly, he shook it and tried to put on a polite smile.

“I'm Abby, but I'm sure you figured that out. It's nice to meet you- Neil, right? David said you prefer that.”
“Yes.”

She beamed at him. “Wonderful. Oh, is your cheek hurt? Would you like me to take a look at it?”

Neil dropped her hand and retreated half a step. “I'm fine.”

“He’s just keeping his tattoo covered,” Wymack explained as he poked at the strips of bacon with a spatula. “I don't think showing off a second Raven would do us any good right about now.”

Abby’s eyebrows knit together. “I suppose that's true. Well, Neil, if you need anything don't hesitate to ask. You can drop your stuff in the den. It's just down those steps there.” She pointed over his shoulder. “We have to put you on the couch, I'm afraid. The boys took the guest rooms.”

Neil turned and walked through the dining room to where a half wall overlooked the sunken den, which was obviously furnished with comfort in mind rather than style. An overstuffed sofa was flanked by two end tables and three recliners that didn't match. There was already a pillow and a stack of blankets waiting on one of the sofa's arms for him. Facing the seating area was an impressive entertainment center that housed a large television and a DVD player. Neil went down the three steps and took a closer look at an abstract painting hanging on the far wall beside a door that Neil assumed led into the garage. When he heard the others bickering and heading for the kitchen, he tucked his plastic sack of clothing under an end table before going back up the stairs. He knew he had to face Kevin eventually.

“Aw, Abby, he could've slept with me. I get awful cold at night all by myself,” Nicky laughed just as Neil came to stand at the edge of the kitchen's tiled floor. A shiver ran through Neil's stomach and for a moment he could feel phantom hands on his chest.

Aaron turned from the fridge with a carton of orange juice in hand and glared at his cousin. “I'm going to tell Erik if you keep that shit up.”

Kevin was busy scolding Andrew for how much creamer he was dumping into his coffee and Andrew was clearly intent on aggravating Kevin- once his own mug was full, he poured a second cup of coffee and added a copious amount of creamer to that as well. Abby fussed over Wymack, reminding him that it took half an hour to get to the airport from there and that he didn't want to be late.

Nicky finished piling eggs and bacon onto his plate and he nearly dropped it when he noticed Neil. “Hey, Nathaniel! I was just wondering how you liked your eggs in the morning.”

“Fuck's sake, Nicky,” Aaron snapped as he poured himself a large glass of juice.

Andrew glanced over his shoulder and grinned. “I made you a cup of coffee, Nathaniel.”

“That's not fit for human consumption,” Kevin growled before looking at Neil properly. “I'm sure you've already ruined your diet at Wymack's, though.”

Wymack rolled his eyes. “And on that note, I'm off. Don't break him, okay? He's a rental.”

“Have a good trip,” said Abby.

“I miss you already!” Nicky cried.

“Behave, Hemmick!” Wymack shouted back before slamming the door shut behind him. Neil leaned back to watch the lock and deadbolt flip back into their locked positions. He already felt trapped.
Aaron took his plate of food and glass of juice and pushed past Neil to sit at the dining room table, while Andrew hopped up to perch on the counter by the stove with his two cups of disgusting coffee. Kevin opted to sit at the bar with Abby and Nicky. Neil remained standing in the doorway, a safe distance away from Andrew.

“We're going to the court today,” Kevin announced, drawing Neil's attention. He looked at Neil like he expected something from him.

“I'm sure you'll have a marvelous time,” Neil replied flatly.

Kevin blinked at him, annoyed. “You're coming with us. You can show Aaron and Nicky what a backliner is supposed to do.”

“Hey,” Nicky protested around a mouthful of bacon.

Neil thought of how none of his new clothing would hide the blood if he popped his stitches and said, “No.”

That earned him a dark scowl from Kevin and a laugh from Andrew.

“Insolence isn't a good look on you,” Kevin said haughtily.

“Stop looking, then,” Neil retorted.

Nicky and Abby exchanged a look with raised brows. Andrew slurped his coffee and knocked his bare heels against the cupboard doors.

Kevin put down his fork and leaned back in his chair, looking large and intimidating somehow even while sitting. With all of his usual authority, he said, “You're taking up space here. You might as well make yourself useful.”

“I'm sure they already know how bad they are without me showing them, Kevin.”

Nicky squawked indignantly. “Hey! We made it all the way to spring championships, man.”

Neil blinked at him. “How?”

“Damn, he's just as bad as Kevin. There goes my boner.”

Abby smacked the back of his head lightly and Aaron made gagging noises.

Kevin sighed. “As entertaining as this little act is, you're still coming. You have nothing better to do and you don't want to get out of shape while you're here.”

“You mean you don't want me to get out of shape while I'm here.”

“Did you leave your common sense back at the Nest with your manners?”

“Didn't have room in my pockets, unfortunately.”

“You're coming to the court with us.”

Neil sneered. “Or you'll what?”

Kevin's lip curled like it always did when he wanted Neil to be punished, but this time Riko wasn't there to order it. Instead, there was Andrew, who was still grinning horribly.
“Guess it's easier to get your ducks in a row than Ravens, huh, Kevin?” Andrew teased. “Leave him here with Abby. Maybe she'll teach him how to play nice by the time we get back.”

Abby scoffed. “Didn't work on the rest of you.”

Nicky stuck out his lower lip dramatically. “We're trying to be good boys, Abby, but it's just so much more fun being bad.”

Aaron shoved past Neil again to take his dishes to the sink. He looked from his twin to Kevin and said, “Isn't having one Raven around bad enough? I say we leave him here, too.”

“I don't recall asking you,” Kevin snapped.

“You never ask, Kevin,” Neil cut in. “I'm not the only one who needs to work on manners.”

Nicky snorted. “At least he admits it.”

“Fine,” Kevin huffed. “You can waste time here today, but the next time I invite you to practice you will say yes.”

Neil folded his arms carefully over his middle and stared blankly at him.

“Well?” Kevin prompted.

“You didn't ask a question,” Neil said. “Ms. Winfield, may I use your bathroom?”

Abby smiled at him. “Of course. It's the door by the stairs.”

“I appreciate it.” Neil shot one last look at Kevin before wandering down to the door Abby had mentioned.

The guest bathroom was a small half-bath with no medicine cabinet and nothing to be found under the sink except cleaning supplies. There was a spare bottle of toothpaste set out by the hand soap, but that was it. He used the toilet quickly and washed his hands, thinking over the situation at hand. Abby seemed like a genuinely kind person who was willing to give him her good opinion right off the bat. If she caught Neil snooping around for medical supplies, her good opinion would undoubtedly be lost. Asking outright seemed like the safest bet. He would need the nurse on his side if he wanted to have an opportunity to steal useful supplies when he was ready to make his move.

Kevin sulked for the next forty-five minutes until his new teammates were ready to leave for the court, which none of them seemed enthusiastic about. Apparently, Nicky had wanted to travel to Germany to see his boyfriend for spring break, but it wasn't in the budget. The way Nicky told the story, however, made it sound as if it was Andrew that proved to be the biggest obstacle. The manic twin had an impressive hold on the others. Riko had made easy work of controlling those around him as well and the similarities were deeply unsettling.

Neil kept quietly to himself until Andrew's car disappeared from the driveway. Then, he padded into the kitchen where Abby was washing dishes and cleared his throat.

“Ms. Winfield,” he said gently.

Abby turned with a smile ready for him. “You need something, Neil?”

Neil folded his hands behind his back and looked down at his socks. “Um, actually, I was wondering if you had a first aid kit around that I could borrow. My new tennis shoes gave me a couple blisters
and I forgot to put Band-Aids on them this morning.”

“Of course. I could show you if-”

“Oh, I don't want to trouble you. If you could just point me in the right direction, I could find it on my own.” He gave a smile that he hoped looked sincere.

Abby seemed almost surprised. “Okay, sure. If you go upstairs, the second door on the left is another bathroom and you'll find what you need under the sink. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Neil broadened his smile, but tried to keep it soft around the edges as he forced out, “Thank you.”

“Oh, and Neil?” she called as he turned away. When he stopped, she said, “You can call me Abby. While you're here, you're one of ours, okay?”

“Okay, Abby. Thank you again.” He swallowed back the burn of the words and didn't drop his smile until he was out of her line of sight.

Upstairs, he found the kit under the sink in a small nest of empty grocery bags. He locked the door for good measure and opened the kit on the counter to see what he had to work with. There were some rolls of gauze, medical tape, a few boxes of Band-Aids, rubbing alcohol, antibiotic ointment, burn cream, aloe vera gel, eye drops, a thermometer, a spray for insect bites, and a bottle of ibuprofen. There was an unopened box of latex gloves under the sink beneath the plastic sacks and a small pair of scissors in the cabinet above the toilet with a box of cotton swabs and spare towels. Neil quickly removed the bandage across his stomach, which he had managed to keep relatively clean and dry. He grimaced a little at the smell of it and checked his stitches for signs of swelling or infection. The wound itself didn't seem to be that bad; it seemed like Riko intended for it to be only an inconvenience, which it was. Once he taped fresh gauze over the long row of stitches, he peeled back the Band-Aid on his cheek just enough to rub some burn cream onto the blistering, wrecked skin. He bit his lip to keep from hissing in pain and pressed the Band-Aid flat, relieved that it stuck again. Balling up his dirty bandages, he wrapped them in a bit of toilet paper and stuffed the wad deep into the wastebasket where it wouldn't easily be seen. He sprayed a bit of air freshener over it, paranoid that someone would be able to smell it.

It was too risky to take extra supplies just then and hide them in his bag overnight- he figured Andrew would try snooping through it at some point- so he resigned himself to the idea of getting up early enough to shower there before Wymack could return for him. For the final touch, Neil took off his sock and put a Band-Aid over his heel just in case he had a reason to go barefoot later.

After he put the first aid kit back as he found it, he washed his hands and then took a spare moment to peek into the nearest bedroom. One of the twin beds was unmade and covered with discarded clothing while the other was fairly tidy. Two duffel bags were open on the floor in front of the low table that stretched under the window to serve as nightstands for both beds. It almost looked like a dorm room, which spoke volumes to Abby's devotion to the team. He wondered how often they stayed at her house.

Closing the door behind him, Neil headed back downstairs to begin the search for something to occupy his mind with for the next ten to twelve hours. He didn't want to think about Kevin or Exy, but it soon became clear that his mind could focus on nothing else. Exy was the only thing in his life that made sense. His addiction to the sport was the only thing that got him up in the mornings at the Nest. Neil's hands craved his racquet. He could almost smell floor polish and sweat as he thought of the court he should have been on at that very moment.
Dimly, he wondered if Kevin could really learn to play right-handed. He viciously squashed that thought before it could grow into something like hope.

He curled up on the sofa in the den and took out his phone to distract himself. Chewing his lip, he turned the device over and over in his hands. The battery was low enough as it was, but he still took comfort from holding the object. It was his only connection to the other Ravens, the only family he had. You’re not a Raven anymore, he reminded himself coldly.

Unable to help himself, he pressed the power button until the screen lit up. Jean might have had something new to tell him. It was unlikely, but he clung to the weak justification as he put in his passcode and waited for his phone to finish waking up.

To his surprise, there really was a new message from Jean.

Riko wants EA to switch divisions.

It had only been a few days since Riko told Neil to bring Kevin home, but Riko was never one for patience. If Neil didn't convince Kevin to return to the Nest, which he wouldn't, then Riko would bring his Ravens south to crush Kevin all over again. There was no doubt that the ERC would grant Riko's wish. Edgar Allan was the only university with an Exy team in West Virginia, so it wouldn't cause any fuss for other schools. Neil tried to think of how much alcohol Kevin would need to drown himself in when the news finally broke.

The Foxes didn't stand a chance, but they were used to that already.

Neil powered his phone down again to save what was left of the battery and tucked it back into his bag of spare clothing. He went out to the front room to go through the bookshelves until he happened upon a crime novel that sounded more interesting than the others. Then, he returned to the den and split his focus between a dull TV show and the novel for the next few hours.

At three, the others returned from the court and Neil pretended to be deeply invested in the crime novel, though he had lost track of the plot after fifty pages. Kevin sat in a recliner and stared at him, but Neil kept his eyes glued to the book. Every other minute or so, he turned a page and continued staring at the words without absorbing any of them.

Andrew's laughter carried in from the kitchen. He and Nicky were talking about something with increasing volume while they rummaged around for a snack. Judging from the sound of their cackling, Neil figured the topic of conversation must have been highly amusing.

“I've been trying to make sense of it all,” Kevin said quietly.

Neil was caught off guard by the violent chemical reaction in his chest. “Go away, Kevin.”

“In spite of what Riko said, I don't—”

The book fell to the floor. Neil shot to his feet, ignoring the pull of his stitches, and headed straight for the guest bathroom. He didn't let go of the breath he was holding until the door was locked. His hands shook as he gripped the sides of the sink. In the mirror, his eyes were as cold and hard as ice. The panic came quickly. It squeezed the air from his lungs and crawled coldly beneath his flesh like cockroaches looking to feast on his nerves. He clamped his lips together so tightly they turned white and he forced himself to count in his head.

When he made it to eight, he was able to get half of a breath into his chest through his nose. By sixteen, he was able to let the breath go to make room for another, which didn't inflate his lungs until he made it to twenty-seven.
The second wave of the panic attack was lesser than the first, but it still knocked the wind out of him and he had to restart the process of learning how to breathe.

*Just don’t think about it.*

It was easier said than done. Not thinking about things was a careful balancing act he’d taught himself over the years. His mind was an acrobat, tiptoeing across the high wire and trying not to fall into the festering pit below.

*Just don’t think about it.*

He tried to picture that house in the mountains his mother always told him about, but he couldn’t visualize the steps just right and his brain skipped over the porch and took him directly into the front hall. It wasn't peaceful like it was supposed to be. Fear poisoned his mind and seeped into his safe place.

There was blood on the glossy floorboards. Kevin's screams hung like gun smoke in the air.

And Riko-

“*Look at what you did to him, Nathaniel.*”

“Neil?” Abby's voice was followed by two quick knocks. “You okay in there?”

Shuddering, Neil sucked in a deep breath that made his ribs feel like they were cracking and said, “I'm fine.”
Wednesday didn't get any easier for Neil. For the rest of the afternoon, Andrew watched him like a vulture trying to figure out how it wanted to pick apart its meal. It wasn't anything new for Neil—Riko wore a variation of that look often enough—but he couldn't be sure just what was going through the medicated blond's head as he grinned at him.

Kevin thankfully decided to leave Neil alone, but that left room for Nicky to step in and attempt to draw Neil into a conversation with innuendos hiding beneath his innocent tone. Aaron was gloomy, but relatively quiet and this made him the second most tolerable person in the house after Abby, who made it her mission to shoo Andrew and Nicky away from Neil whenever she was close enough to hear what they were saying.

The real trouble started just after dinner when Neil's drained mind began to demand sleep. He'd been on edge all day and now his eyes drooped heavily while his thoughts turned sluggish. Kevin watched him with a grim, knowing look all through the meal. The others found it amusing. When Neil retreated to the den to sink into one end of the sofa, they all followed. Kevin and Aaron took the recliners that were the farthest apart while Nicky and Andrew sat on the floor by the entertainment center. Neil battled hard against his own fatigue, desperate to stay awake in their presence, but he could feel himself slipping. He just wanted to sleep.

"Bedtime already?" Andrew cooed as he methodically removed each DVD from the cabinet below the television. The cousins wanted to watch something and Andrew had insisted with a sharp warning in his eyes that Neil stay put.

"You can nap if you want," Nicky offered. "We won't draw dicks on your face or anything."

"Doesn't mean you won't try to put your dick on his face," Aaron muttered.

Fear trickled down Neil's spine.

Nicky gave him a sour look. "Aaron, don't be like that."

Andrew finished putting all the DVDs on the floor and suddenly lost interest in the mess he'd made. Nicky moved to take his place in the middle of the sea of cases and Andrew went to sit on the other end of the couch, tucking one leg under himself so he could face Neil.

"A little birdie told me you have sixteen-hour days back at the Nest sometimes," he said with a little
bubbling laugh. “How old is Kevin in Raven years?”

Neil’s eye twitched.

“Are Raven years shorter or longer than dog years?” Nicky wondered out loud. His hands hovered over the DVDs while he tried to pick one. “How long are dog years anyway?”

Aaron blew out an annoyed sigh. “First two years of a dog's life equal about ten and a half human years in terms of development. After that, each human year is about four dog years, but it varies by breed.”

Nicky squinted over his shoulder at his cousin. “How do you know that, man?”

“It’s common knowledge.”

“Well, excuse the fuck outta me,” Nicky grumbled. “Okay, how about *Memento*?”

“No,” said Andrew. “I can't focus on that shit. You know the pills scramble my brain.”


Aaron started, “How about-”

“Not *Donnie Darko,*” Nicky and Andrew said in unison before grinning at each other.

Aaron made an irritated noise and sank back into the recliner sullenly.

Neil looked away from Aaron and stiffened when he noticed that Andrew was leaning toward him, shoulders hunched and arms deceptively relaxed. His eyes were intent and his smile was anything but friendly.

“What’s your favorite movie, Raven?”


He didn't miss Kevin rolling his eyes. Nicky shot Neil an approving smile.

Another brittle laugh scraped out of Andrew’s chest. “What about *Three Kings*? Or perhaps *The Three Musketeers*? Do you like *The Three Stooges*?”

Neil felt sick, but it shouldn’t have surprised him that Andrew had figured out his number. Ever since Jean appeared on the Ravens’ line-up as number four, people had been speculating about where number three was. Riko had wanted to keep it all a secret in order to make the big reveal more dramatic.

Instead of giving Andrew the reaction he wanted, Neil said, “I didn't think you gave enough of a shit about Exy to know your own number.”

Andrew tilted his head against the back of the couch, looking almost young and vulnerable half-curled into a ball like that. Neil was willing to bet there was a weapon on him somewhere.

“There's no number three on the Ravens line-up,” Andrew said lightly. “It's curious, isn't it? It goes one, two, four, ten. You're little tattoo suggests you're part of the so-called 'perfect Court' so which number are you and why aren't you listed on the team's website?”

“Maybe Kevin and I gave you a fake name. Maybe there's no tattoo under here.”
“It's not nice to tell lies, Nathaniel.”

“It's not nice to beat four men nearly to death. I've googled you, too, Andrew Doe.”

Nicky sat back and looked between them, chewing his lip. “Um, how about we—”

“Shut up, Nicky,” Andrew said. His voice was soft, but still commanding. “You seem to be under the delusion that I won't kill you as soon as I nail down a reason to. I have your gravesite picked out and everything.”

“You seem to be under the delusion that I give a damn. You're not my biggest problem. You're not even in the top five.”

Andrew hummed lowly. “Yes, we've heard plenty about Riko.”

Kevin stared silently down at his hands, picking at a hangnail and avoiding Neil's irritated look.

“Kevin's going to move into our dorm full-time now that you've stolen Coach's couch,” Andrew added with a little glint in his eye. “We're all very grateful for the opportunity to be so close to each other. One big happy family, right, Nicky?”

Nicky was oddly silent as well. He hunched over the DVDs and ignored Andrew. It reminded Neil of the way the new Ravens always tried to avoid Riko's eyes when his questions started sounding like traps. They learned quickly that it only made him angrier.

Neil's own temper flickered to life. “I'm sure Kevin feels right at home here.”

Andrew blinked and then chuckled. “Oh, that's just rude. You take that back right now.”

“All right, I think I've got something!” Nicky cut in, waving a case over his head. The distraction effectively ended Andrew and Neil's standoff. While the violent action movie played, Neil curled up on his end of the sofa and stared straight ahead at the wall. He did his best to ignore Andrew's heavy stare boring into his head.

His anger kept him awake and fairly alert for a short while, but unfortunately his exhaustion won the war in the end. He fell asleep halfway through the climax of the movie, still tense and leaning on the arm of the sofa. His sleep was dreamless and shallow, but he still didn't stir when Andrew crept closer.

He snapped awake to find that the room was empty and dim. The television was off and the DVDs were put away. The house was quiet around him. His pulse thumped hard in his temples as panic coursed through him. He turned on the lamp on the end table and reached up to feel that the bandage was still in place over his cheek. His mind came up with plenty of things the others could have done to him in his vulnerable state and each scenario made his skin prickle hotly.

Taking his bag of belongings with him, he went to the guest bathroom. He swallowed a horrible noise when he saw his face in the mirror.

Someone had written "AJM" over his bandage in black marker. The adhesive was still firmly stuck to his skin and he was certain he would've woken if they'd tried to peel it off, but his gut still knotted at the thought of it. He should've felt the tip of the marker pressing into his burn.


He dug out his toothbrush along with the shorts he planned on sleeping in. Abby had left a small
tube of toothpaste for him by the sink, so he scrubbed the awful taste out of his mouth before rinsing and rubbing some cold water over his right cheek and forehead. After he pissed and washed his hands again, he traded his jeans for the shorts and headed back toward the den.

A heavy thump at the front door startled him so badly he nearly dropped the sack halfway through the dining room. Frozen, he listened hard. Another thump came a minute later followed by a muffled shout.

Neil quickly tucked his grocery sack back under the end table and then crept to the front room to peer through the blinds at the front lawn. There wasn't much he could see in the dark, but he could make out a few lumps on the dewy grass in the light shining from the porch. Soft footsteps came down the stairs while he was still trying to see if anyone was out there. When a pair of feet hit the wooden floor of the entryway, Neil turned and found Andrew there, rumpled from sleep and unsmiling.

Andrew watched him for a moment before drawing a blade from beneath his armbands and reaching for the deadbolt. Sighing, Neil went to stand behind him as he slowly opened the door. He didn't think Riko would send someone else so soon, but Riko wasn't the most predictable creature anymore.

The porch light glinted off wet smears of blood across the white paint of the door. On the doormat, sprawled across the words “Home Sweet Home” was a dead, mangled fox. A second one with was a couple feet away where it had fallen after hitting the wall. Several more were scattered across the lawn.

Andrew was still poised to attack anyone that might still be hanging around, but Neil was already thinking of the clean-up. Wordlessly, he climbed the stairs and stole down the hallway to the bathroom where he retrieved two pairs of latex gloves.

He tossed a pair at Andrew on his way down, which Andrew ignored, and then Neil went to the kitchen. He opened two different cupboards before he found a mixing bowl of a decent size. After filling it with cool water, he set it aside to hunt for a garbage bag and paper towels.

With his supplies in hand, he returned to the entryway and ignored Andrew's annoyed stare. The gloves were still laying by his feet.

“If you're not going to help, get out of my way,” Neil muttered as he set the bowl on the floor and pulled on his own gloves.

Andrew didn't say anything. Neil expected him to go back to bed, but instead Andrew disappeared down the hallway. He could have been getting something to help or he could have just been using the opportunity to rifle through Neil's belongings. Neil wasn't sure and he didn't really care at the moment.

To the soft chirping of crickets and buzzing of insects, Neil fell into a rhythm of dipping wads of paper towels into the water and wiping at the smeared blood on the door. He put the soiled towels into the garbage bag before reaching for new ones to avoid getting blood on Abby's bowl. Thankfully, the blood came off easily since it didn't have long to dry.

Just as Neil was moving on to the second patch of bloodstains on the wall, Andrew appeared in the open doorway with his shoes on his feet and a garden shovel in his hand. He propped it against the door frame and then pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. With a lazy flick of his wrist, he shook out a stick and his lighter and lit up while Neil stared dully at him. Andrew arched an eyebrow as he sucked down his first lungful of smoke, challenging Neil to say something.
Neil turned back to the task at hand. Under Andrew's hooded stare, he cleaned the last of the blood off the wall. Then, he picked up the nearest fox corpse and stuffed it into the garbage bag, looking quickly away from the glistening red wounds. Whoever had killed the creature had done a messy job of it. Neil wiped up the blood it left behind as best he could before moving on to the other one. The stained, bristly doormat wouldn't be cleaned as easily, so he rolled it up with the dead fox inside it and stuffed the whole thing into the bag.

He took great care not to wince when his stitches pulled sharply.

Andrew remained on the porch while Neil ventured out into the lawn to collect the other slain foxes. A mosquito landed on Neil's neck and he just barely resisted the urge to slap it away when he remembered the filthy gloves he was wearing.

Some of the foxes had obviously been killed earlier in the week if their stench was anything to go by. Neil gagged on the sour odor of their decomposition before hurriedly stuffing the little bodies into the bag with the others.

In the dark, it was slow work to find them all. Once Neil was reasonably certain that the evidence of this night's prank was safely stowed away in the garbage bag along with his dirty gloves, he returned to the porch for the shovel. Andrew was already lighting up a third cigarette; the butts of the previous two were squashed into the place where the mat had been. He was still seemingly content to watch Neil.

With the shovel, Neil went to the driveway and cut a circle out of the grass by the driver's door of Andrew's car. His abdomen throbbed as he tried to move the round section of lawn in one piece. Eventually, he managed to lift it away and move it aside. Then, he dug deeper and shoveled the loose soil onto the driveway by the front bumper. Once the hole was deep enough to be satisfactory, he stuffed the bag into it and covered it with a few layers of dirt. Moving the large clump of grass made his gut ache, but there wasn't much he could do about that short of asking Andrew for help and there wasn't any chance that he'd stoop that low.

He gasped for breath when the clump of grass was back in place and stomped down enough that it almost blended in with the surrounding lawn. Neil almost felt cheered by the small success until he remembered there was still a pile of dirt in the driveway to deal with. No ideas came to mind of how to hide it, though, so he decided on another course of action. After he checked to make sure Andrew was still out of sight, Neil spread handfuls of the dirt all over the expensive-looking car. Lastly, he smeared some over the windows and inside all the door handles before he picked up the shovel and headed back to the porch.

Andrew put out his last cigarette and took the shovel from Neil before he could step over the threshold with it. He jerked his head toward the guest bathroom, silently commanding Neil to clean himself up. Neil gave him a cold look in return, but he went without any argument. He washed his hands three times and carefully wiped the specks of mud out of the sink with toilet paper, which he flushed down the toilet before washing his hands again. He quickly checked his stitches and then his attention snagged on his reflection as he turned toward the door. With a hot rush of embarrassment, he saw that he was still wearing the Band-Aid that had Andrew's initials on it.

When finally he stepped out of the bathroom, the front door was locked again and Andrew was gone. The shovel was nowhere to be seen and the mixing bowl was dumped out and set aside to dry next to the kitchen sink.

Neil turned the lights off and headed back to the sofa to try to get some decent sleep.
Change

Chapter Summary

Back at Wymack's, Neil tries to adjust to his new life.

Returning to Wymack's little apartment with its plethora of dirty coffee mugs and scattered paperwork was almost a relief after the night at Abby's house with Kevin and the cousins. Wymack was gruff and he sometimes startled Neil when he banged around in the kitchen or yelled at someone on the phone, but he still hadn't shown any violent tendencies, which Neil tentatively thought of as a plus.

Neil wasn't asked for his opinion on the Foxes' newest striker until after she signed her contract on Wednesday. Wymack showed Neil her profile sheet and the tape her coach had sent in to showcase her skills on the court. Why Wymack wanted Neil's opinion was a mystery that Neil couldn't be bothered to solve. He could see why she'd fit in with the Foxes and also why Kevin had chosen her, but he also knew what Riko would have said about her- sloppy footwork wasted precious time, dirty tactics were only acceptable if one was clever enough to get away with them, poor test scores reflected poor work ethic. Neil voiced only his vague thoughts and kept Riko's words stuffed in the back of his mind where they couldn't offend or anger Wymack.

As the week went on, Neil still struggled to adjust, but he could feel it getting slightly easier. Cleaning around campus became easier as his wounds and bruises healed. With some gauze he'd stolen from Abby's first aid kit and some tape he snagged from Wymack's kitchen, he kept the bandages over his stomach fresh as the wound slowly closed. The glob of burn cream he'd squeezed into a sandwich bag and brought back with him provided relief to his blistering cheek.

On Friday, Wymack paid Neil in cash instead of clothing for the hours he spent getting toilet paper out of the trees outside the Foxes' dormitory. On their way back to the apartment, Wymack stopped by a convenience store, where Neil picked out a bottle of aspirin, a box of adhesive bandages large enough to cover his cheek, and a roll of gauze that he explained away with a simple "just in case." While Wymack wandered through the refrigerated section, Neil stepped up to the cashier's counter and paid for his items with the money he'd earned. He handed over the soft paper, received smaller bills and coins in return. The cashier gave him a receipt and a plastic bag holding what he'd purchased. It was the closest thing to independence he'd ever tasted. Something close to pride wriggled warmly behind his breastbone as he stepped back out into the sun.

Sometime between Friday night and Saturday morning, disgruntled fans descended upon Palmetto State's campus. Spring break was ending, so they must have expected the Foxes to return in time to see the mess they'd left in their wake. Because of their desire for property damage instead of anonymous vitriol spewed into the void of the internet, Neil spent most of Saturday outside working. He met a few of the other maintenance workers while he cleaned a mess of graffiti off the outer walls of the building called Fox Tower. He didn't like the looks they gave him and he bristled when he overheard one mention to another that he was just another stray that Wymack had taken in off the street.

Before Wymack went off to practice with Kevin at the court, he left strict instructions that Neil wasn't allowed to help repair the broken glass door or pick up the dead vermin left out in the parking
lot, which only earned Neil more looks from the other workers. “Last thing we need is you getting all cut up or picking up some weird rodent disease,” he'd said. Wymack's concern left Neil feeling baffled and mildly uncomfortable all day.

Wymack left Neil alone at the apartment on Sunday while he went to pick up some of his players from the airport. Practices would resume the next day for the Foxes that weren't going to graduate in May and Neil would be dragged along to the court since Wymack didn't want to leave him alone in the apartment for such long stretches of time. Part of him wondered if he would be allowed to use some of the equipment. He'd lost a week of training and he was restless with the need for decent exercise. What he really craved was Exy, but he was still determined to deny himself.

Neil's stomach twisted at the thought of meeting the team. He wasn't Kevin, he wasn't their new assistant coach, he wasn't anything to them. They would hate him on principle and Neil knew that one suggestion of violence would be enough to infect the group with a thirst for blood. He'd seen it spread through the whole flock of Ravens before. Riko and Kevin had just started learning about mob mentality in class. Neil couldn't remember how he and Jean made it back to their room that day.

Still, he was achingly curious to see if Kevin was making any progress playing right-handed. Jean had said what they'd all been thinking back in December when a single swing of a racquet destroyed Kevin's hand and his future. “He'll never play again.”

But what if he could?

While Neil ate a sandwich that he'd put together from the meager supplies in Wymack's fridge, he powered up his phone for the first time in days. He nearly choked when he saw that the service was disconnected. The final link had broken.

He missed the world of the Ravens, where he knew what to expect and what was expected of him. Out here there was nothing but chaos and uncertainty. Neil felt like he was adrift in a black sky, thunder scraping through his head and lightning stinging his lungs.

He put his forehead on the breakfast bar beside his plate and didn't bother smothering the ragged noise that broke through his throat. He had no home, no team, no future. When the last little flicker of his life was snuffed out, no one here would notice or care. He'd be a faint, flat memory to some and nothing more than a nameless figment to others.

Nathaniel Wesninski was a hopeless wisp of a boy.

He didn't notice that Wymack had returned until the man drawled, “Are we having a crisis?”

Neil flinched, but didn't lift his head. He was worried about what Wymack would see on his face.

“I'm fine,” he croaked.

“Yeah, you're the paragon of mental health.” Wymack opened the refrigerator for a few seconds before slamming it shut again and moving to rummage through the cupboards. Neil breathed deeply and listened to the grumpy older man shove things around until his swarm of thoughts settled.

Sitting up, he rubbed at his eyes and asked, “Are all the Foxes back in their hole?”

Wymack shot him a dry look as he poured a cup of cold coffee. “Not all of them. Matt'll be in later and Dan's flying in with Renee in a couple hours. Are you going to eat that sandwich or admire it all day?”

“Haven't decided yet.” Neil yawned and looked at the time. He'd been sitting there for over an hour.
“Any new messes for me to clean up this afternoon?”

“Why, is my company not entertaining enough for you?”

“Depends. Can you tap dance?”

“Funny little fucker. I'm sure the Minyard menace has wrecked the Tower by now, so maybe you can clean the inside for a change.”

Neil drummed his fingers on either side of his plate. “How bad will things get now that the team is back?”

“What do you think?” Wymack challenged, leaning against the counter and studying him.

“I can't say what the fans will do. I don't know them.”

“And Riko?”

Neil swallowed hard.

“If you knew something, would you tell me?” The stern look in Wymack's eyes sent an icy shiver down Neil's spine. It made him feel horribly small and young.


“Simplify it. If you know something-”

“There's no point in telling you. You can't stop what's already been set in motion and if someone found out that I told you, the punishment would be... severe.”

“I won't let Riko or his goons get to you while you're living under my roof.”

“One of my teammates would take the punishment for me in my absence,” Neil admitted, lowering his eyes. His throat burned. “I've already put him through enough. I'll work for you, I'll behave, I'll even play nice with your miserable team, but I won't put him in more danger.”

Wymack took a sip of coffee and watched Neil over the rim of his mug. He ran his thumb over the handle and twisted his mouth into a grim half-smile. “I've gotta hand it to Riko- fear is one hell of a motivator. He's gonna do what he wants, though, so you might as well cut the cord now. You can't take the blame for his shitty choices.”

“Your choice, Nathaniel,” Riko's voice hissed in his ear.

“I appreciate the thought,” Neil said without much sincerity.

“Haven't seen you use your phone much,” Wymack said, nodding toward where it sat innocuously in front of Neil's plate. “You been texting that teammate of yours?”

“No.” For a moment, he let himself regret not sending one last message to Jean while he had the chance and this moment of weakness would irk him for the rest of the day.

After lunch, Wymack disappeared into the back room for awhile to make some calls and then he left to meet Kevin at the Foxhole Court. Neil stayed behind and did laundry. He left the television on with the volume turned down and did some stretches, squats, and lunges just to appease his body's itch for exercise while he waited for the timer to go off. He told himself that the quiet solitude was a good thing, that it was peaceful, but all he could think about was how he'd never get to speak to Jean
again. He couldn't even remember their last words to each other. What memory had he left Jean with?

The question haunted him all evening. Thankfully, Wymack didn't comment on his sullen mood at dinner; he was too preoccupied with the texts and short phone calls from his Foxes. From what Neil could gather, there had already been a fistfight and one television set had been broken, but Neil couldn't tell if the two incidents were related or not. He tried and failed to think of an excuse that would get him out of going to the Foxhole Court the next day.
Neil snapped awake as soon as Wymack's alarm squawked in his bedroom. His heart thudded in his chest. Adrenaline dumped into his veins, preparing him to run or fight like hell. It was still dark outside, so Neil could already tell it was an unusually early start for the Foxes' coach. At the Nest, nothing good ever came from the unexpected.

Paralyzed, he held his breath and waited. The memory of his father's voice whispered, “Wake up, Junior. It's time for your lesson.”

The hallway light flicked on, slanting yellow into the front room.

“Up and at 'em, kid!” Wymack called. Neil jolted so hard he nearly slipped off the couch. “You are about to have the honor of watching the Foxes drag their dumb asses around my court.”

Shaking, Neil threw back the blanket and got up. He went to the kitchen first while Wymack went into the bathroom for his morning shower. Neil blinked against the bright kitchen light as he groped around for coffee filters and the bag of grounds. It had become an unspoken agreement between the two of them that whoever didn't make it into the shower first was in charge of brewing the day's first pot of coffee. Neil preferred making it himself since Wymack brewed it so strongly that it felt like a kick to the chest.

He wondered sometimes how Kevin had fared during his stay at this apartment.

The coffeepot gurgled to life and Neil went to the fridge to pull out the carton of eggs and the baggie of washed spinach leaves and sliced green peppers he'd prepared the night before. He withdrew a pan from the little cupboard next to the oven and set it on one of the burners to heat up. Yawning, he reached his hand under his t-shirt to scratch at the tape on his stomach.

When his mediocre excuse for an omelette was almost finished cooking, he set a piece of bread in the old toaster and pushed the creaky lever down. He flipped the omelette onto a plate for himself and dug out a fork just as the water in the other room cut off. A couple minutes later, Wymack walked in just in time to get his toast out of the toaster. He was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt bearing the logo of a band Neil had never heard of. The master would never have worn such casual attire even in the privacy of his own home. He prided himself on elegance and power. Everything he wore was black and sleek and his wardrobe probably cost as much as his car. Neil suspected even the master's
pajamas were tailor-made.

Neil ate quickly and gulped down a cup of coffee that was slightly cooled by the inch of skim milk he'd added. Wymack grunted at him to hurry it up as Neil set his dishes in the sink and went off to take his shower.

He scrubbed his body clean with a washcloth, standing just outside the spray to keep his stitches dry, and then he bent into the water to wash his hair. After he toweled off, he swiped deodorant under his arms and slipped into his underwear, shorts, and his new black t-shirt. He didn't know what the day would hold and he didn't want to risk anyone seeing it if he bled. He brushed his teeth and then he changed the bandage on his face, taking the opportunity to dab on some more burn cream.

“Let's go, Neil!” Wymack called.

The drive to the Foxhole Court was quiet. The sky was just turning pink in the east and the black of night was lightening into a softer shade of blue. Neil couldn't remember the last time he saw a sunrise. He stared, wide-eyed, out the window at the dark shapes of trees and wispy clouds in the sky that still cradled a few stubborn stars.

The window suddenly slid open with a buzzing whine. Neil glanced over at Wymack, who had his left hand resting over the window controls on his door and his eyes fixed firmly to the road ahead. Embarrassment burst in Neil's chest, but he still leaned his head out into the fresh air for a better view of the sky overhead. He drank in the soft morning, relishing in the cool air brushing over his face and the distant birdsong.

The Foxhole Court was different than Castle Evermore. It was smaller and plain with white-painted concrete walls and noisy fluorescent lights inside. The floor was dull gray concrete with flecks of white paint here and there. There wasn't a hint of elegance anywhere, but there was a sort of brightness to it. It didn't feel like a prison or a black hole.

Wymack seemed to understand the nervous energy coursing through Neil, so he wordlessly showed him out to a room that Neil recognized from post-game interviews he'd watched. Beyond it was the dark, silent stadium.

Neil wandered out on his own, following the glowing emergency lights down toward the eerie reflections playing off the plexiglass wall. Even in total darkness, he could feel how hollow and huge the stadium was. It was all empty air waiting to be filled with lights and sounds, the anticipatory gasp before a scream.

The blocks of lights overhead came on one by one, revealing rows of orange and white seats surrounding the court. Even though it wasn't his, it still almost felt like home. He knew the lines and the boundaries and the rules better than his own heartbeat.

Exy was the only thing that felt like living to a Raven.

Neil didn't know how long he stood there staring at the court and aching to be on it, wrapped in gear with a racquet in his hand, but soon a sickly-sweet voice startled him out of his reverie.

“Wanna play now, Nathaniel?”

He flinched, but smoothed his features before he faced Andrew. “Not with you.”

“Oh, come on. We could do three-on-three.” He tapped his left cheekbone and giggled at his own joke. His hair was a mess and he was wearing his usual black ensemble including the armbands that hid his knives.
“Shouldn’t you be getting ready for practice?” Neil suggested coolly.

“Just scoping out the place for potential threats.” Andrew mimed binoculars and pretended to look around the empty stadium. “Gotta keep Kevin safe and secure and all that, remember?”

“Any threats?”

Andrew tilted his head and lowered his hands. “I’ll figure it out one way or another.”

“Andrew! What are you doing out there? Coach wants us in the lounge,” Kevin called from the direction of the locker room. He appeared a moment later at Andrew’s side and looked surprised to see Neil there. “Oh, you’re here. Are you finally going to cooperate?”

“No,” said Neil and Andrew at the same time. Neil grit his teeth. Andrew snickered at the sour look on Kevin’s face.

“Kevin and Andrew, get your asses back in here!” Wymack bellowed.

Andrew rubbed his palms together and flashed Neil a shark-like grin. Kevin turned on his heel and marched back to where the rest of the Foxes were waiting. Neil followed several paces behind Andrew and tried to ignore the twisting in his stomach. He figured it was better to face the Foxes now than later when they came down to the court for practice with racquets in hand.

In the doorway of the lounge, Neil froze and stared. The Foxes were as rowdy there as they were during games. The four oldest players were missing from the gathering. Those that were present were dressed in clashing colors and styles with no hint of uniformity anywhere. Neil’s eyes ached just looking at them all together.

Dan Wilds, the Foxes’ team captain, was standing over the senior striker Seth Gordon while he sat sullenly in an armchair; she was scolding him about something he’d said to Nicky. The sophomore backliner Matt Boyd stood by watching them with his shoulders hunched, though it didn't make his huge frame seem any smaller. Renee Walker, the junior goalkeeper, was smiling serenely at Andrew, who was standing in front of her and gesticulating widely as he told her about something that had happened the day before. Aaron stood in the corner with Nicky. The defensive dealer Allison Reynolds was sitting on the arm of Seth’s chair, twisting the end of her shiny ponytail around her finger. Kevin stood near the front of the room, arms folded and face reddening with irritation as the others continued to ignore him.

Wymack flipped through the contents of his clipboard and ignored his team as if this type of behavior was normal. Neil couldn’t believe how casual he looked in the face of such disrespect. This never would have happened at the Nest. Just thinking about it made Neil's shoulders tense up, remembering the bite of the master's cane.

The whole room fell silent, though, when Nicky shouted, “Hi, Nathaniel!”

Their attention locked onto him and turned his blood cold. The three women exchanged looks with each other. Seth got to his feet and rose to his full height, exuding the sort of arrogance that came from waging war on the world and not caring who got caught in the crossfire. He was just barely taller than Matt, who was blinking owlishly at Neil in surprise.

“Who the fuck is this?” asked Allison.

“Coach brought us a new toy,” Andrew chuckled.

Wymack tucked his pen behind his ear and said, “Foxes, meet Nathaniel Wesninski. You can call
him Neil. Neil, these knuckleheads are the Foxes.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Neil,” said Renee kindly from her seat.

“Are you a fucking Raven, too?” Seth demanded harshly.

Neil ignored him in favor of looking to Kevin, wondering how he could possibly be serious about joining this team.

“Hey, asshole, I asked you a question!” Seth snapped.

“And I ignored you,” Neil replied.

Dan’s mouth pursed, but Neil couldn’t tell if she was annoyed or amused. Behind her, Matt bit back a little smile.

“The fuck is the Band-Aid for?” Seth asked. “It's pretty obvious what's under there, jackass. You're not fooling anybody.”

“Seth, sit down,” Wymack said with a bored tone.

Seth flopped back down into his chair, jostling Allison on her perch. Allison turned and smacked his shoulder before moving to sit on one end of the couch. Dan settled on the middle cushion and Matt sat at the other end.

“So, what's he doing here?” Dan asked Wymack. “I didn't realize we were collecting Ravens, Coach.”

Andrew fell into one of the other armchairs and tapped one finger against his mouth. “Do you think if we collect four we get the fifth one free?”

“Shut up,” Kevin ordered. “Nicky, Aaron, sit down already. This is a team meeting, not a social gathering.”

Nicky made a beeline for the empty couch near Andrew’s chair. Aaron tucked his phone into his pocket and followed at a slower pace, eyeing Neil as he crossed the room.

“If it's a team meeting, why is he here?” Aaron asked.

“He's here to look pretty and boost morale,” Nicky joked in German. “You know, like those chicks they bring out to entertain the troops. He's got a face that could make any soldier stand at attention, if you know what I'm saying.”

Neil's breakfast squirmed in his stomach.

“Christ on a stick, Nicky,” Aaron muttered, rubbing at his eyes.

“English, guys,” Dan sighed, though she didn't look like she expected to be listened to.

Nicky didn't even glance at her. “Oh, you're such a prude, Aaron. Don't be afraid to give him a little salute, too.”

“I'm going to murder you in your sleep.”

Kevin watched Neil closely for a reaction since he couldn't understand what the cousins were saying. Neil glared at him and then looked down at Wymack’s shoes, fiercely hoping he'd be kicked out of
the team meeting.

“Are we going to do something or just sit here staring at the fresh meat?” Andrew asked, lolling his head back against the chair. “I'm getting bored, Coach! I can't live like this!”

“Anyone else have any dramatics they want to get out of the way before we start?” Wymack asked dryly. “No? Fantastic. To answer the question you're all dying to ask, Neil is just here until he gets back on his feet. He'll be doing some odd jobs here and there for me, so don't bother him.”

Seth looked like he wanted to punch Neil already. Dan and Allison were staring at him hard like they wanted to interrogate him and Renee was watching him with an unnervingly calm look on her face.

Wymack continued, “We all know we got crushed pretty bad back in February and it sucks, but I want us to focus on getting better for next year, okay? I see our graduating seniors have decided to ditch us and we probably won't see their sorry asses again, so get used to the new line-up. Aaron, congrats, you'll be a starting backliner next season. Nicky, you'll be subbing still. We signed our new striker a few days ago. Do not scare her off when she gets here in June, understand?” Wymack shot a meaningful look to Andrew, who pointed to his own chest and mouthed, “Me?”

“Great. I'm feeling generous so today will just be scrimmages and whatever Dan wants. Tomorrow morning we'll be meeting in the gym for weights and cardio like usual. Don't be late and don't show up at the wrong place. If you slacked off too much over break, you will regret it this week,” Wymack said with a pointed look at Seth, who held up his hands and looked insulted. “Class dismissed. Dan, get these clowns changed out and running laps. Kevin will be joining you guys on the court this morning. It is your lucky day.”

“Let's go, guys,” Dan said, springing up to her feet.

Grumbling and bickering with each other, the team shuffled off to the locker room to get their gear on. Neil didn't relax until Andrew disappeared through the doorway.

“First impression?” Wymack asked once they were alone together.

Neil inhaled sharply and answered, “I can certainly see why they are all Foxes.”

“Do us both a favor and keep shit like that to yourself,” Wymack said. “Come on, you can watch with me. I'm sure Kevin will love to hear your glowing review.”

It was even worse than Neil expected.

He sat with Wymack on one of the benches in the inner court and watched as the Foxes stretched and then ran laps at a pace set by Dan. It all looked fairly standard until they got onto the actual court and quickly dissolved into shouting matches that nearly turned into fistfights. Most of the fights seemed to be between the two strikers. Kevin's discomfort was subtle, but Neil could see it in his awkward posture and the way he held his racquet in his right hand. Neil knew that any discomfort or anxiety would sharpen Kevin's criticism and shorten his temper. Proof of this was in the violent reactions Kevin got from Seth whenever he spoke. When Seth wasn't shouting and pointing emphatically at Kevin, he was shouting things at Nicky, which earned him either a cheeky gesture from Nicky or what looked like a threat from Aaron. Each time a fight broke out, Dan managed to break it up and get the team back in order within a few minutes.

It was messy and disordered. The Ravens were like a well-oiled machine, each cog knowing their place and their purpose. The strict hierarchy kept them all in line. The Foxes were like a train tipping off the tracks. They all held a flicker of respect for Dan's orders, but most were at each other's throats
more often than not. Neil hadn't seen such chaos since little leagues.

The worst of it, though, was when Kevin finally worked up the nerve to try taking shots on goal. The ball landed at least a foot outside the boundary every time and each miss squeezed Neil's stomach into a hard knot. He knew what Kevin was losing the night his hand was ruined and the aftermath was sickening.

Neil tore his eyes away and looked down at his shoes.

Wymack elbowed him softly. “Painful to watch, right?”

“Right,” Neil echoed for a private reason.

“Oh, Christ, here we go,” Wymack muttered.

Neil looked up to see Kevin standing near the goalkeeper's box shouting something at Andrew. Andrew didn't seem to be responding until he threw his racquet down and stormed off the court. Wymack stood and held his hands up like he was facing a wild animal as Andrew came stalking toward them.

“Where do you think you're going?”

“Oh, Coach, Kevin is on my last nerve and I'd really hate to do our pal Riko any favors by finishing him off,” Andrew answered with a little hiccuping giggle as he tore off his gloves and then his helmet. His smile was sharp and deadly.

A ball bounced off the court wall near where Wymack and Andrew were standing. Kevin had thrown it. Andrew flipped him off in return. The other Foxes exchanged looks and shrugs while Kevin gestured violently with his racquet and got them going again.

“Andrew,” Wymack sighed tiredly, rubbing his forehead.

“No.” The smile disappeared for a second before coming back stronger. “I'll kill him, Coach, and I'll enjoy it.”

“Andrew, you can't just sulk out here because Kevin pulled your pigtails. You're here to play a goddamn sport, so play the goddamn sport.”

“I'll play the sport, but I don't have the patience for his little mind games.” Andrew's eyes snapped to Neil and he put on a fake pout. “Oh, poor puppy. He looks like he needs a walk, Coach.”

“Don't mind him, Neil.”

“Coach, you told me I'm not allowed to sulk. I'm doing you a favor by walking your dog for you. Or your dog can walk me- whichever version suits you. Take your pick. I'm in a giving mood.” He pointed at Neil. “Wait right there. I'll be back.”

Andrew jogged up toward the locker room in his bulky gear. Neil stared after him with an unsettled heart. With men like Riko and Andrew, the consequences of saying no were far worse than going along with whatever sick game they wanted to play.

Neil stood up from the bench and began stretching.

Wymack sighed loudly. “All right. Don't say I didn't warn you.”

“You said no dark alleys.”
“The whole world's a dark alley to Andrew.”

Neil shrugged before dropping into a lunge. He leaned into the pleasant burn in his muscles as he stretched. He'd missed this feeling.

“By the way, you should let Abby take a look at that wound.”

Wymack’s words startled Neil so badly he almost toppled over. He shot upright and sputtered, “Wh-what are you talking about?”

“You've been changing the bathroom trash an awful lot since you got here, which is cause for concern when you've known the people I have. I found the used gauze this morning.”

Neil bristled. It was none of his business. “I'm fine.”

“Do not get an infection,” Wymack said with a stern look. “First sign of something wrong, you go to Abby.”

“I won't get an infection,” Neil muttered. He hadn't gotten one in years, but he always had access to sanitary supplies at the Nest. Frowning, he finished stretching and tried to ignore the uneasy feeling turning over in his chest.

Andrew jogged back down to them with a smile as dark as his clothing. He whistled and crooked two fingers at Neil as he started walking the length of the inner court. Wymack shook his head as Neil went to catch up to him.

He had to jog a little before falling in stride with Andrew, keeping to Andrew's right to avoid being caught between him and the wall. Andrew didn't seem to care, he just kept smiling and rattling his keys in his pocket. Neil glanced past him at the Foxes on the court and caught Kevin looking their way. He was glad he wouldn't have to deal with Kevin's complaints later.

Halfway through the first lap, Andrew nudged him hard and said, “Stop being boring.”

“You're being just as boring as I am.” Neil moved a little farther from him to avoid being elbowed again.

“I'm sure I can find something to entertain you, if you'd like. I could show you what I can do with a knife. It's pretty impressive.”

Without thinking, Neil reached up to fiddle with his collar, making sure it was covering the scar there. The fat, pale rows of scar tissue up and down his torso seemed to burn at the mere thought of a blade. In that moment, he hated Kevin for getting involved with someone like this after finally getting away from the Nest.

“Knives aren't really my thing,” Neil mumbled.

Andrew shifted closer so their arms were almost brushing. “So what is your thing? What do Ravens do for kicks and giggles?”

“Exy.”

“And?”

“Exercise.”

“Bo-ring,” Andrew sang. “I know! How about we play a little game? Here's how it works: I'll ask a
question and you answer or I'll gut you. How does that sound?"

“It sounds like I don't have much of a choice.”

“He's a smart one,” Andrew cooed, giving Neil's covered cheek a pat. Neil couldn't hide his pained wince. Andrew laughed and said, “Sore, huh? What, did Riko tag you just before releasing you into the wild?”

“Something like that.”

“We're off to a shaky start, but you'll get better at this game eventually if you know what's good for you.” Andrew took out his keys and began tossing them into the air and catching them as they walked. “What do you want with Kevin?”

“Nothing.”

“Bzzt! Don’t buy it. You showed up here for a reason. I am heavily medicated, not stupid.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “I'm here because this is where the bus ride ended.”

“Do you honestly think Kevin is going to follow you back to the Nest? I won't let him break his deal with me, you know. You can tell that to your master.”

“If you have everything under control, you shouldn't be so bothered that I'm here. I'm not doing anything to Kevin. I'm not talking to Kevin. In fact, I'm avoiding Kevin as best I can, so you should just get over your paranoia and leave me the fuck alone.”

Andrew wrapped a hand around Neil's wrist and squeezed. “Either you dropped out of college and escaped or Riko sent you here. Seeing as how you're still in one piece, I'm guessing you left with Riko's blessing. What did Riko send you here to do, Nathaniel? Did he tell you to break Kevin's other hand? Smother him in his sleep? Is he going to give you a nice little treat when you get back?”

A ball rebounded off the court wall near them and Neil looked behind Andrew's shoulders to see Nicky waving at them enthusiastically. Andrew paid no attention.

On the court, the Foxes dissolved into another shouting match. While they were squabbling, they didn't notice when Andrew stopped walking and wrenched Neil's arm behind his back. Neil barely managed to bite back his yelp of pain.

With laughter in his voice, Andrew asked, “What game are you trying to play, Nathaniel?”

Neil glared and clawed at Andrew with his other hand. “I'm not playing any games.”

“You're not giving me much to go on, you silly boy. How am I supposed to believe you?”

“You won't accept the truth. I've told you over and over that I'm not here to hurt Kevin. The fact that you don't believe me is your problem.”

“Oh, it's definitely your problem.” Andrew twisted harder. “Doesn't it feel like your problem, Nathaniel? I'll solve it, though. Don't worry. I'm very good at solving problems.”

Neil gave up on struggling. “So hurry up and solve it already.”

“I've cleared my schedule for you, Nathaniel. You have my full attention.”

Before Neil could say something back, Andrew released him and laughed merrily as Neil stumbled.
Pain shot up and down his arm as he shook it out, but it wasn't as bad as it could've been. No blood spilled, no stitches broken. Neil had gotten off relatively easy.

As they kept walking, Andrew hummed to himself and continued tossing and catching his keys, throwing them higher and higher each time. Neil didn't sit down next to Wymack when they passed him, knowing the older man would only ask him more questions that he didn't want to answer. Besides, backing out now would tempt Andrew's temper and that wasn't something Neil wanted either.

Andrew caught his keys and shot Neil a grin. “Still with me? I'm flattered.”

“This is less painful than watching your pitiful team.”

Andrew's laugh was so sharp and sudden Neil jolted in surprise. “Okay, then, here's another one: why'd you sign with Edgar Allan in the first place?”

“The uniforms are flattering,” Neil deadpanned.

“And you're not on the line-up because-?”

“Still in training to be an asshole.”

“You're doing your teachers proud.” Andrew threw his keys up with impressive force. Neil watched them rise and stepped away as they fell. Andrew caught them easily and then spun the key ring around his forefinger. The look in his eyes promised trouble.

Another brawl broke out by the time Andrew and Neil made it to the away side benches and Andrew didn't waste the opportunity. He pivoted suddenly and forced Neil to the nearest bench. Knocking one of Neil's feet out from under him, Andrew shoved him down and had the tip of a knife digging into the underside of Neil's jaw a second later. The feeling of sharp metal against his skin was as alarming as it was familiar. His stomach shivered. His hands went limp on his thighs, surrendering reflexively after years of learning over and over what sort of punishment a struggle would earn.

With his other hand, Andrew squeezed Neil's throat.

*There's a cabin in the mountains.* Neil turned his mind away from the present and tipped it neatly out of his body, sending his thoughts somewhere safe. *The stairs are damp from the rain. I can hear the wind chimes.*

Andrew's voice rumbled through the pine trees. “Tell me why Riko sent you.”

Neil's unfocused eyes were pinned to Andrew's black shirt. The hand on his throat tightened. His lungs burned. Neil struggled to focus instead on the imaginary blue pinwheel in the pot of hydrangeas outside the cabin in his mind.

“What aren't you telling me?” Andrew demanded lowly.

With a weak smile, Neil wheezed, “Kill me or fuck off.”

“I will break you.”

Neil finally lifted his eyes to his captor's. “You don't know how.”

“Let him go!” Kevin shouted. “Andrew, get off him!”
Kevin appeared a moment later, missing his gloves and helmet. He froze when he saw the knife, but his shock wore off after only a second. Neil watched, detached, as Kevin clapped a hand on Andrew's shoulder and tried to pull him away.

“Andrew!” someone else cried. “Fuck's sake, let the kid go!”

The other Foxes were swarming now, but Neil was still struggling to pull himself back into the present. Their voices blurred together into a loud buzzing he couldn't translate. All the while, he kept his eyes on Andrew, watching him smile and smile and smile.

The hand released his throat finally. Neil sucked in a breath too quickly and then coughed.

“What in the hell is going on!” bellowed Wymack. The Foxes parted and Neil could see that their coach had cut across the court to get to them.

Dan spoke first, “Andrew was choking Neil.”

“The psycho couldn't go a day without trying to kill someone,” said Seth. “I told you guys we should keep him on a leash.”

“Shut the fuck up, Seth,” snapped Nicky.

“You all right, Neil?” asked Matt.

Allison waved her hand dismissively. “He's not even bleeding. He's fine.”

“I think we ought to give Neil some room to breathe,” suggested Renee, pulling Nicky back a step.

Kevin was still holding onto Andrew. “He is not a threat to me. I told you to leave him alone.”

Neil snorted and drew everyone's attention back to him.

“Neil, you wanna tell me what happened?” Wymack asked, shooting Andrew a warning look.

“We were playing a little game,” Neil said quietly, rubbing at his neck.

“And?”

“Apparently, I lost.”

Wymack's frown deepened. “Kevin, Andrew, we need to have a chat. Dan, get the rest of them going again. I want you all sweating bullets by the time we get back.”

Dan shoved Seth's arm and looped her elbow through Allison's. “Come on, guys. We're not done yet.”

Nicky and Aaron traded a look before following the rest of their team back onto the court. Kevin scowled at Andrew, who didn't look impressed by Kevin's stature or authority. Neil still felt like his mind was floating off somewhere else as he watched them silently challenge each other.


Andrew whistled and strolled ahead of Wymack, spinning his key ring around his finger, while Kevin hung back to walk near Neil, which Neil tried to ignore. The four of them walked around the inner court while the other Foxes resumed practice. Neil trudged behind the other three and gave the court one last look before disappearing into the white concrete maze leading to Wymack's office.
Neil was the last one in the room, so he shut the door and leaned against it. He kept one hand on the knob, ready to run if it came to that. Wymack rested his hip against the edge of his desk and regarded the three young men standing before him.

“All right,” he said. “What needs to happen?”

“That one needs to go,” Andrew said, making a gun with his thumb and forefinger and pretending to aim at Neil's head.

Kevin huffed and turned to Wymack. “Can you get Dr. Dobson to adjust his meds? This can't go on.”

Andrew sank into the chair in the corner and folded his hands behind his head. “Tell me, Kevin, are you upset because I won't play with you or because I scratched your little buddy?”

“You threatened him with a knife,” Kevin said heatedly. “He's done nothing to you.”

“I'm doing what I promised,” Andrew replied. The corners of his smile were crumpling a little. “This sucker came waltzing in right after your little press conference. What did you expect me to do? Shake his hand? Give him a cookie?”

Kevin scoffed. “If Riko was going to send someone to hurt me he would've sent someone else and it would be done by now.”

“Then why the fuck is he here, Kevin?” Andrew cried, throwing his hands into the air.

Wymack grumbled, “Simmer down, Andrew.”

“Fuck off, Coach,” Andrew retorted. “You let this thing sleep on your couch and now you're letting it wander around in here.”

Kevin threw out his hands and looked at Neil, furious. “Just tell them why you're really here. You're here to convince me to go back to Evermore, right? That's it, isn't it?”

“Obviously,” Neil said flatly.

“Happy now?” Kevin asked Andrew.

“Never, but that's beside the point. I want to know why he's not going back to the Nest. He came, he saw, he failed.” Andrew cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “Go home, birdie!”

Neil thumped his head back against the door.

Kevin looked at him, stricken. “What exactly did Riko tell you? He's going to let you back in, right? He's not- he wouldn't just kick you out.”

Neil's insides squirmed. The look in Kevin's eyes was what Riko had been counting on. Kevin never had the chance to play hero and now Riko was giving him a twisted opportunity to save Neil from his father. Unlike Riko, Kevin still had some of his humanity somewhere. He couldn't throw Neil to the wolves and be able to live with himself afterward.

“He gave me until the start of summer practice,” Neil lied. “If you're not back by June then I will be punished for it.”

“Is he gonna break your hand, too?” Andrew chuckled.
Wymack concluded, “That's why you're planning on running away.”

“You can't run,” Kevin said. “Nathaniel-”

“Shut up, Kevin,” Neil warned. “I'll handle my shit, you handle yours.”

Andrew sighed loudly and rattled his keys to get everyone's attention again. “Still doesn't explain why you're not listed on the Ravens' line-up. How old are you, really?”

“I'm eighteen.”

“Bullshit.”

“I turned eighteen in January.”

Wymack's eyebrows lifted.

Andrew burst out laughing. “I knew it! A high school kid! Of course he's a high school kid.”

“He graduated already,” Kevin said before narrowing his eyes at Neil. “You graduated, right?”

Kevin was the one who pushed him to finish early. “Yes, I graduated,” Neil replied tightly.

“Why is a high school kid living at Evermore?” Andrew asked. “They adopt you, too?”

Neil's lip curled into a nasty snarl. “I don't owe you answers about my life, asshole, and I'm not going to roll over so you can cut me open and see what makes me tick. I'm real sorry that your own business isn't interesting enough to keep you occupied, but stay the fuck out of mine.”

“I will figure you out,” Andrew vowed.

“Can you focus for that long?”

Andrew held his hands up. “We'll see.”

“Are you satisfied, Andrew?” Wymack asked with a long-suffering sigh. “Do you think you can keep your knives to yourself?”

“So long as he plays nice,” Andrew answered. He hauled himself out of his chair and said, “Rumor has it there's an Exy team practicing here today. We should go check that out, Kevin.”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “Fucking impossible.”

Neil moved so they could both leave the room. Wymack remained by his desk, studying Neil intently. The intensity of his stare made Neil fidget with the hem of his shirt.

“How long were you living at Evermore?” Wymack asked quietly.

Weights and Cardio

Chapter Summary

Neil finally gets some exercise.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer- I'm not a medical professional and I've never removed stitches. Don't try it at home, kids.

Also, in this chapter there are some allusions to past rape

On Tuesday morning, Wymack tried once again to convince Neil to let Abby inspect and remove his stitches and, once again, Neil brushed him off. His wounds weren't any of their business. Wymack had found out simply because he paid too much attention to the wastebasket in his bathroom. Since he knew already, though, Neil didn't see a reason why he shouldn't purchase new scissors and tweezers. Wymack stopped at the store on the way home from the Foxes' practice just like Neil asked, but he gave Neil a look that meant he wasn't happy about it.

After Wymack went to sleep, Neil went to work. He locked himself in the bathroom and sterilized his tools by soaking them in rubbing alcohol. While he waited, he peeled off his shirt and slipped on a pair of latex gloves he stole from Abby's house before removing the bandage from his stomach. As soon as the tools were dry, he carefully snipped the threads and tugged them out of his skin. Jean was always better at this and he used to ramble quietly in French to distract them both from unpleasant or painful tasks. Thinking of him kept Neil's hands steady.

He put everything into an empty grocery sack, balled it up, and then stuffed it beneath the used tissues in the wastebasket. After washing his hands, he scratched at his stomach around the healing wound and sighed contentedly. He was already thinking of going to the gym in the morning and how good it would feel not to worry about ripping stitches anymore. He wondered if Wymack would allow him to use the equipment.

Neil went to sleep feeling almost eager for the upcoming day.

Later, Wymack's alarm pulled Neil out of a fuzzy dream about Jean and the dishwasher in one of the Nest's kitchens. Jean had been trying to tell him something important about the soap. Yawning, he shuffled into the kitchen to start the day's first pot of coffee and make himself breakfast, but he jumped in surprise when Wymack appeared in the doorway of the kitchen instead of going off to shower like Neil expected. It was then that Neil noticed that it was only four-thirty, earlier than Wymack usually got up.

“Gettin' back into my usual routine,” Wymack explained. “Kevin isn't much of a morning person, so my schedule got fucked up. Oh, good, you've got the coffee going. Fancy walking around the neighborhood for a bit?”
Neil narrowed his eyes while Wymack opened the refrigerator to get out two chilled water bottles. He handed one to Neil before uncapping the other and taking a drink.


“Yeah, you know that thing some people do with their legs?”

Neil rolled his eyes. “I prefer running.”

“It's not a crime to take things slow.” He held a finger up in warning when Neil opened his mouth to retort. “Shut it. No trash-talking this early in the morning.”

In the end, Neil’s need for exercise won out over his desire to maintain distance from Wymack. Neil borrowed a fleece jacket because of the early morning chill and had to push the baggy sleeves up to his elbows so they wouldn't fall over his hands. With their steaming mugs of coffee, Wymack and Neil set out from the apartment.

The world was dark blue and reverently quiet beneath a sprinkling of stars. There was only the faint song of a lonely bird and the quiet scuff of their sneakers against the gritty pavement. The cool breeze against Neil's cheeks and exposed forearms soothed away the last wisps of sleep from his mind and the warm cup of coffee cradled between his palms kept him from shivering. Neil’s heart was calm.

Wymack led him through a cozy neighborhood with modest houses sitting behind well-groomed front lawns, a safe distance from the road. Tall trees sighed as the morning breeze combed through their young leaves. Empty cars sat patiently while their owners slept on.

They came out of the neighborhood to an intersection. The hazy streetlights shifted from green to yellow to red with no cars around to care. Neil and Wymack cut across the intersection diagonally, confident that the lone oncoming car was much too far away to be a danger to them.

Neither of them spoke until they were back inside Wymack’s kitchen, refilling their mugs with more coffee. Wymack tossed the morning paper onto the breakfast bar and put a piece of bread into the toaster. Neil quietly cut up a banana and some strawberries and put the pieces into a bowl with a fork. He settled on one of the stools to eat and tried to read Wymack's paper upside down.

“Kevin keeps pestering me about getting you on the court with the rest of them,” Wymack said.

Neil's mouth pinched into a tight frown.

“He must think highly of you. He can barely stand to be in the same room as the others.”

“Kevin chose the Foxes. He must learn to live with that.”

“I've been training with him privately while you've been spiffing up our fine campus. I could bring you along if you're interested. Might be fun for you and it might do Kevin some good.”

There was no point in entertaining the idea of playing Exy. Neil was going to run and he'd never have the chance to pick up a racquet again. The temptation tugged on his heart anyway. Exy was in his blood, carved into his bones. Still, if he gave in to this it would make it that much harder to leave. Better to deny himself now than to pry himself away later.

Besides, he wasn't keen on finding out what would happen if he ever set foot on a court with Kevin again. The vision of Kevin's blood leaking from his destroyed hand rose up behind his eyes.
Neil cleared his throat and replied, “I’d prefer not to.”

He watched for cracks in Wymack’s smooth expression. Experience had taught him there was always violence somewhere waiting to be unleashed. After a week and a half, Neil was still waiting for Wymack to hit the end of his patience. He was gruff and sometimes loud, but his players never showed the slightest hint of fear in his presence even when he was shouting at them. Neil reminded himself firmly that he wasn’t one of Wymack’s Foxes. He was a disowned Raven and Wymack owed him nothing. It would be dangerous to forget that.

“All right,” Wymack said after a thoughtful pause. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

Neil slowly went back to eating his breakfast with tension knotted between his shoulder blades.

After his toast and coffee, Wymack showered, dressed for the day, and sat down on the couch to watch the morning news. With nothing better to do, Neil sat on the other end of the couch and watched as well.

Twenty minutes before they were supposed to head over to the gym, Wymack turned to Neil and asked, “You gonna shower before we go? I’ve got tons of shit to do today, so you won’t be working outside.”

Neil toyed with the hem of his shirt. “May I use the gym equipment today?”

“You really want to do weights and cardio?”

“I need to stay in shape.”

Wymack rubbed a hand over his jaw and said, “I don't care what you do so long as you don't cause trouble. There’s a duffel bag in the hall closet you can use. Go pack some spare clothes and let’s go.”

Neil took the small duffel from the closet and stuffed a fresh change of clothes into it along with a few extra water bottles and an empty plastic bag to put his dirty laundry in later. He quickly applied the last of the burn cream to his cheekbone and replaced the bandage over it before hurrying out to meet Wymack by the door.

At the gym, Neil tried to keep himself separate from the Foxes. He lifted weights in the corner and pointedly avoided looking at Kevin. Seeing how much Andrew could bench press didn’t make him feel any better about being in the same room as him. He jogged three miles on the treadmill at the very end of the row and tried to ignore the weight of Matt and Seth’s stares. Their whispers carried over to him, but he firmly told himself it didn’t matter what they said about him.

During a break, he sat on the floor off to the side with his water bottle and dead phone. He'd brought it along just to have something to fiddle with, hoping that if he seemed occupied the Foxes would leave him alone.

They didn't.

Dan and Allison lowered themselves to sit on either side of him, close enough for him to feel their body heat. The sweet smell of Allison's shampoo invaded his nose and made his stomach churn. He clenched his hand around his phone and bit down on his inner cheek. His entire body was trembling between them and his mind was full of unwelcome hands with sharp nails digging into his skin and suffocating perfume and too much skin and his own voice whispering, "Please, don't do this.”

“So, Neil,” Dan started after an awkward length of silence, “if you're going to work out with us you might as well, you know, work out with us. You don't have to keep your distance.”
“You should give us the dirt on Kevin,” Allison added, studying her manicured nails.

Neil couldn’t breathe.

“You okay?” Dan leaned forward, trying to catch his eye. “You look a little green around the gills, kid.”

“Do they not have girls where you're from?” Allison asked with a derisive tone.

“Allison,” Dan scolded over the top of Neil's bent head.

Allison shrugged and the brush of her arm against Neil's made him flinch. His hands wouldn't stop shaking and he knew they would notice soon.

“There you guys are,” said Renee as she wandered over with a cup of water and a protein bar. She came to a stop a couple feet away from Neil's feet, but Neil couldn't bring himself to look up at her. “What are you guys talking about?”

Allison gave a breathy little laugh. “I think Neil's afraid of girls.”

“Allison,” Dan groaned. Then, she leaned closer to Neil and asked, “You're not, are you?”

“Perhaps he might be more comfortable if you two gave him a bit of space,” Renee suggested kindly. “Neil, are you hungry? I could get you something from the machines if you'd like.”

“Nathaniel,” Kevin barked from across the room.

Neil lifted his head just to glare at him. Andrew was standing at Kevin's elbow, watching Neil with an amused look on his face.

Kevin beckoned him over with a wave of his hand. “Come here, Nathaniel.”

Andrew whistled shrilly and shouted, “Here, boy!” He shook a bag of pretzels in his direction. “We've got yummy treats for you!”

“Assholes,” Dan muttered.

“You're the one that wanted to sign the monsters,” Allison said lightly.

Dan shot her a nasty look. “We all agreed we could take them on, Allison.”

“Nathaniel.” Kevin's voice was hardened from years of having more authority than he had a natural right to. It was a struggle to disobey him.

“You could come join us over here, Kevin,” Renee offered sweetly.

The other two girls grumbled about that, not wanting Kevin's company. Dan put her warm hand on Neil's shoulder and Neil sprang to his feet just to hide his shudder. He muttered a hasty good-bye to the three girls and stalked toward Kevin. Nicky and Aaron had joined Kevin and Andrew, but only Nicky looked genuinely pleased to see Neil with them. Andrew dumped a packet of M&Ms into his mouth and smacked Kevin's hand away when he tried to take them.

“What do you want?” Neil snapped once he was close enough to be heard without raising his voice.

Kevin's green eyes flashed with a warning at his tone, but then his entire countenance softened slightly. “You aren't comfortable with girls,” he said in French. “Are you all right?”
Neil was taken aback by that. He felt exposed and it only fueled his anger. “Fuck off,” he spat in plain English before going off to find Wymack. He was done working out for the day.

Seth purposefully knocked into Neil's shoulder as he passed him and barked, “Watch where you're going, fuckface.”

“Chill, Seth,” Matt said wearily from his place by the water cooler.

He found Wymack in one of the offices and told him he'd meet him outside after they were done. Then, Neil went off to shower quickly and change into clean clothes. He took his duffel bag outside and sat on the curb by Wymack's car to wait. The pleasantly loose feeling in his muscles wasn't enough to lighten his dark mood.

Neil fiddled with his useless phone and tried to breathe around the pressure building in his chest. He put on his sunglasses even though the sun was only just barely over the horizon and tried to blink away the heat prickling his eyes. The horror he'd suffered at the Nest clawed back to the surface of his mind and ripped open old wounds.

Choking back the awful noise in his throat, he put his head between his knees and counted to ten in every language he knew. English, French, German, Japanese. Then, he counted backwards. He dug his fingers into his hair and pulled hard enough for it to sting.

_There's a fucking cabin in the fucking mountains_, he told himself when the counting failed to calm him down. He imagined stomping up the steps and flinging open the door. He couldn't think of how it was supposed to smell because his nose was still full of Allison's awful shampoo. He couldn't hear anything past the memory of Riko taunting him. “_You liked it, Nathaniel. Say thank you._”

The cabin in the mountains wasn't there. Neil opened his eyes and sat up straight, gulping down clean air. His chest was full of broken glass and his head was full of fire. He wanted to vomit. He wanted to scream.

At least at the Nest there was always new pain to distract from the old.

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, Neil shot to his feet and hurled his phone across the lot. With sick joy, he watched it break against the pavement. His glee died as soon as the pieces landed. He could have bought a charger. He could have written Jean’s number down somewhere.

Neil's mind was full of things he'd never get to say to Jean.

His heart sank like a lead weight. He sat back down beside the car to wait for Wymack, wishing that he could just pick up and leave already.
The calm before the storm ended when March did.

Press vans traveled in flocks around Palmetto State's campus in search of the elusive Kevin Day. Campus security chased them off as best they could, but photographs and grainy videos of the Exy star walking to and from classes with a certain Minyard twin still ended up all over the internet. Neil peeked over Wymack's shoulder to see what the world was saying and strained his ears to eavesdrop on phone calls.

It wasn't pleasant. Wymack had Neil make a list of the most creative death threats he received just so he could burn it. “It's catharsis or some bullshit like that,” he'd explained. After their morning conditioning, the Foxes spent five minutes discussing who would pair up for the day, not wanting to travel anywhere alone for the time being. Andrew still adamantly refused to set foot on the court while Kevin was there, but he stuck close to him everywhere else. Nicky and Aaron, too, were always near Kevin with Andrew acting as the intense gravitational force keeping them all in orbit.

On the first Friday of April, an anonymous tip caused the DEA to raid Fox Tower in the middle of the night. Wymack dragged Neil out into the night to see what was happening with the team. Outside the Tower, Neil stood on the sidewalk in the flashing red and blue lights, watching Wymack exchange heated words with the uniformed men near the door. A few feet away, Andrew smoked a cigarette and watched the policemen with a bored expression. Nicky and Aaron looked rightfully agitated while Kevin warily scanned the curious crowd that was gathering around them like he expected to see a Raven.

The rest of the Foxes were bleary-eyed and quietly furious while the agents searched their rooms up in the Tower for the meth lab that they'd allegedly been running.

It was Seth who said, “I say Kevin should clean up since this shit is his fault.”

Two of the four fifth-year seniors nodded in agreement and scowled in Kevin's direction. Andrew flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette and stared at them.

“It's not Kevin's fault,” Matt tried.

“Fuck you,” Seth interrupted. “Of course it's his fault.”

“Maybe it's not,” Allison said with a delicate sigh. “Maybe people think you're running a meth lab
because you and your roommates are well-known junkies. I wouldn't be surprised if they did find meth up there.”

Seth glared. “I've never touched that shit and you know it.”

“So you were just born that ugly, huh?”

“Save it for couples counseling,” snapped Dan. “We've all dealt with worse than this. These fuckers can't shake us, so shut up and give it a minute and we'll all be back inside in no time.”

It was another half an hour before the DEA finally accepted that there wasn't a stash to be found. Neil shuffled his feet against the sidewalk and tried not to fall asleep while he waited. Wymack stayed until the agents left and his Foxes were able to go back inside to pick up their ransacked dorms so they could attempt to get some more sleep.

It was almost three in the morning when Wymack seemed satisfied that it was over. He stormed back over to where Neil was waiting on the curb and barked, “Get in the car!”

Neil tensed before scrambling toward Wymack's car with his heart in his throat. He was queasy with dread and anticipation as he buckled himself into the front seat. This had cracked Wymack's patience and now Neil would see who he really was. He braced himself against the car door for blows that never came.

Wymack paused once he was sitting behind the wheel, took in the way Neil was leaning away from him, and then sighed heavily. Neil trembled, watching Wymack's broad hand click his seat belt into place.

“Look, Neil, I know I'm a miserable bastard to be around sometimes, but I don't beat people to make myself feel better. You're not a punching bag.” Wymack said it like it was a concrete truth. Neil let go of the door and relaxed back against the seat.

On their way back to the apartment, Wymack stopped at a 24-hour McDonald's. He bought a chocolate milkshake for himself and a yogurt parfait for Neil after he failed to talk Neil into getting an ice cream cone.

After that, Wymack was hesitant to leave Neil alone outside with all the press and pranksters lurking around campus. Neil took on the role of Wymack's full-time shadow. He cleaned up graffiti when Wymack could spare the time to sit with him, but that happened less and less frequently. Wymack still handed him small amounts of cash here and there, but the reasons behind the money became increasingly ridiculous.

Wymack gave him five dollars for doing his laundry and ten for dusting the apartment. Hunting down every last coffee mug that Wymack owned and washing them all got him another five. For fifty dollars, Neil spent a day with Wymack's elderly neighbor Mr. Harris, assembling a new bookcase and watching documentaries about the Civil War. Mr. Harris told Neil that he had tried to get Wymack evicted once or twice because of the “hooligans” Wymack had hanging around his place all the time and that he was pleasantly surprised by Neil's ability to sit up straight and end all of his sentences with “sir.” The fifty-dollar bill Wymack handed to Neil that night was wrapped around a bottle of beer, which Neil didn't drink but appreciated all the same.

He earned another fifty dollars for the day he spent cleaning Abby's house and twenty-five for washing Dr. Dobson's car while it was parked outside the medical center. He hadn't met the team's psychiatrist and he didn't want to. Thankfully, he finished washing the car before the doctor could come out on her lunch break.
After four weeks in South Carolina, Neil felt like he could breathe a little easier. He now had enough clothing to get him through the week without having to do laundry more than once and he no longer had to use Wymack's shampoo or toothpaste because he had his own. Wymack let him keep his growing pile of cash in one of his desk drawers that locked and gave Neil the key to it, which put an odd feeling in his chest. This one little drawer was under Neil's control. Who had access to it was entirely his decision and he liked that idea very much.

The key never left his pocket.

The only downside to his arrangement with Wymack was that it forced him to be in the same place as the Foxes twice a day during the week. He continued to exercise on his own at the gym in the mornings, but Dan was determined to get a conversation out of him and Allison still tried to bully him into gossiping about Kevin. Renee smiled at him and offered to share snacks or let him borrow books, which he found unnerving. She had no reason to be so kind to him and that made him suspicious of her motives. He went to great lengths to avoid being caught alone with the girls. They weren't cruel in any obvious way like the four Raven girls Neil still had nightmares about, but he still shook when they got too close.

Matt was friendly without being pushy, which Neil appreciated. Seth tried to provoke Neil whenever he could, which Neil ignored. Seth reminded Neil of the freshmen who signed with Edgar Allan expecting to keep their individuality and freedom. They spoke loudly and took up as much space as possible, wanting the world to notice them, just like Seth did. Sometimes Neil wondered how long it would've taken Riko to break a man like Seth. His guess was about three months.

Since Neil spent his afternoons watching the Foxes practice, he was painfully aware that Kevin hadn't managed to score against Renee, who was still the only goalkeeper willing to practice with him. She showed up every day to stand in the goal and watch Kevin continuously fail to get the ball past her. Andrew lay on the home bench, laughing or spouting useless nonsense at Neil.

It didn't really matter that Kevin couldn't score, though, since the Foxes were hopelessly incapable of working together as a team. The cousins were three islands that no one could reach. Seth was a hurricane that drowned out Matt's optimism again and again. The girls were fiercely united, but they still couldn't manage to pull the others into a cohesive unit. Kevin remained adrift, icy and jagged around the edges. Some of them tried more than others to get along with their assistant coach-turned-striker, but Kevin's cold demeanor and condescension made it impossible. He had no qualms about reminding them of their many shortcomings as individuals and as a team.

Almost every day, Kevin pulled Neil aside and commanded him to join the Foxes for practice. He either hoped that the defense line could learn something from Neil's Raven-honed skills as a backliner or that having someone who wasn't a Fox on the court would give the team a common enemy to unite against. Neil responded to Kevin's demands with icy silence and he retreated to Wymack's office when Kevin pushed too hard. He clung to his decision to give up Exy for good, but he could feel his resolve weakening like cheap glue. In truth, Neil longed for it. He had arrived at Evermore already addicted to the sport and it gave some sort of meaning to the grueling days and torturous nights. His suffering had a purpose: it was all for Exy. Just being near the equipment made his chest heavy with yearning. The only thing preventing him from reaching for a racquet was the memory of the last time he had been on a court with Kevin. He could still hear bones cracking.

It was only a matter of time before Kevin grew tired of Neil's silent treatment. At the beginning of the third week of April, the Foxes were taking a water break in the foyer when Kevin finally decided to switch tactics.

“You've been here over a month. Stop being useless,” Kevin said.
Everyone stopped chattering and turned to Neil. He was standing in the corner like he always did, arms crossed and face blank, and his insides squirmed as they stared at him. Wymack was going over strategy with Dan on one of the benches and he looked up as well, surprised at Kevin's harsh tone.

“Neil isn't useless,” Renee said. “If he wants to practice with us, then he will.”

Kevin ignored her and glared at Neil so intensely the back of Neil's neck prickled. “What's the point of you now that you won't play Exy?”

In front of all the Foxes—how dare he? Neil's face grew hot. In English, in front of everyone, Kevin was either trying to humiliate him until he caved or trying to invite the Foxes to pressure him as well. Outrage oozed through his chest like lava. He wasn't their property. He wasn't a tool for them to use.

“What's the point of a striker who can't score?” Neil challenged.

It was like all the air was sucked from the room. No one breathed or moved except Andrew, who snorted.

“What did you just say to me?” Kevin asked slowly.

“Is your hearing as bad as your aim?” Neil cupped his hands around his mouth and raised his voice to say, “You can't score, Kevin.”

Allison said, “He's got a point.”

“More than Kevin's got all semester,” Seth commented with a harsh laugh.

“Shut the fuck up, Seth,” Kevin growled before turning his scowl back on Neil. “You're on thin ice, so tread carefully.”

“And you're already at rock bottom, so stop digging,” Neil fired back. “Not only did you give this team an assistant coach they can't stand, you crippled their offensive line as well. At this rate, you'll go down in Exy history as the striker who put goalies to sleep. How much lower can you possibly sink?”

Matt choked on his water. Nicky clicked his tongue and made a pitying face at Kevin.

“I'm still recovering,” Kevin said tightly. “I'll be back where I was in no time.”

“Well, consider this an invitation to get on with it already.”

Kevin took one slow, predatory step toward him. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kick your ass.”

“Besides the obvious?”

Kevin opened his mouth but Matt stood up and held his hands out. “All right, guys, let's just take a breath. Kevin, with your hand the way it is, maybe violence isn't the best option. Neil... I don't know you, but you're pretty tiny.”

Seth nodded and added, “Like all Kevin would have to do is sit on you and then it's game over. Light's out. You're done. Good job ripping him a new asshole, though. Maybe with two he won't be so full of shit.”

“I'm surprised you can count that high, crackhead,” Kevin spat.
Seth's sneer twisted into a livid scowl.

“Go fuck yourself, Kevin,” Allison spat.

“Okay!” Dan said loudly, standing up from the bench. “I think it's time we get back out there. Let's go, Foxes.”

Kevin marched toward the court like he was marching off to war with the rest of his new team following slowly. Neil traipsed back out to the inner court to watch the rest of practice unfold. Vague mockery and lukewarm encouragement was what the Foxes had been feeding Kevin since he'd arrived, but Ravens required a steady diet of barbed, well-aimed insults to motivate them.

Kevin fought harder on the court than he had in weeks, no doubt still burning from Neil's remarks. He went after the ball like it was to blame for his suffering and hurled it at Renee in the goal. Neil's eyes followed him wherever he went and everything in his body tensed in quiet anticipation. His own anger was cooling off and now all he wanted was for Kevin to prove he wasn't a lost cause. Neil needed to see Kevin take back what Riko had stolen from him. He needed to know that Riko had failed to break him.

Over an hour later, Kevin finally shot the ball right past Renee's racquet and lit the goal up red. Neil couldn't hold back his startled gasp. Kevin pointed his racquet in Neil's direction in a way that looked decidedly smug, but Neil didn't care.

Kevin was going to recover. He'd begun the slow climb back to the top. Perhaps one day Neil could forgive himself for what he'd done- if he lived that long, anyway.

Neil's heart surged as he imagined Kevin's potential. The game was different now that the king wasn't controlling all his pieces. Knowing Kevin, he wouldn't give up until he took Riko's place as number one and Neil hoped he would.

The sound of Kevin begging for mercy finally started to fade from his ears.

The small smile slipped from his face when he noticed Andrew watching him from a few feet away. Heat flooded his cheeks as he thought of what his unguarded expression might have revealed. Andrew's mouth was stretched wide by a lazy grin and his eyes flashed with something that made Neil's stomach twist.

“Peekaboo, I see you,” Andrew taunted.

Neil's fingernails bit into his palms.

“We've got a problem,” Wymack called as he came down the walkway toward them. “I just got a phone call. Janie Smalls tried to kill herself.”
Janie Smalls would recover from her suicide attempt, but she no longer intended to come to Palmetto State to be the Foxes' new striker. The fragile thread of hope Neil had for the hapless Foxes snapped.

When Wymack broke the news after Tuesday's practice, the team reacted with varying degrees of outrage and disappointment- except for Andrew, who laughed. Dan put her head in her hands. Seth kicked a wastebasket over and Allison rolled her eyes at his theatrics. Kevin stared at Wymack with a pinched expression. Matt put his arm tentatively around Dan's shoulders and Renee asked Wymack if Janie was getting the help she needed.

“How could she be so reckless?” Kevin snapped. “This is a disaster.”

Neil couldn't help agreeing with Kevin. If the master was successful in moving Edgar Allan south into the Foxes' division, their defeat would be even more humiliating if they were left with only two strikers to hold the offensive line. Even if Kevin managed to play half as well as he used to, they were in deep trouble.

“Exy isn't everything, Kevin,” Renee reminded him gently. “Let's be thankful that she survived.”

“I can't fucking believe this,” Seth muttered in the corner where he stood against the wall, brooding.

Andrew tossed his pill bottle into the air and caught it. “Yeah, Coach. Seth's tried to commit suicide loads of times and he's still here. Do I smell double standards?”

Allison shot Andrew a nasty look. “Shut the fuck up.”

Andrew gave her a cheeky grin in return. “You know all about his commitment issues, I suppose.”

Nicky cringed and rubbed at his forehead to hide it.

“Put a muzzle on the monster already,” snapped Seth.
Andrew squinted, scrunching his nose up in feigned confusion, and gestured between himself and his twin as if to ask *which one?*

“Chill, Seth,” Matt said.

Andrew laughed brightly. “Yeah, take a chill pill, Seth. Just one, though, not one handful.”

“I'll knock your teeth in,” Seth warned. “Let's see you smile then, asshole.”

“You're such a dick, Seth,” Nicky sighed. Neil wondered if Nicky was unwilling to chide his cousin in public or if he was too frightened to do it at all.

Seth's lip curled. “You love dick, you little fa-”

“Hey!” Dan barked. “Watch your fucking mouth. We don't tolerate that shit and you know it.”

The corner of Andrew's smile twitched and his eyes narrowed. It looked like a genuine reaction was fighting against the medicated mask.

From the look on Dan's face, Neil thought she was just about ready to take a swing at the older striker herself. Seth wasn't impressed by her fierce scowl, though. He folded his arms and cocked his head to one side in a lazy, but challenging way. Renee put her hand on Dan's shoulder and slid a blank, odd look over to Seth.

Allison shook her head at him and sarcastically said, “That's attractive.”

“Good to see the bitch brigade is back in business,” Seth spat.

“Come on-” Matt started just as Allison bit out, “Go fuck yourself.”

“That's enough!” bellowed Wymack. The team quieted at once. Neil shrank back into the corner.

Wymack's chest swelled with a deep breath, his nostrils flared, and his stare swept over the entire room before he continued, “We will figure this shit out as a team just like we always do. There are other strikers and there is still time.”

Kevin expelled a frustrated sigh. “It's too late in the year to get anyone good. Janie was the only decent option.”

Wymack waved him off. “Enough about Janie. We need to move forward.”

“You're not going to find anyone good enough that's not signed yet.”

“Try to find someone anyway. I'll go call some of my contacts to see if they've heard of anybody. You guys are dismissed. Get outta here.”

On their way out, Seth and Aaron traded sneers while Nicky ushered Aaron out of the room, talking loudly about getting ice cream later. Matt ruffled Dan's hair and murmured something quietly to her. Allison and Renee followed behind them, discussing what movie they would go see that night.

Kevin stayed behind, staring hard at Neil, and Andrew waited for Kevin. Wymack paused by the door when he noticed them both eyeing Neil.

“What's up, Kevin?” Wymack asked.

Ignoring him, Kevin spoke to Neil in French. “You haven't been on a court in a month. You can't
afford to lose your form.”

Neil bit the inside of his cheek to steady himself. This argument with Kevin had been going in circles for a long time. Kevin refused to let go of the idea of getting Neil back into shape for when he returned to the Nest and Neil couldn't tell Kevin the truth about why he wasn't going back.

“Neil, you good?” Wymack asked.

Neil nodded. “I'll meet you in your office.”

Wymack looked like he wanted to say something else, but then he shook his head and stepped out into the hallway.

Kevin waited for the door to swing shut before he continued in French, “The Moriyamas will kill you if you stop looking like a good investment. They'll cut their losses and dump your body in a river without a second thought. You're nothing but a Christmas bonus to them.”

“And?”

“You can't afford to get out of shape and I need someone good to practice with.”

Neil scoffed. “First of all, you should be more worried about getting your little goalie on that court. Second, he'll never let me near you.”

“I'm working on him. He'll come around.” Kevin said it as if it was a simple matter.

Neil looked at Andrew. It would have been easier to convince a river to switch directions than get him to say yes to Kevin's demands. Andrew didn't know what they were saying, but he grinned at Neil like he did anyway.

“You really want to be on a court with me again?”

Kevin's expression twisted into something tight and complicated. “You're my best option at the moment.”

All that mattered was Exy, after all.

The last of his resolve peeled away, leaving him without any more excuses to hide his aching heart behind. The temptation was too great and he was foolish to think he could have kept himself from giving in. Exy was his life and Kevin was the only piece of his team that he had left. He didn't have much time left, so he might as well savor his last days on a court while he still could.

He told Kevin, “I'll do it if you can get your bodyguard on board.”

“I'm glad to see you're finally being reasonable.”

“Well, as long as you're happy,” Neil muttered before going off to find Wymack.

He didn't realize his hands were shaking until he was at Wymack's office door and the knob rattled in his hand. Steeling himself, he pushed the door open and stepped in. Wymack was sitting at his desk with the phone squashed between his ear and his shoulder, talking about some boy out in Wyoming. Neil leaned against the wall and waited patiently, trying to focus on the rhythm of Wymack's agitated voice instead of the swelling trepidation under his breastbone.

Neil had seen enough of Andrew Minyard to know he would relent to Kevin's wishes on his own terms or not at all. He still wanted answers and he'd choke them out of Neil if he had to. A month
had passed since Neil last tasted real violence and he was morbidly curious as to how Andrew's explosive temper would measure up to Riko's cold sadism. Pain was a fact of life that Neil needed to remember before he got too soft.

Wymack's phone call ended abruptly. He slammed the receiver down and swiveled around to fix Neil with a grumpy look. “We're fucked.”

“You're fucked,” Neil corrected.

“Helpful as always.”

Neil lifted a shoulder. “I try.”

“Yeah, well, guess who gets to wash my car.”

“Something tells me it's not Janie Smalls.”

“Smart-ass,” Wymack grumbled into his coffee mug before he took a long drink and grimaced. “Any chance you could lure another Raven striker down here?”

“I'll set out some traps.”

“What're you gonna use as bait?”

“Top shelf bourbon.”

Wymack smirked and said, “You'll have to settle for the cheap shit.”

“Okay, but you'll just end up with another dud like Kevin.”

“You Ravens sure are warm and fuzzy. I can feel the love.” Wymack stood and slipped into his windbreaker. “You hungry yet? I was thinking we could go back to that diner on Oak Street.”

Neil had no room to complain since Wymack never made him pay, so he shrugged and said, “Whatever's fine.” He pushed away from the door and took the box of files that Wymack handed him before following him out.

The rest of their evening was spent eating roast beef sandwiches and potato chips while looking over a stack of profile sheets that Kevin had already dismissed as not being worth his time. Wymack was still hoping that maybe hiding in that pile was someone they'd overlooked on accident, someone with real potential, someone they needed. The more they looked, however, the more clear it became that the Foxes would have to settle for someone mediocre or go into the new season with only two strikers. Neil couldn't understand why Wymack willingly put himself through this. He was a good coach with a good eye for strategy and technique, but he stubbornly wasted his own skills on anti-social rejects.

Neil was so distracted by trying to figure Wymack out that he forgot to ask what he might expect from Andrew in the upcoming days.

The next morning, Wymack got Neil up for their daily walk through the surrounding neighborhoods. Creamy white magnolias were beginning to open on the trees and flowers in brilliant shades of purple and red and yellow were bursting to life in the gardens outside the dark houses. They never spoke on these walks, which Neil liked. He enjoyed listening to the birds and the soft scuff of his shoes against the sidewalk.
Neil found a comforting symmetry between himself and the melancholic shade of the sky. The world was listless and quiet and so was he. This was when he let his mind wander back to Jean. This was when it was safe to do so. He unpacked his thoughts, left them strewn on the sidewalks and piled at the street corners where he could wade through them again the next morning.

It was getting easier to think of Jean; it was more like carefully pouring out a bottle and less like tripping helplessly down a flight of stairs.

He was no longer surprised to find empty air instead of Jean to his left. He no longer imagined how Jean would respond to Wymack or Kevin. He no longer pictured Jean at the dinner table or the gym or the court. Jean was hours away at the Nest, carrying on their routine without him, and Neil was no longer overwhelmed by this fact.

He recalled the stories about Jean's childhood that he'd listened to hundreds of times back when they were young and full of longing for people and places they could never return to. By the age of thirteen, Neil had memorized all the minute details of Marseille and catalogued Jean's complaints about New York City. He knew Jean's life almost as well as his own.

In Marseille, Jean collected seashells for his younger sister Vianne, who left them upturned on the flagstone path to catch drops of summer rain. "A tea party for fairies," Jean had said, voice brittle but fond. "In the morning, she would leave pieces of pastry for them, too." This ritual of Vianne's stopped once the Moreau family crossed the Atlantic to settle in New York City. The softness of their youth, nurtured by golden beaches and fresh-baked bread and the gentle words of their grandmère, could not survive in the polluted city streets or their cramped apartment with its cockroaches and clanking pipes. Jean had naively thought things couldn't get worse. That was before he was sold to the master and locked away in the Nest. Underground, they had no rain or seashells or summer. They had only memories that seemed strange and dreamlike down there in the stifling, sterile darkness.

It was easy to get lost down there.

Their secrets slipped through the cracks of their fractured minds on the bad nights. They had to remind each other of what came before the Nest on those nights when Jean struggled to remember the color of Vianne's hair and Neil couldn't think of the title of his mother's favorite book.

Now the Nest seemed like the dream. Trees shielded the streets with long branches. Dew clung to the fresh-cut grass. The coffee mug was still warm between his palms. His lungs were full of fresh air.

Guilt stung his heart. Jean was still trapped in the hell they'd shared while he walked free. Neil couldn't even bring himself to watch the Ravens' games on television. He'd sat on the floor of the back room with his head between his knees until Wymack turned the TV off. He couldn't form the words to ask if Jean played well.

Hot shame prickled his eyes. Neil tripped over a crack in the sidewalk.

"You good?" Wymack asked, breaking the fragile silence.

"I'm fine," Neil murmured.

As always, once Wymack unlocked the gate outside the apartment complex, Neil shrugged off his thoughts of Jean and left them outside. They were too heavy to carry upstairs. Until tomorrow, he thought as he followed Wymack through the door.
They shared more coffee and the morning paper. Neil made a pan of eggs with bits of green pepper and spinach. Wymack made toast that ended up blackened on one side. Settling into this new routine was easier than Neil expected.

Neil packed clean clothes into his bag and went with Wymack to the gym for the Foxes' morning conditioning. It didn't matter that he hated being in the same room as them, outnumbered and out of his depth. Neil needed to keep his body in shape, so he swallowed his sharp retorts and kept his face blank when he felt their eyes on him.

He still did his best to avoid Kevin, though that would be harder from now on since he'd given in to Kevin's request. He almost wished that Andrew would stand in the way of Kevin's plans. Like Riko, he could push Kevin's wishes out of reach and Neil felt that, in this case, it might be for the best. No matter how badly Neil wanted to step back onto the court, he knew that keeping his distance would be wiser. He cursed himself for being too weak to tell Kevin no.

He finished his workout early and headed off to the showers before Kevin could try to get his attention again. His insides were crawling with anxiety. Once he showered and changed, he went outside to wait by Wymack's car.

He needed to get out of there. He had no deadline in mind, but he could feel his time there running out. Soon, he would need to figure out a plan and leave Wymack's for good. The thought made him sick.

Ten minutes later, the doors opened and the Foxes exited with their usual noisy chatter. Neil watched them walk to their cars, hugging his bag to his stomach, until Wymack finally came out.

“Let's go, kid,” Wymack called.

Neil brushed himself off and got into the car.

Wymack decided he would work out of his home office that day, so he and Neil returned to the apartment. Neil kept himself busy with some chores while Wymack made more calls about potential recruits. From what Neil could hear, it didn't sound like it was going well.

After an hour, Wymack took a break to set Neil up in the parking lot with a bucket of soapy water, a large sponge, a bag of clean towels, and a hose connected to one of the spigots on the outside of the building. Neil slathered sunscreen on his exposed forearms, face, and neck and slipped on his sunglasses before getting to work.

After the car was hosed down and dripping, he picked up the soapy sponge and started washing as much of the roof as he could. The center of the roof was out of Neil's reach, which wouldn't have mattered if not for a white patch of bird shit near the front. He couldn't reach it well enough to scrub at it properly and Wymack would notice if he left it. With nothing to stand on and his pride stinging, Neil removed his shoes before climbing carefully onto the car's hood, sponge in hand. No one was around, but he still felt like he was being watched as he quickly scrubbed at the stubborn white spot. Water and frothy globs of soap ran down to seep into his t-shirt and shorts where he was pressed against the windshield, making him grateful that he'd chosen to wear black shorts that day.

The front door swung open and a woman walked out, rummaging in her leather purse for something as she went. Since Wymack had backed into the space, Neil was facing the sidewalk and couldn't help making eye contact with her when they both happened to glance up. She paused and frowned at Neil before hurrying to her truck on the other side of the lot. Neil's face burned, but he kept scrubbing.
Most of the splotch was gone, but he refused to call it quits just yet. The master never accepted anything less than perfection, so he grit his teeth, gripped the sponge tighter, and scrubbed harder. A sedan parked a few spaces away and Neil tried to ignore the man getting out of it.

Another car entered the lot and drove slowly by. Humiliation splashed down his chest like icy slush, but he continued on with the task at hand. His ear twitched when he heard an engine cut off directly behind him. Dread knotted in his stomach as he looked over his shoulder. Sure enough, the shiny black car he'd come to loathe was parked there and Andrew Minyard was smoothly climbing out from behind the wheel with dark sunglasses hiding his eyes. Neil could only stare, frozen where he was half-leaning against Wymack's windshield.

“How much do you charge?” Andrew asked lightly. “Some asshole smeared dirt all over my car.”

“I'm not for sale,” Neil replied before turning back around. He risked getting up onto his feet for a better angle and scrubbed fiercely at the spot until it finally disappeared. He gave a small sigh of relief, but then jolted when a powerful jet of water from the hose hit his chest. Sputtering, he took a step back and his bare feet slipped on the soapy metal. He landed in a painful heap in the blessedly empty space beside Wymack's.

Andrew chuckled as Neil slowly got back to his feet, glowering. His wet clothing was plastered uncomfortably to his skin and his scraped palms were burning. He slid his sunglasses back on and brushed his hand over his bandage to make sure it was still stuck securely to his cheek.

“Why are you here? Did you get bored of annoying your teammates?” Neil grumbled, rubbing at his throbbing hip. He walked around the car to stand a few feet away from Andrew, trying to appear unafraid and unaffected.

“Nah,” Andrew said, drawing out the syllable obnoxiously. “I came to have a chat with you.”

“Lucky me,” Neil said flatly. “What do you want?”

“Does Wymack pay extra for the delightful attitude or is that just a perk?”

“It's twenty-five cents per comment and fifty for an insult.”

“You must be swimming in quarters,” Andrew said.

“Business is booming.”

“Happy day.”

“It was until you showed up.”

Andrew's smirk was subtle, which was odd. He made a show of patting down his pockets and then showed his empty palms, saying, “I left my wallet at home, I'm afraid. Put that one on my tab, okay?”

Neil shifted his weight and tilted his head, annoyed. Andrew was there to talk to him about Kevin and Neil wished he would just get on with it already. It seemed to Neil that the only thing Andrew took pleasure in was inconveniencing everyone else.

Andrew kicked the hose away from him. “Kevin has been talking, talking, talking about getting you on the court and, since killing him would violate our little agreement, I've had to put up with all this talking, talking, talking. Last night, I got a little idea.”
“An idea is good, but a point would be even better.”

“Shh, shush, Nathaniel, I'm getting there.” Andrew paused to take out a stick of gum from his pocket and unwrap it slowly. He folded it into his mouth and balled up the wrapper just to flick it in Neil's direction. After chewing a few times, he continued, “As I was saying, Kevin has been talking my ear off about getting you on the court. He seems convinced that you're no danger to him, but I am not an idiot. I am also, luckily for you, not unreasonable. I've decided I'll let you practice with him on one condition.”

Chilly dread slid down his spine. “What is it?”

Andrew’s smile got wider. “You have to come out with us on Friday.”

“What to do what?”

“We'll go to Columbia. Just for a boys' night out. We'll get ice cream, have some drinks, get to know each other. Sounds like a fun time, doesn't it? And after that, you and Kevin can play Exy all you like. I know you want it as bad as he does. I saw that look on your face when he scored.”

Nothing involving Andrew Minyard could end well, but this was the only thing standing between Neil and an Exy court now. One night. It sounded so simple. All he had to do was get through it and he could have Exy again. The night would be unpleasant, perhaps horrific, but Neil had survived plenty of nights like that. He could survive this, too.

“One night,” Neil said. “I go out with you guys for one night and then you'll let me practice with Kevin.”

“Excellent listening comprehension, Mr. Wesninski. You get a gold star.”

Neil did not want to do this. He swallowed shakily and said, “I'll do it.”

“Friday, then. We'll pick you up at eight. You'll wear what we bring you. Put your excited face on, Nathaniel. It's going to be fun.” Andrew gave him a smirk and then got back into his car.

Neil watched him drive out of the parking lot, feeling at once exhilarated and terrified.
Neil sat on the couch with a thick plastic bag of dark clothing in his lap and only thirty minutes left before Andrew came for him. The outfit was a gift from Andrew. Nicky said as much when he gave the bag to Neil at the end of afternoon practice with a large smile and a wink. He also said it should all fit because Kevin had told them what sizes to get for Neil. The idea of Kevin sharing information about him, no matter how trivial, made him burn with irritation. Kevin had forgotten how to keep his mouth shut since leaving the Nest.

He had twenty-five minutes left. His dinner wasn’t sitting well in his stomach. He only ate that sandwich because he knew he’d need to keep up his strength tonight. This night was all that stood between him and Exy and he’d endure whatever he had to.

Wymack had tried to tell him something about Matt and a night in Columbia with Andrew’s group that took a turn for the worse, but Neil didn’t want to hear it. He didn’t need another reason to regret his decision to go.

“I’ll be fine,” Neil said to himself, staring down at the plastic bag.

“You say something?” Wymack asked from the kitchen.

“No,” Neil answered.

Ten minutes later, he made himself go to the bathroom to change. The outfit was all black, but it was a far cry from the practical outfits he’d worn every day at the Nest. The soft, long-sleeved shirt was riddled with holes, making it look like someone had splashed acid on it. For a moment, Neil panicked and thought that his scars would show through, but when he held the garment up, he saw
that there was a second layer of thin, gunmetal-gray fabric inside it. After Neil put it on, he pulled
and pawed at the shirt, inspecting it closely to make sure none of his skin was showing. The snug,
dark pants bunched weirdly around his calves and had an odd number of pockets, which Neil
supposed could be useful. He put on the boots last and immediately decided he liked them because
they were heavy and made him at least an inch taller. It was easy to imagine the damage these boots
could inflict on someone's face.

Neil put a fresh bandage over his cheek and ran a hand through his messy hair before picking up his
discarded clothing. He fished the little key out of the pocket of his shorts before he stowed the
clothing away in the plastic bag behind the couch. In the back room, he opened the locked drawer
and took two twenty-dollar bills from his stash. Once the money was tucked away in one of his
zippered pockets, he went out to the kitchen, where Wymack was drinking a beer and fixing himself
a snack.

Wymack grimaced when he saw him and said, “You forgot your eyeliner.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Here, take this.” Wymack thrust a scrap of paper toward him. There was a phone number
written on it. “If you get into trouble, find a pay phone and call me. You're bringing money, right?
You got change?”

“Uh-”

“Hold on,” Wymack sighed, already on his way to the hall closet. He shook out some quarters from
the pouch they used for laundry and handed them over. Neil slipped them into the pocket holding the
twenties and thanked Wymack quietly.

Just after eight o'clock, someone pounded on the front door and Neil's heart jumped into his throat.
Wymack shot him a knowing look. Ignoring him, Neil wiped his palms on his pants and went to
open the door. He was greeted with all four members of Andrew's group, all dressed in black.
Andrew gave Neil a slow once-over. Kevin and Aaron obviously wished they were elsewhere.
Only Nicky looked like he was genuinely enjoying himself. “This is a huge improvement,” he said,
waggling his eyebrows.

Wymack leaned out of the kitchen to fix them all with a stern scowl. “Nothing that a nap and a
strong cup of coffee won't fix, you hear me?”

“Don't worry, Mr. Wymack, your precious daughter is in good hands,” Andrew teased. “I had
flowers and everything, but Kevin mistook them for salad. You know how he is about eating his
leafy greens.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. Neil traded a look with Kevin, who looked slightly unsettled as well. Earlier,
Neil had learned that Kevin hadn't been to Columbia with Andrew yet, so he probably didn't know
what to expect either. Neil wasn't naive enough to imagine they'd be getting the same treatment,
though. Kevin was under Andrew's protection. Neil was under suspicion.

“Well, we should probably get going,” Nicky suggested. “Come on, Nathaniel. Bye, Wymack! We'll
have him back tomorrow.”

Neil followed them out into the hall and didn't look back. Andrew elbowed his side and snorted
when he flinched away.

“So tense,” Andrew mocked. “What, are you scared? Nicky, I think he's scared of us.”
Nicky looked back at him. “It'll be fine, man. Just roll with it.”

Neil avoided their eyes as they waited for the elevator to arrive. Andrew pushed the button repeatedly until the doors finally slid open and they could step inside. Once the doors closed behind them, Andrew slid up against Neil's side. He smelled like cigarettes and peppermint gum. Neil tensed, but tried to keep a neutral expression. Everyone else was watching him closely. If it came to a fight, he knew that Kevin would side with his new group instead of the outsider.

“I'm on my way down now,” Andrew said. “Give it some time and we'll be able to chat without the meds getting in the way. Doesn't that sound like fun?”

Neil's eyes jumped to Kevin's just as Kevin looked away. “Does your medication make it hard to drive?”

“Nicky's driving tonight.”

“That's not what I asked.”

Nicky gave him an amused little smile. “Don't worry. He doesn't dose and drive.”

Andrew had been sober on the night they first met, but Neil hadn't realized he'd talked to Andrew while he was off his meds since then. More than once, Andrew had driven over just to bother Neil while he was cleaning something for Wymack.

The elevator came to a stop and they stepped out before Neil could make a comment about Andrew's probation. Andrew pushed him toward the door with a firm hand on his back.

“You look good in black,” Nicky piped up from the rear of their little group. “The other Ravens must have had trouble concentrating because, damn, you and Kevin look good. Kevin says you guys wear black all the time.”

“Enough, Nicky,” Aaron hissed.

Neil turned and leveled Kevin with a flat glare. “Kevin's been saying lots of things, apparently.”

They stepped out into the cool night air and Andrew steered Neil toward his car at the other side of the lot.

“Kevin wouldn't tell us which way you swing, though,” Nicky went on. “He said you weren't involved with anyone, but that doesn't really answer my question.”

“I don't swing,” Neil said.

Nicky took out the car keys and popped the locks. There was a little wrinkle between his eyebrows. “That doesn't make sense. How can you not swing?”

Neil's skin prickled all over and he gave no answer.

Andrew sat up front with Nicky, which annoyed Kevin. Kevin had spent his whole life in the passenger seat while Riko drove them to the brink of insanity. It made sense that he'd view the backseat as a demotion. Aaron took the left side and Kevin insisted that Neil take the middle because he was smaller. Nicky and Andrew snickered while Neil, bristling, crawled in to sit in the center.

Neil tucked his elbows in and tried not to touch the men on either side of him. Nicky drove out of the parking lot while Andrew fiddled with the radio. After a few minutes, he got bored and shut the
noise off. The car slithered through the town to the interstate. Nicky accelerated hard up the on-ramp and then jerked the car left to merge into the swift-moving traffic. The farther they got from Wymack's apartment, the more Neil felt like throwing up.

“So, Nathaniel, I have a question,” Nicky piped up once they were cruising at a speed that was a bit alarming. “Who would you rather see naked, Orlando Bloom or Jessica Alba?”

“What?” Neil didn't recognize either of those names.

“Don't be shy now. You can tell us.”

“I don't understand what that could possibly have to do with anything.”

Aaron scowled at him. “He wants to know if you're gay or straight, dumbass.”

“I'm... neither. Why do you care?” He hated how small his voice sounded. Kevin's thigh pressed into his for a moment before Neil shifted away.

Nicky looked at him in the rearview mirror. “Some of us want you to have a little fun here. I know Kevin's straight, which is boring, but that's okay. You, on the other hand, you haven't ogled Allison at all and that gives me hope. Just tell me what your type is and I'll see if I can make some magic happen.”

“I'm not interested,” Neil replied coldly.

“Come on,” Nicky whined. “There's no reason to be embarrassed.”

Andrew popped open the glove compartment and started rifling through the contents.

Agitated, Neil said, “I don't swing.”

“Well, you're not a virgin, are you? With a face like that, I seriously doubt it.”

Aaron popped the back of Nicky's headrest. “Nicky, shut the hell up.”

“Just tune us out like you always do, Aaron,” Nicky said. “Nathaniel, I'm still waiting on that answer.”

Neil said nothing. A fever was eating away at his skin and the memory of sharp fingernails dragged down his chest. Nicky's curiosity disturbed him. He'd thought that there would be alcohol and maybe a beating in store for him that night, but he was beginning to worry that something far worse was going to happen.

Nicky buzzed his lips, sounding almost horse-like, and grumbled, “Fine. Don't tell me. I want it on the record that none of you are any fun.”

Andrew sat up and shot a rubber band at Nicky's cheek, causing him to squawk and swerve dangerously. The truck behind them honked. Neil's entire body went rigid.

“Jesus!” snarled Aaron, bracing himself against his door.

Kevin grumbled, “I didn't realize a near-death experience was on the agenda for tonight.”

Andrew poked at the red spot blooming on his grumpy cousin's cheek and said, “Time for a new topic, I think. I'm getting bored.”
Neil didn't know what to make of that, but he was thankful when the conversation turned away from the subject of his sexuality.

Forty minutes later, the cousins bickered about which exit to take before Nicky told the twins to shut up and decided all on his own. They drove through the dark city streets until they came to a small restaurant with a cheerful neon sign that said “Sweetie's” in fat, looping letters. Nicky parked and the dying rumble of the engine was followed by five seat belts disengaging with sharp clicks. They climbed out of the car and headed toward the door as a grim-looking group.

They took their place in line behind two groups and Nicky went up to talk to the hostess at the stand. Andrew looked pallid and glassy-eyed. Sweat shone on his forehead and plastered some of his hair to his skin. He lifted a trembling hand and stared for a few moments before turning on his heel and marching right back out the door. Neil frowned after him, watching through the glass as Andrew bent over to vomit into a potted plant a little ways down the sidewalk. A couple walking past scurried away from him, disgusted.

Kevin's nose wrinkled. “Ugh.”

“Jeez,” Aaron muttered. Instead of going after his brother, he made a beeline for the salad bar. Aaron dug out a handful of cracker packets from a metal bucket and then returned to Neil and Kevin near the doors. He began eating the crackers while Andrew braced his hands on his knees and dry-heaved.

Nicky came back over to them and shot a worried look in Andrew's direction. “Is he okay?”

“He's barfing, so what does that tell you?” Aaron shot back.

The door opened and Andrew ambled in, clearing his throat roughly. He narrowed his eyes at Aaron and held out his hand once he reached him. Obediently, Aaron gave up all the packets, empty and full. Andrew quickly devoured the rest of the crackers. Each time he swallowed it looked like a struggle.

When they were finally escorted to a booth near the back, Andrew sat in the middle with Kevin and Nicky on either side of him. Neil sat beside Nicky at one end and Aaron sat at the other. Aaron stuffed the empty cracker wrappers into the hostess's apron pocket and Kevin gawked at the rude display. The hostess, however, simply smiled and said their server would be right out to take their order.

The waiter appeared before any of them could say anything to each other. Nicky handed over the stack of menus and said, “Just the ice cream special, Greg, please and thank you.”

The waiter smiled brightly and briskly walked away toward the kitchen. Nicky beamed down at Neil and nudged him gently. “You like ice cream, right?”

Neil stared blankly back at him and tried to recall the last time he'd eaten any. One summer, his father hired a man called Isaac to cook meals a few nights a week since everyone else was so busy. Sometimes Isaac sneaked Neil bowls of strawberry ice cream when Neil's mother wasn't around. Neil enjoyed spending time with him since he always had a funny story to tell and the kitchen was always warm and full of good smells. After a few weeks, Isaac became more and more curious about the house because he was only allowed in the kitchen, so Neil tried to answer his questions as best he could. His father found out somehow and he was furious. Isaac went down into the basement with Neil's father and Lola and he never came back up. That was the day that Neil learned what an undercover cop was and what a dislocated shoulder felt like.
He didn't think he liked ice cream.

“I'm going to take that as a no,” Nicky said eventually.

Neil blinked and avoided Aaron's stare. Andrew had one hand clamped over his mouth and his unfocused gaze was fixed to the table, too distracted by his own withdrawal to notice Neil's impolite silence.

“He was on a strict diet,” said Kevin. Neil didn't know if he was trying to give him an out or remind him of Riko's rules. Neil's body was purchased by the master and given to Riko. He wasn't allowed to feed it anything they didn't approve of.

Greg came back soon enough and dropped a pile of napkins in the middle of the table before disappearing again without a word. Andrew pawed through the napkins and uncovered a stash of plastic packets filled with yellowish powder. He ripped two open immediately and dumped them into his mouth.

“What-” Kevin began.

“Can we not make a scene, please?” Aaron asked snidely.

“I don't like that word,” Andrew muttered before clamping his hand over his mouth again with a throaty, “Ugh.”

Andrew collected the rest of the packets and stuffed them into his pocket. He took deep, slow breaths through his nose and trembled still, but by the time the bowls of ice cream were placed in front of them, he seemed to be settling down. After the first few bites, Andrew looked like he was feeling much better.

“Try it, Nathaniel,” Nicky encouraged before taking another large bite.

Neil looked down at the scoops of chocolate ice cream. The spoon shook in his hand. This was against the rules. Riko wasn't there and it wasn't likely that he would find out about this, but his fear spiraled and ignored logic. None of the men at this table would call Riko up to tell him about this tiny thing, but Riko was his owner. Riko decided what he ate and when he slept and what he wore. Riko would know somehow that he defied him again- just like Neil's father always knew.

His heart was a furnace.

Fuck him.

Neil jammed a large bite of ice cream into his mouth and swallowed it thickly.

“Woah, take it easy there, man,” Nicky laughed. “You're gonna give yourself brain freeze.”

Pain filled his throat and reached up the back of his skull, bringing water to his eyes. He winced and welcomed the distraction of it. Kevin looked up at him and paused in his methodical consumption of his own ice cream. There was no sign of an internal crisis on Kevin's face and Neil hated him for it.

When the bill finally came, Aaron opened the faux leather folder and shoved a small stack of twenties under the clip. Then, Nicky leaned into Neil a little and told him to move. Neil did as he was told. The others slid out of the booth as well and they made their way to the front doors. As they exited the restaurant, Neil looked back in time to see Greg pocketing the money Aaron left behind.

Nicky drove them to a two-story club with a line of darkly dressed people stretching from the door
all the way down the block. Neil leaned forward and stared past Kevin at the black-clad crowd. These people made the color that Neil had donned with solemnity for almost half his life look almost festive. Each outfit was unique, intentionally damaged like Neil’s shirt and fashionably disheveled.

Nicky parked at the curb near the entrance and let them out. Andrew procured a brightly colored tag from the bouncer and passed it off to Nicky, who hung it from the mirror before driving off to park. Aaron shoved Neil’s arm and motioned toward the door. Neil followed Andrew and Kevin with Aaron walking close behind him.

Inside, there was a mess of colored lights and heavy music. They walked out onto a dais, which held them above the sunken dance floor and the writhing mass of bodies with dozens of arms twisting in the air and rapturous faces lifted toward the kaleidoscopic lights. The raised platform hugged the wall and led to alcoves where there were high tables with shiny, sticky spots of spilled liquids and abandoned glasses. On either side of the room were two staircases spiraling up to a second floor. At the back was a long bar where people crowded together hoping to catch the attention of one of the bartenders.

Neil followed the others through the swarm of sweaty strangers to an empty table. Aaron darted off and returned with another chair before he and Kevin sat down. Andrew snagged Neil by his collar and tugged him toward the stairs leading down into the chaotic dance floor. Neil followed. It was too loud to object or ask questions, but that was just as well. Andrew would have ignored him anyway.

They wove through the thick forest of rolling hips and uplifted arms and swaying spills of long, glossy hair. Neil focused on the light playing across Andrew’s pale hair to keep track of him as they made their way across the club to the bar. It wasn’t until Andrew had wedged himself between a lanky man with several ear piercings and a curvy woman with leather bracelets that Andrew turned and faced Neil again.

“You drinking with us?” Andrew asked with a tilt of his head.

Neil swallowed nervously. “No.”

A bartender appeared and gave Andrew a broad, easy smile. “Hey, Andrew, who’s your new friend?”

“Nathaniel, this is Roland. Roland, this is Nathaniel,” Andrew said with a lazy flick of his hand. “He’s not drinking.”

An elbow hit Neil’s back sharply and he jerked away from it.

Roland gave him a thoughtful look and said, “Soda, then.”

Neil wanted to ask for water, but he didn’t get a chance to. Roland moved away to make Andrew’s order. Neil leaned into the bar to watch Roland mix and swirl different liquids into glasses of varying shapes and sizes. A cherry here, an olive there. A splash of cola, a lime wedge.

Finally, Roland pushed the tray of drinks across the bar to Andrew and then handed an unopened can of soda to Neil along with an empty glass. Roland saw them off with a smile and a wave and then moved on to another patron. Andrew hoisted the tray over his head and nodded at Neil to go first. Neil fought his way through the crowd with Andrew following in his wake.

Nicky was at the table with Aaron and Kevin and all three men perked up a little when they spotted Andrew with their drinks. The tray was set down and the packets of yellow powder were tossed onto the table before Andrew took his seat beside Kevin. He handed a packet to Kevin and leaned in to
explain what it was. Kevin's eyes lit up and he snatched the packet eagerly. Nicky cheered and slapped him on his back as he emptied the packet into his mouth. The powder and the liquor didn't last long after that.

As they hurled themselves headlong into the abyss of inebriation, anxiety clouded Neil's lungs, thick and hot and sticky. The throbbing music was like a wall pushing at his back and all around him were people eager to shed their self-control.

He was afraid.

He wanted to leave.

His throat burned with thirst and the only drink he had was soda, which wouldn't help. Without a better option, Neil opened the can and took a drink. Once he started drinking, Nicky urged him to keep up with their ridiculous pace even though the rush he'd get from his soda would be from sugar and caffeine only.

Andrew ignored him while they worked their way through the first round, talking instead to Kevin and peering into his eyes every now and then to check his pupils.

“It's cracker dust!” Nicky giggled as he scooted his stool closer to Neil's. He was slurring his words and struggling to speak through his laughter. “It's non-addictive and wonderful. Sweet and salty and super fun. Do Ravens like fun? You guys could use some fun.”

There were drugs at the Nest, too. Pills mostly, sometimes powder. Kevin was more enthusiastic, so Neil suspected the drugs were his idea. Riko always forced Neil and Jean to take them first so he could see what effect they had before he and Kevin indulged. Neil understood Kevin's need for an escape, but he resented being experimented on.

As if sensing his thoughts, Kevin turned a wide-eyed, crazed look on Neil and said, “I can do whatever the fuck I want, okay?”

Nicky laughed so hard he almost fell out of his seat. Aaron downed another packet of dust and another shot.

“I fucking hate you,” Kevin continued, not caring that Neil wasn't replying. “Just seeing you here makes me sick.”

“Trouble in paradise?” Andrew crooned too close to Neil's ear for comfort. “Kevin's playing nice. Why aren't you, Nathaniel? We're all friends here, aren't we? Come on, it's time to get round two.”

This time, he tried asking for water at the bar. The soda gave him a headache and his throat felt like it was lined with sandpaper. Roland didn't hear him, though. He poured Neil's soda into a glass and set it with the other drinks. Neil fell quiet again and tried to make himself smaller to avoid bumping into the others at the bar.

“Second round!” Nicky cheered once they returned. He handed Neil his glass of soda and clinked his own shot against it. “Drink with us, Nathaniel!”

Andrew elbowed him sharply and smirked. He held up a shot glass and waited. Fear scratched up his back, but he was losing hold of his reasons for saying no. Andrew had knives and a new drug tearing through his system. Andrew had a mission and a point to prove. He was volatile on a normal day, how violent would he be now?

Neil drank and regretted it instantly. It was too sweet to be just soda. It scraped down his throat and
left behind a bitter flavor that made his body scream for water. There was nothing he could do to stop it now. He could almost feel the drug explode into his system from his belly. His body was being stolen from him again. *Not again. Not again. Please, not this again.* Panic wrapped around his bones like thorny vines, clawing at his muscles and scratching under his skin.

“Moron,” Andrew said. His eyes were smug.

This fear was familiar—heart racing, pulse squelching at the back of his throat, body shivering. Neil could only stare in horror at the glass in his hand.

“You really thought you were safe just because you were up there with me?” Andrew paused to knock back another shot. “Roland knows what to do. I'm in control here, understand? Tonight, you're all ours.”

*“Bought and paid for, Nathaniel.”*

Andrew grabbed his chin and studied his eyes. “You're not there yet, but don't worry. You'll feel it soon enough. The night's still young, so run along and have some fun. I'll be back for you later. Be a good boy for Nicky and Aaron.”

The drug was crackling through his blood. His head was fuzzy and his lips were numb. He tried to take a swing at Andrew, but Aaron knocked him out of his stool before he could. The world flipped upside down as he hit the floor. The drug put his mind in a snow globe and shook viciously, swirling and drowning his senses. Nicky hauled him back to his feet and turned him toward the shifting beast with a hundred limbs in the pit below.

“We'll have some fun first, 'kay?” Nicky slurred into his ear.

Hands slid over his back and shoulders and hips. Music ground his bones into dust. Lights blinded him. Everything was too much, too big, too loud. The bodies bumping into him felt like air one moment and stone the next.

Neil squinted and stumbled forward into someone who immediately shoved him back into a solid wall of muscle. A pair of hands slid up his chest and a laugh grated against his ear when Neil pawed at them helplessly.

“Lemme go,” he whimpered, tugging against the circle of arms he was trapped in.

He couldn't remember where he was.

Fingers dug into his arms and spun him too quickly. Everything blurred together and tilted dangerously. Neil grimaced. His head was full of sloshing water. His mouth was full of sawdust.

Nicky grinned down at him and nudged his hips forward into Neil's.

“No!” Neil shouted. His body remembered. Adrenaline poured through his chest to wage war against the drug dulling his senses. He fought against Nicky, scratching and clawing and kicking with his heavy boots. Nicky was bigger, though, and all around them was a wall of people. Neil couldn't breathe.

“Don't,” Neil groaned.

“Just relax,” Nicky told him before pushing their lips together. Neil tried to scream, but his mouth was suddenly full of Nicky's tongue. Nicky pulled back for a moment, but before Neil could seize the chance to yell for someone, anyone, Nicky's mouth was on his again. More agonizing sweetness
filled his mouth and he convulsively swallowed. His stomach rolled in protest.

His mind was a fun-house mirror, his emotions were distorted and wobbling. His anger was too small, his fear too large. He felt like a child stumbling around in the dark.

The drugs lifted him up on a wave, foamy and hot, and left him hanging, dangling, too high off the ground. He wasn't safe there. He couldn't remember the way to his safe place.

There were hands, hands, hands.

The world was in a blender. Everything was choppy and too fast and too loud. He was spinning and trying to pull away from something, but he couldn't tell which way he needed to go.

There were hands, hands, handcuffs.

He didn't realize his eyes were closed until he tried to open them, which felt like the most difficult thing he'd ever done. His vision swam. A fly buzzed in his ear. His legs were stretched out in front of him, weighed down by something, and his ass was going numb against cold concrete. His boots were gone. His back was propped up against a metal pole. His wrists were in padded cuffs hanging from the railing above his head and a heavy numbness was spreading through his arms.

Andrew was sitting on Neil's shins so he couldn't kick at him. They were on a concrete landing out in a dark alley with one bright light illuminating the metal door that Neil guessed led back into the club. Kevin was standing against it, blinking at him owlishly. The hot stench of rotting refuse rolled off the dumpster a few yards away, mixing with the salty smell of Neil's sweat. His stomach churned.

Andrew shook a water bottle at him and let out a husky laugh when Neil flinched away from the noise.

“Come back down, Nathaniel,” he said, voice smooth and teasing. “You've been up there for hours.”

“Andrew, I don't feel good,” complained Kevin.

Neil's thoughts were egg yolks slipping through cracked shells. He mumbled, “What's going on?”

“Shh, there, there,” Andrew sang, soft and deadly. Feathers on a bird of prey. “It'll all be better soon, Nathaniel. You thirsty? You look thirsty.”

Neil pried his tongue off the roof of his mouth and rasped, “I need-”

“Shh,” Andrew hushed him, moving up to sit on Neil's knees. Neil couldn't remember how to scream. His lungs were empty.

“Just tell him what he wants to know,” Kevin groaned, rubbing at his forehead. “Andrew, we've been here forever. I need more-”

“In a minute,” Andrew interrupted. “Nathaniel, tell me what you're planning. Tell me the truth and I'll give you all the water you want. You can drink and rest and it'll all be over.”

His promises slid over Neil's better judgment like syrup- just like Riko's had been. They coated his mind and left him confused and stuck. Neil was exhausted. He wanted things to feel right again. The drug stretched his thoughts like taffy.

“Talk to me,” Andrew said.

“Riko needs to get Kevin back,” he heard himself mumble.
“And how are you going to get Kevin back to the Nest?”

“Nothing. I'm... I'm not staying.” His wrists ached. He wanted to pull and fight, but he couldn't find the energy.

Andrew leaned closer and Neil grimaced as his sour breath filled his nose. “I'm not buying that. Kevin says you can't run. Try again.”

The tip of a knife poked his neck and the jumbled mess in Neil's head fell silent. His body burned with the memory of Riko's blades dragging and digging in and peeling his skin open.

“I swear I'm not taking Kevin back,” Neil whispered, shivering.

Andrew shook his head disbelievingly and tossed the bottle aside, denying Neil the drink he so desperately needed. Water splashed onto the concrete. He pressed the knife harder against Neil's throat and reached up with his free hand to pinch the edge of the bandage over Neil's cheek.

Oh, right. The burn scars. The ruined tattoo. Kevin.

Kevin was craning his neck, trying to see around Andrew's shoulder. Neil's heart rebounded off the wall of his chest.

“Don't-” Neil gasped, trying to jerk out of Andrew's grasp. “Don't- please, don't.”

“Shut up.”

“Don't let him see it,” Neil begged in German.

Andrew paused for a moment, looking almost surprised, and then he tore the bandage off. Neil whimpered as the adhesive ripped from his skin, but the noise was buried by a startled cry. Kevin slammed back against the door and clapped his hand over his own cheek, eyes wide and mouth gaping.

“Huh,” Andrew murmured.

“No, no, no,” moaned Kevin, sliding down to the ground. The light carved a deep shadow in the hollow of his cheek. “Why didn't you tell me? He's not going to let you back in, is he? You lied to me!”

Neil swallowed and tried to work up a bit more saliva. His tongue was heavy and furry. His lips and cheeks were tingling.

“He kicked you off the team,” Andrew said, gripping Neil's jaw and roughly tilting his face to examine it closer. “He kicked you off the team and he sent you here because he needs Kevin back. I'm going to assume that means Kevin is your way back in. You're going to use Kevin to buy back your spot on the team. Tsk, tsk, Nathaniel.”

“No,” mumbled Neil.

Kevin leaned over and vomited on the steps. Andrew glanced back at him briefly before digging the tip of his knife harder into Neil's neck. The skin was close to breaking. Neil was too afraid to swallow, too afraid to move.

“Keep talking,” Andrew ordered.

“Woke up on the bus,” Neil confessed quietly, forming the words as best he could. “Riko said
Kevin's my ticket back in, but my uncle... I need to find my uncle.”

“Why does Riko think his plan will work? Why would you willingly go back to him after what he's done?”

“It's my best option,” Neil sighed. His mind was sinking. He could feel the urge to sleep pulling at him. He let his eyelids droop. Andrew knocked his head back against the metal pole to wake him up. Sparks flew behind his eyes and pain shocked his skull.

Kevin retched one final time and sat up, wiping his mouth on the hem of his shirt. “God,” he groaned. “Andrew, just stop it already.”

“Why do you keep defending him?” Andrew demanded.

Neil could see the resignation on Kevin's face. “Kevin, don't tell-”

“He helped me get out.”


“Shut up,” Andrew told him, smacking his scarred cheek just hard enough to stun him. “Kevin, explain.”

“Nathaniel got me out of the Nest.”

Neil felt like he'd been drenched in ice water. Struggling against Andrew's weight and the cuffs, Neil growled, “Shut up, Kevin! Stop talking!”

“There's no point in keeping this a secret.”

“You know what'll happen to Jean if-”

“Jean isn't your problem anymore.” Grimacing, Kevin belched into his fist and then told Andrew, “Nathaniel got me to my car while Riko was in the shower. He told me where to go. He knew your team was at the banquet in Virginia that night.”

Neil squeezed his eyes shut and felt like his chest was collapsing. His lungs popped. A ragged wheeze came out of his mouth.

Riko would find out. Kevin had set the words free and they would somehow find their way to the Nest. Riko would punish Jean for what Neil did. Jean would suffer like never before; he'd be forced to survive it, no matter how many times he begged for death, and it would be Neil's fault.

Neil wasn't there to piece him back together. Neil wasn't there to speak to him in soothing French and fetch him ice and stay by his bedside to remind him that it was over. Neil wasn't there to help him.

Neil sucked in short, useless breaths. Pressure rang in his ears. This was a nightmare.

“Hey,” Andrew barked, tapping Neil's cheek, “knock that off.”

Neil managed to let out a strangled cry and suck in a gulp of air. The knife was no longer pressing into his neck.

“I have to go back with him,” Kevin said, sounding more sober than he had a minute ago.
White-hot fury flooded Neil's skull and poured down into his chest. “No, you're staying here, you useless son of a bitch. You're not going back to him.”

“And let you get killed for it?” Kevin had the nerve to look incredulous. “You really expect me to just do nothing? Jesus Christ.”

“If you want to go, fine,” Neil spat, “but I'm not going with you.”

“This is suicide.”

“This is revenge.” His mouth curved into a horrible, dark smile. “You and I are worth, what, millions? The Moriyamas might not really need it, but they'll be pissed when they find out they lost it because of Riko's stupid pride. Riko fucked up and I'm not going to help him fix his mistakes.”

Kevin looked like he was going to be sick again. “You know what's going to happen to you out here and you're willing to risk it just to get back at him?”

“Yes,” Neil replied. He spent years trying to figure out how to get rid of Riko. All he really had to do was wait and let Riko destroy himself.

Andrew moved off of Neil's legs at last. Standing, he dusted off his jeans and pulled out his phone to send a text. A minute later, the door opened and Nicky's head poked out.

“God, are you guys done?” he groaned. “It's so fucking late. Can we go now?”

Andrew motioned him out onto the landing and said, “I'll get the car. You get Nathaniel.”

Andrew traded him the key to the cuffs for the car keys and then he dragged Kevin inside. Nicky yawned and then shuffled over to the railing. Neil's heart quivered. He tried to curl into himself as best he could with his hands cuffed above him.

Nicky loomed over him and gave him a dopey grin. “Not gonna lie, you look real good in handcuffs.”

“Don't touch me,” Neil croaked. As soon as the cuffs were unlocked, he lashed out violently. Nicky stumbled away just in time to avoid being hit in the groin.

Nicky called over his shoulder, “Aaron, come help! He's trying to fight me again.”

Aaron appeared in the doorway, scowling. He came forward with another packet of dust in his hand. Neil tried to scramble away, but the other two were quicker. They forced the powder into his mouth and Aaron clamped his sweaty palm over his lips until he had no choice but to swallow.

The dust dragged his mind back up into the clouds.

Chapter End Notes

(The thing about the Christmas banquet in Virginia came from Nora's tumblr)
Everything hurt.

He was raw, cotton-mouthed, sore all over. His pulse throbbed in his temples. Something heavy and too hot was on top of him, squeezing the air from his lungs. The world felt like it was spinning and skipping like a scratched record. The something on top of him curled its arm over his waist and pulled him closer.

Neil licked his cracked lips and croaked, “Jean?”

A chuckle ruffled his hair. “Sorry. Try again,” said Nicky.

Neil’s eyes snapped open and a bomb went off in his chest. He squirmed and struggled, but his body was too heavy, Nicky was too heavy. As bile surged upward in his throat, Nicky nudged his head over the side of the bed where a wastebasket sat waiting. Neil emptied his stomach into it, shaking and groaning as hard tremors wracked his weak body. His sinuses burned. A balloon of pressure swelled in his skull.

Nicky patted his back as he continued dry-heaving. Neil's skin crawled with disgust.

What the hell happened?

Nicky moved away from him to climb off the bed. He didn't reach for Neil, but Neil slammed his socked foot into Nicky's hip anyway.

“Ow!” Nicky jerked out of his reach. “Calm down, man.”

Neil spat into the wastebasket and snarled, “Stay the fuck away from me.”

Nicky rubbed his hip and sighed as if he'd been through this before. “All right. Go ahead and try to get up on your own. See how that works out for you.”

While Neil struggled off the mattress, Nicky leaned out the door and called, “Aaron! Glass of water, please!”
Neil winced at Nicky's volume as he slowly maneuvered his aching body around to put his feet on the floor. He clutched the edge of the nightstand and forcefully swallowed back another rush of vomit as he stood up. His legs quivered beneath him, but Nicky was there with an arm around his shoulders before he could collapse.

“Easy there,” he said gently. “Dust'll dehydrate you like nothing else. Aaron's bringing you some water. We'll get you cleaned up and fed and you'll perk right up. You'll feel better soon.”

Nicky helped him sit down on the edge of the mattress. Neil wanted to yell and shove Nicky away, but he knew any sudden movement would agitate his stomach. He twisted the sheet in his hands and tried to breathe through the throbbing pain in his head. When he looked down, he noticed the button and zipper of his pants were undone.

The memory of hands slithered over his skin.

He remembered the club. Lights. Hands. A knife. World caught in a blender. His shoulders were sore and his wrists were faintly pink. “You look real good in handcuffs.” The blood drained from Neil's face. The feeling of Nicky's drugged kiss was still on his mouth like a stamp. He could still feel Nicky's hands.

Aaron appeared in the doorway with a glass of water and a bored look on his face. Nicky took the glass from him and carried it over to Neil, who immediately dumped it on the carpet and threw the glass at the wall. He was faintly pleased when it shattered.

“Nice,” Aaron said, rolling his eyes. “What the fuck happened to his face?”

Neil's hand shot up to his cheek and hit bare scar tissue. The bandage was gone. His stomach heaved again.

“Oh,” Nicky said, surprised. “God, that looks awful. When did that happen?”

“None of your fucking business,” Neil growled.

“Right.” Nicky managed a tremulous smile and turned back to his cousin. “When will Andrew be back?”

Aaron shrugged. “Dunno. He and Kevin left like ten minutes ago.”

“I hope he's not pushing his morning dose back too far. It'll fuck him up the whole weekend.” Nicky turned back to Neil and clasped his hands together. His eyes darted to Neil's cheek. “Andrew and Kevin went out for some food. Let's get you in the shower so you can eat when they get back.”

“Touch me again and I'll kill you,” Neil grit out.

Aaron scoffed and left.

Nicky blinked twice and then turned toward the chest of drawers. On top was a stack of soft-looking clothing. He handed it to Neil and then said, “Okay, well, it's shower time. I'll show you where the bathroom is.”

Since it meant he would have at least a couple moments alone, he took the clothes and then followed Nicky out of the bedroom. The bedroom was on the ground floor of a house he'd never been in. Down a short hallway was the bathroom with plain fixtures and bottles of hair products littering the dingy counter. Nicky pointed out the spare towel folded over the edge of the tub and told Neil to take as much time as he needed before leaving him.
Neil locked the door immediately and dropped the clothes on the floor. He drank gulps of water from the sink faucet, dry-heaved some more, and then continued to drink until he could think straight.

*Why does this keep happening to me?*

When he finally faced his own reflection, he froze. His eyes were bloodshot with dark smudges underneath, but they were still his father's. After these nights, he always expected to see grimy handprints on his skin since he could still feel clammy palms and rough fingers ghosting over him, but there were none. He looked a bit dirty and exhausted, but no one could tell from looking at him what Nicky had done. The stains were under his skin, burned into his memory.

He examined his scar. The outer edges of it had faded thanks to the cream, but there was still an ugly patch of dark pink where his tattoo had been.

Neil shuddered as he remembered Kevin vomiting and yelling and saying he would take Neil back to the Nest. Andrew hadn't listened when Neil begged him not to let Kevin see. Neil's grip tightened around the edge of the counter. Andrew only wanted answers and didn't care about the damage they caused. After he was finished ruining Neil's secret, he'd given Neil over to his cousin. Neil didn't remember anything after that.

Knowing was bad enough. Wondering was worse.

Jean had always been in immense pain after Riko let the older boys into his bed. Neil had to help him walk to the showers and he often had to help him with his gear for at least a couple days. He wasn't in that much pain and his underwear was dry and still in place, which was a bit of a relief. Still, there were other things a person could do to another.

*“Let's a flip a coin and see if it's heads or tails.”*

His heart was hot and high in his throat. Neil had to get out of there. He couldn't spend the morning in this house with the cousins and Kevin. What if it wasn't over? Andrew could slip drugs in his breakfast or make good on his threats to finally murder him. Nicky could be outside waiting for Neil to climb naked into the shower to break in and have more of his "fun."

The window was his best option.

Keeping an eye on the door, Neil changed quickly into the clean clothes Nicky had given him. He didn't have his boots, which was unfortunate, but he couldn't go out looking for them now. Luckily, his money and Wymack's phone number were still in the zippered pockets of his black pants. He dug the money and the scrap of paper out and stuffed them into the pocket of the baggy sweatpants he now wore.

After turning on the shower to muffle the noise, Neil stood on the closed toilet lid and worked the window open. It was a tight fit, but Neil wriggled and struggled until he finally got his body through the window frame. He fell gracelessly into the hedge below with a harsh grunt. The branches left stinging scratches down his arms and pain flared through his side, but it didn't stop him from hobbling away as quickly as he could away from the house. He checked to make sure the money was still in his pocket before climbing over the waist-high fence and continuing through the neighbor's lawn.

When he made it out onto a street, he stopped and looked around. There was no easy way for him to determine which street would lead out of the labyrinthine suburb. Even if he could manage to escape it, he still had no clue how to get to a pay phone. He had no idea what he was doing and the whole world seemed to press in around him, threatening to suffocate him. Neil stuffed back the prickle of
hopelessness and started walking.

He stuck to the sidewalks and kept a wary eye out for Andrew’s car as he walked through the tangled streets. His neck tingled with the sensation of being watched and his chest was swelling with the beginning stage of a panic attack. Anxiety trickled coldly down his back. He didn't think he could make it back to the cousins' house now even if he wanted to.

He kept moving forward. Every step made his legs twinge painfully.

Eventually, he reached the entrance to the suburb and found a four-lane road with enough traffic to suggest it led to useful places. Neil turned down the sidewalk and headed toward a cluster of signs in the distance, promising shops or gas stations or restaurants. He tried to ignore the curious looks he got from a jogger and then two dog-walkers and scanned the road for any black cars the same size and shape as Andrew's. Escaping would undoubtedly earn him a nasty punishment.

By the time he finally reached a gas station, his body felt like it was made of eggshells, hollow and fragile. A headache festered behind his eyes. Hunger squeezed his stomach and his groin was heavy with the need to urinate. He flinched when the bell above the door jangled to announce his arrival. The middle-aged man behind the counter frowned at him and asked, “You all right, kid?”

Neil grit his teeth and nodded. He knew his height made him look younger at a distance and he hoped this would work in his favor here. There was a sign posted outside stating that all customers must have shoes and it was only a matter of time before someone noticed the filthy socks he was wandering around in.

In a dark little hallway at the back of the store, there were three blue doors with peeling paint and smudged handles; one was for staff only and the other two were restrooms. Neil knocked twice on the one marked for men and then pushed the door open. The room was smelly, but blessedly empty.

After relieving himself and washing his hands, Neil ventured back out into the store. He kept the cashier in his periphery at all times, aware of the man's eyes following him as he picked out a couple water bottles and a small bag of pretzels.

When Neil stepped up to the counter to pay for the items, the cashier asked, “Rough night?”

Neil nodded and handed over some cash. The man looked pointedly at Neil's hands, which were shaking uncontrollably, as he got Neil's change out of the register drawer and printed his receipt. He handed everything other and said, “You take care now, okay?”

Avoiding eye contact, Neil thanked the man politely and then hurried outside with his bag and his change. He plopped down on the curb, squinting in the sunlight, and hastily opened one of the water bottles. He downed almost half of it before he stopped to catch his breath and eat. The pretzels and water took the edge off his headache, but he needed more food, more water, and more sleep. He needed to get back to Wymack's.

A mother and her two young children looked at him with a mixture of wariness and curiosity as they passed him on their way inside. A man pumping gas into his truck was watching him as well. Heat climbed up his chest and into his cheeks. He curled his toes against the gritty asphalt.

Fatigue filled him like wet, lazy concrete and weighed him down. Before he got too tired, Neil forced himself back to his feet and ambled over to the pay phone. He cradled the receiver between his ear and his shoulder and slipped two quarters into the slot. With the scrap of paper in hand, Neil dialed Wymack's number and waited.
“This is David Wymack. Leave a message and I'll get back to you.”

Neil hung up.

He tried again.

The phone rang.

“This is David Wymack. Leave a message-”

He hung up.

He tried to stay calm.

He dialed again.

“This is David Wymack. Leave-”

A bubble of panic expanded in his chest, squashing his lungs and squeezing his heart, until it burst and a strangled cry got stuck in his throat. He didn't know what to do.

“Think,” he growled to himself, but his mind was full of static. He didn't know anyone else's number. He didn't even know where he was really. He didn't remember how to get back to the cousins' house. His eyes darted around the parking lot. There were two cars at the pumps, one parked in front of the store, and an eighteen-wheeler parked in the side lot. He had thirty-six dollars, some change, half a bag of pretzels, and a water bottle. He didn't know if that was enough to convince someone to help him.

He didn't know what to do.

Desperate, he tried the phone again.

“This is David-”

He slammed the phone down and let out a broken cry of frustration as he broke out in a cold sweat. What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?

A car pulled into the handicapped space behind him; gravel crunched beneath tires and the engine growled smoothly. Neil glanced back and felt a strange combination of relief and horror. Andrew was behind the wheel with his phone pressed to his ear. Kevin sprang out of the passenger seat and stalked toward Neil, furious and large as a thunderstorm.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Kevin demanded. “We've been driving all over looking for you.”

Neil gave him a flat look. He felt perfectly ridiculous standing there in his socks, panicking and still recovering from a heaping dose of cracker dust.

“You can't just wander off, Nathaniel!” Kevin shouted, throwing his arm out to gesture at the rest of the world. “Are you still high? Jesus, it's like you want to get murdered.”

Andrew opened his door and climbed out of the car, still talking into the phone. “Yes, Coach, he's safe and sound just like I promised. Naughtly little thing just ran off to explore. Well, I don't know. I just said I don't know. No, you'll have to ask him yourself. Bye, Coach. Good-bye, Coach.” He flipped the phone shut and shielded his eyes with one hand. “Well, hello, Nathaniel. Fancy meeting you here.”
“I was thirsty,” said Neil.

Kevin seethed. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Neil held up the water bottle and gave it a little shake. Kevin’s fists clenched.

Andrew beckoned Neil over with a wave of his hand. “Time to go home, children. Mother Wymack is ever so worried.”

They stopped by the house to eat the breakfast sandwiches Andrew and Kevin had bought earlier. Neil refused to touch the food and instead made himself look busy by collecting his club clothing and his boots. Aaron glared daggers at him the entire time, angry that he’d had to spend half an hour wandering around the neighborhood searching for Neil. Nicky tried to make conversation with Kevin while Andrew finally took his morning dose and passed out cold on the sofa for a short nap.

They waited for Andrew to wake before piling into the car to head back to campus. Andrew’s obnoxious grin was back and his eyes were bright. This time, Andrew sat in the backseat to Neil’s right while Kevin sat up front with Nicky. Aaron complained about Neil’s smell while Nicky tried to make small talk, though he was clearly dancing around the topic of Neil’s scarred cheekbone.

Andrew’s untempered glee and snide laughter was preferable to the soft, hopeful smiles Nicky kept giving him over his shoulder. Neil focused on Andrew’s excited prattling about a hypothetical vacation to Mexico instead of Nicky’s questions about how Neil was feeling and whether he wanted to stop for food since he didn’t eat his breakfast.

Neil didn’t feel like he could breathe properly until Nicky parked in front of Wymack’s apartment complex. He was buzzing with the need to get out, get away from them, and forget any of this happened.

Before Andrew climbed out to let Neil past, he said, “Wait here, Nicky. Kevin and I need to have a chat with Wymack. Won’t take long.”

Neil’s rage roared to life. He was exhausted and his insides felt like they’d been scraped out with a soup spoon. His clothes were glued to his skin by dried sweat. He just wanted a hot shower and a nap on Wymack’s lumpy couch before deciding if he was going to finally run or not. The last thing he wanted was more time with Andrew and Kevin.

He hauled himself out of the car, trembling and barely able to catch his breath with all the heat building in his chest.

Kevin got out smoothly and slammed his door shut. Andrew led them inside and Neil stared at the back of his neck, imagining how simple it would be to strangle him.

Andrew whistled while they rode up to Wymack’s floor and then he rattled his prescription bottle all the way to the door. The third knock was interrupted by Wymack pulling the door open and fixing Andrew with a hard look.

“What?” Andrew asked nonchalantly. “We only lost track of him for a little while. No harm, no foul. Just a bit of a wild goose chase. All is well, Coach.”

Wymack put a hand on Neil’s shoulder as soon as he stepped over the threshold. Neil flinched away and hurried across the room to stand beside the couch that he fully intended to nap on once Andrew and Kevin finally left him alone.

“So who wants to tell me what the hell happened to his face?” Wymack asked.
Neil touched his scar without thinking. Getting a bandage for it now wouldn't do anything, but he still wanted to anyway.

“Riko burned his tattoo off,” Kevin answered. “He kicked Nathaniel off the team.”

“Nathaniel is a little liar, after all,” Andrew added unhelpfully as he flopped down onto the middle cushion of the coach. With his hands clasped behind his head, he grinned up at Neil.

“Neil?” Wymack grunted, arms crossed and brow furrowed.

Neil dropped his gaze to the floor. “It doesn't matter.”

Kevin sighed heavily. “Riko isn't going to let him back into the Nest unless he brings me, too.”

Andrew mimed playing a trombone with a mournful, “Bwah-wah.”

“Why would Neil want to go back to the Nest if this is the sort of treatment he gets?” Wymack asked.

“It's his 'best option,’” Andrew supplied, crooking two fingers into air quotes.

“That doesn't make sense.”

“Nathaniel,” Kevin prompted.

Neil sucked in a deep breath. “If you were bleeding out in the ocean, wouldn't you swim into a cage to avoid a shark?”

When he looked up, he could see Wymack turning it over in his mind. Even Andrew's smile had dimmed while he considered what Neil was saying. Kevin had told them stories about Riko's sadistic nature, but Riko wasn't the cruelest god in Neil's universe.

Andrew tilted his head back against the couch and asked, “Where does Riko rank in your top five problems?”

“Fourth or fifth depending on the day,” Neil replied.

“Interesting.”

Wymack rubbed at his jaw and frowned deeply. “What kind of trouble are you in?”

“The bad kind.”

“So where are you running to?”

Kevin shook his head. “You can't run. You'll be dead in a month.”

“The Moriyamas didn't kill you for running away,” Andrew pointed out. He fidgeted on the couch cushion and his smile was twitching at one corner. Neil wondered if he was agitated by the topic of conversation or his own lack of information.

“Nathaniel and I are not the same,” Kevin told him with a bizarre half-smile, as if he couldn't believe Andrew would even suggest such a thing. “Besides, I was broken when I left the Nest. They don't expect me to be of any use to them.”

“You've told them enough, Kevin,” Neil said coldly. He would get them all killed with his big mouth
in no time.

“It’s their business now, too, Nathaniel.”

“Only because you dragged it onto their doorstep.”

“You gave him directions,” Andrew interjected.

Wymack held up his hand and said, “Somebody explain.”

Neil's stomach knotted.

“Nathaniel aided in Kevin's great escape,” Andrew replied. “News to me, too, Coach. You should thank me for drugging the truth out of him.”

“You did what?”

Kevin let out a low groan. “None of it matters now. Nathaniel and I have to go back to West Virginia. Should we take a bus or-”

“No,” Neil snarled, pushing off the wall. He didn't take more than two steps toward Kevin before Andrew was on his feet, blocking Neil's path.

“You know what will happen if I don't do this,” Kevin reminded him.

“So what? I'm not your concern.”

“We were friends once.”

Neil scoffed. “No, we weren't.”

This was bad. Kevin's resignation was clear on his face. He knew the only way they would both survive was for them to return to the Nest, but Neil wasn't done digging in his heels yet. If his death was another step towards Riko's downfall, then so be it. At least Jean would be given a chance at a life free of their so-called king. Neil wasn't about to let Kevin ruin everything with some misguided attempt at heroism.

Kevin was already wilting under the pressure of Riko's wishes just like Neil feared he would. He was trained to stand tall and conquer the Exy world, but also to shrink and surrender whenever Riko commanded it. Neil had watched it happen too many times over the years. Kevin was whatever his masters wished him to be.

It would take something drastic- anger, betrayal, hatred- to puff Kevin up enough to stand on his own and, if that failed, then Neil would have to give the other two men a reason to throw him out of Kevin's life for good. Neil couldn't sever the ties by himself with Kevin being so stubborn.

“What happened to your hand was my fault.”

The silence was somehow worse than the outrage he'd expected. Kevin's features smoothed into a stony mask, but he said nothing. Andrew cocked his head.

“What happened to your hand was my fault.”

Wymack asked quietly.

Neil stared at Kevin. “I had to mop up the blood, too. I've always been cleaning up your messes and I'm so goddamn sick of it. You're too pathetic and weak to face anything, so you drown the bad thoughts with booze. Not all of us had the luxury of a drinking habit, Kevin. I had to deal with all
your shit even when you couldn't. I got you back pretty good, though, didn't I? Exy was all you had and now you have nothing. Without Exy, you *are* nothing. So damaged only the Foxes could want you.”

Wymack rubbed at his frowning mouth. He looked ancient and exhausted and to know that he was the cause of it sent a dull pang through Neil's chest. He broke Wymack's son and now he'd tracked his filth into Wymack's home. Cold shame snuffed out his anger. Neil didn't realize that he cared for Wymack's good opinion until he felt the sudden loss of it.

“Do you want me to stab him now, Kevin?” Andrew asked, sounding highly amused.

Kevin tipped his chin up imperiously and asked, “What was your other choice?”

“Other choice?” Andrew echoed brightly. “I'm intrigued.” He tapped the broad side of his knife against his cheek and tilted his head, eyeing Neil curiously.

“Riko liked giving you choices to fuck with your head,” Kevin continued. “What was your other option?”

Neil's eyes bulged. Did Riko tell Kevin about his little mind games or did Kevin somehow manage to notice through his thick layer of denial?

“Explain it to us, Neil,” Wymack urged, probably wanting to give Neil the benefit of the doubt even now.

*Ever the optimist,* Neil thought bitterly. He looked Wymack in the eye and said, “I held Kevin down and told Jean to aim for his hand. I told him to break it.”

Wymack's jaw clenched. It didn't feel like a victory. Neil didn't want Wymack to hate him, but he needed to do this. Kevin had to stay at Palmetto State no matter what. He had to succeed in order for Riko to fall.

“Still not adding up right,” Andrew murmured. “You hurt him, then you helped him. Why so inconsistent, Nathaniel? You been diagnosed with anything yet?”

Over Andrew's shoulder, Neil found Kevin's steely gaze. Cold metal slid under the hem of Neil's shirt and his abdomen clenched at the chilly slide of it. Andrew wasn't pressing hard enough to draw blood yet. Neil held perfectly still.

“Andrew, put the knife away and step back,” Wymack commanded. The blade disappeared and then Andrew moved away. Then, Wymack turned to Neil and said, “Help me understand what's going on here.”

Kevin had pulled at his loose threads and now Neil was unraveling. Nothing was going like he'd planned. He needed to think of something else to say that might provoke one of them into kicking him out. He needed to get away or else Kevin would do something foolish.

Kevin's mouth twisted unhappily. “Since Nathaniel refuses to go back to the Nest and running will get him killed, we only have one option: he'll be our new striker.”

Neil narrowed his eyes. He couldn't have heard that right. “What?”

“Wymack, get him a contract,” Kevin commanded. “Nathaniel is our new striker.”

“Wait,” Neil protested. “I'm not a striker and I have no interest in playing for your team. I'm not
staying.”

Kevin’s nostrils flared. In French, he said, “Prove to our masters that you are still a good investment, that you aren’t going to run off, and they might let you live. Your father won’t be out until next summer, so you’ll have enough time. Stop acting like a petulant child.”

Temptation yanked at his heart, but he still hesitated. “I can’t.”

“The media exposure might catch your uncle's eye,” Kevin added. “You’ll never find him on your own.”

The Foxes were the laughingstock of the Class I division, but they did get plenty of attention.

“I'm not a striker,” Neil repeated.

“You will learn.”

“Kevin-”

“Andrew will take us to the court every night to practice.”

Surely, the drugs were still lurking in Neil's system. This was all a cruel trick of his mind. Kevin made it sound so simple, but he knew it was hopeless. He couldn't keep Exy. He would never be a Fox.

“Your team won't agree to this.”

Kevin waved him off. “Don't be stupid. It's already settled. Wymack, the contract?”

Wymack slid him a questioning look. “What do you say, Neil?”

He knew he couldn't have this, but that didn't stop him from wanting.

“I think Kevin's lost his goddamn mind,” he muttered.

Wymack snorted. “I'll go make some calls and get started on that paperwork. Sit tight.”

After Wymack disappeared down the hall, Andrew twisted around to give Kevin a sweet smile. “Better go make sure he spells Nathaniel’s name right. Bit tricky, that one.”

“Andrew-”

“Run along, Kevin,” Andrew sang.

Kevin shoved his hands in his pockets and stalked off, scowling but obedient. That was more like the Kevin that Neil was familiar with.

Once they were alone, Andrew studied him with his sharp eyes. Neil was too numb to feel any fear. He stood there and he expected pain. He was already preparing for it and trying to remember how much gauze and medical tape he had left. He couldn't give himself stitches with what he had on hand. That was the only problem. Grimly, he resigned himself to the fact that he’d have to accept help from Wymack or Abby if they were still willing to offer it.

Instead of lashing out, though, Andrew said, “I'll make a deal with you.”

Neil stared blankly. It felt like a trap.
“Kevin's a bit wobbly, isn't he?” Andrew leaned closer and pitched his voice low like he was sharing a secret. “Wishy-washy Kevin, always changing his mind. He's a little obsessed with you- he's consistent in that, at least. Still thinking with that old hive mind. Bee is busy working on it. Here's my proposal: if you keep him here where I can keep him safe like I promised, I'll protect you from your big, bad wolf.”

Neil couldn't hold back the incredulous puff of laughter. “Go fuck yourself.”

“No need to be rude, Nathaniel.”

“You can't protect me from what's coming my way. Even if you could, if you really think I'd trust you after last night then you need to get your head examined again.”

Andrew narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. “So what will you take in exchange for it?”

“I don't want anything.”

“Everyone wants something.”

“Exception to every rule.”

“We'll see how exceptional you are,” Andrew said with a little chuckle.

Neil shook his head. “Take Kevin and go.”

Andrew tapped two fingers to his temple. “Til next time.”

Neil watched Andrew saunter down the hall and lean into the open doorway of the office. He was almost free of them. He could feel himself crumbling. The first tremors of his panic attack rumbled in his center, sending shock waves out to the boundaries of his body. His skin tingled. To stave it off, he bit the inside of his cheek and focused all his attention on the air passing in and out of his lungs.

On his way out, Kevin said something to him about starting practice the next day. He told Neil to eat and sleep and ready himself. Neil was out of shape after a month of “wasting away on Wymack's couch.” Neil would have to work harder than ever to catch up.

Andrew smiled widely at him once more before closing the door behind them. Neil let out a shaky sigh of relief. He could sense Wymack standing behind him, but he couldn't force himself to turn around. He didn't want to see the expression on his face.

“Hop in the shower, kid. You stink,” Wymack said after a long stretch of silence. “I'll get you something to eat, but then I've gotta run. Exites should still be open, so I'm going to get you some gear for tomorrow, all right? Kevin already told me what sizes to get.”

Neil nodded; he couldn't form any words. He couldn't even bring himself to thank Wymack for agreeing to all this after what he'd learned about Neil's ugly nature. He could never evict the demons from his skull. Had Wymack seen them peeking through his eyes?

With an armful of his own clothing, Neil shut himself in the bathroom. He checked the lock three times before using the toilet and then washing up in the sink. He kept his eyes cast down to avoid the dead-eyed boy in the mirror.

It wasn't until he was naked under the hot spray of the shower that he let himself fall apart. The rush of water muffled his staccato, wheezing gasps for air. He could still feel Nicky's tongue stuffed into his mouth, Nicky's hands slipping over his body. He could still feel all of them. On top of him,
leaning over him, clawing at him. The chambers of his heart housed a grotesque gallery where his worst memories were on display, memories of hands and teeth and his own body's betrayal. “This boy needs a woman's touch. He misses his mother.”

He wanted to peel his body away and leave it behind. It didn't belong to him anyway. It was the master's property, Riko's plaything, broken flesh and weary bones left for Neil to somehow hold together. Useful and used. He scrubbed his skin until it was red and raw, but he didn't feel clean.

He didn't sob, but it was a near thing. He blamed the exhaustion for weakening his emotional dam. Another wave of hysteria slammed into him forcefully, knocking him to his knees. He curled forward and clutched at his hair, tugging gently like Jean always did to calm him down.

“You survived everything else,” he mumbled to himself. “You will survive this, too.”
Chapter Summary

Neil signs his contract and prepares for his first time back on the court with Kevin.

Chapter Notes

For the billionth time, I'm sorry I've been so behind on replying! Thank you all for reading!! I really appreciate it <3

The memory of his name scratched along the line at the bottom of a contract kept him awake. Neil had signed with the Foxes. He was on his way to becoming a student at Palmetto State University with a scholarship that should have gone to Janie Smalls. He would have books, food, a room with a real bed. He would have a monthly allowance and classes filled with strangers. As he stared up at the dark ceiling, Neil pictured himself in orange.

The siren call of the contract dragged him down into dangerous territory. If he got comfortable there, he'd die. It was crucial that he remember he would never be a Fox, no matter what that piece of paper said. He could paint himself orange all he liked, but he was a Raven, scarred and feathered. He'd never be able to escape his past or the gruesome fate that awaited him. All he had was the opportunity to keep Kevin out of Riko's clutches; hopefully, it would be long enough for Kevin to take his rightful place at the top. If Neil was lucky, he'd see Riko fall before his time ran out.

When Wymack rose to take his morning walk on Sunday, Neil pretended to be asleep. Wymack shuffled into the kitchen and started the day's first pot of coffee by himself. Neil clenched his eyes shut and pressed his face into the cushion, trying to keep still. Ten minutes later, two coffee mugs clinked against the counter before the coffee was poured.

On his way out, Wymack paused, sighed, then continued out into the hallway alone. In spite of the blanket, Neil felt cold all over. The apartment was silent. Once he was sure Wymack was gone, Neil climbed out of his makeshift bed and made himself breakfast even though he didn't have an appetite. Neil was restless and itching to run.

He went to the window and drew the blinds just to peer out into the eerie blue morning. Just a couple of states away, Riko was stewing in the knowledge of what Neil had done. He knew now that Neil wasn't coming back, that he wasn't going to obey Riko's orders. Riko would drag Edgar Allan south and crush the Foxes just to teach Kevin and Neil a lesson they'd learned years ago: all must kneel before the king. It was a lesson Riko was probably beating into Jean at that very moment. Neil grit his teeth and told himself that Jean wasn't his to protect anymore. He couldn't help him now. Looking back was pointless. Jean was no longer his concern.

He turned his thoughts forward and thought of Exy.

Not only would he have to make up for a month of missed practices, he would have to learn to play as a striker. He had two months before he would have to step onto the court with the rest of the
Foxes and prove that he could be of use to them.

Neil knew he was going to die. Kevin said he only needed to prove he was still a good investment for the Moriyamas in order to save his skin, but on a team like the Foxes that would be impossible. They were the joke of their division and a disgrace to the sport itself. Even a striker like Kevin would look incompetent surrounded by a team like that.

He paced the length of the front room with his fingers hooked tightly around the handle of a coffee mug. Riko hadn't kicked Neil out of the Nest because he no longer wanted Neil in his inner circle, but because he was so thoroughly convinced that Neil would come running back out of fear. Neil still had value. Riko would retaliate, of course, and humiliate him on the court, but he wouldn't kill him— that honor would be left for his father.

It was decided then and there that if the Foxes didn't make it to spring championships, he would take what he had and run. If he was lucky, his father's men wouldn't come for him before then. He would have all of spring to make himself disappear before his father got out of prison.

The lock clicked and the door swung open. “Oh,” Wymack grunted, pausing mid-step over the threshold. “You're up.”

Neil froze. *Here it comes,* he thought. There was no way Wymack would treat him kindly after what he learned the day before. He waited for the disgust to appear in Wymack's eyes.

“Kevin wants you on the court at nine.”

Neil blinked at him.

“I was, uh, thinking we could go a bit early- maybe around eight? I could give you some pointers before he runs you into the ground.”

Neil shifted his weight and nodded once.

Wymack's mouth twitched to one side. “Think fast,” he said, and tossed something.

The key ring sailed across the room, jangling and glinting, and Neil caught it easily in his left hand. The two keys were larger than the one to Wymack's cabinet; one was dull steel, the other tarnished brass. Neither made any sense.

“The long one opens the gate. The other one opens the door,” Wymack explained. “You'll be coming and going on your own now, so I figured those might come in handy. I'll get you some court keys, too.”

“You have no reason to trust me with these,” Neil said. His voice came out scratchy.

Wymack shrugged one shoulder. “And yet...”

Neil rubbed his thumb over the jagged, worn teeth of the brass key. *I can't keep this,* he reminded himself. He clenched his hand until the keys bit into his palm and held onto the pain.

Wymack ate his breakfast alone in the kitchen. Neil changed into fresh clothes in the bathroom and prodded at his scarred cheek. He stopped himself from reaching for a bandage to cover it with. There was no point in hiding now.

Neil had a few hours to kill, so he turned on the morning news and pretended to watch. With a grim heart, he tried to ignore the sounds of Wymack shuffling around, opening and closing doors. The
ugly words Neil had spewed yesterday stretched between them, dripping poison everywhere. Neil felt stupid for letting his guard down around the older man, for letting himself soften enough to care what Wymack thought of him. As ridiculous as it was, Neil still wanted to explain himself so that Wymack might understand. He wanted Wymack to see that he'd tried to do right in a world that was all wrong. The thought that Wymack might despise him left him sickened and chilled to the bone.

Wymack had said they'd go to the court at eight, but they left at seven-thirty. Like Neil, Wymack seemed eager to escape the heavy silence lingering in the apartment. Wordlessly, they made their way down to Wymack's car. Neil climbed into the passenger seat and hugged his bag to his stomach hard enough to feel the shape of his new court shoes through bag's material. Wymack had driven to some store in Columbia the previous afternoon while Neil napped to buy him some basic gear and plain outfits to practice in. Kevin had told him what sizes to get, of course. He didn't say how much it all cost, only that the rest of it would be delivered soon.

Neil's head was too full of Exy to pay any attention to how soft the morning sky was.

The parking lot was empty when they arrived, which was a relief. Neil had been half-worried that Kevin might have the same idea and drag his bodyguard to the stadium earlier than planned. Wymack parked close to the door and, this time, he explained the code and how often it changed. He used his own key ring to point out which keys opened what doors and, when they reached his office, Wymack dug out a second set of court keys from his desk drawer and placed them in Neil's palm.

"There," Wymack said. "Now you can run over here anytime you like. If you want a campus map, let me know."

More keys. More unearned trust. Neil couldn't look him in the eye. He stared at the key ring and choked on his own unworthiness.

"It was his hand or his kneecap," he croaked, wincing at how weak his voice was. He'd cracked and the truth was escaping now. This was breaking the rules. Ravens weren't allowed to speak to outsiders about what went on in the Nest, but Neil had already told Wymack a little, so why not tell him the rest?

"Huh?"

He ripped the rest of the secret out of his lungs. "Riko gave me a choice between... between Kevin's hand and his kneecap."

Wymack clenched his jaw and swallowed hard while he absorbed this. Then, he asked, "And what if you didn't pick?"

"He never told me beforehand, but saying no always made it worse."

"But you had an idea?" Wymack asked.

"His spine," Neil mumbled. "I knew he'd be willing to leave Riko that night. I figured it would be easier to get him out of the Nest if he could still walk."

"Jesus." Wymack scrubbed a hand over his face. He inhaled sharply and held the breath in his lungs for a few seconds before letting it go. "Okay, I want you to listen to me because this is important. You made the best of a shit situation and anyone would've done the same. Leave that baggage at the door. That's in your past. The choices you make from here on out are the ones that matter. Got it? You choose who you want to be."

Neil's hands shook. It was a speech that the other Foxes had probably heard and took comfort in. For
Neil, there was no hope for redemption. He was born into a slaughterhouse. He had his father's cold eyes and his mother's vengeful heart. Monsters made monsters. There was nothing good in him when he was handed over to Riko, but Riko dug his claws in anyway just in case there was something soft to gouge out.

It was foolish to want Wymack's charity and the warmth of his concern. Thawing out would only hurt him more when he was tossed back into the cold. *Don't get used to this*, he warned himself, but he was already slipping.

Wymack was still staring at him hard. “How long did you live at the Nest?”

“It doesn't matter.”

“You should talk to Betsy. If anyone can help you sort through this, it's her.”

The psychiatrist. Neil wasn't going to spill the hideous contents of his mind just so Dr. Dobson could frown and struggle to understand it all. He already knew he was damaged beyond repair.

“It'd be a waste of time,” he muttered.

“Whose time? Yours or hers?” Wymack challenged.

Neil didn't reply.

“You might feel like you're too fucked up to get help, but I don't believe that. Abby doesn't and neither does Betsy. There's always a way back, so let us help you find it.”

Neil swallowed the fire in his throat. “Can we go to the court now?”

Sighing, Wymack said, “Sure.”

Neil tucked the key ring deep into his bag where it would be safest and followed Wymack out into the hallway. In one of the equipment closets, Wymack found a spare striker's racquet that would suit Neil's height. It was aluminum, lighter than Neil’s old racquet, and its net was deeper. It looked wrong in Neil's hands, but it was the closest thing to right he'd felt in weeks.

Watching him, Wymack said, “Your new racquets will be here in a few days. This'll have to do in the meantime.”

Since it was just the two of them for now, Neil went without armor. He put on his court shoes and stretched by the home benches on the inner court while Wymack took a call on his cell from Dan. Every so often, Wymack would glance over at Neil, which made Neil's neck prickle. As captain, Dan couldn't have been very pleased with taking him on as their new striker.

He wondered what Wymack told the Foxes. Nathaniel Wesninski wasn't on the Ravens' line-up, wasn't enrolled at Edgar Allan University, but he was marked for Riko's perfect Court. They must have already guessed he'd been living at the Nest for some time. Maybe they assumed he was taken in when he was younger and kept out of the public eye. Maybe they didn't care enough to wonder about him. He hoped that was the case because if any of them discovered the truth, he wasn't sure he could handle the embarrassment.

Maybe Kevin told them already that he was nothing more than a thing to use, a mindless body trained to serve and obey. Maybe Kevin explained what he was to spare them the trouble of treating him as one of their own.
“We are not his pets. We're not the same,” Kevin had once said. “I'm his brother and you're his plaything.”

Mortification washed coldly over his stomach.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

After he was done with stretches, Wymack was still talking quietly to Dan, so Neil left him there and jogged a few laps around the court. His steady footfalls were too loud, his breathing too harsh. He didn't think he'd ever get used to doing this alone.

When he finally stopped, Wymack was waiting for him at the court door. Neil's lungs quivered with anticipation as he stepped onto the glossy, gleaming floorboards. His heart felt both settled and exhilarated. The court was the only home he'd ever loved and he never wanted to leave it again.

“Kevin had that same look,” Wymack said. He carried a bucket of balls and a racquet of his own toward the fox paw painted in the center of the court. “You're probably rusty as hell, so I'll go easy on you.”

“Right back at you.”

Wymack arched an eyebrow and then they began.

The drills were insultingly simple, the kind Neil remembered from little leagues, but he still fumbled. They played a simple game of catch first just to get Neil accustomed to the feel of his racquet. Neil's aim was clumsy and he got scolded for mistakes that Kevin hadn't made since he was twelve. He didn't need Kevin around to know what he'd say.

After an hour, Neil felt miserable again. He wasn't overworked or exhausted, but he was embarrassed and once again furious that he let himself end up in this position. The relief of being back on the court was choked out by the agonizing realization of how much progress he needed to make by June.

When it was almost nine o'clock, they took another break and waited for Kevin and Andrew to get there. Neil stared at the clock on the foyer's wall. His stomach was heavy with dread. He hadn't felt like this about practice in years.

“You sure you don't want me to stay?” Wymack asked for the third time that morning.

It was bad enough that Andrew would witness his humiliation. He didn't need Wymack there as well.

“I'm sure,” Neil replied.

Wymack frowned. “All right. I'll be in my office. Come find me when you're done.”

Neil picked up his pile of gear and took it back to the showers. He locked himself in one of the stalls and wriggled out of his clothing to strap his armor into place. He avoided looking at the rows upon rows of scar tissue covering his chest and upper thighs. There were days when he could stand the sight of his body, but it wasn't one of those days.

After he was fully dressed, he leaned against the door and squeezed his eyes shut. Wearing gear again felt better than he thought it would. It was like he'd been missing parts of his body and now he was finally whole. The flood of relief left a sick feeling in its wake. Maybe it wasn't self-preservation that drove him to sign the contract after all. It was childish greed- empty, needy hands stretched out
toward the one thing that made him feel good.

Giving it up again would kill him.

He'd made a terrible mistake.

Kevin and Andrew's voices reached him, drifting in from the locker room. Neil straightened his back and squared his shoulders, mentally preparing himself.

“Nathaniel?” Kevin called.

Neil opened the stall door and stepped out hesitantly. Kevin gave him a once-over and then jerked his head toward the locker room, beckoning him to follow. Kevin was already in his gear, but Andrew was not. He straddled one of the benches, eating a candy bar while texting with his free hand.

Noticing his stare, Kevin said, “There's no point in Andrew practicing with us today.”

“Practicing with you is always pointless,” Andrew answered around a mouthful of chocolate. Closing his flip phone, he looked up at Neil and grinned. “Ready to learn a new dance, monkey?”

“Just be glad he sent the other two away,” Kevin muttered.

Neil's mouth twitched. He checked behind him anyway just in case Nicky and Aaron suddenly appeared. “Where are they?”

“They've got their own games to play,” Andrew said, getting to his feet. “Come along now. You don't want to miss your court date.”

In the foyer, Neil tucked his racquet under his armpit so he could carry the bucket of balls and the stack of plastic cones that Kevin handed to him. Kevin carried only his own racquet and led the way out to the court. Andrew's candy bar wrapper crinkled behind Neil as they walked.

Andrew followed them out to the inner court before turning sharply and darting up into the stands to find a seat. Neil watched him wander back and forth along the rows until finally he flopped down. When he noticed Neil's eyes on him, he held the candy bar between his teeth and flipped Neil off with both hands.

Neil turned back and caught a glimpse of Kevin's complicated expression before it was stowed behind his calm mask. Somberly, they donned their helmets and armored gloves. Neil ignored the way Kevin flexed his left hand.

The bolts of the court door slid harshly into place. Once the echoes faded, the silence settled around them. Floor polish, sweat, blood—only two scents were real, but it took Neil a moment to remember that.

They were frozen for a while, too afraid to move. This was a different court, but it held all the usual ghosts. The orange fox paw in the center did nothing to chase away Riko's silky commands and the master's thunderous reprimands. Standing there in the plexiglass prison, memories of every game, every drill, every scrimmage stacked on top of one another until Neil's brain held them all at once. Riko, the master, the Ravens moving as one black shadow, Neil's little league coach Mr. Burton, the other children running around him and laughing, his mother cheering for him in the front row, the first time he saw an Exy game on television.

“What's that, Mom?”
“It’s just a game.”

He didn’t realize he’d stopped breathing until his chest jerked with a sharp gasp that sucked air into his lungs. His body remembered how to function even though he’d forgotten.

“It’s strange.”

Neil wasn’t sure if he’d imagined Kevin saying that or not, so he ignored it and began setting up the cones like he’d done for Riko and Kevin a million times. Kevin watched him with his mouth set in a firm line and then gripped his racquet tighter in his right hand.

Their history and their circumstances made it impossible for them to ever be brothers or partners the way that Neil and Jean had been. Kevin spent the last eight years looking down on Neil, but it was Riko who trapped Kevin on his pedestal. They despised themselves and one another for the parts they’d been forced to play in the horror Riko orchestrated, but Ravens weren’t built to be without each other. They were bound together, whether they liked it or not.

Kevin cleared his throat and said, “All right, let’s begin.”
On Monday, Riko appeared on the morning news. Neil almost choked on his coffee and it took Wymack's hand clamping down on his shoulder to remind him where he actually was. Neil was still in Wymack's apartment. Riko wasn't there. He was just on the television. He's not here, he told himself.

His voice scratched deep lines into Neil's mind.

“As you all know, the Ravens recently suffered the loss of our vice-captain and starting striker Kevin Day,” he said, looking perfectly calm and collected. He was in control and he knew it. “What you do not know is that we lost another gifted player. Nathaniel Wesninski was meant to be our new starting backliner this fall, but some private matters have caused him a great deal of distress. My uncle and I felt it only right to release him from his contract due to the troubling signs of his mental instability. We wish Nathaniel luck wherever he goes and we hope he finds the help he needs. Thank you all for your time and support.”

Neil scoffed bitterly. If he ever went crawling back to the Nest, Riko could claim he had a miraculous recovery. In the meantime, Riko made him seem damaged enough to be Fox material. No one would be surprised when he appeared on their line-up.

Riko was still in control.

Cold nausea tickled Neil's belly. He could almost hear his father's cronies buzzing with the news, swarming like wasps, all eager for the opportunity to hunt down their boss's son. His father would hear about it soon enough and he would decide who to send after Neil when the time was right. His life was circling the drain. There was nothing he could do to stop it now.

Wymack let go of Neil's shoulder and Neil headed straight for the bathroom to lean over the toilet and retch until his stomach stopped squirming. When he returned to the front room, the television was off and Wymack was putting on his shoes.

“Well, that's over with now,” said Wymack. “Time to hit the gym.”
The Foxes watched him with a wariness they hadn't worn around him since he first arrived. It was as if signing with their team made him a new person. Seth knocked him roughly into a wall when he passed by on his way to the free weights; there wasn't much Neil could do against someone of Seth's size, so he let himself crumple and then brushed himself off.

The girls' interest in him was, unfortunately, doubled. Once again, they tried to make conversation with him and, once again, Neil tried to hold his breath to avoid inhaling the scent of their shampoo. Allison's nails drummed menacingly against her water bottle and Dan's arm was draped heavily across Neil's stiff shoulders while Renee watched him with curious eyes. It took him ten minutes to escape.

Shortly after, Nicky bounded over to Neil to offer his extra Gatorade. Neil stared at Nicky's golden-brown hand wrapped around the bottle and everything in him shriveled coldly as he remembered those hands slithering up and down his chest. Had he bragged to the others about what he'd done to Neil? Had they watched? Maybe everyone was laughing at the horrible gap in Neil's memory, waiting for him to ask so they could dangle the answers just out of his reach. Neil stared up at Nicky silently, too afraid to open his mouth. For a moment he could taste alcohol and cracker dust and Nicky's tongue.

Eventually, Nicky gave up and wandered back to his family.

A few times, Neil caught Kevin staring at him. He wondered if Kevin could ever really be a Fox with another Raven around to remind him of what he should be. Neil couldn't hold Kevin up, but he'd do his best not to drag him down.

After the Foxes were through with their work-out, they all showered and changed and regrouped just outside the locker room to wait for Wymack. Neil stepped out last and kept close to the wall. Andrew was rambling loudly about a hypothetical nuclear apocalypse, but Seth could still be heard over him.

“He's a fucking backliner!” Seth cried, looking to Matt and Allison for support. “No one took us seriously before and now they'll just be laughing at us. What the hell is Coach thinking?”

He talked as if Neil wasn't there with them, but Neil was used to being looked over and ignored. Most of the Ravens treated him like he was just a piece of furniture when they weren't on the court. Renee's steady stare was what made him uncomfortable.

Dan folded her arms and glared at Seth. “Coach thinks he can learn and so do I, so shut up and figure out how to deal with it, Seth.”

“You might as well put me out there by myself! I'm going to be stuck with a cripple and an idiot with no experience.”

“The fuck did you just call me?” snapped Kevin.

“He's not wrong,” commented Allison.

“Guys, come on,” Matt said. “We don't know much about him, so let's just give him a chance.”

Allison snorted. “Exactly. He's been here for, what, a month? And he's barely said two words to us. He's boring or he's hiding shit.”

“He's talked to us,” Nicky chimed in.

Allison stared at him flatly.
“What?” Nicky folded his arms moodily. “He came to Columbia on Friday and everything. Andrew says he's not a threat.”

There was a moment of silence before the older Foxes exploded at once.

“He did what?” Dan demanded.

Allison glared at Andrew. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You're lucky he didn't call the cops.”

Neil hadn't considered that as an option. He knew what happened when he spoke to cops.

“We're lucky he's still in one piece,” said Matt, shooting a haunted look Neil's way.

Seth flung his hands up in exasperation. “Great! Now he's probably broken, too. Thanks a fucking lot, monsters.”

Aaron scoffed. Andrew grinned widely at the upset upperclassmen and gave Seth a thumbs-up.

Renee took a step closer to Neil and glanced over at Andrew. “Are you all right, Neil? I could give you Betsy's number, if you'd like.”

“I'm fine,” Neil replied.

Dan jerked her thumb at Matt and said, “This one was messed up for weeks after his night in Columbia. Don't act tough now if you're going to fall on your face later.”

Neil was almost amused. His words came out cold. “I appreciate your concern.”

“All right, sorry for the wait,” Wymack called as he strode down the hallway. He tucked his clipboard under his arm as he came to a stop in front of them. “Chuck's been talking my ear off about our new recruit. I'm sure Dan's filled you in about Neil. He's going to be our striker sub next- shut it, Gordon. You can pitch a fit in the summer if he's still too far behind. I don't want to hear any shit about it until then, okay? Okay. Great. Get on out of here. You all have places to be.”

Seth tried to protest again, but Dan cut him off with a sharp, “Save it.”

Things didn't get any better after that.

The Foxes sneaked glances his way during afternoon practice while he sat on the bench with Wymack. Kevin hadn't intended on practicing with the others that day, but the sight of Andrew walking out in his gear changed his mind instantly. For the first time since their big argument, Andrew guarded the goal and stopped every single shot that Kevin managed to get around Matt. Kevin looked frustrated, but Neil knew he was grateful for the challenge. The more Neil watched, the uneasier he felt about his new position on the team. He needed to master in a few months what Kevin had been perfecting since childhood.

At ten o'clock that night, Neil crept out of Wymack's apartment. His insides shivered anxiously as he pulled the door closed behind him. He clutched the keys and reminded himself that he would be able to get back in. It's just leaving for a couple hours and coming back, he thought. Leaving and coming back.

When he made it to Andrew's car, Kevin was angry at him for being late. “Ten o'clock means on the court at ten, not leaving at ten,” he said. “If you're late again tomorrow night, we'll leave you here.”

Neil said nothing, but internally reprimanded himself for making such a simple mistake. He should
have known better.

Andrew napped somewhere in the stadium instead of practicing with them, which Neil didn't mind at all. If Andrew had been in the goal, the shots that Neil actually managed to get inside the goal's boundaries would've all been blocked.

Neil was sickened by what a relief it was to be beside Kevin, focusing on nothing but the game. The court was his safe harbor and the robotic repetition of his movements lulled his mind into a tranquil, numb state. Nothing existed but the ball and the goal. His only concern was the angle of his shots.

They ran the simplest Raven drill in silence until Neil's arms felt like jelly.

When he finally slipped back into Wymack's apartment a few hours later, he brushed his teeth and traded his sweatpants for shorts before slipping under the blanket on the couch. His mind was empty, his body was exhausted, and he slept better than he had in weeks.

On Tuesday morning, as soon as Wymack parked in the lot at the gym, his phone rang. Neil unbuckled his seat belt, but stayed in the car.

“Too early for bad news, Dan,” Wymack said in lieu of a greeting. “Wait, what? Christ. Okay. We're on our way. Don't let any of those idiots touch the damn thing, okay?”

After dropping his phone in the cup holder, Wymack swore under his breath and shoved the key back into the ignition. Neil pulled his belt back on and leaned against the door. Wymack reversed roughly out of the space and they sped off in the direction of Fox Tower. Neil kept quiet, turning cold with sick anticipation. He thought back to the fox corpses scattered across Abby's lawn and Riko's announcement the day before.

When Wymack parked in the Tower's lot and they got out, Neil saw it hanging from a tree. The Foxes stood together on the sidewalk, half were staring at the tree and half were looking Wymack's way. The other athletes unlucky enough to be awake at this hour gave the Exy team and their coach a wide berth.

“This is just sick,” Matt said as they walked closer.

The wind shifted and the sour stench of spoiled meat stung Neil's nose.

Seth's lip curled. “Coach, you seeing this? This is what we get for taking in refugees.”

Hanging from a noose was something human-shaped made of garbage bags and duct tape. It was dressed in the Raven uniform that Neil would have worn on the court that fall. Raw meat had spilled out from the slashed open “3” on its front. As it rotated slowly in the breeze, Neil saw that the white lettering on the back of the jersey was completely ruined with bloodstains and scorch marks.

Neil rubbed at the scar on his cheekbone. He felt oddly hollow, like his emotions were sealed safely behind a wall so the rest of him wouldn't sink under their weight. Somewhere, hysteria was howling. Somewhere, despair was banging on the door. Somewhere, panic was trying to pry the hinges off.

For the moment, he was perfectly calm.

“Well, Dan, you did say Nathaniel should hang with the team more often,” Andrew said with a cruel laugh.

Allison said, “Shut the hell up.”
The thing wearing his uniform kept turning slowly.

It took him almost a full minute to realize that everyone's attention was on him. Kevin's face was pinched and unreadable. Andrew had an easy smile curving his mouth. The others looked either pitying or curious.

“Neil,” Wymack said lowly, “you can get back in the car. You don’t need to be here for this.”

“I'll take care of it,” Neil mumbled. It was his fault, his responsibility. He'd been taught to clean up his own messes.

“No,” Wymack snapped. “Absolutely not.”

“What's the plan here, Coach?” asked Dan.

“You guys go on ahead to the gym and carry on like normal. I'll call maintenance and deal with this.”

“I can-” Neil tried again.

“No.”

“But-”

“I said no,” Wymack growled.

Neil folded his arms over his stomach, avoiding eye contact. He felt frail and brittle all over. The slight push of the wind made him ache. Everything was too much, too much, too much. He wished it would all stop.

The world kept turning slowly.

After that, Neil kept his head down, kept the hood of his new sweatshirt up, and focused only on exercise and Exy. With Wymack, he thought of strategy and the exhausting drills he'd been doing with Kevin each night. With the Foxes, he thought of how he could convince them he was worth their time. With Kevin, he thought of how he could never return to the life he was supposed to have.

On Wednesday, Wymack only watched a few minutes of the morning news. The Exy world was wondering where Nathaniel Wesinski had disappeared to and whether or not he had any connection to Nathan Wesinski, who was currently serving time for tax evasion. Neil knew he only had one day before everyone found out where he was and what he was doing. All day long, he trembled with fear- fear of his father, fear of Riko, fear of the world.

That night, Neil fumbled through his drills. His body was stiff and exhausted and it refused to cooperate. His head was full of fog, but he could still hear the master's voice overlapping Kevin's.

“No food and no rest until you get this right. Get up and do it again.”

When he finally slept, he dreamed of Jean suffering for each of his mistakes.

On Thursday, Palmetto State's website announced the newest addition to their line-up for the upcoming school year. Neil's legs itched to run, but he was too tired and too frightened of the outside world to even consider prying himself off Wymack's couch until it was time for practice.

After his morning work-out, he stood in the shower and felt five pairs of hands that didn't belong to him. Grimy shame coated his skin and clogged his heart. He didn't bother washing his hair; he
scrambled out from under the hot spray and towed off as quickly as he could. He didn't feel safe 
even after he was clothed again. He kept his eyes on the ground so he wouldn't have to see Nicky's 
smiling face.

On Friday, Neil's panic finally escaped whatever trap it had gotten caught in down in the darkest part 
of his mind. He couldn't land a single shot that night because he was too jittery to focus. He was 
unsettled by the shadows gathering high up in the stadium. Riko was coming for them, he could feel 
it. Kevin knocked his racquet into Neil's stomach and left him crumpled on the floor.

“Stop wasting my time,” was the last thing Kevin said to him that night.

On Saturday, Neil forced himself to leave the safety of Wymack's apartment. He hadn't been on a 
walk with Wymack since the day he went to Columbia and he found himself craving the fresh air. 
After a late dinner, Neil went downstairs with his keys clutched in his hand. At the front door, he 
froze. His joints locked, his muscles went rigid. His body refused to go another step.

“Leaving and coming back,” he muttered through clenched teeth. “It's just leaving and coming back.”

_But what if I get lost?_ whispered his fear. _What if I can't come back?_

Would anyone come looking for him?

His mind provided the memory of Jean at twelve years old, curled up and crying, "No one's even 
trying to save us. No one cares.”

Neil was beyond saving now.

He squeezed the keys and forcibly relaxed his body until he could finally step outside. The sky felt 
closer than it usually did- a giant ash-purple bowl clapped down over him, trapping him like a spider. 
The air was heavy and limited and he knew he'd run out eventually. His skin was tight and prickly. 
There was no one around, but he could feel a thousand eyes on him as he walked across the lot.

Once he finished stretching, he jogged down the street. He turned around after a few blocks and ran 
the other way. Up and down the street, he went. He glanced up at Wymack's apartment complex 
each time he passed just to make sure it was still there. He ran faster and faster until everything in his 
body was bright and blazing.

When he reached his limit, he slowed to a walk and caught his breath on his way back to Wymack's. 
The anxious tension didn't leave his body until he locked the door behind him. The size and smell of 
the apartment was comforting and familiar. Even the sound of Wymack shuffling around in the back 
room was soothing in its own way.

On Sunday, Wymack forced him to rest. Should be's wriggled under his skin like cockroaches. 
*Should be at the gym. Should be on the treadmill.*

It was seven in the morning and he was falling behind.

Wymack handed him a cup of coffee, his second one that day, and said, “You're dead on your feet, 
so sit your ass down on that couch. We're going to watch something.”

Neil didn't have the energy to argue anymore, so he drifted over to the couch and sat down with his 
mug cradled between his palms. The day stretched out dauntingly before him, his plans unraveling. 
He couldn't imagine what Wymack wanted him to do. Frustration wound tightly in his chest. He had 
just started settling into his new routine and he didn't want a break. He didn't want the chance to stop
and look up and remember what he'd rather forget.

“You and I are going to watch some old games. Doesn't that sound like fun?” Wymack asked dryly.

Neil floundered for a reply. Words didn't come as easily around Wymack as they once did, but he had been asked a question. “You will speak when spoken to. Answer me!” The crack of the master's cane filled his ears. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

“I know we've watched these already,” Wymack continued, ignoring Neil's silence, “but you're a Fox now so maybe you'll see something new this time. We could watch cartoons or something instead, but you and Kevin seem to be allergic to the usual kid stuff.”

Neil couldn't remember the names of any cartoons.

The television screen lit up and Wymack settled on the other end of the couch. Sound filled the room and the familiar sight of an Exy court appeared on the screen. It was dotted with players and referees and the starting buzzer was about to go off. The commentators spoke of the Foxes' rough season and joked with each other about how soon Palmetto's Exy team would lose its Class I ranking.

“I remember this game,” Neil said quietly.

Wymack gave him a sidelong glance. “Yeah? What about it?”

It was the game against Virginia. It was the game that turned the Foxes' season around and astounded just about everyone. It was the game that made people realize that Andrew Minyard might be an asset instead of just a liability. For some reason, Andrew decided to guard the goal like he actually cared about this game's outcome. Neil remembered this as the game that made him see why Riko wanted to see Andrew with a tattooed “5” on his cheek.

“He told me to pick a number,” Wymack said after the Jackdaws on the screen scored their fifth point. If Neil remembered correctly, it was the last point they would get.

“A number?”

“Yeah, he told me to pick a number and that's how many shots he let through. It was his idea to play a full game that night.”

Neil frowned at the screen. That didn't make any sense. Andrew didn't care about Exy. He didn't care about Wymack or the Foxes. He entertained himself with drugs, violence, and bargains with those desperate enough to accept them. Neil couldn't understand why Andrew would volunteer to run himself ragged to help the Foxes win.

While they watched the game, Wymack recounted the small details that he could remember. Neil detected an undercurrent of pride beneath his words. It was obvious that he believed in his players, that he saw their worth when no one else did.

Andrew's whimsy won them the game, won them several games after this one, and won them their spot in the spring championships. If the Foxes could somehow convince Andrew to latch onto that fleeting spark of motivation, they would have an actual chance next season.

Andrew had offered Neil protection in return for Neil's help with keeping Kevin tethered to Palmetto State. The idea of him protecting Neil after what he'd done and what he allowed his cousin to do was ridiculous. Not only that, but it would be impossible for anyone- even someone like Andrew Minyard- to stand between Neil and his father's men. If Andrew still wanted Neil's help with Kevin, though, perhaps Neil could ask for something else in exchange. He didn't like the idea brewing in his
mind, but the larger it grew, the more he saw how necessary it was.

The Foxes needed to do better; Neil's flimsy chance of survival depended on it. If making a deal with Andrew would get them to semifinals, then that was what Neil was going to do.
Chapter Summary

Neil gets more than he bargained for.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: several references/mentions/brief descriptions of past rape. Sexual assault/rape and STDs resulting from sexual assault are thought about and discussed.

If you want to know more about what to look out for in this chapter, feel free to send me an ask on tumblr @ hopingforcoordinates (I have anon turned off because of reasons, but if you want me to answer privately just let me know! chat is also an option if that would make you more comfy). If I need to add a warning, please tell me and I'll fix it!

Thank you all for reading! And thank you for the kudos/comments. I really appreciate it <3

Shout-out to snappleeducated and MajorinMonster for being wonderfully supportive and putting up with lots of whining about this chapter (and pretty much every other chapter as well haha). Snappleeducated, thanks again for the tips about lock-picking! You two are angels <3

Striking a bargain with Andrew would be unpleasant, but the Foxes didn't stand a chance without Andrew's cooperation and this was the best way to get it. Andrew was fiercely dedicated to his promise to Kevin, so Neil felt somewhat safe in assuming that if Andrew agreed to this deal he would do whatever it took to see it through.

Neil wasn't going to grovel, though. He wouldn't bend or kneel or beg. He wouldn't let Andrew put him on a leash like the others. Just thinking about it made his blood fizz with invigorating anger. He felt truly alert for once, like the fog had cleared momentarily from his mind.

First, he needed to find the dorm assignments. After returning from night practice with Kevin, he crept into the back room and quietly rummaged through drawers and files until he came across the sheet of paper with the information he needed. Andrew's group was assigned to Room 303.

He repeated the room number to himself like a mantra so he wouldn't forget it while he searched the desk for paper clips sturdy enough to pick a lock with. In the top drawer, he found a small crumpled box, but the paper clips inside it were too small and flimsy to be of use to him. He spent a few more minutes searching, but he came up empty. Resigned, he put Wymack's desk back the way he found it and went off to finally catch some sleep.

At the gym the next morning, Neil slipped away to take a water break on his own while the Foxes were still exercising. They were used to him avoiding them by now, so none of them commented on it when they saw him leave. Neil sneaked into the empty women's bathroom and managed to find
five bobby pins covered in dust beneath the sinks. He pocketed the two longest ones and hurried back to the locker room before anyone could catch him.

It was surprisingly easy to steal Nicky's student ID. Either his stupidity or his trusting nature led him to leave his gym locker hanging open, so all Neil had to do was reach in and take the card from his wallet.

He knew how to pick locks, he knew where they lived, and now he had a way in. All he needed was an opportunity, which presented itself later when he overheard Nicky and Aaron arguing over where to go to dinner that night. Once Kevin insisted on going to Abby's instead because it would be safer, Neil knew the four of them would be out of their room.

Neil caught Wymack in his office just as he was packing up for the day and said, “I'd like to stay here to run some drills alone, if that's all right.”

Wymack studied him for a moment with a frown tugging at his mouth.

“Campus security is everywhere,” Neil reminded him. “Not many people know what I look like. I'll be all right.”

Sighing, Wymack grumbled, “Yeah, okay. Let's get you a map of campus just in case you get lost, yeah?”

Wymack dug through one of his cabinets until he found a red folder full of grainy maps of Palmetto State's campus. He pointed out Perimeter Road and the Foxhole Court to Neil and then he wrote directions to his apartment complex with blue pen in the corner.

“I appreciate it,” Neil said. “I'll clean up after myself.”

“Yeah, yeah, don't work yourself too hard. That's Kevin's job.”

“Yes, sir.”

Wymack gave him another dry, flat look before leaving him there. Neil returned to the foyer to sit and wait until he could be sure Wymack was gone. He couldn't help himself from peeking through the stadium doors into the thick darkness that made his stomach tighten with longing for lights, sounds, the chance to be *seen*.

Shaking himself out of his daydreams, he sat down and took the bobby pins out of his pocket. After working off the rubber ends with his teeth, he pulled the first one open until it was flat and, with a little effort, he bent the second one into a right angle. Satisfied, he put the pieces of metal into his pocket and checked the time.

After ten minutes had gone by, he used the map to plan his route to Fox Tower. The silence leaned heavily on his back. Nervousness made his legs weak and his throat tight. He just wanted this to be over with. Trembling, he folded the map and slipped it into his pocket with the stolen ID, the pins, and his keys. He slung his bag over his shoulder and headed for the exit. Outside, he checked the doors twice to make sure they were really locked before cutting across the parking lot to the street.

The warm air stuck to Neil's lungs as he followed his planned route to the Tower. His pulse hammered in his throat and his heart jumped every time he saw a black car on the street. Luckily, none of them were the right make or model to be Andrew's.

Fox Tower's parking lot was almost full of cars when he reached it. He searched for Andrew's and let out a quiet sigh of relief when he found that it was absent. There was a good chance Kevin and
the cousins were already at Abby's. Neil adjusted the strap of his duffel bag on his shoulder and followed the sidewalk to the front door. Athletes filtered in and out of the Tower, but none of them looked at Neil twice as he strode past them. He had an ID card. He walked with his head held high. As far as they knew, he was one of them.

The elevator dinged and, before the doors slid open, Neil darted through the door leading to the stairs. The other Foxes didn't get along with Andrew's lot, but Neil didn't want to risk being seen by them. He was still an outsider and the Foxes were more likely to look out for their own than take his side.

He paused at the bottom of the stairwell and listened. When he felt certain he was alone, he took the stairs two at a time until he reached the third floor. A pleasant burn sang in his thighs by the time he made it to the right landing. He peeked through a narrow window in the door to make sure the hallway was empty.

Room 303 was the first door on his left. Dizzy with horrible excitement, Neil fell to his knees and shoved the flattened bobby pin into the lock. He pushed it to one side until the tip bent and then he got to work. He nudged at the pins of the lock with his makeshift pick and slowly turned the barrel using the folded bobby pin. Success was almost his when a door at the other end of the hall opened. Neil's body stiffened with fear as Seth emerged from his own suite, pulling a baseball cap over his messy blond hair. Seth stopped when he spotted Neil and, for a moment, the two of them simply stared at each other. For whatever reason, Seth decided to leave Neil to his crime in progress without saying a word.

Neil slumped in relief when the elevator doors closed behind Seth. After some more fiddling, the lock finally gave way and he shoved his way inside the empty suite.

All was quiet and dark. Neil dropped his bag by the door and swept his eyes over the main room and the kitchenette off to the side. There were dishes and a few crushed beer cans on the counter. Two beanbags with deep indentations sat in front of a television that rested directly on the floor. Video game controllers were flung carelessly to either side. A stack of games on top of the TV threatened to topple over. There were four desks pushed up against the other walls; only three were kept tidy.

Once he caught his breath, Neil went to work.

Every drawer was pulled out four or five inches. The books on top were opened to the middle page and left splayed open. Neil pushed the desk chairs into the center of the room, forming a ring around the beanbags. Then, he moved through the rest of the suite. The kitchen cupboards and dishwasher were left hanging open. The shower curtain was shoved to one side. The bottles on the bathroom shelves and the sink counter were arranged in rows on the floor.

In the bedroom, Neil could tell immediately which bed was Kevin's by the way the linens were pulled perfectly taut over the mattress. All Ravens learned to make their beds that way. Neil yanked the covers loose and threw Kevin's pillow to the floor before climbing the ladder to the bunk above. When he moved the pillow, he found a worn copy of *Frankenstein*. Inside the front cover was a short note addressed to Andrew and signed with Renee's name. Neil paused and stared at the neat penmanship. This was Andrew's bed. After a short internal struggle, Neil decided to leave the bed as it was. Before he climbed down, though, he folded one corner of the cover to let Andrew know he'd found the book.

The other two bunks were given the same treatment as Kevin's: covers ripped back and pillows knocked to the floor. The clothes Neil found in the closet joined the pillows on the carpet in an unhappy heap of fabric and hangers.
When he was finished, there was evidence of his exploration everywhere. They would know that he had gotten inside their home, that the lock on their door hadn't stopped him. He'd broken the boundary between their safe place and the rest of the world. They would get a taste of how unsettled they left him feeling in his own skin.

While he waited for their return, Neil retrieved a carton of chocolate ice cream from the freezer and perched on the desk nearest the window. He picked up a pen and wrote his initials at the bottom of Andrew's biology assignment before he began eating the ice cream. It was too sweet and it sat uncomfortably in his stomach, but he had enough spite coursing through his veins to eat most of the pint without regretting it.

A nervous tremor rattled through him when a key slid into the lock and the doorknob turned.

Kevin's voice filtered in through the door. “What the hell? It's unlocked already.”

Andrew threw the door open and breezed inside, coming to a stop in the middle of the room. Brightly, he said, “Nathaniel! I don't remember inviting you over.”

“How the fuck did he get in?” Aaron asked.

“Good chance for another boys' night,” Nicky suggested. “Nathaniel, do you like video games?”

Neil looked from Nicky to Andrew and slowly ate the last bite of ice cream. He was there to speak to Andrew only.

Andrew seemed to get the hint even through the haze of his medication. Turning, he said, “You three go to the bedroom. See whose bed was just right for Goldilocks.”

Kevin gave Neil a warning look and said, “Don't make a habit of this. I don't like surprises.”

It wasn't a question, so Neil didn't bother giving him a reply. A few moments later, the bedroom door clacked shut and Neil was left alone with Andrew, who stroked his chin and pulled a pensive frown while he took in the state of the main room.

“This is some sort of payback, hm?”

Neil lifted a shoulder. “It's pretty tame payback. Note the lack of handcuffs.”

Andrew pretended to examine his wrists and chuckled. “Noted. You came, you saw, you ate my ice cream. Bravo. Good show. Take a bow and get the fuck out.”

“I came to make a deal with you,” Neil said. He knocked one heel against the side of the desk and sucked the last smear of chocolate off the spoon.

“That was a one-time offer. Too bad, so sad.”

“It was a shitty offer. I'm not going to accept a promise that you have no chance of keeping.”

Andrew snorted. “Ah, yes, you and your mysterious shark.”

“I finally figured out what I want from you.”

“I'm on the edge of my seat,” Andrew said dryly.

Neil hopped off the desk and dropped the spoon into the empty ice cream container before he said, “I'll help you keep Kevin here if you help the team.”
Andrew hummed contemplatively. “Be more specific.”

“On game nights, play like you actually want the Foxes to win.”

Andrew lifted an eyebrow and cocked his head. “Just game nights? You're not going to ask for extra practices? Come on, Nathaniel, think big.”

“I don't care how much you practice as long as you play well during games. The Foxes have to do better this year. You can't get to Riko outside of Exy, trust me. This is the only way you can hurt him.”

“He's nothing to me. Why would I want to hurt him?”

“Because it'll be fun.”

Andrew shrugged and made a face. “I guess. Very well, then. A deal's a deal.”

“Glad that's settled.” Neil slipped the stolen ID out of his pocket and flicked it at Andrew’s chest as he walked by. At the door, he nearly forgot to grab his duffel bag. He could barely hear the sound of Andrew’s laughter over his own thundering pulse as he stepped out into the hallway. With his bag knocking against his hip, he practically ran out of the Tower.

With the help of Wymack's map, he made his way back to the apartment. As soon as he stepped through the front door, he inhaled deeply to take in the familiar scent of old coffee, dust, and stale air. Beneath it all, he could smell pizza as well.

“There you are,” Wymack called from the kitchen. “I hope you remembered your appetite.”

Neil grimaced at the thought of the ice cream in his belly and the greasy dinner awaiting him, but he didn't complain. He left his shoes by the door and padded over to sit across from Wymack at the bar. With a quiet “thank you” he accepted a plate and a glass of water that Wymack had already poured for him. Neil took a few small bites and thought of nothing but calories.

“So,” Wymack began slowly, “how's it going with Kevin?”

Neil's eyes flew up to Wymack's, startled. He swallowed the food in his mouth and answered, “I'm out of shape.”

Wymack took a sip of water and hummed. “You've been moving like something's hurtin' you real bad lately.”

Neil's hand went to the bruise with smudgy yellow edges on his side. “Being sore is normal, isn't it?”

“Just take care of yourself, all right?” Wymack took another large bite of pizza and chewed noisily. After he swallowed, he asked, “How're you liking your new racquet?”

“It's good.”

“Your gear fit all right?”

“Yes.”

Wymack wiped his mouth with his napkin and sighed. “Look, I've seen the way Kevin pushes the Foxes and I allow it because it hasn't gotten out of hand. You two are alone every night and I need to know if things are going too far.”
“Too far?” Neil echoed.

“He's told me a little about Riko, but I don't know what Kevin was like or where you fit in with all that. Plus, you've been... quiet lately.”

Embarrassment warmed Neil's face. “I've just been tired.”

Wymack didn't look like he believed him. Neil tore off a large piece of pizza crust and popped it into his mouth.

It was surprisingly easy to slide back into his place at Kevin's feet. Things made more sense down there. He was back to following orders, focusing on the ball, repeating drills until he got them right. As soon as Neil stepped onto the court with him, it felt like he'd never left the Nest. The only difference was that Kevin didn't have anyone to dish out punishment for him.

Neil hated what he became when Kevin loomed over him, but he couldn't help it when most days he was almost too stiff and exhausted to move. He couldn't afford to waste energy on snarling at Kevin any longer. Everything he had went toward improving his skills on the court.

Wymack's words and his concern stuck with Neil the rest of the night. Wymack could see him withering into the shape Riko had designed and Neil felt both ashamed and angry. He'd never be a Fox and Wymack knew it. There was no point in pretending otherwise.

After that, Neil worked himself harder to smother those thoughts. In the hours between morning conditioning and afternoon practice, Neil was on the court- either alone or with Wymack. For the first time in years, Exy left him feeling frustrated and off kilter. His new racquet was too light, the net was too deep, and his new coach kept asking him questions about his family, his interests, and what classes he was thinking of taking. With Wymack around, it was impossible to focus entirely on Exy and the division of his attention made him cranky. He swallowed so many razor-sharp words he felt sick.

He was so distracted by it all that he didn't realize the championship game was close at hand until Kevin stopped him on Thursday morning and said, “We'll watch the game at Wymack's.”

Neil didn't want to watch it. Kevin didn't look like he did either, but how could they not? It was the most important night of the year. The Ravens would beat the Trojans, of course. They didn't have much of a choice. They would cling to first place even if it killed them because they knew what was in store if they failed.

All Neil could think about for the rest of the day was Jean. No matter how hard he tried to turn his mind away from his former partner, he couldn't. Jean had been worrying for over a year about this game. He didn't play as well with the junior backliner he was partnered with on the court and game nights made him horribly tense. It usually took Neil at least an hour to get Jean to speak again after he returned to their room. He would force Jean to drink water, put ice cubes in his hands to shock him back into the present moment, and wait for Jean's thoughts to spill out in a stream of incoherent French.

It was the night Jean was terrified of and Neil wasn't there.

On Friday, Neil woke after a few hours of troubled sleep and immediately noticed a swollen, stinging bump on his lower lip. The spot had been itching for a couple days, but now it was too tender and painful to ignore.

He waited until Wymack left for his morning walk and then he got up and padded to the bathroom.
In the mirror, he studied the dark pink spot closely and prodded at it with his tongue. Neil frowned, confused about the sore's origin, before he remembered Riko asking, “Heads or tails?” He could still hear the guttural sounds Jean made as he choked.

Neil's back slammed against the wall as he dry-heaved. His shoulder clipped the towel rod and pain sparked hotly there. He clamped his hand over his mouth to muffle his panicked wheezing as he slid to the floor. For over a week he'd been asking himself over and over what Nicky had done to him that night in Columbia. He hadn't stopped to wonder if Nicky had a clean bill of health or not. The Ravens that Riko let crawl into Neil and Jean's beds were always tested for STDs in advance. Riko was heartless, but he would never allow his property to contract a disease.

Neil hugged his knees to his chest and pressed his forehead into the warm cotton of his sweatpants and shuddered. His lungs were too full, but he couldn't force himself to exhale properly. He clawed at his hair, pulling hard enough to feel the sting of it, and ordered himself to calm down. It might be nothing, he thought. It could just be a cold sore.

Lifting his head, he blinked rapidly and swallowed. He sucked his lower lip between his teeth and purposefully bit down around the bump.

The what if taunted him. What if it was something? What if he had something else? What if he ignored the alarm bells ringing in his head and a disease grew inside him until it was too late for treatment? Neil tugged at his hair again. His head was burning and his stomach was a block of ice. What do I do?

He knew there were clinics for this sort of thing, but he didn't know where to find one or how much it would cost. It wasn't as if he had health insurance. He didn't even have an ID. Abby would probably be willing to help him, but the thought of telling her what had happened made him cringe. He didn't want to tell her or Wymack what Nicky might have done. They might not believe him anyway. Nicky was a Fox. He was one of theirs.

There were only two other people that knew what happened: Nicky and Andrew. Neil had no plans of ever getting near Nicky again, so that meant Andrew was his only option.


He pulled himself to his feet and braced his hands against the sink while he thought things over. It wouldn't do him any good to ask Andrew while he was medicated- he was more likely to get laughed at- so his question would have to wait until night practice.

All morning, he couldn't stop sucking his lower lip between his teeth and poking the sore with his tongue. His mind was split between Jean and his own physical health. He could barely keep his breakfast down. Eating lunch was a struggle; each bite felt like it went down wrong. His muscles felt weak, his skin felt electrified, and his body was either boiling or freezing at any given time. Everything the Foxes did irritated him; he'd never been so close to snapping at them.

All day long, his heart pounded what if what if what if.

By the time afternoon practice ended, he felt like opening his mouth was a risk. There was a scream lying in shards at the back of his throat, ready to slice him open if he gave it a chance. He avoided meeting Wymack's heavy stare. There was no way the older man wouldn't notice the terror in his eyes.

That night, Wymack turned the television on half an hour before the first serve and Neil flitted between the couch and the kitchen like a frantic moth, unsure of where to land. Three commentators
discussed the Trojans' chances this year and the Ravens' impressive winning streak. Neil's stomach jumped when the camera panned over to the master and a senior named Peter McCullough, number eleven, who was acting as the Ravens' captain since Riko wasn't there. Like Kevin, Riko had spent the semester away from the court while he recovered from his so-called shock and grief. Neil flinched the first time they said Kevin's name. He didn't stick around to listen to them talk about Kevin's hand or his new contract with the Foxes.

Kevin and the cousins showed up shortly after the pizza did. The smell of grease and cheese rose into the air as the cousins settled around the television with their plates and drinks. Aaron and Nicky sat on the floor on either side of the coffee table while Andrew took one end of the couch. Neil stepped into the kitchen to avoid Nicky's questions about the Ravens only to find Kevin and Wymack speaking in hushed tones with an open bottle of vodka on the counter between them. When Neil cleared his throat, Kevin looked genuinely startled.

"They're about to do the coin toss," Neil said flatly.

Wymack nodded and clapped Kevin on the shoulder, which made Kevin's expression do something complicated. Neil studied him curiously. He'd assumed at first that Kevin was too much of a coward to tell Wymack that they were father and son, but now he wondered if it was something else. Anyone close to Kevin could get caught in the crossfire when Riko came for him, so perhaps it was Kevin's way of trying to keep the man safe. Or perhaps it was a fear of rejection keeping Kevin's mouth shut. Wymack took in all manner of outcasts, but Neil doubted he ever came across someone who had witnessed and endured what Kevin had. Kevin couldn't even admit what had happened to himself, so how could he ever hope to explain it to his father?

Kevin poured some vodka into a glass and went to sit on the couch beside Andrew. Wymack followed with a can of beer and a plate of pizza. Neil shuffled after him, feeling lost and apprehensive. Onscreen, Peter McCullough and Jeremy Knox, the Trojans' fair-haired captain, met in the center of the court with a referee to see which team would have first serve.

"Neil?" Wymack grunted. "You want the couch or the chair?"

Neil tore his eyes away from the screen. He looked from the empty chair Wymack had brought in from the back room to the vacant spot on the couch. Kevin looked up at him expectantly. The two men on the floor glanced up at him as well, curious about his hesitation. Andrew continued shredding his slice of pizza into small pieces and wrinkled his nose at the grease on his fingers.

"I'll stand," Neil answered finally.

"All right. Suit yourself," Wymack said before taking a seat in the chair.

Kevin stared at Neil for a moment longer and then he moved over so he and Andrew had room to spread out. Neil leaned against the wall by the side of the couch and chewed his tender lip.

"Who are we betting on?" Nicky asked as the teams assembled on the court. He took a large bite of pizza and turned to look at Kevin and Neil. With his mouth full, he said, "You two don't look so good. You gonna be okay?"

Kevin drank until the first buzzer went off. Trojans and Ravens clashed horribly. The ball zipped between black-clad players in a series of impossible, but well-practiced maneuvers. Neil held his breath as the ball bounced off the Trojan goalkeeper's racquet and fired up the court.

It was another few minutes of desperate scrambling, a battle between black and gold, before a Trojan striker managed to get around Jean.
The goal lit up red.

The Ravens had lost the first point of the game and it was Jean's fault.

Neil couldn't breathe.

Kevin scoffed. “Careless. He'll pay for that later.”

The others glanced over at Neil, so he tried to hide his rage and swallow the pained noise curling in his throat. Nicky's raised eyebrows told him he failed at that.

“That's Jean, right?” Nicky asked. “Was he like your boyfriend or something?”

Kevin choked on his drink and Andrew smacked him once between his shoulder blades. Heat climbed up Neil's throat, so he stayed quiet.

“It's okay, man,” Nicky continued. “We won't spill your secrets to the media or anything.”

“Stop talking,” Aaron grumbled.

Nicky shot his cousin a look. “It's just friendly chit-chat. You're not even paying attention to the game.”

“I'd rather pay attention to the game than hear you talking about Nathaniel's boy toy.”

Wymack shook his head and took a long drink of beer. Neil's anger sprouted thorns as it grew.

“They weren't sleeping together,” Kevin said roughly after he finally cleared his airway. “Don't say things like that. A rumor could kill a career.”

Kevin wasn't thinking of Neil's career, of course, but neither was Neil. He'd be lucky to see the end of his freshman year. If Nicky spread rumors, Jean would be the one dealing with them.

“Is that why you said you don't swing?” Nicky asked, relentless in his pursuit of information. “He's cute. I can see why you'd go for him. I mean, that face-”

“Shut up,” Neil snarled. He remembered Nicky slurring, “Not gonna lie, you look real good in handcuffs.” A flip book of male faces and half-naked bodies flickered behind his eyes. Beneath them all was Jean, smeared with bruises and lifeless. His hands were limp against the headboard and metal rattled around his wrists.

Nicky blinked at him in surprise. Andrew leaned back to look at Neil around Kevin's shoulders. His smile was fading. It wouldn't be long before Neil could ask his question without Andrew laughing in response.

“Drop it, Nicky,” Kevin said sternly.

The Ravens quickly regained their footing and scored three times before the Trojans could get the ball anywhere near the Ravens' goal. Neil wasn't able to relax until Jean was traded out for one of the subs. He wouldn't be able to make any more mistakes from the bench.

At halftime, the cameras panned over the teams and Neil could read the fear in Jean's rigid posture. The master wouldn't bother with him, of course, but Riko would have his fun later.

Kevin shook his glass at Neil and said, “Get me some water.”
It was instinct that made Neil reach out. He recognized that, but he couldn't fight it. Serving Riko and Kevin wasn't what he was born to do, but they took him apart and rebuilt him with that purpose in mind.

“Your legs broken?” Wymack challenged mildly.

Neil froze with his fingers wrapped around the middle of the glass. Kevin swiveled his head to look at the older man in surprise. Andrew let out a raspy snore, slumped back against the cushions and unaware of the sudden tension around him.

“Erm, I…” Kevin floundered for a moment. “He's already up.”

Neil's fingers were stiff and creaky, but he managed to pry them away from the glass before Kevin could let go. The weight of Wymack and Aaron's stares squashed him. They didn't understand. They weren't taught like the other Ravens were. “This is just the way things are.”

Nicky chewed a large, doughy bite of his third slice of pizza and watched them, wide-eyed and intrigued.

“You know where the kitchen is,” Wymack prompted. “Go on.”

Neil could make out the embarrassed flush darkening Kevin's cheeks as he walked by.

“Don't let him bully you like that, he's just spoiled,” Nicky said with a little laugh.

“Princess,” Aaron muttered into his own drink.

Neil didn't disagree, but he didn't wholly agree either. The master had used Kevin's grief for his dead mother as an entry point and he burrowed into Kevin's young mind. The master taught Riko how to scramble Kevin's thoughts until Kevin believed what they wanted him to. Kevin had a new brother. Kevin had a new home. Kevin had a new purpose. Kevin believed them because he had no choice. He believed them when they said Neil and Jean were bad, so they must be punished.

When Neil arrived at the Nest, he didn't see Riko's brother. He saw a pet. Kevin hadn't reacted well when Neil tried pointing it out.

Everything was black and white in Kevin's mind. Correct and incorrect. Correct behavior was expected, incorrect behavior was punished. He might not have understood why Riko's methods for punishing his playthings got messier, bloodier, but he never asked questions. Why bother asking when you know the answers would burn your world down?

Neil stared straight ahead at the television when Kevin returned.

After the next buzzer, it was chaos. The Trojans were an excellent team and they won the Day Spirit Award every year for a reason. Kevin had the names and numbers of many captains and coaches in the league, but he spoke to Jeremy Knox more than most. Riko always looked amused when Kevin spoke to Jeremy on the phone, like he was watching a child speak to an imaginary friend. As long as the calls didn't come too frequently and the topic was always Exy, Riko allowed it. It was considered a kindness and Kevin's gratitude was easy to use against him.

The game ended with a score of 10-8, Ravens' favor. Neil let out a huge breath of relief as the crowd on television exploded with thunderous celebration. The Ravens had won. It was over now. Jean's punishment would be light unless Riko was feeling particularly bitter about missing the game.

Or perhaps Riko had just been waiting until finals were over to finally unleash his wrath. Kevin was
playing Exy again, Neil wasn't returning, and Jean was the only thing Riko had left to take his anger out on. Neil's lungs threatened to seize up, so he quickly shoved those thoughts away. He scraped his teeth over the stinging sore on his lip again and reminded himself that he still needed to talk to Andrew.

Wymack tore the crust off his pizza and threw it at Andrew's forehead. Andrew snapped forward in his seat like his body was ready for a fight before his mind could process what had happened. He blinked in confusion and tossed the piece of crust back at Wymack.

“Party's over,” Wymack announced.

Nicky and Aaron collected everyone's dishes and carried them to the kitchen. Wymack went to the bathroom and Kevin returned to the kitchen for one last drink, which gave Neil a moment alone with Andrew.

“I need to ask you something,” he said.

Andrew arched an eyebrow. “You had all day.”

“I need to ask you, not your meds,” Neil clarified, tapping his temple.

“Oh, sounds serious. Too bad I'm not interested in sticking around for a heart-to-heart.”

“I'll ask at practice, then.”

Andrew gave him another funny look. “No practice tonight. Kevin needs to drink his worries away. We're going to Columbia.”

A chill trickled down Neil's back. “I'll save it for Saturday night.”

The glint in Andrew's eyes told him otherwise. “You can try, but who knows if I'll feel like answering? I'm unpredictable like that. Better to ask when I'm in a good mood, I think.”

“So, never?”

“Clever,” Andrew said wryly. “If your question is really so important to you, come to Columbia with us tonight and ask me after I've had my fun.”

Neil's heart turned to stone. “What?”

“Don't look so spooked. You passed my little test and you can't hold up your end of the bargain if I kill you. No reason for you to worry, is there?”

“I'm not going to Columbia again,” Neil hissed.

Andrew shrugged. “I guess you're not getting any answers. Oh, look, Nicky and Aaron are already at the door. Tick tock, Nathaniel.”

“Can we leave sometime this century?” Aaron asked from the doorway.

“You still have the clothes we gave you, yes? You can change at Sweetie's,” Andrew told Neil.

The sudden snap of his temper startled him, but the violent surge of hatred washed away everything else. Boiling, Neil snatched his sack of clothing from behind the couch and dug out the crumpled long-sleeved shirt that he hadn't wanted to keep in the first place and his black jeans. Andrew counted down from thirty while Neil stomped to the back room to get some spare cash.
“Neil?” Wymack called through the open door of his bedroom. He was smoking by the window and craning his neck to see across the hall. “What're you doing over there?”

“Getting money. I'm going with them,” Neil spat, stuffing a twenty-dollar bill into the pocket of his sweatpants.

“You're what?” Wymack met him in the hallway and stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Hold your horses. What's going on?”

“Eleven, ten, nine,” Andrew chanted from his place near the front door.

“I'm going with them. I'll be back tomorrow.”

“Neil-”

He ripped out of Wymack's grasp and stormed to the front door. He shoved his socked feet into the black boots Andrew had given him and then followed the group out into the hallway. The door slammed shut behind him and he locked up with his keys.

“Why are you coming with us?” Kevin asked in French.

“I need to speak with your dog,” Neil replied nastily. His temper was an animal that had been starving for years. Neil fed it scraps of someday, if I ever get the chance and it survived in its cage like that, withered and waiting.

Neil followed Andrew into the sticky night air with the ball of clothing gripped tightly in his hands. Once they reached the car, Nicky handed Andrew a packet of dust with a worried look and Kevin offered him an orange pill bottle from his pocket. Andrew took the dust and pointed a finger at Kevin in warning. For a moment, Neil fantasized about calling someone, anyone, and sending Andrew to jail for violating his probation. If he failed one urinalysis, he'd be hauled away in handcuffs. Even though Neil needed him on the line-up next season, the thought delighted the vengeful beast in his chest.

He sat in the backseat between the twins and resisted the urge to shout and smash his elbow into Andrew's face. His fury went sour in his stomach.

Nicky drove and kept his mouth shut for once. Kevin was in no mood for conversation and Andrew's cheer was gone for the night, so the car was silent all the way to Columbia. Neil thought of Andrew's blades and what he could do with them if he was given the chance. His anger was still growing and he was bursting at the seams with it. He was careening toward a dangerous edge.

They arrived at Sweetie's eventually and Neil hadn't calmed down at all. Usually, thoughts of Jean suffering for his mistakes did the trick, but Jean was far away and he was probably suffering for his own mistakes by now.

Andrew led the group inside and Nicky went up to talk to the host. Neil swept his eyes over the room while they waited. It was packed with people again and servers bustled back and forth with trays of food and drinks. A waiter dumped a pile of napkins unceremoniously in the center of a table near the windows and the young men sitting there tried to look casual as they rooted through the pile to find the packets of cracker dust. Neil scowled.

“You in or out tonight?” Andrew asked, nudging Neil's side with his elbow.

Neil jerked away from him. “In or out for what?”
“Dust,” Andrew said it like it was obvious.

“You're insane.”

“That's what they tell me,” Andrew replied lightly, scratching at the side of his nose. “Doesn't answer my question.”

Neil glanced over at Aaron and Kevin, who were both staring at him. He inhaled deeply and shifted closer to Andrew to say, “I've played this game before, so spare me the bullshit.”

Andrew snorted. “What game?”

“You're pretending to give me a choice. I'm obviously going to say no to dust after last time, so it'll be something else like heroin or LSD and, in the end, it'll be my fault for choosing wrong. Just cut to the chase and save your fancy footwork for someone who gives a rat's ass.”

“I am not like Riko,” Andrew said lowly.

“You're a cheap imitation,” Neil fired back, “but you're convincing enough for Kevin, I suppose. Why do you think he picked you?”

Andrew's mouth twitched. “It's 'yes or no' not 'this or that' with us. Do you or do you not want to take dust tonight?”

“And if I say nothing?”

“Then it's a no. Wait and see if you don't believe me.”

Neil shook his head and smiled bitterly. “You're completely full of shit. It's a good thing you're not any bigger. I don't think I could tolerate more.”

“Run along now and change your clothes,” Andrew ordered.

With one last sneer, Neil marched off. He followed the perimeter of the dining room until he found a short hallway that led to the restrooms. Inside the men's room, the noise from the restaurant was muffled and replaced with the flushing of a urinal. Neil hurried into a stall at the end of the row and locked himself in. His hands were shaking and his lungs felt so hot he was surprised there wasn't smoke leaking from his nostrils.

The sink cut on for a minute and then the door creaked open. When it swung shut, Neil knew he was finally alone.

The throbbing bruises covering his ribs made it difficult to change in the narrow stall. He felt winded after he finally managed to slip into the long-sleeved shirt. The restroom door opened with a squeak and then Nicky's voice made Neil's heart stutter.

“Nathaniel? Andrew sent me in here so I could take you to our table when you're done.”

Punishment for talking back. Predictable. It hurt more to rein in his temper than it would have to let it loose.

“I'll find it on my own,” Neil said. He leaned against the door and listened hard, waiting for Nicky's next move.

“It's no trouble,” Nicky insisted. “I wanted a minute to talk to you anyway.”
Neil pressed harder against the door. The fire in his heart was buffeted by a cold gust of fear. *This can't be happening again.*

“Uh, okay,” Nicky started again when he was met with silence. “I just wanted to apologize about last time. Andrew's intense, but he's really just looking out for the rest of us. I'm sure you can understand why he thought you were a threat. Things will be different from now on, okay?”

Slowly, Neil grit out, “If a perceived threat justifies that sort of violence, then you should leave now.”

“What?” Nicky laughed, but it sounded forced. “Come on, Nathaniel, we're practically family now that he's keeping you.”

“Keeping me?”

“He's going to protect you, which makes you part of our family. Andrew's promises are thicker than water,” he joked weakly.

Neil rolled his eyes. “He's not protecting me and I am not part of your family. Leave me alone.”

“Being with us has its perks, you know. We could get you some decent stuff to wear, maybe a new phone- you don't have one, do you? Either way, we'll get you on our plan. Andrew will take care of it.”

“Get out.”

“But-”

“Now!” Neil barked. The word bounced off the restroom walls. He pinched his bottom lip between his teeth and waited until Nicky was gone before he peeled himself away from the door to finish changing.

If Andrew's plan was to scare Neil out of his defiant attitude, it worked.

Neil picked up his discarded clothing and tucked his money and keys into the front pocket of his jeans. With the bundle of clothes tucked under his arm, he left the restroom to join the others. He edged out into the dining room and craned his neck to look for Andrew's group. Kevin was easy to spot with his perfect posture; he still carried himself with pride even though Riko had ruined the only thing Kevin was proud of. Neil grit his teeth and made his way over to their booth in the corner. There was a glass of water waiting for him in front of the empty place at Kevin's side. Nicky had shoved Aaron over enough to leave space for Neil on their side of the booth as well, but the idea of sitting with Nicky made Neil's skin crawl. He sat down beside Kevin and clasped his hands over the bundle of clothing in his lap as he eyed the glass of water warily. The packets of dust hadn't arrived yet, but that didn't mean they hadn't brought anything with them. Drugging him here would be risky, but Neil thought it was safer not to eat or drink anything. The bartender had done Andrew's bidding last time, someone in the kitchen might do the same. One night without food or water would be uncomfortable, but it wouldn't kill him. It was preferable to another night lost to cracker dust.

Nicky cleared his throat awkwardly. “We just ordered, but I'll flag down Birdie when she comes out of the kitchen again.”

Ignoring him, Neil watched two people approach the salad bar and take some crackers from the metal bucket.
“Are you always this much of an asshole?” Aaron asked.

“Yes,” Neil replied.

“You'll fit right in,” Nicky said with a laugh.

Kevin shifted in his seat and fiddled with his straw wrapper. “Did you eat dinner at Wymack's?”

“I'm not hungry,” Neil answered.

“That wasn't what I asked,” Kevin scolded.

Neil gave him a cold look. “No.”

“Get a salad or something,” Kevin said.

Neil bristled. “No.”

Kevin turned slowly to look at him, surprised. “What?”

“You heard me.”

Kevin hissed, “I thought you were done being difficult.”

Neil didn't answer him. They weren't on the court and Kevin wouldn't punish him in front of the others.

A few minutes later, a waiter put a pile of napkins in the middle of the table. The packets of dust disappeared into Andrew's pockets a moment before the waitress arrived with their ice cream. Kevin ate a few small bites before pushing his bowl away and sipping his water. Nicky and Aaron carried on a conversation about their upcoming exams. Andrew worked his way through three scoops of chocolate ice cream at an alarming pace. Once Andrew's bowl was empty, Nicky turned and waved at a waitress. He made a scribbling motion with his hand and the woman hurried off to get their bill.

After they paid for the ice cream and the drugs, the five of them left Sweetie's and drove over to Eden's Twilight. Neil dropped his sweatpants and tee on the floor of the backseat and made sure his money and keys were still in his pocket before stepping out onto the curb. Once again, Andrew got the VIP tags from the bouncer and handed them over to Nicky so he could go park the car.

Neil walked between Kevin and Aaron into the technicolor chaos waiting inside for them. The music punished his eardrums with its throbbing bass and frantic electronic sound effects. The flashing lights made the movement of the crowd look choppy like a raging sea under a lightning storm. Neil could see either everything or nothing and it gave him a headache by the time they found a table.

Before he could take his seat, Andrew smacked his shoulder and jerked his head toward the bar. Neil scowled, but followed anyway. It didn't matter if the bartender drugged his soda again. He wouldn't drink anything unless they held him down and forced him. At least he would still be clear-headed enough to put up a good fight.

They wove through the mindless tangle of bodies on the dance floor and reached the crowded bar. Neil scowled at a man who bumped into him. The man's drink sloshed onto Neil's arm and soaked through his sleeve. His skin prickled with bitter anger.

Andrew leaned in close enough to be heard over the music. “What do you want?”

Andrew shook his head and turned away from him to get his bartender's attention. After a few minutes, the man came up to them, smiling and wiping his hands off on a towel.

“Hey, Andrew- oh, look who's back! Didn't think I'd see you again, Nathaniel.”

Neil narrowed his eyes at the man. He wondered if the bartender remembered the names of all the people he drugged for Andrew.

“Roland, just the usual tonight,” Andrew said.

Roland looked at Neil. “Soda for you again? Or water?”

“He wants nothing,” Andrew answered.

Roland's eyebrows knit together. “Okay... well, let me know if you change your mind. It'll be on the house.”

Neil stared blankly at him until he finally moved away to start mixing the drinks for Andrew's group. He could feel the sweat beading along his hairline and under his arms. His throat was scratchy and raw with thirst. Watching the people around him guzzling colorful liquids only made him feel worse.

Once Andrew had the tray of drinks, Neil led the way back to the table. There wasn't enough air to breathe. Neil's shoulders scrunched up to his ears as he tried to get through the crush of sweaty, half-dressed people without touching any particular person for too long. He couldn't tell if the hands sliding down his chest were real or imagined until he reached the stairs. He put his own hand to his stomach as he climbed up to the platform so his mind could tell the difference between his memories and the present.

The others were instantly distracted by the packets of dust and the drinks. Neil sat quietly, observing them with disgust. Kevin tried to dump a second packet into his mouth right after his first, but Andrew smacked his shoulder and told him to pace himself. Scowling, Kevin put it down and reached for another drink instead.

Neil was ignored, thankfully. His stomach twisted with hunger and his throat burned, but no one had tried to hurt him yet. He stopped himself from fantasizing about the meal he would have when he got back to the safety of Wymack's apartment. Thinking about large glasses of cool water and the uneaten sub sandwich waiting for him in the fridge would only make him feel worse.

Nicky went from giggling to guffawing as the drinks and dust loosened his senses. Aaron relaxed enough to smile every now and then and, eventually, the two of them disappeared into the crowd.

After the second round, Andrew threw back one last shot and slammed the glass down on the table, bright-eyed but unsmiling. “Stay with Kevin,” he told Neil. The words puffed hotly against his ear.

Neil watched him vanish into the crowd as well. Something felt off about this new development. Before, Andrew hadn't wanted Neil in the same state as Kevin and now he was entrusting him with Kevin's well-being. It felt like a trick, but Neil couldn't figure out the logic behind it.

Kevin blinked owlishly and then squinted at him. “He knows that you were protectin’ me.”

“I did what I did to get back at Riko,” said Neil.

“Yeah, well, keeping me alive's a good way to do that. Results are results.” His syllables were stretched far apart like stepping stones. There was a hint of hesitation between them like Kevin was afraid to fully let go of one before latching onto the next.
Neil watched Kevin empty another packet into his mouth, looking greedy and desperate. His lip curled. It was a temporary solution to a permanent problem. Neil had spent years scrubbing hard at the feeling of hands left on his skin, so he understood the mental merry-go-round of wishful thinking. Maybe this time it'll work. Maybe this time I'll feel better. Maybe this time it'll go away for good. But no matter how much alcohol Kevin poured into his body, the stains would remain. Neil was curious, though, about whose crimes Kevin was running away from: Riko's or his own.

“You should drink,” Kevin slurred. “Helps.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “For a few hours, maybe.”

Kevin scowled and picked up another shot glass.

Andrew returned after a while and ordered Neil to help him get the final round. The pulse of the music loosened Neil's joints and vibrated in his bones. Once again, he turned down Roland's offer of a drink, which was getting more difficult to do. His body was overheated and aching and begging for water. His stomach was empty and rumbling. His head was full of cotton. He scraped his teeth over his swollen lip again and remembered why he had agreed to come out with them.

He was fuzzy and numb all over by the time they finally dragged themselves out of the club. Andrew left the rest of them on the sidewalk while he went to get the car. Looking at him, no one would be able to tell Andrew had spent the last few hours drinking and ingesting cracker dust. He looked as steady and sober as Neil. The others could barely stand without help.

When Andrew drove up and popped the locks, Neil dumped Kevin's tall frame into the passenger seat and shut the door for him. Then, he looked up to see Nicky leaning heavily against the open back door.

“Middle's all yours!” Nicky said with a large grin.

Neil swallowed. His eyes darted to the darkened backseat where Aaron was already curled up against the far window.

“Sometime tonight, Nathaniel,” Andrew said from the front.

Nicky's hand came down hard on Neil's shoulder, making him jump. Neil shook him off to climb into the middle seat. Nicky fell in beside him and slammed the door shut. Neil was trapped.

“Nicky, seat belt,” Andrew said.

Nicky made a psshh sound and dissolved into giggles.

Andrew didn't remind him twice. He guided the car back onto the road and drove through the quiet city streets. Neil tucked in his elbows and squeezed his thighs together to make himself smaller, but it was no use. Nicky relaxed against the seat and spread like pancake batter. His hot thigh melted against Neil's and his heavy arm flopped around Neil's shoulders. The stench of Nicky's sweat and the alcohol on his breath choked him.

“So glad you came out with us, man. You should def- definitely come out with us again. This was fun, right?” His sweaty hand came up to pat Neil's cheek.

“Stop,” Neil whispered hoarsely.

Nicky rested his cheek on top of Neil's head and heaved a large sigh. “It's fiiiiine. We're all gonna be fine.”
Panic spiked in Neil's chest, stealing his breath and squeezing his heart. “Get off of me,” he wheezed.

Andrew’s head whipped around and his eyes narrowed dangerously when he took in the sight of his cousin draped over Neil. He hit the brakes hard and everyone jerked forward in their seats. Without his seat belt to hold him back, Nicky's face collided with Kevin's headrest. He fell back and clutched his forehead, moaning in pain. Aaron grumbled something rude in German and kicked the back of Andrew’s seat.

“What's goin' on?” Kevin mumbled.

“Hands to yourself, Nicky,” Andrew warned.

Nicky groaned and leaned against his door, still rubbing at his face. “Why, Andrew?” he complained. “Fuck, that hurt.”

Andrew’s eyes flicked to Neil’s briefly before he twisted back around and continued driving. Neil stared at Andrew and tried to figure out the reason for that little display. Andrew didn't seem like the type to fake nice in order to win someone over and it was a bit late in the game to try. Perhaps he was switching tactics to keep Neil confused.

Without warning, Andrew turned roughly into a gas station and stopped the car in front of the store. He shifted around in his seat until he was able to free his wallet from his back pocket.

“This isn't the house,” Nicky murmured against the window.

Andrew thrust a ten-dollar bill through the gap between the front seats and shook it once at Neil. “Get a water bottle and a sandwich. Go. Take it while I'm still feeling generous.”

Neil frowned, but he slowly took the money anyway. He wanted to say he had his own cash, but the words got stuck in his throat.

“Aaron,” Andrew said harshly, “let Nathaniel out of the car.”

Aaron peeled his eyes open and immediately grimaced. “Ugh, fuck's sake.”

“Now.”

“Fine,” he snapped. Neil looked from one twin to the other in confusion. It took Aaron two tries to get the door unlocked and then open. It took another few moments of fumbling before he freed himself of his seat belt. Neil unbuckled himself and slid out as soon as it was clear.

Aaron got back in and pulled the door shut behind him. Neil blinked at the car and then looked around at the eerily quiet lot. The concrete was washed out by harsh, white light. The muggy, gasoline-scented air was full of crickets’ chirping and the raspy rattle of katydids.

Andrew rapped his knuckles against his window and pointed at an imaginary watch on his wrist, telling Neil to hurry up.

Neil crumpled Andrew's money in his fist and went inside the store. The air conditioning chilled the sweat on his skin instantly. Shivering, he headed straight for the refrigerated section in the back and the sight of the colorful sports drinks and the slender bottles of iced coffee made his throat ache. He picked out two of the cheapest water bottles and swallowed convulsively at the mere thought of getting a drink at last. Andrew had suggested a sandwich, but Neil went to the aisles of snack food instead. He bought as much as he could without spending more than ten dollars.
When he returned to the car, he found Aaron in the middle, slumped against Nicky's arm and snoring softly. Neil gingerly lowered himself into the seat behind Andrew and shut the door.

Andrew glanced at him in the mirror and dryly asked, “Where’s my change?”

Neil leaned forward to hand him twenty-seven cents. He waited until they were on the road again before cracking the seal on one of his water bottles. While Andrew navigated through a suburb, Neil forced himself to drink slowly and relished in the feeling of cold water slipping down his parched throat.

Andrew parked in a driveway outside a darkened two-story house. Once the engine went quiet, Andrew shoved Kevin's shoulder and told him to get up. Neil felt around on the floor for his sweatpants and t-shirt and stuffed them into the plastic sack of food. He got out of the car and took a few steps into the damp lawn to watch the others slowly climb out as well, grumbling and swaying on their feet. Andrew silently herded the three drunk men inside after making sure the car was locked.

The front door was left open for him, but Neil stayed out on the porch. Seated on the top step, he dug a bag of trail mix and the half-empty water bottle out of the plastic sack and began eating. The buzzing of insects and the clicking of sprinklers in neighboring lawns broke up the thick silence of the small hour. His eyes were dry and heavy. The anger he’d felt earlier left him feeling gutted and frail like the charred remains of a house after a fire.

He sat and waited, eating quietly and wondering if Andrew would remember that he’d agreed to speak with Neil that night. His hopes weren’t very high and thinking of the question he needed to ask turned his insides to cold slush.

The porch light came on, spilling bright light over his hunched frame, and then Andrew asked, “Are you planning to sleep out here?”

“And if I am?” Neil challenged, glancing over his shoulder. Andrew quirked an eyebrow and slipped a cigarette between his lips so he could light it. He stood directly behind Neil and looked down at him. Neil turned his attention back to the bag of trail mix in his lap.

“That’s ill-advised,” said Andrew. “All sorts of shit out here.”

“There’s shit in there, too.”

Andrew sighed in annoyance and the smell of smoke wafted over Neil. “You proved your point, drama queen. You don’t trust us.”

“You can’t be surprised after what you did to me.”

“I had my reasons,” Andrew replied.

Neil shook his head. “Riko had reasons, too.”

Andrew made a noncommittal noise and moved to stand at Neil’s side. Neil popped a raisin in his mouth and tried to pretend he wasn't shaking. His lip stung. In his periphery, he saw Andrew’s hand slip into his pocket. Keys clinked together quietly.


“You get one question. Make it good.”
The words were glued to the back of his throat and he had to take a moment to pry them loose. When he did, his voice came out small and weak.

“Does Nicky have any STDs?”

Andrew was silent and perfectly still. Hot humiliation flashed over Neil's cheeks and rolled down his chest, chased by dull anger. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and his skin prickled while he waited.

Andrew stepped down onto the front path and crouched by Neil's feet. He'd been dismissive and sarcastic before, but now he was an entirely different animal, eyes keen and mind churning. They studied each other in the harsh yellow light; one working out a puzzle and the other working out an escape plan.

“What did he do?” Andrew demanded, low and rough.

The last embers of Neil's rage glowed to life. “He did what you told him to.”

Andrew's nostrils flared. “What did he do?”

“You were the one in control that night. Either you're playing dumb to fuck with my head or your puppets need new strings.”

Andrew took a harsh drag off his cigarette and his cheek twitched. “I told him to take you into the crowd and keep you there.”

“Which he did.”

“And what else did he do?” Andrew snapped.

Embarrassment flooded his body as he remembered vividly what Nicky had done. What had he looked like to the others around them? Drugged and dazed, had he seemed like he was with Nicky by choice?

Neil stole Andrew's cigarette. He wanted the smell and the memories that the smoke brought forward. Andrew didn't object to him holding it.

“He shoved his tongue down my throat,” Neil grit out at last, trying desperately to sound sharp instead of just broken. “He... put his hands all over me and kissed me and the next thing I remember is the alley. I don't know what happened after you gave me back to him, but I woke up in his bed.”

Andrew reclaimed his cigarette only long enough to suck more smoke down. Then, he placed the stick back between Neil's fingers. Neil stared at it and then looked at Andrew, trying to figure out what was going on behind his intense stare.

“Did anything happen tonight?”

“Just answer my question. Should I get tested or not? I'd rather not spend money on a clinic if there's no need.”

“I don't know if he's clean,” Andrew admitted. His fists clenched.

“Great,” Neil scoffed. He felt twitchy and restless and he just wanted this part to be over. He wanted to fast-forward a month or two or however long it took for this icy dread to thaw.

“What symptoms do you have?” Andrew asked.
Neil swallowed hard and gestured to his mouth. "I have a sore on my lip. I don't- I don't know if it's, um-"

"Just a cold sore? Judging by the look on your face, I'm going to assume you haven't researched this much." Andrew's tone was flat, but there was something hiding under it. It almost sounded patronizing to Neil's ears.

"I never needed to," Neil growled. "The Ravens all got-" He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek to stop himself from saying any more, but it was too late.

Andrew's stare turned darker, deeper. "You don't swing."

Neil swallowed hard. Andrew hadn't even known about Nicky until Neil told him and now he was burrowing deeper into a secret that Neil hadn't ever wanted anyone to discover. I should have just kept my mouth shut. Regret slid down his chest like sloppy, cold globs of paint.

"You were raped at the Nest?"

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. The answer to that question had always been out of his reach. He'd never tried to stretch the label over his experiences as well. Jean was left bleeding and broken; Neil was left with a sick heat in his gut and shame eating a hole through his chest. The humiliation and self-hatred cut him deeper than Riko's blades ever could.

His free hand came up to scratch at the faint ring of scar tissue wrapped around his wrist.

Andrew narrowed his eyes. "Were you or weren't you?"

Neil rolled the cigarette between his fingertips and watched the smoke leaking from it. "It's not that simple."

"Of course it is. If you didn't have a choice- a real choice- it was rape."

Neil wanted to believe him, but he was still wary. Warning bells filled his mind. Men like Andrew weren't to be trusted. He could easily turn Neil's pain into a knife and stab him in the back with it whenever he pleased.

Neil sneered. "Googled this, have you?"

He expected a sharp retort or a disgusted dismissal, but instead he was met with a silence that said everything. Andrew's eyes were filled with a darkness that Neil recognized. He was giving Neil a weapon in return, putting them on even ground. Now they were both armed with an ugly truth about the other and they could either wage war or part ways unscathed. Neil didn't know what to make of that. He couldn't understand why Andrew would give up the advantage.

Andrew glanced at the cigarette between Neil's fingers, but he didn't reach for it even though it was obvious that he wanted to. His jaw was clenched and his hands shook. Neil flipped the stick around, turning the faintly glowing cherry toward himself, and raised it toward Andrew's mouth in offering. Andrew stared at the cigarette for a long moment before leaning forward, tilting his head to avoid brushing his nose against Neil's fingers as he pulled smoke into his mouth. He inhaled slowly as he sat back on his heels and held the smoke in his lungs for a few beats before releasing it. Neil watched the gray cloud spill into the air and dissipate.

"Wait here," Andrew ordered quietly. He stepped around Neil and disappeared into the shadows of the front hall.
For a minute, Neil studied the cigarette that Andrew let him keep and then he got up. Silently, he entered the house and listened hard. He could hear Kevin snoring in the back room and his own pulse thumping in his ears.

It was only a couple more seconds before there was a harsh crack down the hall, followed by Nicky crying, “What the fuck, Andrew?”

Neil crept closer to the door of Nicky’s bedroom.

“What did you do to him?” Andrew’s voice was slightly muffled, but Neil could still hear the dangerous edge in it when he spoke.

Nicky let out a weak groan and mumbled, “What’re you talking about? Who?”

“Nathaniel,” Andrew hissed. “Last time we brought him here, what did you do?”

“Andrew, come on,” Nicky pleaded. “I’m still buzzed. Can’t this wait ‘til- ow! Jesus, put the knife away!”

“Start talking.”

The mattress creaked and Nicky let out another fearful whimper. “We just made out a little, that’s all, I swear.”

“Did you rape him?”

“What? Of course not!”

“You took him to your room that night.”

“Did he say I raped him? He unbuttoned his own pants because he wasn’t comfortable. I had nothing to do with that. This is just a huge misunderstanding.”

There was a loud thump and a strangled yelp of pain before Andrew said, “Tell me the truth.”

“I didn’t do anything. Please, please, put the knife away, Andrew. You made your point. Just put it down. Please.”

“Stop saying that fucking word. You know I hate it. Now give me the truth, Nicky. Do not keep me waiting.”

“I didn’t do anything to him, I swear,” Nicky said thickly.

“You assaulted him.”

“It was probably the least painful thing he went through that night.”

“Doesn’t matter what it felt like, Nicky. You forced him. That’s assault.”

Neil had spent years drowning in a murky gray area. He let himself latch onto Andrew’s certainty like a rope that might pull him to shore.

Before Nicky could try to defend himself again, Andrew continued, “You’re never touching him again, understand? If you so much as reach, I’ll cut your hands off. Tomorrow you’re going to look for an STD clinic and make an appointment to get tested. This is the part where you nod and say ‘yes, Andrew.’”
“Yes, Andrew,” Nicky said quietly.

“Get some sleep. You look like shit.”

Nicky’s mattress shifted. Then, quiet footsteps came toward the door. A bit of ash fell from the tip of the cigarette as Neil stepped back. He watched it float down to the carpet as the doorknob turned. Andrew tugged Nicky’s door shut and then froze mid-step when he noticed Neil in the hallway.

After a tense moment, he said, “There’s no smoking in here.”

Neil dropped the cigarette and ground it into the carpet with his shoe. “Protecting me wasn’t part of our deal.”

“I have rules. He broke one,” Andrew said as he passed him. “Bathroom’s there. Meet me upstairs when you’re done.”

He walked away before Neil could ask any questions. Confused, Neil went into the bathroom and quickly relieved himself. After washing up, he rinsed his mouth out with some spearmint mouthwash he found under the sink. The sore on his lip burned after he spat into the sink, but at least his breath was no longer foul.

Andrew was waiting at the top of the stairs, a shadowy figure in the dim light holding the plastic bag full of Neil’s food and clothing. Swallowing nervously, Neil followed him into a bedroom that had only a bare nightstand and a rumpled bed.

Neil’s pulse quickened as he took one cautious step inside. Andrew deposited the plastic bag on the floor in front of the nightstand and padded over to the closet. It looked empty from where Neil stood, but Andrew pulled out a metal folding chair with a large dent in the seat.

“You’re staying in here tonight,” Andrew explained.

“Why?”

“You’re not sleeping on the porch.”

Neil’s protest was interrupted by a wide yawn.

Andrew quirked an eyebrow and opened the folding chair. “You can put this under the doorknob when I leave.”

Neil’s mind searched for an ulterior motive. Was there a hidden entrance? Was this meant to lull him into a false sense of security? He didn’t know Andrew as well as he knew Riko. He didn’t know what to expect.

Andrew left him alone with his swarming questions. Neil frowned at the closed door for a minute or two before forcing himself to move. The door locked. He checked it twice before wedging the chair underneath the doorknob. Then, he went to the window and made sure it was secure as well. As far as he could tell, there wasn’t a third entry point.

Neil didn’t know what to make of this, but he was too tired to wonder about it any longer. He toed off his shoes and turned out the lights. In the dark, he found his way to the bed and crawled on top of the covers. Andrew’s mattress was less firm than he expected and he relaxed into it with a quiet sigh of relief. The pillow squished under his head smelled like smoke and detergent. The blanket was cool and soft beneath his bare palms. He had room to move around and stretch out, which was a luxury after weeks spent on Wymack’s couch. With his back to the wall, he curled up and inhaled the scent
of smoke clinging to the pillowcase. He was safe and alone in a locked room and he had more answers than he expected to get. Nicky hadn't done anything to him while he was unconscious. Andrew hadn't ordered the assault.

Tension melted from his body and he drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep.
Neil stood in the entryway of Abby's home, frowning at the dent in the wall. The cracks in the paint and crumpled drywall puzzled him. According to Abby, Andrew had walked in with a grin and a "good morning" before putting his fist through the wall and walking right back out. Kevin, Nicky, and Aaron were left behind to catch some more sleep in the guest rooms upstairs while Andrew disappeared down the street.

After Abby called Wymack about it, Wymack brought Neil over to cover the hole in spackle just so he could give Neil ten dollars. While the two adults puzzled over Andrew's erratic behavior in the kitchen, Neil sifted through his memories of that morning in search of an explanation.

The day got off to a weird start: Neil had jolted awake in an unfamiliar bedroom to Aaron's muffled voice asking, "Andrew, why are you sleeping out in the hall?" Things had only gotten weirder from there.

Breakfast was quiet and awkward. Nicky's cheer was paper-thin and wrinkled under the weight of the questions in his eyes as he looked at Neil. Once Andrew's morning dose flung his mind back up into the stratosphere, he rattled off all the facts he knew about the human digestive system until Kevin and Aaron lost interest in their breakfasts.

In the car, Andrew situated himself in the middle of the backseat and ordered Aaron to sit to his left, leaving Neil to sit behind Kevin. After that, Andrew's babbling left no room for anyone else to get a word in edgewise. He talked about everything from the new action film out in theaters to the dining hall's poor choice in desserts, switching between topics too rapidly for anyone to have time to think of a response.

Twenty minutes after Andrew's group left Neil in the parking lot of Wymack's apartment complex, Wymack got the call from Abby about Andrew's vanishing act.

Almost half an hour had passed since then and Neil still couldn't make himself reach for the tub of spackling paste waiting by his feet. A cabinet banged shut in the kitchen, snapping Neil’s attention back to the present. He glanced down the hallway and listened hard to catch what Abby was saying.

“Should we call Renee again?” she asked. “Maybe she's heard from him by now.”
“He'll probably be fine,” said Wymack. “At least he didn’t try taking the car.”

Abby sighed loudly. “I hope he's not getting himself into trouble.”

“Do the others know what he got all worked up about?”

“They said he seemed pretty normal- well, normal for Andrew, anyway.”

“Maybe we should call Betsy,” Wymack said.

Neil could see a reason behind Andrew's outburst, but he was hesitant to leap that far. Andrew had lashed out at Nicky the night before. If he was still this angry about what he'd learned, why pack it away and hold onto it until the morning?

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Andrew wasn't behaving at all like Neil expected him to and Neil didn't do well with surprises.

Shaking himself, Neil tried to put the memories of the previous night away. He'd gotten his answers, he knew the truth about what had happened that first night in Columbia, and he knew now that Andrew hadn't planned to have Neil assaulted by his cousin. It was over and done with, as far as Neil was concerned.

He felt lightheaded without the weight of that particular worry, like a swirl of dust motes in a sunbeam with nothing to do but drift. Drifting wasn't in his nature, though, so even without a warning bell ringing in his head he searched for signs of trouble. He couldn't afford to relax around men like Andrew Minyard. The whole thing could have been a trick to get his trust, but something didn't feel right. There was no guarantee that Neil would see this dent or assume it had anything to do with him. Andrew couldn't have been sure that Neil would set foot in Abby's house while Nicky was there.

No, there was something strangely honest hidden in the fracture lines, a pure unfettered outrage. It was a pity he'd have to cover it up.

Finally, Neil bent down to pick up the tub of spackling paste and the putty knife. As he began to spread the paste like Wymack had instructed, a phone rang. It wasn't Wymack's usual ringtone, so Neil figured it was Abby's.

“Renee?” Abby answered. “Oh, he's with you? Good, that's good. How's he- okay, sure. Thanks for letting me know. Talk to you soon.”

Neil spread the white paste over the last section of the dent, smearing it up to cover every inch of the cracks. Then, he dragged the edge of the knife over the paste to smooth it as best he could. Once it was even and fairly smooth, he snapped the lid back on the tub and took the supplies to the kitchen.

Wymack took a step back away from Abby when Neil appeared in the doorway. Abby gave him a shaky smile and swiped her fingertip over the corner of her mouth.

“You done?” Wymack asked.

Neil nodded and put the tub and the knife on the kitchen table.

Abby wrapped a hand around the handle of the refrigerator door. “Would you two like some coffee or- I've got iced tea, if you'd prefer that. Or maybe some lemonade?”

“Iced tea sounds good, Abby. Thanks,” Wymack said.
“Neil? Anything I can get you?”

Neil’s eyes darted between them. “Um, just water for me, please.”

Abby nodded and opened the fridge to pull out the pitcher of iced tea while Wymack got two glasses down from the cupboard. Neil watched them avoid each other’s eyes. Whatever they weren’t saying made the air feel awkward, so once Neil had his glass of water in hand, he said, “I think I’ll sit out front for a bit and get some fresh air.”

Abby smiled at him again and replied, “Okay. David and I will get some lunch together. We'll let you know when it's ready.”

“Thank you.”

He took his water out to the front porch and sat on the steps. The heat of the day was softened by a cool breeze. Fat, sculpted clouds inched slowly across the pale sky. A few lazy bumblebees drifted between the bright, fluffy heads of peonies and the light purple sprays of Russian sage that Wymack had paid Neil to plant.

Andrew's car sat in the driveway, baking in sunlight.

Neil's old worries still rang at the back of his mind somewhere, but for the moment, he felt unusually quiet. Without the questions about Nicky rattling around in his head, he had room to breathe. The sore on his lip was still painful, but no longer terrifying.

He wanted to believe everything that had happened was some sort of elaborate ruse, but only because that would be consistent with his other ideas about Andrew. The tower Neil built out of observations and assumptions about Andrew Minyard had a crack running through its foundation. Now, he’d need to reevaluate what he knew about the other man, see which theories still had merit.

Some time later, Abby called him back inside for lunch. He quietly ate his sandwich and ignored the glances he caught passing between Abby and Wymack every now and then. Upstairs, all was quiet while the other three continued to sleep the day away.

The front door opened abruptly and smacked the wall with the sort of force used by someone who didn't give a damn about dents in the wall. Neil's heart lurched.

Andrew.

He didn't know if the sizzling current of anticipation in his stomach was fearful or not. He didn't know what to expect anymore.

Andrew came into the kitchen a few moments later, a fierce smile pasted to his face and a bruise darkening along his jaw. He moved carefully, like his right hip was troubling him, and his knuckles were split and furiously red.

He stopped and looked hard at Neil, smile withering slightly as if he was genuinely surprised to see Neil sitting there at the small table with Abby and Wymack. A clear what the hell are you doing here? shone in his eyes.

Neil stared. He'd overheard Abby say Andrew was with Renee. Had it been a lie? Or had Andrew found trouble somewhere between Renee's dorm and Abby's house? Was the violence a coincidence or had Andrew craved more after taking his anger out on the wall?

He knew what question was staring out at Andrew from his own eyes: what the hell are you?

Another moment passed and they remained locked in their confusion, both baffled by the other's presence- or existence. Neil knew it didn't make sense for him to be there while a man who once
attacked him slept upstairs, just like it didn't make sense for Andrew's rage to burst the cheerful bubble his medication kept him in.

Andrew recovered first. He pivoted mechanically on his socked heel and scanned for signs of the others, asking, “Are the little ones still napping?”

His voice broke the odd spell in the kitchen. Abby jumped up to get Andrew some ice even though it wasn't likely Andrew cared enough to accept it.

“Something you'd like to share with the class, Minyard?” Wymack drawled.

Andrew's grin stretched, revealing more and more teeth. “Only if the class is willing to pay for it.”

“That's not sharing, that's selling.”

“Sharing is for children and chumps.” Andrew waved Abby and her ice pack away before turning to the fridge to rummage around for some food. Abby and Wymack exchanged another meaningful look that Neil couldn't translate.

Wymack turned to Neil and glanced down at Neil's half-empty plate. “You 'bout ready to go?”

Neil popped a potato chip into his mouth to give himself a few extra seconds to weigh pros and cons. He wanted to poke and prod at Andrew, crack him open and study the wires. He wanted another glimpse into the abyss he saw in Andrew's eyes the night before, that internal morgue where the corpses of all things youthful and innocent were sealed away in cold drawers.

But curiosity was dangerous and, like Andrew had said, if Neil wanted a secret he'd have to pay for it. He was better off smothering this urge to look closer and learn. Distance was smarter and safer.

“Yeah, I'm ready to go,” he answered finally.

Andrew didn't look back at him, but Neil saw the twitch in his shoulders like he wanted to but stopped himself. They had their bargain and they'd reached some sort of understanding. Neither posed an immediate threat to the other. They had no reason to be curious. It was nothing more than a childish need to see what was behind locked doors.

After they said good-bye to Abby and thanked her for the food, Neil and Wymack returned to the apartment complex for a dull afternoon of laundry and the sports channel that Wymack favored.

For once, Neil could sit without feeling the need to get up, get out, do something, make progress, practice, practice, practice sizzling under his skin. Chores were completed slowly while he continued to dissect the previous night to make sense of Andrew's actions and rewrite his own opinions about it. Oddly enough, he didn't feel desperate to reach a conclusion. Andrew hadn't hurt him when he had the perfect opportunity to because Andrew had no reason to hurt him.

For now, he was safe. For now, he could breathe.

He had time.

This surreal tranquility turned Neil's life inside out: his days felt strange and dreamlike and his nightmares were so convincing he thought they were real.

He floated through his daily routines with the Foxes' inane chatter buzzing in the background. They commiserated over final exams and tricky travel arrangements for summer vacation. Once Neil was sure they weren’t talking about him, he tuned them out. He kept an eye on the cousins, but they
ignored him almost entirely. The few times that Nicky looked Neil's way, Andrew immediately dragged his attention back to their group with absurd questions or snide comments.

On Tuesday, Seth viciously shoved Kevin into a wall as they all headed out of the stadium. Andrew retaliated with a kick to the back of Seth's knee and a well-timed shove to ensure Seth didn't knock into Neil as he fell to the floor. Andrew strolled away with his group, twirling his key ring around his finger and laughing.

“What are you looking at, fuckface?” Seth snarled as he clumsily got to his feet again.

Neil stared at his retreating figure blankly. The three girls glanced his way as they passed.

“Don't worry about him, man,” Matt told him with a hesitant smile. “He probably won't be around our dorm much next year.”

In the back of his mind, Neil knew it should concern him that Wymack assigned him to a dorm with Matt and Seth, but he couldn't bring himself to care. It was an unfortunate aspect of being part of a team. With Jean, it was easy to share a limited space. They followed the same routine, developed similar habits, worked around and with each other seamlessly. Matt seemed willing to cooperate, but Seth was determined to go crashing down a path of his own making.

It would be difficult, but Neil would cope. He didn't have a choice. The anxiety slid off him like snow piled too thickly on a steep roof.

Every night, Neil was plagued by familiar images that were sharper than anything he saw during the day. Castle Evermore was stacked around him. It was just as he remembered: dark and stifling. He could smell the air conditioning and concrete. He could feel the chill. He could hear the Ravens’ voices growing louder and louder until he lost track of his own thoughts.

He saw himself standing in the middle of a court, washed out in the harsh lights and surrounded by walls of shadows. The floorboards opened up to swallow him whole; he suffocated there in the dark.

Every time, he woke up gasping and shocked to find himself still alive. He calmed himself by breathing deeply and building his mental safe haven with painstaking care, just like his mother taught him. *There's a cabin in the mountains.* He pictured the wooden stairs, imagined the scent of rain, and made up details to fill the empty spaces inside this nonexistent place: a collection of dirty coffee mugs, the smell of floor polish, the sounds of a television playing in another room.

Every morning, Wymack found Neil sitting on the dingy kitchen floor with dried sweat gluing his shirt to his skin and his hair in greasy disarray. He always raised an eyebrow, but never said anything as he moved around Neil to start the day's first pot of coffee. Neil tucked his knees tighter to his chest and pressed harder against the cupboard doors to make himself smaller. He stared, unblinking, at the tiles and counted the days since he'd last been under Riko's hands. The number was growing steadily higher, but some days the Nest felt closer than ever.

Without fail, Wymack handed down a cup of coffee each time, fixed the way Neil liked it, and said, “Come on, kid. Let's go for a walk.”

Neil wanted to ask why he bothered, how he wasn't out of patience yet. He wanted to know how Wymack could do this day after day without getting anything in return. What sort of life taught him to carry burdens tirelessly like this?

Of course, asking would only risk drawing Wymack's attention to how little Neil was doing to earn his keep, which Neil didn't want. Day after day, he accepted the coffee silently and shuffled to the
door to put on his shoes for their daily walk.

Sometimes, his demons fell away and dissipated in the blue morning air. Sometimes, they lingered and clouded his brain throughout the day.

On Friday, though, his demons came to him in a cardboard box—To: Nathaniel Wesninski, c/o David Wymack. It was delivered by an average-looking man in khaki shorts just before noon and signed for by Wymack. For a full five minutes, it sat on the coffee table like a bomb about to go off. Neil knew even without looking that it had come all the way from Edgar Allan University and he suddenly wished they hadn't come back to the apartment to have lunch.

Eventually, Wymack asked, “Do you want to do the honors or should I?”

“Isn’t it against the law to open someone else's mail?” Neil asked, stalling. “I'm pretty sure I heard that somewhere.”

Wymack pushed a pair or scissors into Neil's hand. “Fine. Have it your way.”

Neil took a shallow breath and, while he cut through the tape, his mind flicked through a list of gruesome things that Riko could have fit inside the box. Instead of anything bloody or horrifying, though, he found a manila envelope sitting on top of a plastic-covered bundle of what felt like fabric when Neil poked at it.

Wymack looked over his shoulder. “Must be from Coach Moriyama. I asked him if you might've left anything important up there.”

Trembling, Neil opened the envelope and shook out the driver's license the master had paid to have made, Neil's birth certificate, and his social security card. Neil had never seen the last two. Having his documents now didn't mean much and it certainly didn't mean he was a free man, but it loosened something in Neil's chest.

“It'd be smart to keep track of those from now on,” said Wymack. “What else did he send you?”

Neil set the folder and its contents aside to lift away the loose plastic. He and Wymack both froze when they saw the sweatshirt underneath, folded to proudly display “EDGAR ALLAN” curving over two crossed racquets with “EXY” printed underneath. It was just like the hooded sweatshirts all the other Ravens wore, but Neil wasn't a Raven and he never would be. It was a taunt, something to poison his new home.

Wymack hummed and went into the kitchen. He came back out carrying the bag from the trash can. Wordlessly, he held it open and gave it a shake with a pointed look. Neil stuffed the sweatshirt inside without a moment's hesitation, and then he stood there and watched as Wymack marched the trash bag out of the apartment.

When he returned, Wymack grumbled, “Didn't look like it'd fit you anyway.”

Neil could only nod with the lump of grateful words caught in his throat.
Trouble with Numbers

Chapter Summary

The Foxes’ summer vacation begins and Neil struggles to keep up with Andrew's confusing behavior.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: a couple brief mentions of rape and STDs.

I cannot thank you guys enough for all the kudos and comments!! I am trying to get back in the habit of replying to each comment, but I am sloooow haha. If I haven't gotten to yours yet, I will soon- it might just take me a couple days.

Happy reading!! <3

After the school year ended, all life drained from Palmetto State’s campus. The fifth-year Foxes graduated and the rest of the upperclassmen went their separate ways for a few weeks of summer vacation. Only Andrew’s group remained in town; they moved from the Tower to Abby’s house full-time to “eat all her food and drive up the electricity bill,” according to Wymack.

Neil didn’t go with Wymack to shuttle the older Foxes to the airport or say good-bye for the summer. He rested a little easier knowing most of the team would be gone for awhile. For a few weeks, he and Kevin would have the court all to themselves. A sickening mixture of relief and dread churned in Neil’s stomach at the thought of spending every moment he could spare on the court, pushing his limits and chasing perfection until his legs gave out. It was what Ravens were built for, but Neil no longer belonged in black and red.

On Monday morning, instead of going to the gym like usual, Wymack drove Neil to the Foxhole Court even though Neil insisted he could walk. Neil was fidgety and anxious the entire way there, staring out his window at the empty streets and parking lots.

“No reason to be nervous,” Wymack grumbled as he turned into the stadium’s lot. “You’ve practiced with Kevin before.”

Neil swallowed hard and nodded as he fiddled with the strap of his bag. He knew Kevin wanted Aaron and Nicky to start practicing with them since Neil needed experience going up against backliners. Premature humiliation coated Neil’s stomach like cold slime. They’d see how far behind he was; they’d probably tell the rest of the Foxes all about it.

This plan would never work.

“If you’re gonna get sick, do me a favor and do it on the pavement,” Wymack said, jolting Neil out of his self-pity. Neil blinked and realized that they were parked by the stadium door.

“Kevin will text me if they can’t give you a ride and I will come get you,” Wymack corrected with a pointed look. “Campus security is fine and all, but I’m not going to take any chances now that we’ve got a bunch of Ravens with too much free time on their hands.”

Neil sighed. “Yes, Coach.”

“Good man. Now get out of my car and go bust your ass on the court.”

“Yes, Coach,” Neil repeated before he pushed his door open and climbed out. Wymack waited until Neil had the door open to pull away from the curb.

As he walked to the locker room, Neil mentally braced himself for a practice with Andrew’s family and the embarrassment he was sure to suffer. To his surprise, though, he found only Andrew and Kevin waiting for him. For a long moment, Kevin did nothing but stare at him; his eyes were stony and unreadable, which never meant anything good. Neil's first instinct was to check the time to see if he was late, but he didn't want to admit that he cared that much, so he held himself still and stared back.

“Think fast!” Andrew shouted, launching a ball of bright orange cloth at Neil’s face. Neil caught the jersey and held it up for inspection. The color made his eyes burn, but he was quickly distracted by the “10” beneath his last name.

It was all wrong.

For eight years, he’d been Wesninski, number three. He was number three because he was going to be one of the best Exy players in the world- or, at least, he would have been. Neil fought back the urge to touch the shriveled patch of skin on his cheekbone.

Every Raven wanted to bear a single digit. They all wanted a piece of the spotlight, a place on Riko’s perfect line-up, but as long as they had double digits they were unimportant and disposable.

The two digits were an insult, a sign of how far he’d fallen.

Kevin cleared his throat awkwardly. “It doesn't mean the same-”

Neil cut him off with a shake of his head and, thankfully, Kevin dropped it. With his jersey clenched in one hand, Neil went to the locker that now had his name and new number across the top. He gathered his gear and a practice uniform and went to change out in a shower stall.

Soon enough, the sting of his new number was stamped out by physical exertion. On the court, all his energy was focused on the swing of his racquet and the row of cones. Kevin called out numbers and Neil did his best to knock the corresponding cones down in the correct order.

He was improving gradually, but he'd been a backliner since he was a child and all those years of brutal training at the Nest heavily outweighed the few pathetic weeks of night practices with Kevin. As a striker, he'd never match his own skill as a backliner and that thought stuck in his mind like a thorn.

In reality, he knew that he didn't need to be extraordinary. He only needed to do well enough to pull his weight during games, but that wasn't good enough for him and it wasn't good enough for Kevin. They weren’t designed to settle for anything less than perfection.

Hours later, Kevin called for Neil to stop and Neil almost resented him for it. He wanted to live on
the court until he was better at this. Nothing was as important to him than Exy. His old instincts told him, *Keep going. Don’t eat or sleep until you can do it perfectly.*

After a brief bickering match, Neil agreed to stop for the day and carried the equipment up from the court. He put the cones and the bucket of balls in the foyer and secured their racquets back in the stick rack. When he ambled over to his locker, Kevin was there waiting with a stern expression.

“Don't take too long in the shower. You're coming to the mall with us.”

Neil narrowed his eyes at him. “Why?”

“You need new clothes. You're a reflection of this team now and I won't have you wandering around looking like a twelve-year-old fresh out of basketball practice.”

“My clothes are fine.”

“This isn't up for debate. Just shower and get dressed. Nicky will be here soon to pick us up.”

“Does Wymack know you’re dragging me to the mall?”

“I'll text him,” Kevin said with a dismissive wave.

Across the room, Andrew was straddling a bench and tapping his sneaker against the concrete floor. He caught Neil's eye and tapped his wrist, saying, “Time is money, charity case. Get a move on.”

Neil snatched a clean outfit and a towel and went off to the showers to clean up. He allowed himself a few extra minutes under the hot spray to collect his thoughts, but he didn’t stay long enough to get yelled at. When he walked back out, plucking at the shirt clinging to his damp chest, Kevin was visibly annoyed and Andrew was lying back on the bench while he rhythmically drummed his hands against his stomach. A few seconds after Neil walked into the room, Andrew sprang to his feet and shouted merrily, “Off we go, children!”

Outside, Andrew’s car was idling by the curb with Nicky behind the wheel and Aaron sitting behind Nicky. Kevin slid into the passenger seat like it was his birthright; Andrew smoothly cut in front of Neil and situated himself in the center of the backseat. Aaron acknowledged this only by curling tighter against his door, putting as much space between himself and his twin as he could. Neil's stomach twisted as he lowered himself into the seat next to Andrew and shut the door. He hated being in that car.

“Eyes up front, Nicky,” Andrew purred with a menacing smile.

Neil looked up just as Nicky turned away and put the car in drive with an awkward cough. Since that night in Columbia, Nicky had been jittery and quiet in Neil's presence— not that he was ever in Neil's presence for long. Neil could live with that.

They drove away from campus and, eventually, Nicky parked in a sea of cars, all shimmering in the heat. The mall's entrance was under a decorative wire archway with curling letters, sandwiched between two blocky, bland-looking department stores. Benches, shrubbery, and trash cans were lined up symmetrically on either side of the path feeding a steady stream of people through the automatic glass doors.

Neil had a few memories of a shopping mall his mother took him to. It was a long drive from the house and she always seemed tense when they went. He remembered trailing after her from store to store, his hand clasped firmly in hers and his mind distracted by shiny shopping bags and manicured hands flashing with fine jewelry. They’d walk through mazes of fashionable women’s clothing and
gleaming displays of shoes with thin heels that made Neil think of skewers. Sometimes, a wiry man with beady eyes and sunken cheeks would appear nearby, but he never approached them. Neil remembered him because he wasn't dressed smartly like his father's men; he wore tweed and corduroy and a bulky wristwatch. The one time Neil asked about him, his mother hissed at him to be quiet.

This mall was a bright, over-sized beehive with swarms of people buzzing around shop windows and kiosks. Their wandering eyes sometimes landed on Neil with startlingly sharp focus before flitting away again, always on the hunt for something better, something more. The eager greed practically dripped off them like honey.

The smell seemed vaguely familiar: recycled air, hot pretzels, perfume, floor polish. They walked through clouds of crisp fragrance spilling out from the trendy boutiques, and closer to the food court, Neil could smell fried food and something else that was hot and sweet. *Cinnamon rolls*, he realized. He couldn’t remember if he liked them or not.

Glancing around at the other people, Neil felt lost. He had no idea where they were going or how he’d navigate on his own if he got separated from the group. He was at the mercy of Andrew once again. If Andrew decided to leave him there, he’d have no way of getting back to Wymack’s. Everyone around him walked with purpose, plotted their own paths, figured out what they needed to do and how to do it. Even the children were all comfortably confident as they followed the grown-ups that were sure to take care of them.

It wasn't until Neil followed Kevin past a booth advertising a new teeth whitening treatment that he remembered he had no money with him to pay for his new clothes. Anxiety bubbled in his gut.

Just as Nicky steered the group through a department store to the men's section, Neil buried his uneasiness where it wouldn't be seen. At the back of the group, Neil stopped to take in the sea of clothing before him: blazers and jackets crowding four-armed fixtures, trousers hanging tidily from clips along the wall, stacks of jeans on wooden tables, piles of t-shirts stuffed into white shelves, folded button down shirts wrapped in slippery plastic threatening to slide right off their tables.

It was too much. He’d had some practice at picking out his own clothes from the cheap selections at the grocery store, but he wasn’t prepared for this overwhelming sea of choices.

Nicky was the only one who noticed that Neil was frozen in place. The others had already fanned out, somehow knowing what to look for, but Nicky hung back to keep an eye on him. He frowned at Neil and Neil could only stare back, dumbfounded.

Nicky craned his neck to look for the others and called out, “Kevin, what does Nathaniel need again?”

Kevin's reply came from behind some shelves holding t-shirts. “We already went over this, Nicky.”

Neil moved toward the sound of his voice instinctively like a child searching for their parent.

Nicky shrugged helplessly and said, “You told me before I had my coffee.”

“Jeans and shirts that actually fit,” Kevin answered. “We'll worry about shoes later and we’ll get him a suit closer to the fall banquet.”

Neil rounded the shelves and found Kevin thumbing through a pile of black shirts in search of the right size. There was a wrinkle between his eyebrows and his mouth was pulled downward in concentration.
“I can pick out my own clothes,” Neil snapped without thinking. Sure, the amount of choices made him dizzy, but he didn't want to be treated like a helpless child in front of the others.

Kevin didn’t even look at him. “Go pick stuff out then and we'll compare in a minute.”

Neil grit his teeth at the easy, careless dismissal, but he stalked away before he could make things any worse. Angry heat crawled up his throat and into his cheeks while he snaked through racks and shelves, scanning the garments but not really seeing any of them. He had no idea where to start.

“Rich kid can't shop for himself?”

Neil's head snapped up. At first, he thought it was Andrew, but the blond man in front of him looked too apathetic and disdainful to be Andrew at that time of day. Neil narrowed his eyes at the Aaron and wondered what he wanted. He’d never showed much interest in Neil before, but there he stood.

“I'm just looking,” Neil said sharply.

Aaron's eyebrow twitched upward. “People are saying your dad's probably that fancy-schmancy day trader who got busted for tax evasion. You must've been drowning in money growing up. Probably had everything down to your underwear tailored just for you.”

The mere mention of his father turned Neil’s stomach hot and oily. There was speculation on the internet about his past, but he didn’t want the Foxes looking too closely at him. He hoped they’d get bored eventually so long as he didn’t confirm or deny anything.

Neil asked, “Do you really care enough to be curious?”

Aaron lifted one shoulder. “No, but you could settle a few bets since you're not really looking for clothes.”

“Bets?”

“The Foxes have a few going.” Aaron ticked them off on his fingers. “How long you were at the Nest, whether or not you're an orphan, and how long you'll last before Andrew breaks you.”

It made sense since that they would make a game out of misfortune: it was the only thing they had in common.

“Are you really this eager to hear the results?”

Aaron replied, “There's a fifty-buck bonus for whoever gets you to spill your guts.”

“If you're so desperate to make money, I suggest you find a job,” Neil said coldly. He turned to the table of short-sleeved, collared shirts and quickly picked out two in both small and medium just so he'd have more to hold. Then, he hurried away to look elsewhere. Aaron didn't follow him.

Once he had several shirts draped over his arm, he moved toward the tables of jeans. He picked out a few pairs that weren’t intentionally damaged in any way and laid them over the shirts he was carrying. On his way to the fitting rooms, he saw Andrew linking several belts together to form one long belt that snaked down the center aisle.

Safely locked away in a fitting room, Neil turned away from the mirror and began the process of trying on the clothing he picked out for himself. The price tags made him grimace, but he kept moving. All the shirts that were long-sleeved or not machine washable went into a pile in the corner. The shirts that didn't fit him or weren't comfortable went in the pile as well. In the end, he was left
with three shirts and one pair of jeans.

It was pointless. He had no way to pay for this, so why even bother?

Huffing quietly, he folded all the clothes as best he could, trying to use the creases as a guide to get them back into their original crisp shapes, and took the two piles out. He dropped the larger pile in the metal cart waiting near the end of the little hallway and went to find Kevin. As he walked, he practiced saying, “Can you lend me some money?” and the words burned the tender walls of his throat.

Oblivious to Neil's internal struggle, Kevin cast a disdainful glance down at the clothing in Neil's arms before shoving a heavy bundle into his chest and ordering, “Go try these on.”

Neil couldn't get the question he’d practiced out. Instead, he turned and obeyed.

It wasn’t until he was pulling on the fifth shirt that he realized Kevin was trying to dress him in all black. Neil tugged the shirt back off and stared down at it. The thought of dressing to Riko's standards out in the real world unsettled him. When he first arrived at Palmetto, he wanted to wear all black because that was familiar, but what was familiar was no longer comforting.

Neil left the fitting room and wandered through the store until he replaced the shirts with ones in dark shades of green, blue, and gray. When he finally met back up with Kevin near the section of blazers, Kevin eyed the shirts with a quirked eyebrow and said nothing.

“I'll have to pay you back for these,” Neil grit out.

“If I expected you to pay, I would've told you to bring money. I have Coach's card.”

“I won't take his charity like this. I'm putting these back.” Neil started off toward to put the shirts back in their places, but Kevin's voice stopped him cold.

“You sound awfully high and mighty for someone living on his couch, eating his food, and taking his handouts. Just take the damn clothes and be grateful.”

Neil lifted his chin and asked in French, “Are you ever going to tell him he's your father?”

Kevin recoiled like he'd been slapped. “That's none of your fucking business,” he hissed.

Nearby, hangers scraped on the metal arms of the fixtures and fabric swished quietly. Andrew was between Neil and Kevin a moment later, lifting the bundle neatly from Neil's arms to shove it into Kevin's chest.

“Fun’s over, kids,” Andrew said brightly. “I’m taking Nathaniel now. You can scratch each other’s eyes out later.”

Neil narrowed his eyes. “Where are you taking me?”

“You need a phone,” Kevin explained. “You can’t wander around without one anymore. I need to be able to get a hold of you.”

“What? But I-”


Neil and Kevin exchanged one last scowl and then Neil followed Andrew through to the doors leading out into the mall. They cut through the heart of the mall, past a fountain wrapped in a thick
stone wall beneath the soaring glass ceiling, and headed for the escalators. Andrew barreled through the thick crowd unflinchingly and people shifted out of his way on instinct. Neil quickened his pace and followed in his wake. On the second floor, the air was closer, the ceiling lower, and the crowd more compact. Neil was jostled by stray elbows and purses as he struggled to keep up.

Then, the sugary scent of vanilla perfume flooded his nose and dragged up a memory of a Raven girl. He could smell the sickly-sweet vanilla lotion rubbed into the girl’s calloused hands, mixing with the stench of her sweat and the sour alcohol on her breath.

Nails dug into his chest and clawed his heart out.

*There’s a cabin in the mountains.* Neil picked up the pace again. His eyes landed on the hard line of Andrew’s shoulders; his black t-shirt was easy to find amid the floral sundresses, graphic tees, and bright polos. *The steps are damp and everything smells like rain.*

They passed a shop with a cheerful display in the windows- a beach backdrop behind baskets of lotions and perfumes tilted enticingly for the perusal of passersby. Neil wouldn't have paid it any mind if not for the cloud of fragrance lingering outside the wide doorway.

He was engulfed at once by the cloying stench of roses and lavender, pears and passion fruit, jasmine and musk. More memories skittered across his flesh and wrung the air from his lungs. Hair brushing against his face. Slick skin. Husky laughter. Heat.

Neil tugged the collar of his t-shirt up over his nose and hurried after Andrew. The stink of perfume dug into Neil's sinuses, shame bore holes in his bones and hollowed him out. Nervous energy crackled in his veins.

Once he fell in stride with Andrew, he let go of his collar and tried to smooth his features. Andrew glanced over at him and laughed at whatever he saw on Neil’s face. Then, he pulled a pack of peppermint gum from his pocket; he unwrapped one piece and folded it into his mouth before offering a second one to Neil.

Neil took the gum even though he wasn’t sure why Andrew was giving it to him. Peppermint burst over his tongue and stung his sinuses, washing away the stink of perfume. Relief broke his panic apart and it gradually melted away, piece by piece.

By the time they stepped into an electronics store, Neil almost felt normal again. For a moment, he stopped and watched Andrew wander up and down the aisles, fiddling with display models of cell phones tethered to their cradles with cords.

He didn’t see why he needed to get a phone. Riko might hurt him, but he wouldn’t kill him and Neil’s father still had a little over a year on his sentence. Neil was only on his own for a couple hours each day and if Kevin or Wymack really needed to find him there was only a few places he could be.

Andrew lifted one of the phones over his head to stretch the cord it was attached to as far as it would go. From the doorway, Neil watched him and regretted not memorizing Jean’s number. Trying to hold onto Jean would only hurt him, but it would’ve been comforting to have his phone number all the same. He could always ask Kevin, but Kevin would ask questions that Neil wouldn’t want to answer.

“*Earth to Wesninski!*”

Andrew’s shout startled him. Neil’s eyes jumped back to Andrew, who was staring at him with a phone pressed to his ear. Once he had Neil's attention, he waved the phone and slapped it back onto
its holder.

“I don't want a phone,” Neil said.

Andrew only shrugged and headed down the aisle.

Neil followed him, cheeks burning and chest tight. “I'll work something out on my own later. Let's just go back.”

“Nope,” chirped Andrew before he disappeared from view.

Frustrated, Neil rounded the corner so fast he nearly bumped into Andrew’s back. Andrew had stopped to inspect a flip phone and poke at the keypad. Neil knew if he got a phone he'd expect to see Jean's name on the display every time it went off. The ache he'd been trying to ignore flared painfully like stitches ripping open across his heart.

“Seriously, I'll figure it out on my own,” Neil said weakly.

Andrew looked deeply amused. Tossing the phone aside, he rested one elbow on the shelf and propped his cheek against his fist. “Little Kevin's only comfortable being alone when he's taking a piss or a nap and here you are playing Mr. Independent, claiming you don't need a way to call for help when shit goes south. I find that curious, Mr. Wesninski.”

“Shit's not going south anytime soon.”

“Such confidence,” Andrew said, affecting awe. “How has Riko been keeping you up to date on his evil plans? Carrier pigeon? Thought you smelled like bullshit, but maybe it's been bird shit. This nose of mine might not know so much, after all.”

“He won't pass up the chance to watch us get humiliated on the court. He'll draw this out as long as possible, let Kevin's reputation crumble into dust, and then he'll strike.”

“That's your prediction?”

“Yes.”

“You know him well enough to predict his moves like that?”

“I- yeah, pretty much.” Neil had a bad feeling when Andrew’s grin deepened.

“So you knew he'd send you here to get Kevin?” Andrew asked mockingly. “You didn't seem very prepared for life on the outside. Personally, I would've grabbed some food money or a phone charger, but hey, maybe you wanted to play on expert mode.”

Neil scowled. “Kevin's announcement took us all by surprise. Riko reacted quicker than I expected.”

“I see,” Andrew replied with a sage nod. He straightened up and flicked the flip phone’s price tag. “This one will do just fine. What color would you like? Gray? Gray. Great. Let's pay. I'm getting bored.”

“I don't need a phone,” Neil insisted.

Andrew clicked his tongue. “You keep saying that, but I still can't remember asking. How strange.”

Irritation burst in Neil's lungs. The fire ate up all his oxygen while Andrew breezed away in the direction of the cashier. With a few quick strides, Neil caught up to him again and hissed, “I'll buy
my own goddamn phone when my allowance kicks in. I’m not going to let Wymack buy me a phone on top of everything else he’s done.”

Andrew looked at him funny and then chuckled. “Coach isn’t buying your phone. I’m putting you on our plan. Unlimited shit. You can text your one friend until your thumbs fall off.”

“What plan?” Neil’s stomach dropped. This phone would connect him to the Foxes, to Wymack. The thought of anyone having control over it made Neil uncomfortable. How long would it be before Andrew snapped the scissors shut and severed Neil’s tie to his new team?

Andrew stopped walking and dropped his smile as he studied Neil; his jaw worked while he chewed his gum. Neil didn’t like Andrew’s drugged cheer, but he hated the weight of Andrew’s scrutiny more. It made him want to take cover until Andrew got distracted again.

“Can I help you find anything?” asked a man in khakis and a red shirt.

Andrew cocked his head and kept staring at Neil while he replied, “We need one of those pay-as-you-go phones.”

With a polite smile, the man said, “No problem! I can show you what we’ve got available, if you’ll just follow me for a minute.”

Not long later, Andrew was paying for a simple gray cell phone that Neil would have total control over. Neil protested when Andrew added a hundred-dollar refill card to the purchase- the card would give him more minutes and texts than he could ever hope to use- but he was ignored by both Andrew and the store employee.

Andrew took the bag and his receipt and, sullenly, Neil followed him out of the store and back down the escalator. Instead of going back to the rest of the group, Andrew stopped at the fountain and perched on the stone wall so he could fiddle with Neil’s new phone.

Neil stood beside him, anxiously shifting his weight. His body ached from practice and his head throbbed hotly with the murmur of the bustling crowd swimming in his ears. His thoughts were a hopeless jumble.

The looks he got from strangers burned his skin; he could tell that they were eying the scar on his cheek. He just wanted to leave.

Andrew was still absorbed in whatever he was doing, so Neil searched the crowd for Kevin and the other two, hoping they were nearby. His entire body turned to stone when he spotted a pair of men in suits. He didn’t recognize them and they weren’t looking his way, but they served as an unfriendly reminder that the Butcher’s men could be anywhere and he wouldn’t know until it was too late. Maybe they’d throw him in a cage until his father was out of prison, maybe the Butcher no longer cared who carved up his son.

The two men disappeared in the direction of the food court, but Neil couldn’t make himself relax. Impatient, he glanced over Andrew’s shoulder to see what was taking so long. Andrew was in the middle of typing “Allison Reynolds” in a box labeled “Contact Name.” Neil watched, completely baffled, as Andrew entered in a phone number as well. When he was finished, he hit “OK” to save the information, and then he pressed the button again to select “New Contact” so he could put in Renee’s name and number.

After Andrew started on Dan’s details, Neil asked, “You memorized all their numbers?”
Andrew snorted. “What makes you think these are the right numbers?”

“You know I'm never going to call any of you guys. If you wanted to pull a prank, you would've just given everyone else a fake number instead of mine.”

“There's that confidence again.”

“I seriously doubt you’d put this much energy into something pointless.”

“Not true. I play Exy, don't I?”


Andrew's smile was unkind. “Try that line again, but this time pretend like you mean it.”

The temptation to shove Andrew into the water was strong, but Neil dug his fingernails into his palms and resisted. The hiss of the fountain’s spray and the buzzing chatter of the people around them seeped into the gap in their conversation.

Finally, Andrew clapped the phone shut and tossed it to Neil, who caught it easily and opened it to look over Andrew's work. All the Foxes were on his contact list along with Wymack, Abby, and Dr. Dobson. He didn’t want to admit it, but knowing he wouldn’t have to go searching for a pay phone again was comforting. “Say thank you,” Riko's voice hissed at the back of Neil’s mind. Ingratitude always infuriated Riko, but Andrew didn’t look like he expected Neil to thank him.

“I have a question,” said Neil.

Andrew heaved a dramatic sigh as he fished his own phone out of his pocket. “Do you remember when you used to sulk quietly? Those were the days.”

“You could've left me with the others.”

“I could do all sorts of things. It’s a free country- or so they tell me.”

Neil studied Andrew's profile while Andrew typed out a message. “None of this is part of our deal. Protecting me from Nicky, buying me a phone...”

Andrew shot an annoyed look Neil's way. “You can't keep Kevin here if you're dead. You're not getting out of our deal that easily.”

“I told you Riko isn't going to kill me.”

Andrew shrugged. “You can gamble with your life after you do what you promised. Until then, stay away from the betting table.”

Neil folded his arms and tilted his head. “I heard about the others placing bets about my past. What’d you put your money on?”

“You have a phone full of numbers. Go bother someone else.”

“I thought the meds kept you too high to get bothered by anybody.”

“My patience shouldn’t be tested,” he said with a sharp edge to his voice that contradicted the hazy mirth in his eyes. “Oh! Speaking of tests: old Saint Nick has a clean south pole.”

“How many pills did you take this morning?”
“Keep up, Nathaniel.” Andrew snapped his fingers at him. “Nicky's disease-free.”

Neil blinked in surprise and quickly checked to make sure no one was within earshot. “Nicky didn't do anything to me after I passed out. Why would you make him go to a clinic?”

“You didn't ask me if he 'did anything' to you. You asked if he had any STDs, and now you have your answer.”

Neil didn’t understand. It would've been much easier for Andrew to drop the whole thing after finding out that Neil wasn’t raped that night. Neil wouldn't have pressed him for test results he didn’t need.

None of Andrew’s actions added up right- the chair under the doorknob in Columbia, the hole in Abby’s wall the next morning, the phone, the test results. It was tempting to chalk it up to Andrew’s mental instability, but Neil had a gut feeling there was something else behind it. Andrew had drugged and threatened him for a reason, so he must’ve had a reason for helping Neil as well. Neil just couldn’t see what that reason was. Unsettled, he looked back out into the crowd and curled his toes in his shoes, half-tempted to run.
The month of May was passing over Neil like a cloud on a strong wind and he wasn't making the sort of progress he'd hoped for. He wasn't ready to set foot on the court with a real team- even a team like the Foxes- and his anxiety was a constant thrum of restless electricity under his skin.

Every day of the week followed the same pattern except Wednesday. On Wednesday mornings, Andrew had appointments with Dr. Dobson, so practice was pushed back until after lunch and Neil was left with a terrifying stretch of free time. On the first Wednesday of the summer, Neil made the mistake of going to the stadium alone to run drills before Kevin and Andrew arrived. By the time Kevin was through with him, Neil's arms felt jellied and boneless; he barely had the strength to lift his bag.

On the second Wednesday, Neil tried to keep himself busy with chores around the apartment while Wymack watched the morning news. Thankfully, Wymack sensed that Neil wasn't in the mood for conversation and let him work in silence. After cleaning the front room and the bathroom, Neil went into the kitchen to furiously scrub the dishes in the sink and watch the clock above the stove. It was nearing eleven and it would be another two hours at least before Kevin called to tell him they were finally ready for practice.

The television went quiet and then Wymack’s voice drifted in from the other room. “Hello? Oh, good morning to you, too, Mr. Moriyama. What can I do for you?”

Neil nearly dropped the coffee mug he was washing. He carefully put it down and listened hard to what Wymack was saying.

“Oh?” Wymack's tone was colored with something dark. “Oh, I see. That's... that's certainly something. Well, thanks for the heads-up. Yup. You as well. Bye.”

Neil shuddered, suddenly unable to breathe. There wasn't enough air in the apartment anymore. He hastily dried his hands on the scratchy dish towel and rushed to the front door.

“What's the fire, kid?” Wymack called from the couch.

Neil swallowed the cold lump in his throat and shoved his feet into his running shoes. “I- I just need some air.”
“Be careful.”

“Yes, sir.” Slipping out into the hall, Neil patted his shorts to make sure he had his phone and keys before bolting toward the stairwell.

After some quick stretches in the parking lot, Neil took off running like the master himself was at his heels. It was too warm and bright outside to be pleasant. Sunlight baked whatever wasn’t shaded by trees and threatened to burn the back of Neil’s neck again. Sweat left vulgar wet patches under his arms and glued his shirt to his skin. The swollen mosquito bites dotting his calves itched.

He didn’t slow down until after he ran a full mile. Everything inside him was on fire, but the icy needles in his heart remained. The master had called Wymack and, no matter what they talked about, it was a bad sign.

Neil’s phone chimed, indicating a new text message, and he grimaced at the sound of it. For days, Andrew had been sending texts that made no sense whatsoever. It was just another game Neil couldn’t get the hang of.

He slowed to a stop at a quiet street corner to look at what Andrew had sent this time.

Eggs

Neil sighed heavily. His working theory was that it might be some bizarre word association game—perhaps something Andrew’s psychiatrist made him play. He sent back: Omelette.

The fingers he’d broken when he was younger twinged slightly as he scratched his sweat-slick neck. A cool breeze made him shiver as he waited for Andrew’s answer. Luckily, he didn’t have to wait long before his phone chimed again.

Nope

Neil rolled his eyes and slipped his phone back into his pocket as he resumed walking along Perimeter Road.

By the time he made it back to Wymack’s apartment complex, the wind was growing stronger and the sun was tucked away behind a blanket of shifting gray clouds. Neil was tempted to watch the storm brew, but his desire for a shower outweighed that.

He took the elevator up to Wymack’s floor and trudged down the hall. All thoughts of showering and fixing himself a quick lunch were cut short by the sound of raised voices inside the apartment. Nervously, Neil pressed his ear to the door and listened.

“Calm the hell down!” Wymack bellowed just before glass shattered.

Neil flinched back.

“I told you!” shrieked Kevin. “I told you he’d come after me!”

“Sit down and breathe, damn it!” Wymack growled. There was a brief struggle that ended with a body hitting the wall. “Listen, fuckhead, you're not doing yourself any favors by flipping your shit, so pull it together.”

There was silence for a few heartbeats and then came a choked-off sob.

“Why didn’t you do anything?” Kevin demanded. “You could’ve tried to-”
“You know damn well there was nothing I could've done to stop this. The transfer is in the works. Edgar Allan is coming south. Now, breathe, for fuck’s sake.”

Hearing it out loud turned Neil's heart to ash. The master was setting the stage for a show that would make him a fortune. Kevin would be allowed to stay at Palmetto State for the year, since the money mattered more than the jersey he was in. As soon as the show was over, though, the master would summon Kevin back to the Nest where he belonged.

Neil's survival wasn't guaranteed like Kevin's was. He hadn't played a single game yet and gossip was already ruining his reputation. With only Riko's short speech and the Foxes' updated roster to go off of, they spun tales of a grief-stricken young backliner following his idol Kevin Day to South Carolina to beg for a place at his side. They said Neil was an “obsessed fanboy.” They said Wymack had too much pity and no other options. They said Neil’s contract with Palmetto State was the biggest joke of the decade.

Neil was worthless. The master had no reason to want him back.

He pressed his forehead to the door and exhaled quietly. Now wasn’t the time to get swallowed by self-pity.

Inside, Kevin was unraveling into hysterics. “I can’t do this. I can’t! They'll never let me go, don’t you understand? They're going to take me back. They’ll do whatever it takes—”

“Enough!” snapped Wymack. “Moriyama can do all sorts of things, I’m sure, but he can't take you back to Edgar Allan unless you say yes. You signed a contract with me. You’re staying here.”

“If he tells me to come back, I won’t be able to tell him no. I don’t—”

“Andrew and I will tell him no for you. We’ll handle that asshole Riko, too. Just keep your mouth shut and focus on your game.”

Neil had wasted enough time out in the hallway. He promised Andrew he'd keep Kevin at Palmetto State and it was time to prove that he could.

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. Kevin's face crumpled and he had to turn away to regain his composure.


Neil bobbed his head in acknowledgment. “What's going on?”

Kevin made a choked noise, something between a laugh and a sob. “Edgar Allan is coming south,” he said, voice thick and wobbling. “The transfer was approved this morning.”

“We would’ve had to face them anyway in the spring,” Neil said as evenly as he could.

Kevin whipped around to glare at him. “We’ll have to face them in a few months. They’re going to slaughter us on the court. We don’t stand a fucking chance!”

Neil feigned nonchalance even though his insides were shivering. “Okay, so we’ll lose one game. Throwing a tantrum isn't going to make a difference.”

“You know what Riko will do to me- to us.”

“You made a deal with Minyard because you believed he could protect you,” Neil pointed out.
“Nothing has changed there. You’re just getting cold feet now that things are actually happening.”

“You should run,” Kevin whispered in French. “This isn't going to work. I never should have-”

“I’m not going anywhere and neither are you. We’re sticking to the plan.” His words came out resigned and weary.

Wymack stared at him like he was working out a problem in his head. Neil realized he’d forgotten to act surprised when Kevin told him the news. He owed Wymack an explanation, but first, he wanted a shower. Leaving his shoes by the door, he crossed the room and pulled his bag out from behind the couch to get a fresh change of clothes.

Kevin sank into the armchair and miserably scrubbed his hands over his face, groaning, “We're gonna die.”

No, just me, Neil thought bitterly. What he said was, “Everyone dies at some point. Try not to drown in booze while I’m in the shower.”

Avoiding Wymack’s stare, Neil hurried into the bathroom and locked the door behind him. He sagged against the wall and let his panic wash over him. In spite of what he told Kevin, this did change things. The Nest felt closer than ever; he could practically feel Riko breathing down his neck.

There's a cabin in the mountains, he thought weakly, but the fire in his chest made it hard to picture it. He remembered the photo his mother used to place in his small, trembling hands as he curled up under the desk in her study. He remembered the slow, predatory thump-thump-thump of his father's boots out in the hall. He remembered the sound of his mother’s voice as she told him to put his mind somewhere safe.

Her face flashed behind his eyelids and he flinched away from the memory so hard his head smacked into the wall. A white-hot burst of pain washed everything away.

“Neil?” Wymack called. “Everything okay in there?”

“I'm fine!”

He showered as quickly as he could, keeping his mind focused on the present. After he roughly dried himself with a towel, he yanked his clean clothes on and headed back out to face the others again.

Wymack stood sentinel in the middle of the room, arms folded and eyes stern. Kevin was now curled up on the couch in a shroud of fearful anxiety, slowly draining a bottle of vodka. Looking down at him almost made Neil feel tall.

Neil stuffed his dirty clothes into the mesh bag he used for laundry and wedged it back under the couch. Then, he asked Kevin, “Are you going to practice drunk?”

Kevin turned his face into the cushion and mumbled, “Fuck off.”

“I think it’s time for lunch,” Wymack said, already on his way to the kitchen.

Neil swallowed nervously and followed him, wanting to get this conversation over with. He hovered at the edge of the dingy white tiles and watched Wymack dig out the ingredients for stir-fry. He waited for the first spark to ignite Wymack’s rage. He waited for Wymack to turn on him and spit fire.

He hated waiting.
“I knew the transfer was going to happen.”
Wymack replied, “Yeah, I figured as much.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”
Wymack shrugged and stirred the food in the pan. “There was nothing I could’ve said to change their minds. The ERC knows how much they’ll gain by letting this shitshow go down. They’re thinking of the money and the publicity.”

Neil still felt guilty, but he kept quiet about it.

“Lucky for us,” Wymack continued, “they won’t make the announcement until the team's back in town. It’ll be easier to keep all of you safe that way. Things might get nasty if word gets out early, so don't go blabbing to all your friends.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” muttered Neil.

“Edgar Allan isn’t getting either of you back,” Wymack said, lowering his voice. “Your contracts say that you’re both mine unless you choose to leave. Moriyama’s money and Riko’s stupid pranks can’t change that, okay?”

“Okay,” Neil answered awkwardly. Wymack made it sound like he was safe and secure, but he knew better. If the Moriyamas wanted him back, they’d take him. And if they wanted him gone, they’d make him disappear.

“You gonna be able to hold it together or should I get more booze?”

Neil blinked in surprise. “I'm fine. You might need it for Andrew, though.”

“He'll find out with the rest of the Foxes in June. The last thing we need is him doing something drastic. The ERC's been looking for a reason to kick him off my team and I’d rather not hand them one on a silver platter.”

“What about his weekly probation violations?”

Wymack drawled, “I don’t know anything about that. Do you?”

“No, sir.”

“Good man.”

Neil nodded even though Wymack wasn’t looking his way and then slipped out of the kitchen. In the front room, Kevin was pacing with his arms crossed tightly and nervous energy rolling off him like toxic fumes. The silence was stifling, but Neil didn’t want to talk about Riko or Edgar Allan anymore.

Then, he got an idea. He cleared his throat and asked, “Did you guys eat eggs at Abby’s this morning?”

A sharp crack of thunder startled them both.

Recovering, Kevin said, “Yeah, she made us scrambled eggs.”

Andrew's odd text from earlier suddenly made more sense.
“Why are you asking about breakfast?”

Neil ignored him and went to the window to look outside. Rain fell in heavy, misty sheets; the dark clouds flickered with lightning. He wanted to get closer, so he unlocked the window and shoved the sash up as high as he could get it. Cool air spilled over him, carrying the scent of damp bricks and earth into the apartment. Raindrops spattered the front of his shirt and his bare forearms through the screen. Goosebumps tingled across his skin.

The wind picked up without warning, throwing more water through the window at him. Lightning forked across the sky. The answering growl of thunder reverberated in Neil’s chest. Flexing his hands, he felt the ache of old injuries; he wondered if the pain would ever leave him.
In a Flash

Chapter Summary

Neil breaks a rule.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: descriptions of violence/physical abuse/child abuse and a "full flashback"

Disclaimer: I'm not a mental health professional. I'm just doing my best with a lot of research.

Also, I just want to point out that Neil has very negative views about therapy and medication right now because of his backstory. Personally, I've had really positive experiences with both therapy and meds in the past and I know plenty of people who could say the same. It's not everyone's cup of tea, but I recommend keeping an open mind about it and exploring your options. There's no shame in getting the help you need.

I hope you enjoy the chapter! As always, the kudos/comments/messages you guys leave me are really appreciated <3

The next four days felt like four decades.

The secret grew in the space between Neil and Kevin. It festered, turned ugly, turned mean. Its claws scratched at their chests and pulled at their tongues. Tell someone, tell anyone, scream. As always, though, fear of the consequences kept them quiet. They knew better than anyone that there was always something worse lurking around the corner.

Neil tried to stuff his days full of activity to keep his anxiety at bay. He studied old games, poured over Wymack's notes, cleaned the apartment. He ran to exhaust himself at night and sometimes he found himself at the stadium, checking the equipment and ignoring the phantom echoes of voices he'd rather forget.

He couldn't avoid sleep, unfortunately. Dream versions of Riko came for him with talons and beady eyes glinting with sadistic glee. Metal clapped around his wrists, blades took deep bites out of his body, Ravens crowed with delight. Sometimes there were splashes of orange in his periphery, vague shapes that he recognized as the Foxes. Instead of moving closer, they always walked away; they judged him and found him lacking.

The secret gripped Neil's heart and bounced it off the walls of his chest. Riko's coming for us. The Ravens are coming south. He wanted to tell someone even though he had no one to tell. He wanted to run even though he had nowhere to go. He wondered how Kevin was able to keep it from Andrew and the others. Knowing Kevin, he probably washed the words away with alcohol.
Kevin's panic manifested itself as rage on the court and Neil was too worn out to be angry at him for it. He didn't bother to flinch away from Kevin's stick when it knocked against his back or jabbed into his stomach. It was just enough to leave marks, but not enough to cause real damage. Kevin was still a kinder master than Riko had been.

The shadows beyond the court walls were thicker these days. They came crawling out of the corners of the stadium and oozed over the orange and white rows, painting them black. When Neil looked at them directly, though, they disappeared. Tricks of light, perhaps.

On Sunday, Andrew sat on the home bench and tossed his phone back and forth between his palms, watching Kevin and Neil as if he was actually interested. If he hadn't looked so jittery and amused, Neil would have suspected that he was off his medication. It was unnerving to see him sitting in the same place for so long.

Neil didn't realize he'd stopped moving until Kevin barked, “Pay attention!”

He shook himself and sluggishly raised his racquet to continue with the drill. His gear choked him, weighed him down, but he forced himself to keep moving. He felt Andrew's eyes on him as he chased after balls and tried to hit the orange cones in the correct order. They had been at this for hours. He couldn't remember when they'd last taken a break.

“Wrong!”

Kevin's shout came two seconds before a ball smacked into Neil's hip. Anger puffed weakly in his chest. His arms lowered, the head of his racquet thumped softly against the shiny floor. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck. His muscles were made of lava, liquid and burning. The heavy thump of his pulse drowned out his thoughts.

Kevin stalked toward him. “You've got to do better than this, Nathaniel! You're not good enough. Do it again!”

Something in Neil's heart caught fire. He'd had enough of being Kevin's dog. He was sick and tired of being afraid, of bowing down to men who had no right to rule over him. A wild daydream flickered in his mind- knocking Kevin aside, leaving this place, a breath of freedom before the Moriyamas put him out of his misery. It almost seemed worth it.

Kevin stood in front of him now, towering over him and spitting hateful words as if it was Neil's fault that the Ravens were coming south to crush them. Resentment simmered under his tongue.

“What are you just standing there for?” Kevin shoved Neil's shoulder hard enough to send him half a step backward. “Quit fucking around!”

The shadows pooled at the edge of the court, blacking out the plexiglass like smoke.

Kevin's racquet hit his upper arm and he stumbled sideways. His shoe squeaked. Pain blared through skin and muscle.

His temper roused.

“Don't,” he said.

“Don't what?” Kevin sneered, stepping toward him. “You have to improve. Everyone is waiting to rip you apart, so grow up and get your shit together. We don't have time for you to sulk.”

The shadows shifted at the corners of his vision. He could almost hear them whispering. Neil's lungs
were overfilled, stretched too far and unable to exhale. His vision wobbled. Sharp eyes dug into his back, judging and mocking. Old taunts echoed in his ears. His fingers tightened around his racquet.

“This team is already fucked. We can't afford to let you drag us down further. Do you get that? Are you even listening to me? What the fuck is wrong with you? Say something!” Kevin ordered, jabbing the head of his racquet into Neil's arm again.

Everything went black and red.

Neil dropped his own racquet with a loud clack! and threw himself into Kevin as hard as he could. Unprepared for it, Kevin stumbled and fell onto his back with a shocked grunt. Neil took a step toward him, body tight with a violent urge to hit him again, but then his mind tilted. Sick satisfaction gave way to blinding fear. His stomach lurched. He could hear Jean whispering, “What have you done?”

Fighting back was against the rules.

He whipped around in search of Andrew. He broke the rules. Andrew must have seen it. Andrew would make him pay for it. Andrew was going to come after him.

Andrew was going to break him. Andrew, with his knives and his drugs and his cousin, was going to make him pay.

Neil couldn't breathe. His vision went spotty. He was going to be killed for this.

The court door flew open and Neil saw the master there.

“Kneel!”

Neil dropped to his knees, terrified. Riko and Kevin stood over him. Blood poured from Riko's broken nose, staining his snarling lips and trembling chin.

The tip the master's cane came up hard under Neil's chin, forcing him to look up. “Bad things happen when we lose our tempers, Nathaniel. Pay close attention. I do not like giving lessons more than once.”

Neil's mind wrenched forward.

Jean was kneeling in front of him.

No, no, please, no. He opened his mouth to beg, but no sound came out.

The master's cane came down swiftly against Jean's back.

Whip.

Jean cried out.

Whip.

He crumpled onto the floor.

Whip.

There was blood.
Jean went limp and silent. A scream scrambled up Neil’s throat and got tangled around his vocal chords.

A voice swam in Neil's ear. “Goddamn it, kid. Look at me.”

Hands gripped Neil’s arms and hauled him to his feet. Then, he saw rows and rows of orange and white just beyond the inner court.

“Snap out of it,” Wymack said gruffly.

Neil blinked up at him.

The dust was beginning to clear: Andrew and Kevin stood in front of him, one curious and the other horrified. Wymack's hand was heavy on his shoulder.

Neil’s mind was numb.

“Come on, we’re leaving,” said Wymack.

In the locker room, Neil's body moved on autopilot through the usual routine. Shower, dry off, get dressed. He could see his fingers tying a knot in the drawstring of his shorts, but his hands didn’t feel like his own. Everything was far away.

When he saw himself in the mirror above the sinks, eighteen years old and burned instead of tattooed, he remembered that five years stood between him and the day he nearly lost Jean. Still, the wound felt fresh, raw and throbbing.

The journey to Wymack's apartment took no time at all. Neil was ushered to the couch and told to stay put. His joints creaked as he sat down on the cushion. His body ached. Blankly, he stared at the dark television screen and studied the reflection of the room.

All his thoughts were out of reach, tucked away in glass cases. He didn't know what was real. The past had folded over the present and now everything was hazy. He smelled blood and floor polish, felt the fear of losing Jean hammering in his heart, but he still saw Wymack's television against the wall.

Which was the dream: the apartment or Evermore?

“I know what I saw, Kevin.” Wymack's voice came from the kitchen and snagged Neil's focus like a fish hook. “I'm putting an end to this. I don't know what kind of shit you were allowed to get away with at Edgar Allan, but you are not going to beat my players, understand? Your one-on-one practices are over.”

“Coach-”

“Keep your excuses. There's no room for 'em here.”

“You don't understand,” Kevin argued. “I have to be hard on him. If he doesn’t get better at this, the Moriyamas will-”

“How the hell is he supposed to get better if he's a vegetable?” Wymack shouted. “Look out there and tell me if you really, honestly think you've done him a speck of good. Oh, you want to pout now? Fine. Stay in here while I call Betsy. Not a single word to him, got it?”
“Yes, Coach,” Kevin replied frostily.

Wymack paused when he noticed Neil watching him, but then he disappeared down the hallway to make the call from his bedroom. Kevin stepped into view a moment later, scowling in Wymack’s direction. Defying his orders, he walked over to perch on the coffee table in front of Neil. He folded his hands between his knees and picked at his thumbnail.

“Do you remember what happened?” Kevin asked.

Neil stared at his green eyes and tried to lock onto his words.

“Nathaniel? Say something. You’re freaking me out.”

Neil blinked owlishly. He could remember shoving Kevin and the memory resurrected his terror. I broke a rule. He looked around for Andrew, but he couldn’t see or hear him.

Kevin must’ve understood because he said, “Andrew thought it’d be funny to shove a pack of gum at your nose while you were... distracted, so Coach told him to stay in the back room.”

Footsteps thumped down the hall. Kevin straightened his posture and tilted his chin up defiantly.

“You leave your brain behind?” Wymack snapped. “Go to my office and make sure Andrew isn’t lighting shit on fire.”

“Yes, Coach,” mumbled Kevin. He crossed his arms tightly and slinked down the hall. Neil listened hard until he heard the door open and shut.

Wymack rubbed a hand over his bristly jaw and lowered himself onto the edge of the coffee table where Kevin had been a moment ago. He sighed wearily and asked, “You remember what happened?”

Neil didn’t.

“Right.” Wymack heaved another sigh and scraped a hand through his hair. “Well, I was coming to get you since your practice was running long. You and Kevin looked like you were in the middle of a nasty fight. When I said your name, you dropped and zoned out for a few minutes. You wanna tell me what was going on in that brain of yours?”

Fuck, I’m going crazy. A tremor wracked through Neil’s frame. He clenched his trembling hands.

“All right, you don’t have to tell me,” Wymack assured him. His voice sounded awkward, still rough but stilted like he was trying to soften it. Neil’s stomach turned over and twisted. “Just breathe and try to... stay here ’til Betsy shows up. She’ll know what to do, okay? Can you do that?”

Neil bobbed his head.

“Good. You want something to drink?”

Neil shook his head no.

“I’m going to go make sure my office is still in one piece. You sit tight. Betsy’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Neil blew out a slow, shaky breath once Wymack was gone again. The thought of seeing the psychiatrist made him want to run, but he had no choice. She was already on her way. He slumped back against the couch and silently begged his hands to stop shaking.
Wymack let the doctor in when she knocked gently at the front door. “Betsy, good to see you,” he said.

“Hello, David,” replied the doctor. Then, she turned toward Neil and smiled. “Hi, there. I've been looking forward to meet you.”

Dr. Dobson was a middle-aged woman with mousy brown curls falling just below her double chin. Wire-rimmed glasses threatened to slip down her nose until one pudgy finger pushed them back into place. Neil shrank back into the cushions when she walked toward him, leather sandals slapping the soles of her bare feet. The cartoon cat on her baggy purple t-shirt stared out at him.

“I have some packets of hot cocoa with me,” she said, digging them out of her shapeless floral-print tote bag. “Would you like a cup?”

Neil shook his head.

“Anything I can get you?”

Neil shook his head again.

Andrew emerged from the hallway with a chair from the back room and a grin. “Bee! Thought I heard you buzzing around.”

The doctor's warm smile grew. “Hello, Andrew. How has your day been?”

“Oh, I've been a busy, busy bee, Bee.” Andrew dropped the chair next to the coffee table and spun it to face Neil. “I'm not the one on the couch today, though, so mind your own beeswax.”

“Kevin!” Wymack called. “Come get your shoes on. I'm taking you back to Abby's.”

Neil watched Andrew's hands, waiting for the glint of a knife. There was no way he hadn't seen Neil shove Kevin on the court.

“Will you buy us Happy Meals, Coach?” Andrew asked brightly. “We'll be happier if we don't have to eat Abby's meatloaf.”

Kevin breezed into the room with that look of untouchable arrogance he always wore when he was either in public or agitated. He pointedly ignored Wymack as he pulled his shoes on. Neil wanted to ask Kevin what he should do, what he should say, but his mouth wouldn’t work.

“Bee, you’ll be happy to hear I found my book,” said Andrew.

“Oh? Where was it?” Dr. Dobson asked before she set her tote bag on the coffee table and eased herself into the chair.

“Nicky packed it in his bag by accident, the scoundrel.”

“I'm glad you found it. You'll let me know how it ends?”

Andrew sucked his teeth and made a noncommittal sound before wandering over to Kevin's side.

“Out, both of you,” Wymack ordered, pulling the door open and waving Kevin and Andrew out into the hall. “I'll be back later, Betsy. You've got him?”

Dr. Dobson nodded and gave a little wave. “We'll be all right. Have a nice night, boys!”
“Bye, Bee!” Andrew shouted back as the door closed.

It took Neil twenty seconds to gather enough courage to look at Dr. Dobson. Her small, keen eyes watched him; a knowing smile tugged at her thin mouth. Neil’s skin itched.

“Easier to think when it’s quiet, isn’t it?” Dr. Dobson said gently. “David told me you go by Neil. Is it all right if I call you that?”

Neil nodded.

Dr. Dobson’s smile widened. “It’s nice to meet you, Neil. You can call me whatever you prefer. I’ll respond to just about anything: Dr. Dobson, Betsy, Bee. Now, this isn’t a formal session, but I want you to know that anything you say to me will stay between us. Have you ever talked with a counselor before?”

Neil wasn’t allowed to speak to outsiders. There were rules.

Riko and Kevin had been threatened with psychiatrists before. Plenty of people were curious or concerned about their mental health. They never saw any doctors, but the master taught Riko and Kevin what to say anyway. Neil wished he could remember the script.

“Is something making you nervous, Neil? Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to say,” Neil mumbled.

“There’s no right or wrong answer here. You can say whatever is on your mind.”

A headache burrowed into his brain. He was so tired his body was melting into the couch. He just wanted to sleep.

“Are you hungry? Should we make some dinner?”

Neil frowned.

“I’m sure David has something edible in his kitchen. Let’s have a look, shall we?”

Without waiting for a reply, the doctor went to the kitchen and began rummaging around. Neil wasn’t sure why, but it felt like an intrusion. A scalding burst of irritation got him up off the couch and over to where he could see what she was doing.

The doctor opened cupboards one by one and examined their contents. She picked up jars of sauce and cans of soup, turned them around to read their labels, and carefully put them back. Then, she pulled out drawers to study coupons and spotty silverware. Neil wanted to know what mental notes she was making as she rifled through Wymack’s kitchen.

“How about some grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup?” Dr. Dobson turned her watchful eyes on him. “Does that sound okay?”

Neil shrugged.

“Let me know if you’d like something else,” Dr. Dobson said with another smile. Her mouth was bracketed by lines left by decades of easy smiles like that one. After washing her hands in the sink, she muttered, “Now, where does David keep his pots and pans?”

Neil didn’t want her to touch anything else. In a few quick steps, he crossed the kitchen to crouch at the cupboard beside the oven. Metal scraped loudly against metal as he tugged out a frying pan and
a small scratched pot from the jumbled heap. The doctor got out a can of condensed tomato soup and then pulled the butter, milk, and cheddar cheese from the shelves in the refrigerator door.

Neil placed the pan and pot on the front burners of the stove. He wanted the doctor to leave. He wanted this stranger out of the apartment.

“Thank you for helping,” she said. “Would you like to make the soup while I get the sandwiches started?”

Wordlessly, Neil grabbed the soup can and used the metal tab to work the top open. He could feel the doctor's eyes observing him. His brain felt fuzzy. Could she see the ball of anxiety clenched between his shoulder blades? Did he have any anger on his face?

He stared down at the shivery mound of red paste in the cold pot, lost in his thoughts.

What was the point of this?

“What's the next step?” Dr. Dobson prompted as she laid one slice of buttered bread in the pan. The butter hissed against the hot surface as it melted. She arranged the slices of cheese over the bread and asked, “Are you still with me, Neil?”

Neil’s gaze flicked up to her face briefly.

“Do you prefer to make your soup with water or milk?” When he didn't reply, she suggested, “How about we do half water and half milk? That'll be a nice compromise, don’t you think?”

Mechanically, Neil poured milk into the empty soup can and topped it off with filtered water from the pitcher by the sink. Then, he emptied it into the pot, turned on the heat, and went back to staring.

For a while, the only sound was the sizzle of butter in the pan. Dr. Dobson didn’t speak until after steam began to rise from the pot and she’d moved on to cooking the second sandwich.

“Have you and David been getting along?” she asked.

Neil paused for a moment and then resumed stirring the soup. “I’m sure David has told you already.”

“I'd like to hear your side of things.”

“We get along fine,” Neil replied tersely.

Dr. Dobson flipped the sandwich and nudged it into the center of the pan with the spatula. “Do you know who you'll share a room with at the Tower?”

“Matt and Seth.”

“I see. Did you get a chance to meet them before they left for vacation?”

Neil could feel her watching him again, so he nodded and shifted half a step away.

She flipped the sandwich. “Are you nervous about summer practices?”

“It doesn't matter.”

“What makes you say that?”

Neil lifted a stiff shoulder. “Summer practices will happen regardless of how I'm feeling.”
“True, but your feelings still matter,” she said. “If something’s bothering you, talking might help.”

Neil didn’t reply. He watched thick bubbles rise to the soup’s surface and burst.

Dr. Dobson slid the second sandwich onto a plate, turned off the heat, and moved the pan to the cool back burner. Then, she pulled two bowls down from the cabinet by the sink and suggested, “Why don’t you wash up and get yourself something to drink? I’ll get the soup dished up.”

Neil did as he was told.

They sat across from each other at the breakfast bar with their food and glasses of water. Dr. Dobson cut her own sandwich diagonally into two perfect triangles. Neil folded his hands in his lap and waited. Wymack didn’t call Dr. Dobson over so she could find out if he was nervous about summer practices or how he felt about the Foxes. Dr. Dobson was there because something had gone wrong and it needed to be fixed. She’d softened the silence with small, insignificant questions that had small, insignificant answers, but soon she would dig around in his brain to discover just what had happened on the court earlier.

Neil wanted that answer as well, but he didn’t have words for it. He didn’t know why his mind slipped like it did or if it would happen again. What he did know was that a player losing his mind on the court was a problem that no coach wanted to deal with.

The doctor dipped one corner of her sandwich into her soup and took a bite. The bread crunched between her teeth. Neil’s hunger evaporated as anxiety swelled and squeezed his brain.

He couldn’t see the next steps and that frightened him. If he was honest with the doctor, Wymack could take him off the team. Absently, he scratched at his scarred cheekbone. If he was stubborn, the doctor had pills that would loosen his mind until he split open and spilled his secrets. He was horrified to think of what she might learn about him if it came to that. He remembered floating on dust, loose-limbed and defenseless. He knew there was a stark contrast between Andrew on his medication and off of it.

This was a game he’d never counted on playing and he needed to figure out the rules quickly. The doctor was already too many steps ahead of him.

“Soup’s getting cold,” said Dr. Dobson. “We could reheat it, if you’d like.”

Neil shook his head and forced himself to swallow a lukewarm spoonful. It went down his throat like slime.

The doctor watched him. “Penny for your thoughts?”

Neil took a large bite out of the corner of his sandwich and took his time chewing. Then, he steeled himself and said, “You’re going to ask about what happened earlier. That’s why Wymack told you to come here.”

“You don’t have to tell me about it if you don’t want to.”

Neil scoffed and took another bite.

Dr. Dobson tilted her head. “Do you feel pressured to talk?”

After swallowing the bite of sandwich, Neil took a long drink of water.

“Would you like to ask me some questions, Neil?” she asked before dipping the last bite of her
sandwich into her soup and popping it into her mouth.

Neil's mouth twitched, fighting the urge to sneer. “So I can feel in control and get comfortable?”

“Would that be such a bad thing?”

“Not for you. You've gotta reach your goal somehow.”

“What do you think that goal is?” Her tone was neutral, but there was a clever glint in her eyes that Neil didn't like.

Setting down his sandwich, Neil rubbed his fingers together to brush off the crumbs and cleared his throat. “You're a psychiatrist. Wymack called you here to fix me.”

“Are you upset that he called me?”

Neil shrugged and drank more water. Heat crawled under his collar as the silence stretched on. Finally, he spat, “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I'm not grading you on this. There is no right or wrong answer. As a student and an athlete, you will be under enormous pressure. I'm here to help you, but whether or not you talk to me is entirely up to you.”

“Yeah, right.”

Dr. Dobson lifted her hands and shrugged. “You don't have to believe me. You can wait and see for yourself.”

Neil shifted in his seat. “What are you going to tell Wymack when you leave?”

“I'll tell him 'good night.'”

Neil scoffed.

“I'm not your opponent, Neil. I'm on your side,” she said gently. “Do you want to talk about what happened earlier today?”

The half-eaten sandwich remained on his plate; the bread was cold and cheese had turned rubbery. A skin had formed on the soup’s surface, wrinkling around the handle of the spoon. Neil's back was knotted and his stomach felt hard and small. He just wanted to sleep.

“I don't know what happened,” he mumbled.

“Would you like to describe it for me? We could try to figure it out together.”

He sighed and scratched at the faint scars on his wrist. His brain was a puddle.

“Neil?”

“Wymack wants me to talk to you,” he blurted out like a petulant child. Wymack had mentioned it here and there for weeks. He'd even offered to arrange an appointment a few times. He never said outright that Neil was required to talk to her, but the message was loud and clear.

Dr. Dobson hummed sympathetically. “Are you worried he'll be disappointed if you don't?”

Neil gave her a long, dry look that seemed to convey enough for her to understand. He still
suspected she would tell Wymack if he didn't behave.

“You're probably tired,” she said. “I know I would be after a long day of Exy practice. And I bet having a stranger sitting in your kitchen isn't the most relaxing thing for you right now. How about we say we’ll meet up again next Sunday? That’ll give you a week to sort through your thoughts and decide what you want to do. How does that sound?”

He glared. “You really want to waste more of my time and yours?”

She smiled at him and it looked sincere. “I'm up for it if you are.”

More stilted conversation and mind games with the doctor sounded terrible, but Wymack would feel better if Neil agreed to a second session. He wanted Neil to talk to Dr. Dobson and sort out his issues.

“You can always cancel if you change your mind,” said Dr. Dobson. “I'll leave you my number.”

Andrew already programmed her number into Neil's phone, but Neil didn't mention that. Silently, he watched her write down her phone number for him on the small notepad Wymack used for grocery lists.

After that, she put her dishes in the sink and said, “Unless I hear from you, I'll be here at ten on Sunday morning and we can figure out where to go from there.”

Then, she walked out the door. Simple as that.

Neil quickly scarfed down the rest of his soup and sandwich, too hungry to care that it was cold. He still had some time before Wymack returned, so he went to the back room and booted up Wymack's computer to do some research of his own.

His hands trembled as he searched for answers and he silently begged the universe for good results. Maybe it was a one-time thing. Maybe it didn't necessarily mean anything was seriously wrong with him. Maybe it was just a strange byproduct of stress. He hadn't been sleeping well, after all. The more he thought about it, the more he liked that conclusion. He'd just get some more sleep and maybe his demons wouldn't come after him during the daytime anymore. The rest of the Exy world already believed he was unstable, he couldn't have his team making the same assumptions.

What he found on the internet made him regret looking.

The definition of the word “flashback” led to a pastel-colored website detailing the different sorts of flashbacks a person could have after a traumatic event. It explained how his senses came unplugged from the present sometimes: the phantom hands on his skin, the taunting laughter and harsh voices in his ears, the smell of blood and perfume stinging his nose, the panic and fear ringing through his veins. It also explained how his past swallowed him whole earlier.

After another search, his screen was flooded with links to articles and blog posts peppered with words like “trauma” and “survivor” and “coping.” All of them chanted at him: get help, get help, get help.

His stomach churned, gloomy and cold like gray dishwater full of slimy things waiting to surface.
Neil was sitting on the floor of the front room with half a basket of laundry left to fold when his phone chirped. He set aside a folded dish towel and glanced over at the device sitting on the coffee table next to his glass of water. Wymack was in the back room, so he knew it was Andrew, which didn’t make him inclined to answer it. A nervous shiver rolled up his back: he’d been waiting for Andrew’s retaliation for five days.

He didn’t want to read Andrew’s message, but ignoring him came with the risk of making his punishment worse.

Sighing heavily, he picked up his phone and opened it.

The message read:  *Syrup*

Andrew was still playing his little guessing game. Neil wasn’t sure if that was a good sign or not.

*Pancakes*, Neil replied.

*No*

He folded another towel and put it on the stack before making his second guess.  *Waffles*

Andrew’s reply came a few moments later. *Bingo*

Neil rolled his eyes and closed his phone. Andrew’s antics were annoying, but his game was low on Neil’s list of problems.

The flashback left him too shaken to fully trust himself. The present felt fragile, and he found himself flinching away from anything and everything that reminded him of the Nest to avoid a repeat of Sunday. He didn’t look in the knife drawer in Wymack’s kitchen, he focused on the stadium’s bright splashes of orange instead of the black shadows, and he left the television on while he slept to keep the darkness at bay.

He was scared that he was losing his mind and terrified that Dr. Dobson would notice.

Only fifty-one hours stood between him and his next meeting with her. Every day that week, he tried to imagine the questions she might ask so he could map out a safe route through their next hour together, but it was all uncharted water. He didn’t know what to expect from her.
Thankfully, Wymack didn't ask about the flashback or his talk with Dr. Dobson. On Monday, he interrogated Neil about Kevin's training methods like he was building a case against him and Neil's vague answers only made his frown deepen.

Kevin probably spent the week fuming. Neil was surprised Kevin hadn't called him just to complain; he knew he'd probably get an earful about it the next time they saw each other.

“All right,” Wymack said, walking out into the front room and interrupting Neil’s thoughts, “we're going to try something today, but let me know if it's not going to work for you, okay?”

Neil braced himself.

“I know you and Kevin are codependent as hell and you're both getting squirrelly, so I'll let you two practice together today, _but_ Nicky and Aaron will be joining you,” Wymack told him. Then, he scoffed. “Oh, don't give me that face. Kevin's not your only teammate, you know. You'll have to play with the other kids eventually.”

“I'm... I'm not ready to play against them yet.” He hadn't perfected all the drills he was supposed to. He wasn't ready for this. What if he had another flashback? What if the Foxes found out that something was seriously wrong with him? Neil felt like he was going to be sick.

“I hate to break it to you, but in the fall you’ll be playing against people, not cones. You need to get used to it.”

“Have you talked to Kevin about this?” Neil asked.

“I talked to his bodyguard. His Highness is ready when you are.”

“Right.” Neil slowly got to his feet, wincing at the feeling of pins and needles in his legs. “I'll... I guess I’m ready, then.”

He went to put his shoes on, but Wymack stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Kid,” he said, suddenly serious, “if you can't do this, tell me. I know broken bones are supposed to heal stronger and all that jazz, but brains don't work that way. No one's gonna push you farther than you can go, okay?”

It was embarrassing how sincere he sounded. Neil looked away from him, grimacing. Wymack expected him to fall apart again.

“I'm fine,” he said.

“And I'm the fuckin’ tooth fairy,” Wymack deadpanned. “Let's get going. I can almost hear Kevin whining from across town.”

Neil fidgeted in the passenger seat all the way to the stadium, worrying about Kevin's anger and his own fraying mental state. Wymack put the radio on after a few minutes, probably to drown out the incessant tapping of Neil’s shoe. Agitated, Neil slouched in his seat and looked out the window.

The sky was stuffed with dark clouds; it would be another stormy afternoon. Dimly, he thought of the first time Jean had come back from classes soaked with rain and smelling like fresh air, his hair ruffled by the wind. Neil remembered the ugly seed of jealousy that grew in the back of his mind after that. Waiting for his turn to see the outside world was excruciating, but now that he was out here, all he could think of was getting back on the court.

Andrew's car was already parked in the lot when Wymack pulled in. Usually, Neil only saw it idling
near the front doors with a bored Nicky behind the wheel. Sometimes he would lift his hand to wave hello before stopping himself, afraid of Andrew's wrath even when Andrew wasn't anywhere in sight.

Neil hoped his uniform and padding would be enough to keep the memories of Nicky's hands and tongue from slithering into the forefront of his mind. Unfortunately, nothing would be able to protect him from Andrew.

It was going to be a bad day.

His heart quivered with trepidation as he followed Wymack through the doors. The halls felt colder, the lights were harsher, and each echoing step made his chest tighter. Neil couldn't help dragging his feet and wishing the floor would swallow him whole.

“I'll be in my office,” said Wymack. “Let me know if you need anything.”

Neil couldn't squeeze any words through the knot in his throat, so he just nodded.

“Hey.” Wymack waited until Neil met his eyes. “Give 'em hell.”

Wymack left him outside the locker room. Neil inhaled shakily and walked toward the sound of Andrew's hyper chattering like he was walking toward the gallows. He carefully pulled his features into a blank expression and stepped into view. The four men were already in their gear with their gloves tucked into their helmets, which were lined up on one of the benches. Kevin was in the center of the room, arms folded and eyes severe. Andrew sat at the end of the bench, turning his helmet slowly between his hands, while the other two stood quietly together in the corner.

Neil kept Nicky in his periphery and looked at Andrew, tensing in preparation for the goalkeeper's inevitable attack. Would he slice Neil open in front of the others? Or would he drag him into a shadowy corner? Neil couldn't even remember how hard he'd hit Kevin. He hoped he at least left a bruise since he was going to suffer for it.

“Nathaniel!” Andrew greeted with a shark-like smile. “How good of you to join us.”

“Change out and then come out to the inner court for warm-ups,” Kevin said.

Neil stayed where he was and watched Andrew carefully as the four men picked up their helmets and headed out to the foyer. His pulse quickened as their footsteps and voices faded. Quickly, Neil snatched up his gear and his practice uniform and hurried into a shower stall to change. He held his breath as he struggled to fasten on his armor as fast as he could, listening hard in case Andrew was coming back for him.

With shaking hands, Neil fumbled with straps and fastenings and the pieces of his uniform. Once he was fully dressed, he unlatched the door and peeked out. When he still didn't see any sign Andrew, he frowned and stepped out of the stall. Maybe Andrew was waiting until after practice, when Neil was sure to be too tired to put up a decent fight.

There was no avoiding it. He sucked in a deep breath, and marched off to find the others.

After stretching and running laps to warm up, they pulled on their gloves and helmets and headed onto the court with racquets in hand. The first hour was spent doing drills, which Neil was already familiar with. It was different with two backliners in the mix, but Neil picked up the rhythm quickly, and by the third round, Kevin’s irritation with him dimmed a bit. It was difficult for Neil to keep track of Nicky and Andrew’s movements while trying to follow Kevin’s orders, but he managed somehow.
Lastly, they switched to a two-on-three scrimmage with Andrew in the home goal, acting as both goalkeeper and dealer for Neil and Nicky’s team. Once they started playing, it became clear that Neil’s head was far too jumbled for this. He was worried about Andrew’s revenge, lost in his new role, and unable to focus on what he was supposed to be doing.

Everything was backwards and chaotic.

“Watch your steps!” Kevin shouted as he appeared out of nowhere to shove Neil into the wall before Aaron could. “Ten is all you get when you have the ball. Remember that.”

“Are your eyes open?” Kevin snapped when Neil aimed a hair too wide and missed the empty away goal.

Aaron took Neil by surprise with a completely legal body check after Neil snagged the ball and Kevin sneered, “You’ve heard of backliners, right?”

Humiliation washed coldly over him. Every insult hurled Neil’s way wound his heart tighter and tighter. I can't do this, he thought desperately. Playing defense was all he knew; it was what he was made for. He was broken down and rebuilt until he was the perfect Raven backliner. His mind couldn't wrap around this drastic change. He might as well have been trying to sprout wings.

As Kevin stole the ball and scored again, Neil felt lower than he'd been in a while. He could feel Exy slipping out of his reach, and without it, his life was pointless.

He wasn't ready to give up entirely, though. After everything he’d been through, he wasn’t going to roll over and admit defeat after one bad practice with some Foxes.

Embarrassment and resignation were hard lumps of coal in his gut that finally caught fire when Kevin sent Neil's racquet flying with a brutal swipe of his own. Pain sparked down Neil's arms and anger scorched his ribs.

“Don't make Wymack regret keeping you,” Kevin spat before he took off toward the home goal with the ball.

Neil snatched up his racquet and flew up the court after him, sure-footed and furious.

Kevin was fast, but Neil was faster; he darted into Kevin’s blind spot while Kevin was focused on Nicky and popped the ball from Kevin’s net into his own. Blindly, Neil fired it toward the away side without bothering to aim or chase after it. Either he’d get slammed by Aaron or land a shot on an empty goal and neither outcome was worth the effort.

Everything but the ball stopped. The five players watched it rebound, bounce, and then gradually roll to a halt.

Neil's pulse roared in his ears, his arms trembled, and his lungs were full of fire. When Kevin looked at him, Neil saw his own rage mirrored in his eyes.

“Guys?” Nicky tried weakly.

“Stop throwing a tantrum,” said Kevin.

Neil's lip curled. “Why? Are you the only one allowed to?”

Aaron came toward them to investigate. “Are we going to play or—”
“Shh, it's getting good,” Nicky hissed, flapping one hand at his cousin.

“You're pathetic,” Kevin said to Neil, ignoring the other two. “And ungrateful. You only got a chance here because of me.”

Neil could hardly breathe, but he managed a hoarse laugh anyway. “Don't talk to me about what I got because of you, you piece of shit.”

Surprise flashed over Kevin's face.

Neil went on, “Do you even remember the Nest or have you completely wrecked your brain with booze and dust?”

His mind was firmly rooted in the present. He was surrounded by orange and white and Jean wasn't there to take his punishment for him. When Andrew decided to strike, Neil was the only one who'd get hit. Some time away from Kevin had done him good.

Switching to French, Neil said, “Shoving me around now won't make you any stronger when the Ravens come for you. You'll always be a spineless coward.”

“Shut up.”

Neil gave him a wicked grin. “You know I'm right.”

“We're done,” Kevin announced in English, avoiding Neil’s eyes. His voice wavered.

Neil tried to cling to the satisfaction that came with seeing Kevin cowed, but it slipped away and left him cold. Exhaustion settled in his bones.

“Thank fuck,” Nicky sighed. “I need to nap for, like, ten hours if I'm gonna survive Eden’s.”

Aaron paused near the court door to ask, “You guys coming or not?”

“You're cleaning up,” Kevin told Neil before storming away. “Andrew, we’re leaving now.”

Neil watched Kevin and the two Fox backliners until they disappeared through the doors to the foyer. It was then that Neil noticed Andrew hadn't moved. His long racquet was slung across his shoulders with his gloved hands draped lazily over it; he looked like a scarecrow, poised to ward off certain feathered creatures.

Neil's shoulders slumped as his defiance sputtered and died. It was finally time to face consequences.

Andrew lifted the racquet off his shoulders and thumped the butt of it against the floor. “Hot, cold, hot, cold,” he said in a soft, singsong voice. “Careful, Nathaniel. If you fall off that mood swing, it's an awful long way down.”

Neil bit back the retort that threatened to slip out.

“Cat got your tongue?” Andrew teased, taking slow steps out of the goalkeeper's box. “Did you use up all your words on Kevin?”

Cold fear pooled in Neil’s belly. How did a Fox kill its prey? With knives or a racquet? Andrew had witnessed his little breakdown on Sunday- would he use that against Neil as well?

Andrew knew too much already and his mind was sharp in spite of the medication, so it wouldn't take him long to figure out how to break Neil. Plus, Kevin was angry now and he could tell Andrew...
all about Riko’s methods to give him ideas. The memory of his mother's photograph in Riko’s hand flashed behind Neil’s eyelids and his whole body shuddered in shame and disgust.

There was no time to think of the cabin in the mountains to calm himself. Andrew was still walking toward him and he needed a plan fast. Neil frantically wracked his brain for ideas. Kneeling to show contrition seemed like the best move, but his body wasn't cooperating: his lungs were frozen solid and his limbs were paralyzed. He wouldn’t win a fist fight, and he didn’t know how to argue with Andrew since he couldn’t even make sense of Andrew’s behavior.

Neil finally unlocked his knees and crouched to lay down his racquet. He slipped off his helmet, too. All he could do was grit his teeth and wait for it to be over.

Andrew stopped and cocked his head. “Is this some sort of Raven thing? Do you pray to the Father, Son, and Goalie Spirit for on-court miracles?”

“Look,” Neil said tightly, “I know what I did, so just...”

“Just what?”

“Just get it over with,” he grit out.

“You're no fun.” Andrew pulled off his own helmet and tucked it under his arm. “Are you coming to Columbia tonight?”

“What?”

“Col-um-bia,” Andrew enunciated slowly. “Yes or no?”

Neil’s mind went blank. “Uh, no?”

“Okay.” Andrew spun on his heel and walked toward the door.

It was a trick. It had to be.

Neil stood up and said, “I hit Kevin on Sunday. I know you saw it.”

“So, what?” Andrew called over his shoulder.

“You put a knife to my throat just for being here. You're not going to let this go.”

Andrew paused mid-step and looked back at him. This is it, Neil thought. It was best to get it over with now. The sooner it happened, the sooner he healed, the sooner he moved on. That was what he usually told himself, but it wasn’t always comforting.

For a long while, all Andrew did was study him with a lazy grin tugging at one corner of his mouth. Then, he let out a short puff of a laugh and said, “Exy is a violent sport, Nathaniel. Fighting comes with the territory.”

Andrew left him alone with his confusion. Neil spent the rest of the day trying to figure out if Andrew was forgiving him for Sunday or granting him permission to fight back in the future.
Dr. Dobson arrived early. When she knocked on the door, Neil jumped even though he’d been sitting on the couch for half an hour, checking the time on his phone every few minutes.

Wymack wiped his hands dry on a dish towel on his way out of the kitchen. He opened the door and said, “Hey, Betsy, how’s it going?”

Dr. Dobson stepped inside and adjusted the strap of her bag on her shoulder. “Oh, just fine, David. Have you two had a good morning?”

Neil clutched his phone tightly and ordered himself to breathe. It would only last an hour, he reminded himself. He would just sit on a couch in her office for an hour and then it would be over. He could get through an hour. He could do this.

But he really, really didn't want to.

“I could've driven him, you know,” said Wymack. “You sure you don't want me to pick him up when you guys are done?”

“It's no trouble at all. It’s a nice day for driving,” replied the doctor. “Good morning, Neil.”

“Hey, kid, look alive.”

With a start, Neil’s eyes snapped up to them. Dr. Dobson was smiling gently at him.

“You good?” Wymack asked with a frown.

Neil nodded and pocketed his phone as he got up to put his shoes on. Wymack handed Neil his sunglasses and clapped him on the shoulder.

“We should only be about an hour or so,” Dr. Dobson said. “Are you ready, Neil?”

Neil nodded again and slipped out into the hallway. Dr. Dobson said good-bye to Wymack and then stepped out after him. Silently, they headed to the elevator. Neil hit the call button and stared at the doors, wishing time would go faster.

He tried to let go of the tension building in his shoulders. He forcibly unclenched his jaw and
counted to ten in the languages he knew. The doctor was going to ask him about last weekend, the *incident*, his flashback. He didn't know how she'd react if he was honest about it. “*The doctors will only pretend to care about you,*” was what Riko told Kevin once the public began expressing concern for the mental health of the sons of Exy. “*They'll tell everyone how fucked up you are and then no team will want you.*”

Riko was a liar, but he didn't lie about everything. That’s what made it difficult.

They exited the elevator together when it reached the lobby and Neil followed Dr. Dobson out into the sunny parking lot. Anxiety swelled in his chest.

*There's a cabin in the mountains,* he thought, desperate to quell his impending panic attack.

He opened the passenger side door of Dr. Dobson's cherry-red sedan and pictured the wooden steps of the cabin, damp from rain. Neil clicked on his seat belt and struggled to picture the imaginary cabin’s deck. “You can put whatever you like out there,” his mother used to tell him. “It’s in your head, so you decide.” But his mind was blank.

Dr. Dobson turned the key in the ignition. The dashboard displays lit up and, a moment later, cool air poured through the vents. Patches of goosebumps popped up along Neil's arms.

Instead of reaching for the gear shift, the doctor folded her hands on her lap, looked over at him, and said, “We have a decision to make.”

“What decision?”

“Usually, I meet with people in my office, but I got the feeling that you weren't exactly warm to that idea last time we spoke. I thought maybe we could go somewhere else if that would make you more comfortable. For instance, there's a coffee shop nearby. Does that sound good to you?”

Neil blinked at her. “What makes you think I'm more likely to talk in front of an audience?”

“All right. Where would you feel comfortable talking?”

*Nowhere,* he thought. He opened his mouth to say that this whole thing was a mistake, but his stomach interrupted him with a loud grumble. Heat rushed up his throat and burned his cheeks.

“Did you eat breakfast?” she asked.

He was too anxious about the appointment to stomach anything more than coffee that morning and he only managed to eat a few bites of dinner the night before. Suddenly, he worried that she might figure out just how unsettled he was and use that somehow. The interior of the car suddenly felt stifling and hot.

“I do have another idea,” Dr. Dobson began slowly. “How about we cook some brunch at my apartment? We could swing by the store to get some things and then head on over.”

“Is that allowed?” His voice sounded petulant to his own ears; he hoped the doctor wouldn’t comment on it. He could almost hear the master ordering him to straighten up, speak clearly, stow the attitude. He hid his flinch by adjusting the seat belt over his chest.

“It’s a bit unusual, I’ll admit, but sometimes you have to think outside the box,” she said, turning the key in the ignition. “Besides, you never actually said yes to therapy. How does brunch sound?”

It sounded better than an hour in her office, and cooking was a useful skill to have. All he knew was
the basics, just enough to get by. At least if they made a meal the hour wouldn't be a total waste.

“Fine.”

“All right, then,” Dr. Dobson said. Neil could hear her smile in her voice.

They drove east on the nearest highway for a few minutes until they reached the supermarket. It rose behind an expansive parking lot with cracked pavement and fading white lines marking the parking spaces, most of which were empty. The tarnished metal corrals for shopping carts were all empty as well, though the strong June wind had pushed a few stray ones to the far corners of the lot. Dr. Dobson parked near the entrance. Neil followed her inside.

In spite of the nearly empty parking lot, Neil was still surprised by how quiet it was inside. Cheerful music played faintly on the overhead speakers. Squares of fluorescent light glared off the polished white floor. A bored cashier looked over at them from her station at one of the registers.

“I prefer to do my shopping on Sunday mornings,” Dr. Dobson said as they went over to the rows of shopping carts nested together. “Especially in the summer. It’s always nice and empty.”

She took out a package of antibacterial wipes from her bag and used one to thoroughly clean one cart's handle before tugging it free from the others. One of the front wheels squeaked when Dr. Dobson turned the cart towards the produce section.

Neil trailed after her past heads of lettuce and cabbage, fat cucumbers and zucchini, bright orange and red bell peppers. Near the mushrooms, Dr. Dobson stopped to look at the list she'd brought, adjusting her glasses to read it properly.

“Are you allergic to anything?” she asked.

“No.”

“Do you have anything in mind you'd like to make?”

Neil shook his head.

Dr. Dobson looked over her list once more and put a box of white mushrooms in the cart. Then, she turned and pushed the cart over to the table holding bags of potatoes and loose onions. Neil took two bags and twist-ties from the dispensers at the doctor's request and picked out onions, one white and a couple green, while she lifted a bag of russet potatoes into the cart. She snagged a few cloves of garlic on their way to the meat section.

Next, Dr. Dobson stopped to pick out a package of bacon. Behind her back, Neil grimaced at the thought of bacon grease, but he would tolerate whatever the doctor decided to make.

After Dr. Dobson picked out a package of bacon, they continued down to the chilly wall of dairy products.

“What did you do this week?” she asked.

“Not much.”

She grabbed a block of cheddar as they passed the shelves of cheese and tossed it onto the bag of potatoes. “Did you practice Exy at all?”

“I practice every day.”
“How’s that going?”

“It’s fine.”

She nodded and stopped to get eggs; once she checked her carton of choice for broken shells, she set it next to her bag in the baby seat. “What do you think of your new teammates?”

They continued walking. Neil scratched at a patch of peeling skin above his elbow—another sunburn working to heal—and tried to figure out where she was going with this line of questioning. Would she try to dig for information about the Ravens?

Cautiously, he said, “The Foxes are what I expected.”

“Oh?”

“Their reputation isn’t exactly a secret,” he explained.

She gave him a wry smile and adjusted her glasses. “They do get a fair amount of attention from the media, I suppose. How do you and Kevin get along?”

“We get along fine. What else do we need?”

“Milk, and then I think we’re done,” she answered. “Oh, I should get some boxes of tissues while we’re here. I always forget those.”

After Dr. Dobson picked out a gallon of milk, she led Neil to the heart of the supermarket at a slow, leisurely pace. Neil walked a few steps behind her through the home decor aisles, dismally scanning the lamps and clocks and cheap art before pausing to look at some picture frames. They were all filled with people paid to look happy with each other.

Dr. Dobson must’ve noticed when he looked too long at the wooden frame with “#1 Dad” engraved across the top. From the end of the aisle, she asked, “Does your father play sports, too?”

He prefers hunting. Neil swallowed the words and shook his head no. Next, his eyes fell on a black-and-white portrait of a woman with dark hair falling over her shoulders, a clever close-lipped smile, and somber eyes. With a dull pang of horror, Neil thought she almost looked like—

“What about your mother?”

It was like a bucket of ice water over his head. Riko’s voice slid into his ears. “You miss your mother, don’t you, Nathaniel?”

“Neil? What does your mother like to do?”

He snapped, “Don’t talk about her.”

Dr. Dobson showed no visible surprise at his harsh tone. “All right,” she said simply. “Do you like candles? I’ve been meaning to pick out a new one for my home office.”

Neil walked off without answering, unsettled by the crackle of fury under his skin. He rounded the corner and came to a halt in front of the shelves of scented candles in fat glass jars.

His lungs iced over.

“Look, Nathaniel. I found a photo of her.”
He couldn't breathe.

“Neil.” Dr. Dobson’s voice sounded like it was traveling down a tunnel. “Can you hear me?”

Handcuffs dug into his wrists. His mouth was locked shut.

She held a candle in front of his face and said, “Here, smell this.” The lid was in her other hand and a whiff of the strong, crisp scent filled his nose. “Eucalyptus mint. I've never bought this for myself, but I think it smells pretty nice.”

Neil inhaled deeply. With a shaking hand, he took the candle from her and listened as she kept talking.

“Some people like to have a candle burning during appointments. It's hard picking a scent sometimes.” Dr. Dobson picked up a pale purple candle and looked at the price sticker. “Lavender is my favorite. It's interesting how various smells can affect people. When I was in college, my doctor suggested I put drops of lavender oil on my pillow to help me relax and sleep better. Some people use strong smells like peppermint to ground themselves during a panic attack or a flashback; it gives them something of the present to latch onto.”

His eyes narrowed as he pulled the candle away from his nose. The panic was still crumpling the edges of his thoughts, but he hastily pulled himself back together and shoved the candle onto the shelf. Dr. Dobson studied him calmly. Neil felt her eyes on him as he walked away.

A few minutes later, she found him waiting in front of the tissue boxes. His breathing was back under control and his mind was almost settled fully in the present. He’d already worked out which three-pack was the best deal, a habit he'd gotten into with Wymack.

“How are you feeling?” the doctor asked softly.

The aisle was empty- it had been since Neil got there- but he still checked for other people before saying, “I'm fine.”

He felt wrong, like his body was two sizes too big.

“If I say or do something that makes you uncomfortable, all you have to do is tell me to stop and I'll stop,” she told him. “Set your lines, and I'll respect them.”

Neil folded his arms. “Why did you ask about my parents?”

“I was only trying to get to know you. I ask everyone about their parents.”

“Mine are off-limits.”

“Okay,” she replied. “Did you want to get anything else while we're here?”

“No.”

She smiled at him as if he deserved it and then looked thoughtfully at the shelves. It only took her a few seconds to decide on a three-pack of tissue boxes decorated with birds.

After Dr. Dobson paid for her groceries, they loaded everything into the trunk of her car and headed to her apartment complex. Seven minutes was all it took to get there. Unlike Wymack's, it was designed to be pleasing to the eye instead of purely functional: the buildings were done up in spring green siding with white trim, a row of evenly spaced young trees stood behind the sidewalk, and
sheltered staircases darted up between the pairs of four-story buildings.

Dr. Dobson took half the groceries from the trunk of her car and Neil carried the rest. They went between the nearest pair of buildings and up the stairs to her apartment on the second floor.

Wymack's place was a haphazard mess because the man was too busy keeping his rowdy, troubled players in line. Abby's house was a second home for the Foxes, full of photographs with plenty of places to sleep. Dr. Dobson's apartment was a blank slate with hardly any traces of the woman who lived there. The floors were hardwood, the walls were taupe, and the only personal touches Neil could find were the bookshelves in the living room off to the left and the three framed watercolor seascapes in the dining alcove to the right.

"The recipe I have in mind is an easy one," she said as she slipped her shoes off by the door. "It's one of my favorites, but I don't bother to make it that often."

Neil kept his shoes on and followed her down the hallway to the first door on the right, which led to her modest kitchen. He set the bags on the counter while she put the milk away in the refrigerator.

"Which would you like to do: chop potatoes or fry up the bacon?" she asked.

If a knife was going to be used, Neil wanted to be in control of it. "I'll chop potatoes."

"All right. We need three of them in cubes; the recipe says about three-quarters of an inch thick. Knives are in the block over there and the peeler is in the drawer under the cutting board, but you can leave the skins on if you like."

Neil rinsed the potatoes and scrubbed them with a vegetable brush he found near the sink while Dr. Dobson arranged the slices of bacon in the skillet. When she needed to wash her hands, Neil wordlessly stepped aside until she was done.

The knife glinted when Neil pulled it from the block. Riko always insisted that Jean handle the kitchen knives; he didn't trust the Butcher's son. Neil swallowed nervously and tried to focus on the task at hand.

The sizzle of the bacon grew louder. The kitchen knife slipped easily through the potatoes, hitting the cutting board with a dull thud each time. The repetition turned Neil's thoughts into harmless static. Gradually, he relaxed.

Eventually, Dr. Dobson asked, "What do you usually have for breakfast?"

Neil blinked out of his haze to reply, "Eggs."

"Do you try to eat healthy?"

"Yeah."

"Must be a challenge with David around. I've seen his fridge."

The reminder of her friendship with Wymack put a knot of worry in his stomach. It wasn't hard to imagine her telling them about his rude behavior, his ingratitude. "Don't sulk, Nathaniel. It's impolite," Riko's voice hissed.

Finding something to say was a struggle. "I think I gained a couple pounds back in April thanks to all the take-out food."
“I’m sure you’ve worked all that off by now with all your Exy practices,” she said lightly.

The bacon hissed as she turned the slices over with a fork, and the conversation faded away. When Neil finished chopping the potatoes, Dr. Dobson transferred them to a plate and asked him, “Would you mind cutting an onion, too?”

He shook his head no, grateful to having something else to occupy his hands with.

“I’ve always had trouble with onions,” she told him while he dug the onion out of the plastic bag. “My mother had all sorts of tricks that were supposed to help, but I don’t bother with those.”

Back at his cutting board, he started peeling away the outer layers of the onion and decided to keep the conversation afloat by asking, “What were the tricks?”

“Oh, things like chewing gum, lighting a candle, pressing my tongue to the roof of my mouth—once, she had me chop an onion in the sink under running water.”

“Did anything actually work?”

“Swimming goggles.”

He shot her a dubious look. “You put goggles on to chop an onion?”

“Just the once.” She chuckled at the memory. “I decided it wasn’t worth the trouble or the teasing.”

Once the bacon was fully cooked, Dr. Dobson moved it all onto a plate covered in paper towels and dumped the potatoes and onion into the hot grease. Neil washed his hands thoroughly and rubbed at his stinging eyes while Dr. Dobson poured some water from a pitcher into the skillet.

“It’ll be about fifteen minutes and then we’ll add the eggs,” she said as she covered the skillet with a lid. “Would you like to take a peek at the office? Have a look around?”

It sounded better than standing around in the kitchen, so Neil said yes. She handed him a strip of cooling bacon to nibble on and told him to follow her. Neil finished the bacon in a few bites and wiped his fingers off on his jeans before they reached the end of the hallway.

The doctor’s home office was simpler than Neil expected. The walls were pale lavender. Sunlight filtered in through the window behind a small desk in the corner. In front of the desk was an armchair, which faced the cream-colored sofa that was pushed against the wall by the door. There was a low coffee table put between them, just enough to set doctor and patient apart without being obtrusive.

Dr. Dobson went to sit down in her armchair and watched him take everything in from his place in the doorway. “What do you think?”

He pretended to study the sofa. “It looks very… clean.”

“I try to make it as relaxing as possible for people.”

“Does that make people spill their guts faster or something?”

Dr. Dobson smiled serenely. “It’s more about making people feel safe and comfortable when they meet with me. A soothing, neutral environment allows them to turn their focus inward without any distractions.”

Neil folded his arms and leaned against the door frame, unimpressed.
“This isn’t an Exy court, Neil,” she said, gesturing to the room. “I’m not trying to trick you or one-up you.”

He said nothing.

“Why did you agree to meet with me today?”
He shifted his weight and glanced down the hallway.

“Do you feel pressured by Coach Wymack?”
His brow furrowed. “He didn’t force me or anything.”

“I’m not making accusations. I just know that sometimes when someone is really concerned about you, it can cause you to feel like you should hurry up and get better so they can stop worrying. But you can’t rush this, and you can’t make yourself heal to make someone else happy. You owe it only to yourself to seek help.”

He scoffed and shook his head. “It’s not like that.”

“What is it like?”

“I’m here to play Exy. I can’t do that if I freak out on the court.”

She nodded slowly, considering his words. “Do you feel like Wymack values Exy over your health?”

The answer “yes” was automatic, but fleeting. Wymack gave Neil keys he didn’t deserve and shielded him from Kevin. Wymack told him to take it easy instead of demanding he work harder.

He answered, “No.”

“Do you value Exy over your health?” When he only stared at her coldly, she moved on. “Okay. Let’s talk about your options.”

“My options?”

“There are other counselors you can talk to, other kinds of therapy, alternative therapies, self-help…”
She got up and went to get a stack of papers from her desk drawer. “I printed these off for you to look over. I’d prefer to give you a diagnosis first, though, so I can offer you better advice.”

Neil bit the inside of his cheek and took the papers from her. He wasn’t keen on talking to her, but so far it hadn’t been as awful as he imagined it would be, in spite of a few rough spots. The things he read online about his symptoms made it sound like talking to a professional was the best option if he wanted to get better and he didn’t know if another therapist would back off touchy subjects like Dr. Dobson did.

“Do I have to decide right now?”

“Of course not,” she said kindly. “You can take all the time you need. Why don’t we go check on the food? Are you feeling hungry yet?”

He stood there and watched her walk back to the kitchen. The papers felt heavy in his hands: full of choices, possibilities, but each one seemed just as pointless as the next. Maybe it would be easier to avoid being alone with Kevin on the court. Wymack made that an option for him by banning one-on-one practices. Maybe he didn’t need to do this at all.
The smell of food cooking made his mouth water. Dr. Dobson said he could take his time. His
decision could wait. With the papers in hand, he returned to the kitchen to see if there was something
else for him to do.
“Hey, Nathaniel’s really good at this, don’t you think?” Nicky remarked to Aaron as they all headed off the court together. Neil knew what he was doing. Andrew still wouldn’t let Nicky look too long in Neil’s direction or speak to him, so he’d begun using a roundabout method of offering Neil flimsy compliments. Ignoring it was easy. He was too distracted by the fact that the rest of the Foxes would be back in town the next day.

“He’s not good enough yet,” Kevin said as he dropped his helmet and gloves on the home bench. He picked up his water bottle to take a drink. The rest of them took off their helmets and gloves too as they gathered around the bench to rest for a moment.

Neil’s heart was pulsing thickly in his throat and his stomach was queasy. Over the last two weeks, he’d practically lived at the court to get in as much practice as he could, but he still felt woefully unprepared.

“Kevin,” Nicky sighed. “Cut him some slack. His footwork is kick-ass and he’s faster than you, so that’s something.”

“I’m not handing out participation trophies,” Kevin shot back with a withering glare. “Speed won’t matter if he can’t get the ball around the goalkeeper.”

Aaron muttered, “Just give him back to Riko. Christ.”

Neil’s eyes snapped up. Kevin stared Aaron down, stony mask in place and uncracked. It was impressive, really: the worse Kevin’s anxiety got, the less it showed. Stress, fatigue, and small bursts of panic left Neil’s brain slow and fuzzy.

Suddenly, Kevin held his water bottle out toward him. Before Neil realized that Kevin expected him to take it, it fell from Kevin’s hand to the floor with a sharp thunk. Neil stared down at the bottle, his face burning with embarrassment, and then looked up into Kevin’s shocked and angry eyes. They’d
fallen out of sync with each other or maybe Neil had just forgotten how to behave.

Andrew cackled. “You dropped something, Kevin!”

“Let’s pack up and get out of here,” Nicky suggested awkwardly. “We’re all tired.”

Neil and Aaron carried the stick rack back to the foyer and then Neil rushed through the process of showering and changing to avoid Kevin’s glare. Once he was dressed in clean clothes, he practically ran to Wymack’s office.

“Need your autograph,” Wymack said in lieu of a greeting, holding out a piece of paper and a pen. Neil skimmed a few paragraphs about dormitory maintenance and the behavior expected of the Tower’s residents. He signed on the dotted line at the bottom, and then Wymack traded him a glossy school catalogue for it, asking, “How’d it go today?”

“It was fine,” Neil replied as he sat down with the catalogue. Inside, he found information about the classes available to him at Palmetto State, which he hadn’t bothered to think about until that moment. At Edgar Allan he wouldn’t have had a choice.

“You ready for Monday?”

Neil made a face. He slapped the catalogue shut and scraped his damp hair away from his forehead. It was getting long again, so he made a mental note to borrow Wymack’s hair clippers later that night.

"Time to sink or swim," said Wymack.

“I think they want to see me sink,” Neil grumbled.

“Then drag ‘em down with you.” Wymack scribbled something on his notepad and added, “Not that I’m condoning anything that would tarnish the reputation of this fine institution, mind you.”

“Your line-up suggests otherwise.”

Wymack hmph-ed and clicked his pen before tossing it aside. “Right. You hungry? Let’s get something good to celebrate your last night of couch-surfing.”

His stomach iced over. In less than twenty-four hours, Neil would move into the Tower with his new roommates. He felt like he’d only just gotten used to the safety of Wymack’s apartment and now everything was about to change again.

“You ready to go?” asked Wymack.

Neil nodded and shakily got to his feet.

After a short debate over dinner options, they ended up in a quiet corner booth at Kelly’s Deli with iced tea and sandwiches. Neil swiped lines through the condensation on his glass with his thumb and stared out the window at the cars passing through the nearby intersection.

Three months had passed since Neil last saw the stale, unchanging darkness of the Nest. It had been a peculiar season full of fresh air and Fox orange, of sunrises and sunburns. The end of it came too soon for his liking, and now it was time for him to fall in line behind his new team.

Uncertainty cast a shadow over his thoughts. Wymack wouldn’t be able to shield him anymore and he was running out of time to prove he could be worth something on the court; Kevin still had him
shooting at an empty goal like a child because he wasn’t good enough to face Andrew yet. In just a couple more months, he’d have to prove himself to the Exy world and the man who could sign his death warrant.

Chilly anxiety stole across his skin and sandpaper lined his throat. All the hours he wasted piled up on his chest and squeezed the breath out of his lungs.

“Not hungry?” Wymack asked.

Neil didn’t realize his hands were shaking until he nearly knocked over his glass. “Uh… just thinking. Sorry.”

Wymack studied him for a moment and said, “So, about tomorrow…”

Neil’s stomach quivered. He hoped he didn’t look as ill as he felt.

“First off, these are for you.” Wymack placed a metal key and a Palmetto State student ID card on the table between them. A bright orange fox paw print was splashed behind Neil’s photo. “Your ID will get you into the Tower and the library and all those fun places. Keep it on you. And this is your dorm key.”

Neil took a quick drink of iced tea to wet his scratchy throat. “Thanks.”

The keys he wouldn’t be allowed to keep were heavy in his pocket. Change was speeding toward him like a bullet. He’d have to adjust again to new rules and new people, and he didn’t have a choice. The Ravens followed strict patterns, adhered to clear-cut rules. The Foxes were headstrong misfits with no discernable method to their madness.

“Matt’ll be in around noon,” Wymack told him. “You’ll come to the stadium with me and then he’ll swing by to get you and his keys.”

“I can just walk over to the Tower,” Neil said.

“I should hope so,” Wymack drawled, “what, with you being a hotshot college athlete and all. It’s no trouble for Matt to pick you up and you can give him a hand moving all his crap upstairs. He’ll appreciate it, trust me.”

Neil nodded and forced himself to take another bite of his sandwich.

“Team meeting will happen around five-ish. Abby’s hoping everyone will stick around to get dinner together like one big, happy family, but I wouldn’t count on it.”

“Okay.” The grocery store was a few miles from the stadium, but it would be cheaper to get groceries than dinner at a nearby restaurant. He needed to save every penny he could if running away was to be a viable option.

He flinched when his phone vibrated in his pocket. Smothering an annoyed sigh, he opened Andrew’s latest text message: *Ground beef*

“New friend?” Wymack asked.

“What would Abby use ground beef for?”

The question earned him a funny look.

“I think she said something about lasagna this weekend,” Wymack said slowly. “Why?”
Neil typed it out and sent it with a smug warmth in his chest.

Wymack eyed him suspiciously. “You run into a wall today or something?”

“It’s Andrew. He keeps making me guess what he’s eating.” His face went hot as soon as he said out loud. It sounded ridiculous.

“Uh huh. Well, it’s... nice of you to play along.”

Andrew’s response arrived soon after: *I sense cheating*

Neil deleted the text and then paused, staring down at his empty inbox. He never texted Dr. Dobson back after the day they made brunch at her apartment, so he hadn’t seen or heard from her since then. If she agreed to cooking instead of making him sit on her couch, it would mean a free meal. Before he could talk himself out of it, he selected “New Message” and texted the psychiatrist, asking if he could meet with her the next day. He tucked his phone under his thigh so he could scarf down the rest of his meal.

By the time he was finished, there was a new message waiting for him: *Sure! Sunday brunch again?*

Chewing his lip, he typed out his answer: *Dinner?*

The doctor replied quickly. *Sounds good! What time and where am I picking you up?*

*6 @ stadium*

*I’ll see you then!*

Wymack finished off his iced tea and asked, “You about done?”

Neil nodded and Wymack got up to pay. Neil followed him out to the car and curled up in the passenger seat for the short drive back to the apartment.

From the outside, the evening looked the same as any other. Neil and Wymack sat in front of the television, switching between news stations and reruns of some sitcom that Wymack mentioned watching years ago. Neil had given up trying to get Wymack to let him watch old Exy games. “A few hours off won’t kill you,” Wymack had said the last time. “Jesus himself took a three-day weekend before getting back in the game.”

Neil wrestled with the same sick feeling he had when he was taken away from his house in Baltimore, and when he woke up on the bus in Palmetto. He was being dragged into new territory, tossed into uncharted water, and he wasn’t allowed to go back to what was familiar. Wymack’s apartment was the closest he’d ever gotten to having a comfortable home. He didn’t want to leave. As soon as that thought crossed his mind, he shoved it away and scolded himself. He was made of calluses and scars; he was tougher than this.

He repeated that to himself for the rest of the night.

Later, he dreamed of keys melting in a skillet. The smell of burnt flesh stung his nose and stuck in his throat after he woke up.

Neil breathed deeply for a few minutes, trying to shake off the disturbed feeling that followed him out of his dream, and listened for movement in the other room. The apartment was silent and the windows had just begun to lighten. It was morning now, and his last night at Wymack’s was over.
Before self-pity could set in, Neil threw off the blanket and ambled into the kitchen; he squeezed his
eyes shut as he hit the switch and flooded the room with bright light. With a groan, he cracked one
eye open, then the other, and blinked rapidly until his eyesight adjusted.

Once he got the coffee brewing, he went down the hall to use the bathroom and splash water on his
face. By the time Wymack shuffled out of his room, the kitchen smelled like fresh coffee and Neil
was halfway to feeling like he was ready to face the upcoming day.

“Morning,” Wymack grunted absently as he got down two mugs from the cupboard.

Neil mumbled the greeting back and pulled the jug of milk from the fridge while Wymack poured the
coffee. After they added milk and sugar to their mugs and tossed their spoons in the sink, the two of
them headed out for one last morning walk together.

The air was warm and night was peeling at the eastern edge, giving way to the slow bloom of
twilight; directly overhead was a pool of darkness dotted with cold light. Neil breathed deeply and
thought back to stepping off that bus back in March, furious and wounded and afraid. Now, he just
felt weary. Death was still waiting for him at the end of the road, but he’d gotten used to the view.

Jean had once said, “Dying is the only way out.”

Neil remembered it vividly: he spent half the night on the bathroom floor with Jean, shaking and
gradually inching the still-clean kitchen knife away from Jean’s hand. It was months after the master
beat Jean senseless to teach Neil a lesson, and though Jean’s body had healed, his mind was still
battered. Hot bursts of rage punctuated cold stretches of apathy; only sometimes did he seem like his
old self. Neil didn’t know what to do or how to help him.

The knife lay on the cold tile, a sharp and shiny almost, a reminder that this new Jean was ready to
escape the only way he knew how.

“We’ll get out of here someday,” Neil reminded him. “We won’t be at the Nest forever.”

Jean thought they would always be trapped in some way so long as they were alive. Neil didn’t want
to think he was right, but he couldn’t ignore the way he could sometimes still feel his worst days
replaying across his body and see them flickering behind his eyelids. The past would never let go of
him and the future only promised more cruelty.

Absently, he scratched at the underside of his jaw where he could feel the sharp tips of knives
digging in. His head was hot, his hands were freezing, his mind was still trapped underground with
Riko.

Wymack clamped his hand down on Neil’s shoulder and gave him a firm shake. “Too early for that.
C’mon, reel it in.”

Neil managed a deep, rattling breath. Coffee sloshed out of his cup onto his fingers, not hot enough
to burn but warm enough to distract him.

“One step at a time, kid,” Wymack said, nudging him forward. Neil hadn’t even realized they’d
stopped walking. “It won’t be so bad once you adjust a little.”

“I know,” Neil said hoarsely.

“The Foxes will give you plenty of shit, but you just give it right back to ‘em, understand?”

Neil watched a bird hop across the street up ahead of them. “They can’t be worse than Ravens.”
Wymack clapped him on the back twice and said, “That’s the spirit.”

At the next road, they turned to go in the direction of the apartment. Neil tried to savor each step and stuffed down the pitiful idea of continuing this morning routine on his own once he moved into the Tower. He needed to focus more on training for Exy, on perfecting his game. The fact that he enjoyed taking walks in the morning was irrelevant.

Back at the apartment, they made their own breakfasts, and then Neil took a load of laundry down to the basement. He busied himself with tidying up Wymack’s kitchen and front room while he waited for the machines to finish, and about two hours later, he had all of his belongings organized into piles on the coffee table. He looked over it all with a touch of surprise. When he first arrived at Palmetto, he had only the clothes he was wearing and his phone.

The only problem was he didn’t know how he was going to carry everything. The duffel bag he’d been using belonged to Wymack; he already put it away in the closet, not expecting to keep it. His face flushed hotly when he thought of using a garbage bag: the Foxes would definitely have something to say about that. Neil grimaced and scratched the mosquito bite on the back of his neck.

Wymack stepped out of the hall and took a loud sip of coffee. “You wanna borrow the bag a little longer or are you gonna try to fit all that in your pockets?”

“I’ll figure something out,” said Neil.

“Just take the damn bag.”

“But it’s—”

Wymack cut him off with, “I’m limiting you to one battle a day. Is this really the one you want to pick?”

Neil paused to consider it.

“There will be bigger and better things to be a stubborn ass about later,” Wymack promised. “Just keep the bag. I’ll get it back if I need it.”

Deflating, Neil muttered, “All right.”

Wymack gave him a dry look. “Now, if you don’t have any objections to riding in my car, pack this up and let’s get going.” He took his cup into the kitchen while Neil got the bag from the hall closet.

Neil regretted having a second cup of coffee with breakfast. The extra caffeine and his anxiety made it impossible sit still on the way to the court. His leg bounced restlessly while he alternated between chewing his thumbnail and fiddling with his key ring. He just wanted the day to be over with.

As the Foxhole Court came into view, it occurred to him that it was time to give up Wymack’s keys. He no longer needed access to Wymack’s apartment or the drawer in his office. Gnawing on the inside of his cheek, he hesitated a moment and then began working the ring of Wymack’s keys off the other one.

Abby’s car was the only one in the stadium’s parking lot. Wymack pulled into the space beside it and shut the engine off. He dropped his sunglasses into one of the cup holders and froze when he noticed the key ring Neil was holding out to him.

Arching an eyebrow, he said, “That’s generous of you, kid, but I’ve already got keys to my place.”
“I’m not staying at your place anymore.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want you banging on my door in the middle of the night just ‘cause you miss flattening my couch cushions. Hang onto the keys in case you need them.”

Dumbfounded, Neil blurted out, “Uh, thanks.”

Wymack waved him off. “Don’t mention it.”

They climbed out of the car and Neil stuffed the keys into his pocket before grabbing his bag from the backseat. He folded his sunglasses over his t-shirt collar as he followed Wymack to the door.

The air conditioning came as a sharp shock after the sun-roasted parking lot. Neil wasn’t entirely pleased with the way he always seemed to smell of sweat and sunscreen, but he knew he wouldn’t trade it for the controlled chill of the Nest either.

Wymack went to his office to look over some paperwork and Neil hung back in the lounge. He dropped his bag on the floor and took the separated key rings out of his pocket to hook them together again. Moving out of Wymack’s wasn’t quite as daunting now that he knew he was allowed to go back if he ever needed to; even if he was unlikely to take Wymack up on that offer, the option was nice to have.

Too restless to sit down, Neil wandered over to the corkboard on the wall to study the photographs pinned up there. Most of the photos were blurry candids of visibly annoyed Foxes caught in the harsh flash of the camera, but several were clear and obviously planned. Dan, Renee, and Allison appeared more often than the others and they were usually together, side by side with varying degrees of enthusiasm on their faces. Dan’s smile was always the largest and brightest of the three. Allison looked smug more often than not, one dark eyebrow quirked and a lopsided smirk pulling at her small mouth, and Renee was never without that serene expression that made Neil uncomfortable.

Off to the side, Neil noticed a picture of Dan and Matt standing on the sidewalk outside the Tower. Dan wore high heels and a short dress that was vibrantly blue against her brown skin. She was playfully sticking her tongue out at the camera while Matt hunched his shoulders in his button down shirt, smiling but clearly nervous.

A door opened down the hall and Neil turned to see Abby standing halfway out of her office. She smiled and said, “You’re here early. Did David drag you in?”

“I’m supposed to catch a ride with Matt when he gets here.”

“Oh, I see.” Abby checked the slim watch on her wrist. “He’s not due in for a little while. Let’s get your physical out of the way while you wait.”

“My physical,” Neil echoed flatly.

Abby’s smile didn’t falter. “You won’t get on the court tomorrow unless I give you a green light.”

“I already had a physical this year and I was cleared to play.”

The master made sure all his players had a physical exam once a semester to make sure everything was in working order. Neil didn’t like the exams, but he did like the Ravens’ team doctor. Dr. Tagawa was distantly related to the master, and he was hired mainly for his loyalty to the Moriyama family, but concern would flicker over his face whenever Neil or Jean had an injury that was bad enough to warrant a trip to his office.
“You should be a pro at this, then,” Abby said. She stepped fully out into the hall and beckoned to him. “Come on. It won’t take long.”

Neil took his bag and followed her down to the medical room. He dropped his bag on the chair in the corner and waited for her instructions.

Abby did things in a different order than Dr. Tagawa did, but it was more or less the same. First, he was given a cup to pee in and directions to the nearest bathroom. After his urine sample was labelled and put in a cabinet, the rest of the process began. She recorded his height and weight, asked questions about his family’s medical history, pressed a stethoscope to his chest and back, and took his blood pressure. She checked his eyes, his reflexes, and his range of motion. She moved his arms and legs around to watch for rotational deformities before she drew two vials of his blood to label and lock away. When she told him to, Neil stood up and bent forward so she could check his spine for signs of scoliosis, and then he squatted down to do the customary “duck walk” to the wall and back to prove that his hips, knees, and ankles were in good shape.

He mindlessly did everything he was told until she waved her pen at him and said, “Okay, if you could just strip down to your underwear real quick for me, we can get the rest of this over with.”

Bewildered, he blinked at her and tried to figure out why she said that. The physical was over. It was over and there was no reason for her to ask him to undress. His mind darted into a dark place before he could catch it.

“I need to check for track marks,” Abby clarified when he continued to do nothing. “I let people stay dressed for everything else, but I can’t see through clothing. This will just take a minute.”

“The Ravens wouldn’t have wanted me if I was a drug addict.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. Cold arrogance was the only shield he had and he clung to it as if it would save him.

“You’re with the Foxes now. You don’t get special treatment just because you almost went to Edgar Allan.”

Panic buzzed in his heart. “Won’t the urine test show if there are drugs in my system? Isn’t that what’s important? That I’m not on anything now?”

“Look, if you’re feeling shy you should know I’ve seen just about everything working at PSU,” she assured him with a wry smile. “Whatever you’ve got under there isn’t going to send me running for the hills, I promise.”

Neil clutched the hem of his shirt. His body was disgusting- the girls Riko let into Neil’s bed said so. He couldn’t do this. What if Abby told Wymack? Or Dr. Dobson? What if they asked the master questions and made him think Neil was spilling secrets?

“Neil,” Abby said firmly, getting his attention again. “It’s okay. This will stay between us, all right? I’m not going to judge and I’m not going to tell anyone.”

“What about Wymack?”

“I only report to him if you’ve got a problem that’ll affect your game or if you’re doing something illegal. That’s it.”

There was no getting around this. If he said no she wouldn’t allow him to get on the court on Monday. Neil grit his teeth and removed his shoes and socks first; then he reached behind his neck to yank his shirt off. Finally, he dropped his shorts and stepped out of them. He kept his eyes on the floor so he wouldn’t have to see her reaction.
His face burned when she inhaled sharply and whispered, “Oh, Neil.”

Monsters were real. He carried the evidence all over his body.

None of his scars looked like accidents. Some were too faded to be noticed right away, like the messy lines looped around his wrists and the white flecks scattered over his knees. Others were too thick and too ugly to ignore. Pale slashes overlapped across his ribs and stomach; scratch marks, made first by fingernails and deepened by a switchblade, ran down the middle of his chest; the outline of a hot iron was stamped over his right shoulder. His leg hair wasn’t enough to cover the fat jagged line tearing down the outside of his right thigh or the pale horizontal lines a few inches below his groin.

Abby’s silence grew thicker and heavier.

Neil turned to show her his back and woodenly asked, “Are there any track marks?”

“Neil.”

“Are there?”

“No,” she said softly. “No track marks.”

Neil dressed in a hurry, barely taking enough time to make sure he put his shirt on the right way.

“Neil, listen-”

“Don’t.” He stuffed his feet back into his shoes and snatched his bag off the chair.

“Hey,” she said, stepping into his path. “I take care of my Foxes. I’m here if you need anything, and so is Betsy. Don’t hesitate to come to us.”

Neil pulled himself out of her reach. “We’re done, right?”

She looked like she wanted to say something else, but then she sighed and nodded.

He darted out of the room with humiliation pulsing hotly under his skin. In the lounge, Neil tossed his bag onto the couch and patted down the front of his shirt to reassure himself that everything was covered. His scars were all hidden except for his wrists, but no one had noticed the marks there so far.

*I'm fine,* Neil told himself. *I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine.* With his arms folded over his stomach, he stood in the middle of the lounge and tried to calm himself down.

Half an hour later, the lounge door swung open and in stepped Matt Boyd with an easy smile and an air of confidence he’d been lacking in the spring. His dark hair was artfully pomaded and his skin was a darker shade of bronze than it was before his summer vacation. Time away from Palmetto had obviously done him some good, which boded well for the Foxes.

“Hey, man,” Matt said as he strode toward Neil. “Good to see you’re still standing.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Dan was worried the monsters would break you while we were gone.”

“They’re not monsters, just assholes.”
Matt looked at him thoughtfully. “I guess Andrew would seem kinda tame compared to someone like Riko.”

Neil tilted his head and gave a chilly smile. “Has Kevin told you stories?”

“He didn’t have to. We all saw how fucked up he was in December and we kinda figured that Riko was the most likely suspect- especially since he and Kevin were supposed to face off to prove who was really the best.”

Neil cautiously kept his face blank. It was possible that Matt was lying in the hope of gleaning information. Maybe the Foxes had another bet going. Neil asked, “You don’t believe it was a skiing accident?”

“Not unless Kevin went skiing in his Exy gear.”

Neil’s stomach twisted hard. They’d been playing two-on-two, Jean and Riko against Kevin and Neil, the night that it happened. Neil hadn’t given any thought to Kevin’s armor as he scrambled to find Kevin’s keys, wallet, and phone in his room, all the while hissing at Kevin to stop crying and listen to the directions to the winter banquet in Virginia. Riko ended up taking a long shower that night; Neil would’ve had time to get Kevin changed out. It was a stupid mistake.

He bit the inside of his cheek and managed a tight smile for Matt’s sake.

“Is Riko responsible for, uh, that, too?” Matt tapped his left cheekbone and then gestured to Neil’s face.

The smile slipped from Neil’s mouth. Matt held his hands up in surrender, silently backing off.

Wymack stepped into the lounge with a disgruntled expression and launched a key ring at Matt, who didn’t notice until it hit him.

Matt yelped and clutched at the back of his head. Then, he scowled over his shoulder at the older man. “What the fuck, Coach?”

“I’m doing great, Boyd. Thanks for asking.”

“Yeah, whatever. Missed you, too.”

“What’s all the noise?” Abby called a few seconds before she stepped around Wymack into the lounge. “Oh, hey, Matt. How was the drive?”

“Boring. Long.” he said as he stooped to pick the key ring up off the floor.

“Quit your whining and get going already,” said Wymack. “Knowing you, you’ve got a shitload of unpacking to do before the meeting.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah.”

Abby shook her head, amused. “We’ll see you two later.”

“Yes, you will,” Matt promised. He turned back to Neil and said, “Let’s go, dude. Is the rest of your stuff in Coach’s car or did you leave it at his place?”

“This is it,” Neil replied, tugging at the strap of the duffel.

Matt’s eyebrows shot up. “Seriously? How?”
“Not everyone is as high maintenance as you,” Wymack cut in. Abby smacked his arm and told him to be nice.

Matt jerked his thumb in Wymack’s direction. “I want to know how you survived living with that for so long.”

“Same way he’ll survive living with you,” Wymack said. “Get the fuck outta here or tomorrow I’ll make you run suicides ‘til you puke.”

“It’s so good to be back,” Matt deadpanned. His annoyed look only lasted a moment before he flashed Neil a smile. “Come on. I’ll show you the Tower.”

Neil adjusted the bag’s strap over his shoulder as they started walking. “I’ve seen the Tower.”

“Yeah, but that was before you were a Fox. The Tower’s your home now.”

Matt’s truck was a bright blue beast that was as unapologetically large as its owner. The bed was piled high with furniture and boxes secured in place with cords. The backseat was stuffed with suitcases, a backpack, and a plastic laundry basket filled with DVDs and video games.

Neil climbed in the passenger seat and held his bag on his lap. There was a thermos in one of the cup holders and a plastic McDonald’s cup with melting ice at the bottom in the other.

Matt started the engine and the radio instantly blared to life; he fumbled to turn it off with a sheepish grin. Then, he slipped his sunglasses on and shifted into drive.

“So,” he began once they were out on the road, towering over everything else, “what did you do this summer?” Matt’s voice was teasing, but Neil missed the joke.

“Is that a real question?”

Matt glanced at him. “You know how teachers make you do those dumb essays after summer vacation?”

Neil didn’t, but he nodded anyway. “I basically just practiced.”

“Did Kevin practice with you? Or did he just sit and watch with that snooty little look on his face? Either way, it must’ve been brutal.” Matt scoffed and shook his head. “I know Andrew will kick my ass for it, but I’m totally willing to punch Kevin if you want me to. Just say the word and I’ll make it happen.”

“Thanks.”

“Seriously, I don’t know how you put up with his bullshit.”

Neil looked out the window. “You get used to it.”

Matt snorted. “If you say so.”

Up ahead, Fox Tower stood proudly on its hill, waiting for its residents to return. Wind ruffled the trees around it. The sidewalks were empty and clean. There was no trace of vandalism anywhere.

Matt pulled into the lot behind the Tower and ignored the marked spaces in favor of parking parallel to the curb. Andrew’s car was in a shady spot near the far end of the sidewalk, but thankfully there was no sign of Andrew’s group out there.
Matt popped the locks and shut off the engine with a sigh. “All right, let’s do this.”

First, they carried all of Matt’s belongings into the lobby, out of the thick heat and harsh sunlight. Then, Matt filled the elevator with suitcases and bags while Neil held the doors open. When the elevator was nearly full, they squeezed inside and Matt hit the button for the third floor. The doors slid closed. Neil regretted not taking the stairs.

“Hey, I really appreciate your help,” Matt said. “It would’ve been a pain in the ass moving all this on my own.”

“I’ve got nowhere else to be,” Neil replied.

Matt grinned at him as if he’d said something kind.

Once they lugged everything into the suite, they went back down to carry up Matt’s furniture, television, and game consoles. The sofa was left for last and it proved to be the most difficult item to get upstairs. Its size made it nearly impossible to pivot in the narrow stairwell and, more than once, they ended up getting stuck. Neil was sure he’d have a bruise or two from being squashed against the railing.

When they finally had everything heaped together in the main room, Neil wiped the sweat off his brow and dragged his duffel bag into the bedroom. There were bunk beds against the far wall and a third bed raised above a dresser. He paused and looked over the mattresses. The dresser drawers were all empty and the closet was completely bare. Frowning, he clicked off the closet light and turned just as Matt stepped into the doorway and leaned against the frame.

“Do you care which bed you get?” Matt asked.

Neil shook his head no.

“If it’s cool, could you take the top bunk? Seth and I are kinda tall- we’d probably knock ourselves out on the ceiling- and Seth keeps weird hours, so I figure it’s better to let him have the bed by the door.”

“I don’t mind the top bunk,” Neil said. “Where are the linens?”

Matt looked confused. “The linen- oh, did you not bring sheets and stuff?”

The Ravens were given everything from toothbrushes to cars. Neil didn’t think to buy his own and Wymack never mentioned it to him. He felt like a child, helpless and mortified.

“Don’t sweat it,” Matt said. “You can get some from the store. I’ll give you a ride over there- I wanted to stock up on food anyway.”

Neil swallowed his anger and his pride. “Sure. Thanks.”

“Cool. I gotta use the bathroom first. I’ll be ready in a minute.”

“Okay.”

Matt disappeared into the bathroom across the hall. Neil shook his head and crouched down to dig around the duffel for the wad of cash hidden under his clothes. He didn’t know how much he’d need, so he counted out a hundred and fifty dollars just to be safe and folded the bills into his pocket.

The truck looked slightly smaller now that it was empty, but Neil still felt like he towered over the
world as they drove through the quiet campus. The radio was turned down to a faint murmur and cool air poured from the vents.

“So,” Matt began, tentatively easing the word out. “Wesninski. Is that Polish?”

Neil glanced over at him. “I’m not sure.”

“Cool.” Matt bobbed his head and pulled into the left-turn lane at a red light. “I think Boyd’s supposed to be Scottish. I had to ask my dad for a school project once, but he doesn’t know much about where his family came from.”

Small talk was painful, like breaking in new shoes except it never stopped being uncomfortable. The freshmen who made it through summer probation with their curiosity intact always asked Neil and Jean irritating questions about why they were there, where they came from, and how long they’d been at the Nest.

The silence began to go sour. It was Neil’s turn to say something; the burden was growing heavier by the second. He already owed Matt for the ride to the store and he didn’t want to seem ungrateful by sulking.

But the sun slanting through the windshield was too hot and his body was too tired and his thoughts were too tangled to find something interesting enough to revive the conversation.

With nothing better to say, he offered, “I think I have relatives in Scotland.”

Matt perked up. “Yeah? On your mom or dad’s side?”

“My mom’s.” The small sliver of honesty hurt him on its way out and he regretted it instantly. He turned toward the window so Matt wouldn’t see him wince.

“Is she Scottish, then?”

Neil mumbled, “She was English.”

Neil could feel Matt looking over, could almost hear him processing the past tense. He braced for more questions, but Matt surprised him.

“My mom’s from Brazil,” Matt said. “She lives up in New York.”

“Were you with her during summer break?” Neil asked, steering the conversation further into Matt’s territory.

“Yeah, I was. It was awesome.” Before he could launch into any stories about his vacation, they reached the expansive supermarket parking lot. Matt parked crookedly somewhere in the middle, a good distance away from the huddle of cars near the doors.

Inside the store, Matt insisted on sharing a cart, and then proceeded to worm his way through the food aisles with no obvious plan and Neil trailing behind him. Neil politely kept his mouth shut even after the third time they had to circle back because Matt forgot something he wanted. As the cart filled up, Neil fought the urge to kick himself for reaching out to Dr. Dobson. The free meal didn’t seem worth it now that he was buying groceries.

Once they had enough food to last them at least a couple weeks and some other essentials for the dorm, they made their way to the home section. Neil’s mind went blank when he took in all the options available just for bedding, but Matt seemed to know exactly where to go.
“Come pick out a bed in a bag!” he called from the other end of the aisle, gesturing to the shelves. “What’s your favorite color?”

Neil thought about it as he walked toward Matt. “Um… not black.”

“Fair enough. How about blue?”

“Sure.”

“You care about patterns? Ha! This is cute,” he said, holding up a set of white bedding with bright blue flowers. Peeking over the top, he feigned a serious tone and asked, “How secure are you in your masculinity?”

Neil blinked at him.

“I’m kidding.” He traded the flowery bedding set for one with blue and gray stripes. “This one looks good. Not too expensive, but not suspiciously cheap either. What do you think?”

Glancing at the price tag, Neil shrugged and said, “It looks fine.”

“Cool.” Matt tossed it into the cart. “Now, let’s get you a pillow.”

After they finished in that section, Matt pushed the cart to the liquor aisle and said, “So, like, don’t tell Abby- or, you know, the cops- but if you want something, I’ll throw it in with my stuff. I’m a few months shy of twenty-one, but I never get carded here.”

“I don’t drink,” Neil said as he watched Matt tuck a six-pack of beer and a handle of white rum between Neil’s bedding and the side of the cart.

“All right. Feel free to help yourself to my stash if you change your mind. You good to go? I think I’ve got everything.”

Neil couldn’t think of anything else he might need, so he and Matt went up front to stand in the checkout line. Matt put a plastic divider on the conveyor belt and they quickly separated their groceries. Neil’s energy was draining steadily and a prickle of inexplicable irritation was growing on the back of his neck. Each beep of the cashier’s scanner made him twitch.

He just wanted to sleep for a few hours.

Matt hummed along to the radio on the way back to the Tower, letting Neil stew silently. When they got back to their suite, they put the food away in the kitchen, and then Neil went into the bedroom with his new bedding. The more sensible part of his mind told him to find the nearest washing machine, but the rest of him felt slow and heavy.

“Wash it tomorrow, man. You look beat,” Matt suggested, breezing into the room with two suitcases in hand. “One night on funky sheets won’t kill you.”

“Yeah,” Neil mumbled. “Does the Tower have a laundry room?”

Matt dumped one suitcase out onto the bottom bunk. “Yeah. Basement, near the stairs.”

“Thanks.” Neil tossed his bedding up onto the top bunk and climbed up the ladder. His comforter and sheets smelled like plastic, but they were soft enough to be comfortable and all his. After tucking the elastic corners of the bottom sheet around his mattress, he put his pillow in its case and stretched out on his back. He stared up at the ceiling while Matt moved around the room- opening and closing
drawers, unzipping his bags, padding back and forth on socked feet.

Some time later, when Neil’s head was quiet and his thoughts were small and harmless, Matt knocked on the bed frame and said, “Hey, I’m gonna go pick up Dan and Renee from the airport if you want to tag along.”

Neil peeled his eyes open. He didn’t want to risk doing anything that might seem disrespectful to his new team captain, but he couldn’t convince his body to move.

“It’s cool if you don’t want to,” Matt assured him. When Neil failed to reply, he said, “I’ll be back in an hour or so. See ya!”

As soon as he heard the faint sound of the suite door closing, the last scrap of tension fell away and he melted into the mattress. He had a whole hour to himself. His eyes fell closed as he decided to let himself rest awhile.

In his pocket, his phone vibrated twice.

“Ugh.” Neil lifted his hips so he could pull the annoying device out of his pocket and flip it open. Unsurprisingly, there was a new message from Andrew.

Salsa

He wasn’t in the mood for games. Once he deleted the text, he snapped his phone shut and dropped it onto the mattress next to him. Nervous energy was simmering in his blood again.

Bzzt bzzt

“Fuck,” he muttered, snatching his phone up again. Andrew had sent a second clue: Tortilla

Neil scowled at the word on the screen and deleted the message. Only a minute passed before a new one came in. This time, Andrew wrote, Strike three.

His phone vibrated in his hand and Andrew’s name appeared on the screen under the words “Incoming Call.” Neil waited a few seconds before pressing the green button and putting the phone up to his ear.

“We mustn’t ignore our phones when they’re a-ringing, Nathaniel.”

Spiteful silence was all Neil gave him in return.

In a lilting sing-song, Andrew began to recite, “‘Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary.’”

Neil hung up.

Predictably, Andrew called again and, as soon as Neil answered, he said, “‘Quoth the Raven-’”

“Go fuck yourself,” Neil spat.

Andrew laughed and hung up. With an irritated huff, Neil pocketed the phone and climbed out of bed to unpack his duffel bag. Thankfully, his phone stayed quiet.

After he filled the lowest dresser drawer with his clothes, he took his towel and toiletries into the bathroom. Matt had already arranged a baffling number of things around the sink: cologne, aftershave, deodorant, pomade, face wash, shaving cream, and a razor among other things. Neil set
his toothpaste and deodorant in the corner and put his toothbrush in the cheap plastic cup he’d bought. Then, he put his shampoo and bar of soap on the bottom shower shelf and hung his towel from a hook on the door, leaving the towel rods for his roommates.

He went to the kitchenette for a glass of water, hoping it would take the edge off his headache. Matt had already set up a coffeepot on the counter with a bag of coffee grounds and a package of filters beside it. In the main room, the sofa, chairs, and coffee table were arranged to one side across from Matt’s impressive entertainment system. The three desks were pushed against the wall beneath the windows; Matt’s laptop sat on the middle desk with a small stack of novels beside it. Neil crept closer to investigate and found a yellow Post-It note on top of the stack that read: *For Renee, Love Randy*

“Randy?” Neil mumbled.

Under the books, he found an autographed photo of a woman in a Team USA gymnastics uniform. There was another note stuck to the frame: *For Dan, Love Randy*

Neil glanced around, but didn’t see a gift for Allison. Whoever this Randy person was seemed to be playing favorites.

Voices out in the hall made him tense up. Nicky’s loud laugh was followed by a low murmur Neil couldn’t make out. He stole across the room to press his ear against the door, listening until he heard the thud of the stairwell door falling shut. It was an unpleasant reminder that Andrew’s group would be living just down the hall, too close for comfort.

He tried to shake off his apprehension and reminded himself that he’d lived closer to worse things. He would adapt to this.
When Matt’s loud voice and Dan’s bright laughter filled the hallway, Neil steeled himself and stepped out of the suite. They’d taken an extra hour in getting to campus, which meant Neil had an extra hour to fret over how he was supposed to behave. He didn’t know if his new captain would want to see him right away or if she’d have a task for him to do, but he figured it was better to go find out instead of waiting for her to track him down.

Dan and Renee both seemed refreshed after their time away from Palmetto. Dan had a hefty backpack weighing down one shoulder, but she carried none of the tension from the stressful spring. Renee’s hair was frizzy from the humidity, like pillowy tufts of white cloud dipped in a pale rainbow that swept just under her jaw. The summer sun had scattered freckles over her tawny-brown cheeks and across the gentle slope of her nose. A pink purse dangled from the crook of her elbow and a duffel bag thumped against her hip as she walked. She was the first to notice Neil standing there awkwardly. With a small smile and a wave, Renee called, “Hi, Neil! How was your summer?”

That got Dan’s attention. Dimples dug into her cheeks as she grinned. “Freshman!” she shouted, her voice bouncing off the walls. “How’s life?”

“It’s fine,” Neil replied.

The three of them stopped in front of the middle suite’s door and Dan shoved her hand into the pocket of her jeans to get her key. She told Neil, “You should hang out with us while we get settled in. If you need bribing, Renee has a bag of homemade cookies.”

Matt and Renee watched him expectantly. It wasn’t a question or an order- it was a suggestion and Neil wasn’t sure how to reply.

“Is there- do you have more bags downstairs?” he asked.

Dan unlocked the door and flung it open, chuckling, “Yes, yes, we do. We emptied, like, half of Allison’s storage unit on the way back.”
“We can go get it while you guys start unpacking,” Matt offered.

Dan planted a kiss on Matt’s cheek and took the suitcases he’d been carrying. “That’d be great. Thanks, boys.”

Neil followed Matt down the stairs and out into the parking lot. Like before, he propped the front door open and went into the elevator to make sure it didn’t close while Matt filled it with boxes.

The girls’ sofa and chairs were marginally easier to get up the stairs and they were arranged in a half-circle in the main room, facing a blank wall where Neil assumed a television would go at some point. Renee’s bookshelf came last and, once they reassembled it and pushed it up against the wall next to the sofa, Neil was tired enough to be tempted to sit right there on the floor.

By the time they were done, it was after four o’clock and Dan insisted that Neil stay to chat until the team meeting. They sat together in the main room with cold glasses of store-bought sweet tea and a plate of Renee's cookies to share.

For a while, Neil just listened to the other three discuss which charity events the Foxes should participate in during the upcoming school year. Volunteering at a dog-washing fundraiser event or cleaning up the site for a new equine-assisted therapy center wouldn’t help them get better at Exy, but Neil would go along with whatever his new captain told him to.

Renee had just finished telling them about a 5k run the Foxes could do in the spring when Matt jumped up from his chair and said, “I just remembered I have stuff for you guys. I’ll be right back.”

The door swung shut a moment later and Neil was left alone with the girls. The bite of cookie in his mouth suddenly tasted like sand. He tried not to squirm in his chair, hoping his discomfort didn’t show.

Dan’s eyes were bright with interest and focused on Neil. “You ready to kick some ass on the court tomorrow?”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“This will be fun.” Dan’s grin widened. She snagged another cookie off the plate and asked, “How long have you been playing Exy?”

“Since I was six.”

“Damn, they got you going early. You must be ready to go pro by now.”

“I’m not where I need to be,” said Neil, “but I’m making progress.”

Dan waved her hand dismissively. “I’m sure by normal standards you’re golden. I know you got a lotta shit back in the spring- I mean, usually we know more than someone’s name before they get signed- but it’ll be fine. We’ll make this work.”

Renee nodded. “Yes, we will.”

A second later, Matt came back into the suite with the books and picture frame Neil had seen on his desk.

Dan put her glass down on the carpet and made a grabbing motion at him. “Those from Randy?”

“Yup.” Matt handed her the picture frame and then passed the books to Renee. He sank down into
his chair and picked his plate of cookies up off the floor.

Neil watched the girls look over their gifts, smiling and then trading to see what the other got. Hesitantly, he asked, “Who’s Randy?”

Matt answered, “My mom,” and stuffed a cookie into his mouth.

“Her last name is Miranda,” Renee explained. “Randy’s a nickname she got during college.”

“Randy’s the best,” Dan sighed wistfully, fishing out her phone. “I’m gonna text her and say thanks.”

“Tell her thanks for me, too, please,” Renee said.

“Sure thing.”

Renee got up to place her books and Dan’s photo on the middle shelf of the empty bookcase, arranging them with obvious care. Neil watched her and wondered again about why there wasn’t a gift for Allison, why only two of the girls seemed to have a bond with Matt’s mother.

“Did she get something for Allison?” he asked.

Matt lifted one hand, palm up, as if he were posing a deep philosophical question. “What do you get the girl who gets herself everything?”

“The gift of quality time,” Dan answered with a sage nod. She put away her phone and picked up another cookie. “Randy calls her up once or twice a month just to chat and see how she’s doing—something Allison never got from her own parents. Randy’s a goddamn godsend.”

“I’m gonna tell her you said that,” Matt teased.

Dan threw a piece of cookie at him. “I already told her myself, dork.”

Every detail mattered when it came to finding someone’s weakness or getting on their good side. He filed that information away just in case.

“Maybe we should wait until Allison gets here to discuss her private life,” Renee suggested. Her tone wasn’t unkind, but it made Dan’s smile turn guilty nonetheless.

Matt nudged Dan’s calf with his foot. “Tell Neil your story about Candy’s coyote.”

Dan’s eyes widened gleefully. “Oh my god, so one of my old stage sisters can’t tell the difference between coyotes and dogs, apparently.”

She launched into a story of her friend trying to adopt the wild coyote she found outside her trailer and how it took her three days to figure out it wasn’t just a stray dog. Neil didn’t understand what was so funny about it. He drank his tea and tried to work out what had Matt laughing so much, but he was obviously missing something.

After Dan’s story ended, Neil pasted a smile on and said, “That’s funny.”

Matt shook his head, still chuckling. “I can’t believe she gave that thing a bath.”

Dan snorted. “I made Barb promise to teach her how to tell a cat from a raccoon just in case.”

Renee gave another small laugh and then checked her phone. “Oh, we should probably head over
now. Wymack said Allison and Seth just left the airport.”

“The fun begins,” Dan muttered. “Let’s get over there.”

Relief melted away the knots in Neil’s back. They all took their dishes to the kitchen sink and left the Tower as a group. Neil sat in the backseat of Matt’s truck beside Renee and silently listened to her conversation with Dan as Matt drove them over to the court. Thankfully, the girls didn’t require his input on anything.

Andrew’s group was already waiting in the lounge of the Foxhole Court by the time they got there. Andrew had planted himself in the middle of a couch with Kevin and Nicky on either side of him. Aaron’s chair was pulled up against Nicky’s armrest.

“Hail to the chief,” Andrew said, giving Dan a grin that was all teeth.

“Hey, guys,” Dan replied dryly as she took her place on the other couch. Matt sat next to her and Renee took one of the other chairs.

Neil stayed by the door and watched them.

Nicky looked up from his phone after a moment and beamed at the upperclassmen. “Long time, no see. Good summer?”

“We had a lovely summer,” Renee answered. “How was yours?”

“Can’t complain.” Nicky shrugged. “Damn, Matt, you look like you lived out on the beach. You got any fun tan lines to show off?”

Matt tightened his arm around Dan’s shoulders. “Dan gets the first peek.”

“Straight people,” Nicky sighed, shaking his head.

Andrew locked eyes with Neil and laughed. “Stop being a wallflower, Nathaniel.”

Everyone looked at Neil and his face flooded with embarrassed heat. He didn’t know where he was meant to go. There were nine seats and he was number ten. It was unclear whether he was expected to sit on the floor or keep standing.

Dan smacked a hand down on the empty cushion beside her. “Come on, freshman. You’re family now, so make yourself at home.”

“Aww,” Andrew cooed. “So sweet I’m gonna get cavities.”

Neil strode across the room to sit beside Dan, tucking his elbows in to take up as little space as possible. He pointedly ignored Andrew’s amused look.

“Did you get to know Neil better over the summer?” Renee asked Andrew’s group.

Aaron’s expression went from bored to annoyed.

“Oh, we sure did,” Andrew said through a deranged smile. “We learned all sorts of things about young Nathaniel. For instance, he plays Exy. Can you believe it?”

Renee didn’t seem to mind his mocking tone in the slightest. “It’s nice that we all have something in common.”
Andrew snorted. “The nicest.”

“Did any of you actually go outside this summer?” Dan asked. “At least Neil managed to work up a farmer’s tan.”

“Maybe they’re going for vampire chic,” Matt teased.

Andrew cocked his head and played dumb. “Oh, is that why you call us monsters?”

Kevin’s impatience finally got the better of him. “Where the fuck are Allison and Seth? They should be here by now.”

“Maybe God finally aimed a lightning bolt Seth’s way,” joked Nicky. “Happy belated birthday to me.” His tone was light, but there was an undercurrent of something that led Neil to believe Nicky wouldn’t have been too upset if Seth really had died en route.

“Nicky,” Renee said with just enough gentle disappointment in her tone to make Nicky lower his eyes as if he’d been scolded.

Abby and Wymack entered the lounge together a few minutes later and Neil could almost feel Dan’s annoyance fall away. She bounced up off the couch to greet Wymack with a friendly punch to his shoulder; she blocked the one he tried to return and jokingly called him old. Abby gave Dan a one-armed hug and then came over to welcome Renee back from vacation, patting Matt’s shoulder as she passed.

Neil watched Andrew’s group sit quietly while the others chatted and caught up with each other. They’d lived with Abby for a few weeks, seen Wymack in passing, but there was something off about Aaron and Nicky’s neutral expressions. They looked resigned to being observers as they watched the cheerful reunion in front of them.

As the conversations tapered off into questions about dinner and whether or not anyone had heard from the missing two Foxes, the door banged open and Seth trudged in. His baggy clothing hung shabbily off his tall frame, his jaw was covered in stubble, and the rest of his face was splotched with an angry sunburn. Beneath his loose t-shirt sleeves, he had tan lines like Neil did, but the contrast between Seth’s red-brown forearms and pale biceps was more stark.

Seth threw himself into the empty chair and took off his baseball cap to rub a hand over his close-cropped hair. When he noticed everyone looking at him, he sneered, “What?”

“I hope you have a good excuse for being so late,” Kevin said as the door swung open again.

“I do whatever the fuck I want,” Allison answered as she breezed into the room, stiletto heels clicking. “How’s that for an excuse?”

Kevin’s glare was ignored. Unlike the others, Allison was as fresh-faced and put together as ever. Her platinum-dyed hair was scraped back into a ponytail that swished behind her bare shoulders as she walked. The makeup around her small, dark brown eyes was heavier than she usually wore it and a silver stud gleamed from the right side of her nose.

“Nice of you to finally show up,” Wymack said dryly. “You forget how to drive or something?”

Allison turned to Abby. “Is your house still standing?”

“For the most part,” Abby chuckled. “How was your flight?”
“Ask Seth,” Allison said frostily. She swept her eyes over the others before deciding to sit at Neil’s side. She perched on his armrest without bothering to tug the hem of her crimson dress down, leaving most her tanned thighs exposed. Her perfume choked Neil, but he didn’t have enough room to inch away from her without bumping into Dan.

There’s a cabin in the-

“Nathaniel will move if you want to sit there,” Kevin said, still scowling at her.

Allison scoffed and draped her arm behind Neil. Her sharp nails dragged across the back of his neck and set his skin crawling. There’s a cabin in the mountains, he tried again. His back was burning from keeping so painfully still. He was too distracted and the room was too noisy for him to focus on his imaginary safe haven. In his limited space, he managed to dig a roll of breath mints out of his pocket and popped two into his mouth. Cold peppermint burst across his tongue and stung the back of his nose. I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m fine.

His eyes clashed with Andrew’s when he looked up. Andrew blinked slowly, squinted, and then looked between him and Allison.

“Nathaniel, you should-” Kevin started.

“Unclench, Kevin,” Allison said, annoyed. “He has to learn how to be around girls sometime. I’m doing him a favor.”

Andrew looked at Kevin. Neil tore his eyes away and accidentally made eye contact with Seth. He was slouched in his chair, his lip curled in a look of pure hatred.

“All right, simmer down.” Wymack said, coming to stand between Seth and Aaron’s chairs. “I won’t keep you long. Far be it from me to stand between college kids and food.”

“So move it along already,” Allison interrupted.

“Thank you all for being so patient,” Wymack said over her. “If you haven’t signed off on your paperwork yet, do so before you leave. If you don’t get your physical with Abby over with today, you will not come with us tomorrow. If you show up here instead of the gym in the morning at eight-thirty, you will be signed up for whatever volunteer work I can find. Questions? Comments?”

“I’ve got comments,” said Seth.

“I am well and truly shocked by that,” drawled Wymack.

Seth flipped him off. “I know you got a real hard-on for building up our defense line, but my line got royally fucked. I needed decent strikers this year and instead you gave me Lefty and Fuckface McGee.”

“It’s not like we’re thrilled about having you on our line either, junkie,” Kevin said, absently rubbing his scarred left hand.

“So fuck off back to Edgar Allan,” Seth replied, curling forward in his chair.

“They’ll be fine, Seth,” Dan said tiredly. “I’d rather have ex-Ravens than amateurs, which is what we would have had if not for them.”

“How do we know Scarface isn’t an amateur? I don’t even know what team he played for in high school. No one does. There’s no information about this jackass anywhere.”
Matt said, “Breathe, man. It’s good for you.”

“Nathaniel’s great,” Nicky chimed in. “We’ve been playing with him.”

“I don’t want to hear about who you play with,” Seth said snidely. “Keep the gay shit to yourself.”

“You sure? There’s plenty to go around.” Nicky added a cheeky wink for effect, which made Seth’s face turn an alarming shade of red.

Wymack held up a hand in Seth’s direction before he could spew something hateful. “That’s enough. Neil knows how to play Exy, so that’s settled. Unless someone else wants to bitch about things that aren’t gonna change, I’ve got an announcement.”

Neil stiffened and bit down on his inner cheek, waiting for the bomb to go off.

“Edgar Allan has transferred to our district.”

After a beat of stunned silence, the room exploded. Seth threw back his head and laughed. Matt, Aaron, and Nicky shouted over each other to demand an explanation, drowning out Dan’s loud objections. Allison’s claw-like grip tightened on Neil’s shoulder as she shrilly yelled something. Even Abby was shocked and outraged.

Finally, Neil looked at Kevin and Andrew. Kevin’s shoulders were tense and his wide eyes were fixed to the floor. Andrew twisted to face Kevin fully, leaning against Nicky’s arm. His smile was a slow, predatory thing.

Wymack attempted to answer the Foxes’ questions, but he was more focused on Andrew. It didn’t take long for everyone to follow his gaze to the quiet pair on the couch. Even Seth looked curious, though he was probably eager for bloodshed.

Neil watched and waited.

“The birds fly south,” Andrew said, tilting his head to catch Kevin’s eye. “Are you flattered? Is your heart a-flutter?”

Kevin’s voice trembled. “The ERC should have stopped this. They should have-”

“Life is a pile of shit and should’s,” Andrew said sagely. “Riko’s coming after you just like you said he would once upon a time. The little Raven isn’t a ravin’ lunatic, after all.”

“I didn’t think he’d do something like this,” Kevin said.

“You don’t look ruffled. You look guilty.” Andrew grabbed Kevin’s chin and forced him to meet his eyes. “You either suspected he’d do this or you knew about the transfer before today, but that’s ridiculous because you wouldn’t keep a secret like that from me, would you? Say it ain’t so, Kevin. I thought we were friends.”

Kevin, unsurprisingly, wilted for his new master just like he would have for the last one. Bitterness spiked in Neil’s chest. The master and Riko had disassembled Kevin’s spine. When would he put it together again?

“I told him not to say anything to you, so you can stop with the diva act,” Wymack said.

Andrew snapped his head toward their coach. “Do you want to come get your knife out of my back or can I keep it? I’ve been meaning to buy a new one anyway.”
Abby tsk-ed. “Andrew.”

“And you—” Andrew pointed accusingly at Neil—“must’ve known about this, too. I’d put money on it. Birds of a feather screw people over together.”

“I didn’t screw you over,” Neil scoffed. “It’s not my fault that you underestimated Riko. Maybe those pills make you go too fast to spot the obvious.”

“Neil, pump the brakes,” Wymack warned.

Andrew’s grin stretched so far it looked painful. “How long have you known? Did you know before Kevin? Have you known this whole time?”

“If you wanted me to share stuff with you, you shouldn’t have gotten on my bad side.”

“Implying you have a good side?”

“I guess you’ll never know.”

“Ha! Maybe I’ll ask Riko when he gets here,” Andrew said as he pinched Kevin’s cheek. There was a bright pink spot when he let go.

“Don’t let him take me back,” Kevin grit out.

Neil growled, “Don’t be a fucking moron.”

Dan looked over at him in surprise and Nicky’s eyebrows shot up. Even Allison leaned away from him to get a better look at his face.

Andrew looked deeply amused. “I’m really loving that confidence. Where’d you buy it from?”

“You know what will happen to you if you go back,” Neil said to Kevin, who refused to look up at him. It only made Neil angrier. “You have a choice, Kevin. Grow a spine.”

Kevin looked gutted. His misery made the room dimmer, the future darker.

“Anyway,” said Wymack, “the ERC won’t make the official announcement until we’re closer to the start of the season, which gives us time to brace ourselves. Reporters still won’t be allowed on campus unless they’ve got a police escort. If you don’t have campus security’s number in your phones, fix that before you leave. Be smart and safe, okay? And no leaking this to the media either.” He paused and swept a stern look over his players. “Before I let you all go, I think we’ve got one more thing. Kevin, what’d you want to say?”

Kevin cleared his throat and tried to pull himself together. “I spoke with Kathy Ferdinand’s people and they’ve agreed to reschedule my appearance on her show. Nathaniel and I will be doing a joint interview on July fifth.”

The room tilted. Neil stared at Kevin, unsure if he heard him correctly.

“Who’d want to see that face on TV?” Seth sniped.

“Jealous?” Allison taunted, combing her fingers through Neil’s hair.

Neil’s pulse thudded in his temples. An invisible leash he never agreed to be on tugged at his throat. Kevin said it in front of everyone because he knew Neil wouldn’t be able to tell him no, wouldn’t want to look ungrateful in front of his new captain. Anger rose in his chest.
“Has Neil agreed to this already or did you seriously just spring this on him with no warning?” Dan demanded.

Wymack looked caught off guard by this, too, which helped somewhat.

Neil didn’t understand why Kevin would do this. There was enough trouble with having his name released to the public - showing his face on television would make everything worse. It wouldn’t take a genius to guess what was burned off his cheekbone and Neil didn’t want to imagine the public’s reaction to that.


Neil shot up from the couch, out from under Allison’s hand and away from the Foxes before they could say anything to him. Andrew’s laugh chased him out of the room, but he didn’t care.

He made it to Wymack’s office first and he suddenly remembered his appointment with Dr. Dobson. A hot ball of rage exploded in his middle. He wouldn’t be able to sit quietly for an hour without giving himself away.

“Fuck,” he snarled as he kicked Wymack’s wastebasket, sending it flying into the wall and scattering trash everywhere.

He was spiraling out of control. His heart pounded, his hands curled into tight fists.

The door pushed open.

“All right, just take it easy now,” Wymack said, dragging Kevin into the office and kicking the door shut behind him. “Neil, did you know about the show before today?”

“No.”

“I can explain,” insisted Kevin, “but I need to talk to Nathaniel alone.”

Wymack snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“Please.”

Neil was angry enough that he didn’t feel threatened. If Kevin tried to hurt him, Neil would rip him apart and enjoy it - consequences be damned. He could almost smell the blood. Staring Kevin down, he said, “Give us a minute, Coach.”

Wymack hesitated before giving in with a harsh sigh. “Fine, but if I hear anything that sounds like trouble, I’m coming back in.”

Neil and Kevin watched one another in tense silence until they were alone. Two heartbeats later, Kevin blurted out, “We need to get ahead of the rumors about where you came from.”

Neil folded his arms and glared. “The master got his cronies to erase all the records of me in Baltimore - there’s nothing solid to link me to my father. People will lose interest once the season starts.”

“There’s a cold case about a missing- presumed-dead cop and your father is still the only real suspect. Someone dug that info up and now there’s a small group of overeager Exy fans wanting to play detective because they think you could be the son of a cop-killer. These people feed off drama and
you’re the gift that keeps on giving.”

Neil froze.

The surveillance teams that sometimes lurked outside the Wesinski house never caught sight of anything incriminating. Instead, they saw the cleaning crews and gardeners and house painters and personal chefs that Nathan hired specifically to distract whoever was investigating him at the time. Neil didn’t doubt that all those people were questioned, but none of them would have been able to give the police the answers they hoped for. Nathan made sure of it.

Neil knew better than to talk to the workers, but he still sneaked into the kitchen on the days Isaac was there. Isaac was easy to be around—much easier than Nathan’s thugs. It seemed innocent enough when Isaac asked if Neil had any cool video games down in the basement, so without thinking, Neil told him, “No, my dad does stuff down there.”

There was a reason everyone was told the basement was filled in and sealed off: the police wouldn’t search a room they didn’t think existed. No one outside the family and Nathan’s inner circle was supposed to know about it.

Isaac never got the chance to tell anyone what he found out.

“The rumor’s been growing,” Kevin went on, “and someone might work up the nerve to ask Baltimore PD about it soon. If the cops remember seeing you at your house, they’ll start wondering why you disappeared and where you’ve been.”

Neil was the link between the Butcher and a member of the Moriyama family. Lord Kengo would have him killed before anyone with a badge could ask him anything. Numbly, he said, “So you want me to go on Kathy Ferdinand’s show and lie about who I am.”

Kevin nodded. “I’ll tell you what to say and maybe we can stop things from getting out of hand.”

Neil stooped to clean up the overturned wastebasket. “If people see my face, they’ll figure out I was marked for Court. They’ll probably think I burned the tattoo off myself.”

Kevin fought back a grimace. “They’ve been eager to find out who has the ‘3’ ever since Jean’s first appearance. It’ll distract them from gossip about your father, at least.”

Neil hated this. Life was exhausting and cruel and relentless.

He couldn’t stand to look at Kevin any longer. “I’m leaving,” he said as he headed for the door.

Surprisingly, Kevin let him go without an argument.

Wymack didn’t try to stop him either as he passed by. Renee said something as he cut through the lounge, but he brushed her off with a simple, “I’m gonna walk back. I’ll see you guys later.”

He didn’t stop until he was outside standing in the muggy evening air. Checking his phone, he saw it was only five forty, but before he could regret stepping out so early, headlights flashed in his periphery. He turned and saw Dr. Dobson wave at him from the driver’s seat of her car. She was early, too. Swallowing thickly, Neil walked over and climbed into the passenger seat, sinking into the comfort of air conditioning and the smell of a lavender air freshener.

It was a mistake getting this close to the psychiatrist when he was unraveling, but he didn’t leave himself with a plan B.
Dr. Dobson leaned forward to catch his attention. “Hi, Neil. How was moving day?”

“It was fine.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Sure.” What he really wanted was to vomit and then sleep for a full twenty-four hours.

“Here, look over these,” she said, handing over a stack of cards with recipes written on them in her tidy handwriting. “I’ve got the ingredients for these at the apartment, so just pick whatever sounds best.”

She backed the car out of the space while Neil glanced over the cards. Nothing sounded appetizing, so he picked one at random and read: “Lemon chicken.”

Dr. Dobson smiled and said, “Sounds perfect.”

Neil tugged at his seat belt and slumped down in his seat.

His conversation with Kevin, thoughts of Isaac, thoughts of Jean, his fear, his anger- everything was too close to the surface. His heart was beating too fast, his legs were tense from the excess energy he desperately needed to burn off. His mind was circling the drain. Not caring if Dr. Dobson noticed, he popped three mints in his mouth and bit down on them hard.

The car slowed to a stop at an intersection and Dr. Dobson asked, “Was today tiring for you?”

“Mhm.”

Dr. Dobson hummed in acknowledgement and made a smooth left turn. “Change can be stressful. I hope you get a good night’s sleep tonight.”

Anxiety cranked up Neil’s arms and into his lungs. He was going to be on the court with all nine Foxes the next day and he already felt like he was coming apart at the seams. It wouldn’t take much to send him over the edge again.

Earlier, he’d been ready to hit Kevin. He thought of what happened the last time he gave into that urge and shuddered.

“Neil?”

“I’m- I need a minute.”

“Take all the time you need,” she said softly.

As they drove toward Dr. Dobson’s apartment, Neil clung to the door handle, paralyzed by the scenario playing out in his mind. He would lose it again. Everyone would know that he was crazy. Everyone would see what was rotting inside him, blistering red shame and oozing yellow-green guilt and a shriveled black-and-blue soul kept in the dark too long to grow.

He realized he was shivering; his hands were freezing cold. It took him a few moments of disoriented wondering to notice it was because Dr. Dobson had turned up the air conditioning. The buzzing in his ears was soft music playing from the speakers, not old memories trying to crawl out.

Then, he looked up and saw that the car was parked outside Dr. Dobson’s apartment complex. Too embarrassed to ask how long they’d been there for, he threw off his seat belt and gathered up the recipe cards. Dr. Dobson shut off the engine. They climbed out of the car and walked to her front
door in silence.

Inside, the doctor’s apartment looked the same as it did the last time he was there— clean and clinical with only a few personal touches. Dr. Dobson flicked on the lights as she led the way to the kitchen and went right to the sink to wash her hands. Neil washed his hands after her as she began gathering the ingredients they needed.

“Can you set the oven to four hundred, please?” she asked, picking through her collection of spices. Once he did, she said, “Thank you, Neil. How about we make some rice to go with the chicken? That sound okay?”

“I guess.”

“Wonderful. I think we’ve got everything now, so let’s get started, shall we?”

The atmosphere was awkward at first, but Neil gradually relaxed as he focused on the task at hand. He measured water for the rice in a glass pitcher and poured it into a pot on the back burner to heat up. Then, he opened the package of chicken and laid the four fillets in the melted butter in the hot skillet.

It was easy, mindless work that kept his hands busy. There was nothing scary about dumping a cup of rice into the boiling water, nothing to worry about when he flipped the pieces of chicken over, nothing unsettling about the way Dr. Dobson mixed the sauce together in a bowl.

As the tension seeped out of his muscles, his appetite perked up.

Once the chicken was cooked on both sides, Neil used metal tongs to lift the pieces into a baking dish. Dr. Dobson poured the sauce over the chicken and tossed in a few sprigs of rosemary and fresh lemon slices for garnish, saying, “No reason why we shouldn’t get a little fancy with it.”

She slid the dish into the oven and Neil began taking all the dirty dishes to the sink to wash them.

“Oh, thank you, Neil.” She almost sounded surprised.

He stared into the sink, watching the water carry dark flecks of seasoning and globs of sauce down the drain. He knew something needed to be done about his shaky mental state. With his place on the team at stake, he couldn’t take any chances— another flashback on the court would ruin him. They would never trust him to hold his own at games.

Scrubbing a smudge of honey out of a measuring spoon, Neil gathered up his courage and tried to think of how best to start the conversation he didn’t want to have.

“I almost, uh-” he wrestled back a surge of anxiety and changed his mind. “How do flashbacks work? Like… when do they go away?”

“It depends. Everyone’s different; some people take months, some people take years,” Dr. Dobson answered. “May I ask why you want to know about flashbacks?”

The weight on Neil’s chest made it hard to breathe. “I’ve been, um, having them- or at least I think I have, anyway. I don’t know if they’re the same thing or… or if it’s been too long for them to count. I don’t really- I looked stuff up, but I-”

He clamped his mouth shut to stop himself from rambling more and scrubbed harder at the measuring pitcher.
Instead, she waited until it was clear he was done talking. “What are the flashbacks like?”

It was suddenly unbearably hot in the kitchen, but Neil forced himself to answer her. “Memories keep coming back- mostly just smells, sounds… and, uh, physical sensations. Sometimes I get, uh-” he gestured at his chest, flicking water onto his shirt- “really angry or scared and I feel just like I did when it was happening. The ‘incident’ a few weeks ago, that was worse than the others.”

“What happened, Neil? What are the flashbacks about?”

Neil paused for a moment; he was on the brink of something and afraid of what lay ahead. “Is telling you going to help? I can’t afford to be mentally unstable on the court. That’s the only reason I’m doing this. I don’t want to talk about it if it’s not going to do anything.”

“There are no guarantees, unfortunately,” she said. “Some people respond very well to therapy, some people find other things work better for them. If you try it and decide you want to go a different route, that’s perfectly all right. We’ll take it one step at a time.”

He rinsed the measuring pitcher off and set it in the drainer. “How does this work exactly?”

“Think of your mind like a linen closet. The linens are your memories and, usually, they’re put away neatly- except this time a sheet was balled up and just crammed inside the door. Every so often, it falls out and your brain panics and stuffs it back inside the closet only for it to fall out again later. In order to stop this cycle, you need to shake the sheet out and fold it up so it can sit flat on a shelf,” Dr. Dobson explained. “If you’d like to talk to me about what happened, we can go over the event and sort through your thoughts and feelings about it. We’ll also go over grounding techniques and talk about what triggers your flashbacks- stuff like that, okay?”

“Okay.” It all sounded similar to what he’d read online, but it didn’t do anything to loosen the knots in his stomach. He picked up a dirty plate and began washing it.

“This could be unpleasant and scary, I know, but you are safe and I am here to help you.”

“I got someone killed.” The words rushed out of him, horrible and true. He paused, sponge in hand, and braced himself against a heavy wave of guilt.

“What happened, Neil?” Dr. Dobson asked.

Telling the truth about Isaac wasn’t an option, but neither was telling the truth about Jean. To compromise, Neil mashed the two truths together and filled in the cracks with lies.

“In high school, I picked a fight with some older guys at Exy practice,” he began. “I punched one of them in the face and broke his nose. I thought… I expected them to come after me, but they went after my friend John instead.”

For a second, the warm water sliding over his hands was as red as Jean’s blood and the hiss of the water sounded like Isaac’s screams. He shuddered hard and squeezed his eyes shut.

“It’s okay, Neil,” Dr. Dobson said. “Take your time.”

Neil shook his head and tried to focus on scrubbing circles around the edge of the plate. “They kept hitting him and… and then he stopped moving. He was gone.”

In reality, Neil couldn’t see if Jean actually lost consciousness or not, but he remembered the moment he went horribly still. Dr. Tagawa showed up an eternity later and took Jean away. Neil spent almost a whole day alone in his room, staring at Jean’s empty bed and wondering if he was ever coming
back. As for Isaac- Neil knew the exact moment Isaac died. The silence that stretched between the last scream and his father’s footsteps on the stairs wasn’t something he could forget.

“You said you ‘got someone killed.’ Do you blame yourself for John’s death?”

“It was my fault, so yeah.” He finished rinsing the plate and shoved it into the dish drainer. Then, he snagged a towel to dry his hands with.

“You didn’t attack John or choose to kill him. What makes you feel like it was your fault?” Dr. Dobson asked.

Dr. Dobson met his scowl with a calm look of her own and waited patiently while he swallowed back the jagged shards of his anger. Losing his temper was what got him into this mess in the first place. Losing it now wouldn’t do him any good.

“I started the fight,” he said, forcing himself to speak evenly. “I knew they’d retaliate and I pissed them off anyway. I shouldn’t have lost my temper.”

“Hindsight makes everything simpler. Everyone can look back on events and think, ‘Oh, I shouldn’t have done this,’ or ‘I should have done that.’ Truth is, we can’t predict the future. We just do our best in the present.”


“You broke that other boy’s nose,” said Dr. Dobson, “but you didn’t kill anyone.”

Neil huffed and looked away from her, eyes burning and throat tight.

“You weren’t in control of those other boys, Neil. What they did was not your fault.”

He was shaking his head by the time she finished talking. “Look, I appreciate the- the comfort or whatever you’re trying to offer, but it’s not true. Take me out of the equation and the end result is totally different. If I hadn’t been there, he’d still be alive.”

“I can see why you feel that way,” Dr. Dobson said. “Let me ask you this: why do you blame yourself and not the others?”

“I’m the one that set things in motion,” Neil replied with a shrug. The decision to talk to her was starting to feel like a mistake. It was her job to make people feel better, so of course she would say it wasn’t his fault. That’s what she thought he needed to hear.

“How did you feel when they were hurting John?”

Annoyance sparked before he could stop it. “How do you think I felt?” he sneered. “What kind of question is that?”

Her mouth curved into a calm smile. “I’d like you to put words to it.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am,” she told him before turning to check the rice, giving him some time to think it over.

He remembered the frigid rush of what have I done as he watched Jean bleed on the court floor, as he stood at the open door to the basement listening to the thud of his father’s axe. He wanted to make it stop, but he couldn’t. Nathan was a devil, the master was a giant, Riko was a monster. Neil was only a puppet, a piece of property, nothing.
When Dr. Dobson turned back, he had a word ready.

“I felt powerless,” he admitted. He swallowed hard and looked at his shoes. He was almost surprised to see that his body was intact when he felt like he’d cracked open.

She nodded. “Feeling powerless can be very frightening. Does taking all the blame for John’s death make you feel like you had more power over it?”

Neil’s eyes flew up to hers. “What?”

“If it was entirely your fault, then that would mean you were the one in control, right?”

“I suppose so.”

“Would you say that, on some level, you feel like you can prevent bad things from happening again by altering your behavior?”

It startled him to hear it out loud, the belief that made him shrink himself down to fit within the boundaries his owners set. Blaming himself for his own suffering made it easier almost: it gave him the illusion of a chance to avoid the pain in the future. If he could be quieter, his father wouldn’t get mad. If he stopped fighting back, the master wouldn’t beat Jean. If he did what he was told, the nightmare would end.

It was never up to him, though.

“I know that’s not how it works, but…” he trailed off, losing the thought.

She tilted her head and smiled sympathetically. “Knowing something doesn’t always go hand in hand with feeling it.”

He folded his arms tightly over his middle and his shoulders curled forward. The timer for the rice would go off in a few minutes and the chicken would be done soon after, but the food wouldn’t fill the pit in his stomach. The doctor had unearthed more than he intended to let her see.

“Before we eat, I want you to try saying that it wasn’t your fault out loud,” said Dr. Dobson.

“What for?” he asked, staring moodily at the oven.

“Saying it might help it sink in.”

“Fine.” He dragged his hand through his hair and exhaled sharply through his nose, thinking he might as well get it over with. “It wasn’t my fault.”

Neil wanted to believe it so badly he ached, but he couldn’t let himself do that with the voice in his head whispering that it wasn’t true.

“This is a good start, Neil,” Dr. Dobson said warmly. “I have some things to give you before we talk more about your flashbacks. Wait here a sec. I’ll be right back.”

After she disappeared through the kitchen door, Neil took a deep, ragged breath and rubbed at his eyes. He felt exhausted and drained, like he’d spent the evening gouging part of his heart out.

A minute later, Dr. Dobson strode back in with a book, a three-ring binder, and a box of tea with a bear wearing pajamas on it. “Here,” she said, handing him the book first. It was a self-help guide for dealing with trauma and PTSD. “This is yours to keep. I think some information in there could be really helpful to you.”
Neil flipped through the book and glanced at some of the infographics and charts. There was a diagram about the cycle of avoidance and a chapter dedicated to figuring out triggers. There was information about mindfulness, breathing exercises, grounding techniques. The back was full of blank pages for daily notes and meditation.

The thought of walking into the dorm with this made him wince. Anyone he bumped into could take one glance at the book and know instantly that something was wrong with him.

Dr. Dobson held up the box of tea for him to see before setting it on the counter. “I picked up some chamomile tea for you, which might help you sleep in your new room. And this binder- I thought you might want something to tuck that book into so your new roommates won’t see it.”

Neil’s fingers clamped around the book’s edges and heat climbed up into his cheeks.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting your privacy,” she added with a knowing look. She put the binder on the counter with the tea just as the timer for the rice started beeping shrilly. “That worked out nicely. Why don’t you grab yourself a drink and take that book to the table? I’ll get us dished up and meet you in there.”

Neil nodded dumbly, tucked the book under his arm, and poured himself a glass of water to take into the dining alcove. At the table, he sat down and sipped the water slowly. A headache was pulsing sharply in his temples. He felt more exhausted than he should have just from talking.

Over dinner, Dr. Dobson asked him some questions about his on-court flashback and what led up to it. Neil mumbled his answers, struggling to recall what exactly happened, until he finally said he wanted to stop for the night. In an instant, Dr. Dobson dropped the subject and, just like that, it was over. He was free to finish eating in peace.

By the time Dr. Dobson dropped him off in front of the Tower, Neil’s headache was worse but his stomach was comfortably full of good food. He had a grocery sack to carry the box of tea and the binder, which hid his self-help guide and a copy of the lemon chicken recipe. To anyone else, it looked like he was walking home from the store. Neil never said that he was grateful, but he suspected the doctor figured it out as easily as she did everything else.

On the carpet just inside the suite’s door, Neil found a note from Matt that read: went out for pizza w/ seth and the girls. call/text if you want me to bring back food

Neil let out a huge sigh, relieved to be alone for a while. He threw the note away and then headed off to bed to finally get some sleep.
Adjusting

Chapter Summary

After three weeks of summer practices and living with the Foxes, Neil is exhausted.

Chapter Notes

I can't think of any content warnings for this one- let me know if I need to add any!

The smell of onions cooking in butter was thick in the air. Neil’s eyes drooped as he leaned against Dr. Dobson’s kitchen counter and whisked together a bowl of heavy cream, milk, and eggs. He struggled to remember why he agreed to quiche that day. As they assembled the ingredients, it seemed less and less appealing.

All he wanted to do was crawl back into bed and sleep.

He’d made it through three weeks of summer practices with the Foxes and things hadn’t improved much. Too much time was wasted on petty arguments and nasty brawls, just like in the spring. Neil was increasingly frustrated with his lack of progress and his teammates’ inability to focus on the court. The only upside to it was that Kevin and Seth were often too busy fighting each other to criticize Neil.

“You seem tired today,” said Dr. Dobson. Across the kitchen, she was laying tomato slices out on a plate covered in paper towels while she kept an eye on the skillet. “Are you still having trouble sleeping?”

“I’m adjusting,” Neil replied. It was a line he’d been using more and more to dodge her questions; he feared it was wearing thin.

“I didn’t sleep well when I was living in a dorm room,” she told him, stirring the onions in the skillet with a spatula. “Sophomore year, my roommate snored so loudly it’d keep me up half the night. I had to get earplugs.”

Neil nodded and yawned. He was used to sleeping in a dorm room, but he and Jean had the same routine. Seth’s sleeping schedule was as unpredictable as his moods. He startled Neil awake every night by trudging in and out of the room. There was nothing to be done about it since Seth made it clear he hated Neil almost as much as he hated Kevin; he went on a tirade about it at least once a week.

After checking the recipe card, Neil measured out some flour and salt into his bowl and stirred it in. Then, he got the fresh basil leaves, black pepper, and dry mustard.

Dr. Dobson began grating some cheese and asked, “What did you do besides practice this week?”

“Went to the mall with Matt yesterday,” said Neil distractedly, watching the whisk drag the basil
leaves around. “He needed new running shoes.”

“Did you two go out to eat again?”

“Yeah.” Neil grimaced. Dinner the night before had consisted of fried chicken, mashed potatoes with thick gravy, collard greens, and buttery corn. He stuck to small portions, but the food still sat in his stomach like a lead weight all night.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with Matt lately. It’s good that you’re getting along with your teammates.”

The Foxes didn’t have assigned partners, but Matt still behaved as though he and Neil were meant to be paired together. As much as he confused Neil, Matt was better company than Seth or Kevin, so Neil went along with it.

“I think this is done,” Neil said, setting the whisk aside.

“Perfect timing. Bring it on over.”

Neil handed Dr. Dobson the bowl and watched her pour the mixture over the layer of grated cheese, tomato slices, and cooked onions at the bottom of the pie crust. Then, she topped it off with a sprinkling of paprika and put it in the oven.

“That should be about half an hour,” she said as she set the timer. “Can you take the iced tea out to the table, please?”

Yawning again, Neil got the pitcher from the fridge and two glasses from the cupboard and went to the dining alcove to wait for her. He went ahead and poured himself a glass since Dr. Dobson usually took a minute to make sure the spice cupboard was arranged to her liking. When she was done, Dr. Dobson brought a bowl of strawberries out to the table and sat across from Neil.

“I got these strawberries this morning. A friend of mine grows them himself.”

Neil took one and bit into it, setting the leafy top aside on a napkin.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Dr. Dobson asked, smiling.

Neil nodded as he took another.

“Is there anything you’d like to talk about today, Neil?”

Neil took a sip of iced tea. There were a few things he could mention- Andrew’s unnerving presence, Kevin’s scathing comments, Seth’s rude behavior, Allison’s prying questions, or the fact that his interview with Kathy Ferdinand was in five days- but he was tired and talking wouldn’t make those problems go away.

He shook his head. “No, there’s nothing.”

“Any flashbacks this week?”

“No.”

Dr. Dobson nodded slowly and gave him a searching look. “Have you ever considered getting a hobby?”

“What, like gardening?” Neil asked as he picked the stem off another strawberry.
“Might be worth a shot,” replied Dr. Dobson. “You could try a window garden or maybe Abby would let you use a bit of her yard. There’s no harm in asking.”

“I don’t think gardening would work out. Exy’s my thing.”

“You’re eighteen, about to start college- it’s the perfect time for you to explore new things. It might be good for you to disconnect from Exy every now and then.”

Neil suppressed a sigh and turned his glass of iced tea on its coaster. Ever since Riko kicked him out of the Nest, he’d been forced to figure out plenty of new things. “What about cooking?”

That earned him an approving nod. “That’s something. How about you find a new recipe to try on your own this week?”

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” he lied. All his spare time that week would be devoted to practicing his story for Kathy Ferdinand’s show and sleeping.

“If you need help with anything, you can always call or text me, okay?”

Neil forced a small, polite smile. “Okay.”

The rest of the session seemed to stretch on forever. Neil did his best to keep his tone at least somewhat pleasant while he responded to the doctor’s questions, but he could hear his irritation slipping through by the time they finished eating their quiche. Not wanting to risk making things worse with his bad attitude, Neil turned down her offer to drive him home and walked instead.

In the stuffy heat, he followed narrow roads with crumbling edges and dark tangles of sealed cracks in the pavement. Trees shaded his way for the first mile or so, but once he reached a busier road he was left out in the hot sun. Without a sidewalk, Neil was forced to walk in the grass to avoid oncoming cars; the harsh light blinded him and the dry grass crunched underfoot. He almost regretted being so eager to be away from the doctor. Even with the chilled water bottle she had sent him off with, it was a miserable three-mile trek back to the Tower.

His head was pounding and his body was slick with sweat, but he forgot his plans to shower and nap all afternoon as soon as he stepped into the suite. Seth was on the couch, holding a bloodstained tissue under his nose and a bag of frozen peas to his ribs. Matt muted the television when he heard Neil come in and asked, “Dude, you okay?”

“Where’d you run off to, fuckface?” Seth demanded.

Annoyance tightened in Neil's chest. He forced himself to take a deep breath.

“Shut up, Seth,” Matt said. “Neil, you’ve been gone for hours. I tried calling you, but you didn’t pick up.”

Neil fished his phone out of his pocket and realized he'd left it on silent all morning. Matt’s calls weren’t the only ones he’d missed. There were two from Kevin and three from Andrew, along with four texts.

“I didn’t hear it,” Neil mumbled, rubbing a hand over his sweaty hair.

“Your boyfriend stopped by,” Seth told him.

Matt lightly shoved Seth's shoulder. “Kevin and Andrew came looking for you. Seth started a fight, so Andrew finished it. Where’ve you been?”
“I went out for a walk. That’s all.”

He kicked off his shoes and went into the bedroom before Matt could ask any more questions. Once the door was closed, he read through Andrew’s messages.

_Cereal, guess what kind_

_Hey hello_

_We talked about this…_

_Nathaniel._

Neil scowled down at his phone. Andrew didn’t own him, so why should Neil have to be at his beck and call? He replied only to the first message: _Lucky charms_

A minute later, Andrew texted him back. _K wants to see you y/n?_

Neil rolled his eyes. He wasn't in the mood for this, but putting off whatever conversation Kevin wanted to have would just make it worse. He replied, _On my way_

He took his time changing into clean clothes and then he used the bathroom, stalling even further by washing his face and rubbing cold water over his arms. Then, he padded out into the main room to sit by the door and put his shoes back on.

From his spot on the couch, Seth said, “You know, you should just pack up and move in with the monsters. You can curl up at the foot of Kevin’s bed like a little dog.”

Matt scowled. “Seth.”

“What? We shouldn’t have split the Ravens up. Look at him.” Seth waved a hand at Neil. “He looks all antsy and shit. Needs his vitamin K.”

Neil got to his feet; he’d had enough of Seth. With one hand on the doorknob, he said, “It sucks that you got your ass kicked _again_, but the fact that you keep picking fights you can’t win isn’t my fault or my problem.”

He stepped out into the hall. The slam of the door cut off Seth’s curse and Matt’s laugh.

Rubbing at his dry eyes, Neil walked down to the cousins’ suite and rapped his knuckles against the door. Even though Andrew was expecting him, he still made Neil wait a full two minutes before answering the door. Neil guessed it was payback for how long he took to get there.

When Andrew did finally appear, there was a smile stretching across his face. “Nathaniel, welcome to our humble abode.”

“Where’s Kevin?”

Andrew blocked the doorway. “Tell me where you’ve been all morning and I’ll let you in.”

“No,” Neil said flatly.

“No fun,” Andrew sighed. “Kevin’s in the bedroom.”

Silently, Neil followed him inside. In front of the TV, Nicky sat in a beanbag chair with a bag of chips in his lap; he turned to watch Neil and Andrew curiously as they walked past him. Aaron was
tidying up in the kitchen and he didn’t even glance over his shoulder.

Kevin sat cross-legged on his bed with a thick book open in his lap and his phone sitting next to him on the black bedspread. He looked up when the door pushed open and marked his place in his book with a slip of paper.

“Where have you been?” Kevin demanded. “We’ve been trying to call you.”

“I was out,” Neil replied sullenly.

The door fell shut and, for a moment, he was afraid of what could happen to him in that room. Andrew stuffed his hands in his pockets and leaned against the dresser in front of the window.

Kevin narrowed his eyes at Neil. “You weren’t at the court.”

“I know.”

“Don’t be a smart-ass.”

“Did you bring me in here just to scold me for not answering my phone?” Neil asked. “Seeing you is punishment enough, so can I go now?”

Andrew snorted. “Someone’s in a mood.”

“Wandering around outside by yourself is a bad idea,” Kevin said lowly, unfolding his legs and pulling himself forward to sit at the edge of his bed. “Campus police can only do so much to protect you.”

“Worry about yourself. Seth wants to beat you to a pulp.”

Andrew grinned and held up his hand to show off his bruised knuckles. “He tried that already. Didn’t go so well for him.”

“He’ll have an opportunity on Wednesday when you go off to therapy,” Neil reminded him. He took a small bit of pleasure from the look of worry that shadowed Kevin’s face.

“You’re right. Seth is a problem,” Kevin said. “You should stay with us this week. You can sleep out in the main room. Seth’s too volatile. He could.”

“I’m not going to sleep on your floor,” Neil cut him off sharply. “You’re wasting my time. I’m going back to my room.”

Kevin balked. “I can’t bring you on Kathy’s stage if Seth bashes your face in. I’m trying to do you a favor.”

“Yeah, well, I’m an ungrateful asshole, remember?” Neil sneered. “Unless there’s something actually important to talk about, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Nathaniel, come back here,” Kevin ordered as Neil reached the door. “Andrew.”

The way Kevin said Andrew’s name made Neil freeze midstep. It was the same tone that he used to say, “Riko, I think Nathaniel’s forgotten his manners.”

Andrew let out a bored sigh. “What now?”

“Nathaniel needs to stay. Tell him.”
Neil looked back to find that Andrew hadn’t moved from his spot and was gazing down at Kevin with amusement. “You should get a dog if you want something that’ll sit and stay,” Andrew joked.

Relieved, Neil slipped out of the room and ignored the way Kevin called out after him. He hurried out of the cousins’ suite and didn’t slow down until he was alone in his own bedroom. His head swam with exhaustion as he climbed up to his bed and collapsed on top of his blanket.

Even though he was back to living in a dorm room, it wasn’t at all like what he was used to. The Nest had a rhythm that Neil could sink mindlessly into. Life at the Tower was chaotic and Neil was starting to doubt his ability to adapt.

Faintly, he could hear Matt and Seth bickering over the sound of the television. Neil pulled his pillow over his head and tried to get some sleep while he had the chance.
The Foxes’ team bus was an orange and white eyesore with fox paw prints scattered along the sides. It sat outside the Foxhole Court under the bright parking lot lights, ready to make the journey to Kathy Ferdinand’s studio. Neil could hardly look away from the bus as Matt pulled up beside it and parked.

Neil climbed down from the bed of Matt's truck and followed the upperclassmen over to where Wymack and Abby were waiting with Andrew’s group. It was three in the morning and none of the Foxes were as alert as their coach. Neil eyed Wymack’s thermos enviously; he hadn’t woken up early enough to fix a pot of coffee, which he desperately needed after only three hours of sleep.

“Best behavior today, kids,” Wymack told them with a warning in his tone. “Neil, Kevin, either of you wanna puke before we hit the road?”

Kevin was swaying on his feet next to Nicky and protectively cradling his left hand against his stomach. He had reminded Neil that it was only a taping, that it would be edited and smoothed out before it aired on television the next morning, but it didn’t look like Kevin took his own reassurances to heart.

“We’re fine,” Neil said. Thankfully no one commented on the crack in his voice.

Andrew shoved Kevin toward the bus.

“We’ll stop for a break in a few hours,” said Abby, “and we should have time to get food in Raleigh before we go to the studio.”

The team drowsily boarded the bus. Neil got on last and was surprised to find that instead of having four seats to a row, the bus had long benches with an aisle running down one side. The upperclassmen kept to the front half of the bus behind Abby, who sat in the first row with her first aid kit. Andrew’s group took the last four seats, leaving a few empty ones between Aaron and Renee. Neil sat closer to Aaron since Aaron was more likely to ignore him.

Once Wymack started driving, Neil curled up against the window and fell asleep. The dull roar of the wind and the drone of the tires blotted out his thoughts, letting his mind to go pleasantly numb for hours.
He didn’t wake up until Wymack awkwardly maneuvered the bus into the parking lot of a small strip mall and killed the engine. Around him, Neil could hear the others getting up and stretching. They gave slow, tired groans and popped their sleep-stiff joints.

Dan and Wymack got off the bus to buy food for everyone. As soon as they were gone, Kevin began pacing nervously up and down the aisle, rubbing his left wrist. Watching him made Neil’s stomach twist, so he got up onto his knees and looked around at the others instead. Aaron and Nicky’s bickering caught his attention immediately.

“I was supposed to wake him up an hour ago,” Aaron was saying. “It’s your turn.”

Grimly, Nicky glanced toward the back of the bus. “I know. I just… I don’t exactly have a death wish, you know?”

“What the fuck is up with you two anyway? You’ve been weird around each other all summer.”

Nicky forced a laugh and shrugged. “Andrew’s just being Andrew.”

“Whatever. Just go get him up. Wymack’s gonna bitch at us if—” Aaron stopped when he noticed Neil staring at them. “Hey, charity case, go poke Andrew and wake him up.”

Neil rolled his eyes and moved into the aisle before Kevin could block his way. Wymack would return with breakfast soon, and from the way Aaron spoke, it sounded like he wouldn’t be happy if Andrew was still asleep.

“What are you doing?” Kevin asked.

Nicky moved aside, but he tried to stop him with, “I wouldn’t do that, if I were you.”

Ignoring both of them, Neil climbed into the second-to-last seat and peered over the back. Andrew was laying across the bench, arms folded over his chest and face slack as he slept. Quiet snores were rasping in his throat.

“Hey,” Neil said.

Andrew didn’t even twitch.

From several rows up, Kevin called, “You’re gonna get hit.”

Putting his arms over the seat back, Neil smacked his hands together just above Andrew’s face and jerked away just as Andrew lashed out violently. A moment later, Andrew sat up, disoriented and disheveled.

Satisfied that he was awake, Neil returned to his own seat. He heard Andrew croak Kevin’s name and, in an instant, Kevin was making his way to the back of the bus with Andrew’s pill bottle in his hand.

Wymack and Dan came back with breakfast sandwiches, iced coffee, and a box of doughnuts. Neil didn’t feel like eating, but Dan brought him coffee and a sandwich and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“You need to eat,” she insisted. “I won’t have you fainting on that stage.”

Neil took the sandwich and coffee reluctantly and thanked her. She flashed him a toothy grin before going off to sit with Matt.
Neil only had time to take a sip of iced coffee before Kevin slumped into the space beside him. Kevin’s jaw was tight and his eyes were unfocused as he mumbled, “You know what you’re supposed to say. I’ve done this before. It’s going to be fine. Get in, get out, go home.”

“I’ve never seen you right before an interview,” Neil said blandly. “Do you always freak out this much or is it just ’cause you don’t have Riko to hold your hand this time?”

Kevin gave him an annoyed look. “Shut up and eat your food.”

Neil peeled the sandwich wrapper back and took a bite. Other than vodka, anger was the best way to yank Kevin out of a spiral.

“You look like a robot when you’re on TV, by the way. Jean and I used to talk about it a lot - that and how sometimes they put so much product in your hair that it looked like you could’ve popped it off like a helmet.”

“You’re an asshole, you know that?”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Don’t fuck this interview up,” Kevin told him before getting up to resume his pacing.

“Great advice,” Neil muttered to himself.

After the Foxes finished eating, they took turns using the restaurant’s bathrooms and settled back in their seats so they could get back on the road. The studio was only a ten-minute drive away and Neil shrank in his seat when it came into view. It was a plain two-story building with Kathy Ferdinand’s name in big letters on the side and some neatly trimmed shrubs growing along the sidewalk.

Wymack put the bus in park outside the security gate and got out to talk to a guard. After checking over some paperwork, the guard handed over a pile of visitor passes and a parking tag. Then, he stepped into his booth to open the gate while Wymack climbed back into the driver’s seat. He guided the bus into the lot and quickly found somewhere to park.

The door creaked open, the engine went silent, and the Foxes stepped down onto the pavement one by one. Abby shut and locked the bus door once they were all off.

“Let’s get inside,” said Wymack as he handed out the visitor passes. “Pretend we’re all civilized humans for a couple hours, okay?”

Kevin stared up at the studio for a long moment, and then he squared his shoulders and lifted his head. In a second, his mask was in place and his real self was stowed away. Neil wished he could do the same thing.

Just inside the doors, Kathy Ferdinand was waiting for them. Neil thought her too-perfect smile and eager eyes were even more unsettling in person. She immediately clasped Kevin’s good hand in hers and said, “Thank you so much for coming here today, Kevin. I can’t tell you how thrilled I am to see you.”

Kevin smiled back. “Thank you for having us, Kathy, and thank you for letting us reschedule our interview. Moving the date up helped a lot.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all. Anything for you, honey.”

Dan’s eyebrows shot up and she traded an amused look with Matt. Wymack jabbed Seth in the back
of his neck when he pretended to gag.

“So, where is this Nathaniel I’ve heard so much about?” Kathy asked, sweeping her hungry eyes over the group.

Neil raised two fingers in an awkward half-wave just as Kevin turned to find him. “That’d be me,” Neil said. “Hi.”

Kathy stepped closer and gave him a once-over; her eyes got caught on his scarred cheek. “Nathaniel, it’s a real treat having you here. The Exy world has been dying to meet you. Are you excited for your first interview?”

“I guess.”

Kevin gave him a sharp look over Kathy’s shoulder.

Kathy chuckled and moved on. “Come with me; I’ll show you guys around.” She flashed the rest of the group a quick smile and started walking, heels clicking and hair bouncing against her black cardigan.

“Cougar Barbie,” Nicky stage-whispered as the Foxes followed the talk show host.

Abby smacked his shoulder. “Behave.”

“Twenty bucks says this is gonna be a disaster,” Allison said before Abby shushed her too. Dan winked at Allison over her shoulder.

Kathy’s tour consisted of a few busy hallways and the nearest set of restrooms. After that, she handed the Foxes off to a pair of harried production assistants who were both wearing headsets and strained smiles.

“Mr. Day, Mr. Wesninski, my name’s Sabrina and I’ll take you to your dressing room,” said the assistant with a frizzy ponytail. “Everyone else, follow Mark and he’ll get you to your seats.”

Wymack said, “Go get ‘em,” to Neil and Kevin, and then he walked away with the others.

Neil stayed close to Kevin as they followed Sabrina through the bustling maze of the studio. She talked to them over her shoulder about where the lounge was located, what refreshments were available, and how long they would have to get ready before the taping began.

By the time they reached the dressing room, Neil’s head was throbbing. There were huge mirrors overlooking a long counter and leather stools. A rack of clothing stood near the adjacent wall and next to it was a table with water bottles and snack food.

“If you need anything at all, just let one of us know,” Sabrina said. “We put together a few outfits for both of you, so pick out whatever you like best. Everything’s on the rack. Jen and Carrie will be along shortly to do your hair and makeup.”

Kevin smiled at her and thanked her for everything. Neil avoided eye contact.

As soon as Sabrina left them alone, Kevin’s smile dropped. “You need to actually make an effort if you want this to work.”

“I am making an effort,” Neil said. “I don’t know how to talk to these people.”

“Just smile. Be pleasant. It’s not hard.”
“Whatever,” Neil grumbled as he walked over to the rack to rifle through the clothes.

Kevin clucked his tongue in annoyance and stepped up beside him. He decided on an outfit quickly and shoved it at Neil’s chest. “Put this on.”

Gritting his teeth, Neil went to the nearest corner and stripped out of his clothes with his back to the rest of the room.

“I told Kathy not to ask about your, uh…” Kevin trailed off awkwardly.

“My what?” Neil asked sharply, yanking up the zipper of his slacks.

“The burn mark.” Kevin was quiet for a moment; Neil could hear him pulling on his shirt. “They’ll probably be able to cover it up a little with makeup. Maybe people won’t notice.”

“Little late to be thinking about that,” Neil pointed out. “Just worry about yourself. I’m fine.”

Neil transferred his wallet, phone, and keys to the pocket of his borrowed dress slacks since he was unwilling to leave those things behind. Then, he slipped the last of his breath mints into his mouth and threw the wrapper away, hoping his mind would stay in one piece until the interview was over.

When the makeup artists arrived, Kevin and Neil were ushered over to the stools in front of the mirrors. Neil tried to avoid looking at his reflection, even when the woman standing over him said, “Look at those bags under your eyes! Your coach must be working you so hard, poor thing.” Kevin stepped in to say that Neil was a dedicated player who put in extra hours outside of practice.

Thankfully, the women spoke mainly to him after that and Neil was spared from making small talk.

After the makeup artists were done, a bright-eyed producer showed up to make sure Kevin and Neil understood what to do and when to do it. He took them to a small lounge with a couch and a television mounted near a doorway that was covered with thick black curtains. Neil watched the screen as the camera panned over the studio: two deep red couches on the stage formed a V with a stylish coffee table in the middle, a man with a microphone was keeping the audience entertained with jokes, and the Foxes were sitting in the front row.

Sabrina breezed into the lounge, chattering into her headset. She quickly helped Kevin and Neil put their mics on before she scurried away with hardly a word. Kevin adjusted the mic clip on the lapel of Neil’s blazer and looked him over once more.

“We just have to wait now,” Kevin said quietly.

Twenty agonizing minutes passed before the intro music came on. Kathy appeared on the television screen and Neil did the breathing exercises that Dr. Dobson taught him in one of their sessions. He shoved his hands into his pockets to avoid messing up his hair or fiddling with his mic.

“Good morning, everyone!” Kathy’s bubbly voice came from the TV speaker and through the black curtains. The audience gradually quieted as the music faded away. Kathy started the show by briefly talking about the day’s guests and then she launched into a story about a mishap at her family’s Fourth of July picnic the day before. The audience seemed to find it funny.

Kevin stood still as a statue with his eyes fixed to the screen throughout the whole first segment of Kathy’s show. Neil slowly paced the length of the room. He felt like his breakfast could come back up at any moment.

After a short break in the show, the bouncy theme music played and the camera slid toward where Kathy sat on the stage with her perfect smile.
A woman with a clipboard and a headset leaned through the curtain and beckoned to Kevin. Neil watched him disappear through the dark doorway before looking back to the TV.

Once the applause died down, Kathy said, “Welcome back, everyone! Our first guest today is someone who’s been a dear friend to the show and an inspiration to Exy-lovers everywhere. Now, I know the start of the college Exy season is still a ways off, but we’ve all waited long enough to see him again. Give a warm welcome to the one and only Kevin Day!”

A different tune played as Kevin strode onto the stage and waved to the cheering crowd. His smile toed the line between confidence and arrogance. Kathy pulled him in for a hug and a kiss on the cheek before they took their seats, Kathy on one couch and Kevin on the other.

“I think they’re excited to see you,” Kathy said when it was quiet. “I’m right there with them. I could hardly believe my ears when my producers said you’d agreed to this. I was starting to worry you’d never come back to us, Kevin.”

Kevin’s smile almost turned guilty. “I’ve been a little busy this year. Not much time for interviews, I’m afraid.”

“Yes, we’ve heard a little about your new life in South Carolina. Tell us about your stint as the Foxes’ assistant coach last spring. Did you like it?”

“It was a great learning experience,” Kevin answered. “Seeing the game and the players from a new angle offered me a better perspective- plus it gave me an excuse to hang out at the court while I was recovering.”

“Can’t stay away, huh?”

“Some things don’t change.”

Kathy wagged a finger teasingly. “Now, hold on, some things definitely do change. This is my first time seeing you without Riko and I’ve gotta say it’s pretty weird. How do you feel about being here all by yourself?”

Without hesitating, Kevin smiled slyly and said, “I’m not all by myself, Kathy. I’ve got you, don’t I?”

Neil rolled his eyes.

Kathy looked at the audience and shook her head. “What a menace.” That earned her a few laughs. She continued, “Seriously, though, how have you been adjusting to life away from Edgar Allan? That must be hard.”

“I’ve been adjusting pretty well,” Kevin said, still wearing a hint of an easy smile. “This year’s been difficult, of course, but I feel like I’ve grown as a person and a player.”

“That’s good to hear. If I may ask- because you’ve got a lot of people wondering about this- why did you choose to stick with Palmetto State after you learned there was a chance you could play again? Why not go home to Edgar Allan?”

“Honestly, it felt right to stay. The Foxes are a newer, smaller team and, with them, I’ll have the chance to help build something and challenge myself in the process. I’m really looking forward to this season.”

“Ah, well, I’m sure the Ravens will miss you,” Kathy said. “And speaking of Ravens, word on the
street is you managed to bring one along with you. Nathaniel Wesninski, the would-be Raven and
the Fox-to-be. All summer I’ve been hearing about him, but no one seems to have any concrete
information. Care to tell us a little about your new teammate?”

Neil sucked in a deep breath and released it slowly. He felt like he was sweating through his clothes.

“Nathaniel is a remarkable player with a lot of potential,” Kevin answered. “He’s adapted quickly to
the Foxes’ style of playing. We’re very lucky to have him.”

The woman with the clipboard appeared through the curtain again and waved Neil over. “You’re up
soon. Come with me.”

Neil followed her to the wings of the stage and stood in the shadow of a partition like she told him to.

On stage, Kevin was answering questions about Neil’s switch from playing as a backliner to a striker
and how he was getting along with the rest of the team.

Neil’s heart jumped when Kathy said, “Nathaniel sounds fascinating and we’re all dying to meet
him. Let’s bring him out, shall we?”

Applause erupted and the woman mouthed go. He forced himself to walk onto the stage while his
stomach plummeted to his shoes. Under the bright lights, he moved on autopilot to meet Kathy with
an awkward handshake that she turned into a hug. Kevin pulled Neil into a quick one-armed hug,
too, just to whisper a reminder to smile at the audience.

Neil pasted on a smile and gave the crowd a small wave. His eyes landed on the Foxes. They were
all clapping politely except for Matt and Dan, who were cheering and whistling.

A man standing beside a camera operator motioned for the audience to settle as Neil and Kevin sat
down across from Kathy. Silence quickly fell over the studio.

“The Foxes are out in full force today,” Kathy commented in an amused voice.

Neil huffed out a laugh, unsure of how to respond.

“So,” she said, shifting to get comfortable, “Nathaniel Wesninski. That’s a mouthful. I had to practice
saying that all morning.”

“I go by Neil, if that makes it easier.” Under his arms, sweat was already soaking through his shirt
and he was infinitely grateful for his dark blazer.

“You’ve taken us all by surprise, Neil. You were completely unknown before Riko announced you
were being let out of your contract. Now, tons of people are trying to learn about you only to come
up empty-handed.”

Neil took a deep breath. “I, uh, I wasn’t trying to hide or anything. I moved around a lot when I was
in foster care, so I played on several different teams, and I didn’t change my name to Wesninski until
I turned eighteen.”

“Oh? What made you change your name?”

Neil dug his nails into his palm. “I wanted a fresh start and I wanted something more unique than
Smith.”

Kathy nodded slowly. “That makes sense. I guess that blows all our theories out of the water. We’ve
been searching for the wrong name.”
“I’m afraid so.”

“Aw, well, we tried, guys,” she told the cameras with a rueful grin and a shrug. “So, Neil, Kevin, how did you first meet? I bet that’s an interesting story.”

Kevin looked over at Neil and gestured for him to speak; the words Neil had memorized fell into place. “Riko and Kevin came to my school to try to get more kids into Exy. They stuck around for a scrimmage with those of us who were on the team at the community center. We got to talking and we ended up staying in touch.”

“Wow, and here I thought we knew everything about Riko and Kevin. They did an excellent job keeping you a secret.”

Neil gave her a tight smile and forcibly uncurled his fingers.

“We didn’t want to complicate Nathaniel’s life further by putting him in the public eye,” Kevin chimed in, “and we couldn’t guarantee his safety, either. Some of our fans are… enthusiastic.”

“The vandalism at Palmetto State this spring was just awful. I saw something about it on the news,” said Kathy.

“It’ll take a lot more than spray paint and prank calls to bring them down. They’re very resilient.” Kevin almost sounded fond.

“That’s true,” she agreed. “Neil, are you ready for life as a Fox? Things can get pretty crazy down at Palmetto.”

“I can handle whatever they throw at me,” Neil said. He hoped he sounded convincing.

“That’s fantastic. You two seem like you’re doing really well.” Kathy paused to take a sip of her water; there was a gleam in her eye that put Neil on edge. “I think it’s time to ask the question that I’m sure everyone has on their minds: how’s Riko doing? Have either of you talked to him lately?”

“No, we haven’t heard from him,” Kevin said, gently squeezing his scarred hand. “I’m sure he’s doing just fine, though. He’s one of the strongest people I know.”

“No contact at all?” Kathy sounded surprised. “Haven’t you missed him?

Kevin hesitated, looking almost uncomfortable. “Of course I’ve missed him. He’s my brother.”

“I thought you might say that.” There was something lurking behind Kathy’s smile. “We’ve got a great, big surprise for you two.”

Neil tensed. He didn’t like where this was going.

“Please welcome the King of Exy himself: Riko Moriyama!”

Familiar music blared: a strong beat and a vicious melody that trapped Neil’s heart like a web. Chanting that started at the back of the studio grew clearer as more and more audience members picked it up: “King! King! King! King!”

Neil’s eyes darted over to the front row. Dan and Matt stared back in horror, unlike Seth who was clearly amused by the sudden turn of events. Renee had thrown herself into Andrew’s lap and clamped her hand over his mouth while Wymack and Nicky held down his arms.

Kevin and Neil were on their own. They stood up slowly and clapped along with Kathy, unable to
do anything else. Making a scene would result in questions they couldn’t answer.

Riko stepped into view, looking self-satisfied and in command. He acknowledged the audience with a nod and a lazy wave as he sauntered across the stage to Kathy. They hugged and exchanged a few words that were lost in the din. Kevin inched closer to Neil’s side when Riko’s eyes slid over to them.

Riko put his arms around Kevin in a brotherly embrace and people cheered louder. Their beloved sons of Exy were finally together again. They couldn’t see Kevin’s stiff posture or his hollow eyes.

Riko hugged Neil briefly too, as if they really were old friends. Neil held his breath to avoid smelling the crisp scent of Riko’s expensive aftershave. He lifted one hand and held it an inch away from Riko’s back, hoping he fooled the audience into thinking he returned the embrace.

The cheers and applause faded as the four on stage took their seats. Riko sat beside Kathy, but Kevin still sat closer to Neil than before as if they had less room. In the few inches between them, Kevin grabbed Neil’s wrist and held on tight.

“Kevin, honey, you look stunned speechless,” Kathy laughed. “For all this talk about adjusting, we just couldn’t have one of you without the other.”

Peripherally, Neil saw Kevin manage a small smile.

“Thank you for inviting me, Kathy,” Riko said, voice silky and sincere. “Kevin’s been sorely missed at Edgar Allan. I was hoping he’d come visit over summer vacation, but I guess they’re keeping him busy down south.”

“I’m sorry,” said Kevin.

“Don’t worry. I understand,” Riko assured him. “Wrangling the Foxes sounds like a full-time job. I don’t envy you.”

Kevin tightened his grip on Neil’s wrist when Riko flashed a smile. Neil’s anger flared.

“Riko, I’m curious about what you think of Kevin’s choice to stay at Palmetto,” said Kathy. “Do you think he’s doing the right thing?”

“Naturally, I think Kevin should come home,” Riko said lightly, “but he’s free to make his own decisions. I don’t really understand the appeal, but if Palmetto State is where he wants to spend this season, then I’ll support him.”

Neil’s heart thudded. He couldn’t beat Riko at this game, but he could at least get his focus off Kevin.

“What about next season?” he challenged. “You gonna support him when he’s still at PSU?”

Kathy raised an eyebrow.

“A lot can happen in a year,” Riko said slowly. “It’s a little early for predictions.”

“Well, whenever you’re ready to start making bets, my money’s gonna be on orange.”

Someone in the audience whooped at that. Kevin let out a shaky breath.

Kathy looked delighted. “Kevin, it sounds like they’re fighting over you.”
“You should see them argue over pizza toppings. It’s a real bloodbath,” Kevin joked weakly.

Thankfully, the audience laughed. They didn’t know that Riko would never allow his pets anywhere near pizza.

“You sound confident,” Riko said. His piercing eyes had Neil pinned like an insect. “Summer practices are going well, I take it?”

“I’ve seen enough to be confident.”

“And what have you seen?”

“That Kevin’s a Fox.” Neil paused to swallow hard; his stomach churned. “He’s bouncing back from an injury that Edgar Allan would’ve sidelined him for. He looked at impossible odds and saw a challenge, not a reason to quit. That’s what Foxes do, both on and off the court, and that’s what makes them great players. Kevin fits with them.”

Kathy interjected, “They are great players individually, but as a team they’ve definitely had their issues. Neil, do you think they’ll manage to pull it together this year?”

“Yes.” There was ice in his tone. Kevin dug his nails into his wrist warningly.

“You heard it here first, folks,” Kathy said to the audience, lifting her hands. “This is a year for miracles.”

Riko shrugged nonchalantly. “The Foxes may be fighters, but the Ravens are champions.”

“Yeah, well, a lot can happen in a year,” Neil threw back.

Kathy widened her eyes comically and put her hand in front of her mouth as a low oooh rose from the audience.

“I can tell you’re getting the help you needed and I’m glad,” Riko commented. “You seem almost like your old self.”

“Thanks, Riko,” Neil said sarcastically. “I hope you get the help you need, too.”

“I really wish I could see you three on the same team, but I will settle for having you together on my stage,” Kathy gushed, unaware of the way Riko’s expression darkened. “We should do this again once the season gets going.”

Neil glanced out at the Foxes to reassure himself that they were still there. Wymack gave him a stern look and an encouraging nod.

“Oh, Nathaniel,” Riko said before Kathy could start her closing lines. He gestured to his tattoo. “What have you done to your face? That looks like it must’ve been painful.”

Neil’s memory flickered: white-hot pain and drugs washing his mind away. Bitter hatred eclipsed his better judgement and he heard himself say, “It was a skiing accident.”

There was a brief moment of triumph- the tightening around Riko’s eyes, Kevin’s sharp inhale—before the horror hit him like an icy wave. What the fuck did I just do?

Andrew’s laughter rang out before Kathy quickly wrapped up the segment. She cheerfully wished Kevin and Neil the best and reminded them that everyone would be eagerly watching the Foxes in the fall. Then, she said, “After the break, we’ll talk to Riko about what the Ravens have been up to.
and what we can expect from them this year. Stick around! We’ll be right back.”

Neil’s head ached from the music and applause and his roaring pulse. He remembered at the last second to stand up as Kathy came around the coffee table to shake his hand.

“You boys better come back to see me soon,” she said, grinning. “We’re gonna take a ten-minute break now. There are refreshments backstage and seats with your team if you want to watch the rest of the show. We shouldn’t need to re-shoot anything, so take it easy. Thanks a million.”

As soon as she moved on to chat with Riko, Neil and Kevin hurried off the stage. They only kept their composure until they were engulfed in the shadows of the wings. Neil’s entire body flushed with cold, frothy panic as he frantically yanked the mic clip off his lapel and the transmitter from the back of his waistband. Kevin did the same, but he had the foresight to remove his jacket first.

Sabrina appeared and helped Neil with the wire caught under his blazer. He was too shaken up to be embarrassed. Kevin’s smile was a taut, wobbling thing as he thanked her for her help. Once she walked away, Kevin grabbed Neil’s arm and dragged him further away from the studio.

Everything was spinning. Neil couldn’t breathe.

Instead of going into the lounge, they paused in a dim alcove. There were wires snaking across the floor and some props leaning against the wall. Kevin was speaking, but Neil couldn’t hear him over the ringing in his head. 

A skiing accident.

People would think it was a sick joke made at Kevin’s expense or, worse, they’d wonder if there was something else behind Neil’s barbed words.

Kevin looked past Neil and froze. Neil knew it could only be one person standing behind him and his heart thrashed uselessly in his chest.

Riko’s hand came down hard on Neil’s shoulder, claw-like and possessive. “What a performance.”

“Riko, don’t,” Kevin said plaintively.

Riko jerked Neil away from the support of the wall. “Don’t what? Are you really going to tell me what to do with my own property?”

“No, I…” Kevin struggled for words. “It was just an act. He didn’t mean any disrespect. Let him go, please.”

“What were you thinking, putting this-” Riko gave Neil a hard shake- “in front of cameras, Kevin? This is why you need me. You have no common sense.”

Kevin was crumbling. Neil had to get him out of there before things got worse. He swallowed hard and said, “Kevin, go find the team.”

Riko shook him again and hissed, “I did not give you permission to speak, you worthless child.”

“Andrew will come looking for him if he takes too long.”

“Ah, that’s right,” Riko scoffed. “Go find your dog, Kevin. Make sure it doesn’t piss on the carpet.”

Kevin lingered for a moment. Then he was gone. Riko dragged Neil toward the lounge and pushed him through the curtains, letting him stumble.

Quietly, he ordered Neil to follow him and, instinctively, Neil obeyed. The words he said on stage replayed in his head as they walked through the halls. Neil’s thoughts circled around Jean and what
punishment he might suffer because of what Neil had done. Fear turned his blood to icy slush.

Eventually, Riko led Neil into a dark, empty conference room. Neil closed the door a second before he was shoved against the wall next to it. Riko’s forearm pinned his shoulders and the sharp tip of a switchblade dug into the soft underside of his jaw.

Neil clamped his lips shut and stared at Riko’s shoulder. *There’s a cabin in the mountains.*

“Careful, Nathaniel, you are on thin ice,” Riko said lowly. “I can’t say I’m surprised by your little display, though. You’ve always been difficult. You’ve never appreciated all my uncle and I have done for you. We gave you food, clothing, a home and how do you repay us? You run off and make a spectacle of yourself. You should be ashamed.”

*There’s a cabin in the mountains,* Neil repeated in his mind. *The stairs are damp from the rain. I can hear the wind chimes.*

“You are more trouble than you’re worth,” Riko continued, scratching a line into Neil’s skin with his blade. “If you have forgotten your place, I will teach you again.”

Neil bit down hard on the inside of his cheek.

“I am your king, Nathaniel. I own you.” Riko took a step back and pointed at the floor. “On your knees. Show some respect.”

There was no point in fighting. Riko always won. Neil just had to do as he was told and wait for it to end. His frozen body refused to fold, though, so he stayed flat against the wall.

“You will kneel,” Riko commanded.

He couldn’t remember how to breathe.

“Neil will what?” Andrew’s muffled voice asked through the door.

Neil jerked in surprise. Fury flashed over Riko’s face for a moment before it all smoothed away. He put away his switchblade, dragging in a slow breath, and opened the door.

Andrew pulled a cherry-red sucker out of his mouth and gestured to Riko with it. “Ah, I just got it. You were telling him to kneel. I was confused because, you know, everyone calls him Neil.”

Neil’s heart was in his throat. He’d said something similar at the age of ten and gotten a broken nose for it. He shifted against the wall, unsure if he should intervene. Andrew’s eyes flicked to him briefly. In spite of the smile on his face, he looked frighteningly focused.

“Minyard,” Riko said coldly. “Kevin isn’t here.”

“Oh, I know. Kevin’s fine and dandy, eating candy with the rest of the team,” Andrew replied. “I bet Coach fifty bucks that I could find Neil before he did. I guess it’s my lucky day.”

“I will send Nathaniel to you when I’m done with him.”

Andrew chuckled and leaned around Neil to toss the sucker into a wastebasket. “You’re done, trust me.”

“Leave. I won’t tell you twice.”

“The pills kill my patience,” Andrew said. “Can we skip ahead to the violence?”
“Just go, Andrew,” Neil urged.

Riko gave him a chilly smile and slipped his hand into the pocket with his switchblade. “If you touch me, you will regret it.”

In a blink, Andrew seized two handfuls of Riko’s shirt and shoved him hard enough to send him crashing into the edge of the conference table. Riko caught himself with one hand on the table and another clutching the back of a chair.

“I don’t believe in regrets,” Andrew told him with a grin. “I do, however, believe Neil and I will be leaving now.”

Neil struggled to make sense of what was happening. Riko seethed as he stood up. Grabbing the end of Neil’s sleeve, Andrew pulled him out of the room and down the hall. He didn’t let go until after they rounded a corner.

“Well, Neil, that sure was fun,” Andrew said, dodging a couple studio employees. “A real barrel of laughs, Neil. You’re a regular comedian, Neil, but let’s not do this again, hm?”

Neil stopped suddenly and blurted out, “Why did you do that?”

“I do lots of things, you’ll have to be more specific,” Andrew said, turning to face him.

“Protecting me isn’t part of our deal. What the fuck were you thinking?”

“Protecting you?” Andrew snorted. “The wheels on the bus can’t go round and round ‘til all the little Foxes are on board. I’m ready to leave and you were taking too long. Also, I wasn’t lying about the fifty bucks.”

Neil let out a strangled, incredulous laugh. “You have no idea how much worse you made this. You have a giant target on your back. You know that, right?”

“That’s been there since I was born, Neil.” Andrew pulled out his phone and called someone, greeting them with, “Hey, Bo Peep, I found your sheep.”

Neil was Riko’s rightful property. If it looked like he went out and got a bodyguard, there would be hell to pay. Panic banded around his lungs. He didn’t know who would get hurt, Jean or one of the Foxes. Neil rubbed at the stinging scratch under his jaw where he could still feel the blade.

Andrew clapped his phone shut. Narrowing his eyes, he batted Neil’s hand away from his neck and tried to look.

“Don’t touch me,” Neil spat.

Andrew held his hands up in surrender, looking like he wanted to laugh. “No touching, but let’s keep walking, yes?”

Neil nodded and followed him, periodically checking to make sure Riko wasn’t coming after them. All the hallways looked the same and the flurry of activity was disorienting, but Andrew somehow managed to navigate back to the doors they’d entered the building through, where the Foxes were waiting.

“I found Neil,” Andrew announced loudly. He went over to check on Kevin, who was crouched against the wall beside Abby, while Dan grabbed Neil’s shoulders and looked him over for signs of injury.
“Are you okay?” she asked. “Kevin said you were with Riko.”

“Um,” was all Neil managed to get out.

Matt came up behind Dan. “I can’t believe Kathy did that to you guys. That was so fucked up.”

Kevin stared at Neil like he was a ghost.

“I’d call this a disaster,” said Allison. “Dan owes me twenty dollars.”

Matt shot her a look. “Not now.”

Dan got a handle of vodka out of Abby’s first aid kit and pushed it into Neil’s hands. “Here, drink this.”

Neil’s stomach rolled as he remembered drinking when Riko told him to. With a shaky hand, he removed the cap.

Kevin sprang to his feet and snatched the bottle from Neil’s hands. In French, he said, “That was not an order.”

Matt shoved Kevin away from Neil. “Don’t be a dick.”

“You don’t even know what I said.”

“I know that nine times outta ten you’re a dick.”

“Ten times outta ten,” Seth corrected.

“Boys, knock it off,” Abby warned. “How are you feeling, Neil? Is there anything we can do for you?”

Neil shook his head and said, “I’m fine.”

He heard heavy footsteps down the hall and he turned just as Wymack came around the corner with a stormy expression.

Andrew called, “You get lost, Coach?”

“Foxes, get your sorry asses out to the bus! We’re leaving,” Wymack bellowed. He came to a stop in front of the group and swept his sharp eyes over his players. “Someone turn you motherfuckers to stone while I was gone? Get moving!”

Neil tried to hide his flinch by folding his arms over his chest.

“’Bout damn time,” said Seth. He shoved his phone into his pocket and followed Allison toward the door.

Matt put his arm around Dan’s shoulders and she hugged his waist as they walked together, careful not to step on each other’s feet. Kevin hurried ahead of the group with Andrew not far behind.

“I think this shitshow gave me an ulcer,” Nicky muttered to Aaron.

Neil trailed after the Foxes, too dazed to keep up. Before he reached the door, Wymack stopped him with a hand on his shoulder and a harsh, “Hey.”
Neil dragged his eyes up to meet the older man’s.

“You need to call Betsy?” Wymack asked. “I could stall for a while.”

It took Neil a few fuzzy seconds to register the question. When he did, he shook his head no.

“Actual words would be appreciated.”

“I’m okay,” Neil said.

Wymack stared at him for a long moment before sighing heavily. “C’mon, let’s go home.”
Freshmen

Chapter Summary

After Kathy's interview, Riko retaliates.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: knives, references to physical/mental abuse, brief domestic violence, drugs, murder mention

Thank you all for being so lovely!! I hope you enjoy the chapter <3

Neil sat on his bed with his back against the wall and his self-help book clutched in his hands. Fear had been festering in the pit of his stomach ever since he left Kathy Ferdinand’s studio. After the Foxes made it to the Tower, Neil climbed up to his bunk and stayed there. The words he said on Kathy’s stage earlier that day rang in his head.

“It was a skiing accident.”

Cringing, Neil curled over the book in his lap and swallowed back bile. He’d gone too far and now someone was going to get hurt. Riko had figured out years ago that hurting Jean was an effective way to punish Neil, so it made sense that he would target one of Neil’s new teammates. Since Riko couldn’t harm Kevin without raising suspicion, there were eight Foxes for him to choose from. Neil had no idea who he should keep an eye on.

This was all his fault. He should’ve kept quiet. He shouldn’t have lost his temper. He should’ve let Riko say whatever he wanted to say because, really, there was no point in going against him.

A strangled noise came from his throat.

He let go of the book and dug his hands into his hair, tugging enough for it to sting. Jean would’ve told him to be calm. Dr. Dobson would’ve told him the past was over and done with. “You can’t change what happened. What will you do in the here and now?”

With a gusty sigh, he sat up and blinked at the dim room. He was still wearing the clothes from Kathy’s studio and his face felt greasy from whatever powder they’d put on him. Getting changed seemed like a decent enough start.

His arm twinged as he climbed down from his bunk. When he pulled off his button down, he found purple bruises around his wrist from Kevin’s onstage death grip. Kevin had started taking sips from Abby’s handle of vodka on the bus; he was probably on his way to being drunk out of his mind now. The only person that scared Kevin more than Riko was the master himself. A sickening chill splattered the inside of Neil’s chest as he wondered if the master had come with his nephew to the studio, if he’d been watching from the shadows.
He pulled on a t-shirt and a pair of jeans. Being wasteful wasn’t wise, so he stuffed his studio attire into his hamper instead of the trash.

In the bathroom, he relieved himself and washed what was left of the makeup off his face. It made him feel slightly better, enough to notice that he was hungry underneath his anxiety. *Food, then a plan of action,* he thought.

When he stepped out of the bathroom, he heard Renee say, “Nicky, are you okay?”

Neil padded to the end of the hallway to see what was going on.

Nicky was in the doorway with Matt. Allison, Dan, and Renee were on the couch with Seth on the floor in front of them; their movie was paused on the TV.

“I’m good,” Nicky said sheepishly. “I just came by to see if Matt knows anything about replacing broken windows.”

Dan frowned deeply and sat forward. “What happened?”

Nicky flapped his hand. “Nothing, nothing. Minor mishap, but still it’d be nice to get it taken care of before Coach comes round tomorrow and sees it.”

Matt scratched at his jaw. “I mean, I could take a look at it, but I can’t promise anything.”

“Awesome.” Nicky was visibly relieved. “I’ll give you three hundred bucks for your troubles.”

“The rich get richer,” Seth said. Allison nudged the back of his head.

As Nicky waved good-bye to Matt and disappeared down the hallway, Dan noticed that Neil was standing there. “Hey, Neil, you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said.

Matt walked over to him with a worried look. “We were thinking of getting dinner soon. You hungry?”

Neil shrugged. “A little.”

“Is everybody cool with pizza?” Dan asked.

“Pizza sounds great,” said Renee.

Seth twisted around to look up at Dan. “Order from the place that does the thick crusts.”

“But the other place has better breadsticks,” Dan pointed out.

Allison looked up from her phone and wrinkled her nose. “Why do you need breadsticks if you’re getting pizza?”

“Because I love carbs.”

Matt said, “We should do a movie marathon or something after dinner.”

“Yes,” Dan agreed, pointing emphatically at Matt. “Should we do bad horror movies or decent action ones?”
This prompted a short debate over whether or not they should alternate between genres or stick to a theme. Neil listened to them, quietly relieved that they would all stay at the Tower where it was safe—least for that night. Andrew would be on high alert as well; he’d watch over the others.

As Neil was finally beginning to relax, Allison protested, “I’m not wasting away in front of the television tonight.”

“Where do you wanna go?” asked Seth.

Neil’s chest tightened as his anxiety built back up again.

“Maybe you should stay here and, you know, play it safe,” Matt suggested.

Allison made a face at him. “The interview doesn’t air ‘til tomorrow morning. This is our last chance to go out before the fanatics flip their shit.”

“Yeah, but Riko’s already flipping his shit,” said Dan. “Seriously, guys, just stay here with us. We’ll go on a booze run and we’ll make a night of it. It’ll be fun.”

Seth moved to sit on Allison’s armrest. “I’m with Allison on this one. If we’re gonna be on lockdown after the interview airs, I want to go out tonight.”

Neil wanted to say something, but he couldn’t get his mouth open. Fear froze him in place. Riko was hellbent on revenge because of Neil and someone was going to get hurt.

“I can be your designated driver,” Renee offered.

Allison shook her head. “You said you wanted to watch movies. We’re big kids. We’ll get a cab if we get trashed.”

“Yeah, you should stick with Dan and Matt,” Seth said. “Help ‘em with their dentures, make sure they don’t break a hip or something.”

“Fuck off,” Matt said without any heat. “We’re younger than you.”

“Might as well be ninety. My grandma parties harder than you two and she fuckin’ died five years ago.”

Dan rolled her eyes. “Enough. All right, Allison and Seth, don’t go too nuts tonight and do not drive home if you’re drunk. Renee, would you be willing to run to the liquor store while I order pizza?”

“I’ve got cash for you,” said Matt as he went to get his wallet from the bedroom.

Seth rubbed his first two fingers against his thumb and sang, “Money, money,” until Allison elbowed him.

“I’m gonna go change and make the call,” Dan said as she stood up and stretched her arms over her head. “Neil, you picky about toppings?”

Neil shook his head numbly.

Dan asked Seth and Matt what toppings they wanted and then she left. Allison and Renee followed her once Renee got the cash from Matt. Neil stayed rooted in the same spot while Matt started going through his DVD collection.

“You and Allison seem like you’re doing better,” Matt commented.
Seth replied, “It’s none of your business.”

Neil frantically wracked his brain for ideas. There wasn’t anything in the suite that Neil could slip in their food undetected to make them sick for the night. Slashing Allison’s tires wouldn’t work since Allison could just borrow Matt’s truck, and if Neil slashed Matt’s tires as well, then Allison would call a cab. Neil had to either convince them to stay somehow or go with them.

“Where are you guys gonna go?” Matt asked idly as he contemplated the DVD in his hands.

“Dunno. I’ll let Allison pick.”

“Downtown’s still pretty dead. Columbia?”

Seth snorted. “Fuck no.”

Neil needed silence to think. He finally forced himself to go into the bedroom, quietly shutting the door behind him.

Rubbing his forehead, Neil went over everything he knew about Seth and Allison that might help. Seth hated him too much to cooperate, so he focused on Allison instead. He could make up a story about Kevin or the Ravens to catch her interest. It was possible that she’d want gossip. It was also possible that she’d want someone to act as a buffer since she and Seth fought earlier in the week. There was bound to be lingering bitterness between them.

A faint buzzing sound broke him from his thoughts. Neil stepped on the frame of Matt’s bunk in order to reach his phone where he’d left it on his own bed.

The display showed Andrew’s name.

Neil hit the green button to answer the call. “What?”

“Well, hello to you, too.”

“ Heard you broke something over there.”

Andrew chuckled. “It was a skiing accident.”

Neil bit down hard on the inside of his cheek.

“Too soon?” Andrew heaved a dramatic sigh when Neil didn’t reply. “I’m calling to propose a deal, Neil. A trade- information I want for a skill you need.”

It wasn’t what Neil was expecting. Narrowing his eyes at the wall, he asked, “What exactly did you have in mind?”

“Tell me about Riko and I’ll teach you how to use a knife.”

“Pass. Kevin can tell you about Riko and I already know more than I want to about knives.”

Andrew blew out a slow breath and Neil imagined him smoking. “Kevin’s information has holes and I’m willing to negotiate.”

“What am I allowed to ask for?”

“What do you want?”

Neil wanted to be left alone, but he figured that was too big to ask for. Andrew seemed to enjoy
making a nuisance of himself. “How about I tell you what you want to know about Riko and you answer a question for me?”

“Hmm, that’ll work.”

“You first,” Neil said to stall. He didn’t have a question in mind yet. “What do you want to know?”

“What can we expect from our pal Riko tonight?”

“Um, I don’t know what he’s planning.” Neil rubbed his neck with his free hand. It felt wrong to talk to Andrew about this, but Andrew was the only one who could keep Kevin safe. He needed to know what he was dealing with. “Kevin won’t leave as long as the team’s still standing, so Riko will try to cripple the team. He’s good at finding weak spots.”

“I don’t have weak spots.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Riko won’t risk showing his face anywhere near here. He’ll either send a freshman or someone who’s been warming the bench. They’re the ones that are the most desperate to get on his good side.”

“Is Riko capable of murder?”

“He’s capable of anything. He sees people as pawns and he’s never been held accountable for anything in his life.” Neil wondered how far was Andrew willing to go to get what he wanted.

“All right. Your turn.”

A question formed in his head quickly. “Would you really have killed me in the spring?”

“Yes.” Andrew exhaled loudly again and Neil could almost smell cigarette smoke. “Kevin also told me Riko would send a freshman.”

Andrew ended the call there. Neil listened to the dial tone for a few seconds before hanging up too. Morbid curiosity tickled the back of his mind. He wanted to know how Andrew would have done it.

Shaking himself, Neil turned his thoughts back to his current problem. He had an idea of how to get Allison’s cooperation. It wasn’t guaranteed to work, but it was all he had.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” he told his roommates as he headed out of the suite to the one next door.

Renee answered when he knocked and she looked surprised to see him. “Hey, Neil.” She pushed the door open wider to let him inside. “Are you okay?”

“I’m all right, thanks,” he replied. “I need to talk to Allison about something.”

“She’s getting changed right now. She and Dan will be out in a minute.”

Neil shifted his weight, uncomfortable under Renee’s calm gaze. He felt like she could see through him. “Sorry for barging in like this.”

Renee’s smile widened a fraction. “You’re always welcome. Dan will be happy you’re here. She’s been trying to think of ways to help you feel more at home.”

“That’s… not necessary, but I appreciate it, I guess,” Neil said awkwardly.

The smile slipped off her face when Neil scratched the side of his neck. Renee took his left wrist in
“Her hand and scrutinized the bruises. “Did Riko do this to you?”

“It wasn’t Riko.”

Frowning, she let him go. “Was it Kevin?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

“He shouldn’t have done that,” Renee told him quietly. “I’m sorry about what happened earlier. That must’ve been hard for you.”

“I’m fine.”

Her smile came back, small and patient. “If you ever need to talk, I’m here.”

Neil forced a polite smile in return. They both turned when the bedroom door opened and Dan and Allison came out. They were both in sweatpants and t-shirts, but Dan’s clothes were a few sizes too big and bore the name of her high school while Allison’s pants were form-fitting and her top was slashed to reveal the lacy thing underneath it.

“What’s up, Neil?” Dan asked.

Allison folded her arms. “To what do we owe the pleasure of Neil Wesninski dropping in for a visit?”

“I need to talk to you,” he answered.

One of her slim, dark eyebrows twitched upward. “Well, this should be good.”

Dan nudged Allison with her elbow and said, “Play nice. Renee, let’s give them a couple minutes. Let’s go see if Matt has enough soda for tonight.”

Renee nodded and silently followed Dan out the door.

“What’s this about, freshman?” Allison demanded.

Neil didn’t know how to navigate a conversation with Allison, so he said bluntly, “I want to go out with you and Seth tonight.”

“You don’t even know where we’re going,” she pointed out. “Why would I want you third-wheeling anyway? Do you know how hard it is to get alone time with Seth when we’re constantly surrounded by the team?”

“I heard you fighting the other day. He said the only reason you have friends is because Dan and Renee are stuck rooming with you.”

Allison’s expression soured. “And?”

“Seth hates me almost as much as he hates Kevin. Bring me along and say you’re trying to make new friends. You can get back at him without actually restarting the fight.”

She hummed thoughtfully and tapped her lips with a shiny red fingernail. “That’s petty. I’m surprised I didn’t think of that.”

“I’ll leave you guys alone once we get to the bar. You won’t know I’m there,” he said, trying to sweeten the deal.
“No, you’re sitting with us until I tell you to scram, got it?”

“Okay,” he said slowly.

“And you’re not coming with us unless we do something about—” she gestured at his whole body—“this.”

Neil said, “I have clothes I can wear.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it. Come back here at eight thirty and I’ll fix your hair.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?”

“It looks like you cut it yourself.”

He glared at her and didn’t bother confirming that he had, in fact, cut it himself. He didn’t see anything wrong with that.

“Do we have a deal?” Allison asked. Her voice had an edge to it, hard as diamonds. She was used to getting her way.

“I’ll be here at eight thirty.”

She cracked a smile. “This should be interesting.”

Together, Neil and Allison went next door to join the others. As soon as they walked in, Seth sat up on the couch and gave Neil a nasty look. Thankfully, Renee asked Neil if he wanted anything from the liquor store before Seth could speak to him.

Neil asked for orange juice since he couldn’t think of anything better. He went to the kitchen for another glass of water, knowing it was going to be a long night. Not long later, Renee left with the keys to Matt’s truck to go to the liquor store. Dan and Matt made themselves rum and cokes to get the night started; Allison sat on Seth’s lap and scratched her nails through his hair until the scowl melted off his face.

Renee got back shortly after the pizzas arrived and they all gathered around the main room to eat. Allison remained in Seth’s lap and they somehow kept from spilling anything, balancing plates on the couch’s arm and nestling a bottle of beer and a wine cooler between the cushions. Matt sat at the other end of the couch with Dan on the floor between his legs and Renee sitting next to her.

Neil put himself opposite the couch so he could set his plate and glass of water on the coffee table. He didn’t have much of an appetite, but he forced himself to eat three greasy slices of pepperoni pizza so he wouldn’t go to the bar with an empty stomach.

“So,” Matt said, getting everyone’s attention, “Kathy Ferdinand viewing party tomorrow morning?”

Seth dropped his head back against the couch. “No. Seeing it once was enough.”

“We should see how they edited it,” Dan said as she wiped some grease from her mouth. “And I want to see what that fucker had to say after we left.”

“Do you think you can wrangle us Foxes together to watch it?” Allison asked primly. “You should ask Riko how he controls his minions.”

Dan gave her a dull glare.
“How does Riko do that?” Matt asked Neil curiously.

Neil swallowed a bite of pizza and played dumb. “How does he do what?”

“How does Riko get the Ravens to go along with whatever he wants?”

“They’re all robots,” Seth said before taking a swig of beer.

Matt chewed his lip. “I mean, the Ravens used to just be a bunch of weirdly intense assholes who wore the same clothes, but a few years ago it turned creepy. They move the same way, they spout the same bullshit to the press, and I keep hearing rumors that they don’t go home for breaks anymore. You’ve gotta admit that that’s fucked up.”

Neil felt queasy with embarrassment. He and Jean adapted because they had to. The other Ravens didn’t realize what was happening until it was too late. They were distracted by nice clothes, new cars, and a stunning facility to train in. The master twisted their awe and gratitude into a sense of obligation, which he used to sand them down into whatever he wanted them to be. When the master saw Neil and Jean bend to Riko’s commands, it became Riko’s job to train the new Ravens. The gifts were more lavish, the punishments were more brutal, but they adapted. It seemed normal to everyone, eventually.

“It’s a cult,” Allison stage-whispered.

Seth snickered. “That would explain a lot.”

Renee sipped her lemonade and studied Neil over the rim of the glass. Then, she said, “People get lost sometimes. We can all understand that.”

Matt looked contrite, but Allison and Seth were unfazed.

Seth asked, “Why’d you sign with them anyway?”

“Seth,” Matt said warningly.

Dan chewed a bite of crust and eyed Neil. “I mean, if you don’t mind talking about it, I’m curious, too. A foster kid like you should’ve been on Wymack’s radar and your file never landed on his desk.”

“Who had money on him being a foster kid?” Allison asked.

“Allison, shut up,” Dan hissed.

“I know about the bets,” said Neil. Dan and Matt gave him guilty, uncomfortable smiles.

Renee changed the subject by asking if anyone wanted more pizza.

“Ugh, I’m gonna get fat,” Matt complained as he rubbed his stomach.

Dan rested her head against his knee. “We’ll work it off later, hon.”

Seth poked at Allison’s stomach and waggled his eyebrows. “We could work some of this off later if- ow! Shit!”

Allison smacked him upside the head a second time and Dan reached up to stop her, saying, “We don’t hit our boyfriends. Come on, now.”
Glaring, Allison shoved off of Seth’s lap and dumped the rest of her pizza in the kitchen trash.

“Come on, baby, I was kidding!” Seth called.

She stormed out of the suite, slamming the door shut behind her.

Dan sighed. “Seth, why?”

“I was kidding,” Seth repeated defensively.

Neil was uncomfortable and tense. He didn’t know how to fix this and he wasn’t sure why he felt like he needed to.

“I’ll be back later,” Renee said.

Dan got to her feet. “I’ll come with you.”

The girls abandoned their plates and cups and left to find Allison. Seth groaned.

“Dumbass,” Matt said around a mouthful of pizza.

There was a stretch of awkward silence before Neil cleared his throat and got to his feet. “Think I’m gonna take a nap,” he mumbled.

Matt nodded. “Okay, man.”

After putting his dishes in the kitchen sink to wash later, Neil went into the bedroom and climbed up into his bed. He was too raw and anxious to sleep, but lying in the dark room under his cool sheets was soothing in a small way. All he had to do was breathe and try to stay afloat even as his panic tried to pull him under.

Dr. Dobson instructed him to imagine a balloon in his stomach, which sounded ridiculous at the time, but Neil figured it was better than thinking about Riko and the interview. Grimacing, Neil rubbed at the spot under his jaw where he could almost still feel the sharp edge of a knife- his father’s, Riko’s, Andrew’s- and Shakily told himself that it was all in the past. There was only the press of his own fingertips there now.

Breathing deeply, Neil closed his eyes and thought of the imaginary balloon. He pictured it inflating slowly as he inhaled, deflating as he exhaled, over and over.

He drifted on the surface of sleep for a long while. When he roused himself to check the time, he felt as if all the heavy emotions of the day had sunk into his mattress. His soul was emptied, numb. His thoughts were blurry and soft.

It was nearing eight thirty, though, so he didn’t have time to melt into his bed. With a groan, he pulled himself upright and climbed down to the floor. He could hear music from whatever TV show Matt and Seth were watching as he dug out the black shirt Andrew had bought him for his first Columbia trip and his darkest pair of jeans. With a pair of black socks and his boots, Neil figured he looked decent enough for a bar.

After he used the bathroom, it was time to head over to the girls’ suite. In the main room, he told Matt he was going out, that he would be back later, and Matt told him to call if he needed anything. Neil bitterly thought that he just needed the night to be over.

Dan let him into her suite with a warm, wide smile that gave Neil the impression she’d continued
drinking after dinner. The open bottle of rum on the kitchen counter confirmed his suspicions.

“Hi, Neil,” said Renee from the couch. “You look nice. Is that a new shirt?”

Dan rested her elbow on Neil’s shoulder and yelled, “Hey, Al, get out here!”

“I told you not to call me that!” came Allison’s reply, muffled through the bedroom door.

Dan told Neil, “Should be a fun night.”

“Is she still upset about earlier?” Neil asked. It would be harder to watch both Allison and Seth if they broke up before they got to the bar.

Waggling her hand, Dan answered, “Sorta. Seth didn’t mean anything by it, but it’s a sore spot for her. Free piece of advice: don’t ask her if she’s okay because she thinks that means she doesn’t look okay and she hates showing weakness, you know?”

“Sure,” Neil said slowly.

“Send the boy back here!” Allison shouted.

Dan gently pushed him in the direction of the hallway. “Destiny awaits. Godspeed, young one.”

Allison stepped out of the bedroom in a silk robe. Her makeup was heavy around her eyes and her perfume was something musky and floral. She looked over his outfit and nodded once. “It’s acceptable. Get in the bathroom. We’ll do your hair first.”

Neil took a step forward and peered into the small room.

“You’re not claustrophobic, are you?” she asked. It sounded like it’d be an inconvenience if he said yes.

“There’s not much space.”

“We’ll manage.” She dropped a folded towel onto the edge of the tub and snapped her fingers at him. “Sit there.”

Obediently, he sat on the towel she put down. The air smelled like hair products and perfume. There was more stuff crowded around the sink than in Neil’s bathroom, but somehow the room looked tidier.

Allison wrapped a second towel around Neil’s shoulders and used a spray bottle of water to wet a section of his hair. Neil did his best to focus on everything but the scrape of Allison’s sharp nails and how close her body was while she worked. He studied the can of hairspray on the counter as well as the pots of shea and cocoa butter and the colorful bottles of styling gel and camellia oil. There were three toothbrushes in a purple Mason jar next to a white ceramic soap dispenser shaped like a bulldog. The hand towel was embroidered with violets. Five orange Post-It notes were stuck to the mirror with Dan’s large, loopy scrawl on them.

Neil’s ass was numb and his back was stiff by the time Allison switched to electric clippers to finish his haircut. She spent a minute or so making sure it was even before squirting something foamy into her palm. Neil wrinkled his nose at the smell. Allison used the stuff to style his hair, twisting and pulling until she was finally satisfied with how it looked.

“I do excellent work,” she declared as she took the towel off him. “I’m going to go get a broom.”
Neil brushed the hair trimmings off his jeans and stood in front of the mirror after she left. He wasn’t sure what she did other than give him a trim and ruffle the loose curls on top. The master would have called his appearance “unkempt.” Neil had to fight the urge to smooth his hair down.

Allison came back wearing frayed denim shorts with a black top that tied around her neck. She swept the hair on the floor into a dustpan and dumped it into the trash.

“Come on,” she said. “We’ll do your face in the main room.”

“My face?” he asked as he trailed after her.

Renee and Dan were on the couch. Renee had a book in her hands and Dan’s legs resting in her lap. They both looked up when Neil stepped into the room and Renee said, “Your hair looks really good, Neil.”

Dan nodded and waved a hand at him. “Nice work, Allison. His hair’s a better, uh, shape?”

“You’re drunk,” Allison said as she threw two pillows down in front of the coffee table. “Neil, sit.”

“Not drunk, just tipsy,” Dan mumbled. Renee patted her knee and turned the page in her book.

Neil slowly went to the pillow Allison indicated and sat down on it. Allison set a zippered pouch out onto the coffee table and dug out a thin brown pencil. Neil clamped his mouth shut as she cupped his jaw and traced the outer corners of his eyes with the tip of the pencil. Then, she smudged it a little with her fingertip.

“Are you putting makeup on him?” Dan asked with interest, struggling to sit up. “Al, he already got a makeover once today. Let him live.”

Allison gave her a withering glare at the use of the nickname. Neil frowned and leaned away instinctively when she lifted a mascara wand toward him.

“You agreed to this,” Allison said with a warning look. “Now hold still.”

“Raise your eyebrows,” Dan told him, “and try not to blink… or sneeze.”

Uncertain, Neil did as she suggested while Allison applied some mascara to the ends of his eyelashes. His breath got stuck in his lungs and his skin crawled. He hated this, but it was necessary if he was going to watch out for his teammates.

“She always sneezes and gets this shit all over her face,” Allison said quietly, intensely focused on the task at hand.

“Mascara’s annoying when it’s on and awful to get off,” Dan muttered. Then, she chuckled and added, “Unlike Matt.”

Renee gave Dan an amused smile while she chortled at her own joke.

“She is drunk,” Allison whispered.

Dan tutted and got to her feet. “I’m not drunk. I am gonna get another drink, though.”

Allison’s eyes followed Dan over the top of Neil’s head for a few seconds before she looked back at him. Neil heard ice clinking into a glass and the freezer door slamming shut. Dan’s footsteps came closer until she crouched down next to Neil. “You can barely tell he’s wearing makeup at all.”
“That’s the point,” said Allison. “Just enough to make his eyes pop.”

Neil had no idea what that meant, but he hoped she was finished. He tried not to look relieved when she let go of his chin.

“Looks good,” Dan said. “By the way, it’s after nine. Seth’s gonna be annoyed that you’re late.”

Allison shoved everything into her zippered pouch and got to her feet, saying, “Let me get my shoes.”

When Allison was ready, they four of them went back next door together. Dan and Renee took pillows and blankets with them for their movie night. Neil leaned against the wall out in the hallway while the girls disappeared into his suite. Through the open door, Neil could hear Allison say, “Lemme see your pockets, babe,” to Seth. He’d seen her check Seth’s pockets a couple weeks earlier before they went to a club together. Just like last time, Seth grumbled, but went along with it until Allison was sure he didn’t have his pills with him.

Tilting his head back, Neil closed his eyes and tried to imagine the balloon again to help himself breathe as panic simmered in his blood. What if he was wrong about Riko’s plan? What if he was right but unable to stop it? Maybe slashing tires would’ve been better. Maybe it would’ve scared Seth and Allison enough to keep them from going out.

A door opened and Nicky and Andrew’s voices spilled out into the hallway. Neil groaned quietly in annoyance. Andrew let out a bark of laughter and said, “Look at you, out in the hall all by yourself. Hoping for an invitation?”

Neil gave Andrew a flat glare. “No.”

“Are you coming with us?” Kevin asked. His expression was stony, but Neil could tell he hadn’t totally sobered up yet. “You should. It’ll be safer for you.”

“He’s mine tonight,” Allison said from the doorway. “Run along now, monsters.”

Kevin balked. “You can’t be serious, Nathaniel.”

Andrew flashed a sharp smile at Neil. In German, he said, “Careful. Give her your little finger and she’ll take your whole hand.”

Nicky and Aaron exchanged a look and watched Neil curiously, but Neil didn’t respond. The others didn’t know he spoke German and he would hold onto that advantage for as long as he could.

In English, Andrew said, “Good luck out there, freshman,” and touched two fingers to his temple in salute. His hand was wrapped in gauze, stained red over his knuckles.

Kevin frowned at Neil like he wanted to say more. Andrew gave him a light shove and led his group to the elevator.

Seth wrapped his arms around Allison from behind and muttered into her hair, “Are we seriously bringing the kid?”

“I just thought it’d be nice to have someone around that doesn’t comment on my weight,” Allison said hatefully.

With an irritated sigh, Seth held up his hands in surrender and stepped back. Allison shot him a sharp look over her shoulder. Then, she headed in the direction of the stairwell. Seth glared at Neil and
pulled the suite door closed as he took off to follow his girlfriend.

“This’ll be interesting,” Neil muttered under his breath. He shut the suite door and jogged to catch up to the unhappy couple.

The ugly tension between Allison and Seth was palpable when they all got into Allison’s convertible. Neil slouched in the backseat and tried to ignore their tense silence. With the top down, he had balmy summer air rushing over him beneath the clear view of the night sky as Allison sped through the quiet streets.

In the distance, colorful fireworks exploded in the sky—leftovers from the Fourth of July—and Neil tried to remember the last time he’d seen any in person. His mother never really cared about the holiday, but once she agreed to take him to the Inner Harbor for the annual show. Usually, she’d just sit on the porch and light sparklers for him to run around the backyard with.

They drove to a city Neil didn’t recognize and left Allison’s car parked in a garage. Excitement buzzed in the warm air beneath a soft blue sky. People gathered around food trucks and flocked to restaurants. Cars crammed together in the narrow streets of the downtown area. There were so many people, but none of them looked at Neil twice. They didn’t care who he was or where he was going. Neil felt oddly liberated in the sea of strangers.

Allison wove through the sidewalks quickly. Neil was silently grateful for Seth’s height: his baseball cap was easy to spot at all times. They ended up outside a bar called Hebe’s Cup, a simple brick-and-mortar building with an embossed gold sign over the entrance.

The man at the door didn’t look much older than Seth; he would’ve looked younger if not for his stubble and his stern expression. He gave Neil a once-over and raised an eyebrow at Allison. “New friend?”

Allison smirked. “Good to see you, too, Joey. This is Neil; he’s our designated driver.”

“Uh-huh. Does he have ID?”

“Forgot it at the dorms. He’s got a phone number, though, if you wanna ask him for it later.”

A look passed between the two of them. Then, the doorman huffed and said, “If my uncle or the cops ask questions, he showed me a very convincing ID. Got it?”

“We won’t cause trouble,” Allison promised as she ushered Neil through the door. “You’re welcome for the makeover, pretty boy. Joey’s a sucker for blue eyes.”

An uncomfortable feeling settled in his stomach and Allison laughed at whatever expression he made.

Hebe’s Cup wasn’t crowded yet, but there were enough people for it to be loud. The polished bar glowed ochre under the dim lights hanging over it. Off to one side, there were booths against the exposed brick wall. On the other side of the bar, there was a broad hallway connecting to a larger room with more tables, less lighting, and louder music to attract people to the dance floor.

Allison and Seth opted for a booth in the front room. Neil sat across from them and scanned the room for Ravens.

“Hey!” Allison said, knocking on the table to get Neil’s attention. “What do you want to drink? We’ll make Seth go get it.”
“I live to serve,” Seth muttered sarcastically.

Allison ignored him. “What stuff do you like?”

Neil hesitated, worried that Allison would pester him if he didn’t order alcohol. “Beer?”

“What kind?”

“I’m not picky.”

Allison turned toward Seth without fully looking at him. “Get Neil whatever you’re getting. I’ll have a Sex on the Beach. Run along now,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

An angry red flush stained Seth’s cheeks and his eyes darkened with a hot glare. He pushed himself to his feet without a word and stalked toward the bar.

“I should go help him carry stuff,” Neil said.

Allison stopped him with a hand on his arm before he could stand. “He’s fine. He’s just throwing a tantrum.”

“I know, but-”

“Relax. You’re into dudes, I get it. I won’t bite.”

Neil stared at her. “I’m not gay.”

“Well, you’re definitely not straight,” she said, resting her chin in her hand. “Don’t look at me like that. My tits were right in front of your face earlier and you were staring at the shit on the bathroom counter instead.”

Neil’s skin heated uncomfortably. “I’m not interested in anyone.”

She gave him a snide look. “Raven standards too high for you to fuck a lowly Fox?”

“It’s got nothing to do with standards. I just don’t feel attracted to people. Ever.” He hoped Seth would get back soon. His hostility was easier to deal with than Allison’s curiosity.

“Noted.” She put her elbows on the table and leaned forward. “What did the monster do to you in Columbia?”

That wasn’t something he wanted to think or talk about. Neil wiped his clammy palms on his jeans and asked, “Why do you call him a monster?”

“Because of what he did to Matt.”

Neil’s eyes darted to hers. “What happened to Matt?”

“You can’t expect the rest of us to give up our dirty little secrets if you won’t give up yours,” she said.

Seth came back to the table with their drinks, his thumbs and forefingers curled around the glasses of beer with Allison’s drink pinned between them. His tongue poked out of his mouth as he carefully set the glasses down.

“Well done, gorgeous,” Allison said as she pulled her drink closer.
The term of endearment made Seth pause. He sat down next to her, moving slowly like he expected a trap. Allison pulled his arm around her shoulders and settled against his side. Just like that, their fight was over.

Seth looked as confused as Neil felt, but he recovered quickly. “You two have fun flirting?” he grumbled.

“Oh, relax,” Allison said, jostling him a little. “Neil’s ace; sex isn’t in the cards.”

Seth didn’t look convinced, but Allison cooed something else in his ear that smoothed the wrinkle from his brow. Neil took a sip of his beer and regretted it immediately. The bitter, earthy flavor made him shudder. He wiped the foam from his upper lip to hide his grimace.

Thankfully, neither of his companions noticed. Seth smoothed a hand down Allison’s bare arm and told her, “You should get something to eat here. You barely touched your dinner.”

“I’m not hungry,” Allison said.

“Bullshit. What have you eaten today?”

“I had that sausage and egg sandwich for breakfast-”

He cut in, “You took, like, three bites of that.”

“-and I had a salad for lunch,” she finished with an annoyed look.

Seth mimicked her expression. “You didn’t finish that either. Why don’t I get you something? You love the burgers here.”

Allison took a sip of her drink and pretended to watch the TV mounted on the wall near the bar.

“Allison.” When she continued ignoring him, he sighed heavily. “Okay, if this is about what I said earlier, I am sorry. I am a dumbass. It was a stupid joke.”

Neil drank more of his beer and wished he could leave.

“It’s not a joke,” Allison said sullenly. “I’ve gained, like, five pounds this month.”

“Eat a goddamn burger or I will tell Dan to start bugging you about your calorie intake,” Seth threatened. “And Dan will probably tell Abby, who will sit you down for a lecture about how eating is sorta kinda necessary for, you know, being alive.”

Allison’s scowl darkened. “I hate you.”

“Do you want cheese on your burger?”

“I don’t want food right now. I’ll get bloated and I’ll look fat.”

Exasperated, Seth wriggled out of his blue flannel and put it around Allison in spite of her protests. Then, he put his baseball cap on her head, tilted the brim down to hide her glare, and sat back to admire his work. “There,” he said. “You’re incognito. You can eat until you look like a flannel balloon and no one will know it’s you.”

Allison fixed the cap so she could see again. “I’m Seth Gordon,” she said mockingly, pitching her voice as low as she could. “I dress like a farmer and I say dumb shit to my girlfriend.”
Seth did his best not to laugh. “Real cute. What do you want on your burger?”

“Lettuce, tomato, onion,” she answered, toying with the sleeve of Seth's white t-shirt. “Get us some water, too, please.”

“Sure thing, bro.”

Allison playfully swatted at his arm as he flagged down the nearest waitress. To Neil, she said, “You see what I have to deal with?”

“He’s right, though,” Neil replied. “You need to make sure you’re eating enough.”

She rolled her eyes and downed half her drink.

Allison ended up eating the whole burger, Seth stole her fries, and Neil continued to be a mildly uncomfortable witness to moments between them that he felt should have been private.

The beer didn’t sit well in Neil’s stomach- he hadn’t meant to finish the glass- so he switched to water in hopes that it would help. Unfortunately, Allison noticed his glass was empty and ordered him another drink.

By ten thirty, there were more people in the bar and the noise rose to a level that Neil found aggravating. There was still no sign of Riko or any Ravens and no one was paying their booth much attention.

Neil got a funny look when he followed Seth to the bathroom, but Seth shrugged it off. Alcohol and Allison’s affection put him in a more agreeable mood. They came back to an empty booth and Neil was gripped by cold panic until Seth said, “Oh, I know where she probably went.”

They found her in the back room playing pool against two older men. The flannel slipped off her shoulder to bare her tanned skin, which distracted her two opponents. Neil expected Seth to fly into a rage, but instead he laughed and hung back by the doorway to watch.

“She’s even more competitive drunk than she is sober,” Seth explained, sounding oddly proud.

An hour later, Allison was unsteady on her feet and bored of beating people at pool. She decided to quit halfway through a game, ignoring the indignation of the twentysomething man she'd been playing against. Seth put an arm around her shoulders to keep her upright and carried her drink for her as they made their way into the front room. Their booth was taken by another group, so they continued into the larger room to find a table.

Seth helped Allison into a seat and pointed at Neil, “Keep an eye on her. I gotta pee.”

“Hey, wait,” Neil said, but Seth couldn’t hear him over all the noise. He disappeared into the crowd.

Allison grabbed his shoulder and shook him once. “Are you having fun?”

“Sure.” He stared at the spot where he’d last seen Seth.

“He’s so nice when he’s drunk, right?” she continued, leaning against his arm. “It's ‘cause he stops caring so much about what other people think.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Lonely kid. Families are shitty sometimes.” She stilled and her expression turned cold as she stared blankly at the table. “Hey, Neil, dance with me,” she said in an odd tone. “I don’t… I don’t want to
Neil shook his head. “I don’t dance. Seth will be back in a minute. Maybe he’ll dance with you.”

“No, I need to do something now,” she insisted, pulling at his sleeve. “I don’t want to sit here and think about bad stuff. Hey, let’s go talk to those guys. I bet I could do more shots than them.”

He grabbed her arm to stop her from jumping out of her seat. “Allison, stop it. Seth is…”

Seth was drunk and alone. Letting him go off by himself was a mistake. Neil pulled his phone out of his pocket and called Renee. Once the line started to ring, he shoved the device into Allison’s hands. “Talk to Renee while I look for Seth. She’ll keep your mind off the bad stuff.”

Allison squinted at him. “Why’re you looking for Seth?”

“I’ll ask him to dance with you.”

“Oh.” She put the phone to her ear and her hazy eyes brightened. “Renee! How’s the movie?”

“Stay here,” Neil said firmly only to get shushed. He left her at the table and hurried in the direction of the bathrooms.

The men’s room was more crowded than usual, and there was no sign of Seth. Anxiety pulled at Neil’s stomach as he checked the room again.

Seth wasn’t there.

Neil wove through the crowd in front of the bar. His eyes caught on every white t-shirt he saw, but none of them belonged to Seth. His heart pounded as he darted into the other room to see if Seth made it back to Allison.

Allison was alone.

Seth hadn’t gone to the other room to play pool. Seth wasn’t standing outside on the sidewalk. Seth wasn’t anywhere. He was gone.

Panic filled his throat, blocked his air, rang in his ears. He couldn’t find Seth.

Neil headed back to the bathrooms in case he’d missed something the first time. On his way there, he overheard a woman say to her friend, “The line’s ridiculous. Let’s try the other bathroom.”

Other bathroom? Neil hadn’t seen another bathroom. He followed the two women through the hallway to the larger room and around the clusters of people in the dim lighting. At the far end of the room, there was a narrow hallway with restrooms across from one another and a door at the end marked “Employees Only.”

The women disappeared into the ladies’ room and Neil stopped at the men’s. There was a sign with “Out of Order” written on it taped to the door. Neil’s heart raced. The fear of finding Seth’s body clamped around his stomach like a vice. He checked around him to make sure no one was watching and pushed the door open.

Someone inside slammed the door shut in Neil’s face and called, “Closed for maintenance!”

Neil shoved the door inward and swung blindly at the man who tried to grab him. He landed a hard blow to the middle of the man’s torso and sent him stumbling backward, gasping for air. Neil froze when he looked up. Seth was in the corner, blocked by a second black-clad man. There was an
orange prescription bottle in Seth’s hand and ice in Neil’s veins.

“Get him out of here,” the second one hissed at his winded partner.

“So I can call the cops?” Neil challenged. “That doesn’t sound like a smart move to me.”

“Cops? Come on, Neil,” said Seth. “These guys are just trying to sell stuff, but I’m not interested. We’ll be going now.”

When he took a step forward, the Raven pulled out a knife. Seth stumbled back into the corner and cried, “Woah! What the fuck, man?”

“Shut up!” barked the Raven.

The other Raven darted behind Neil to block the door. He fumbled to get a switchblade out of his pocket and flicked it open.

Neil gave him a cold look over his shoulder and clasped his hands behind his back. “What kind of pills did you bring for Seth?” he asked calmly.

The guy in front of him said, “None of your fucking business.”

His hand was shaking. Neil could practically smell the fear rolling off the Ravens, which was a good sign. They were just a couple of eighteen-year-olds in over their heads. Maybe he could talk some sense into them.

“Riko told you to make sure you didn’t have witnesses, right?” Neil took a step closer and the Raven, predictably, turned the knife on him. “What’s he going to do if you fail his little test?”

“Shut up.”

“Neil,” Seth said hesitantly.

Neil took another step closer. “Option one: you make Seth take those pills, whatever they are, and you pass Riko’s test, but I go to the cops. You end up in trouble. Option two: you bail, Riko probably kicks you off the team, and your life still turns out fine. Option three: you make Seth take those pills and you slit my throat to keep me from talking.”

“Sam,” said the Raven at the door.

“Shut up!”

“Shh, Sam, settle down,” Neil taunted. “Don’t want more people coming in here, do we?”

Sam swallowed hard; his forehead was shiny with sweat. “It’s a dumb prank. It doesn’t matter if you go to the cops. The pills are just sugar.”

“Let me guess, you’re supposed to take pictures on your phone?”

“Like I said, it’s a dumb prank.”

Neil gave him a condescending smile. He could see the pieces coming together: in one night, Riko could have done away with Seth, crippled the Foxes’ offensive line, and gotten blackmail material to keep two new Ravens completely under his control for as long as he wanted them.

“Sam, you’ve gotta choose,” Neil said. “Either kill me or walk away.”
Sam tensed and gripped the knife harder, but it was obvious he’d already made his decision. He wasn’t a murderer. “Let’s go, Marcus,” he muttered.

Neil’s shoulders slumped with relief once the two Ravens were finally gone. He immediately grabbed the bottle out of Seth’s hand and flushed the pills down the nearest toilet.

Seth hovered at the open stall door. “Neil?”

“We should get back to Allison,” Neil said, watching the last of the pills disappear. When he turned around, he was alarmed by the lost look on Seth’s face and his glazed-over eyes. His voice came out weak:

“What the hell just happened?”
“Okay,” Seth mumbled, scrubbing his hands over his face. “Okay, so…”

Seth had dragged Neil out to get breakfast at a fast food restaurant, presumably to talk about what happened the night before at Hebe’s Cup, but he was having trouble getting his thoughts together. Part of Neil hoped the alcohol would blur Seth’s memory too much for him to realize how narrowly he’d avoided death. It was still unclear how much he remembered.

Neil sipped his iced coffee and tore the straw wrapper into small pieces. He had to keep his composure and try to prevent Seth from doing anything rash in case he did remember.

Seth ate a bite of his bacon and egg sandwich, staring out the window while he chewed. Then, he said, “Okay. What the fuck?”

“Do you remember much of last night?” Neil asked. He finished destroying his straw wrapper and began picking apart one of his napkins.

“I wouldn’t be losing my shit if I didn’t remember.” Seth took another huge, messy bite and sneered at Neil’s look of disgust. “None of this makes any fuckin’ sense. There were two dudes, they tried to give me pills, and then you showed up. I think you guys talked about Riko. God, it sounds like a fever dream when I say it out loud. Maybe I really was high.”

Quietly, Neil said, “You weren’t high.”

“Okay, so that all happened?”

“Does it matter? It’s over.”

Seth glared at him.

Sighing heavily, Neil scraped his fingers through his hair. “Look, can we just eat and go back to the Tower? Kathy’s show is going to be on soon and I want to see if they cut anything from my interview.”
“No. We’re not leaving ‘til you explain.”

“You won’t believe me.”

“I don’t care. Start talking.”

“Okay, well…” Neil shifted uncomfortably in his seat. There wasn’t a good way to explain this. “I think Riko wanted to get back at me for what I said yesterday.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“You were the easiest to get to.” Neil shrugged. “And I don’t think you getting caught with drugs would seem too out of character. No one would believe you were set up.”

“Fuck you,” Seth said mildly.

“Am I wrong?”

“No, but fuck you anyway. I’ve been clean for over a year.”

“Okay, then I won’t ask why Allison still has to make sure you’re not carrying your pills before you guys go out.”

“Wow. Fuck you.” Seth cleared his throat and flicked a crumb off the table. “The dots still aren’t connecting. Why would me getting caught with pills affect you in any way?”

“My life revolves around Exy. I need this team to do well. Riko probably figured he could get to me by going after one of you guys.”

Seth snorted and shook his head. “Seth Gordon does drugs’ would surprise no one- don’t nod, you asshole- and if I didn’t get disqualified for the other shit, I wouldn’t get disqualified over whatever he hoped would happen last night. Dumb fucker.”

Neil pushed the pieces of his straw wrapper into a pile with his fingertip, wishing the conversation would end soon.

Seth frowned and looked like he wanted to say something, but then he shook his head. “Whatever. Let’s get outta here, fuckface. Wouldn’t want to miss your fifteen minutes of fame.”

Relieved, Neil took his tray with his half-eaten breakfast to the trash can before hurrying out of the restaurant. Seth caught up with him outside on the sidewalk and, to Neil’s surprise, he stayed with him all the way back to the Tower even though neither of them had anything to say.

When they made it back to their suite, Neil was surprised to find the rest of the team waiting in the main room. Dan was still in her pajamas with her hair wrapped in purple satin and her hands curled around a coffee mug. Allison and Renee sat on either side of her; both of them appeared to be more alert than their captain. Matt sat on the floor in front of them with Dan’s leg propped up on his shoulder.

Andrew’s group was broken in half. Kevin was hunched over his knees in one of the desk chairs. Andrew took the other two chairs, using one as a footrest. Aaron and Nicky stood side by side against the wall, looking hungover and miserable. It was barely eleven o’clock. Neil wondered how much sleep they managed to get before Andrew and Kevin dragged them back to campus.

“Where’ve you two been?” Allison asked.
Kevin’s snapped upright in his chair, dazed and disoriented like he’d been asleep up until that moment.

Dan leaned around Allison to look at Neil and Seth. “Did you guys go somewhere together?”

Seth grumbled, “Surprise. We both eat food,” and sank down next to Matt. He ignored Allison when she nudged his back with her foot.

Neil explained, “We got breakfast. Renee was still sleeping out here and we didn’t want to wake her up.”

Everyone’s eyes were on him and it made his skin crawl. Andrew grinned and spun his key ring around his finger.

Allison patted the arm of the couch beside her and told Neil to sit. Before he could, Kevin clumsily pushed himself to his feet and almost tripped over Matt’s legs. He said, “Nathaniel and I need to talk. We’ll be back.”

Neil didn’t resist when Kevin grabbed his arm.

“Ease up, Kevin,” Renee said. Her tone was stern enough to make Kevin pause for a moment before he dragged Neil out into the hall.

Andrew stopped the door from closing with his shoe and he slipped out into the hallway with a lopsided grin. “What’re we talking about, kids?”

Kevin pressed his lips together and inhaled slowly, reining in his anger. “Nathaniel, what happened last night?”

“Nothing,” said Neil.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Okay.”

“Are you for real, Neil?” Andrew teased. “You really won’t tell us? And here I thought we were friends.”

From inside, Dan called, “Guys, it’s starting!”

The three of them went back into the suite together. Neil stood next to the couch and watched the television with anxiety simmering under his skin.

On the screen, Kevin and Kathy sat down together and began talking. The knot in Neil’s gut pulled tighter and tighter until finally it was time for his own appearance. Heat crawled over his face and down his neck. He stared at the floor instead of his onscreen self until he heard his own voice come through the speakers.

His voice sounded canned and distant. He resembled the old pictures of his father— the ones he found in his mother’s only photo album— except for a few differences: he was shorter, less sure of himself, and his cheekbone bore the pale pink smudge of a scar.

Matt shot him a grin. “How’s it feel being on national television?”

Neil had forgotten that the audience wasn’t just Foxes and Ravens. It was still difficult remembering just how full of people the world was, but thinking about it now gave him a bizarre, bubbling feeling
in his heart. Kathy’s show might’ve been on television screens all across the country at that very moment. Neil was more than just a name and some rumors. He wasn’t hidden away anymore.

Kathy’s audience chanting, “King! King! King!” peeled away the good feeling and left him raw.

When Riko came onto the screen, Matt booed and Dan threw a handful of popcorn at the TV. Kevin looked like he was struggling to keep his composure.

Neil was nauseated as he listened to himself mouth off to Riko on TV. He didn’t want to watch anymore. All he wanted to do was curl up in bed and sleep until the memory faded.

“Neil,” said Dan.

Neil’s knees nearly buckled, but then he realized it was his name, not a command.

“Neil? You okay?”

The upperclassmen were watching him and so was Andrew.

“I’m fine,” Neil forced out, trying to let go of the tension in his muscles.

Andrew snorted.

“You want some tea?” Dan offered. She ran her fingers through Matt’s hair and said, “Babe, you’ve got some of your tea left, don’t you?”

“I don’t think caffeine is going to do him any favors,” Allison said. “Seth, you got any weed?”

Neil couldn’t hear Riko over Dan’s frustrated voice as she said, “Seth, please tell me you are not keeping drugs in this dorm.”

Kevin scoffed. “They should’ve disqualified you years ago.”

“You can fuck right off,” Seth snapped. “Self-righteous dick.”

“Let’s watch the show,” Renee piped up. “I liked what Neil said to Kathy here.”

Kevin lifted his chin and gave Seth a long, superior look. “You’d be dead in a ditch somewhere if Wymack didn’t insist on giving you more chances than you deserve.”

“Guys, come on,” Nicky complained. “The rest of us need a break from you two bitching at each other.”

Seth glared over his shoulder. “Shut up, Hemmick.”

“You shut up,” Aaron threw back. “You’re the one being a colossal asshole.”

“Everyone, shut up,” Dan ordered. “Kevin, Seth, you both need to chill out.”

Kevin’s expression darkened. “He’s the one that-”

“Oh, screw you,” Seth interrupted. “Perfect little princess never does anything wrong, huh?”

“Everyone looks perfect compared to you, crackhead.”

“Enough,” Neil cut in sharply. In French, he said to Kevin, “You have no right to talk about drugs or undeserved chances.”
Kevin’s eyes flashed. “Excuse me?”

Neil turned back to the television. In tense silence, the rest of the team continued watching the show as well.

Fortunately, some clever editing removed Neil’s idiotic “skiing accident” remark from the show. Riko would never forget it and rumors might spread from the studio audience, but he would take his ounce of relief and savor it as long as he could. After that, there was a commercial break and Neil took the opportunity to escape into the bathroom. He rubbed cold water on his face and tried to shake the tremors out of his hands.

Dan was talking to someone on her phone when Neil got back to the main room. “Yeah, sandwiches sound fine,” she said. “All of us are over at the boys’ suite- even the monsters.”

Neil sat down on the floor since Seth had moved to sit on Allison’s armrest. Matt was about to say something to him, but then Allison nudged Matt’s head with her foot to get his attention. Ducking out of her reach, Matt said, “I’m not getting you more popcorn. You can get it yourself or ask Nicky and Aaron to.”

In the kitchen, Nicky groaned something unintelligible as he poured more coffee into his mug.

“You need to teach Neil how to drive stick,” Allison said.

Matt frowned at Neil. “You don’t know how to drive stick?”

“He can, just not very well,” said Seth.

Kevin gaped. “You let Nathaniel drive?”

"He was the most sober out of the three of us, so he got to play chauffeur." Allison reached down to stroke Neil's hair in a distinctly condescending way. "I'm pretty sure he went thirty-five the whole way home. It was really, truly sad."

Matt put his hand over his heart and solemnly promised to give Neil driving lessons. Neil hoped he would forget in a day or two.

Renee turned the volume on the TV back up as Kathy's show came back on. At the sound of the cheerful music, Aaron and Nicky sat down together near the coffee table and Dan wrapped up her phone call with, "See you in a bit, Coach."

Kathy welcomed her audience back to the show and jumped right into talking to Riko about the nature of college Exy and the stress players were faced with. Riko expertly guided the conversation toward mental health just so he could use Neil as a cautionary tale.

“It’s not always a matter of strength and endurance,” Riko said, his words smooth and rehearsed. “A player could be one of the best talent-wise, but still falter because of a psychological weak spot- as we’ve seen. Not every great player has what it takes to be a real champion.”

“In your opinion, is Neil Wesninski cut out for this?”

“Coach Wymack certainly seems to think so,” Riko answered with a smirk that made Neil’s stomach turn. Some people in the audience snickered. “He’s never been wrong before, has he?”

More people in the audience laughed. Neil scraped his fingernails against the carpet and swallowed a burning lump of anger.
“Dick,” Matt grunted.

“Do we really have to keep watching this?” Allison asked.

Dan grabbed the remote and turned the TV off. “I’ve heard enough of his crap for one weekend.”

Aaron sighed. “Can we leave now?”

“Only if you want Coach to see the broken window,” Dan replied. “He’ll be here soon with lunch and he wants to see all of us.”

Aaron muttered something rude into his coffee mug. Nicky elbowed him in the arm and told him to behave.

“Kevin, are you all right?” asked Renee.

It caught everyone’s attention. Kevin had his elbows on his knees and his fingers laced behind his neck. He was shaking and sucking in slow, controlled breaths like he was trying very hard not to vomit.

“Christ’s sake, it wasn’t that bad,” Allison said.

Kevin lifted his head to glower at her. “You don’t know Riko like I do. We’re lucky he didn’t fucking kill somebody or something.”

Matt rolled his eyes.

“Drama queen,” Nicky muttered.

“It’s fine,” Dan told Kevin. “People might vandalize our shit again, but it won’t be anything we can’t handle.”

“He wouldn’t actually try to kill someone, though,” Seth said stiffly.

Kevin choked on a near-hysterical laugh. “I wouldn't put it past him.”

Nicky accused Kevin of trying to freak everyone out on purpose. With a laugh, Andrew told him he ought to check under his bed for the boogeyman that night. Seth silently slipped away to the bedroom while everyone else was distracted. Neil stared at the place he’d vacated with a bad feeling in his stomach.
With Honey or Vinegar

Chapter Summary

Neil tries to help Seth the only way he knows how.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: depression (the character skips doses of antidepressants and has a drinking problem)

Thank you all for reading!

The next day, Dr. Dobson picked Neil up from the parking lot of the Foxhole Court instead of the one outside the Tower. Nervous energy kept Neil up half the night and he thought a couple hours of drills might even him out before he had to spend an hour with a trained psychiatrist who probably had lots of questions after his interview.

She asked, “How are you feeling today?” on the way to her apartment like she always did, but the question felt heavier than usual.

“I’m a little tired,” Neil said. He rubbed his shoulder and glanced over at Dr. Dobson. Talking about Kathy’s show was inevitable; he regretted telling her he didn’t mind if she watched it. Might as well get this over with, he thought. “Did you see the show yesterday?”

“I did and I actually wanted to ask you about something.” She paused to turn the car into a parking space. “Did they give you a chance to prepare your answers or did you come up with all that on the spot?”

“I was prepared for some of it.”

“Some of it? The part before Riko came out?” When he nodded, her mouth pulled into a thin, flat line. “If it were me, I would have been very uncomfortable being caught off guard like that in front of all those people and cameras.”

“Yeah, well…” Neil trailed off and got out of the car to avoid commenting further. He already said more about the show than he wanted to. Part of him was relieved that she didn’t assume Riko was his friend.

Once they were inside the apartment, Dr. Dobson changed topics and ran through the usual questions about Exy practice and how he was getting along with the team and how much sleep he was getting. As he gave her all the usual answers, Neil kicked his shoes off by the door and followed her into the kitchen.

Dr. Dobson gestured to the three recipe cards laid out on the counter and asked, “What do you feel like making?”
The recipe for biscuits looked like the easiest one, so he set that card aside and washed his hands while Dr. Dobson put the other two cards in the drawer where they belonged.

The nervous energy that Neil had tried to burn off earlier came back stronger as they began working. His mind replayed what he said on the show over and over. He couldn’t stop thinking about the lies Dr. Dobson probably believed about him now. For some reason, it was worse than the fiction he’d already given her.

Guilt settled over his mind like a nasty frost. The more he got to know her, the more Dr. Dobson seemed like a genuinely decent person and she was taking time out of her Sundays purely for his sake. She wasn’t benefitting from their time together and she couldn’t do her job when Neil couldn’t give her the truth.

He was wasting her time.

As soon as he thought it, the belief took root and the words replayed in a sickening mantra as he measured things into the mixing bowl. By the time he started cutting the cold butter into the mixture, the belief was an indisputable truth.

Neil set aside the wire pastry cutter and let out a shaky breath. He froze when Dr. Dobson stepped closer to peek over his shoulder at the crumbly mixture he made.

“That looks perfect,” she said. “Do you want to try the next part or would you prefer to just watch?”

Neil stepped aside and motioned for her to go ahead. She used a rubber spatula to make a hole in the middle of the mixture to pour the cold buttermilk into.

“We don’t want to stir it too much,” she told him before she quickly mixed everything together. Then, she dumped it onto the flour-covered counter and patted it into a rectangle. “Why don’t you do this part? You just fold it into thirds like paper to put in an envelope.”

Neil folded it like she said to. Then, he turned it, flipped it over, and flattened it again. He rubbed more flour over the dough and folded it into thirds. After he went through the steps a second time, Dr. Dobson asked, “Was what you said on the show true?”

He froze with his fingers pressed to the cold dough. “Do you accuse all your patients of lying?”

“It wasn’t meant to be an accusation. I was only wondering since it seems to me like you value your privacy. It’d be perfectly understandable if you didn’t want to spill secrets on national television.”

For some reason, her words made him bristle. He roughly flipped the folded dough over again and scowled down at the dusting of flour on the hem of his shirt.

“Neil?”

The calm look on her face only made his anger burn hotter. “Why the hell would I agree to go on a talk show just to lie about myself?”

“Was it true, then?”

Neil braced his hands on the edge of the counter and inhaled slowly. The anger coiling around his chest was vague and directionless. Hateful, barbed words pricked his throat, but he couldn’t tell who they were really meant for.

All he did was waste Dr. Dobson’s time and there was no way she couldn’t see that. She wasn’t
stupid; she could see through his lies. If he kept coming to her apartment just to dodge her questions and sulk, she’d hate him in no time. He was nothing but a problem.

He shoved away from the counter and turned on the sink. The water turned the flour on his hands into a gooey paste. It took two rinses to get it all off. Then the gunk disappeared down the drain.

“I was never in foster care,” he admitted, still turned away from her. “I don’t want people to know where I really came from.”

“I understand.” The rolling pin creaked quietly as she flattened the dough with it. “Why don’t you come back over here and help me with the next step?”

Deflated, Neil went back over to her and took the metal circle she handed to him. He cut the biscuits and put them on the parchment paper in the baking tray. She made an indent in each one and brushed buttermilk over it to finish. Then, the biscuits went into the oven to bake. Dr. Dobson washed the flour off her hands slowly and Neil struggled to think of something to say.

“Sorry,” was the best he came up with. It came out hoarse.

She adjusted her glasses on the bridge of her nose and patted his shoulder. “How ‘bout some iced tea? I’m trying out that peach one again. I put in less lime juice this time to see if that makes it better.”

“Okay.”

She poured him a glass from the pitcher that lived in her fridge and handed it over. “Do you want to talk about why you got upset just now?”

Neil poked at an ice cube with his straw and grimaced. “I think I should stop coming over here.”

“Can I ask why you think that?”

“Can I ask why you don’t think that?” He immediately cringed at his own tone and his chest tightened again.

“What’s going on, Neil?”

Setting his glass aside with a hard clunk, Neil said, “I’m never going to give you the answers you want, okay? I’m not going to talk about my parents or my childhood or the other shit you like to ask me about. And, like you said, I only get out of therapy what I put into it, so it stands to reason that since I’ve only given you bullshit, I’m only going to get bullshit in return.”

Fear swept over him, but he didn’t know why. Instincts told him to apologize, grovel, or kneel. It didn’t make sense. Dr. Dobson had never raised a hand to him or threatened him with harm of any kind. Neil stared down at his trembling hands like they belonged to someone else.

“You’re okay,” she said slowly. “Take a few deep breaths. It’ll be all right.”

“I don’t…” He made a frustrated noise and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes until he saw stars. His breaths came out in harsh puffs through his clenched teeth until finally they slowed. When he could relax his shoulders, he dropped his hands and sagged against the counter. The fear was thawing.

“Go back to the beginning of the summer,” Dr. Dobson instructed. “I want you to think about what your mental state was like then and compare it to now. Would you say you’ve made progress?”
Neil glumly stared at the floor. The nightmares hadn’t gone away, sometimes he thought he saw blood on the court floor, and the smell of Allison’s perfume still caused his mind to shrivel up in shame and self-hatred; however, he didn’t feel as helpless in the face of it as he used to.

“I guess I have,” he answered.

“That’s what matters most to me. I am willing to work with whatever you’re comfortable telling me if it helps you.”

Sighing, he dragged his fingers through his hair and smoothed it down with his palm. Everything was jumbled.

“If you still want to cut back on our appointments, then we can discuss that, but I would like you to take more time to think on it. Since your classes will begin next month, I’m concerned about how your level of stress might go up. Can we put a pin in this conversation and save it for later?”

“Sure.”

She gave him a warm smile. “Sounds like a plan.”

Neil picked up his tea to take a long drink.

“Now, on to other important decisions,” Dr. Dobson announced as she went to the fridge. “What type of jam should we have on our biscuits?”

In the end, they decided on butter and blackberry preserves and ate standing up in the kitchen. When they were finished, Dr. Dobson put the remaining biscuits in a gallon-sized Ziploc bag for him to take back to the Tower and dropped him off on Perimeter Road with a reminder that she would see him next week.

It was less than a minute’s walk before Neil reached the Tower. He climbed the stairs to the third floor and slipped into his suite. Everything was perfectly quiet until Matt came out of the bathroom and asked, “Dude, where’d you get biscuits from? I thought you were at the court.”

“I was at the court for a while, but then I went somewhere else.” He offered the Ziploc bag to Matt in the hope of distracting him. “You hungry?”

Matt’s grin was easy and instantaneous. “Definitely. Thanks, man.”

Neil hovered near the kitchen while Matt cut a biscuit in half and warmed it in the toaster oven. The suite was unnervingly quiet. The TV and stereo were both shut off and Matt was moving carefully in the kitchen like he wanted to be as quiet as possible. It was never this quiet at lunchtime- even when Seth was hungover and in a foul mood there was some sort of noise.

Finally, Neil asked, “Is Seth here?”

“He’s asleep,” Matt said quietly. He handed Neil half a biscuit with melted butter and a drizzle of honey on it and kept the other half for himself. “I’m gonna head over to Dan’s soon to hang out. Do you wanna come with?”

Neil shook his head no. Part of him still felt off balance. Being around other people was too risky when he couldn’t be sure his temper would stay in check. Dr. Dobson wasn’t fazed by his mood swing, but Dan might not be so forgiving.

He finished his half of the biscuit in a few careful bites and sucked a stray drop of honey off his
thumb, still distracted by the unsettling stillness of the suite. Matt looked uneasy too, although he tried to hide it behind a smile when he caught Neil’s eye.

“I’ll be back around dinner,” said Matt. “Come over to Dan’s if you get bored or something, okay? You’re always welcome.”

“Should someone check on Seth?”

Matt shrugged. “He gets like this sometimes. He’ll snap out of it in a day or two. Don’t worry about him. See you later, man.”

The silence rang in Neil’s ears after Matt left. It was possible that Seth hadn’t pieced together what Riko most likely intended for him at Hebe’s Cup, but all the signs made him think otherwise. The problem was that he couldn’t know for sure without asking, which would tip Seth off. Knowing Seth, he’d confront Neil if he actually suspected anything, so Neil decided to wait.

Seth didn’t emerge until hours later. Neil expected a tirade, but Seth only used the bathroom before shuffling back to the bedroom. He didn’t even slam the door.

“A day or two” was what Matt said. Neil wasn’t sure if he believed him or not.

The next morning, Seth got up the third time Matt reminded him to and he said nothing to either of his roommates as he got ready to go to the gym. He greeted Allison in the hallway with a grunt of acknowledgement and said, “Yeah, I’m just tired,” when she asked if he was feeling all right.

In the elevator, Allison primly picked a stray hair off Seth’s dirty t-shirt and said, “You didn’t text me back yesterday.”

“I know.”

Allison narrowed her eyes questioningly at Matt behind Seth’s back. Matt shrugged his big shoulders and gave her a look that clearly meant he didn’t have any answers for her.

Dan stared hard up at Seth and said, “If you’re getting sick, tell Coach to let you sit out from practice.”

“M not sick,” Seth grumbled, scrubbing a hand over his face.

“We’ve got some really good chamomile tea that might help you sleep better,” Renee offered.

Seth sighed so heavily that everyone remained quiet until they got out to Matt’s truck. To Neil’s surprise, Seth climbed into the bed and sat next to him instead of sitting with Renee and Allison in the backseat. He wondered if he ought to say something. It wasn’t that he particularly wanted to talk to Seth, but the weird tension would be a hindrance on the court.

“So-”

“Shut up,” Seth said. “I only sat back here because I didn’t want to be in there.”

Neil nodded and closed his mouth.

Exercising didn’t help Seth shake off his mental funk like Neil hoped it would. All throughout the day Seth was sluggish and droopy-eyed; it almost looked like he’d fall asleep right on the bench when the team took water breaks.

The bad feeling in the pit of Neil’s stomach grew worse.
That evening, Seth planted himself on the couch and only moved when he wanted to change the channel. For dinner, he ate the protein bar out of his pocket and ignored Matt’s offer to bring back some food from the Mexican restaurant he and Dan were going to.

Seth remained dull-eyed and listless all through Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursday, the only change was that he snapped at anyone who looked his way for too long; he even tried to pick a fight with Andrew, who was all too happy to talk in circles until Seth got so frustrated he left the locker room before their break was up. An hour after that, he took a swing at Kevin on the court during an argument and Andrew spent the rest of practice aiming for Seth’s ankles with vicious accuracy. Neil thought it was a miracle that Seth didn’t come away with a sprain.

Friday was worse. After another spat with Kevin, Seth threw down his racquet and stormed off the court. When Wymack got in his way on the inner court, Seth responded by shoving him with enough force that he stumbled back a step.

Wymack roughly grabbed a handful of Seth’s jersey and raised his voice. “I’m not fuckin’ around, Gordon. Do not come back here until you sort your shit out.” He let Seth go and glared at the rest of the team. “Are we done already? I coulda sworn we had three more hours.”

Neil flinched when he slammed the court door shut.

“Let’s get back to it, guys.” Dan called.

After practice, Neil took an extra few minutes in the shower to stand under the hot spray and think. Seth wasn’t officially assigned to be his partner like Jean had been, but Neil felt responsible for him all the same. He was the one that provoked Riko’s wrath. Now it was his job to clean up the aftermath.

The biggest problem was Seth’s irregular sleeping habits. The thought of slipping a sleep aid into Seth’s food or drink didn’t sit well with Neil, so he took a more direct approach. On Friday night, Neil marched out to the main room, where Seth was still staring blankly at whatever was on TV, and said, “Go to bed.”

Seth blinked owlishly up at him. “What?”

“It’s almost midnight. You need to sleep.”

“Are you high?”

“Sleep deprivation won’t do you any favors.”

Seth snorted. “Who died and made you my mother?”

“Go to bed.”

“I’ll go to bed when I feel like it.”

Neil folded his arms. “Or you could go to bed now and not feel like total shit tomorrow.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, young fuckface,” Seth said as he reached down to get a can of beer off the floor. He cracked it open and took a long drink. “I feel like shit whether or not I sleep. It’s a real kick in the balls.”

“I thought the antidepressants were supposed to help with that.”
Seth worked his jaw. “Should’ve known you’d go snooping.”

“You left your pills on the bathroom counter.”

“Bring a magazine if you need something to read when you take a shit.”

Neil took a deep breath and willed himself to calm down. “You can take a sleep aid or we can go for a run to wear you out.”

“Option C: I do what I want and you go fuck yourself.”

After ten more minutes of bickering, Neil conceded defeat and climbed up into his bunk, still fuming. He listened to Matt’s snoring and tried to think of a better strategy for the next day.

Unfortunately, Saturday was a bust. Seth and Allison spent the morning curled up on the couch together and started fighting after lunch. From the bedroom, Neil strained to hear what exactly they were saying to each other until Matt came in and said, “Dude, they’re either gonna break up or bang and we don’t wanna be here for either of those things.”

Dan was on her couch with a magazine open in her lap and her feet propped up on the coffee table. She didn’t look surprised to see them. Matt flopped down next to her with a groan. “God, you can hear them a little in here,” he said. “Are the walls super thin or are they just that loud?”

“Little of both, probably,” Dan said, flipping to the next page. “Make yourself at home, Neil. Knowing them, they’ll be at it for at least another half hour.”

Neil took the armchair that didn’t currently have laundry on it and winced when he heard a loud thump coming from next door. It sounded like a shoe hitting a wall.

Matt asked, “Is Renee around? Maybe she could talk ‘em down.”

“Nah, she’s helping out at a food drive.”

“Saint Renee,” Matt said teasingly.

Dan planted a kiss on Matt’s cheek before going back to reading her magazine. Matt turned on the television and found something mildly interesting to watch. Neil picked at his thumbnail, almost wishing he’d gone for a run instead; as much as he wanted to take advantage of being allowed outside, the heat and humidity made him feel choked and miserable.

Some time later, Allison swept into the suite like a storm. “Motherfucker,” she seethed, punctuating the word by slamming the door. “Guess who’s going to be single on her birthday!”

Neil started to get up so she could have the chair, but she went to the kitchen instead. She pulled a couple limes out of the fridge and began chopping them into wedges with a swift, brutal strokes of a large knife. “Where the hell is Renee?” she demanded.

“She’s out being a good person,” Dan answered. “Should you be handling that knife?”

Allison scoffed and threw the knife into the sink. “Like I care about that asshole.”
“Your birthday’s not ‘til Tuesday. Maybe you’ll work it out by then,” Matt said. “You guys always work things out.”

“I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with him.” Allison yanked a bottle of tequila out of the cupboard. “Last time we got back together, we agreed we’d go out once a week. I don’t understand what’s so goddamn hard about that. Last week was fine, but today he got all weird when I said we should go to Hebe’s again, and then when I asked him why he was being all weird, shit hit the fan.”

She came into the main room with a salt shaker and the lime wedges on a plate and the tequila tucked under her arm. With a hard sweep of her arm, she knocked the laundry pile off the other chair and flopped down into it. Matt got up to push the coffee table closer to her so she could put the plate and bottle down.

“Do you want a shot glass?” Dan asked wryly.

“If I wanted one, I would’ve got one.” Allison licked the base of her thumb and sprinkled salt there with an angry wrinkle digging into her brow. Then, she licked the salt, took a swig of tequila, and bit into a lime wedge as quickly as she could.

“What a pro,” Matt said with obvious admiration.

Dan gave a long-suffering sigh and took out her phone to text someone.

Allison went through two more rounds of tequila-salt-lime wedge before handing the bottle and salt shaker to Matt. “I’m not getting drunk alone. You three catch up while I change.”

“I’ll get the shot glasses,” Dan said as she got to her feet. Allison pointed at Dan emphatically and Dan pointed back, communicating something that Neil didn’t understand.

“Neil, you want in?” Matt asked, holding the bottle out toward him.

Neil shook his head. “No, thank you.”

Matt said, “You do you, bro,” before licking and salting his hand like Allison had done. Dan jogged back to the couch and set down four mismatched shot glasses. She poured tequila into the glass with the Empire State Building on it and the one with PSU’s orange fox paw logo.

“Neil, which one do you want?” Dan asked, holding up the remaining two glasses. One was shaped like a skull and the other looked like it had a small, snow-capped mountain trapped in the thick glass base.

“Mount Fuji,” Matt said when he saw Neil looking. “Allison got it when she went to see her grandma in Japan.”

Dan was already filling both shot glasses with tequila. Matt licked the salt off his hand and threw back his shot and the one Dan slid toward Neil. Grimacing, he bit into a lime wedge. When he was done, he shuddered and said, “Neil doesn’t drink.”

“Oh, right.” Dan refilled both shot glasses anyway and told Matt, “You’re drinking for two, then.”

“You tryin’ to get me drunk, lady?”

Dan feigned innocence.

Allison came out of the hallway wearing leggings and a blue New York Rangers sweatshirt that
dwarfed her frame. “You two are not allowed to flirt and be gross, okay? Tonight, we’re all single. Is Neil drinking with us? He better be drinking with us.”

Dan handed Allison the salt shaker. “He doesn’t drink.”

“Is that my sweatshirt?” asked Matt.

“Yes,” Allison said primly. “Why isn’t Neil drinking?”

“Why do you have my sweatshirt? I’ve been looking for that for ages.”

“Dan stole it from you and I stole it from her.” She snapped her fingers at Neil. “Start drinking, freshman.”

Dan pulled a lime out of her mouth and made a face. “Leave Neil alone, Al.”

“Do not call me that or I will smack you. I swear to-“

“Take a chill pill, Alan. Ow! Jesus Christ, that hurt.”

Glaring, Allison raised her hand again.

Matt put his arm around Dan’s shoulder and tugged her closer to him. “I’ll protect you, sweatshirt thief.”

Dan sneered playfully at her roommate. “I don’t need protecting. I could flip her like a pancake.”

Allison rolled her eyes and picked up the skull-shaped glass. “Oh, please, you can barely flip actual pancakes.”

“Wow. Really?”

“Did she tell you, Matty?” Allison paused to do her shot. “Pancake batter all over the floor. It was a huge mess.”

“I was hungover as hell,” Dan said, “and I still tried to make a nice breakfast for us, you ungrateful hag.”

Allison gave her a flat look and shook more salt onto her hand.

Neil cleared his throat and got up. “I think I’ll go… make sure Seth’s not getting into trouble.”


“Come back over if you want to,” Dan told Neil.

He nodded and gave them all a half-wave over his shoulder as he stepped out into the hallway.

Matt’s cry of “Godspeed, little dude!” came muffled through the door.

Next door, Neil found Seth sprawled across the couch with a six-pack of beer on the floor next to him and the television on; only one beer can was opened. Seth didn’t acknowledge his presence, didn’t so much as twitch. The blanket was twisted around his legs with one corner pulled taut around his side like he half-heartedly tried to tug it over himself only to give up. Staring down at Seth’s unmoving form, Neil was reminded of Jean. On bad days, Jean turned into an ungainly, shuffling creature with heavy limbs and hollow eyes. His weariness was too much for him to carry.
If he allowed Seth to remain motionless, there was no telling how long it would go on for. Wymack banished him from the court for the time being and Allison would no longer come around to pull Seth out of whatever dark thoughts were swirling in his head. He had to get Seth moving somehow.

“When’s the last time you did laundry?” Neil asked.

Seth twisted around to look at him with narrowed eyes. “Huh?”

“Have you done laundry recently?”

“Leave me alone.” Seth dropped back onto the couch and went back to watching the zombies on the TV screen, looking a bit like a zombie himself.

Neil bit the inside of his cheek and studied Seth’s unwashed hair. With Jean, Neil sometimes needed to bargain. “If you get out of bed right now, I’ll take care of clean-up today, okay?” was his usual go-to offer. Sometimes Jean just needed a lecture. “You can’t do this, ” Neil would say, trying to make his voice soft but firm like his mother’s. “Riko will notice if we’re not at breakfast on time. Get up or you’ll get us both in trouble.”

Seth wasn’t like Jean, though. He was loud and rude and he had no master to fear.

“Get up,” Neil said.

“No.”

“You’ll feel better with clean clothes.”

“Go away.”

“Do you not know how to do laundry?” Neil coated his words with thick condescension and tilted his chin up imperiously. “Do you need me to teach you? I figured out how to do my own laundry when I was ten, but I guess I can see how it might be too complicated for someone like you. Kevin said you struggled with basic concepts, but I just assumed he meant you were lazy. I hope Allison can find someone less pathetic, for her sake.”

Seth’s back bunched up under his shirt as he slowly pushed up onto his knees; then, he got to his feet and drew himself up to his full height. There was a real threat in his posture, so real Neil could almost feel the punch landing on his cheek and taste the blood on his teeth.

“Get out or I will throw you out,” Seth warned lowly.

Neil didn’t back down. “Do your laundry. It’s gross.”

“If it bothers you, find a new place to live.” Seth pushed past him and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. Neil knew he’d failed, but he still went after Seth and fired off a few more patronizing sentences. None of them achieved what Neil hoped they would. The last one got Seth to shatter his water glass against the wall. Unproductive rage.

Within the next minute, Matt came into the suite to ask, “What happened? We heard a noise.” He wasn’t drunk yet, but he’d had enough alcohol to make him look unsteady.

“We’re fine,” Neil said. “I dropped a glass.”

Matt frowned deeply like he wasn’t sure if he was convinced or not. “Sure,” he said slowly. “Don’t cut yourself, ‘kay?”
After Matt left, Neil went to the bedroom. He sat cross-legged on his bunk and peered over the edge at Seth’s clothing strewn across the floor. He resented Seth a little for it— not the mess itself, but the thoughtless ease with which Seth made messes. Clothes carelessly dropped on the floor. Shards of glass left on the kitchen floor for someone else to sweep. It was unlikely that Seth had ever gotten a hard kick in the ribs for not cleaning up after himself. The master didn’t check his bedroom once a day.

Neil cleaned up the broken glass in the kitchen and hated Seth for that too, letting others deal with his messes.

His resentment festered and festered and it wasn’t until a few days later that he realized he’d started down a slippery slope. Rationally, Neil knew that Seth wasn’t trying to rub anything in his face because he had no idea how Neil was raised, but Neil couldn’t stop himself from feeling like Seth was doing it on purpose. Seth took up space and thought nothing of it. He didn’t shrink himself down for the sake of others. Seth was as loud as he wanted to be, listened to whatever he wanted to, and watched whatever he felt like. He didn’t care about how high the volume was or the fact that other people were trying to sleep.

Seth complained when he didn’t like the food. “This tastes like shit,” he’d say before dumping whatever it was into the trash and finding something else to eat. “Food is nutrition, not entertainment,” was Riko’s mealtime motto. Neil had to hear it anytime one of the new Ravens asked about ketchup or mayonnaise or salad dressing.

Seth talked back to Wymack like it was easy, like it never occurred to him that he might get beaten for it. Wymack always waited patiently until Seth’s vitriolic speeches fizzled out and then he said, “You done?”

Why don’t you just put him in his place? Neil wondered. For a couple seconds, he imagined Wymack’s hand flying up, Seth’s head jerking to one side, the painful red splotch on Seth’s cheek surrounded by pink embarrassment. Neil recoiled from these thoughts, disgusted with himself. He felt sick with regret the rest of the day. He almost wanted to call Dr. Dobson and tell her about it. Maybe she’d understand. Maybe that would make him feel better. Maybe she’d recoil in disgust too. He didn’t want to find out.

Instead, Neil turned his attention back to fixing Seth.

The day that Neil started counting the pills in Seth’s prescription bottle was also the day that “DIE” was spray-painted in large, lopsided letters in the parking lot of the Foxhole Court. The Foxes exchanged glances like they were trying to figure out who the message was for. When Matt put his hand on Neil’s shoulder and nudged him toward the door, Neil guessed they decided it was meant for him. It made sense, in a way.

“Dicey,” said Andrew. His laugh was delayed a few seconds.

Nicky declared it the word of the day and grinned, indulging his cousin by playing along. Matt nudged Neil again and everyone went inside as a group. In the hallway, Kevin fell in stride with Neil and murmured, “Some people are mad about Kathy’s show. They think you’re trying to steal Riko’s place, that you’re some sort of obsessive stalker.”

Petulantly, Neil wanted to spit, “People are dumb assholes,” but he didn’t. He focused very hard on not slamming his locker door because it was important that he keep his temper under control. Face blank, back straight, voice locked up tight in its box. It didn’t matter what people thought of him.

When the team reached the inner court, Dan said, “Hey, Coach, in the parking lot—”
“I saw it.” Wymack had gotten to the court before them. “It’ll get cleaned up soon. Probably best if no one went wandering on their own for the time being.”

The statement made Neil pause. It meant he wasn’t allowed to go running anymore- not on his own, not outside. It was a leash tugging at his neck, a reminder that he only had freedom as long as others allowed him to have it. Disobedience wasn’t worth the risk most of the time.

“Just until things calm down,” Wymack tacked on, sending Neil a pointed look like he could read Neil’s thoughts.

Neil scraped his teeth over his lip and tried not to look like he was sulking.

Keeping track of Seth’s pills redirected his energy and made him feel productive. Since Neil wasn’t going running at night, he had to come up with another excuse for why he was taking showers at the dorm. “It helps me sleep,” was what he told Matt and the lie was accepted without any trouble. Seth didn’t care.

With the shower and the sink running to cover the noise, Neil quietly popped the cap off Seth’s prescription bottle and carefully shook the pills out onto a tissue to count them. He wrote the numbers with corresponding dates on a piece of paper that he kept tucked into his self-help book. It wasn’t long before Neil’s suspicions were confirmed: Seth wasn’t taking his medication regularly.

After his shower, Neil went out to the main room where Seth was on the couch watching a movie about robots. Matt disappeared into the bathroom so he could wash up for bed, which gave Neil a short window to talk to Seth alone.

“You didn’t take your pill today,” he said.

Seth rolled his eyes. “You get your panties in a twist again?” When he noticed his prescription bottle in Neil’s hand, his lip curled.

“You are going to start taking these regularly like you’re supposed to and you’re going to cut back on the alcohol.”

Slowly, Seth got to his feet. “Stay the fuck out of my business,” he said lowly, “or I will kick your ass so bad you won’t know which way is up.”

“If you could at least pretend to be a functional human being, I wouldn’t have to get involved. You barely sleep, you eat garbage, and you drag your shitty behavior onto the court. Someone needs to put a stop to it.”

“I’m a grown-ass man. I will do whatever the fuck I want.”

The shower cut on in the bathroom and Neil was suddenly reminded that Matt was still in the suite. All the same, he was too incensed to stop. “You told me I wasn’t allowed to fuck up the line. Was it because that honor belongs to you and your pathetic inferiority complex? I think you secretly love having Kevin here because it means you don’t have to try at all. You’ll never catch up to him, so why bother trying, right? Easier to sit on the bench and bitch like an eight-year-old.”

“Get this through your head: Kevin is not better than me or worth more than me just because he was born with a silver spoon up his ass. And as for you-” Seth scoffed- “I don’t even know what to say about you. Almost getting on a good team really went to your head.”

“You are an ungrateful asshole.”
“Ungrateful?” Seth let out a sharp laugh. “What, did you expect me to kiss your ass? Go door to door asking, ‘Have you heard the good news about my lord and savior Nathaniel fuckin’ Wesninski?’ Fuck you. Find someone else to stroke your ego.”

“I am trying to help you,” Neil snapped.

“No, you are trying to control me,” Seth retorted, jabbing a finger into Neil’s chest. “You are not gonna force me to do shit I don’t want to do.”

This is for your own good rushed up like vomit and choked Neil. The words were Riko’s. He said them when he splintered Neil’s will to fight back and when he broke Jean’s spirit so thoroughly he didn’t want to live anymore. Kevin said the words, too, when he pushed Neil to his breaking point on the court.

Neil didn’t want to be like them.

Seth grabbed the pill bottle before he stormed out of the suite. Then, the shower cut off and Matt stepped out of the bathroom with his hair still perfectly dry and a wary look on his face. He looked Neil over and asked if he was okay.

The undeserved concern made Neil’s skin crawl. Against his better judgement and against Wymack’s wishes, Neil said, “I’m going out for a run.”

Matt nodded in understanding and let him go without any protest.
The Past and the Present

Chapter Summary

Neil tries to think of a way to fix things with Seth.

Chapter Notes

There's a discussion about the stuff that happened in the last chapter, which references Seth's depression and brings up Neil's control issues.

Thanks so much for reading!!

“Damn it!” Neil hissed, clenching his hands around the steering wheel as the engine of Matt’s truck stalled again. Embarrassment scorched his face. The only reason he agreed to go driving with Matt was to avoid Seth, who was back at the Tower wasting another Saturday in front of the TV.

“It’s all good,” Matt assured him from the passenger seat. “No one starts out perfect.”

“I know how to drive. I’m just out of practice.” Neil jammed the brake pedal and the clutch down with his feet as he shifted into neutral. He restarted the engine easily enough and soon they were continuing down the empty stretch of Perimeter Road that curved north beyond the Foxhole Court. Once Neil got comfortable with the truck’s speed, he took in more of his surroundings.

“Right, so we’re coming up on Summerlin Memorial Arena,” Matt said, pointing to the left of the road. At first, Neil saw only trees and the arch of a gleaming metal roof, but then the rest of the arena came into view. It was perched on a hill that overlooked a garden with a giant fox paw formed of orange and white flowers. The arena itself was a sleek, modern structure made of glass and steel. A few seconds later, the truck passed it and Neil had only a view of the expansive, empty parking lot.

“The Foxhole Court used to be the basketball arena, actually,” Matt explained. “In the ’90s, the women’s locker room caught on fire—old wires or something, I think—and a good portion of it got damaged. They decided to build a bigger, fancier place for the basketball teams to keep up with the other schools, but instead of bulldozing the old one they did some renovations and let Wymack start an Exy team here.”

Neil turned down the air conditioning and glanced over at Matt. He knew a little about the Foxes’ dismal history, but he still listened intently.

“Dan said Wymack has an agreement with Whittier himself: if he bags a championship trophy, they’ll name the court after him. Unless someone throws down some serious dough to spiff up the rest of the stadium, though, it’ll always be the Foxhole.”

“There are worse names,” Neil commented, distracted by the mental image of Wymack’s name painted across the floorboards behind the goals. Kevin would play on a court named for his father, just like he used to play on one named for his mother—although the words “Kayleigh Day Court”
were only seen on game days. The rest of the time they were hidden under tarps.

“Yeah,” Matt said with a chuckle. “Evermore. What the fuck is that, anyway?”

“I always thought it sounded pretentious.”

Riko would have hit him for it, but Matt just laughed and agreed with him.

Sunlight flashed through the leaves of the trees lining the road. The sky was a vibrant, cloudless blue and the road was all theirs. As Neil got the hang of driving, he remembered how much he’d enjoyed it when he first learned. He liked having control. He liked having all that power at his fingertips.

They continued driving until they reached the C.J. Calloway Stadium, which made the Foxhole Court seem tiny by comparison. An orange fox paw stood out against the smooth white facade and the stadium seats rose from the football field like a wide, monumental V behind the cluster of buildings out front.

Matt told Neil to turn off on a smaller road that took them past dormitories and lecture halls. He pointed out the dining hall meant for athletes and Coburn Library, which backed onto a large pond.

“That’s the clocktower,” Matt said, pointing out an old brick building with another fox paw flowerbed in front of it. “Everyone gets taken to the clocktower on tours, but I still don’t know why it’s important. I think it’s just old.”

Not long later, the truck stalled again. Matt continued talking about buildings of note on campus while Neil wrestled with his temper and restarted the engine.

“Behind us is the health center, where Betsy’s office is,” Matt said once Neil started driving again. “You get two mandatory meetings with her a year, but it’s not a big deal. She’s awesome. You’ll like her. Oh, and there’s the student center.”

Neil nodded and made no mention of the fact that he was already somewhat familiar with the campus. He was just grateful to have something to fill the silence with.

“Where do you usually go running?” Matt asked when Neil turned onto a different road to take them south.

“Uh, Perimeter mostly,” Neil answered.

“You been out to the botanical garden yet?”

“It’s out that way, right?” Neil gestured vaguely to his left. He was pretty sure he remembered seeing signs about a garden when he went running through the woods one morning.

“Dan and Renee like running on those trails. Allison and I go to the track sometimes when the weather cools off. It beats running indoors.”

“Yeah.” Fresh air and trees were infinitely better than black walls and daylight-mimicking light boxes.

Matt drummed his fingers against his armrest and looked out the window for a minute. “Hey, if you ever want to borrow the truck, there’s a park with some good trails out past Gazer Hill. You have your license, right?”

“Yes, I have my license,” Neil said. The Foxes kept asking him that like they didn’t believe him.
Matt fished his wallet out of his pocket and shot Neil a grin. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours. Dan laughed her ass off when she saw what my hair used to look like.”

Neil pulled his wallet out of his pocket while trying to keep the truck in the right lane. Matt took it from him and flipped it open to find his license. A few seconds later, he let out a quiet, “Oh.”

“What is it?”

“You’ve got your tattoo in your photo.”

Neil stiffened. He hadn’t looked at it since his documents showed up in the mail. “Does that settle one of your bets or something?”

“Um, sort of.” Matt sounded sheepish. He set Neil’s wallet in one of the cup holders between them and offered, “I won’t tell the girls if it bugs you.”

“Thanks,” Neil said flatly.

“Here. Check me out.” Matt held up his own license so Neil could see it. In the picture, Matt’s hair was in spikes with electric blue tips and he looked like he was struggling not to laugh. “My hair was only like that for about a month before Robbie convinced me to dye it back.”

“Who’s Robbie?”

“Guy I sort of dated back in high school. I’m bi, by the way.”

“Oh.”

“That doesn’t weird you out, does it?”

“No. Why would it?” Neil asked. Matt never looked at Neil the way some of the Raven women had, like he was something to carve up and devour.

“I dunno. Some guys make it weird. You seem chill, though. Nicky told us that you’re not changing in the showers because of any homophobia-related reasons.”

Neil shifted uncomfortably and checked the speedometer. “I like having privacy.”

“I get it. It took me some time before I was comfortable with other people seeing the marks on my arms.” Matt cleared his throat. “Hey, speaking of homophobia-related things, how’s it going with Seth?”

“Nice segue,” Neil said as he braked again. There were two other cars ahead of him at the intersection, waiting to turn onto Perimeter Road.

“I’m a conversational magician,” Matt joked. “Seriously, though, how’re you doing? Because it kinda seems like you’ve been trying to stay away from the dorm.”

Neil kept his eyes on the car in front of him. “Do you mind dropping me off at Wymack’s? I wanted to check out some old games he’s got on tape.”

“All right, I can take a hint. Do you know how to get to his apartment from here?”

Neil nodded and flicked on the turn signal.

In the parking lot outside Wymack’s apartment, Neil did his best to fit the truck into a space. He
wasn’t entirely successful, but Matt shrugged and declared his effort good enough.

On his way up to Wymack’s floor, Neil debated with himself over whether or not he should knock first. Wymack had given him a key so he could come and go as he pleased, but he wasn’t expecting Neil that day. Neil wasn’t sure what the rule was. Maybe he should’ve texted before he got there.

In the end, he decided against knocking and let himself into the apartment. At least that way he wouldn’t make Wymack get up to answer the door himself.

Wymack was on the couch with his elbows propped on his knees, wearing a red and white Richmond Racqueteers t-shirt. On the coffee table there was a plate with a half-eaten sandwich and a handful of potato chips. He raised an eyebrow at Neil and said, “I was wondering when you’d show up.”

Neil frowned in confusion as he took off his shoes. “What made you think I’d come here?”

“You and Seth are having issues.”

“Which one of them told you?” Neil asked with an irritated sigh.

“I have eyes, you know.”

“Right,” Neil muttered. He went into the kitchen and fixed himself a ham and cheese sandwich with some of the Dijon mustard he’d developed a fondness for.

“There’s coffee in the fridge if you want it,” Wymack called.

“You ever think that maybe you consume too much caffeine?” Neil called back.

“You some kind of doctor now?”

Neil took his sandwich out to the front room and sat on the other end of the couch. On the TV there was an exhibition game between the Denver Coyotes and the Richmond Racqueteers.

“You played for Richmond for, what, five years?” Neil asked before taking a bite of his sandwich.

Wymack nodded. “Someone’s done his homework.”

Neil shrugged uneasily. Kevin was the one who went searching for that information. He couldn’t help himself after finding out Wymack was his father. Neil said, “I’ve seen some footage of your games. You guys were a solid team.”

“Big fish in a small pond,” Wymack said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Not much competition back then.”

“That’s where you met Kevin’s mom, right?”

Wymack’s expression hardened and Neil cursed himself for asking. Of course Wymack and Kayleigh knew each other through the team- not that it mattered since it wasn’t any of his business.

Neil stumbled over his explanation. “I, um… I saw a photo of her and the mas- Mr. Moriyama with your team after the 1989 championship game.”

Kevin had stared at the picture for nearly half an hour, almost as if he’d known Riko wouldn’t let him look at it again.
Wymack cleared his throat and drank some more of his coffee before he replied, “I met her my sophomore year at Virginia Tech, actually. I couldn’t afford to keep playing lacrosse there and she heard about it through one of her contacts. Came to recruit me for the Racqueteers.”

“Just like that?”

Wymack shook his head at the memory. “I told her she sounded nuts and she said, ‘If you can hold a stick and follow directions, I can make an Exy player outta you.’”


“Real force of nature, that one.”

Neil looked back at the television, feeling like he’d stolen something. Kevin should’ve been the one to hear Wymack talk about Kayleigh like this.

During halftime, Wymack turned down the volume and asked, “So are you gonna figure things out with Seth or do I need to invest in a pull-out couch?”

“It’s a little late for that, don’t you think? I slept on this thing for months.”

“He giving you trouble?”

“We had a fight, that’s all.”

When he and Jean argued- really argued- it was nothing but sour silences and dirty glares until they finally shouted at each other to clear the air. Neil didn’t have time to wait for things to play out naturally, though. He had to fix things before their tenuous on-court chemistry rotted away entirely.

“Bet that was nasty. You’ve both got tempers,” Wymack commented dryly.

Neil’s face went hot. “I was trying to help him.”

*Control him*, he amended privately. The distinction was important even if it made his insides feel cold and slimy. Riko’s poison tainted him and he couldn’t let himself forget that or else he’d infect someone else.

“Help him how?” Wymack asked.

“He’s a mess and he refuses to take care of himself.”

“That’s his choice,” Wymack said with a shrug. “There’s nothing you can do about that.”

“But...”

“Look, I’ve been around that block a couple times, so here’s some free advice for you: people are not supposed to be crutches for other people. As soon as you get worn out, you both fall on your asses. Does more harm than good in the end.”

Neil folded his arms over his stomach and tried very hard not to think about Jean. “So what am I supposed to do?”

“Seth’s a big kid. He knows where help is if he wants it. You don’t get to make decisions for him just 'cause you think you know better.”
A stubborn part of him wanted to argue even after everything that happened. He got Kevin out of the Nest and he saved Seth’s life. Didn’t that earn him the right to be listened to?

Riko went down a similar path and that thought was sobering. In his eyes, each victory was proof that he was meant to be in command. It led to him holding the Ravens to impossible standards. His temper taught them to fear failure in a whole new way.

Neil made a mental note to bring up the topic of control issues with Dr. Dobson. It couldn’t hurt to discuss it again.

“All right,” he said eventually. “I’ll back off.”

Wymack nodded once in approval and they went back to watching the game. The Racqueteers ended up winning by three points, which put Wymack in a better mood. They spent the afternoon watching sports highlights and picking apart some of the Racqueteers’ new strategies.

Neil decided not to stay the night like he’d originally planned to. He couldn’t avoid Seth forever. After they got a late dinner at Kelly’s Deli, Wymack drove him back to the Tower and reminded him, “The couch will be there if you need it,” before he got out of the car. Knowing he had a place to go if things went south made him feel slightly better.

Matt and Seth were sitting on the couch, watching that zombie show Seth liked. Neil paused by the door and waited for Seth to sneer or snarl or demand Neil find a new place to stay, but Seth didn’t do any of those things. He slid Neil a bored look and said, “‘Sup, fuckface.”

Neil blinked in surprise. The air in the suite felt lighter all of a sudden as if their fight had never happened. He didn’t understand how Seth did that.

Matt gave him a nod of acknowledgement. “How was Wymack’s?”

“It was fine.” Neil ignored the urge to retreat and walked further into the main room. He hesitantly gestured to the TV and asked, “What’s this about?”

Seth made a show of hitting the pause button before he went to the kitchen. “You explain it,” he told Matt. “I’m gonna make more popcorn.”

“Make enough for us, too,” Matt called after him.

“Make it yourself, dickmunch.”

Matt ignored him and beckoned to Neil. “Come sit. You’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”
The beginning of the semester had been slowly creeping closer for a while, but Neil was still taken by surprise when it arrived at his doorstep. Over the course of a few days, the campus seemed to explode with activity. Thus far, the only other people at the Tower were the football players who had come early for preseason. When Neil snuck out on Sunday for a run, he was met with an elevator crowded full of luggage and three people he’d never seen before.

He took the stairs instead.

There were cars parked along the streets near the dormitories and the sidewalks were teeming with people carrying boxes, bags, and laundry baskets of stuff into the buildings. Neil avoided eye contact as he jogged past them. He felt like he was being watched.

On Monday night, some of the football players on the fourth floor decided to get drunk and they seemed to have a competition to see who could make the most noise. Matt gave Neil a pair of squishy foam earplugs while Seth threw an Exy ball up at the ceiling repeatedly until someone upstairs finally turned the music down.

“Next time we’ll do the plunger trick,” Seth said. Neil didn’t think he wanted to find out what he meant by that.

On Tuesday, the Foxes were required to see Dr. Dobson for mandatory, half-hour sessions just as Matt had said. The only one exempt from this was Andrew and that was only because he had therapy the next day. Neil considered telling Wymack that he’d been seeing Dr. Dobson weekly too so he wouldn’t have to miss practice, but he chickened out at the last moment. He didn’t want Wymack questioning his mental stability so close to their first game.

Renee and Neil were scheduled last. During a water break, Dan and Renee felt the need to reassure Neil that the psychiatrist was nice and that he would be fine. Allison rolled her eyes and said, “I’d bet my entire savings account that he’s been sent to a shrink before.”
Neil finished his water and didn’t say anything. He rode with Renee over to the Reddin Health Center in Andrew’s car. He wasn’t comfortable enough to ask why Andrew trusted her so much. The upperclassmen had bets on whether or not the two goalkeepers were secretly dating, but Neil couldn’t wrap his head around the idea. Did they hold hands while Andrew prattled on about far-fetched conspiracy theories and hare-brained schemes to commit murder? Was it just a physical thing? Neil shook his head to banish the thought before it could give him a headache.

Reddin was a sprawling, one-story building that was split into two separate wings. Renee quickly found a parking space near the doors and asked, “Are you nervous?”

Neil answered, “Not really.”

“That’s good,” she said, smiling. “Betsy really is wonderful. I’m sure you’ll get along great.”

The woman at the front desk smiled at them while she talked on the phone and typed something into her computer. Renee gave her a small wave and led Neil to the wing that housed the offices of the mental health professionals PSU kept handy. Renee signed them both in at a little desk and the guy working there said, “Whichever one of you is up first can head on back. Betsy’s ready for you.”

“Thanks, Thomas,” Renee said. She walked with Neil to the middle of the waiting room, which was decorated in shades of blue. “Do you want to go first or shall I?”

“You can go first.”

“Okay,” she said. “Make yourself comfy. There’s a water cooler and a fridge with soda up by the desk. Just help yourself.”

“Okay.”

Renee continued down the hall by herself to find Dr. Dobson’s office. Neil sat on the couch and watched the clock. He expected his session to go smoothly. It was only half an hour and he really did feel fine even if “fine” really meant “blank.”

Half an hour later, a door opened and Neil heard Renee’s voice intermingling with Dr. Dobson’s. They came into view and traded friendly see-you-next-time’s. Renee strode over to the couch and plopped down beside Neil, saying, “You’re up.”

Neil got up from the couch and dutifully followed Dr. Dobson back into the hallway. The door with “Dr. Betsy Dobson, M.D.” on its nameplate was left half-open. There was a fat candle- bergamot and lemon, according to the label- sitting in the center of the coffee table between the doctor’s armchair and the patient’s couch. The bookcase in the back corner caught Neil’s eye; the middle shelf had several crystal figurines of animals sitting equidistant to one another.

Dr. Dobson closed the door gently and took her seat. “You can have a look, if you want,” she offered, gesturing to the shelf.

Neil silently crossed the small office to study the shelf closer, only then noticing the hot plate and kettle sitting on a low folding table behind the desk. He imagined one of her drawers was filled with packets of hot cocoa and individually wrapped tea bags.

The hot plate and kettle made sense, unlike the figurines. She didn’t have anything like that at her apartment. It was possible that she hid them away before their weekly cooking lessons to keep the apartment as neutral as possible, but Neil didn’t understand why they’d be on display in her office instead.
Neil pulled himself away from the shelf and sat down on the couch, flattening a decorative pillow behind his back.

Dr. Dobson folded her hands on top of her notepad and smiled at him. “How’ve you been since we last spoke?”

“You saw me two days ago,” he pointed out.

“Plenty of things can happen in a day.”

“I’ve been fine.”

“Are you nervous about your classes?”

“Best case scenario: they’re interesting. Worst case scenario: they’re not,” Neil replied with a shrug. He was more concerned about how much time he’d lose completing his assignments. The Ravens majored in the same subject and took the same classes, so assignments were a group effort. Neil didn’t miss them, but he wasn’t exactly looking forward to taking classes alone.

She studied him for a moment and asked, “How are you feeling right now?”

“Kind of annoyed that I’m missing practice.”

“I thought you might be,” she said with a chuckle. “Do you feel like the team is ready for the game on Friday?”

“I don’t know. I feel like it could go either way,” he said neutrally.

The Foxes didn’t stand a chance against Breckenridge. Confidence was impossible to keep when faced with the Foxes’ disorganization during practice. Neil rolled his shoulder and nervously shifted against the cushion.

Dr. Dobson nodded slowly in understanding. “What about after the game? Any plans?”

“Not really.”

“You’ve been working really hard this summer. It might be good for you to get out and have some fun.”

Neil made a face. “I have to practice and I’ll probably have stuff to do for class.”

“When’s the last time you went to a game that you weren’t playing in? The football team’s playing UGA this weekend. Is there someone on the team you’d feel comfortable asking to go with you?”

“I get along okay with Matt, but... football? Really?”

“You might have a good time,” she said. “Sports are supposed to be entertaining, aren’t they?”

“I’ll think about it,” he lied.

When the session was over, Dr. Dobson wished him luck with his classes and reminded him that he had her phone number in case he needed to talk before Sunday. Neil hurried back out to the waiting room, eager to get back to practice.

The strange sense of calm only lasted until the next morning. Matt’s alarm went off two hours earlier than usual and jolted Neil out of a dream. Once he remembered what day it was, his stomach twisted.
Matt fumbled with his alarm until the blaring noise cut off and then he let out a loud yawn. “Neil? You up?”

“Yeah,” Neil replied.

Matt yawned again before he got out of bed. The bedroom door swung open and the light in the hallway clicked on. Neil rubbed at his eyes as he reminded himself that he used to get up earlier at Wymack’s and that he survived on less sleep at the Nest. His head throbbed with the need for more sleep as he peeled himself away from his warm bed.

His thoughts oozed together like broken egg yolks as he got ready to go. He drank cold coffee from the fridge with Matt and let out a jaw-cracking yawn while he stuffed his feet into his shoes.

“You’ll get used to it,” Matt said through another yawn of his own.

Seth shuffled out of the bedroom, rubbing his eyes. “Fuck,” was all he said before they left.

The girls were waiting for them in the hallway and Dan immediately leaned against Matt for support. Renee and Allison looked unfairly alert. Neil tried to hide how tired he was.

At the gym, Dan egged everyone on, telling them to work harder and push themselves. “Are you guys still asleep or something?” she barked. “Wake the fuck up. Let’s go.”

Allison retorted, “If you can still talk, you’re slacking.”

Morning conditioning ended much sooner than Neil expected. He didn’t realize what time it was until Wymack bellowed, “Eight o’clock, fuckbuckets! Time for school.”

Everyone except Andrew was startled.

“Remember we’ve got a full campus and not enough security guards to babysit you,” Wymack said. “Watch out for each other and play nice with the other kids. Now, get outta here. Anyone late to class eats gym socks for dinner.”

Neil smeared sweat across his brow with his damp wristband and trudged off with the others to shower and change out.

Thanks to his appearance on Kathy Ferdinand’s show, his name and face were all over the internet, which meant anyone who followed college Exy would be able to pick him out of a crowd. Because of this, the upperclassmen told Neil they’d be walking with him to and from his classes. It made Neil feel like a burden, but he didn’t say anything out of fear of sounding ungrateful.

At eight thirty, Neil left the Tower with Matt and mixed in with the stream of students heading down the hill toward campus; most of them were clad in Palmetto’s colors. Neil clenched his hands around the strap of his new messenger bag.

He made it to his biology class with five minutes to spare and managed to get a seat near the back corner. “Biology 1030” was written in the middle of the blackboard. Other students filed into the room and slowly filled the empty seats. Some looked put together and well rested, while others wore sleep-rumbled sweats and clutched to-go cups from a nearby coffee kiosk. Neil made a mental note to get some coffee on his way to his next class.

At exactly eight forty-five, a woman strode into the room with a fat leather satchel bouncing against her hip and a thermos in her hand. She was dressed in jeans and a plain white top with a blue blazer over it. Her thick black hair was wrestled back into a bun and impaled with a pencil.
After she dropped her satchel on the table at the front of the room, she looked over her students and said, “Good morning. I am Dr. Gloria Ruiz and this is Biology 1030. We’ll start with this semester’s syllabus.”

She pulled a thick stack of paper out of her satchel and dropped it in front of the person nearest the door. As she wrote a few things on the blackboard and began talking, the stack was passed around the room until everyone had a copy of the syllabus.

Somehow, she found enough things to talk about for the entire fifty minutes. Neil paid attention as best he could, but when he looked down at his notes there wasn’t much there.

Dr. Ruiz released the class as soon as the clock hit nine thirty-five. Neil gathered his things and followed the line of students through the doors. Dan was waiting for him just outside with two iced coffees in hand. She gave one to him when he got to her and laughed at the way he gulped down a few mouthfuls.

“How’d it go?” she asked.

Neil made a noncommittal noise and kept drinking, desperate for the caffeine.

Dan linked arms with him as they walked toward the web of footpaths shaded by wide trees. “What’ve you got next?” she asked.

“Intro to Public Health over in Griffith.”

“Awesome. That’s close by.”

They veered left and went up a shallow set of steps as Dan made comments about the weather and how she wanted to have a team dinner at Abby’s house on Thursday. The path they were on cut behind Reddin and let them out onto the road near Griffith Hall.

Dan walked with him all the way to the stairwell inside the building. She left him with an encouraging thumbs-up and a breezy, “See you later!”

With a few minutes to spare, Neil finished the iced coffee and pitched the cup in the first trash can he saw. On the third floor, he found the right classroom and slipped inside. The man that Neil assumed was Professor Fitzgerald was perched on the edge of a desk eating a granola bar. He was an older man with weathered skin, a receding hairline, and a belly that stretched his teal polo shirt over his belt.

Neil went to an empty seat in the second to last row and avoided the professor’s eyes by arranging a notebook and a couple pens on his desk.

Fitzgerald told the class to call him Larry and, unlike Ruiz, he spent more time talking about himself than going over the syllabus. More than once, Neil had to jab his pen into his thigh to keep himself awake while Fitzgerald droned on and on about his academic and professional background.

When Fitzgerald’s time was finally up, the students packed their things and scurried out into the hall like they were afraid of giving him another chance to start talking again. Neil nearly bumped into Allison in his rush to escape the crowd.

She arched an eyebrow at him and asked, “When’s your next class?”

Neil dug out the campus map that he’d written his schedule on. “Twelve thirty.”
“That’s good. We’ve got time to eat.” She put her arm around his shoulder, ignoring the way he tensed under it, and kept it there all the way to the northwestern corner of campus.

Ashworth Dining Hall was an old building that was tucked away behind some trees near the pond. Sweat coated the back of Neil’s neck by the time they stepped into the chilly air conditioning. He followed Allison through the buffet line in the main dining room and piled chicken, vegetables, and rice onto his plate. They sat down with Seth at the end of a long table.

Thankfully, Allison and Seth were back together, which made it easier to be around the two of them. Neil quietly ate his food while they told each other about their classes. Allison hated one of her professors, apparently, and Seth joked about failing Organizational Psychology. Halfway through the meal, Neil realized he couldn’t remember which classes Jean was supposed to be taking that semester.

Fifteen minutes later, Allison left to meet with her advisor and an awkward silence settled over the table once she was gone. Neil didn’t know how to interact with Seth anymore. He was sure he’d ruin the unspoken, fragile truce between them. He didn’t even understand how it came to be in the first place.

“Guess I’m walking you to class,” Seth grumbled. “Come on.”

Neil followed his lead. They took their trays up to the front and threw away their trash. As they walked back outside, Seth asked, “What’ve you got next?”

“Intro to Psychology,” Neil answered.

Seth looked vaguely interested. “Who’s your professor?”

“Jepsen.”

“Good luck with that,” Seth said wryly. “Vicky kinda hates athletes. Listen, don’t sit in the back, don’t avoid eye contact when she’s talking, and don’t call her by her first name right off the bat.”

Neil dug his sunglasses out of his bag and slipped them on while he took in Seth’s advice. “Why does she hate athletes?”

“Probably ‘cause a lot of them pay their tutors to write their papers, which is also something you should avoid doing. Vicky always knows and she’ll make your life hell for it.”

They crossed the street to get to Pritchett Hall, a newer building with rows of large square windows and young trees planted out front. Seth left Neil at the door without a word and went off to his next class.

Neil went inside and found the right classroom. Following Seth’s advice, he snagged a seat in the middle of the fourth row. He quietly observed his classmates until Professor Jepsen strode into the room. She was impossible to miss in her sunny yellow dress that flared around her dark brown calves. Her high heels clicked on the tile floor and gold earrings glinted from under her shoulder-length curls. She dropped her canvas bag on her desk and turned her sharp stare on her class, which had fallen silent upon her entry.

After a few more seconds of tense silence, Professor Jepsen broke into a wry grin and said, “Relax, guys. I haven’t even given you a good reason to be nervous yet.”

She started them off with a quick round of self-introductions before launching into an overview of the syllabus, class policies, and what they could expect that semester. Half an hour before the class
was scheduled to end, she sighed and said, “Well, that’s all I have for you today, so you’re free to go. I’ll see you on Monday.”

Neil slung his bag over his shoulder and slipped out of the room with the rest of his classmates. Because he was let out early, there was no one waiting to walk back to the Tower with him, which was a relief.

Outside on the sidewalk, he walked slowly and weighed his options. He had an hour and forty-five minutes before afternoon practice and his most pressing assignment was just some reading for Friday’s biology class. There was no reason why he should hurry straight to the Tower.

Hesitantly, he turned to go in the opposite direction of the route he was supposed to take.

There was a coffee house called the Mugshot a couple blocks away from the rec center that housed the gym the Foxes used every morning. Just inside the cafe door, engulfed in the scent of fresh coffee, Neil decided that a small indulgence wouldn’t hurt. After all, it was a hot day and he had some money in his wallet. An iced drink would make the long walk to the Tower a little easier.

He ignored the way the barista’s eyes kept flicking down to his burn scar while he placed his order and paid. Once the barista handed him his iced tea, he went back out into the hot afternoon sun and found his way back to University Boulevard, which cut south through the middle of the campus. Along the way, he attempted to walk in as much shade as possible out of fear of another sunburn.

Neil finished his tea and shook an ice cube into his mouth when he was sure no one was around to see him do it. The calm he felt wasn’t hollowed out like it had been the day before. His classes were over, he had five hours of Exy practice to look forward to, and then dinner. Overall, it was shaping up to be a pretty decent day.

As soon as he turned onto Perimeter Road, his phone started buzzing in his pocket. Andrew’s name was on the display, which was enough to make irritation rise in Neil’s chest. He answered only because he knew Andrew would keep calling until he did.

“What do you want?”

“Well, he doesn’t sound dead, Kevin.” Andrew’s voice was distant and Kevin’s angry reply was muffled. After a moment, Andrew asked, “Where have you toddled off to? Your babysitter is throwing a tantrum.”

“I’m almost at the Tower,” Neil said. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Have it your way, then.”

Neil put his phone back in his pocket and mentally thanked Professor Jepsen for letting class out early.

The suite was quiet and dark when he got back to it. Relieved, he flicked on the light, locked the door, and kicked off his shoes. A bead of sweat trickled through his hair to roll down the side of his face and his t-shirt was clinging uncomfortably to his skin. He quickly got a change of clothes from the bedroom and treated himself to a five-minute cold shower.

After he was dressed, Neil padded barefoot out to the main room and put his bag on his desk. He stacked his textbooks on one side and tried not to be annoyed that he brought them to class for nothing and that he’d nearly worried himself sick over getting the right editions of the books on time. With a heavy sigh, he sat down to read the recommended section for biology.
Some time later, he heard Kevin and Andrew’s voices in the hall and he held his breath until he was sure they weren’t coming to knock on his door. There was no doubt in his mind that Kevin would try to talk to him when the team went to practice- either to scold him for wandering off alone after class or to go over something for Friday’s game- but for now he could relax in his desk chair and try to forget that Kevin existed.

Unfortunately, reading didn’t kill as much time as Neil hoped it would and he was left staring down the better part of an hour with nothing to do. He pushed his toes against the carpet to spin his chair in a slow circle before deciding there was no reason he shouldn’t get a little extra exercise in. After spinning his chair around a second time, he got up to stretch.

Eventually, the suite’s door swung open and Matt said, “Starting early, are we?”

Neil stopped doing sit-ups and pushed himself to his feet as Matt went to the kitchen for a glass of water.

“So,” Matt said, leaning heavily on the word, “how was the first day?”

“It was fine,” Neil replied.

“Things’ll get more interesting. Don’t worry.”

Thankfully, Matt didn’t pursue the small talk further than that. Once Seth came back, Matt’s attention was taken up by Seth’s rant about something the freshmen football players- whom he referred to as “those fourth floor fuckers”- had said about the Exy team in the elevator.

When it was time to leave for practice, the three of them stepped out into the hall together. Neil froze when he heard Kevin snap, “Nathaniel.”

Seth calmly looked over the top of Neil’s head. “What crawled up his ass today?”

“Fuck if I know,” Matt muttered.

Kevin stalked down the hall toward them. “Nathaniel, we need to talk.”

The irritation in his voice made Neil’s skin prickle. “Go on without me. I’ll catch up,” he told Matt and Seth.

Seth gave a dry laugh and headed for the elevator. Matt looked unsure.

“It’ll be fine,” Neil assured him.

Kevin stood at Neil’s side with his arms folded until Matt and Seth were both out of sight. Andrew was a few feet away, flanked by Nicky and Aaron.

“You disappeared after class,” Kevin said crossly. “You know how dangerous it is for you right now.”

Arguing would only draw this out. Neil sighed heavily and deadpanned, “Yes, Kevin. Won’t happen again. Can we go now?”

“Next time, text someone when you’re not where you’re supposed to be.”

“Yes, Kevin.”

“I’m serious.”
“Whatever you say, Kevin.”

Kevin glared at him. “Whatever. Let’s go.”

Neil took the elevator down to the lobby with Andrew’s group. Andrew stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels while they all stared at the changing numbers on the display. As soon as the doors opened, Neil darted out. He stopped halfway across the lobby when he saw the upperclassmen standing by the tree a few yards away from the door. The lawn was covered in what looked like hundreds of flyers; the wind had scattered them across the grass and into the road.

Stiffly, Neil forced himself to move forward. He pushed the door open and took a step outside, vaguely aware of Andrew’s group passing him by to join the upperclassmen.

“What’s going on, guys?” Nicky asked.

“Oh, my god,” Kevin choked out.

The wind picked up again and the papers rustled. A few turned face-up where Neil could see them.

“HAVE YOU SEEN ME?” was printed above a familiar face. His mother’s somber eyes stared up at him, a tense smile on her lips. Neil hadn’t seen this photo since the last time Riko held it in front of his face and called a girl into his room.

Dan was passing a copy of it to Nicky.

“You’ve met our new defensive dealer,” was what Riko had said. Neil could almost hear him clear as day. “I couldn’t help noticing that she looks a lot like your mother.”

The heat of August vanished. Chills crawled under Neil’s flesh like beetles and he could’ve sworn he smelled fruity perfume and vanilla lotion in the air.

“You miss your mother, don’t you, Nathaniel?”

Hands slid over him, stripping away his clothes and his dignity. His own personal hell was laid bare for everyone to see. They would all know how damaged he was. It was written all over his skin, he was sure of it.

Neil couldn’t move or breathe or think.

His body always betrayed him, never functioned like he needed it to.

An arm locked around Neil’s shoulders and forcibly dragged him back inside. Neil stumbled, but he was forcibly kept upright. Kevin’s voice swam in his ear before he was shoved into the elevator.

Kevin looked shell-shocked. He smacked the button for the third floor and grit out, “Go back to your room,” without meeting Neil’s eyes.

The elevator rose and, when it stopped, Neil’s feet carried him forward. At the door of the suite, it took him a minute to remember how to get in.

He stood in the main room, blinking dumbly at the carpet.

“This boy needs a woman’s touch. He misses his mother.”

Hot bile surged up from his stomach.
He made to the bathroom just in time to bend over the toilet. When his stomach was empty, he sat back on his heels, shivering and breathing hard. His abdomen ached. The porcelain was cold under his hands; the tile floor was hard under his shins.

“Your mother must’ve loved you a lot before you got her killed.”

His mother stared out at him from the photograph as his body was violated.

“What would she say if she could see you now?”

Sharp nails were clawing at his chest.

Saliva clung to his chin. Something buzzed in his pocket.

“She’d be disgusted,” Riko said, and Neil believed him.

Violent tremors shook through him, locking up his muscles and rattling his bones. His pocket kept buzzing. He sucked in short gasps of air, but he couldn’t let any of it out. His lungs were swelling and swelling, about to burst. The thumpthumpthump of his pulse was deafening.

A keening sound cracked in his throat and all the air in his lungs rushed out in a great big shuddering breath.

Everything was mashed together. Past and present. A mattress and a tile floor. Perfume and vomit. He didn’t know what to do, but there was something at the back of his mind: a small seed planted months ago that had taken root. He’d been through this before. Breathe, he told himself. He inhaled deeply and forced himself to exhale. Breathe. Focus. What’s next?

Neil pulled the half-finished roll of breath mints from his pocket. One clattered to the floor as he hastily tore back the paper. He stuffed three into his mouth and bit down hard to break them. He pressed his tongue against the shards until the peppermint stung him. Mint mixed with the aftertaste of vomit in an unpleasant way, but at least it was stronger than the memory of perfume.

It’s over. He rapped his knuckles against the floor, just hard enough to get small shocks of pain. This is real. The rest is not.

He was alone, he was safe, and two years sat firmly between him and the last time he was raped.

His lungs felt stretched out and misshapen as he breathed. His soul was wrung out like a used rag and his body was crumpled on the floor like a broken toy, but the storm in his head was clearing up. He stayed in the safety of the locked room until he was fairly certain he could move without falling apart.

First, he flushed the toilet. Then, he got up to rinse his mouth out and brush his teeth. The boy in the mirror looked pale as a ghost with iced-over eyes. He checked the time on his phone. His panic attack had cost him twenty minutes and most of the circulation in his legs. Prickly waves of pins and needles rolled from his calves to his toes as feeling returned.

Anxiety spiked when he saw that there were two missed calls from Wymack, one voicemail message, and a text. When Neil played the voicemail message, he heard Wymack’s voice say, “Hey, kid, heard you were having some trouble. You don’t need to come in today, but I have a feeling you will anyhow, so start walking around four if you can. Nicky and Andrew will be heading back from Reddin and they’ll pick you up on Perimeter. Don’t be reckless.”

The text was from Matt: flyers are gone coast is clear
Neil sighed heavily and hung his head in shame. They all saw the pictures. They all caught a glimpse of his nightmares.

But the pictures hadn’t shown up randomly. They didn’t sprout out of thin air. Someone left them there intentionally.

Neil was too numb for anger; it was hidden away behind a soundproof wall, waiting to erupt.

At four, Neil made sure he got rid of all traces of his breakdown and left the suite. He glanced around warily as he walked downstairs, expecting to see his mother’s face plastered to the walls. More flyers could be anywhere. The Ravens wouldn’t have any trouble getting around now that the semester had begun. Campus security wouldn’t notice a few extra college kids.

His skin was hypersensitive- his shirt brushing against his skin made him flinch, his jeans felt too rough on his legs. He shied away from the brush of wind. He wanted to hide from the heat of the sun. When he heard a car slow down behind him, he grimaced and wished he’d ignored Wymack’s instructions to wait for a ride from Nicky and Andrew. He didn’t want to see them.

Andrew rolled down the passenger side window and called, “You riding with us or what?”

Neil stopped walking and Nicky braked, jerking the car to a halt. The doors were unlocked already, so Neil let himself into the backseat. Andrew put his window back up and blasted the air conditioning as Nicky drove forward.

Nicky glanced back at Neil nervously. “You okay?” he asked.

“Don’t talk to him,” Andrew snapped. “I want tacos tonight.”

“We can get tacos,” Nicky mumbled, glancing in the rearview mirror at Neil. He seemed embarrassed when he realized Neil caught him.

“And ice cream for dessert,” Andrew said. “We should go to the desert for winter break. The Sonoran one. I watched something about it.”

“I’m going to Germany for Christmas, remember? You could let Aaron and Kevin take turns driving if you still want to go.”

“Ugh, no. We’ll just rewatch Lost at Abby’s.”

“Aaron hates that show.”

Andrew snorted. “I am aware.”

“I don’t know why you go out of your way to torment your brother.”

“Oh, Nicky, you know damn well why.”

There was silence in the front seat for about a minute before Andrew started rambling about the Hoover Dam.

The Foxes were taking a water break when the three of them finally got to the locker room. Neil burned with mortification as he started pulling his gear out of his locker. He could feel everyone staring at him. Peripherally, Neil saw Matt open and close his mouth several times before giving up on whatever he wanted to say. Dan inched closer to Neil, but it was Wymack who spoke first.

“All right, now that the gang’s all back together we’ll start scrimmages. Dan, thoughts?”
Dan cleared her throat. “Okay, uh, I’ll partner up with Kevin on offense on the away side with Nicky, Aaron, and Renee. Allison, you’re with Matt on defense for the other side. I want everyone going extra hard. We need to be ready for Breckenridge on Friday.”

The phone in Wymack’s office rang. Wymack mumbled something under his breath and went to go answer it. Dan floundered for something else to say to her team. Neil quickly finished getting his gear together, hoping to escape to a shower stall before anyone could talk to him, but he forgot all about that when Wymack shouted, “Andrew Joseph Minyard, why is there a cop asking about you?”

“Maybe he’s a fan of my work!” Andrew shouted back.

Wymack appeared in the doorway with his hand covering one end of the cordless phone. He gave Andrew a hard look and said, “Talk to him and deal with whatever shit you’ve got going on. Make it quick.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Andrew drawled as he took the phone from him. Putting it up to his ear, he said, “Greetings, Officer Whoever-you-are!”

Neil watched curiously as Andrew’s gaze sharpened and his body went dangerously still.

“Oh, Piggins,” Andrew said lowly. “Piggins, Piggins, Piggins, have they been putting something funny in your donuts? Sober-you would have known better than to call little ol’ me.”

As he listened to whatever the police officer said, Andrew’s eyes narrowed and his smile melted away. Something was getting through his armor. With growing alarm, Neil realized that Andrew might have been lying when he claimed not to have any weak points.

“No,” Andrew bit out before hanging up. His lips pursed and he tapped the phone against his palm. “Hey, Coach, I’m-”

The phone rang again. Andrew looked down at it hatefully and answered with a brisk, “No means no, Piggins,” before hanging up again.

“Bad news?” Wymack asked.

“Yeah, he says I’m coming down with a cold.” Andrew faked a loud, hacking cough and thumped his fist against his chest. “Oof, sorry, Coach. Today’s no good. There’s always tomorrow, yes? Buh-bye now.”

Wymack caught a handful of Andrew’s t-shirt to stop him from leaving and demanded, “What kinda trouble are you in?”

Andrew grabbed Wymack’s wrist and gave him a shark-like grin. “Sickness is catching, old man. Go wash your hands.” He twisted free of Wymack’s grasp and dumped the phone in the trashcan on his way out of the room.

“Andrew, come back here,” Kevin called.

“The fuck was that?” Seth asked no one in particular.

Nicky frowned at Aaron. “Why would Higgins be calling?”

Dan asked Renee, “Should you go after him?”

“If he wanted me to follow, he would’ve said so,” Renee replied.
“Well, this is fantastic,” Allison said sarcastically. “The monster’s out and the freshman lost his mind over some goddamn flyers. This year’s off to a great start.”

The Foxes dissolved into chaos once more. Dan chided Allison. Seth gloated loudly about being right when he predicted everything would go wrong, which earned him a dirty glare from Matt. Nicky and Aaron switched to German to talk about Andrew and the police officer.

Wymack raised his voice to be heard. “Simmer down, meatheads. Get your sorry asses back out on the court.”

Neil slipped away to change into his practice gear. He was still reeling from his own upheaval and disturbed by the way Andrew looked when he took that phone call, but he tried his best to shift his thoughts toward Exy.

Unfortunately, stepping out onto the court didn’t settle his heart like it usually did. The Foxes were short a goalkeeper, Allison and Seth started bickering about something, Aaron was distracted, and Neil couldn’t bear to look directly at Kevin because he was a walking reminder of the Nest.

The scrimmage ground to another halt when Nicky and Seth got into a spat that evolved into shoving and swinging at each other. Neil stood off to one side while Dan, Matt, and Renee tried to break up the fight.

A bubble of frustration cracked the wall in Neil’s head and the anger leaked out like hot oil, sputtering and spitting and ready to catch fire. He knew why Riko did it. It was his punishment for intervening at Hebe’s Cup the first time Riko tried to get revenge. Riko was trying to put him back in his place.

Fuck that, Neil thought viciously. If Riko didn’t like how Neil behaved, it was his own fault. He didn’t get to kick Neil out of the Nest and expect him to keep playing by the rules.

Neil wanted to make him bleed.

After practice was over, Neil couldn’t stop himself from slamming his locker door. No one said anything about it, but Matt kept sending worried looks his way. Neil’s teeth ached from clenching his jaw. He still wanted to hit something, even after a few hours of clashing against the others on the court.

The only thing strong enough to douse the heat in his heart was the sight of Andrew standing on the sidewalk outside the Tower with that horrible smile stretching his mouth as wide as it would go. Neil needed to warn him. Riko would find the gap in his armor and blow it wide open.

“Do you need me?” Renee asked.

Andrew nodded twice and pivoted on his heel; Renee followed him away from the group.

The rest of the Foxes went inside and took the stairs up to their floor. Matt seized the opportunity to ask, “Who’s Piggins?”

“Officer Higgins,” Nicky answered from the front of the group. “He’s the reason we found out that Aaron had a long-lost twin.”

Dan said, “Okay, that’s a story I want to hear.”

Aaron threw a disdainful look over his shoulder. “Read some tabloids if you want gossip.”
“You guys cause trouble like it’s your job. Don’t get pissy when people actually pay attention,” Allison shot back.

Aaron and Kevin disappeared into the cousins’ suite as soon as they reached the third floor. Nicky lingered out in the hallway with a troubled look. Neil wouldn’t have blamed him if he didn’t want to be alone with the other two.

“Nicky, you can come hang with us if you want,” Matt offered.

Nicky flicked a look at Seth and shook his head. “Thanks, but no thanks. I’m gonna call Erik. See you guys tomorrow?”

Matt nodded and said, “Sure, man.”

Neil didn’t feel like being around the upperclassmen, so he said he was going to take a nap and crawled into his bed. Instead of sleeping, Neil idly flipped through the self-help book. He went over the section on triggers again, jotted a few notes down in the margins, and then he turned onto his back to stare up at the ceiling until Dan knocked on the door and said, “Neil, we got dinner. You hungry?”

Food was a necessity, so Neil forced himself to get up. While they ate, Matt and Dan verbally tiptoed around what had happened to Neil that afternoon. Allison and Seth were too busy bickering quietly about whether or not Seth was “in a mood” that day to take notice of the awkwardness.

After the food was mostly gone, Allison went away to talk to Matt’s mother on the phone and Seth disappeared to meet up with some friends. Neil tried to go back to the bedroom so Dan and Matt could have some privacy, but Dan caught his shoulder and gently shoved him toward the couch. “You live here,” she said. “If we want alone time, we’ll go somewhere else.”

Matt slapped a hand down on the couch cushion next to him. “Come on. Bad reality TV will cure what ails ya.”

Neil didn’t think he could get away with saying he wanted to go to bed early since he already faked a nap. He sat down and left as much space between himself and Matt as he could. Dan got a bowl of pretzels while Matt found the right channel. Dramatic theme music played and the host of the show started talking about the events of last week’s episode.

Neil politely took a pretzel when the bowl was offered to him and chewed quietly, counting down the minutes until the show would end. It was mind-numbing, which he would have appreciated after all that had happened that day if he wasn’t anxious to speak to Andrew. He hoped Renee would get back soon.

An episode and a half later, Renee finally came limping in. She fought back a wince and said, “Hey, guys. How’s it going?”

Dan was on her feet in an instant, rushing over to put a supportive arm around Renee’s waist to help her to the couch. Neil got up to offer her his seat, which she took with a grateful smile. Matt muted the television and put a pillow in his lap for Renee to rest her injured leg on, muttering, “Jesus, what’d he do to you?”

A bruise bloomed along her jaw, another swelled around her bloodshot eye, and she moved carefully like most of her body was in pain. Neil looked at her raw knuckles and wondered what state she left Andrew in.

“It’s nothing,” Renee said with a wave of her hand. “He was faster than usual today, that’s all. I
caught up with him, though.”

“Good. He deserves to have his ass kicked,” Dan said.

Renee cocked her head and gave her a meaningful look.

“Where is he?” Neil asked. “I need to talk to him about something.”

Matt, Dan, and Renee blinked at him in bemusement and then they exchanged looks with each other.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Matt said.

“Yeah, probably best to avoid the monster for now,” Dan agreed.

Renee had steel in her eyes. “Can it wait?”

“No,” Neil replied.

Cutting off Dan’s protest, Renee said, “He might be on the roof. If he tells you to leave him alone, I’d suggest you do so.”

Neil thanked her and strode quickly out of the suite.

The door to the roof was closed, but the lock had been tampered with to prevent it from doing its job. Stepping out into the stuffy night air, Neil could almost see why Andrew chose this spot to retreat to. Palmetto’s campus lights formed a glowing carpet beneath the darkening sky. A whisper of a breeze swept some of the lingering heat away.

Andrew sat on the ledge with his feet dangling over the four-story drop and a cigarette hanging from his mouth. As Neil got closer to him, he gruffly said, “Unless you’re selling girl scout cookies, I’m not interested in whatever’s about to come out of your mouth.”

Neil came to a stop a foot away from him. “I want to know why that cop called you.”

Andrew cocked his head, still staring off into the distance. “Old acquaintance. He wanted to catch up.”

“You said you didn’t have any weak spots.”

“I don’t have weak spots.”

“That’s not what it seemed like today. Something got under your skin.”

Andrew looked up at him dryly and puffed on his cigarette. “Gloating isn’t a good look on you.”

“I’m not gloating. I told you you’ve got a giant target on your back and if you’ve got weak spots it’s safer to assume Riko already knows about them. He’ll come after you. You need to be prepared.”

“Wow, you got any free tips about the stock market? Those might actually be useful.”

His flippant tone pissed Neil off. “I’m serious.”

“I’m Andrew.”

This wasn’t working. Neil realized he probably wouldn’t give up something that important for nothing in return. Gritting his teeth, he sat down next to Andrew on the ledge.
“Persistent,” Andrew said. “What if I push you off?”

“I’m guessing I’d fall.”

Andrew nodded sagely. “Flightless bird. Tragic.”

Neil stole Andrew’s cigarette and rolled the stick between his fingers, trying to let the familiar scent calm him down. It was difficult not to picture his mother, though, especially since her photograph was so fresh in his mind.

Shaking, he took the plunge. “What if I traded you something?”

“What, like my cigarette?”

“I’ll tell you about the photos if you tell me about the phone call.” Even in the dim light Neil could see Andrew’s stare sharpen with interest.

“The bait’s not bad. I’ll bite.”

“At the Nest, you either bend or you break. I stopped bending after a while, so Riko figured out a way to break me.” Neil swallowed the hot lump in his throat and looked out over the campus; he could feel Andrew’s eyes on him. With a fortifying breath, he continued, “Riko knew how important my mother was to me, so he tried to ruin her. He stole the only picture I had of her and found a girl on the team that looked similar.”

Andrew started to move. Neil tensed until he saw that Andrew was just turning to face him.

Neil forced the rest out in a rush. “Riko handcuffed me to my bed and held up the picture while she raped me.”

The world pitched to one side. The words were out there, hanging between them with the smoke.

Andrew’s expression didn’t change. “How many times did this happen?”

“Six.”

“Same person every time?”

Neil shook his head. “There were four different girls altogether. The last one came back a couple more times.”

Andrew pulled a folded flyer out of his pocket. Neil recoiled, nearly dropping the cigarette as he scrambled to his feet. Then, he heard the click of Andrew’s lighter and his mother’s photo was quickly eaten away by the flame. Andrew set it aside to let it finish burning. The breeze knocked the ashes over the edge of the roof.

Cautiously, Neil sat back down. “Why did you keep that?”

“Piece of the puzzle,” Andrew said.

“I’m not a puzzle.”

“You’re puzzling. I’ll figure you out, though.”

It didn’t sound like a threat, but nonetheless Neil didn’t want anyone looking too closely at him.
Eventually, Andrew took his cigarette back and said, “My last foster father is being investigated for supposedly raping some kids. Higgins wanted to know if I had anything to say.”

“Is he guilty?”

Andrew scoffed. “Richard Spear would never go beyond a perfunctory pat on the head.”

“So who’s hurting the kids? Cass or Drake?”

Something dangerous flashed across Andrew’s face. “And how did you come across those names?”

“Riko hires private investigators to check out new recruits sometimes,” Neil explained. “He hired two for you, one in South Carolina and one in California.”

“Did you hear about all this recently or were you already living at the Nest at the time?”

“We’ve discussed enough of my life.”

“Fine,” Andrew said. “It’s Drake.”

There wasn’t much about Drake Spear in the file. He was a few years older than Andrew, serving in the Marines, and had no criminal record to speak of. On paper, he looked as spotless as Riko did.

Neil studied Andrew’s profile. “He raped you?”

Andrew nodded once and inhaled more smoke. After their conversation on Andrew’s porch in Columbia, Neil suspected that someone hurt Andrew in that way. There was no satisfaction in having it confirmed.

He asked, “Was he the only one who did that you?”

“Only one at that house,” Andrew replied evenly. “What’s Riko going to do with this information?”

The most obvious course of action was leaking it to the public, but without solid evidence it’d fall flat as speculation. Neil spent a few minutes turning it around in his mind and trying to see it from every possible angle, but in the end he had nothing.

“I’ll let you know if I think of something,” Neil said. “In the meantime, you need to be more careful.”

Andrew made a derisive noise.

“No one’s there to watch your back while you babysit three drunk men in Columbia. Do you have any idea how easy it would be for Riko’s cronies to come after you in a dark nightclub? All they would have to do is dump something in your drink while you’re busy keeping the others upright.”

Andrew tapped his temple. “Not much cuts through this fog.”

“You sure about that? Have you tested that fog against rohypnol? Or ketamine?”

Andrew’s expression was unreadable. Neil folded his arms over his stomach and hunched over, trying to get himself back under control. His temper could kill his chances of getting through to Andrew.

“Going to Sweetie’s and Eden’s is non-negotiable,” Andrew told him.
“I’m sure there are other places to go in Columbia.”

“Our dealer works at Sweetie’s and Roland works at Eden’s. It’s non-negotiable.”

Neil sighed. “Take someone with you, then.”

“I don’t want or need backup.”

“I thought you were serious about protecting Kevin— or maybe you just get a kick out of drugging and assaulting people he knows.”

Andrew smiled faintly. “You can’t manipulate me, but I’ll give you an A for effort.”

“What about Renee? She can handle herself in a fight and isn’t she basically your girlfriend? That’s what everyone else says anyway.”

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear.”

“Whatever. Dating or not, you seem like you can stand to spend time with her, so take her with you to Columbia from now on.”

Andrew shook his head and countered, “Kevin would drink himself blind if Renee was there radiating Jesus’s love all over the place.”

He was right. Sitting next to someone as happy and healthy as Renee would just make Kevin feel infinitely worse about himself. Without Renee, there was really only one option left. As much as Neil hated the idea of going back to Columbia again, the accompanying fear was only a dull, residual thing. Andrew was confusing, but he hadn’t been hostile in months.

“I’ll go with you,” Neil offered, barely above a murmur.

“And why would you do that?”

“If you break, Kevin will go back. I don’t want Riko to get what he wants.”

Andrew laughed hoarsely. “You think you can protect me?”

“No,” Neil said. “I can give you a warning when I think shit’s about to hit the fan, though.”

For someone who didn’t want or need backup, Andrew seemed to accept it easily enough. “What do you want in return?”

“I don’t want to be drugged, handcuffed, or threatened at knifepoint.”

“That’s no good,” said Andrew. “Pick something you’re not already getting.”

“I don’t want anything else from you.”

Andrew hmm-ed and tapped the ash off his cigarette. “I’ll give you a night for a night.”

“Meaning?”

“You come to Columbia. I’ll go to the court. Kevin will start going to bed early on Sundays. We can practice then.”

Andrew was one of the best goalkeepers in the district. One-on-one time with him was invaluable
and any striker would be stupid to turn it down, but Neil still hated himself for wanting it.

“Fine,” he said. “It’s a deal.”

“Who’s predictable now?” Andrew mocked.

Neil flicked the cigarette from between Andrew’s fingers. They both leaned over to watch it fall to the ground below.
Neil woke up with an empty head and the smell of cigarette smoke clinging to his shirt. It was dark and everything was still quiet, but he didn’t know how much time he had before Matt’s alarm went off. Flattening his palms over his stomach, he focused on his breathing while the haze of sleep lifted from his mind.

The day before, he told Andrew what happened to him. Now Andrew knew about six of the worst nights of Neil’s life. It should’ve made Neil sick, handing over his humiliation and shame for Andrew to look at, but any anger or fear or regret inside his chest was put on mute. His heart was walled off, detached from it all. He slid one hand over his chest just to feel it beating slow and steady. The numbness was almost a relief. Neil was tired of feeling ripped open just like he was tired of puzzling over Andrew’s intentions.

Matt’s alarm made him jump. While Matt groaned obscenities at the shrieking device, Neil climbed down from his bunk and went straight to the kitchen to start the coffee.

It was Thursday, he realized as he scooped the coffee grounds into the filter-lined basket of the coffee pot. Tomorrow was the Foxes’ first game.

Neil swallowed thickly and hoped the day would go by fast.

During morning conditioning, the atmosphere in the gym was uneasy. It was obvious that some of the Foxes were anxious about the game against Breckenridge, but it also seemed like they were thrown off by Andrew and Renee’s behavior. They were lifting weights together and chatting casually about a hypothetical flying car— and whether or not they would want to drive it— while sporting the ugly, swollen bruises they gave each other.

Dan, Matt, and Allison watched them without trying to be subtle about it and sometimes Neil caught their eyes lingering on him as well. He didn’t mind their staring since none of them asked about yesterday’s theatrics.

After conditioning was over, Neil ate breakfast with the upperclassmen at the Mugshot and went back with them to the Tower, where they all parted ways. Matt and Seth both had early classes to get to, so Neil had about an hour to himself before he made his way to Bear Hall again for the other biology class he was taking. He followed the route he’d taken with Matt the day before and he got to the classroom in time to get a seat near the back.
Professor Fischer showed up five minutes late with a coffee stain on the front of his beige sweater vest. He looked like he was in his late twenties. His dark hair was short and carefully styled and a pair of squarish glasses were perched on the bridge of his nose. The sleeves of his button down were rolled up to his elbows and the tip of a tattoo peeked out from under one.

“Morning, everyone,” Fischer said as he dumped his bag on his desk chair. “Next week this will be Principles of Biology I, but today it’s just an icebreaker. Let’s start off with some self-intros: I’m Joey, this is my second year teaching at Palmetto State, and I’m automatically suspicious of anyone who keeps a tarantula as a pet. You in the red hoodie, your turn.”

It took an hour to get through the self-introductions- not because of the number of students in the class, but because Fischer asked questions and offered up opinions of his own about whatever his students said. He seemed to have strong opinions about everything from jazz music to chocolate-covered raisins. When Neil stood up to speak, Fischer interrupted to say, “Lighten up, dude. It’s an intro not a murder confession.”

Neil didn’t like him.

During the last ten minutes of class, Fischer hastily went over the main points of the syllabus and told them what his office hours were. He finished with, “Time’s up, I guess. I’ll see you next Thursday. Make good choices.”

Neil left the classroom annoyed and unsure about whether or not he should stay in this class. As he walked back to the Tower, he kept his eyes on the pavement in case more of Riko’s flyers were taped up. There was a text from Dan about meeting her and Renee for lunch at Ashworth, which Neil didn’t answer until he was back in his empty bedroom: *Sorry already back at the tower.*

Dan replied, *All good see u later*

Neil lay in his bed for two mind-numbing hours until he finally got his body to cooperate again. He dragged himself to the kitchen and forced himself to eat leftover whole wheat pasta, instant rice, and a sliced-up green pepper with some hummus. He felt more sluggish than usual, so he heated up some coffee from the fridge to try to wake himself up. It didn’t help much. He wanted to go back to bed.

Somehow he stayed awake until it was time for afternoon practice. His body was heavy and a fog had settled in his head. Even breathing seemed strenuous. Matt shot him concerned looks as the Foxes jogged laps together around the inner court. Neil fantasized about napping on the bench during drills even as he reminded himself that his debut game was tomorrow. He hadn’t played against real opponents since little league and he would probably have to talk to reporters as well. It should’ve been terrifying, but the terror couldn’t get through the thick blanket of apathy he was under.

A fistfight brought the last scrimmage of the day to a halt. Seth threw the first punch and caught Kevin in the gut. Kevin went for Seth’s face. Andrew was between them in a flash and Seth was suddenly flat on his back gasping for air. Neil didn’t hear what Kevin said to set Seth off this time, but he’d been lecturing everyone all day with more condescension than usual.

After practice, the team went to Abby’s house for a large dinner together. Neil felt distantly guilty and grateful when he saw how much food she made- the table almost couldn’t hold it all. Instead of eating together, the Foxes filled up their plates and spread out over the main floor of the house. The cousins claimed the den and watched TV while they ate. Kevin stood in the kitchen with Wymack so they could discuss an idea he had for a play. Renee, Allison, and Seth sat on the patio with Abby. Before Neil could find a quiet corner to retreat to, Matt steered him toward the front room, where they sat down at the coffee table with Dan.
“God, I don’t know how I’m gonna eat all this,” she said with a weak laugh. “I always feel sick the day before a big game.”

Matt reached over to massage a little circle between her shoulder blades, assuring her, “It’ll be fine. We’re ready for this, aren’t we, Neil?”

“Yes,” Neil said slowly as he cut into his enchilada.

Dan pursed her lips and sighed unhappily. “Expectations are higher now that we’ve got Kevin. There’re more eyes on us than last year.”

“It’s a fun challenge,” Matt said. He took a sip of water and his eyes darted over to Neil like he just remembered something. “Uh, speaking of tomorrow’s game…”

Dan perked up. “Oh, right. Neil, there was something we wanted to talk to you about. Probably should’ve done this earlier, but… well…”

“We weren’t sure how you’d react,” Matt finished for her. “No offense, but it’s kind of a sensitive subject. You understand, right?”

Neil put his fork down, wiped his mouth with his napkin, and waited for the bad news.

“You know about Andrew’s situation, right? Deferred sentence, the pills and therapy—” she made a rolling gesture with one hand: *et cetera, et cetera—* and all that shit. I’m sure you’ve heard.”

“I’ve heard,” Neil confirmed.

“Here’s the thing: the pills fuck with Andrew’s ability to think straight, so around game days he fucks with the pills. Messes with his dosage or something. That’s the only way he can focus when we need him to.”

Neil had already figured out that Andrew played with his meds, but he decided to play dumb. “Oh, wow. Does Coach know?”

Dan rushed to assure him, “Oh, yeah, definitely. He and Andrew have an understanding. That’s pretty much the only reason we were able to sign Andrew— that plus Coach offered contracts to all three of them.”

“Interesting.”

“Just steer clear of him and you should be all right,” Matt chimed in.

“Actually, I’m going to Columbia tomorrow night. Thanks for the heads-up, though.”

Dan’s jaw dropped. “You’re what?”

Her volume made Matt wince.

“What what?” Andrew shouted back.

Dan shot a glare in the direction of the den, nostrils flaring.

Neil said, “I thought it’d be good to blow off some steam after the game, so Andrew’s letting me tag along.”

“How’d you get Andrew to agree to that?” Matt asked. “People don’t just tag along with the
monsters.”

“I asked and he said yes.”

Dan blinked at him. “You remember we were all there when he had a knife to your throat, right?”

“Yes, I remember. I’ll be fine. Things are different now.” Neil picked up his fork and went back to eating, hoping they would drop the subject.

“Just… be careful,” Dan warned.

“Yeah, and if you need a ride back you can always call one of us,” Matt said. “I’m serious. Call us any time. I’ll drive to Columbia at three in the morning. I don’t give a fuck.”

Neil held back a weary sigh; he wanted it to be Sunday already. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Dan and Matt exchanged a look, but that was the end of that conversation.

They went back to the dining room for seconds and the team rearranged. Nicky took a bowl of fruit and yogurt out to the front porch to call his boyfriend. Aaron disappeared upstairs. The upperclassmen wound up in the kitchen with Wymack and Abby and a half-eaten dish of lasagna. Kevin called Neil to the den where he and Andrew were sitting on the couch.

Reluctantly, Neil went down the steps and folded his arms over his chest. His little show of defiance went unnoticed, though, because Kevin’s stare stayed glued to the wall. It occurred to Neil then that Kevin hadn’t looked at him at all that day.

“You’ll have to talk to some reporters tomorrow,” Kevin said. He pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and held it out towards Neil. “I made you a list of sample questions and answers to give you an idea of what sort of things you should say.”

“Of course you did,” Neil muttered as he took the paper from him. “Is it the usual script or will it be vulgar to maintain the Foxes’ image?”

Kevin scowled at Neil’s snide tone, but kept his eyes stubbornly on the wall. “I’m trying to help,” he said. Then, quietly, he added, “You’ve never done this before.”

Andrew’s eyes were focused on Neil. The fact that he wasn’t smiling or cracking jokes was unsettling. Maybe he’d come down from high already or maybe he was pretending. Neil couldn’t tell.

In German, Neil asked, “Do you remember your first promise?”

Andrew tapped his temple. “I remember everything.”

His words weren’t very reassuring, but nothing Andrew said would be reassuring with how little Neil trusted him. It didn’t really matter what he said anyway. In twenty-four hours, Andrew would either keep his promise or break it. All Neil had to do was wait.
Neil sat in Dr. Ruiz’s classroom and wished he could have skipped General Biology. Since it was game day, the Foxes were required to wear their jerseys and the hideous shade of orange seemed even brighter outside the stadium. A few of his classmates stared openly. Some of them whispered to each other about the infamous Exy team. Neil’s skin felt tight and prickly as their words sliced through the air around him.

“Why do we even have an Exy team?”

“That must be the new guy. I heard he’s got a few screws loose.”

“Did you hear some of them got busted for cooking meth at the Tower last spring?”

“Colleges need to stop giving so much money to criminals just because they can throw a ball around. It’s fucking ridiculous.”

Neil bit down on the inside of his cheek and watched the door for Dr. Ruiz. The numbness from yesterday was starting to wear off. Anger burned around the edges of his thoughts.

Thankfully, biology was the only class he had to suffer through that day. As soon as it was over, he hurried back to the Tower. He ate lunch alone and then he tried to sleep until Matt came in to tell him it was time to go to the court.

Perimeter road was clogged with traffic and the sidewalk was crowded as they got closer to the stadium. Everyone was heading to the Foxhole Court. Neil felt paralyzed by the importance of tonight’s game. All the anxiety he should’ve felt the day before crashed into him. His body felt chilled in spite of the August heat, thick with the smell of car fumes and hot pavement.

Matt parked next to Andrew’s car and the upperclassmen got out. Neil sat in the truck bed with his arms wrapped around his knees, staring out at the packed parking lot.

“Come on, man. Let’s go,” Matt called. Dan thumped the side of the truck with her fist to break him out of his stupor.

Neil forced himself to move. He climbed down from the truck and followed the upperclassmen inside.
The Foxes quietly changed out and gathered in the foyer with their helmets tucked under their arms and the stick rack off to one side. Noise from the stadium seeped through the closed doors. The air around them was somber. Even Andrew was quiet, though Neil knew better than to think he really cared.

“Any words of wisdom, Coach?” Dan asked.

Wymack looked up from his clipboard and raised an eyebrow. “No red cards, no broken bones, and no stepping on the refs’ toes. Understood?”

“Yes, Coach,” the Foxes replied in unison.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Seth said with a dreary sigh.

Matt nudged Neil with his elbow. “You sure you wouldn’t rather blow off steam here tonight?”

Neil couldn’t think about Columbia. The game took up too much room in his head with a little voice saying, This is it. This is it.

“We’ve got warm-ups on home court,” said Wymack. “Start with relay shots and, for fuck’s sake, stay on your side of the half-court line. Save the fights for the game. Here’s the roster for tonight. Take a gander and pass it around.”

Matt and Seth peered over Dan’s shoulders at the paper Wymack handed to her. Seth immediately groaned and said, “Oh, great. The Gorilla.”

Nicky put on a contemplative look and stroked his chin. “Seth, would you say it’s better to have a guy crush you than crush on you?”

“Shut up, Hemmick.”

Dan passed the roster to Allison and Renee. Neither of them looked pleased with what they saw.

Matt rested his arm on Neil’s shoulder and said, “The Gorilla will wear himself out smacking Seth and Kevin around. He’ll be ready for a nap by the time you get out there.”

“They’re talking about number sixteen, Hawking,” Kevin explained.

Recognition clicked. Hawking was the Jackals’ best defensive player. He was six foot six and made Matt look thin in comparison.

“If it comes down to a fight, you’re on your own,” Kevin warned. He lifted his left hand as if Neil needed an explanation.

“I can take care of myself.” It wouldn’t be the first time he went up against someone that greatly surpassed him in strength and size. The master never interfered on Neil or Jean’s behalf.

“Enough chit-chat,” said Wymack. “Get your crap and line up.”

The Foxes immediately fell in line behind their captain, sorting themselves according to playing position with strikers at the front and goalkeepers at the back.

Wymack got the go-ahead from the announcer's booth through his earpiece. He pushed the doors open and led the Foxes out to the inner court while the crowd around them roared. The stadium was a riot of movement and color and sound with the empty court at the center of it all. The buzz of brass instruments and snare drums stood out above the din. The Vixens were gathered a short ways away
from the Foxes; they chanted in unison as they waved their pom poms and did some sort of choreographed dance. Neil’s blood fizzed with all the excited energy in the room. His heart swelled and slid down to his stomach.

Kevin calmly held his head high like he was above it all. The crowd roared at the sight of him. For now it didn’t matter that he was in orange instead of black, they were probably just thrilled he was back in uniform at all.

He met Neil’s eye and, as if he could read Neil’s thoughts, said, “They’re just part of the scenery. Ignore them.”

Neil didn’t think he could do that. He nodded anyway and followed Kevin onto the court with the rest of their team. The Foxes were outnumbered almost three to one; their side of the court looked almost empty compared to the Jackals’ side. Dan kept her team moving and focused while they all pretended not to hear the jeering coming from a few of their opponents near the half-court line.

After their twenty minutes were up, the teams were ushered off the court through opposite doors. The announcer’s voice came over the speaker to read the names off Palmetto State’s roster and each of the Foxes lifted their racquet when their name was called. People went wild for all of them- even Neil Wesninski. When the Jackals’ names were read, there was polite applause and some booing from the crowd behind the Foxes.

One of the referees walked out to the fox paw logo and gestured for the captains to come out for the handshake and the coin toss. Dan marched onto her court proudly to meet the Jackal captain. She didn’t get much respect from people because of her gender, race, and background. People were idiots. Neil would rather follow Dan than Riko any day.

On her way back, she flashed her team a crooked grin and two thumbs-up.

The coin toss determined that the Foxes got home court and the Jackals got first serve. Wymack stood in front of his players and said, “It’s showtime, kids. Subs, I want you at the wall supporting your teammates, but I’ll have your ass if you get in a ref’s way. Save your troublemaking for the other team. Give me a ‘yes, Coach’ and go make those fuckers sorry for stepping on our court.”

“Yes, Coach,” the Foxes replied on cue.

Whatever the announcer said next was drowned out by the screams of the fans when they saw Kevin walking out onto the court. Even Neil felt something akin to pride nestled under his ribs. He remembered Jean saying, “He’ll never play again,” and he was grateful to see him proven wrong.

The others took their places with less fanfare: Seth at half-court with Kevin, Matt and Aaron on first-court, Dan halfway between the strikers and backliners. Andrew went out last and casually strolled to his box at the end of the court.

The Jackals filed onto the court next and arranged themselves on their side. Then, the referees closed and bolted the doors. Neil stood at the wall with Nicky, Allison, and Renee with anticipation crackling under his skin. He couldn’t hear what the players were saying to one another, but one of the Jackals made a cutting gesture at Seth, who responded by flipping him off. Whatever Kevin said to Seth got the same response.

Nicky sighed. “Fifteen bucks says the first punch tonight will be friendly fire.”

Allison shook her head. “I’m not dumb enough to take that.”

“It’s the first game of the season,” said Renee. “Try to have a little faith in our team.”
Down the inner court, the Vixens cheered in support of their team and rustled their orange and white pom poms.

The starting buzzer bolted through Neil’s heart like lightning.

The Jackals’ dealer served and the players sprang into action at once.

Neil felt lightheaded as he watched the Foxes fight for control of the ball. Right before his very eyes, the strategy Kevin and Dan came up with unfolded. Neil had never seen them play like this in person and, after a summer of watching them squabble and tear each other down, he was amazed. The Jackals gave them a common enemy. For once, the Foxes were all on the same side.

Andrew was lazily twirling his racquet like a pinwheel until a Jackal striker got close enough to take a shot on goal. In a flash, Andrew batted the ball away like it was nothing and sent it flying toward Kevin, who was ready for it. The Foxes finally had the ball. Nicky, Allison, and Renee pounded on the wall in support of their teammates, but Neil was frozen in place.

Kevin couldn’t get around the Jackals’ defense, so he flicked the ball to Seth. Hawking slammed his racquet into Seth’s so hard that both sticks clattered to the floor. Dan got the ball after a short scuffle; she sprinted toward the away side and took a shot at the wall to rebound the ball to Kevin. Her momentum carried her right into the Jackals’ dealer and sent both of them sprawling. Some people booed and shouted for Dan to get carded, but the referees did nothing since it looked enough like an accident.

Unfortunately, the Foxes couldn’t get a decent opening to take a shot at the goal and soon they started to slip. Dan narrowly avoided getting carded after a barely legal check, Matt and Aaron were losing ground, and a nasty check from Hawking sent Kevin sprawling. He caught himself on his hands and Neil saw his left elbow buckle. Hawking went straight for Matt next and helped the Jackals break the Foxes’ defensive line to crowd the goal.

Wymack bellowed, “Get it together, defense!”

Andrew blocked the first few shots, but he didn’t have room to aim properly. When he tried to get the ball over the Jackals, Hawking snatched it out of the air and slammed it back down into the box.

The wall went red and the buzzer went off.

The crowd was deafening. The Foxes lost the first point on their own court and Neil felt the shame of it keenly.

The Jackals clacked sticks and slapped each other’s backs as they jogged back to their places. Kevin and Seth shouted at each other until Dan intervened. Andrew beat his racquet against the wall to get Matt and Aaron’s attention. Whatever he said to them delayed the game for a minute, but everyone was back in place before the refs could get annoyed.

Both the master and Riko insisted that the Ravens learn to be unemotional and detached when they were on the court. Anger or fear or elation all had the potential to hinder a player’s focus. It was something Neil always struggled with and something he worried about now. He could tell the Foxes were pissed off.

It wasn’t long before Neil realized that their anger made them sharper. Their checks were rougher, their passes were quicker, and the defensive line clicked in a way they hadn’t before. Whatever Andrew said to Matt and Aaron was working.

Aaron managed to steal the ball with a risky move and passed it seamlessly back to Andrew, who
fired it across the court. Kevin caught it, knocked a Jackal flat on her back, and ran deeper into
Jackal territory until Hawking reached him. Then, Kevin flicked the ball to Seth like it was second
nature, like he could sense where Seth would be. Dan wasn’t far behind. The three of them kept the
ball away from the Jackals until Kevin scored the Foxes’ first point.

Relief almost knocked Neil off his feet. He steadied himself with a hand pressed to the court wall
while the crowd behind him erupted with excitement, yelling and cheering so loudly that Neil
expected the walls to shake.

On his way back to half-court, Kevin ended up getting into a fight with Leverett, the Jackal backliner
he’d knocked over. She threw the first punch after they exchanged heated words and Kevin fought
back. Hawking viciously grabbed Kevin’s left wrist and twisted to drag him away from the other
backliner. Seth shouted something and shoved Hawking hard to make him let go of Kevin seconds
before Andrew got there. He pulled Kevin’s glove off and inspected his hand while the other players
shouted at each other.

“Should we pull him out?” Abby asked.

“He has to call it,” Wymack replied.

A referee gave Leverett a yellow card and Kevin a warning. Neil took a few slow steps along the
wall towards the home goal, restless and angry. He wanted to be out there where he could do
something. On the sidelines, he was powerless.

After the game resumed, Kevin noticeably favored his left hand, but Neil couldn’t tell if he was in
pain or just nervous. Either way, it didn’t stop him from bagging the Foxes’ second point a short
while later.

Neil’s elation was cut short when Abby gasped, “Oh, no.”

A referee’s whistle cut through the noise. Seth was crumpled against the far wall, struggling to get
back to his feet. With some help, he slowly walked off the court with one arm wrapped tightly
around his middle. Abby and Allison took him from the referee at the court door and guided him
over to the bench. Neil could hear him grumbling, “Fuckin’ Gorilla.”

Wymack called, “Neil, it’s your turn. Get out there.”

“You got this, Neil,” Renee said with an encouraging smile. “Good luck out there.”

Neil had waited years for a chance to prove himself in a real game, but now he was distracted by
thoughts of Hawking. Kevin’s hand, Seth’s ribs- if Hawking thought he could get away with hurting
Foxes, he was wrong.

“Hey, Neil,” Seth called, still noticeably winded. “Go ruin that asshole’s night.”

Neil calmly adjusted his gloves, picked up his racquet, and walked onto the court. The announcer’s
voice boomed, “Going on for Seth Gordon is freshman Neil Wesninski, number ten, of Point
Pleasant, West Virginia.”

The referee bolted the door shut behind him and the noise of the stadium was instantly muffled. A
couple Jackals hurled insults at him for taking his time.

Dan grinned at him and said, “Welcome to the party, freshman.”

“Hey,” Hawking said. “I didn’t know they let twelve-year-olds play college Exy. Have you even hit
puberty yet?"

Neil stared at him silently and thought about how this wasn’t like going up against the Ravens or the Foxes. The Jackals didn’t live down the hall from him. They wouldn’t be at breakfast the next morning. They wouldn’t be around to make his life hell after the game ended. Their only chance of retaliating against him died with the final buzzer.

Possibilities bloomed at Neil’s feet.

Dan served and chaos broke out once again. Instinct took Neil over. He was too quick for Hawking to stop right away, so he was open when Kevin needed to pass the ball to him. Eight steps later, Neil attempted a shot on goal, which the goalkeeper deflected to Leverett. Kevin knocked the ball loose with a stick-check and Dan scooped it up as it went bouncing away.

She passed the ball back to Kevin and, predictably, Hawking went after him. Neil sprinted ahead of him, got in front, and turned sharply. He managed to angle his racquet so that it got caught between Hawking’s knees as they crashed together. Pain burst all over Neil’s body as he hit the floor hard with Hawking half on top of him, but the harsh scream Hawking let out made it worthwhile.

The game came to a halt and several people rushed over. Kevin grabbed Neil’s arm and hauled him to his feet, demanding, “What the fuck was that?” as Dan patted his arms and looked him over.

“Are you okay? Jesus, that looked bad,” Matt said.

Neil hunched his shoulders and rubbed his elbow, which hurt enough that he didn’t need to fake it.

“I’m all right. I just tripped.”

He said the same thing to the referee that came over to them.

Two referees helped Hawking hobble off the court. From the look of it, he wouldn’t be coming back out anytime soon.

In spite of the Jackals’ anger and demands for Neil to be at least yellow carded, the refs decided that the whole thing was an accident, an inexperienced and nervous freshman tripping over his own shoes.

Neil swapped out his racquet for his spare one since it took too much of Hawking’s weight during the fall. Kayla Burns, Hawking’s replacement, was waiting for him when he got back to his spot.

“You’re not gonna win this,” she said. “Your team sucks ass.”

Burns was right and Neil knew it: his team was out of sync, Neil was inexperienced, and Kevin was flinching away from hits more and more. Andrew was fighting like hell to keep the ball out of his box. The Foxes were slipping.

Neil kept his mouth shut and waited for the game to start again.

The Jackals had to work harder without Hawking, but they still managed to break the Foxes’ defense again. Soon they were crowding the goal once more. Andrew blocked the first four shots easily, but the fifth got too close for comfort. Neil could only watch helplessly from further back, waiting for one of the backliners or Andrew to get the ball out of there.

Neil didn’t see what exactly happened and he didn’t hear what Andrew shouted at Matt, but the next thing he knew the game was stopped. A Jackal striker hobbled back to his team’s bench and Matt jogged off the court with a grin and a yellow card. Nicky clacked sticks with him in passing on his
way to the place Matt had last been.

Everyone pulled back to give the new Jackal striker room to take his foul shot. Andrew sent it sailing towards the away side.

Neil’s brain was a blank screen, his chest a furnace. Adrenaline burned through his body as he moved on auto-pilot to grab the ball and sprint towards the goal with it. When he got body-checked into the wall, he barely felt it. Neil got his breath back quickly and got back in the game.

Everything clicked when Kevin smashed a Jackal’s racquet away with his own to steal the ball. He passed to Dan when his ten steps were up, Dan passed to Neil off the wall, and Neil darted around his mark to shoot the ball right between the goalkeeper’s feet.

It was a risky shot, but the wall went red.

Dan threw her arms around his shoulders and shouted something in celebration of his first goal. The roar of the crowd leaked in through the vents overhead. Neil looked up at the scoreboard with his pulse thundering. Four-three. The Jackals were still ahead, but the Foxes were right behind them.

When the halftime buzzer blared, Kevin and Neil had put two more points on the scoreboard. Neil’s point came from a foul shot that he sank easily despite the fresh pain in his ribs from an illegal check. It was an easy point, not as satisfying as his first, but it meant that the Foxes left the court with the lead. Maybe they had a shot at winning, after all.

Exy had never been so exhilarating. Neil felt like his heart might burst.

The crowd screamed for Kevin when he slipped off his left glove and gave them a wave. Neil’s hands were shaking when he tried to get the cap off his water bottle; he hoped everyone was too busy watching Kevin to notice him.

A hand came down heavily on his shoulder. “Don’t get comfy,” Wymack said. “We’re heading up to the locker room to regroup.”

Neil looked up and, sure enough, Dan and Matt were already leading the others up the walkway. He grabbed his gloves, helmet, and water bottle and hurried after them.

In the locker room, Neil sat down on the end of a bench to keep himself from pacing like he wanted to. Abby dropped to one knee in front of him and said, “Let me look at you. You took some nasty hits out there.”

“I’m fine,” Neil insisted, but he didn’t put up a fight when she experimentally lifted his arm to check his shoulder.

“What was that with Gorilla? Did you forget to tie your shoelaces?” Aaron asked mockingly.

Seth scoffed. “You think twinkle-toes tripped? Get your eyes checked, man.”

Wymack gave Neil a stern look.

“If anyone asks, I’ll say it was an accident,” Neil said.

Matt blinked in disbelief. “You did that on purpose?”

“He was causing problems.”

Abby clucked her tongue and stood up. “You could’ve broken his leg or yours,” she chided.
“He could’ve broken Kevin’s hand or Seth’s ribs. Better him than one of us,” Neil replied waspishly. “Breckenridge has plenty of players to spare. We don’t.”

“That is stone cold, bro,” Seth said.

Kevin rolled his eyes. “No, it’s stupid,” he corrected. His eyes dropped to Neil’s with familiar, cutting judgement. “You’re lucky he didn’t land on you differently. You’re lucky you didn’t give them a foul shot. You know better than to pull stunts like that, Nathaniel.”

Neil’s lip curled as anger boiled through him.

“Lighten up,” Dan said, giving Kevin a withering glare. “The last thing we need going into the second half is to start bickering with each other. It’s Neil’s first college game. We’ll cut him some slack.”

“All right,” Wymack said. “It’s over. Let’s all just breathe and focus on the second half now.”

Andrew, who had been trying to down his water bottle, finally came up for air and beckoned Renee over to him. She went immediately and bent down so they could speak quietly.

“Four-five ain’t bad,” Wymack said. “I know you’re all tired, but it’s time to buck the fuck up. Defense, I want you to focus on keeping those assholes from ganging up on Renee. Offense, I don’t want you to shoot unless you’re at least seventy-five percent sure you can score. Cheap shots aren’t worth losing the ball over, okay?”

The comment wasn’t directed at Neil, but it stung him anyway.

“Kevin, you sitting the second half out?” Wymack asked.

Kevin worked his jaw and rubbed his wrist. “I’ll start us off, but I don’t know how long I’ll last.”

Dan said, “You shouldn’t go out there again. You’re no good to us if you fuck up your hand again.”

“My hand is fine,” Kevin said frostily. “Worry about your other players.”

When halftime was over, the home crowd greeted the Foxes with wild cheers, clearly eager for the game to get back underway. Neil bit the inside of his cheek and watched Seth and Kevin take their places at half-court.

Neil was wound tight as a trap, ready to snap at whoever provoked him next. Kevin’s censure made him feel nervous and ashamed of himself.

When the buzzer went off, everyone on the court sprang into action and furiously fought for control of the ball. Neil paced along the court wall, silently observing the game and keeping out of the referees’ way.

It wasn’t long before the Foxes were noticeably flagging. They were up against a fresh line-up of Jackals, who were just as relentless as the others. Five minutes in, the Jackals scored. Seth took the next point, but ten minutes later, the Jackals scored again and the score was back to being tied. The Foxes couldn’t keep the lead.

Neil folded his arms and watched his teammates on the court go back to their starting positions. Kevin and Seth looked like they were arguing again. Further down the inner court, the cheerleaders got some of the home crowd to join in an inane chant meant to encourage the Foxes. Neil tried to block the cheering out until he noticed Aaron looking over at them. One of the Vixens at the edge of
the formation smiled back at Aaron and gave him a little wave with her pom pom. She had a prominent nose, manicured eyebrows, and an orange fox paw painted on her amber brown cheek. Andrew appeared to be sleeping on the bench, unaware of his brother and the cheerleader.

Neil’s attention was pulled back to the court when Kevin and Seth went from arguing to throwing punches. Nicky and Matt tried to pull them off of each other and Renee jogged over to help, too, before the referees got involved.

Wymack shook his head and said, “Another year off my life. Mark my words, Abby, these assholes will kill me before the cigarettes get a chance. Merciful Jesus, end my suffering now.”

Abby covered her mouth with her hand, but the dimples in her cheeks gave away her smile.

“Idiots,” Dan muttered. “Kevin probably cut his time short with that dumbass move.”

On the court, Matt and Kevin were talking. Kevin was holding his wrist and there was tension in his posture. It looked like Dan was right.

Andrew sat up on the bench so suddenly it made Neil jump. Squinting, he stood up to get a closer look at the court. “Things got flip-flopped,” he said to Neil. “You’ve got a score to settle.”

“Neil, you’re up!” Wymack called.

With a deep breath, Neil put on his helmet and pulled on his gloves. His pulse was already racing by the time he took Kevin’s place.

With only twenty minutes left, there was an edge of desperation that sliced deep into Neil’s bones. The two teams fought for control of the ball for what seemed like forever. The insults hurled between players got nastier, the checks were barely legal. Neil felt bruised all over, but he knew how to push through the pain. When he finally managed to break away from the Jackals with the ball in his net, he sprinted with everything he had. He used his tenth step to tilt forward and fire at just the right angle to send the ball past the goalkeeper’s shoulder. It smacked off the wall and sounded the buzzer.

Seth slapped Neil’s back and clacked their sticks together as they headed back to half-court.

Neil’s legs were turning to rubber and it didn’t look like the other Foxes were faring much better as the game went on. Aaron and Dan switched out with Matt and Allison, but it didn’t make much of a difference. The Jackals hit Renee hard and managed to take two points within a few minutes of each other.

One of the Jackals hit Seth a little too roughly and he got to take a foul shot for it, which tied the score at eight-eight.

After the game restarted, the Jackals immediately pushed through the Foxes’ exhausted defense line and crowded the goal until they scored.

The score was nine-eight. Neil looked over his teammates as they returned to their starting positions. The next few minutes were crucial.

Things were getting blurry for Neil. Sweat dripped through his hair and soaked his neck. His skull throbbed in time with his pulse. Fresh bruises littered his body. His muscles were melting.

The Foxes were losing. Neil was a cornered animal scrabbling for a way out. There had to be a way to fix this. He couldn’t leave the court a failure.
The next time the Jackals swarmed around the goal, Neil ignored what Wymack had told him and flung himself into the fray. The Jackal dealer caught the ball a couple seconds before Neil rammed him into the plexiglass and stole it from his net. Another Jackal was on him almost instantly, leaving him only a second to make a decision. He rebounded the ball the floor at an angle that sent it bouncing off the wall and arcing toward half-court.

Everyone broke apart to scramble after it. Running on fumes and fear, Neil sprinted down the court. Seth managed a shot on goal before the rest of the Jackals reached him, which the goalkeeper deflected. Neil veered toward the middle of the floor to viciously knock the ball out of a Jackal striker’s net. He passed to Dan. She shoved a backliner out of her way and fired at the goal. The wall lit up just before the final buzzer blared.

Breathing hard, Neil looked up at the board. The score was tied. Nine-nine.

Neil felt like his heart was trying to crawl up his throat, like his body was dissolving.

Seth weakly slapped Neil’s helmet. “Not bad, fuckface. Sucks that we gotta survive overtime, though.”

Dan patted Neil’s helmet as she walked past him. “Fifteen more minutes. Deep breaths. We got this.”

As soon as the game restarted, everything fell apart. It took too long for the Foxes to get control of the ball. When Neil finally took a shot at the goal, the Jackal goalkeeper knocked it straight to his teammates and then it was over for the Foxes.

They lost by one point.

It was Neil’s fault.

While the Jackals celebrated on the court, Neil stared dismally up at the scoreboard as self-loathing sprouted in thorny patches across his chest. He missed too many shots, took too many risks, pushed himself too hard too early instead of saving his strength.

He was built to succeed at Exy and now he was a proven failure. As he followed the others off the court, he couldn’t meet anyone’s eyes. He could barely hear them speaking to one another over the unhappy murmur of the disappointed home crowd.

Abby touched his shoulder and said something to him as he put his racquet on the stick rack. Matt’s voice sounded close. Neil’s body was boneless and shivering. There were spiders skittering under his skin. The master’s voice rang in his ears: poor investment, ungrateful child, better off in a grave than on anyone’s court.

There were reporters waiting in the foyer. Kevin stopped Neil so they could answer a few questions together. Thankfully, most of them were aimed at Kevin. All Neil had to do was paste on a polite expression and say that it was thrilling to be out there with his team for the first time and, yes, he was still optimistic for the Foxes’ season.

Andrew waited for them by the locker room door until they were done faking nice for the cameras.

Inside the locker room, the atmosphere was subdued. Neil kept his head down as he quickly got a change of clothes and darted to the showers. In the privacy of his stall, he clenched his eyes shut and forced out a ragged breath. His hand clutched at the double-digit number on his jersey, wishing he’d run instead of signing Wymack’s contract. They should have found someone better, someone with real experience.
Neil could hear the others coming into the room to take their showers and talking with each other. Shaking, he peeled off his sweaty uniform and fumbled with the buckles and straps of his armor. It left him winded and weak and ready to throw up.

The hot water beat down hard on his skin, but he didn’t turn the temperature down. He rubbed shampoo over his head and then he roughly scrubbed at his skin until it was pink and oversensitive.

The shower knobs squeaked when he cut the water off. Neil clumsily dried off as best he could in a cloud of thick steam and pulled his clothes on. He was so light-headed that he nearly tipped over as he balanced on one foot to dry the other one so he could put on his sock and shoe in one go. It took him two tries to get the other sock and shoe on.

Neil took a moment to press his hands flat to the stall door and breathe before stepping outside with the bundle of dirty gear. The men’s changing room was empty and so was the locker room. He dropped his dirty uniform in the laundry basket and put the rest of his stuff away. Slinging his bag over his shoulder, he stepped out into the hallway.

Dan was waiting for him just outside the door. She hooked her arm around his neck and laughed. “There he is!”

Neil immediately tensed and tried to pull free. She ruffled his wet hair as she dragged him to the lounge, where most of the team was waiting with Wymack and Abby.

Matt grabbed his shoulder and jostled him a little. “We started to worry you drowned in there.”

“Fuck, I’m starving,” Seth complained. “Kevin better not take too long out there.”

Neil glanced around and noted that Kevin was missing along with Andrew and Renee.

Dan said something in reply, something about dinner. The words swam in Neil’s ears. The solid press of Dan’s body heat at his side felt like a threat, her arm a yoke around his neck to keep him from escaping- not that he would. He knew better than to try.

The first time Jean dragged himself back to the room after the Ravens lost a game, Neil had understood why it was worse than messing up at practice. He didn’t know the gut-wrenching ache that came with it until now. His mistakes were set in stone and televised, available for everyone to replay and pick apart forever.

After Kevin, Andrew, and Renee got back, Wymack quieted the Foxes down with a raised hand. “Listen up, everybody. I’ll be quick, then you can fuck off and do whatever you want.”

“Gonna get wasted,” Matt said under his breath, nudging Neil and grinning.

“Is it less fun now that you’re legal?” Seth asked.

“Pfft, I haven’t been legal that long, and I haven’t been carded in forever.”

Wymack gave them both an exasperated look. “Shut the fuck up and let your coach talk. Now, it sucks that we lost, but you guys played well. We need to work on getting that point gap earlier because we lose speed in the second half. Communication is another thing, same as always. More chatter, less lone wolf bullshit. I think that’s all for now. We can go over things in detail on Monday. Abby, anything to add?”

Abby smiled wryly. “There’s drinks and leftovers at my place. Be safe this weekend. Stay out of trouble.”
“Dismissed,” Wymack said, making a loose shooing motion with his hands. “Neil, go down to Abby’s office. She wants to check your shoulder again.”

Dan’s arm slipped away from him. Neil went to Abby’s office like Wymack told him to and waited for her. Half a minute later, the door pushed open, but it wasn’t Abby that stepped inside with him.

“If you’re having another one of your episodes, blink twice,” Wymack said. He folded his arms over his chest and looked uncomfortable.

Neil frowned at him. “What?”

“Talking’s a good sign, I suppose,” he grumbled. “You need me to call Betsy? She might be here already.”

“We lost.”

“And?”

“It’s my fault.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Wymack sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Look, kid, we lost and that’s a kick in the balls, but you’re not taking the blame for that just like you wouldn’t take the credit if we’d won. It’s a team sport.”

“But.”

“No buts. Breckenridge has been at the top of the southeastern division since the get-go. Tonight we dragged those smug assholes into overtime and made ’em nervous. You played well. All of you did. Next week, we’ll do better. Now get outta here and shake this off. Start fresh on Monday.”

Neil stared at him, lost.

Wymack raised an eyebrow expectantly.

Swallowing hard, Neil said, “Yes, Coach,” and skirted around him to leave the room. He wanted to take what Wymack said to heart, but the master’s words took up too much space.
Neil was roused from his nap by the chime of his phone. Groaning, he turned off the alarm and buried his face in his pillow. He didn’t want to get up. The food he ate after the game was a heavy lump in his stomach and every muscle in his body ached.

The guilt weighing him down was worse. He cost the Foxes the game. He couldn’t do the one thing he was built for.

Regardless of how he felt, he made a deal with Andrew and he wasn’t keen on the idea of going back on his word. He already let enough people down that day.

With great effort, he pulled himself out of bed and went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Then, he got dressed in the clothes Andrew bought for his first trip to Columbia and combed his hair with his fingers.

After he was done getting ready, he stayed in the bedroom to avoid Dan and Matt. Over dinner, Dan was somehow able to put their defeat out of her mind and focus on next week’s game against the Belmonte University Terrapins. Matt kept beaming at Neil, going, “Those were sweet-ass points, bro.”

Neil didn’t understand why they weren’t more upset about losing, how they weren’t consumed by it. He didn’t want to ruin their good spirits with his bad mood.

There was a loud, authoritative knock at the suite’s door. A few seconds later, Matt called, “Andrew’s here!”

Neil smoothed his shirt down over his stomach and opened the bedroom door to find Andrew
standing there with a shiny plastic bag in his hand.

“New clothes,” he said, holding the bag out toward Neil.

“I didn’t ask for new clothes.”

Andrew gave his outfit a once-over. “Are you planning to wear that every week?”

“If I feel like it,” Neil answered waspishly, shutting the bedroom door behind him. “Let’s go.”

Andrew dropped the bag of clothes on the floor—determined, apparently, to gift them to Neil—and led the way to the suite door.

Dan gave Andrew a severe look from the couch as they walked by. “Bring him back in one piece, Minyard.”

Andrew waved her off and stepped outside. Neil paused to pat down his pockets for his wallet, keys, and phone. He had plenty of cash, just in case, as well as half a roll of breath mints. He felt as prepared for the night in Columbia as he could be.

“We’ll see you later, man,” Matt said. “Call us if you need us.”

Neil replied, “Have a good night,” as he stepped out into the hallway. He locked the door behind him and tried to push down his dread.

There was muffled music coming from the suite across from Dan’s. Nicky fidgeted with the hem of his black tank top. Aaron stood sullenly beside him.

Kevin’s expression gave no hint about what he was thinking or feeling, which made Neil nervous. Kevin wasn’t usually an angry drunk, but Neil had never messed up a real game before.

Andrew toyed with the simple rectangular pendant hanging from a thin chain around his neck and said, “Now that we’ve got the awkward silence portion of the evening over with, let’s get to the good part, shall we?”

Wordlessly, they started down the hall toward the elevator. Neil tried not to wince at the soreness in his legs as Andrew fell into stride with him.

Kevin hit the button to call the elevator. When the doors opened, Renee stepped out holding a large brown paper sack. “Are you all going to Columbia?” she asked with a bemused smile.

“No, we’re all going to hell,” Andrew quipped. “Walker, keep walking lest we drag you down.”

Renee rolled her eyes, still smiling. “Have a good time, guys. Andrew, call me tomorrow.”

Neil got into the elevator first and hit the button for the ground floor. Andrew stood next to him, forcing the others to sidestep around him to get in. The ride down to the lobby was silent except for the metallic zzzing as Andrew slid his pendant back and forth on its chain.

Outside, Nicky used his key fob to unlock the car doors. Neil assumed he was supposed to sit between the twins in the back, but as soon as he opened the door, Andrew squeezed past him to plant himself in the middle. Aaron shifted closer to his door to put as much space between himself and his brother as he could. Neil tentatively lowered himself into the seat behind Kevin and pulled on his seat belt.

As Nicky drove out of the parking lot, Andrew nodded towards Neil’s door and said, “If we stop to
let me vomit, you will want to move quickly.”

“Noted,” Neil replied. “Did you take your meds tonight?”

“Don’t ask,” said Kevin. “You don’t want to know the finer details.”

Andrew’s answering grin was sharklike.

Traffic on Perimeter Road was heavy. No one spoke as the car crawled in the direction of the highway. Nicky tapped his thumbs against the steering wheel to the beat of the song playing quietly on the radio. Andrew fiddled with his necklace and bounced his leg.

When the car finally accelerated up the on-ramp, Neil stifled a sigh of relief. He wanted to get to Columbia and get the night over with.

They picked up speed once Nicky merged into the right lane. Neil stared out his window at the dark world dotted with lights and relaxed into his seat. The hum of the highway beneath the tires nearly lulled him to sleep until Andrew said, “Nicky,” with a clear warning in his voice.

Nicky swerved into the shoulder and braked hard. Neil scrambled out of the car, narrowly avoiding the splatter of vomit as Andrew emptied his stomach into the weeds. The sounds of Andrew heaving and choking made his stomach turn. Once Andrew was finished, Kevin handed him a water bottle and a tissue. Andrew rinsed his mouth out and wiped his chin before sliding back into the middle seat.

Neil gingerly stepped over the puddle and got back into the car. He offered Andrew a couple breath mints from his pocket while Nicky waited for an opening to get back on the highway.

Dryly, Andrew said, “Generous of you.”

“Your breath is foul.”

“Fowl crying foul. Funny.” Andrew popped the mints into his mouth and chewed them noisily.

From there, it took them an hour to get to Sweetie’s. Nicky went up to the host’s stand and Andrew silently flicked a hand in Neil’s direction, motioning for him to follow. Since the other option was waiting with Aaron and Kevin, Neil decided to go with Andrew to the salad bar.

He scanned the room while Andrew dug into the bucket of crackers. Most of the tables were full of people laughing and talking over drinks and desserts. They all looked like normal people enjoying a normal Friday night out.

Andrew shoved some crackers at Neil. “Feeling peckish, Raven?”

Neil threw the crackers away in the nearest trash can and gave the empty wrappers back to Andrew.

“Suit yourself.” Andrew crammed two crackers into his mouth and started in the direction of the others. Neil walked a few paces behind him, keeping an eye out for anyone that might be paying them too much attention.

When they reached the other three, Nicky said, “It shouldn’t be a long wait. How, uh, how much are we getting tonight?” He nodded toward the wrappers in Andrew’s hand.

The wrappers crinkled as Andrew’s fist clenched. “Why are you asking, Nicky?”

“Just wondering.”
Kevin explained, “He wanted to know if Nathaniel’s doing dust with us tonight.”

The threat in Andrew's eyes was clear as he stared Nicky down.

“You should give cracker dust another try,” Kevin told Neil. “It’d take the edge off.”

Aaron said, “Maybe he likes having that stick up his ass. Nicky might’ve been right about him after all.”

“Isn’t it foolish to be doing drugs now that the season’s started?” Neil asked. He gave Aaron a pointed look. “Everyone knows there are addicts on the team. Won’t they be watching us closely?”

Aaron’s cold anger almost matched his brother's.

“It’ll be out of our systems by Monday,” Kevin said, brushing off Neil’s question easily.

The host called Nicky’s name and took them to a U-shaped booth near the back windows. Andrew stuffed the cracker wrappers into the man’s apron and slid into the booth next to Kevin, leaving room for Neil at the end.

When the waitress showed up, the others ordered glasses of water and bowls of ice cream. She turned to Neil last and asked, “Anything for you, hon?”

“No, thank you.”

“You sure you don’t want water or anything? It’s free.”

“I’m sure.” Neil tried to smile politely, but his face felt stiff.

“All right,” she said. “Lemme know if you change your mind. I’ll have everything out for you boys as soon as I can.”

After she left, silence fell over the table like a wet blanket. Andrew was agitated and restless, bouncing his knee and playing with his necklace. Nicky twisted the corners of his napkin. Aaron dug his thumbnail into a scratch in the surface of the table.

Neil’s phone buzzed with an incoming call. He said, “I’ll be right back,” and strode away from the table. Halfway to the front door, he answered the call with, “Seth? What’s going on?”

“Yo, fuckface.” There was music and laughter coming from Seth’s end of the call. “So, uh, what are the chances Riko’s gonna try his little OD-in-the-bathroom stunt again?”

A jolt of worry hit Neil in the chest. “Where are you? Did something happen?”

“I’m at a bar with Allison and some people and I was just… ya know… wondering.”

“I don’t know if Riko’s going to try again.” He lowered his voice and kept his head down as he passed by a group of young women waiting to be seated. “Stay with Allison and your friends and you should be all right.”

“Right. Uh-huh. Sure.”

Neil stepped outside and inhaled the fresh air, trying to clear his head. “Maybe you should take it easy. Tell Allison you’re tired and call it a night.”

“Ugh, no. I’m not doing that.”
Seth hung up before Neil could say anything else. Frustrated, Neil closed his phone against his hip and stuffed it into his pocket. He took a deep, fortifying breath and went inside.

Andrew’s forehead was pressed to the table and his fingers were laced behind his head. None of the others seemed particularly concerned, so Neil decided not to worry.

“Who were you on the phone with?” Kevin asked.

Neil shrugged. “It was just Seth.”

Nicky made a face and traded a look with Aaron.

Kevin said, “I didn’t realize you and Seth were friends.”

“He’s my roommate. We talk to each other occasionally,” Neil replied, irritated. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“Just watch yourself. He has bad habits that you shouldn’t be picking up.”

“We’re here to buy drugs,” Neil said bluntly. “You don’t exactly have room to criticize anyone’s bad habits.”

“Lower your voice. We’re in public,” Aaron snapped.

The waitress brought out their ice cream, but it didn’t do much to improve the atmosphere. Andrew tapped his spoon against the heel of his hand and watched the passing servers like a hawk. His breathing was too shallow and controlled to be natural; it gave away his discomfort.

A waiter dumped a pile of napkins in the middle of the table and Andrew wasted no time in digging out the packets of yellow powder. He poured one into his mouth, ignoring Aaron’s hissed warning about being seen, and then put the rest in his pocket for later.

Since it was almost closing time, they ate quickly and took turns going to the bathroom while they waited for the check to arrive. When it did, Aaron paid for the ice cream and left a stack of twenties for the drugs under the clip. The restaurant was practically empty by the time they left.

Next was Eden’s Twilight. Nicky dropped the rest of them off near the door and got a special parking tag from the bouncer. Neil watched him drive away before going inside to catch up with the others. They made their way around the platform until they found an empty table in one of the alcoves. Aaron grabbed a couple extra chairs from other tables and sat down with Kevin.

Andrew leaned closer to Neil so he would be heard over the music. “You and I are getting drinks. Keep up.”

The club was exactly like he remembered: flickering lights, thick heat in the air, and music so loud Neil felt vibrations in his teeth. He pulled his sleeves down over his fists and scrunched his shoulders up to make himself smaller, but it was impossible to get through the crowd without bumping into anyone.

At the bar, Andrew wedged himself between two people and caught Roland’s eye. He turned back to Neil to ask, “What do you want?”

“Nothing.”

Roland approached them with a friendly grin. “Hey, you brought Nathaniel back. How’s it going,
“Neil doesn’t want anything,” Andrew told him, leaning on the bar. “Just the usual tonight.”

Roland opened his mouth like he wanted to ask something, but then he shook his head and stepped away. Neil moved closer to the bar to watch Roland prepare the drinks. If he was willing to drug Neil as a favor, it was likely he’d be willing to drug Andrew for the amount of money Riko could offer.

“So suspicious.” Andrew sounded amused. “Roland isn’t going to cause problems.”

“Why, because he only drugs the people you want him to?”

“Because he knows what I’m capable of.”

Neil’s brow furrowed.

Andrew held up four fingers. “Four men jumped Nicky in the alley out back. You know this story.”

“Yeah.”

“Yes,” Andrew repeated mockingly. “Roland came outside to tell Nicky his break was up and he saw what I did to those men. He’s the one that called for an ambulance.”

It was the severity of their injuries that made Andrew’s case more than a simple matter of self-defense. Neil could imagine the gruesome scene Roland must have stumbled across that night.

“He doesn’t seem afraid of you,” Neil pointed out.

Andrew shrugged. “He has no reason to be afraid unless he threatens what’s mine.”

They were standing too close for comfort. Andrew didn’t seem fazed by it. Annoyed, Neil inched away from him and kept an eye on Roland. Andrew may have trusted him with the drinks, but Neil didn’t.

When the drinks were ready, Andrew handed Neil the tray and cleared a path for him through the crowd. Nicky was with the other two at the table and all three of them set upon the booze and the dust with a desperate urgency. It wasn’t long before all the glasses were empty.

Halfway through the second round of drinks, Nicky and Aaron left the table and disappeared into the shadowy crowd for a while. Neil didn’t bother trying to keep track of them since Andrew didn’t seem concerned in the slightest.

Kevin slumped back in his chair with glazed eyes, unfocused and unguarded for the first time that night. He tapped the edge of the tray and said, “Andrew, go get more.”

Andrew stood up and switched the full glasses on the tray for the empty ones on the table. Neil got up, intending to go with him to the bar again.

Kevin slammed his hand down on the table near Neil. “You’re staying. Andrew, go.”

“Drink your water,” Andrew said.

“Whatever.” Kevin flapped his hand dismissively. “Nathaniel, sit.”

Andrew arched an eyebrow at Neil as he picked up the tray.
“Unless you want to have this conversation with an audience,” Kevin added.

When Neil hesitated, Andrew walked away without him. A cold shiver of anger went down Neil’s spine. He knew what Kevin wanted to talk about. Reluctantly, he sat down and faced Kevin with a neutral expression, steeling himself for a lecture.

“The master would’ve killed you after the way you played tonight,” Kevin blurted out harshly. “You didn’t save your energy for the second half, you deviated from the strategy, and that stunt with Hawking made you look like a clumsy idiot. You were reckless.”

Even though nothing Kevin said was unexpected, the words cut Neil deeply. He made foolish mistakes- got cocky and careless- and all he gained was a fresh batch of bruises.

“For a Fox, you played well,” Kevin added lamely.

Neil’s eyes narrowed. “For a Fox?”

“Ravens never deviate from the play. Foxes think on their feet, improvise. It’s sloppy, but sometimes it’s effective.”

“This sounds like a very watered-down insult.”

“I meant it to be a compliment,” Kevin mumbled, frowning at the table. “It wasn’t a bad game.”

“We lost.”

“Ravens lose sometimes. It's impossible to be perfect.”

Neil eyed him dubiously, trying to remember how many packets of dust Kevin had that night.

“It was one point in overtime,” Kevin went on, stumbling over the syllables. “We did better than I thought we would. That’s… something.”

Andrew came back to the table and Neil was saved from Kevin’s awkward attempt at kindness. Nicky and Aaron weren’t far behind, tripping over their own feet and breathing hard. Without any more dust to bring them up, the alcohol dragged them down into exhausted stupors.

Kevin put his head on the table. “I’m tired.”

“Tired as shit,” Aaron slurred in agreement.

“The game was last night, right?” Nicky squinted and rubbed his forehead. “What day is it?”

Andrew ran an assessing look over the others and said, “We’re leaving.”

Indignant, Nicky cried, “But we jus’ got here!”

Andrew pulled Kevin to his feet and gave him a push to get him moving. Nicky’s foot got caught on his chair leg, but Aaron steadied him before he could fall. Neil trailed behind the group, privately relieved that they were leaving the club.

The throbbing music fell away as the doors swung shut behind them. A breeze momentarily brushed away the sticky heat hanging in the air. Neil was lightheaded from thirst. He entertained the idea of sticking his head under the bathroom faucet at the house and gulping down water until he felt better. His throat ached with anticipation.
Kevin was irritated that Andrew made them all walk to the parking garage together and he complained the whole way. He complained louder when Andrew guided him into the backseat.

“But I always sit shotgun,” Kevin protested. “My legs’re gonna get crushed back here.”

“Be quiet,” Andrew said. “Neil, sit in the front.”

Neil got in the car and moved his seat forward so Kevin would stop grumbling about his legs. In spite of his headache, he dozed off as soon as the car pulled out of the parking space. He was vaguely aware of the car moving, but he didn’t wake up fully until Andrew said his name.

“Where’re we?” Nicky asked groggily from the backseat.

They weren’t at the house like Neil expected. Instead, the car was idling outside a convenience store. Andrew held out a ten-dollar bill and silently gestured toward the store’s entrance. Confused, Neil accepted the money and went inside to buy himself a bottle of Gatorade, a box of his favorite granola bars, and a roll of breath mints.

Once he was back in the car, he gave the change to Andrew and mumbled a thank-you so quietly he wasn’t sure Andrew heard it. During the short drive to the cousins’ house, Neil wolfed down a granola bar and drank half his Gatorade.

In the driveway, Andrew shut the engine off and Neil could no longer avoid wondering where he would sleep that night. He hung back by the car to watch Andrew usher the other three into the house. Sleeping in the backseat of the car seemed like his best option, but he would have to ask Andrew for permission and the keys. With Nicky in the house, he wouldn’t be able to sleep on any of the chairs or the couch and he didn’t even consider sleeping on the porch- he dealt with enough bug bites that summer to know better.

In the middle of his thought process, Andrew appeared in the doorway of the house with a bundle of blankets in his arms and a bare pillow tucked under his elbow. He said, “Come with me unless you want to stand there all night.”

Neil shifted his weight. “I’m not taking your bed again.”

“I’m not offering my bed again.”

It was curiosity more than anything that made Neil follow Andrew into the house and up the stairs to his room. Andrew dumped the blankets and the pillow onto the floor near his closet and nudged the heap with his foot.

“I can sleep in the car,” Neil said. He wasn’t afraid or nervous, but something deep down urged him to cautious. The peace between them was fragile.

Andrew’s face was an unreadable mask. “Nicky has keys to the car.”

“Do you think he’d try to do something to me again?”

“It doesn’t matter if he would or not. I’m not giving him the opportunity.”

They stared at each other from across the room. Neil wanted to know what Andrew was thinking, what it was like to nearly kill four men for Nicky only to turn on him like this.

Eventually, Andrew said, “I’m going out for a smoke.”
Neil stepped aside to let him pass and listened to him quietly thump down the stairs. A moment later, the front door scraped back and forth over the mat, open and shut.

Uneasily, Neil put his Gatorade and granola bars near the blankets Andrew left for him. By the light spilling out of the doorway, he found his way down the hallway to the bathroom. He used the toilet, washed up in the sink, and rinsed his mouth with a small swig of mouthwash.

Exhaustion pulled him towards his makeshift bed- even sleeping on the floor sounded like a luxury at that point- but he went downstairs instead.

Andrew was sitting at the edge of the porch with his feet planted on the first step and a lit cigarette in his hand. He turned his head just enough to see who was there before facing forward again and exhaling smoke through his nose. Slowly, he moved over to one side. Neil took it as an invitation and sat down, leaving plenty of space between them.

“On Wednesday,” Andrew began, “Kevin reacted to the flyers before you did.”

Neil folded his arms over his stomach and studied the porch lights on the other side of the street. The decision to come outside suddenly seemed like the wrong one.

“He knows what that picture of your mother means to you.”

Curling forward over his knees, Neil asked, “So, what?”

“Were you the one that told him about it?”

“No one told him about it,” Neil said, low and bitter. “He was there when it happened.”

Andrew put his cigarette back in his mouth and took a harsh drag, making the ember flare bright orange. Smoke wafted over Neil as it dissipated. The acrid smell of it didn’t calm his nerves like it usually did; he couldn’t let his mind wander anywhere near his mother.

An inexplicable urge to explain swelled between Neil’s lungs. Despite his complicated feelings about Kevin, he didn’t blame him for this. “He always had to be with Riko and Riko wanted to watch to make sure things went according to plan. Kevin didn’t have a choice.”

Andrew gave a flat hmm. It didn’t sound like judgement or scorn, but it made Neil tense.

“There wasn’t anything he could have done.”

“Defensive.” Andrew knocked some ash onto the porch step. “Who are you trying to convince?”

Neil dug his fingernails into his palms and grit his teeth. Andrew’s snide question poked at a door that was better kept shut. Kevin wasn’t the only one who failed to save someone else from getting hurt. They were all shadows in the background of each other’s nightmares, silent and passive witnesses.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” Neil said.

“Fine. It’s your turn.”

Neil stared thoughtfully at his boots. There were so many things he wanted to know that it took him a minute to decide on a single question.

“How were you going to kill me?”
Andrew’s answer came without hesitation. “I would’ve strangled you in the garage. I had a plan to dump your body at a construction site and make it look like you ran away.”

Touching his throat, Neil imagined Andrew’s hands there, squeezing and squeezing until everything went dark. He imagined his body being hidden forever underground. Coldly, he said, “But you had reasons, right?”

Andrew stared out at the lawn with hooded eyes, offering no excuses or defense. Riko would’ve had it all pinned down as someone else’s fault by that point.

The stony silence irked Neil. He stole the cigarette from Andrew’s mouth and asked, "Why didn’t you go through with it?"

“I was ninety percent certain that I knew what you were. I wanted to be at a hundred.”

“What percent are you at now?”

Andrew cast a sidelong look at him. “Ten.”

It was slightly comforting to know his confusion was shared, that Neil wasn’t alone in uncharted territory. He offered the cigarette back, but Andrew ignored it to fish something out of his pocket.

“This is your key to the house,” he said, dropping it next to Neil’s thigh. “Leave or stay, just lock the door behind you.”

He went inside and left Neil alone on the porch.

Neil didn’t know what he wanted to do. Maybe it was wiser to call Matt to come get him. Maybe it was safe to sleep upstairs.

The reasons to trust Andrew didn’t come close to outweighing the reasons not to, but they were enough to anchor him for the night. When the cigarette burned down to the filter, Neil flicked it away and slipped the key into his pocket. He went back into the house, locked the door behind him, and made his way upstairs.

Andrew was already asleep in his bed with his back against the wall and his face pressed into his squishy pillow. Neil locked the bedroom door and flicked the lights off before crossing the room to the pile of blankets waiting for him.

Laying on the floor wouldn’t do his bruised body any favors, but as he listened to Andrew’s steady breathing he realized he didn’t regret his decision to stay. He ran his thumb over the teeth of his new key until he finally drifted off to sleep.
Team Spirit

Chapter Summary

Neil watches a game with the upperclassmen.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: discussion of drug abuse/mixing drugs with alcohol, discussions of sexual harassment and attempted sexual assault

The story Seth tells in this chapter is based off of what Nora had in her extra content about him and Allison.

As always, thank you so much for reading!!

When Neil got back to his suite Saturday evening, he found the upperclassmen eating dinner and drinking in the main room. They were all dressed in black and red and there was an impressive amount of food crowding the coffee table. Neil stopped in his tracks to blink at them stupidly, wondering if this was all a bizarre dream.

“He lives!” Matt cried theatrically.

Seth spun his desk chair around to face the door, hands spread. “The prodigal son returns.”

“Ignore them,” Allison said. “They’re trashed.”

Seth scrunched his nose, indignant and obviously drunk. “I’m… you’re trashed.”

Matt snickered at Seth’s slurred words. Renee looked up from the pistachio shell she was trying to crack open and gave him a smile that was as amused as it was fond.

“You two should switch to water,” Dan suggested before waving to Neil. “Come sit with us. We’re trying to find something to watch before the game starts.”

Neil was still trying to process the scene in front of him. He noticed the large black “G” printed on the front of Allison’s red tank top and the word “Bulldogs” running down the leg of her tight black sweatpants as she went to the kitchen for another drink.

“What game?” he asked.

“Oh, the big one,” Seth said as if it should have been obvious. “Football is happening. Haven’t you heard?”

It took Neil a second to put Seth’s words together with what they were all wearing. When he realized what it meant, he frowned and asked, “Why are you rooting against our team?”
“Because we hate them, Neil,” Matt said soberly. “We hate them like you wouldn’t believe.”

“And the enemies of our enemies are our favorite team,” Seth added before taking a huge bite of chicken, which left a messy smear of barbecue sauce around his mouth.

“You can sit by me, Neil,” Renee offered. “Plenty of room here on the floor.”

Neil said, “Thanks. I’ll be right back,” and went to the bedroom to change his clothes.

It had been a strange day so far, so he supposed it made sense for the rest of the evening to be strange as well. He’d woken up disoriented and aching on Andrew’s bedroom floor in Columbia, wrapped in blankets that smelt like dust with angry red indents on his palm left by the teeth of his new key.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Neil closed his eyes and breathed deeply as the ache in his head swelled again. He needed water and a meal that wasn’t comprised entirely of granola bars. Nicky bought enough fast food to feed an army for lunch, but Neil still didn’t trust any food or drink that came from the cousins. Of course, his caution cost him comfort.

He waited for the wave of pain to pass and then he quickly exchanged his dirty clothes for a clean pair of underwear, basketball shorts, and a t-shirt. Before going back to the main room, he paused to pull on a fresh pair of socks, worried about how his feet must’ve smelled after a night wearing his heavy boots.

The sight of the food on the coffee table made hunger twist impatiently in his stomach and saliva pool under his tongue in anticipation. Neil got himself a glass of water and a plate with a fork and knife from the kitchen before sitting down on the pillow Renee put down for him on the floor next to her. He loaded up his plate with thick pieces of barbecue chicken, celery sticks, steamed corn, and a heaping spoonful of mashed potatoes. His stiff muscles protested every move he made.

“You should microwave it,” said Dan. “It’s probably cold.”

“It’s warm enough,” Neil replied before shoveling a bite of potatoes into his mouth. Dan was right— the food was lukewarm— but he was too hungry to care.

Dan watched him for a moment, bemused, and then she shrugged it off. Slumping against Matt’s side, she went back to clicking through the channels with the remote. “Why isn’t there anything good to watch?” she asked with a bored sigh.

Matt grunted in either acknowledgement or agreement and turned to Neil. “Hey, you got any entertaining stories from last night?”

“Give us the gossip, freshman,” Allison said. “What happened at the monster’s slumber party?”


“How’s Andrew doing?” Renee asked.

Neil blinked in surprise at her concern. “I think he’s still sick from yesterday.”

Andrew spent the morning and a fair portion of the afternoon lying on the couch with a bucket next to him just in case he threw up. His morning dose gave him plenty of energy, which his brain devoted entirely to being viciously angry without provocation. The others nursed their hangovers in other parts of the house and instinctively gave him a wide berth. Neil didn’t have anywhere better to go, so he sat in a recliner in the den with Andrew and listened to him verbally abuse game show contestants on the TV.
Renee frowned. “I hope he evens out soon. Game nights are really rough on him.”

“Well, if anyone deserves to suffer through it, it’s Andrew,” Dan said with a surprising amount of hatred coloring her tone.

“Dan,” Renee said disapprovingly.

“What? We’re off the court. I don’t have to be civil here.”

Matt’s mouth pressed into a flat line and rubbed Dan’s arm soothingly.

“I know,” said Renee. “He’s still my friend, though.”

Seth gave an ugly snort. “Do you get extra Jesus points every time you say that?”

“Why do you hate him so much, Dan?” Neil asked curiously as he cut off a bite of chicken. He looked up at his captain’s face to see her expression darken in a way that chilled his blood.

“Matthew?” Allison asked primly.

Matt made a face and sighed. “It’s okay if Neil knows.”

“The monster pumped him full of drugs and dumped him on Coach’s doorstep,” Seth said.

Neil stopped chewing and stared at Seth in shock. It took him a few moments to really process what he said. It wasn’t a surprise that Andrew did something so extreme, but he couldn’t see a reason for him to go after Matt like that.

“That’s not really accurate, man,” Matt said.

“Matt was their roommate last year,” Renee began softly.

Allison interjected, “Only for a few weeks.”

Matt explained, “I had a bad time with my roommates freshman year. They were all older than me and they were either using or dealing, which didn’t do my sobriety any favors. I didn’t relapse, but there were some close calls, so Coach decided I should room with the cousins during my sophomore year because there was at least a tiny chance that I’d be better off with them.”

“Coach is gettin’ senile,” Seth commented.

Neil said, “But Aaron had a drug problem in high school. Didn’t Coach know about that?”

Allison looked at Neil guardedly. “How do you know about that? The monster tell you bedtime stories?”

“Kevin told me,” he lied. The truth about Riko’s private investigators would only raise more questions. “Who told you about it?”

Allison’s eyes narrowed. “Renee told us after she and the monster got all buddy-buddy.”

“Andrew said that I could tell them since it explained why he did what he did,” said Renee. “Matt, go on with your story.”

Matt inhaled deeply and continued, “Andrew took me to Columbia and I got drunk and then I got stupid. When he offered me speedballs, they seemed like a great idea.”
Neil stared at Matt in mute horror. He was the guinea pig for Riko and Kevin’s foray into substance abuse, so he had a vague idea of the state Matt must’ve been in at the end of his night in Columbia; however, Riko never let anyone mix drugs with alcohol. The risk wasn’t worth the high.

Matt jerked his shoulder up in an awkward shrug. “It wasn’t like he held a gun to my head.”

“It wasn’t like there was any question about what you’d do,” Allison said snidely. “You were totally pathetic back then. I could barely stand to look at you.”

“What happened after that?” Neil asked.

“Abby kept Matt at her house for the rest of the summer,” Dan replied. “Randy flew down to help take care of him, too. Apparently, she gave Andrew the green light when he told her he could ‘fix’ Matt’s addiction.”

“How which technically did,” Allison added.

Seth shook his head and took another sip of beer. “Guy’s a sociopath. If he turns out to be a serial killer, I won’t be surprised.”

“I think if Matt started using again, then Aaron would have too,” Renee said carefully. “Andrew didn’t want that to happen. Despite his harsh methods, I don’t think he would’ve let him get seriously hurt.”

Dan fixed her with a hard stare. “Because that’s definitely something Andrew had under his control. Street drugs are always predictable—especially when there’s alcohol involved. Sure.”

Matt made a weak attempt at a smile. “The upshot was that I crash-landed so hard at rock bottom that it put me off drugs for good. Vicious, but effective.”

“I should’ve wrung his neck,” Dan spat.

“Why didn’t you?” asked Neil.

Dan made a sweeping gesture at Renee.

“It is what it is,” Matt said as he tightened his arm around Dan’s shoulders. “And it’s over, so let’s talk about something else.”

“Still wanna punch him,” Dan muttered bitterly. She turned so her back was against Matt’s side and folded her arms over Matt’s forearm.

“Such a feisty drunk,” Allison said.

Dan gave Allison’s shoulder a nudge with her socked foot, which earned her a glare and a, “Get your gross feet off me.”

“I’m not even touching you,” Dan said, wiggling her toes an inch away from Allison’s head.

Neil finished eating while they bickered and swatted at each other. Eventually Dan and Allison got bored of fighting and noticed the time. Allison looked down into her cup and wondered aloud if they should send Renee on another run to the liquor store before the game started.

“Hey, Neil, you a football fan?” Matt asked suddenly.

Neil shook his head. “I don’t know much about it.”
“What do you know about football?” inquired Seth with a narrow-eyed look that only made him look more drunk.

“It’s played on a field,” was the best answer Neil could come up with.

Seth and Matt snorted.

“I can explain things to you,” Renee said softly. “I used to watch football with my dad.”

The way the others went quiet told Neil this detail was significant. He didn’t know much about Renee because Riko’s henchman was only able to dig up a sealed file and the fact that she changed her name. There were no stories about her in local papers, nothing on social media, and the rumor mill came up empty for once. No one in Devils Lake, North Dakota knew who Renee Walker was before she moved there and no one in her old neighborhood in Detroit was willing to talk.

Seth broke the silence with, “Let me guess: you and your old man rooted for the Lions.”

Renee’s smile widened. “Yeah. Are we still cool?”

“We’re good as long as you don’t root for the Patriots.”

Dan pointed emphatically at Neil. “Life tip: don’t get Seth started on the Patriots and definitely don’t ask him about Peyton Manning.”

Seth dragged his hands over his face and let out a long, loud groan. “Okay, but Peyton Manning-”

“Let it go, babe,” Allison cut in. “He ditched Indy over a year ago.”

“He did not ditch Indy. He-”

“No,” Matt said firmly. “I can’t listen to this again. I don’t even watch pro football.”

“Who’s Peyton Manning?” Neil asked.

Seth looked wounded.

“Ignorance is bliss, Neil,” Matt said. He clinked glasses with Allison and they both drank.

Seth flipped them off and got up to fetch another beer for himself, pretending not to hear Dan’s request for more popcorn.

Just before the game actually began, Renee explained the basics of football to Neil and gave him a watered-down history of the rivalry between the two schools. From the comments the others made, Neil gathered the rivalry was more intense than Renee let on.

When a commentator on the television mentioned Ken Calloway, everyone except Renee and Neil threw a handful of food at the television. Pretzels, popcorn, and potato chips bounced harmlessly to the carpet while the upperclassmen booed at the close-up of a guy Neil vaguely recognized from around Ashworth Hall. He was tall and broad-shouldered with a deep suntan and a smile as camera-ready as Kevin’s.

Seth’s lip curled. “Kenny motherfuckin’ Calloway.”

“The third,” Matt added darkly.

Neil said, “Ken Calloway and Calloway Stadium. Is that a coincidence?”

Affecting a deep Southern accent, Seth said, “His daddy and his granddaddy and his granddaddy’s granddaddy’s daddy and every big-balled, cleft-chinned Calloway boy in between have attended this fine, upstanding institution.” He let out a belch and toasted the television, sloshing beer on himself in the process. “God save the motherfuckers.”

“His family donated a mountain of money to the school,” Matt said. “Kenny could get away with murder.”

“So why do you hate the rest of the team?” asked Neil.

Dan hiccuped behind her hand and explained, “Most of them are just run-of-the-mill douchebags. When I was a freshman, word kinda got around that I used to be a stripper, so one day the captain of the football team walks up and waves a wad of cash in my face and tells me to come dance at one the team’s parties. A couple months later, one of his underlings stuffed a handful of dollar bills down my shirt and shit like that just went on and on.”

Righteous anger sputtered to life in Neil’s heart. Dan was his captain and the thought of her being treated like that made his blood boil. She got the most disorganized team in Class I Exy to fall in line behind her. That alone made her worthy of respect by Neil’s standards.

“Assholes,” Allison muttered before taking a long drink. “Plus, you know every time those douches throw a party someone gets sexually assaulted- not that the school gives a rat’s ass about it.”

Seth’s grip on his beer bottle turned his knuckles white. Renee and Dan’s eyes cut briefly toward Allison and the implications of that made Neil go cold all over. Before he could put together the words to ask more about what Allison said, Matt pointed out that the game was starting.

Neil looked back at the TV. He tried to ignore the tightness in his stomach and decided to save his questions for later.

The upperclassmen got progressively louder as the game went on. They cheered drunkenly when the Bulldogs scored and threw food at the TV or booed whenever the Foxes had the ball. Renee did her best to explain things to Neil, but he was too bored to pay attention by the end of the first quarter.

At halftime, Matt stood up with a drawn-out groan and grabbed Dan’s hands to help her to her feet. Neil’s knees cracked as he got up; sitting on the floor felt like a mistake.

They all took turns going to the bathroom and then filtered in and out of the kitchen to refresh their drinks. Neil leaned against the sink and watched Allison mix a few kinds of liquor with Coke in a large glass. Seth hummed something under his breath as he swayed unsteadily and tried to pour ginger ale and Southern Comfort into a PSU thermos without spilling.

“You’re gonna get sick,” Allison said. “Babe, seriously, drink some water. You’ll be dehydrated as hell in the morning.”

Seth’s singing grew louder until Allison gave up. Neil watched her go back to the main room and craned his neck to make sure Dan, Matt, and Renee were out there too.

“Hey,” he said softly to get Seth’s attention.

Seth swivelled toward him with an owlish blink and held the bottle of Southern Comfort out to him. “You need?”
“No, thanks. I wanted to ask you something.”

“You just did.” Seth laughed before frowning. “No, wait, I guess you didn’t.”

“Did the football team do anything to Allison?”

The mirth drained from Seth’s face immediately. “Why’re you asking?”

“There was a look back there when you guys were talking about their parties. Did something happen to her?”

Seth checked that the others were out in the main room before he said, “She followed me to a party when she was a freshman, wanted to prove she could drink me under the table. You know how competitive she is.”

Neil nodded.

“I dodged her because I wasn’t in the mood to deal, and then I saw some guys taking her upstairs. She was, like… they had to hold her upright, she was so trashed.” Seth took a large gulp of his drink and shook his head. “I had to go get her, y’know? She was a total pain and kind of a bitch, but… anyway, I got my ass handed to me, but I got her out of there before anything really bad happened.”

“Right,” Neil said tersely. “That’s good. It’s good that you got her.”

Allison was nothing more than a teammate, but the thought of her suffering like he had made him sick.

Seth shrugged a shoulder awkwardly. “I’m an asshole, but I’m not a total piece of shit, you know?”

“What are you guys gossiping about in there?” Allison demanded, leaning over the arm of the couch to give them a sharp look.

“Allison’s not showing any team spirit,” Seth called back, gesturing expansively at Neil’s clothes. “I say we make him change before the second half starts.”

“You’ve got two minutes,” said Dan. “How fast can you find something?”

Matt bolted off the couch and tripped over his own feet. Through his laughter, he managed to get out, “Neil, c’mon. I’ve got something for you to wear,” as he sped to the bedroom.

Neil left his water on the counter and went after him. Once he stepped through the door, a dark gray sweatshirt hit him in the face. He held it out in front of him to look it over. “Georgia” was printed in red across the chest and “Bulldogs” ran down one of the sleeves.

Matt said, “That might be kinda loose, but it should work. Figured you wouldn’t want something black.” Matt hiccuped, thumped his chest with his fist, and gave Neil a grin. “Put that on and let’s go. Wouldn’t want to miss anything, right?”

“Right. Thanks, Matt.”

“No problem, buddy.”

Neil slipped the sweatshirt over his head and pushed his arms through the sleeves. The bottom hem fell down past his hips and the sleeves flopped down past his hands; shoving them up to his elbows didn’t make it look any better. He felt stupid staring down at the ill-fitting sleeves with Matt and Allison and Dan’s misfortunes jumbled up in his head.
Life was unkind to all of them, but they were laughing and drinking and enjoying themselves in spite of it. Maybe they knew something Neil didn’t. Maybe he was just too broken. The urge to hide out alone in the bedroom for the rest of the night came swiftly. He didn’t belong with them.

Matt chuckled, unaware of Neil’s grim thoughts. “Not bad, dude. Not bad. You’re—” he made two L’s with his fingers and squinted at Neil through them—“space efficient.”

“Thanks,” Neil said dully.

“Anytime.” Matt beamed. “Let’s get back out there or else we’ll miss stuff.”

He lightly knocked his fist against Neil’s shoulder as he passed. Neil dragged in a deep breath and raked his fingernails through his hair. Dan’s laughter reached him, followed by Seth’s raised voice. They were teasing each other about something.

“Neil,” called Matt. “You coming or what?”

“Get out here, fuckface!” shouted Seth.

Neil didn’t know what he was doing there with them, but he walked back out to the main room anyway. Seth laughed at the way Matt’s sweatshirt ballooned around Neil’s torso. Dan pet Neil’s hair and slurried something that was meant to be reassuring, Neil assumed.

“You’re a good sport,” Renee commented with a small, warm smile. “We’re glad you’re here.”

Neil fought the urge to correct her. I don’t belong here, he wanted to say. I shouldn’t be here. He wasn’t like them: he was poisoned by life’s cruelty. There weren’t just cracks in his soul, there were canyons—cold, howling spaces. He couldn’t dust off his laugh and joke with them like they probably wanted.

Regardless, he couldn’t bring himself to leave.
Neil watched the kale, basil, and olive oil turn into a green blur in Dr. Dobson’s food processor. He gave it a few extra seconds before asking, “Is that good?”

“That looks great,” Dr. Dobson said. “What’s next?”

Neil pulled the recipe card toward himself on the counter to read it. “Parmesan, walnuts, garlic, and salt.”

Dr. Dobson nodded and said, “I’ll get the cheese and nuts if you get the garlic and salt.”

He nodded and went about measuring the salt and chopped garlic into the bowl of the food processor. Dr. Dobson dumped in the grated Parmesan cheese and chopped walnuts and blended it all together to finish the pesto, which was spooned over slices of ciabatta.

The two of them constructed their own paninis with sliced turkey, tomatoes, and fresh mozzarella. Dr. Dobson brushed olive oil over the bread and showed Neil how to use her new panini press, a gift from some friend of hers.

Once Neil was done, he poured two glasses of peach ginger iced tea from the pitcher in the fridge and took his sandwich and his drink out to the table. A couple minutes later, Dr. Dobson joined him and they began eating in silence. The bread was toasted golden brown and the cheese oozed out over the sides, tinged green from the pesto. Crumbs fell all over Neil’s plate and stuck to his lips; he self-consciously wiped his mouth with his napkin after every bite.

Halfway through the meal, Dr. Dobson asked, “Would you like to talk about Friday’s game?”

Neil set his sandwich down and wiped his mouth again. “There’s not much to say. Did you watch it?”

“I did,” she said. “I thought you played very well.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you feel like you did well?”
“We lost,” he said stiffly.

“Losing doesn’t mean you didn’t do a good job. It just means things didn’t work out exactly the way you hoped they would. That’s how life goes sometimes.”

He was too tired to argue or explain that winning was the whole point of a game, that playing well wasn’t good enough. It was easier to say, “Okay,” and go back to eating.

Dr. Dobson watched him from across the table, quietly contemplative.

Neil finished his sandwich and washed it down with some iced tea. “You said we could talk about cutting back on these sessions if I still wanted to after school started.”

“I remember. Are you still feeling the same way that you were back then?”

“I’m better than I was at the beginning, but I don’t think I’ve made progress lately. This might be as good as it gets.”

“You feel like you’ve plateaued?”

He nodded, relieved that she understood. “Yeah, exactly.”

“I won’t force you to keep coming here if that’s not what you want to do,” she said. “What if you replaced our meetings with something else? There are plenty of things that would work as a supplement to what we’ve been doing.”

Neil frowned at her. She wasn’t agreeing as easily as he hoped she would.

“I’m not trying to change your mind,” she told him with a knowing look. “I only want to make sure we’re not changing too much too fast.”

“I don’t need something every week. I’m better- I’m fine on the court and I’m sleeping decently.”

“And I would prefer to keep it that way.” Dr. Dobson pushed aside her plate and folded her hands on the table. “Neil, you came to me a few months ago because something on the court triggered a flashback of a traumatic event. You’re on that court almost every day. My main priority here is to help you keep yourself in a good place.”

“I’m not…” Neil shook his head and shifted in his chair, agitated. “I’m not going to get triggered just because I spend a lot of time on the court.”

“But that’s where you were triggered.”

“Well, yeah, but it was because of Kevin.”

He immediately wished he could take that back. The gears were already turning in her head.

“Why was it because of Kevin?” she asked.

“He… he reminds me of someone- one of the guys who hurt John.”

Dr. Dobson studied him for a long moment. “Is there something you’d like to tell me, Neil?”

“I just don’t want to do this every week. What do you want me to do instead? Arts and crafts?”

She blinked and her eyes softened. “I was going to suggest yoga, but if you’d prefer arts and
Neil’s eyebrows shot up. “Yoga? Seriously?”

“We’ve talked a little about mindfulness. Yoga is a good way to practice that and it’d good for your muscles too. I thought it’d be a perfect fit,” she said with a kind smile. “There are classes at the Whelan Center. Your team uses the gym equipment there, right?”

He nodded.

“So you already know where it is and I’ll bet you could find a class on Saturday or Sunday morning. It wouldn’t have to disrupt your schedule very much. Are you willing to give it a try?”

It wasn’t the worst thing she could have suggested, he supposed. Yoga seemed like glorified stretching, which was crucial if he wanted to keep himself in good condition.

“I guess I can give it a shot.”

Dr. Dobson’s smile widened. “I’m happy to hear that. Would you like another panini? Maybe one for the road?”

Fifteen minutes later, they were in Dr. Dobson’s car, driving through campus toward the Tower. Neil had a foil-wrapped panini in his lap and a budding headache. He felt drained, although he couldn’t pin down why exactly.

As they passed Reddin, Dr. Dobson asked, “Would you like to stop at the student center to see if there’s any information about yoga classes?”

“Yeah, you can just drop me off there. I’ll walk the rest of the way,” Neil said.

“You sure? Driving’s no trouble.”

“I could use the fresh air.”

The student center was a short drive down the road. Dr. Dobson smoothly turned her car into one of the parking spaces near the front door. There were colorful flyers pinned to the bulletin boards in the shade of the building’s overhang; they fluttered in the breeze and were mostly ignored by the students milling around the sunny sidewalk.

Dr. Dobson asked, “Do you want to meet next week or would you rather start yoga right away?”

Neil wasn’t thrilled about trying it, but he figured it was better to get it over with as soon as possible. “I’ll sign up for a class this week.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you the Sunday after next, then. I hope you have a good week, Neil.”

“Thanks. You too,” Neil mumbled back before climbing out of the car and closing the door. From the curb, he watched her drive away.

Movement across the road caught his attention. Matt was running toward him, only slowing down long enough to make sure there weren’t any cars coming. He hopped up onto the curb with a grin and a, “Hey, man, where you been?”

Caught off guard, Neil floundered for an excuse.

“That was Betsy’s car, wasn’t it? Did she drop you here?” Matt asked, squinting in the direction Dr.
Dobson had driven off in.

Any lie Neil might’ve offered was ruined by the way he tensed.

Matt’s face dropped. “Oh,” he said soberly. “My bad. I can pretend I didn’t see her- or, hey, I could go back across the street and we could start this whole thing over.”

“It’s fine,” Neil muttered. “I see Dr. Dobson on Sundays.”

“That’s cool.” Matt smiled hesitantly. “I saw her a lot when I was a freshman- I still do, but not as often.”

Neil glanced at the track marks on the inside of Matt’s elbows, immediately looking away when Matt scratched at the scars. Then, Neil noticed that Matt was in his running shoes. It seemed odd that Matt would be out running when it was nearly noon and uncomfortably hot.

When he asked about it, Matt’s smile came back and he said, “Yeah, Seth and Allison were going at it on the couch, so I grabbed my shoes and got outta there. I didn’t really feel like driving- which I regret now. It’s hot as fuck today.”

“By ‘going at it’ you mean-”

“Started as a fight, and then all of a sudden they were making out. I don’t want to think about what they did after I left.”

“Right.”

Matt snickered. “You wanna grab lunch or something? I’m getting a little peckish.”

“I’ve got this if you want it,” Neil said, offering the panini. “I’m not that hungry.”

Matt’s forehead scrunched in bemusement as he took it. “Uh, thanks, bro. When did you have time to make this?”

“Dr. Dobson’s teaching me some new recipes,” Neil explained. “It’s weird. You don’t have to-”

“Only weird thing is that you keep calling her Dr. Dobson,” Matt said teasingly as he peeled back the foil. “I guess this would explain all the mystery leftovers in our fridge.”

"Yeah.” Neil scuffed his shoe against the sidewalk and checked to make sure no one was watching them.

Matt finished the sandwich in a few large bites and tossed the wad of foil at a nearby trash can.

“Wanna go to the movie theater downtown? There might be something decent playing and we could chill in the AC for a couple hours- it’d be my treat, of course. I won’t make you risk seeing Seth and Allison mid-bang just to get cash.”

Air conditioning sounded appealing and Neil didn’t see the point in going to the library without his books or his notes. “Sure, I'm in. I can pay you back later.”

“No big.” Matt shrugged loosely. “Let’s get going. I’m gonna melt out here.”

They followed the sidewalk to a large square lawn known as “the Green” with narrow footpaths running through it. A short ways beyond it was a road leading straight into the heart of the downtown area, which was bustling with people. The movie theater was a small building with double doors that required a hard yank to open. The poor lighting and overactive air conditioner in
the lobby were a relief. The sweat on the back of Neil’s neck cooled quickly, making him shiver, and once his eyes adjusted he could see that the place was almost empty.

Matt bought two tickets for a comedy, and then he bought two buckets of popcorn and two large blue raspberry Ictees at the concession counter. Neil’s promise to pay Matt back was waved off. Matt said, “You gave me your sandwich. It’s only fair,” as he thrust his credit card at the bored employee behind the cash register.

They took their drinks and popcorn into theater number six and found a place to sit in the very center, to Matt’s delight. Neil’s seat creaked ominously as he settled into it, his shoe stuck to the floor, and the smell of stale food hung in the air, but it was infinitely better than being out in the heat. Neil took an experimental sip of the cold, sugary slush in his cup. It wasn’t quite sweet enough to be completely overwhelming and it beat a carbonated beverage, in Neil’s opinion.

When the lights dimmed, a string of lively commercials played on the screen until the movie finally began. Neil watched with vague detachment as he ate his buttery popcorn and tried not to feel guilty about ruining his diet plan for the second day in a row.

There were only a handful of other people in the theater and a couple of them laughed as loud as Matt did at parts. Whenever Matt glanced over at him, Neil pasted on a small smile as if he understood why the jokes were funny. In spite of his disinterest, Neil realized he was having a pretty good time there. The bright light of the giant screen kept his mind firmly in the present and it held Matt’s attention so Neil didn’t have to come up with anything to say for a while. It was relaxing, if nothing else.

Once the end credits rolled, Neil and Matt went back out into the lobby and grimaced as their eyes adjusted to the change in lighting. Neil turned his back on the sunlight flooding in through the doors and rubbed at his eye with his knuckle.

Matt made a low grumbling noise. “I don’t want to walk all the way back yet. You up for another one?”

Neil squinted at him. “Really?”

“Sure. What should we see next?”

They stared muzzily up at the movie titles on the board for a few minutes before deciding on one at random. Matt was almost positive it was an action film. Neil didn’t particularly care. They got their tickets and took their empty cups and popcorn buckets to the concession counter for refills.

When it came time for their third movie, Matt decided he’d had enough of popcorn for the time being and bought several boxes of candy instead. Over the course of the next two hours, Neil discovered an intense dislike for Milk Duds and found that he didn’t mind Sno-Caps or Raisinets as much as he thought he would.

They finally left the theater just after sunset with their mouths stained blue and their brains partly melted from staring up at movie screens all afternoon. Hungry for an actual meal, they stopped at a restaurant for BBQ ribs, baked potatoes, and beer that neither of them got carded for. Neil only drank a few sips of his beer and offered the rest to Matt.

Matt accepted it with a laugh. “You don’t like beer, do you?”

Neil shook his head. He was sluggish enough that falling asleep in the booth seemed like a real possibility. He thought about going to bed early that night until he remembered what he was actually
supposed to do later. His wince made Matt curious.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Neil mumbled. “Just remembered I have to go to the court tonight.”

“Dude, it’s Sunday. You don’t have to do anything.”

Neil made a face. “Yeah, it’s just… I made plans.”

Even on normal days, he struggled to hold his own against Andrew. Now that he was stuffed with junk food and lost in a mental haze, tonight was guaranteed to be a disaster. At least no one except Andrew would be around to see it.

After dinner, they made their way back to the Tower. Seth was alone on the couch watching television and, thankfully, there was no evidence of whatever he did with Allison earlier. Neil chose to ignore the lingering scent of air freshener and the absence of the throw blanket that was usually on the couch.

To kill some time, Neil sat at his desk to read his psychology textbook. He jotted down notes as he went along and tried to think of things to ask the tutor he’d meet with on Tuesday. In the background, Seth called him an overeager overachiever and Matt said, “Wish I had that motivation. What a champ.”

“MVP,” Seth added. “Most valuable pupil.”

Matt was quiet for a few moments before he said, “Most vexing parrot.”

Seth snorted. “Most venturous platypus.”

Their distracting little game went on for another five minutes until Seth said, “More vagina and pussy,” to which Matt replied, “I think we got off track somewhere. What were we talking about?”

At nine forty-five, Neil got a text from Andrew asking what time they were going to the court. Neil thought it over for half a minute and typed back, Im leaving now you can meet me whenever.

Getting there first would give him a chance to warm up with some drills. He grabbed his keys, got a water bottle from the fridge, and said goodnight to his roommates. They grunted back at him, too engrossed in a TV show about ghost hunting to form real words.

In the hallway, Neil could hear noises from the other suites—televisions and music and people laughing too loudly—and then the door to the cousins’ suite slammed open. Kevin’s raised voice made Neil stop and turn.

“You’ve been shutting me down for months,” Kevin said as he followed Andrew out the door. “Now you’re going to the court for extra practice?”

Andrew ignored him and told Neil, “We’re taking my car.”

Neil didn’t like that Andrew assumed they’d go together in his car just because he said so.

Kevin caught up to them and pinned Neil with a hard look. “I want to know how you got him to agree to—why is your mouth blue?”

“It’s none of your business,” Neil replied.
Andrew made a shooing motion with one hand. “Go to bed, Kevin. You have school tomorrow.”

The indignation on Kevin’s face made Neil feel smug until he was alone with Andrew in the elevator. Then, uncertainty crept back in and dampened his mood.

“So why is your mouth that color?” Andrew asked.

Neil shot a sidelong glare at him, but he wasn’t looking in Neil’s direction. “Why don’t your pills affect you at night?”

“Different dosage. Even crazies need to sleep.”

“Oh.” Neil faced forward again. After a beat, he said, “I drank Icees at the movie theater.”

“You drank Icees at the movie theater,” Andrew repeated, making all the syllables crisp and dry. The words sounded even more ridiculous.

Neil shifted his weight to put a couple extra inches between them. “I don’t need you to drive me.”

Andrew didn’t respond.

Neil stared at their blurry reflections in the metal doors until the elevator stopped at the ground floor. Neither of them spoke on their way across the parking lot to Andrew’s car. Wordlessly, they slid into their seats and buckled themselves in. Neil watched Andrew stick the key into the ignition and decided he’d had enough of the silence.

“This is a surprisingly nice car,” he commented. “Are Nicky’s parents secretly wealthy or something?”

Andrew shifted into reverse and kept his eyes on the mirrors as he backed out of the space. “Life insurance money paid for this. Neither Tilda nor the car survived the crash.”

Neil looked over at him, unsure if there was anything hiding beneath his blank tone. Slowly, he said, “That’s too bad.”

“Yes, it’s a real shame. That car had a few good years left on it.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t think much of your mother.”

“Not as much as you thought of yours.”

The comment struck Neil dumb for a few seconds. The implication sank in slowly and made him sick to his stomach. It was one of Riko’s favorite taunts—perverse and effective. “You must love your mother very deeply to keep her photograph so... close at hand. Is that normal for a boy your age, I wonder?”

“Out of things to say already?” asked Andrew.

“Maybe I just don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

“So don’t talk.”

Fuming, Neil turned back to his window and clenched his jaw. As soon as Andrew parked outside the stadium, he flung off his seat belt and got out. He went inside without holding the door for Andrew, but it didn’t slow Andrew down by much. He caught up to Neil halfway down the hallway, not at all fazed by his behavior.
Neil changed in a shower stall like always and met Andrew in the foyer to gather up their equipment. Out in the inner court, they stretched and warmed up a few yards apart in complete silence. They didn’t face each other until Andrew was standing in the goal and Neil was at the first-court line. The anxiety Neil had earlier was gone; his only concern was getting a decent number of shots in and getting away from Andrew. He kept score in his head as he took shot after shot, pushing himself like the master taught him to until he finally turned the wall red.

Andrew’s posture gave off the impression that he was bored and he had reason to be since Neil wasn’t much of a challenge. Regardless, he stayed put without any complaints. In the end, Neil was the one who decided when they stopped. He pushed himself to the brink of overexertion—foolish and yet not enough—and only stopped once he managed to land another shot successfully.

Breathing hard, he pulled off his helmet and said, “That’s enough.”

Andrew gave a nod of acknowledgement and straightened up, but he didn’t go anywhere.

“You can go,” Neil added. “I’ll clean up.”

Thankfully, that got Andrew to leave. Neil sighed with relief and began gathering the scattered Exy balls from all over the court. It was slow going because of how exhausted he felt. He chastised himself for not eating right when the Foxes had a game in three days. He couldn’t afford to let his diet slip again.

When the court was clear, Neil put his racquet and the bucket away and switched off the stadium lights. Eager to get out of there, he went through his routine of changing out and showering faster than usual. He rushed down the hallway, unnerved by the eerie silence, and he nearly cried out in alarm when he shoved the door open to find a figure standing just outside.

Andrew plucked the cigarette from his mouth and drawled, “You done?”

“Fuck you.” Neil pulled the door shut forcefully and scowled. “I’ll walk back.”

“Have it your way. Don’t let your baggage slow you down.”

Neil’s temper rose too quickly for him to stop it. “You ever insinuate shit about me and my mother again and this part of our arrangement is over. You can do me a favor by leaving me alone on Sunday nights instead.”

“I didn’t imply anything worth getting this riled up over.”

“Bullshit.”

“You should get the credit for whatever insinuation you invented. You obviously put work into it.”

Neil scoffed. “Is there a reason I should believe you?”

“Not really.” Andrew put his cigarette to his mouth and sucked down more smoke. “Assume the worst if you want. That’s your prerogative.”

“This is coming from the expert in assuming the worst.”

Andrew shrugged a shoulder.

Neil scanned the parking lot and folded his arms. It was possible that Andrew was telling the truth, that no harm was meant by the comment in question. Andrew and Riko weren’t the same, after all. It
was difficult to remember that sometimes. Gradually, Neil deflated and his anger cooled off enough for him to see things clearly. It was embarrassing to realize he overreacted.

“I may have jumped to the wrong conclusion,” Neil admitted. “It’s been a weird day and-”

“I’m not your diary.” Andrew crushed his cigarette under his shoe and nodded at the parking lot. “Better get a move on. It’s late.”

“Are you going to offer me a ride?”

“Is there a point in offering you a ride?”

“Are you only willing to offer if you know I’ll say yes?”

“You’re easier to deal with on the daytime pills,” Andrew muttered as he fished out his keys. He hit the button on his key fob to pop the locks and said, “Get in the car or start walking.”

They stared at each other, both too stubborn to move at first. Neil knew it was his choice and he knew he didn’t really want to walk all the way back to the Tower, but nothing with Andrew was ever easy.

Eventually, Neil grumbled, “You’re easier to deal with on the daytime pills too, you know,” and started toward the car.

Andrew wasn’t far behind.
Thanks to the tutor coordinator, Neil was scheduled to meet with all of his tutors before noon on Tuesday in various study rooms at Coburn Library, so that’s where he spent the better part of his morning. His first tutor of the day was a junior named Inaya, who showed up promptly at eight thirty looking tidy and professional in her lilac purple hijab and taupe cardigan. His second tutor Savannah showed up late and hungover at ten fifteen; she used her balled-up denim jacket as a pillow through most of her hour with Neil. He didn’t bother telling her that the buttons were digging angry red indents into her freckled cheek.

Neil’s last tutor was Zack Carter, a guy with dark skin and a bright smile. He took one look at Neil’s Palmetto State Exy t-shirt and said, “You must be Seth’s new teammate.”

“Um, yeah, I know Seth,” Neil replied awkwardly.

Zack’s mouth flattened grimly. “Did you know that ‘fuckface’ is how he refers to you?”

“He calls me that to my face.”

“They don’t have manners where he’s from. And speaking of headcases, we should probably get started on your psych stuff. You brought your notes, right?”

It was impossible to miss Zack’s intelligence once he started talking, but Neil didn’t feel intimidated by it or lost as they worked on Neil’s assignment together. Neil mentally took notes on Zack’s insights about what Jepsen looked for in her students and possible extra credit opportunities if he fell behind later in the semester.

A text from Allison came in a few minutes before Neil’s time with Zack was supposed to be over. It read: Call me when you’re ready for lunch.

“Everything good?” asked Zack. “Your face is doing a thing.”

“Everything’s fine,” Neil muttered, flipping his phone shut.

“I think we can end things here. There’s only four minutes left and you seem like you’re in good
shape for now.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Zack held out his fist for Neil to bump with his own and said, “Cool. See you next week, Wesninski.” Then he grabbed his bag and left.

Neil packed up his things and pushed the chairs around the study room table back in. For a minute, he thought about calling Allison like she requested, but decided to wait. It would be safer to call her after he got his lunch at the dining hall. That way she couldn’t rope him into going out to eat somewhere he might not be able to afford with only ten dollars in his pocket.

As soon as Neil stepped outside, he saw Allison’s convertible parked at the curb. The top was folded down so there was no mistaking who the driver was. Allison gave him a little wave and a smug smile as he walked over to her.

Neil got into the passenger seat and dropped his bag in the footwell. “How long have you been waiting?” he asked.

“Allison shifted into drive and checked to make sure the road was clear before pulling away from the curb. “Dan told me when you’d be done. She has everyone’s schedule in her phone.”

“So why did you ask me to call you?”

“I wanted to give you a heads-up, but if you knew I’d be waiting outside the library, you could’ve snuck out the back and made some excuse to avoid me,” she said nonchalantly.

Neil was a little annoyed at her deft handling of him and still confused about why she sought him out. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” he asked.

“You’re coming with me to the mall.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

He knew he wouldn’t get any real answers, so he slumped down in his seat and looked out the window.

A couple minutes later, Allison parked outside an old brick building with a few bicycles chained up on the sidewalk in front of it and a plaque that said “Harris Hall” next to the doors. A breeze ruffled the long leaves of a nearby loquat tree and rolled a stray plastic cup out into the street. Thick clouds were moving in and Neil could almost smell the storm that the forecast promised. He briefly thought of the weather in West Virginia; Jean was supposed to have sunshine that day.

The sound of the convertible’s horn made Neil jump. Some of the students leaving Harris Hall looked startled too. After honking again, Allison cupped one hand around her mouth and yelled, “Matthew Boyd!”

Matt broke away from the crowd, surprised but delighted to see them. He shouted back, “Allison Reynolds!”

Allison beckoned him over.

Grinning, Matt jogged over to the car. “What’s up, guys?”
“We’ve got plans,” Allison said. “Get in- no, not like that, you animal!”

Matt vaulted over the side of the car and settled in the backseat, patting Neil’s headrest in silent apology for jostling it. Allison flicked her sunglasses down to glower at him over her shoulder.


“Nasty-ass shoes all over my seats,” Allison muttered, shifting back into drive. “Dan and Renee are busy, so it’s just us today, boys.”

“What about Seth?” asked Neil.

“I would rather deal with a toddler on an international flight than Seth at the mall- especially today. He’s in one of his moods.”

Matt snorted and leaned forward with his hands on their headrests. “Wait, so we’re hitting the mall? What for- oh.”

“Yup,” Allison replied.

Neil looked between them curiously.

“Fall banquet,” Matt explained.

“It’s next week,” Allison added. “You two are getting new clothes, but first lunch. I’m not dealing with you when you’re hungry and grumpy.”

Neil rubbed a hand over his mouth, thinking of his ten-dollar bill. He couldn’t think of a way out of this. Breathing slowly, he shifted around to get comfortable and tried to ignore the anxiety bubbling in his stomach.

They stopped at a seafood restaurant with borderline overbearing nautical decor. The hostess seated them at a table for four and left them with menus. Neil barely refrained from wincing at the prices.

“I can’t decide if I want steak or seafood,” Matt said while he perused his own menu. “What looks good to you, Neil?”

“I’m not that hungry. I might just get soup,” Neil replied.

Allison stared at him flatly. “This was my idea. I’m buying, so get whatever you want. It’s not a big deal.”

Neil’s face burned with embarrassment, but he knew swallowing his pride was easier than getting her to back down.

Matt looked between Neil and Allison and put his chin in his hands. “Hey, lady, you gonna buy me lunch too or are you playing favorites?”

“Yes, Matthew, you’re both sugar babies for the day,” Allison said with a saccharine tone.

“Neil, we’re gonna feast like kings. Let’s get everything.”

Neil was very relieved when he realized Matt was joking.

When their waiter arrived, Allison ordered food and drinks for all three of them and handed over their menus once the guy finished jotting everything down on his notepad. The waiter flashed a
polite smile at Allison and left to get their drinks.

“I’ll pay you back for everything,” Neil promised, although he was still trying to get Matt to accept money for all the movie tickets and snacks he bought on Sunday. Allison was even more stubborn than he was.

She waved him off dismissively. “Money means nothing to me. I’m also buying your clothes, so you might as well start getting over that too while you’re at it.”

“What?” Neil balked. “That’s way too much and I don’t even need new clothes. I still have the stuff from Kathy Ferdinand’s show.”

Her smile turned sharp. “You care about the team’s image, right? You wouldn’t want to look shabby at the banquet in front of Riko. If it’s gonna undermine your masculinity or whatever you can pay me back later. It’s not a big deal.”

Neil rubbed a hand over his mouth, his pride stinging. “I don’t know if I can afford it,” he admitted.

Matt’s eyebrows knit together. “What about the money you got from Kathy? Did you spend it already?”

“What money?”

“Dan got a couple hundred bucks for her interview,” Allison said. “Didn’t you get a check?”

Neil shook his head. Kevin never mentioned anything about it after the show.

“Things were pretty hectic that day,” Matt pointed out. “Maybe there was a mix-up.”

Allison scoffed. “It’s been almost two months. That’s not a mix-up, that’s a fuck-up.”

“I’ll ask Kevin about it,” Neil said tightly. Knowing Kevin, he probably had the money all along and kept it a secret on purpose. Neil shoved his anger aside. He couldn’t lose his temper now.

Allison cleared her throat and smoothed her hand over the tablecloth. “By the way, one of you is getting a slice of cheesecake so I can have a bite.”

“Why not get your own slice of cheesecake?” asked Matt.

“Because I don’t want a whole slice. I just want a bite.”

“What’s it matter? We’re gonna burn a billion calories at practice anyway.”

“And yet I still only want a bite.”

Matt held his hands up. “Do what you want.”

“Don’t I always?”

With a fond eye-roll, Matt changed the subject by asking Allison if she would make Seth get something new for the banquet. Neil sipped his water and wrestled with his irritation toward Kevin until the food showed up.

After dessert, Allison paid the bill and drove them all to a nearby shopping center. Practice wasn’t for a couple more hours, but every minute felt crucial to Neil and he couldn’t help checking the time on his phone every so often as they headed inside. He didn’t want to disrespect Wymack by showing up
late. Nothing took precedence over the sport he was at Palmetto State to play.

He expected some meandering in the beginning, but Allison seemed to have a store in mind. She strode confidently down the corridor, not sparing any of the shops a second glance, until she found the one she wanted. Neil and Matt trailed after her as she breezed in like she owned the place and called one of the employees over.

“This one needs to be measured,” Allison told him, gesturing at Neil. “He’ll need a cream button-down and a few different pairs of shoes to try on so I can figure out the whole look, okay? Much appreciated.” She hooked her arm through Matt’s and steered him toward a section of blazers.

The employee, whose name tag said Sean, gave Neil an amused look and guessed, “Your sister?”

“Teammate,” Neil corrected. He followed Sean deeper into the store and held still while his measurements were taken. Sean started at Neil’s neck and quickly worked his way down. After Sean measured around Neil’s hips, he politely gave Neil one end of the tape and told him to hold it to his groin so he could measure his inseam. Neil was embarrassed, but silently grateful. He was also glad that there were only a few other customers wandering around the store. Sean finished up by getting Neil’s shoe size, and then he strode away at a brisk pace to find things for him to try on.

Neil found Allison and Matt by the racks of dress pants. As he got closer, he could hear Matt say, “He’s not gonna show up to the banquet in a three-piece. He’d be majorly overdressed.”

“I outgrew my dolls. Let me have my fun,” replied Allison. She had two blazers hanging from her fingers and a few pairs of pants draped over her arm. “Oh, Neil, there you are. Sean’s bringing you stuff, right?”

Neil nodded.

“Good.” She held up the blazers to Neil’s chest and pursed her lips in thought.

“I don’t need a new blazer,” Neil protested.

“You’re getting one anyway,” Allison said. “I think we’ll put you in a blazer with some nice pants for this banquet and a gray suit for the next one. Matt, what do you think?”

“Whatever you say, dear,” was Matt’s automatic response.

When it was time to try everything on, Neil quickly learned that Allison was both better and worse to shop with than Kevin. She trusted Matt’s taste enough to let him try things on in peace, but Neil had to step out of his fitting room in a white button-down, charcoal gray pants, and black shoes so Allison could see what each blazer looked like on him.

After the third blazer, she made him change into a pair of light beige chinos only to decide he should wear the lighter gray pants instead. Next, she had a problem with the shoes, so Neil swapped them out for dark brown ones. Allison stared down at them with vague disapproval.

“Those would look better in merlot. Hold on,” she said, heading back out into the store.

Safe inside his own fitting room, Matt clucked his tongue. “You shouldn’t have let her cut your hair. That’s how it all starts.”

“Are we going to make it back in time for practice?” asked Neil.

“Only if Allison wills it. If not, Coach will understand that we were powerless and not at all to
blame.”

“That’s not reassuring.”

A few minutes later, Allison returned with a new pair of shoes and declared, “You’re getting these,” as she thrust the box at Neil’s chest.

The rest of the outfit quickly fell into place after that. Allison decided on a pale blue shirt, the first navy blazer Neil had tried on, and the lighter gray pants he was currently wearing.

“See? That was painless,” she said through the door as Neil got undressed. She couldn’t see him roll his eyes. “Now all we have to do is pick out a suit.”

The whole ordeal lasted another half an hour before Allison was finally satisfied that Matt and Neil would be dressed well enough for the banquet. At the register, Neil was horrified at the total cost of everything. Allison handed over her credit card like it was nothing and she paid for Matt’s stuff as well. Behind her back, Matt shrugged at Neil as if this was normal.

In a way, it did feel normal. Neil had grown accustomed to Matt’s easygoing nature and Allison’s headstrong attitude. Quietly and seamlessly, they fit him into their daily lives like he belonged there. Neil wondered if he would lift out just as easily. Maybe next year they would be back in this spot with someone else.

“Spacing out on us,” Allison chided, putting her arm around Neil’s shoulders. “We have to pick up my dress and haul ass back to campus, so keep up.”

“Who’s gonna be more pissed if we’re late: Dan or Kevin?” Matt asked.

Allison shrugged. “Day before game day? It’s a toss-up.”

She led Neil and Matt to a shop on the second floor that had the dress she wanted on hold. It only took her a few minutes to pay for it, and then the three of them were on their way to the parking lot, walking as fast as Allison was willing to go in her heels.

The entire drive back Neil watched the clock and the speedometer. For all her nonchalance, Allison drove like she was eager to get back on time as well. She pushed the gas pedal harder and pulled a few risky maneuvers to weave through traffic until they were speeding down Perimeter Road. Miraculously, they made it to the Tower with enough time to drop their bags off in their rooms and meet Seth, Dan, and Renee in the parking lot for the drive to the stadium.

Neil climbed into the bed of Matt’s truck and let out a huge breath of relief. They were no longer in danger of being late. He needed this practice to go well even though it wouldn’t make the Foxes’ chances of winning against Belmonte any better. A short ways down Perimeter Road, the first few raindrops of the afternoon finally fell from the darkening sky. The wind picked up, rustling loudly through the trees and lifting stray leaves and discarded papers into the air. More droplets hit Neil’s face and arms before Matt parked next to Wymack’s car.

“Sorry, Neil,” Matt said as they all ducked inside to avoid getting rained on. “We should’ve brought both cars today. I hope the rain stops before we have to leave.”

“I don’t mind the rain. Don’t worry about it.” Neil shivered as the air conditioning washed over his skin. Thunder rumbled outside as the stadium door slid shut. The storm had arrived.

The atmosphere in the locker room was subdued. Andrew and Nicky were at Reddin because Andrew’s appointment with Dr. Dobson got bumped up a day. Seth’s headache dimmed his mood
and turned him quiet. Dan and Kevin were both obviously tense about the Belmonte game. Their tension infected the others and followed them all out onto the court.

Practice that day was rougher than it had been in weeks. Seth and Kevin grated on each other’s nerves until they erupted into a shouting match. Snide comments from Aaron egged Seth on, which irritated Matt and soon the backliners were bickering too.

Dan tried her hardest to keep everyone focused, but it was impossible to get the team into a rhythm when their squabbling kept halting the drills every few minutes. Andrew and Nicky’s arrival added fuel to the fire. Nicky knew exactly what to say to push Seth toward the edge and one well-aimed insult from Kevin tipped him over into a blind, seething rage. Neil moved to a safe distance when Seth and Kevin started throwing punches because it was only a matter of seconds before Andrew got there. In a matter of seconds, Seth was on the ground in a wheezing heap.

The court door banged open and Wymack bellowed, “You can’t play like a team, then you don’t play! Get your sorry asses off my court. Water break and then you’re running laps ’til I say you can stop.”

Several dirty looks were exchanged as the Foxes trudged off the court.

Everyone was in a bad mood by the time Wymack dismissed them for the night, but they were all too worn out to snipe at each other. In sullen silence, they walked out to the cars to find that the storm had crawled fully over campus. A gust of wind slapped a plastic bag against the window of Wymack’s car. Lightning flickered in the thick clouds as torrential rain poured down on the stadium.

Andrew’s group piled into their car and took off. The girls and Seth climbed into the cab of Matt’s truck, but Matt lingered in the open doorway with Neil. They looked out at the nasty weather together.

“If you’re cool hanging out here for a little while longer, I’ll come back and get you,” Matt offered with a strained smile. All the anger and vitriol during practice had flattened his good mood. “Maybe we could grab dinner somewhere?”

Neil didn’t miss the hopeful undertone in his roommate’s voice. “Sure,” he said. “I’ll wait here.”

Matt clapped him on the shoulder and dashed out to his truck.

The hallway was eerily quiet after Neil closed the door, like the storm sucked out all the noise. He sat with his back to the wall and pulled out a granola bar from his bag to snack on while he waited.

A few minutes later, he heard Wymack and Abby walking toward him just before Wymack asked, “You get ditched today, Neil?”

“One of us could give you a ride,” Abby said.

Neil shook his head. “Matt’s coming back for me, but thanks anyway.”

“That’s good.” Abby dug her keys out of her purse and put her hand on the door. “I’ll see you two tomorrow, then.”

“See you tomorrow,” Neil replied at the same time Wymack said, “Night, Abby.”

A burst of wind blew raindrops into the hallway when Abby opened the door. She yanked it shut behind her and Neil looked up at Wymack questioningly. Wymack leaned against the wall opposite Neil, folded his arms, and asked, “You good?”
“I’m okay,” Neil replied.

“Good.”

They waited in silence until Matt texted Neil to let him know he was outside. Neil stood up and grabbed his bag. “See you tomorrow, Coach.”

“Rest up tonight.”

Neil jogged out to Matt’s truck and practically flung himself into the passenger seat, soaked from the short journey. Dan was sitting in the back and she passed Neil a beach towel with a sympathetic smile.

Matt drove away from the curb and cut through the parking lot toward Perimeter Road. “Where do you guys wanna eat?”

“I don’t know,” said Dan. “What’re you in the mood for, babe?”

“Anywhere I don’t have to look at Seth’s fucking face is fine by me.”

Neil was taken aback by the venom in Matt’s voice.

Dan reached forward to rub Matt’s shoulder. “You can sleep at mine tonight. Neil, you can have the couch if you want.”

“I want to punch him,” Matt grumbled.

“I know, hon.”

“I try to ignore the shit he says, but I swear to shit, Dan, one of these days I’m gonna snap and beat him to a pulp. You and Neil better visit me in prison when that happens.”

“Sure thing, sweetheart. Whatever you need.”

Neil ran over everything that happened during practice, trying to figure out what set Matt off like this. Then, he remembered the way Seth hurled the word “cocksucker” at Nicky and he understood.

Dan scooted forward in her seat so she could run her fingers through Matt’s hair. “I could try talking to him again- or Coach. He’d rip Seth a new one.”

“No,” Matt said with a defeated sigh. “Besides, he wasn’t even directing that shit at me. Nicky’s the one who should go to Coach.”

“Nicky has Andrew and he riles Seth up on purpose.”

Matt stopped at a red light and thumped his forehead against the steering wheel, sighing again.

Carefully, Neil asked, “Would it make a difference if you were the one to talk to him? He hates Nicky, but you’re-”

“You’d have to get me catastrophically drunk to even think about talking to Seth about his bullshit. He’s an asshole for the sake of being an asshole, which makes this a lost cause.”

Neil chewed his lip. The division between the upperclassmen and Andrew’s group already caused enough problems and Seth’s behavior would only alienate him. If he felt like the whole team was against him, he’d probably be even more volatile and hostile than usual. This problem had festered
long enough and now Neil needed to come up with a solution.

The light turned green and Matt drove through the intersection toward a spot on campus with a cluster of restaurants. After a quick debate, they decided on El Encanto, a Mexican restaurant that Neil secretly favored but rarely went to. Inside, the lighting was dim, the vinyl booths were well worn and comfortable, and the music was at the perfect volume to be soothing but not distracting.

With the emergency cash from his gym bag, Neil could afford enough food to keep up with Matt and Dan’s large appetites. After the food was devoured, Dan ordered more chips and salsa for them to share and a couple more beers for Matt to soften his bad mood. Neil half-listened to Dan talk about what she did that day while mentally rearranging his to-do list as the hour grew later.

Matt decided he was ready to leave at nine forty-five. He passed his keys to Neil with a, “Better safe than sorry, you know?” since he and Dan had enough beer to make their eyes look hazy.

Miraculously, Neil managed to drive safely at the speed limit in the rain without stalling the engine at all. When he parked without hitting anything, Dan and Matt let out exaggerated sighs of relief.

“That’ll do, freshman, that’ll do,” Dan said, patting Neil’s hair.

“Ten outta ten,” Matt added.

They didn’t seem that drunk, but Neil still followed close behind just in case one of them fell over.

Seth wasn’t in their suite when they made it upstairs, although that didn’t make a difference to Matt. He snatched up the shorts he preferred to sleep in and his toiletries and rushed next door to the girls’ room to spend the night with Dan.

Neil was ready to put the whole day behind him. He scratched his head and swept his eyes over the main room. There was no telling where Seth had gone off to or when he’d be back. There was nothing to be done about it either, so Neil gathered up his dirty laundry, his bottle of detergent, and his Ziploc bag of quarters and headed down to the basement.

He didn’t linger longer than he had to down there; the smell of musty concrete and the lack of windows pulled his mind in a direction he definitely didn’t want to go in. As the elevator took him up to the third floor, he firmly told himself that he would stay awake until his laundry was done for fear of forgetting it. Unfortunately, his determination evaporated once he was back in the quiet stillness of his dorm.

For a minute, he entertained ideas of watching TV or doing push-ups or texting Andrew to keep himself awake. He couldn’t bring himself to do any of those things. His eyes were already drooping.

It can’t hurt to lie down for a little while, he reasoned as he drank a glass of water. His alarm never failed to wake him up since he was such a light sleeper. Besides, the Foxes had a big game tomorrow and he needed to be well rested. Yawning, he set an alarm on his phone and climbed up into his bed. His world went dark the second his head hit the pillow.

The alarm wasn’t what wrenched him out of a dead sleep. His heart pounded and his breathing was too quick, but he couldn’t figure out what startled him. Then, he heard a thump out in the main room. It was most likely Seth, so Neil didn’t force himself to get up until his alarm went off ten minutes later.

Seth was sitting in his desk chair next to the open window. When he saw Neil, he laughed, “Oh, shit,” and a cloud of pungent smoke came out of his mouth.
Neil sniffed the air and glared at Seth with disdain. “You’re smoking weed? You know that random drug tests are a thing, right?”

Seth waved him off carelessly and puffed on his joint. “We don’t have to worry about that shit yet.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Let’s just say we’ve got friends in convenient places.”

The implications made Neil’s heart stutter. “Is Wymack bribing someone?” he asked, horrified.

“Nah,” Seth drew out the word and leaned his head against the window sill. “One of the poor drug-testing bastards has a massive boner for Abby, so he calls her up to chat and that’s how we know when to start cleaning up.”

“That doesn’t sound like a fool-proof system.”

Seth’s expression turned stormy. “You can fuck off if you’re going to be uptight. I’m already high and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Neil bit back a handful of barbed words. What Seth was doing was risky and foolish, but he knew that already. Despite what others said, he wasn’t a total idiot. There had to be something below the surface. Maybe after all this time on a losing team he’d stopped caring. Maybe the loss of his scholarship would save him from a career with high expectations, something else he could fail at.

He needed time to think, so he said, “I have to put my laundry in the dryer. I’ll be right back,” and left.

All the way down to the basement, he searched his brain for a new tactic to deal with Seth. Scorn would only make him more stubborn and faking nice would only raise suspicion no matter how stoned he was.

Neil transferred his clothes to a dryer, checked the lint trap, and put his quarters into the machine to start it up. He set another alarm on his phone as he walked back to the elevator. If he couldn’t get through to Seth in the time it’d take for his clothes to dry, he would give up for the night.

Inspiration struck as soon as he walked through the door. Leaning against one of the desks, he said, “Riko and Kevin used to smoke weed sometimes.”

Seth’s head jerked up, his eyes glazed and wide. “You’re shitting me. How the fuck do you know that?”

“I, uh, got high with them a few times.” It was as uncomfortably close to the truth as Neil was willing to get.

“Kevin Day. High and mighty. Incredible.” Seth shook his head. “You want some?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

Seth shrugged and took another drag. “You know, they let Kevin transfer weeks after the deadline. Isn’t that bullshit? He just waltzed right in and got a job and insurance and a whole fucking mountain of fanmail. There were flowers and everything. Ridiculous.”

“It’s bullshit,” Neil replied. He knew that Seth was only interested in agreement.

“You know, it’s almost been two months since Hebe’s.”
Neil’s eyes snapped to Seth’s face. His eyes were vacant, focused on nothing, and his voice sounded faint.

“They’d be over it by now if I’d died there.”

“The team?” Neil guessed.

Seth barreled on. “If Kevin died, people everywhere’d be bawlin’ their eyes out. People who haven’t even met him, people he’s got fuck-all to do with. First time I OD-ed, my mom called just to say she wouldn’t waste money on a funeral if I got myself killed doing stupid shit. That was also- fun fact-the last time she and I talked.”

“You have siblings, right?”

“Six brothers.” Seth made a sound that was almost a scoff. “Josh is a freshman at Belmonte now—that’s what Facebook says, anyway. Haven’t heard from a single one of those assholes since I started here. You remind me a little of Josh, actually.”

“Because he’s an asshole?” Neil asked dryly.

Seth pointed at him and gave a sleepy grin. “Exactly. Total punk. One time he put a dirty magazine under my bed and ratted me out for it.”

“Can I ask a question?”

“You just did, dumbass.”

“Do you actually want the team to care about you?”

Seth frowned. “The hell kinda question is that?”

“You seem like you get along with them some of the time, but then on days like today you act like you want to burn every bridge you can.”

Seth only stared at him, dazed and vaguely annoyed.

Changing tack, Neil said, “You really shouldn’t say that stuff to Nicky anymore. It’s uncalled for and it pisses everyone off.”

“Why the shit do you care?”

“Your behavior is messing up the team’s chemistry and I’m not going to let you tank our chances just because you choose to be a bigoted asshole.”

Seth blinked slowly. “You’re lucky I’m high as a kite right now.”

“I know.”

“Yeah, you know.” Seth took one last drag before putting out his joint. “Whatever. I’m gonna go down to the vending machine. I’d kill a man for some Cheetos.”

“I’ll come with you. I don’t trust you not to wander off for more drugs.”

Seth licked his palm and smeared it against Neil’s cheek. Neil shoved him away, sputtering in surprise and disgust.
“Punk,” Seth said with a definitive nod.
Dan made sure everyone got to the stadium at eleven forty-five on Wednesday. In spite of everything, she was bright-eyed and optimistic. Matt seemed in better spirits after spending the night in the girls’ suite and even Seth had calmed down a little.

Neil’s stomach was in knots.

In the lounge, Abby passed out sub sandwiches and bottles of juice to everyone as they took their seats. Neil felt so nauseated that the only way he could force himself to eat was by thinking of the carbs and protein he’d need to get through the night.

The dread in Neil’s gut curled tighter and tighter as Wymack drew plays on the whiteboard and talked. He needed to work twice as hard to prove himself. If he couldn’t win games like he was supposed to, there was no point in staying at Palmetto State and no chance of the master keeping him alive.

“We’re doing a roundtrip tonight,” Wymack said, capping the dry erase marker. “Abby’s bringing sleep aids if anyone needs help conking out on the way back. We won’t get in ‘til late, so tomorrow morning’s gym time will be optional. Kevin, Neil, that means stay home and sleep in for once in your lives. You’re all in charge of your own gear- Lord help us- so make sure you’ve got everything before loading it up on the bus. Finish eating and hop to it.”

Neil downed the rest of his juice, stuffed the last bite of his sandwich into his mouth, and finished chewing on the way to the locker room. He carefully packed his gear and his white away uniform into his new duffel bag. It was Fox orange with a large paw print stitched in white on one side; on the other side was his last name and jersey number. He still found the colors headache-inducing even if he preferred them to Raven black and blood red.

“Let me see,” Dan said over his shoulder, startling him. Neil stepped aside and watched as she quickly rifled through his bag. She patted his shoulder and went to check the other bags.

“I’ve got extra undies and everything, Mom,” Seth drawled.

Dan flicked his ear in admonishment. “Call me that again and see what happens.”

Nicky stepped aside with a theatrical sweep of his arm so Dan could check his gear too. Neil zipped
up his bag, shouldered it, and went outside.

The team bus was parked a short distance from the door, ready and waiting for the trip to Nashville. Allison and Renee were out there already to load their bags into the nearly empty undercarriage while Abby stood off to one side, anxiously frowning at her clipboard. Renee offered to stow Neil’s bag for him, so he let her take it from him and went back inside to get his messenger bag from the lounge. Then, he headed to the foyer to see if Wymack still needed help with the stick rack.

Wymack gave him a funny look when he appeared in the doorway and said, “Thought I put Boyd on stick rack duty.”

“I could go get him or I could just help you instead,” Neil replied.

Wymack snapped the plastic lids shut and gave the stick rack a hard shake to make sure nothing popped out of place. “Get that side, would ya?”

Neil grabbed the front handle and together they rolled the rack out into the hallway.

“You don’t need to work for extra credit, you know,” Wymack said, barely audible over the dull rumbling of the wheels. “The others might seem lazy, but they’re more than capable of pulling their own weight.”

“You and Abby pull plenty of extra weight.”

Wymack rolled his eyes. “I got tired of the revolving door of managers and assistant coaches. Eventually, I figured I could just do this shit myself. Worked out better for the team that way- none of you like dealing with strangers any more than I do.”

Neil could see his point. “Is it really worth all the trouble?”

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t. Now try worrying less about my career choices and more about how you’re gonna keep yourself busy for six hours on the bus.”

Once the stick rack and all the gear bags were loaded into the undercarriage, the Foxes filed onto the bus to take their seats. Just like the last time, the upperclassmen kept to the front of the bus while the cousins and Kevin went to the back. Neil claimed one of the empty middle rows for himself. Wymack and Abby were the last ones on. Abby got situated behind the wheel and Wymack lay down in the first row with a sleep aid to help him rest as much as he could since he would have to drive them back to Palmetto after the game.

Neil’s heart started racing before they even made it out of the parking lot. The taste of the Foxes’ first defeat was still bitter in his mouth and he didn’t think there was much hope for that night. A whole summer of practices did practically nothing to make the team more cohesive. It made him feel like he chained himself to a sinking ship. He was more and more convinced that running would have been the wiser option; at least he could have died quietly instead of suffering through all this public humiliation first.

For better or worse, his choice was made and he had to see it through- at least until December. Maybe with some more money or resources, he could still try to disappear.

Now, though, he had schoolwork to do and only a handful of hours left to mentally prepare himself for the Belmont game. He popped a breath mint into his mouth and opened his biology textbook, determined to be keep his mind busy.

Within minutes, he was back to staring out at the world.
The bus traveled northwest on the highway. A wall of trees grew along the right side of the road and between trunks and branches Neil caught glimpses of a wide field. He could hear the low sounds of the upperclassmen talking to each other over their seats. It vaguely reminded him of sitting under his mother’s desk and listening to her make phone calls in languages he didn’t understand. Separated from him, but still close by.

Neil slipped another mint into his mouth to get rid of the aftertaste left by the last one and tried to think of something other than his mother. Naturally, the more he tried not to think of her, the more his thoughts circled back to random memories- the plush rug in her office, her crystal ashtray, the secret games she invented just for the two of them.

A dark, shapeless memory shifted at the back of his mind, hidden under old fear that chilled his blood the more he tried to see past it. He remembered saying, “I can’t do this, Mom. Please, don’t make me,” but he couldn’t remember what she asked him to do.

Digging into old memories wouldn’t lead anywhere that he wanted to go. Neil ate another mint and went back to his textbook.

Unfortunately, the roar of tires on the highway and the hypnotic blur of the world outside made it almost impossible to focus on his reading. After the Foxes stopped to get more food and use the restaurant’s bathrooms, Neil had to reread most of the chapter just to make sure his brain actually absorbed the information.

As they crossed Tennessee’s border, Neil ate a few granola bars and slowly came to realize that he never once asked Jean what he thought about while traveling to the Ravens’ away games. He wondered if Jean read billboards and small town store signs, if he stared at forests and lakes, if he ever got an itch in his legs telling him to run. He almost wished he had Jean’s phone number so he could ask, although it wouldn’t do either of them any good. Up ahead, Neil spied the small, lumpy silhouettes of distant mountains- not the ones from his mother’s postcard, but for a second Neil let himself pretend.

He was startled and confused by his phone vibrating in his pocket. Anyone who might need to talk to him was on the bus within easy walking distance.

The text came from Maddie, a girl from his psychology class. He picked her at random on Monday and explained that the Belmonte game meant he’d miss class. She agreed to let him borrow her notes and suggested they exchange numbers so they could meet up later in the week; however, that didn’t give her a reason to tell him, Good luck tonight!!

Neil sent back a simple “thanks” and hoped she wouldn’t reply.

Kevin sank down next to him without warning. “We should go over our strategy again,” he said.

“We’ve been over this a million times already,” Neil replied as he moved closer to the window. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with Kevin’s anxiety on top of his own.

“You can’t deviate like you did last week. We have to win tonight.”

Neil worked his jaw and glared out the window. He wasn’t the only one who craved control over everything, but he didn’t think Kevin would ever own up to his issues.

“Nathaniel, listen to me.”

“Did we get paid for Kathy’s show?” The words tumbled out in a rush. It was satisfying to see Kevin startled.
“We both got five hundred,” Kevin answered. “Why? Is there something you want to buy?”

“You never mentioned the money. I assume you have an explanation for that.”

Kevin flinched back, stunned by Neil’s sharp tone. “You’ve never had that much money all at once. I thought it’d be better for me to hold onto it for safekeeping, so I signed the check over to me and put it in my account.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Neil spat. “I want the five hundred in cash. You had no right to keep it.”

Defensively, Kevin insisted, “I was just holding onto it temporarily and I’ll give you money if you need something. I thought you knew that.”

“You didn’t even tell me about it,” Neil hissed. “We’re not in the Nest anymore; you don’t get to force me to be dependent on you.”

Kevin’s eyes glinted with indignation. “I didn’t want you to burn through it. You need to save your money in case… you know.”

“That’s not your concern.”

“I’m not your enemy.”

“Bullshit.”

Kevin looked away with his nostrils flaring and his jaw clenched. “Fine,” he bit out. “I’ll get the cash to you this week. Can we talk about the game now or is there another fight you want to pick?”

Satisfied, Neil leaned back against the seat and motioned for Kevin to keep talking. Exy was an easy middle ground even if they weren’t quite on equal footing. In spite of knowing the strategy backwards and forwards, reciting it like some sort of mantra softened the hard edges of Neil’s dread.

The Foxes’ bus pulled into the parking lot of Belmonte’s stadium forty-five minutes before first serve. Abby parked in a gated area close to one of the side doors. Two bored-looking security guards kept watch while the Foxes unloaded their gear from the undercarriage. When the Vixens showed up in their large van, one of the guards went to stand near the cheerleaders as they climbed out. Neil hefted his gear bag and his messenger bag over his shoulders with the straps criss-crossing over his chest; he was too paranoid to leave anything behind on the bus.

A man in a volunteer’s vest led them inside and handed Wymack a clipboard with some papers to look over. After months in the Foxes’ cramped and musty locker room, stepping into Belmonte’s was almost jarring. Everything was newer and nicer than at the Foxhole Court. The ceiling was higher, the lighting was softer, and the floor was covered in gunmetal gray carpet with the Terrapin logo in the middle. Instead of metal lockers, there were open wooden stalls that had roomy compartments overhead and below their cushioned seats.

The Foxes spread out to begin getting ready. Neil put his bags down in front of a stall near the door and rubbed the back of his neck, wishing there was a way to lock his belongings up. In Neil’s opinion, the security and peace of mind at the Foxhole Court outweighed all the luxury that Belmonte offered.

Nothing proved this like the communal showers he found in the adjacent room. After the game, there would be nowhere for him to hide and the thought of showering with the other guys made his insides squirm. Neil thought of the questions, the pity, and the disgust. Maybe they’d even start betting on where the scars came from.
After the initial burst of panic passed, he decided that worrying about the showers would have to wait. First, he needed to get into his uniform and the only place he could do that with any sort of privacy was the men’s bathroom. He only took his jersey, shorts, and the gear to be worn under them with him into one of the stalls. The cramped space made it difficult to get the straps of his shoulder and chest padding on right, but he managed eventually. Then, he went back to the locker room to put on the rest of his uniform.

Wymack stood near the center of the floor with his clipboard hugged to his chest, waiting for everyone to finish up. Seth was the last one out of the changing room and, once he appeared, Wymack said, “All right, listen up, folks. Last week, you made Breckenridge nervous. Tonight, I want you to kick Belmonte’s ass. You’ve all got something to prove, so go out there and prove it.”

“And if we lose?” Seth asked dryly.

“You better not lose easy,” Wymack warned. “Belmonte talked a lot of shit about us last year. Make ‘em eat their words.”

Aaron tipped his head back and flicked Neil a look. “If it gets bad, I guess we can have Wesninski start breaking kneecaps.”

“As long as he makes it look like an accident, I’m for it,” Nicky said lightly.

“Try to keep it clean tonight, guys,” said Wymack. “No red cards, no broken bones, no fighting with each other. Keep your squabbles to the locker room- I’m looking at you, Kevin and Seth. Today’s the day you act like big kids. Save the pigtail pulling and wedgies for the bus ride home.”

Kevin and Seth shot each other dirty looks.

“All right, up and at ‘em,” Wymack said with two sharp claps. “You know how this goes.”

Neil stuffed his armored gloves into his helmet and tucked it under his arm before falling into line with the rest of the team. They followed Wymack and Dan through the tunnel and out to the inner court.

Andrew and Renee locked the stick rack in place between the benches and Dan quickly popped the lids open. Kevin grabbed his racquet and went straight to the plexiglass court wall, ignoring the jeering crowd at his back. The stadium was packed with fans dressed in Belmonte’s green, white, and silver. Neil kept an eye on Seth to see if he would look for his brother in the stands, but he never did.

The Foxes warmed up, jogged laps around the inner court, and headed onto the court for some drills. Belmonte’s team wasn’t as dauntingly big as some, but there were still at least two Terrapins for every Fox. Despite knowing the Terrapins’ strengths and weaknesses as a team, Neil didn’t have a shred of optimism about tonight’s game.

The Foxes left the court when their time was up and stood side by side while the announcer went through both line-ups. The crowd went wild for the Terrapins and politely clapped or booed for the Foxes.

Once that was over with, Dan met the Terrapins’ captain and the head referee in the center of the court for the coin toss. She won the Foxes first serve, so the Terrapin captain opted to start on home court. The captains returned to their teams and the six referees took their places near the doors.

Wymack swept his eyes over his players and said, “All right, let’s do this. Go raise some hell, Foxes.”
Matt and Dan exchanged grins.

“Just try to stick to the plays for once,” Kevin said with a cold look at the others.

Nicky gave Kevin a fake smile. “You’re only allowed one racquet on the court, Kevin, so take the one out of your ass and leave it behind, okay?”

“For once, I actually agree with Hemmick,” Seth muttered.

Nicky wrinkled his nose in disgust and Seth sneered back at him.

Wymack sighed. “Jesus. Starters, get moving. Andrew, you with us or not?”

Andrew turned like he was surprised to see the rest of the team there. He smiled, but it looked more like he was just baring his teeth. “You say something, Coach?”

“Get your ass out there.”

“And the rest of me?”

Wymack glared. Andrew picked up his racquet and walked over to Seth and Kevin to tell them something. He seemed too energetic for his night pill and too focused for his daytime one. Neil glanced at the cameras, troubled by the thought of Andrew’s behavior being broadcast where anyone could see it. If the wrong person realized something was off with him, a mandatory urinalysis would send him to prison.

Neil faced the plexiglass and told himself he was thinking too hard about this, worrying over an unlikely scenario. People that weren’t around him everyday wouldn’t notice that anything was amiss.

However, he wouldn’t put it past Riko to call in a tip out of revenge. If he really wanted to get rid of Andrew, that would be an effective way to do it.

Neil shook his head and forced out a tight breath. There were more important things to focus on at the moment.

The Foxes’ starting line-up was in place on the court, facing the Terrapins. Dan was handed the ball and the referees locked the doors. Then the warning buzzer went off: one minute to go. The Foxes and the Terrapins braced themselves for a fight.

“We got this,” Nicky said to no one in particular.

Neil watched the seconds count down until they hit zero.

The starting buzzer blared and Dan served the ball to herself as everyone broke formation. She passed to Matt and he passed to Aaron, who knocked it back to his brother. Andrew slammed the ball in a neat arc over the court to the nearly empty home side, where Kevin and Seth were ready for it. The Foxes kept the ball moving between them almost seamlessly, and when they fumbled or failed, Andrew was ready to block the Terrapins’ shots.

“They’re playing nice with each other for once,” said Wymack.

Neil almost couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

Eight minutes passed before Kevin scored the first point. The crowd seethed and a viciously pleased shiver rolled down Neil’s back.
Wymack thumped his fist twice against the wall and shouted, “There you go, Foxes!”

Belmonte seemed to have made the same mistake as Breckenridge- expecting an easy win- but they didn’t have the same level of skill Breckenridge boasted. They weren’t prepared for the fight the Foxes brought to their court.

At twenty-three minutes in, the score was three-one, Foxes’ favor, and Wymack was ready to swap out some of his players. Neil shook out the tremors in his hands and followed Allison and Nicky onto the court. Kevin nodded at him as everyone got into position.

The sounds of the stadium fell away once the doors were bolted shut. Neil bent his knees, adjusted his grip on his racquet, and breathed.

When the game restarted, Neil gave himself over to adrenaline and instinct. He barely felt the first few hits from his mark as they shoved at each other. The Terrapin goalkeeper shouted something at her teammates. With a barely legal check, Kevin’s mark stole the ball from Kevin’s net and smacked it over to one of the Terrapin strikers while Kevin struggled to get back to his feet. Instead of chasing the other striker, Neil took off toward the Terrapins’ goal and, sure enough, Andrew fired the ball his way after a scuffle on the away side.

Neil saw someone coming and braced for the inevitable body-check, spinning around the Terrapin to get away. Five steps later, he shot at the goal.

Blood roared in his ears as the wall lit up red. It took his brain a few seconds to catch up to the fact that he put a point on the board. Matt sprinted all the way over to him just to slap his helmet with a loud, “Fuck yeah, bro!”

As Neil jogged back to the half-court line, he saw Dan and Renee pounding their fists on the plexiglass and cheering. Wymack gave him a thumbs-up.

He didn’t let himself feel relieved or proud. The game was far from over and he had to be better if he wanted to win.

As the first half wound down, the Terrapins’ frustration with being behind on points became more and more evident. Their plays turned sloppy, but their checks went from rough to outright violent. The Foxes responded in kind, naturally. The Terrapin dealer shoved Allison into the wall and the resulting fight earned both Allison and Matt yellow cards. Kevin struggled for control of the ball until his mark sent him sprawling. He hit the floor hard enough that Neil felt a spike of genuine fear for him until he got back up.

Not long later, Neil took an elbow to the face as he and a Terrapin crashed to the ground together. Pain exploded in Neil’s nose and his vision danced with spots. The game was halted by a buzzer and a burst of noise from an open door. Neil pushed his helmet all the way off and rolled onto his hands and knees. Warm blood ran over his lips and dripped off his chin onto the floorboards. With his head swimming, he was only distantly aware of other voices shouting around him and hands on his shoulders trying to pull him up.

Matt was shouting, “What the shit, ref? Red card that asshole!”

“Wesninski, you good?” someone else asked.

Neil blinked at the drops of blood on the floor. His head throbbed. His mind was slipping away. He hated cleaning blood off the court, scrubbing it out of the seams in the floor. Towels were worse, of course. Even if they didn’t show the stains, using them never felt the same afterward.
“Hey, number ten, look at me.”

“Is he okay?”

“Here, let me see,” said Abby’s voice as gentle hands tilted his face up. Her eyes were clouded with concern as they flicked between Neil’s. “Hon, are you okay? You with us?”

He suddenly remembered where he was. “I’m fine,” he muttered as she wiped his face off with some gauze. Blood was still pooling thickly at the back of his tongue and, not wanting to add to the mess he’d already made, he swallowed it down. His stomach quivered with disgust.

Kevin stepped in front of him and frowned. “If you have a concussion, get off this court.”

“I’m fine,” Neil repeated. “Nothing’s broken.”

“You have to take your injuries seriously, Nathaniel.”

Neil rolled his eyes and bent down to get his helmet, wincing at the swell of pressure in his nose when he did so. “You’ve done worse to me on a good day, Kevin. Fuck off.”

Kevin tensed and then Neil realized his error. Matt and Abby were both frowning at the pair of them.

Andrew strolled over to see what the hold-up was. He cocked his head and stepped closer to Neil for a better look at his face.

“Are we going to play or keep wasting time?” Neil asked sourly.

The other players drifted back into position once the referees decided the fall and the hit were both accidental. Neil looked up at the scoreboard for the first time in what felt like forever. Only nine minutes remained on the clock and the Foxes were up by three points.

Neil managed to score again just before the halftime buzzer went off. His mark called him something offensive, but unimaginative. Neil responded by spitting blood-tinged phlegm on the court floor.

When he reached the bench, Kevin gave him a disapproving frown. “That was disgusting. Was it really necessary?”

Seth laughed and said, “Next time spit in that fucker’s face.”

Wymack ushered his Foxes into the tunnel and away from the furious crowd. Once they were safe in their locker room, Renee passed out ice packs and cups of Gatorade while Abby checked everyone’s injuries. The Foxes were all feeling the effects of the rough game, but the mood in the room was light. Even Wymack was in a better mood than usual.

Andrew was the exception. He sat in the stall beside Kevin’s and seemed completely unaware of anyone else in the room. When Neil stood in front of him, it took a few seconds before he looked up. His voice came out flat and cold. “Do you need something?”

“Do you?” Neil asked. He wasn’t the only one who was pushing himself hard that night.

“Not from you.” Andrew made a dismissive gesture. “Go away.”

Neil wanted to press more, but Kevin quietly warned, “Leave him be, Nathaniel. You need to rest and hydrate.”

Reluctantly, Neil walked away. He sat down between Matt and Seth and accepted the drink Renee
offered him, downing it in a few large gulps.


“And annoyed,” Neil said honestly.

“Not as annoyed as those assholes out there,” said Seth. “Five-one’s gotta sting.”

“I hope it does,” Dan chimed in with a grin. She stood in front of Matt and reached down to jostle Neil’s shoulder. “How about another two points in the second half, huh? Four’s a good number, isn’t it, Matt?”

“It is indeed,” Matt intoned deeply, stroking a hand over the number on his jersey.

“I feel good about tonight, guys,” said Nicky from across the room. “We might have this thing in the bag.”

Kevin said, “Everything could go to hell in the second half. Stay sharp.”

“Positive as always,” muttered Allison.

“We’ve got four points on them,” said Dan. “At least we’re off to a good start.”

“It’s not good enough until we actually win,” Kevin replied.

Neil agreed, but he didn’t say so. Most of the Foxes were exhausted and bruised. They couldn’t afford to take much more of a beating with another game to play on Friday. The Foxes didn’t have players to spare like other teams did.

Wymack stepped in before Kevin could irritate the others any further. He went over the high points and low points of the first half, pointed out what the Foxes needed to work on, and then he went over the Terrapins’ starters for the second half.

The Foxes were restless while he talked, but they all seemed to be listening carefully as they stretched their sore muscles or paced the length of the room. When Wymack was done, they drifted off into their little groups again.

Peripherally, Neil noticed Wymack approaching Andrew and he was too curious not to try eavesdropping. Under the guise of getting a better view of the TV, he wandered closer to them and stood within earshot.

“I know we didn’t agree on it,” Wymack started slowly, “but I can get you your usual payment when we get home if you want it. You did good out there. You earned it.”

Neil fought hard against the urge to look at them, aching to ask what Wymack’s “usual payment” was. Wymack told him about the Foxes’ game against the Jackdaws last year, about how Andrew said, “Pick a number,” and only allowed that many shots past him. At the time, Neil assumed it was on a whim that Andrew cooperated.

“Someone’s already paid your tab, Coach,” Andrew replied.

“Well… all right, then. You can shower and change out if you want to hang out here the rest of the game. You look like shit.”

Andrew disappeared into the changing room just as a warning buzzer went off and the Foxes went back to the inner court without him. Andrew's welfare wasn't Neil's problem, but leaving him alone
when he was playing with his meds didn’t seem like the right thing to do. At the bench, Neil checked over his shoulder for any sign of the goalkeeper in the dark, empty tunnel.

“Focus,” Kevin said, tapping the helmet in Neil’s hands. “You have another quarter to get through and it’s only going to get worse from here.”

The announcer’s voice boomed over the noise of the fans as each team’s starting line-up gathered at the center court doors. Neil pulled his helmet on and stood behind Seth.

“Keep it going, Foxes. Let’s take home a win,” Wymack said.

Adrenaline was already coursing through Neil’s body by the time he stepped through the door. Seth clacked sticks with him before they separated to get into position on the half-court line. Neil stared down his new mark and felt a rush of self-doubt. His nose throbbed painfully, his body ached, and he knew he’d have no energy left by the time Kevin took over for him. He just hoped Renee would be able to hold her ground. As long as the Terrapins didn’t score more than three points, the Foxes were safe.

After the buzzer, things went from bad to brutal.

Seth managed to score once, but from then on the Foxes couldn’t even get possession of the ball. The Terrapins swarmed the goal and scored twice. A nasty check left Neil’s shoulder feeling like it was speared with fire. Aaron started favoring his left ankle after knocking a Terrapin striker to the ground and Seth looked shaky on his feet.

The score was seven-four when Neil was finally called off the court. Kevin, Dan, and Matt went on and a few of the Terrapins were swapped out as well. Neil collapsed onto the bench, breathing hard. He was relieved to be sitting down again and terrified that he hadn’t done enough. He’d only managed to snag one point in twenty-five minutes. Even with the Foxes’ lead, it still felt like things were taking a turn for the worst.

Abby prodded and squeezed Neil’s shoulder through his padding, frowning when he winced. It took Neil a few tries to get her to believe he was fine. She pushed a cup of water into his hands before going down the bench to check on Aaron’s ankle.

Wymack paced along the wall as the game restarted. Neil’s eyes followed him for a few minutes and his stomach rolled at the thought of another failure.

There was nothing he could do but watch his teammates war with their opponents behind the plexiglass. Kevin and Riko were so attuned to each other that they seemed like one mind in two bodies. Paired with Seth, Kevin played like he only had half a brain, like he forgot he wasn’t the only striker out there.

As for the Foxes’ defense, Renee was a fine goalkeeper, but she didn’t have Andrew’s reflexes. Matt was easily one of the best players on the team, but he couldn’t cover for Nicky’s weaknesses like Aaron did.

The Terrapins exploited all of the Foxes’ weak spots and landed another goal, bringing the score to seven-five.

Anxiously, Neil rose to his feet and pressed his shaking hands to the wall. There were only two points standing between the Foxes and defeat.

The ball went from Kevin to Dan to Seth and back again until finally Seth had an opening. He took a shot on goal as soon as he could and failed. Wymack made a bitten-off sound of frustration as the
Terrapin goalkeeper slammed the ball to the other side of the court.

The score was seven-six within a few minutes.

With five minutes on the clock, Kevin managed to steal the ball back. He didn’t attempt to score and, for once, Seth and Dan were on the same page as him. They kept the ball moving between them and tried to run down the clock without letting the Terrapins get control again.

Neil looked from the clock to the court in a dreamlike daze. Wymack muttered, “Come on, come on,” under his breath.

When the final buzzer sounded, the score was still seven to six.

The home crowd’s fury erupted; their yells and shouts and insults blurred together in Neil’s ears. He stared blankly at his celebrating teammates on the court.

They won. He couldn’t believe it.

Wymack’s hand came down hard on Neil’s back. “Don’t look so shocked, kid. Even Foxes win once in a while.”

Neil forced a tight smile at his coach and looked at the scoreboard. The numbers hadn’t changed.

His brain shut down and he was only vaguely aware of what happened after that. There was shouting and Dan’s bubbly laughter. Neil was shaking hands with disgruntled Terrapins one minute and the next he was following Kevin into the tunnel with his helmet cradled against his stomach.

Wymack and Abby both disappeared into the medical room, where Neil assumed Andrew was holed up. In the doorway to the locker room, Neil stopped and watched his teammates. Seth hugged Allison tightly and lifted her off her feet, snickering when she complained loudly about how sweaty they both were. Dan was laughing and leaning against Matt as he told Nicky and Aaron about something one of the Terrapins said to him.

At last, Neil’s brain caught up and the fact that they won the game hit him squarely in the chest. Relief crashed over him like a panic attack, filling him with a buzzing and raw terror. Their escape from failure was too narrow to feel good about. One point. That was it. They couldn’t survive the season like this and they’d never make it through spring championships.

He didn’t see Kevin until he was right in front of him. “That was too close,” Neil whispered shakily.

Kevin nudged him back into the hallway and let the door swing shut behind them. His eyes were grim with understanding. “We won. That’s what you need to focus on.”

Neil dropped his gloves and ripped off his neck guard. “We shouldn’t have. That was- that was luck.”

“This is just the nature of games. You’ll get used to it.”

Neil stumbled back against the wall as he sucked in short gulps of air. They were going to fail and the Moriyamas would kill him. He could already feel the chill of death in his veins. “We can’t do this,” he croaked. “There’s no way we can pull this off. What the fuck was I thinking?”

“We will do what we have to,” Kevin replied. “We’re Ravens, Nathaniel. If anyone can handle this it’s us.”
Matt pulled the locker room door open and frowned at them. “What’s going on, guys?”

Kevin shifted to hide Neil from Matt’s view and spoke with icy superiority. “We were trying to have a conversation in private. What does it look like we’re doing?”

“Neil, you okay?” Matt asked.

Neil put a hand over his mouth and tried to muffle his harsh breathing.

“He’s fine,” Kevin snapped loudly. “In case it escaped your memory, you were not invited into this discussion, so do the polite thing and leave us alone. I would have thought someone with your background would understand basic manners, but I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that a Fox is completely uncivilized.”

“In case you missed it, we won tonight,” Matt growled. “Chill the fuck out for once, you pretentious asshat.”

Renee’s soft voice interrupted them. “Hey guys, why don’t you two go clean up? I need a word with Neil.”

Neil fought the childish urge to latch onto Kevin’s jersey; he was the only one who could understand why Neil was overwhelmed instead of overjoyed. Thankfully, Kevin’s pompous speech had given Neil enough time to get his breathing back under control. When he was left alone with Renee, he was able to stand up straight and school his features into a neutral expression.

She studied him for a moment and smiled. “Allison, Dan, and I are going to go do press in a minute. You’re welcome to use the women’s room to shower if you’d like.”

Neil blinked at her in confusion.

“The guys said you might like to have privacy,” she explained. “Let us know when you’re done, okay?”

He didn’t trust Renee. She was praised for her sweet temperament and her kindness and her charity work, but no one ended up on Wymack’s radar for no reason. There was a chance that her offer was part of a trap, but the only way to know for sure was to accept and see for himself.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ll be quick.”

He slipped past her into the locker room to gather his things before continuing on through the door marked “WOMEN.” The room was unnervingly quiet and it smelled like bleach. Neil grabbed a fresh towel from the shelving unit near the door and dumped his things on one end of the long counter. He undressed quickly, wrapping his towel around his waist when he was naked, and then he followed a short hallway to the showers.

His skin prickled with paranoia as he scrubbed himself clean. His heart didn’t slow down again until he was fully dressed and he realized that it hadn’t been a trap after all. He was both relieved and embarrassed at being wrong.

After he packed up his gear bag, he left the locker room to go tell the girls he was done showering. In the hallway, he was stopped dead in his tracks by the sight of Wymack and Abby in the middle of what appeared to be an argument.

“He’s underage and he’s on medication. You can’t keep-” Abby froze when she noticed Neil and forced a tense smile. “Hi, hon, you okay?”
Wymack rubbed at his mouth like he could erase his frown. “What’s up, kid?”

“The girls let me borrow their shower, so I was going to tell them I’m out,” Neil replied, deeply uncomfortable with the knowledge that he interrupted something he shouldn’t have.

“Oh, David was heading back that way, so he can tell them for you. Why don’t you go get your stuff ready? We’ll hit the road soon.” Abby started walking away before Neil or Wymack could say anything and she continued, “I’m gonna grab something from the vending machine. I’ll be back in a minute.”

When Abby disappeared around the corner, Neil raised an eyebrow at Wymack.

“Just a minor disagreement,” Wymack said gruffly. “Go get your shit and I’ll get the girls.”

Neil watched him walk away. Once he was alone, he went to the medical room and slowly crept inside, curious about what he’d find. Andrew was seated on the floor by the desk, legs crossed and head bowed. For a second, it seemed like he was asleep, but then he asked, “Are they still fighting?”

“Do you know what they were fighting about?”

Andrew lifted his head to give Neil a condescending look. He tapped his left cheekbone and said, “Three guesses.”

“Something to do with your meds?”

“Not bad.” He took a deep, labored breath and rested his head against a drawer. “Abby’s on board for bending rules, but she doesn’t bend them as far as Coach does.”

“Which rules?”

“The booze-related ones. Last year Coach and I made a deal, see: a bottle of Johnnie Walker for my best efforts in the goal. Abby kicks up a fuss every now and then to keep her membership to the moral high ground.”

Neil wondered if it was the rules or Andrew that Abby was most worried about. “How safe is it for you to be drinking alcohol?”

Andrew looked at him like the question wasn’t even worth thinking about.

Someone pushed the door open. Neil turned, ready to justify his being there to Wymack, but it wasn’t Wymack who came in. It was Kevin. He calmly shut the door behind him and asked, “What are you doing in here, Nathaniel?”

Andrew grabbed the desk to haul himself to his feet. “Why are you here, Kevin?”

“I came to see how you were holding up,” Kevin replied coolly, studying Andrew’s unsteady movements. “You should take something if you’re still feeling this poorly. You’ve still got half.”

“Shut up.” Andrew gestured at Kevin’s jacket. “Give me a drink.”

Kevin handed over a silver flask without any argument.

Neil felt uneasy. “Is that really a good idea?”

“There are no good ideas here, Neil. Just a handful of bad options.” Andrew paused to take a swig from the flask. “If you don’t pick one for yourself, someone else will.”
There was nothing Neil could say to counter that. He stepped around Kevin to get out of the room, muttering, “We’re all screwed.”
Chapter Summary

After the Foxes' third game, Neil goes out with Andrew's group despite his better judgement.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: violence, knives, discussion of canon murder and past child abuse

Thanks to everyone who left comments or kudos on the last chapter!! I really appreciate it

Happy reading <3

Two days later, Neil was once again staring up at a scoreboard and trying to process the fact that the Foxes managed to win somehow. This time, they were at the USC-Columbia Court and they beat the Gamecocks eight points to five. Neil’s ears rang and he was so worn out that he let himself lean against his teammates for support as they slammed into him.

Seth grabbed Neil’s helmet and gave him a violent shake, shouting, “You fucker! You pulled that last point out of your ass.”

Matt slapped Neil on the back, and even though it made Neil’s bruises ache, he didn’t mind. He followed the others off the court on wobbly legs only to get swept up into another crushing hug by Dan near the bench. Wymack clapped him on the helmet as he walked by and boomed, “That’s what I like to see, Foxes!”

“We beat two teams on their own turf,” Matt said with a giddy laugh as they got booed by some disgruntled fans. “This shit never gets old.”

“We got beat on our own turf,” Allison pointed out.

“We’ll pay Breckenridge back for it when we play them again,” countered Matt.

Dan beamed and bumped his fist with hers. “Let’s make it a winning streak, yeah?”

“Let’s make it to the bus first,” Wymack cut in. “Matt, Dan, you two still up for talking to the press? Good. Everyone else, get a move on.”

In the locker room, Renee and Allison sat together to wait for Dan and give Neil time to use the women’s showers again. Neil didn’t want to waste any time, so he grabbed the shorts and t-shirt he wore earlier and left his outfit for Eden’s in his bag. Getting clean was the first priority; after that, he could ask Andrew what the plan for the night was. He didn’t want to think they’d risk going out for ice cream and alcohol when the whole city felt like enemy territory, but he knew better than to get his hopes up.
After he was done showering and getting dressed, he packed his gear back into his bag and pitched his towel in the hamper. Then, he went into the men's room in search of Andrew.

Nicky stood in front of the mirror, rubbing product through his hair, and Andrew was sitting on the bench to lace up his boots. They were both dressed for Eden’s and they both gave Neil a neutral once-over when he entered the room.

“I think it’s a bad idea to go out tonight,” said Neil.

“No one’s holding a gun to your head,” Andrew replied. “If you’re out, you can run along back to campus with the other kids. If you’re in, there’s a bag of clothes for you in the car. You can change at the house when we drop off our gear.”

“There are pictures of Kevin at Sweetie’s and outside Eden’s posted online. People know where you guys go and we just pissed off a crowd.”

“If someone wants to pick a fight, Andrew will take care of it,” Kevin said as he came around the corner wearing only a towel around his waist.

Andrew pulled out a packet of cracker dust and shook some into his mouth while Kevin went to his pile of clothes on the counter next to Nicky. Neil’s gaze was drawn to the line of scar tissue across Kevin’s shoulder blade; he remembered the wound because he was the one who stitched it up. He only stared for a second, but Andrew smirked at him like he’d revealed something significant.

The showers cut off and Aaron appeared a couple seconds later, toweling off his arms and chest. He flicked his eyes over Neil and asked, “What do you want?”

“We’ll be done in here soon, Nathaniel,” Kevin said.

Neil heard the note of dismissal in his voice and figured they didn’t want to hear about the night’s risks anymore. He went back out to the locker room and sat with his roommates, easily joining in their conversation about the game.

Once Andrew’s group was done getting ready, they didn’t stick around for the rest of the team and they ignored Wymack’s, “Keep out of trouble,” as they headed out the door.

“We’ll see you tomorrow, Coach,” Neil said quietly before slipping out into the hallway after them.

He didn’t know what the night had in store for them, but a bad feeling was brewing in his gut. Andrew had taken down a small group of drunk twentysomethings to defend his cousin, but that was before he was on his medication. There was no guarantee he’d be able to pull off a stunt like that a second time. The police wouldn’t go easy on Andrew. They’d see his record, his knives, and the cracker dust in his system and they’d ship him off to prison. Kevin would be left unguarded, Riko would reel him back in, and what would happen to Neil?

Distant yelling in the parking lot made Neil jump. He blinked rapidly and took in his surroundings, chastising himself for not paying attention. They were walking through the parking, far from the safety of the gated area where the team bus was, and keeping their heads down as they slipped passed the Exy fans leaving the stadium. Thankfully, none of them had on anything that could distinguish them as Foxes. Despite their confidence in Andrew’s ability to protect them, Aaron, Nicky, and Kevin let out small sighs of relief as soon as they were safe in the car.

It took Nicky thirty minutes to drive through the traffic-clogged streets to get to the house and the entire drive was tense. Every so often, Andrew tipped a little more dust into his mouth.
At the house, they piled their bags in the entryway and let Neil change clothes before heading off to Sweetie’s, where they got a quick bite to eat and their usual ice cream specials with a side of cracker dust to go. Neil’s stomach ached with hunger at the smell of Andrew’s chicken sandwich. He tried not to think about it too much and watched the other people at the restaurant closely.

A crumpled napkin hit the side of his head and Aaron said, “I’m talking to you, fresh meat.”

Neil looked from the fallen napkin to Aaron. “What?”

“Dial it back. You’re creeping people out.”

“I’m just looking around.”

Kevin frowned and pulled his spoon out of his mouth. “You’re really tense. You sure you don’t want something to take the edge off?”

“You’re pretty tense, too, Aaron,” Nicky said, nudging him with his elbow. “Is it ‘cause Katelyn wasn’t there tonight? Her ankle’s still fucked, right?”

Aaron muttered, “Shut up, Nicky.”

“Hey, at least she’s not dead,” Andrew said.

A look passed between the Minyard brothers and Neil had no idea how to interpret it.

No one else said anything for a long time.

Nicky paid the bill and the five of them trudged outside to the car together. Neil almost volunteered to sit between Andrew and Aaron, if only to dispel some of the crackling tension. On the way to Eden’s, he wished he had because he was almost certain that Aaron wasn’t even breathing.

The hostility in the air didn’t let up until they were at a table with a tray of drinks, a pile of dust packets, and the heavy beat of Eden’s music in their ears. Neil scanned the platform to either side of the alcove. People were mostly lost to shadow and distorted by lights hitting them from different angles. No one seemed to be looking their way.

The chair was uncomfortable and there was a sharp, hot ache cutting into Neil’s upper back. He was reminded of every injury he’d sustained that week whenever he moved, but he supposed he ought to be grateful. After worrying all summer long, the Foxes were three games into the season and they’d won twice. Things were going much better than Neil expected.

Kevin loosened up enough to get chatty halfway through the second tray of drinks. Andrew and Nicky took more dust and escaped Kevin’s run-down of that night’s game by darting off into the crowd on the dance floor. Andrew stared at Kevin while he talked, but Neil doubted he was retaining anything Kevin was saying. That left the burden of replying and giving input on Neil’s shoulders. Fortunately, he already knew exactly what Kevin wanted to hear. After all their years together in the Nest, talking to him about Exy came as naturally as breathing.

“You should explain to Nicky about footwork,” Kevin said, scraping his dark hair back with both hands and stretching to pop his back. “He’s so… he’s not clumsy, but... you know what I mean.”

“He’s unpredictable,” said Neil. “Sometimes it’s like he’s so desperate to get the ball away from his mark that he doesn’t actually think about where he’s aiming.”

“Yes!” Kevin jabbed a finger at Neil, more emphatically than anything he would’ve done sober.
“That’s exactly it. You need to practice with Nicky.”

“No,” said Andrew.

Kevin squinted. “Why not? I don’t understand why you keep saying no. There’s no reason to keep Nathaniel away from Nicky.”

Andrew didn’t give him a reply. Kevin glared and sipped his vodka tonic.

Aaron and Nicky reappeared long enough to drink themselves back into a haze. Andrew checked his phone, finished his drink, and got up. “I’m going out for a smoke,” he said. “I’ll be back soon.”

It wasn’t an invitation. Neil said, “I’ll keep an eye on Kevin.”

“Get more drinks,” Kevin demanded.

Andrew cut him a flat look and carried the tray in the direction of the bar. Kevin watched him disappear into the throng of people. Then, he blinked dazedly at Neil like he was searching for a thought that escaped from him. Eventually, he found it. “I told Wymack to put you on the starting line-up for Monday’s game.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s where you should be.” Kevin put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “We have to be smart if we want to keep winning. You and I were born for this.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “We weren’t born for this. We were brainwashed.”

“You always had talent. The master wouldn’t have wanted you otherwise.”

“Lucky me,” Neil muttered.

Someone passing by their alcove guffawed and stumbled, spilling his drink on the floor. One of his friends said something and all three guys were set off into another fit of obnoxious, drunken laughter. They looked like college students and the issue with that occurred to Neil just after they noticed Neil looking.

The tallest one squinted at Kevin and let out a low belch. “Well, fuck me sideways,” he said. “It’s Kevin Day.”

Neil tugged his phone out of his pocket while their focus was on Kevin, who stared back at them with obvious disdain in spite of his own inebriation.

One of the other guys chortled. “Number two sounds about right.”

“Real piece of shit,” said the other.

Neil quickly found Andrew’s name on his contact list and called the number with the phone hidden under the table. He hoped Andrew would be able to figure out what was going on.

“Are you Exy fans? Did you want an autograph or something?” Kevin asked waspishly.

“We go to USC, you dumb fuck,” spat the first guy.

“There’s no need for name-calling,” Neil cut in haughtily. “We’re just having a drink. I think we deserve it even if we didn’t work all that hard tonight.”
“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

Neil clucked his tongue. “Kevin, no one from USC can keep up tonight. What do you think? Off-week? Or a worrying trend in the collective intelligence of the student body?”

Kevin furrowed his brow as he pretended to think it over.

The first and largest of the group took a step toward Neil, looming over him threateningly. “How about I knock your teeth in?”

“I don’t even think USC wanted to win,” Neil continued, ignoring them. “They definitely didn’t play like it.”

One of the other two gave a short, incredulous laugh. “Sounds like this guy wants an ass-kicking, Jake.”

Neil looked up at the guy called Jake and gave him a sharp smile. “Go ahead and kick my ass. It won’t make your team suck less.”

He predicted the punch, but it still caught him by surprise. Jake’s fist smashed into Neil’s left eye and knocked him out of his chair. The floor tilted when Neil hit it with pain erupting in his skull and his vision flickering with bright spots.

He got hauled to his feet by his shirt collar like a rag doll while the other two guys howled with laughter. Neil took one more hit to the face before something crashed into his assailant. Kevin caught him by the arm and dragged him away from the fight.

Jake was struggling to get up off the floor. Andrew kneed him in the face and practically threw him face-first into the railing before turning on the other two. He punched one in the solar plexus and bent the other guy’s hand back to the point where Neil thought his fingers would surely break.

Kevin’s voice swam in his ear, saying, “We should go. Come on.”

He dragged Neil along the platform, skirting around the people who gathered to watch the three-on-one brawl. A few men with “SECURITY” on their shirts strode past them purposefully.

Neil’s fear about Andrew’s prison sentence broke the surface the moment they got to the bottom of the steps. Trying to break free from Kevin’s hold on him, he said, “We have to go back. If Andrew gets arrested—”

“They all know Andrew here,” Kevin cut him off. “They won’t call the cops. It’s gonna be fine. Just wait.”

Neil craned his neck and strained to see the shadowy group of men on the platform. His head pounded and he was sure to have new bruises on top of his old ones. He was too tense to draw a full breath until Andrew shoved through the crowd. He had a murderous look on his face as he came down the steps.

“Andrew,” Kevin started.

Andrew shoved something against Neil’s chest. “You dropped this,” he said before roughly ushering Neil and Kevin outside to the sidewalk.

“Thanks,” Neil replied belatedly once he realized Andrew had given him back his phone. He didn’t even remember dropping it.
Andrew led them away from the bouncers until they were definitely out of earshot. Then, he grabbed Neil’s chin to get a better look at his eye under the streetlight.

“It’s not his fault,” Kevin said quietly.

“Shut up, Kevin.”

“It’s not, Andrew. Don’t.”

Andrew silenced him with a glare and let go of Neil. “You two will stay out here while I get Nicky and Aaron.” He pressed a closed switchblade into Neil’s palm and folded his fingers over it. “If those idiots come out this way, the bouncers will deal with them, but keep this just in case.”

The switchblade handle was glossy and warm and it made Neil break out in a cold sweat just looking at it. Andrew didn’t know what Neil really was. He didn’t know he just handed a blade to the Butcher’s son. Kevin looked rightly afraid.

“You can’t give me this,” Neil said, holding it out and hoping Andrew would take it back without questions.

Andrew wrapped a callused hand around Neil’s to push the button on the knife’s handle, causing the blade to flick out and click into place. “Keep the sharp end away from anything you don’t want cut off and you’ll be fine.”

“I know how it works,” Neil snapped. He frantically thumbed at the silver bolster to unlock the mechanism so he could tuck the blade back down where it couldn’t hurt anyone. “This is insane. You were ready to kill me a few months ago and now you’re trusting me with a knife?”

“Would you kill to protect what’s yours?”

Neil often fantasized about ending Riko’s life and back when Riko was certain he’d make a Raven of Andrew, whose violent reputation meant he posed a threat to Jean, Neil fantasized of ending his too. He swallowed hard. “Kevin’s not mine.”

“Pretend,” Andrew said dryly. “I’ll be back.”

Kevin swayed and put his hand against the wall, leaning forward like he was about to vomit. Neil looked around, taking in the people staggering out to a cab and the bouncers slowly admitting people from the line and the lone man sleeping in a heap at the mouth of an alley.

The handle of the switchblade bit into his palm as he clenched his fist. He felt it like a brand and remembered the few lessons he’d received as a child from Lola, the woman the Butcher called to make crime scenes and corpses disappear. Neil hated her as much as he feared her. He remembered her lopsided, red-lipstick smiles and details of her gruesome work whispered in passing to frighten him and the smell of bleach clinging to her when she came up from the basement.

Lola was the one who suggested to Nathan that his son ought to learn how to handle a knife, how to carve into a body, and how to cause pain. His father agreed because he generally let her do as she pleased. It was one of many reasons that Neil’s mother despised her; sometimes she threatened to get rid of Lola herself and Neil wished she would have. When it was finally time for him to die, Lola would be there and she’d enjoy every minute of his torture. Neil’s body would be given to her for dismemberment and disposal just like his mother’s probably was.

Shuddering, he shoved the switchblade into his pocket and pulled out his roll of mints. He tore away the foil with trembling fingers and shoved three into his mouth.
“Nathaniel?” Kevin asked hoarsely.

Neil ignored him. His mind was in a tailspin. He crushed the mints with his teeth and pressed the pieces to the roof of his mouth with his tongue. The peppermint burned his taste buds and chilled his sinuses. Then, he put his hand over his stomach, took deep breaths, and focused on the way his hand rose and fell with each one. He counted to ten in all the languages he knew, ran over what he learned in his last biology class, and tried to name all the ingredients for the paninis he made with Dr. Dobson last Sunday.

Slowly, the panic loosened its chokehold on him.

“Nathaniel,” Kevin tried again. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s a lie.”

“It’s all you’re prepared to deal with at the moment,” said Neil.

Kevin gropped at the wall again, holding his stomach. “Fair. Fair enough.”

“Summer’s over. You shouldn’t keep drinking like this and you know it.” Neil put another mint in his mouth and scanned the sidewalk again. “Your secrets might be safe with Andrew, but the other two? I doubt it. You need to be more careful.”

“I know how to keep a secret,” Kevin said indignantly. “And it’s not like I show up to practices wasted. I only drink once or twice a week to take the edge off.”

“But you’re always on edge. Look at you, you can’t even stand up straight.”

Kevin scoffed. “The point of getting drunk is getting drunk.”

“There’s a quote for the press,” Neil muttered.

They continued waiting for the others in silence. Neil paced slowly- ten steps away from Kevin and ten steps back- until finally Andrew strode out of the club with his brother and cousin behind him. Andrew pulled Kevin along by his arm and checked over his shoulder to make sure Neil was following.

No one spoke on the way to the parking garage. Nicky and Aaron traded meaningful looks and helped keep each other upright. Neil stayed close to the pair in case they lost their balance. When they reached the car, Andrew held onto Kevin and gestured to his cousin. “Nicky, get in the middle. Neil, you’re up front.”

Neil sidestepped around Andrew and Kevin to get in the passenger seat. Nicky and Aaron climbed in the backseat from the other side of the car. Once Neil was belted in, Andrew pushed Kevin into the seat behind him and slammed the door shut. The switchblade was still in Neil’s pocket and the side of his face pulsed painfully. He clasped his hands between his knees to keep himself from prodding at his cheek.

Andrew’s anger showed in his driving. He braked too hard, turned too fast, and parked crookedly outside the convenience store they always stopped at. Before Neil could get out, Andrew shoved thirty dollars in his direction without looking at him. Confused and a little wary, Neil accepted the money, but he didn’t buy more than usual and he ended up handing back over twenty dollars when he returned to the car.
On the way to the house, Aaron asked, “Why’d we have to leave so early?”

“There were USC students,” Kevin slurred. “They recognized me.”

“Well, maybe you should’ve covered that shitty tattoo up.”

Nicky sighed. “Guys, there’s drinks at home. It’s fine.”

The backseat fell quiet again. Neil closed his eyes and forcibly relaxed his shoulders. The night was almost over. He was familiar enough with the route that he could count down the number of turns Andrew would make before they reached the cousins’ street.

In the driveway, Nicky and Aaron almost tripped over each other getting out of the car. Aaron called Nicky a nuisance as Nicky lumbered up to the door, laughing. Once he managed to get the door unlocked, he swept inside and cheerfully announced, “Let there be light,” as he flipped every switch he could find. Aaron went inside at a slower pace, followed by Kevin and Andrew.

Neil was the last one through the door. He immediately pulled off his boots and curled his toes against the floor in relief. His entire body was sore. From the kitchen came sounds of cupboards banging open and shut, ice clinking into glasses, and Kevin and Aaron’s voices. Andrew stood in the hallway in a spot where he could see the kitchen and Neil.

“Andrew, you want anything?” Nicky asked as he leaned through the doorway. His grin fell when he noticed Neil’s face. “Whoa, did someone hit you?”

“Nicky,” Andrew warned.

Turning, Nicky asked, “Kevin, did you punch Neil in the face?”

“No, I did not punch him in the face,” Kevin replied sourly.

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” Aaron said. “Oh, wait, was it those morons who recognized you?”

Neil didn’t want to stick around for this conversation. He took his bag from the convenience store out to the porch, sat on the step, and dug into his box of granola bars. When the door opened a few minutes later, he knew without looking that it was Andrew—partly because the others had no reason to come out there and partly because the others wouldn’t be nearly as quiet.

Andrew sat next to him on the step and casually lit a cigarette. Neil watched his hand, but he couldn’t tell if his knuckles were bruised in the weak light leaking out from the windows. He knew he ought to thank Andrew for showing up when he called, but he couldn’t force the words out. Instead, he dropped the switchblade in the space between them and said, “You shouldn’t have given me that.”

“You should keep it,” Andrew replied. “You can put it in Riko’s gut at the banquet next weekend.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to kill Riko.”

“You might change your mind.”

“I won’t. I’m not the only one who would suffer the consequences.”

Andrew turned his head, his eyes hooded and unreadable. “Is that the only thing stopping you?”

“Yes.”
“Interesting,” Andrew murmured. He ran his fingers over the handle of the switchblade, lingering over the button like he intended to push it. “You were looking at Kevin’s scar earlier. Are you aware of how he got it?”

Neil nodded.

“How many scars did Riko give you?”

“I didn’t keep track,” Neil replied honestly.

Behind them, the door opened. Nicky tossed a bag of frozen peas onto the porch within Neil’s reach. His arm nearly got caught in the door in his haste to retreat back inside. Neil stared at the door and searched the front window for signs of Nicky watching them. Andrew grabbed the frozen peas, wiped some condensation and dirt off on his pants, and dropped the bag in Neil’s lap.

“He’s still terrified of you,” Neil commented as he put the frozen peas to his bruised eye. The cold was a shock and a relief.

Andrew took a drag off his cigarette. “He thinks you’re afraid of changing out with the rest of us because of him.”

“After the things he said and did, he couldn’t blame me if that was true.”

Andrew hummed in agreement. “He said a lot of things about you in German.”

“I remember.”

“And you understood it,” Andrew said, “because you speak German.”

Neil readjusted the bag against his face and tried to work out what Andrew’s angle was. “What’s your point?”

“What’s the point in learning both French and German? Are you an overachiever or do you actually think that Exy will pick back up in Europe?”

“It’s still sort of popular over there,” Neil said defensively.

Andrew scoffed. “It was a fad in the eighties because Kevin’s mother had a semi-famous father who helped promote it before he died. Give it another decade and Exy will be extinct everywhere except here and Japan.”

“Have you given this speech to Kevin yet?”

“Yes, and he wouldn’t tell me why you speak German either.”

Neil didn’t hesitate long before he explained, “A goalkeeper Riko wanted to recruit was taking German classes with his twin brother. Riko didn’t want him to be able to talk to his brother or cousin without someone knowing what he said, so he made me learn German too.”

Andrew stared out at the street, eyes narrowed pensively. After a minute, he stubbed out his cigarette and flicked it onto the path at their feet. “You would’ve been fifteen when I started taking those classes.”

“Good to know your math classes didn’t go to waste,” Neil said lightly even though inside he felt shaken. He kept handing over secrets even though it would be better for Andrew to stop trying to figure him out.
Something crashed inside the house and cut their conversation short. Andrew went to investigate.

Neil ate another granola bar, drank some more Gatorade, and then he put everything into the plastic sack to take back into the house.

He put the bag of peas in the freezer before following the sound of Nicky’s drunken laughter to the back room. Andrew stood over Nicky, who was in a giggling heap next to an overturned recliner and a shattered lamp. Kevin was curled up in the other recliner with a peevish expression pinching his face and Aaron sat on the floor with a mostly empty bottle of liquor clasped between his hands as he stared blankly at the TV.

“I’ve got this under control,” Andrew said.

Aaron made a rough noise in the back of his throat and clumsily got to his feet. “Whatever. Piece of shit.”

Andrew watched indifferently as his brother nearly stumbled into the TV stand.

Nicky lifted his head with a gasp. “Aaron! You okay, bub?”

“Don’t-” Aaron pointed viciously in Nicky’s direction - “ever call me that.”

“Hand me the tequila,” Kevin said, making a grabbing motion at the bottle Aaron left behind on the floor.

Aaron shuffled out of the room, ignoring him. Kevin muttered angrily under his breath and scooted forward in his seat until he could reach the bottle without having to get up.

Neil left the room and found Aaron slowly crawling up the stairs on all fours. Any offer to help would be met with a sneer or an acidic retort, so Neil didn’t bother. He rooted around in his gear bag for his t-shirt and basketball shorts, which would be much more comfortable to sleep in than his underwear and his Eden’s shirt. When Aaron locked himself in the upstairs bathroom, Neil went up to Andrew’s room.

He forced himself to eat a few more granola bars to stave off any hunger pangs that might bother him in the night and washed it all down with Gatorade. His bruises still ached and his neck twinged when he turned his head, but he couldn’t complain about how the night had gone. All that mattered was that the Foxes won another game and everyone was safe for now.

A restless feeling grew in the pit of Neil’s stomach as he replayed the game in his head. Two of his goals were sloppy, he messed up a couple plays, he didn’t always get where he needed to be. The master would’ve forced him to do extra drills or clean the whole team’s gear and knowing this made him feel like he wasn’t allowed to sleep yet.

Neil raked his fingers through his hair. He wasn’t at the Nest anymore and he wasn’t playing by the master’s rules. If Wymack were there, he’d probably roll his eyes and say, “Take a fuckin’ break already, kid.”

Andrew came in before Neil could fully calm himself down. They made eye contact, but didn’t speak. Neil pulled his hands out of his hair, vaguely embarrassed, and Andrew grabbed the sweats and t-shirt he usually slept in and went down the hall to the bathroom.

When he returned, Neil got up from the floor and took his turn getting changed and washing up for bed. As he gargled with some mouthwash, he considered buying a spare toothbrush for the cousins’ house only to immediately dismiss the idea as overfamiliar. He rinsed his mouth with water, wiped his face dry, and stepped out of the bathroom.
The hall light was left on, but downstairs was dark and not a single sound could be heard. The silence put him on edge. It made him feel like a child again- waiting on the top stair with bated breath, watching for ghosts. Neil quickly flipped the light switch and followed the remaining slit of light coming from beneath Andrew’s bedroom door.

Andrew lay in his bed with his back to the wall and his face half-buried in his pillow. Neil locked the door and turned off the light before padding over to his makeshift bed. He put his folded clothing next to his pillow and lay on his back to let his eyes adjust. Then, he moved under the top blanket and scratched at an itch on his chest.

“Andrew,” Neil said quietly, “I have a question.”

Andrew repositioned himself on his mattress and sighed. “What is it?”

“What’s going on between you and Aaron?”

“Too broad. Narrow it down.”

“Did something happen to make Aaron hate you or is it just a general dislike? I know things must be complicated between you two with your history.”

“Ugh.” Andrew sat up in his bed, only a shadow shifting in the dark to Neil’s eyes. “Aaron is bitter about the deal he agreed to and the death of his mother.”

“Does he blame you for the accident?”

“I never said it was an accident.”

Interest piqued, Neil propped himself up on one elbow. “Are you saying you planned it?”

“If this is going to be an issue, you know where the door is.”

“She dumped you in foster care and kept Aaron. I can understand why you’d want revenge after what happened to you.”

He could feel Andrew looking at him like he was stupid. “Revenge is a waste of time. Killing Tilda was never about me or my past.”

“Okay, then I’m confused,” said Neil. “Why’d you do it?”

“I found out that Aaron’s mother was abusive and I promised Aaron I’d get rid of her if she hit him after I moved in. She hit him, so I got rid of her.”

“And you decided a car wreck was the best way to do that,” Neil said flatly. “Tell me you weren’t dumb enough to actually tamper with the car itself.”

The Butcher and the Moriyamas had the people and the resources to get away with something like that, but Andrew acted all on his own. It was a miracle he didn’t end up in a grave or a prison cell.

“Most people would take issue with the murder, not my methods,” Andrew pointed out.

Neil sat up, wishing he’d left the light on so he could see Andrew’s face. There was something in his tone that Neil couldn’t interpret. “If you’re going to commit murder, you might as well be smart about it,” he said. “You purposefully wrecked a car while you were in it. You could’ve gotten yourself killed.”
“Life is a gamble and death is never off the table.”

“There are easier ways to kill a person. A suicide would’ve been easier to stage and less risky.”

“Less rewarding with a higher risk of getting caught,” Andrew countered. “A woman with no record of suicidal tendencies suddenly offing herself right after her long-lost problem child gets out of juvie and moves in with her would’ve raised some eyebrows. Plus, if they did rule it a suicide, the insurance company wouldn’t have given us a dime.”

Neil silently conceded that Andrew had a point. “What did Aaron promise you in return?”

“He promised loyalty, but after Tilda was dead he suddenly had a change of heart. He mourned for her like she was a saint and acted like I was an asshole for doing exactly what I told him I would. He even threatened to call the cops on me a few times.”

“Not everyone keeps their word,” Neil said. “Trust is a gamble too.”

Andrew mumbled something Neil couldn’t hear. When it was clear that neither of them had anything more to say, they both lay back down on their beds to sleep. Neil stared up at the ceiling as he thought about what Andrew revealed, a piece of the puzzle he didn’t expect to solve.
Early Sunday morning, Neil navigated the mostly empty hallways of the Whelan Recreation Center until he made it to his new locker, which was as good as his for the rest of the semester. Renting the locker and buying a yoga mat from Whelan’s small store felt wasteful even in spite of the student discount he got and the fact that he was a few hundred dollars richer thanks to Kevin finally giving him the money he was owed.

A waste of money and a waste of time, Neil thought bitterly as he twisted the dial on the padlock to enter his combination. Yoga class wasn’t how he wanted to spend his Sunday morning.

The rolled-up mat was secured by two stretchy loops of fabric with a strap connecting them to form a handle. Neil slung it over his shoulder and closed his locker, taking a moment to breathe through another burst of irritation. Dr. Dobson hadn’t led him astray yet and, if nothing else, she was knowledgeable enough to make her input valuable. If she thought this might do him some good, there was a chance she was right. Still, Neil debated with himself over whether or not to skip the class and lie about it as he walked to the nearest stairwell.

For all the time he spent in this building, he hadn’t seen much of it since the Foxes used the same training rooms each morning. The second floor was new territory for him. Fitness Studio B was a spacious room with a smooth, wood floor and a wall of mirrors that reflected the overhead lights and the sunlight coming in the large windows. Several people had already arrived for class and unrolled their mats on the floor. Neil couldn’t help but notice that they were all women. A few eyed him curiously as he stepped into the room and made a beeline for the back corner, ignoring the bubbly welcome he got from the woman he assumed was the instructor.

Neil busied himself with some simple stretches on his mat and tried to will the awkward feeling away.

More people filtered into the room as eight o’clock grew closer. Neil took off his shoes and socks since at least half the girls were barefoot at this point. He stuffed his socks into one shoe, left his wallet and keys in the other, and checked his phone to make himself look occupied. Sitting on the floor in basketball shorts and a t-shirt made his skin crawl, as if he already let his guard down.
somehow. Having his back to the wall only made it slightly more bearable.

A few more people showed up at the last minute. Two of them were guys, to Neil’s relief. That relief was short-lived, however, because the girl that came in last had familiar pastel, rainbow-tipped hair.

Renee spotted him before he could think of a way to hide. She recovered quickly from her surprise and smiled at him. Then, she found a spot to lay down her mat toward the front of the group. Neil caught a glimpse of a tattoo on the back of her shoulder peeking out from the strap of her tank top.

The instructor closed the door and said, “Good morning, everyone! I’m Carly and I’ll be guiding you today. Are we all ready to begin?”

Neil went along with the others and tried to mimic the way that Carly sat with her legs folded and her back straight.

“First, we’re going to take a few minutes to relax and connect with our breath,” Carly told the group. Her voice seemed to slow with each word. “Inhale deeply and feel the air moving into your body and filling you up with positive energy. Now, exhale, and let go of any tension you’re holding onto. Keep your shoulders soft, back straight. Close your eyes if you’re comfortable doing so and inhale…”

Neil was already restless. He was sorely tempted to open his phone in front of him so he could watch the time.

After Carly was done teaching the class how to breathe, she guided them through some stretches and got up to start walking around. Her steady stream of instructions and encouragement never faltered.

*Maybe this is a prank,* Neil thought. Dr. Dobson didn’t seem like the type to joke about this sort of thing, but he knew not to put it past anybody. Maybe the idea of him doing this every other week was so laughable that he should’ve known not to take it seriously.

Next, Carly led the class into something called “child’s pose.” Neil watched the others to figure out what exactly he was supposed to do. He turned onto his hands and knees, sat back on his heels, and bent forward like everyone else was doing until his arms were stretched as far as possible and his forehead was almost touching the mat. All the air in his lungs squeezed out of his mouth in a pathetic wheeze.

Then, Carly said, “Remember to keep your knees apart and let your belly rest between your thighs. Loosen your jaw and your shoulders. Feel every inhale gently rounding your back and lengthening your spine. With every exhale, let your body gradually sink into the pose more and more.”

Neil rolled his eyes and adjusted his knees. Breathing was easier after that, but there was a hard knot of anxiety forming between his shoulder blades. Not even the master made him bow like this. With his face practically pressed to the mat, he had to rely solely on his hearing to keep track where Carly was as she wandered around and it was hard to hear over the rush of his own pulse.

After a few more rounds of inhaling and exhaling, the class was ordered to raise back up onto their hands and knees. “Now, deep inhale, lift your head up and let your back curve,” said Carly. “Feel your chest open up. Let all the good oxygen refresh your heart and energize you. Now, exhale, lower your head, and arch your back like a cat.”

Getting a spot at the back was a small blessing, Neil supposed, but he was more convinced than ever that he should’ve stayed at the Tower and lied to Dr. Dobson about coming here. This was ridiculous.
"Now, tuck your toes under, pretend you’re pushing the floor away with your hands, and lift up through your hips into downward-facing dog."

The girl next to Neil kept her hands and feet flat on her mat while her legs and back were perfectly straight, making an effortless inverted V with her body. He did his best to copy her and struggled more than he expected to. A burning ache gnawed at his hamstrings, the muscles in his upper back felt crowded, and his wrists twinged. Paranoia fizzed over his skin as he held still, waiting to be attacked or laughed at. To make matters worse, his t-shirt was loose enough that it threatened to inch up his back.

"Remember our goal is to stretch, not strain,” Carly said. Her voice sounded like it was getting closer. “If you need to keep your legs bent or if you need a break at any time, that’s all right.”

Neil held his breath to keep quiet and tried to force his body to do as he willed. It only made the pain worse. The backs of his legs flared white-hot and it was alarming enough that he backed off. Bending his knees, he exhaled slowly through his nose.

Carly moved on an eternity later. “Okay, inhale and bring your right foot forward to place it between your hands. If you have to pull your foot to get there or if you want to go into this pose from a standing position, that’s just fine. Take it at your own pace.”

Stubbornly, Neil tried to move his foot forward without the use of his hand at first, only to find that his body wouldn’t cooperate in this way either. Even when he gave in and tugged his foot forward, it was a fight to stretch his leg enough to get his foot where it needed to be.

Next, Carly had them lift their torsos until they were upright in a sort of lunge with their arms stretched above their heads. “Anchor your back foot to the mat- keep that leg straight- and bend your front knee until it’s over your ankle if you can,” she said. “Feel your heart lift as you reach for the ceiling and sink into that deep stretch in your thigh.”

Neil’s front foot wobbled until he found his balance. Unfortunately, he caught Carly’s eye and she started making her way back to him, still talking to the class like they were a bunch of spooked horses. Everything in him tensed painfully as she stepped up to his mat and quietly asked, “Are you all right being touched?”

Humiliated, Neil shook his head.

She didn’t come any closer. “Try turning your hips so you’re squarely facing the wall. There you go; that looks great. Good job.”

Neil grit his teeth until she meandered away from him, reminding everyone once again to breathe.

The rest of the session was a battle that Neil didn’t quite win. He endured without making a complete fool of himself, which was a victory in its own way, but his body felt stretched beyond limits he wasn’t previously aware of.

At the end of the class, Carly told them to lie flat on their backs and headed for the light switch. An unnerving stillness fell over the room once the room was dark and Carly stopped talking at last. Neil restlessly shifted on his mat, itching to go home. He wondered how he would explain to Dr. Dobson that he failed. He was inflexible and had difficulty balancing and he didn’t understand how this was supposed to be therapeutic in any way.

Neil couldn’t tell if the others were asleep or awake anymore. Boredom took hold of his mind, but there was nothing for him to do other than count ceiling tiles or stare at the tiny light on the smoke
It was the longest ten minutes of his life.

As soon as the class was released, Neil yanked his socks and shoes back on, stuffed his belongings in his pockets, and rolled his mat back up. He hurried downstairs to his locker to put his mat away, and then he wasted some extra time buying a water bottle from the vending machine to give Renee more of a head start so he could avoid her.

It was just his luck that she was waiting for him outside the front door. She shouldered her bag as she rose from her bench and asked, “Could we walk back together? You can say no if you don’t want to.”

Neil shrugged a shoulder. “I don’t mind.”

She smiled at him and started walking toward the street. Neil put himself on her left side to sneak another glance at the tattoo he saw earlier. He could see part of a skull done in thin black lines that was sprouting with bright purple violets, a clash of life and death. Before she could catch him, he looked away.

“I’ve never seen you at class before. Was it your first time?” Renee asked.

“Dr. Dobson—” Neil faltered, remembering how Matt found his formality strange—“I mean, Betsy told me to try it.”

Renee nodded in understanding. “I wasn’t sure about it at first. The classes here are more like simplified, easier to sell versions of yoga, but most of the instructors are aware of that and they don’t try to pretend it’s more than it is.”

Neil didn’t follow her meaning, so he drank more water instead of saying anything. They walked in silence until they crossed the street and reached a shady stretch of sidewalk. The campus was still quiet, slower to wake on a Sunday morning.

“Andrew told me about the USC students at Eden’s,” Renee said, gesturing to Neil’s bruised eye. “That looks painful. I’m sorry.”

Neil’s mouth twisted into an annoyed frown. “Do you two talk about me a lot on your little dates?”

“We only talked about it because I asked. Matt said you claimed you got elbowed accidentally at the club, but I know there’s been some tension between you and certain members of Andrew’s group. I wanted to know what Andrew had to say about it.”

“How do you know he wasn’t lying?”

“He’s one of the most honest people I know,” Renee answered. “Last December, we had a long discussion about Kevin’s situation. Andrew said he was thinking about taking Kevin in, but he’d only do it if I agreed to watch out for the rest of the team. The others don’t know the full extent of the danger Kevin brought with him.”

Neil didn’t trust Kevin enough to think he gave Andrew all the facts; there were things he wouldn’t even admit to himself. He asked, “What exactly do you know?”

“I know the Moriyamas are involved in organized crime, that they’re very powerful, and that Tetsuji sees Kevin and Riko as things to profit off of. Andrew told me you know all of this, too. He thinks you know a lot more than you let on.”
“I don’t see what the point of this conversation is. If you’re trying to get information out of me, you’re wasting your time.”

Renee didn’t seem stung by his sharp tone. She smiled patiently and said, “You’ve probably noticed the line down the middle of this team. Andrew protects one half while I protect the other, like I mentioned. What we can’t seem to figure out is which side you fall on.”

“I already told Andrew that I don’t want anyone’s protection, so there’s no reason for you two to be confused.”

“If you don’t want protection, what about conversation instead? Talking about whatever you’re going through might help and I really would like us to be friends, Neil.”

“You barely know anything about me and I don’t understand anything about you.” He gestured to the slim cross hanging around her neck. “Do you even buy into that stuff or do you just want people to think you do?”

Renee blinked in surprise and automatically reached for her necklace. Neil didn’t believe it meant anything like the others did. Nice, clean clothes and a cross made it easy for the wolves to blend in with the rest of the flock; even the Butcher could spare time on Sundays to keep up appearances.

“Andrew was suspicious of me too when he first got here,” Renee said after a little while. “You already know why he invited Matt to Columbia last year. He invited Dan to figure out if she was worth listening to and he invited me because he wanted to know how I ended up on the team.”

“And what did you tell him?” Neil expected her to deflect or maybe refuse to answer outright, so he was surprised by what she said next.

“My dad was a paramedic,” she began, sliding her cross back and forth on its chain. “He had a big, loving heart and he was always ready to help people no matter where he was. I wanted to be exactly like him. I wanted to be someone who never hesitated to do the right thing.”

“Is that what all the charity work is about?”

“Sort of.” She shrugged. “Sometimes it feels like I’m still trying to atone for everything.”

Neil looked at her curiously. “What do you mean?”

“My dad died when I was eleven. His ambulance got hit going through an intersection- an accident, out of the blue. My mom and I lost sight of ourselves and each other and God in our grief. We both looked for ways to escape as things got harder and we both got mixed up with things we shouldn’t have.” She gripped her cross tight and kept her eyes forward. Her story sounded rehearsed, like she had practice telling it. “My mom met someone who got her into drugs and a girl at my school introduced me to a guy willing to pay me good money to deliver packages or messages to people. I was pretty naive at thirteen. It took me a while to realize that I agreed to work for a member of a gang.”

The dead-eyed look on her face was what made Neil certain she was telling him the truth. It was difficult to wrap his brain around. “What happened next?” he asked.

“I told myself I’d get out of that situation once I saved up a decent amount of money, but it’s hard to turn down cash when it’s right in front of you and I didn’t have anywhere else to go. One thing led to another and I ended up working as a runner and a lookout for a couple years.”

“How’d you get away?”
“I got arrested.” Her tone went cold and flat, the last of her warmth flickering out as she remembered. “War broke out between us and a rival gang and someone higher on the food chain set me up to take the fall for them. The police offered me leniency in exchange for information when I got brought in. I was only fifteen, but I was at rock bottom and it didn’t seem like things could get any worse for me even if I wound up dead. I didn’t consider who might get caught in the crossfire.”


She swallowed hard and cleared her throat, bracing herself. “My mom and her boyfriend were gunned down together at their apartment. Their deaths aren’t the only ones I’m responsible for, but they’re the hardest to carry. I couldn’t even bring myself to visit their graves before I left Michigan to move in with my adoptive mother.”

Neil stared ahead at the sidewalk while he absorbed the story. It was a far cry from anything he would have imagined after knowing her for a few months. Finally, he asked, “What kind of conversation were you hoping to have with me today?”

“This kind, actually,” she said. “I thought if I opened up first, it might be easier for you to do the same. We can compare battle scars anytime. You know where to find me.”

They stopped at a crosswalk to wait for the light to change and the conversation lapsed. Renee dug around in her bag until she found a package of dried apricots. The plastic crinkled noisily as she pulled it open and offered some of the fruit to Neil.

He hesitantly took a couple apricots and popped one into his mouth with a mumbled, “Thanks.”

When the light changed, they crossed the street and continued toward the Tower. The buildings were beginning to thin out and up ahead Neil could see the trees that lined the far side of Perimeter Road. It wouldn’t be long before they reached the Tower and, once they did, Neil knew this conversation would be difficult to bring up again regardless of her open invitation.

“Do you expect this atoning thing to work?” he asked.

Renee hummed thoughtfully and finished eating the piece of apricot in her mouth. “I can't erase my past and I can't be the person I might've been if my world didn't fall apart, but I still want to be like my dad. Maybe I can use what I've learned and what I've been through to help others. That's what I try to focus on.”

Neil understood why Andrew trusted her and why the others liked her so much. He was more at ease in her presence now that he knew about her past and he hoped for her sake that Riko never discovered what she left behind in Detroit.
Crusaders

Chapter Summary

Neil plays his first game as a starting striker.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the wait, guys! I hope you enjoy the chapter and, as always, if there are any content warnings I need to put up just let me know. I really appreciate all the kind words and encouragement you guys have given me over the course of this fic. I can't thank you enough <3

On Monday, Neil got to his psychology class early and sat near the door to keep watch for Maddie. He wasn’t looking forward to interacting with her again- not because he wasn’t grateful to her for lending him her notes, but because she texted him twice over the weekend. The first text was a thinly veiled hint that she was bored and the second was to ask him if he had any fun plans. It appeared that asking her for a favor spawned a sense of familiarity, which he wanted to snuff out as quickly as possible.

As soon as Maddie came through the door, she spotted Neil’s bright orange jersey and made a beeline for him. “Big day, huh?” she asked as she playfully plucked at his sleeve. Then, she sobered in an instant. “Holy crap, your eye! Did that happen at your last game?”

“Yeah,” Neil lied. He handed over the borrowed notes and said, “Thanks again for the notes. I appreciate it.”

She grinned. “You can take me out for coffee and we’ll call it even. How about Wednesday?”

“Uh, sure,” Neil agreed without meaning to. Irritation hardened in his chest. As a Raven, he wouldn’t have had this sort of problem. The master had enough pull at the university that every class his players missed was videotaped for them.

Maddie grinned and claimed the empty seat next to him, dropping her large purse on the floor between their feet. “Are you nervous about tonight?”

“Not really, no.” He subtly shifted away from her in his seat and opened his textbook.

“We didn’t have an Exy team at my high school, so I don’t know all that much about it. You’re a striker, right? You’re the one getting all the points?”

Neil pretended to study a section he already read. “That’s the general idea, yes.”

Jepsen finally came through the door. She didn’t look at her students as she strode across the front of the room to place her bag and travel mug on her desk.

“Well, I hope you score tonight,” Maddie said in an undertone. There was something about the way
she smiled at him that set Neil on edge. He wasn’t a mind reader, but he’d seen that look before in the eyes of someone he tried hard not to think about.

“Afternoon, everyone,” Jepsen said. The other students quieted down and Neil exhaled in relief. “Let’s jump right in, shall we?”

Throughout the class, Neil sensed Maddie glancing over at him and her attention made his skin crawl. The only reason he approached her at all was because she smiled at him once on the second day of class and that meant she was the classmate Neil was most acquainted with. Approaching her seemed easier than asking a total stranger for a favor out of the blue.

Her interest wasn’t a problem- not yet- but it couldn’t hurt to be cautious. Neil needed a plan for how to handle Wednesday’s coffee with delicacy. Maddie was friendly and she appeared to have made friends with other people in the class. He knew how the right rumors could turn a whole group against a single person.

Next time, he would brave the awkwardness and seek out a total stranger.

When Jepsen finished the lesson and dismissed them, Neil pretended to get a phone call. He held his phone to his ear and mumbled, “Hello?” as he got up from his seat. Luckily, Maddie bought it. She waved good-bye before leaving him to his fake conversation. Neil didn’t drop the act until he was a good distance away from the building and he was certain Maddie was nowhere in sight.

Neil’s dorm was empty when he arrived back to the Tower. It only took ten minutes in the quiet safety of his room to convince himself that he was being overly paranoid about Maddie. The threat was imaginary. He was seeing patterns that weren’t really there. That was all it was. Probably.

He went to the kitchen to down a glass of water before returning to his desk, determined to focus on his schoolwork. There was a biology assignment to work on and notes from that morning to go over and a number of better things to do than obsess over some random girl’s attempt at flirting. Besides, tonight’s game would be his first as a starter instead of a sub, so he couldn’t afford any distractions.

After spending a reasonable amount of time on his biology assignment, Neil put it aside and took out his notes on the Prescott College Crusaders.

The Crusaders were currently ranked eighth in the district and, since they were the weakest team the Foxes faced so far, Wymack was using this game as an opportunity to experiment with the starting line-up. He hoped that having Neil on the court from the beginning could strengthen the Foxes’ first half. There was too much hostility between Kevin and Seth without any trust to make up for it and Neil had learned to adapt his playing style to complement either of them.

Kevin was supportive of the change. Neil suspected it was partly because of the hierarchy ingrained in Kevin’s mind- Ravens existed above all others. Seth hadn’t said much about switching places with Neil, but it was obvious he was angry about it.

There had to be a way to defuse the tension without making Seth feel coddled. Finding it would be more challenging than the game against Prescott.

Neil spent the rest of the afternoon puzzling over this particular problem. When it was time to go to the stadium, he wasn’t any closer to a solution. As predicted, Seth was silent and sulking and he scowled at anyone who dared point it out- even Wymack, who told him to “grow the hell up.”

Even with Seth’s poor attitude to contend with, Neil was buzzing with excitement and anticipation as he followed his teammates out to the inner court. The stadium was crowded and alive with the noise
and movement of the people packed into the stands. Neil was ready to prove his worth to everyone watching.

After the Foxes jogged laps and ran through their usual twenty minutes of drills, they gathered around the benches to wait. Wymack was going over some last-minute pieces of advice for the defensive line when Neil realized someone in the stands was calling his name. He looked over his shoulder and immediately spotted Maddie in the aisleway only a few rows up, waving cheerfully at him. Her bright orange t-shirt matched the Fox paw painted on her cheek.

Neil lifted his hand to half-heartedly wave back at her before turning to the court. He muttered, “Shit,” under his breath, but it was loud enough to snag Allison’s attention.

“Problem?” she asked, sidling closer.

“No, it’s just… a girl from my psych class is here.”


“I wasn’t expecting her to be here, that’s all,” Neil mumbled. He remembered the cameras positioned all around the court and wiped at his mouth, hoping he didn’t look sullen.

Allison elbowed his side. “Is she a new friend? Girlfriend? This could settle a few bets, you know. If you tell me first, I’ll give you a cut of the profits.”

Neil shot her a dull glare, irritated as ever with the Foxes placing bets about his personal life. “I borrowed her notes and now apparently I have to take her out for coffee.”

“If you don’t want to, just don’t do it.”

“But I already agreed.”

She scoffed. “Who cares? She’ll get over it.”

“Are you two about done gabbing?” Wymack cut in. “‘Cause we kinda have important shit to cover.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep the ball out of our goal. We know the drill, old man,” Allison said dismissively. “Did you know Neil has a stalker?”

Neil cut Allison another glare and said, “Sorry, Coach, we’re listening.”

“A stalker?” Matt asked with a mix of interest and concern.

Next to Wymack, Kevin folded his arms and frowned pensively at the crowd. Seth pointedly ignored everyone. On the bench, Andrew stared at the court wall and bounced his leg, distracted and full of energy.

Dan shook a finger at Neil teasingly. “Make sure you use protection. We don’t need any baby Foxes running around. What are baby foxes called anyway?”

“Allright, vultures, stop circling and focus up,” Wymack said. “Kevin, repeat what you just said.”

Kevin shifted uncomfortably and frowned like he couldn’t quite remember what he’d been talking about. Things got back on track once the head referee called Dan away for the captains’ coin toss.
After that, the others were too focused on the game to joke about Maddie anymore.

The Crusader captain won the coin toss and the right to first serve. Dan chose to start her team on the home side of the court. The captains rejoined their teams and everyone readied themselves for the game to finally begin. Neil followed Kevin to the half-court line with the cheers of Fox fans at his back and a steely determination settling over his mind like a shield.

Prescott’s offense was considerably stronger than their defense and they seemed to favor underhanded tactics to score points. The Foxes were ready for them, though. Neil was confident in the skill of his teammates.

The first half of the game unfolded like a dream. Neil was in tune with Kevin and together they carried out the plays they’d studied relentlessly. When Seth took Kevin’s place, Neil knew he could toss out the agreed upon strategy because Seth relied on gut feelings instead of calculated moves. With Neil as backup, some of his recklessness actually paid off.

Dan was there to back them up or get her strikers out of tight spots when they needed her most. Despite some of her teammates keeping her at arm’s length, she could read all of them like open books on the court.

Neil couldn’t see or hear the Foxes’ defensive line, but obviously something good was happening down by the home goal because when the halftime buzzer halted play the Foxes had four points while the Crusaders had none.

During the break, Neil was painfully eager with the need to get back on the court despite his exhaustion. His good mood was dampened when he caught sight of the glassy, half-wild look in Andrew’s eyes and the trembling in his hands as he shook off his goalie gloves. While the others hydrated and stretched, Andrew sat hunched over his knees and looked like he was trying very hard not to vomit on his shoes. Neil almost went over to him, but Kevin got there first and insistently pushed a bottle of Gatorade into Andrew’s hands.

Neil tried to focus on Wymack as he reviewed the high and low points of the game so far and gave everyone pointers for the second half. “We’re off to a good start,” Wymack told them. “Let’s keep that going through to the end.”

After the break was over, they went back out to the court with a quiet confidence. No one said it, but Neil knew they were all in silent agreement that they would thoroughly crush their opponents.

That confidence crumbled as soon as the second half started. The Crusaders scored their first point only three minutes in, but that wasn’t what threw the Foxes off. Seth and Kevin were arguing already, and then Seth turned and said something that made Nicky’s shoulders tighten.

Next to him, Dan said, “It’s okay. We’re still up by three. We got this.”

Neil kept his doubts to himself. The Crusaders didn’t pose as much of a threat to the Foxes’ success as their in-fighting did.

The game continued unraveling from there. Kevin and Seth came close to physically fighting each other twice and the Foxes struggled to hold onto their lead as the point gap shrank. The Crusaders had three points on the board when Neil took over for Kevin, who kept his left arm tucked against his body as he marched off the court.

Seth was too riled up to play well, so Neil didn’t expect much from him. He devoted all his energy to keeping the ball away from their opponents for as long as he could. Aaron and Matt were finally
together again on defense, which helped Renee’s chances of stopping the Crusaders’ progress.

The minutes dragged by. No one could get a decent shot on either goal, so the game devolved into a brutal game of keep away for the last ten minutes.

Neil was too frustrated to fully enjoy the Foxes’ third win in a row. Everyone else appeared to be relieved just to have it all over and done with. When the Foxes made it back to their locker room, Nicky loudly declared, “That sucked.”

“Whose fault is that?” spat Seth.

“Yours,” Kevin fired back. “That’s so obvious even an idiot like you should be able to see it.”

Dan glared at her strikers. “You two are gonna tank our season if you can’t work together. Neil saved your asses out there.”

Incensed, Seth slammed his locker open and viciously dug out his street clothes. Allison shot a withering glare at his back and Renee frowned unhappily, still rubbing the elbow she’d fallen on in the last quarter.

“It wasn’t our best work,” Matt said neutrally. “It wasn’t our worst either, though. A win is a win, right?”

“You guys did great,” Abby said, almost convincingly, as she checked on Kevin’s hand.

In the doorway, Wymack rubbed a hand over his chin and sighed heavily. “Good job out there, Foxes. Neil and Kevin, you two still good to do press?”

“Yes, Coach,” Kevin replied, words clipped, and pulled away from Abby.

Neil left his helmet and gloves behind and shoved his feelings down. He followed Kevin back to the foyer, where the reporters were waiting with questions and cameras at the ready, and fought to keep a polite smile on his face.

The first two questions were for Kevin: how he felt about the Foxes’ little winning streak and if he thought the team could keep it going. Then, one of the reporters turned to Neil with a broad smile and asked, “Neil, are the Foxes ready to face off against Edgar Allan yet?”

The answer was so obvious it seemed cruel to even ask the question. No, the Foxes weren’t ready. They weren’t ready for the game against the Ravens in six weeks and they probably wouldn’t be ready for the game in November either.

When he opened his mouth to reply, Kevin took command of everyone’s attention and said, “We’re continuing to make good progress and we’re interested to see how we measure up against champions.”

“And is Neil’s switch to starting striker a permanent one? The Foxes only took four points tonight. That’s the lowest score you’ve had so far.”

Kevin answered, “Coach Wymack and I are confident in his potential.”

Neil remained silent for the rest of the questions, seen but not heard. As soon as he and Kevin left the foyer, his simmering anger reached a full boil. He waited until they were halfway down the hallway before lashing out. “What’s the point of me doing this if you won’t let me speak?”
Kevin made a dismissive gesture. “The game got to your head. I didn’t want a repeat of Kathy’s show.”

Neil’s jaw clenched so hard his teeth hurt.

“You’ll come with Andrew and me tomorrow to the mall,” Kevin went on. “We’re going to buy clothes for the banquet and I want to make sure you look presentable.”

“I don’t need new clothes.”

“Yes, you do.”

Neil couldn’t get his voice to work. Every wrong thing Kevin had ever done jumped to the forefront of Neil’s mind and made him too furious to speak. He stormed into the locker room to get his things before locking himself in a shower stall. The hot water stung his skin and turned him a raw shade of pink. Once he was sufficiently clean, he towed off and yanked his clothes on.

Something inside him snapped. He hated his own life- biting his tongue and bending to Kevin’s wishes and being afraid of drawing too much attention to himself- and he wanted to burn everything down. Beneath that want was a faint trill of alarm because he knew what kind of violence this anger could lead to. He didn’t want to turn into his father. He didn’t want anyone to see the fire eating up his insides.

According to the book that lived under his pillow, it was better to face feelings than fight them. The book also promised that whatever the feeling was it would fade sooner or later. Neil supposed he had no choice now but to wait for his anger to run out of fuel and hide it as best he could as he moved through the locker room.

He clamped his mouth shut and planned to keep it like that until he could manage to unclench his fists. To distract himself, he counted up and down from ten in all the languages he knew until the Foxes were ready to leave the stadium. Then, he counted his steps down the hallway and out into the parking lot.

“You good? You seem kinda tense,” Matt said, too quietly for the others to hear as they piled into his truck.

Neil forced his shoulders to relax and managed to speak evenly. “I’m a little pissed off at Kevin, that’s all.”

“For a specific thing or just because of who he is as a person?”

“He just-” Neil waved vaguely- “he treats me like a child. He talked all over me while we were doing press.”

“I’ll punch him if you want me to,” Matt said seriously. “Give me the green light, please. I’m begging.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and punch him if you want to so bad?”

Matt shrugged and looked over his shoulder at Andrew’s group getting into their car. “If I do it for someone else, it seems more noble.”

“I guess.” Neil took a deep breath and scraped a hand through his damp hair. His head felt clearer. “We have a game on Thursday, though, so we shouldn’t risk Andrew hurting you in retaliation. Let’s wait until the season’s over to beat Kevin up.”
“I’m so down for that.” Matt chuckled and knocked his fist against Neil’s shoulder. “Come on, let’s get going. I bet you anything Dan will want to celebrate.”

Neil climbed into the bed of Matt’s truck and watched the cloudy sky as they drove back to the Tower. The lights and noise of the traffic along Perimeter Road lulled the storm in his head to a murmur. He felt drained rather than calm when the truck parked outside Fox Tower, but he figured it was better than livid. Sleep would come easier this way.

Just like Matt predicted, Dan wanted to celebrate even if the general mood was lackluster. They ordered take-out, put on a movie, and brought out a handle of rum. Seth went to get dinner by himself somewhere, which annoyed Allison. Renee put on a smile for the sake of her friends, but it was obvious she was worn out. Neil appreciated her presence because, tired or not, she served as a buffer between him and everyone else as they got more and more tipsy.

When they cleared the dirty dishes from the coffee table, Renee came up to Neil at the sink and said, “You did a good job tonight.”

“Thanks, you too,” Neil replied. He noticed the stiffness in her shoulders. It wasn’t his place to ask what she was feeling, but he could guess. All three of the Crusaders’ points were scored while she was guarding the goal. He added, “Those points weren’t your fault.”

She gave him a smile. “Thanks, Neil.”

It didn’t seem like she believed him, so he tried again. “The goalkeeper is supposed to be the last line of defense, not the only one. The rest of us should’ve been better.”

She smiled again, more sincerely, and patted his shoulder. “It was a difficult game, wasn’t it? Still, we’re getting better as a team and we deserve to feel good about that. Maybe this will be our year.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he replied awkwardly. He couldn’t focus on the year. Thinking about the rest of the week was enough to exhaust him. He had to go to the mall with Andrew’s group tomorrow, deal with Maddie on Wednesday, and win the game against UGA on Thursday.

On Saturday, he had to survive the banquet. It would be the first time since December that the four members of Riko’s perfect Court would be together under one roof along with all the Foxes and all the Ravens. Neil didn’t know how he would make it through.
Chapter Summary

In the days leading up to the banquet, Neil has to figure out how to deal with Kevin, Maddie, and his own nightmares.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: brief reference to past rape and a rapist, drug use, mention of self-destructive behavior/death

The next morning, when Neil was finished with his tutoring sessions, he walked out of Coburn Library to find Andrew’s car waiting on the street outside. Unlike last week, he had plenty of cash stashed at the bottom of his bag and, more importantly, he had a plan. He didn’t need clothes for the banquet, but he figured he might as well make the most of the free ride to the mall. There were a few stores that sold athletic gear, according to the website, and he needed something new to wear to yoga, something that wouldn’t make him worry about exposing his scars as he moved, and something that was better to go running in too.

As per usual, Neil’s place was in the backseat behind Kevin and next to Andrew. The air conditioning was hard at work, keeping the inside of the car as cold as the silence between the three cousins. Neil pulled his seat belt on and readied himself for a long, awkward drive.

Once Nicky pulled away from the curb, Kevin twisted around in his seat to look at Neil and asked, “Did your tutoring appointments go well?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“Your behavior reflects on the team and the team is the face of the school, so you have to take your classes seriously. We can’t leave extra room for criticism.”

“I don’t need to hear this speech again,” Neil grumbled. At the end of every summer, the master lectured his players on the importance of poise and presenting a certain image to the world. In everything they did, they were to seek perfection. Even though Neil never got to leave the Nest, he still had to sit through those speeches with everyone else.

“How many faces does the school have?” Andrew wondered aloud.

Nicky glanced at his cousin in the rearview mirror. “Probably, like, five hundred if you count everything. You’ve got all the athletic teams, the sororities, the frats, the student newspaper, all the clubs…”

“Is each face the same size?”

That startled a giggle out of Nicky. “Yeah, just think of the school’s tiny, little scuba club face
Andrew’s laughter set Nicky off again until Kevin cut through their hysterics with a sharp, “You’re both children.”

“Nuh-uh,” said Nicky.

“I’m a grown-up, Kevin,” Andrew said, deranged smile in full force. “I can smoke and vote and go to war.”

“You can also go to grown-up prison,” Aaron muttered.

“Technically,” Nicky interjected, “I think anyone can go to grown-up prison if they do something fucked up enough.”

Andrew leaned toward Aaron and pointed at him. “Unless you play your cards right.”

“Get your finger out of my face or I’ll break it,” said Aaron.

Nicky sighed. “Guys, come on.”

Snickering, Andrew sagged against the seat back and tugged at the seat belt across his hips. Neil shifted closer to the door. He stared out the window for the rest of the drive and did his best to block out everyone else.

At the mall, they headed straight for the food court to get some lunch. Neil bought himself as much chicken and rice as he could stomach from a Chinese restaurant and sat at the end of the cousins’ table.

When he was done eating, he said, “Text me when you’re ready to leave and I’ll meet you by the car,” as he stood up with his tray.

Kevin startled. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I already found something to wear to the banquet with Matt and Allison last week,” Neil replied. “I wanted to look at other things while we’re here.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“I’m not required to tell you anything.”

Andrew chortled around the spoon in his mouth.

Neil dumped his trash in a garbage can and ditched his tray before going to the map at the edge of the food court. There was a Dick’s Sporting Goods at the other end of the mall, which seemed to be his best bet at finding what he wanted, so he made a mental note of how to get there and headed off in that direction.

Navigating through the store itself turned out to be harder than navigating through the rest of the mall. It was made up of two levels and it offered gear and apparel and equipment for everything from rock climbing to baseball. It was overwhelming. Neil felt watched and out of place, like the other customers could tell he was lost; they all seemed to know exactly what they were doing. Neil tried to appear casual as he wandered around and, eventually, he stumbled across what he was searching for.

He found racks of shorts, tops, jackets, track pants, and compression clothing. There were things designed for exercising in all kinds of weather, high-visibility gear, running accessories, and a whole
section dedicated to footwear. As a Raven, Neil was used to the highest quality since the master never spared any expense for his players, but the prices stopped him short. In the end, he settled for a pair of running shorts, three-quarter length compression tights, and a long-sleeved thermal shirt that were adequate, but certainly not up to Raven standards- not to mention the wrong colors.

In line at the cash register, Neil considered abandoning the whole idea. He could make do with the clothes he already had as long as he remembered to tuck his shirt in a little before yoga. It wasn’t necessary to buy new things.

But when the cashier said, “I can help whoever’s next,” Neil stepped up and put everything on the counter, hoping it wouldn’t be a waste of money.

After that, Neil walked around the mall since the others hadn’t texted him yet. Considering how particular Kevin was about everything, he knew he had plenty of time to kill. He explored a bookstore, ventured into a shop specializing in luggage, and wound up in another large department store that he quickly grew bored of. Toward the center of the mall, he picked through displays of leather wallets and sunglasses at a kiosk. Then, he shelled out a couple bucks for a soft pretzel simply because it smelled enticing and sat down on the edge of the fountain to eat.

A few minutes later, Andrew texted him: Race you to the car.

Neil finished his pretzel and took his time getting to the parking lot, pausing every so often when something caught his eye.

Naturally, he was the last one back to the car. Andrew was sitting on the trunk lid with his feet on the bumper. He and Nicky were smoking together while the other two stood off to either side, both distracted by their phones.

“Boo,” Andrew said as Neil approached. “You’re no fun, slowpoke.”

“For all I know you sent that text after you were already out here,” Neil replied.

Aaron pocketed his phone and raised an eyebrow at Neil’s shopping bag. “He went to your favorite place, Nicky.”

“What?” Nicky frowned before realizing what Aaron was referring to. Then, he rolled his eyes. “Hilarious as always, Aaron. We’re all very amused.”

Andrew stubbed his cigarette out and tucked the rest of the stick away for later. He announced that he was bored in a way that meant it was time to leave. Nicky popped the trunk so Neil could put his bag in with the rest of theirs, and then they all climbed back into the hot car. They idled in the parking space until the AC kicked in and the warm air blasting from the vents turned cold.

The atmosphere in the car was different on the drive back to campus. Nicky tapped an anxious rhythm on the steering wheel and repeatedly looked at the backseat in his mirror. Whatever was bothering him didn’t seem to affect anyone else. Kevin and Aaron were staring out their own windows and Andrew looked like his mind was a thousand miles away.

Finally, Nicky broke the silence with, “Aaron, you have the list that Dan asked you to get, right?”

Aaron dug a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. He tried to hand the paper to Neil, but Andrew snatched it from him. Neil leaned closer as Andrew unfolded it and saw that there was a short list of names and phone numbers written in blue ink.

“Those are available cheerleaders for you to ask last minute to the banquet,” Aaron explained. “Next
time get a date on your own.”

“I told you to forget about that,” Kevin said sharply.

“And we figured Neil could make his own decisions because he’s eighteen and you’re not his keeper,” replied Nicky.

Andrew began shredding the paper into tiny pieces. “So generous of you, Nicky. You’re such a giver, but take my advice and stick to your own business in the future, okay? Okay. Good talk.”

“He could bring his stalker,” Aaron suggested.

Andrew gestured for Neil to roll down his window and, once Neil did, he cast the handful of paper pieces out into the wind. They scattered like a burst of snowflakes on the highway. The conversation was over after that.

Back at the Tower, Neil grabbed his bag from the trunk and took the stairs while the others waited for the elevator. He was relieved the mall trip was over, but now he didn’t have much time left before practice, which would eat up his evening. And there wouldn’t be much time between practice, dinner, and when Neil had to go to bed. In a blink, it would be Wednesday, which would probably whip past him just as fast and blur right into Thursday.

The week was slipping by too fast, dragging him closer and closer to the banquet. Beneath his fear of seeing the master and Riko again was the fear of seeing Jean. What had Riko done to him in Neil’s absence? What was going through his head? Maybe he couldn’t cope with the Nest on his own. Maybe he hated Neil for staying away.

Maybe Riko had poisoned Jean’s mind like he poisoned Kevin’s.

Before he knew it, Tuesday was over. Neil could barely remember practice, could hardly taste the dinner he ate with Matt and Dan, and then suddenly it was after ten pm. The whole day felt like it only lasted a few minutes.

When he lay down in his bed to sleep, a nightmare was waiting for him. A tangle of hands and metal and pain throttled him and tossed him back into wakefulness. Drenched in cold sweat and gasping for breath, Neil opened his phone for the small light it could provide and slowly settled back into reality. He pressed his hand against the smooth, cool wall and held his phone up to check that the paint color wasn’t black. Then, he quietly got out of bed and groped around inside his dresser drawer for a clean change of clothes.

In the main room, he did push-ups and sit-ups until his body felt like it was on fire. After he cleaned up and put on the clothes he brought out with him, he collapsed on the couch. The sounds of late night television lulled him into a shallow sleep and the morning news woke him up not long later.

Leaving the Tower was difficult. Neil did his best to hide it, but the nightmare left him feeling like a caged thing expecting a swift kick to the ribs for sneaking outside. The fresh air stung his throat. His scars burned and the few fingers he’d broken in years past twinged painfully.

The sky unleashed a torrential downpour after the Foxes got to the gym. Neil almost enjoyed hearing the rain beat against the windows and the wind buffet against the building like it was determined to tear down the walls. He relished in the strength and fury of it until it came time for him to walk across campus in the punishing weather.

After biology and Intro to Public Health, Neil was sorely tempted to skip psychology. Anxiety shivered over his skin. The wind had claws, the rain had teeth, and his heartbeat thundered in his
ears. He was drenched and exhausted and his only comfort was the thought of a nap after class.

Halfway to Pritchett Hall, Neil remembered Maddie and the dreaded coffee date. Frustration shuddered through him. There were enough problems for him without Maddie adding another and, really, why should he be afraid of her? No matter what she did to him, chances were that he’d seen and survived worse already. If she decided to make trouble, Neil would make her regret it.

His sudden burst of anger resulted in a snap decision. The detour to the nearest coffee shop cost him a few precious minutes, but he still managed to get to Jepsen’s classroom with a little time to spare. Maddie was already there and she perked up once she saw Neil, oblivious to his horrible mood. She moved her purse from the chair next to hers and said, “Hey, Neil, I saved you a seat.”

Neil sat the latte on her desk. “I can’t take you out for coffee. My team’s doing something all afternoon and I have to be there.”

Maddie blinked at the cup, a little frown forming on her face. Neil could tell she put more effort into her appearance that day- heavier eye makeup and a slightly nicer top than usual- and it irritated him for no good reason. For all he knew, it had nothing to do with him.

She said, “Uh, thanks, I guess. We could’ve gone out another day if you-”

“I’m busy,” he replied briskly. “I’ll see you around.”

He found an empty seat in the back and didn’t look her way again. His heart was still beating too fast. At least it was over, he told himself. At least the Exy team’s reputation couldn’t be made much worse by his bad attitude.

Maddie attempted to talk to him after Jepsen dismissed the class. She caught up to him at the building’s exit and said, “If you didn’t want to go out, you could’ve just said so. I was just being friendly.”

“I don’t really have time for ‘friendly.’ I’ve got a lot going on,” Neil hiked the strap of his bag higher on his shoulder. Just outside the main door, he nearly ran straight into Kevin and Andrew.

Kevin flicked an icy glare over Neil’s shoulder- presumably at Maddie- and said, “We need to leave. Nicky’s waiting for us in the car.”

He pulled Neil toward the street. Andrew walked on Kevin’s other side, whistling and juggling his key ring back and forth between his palms. The wind and rain had stopped and now the warm air was thickening with humidity. Neil’s lungs felt clogged; a band tightened around his heart. It took him a full minute to remember how to fight back.

“Let go of me,” he snarled, ripping himself away from Kevin’s grip. The other students on the sidewalk sidestepped around the three Exy players, casting odd looks their way.

Kevin stared at Neil impassively. “You need to calm down, Nathaniel.”

“Why are you here?”

“A man can never have too many stalkers, hm?” Andrew drawled mockingly.

“I wanted to speak with you.” Kevin lowered his voice and switched to French. “Is that girl a problem for you?”

Neil wanted to hit him. In French, he replied, “I can solve my own problems.”
“Are you certain? Corin is coming to the banquet on Saturday. Riko might use her against you.”

Neil froze.

For four years, he had lived with Corin. Her freshman year, she was just another face amongst two dozen in the Nest. After what she did to him on Riko’s orders the next year, she stood out and always seemed to be in his periphery. He learned to distract himself and ignore her for his own sanity, but he was out of practice now.

The spike of dread in Neil’s stomach twisted like a knife.

“I’ll be fine,” he said in English. “Worry about yourself.”

He stormed off, leaving Kevin and Andrew behind on the sidewalk. When he got back to the Tower, he changed into dry clothes and spent the rest of the afternoon pretending to sleep in order to avoid everyone until practice, but afterward, he couldn’t help feeling like he wasted his Wednesday. Not that it really mattered what he did. The time would’ve slipped through his fingers all the same.

After his biology lab on Thursday, Neil tried and failed to catch up on sleep. Lying in a quiet room only seemed to make his anxious thoughts about the UGA game louder. He climbed down from his bunk to try pacing up and down the length of the suite, but that didn’t calm his nerves at all. His dry eyes burned. Nausea had taken up permanent residence in the pit of his stomach, a sickly and scraped-raw feeling made worse by his increased caffeine intake.

He worried he wouldn’t play well because of how tired he was. He worried the nightmares would never stop. He worried Wymack would regret moving him up to starting striker. I’m being irrational, he thought, rubbing at his eyes as if it would make his mind be quiet. He just needed to focus and persevere, which he was perfectly capable of.

In theory, it was easy. In reality, it wasn’t.

That night in Georgia, the Foxes put up a good fight against the Bulldogs and lost by nine points. It wasn’t entirely Neil’s fault, but it felt like it. He carried the weight of the crushing loss all the way home, all the way to his dorm, and all the way into his sleep.

In his nightmare, the master stood at the front of Jepsen’s classroom. Neil’s hands were glued to his desk and his voice was too hoarse to cry out for help.

His eyes snapped open. The relief of being awake and still in the Tower was almost enough to cancel out the rushing wave of sickening fatigue as he scrambled out of bed. Using his phone as a flashlight, he got clean clothes from the dresser and sneaked out of the bedroom. While he changed in the bathroom, he decided to give sleeping on the couch another try.

Then, he noticed the light was on in the main room and someone was watching the TV on mute. Neil crept down the hallway until he could see the top of Seth’s buzzed head. A step further and he could see that Seth’s eyes were open.

“‘Sup, fuckface,” Seth grunted.

Neil sniffed at the air. “Have you been smoking weed in here again?”

“Winner, winner, chicken dinner.”

“What are you wallowing because we lost the game?” Neil asked, leaning against the wall. Part of him wanted to ask if it was really because of the banquet and what Riko tried to have done to him over
the summer.

“Nah, I’m not wallowing. Getting high beats being low. Simple as that.” Seth sat up and turned the
Television off. “What’s got your panties in a bunch? Nightmares again?”

“No,” Neil replied defensively.

“Chill, man. Luke used to get nightmares and I could always tell because he’d change his sweaty-ass
clothes in the middle of the night like you do.” Seth nodded at the ball of sweaty clothing tucked
under Neil’s arm.

“I take it Luke is one of your brothers.”

“Yup. The youngest.”

Neil dropped his clothes on the floor and pulled his desk chair closer to the couch to sit down. “Is he
a punk too?”

“Nah, just a brat.” Seth picked a beer can up off the floor and took a drink. “He’s spoiled as hell, but
not as spoiled as you.”

“Still bitter about the line change?”

Seth gave a rough laugh with a brief flash of his teeth. “Whatever. You know they’re gonna pin
tonight’s shitfest on you, right? Twelve to three. Way to go, wonder boy.”

“Says the guy who didn’t score at all.”

“It doesn’t matter to people what I do.”

“Do you mean on the court or in general?”

Seth only rolled his eyes and drained the rest of his can; his sharp edges were too dulled by weed and
beer for him to bristle at Neil’s snide tone.

Out of curiosity, Neil asked, “Do you know what you’ll do after you graduate?”

“You can’t just ask a college senior that question. Buy some manners.”

“So you don’t have a plan.”

“I’m gonna level with you, I didn’t think I’d live past twenty.” Seth let his head fall back against the
couch and his jaw went slack as he gazed up at the ceiling for a minute or two. “I did all the stupid
shit people promise will kill you and I didn’t care enough to be careful and I didn’t bother planning a
future. At this point, all I want outta life is a cheeseburger. Beyond that, I don’t have a fuckin’ clue.”

Neil let that sink in and couldn’t come up with a response. Even if he’d been well rested, he wasn’t
sure he would’ve known what to say.

“What about you, fuckface? Hm? You gonna go pro with Kevin and be best buds forever?”

“Honestly, I don’t think I’ll make it past twenty,” Neil said, just lightly enough to be taken as a joke.
Seth huffed out a laugh. “Well, if you do make it, watch yourself. Everything after twenty-one is a
scam.”
“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good. Now, I made myself think of cheeseburgers and I’m starving, so I’m gonna take a stroll down to the good ol’ McDonald’s. You can come too, but only because I’m stoned as hell.”

Neil decided to go with him. His chances of getting sleep anytime soon weren’t that good and he figured there were worse ways to spend the early hours of the morning than walking outside in the fresh air.
Hazard Lights

Chapter Summary

The Foxes go to the fall banquet.

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNINGS: suicidal thoughts, mentions of past rape/sexual abuse, a character sees their rapist in person, body memories and multiple flashbacks, references to past child abuse, panic/anxiety, thoughts of violence, slut-shaming, knives, blood, alcohol, drug mention, vomit mention, self-induced vomiting, references to past parent death

Please read through the content warnings carefully!

If you want more details about what's in the chapter or would like to know which sections to avoid, I am 100% willing to talk you through it. Also if there is a warning that needs to be added, please feel free to let me know. You can leave a comment on here or come talk to me on tumblr @hopingforcoordinates.

Neil felt like wasps were buzzing under his skin as he boarded the team bus on Saturday afternoon. There were only a few hours left before he would be forced into the same room as the master and Riko. His heart was swollen and stuck high in his chest, beating out an irregular and frantic warning. He wiped his clammy hands on his dress pants and gave up on Dr. Dobson’s breathing exercises a minute after he sat down. There was a limit to how much those could help him, apparently, and that limit had been reached.

“Simmer down,” Wymack called from the front of the bus. He’d already ditched his tie and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. “As we’ve said before, we’re staying until at least eight thirty and then we’ll go home. Play nice and smile pretty and if anyone gives you trouble, you come find me or Abby. Is that clear?”

The Foxes who were present mumbled their assent. Neil assumed Nicky and Aaron, who were driving separately in their car, would get the same instructions later.

Wymack heaved a sigh. “Any questions, comments, or concerns?”

Seth’s hand shot up. “Yeah, if Kevin goes dark side, do we have the green light to start poaching from other teams?”

“No. Anyone else?” After a beat of silence, Wymack said, “Good. Let’s get this shitshow on the road.”

The bus engine turned over with a growl and Neil’s stomach lurched. Dread had been eating away at him all morning. He rested his forehead against the warm glass of the window and looked out at the
cousins’ car. Nicky and Jim, Nicky’s classmate and date for the evening, sat in the front while Aaron was in the backseat with the cheerleader named Katelyn.

Once Nicky gave a thumbs-up out his window, the bus started moving.

The cousins claimed they wanted the freedom to go to their house in Columbia after the banquet, but Neil didn’t believe that and Wymack probably didn’t either. There wasn’t enough room for all four of them plus two extra people. If they made an early escape, Neil guessed they would leave at least one person behind to ride home on the bus. Given Andrew’s attitude toward Katelyn, it was highly likely that she would be the one left behind.

No matter what the cousins’ plans were, Neil planned on going home with the rest of the team. There wasn’t much the Ravens could do to Andrew’s group since they would undoubtedly stay for the whole two-day event at JD Campbell.

As the bus trundled up the interstate towards North Carolina, Neil ate half a roll of breath mints despite knowing the anxiety wouldn’t go away until the hellish weekend was over. All he could do was try to survive it.

When they passed through a place called Rock Hill, Neil resorted to an old method. There’s a cabin in the mountains, he thought, mentally building the familiar place. He recalled the feeling of rain splashing through the window screen in Wymack’s apartment. He imagined the potted flowers on the porch and several pinwheels spinning in the breeze.

Carefully, he kept his mother out of his imaginary safe haven. He shut out her smile and her voice and the scent of her perfume mixed with smoke. It wasn’t safe to think of her.

When the first signs for Charlotte appeared, Kevin sat next to Neil. His breathing was choppy and panicked and his skin had a sickly sheen to it. “I feel like we’re walking into a giant trap,” he said, curling forward with his arms wrapped around his middle.

“You’ve got Andrew,” Neil reminded him. “He’ll be with you the whole time.”

“I know.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

As if on cue, Andrew folded his elbows over the seat back and looked down at them. “Have I missed the hyperventilating?”

“No all of it,” said Neil.

Andrew snapped his fingers at Kevin. “Hey, Two-Face, this is what you have me for, remember? Show a little trust or I’ll take it as an insult.”

“I ran away without permission,” Kevin whispered fearfully. “What the hell was I thinking?”

“They can’t do anything tonight unless they get through me and Coach,” Andrew said. “If anyone’s spilling blood tonight, it’ll be Riko.”

Neil shot him a hard look. “He hates you enough as it is. Don’t provoke him further.”

“I’ll leave that to you, shall I?”

“He’s already done his worst to me.”
Kevin shook his head and groaned as he pulled his flask out of the front pocket of his sweatshirt. He took a small sip and said, “This is going to be a nightmare.”

When the team stopped at a random shopping center, Andrew got the bottle of vodka from Abby’s bag so Kevin could keep drinking through his feelings. Neil and the rest of the Foxes collected their bags from the storage compartment and split up to find bathrooms so they could change into their dress clothes.

Neil went with Matt and Seth to the men’s room in a fast food restaurant and they took turns in one of the stalls. Once he was dressed, Neil fidgeted with his clothes in front of the mirror. His burn scar stood out under the harsh lights and he wished he would have ignored Allison’s order not to comb his hair down flat.

Matt stepped up beside him and adjusted the sleeves of his jacket. “We look awesome,” he said with a grin. “You worried about tonight?”

“I’m fine.”

Inside the stall, Seth scoffed. “It’s gonna be a clusterfuck. A total shitshow.”

“There’s going to be a ton of people there,” Matt pointed out. “I doubt Riko will start anything in front of a big audience.”

Neil didn’t have anything to say to that. He checked his appearance one more time before grabbing his bag and heading out to the bus. After he stowed his bag away, he climbed up the steps and stopped when he saw Kevin and Abby sitting together in the second row. Kevin had one knee hugged to his chest, carelessly wrinkling his dress clothes, and his face was hidden in the crook of his arm. Abby’s arm was around his shoulders and she was doing her best to console him.

Someone cleared their throat pointedly behind Neil, so he stepped in front of the empty first row to get out of the aisle. Andrew slipped around him and went to stand sentinel over Kevin.

A gruff, “Hey, kid,” came from the driver’s seat.

Neil turned toward Wymack. “Yeah?”

“You need something, you say so,” he said sternly. “Got it?”

“Got it.”

“The vodka in Abby’s bag is up for grabs, by the way. Help yourself if you want to settle your nerves.”

Neil didn’t, but he thanked Wymack anyway.

He sat down in one of the middle rows and toyed with his phone to distract himself from his thoughts. The battery was at eighty-six percent. There were no new messages, no missed calls, nothing for him to do at the moment.

The upperclassmen boarded the bus noisily. Dan and Seth’s voices overlapped and Matt’s laughter was almost louder than both of them. Allison’s heels thumped down the aisle. When she reached Neil’s seat, she nodded approvingly at his clothes before leaning in to ruffle and tug at his hair. “There,” she said. “Now you’re ready.”

She claimed the seat in front of his and was joined by Seth a few seconds later. Dan motioned for
Neil to scoot toward the window so she could sit next to him and Matt sat behind them with Renee. As soon as Nicky gave the thumbs-up signal from the car, Wymack carefully drove the bus out of the parking lot and back onto the main road.

Dan tugged at the hem of her knee-length dress and made a face. “Next time, I swear I’m gonna wear a suit.”

“You’d look hot,” said Allison.

Matt chimed in, “I second that.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Dan chuckled, and then her expression turned serious. “We’re about twenty minutes out. You ready for this, Neil?”

“It’s only dinner.” He sounded steadier than he felt.

“That’s the spirit.”

“We’re gonna be in a room full of people who talk shit about us all year,” said Seth. “Plus the Ravens, who want us dead.”

Dan rolled her eyes. “Yeah, they hate us, but I’ve never seen anyone cause trouble at an event like this. We’ll all fake nice, get fat on fancy catering, and leave as soon as Coach says we can. It’s going to be fine.”

Seth twisted around to look at Dan over the seat back. “Tell that to Kevin. Twenty bucks says he cries at some point tonight.”

“I don’t blame him for being freaked out after what Riko did to him,” Dan said. “We have to have each other’s backs tonight. I’m ordering a team-wide truce.”

“Like that’s ever worked for us before,” Seth muttered.

The last twenty minutes of the drive passed too quickly. Neil repeated his mother’s mantra and built the imaginary cabin until his mind felt numb. He didn’t have a choice in this. There was no chance of escape, no solution to this problem. All he could do was sit through the banquet and endure whatever happened.

At an engraved stone sign for the JD Campbell University Conference Center and Inn, the bus turned and followed a tree-lined road to a cluster of beige stuccoed buildings. Wymack took a space between two other buses at the edge of the parking lot and Nicky drove away to park somewhere else. They all met up on the way to the door and went inside together.

Wymack checked in with the lady behind the front desk in the lobby, and then he led his team down a long hallway to the ballroom where the banquet was being held.

Stepping through the double doors, Matt commented, “They busted out the good stuff this year.”

“Gee, I wonder who they’re trying to kiss up to,” Allison said sarcastically. “At least the food will be better than the usual buffet crap.”

“Whatever their reasons, the place looks really nice. Let’s try to have a good time,” said Renee.

Long tables with floral centerpieces and white tablecloths were arranged around a small dance floor. A banner for the annual fall banquet hung above the small stage and, at the opposite end of the room,
a drink station was set up.

Dozens of people were there, but Neil’s eyes immediately landed on the Ravens. All of them were together with Riko and Jean at the center of the group.

Seeing Jean again made Neil’s throat squeeze shut. His dark hair was longer than usual, parted off-center and combed in a neat sweep over his forehead. His shoulders were slouched like they always were when Jean was too distracted or tired to mind his posture.

Neil wanted to pull him aside so they could talk alone. There were so many things he needed to say.

Wymack blew out an aggravated sigh. “Showtime, gang. Keep each other out of trouble and remember: no fist fights, no food fights, no fire, and no tampering with the music.”

“Why did you look at me when you said that?” Seth asked, offended.

“You know damn well why,” said Wymack. “Come on, Abby, we better go make the rounds.”

Abby said, “You know where to find us if you need anything,” before going with Wymack to speak to some of the other coaches.

In the absence of their coach, the Foxes turned to their captain for direction.

“Let’s find our table first and scope out the place,” Dan suggested.

Each table was set up to be shared by two teams, one on each side, and that made it painfully obvious where the Foxes would be sitting. They only needed twelve chairs; every other team needed almost twice as many.

When they got to their table, Seth leaned over to snatch the place card from the other side to see who they would be stuck with during the meal. He swore loudly and said, “Whoever thought this was a good idea is getting their ass kicked.”

The others crowded around him to see for themselves.

“Well, shit,” Matt said bluntly.

Dan frowned at the innocent black letters on the card. “They can’t be serious. I can’t believe this.”

“What’s going on?” Jim whispered to Nicky, confused by the others’ anger.

“We should tell Coach,” said Renee. “He might be able to get them to change the seating arrangement.”

“We’re not going to run and hide from these lowlife assholes,” Allison said, snatching the place card out of Aaron’s hands and tossing it onto the table.

“We’re sharing a table tonight. How cozy,” Riko’s voice said from behind them.

While the Foxes were distracted, the Ravens had silently closed in around them. Neil’s shoulders tightened and his eyes darted around the group. These were the people he used to see every day, the people who thought of Riko as a king and Neil as a piece of property.

Jean was standing by Riko’s right side, where Kevin’s place used to be. To Riko’s left were the only two women on Edgar Allan’s team, wearing matching black dresses and heels. Corin was exactly as Neil remembered: dark hair, a self-satisfied smile, and an air of superiority that had only gotten worse
over the years.

“He looks disgusting,” she’d said the first time Riko brought her to Neil’s room. “No wonder he needs help getting laid.”

Neil could almost feel her sharp nails digging into his skin. He folded his arms tightly over his chest and took slow, deep breaths. Kevin lightly touched the back of his shoulder, either to offer support or ask for it.

Dan ended the awkward silence between the teams. “We don’t want any trouble and I don’t think you guys do either, so let’s chill out for tonight.”

“You say that and yet you’re the ones who invited trouble. You’ve taken things that aren’t yours, Danielle,” Riko said. His expression hardened and he asked, “Aren’t you two going to say hello?”

In unison, the Ravens turned their heads toward Kevin and Neil.

“Hello, Riko,” Kevin said, somehow managing to keep his voice even. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been well,” Riko replied pleasantly. “The others and I watched your game on Thursday. We’ve all noticed the astonishing change in your performance since your accident and I wondered if perhaps you’re making the damage worse by pushing yourself too hard.”

Neil didn’t trust Kevin to stand his ground, so he spoke up for him. “Kevin’s not on your team anymore, so you don’t need to worry about that. Focus on the teammates you still have.”

Riko blinked and fixed his gaze on Neil. “There’s no reason to be rude, Nathaniel.”

“Yes, there is.”

For the first time that night, Jean looked at him and there was nothing but contempt in his gray eyes. Neil was speaking out of turn again, causing problems others might have to pay for.

Dan intervened with a bright, “Okay, we’re going to go talk to other people now,” and motioned for the other Foxes to start moving.

Neil exhaled slowly as he walked away from the Ravens. His whole body crackled with paranoia, but it was a little comforting to be surrounded by his team. Allison linked arms with Seth and Renee and made comments about the tacky decorations. Aaron apologized to Katelyn for the weird situation he brought her into and Nicky cracked a joke to Jim about a dance-off. At the front of the group, Matt put his arm around Dan’s shoulders and dropped a quick kiss to her cheek. At the back, Andrew spoke to Kevin until Kevin’s breathing finally evened out.

The team didn't stick together for very long. Nicky and Aaron wandered off with their dates and Kevin went to mingle with his celebrity smile firmly in place. Andrew, of course, stayed right by Kevin’s side the whole time.

The upperclassmen visited the drink station, which had pitchers of punch and water alongside dispensers of lemonade and iced tea. Everyone except Neil and Renee spiked their drinks with whatever Seth smuggled in. Neil hovered at the edge of their group until each laugh or too-loud remark felt as jarring as a physical blow. Waiting for the meal to start was making him jittery. Quietly, he told Renee that he was going to get a refill and slipped away.

Neil stood next to the iced tea dispenser and surveyed the rest of the room, trying to get his nerves under control. With so many potential witnesses, the threat of physical violence was fairly low, but
he couldn’t get rid of the tight ball of dread in his stomach that always came before a beating.

That feeling got worse when he caught sight of the master, imposing as ever in his designer suit. He didn’t smile at other people because he didn’t need to be friendly or polite. He was the only surviving creator of Exy, founder of the Exy Rules and Regulations Committee, the owner of two professional teams, and the coach of the best collegiate team in the country. It would take a scandal of epic proportions to make him lose a fraction of the respect he commanded.

Neil was too busy staring to notice Corin approaching him until it was too late. She headed him off before he could get to the upperclassmen. “Hey, there, Neil,” she said, reaching up to touch his hair. “I like your new look.”

Neil jerked away from her with a harsh, “Don’t.” He almost tripped over a chair leg and burned with embarrassment when she laughed at him.

“Relax. Jesus, some things never change.” She smirked and tucked a plastic card into the pocket of his blazer. “Riko got me a single room since it’s my last year. Meet me in 220 later if you’re interested.”

Shock flash-froze Neil’s insides. He couldn’t even flinch when she ran her hand down his lapel before sauntering away. The three nights she crawled into his bed crashed into him at once and flattened his lungs. Her nails, the cuffs, the sweaty sheets he threw up on afterward. The poisoned memory of his mother. The scars on his body never made him feel as disgusting as Corin and the three other girls did.

“You liked it, Nathaniel,” Riko had said each time. “Say thank you.”

Scorching heat surged up his throat. His mouth filled with ash. Neil tried to see Andrew through the crowd, tried to remember exactly what he said the night he found out what Nicky did.

A hand clamped onto Neil’s shoulder and the touch burned him through his clothes like a splash of acid. Seth’s alcohol-sour laugh burst across his face. “Look at you, pullin’ older ladies like a legend,” Seth said. “Don’t think I didn’t see that little sneaky-sneak.”

Neil shoved Seth away from him. “Get off of me. You’re drunk.”

Seth held his hands up in mock surrender and mimed locking his mouth shut. “Secret’s safe with me, bro. A man’s gotta get it where he can even if it’s behind enemy lines.”

A bolt of anger cracked through Neil’s chest like a bullet. Before he could do something he might regret, he stormed out of the ballroom and down the empty hallway. He threw his cup of water and Corin’s key card in the first trash can he came across.

The anger was raw and dizzying and it melted away the rest of him. His common sense evaporated. His self control dissolved. The urge to go after Riko was almost too strong to rein in. He wanted Riko to suffer, he wanted Riko to die, and he wanted to be the one who made it happen.

He needed to hit something and feel it break under his hand. Just as he was thinking about putting a hole in the wall, the master’s voice stopped him.

“Where do you think you are going, Nathaniel?”

Neil stared at the wall, too afraid to breathe. But the master asked a question, so he had to make himself speak. “I was trying to-”
“Face me and stop mumbling like a child.”

Like a kicked dog, he shrank in on himself out of instinct. Then, he straightened his spine and clasped his hands behind him like he was supposed to. When he turned, he lowered his gaze to the floor. “I was trying to find the men’s room, Master.”

“Have you had too much to drink?”

“Only water, sir.”

“I see. Come closer and let me look at you.”

Neil’s knees trembled with every step. He kept his eyes on the carpet and stopped walking when the master’s shiny black shoes were a couple feet from his own.

“I hear you are seeing a psychiatrist,” the master said. “Is that true?”

Assuming the master knew everything was the safest option. “Yes, sir. Riko announced that I was mentally unstable and Coach Wymack had concerns. I’m playing the part.”

“If you do not wish to cause trouble for Dr. Dobson or Coach Wymack, you will behave sensibly.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I am not permitted to contact your father, so he will draw his own conclusions about this situation and take action as he sees fit to make it right. Remember this and tread carefully. I invested time and resources into your training. Do not let that go to waste.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Perhaps if you survive the year, I will be generous and grant you more responsibilities upon your return to Edgar Allan.” The master took Neil’s chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted his head to see the burn mark better. “This will need to be fixed as well. It’s unsightly.”

He let Neil go when the doors to the ballroom were yanked open. Wymack stepped out and, when he spotted Neil, he strode toward him, saying, “Been lookin’ for you, kid. Dan told me you disappeared.”

The master greeted the other man with a neutral, “David.”

“Tetsuji,” Wymack returned. He rested his hand on Neil’s shoulder and said, “You two done catching up? They’re almost ready to start in there.”

“I was just about to head back in. Enjoy your evening, Nathaniel.”

The master went back inside the ballroom. Neil stared at the floor, his heart thudding like he’d sprinted a mile and alarm bells ringing in his head.

Wymack grumbled, “Someone must’ve pissed in his Cheerios this morning.”

The Butcher would draw his own conclusions about his son’s supposed freedom. Dr. Dobson could be in danger. If Neil wasn’t murdered, he would get dragged back to the Nest for another four years of life as a Raven. How could he explain that to Wymack?

“Earth to Neil.” Wymack gave Neil’s shoulder a gentle shake. “Hey, you still with me?”
Neil inhaled sharply and came back to the present. “Yes, sir.”

Wymack frowned. “If you need a minute, we can say you got a migraine or something.”

“I don’t need special treatment.”

“Get over yourself. I’d do the same for any of my players who were about two seconds away from a panic attack.”

“I can make it through dinner,” Neil said. “I really do feel fine.”

Wymack nodded. “All right, let’s get in there. I wasn’t lying about them being ready to start.”

Back in the ballroom, Neil joined the upperclassmen on their way to the table. Andrew’s group was already there, but no one sat down until Andrew finished rearranging the Foxes’ individual name cards. From the other side, the Ravens watched in scornful silence.

The new order kept Matt and Dan in the middle two seats, but placed Renee in the seat Neil was originally supposed to have between Katelyn and Nicky, directly across from Corin. To Neil’s relief, his new seat was between Allison and Andrew toward the other end of the table. He would have pitied Kevin for ending up diagonal from Riko, but he had Dan and Andrew on either side of him to offer their protection.

Across from Kevin was Jean, who stared blankly ahead as if he couldn’t see anyone.

Riko’s eyes glinted with mirth. “You’re not going to keep Kevin as far away from me as possible?”

“What would the point of that be?” Andrew asked as he plopped down in his seat. “You follow him around like a pathetic dog wherever he goes.”

“I’m entitled to my own property. Kevin and Nathaniel-”

“Who’s Nathaniel?”

Riko returned Andrew’s smile with one of his own.

Jean asked, “Do you often struggle with names, Doe?”

Down the table, Nicky muttered something angrily.

Andrew wasn’t affected at all. “Your name’s Gene, right?”

“Jean, actually.”

“John. Got it.”

Thankfully, the head coach of the Tornadoes chose that moment to step behind the podium on the stage to give a short speech welcoming all the teams to North Carolina for the weekend and thanking the people who organized the event. After he was done, the catering staff began serving dinner.

Neil didn’t have an appetite. He would’ve preferred a bag of pretzels in his suite’s kitchen over a catered meal with the Ravens.

When a plate of salmon appeared in front of him, Neil blinked down at it in confusion. During morning conditioning a few weeks ago, Wymack passed around a sheet of paper with the menu options on it and Neil was certain he’d put his initials next to chicken Florentine. They ate fish so
often at the Nest that he was sick of it.

He saw the way Riko was watching him and how Jean was scowling at the table and realized it wasn’t a mistake at all. This was another game. Riko wanted Neil to know that he had changed his food order; he wanted Neil to wonder about what else he might’ve done and be afraid.

Neil pushed some rice into his vegetables with his fork and cut up the salmon, trying to make it look like he’d eaten some. Andrew tore a dinner roll in half and wiped some sauce off his chicken with it before taking a bite. He was hunched over his plate with his left arm resting almost protectively alongside it. His bad posture drew Riko’s eye away from Neil for the moment.

“It’s a shame you had no parents to teach you not to eat like a cave person,” said Riko.

Andrew speared a bite of chicken with his fork. “What would a guy like you know about parents? When’s the last time you saw yours?”

Riko chuckled. “Not a bad shot from someone all the way down in the gutter.”

“Not that long ago you were singing my praises and now you’re looking down your nose at me.” Andrew shook his head and tsk- tsk-ed. “Learn how to take rejection. Nobody likes a sore loser.”

“Thank God you didn’t go to Edgar Allan,” said Blair, the younger Raven girl. “Someone like you doesn’t deserve to set foot on a court at all.”

Andrew jabbed his fork in her direction emphatically. “First of all, thank me. God had nothing to do with it. Second of all, your beloved captain is the one that wanted me. Don’t question his judgement while he’s sitting right there. We all know how fragile his ego is.”

Riko said, “Ignore him, Blair. You can’t reason with crazy people.”

“He’s not crazy,” said Kevin. “He has a point. We tried to recruit him for a reason and that reason hasn’t changed. No one can say he’s not an asset to the team.”

Riko’s eyes narrowed. “You seem a bit drunk. Maybe you should switch to water now.”

“Maybe you should switch to booze,” Seth suggested. “It might make you less of an uptight, unbearable prick.”

“I almost forgot about you, Gordon,” said Riko.

“Still alive and kickin’, bitch.” Seth burped into his fist, earning an eye-roll from Allison.

“I think we should focus on the food and ignore each other,” Matt said.

One of the Ravens replied, “I’d be shocked if you guys could last more than ten minutes without running your mouths.”

“Should we bet on it?” Nicky asked.

The tension only got worse from that point on. The Ravens were armed with ready-made insults and the Foxes didn’t know how to back down from a fight. Dan and Renee tried to get things under control to no avail. Riko had no interest in keeping the peace. Neil caught snippets of conversations here and there, and none of them were good.

A Raven striker named Josiah eyed Allison’s plunging neckline with a smirk. “I thought Wilds was the only whore on the team. I would’ve brought more cash if I’d known.”
Allison sighed primly. “All the money in the world wouldn’t make you worth my time.”

“Look at her again and I’ll fuckin’ knock your lights out,” Seth threatened.

Josiah laughed. “Am I supposed to be scared?”

Down the table, one of the Raven dealers was sneering at Matt. “You wouldn’t know what a good captain looked like if one was sitting right in front of you.”

Aaron retorted, “I think you mean ‘cult leader.’”

A headache jabbed at Neil’s temples.

Meanwhile, the junior goalkeeper named Marty was asking Dan, “Why don’t you give us a little show, Hennessy? We brought plenty of singles.”

“I’m not surprised. You seem like the kind of guy who has to pay women to get naked,” Dan said in a dry, bored tone. “Are you going to insult me for having a job at Burger King too or do you have to get permission from your ‘king’ first?”

“Hey, do you have to call him ‘Your Majesty’ at practice?” Matt asked.

“Yeah, we’re trying to settle a bet,” Nicky chimed in.

“This is fun,” Andrew said above the chatter. “Aren’t you having fun, Kevin?”

All at once, the Raven side of the table fell quiet because Riko lifted his right hand, a signal for something.

Jean calmly pointed out, “You haven’t eaten any of your food, Nathaniel.”

The Ravens stared at Neil with hungry anticipation. The Foxes exchanged wary, confused looks with each other.

“Jean won’t mind trading with you if you’d prefer chicken,” Riko offered with a deadly smile. “He hasn’t touched his dinner either.”

Riko was recycling old tricks. There was a chance the food was tampered with and there was a chance it was just a bluff. Either way, someone would be forced to eat it and it was up to Neil to choose whose safety to gamble with: his own or Jean’s.

*To hell with everything,* thought Neil. “No need to trade. The smell of that overpriced cologne you seem to have bathed yourself in killed my appetite. I’ll eat something later.”

Matt choked on a laugh and Jean’s eyes flashed angrily.

“Don’t let your temper get away from you, Nathaniel. You know better than that,” Riko warned.

“My temper isn’t the one you should be worried about. Yours is causing plenty of problems and one of these days you’ll cross a line that you can’t cheat or bribe your way back from. My advice? Accept the fact that Kevin wants nothing to do with you and leave the Foxes alone.”

“Kevin will return to his rightful place soon.”

“Kevin’s staying where he is. He’s not going to stand in your shadow and pretend he’s not better than you anymore.”
Riko’s eyes could’ve frozen hell. “By all means, be as insolent as you like, but all it will get you in the end is a very, very deep grave.”

“And I will drag you down with me if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Dude,” Seth said with feeling at the same time Kevin murmured, “Nathaniel.”

Dan started saying, “Matt, go get-” but Matt was already out of his chair and on his way to Wymack’s table.

Neil had acted out of turn and, if he wasn’t punished, someone else would suffer in his place. Those were the rules and every Raven followed them. Throwing out the last of his self-preservation, Neil took three large bites of the potentially drug-laced fish and forced himself to swallow. He tossed his fork down, scattering rice onto the tablecloth, and wiped his mouth.

No one said anything. Jean was the only person that refused to look at him.

A cold tendril of nausea curled around Neil’s stomach as he imagined the drugs worming their way into his system and wondered what would happen next. If he fell into trouble, who would help him?

Matt returned to the table with Wymack at his heels.

“What’s going on?” Wymack demanded. “You chuckleheads couldn’t make it through dinner without throwing a hissy fit?” His words were aimed at the Ravens too, which they didn’t care for.

Neil cleared his throat. “Coach, I think I’m getting a migraine. May I be excused?”

“Sure. Text Abby if you need her.”

Without a backwards glance, Neil left the ballroom.

If the food was drugged like he suspected, he wanted to get it out of his stomach as soon as possible. He strode briskly down the hall until he found the men’s room and, fortunately for him, it was empty.

To prepare, Neil left his blazer on the counter, rolled up his sleeves, and put his tie over his shoulder. Once he was locked in a stall, he shoved two fingers into his mouth until he triggered his gag reflex. His knees hit the floor with a painful crack as he vomited into the toilet. The ringing in his ears rose and fell with every heave of his stomach. His throat convulsed. His whole body strained and jerked miserably from the force of it. Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes as a cold chill scraped over his spine.

When he was finished, he flushed the toilet and stumbled out of the stall to rinse the sour grime from his mouth. He slumped, exhausted and shivering, against the counter. Sweat pooled under his arms and slicked the backs of his knees.

From where Neil stood, he couldn’t see the bathroom door, but he heard it swing open and fall shut. He mentally readied himself to face whoever was about to come around the corner.

A couple seconds later, the lock on the door clicked and Jean stepped into view. “Quite the mess you’ve made,” he said softly.

Neil had wanted to speak to him alone, but something about the timing of this felt wrong. “Riko’s the one who caused the whole mess and you know it. You were there.”

“He has already been made to pay for it. Dr. Tagawa and I had to carry him to his room once the
master was finished with him.”

“Good.”

Jean looked annoyed.

“He can’t punish you for this,” Neil said. “I’m not a Raven anymore.”

“That is true, but he wants to make sure that I understand.” Jean opened his hand to show Neil the pocket knife he was carrying. “I’m supposed to prove I’m not loyal to you any longer.”

Hurting people was one thing, but forcing a person to hurt someone else pleased Riko’s deep-seated need for control like nothing else. He loved knowing that he could make anyone do anything.

Neil should have seen this coming. “I can do it myself if you’d rather-”

“I won’t mind doing this.” Anger coiled under his words like a snake. Jean could only ever lash out sideways, never upwards at the one actually causing him to suffer. “You could’ve done what he wanted if you really tried. Don’t you dare tell me it was impossible. Kevin’s a bastard, but he wouldn’t let you die if you told him he could save you.”

“I’m done being Riko’s pawn.”

“What about me?” The words came out as a broken whisper. Jean glowered at his shoes and scrubbed a hand over his mouth like he wanted to erase what he said. “Lift up your shirt. Let’s get this over with so I won’t have to look at you anymore.”

“Jean…”

“For once, just do as you’re told, Neil.”

Neil tugged his shirt free of his waistband and undid a few of the lower buttons. “Press the blade down firmly and do a quick slash. It’ll be okay,” he said, pulling the shirt up.

“Be quiet.” Jean was still glaring, but his shaking hands gave away his real feelings. All Neil could do to help him was hold still and stay quiet. Jean’s hesitation made the process slower and more painful than necessary, but Neil didn’t hold that against him. No one ever gave him lessons and, besides, his hesitation had its upsides. When they broke Kevin’s hand, Jean pulled back at the last second. He didn’t hit half as hard as Riko would have.

Jean snapped a picture of the bleeding gash with his phone as evidence for Riko and shoved a handful of paper towels at Neil’s chest. “There. We’re finished.”

“Thanks.” A lump grew in Neil’s throat as he pressed the paper towels to his side. Things would never be the same between them, but it was better this way. Jean was better off without Neil getting him in trouble.

“Neil?” someone called from outside the door. “Neil, are you in there?”

Jean froze. “Who is that?”

“Sounds like Renee,” Neil said, frowning. He wasn’t sure how he was going to hide his wound. “You should go. Tell her I’m not in here and get back to the others.”

“And what will you do?”
“I’ll think of something,” he said. “I’ll be fine.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that before,” Jean muttered. With one last angry scowl, he went around the corner and unlocked the door.

Neil couldn’t hear what Jean and Renee said to each other, but the plan must not have worked because Renee came into the men’s room after Jean left. Her eyes widened at the sight of him. “What happened to you? Did Jean do this?”

“I’m not under your protection or Andrew’s, so neither of you can retaliate for this,” he said waspishly. “None of this is Jean’s fault. Do you understand?”

“Okay, I understand,” she said. “Do you want me to get Abby for you?”

“It’s not bad. He didn’t cut that deep.”

Renee nodded and pushed the sleeves of her cardigan up to her elbows. “You should dress that. You’ll need bandages.”

He shook his head. “I can manage with some paper towels and tape. You didn’t happen to see a supply closet around here, did you?”

“I’ll borrow Coach’s keys so we can get the first aid kit.” Renee pressed her knuckle to her mouth, frowning in thought. “Will you be all right getting outside by yourself? Maybe I should ask him to meet us out there.”

“I can get to the bus unchaperoned. Promise me you won’t go after Jean- I mean it, this wasn’t his fault.”

“I understand and I promise nothing will happen to him. I’m going to get the keys and I’ll meet you by the bus in a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay.” Then, he remembered to say, “Thank you for your help.”

Renee gave him a small smile. “We’re a team, Neil. We have to watch out for each other.”

They split up in the hallway and Neil walked as fast as he could out the main entrance, checking over his shoulder every few seconds in case he was being followed. The night air washed over him as he pushed through the glass doors. A cool breeze cut through the humidity hanging over the parking lot and rustled through the tree branches. Neil’s heart gradually began to calm down.

Renee got to the bus a couple minutes after he did and unlocked the door. “How’re you holding up?” she asked.

“It doesn’t hurt as much as before.”

“Sounds like a good sign.” Renee pushed the door open and gestured for him to go ahead of her. “Do you want any help?”

Neil told her he didn’t, so she stayed outside to keep watch.

Abby’s bag was in the first row, ready and waiting. Neil put his blazer on the seat and dropped the blood-soaked paper towels on the floor. With his clean hand, he unzipped the bag and set the bottle of vodka aside. His cell phone served as a flashlight while he searched through the medical supplies for what he needed.
He grabbed a water bottle and a handful of Kleenex first and bunched his shirt up under his armpit to keep it out of the way. By the light of his phone, he used wet tissues to clean his wound and scrub at the large patch of dried blood.

Andrew’s voice came from the doorway. “Are you decent?”

Neil startled and nearly dropped his phone. “What are you doing here?”

“Are you decent. What are you doing here?”

“Give me a minute,” Neil said. Hastily, he patted his skin dry with more Kleenex so he could stick an extra large adhesive bandage over the cut. He tucked his shirt into his waistband and pocketed his phone. “Okay, you can come up now.”

Andrew stopped at the top of the steps and said, “Kevin needs a drink.”

Neil bit back a comment about Kevin’s drinking and handed over the bottle of vodka.

“What happened here?” Andrew asked, wagging his finger at the ransacked first aid kit.

“Kevin still needs a drink.”

Andrew tapped his temple and disappeared down the steps with the vodka. Neil hid the bloody paper towels and Kleenex at the bottom of the grocery sack the team used as a wastebasket. Then, he used an anti-bacterial wipe to clean the things he touched, packed up Abby’s bag, and zipped it shut.

When he stepped outside, Renee and Andrew were quietly talking. Kevin was leaning against the bus and drinking vodka straight from the bottle.

“Are you doing okay?” Renee asked.

Neil nodded and self-consciously straightened his tie.

“There’s no point worrying about your tie when there’s blood on your shirt,” Andrew said, faintly amused.

Neil looked down and clapped a hand over the dark red stain, horrified.

“Kevin and Andrew are going to head out now,” Renee explained. “Do you want to leave with them or go back to the banquet with me? Wymack said the team might leave earlier than planned.”

Anything that would let him avoid the ballroom sounded appealing, but he had to ask, “What about Aaron and Nicky?”

Andrew said, “They have Wymack, Renee, and their personal potential witnesses keeping an eye on them.”

Neil frowned in disbelief. “Is that why you let them bring dates?”

“Nice, normal people from nice, normal families don’t react well to the kind of mischief Riko likes to get up to. They do things that people like us wouldn’t think of like calling the cops or posting stories on Facebook.”

“Riko doesn’t want Aaron and Nicky. They’ll be fine,” Kevin said, pushing away from the bus. “Nathaniel, what’re you hiding? What’s on your shirt?”
“You’re drunk,” said Neil. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with Kevin like this.

“I’m sorry.”

“Be sorry and quiet.”

“Still waiting on your answer,” Andrew interrupted. “Are you coming with me? Yes or no?”

Neil sighed. He had to make a decision quickly. They were waiting on him. “Yes,” he said finally. “I’ll go with you.”

Andrew and Renee communicated something with a single glance, and then Renee went to lock up the bus while Andrew started shepherding Kevin in the direction of the car.

“Drive safe,” Renee said. “I’ll text you when we get to campus.”

Andrew waved good-bye over his shoulder.

Neil wished Renee a good night before following Andrew and Kevin through the parking lot. A cocktail of apprehension and relief fizzed in his head. He was glad to be leaving, but he feared for the rest of the Foxes.

Near Andrew’s car, Neil stopped to text Renee: Don’t leave Seth alone. Neil was still angry at what Seth said earlier, but he didn’t want any harm to come to him tonight. Seth was too drunk to look out for himself.

“Let’s not drag this out,” Andrew said once he managed to get Kevin into the backseat. “If you’re coming, get in the car.”

Grimacing, Neil climbed into the front seat and put his seat belt on. He worried that leaving was a mistake.

“Nathaniel,” Kevin said, leaning forward. “Nathaniel, did you throw up the food?”

“Stop calling me that.”

Andrew got into the driver’s seat and slammed the door shut behind him. With a turn of the key in the ignition, the engine stuttered three times and came to life with a powerful rumble. Andrew put the car into drive and sped out of the parking lot, taking turns too sharply and ignoring the speed limit.

Renee texted Neil back just as Andrew stopped at a red light. Her message said, Don’t worry! We’ll get home safe.

Neil closed his eyes and hoped Renee was right.

A few miles down the road, his hands started shaking and his mind jumbled all his memories of the night together to replay them in the wrong order. Jean’s pocket knife. The key card in his pocket. The cruel chatter of Ravens. The master’s hand gripping his chin. Neil laced his fingers together and squeezed until his knuckles ached.

Andrew pushed on the gas pedal as the car hugged the curve of the on-ramp and picked up speed. There was no traffic, so Andrew barely checked his mirrors before jerking the car into the right lane.

Inertia pulled at Neil’s insides as the car flew down the interstate. He watched the needle of the speedometer go up and up and he still wanted Andrew to go faster. He wanted to leave the whole world behind.
“Was there something in your food?” Andrew asked.

Shaking his head, Neil answered, “I don’t think so.”

“He needs to throw up just in case,” Kevin said.

Neil glared at him. “I thought I told you to be quiet.”

“A little extra leash and you think you own the whole yard.” Kevin scoffed. “You always forget where your place is.”

“A couple hours with Riko and you sound just like him.”

“Don’t you dare say that to me.”

Andrew maneuvered the car around an eighteen-wheeler and an RV. When he got the car ahead of the other vehicles, he cranked up the air conditioning and the blast of cold air made Neil shiver.

Andrew’s next question took Neil by surprise. “If I had said yes to Riko, how would it have worked?”

“How would what work?” Kevin asked.

“This demented little hierarchy of yours.”

Neil looked at him oddly. “Why are you asking?”

“I don’t feel like listening to you two hiss at each other like cats all the way to Columbia, so I’m changing the subject.”

Kevin made an unhappy noise and tugged at his seat belt. “Pick something else. I don’t wanna talk about the Nest.”

That was enough motivation to make Neil talk. “You would’ve been number five, our starting goalkeeper,” he said, ignoring Kevin’s protests. “As soon as you signed, Riko would’ve found a way to get you taken off your meds.”

Andrew cut Neil an unreadable look. “Tricky business. What was his plan for handling my infamous violent streak? Dedicated punching bag?”

“Not a punching bag,” Neil said. “Just me.”

Kevin hissed, “Nathaniel, stop it.”

“What about Jean?” Andrew asked.

“I wouldn’t have let you lay a hand on him.”

“By making yourself the biggest target? That only works for so long. Not every monster is happy with the same meal every day.”

“I think I could’ve pulled it off. I’m told I can be incredibly irritating.”

“That may be true, but my point still stands.”

Neil shrugged it off. “Anyway, to answer your question about the hierarchy, you would’ve ranked
below Kevin and above me. It would’ve been difficult for Riko to get you to fit there without letting you have too much power. I’m not sure their usual methods would work on someone like you.”

“Usual methods?”

In French, Kevin asked, “Why are you doing this?”

Neil responded in English, “Why don’t you want him to know? Are you worried about how he’ll react?”

“Pull over,” Kevin ordered. “Andrew, pull the car over now.”

Andrew put his hazard lights on. Traffic was sparse enough that he didn’t have any trouble slowing down and pulling onto the shoulder, gently braking until the car rocked to a stop. Neil immediately got out and started walking along the highway, away from Kevin. He only made it a few yards before Kevin caught up.

“I know you’re pissed off,” Kevin spat. “I get it, but that doesn’t mean you can start telling Andrew all of our secrets. I’ve told him what he needs to know- everything else is a needless risk.”

“He knows Riko’s an abusive asshole. It doesn’t matter if he knows exactly how Riko does the abusing,” Neil argued. “I think you’re worried Andrew might not want to protect you if he knows you were Riko’s sidekick, not just his victim.”

“None of us had any choices! It’s not like you could’ve made Riko stop if you were in my shoes.”

Neil kept walking, fuming and unsure of what he might do if he didn’t get away. He already came too close to losing his temper that night.

“You have reasons to hate me,” Kevin called after him. “I get that and I don’t expect forgiveness from you, but we should at least clear the air because we can’t keep going like this. Nathaniel, please!”

Neil stopped. The night was warm, but his insides felt like dirty, half-melted sidewalk snow. Trampled too many times to ever get clean again. Too much had happened. There was too much ugliness between him and Kevin and nothing could ever make it go away.

When he turned, he couldn’t even see Kevin properly. His body was backlit by Andrew’s car: a dark shape stuck in a bright beam with light swimming in his glass bottle.

Slowly, Kevin took lumbering steps toward him. The conversation wasn’t finished; it never would be.

“I don’t blame you for what Riko did,” Neil said truthfully. “I don’t hate you for any of that.”

“You don’t?”

“No, I hate you because you justified it and you believed him when he said we deserved what we got.”

“That’s not true,” Kevin said thickly.

“Honestly, I don’t think you cared what happened to the rest of us as long as it wasn’t happening to you. Must’ve been easier to only think of yourself.”

“I don’t know why I did what I did. I can’t make sense of anything that happened to us,” Kevin said.
“All I know is that I don’t want to be like Riko.”

“Oh, you’re not in any danger of being like Riko. For that to happen you’d have to be able to think for yourself.” Neil was going too far, but he couldn’t stop. “You’re not the guy who tortures people, you’re the guy who stands by and does nothing. You accepted what he did because he told you to, you helped him because he told you to, and someday you’ll go crawling back to that hellhole because he told you to. Spineless and weak-minded. That’s the real Kevin Day.”

His skin broke out in goosebumps. He didn’t have to see Kevin’s face to know that he’d been nudged past his breaking point.

Kevin pulled himself up to his full height. “Did you ever wonder why the master kept your name?” he taunted. “It’s cause your father made him promise not to change it- didn’t want you to forget where you came from. Nathaniel Wesninski. That’s who you are and that’s why Riko had to break you. Otherwise, you would’ve butchered us all.”

“Stop talking.”

“We used to wonder when you’d snap and kill poor Jean,” Kevin said spitefully, raising the bottle to his mouth again. “You get your pigheadedness from your mother, though. She didn’t know when to quit and neither do you.”

Neil lunged forward and knocked Kevin to the ground. The glass bottle bounced away, spilling vodka into the grass. A short scuffle ended with Neil digging his knee into Kevin’s stomach with his hands around his throat, holding him down. Kevin was too drunk and surprised to fight him off. After a few seconds, he stopped struggling and laughed bitterly. “Are you going to kill me now? See, you really are just like your father.”

Breathing hard, Neil said, “It’s too bad you’re nothing like yours.”

Kevin stilled and Neil knew the fight was over. They were too damaged to keep hurting each other.

Neil got to his feet and clutched at his side, where stinging pain had flared up again. For the first time since the fight began, Andrew came walking toward them. He’d given Neil a free pass for shoving Kevin on the court, but there was no reason for him to do that twice.

The sudden drop from his anger at Kevin paralyzed him. Instead of fear, Neil felt nothing. If Andrew wanted retribution, he could easily come and get it, but Neil wasn’t going to stand there waiting. He continued walking until the headlights of Andrew’s car grew faint and the shadows enveloped him. Nobody came after him.

A black mass of trees loomed to his right. The undergrowth spilled out from the treeline and crowded the bottom of the little grassy bank sloping down from the highway shoulder. Neil felt a pull in his bones as his eyes adjusted to the dark, tempting him to keep going until he disappeared for good.

Kevin said his mother didn’t know when to quit. It had a ring of truth to it; if she hadn’t tried to save Neil, she wouldn’t have died that night. Maybe it’s time, Neil thought. He was chained to a fate he had no control over. Maybe it was time to quit.

A car flew past him on the highway, a streak of lights followed by a warm gust of air. Neil watched the red tail lights shrink in the distance and imagined how simple it would be to jump in front of the next car. It wasn’t ideal and it wasn’t foolproof, but at least it would be his choice. He could die on the highway or die fighting like his mother.

The night closed in around him like the walls of the tunnel under the house in Baltimore. There
wasn’t enough light to remember where he was. Old fear exploded across his chest—fear of the basement and the Butcher. “I can’t do this, Mom.” She’d asked him to be brave, but he couldn’t. It was so dark that night. He was too afraid.

Another car whipped by.

Neil tore back the foil wrapper of his breath mints and put two on his tongue. He looked at the date on his phone. It’s Saturday, he reminded himself, crunching the mints between his teeth. September 7. I’m eighteen years old. Number ten, starting striker for the Palmetto State Foxes.

Screams echoed in his skull. He could still feel the way his mother’s blood made his shoes stick to the floor.

Dr. Dobson was on speed dial, he remembered. All he had to do was hold down the right button.

The line rang and then a small, tinny, “Hello?” came from the phone’s earpiece.

Neil squeezed his eyes shut. Calling her was a stupid thing to do after what the master said. He’d probably been watching her for months. He could’ve had her apartment bugged.

“Neil, is that you? Are you okay?”

“Hi, Dr. Dobson,” he said awkwardly. “Sorry for calling so late.”

“No need to apologize. Are you still at the banquet? That was tonight, right?”

“Yeah, it was tonight. I’m on my way home.”

“How did it go?”

“Not great,” he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Was the food good at least?”

Neil watched an eighteen-wheeler go by. “No. I didn’t eat much.”

She hummed sympathetically. “That’s too bad. Maybe you can find something better to eat when you get home.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Did something happen to make you want to call me tonight?”

His throat closed up as a wave of grief crashed over him. He held his breath and waited for it to pass. Then, he said, “I’m just really tired. It was a long day.”

“Well, the good news is the hard part’s over. You made it through the banquet and now you get to rest and relax. There’s always a chance that tomorrow will be better.”

He sighed heavily. “I guess.”

“Would you still like to meet at our usual time or would you rather push our session back a few hours and sleep in?”

“Could we do dinner tomorrow?” If they were going to Columbia, he wasn’t sure how they would get back to campus in the morning without Nicky to drive.
“Dinner would be great. I’ve got my fridge stocked up and some new recipes we can try. How does six o’clock sound?”

“Sounds fine.”

“All right, I’ve got it written on my calendar.”

“Okay, um, I should go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Neil. I hope you sleep well.”

Neil snapped his phone shut and squeezed it in his hand.

As he walked back to Andrew’s car, he maintained a fair distance between his feet and the highway, just in case his mind turned traitor again, and he pressed two fingers to his neck. His pulse hammered out a strong rhythm that reassured him he was still there, still alive.

Andrew and Kevin said nothing when Neil gingerly climbed into the front seat. Neil clicked his seat belt in place and sank into the relief of being inside the confines of the car. There were lights on the dashboard to push away some of the darkness. There were walls and windows and a roof to keep him secure. The faint smell of leather and cigarette smoke and recycled air was familiar and soothing.

Andrew’s head lolled against his headrest. He looked at Neil inquisitively, an eyebrow slightly raised to ask what now?

What Neil suddenly wanted to say was, “I could've died a few minutes ago,” but instead he went with, “I left my bag on the bus.”

“You also left your jacket,” Andrew pointed out.

Neil screwed up his mouth. He hadn’t realized his blazer was missing. “I’ll have to sleep in these clothes if we stay at your house.”

Andrew shrugged, turned off the hazard lights, and put the car in drive. At thirty-five miles an hour, he swerved back onto the highway and accelerated hard. Kevin grunted an incoherent complaint and huffed in annoyance. Neil couldn’t bring himself to look back at him. If he was lucky, Kevin would be too drunk to remember the awful things they said to each other, but Neil wasn’t feeling optimistic.

On top of that, he was pretty sure his wound had started bleeding again.

Over the next hour, Neil received a few texts from both his roommates and Renee. She let him know that the Foxes were on their way home and Matt asked how he was doing. Neil responded to them and ignored the texts from Seth.

When they reached the outskirts of Columbia, Andrew took an exit off the highway and drove through an unfamiliar part of the city. The streets were lined with gas stations and fast food restaurants and dark storefronts almost exactly like the ones near Andrew’s neighborhood, but the names on the signs were different. After a few minutes, Andrew turned into the parking lot of a Waffle House and parked near the doors. He killed the engine and got out, leaving Kevin asleep and slumped over in the backseat.

“Kevin?” Neil tried. “Do you want to get something to eat?”

The only response was Kevin’s slow, raspy breathing.
Neil worried his lip between his teeth and waited a few more seconds before getting out of the car. He made sure the doors were locked and went inside.

Andrew was sitting in a booth with a piece of duct tape covering a crack in the vinyl and a sticky substance dried on the table. He slid the menu over when Neil sat across from him.

“I think we’re the only sober people here,” Neil remarked. There was a lady in a cocktail dress asleep at the counter, a group of guys holding a pancake-eating contest, a man in sweats sitting with his head in his hands, and two young women who nearly toppled out of their booth as they took a picture of themselves.

“We’re at a Waffle House after ten pm,” Andrew said as if that explained everything.

“Why are we here? There was plenty of food at the banquet.”

“I remember.”

The night had taken several strange turns and this was the strangest one yet. When a waitress came to take their order, Neil asked for a glass of water on the off-chance it might help ease the headache pulsing at his temples. Andrew ordered a glass of orange juice and something called the “All-Star Special.” Neil barely listened to him answer the waitress’s questions—white or wheat toast, hash browns or grits—and rubbed at his forehead. Whatever Andrew was getting, Neil hoped he’d eat it fast so they could get back on the road.

About ten minutes after they got their drinks, the waitress brought out three plates of food for Andrew. The largest plate had hash browns, scrambled eggs, and toast. There was a waffle on one of the smaller plates and strips of bacon on the other. The smell of steaming hot food made Neil’s mouth water. He tried to appear unaffected, wishing he could ignore the hunger pangs in his empty stomach.

The waitress put down two sets of silverware that were wrapped up neatly in paper napkins and told Andrew and Neil to give her a holler if they needed anything else.

Andrew methodically took a bite of everything, starting with the waffle and ending with the toast. Once he was done chewing and swallowing the last bite, he announced, “It’s not poisoned.”

“Good for you.”

“Unless your goal is to go to bed hungry, I suggest you dig in before it gets cold.”

Taken aback, Neil said, “I’m not going to take your food.”

“I don’t need all this. Like you mentioned, there was plenty of food at the banquet.” Andrew shoved another forkful of scrambled eggs in his mouth and watched Neil to see what he’d do.

On any other night, Neil would have refused, but he felt close to starving and there wasn’t much risk in accepting this offer. He unwrapped the second bundle of silverware and took a bite of eggs.

Andrew put a generous amount of butter and syrup on the waffle and made sure to cover each square. When he looked up, Neil took that as his cue to cut off a small piece for himself. It was surprisingly good even if it wasn’t something he’d eat on a normal day. He gave a little shrug and a nod of approval and snagged a piece of bacon.

While they worked through the food, they periodically glanced out the window at Andrew’s car. A ripple of worry went through Neil at the thought of how much Kevin had to drink that night and the
parting words he left him with.

“Should we check on Kevin?” Neil asked.

“Stop trying to do my job for me.”

“You let him drink too much.”

Andrew ate a bite of hash browns. “I kept him from choking on his puke after you pushed him over
the edge, so the way I see it, I did my part. I’m not here to be his life coach or his mother.”

Neil fiddled with his napkin. “How much of our fight did you hear?”

“Only the beginning. Something about him telling me what I need to know. After that, I didn’t get
much.” Andrew noticed Neil’s relief and added, “If you want to keep your business private, shouting
about it on the side of the road isn’t the wisest choice.”

Neil nodded and picked up his fork to keep eating.

When the eggs, bacon, and hash browns were finished, the two of them half-heartedly picked at the
syrup-soaked remains of the waffle and avoided eye contact. The late hour, the dingy lights, and the
comfort of a full stomach made Neil feel subdued and disconnected from the rest of the world. He’d
have to deal with everything that happened that night eventually, but at the moment his mind was
drifting away from it all.

“So, what did the bitch want?” Andrew asked.

Neil yawned into his fist. “Do you mean Kevin?”

“Corin, the rapist. I saw her talking to you.”

The room felt colder all of a sudden and Neil’s body tensed. “I never told you that she-”

“Call it an educated guess.”

“She invited me to her room and gave me a key card,” Neil said dully. He didn’t want to think about
it ever again.

Andrew ran his tongue over his teeth and let his gaze wander around the room.

Neil used his turn to ask, “Why didn’t you protect Kevin from me earlier?”

“Because he doesn’t need protecting from you.”

Neil cocked his head, brow furrowed in bemusement. “Is that trust or an insult? I could’ve killed him
if I wanted to.”

“Kevin’s not Riko, but he’s still higher in the hierarchy and people like that don’t give up their power
over you because you ask nicely. You have to take it away by force.” Andrew paused to let his
words sink in. “That said, you would never do anything to jeopardize our season like hurting one of
our best players; ergo, I don’t need to protect Kevin from you.”

Neil hated being so transparent. “It would be easier and probably safer to break out the knives
instead of wagering Kevin’s safety on a hunch.”

“If I was interested in easy, I wouldn’t have let Kevin stay.”
“What are you interested in, then? Making things as difficult as possible?”

“I’m interested in things that are interesting.”

Neil rolled his eyes at Andrew’s non-answer. “On the subject of interesting things, I had a talk with Renee earlier in the week. She’s an interesting person who’s had an interesting life.”

“No argument there.”

“Is she interesting enough to date or is her faith a deal-breaker for you?”

Andrew stared at him in a shrewd, calculating way. For a few seconds, Neil thought he’d crossed a line, that he’d gone too far and now Andrew was about to shut him down. But then Andrew said, “Her faith doesn’t mean anything to me. Her gender is the ‘deal-breaker.’”

“Her gender?”

“I’m only interested in men.”

Neil shuffled this new fact into his collection of Andrew-related information and found it didn’t change much besides raising a few new questions he’d probably never ask. “Who else knows?”

“Renee and Roland.”

Neil blinked in surprise. “You haven’t told Nicky?”

“No, because then he would want to talk about it.”

The twins locked themselves away within mazes of defense mechanisms and rough edges. If Nicky spotted something that might help him bond with Andrew, he would charge headlong toward it and the subject of Andrew’s sexuality was bound to be a minefield with his history of abuse.

Andrew took the last bite of cold waffle and sucked the syrup off his fork. “Are you going to eat those crumbs or are you ready to go?”

Neil’s jaw-cracking yawn was enough of an answer; sleep was all he wanted, even if it was on a hard floor. Once Andrew paid for their food, they left the restaurant and finished the last leg of their journey to the cousins’ house. The night was finally over.
Neil woke up on the floor of Andrew’s bedroom with a dry mouth and a stiff back. He wasn’t sure how long he slept or what time it was and he couldn’t find the motivation to reach for his phone to check. There was a vacancy in his chest where his heart should’ve been and the emptiness had eaten away at his insides until he was nothing but a frail shell of a human. Every breath threatened to put cracks in his chest.

The wound on Neil’s side twinged when he rolled over to look at the empty bed. He woke up when Andrew rummaged through his nightstand, and again when Andrew left the room. That could’ve been hours or minutes ago for all Neil knew.

His eyes dropped to the shadowy space beneath the bed, where a white plastic garbage sack stuffed with clothes was squished under there. “Cheapest suitcase in the world,” was what Andrew called it the night before as he dug out a baggy shirt and sweats for Neil to borrow. The cheap clothes smelled like dust and mildew and Neil knew without asking that the plastic sack was a remnant of Andrew’s life in foster care.

Sighing, he bunched up the blanket under his head to make a better pillow. Part of him wanted to shower and brush his teeth, but he didn’t have the energy to get up.

There were two sharp knocks on the door before Andrew came into the room and dropped Neil’s duffel bag next to his head. Neil blinked in confusion. He’d left his bag on the bus last night. “Where did you get that?” he asked.

“Coach. He’s here and he wants to have a chat.” Andrew clapped his hands twice and said, “Up and at ‘em, soldier.”

Neil’s groan was masked by the sound of the door shutting behind Andrew. He stared at the ceiling for a few more minutes before forcing his body to move. Fighting the temptation to lie back down, he changed into the jeans and shirt that were left in his bag from yesterday and put Andrew’s things on the bed. Then, he stuffed his ruined dress shirt and pants into the duffel bag, pocketed his phone,
and went down to the kitchen.

Wymack had a cup of coffee in one hand and his sunglasses folded over his shirt collar. Nicky and Andrew were watching a plate of food rotate in the microwave and Kevin had his forehead pressed to the cool surface of the freezer door, eyes closed in agony.

“Morning,” Neil mumbled.

“It’s one thirty in the afternoon,” Wymack said. He pointed at a paper bag with the logo from Kelly’s Deli on it and a plastic to-go cup. “That’s for you. Andrew told me he doesn’t feed ‘strays.’”

That didn’t match up with Andrew’s actions, but Neil lacked the energy to solve that particular puzzle at the moment. He thanked Wymack for bringing him lunch and peered into the bag to find a chicken salad sandwich and a small bag of pretzels. Despite his lack of appetite, he began eating.

The microwave finally beeped and the noise made Kevin clutch at his head. Fighting back a laugh, Nicky cooed, “Poor little lamb.” Kevin opened his eyes enough to scowl at him before ambling out of the kitchen.

“Is the team okay?” Neil asked. The food helped clear away some of his mental fog and now the worry was creeping back in.

Wymack nodded. “Everyone’s fine, some more hungover than others. I hear you stopped answering your phone, by the way. What’s that about?”

“My battery’s dead,” he lied. He stopped checking his phone after Seth texted him a second time, too angry at his roommate to fake civility.

“Keep it charged from now on.”

“Yes, Coach.”

Halfway through lunch, Kevin started drinking again- not enough to get fully drunk, but enough to keep him buzzing. Sobriety was most likely too much for him to handle at the moment. Neil didn’t care. At least it kept him from talking.

Afterward, they all headed outside to the cars in the driveway. Neil went with Wymack and the other three took the cousins’ car. Wymack followed Nicky out of the neighborhood onto the main road.

It took Neil longer than it should’ve to realize they were going in the wrong direction. There was a tiny pang of alarm before he decided to keep his mouth shut. Asking questions would be a waste of breath when he could just wait and see where they ended up.

Fifteen minutes later, they were parked outside a plain white, three-story building with “EXITES” spelled in bold black lettering on the front. The lot was too crowded for Wymack and Nicky to park together, so Wymack and Neil met the others at the door.

The ground floor was a busy maze of tables and displays for what seemed like every NCAA and professional Exy team in the United States. Kevin was surprisingly steady on his feet. Sobriety was most likely too much for him to handle at the moment. Neil didn’t care. At least it kept him from talking.

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Wymack caught Neil’s eye and jerked his head toward the stairs at the back. The two of them went up to the second floor, which was dedicated to Exy gear and equipment. There were fewer people up
there and the air smelled strongly of new plastic and carpet cleaner. To the right was a wall of top-of-the-line aluminum, wood, and carbon composite racquets hung from pegs to be viewed and admired. At the very back was a section for uniforms, armor, and court shoes.

“For the record,” Wymack started, “I am not rewarding you for causing a scene last night and I do not encourage such behavior at future events, but uh... go on and find yourself a new racquet. The school’s footing the bill. Go nuts.”

Dubiously, Neil asked, “Are you hoping a better racquet will prevent a repeat of the UGA game?”

“Bad nights happen. End of story,” Wymack nudged him forward. “Get to it. I’m gonna make sure the others aren’t terrorizing the public.”

The woman stationed behind a counter near the top of the stairs gave Neil a bright, customer-service smile when he accidentally looked at her. He turned away and walked over to the display wall of racquets.

Exy was the second most important thing in his life during his childhood. His mother was his anchor, a safe haven to shelter him from his father’s temper, and Exy was his escape. Little league practice was over an hour away from Baltimore and his mother decided they would go by different names there. Nathaniel had to be small and quiet, always sneaking around the edges of his father’s temper on the lookout for tripwires. Abram was allowed to yell and run and be around other kids his age.

It was like stepping into another world, one he never wanted to leave.

Now, he never wanted to pick up a racquet again.

Neil wondered when his mother found out that Lord Kengo’s people weren’t allowed to have children. He wondered when she realized that he would have to be sold to the master or killed, if that was why she drove him to little league practice every week and beamed with pride when he took to Exy like a fish to water. He wondered how much she knew before she got pregnant, if she gave birth to him knowing what lay ahead.

Andrew stepped up beside Neil and stage-whispered, “Try to contain your excitement. You’re making a scene.”

“You’re free to leave.”

“What will it take to speed this up? Kevin has decided no one leaves until you’re done and he isn’t sober enough to be reasoned with.”

Neil stared listlessly at the wall. Somewhere in his head was a box that held all he knew about Exy, but he couldn’t pry it open. “I've never chosen one for myself before. I don't know where to start.”

Andrew lifted a Kingpin model off the wall and handed it to Neil. “This one. Yes or no?”

Neil turned the racquet over in his hands. It wasn't a question of quality: Kingpin sponsored the USC Trojans and had an excellent reputation as a manufacturer. Still, the Frenzy 800's pocket sat too low for his taste and the Whiplash was a standard stick with nothing really remarkable about it.

Andrew snapped his fingers impatiently. “Gut feelings only. Yes or no?”

“No,” Neil sighed. He put the racquet back on the wall.

The second choice Andrew presented to him was another Kingpin. Neil made a face at the weight of
the stick and, again, his answer was no.

Andrew swapped that racquet out for one made by Victor: a Pro stick with a Thunderbolt X head. Neil would know it anywhere. He blurted out, “That’s Riko’s,” and Andrew immediately dropped it on the floor. A hard kick sent it sliding away across the carpet. A guy browsing the goalkeeper section further down the wall gave them a nasty look for the mistreatment of the equipment.

Neil and Andrew continued until they had gone through the entire selection of striker racquets. The ones Neil rejected were either put back or tossed aside at random and the ones Neil said yes to were laid at his feet so he could compare them side by side.

While Neil struggled, Wymack showed up. “How’s it going up here?” he asked, looking at the mess like he couldn’t decide if he was irritated or not.

Andrew said, “He’s either meditating or- is it possible to sleep standing up with your eyes open? That would be a neat trick. Not circus-worthy, but neat.”

“Give me a minute,” Neil grumbled. He studied the two Renegade models he’d chosen and something in his head clicked. The Uproar 350 was a fairly popular carbon composite stick. It would be heavier than his current one, but it had a little more flex that promised to pack extra power into his shots. The Mars II head had a narrower design for precision and control, which of course was highly valued on the court. Put together, the parts would make an excellent racquet as soon as he got used to it.

Upon hearing Neil's choices, Wymack said, “Sounds solid. You need anything else while we’re here?”

“No, I’m ready to leave.”

Andrew reverently lifted his hands. “Praise be to the sports gods. Time to spread the good news.”

Andrew went downstairs to find Kevin and Nicky. Neil put the racquets back where they belonged and made it to the register just as Wymack finished filling out the order forms. The total cost was more than what Neil made from his Kathy Ferdinand interview.

“I could get something cheaper,” he offered quietly.

“I told you the school’s paying for it. If it makes you feel better, you’ll never be as expensive as Kevin.”

“Yeah, but Kevin’s… Kevin Day.”

Wymack shrugged dismissively and handed over the p-card to finish the transaction.

When they went downstairs to find the other three, Kevin was uncharacteristically quiet. There was an expression on his face that Neil didn’t feel like interpreting and, after they split up in the parking lot to find the cars, Neil put it out of his mind entirely.

A couple hours later, Wymack dropped him off at Fox Tower. He went up to his suite to find Matt, Seth, and the girls sitting around the main room with plenty of snacks and drinks between the five of them.

“There’s our freshman,” Dan said with a tipsy smile. “You had us worried last night.”

“How are you?” asked Renee.
Seth downed the rest of his drink. “Game’s on in an hour. You down for some football?”

Neil shook his head and continued down the hallway.

“He needs to recover from his night at the monster’s lair,” joked Allison.

Matt followed Neil into the bedroom to ask, “Hey, you okay?” with concern written plainly on his face.

“I’m all right. I’m just gonna crash.” Neil dropped his bag on the floor and caught a whiff of his own body odor. He needed a shower.

“Fair enough. We’ll move over to the girls’ room so you can sleep.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Dude, don’t get me wrong, watching you rip Riko a new asshole was awesome, but I know last night must’ve sucked for you and you’re probably in serious need of some decent shut-eye. We’ll be next door if you need us. It’s seriously not a problem at all.”


“See you later, man.” Matt gave him a hesitant smile before going back to the main room.

Neil stood where he was and listened to the others gathering up their things to move to the girls’ suite. Once everything went quiet, he went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth, eyeing the shower curtain warily. He didn’t want to take his clothes off, even to scrub himself clean. To make up for it, he used a generous amount of deodorant and put on clean shorts and a t-shirt.

The bloodstained clothing from the banquet stayed in his duffel bag to be dealt with later.

Neil climbed into his bunk, pulled the covers over his head, and let the next few hours drift by. He dipped in and out of sleep, either picturing what his life would look like next year as a Raven or dreaming of his father and Lola.

Six o’clock showed up faster than he anticipated. He knew he had to get up to meet Dr. Dobson, but his body was sluggish and uncooperative. Because of that, he was late getting down to the parking lot and chewed up by guilt when he got into her car and saw that it was six ten.

He muttered an apology and buckled his seat belt.

“I don’t mind waiting,” Dr. Dobson said kindly, shifting the car into drive. “How are you feeling today, Neil?”

“I’m fine.”

She turned onto Perimeter Road and accelerated to reach the speed limit. “You seem a little tired. Did you sleep okay last night?”

“Not really. I slept on the floor at Andrew’s house in Columbia.” He hoped the explanation would be enough to justify his sullen mood.

“I didn’t realize you went to Columbia with Andrew. Was it just you two?”

Neil shook his head. “Kevin was there. We left the banquet early together.”
She took her eyes off the road for a couple seconds to study his face. “Sometimes it’s nice getting to escape from big events like that.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

She looked at him again over her glasses. “How about you catch me up over the last couple weeks? It’s been a while since we saw each other last.”

Neil gave a bland summary of the past two weeks: the topics his classes were covering, a watered-down recap of a movie Matt made him watch, a brief assurance that he planned to go back to yoga class. He spent the rest of the drive talking about the highlights of the Foxes’ last few games.

“You’ve got a busy schedule this week, don’t you?” she asked as they walked up the path to her apartment. “What is it, four games in the next week or so?”

Neil nodded. “Two at home, and then two back-to-back away games on Sunday and Monday.”

Dr. Dobson opened her door and stepped inside. “I’ve always had trouble relaxing at hotels. I hope you have an easier time of it.”

After he took off his shoes, Neil washed his hands in the kitchen and the weight he’d been trying to shake off all day came down harder on his chest.

“Go ahead and pick out something to make,” Dr. Dobson said while she washed up.

Obediently, Neil studied the recipe cards that were already laid out for him. The words didn’t make it past his eyes; his brain refused to process what he was seeing. He wanted to go back to his dorm and crawl into his bed. It wasn’t like he could actually talk to Dr. Dobson even if he did feel inclined to. There was still the possibility that the apartment was bugged.

The silence had dragged on too long. He was wasting her time. “You should pick what we’re making tonight,” he said.

Dr. Dobson asked, “Does anything sound good to you?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“No appetite at all?”

“No, I’m just really tired.” He scraped his greasy hair back from his forehead and clamped his hand around the back of his neck. The room was too warm, his insides too cold. He felt sick and he wondered if maybe he picked up a bug at the Waffle House.

Dr. Dobson watched him for a few long moments and said, “I have an idea. Will you help me carry some stuff to the table?”

Neil agreed and stood next to her while she started pulling things out of the refrigerator: a package of lunch meat, a bag of cheese cubes, a jar of pickles, and a Tupperware container of tomato slices. He carried the armful of food to the table while she grabbed two glasses and the iced tea pitcher.

When everything was arranged in the middle of the table, Dr. Dobson said, “Oh, I almost forgot,” and returned to the kitchen for a couple plates and a loaf of white bread. She undid the twist tie and set the bread in the middle of everything.

“It’s a lesson I learned the hard way and I feel like I ought to share it with you,” Dr. Dobson said. “Back in college, there were days when I felt too on edge or depressed to function. It was almost like being paralyzed. I couldn’t eat, I could barely sleep, and I couldn’t get out of bed. My physical health got worse and my grades slipped.”

“What was wrong with you?”

She smiled kindly at his blunt tone. “I was diagnosed with depression when I was a teenager and obsessive-compulsive disorder later on in my twenties. Sometimes mental illnesses team up on a person. It’s what we call ‘comorbidity.’”

Neil bit off the corner of a cheese cube and listened, unable to see why she was telling him this.

“Anyway,” she continued, “my therapist once used the term ‘rout’ to describe how I coped with my bad days. Do you know what it means? It’s a disorganized retreat from a battlefield- an ‘every man for himself’ situation.”

“I’m familiar with the concept.”

“She said when I retreated into myself, I abandoned everything else- eating, sleeping, hygiene, my support network- which made it that much harder to recover. I asked her, ‘What do you expect me to do? I can’t force myself to function,’ and she told me to make a plan. ‘Work towards better days, but prepare for bad ones.’ To start off, I kept Pop-Tarts and water bottles in the bottom drawer of my nightstand.”

Neil ripped a slice of bread into pieces and ate while she talked. He looked up at the mention of Pop-Tarts. “Seriously?”

“There were still days where I couldn’t drag myself out of bed, but at least I had some food and water within easy reach. Sometimes it gave me the boost I needed to get up. I also made sure to keep things like this-” she gestured to the food on the table- “on hand. I wouldn’t recommend eating cheese and lunch meat right out of the package while standing in front of an open fridge, but it's better than not eating at all.”

“And this is supposed to help me?”

Her smile softened her features. “You’ve already had some bread and cheese. Grab yourself some ham and you could say you ate a sandwich. Ten minutes ago you didn’t want to bother with food at all, so I’d call that progress.”

“Maybe we should have Pop-Tarts for dessert,” he muttered disdainfully.

To his surprise, she chuckled. “My point is that it’s helpful to have a plan for an orderly retreat when the world feels like too much. There’s no shame in having off days; they happen to everyone, everywhere.”

When Neil left that night, he didn’t have a new recipe card to add to his small collection, so he wrote “orderly retreat” on a slip of paper and tucked it into the binder hidden beneath his pillow. It was a nice concept, he supposed, and with that in mind, he toyed with the idea of retreating from his own dorm. Seth would be back eventually and Neil didn’t want to be anywhere near him with the words he said at the banquet still fresh in his brain. “Look at you, pullin’ older ladies like a legend.” A fight felt inevitable. Neil didn’t want to risk losing his temper when he was still raw from the night before.

There weren’t many places for him to go, unfortunately. Being in the Tower’s windowless basement made him feel ill and the roof was Andrew’s territory. He didn’t want to go to the court or the library
either. Then, he remembered a pair of borrowed keys on his key ring and Wymack’s open invitation.

Five minutes later, he had his messenger bag packed with a change of clothes, his toothbrush, and some extra gauze and tape. He saw his roommates in the hallway and, without slowing down, he said, “I’m going to Wymack’s. See you tomorrow.”

Neil walked from the Tower along Perimeter Road in the direction of Wymack’s home. He wasn’t sure he could actually find the apartment complex until he began to recognize the streets. He followed the route Wymack took on his morning walks and, after a couple wrong turns, he ended up at the right place.

He unlocked the door to Wymack’s apartment and stepped inside, knocking twice to announce his presence.

Wymack was on the couch in sweatpants and a tank. He paused with a can of beer halfway to his mouth. “Was I expecting you?”

“It was a spur-of-the-moment decision,” said Neil. “Do you mind?”

“No if you don’t mind watching a game.”

Neil walked further into the front room to see the television. The Racqueteers were facing off against the Columbia Dragons with a score of five to three. “Richmond’s doing well,” he said.

“We’ll see if they can keep it up this half.”

“Dragons aren’t much of a threat from what I’ve heard.” Neil dropped his bag next to the couch and went into the kitchen to get a glass of water before taking a seat next to Wymack.

As they watched the game, Neil’s mind replayed the cruel words he’d exchanged with Kevin. Once, Wymack told him he could choose who he wanted to be. Neil wondered if that was really true, if he could be something other than a Wesninski.

Between the third and fourth quarter, he cleared his throat and hesitantly asked, “Could I change-” he faltered at the last second- “driver’s license?”

“What’d you wanna do that for?”

“The picture isn’t really accurate.” Neil tapped his burn scar. “I’d like to get a South Carolina license if that’s possible.”

Wymack rubbed a hand over his mouth and sighed. “For one thing, you’d need something like a water bill or a bank statement to prove that you live here.”

The game was starting back up, but Neil wasn’t ready to drop the subject. “What about school stuff?”

“I’m not sure the dorms count as a permanent residence.” Wymack fixed him with a hard look. “How bad do you want to do this?”

Neil shrugged stiffly. “I don’t want to keep any ties to West Virginia.”

With a heavy sigh, Wymack stood up and said, “I’m gonna get you something and I don’t want any hissy fits about it, you hear?” He went to the back room for a few minutes and came out with two envelopes for Neil. Both of them were addressed to Neil Wesninski at another apartment in
Wymack’s building. Inside were utility bills dated June 6 and July 6.

“Coach, what the hell is this?”

Wymack drew himself up to his full height and folded his arms sternly. “Look, a whole lotta shit’s easier when you’ve got yourself a home address. I worked out a deal with the landlord ages ago: for some extra cash, he’ll put a name on an empty apartment for a few months. That way, if someone needs to open a bank account or whatever they can do so without as much hassle. It all works out.”

“You rented an apartment in my name and you didn’t say anything?”

“Kid, it was a fight and a half just to get you to take a duffel bag. I figured I’d save myself the headache until you absolutely needed to know about this.”

Neil looked the bills over again, shaking his head. “How did you even- this can’t be legal.”

“What are you, a cop?” Wymack took a drink of beer and raised his eyebrows, silently daring Neil to argue with him. “You can borrow my car to get to the DMV as long as you don’t dick around for too long.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“Forget that. Is there anything else we need to discuss or can we focus on how these refs have lost their goddamn minds? Jesus, they’re yellow-carding everything that moves.”

Wymack threw everything he had into helping his players regardless of whether his kindness was earned or if he would ever be repaid. No matter what fate awaited Neil at the end of the year, he was grateful for the chance to be a Fox. He only wished he could stay longer.
It wasn’t a particularly bad week for Neil, but by the end of it he felt like a lifeless heap. On Saturday morning, he lay awake in bed letting the hours pass him by, unable to convince himself to move. Since he didn’t have practice or classes, he was his only source of motivation and he wasn’t up for the task.

There was no reason for him to be tired, he told himself. His dreams, while unsettling, hadn’t been bad enough to have him gasping awake at three in the morning, so he was getting at least six hours of sleep every night.

He hadn’t followed Dr. Dobson’s advice about keeping snacks and water bottles within reach of his bed. Now, as thirst scratched at his throat, he wished he had.

The cut Jean gave him was healing, but there was still a painful tug when Neil twisted around under his blankets to lay on his back. His body was stiff from last night’s game against the Blackwell Jackrabbits, which made him thankful that Andrew’s group hadn’t gone to Columbia. Andrew said it was because Kevin was sulking, but Neil suspected it was because Kevin couldn’t take time off to relax with the Foxes’ next game so close at hand. Either way, he was glad he didn’t have to sleep on Andrew’s floor.

The bedroom door pushed open, and then Matt’s voice asked, “Hey, you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Neil mumbled.

“It’s almost dinnertime. Dan and I are going out for some food if you wanna come with. We could go to that one Mexican place on Harvey Street.”

Not even food from his favorite restaurant could perk up his appetite; however, Neil had been dodging Matt’s invitations to lunch and dinner and movies lately and the guilt was steadily growing.
He lifted his head and squinted down at Matt. “What time is it?”

“It’s about five thirty.”

Neil grimaced. The day was almost over and his only accomplishment was getting up to use the bathroom. He couldn’t afford to skip another meal if he wanted to be in decent shape for the Foxes’ game against the Bloodhounds tomorrow.

“Can you give me ten minutes?” Neil asked.

“You got it. We’ll be out in the main room,” Matt replied easily before slipping out of the bedroom.

When Neil climbed out of bed, he was light-headed and heavy-limbed, awkward and ambling and only partially human. Brushing his teeth and standing in the shower for a couple minutes improved his sorry state a little, but it was closer to six o’clock than he expected when he met Dan and Matt out in the main room.

“Sorry I took so long,” he said.

“It’s all right,” Dan said, waving him off. She turned to Seth, who was sprawled across the couch. “What about you? You coming with us?”

Seth muttered something that made Dan roll her eyes. She shouldered her purse and led Matt and Neil out into the hallway.

“Looks like Seth and Allison are on the outs,” Matt told Neil quietly once they got on the elevator.

Neil wasn’t particularly concerned by this, but he felt somewhat obligated to ask, “What happened?”

“He cancelled plans on her for, like, the third time in a row. They were supposed to go on a date tonight.”

“They see each other every day. What’s the point of a date?”

Dan shot him a chiding look. “Seeing each other at practice and going on a date are two very different things.”

“If you say so.” Neil leaned against the elevator wall and yawned. “Just sounds like extra effort.”

“The extra effort is kinda the point,” Matt said, amused.

“Seth needs to stop slacking off or end things permanently already,” said Dan. “Relationships require maintenance. You can’t just settle for existing in the same building and hope that things keep running smoothly.”

Neil asked, “So how does bringing me along to dinner factor into your relationship maintenance?”

“This isn’t about my relationship with Matt. This is team bonding and also making sure you don’t waste away. Have you eaten anything since last night?”

“Of course I have,” Neil lied.

They got off the elevator and walked out to the parking lot. Neil scanned the lawn and footpaths and other cars out of habit, searching for anything out of the ordinary. A week had gone by with no retaliation from Riko. Maybe he was still planning, maybe he was willing to wait a month to get his revenge at the Ravens’ first game at the Foxhole Court. Something was coming, though.
Neil was distracted by all the possible ways Riko could strike at the Foxes, all the weak spots they had. Even Wymack had unknowingly put himself at risk. The arrangement he made to help his players skirt around random drug-testing, putting homeless players’ names on apartments without their knowledge— the things he did to protect his Foxes could get him fired or worse.

Luckily, Neil’s quiet demeanor didn’t bother Matt or Dan that night. The three of them ended up at El Encanto and, once they had their drinks, the conversation turned to the Bloodhounds. Neil struggled to stay tuned in to whatever Dan was saying because he’d been over all the available information several times already. His mind only stopped wandering when Dan said, “I wouldn’t be worried at all if it weren’t for Kevin.”

Neil looked up from his dinner in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“He’s been a little off this week. Nicky told me he’s been practicing on his own and my guess is he’s overdoing it.”

Riko’s jab about Kevin’s return to Exy so soon after his “accident” must have sparked a renewed need to prove himself. It wasn’t surprising. Despite how smart Kevin was, Riko knew how to drive him to the point of being hopelessly stupid.

Matt said, “He’ll be all right. He knows what he’s doing.”

Dan made a face and changed the subject. Neil tried to forget about Kevin; it wasn’t his problem, after all. He finished his food while Dan and Matt talked about the latest news from Matt’s mother, who was in Brazil for a relative’s wedding.

After dinner, Matt went to Dan’s dorm to watch a movie with the girls and Neil went running as an excuse to not join them and to avoid being alone with Seth. He didn’t care that the floor at Seth’s feet was littered with beer cans and the air smelled faintly of marijuana. After what Seth said at the banquet, the sickening assumption about Corin, Neil could hardly stomach looking at him. He didn’t know how to bridge the gap. He didn’t even know if he wanted to.

Neil ran until his lungs felt ready to pop, and then he walked back to the Tower to clean up and pack his duffel bag for the Foxes’ upcoming three-day trip. After double checking everything, he went to bed.

He dreamed he was climbing a staircase in the dark, stumbling up the steps and knowing somehow that he would never reach the top. The panic in his heart grew and grew until he finally jolted awake. Paralyzed by terror, he lay still and dragged in shaky, uneven breaths until he calmed down.

Then, he closed his eyes and imagined the staircase again, only this time there was a door at the top that led to a parking lot. He pictured himself going through that door and no longer being trapped.

He drifted off to sleep without realizing it and, the next thing he knew, his phone was buzzing under his pillow to wake him up for yoga class. Neil turned off the alarm and curled up on his side, feeling both anxious and inexplicably angry about it. For a brief, blinding moment, he hated himself for being broken, he resented Dr. Dobson for trying to piece him together, and he loathed the rest of the world simply for existing.

The fury dulled slowly. Neil rolled onto his back and rubbed at his eyes. Maybe his best option was to lie about going to yoga. It wouldn’t be the first or the worst lie he told to Dr. Dobson. If she figured it out and was disappointed or even angry with him, it would be all the better. If he stopped seeing her, she would be in less danger.
His decision was made. He stayed in bed and watched the minutes pass on his phone. Twenty minutes later, Matt showered, dressed, and started shoving clothes into his duffel bag. Eventually, Seth got up too. Since all Neil had to do was shower and eat breakfast, he waited until it was almost nine to force himself out of bed.

At nine thirty, the whole team was gathered at the Foxhole Court to load up the bus. Dan made sure everyone had their uniforms and gear packed like she always did before away games. Once she gave Neil a thumbs-up, he zipped his bag closed and took it outside to put it in the luggage compartment under the bus. He went back in with the intention of helping Wymack with the stick rack, but he stopped when he noticed Andrew lingering a few feet away from Abby’s office door. Kevin had shown up wearing his wrist brace again and Dan’s words about him overdoing it at practice came back in a rush.

Neil walked closer to Andrew and asked, “Why is Kevin wearing his brace?”

“Because he refuses to wear a cone around his neck. He thinks the other dogs make fun of him.”

“I’m serious. Is he in pain?”

“No, he’s in Abby’s office.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Andrew shrugged. “Do as you like.”

Neil gave up. By the time he caught up with Wymack, the stick rack had already been put on the bus and secured with the rest of the Foxes’ luggage.

The team left the stadium twenty minutes late and they lost more time due to some construction on the interstate, but thanks to shortened breaks and possibly some speeding on Wymack’s part, they pulled into the back lot of Alabaster Tech’s stadium just before four o’clock. The Foxes unloaded their bags and the stick rack in a hurry and followed someone in an Alabaster Tech shirt to the visitors’ locker room.

They all rushed to get ready. Neil bruised his elbow again in his haste to change in a cramped bathroom stall. He got his socks and court shoes on a minute before the Foxes lined up to go out to the inner court.

There was a surprising number of PSU fans in the stands and the Foxes made it well worth their while that night. The Bloodhounds only managed to take four points, which did little to lessen their humiliation when the Foxes finished the game with ten.

Neil was drunk on the ease of their win right until the moment Kevin’s racquet slipped from his hand and clattered to the floor by the bench. He managed a sheepish smile for the sake of the cameras as Andrew picked up the fallen racquet and put it on the stick rack like everything was normal.

Back in the locker room, Kevin argued with both Abby and Dan over whether or not he needed to get his hand checked out. It wasn’t like him to refuse medical attention from Abby. Wymack’s frown deepened as he prepared to intervene, but Andrew beat him to it. He grabbed Kevin’s hand and tried to curl it into a fist. The sound that punched out of Kevin’s throat settled the argument in an instant. Kevin pushed Andrew away, glowering.

Abby sighed. “I don’t think you should play tomorrow. You need to rest and give yourself time to recover.”
“You can’t bench me,” Kevin snapped. “I’ll do the stretches you recommended and take some aspirin and I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t be a hypocrite,” said Neil.

Kevin’s eyes flicked up to his. “Excuse me?”

“If it were anyone else, you’d call them an idiot for pushing themselves too hard. You know better than this.”

“Mind your own business.”

“It’s everyone’s business when it affects what happens on the court.”

Wymack said, “What Abby says goes, Kevin. You’re on the bench tomorrow.”

Neil could practically see the panic and rage winding up in Kevin’s brain. The threat of losing Exy for good had him cornered and helpless. Kevin grabbed his entire bag with his good hand and stormed into the men’s changing room.

After an awkward beat of silence, Dan suggested, “Let’s get cleaned up and leave. This place is gross.”

“You can have the first shower, Neil,” said Renee. “Allison and I are doing press.”

Neil took his things into the women’s changing room to shower and get dressed. As he went through his routine, he thought about how the verdict on Kevin’s hand would impact their game against Guillory College. Dan could probably sub when she was needed, but the burden of putting points on the board would land squarely on Neil and Seth’s shoulders. They’d barely spoken all week and Seth wasn’t above letting petty disputes affect his playing.

He wasn’t any closer to a solution when the Foxes left Alabaster Tech’s campus. They stopped at a restaurant for a post-game meal before continuing to their hotel. Due to the odd number of men and women on the team, Renee and Neil got their own rooms while everyone else was paired up.

It was Neil’s first time in a hotel that he could remember. Alone in his room, he hesitated in the entryway. He had his own bathroom, a huge bed, and a television that sat on a dresser. Next to the television was an ice bucket, a coffee maker, paper cups in a sleeve of plastic, and a basket with ground coffee, sugar packets, and small containers of creamer.

He read over the coffee maker’s instructions and studied the simple piece of framed art hanging over the bed. In the bathroom, he found small bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and body wash on the counter next to a wrapped bar of soap and a stack of folded towels.

The place was clean, comfortable, and impersonal. This wasn’t a room for a college student or an Exy player; it could’ve been for anyone. Neil felt anonymous and he didn’t mind that at all. He could take up as much space as he wanted, put whatever caught his attention on the TV, and decide for himself when to turn the lights out.

The novelty of it all was hindered by the responsibilities he carried inside with him. He didn’t have all night to mess around. There was still another game to prepare for. After he laid out his Exy gear to air it out, he grabbed the ice bucket and his key card and left his room in search of an ice machine.

At the end of the hallway, Andrew was repeatedly pushing the call button for the elevator. Neil asked, “Where are you going?”
Andrew held up a crumpled pack of cigarettes by way of an answer. “Where are you going?”

Neil held up the bucket. “I need ice.”

Pointing toward the opposite end of the hallway, Andrew said, “By the stairs.”

“Thanks.”

Andrew gave a mock salute in return and stepped into the elevator as the doors pulled open.

When Neil was halfway to the stairwell, Dan came out of her room and caught up to him with a cheerful, “Hey, freshman! Oh, are you getting ice? You’re going my way, then.” She hooked her arm through his, grinning. “Allison and I got a little tipsy and we are in desperate need of chips. I lost the coin toss.”

Neil steadied her when she stumbled over her own shoes.

Together, they found the ice and vending machines in a room by the stairs. Dan enlisted Neil’s help in carrying some bags of junk food back to her room, and then she and Allison talked circles around Neil until he finally agreed to hang out with them for a short while.

“Holding a bag of ice against your back isn’t going to be fun for you,” Allison pointed out.

“We can take turns holding the bag and you can make sure we don’t spill stuff all over the bed. It’s a win-win-win,” Dan added. She waited until Neil conceded defeat to pull out her phone. “Since we’ve got one boy in our room, we might as well have two.”

Allison rolled her eyes and popped an M&M into her mouth. “Might as well invite Seth too. And text Renee again– she takes the longest baths, I swear.”

True to their word, Allison and Dan did take turns holding Neil’s makeshift ice pack against his sore shoulder blade every twenty minutes. Matt helped too once he and Seth showed up. Sullenly, Seth mixed some rum with Coke in a paper cup and shuffled over to the bed Allison was sprawled across. Neil couldn’t hear what they were saying, but a few minutes later they were sitting side by side sharing Seth’s drink and Allison’s candy.

Renee was the last one to arrive at the small, impromptu gathering; her hair was wrapped in a satin scarf and she wore a bathrobe over her pajamas. By that point, Neil’s ice was mostly melted in the plastic bag and the pain in his shoulder had faded. Every time he got up to leave, Dan was ready with an excuse as to why he should stay, which is how he ended up staying until after midnight.

Eight hours later, he saw them all again at breakfast and, to his surprise, none of them appeared to be hungover. Dan sat between Wymack and Matt so they could review Guillory’s lineup over bowls of fruit and yogurt. Allison and Seth ate their breakfasts together, their chairs pulled close. Neil took the seat next to Renee and sneaked glances at Kevin, who looked downright murderous when Matt jokingly asked, “Any big plans for your day off, Kev?”

Oddly enough, it gave Neil an idea for that night’s game.

At nine twenty, the team bus was packed up and the Foxes were on their way to Louisiana. Neil waited a little while before walking up the aisle to the seat Seth and Allison were sharing. He could only hope that the two of them being on decent terms would put Seth in an agreeable mood.

“Can we go over some stuff for tonight?” Neil asked.
Seth feigned surprise. “Oh, are you acknowledging my existence again?”

“If this is going to be a thing, I’m not going to be in the middle of it,” Allison announced as she pushed past Neil to go sit with Renee.

The two strikers stared at each other in stubborn silence until Neil got tired of waiting. “We won’t beat Guillory if we can’t work together.”

“Why the fuck should I care?”

“People say we only win because of Kevin. We have a chance to prove them wrong and knock Kevin down a few pegs at the same time.”

Seth’s eyes narrowed. “So you’re saying we should win out of spite.”

“Why not? I’ve never seen you resist an opportunity to be spiteful.”

“Fine. I’ll listen to what you had in mind and it better not be any of that fancy-ass Raven shit that Kevin keeps trying to force on us.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll draw pictures to help you keep up,” Neil said dryly as he sat down.

Seth socked him in the arm. He didn’t offer much input over the next hour, but he listened to Neil’s ideas and studied the plays Neil sketched out in his notebook. Neil didn’t expect much from him at this point. What mattered was whether or not Seth would cooperate with him on the court.

When they reached a stopping point, Neil took his notebook to Dan to get her approval, and then he went to the back of the bus to briefly inform Andrew of the changes to tonight’s strategy. Andrew studied Neil’s notebook, and then he used a pen to connect the X’s and arrows to make a crude outline of a horse. As he started coloring it in, Neil decided to let him keep the notebook. It was mostly empty anyway.

For the rest of the drive, Neil sat by himself and stared out his window. The highway rose up on concrete stilts to cross the wetland that broke the Pascagoula up into smaller scraps and ribbons of water that flashed like mirrors in the grass.

The drive was over sooner than Neil would’ve liked. The Foxes checked into their hotel first since they still had plenty of time before the game. Like last night, Neil and Renee had single rooms while everyone else was paired up. Matt and Allison swapped room keys as soon as Wymack and Abby weren’t looking.

Neil tried to nap before dinner, but it was impossible to sleep when the game against Guillory was only a few hours away. Thirty minutes later, he gave up and went to the window. Sunlight sliced into the room as he drew back the thick curtains. It took his eyes a few minutes to adjust. All he could see from his room was sun-bleached pavement, fast food restaurants, and gas stations- just like he’d seen all along the interstate. This underwhelming view and the Exy court he’d play on later was all he would ever see of this city. In another life, Neil would’ve liked to travel for more than just away games and banquets.

He sat on the edge of his bed and flipped through TV channels until he found footage of the Ravens’ game against the Bulldogs. The Ravens had a three-point lead and, from the sound of it, they’d been ahead since the beginning. “Edgar Allan is taking this district by storm,” one of the commentators said with a chuckle. “It’s rare to see a team with such perfect chemistry like this. I hope all the southeastern teams are taking notes.”
Annoyed, Neil turned the TV off and flopped backward on the mattress to stare at the ceiling. He stayed that way until he got a text from Wymack announcing that there was food for everyone in Abby’s room.

After dinner the Foxes drove to Guillory’s Exy stadium, which was unofficially dubbed “the Swamp” according to Allison. The visitors’ locker room smelled damp as if the humidity had seeped through the walls and gotten trapped inside. Neil privately thought Allison’s nickname for the place was deserved.

Kevin left his wrist brace behind in the locker room and joined the rest of the Foxes for warm-ups on the court. He was wise enough to take it easy, spending most of the twenty minutes giving critique or commands. Abby still frowned at him disapprovingly. Neil’s attention was split between Kevin and the opposing team doing relays on the other side of the court.

The Guillory College Gators were unpredictable. In some of the old games Neil had reviewed, it seemed like the Gators cared more about beating their opponents to a pulp than actually winning. They brought the same sort of volatile hostility the Foxes were known for, only they had a better track record for winning games as well.

The odds weren’t terrible, but Neil didn’t find that very reassuring. There was no telling how things would go without Kevin on the court tonight.

After the captains’ coin toss, Wymack gathered the Foxes around him and said, “Listen, I know you fuckers hate sticking to plays, so just keep track of your teammates and try to communicate, all right? Also, anyone who starts throwing punches gets strapped to the top of the bus for the drive back to South Carolina, got it?”

“We’ve got this,” Dan said, grinning and confident. “This is gonna be fun.”

The warning buzzer went off and the noise level in the stadium rose with excitement. Wymack took a fortifying breath and said, “Let’s bag another win tonight, Foxes.”

Andrew paused to say something to Kevin before pulling his helmet on. Seth told Kevin, “Enjoy the show, skidmark,” as he passed by.

Kevin’s expression never wavered.

The PSU fans hadn’t fully recovered from the shock of not hearing Kevin’s name with the rest of the Foxes’ starting line-up, but they cheered loudly when the Foxes filed onto the court anyway.

Neil’s entire body tightened when he was standing on the half-court line and his nerves settled. Everything outside the plexiglass walls fell away.

“Looks like it’s your unlucky day,” taunted the Gator striker to Neil’s left.

Neil’s mark laughed and said, “Let’s just call it a win and go home.”

The referees closed the court doors.

“How does it feel being a fifth-year and the last resort, Gordon?” someone shouted.

Seth replied, “It’ll feel pretty good when I kick your ass. I know that much.”

“Stay sharp, guys,” said Dan.
The buzzer went off, the Gator dealer served, and both teams scrambled into action. Neil sprinted after the ball until the Gator strikers managed to get around Matt and Aaron. Then, he circled back up the court and waited, trusting the Foxes’ defensive line to handle things. Without fail, Andrew smashed the ball away from his box. Neil was ready for it and Seth caught up a few seconds later with the Gator backliners hot on his heels.

Things went more or less according to plan during the beginning. The first point of the game was Neil’s: a shot taken from just the right angle to land the ball squarely behind the goalkeeper’s legs. Then, everything fell apart. The strategy Seth agreed to was forgotten as tension ratcheted higher and higher. Barbed remarks turned into flat-out insults after Neil scored and those insults, as unoriginal as they were, drove Seth into a blind rage.

Luckily, it was the sort of rage Neil could work with. He crashed into his mark and took off to the other side of the court to put himself in Seth’s line of sight. When Seth’s ten steps were up, he passed to Neil and Neil passed back immediately. Then, he checked Seth’s mark in a risky, barely legal move to give Seth a window to take a shot on goal.

The wall lit up red and the buzzer sounded, drowning out the vicious words Seth yelled at the goalkeeper.

After that, Neil continued following Seth’s lead and focused all his energy into keeping Seth from getting pummeled by the Gators’ defense. He had a quick word with Allison when she took over for Dan at the beginning of the second quarter. Since Allison and Seth were on good terms, things took a turn for the better. Matt and Aaron probably weren’t happy with Seth’s renegade antics, but the Foxes’ defense was steady all the way until the buzzer for halftime.

When the Foxes’ walked off the court, Andrew was grinning and sweaty. The Gators hadn’t managed to get a single shot past him. Neil wanted to say something to him, but couldn’t muster up the words. His hope was too fragile. The Foxes were up by six points and there was plenty of time for everything to fall apart.

The excitement thrumming in the air between Neil and his teammates only lasted until they got to the locker room and Kevin rounded on Seth with an explosive, “What the fuck was that?”

“You’re not even playing tonight. I don’t want to hear shit from you,” Seth snapped. Andrew separated the two of them by pushing Seth away.

“The only reason we’re not losing is because Neil and Allison covered your ass,” Kevin swept on, undeterred. “You have absolutely no concept of what it means to be part of a team. You’re a spoiled, selfish child.”

“Oh, that’s rich coming from you!”

Neil sat down on one of the benches and thanked Renee sincerely for the bottle of Gatorade she offered him.

“Well, that was interesting,” Wymack said over Kevin and Seth. “Neil, are you playing offense or defense tonight? ‘Cause I can’t really tell anymore.”

He didn’t sound angry or disappointed, but Neil felt the need to apologize.

Wymack waved him off. “At this point I don’t give a damn how it’s done so long as it’s gettin’ done.”

Dan said, “I suppose there’s something to be said about on-court creativity.”
“Insane, and yet typical,” commented Allison.

“If we lose tonight, we’ll know who to blame,” Aaron muttered with a glare in Seth’s direction. Nicky rolled his eyes and nodded in agreement.

For the last five minutes of their break, Kevin rattled off the reasons why he should be allowed to go on for the second half- Neil and Seth had exhausted themselves, no one was sticking to a strategy, their luck would run out soon. He made a compelling argument, but Wymack couldn’t be swayed.

When the game restarted, Dan took Neil’s place for most of the third quarter. Seth respected her authority enough to actually stick to the plan this time around. The Gators were getting desperate to catch up in points, though, so their aggression only grew. Neil watched nervously from the inner court.

On the bench, Andrew chattered incessantly at Kevin, who was obviously trying not to scowl where the cameras might catch him; his right fist was clenched so hard that Neil worried he might try to put it through something later. With nothing to do but wait, Neil turned his attention to the cheers of the PSU fans and the anger of the home crowd.

For the last quarter, Neil was allowed to take over for Seth. As he walked out to the half-court line, the Foxes’ victory felt set in stone. The Gators had no hope of catching up in points, so they spent the rest of the game roughing up the Foxes in whatever way they could get away with. Despite that, Neil and Dan managed to bag a few more points before the final buzzer, putting the score at eleven to two.

Neil didn’t think winning would ever stop feeling surreal. He wanted to sleep for twelve hours and then watch every second of the game footage to reassure himself it actually happened. In a daze, he took off his helmet and put his racquet on the stick rack. The roar of the crowd rang in his ears as he followed the others back to the locker room.

Nicky summed everything up with, “Well, holy shit, that happened,” once they were all behind closed doors.

Abby ushered Aaron to a bench so she could check on his ankle. Dan shuffled to the cooler to grab a few bottles of Gatorade for herself, Renee, and Allison.

“I can’t feel my legs,” Seth mumbled. He leaned against his stall and let his arms dangle at his sides. Allison squeezed his upper thigh playfully.

“Whatever the hell that was, you guys pulled it off, so congrats,” Wymack said. “I guess this means I won’t make anyone walk home.”

“We live to die another day,” Matt intoned somberly, earning a breathless laugh from Dan.

Abby finished wrapping up Aaron’s ankle and reminded the rest of them to speak up if they needed her for anything. Neil’s shoulder was still twinging, but it didn’t feel bad enough to bring up. He grabbed his clothes and went to shower while Dan and Kevin went out to speak to the press.

The Foxes walked out of Guillory’s campus with low energy and high spirits. As they packed their gear onto the bus, Seth asked, “Hey, Coach, can we go grab dinner over in New Orleans? It’s, like, ten seconds away from here.”

“We can just get a cab, babe,” Allison said as she pulled out her phone to look up information.

Matt raised his hand. “Hey, Coach, can we go watch Seth get mugged in New Orleans?”
Seth shoved Matt’s shoulder and told him to shut up.

“I could go for watching Seth get his ass kicked,” Nicky chimed in.

Aaron nodded. “Dinner and a show. Maybe he’ll get stabbed.”

“I could steal his wallet and stab him right here,” Andrew offered with a slow grin. “Save us all a trip.”

“What makes you think I’m the one that’d get mugged?” Seth demanded as he tried to twist out of the headlock Matt had him in.

Matt retorted, “Have you ever been to a real city, corn boy?”

“You do have a punchable face,” Dan said, patting Seth’s shoulder with feigned sympathy.

“The only reason I’m not leaving you clowns to fend for yourselves is that double digit score tonight,” Wymack grumbled.

Abby sighed and motioned toward the bus door. “Everybody get on before Coach pops a blood vessel.”

Instead of going to New Orleans, they all went to a family diner near the hotel and spread out across three separate booths. Wymack left an extra large tip for the waitress who had to deal with the Foxes’ rowdiness. He made everyone swear on their lives not to break anything when they reached the hotel.

The first thing Neil did once he got to his room was collapse facedown on the bed for one blissful moment of rest. Then, he pulled himself up to take care of his gear, use the toilet, and brush his teeth. It was a little early to sleep, but he lay down in bed with the lights off with the hope of getting extra rest. The air conditioner was a low, soothing hum. Neil’s body practically melted into the mattress beneath the smooth sheets. He sprawled out on his stomach, taking up as much space as possible, before he got too cold and curled up on his side. He hugged one of the thick pillows to his chest and shoved at the others until he could rest his head without getting a crick in his neck.

Comfortable and content, Neil began to drift into sleep. He was almost out completely when a thump came from the room next door. A minute later, there was another thump, a low laugh, and a high-pitched moan.

That room was supposed to be Matt and Seth’s, which meant the moan probably came from Allison since she traded keys with Matt earlier. The realization of what was happening next door dawned, followed by a flood of disgust. Neil sprang out of bed, shoved his bare feet into his tennis shoes, and snatched his wallet and key card on his way out of the room.

He took the elevator down to the lobby and passed a harried-looking family of four at the front desk on his way outside. A short ways down the sidewalk, he caught a whiff of cigarette smoke mixed with the warm night air. That was when he noticed a figure standing in the shadows between two dark windows.

“Where’s the fire?” asked Andrew.

Neil glanced over his shoulder at the hotel’s entrance. “What?”

Andrew pushed away from the wall and took a few lazy steps toward him. “You shot outta there as
if you were escaping from a fire; hence, the question.”

“I think Seth and Allison are having sex in the room next to mine.”

“Ah.” Andrew nodded sagely. “Perhaps there ought to be a fire. I have a lighter if you have the balls to put it to good use. Turn up the heat, smoke ‘em out, so to speak.”

“You’re not usually this energetic this time of night.”

Andrew chuckled and pulled a Ziploc bag out of his pocket. Inside were several small pills.

“What the hell are those?” Neil demanded.

“Little helpers,” Andrew said before puffing on his cigarette again. “Everyone needs a boost every now and then and I needed mine tonight.”

“It’s a miracle you’re still standing.”

“Maybe the Vatican will finally text me back. Fingers crossed.”

“I’m guessing you came out here to wait out the rest of your buzz. How’s that going?”

“I’m out here avoiding Kevin because he’s the crabbiest boy in town. And it’s going just fine, thanks for asking,” Andrew looked at the parking lot and rocked back on his heels. “Hmm, I am bored. If you can keep up, you can come with.”

With that, Andrew started walking in the direction of the road. The Foxes had a curfew and strict instructions to stay at the hotel and out of trouble. Andrew knew that, but he obviously didn’t care.

Neil envied the way Andrew moved through the world. He was self-possessed, existing on his own terms and indifferent to the chaos raging outside the walls he built. Meanwhile, Neil struggled under the weight of other people’s rules and expectations and he was tired of it.

He sprinted to catch up to Andrew, who was already halfway across the parking lot. “Are we going to be out past curfew?”

“Don’t worry. When we get hauled off to jail by the bedtime police, you can say I coerced you,” Andrew mocked.

“Thanks, I appreciate it,” Neil said wryly.

The sidewalk took them under the interstate to the fast food restaurants and gas stations beyond it. Andrew carelessly flicked his cigarette out into the street, blowing out one last stream of smoke. They walked by darkened storefronts, lively restaurants, and a daiquiri shop with a drive-thru lane.

Slowly, the clot of nervous excitement at the back of Neil’s throat dissipated. They had only turned one time, which would make it easy to find their way back; he just regretted not grabbing his phone before he left his room. He had no idea what time it was or how long they’d been walking.

There wasn’t much to see other than run-down houses and trees in the area they’d wandered into. Power lines ran overhead between telephone poles. The streetlights and porch lights trapped everything on the ground in a humid, yellow-orange haze. Andrew’s quiet whistling was interrupted by both of them intermittently swatting away large mosquitoes.

At a random intersection, Andrew took one glance at the oncoming traffic and darted across the street. Neil had to run to keep up. One of the cars honked angrily as it braked to avoid hitting him.
“What’d you do that for?” Neil demanded once they were safely on the sidewalk.

Andrew slapped a bug on the side of his neck and wiped his hand on his shorts. “We need to go this way.”

“If we get lost, I’m blaming you.”

“Nothing is lost unless it needs to be found.”

“What, so the hotel is what’s actually lost?”

“The hotel is right where we left it, Neil. It’s not like it can move.”

Neil bit back a response and sighed with annoyance, loud enough for Andrew to hear.

They turned down a busy boulevard with six lanes separated by a green strip in the middle. After a few blocks, they found a small ice cream shop tucked between a bank and a Chinese buffet. A bell above the shop’s door jingled when they stepped inside and the cool air conditioning made them both shiver. Neil’s shirt was stuck to his skin with sweat and he could feel wet patches growing under his armpits. He wished he’d worn a darker color to disguise it.

The few tables arranged near the front windows were empty and there was only one employee working behind the counter. He gave a tight smile and a clipped greeting, most likely annoyed at the fact that he had customers just before closing time.

Andrew ordered and paid for two bowls of ice cream. He kept the rocky road for himself and passed the mint chocolate chip to Neil on their way out of the shop. Neil accepted it hesitantly and took small bites as he and Andrew continued up the boulevard.

The chill of the ice cream was nice against the heat, but just like at Sweetie’s, it reminded Neil of sitting with Isaac in the kitchen back in Baltimore. The memory of Isaac disappearing into the basement felt more like a healing scar now since he’d cautiously explored it under the guidance of Dr. Dobson’s book. The sounds of screaming didn’t fill his ears like he feared it would.

Neil frowned at his bowl, perturbed.

With the way he remembered it, he shouldn’t have been able to hear anything that day. The basement of the Baltimore house was soundproofed and Neil’s father wouldn’t have left the door open while he worked on someone. Neil took another bite as he poked around the memory for something he might have missed only to come up empty. The door had been closed, he was sure of it, which meant the house would have been almost entirely silent.

So whose screaming did he remember?

“What’s your problem with ice cream?” asked Andrew.

Neil shook his head and swallowed another spoonful. “Reminds me of someone I’d rather not think about. What’s with you and ice cream?”

“With Cass, Saturdays were for errands and ice cream. It was something to look forward to at the end of the week.”

“The ice cream?”

“Getting away from the house.”
“Understandable,” Neil murmured. He stirred what was left of his ice cream and, upon noticing a mosquito stuck in it, he decided to throw it away in the next trash can he saw.

“Why don’t you like thinking about your mysterious ice cream-related person?” Andrew asked.

Being honest with Andrew was like sticking a hand into steaming water: uncomfortable, but so far he hadn’t been burned. Neil confessed, “He died because of me.”

Andrew gave a nonchalant *hmm*. “I fail to see the connection. Did you push him in front of an ice cream truck?”

“I wasn’t there when he died.”

“Did you poison his ice cream and leave?”

Neil gave him a dull look. “I won’t give you details, so you’ll have to take my word for it.”

“How boring.”

A breeze picked up and rustled through the small trees growing in the middle of the boulevard. Andrew watched the palm fronds sway under the lights while Neil studied his profile. He seemed calmer now, so Neil guessed the drugs he took earlier had finally let him down from his high.

“Has Officer Higgins made the arrest yet?”

Andrew’s eyes flicked over to him. “No. That investigation isn’t going anywhere.”

“Why not? If kids are coming forward—”

“They didn’t have any kids after me. I made sure of that,” said Andrew. “One of my unfortunate predecessors must’ve let something slip to a therapist or maybe they got drunk enough to try to report it on their own.”

“You could still testify. He deserves to rot in prison.”

Andrew let out a quiet, hollow laugh. “No one gets what they deserve.”

“How did you make sure the Spears didn’t take in any more foster kids?”

“I cut a deal with Luther, Nicky’s father. He didn’t believe what I told him, but he convinced Cass to quit being a foster mom.”

“In exchange for what?”

“In exchange for me playing nice with Tilda.”

Neil was surprised by that. “You killed her.”

“I gave her fair warning,” Andrew countered. “Most killers don’t extend their victims the same courtesy.”

Neil supposed that qualified as kindness from Andrew’s perspective. Regardless of whether that was a genuine belief or something Andrew convinced himself of to avoid breaking his own promise, it worked as a loophole to let him slip out of a bad situation.

Neil said, “You shouldn’t be so nice to people in the future. Unless you block off all the exits,
threatening someone is just giving them a head start.”

Andrew scoffed. “Did you get that from a fortune cookie?”

“My mother, actually.”

The Butcher’s wife had taken lives too, but her brand of violence was easier for Neil to live with because it was never aimed at him. When she killed, Neil trusted that she had a good reason for doing it.

Their next stop was at a Shop Rite down the block. They threw their trash away outside before going in to buy water bottles and insect repellent. Neil wished he had the foresight to bring some on the trip; he was fairly certain he had at least five mosquito bites already.

After they paid, they paused outside the doors to take turns with the insect repellent. The mosquitos were big enough to bite through clothing apparently, so Neil sprayed a generous amount over his entire body. His nostrils burned, but he didn’t mind if this stuff could stop the bugs from eating him alive.

Andrew stripped off his baggy tee, leaving himself in a white tank top, and began spraying repellent all over his body. Neil wondered idly if the smell would cling to his armbands, which led him to wondering how often those got washed. Andrew twisted to spray the back of his legs and wordlessly leaned over to get Neil’s calves as well, spots Neil had missed. Then, he picked up his water bottle, slung his shirt over his shoulder, and gestured toward the main road to silently say let’s go.

The water washed the funny aftertaste of the ice cream out of Neil’s mouth and the bug spray seemed to work; however, there was nothing they could do to escape the heat.

Six lanes of traffic eventually narrowed to four, and then Andrew veered off to the right to cut through a parking lot. A set of steps took them up and over the grassy slope of the levee. They followed a bike path back to where the road split in three directions.

Through the stout trees along the road, Neil could see a building decked out in lights. He glanced at it repeatedly as he and Andrew walked around the little harbor. They passed a few wooden boat slips and a playground before Neil realized the mass of lights was a riverboat casino sitting on the water with its blurry reflection glowing underneath.

Looking at it made Neil think of sneaking out of the house late at night with his mother to go to the Inner Harbor. No one else knew about those outings. They practiced being as quiet as possible so Neil’s father wouldn’t hear, pretending they were spies or soldiers behind enemy lines. “You’re my right-hand man,” his mother would say, and Neil always felt like the two of them were invincible so long as they had each other.

Swallowing the lump of grief in his throat, Neil jogged to catch up to Andrew on a well-lit concrete fishing pier. Waves lapped at the pier’s support pillars and a warm breeze ruffled Neil’s hair.

Side by side, they leaned against the railing and looked out over the dark water.

Andrew put a cigarette in his mouth and shielded the end as he lit it. He stuffed the lighter and the crumpled pack into the pocket of his shorts and said, “Tell me something.”

Neil took a slow, deep breath. “Like what?”

“Something interesting enough to keep me awake. It’s a long way back.”
“I’ve got this group project for one of my classes. We’re supposed to come up with a mock social media campaign for a public health thing and my group picked smoking.” Neil stole the cigarette and studied the glowing cherry of it. “Apparently, these things will kill you.”

“Is that a promise?”

“If the pills don’t kill you first.”

“Well, then, let the games begin.” Andrew took the cigarette back and asked, “Are ‘these things’ what killed your mother?”

Quietly, Neil answered, “No.”

Andrew watched him through the smoke, eyes hooded and unreadable, and Neil suddenly found himself on the brink of telling him more than he should. It wouldn’t matter to Andrew. Maybe Neil could leave some of the weight behind.

“Tell me something about Cass,” Neil blurted out, squashing the temptation. “It’s your turn.”

“She’s a librarian.”

“And?”

“She works in a library.”

While trying to think of another question, Neil plucked the cigarette from Andrew’s lips and rolled the stick between his thumb and forefinger.

Andrew seemed annoyed, but he let Neil do it. “Is this part of your genius campaign to cut down on smoking? Swiping cigarettes directly out of people’s mouths?”

“It won’t stop you, but it’ll slow you down,” Neil quipped. “When did you start smoking?”

“I asked Nicky to buy me a pack of Camels after he moved in with Aaron and me. I wanted to see if he’d do it. It didn’t become an actual habit until after I started taking the meds.”

“Does it help with the side effects?”

“It’s a way to get non-smokers to leave me alone.” Andrew cut him a dull look and added, “Ninety-nine percent of the time.”

Neil handed the cigarette back. “My mom smoked Parliaments.”

He had never told anyone that before, not even Jean.

“Sounds pretentious,” Andrew said flatly. He tipped his head back for a moment and sighed. “We should head back now.”

Neil grimaced. “We probably shouldn’t have come this far. It’s going to take forever to get to the hotel.”

“We’ll steal a car next time,” Andrew promised as they started walking.
Neil told Dr. Dobson he attended his second yoga class and that he wasn’t sure it was the right fit for him. She believed his lies without a sliver of a doubt, which made him feel guiltier than he expected to. “A waste of time and money,” was what Riko often accused him of being, and maybe he wasn’t entirely wrong.

As much as Neil resented feeling obligated to do anything, he put on his running clothes and went to the Whelan Recreation Center a week later to give yoga another try. He reminded himself once again that, after all Dr. Dobson did to help him, respecting and adhering to her advice was the least he could do.

Besides that, he’d already paid to rent a mat and a locker. He didn’t care much about wasting the master’s money, but he hated the thought of wasting his own.

At seven forty-five, he was unrolling his mat in the back corner of the studio on the second floor. There were eight women in the room with him and he tried very hard to ignore every one of them, focusing instead on how he could improve during this class. He was determined to get it right this time.

Closer to eight o’clock, Renee breezed into the room and stopped in her tracks when she spotted Neil, surprised to see him there. After a few seconds, she slowly made her way over to him and asked, “Do you mind if I join you?”

It didn’t matter if he minded. She had more of a right to be there than he did since she actually benefited and enjoyed the class.

A girl with a long, blonde braid was watching them curiously.

Neil shrugged and told Renee that he didn’t mind.

She thanked him like he’d done her a favor before spreading her mat out next to him. “I wasn’t sure you’d come back here,” she said. “I’m glad you did.”

Carly started the class at eight o’clock sharp. Neil made an honest effort to relax during the breathing exercises and the beginning warm-up stretches. He was still trying his hardest to relax during the first few poses.

Knowing what to expect helped and, after the first downward-facing dog, Neil could feel his
shoulders loosening and his nerves finally settling down. Following along was easier this time; however, he itched to leave well before the hour was up and was sorely tempted to do so when Carly had everyone lie flat on their backs at the end of class.

“Take a deep, cleansing breath and tell your body it’s time to relax,” she said, turning down the lights. “Breathe and let everything melt away from you.”

It was somehow worse than last time. The floor was hard and uncomfortable and Neil’s entire body was tensed in anticipation of an attack. His heart rate refused to slow. He wanted to leave.

When Carly dismissed the class, Neil was the first one out of the room. He dumped his mat in his locker and sped outside.

The sky was going dark with thickening clouds. The wind scraped over the treetops and sent a stray aluminum can clattering down the sidewalk. The air was electrified. It wasn’t long before fat raindrops started falling.

“Another stormy day,” Renee said as she caught up to him. “Maybe we should catch a bus so we don’t get soaked.”

Besides waking up on a bus back in March, Neil had never used public transportation before. It seemed like second nature for everyone else on campus, but he was sure he’d only look like a clumsy idiot if he attempted to take a campus bus on his own. Of course, he didn’t tell Renee any of this. He simply nodded and followed her to the nearest stop.

The rain came down harder as they stood together under Renee’s umbrella. Luckily, it was only a few minutes before the next bus appeared. Renee waved to signal the driver and, once the bus pulled to a complete stop, she hastily shoved her umbrella into her bag. Neil followed her onto the bus and straight down the aisle to one of the many empty rows of seats.

“Don’t we have to pay for tickets?” he asked quietly.

Renee shook her head and pushed some damp hair away from her face. “No, the school provides these buses for free. Have you just been walking around campus this whole time?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you definitely have the rest of us beat in the exercise department then,” she said with a laugh.

Neil was annoyed to learn that he’d been subjecting himself to the heat and humidity for no reason. He slouched in his seat to get comfortable and glanced at the other people on the bus. Most of them looked disgruntled or bored. One girl appeared to be hungover, dressed in pajama pants and a baggy sweatshirt with a cardboard tray of Starbucks drinks in her lap. The guy sitting behind her was asleep.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something, if that’s all right,” Renee said.

The uncertainty in her voice was troubling. Neil braced himself for something bad.

“At the banquet, after you left,” she began haltingly, “I spoke to Jean for a few minutes. I caught him alone and he seemed upset, so I told him that you were okay. We ended up exchanging numbers and I’ve texted him a few times since then, but he didn’t respond until yesterday. I thought you ought to know. I won’t talk to him if it makes you uncomfortable. I get the feeling things are complicated between the two of you and I’m sorry if I overstepped.”
Neil was stunned. The Jean he grew up with wouldn’t have even considered giving his phone number to an outsider, much less a Fox. He was never one for rebellion.

“What did he text you about?” he asked.

Renee pulled out her phone and tapped the screen a few times before handing it to him. There was a message she’d written that said, *I’m reading The Great Gatsby for class. Have you read it?*

Jean had replied, *Unfortunately.*

That one predictably scornful word put a speck of hope in Neil’s heart. There was a window in Jean’s bleak corner of the Nest and he cracked it open for Renee.

“Have you read any science fiction?” Neil asked.

“Not much. Would you recommend any authors in particular?”

He shook his head. “You should check out the sci-fi section next time you’re at the library… and don’t tell Jean I told you that.”

Renee mimed zipping her lips shut and smiled.

They got off the bus near Fox Tower and ran through the rain to the front doors. Their wet shoes squeaked against the tile floor of the lobby and they both shivered in the air conditioning as the elevator took them up to their floor.

Dan and Allison were leaving their suite as Neil and Renee stepped out of the elevator. Dan said good morning to them through a yawn while Allison narrowed her eyes accusingly. “Was Neil at yoga with you?”

Neil started, “No, I—”

“He was out running when the rain started,” Renee lied smoothly. “We ended up catching the same bus.”

Allison said, “In that case, I’m not interested. Dan and I are going out for breakfast. Text if you want something.”

Yawning again, Dan waved goodbye over her shoulder as she and Allison walked down the hall. Neil went into his suite to find Matt standing at the kitchen sink, barely awake and slowly eating a bowl of cereal. Seth was still asleep, so Neil tried to be quiet while he got a fresh change of clothes out of his dresser drawer. Then, he showered and went into the kitchen for breakfast.

Matt had finished his cereal by that point, but he hadn’t moved from his spot. “You feel like doing anything today?” he asked hoarsely.

Neil stirred some sugar into his coffee and shrugged noncommittally. “I’m caught up on everything, so maybe.”

A loud groan came from the bedroom, which meant Seth was awake and unhappy about it. He shuffled out into the main room a minute later and croaked, “Shit morning.”

“You slept forever, man,” Matt said. “We’ve been up for hours. Neil already went for a run and everything.”

“Disgusting.” Seth rubbed the heel of his hand over one eye. “There better be coffee left.”
The sounds of the brewing storm made the dorm feel like an insulated bubble, safe and separate from the world. The three of them stayed inside, sipped lukewarm coffee, and watched television all morning. At lunchtime, they had sandwiches and microwaved leftovers, and then Matt dug out one of his video game consoles. The game they played was simple and mind-numbing, but it passed the time well.

After dinner, they switched back to watching television until Neil had to meet Andrew for their Sunday night practice. His mind was fuzzy and out of focus from staring at a TV screen all day, so he splashed some cold water on his face to wake himself up before he went down to the parking lot.

Andrew drove them over to the stadium and Neil let them inside with his keys and the four-digit code. In separate rooms, they put on their gear before gathering their equipment and going out to the inner court for some warm-up stretches. Neil jogged a couple laps alone before walking onto the court with his racquet and the bucket of Exy balls. He bolted the door shut on his way in, took his place near the first-court line, and then they began.

Neil’s new racquet added enough power behind his shots to make a subtle difference and the weight of it didn’t slow him down like he worried it would. He measured his progress by mentally keeping score during these one-on-one sessions. They always did the same number of rounds, emptying and refilling the bucket ten times, and Neil’s number of points almost always increased. Not even Kevin could’ve convinced him he’d chosen the wrong racquet.

There was something uniquely thrilling about lighting up the goal when it was only the two of them out there. Andrew was well-rested and focused and he made Neil fight like hell for each point he managed to steal. Unlike actual games, it never felt like a battle. There was no desperation or fear of losing. Neil almost wanted to call it fun.

That night, he couldn’t bring himself to stop after the usual ten rounds even though his body was one big fiery ache. One more, he thought, but “one more” quickly turned into five, then six.

As Neil lined up to take the last shot of the seventeenth round, Andrew charged forward to body-check him and slam the ball down the court. Neil hit the floor hard. He was more stunned than hurt and unable to do more than roll onto his back, gasping for air.

Andrew pulled his helmet off and wiped sweat from his forehead with his glove, asking, “Are you ready to call it a night?” He sounded as winded as Neil felt.

Neil nodded and grabbed Andrew’s hand when he offered it. Andrew hauled him to his feet like he weighed nothing. They slowly put all the balls back in the bucket, picked up their racquets, and made their way back to the locker room.

Neil knew he’d sleep deeply that night. The last bit of energy he had left was fading fast. He nearly dozed off in the steamy warmth of the shower, and then again in the comfortable front seat of Andrew’s car despite the cold air blasting from the vents. Keeping his eyes open was a struggle, so he decided to strike up a conversation to stay awake. He asked, “Has Kevin stopped overworking himself?”

“I’m not a middleman. Ask him yourself.”

Neil covered a yawn with his hand. “What are you going to do if he goes back to Edgar Allan?”

“Your job is to prevent that, so first I’d have to fire you. After that, we’ll see.”

“I won’t be here next year, but if you keep this up you might be able to buy Kevin more time.”
Andrew gestured for him to go on.

“People act like this is the season to end all seasons because they’ll finally get to see Kevin and Riko face off on the court, but the rivalry doesn’t necessarily have to end this year if the Foxes can prove they’re a real threat to the Ravens. Coach Moriyama is more likely to be lenient about letting Kevin stay here if it’s a profitable option. You’re the key to that. The Foxes don’t stand a chance without you.”

Andrew thought it over while he drove to the back corner of the Tower’s lot to park the car. “If you want to extend our deal another year, you can come right out and say it. Don’t make this about Kevin when it’s really about you.”

“What do you mean? This has nothing to do with me.”

“Moriyama worships at the altar of his wallet and he has the connections to keep his money protected. For whatever reason, he’s invested in you and I’d bet my left arm that he won’t let the sharks get close until he’s done bleeding you dry.”

“I’m not worth nearly as much as Kevin. He’s Riko’s brother, the second ‘son of Exy.’ People only paid attention to me because I was an ass to Riko on national television. I’ll fade into the background before the year is out.”

Andrew shut off the engine and the lights, leaving them both in almost complete darkness. “A mouthy rookie is novel for a minute. A good villain is remembered forever.”

“What?”

“You’ve already auditioned for the role. It’s time to commit.”

Neil couldn’t believe what Andrew was saying. “You think I should antagonize Riko publicly.”

“I think you’re going to do it anyway. You might as well make the most of it.”

Andrew got out of the car after that and Neil was relieved to be done talking. The conversation had taken a wrong turn. He mentally tore Andrew’s idea apart on his way up to the third floor. The last time he lost his temper in front of a camera, Seth nearly lost his life. Playing Riko’s villain in the public eye would only provoke the master and Riko and, if Neil did have to return to the Ravens at some point, life would be hellish enough as it was.

His train of thought was derailed as soon as he stepped off the elevator. Matt and Seth’s raised voices could be heard through the suite door and whatever they were arguing about sounded nastier than their usual spats. Neil’s stomach dropped. He waited until Andrew was further down the hall before he stepped closer to the door to eavesdrop. If he was about to walk into a warzone, he wanted to know what was going on beforehand.

“What the hell am I supposed to think?” Seth snapped. “You’ve been hiding this shit the whole time!”

Matt fired back, “How is your mind this ass-backwards? Were your parents cousins or something?”

“Does your girlfriend know you’re a faggot?”

“Fuck you. I am so fucking done with your shit.”

The door swung open before Neil could pretend he hadn’t been standing there listening. Matt’s face
and neck were ruddy. The air around him reeked of alcohol. He muttered a rough, “Sorry,” and stormed down the hall to the girls’ suite.

Neil took a deep breath and went inside to find Seth pacing angrily in the main room. A movie was paused on the television, a beer can lay on its side on the carpet with a small wet patch under it, and the air was fraught with the fallout of explosive words detonated too carelessly.

There wasn’t a good time for Matt and Seth to be at war with each other. Tomorrow they were playing against the Tornadoes. In a week, they had another pair of back-to-back away games. The rest of the team would side with Matt, obviously, which left Neil with a difficult choice: cut Seth loose or keep him from self-destructing in isolation.

Seth stopped moving suddenly and scowled at Neil. “Did you know Matt’s gay?”

On second thought, the choice wasn’t all that difficult. Siding with Seth would mean siding against Andrew, Matt, and Nicky. It was basic math.

Neil sighed heavily. “He already told me he’s bi. Why are you upset about this?”

“You seriously have to ask?”

“It doesn’t affect you. You should be more worried about how the team will react when they hear about your behavior. What will you do when they finally show you the door?”

Seth scoffed and waved him off as he stormed into the kitchen to snatch another can of beer out of the fridge. “I should’ve fuckin’ figured, you know? What, with all your bullshit about playing nice with Nicky. You really think I give a shit if the rest of you want to hold hands and sing Kumbaya without me? Go ahead. Cut me out. I don’t fucking care.”

“You’re the one cutting yourself out, Seth. Finish what you started and leave.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m serious. I don’t want to see you here or at practice. I’d rather be short a player than have to clean up after some deadweight asshole who actively causes problems.” Neil’s voice came out steadier than he expected. To his own ears, he sounded authoritative and cold.

“‘Deadweight.’ Funny,” Seth bit out.

“Pack your things and go to Wymack’s. If you decide you’d like to be a rational human being, talk to Matt before moving back in. He’s actually useful to the team. I don’t want anything messing with his head.”

A furious scarlet flush broke out across Seth’s cheeks before he hurled his beer can across the room. It hit the wall with a thunk and a spray of foamy beer. Seth stalked to the bedroom and ripped the door open so hard it sounded like it almost came off its hinges.

Neil went next door to the girls’ suite and texted Wymack a warning on the way there. Matt was on the couch with his head in his hands. Dan and Renee sat on either side of him, rubbing his back and murmuring soothing words. Allison stood a few feet away with one finger pressed to her lips and a distant, calculating look in her eyes.

Dan gave Neil a small, tight smile. “We heard shouting. You okay?”

“Maybe I should go talk to Seth,” Renee suggested softly.
It got a broken laugh out of Matt. “There is no talking to Seth. I thought… he’s been less of a douche lately. I thought maybe he was starting to chill out. God, I’m an idiot.”

“His mind is either narrow or closed. Those are his only two settings,” Allison muttered.

“And yet you’re still dating him,” Dan pointed out, earning a sharp glare in return.

“I’m sorry it turned out this way,” Renee told Matt.

Allison’s phone vibrated. She glanced at the name displayed on the screen and ignored the call.

“Can I stay here for a while?” Matt mumbled as he leaned further into Dan’s embrace.

Dan nodded without checking with either of her roommates, confident they’d be in agreement. “Of course. You can stay as long as you need to.”

Neil said, “You can come back to our dorm if you want. Seth’s going to stay somewhere else for the time being.”

Allison raised an eyebrow. “Did you kick Seth out?”

“I told him to leave since he’s the one with the issue.”

Dan asked, “And he left just like that?”

“Some other things were said, but yeah that’s the gist of it.”

Matt blinked a few times and looked at Dan, who understood what he wasn’t saying. Squeezing his shoulders, she said, “Drink some water before you sleep. It’ll make tomorrow morning a little easier.”

“All right,” Matt mumbled as he got to his feet. “Thanks for letting me hang here. See you in the morning.”

Neil walked with him over to their dorm and slipped inside first to make sure it was empty. The bathroom floor was littered with various products and the bedroom was messier than usual, but most of Seth’s belongings were noticeably missing.

When Neil said that the coast was clear, Matt warily walked into the main room and stood there in a daze. His eyes wandered from the scattered beer cans to the dark television screen to Neil. “I’m sorry about all this. I- I really hate drama, you know? I should’ve kept my mouth shut.”

Neil shrugged. “We’ll deal with it.”

“Still.”

“It’s all right, seriously. Go get some rest. I’ll clean up out here.”

“No, you don’t have to-”

“You’re still a little drunk, Matt. Sleep it off. We’ve got a game to win tomorrow.”

Matt seemed torn. A minute or two later, he agreed to go to bed and shuffled down the little hallway to the bathroom. Neil took it as a good sign that he was still able to go through his usual nightly routine.
He had no idea what Seth would do now, if he would disappear or come back to prove Neil wrong. It wasn’t fair that months of hard-earned progress could potentially be unraveled by a few bitter words. With a sigh, Neil sank down onto the couch and looked over the mess at his feet, thinking, *What’s done is done.* There was no taking back any of what happened that night. They would have to figure out a way to move forward.
Neil tried to get through a night in Columbia with some complicated problems weighing him down.

Content warnings: reference to rape/coercion, drugs and alcohol, mention of canon parental death/murder, and a mention of a knife wound (if I need to add any warnings, feel free to let me know)

I'm sorry about the wait for this chapter!! I hope you guys had a lovely holiday season and a good start to the new year <3

Neil had less than an hour left to study his psychology notes before he was supposed to meet up with Andrew’s group, but he kept getting distracted by the loud conversation Matt and Allison were having on the couch. Dan asked them to think of something to do that night while she and Renee had a talk with Seth; however, Allison brought over wine and, once the first cork was popped, any chance of them staying on task went out the window.

“Titanic isn’t good, it’s just long,” Allison said, over-enunciating her words in a poor attempt to sound less drunk. “No one wants to walk out of a billion-hour movie and admit that it was a fucking waste of time.”

Neil took a deep breath and went back to the beginning of the paragraph he’d been trying to read. He was determined to absorb the information this time.

Wine sloshed into a glass, and then Matt asked, “How’d we get on Titanic? We were talking about Star Wars.”

“Star Wars also isn’t good. It was passably good at the time it came out. Nowadays, we can afford to have standards.”

Matt snorted. “What about Jurassic Park?”

“You say shit about Jurassic Park and I will hurt you,” Allison warned.

The suite door swung open and Dan’s voice said, “Congrats, freshman, you won the bet,” as she and Renee came in.

Neil dropped his pencil in defeat and turned around in his desk chair. “What bet?”

Matt sat up straight on the couch. “Is Seth moving back in?”

Allison muttered something under her breath and downed the rest of her wine.
“He went to stay at Abby’s house,” Renee explained. She tilted her head and frowned a little at the two open wine bottles on the coffee table, one empty and the other halfway there.

“What bet?” Neil asked again.

Dan tossed a rubber-banded wad of money onto his desk. “You said he wouldn’t last a week at Coach’s place.”

It was an offhand remark he made days ago after Dan wondered aloud if Seth would be Wymack’s roommate for the rest of the year. Seth was certainly stubborn enough to consider pulling a stunt like that, but Neil knew that Seth’s erratic sleeping habits would clash with Wymack’s early morning routine.

Neil said, “I wasn’t aware that there was a bet or that I was participating.”

“Take the money anyway. Fair’s fair.”

“What happened when you saw him?” asked Allison.

Dan gestured vaguely. “Renee gave him the cookies and I... may have ended up yelling. As far as interventions go, I wouldn’t exactly call that a success, but in my defense, Seth is an ass and I still say him moving out of here is a good thing.”

Matt slouched like he wanted to shrink himself. “I just want things to be normal.”

“‘Normal’ doesn’t mean ‘good,’” Dan said gently.

Matt gave her a tired smile and beckoned her over so he could wind his arms around her waist. She pushed back his hair to plant a kiss on his forehead and asked, “Did you guys figure out what you wanted to do tonight? We should do something extra fun.”

“We are having extra fun,” Allison replied, jabbing a finger at the wine bottles. She got to her feet and batted away Renee’s hand when she tried to steady her.

“Neil, what do you say to bowling?” Matt asked. “They’ve got really good waffle fries at that one place.”

From the kitchen, Allison protested, “You said we could go out for sushi tonight.”

Matt's brow furrowed. "Did I?"

Neil said, “Sorry, I can’t tonight. I’m going to Columbia.”

Allison returned to the couch with a glass of water. She narrowed her eyes at Neil disapprovingly. “Partying with the monsters instead of us? Disloyalty will not be tolerated, fresh meat.”

“The wild freshman does what he wants,” Dan tried to joke. Her words came out stilted.

Allison glanced in her direction and changed the subject.

Neil could sense that they’d had an argument that week. The girls never stopped presenting a united front around the rest of the team, but there was a newly developed distance between Dan and Allison.

Everything had been off-balance since Seth left on Sunday and it was only getting worse with the mounting pressure of midterms and the upcoming game against Edgar Allan. Matt’s guilt over the
whole thing was a constant low buzz in the background; he tried his hardest to keep the silence from settling in the empty gap Seth left behind. Dan explained to Neil that Matt’s parents often used him as a weapon against each other. “He can’t stand it when people fight because of him,” she said. “He’s fine watching drama from the sidelines, but when he’s at the center of it he goes right to pieces.”

While Neil understood Matt’s discomfort, he thought the situation was playing out as well as it possibly could have. Spite was an effective motivator for Seth. Apparently, he didn’t appreciate being called “deadweight” so he’d been going out of his way to prove Neil wrong—especially during the Foxes’ last game. He managed to outscore Kevin by one point.

Renee killed the growing awkwardness in the room with a bright smile and a cheerful, “Why don’t we get sushi first and go bowling afterward?”

The others shrugged and mumbled their agreement.

Neil barely got any studying done, even after the upperclassmen had gone. Ten minutes before he was supposed to meet up with Andrew’s group, he put away his schoolwork and went to the bedroom to change. He briefly considered wearing something different that night. In the closet, there was a small pile of shiny plastic bags, each one containing a new outfit Andrew had bought for him. After a short internal debate, Neil put on what he always wore to Columbia: the clothes from that first nightmarish trip.

Andrew texted him when it was time to leave. Neil laced up his boots, grabbed his wallet and keys, and made sure to lock the door on his way out. Andrew’s group was waiting for him in the hallway. Nobody said anything as the five of them headed downstairs together.

Neil didn’t notice how tense the silence was until they were locked in the car together. Andrew, as usual, was unaffected by the general atmosphere. He tipped his head back and blinked up at the ceiling. Kevin sat rigidly in the front passenger seat and Aaron was practically plastered to his door, arms crossed over his chest. Nicky cast worried looks at the backseat in the rearview mirror. Eventually, he cleared his throat pointedly.

Aaron let out a long-suffering sigh. “Nicky wants to know what’s going on with Seth.”

Andrew made a noise that was halfway between a chuckle and a scoff.

Neil answered, “There was an argument.”

“You were right, Nicky. That is a story worth hearing,” Aaron deadpanned.

“Whatever that argument was, it should’ve happened sooner. Seth was actually useful this week,” said Kevin.

Nicky grumbled, “I was hoping he’d finally get kicked off the team.”

“Oh, please,” Aaron said, oblivious to the way Andrew tensed at the word. “Coach isn’t gonna kick anyone off the team unless they, like, commit murder on live television or something.”

Neil studied Andrew’s profile curiously. Andrew ignored him.

“I’d murder Seth on live television,” said Nicky. “He’s the goddamn worst.”

“We know. You’ve told us a thousand times,” Kevin shot back.
Nicky gave him a sour glare, but he let the subject go and turned on the radio. The high volume he kept it at made conversation nearly impossible, which Neil was grateful for.

At Sweetie’s, it was business as usual. Nicky gave his name to the hostess, the group was told to wait a short while for a table to open up, and Neil accompanied Andrew to the salad bar for packets of crackers. This time, however, Andrew seemed to struggle with the simple task. He squinted across the restaurant at his family members, and then he squinted down at the metal bucket.

“Are you feeling all right?” Neil asked.

“Hm?” Andrew blinked owlishly at him. When the question clicked in his head, he bobbed his head once. “Mhm, pills.”

“Your meds are making it hard to focus?”

“That is what I said.” Andrew stared at the cracker packets for a few long moments, and then he grabbed as many as he could fit in one hand.

Neil shook his head. “That’s too many. Here.” He counted out the cousins’ usual number of packets from the ones Andrew was clutching and motioned for Andrew to put the extras back. Once they rejoined the group, Andrew gave Neil half of the crackers to eat.

Thankfully, it was only a fifteen-minute wait until a table was available. The five of them arranged themselves around a U-shaped booth with Kevin in the middle and Neil and Aaron on the ends. Neil had kept the cracker wrappers to avoid any mishaps due to Andrew’s distracted state of mind. He tucked the crinkly plastic into the hostess’s apron like he’d seen the others do a dozen times, feeling clumsy and conspicuous. As soon as the hostess left, Neil glanced around to see if anyone was watching him and, with a start, he realized that someone was.

Kevin noticed a second after Neil did. “That guy over there looks familiar.”

Aaron scoffed and asked, “Why, ’cause he’s Asian?”

“Shut up, Aaron.”

Recognition clicked for Neil when the guy was halfway to the table. His name was Naoya Yamamoto and he almost became a Raven a few years back, but he didn’t make it through the summer probationary period.

Andrew rubbed his hands over the table and hmm-ed. “Friend of yours?”

Kevin switched to French to ask, “Why is he here?”

Neil was just as confused as Kevin. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the glint of a blade under the table. The potential for disaster was enough to make his chest tight with panic. “Andrew, put the knife away and let me handle this.”

“Handle this and then I’ll put the knife away, Neil.”

Naoya stepped up to the table, looking uncomfortable but determined. The cousins fell silent and Neil searched for something to say.

Kevin flashed his TV smile. “Naoya, right? It’s been so long. How are you?”

Naoya ignored him and addressed Neil. “I’d like to talk to you, if that’s all right. Can we step
outside?"

Neil slowly got to his feet. He would cooperate until he figured out Naoya’s intentions.

Kevin motioned for Aaron and Nicky to let him out of the booth too. “Let’s get some fresh air and catch up. I’d love to hear what you’ve been doing lately.”

“I’m not here for you,” Naoya snapped.

“We’ll talk outside. Come on,” Neil urged quietly.

Naoya glared at Kevin with pure hatred in his eyes before he walked away. Neil led him to a bench outside, but neither of them sat down. They stood a few feet apart and waited for some noisy teenagers to pass by them. After the group had gone inside, Naoya said, “You probably don’t remember me.”

“Only vaguely. How did you find us?”

“Someone online said you guys come here on Fridays.”

Kevin had devoted fans. Neil had always known they would cause problems.

Naoya cleared his throat. “I’ve been, uh, watching your games on TV. I can’t believe you got away from the Ravens and still wound up on a team with that backstabbing snake.”

“Is that what you came here to tell me?”

“No, I…” Naoya squared his shoulders like he’d practiced this speech. “I’m here because I think you should go to the police.”

Neil feigned amusement to hide his alarm. “The police? Why would I do that?”

“I know you lived with the master back then- that’s what everybody on the team said. If I figured out that something was seriously messed up with the Ravens after only being around them for a few weeks, then I’m sure you’re aware of it too.”

“Naoya, listen, it’s not-”

“Do you know why I had to leave Edgar Allan? They found heroin in my suitcase. I’ve never done drugs in my life- I wouldn’t even know where to buy that shit.”

Neil wasn’t surprised. Riko had ways of getting rid of unruly Ravens. Seth’s would-be murderers probably got similar treatment.

“Coach Moriyama pulled some strings. The school told me I could either leave quietly or get arrested, so I dropped out. They didn’t want a scandal, I guess. Kept me out of jail, which I’m grateful for, but I lost my scholarship and I couldn’t explain it to anyone.”

“We all signed non-disclosure agreements, so you’re in the wrong place if you’re looking for revenge. I can’t help you.”

“Do you honestly believe those would hold up in court?”

Neil said, “I’m not a lawyer,” as he stepped around Naoya, wanting to end this conversation as quickly as possible.
Naoya blocked his path and pitched his voice low. “Riko told me I had to have sex with Jean to pass some sick test. He and Kevin set me up with the drugs because I refused. It’s been three years and I still lose sleep at night wondering what everybody else said yes to.”

Neil froze at the mention of Jean, sickened by everything that hid behind Naoya’s words. He noticed Andrew watching them through the glass doors. One gesture, one sign of distress, and Neil knew he’d step in. It was tempting to let him take over.

“You know what I’m talking about. I can see it on your face,” said Naoya. “I need you with me on this. No one will believe me on my own. If the police won’t help us, then we can go to the media—even if it’s just to say that Coach Moriyama groomed his foster kids to be Ravens. That almost landed him in hot water with the NCAA when he signed Kevin. Maybe we could get him in trouble this time. Do you think Jean would help us?”

Neil had to get away. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

“I’m just trying to do the right thing.”

“You already did the right thing. My advice is to leave this in the past and move on with your life.”

“All right, well, it was worth a shot.” With a heavy sigh, Naoya dug a napkin out of his pocket. It had his name and phone number in black marker. “Call me if you change your mind. I’m serious about this, Neil.”

Naoya walked into the parking lot and climbed into a car. Neil crumpled the napkin in his fist, but he couldn’t make himself throw it away. He waited until Naoya drove out of the lot before going inside.

Kevin’s eyes darted nervously between Neil and Andrew when they returned to the table. “Do we have a problem?” he asked.

“I handled it,” said Neil.

Andrew picked up his spoon and dug into his melting ice cream. The others followed suit one by one. Kevin didn’t look reassured at all, but he kept his mouth shut and went back to ignoring Neil’s existence.

The conversation replayed itself in Neil’s mind on repeat. He was afraid that he said the wrong things, anxious about what would happen if Naoya went to the press, and angry that this fell into his lap when he had enough problems already. He didn’t have the energy to worry about another person’s safety.

He continued agonizing over it at Eden’s. Part of him regretted not trying harder to discourage Naoya, but pushing him might’ve only made him more determined to go forward with his plan. He didn’t understand how powerful the Moriyamas were. Talking to him out in the open had been stupid- Neil shouldn’t have talked to him at all. Maybe the master already had Naoya under surveillance. Maybe the master sent Naoya as a test.

Neil winced and rubbed his forehead; he could feel a headache coming on. The more he thought about it, the less likely it seemed that the master would risk using Naoya as a spy, which meant Naoya was probably telling the truth.

Belatedly, Neil realized that his phone was buzzing. He had a missed call and three new text messages, all from Matt.

*found seth’s stash... should i give him it?? olive brnch?*
Neil scrubbed a hand over his face. Nine days until the game against the Ravens, two roommates at odds with each other, and the very real possibility Naoya might announce to the world that Riko Moriyama was a monster.

His headache was still going strong when the group walked out of Eden’s an hour later. Kevin was lost in a drunken fog while Nicky and Aaron attempted to argue about something, though neither of them could keep track of what that was.

Neil eyed Andrew under the bright lights of the parking garage, worried about how they would get to the house. “I can drive,” he offered.

“You can, but you won’t,” Andrew said. To Neil’s surprise, he sounded sober and he was steady on his feet as he pushed the others into the back of the car. Thinking back, Neil couldn’t remember seeing Andrew drink any alcohol or take dust.

“You didn’t have anything tonight?”

Andrew tapped his temple. “Unwise to make a bad thing worse.”

Neil felt marginally better about letting Andrew get behind the wheel.

They made it to the house without incident. Neil hurried up to Andrew’s bedroom as soon as the others were out of sight and he grabbed a leftover granola bar from the bottom drawer of Andrew’s nightstand. Then, he went back outside to sit on the porch. The fresh air and the aspirin he’d bought at the convenience store gradually soothed the throbbing pain in his temples.

He felt almost normal by the time Andrew came out for his nightly cigarette. After a few minutes, Neil snagged the stick from between Andrew’s fingers. Andrew retaliated by opening the granola bar and taking a bite. They traded back when Andrew wanted another drag.

“What did your mystery guest want?” Andrew asked.

“He wants to rat Riko out to the police and he wants my help. I’m not sure if I should try to talk him down again or lose his number.”

“If someone tells you they’re gonna take a swing at a hornet nest, you leave them to it. You don’t stand next to them.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing with me and Kevin?”

“That’s different.”

“How so?”

“Hornets don’t scare me.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Then your self-preservation skills are almost as bad as mine.”

“How much damage would this guy do if he started talking?”

“He doesn’t know much. I doubt anyone would believe him over Riko.”
“That means he’s harmless and relatively safe.” Andrew helped himself to Neil’s water. He wiped the mouth of the bottle off with his sleeve and screwed the cap back on.

Andrew was right. The Moriyamas wouldn’t kill Naoya unless he was perceived as a real threat, which he would be if anyone suspected he got information from Neil or Kevin. Keeping his distance was the smartest thing to do.

Neil looked around for something to distract him from the anxiety still bubbling up in his chest.
“Why don’t you ever park in the garage?”

“That’s where Aaron keeps his ghosts.”

“Can I see?”

Andrew gave him the car keys and said, “Button’s in the glove box.”

Neil unlocked the car and sat in the front passenger seat to rifle through the glove box. As promised, a small remote control for the garage door opener was there along with loose papers, a small flashlight, and a manual with curling, yellowed pages. The press of a button caused a loud droning noise from within the garage, and then the door slowly lifted.

Curious, Neil wandered inside and found musty cardboard boxes in stacks of two or three with a few suitcases hidden here and there. A pair of metal shelving units sat against one wall and an old bicycle was collecting dust near the door that led into the house.

Neil picked a box at random to open first. He wrinkled his nose at the musty smell and poked through the moth-bitten women’s clothing that had been carelessly stuffed inside. Andrew appeared at his side and flipped the lid off another box. He pinched a shirt sleeve with two fingers to hold the garment up at arm’s length.

The second box Neil opened contained celebrity gossip magazines, a zippered pouch filled with makeup, and a nearly empty bottle of perfume. “What’s the point of holding onto Tilda’s stuff?” he asked.

Andrew dumped the contents of his box onto the dirty floor. “Ask Aaron if he’s a fan of Norman Bates.”

“Why?” Neil didn’t know who that was.

“Because it'll piss him off and that's always fun to watch.”

“I doubt that's doing your relationship with him any favors.”

“Aaron and I don’t have a relationship. We have a deal.”

Neil watched Andrew root through another box, more curious about him than a dead woman’s possessions. “Does that bother you?”

“To be bothered, one would have to give a shit.”

“What did you want Aaron to do after Tilda died? Piss on the casket?” Something dangerous flashed in Andrew’s eyes, there and gone in an instant, but there was no real threat to Neil so he kept going. “Kevin sympathizes with Riko- always has, probably always will- and yet I don’t see him getting iced out for it. Either Aaron means something to you or you weren’t as indifferent about Tilda as you claim to be.”
“Do you enjoy listening to yourself talk?”

“I’m just trying to solve a puzzle. Why, am I bothering you?”

“Snooping time is over now. Shoo.” Andrew waved him out toward the driveway.

They closed the garage, locked the car, and went inside together. Annoyed or not, Andrew didn’t tell him to find a different place to sleep, so Neil crawled into his nest of blankets like always. Andrew locked the bedroom door and flicked off the light, throwing the room into darkness.

Neil listened to him get settled in his bed. “Andrew?”

Andrew grunted a drowsy, “Hm?” into his pillow.

“What’s the point of holding onto Aaron?” He couldn’t figure the Minyard brothers out and it bothered him more than he cared to let on.

“The point is that I’m making a point.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t make empty promises and he needs to get that through his thick skull.”

Neil frowned. “But you kept your promise to kill Tilda. You said he hated you for it.”

“He likes to pretend I did it for my own sake, not his. You can pick his brains about it later, Snoopy.” Andrew was quiet long enough that Neil began to think he’d fallen asleep. His next question was entirely unexpected. “What’s the point of holding onto Jean?”

Neil rubbed at the ache in his chest. “I don’t have parents. I barely remember my uncle. Jean is the closest I’ve ever gotten to having a brother and he’s the only family I have left.”

“Even though he took a knife to you at the banquet?”

Neil startled.

“Renee told me,” Andrew added.

“Have you and Renee been swapping information about me?” Neil demanded coldly. “Need I remind you that I know plenty of your secrets too?”

“Actually, she wouldn’t tell me anything, so thanks for confirming my hunch. That was almost too easy.”

“What?”

“Sleep tight. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

Andrew sounded smug. Embarrassed, Neil muttered something insulting in German and turned his back toward the bed. He wondered how many nerves they’d hit before they finally stopped trying to get under each other’s skin.
Neil was already irritated when he slid into the front seat of Dr. Dobson’s car on Sunday. He thought he had a handle on it until a few simple questions about what he wanted to cook for lunch tipped him over the edge. “Fried chicken, fried catfish- I’ll have to spend the rest of the week working it off either way, so you pick. I don’t care,” he said waspishly. He regretted his tone the instant the words left his mouth.

“We could make chili and cornbread,” Betsy suggested. “I’ll need to swing by the store for some things, but it shouldn’t take too long. What do you say to that?”

“Sure.” Slouching in his seat, he propped his knees up against the dash and tried a breathing exercise.

When they got to the grocery store, Neil opted to stay in the car while Dr. Dobson went in to buy ingredients. He berated himself for being sullen and unhelpful. It would’ve been bad enough if it had started with Dr. Dobson, but he’d come far too close to losing his temper with Matt earlier that morning. Matt’s fretting over what to do about Seth grated on Neil’s nerves. Seth was the one who should have been wringing his hands and worrying, only he was too stubborn and stupid to see that. What made it worse was the fact that there was only a week left until the Foxes faced the Ravens. They were guaranteed to lose, but it would be humiliating if they couldn’t even pull themselves together to put up a fight.

Neil watched for Dr. Dobson's return and climbed out of the car to help her put the bags in the backseat. He took the shopping cart over to the dented metal corral for her as well. After they were on their way to Dr. Dobson’s apartment, he blurted out, “I think I’m a shitty person.”

“I don’t think anyone would call you that simply for turning down fried food, even in the South,” she teased lightly. Her smile faded into something more neutral. “Will you tell me what’s going on, Neil? Did something happen?”

“Matt’s been anxious and clingy ever since he had a fight with Seth and I kind of snapped at him this morning. I don’t feel prepared at all for this week and I can’t waste my time playing video games or
doing other shit just because he feels weird about Seth being gone.”

“Have you tried talking to Matt about how you're feeling? Maybe you could ask him for some room to breathe until everything else calms down.”

Neil picked at a hangnail and thought about his answer. Matt’s kindness was something he could lose if he wasn’t careful. If he ruined things with Matt, he would lose Dan and Allison’s good opinion as well. The Ravens regularly ripped each other to shreds because of stress or frustration, but they were always trapped in the same spider’s web. If the Foxes wanted to abandon one another, they could.

“In my experience, people don’t react well to being told no,” he said eventually.

“You don’t have to say yes to everything to be a good friend to somebody. Matt’s feelings aren’t more important than yours.”

He grumbled, “Everything sounds easy when you say it.”

Dr. Dobson parked the car outside her apartment and the two of them carried the groceries inside. In the kitchen, she turned the oven on and handed Neil a recipe card. “Do you want to try making the cornbread while I throw the chili together?”

Neil read the card twice and got to work.

They traded some tasks to make things easier: Neil chopped an onion for the chili and Dr. Dobson heated up a couple tablespoons of bacon drippings in the cast iron skillet for the cornbread. When the skillet began to give off smoke, Neil quickly combined the wet ingredients with the dry ones and added the bacon drippings to complete the batter. Then, he emptied the bowl into the hot skillet and slid it into the oven.

While the cornbread baked and the chili simmered on the stove, they sat at the table with glasses of lemonade. Dr. Dobson ran through her usual questions regarding Neil’s sleeping habits, his moods, and what his schedule looked like for the next two weeks. She raised an eyebrow knowingly when he mentioned the Ravens game.

“It’s a lot of pressure, that’s all,” he said, not wanting to linger on the subject. “Everyone’s nervous. It’s not just me.”

“We don’t have to discuss it if you don’t want to. Remember to take extra good care of yourself this week, okay? ‘Under stress we regress.’ We’ve talked about that before.”

Neil nodded. “I know. I’ll be careful.”

“Would you like to talk more about this or change topics?”

“Change topics.”

“How have things been with Seth? You mentioned that he and Matt had a fight.”

Neil bit the inside of his cheek and hesitated. “Can I be completely honest?”

“Of course.”

“He’s an asshole and he’s being impossible,” Neil began, and all his frustration and anger came bubbling up at once. As he told her exactly how he felt, it struck him again how nice it was to talk to
Dr. Dobson about something freely. He didn’t have to worry about upsetting the team balance since everything he said would stay a secret. Naturally, he left out the exact details of Matt and Seth’s fight, but he still had enough to say about the matter to last until the oven timer beeped.

They made a simple salad to go with their meal and refilled their glasses with lemonade before sitting down to eat. Neil waited for Dr. Dobson’s analysis on what he’d told her about Seth. He expected more advice on honesty and communication, but instead she asked him, “What would you like to happen?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want Seth to move back in?”

Neil knew he was supposed to say yes. As long as Seth was isolated, he was an easy target and Neil still had plenty of guilt over what nearly happened at Hebe’s Cup.

“I want him to stop being a problem I have to fix,” Neil admitted.

“You’re not responsible for what other people do,” she reminded him. “Have you thought about why you feel like you need to take care of him? Are you worried something will happen to him if you aren’t there to stop it?”

“He’s a depressed addict. The answer’s kind of obvious, isn’t it?”

Dr. Dobson motioned for him to go on.

Their session ended fifteen minutes later. Neil took Dr. Dobson up on her offer to drive him back to the Tower. When they got there, he felt at least somewhat ready for an uncomfortable conversation with Matt.

In the main room of the suite, Matt was waiting on the couch, hands clasped and one knee bouncing nervously. He sprang to his feet and gave Neil a small, twitchy smile. “Hey, man, how’d it go?”

Neil held up his foil-covered cornbread and Tupperware container of chili. “Betsy and I had leftovers. You want some?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. Thanks,” Matt said in a rush. “Can we talk for a sec?”

“Sure.” Neil left his shoes by the door and put the food on the kitchen counter. Something was off. Matt looked like he’d downed an entire pot of coffee in the time Neil had been away. Slowly, Neil sat down on the couch and braced himself.

Matt remained standing. “So, uh, this morning was kinda weird. Sorry about that.”

“I’m really behind on sleep. I was irritable-”

“I called my sponsor.” Matt cringed at himself, but he pressed on. “I mean my Narcotics Anonymous sponsor. I said that the whole thing with Andrew down in Columbia put me off drugs for good- and it sort of did- but the real truth is that I’m still a recovering addict, emphasis on the ‘ing.’ I want to be more honest about it, so… there it is.”

Neil pressed his lips together and nodded. Clearly, it wasn’t the time to follow Dr. Dobson’s advice.

Matt said, “I haven’t relapsed. It’s just been weird and stressful lately and I need to stay ahead of this in case I start backsliding.”
“You’ve been drinking more,” Neil pointed out.

“I know I probably shouldn’t drink at all, but come on, man, you know it’s no fun being the only sober one at parties. I already felt like enough of a freak after rehab and the shitfest with Andrew.”

“Understandable.”

“I’ll stop drinking until things calm down, though. If I start using stuff to feel better during a rough patch, the slope goes from slippery to practical vertical.”

“Okay, so what needs to happen? What should I do?”

“Oh, you don’t have to do anything,” Matt assured him. “I wanted you to know because we live together and my behavior doesn’t only affect me.”

“The other night you texted me something about Seth’s stash. Do you want me to get rid of it?”

“I should probably give it back instead of flushing it. I don’t want more drama.”

Neil was tempted to flush Seth’s drugs anyway for the simple pleasure of being spiteful. He would’ve done it if not for the risk of making things worse for Matt. As he got to his feet, he said, “I’ll take the stuff over to Seth for you. What about all the alcohol you’ve got here?”

“I dumped it when you were gone. If you see me with a drink this week, you’re free and welcome to smack it out of my hands,” Matt tried to joke. Neil tried to smile, but they both just ended up grimacing at each other.

“I’m going to go over to Abby’s now,” Neil said. “I’ll head to the library afterward because I really need to get some studying done today, but we can hang out later tonight. You could come running with me if you want.”

Matt gave another jerky nod. “Yeah, sure, that’d be cool.”

Neil went into the bedroom to add the new recipe cards to his binder and get the tin box containing Seth’s bag of weed and little glass pipe. He stuffed the box and his notebooks into his bag and tucked a couple textbooks under his arm.

Matt handed him the keys to his truck with a sheepish shrug and said, “It’s not like I’m going anywhere this afternoon.”

“Thanks. I’ll try to be back before dinner,” Neil replied.

Having the truck made the trip to Abby’s easier, although it also meant Neil only had a few minutes to figure out a plan of action. There were no guarantees when it came to Seth’s state of mind and Neil hadn’t spoken to him properly in a while.

Abby welcomed him inside when he knocked and said, “I wasn’t expecting to see you today. What brings you by, hon?”

“I need to give Seth something.”

She glanced at the stairs. “He’s here, but he’s in a real mood today. You can leave whatever it is with me and I’ll make sure he gets it.”

“That’s okay. I’ll be quick.” Neil turned and darted upstairs before she could object.
Of the two guest rooms, only one had a closed door. It was locked, unsurprisingly, so Neil thumped his fist against it three times. A second later, the door was yanked open to reveal Seth’s irritated face. “What do you want now?” he demanded.

Neil pulled the tin out of his bag. “Did you leave any other drugs in our room?”

“Nosy little shitbag like you, I’m sure you would’ve found ‘em by now if there were.”

“Is there anything other than weed?”

Seth’s eyebrows knit together. “Wait. Is this about Matt?”

“Do you care?”

“You weren’t around the last time he fell off the wagon,” Seth said with a flare of annoyance. “I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. I’m not totally heartless.”

“And yet you’re leaving drugs lying around where he can find them.”

“I forgot. I didn’t do it on purpose.”

Neil tugged at the strap of his bag and shuffled back a step. Every frustrated, furious thing he’d wanted to yell at Seth came rushing up into his throat. “Just answer the goddamn question. Is there anything else I should know about?”

“No.”

“If I find anything, you’re not getting it back.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “If you’re not gonna believe me, why bother asking? In fact, why bother bringing me this at all?”

“Matt feels weird enough as it is though this entire shitstorm is your fault and he wanted to do the decent thing by not destroying your property. I offered to bring it over so he wouldn’t have to see you. I’m not bothering with any of this for your sake.”

“Full bitch mode today, huh? Woof.”

Neil flashed a chilly smile. “Out of curiosity: are you satisfied with what you are right now?”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“This-” Neil gestured up and down at Seth- “is how they would’ve remembered you if I hadn’t gotten to you in time at Hebe’s Cup. Your headstone would’ve been like, ‘Here lies Seth Gordon: a pathetic, bigoted, miserable asshole with a drug habit he couldn’t kick and abandonment issues he couldn’t hide.’ Are you satisfied with that?”

Seth’s jaw tightened. “Thanks for the chat, Mr. Half-A-Psych-Class. Let’s not do this again.”

Neil decided to leave it at that. He said goodbye to Abby on his way out of her house, and then he drove to Coburn Library to get some studying done. The fear of being unprepared for his exams weighed heavily on him. The Ravens took the same classes and completed their work together; they kept each other on track because if one fell behind, the whole team suffered for it. A small part of Neil worried he wouldn’t be able to keep his GPA up by himself.

Parallel parking wasn’t one of his strong suits, so he snagged a space in a small lot outside a nearby
lecture hall and walked the rest of the way, savoring the sunshine. The air was warm and sweet with the fragrance of loquat trees in bloom.

When he made it inside the library, he stopped at the small coffee shop on the ground floor to buy himself some iced tea and a cranberry muffin. On the second floor, a familiar head of blond hair caught his eye. Aaron was sitting on a couch near the windows and he wasn’t alone. Katelyn was on her back with her head pillowed on his thigh, her dark hair spilling over his lap, and her legs dangling over the arm of the couch. She was in the middle of telling him something with sweeping hand gestures and animated expressions. Aaron looked more relaxed than Neil had ever seen him as he listened to her intently.

Unfortunately, Aaron noticed him. Neil quickly pushed through the door to the stairs and continued up to the third floor.

He went to a bank of computers flanked by tall bookshelves and sat down at the end, leaving plenty of space between himself and the other students. It was easy to settle into the hushed atmosphere of the library. The soft whisper of pages being turned and the quiet clacking of computer keys faded into the background like static.

Neil spent the afternoon rereading his notes, going over his study guides, and poring over passages in his textbooks. Around four o’clock, he got up to stretch his legs and throw away his muffin wrapper and empty cup. He bought a bottle of water from a vending machine before settling back into his chair.

Dan texted him later to ask about dinner plans. He was in the middle of deciding what to tell her when he heard someone approaching.

“Hey, asshole,” said Aaron.

Neil turned toward him to show he was listening.

“Tell Andrew what you saw earlier and I’ll make sure you regret it. Understand?”

“If hiding your relationship is that important, you should consider actually trying to hide it,” Neil replied.

“As long as you don’t go running your mouth, it’s safe to bring Katelyn here. You’ll see pigs fly before you see Andrew willingly set foot in a library.”

“That’s interesting.” Neil doubted it was a coincidence that Cass was a librarian.

“Whatever. I need to know that you’ll keep your mouth shut.”

“I don’t care what you and Katelyn get up to and I’m not here to enforce Andrew’s rules,” Neil said as he turned back to his books. He didn’t relax until he heard Aaron walk away. He muttered, “This team and their goddamn drama,” under his breath and opened his phone to text Dan back.

He accepted Dan’s invitation to dinner and drove to the Thai restaurant that she directed him to. By the time he got there, Matt and the girls were already at a table with drinks. Neil apologized to Matt for keeping the truck so long and handed the keys over.

Matt waved off his apology. “No worries. It was fun taking Allison’s car for a change.”

“Glad you could join us, Neil. This is our last supper before the descent into madness,” Dan joked.
Renee smiled wryly. “It’s going to be all right. We can handle this.”

“Two away games plus exams plus the Ravens on Sunday,” Allison pointed out. “I’m going to smack Coach with his clipboard for this shitty scheduling.”

“Some things can’t be helped. It’s not his fault,” said Renee.

Matt shrugged and sipped his water. “It’s gonna suck, but we got this. One day at a time, right?”

“Awy, good attitude, babe,” Dan said.

“Thanks, sweetness.”

Allison rolled her eyes at the two of them. “I hate you both.”

Matt’s idea sounded reasonable in theory, but Neil couldn’t focus on a single day at a time when the upcoming Edgar Allan game cast a shadow over the entire week. There was a countdown at the back of Neil’s mind that wouldn’t let him rest.

His worrying boiled over on Monday morning, resulting in a panic attack while he was in the shower at the gym. Thankfully, no one could hear him hyperventilating over the spray of water and no one commented on the fact that he took a lot longer than normal.

The back of his neck prickled with the memory of the master’s eyes on him all throughout his first exam. During practice that afternoon, he couldn’t look at the Foxhole Court without imagining Riko standing on the half-court line. Going down to the basement for a load of laundry nearly triggered another panic attack. Neil had to chew on a couple mints and focus on his breathing while he stuffed his clothes into the machine.

Early Tuesday afternoon, the Foxes drove to Georgia. Judging by the sounds of conversation and laughter, Neil guessed most of the others gave up on studying before they even made it across the state line. After they skirted around Atlanta to take the interstate south, Dan and Kevin started reviewing the strategy for that night’s game and drew almost everyone else into the conversation until they reached their hotel in a small city near the southwestern corner of the state.

The Aiken-Charles College Falcons had a solid reputation as a team, but a recent change in the coaching staff wasn’t working in their favor. The Foxes beat them by four points, gaining a much-needed boost in morale; however, they couldn’t celebrate properly since Dan, Kevin, and Nicky had to take make-up exams at the hotel. Wymack booked a meeting room in advance and acted as their proctor. Abby gave everyone else unsubtle hints about using the quiet space to study.

Allison ignored Seth’s meaningful comment about having a room to himself for a change. She showed up to Neil and Matt’s room with Renee to watch television and unwind.

Neil volunteered to make the first trip to the vending machines for snacks. Allison and Matt gave him a stack of one-dollar bills, a handful of change, and a list written on some hotel stationary. In the hallway, he passed Andrew and remembered the night in Louisiana when Andrew told him, “We’ll steal a car next time.” Neil didn’t know if it was a real promise or a joke. Part of him wanted to go outside with Andrew to see what would happen, but he shook the urge off and continued to the vending machines.

Later on, after the girls left and the lights were off, Neil lay awake in his bed and wondered if Andrew went for a walk through the town, if he saw anything interesting. He felt stupid for thinking about it all. It wasn’t like he missed out on anything. At that time of night, the town would’ve been nothing but neon signs and mosquitos.
Neil could hear Matt trying to get comfortable in the other bed, obviously struggling to fall asleep too. A question he’d wanted to ask Matt for a while crept to the forefront of his mind and the words crowded behind his teeth until he finally broke the silence. “Do you hate Andrew for what he did to you?”

Matt hedged, “I dunno. It’s complicated.”

“Did he actually get your mom’s permission to give you drugs?”

“Not exactly. He called her from the bar and said he was concerned that I might be doing drugs that night. She thought he was my friend, so she answered his questions about my medical history in case he needed to pass along the info to paramedics. She hopped on a plane as soon as she could.”

“I don’t get why he’d go to all that trouble if his goal was to make sure Aaron stayed clean. He sets Aaron loose in a nightclub almost every weekend.”

Matt was quiet for a minute before hesitantly asking, “If I tell you something, can you promise it won’t leave this room?”

Neil frowned at how small Matt’s voice sounded. “Sure.”

“Andrew didn’t buy the drugs.”

Confused, Neil sat up in his bed and squinted through the darkness in Matt’s direction. “What do you mean?”

“I was having a really hard time.” Matt’s voice sounded small, like something was squeezing his throat. “Freshman year was horrible because I was depressed, my roommates were high off their asses most of the time, and I didn’t have a lot of places to go. I was hanging onto my self-control by my fingernails. Sophomore year was supposed to be easier.”

“But instead you were assigned to a room with the cousins.” Neil could see where his story was leading.

“First time I met the twins, Aaron made some douchey comment about the scars on my arms and... well, you’ve met Andrew.”

“Is that why you bought the drugs?”

“No, I still had shit left from before rehab. I can’t really explain why I bought it in the first place. I never mixed heroin with anything, but my dealer… whatever. It’s not important.” Matt groped around the nightstand for his water bottle and took a long drink. “Anyway, after a couple exceptionally shitty weeks, I hit a low enough point to want to shoot up, so I got everything ready to go at, like, three a.m. in the bathroom. I chickened out right before I put the needle in, though, and then I freaked. Wrapped the syringe in a towel and stashed it somewhere.”

“I’m guessing Andrew found it.”

“Yeah, I didn’t realize it until we were at the club in Columbia. Andrew followed me into the bathroom, pulled out the syringe, and told me to decide if I was gonna be on or off the wagon. Said he wasn’t interested in sharing a space with ‘Schrödinger's junkie.’”

“Did he even know what was in the syringe?”

“No, he just knew it was mine.”

“A total clusterfuck,” Matt finished with a shaky laugh. “I let everyone assume what they wanted. Their version of the story sounded better than the truth.”

“Would the truth have made that much of a difference? He still gave you that needle when he knew you weren’t in good enough shape to say no.”

“Maybe Dan and Abby wouldn’t have thought the absolute worst of him or maybe the team wouldn’t have been as divided. I don’t know.”

“Dan would’ve hated him regardless and Andrew isn’t interested in team unity.”

Matt let out a loud yawn. “I’ll tell Dan the truth at some point. I’m just not exactly eager to stir this shit up again and… I don’t want her to look at me differently, you know?”

“Sorry I brought it up.”

“No worries, man. You mind if we call it a night? Think I’m drifting off.”

“Sure,” Neil said quietly. He lay back down and pulled the covers up over his shoulders. Within minutes, Matt’s breathing evened out. Neil gave up on trying to untangle Matt and Andrew’s complicated history soon after that.

The next night, the Foxes drove to Mississippi, where they lost to the Crusaders by a single point. The locker room afterward was fraught with tension and, when everyone was packing up to leave, Kevin managed to start a team-wide argument with a particularly sharp comment. Neil pretended to search his duffel bag for something; he was bruised and tired and wanted nothing more than to stay out of it. Renee and Abby tried to get the others to settle down, but the yelling didn’t stop until Andrew appeared at Kevin’s side. The unspoken threat of Andrew’s brutal brand of conflict resolution was enough to make everyone else lose their appetite for fighting.

When the Foxes made it back to Palmetto State on Thursday morning, Wymack looked at their weary faces and bloodshot eyes and said, “Afternoon practice is cancelled. You all look like shit and I’d rather stare at the TV than your sorry selves.”

“Gettin’ old and goin’ soft,” Dan accused playfully.

Wymack gave her a stern scowl. “Get the fuck outta here before I change my mind. You wanna run laps all afternoon?”

Neil was grateful for the chance to take an afternoon off, although his attempt to catch up on sleep backfired. He lay awake in his bed thinking of how much he needed to sleep, how he couldn’t fix the rift between Seth and the team, and how easy it would be for Matt to stumble in his recovery.

He was practically dead on his feet when he drifted across campus for his last midterm exam. His stress and exhaustion crouched over him while he wrote down his answers with a shaking hand. It was a small consolation to see that he wasn’t the only student with bloodshot eyes and hunched shoulders.

When it was over, he had no idea if he’d done poorly or if his GPA would survive. He climbed into his bed, still wearing his jeans and his sweatshirt, and fell into a sleep so deep his nightmares couldn’t touch him.
On Sunday morning, Neil woke up afraid and chilled to the bone by a nightmare he couldn’t fully remember. It was still dark outside and he had a couple hours left before his alarm was set to go off, but he knew it would be impossible to sleep more at that point.

Matt and Dan were fast asleep in the bunk below, their shallow breathing almost in sync. Trying to stay quiet, Neil grabbed his phone and crept out of the bedroom. He held his breath until he reached the hallway and the door was shut behind him. With nothing better to do, he made coffee and went for a long walk through the winding, tangled roads of Palmetto State’s campus.

It was relatively quiet for a Sunday morning. The air was warm and damp. The roads were empty enough that Neil didn’t have to be as cautious as normal; he just had to move aside for a jogger or two on the sidewalk every now and then. He kept walking until the . He stopped to watch some white-tailed deer wander across the Green before turning in the direction of Fox Tower.

When he got back to his suite, Dan was in the kitchen. Her threadbare bathrobe hung open over her tank top and shorts and her hair was wrapped in a shiny green scarf. She saluted Neil with her coffee mug and rasped, “Morning. Where’d you disappear to?”

“I just went outside for a little while. Might go running in a bit.” Neil stepped around her to place his mug in the sink.

She nodded sleepily. “Don’t push yourself too hard ’cause we need you in good shape tonight.”

“I’ll take it easy.”

“Good, that’s-” she broke off to yawn. “Ugh, been awake ten minutes and I already need a nap.”

Matt ambled into the kitchen with his eyes barely open. He reached around Dan for a clean mug and playfully pinned her to the counter with his full weight. Dan patted his back, leaned up to accept a kiss on the cheek, and then Matt shuffled away to pour himself some coffee.

Dan said, “So, the elephant in the room: tonight’s game.”
“Aw, come on,” groaned Matt. “We got, like, twelve hours. There’s still a chance the world will end and we’ll be too dead to deal with that shit.”

“Way to be optimistic, Matt.”

“I’m gonna go for a run,” Neil said as he started toward the bedroom.

He changed his clothes, and then he left the Tower to catch a bus to the Whelan Recreation Center. Surprisingly enough, he wasn’t dreading yoga class that morning. At least it would keep his mind off the Ravens; with each passing hour, he could feel himself inching closer to an all-out panic attack.

Renee was already in the studio when Neil got there. She’d set up her stuff in the back corner and left plenty of space between her mat and the wall for him. As Neil unrolled his mat, she asked, “How’re you feeling today?”

“I’m fine. Have you heard from Jean lately?”

Renee didn’t get a chance to answer because Carly breezed into the room with a bubbly, “Good morning, everyone!”

“We can talk after class,” Renee said quietly.

Neil nodded and turned his attention to the front of the room.

There was nothing different about the class that day, but by the halfway point all of Neil’s thoughts had drained out of his head. He was too focused on breathing in time with everyone else and holding his body steady through the poses to think about anything. At the end of the hour, Carly instructed everyone to lie on their backs while she dimmed the lights. Neil blinked up at the ceiling, light-headed and half-melted and relaxed enough that he was in danger of falling asleep.

It seemed like only a minute went by before Carly announced that class was finished. “Great job, guys,” she said. “Have an awesome week.”

Neil sluggishly got up and collected his things. Renee waited for him so the two of them could walk downstairs together. Once they reached the lockers, she said, “Jean’s been quiet this week.”

“The Ravens keep themselves busy,” Neil said, trying to hide his disappointment.

“I figured they must be extra busy getting ready for tonight. It must be so weird for the Ravens to play against Kevin.”

Neil mhm-ed noncommittally and shoved his mat into his locker. “Weird” wasn’t the word he would’ve used for what he imagined the Ravens were feeling at that very moment. “Bloodthirsty” or “vengeful” seemed more likely. Naoya was proof that the grudges formed at Castle Evermore were permanent. Neil hoped Kevin would be safe under the watchful eyes of the Exy world; if not, he had Andrew to watch his back.

As they walked to the bus stop, Renee nudged Neil with her elbow and said, “You’ve been quiet this week too.”

“I’ve had a lot on my mind.”

“It’ll be all right, Neil. We’ll all get through tonight together.”

Neil could appreciate the sentiment, so he tried not to sound sarcastic as he said, “Thanks.”
They switched to lighter topics on the bus. Renee told him about her classes and the team’s upcoming volunteering event. She was kind enough to carry the conversation on her own all the way up to the third floor of the Tower.

Back in his bedroom, Neil changed into sweats and climbed into his bed to nap while his body was still relaxed from yoga. He slept until eleven and stayed under the covers until noon, when his persistent hunger pangs forced him to move.

He ate lunch in the main room with Matt and the girls and stayed there for most of the afternoon, watching whatever was on TV. He briefly thought about texting Andrew to see if Kevin would be able to stay sober for the game. Even if Andrew cared, though, no one would be able to stop Kevin from drinking if he had his heart set on it, so Neil decided he’d rather live in ignorance as long as possible.

Neil and Matt had a small, early dinner with the girls and left for the stadium with plenty of time to spare before first serve. Due to the hype surrounding the Fox-Raven showdown, campus security was nearly doubled. Officers in neon yellow vests directed traffic, but despite their best efforts, the streets were already clogged. From the bed of Matt’s truck, Neil watched the swarms of people on the sidewalk and felt sick at how many had come in black. Some even went so far as to draw a “1” or “2” on their cheeks.

The burn scar on his cheekbone itched.

Anxiety unmoored him. At the stadium, he climbed down from the truck bed on numb, stiff legs and dizzily followed the upperclassmen into the building. The words spoken around him piled up in his ears without any hope of making it to his brain. He was out of touch with the real world, adrift in his worries and in danger of drowning.

In the lounge, he sat on the end of a couch and stared blankly at his knees, unable to get a grip on the present. It was the shock of cold, wet plastic against his neck that finally wrenched his mind into place. He jerked back and scowled up at Andrew, who was holding a half-frozen water bottle.

Grinning, Andrew tapped two fingers to his temple and said, “Don’t wander off.”

“Fuck off, Andrew,” Matt said mildly. Then he told Neil, “Ignore him. He’s an asshole.”

Neil nodded. When Andrew wasn’t looking, he slipped a breath mint into his mouth.

“Is everyone feeling okay?” Abby asked. “Kevin, how’re you holding up?”

“I’m all right,” said Kevin.

Seth rolled his eyes and slouched in his chair.

“Abby, you’ve done excellent work with our Humpty Dumpty,” Andrew said cheerfully. “All the king’s men could learn a thing or two from you.”

Abby smiled tightly. She opened her mouth to say something, but was cut off by the lounge door banging open.

Wymack strode into the room and held up a piece of paper, “Neil, you got any idea why someone’s leaving voicemails on my machine for you?”

Neil frowned. “Who was it?”
“Something Yamamoto. He left a number, said to call him back.” Wymack shrugged and handed the paper to him. “And if I’m gonna be your secretary, I want a raise.”

Matt said, “Gotta work hard for that extra dollar, Coach.”

Wymack lightly swatted him upside the head and told him to shut up.

Neil chewed on another mint while his stomach churned. The master could easily get his hands on Naoya’s phone records if he wanted and now those records would show a call to Palmetto State.

His anxiety subsided a little after Wymack got everyone’s attention to go over their strategy for the game one last time. Focusing on Exy and mentally mapping out plays was almost soothing. He just had to ignore the names Wymack mentioned. Riko, Jean, Corin- if he was going to make it through the night, he had to see them as the numbers they wore, not the people they were.

“I want a double-digit score from you three,” Wymack said, giving a stern look to Seth, Kevin, and Neil. “However, Dan and Allison, you two need to back up our defensive line when things get hairy. Let offense fend for themselves. Does anybody have questions, comments, or concerns?”

No one spoke, so Wymack shooed them off to the locker room to gear up.

The Foxes met in the foyer when they were ready. The air was gloomy and thick with the dread they all shared. Through the doors, they could hear the crushing din of the packed stadium. Andrew was wholly unaffected, as usual. Neil stood beside him as if his indifference could be a breakwater against the rising wave of panic in Neil’s chest. He didn’t care if Allison shot him a strange look from the upperclassmen’s side of the semicircle.

“On the bright side,” Dan said out of nowhere, “after tonight, we can stop studying Raven shit for a while.”

Matt grimaced. “Thank fuck. I’ve been seeing their game footage in my dreams.”

“At least no one can say we didn’t do our homework,” said Nicky.

Allison rolled her eyes. “Like anyone gives a shit.”

“Can’t be worse than last spring,” Seth said.

Kevin retorted, “How would you know? You were high the whole time.”

“Hey,” Dan cut in, glaring at both of them. “When we’re here, we’re on the same side. Let’s give an honest effort and see what we can do as a team against the best of the best. If we can keep improving, we’ll have a real shot at winning the rematch on Thanksgiving.”

“Yeah, right,” Aaron muttered.

Wymack said, “Stop treating Riko and his goons like they’re something special. I don’t give a rat’s ass if they were national champions last year. This year’s trophy is up for grabs and I want you to make them real aware of that before they leave. You might think you’ve got a snowball’s chance in hell tonight, but you’ve had the odds stacked against you all your lives and here you are anyway. So fuck off with your shitty attitudes. As long as you’ve got seconds on the clock, you’ve got a fighting chance.”

“I shouldn’t’ve stayed sober tonight,” Seth grumbled.
“Andrew, where’s your head at?” Wymack asked.

“Right where I left it, Coach.”

“You gonna help us ruffle some feathers tonight?”

“I promised, didn’t I?”

Wymack furrowed his brow. “Did you?”

Andrew laughed. Wymack obviously wasn’t reassured, but Neil found it a little easier to breathe. The Foxes had Andrew and Renee as their last line of defense. Neil trusted them more than he ever expected to. He squared his shoulders and lifted his head, trying to project all the confidence he didn’t feel.

When the Foxes lined up at the doors, Kevin turned and met Neil’s eyes. Regardless of how they felt about each other, they were in the same foxhole, fighting the same battle. The others could only guess at what this game meant for them. Neil gave a small nod of acknowledgement and Kevin nodded back.

Wymack got the go-ahead through his earpiece and led the Foxes out of the foyer. Palmetto State’s fight song began to play as the Foxes walked into view and a raucous cheer rose up from the stands. The Vixens cheered the Exy team on and the Fox mascot jogged along the inner court to rile up the crowd more.

The opposite side of the stadium was darkened by black-clad Edgar Allan fans, blotting out the rows of bright orange and white seats. As the Foxes reached the home benches, Edgar Allan’s fight song began to play. Another roar went up when the master and Riko led the Ravens into view.

“We’re gonna run laps inside the court tonight,” said Dan. “Stick to the wall and don’t make eye contact with the Ravens. Pretend those assholes don’t exist until the game starts.”

The Foxes left their gloves and helmets on the bench and followed Dan through the court door. They ran laps in pairs. Neil matched Seth’s pace and kept his eyes on the “3” of Andrew’s jersey a few feet ahead. Jogging helped Neil center himself in time for warm-up drills, although he couldn’t completely ignore the Ravens at the other end of the court. Neil recognized the drills the master designed and felt a tug of something almost like longing. If not for Riko, he would’ve been blending into the blur of Ravens alongside Jean, right where he was always meant to be.

After twenty minutes, the teams were called off the court and their captains met in the middle for the coin toss. Neil’s heart pounded to the heavy beat of Edgar Allan’s drums as he watched Dan shake Riko’s hand. Somehow, they made it look civil. The coin toss resulted in the Ravens’ getting first serve and Neil felt a twinge of disappointment even though it didn’t make a difference. The Foxes’ chances were already as low as they could possibly get.

Dan came back to the inner court for her racquet, helmet, and gloves. She stood near the door and bumped fists with Wymack. The other starters lined up behind her. Neil shifted his weight to keep his knees from buckling and sucked in a slow, deep breath. There’s a cabin in the mountains; he recited mentally. The stairs are damp from the rain.

The announcer’s voice came on loud and clear through the speakers. “Tonight’s starting line-up: for the Foxes, number two-”

The roar that rose from the whole stadium drowned out Kevin’s name. Some people stood up to cheer and whistle, others shook their paper signs dedicated to the sons of Exy. Kevin was stoic in the
face of it all; their adoration was as much a weight as it was an honor.

“Number ten, Neil Wesninski,” was met with noticeable jeering that cut through the applause of the home crowd. Neil wasn’t surprised. The diehard Exy fans had plenty to say about him online and every word read like it came straight from Riko’s mouth. Every word he said in his interviews and every move he made on the court was wrong in their eyes because he had the audacity to interfere with their idols.

Over the cacophony, Neil heard someone shouting, “Go ruin Riko’s night, fuckface.”

The Foxes and the Ravens filed onto the court and spread out to take their places. Jean was Neil’s mark for the evening and a clear indication that the master let Riko have too much responsibility. Riko wouldn’t be able to resist pitting Neil and Jean against each other and delivering a thinly veiled insult to Kevin at the same time. As the Raven’s best backliner, Jean should’ve been assigned to better striker. Neil was offended on Kevin’s behalf.

Riko tucked his helmet under his arm before he approached Kevin. The cameras would have a perfect shot of him smiling at his so-called brother as he leaned in for an embrace. Neil tensed, ready to spring into action, until Riko released Kevin and walked to his spot on the line.

The head referee handed the ball to the Raven dealer and left the court. The doors were bolted shut a few moments later. Neil could still hear screaming through the vents.

“Too bad you’re not still playing defense,” said the other Raven striker. “I would’ve enjoyed crushing you.”

Neil replied, “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Charlie. If you were good enough to beat me, you wouldn’t still be wearing double digits.”

“You’re wearing double digits tonight too,” Charlie shot back.

“Not because my captain thinks I’m inferior.”

“Quiet,” Riko barked. Charlie adjusted his stance and shut his mouth.

Neil tightened his grip on his racquet, as ready as he would ever be.

When the buzzer blared, hell broke loose.

The dealer shot the ball to Kevin’s mark and she immediately flicked it away. Riko had possession of the ball a second later. Neil darted out of Jean’s path just in time to avoid a barely-legal check and sprinted after Riko into Fox territory. The ball zipped from Raven to Raven with startling speed and precision. Desperately, Neil struggled to get into the rhythm in the Ravens’ movements; he knew he’d spend the whole game two steps behind if he couldn’t find a mental foothold.

Less than five minutes in, the Foxes’ goal lit up red. Riko had taken the first point and the Ravens barely reacted because victory was expected, not worthy of a celebration. Between bodies, Neil saw Andrew swat at the wall with his racquet in what looked like an honest outburst of frustration.

Kevin appeared at Neil’s side and said, “You know the Ravens. You know all their tricks, all their plays. Remember that.”

Neil glared and swallowed a handful of bitter words.

Kevin grabbed the collar of Neil’s uniform to drag him closer. “Get out of your head and trust your
instincts.”

“Worry about yourself,” Neil snapped, shoving Kevin away from him.

It took another infuriating ten minutes for the Foxes to make any sort of headway. Andrew smashed the ball across the court to where Dan was waiting. Matt’s aggression and Aaron’s quick thinking tied up the Raven strikers long enough for Dan to get the ball to Neil, who bounced it off the wall to avoid getting hit by Jean. Kevin wasn’t one for risky shots on goal, so he passed back to Dan to play it safe.

The flaws in Riko’s plan revealed themselves in the next few moments. Jean was taller and stronger than Neil, but he wasn’t as quick and Kevin’s reflexes were on par with Riko’s. By the time Riko caught up to Kevin to smash his racquet out of his hands, Kevin had flicked the ball neatly to Neil.

Without another option, Neil took the risk Kevin hadn’t been willing to. Corin dove to block the shot, but the ball bounced an inch inside the line. The wall went red and the buzzer went off to signal the Foxes’ first point.

The Vixens’ celebration was a flurry of orange pom poms in Neil’s periphery. The elation in Neil’s heart withered away when he locked eyes with Jean through their helmet visors. Ever since Riko knocked the world off its axis, Neil’s success was Jean’s failure. Every point he scored that night would put Jean in danger.

Dan let out an ecstatic whoop! as she crashed into Neil, jarring him out of his thoughts. Kevin clapped Neil on the shoulder and said, “Brace yourself. You know it’s about to get worse.”

He was right, of course.

The Ravens were constantly pushed toward perfection, which meant keeping their opponents’ score at zero. Anything higher than that meant they’d failed. They took their fury out on the Foxes. The Foxes had the aggression to meet them head on, but they couldn’t close the point gap once it started growing bigger and bigger.

Kevin’s mark channeled her energy into leaving Kevin as bruised as possible until she finally pulled a move dirty enough to get her red-carded and thrown out of the game in the second quarter.

The penalty shot was Kevin’s third goal, the Foxes’ sixth point. The Ravens were still ahead by two, but it was intensely satisfying to see Corin get pulled from the game early. Losing six points to a team like the Foxes was unforgivable. Given what she did to Neil to earn her place on the starting line, Neil hoped she suffered for it.

The coaches sent on substitutions and team physicians checked in with the players in need of medical attention. During the short break, Matt came up to Neil and patted his helmet. “How’re you holding up?” he asked.

Neil shrugged a shoulder. “Better than I expected.”

“What were you expecting?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Matt gave a wheezing laugh and patted Neil’s helmet again.

Neil didn’t realize that Kevin had signaled to Wymack until he heard Seth’s voice behind him. “You two better not be tired yet.”
“You better be able to keep up,” Neil retorted. He looked for Kevin and saw him sitting on the home bench. His gloves were off and Abby was inspecting his left hand.

“Welcome to the party, Gordon,” Matt said neutrally.

Seth shifted his weight and looked around. Then, he held out his fist and offered, “Truce?”

Matt hesitantly bumped it with his own. “Only because I want to knock these fuckers down a peg.”

The Foxes’ sense of teamwork might have been inconsistent at best, but as always, spite worked wonders to unite them. They played with the kind of on-court synergy Neil had been hoping for since the beginning of summer practices. Perhaps Neil should have predicted what would happen, but he was still stunned to see Seth sucker punch Riko just after halftime. For a moment, his mind flicked back to the Nest, gripped by the fear that the master would punish any and all insubordination. His nerves were so rattled that he messed up a pass once the game restarted, costing the Foxes possession of the ball and another point.

By the final buzzer, almost every player who set foot on the court had at least one yellow card for fighting or dirty checks. Along with Seth, three Ravens were red-carded. The game took its toll on everyone—even Andrew was moving stiffly. Neil felt bruised all over with a bloodied nose and a limp.

The Foxes didn’t get their score into the double digits like Wymack wanted, but they ended up with nine points, which was more than enough to be proud of. Losing wasn’t so bad when Neil knew the Ravens couldn’t fully enjoy their victory. The master would make them pay for giving up that many points to a team like the Foxes.

*Good*, Neil thought viciously. His hatred burned bright until it was snuffed out by a cold rush of guilt. Jean would suffer more than anyone—not only at the master’s hands, but Riko’s too—and he would bear it all alone.

The sound of a locker door closing made Neil flinch. The air around him suddenly felt boiling and his neck guard was too tight for him to breathe. He clumsily pawed at the clasp while trying to hide his panic from the others.

Someone pushed Neil’s away and undid the clasp for him. The plastic band bounced off the floor at Neil’s feet. “I hate those things,” Matt said, moving to lean against the lockers. “You good?”

“I’m fine,” Neil replied thinly.

Matt pursed his lips and nodded. “I’m not sure what exactly tonight’s game was for you, but it’s over now. You made it.”

Neil almost wanted to laugh. It wouldn’t be over for him until he was dead.

“Well, I’ll be goddamned,” Wymack said loudly to get everyone’s attention. “The ten of you managed to keep up with the best Class I team in the country. If we keep going like this, you’ll be kicking some real ass this spring and I can’t wait to see it.”

“We still lost,” Aaron pointed out.

Allison said, “This isn’t the kind of loss you feel bad about, it’s the kind you learn from.”

Renee voiced her agreement and leaned into the fierce one-armed hug Nicky gave her.
"Besides," Allison continued, "UGA beat us worse than they did. I bet Riko's having an existential crisis."

"Who’s on press duty?" asked Matt.

“Dan and Kevin,” Wymack answered. “If they're both still up to it, that is.”

Dan’s smile was tired, but wide and genuine. “Yeah, I’m definitely up for it.”

Nicky wrinkled his nose. “Oh, shit. What’re you gonna say about us, Kevin? Do we even want to know?”

Kevin shrugged. “I’ll tell them the truth, that I’m satisfied with our performance tonight, proud of our progress, and confident that we will continue to improve.”

Matt exchanged a startled look with Dan.

"So sincere. Not at all rehearsed," Aaron said sarcastically.

Wymack flapped his hand toward the door. “All right, Dan and Kevin, go do your thing. The rest of you, wash the stink off. If anyone’s thinking of breaking out the booze, remember the ground rules: stay safe, stay together, and stay the fuck off the road.”

Neil hurried off to the showers. He scrubbed his skin until he felt as raw on the outside as he did on the inside and quickly toweled off. After he pulled on his clothes, he stepped out of his stall and glanced at the mirror. Along his jaw was an ugly splash of slow-purpling red that matched the other bruises beneath his clothes. By morning, he’d be sore and stiff all over; however, his pain would pale in comparison to Jean’s.

Don’t think about him, Neil told himself sternly. His mind teetered at the edge of a cliff over a dark pit. If he looked down, he’d fall.

No one left the stadium until Dan, Kevin, and Andrew were ready to go. They walked outside together and split up in the parking lot. Neil climbed into the bed of Matt’s truck, stretched his legs out in front of him and let out a deep sigh. Every wrong move he made replayed in his head. Every mistake was crystal clear in hindsight. He clenched his eyes shut and tried to think about something else.

At the Tower, Dan decided a celebration was in order despite the team’s defeat and the fact that it was a Sunday night. Seth wasn’t expected to show up, but Andrew’s lot was lured in with the promise of alcohol. Neutral ground was safer, so they all agreed to go to one of the empty study rooms in the basement. Neil was put in charge of cups; he found ten that were close to being the same size and put them in a plastic bag to take downstairs.

Allison and Renee had already claimed a room. A song Neil didn’t recognize played from Allison’s portable speakers while the two of them rearranged the desks and chairs. Dan arrived a few minutes later with a bottle of soda tucked under her arm and a few half-empty bottles of liquor in a large paper sack.

“Did Matt get lost?” Allison asked wryly.

Dan made a face and set the soda down. “Seth showed up to talk.”

Allison and Renee exchanged a look. “This might be a good thing,” Renee said carefully.
“Matt forgives everyone too fast,” Dan muttered.

“That’s his choice.”

“I know, Renee.”

“Hello?” Nicky called from down the hallway.

“In here!” Dan shouted back.

A few seconds later, Nicky came into the room with a grin and a backpack full of junk food. Andrew, Kevin, and Aaron weren’t far behind. Allison changed the music to something more upbeat and Nicky began pouring drinks. Andrew and Kevin sat together in the corner of the room with a bottle of vodka Kevin had claimed for himself.

Neil accepted a cup of soda from Renee and leaned against the wall as he took a sip. The soda fizzed unpleasantly in his mouth. Dan pulled out a deck of cards and roped Allison, Renee, and Nicky into a game of poker. To keep things civil, they bet pretzels instead of actual money. For the second round, Aaron joined them out of boredom.

An uncomfortable, anxious heat stole across Neil’s skin, just like it always did when he lingered too long in the basement. He curled his toes in his shoes and stared at the floor instead of the walls.

There were no windows.

Rationally, he knew he was free to leave, but he felt trapped anyway. He hated the basement for a reason. He had already faced the Ravens that night, he didn’t want more reminders of the Nest.

Neil left his cup on a desk and sped out of the room, ignoring Dan when she asked where he was going. His legs ached as he took the stairs too fast. He burst through the door at the top and didn’t stop moving until he was outside.

In a flood of fresh air, he could finally breathe again.

He sat in the wet grass and clasped his hands behind his neck, sucking in deep breaths. The sounds of the outdoors slowly soothed him: insects chirped, laughter and music drifted out of open windows overhead, and in the distance was the dull roar of highway traffic. From his lonely hiding spot, he could hear the rest of the world carrying on as usual.

The Tower door opened. Neil kept his head down, hoping to go unnoticed, but he wasn’t that lucky. Footsteps approached, and then Kevin’s voice asked, “Mind if I sit?”

Neil exhaled sharply. “What do you want?”

A few feet away, Andrew lit a cigarette and watched the two of them.

Kevin slipped his hands into his pockets and remained standing. There was a strange expression on his face: peaceful, but detached. “Andrew told me about Naoya,” he said. “I called Coach Moriyama to let him know.”

“You what?”

“I’m supposed to make sure you have his phone number so you can call him yourself if something like this happens again. I explained that you lost it after Riko cut off your phone’s service.”

Neil fumed silently for a minute. “If something happens to him, his blood is on your hands.”
Kevin’s brow furrowed. “Don’t be absurd.”

“Didn’t you say the Moriyamas have a boogyman-like butcher on retainer in case they need someone sliced and diced?” Andrew asked.

It took Neil a second to remember how to breathe. “Andrew, can you give us a minute alone?”

Andrew squashed his cigarette with his shoe and went inside the Tower to wait.

“He asked what the Moriyamas were capable of, how dangerous they were,” Kevin explained.

“So you told him about the Butcher?” Neil hissed. “Even if the Moriyamas were going to send someone after you, they wouldn’t send him and you know it.”

Defensive, Kevin replied, “I don’t know that! It’s not like I got to read his job description. All I know is what I saw after your audition.”

Realization dawned belatedly. Neil had a vague recollection of his father disappearing into a meeting room at Castle Evermore with the master and another man. Riko wanted to spy on them, but Neil could tell what would happen since his father had brought his bag of tools.

Neil muttered, “I warned you not to look.”

Kevin’s expression turned pinched and wary. “That’s why Riko was afraid of you, you know.”

“What? Why?”

“The look in your eyes when you warned us. It was like it was normal, like you were so used to it that it didn’t bother you. That really freaked us out.”

“Poor you.”

“Neil, I don’t—” Kevin covered his mouth with his hand and turned to the side, shoulders sagging. “Does everything seem worse out here to you too? What the hell is wrong with me?”

Kevin sounded like a lost child. Neil was too numb to be affected by how wrong it was. They were free from the Nest, but not from themselves and Kevin needed to learn to navigate around the edges of his broken pieces just like Neil did.

“I can’t fall asleep sober anymore,” Kevin admitted.

Neil scoffed weakly. “You have a problem.”

“We both have problems.”

“Understatement of the century.”

Kevin shrugged in agreement and let his arms fall to his sides.

Neil asked, “Did you really mean what you said in the locker room?”

“I think so,” Kevin said. “Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between what’s true and what I want to be true.”

The Tower door opened again and loud voices spilled into the air, startling them both. Matt said, “I can’t believe you’re whining about this. You told me to do it.”
Next to him, Seth was clutching his bicep and scowling. “I didn’t think you actually would, though.”

“Well, think harder next time.” Matt glanced back at Andrew, who had followed them, and then he noticed Neil and Kevin. He smacked Seth’s injured arm to get his attention.

Seth lifted his hand in a half-hearted greeting. “‘Sup, fuckface?”

“What’s going on?” asked Matt.

Kevin straightened his spine, adopting the perfect posture of a soldier. “Mind your own business.”

“Our roommate is our business, asshole,” Seth said.

“He isn’t your roommate. You moved out.”

Matt ignored Kevin and said to Neil, “We’re gonna go get Seth’s shit from Abby’s house real quick. Wanna come with?”

Neil stared at him, incredulous and annoyed. He wanted to ask, “Seriously? Just like that?” After all the recent tension and turmoil, he couldn’t believe a real resolution was reached after one conversation.

“We’re not getting any younger. Come on,” Seth said impatiently.

With a heavy sigh, Neil decided he was too tired to question it any further. Like Dr. Dobson told him over and over, it wasn’t his job to fix everything. Maybe Matt and Seth’s truce was too flimsy to last, but that was their problem to solve. Neil stood up, wincing as his joints cracked, and went with his roommates. It beat staying in the dark with Kevin.
Things settle after the Ravens game.

Despite Seth being benched by a red card, the Foxes managed to eke out a win against the Bulldogs on Wednesday. They only won by a single point, but it was enough to clear away the gloom hanging over the Foxhole Court in the Ravens’ wake.

By Thursday, things were almost back to normal. Matt and Seth remained on good terms, the rift between them gradually sealing shut with the help of forced humor and Matt’s readiness to forgive. Sometimes, Seth looked like he was still walking on eggshells, which Neil privately thought was for the best. Maintaining the peace would require work, regardless of what motivated Seth’s return to the dorm.

Saturday was the day of the creek clean-up that Dan and Renee had decided on for the team’s annual volunteering event. Even though attendance wasn’t mandatory, everyone was in the parking lot at seven thirty, more or less ready to go. Kevin insisted on participating for the chance of good publicity, so naturally the cousins were there as well. Seth only agreed to go because of Allison, who was there because of Dan and Renee. Matt was enough of a team player to decide on his own to join in, but as a whole, the Foxes weren’t loyal to the idea of the team itself like the Ravens were. They followed each other.

Neil caught a ride with Andrew’s group while the upperclassmen took Matt’s truck. They met Wymack and Abby at a public parking area a few miles away from campus, where more volunteers for the creek clean-up were gathered. The site leader was a middle-aged woman named Deborah, who greeted Renee with a friendly hug. From what Neil gathered, she and several of the others attended Renee’s church.

Deborah radiated enthusiasm as she went over the general instructions and safety guidelines. Two other people handed out gloves and thick plastic garbage bags, and then everyone got to work. The Foxes were directed to a section of the creek north of the parking lot and they divided into their usual factions. Neil stayed with the upperclassmen. Andrew’s lot drifted towards a thin walking trail that cut through the thicket. Wymack and Abby crossed the creek to collect trash from the other side.

“Whoever finds a snake first wins,” Matt joked.

Allison glared. “I hope you get bit by something just for saying that.”

Neil scanned the grass around him. Questions about venom and first aid ran through his mind. He
checked to make sure Abby wasn’t too far away.

Seth crouched down to fish a tennis shoe out of the water. “I got bit by a snake once.”

“How’d that happen?” Matt asked, amused by the idea.

“My older brother said he’d pay me five bucks to pick one up,” Seth replied.

Dan met Neil’s eyes and shook her head as if to say, “What an idiot.”

Luckily, for all their talk about snakes, they didn’t come across much wildlife as they filled their bags with stray pieces of garbage. There were some small insects buzzing in the cool air. If Neil squinted, he could make out the shapes of minnows beneath the creek’s surface. Seth stepped into the water to turn over a couple large rocks and disturb some crawfish, soaking his sneakers in the process.

Further up the creek, Allison waved Neil over to help her untangle a bicycle tire from the weeds. After it was taken back to the pile of items too large to fit in the bags, Allison used a metal trash pick to spear some crumpled beer cans that were stuck up against a stone near the middle of the creek. It was Neil’s job to pull the cans off the end of the spike whenever she was successful.

“All special plans for Halloween?” Allison asked out of nowhere.

Neil dropped the last beer can into the bag and said, “There’s a Halloween thing at Eden’s on Friday, but I wouldn’t call that special.”

Allison said, “Normally-”

She was interrupted by Matt shouting, “Hey, Seth, I’ll give you five bucks if you drink this!” as he held up a bottle of what looked like water.

Abby called Matt by his full name in exasperation. Wymack said, “You’ve got no idea what’s actually in there, you dumbass. We told you not to open anything.”

Allison rolled her eyes. “Anyway, I was going to say that normally I’d rather chew glass than get within ten feet of the monsters, but I also refuse to spend another Halloween at some lame frat party. I’ve heard the club you guys go to is decent. Think you could get us an invite?”

Neil glanced toward Andrew’s group. The team spending a night at Eden’s together seemed like a bad idea. “Aren’t there other clubs you could go to?”

“The club isn’t the point,” she said, casually winding her arm around his shoulders. “Dan told me the monsters are into some new drug that sounds like a fun time.”

“I doubt Matt and Dan will want to do this.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Matt got over what happened and Dan will agree to it if I say the words ‘team bonding.’”

“And Seth?”

“He’ll do what I tell him.”

Against his better judgement, Neil said, “I’ll ask Andrew, but I can’t promise he’ll say yes.”

“You’ll figure out a way to make it happen. Don’t let me down.”
He had a good idea of how it would play out when he brought the topic up with Andrew, so he put it all out of his mind for the time being. The Foxes spent a couple more hours filling garbage bags with litter, and then Wymack rounded them up so they could haul everything to the parking lot. Deborah insisted on taking a group photo of them. With a huge smile, she thanked them for their help and moved on to take photos of another group.

After they cleaned up in the public restrooms, Wymack bought everyone lunch at a nearby diner before letting them go to the Tower to enjoy the rest of the afternoon.

Seth left to meet up with his friends and Matt went to the girls’ suite to hang out with Dan. Alone, Neil sat at his desk and tried to force himself to study. He tapped his pen against his biology notes, unable to focus, for half an hour. **Too much freedom these days,** he thought blithely. For a second, his mind dipped dangerously close to what the consequences for poor work ethic would be if the master dragged him back to the Nest.

Shuddering, Neil pushed away from his desk. He rubbed a hand over his face, exhaled harshly through his nose, and decided to get his conversation with Andrew about Halloween over with. It would be more productive than glaring at his schoolwork.

Nicky was the one who answered the cousins’ door when Neil knocked. It took him a second to recover from his surprise, and then he announced, “Andrew, we’ve got a guest.”

“What fun,” Andrew said. He leaned against the side of his desk, holding his cigarette near the open window. With his free hand, he beckoned Neil into the suite. “Step into my office.”

Aaron shifted around in his beanbag chair to watch the exchange. Nicky stayed by the door.

Neil stopped a few feet away from Andrew and squared his shoulders. “Can the upperclassmen come with us to Eden’s for Halloween?”

Predictably, Andrew started laughing.

Aaron shook his head at Neil and said, “Whatever drugs you’re on, you might want to ease up.”

Neil ignored him and waited for Andrew’s laughter to peter out. “I promised Allison that I’d ask. It was her idea.”

“What a good little ambassador you are,” Andrew crooned. “No opinion of your own, I suppose. Disappointing.”

“I’d call it a good idea if I wasn’t familiar with what you do to people.” Neil flicked a significant look at Nicky. It was enough to put a dent in Andrew’s amusement.

Andrew tapped ash onto the window sill and forced another grin. “Don’t be dull. Negotiate. Your future in diplomacy is on the line.”

“What if Allison paid for the cracker dust?” Neil asked. He didn’t know what he was doing. “Would you tolerate them for an evening in exchange for free drugs?”

“That’s less dull,” replied Andrew.

Nicky laughed nervously. “Uh, Andrew? You’re not actually considering this, are you? Not to be dramatic, but I’d rather die than go clubbing with Seth.”

“I can keep Seth in line,” Neil told him. He didn’t think it’d be a challenge since Seth was trying to
stay on Matt’s good side.

Nicky clamped his mouth shut and widened his eyes at Andrew, trying to silently communicate something. Rules were still in place that kept him from speaking directly to Neil.

A tense moment passed, and then Andrew spoke. “You’re going to put a muzzle on Seth Gordon? Now that’s interesting. You officially have my blessing.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding,” Aaron protested. “We’re forced to associate with them enough as it is.”

Andrew gave his brother a chilly look. “Nobody asked you.”

“One condition,” said Neil. “If we’re doing this, I want you to promise that no one will end up high on drugs they didn’t give clear-headed consent to.”

“Done.” Andrew put his cigarette between his lips and dismissed Neil with a wave.

Once he was back in his own suite, Neil texted Allison to give her the news. Fortunately, she didn’t care that he promised her money to Andrew. She replied, *Good work A+*, and offered to reward him with dinner at El Encanto.

Somehow, Allison had already gotten the rest of the upperclassmen on board with her Halloween idea by the time they arrived at the restaurant that night. The conversation over dinner was split between Halloween costumes and the upcoming game against the Westwood University Cyclones. Neil was more interested in the latter, so he switched seats with Seth to be closer to Dan to talk to her about it. Strategizing with her was more enjoyable than it ever was with Riko and Kevin.

Of course, there was one small detail that Neil forgot about until the day of the game: the travel arrangements. Wymack had talked the school into paying for the team to fly for a change.

Before they left for the airport, Dan went around the suites to make sure everyone packed their bags correctly. Neil was grateful for the pointers she gave him and for the fact that she didn’t ask why he didn’t know everything already.

He wasn’t nervous when the team arrived at Upstate Regional, but he didn’t know what to expect. The airport felt cramped and clinical. Everywhere he looked there were signs with directions and flight information and reminders about TSA regulations. All the other people there looked like they knew exactly what to do and where to go. Their ease was enviable.

Neil watched his teammates closely for clues about what he was meant to do. At the check-in counter, he produced his student ID when the others did and reluctantly handed over his gear bag. The employee looped a label around the handle and put it on a conveyor belt, which carried it out of sight.

Next, they walked to the security checkpoint. Even though the line shuffled forward at a slow pace, Neil had to rush to get all his belongings into the large plastic tray sliding along the belt next to him. He emptied his pockets and removed his belt before stepping up to the metal detector.

“Remove your jacket,” the security officer barked at him.

Neil hastily stuffed his orange windbreaker into the tray. The officer motioned for him to walk through the metal detector and waved him away when no alarms sounded. Neil snagged his tray as it slid out of the scanner and gathered his stuff, nearly tripping over his shoes in his haste to put them back on.
The Foxes made it to their gate with plenty of time to spare. Neil was about to sit down with Matt and Seth when he noticed Andrew making a beeline for the wall of windows. Curious, Neil went with him. Outside, the rain clouds that had been darkening the sky all morning unleashed a downpour. The water running down the glass was smeared by the strong wind, blurring the view of the tarmac.

Neil asked, “Should we be worried about the weather?”

“Worrying won’t stop the plane from falling,” Andrew replied. His eyes were bright and alert. He zipped the pendant of his necklace back and forth along its chain, agitated and brimming with energy.

“Are you nervous?”

“Are you?”

“I’ve never been on a plane,” Neil admitted.

“Lucky.”

Neil stared at Andrew’s profile, surprised at the bitterness in his tone. “You’re not afraid of flying, are you?”

“Avoiding planes is a personal preference.”

“That’s what you’re calling it?”

“Yes. Personally, I’d prefer to be six feet under than five miles up in the sky in a tin can with wings.”

“Think I’d prefer flying to being underground.”

Andrew cocked his head. “If you had a choice between two hours on a plane or two hours locked in the Tower basement, which would you pick?”

Neil didn’t like the glint in his eyes.

“I only ask because Kevin gets a little skittish when he’s down there too. Care to discuss that?”

“No.”

“Good call. Go annoy someone else.”

Half an hour later, they were boarding their flight to Atlanta. Why they couldn’t fly directly to Florida, Neil didn’t know. Matt joked about it being a requirement to visit Hartsfield-Jackson, which didn’t explain anything.

Neil stuffed his bag into the overhead compartment and slid into the window seat he’d been assigned to. His view was almost entirely blocked by the plane’s wing. The air smelled stale and the change in pressure made Neil’s head feel funny.

“Are you a gum or a pretzel person?” Matt asked.

“For what?”

Matt gestured at his head. “To get your ears to pop. Do you chew gum or eat pretzels?”
“Depends on the day, I guess,” Neil lied.

A flight attendant went through a well-rehearsed routine about safety procedures. She demonstrated how to put on the seat belts and oxygen masks, pointed out the exits, and explained what the passengers should do in case of an emergency water landing. In the background, the whine of the engines grew louder.

The plane pulled away from the gate and slowly taxied toward the runway. Once they were lined up, the engines roared and the plane accelerated. Inertia pinned Neil to his seat, and then came the tickling swoop in his stomach as the plane lifted into the air. Pressure built in Neil’s head until his ears finally popped. Then, he heard the quick zing-zing-zing of Andrew toying with his necklace in the seat behind him. The noise didn’t stop until an hour and a half later when the plane touched down in Atlanta.

Hartsfield-Jackson was huge in comparison to Upstate Regional. Somewhere along the way to their next gate, Andrew and Kevin separated from the group. Neil craned his neck to try to find them in the crowd, but he decided not to worry too much since Wymack wasn’t fazed by their disappearance. They rejoined the group at the gate with ten minutes to go until boarding was scheduled to start. Andrew clutched a plastic bag from one of the gift shops in his hand and flashed a chilly smile in response to Neil’s questioning look.

When they got to Tampa, Wymack left the Foxes under Abby’s supervision at baggage claim. It took twenty minutes for their bags and their gear to appear on the belt. By the time they made it outside with everything, Wymack was waiting for them at the curb with the twelve-passenger van he’d rented.

They stopped for an early dinner in the city and got on the highway heading west over the Howard Frankland Bridge, then south through St. Petersburg. Afternoon sunshine cut through towering piles of clouds and turned buildings to gold. The highway snaked past trees and billboards and blocky signs until it reached the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. Neil squinted at the thick cables fanning down from the towers, briefly wondering at the engineering, and tried to memorize the view of the deep blue water with white-capped waves down below.

From there, it was only forty minutes until they reached Westwood University. Like the Foxes, the Cyclones played Exy on a repurposed basketball arena, but their remodel did a better job of hiding the building’s age.

In the locker room, Wymack looked over the clipboard given to him by a member of Cyclones staff and said, “Simmer down,” to get everyone’s attention. “I know we trounced this team last time, but don’t get cocky tonight. They’re getting desperate, they hate us, and we’re meeting ‘em on their own turf. I want you all to keep on your toes, understand?”

Most of the team responded with an obligatory, “Yes, Coach.”

Out in the stadium, the energy of the home crowd was high and hopeful, although the Cyclones’ chances of winning were low. The season hadn’t been kind to them. With a new captain at the helm, their head coach on maternity leave, and their star striker out on recovery from an ACL injury, they were plummeting through the ranks with only JD Campbell to cushion their fall.

Beating the Cyclones didn’t feel like much of a challenge. Winning always felt good, though, so he let himself relish in it as he followed his teammates into the tunnel to the chorus of jeering coming from the stands. Nicky blew a kiss to the crowd before stepping out of their view. Allison rattled off a string of creative insults about the Cyclones, raising her voice to be heard over Matt and Dan’s laughter. Seth chimed in with insults of his own whenever Allison paused.
Matt and Renee spoke to the press while the rest of the Foxes cleaned up. Neil showered and dressed as fast as possible in the women’s room. Then, he sat in the locker room with his bag at his feet and waited for everyone else. Kevin hovered by Andrew, who was quiet and slow-moving. He swatted Kevin away like an irritating fly when Kevin kept trying to shove a bottle of Gatorade at him.

After they left the Cyclones’ stadium, Wymack bought the team dinner at the first decent-looking restaurant they found and drove them to the hotel. He sternly reminded everyone to keep their noise level down out of respect for the other people staying there and to remember their curfew. Matt and Seth were assigned to a room together again and, as usual, Matt swapped key cards with Allison.

Neil draped his gear over the side of his bathtub to air it out and spent some time poking around his room. The wrapped bar of soap sitting by his sink was lilac-scented. A watercolor painting of an orange tree was hanging over his bed and a Bible was tucked away in the bottom drawer of his nightstand. His window overlooked a strip of lawn separating the hotel from the parking lot of a strip mall.

With nothing else to investigate and too much energy to sit still, he swapped his jeans for basketball shorts, pocketed his phone and wallet, and sprayed himself with insect repellent. The hallway was empty when he crept out of his room. He didn’t see anyone besides the person working behind the front desk until he got outside. Andrew was sitting on the sidewalk with his legs stretched out into an empty parking space. Neil sat next to him and stole the cigarette from his mouth, which earned him a sidelong glance.

With the Halloween party coming up, Neil wanted to ask Andrew about Matt’s night in Columbia, but he couldn’t figure out how to start. He wasn’t sure why he wanted to understand Andrew’s reasons for doing what he did. It wouldn’t change what happened and, ultimately, it wasn’t his business.

Andrew took the cigarette and stamped it out. He tucked the remainder of the stick into the pack to finish later. “Are you coming with me or staying put?”

“You were kidding when you said we’d steal a car, right?”

“Me? Kid? Never.” Andrew produced an unfamiliar key ring from his pocket and pressed a button on the fob. The lights on the Foxes’ rental van flashed twice.

Neil stared at him incredulously. “You stole from Wymack? When did you have time to do that?”

“Kevin went to his room to ask him something and I saw an opportunity to be seized.” Andrew stood up and brushed his jeans off. “Time to make a decision: are you in or out?”

Neil mentally tallied up the rules they’d be breaking, but the list wasn’t enough to deter him. After all, he didn’t seek Andrew out because he wanted to stay behind.

It wasn’t until they were inside the van that another potential issue occurred to Neil. Clicking his seat belt into place, he asked, “Have you ever driven a van like this?”

“No, but I’ve got the best spatial awareness this side of the Mississippi. It won’t be a problem,” Andrew replied.

“Is that with or without the pills?”

Andrew gave a single, sarcastic ha! and turned the key in the ignition. He adjusted the mirrors before putting the van in gear and pulling out of the parking space. When he turned onto the main road, the tires on Neil’s side hit the curb and jerked the van roughly.
Neil winced and grabbed the door handle. “What were you saying about spatial awareness?”

“You agreed to this.”

“Something to write on my headstone,” Neil muttered.

To Andrew’s credit, he got the hang of it quickly and there were no other incidents as they drove down the well-lit streets. Neil gradually relaxed enough to pay attention to the little details around them—teenagers riding bikes, an advertisement written in Spanish, palm fronds waving in the nighttime breeze.

Twenty minutes later, Andrew nosed the van into the drive-thru lane of a fast food restaurant. Knowing Andrew, Neil figured they were there to get ice cream. He looked at the illuminated menu board and shrugged. “I don’t know what’s good here.”

“Are we feeling adventurous?”

“I got into a stolen van with you behind the wheel, didn’t I?”

When it was their turn at the speaker box, Andrew got two orders of fries and two cups of ice cream. Neil’s was mint-flavored with crushed Oreos mixed in and, for himself, Andrew got chocolate with brownie pieces and caramel sauce. They waited to eat until they were parked at a nearby beach.

Fresh sea air poured in through the open windows and the sound of waves could be heard. There was only the meager light of the dashboard to see by, but the darkness was peaceful. Not a bad way to end the day, in Neil’s opinion.

Andrew said, “The table at Sweetie’s is booked for nine thirty. Make sure Allison brings cash.”

“I’ll pass the message along.”

Andrew went back to digging chunks of brownie out of his ice cream. Neil still had a couple inches in his cup, but he didn’t feel like finishing it. On a whim, he set the cup in the cup holder and got out of the van.

Most of the clouds had drifted away, leaving enough moonlight for Neil to successfully navigate between patches of tall vegetation. He reached a blank stretch of pale, powdery sand and began taking his shoes and socks off. Behind him, he heard Andrew’s car door open and shut.

Neil waded into the water until it could touch the hem of his shorts. The night air was calming in a melancholic sort of way. The push-pull of seawater around his legs tempted him to go farther out, but he decided against it. He looked up at the stars and listened to the waves rush up onto the beach over and over, reaching for what they couldn’t have.

Eventually, he forced himself to head back. Andrew was waiting on dry land; the ember of his cigarette was a speck of orange glowing in the dark. They returned to the van together and Neil used the napkins from the fast food restaurant to wipe sand off his feet with little success. Forgoing socks, he put his shoes on in an attempt to minimize the sandy mess he made of the footwell.

When they got to the hotel parking lot, Neil asked, “So how’re you going to get away with car theft?”

He didn’t get an answer. Following Andrew into the hotel lobby, Neil watched him go up to the front desk and claim he found the key ring lying on the sidewalk. The employee put it away in a cabinet for safekeeping without a single question. Neil couldn’t believe it was that easy. He didn’t want to admit that a part of him was a little impressed.
In the elevator, Andrew flipped his hands palm-up and dryly said, “Ta da.”

“Not bad, but Wymack might notice the fuel gauge or the odometer-”

“Or all the sand you left on your side.”

“-and figure out someone took the van,” Neil finished. “The list of suspects will be pretty short.”

“Next time, you can be in charge of stealing us a ride and I’ll be the one who nitpicks.”

They got off the elevator on the second floor and reached Neil’s room a few moments later. Yawning, Neil swiped his key card to unlock his door. “See you at breakfast,” he said as he stepped inside.

Andrew tapped two fingers against his temple before continuing down the hallway alone.

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!! <3

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