Jailbirds

by peachycans

Summary

Waylon Park, a high-school senior, gets accused of a crime he didn't commit and is sentenced to two years at Mount Massive Reform- A step down from a year in prison. Disowned and completely alone, Waylon tries his best to make allies among the other inmates. But something much more foul lurks through the halls of MMR, and secrets dug so deep that not even the most intelligent inmates can shed light upon it.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
The judge tried to comfort Waylon and tell him that everything was okay; that the verdict could’ve been much worse. That he could’ve gotten a much harsher penalty. That he was alright.

Waylon was not alright. Not in the slightest.

The courtroom was already empty; had been for almost ten minutes. Two officers waited to escort him out, one on each side. Waylon was too busy running his twitchy fingers through blonde locks. This was not happening.

‘Oh god,’ Waylon thought uneasily, a wave of nausea threatening to make him keel over and release the contents of his stomach. ‘How the hell did I get here…?’

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

Waylon groaned loudly as he sat up in bed, pages upon pages of homework shifting and falling to the floor. He peeled off his large, circular reading glasses to rub at his tired eyes. What the hell was making that annoying clinking sound?

THUD.

Growling, Waylon glared daggers at his bedroom window. He stomped over to the glass, about to fling it open and confront whoever stood below when someone started screaming down the hall from his room.

“Waylon! Are you the one stomping all over the place you useless little shit?!” He heard an angry male voice shout in his general direction. The house was completely silent for a split second before Waylon decided to respond.

Gulping, Waylon moved for the door and slowly cracked it open, “Sorry Uncle, I didn’t mean to.” He practically squeaked out.

He heard his aunt shouting something at his uncle. Waylon couldn’t make out much, but he did hear the words ‘sick’ and ‘orphan’ tossed around. The blonde shook his head and closed the door, moving back over to his bed and picking up his homework.

Waylon wasn’t sick. He just had a twitching problem and it wasn’t his fault that he got scared so easily. But that’s what his aunt always thought, and there was no way of changing her mind.

THUD.

‘Oh, right.’ Waylon thought as he opened up the window and glared down at two boys standing on the front lawn of his house. One had a few scars across one half of his face and dark black hair. The other was bald with small eyes and a thin stature. The latter waved up at Waylon, grinning like an idiot while the other kicked him.
“What are you guys doing here?” Waylon practically hissed down at the two idiots standing below. “You’re gonna get me in a lot of trouble if you don’t leave.”

“Well, Silk here decided to be a dipshit,” The black-haired boy stated, glaring at his comrade, “And left his phone in his locker at school. He needs it for an appointment tomorrow afternoon and we wanted to know if you could give us a ride tomorrow morning to go get it.”

Waylon rolled his eyes, beginning to feel his fingers twitch, “Ugh, fine—Fine, but be here by seven. And I’m only doing this if you get out of here right now before my uncle blows a fuse. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll stay at Pyro’s tonight so he can wake me up.” Silk nudged the boy standing next to him before they both started walking back down the street. “See you tomorrow!”

The blonde closed his bedroom window slowly, sighing as he sealed the locks. The whole situation seemed a bit odd to him. They needed a ride to school, and they didn’t call one of their better friends? Waylon hardly knew them; they just talked to him occasionally in anatomy and physiology. Well, Waylon did live down the road from them, so the closeness was probably their convenience.

“Waylon! Get down here!” Waylon’s uncle shouted from the floor below. The blonde groaned, moving over to his bedroom drawer. He pulled out a small first-aid kit and an extra roll of gauze, tossing it onto his bed. His fingers and legs began to twitch rapidly as he opened the door to go downstairs and see what his uncle wanted.

The next morning, woken up by his alarm and an ache in his cheek, Waylon crawled out of his bed and got dressed. He made it a point to be very quiet when moving around the house as to not disturb his sleeping relatives.

Just as he had said, Waylon was outside at 7:08 AM with the two boys from the night before waiting in his driveway. The blonde glared tiredly at them before gesturing to his beat-down car. The clambered into the back eagerly as Waylon started the engine, driving for ten minutes to their local high school.

When they arrived, Waylon waited in the car while the two made their way to the front entrance of the school. Using Pyro’s student I.D. to unlock the door, Waylon expected them to be in and out in a matter of a few minutes.

A few minutes passed. Then another few. Twenty minutes.

Waylon paid no attention to the time it was taking for the duo to get in and out until he began to smell smoke through the window of his car. The blonde jolted up from his half-asleep state, glancing over towards the clock in his car. Twenty-three minutes had passed.

The blonde was about to get out of the car when he noticed trails of smoke rising from all different sides of the building. Pyro and Silk ran out of the building hardly a minute later, panting heavily as they jumped into the back of Waylon’s car.

“What--” Waylon began to ask nervously, but was cut off by Pyro screaming at him.

“Drive!” The black-haired boy shouted, banging on the ceiling of the car and laughing wildly along with his friend. Waylon didn’t think about the situation for a second longer; he put the car into drive and pulled out of the parking lot as fast as possible.

It took Waylon a moment to orient himself with the situation enough to speak, “What the hell did you guys do?” He breathed heavily, taking a left wildly as a red jeep honked.
“What did it look like, dumbass? We set the building on fire.” Pyro stated matter-of-factly. Silk laughed, slapping his friend on the back while clutching his stomach.

As soon as the words came out Waylon swerved to the side of the road and slammed on the brakes. Everyone jerked forward, hard enough to wipe the smirks off of the duo’s faces. Waylon spun around in his seat, eyes alight with fire.

“How do you even realize what you just did? You’ll be arrested and have to go to prison or, or something like it!” Waylon yelled, slamming his fist on the passenger seat. “Get the fuck out of my car!”

“Psh.” Pyro sneered, grabbing Silk by the collar of his shirt and tossing him out of the car. “Not if we don’t get caught. And by the way,” The smirk replaced itself quickly on the boy’s face, gripping the car door tightly. “You will too. Security cameras are good at picking up license plate numbers. You think I can’t drive?”

Waylon froze in place as the door slammed shut. The blonde watched in his rearview mirror as the two ran down the road and further away from the crime scene. He sat in place, putting the car’s brakes on and shutting off the engine before burying his face in his hands. He was technically guilty of helping a crime, Pyro was right. But how could he have known that they weren’t going to the school just to get Silk’s phone?

He could smell smoke even from the drive away from the school. Waylon let out another wet sob, collapsing in on himself. He passed out, waking up every now and then to different things. Fire truck sirens racing down the road. Loud trucks passing by. Police sirens going off. Car doors slamming shut. Someone’s arms wrapped tightly around him.

At the last one, Waylon tried to wake himself up from his hazy state in order to see who was carrying him. He could faintly feel the scratchy material of a police uniform against his cheek, cursing lowly before falling back into pure nothingness.

Oh, right. That was why Waylon was sitting in a courtroom, about to vomit all over the polished floor.

Pyro and Silk had disappeared to god knows where. Police searched their homes, frequent hangouts, even questioned relatives and friends. No one knew where they’d gone.

But Pyro had been right. Soon after police had arrived at the school, they checked out the security cameras and had discovered Waylon’s license plate number as he’d zoomed in and out of the parking lot. They’d taken him into custody and, after a month, finally decided what his fate would be.

He was being sent to Mount Massive Reform. Better than flat-out jail time.

They allowed Waylon to pick three belongings to take with him to the school/prison. Within reason, of course. His reading glasses were a must, so they weren’t counted.

He made careful work of choosing what to take. First was his old varsity-style hoodie. It was white with dark-blue arms, pockets and hood. Next was his computer equipment. He called his laptop Parker, named after his last name Park. People constantly teased him for it, but the name had just kinda stuck.

Last was a photograph of Waylon and his parents from when he was three years old. It was taken at restaurant he couldn’t remember the name of, but he remembered them going to it a lot. That was a
Waylon was sitting in the back of a police car, his wrists cuffed behind his back uncomfortably. His items were apparently already in the room he was sharing with another— inmate? That didn’t sound right. Maybe convict was a better word? Mount Massive worked a lot like a jail, if the security and wire fencing outside the front gates were any indication.

“Alright, kid.” The officer said, stepping outside of the car and opening the door for him. “Time to move out.”

It was nighttime, Waylon realized as he stepped out of the car. Probably for the best; Waylon wouldn’t have to worry about any detainees with a lust for blood at this hour. The officer escorted him through the plentiful amount of security gates and into the main office of the building.

The officer nudged Waylon towards a man standing behind the front desk, “Here’s the kid, Frank. I’m off for the rest of the night.” He murmured before making his way to the exit.

Waylon gulped down his fear as the gangly man turned towards him, long hair and beard giving off a somewhat frightening first-impression. The man moved out from behind the counter and took a step towards him, crouching down to his height.

“I’d say…” The man named Frank mumbled, holding his hand just above Waylon’s head, “Five foot three.” He scribbled the information onto a notepad before placing it into his back pocket. “Hi there Mr. Waylon Park, I’m Officer Frank Manera. This’ll be your new home for… How long is your sentence…?”

The blonde tried to avoid eye contact as Frank pulled out his notepad again. He looked back up, “Two years. You look pretty young, not counting that scruff growin’ on your face. You sure you’re seventeen?” He joked.

Waylon finally met the man’s eyes and nodded nervously. Frank clapped him on the back, gesturing to a door at the other end of the office, “Well, we got people here from sixteen to twenty-five, so lots of kids your age. Follow me, I’ll get you all of the stuff you’ll need and show you to your new room.”

Frank brought Waylon through the door and past a set of security locks before they were in a long hallway with a few officers roaming around. Some glanced curiously at Waylon as Frank brought him into a large supply room.

“Alright,” Frank said, cracking his knuckles and pulling a key out of his pocket. He held it before Waylon and gave him a cold stare, “You gonna behave, or do we need to keep the cuffs on? …I need you to tell me with your words.”

“Y-yeah, I’m fine.” Waylon mumbled, beginning to feel his fingers twitch. It seemed to be enough for Frank; a moment later his cuffs were removed. The blonde rubbed his wrists and stretched out his arms as Frank pulled a few uniforms off of a high shelf.

“Whelp, this is what you’re gonna be wearin’ while you’re here. Unless you brought clothes…” Frank asked, handing Waylon the small pile.

“Uh, a sweatshirt, yeah.” He sighed, thinking about the fluffy garment and how much better he’ll feel when he’s back into it again. “M-My stuff is in my r-room, right?”

Frank chuckled, handing Waylon a few notebooks along with the pile. “Yeah, all of it’s there. Don’t worry; the first week or so here is tough. But the better you are and more privileges you earn, you
can start requesting stuff like certain clothing items and trinkets and whatever you kids like. We got
timed wifi, be happy you’re not in a real jail.”

Frank nodded with approval as Waylon hefted up his pile, “So I guess I should show you to your
room.” He opened the storage room door again and held it open for Waylon, leading him down the
hall, “There are three floors of rooms here. You’re on level one. The rooms are pretty small, two
twin beds and a desk with a little bit of moving room, but that’s all there is to it. Your storage areas
are these little compartments under your beds, they’re actually pretty neat.”

Waylon nodded along with the man, feeling more comfortable in Mount Massive already. If all of the
guards were this nice, his time shouldn’t be too bad—hopefully.

Frank continued, “Everyone gets up at seven. Eat in the cafeteria, go to class until one with lunch in
between, yard time until four, everyone back inside for dinner, and then you’re free to hang around
on your floor until curfew at eight. As long as you don’t start any fights or get hostile with guards, no
harm done. We check on you guys every two hours at night, usually never wakes anyone up, and
full room checks Mondays once a week.

“We usually have two of you kids per room. You’re roomie’s name is Miles Upshur. Great kid, a
little fanatical but not in a bad way.” Waylon noticed that sometime during their conversation they
started climbing a set of stairs, and soon enough Frank was unlocking a door at the top step.

As soon as the door opened, Frank patted Waylon’s back and gestured him into the small hallway.
There were about ten doors in total, Waylon calculated, five on each side. Some of them were open,
some closed, but all of them had security locks on the frames. Waylon assumed it was for curfew.

“Here ya go kiddo.” Frank said, getting Waylon’s attention again. He was halfway down the hall
already and standing in front of an open door.

Waylon approached him cautiously, glancing around for any sort of threat. There wasn’t anyone else
in the hall itself besides one large man at the end sitting on the floor reading a book. He glanced up
from the pages to look Waylon up and down. He gave him a small smile before looking back down.

The blonde glanced inside of the small room and saw a boy not much taller than him but certainly
older lying asleep on the bed furthest from the door. His skin was much darker than Waylon’s pasty
white, and even darker brown locks of hair were pulled back into a small ponytail. Waylon walked
in, glancing over at his items lying pristine on the desk across the room.

“Hey, Miles!” Frank shouted from the doorway, startling the man awake, “This is your new
roommate, Waylon Park! Why don’t ya introduce him to some of the other kids here, hm?” Frank
grinned, hitting the doorframe twice and nodding at Waylon before departing.

Waylon was in complete panic at his only safe-haven leaving as the man across the room cleared his
throat, “Park, huh? Miles Upshur.” He held out his hand for Waylon to shake.

It took him a moment, but somehow Waylon returned the handshake. Miles scratched the back of his
head before looking around the room. He picked up a notebook and pen at one end of his bed,
quickly scribbling down on the paper and looking back up at Waylon every few seconds.

“It’s an impulse thing, I write down a lot of the stuff I see. So how old are you Park, thirteen?” Miles
asked, finally plopping his pen and notebook down on his lap.
“I uh, I’m seventeen, actually.” The blonde muttered embarrassedly. What was with everyone mistaking him as a twelve-year-old?

Miles’s eyebrows shot up immediately, going back to scribbling down in his notebook, “Wow, you sure look a lot younger than that. I’m nineteen. Heh,” Miles held up his notebook and pointed to a small doodle of a dot-eyed, diamond-nosed version of Waylon. “That’s you.”

Waylon chuckled, taking the notebook into his hands and tracing over the scribble. It sure looked cute. But Waylon himself was not cute. At least he didn’t think he was. He handed the notebook back to Miles and glanced down at all of the items on his bed.

“You’re probably gonna wanna change into your P.J’s before I show you around. They should be on the bottom of the pile Frank gave you… Aha,” Miles mumbled, pulling out a plain white t-shirt and brown flannel pants. “There we go.”

“Oh, thanks.” Waylon said quickly, grabbing the clothes with a reddened face. He closed the door and ducked under the side of his bed, slipping on the clothes as fast as possible. When he was done Waylon grabbed the hoodie he brought and pulled it over his head, standing up once more to a grinning Miles.

“Wow,” The brunette clapped slowly, hopping off of his bed and opening the door. He raised an eyebrow at Waylon. “It’s only seven-forty, we still got twenty minutes. I’ll show you to the people that I know.”

Waylon nodded, following Miles out the door and into the hall. Miles glanced around for a moment before his eyes locked on the man sitting on the floor at the other end of the hall, “Hey, Chris! Chris, we got a new guy! His name’s Wayland Park- That’s your name, right?” Miles asked for confirmation.

“Uh, Waylon, but almost r-right.” Waylon stuttered, shoving his hands into his hoodie’s pockets to conceal his fingers, which began to twitch once more.

The man closed his book and stood, his height towering more than a foot above Waylon. He was very intimidating. But instead of beating him up, Chris took Waylon’s hand and shook it gently. “Chris Walker. Nice you meet you, Waylon. I see you’re Miles’s new roommate. Have fun with him, he’s definitely… Something.” He teased, earning a light punch to the arm and a ‘Hey!’ from Miles.

Miles shook his head, tilting his head towards the door cracked open next to Chris. “Chris has a roommate, too. Very much on the dramatic side though, and he has a tendency to be-”

“I can hear all of you, you know. You did leave the door open.”

Chris peeked into the room before opening the door the rest of the way to reveal a very tired-looking man sitting crisscross on the furthest bed, a pencil and sketchbook in hand. His jet-black hair was slicked back into a severe undercut, and he had an amazingly sculpted jawline. Waylon was amused; the whole image was a little ridiculous. The man was clearly way too big for the bed.

Waylon hadn’t realized he’d been chuckling until the man glared him down and stood from his perch. That certainly shut him up; he was nearly the same height as Chris, and the muscle definition showing through his navy-blue sweatshirt looked like he could pack a punch, “What are you laughing at?” He demanded.

As soon as the man cleared the doorway Chris held his shoulder back, chuckling softly. “Ed, this is
Waylon Park, the new guy. Waylon, this is my roommate Eddie Gluskin. Which sucks because we hardly fit into the room together as you can see.” He laughed again, letting go of Eddie’s shoulder.

Eddie looked Waylon up and down with tired eyes before glancing down at Waylon’s face. Waylon was short; Eddie was very, very tall. “So what, is he twelve or something?” He asked Miles and Chris.

Waylon hissed. “Goddammit.”

“Nah Eddie, he’s seventeen.” Miles laughed, “I know, a shocker. If his voice wasn’t so deep and he didn’t have all that scruff I don’t think anything would be able to convince me he wasn’t.”

Waylon silently glared at Miles as the brunette held up his hands in defense, “Hey man, its cool. Chris here’s 20, and Ed’s 21. Smart of Mount Massive, putting the two biggest guys in one room. Watching them trying to fit into that room is funnier than your age Park, trust me.”

Eddie stared coldly at Miles, about to retort when an alarm bell went off. Chris retreated into his room while Waylon yelped, accidentally tripping over Miles’s leg and falling straight into Eddie’s chest.

Waylon froze on the spot, not even daring to look up at the most likely seething man above him. He felt his entire body go into some sort of shock, his head down to his toes consumed in furious twitching.

Suddenly Waylon felt two very large gloved hands on his shoulders pulling him off and back into a standing position. Eddie looked Waylon up and down before walking back into his room and slamming the door shut angrily.

It was dead silent in the hall for less than a fraction of a second before Miles slapped Waylon’s still-twitching back, “Oh-ho-ho-ho, you’ve done it now, Park.” He laughed, grabbing Waylon’s arm and pulling him back towards their room.

“Oh god, what the hell was that.” Waylon chocked out, flopping down onto his bed and curling up into a ball. All he wanted to do was disappear into the sheets.

Miles, still laughing, closed the door and flopped onto his bed. A loud metallic click of the security door could be heard, and the lights in the room flickered off. Miles let out one last giggle before speaking. “That was the curfew bell, dummy.”

Waylon made an ‘o’ shape with his mouth. Miles continued, “Like I was saying before Eddie interrupted me, he’s here because of his anger issues. Nearly killed a man; it’s only a rumor, but I’m convinced he actually killed someone once. He hates being touched, you know. And you fell right into him.” Miles laughed once more, flopping down into the sheets of his own bed.

“Goddammit, not even my first day and I already fucked myself over. Like usual.” Waylon groaned, rubbing his eyes.

“Aw, cheer up Park,” Miles comforted, yawning. “You’ll get used to the place. And I’m sure you probably won’t even be around Eddie Gluskin most of the day, anyway.”

Waylon nodded, trying his best to fall asleep. But for the rest of the night, he worried the security door would unlock and a tall, scary man would come in and slit his throat while he was asleep.

He never did.
I tried to explain as much as possible in this first chapter all the while keeping many things to come later in the dark-- I hope I did an O.K. job of it, I wasn't 100% sure. There's a lot of detail that's going to be put into this story, that I can say with certainty.

Like all of my other stories, I'll put any warnings required in beginning notes. I don't think anything that big will be needed for a while, though.

For updates/notifications/art on Jailbirds, visit here.
The next morning, the door slammed open so harshly that Waylon Park shook himself awake. He squinted over his shoulder to see Frank standing in the doorway, a clipboard and pen in hand.

Frank scanned over the room thoughtfully before making two marks on his paper and moving down the hall, “Everybody up! Don’t make me bring more guards down here! Everyone remembers what happened last week. Yes, I’m looking at you, Stevenson.” Waylon heard him shout off from the other end of the hall.

Feet began to shuffle around outside. Frank called out once more, “Dressed and in the cafeteria in ten minutes! Anyone that’s late won’t be sleeping in their own room tonight, that clear?”

Waylon groaned, rolling off the side of his bed tiredly. He heard Miles chuckle from across the room, the other man already getting up and pulling his morning clothes on. His positivity didn’t make Waylon any more anxious to be up and at it. Not one bit.

“C’mon little man,” Miles laughed as he finished clothing himself, moving to pull Waylon up off of the ground just so he could flop back onto his bed again. “Your first day, you don’t want to spend it in solitary confinement.”

“I’m not little,” Waylon scoffed, pulling himself up onto his feet. He opened the cabinets under his bed and pulled out the same MM t-shirt Miles wore, matching slacks and soft-toed boots. He sighed, “Clearly I fucked up yesterday night—Uh… Miles. I fucked with one of the biggest guys in this wing. …I assume. Seems like it.”

Miles waved his arm, plopping back down onto his mattress as Waylon changed, “Nah, you’ll be fine. Gluskin’s a hard-ass, sure, but he’s not so bad once you get used to him. Most of the time. Y’know he was actually part of that whole Stevenson incident Frank was talking about from last week? You should’ve seen it, it was hilarious. Beat him down into the floor.”

The blonde sent a half-assed glare in Miles’ direction, “You’re not really helping.” He grumbled, pulling his pants on the rest of the way.

Miles chuckled, “You know you look like a proper little school boy with those clothes.” He thought aloud, scanning Waylon up and down.

Waylon’s cheeks reddened from embarrassment as he grabbed his hoodie off the side of his bed and tugged it over his head. Miles was likely right; he glanced at other inmates roaming down the hall and noticed all of them seemed to be wearing normal-like clothes. Even Miles with the MM t-shirt still wore jeans rolled up at the ankles and orange flip-flops.

“Whatever.” The blonde mumbled, pushing the door open a few inches to peek down the hall. There weren’t many other people left in the hall besides him. Just Frank, a couple inmates Waylon had yet to meet, and- of course, of course Eddie and Chris were still present.

Chris noticed the mess of blonde hair peeking out from the doorway almost immediately. “Hey there, Park! How are you feeling this morning?” The larger man greeted as if they’d known each other their whole lives.

“U-uh, I-I-I’m good, thanks.” Waylon stuttered, feeling his right leg and arm begin to twitch with anxiety. Waylon’s eyes quickly flickered over towards Eddie, still cautious of the other man’s presence.
Eddie seemed to be completely unaware of everything going on around him; he was staring at the wall across the hall where Chris had once stood. Waylon took the moment of opportunity to scan the man’s appearance more thoroughly. Pale skin, raven-black hair shaved back into a wild-looking undercut, and a chiseled jawline. A dark blue flannel buttoned up with black plaid stripes, black slacks, and dress shoes—

‘Oh god, he’s coming this way.’ Waylon panicked as the other man moved down the hall, his eyes seemingly unfocused. It was only until he passed Waylon and Miles’ room did he shoot a quick, dark glare towards Waylon before moving down the stairwell at the end of the hall.

“That’s good to hear.” Chris nodded. He glanced into their room where Miles was pulling some notebooks apart on his bed, “Hey, Upshur! You coming to eat or what?” He asked with a playful tone in his voice.

“Two minutes.” Frank announced to the group, tapping the watch on his wrist impatiently. Miles groaned, yanking a dark brown notebook from his pile. He nudged Waylon’s shoulder to move him out of the doorway, shutting it behind them.

Miles shoved Chris before grabbing Waylon’s arm and pulling him down the hall to the stairwell. The blonde yelped, yanking his arm back when Miles’ grip slackened. He rubbed his wrist, the fingers of that hand beginning to twitch.

Chris took an approach from behind, gently tapping Waylon on the shoulder, “Hey Waylon, you okay? You’re twitching pretty bad…”

“It’s fine,” Waylon cut him off, dropping his hand and trying to will the bug off. Pointless, he knew. “U-uh, it’s just a thing I do. A habit.”

The larger man frowned, but decided not to press the issue further. Instead the three made their way down into a hall full of guards standing post and inmates moving around. Passing through a set of double doors, they found themselves in a very large cafeteria full of inmates bustling about.

Waylon looked around, his whole body beginning to twitch with fear as his eyes landed on Eddie. He was sitting alone at one of the rectangular tables nearby. The man seemed to have already gotten his breakfast.

He tucked a strand of blonde hair behind his ear, quickly moving over to the end of what he assumed was the food line. Waylon grabbed a small plastic tray from a rack along with Miles, nervously tapping his foot on the ground.

“Hey Park,” Miles began, nudging his shoulder. “Y’know normally I sit with Chris and Ed, but if you don’t want to I can sit somewhere else with you.”

That made Waylon pause. Miles was being strangely nice to him considering he was the newbie in a place he didn’t belong. It should’ve seemed suspicious to him, but instead he shrugged it off. An offer to be as far away from Eddie as possible? He’d take it.

Waylon nodded, holding out his tray for a few women and men working behind the glass. He got a scoop of scrambled eggs, peaches, and a hash brown. A man at the end of the line handed him a milk carton, and he was done.

The blonde scanned the room quickly and found a circular table nearby free of inmates. He moved to sit down, Miles following close behind. Waylon stared awkwardly down at his tray, unsure of what he should say. Or if he should say anything at all.
“So uh…” Waylon mumbled as he picked up his plastic fork, taking a scoop of sliced peaches. “This seems pretty casual. Considering that this is kinda like a prison and everything.”

Miles chugged a large gulp of milk, setting the carton down with a satisfied groan, “Oh it’s not usually this laid back. It’s kind of a Sunday-Monday thing. None of the guards like being here, especially on Mondays like today; we’ve gone a whole week without an incident. Everyone’s on their toes.” He laughed, staring up at the ceiling as if reliving one of the chaotic memories from week’s past.

Waylon chewed slowly, pressing his cheek on the table and grabbing a scoop of eggs. Miles eyed his roommate carefully, frowning.

“You alright, man? I know it’s your first day, but normally the other inmates have accepted that this is their life by now. What’s up? Was it something you did?” Miles asked curiously, patting Waylon on the back twice for good measure. He wasn’t the best at comforting people.

“I don’t belong here, Miles.” The blonde sighed, sitting up to take a long gulp of milk, “I didn’t do anything wrong. Now I’m paying the price for it? What kind of fucked up situation is that?” Waylon rambled, throwing the carton down onto the table.

Miles sat back, eyebrows raised. He yanked out a notebook and began scribbling on the lined paper. “What do you mean you didn’t do anything wrong? Everyone’s here for a reason, right?”

“N-not me,” Waylon stuttered, tapping his fingers onto the table carelessly. He sighed heavily and stared down at his tray. “I got convicted for something I didn’t actually do.”

It was clear to Waylon that Miles wanted to know more, but his questioning was cut off by a loud whistle at the other end of the room. Waylon shrieked, covering his ears. Dammit, he was scared by everything!

Waylon located the source of his distress after a few disorienting seconds. There was a woman standing by the back wall of the cafe; another guard. She had a menacing look to her features and short black hair even darker than Eddie’s, but not by much.

“All right morons, time to throw the trash out. Get rid of your garbage and get to your assigned classrooms. If we go without an incident, Frank will bring dessert to dinner later. Real dessert.” She commanded, clapping her hands together.

“Oh god,” Waylon panicked when Miles stood to throw his garbage away. He tugged at his roommate’s pant leg. “No one ever told me what room I was supposed to be in for the day!”

Just as he began twitching again, Miles came to his rescue with a firm hand on his shoulder, “Park, calm down. We only have two rooms and they’re alphabetized. A through M and N through Z. You’re with me.” He assured.

Waylon breathed out heavily, nodding his thanks to Miles. He stood up and tossed his garbage in a timely fashion along with the other inmates, sticking close to Miles. The blonde looked around quickly.

No Chris or Eddie in sight.

Waylon followed Miles close behind to the room he was supposed to go to, practically clinging to the man. He was nervous; he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to expect from a day at Mount Massive Reform.
Miles plopped down at a desk halfway into the room next to Chris. Waylon looked around and noticed that quite a few inmates were already in the room, even more still filing in. He took his chance and sat close to Miles.

“You’re lucky here, Waylon.” Chris mumbled from the desk diagonal to Waylon’s. It was a funny sight actually, seeing Chris fit into a desk. “Eddie’s not in this room.”

Waylon felt all of the energy he’d worked up over the course of the morning flood out of his body instantaneously. Now that was something he could get behind. It meant fewer problems to deal with.

“See Chris over here, his last name is Walker. I’m Upshur, and you’re Park. We’re all under N, so Eddie’s Gluskin, he falls under A. I told you, alphabetical.” Miles confirmed Chris’s previous statement, leaning over Waylon’s shoulder to peek at his desk. He began scribbling in his notebook again as Chris rolled his eyes.

The beginning of the ‘school’ portion of Mount Massive could’ve gone better, in Waylon’s opinion. It hadn’t gone horribly; but it definitely could’ve been better.

Their instructor was kind of an asshole. Waylon had no idea why he’d gotten his hopes up about having someone nice. Frank, he thought, made him think everyone was going to be polite right up front.

His name was Andrew and he was indeed a genuine jackass; particularly to Waylon. He started off by shouting Waylon’s name as a way of introducing him to the rest of the inmates that hadn’t learned about his presence yet. He’d quickly spewed off why Waylon was there, much to his dismay. Wasn’t that a personal violation or something?

Miles and several other inmates had slammed their hands on their desks and shouted like middle-school aged boys learning sex-ed for the first time. Andrew hadn’t been very detailed about what Waylon ‘did’, all he’d said was that he set a school on fire. Andrew had threatened his and everyone else’s behavior, waving a baton around for emphasis.

The first three hours of class were spent talking about behavioral correction. Waylon was bored out of his mind, almost falling asleep on his desk a few times in between. At ten-fifteen everyone got a ten-minute break to stretch and walk around. Guards were brought in to keep an eye on everyone during that period.

When everyone got back into the groove again after break, Andrew rambled on about etiquette for another hour before they began an actual interactive group paper to keep the inmates from passing out.

Another hour passed and Andrew announced to everyone it was time to go to the cafeteria for lunch. They received an hour in there, much longer than breakfast. It was extended for inmates to be able to walk around, stretch and socialize before they went back to sitting down for another hour and a half.

Waylon didn’t complain much after that; an hour to eat and talk to Miles? That’s what he continued thinking as the duo made their way down to the cafeteria for the second time that day.

Chris split off from them to go find Eddie (At least, that’s what Waylon assumed) while he waited with Miles in the food line. Thinly-sliced pizza, juice, and a small salad was what they were given to eat that afternoon.

Waylon held his tray tightly as he glanced over to the table he and Miles had sat at that morning. There was a group of inmates already there, all of them clearly older than Waylon himself by three
years minimum. One of them glared harshly at Waylon, clearly not happy about the latter taking his table.

The blonde yelped, moving faster to find another place to sit. It was then that he noticed a young man sitting alone at one of the rectangular tables. Waylon’s fingers twitched anxiously, but he moved to sit across from the boy nonetheless.

He said nothing at first, and neither did the boy. Miles stood a few feet from where Waylon had sat, staring questioningly. Waylon shrugged, unable to say much about the quiet boy in front of him. Miles took it as an answer anyway, plopping down next to the boy.

“U-uhm…” Waylon began, clearing his throat. It finally gained the attention of the young man. “Er… Hi.”

“Sup, kid?” Miles began much more nonchalantly than Waylon had. He gave the kid a firm pat on the shoulder.

The boy flinched, but still said nothing. Instead he looked up to Waylon with impossibly large, hazel-colored eyes. He looked around nervously before reaching a hand out to Waylon and crossing over his other to reach for Miles.

“Hi. Dennis. Sixteen.” The boy greeted calmly, waving both hands towards Waylon and Miles. Each took one of Dennis’s hands, shaking them carefully. The young man smirked, picking up a plastic spoon and pouring ranch onto his salad.

It took him a moment to understand what was happening, but Waylon noticed Dennis had been keeping an eye on him while he ate his food. He gulped nervously, feeling his left leg begin to twitch nervously.

“You’re supposed to be the new inmate, aren’t you?” Dennis asked carefully, shaving a forkful of lettuce and onion into his mouth. “You’ve been fidgeting all day.”

Waylon raised his eyebrows, “Uh, yeah,” He said, scratching the back of his head. This kid seemed to know about his arrival, had he seen him before? Waylon coughed, “Are you on the same floor as me?”

Dennis shook his head, “No. I’m on floor two. Although I’m allowed to visit floors one and three after dinner if I want. Privileges got bumped up. I’m not in your class either. I got class A. Word travels fast.” He explained carefully.

The blonde nodded, glancing around the cafeteria in search of Chris. After a quick scan he found the large man sitting at a table with a couple other inmates at the other end of the room. One of them being Eddie Gluskin.

He tried not to pay attention to that fact when Chris looked in his general direction. Waylon gave a small wave to the man, which was soon returned by a bright smile on Chris’s face. Chris seemed to like to know if Waylon was doing okay a lot; it was starting to become his thing.

The exchange gained the attention of Eddie, the other man looking about the room to see who Chris was waving at. As soon as his eyes landed on Waylon his gaze narrowed, slowly placing his fork back onto his tray.

Waylon tried muffling his yelp as he swiveled back around to the two other men sitting in front of him. It wasn’t until then that he’d realized both Miles and Dennis had been watching the whole exchange unfold. Dennis in particular seemed fascinated.
“Gluskin, huh? What’d you do to piss him off so soon?” The younger man asked casually, taking a sip of his orange juice.

“I-Well- I just bumped into him! That’s it! I didn’t even do anything!” Waylon near-shouted, slamming a fist down onto the table. He was tired of being tired. That all he did was nudge a guy and all of a sudden he was on the man’s hit-list. Who does that?

The blonde paused, looking up at Dennis, “Wait, how’d you know?” Waylon asked nervously.

“Well for one, he’s still glaring holes into the back of your head.” Dennis answered, tone completely relaxed. “It’s kind of creepy, actually. Walker looks like he’s trying to get his attention away from you.”

“Oh god, is he really?” Waylon flushed beet-red, his skull feeling like it was closing in on itself. His eyes darted around the room to a few inmates throwing their garbage away, and he stood. “I’m going to throw my stuff out.”

Miles’ eyes widened, “Well at least give me the crust of your pizza and your salad dressing, you food-heathen!” He demanded, grabbing both items off of Waylon’s tray before the other man had the time to reach for them.

Waylon rolled his eyes, tossing his things out in one of the many trash bins. He wiped his hands off over the bag, satisfied with his meal. He glanced over to Chris one more time, mainly to see if Eddie really was glaring at him when he noticed something.

Eddie wasn’t sitting at the table anymore.

Before Waylon even knew what was happening, a punch was thrown hard and fast into his nose that he would’ve never seen coming. He reeled back in shock, unable to get a single noise out before there was a hand at his throat shoving him against one of the cafeteria walls.

He could feel warm blood dripping down over his cheeks and lips from a fresh bloody nose. He cried out, pulling desperately at the hand clutching his windpipe. Waylon opened his eyes only to be met with the cold harsh stare from icy blue ones.

Someone at the other end of the cafeteria yelled, another few laughed, someone chanted the word, ‘Fight!’ a few times before giving up. Waylon noticed out of the corner of his eye Miles and Dennis freaking out, both moving up from their sitting positions.

The hand at his throat continued to get tighter and tighter in its hold. Waylon decided to give up his struggle; he was at least a foot shorter than the man before him, and his muscles had yet to develop. It was pointless, really. So instead he decided to focus on Eddie himself as said inmate choked the life out of him.

More details he could memorize. Bright blue eyes, a scar across his right eyebrow, chapped lips; dammit, now was not the time for this!

Three guards ran over, yanking Eddie off of Waylon hard and fast as to create the least amount of resistance. Eddie didn’t put up a struggle against them; he let himself be pulled back into the group’s embrace and dragged away to god knows where.

Waylon fell to the floor, sucking in large gasps of air. Two guards stood in front of him, helping him onto his side. Miles fell to his knees in front of Waylon, unsure of what he should be doing. Waylon hardly noticed Dennis standing nearby, gripping his arms to try and comfort himself.
The guards pulled Waylon up off of the ground in one swift motion. One of them was Frank; the older man threw one of Waylon’s arms over his shoulder, hefting him towards the exit in the back of the room. The other guard helped him towards the door, placing a few tissues up to Waylon’s still very bloody nose.

“Nothing to see here! Back to eating, all of you!” Frank yelled as they passed the rest of the tables in the cafeteria towards the exit. The other guard helped keep the doors open for Frank, who led them out into the hall.

“Dammit Park. Tough first day, huh?” Frank joked half-heartedly as he heaved Waylon down the hall. It only took them a minute to end up in what looked like an infirmary, hefting Waylon up onto one of the medical beds.

Frank nodded at the other guard, “Go get Trager and a lot of tissues.” He ordered, pulling more tissues out of his pocket to hold to Waylon’s nose. “You gotta sit up for me, Park. Hold these the best you can.”

Waylon nodded dizzily, trying to thank him. Instead he ended up hacking painfully, nearly keeling over onto the hard tile floor. Frank cringed just as the guard and another man dressed in doctoral scrubs enter the room. The guard’s help wasn’t needed anymore, so he departed back to the cafeteria.

“Christ, is this the new kid?” The doctor-like man asked Frank. “Common buddy, we’ll patch you up.”

The blonde looked around nervously, feeling the beginnings of unconsciousness seep into the back of his mind. He leaned back on the bed, closing his eyes. If only he could sleep for a couple of minutes…

When Waylon came to, he was still in the medical wing. Although he could tell he’d been moved, the sheets underneath him were much softer than before. He groaned softly, rolling over onto his side. He heaved out a long sigh, closing his eyes.

The doctor from before walked in from behind curtains, checking a clipboard quickly before looking up at Waylon, “Ah, you’re up. Good job, buddy. You’ve been asleep for about six hours.”

The blonde looked up at the ceiling, his eyebrows scrunching up with worry. The hell happened before he passed out?

Oh, right. Eddie had nearly strangled him to death. God, what was that guy’s deal?

“Name’s Dr. Rick Trager, but most of you kids just call me Trager. Some people are probably going to come in and ask you questions tomorrow morning,” Trager continued, nodding his head to the side. “Try to speak slowly. You’ll be here overnight, and then we’ll send you back to your room in the morning. You’ll be staying in there for a day to make sure your throat’s alright. Got some nasty bruising, buddy. A broken nose, too.” Trager finished, clicking his tongue.

Waylon nodded, lying back down on the bed and closing his eyes. He tried his best to fall back to sleep, even while Trager inspected his throat and the bandaging on his nose. But all he could think about was the man who’d tried to kill him just hours before, and how scared he was to see him again.

When he woke up again it was to a security guard he didn’t recognize at first carrying him into his room. Once he was placed on his bed, Waylon looked up to see it was the woman from breakfast the previous morning. She seemed to be overworked.
“Ah, you’re awake.” She said tiredly, “You’ve got some food and lots of water on the desk. Eat it when you’re hungry. Everyone else is in class for the day, so you should be alone until they get back. We’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

“Alright. Thank y-y-o-u.” Waylon croaked, reaching up to rub at his sensitive throat. The action caused his throat to flare up in pain, and he winced.

“No problem.” She nodded, exiting the room. Waylon managed to get up to eat, taking his time as to not irritate his injuries further. He fell back to sleep an hour later with a small nose ache throbbing back into his skull.

The very last time Waylon woke it was to the sound of inmates shuffling around outside his door. Miles burst through the doorframe moments later, expression even more excitable than usual.

Miles sucked in a long breath of air before spilling his guts all over the floor. “Holy shit Waylon, you’re back! Fuck, you missed so much! You just got dragged right out of that cafeteria a complete mess dude; there was a lot of blood on the floor. Boy did the janitors get pissed. Gluskin got put in solitary ‘till lunch today when he came back. Chris refuses to talk to him. Thanks to you guys we didn’t get dessert. Also Dennis was hanging around us a lot, guess he’s like, with-”

“Miles shut the f-f-u-uck up.” Waylon choked out, sitting up in order to cough over his lap. His neck ached, his nose ached, everything ached. But he wasn’t tired anymore. At least there was that.

“Woah Park,” Miles mumbled, walking over to inspect Waylon’s throat. “That… Doesn’t look pretty.” He said, tapping the underside of his chin.

Waylon rolled his eyes, “No s-shit.” He spoke louder than before, crossing his arms over his chest.

Miles grabbed his notebook off of the desk in the corner of the room, plopping down onto the bed next to Waylon. He looked to Waylon and back every so often while sketching something unknown. Waylon knew he was probably drawing out his injuries.

It was quiet for a while after that; Miles calmly drawing Waylon while talking about smoother parts of his day. Waylon was grateful for the distraction. But the peace was shattered once a large silhouette of a man took up space in their doorframe.

Eddie Gluskin.

“Get outta here, Gluskin. Can’t you see you’ve done enough to poor Way already?” Miles warned the taller man from his perch. It didn’t seem to affect Eddie in the slightest; his attention was completely focused on Waylon.

The man in question whimpered, knowing he would be unable to do anything if the other man decided to attack him again. But instead, Eddie placed a hand on the doorframe and sighed, taking a cautious step into the room towards Waylon.

The man looked up to the ceiling grumpily before glancing back down at Waylon, “…I’m sorry.” He grumbled, leaning on the wall across the room. He glanced over the blonde’s neck, visibly cringing. “…Looks like it hurts.”

Waylon gave a half-assed glared, leaning back on his bed. “It does.”

Eddie scratched the back of his head nervously, “…Sorry. I’ll just ah… Go.” He spoke nervously, almost high-tailing it out of the room. Miles looked between the doorframe and Waylon repeatedly beforewhistling.
“Well that’s something you only see once in a lifetime. Eddie Gluskin *apologizing* for something.” Miles said, slowly clapping his hands. Waylon moaned, covering his face with his hands.

He was gonna have one fucked-up time at Mount Massive. That much was certain.
Waylon’s throat felt dry when he woke up to the bedroom door opening the next morning. Miles had spent all night talking to him once they’d settled in. They stayed up much later than curfew; the doors had sealed, but their talk had carried on. Chris had come in ten minutes before lights out to make sure Waylon was doing okay.

The blonde had been more than surprised that Miles hadn’t pressed him on his arrest when he’d gotten back. Waylon was grateful for the lack of questions about the subject. He liked all of the friends he’d made thus far, but he wasn’t comfortable enough around them to talk about his own personal ordeals.

Instead Miles had decided to drone on about anything and everything he could come up with. How his day went, more complaining about not getting dessert, childish conspiracy theories. The whole time he talked he’d been sketching and writing in that notebook of his, even after the lights went off.

They’d talked about the three things they’d brought to Mount Massive. Waylon showed Miles his computer and photo, although the picture viewing was brief. He explained how he thought his varsity-style sweatshirt meant good luck. Miles had laughed.

The three things Miles had brought were as follows; a red plaid no-sew blanket, his extensive collection of rainbow hair ties, and his iPod 5 with its speaker system. Miles told Waylon he’d never put internet connection onto the iPod. When he asked why Miles had brought it, Miles told him it was because of his insane list of rock and alternative music. When Waylon told him he didn’t listen to music, Miles offered to show him his collection when they had the time.

Once the two had finally fallen asleep, throats parched, it was one o’clock in the morning. Waylon wasn’t too upset about the lack of sleep he’d gotten that night; he liked talking to Miles. It made him feel better and allowed him to forget about his injuries.

Waylon sat up carefully and stretched his arms over his head. The person taking check wasn’t Frank that morning. Instead it was a short man with a sunken face and tired eyes. The blonde shrugged, uncaring.

He stood up and immediately pulled out a fresh set of clothes. Miles was already up and about, yanking on a pair of his makeshift capris while scribbling in his notebook. He started pulling his hair back into a sloppy ponytail, putting the pen into his mouth. Waylon snorted.

“What?” Miles hissed through the pen as he tilted his head in Waylon’s direction. The blonde shook his head, amused. Miles grumbled, pulling on the ends of his hair and planting his hands on his hips, “You wanna put your pants on faster? We’re gonna be late to breakfast again.” He complained, hopping over Waylon’s bed towards the door.

Waylon yelped, “Just hold on a second!” He said, hurrying to pull his belt through loops with shaking hands. Once the plastic buckle sealed around his waist, he ran after Miles. “Wait, you jackass!”

He could hear Miles laugh manically halfway down the stairwell. Waylon growled, hopping down the stairs two at a time past other inmates in order to catch up. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and pressed on. “Miles!”

Waylon found Miles already in the cafeteria line, throwing his two best fingers forward. When the
blonde reached him he slapped his hands away angrily while a guard nearby yelled at Miles for indecency. Miles chose to ignore them.

They got their food quickly, Miles shoving through the line like he owned the place. Waylon followed, trying to find an open table to sit at. While he walked, the blonde hadn’t noticed that he’d passed Chris and Eddie’s table until a firm hand grabbed the hood of his sweatshirt.

“Uh-uh, no.” Waylon heard Chris order from where he was still holding his hoodie in place. Miles had seated himself next to Chris, watching the encounter with amusement. Dennis sat in the chair on the other side of Miles, a look of concern etched on his face.

And then there was Eddie. The bulk of a man sat across from Chris, staring at Waylon with an unreadable poker face. The blonde gulped once Chris let go of his sweatshirt. The man gave Waylon a small smile, gesturing to the only other open seat; next to Eddie.

“Sit with us, Waylon. Gotta get to know you at some point.” Chris commanded more than offered, kicking the empty chair on the other side of the table.

Waylon grumbled, plopping down and avoiding eye-contact with Eddie while doing so. He rolled his eyes, poking at a pancake disinterestedly. A few minutes passed in total silence, tension clearly straining above their heads. Chris and Miles sighed in unison.

“Alright you two fuck-nuggets,” Miles growled impatiently, propping himself up in his seat. He crossed his arms over his chest. “You two need to make up right now before I McFreakin’ lose it.”

Everyone paused, looking up at Miles in shock. Eddie coughed, “McFreakin lose it…?” He asked, confused. Chris was trying his his best to choke back laughter.

Waylon looked up at the other man, biting the inside of his cheek in order to keep himself from bursting into giggles, “How do you know about that video, anyway? Almost every website here is under block.” He asked curiously.

Miles’ cheeks burned angrily as he slammed his palms down onto the table, “I haven’t been here that long! Besides, you’re changing the subject!” He pointed two fingers at Eddie and Waylon and plopped back down into his seat. “Make. Up.”

Both Eddie and Waylon glanced at each other for a moment before turning away. Waylon’s cheeks heated up while his fingers twitched nervously on top of the table. Eddie furrowed his eyebrows uncertainly.

“It’s uh, it’s a video.” Waylon mumbled. Eddie glanced down at him, brows still furrowed. The blonde cleared his throat nervously, looking up to the other man in order to continue, “McFreakin’ lose it. It’s a video of a Ronald McDonald screaming in the middle of one of their restaurants.”

“…Sounds childish.” Eddie replied, finally relaxing his eyebrows. Waylon chuckled, glancing over to the other end of the table. Dennis rubbed his face continuously, Chris stared at the two oddly and Miles groaned, leaning back in his chair.

Clearly the clarification wasn’t good enough for them. Luckily Waylon didn’t have to initiate anything else; Eddie outstretched his hand towards Waylon carefully. He managed to keep eye contact before sucking in a breath. “…Sorry for choking you. And breaking your nose.”

Waylon felt the bandaging still covering his nose. He watched as Eddie looked away embarrassedly, chuckling. He took the larger hand gratefully, firmly shaking it. “Apology accepted.”
All three men on the other side of the table let out over-dramatic groans of relief. Miles slammed his face down onto the table while Dennis mumbled, “Finally…” under his breath.

“So what should we do now; one of those middle-school things where we introduce ourselves and tell everyone why we’re here?” Miles joked, hitting Chris’ arm playfully. The larger man paused, grinning.

“That’s a great idea, actually. I’ll go first,” Chris began, clearing his throat. “I’m Chris Walker. I’m twenty years old-”

Miles cringed, “Wait, we’re not actually doing this, are we?” He asked pleadingly.

“-and I’m here because of an accident with a friend. Alongside that, I hallucinate.” Chris finished, nudging Miles back and leaning over the other man, “You’re next.” He demanded, staring darkly down into Miles’ core.

The other man laughed nervously, turning to face the others, “Fine. I’m Miles Upshur, I’m nineteen, and I’m here because of a drinking and driving accident that kinda fucked a lot of people up. I also have an impulsive disorder, and for some reason it concerned the court.” Miles said, looking down at his empty hands questioningly.

Dennis piped up next, leaning over so the others could hear him, “Um, I’m Dennis-- Ah… Never mind. I’m sixteen years old, and I’m here because of a situation at home. I broke a guy’s bones, I got sent here.” He said, staring darkly down at the table.

All eyes turned towards Eddie next. The other man glanced over the questioning stares of the others for a few seconds before raising a hand. “Eddie Gluskin. Twenty-one, I was in a bar fight. I have bipolar disorder and a short temper. Don’t push it.” He said, glancing over towards Waylon.

The blonde swallowed nervously once everyone looked over to him. He sighed, staring down at the table. “I’m… I’m Waylon Park. I’m s-seventeen years old and I got sent here apparently. Which I didn’t do. I just gave the guys that did a ride there.”

Everyone remained silent before Miles piped up, “Well that still makes you guilty of helping a crime, doesn’t it?” He inquired.

“They told me they were getting a phone, I didn’t know!” Waylon burst, crossing his arms over his chest. He huffed angrily, “I’m pretty sure they used my issues with twitching and getting scared as another excuse to ‘fix me’.” He stammered, feeling his leg thump up and down under the table.

Miles gave Waylon an apologetic frown, “I’m sorry, dude.” He said sadly, reaching over to pat him on the shoulder. He paused. “But where are the other guys? The ones that did it?”

Waylon sighed, “I dunno. Gone. They disappeared.” He said, leaning over to his side tiredly. It wasn’t until his cheek hit something firm and warm did he realize he was leaning directly on Eddie Gluskin’s side. The blonde yelped, jumping back. “S-sorry!”

Chris looked up at Eddie with a firm edge to his voice, “Ed…” He whispered towards the other man warningly.

Dennis, Waylon and Miles watched as Eddie closed his eyes and breathed out heavily, raising his eyebrows at Waylon, “You’re a clingy little minx, aren’t you?” He mumbled, spearing some food on his fork and stuffing it into his mouth.

“Er…” Waylon squeaked nervously. He glanced over to Miles and glared harshly when he saw the
other man raising his eyebrows suggestively. “Ugh… Sure.”

The day passed by almost the same as Waylon’s first day. Without the physical assault at lunch, of course. When the day stuck with Andrew the Creep (what Waylon began calling him) was over, he made it to their time outside without any incident.

It worked similarly to yard time in an actual prison. There was wired fencing and guards on post everywhere. A few tables were placed to the side of the yard for inmates to sit at while the other half was covered with half-dead grass. There was a small basketball court where a few shirtless inmates were playing, but not much else.

Waylon looked around and found Dennis instantly. The younger man was sitting against the concrete wall of the building, reading a small book. He looked up once Waylon approached, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Hey,” Waylon greeted, sliding down the wall so he was sitting next to the other teenager. He glanced over a page of text in Dennis’ book, trying to identify what he was reading. The blonde read over a few more lines. “…Of Mice and Men?”

“Mhm.” Dennis nodded, turning a page. “Good story. I always liked Lennie.”

“Me too.” The blonde agreed. He looked up and found Chris and Miles had seated themselves at one of the tables across the field, seemingly invested in conversation. Waylon looked further and saw Eddie pop out from a corner, looking just as lost as he had previously.

Dennis seemed to notice Waylon staring; he whistled obnoxiously over the field, making Waylon near-scream and fall over. It gained the attention of many inmates nearby, including Eddie. The large man glanced over towards Waylon, unsure of what he should do.

Dennis took care of the situation rather quickly, waving Eddie over. When Eddie was standing in front of them, Dennis clapped his book shut and patted Waylon on the shoulder, “I thought you two should talk more after what happened the other day. I’ll be back later.” He said, waving his book before departing.

Eddie looked down at Waylon, who was currently curled up in the fetal position on the ground. He sighed, moving to sit down crisscross in front of the smaller man, “Are you alright?” Eddie asked, gently pulling Waylon out from his legs.

The smaller man scrambled up as soon as his knees were no longer pressed to his chest, sighing heavily. “I’m fine. …What about you?”

Eddie’s eyebrows raised, “Me?” He asked quietly, tilting his head. “What would be concerning about me?”

“I dunno,” Waylon shrugged. “You just seemed high-strung all morning.”

“Ahh.” Eddie mumbled, looking off to his right. It seemed like he had nothing more to say, so Waylon decided to change tactics.

“…Why’d you do it?” He asked carefully. He didn’t want to aggravate Eddie any further than he already had. He didn’t want to know what else Eddie could do to hurt him.

Eddie looked back quizzically. “Do what?”
Waylon pointed up and down his nose and neck as an answer. Eddie made an ‘o’ shape with his mouth, looking down to the dirty ground before responding, “I’ve always had issues with close human contact. As soon as you fell on me, my brain wouldn’t let it go until I did something about it. To you specifically.” He explained. “And again, I am truly sorry.”

“’S fine.” Waylon said, waving his arm to dismiss Eddie’s previous statement. “It’s just… I don’t want that one encounter to make everything with me, you, Miles and the others awkward. Y’know?”

Eddie nodded in agreement. “So what you’re saying is you… Want to start over?”

Waylon cleared his throat dramatically, grinning as he outstretched his hand. “Hi! I’m Waylon Park, and I am not a dummy.”

The larger man laughed, shaking Waylon’s hand for the second time that day. “Now there is a reference I understand. I wouldn’t have truly experienced my high school years if someone wasn’t quoting SpongeBob every five seconds.”

The blonde laughed as well, leaning his head back on the concrete wall. “Oh thank god.”

“Everybody up and against the wall, now!” Frank yelled from the back door of the yard. The inmates obeyed, some verbally protesting while getting in position. Frank didn’t seem to care, pulling out a clicker from his pocket.

Waylon had initially freaked at the sudden outburst, but quickly managed to compose himself enough in order to line up against the wall with the others. Chris, Miles and Dennis were all positioned at the other end of the line while Eddie remained by his side. He wasn’t sure whether to be grateful or not.

“He’s making sure we’re all here before we go inside to eat dinner.” Eddie explained when Waylon couldn’t get his arms to stop twitching. The older man pressed a hand to his shoulder, making his best efforts to calm Waylon down.

Once Frank reached their end of the line, he paused. He looked between Eddie and Waylon, back and forth before inspecting Waylon’s nose, “You alright, Park?” Frank asked, glancing back over to Eddie warningly.

When the blonde nodded in confirmation, Frank made a few last clicks at the end of the row before tallying the inmates up on a notepad, “Alright, single file into the cafeteria! I don’t want anyone causing a mess on the way there!” He barked, putting his notepad away in order to lead the line.

Everyone remained relatively silent as they made their way to the cafeteria. As soon as people made it through the doors, the sound of chatter took up the entire room. The same process as the first two meals of the day; always the same.

“God, does anything ever change around here, or are we just expected to do the same thing every day?” Waylon asked once everyone was seated.

Miles swallowed, a grin quickly overtaking his face, “Oh-ho-ho, now I may not have been here long, but I sure as hell know that dinner time is the best time of the day. Nobody knows what’ll happen during dinner time; sometimes it’ll be some dumb show, occasionally nothing, other times there might be a karaoke machine–”

“Would you stop that incessant rambling about a karaoke machine?” Eddie growled lowly, taking a large bite of chicken, “You’ve been going on about it for weeks now.”
The smaller man scoffed, “Frank promised! He told me, ‘We’re going to have karaoke night sometime for you crazy meat-bags eventually.’ Eventually could be any day!” Miles screeched, slamming his fists down onto the table.

Waylon tilted his head, “Why do you want him to bring in a karaoke machine so bad?” He asked, genuinely curious. He had to admit, it actually sounded like a fun idea.

“Oh I’ll tell you why,” Miles began, pointing his finger at Waylon dramatically. He took in a deep breath before Chris cut him off.

“He wants to sing some song he has about reform school being stupid in front of the whole cafeteria because he thinks everyone will find it relatable.” The larger man answered for him, earning a fire-spitting glare from Miles.

Waylon laughed as the other man seethed, “Don’t you have any class, Chris? Bebe is relatable!” Miles shouted, trying and failing to shake the other man into having common sense.

Chris laughed, pulling the other man off of him. “Well it sucks to be you then, because we’re in reform. Which means they’re only going to allow safe-for-work songs.”

“You don’t know that--!”

“Oh god, not again.” Eddie mumbled, cutting off the argument on the other side of the table. He was staring towards the front of the cafeteria; that was where all heads were turned.

There stood a sharp-looking man wearing a fancy business suit, seemingly standing over the inmates despite being shorter than most of them. He had a look of authority etched into him with his business-like appearance and slicked-back hair.

In fact, Waylon noted that the man seemed like he was only a couple years older than he himself was. Yet through his age, the man still remained in a position of power over everyone in the room. It made Waylon nervous; he tucked his hands under the table once his fingers began to twitch. The man looked over in their direction and approached, making Waylon shrink back into himself that much further.

Once the man was in range he smirked, looking over the five men sitting at the table, “Upshur, Walker, D, looking well as always.” He greeted, scanning Eddie up and down with a distasteful scowl. “Gluskin.”

“Always a pleasure, Jeremy Blaire.” Eddie snarled sarcastically. The larger man didn’t have to look to know that Waylon was cowering away, so he tried to help by leaning over the table in order to block Blaire’s view of him.

Too late, Jeremy had already noticed the small, nervous man even when he stood all the way across the room. He moved past Eddie in between seats in order to stare Waylon down. “Hmm… You’re that new inmate that got blasted on his first day, aren’t you? Waylon Park? A pleasure. I actually stopped by to talk to you.” Blaire said.

Waylon sat up straighter from his hunched position, eyes resembling that of a deer caught in headlights. “Uh… Me?”

“Yes, you.” Jeremy snapped, looking down to check his watch before gesturing to the double doors in the back with a nod of his head. “Follow me.”

As he was getting up to follow Blaire, Waylon looked around to see the reactions of his comrades.
Miles and Chris were glancing at each other, unsure of what to do while Dennis looked away. Eddie almost reached an arm out to stop Waylon, but retracted it at the last second warily.

He followed Blaire out the doors and into the corridor that was practically void of all life. Jeremy looked around before shoving Waylon into the wall, gaining his full attention.

“So you’re the one that ‘set the school on fire’, huh?” Jeremy asked, using his finger to make quotation marks.

Waylon looked back at the double doors, considering bolting back to the cafeteria before shaking his head clear and nodding to Jeremy Blaire. Blaire nodded, leaning in close as if to whisper into Waylon’s ear.

“I know you didn’t do it, and I want to help you.” Jeremy insisted, grabbing Waylon’s shaking wrist and yanking it up to inspect it.

The blonde squeaked, daring to throw a glare Blaire’s way before yanking his arm back, “Why would you want to help me? Who even are you?” Waylon demanded, trying to carry some authority in his weak voice.

The other man laughed, “My father owns this place, and the whole lot of you. I can do whatever I please with the trashy inmates here. But what I want to do with you specifically is of my own personal matters.

“I don’t have a lot of time, so I’ll make this brief.” Blaire stated firmly, tucking his hands into his coat pockets. “I can get you out of this place. Clean your record. Pretend like none of this ever happened. But in return you’ll have to do something for me. But you see little Park, that’s the thing; I’m afraid I can’t tell you what I’ll need you to do until you agree.”

Waylon stuttered, unable to make up his mind about a decision so big as soon as he was. Was this ‘Jeremy Blaire’ bluffing? Who the hell was this guy, seriously?

Blaire laughed, grabbing Waylon’s chin between his index finger and thumb, “You don’t have to make up your mind so soon, little one. I’ll be back within the next few days for an answer. Just let the offer settle.” Blaire let go of his face, moving away from him and down to the other end of the hall. “Enjoy the rest of your dinner, Waylon Park.”

Waylon scowled, crossing his arms over his chest long after Blaire was gone. He huffed. “I am not little.”
So If You're Lonely

“Hey, where’s Waylon Park’s room?! …Thanks, Stevenson. Park! PARK!”

Waylon looked up when he heard Frank screaming his name outside the room. He was in the middle of hooking up his computer equipment when the man practically bashed down the bedroom door as soon as he made it down the hall.

The blonde jumped upright at the noise, brushing off the dust on his pants before approaching, “Hi, Frank. What is it?” Waylon asked curiously, trying to peek over the papers Frank was holding tightly.

“Request papers! They approved you to be able to get some real clothes now—Within Mount Massive standards and laws, of course. Nothing metal or potentially dangerous, hazardous, could be used as a weapon, I shouldn’t need to explain this to you of all people.” Frank breathed excitedly, handing Waylon the sheet. “You’re allowed to request three separate pairs of clothes. …Actually just shirts, pants and shoes. Or sweat gear if you’ve been feeling chilly.”

Waylon’s eyes lit up with delight when Frank gave him a paper with his name, information and sizes printed on the top. The title of the form read, “CLOTHING REQUEST SHEET”. Below the text were a few rows for him to fill out with what he desired to wear.

He looked back up to Frank, practically beaming. “Thanks, Frank! Do I need to fill this out now, or…?”

Frank put a hand on the doorframe, grinning. “If you fill it out before curfew then you’ll be able to have your new clothes by tomorrow night. I’m stationed in this hall right now so you can give them to me when you’re ready.”

“Really?” Waylon asked, stunned. He glanced back down at the papers again when Frank placed a marker on top of his pile.

The other man nodded, “We send our guy out to get you kid’s stuff during the day. Clothes are easy to get a hold of. When you can start requesting other things as your privileges go up, it takes longer depending on what you asked for. Doesn’t cost us nothin’, so-- get to it!” He clapped, moving into the hall before closing the door behind him.

Waylon hadn’t realized that Miles had snuck up on him during the conversation, yelping when the man took the paper out of his hands. Miles cackled, hopping onto Waylon’s bed before beginning to jump up and down like a child.

“Hey, give it back!” Waylon cried, climbing up in order to snatch the paper out of Miles’ grip. He wasn’t in the mood for games.

Miles laughed and let go, plopping down on the sheets, “Can I help? We’ve gotta get you out of these rags.” He said firmly, tugging on Waylon’s standard-issue pants. The blonde sighed, moving over to the desk with his computer equipment and shoving the paper down.

“Okay.” The blonde said, taking off the marker’s cap, “Well first of all, I want two pairs of jeans. And sneakers…” He mumbled, writing the information down.

Miles hopped over and kneeled next to the desk chair, placing his chin on Waylon’s shoulder, “I think you should ask for a plain white tee, too. And something along the lines of flip-flops. I know it’s almost winter but trust me; you’ll want them for the showers and stuff. It gets pretty nasty in
Waylon paused as he wrote down the items, leaning over to sniff himself. He cringed. “I haven’t taken a single goddamn shower since I got here, Miles.”

“Wait, really?” Miles asked, cringing as well. That didn’t stop him from continuing to lean over Waylon, though. Miles looked thoughtful for a few moments before a dawning realization overcame him. “Oh yeah! We have to take ‘em before we go back to our rooms every other day, but you were hurt. That’s why no one took you down to get one.”

Waylon sighed, scribbling on the side of the paper. He put his marker down, glancing back at Miles. “Okay well, I still need a pair of shoes, pants, and two shirts.”

Miles smiled, “Heh, you should get those slippers that have bacon and eggs on them. Those would look adorable on your tiny-ass feet.” He giggled, prodding Waylon’s nose.

The blonde growled, shrugging Miles off, “Stop calling me small! I’ll just get a long-sleeve shirt and a flannel… And like, some sleep pants and I’ll be fine.” He said, quickly writing the last items down before standing up to give Frank the paper.

“Wait, you didn’t say anything about a pair of shoes!” He called out. It took Miles a split second before he broke out into a shit-eating grin, “Holy fuck, you’re getting those slippers, aren’t you?!” He asked. All Miles had to see was the growing blush on Waylon’s cheeks to confirm his theory. Waylon slammed the door on Miles’ laughing form.

Waylon made it to Frank and back quickly enough. His face was completely red by the time he walked back to his and Miles’ shared room. But as he glanced into the room, he found that Miles was no longer there. Gone without a trace.

The blonde paused, looking up and down the hall. There was no Miles, but he did see Dennis appear at one end of the hall. The teen had a book bag slung over his shoulder as he jumped the last stair onto the floor. The other man looked up and immediately saw Waylon, smiling shyly as he walked towards his room.

“Hello, Waylon Park.” Dennis greeted, glancing into his room. “Lots of computer stuff I see. Where’s Miles?”

Waylon ran a hand through his hair, glancing over his shoulder. “I was wondering the same thing. I left for less than a minute and just like that he’s gone. I don’t know.”

Dennis pressed his lips together, walking back down to the very end of the hall. Waylon followed him to Chris and Eddie’s room, peeking in to see if Miles was inside. The only person in was Eddie, who had been sitting on his bed half-naked with a sketchbook in hand.

Eddie glanced over when Dennis creaked the wood floor, eyeing the two down before his eyes landed on Waylon. The blonde hadn’t noticed that he was staring directly at Eddie’s bare chest. The larger man raised an eyebrow. “Like what you see, darling?”

Waylon blushed fiercely when Dennis cackled. The blonde coughed in order to clear his throat, “U-uh, actually we were just looking for Miles and though he’d be in here…?” He stuttered, looking anywhere but at the tall man sitting at the other end of the room.

The two watched as Eddie shrugged, turning back to his work. “Chris left a minute ago because Stevenson—that whore was calling for him. He might be there with ‘im.” Eddie mumbled, scratching his pencil fiercely into the paper below.
“Thanks.” Dennis said, clicking his tongue at Waylon. The blonde shoved him away angrily as they made it to the opposite end of the hall. Once they were only a few doors away, both Waylon and Dennis heard psychotic hoots and screaming coming what could only be Stevenson’s door.

The two peeked inside to see Miles, Chris, Stevenson, and a few others gathered around a small television. They all appeared to be watching a DVD logo as it hit different edges of the screen. Dennis looked at Waylon with a look of question before the two entered the room.

Miles was screaming the loudest out of all the men, hooting repeatedly as everyone watched the logo bump another side of the screen. Chris was clapping besides Miles while another inmate Waylon didn’t know practically held the screen in his large hands.

It was then that the logo hit another edge before making a direct beeline to a sharp corner of the screen. The screaming got louder and louder the closer the logo approached. Waylon watched as Miles practically threw himself onto Chris in anticipation.

As soon as the logo hit the corner of the screen in the most perfect manner imaginable, all hell broke loose. Waylon and Dennis jumped back as everyone screamed their lungs out. Many inmates fell onto the floor in victory, a few beginning to sob. Miles was gripping his hair tightly while yelling in triumph along with the others. Chris laughed loudly, pulling Miles into a bone-crushing hug.

The screaming died down when they heard heavy footsteps approach the doorway, and soon Frank stood over the group with a deep frown. The man shook his head disappointedly, moving around the fallen bodies to unplug the T.V. and carry it under his arm, “I think I just remembered why I never bring the T.V. in for you guys.” He mumbled, walking out with the group’s only source of entertainment.

Dennis scooted up next to Miles, shaking his head. “You people are idiots.”

Chris glanced over to Dennis, grinning, “Oh hey D, good to see you again. Enjoy the show?” He asked innocently enough.

“He’s right.” A voice scoffed in front of the group. Everyone looked up to see Eddie standing in front of the door to his room, arms crossed over his chest. Waylon noted that the larger man had put on a sweatshirt unlike his previous position minutes before.

Miles laughed, “Oh come on Ed, it was great and you know it. That’s something you only see once in a lifetime.” He sighed dreamily. Chris patted Miles’ shoulder affectionately before moving into his own room.

Eddie’s eyes narrowed. “A DVD logo. Hitting the corner of a screen. Is amazing?” He asked rhetorically. Miles rolled his eyes, sticking out his tongue. He swiveled around to Dennis and Waylon, yanking the two back towards his room.

“He can be such a sourpuss sometimes, guys.” Miles grumbled, glancing over to the alarm clock embedded in the wall. “Oh shit Dennis, it’s seven-fifty. Don’t you need to be back for curfew?”

Dennis’ eyebrows shot up, drawing his attention over to the clock as well, “Is it time already? Shit. Well, goodnight guys. See you in the morning.” He said, waving back at the two in the room before departing for the night.

Once Dennis was gone Waylon flopped onto his bed, pulling bedsheets over his legs. “You’re a
dumbass, Miles.” He sighed, rolling over onto his side.

“That’s just what makes me so iconic.” Miles grumbled, jumping onto Waylon’s bed. He wasn’t about to let his friend go to sleep that easily.

The next day Waylon witnessed his first fight between a group of older inmates. It wasn’t until the second half of his their class period, though. Miles had gotten a kick out of watching them.

Three inmates had approached another two sitting at their desks, quietly mumbling amongst themselves. At first it had seemed like a normal conversation; then one of the three slammed his fists onto a creaky desk, shattering it.

Andrew had begun yelling, radioing for the help of guards to take the inmate away. As soon as Andrew laid a hand on the inmate’s shoulder the fight broke out. The man tossed Andrew to the side and grabbed one of the two other inmates, knocking him out cold. All of them began punching and kicking, knocking over several desks and chairs.

Miles had laughed the whole way through, clapping along with the rest of the group in the classroom once everyone involved was removed from the area. When Waylon asked why he’d been clapping, Miles had told him it had become a Mount Massive tradition over the years to clap when a fight was over. He’d told Waylon that the whole cafeteria had clapped once he’d been taken out days prior due to Eddie.

That didn’t comfort him much. It didn’t comfort him at all, really.

When guards came in to escort everyone to yard time, Waylon stood up carefully as to not provoke any inmates with hot blood after watching the fight earlier in the day. But after everyone filed into a line in the hall, the guards told them it was pouring rain outside. Instead of having yard time they’d be taking showers early and spending the rest of the day in their rooms, save for dinner.

Waylon couldn’t have been happier. It gave him a lot of time to play around with his computer equipment, and Dennis could hang out with them longer if the only other teenager in their group decided he wanted to stay on the first floor for the evening.

They all walked in a line to the showers. Waylon sighed in relief as soon as they were dismissed to the stalls; he didn’t care about the fact that men were standing completely naked all around him, he was getting a shower. Finally.

When Waylon stripped down to just his boxers, he glanced around and noticed a few inmates eyeing him up and down while passing by. The blonde blushed furiously, looking away from them all. He squeaked when he felt a hand on his back, relief flooding through him when he found it was only Miles.

“Hey, you’ll be okay. I’m not much bigger than you and nobody messes with me. Just try to act like you don’t care and no one else will either.” Miles whispered, tossing his clothes onto a shelf above their heads.

Waylon nodded his thanks, face reddening as he peeled off his final concealment as well. He twisted his frame to hide from others while making his way to an open shower stall. He nearly yanked the curtain off of its hinges when he found it was only Miles.

“Hey, you’ll be okay. I’m not much bigger than you and nobody messes with me. Just try to act like you don’t care and no one else will either.” Miles whispered, tossing his clothes onto a shelf above their heads.

Waylon nodded his thanks, face reddening as he peeled off his final concealment as well. He twisted his frame to hide from others while making his way to an open shower stall. He nearly yanked the curtain off of its hinges when he made it over unharmed.

Miles had made the whole situation seem easy. Acting like a tough forty-year-old man with no shame while flaunting his manhood was much easier said than done. Fuck it all. He was taking a goddamn shower.
He took his time scrubbing down, happy to be rid of all of the grime from the past few days. Waylon hated going more than a day or two without a good shower; it made him feel like a dirty gremlin when he didn’t clean up properly. It didn’t feel right.

When Waylon was done, he peeked around the curtain to find there were only a few inmates outside of the stalls. He made his way across the room soaking wet. He’d also made sure to wrap a towel around his waist before departing the safety of his shower stall.

He was only a few feet away from his clothes when Waylon felt a hand on each of his shoulders. He slowly craned his head to find an inmate a few inches taller smirking suggestively as he pulled Waylon closer to his chest.

Waylon yelped, shaking furiously as the man ran a hand down his slick waist, “G-get away from me.” He demanded, yanking himself out of the man’s grip. But the inmate was determined, swearing furiously before yanking the blonde back over.

There were no guards around in the showers. They were most likely standing outside. ‘I’m so fucked. Literally fucked.’

The blonde closed his eyes and shivered furiously, trying again to pull away from the inmate. But he didn’t have to worry about his predicament for too long- Waylon heard wet, heavy footsteps approach behind and suddenly the other man was yanked off of him.

Waylon swiveled around in shock to find the other inmate thrown harshly against the tile by none other than Eddie Gluskin. The random inmate had been bigger than Waylon sure, but everyone was. Eddie, though; he towered over the man.

Eddie immediately followed him down, nearly straddling the man in order to get a good angle at his throat. He punched him once in his jugular before kneeling the inmate’s manhood, hard. The inmate wheezed, growling as Eddie grabbed his hair and slammed the back of his head into the floor.

Waylon watched as Eddie stood and put a bare foot to the man’s chest, pressing down just enough to make the inmate sputter. He lowered his voice darkly, “Don’t you ever touch him again, whore. You filthy slut. Understand?” Eddie growled harshly.

The inmate nodded furiously, trying to pull Eddie’s foot off of his chest. After a few more seconds Eddie left off, re-adjusting the towel around his waist. He glanced over to Waylon, looking him up and down critically. The blonde shuddered when Eddie’s eyes met his before the other man walked to another corner of the showers, and he was gone.

Waylon glanced at the broken inmate once more before running off to find his clothes. He needed to put some distance between him and any other potential suspects.

Once all of his fresh clothes were on properly, Waylon made his way as fast as he could back to his room. There hadn’t been many inmates left when he’d finished showering, so he assumed the others were back in the hall already. Besides Eddie Gluskin, of course.

Waylon was sulking when he peeked into Eddie and Chris’s room. Neither of the two were back yet. When he approached his own room, he began to hear the beat of music along with… Singing?

The blonde turned into his room to see Miles sitting at their desk with his iPod plugged in and powered on, blasting a song Waylon didn’t recognize. Miles was singing along with the lyrics while writing. Waylon had to admit, he didn’t sound half bad.

“Your daddy always said you should stay away from a fool like me, a fool like me, and when your
Waylon flinched, fingers twitching when Miles suddenly turned around to face him, holding one of his hands up towards the ceiling dramatically. “Yeah I knooooooow that I'm a grown ass man, who still acts like an idiot—“

“Fuckin’ right you’re an idiot.” Waylon mumbled, throwing his things down onto his bed. He sat on the edge, watching as Miles leaned over to pause his music.

Miles smirked, placing his hands on his hips as soon as the audio cut out, “Excuse me Miss Critical, but it’s Cobra Starship that says they’re acting like an idiot. ‘Fool Like Me by Cobra Starship’, two-thousand eleven.” He stated proudly, reaching over to yank Waylon up off of the bed. “Come on Waylon, it’s time I introduced you to the world of music. Today’s focus; alternative and rock.

“Miles, no.” Waylon begged, trying and failing to pull his arm back when the other man led him towards the speaker set.

Miles had Waylon sit down in the chair, “Miles, yes. You told me the other day you didn’t listen to music and that is just unacceptable. We’re gonna find out what’s for you over the course of the next week. Now pipe down and allow yourself to be absorbed.” He said with an accent, picking up his iPod to flick through the selections.

Waylon groaned, leaning back in the chair. It was going to be a long night, he could tell already.

Chris made his way up the staircase towards his room. It took him forever to fill out the request forms, but he knew in a week’s time the paperwork and list of approvals would be worth it. He glanced into his room to find Eddie face-down on one of the beds, pillow crushed over his head. Chris noticed the other man’s hand and arm muscles flexing as he pulled harder and harder on the casing.

“You alright, Ed?” Chris asked curiously, tapping the door. The other man growled from his position, furiously tossing the pillow across the room before covering his ears with his hands. Eddie shook his head before flopping back down onto the mattress.

When Eddie opened his eyes to glare at him across the room, Chris raised an eyebrow. The other man groaned, rolling over and pointing down the hall.

It was then that Chris heard the overly loud and obnoxious music coming from halfway down the hall. Waylon and Miles’ door was wide open, so he could only assume that was the source. Once he got close enough, Chris recognized the song playing immediately.

“I say don't you know, you say you don't know, I say... take me out!

Chris peeked around the door into the room. His eyes immediately landed on Miles and Waylon, both running around the room while vaulting over beds and other obstacles, singing along to the song.

“I say you don't show, don't move, time is slow, I say... take me out!”

The large man chuckled under his breath at the adorable sight. The two were giggling furiously in between verses, having such a great time with each other that Chris couldn’t bring himself to interrupt them. He covered his mouth in order to conceal his laughter, watching the two bouncing around like baby cats.
Chris was grinning like an idiot as he walked away from the scene, patting Eddie once on the back before grabbing a book off of their desk. He sat back and glanced at the clock; four-thirty in the afternoon.

Eddie groaned beside him, unplugging his ears to lean up on his stomach. “How can you stand listening to their ridiculous antics?”


At dinnertime, Waylon and Miles had to endure the harsh glare of Eddie while they ate. Dennis, the only one who’d been residing on a different floor, simply sat confused at the sudden stare-off. Waylon kept his gaze down to his food while Miles challenged Eddie with a look of his own.

When dinner was nearly finished, Miles turned to Chris with a grin. “So. Waylon likes Kaleo the most.”

Eddie made a strangled noise, stuffing the rest of his food into his mouth before standing to throw away his garbage. Miles laughed, slapping one of his knees. Waylon fidgeted nervously when Eddie returned to his seat, glaring at Miles before Waylon.

“Stuffing your face full. And you call yourself a gentleman.” Miles laughed. Waylon covered his mouth as Eddie stared Miles down with a look so indescribable even Miles himself backed off, smirk wiped right off of his face.

“You two are insufferable.” Eddie growled. Waylon frowned, sighing heavily as he poked at his mashed potatoes.

It was then that Frank approached their group, smiling politely. He looked over to Waylon specifically, one hand resting on the table, “Waylon, your stuff came in. I’ll let you go up early today so you can put them away before the others get back.” The guard offered.

Waylon nodded, eating one last bite of food before dumping his things and following Frank out of the cafe. Once they were back in the hall, Frank gestured to his room, “I trust you enough to behave while up here on your own, but Pauline is going to be around just in case.” He said before departing.

The blonde looked over at the neat stack on clothes piled on his bed. He sorted through everything he’d requested immediately, finding it all to be there. Even the bacon and egg slippers. Waylon chuckled, moving most of the clothes into drawers under his bed. The only things he left out were sleepwear; Miles’ suggested white shirt, shortened gray sleep shorts, and the slippers.

He changed quickly, making sure he pulled his blue and white hoodie back on when he was done. Waylon walked over to the door and glanced down the hall; no one around. Not even Glick. Waylon knew she was somewhere nearby, though. He glanced back at the clock in the wall. Five minutes until dinner ended.

Waylon decided he was going to finish setting up the files on his computer, Parker. He sighed happily, plopping down into the desk chair and turning on his equipment. He looked over the screen carefully when everything loaded, looking around to make sure none of his files had been wiped out during the move.

The door to the room slammed open suddenly, making Waylon screech. He didn’t turn around to see
who it was; he didn’t have the time before a slick voice called out, “Ah, Park! Just the man I wanted to see!” In a snide tone.

Jeremy Blaire. Of course. Waylon hardly knew the guy and he was already starting to get on his nerves, “The fuck do you want, Blaire?” He asked, typing furiously at his keyboard.

Waylon could see the other man’s silhouette lean over in the doorway, “What an audacious greeting, Park. Not much. I was just wondering if you’d come to a decision about that little deal of ours…?” Blaire asked politely, sizing Waylon up.

The blonde froze, unable to type anymore. He had to use all of his strength to keep himself from shaking furiously. ‘Oh god… Fuck! I forgot…’ Waylon thought, eyes widened. He couldn’t keep himself from twitching anymore; his body was converting to full-panic mode.

“HEY!”

It was then that Waylon finally spared a glance over his shoulder. Blaire looked back into the hall as well, both men spotting Eddie behind Blaire with a look of annoyance. The blonde sucked in a breath, hoping Eddie would get rid of the slimy man.

“Get out, Blaire.” Eddie said firmly, tucking his hands into the pockets of his dark blue hoodie. “You’re not supposed to be in this wing during visitation hours, so you can bet you shouldn’t be here now either. Whether your father owns Mount Massive or not.”

Blaire chuckled, sending a glare of his own Eddie’s way, “How noble of you, Gluskin. Isn’t it past your curfew?” He asked mockingly.

Eddie tilted his head, narrowing his eyes. “Even more of a reason to get lost. You don’t even know the schedules of the inmates. Go. Away.”

Blaire rolled his eyes, glancing back at Waylon, “I’m just checking on good ol’ Park here. I’ll come back another time, I see how it is.” Jeremy scoffed, purposely bumping into Eddie on his way out. Eddie glared after him furiously, walking away and into his own room.

Waylon leaned back in his chair, breathing heavily. He was about to get back to work when Miles ran into the room, grabbing a notebook and pen. “Hey Park, I’m gonna be gone until curfew. Dennis is reading Ender’s Game to Chris and I at the other end of the hall. You can come if you want.” He thought the offer over before shaking his head, “Not tonight, Miles. Have fun, though.” He said, turning back to his computer.

“Ohay then. Feel free to use my iPod while I’m gone. You know the passcode.” Miles said, waving once before leaving for Dennis and Chris. Waylon watched him go before glancing over to said iPod sitting dormant on the desk.

Eddie sighed heavily, yanking off his hoodie and throwing it on the chair across the room. He began cleaning up his sketchbooks and writing materials, unable to think of anything else to occupy himself with. He wasn’t a fan of sci-fi novels to listen to Dennis; he was more of a romance and paranormal kind of guy himself. Besides, he liked reading to himself opposed to being read to.

…He could always go and talk to Waylon. But the teenager had seemed busy with his computer devices, and Eddie didn’t want to bother him. It may have also been because he still felt bad for the small man over their first encounter.
That made Eddie growl lowly, tossing his books carelessly into the drawers under his bed. He despised his family; his father for making him this way. He’d never wanted to hurt the tiny teenager down the hall… It was their fault he’d done it.

He ran a hand through his black strip of hair, groaning. He didn’t want Waylon to receive any more punches than he’d already given him. Fuck Jeremy Blaire. Fuck the whore that’d been in the shower room. Fuck anyone who wanted to touch Waylon in any way besides a friendly gesture.

Fuck himself, too. He’s the one who thought it’d be a brilliant idea to choke the life out of the poor guy. Eddie had learned fairly quickly about Waylon’s issues with twitching and fright. He felt horrible; he must’ve scared Waylon nearly to death.

Eddie was pleased that no one had ever bothered to use Waylon’s weakness to scare him jokingly, though. If anyone ever did…

What the hell was he thinking? Waylon was just another convict like the rest of them. He wasn’t special or anything like it. Besides his unusual height, maybe. It made Eddie chuckle under his breath to think about Waylon quite literally looking up to everyone in Mount Massive.

He didn’t care about his semi-nakedness. Eddie left his sweatshirt in the room as he walked over to Waylon and Miles’ room. He was about to knock on the half-open door when he heard a soft noise flowing out the door. Singing, to be exact.

“For every hard-earned dollar that I make, there stands a white man just to take it away. Some might say I talk loud, see if I care. Unlike them, don’t walk away from my fear.”

Eddie peeked into the room to see Waylon clicking through files on his computer, singing quietly along with Miles’ iPod. It was somewhat adorable; the small teenager was kicking his legs back and forth under the chair, short-shorts riding up his thighs and blonde hair a fluffy mess. He could see that Waylon also had large, circular-framed glasses resting on the tip of his nose while he worked.

Now he understood what Chris had been talking about. But this was somehow better; the music and singing wasn’t loud or disrupting.

“I’ve busted bones, broken stones, looked the devil in the eye. I hope he’s going to break these chains, oh yeah.”

Eddie nearly snorted at the irony of the lyrics, which would’ve given away his position. Waylon rapped gently on the desk a few times before adjusting his position in the chair. He began another round of lyrics.

“The devil's going to make me a free man, the devil's going to set me free. The devil's going to make me a free man, the devil's going to set me free.”

Well, Mount Massive certainly was the devil. After everything with the inmates, and Billy…

He would allow himself this one chance at a peaceful night. Eddie walked back into his room and grabbed a sketchbook and pen, feeling inspired. He walked back to Waylon and Miles’ room before sliding down the wall and onto the floor. Any other day, Eddie would despise Miles’ absurd taste in music.

Presently … It wasn’t so bad.
Waylon took off his glasses, trying to rub the tiredness out of his eyes. He’d been working through all of the files and security checks on his computer ever since they returned from the cafeteria. He glanced over at the clock; twelve minutes until curfew.

He sighed, leaning over the backrest of his chair and stretching his arms over his head. Waylon let out an exaggerated yawn before standing up and shutting his computer down. It was then he heard a quiet shuffling noise from just outside of the door, as if someone had been messing with a stack of papers. He flinched, fingers twitching as he tilted his head.

The blonde shifted over the desk in order to turn off the music that had droned on. He looked into the doorway, still no sign of anyone approaching. Just as he made it to the edge of the room, Miles popped out from the other side, screaming “WAYLON!” directly into his ear.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say Waylon screamed as loud as a character in a cheesy horror film. The short teen jumped back in fright, almost ripping sheets as he did parkour onto the other side of the bedframe.

Pauline was in the doorframe within seconds, eyes narrowed towards Miles who’d already made himself comfortable on his side of the room, “The hell’s going on in here?” She demanded, hand immediately moving towards her radio. Waylon peeked over the side of the bed, breath ragged. He saw Chris, Dennis and Eddie along with a few other curious inmates standing behind her to see what had happened.

“Sorry, Waylon.” Miles apologized in a whisper before turning towards the group in the doorway, “I jumped through the door too fast and scared Way, Glick. Everything’s fine. Tell her, Way.” He said, gently touching Waylon’s shoulder to get him to confirm his previous statement.

Waylon made eye contact with the guard before nodding slowly. Everyone started filing out of the hall, leaving only Dennis, “Night guys. Feel better soon, Waylon.” He said sympathetically before departing with the rest of the group.

The blonde watched Miles close the bedroom door while climbing up onto his bed for some semblance of comfort. When Miles turned back around, he gave Waylon a small smile, “Sorry about all that, didn’t mean to scare you. I just got excited. You sure you’re okay?” He asked, sitting next to Waylon and rubbing his back.

Waylon nodded, “Y-yeah. Yeah, I’m okay. Just got scared.” He mumbled, rubbing his forehead. He felt Miles pat his back a few times before the other man slipped back onto his own bed. Waylon turned, watching as Miles fidgeted around with a few of his notebooks.

“Anyway, I was going to tell you before you had your small panic attack.” Miles began, pulling out a notebook stuffed full of papers and beginning to write. “Eddie was sitting right outside the door. I don’t know for how long; Dennis got to chapter two before I noticed he was there.”

Waylon’s head whipped up, looking shocked over to Miles, “Wait, he was outside our room?! Oh god, I was singing poorly the whole time too….” He gasped, covering his reddening face with his hands. “Why was he sitting there, anyway?!”

Miles shrugged, “I really don’t have an answer to that question. He was sitting right outside the door with his sketchpad, just drawing. Never did anything else until we all started coming back.” He said,
finally putting the notebook away.

The blonde was embarrassed, to say the least. He’d been singing along with Miles’ music for a little over an hour, and Eddie had been there listening to it? That made Waylon’s face turn even redder as he collapsed onto his bed and pulled the sheets over his head. “I think I wanna go to sleep now.”

The brunette snorted. “You do that.”

Waylon was getting ahead classwork-wise when they all came back from lunch. Andrew had told them to get to work either way, walking around the room while doing all and nothing. He’d look through shelves, organized papers, and glared at other students while they glared back. The usual.

Although it seemed as though Andrew passed him by every couple of minutes. It was starting to become very disturbing in Waylon’s eyes, actually. The blonde wasn’t sure if he was imagining it or if it was actually happening, but sometimes the older man would stand over his shoulder for a while, watching him work.

His fingers were twitching, and so was his leg. Something wasn’t right with that man.

Waylon heard people whispering behind him, but he couldn’t tell who it was. The mumbles were too quiet and he couldn’t make out any key words. Suddenly there was a loud bang from a desk where the whispering originated from, making Waylon jump.

Many of the students looked back to see what had made the noise. It didn’t surprise anyone that it had been Andrew, who was currently looming over Chris’s desk with a dark expression clouding his features. Waylon looked over to Miles and he did the same back, both sharing a look that was a combination of both confusion and worry.

“You lazy-ass kid, couldn’t even be bothered to work on his own papers. Your worth in this building is already at the bottom, you sure you want to push it even lower, Mr. Walker?” Andrew practically spat in Chris’s face, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Hey!” Both Waylon and Miles said in unison, earning a harsh stare from their instructor.

Andrew scoffed, “You two pipe down before I have you all locked up. As for you,” He said, turning his anger back on Chris. The man leaned down, parallel with Chris’s ear, “You better figure out your place in this room real quick before I call more security down to show it to you. Agreed?” He hissed.

Waylon stood up from his chair angrily, “He didn’t even do anything wrong!” He squeaked, covering his mouth with a hand. More so with the sleeve of his sweatshirt, the fabric easily overlapping both of his palms.

He almost regretted his words when Andrew stormed over to his desk, grinning evilly. Waylon plopped right back down in his seat, prepared to take the worst from their instructor. He couldn’t bring himself to care as much as he normally would; Waylon simply scrunched up his face and his leg started twitching, ready for the screaming.

While Andrew told him right off, Waylon glanced over the man’s shoulder to see Chris sitting with his face in his hands, shaking his head back and forth. Miles had a hand on Chris’s shoulder, brows knit together in worry. Something serious was happening.

“Nononono… Go away… Miles please, make them go away. I thought they were gone…” The blonde overheard Chris mumbling. Miles stood, trying his best to wrap his arms around Chris’s torso and rub the larger man’s back. Something serious was happening, yet Andrew did nothing.
Just as Andrew finished his lecture to Waylon, Chris stood up, chair falling back onto the tile floor. He had a mad look in his eyes as he walked backwards into the wall on the other side of the room, beginning to hyperventilate. His eyes were everywhere, on everyone. Waylon was beginning to panic himself.

Miles swiveled on Andrew, “Do something! He’s having a hallucination, do something-!” He screamed at the teacher, throwing his own chair over during his fit of anger. Waylon watched, amazed at Miles’ forwardness. He wasn’t playing around.

Andrew had a fiery look in his eyes, desperate to do something about Miles’ sass before dealing with Chris. But it seemed as if the situation had finally clicked into place somewhere behind his thick skull, because moments later he was radioing for guards with restraints to take Chris to a safe room where he could ride out his hallucination without harming himself or others.

Not even a minute later Chris was taken away by several guards, the panic in the room finally beginning to dial down as soon the doors closed. Andrew turned on Miles, about to blow a fuse when the alarm for yard time went off.

Their instructor inhaled deeply, then exhaled even deeper. He looked Miles straight in the eye, “Go. I’ll deal with you tomorrow, you can count on it. The lot of you-!” He then faced the rest of the class. “In the hall! Now!”

Everyone did what they were told until the yard finally surrounded everyone present. People began going their separate ways, but Waylon made sure to trail closely behind Miles.

“He has… He still has hallucinations? I remember he mentioned them a few days ago.” Waylon mumbled quietly when Miles plopped himself down at his and Chris’s usual spot. The blonde was willing to give Miles all the time in the world to cool down from their previous situation.

Miles kicked a pebble angrily, “Yeah, but he hasn’t had one in almost a year. He thought they’d finally gone away. But I guess not. Andrew… That asshole, he doesn’t understand that Chris isn’t with us when it happens. He tried hiding it, that’s why he hadn’t been working on his papers. He never tells anyone when it happens.” He grumbled, looking to the ground.

Waylon nodded, leaning down as well. “Andrew’s a dick. Since the first day I got here he’s been an ass towards me and the others.”

It was then Miles looked over to him, eyes narrowed, “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that, actually. Distract me from the subject, please. But he’s been paying a disturbing amount of attention to you. Like, a really disturbing amount.” He said, tone beginning to soften.

Waylon looked up, puzzled. “I thought that he just did that to everyone.”

“No, he doesn’t.” Miles said firmly, turning so he was facing Waylon. “Dude, you should be careful around Andrew. If the guy’s ever around and no one else is, get the fuck out of there. I don’t trust him around you. I’m sorry, I know you don’t like hearing it, I’m so sorry, but you’re a small guy and if he’s alone with you he can do some real damage. Same with other inmates, but—Andrew. Stay away from him.”

The blonde was petrified, but he understood his predicament perfectly. Great. Another slave to Mount Massive after his ass. Only time would tell what Waylon’s fate with Andrew would be. He hoped that it would be getting as far away from him as possible.

It was silent for a few minutes between the two of them. Waylon was wondering where Eddie and
Dennis were, looking up to see if their friends had been sent out into the yard yet. Just as he did, he spotted a group of five inmates making their way towards them. No one he knew the names of, but all of them were definitely from their class.

Miles’ attention, Waylon noticed, only drew over to the group once they were standing directly above them. Waylon didn’t have to stand up to know that all of them were taller than both he and Miles. He gulped, praying to some random god that they were all there to talk to them on friendly terms.

“Sup, Upshur.” One of the inmates hissed, leaning down towards said man, “Saw your big scary boyfriend had another one of his hallucinations. How long has it been, a year? Sad they had to drag him down under to get fixed. Maybe he’ll still have some of his brain left by the time they’re done with him. Billy wasn’t so lucky, was he?” He laughed, nudging the smaller boy in order to get a reaction.

Miles glared at the inmate, standing upright. Waylon noticed that Miles didn’t give a single hoot about their height difference; the man had always been drawn to intelligence as the greatest form of power. “Wow, an astounding insult, Steve. Truly, I’m impressed. A piece of fine art if I do say so myself.” He said sarcastically.

The inmate frowned before the corner of his lips quirked up. He nudged one of his friends. “Such a shame, the guards could hardly get the guy’s fat-ass through the goddamn door-”

That lit a fire in Miles’ eyes. Waylon yelped when Miles went fist-first towards the inmate, reaching up far enough to knock him dead in the nose. The inmate fell back, pinching his nose to hold back the fresh blood. Waylon watched the whole scene in absolute horror.

Two of the five moved quickly, grabbing each of Miles’ arms to hold him back. Miles kicked and flailed, spewing curse words as the inmate known as Steve cracked his neck, landing a swift punch to Miles’ lower abdomen. The smaller man wheezed, slouching forward.

Waylon couldn’t watch anymore, he was driven by the impulse to act. He yelled angrily, reaching up to grab the long hair of an inmate closest to him. He gripped thin strands tightly in his fist, yanking back hard and fast. The inmate screeched, collapsing onto the ground in pain. Waylon let out his own battle-cry, decking the inmate across the jaw.

The blonde turned back around when he thought the man below him would finally stay put, watching as Miles bit into one of the arms holding him back. There was a scream, and Miles was free.

Waylon felt himself be yanked back by his hoodie, and suddenly there was a hand under each of his armpits. One of the inmates had picked him up.

He yelped, flailing his arms wildly to try and land a hit on the person behind him. They dodged all of his blows, laughing heavily. Waylon looked around and found that Steve had grabbed Miles, shoving him to the ground before kicking his stomach. The inmate laughed along with his comrade for a few moments before there were two arms wrapped around his neck from behind.

At the same moment Waylon fell to the ground, hard. His knees caved in underneath him, and he barely managed to throw his arms out in time to keep his still-healing nose from hitting the dirt. He coughed and sputtered, looking up to see what had gone wrong.

The inmate that had been holding him was barely on his feet, cheek busted as he glared up at Eddie. The larger man moved forward, lashing out and tackling the inmate to the ground.
Waylon turned in the other direction to see if Miles was okay. He watched through half-lidded eyes as Dennis finished off one of the inmates, gripping his neck in a strange hold that made the inmate fall unconscious. As one of his colleagues approached Dennis jumped onto the next one, then Miles.

“Hey, break it up! Break it up!” A guard shouted from a few feet away. There were five guards to be exact; one of them was Paul, talking into his radio, probably calling in for backup. Waylon gulped, knowing that all nine of them were screwed.

Everything happened quickly after that. Everyone had a guard holding their wrists behind their backs, one guard hauling two unconscious inmates over each of her shoulders. Everyone had gone peacefully down to solitary, a lot of kids stuck there already from other incidents. Some inmates dumped here, others dumped there. Miles and Dennis got shoved into a cell together, and Waylon was put in one with Eddie. Of course.

The blonde put a hand the door closing them off from the rest of the building, sealed tight by a lock mechanism that had previously clicked into place. He sighed, running a hand through his hair. Why did he get involved like he had?

“Are you alright, darling?” Waylon heard Eddie ask quietly from a corner of the room.

He swiveled around to find the larger man sitting on one of the two beds, hands folded neatly in his lap. His face lacked any expression as he looked the blonde up and down. Waylon sighed, moving to the bed opposite Eddie’s, “Fine.” He said sadly, choosing to lie down when he began to feel dizzy.

Waylon closed his eyes, trying to calm the rushing of blood in and out of his brain. After a few minutes of quiet he turned his head over towards Eddie, cracking his eyes open. “So what happens now?”

Eddie glanced over towards the door, pressing his lips together in a thin line, “I imagine we’ll be in here for the night and out by morning. There were no serious injuries, so the decision shouldn’t take too long. They’ll come in and question all of us within the hour.” He said, looking back over towards Waylon. “…Why did those whores attack you?”

The blonde raised an eyebrow at the man’s choice of wording, propping himself up on the thin sheets, “They came for Miles. Chris had a hallucination while we were still inside and they came over and just started insulting him. Miles had gotten fed up and he jumped; I couldn’t leave him all alone.” He answered simply, rolling off the bed and onto the floor lazily.

The other man hummed, standing from his position on the bed to stand over Waylon’s smaller form. Slowly he leaned down, scooping Waylon up underneath his armpits to hold him up off of the floor.

Waylon hissed loudly, kicking his feet back and forth, “Hey-!” He shouted, managing to push himself out of Eddie’s grip. He landed somewhat-painfully back onto the cement flooring.

“Sorry, darling,” Eddie smirked, moving to lie down on his own bed, “Just wanted to make sure you didn’t have any injuries. You’re heavier than you look. But still fairly easy to get off the ground.” He smirked, glancing over at Waylon.

Waylon growled, “That’s right; I’m one-hundred and forty pounds of bite-sized kick-ass. And I am not afraid to unleash it when someone says I’m a pebble!” He scoffed, placing his hands on his hips. He felt his eyebrow twitching, but he held his ground.

“Hey,” An echo bounced from down the hall, “Is Waylon being a fluff-ball again?” Miles’ voice sounded from a couple cells away. “Please tell me it’s as adorable as I’m imagining it.”
Waylon’s eyes narrowed, unsure of what expression to make with his face. “Miles, you _dick-!_”

“Knock it off, both of you!” A third, deeper voice said from in front of Waylon’s cell. A guard. Waylon heard Miles cackle lowly, then things fell silent.

Within the hour a guard came down and questioned the whole group as Eddie had predicted. They gave their side to the story, then the assholes gave theirs. When everything was said and done the security team decided their group would be in solitary for just the night while the other group would stay for the entire day.

Waylon tried to think of different things to do to pass the time. At one point he ended up trying to teach Eddie how to play rock-paper-scissors (How did anyone _not_ know the game?) and they played for a good hour. They talked over dinner, and Waylon asked about different conspiracies and random theories.

“There was an inmate here that disappeared a year ago named Billy. Great kid, but not so great record.” Eddie had said, digging into his fried rice.

“What happened to him?” Waylon had asked.

Eddie had shrugged. “No one really knows. They told us he’d gotten discharged, but they told the public that he was still here. Both sides were wrong.”

“Who is ‘they’?”

“Murkoff. The people that own this facility.”

By the time curfew came around, Waylon was feeling restless. Eddie had fallen asleep half an hour beforehand, stretched out on his bed. Waylon crawled over to his own, yanking the hood of his sweatshirt over his head and pulling on the strings to tighten it around his face.

He dreamed of his extended family before getting sent to Mount Massive. He remembers faint images of his uncle and aunt racing through his mind, but that was all. Waylon woke up in a sweat, his hoodie lying on the ground next to his mattress and his hair matted down to his forehead. He glanced around, finding Eddie still sleeping across the room. The only thing that had changed was that the man switched positions in his sleep, now facing him.

Waylon tapped the bedframe, unsure of what he should do. There was no way he’d be able to just fall back to sleep. His whole body was shaking something awful as he crawled out of bed and across the room. He sat at the edge of the other man’s bed, watching him sleep for a solid minute before gently poking Eddie’s arm.

…Nothing. He poked again, this time whispering a soft, “Eddie. Hey, hey Eddie. Wake up.” While doing so. The man finally stirred, barely opening his eyes to Waylon sitting on the ground in front of him. He gave no reaction, so Waylon took it as his queue to proceed.

His cheeks flared a dull red as he scooted forward, “You know how sometimes when a little kid gets scared because of something they saw in their dreams, they go to their parent’s room and sleep it out?” He asked. Eddie blinked.

Waylon coughed nervously, “Well, I never really had parents to do that with. And I would always use this big old body pillow, but I didn’t bring it here with me. Would you mind… Doing. Its job. For me…?” He asked nervously.

Eddie gave him a strange look, as if he would laugh at the statement if he wasn’t so tired, “That’s a
very odd way to word it, darling.” He whispered, flipping over so his back was facing Waylon. The blonde heard him yawn. “Get in.”

Waylon’s face lit up with glee as he climbed onto the mattress, back against Eddie’s. “Thanks.”

Eddie was already asleep.

“**Oh my god, that is the cutest thing I have ever seen in my entire life.** Hey do you think they banged?”

Waylon’s eyes opened quickly when he heard the cell door opening and the excited whispers of the one and only Miles Upshur. He toppled off the side of the bed, back to the floor. He sat up, looking between the bed he’d been sharing with Eddie and the door where Miles, Dennis, and Frank all stood. He squeaked. “It’s not what it looks like!”

Frank looked as if he was trying to choke back laughter along with Miles, while Dennis palmed his own face disappointedly. Waylon hadn’t noticed when Eddie stood from the bed, stretching his arms over his head, “Let’s go.” He said quietly, exiting the room after giving Waylon a quick look.

“Oh no, oh like hell it’s not what it looked like. If I’d had my iPod I would’ve taken a couple of pictures. You’re in a lucky position Park, I wouldn’t start complaining.” Miles teased, starting a long run down the hall as Waylon growled and began to chase after him.

The blonde didn’t make it far past the door when the collar of his t-shirt was grabbed, and he was turned back around to face Frank, “Wouldn’t start that again, Park. Don’t want to be down here for another night, do we? Besides, you forgot your sweatshirt.” Frank said, pointing his thumb back inside the cell.

Waylon huffed, shoulders slumped. “Right.”

Chris laughed at breakfast that morning, poking through his food. “I leave you all for less than a day and this is what happens. Why am I not surprised.”

“It wasn’t our fault!” Miles shouted, pointing a fork at Chris. “They started it! And besides, Eddie and Dennis didn’t need to get sent down too. They were only defending us. Although we found Eddie and Waylon is a very compromising position this morning, and I think it was kind of worth it…”

Waylon’s face couldn’t get any redder as he slammed his palms flat on the table, “That’s not what happened!” He squeaked, looking anywhere but at the four men staring down into the core of his very being.

“Absolutely right, Park.” A new voice said over Waylon’s shoulder. The man had the audacity to sit down next to Waylon, leaning over so everyone could hear him, “I can see this is a bad time. I needed to ask Waylon Park here when I can come back to speak with him.” He said, casting a strange glance in Waylon’s direction.
The blonde sputtered, “Two days!” He stammered out quickly, desperately wanting the man to leave. Two days? Why the hell did he say it so quick…?

Jeremy knocked four knuckles on the table, “Alright then, I’ll see you in two days. If you don’t speak to me then, there will be consequences. Have a day, the lot of you.” He said, sending a special glare in Eddie’s direction.

As soon as he was gone all eyes turned to Waylon. Dennis was the first to speak up, “Waylon, what’s been going on with you and Blaire? He keeps coming in and asking you for something almost every day.” He asked with a flat voice, but Waylon knew he was worried.

Waylon sighed, slouching over in his chair, “He said he’d get me out of here if I did something for him, but he won’t tell me what it is until I agree to it.” He said, bringing his voice down to a whisper.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, don’t do it!” Miles whispered back as to not draw the attention of the guards on post nearby, “It’s Jeremy Blaire. You could end up just like Billy. And yes, I heard you two talking about him last night.” He said, looking between the two on the opposite end of the table.

“I’m not going to!” Waylon said harshly, bringing his voice back to its normal level. “It’s just… I don’t want to know what’ll happen if I say no.”

Chris leaned over, placing a firm hand on Waylon’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, kid. We’re all here for you. If he tries anything, he won’t get far. You’ll be fine.”

Waylon pursed his lips together, deep in thought. After a minute or so his face lit up with an idea, “Hey… About that Billy mystery… What if we were to solve it? Do you we’d get our sentences brought down?” He asked, lowering his voice again.

All four men seemed to be considering the idea, mulling it over. Chris was the first to speak, “I… I really don’t know. Depending on how serious the circumstances are, maybe.” He said just as quietly. “But don’t get your hopes up, Waylon. That whole thing is dead to everyone. It happened over a year ago.”

The blonde shook his head, “I’ll talk to you guys about it more sometime soon. I have no clue how to go about it, but I’ve been trying to think of something to get my mind off of things. Just… Thinking.” Waylon mumbled, leaning back from the group. “Just something to consider.”

“Dennis gonna read to you guys again?” Waylon asked as Miles collected his notebooks later that night. The man nodded, pulling the books under his arm. The blonde turned back to his computer, scribbling down a few notes. He was going to start doing some investigating on the Billy case from internet files he could dig up.

Miles walked over, “Maybe if you start singing again, your spooky boyfriend down the hall will end up by your door again.” He cackled, Waylon batting his hands away.

“We are far from anything of the sort, Miles. Now go away.” He grumbled, plugging in Miles’ iPod. The other man left, leaving Waylon alone with his thoughts. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but Waylon caught himself singing another song when he snapped back into reality.

“We get what we deserve… Oh, we get what we deserve… And way down we go.”

Waylon wondered if Miles could’ve been right. He got up from his chair slowly, making sure to stay silent as he crawled through the room. He turned the music up a notch before moving for the
doorway. He grabbed the doorframe and quickly looked down next towards the floor; nothing.

Waylon walked to his desk to turn off the music, moving back into the hall. He pulled on his bacon and egg slippers while walking towards Chris and Eddie’s room. But when he looked inside, no one was there, either.

The blonde noticed a stack of sketchbooks and papers piled on top of each other, all organized in little rows. Waylon looked around once before sliding into the room, leaving the door open a crack. He took the first sketchbook he found off a pile, looking like it was the most recent.

He flitted through the pages, taking more and more time on each picture when he began to notice just how exquisite all of the drawings were. Some were mannequin models in different poses, and some were the same but coated with beautiful pencil layers of imaginary cloth and beads. Dresses.

As Waylon glanced over a few more books, he found that they were all full of clothing designs. Although the one he had in his hands at the moment was not full of the trendy mannequins, but instead people.

A few pages were just random scenes. Some seemed as if they should be in a perfect life 1950’s advertisement. As he went further into the book, he found some unfinished sketches of what looked like other inmates. On the last page…

…Was a very sketchy figure with a thin, somewhat-sculpted face. The beginning works of hair were sticking up in the front of the person’s head while thick locks curled around their neck just about three inches below their ear.

It was Waylon. It was so Waylon. He knew what his own damn face was shaped like; it was an extremely rough sketch, yeah, but he wasn’t stupid.

“Waylon?”

The blonde dropped the book onto the desk immediately as he heard Eddie’s low voice in the doorway. He looked over at the tall man, who was glancing in between Waylon and his own books.

Waylon stuttered, “I-I uh, I was just, a-ah, the d-door was open and well, I-I-I really like how they look, they’re s-super nice…” He said, nearly tripping on a box while making his way out the door.

Eddie tilted his head, poker face as bland as ever. Waylon’s cheeks reddened as he stood in place, unsure of what he should be doing, “W-well ah, keep up the good work and u-uhm… Goodnight!” He said, racing back to his room and slamming the door shut.

He breathed heavily as soon as he was away from Eddie and his room, falling onto his bed. ‘Great job at being subtle, Waylon.’

He’d go on and pretend like he’d never seen himself in Eddie’s books. Yep.
“Fuck. Me. In. Ass. Please. Lord.” Waylon groaned, punctuating each word with a bang of his head against the bedroom wall.

He heard Miles chuckle close by, looking over to see the man tying his hair back with a worn-out elastic, “Aren’t you getting Eddie to do that for you?” He asked casually.

“The fuck, Miles? No!” Waylon growled, slamming his head onto the thin wall one more time for good measure before slumping down to the floor. Chris came into the room moments later, eyebrows raised when he saw Waylon curled up in the fetal position. “Uh… Everything alright in here?”

Miles laughed, stepping over Waylon’s body, “Oh he’s fine. He just doesn’t want to get up and have to look Eddie in the eye after stalking his shit last night while the beefcake was out.” He said, pulling a brown zip-up hoodie over his shoulders.

The two turned back to Waylon when the blonde let out a loud groan, rolling onto his side. Chris laughed, shaking his head. “Come on Way, time to eat. There’s a blizzard outside; don’t you want to watch it once we get to the cafeteria?”

The blonde groaned, reaching blindly for his glasses, which had previously been resting on the desk. He gave up after a minute of shuffling papers around, his arm flopping back down lifelessly. “No…”

Heavy footsteps thudded down the hall. Waylon looked up to watch Eddie pass by the room without as much as a glance in their direction. He heard the man’s deep voice down the hall, though. “Waylon, stop being a little bitch and join us for breakfast before I have to come back up here and drag you down myself.”

“I won’t hesitate, bitch.” Miles mumbled in a high-pitched voice, sending finger guns towards Waylon before following Eddie down the hall. That left only Chris, arms crossed over his chest. Waylon peered up at Chris with his signature doe-eyes, earning a lazy eye roll while the man walked over to him.

Just like that Chris hauled Waylon to his feet, patting his fluffy blonde hair twice before moving into the hall, “Get dressed quick, Waylon. If Paul doesn’t kick you out first, Ed was not kidding when he said he’d come back up here.” He grinned before departing with the others.

Waylon sulked down the stairwell, rubbing his tired eyes as he approached the cafeteria doors. He yelped when he realized his feet weren’t touching the ground anymore, shaking violently until he realized who had picked him up off of the ground.

“Fuck. You. Were you waiting by the door the whole goddamn time?!” The blonde shrieked, trying and failing to struggle out of the bridal-carry he was currently held hostage in.

“What vulgar language, darling.” Eddie huffed, pushing the cafeteria doors open with his foot. “I was just headed out to get you; I was almost convinced you’d thought I’d lied about prying you out.”

The smaller man hissed, still trying to pull himself out of Eddie’s vice-like grip, “Like you’re so much better at holding your tongue. Now would you put me down?!” He seethed, managing to detach Eddie’s pinky finger from his back.

A guard yelled at them from across the room, stalking over furiously. She seemed ready to kick
Eddie’s ass until Waylon assured her that he was fine. She gave Eddie a strict warning before moving back to her post. They reached their table, and Waylon only realized that the rest of their group had been able to witness the ordeal when he saw Miles dying of a laughing fit on the table.

Waylon’s cheeks flared as he slammed down into his seat, but didn’t comment further. He didn’t want to get in the breakfast line; he didn’t feel all that hungry. Instead Waylon folded his arms over each other, placing his face in between them.

“Come on Waylon,” Dennis said quietly, poking Waylon with his plastic fork. “Go and get something to eat. You need energy.”

The blonde shook his head slowly, earning a frustrated groan from Chris. The larger man leaned over the table, voice lowered. “Look kid, we can do this the easy way, or I can call Eddie back over and have him carry you to the line as well. What’s it gonna be?”

“And I’m up!” Waylon breathed, pushing himself away from the table in order to get in line with the remaining inmates. He sent a menacing glare Chris’s way, only paying attention to where he was walking when he bumped into something warm and firm.

He looked up, his brown eyes meeting icy blue irises, “Honestly darling, how many times are we going to do this?” Eddie grumbled, shifting away from Waylon’s touch uncomfortably. The blonde jumped back, twitching further when he felt someone shove him from behind.

There was an inmate standing next to Waylon along with a few others; the man was obviously trying to make himself seem a few inches taller in the hopes of scaring Waylon further. It did the trick well enough; Waylon shrunk back nervously to Eddie’s side in almost an instant.

The man shoved Waylon again, now gaining Eddie’s attention, “Ain’t no cutters in this line, you little cu-”

Eddie huffed, shoving the man back, “First of all, don’t ever use that word you disgusting whore. Didn’t your mother teach you better? Secondly, he’s with me, therefore he can stand in line with me.” He said, placing a hand on Waylon’s upper back.

The inmate growled as another guard approached to see what was going on. This time the other inmate had to confirm that everything was okay, and like before the guard left after a few choice words of his own. After that the atmosphere fell to silence; Waylon shifted uncomfortably.

“You know, I could’ve just moved to the back of the line, you didn’t have to vouch for me…” He mumbled, rubbing his arm awkwardly.

Eddie looked down to him, furrowing his brows. “Why did you look through my books last night?”

Well that certainly caught him off guard. Waylon bit his lip, looking to the floor due to embarrassment, “I didn’t really go in there for that, I just wanted to see if you were still in your room…” He mumbled, cheeks reddening.

“You know it’s polite to look at the person you’re talking to when having a conversation, don’t you?” Eddie said, shifting Waylon’s shoulder so he’d have to keep eye contact.

The blonde rubbed the back of his head awkwardly, finally looking up at Eddie, “Miles told me that you’d been sitting outside of my room drawing when I was working the other night. I wanted to see what you’d made.” He spewed quickly, trying to swallow the lump in his throat.

The other man seemed taken aback, probably since he hadn’t known he’d been found out. Eddie
cleared his throat, “I… I see. Sorry about the invasion of privacy, darling. …Were they… Alright?” He asked, clearly talking about what Waylon had seen in his sketchbooks.

He didn’t want to bring up the drawing that he’d suspected was himself. No, no way. Waylon nodded instead, offering a smile as a form of consolation. But the curl in his lips disappeared soon after, another question on his mind. “Why do you always call me that?”

“What?” Eddie asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Darling. Why do you always call me that?” Waylon asked genuinely. It’d always felt a bit weird when Eddie called him that as if they were a couple in the 1950’s or something. Which they weren’t.

Eddie grabbed a tray as they made it to the front of the line, offering it to some bored-looking cafeteria attendants. “I call everyone darling, darling.”

“Yeah, no you don’t.” Waylon pointed out, grabbing a tray himself. “You call the rest of the gang by their names, and everyone else either a slut and/or whore.”

Eddie moved away from the line, waiting for Waylon patiently. When Waylon was done, they began walking back to the table, “You just haven’t seen me in the real world, Waylon. I’m not lying to you.” He said as if trying to convince himself.

Waylon rolled his eyes, blowing a lock of blonde hair away from his face. “Sure you aren’t.”

The rest of breakfast passed by fairly quickly; everyone seemed to be eating slower. It was the weekend and no one was in a hurry to get anywhere it seemed. Waylon wasn’t sure what they’d be doing today; he’d come to Mount Massive on a Sunday night, so he didn’t know what the weekend ritual was.

Waylon nearly fell out of his chair as a loud bell went off towards the exit of the cafeteria. Frank stood in the middle of the room, one hand pointing towards the garbage cans and the other pointing towards the door, “Alright you diabolical squirts, throw your shi…” The man paused, looking outside the café doors; a higher-up was most likely giving him a stare down from his near slip-up in language. “…garbage in the cans and file into your two groups so we can send you all to the gymnasium.”

Everyone got up and did what was told. The week had been strange; everyone always seemed to be in a rush to obey the rules of hallway movement. Waylon had walked into Mount Massive expecting inmates to try standing up to the guards. But instead everyone was sent from place to place with no effort at all.

Waylon nearly panicked when he was separated from the others, trying to find them as soon as he entered the gym. Waylon halted his search after a few seconds, deciding that he wanted to look around instead. The whole room was set up much like a high-school gymnasium, minus a locker room and anything detachable or potentially dangerous. He noticed everything was secured firmly in place; probably for the best.

He looked towards one of the smaller basketball hoops in the room, picking out Miles and Chris playing basketball with each other while Dennis stood empty-handed nearby. Waylon could hear Miles bitching across the room every time he went in for a shot; Chris was so tall that any attempt at scoring on Miles’ part was futile.

The two looked to be inviting Dennis in after every one of Miles’ bitch fits, the teen continuously shaking his head to decline. After a minute or so Miles yanked Dennis over, giving him the ball and
teaching him how to shoot. When he left Dennis alone the teen tried shooting, aim so far off from the hoop it made Waylon snort out loud.

Shaking his head in amusement, Waylon made his way up a few steps of the bleachers to sit down and watch. He found that Eddie had already beaten him to it; the man was hunched over with his arms draped over his legs, watching the match.

“Hey.” Waylon greeted, climbing up a few more steps before plopping himself down next to the other man. “How come you aren’t playing with them?”

Eddie snorted as another one of Dennis’s shots hit the bottom bleacher, “Never liked sports myself. Besides, I’m not sure Miles wants another person standing in his way unless they’re a fair fight.” He laughed.

Waylon chuckled and yawned, draping his arms over the step behind him. He rubbed his eyes again, kicking his feet up in order to get more comfortable. He wanted to watch the three play below, but his vision kept fading in and out.

“Tired, darling?” Waylon heard Eddie ask beside him. He nodded, leaning his head back and closing his eyes, “Didn’t sleep much?” Eddie asked next. Another nod, Waylon began to feel himself drifting off.

He was pretty sure Eddie had mentioned something about waking him up in an hour, but he didn’t pay him any mind as his brain shut down, trying to catch up on all of the sleep he’d lost from the night he’d spent worrying. He really was an anxiety-riddled nerd…

Waylon opened his eyes, sitting up from a soft bed. He looked around, squinting through a blur before realizing he had his glasses on. He placed them on the nightstand beside him, tossing sheets over his legs before getting up. He looked around, observing his surroundings.

He was in his old house again.

The blonde stretched out before looking for his hoodie. It was cold… Yet the garment was nowhere to be found. In fact the whole room seemed to be a bit barren, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on why.

He opened a door across the room, peeking out into the hallway. The hall was the same one as in Mount Massive. Waylon squinted again; what the hell was going on?

Waylon walked to the end of the hall and down the stairs, wrapping his arms around himself in an attempt to keep warm. God, why the hell was it so cold?

He opened another door that should’ve led into the cafeteria hall, but instead he was on the first floor of his old house. He glanced around, closing the door behind himself before walking into the kitchen. There stood an extremely tall girl in her early twenties, and a boy that was slightly shorter yet just a tad bit older. His two cousins. The boy turned around to face Waylon, scoffing as he moved to exit through the back door.

Waylon glared back, noticing now that the girl was standing in front of him. When did she get there? She looked down at him affectionately; she was about six-foot-one with short, curly black hair. She dropped down into a half-squat, ruffling Waylon’s hair.

The blonde giggled, pushing her hands away as she laughed along with him. She stood back up, reaching over the counter and handing Waylon his hoodie. The hoodie itself seemed to be a bit distorted; the sleeves and hood were orange instead of blue, but he couldn’t bring himself to care all
that much. He pulled it over his head, hoping it would relieve him of the cold. It didn’t do anything; if anything, he felt even colder.

Both jumped when a loud bang erupted from the living room. The girl paled, rushing over to Waylon and placing both of her hands on his shoulders. She looked panicked. “Way, stay strong for me. I’ll be back, okay? I’ll be back, I promise. Just… Hold out, okay?” She spoke quickly, placing a quick kiss to his forehead before rushing out the door.

“No, please…” Waylon’s breath caught in his throat as a closer, much louder bang crashed once more from the living room. He followed his cousin out the door, hyperventilating. When he ran outside, he was in the football field of his high school.

Waylon swiveled around helplessly, looking back at the door to find a silhouette standing in the doorframe. The blonde choked, running as fast as his legs could carry him to the side-entrance of the school.

“Weapon, weapon… What’s the closest shop…Industrial? Thank god for vocational schools.” Waylon found himself talking aloud as he ran, swerving down the hall and swinging open a door with the large words, ‘INDUSTRIAL TECH’ printed above in white lettering. There wouldn’t be any good weapons in Info Tech where he worked, and even if they did it was all the way on the other side of the school.

Just as Waylon located a stray hammer on a nearby table he was grabbed by the neck and tossed across the room. He cried out, head slamming painfully onto the concrete floor. Black outlined the corners of his vision as he was yanked off of the ground, forced to stare into the eyes of his attacker. His uncle.

The blonde kicked and tried to scream as the hand around his neck tightened, closing off the air to his windpipe. He gagged, looking up at the ceiling while he was dragged over to a brick wall.

“Small. Pathetic. Weak. That’s why I’ve kept you around all these years; you make a perfect punching bag.” His uncle laughed, the last few words seeming to dip down to a deeper octave. Waylon felt tears fall down his cheeks, sparing one last look at his uncle who… Wasn’t his uncle anymore.

“E-e-ed…” Waylon choked as the hand around his neck squeezed, another grabbing a large tuft of his hair.

Eddie was the one attacking him now. If only he’d managed to grab that hammer before it was too late he could’ve…

“Waylon!” Eddie screamed, slamming Waylon’s face into the brick wall. The blonde screamed, feeling thick blood flow out of his nose and down his forehead. Everything tasted like copper. The cold from earlier seemed to be slowly consuming his body, fingers turning to icicles before traveling up his hands, then his arms…

“Waylon!” Another shriek, this time Waylon thought it sounded like Miles. His head was tossed against the bricks again, and he was pretty sure a few of his teeth fell out of his mouth. The blonde begged for mercy, blood leaking into his eyes.

“Waylon!” It was Eddie again, yanking his hair back one last time, this one more forceful than the others. Waylon just wanted it to be over; if death meant he wouldn’t have to suffer like this, then he’d take it.
Waylon screamed, launching up from his position on the bleachers. Tears were running in rivers down his cheeks, hands immediately flying up to feel his face. Everything seemed fine, and when he pulled his hands away they weren’t covered in blood.

He looked up to find Miles and Eddie standing above him, both breathing heavily with panicked expressions on their faces. Miles looked ready to pass out, taking a step down before letting out a long breath of relief.

Most of the inmates around the room were looking in his direction. When Waylon glanced over they’d turn back around, resuming their previous activities. Waylon realized he was still hyperventilating, looking back over at his friends. While Eddie and Miles remained in front of him, he could see Chris and Dennis standing at the bottom of the bleachers. Dennis was clutching a basketball to his chest tightly.

“Christ Waylon, are you alright?” Miles spoke, regaining Waylon’s attention. The blonde stared blankly at Miles before letting out a chocked sob and launching forward, enveloping him in a tight hug.

“Nightmare…” Waylon choked out, balling up Miles’ sweatshirt in his fist. He tried to steady his breathing while holding onto his friend for dear life. Miles was real; he was real. Waylon then looked over to Eddie, scanning him up and down. The man looked shaken, running a hand through his strip of black hair tiredly. Waylon hiccupped, moving away from Miles in order to latch onto Eddie next.

Waylon felt Eddie freeze in place as he held onto his flannel shirt and sobbed into his chest. That was a human reaction. He’s real. He’s real. I’m alive.

Eddie had no idea what to do with himself. He glanced over at Miles for help; the other man gestured in a motion that was meant to resemble a hug. Eddie looked back down at Waylon before wrapping his arms around him, leaning his head on Waylon’s shoulder, “Do you want to talk about it?” He whispered.

The blonde shook his head in response. No way would he want to relive that dream again; he’d had some nasty ones about his family in the past, but nothing quite that bloody. He only managed a small sniffle as he felt himself picked up in a way a parent would hold a sleeping baby to their chest by Eddie, and he began walking down to the bottom of the bleachers.

“Go back to your game, I’ve got him.” Waylon heard Eddie speak faintly, feeling the vibration of his vocal chords as the man talked. He let out a few more whimpers, feeling drowsy again. He didn’t want to fall asleep, not if he was going to have another nightmare, but his body was betraying him and soon he was overcome by sleepiness; but this time, he dreamt of nothing but warmth.

“Do you think it’s safe to let him sleep again? That guard from before said you might want to wake him up soon.” Dennis asked as he sat beside Eddie. The teenager looked Waylon up and down, making sure there weren’t any signs that he was having another nightmare.

Eddie sat on the bottom step of the bleacher, having maneuvered Waylon so the blonde was lying down on the seat with his head in Eddie’s lap. The man sighed, tearing his eyes away from Chris and Miles’ game to look at Dennis.

“I know what a nightmare looks like. If it looks like he’ll have another one then I’ll wake him up. It
doesn’t seem like he got a lot of sleep last night, I think it’d be best to let him rest.” Eddie replied, weaving his fingers through a section of Waylon’s hair.

Eddie hadn’t noticed that the sound of dribbling had stopped until Miles approached, basketball underneath his arm, “You know what I think,” He said, smirking in a way not like his usual devious smile but more like a sympathetic grin. “I think you’ve got a thing for him.”

“Absurd.” Eddie replied, removing his fingers from Waylon’s hair.

Chris sat down beside Eddie, grabbing a towel he’d managed to convince a guard to get. He began wiping off the thin sheen of sweat coating his forehead. “Sorry Ed, but I’m siding with Miles on this one. I mean sure, you beat him to shit on his first day and scared the living piss out of him, yeah, but come on. Face the facts. You’ve been all over each other ever since.”

“Shut your disgusting mouth, Walker.” Eddie hissed through clenched teeth. “First off, he’s been here for just under a week. That’s not nearly enough time to develop true feelings for someone. Secondly, he most likely latches onto me because he knows it bothers me. Lastly, even if I did, he’s still a minor, and I’m almost twenty-two.”

Miles chuckled, making Eddie’s eyebrow twitch. The man put his basketball to the side, “Age is but a number in your case, my friend. Frank told me he turns eighteen in about a month. Besides,” He leaned down, lowering his voice. “Technically you haven’t denied it.”

Eddie ground his teeth together in his mouth, taking off his flannel so he had on only the white shirt he wore underneath. He folded it up carefully before lifting Waylon’s head, placing the cloth on the bench beneath him and lowering his head back down.

The smirk faded from Miles’ face as soon as Eddie pried off his dress shoes and socks, turning back towards him. Eddie bent his neck so it made a loud cracking sound, and he took a single step towards Miles before the other man panicked and bolted across the gym. He shoved through other inmates frantically to get away from Eddie, who began a high-speed chase after him.

“Ungrateful shit!” Eddie screamed as he ran after Miles; the guards didn’t seem to care much about Miles’ well-being, most of them laughing as the smaller man tripped over a chord on the floor before scrambling back up.

“And you like this man?” Dennis asked Chris, gesturing towards Miles’ loud screaming.

Chris shrugged, “I don’t know why myself, D. It sure is entertaining.” He laughed, bringing his hands up to his mouth to conceal a fit of laughter when an inmate tried grabbing Miles in order to sacrifice him to Eddie. Miles began yelling louder, attracting the attention of a few more guards. They all stood by, laughing quietly amongst themselves.

“How long do you think Miles will be able to go for?” Dennis asked, nudging Chris to gain his attention again.

The larger man stood up, still laughing. “Less than a minute. I better go help him before we have another broken nose on our hands.”

Waylon was prodded awake by Dennis when lunch was brought into the gym. He’d shaken his head, falling back asleep. The next time he was woken up by Chris, saying that the guards allowed them to go back to their rooms for the next hour before dinner. He’d also declined the offer, wanting to go back to sleep again. Chris had told him he wouldn’t be able to sleep through the night if he didn’t stay awake, but Waylon couldn’t bring himself to care.
He’d drifted off into a half-asleep half-awake state until dinner rolled around. Dennis had been the one to pry him off of the bleachers after that, gently tugging him up when he didn’t move more than an inch himself.

Miles greeted him with a small smile when he finally did make it up, patting him on the back. Waylon noticed the man had a small red mark on the side of his head and wanted to question why, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to know at the same time.

Dinner passed by as uneventful as ever. At one point Frank had come over to their table to say hi, but took a few minutes to talk with Miles.

“I’ve got something for you guys next weekend, I think you’re gonna like it.” Frank had said giddily, rubbing his hands together.

Miles’ face had lit up with childish glee, but no one seemed to know what Frank had been referring to. No one cared enough to ask, so they were left in the dark.

After dinner they were all sent to their rooms like usual, and the night trudged on peacefully. Waylon continued to save files from the Billy Hope case into specific folder he’d made, not ready to start talking with the others yet. He just needed another week or so.

Halfway through working with what he’d collected, Waylon got up to use the bathroom. He walked down the hall, pausing at Chris and Eddie’s room. Chris was sat on his bed reading a book with headphones in while Eddie sat on his own, twirling a pencil in between his fingers while he stared down at a blank piece of sketchbook paper.

Waylon continued on, letting the guard at the end of the hall know he was going to take a piss before making his way to the bathroom door. He heard someone else walk in while he was using it, not an unusual thing. What was unusual was the click of the door’s lock and the sound of a sink turning on behind him.

The blonde finished quickly, turning around to find the person he wanted to see the least standing at the sinks across the room.

“Waylon Park, always a pleasure.” Jeremy Blaire sneered, dangling a small key in his hand. The bathroom key.

Waylon snarled, reaching out in a half-assed attempt at snatching the key out of Blaire’s hands. Jeremy laughed, pocketing the item as Waylon moved to wash his own hands. He tried his best to ignore the man’s presence and let him know he wasn’t interested in his bullshit, but he could practically feel Blaire breathing down his neck.

Blaire moved to stand beside him, grinning, “It’s been two days, Park. Well, almost two, but I’d really like to know what you’ve chosen to commit to.” He said calmly, nudging Waylon’s side like they were long-time pals.

Time seemed as if it had frozen. Waylon drew a blank before the pieces clicked together in his brain. ‘Fuckety fucker-fuck. Fine. I’m not going to be this assholes pawn.’

“No.” Waylon said firmly, trying to will his right eyebrow and hands to stop twitching. He tried standing tall, raising his chin to let Jeremy know with his body language along with his words just what exactly he meant by ‘no’.

Jeremy leaned over the sink, still smirking but not quite as heated as before, “No…?” The man asked, features finally contorting into a frown.
“No.” Waylon repeated again, speaking up. “I’m serving my time here; I don’t need a manipulative scumbag like you making me do something against my own will. Fuck off, Blaire. Will you unlock the door so I can leave now?”

Blaire’s frown deepened, “Real cocky, Park. You’re making friends with the wrong crowd, and eventually you’re gonna regret setting foot in this place.” He growled, pulling the bathroom key out of his pocket. He unlocked the door, that god-awful smirk returning. “Don’t think that this is the last we’ll be seeing each other, Park. I’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

Waylon rolled his eyes, pushing the door open, “As if I had a choice to come here.” He scoffed, walking back down towards the hall.

He almost missed Jeremy say one last thing; “You’re the one that choose this school instead of going to prison like a good little bitch. Remember that.” Whatever, Jeremy couldn’t do much to worsen how fucked up he already was. Fuck him; Waylon didn’t care about his sorry ass.

On his way back Waylon knocked on the door to Chris and Eddie’s room. Both men looked up from their work to see who’d knocked, surprised as to who it was. Waylon cleared his throat, “Hey Chris, is Miles hanging out with Dennis again tonight?” He asked.

Chris nodded, turning back to his book. “Yeah, but for tonight only. He wanted Dennis to read him the bonus section of his book.”

“Ah.” Waylon clapped his hands together, now turning towards Eddie. He noticed the man’s sketchpad remained as blank as ever. “If you want to bring your stuff over Eddie, you can hang out down the hall with me until curfew.”

Eddie’s eyebrows raised as Chris’s mouth fell into a toothy grin. The man nudged Eddie lightly, earning a low rumble of distaste before Eddie gathered the materials on his lap and followed Waylon down the hall.

Waylon walked over to his desk, turning his computer off. He hopped onto his bed next, pulling off his hoodie and falling back onto his sheets. He’d almost forgotten that Eddie was there until he glanced over at the man standing awkwardly in the doorway.

Waylon blushed, nodding over to the desk then back at Eddie. “If you like working at desks, you can use ours.”

“Thank you.” Eddie mumbled, tossing his things down onto the desk before taking a seat. He glanced back at Waylon. “Desk’s too cluttered in my room to use.”

Oh, Waylon had noticed. Of course he had, he’d been in there just the other night. The blonde sighed, flipping himself over so he was lying on his stomach. He watched Eddie get to work drawing for a good ten minutes before he decided he was feeling honest. “…The nightmare was about my family.”

The blonde watched wearily as Eddie paused, placing his pencil down onto the paper before turning around to face Waylon. He didn’t say anything in response, so Waylon assumed he could continue.

“My nightmare from earlier. It was… Well, not about my direct family. Before I got sent here, I lived with my aunt and uncle. I had two cousins too, but they’d moved out a while ago.” Waylon sighed, thinking back on when they had left one by one. “My uh, my aunt was nice for the most part. I mean… When I didn’t screw something up or do anything to piss her off, that is. My uncle on the other hand, he… He was a brute. I’m pretty sure nothing could ever make him happy.
“I’ve had dreams about them before. Dreams where… I’d get thrown around a few times, or others where I’d take a small beating and move on to my next adventure. But I’ve never had one like earlier. It was…” What the hell was it? It was bloody, it was grotesque, it was… “Horrific. I was scared more than I’ve ever been before in my life. Even more so than you choking me. It was so vivid.”

Eddie pursed his lips together, drumming his fingers on the backrest of the chair. “Did they… Did he hurt you, darling? …You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

Waylon felt tears begin to well at the corner of his eyes, but he forced them back to the best of his ability. He nodded slowly, “My uh… P-parents died when… A-and they didn’t really want me, always w-waiting for the o-opportunity for me to fuck up so bad they could j-just… They kept me around b-because…” He stuttered, struggling painfully to keep his tears back. No crying.

“It’s okay.” Waylon looked up at Eddie, who was giving him the most sympathetic look he’d ever received. He didn’t want to be pitied, but it didn’t seem like Eddie was doing that, exactly. Waylon couldn’t read his expression, but it wasn’t full of pity like he’d thought.

The blonde wiped his nose, squeezing his eyes shut. “I think that’s all I want to talk about. I’m sorry.”

Eddie shook his head, standing up. He seemed like he wanted to comfort Waylon but wasn’t sure how, “Don’t be, it’s not something that’s easy to discuss…” He said, placing a hand on Waylon’s back. The blonde looked up, eyes wide and glossy. “Darling…”?

Waylon sniffed, moving up so he could kneel on the edge of his bed. He wrapped his arms around Eddie’s neck, pulling the man into a tight hug. “Thank you for tolerating me.”

That made Eddie laugh, returning the gesture. “I’d hardly call it toleration, darling, I don’t mind your emotional needs; after all, people should be able to express how they feel.”

“Yeah,” Waylon sniffed, rubbing his nose. “You’re right.”
“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

“Watch the language, if I were any other guard you’d be removed from the room. No. I’m not kidding you.”

“Please tell me they’re at least censoring the music.”

“Nope. Wernicke finally agreed that it was time for all of you kids to let off some steam.”

“Ohohoho, tonight is gonna be fun.”

“I’m a twenty-one year old man, Frank.”

“And yet you’re here...?”

“Roasted!”

Frank laughed, taking the cardboard box off of the lunch table and moving it to a desk set up in the center of the room. Waylon watched him leave before turning his attention back towards where Miles and Eddie were having a glaring contest.

Miles rolled his eyes and looked away to smile brightly at Waylon. “I still can’t believe he actually brought it in for us.”

Dennis took a sip of his juice pouch, raising an eyebrow. “He said last week that he’d have a surprise for us, I just wasn’t anticipating that.”

“Oh come on, it was obvious he was bringing in the karaoke machine.” Miles grinned even wider, slamming his fists down onto the table. “What I can’t believe is that he actually got the O.K. to uncensor the music.”

Waylon laughed, “What song are you going to sing, Miles?” He asked. The blonde faintly recalled him mentioning a name like ‘bee-bee’ the week before, but he didn’t remember Miles ever mentioning a title.

Miles cackled evilly, hunching over the table. “I’m Gonna Show You Crazy by Bebe Rexha.”

‘Bebe, Bebe... Oh my god.’ Waylon’s jaw dropped as he stood up from his seat, “I know that song! My cousin used to play it in her room all the time before she left! It was one of the only songs I knew at the time!” He slammed back down into his seat. “I loved that song.”

“Care to sing it with me, then?” Miles asked, leaning over the table.

“Oh my god, this is going to be chaos.” Dennis sighed, rubbing his temples. “Don’t sing too loud, I’ve been having a dull headache off and on recently and I don’t need you two making it worse.”

Waylon laughed nervously. “I’ve never been someone to stand in front of a crowd because I felt like it. I’ll pass.”

Before Miles could respond, several loud bangs shot across all walls of the cafeteria. Waylon flinched, but turned around to look for the noise along with the rest of the inmates. Frank and a couple other guards were purposefully banging on the table in the center of the cafeteria trying to
gain everyone’s attention. The room fell silent once Frank climbed up onto the table.

“Alright kiddos, we’ve got a little treat for you all tonight.” The older man began, placing his hands on his hips. Waylon watched Pauline stand nearby, pinching the bridge of her nose in distaste.

Frank continued, “I brought in my karaoke machine like so many of you have asked about over the last few weeks. Now, to answer questions right off the bat; yes, you can pick out any song you desire as long as no violence is involved. Yes, it’s legal right now so don’t think we’re going under the man. Not all of us are morons.” He said towards Miles. Waylon choked on his water when Frank narrowed his eyes.

“And finally, yes,” Frank said, making sure to speak loud enough throughout the cafeteria so all of the inmates could hear him, “Both solos and duets are allowed. We’ve got a sheet up here,” The man gestured to Paul, who held up a clipboard with a few pieces of paper attached. “That you have to write your name and song/artist that you’re singing on. Dinner time is gonna be extended for y’all to listen to your own incessant screaming. Any other questions?”

There were a few murmurs throughout the crowd, but otherwise everyone remained silent. Frank nodded, “Good. You have until the end of breakfast.” Once he hopped down, a couple of inmates from various sections of the room ran up giddily to write down on the paper.

“Do you think anyone will be cocky enough to try and sing ‘Gangster Bitch’?” Miles asked, leaning towards Dennis.

Dennis shoved Miles off, “Doubtful. Besides, that song is terrible.” He shivered.

Waylon pushed his tray away, leaning on the table tiredly before Miles stood proudly, “Whelp, I’m signing up, and I’m writing your name down with mine, Waylon.” He laughed, running away to get into the short line.

“Miles, no!” Waylon shrieked, swiveling around in his seat as Miles left. His right eyebrow began to twitch as he pondered his options. He could let Miles write his name down… Or he could go up there and cause a scene that could get them both locked up in solitary. Then Miles would be pissed but Waylon wouldn’t have to sing. But then they’d also get their privileges taken down. Fuck.

The blonde groaned, sulking into his seat. He buried his face in his hands, blushing madly. Maybe if he did that thing where he pretended everybody was in their underwear…

He felt a large hand patting his back. Waylon looked up to find Eddie looking down on him with an expression as close to sympathy as the man could get. Out of all the times Eddie would stick his neck out for him and fight Miles to save his dignity, why wasn’t he doing it now? Waylon put his face back into his hands when he realized that the taller man probably didn’t want to risk his privileges, either. Great.

When Miles returned to the table, Waylon gave him a look as cold as ice before ignoring any and all conversation the other man tried to make. He pressed on until class time. Then lunch. Then class again. Then outside time.

Waylon was sitting in a corner of the yard, staring at the wall where Mount Massive ended and wire fencing began. He heard heavy footsteps approach from behind, but he refused to look over his shoulder to see who it was.

“The pioneers used to ride these babies for miles!” Waylon heard Miles shriek. He couldn’t help but look back at the sudden outburst; he stopped the silent treatment immediately as he glanced up and
saw Chris giving Miles a piggy-back ride. The blonde burst out into a fit of giggles, rolling onto his side when Chris leaned back fast enough that Miles dropped to the ground, hard.

The smaller man let out a soft ‘oof!’ raising a fist into the air weakly when Chris walked away, “I knew that would get you.” Miles wheezed, peeling his head up to look over towards Waylon’s continuous laughter.

“Holy fuck,” Waylon choked out, crawling over towards Miles to help him into a sitting position. “I hate you, but that was pretty good.”

Miles laughed, brushing dirt and a bit of frost off of his sweatshirt. He looked back over towards where Chris was standing nearby; the man was obviously laughing, gesturing between the two during several fits of giggles.

“Anyway,” Miles coughed, “It’s probably one of the last day’s we’ll have in the yard before the snow starts sticking for good. That would’ve hurt too much to do in the gym.” He laughed, reaching up to ruffle a hand through Waylon’s hair. “Are you still mad at me? Can you forgive me?”

Waylon shook his hair back and forth, trying to shake him off, but Miles’ hand stuck firmly in place.

“I dunno, you’re making me stand up in front of a few hundred people just so you can sing a stupid duet…”

The other man laughed, reaching over to squish the sides of Waylon’s face between his palms. Waylon gurgled, “Pleeeeeease?” Miles insisted, beginning to rub his hands more vigorously over his cheeks. “Pleeeeeeaseease…”?

“Oh, okay! Just stop touching my face!” Waylon shrieked, trying to peel Miles’ fingers away. The other man finally showed mercy, bringing his hands back to his sides. “Good. So, you know the lyrics to the song, right?”

The blonde sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“Uh… Okay, Miles! Waylon! Front and center, please!” Frank shrieked across the cafeteria. Waylon remained a fidgety sobbing mess as Miles dragged him up to the center of the room.

Frank laughed once he saw the expression on Waylon’s face, handing Miles a microphone. Frank held the second one himself in order to speak to the rest of the inmates, “So these two knuckle-heads are singing Bebe Rexha. God save your souls, gentlemen.” He handed Waylon the second microphone, the blonde taking it with shaking hands. “Good luck, boys.”

Once the music started, Waylon recognized the tempo immediately. He gulped, his whole body shaking. He glanced over to Miles, who had already brought the microphone to his lips.

“There's a war inside my head, sometimes I wish that I was dead, I'm broken.”

It was clear Miles was trying to be funny about the whole situation, but Waylon still groaned, trying to calm his breathing.

“So I call this therapist and she said, “Girl you can't be fixed, just take this…”

Miles exaggerated the second half of the verse with a swing of his hips, causing most of the inmates nearby to chuckle. Waylon closed his eyes, stepping forward before Miles could sing the next part of the song. He opened his eyes.
“I'm tired of trying to be normal. I'm always overthinking. I'm driving myself crazy—So what if I'm fucking crazy?!"

Waylon sang into his microphone, glaring at the people staring him down. He glanced over towards Miles to see the other man with both eyebrows raised, jaw dropped before it turned into a toothy smile. Waylon continued on.

“And I don't need your quick fix, I don't want your prescriptions, just cause you say I'm crazy—So what if I'm fucking crazy?! ...Yeah I'm gonna show you…”

As soon as the chorus began, both men sang in sync, nearly collapsing into a fit of laughter as the second half of the song started up. Suddenly Waylon forgot that he was in a room full of people watching; his mind saw it as him and a friend, singing a song as if there was nothing wrong with them.

“Loco, maniac! Sick bitch, psychopath! Yeah I'm gonna show you, I'm gonna show you! Yeah I'm gonna show you mental, out my brain! Bat-shit, go insane! Yeah I'm gonna show you, I'm gonna show you! Yeah I'm gonna show you--!”

Eddie watched Waylon and Miles singing from his own seat in the cafe. He didn’t have to look over his shoulder to know Chris was laughing his ass off, fist slamming down onto the table every so often. Dennis had moved into the seat next to him to get a better view of their friends, grin curling up the corners of his lips.

Eddie wasn’t focused on the singing, though. Instead his attention was drawn to the blonde ten feet away, laughing along with Miles as they sang along with a cheesy song that… Actually did a pretty good job at describing their current status.

Soft, blonde hair curled gently around his ears, wide, bright brown eyes, a few freckles dotted across his nose…

Waylon didn’t belong here. He was too fragile, too innocent for this place. It made Eddie’s anger flare. If he ever met the people that stuck Waylon in Mount Massive, they were going to pay the severe price.

Eddie glanced back up at the two. Waylon was looking around the room, eyes locking with Eddie’s for a few moments before he turned away with a small blush. Even Eddie’s cheeks felt hot at the way the teenager’s face reddened. He thought back to what Miles had said about him the week before.

No. No way in hell would he be fucked over like this. Two weeks, two goddamn weeks—No. He didn’t have any feelings towards the smaller man. He couldn’t. It was impossible.

But goddammit, every time he glance back over in Waylon’s direction his cheeks got hotter and hotter. Was that just a thing that close friends did? He wouldn’t know. Although Eddie wasn’t sure he would consider their relationship anything near ‘close’.

The song ended. Eddie watched as Miles had Waylon bow with him in the dorkiest way they could possibly manage. He heard Dennis stand and give a few wolf-whistles while Chris clapped loudly from behind. Eddie chuckled, slowly bringing his hands up to applaud along with the rest of the room.

The two made their way back to the table; Waylon plopped down in his usual seat beside Eddie, his twitching removed from existence for the time being as he grinned up at him.
He was in denial.

“Waylon holy *fuck*, get up!” Miles screamed, jumping on the teen’s bed in an attempt to get him up and moving faster.

Waylon groaned, looking around blearily when his roommate took hold of his shoulders, shaking him vigorously. “What is it?”

“It’s hardcore snowing outside, bud. Frank opened up the storage space between the stairs so we can see it out the window!” Miles cheered happily, slapping the sides of Waylon’s face until the blonde forced himself out of bed.

He followed Miles down the hall towards an open door near the staircase like he’d said. Not too many inmates were left in the hall; had he slept through morning wake-up? Why hadn’t Miles woken him up sooner?

Miles more or less ran towards the window at the other end of the room, hands smacking against the cold glass as he looked at the bright white blanket covering the ground in awe. Waylon trotted up beside him, pulling his shoulder down a fraction of an inch to get a better view out the window.

“I don’t think we’re gonna be going outside again until spring, it looks like it’s sticking real well now.” Miles mumbled, pulling his hands down from the glass. “Wooooow.”

“You two are such children.” A third voice said from the storage room doorway.

Waylon inhaled sharply, turning around to see Eddie standing with his arms crossed over his chest. The man didn’t have his usual blank stare; instead, Waylon found that his lip was curled into a hidden smile. It fell once Waylon approached.

The blonde sucked in a breath, “Holy shit, it can’t be,” Waylon gasped over-exaggeratedly, reaching up to poke the corner of Eddie’s mouth. “Was that a *smile* I saw?”

Eddie smacked Waylon’s hand away, frown deepening, “No.” He grumbled, turning his nose up at the smaller man. Waylon was ready for the challenge.

“Come on,” Waylon smirked, moving to poke different parts of Eddie’s chest over and over. “Admit it. *Admit it. You were smiling-*!”

The taller man growled, grabbing both of Waylon’s wrists and holding them to each side of his head. He leaned down, lips pulled back in a snarl. “You need to learn how to hold your tongue, darling.”

Waylon glared back, leaning up to fight back on his own. “I’m starting to want to see you *make me.*”

“Holy hell, can you two just fuck already? Please?!” Miles groaned, moving to place a hand in between Waylon and Eddie’s faces. He smacked his hand back and forth, hitting both of them twice. “There’s barely an inch between you!”

Eddie dropped Waylon’s arms almost immediately with a low growl, storming out of the storage room and down the hall. Waylon blushed furiously, tugging at the strings of his hoodie. He swiveled around to Miles, unable to control the heat spreading quickly under his skin. “What the fuck, Miles?!” He screeched.

Miles laughed, putting his hands on his hips, “What, did I ruin your moment or something?” He
teased. It certainly got the desired reaction; Waylon’s cheeks got impossibly redder as he ran out of
the room to go get breakfast.

The blonde grumbled as he walked down the hall to the stairwell. They all were definitely late to
breakfast now; wasn’t Frank supposed to be on duty? He certainly wasn’t doing his job properly.
Waylon couldn’t bring himself to hate the guard too much for it; it was Sunday morning after all.

The blonde continued to glare at the floor as he stomped down the steps, considering pulling his
hood over his face to conceal his obvious embarrassment when he entered the cafe. Once Waylon
reached the bottom step, he nearly screamed as he was slammed against the wall just beside the exit
doors.

“What-” Waylon gasped in a near-panic state just as lips closed over his own. His eyes widened as
both of his upper arms were grabbed and pressed further into the wall, and he looked up to find the
person holding him captive was Eddie himself.

Waylon wasn’t sure what to do or how to react. He’d never been kissed before; hell, he’d never
thought he’d be kissed by anyone. Yet here he was. So instead of panicking further, he closed his
eyes, slumping against the wall as Eddie tilted his head to get better access to the kiss.

As soon as it started it was over, Eddie pulled away and stood back up, staring down at Waylon with
a whimsical look adorning his features. He brought his hand up, fingers ghosting over Waylon’s lips
before pushing the exit door open and leaving into the hall.

The blonde stood there in a daze for a few more seconds, unable to make his legs move. It was as if
he was stuck in mud on the floor. Waylon heard Miles trotting down the stairs moments later, the
man hopping off the last step and landing in front of him.

“Still here?” Miles asked slyly, nudging Waylon’s arm. “Let’s eat. Oh uh, looks like you’ve got
something on your cheek here.” Miles commented, tapping the corner of his lip before leaving for the
hall like so many others had already done.

Waylon stood up straight, swiping two fingers against the skin next to his lips. He looked down and
squinted.

Makeup.

Breakfast passed by in an uneasy silence. Dennis seemed tranquil, happily absorbing the rare peace
and quiet. Chris and Miles both seemed like they wanted to say something to Waylon, but were
unable to do more than give each other the same look over and over. Eddie remained a statue while
Waylon sat uncomfortably next to him.

Waylon had initially felt awkward taking a seat next to Eddie after what had happened in the
stairwell. What in the actual fuck had that been, anyway? Was Eddie just screwing with him, or did
his actions mean something else entirely?

He didn’t think on it very long; soon he began to wonder why he’d had makeup on his face. There
was no way… Could it have really come from Eddie? Why would the man be wearing makeup? It
had undoubtedly been concealer. Maybe Eddie was hiding something.

Waylon thought about all the different possibilities. Maybe Eddie had a black eye from a fight, or
someone managed to give him a couple good bruises and he happened to have the concealer on-hand
to cover it up. Who the hell decided to allow inmates to have such luxuries? With such assholes as
staff members, Waylon would’ve thought Mount Massive’s policies would be much stricter. Eddie’s
privileges weren’t all that great, either.

Maybe someone had gotten a hold of it for him. Chris? Possibly. But Eddie didn’t seem close enough to Chris to ask a favor of him as important as that.

Waylon hadn’t realized that it was time to leave until Dennis tried pulling him out of his seat. He looked around; most inmates had already filed out, only a few guards waiting for stragglers such as themselves. Waylon didn’t care enough to apologize as they walked out after the others.

Dennis sat with him when they got to the gym. Chris and Miles hung around nearby, nearly leaning on each other as they talked. Eddie was nowhere to be found; where the hell was he? Waylon felt awful; it was a possibility that the man had been disgusted with him and did something to stupid to get sent away. ‘Well fine, I wasn’t the one that initiated you asshole. You act like a dick, kiss me and leave? What the hell is your problem you slippery-‘

“Are you okay, Waylon?” Dennis asked, eyes wide with curiosity. Waylon tried to look away; the look Dennis was giving him challenged his own signature doe-eyes.

Waylon sighed, folding his hands over his lap, “I’m fine.” He said, voice strained. Waylon felt anything but okay. He’d had a lot on his mind over the last week. He was still adjusting to the fact that he was a convict, the disturbing amount of attention coming from a certain man named Andrew, and Eddie just had to come along and make everything worse.

He knew Dennis could see him blushing. The other teenager slid closer, “Doesn’t seem like nothing. You look like that meme with the kid’s vein popping out of his skull.” He said, bumping Waylon’s elbow. “I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to.”

Waylon laughed weakly, “What is this, Real Housewives? Are we going to keep secrets about Miles behind Chris’s back? I said it’s nothing.” He sighed, slumping over and folding his arms over his lap.

Dennis shrugged, tapping his chin, “Hm. Let me guess… It has to be about either you and Eddie’s make-out session earlier, or your quest for Billy Hope.” Dennis scanned Waylon up and down. “My guess is that it’s both.”

The blonde immediately scooted away, sputtering, “How do you know about Eddie…?!” He asked, blushing furiously. No one had been around at the time, how was that even possible?!

“Miles saw you two when he was going down the stairwell. He felt the need to share.” Dennis mumbled, glaring towards where the other man sat across the bleachers. He made it clear with his eyes that he hadn’t really wanted to know the gross details of what had gone down.

“Prison, more like high-school drama. I can’t believe you people.” Waylon growled, sending his own special look Miles’ way when the man glanced over. He communicated his feelings quite clearly; ‘I know exactly what you did and you are gonna pay, you son of a bitch.’

Dennis cleared his throat, “Anyway,” He coughed, yanking Waylon’s arm back down for him to sit. “I can tell you what I know about the Billy case if it’ll help. I was around when he disappeared.”

Waylon was grateful for the distraction. “Okay.”

“Well for starters, his full name was William Hope. He’d been at Mount Massive for about five months; Jeremy Blaire had been around a lot while he was here. Blaire hovered over him in that creepy way he always did with you, but Billy didn’t seem to mind. He was always real nice with the rest of the inmates, even when they didn’t treat him the same.” Dennis began, looking up at the gymnasium ceiling.
He continued. “Just around his sixth month in, Billy had a fit. It took three guards to pin him down, and even Blaire had shown up make sure he made it to solitary. I remember him screaming, “You said you’d help me! You promised!” but nobody knew what the hell he’d been rambling on about. Still remains true to this day. They took him away, told us he’d be going into solitary for a few days. But he never came back.”

Waylon heard footsteps approach on the bleachers behind them. The blonde watched as Chris plopped himself down on his other side, “You guys talking about Hope again?” He asked gently as if the subject itself hurt him.

“Yes. Waylon seems really invested in the case. He’s like the detective that doesn’t give up, but just got hired yesterday.” Dennis chuckled. “I’m trying to help him out.”

Chris tilted his head, “Well, let me see if I can remember anything. Uh…” The man looked around the room, deep in thought before turning back to the two teens, “Well, I recall Jeremy and Wernicke coming in a few days after his fit to talk about Billy’s release. They didn’t say much about it, just that he was let out that morning. A week later the press came in to investigate in the middle of dinner, and most of us had heard them yelling and pressing guards about how Murkoff had been lying to them and that they wanted to know the truth about what they did to Billy. We were all scared about what might happen to us if Murkoff was let off the hook.” He said. “A few random inmates had disappeared before, but nobody noticed them as they had Billy. Everybody liked Billy.”

Waylon scratched the scruff on his chin, hunching over further in his seat. “I read about the journalists that came here online. It took forever, but I managed to get past the security and onto the sites.”

“Waylon!” Miles hissed, just now making his way over to the group. He sat down on the bench above them. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you’ll get into if they catch you pulling off that kind of shit?!”

Waylon scoffed, “Well it’s their own damn fault for covering up the whole epidemic. I’m just trying to help while earning a ticket back outside and out of this place.” He grumbled, glaring Miles down.

Waylon knew he’d said the wrong thing when he looked at the cringe the other three wore. Miles stood angrily. “What’s going to be outside for you huh, Waylon? Who’d look after your scrawny ass once you’re ‘free’? You know, now I think I have a pretty good guess as to why it’s so easy to scare the piss out of you—”

“Enough! Both of you!” Chris yelled in fury, shoving Miles away before looking down on Waylon down so fiercely the blonde began to tremble in fear. Even Dennis seemed surprised at the sudden outburst, pushing himself further away from them.

Waylon stood, standing eerily tall over both Miles and Waylon. He snarled, “You two are acting like children!” He swiveled on Waylon, making the blonde shriek, “Waylon, you seem like a good kid. But I never thought you’d sink so low as to confirm you do not give a single fuck about the friends you’ve made here.” He turned on Miles next, “And you. How dare you use a low blow like that, you have no goddamn right to make assumptions about other people that you barely know anything about.”

Dennis’ eyes were squeezed shut tight, hands moving around like he was contemplating covering his ears too. Waylon jumped as soon as Chris started yelling again, “We might all be a cheery little group of friends on the outside but let’s be honest; we know nothing about each other’s lives. Do not use that against each other. Come back and talk to me when you’re done being complete assholes.” The larger man spat, storming off the bleachers over to Paul, who’d come by once he’d heard the
Waylon looked up at Miles angrily, “Well I’m fucking sorry that I was raised by people who hated me, I’m sorry I couldn’t be fucking normal for you, I’m sorry I got sent here!” He cried out, grabbing Dennis’ arm and yanking him away from the bleachers to a separate corner of the gym floor.

The other teen struggled in Waylon’s tight hold, “L-look, if you expect me to be a middle ground in this fight then I’m going to have to disappoint you-” Dennis stuttered as he was pulled over to the far wall.

The blonde finally let go, “No, I don’t. Tell me where the fuck Eddie is right now.” Waylon whispered harshly.

Dennis seemed taken aback by the question, “E-Eddie? Wait, I… I have no idea, I swear. He just kinda disappears like this sometimes; none of the guards or staff notice…” He said, looking around the gym. “Waylon, we’re going to be leaving in a minute, can we please stop all this? You’re scaring me…”

The blonde followed Dennis’s line of sight, eyes landing on Pauline. She brought her fingers to her lips, clearly ready to whistle everybody in. Waylon grunted. “Fine.”

Finger tapped quietly on the shower-room counter. Waylon looked around wearily, watching steam slowly begin to disappear off of the sides of the mirrors.

Most inmates had finished showering long ago. There were only two or three still kicking around, but all of them wandered around the larger section of the shower room. There was still a single showerhead running; the one directly in front of him.

Waylon was sitting on the counter, already cleaned up and wearing his night clothes; the gray shorts and white t-shirt. He didn’t have anything on his feet, which is one of two reasons he was sitting on the counter instead of standing on the floor. The other reason was as to not be seen lurking around the stalls when the final run ended.

If Waylon wanted an explanation, he was going to make sure he got one. His ears perked up once the running water stopped. He could see the faint silhouette of a large, muscular arm when it got close enough to the stall curtain, grabbing up a towel hooked on the other side.

…He felt kind of perverted.

The curtain opened. Waylon kicked his legs back and forth like a child would, cheeks tinting a light pink as he watched the man step out of the stall. One towel was wrapped loosely around his waist while another was being used to dry out the man’s cropped, black hair.

Eddie glanced up for a millisecond, spotting Waylon before letting out an angry gasp. He pulled his hair towel over his face quickly, making sure to hold the fabric tightly in place. “Get out. Get out right now.”

Waylon swallowed his fear, hopping off of the counter to approach Eddie. He slowly reached up, tugging gently on the towel he still held against his face as if it was the only thing keeping him alive, “It’s free-range for any of the inmates to use. I’ll leave if you tell me to go like a normal person.” He tried, squeaking once his hand was slapped away.

“I am.” Eddie snapped, voice muffled through the fabric of the towel. He walked over to the counter
quickly, shifting the cloth so it'd block Waylon’s view of his face. “Leave!”

“Don’t you know that it’s polite to look at the person you’re talking to when having a conversation, darling?” Waylon exaggerated, moving over to where Eddie now stood. He liked that he could finally use Eddie’s own words against him. It made Waylon feel like he had more power over the situation that he actually did.

The blonde could practically hear the man seething, “If you don’t leave within the next five seconds…” He spat, clutching the towel tighter around his face.

Waylon narrowed his eyes, “No! What the fuck is going on with you?! You attack me on my first day, act really weird when I try to talk to you, and then you have a minute make-out session with me in the hall and then leave for the rest of the day without any warning? What the hell is your problem? What is your problem with me?!” He gasped, clutching his shirt tightly.

“You little-- Fine!” Eddie growled, throwing the towel to the ground. The man swiveled around, storming to stand above Waylon, face twisted in fury. “Is this what you wanted to see, you little whore?!”

The blonde nearly jumped back at both the pitch of Eddie’s voice and the proximity of his face. Waylon took everything in at once. He immediately regretted his words as he looked over Eddie’s face; the man had scars scattered all along the right side of his face; they were small marks, but it was clear that they were old burn marks. On the left side of his face were two long lines that stretched from his cheekbone down to the corner of his chin.

He’d seen Eddie’s eyebrow sliced by a small scar, but now the mark was much more prominent. There was a thick line that cut straight through his right brow, marked from his eyelid up to the middle of his forehead.

“…Oh.” Waylon choked out. He reached up slowly to run his fingers along the scar pair on the left side of Eddie’s face when the other man flinched away. Eddie moved back to the counter and pulled on a pair of boxers, then sleep-pants. Waylon moved with him. “Oh Eddie, that’s not something you should be ashamed about.”

Eddie laughed humorlessly, “It’s horrific. They turned me into a monster.” He said quietly, placing his palms on the counter to stare at himself in the mirror with a look of disgust. As he spoke, Waylon began to notice other burn marks and scars running across the expanse of his back and shoulders; he wasn’t even sure what he’d be able to find on Eddie’s chest.

Waylon reached over to grasp Eddie’s arm, “Who did?” He asked gently, making sure he didn’t anger the man further.

Instead of freaking out Eddie sighed, turning towards Waylon, “I don’t want to talk about this. I need to think.” He mumbled, finally making eye-contact with the teenager.

“…Okay.” The smaller man said, offering a smile, “I’m here if you ever need anything, though. Those scars don’t define you; you still look handsome either way.” Waylon complimented, trying and failing to hide the blush creeping up his neck.

“You’re too good to me, darling.” Eddie sighed. Waylon watched as the man pressed his lips together in a fine line as if thinking something over. After a few more seconds of tension-filled silence, he dropped the stray towel next to the sink, grabbing Waylon’s hips and pressing his back into the counter.
Waylon let out a short gasp of surprise before Eddie’s lips sealed against his own for the second time that day. It took him a few moments to register what was happening before he closed his eyes, trying and failing to reach up and wrap his arms around the other man’s neck properly.

The problem was fixed easily enough. Waylon whimpered as Eddie lifted him onto the counter, chuckling to himself as he positioned himself in between Waylon’s legs. Waylon sighed, pulling Eddie back in to resume their heated kiss.

“Wait,” Waylon gasped, managing only a few short breaths in order to speak clearly, “People can walk in and out anytime. Someone’s gonna see us.” He spoke as quickly as possible.

Waylon groaned softly as Eddie ground his hips up into his own, “Not if we make it quick.” The man mumbled breathlessly, moving his lips to ghost over Waylon’s jawline.

“Asshole.” The blonde moaned, clutching the other man’s back tightly when Eddie pulled Waylon’s legs over to wrap around his waist.

Waylon made it back to his room on wobbly legs, nearly tripping over the doorway once he made it down the hall. He looked up and suddenly remembered one of the reasons he’s taken his sweet-time in the showers; Miles sat on his bed, fiddling with his hands in his lap. He looked up once he heard Waylon walking into the room.

“Waylon…?” The man asked quietly, turning his head towards the teen in question. Waylon tried to ignore him, so Miles pressed further. “Waylon, please, just fucking talk to me.”

He made no movements to do as Miles requested. Instead Waylon plopped himself down in the desk chair, staring at the blank computer screen in front of him.

There were a couple quiet steps behind him. Waylon only hand a moment to process the information before Miles’ arms wrapped tightly around his shoulders, pulling him back against the man’s chest.

“I don’t want us to fight,” Miles said quietly, squeezing Waylon tighter. “I’m sorry about what I said earlier. I just got frustrated, and there was no justifying it. I’m really sorry, Waylon.”

Just like that Waylon’s resolve crumbled. He let out a choked sob before turning himself around and pressing into Miles’ strong hold, “I’m sorry, too.” He shuddered into Miles’ t-shirt, looking glossy-eyed up at him. “I like all of you guys a lot, I care, I didn’t mean to make it sound like I hated you all…”

Miles hugged him tighter, “Mm, shut up.” He mumbled, rubbing Waylon’s back a few times before letting him go. He looked Waylon up and down, laughing. “So, we cool?”

Waylon wiped his nose. “Yeah. We’re cool.”

“Hey there kids, I have just the cure for a fight like yours.” Waylon and Miles both looked over at the door to see Frank, pushing a small cart with the TV from the week before propped on top along with a few chords running from all sides of a small DVD player hooked up on the bottom shelf. The older man pushed it into the corner of the room, grunting as he hooked up the cables one by one.

Waylon rubbed his eyes, “How’d you know we were fighting?” He asked, jumping in surprise when Frank shouted with glee once the TV came to life.

“Oh please,” Frank waved him off, removing his security jacket, “Everyone and their grandmothers could hear the lot of you screaming back at the gymnasium. And I know just what’ll help you all
solve the issue if you haven’t already,” He said, sifting through the inside pockets of his jacket before bulling out a small DVD case. “There ya are.”

Both men looked over the cover of the DVD when Frank tossed it onto the desk. They simultaneously bounced up and down excitedly, Miles snatching the box before running over to shove it into the disk reader, “All of SpongeBob Seasons 1 and 2?! How do you even have that, Frank?” Miles asked anxiously, fumbling with the buttons on the player.

Frank shrugged, “I like watching the show a lot myself. Reminds me of you lot. Anyway, I’ll be back twenty minutes before curfew to come get it. As long as you two don’t start screaming, we won’t have any problems.” He said, waving off to let Miles and Waylon watch the cartoon.

Chris sighed, getting up off of his bed. It’d been over half an hour since everyone had come back from the showers. He wasn’t sure how Miles and Waylon had been doing since their blow-up in the gym. He hadn’t heard any screaming once everyone had returned, which may or may not have been a good sign.

He stood, opening the bedroom door to peek into the hall. Eddie was already fast asleep on his bed despite it still being a few hours until curfew. The man seemed to be more worn-out than usual, but Chris didn’t have the energy in him to ask why.

The door to Miles and Waylon’s room was open only half an inch. Chris walked down the hall, beginning to hear quiet, obnoxious voices coming out of the crack in the door.

“The maniac is in the mailbox!”

Chris slowly opened the door, glancing inside to see what was going on. What he saw was the last thing he would’ve expected from the two idiots down the hall.

Miles and Waylon were curled against each other, lying stomach-down on Miles’ bed. The sheets from both beds were thrown over them and pulled over their heads just enough that they could still see the TV screen. The two were laughing together as a cartoon character screamed on-screen, running down a dark road towards a starfish wearing an ice-cream cone on his head.

It took everything in him not to laugh. The whole scene was too cute, he was almost jealous of how close the two were to one another.

He closed the bedroom door the rest of the way as the sponge on-screen was surrounded by a bunch of small, cartoon police cars. Chris made it halfway down the hall before collapsing onto the wall in a fit of laughter. His friends were ridiculous.

Waylon didn’t get to see Wormy take over Bikini Bottom that night. Halfway through the episode he’d passed out on Miles’ bed, the other man already beginning to snore by the time the episode began. His eyes hadn’t been able to stay open any longer; it’d been such a tiring day…

...Waylon opened his eyes, sitting up in bed. Miles was still sleeping beside him, snoring as loudly as ever. The blonde chuckled, pushing himself up so he could move over to his own bed. That was when he realized something.

He was watching himself sleep.

His jaw dropped as he looked down at his seemingly lifeless body, sleeping in the fetal position right beside Miles, “Wait… Holy shit, am I dreaming? And I know I’m dreaming? …This is awesome!”
He said to nobody in particular. He tried jumping to see if he could fly, but to no avail.

Waylon brushed off a few blue particles that had stuck to his t-shirt from the floor. He then tried reaching out to touch both Miles and himself, but his arm went right through them like a ghost’s. “What in the hell is going on?”

The TV from earlier was gone, the only trace of it ever having been there being four small indents from where the wheels had been planted in the floor.

There was a small creak outside in the hall. Waylon walked over to the closed door curiously, trying to turn the knob and open it. When his hand went right through it like it had all objects before, Waylon tried and succeeded in simply fazing through the door.

Everything was dark and empty. Waylon looked up and down the hall; all of the doors were shut, the lights off. A single guard appeared by the stairwell at the end of the hall, probably on patrol duty for the night.

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“What in the hell is going on?” Waylon called out, walking towards the man, “Hey, do you know what’s going on? Is this a dream?” He asked curiously.

Waylon let out a frustrated groan when the guard said nothing, walking right through his body to get to the other side of the hall. The blonde let out a disgusted shriek before looking up towards a new light at the end of the hall.

The light was blue, and it was radiating intensely off of a young man. At least, that’s all Waylon could make out from the distance put between them. The boy suddenly lifted himself off the floor and raced towards Waylon at an incredible speed, making him jump back and begin twitching nervously.

The boy, now closer for inspection, looked horrific. Long, purple veins struck out under his skin where several holes dug into his arms, chest and legs. He had a fresh buzz-cut for hair and piercing blue eyes.

“Help us.” The boy rasped, “Do you still know what’s real?” He asked sharply. Waylon, unsure of what he was asking, nodded nervously. The boy’s eyes narrowed as he grabbed Waylon’s wrist, yanking him towards the stairwell.

Waylon tried pulling his wrist away, but to no avail, “Where are we going?” He asked nervously, arm beginning to shake.

“Follow me.” The boy demanded. “Help us.”

“Help who? Who are you with? I don’t understand what’s going on.” Waylon begged, once again trying to pry his arm free. As he gave it one final tug, small blue particles began floating off his skin like insects, destroying his limbs one by one.

The boy hissed, trying to grab hold of Waylon’s dissipating form, “No!” He shouted fiercely. “No! Help us!”

“I’m sorry!” Waylon screamed, pulling what was left of his arms over his head to protect himself when the boy raised a fist.

Waylon shot up in bed, sweat beading across his hairline, breathing ragged. Besides the setbacks, he didn’t make a single sound in his panic. He looked around, shocked by what he found.

The TV in the room was gone, the lights shut off. Miles was sleeping in bed beside him just as he’d
been in his dream. ‘It seemed so real… Trippy.’ Waylon thought, climbing over their small pile of blankets onto his own bed. He tugged one over from Miles’ pile and wrapped it around himself, trying to fall back to sleep.

‘Dreams are weird.’
Blaire was not happy.

Granted, being happy was a rare emotion for him to feel. But on this particular day, he was especially not happy.

He stood in between the door to the infirmary wing and the cafeteria hall, waiting for the first group of inmates to come downstairs for breakfast. The atmosphere was quiet, tranquil; he hated the feeling. All the more reason to be unhappy about the cursed day.

The stairwell doors opened. Blaire watched, drumming his fingers on his arm impatiently as inmates walked on by without notice. After a dozen people passed, he spotted the one he’d been waiting for. Blaire moved out into the open for only a second to grab hold of the young man’s collar, yanking him back into the infirmary hall.

“Stevenson,” Blaire snarled, finally letting the man’s shirt go. “It’s been too long.”


Blaire held back from knocking the snarky inmate straight in the nose. On any other day, Stevenson’s inability to hold his tongue in front of a higher-up would cost him. But he had a special use for the inmate, “You’re lucky I need you this morning, scum. We’re heading back to the first-floor rooms.” He ordered, tilting his head back towards the main hall.

The other man looked as if he’d been offended, slumping his posture. “Are you fucking kidding me? First of all, there are guards patrolling in there every ten minutes. Second of all, and most importantly, I’m going to miss breakfast. What’s in it for me?”

“Your sentence getting pulled back five months.” Blaire said calmly, crossing his arms over his chest. “Been a while since your dear little mother showed up for a visit, hasn’t it?”

The inmate sucked in a breath, looking at the floor. Jackpot. Blaire knew he had him now. Stevenson sighed, glancing back up at Blaire, “That sounds too nice for a sick bastard like you. What else are you looking for that I don’t have?” He asked suspiciously, looking the well-dressed man up and down.

Blaire smirked, “You’re gonna work with me for the next two months. Do as I ask of you and I won’t have any problems pulling your date.” He said, pushing a door to the main hall open before checking for guards. He turned back to Stevenson. “Let’s go.”

The two climbed the stairwell Stevenson had previously walked down. Halfway up the flight, said inmate piped up, “What made you change your mind, Blaire? Thought you said you could find someone more resourceful than me.” Stevenson couldn’t help the smirk that pulled at the corners of his lips.

The question made Jeremy’s mood darken further. He hated admitting defeat. Stevenson had made a good grunt for the first year he’d gotten stuck in Mount Massive. The kid had an amazing photographic memory and sense of hearing; it had been too good of a chance for Blaire to pass up. He’d bribed the inmate with small things to get him to do random jobs inside the building, but never anything quite as big as what he had in mind over the course of the next two months.
“My guy’s… Busy.” Jeremy scoffed, practically bashing the bedroom hall’s door open once they reached the correct level.

Stevenson chuckled, following Blaire in and closing the door much more gently behind them. “Heh, sure.”

Blaire turned around to glare darkly at the other man. “I’m glad they make you climb all of those stairs every day; it’s well-deserved after the ridiculous amount of privileges they allow you to have.”

The other man shrugged, glancing around meticulously. “Hm… Looks like a guard just passed through. You have about… Eight minutes to do whatever it is you’re doing.”

Jeremy stormed down the hall, checking door after door, “Make it twelve. I need to be sure I get through all of the files. God-damn privileges, I swear…” He murmured, pressing a hand against a door closer to the far end of the hall.

Stevenson jogged over to him, peeking into the room once Jeremy pulled out a card to unlock it, “Park and Upshur’s room…?” He asked, checking both ends of the hall before walking in after him.

Blaire grunted, pointing towards the door, “Go stand by the door. Tell me when a guard is going to pass exactly one minute before it happens.” He instructed, taking a seat at the desk chair.

“Alright…” The inmate nodded, peeking out into the hall before taking a seat on the floor next to the door.

Jeremy rolled his eyes, pulling himself closer to the desk. He glanced over the computer system in front of him, searching for and locating the power switch. After a minute of waiting for the stupid machine to power up, he inserted a USB drive into one of five ports attached to a separate connector in the main box.

“What are you trying to do, anyway?” Stevenson asked curiously, rolling over onto his side as he watched Jeremy sift through several computer files at once.

Blaire scoffed, “Keep. Watch. It’s none of your business.” He grumbled, opening a history file stored in a hidden PC cleaner. He grinned. Waylon wasn’t as dumb as he thought he was, but not as smart, either.

He started looking at the different files. After Waylon had turned down his more than generous offer for help, he’d had no choice but to keep a close eye on the kid– without him knowing, of course. From day one Jeremy had been feeling off about their little newcomer. Then he’d found the feeds and security tapes saved of him and his clique of freaks talking about the Billy Hope case; he didn’t have any other thoughts on the matter after that. He had to make sure Waylon wouldn’t be stirring up any trouble involving that whole… Incident.

It took several minutes, but eventually he managed to hack a title open. ‘B.H. 174 INFO’. That little shit. He was doing something with the forgotten case.

Blaire went through the files as quick as possible. Screenshots and several digital note sheets were saved into the folder, and Jeremy made sure to look through them all. What the hell did Waylon Park think he was doing, what was he trying to achieve? No matter; none of the files seemed like they’d get him very far, but he’d still be making sure to keep closer tabs on him and his posse.

“Guard. Not sure which one, but they’ll turn the right corner in about… forty-three seconds.” Stevenson finally mumbled from his position in the doorway, crawling into the room and placing himself next to Blaire. He looked up, eyebrows raised as Blaire huffed, moving towards the door.
He grabbed the handle, pushing it into the lock just enough that it wouldn’t set in place. His father had taught him the trick years ago; Jeremy made sure to never forget it. He looked down at Stevenson, glaring. “Keep quiet. One sound out of you and you’ll end up just like your old friend Hope. Understand?”

Stevenson visibly paled, nodding.

Soft footsteps padded down the hall, the clinking of keys on a belt signaling that it was in fact a guard Stevenson had warned him of. Jeremy narrowed his eyes, pressing an ear against the door. Jeremy signed to Stevenson. ‘Gone?’

The inmate tilted his head, closing his eyes. After a few more seconds of silence, he held up his hand, ticking off each finger slowly. Then, with only one finger raised, he lowered his hand and opened his eyes, nodding.

Jeremy huffed, opening the door a crack to make sure his grunt had been correct. Sure enough, both entry and exit doors were empty, and no one was left roaming the halls. He gestured back to the door with his thumb. Stevenson got back into place, whispering. “How long is it going to take you from here?”

“Not long. Keep quiet and you won’t find yourself in solitary for the next three days.” Blaire threatened, taking his seat once more. Now he fidgeted with the files he’d brought over in his own USB drive. There was a system he needed to put into Waylon’s computer, but with the little pisser always on the hunt for computer viruses and malware, he’d have to be very careful as to how he went about placing it inside.

It’d aid him in keeping a closer eye on Waylon’s activities. He’d even had key-word software installed into it by a family friend so he’d be alerted every time a certain word was typed or opened on the computer. For everything else, he could monitor it with his own computer monitors.

Anything about Billy Hope, Blaire would know. If the information was anything threatening, he’d make sure to confront the little twerp about it as soon as it happened. They’d done this for years, coming closer and closer… No way was any of this getting crushed down into the dirt after how far they’d come.

Blaire closed the files, making sure not a single thing was out of place to make Waylon suspicious. He sighed angrily, running a hand through his slicked-back hair, “Stevenson,” He grunted, kicking the inmate’s leg. “Time to go. Say a word about this, and you’re toast.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Stevenson grumbled, brushing the floor’s dirt off of his pants. “Not like you’ve told me a thousand times before or anything.”

Jeremy snuck Stevenson into the cafe without an issue. He hated the snarky inmate, but he still needed him nonetheless. He could’ve been using Waylon for jobs, but he’d been so bold as to deny his simple request. Now he was going to start paying for it.

“This calls for some holiday tunes!” Miles cheered, grabbing hold of Waylon’s shoulder and laughing as they passed through another hall.

The blonde giggled beside him, pulling the hood of his sweatshirt down from his head. Breakfast had ended only minutes before with him, Miles and Chris all on their way to class.

“I love Wednesdays, but I don’t think it’s going to be a very good day if Andrew has to hear you two screaming radio music in the middle of class. He snaps when people pass notes to talk.” Chris
laughed, holding the door open for the two smaller inmates. Waylon thanked him, trotting over to his desk near the center of the room.

Waylon noticed how Andrew was already sitting straight in his chair when people began entering the room, glaring certain inmates down as they passed by. When his eyes caught on Waylon, he gave him a look so fierce the blonde had to choke down the strangled noise bubbling up in his throat as he moved across the room much faster than he’d been walking previously.

The beginning of class passed by in a rush to Waylon. Andrew had checked to make sure everyone was in order; an inmate had been missing, and guards were sent to find him. A day in the life of Mount Massive.

They were all sent to work after a lecture that Waylon wished had been longer. He’d been thinking about too many things at the same time, all of them crushed together into a huge crippling ball of confusion. Most of them involved the dreams he’d had nights before; he hadn’t truly stopped thinking about them. They were just… Off.

‘I need a fucking hug right now. None of this is making any sense.’ He thought, letting out a long sigh. ‘I wonder what Eddie’s doing right now…’

‘Mr. Park?’ A smooth voice called out just over Waylon’s shoulder. He nearly jumped out of his skin at the noise, hands shaking over his papers violently as he turned to look over his shoulder. Of course, he already knew who it was.

The blonde choked back his fear, hunching over his desk. ‘Maybe if I pretend I'm a speck of dirt he’ll leave. Yeah, yeah nice thinking, Waylon. That's really gonna help.’

Andrew closed the distance between them, looming over the teenager, “Sit straight in your chair, Mr. Park. Correct posture is a part of why you’re in this room.” He commanded, placing a hand on Waylon’s back before slowly forcing him sit up properly.

Waylon tilted his head just enough to catch Miles and Chris’s reactions. Chris had his eyebrows knit together in blatant worry, looking away when Andrew moved his hand to Waylon’s shoulder. Miles however looked ready to pounce, gripping the desk portion of his seat tightly as Andrew touched Waylon.

Waylon took a deep breath, finally daring a glance up at Andrew. The older man was smiling down at him, but it wasn’t with a warm or comforting look. He had to force himself to speak, unable to hold back his stutter, “I-I... D-d’nt quite catch t-t-the notes, sir. Distracted…” He mumbled, shrugging his shoulders up to his ears.

Andrew finally pulled his hand away, frowning at Waylon’s incompetence. He rolled his eyes, “Then you should’ve been paying better attention, Mr. Park. Get them from one of your friends over there.” He snapped, shooting a glare towards Chris and Miles before swiveling on his heels back to his desk.

The blonde let out a ragged breath of relief, grabbing his notebook and standing up. He scooted himself over to Miles’ desk, looking back at Andrew for any signs of disapproval. The man simply smirked, licking his bottom lip quickly as he turned back to his work. Waylon shivered in discomfort.

“Miles, please help me.” Waylon whispered harshly, lowering himself down to his knees so he could sit next to his friend’s work desk.

The other man pulled out his own notebook, flipping a few pages back. “With what?”
Waylon scooted closer, pulling a few papers on Miles’ desk closer for his viewing. “Everything.”

At that his friend sighed, turning in his seat to get a good look at Waylon. The blonde couldn’t help the tears threatening to fall down his cheeks. Miles took it as obvious nervousness and embarrassment. Waylon had felt small and helpless in the moment; both of which were probably true.

Miles looked over at a distracted Andrew before leaning over towards Waylon. He put a hand on his friend’s shoulder, quietly trying to shush him, “Shh, Waylon it’s okay. He can’t do anything to you, we’re here with you. Just… Please try to calm down. Do you want the notes?” He offered, pushing his notebook over to Waylon’s side.

Waylon nodded, taking comfort in the fact that Miles was by his side. He brought his own notebook onto Miles’ desk, beginning to scribble his notes down as quickly as he possibly could.

“Take your time.” Miles sighed, leaning his arms over the desk. “You going to be alright?”

The teen nodded, writing slower, “Yeah. Yeah, I just don’t like… The touching…” He blushed, pencil pressing harder into the pieces of paper.

Miles nodded in understanding. Waylon’s entire body flinched and began to shake once Andrew piped up across the room, “You two better be working over there.” The man snarled, nose peeking over the thick book he had in his hands.

“Yes, sir.” Miles and Waylon said in unison, making sure to keep direct eye contact with Andrew until he looked away.

By the time Waylon had finished copying the notes, it was already lunch. Everyone had gotten up in a rush, eager to be away from their claustrophobic desks. Before anyone could make it more than a foot past the doorway, guards had everyone line up against the wall in a neat and orderly fashion.

Andrew stepped out before of the inmates, hands wrung together behind his back, “You will not be returning here after lunch. You’re all going straight to the gymnasium for a bit of a… Lecture from the higher-ups. Are we clear?” He barked. Everyone gave some form of an affirmative as they trekked away from the classroom.

Waylon tried to avoid eye-contact with Andrew along with Miles and Chris when they passed, “Have a nice lunch, Mr. Park.” Andrew said quietly as the blonde passed by. Waylon nodded quickly, speeding up to keep pace with the rest of the pack.

Lunch went by at a snail’s pace. Waylon wasn’t really in the mood to talk about anything as he ate his food, sitting a fraction of an inch closer to Eddie than he normally would. No one took notice, which he was thankful for. He’d wanted some semblance of comfort nearby.

“Waylon, is there anything you want to talk about?” Miles asked carefully as Eddie stood up from his seat, moving to throw his garbage away.

Dennis spoke when Waylon raised his head, “You should talk to a guard or someone who works here if Andrew’s bothering you. I’m sure they’ll do something about it.” He said, taking a bite out of his peanut-butter and jelly sandwich.

The blonde raised both of his eyebrows. “You know, too?”

The other teen rolled his eyes, “Of course I know. Miles will tell you virtually anything; sometimes things you don’t want to hear, along with the rest.” He said, looking over to the aforementioned man.
Miles shrugged, grabbing his carton of milk.

“Oh god, does…” Waylon lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “Does Eddie know?”

Miles flinched, “Oh fuck no! You can’t tell him anything; look, I have no idea what’s been going on between you two within the last few weeks but I sure as hell know if he knew anything like that was going on with you, he would freak out so bad we might not see him for months.” He whispered back, face paling when he looked up over Waylon’s shoulder.

“What are you all talking about?” Eddie asked tiredly, taking his seat next to Waylon once more.

Waylon was just about ready to panic when Chris spoke up, “Waylon hasn’t been getting much sleep; he’s been falling asleep in class a lot and it’s been pissing Andrew off.” The man said calmly. Waylon was shocked, sending the man a silent ‘thank you’.

Eddie looked down at Waylon worriedly. “Why’s that, darling?”

Before Waylon could respond, guards began calling inmates section by section to head down to the gym. He was thankful for the disturbance, moving quickly to avoid further conversation with Eddie. By the time the guards managed to get everyone in at once, inmates were ordered to sit on the bleachers while a few well-dressed men were escorted onto the gym floor. ‘Higher-ups.’

Classes weren’t divided this time, so inmates were allowed to sit wherever they pleased. Waylon managed to wriggle his way through several groups of irritated inmates, taking a seat on the bench just above where Eddie, Miles, Chris and Dennis sat. Eddie looked up at him before climbing up the step to sit next to Waylon instead.

Waylon noticed Miles watching Eddie’s movement with a devilish smirk once the man was situated next to him, raising his eyebrows up and down suggestively. The blonde glared down at the Miles darkly, holding the stare until the man looked away with a roll of his eyes. As soon as he was turned away, Waylon felt an arm snake around his waist. He looked up at Eddie curiously but the other man ignored him, simply clutching the blonde closer to his side.

Once everyone managed to calm down, the men who’d entered the gym began to speak. One was an older man who needed to be helped up from his wheelchair by two guards, while the other was a fairly tall man who looked like a carbon-copy of Jeremy Blaire if he was older and his facial features were more pronounced. Waylon could only come to the conclusion that the man was Jeremy’s father.

That could only mean the other man was the Wernicke everyone constantly talked about. Blaire and Wernicke, the two men in charge of Mount Massive Reform. How delightful.

In Waylon’s mind, the two seemed to drone on and on. They briefly introduced themselves as if everyone in the room wasn’t constantly informed about who they were. They mostly talked about the lack of discipline that was going on inside the building, and inmates acting out of line; it was as much of a lecture to the inmates as it was to the guards.

They said there’d be a few new rules implemented within the next couple of weeks. Waylon didn’t really care. Halfway through the speech Waylon felt sleepy again, practically falling over onto Eddie’s lap when he couldn’t keep his eyes open anymore.

“Hey! You there!”

Waylon jolted up in fright when the man that looked like Blaire stood at the bottom of the bleachers. The blonde froze, unsure of what he should do before his legs began twitching violently.
Frank ran over to Mr. Blaire seconds later, trying to calm the infuriated man down, “I’m sorry sir, he’s still new here and he’s just a kid, he doesn’t know any better. We’ll be sure to keep him awake next time.” He said in a failed attempt at a whisper.

The blonde was still shaking when he felt Eddie pull him closer to his side almost as if he was shielding him from the older man. Mr. Blaire let out a disgusted noise when Eddie narrowed his eyes at him. “Then this will be the only time he’ll get off from this. You people are getting paid to teach these kids their place. Next time it’ll be a day in confinement.”

Everyone’s eyes were on Waylon at that point. The blonde could feel the beginnings of a panic attack as he shrunk further and further into Eddie’s side. The man closed up shop with a few choice words, and then they all packed up and left without a trace.

As soon as the men and their entourage were gone, the tension that had been building slipped away without as much as a whisper. Inmates went along to hang out and exercise on the gymnasium floor. Waylon kept his eyes shut tight, only daring to open them when he felt a gentle push from Eddie’s arm.

“Waylon- They’re gone now, darling.” Eddie said, trying to bring Waylon out from his side. The blonde slowly peeled himself away from the man as most of the inmates cleared off the bleachers, huddling himself up into a ball on the next step down.

He knew the rest of his friends had been staring as well. But Waylon still kept to himself, unable to look any of them directly in the eye or speak a word.

He didn’t even hear the loud stomp of boots clambering up the steps until Miles screamed across the room, “Alright, Pinhead! Your time is up!” The man called out through cupped hands.

Waylon brought his head up from in between his legs, finally looking over at Miles from across the bleachers. The other man ran over the next couple of the steps to make it over to him, dropping down at Waylon’s side, “Come on, I know what’ll make you feel better. I want to be Dirty Dan.”

The blonde looked around before narrowing his eyes at Miles. “…Who are you callin’ Pinhead?”

“‘It’s shaping up to be a wonderful holiday-! Not your normal average every day-!’” Waylon and Miles sang obnoxiously, pretending to chop down an imaginary tree in the middle of the gymnasium.

An inmate nearby stood up, “Stop singing!” He screamed, clenching his fists by his sides. Frank laughed from the far corner of the room, slapping his knee.

Waylon and Miles burst into a fit of giggles, collapsing onto the floor together. The smaller of the two continued to laugh, bringing his hands to his chest when he began to develop a painful cramp.

Miles wheezed, sitting upright, “Okay, okay, but have you accepted that you’re Pinhead Larry by now? I gave you an hour.” He said mischievously, poking Waylon’s side.

The blonde twitched, pounding his fist down onto the floor. He wasn’t ready to give up just yet, “Never! I’m Dirty Dan!” He shouted, moving up into a fighting stance. His eyebrows rose when he saw Chris approach Miles from behind, putting two hands on the man’s shoulders.

Chris leaned down towards Miles’ ear, “Which one of you is the real Dirty Dan…?” He asked lowly.

Waylon watched as Miles brought his thumb to his chest, grinning. “Me.”
As soon as the words left his mouth Miles was swept off of his feet and tossed over Chris’s shoulder. The man kicked and shouted and laughed as Chris ran across the room with him, doing laps until Paul began ordering Chris to put Miles down.

“Hey, Miles!” Waylon yelled, still laughing. “I’m gonna use the bathroom, I’ll be back in a minute!”

Miles gave him a thumbs-up from the other side of the gym, obviously about to get a long and loud lecture from Paul. Waylon laughed once more before pushing the bathroom door open.

There was another inmate in one of the two stalls, Waylon noted as he went to relive himself. He was washing his hands when the stall finally opened, and suddenly his chest was pushed painfully into the counter.

Heated kisses were pressed to the back of his neck, making the smaller man gasp in surprise. A quick bite to the nape of his neck had him looking up into the mirror, strong arms snaking around his waist in a tight hold.

“Is this always going to be just a bathroom thing…?” Waylon breathed as one of Eddie’s hands traveled up the front of his hoodie. The blonde stifled a groan as the man’s hands removed themselves from his body in order to spin him around to face Eddie.

Eddie moved his lips to Waylon’s jaw, grinning. “Only if you want it to be.” He mumbled, holding the side of Waylon’s face gently as he moved to kiss the corner of his mouth. As Waylon brought his arms over Eddie’s shoulders, he finally took note that the man had his concealer back on.

Waylon yelped as he felt one of Eddie’s hands wrap around his back while the other burrowed itself under the fabric of both his hoodie and tee, gently lifting the hem to expose his now burning-hot skin. The man captured Waylon’s lips with his own, silently asking to enter his mouth. “G-damnit, Eddie…”

Just then the bathroom door burst open, making Waylon startle back in embarrassment. He couldn’t go very far since Eddie was stock-still where he was, glaring at the intruder who was standing giddily in the doorway.

Miles.

“Of all the people…” Eddie hissed quietly, finally releasing Waylon and backing away enough to let the younger man breathe.

Miles couldn’t seem to stand still, which made Waylon’s cheeks grow that much hotter. He made a flustered noise before moving towards the door to get away from his intrusive friend quickly and efficiently.

“Oh nu-uh, not on my watch.” Miles said joyously, grabbing Waylon by the hood and yanking him back into the bathroom. He quickly closed the door behind them, gesturing between the other two in the room wildly. “When did this happen?! Probably good I busted in looking for Way like this, not sure I want to know what would’ve happened if you were left in here together. Heh, you wouldn’t have been a virgin for much longer, Waylon…”

Waylon buried his face in his hands, shaking his head. “Miles…”

Miles held his hands up in defense once Eddie took an aggressive step towards him. “Oh never mind, I’m only here because Waylon was taking forever. I thought you’d be out by the time Paul stopped screaming. Anyway, you two should probably get out of here erection-less, I heard Frank mention that he was gonna take a leak soon.”
“Stop talking, Miles.” Waylon groaned, pushing away from the other man in order to exit the bathroom.

Eddie glared darkly at Miles, pushing the door open the rest of the way. “You better not tell the rest of them about this.”

Miles laughed, sending the older man double finger-guns. “You know I will.”

Waylon sat on his desk chair nervously, holding several sheets of paper in his trembling hands. Dennis, Miles, Chris, and Eddie all sat in front of him, giving him their full attention. The bedroom door was closed, but the noise of other inmates roaming around could still be heard crystal-clear outside.

“So, I’ve gathered you all here today…” Waylon began, clearing his throat nervously. “To… To talk about what I found out about the Billy Hope case.”

Dennis leaned over onto his side, placing his chin in his palm. “Did you find something?”

The blonde wiped a bead of sweat off of his forehead, “Well, sort of. See, I would take notes sometimes when I found something interesting from an article or talk from the guards…” He said, waving the small stack of papers in his hand around to further his point.

Miles straightened his back, gesturing for Waylon to continue while he grabbed a pen and marker out from under his bed, “Well? What’d you find?” He asked, looking around the room before scribbling furiously.

“Well,” Waylon said, sifting through the papers, “Billy assaulted a police officer in the middle of the highway when the officer began screaming, and laid a hand on his mother. He was sent here, and attended for only six months before he raged on a guard and was sent to solitary confinement.” He said, pulling another paper out from the bottom of his pile.

Chris sighed, rubbing his temples. “We already know that, though.”

The blonde placed the stack down onto his lap, “Yes, but now I’m getting to the part you don’t know.” He said snappier than he’d meant to, lowering his voice once everyone fell silent. “Billy was in solitary for four days after he was taken away. But you see, security feeds had been checked by the outside authorities, and they didn’t find any footage of him being taken anywhere else in Mount Massive. At all. Billy never left the room.”

Everyone’s eyes widened. Dennis spoke up. “B-but… That’s impossible…”

Eddie kicked his legs over the side of the bed, “How did you discover such a fact?” He asked suspiciously.

Waylon picked his pile of papers back up, “Frank and Pauline were new here when it all happened, but they were still here nonetheless. It’s actually interesting how much information they’ll slip when they like you enough.” He said, smirking when Miles’ jaw dropped.

“Okay, well,” Chris urged Waylon on. “Wouldn’t they search the room?”

Waylon nodded. “Of course, they had to. The room was inspected for escape routes, trap doors, anything that could’ve been a cause of Billy’s escape. There wasn’t a single thing to be found. Just a regular solitary room with two beds and nothing to do.”
“That’s horrifying.” Miles said, crossing his arms. “Did Frank or Pauline tell you anything other than that?”

This time Waylon shook his head. “No, no they didn’t know anything else that happened later on. They only helped escort him downstairs with the rest of the team on-duty that day. I… I have a theory as to what might’ve happened to him, though.”

Chris shook his head, “Unfortunately a theory isn’t a fact. But go ahead, it’s better than nothing. It’s a start.” He said, giving Waylon a small smile of encouragement.

“Y-yeah.” Waylon said, placing the pile of papers on the desk by his computer. “Well, I… I’ve been having this ah… This weird dream, lately.”

Both Dennis and Miles groaned in unison. Waylon felt a blush creep up his cheeks. “No, no, hear me out. It’s… It’s like I can see everything from a third-person perspective. I can see myself sleep. It’s only happened twice so far. This boy will show up, and he asks me to follow him and help him. I looked back on it a few days ago, and his appearance looks suspiciously like the photos of Billy Hope online. But he looks… I dunno, damaged.”

Waylon looked around, catching everyone’s reactions. Chris seemed intrigued while Miles and Dennis still looked unconvinced. Eddie, on the other hand, was gripping the sheets of the bed tightly, his face pale.

Waylon furrowed his eyebrows, “Are you alright, Eddie…?” He asked softly. Everyone looked over to the man in question, and soon he released his tight hold and his expression relaxed back into its resting state.

“I’m fine.” He said, voice strained. Waylon shrugged, turning back to address everyone in the room once more.

The blonde sighed, “I have no idea what’s going on in them half the time; but I feel like he’s trying to lead me somewhere in the building. He seems really desperate, and I have no idea how to control the dreams. I have no idea if it’ll even happen again.” He sighed, running a hand through his blonde locks.

Chris stood suddenly, making Waylon jump in his chair. The larger man grunted, turning to face everyone in the room, “Listen guys, I know you probably don’t believe Waylon right now, but I’ve heard some inmates talk about that dream-state before. Although for my old friends, it only happened once. But you made it happen twice.” He said, gesturing towards Waylon. “I think it’s time we stopped beating around the fucking bush and help Waylon out.”

Miles opened his mouth to respond, but Chris shushed him with a wave of his hand, “But doing so requires us to have trust in each other. That’s essential. And if we know nothing about one another, there’s no way we’ll be able to trust each other, is there?” He stated more than asked. “Therefore, if we’re going to work on Billy’s case together, we have to be honest. We have to understand each other. Please… Are you all okay with this?”

It was quiet for a full minute. Waylon stood, holding his arm out towards the middle of the room. “I… I’m in. I really want to help, through both this and what might come in the future. I know we’ve all only known each other for a month, but…”

Chris reached forward, placing his hand on top of Waylon’s. He smiled down at the teen before looking over at the other three in the room.
Miles smirked, reaching over to put his hand on top of the other two. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

Dennis clapped next, pulling his arm out from under him so he could place it on the top of the pile. That left only Eddie, sitting nervously on the bed beside them.

They all looked to him hopefully. Eddie seemed to be having an inner battle before he let out a long sigh. Slowly, the man stood up from his seat and shuffled over to the group, lowering his hand down to the others. “You four are very persistent.”

The rest of the group grinned, all huddling up into an awkward group-hug, “Alright, no pitying allowed here,” Waylon said nervously, pulling back to sit on his bed. “Who wants to start?”
“You've been a disappointment since day one, you little runt.”

“If I'd like to have my breakfast hot Madame Carp will make me pay, and I have to fetch the eggs myself and the barn's a mile away. It's cold and wet, but still I get an omelette on my plate…”

Waylon sang along with the car radio, waving his stuffed lion back and forth between his small hands. He could hear his mother giggle from her position in the passenger seat, watching as she adjusted her seat belt to face him. “I didn’t think you’d like The Princess and the Pauper as much as you do.”

He heard his dad laugh faintly beside her as they drove up to a stop sign, “He’s four. Of course he’s gonna like it.” He said before pulling out onto the barren highway ahead of them.

The boy’s mother turned back around, smiling at his dad, “Maybe we should bring him to that cute little cartoon movie that’s coming out in a few months… In March, I think. He’d like it.” She thought out loud, turning her attention back to the road.

“There are only a hundred cartoon movies coming out next year.” Waylon’s dad said, brightening the headlights on the front of the car. “’No gas for the next thirty-two miles.’ Welcome to New Hampshire, everyone.”

Waylon watched his mother pull her hair down from her ponytail, “Ah, I only came to this side of the country a few times when I was younger, but I always remembered this highway. My mother tried to convince me it was haunted since I never saw any cars pass by while we drove.” She said, laughing fondly at the memory. Her laugher made Waylon start to giggle himself, the small boy laughing along as the song continued to play in the car.

“I’m just like you… You're just like me…There's somewhere else we'd rather be. Somewhere that's ours, somewhere that dreams come true- Yes I am a girl like you.”

Twenty minutes passed. The road ahead remained as dark and empty as ever, save for the light from their red mini-van. Once the movie album ended, Waylon cradled his lion to his chest, ready to go to bed for the night.

The small boy barely caught his mother turning in her seat again, reaching back to brush a lock of long blonde hair out of Waylon’s eyes, “My sweet little boy, are you tired?” She asked softly, tugging on the belt of Waylon’s car seat to make sure it was still tight.

The blonde nodded, stretching out his baby legs tiredly before pulling a thin blanket that had been draped over his ankles further up his body.

“We really should start dressing him in more clothes during the winter time, I don’t think a children’s tee and sleep pants are going to cut it. He’s not even wearing socks or shoes.” His mother said tiredly, looking back for her husband’s reaction.

Waylon closed his eyes just as his mother got comfortable in her seat. He barely registered the panicked, “Look out for the ice patch-!” From his mother before he felt a hard thud on the top of his head, and the world went dark.
“Oh god, no, please…”

“…I can’t do this… Oh god…”

“Waylon… Waylon my baby, please… Please, wake up…”

Waylon’s eyes opened slowly, vision blurring in and out as he tried to make out his surroundings. He was still in the car, but there was a strange red substance coating most of the vehicle’s inner walls.

The blonde felt a sharp stab of pain shoot throughout both his arm and temple once he shifted in his seat, crying out to try and get the attention of his mom or dad. Preferably both.

He heard the sound of glass shattering behind him, and soon Waylon found himself unbuckled from his car seat and pulled into the tight embrace of his father. At least, that’s what the man looked like for the most part. The person clutching him to his chest didn’t have his left arm, and most of his face was coated with the same sticky red liquid Waylon had been surrounded by inside of the car.

Waylon stared bleary-eyed at the man before him, a few tears running down his cheeks but otherwise he didn’t make a sound. His father sobbed, placing a kiss to Waylon’s forehead, “Shh Waylon, we’re gonna be okay.” The man sniffed, brushing the snow away from a small section of the ground with his boot before placing the small boy on top of it. “Wait here, okay Way? Don’t give up on me. I just… Need to find something to warm you up with…”

It wasn’t until the words left his father’s mouth did Waylon realize just how little he had on. He wrapped his small arms around his sides, trying to keep warm while his father tried to kick the back window open with his feet.

After a couple more tries, the glass shattered. His dad pulled himself inside the mini-van to sift through the bags piled in the back. Waylon heard a few quick zips before the man came back, holding a white hoodie with a blue hood and sleeves.

Waylon took note that his father’s missing arm was dripping red gunk onto the ground more furiously than it’d been before. His dad panted, “Got my old hoodie for you, Waylon. Here,” He said quietly, pulling the toddler off of the ground before wrapping the garment around his body. “Now you won’t be as cold while I carry you up the hill. We’re going to go up now, okay? Up.”

More tears slid down Waylon’s cheeks as he shivered, a few stabs of pain shooting back up through his scalp. He looked frantically towards at the car, then back at his father. “M-mommy…?”

His father sucked in a harsh breath, his face constricted like he was holding back tears of his own. The man shook his head slowly, “Mommy… Mommy’s r-resting. Just resting, Waylon.” His dad said quickly, taking a few deep breaths before beginning to trek up the dark, snowy hill.

Waylon began clutching his father’s hoodie tighter and tighter the further they walked up the hill. The blonde began hearing his father wheezing every so often as they neared the top. Waylon was worried; when his mom woke up, would she be tired trying to climb the hill, too? Maybe he could help her.

The boy clutched the hoodie as tight as his fingers would allow when his father gripped the rail on the side of the highway, pulling both of them over the edge. Waylon felt himself slip out of his father’s grip once the man landed on the other side, the two of them tumbling onto the edge of the quiet road.

The faint stabbing that’d been surging through his skin spiked again when he hit the pavement, the hoodie he’d been cradled in coated with splotches of red and snow. That was when his body decided
it’d had enough; Waylon began to cry as he tried pulling himself towards his father. The man was lying face-down a few feet away, body unmoving with the red liquid still pouring out of him.

“Daddy…?” Waylon shuddered, placing a small hand on his father’s forehead. “Daddy…?!”

Waylon couldn’t bring himself to scream for his parents anymore. He couldn’t even manage to cry as the pain surging through him and the cold of winter’s night began to suck him into the void. He didn’t know how long he laid there; frostbite had quickly developed over his nose and fingers. Then when he saw a light.

The boy barely managed to see what the light was coming from. It was a car, driving down the road at a moderate speed. Waylon whimpered, kneading his frozen fingers along the edge of his father’s hoodie when the car stopped abruptly just a few yards away. A woman climbed out along with a young girl who appeared to be just out of high school.

“Oh… Oh my god, honey, call 911!” The woman shouted, running over to Waylon’s side. She scooped the toddler up in her gangly arms, rocking him back and forth when she noticed his father lying on the pavement nearby. She yelped, looking back at who Waylon could only assume was her daughter. She sucked in a breath before taking a step forward.

The girl slammed the car door, phone in hand, “They said they’d be here in fifteen minutes!” She called, trotting over to her mother. Once her eyes landed on Waylon’s dad, she gave the same reaction as her mother, “…Is he dead?” She asked quietly, gesturing nervously to her mother.

The woman moved to Waylon’s dad, kneeling beside him. She pressed two fingers to his throat before sucking in a harsh breath, “Don’t come near him; we can’t do anything else before the ambulance arrives.” The woman sighed, turning her attention back to Waylon. She carried the boy over to her car, placing him in the much warmer atmosphere. “Oh, you poor little thing…”

Waylon shivered, finally mustering enough strength to look up at the stranger. Tears began to flow from his eyes once more, and finally he let himself sob as the woman cradled him closer, checking for visible wounds. She sighed. “I hope the ambulance makes it here faster…”

“Hey,” The girl called out from her position in front of the headlights. She picked the white and blue hoodie up off of the ground. “What should I do with this?”

The woman waved her daughter over, “Give it here. I think the boy will want to keep his father’s feel around while he’s getting moved.” She said, taking the hoodie as calmly as she could. Waylon blinked tiredly once she turned back to him. “Don’t worry sweetie, you’re gonna be okay.”

He never truly forgot the woman who’d saved his life that day.

Waylon had spent months in the hospital, having cracked the back of his skull during the crash. He’d gained a long, jagged scar that ran up his arm as a reminder of both of his lost parents that night. If it hadn’t been for his father’s determination to save him, Waylon wouldn’t have made it either.

He’d cried all day and night for the first couple days after waking up. All of the information that had been passed onto him was too much for a simple four-year-old mind to comprehend. A few weeks later, his birthday was spent inside the hospital wing without much of a celebration. He couldn’t bring himself to care, only thinking about how his dad said his mom was going to wake up. She was coming to get him.

More weeks passed. Waylon had started losing hope about her return, but he refused to let the thought slip entirely. There was still a shred of doubt through the doctor’s words. They’d managed to
wash all of the stains out of his father’s hoodie for him; they gave it to him, talking about it as if it was a final parting gift.

“We need to find him a place to live,” A doctor said one day; she was a beautiful lady with dark skin, hair pulled back into a curly bun. “Do we have any contacts of other family members who would take him in?”

That was how he’d met his aunt and uncle.

Another month passed, and all of Waylon’s wounds had healed to the best of their ability. He’d been left with finicky limbs; the car’s fall jolted his nerves enough that he would have problems when they were stimulated to a certain degree, but it hadn’t been enough to give him around-the-clock issues.

One day a nice lady had driven him to the small house in a town called Leadville, telling him he was going to be staying with his relatives. When they’d arrived, both his aunt and uncle had been informed about the issue involving his nerves; meanwhile, Waylon had been wondering why his parents had never brought him to meet the rest of the family.

It took a couple of years, but eventually he figured it out.

Waylon had met his two cousins as soon as he walked through the door. One was a bratty eleven-year old boy with a near-unbearable attitude while the other was a nine-year-old girl who immediately began to coddle him as soon as she saw him.

“You’re such a cute little man.” She giggled, wrapping her arms around Waylon’s torso and nuzzling his hair. “So unbelievably cute. I wish I’d met you when you were a baby, you must’ve been the most adorable little thing…”

Waylon warmed up to her immediately. The two had bonded over the months over anything and everything. She’d introduced him to the world of cartoons, even forcing him to watch the SpongeBob Movie five times in a row during a snow day just to prove that it was a work of art.

The rest of the family hadn’t taken much of a liking to him as time passed on, but Waylon tried his best not to notice. His parents had showered him with affection when he was young, and as he grew up he was told it was because he was a spoiled only-child who needed to be taught how cruel the real world was by his uncle.

When the girl wasn’t around, it was typically just Waylon and the boy left in the house. He’d constantly pushed Waylon around, sometimes trying to bully him into doing things. The blonde had always tried to pay him no mind along with the others.

Once Waylon turned ten, his uncle decided it was finally time to lay a hand on him. He was old enough for a good beating, he’d said.

It was only small things for the first year. A whack across the head, a kick to the shin when he walked by. Their son had learned well, typically trying to trip Waylon when he made his way upstairs. He’d tried to let it all pass by; this place was only temporary, right?

At twelve years old, Waylon nearly had a heart attack when he was called down to the student support office for the first time. He was worried that he’d done something bad and that they’d be making a call home. He didn’t want them to call home.

“Waylon,” The nice man sitting across the desk asked gently, folding his arms over each other. “We’ve been worried about you. You’ve been falling asleep in class and your attendance is slipping because of all these sick days. How’s home, Waylon? Are you doing okay?”
Waylon had lied, telling the man that he was a constant klutz due to his past damage, always banging himself around on inanimate objects when he didn’t know they were there. The counselor hadn’t been completely convinced; he’d always been a shitty liar. The man hadn’t pressed him further, simply requesting he be more careful at home and if anything was going on both in-school or at home, to let him know immediately. Of course, Waylon never had.

His aunt was a fairly nice lady when she wasn’t blind stinking drunk or watching her husband ‘knock some sense’ into Waylon. She would actually cook for him on those better days, and sometimes she would come into his room an hour before bedtime and read to him. Waylon convinced himself she was just trying to help.

Wearing his father’s sweatshirt constantly, taking seconds at the dinner table, or doing anything outside of his room without asking for explicit permission first earned Waylon a fresh black eye for the week. Some classmates in middle school had been convinced it was a mark he’d been born with every time it’d reappear after fading ever-so-slightly.

It was when high school rolled around that Waylon had managed to screw up so bad he’d wished he was never born. At the time, at least.

“What the hell is this?” His uncle had demanded once he’d returned home from the last day of eighth grade. Waylon had learned to leave his bag on, place his shoes by the door, and keep head down until he was in his room.

He sucked in a breath and approached the man, hands shaking over the straps of his school bag, “W-what, sir?” He asked nervously, jumping back in fright when a stack of papers were thrusted down onto the counter. Waylon glanced them over briefly before looking back up at his uncle.

It was his acceptance letter to the local vocational technical high school. Oh shit. He was fucked. He hadn’t meant for his uncle to find out he’d tried to get in.

The man had ordered him to wait in his room while he talked things over with his aunt. He didn’t have to be told twice; Waylon shot up the stairs so fast there was barely any trace that he’d been there to begin with. He’d heard the shouting; the groans and stomps.

His oldest cousin had watched with sadistic pleasure when Waylon had finally been called back down. There would be too much work on his family’s part (in their own opinion) to pull him out. Instead, he’d been pinned down onto the living room floor and beaten so badly he’d fallen unconscious and had to be taken to the hospital afterwards. He’d never tried anything of the sort again.

His eldest cousin left the house a few months later. Only Waylon and the girl were left; she talked to him constantly about how she was going to take him with her when she left next year. She left before her deadline. Well, she didn’t leave necessarily; she just disappeared. No one had heard from her since.

Years passed. Two idiots asked for his help. Two idiots escaped. Waylon was officially disowned and tossed into jail like he’d never existed to begin with.

“If you hadn’t said yes to those idiots, this would’ve never happened.”

To say Miles lived lower-class was an understatement. No; he’d lived in complete and total poverty since day one.
That didn’t mean his parents hadn’t tried, no. His mother and father loved him with all of their hearts; and unfortunately their wallets, too. Another thing he’d dealt with from day one; both of his parents were horrible spenders.

He would constantly come home to find something new and useless; a fancy-looking box sitting on his dirty bed, or a set of necklaces and chains that were probably worth far more than they should’ve been.

“How come you buy all this random junk?” A fourteen-year-old Miles asked one day. He was tired of sucking up to his teachers for lunch money; he knew his parents could buy food if they put some work into it. Being a fast-food worker and a retail manager didn’t have to have as low of a budget as they made it out to be.

His mother put down her sewing needles, smiling, “We only want you to have the best, honey.” She said politely, running her thumb along Miles’ cheek.

Miles brushed her away, “Well maybe you should start with new furniture and a fridge full of food. I’m sick of digging out of the garbage every day. You just keep buying all of this stuff we don’t need when there are clearly more important things for you to look into.” He said angrily, waving one hand to the leaky ceiling and the other to the rusty old table in the kitchen. He kicked his torn shoe on the bedroom door that was ready to fall off.

“Don’t be ungrateful, Miles. She tries.” His father snapped, folding the day’s newspaper over in his greasy hands.

The teenager huffed, moving back towards his room, “Clearly not enough.” He mumbled quiet enough that they wouldn’t hear him. Sometimes he’d wished they had.

None of it meant he didn’t love his parents. He loved them too; he tried desperately to get a job so he could start supporting the family in his own special way, but no one was looking to hire anyone under the age of sixteen. He’d tried a farm over the summer, but the place had gotten shut down near the end of the season due to severe contamination in several chicken barns.

He felt like giving up. But Miles didn’t want to give up; not yet, at least. It’s why he said yes to the bottle of booze a few weeks before his sixteenth birthday.

His high-school friends had offered it as a sort of mercy gift. An early birthday treat. The teen hadn’t been sure if he’d wanted to get involved with the substance until he felt the sour taste on his tongue for the first time. After he’d walked around the bad parts of town drunk, he knew he wanted to try it again. And again.

“He’s such a gifted student.” He’d remembered his second-grade teacher telling the principal, making her way over to the young boy studiously writing down answers to his English paper. She kneeled down. “How have you been, Miles?”

Miles sat up straight in his seat, trying to draw the woman’s attention away from his knotted, greasy hair and over to his eyes. “I’m okay, ma’am.”

The woman chuckled, holding a thick notebook in her hands. It was a dull green with little dinosaurs printed on the cover. She slid it towards Miles. “I see you like to write. And I’ve noticed you trying to draw other students in class.” She said politely, opening the first page of the book to the teen.

Miles squinted down at the sheets before giving his teacher a curious look. She giggled again, “Why don’t you try writing things down? It doesn’t matter what. Write what you hear and think, draw what
you see- Whatever you choose to do with it, it’s up to you. I think you could go far.” She said encouragingly, placing Miles’ pencil on top of the book.

He’d always taken his teacher’s words to heart. After their talk he began writing and drawing so much, he flew through notebooks like they were nothing. He’d excelled through his classes, and no matter how old he got, his old second-grade teacher would buy him new books every time he ran out of pages.

When he’d been ready to move to middle school, she’d given him a farewell gift of fifteen huge spiral notebooks. Miles had been elated; he’d nearly refused to let go when she gave him a goodbye hug.

Miles found, once he’d started getting wasted more and more often, he’d been incorporating his writing and sketching into his cycles. Drink, write. Drink, draw. It kept him from doing anything too stupid.

Record his enhanced observations. Another birthday passed? He didn’t feel it. Drink, write. Drink, write some more. It was never-ending, but it made him forget about his life. Who he was; what he was going to do.

His parents knew he’d began to develop a problem once he’d come home blinded for the fourth time in a row. They wouldn’t ever speak to him about it, no. They loved him too much to hurt him. That’s how Miles liked it.

Whenever a bottle wasn’t being passed, Miles would drown out the world with music. It was the only thing his mother had ever given him that he’d actually put to good use; his iPod. It’d been a gift for his sixteenth birthday, as a way for them to show how proud they were over his hard work.

Write. Draw. Listen. Drink some more. Miles didn’t care.

Eighteen? Not old enough to drink legally, but still old enough to forget. Well, try to at least. That’s what he’d been doing for the last two years, after all.

Miles was smart; he knew not to take his toxic behaviors out onto the big streets. Things would only end badly if an officer measured just how much he had in him; he’d be done for. Instead he would stick to the woods around his house, the shitty sectors, or over at his friend’s. Like at a party.

It was a party. Miles arrived sober; like he’d known, he wasn’t an idiot. Of course there had been drugs and booze, they were high schoolers after all. They’d act the part. That was how Miles took it three shots of vodka in, when a friend had offered him a blunt.

Miles hadn’t ever thought of setting foot into the world of drugs. But being as done with caring as he was, he decided one smoke wouldn’t kill him. Just like everyone else at the suffocating party.

He needed to leave. Two older men were already fighting on the back deck over a girl that was already making out with two other guys and one fortunate woman. Others had urged him to stay, but he couldn’t bring himself to indulge their requests. His breath caught in his throat; he couldn’t breathe. Miles knew he was leaving.

The car engine turned on, and he pulled out of the gravely driveway a bit faster than he’d meant to. God, when did it become so hard to see? Miles just wanted to go home, listen to music and sleep off the massive hangover he knew he’d have in the morning. He turned onto the highway.

Miles blacked out. He never felt his car swerve and hit the SUV on the other side of the road, nor did he feel the three other cars that got caught up in the action. All he remembered were sirens blaring in
the distance as he crawled out of his toppled car and onto the side of the road.

He brought a hand up to the back of his head; there was a gash split across his scalp and several deep cuts spread across his arms and shins that bled out onto the already glossy pavement. How wasn’t he dead?

There was a gentle flop beside him as he propped himself up on the side of his car. There were police sirens blaring in the distance, but he couldn’t bring himself to care as he picked the blood-stained notebook off of the ground. There was a bright-orange highlighter attached to it, and suddenly, Miles had an idea.

Police arrived to find Miles sitting in front of the wreck, scribbling an image of the scene viciously onto several sheets of paper. There were already a dozen crumpled up notes beside him as a baby cried nearby.

“He’s fucking crazy; help me get him into the ambulance.” Miles heard an officer mumble nearby. Once a pair of hands grabbed him from under his arms, he blacked out.

He’d been tested positive for high alcohol levels, and a couple officers had found a small stash of marijuana in the back of his jeep that a couple of his friends had most likely hid in there when he hadn’t been looking. He’d been fixed up at the hospital and then sent off for a trial.

Miles was being sent to Mount Massive Reform. He couldn’t bring himself to care much like always as his date to leave would be pushed back in order to help him make it through the withdrawal of his addiction. He didn’t think it’d work.

Like some sort of miracle, it had. Miles’ parents had even come to visit him on multiple occasions, his mother bursting into tears every time she saw that her son was actually getting better. Soon Miles began to smile again; something he hadn’t done since he was little. He was feeling good. Better than ever, actually.

They sent him to Mount Massive as soon as he was clear to go. Miles went willingly; he knew he deserved what was coming to him. He’d technically killed everyone in that wreck besides a single baby girl; lives that would never come back. He was going to serve his time and make things right. One way or another.

“Don’t you dare try to pretend that it wasn’t your fault.”

“Ms. Walker, they’re telling us… Well, your son is a genius. Or will be. But… There’s something I’d like to discuss with you. He’s only nine so we can’t be sure yet, but I think it’d be best to let you know ahead of time.”

Chris was coloring Finn and Jake inside of a coloring book the office had given him when he saw his mother finally stand. She looked down at him sweetly before moving to the only other person in the room; the nice lady who’d brought him in for testing.

He tried listening as closely as he could while his mother and the woman talked. After a full minute he managed to pick out a few words; ‘possible’, ‘unclear’, and ‘mental illness’ was all he was able to pick up before his mother came back, grabbing Chris’s hand tightly.

“Thank you, Mrs. Greene. We’ll be going now; thank you for your time.” His mother said in her special voice that Chris was only somewhat familiar with. It was the tone she used when she was angry but still trying to be polite. Before they left, Chris ripped out the page he’d been coloring,
taking it with him as he was tugged downstairs and out the door.

Once they’d gotten into the car, Chris leaned over to his mom, “What did she want to talk about, mum?” He asked, watching curiously as she started the engine.

“Nothin’ sweetie pie,” His mother said, letting out a long sigh. Before she backed out, her eyes locked on Chris’s. “Put your seat belt on; we don’t want to have an accident on the way home.”

Chris sat on his bed, staring at the spread of his mother’s origami animals along the shelf just above his bed. He shook his head, grabbing his page of Finn and Jake to place it on his work desk. Then, he looked around for a roll of tape before pinning the piece of paper with a collection of many others on the right side of the wall.

The nine-year-old looked around curiously before hopping off the stool over to a picture he’d scribbled a few years back. Chris peeled the piece off of his wall, grabbing a folder full of both lined and white paper and stuffing it inside.

Someone knocked on his bedroom door. There was only one person it could be, he knew, so he went to open it happily. On the other side was his mother, steaming bowl of homemade soup in her hands along with a cup of milk. She smiled, allowing herself into the room to put the food items on his desk.

“We’d better put that kitchen table up soon so we can start eating together again.” She said, looking over the huge stacks of papers on Chris’s desk. She hummed in approval, turning around to face her son. “I see you’ve been busy.”

Chris nodded, hopping onto the desk’s swivel chair. “Yeah, my teacher says I’m getting way ahead of the class. He told me it can’t just be from having another teacher as a mom. It’s strange though, I’m always working hard but the kid in the back never gets noticed by him. He looks like he’s working really hard.”

His mother paused, slowly turning back around. She tilted her head, frowning. “But no one sits in the back of your room, honey. I see the last two rows empty every time I go to deliver papers to your teacher.”

The boy shook his head, “Nope, he sits right in the corner of the room. Maybe you just don’t see him. He disappears sometimes.” He said cheerfully, grabbing some sheets from his homework and stuffing them into a new folder.

“Oh, sweetie pie.” His mother said nervously, exiting the room and closing the door behind her. Chris didn’t notice the edge in her voice.

“I’m sorry ma’am, but I’m afraid he’s not permitted to be on the roads until he’s better.” The man on the other side of the conference table sighed, sliding the health papers over to the woman and her sixteen year old son.

Chris flinched when his mother stood angrily, slamming her fist down onto the table, “Nothing’s wrong with my boy, you hear me?! He’ll do great.” She hissed, snatching the papers up off of the counter. “Come on Chris, let’s go.”

The man spoke up again. “They’re not going to allow it.”

“Well I don’t care.” She snapped back, turning on her heels before grabbing the arm of Chris’s coat.
He watched her lips curl into a small sympathetic smile as they walked out of the office room and back to the parking lot.

Once they were outside, Chris took it as his chance to speak, “I’m sorry, mum.” He said sadly, beginning to trudge behind his mother as she led them to her car. He needed to get it out; he’d felt awful about his hallucinations ever since he was seen by a professional, and he didn’t want his mother to be dragged down with him.

His mother finally stopped, moving a hand under Chris’s chin. “Oh, don’t be upset about it, sweetie pie. None of this is your fault, you hear me? Come on now, say it back to me. None of this is your fault.”

Chris certainly didn’t feel like it wasn’t his fault. But instead of talking back to the one person he cared about the most, he tilted his chin up and sighed. “None of this… Is my fault.”

As soon as the words left his lips his mother laughed, running a hand over his buzz-cut and gesturing around them, “Good. Are you seeing anything right now?” She asked delicately, squinting her eyes in all different directions as if she was trying to see the phantoms herself.

He nodded, pointing over his shoulder. “There’s someone following me.”

His mom let out a long shaky breath, nodding, “Okay. Chris, you remember the last time you met with Doc?” She asked. He nodded, so she continued. “Remember how he told you if any of those things get violent, you stay calm and move somewhere safe? I want you to repeat that to yourself over and over. I don’t want my baby getting hurt, okay?”

Chris nuzzled into his mother’s touch as she pulled away, nodding again. “I understand, mom. He’s just… There. I can’t convince myself he’s not.” He looked back over his shoulder at the figure looming nearby. It was whispering something to him; something he couldn’t make out.

“I know,” His mom said quietly, slinging her purse over her shoulder. “I know.”

It had only taken a couple months after the rejection for his hallucinations to become more than just ghosts stalking his every move.

Thanksgiving morning was spent cleaning Chris’s legs free of blood and infection. He’d told his mother that a strange man wouldn’t let him go throughout the night and he thought trying to slice the thing’s fingers off would make it go away.

A closer eye was kept on him after that. He frequently went to a small mental institution in town by both his and his mother’s agreement. They had tried to make him better, and they technically had. But only for a certain amount of time.

Months went by without another hallucination. Chris was clear to his mother once more at the age of eighteen. He’d never felt as safe before in his life. He felt free.

“Hey, Chris! We’re going to watch the fireworks for the fourth of July tomorrow night; wanna come?” One of Chris’s cousins asked one day. “I’m bringing a friend. Come on, it’ll be fun! It’s like a late gift celebrating your graduation as valedictorian.”

Of course he had agreed. It sounded like fun. Something he hadn’t experienced in such a long time; he was grateful that she’d given him the distraction. He went along.

“Aren’t we going home?” Chris asked as the girl changed course after the show, her friend sitting
quietly in the back. He’d seemed like such a nice boy in Chris’s eyes. He turned to face his cousin.

She shook her head, “Not yet. There’s this place by some railroad tracks I thought we could all have a little picnic at before we head back. Don’t worry; you’ll be home before eleven like you promised your mom.” She giggled, pulling onto an old dirt road surrounded by nothing but grass and bright summer flowers.

Chris didn’t mind. It sounded like fun.

They’d laid out a blanket and ate ham and cheese sandwiches while watching dark clouds pass over the bright stars in the sky. Chris had given a long speech about how each of them meant something special; both of them had liked it.

Horns blared in the distance. Chris winced at the sudden noise while his cousin and her friend laughed. “Don’t worry Chris, the train’s just coming by. It’ll probably pass in a few minutes.”

At the reassurance, Chris laughed. But then he saw something pass by out of the corner of his eye. His eyes widened, “What was that?” Chris gasped, whipping around to locate the person creeping around the field. But no one around could be seen.

His cousin looked around, and so did the boy. “What? There’s nobody here.”

“How.” Chris grunted, shaking his head. But once he turned around, a large, dark figure was looming over just behind his cousin, fangs bared. The larger man gasped, immediately hopping up to his feet. He rubbed his eyes, but the creature still remained. And it was getting bigger.

“Chris?” The girl shrieked nervously, scooting back from her position on the blanket. The boy reached up to calm him, unsure of how to react to Chris’s current state of panic.

When Chris felt the cool touch of fingers on his arm he screamed, yanking on the boy’s wrist up just enough that he heard the sound of bones snapping. He looked down; oh god, what had he done? And the figure was still there, threatening to rip both him and his friends apart. So he did the only thing he knew; he ran.

“Holy-! Just hold on, Sam. Chris!” She yelled after him desperately. Chris could hear her running from behind; was she trying to get away from that thing too? He wasn’t crazy?!

Chris collapsed onto the ground, knees connecting with the hard steel of train tracks. He cried out, pulling himself together enough to stand up and keep moving. He heard a loud horn blaring; the creature?

He turned around and saw his cousin still trying to catch up to him, “Wait, please!” She cried out desperately. Chris saw the creature standing close behind her, making its way towards them. He breathed heavily, yelling for his cousin to move faster. She stepped onto the tracks.

The phantom whisked itself away as soon as a train connected with flesh and bone.

Chris snapped back to reality, covering his mouth in a near-scream. His cousin, her body bent and twisted from the impact, was sprawled out on the ground in front of him.

Once the train passed, Chris looked up to see the boy named Sam standing on the other side of the tracks. He took a step back as the boy seethed, “…This is your fault!” He screamed, walking across the tracks before slumping down in front of her mangled body, tears flowing freely down his cheeks. The boy looked back up, anger clear as day despite his pure agony. The boy yanked out his cellphone with his good arm, dialing three numbers.
Once the boy brought the phone to his ear, Chris panicked. He ran away as fast as he could from the scene, his vision starting to pollute with tears of his own. He couldn’t be there; he couldn’t do it.

He’d had no idea how long he ran for. Before he knew it, he was standing in front of a convenience store with people roaming in and out. People, people, people.

Chris knew he needed something. He didn’t know what he needed, but he knew he needed it fast. He ran inside the store, nearly plowing over a young boy and his mother as he made his way to the food and drink isle. A drink of water, maybe that would calm him down.

Something entirely new was driving him. He grabbed several items off of the shelves and packed them into his arms, shrieking when the phantom walked up behind him. He picked up speed again, slamming the front door open before running into the night. He heard someone shout after him; he didn’t care who it was.

Maybe he could live on his own for a while. At least until things calmed down. Maybe he and his mother could move somewhere; was he a criminal now? This was sort of like the cartoons he’d watched when he was younger.

He collapsed onto the side of the road, oxygen unable to flow in and out of his lungs. He couldn’t breathe.

The police found him barely breathing on the side of the road. Everything was recorded; his mother was an absolute wreck. She told Chris she needed time to think things over. They sent him to Mount Massive to serve time and recover all at once. They told him it was good for him. His mother came to visit on his very first day.

“I’m just trying to help you be a normal fucking kid is all.”

It’d been five years since Dennis had seen his mom.

His mother and father had divorced when he was six, and his dad had never looked back on it. He’d won custody over his son while his wife was left to wallow and rot.

The main reason they’d left was to save Dennis from her incurable addiction to heroine. He had wandered in on her shooting up on numerous occasions since he’d grown out of being a toddler. His dad had hated it, and couldn’t stand the thought of making his son watch his mother kill herself.

She’d been put through recovery program after recovery program, as Dennis had been told by his father during the move. Once she was out, she’d go right back onto her old habits and just make herself sicker and sicker. Dennis had tried to make her feel better when she’d cry, but besides that he couldn’t muster the courage to do anything else.

When his father was out of the house, she would scream through the rooftops and scratch her eyes and arms, begging some unknown source to make everything stop. Dennis hadn’t known what it was that she was trying to achieve; it was nights like those where he would lock himself in his room with his dad’s ear plugs and books.

After all of those months watching his mother progress further and further into her addiction, reading became his addiction. His father had been so proud; the man would never come home to see his son empty-handed. Dennis always had a book on-hand.

When his mother was ready to die, Dennis watched his father talk to her about whether she was
going to help herself for both her well-being and her son, or if she was going to let herself fall apart until there was nothing left. She took the drugs over her own child. They signed the papers, and Dennis was removed from her life as she was his.

Dennis never heard from his mother again after the incident. His father never spoke about her, and Dennis never bothered to ask. He didn’t want to know; he just wanted to pretend she was off the grid and move on with his life.

As soon as his father took him to their cozy apartment for the first time, Dennis had set up all of his things as soon as possible and got himself ready for his new school. Then he read. And read. And read some more.

Sometimes when his father came home after his plentiful amount of business trips and job moves, he’d bring Dennis a whole new stack of both fiction and non-fiction books to peruse. Sometimes his father would read to him, or help him get started on a new book. He loved it.

They lived in that little apartment for years after the disappearance of his mother. Slowly, Dennis had built his collection of books high enough that piles of them were stacked on the far wall of his room; and he loved every single one of them.

Dennis had always made the average student grade in most of his classes, but English and writing classes were where he excelled. Honors this, honors that, all the way up to high school. He was proud of his achievements just as much as his father was.

One day when Dennis had been studying for a freshman-level biology test, his father brought a man home to meet him. Dennis had always been shy, but the man was bright and extroverted, shaking his hand firmly and he’d even patted him on the head. His father told him that he had started dating the man. Dennis didn’t mind.

At first, he liked Bradley. The man had only come home with his father when they’d first been together, and usually he would insist on cooking for the two of them. He would even bring his own cooking supplies, which Dennis appreciated. Then there’d still be things left over for when his dad cooked on his own.

Eventually, Brad started coming before his father would get home. Sometimes Dennis felt uneasy with the other man around; he’d asked his dad about it before, but he’d let Dennis know that Brad had permission. Dennis didn’t have it in him to protest, so he just kept reading.

Read, read, read.

“How come all you do when I’m over is read, huh?” Brad asked on a Thursday night, two hours before his dad was supposed to return home. He had come early. “Let’s watch one of those popular action movies or something.”

Dennis shrugged, “I’m not really a fan of TV.” He said simply, shying away from the other man. He held his copy of ‘The Swordbearer’ close to his chest, breath hitching when Brad snatched it from his grasp.

“Hey, g-give it back!” Dennis pleaded, climbing up onto the armrest of the couch when Brad held it high enough that the teen couldn’t reach. The smaller of the two grunted, standing on the chair in an attempt to get better access to the book.

Brad chuckled darkly, nudging Dennis’s chest far enough that he lost his balance and toppled over, head smacking painfully against the hardwood floor. Dennis hissed, rubbing his hands over his scalp
as pain shot through his temples.

The older man stood to loom over him, book still in hand, “You can have it back when you spend an hour and a half watching something with me. No room, either. Just you and me, kid.” Brad commanded, tossing the book onto the table beside him.

That’s when Dennis started liking Bradley a whole lot less.

As time passed, Dennis was constantly bullied by his dad’s boyfriend when he wasn’t home. Take away his things for a price, sometimes even money, or shove him a little harshly. Dennis couldn’t bring himself to talk to his father about it; he was too nervous to face the consequences Brad would have in mind.

Besides, the man had access to their house key now. Brad had almost all control over the house. Except the lock on his bedroom door.

Most days Dennis spent locked in his bedroom with all of his belongings in check. His dad would sometimes beg him to come out, upset at how long it’d been since he’d seen his son. It was slowly tearing Dennis apart, but he had to hold his ground; Brad was always there.

Some nights Dennis would cry himself to sleep, missing his father down to his very core. Only once did his father arrive at the house alone, and Dennis had nearly jumped into the man’s arms in relief. His father had asked why he’d trapped himself in his room all the time, but Dennis still couldn’t tell him.

His father said he’d gotten the next few days of work off so he could spend time with him. Dennis had been elated; no Brad around. It was like he’d fallen in love with just the concept itself.

That Friday, Dennis came home from school to find the main hallway dark, the light turned off by the side of the room. He could see the living room lamp was on around the corner, but he wasn’t sure if his dad had gone out shopping or something similar.

“Please, get out of here. This is my son we’re talking about.”

“So what, his feelings are more important than mine about you?”

“With how you’re acting now? Yes, definitely. Go.”

Dennis heard a loud crash along with the voices in the living room. He hung his school bag up on the hook by the door, quickly making his way around the corner to see what had happened. What he found shook him, but somehow didn’t surprise him even though he desperately wished it had.

His father was lying face-down on the ground, elbows scratched and nose leaking blood. The lamp near the center of the room was toppled over, shards from the lightbulb scattered across the floor. Dennis sucked in a breath. “Hey!”

Both men looked up to trace Dennis’s shout. Brad found him first, grinning as he put a foot down on his father’s leg. The man winced, but focused all of his attention on his son, “Dennis, run!” He shouted, wincing as the pressure on his leg increased.

Both men looked up to trace Dennis’s shout. Brad found him first, grinning as he put a foot down on his father’s leg. The man winced, but focused all of his attention on his son, “Dennis, run!” He shouted, wincing as the pressure on his leg increased.

Dennis began feeling something dark boil inside of him. He felt strange and twitchy; it wasn’t a feeling he’d ever experienced before. He sort of liked it, but at the same time it stung. It gave him the urge to act.

Brad grinned wider, “Come on kid, you don’t want to run off now, do ya? We’re just having a bit of
fun.” He laughed, twisting his foot over the leg of the man lying beneath him.

The dark feeling continued to pour throughout Dennis’s being as the teen rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, breath ragged as he approached Bradley.

The man laughed when he noticed Dennis’s dark expression, finally showing mercy on the leg beneath him. “Seriously? You actually expect—”

Dennis grabbed a cane resting inside of the umbrella case by the couch, yelling as loud as he could as he slammed it across the man’s face. He panted heavily as Brad collapsed onto the floor, a large bruise already beginning to form over the skin it’d come in contact with. Dennis didn’t stop there.

He growled over the form of a man that’d attacked his father, reaching down to grab Bradley’s arm before yanking it far enough he heard the bone of his elbow pop. Brad let out a short scream before Dennis grabbed the metal cane again, slamming it down as fast as possible and snapping the man’s lower leg.

“All of a sudden the burden of what he’d done rested over his shoulders, and Dennis took a frantic step back. He glanced to his father. “…Dad?”

They’d all gone to trial in the end. Bradley had gotten locked away in the state prison for an amount of time that Dennis couldn’t have cared less about. As for him, he got picked by Murkoff’s higher-ups and was going to be sent to their own special prison for kids ages 15-25.

“I’m glad he’s gone. I just wish you hadn’t gotten as violent as you did…” Dennis’s father sighed, running a hand through his hair.

Dennis looked down at the floor. “Me too.”

His dad looked up at him when he saw his son’s obvious distress, reaching over to take one of his hands, “Well, I heard they let you take three things from home. I’ll buy you some more books before we leave. You ever heard of Ender’s Game?” He asked, trying to cheer Dennis up.

The teen look up again, “No…” He responded quietly, finally making eye-contact.

His dad grinned. “Well, you’re going to.”

“How is your family so perfect?”

“Okay, everybody say cheese!”

SNAP.

“And… Ooh, looks nice! We’re all set. Eddie, you can let go of Rover’s collar now.”

The young boy ignored the photographer’s request, instead moving to hug the Doberman close to his body. He laughed as he nuzzled his face into the dog’s thin fur coat, moving to chase after it once it broke free of his grip.

The dog barked once he caught up to it, tackling the boy to the ground before licking his face. His
father across the yard sighed loudly, stepping off of the platform, “Eddie! Over here, now! You’ll ruin your clothes!” He ordered, pointing to the open space of the lawn in front of his mother.

Eddie shoved the dog off of him immediately, straightening his clothes before walking head-down to his mother. She embraced him in loving arms as soon as he approached, her floral-patterned dress flowing just past her ankles.

“He’s only six, honey. He doesn’t know any better.” Eddie’s mother whispered, running her hands up and down her son’s arms.

Eddie kept his head tilted down as his father approached, gazing darkly down at his wife when the photographer began packing up her things. “Then teach him. Or I will.”

His mother nodded quickly just as the photographer turned back around, smiling brightly, “Whelp, I’ll have these processed for you as soon as I can. I’d say it’ll take about a week, tops. Are you all set?” She asked politely, looking over each member of the family carefully.

Eddie’s mother let her hands fall back to her sides, cheerful smile plastered across her features once more. “Yes, thank you. You’ve been so helpful.”

“Don’t mention it! You all have a nice afternoon now.” The woman said a bit more gleefully than Eddie liked, quickly scooping up all of the items she had left before putting them into her car’s trunk and driving away.

It seemed as if everyone except Eddie’s father let out a breath of relief. Instead of joining his family, the older man walked over to the dog currently doing laps around the yard, snagging his collar before latching it onto the chain attached to the side of the house.

Eddie had never been close to anybody except his mother. To him, his mother was his whole world. She’d taught him everything he’d come to know years and years later; how to cook proper meals for himself, how to sew (a hidden talent he neglected to tell anyone about due to personal issues surrounding the subject) and how to act like a proper gentleman. Eddie looked up to her; it was almost like she was his idol.

What his father had given him was his temper, his issues with human contact, and years’ worth of both mental and physical damage. In many aspects, he was broken.

All Eddie had ever known as a child was what had come from his mother. There was never a second of the day when the woman wasn’t around; she met the needs of her child above everything else. His father on the other hand was rarely around, and when he was he’d either be screaming at his wife or smoking cigarettes out back.

It wasn’t until Eddie was eight that his father started getting physical with him.

Eddie held his bleeding lip with three fingers, bright blue eyes wide and alert as his father loomed over him.

“What did I tell you before I left, boy?” The man growled, stepping on Eddie’s foot.

He yelped, trying to cover up the shake in his voice, “To take Rover outside?” Eddie asked carefully, trying and failing to yank his abused foot away.

The man stepped off, un-looping his belt from his pants and winding it up in a coil. “And what didn’t
you do, Eddie? Stand up.”

Eddie did as he was told, brushing off the newly formed wrinkles in his clothes. “…Take him outside.”

His father nodded, gesturing towards the living room. “That’s right. Now get on the couch.”

After all of his time spent in the bathroom both by and himself and with his mother cleaning cuts and bruises, Eddie had assumed that the beatings were just a common thing within families. He’d thought all that would happen to him was get beat when he did something wrong.

Then his distant uncle moved to a sector just outside of town. Eddie had never wished he could’ve gone back to getting whipped so badly before in his life.

Whenever Eddie’s father would leave the house to get alcohol down at the local liquor store, his uncle would take it upon himself to order Eddie to take off his shirt. The boy wasn’t sure what it was he’d done wrong the first time it’d happened; but he quickly learned the reason why his uncle kept asking him to take it off.

It started with just the shirt. Then his pants. And, almost a year after it began, every single item he wore had to be placed neatly on the counter nearby.

On those days, Eddie would internally beg for his father to come home faster. His mother hadn’t been around as much as she had when he’d been small; she’d begun volunteering nightly at the local hospital. No one was ever around to help him.

Sometimes his uncle would bring his old camera around to take pictures. In the moment, that was the least of Eddie’s concerns.

By the time Eddie turned twelve, his father had finally come home early to find him sprawled out on the floor naked. He’d been elated; finally, someone was there to help. Unfortunately for him, his father had other plans in mind when he found his son like that. He wanted to help his brother out.

Nothing was ever the same after that. It took Eddie until he was fourteen to fully understand just what the two men had been doing to his body all that time. The only thing he’d known as he grew was that it hurt.

“Come on, boy.” His uncle spat, cackling as he watched Eddie yank off the torn fabric of his dress shirt. The teen huffed, wiping blood from his nose. “Stop acting like such a little slut. Get over here.”

Eddie narrowed his eyes at the man. “No.”

Once the words left his lips his father turned around in his seat across the room, looking his son up and down, “Eddie, do as your uncle says, or you face the consequences.” He snapped, nodding towards the rope sprawled out on the coffee table nearby.

His uncle laughed harder as Eddie wrapped his arms around his built torso self-consciously, “Goddamn teenagers. What is he in, the eighth grade? He shouldn’t be getting so cocky so soon.” The man cackled, placing his beer on the table before grabbing the length of rope next to it.

“I’m a junior, jackass.” Eddie mumbled, taking a step back as the man approached.

That made his uncle stop, any and all amusement wiped from his face, “…What did you just say to me, boy?” He asked viciously, wrapping the rope around his right arm.
Eddie’s breathing became labored, but he held his ground, “…I said jackass you old, disgusting man-whore.” The teen seethed, eyes darting around frantically before landing on the sharpened cleaning tongs resting beside the roaring fireplace. He reached out and held the tool tightly in his grip, pointing the dangerous edge towards his uncle.

The older man growled, daring to take a step towards Eddie, “You really want to try and play that game?” He snarled, letting the remaining rope hang over his shoulders so his hands were free. “Alright then.”

“Eddie!” The teenager heard his father yell angrily. He looked over to see how the other man was standing straight up by now. Eddie couldn’t care less. He’d wanted a way to defend himself; now was his chance.

Eddie yelled, raising the tool to his uncle before swinging down. The edge ripped into the sleeve of the man’s shirt, forming a shallow cut in his arm. The teen grinned; something was finally being done about the disgusting excuse for a human being.

Despite the small victory, his uncle was back on his feet in seconds, yanking the tool out of Eddie’s grip while he was distracted. The teen gasped, unable to comprehend what was happening until his uncle turned the weapon on him, swinging down much harder and faster than Eddie had.

Eddie screamed as he felt two long lines cut into the side of his face. He stumbled back, hand moving to feel the wound that was currently oozing blood across his pale skin. His uncle continued; he grabbed the lengthy section of Eddie’s undercut, yanking his hair back just enough to make Eddie scream once more.

“You brought this on yourself.” Eddie heard his father mumble disappointedly nearby. It was quiet compared to the sound of the fireplace so close to his ears coupled with the sound of heavy breathing.

The teen began to panic when he saw the glint of a knife out of the corner of his eye. He kicked and thrashed, trying and failing to toss his uncle off of his back. The man was persistent; he used the rope still over his shoulders to tie Eddie’s hands behind his back before slicing the knife over the teen’s face.

Eddie could feel a new section of his face slowly bleeding out just above his right eye. How had he not been blinded?

“I’ll show you; you slut, bitch, cun-!” His uncle hissed, cut off when Eddie thrashed beneath him.

“Don’t…” Eddie choked out, tilting his head to glare up at his captor. “…Use that filthy word, useless whore…”

The teen watched helplessly as his uncle’s eyes lit up with a new form of rage, grabbing the same tuft of Eddie’s hair before doing the last the he would’ve ever expected him to do. It made him regret his words immediately.

The man threw the side of Eddie’s face straight into the fire pit. Eddie screamed, trying his hardest to yank his arms out of their ties, but to no avail. ‘Oh god, I’m going to die, it hurts, its hurts so bad…’

Just like that he was yanked back out of the fire, heaving sobs as the skin on the right side of his face felt as if they were still burning in the fire pit. His uncle let go, and he slumped to the floor like a rag doll.

He could barely hear the whispers of, “Go get what you can. Lighting up a rod would be even better.
His punishment’s not over just yet.” Before he closed his eyes, moving off into a different world that wasn’t quite dead but not alive, either.

Immediately after Eddie received his high school diploma, he moved straight out of the house as far away from his family as he could.

It’d nearly broken his heart when he said goodbye to his mother. She’d shed a few tears, but she understood perfectly well why her son wanted to leave so badly. Throughout the whole move, she’d actually encouraged him to continue on his way.

Eddie couldn’t find a way to be proud of himself. Once he’d moved, he’d gotten a job working as a full-time assistant in a bridal shop. It was owned by a woman who didn’t have a single care about growing older; in fact, she’d always embraced the beginnings of gray in her hair. Eddie didn’t mind her presence.

After a year of working there, she’d started allowing him to try and make dresses on his own. Eddie had been pleased with all of his hard work that had gotten him there; the work kept his mind off of his old wounds and onto more pressing matters such as what color he should use for the bridesmaid dress he was making for the window display.

When Eddie’s twenty-first birthday rolled around, the nice woman he’d been working for gave him a large amount of cash to spend at the bar in town. At first he’d declined; but her insistence had eventually gotten to him, and he had accepted the offer. She’d told him it was just for him, and she wouldn’t be coming along.

Eddie nearly felt bad when he didn’t buy anything alcoholic there. He couldn’t bring himself to do it; he’d spent his entire life growing up surrounded by the vile liquids and he didn’t want to indulge in their ‘pleasures’ himself.

“The fuck was that, man?!!”

CRASH.

Eddie turned around in his chair by the bar to see what everyone was yelling at. He’d slowly developed a headache over the night, and the crashing sounds were only making it worse. There were two older men pushing and shoving each other around nearby. One had knocked over a glass table-placer, startling a few more people that were drinking and laughing nearby.

A goddamn bar fight. Great. Eddie knew he wanted to leave, as soon as possible.

Some of the staff began yelling behind the counter as Eddie paid for little amount of food he’d ordered, adjusting his crooked bowtie before moving for the exit. A few more crashes, people were yelling louder, and suddenly someone shoved into his back.

Eddie froze, looking down angrily to find a man only a few inches shorter than him pushing himself away from his body with a disgusting wet sound. The taller man didn’t know what to do; he was angry, tired, and now frightened. He went off of his first instinct, punching the man straight in the nose.

The man reeled back, letting out a hiss of pain before shoving Eddie hard enough that he stumbled back a few steps. It only fueled the dark energy building up inside of him; he had to do something about this man right away.

When 911 was finally called and police arrived, several patrons were lying on the floor, including the
man who’d slammed into Eddie. There was one that he was currently on top of, nearly dead with how much blood was leaking out of his face.

It’d taken four officers to drag Eddie away, one of them having to step back due to accidentally stepping into the line of fire. Several other people were taken away that night, including two women and one man who looked to be in his early fifties.

Eddie nearly collapsed when the results of his trial came to. They were locking him up with Murkoff since he would still be within age-range when released. The woman who he’d worked for came to see him once during the court stage, giving him her sympathy before he never saw her again. Eddie didn’t blame her for not wanting to come back.

He felt like a monster. He probably was. That’s why people got sent to jail after all, wasn’t it?

Of course it was.
Recovery

It was quiet. The bedroom door had been closed for five minutes now, leaving Dennis, Miles and Waylon to sit alone and do nothing but stare at each other.

Finally Waylon cleared his throat, eyes flickering over to Miles. “I… Cannot… Believe you used to be an alcoholic. And upset all the time.”

Miles laughed, crossing his arms over his chest, “If you’re under-age and only drank for two years that doesn’t technically count as alcoholism… Right?” He pondered, tapping his chin thoughtfully.

“I don’t think that’s how it works.” Dennis mumbled, rubbing his forehead tiredly.

“No, no,” Miles continued, pointing a finger at Dennis accusingly. The teen shrunk back, yanking his legs up onto the desk chair where he sat, “What surprises me is that you broke a beefy man’s arm and leg. That’s badass, dude!” Miles clapped, bringing his arms back to his chest.

Dennis’s eyes widened as he shook his head, “Yeah no, that was a very bad idea. Don’t be inspired by it.” He pleaded, waving his hands around violently.

Both Waylon and Miles laughed in response, continuous giggling eventually turning into a full fit of laughter. After his initial embarrassment wore away, Dennis joined the mess. The three collapsed onto the floor in a pile, continuously toppling over each other.

“Oh god,” Miles choked, pushing himself up onto his elbows. “We’re fucking idiots. But hey, we’re idiots that just happen to be friends. Glad we all finally came to.”

Waylon wiped his runny nose. “Yeah, me too.”

Dennis stood before the other two, glancing at the clock on the other side of the room. He frowned, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to leave you guys, it’s almost curfew. See you soon Miles Upshur and Waylon Park, have a good night’s rest.” The teen laughed, bowing formally before departing into the hall.

Once Dennis left, Waylon moved to close the door in order to get changed in what was almost privacy. He’d always felt a bit weird with Miles being present while he dressed, but the last month had slowly forced him to get used to the other man lurking about. The blonde kneeled over to his storage space, taking out his night clothes before slowly yanking them on.

He’d been pulling his shorts up when Miles whistled nearby, “Woooow, Waylon. Nice ass. No wonder Ed’s been trying to claim the territory as his own.” The man said from his bed, gesturing to where Waylon’s back was turned.

The blonde instantly blushed, swiveling around so his roommate no longer had a proper view of his backside. “Miles!”

Miles chuckled, piping up again, “You know I’m not actually going to tell the others about you two unless you both pull your act together, right?” He spoke, voice lowered. Waylon could hear him shift on the comforter nearby. Miles sighed. “…Do you actually like him, or are you just using each other for fucksies?”

Waylon looked up, eyebrows raised. “…What are you talking about?”
Miles huffed. “Well the only times I’ve ever been so ‘lucky’ as to catch you in the act you two were either dry-humping or making out so hard I’m surprised you didn’t fuck in the middle of the goddamn hall.”

The statement made Waylon’s face even hotter, “Miles, would you knock it off?! It’s not like that!” He groaned, pulling himself under the bed sheets in an attempt to hide his embarrassment. “I… I have no idea what’s going on. I’m just here to serve time and hopefully solve the Hope case with you guys along the ride. That’s it.”

“Well,” Miles reached over, prodding the lump on the bed that was Waylon. “I don’t think being a prison bitch is as good as people make it out to be. You’re seventeen, Waylon. Don’t do that to yourself, especially if you don’t like him. If there’s nothing between you then he’s probably just doing it because you’re a little flowery virgin that’s easy to take advantage of.”

If his face could get any hotter, it would. Waylon threw the sheets over his legs in a huff, “We’ve never had sex, okay?! I-I… I didn’t know any of this was going to happen, I always thought I’d just be a lone wolf in the big world that doesn’t… Doesn’t…” He trailed off, bringing his hands up to his face.

Miles rolled his eyes, hopping off of the bed to stand over Waylon’s tiny form, “Oh come on Way, don’t give me that. You’re the IT guy extraordinaire and we’re your friends. Talk to Eddie; please. If you two don’t talk soon you’re only going to end up tearing each other apart seam by seam.” He placed a hand on Waylon’s shoulder, shaking him gently back and forth.

Waylon nodded, lying down before curling up into a small ball under the sheets. The pose made Miles laugh, ruffling his blonde hair. “What, you want me to give you a goodnight kiss or somethin’?”

The blonde peeked his nose out from under the sheets, staring. Miles choked on his breath, laughing, before leaning down and giving Waylon a wet raspberry on his cheek. The blonde shrieked, shoving him off disgustedly. Miles only laughed harder, climbing into his own bed before the lights flickered off and the locks were set.

Waylon opened his eyes, glancing around the room before shifting to a stand. This again? This was the third time in a month. Hm. Where was that boy…?

The blonde walked into the hall, looking both ways. Not one person, guard or phantom, wandered the halls. Waylon cupped his hands around his mouth, “…Billy?! Are you here?!” Waylon shouted. No response was given, making him frustrated. Well then what the hell was he supposed to do?

He decided to wander the corridor before the young man showed up again; if past experience had taught him anything, it was that he never made it past this wing before disappearing from the world of blue light.

A night guard that Waylon didn’t recognize passed by in a flash. He could only assume Murkoff shifts swapped out between day and night, which is why he didn’t seem to know a single person that lurked the halls while everyone slept. Waylon continued on to a door at the end of the hall, sighing before gently pressing his hand against the metal.

‘I feel like such a stalker.’ He thought internally before moving through the doorway. Now inside, he stood by two beds; one occupied by Chris Walker, and the other Eddie Gluskin.

Waylon tried to avoid laughing when he saw the copy of ‘The Very Hungry Caterpillar’ lying on the
edge of Chris’s bed. Why did Chris have that book? He shook his head, making his way to Eddie’s
bedside. He looked down at the man, face still serious-looking even as he slept. Waylon giggled,
kneeling on the floor.

He folded his arms over each other and placed them on the edge of Eddie’s bed, resting his chin in
between. Waylon knew Eddie wore his make-up even while he slept, but with the parallel through
this strange world and his own, he could see the dull blue outlines of his scars. The blonde sighed,
reaching forward to brush his fingers against the two deep lines carved into the side of his face.

“Oh, come on Eddie…” Waylon mumbled, retracting his hand as the man’s face twitched in his
sleep. He thought about what Miles had asked him earlier.

Did he have feelings for Eddie? How long had he been at Mount Massive… a month and a half?
Did it even matter?

Waylon sighed, trying to stare through Eddie’s eyelids. He felt like such a creep for watching the
man sleep, but some part of him wished he wasn’t stuck in this dream state so he could brush his lips
against his. Yes, he definitely felt something for the man, but how did Eddie feel after all of this? Was
he really just using Waylon like Miles had suggested?

The blonde stood, looking over Eddie’s sleeping form for a few more seconds before slowly leaning
down…

Two hands clasped over his mouth and yanked him back. Waylon’s eyes widened as he was tossed
out of the room and back into the hall. The hands that had latched onto his mouth released, now
moving to tug at his wrists. The blonde looked up at the form he only assumed was Billy Hope.

Which reminded him, he needed to ask! Waylon sucked in a breath as he was dragged over to the
stairwell, “…Billy? Billy Hope? Is that you? Please, tell me what you’re doing!” He called out,
trying to shake himself out of the man’s grip. The door burst open, and he was more or less tossed
down the stairwell.

Waylon choked on his own spit as he fell, hitting the wall at the bottom with a loud thud. He looked
back up to find the boy descending, his fists clenched in anger. This time Waylon made sure to keep
his eyes locked on the boy’s, feeling determined as he shouted. “Billy!”

Everything froze. The blue particles shifting around on the floor, Waylon’s movement; even the boy
himself. The only thing left to roam was the boy’s eyes, trembling softly in their current distress. He
barely opened his mouth as he whispered. “…No one calls me that anymore.”

Suddenly time sped up and the boy was standing in front of him, offering his hand. Waylon’s whole
body shook, but he took the hand offered nonetheless. Billy (It was really Billy!) yanked him up to
face-level, whispering once more. “Help us. …Please.”

Just like that the world shattered, and the floor collapsed beneath Waylon’s feet.

KNOCK.

Waylon opened his eyes in a snap, looking around the room frantically as if searching for something
new. Suddenly the lights above him flickered to life, and the bedroom door burst open. Paul stood on
the other side, checking tallies of the inmates off on his clipboard before moving to the next door
down.

The blonde remained frozen in place even as Miles yawned and stood up beside him. His roommate
scratched his back tiredly while grabbing the pile of clothes he’d left out the night before. Waylon
didn’t pay him any mind as he yanked on his clothes as fast as possible, resting his hands on the messy bedsheets once he was done.

Miles finally turned in greeting, posture nearing his usual bright and cheery state as he looked Waylon over, “You alright, Way?” The man asked, tilting his head to the side when Waylon’s arms began to shake.

“Miles…” Waylon mumbled, throat scratchy. He coughed, trying again. “Miles… It’s Billy. It’s Billy Miles, its Billy!”

Miles nearly screamed when Waylon tacked him to the floor, laughing joyfully. Miles wheezed. “Who’s Billy, Waylon…?”

“The kid, the kid from my dream! It’s him, it’s him, it’s him!” Waylon yelped, slapping the sides of Miles’ face as the other man had done to him days before. He jumped up, running into the hall while screaming behind his back. “Payback’s a bitch, ain’t it?!”

Waylon needed to spill more. He spotted Chris first, the man already dressed in a white t-shirt and tan cargo shorts as he ran down the hall. The man barely had the chance to say good morning before Waylon plowed into him, “Chris, Chris! The kid from my dream is Billy! He told me so himself, we can help him! It’s Billy!” He continued to shout until Paul hushed him nearby.

Chris’s face lit up in a mixture of both joy and surprise. Before he had the chance to respond their bedroom door opened again to reveal Eddie, looking tired and worn-down as he closed the door on his way out.

“I have a headache, why are you all screaming?” The man demanded quietly, rubbing his temples slowly before his eyes caught on Waylon standing below him. His scarred eyebrow rose at the sight, lips tightening into a firm line.

Waylon grinned manically. “It’s a little boy in the building Eddie, and his name is Billy Hope-!”

Eddie shushed his yelling as soon as it began, waving a hand forward as Miles emerged from their own room. No one paid him any mind while Waylon scoffed, brushing his hair back with his hands as a horrible parody of Eddie’s haircut. “Oh look at me, I’m Eddie Gluskin and I’m always tired and angry at everyone so I have the right to tell people off when they’re just trying to spread good news. Oh, woe is me.” Waylon mocked, faking a deeper voice while he sauntered around like Eddie would.

Chris cackled to which Eddie glared darkly. The two turned back to Waylon when the smaller man started making awkward gurgling noises.

“I’m Eddie, I’m Eddie, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie!” Miles called down the hall, yanking his untied hair back the same way Waylon had before sauntering over to his friend in a lousy strut.

Waylon swiveled around to face the two other men in the hall, standing next to Miles, “I’m Eddie, I’m Eddie, Eddie, Eddie!” They called, giving each other a high-five as they continued to be as obnoxious as possible.

Chris sensed the rising anger from the man beside him, laughing nervously as he moved to grab Miles out of the line of fire. He wrapped his arm around Miles’ waist and yanked the man to his chest, not the least bit sorry for what was about to be done to Waylon.

It all happened so fast that Waylon barely saw it coming. Eddie stormed the couple steps it took to reach him, grabbing the front of his hoodie before lifting him up to eye-level and slamming him
against the wall.

“Do you feel that you want to apologize now, darling?” The taller man hissed, putting more and more pressure onto Waylon’s lungs.

The smaller man wheezed, looking all around the hall while grinning. He tried helplessly to push Eddie’s shoulders back. “Nope-!”

Eddie growled, yanking Waylon further up off of the ground before throwing him over his shoulder. The smaller man shrieked, arms fidgeting as he tried kicking his way out of the man’s steely grip, “Oh come on Eddie, I was just kidding! Eddie? Eddie!” He yelped as Eddie kicked the stairwell door open, marching down the flight.

“Aren’t you going to do something?” Miles asked nervously, looking up to Paul for help.

Paul sighed, facial features dropping as he ran a hand through his hair. “I’ll let Glick deal with it. I’m too old for this.”

“Eddie, Eddie wait, nooo!” Waylon shrieked nervously as he was carried further down the stairwell. The man stormed past several inmates, most of them laughing at Waylon’s apparent helplessness.

When they reached the main hall Eddie finally showed mercy on Waylon’s torso, dropping the smaller man to the ground. Waylon blew a tuft of hair out of his face when the taller man grabbed him by the arms and pulled him up to his feet.

Waylon brought his wrists up in self-defense when Eddie’s hands loomed over him, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” He pleaded desperately, squeezing his eyes shut. But the other man simply pulled Waylon’s arms away from his face, taking both cheeks into his hands.

“You really need to calm down, my darling Waylon.” Eddie sighed, running his hands through the blonde’s hair in an attempt to straighten it back to its natural form. Waylon didn’t protest, simply slumping over in defeat when he realized the battle had been lost.

Once he was done, Eddie gently smacked Waylon’s cheek, “That wasn’t a very good look for you.” He mumbled, wrapping an arm around Waylon’s shoulder. “Let’s eat before Miles comes down; you two should not be kept in the same room together.”

“…done, Mr. Park?”

Waylon shot up from his desk, looking around frantically before his eyes landed on the teacher standing before him. He yelped, scooting back in his seat. “Er… What?”

Andrew tapped his fingers on Waylon’s desk impatiently, rolling his eyes, “I asked if you were done with yesterday’s assignment, Mr. Park.” He demanded, holding his hand out to take the paper.

“Ah…” Waylon looked down, sifting through his pile of worksheets quickly before dropping them back down. “I-I don’t…”

The man waved his hand forward in a slicing motion to cut Waylon off before checking something over the clipboard on his arm. “That’s the third assignment within the last two weeks, Park. I need to have a discussion with you about it later. I’ll call you over when I have the rest of the grades in order.”

Waylon’s blood ran cold, forehead breaking out into a sweat. “B-b-but…”
“I’ll see you in fifteen, Mr. Park.” Andrew whispered roughly, brushing a hand along Waylon’s shoulder as he moved to check other student’s papers. Waylon slumped forward, breathing ragged. He felt his leg begin to twitch, then his fingers.

It was the longest fifteen minutes of Waylon’s life. He tried to make time pass as fast as possible just so he could just get it over with, but life just wasn’t on his side that day. No, Waylon sat there for what felt like hours before he heard the sharp shout of his name from the other end of the room.

The blonde stood up shakily, passing Chris and Miles on the way to Andrew’s desk. He noticed his teacher standing, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips. Waylon sighed when he felt Chris’s large fingers brush the arm of his hoodie in comfort.

Once Waylon was in front of the bane of his existence, Andrew’s smile turned into a harsh frown, “In the hall. Now.” He ordered, pointing towards the door.

Oh come on, they weren’t even going to go over his missing work where there was people around? Seriously? Fuck you, life!

Andrew made sure Waylon was out the door first, hand ghosting over the small of his back as he moved past the exit. The blonde shivered, immediately lining up along the wall in the standard position inmates were supposed to wait in when being brought through the halls. He didn’t know what else to do in his current predicament.

The gesture seemed to please Andrew though; the man’s small grin returned as he moved directly in front of him, “Well Waylon, you’re missing three assignments and this is the fourth time you’ve fallen asleep in class on my watch. You’ve been speaking to your little friend Miles, too…” He began, ticking the violations off on his disgusting, perverted fingers.

“I only talk to Miles when we have group assignments…” Waylon mumbled, dropping the act in order to rub his right arm awkwardly.

Andrew’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, dropping his hand. “…What did you say?”

Waylon had only realized the burden of his words once they’d left his mouth. He panicked, taking in a long gulp, “I-I didn’t say a-anything, sir.” His voice stuttered as his fingers began twitching once more.

His teacher’s expression turned to fury as his hand snapped out, grabbing the collar of Waylon’s hoodie and tugging him forward. Waylon gasped helplessly, trying to push himself away from the older man. But Andrew was persistent, “You’re treading a thin line, Mr. Park. Maybe there’s a way you can to make it up to me…” He mumbled, hand resting on the wall beside Waylon.

“No! G-get away from me!” Waylon burst out, managing to kick his way out of Andrew’s grip in one go. He was almost proud of himself.

Andrew wasn’t as pleased. In one quick motion he threw a punch straight into Waylon’s gut. The smaller man wheezed as Andrew leaned over to whisper in his ear, “Get back inside. I’m done with you. For now.” He hissed, shoving the door back open for Waylon to enter.

Waylon, breath still struggling to make it in and out of his lungs, stumbled over his desk in a rush. Once he finally plopped back down, his vocal chords forced out a small squeak as he clutched the bursting pain in his stomach.

It only took the moment of pure pain to make Chris stand up from his desk, glaring their teacher down as he closed the door behind them. “Hey! What the hell have you been doing to him, you
asshole? Are you just begging for a good fight?”

Andrew’s expression was priceless; if Waylon wasn’t in pain he might’ve laughed. The surprise quickly turned into something much darker as the man stormed over to Chris, trying to size up the man who was almost a foot taller than him, “How dare you speak to your teacher like that in class.” He snapped, grabbing the radio from the latch on his belt.

Miles stood up next, and Waylon wished he could do something to stop him, “You fucking asshat, don’t you dare to touch my best friend like that!” He snarled, bringing the short sleeves of his t-shirt higher up on his shoulders.

After the threats were left hanging in the air Andrew actually had the audacity to laugh, dialing a few numbers down on the radio before latching it back on. “You stupid kids, I’ll do whatever the hell I please. I’m the one running this show, cinnamon crunch. You and Peter Griffin over here need to sit back down, now.”

Once Andrew finished his slew of insults, Waylon covered his ears and shrunk into his desk. He knew exactly what was about to happen, and he didn’t want to him or his two friends to get caught up in the tide.

Guards arrived in the classroom long after Miles straddled Andrew, trying to punch the man’s lights out while Chris made pathetic attempts to yank him off. Several students throughout the classroom began to yell viciously as the fight dragged on, and once everything was settled there were two less students in the room.

Frank had been one of the guards sent to calm things down. When Waylon was done being questioned, he’d told him that Miles and Chris were going to solitary. Waylon asked how long they’d be there; Chris would be in for a day and a half while Miles wouldn’t come back for almost a whole week. Waylon panicked. ‘Why must you always defend me, Miles…?’

Class had ended only a couple of minutes after the whole situation was figured out. Waylon nearly ran out the door once everyone was cleared to go down to the gymnasium. When Waylon had shown up with no sign of Miles or Chris in sight, Dennis and Eddie had been more than just a little concerned.

Waylon couldn’t say what exactly had gone down due to Eddie’s presence. So instead of delving into the gross details of their debacle, he quickly explained how the two were tired of Andrew’s attitude and tried taking a stand for themselves.

“Those idiots…” Eddie mumbled, scratching the back of his head in annoyance. Meanwhile, Dennis seemed to stare down into his very core, and Waylon knew the teen was aware of just what exactly had caused them to do such a thing. He continued to tell him to get help, but there was no way in hell that was going to be possible after what had become of his friends during their more than excessive try.

Waylon had offered to play basketball with Dennis while Eddie continued to be a spectator from the bleachers. It kept their minds off of their friends for only a certain amount of time before they had to think of other things to do. Tick-tac-toe, hula-hoop, jump-rope. They did everything that was available until dinnertime, which was spent mostly in silence. Waylon never realized how much life both Miles and Chris had brought to the table until they were gone.

A day for Chris, a week for Miles. They could survive, right? He couldn’t help but wonder what the two were doing.
“Fuck!” Miles cursed, slamming his fist against the cold solitary door.

A guard shouted at the curse nearby. Miles stuck his tongue out even though he knew quite well that no one would be able to see him. He groaned, sinking down the wall and onto the floor. Couldn’t he have at least been given a cellmate or something?

“…I’m sorry, Miles.”

Chris’s voice. He must’ve been put in a cell nearby. Miles jumped back up, wrapping his hands around the bars that rested in the small window above him. “What on earth do you have to be sorry for?”

Miles heard the other man sigh, feet padding across the floor. The brunette hummed impatiently, pulling up on the bars once more, “Chris, you didn’t do anything wrong.” He insisted, trying to gain the other man’s attention.

After a minute of silence, Chris responded. “I didn’t mean to cause any trouble for the two of you.”

Well, that was stupid. Miles rolled his eyes, “Hey, I was the one who decided it would be a good idea to assault a teacher. I’d say you just got caught up in a bad case of false accusations. You’re getting out tomorrow anyway, right? …Tell Waylon… He was a good kid…” The man whispered the last part dramatically, making a whole slew of exaggerated choking noises before falling to the floor.

Chris laughed, and Miles could hear him grasp his cell bars as well. “Miles, you make too much good out of a bad situation, you know that?”

He laughed along with Chris, slumping against the door. Miles sighed, bringing his gaze down further. “Well, I spent way too much time taking hits from the bad before I came here…”

It fell silent once more before Chris exhaled. “I know.”

The two remained there for an hour, both sitting tiredly by the doors of their cells. Guards rotated in and out every so often, as could be heard by the continuous shift of footsteps. It was then that Miles heard Chris speak. “…When you get sent back up, you can have my dessert for the first three days. It’s… Kind of a nice thing you did for Way back there.”

“Heh. You did good, too.” Miles mumbled, pulling himself up onto the cot across the room. He tilted his head up to the ceiling. “You think he’s doing okay?”

Miles could practically hear Chris shrug. “Probably. He’s got Ed and D with him now. He’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

Waylon paced around his room, looking back between Miles’s empty bed and his own computer. The machine was powered off; he hadn’t put it to use for the last couple of days. When he’d powered it back up, it seemed to be running a bit slower than usual. Maybe it was time for an update.

It was times of pure boredom like these where Waylon wished Dennis would come down to visit. But instead, the teenager had gone on about how his new book had come in and he had to try to read it all in one go that night.

Someone knocked on the door. Waylon was shocked back into reality, left hand twitching nervously as he went for the handle.
As soon as the door was open, a figure shot in and shut it just as quickly. Waylon wasn’t able to get a good look at them until he was pressed harshly against one of the room’s many walls, lips slamming against his own.

Once the other person pulled away for air, Waylon licked his lips, gaze traveling up, “Eddie,” He whispered softly, running his fingers though slick black hair.

The other man wasn’t wearing anything but his sleep pants, the ties pulled loosely around his waist. Waylon immediately took advantage of the body presented to him, running his hands along the expanse of toned muscles and sharp facial features.

It seemed Eddie was already tired of having to crane his neck down to reach him. He moved to hold Waylon up against the wall, and in return he wrapped his legs around Eddie’s waist. Hands slid up underneath his hoodie, igniting all of the skin it came in contact with. Waylon moaned quietly, tilting his head back when Eddie left a trail of saliva down his neck.

“A guard just came in for check, right darling?” Eddie breathed in between kisses, running a hand along one of the thighs clutching desperately to his waist. Waylon nodded frantically; Eddie grinned. “Good.”

Slowly, Eddie managed to get a secure grip on Waylon’s behind, carrying him over to his bed. The blonde was tossed down with a soft ‘oof!’ before the man climbed over him, immediately moving to attack his throat. He felt Eddie’s hands yank the fabric of his hoodie up until it was over his head, the garment tossed quickly onto the floor. Eddie went to seize the now exposed skin, panting deliciously.

Waylon groaned, fingers gripping the sheets tightly as he felt a bulge press up against his thigh. He gasped, limbs already growing weak from the stimulation. God, Miles had been right, he really was an ultra-virgin.

Oh no.

The blonde felt tears prick the corners of his eyes as he pushed Eddie back, sitting up from his position in fright. He let out a choked sob before wiping at his eyes furiously with the back of his hand; Eddie stood at the edge of the bed, looking concernedly down at him.

“Darling, what’s wrong? Did I do something to upset you?” Eddie asked delicately, moving to Waylon’s side before brushing a delicate hand over his jaw. The smaller man moved away from the touch, the frown on Eddie’s face deepening.

“E-Eddie,” Waylon choked out, wrapping his arms around his legs to hide his faltering arousal, “Are… Are you only here because you want to…? To…” He bit his lip in embarrassment, cheeks growing redder and redder. It seemed to take Eddie a minute to understand just what he was asking, and his eyebrows furrowed.

Slowly, Eddie sat down beside him, “…Waylon… Waylon darling, no.” He sighed, bringing a hand up to cup the side of Waylon’s face once more. The blonde couldn’t help but nuzzle into the touch, encouraging Eddie to continue. “I don’t quite know what I’ve experienced over the last few weeks, but I know for certain it’s not just a growing loneliness that… Men often get when…”

Waylon was tempted to laugh when Eddie’s face took on a blush of his own. The man quickly shook it off as he turned to look back at Waylon. Eddie breathed deeply through his nose, “I’ve never done things quite so intimate right off the bat with previous relationships…” He said more to himself than anything. He looked down at Waylon’s hands longingly. “I don’t have a proper answer for you, Waylon, but believe I do want this here to go somewhere in the future.”
The blonde looked down at their hands too, staring for a good minute before he reached forward to grasp Eddie’s with his own. Blue eyes locked onto his and Waylon finally brought their lips back together, this time moving much slower and more intimately. They stayed like that for a long while until Eddie brought his hands down to Waylon’s sides, pressing the smaller man back into the sheets.

Waylon groaned softly as Eddie moved in between his legs, deepening their kiss further. The blonde began to regain the previous feeling in his shorts, wrapping his arms around Eddie’s shoulders when the man ground down into him.

The two broke for air, only wasting a couple of heartbeats before Waylon yanked him back down, right leg moving to wrap around Eddie’s waist. The man rewarded Waylon’s obedience with a quick thrust of his hips, and his shirt was suddenly yanked up over his head.

Eddie’s hot breath over his ear only urged Waylon further, hand snaking down to tug at the strings of his sleep pants. Once the ties fell loose he paused, looking back up at the other man, “Uh, E-Eddie, there’s something I should tell you…” He mumbled, trying not to make direct eye contact. “I-I’ve ah, never… Never had sex before…”

The other man paused, placing both hands on either side of Waylon’s head. “Are you sure you’re comfortable with this?”

The blonde bit his lip, gaze traveling down, “I-I think, I mean y-yes, I am. Just… I don’t think I’ll be very good.” He whispered, squeezing his eyes shut.

It seemed Eddie already understood perfectly, leaning down to give him another deep, heated kiss as he tugged at the hem of Waylon’s shorts, “Don’t worry, darling.” He sighed, dragging the fabric down to the smaller man’s thighs. “I’ll help you.”

Waylon opened his eyes slowly when a loud bang resonated from the bedroom door. He groaned as a guard shoved the metal open, doing the same to the rest of the rooms down the hall. Damn, was it morning already? He must’ve passed out.

He sat up slowly, looking around the empty room cautiously. Waking up without Miles nearby was strange; suddenly he wanted his roommate to return that much more. The other man gave the morning pizzazz, and without him everything just seemed dulled down.

The blonde rubbed the back of his neck when he felt a light throb in his skin. Waylon winced as his fingers brushed over several dark bruises he hadn’t remembered being there the night before. The he looked down; there were a few more marks spread across his upper torso, and dried sweat coated his entire body. Waylon sat up, closing his eyes when a dull ache spiked below his waist. He looked around, searching for a fresh pair of clothes to put on. He’d need to visit the bathroom to wipe the musk of post-sex off of his body ASAP.

After a minute of searching, Waylon located his hoodie along with a fresh Mount Massive tee and jeans. He yanked his boxers the rest of the way up his hips while pulling the shirt over his head, walking out into the hall.

He kept his gaze to the floor while rushing to get to the bathroom. He almost made a startled noise of alarm when someone stepped forward, blocking his path. Waylon looked up nervously, letting a breath of relief out when he realized it was just his neighbor down the hall, Stevenson.

“Hey, Park.” The man greeted, chuckling as he flicked the side of Waylon’s already painful neck. “Looks like you had some fun before curfew. You’re hooking up with Gluskin, right?”
Waylon’s cheeks lit bright red, gaze lowering back to the floor. Stevenson laughed, “Best not to let any of the guards see; you’ll get into a lot of trouble. Anyway, just wanted to ask about Miles and Chris. They doing okay? What happened?” He asked brightly, placing a gentle hand on Waylon’s shoulder.

The blonde shrugged, “Yeah, yeah they’re fine. Chris is coming back later today but Miles won’t be back for a week or so.” He sighed, rubbing his bare feet into the carpeted floor. “The idiots tried bashing Andrew.”

Stevenson took a step back, “Ah, a shame. Well, have a good day; hope you’re feeling better soon.” Waylon looked back up to watch the other man go, wrapping the arms of his hoodie around his neck to conceal the markings from guards as he ran full-speed to the bathroom.

Once he was past the doors and standing in front of a whole slew of sinks, Waylon took the time to place his palms down onto the counter and breathe. He looked up at his reflection in the mirror; his hair was a bit of a mess, tufts of it pulled out in all different directions. His cheeks were still hot, and a fair amount of hickeys covered his neck while finger-shaped bruises graced his lower hips and waist. What a way to lose your virginity.

Waylon wasn’t sure if he had any regrets yet. It had been good at the time, really good, but now what? He’d never gotten emotionally attached to anyone before besides his cousin and his parents, and they were all gone forever. Had been for years and years. What was he supposed to do?

Best to just let things figure themselves out. They would, one way or another. For now, the bigger question on his mind was how he’d be able to use the tiny paper towels provided in the stalls to clean himself up.
Prelude of Awful

“I still think this is a bit stalker-ish, Blaire. He’s just a kid.” Stevenson said, wringing his hands together nervously as he followed his walking orders down the hall.

Blaire grunted, looking over his shoulder to glare the inmate down, “A kid with an unsafe knowledge of technology and this building, Stevenson.” He grumbled, pointing towards the floor. “Wait right here, and don’t move an inch. You’re not allowed in this part of the building to begin with; having you inside of this room would be a crime.”

Stevenson rolled his eyes, looking up and down the hall before nodding. Jeremy pointed his index and middle fingers towards his eyes, then at the inmate before sliding into the security room and closing the door without another sound.

Blaire walked over to a corner of the room where his own security devices and computer were set up on a shiny metal desk. He knew he had to finish his task quickly if he wanted to keep Stevenson’s presence a secret; he’d never wanted the inmate to set foot in their current wing if he could help it, but desperate times called for desperate measures and he needed the asshole for the cameras both in the wing and out of it.

His photographic memory would capture all of the different motion and video devices along with their serial numbers that he could later use to track down any of his little trouble-making friends if they were on the move. Maybe he was just paranoid that they’d stumble into something along the Mount Massive servers; Jeremy knew they were beneath him, but that’d never stopped anyone before from acting like slippery little shits. He couldn’t let his father and Wernicke down.

With Stevenson in the hall, Jeremy could barely admit that he was a little bit nervous. Bringing him through the wing he could get away with, but the main control room for the upper floors? Even his father wouldn’t let that slide. As long as his obnoxious minion stayed quiet and stayed in line, they’d be fine.

With that in mind, he sat down at the desk chair in front of his computer. He looked up at the clock in the corner of the room; 5:03 PM. Everybody was still at dinner, and would be for at least the next hour and a half. He’d overheard a couple of the guards in solitary confinement talking about how they were going to project the movie ‘Beauty and the Beast’ tonight. Privileges.

Putting aside his distaste for the inmate’s pampered well-beings, Blaire got to work prying through the different files lurking throughout Waylon’s computer. When he’d snuck into his room days before, he hadn’t had much time to search what the little twerp was hiding out. But now that he had the floor to himself, he could dig much deeper.

After some time sifting through the same works he’d gone past before, he came across something interesting. Sheet notes. When he tried to open the files, they were locked through layers and layers of complicated coding. Blaire chuckled; he really did have to give Waylon some credit for his work, otherwise he wouldn’t have been brought to Mount Massive in the first place.

It took much longer than necessary in Jeremy’s opinion, but after several helpful and not-so-helpful devices and a full minute of slamming his fist against the counter, he managed to slip through just enough encryption to glimpse at the beginnings of the notes. And boy, were they informative.

What he read made his anger flare like a match lit deep inside of his chest. It wasn’t much, but it was enough. It was fascinating yet damaging, how much the kid and his friends could discover in such a
small amount of time. Their little mystery group, solving crimes and getting themselves into trouble. Oh, they had no idea what kind of storm was about to hit them.

Jeremy stopped when he skimmed over one of the last lines of the unencrypted pages. No. That couldn’t be. He read it again.

…Waylon had begun syncing into the dream-state of Billy Hope? Not only that, but he knew it was Billy? ‘How?!’ Jeremy seethed, slamming his palm against the wall next to him. Fuck. He’d thought that problem had been fixed! The security guards and staff had told them all, they’d told them—

No, now wasn’t the time to panic. Blaire took a deep breath in, exhaling his pent-up energy smoothly enough. He couldn’t deal with this issue right now; Billy wasn’t strong enough yet, he couldn’t pull his victims downstairs. Waylon didn’t mention anything about the exits or entrances, so for now he could remain relatively stable.

They needed to slow down Billy and the other’s progress while he took care of his friends upstairs. He could wait, but not more than a week. Otherwise ascensions would cause a disruption and he’d have to do things to a certain blonde and that would cause a whole other outburst from the public. This was just ridiculous. How was Waylon that strong, anyway?

Or… It was possible he wasn’t strong like their lab rats down below. Strength is one thing, but a person’s experiences are another. Now that he thought about it, he’d never actually taken the time to go through Waylon’s background file.

Blaire sat up straighter in his seat, glancing around the empty room. Maybe one quick look wouldn’t hurt. He searched through the inmate reports, pulling down all of his other tabs in favor of scrolling down to the ‘P’ section.

Jeremy hissed when the security door was nearly bashed off of its hinges. His eyebrows rose as he watched Stevenson slam the metal plating shut, teeth grinding against each other. Stevenson traced his fury, moving quickly to cover his eyes as his bottom lip trembled.

“What the fuck are you doing in here?!” Blaire snapped, slamming Stevenson against the wall next to the door.

Stevenson kept his eyes squeezed shut as he pointed to the door. “T-there’s someone coming down the hall! I don’t know who it is, but their footsteps are clunking pretty damn loud and they’re going to pass the door in about thirteen seconds.”

Jeremy cursed under his breath, grabbing the inmate by the elbow, “No time then. Keep your eyes shut or you’re gonna have one hell of a ride, Stevenson.” He ran to a locker nearby, scanning the plated door before yanking it open. “In, now. Stay quiet and keep your eyes shut.”

“Oh, okay!” Stevenson grunted as he pulled himself inside, closing it tight behind him. Jeremy sealed the lock into place just as he too heard the clunking of boots down the hall. He bolted back to his desk, plopping down gracefully before opening up several different tabs just as he heard a beep on the other side of the metal.

He didn’t glance up when the door opened, Pauline Glick sighing as she closed the door behind herself. She walked over to the security feeds playing in the corner of the room, clicking a few buttons to open up the tapes from a new monitor placed to the side. Jeremy glanced over his shoulder, curious to see what she was looking for. She never came inside of security unless someone ordered her to review the tapes.
The screen showed a hall that Blaire knew to be in between the classroom wing and the bathrooms. His eyes trailed to the date and time; it was captured on Tuesday, December 13th at 11:28 AM. All inmates were scheduled to be in class; what, had someone gone out and roamed the halls unchecked? Who was running this place, anyway?

Another minute ticked by on the footage, and suddenly a small figure holding a slip of paper passed quickly from the academic wing. Even though the cameras weren’t state-of-the-art, Blaire could tell by the messy locks and multi-colored hoodie that it was Park. The slip of paper signaled that he’d had permission to leave to the bathrooms, but why would Pauline be searching through something like that?

Glick’s posture shifted as she huffed, blocking Jeremy’s view. But once she leaned over to write something down, he could see again. He barely noticed it, but another figure a bit larger than Waylon trailed down the hall just another minute later.

The woman continued to write as Jeremy strained his eyes to see who it was. A dress shirt and tie, short-cut brown hair with his sleeves rolled up. Ugh, Andrew. He had a meeting with that prick later. What about the footage needed to be monitored?

He turned back around in his seat, uncaring. It wasn’t until he heard the swish of fast-forwarding tapes did he glance back again.

There, on the camera, was Waylon walking back to the classroom hunched over, fists clenched by his sides. He still had the paper from before, but Blaire could make out a new, nasty mark on his left eye. If Jeremy happened to stop by in the hall within the next few days and Waylon had a black eye, he wouldn’t be surprised.

Pauline flipped her notebook shut, standing back up before glancing at the lockers across the room. Jeremy felt himself begin to sweat; he didn’t think Stevenson was hiding out in her locker in particular.

She seemed contemplative for a few more seconds before shrugging, walking back towards the door, “Eyes on your own business, Blaire.” She mumbled before moving out into the hall. Once the door shut, he grinned smugly. So she had felt his eyes watching. She was a clever woman.

Blaire waited for a full minute before checking the hall. No one was left around, so he took it as his chance to move Stevenson out. He stormed over to the locker, taking out his keys before yanking the door open and pulling on the inmate’s shirt.

Stevenson tripped onto the tile flooring with a yelp, meeting Blaire’s cold stare, “You’re going to see if anyone’s out in the hall, and then we’re going to leave.” He ordered, shoving him towards their only exit.

The inmate mumbled a few choice words under his breath, but otherwise didn’t complain as he felt the cool metal frame for any signs of motion. After giving Blaire a small nod, he shoved the door open and pulled them both into the hall.

Jeremy grabbed the man’s wrist before Stevenson had the chance to speak, gliding down the wing with ease, “Now, we’re going to be here for a little while longer. You’re going back at five-thirty sharp, and you’re not going to tell anyone about the locations I’m about to give to you. Clear?” He demanded, letting the inmate go.

Stevenson rubbed his wrist, letting out a long, exaggerated sigh. “…What locations?”
Waylon sighed, hunching over on the bleachers. “Eddie not here again?”

Dennis nodded, giving him a gentle pat on the back, “Yeah, I told you. He just disappears sometimes. Never been a big deal.” He shrugged, sliding into the space between the seats and the footrests. “So Chris is coming back tomorrow night, right?”

“Mmmhm.” Waylon mumbled, leaning back into the seats with Dennis. He closed his eyes, sighing. Even though Dennis was a good friend, having the group cut down to just the two of them made things a lot simpler and unamusing than the norm.

The blonde opened his eyes once more when he heard Dennis shuffling around next to him, “You know you’re going to get the questioning of all questionings from Eddie when he sees that shiner of yours,” He sighed, running a finger just beside Waylon’s mark.

“I know.” Waylon huffed, nudging Dennis’s fingers away. “…I guess I won’t lie. It was Andrew.”

His friend’s eyebrows shot up before a look of disappointment overcame all over emotions. “Oh, come on Waylon…”

“No, no!” Waylon grinned, launching up from his seat. “I’ve got a story to go along with it, and one you’re going to like.”

Dennis struggled to pull himself up, “How could anything about this be good, Waylon?” He sighed, waving his hands around exasperatedly.

Waylon grinned, scooting closer to the other teen. “Well if you just let me tell you…”

He really, really, really had to piss.

Waylon had tried to hold it in until class ended, he really did, but they still had so much time left and his bladder felt just about ready to burst. But going to the bathroom would require a pass, and requiring a pass meant asking Andrew for one.

Now maybe if Miles and Chris weren’t locked away in solitary, he might’ve been okay with going up to ask. They’d always be there to have his back if Andrew tried anything risky; but then again, that’s how they’d gotten locked away in the first place, right? Shit.

His bladder wasn’t exactly giving him a choice in the matter. With a great deal of courage, Waylon pried himself out of his seat to ask his teacher if he could go. He silently cursed his digestive and urinary system for being so against him in these troubling times; weren’t they all supposed to work together?

Andrew had been watching him with careful precision ever since he stood up across the room. As soon as the blonde was standing before him, the older man looked him up and down with piqued interest. Waylon swallowed thickly, “I-I need to use the b-bathroom, sir.” He said, forcing himself to look up as he shifted his hands to interlock behind his back.

The older man hummed, pulling a drawer open on the right side of his desk, “Hm, of course. You’ve made up yesterday’s work, right?” He asked, holding the pass back in his hand for the answer first.

“Yes, sir.” Waylon mumbled, shifting on his heels as his teacher wrote a few lines of information down on the top sheet. Andrew tore the piece off, pulling the slip back a couple of times when Waylon reached for it before finally surrendering it with a light brush against his wrist.
Waylon made a small squeaking noise as he raced for the door, nearly slamming it shut as he jumped out into the hall. He walked over to the guard standing post, showing them the paper before walking down to the restrooms.

He more or less ran into one of the stalls, making sure he took his sweet-time as to avoid any further interactions with Andrew throughout the day. There was already another inmate inside with him, which made Waylon feel a little bit better when he heard the other person move to wash his hands. Waylon was almost hopeful that it’d be Dennis, Eddie or someone he knew.

But when he was done, he soon found that it was simply just another face in the crowd. The inmate ignored him as he finished up and left the room without a sound. Waylon watched him go, leaning over on the side of the counter. The blonde looked at himself in the mirror, running his fingers over the freckles on his nose, brushing a fussy strand of blond hair out of his eyes.

A hand yanking at his hair, angling his head to the side. A warm, wet mouth biting at the side of his neck…

Waylon felt for the case his glasses were always kept in the pocket of his hoodie. Making sure it was still there, the blonde accidentally nudged a sensitive spot on his chest.

His back arched as a hand slid down his thigh, kisses pressed lower and lower on his torso…

He hadn’t even realized he’d closed his eyes until the bathroom door locked shut with an almost silent ‘click’. Suddenly he was grabbed by the shoulders and shoved into the hard bathroom wall, head smacking against it painfully.

One hand rested on the wall beside him while the other dropped underneath his chin, tilting his head up. Waylon shivered, panicked eyes meeting the cold irises of Andrew’s.

“W-what…” Waylon yelped, shifting his face in the other direction when Andrew leaned down towards him. He opened his mouth to scream, but the other man had his hand over the blonde’s lips in no time, throwing a hard punch to his eye to assure compliance.

“Keep quiet you little brat.” The man hissed, bringing his lips to Waylon’s cheek. The blonde fidgeted, eyebrow twitching as he tried in vain to struggle out of the man’s grip.

Andrew simply chuckled in response, continuing his manipulations until he felt Waylon spit on his hand. It didn’t disgust him enough to make him pull away, but he did cringe angrily, “You little shit, you’re so puny. You really think you can stop this?” His anger quickly formed into a form of sadistic pleasure, licking his lips delightedly.

Well, there was one last thing Waylon knew he could try. He tried to speak, but of course it was muffled by the older man’s hand. He tried again, but his attempts still proved futile.

Andrew rolled his eyes, “You better not scream.” He whispered harshly before letting go of Waylon’s mouth. The saliva that had marked him before was wiped off onto his pants quickly as he waited for Waylon’s response.

Waylon huffed, turning to glare up at the older man. Well, it was now or never, “I might be short…” He breathed, sucking in a breath before bracing himself against the wall. “…But I’m the perfect height to punch you in the balls.”

Waylon made quick work of proving himself right.
“That’s really, really bad but also really, really funny.” Dennis cackled, trying to keep in the rest of his laughter. “But what happened after that?”

Waylon brushed a lock of hair behind his ear. “Well, he basically crawled to the door and unlocked it to get himself out. A guard saw my mark, and I heard him asking for someone to check the feeds. I don’t think Andrew will want to try anything like that again, since I can’t be held responsible if he attacked me.”

“True, true.” Dennis said, plopping back down into his seat. “Well, we can only hope. I still wouldn’t tell Eddie about it, though.”

“I know.”

The minutes ticked by slowly in silence until Dennis decided to speak again. “Hey, I know it might not seem like it, but I can quote dumb videos just as well as you and Miles. Maybe if I held his place for a day it’d make you feel better…?”

Waylon glanced over to the other teen. “Really? You?”

Dennis nodded, “Yeah, when my dad went on business trips he’d send me a bunch of video clips he thought were funny to try and cheer me up.” He said, looking up as if reliving the fond memories.

“Well then,” Waylon rubbed his hands together, grinning at his friend. “Show me what you got.”

The other teen pursed his lips together before closing his eyes. Slowly, he craned his head over to Waylon, an eerie grin stretching across his face. It was a strange look for him, and already the blonde was giggling.

“…Heelloooo.” Dennis breathed, inhaling deeply through his teeth and nose as he pretended to hold a foreign object in his hand, “I like rusty spoons…” He shivered, tracing a finger over the imaginary spoon. “I-I like to touch them…Negh…”

Waylon burst out laughing, doubling over as he tried to control his breathing. After a minute, he looked lazily over to Dennis, “The feeling of rust… Against my salad fingers… Is almost orgasmic. Heu…” He mumbled, holding up one finger. “I must find the perfect spoon…”

“You two are disturbing.” An inmate neither Dennis nor Waylon recognized yelled. The man had thick black hair that curled in waves on top of his head, a light dusting of freckles scattered over his cheeks, and piercing brown eyes. He had a disgusted look on his face as he fiddled with the book in his hand. “Stop talking about Salad Fingers. It’s creepy.”

The two laughed even harder. Suddenly the rest of the day didn’t seem like it’d go by as horribly as Waylon had thought.

“Waylon, what the fuck happened to you?!”

Nope, he changed his mind. He was aborting the mission. Abort. Abort.

As soon as the deep voice plummeted down into his very core, Waylon saw the tray of food slammed carelessly onto the table and a firm hand grabbed his chin. He yelped when he met the piercing stare of Eddie Gluskin’s bright blue eyes.

“He was met with the guidance of Hubert Cumberdale.” Waylon heard Dennis say from across the table. Eddie craned his head to give the teen a horrifying look that quickly shut him up. Since
Eddie’s gaze was momentarily diverted from his own, Waylon just noticed the attire Eddie wore.

Waylon’s eyes widened as he took in the dress clothes that Eddie adorned from top to bottom. He even wore a waistcoat and bowtie, which the blonde found extremely attractive. Eddie looked handsome. *Really* handsome, actually.

The thought was momentarily forgotten when Eddie swiveled on him again, chin still firm in his grasp. Waylon tried prying the man’s fingers off, but to no avail. He broke out in a sweat, stumbling against his words. “E-Eddie, its fine!”

“Like hell it is,” The man spat, maneuvering himself into the seat next to Waylon. His hand dropped from his chin momentarily before both of Waylon’s cheeks were between his calloused palms. He felt Eddie trace his thumb over the bruise around his eye, wincing at the touch. “Who did this to you?”

Waylon held up his hands in defense, “N-no one! You know I’m a mess, I just stumbled over a d-desk and…” He stuttered, trying to look away from his… friend’s intense stare.

Eddie snarled, “I don’t believe you.” He leaned in closer to Waylon face, shaking the smaller man’s head. “Who?”

The blonde spared a glance in Dennis’ direction for some form of help. Dennis looked panicked, but otherwise had no guidance beside a simple shrug. Waylon wheezed, regrettably looking back to meet Eddie’s eyes.

“I-I don’t know his name, but I bumped into him while leaving the bathroom,” Waylon made up, and he surprised himself with how real the lie sounded. “He got pissed when I accidentally scratched his face up on the way down, so he popped me one while I was leaving.”

The man’s face took on a much darker look. “Show me who.”

Finally, Waylon managed to struggle out of Eddie’s intense grip, “I don’t remember his face, Eddie! H-he came and he went! Just forget about it, it’s nothing.” He pleaded, trying to huddle himself into the comfort of his hoodie.

If it was the plead in his voice or the look on his face, Waylon didn’t know. Eddie’s expression softened just slightly, sighing as he slouched over in his seat. After a few moments of passing through the five stages of grief, Eddie adjusted his bowtie and sat back up properly.

That was when Waylon’s attention was drawn back to the man’s choice in attire, “Umh, you look…” The blonde mumbled, biting his lip. “…Nice today.”

“Yeah, what’s the occasion, Ed?” Dennis asked across the table, taking a bite out of his apple.

Eddie looked up from his food, glancing tiredly at the other two men at the table. “No occasion. I just put in a request for these clothes months ago, and they finally gave them to me last night.”

Waylon raised an eyebrow. “Wait, you put in a request for these?”

The man nodded, “This is what I used to wear before I was convicted and sent here. I’m allowed to wear them during the weekdays, now.” He sighed, running a hand through his slick black hair.

Thoughts of Eddie dressing like a gentleman every day had a blush creeping up Waylon’s neck. He tried shaking off the warm feeling as the three finished their dinner in relative silence.
Just as Waylon got up to throw his garbage away, Paul piped up across the room, “When you’re all done, stay in your seats. Frank and I brought some stuff in for everyone to sit and watch a movie.” He said, gesturing for the more antsy inmates to take a seat.

“What movie?!” An inmate called from across the room.

“Disney. You’ll see when we put it on.” Paul waved off, earning a few claps here and there but most other inmates groaned.

By the time guards and faculty managed to get everything into working order and all disputes settled, Waylon sat on the floor with one blanket underneath him and another tossed over his and Dennis’s shoulders. Eddie sat beside them, leaning back onto his elbows.

The Disney movie that the staff had decided to play that night was one that Waylon was very fond of; it’d been one of his favorites, and his mother used to like to put in on to distract him while she was working in the next room over. He pulled his hood over his head as the intro played, getting comfortable next to Dennis.

‘by the time the last petal fell, then the spell would be broken. If not, he would be doomed to remain a beast for all time.’

Waylon blinked, glancing over to the man on his other side. Eddie sat, frowning, as the movie played. He looked down at the floor, then back at Eddie.

‘As years passed, he fell into despair, and lost all hope. For who could ever learn to love a beast?’

The blonde nudged Dennis, handing the rest of the blanket over before scooting towards Eddie. The man’s frown deepened when he saw him shifting next to him, but Waylon tried not to pay attention to it as he folded his legs to the side and laid down until his head was resting on Eddie’s chest.

Waylon could feel Eddie freeze beneath him, so he tried to supplement his previous actions by throwing his arm over his chest. He looked up at him for a few seconds doe-eyed before Eddie rolled his eyes, wrapping one hand around his waist and carding the other through his hair.

“Chriiiiiis Walker!”

Waylon watched with mild amusement as Dennis shook Chris’s hand vigorously when the other man returned for dinner the next night. Chris took a seat at his usual spot at the table, glancing between his comrades with a grin. “Hey, guys.”

“Good to have you back, Chris. Thanks for sticking up for me the other day.” Waylon said graciously, bowing his head. “It wasn’t that bad, was it? How’s Miles?”

Chris waved his hand, laughing, “Miles is fine. I bet he can’t wait to get his sorry ass back up here with the rest of us, though. He tried everything to stay entertained, annoyed the shit out of the guards but playing verbal rock-paper-scissors with me.” He chuckled, wiping the corner of his eyes. “What’s been going on up here?”

“Well,” Dennis spoke before Waylon could release a whisper, “It was pretty boring. Other than one thing…” The teen whispered, leaning over towards Chris to speak with him alone. Waylon knew he was telling Chris about how he punched Andrew in the dick the previous morning.

The group tried to rush the rest of the week by as fast as they could in order of speed up Miles’ return. Waylon had yet another dream about Billy Hope, but this time the young man hadn’t tried
dragging him down the hall. Instead, he constantly whispered for help and kept pointing towards the
floor. The blonde couldn’t make much of it out; what did it all mean?

As predicted, Andrew kept his distance from Waylon. He treated him just as every other student was
treated, even going so far as to maintain further distance. Good. He should be scared.

When Saturday finally rolled around, Waylon was jumping up and down in his seat as he waited in
the gym for Miles. Frank had slipped to him that he was getting out during their free time, so the
blonde practically bounced off the walls when the brunette slammed the gymnasium doors open.

Waylon jolted up, sparking Chris, Miles, and Dennis’s attention. He ran down the set of bleachers
before tripping, sneakers screeching against the polished floor as he ran for his best friend.

“Miles!” Waylon screeched as he wrapped his arms around Miles’ torso in a tight hug. He could
hear Miles choke on his breath, suffocating under his unrelenting hold. The blonde laughed, trying to
pull his friend in even harder.

“Uncle! Uncle!” Miles choked, slapping Waylon’s wrist in an attempt to surrender. Waylon finally
let go, laughing even harder when Miles doubled over, air finally returning to his lungs. “Good… To
see you too, bud…”

Chris walked over next, pulling Miles back to his feet before placing a hand on his neck, “Good to
see you again, Miles. You feeling okay?” The larger man asked, scanning Miles up and down.
Dennis crawled over to the man’s side, offering a friendly wave.

“Fine, fine. Good to be back; I missed you assholes.” He chuckled, reaching a hand up to mess with
Waylon’s hair. The blonde pulled away in distaste, nearly toppling into Eddie as he moved back.

Eddie looked Miles up and down with a quick flick of his eyes. “Upshur.”

“Gluskin.” Miles raised an eyebrow, gently hitting the man’s chest. “Lookin’ fit. I heard about the
new getup. Wouldn’t mind seein’ that.”

Miles plopped down onto his bed later that night, sighing contently as he rubbed his face into the
bedsheets. Waylon closed the door behind them, quickly changing into his night clothes. It felt great
to have his roommate back; it was like the life of the party returning after a long winter break. The
brunette had immediately latched onto his notebook, writing down everything he could see
throughout the room.

Waylon flinched, fingers twitching when Miles jolted up from his seat. He inhaled deeply, brows
furrowed. A grin slowly formed on the man’s face as he raced over to Waylon’s bed, “No way.
Ohoho, no.” He laughed, yanking the sheets back.

“What the hell are you doing?” Waylon demanded, panicking when Miles’ eyes locked on a small
stain before he tossed the sheets back into place and hopped over the bed. Waylon backed up until he
hit the wall, unable to bolt out the door in time.

Miles took Waylon’s cheeks in his hands, pinching them obnoxiously like someone’s grandmother
might do. “Awh, did the little man get deflowered while I was gone?”

“W-what?!” The blonde shrieked, face feeling like it was on fire. “N-nuh, M-miles no, no-”

“Aw you did?! Oh my god no, no was it Gluskin?! It definitely was! Don’t you dare lie to me!” He
laughed, nearly toppling over with how funny the whole situation was to him. Waylon, on the other
hand, was a blushing stuttering mess, desperately trying to pull himself out of Miles’ grip.

Waylon squeaked, wriggling his body down to the floor, “Shut your face-hole, Miles!” He whimpered, trying to cover his blush with his hands. He did not want to talk about the scene from days before with him.

The brunette pulled Waylon back up, dragging him over to his bed, “Shh my child. I feel like a proud father right now after his son gets his first lay. Even though Gluskin’s two years older than me. It’s fine.” He mumbled, shoving Waylon underneath the sheets. “Now son, you stay in bed and get a good night’s rest. I barred the windows and doors, so no sneaking off to your boyfriend’s house tonight for another hard fuck. Want me to tuck you in?”

“I WILL MURDER YOU IN YOUR SLEEP.”

Everyone rested easy that night. But no one knew of the chaos that was slowly emerging like a serpent, ready to bite when prompted.
Downward

BEEP.
BEEP.
BEEP.

Waylon raised an eyebrow, pulling down the tab currently open on his computer. Something was causing the machine to make a weird beeping noise, and he didn’t know what.

BEEP.

A small marker flared at the bottom right corner of the screen. It was a strange-looking symbol with a small red exclamation triangle beside it. Curious, Waylon clicked the icon to see what was screwing with his computer. A file with bright red letters popped up, and he squinted; did something get infected with a virus?

‘STATUS; OFFLINE. JB-MM.EXE FILES SAVED SUCESSFULLY.’

The blonde’s anxiety flared. The program didn’t seem like an average computer virus, nor did he remember installing anything onto his drive. The only logical answer to his problem was that someone or something else had installed it.

…Someone had to have broken into their room while they were out and installed spyware onto his computer. It was clearly spyware, he knew through four years of info tech and cyber training what that type of software looked like. Whoever it was could’ve done a number of things to the room while no one was around—the possibilities were endless. Waylon’s breathing became ragged; someone must’ve wanted to know something, but what?

…The mini-investigation. That was the only thing Waylon could think of that had true value. But who the hell had time to do all of that?

Waylon stood, nearly toppling over an inmate that’d been walking by as he raced down the hall. He didn’t care who he found first, he just wanted them to help him search his room; wires, cameras, anything. The staff didn’t keep security cameras inside of their bunks since they ran checks frequently. If there actually were new devices installed, then he couldn’t do much about them since they could be Murkoff owned; maybe they could be more hush-hush about the investigation?

He found Dennis and Chris easily enough. Eddie and Miles were MIA, and Waylon couldn’t bring himself to care much in the heat of the moment as he quickly explained his current situation to his two friends and begged them to help him look.

Twenty minutes and a long de-bugging process later, Waylon had the spyware and any trace of it gone from his computer, and Chris and Dennis had come up empty.

“Who knows what they could keep inside of the walls; but there aren’t any tapes or cameras out in the open. You okay, Waylon?” Dennis asked, both he and Chris holding up their empty hands.

Waylon panted, “Yes. Yes, I-I… I’m all set. Thank you, for the help.” He breathed, leaning over on the desk chair tiredly. He could use a good nap right about now.

Chris looked around the room one last time, “Have any idea who might’ve done it?” He asked,
“Uh…” Waylon thought back, wondering if any Murkoff personnel would’ve done it. He shook his head, relinquishing his previous tension only a smidge. “Not right now. I’ll look into it; once again, thank you so much.”

The two left, Chris patting Waylon on the shoulder comfortingly as he walked out. Waylon sighed, running a hand through his hair once he heard the faint click of the door handle setting into place. He closed his eyes, trying to slow his breathing further when the door was nearly flung open a moment later.

Waylon screamed, falling off the side of the chair and smacking his head against the floor. He groaned, whole body shaking as he heard heavy footsteps approach. Instinctively, he wrapped his arms around his head and sunk down into his hoodie like a turtle would as his own form of a defense mechanism.

A large hand smoothed the bangs back over his forehead, another wrapping around his waist to pull him onto the person’s lap. Waylon opened his eyes, finding that the intruder was only Eddie Gluskin, staring down at him with a somewhat panicked look.

“Did I frighten you? I’m awfully sorry I didn’t mean to.” The man apologized, looking back at the open door. “I would normally knock as to not disturb you, but this is important.”

Waylon blushed, slowly pushing himself off of Eddie’s lap. He stood, brushing the wrinkles out of his jeans before placing his hands in the pockets of his hoodie. “Where were you? I was looking for you and Miles earlier but you weren’t here.”

Eddie shook his head, “The dim-wit was called downstairs for a physical with Trager. Where I was is part of what I need to tell you.” He said much quicker than Waylon would’ve expected from him, standing up himself. “It’s actually something I should’ve told you the time we talked about Hope’s case, darling.”

The blonde shrugged, raising his eyebrows. “Well, what is it?”

“I had the dreams about Billy Hope every night until you showed up here.”

Waylon’s jaw dropped, hands falling out of his pockets. After the first few seconds of shock, his temper turned to that of annoyance, “And you didn’t feel the need to bring this up earlier?!” He demanded harsher than intended, almost regretting how he’d worded it.

Eddie’s face became a mix of anger and sorrow, taking a hostile step towards Waylon. The blonde nearly jumped back at the movement, Eddie’s voice a harsh whisper, “I didn’t want to bring it up until it happened again, Waylon. Will you allow me to finish?” He hissed, crossing his muscular arms over his chest.

The blonde looked down to the floor, nodding. Eddie’s eyes softened, “In the dreams; does Billy try taking you downstairs before you shatter?” He asked cautiously, looking for any signs of recognition in Waylon’s eyes.

Waylon furrowed his brows, nodding up at him. “And we never make it past…”

“The main hall.” Eddie finished for him. He seemed confident in his answer, but Waylon wasn’t so sure.

“I was going to say the stairwell.” Waylon mumbled, rubbing his arm nervously. “We’ve never
gotten past the bottom of the stairwell at the end of the hall.”

That particular confession grabbed Eddie’s attention, the man rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “I’ve always had an itch in my spine… That’s he’s trying to lead me somewhere.”

Waylon paused, opening his mouth to respond before Miles trotted through the door. The man grinned, looking in between Eddie and Waylon while placing his things down onto his bed, “I’m sorry, did I interrupt something?” He asked sweetly, making a series of kissing noises behind Waylon’s back.

The blonde noticed Eddie’s fists clench by his sides, quick to jump out in front of him, “No! Nothing. We’re just talking about Billy. Eddie told me that he has had the same dreams about him that I have.” He looked over his shoulder at the older man, pouting. “Apparently he gets further into the building than I do.”

Miles dropped the last of his supplies in surprise, quickly turning a frustrated glare on Eddie, “And you didn’t think to bring this up earlier?” He asked, placing his hands on his hips.

“That’s what I said!”

Eddie growled under his breath, running a gloved hand down his face, “Look, my darling and his fairly annoying friend,” He shot a glare in Miles’ direction. “I thought if I had another week maybe I could figure out what he wants to show me. I was trying to help you.”

Waylon rolled his eyes, looking between the two other men in the room back and forth, “Well, clearly that’s not working. Come on, we can be smart! Let’s theorize. What are potential areas of importance Billy would want to bring us to?”

“Okay, no,” Miles began, waving a hand around, “First of all, theories won’t get us anywhere. None of us have a good layout of the building. Secondly, none of us knew Billy. How the fuck would we know anything about him? Who knows if he’s even bringing you both to the same place!”

The blonde raised an eyebrow. “Do you have any better ideas?”

The room fell silent for a full minute before Miles hissed, “Alright, fine. Fine, fine, fine, fine. Fine. You said he’s leading you downstairs, and you told me he takes you to the main hall.” He gestured between the two men in a quick flick of his finger. “So let’s also assume that you’re both going to the same place. With our knowledge, he’s either leading you to the infirmary, shower rooms, or solitary if you’re heading in that general direction. What now?”

“Hm.” Waylon grunted, plopping down onto his bed. Eddie stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, shifting on the heels of his dress shoes until Waylon patted the bed beside him. The three men sat in silence for what seemed like forever until Miles jumped up off of his bed, startling Waylon. 

“Wait,” Miles breathed, plucking a notebook off of the work desk and the first pen his eyes landed on. “Hold on. Hold on just a flip dippin’ second,” He murmured, jotting down notes quickly onto his notepad before pointing at Waylon. “What if he is leading you to solitary?”


“Think about it, Gluskin,” Miles replied, tossing his notebook to the side before moving to stand in front of them, “Waylon told us when we’d all gotten together that Hope never left solitary confinement when he went down there. The cafeteria and showers don’t make any sense since guards are posted in the cafe constantly and the showers are just one big dead end.” He rubbed his
hands together, looking up at the ceiling. “Holy shit, we might actually be getting somewhere.”

“Theorizing.” Eddie exaggerated, standing up. “I’ve been looking around the entire main floor for months now, and I haven’t come up with anything. But... Maybe we should try something new.”

“Holy shit, you agree with me?” Waylon’s eyes widened, pushing himself off of the bed as well, “Wait, is that why you’re always missing?” He asked. When he received a confirming nod, Waylon was taken aback. “How haven’t you been caught?! That’s ridiculous!”

Eddie chuckled. “You underestimate my abilities, darling.”

“Oh man, I have so many questions.” Miles laughed, causing some of the previous tension in the room to dissipate. After a minute his laughter ceased, replaced with a look as if he was lost in thought. Finally, Miles looked back up. “We’ll need to come up with some sort of plan for someone to get into Billy’s old solitary cell. Maybe if we manage to get sent down there all at once, we could get lucky. Because I sure as hell know Ed’s not gonna be able to sneak down there on his own, I don’t care what he says.”

“Possibly,” Waylon thought aloud. “But we have no clue which cell was his.”

Miles shrugged. “We can always wing it. I’ll help you guys talk to Chris and Dennis about it next time we eat. Gotta make sure no Murkoff personnel’s listening in, though. Like one of those chatty guards or worse, Blaire…”

Waylon coughed awkwardly, raising a hand. “Yeah, that’s another thing I should tell you guys about. Someone bugged my computer, and I don’t know who or when. Chris and Dennis helped me look for more bugs inside of the room earlier, but we didn’t find anything out of the ordinary. I don’t know anything about the person that did it, or what they were trying to gain access to.”

Both Miles and Eddie over to him in a mix of concern and surprise, “That’s not good.” Miles said, running a hand through the back of his hair before yanking out his hair tie. He flicked the piece to the side, dark brown strands flopping over his tired eyes, “Well that’s a problem for another day. I’m going to bed. I’ll help you out tomorrow morning, I swear. Pinky promise,” He yawned, holding his pinky finger out to Waylon.

The blonde shook on it with a nervous laugh, watching as Miles held his digit out to Eddie next. The other man narrowed his eyes before shaking his with an aggressive nudge, walking out of the room and back to his own.

“Aggressive,” Miles mumbled, falling face-first onto his bed. “I see you’re the ‘opposites attract’ type of guy, Waylon.”

Miles had immediately pounced on the opportunity to talk to Chris and Dennis when the two had situated themselves at the breakfast table the next morning. Waylon hadn’t said much to back him up during the ramble other than keep constant check for incoming guards.

“-That reminds me, I have something for you later…” Waylon picked up from Chris, who was still talking to Miles on the other side of the table. He zoned out again immediately after that, eyes catching on a figure standing across the room. Whoever it was, they were staring directly at him with a dark expression. The figure flexed a quick finger towards him before disappearing around the corner.

Waylon had suspicions as to who the mystery person might be, but he couldn’t help his growing
curiosity as he stood up from his seat. Everyone looked up at him when he dismissed himself with a flourish, moving to the other end of the cafeteria.

As soon as he was out of earshot and around the corner, Waylon looked around the dark space with tired eyes. When no one showed themselves during his entrance, he shrugged and turned to move back to his group waiting at their table.

Suddenly he felt his arm being grabbed in a vice-like hold, and he was quickly pinned to the wall by hands grabbing viciously at the front of his hoodie. Waylon gasped, only managing a small squeak before a hand covered his mouth firmly. His legs trembled, brain trying to decipher who was in front of him.

Once his eyes began to focus and he recognized the suspect, he growled and shoved the person back and away from his smaller frame. He brushed off his sleeves, scowling at the older man; Jeremy Blaire.

“Don’t you dare, Park.” The man hissed angrily, quick to pin Waylon back against the wall. “You have no idea how deep a grave you just dug yourself.”

Waylon coughed, struggling angrily in the man’s hold, “I’m not afraid of you, asshat. The fuck do you want?” He scowled, trying to pry the man’s wrist off of his chest.

“You know exactly what I want, you little twerp.” Blaire snarled, smacking Waylon across the cheek, hard. It barely did anything to faze the blonde, still struggling with all his might. He could tell his actions were pissing Blaire off, too. The man tried a new angle, tightening a hold around his wrists. “I see you found the hardware, huh?”

The blonde ceased his struggling immediately, head slowly turning to look up at Blaire, “…That was you? Dammit… I guess that should’ve been obvious.” He mumbled to himself more than anything.

Blaire snarled, slamming Waylon against the wall. “I know what you’ve been doing, Park. You couldn’t just keep your mouth shut, could you? You couldn’t just play along. Stay away from the Billy Hope case, and maybe I’ll consider letting you off easy.”

“Wow, you’re threatening me to step away from it?” Waylon chuckled through his burning limbs, mustering up every ounce of courage he had left. “That must mean I’m getting somewhere with it, then.”

That was what finally set Blaire off. With one final push, Waylon’s head knocked into the wall hard enough that he saw stars in the corner of his eyes. He managed to stay upright though, propping himself up against the wall to send a nice, hard glare Blaire’s way.

“Stupid, Park. You’re more than stupid. It’s a shame, really. You have no idea what’s coming.” Blaire whispered, moving off towards the side door and then, he was gone.

Waylon stood there, taking a moment to catch his breath before he brought a hand up to his cheek. ‘How the hell am I supposed to explain this now…?’

Andrew was filing through his papers, walking back to the classroom to prepare for his students when he felt a presence lingering somewhere close. He looked over his shoulder, down the hall, and around the nearest corners; but no one was there. When he determined it was just his imagination, he continued forward.

“Hello, Andrew.”
The man tripped over his heels, dropping several folders full of paper onto the floor. He sent a dark glare over his shoulder at the disturbance, eyes locking onto those of Pauline Glick.

“Glick.” The man scoffed, picking up his missing files before deciding it best to ignore the woman. She didn’t have any business with him, anyway.

Pauline wasn’t having any of it, simply grabbing him by the collar of his shirt and spinning him back around, “U-uh, not so fast. You haven’t properly greeted me yet.” She said, fingers tightening around the collar of his shirt.

The older man scoffed, shrugging her off, “What do you want, Glick?” A fair question. She hated him enough to avoid any form of socialization. She was planning something, and Andrew wasn’t sure he was going to like it.

Pauline didn’t waste a single breath, “What the hell are you doing to that poor kid, Andrew? What kind of sick game are you playing now?” She asked, the polite tone from before dropping as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Andrew froze, looking down at the floor before clearing his throat. “I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about. I need to get back to my room to grade papers.”

“Did you forget that security cameras still exist?” She asked, taking a step towards him while he took one step back. “Would be a shame if any of last week’s footage were to leak out to the press, you remember what happened last time…”

He froze, taking in a thick, shuddering gulp. Yes, he did remember his last encounter before Murkoff hired him. He almost thought he’d never see the light of day again. Instead of responding in words, he gave the woman a quick nod.

Pauline laughed, slinging an arm over Andrew’s shoulder, “Tell you what Andrew, I’ll keep my, ‘pretty little mouth’ shut under two conditions.” She offered, voice mocking in the old tease Andrew used to call her when she’d first been hired.

Andrew growled under his breath, teeth grinding against each other inside of his mouth as he struggled to respond. “…What. Do you want.”

Glick held up her index finger, “First, I want you to lay off harassing Waylon Park. He’s a good kid, and I don’t like knowing you’re putting your slimy perverted hands on him.” She said, tone taking a darker shift as she leaned in. “And secondly, I want to pop you right in the face, just once, real good. Don’t worry- I won’t break anything, but it’ll certainly leave a bruise.”

The older man weighed his options. Getting got in the nose just one time and having to lay off of his precious student did seem like a better option than spending all that time going through court rooms and the media like last time, and all of the orders…

“Fine. Have it your way, Glick.” He hissed, raising his arms by his sides. “Give it your best shot, sugar lips.”

Pauline was quick to take on the offer presented, sending Andrew soaring like a rocket across the hall. Any papers and files he’d managed to hold onto before fell easily to the floor, coating the tile in a thin white sheen of destruction as she made her way down the remainder of the hall.

“That’s a good boy, Andrew.” She mocked, kicking his chest over to her before kneeling down in front of him. “I can’t wait to see you rot.”
“Please, tell me this is all a sick, horrible joke. Please. I can’t do this.”

“Consider your sentence moved back another year if you don’t comply.”

“I-I-! Blaire! I can’t do that to him! What kind of twisted person are you…”

“Maybe mommy dearest will wind up with a fate similar to his.”

“…”

“That’s what I thought, grunt.”

“Don’t… Don’t do this.”

“So you’ll help?”

“…Yes.”

Even though Waylon had no fear of Jeremy Blaire as a person, he would admit that he was a bit terrified as to what the man could do when in a position of power. His leg wouldn’t stop twitching, and he couldn’t get the threats out of his head.

He wondered, how many of his files of his had Blaire gone through? Probably all of them if he had been that worked up about Waylon’s presence on the Mount Massive servers. Clearly that was a sign that they were doing good, and Blaire was doing… Not so good.

In order to conceal the red mark that had blossomed over his cheek, he’d waited in the hall until it faded down to a dull pink. Waylon tried thinking of something embarrassing to match the hue on the other side of his face (Which, given his more recent dilemmas, wasn’t that hard to conjure up) before moving to sit back with his friends.

What he’d been contemplating all throughout their free time was what he should tell the others involving his encounter with Blaire. Should he tell them anything? Blaire didn’t seem like the type to go overboard with punishments for inmates… But then again, the man was always hiding new tricks up his sleeves. Who knew what he could get away with given the proper tools and time.

Until anything bad seemingly made an approach, Waylon decided he wouldn’t mention anything. Besides, Blaire seemed to be interacting with the inmates less and less, and that had been the first time Waylon saw the man in such a long time. Maybe he was finally boiling down, and he had nothing left in him but a bunch of empty threats.

Waylon couldn’t be sure. Instead he decided to just go with the flow and see where, exactly, the flow would take him. Couldn’t get much worse from here, right? He was technically in prison, after all.

‘For something you didn’t do, mind you.’

He recalled his first conversation with Blaire. How the man had offered him a chance at freedom--the scratches repaired and let pristine on his record, as if nothing involving the school fire had ever happened. Would he still consider taking that risk?

If he’d said yes, he would’ve never been able to stay around Miles, Chris, Dennis, Eddie…

They all meant so much to him now. Who knew, that only in a matter of two months, he would’ve become such close friends with people just like him? They’d all gotten sentenced for very real crimes, sure, and their personalities more than differed, but in actuality they were all a bunch of
misfits that had simply been misguided; like he had.

God, why weren’t people like them given the chance to be rehabilitated? After all of their hard work at Mount Massive and things they’ve been doing right, something like that should’ve been available by now. They certainly needed it more than anything a prison sentence could give them.

Waylon shook his head, staring down at his spaghetti mixed with tomato sauce and parmesan cheese. He didn’t feel all that hungry that night, only choosing to take a bite out of his side of garlic bread. He chewed slowly, eyes drooping.

“Waaaaylooon…”

Waylon looked up at Miles, who had been calling him across the table with a soft look on his features. “You doing alright there, bud?”

“Are you feeling ill, darling?” Waylon heard Eddie speak up next. He looked up to the man with flushed cheeks and a runny nose, making Eddie chuckle heartily. “I think you might be coming down with a cold.”

The blonde heard Miles bump the table, posture shifting. “Oh, don’t get it on me, then!” The man screeched, scooting closer to Chris’s edge of the table for a form of feeble protection. Waylon grinned, rubbing the run from his nose before slowly leaning over the table towards Miles.

Miles hissed much like cat would, leaning as far away from Waylon as he could, “No, no Park no, don’t you dare, were it not for the laws of this land…” He spat, nearly falling over in his seat as a newcomer approached.

All five looked up at Stevenson, who was leaning over the edge of the table nervously. Waylon had never recalled seeing the man in anything but a carefree manner, but he greeted him nonetheless.

Stevenson looked hard at Waylon for a solid ten seconds before standing upright, “Hey Park, you mind helping me out?” He asked pleadingly, wringing his hands together behind his back.

“Uh…” Waylon looked between the other four men before him before glancing back at Stevenson. “What is it?”

Stevenson sighed, “Well, I got… Permission from Paul to run upstairs before we’re dismissed to move a box with some of my new stuff outside of my room. Since I’ve been talking to you a bit lately, I wanted to see if you would come.” He said, looking over his shoulder before turning back to Waylon hastily.

The blonde felt a large hand wrap around his in a tight hold. Waylon looked down to see Eddie’s gloved fingers enveloping his own, looking up at the man to catch his reaction. He wore the same blank stare as always, but this time Waylon caught something shimmering behind his eyes.

“…Okay. I’ll help.” He agreed, standing up and making Eddie release his hand. The man more than reluctantly let go, and Waylon could feel him actually shaking. What was his deal?

He looked back at the table as Stevenson led him off. Miles and Dennis seemed uninterested in the conversation presented while Chris watched him go with a small smile. Eddie, on the other hand, still seemed a bit distressed by Waylon’s leaving, although he didn’t seem to express it on the outside. But Waylon knew.

Stevenson paused by the door, looking around at the different guard posts in the cafe before grabbing Waylon’s wrist and tugging him out into the hall towards the stairwell. Waylon was curious as to
why Stevenson was so urgent about getting to a simple package, continuing to question the man’s honesty until they reached the top step into their hall.

Sure enough, there was a large cardboard box lying on the floor just near the mid-section of the hall; Stevenson’s room. Waylon let out a breath of relief as the man let go of his arm, trotting over to the box.

“Grab the other end for me?” He asked quietly, hefting up one end and gesturing for Waylon to do the same with the other.

“Sure.” Waylon mumbled, taking off his hoodie and throwing it onto the floor beside him before grabbing his share of the box. He looked around as the two of them kicked Stevenson’s door open. “How come there aren’t any guards posted while we’re up here?”

Stevenson huffed, “Oh, they’re around. Another one should be coming up in a… Minute.” He mumbled, tossing the box onto the bedroom floor. The man brushed his hands off, looking up to Waylon with a nervous smile. “Thanks for the help, man. Hey, you wouldn’t happen to have a pen or something I could open this with? All I own are stupid markers…”

Waylon nodded, “Sure. I’ll go get one.” He said, walking out into the hall before making his way to his room. The blonde opened his door, walking in while looking back over his shoulder. “Hey, I meant to ask, what did you request anyway?”

Just like that Stevenson appeared in his doorway, looking shaken up as he stared Waylon down. The blonde shuddered, moving towards the other man with his hands up. “Hey, are you good? You’re acting really weird…”

Just as he reached the edge of the doorway, Stevenson mouthed a quick, ‘I’m so sorry’ before slamming the door in his face. Waylon jumped back, hearing a soft metallic ‘click’ in between the metal. When Waylon tried the handle, it wouldn’t budge.

The blonde’s breathing became labored when he realized he was trapped, taking a step back towards his bed. Just like that a hand clenched over his shoulder and he was swiveled around by an unknown force. Everything happened so quickly.

Just like that there was a solid hand gripping his shoulder, a sharp pain in his side, and he was forced to stare into the cold irises of Jeremy Blaire.

Waylon’s eyes widened as he brought his hands to the sudden flare of pain, fingers drawing back coated in a thick layer of a substance he knew by heart; blood. He looked down, watching the metallic shine of a knife as it was slowly pulled out of his chest through his t-shirt. He shuddered, knees buckling as he collapsed onto the floor.

“Do me a favor, Park.” Blaire whispered from above him, twirling the freshly-stained knife in his hand. “You’re going to know what pain really feels like. You’re done talking now.”
Blaire was cruel, but he wasn’t a heathen. He knew where major blood vessels and organs lie, and he knew where to avoid them. If Waylon was going to die, he was going to die slow.

He’d sunk the blade deep into the blonde’s chest before stabbing into his arm and kicking him to the ground. Blaire gave the room a quick once-over after watching Waylon’s shock turn into something much more twisted. He turned back to Waylon when a small noise echoed from the back of the teen’s throat, brown eyes staring into his own a bit freakishly in his opinion.

He watched as Waylon brought a hand up to his side, trying to stifle the blood flowing out of his side. The attempt was almost laughable considering how much was seeping through his fingers, “W-why…” The blonde choked out, looking back up at Blaire once more.

The man sighed comfortably, leaning towards Waylon with a satisfactory smirk, “I told you to stop feeding into the media’s lies and put down the investigation, didn’t I?” He asked, watching as Waylon’s eyes widened in realization. Blaire’s grin turned into a frown. “And what didn’t you do?”

When Waylon didn’t respond, Blaire led their discussion down a different route, “Y’know, I heard from my good friend Stevenson out there that you’ve been fucking around with Gluskin.” He pursed his lips, shaking his head. “You know that’s against Mount Massive rules, Waylon. Fucking another inmate.” He punctuated the last word by jumping towards the blonde, blade sinking deep into his thigh. Blaire made quick work of slamming his hand against Waylon’s mouth to stifle the oncoming screams.

And boy did Waylon scream. He screamed and kicked relentlessly as Blaire twisted the blade, tearing a hole even bigger than the one in his chest. “Serves you right, you stupid harlot.”

Blaire paused when he felt a few drops of clear liquid fall onto his fingers, looking up to find a steady flow of tears falling down Waylon’s cheeks as he continued to push and pull. Jeremy was disgusted, “Don’t you have any dignity, Park?” He snarled, moving the knife into Waylon’s torso.

Waylon’s muffled screaming and pleading beneath him became louder and louder as time dragged on. Jeremy was becoming agitated from having to hold his hand over the blonde’s mouth constantly, using his knife to cut down a section of the bedsheets nearby before shoving a piece into Waylon’s mouth. Blaire made quick work of tying it all the way around his head.

Once the blonde was finally silenced, Jeremy stood to made sure Waylon wouldn’t move a muscle before tearing off another, larger piece of the sheet. With it, he tried tying Waylon’s hands behind his back. But when Waylon was flipped onto his stomach and Jeremy reached for his wrists, the man was stunned by a sudden blow far too close to his manhood.

Blaire stumbled, grabbing a hold on the desk behind him for some form of stability. Waylon was glaring at him through half-lidded eyes, cheek crushed against the ground pathetically. Jeremy’s eyes traveled down towards Waylon’s offending leg, smirking as he grabbed the blonde’s foot and
yanked him back.

The resulting sound of bone snapping once his foot came in contact nearly made Jeremy flinch, but the screams and cries that followed made up for it. He smirked, resting a hand back on the desk beside him while he watched Waylon fidget helplessly on the floor.

Blaire felt his hand come in contact with a cold, rectangular object on the desk below. Curious, he turned his head to find himself pressing down on a now blood-stained iPod. He recognized it quickly as the one Miles Upshur liked to flaunt around; the little shit was always stirring up trouble.

In a fit of rage at the thought of the other inmate, Jeremy grabbed hold of the device and flung it across the room just above Waylon’s head. The small snapping noise followed by glass cracking on the floor was music to Jeremy’s ears. He looked down and noted the panicked expression on Waylon’s face as the teen looked over at the broken device.

Which reminded him, he needed to get back to work. Blaire was quick to kneel back down onto the floor and straddle Waylon’s back. He looked at the clock in the corner of the room; damn, he only had seven minutes left until the inmates retired for the night.

“Allright, Park. Time to say goodbye to my new trophy,” He chuckled, dragging the tip of the knife over one of Waylon’s eyes. The blade nearly bit into the skin it came in contact with, leaving just enough room in between, “What’ll it be? Your eye? Your nose?” He asked, moving the sharpened tool underneath Waylon’s nose.

Blaire laughed when he felt Waylon trembling, dragging the knife over his cheek and then down the nape of his neck. The knife moved just over the edge of Waylon’s right ear, the smaller man gasping beneath him. Jeremy paused before he broke out into a large grin. A few minutes, huh? He could manage.

“I think I’ve made up my mind.” Jeremy whispered with a snap, grabbing Waylon’s ear and yanking it back painfully before making the first slice into the protruding feature.

“Go clean up the mess, Stevenson.” Jeremy commanded as he exited the bedroom, holding a blood-soaked bag in one hand.

Stevenson glanced into the bag before gagging loudly, taking a step back, “Holy fuck Blaire, what is that?!?” He scream-whispered, trying to look away when the plastic was shoved towards his face.

Blaire rolled his eyes, moving the bag back and forth, “It’s just his ear, no need to get so worked up over it. I needed to take a trophy or else I couldn’t call myself a good enforcer.” He said, stuffing the bag into a black case sitting by the door. He glanced back over towards Stevenson, grinning. “I’m saving it for a special occasion. Now get cleaning.”

The inmate plugged his nose, glancing into the bedroom. “How do you expect me to clean that up?! It smells like a lake full of dirty pennies.”

“I dunno, roll his body over where no one’s going to see it from the doorway; it’s not like I want you to sterilize the whole room. Let the guards take care of that,” Jeremy waved off, clicking the case shut. “I’ve gotta bring you down into the basement because of this, I hope you know.”

Stevenson’s eyes widened. “The… Basement…?”

Blaire huffed exaggeratedly. “Yes, Stevenson. You’ll be back in a day.”
Chris laughed along with Miles and Dennis as he gave the latter a piggy-back ride up the staircase. There were inmates moving around everywhere, all desperate to get back to their rooms and relax.

“Hey, can we all hang out in your room tonight? We haven’t had the whole lot of us together just for fun in so long, and Waylon needs something to take him off-edge.” Miles asked politely, hopping off of Chris’s back once they reached the first floor bedrooms.

Dennis padded up beside them, “What do you suppose Waylon’s doing?” He asked, looking over his shoulder to make sure Eddie was still following.

Miles clapped Dennis on the back. “Probably fiddling around on his computer. Want me to go get him?”

Chris piped up beside them, “Nah, I’ll go. You guys just set up the bed sheets. Make them like that fort you built the other day. It looked nice.” Chris said, eyes darting to catch Eddie’s reaction out of the corner of his eye. The man’s lips were pursed in a fine line, but he continued to follow Miles and Dennis nonetheless.

As the three made their way down the hall, Chris looked into the open door of Stevenson’s room. Surprisingly, the inmate wasn’t hanging around inside like he’d assumed he’d be. Shrugging, he started to walk towards Waylon and Miles’ room when he almost kicked the blue and white hoodie lying on the floor beneath him.

Chris raised an eyebrow, reaching down to pick up the garment in his large hands. He gave it a quick once-over before glancing back down the hall.

He moved to stand in front of Waylon and Miles’ bedroom door, raising a gentle fist towards the metal plating.

A knock. After a minute of waiting, Chris became concerned at the lack of an affirmative, so he spoke. “Waylon, may I come in?”

When he still didn’t hear so much as a whisper from the other side of the metal, Chris furrowed his brows and reached for the knob, opening the door carefully.

Everything happened in a flash. He saw the fingertips resting on the other side of Waylon’s bed first, the digits as white as snow, and there was blood—so much blood. It pooled all over the floor, some dried and some fresh. For the few seconds he’d peeked around the bed and seen Waylon’s body, all he really took in was the heavy puddles of blood surrounding the blonde-haired teenager.

Images flashed through the back of Chris’s mind instantly. First he saw his cousin, then her body after the impact of that oncoming train. Chris covered his mouth with his hand, choking down a gag as he stumbled back into the wall.

Suddenly, a black, sticky creature rose up from Waylon’s body on the ground. An illusion, he knew, but for some reason his mind tried convincing him it was real. The creature somewhat-resembled Waylon, if all that was left of the blonde was a dark silhouette and two white dots for eyes. From the center of its face, the phantom’s white, dripping mouth opened, a finger pointing back towards the door.

Chris froze. Oh god, he had to move. He needed to get help. Who was on duty again?

“Frank!” Chris all but screamed, stumbling out of the room in a panicked rush. He didn’t wait for the guard to look up from his post before he clamped his hands over the man’s shoulders. Chris didn’t miss a beat. “Someone stabbed Waylon, I don’t know who but he’s dying in his room Frank, help!”
“What?!” Chris heard someone yell a few doors down the hall. He swiveled on his heels to find Miles already racing after Frank towards his room down the hall. Chris felt his breathing quicken as he slumped against the wall, trying to stop the trembling in his body.

Miles stood in the doorway of his shared room, breath coming out in gasps as he watched Frank yank a radio out from his belt, growling into the device before he clicked it back into place and yanked a small box out of a separate compartment. The man kneeled in front of Waylon, sifting through layers of gauze and disinfectant.

Miles’ eyes trailed down until he saw the obvious blood stains on the floor, breath hitching. He barely flinched when more guards pushed past him, one even being so daring as to try to drag him back out into the hall.

“No, no!” Miles hissed, kicking and screaming as the guard propped him up against the wall. Pauline. She held onto his shoulders, giving him a harsh look of disapproval before letting go in favor of helping Trager, another new arrival, drag a stretcher into the room.

The brunette growled, still trying to plow past guards in order to see what had become of his best friend. Frank, now trying to help the doctors nearby, shoved Miles back with a bit more force than Pauline had used. “Miles, get out.”

Miles shoved him right back, startling the guard, “Fuck you Frank, I’m going to see my friend!” He snapped, trying to move past him but to no avail.

Frank’s expression turned from grim to something much more foul as he grabbed Miles by the collar of the shirt and shoved him further down the hall. “Stay out of here! You’re only going to delay us if you interfere!”

The tone that Frank’s voice took on immediately shut Miles up, the brunette actually going so far as to move back towards the other end of the hall before he finally lost his composure. He broke down, letting out a short cry before slumping forward beside Chris and Eddie’s door, covering his face with his hands.

“What’s going on?!” Dennis asked, popping out from inside the bedroom. Before Miles could calm himself down enough to answer, he felt his ponytail yanked harshly from behind, hair tugging him back until he was standing face-to-face with Eddie Gluskin.

The man didn’t mutter a single word of question before Mile’s vocal chords worked on overdrive. “Someone hurt Waylon really bad while we were gone and the guards are taking him out!”

Eddie stood stock-still, head craning towards where guards were slowly making their way back out into the hall. Miles’ slumped back down onto the floor, holding his head in his hands.

Chris was already up and moving again when he heard Miles and Eddie’s interaction just a few feet down the hall. He knew exactly what was going to happen if he didn’t do something. In a flash, Chris pinned Eddie against the wall just as the man took his first step towards the commotion.

“Get off of me, you whore!” Eddie roared, trying to pry his wrists out of Chris’s steely grip. The larger man grunted, placing all of his body weight onto the other man as the guards removed Waylon from his room.

Chris turned to Eddie, torn. “Eddie, doing this isn’t going to save Waylon, okay? You’re only going to delay the guards further if you keep this up!”

“I wouldn’t trust those stupid sluts with my life, much less with HIM.” Eddie snapped, still struggling
profusely against Chris’s hold.

The larger man huffed, shifting his hands to keep a steady hold of Eddie’s arms, “Yeah, you toss them all aside and then what? You rock him back and forth gently while he bleeds to death? He’s probably going to a hospital where actual doctors are going to help him!”

Eddie growled, “Probably.” He spat, hands clenching into fists. “Such an unreliable word.”

It was then that a metal clicking sound resonated from down the hall. Both men looked over to where the guards and infirmary staff had finally managed to haul Waylon onto the stretcher and began dragging him down the hall towards the security elevator. Almost all of the inmates were out to watch the chaos now, some backtracking into their rooms again as soon as they saw the mess that was Waylon Park.

“He’s breathing, but barely. He’s lost a lot of blood; we need to get him to the hospital before his heart or lungs give up…”

With the newest distraction loosening Chris’s hold on Eddie, the older man shoved him out of the way in favor of chasing the guards down the hall. They were practically gone; Chris was almost certain Eddie wouldn’t make it to them in time.

“Waylon!” He heard Eddie scream as he ran down the hall, surprised to hear the man use Waylon’s actual name. Eddie fell to his knees just a few feet away from the now closed doors where three guards had been left behind. Chris made his way towards him, hearing another quieter mumble. “Waylon…”

‘Shit.’ Chris cursed internally, fingernails biting into his palms as he tried to control his breathing enough to speak. He approached the guards; Frank, Paul, and another that Chris wasn’t familiar with.

Frank ran a hand through his long hair, distraught, “Fucking hell. Annapurna, you come with me to clean up the mess. Paul, you radio to the other floors and check the inmates.” He commanded, gesturing for the guard named Annapurna to follow him to Waylon and Miles’ room. Frank paused, looking both ways down the hall, “No one allowed in or outside of 193 until the tape is taken down!” He shouted, dragging Annapurna behind him.

That left only Paul to guard the hall. Chris was amazed by how quick the normally tired man sharpened, narrowing his eyes at watching inmates. “Alright everyone, out in the hall, doors open! If you aren’t out and standing still in the next ten seconds it’s going to be five days in solitary confinement! Anyone who’s supposed to be on another floor, you better haul ass right now or you get the same punishment!” He barked, slamming his fist on all of the doors that inmates had left closed.

Chris looked to where Eddie remained sitting stock-still on the floor, “Ed, we have to move.” He whispered, voice shaking as he placed a delicate hand on Eddie’s shoulder.

Eddie stood instantly, smacking Chris away with a new form of darkness clouding his bright blue eyes, “Don’t touch me;” He sneered, storming down the hall to stand outside of their bedroom like everyone else.

As Chris moved to join him, he noticed that Dennis was no longer present in the hall or in his room; well, he was certainly quick to obey Paul’s orders. Better to not cause trouble, anyway.

As Paul started patting down inmates and searching rooms at the far end of the hall, Chris glanced
over to Waylon and Miles’ room. Miles was standing a few feet away from the door, obeying both Paul and Frank’s orders at the same time. Chris looked Miles up and down, saddening when he noticed the wet tracks running from the man’s eyes down his cheeks. He squinted; Miles’ lip was trembling.

Chris looked to Eddie next, the man standing with his hands behind his back and his posture freakishly straight. All of his muscles were tense, and his eyes had been narrowed towards the barricaded door. Chris felt all sorts of emotions swell in his chest as the full realization of what had happened hit him.

Someone had tried killing Waylon while they were gone. ‘Waylon’s dying. Oh shit. Shit, oh god…’

“Hey! Where the hell is Stevenson?!”

All heads turned to Paul, who was looking back and forth towards every inmate in the hall. The guard walked through Stevenson’s door, searching the room thoroughly before popping back out again. “Has anyone seen Stevenson within the last hour?”

Everything suddenly clicked inside of Chris, Miles, and Eddie’s heads at the same time. Stevenson was missing, the same inmate who’d asked for Waylon’s help only half an hour beforehand.

Eddie looked ready to pounce, but his feet remained glued to the floor nonetheless; or at least until Paul checked their end of the hall. Chris shook his head, using the opening to speak to Paul. “He brought Waylon upstairs after saying you gave him permission to do so, sir.”

At that admission, Paul took out a pad of paper and a pen, scribbling quickly as he made his way towards Chris. “What did he bring him up for, when, and did you see him afterwards?”

“U-uh…” Chris stuttered, biting his cheek as he spoke. “He left with Waylon about a half an hour ago after he asked him to help move a request box into his room, and I didn’t see either of them after that.”

Paul cursed under his breath as he scribbled more notes down, clapping the pad shut before sliding it into his back pocket. He grabbed his radio and began repeating orders over and over again into the mic. Chris sighed, leaning against the wall when Paul began searching their room early. When he finally emerged, he pointed towards Chris. “Who was with you?”

“It was me, Miles, Eddie, and Dennis…” He mumbled, looking apologetically towards his friends nearby.

Paul nodded, moving back down the hall to finish checking rooms, “Thanks, Walker. We’ll look into it, but for now, we need to find Stevenson.” He said, finishing off the check before sending everyone into their rooms early. Miles, whose room was an actual crime scene now, was taken down the hall by Paul to what was probably an open room somewhere else in Mount Massive.

As soon as their door clicked shut, Chris watched Eddie storm over to the desk across the room, tossing everything over the edge. Piles of art books and pencil cases crashed to the floor, leaving a complete mess across the entirety of the bedroom walk space.

Chris jumped back, looking between Eddie and the new clutter coating the carpet, “Eddie, please calm down.” He practically begged, moving to clean up the mess once Eddie walked away from it.

“Don’t you dare tell me to be calm, Walker!” Eddie shouted, kicking the desk chair over next, “That whore; that slut tried killing Waylon, and he’s nowhere to be found! Waylon could be dead right NOW!” He roared, shoving Chris back before standing still in the center of the room. Eddie looked
down at his fists, cursing quietly before covering his eyes with his arm. “I-I… Can’t lose him… Not after all of this…”

The larger man’s jaw nearly dropped when he realized that Eddie was actually crying. Chris had no idea what to do; he’d never in his life seen Eddie show a hint of emotion, much less burst into tears on the spot. If it were any other day, he probably would’ve teased him about it with Miles. But instead, all he did was watch as Eddie sunk down onto his mattress, keeping his eyes covered as he gripped the bedsheets tightly.

That’s when it hit him. Chris looked down at Eddie solemnly as he realized that the man, probably for the first time in his life, felt completely and utterly helpless. And not just in the normal sense; Waylon was most likely one of the first people in Eddie’s life that the man cared for as much as he did, and now that person was dying and Eddie couldn’t do anything to stop it.

“Eddie…”

“Don’t.”

Chris’s lip trembled, giving Eddie a silent nod as he sunk down onto his own bed. He shoved his face into the sheets, praying to whatever god was out there, if there even was one, that Waylon would make it.

The next morning was awkward, to say the least. Miles had trudged out of the spare room in the wing above his regular floor, the guard who’s full name was apparently David Annapurna telling him that he was going to be sent back to his now-sterile room when they went back for curfew that evening.

Once he’d found Dennis, Chris was quick to follow. Chris had side-hugged the two when he’d seen them, giving helpful advice not to talking to Eddie that morning. There was a monster buried deep inside of the man, and it was definitely lurking near the surface by now. Miles was happy to comply; he didn’t really want to talk about what had happened the night before, either.

His best friend was dying in a hospital somewhere; if he wasn’t already dead. The thought made a small spark of anger flare in Mile’s chest, fists clenching and unclenching by his sides as he walked towards the cafeteria.

Everyone sat in silence, unable to look each other in the eye. Only Chris and Dennis ate, though they only took a small bite of food here and there. Nobody dared to glance further than their laps; Eddie especially seemed more than distraught.

“Hey, kids.”

Everyone turned see Frank standing at the end of their table, the man looking between Eddie and his chair. “Mind if I sit? I need to talk to you all about somethin’.”

Eddie said nothing, but moved over to occupy Waylon’s chair nonetheless. Frank nodded gratefully, sliding in between the rows of inmates to take his seat. Miles watched as the man yanked the radio off of his hip, placing it at the end of the table before looking between the four men.

“Nobody told me this information was confidential, so I thought you’d all want to know.” Frank began, wringing his hands together nervously. “We still haven’t found Stevenson. Odds are growing higher and higher that he’s our suspect. We still have people, whole teams, looking for him. As for Waylon, he arrived at the hospital just ten minutes after our team left. He’s… Alive, but still in critical condition. I’m so sorry, but nobody has any idea if he’s going to make it or not. He… Has a
lot of wounds.”

Miles jumped when he felt Eddie slam a hand against the table, speaking for the first time that morning. “What were his injuries?”

Frank cringed, flattening his hands against the table. He looked in between the three other inmates warily, “Are you all going to remain calm if I tell you? I won’t hesitate to send you to solitary if you act up.” He said, the threat mainly directed towards Eddie.

Everyone nodded in-sync, so Frank took it as good of an O.K. as he was going to get. “He had stab wounds, four of them. Bruising, lots of it; and his left leg is broken. Ah…” Frank scratched the back of his head, leaning further onto the table. “And the suspect… Took something.”

Mile raised an eyebrow in confusion. “Like what? His computer?”

“No,” Frank coughed, shifting awkwardly in his seat. “They took a trophy; um, his right ear, actually. Chopped the damn thing right off, and since we didn’t find it anywhere inside of the room, we can only assume whoever it was took it with them.”

Before anyone at the table could react, Frank stood in a rush. “I’ll tell you if… When Park comes out of critical condition. But for now we have to find out who’s responsible for this.”

Just as the words left his mouth, the cafeteria doors burst open. Everyone’s heads turned towards the person who’d caused the sudden outburst; Stevenson.

Several inmates stood up from their seats, including Miles and Eddie, when two guards ran to restrain Stevenson. Miles looked down when he felt a hand clamp over his own, finding himself held back by Chris. He saw that Chris was already giving Eddie a solid look of warning.

Stevenson let out a thick sob, looking between the guards that were holding him down, “I-I need to talk! Please, I wasn’t the one that hurt Waylon Park…” He cried, face crushed against the tile flooring.

Pauline, one of the guards nearby, moved to stand in front of Stevenson. She kneeled, grasping his chin in her hand, “You’ve been missing for a day, and that’s the best you can come up with?” She hissed, pulling a nightstick out from her side.

“N-no, please!” Stevenson begged, tilting his head up as much as he dared to look Pauline in the eye. “I-I helped him… I locked Waylon inside of his room while he did all of the dirty work… Please, I didn’t mean to, he made me…”

Pauline smacked him, hard. “Who is ‘he’?”

Stevenson’s eyes widened as he shook his head, “No, no I can’t tell, I can’t do it, he’s gonna do something bad if I do, I just know it…” He sobbed, turning his head towards Miles, Chris, Dennis, and Eddie. “I didn’t want to set Park up, he made me! Don’t you understand?!”

Pauline wasn’t pleased with Stevenson’s answer, so she commanded the two others to hurry up with his bindings before yanking him up off of the ground, “We’re gonna have a long, fun conversation about this, Stevenson.” She said humorlessly, gesturing towards the double doors. “Take him to solitary confinement. Two weeks, three depending on whether I like his answers or not.”

All four inmates watched as Pauline and the two other guards more or less dragged Stevenson by his upper arms out of the cafeteria. Miles felt tears pricking at the corner of his eyes, but he forced them back when he heard Frank begin to pass information through his radio.
Once Frank was done, he let out a heavy sigh and turned back to the group of four, “I hate to say it, but there’s more bad news.” He heaved, looking at Miles specifically. “Miles, I found your iPod shattered on the floor; there was a dent left over in the wall. Whoever was in there with Park is most likely the person that threw it.”

Miles felt a sharp stab of pain in his lower abdomen at the news. He swallowed heavily, unable to let the news of his iPod to overcome the overwhelming sorrow he felt about Waylon’s condition. He nodded slowly, sitting back down before stare blankly at the cafeteria table.

“I’ve gotta get back to my post,” Frank sighed, patting his hip. “I’ll check in on you guys tomorrow.”

Once the guard left, Miles felt a light push to his shoulder. He knew it was Chris, but he didn’t bother to look up or reply. He didn’t want to say much of anything, as usual.

Chris sighed beside him, putting a hand on his shoulder. “I think it’s time I gave you what I’d requested.”
“How long do I have to keep my eyes closed?”

“How long do I have to keep my eyes closed?”

“I’ve given you five minutes already.”

“Just give me a minute.”

“Oh, calm down. I found it.”

Miles would’ve rolled his eyes if they weren’t already closed. In his hands, he felt a cool, rectangular object being placed only moments later. He raised an eyebrow with his eyes still shut, an obvious question to the man standing in front of him.

Chris sniffed, and Miles heard him take a step back before he spoke again. “Okay, now you can look.”

When Miles opened his eyes, he was more than surprised to find a silver camcorder resting in his palms. His eyes widened as he took the device into one hand, inspecting it inside and out. It already had a pair of fully-charged batteries inside, along with a 32 GB SD card. When he opened it, the camera flashed a quick greeting before flickering over to the main screen with several different recording options listed to the side.

“A full-SD card and night vision mode? How the hell did the higher-ups approve this request?” Miles asked in awe, looking back up at Chris when he was done looking it over.

Chris leaned onto the desk nearby, sighing. “Well, they didn’t pay for it, actually. I had a long meeting and a whole pile of forms to fill detailing something so simple; I was having my mother take money out of my old account to pay for it myself, and Mount Massive staff would bring it here when it came in.”

This time both of Miles’ eyebrows rose, absolutely dumbstruck. “You bought this out of your own pocket… For me?”

“Yes.”

Chris was hardly able to get another breath out before he was pulling into a tight, nearly bone-crushing hug. He wheezed, patting the other man slowly on the back. “You’re… Welcome…?”

“Thanks.”

Miles nodded into his chest, tilting his head up, “Thanks.” He breathed, pulling back in order to open the camera once more. “Man, I’m already thinking of all the things I can use this for. Maybe when Waylon gets back I can show him how to use it if I’m not around. It’d be good for scoping out the scene when we figure out where else Murkoff’s hiding out.”

At the mention of Waylon, Chris froze from his position across the room. He looked down at the floor, tapping his fingers rhythmically on the desk below. After a few seconds of silence, he sucked in a long, deep breath. “Miles, I know-”

“He’s going to come back.” Miles said, cutting him off with a harsh pitch to his voice. “Looking back on everything we’ve all been through together, both as friends and… More…” He paused, eyes flickering over to an open sketchbook resting on Eddie’s bed before looking back at Chris. “…and how much we’ve all grown on each other- Nothing holding life together here would be so cruel as to let Waylon die.”
Chris seemed taken aback by Miles’ short speech, letting out a low whistle. Miles watched his features shift, making it look like he wanted to say something that just wouldn’t come out.

After another minute, Miles chuckled. “Have you ever heard the phrase… ‘Tiny but mighty…?’”

Chris let out a full-belly laugh, pressing his hands against his chest to try to stifle his laughter. It was contagious; after only a few seconds Miles began laughing as well, both falling into a strange peace-like state.

“What’s so funny about it…?” Miles asked once he managed to calm himself down enough to speak. He liked that things were beginning to brighten up, if only a little, after the days that’d gone by since the incident. It gave him hope.

The larger man let out one last chuckle before answering, “All I could think of was what Waylon’s reaction would be if he heard you say that.” He laughed, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

Oh, Miles could picture it alright. The blonde would make some sort of half-offended half-flustered noise before trying to slap Miles with limp, noodle-like arms. It was certainly a funny sight to picture, and Miles fell back into another fit of laughter the more he thought about it.

He would wait for Waylon to return. All Miles wanted to know was when the blonde would be coming back.

“What in the name of kraft noodles,” Dennis said, taking a seat on the bleachers beside Miles as he kept his line of sight focused on the court below. “Do my eyes deceive me, or is Eddie Gluskin actually playing basketball?”

Miles looked back down to the court, new video camera in hand. He watched as Eddie and Chris sprinted around other inmates in order to play one-on-one basketball; full-court. The brunette nodded, holding the camera firmly in his grasp as he recorded the game.

Dennis hummed contently. “What made him change his mind?”

“Uhm,” Miles paused, unsure of what to say. “Well, I assume he got tired of sitting on the bench all the time. Remember when he used to do pull-ups and stuff on the bars outside?” He asked, trying to avoid giving the second reason for Eddie’s change of heart.

When Dennis nodded, Miles sighed. He glanced at his wrist, pulling one of four hair ties off and wrapping his brown locks up in it. When he was done, Miles pulled the camera back up to record more of the game. “I think he’s using as a distraction, too.”

Dennis made an ‘o’ shape with his mouth in understanding. Both men fell silent after that, choosing instead to watch the Eddie and Chris fight over the basketball across the gym floor. Miles looked closer; it seemed that Chris was on offense now while Eddie started up a solid defense. Chris was moving the ball back and forth at such a fast pace that Miles was impressed when Eddie blocked Chris as he went for a shot.

Watching them was… Strange. Miles was always used to playing basketball for fun with Chris; they always used the two smaller hoops while talking about random things like the existence of extraterrestrial life or what was the last show they watched before getting arrested.

This was different; the two were playing with an almost ferocious amount of intensity. Instead of hanging around in their usual garb, Chris was wearing a red t-shirt folded over at the sleeves with gym shorts while Eddie wore a black tank-top and loose pants that had been rolled up just above his
ankles. They were both wearing the standard Mount Massive sneakers, and Miles picked up the squeaks they made against the floor every time one of them grabbed the ball and ran towards the opposite net.

It all seemed so unnatural. Miles had no idea what to make of it; he simply recorded and watched, hoping that he could show Waylon some of the footage of what he’d missed while he was away. He almost laughed at what Waylon’s reaction would be to hearing Dennis talk in the name of kraft noodles.

“Gluskin swivels around Walker,” Miles spoke into the camera, trying to narrate the scene for Waylon’s future viewing. “He’s got an open shot, will he take it? He did! Oh, but the ball’s circling around the edge… And he scores!” He laughed, attempting a half-clap with the camera in-hand. “You’re missing such a turn of events, Waylon. We’ve been missing you.”

Dennis glanced towards him sadly, looking almost apologetic. The teen tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention further, “Hey Miles, could you turn that off for a minute?” He asked softly, gesturing towards the camera.

Miles glanced over at Dennis before nodding, flicking the device shut. “What’s on your mind, D?”

Dennis shifted awkwardly in his seat, “Well, I was thinking. Would you like to go to the library and see if we can get more information on the Billy Hope case? I think there’s some stuff we could find on the building down there if we look far enough.” He asked, rubbing his arm awkwardly.

Miles raised his eyebrows, “Wait, there’s a library here?” He asked, stunned. Damn, maybe he didn’t know as much about the building as he once thought.

“Yeah, of course. It’s a standard requirement in this state. God damn Miles, you need to get out more.” Dennis said, letting out a light chuckle. “Inmates are allowed to go to the library mid-day when we’re either in the gym or outside. I haven’t been in a while, and we still have another hour of gym time. Wanna go?”

The brunette looked back to the two men still sprinting across the court below, sighing. He stood, grabbing his zip-up hoodie off of the bench, “Alright. I’ll go.” He agreed, pulling his camera back open again. “Wait for me at the door. I just wanna record one last thing.”

Dennis smiled, already walking down the steps of the bleachers. “Take your time.”

Miles pulled the screen back up to Chris and Eddie, hitting the record button. “Everyone misses you Waylon, but I think Eddie takes the cake,” He chuckled, zooming in on the man as he practically growled at Chris for snatching the ball back. “Just look at him, dude. Frank hasn’t told us if you’re out of critical condition yet. But I know you’re gonna be alright. Eddie’s determined to unleash hell on us if you don’t, so do it both for your sake and ours.”

He laughed once more, louder this time. “Get some rest and feel better soon, little pebble. …You’re not here so you can’t punch me for saying that.” Miles said before turning the video off again. He spared one last glance back at Eddie and Chris before following Dennis’s footsteps off the bleachers and towards the guards standing by the double doors.

“Why would there be references to Mount Massive Reform in here, anyway?” Miles asked curiously, following Dennis down the rows and rows of bookshelves. He had no idea where he was supposed to be looking, so he’d let Dennis take the reins of this mini-operation.

Dennis ran his hand along a shelf of similarly-organized books, humming. “Mount Massive Reform
is a very old building that had been modernized by Murkoff Corporation about twenty years ago. This place was originally constructed in 1923 as a mental asylum, but it got shut down. Then it turned into a county hospital and got shut down again. I remember reading in one specific history book detailing events of its previous uses when I was beginning middle school.”

Miles grunted, feeling for the notepad he kept in his back pocket. He began scribbling down Dennis’ words, looking between the empty slots where books had been taken out. “That’s cool and everything, but why would they keep books like that inside of the building? If it’s bad talk, then they’d want to keep the information away from us, wouldn’t they…”

The teen sighed, turning back around to Miles, “Miles, this is something I meant to tell all of you a while ago. I think it’d be best if I just found the book first, then I’ll tell you everything I know. Agreed?” He asked, holding out his hand.

The brunette smirked, shaking Dennis’s hand once with a firm grip. “Agreed.”

It only took Dennis a few more minutes to find the book he’d been describing; ‘The Mount Massive Outlook’, dated with information from 1923 up until 2005. Dennis had made a small noise of triumph before moving to one of the tables near the back of the library and away from the guards.

“Okay,” Dennis said, plopping down into one of the chairs before flipping to the table of contents, “We’ve got to make this fast; I think there’s only forty minutes of gym time left and this book is pretty gosh-dang big.” He sighed, flipping a couple of pages inwards.

Miles took a seat as well, leaning over to observe the teenager in his working form, “What did you have in mind for this?” He asked, still writing and drawing on his notepad while he watched.

Dennis continued to flip pages, getting closer and closer to the end of the asylum ages, “I was reminded earlier this week about something I’d found suspicious when I’d taken this book out all of those years ago. First I want to see if it actually was part of the book…” He mumbled, gasping with delight when he landed on another page. He turned the book around towards Miles, pointing near the bottom. “There.”

The brunette skimmed over the page and its contents, hand working beneath him to sketch out a photograph of a tunnel system under construction. “What the hell is it?”

“An underground tunnel system that’d been built just before the extinction of its asylum ages in 1943.” Dennis said, practically beaming with joy as he turned the book back around. “It’s just a photo of the tunnels; looks like something you could find in any other old building. Unless you’ve been looking into Mount Massive secrets like we have.” Dennis said, flipping two more pages ahead before scanning the contents.

Miles looked between the pages and Dennis, back and forth. “What are you suggesting, exactly?”

Dennis looked back up at him, eyes narrowed mischievously, “That Mount Massive Reform has an underground level that could still be in use. For what, I have no clue. But whether they’re using it or not, it’s there.” He said, pointing to a different page. “See, the whole reason the asylum was shut down was because of serious suspicion that Nazi experiments were being conducted down there on the sick patients.”

“Experiments, what the hell?” Miles scoffed, reading the page over and over to make sure his eyes weren’t deceiving him. “And I ask again, why the hell was this book allowed inside of the building?”
The teen shook his head, “I think after all of these years they forgot it was here. The front doesn’t have any check-out dates, and it was probably something left over that the librarian put away by mistake.” Dennis explained, now moving past the hospital section of the book.

Miles rubbed his forehead, watching the pages flip by. “Is that why you never checked it out yourself?”

Dennis sighed, starting to read down the various lines of text. “Part of it. If that were the only reason, then I wouldn’t be as hesitant as I am. But according to Waylon, some anonymous Murkoff staff member has been spying on us. They could get access to our check-out history.”

Both men groaned in unison, falling into an uneasy silence until Dennis slammed his finger back down onto the paper. “Okay, see? The hospital was shut down due to unfair treatment of patients. Some would disappear from their rooms and wouldn’t come back.”

“Like Billy and those others.” Miles breathed, scribbling even faster onto his pad of paper.

It was then that Dennis slammed the book shut, resting his arms on top of it as he stared Miles directly in the eyes. “Do you find it suspicious that all five of us have baggage? Have you ever considered the other inmates do too?”

Miles stopped writing, lowering his pencil. “What are you saying?”

Dennis tilted his head to the side. “That the reason Murkoff had us all whisked off here instead of any other juvenile center or prison might be because of who we are. Y’know what’s another thing I’ve caught on to around here?”

The brunette looked over his shoulder, paranoid that someone might be watching them. After a quick scan of the nearby shelves and doorways, he turned back to Dennis. “What have you caught on to, D?”

“We’re all geniuses.”

At that, Miles laughed, hard. He laughed until he felt the depletion of oxygen in his lungs. When he sat back up, Dennis was still giving him the same focused stare as before.

His laughter died down when he began to realize Dennis hadn’t been trying to joke with him. “Dennis, you can’t be serious. We’re all idiots; we quote cartoons and pry in on each other’s sex lives.”

“Okay first of all,” Dennis said, pointing an accusing finger at Miles. “You’re the only one that’s invested in other people’s sex lives. Secondly, I’m serious. Think about it. They chose us because of our lives and because we’re geniuses who don’t know they’re smart. Easily manipulated. Why, I don’t know.”

Miles sat back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. “Alright, give me examples.”

Dennis sat up straighter in his seat, clearing his throat. “Waylon is a technology genius. Coding, hacking, encrypting; I don’t know where or how he learned it, but he’s good. You’re an impulse-based writer that documents every little detail, every last word, and your journalistic skills are more than impressive. Eddie is an artist, tailor, painter, and not many people know this, but his sense of smell is disturbingly similar to that of a dog’s. Don’t ask me how I know that.

“I can read an entire page of text in ten seconds or less. I have a photographic memory when it comes to signs and locations. Chris was valedictorian of his graduating class, he’s good at
memorization skills and his knack for science and chemical formulas from high school records are shocking.

“What about other inmates? Stevenson, he’s an asshole, but an asshole with a complete photographic memory and a touch sensory system so incredible he can feel someone approaching a full minute and a half before they get there. Things only go further from there.”

Miles raised his eyebrows, “Woah, woah,” He said, waving his hands around in front of the teen. “You’re right, you’re so right, but the hidden message I’m getting from all this is that you went through everyone’s interview files and medical history at some point.”

Dennis’s expression turned to that of guilt as he rubbed the back of his head. “Last week, yeah. Sorry…I ran out of things to read. I used Waylon’s computer password to get in. But that’s not the point. The point is- that’s was when I first realized something wasn’t right with the line-up of inmates here.”

“Hm.” Miles stood from his seat, looking over at the clock, “Maybe you should put the book back somewhere were people won’t find it. Then we can get it another time if we need it again.” He said, pushing his seat in. “Five minutes. I can see the guards about to blow the whistle already.”

Blaire sighed, leaning over the desk in front of the computer controls. “So what you’re saying is he’ll live.”

Andrew shook his head, peering out past the control room window and into the laboratory, “He was in critical condition the last we heard from his doctors. The hospital hasn’t given us any word since.” He mumbled, rapping his knuckles against the counter.

Jeremy grunted, standing up from his seat. He pushed the control room door open, gesturing for Andrew to follow, “If he was going to die, it would’ve happened by now. I’ll have to send a message to the staff about contacting the hospital.” He said, making his way to one of the testing rooms set up down the hall.

“Did you mean to kill him, sir?” Andrew asked quietly, folding his arms behind his back.

The question made Jeremy pause, pressing his lips into a fine line, “Whether he lived or died wasn’t a great concern of mine. If he lives, he’ll know now to shut his little trap and keep his head down like everyone else when he returns.” He grumbled, tapping a finger lightly on the two-way glass in front of him. “This; this is our territory.”

Both men turned to observe the person on the other side of the glass. The room didn’t have much in it; a standard bed, desk, and chair- all bolted into the floor. There was a stack of papers locked away with a few markers in a see-through container next to the desk, and one wall dedicated to tubes and racks that had also been sealed off from the inmate living inside.

“Where the hell is he?” Andrew asked, looking from corner to corner but finding nothing inside of the sterile white room.

A hand slammed on the glass from the other side, a young man sliding over from the right end of the glass. Andrew yelped, taking a step back while Jeremy only shook his head in disappointment.

“I know you’re hiding there,” The young boy spoke, breath puffing against the glass. “I can hear you.”

Jeremy rolled his eyes, looking over his shoulder at Andrew. “He does that a lot.”
The boy pressed a cheek against the glass, the corner of his mouth pulling into an almost inhuman smile. “Hello, Jeremy Blaire.”

Andrew finally let go of the wall behind him, looking at the boy behind the glass quizzically. “Who’s coming in next, anyway?”

Blaire scoffed, opening up the control panel next to the window. “It was supposed to be Stevenson, if Park hadn’t cut me off.” He grunted, entering a passcode onto the main screen. “I brought him down here a couple of days ago to run him through the starter tests. He’s becoming… For lack of a better word, crazy. Too crazy.”

Pressing one last button on the panel, the main lights in the room turned off, only a small light left blinking just above the bed. Jeremy watched the silhouette of the young man walk over to it, crawling under the covers.

He huffed, tapping his foot impatiently on the floor. “We need to put him in the pod again; the idiots that call themselves scientists said that the dream states have been altered, but whether or not the inmates above are going to be affected by it is still undetermined.”

“Maybe it’s just something about Billy that allows him to connect with the inmates as far as he has.” Andrew suggested, looking back at the young boy now sound asleep in his bed.

Jeremy shrugged, closing the control panel up again before putting his hands in his pockets. “I’ll have them look into it. But for now all we know is that it’s related to the inmate’s experiences from both present and past trauma. It explains why Waylon Park was able to connect with him as strongly as he did. I really need to start looking into those interview files again.”

Eddie jolted awake, fingers digging into the sheets beneath him. He sat up, glancing around the room before his eyes locked on the sleeping form of Chris Walker. Next he looked down at his hand, watching as his pale white skin glowed an unnatural blue color.

He slid out of bed and walked through the metal bedroom door, glancing up and down the hall. He watched the smaller silhouette of a boy at the far end by the stairs, narrowing his eyes.

Instead of making his move and trying to force Eddie down the hall like he usually did, the boy that they had come to identify as Billy Hope walked over to him carefully, fingers fidgeting as he spared a glance up at Eddie.

Eddie stared down at him, crossing his arms over his chest. Billy looked away, picking his feet up off of the floor to raise himself to Eddie’s eye-level. Slowly, he spoke. “…Help us. Please.”

The larger man grunted at the use of the word ‘please’, looking Billy up and down. The smaller man reached a hand forward, lightly poking Eddie on the nose. “Please? Help us. Help… Friends. Wayland?”

At the mention of Waylon’s name (almost), Eddie took a step back. He raised his eyebrows in surprise before speaking. “…You’ve seen Waylon. Before.”

Billy nodded vigorously, reaching a tentative hand towards Eddie wrist. He’d learned not to touch the man right away. “Help friends. Help us.”

Eddie sighed, allowing himself to be lead down the hall by Billy. The two walked in silence for a few minutes, out the door and down the stairwell before moving in a direction opposite from the shower rooms. Well, Miles had been right before. They could cross that location off of their list.
Billy stopped after a few more feet, turning back around to look up at Eddie. “Downstairs.” He said, stomping a foot down onto the floor below.

Eddie raised an eyebrow. “Downstairs? What does that mean?”


Just as Billy got through his last plead for help, his entire form shattered, and the world caved in beneath Eddie. The larger man gasped, ready to fall back into reality again when he landed on a concrete floor, hard.

He hissed, groaning as he flipped himself over onto his back. After the initial pain was gone, Eddie pushed himself up off of the floor and looked up to see a somewhat-faded image of an underground hallway before him. He pressed his palms onto the floor, looking around suspiciously at the ice-like walls and winding tunnels.

When he went to stand, the floor fell out beneath him again, and everything turned to darkness.

Miles took a small sip of his milk, watching Eddie fidget angrily in his seat across the table. He was acting even weirder than usual, and Miles couldn’t even begin to understand why.

Chris beside him raised a hand onto the table, looking like he was about to say something when someone shouted at them from across the room.

All four men looked to see Frank calling towards their table a few feet away with a grin wider than anything Miles had ever seen. What was he so cheery about?

Frank slammed his hands down at the end of the table, smile growing even wider. “I’ve got great news. Waylon’s out of critical. He woke up yesterday night.”

Waylon sat in bed, fidgeting with the book in his hands when someone knocked softly on the door. He yelped, dropping the book before he realized that someone had asked for permission to enter. He made a small noise as an answer before a nurse walked in, followed by two rather large police officers.

The blonde tried sinking further into the sheets of the hospital bed as he watched one of the men approach. The nurse quickly introduced them and told him that they wanted to ask him questions about his ‘accident’.

“Hello, Mr. Park. I’m Officer Garret Snow. Mind if I sit down?” He asked, gesturing to the chair resting beside Waylon’s bed.

Waylon nodded quickly, arms shaking in his lap as the man took a seat. The nurse quickly spewed something about returning in a few minutes before she left, closing the door behind her. The other officer stood in the corner of the room, hands resting inside the pockets of his jacket.

The blonde’s breathing quickened when he heard Officer Snow clear his throat, “How are you, Waylon? I have a couple questions involving your incident that I’d like to ask you about, if that’s alright.” He asked gently, tilting his head to the side as he pulled out a small notepad and pen.

Another nod. The officer clicked his pen open. “Thank you, Waylon.”

The officer didn’t ask much, and it didn’t take too long. He asked Waylon about what he could
remember from the incident, and who was involved. The other officer in the corner had even asked if his injuries didn’t feel too bad since waking up.

“Mr. Park, we can’t help you if you won’t tell us who did this to you.” The officer sighed, leaning back in his chair and fiddling with the notepad in his hand.

Waylon felt himself trembling, a few tears leaking down his cheeks, “I’m sorry.” He whimpered, wanting to cover his face with his hands but not wanting to agitate his wounds and stitches further. “I-I can’t. I’m s-so sorry… I don’t know w-what he’ll do if I tell anyone.”

The officer scribbled more notes down onto the paper, “Well, at least we know the attacker is male.” Snow sighed, putting his notepad into his back pocket before nodding towards Waylon. “Thanks, kid. You’re going to be sent back to Mount Massive Reform when you’re cleared by the hospital. If you feel like speaking up about your attacker at any time, have them contact us immediately. …Feel better soon.”

With that, the two officers exited the room and the nurse entered shortly after. She checked the monitors and his vitals before moving to stand beside him. “It’s almost supper time now. Are you hungry?”

The blonde felt his stomach growl as the question was asked, quick to nod his head. The nurse giggled, patting the sheets beside his legs before moving towards the door to get food.

“Uhm, excuse me,” Waylon asked quietly, fidgeting with the book in his lap. “H-how long do you think I’ll be here?”

The nurse paused, tapping a finger against her chin, “Hm, hard to say. If I had to take a guess, it’d be about two months. Since your wounds didn’t hit anything vital, your stitches could probably come out in a few weeks. Your leg will take a little bit longer, though.” She answered, looking over to the cast secured firmly around Waylon’s lower leg.

Waylon looked down to his cast as well, sighing. “W-would it be possible for me to get sent back… While I still have the cast on?”

The woman hummed at his question, leaning against the doorframe. “I don’t know. If you hadn’t come from a reform school then I’d say you could. It’d be a lot of paperwork, and it’d have to go through a lot of approval lists. …I hope you don’t mind me asking, but why do you want to go back there so soon?”

The blonde looked back to the nurse, unconsciously giving her his signature doe-eyes. “It’s a month until my birthday. And I don’t want much more than to see my friends again.”

The nurse smiled sincerely, “I’ll see what I can do. But for now, I’m going to go get you some food.” She said, leaving the room and closing the door behind her.
Feel Like Home

Chapter Notes

Warning for brief mentions of suggested non-con halfway through this chapter; it's extremely brief and nothing of the sort actually happens, but better to warn you all ahead of time.

Miles was grateful for Frank’s patience. It seemed like forever until everyone at the table finally calmed down enough to breathe, and the endless questions and shouts died down. Frank had dealt with them as a group ever since they’d arrived; waiting them out was hardly an inconvenience at this point.

“I have more news, actually,” Frank said gleefully, crossing his arms over his chest. “I got the o.k. from the hospital, police headquarters, and surprisingly the higher-ups for you all to hand over one item- if you want to, that is- to give to Waylon while he’s at the hospital. His usual nurse was the one that suggested it, actually. She’s been worried about his mental health; she thought memories of his friends might make him more comfortable.”

Miles was practically bouncing up and down in his seat, “Just us though, right?” He asked, a little worried about the involvement of other inmates.

Frank chuckled, “Just the four of ya. You have to give it to me by curfew, though; I’m the one keeping watch over you kids tonight, so just find me beforehand.” Frank said, picking up the radio attached to his belt. He seemed to be communicating with other guards, talking back and forth through the speaker.

“God, I wish we could see Waylon right now. I wonder what he’s thinking,” Miles said, offering further conversation to the others. “What if he had the arm casts like from the episode ‘Jellyfishing’? Heh,” He chuckled, slowly raising his fist. “Firmly grasp it in your hand…”

Eddie’s head snapped up, expression dark. “That isn’t something to joke about you wh-”

“Okay!” Chris breathed, slamming a palm down onto the table with one hand and smacking Miles over the head with the other. “Miles, stop. He’s right. Eddie, don’t be an asshole.”

Both Eddie and Miles grumbled, turning away from each other while making a series of ridiculous grumbling noises.

As soon as Miles looked away, he saw a figure approaching them with a wide grin all the way across the cafeteria floor. The brunette cringed, rolling his eyes before turning back around to the table. “Oh dear lord, not again…”

Just as Frank walked away onto more pressing matters, Jeremy Blaire took his place, as smug as ever. Miles ignored him, silently praying that whoever was out there watching his sorry ass would send the prick in a direction opposite to them. He really didn’t want to deal with another dickhead after everything that’d happened with Stevenson. All Miles could credit Blaire with was working out Waylon’s situation once he was sent to the hospital; fucking Stevenson. The fucker behind everything.
His supposed ‘guardian angel’ didn’t seem to like any of them that morning. Jeremy chuckled, putting his hands in his pockets once he was standing at the close end of the table, “Gentlemen.” He greeted smoothly. “I hope you know I did all I could during your little friend’s ‘accident’. I’m truly sorry that happened to him.”

Miles looked over to Eddie’s infuriated expression, scoffing. “Yeah, I’m sure you are.”

Blaire gasped, placing a hand over his heart before leaning down towards Miles, “Sarcasm, Upshur? I really am sorry, you know. Truly, deeply sorry. We were doing maintenance on security performance during your dinner period.”

The brunette was about to retort when he felt a hard thump across the table. Chris had an infuriated look on his face as he glared at Eddie; the man was lowering himself back into his seat, absolutely seething. Oh no. This wasn’t good.

Jeremy definitely noticed; he laughed, rapping his fist on the table. “Keep your status in check, Gluskin. We’ll be checking in on your prison bitch again soon enough, don’t you worry about a thing.”

Once Blaire turned his back to the four and began walking away, Eddie snapped. Miles and Dennis both watched in horror as the man slammed his tray down hard enough that his remaining food went flying. He stood, fists clenching with a loud crack before his eyes focused solely on Blaire.

Chris seemed prepared for this; he was up almost as soon as Eddie was, grabbing the man’s arms behind his back before yanking him away from Blaire’s direction.

Miles looked between the two men, knowing that no matter what all of this would end in chaos. Eddie yelled and struggled, hissed and cussed as he tried to get to Blaire. The focus of Eddie’s attention looked over his shoulder, flashing one last grin before disappearing through the double doors at the other end of the room.

That did it. With one swift thrust of his elbow, Eddie was free of Chris’s grip. It took him less than a second to storm across the room for the door. But three guards already had Chris’s tactic in mind; two of them went to restrain Eddie’s arms while another felt for both his nightstick and taser.

“God damn…” Chris mumbled, holding two fingers up to his now bloody nose. Miles stood, grabbing a clean napkin off of Dennis’s tray (No way would he be seen with napkins; he cleaned his face with his sleeve and arm like his great ancestors once did) before handing it over to Chris.

The larger man finalized away from the scene when the item was pressed up towards him. Miles glanced between Chris and Eddie in disappointment as the latter was dragged away to what was definitely going to be two days in solitary confinement. He could only blame Eddie a little; Blaire was a horrible excuse for a human being. He wouldn’t be surprised if the man was the one responsible for the security malfunction…

Chris nudged Miles’ shoulder, dragging him back to reality. Miles rubbed his eyes tiredly, softening up when he saw the gentle look Chris gave him. The man’s nose was still a mess, and it looked like Eddie’s elbow had bruised the corner of his mouth nicely. The brunette shook his head, sighing.

The larger man put a hand around Miles’ shoulders. “I think we all just need some time to gather our bearings.”

Miles rolled his eyes at the statement, looking back up towards the other man. “Well, he didn’t need to go that far.”
Chris pressed his lips together, watching as the double doors clanged shut. “Can you blame him?”

The brunette sighed again, “Well it sucks to be him, cuz now he can’t give anything to Waylon.” Miles said, taking his seat at the table once again.

A guard came over to ask Chris about his injury, but the larger man had brushed them off easily enough. The blood would go away eventually, and it wasn’t like his nose was broken. Chris finally turned his attention back to Miles’ previous statement, “Nah,” He said, stuffing a fresh napkin up his nose. “I know what he’d want to give him. I’ll hand it over to Frank.”

Waylon tilted his head, opening up the cardboard box placed beside him on the hospital bed. He felt a twinge of pain from the action, both from his abdomen and the side of his head. The blonde brought a hand up to his ear- well, where his ear used to be- trying to figure out some way to numb the ache. His painkillers were starting to run dry, he was too nervous to ask for more.

Sucking in a breath, Waylon re-opened the box. On top of the pile was a little note, written messily with a blue pen. He had class with Chris and Miles, so he knew the writing couldn’t be either of them. And Dennis and Eddie had neat and script font from the time he’d had them write on his arm, so it wasn’t them, either. He scanned the letter carefully.

‘To: Waylon Park.

Hey, kid. This is the only message anyone’s allowed to give you while you’re in the hospital, so I tried to make it count. Everyone hopes you’re feeling better; after what happened, things have become duller around here. Your friends really want you back with them- you should’ve seen their reaction when I told them you were out of critical condition. I should’ve been afraid for my life. In this box are some things the security team allowed your friends to give to you; how it got approved, I don’t know. Just let it happen. And we hope you come back in (mostly) one piece. …Sorry, is it still bad timing? Too late now I guess, this is pen after all.

-Frank Manera – Mount Massive Security’

The blonde chuckled, trying to ignore the jab at his… missing organ as he peeked inside of the box. As soon as Waylon saw the first thing on the pile, he tried to stifle his laughter as he pulled out the bacon and egg slippers with the sticky note ‘MILES’ slapped on top.

Once Waylon pulled them out of the box, he inspected their condition before sparing a glance down towards the cast stuck to his lower leg. Waylon shrugged, placing them on his lap before reaching inside the box again. He could always wear one on one foot until the cast came off for him to put on the other.

The next item had a sticky note labeled ‘DENNIS’ on top of it. Waylon took it out, peeling the tape off of what was clearly a book. But upon closer inspection, it wasn’t just any book.

Waylon choked on another fit of giggles as he looked down at the Spongebob Squarepants cover, flipping open to the first page of what had actually been a coloring book. There were unopened colored pencils attached to the inside cover along with a note etched into the side.

‘Can you believe I found this near the bottom of my book bin? I have no idea when I got this. Feel better soon, Waylon.’

Well, that’d keep him entertained for a while. He’d try to color everything for when they finally decided to release him back to Mount Massive. …Mount Massive…
Shaking his head, Waylon pursued the next item. It took up most of the box, and it was light pink in color. Once the blonde managed to pull it out all the way, he discovered that it’d been the blanket Waylon was always looking at on Chris’s bed. He’d been envious of it, staring the item down every time he hung out in the room. It’d always looked so soft, and the light pink tint was such a soothing color for him...

...Chris would probably want it back once he was cleared to go. Oh well, he’d definitely use it while it was in his possession. ‘Thank you for reading my mind, Chris.’

That left only one thing in the box. Waylon knew there was only one person who it could be from, too. Sighing, the blonde carefully peeked over the cardboard edging to see a blank, upside-down piece of paper take up the entire bottom of the box.

Curious, the blonde pulled it out and read through both the fancy cursive writing and basic font at the bottom corner. The striking cursive came first, then the text,

‘W.P. – Finished 12/6/--- (Edward G.)’

‘Good ol’ Ed got sent down to solitary because he was defending you. Wasn’t here to give you something. But I imagine he would’ve given you this. - Chris

Waylon raised an eyebrow, peeling off the sticky note that said ‘EDDIE’ before flipping the fancy paper over. The paper was pretty thick...

The blonde’s hand immediately shot up to his mouth to stifle a gasp as he looked the picture over. It was detailed thoroughly with line art, but the shading to exact proportions while only using shades of blue, green, and purple watercolors was what took the cake. How did Eddie have the time and resources to do this?!

Suddenly it all came flooding back to him. From when he’d first arrived and snuck into Chris and Eddie’s room. How he’d looked through Eddie’s sketchbooks, and found the picture that somewhat-resembled him. This was it; there was no doubt in his mind. It was finished. It had been him all along.

Eddie had painted him.

He was too caught up in his own thoughts to have heard the door to his room open, nearly screaming when he noticed his nurse standing by his side. She had a look of guilt on her face as she tried calming him down, doing a once-over of his vitals.

“I’m sorry,” She apologized, running a hand down the computer monitor before moving back to Waylon’s bedside. “I didn’t mean to alarm you. I greeted you on my way in, but I only assumed you’d heard me.”

Waylon took a deep breath, calming his nerves, “Yeah, I was too wrapped up in my own world. I’m sorry.” He whispered, glancing back down at the gifts he’d been given.

His nurse followed his line of sight, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips as she looked back at Waylon’s expression, “No need to apologize. You have good friends, Waylon. I mean, look at all these things,” She said, taking a seat beside him before brushing a hand over the slippers. “Would you like me to put one on for you? Don’t try to do it yourself; you’ll rip your stitches if you reach that far over.”

Waylon blushed embarrassedly, crossing his arms over his chest before nodding. His nurse smiled, grabbing one of the slippers before gently sliding it onto his good foot. She stifled a laugh as she
stood up straighter. “Just like Cinderella, huh?”

The blonde snorted, glancing down at his now-covered foot. “Yeah, that sounds like something Miles would say alright.”

“Is he the one that gave them to you?” She asked politely. “I like the bacon and egg pattern.”

Waylon nodded again, “…Well, they were already mine while I was at Mount Massive. He probably just sent them over because… Well, they have a special meaning to us. Kind of like an inside joke, I guess you could say.” He said, grabbing Chris’s blanket before pulling it over his head. It smelled only slightly like the man after its long trip over.

“Oh! That reminds me,” His nurse said, straightening her back. “I have some god news for you! Following the box, I think this will make it even better.”

Waylon laid back in his bed, feeling a bit drowsy as he kept his eyes open for the kind lady in front of him. “What?”

His nurse clapped her hand together excitedly. “The papers went through. As long as a close eye is kept on you at all times and you stay on crutches, you’re going to be sent back at the end of the month; exactly on your birthday.”

That woke him up.

Miles was pacing in his room over and over, again and again while Dennis sat on his bed across the room. The brunette didn’t care to humor the teenager at the moment, and Dennis didn’t seem to mind.

“It’s been three weeks and four days without Waylon, Dennis. I think I’m gonna go crazy. No music to calm me down, either…” Miles said in a rush, picking up the pace. “Goddammit, I want him to get better, but I’d be lying if I said that this wasn’t slowly making me go insane. I mean, I can’t know he’s actually alive unless they actually show me. Remember Billy?!”

Dennis sighed, placing his book on Miles’ bed before standing up. “Miles, please calm down. He’ll be back in no time, I promise.”

The brunette growled, tossing his hands up exasperatedly towards Dennis. “But what if he doesn’t?!! We have no idea if he’s even there. He could be in trouble!”

“Jeez Miles, don’t pull an Eddie. Remember what happened last week? We don’t need a repeat.” Dennis mumbled, face contorting into an awkward expression. Miles knew he was re-living the memory himself.

Mount Massive wasn’t doing its job correctly, clearly. They were supposed to be helping unstable inmates as well as guiding them towards a better future. Eddie’s obsession with Waylon was starting to make even Chris uneasy. Eddie had been brought down to solitary three times since Waylon’s ‘accident’, and the three had tried to do everything in their power to prevent it from happening. Nothing was working.

The previous week had been the worst case yet. Looking back on it, Miles knew he had been completely prepared to unleash hell along with his comrade himself had Dennis not pinned him down to get him to stop. After so many sentences everyone was almost sure Eddie was actually trying to get down there just so he could kill Stevenson himself.
Stevenson. The inmate had nearly broken while in solitary; as far as everyone knew, he was still there. Serves him right; even though the staff had finally determined that he was in fact not guilty of actually attempting homicide. He was unbelievably guilty of assisting it, though.

Inmates at Mount Massive were horrible about Waylon’s condition. That’s what had sent Eddie over the edge; if that were even possible anymore. Miles had thought the man had lost it long before; but he’d been proven so, so wrong.

Two inmates had stalked over to them all when they were taking a break from another basketball match to comment on how Waylon wouldn’t survive when he came back. Eddie had gotten better at tolerating the jabs made only to get a rise out of him; Chris had showed him how. Oh, but what they’d said next was what dropped the match into the gasoline.

"Can’t imagine how many are gonna be lining up to fuck his scrawny ass once he settles back down. They always like the fragile ones."

Miles had been ready to take the inmate’s hand and shove it so far up his ass that he’d be holding on to his own tongue. Dennis had to smack some sense into him while no one had been able to control Chris and Eddie. Chris hadn’t even bothered holding Eddie back. It was like unleashing a hell hound on an old, crippled gazelle.

Three broken fingers and two concussions (counting both inmates) later, everyone involved had been sent down to solitary confinement. Eddie had gotten out earlier than expected; Miles knew it was because the guards had overheard their conversation. The guards liked Waylon a lot, and everyone thought he was a good kid. They would’ve taken just the inmates themselves had Eddie not gotten involved.

“Yeah, I remember. I try to forget, actually.” Miles sighed, flopping down onto Waylon’s bed. He looked up at the ceiling grumpily, running a hand down his unwashed face.

“No please, I’m sorry!”

CRASH.

Both Miles and Dennis jolted up at the noise, opening the bedroom door in order to peek out and see what kind of commotion was taking place down the hall. Miles watched as the guard on-duty, Pauline from what he could see, walked away from her position towards a different section of the hall. What the hell was going on? Why wasn’t she doing anything?

When Miles looked down the other end of the hall, everything snapped into place. There was Stevenson, a sobbing mess on the floor just a few feet away from his shared room. He was finally released from solitary and back to the ‘comfort’ of the other inmates at last, it seemed. Terrific. Eddie was on top of him, a knee pressed down into the smaller man’s thigh and a fist clenched just above his face. Stevenson slapped his hands repeatedly on the floor before making half-hearted attempts at shoving the other man away.

“Please…” The inmate begged one last time before a swift punch was delivered to his nose. Then another one. And another one. The punching and bruising continued on for what felt like forever, but Miles couldn’t pry his eyes away from the scene. It was a bloody mess, but the satisfaction was too great to ignore. Even Dennis beside him seemed unfazed. Hell, nobody wanted to move an inch.

Once Eddie felt that he’d given Stevenson enough of a beating, he stood back up and brushed off his clothes, hacking through his mouth and throat before spitting onto the inmate below him. Holy. Shit.
Miles couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

It was then that Pauline popped back out from where she’d disappeared to, quick to lug Stevenson over her shoulder and carry his bloodied body down to the infirmary. ‘Have fun with Trager, asswipe.’

That’s when her disappearance clicked into place, too. She’d left because she’d… Wanted this to happen. Who could blame her- who didn’t?

Eddie stopped beside them, his old darkness still lurking deep behind his eyes, “He doesn’t get to die. I’m saving that special gift for whoever did it.” He hissed before stalking down the rest of the hall to his room. Miles’ eyes followed him, flinching when the bedroom door slammed shut.

Holy. Shit.

Five and a half weeks. Miles was trying his best not to lose it. He missed Waylon. He missed them all together as a group. He was worried; what if Murkoff had been lying to them this whole time? It wouldn’t be shocking; but it would hurt like high hell. Was that what everyone else was thinking, too?

They had no contact with Waylon. They never got updates. Frank wasn’t around as much as he used to be, and even he knew nothing involving Waylon’s condition. What was going on?

Through all of the hard times, Miles tried his best to stay optimistic. But with every passing day, his hope kept running thinner and thinner. And Eddie. They couldn’t all just abandon Eddie; the man was their friend, not to mention incredibly unstable without the one person who’d helped him through it all. Chris had grown tired trying to calming the man down constantly, and Dennis had no idea what to do about them anymore. That left Miles, the only voice that remained.

He was reminded of something important as he continued on his train of thought. Miles got up to grab a tray of food, passing by the stupid kitten calendar the lunch attendants kept behind the glass. The dates were all marked up until the present time; ‘1/23/--’. It was just the day he thought it was.

Moving back to his seat, the crowd remained as silent as ever. Dennis was picking at his meatloaf while Eddie sat with nothing, and Chris only took small sips of his water bottle every now and then. To gain their attention, Miles slammed down his tray, hard.

Only Dennis and Chris looked up, but the attention was lost almost as soon as it came. Miles sighed heavily, plopping back down into his seat. “I know I brought this up a couple months ago, but Waylon turns eighteen today.”

The statement had won over everyone’s attention this time, including Eddie’s. The larger man furrowed his brows, fingers twitching on the table. “It’s his birthday?”

Miles nodded, grabbing his carton of milk, “Frank had told me the date a long time ago when he was trying to convince me he wasn’t thirteen.” The brunette rasped, chuckling fondly at the memory. “Ah, I wish we could make him a huge, disgusting birthday cake.”

Everyone chuckled at the thought, even though Eddie only let out a small pathetic excuse for a laugh. Well, at least it was something.

“Miles.”

Miles looked across the table to see Paul, the guard gesturing with his thumb towards the double-
doors. “Frank’s already up in the hall for you. You asked for a sweatshirt, right? We’ve got two minutes left, why not go up and get it now?”

Miles nodded, standing up from his seat to follow Paul out the doors. Eddie watched him go, feeling a small twinge of jealousy that the man had time to spend alone; even though it was only a whole two minutes. It was more than he could ask for himself.

It seemed like so much longer until the guards finally started signaling and ushering inmates here and there to get them back to their designated halls. Eddie slugged through it all like he always did, ignoring everyone and anyone even on his way up the stairs.

How the hell did he survive Mount Massive before his beloved darling came along? Before any of them did? How did he even manage to live on his own all alone…? Just thinking about it was giving him a headache…

Eddie kept his eyes glued to the floor as he reached the level-one hall, glancing up only when an inmate pushed him out of the way to get to their room nearby. That’s when he saw them.

At first he saw only Miles, standing hunched over in the middle of the hallway. He was wondering what the hell the idiot was doing until he noticed a small pair of arms wrapped around his sides, little tufts of blonde hair sticking up from the head resting on the man’s shoulder.

Eddie glanced over to the wall beside them, noting the pair of crutches propped carefully before his attention was dragged back to the two hugging. The blonde finally looked up from Miles’ shoulder, tears leaking freely down his cheeks from beautiful brown eyes.

Waylon.

It only took a second for their eyes to lock onto one another despite the distance between them. Waylon seemed frozen in Miles’ grip, the other man pulling away to reveal joyous tears of his own as he followed his gaze to Eddie. Miles handed Waylon one of his crutches, gesturing towards him before backing up against the wall.

It took a moment, but Eddie finally managed to get his legs to work before he was walking down the hall, faster and faster, moving at a near-run by the time he got to Waylon.

“Eddie,” Waylon mumbled softly, but the blonde was unable to say anything else as his face was placed in between Eddie’s strong hands and his lips were pressed furiously onto his own.

Neither of the two had any idea how long they stayed like that. It felt like an eternity before Eddie finally mustered the strength to pull away, one hand sliding down to Waylon’s neck. The blonde laughed, more tears leaking down his cheeks as he pulled the man into a tight hug.

“Oh my god, Waylon!” The blonde heard over Eddie’s shoulder. Suddenly Dennis and Chris were approaching at a rapid pace, too. He didn’t want to pull away from Eddie’s protective hold just yet, but he also knew he wanted the comfort of his other friends as well.

When Waylon got a good look at Dennis, the teen seemed on the verge of tears, but was struggling to hold them back. Chris seemed both elated and relieved, cheeks rosy red and his face holding an incredible amount of joy for Waylon’s eyes to take in. It was all so overwhelming; even after everything that had happened, he actually felt safe.

“We missed you so much,” Someone, Waylon had no idea who at this point, sighed, and suddenly he was enveloped with hugs and kisses from all directions; although the kisses only came from Eddie.
“It’s been hell here Waylon, you have no idea what you’ve missed!” Miles, it was definitely Miles this time, said from his side, ruffling the hair on top of his head. “We were all ready to tear each other apart; nobody would tell us anything about you.”

Waylon laughed, genuinely laughed, for the first time in so long. There was no way to describe his emotions; he had no idea what to say. All he felt was a bubbly sensation, his heart thrumming in his chest. He was back.

Taking his crutches to his room, everyone squeezed into the small space to be one big bubble of happiness together. Waylon showed Dennis his finished Spongebob book, and he pulled on the slippers that Miles had transferred to him before. He offered the blanket back to Chris, but the man had refused. According to him it was his now, and it wasn’t like it was a special Walker family possession.

The blonde turned to Eddie, handing him the picture. “It looks beautiful, Eddie. I can’t believe you made this. Is that what you’d been working on?”

Eddie nodded, handing the picture back to Waylon upon quick inspection. “It’s yours, darling. It was always meant for you.”

The talking and catching up and laughter seemed endless. By the time curfew rolled around, everyone had already fallen fast asleep. Frank walked down the hall, closing door after door until he came upon Waylon and Miles’ room.

Outside slept Dennis and Chris, both curled up in front of the doorway. Frank chuckled lightly, peeking into the room to see what else was going on inside. Miles was stretched out on the floor beside Waylon’s bed, a hand draped carelessly to the side. Waylon slept up on his own bed, enveloped tightly in Eddie’s strong arms. It seemed the two had been careful about Waylon’s newest weak-spots and his cast while getting comfortable.

Frank couldn’t bring himself to tear everything apart, despite if being curfew. It was quite the sight; like they were all protecting Waylon. Sighing, the older man turned off the radio on his belt before nudging Chris and Dennis awake.

Both men looked up at him blearily, eyes adjusting to the dim light of the hall before they both locked onto Frank. The guard nodded into the room. “You two, inside. Quick, the doors are locking in one minute and thirty-five seconds.”

“Wait,” Dennis said, his voice strained. “Oh no, I’m supposed to be upstairs…”

“No,” Frank interrupted, gesturing into the room, “As long as you three-” He began, pointing towards Eddie. “Don’t talk about this, I’ll let you all room together for the night. Park’s been through a lot, and I’d hate to see this whole protection-line broken up.”

Chris and Dennis looked at each other, astounded. They didn’t ask any more questions as they moved into the room, allowing Frank to shut the door behind them.

The guard waited until he heard the click of the locks setting into place before grabbing the key hook off of his belt, twirling it in his fingers. “You done good, Manera. You done good.”
Waylon was resting on his bed reading ‘Coraline’ when Miles came bursting through the door.

“Waylon Park! Waylon, Waylon get your baby-smooth ass up and come check this out!” Miles shouted excitedly, kicking the door shut behind him. Waylon jolted upright in a rush having only been half-awake beforehand. When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw Miles holding a small package.

The blonde put the book down, maneuvering his bad leg over the sheets carefully before grabbing one of the crutches by his bedside, “What is it…?” Waylon asked, limping over to where Miles was now standing by their desk.

Miles shrugged, “No idea. But hey, it’s got a note.” He answered giddily, pulling a small folded-up piece of paper off of the top. “One of the guards handed it to me on my way back here.”

Once the note was opened, both Waylon and Miles scanned it over. It was written in a neat-yet-messy handwriting, signed ‘Kalani & Raymon Upshur’ at the very bottom of the page.

“Your parents? Wait, you’re Polynesian?” Waylon asked incredulously, eyes traveling back over to the box. He’d never heard or seen anything from Miles’ actual parents before besides the stories he sometimes felt in the mood to tell.

Miles looked up towards the ceiling, “Well; sort of. My mother moved from Oahu to Arizona when she was three. But my grandfather came from Thailand with his father way back when so I’m like… part-Hawaiian, part-Thai, part-European.” He answered, looking back at the note.

Waylon hummed in interest, turning back to the paper in Miles’ hand. The letter wasn’t too wordy. It talked about how Miles’ mother hoped he and his friends were safe and healthy, and that she’d heard about their recent events and sent her regards. As for the gift, it mentioned something along the lines of wanting to make him feel better.

His friend was already one step ahead of him, prying the thin layer of tape off of the packaging before opening the flaps. It wouldn’t be a stretch to say Miles shoved his face inside, pulling out an even smaller white box. Miles’ smile grew even further when he opened it up, revealing a brand-new black iPod.

“What,” Waylon asked, astounded by what had come in for Miles. “How-? A new one?!”

Miles chuckled evilly, pressing the power button to reveal that the device had already been set up for him, “My parents may not have known much about me or my life,” He began, flicking past the lock screen and onto the music app. “But the one thing they did understand was that no one takes my music from me.”

Waylon whistled, glancing over the small device. “They sure can’t. I still can’t believe you got a new one, though. Like; I can’t explain just how surprised I am right now.”

“Shh,” Miles whispered, bringing a finger to Waylon’s lips to silence him. Waylon narrowed his eyes, frustrated while Miles only continued to grin. “Just let it happen.”

The blonde could only roll his eyes in annoyance as Miles started scrolling through his music library. “Lemme see if I can find something to commemorate the homecoming of two of my best friends.”
“It feels great to be compared to an iPod.” Waylon mumbled, taking a seat on his bed.

Miles hummed in response, finger moving across the screen rapidly. Up and down, up and down. It took forever for the man to come to a decision, but finally Miles hooked his iPod up to the old cable before pressing play.

“Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Waylon asked, raising an eyebrow. His friend only laughed, cranking up the volume before slapping a hand on Waylon’s back and taking a seat beside him. He began to sing along with the lyrics sloppily, forcing Waylon to sway back and forth with him.

“Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see- I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy... Because I'm easy come, easy go, little high, little low. Any way the wind blows doesn't really matter to me- To me.”

Waylon couldn’t help but let a small smile creep up over his frustration, and the plague only got worse when Miles started trying to tickle him out of his funk. He allowed himself to sing along with Miles; the song was a classic, after all.

“Mama, just killed a man- Put a gun against his head, pulled my trigger, now he's dead. Mama, life had just begun- But now I've gone and thrown it all away.”

The bedroom door burst open, causing Waylon to shriek when Chris leaned over in the doorway, pretending to hold a microphone in his hands.

“Mama, ooh! Didn't mean to make you cry, if I'm not back again this time tomorrow-! Carry on, carry on, as if nothing really matters.”

Both Miles and Waylon burst out into a fit of giggles when Chris collapsed onto the floor, pretending to cry as if he was impersonating the sad boy in the song. The two laughed even harder when they saw Eddie peek into the room to make sure nothing serious was going on, mouthing a slow, ‘What the fuck…?’

The song progressed further and further as the three continued to laugh. When Eddie had tried to leave a few lines later, Waylon had used all of his strength to yank the grouchy man back into the room to join them. Eddie let him, but made it clear he wasn’t going to be singing along.

“So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye?!”

Miles was curled up on the floor, an arm raised as he tried his best to keep up with the lyrics in between fits of laugher. Chris was trying to yank him up off the floor, unable to contain himself either.

“So you think you can love me and leave me to die?! Oh, baby, can't do this to me, baby! Just gotta get out, just gotta get right outta here!”

At the last line Waylon gripped onto Eddie’s flannel easily, pulling him in so their noses brushed against each other. Eddie looked panicked, which only served to make Waylon laugh that much harder. It was a rare witnessing of an Eddie Gluskin Emotion™.

“Nothing really matters, anyone can see; nothing really matters... Nothing really matters... to me.”

“I disagree, darling.” Eddie mumbled, shoulders relaxing when he realized Waylon wasn’t trying to push him into a fit of rage. Instead he brought his hands to rest on Waylon’s hips, pulling the blonde
Waylon barely heard the choking sound Miles made across the room, followed by a joking, “Aw come on guys, now? Really!”

Just as another song in the lineup began to play, all four heard someone clearing their throat by the door. There stood Dennis, shifting on the soles of his feet uncomfortably as he made eye contact with each and every one of them. “Um… What in the actual fuck is going on in here?”

Miles was already one step ahead of Waylon, standing up to greet their friend, “Dennis, oh thank god, help me. The lovebirds are canoodling! Save us.” The brunette begged, pulling on the teenager’s shirt as he tried to act helpless.

Waylon blushed furiously, moving to turn off the music. Before he got more than an inch away the blonde felt large hands tugging him back onto the bed, and suddenly he became very aware that he was situated in Eddie’s lap. He felt the man’s lips kiss the a section of his ear, slowly making his way down while Waylon felt ready to panic.

Chris laughed, wiping his nose as he stepped around Dennis and out into the hall. The teenager followed shortly, and right as Miles started on out after them Waylon shot him a look, silently whispering, ‘Help!’.

Miles only laughed, slamming a palm onto the doorframe before gesturing his goodbyes, “He’s all yours, buddy.” The brunette spoke towards Eddie specifically, sending Waylon a quick wink before leaving the room, shutting the door for good measure. Waylon felt just about ready to kill him.

“…Oh. Maybe not right now, but later.”

“Ah… That’s a lot to take in all at once.” Waylon mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. “So… Are you serious?”

Chris nodded, taking a sip of the orange juice resting on the table in front of him, “All of it. Unless Miles and D have anything else they’d like to share…” He said, glancing at the other two inmates sitting by his side.

Waylon almost laughed at the look of offense on Miles’ face. “Like I’d keep secrets from you guys-?! Jeez, I’m feeling the love here…”

“Well, someone might be.” Chris shrugged, eyes flickering over to Waylon right as the words came out of his mouth.

“What would I…”

“Hey.” An inmate spoke up beside Eddie. Waylon glanced over to see someone familiar greeting them. It took him a moment, but the blonde slowly put the pieces together. ‘Wait- wasn’t he the one that insulted Chris a while back…?’

Waylon looked around to make sure the inmate was actually talking to him instead of someone else, raising an eyebrow in confusion. “Uh… Hi?”

Miles crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back in his seat. “What do you want, Steve?” He asked a bit harsher than what was necessary, scanning the man up and down as if to make sure he wasn’t going to be a threat. Who knew, maybe he was.
Steve just raised his hands as a sign of peace, shooting a glare right back. “Calm down, Upshur. I’m not lookin’ for a fight. Just wanted to send my condolences to Park over here. It’s… Ah… Kind of messed up what happened to him.”

Everyone at the table was taken aback, especially Waylon. He’d been in a fight with this inmate months ago, now here he was being nice to him. He was showing sympathy for what had happened to him. Oh god, what had happened…

Waylon tried to control his breathing enough to respond, “Thanks.” He said, shrinking into his seat. Chris and Eddie noticed the sudden shyness as soon as it started, concern lighting up their features even as Steve bid a quick farewell.

Waylon brought his hands up to cover his eyes, his whole body beginning to tremble in fear. He could almost feel the sensation of the blade cutting through his flesh, and suddenly all of his scars flared with an intense pain. The blonde whimpered, trying to collapse in on himself further.

“Woah, Waylon,” Miles said from his seat nearby, but to Waylon he sounded so distant and unclear. A hand was placed on his shoulder; it… it was Eddie, he should know this, but all of his being was screaming that it was him instead…

The blonde jolted in his seat, covering his face with his arms. “Not again, not again…”

Chris slammed his palm down onto the table, gaining the attention of everyone that was able to give it, “See? This is what I was talking about.” He started, obviously trying to control his anger as he gestured towards Waylon. “He wouldn’t tell anyone who did this to him. This is happening because of the person that should be responsible! And yet he refuses to say who. We know now it wasn’t just Stevenson.”

“Chris, that isn’t exactly fair.” Dennis piped up. “Something could’ve happened that day that we don’t understand.”

The larger man grumbled, sending an apologetic look Waylon’s way. “I… I’m sorry. It’s just… I hate that this happened to him and yet no one is able to do anything about it. Thinking about whoever did this to him makes me sick to my stomach.”

Waylon listened to the whole conversation from his seat at the table, but in his own mind it felt like he was hearing them from afar. He wished that he could tell everyone everything they wanted to know, he really did. But too much was at stake- Not just his own life, but that of his friends, too. He just had to prevent it from happening again. And there was only one way to do it.

The blonde sniffed, finally peeking through his fingers, “A-actually…” He whispered, looking between the four other men. “M-maybe we should… Call off the case…”

“What?!” All four of them yelled at the same time. Waylon shrunk into himself further, pulling his legs up to his chest. He almost felt like rocking back and forth for five hours and then taking a well-deserved nap after all of the bullshit he’d gone through since mid-December.

“You can’t be serious.” Miles said incredulously, leaning over the table. “Why would you say that?”

Waylon struggled to use the right words, but after a couple second of choking, he found them, “I-I…” He stuttered, sparing a glance up at Miles. “I don’t want anyone else getting hurt. This has to stop.”

After a moment of dead silence, Eddie lowered his voice, “An inmate didn’t do this to him,” He snapped, glaring at Chris from across the table. “It was someone on staff. He just confirmed it.”
“How…?” Dennis asked, brows furrowed.

Eddie looked down at Waylon gently before his spared a moment of his time to Dennis. “He just said he didn’t want anyone getting hurt because of Billy’s case. That means that someone tried to kill him because of the case. None of the inmates would know about it, much less have a reason to keep us from continuing.”

“Oh… Well, fuck.” Miles hissed, gaining a harsh glare from a guard passing nearby. He was tempted to glare right back, but decided against it knowing damn well he’d end up somewhere stupid for it. He turned back to Waylon, leaning further over towards his friend. “Waylon… I know this was horrible, and nobody wants anyone to get hurt. But don’t you think this would be an even bigger incentive to continue?”

Waylon looked up from between his legs, hands shaking from where they rested on his knees. “H-how…?”

Miles frowned, plopping back down in his chair. “We wouldn’t have to be afraid of this mystery person anymore. If we’re even more careful, and it’s coming close to our time, then we can fix all of this and be free of the garbage that’s been tossed our way because of Murkoff.”

It… was actually a pretty good argument. So good, that Waylon couldn’t really find a point to argue against. From what everyone had told him, it seemed like they could put a plan into action sooner than he could catch up with them.

The blonde sighed, planting his feet back onto the cafeteria floor. “A-Alright.” He sighed, rubbing his forehead tiredly. “Okay.”

Frank was quick to catch up to them once gym time came around.

“Augh, I know I already said it the other day, but it’s so good to see everyone back and happy again!” The guard rejoiced, pulling Dennis, Miles, and Waylon into a group hug. Chris stood by chuckling; he couldn’t fit into Frank’s arms even if he tried. As for Eddie, well; he just didn’t want to participate.

Waylon laughed as soon as Frank’s hold released, keeping his crutches firmly on each side of his body. “Yeah, Frank. Feels good to be back.”

The period went by in a flash. A few pull-up bars had been brought into the gymnasium the week before, so that was where Eddie decided to spend most of his time while Chris got in on a game of knockout with half of the other inmates, basketballs flying everywhere in the heat to beat each other out.

Miles had showed Waylon the camera Chris had given him the day after his return, but now that they had more time he’d decided to bring it into the gymnasium to show Waylon the different features and controls. He had Waylon film some of Chris’s knockout game for good measure.

Once Waylon decided he knew how to work it, they’d called Dennis over to watch the videos Miles had recorded during Waylon’s absence. The blonde nearly choked on his own laughter when Eddie more or less tackled Chris to the ground after three shots in and he’d been ready to have a turn with the ball.

Waylon had gotten mushy and gross when it came to Miles’ special messages for him, and at that point even Miles wanted to shove him off so he’d stop making the loud, “AWW-!”’s and kissy noises. The niceness was replaced by a punch to the arm at every comment about his height, though.
When the period crept closer to a close, Miles locked up his camera and informed his friends that he would be going back to the library for the rest of their free time so he could find the book again. He wanted to take pictures of the suspicious pages with his camera, calling it ‘vital information’ to their case.

Once the brunette made his way there, he made sure no guards or inmates were snooping around his territory when he went to his and Dennis’ secret book-hiding place. Miles looked over his shoulder once more before pulling three sets of books away to get to it.

As Miles pulled the last book back from the shelf, he found that nothing was left over behind it. The Mount Massive book; it was gone.

“Shit.” Miles cursed under his breath, looking over his shoulder once more. Maybe the person who’d taken it out was watching him… There wasn’t any reason an inmate would take it out if it was hidden and they were, y’know, smart.

Unable to do anything other than make random assumptions, Miles placed the books back exactly the way he’d found them. He sighed, making his way back to the other inmates, who were already lining up for the end of break.

“Hm. Upshur, now?” Jeremy mumbled under his breath, playing the video of Miles looking for what could only be the Mount Massive book over and over again.

He’d heard from Andrew that Dennis and Miles had been lurking through unknown depths of the library long before. Unable to confront them directly, Jeremy had set up small cameras on the shelves nearby. After endless waiting for one of them to go back and confirm Andrew’s report, one finally had.

Blaire rolled his eyes, pulling the video down before glancing at the book on the desk beside him. It would be safer to keep it in the underground lab, anyway; no prying eyes or oblivious guards walking in and out. He needed to have the whole library inspected to make sure nothing else like it was still kicking around from years before.

Jeremy looked back at Miles Upshur’s file, which was still open for reading on his desktop. He’d already scanned through it before; but now Blaire decided to put it in his save files for later use. He was going to need it if he was to teach these idiots what they were costing themselves. “First you take an ear, then a whole body. Great going, Blaire. Fantastic.”

After a few minutes of packing up his belongings, Jeremy logged out of his computer and headed out for the night. What he failed to notice, however, was the guard standing in the hall just outside the room, listening in on the conversation he’d had with himself.

Pauline huffed, shaking her head as she scratched at the emblem on her uniform. After a moment of hesitation, she ripped it off and threw it on the ground, walking away from the lab room. It meant nothing to her now.

Waylon pulled the bedsheets further over his head, a restless feeling creeping up his spine as he tried to fall asleep. What was he so worked up about? He knew it wasn’t good when his body told him to stay awake even when he had no idea why.

It seemed like forever, but a few minutes later he was cast into an uneasy sleep.

*The blonde groaned, rolling over in bed a bit further than what was physically allowed. He*
screamed as he toppled over, nose smacking painfully against the bedroom floor. Waylon felt his face to check for the blood that was most certainly overflowing, but when his hand came back, nothing was there.

What he did notice was the bluish hue his hand and arm took on. Oh; so it was back to this, huh?

He stretched his arms over his head, popping his shoulder blades as he walked out into the hall. Things were suspiciously silent; no humming, no whispers; nothing. And his surroundings appeared to be a lot less blue than they’d been in his past dreams. It was still there, but it’d been significantly reduced.

Heavy footsteps thrummed against the floor beneath him. Waylon froze, hands twitching as he turned his head towards the source of the noise. It sounded like it was coming from down the hall, the noise growing louder and louder. No way was it Billy; but who else could it be?

The footsteps’ constant banging continued, faster and faster as they approached his end of the hall. Waylon’s breath quickened, arms raising in self-defense just as the figure he’d been hearing revealed themselves just a few feet away.

Holy. SHIT.

“Eddie?!” Waylon gasped, immediately moving towards the other man. Was this actually happening? It couldn’t be real.

Eddie’s turned his head at the call of his name, more than surprised to see Waylon running towards him, “Darling-?” He said, stumbling back when Waylon more or less threw himself into his arms.

Waylon looked up at the other man, placing his hands against Eddie’s chest to make sure he wasn’t just some strange hallucination. “I know, I’m as confused as you are. Are… Are you actually here…? Or am I just imagining this…?”

“No.” Eddie said firmly, tugging at Waylon’s arm. “This is the dream state. I’m here as well.”

“You won’t be for long. Please, we have to get going. We don’t have much time.”

The blonde jumped at the sound of a new voice, both men’s eyes locking onto those of Billy Hope. The young man looked nervous, hands wrung together in front of him.

Waylon was about to open his mouth, but Billy didn’t give him the chance. “I don’t have much time to explain. Please, follow me and stay quiet while I talk.”

Waylon nodded, letting go of Eddie in the process. Eddie seemed less than excited to comply, but when Waylon gave him a reassuring squeeze to his hand the other man had no choice but to follow.

Billy walked fast, not bothering to look over his shoulder as he began speaking. “The reason you are here now is because I can tune into the dream states of inmates who have higher trauma levels than others. Most are weak, but some are strong. Like you two.

Down the stairwell and into the main hall. “I’ve been trying to match up the dream states of two inmates whose cases are the most severe. I had to test other inmates as well. Together, the two of you wouldn’t have been strong enough to conjure up what’s been produced now… until the one of you known as Waylon Park was pushed further ahead a month ago. Then, you matched up. I was the outcome.”

Through the main hall, down the security wing. “I wasn’t able to speak properly before; it was such
a weak connection. But it was there nonetheless. I’ve been trying to connect the cords ever since. I’ve been trying to show you where they’re keeping us. My monitors prevent me from giving names, but I forced myself far enough into the software when the scientists were away to reach you both.”

Down another flight of stairs. “There’s not much time to lose. Do what you must with this information; I’ve been observing all of you against Murkoff’s will for me. We’re hurt. My mind in this dream state is that of who I used to be. Now, they’ve… Twisted me. I’m close to what could be considered a monster.”

Billy led them down the solitary wing, pointing to the left side of the hall, “I’m unable to show you which room it’s in. There’s a latch under a bed that leads to the underground lab where they’re holding us. Do what you can.” The young boy paused, looking between both Eddie and Waylon. “I was only meant to do this once. …Please; help us.”

As soon as the words left Billy’s mouth, he shattered into a million blue shards dangling in the empty space of the solitary hall. Waylon jumped back, looking towards Eddie with fear in his eyes. He didn’t know what to do- how they could help.

Eddie reached out to him, but just as his fingers graced the skin of Waylon’s forearm his body shattered along with Billy’s. Waylon yelped, taking a few steps back until he came in contact with the wall. He looked down to see his hands slowly fading away, his feet following suit.

The floor caved in, and he fell.

Waylon sat upright, tears streaming down his face as he looked around the bedroom frantically. It took him a moment to come to, but the blonde recognized Miles’ presence, the other man holding him in a tight hug as he rubbed Waylon’s back.

The blonde tried to calm his breathing down, arms wrapping around Miles as the other man let out a sigh of relief. “Holy fuck Waylon, you were kicking and screaming once Pauline opened the door. Scared the hell out of me. What happened? You okay?”

Suddenly, all of his memories of what had happened in his dream came flooding back, thoughts and information colliding into one big picture. Waylon shoved Miles off of him, looking straight to the door. “Sorry, Miles. I need to find Eddie; right fucking now.”

He knew he sounded crazy, but Miles seemed to understand the severity of the situation at least a little bit. His friend nodded, hopping off the bed before pointing out the door. Waylon didn’t need to be told twice; he ran.

Once the door was slammed open into the hall, he found Eddie doing the same from his room a few feet away. Both pairs of eyes locked on to each other before Waylon’s face was in Eddie’s hands, both of them shaking in the other’s arms.

“It was real, tell me it was real.” Eddie demanded, holding Waylon even closer to him. Waylon nodded frantically, tugging at Eddie’s white tank top. “Get dressed. Get moving. We all need to talk. It’s time to start planning.”

Once everyone had done their tasks and set up in the cafeteria, all hell broke loose on Eddie and Waylon’s side of the table. They’d tried to remain as quiet as possible, but the task proved difficult with all they had to say. By the time the two finished, everyone’s jaws had dropped.

“So it seems like that plan about getting sent to solitary is going to be worth it now.” Miles said, gesturing between his friends. “How and when are we going to do this?”
Waylon watched as Dennis pressed his lips into a thin line, tapping his fingers onto the table beneath him, “I think we should wait until Waylon’s cast is removed to pull this off. We’re only going to have one chance at this, and it’d be a necessity for him to walk properly.” The teen suggested. He looked up to Waylon in all seriousness. “When does it come off?”

“A week and a half.”

“Perfect.”

“I think we’re going to need to do something stupid between just the five of us if we’re going to get sent down there. Guards… They’re going to be a problem. If we had to deal with them, then other inmates involved would be extremely risky. Like Dennis said, we only have one shot or we’re royally f***ed.” Chris said next, offering any help he could give.

Everyone at the table fell silent for a few seconds until Chris jolted in his seat, “I… I think I might have an idea. But I don’t think Ed’s going to like it.” He said, cringing. Oh boy.

Waylon raised an eyebrow when Eddie’s fists clenched and unclenched from their position on the table. The man lowered his brows, concern level rising steadily. “And would I be doing, exactly?”

Chris ran a hand over his clean-shaven head; from the hard look he was giving the table, Waylon knew his plan wasn’t going to benefit Eddie. The larger man huffed, “Okay, well… Save all comments until the end. …Eddie, I thought you could start an argument with Waylon in the gym. Something small, until you start getting louder. Make it seem like it’s something about your relations with one another. Pretend to smack, hit, I dunno do something to Waylon. Then I’ll intervene, you try to fight me over it while Waylon tries to attack me. Miles and Dennis, I’ll leave your parts up to you.” He spoke quickly, looking away from Eddie’s oncoming reaction.

“No. Absolutely not.” Eddie snapped, crossing his arms over his chest assertively. “I would never raise a hand to him.”

“But you’d just be pretending, Ed!” Miles reminded from his seat, gesturing towards Waylon. “Besides, Way knows you wouldn’t try to hurt him. It’s an act.”

Waylon tugged at Eddie’s shirt, looking up at him doe-eyed. “It’ll be fine. I trust you. You’re faking it; and it’s for a good cause.”

Waylon, Dennis, Miles and Chris were all looking at Eddie hopefully. The object was to box him in. After another minute of silence Eddie rolled his eyes, grumbling. “Fine.”

Miles whopped, rocking back and forth in his seat. “And so the plan is set into motion. Hooh-fuckin’-rah.”
Waylon shook in the cool plastic chair of the guard’s office, fingers fidgeting over his chapped lips. He didn’t want to talk about this. If it weren’t for basic human rights, he was sure the woman he was sitting before would try forcing the answers out of him.

“Park, I’m not going to hurt you.” Pauline Glick murmured, as if reading his mind. “We just want to know what happened that day.”

The blonde flinched at the sound of a cough, glancing to his side to shoot a quick glare at Officer Annapurna standing nearby, thumbs hooked under his belt. Waylon turned back to Pauline, taking a deep breath. “…I’ve already told you everything.”

Pauline folded her arms over the table impatiently. Waylon closed his eyes, trying to will the shaking in both his lungs and limbs to stop. The woman’s finger tapped rhythmically against the desk as she spoke. “For the most part, and I appreciate it— but you still refuse to give us a name other than Stevenson.”

At the mention of the inmate’s name, Waylon opened his eyes. “Where is he?”

“He was moved out of your hall, and until we can calm everyone down he’s been put on a different schedule.” She replied, frowning. “Don’t try to change the subject.”

Waylon’s breathing hitched, “Please,” He pleaded, slumping down into the chair. “Don’t make me do this.”

Pauline paused, sparing a glance over at the other guard in the room. Waylon followed her eyes, watching as Annapurna looked between him and Glick before shrugging towards the older woman. Once her eyes moved back to Waylon, she sighed.

“Alright,” The officer huffed, scribbling a few more notes down onto her notepad before flicking it shut. “You’re all set. Officer Annapurna will show you out.”

Waylon let out a sigh of relief, allowing David to escort him back into the hall. Just as he reached the doorway, he heard Pauline call out to him once more. It was quiet; Waylon barely heard her.

He looked over his shoulder, fingers twitching behind his back. Pauline had a sympathetic look on her face as she stood from the table, nodding. “You’re going back to the hospital tomorrow morning to get your cast taken off. We’ll find you after you eat.” She placed a hand down onto the cool metal table, sighing. “If you decide you’d like to tell us anything in the future, have them contact me.”

The blonde looked to the floor, letting out a small noise of affirmative before the door clicked shut, and he was free. Back to the hall he went.

“So I’ve been walking, I’m gonna find you. Through every backstreet I will run through! I count the days— till I can bring you home. Your hand in my hand, yeah!”

He heard the music before he entered. Waylon hummed along with the tune as walked into the bedroom, finding Miles as he scribbled over numerous papers at a time at their work desk. Even his laptop was on, the screen saver moving around almost perfectly in-sync with the song.

Miles grabbed a pen beside him, glancing over towards another paper, “Sup, Way?” He greeted without looking up, head swaying gently along with the song. He looked focused; bent on one single
“Hey,” Waylon mumbled, pulling off his hoodie before tossing it onto the bed. “I’m going to the hospital for my cast tomorrow, so if a scary guard comes over and takes me away don’t start freaking out.”

His roommate chuckled, crumpling up a sheet before tossing it onto the floor, “I’m not the one you should be warning.” Miles said, picking up a fresh paper before drawing a quick doodle across it. He took a piece of gum out of his mouth, sticking it onto the back of the sheet before slapping it one the wall above his head.

Waylon tried and failed to contain his giggles when he saw the angry sketch Miles had plastered somewhat-grossly onto their bedroom wall. It was Eddie, brows drawn in thick with a bunch of arrows pointing towards him. The word ‘HIM’ was scratched on in bold font at the top.

“Psh, nasty.” Waylon chuckled, peeling the drawing away. He waved it in front of Miles as he worked, trying to get his attention. “I’m keeping this.”

Miles hummed, shoving three papers off of the desk. Once Waylon put the drawing away, he plopped down onto his bed, “What’re you doing, anyway?” He asked curiously, propping himself up onto an elbow.

Another hum, “I dunno, lots of things. Writing the Mount Massive info down, mostly. I want to save it for later.” He replied, never sparing a glance away from his work.

Waylon flopped back down, rolling around on his bed restlessly before pushing himself back up again, “Miles, I’m boooored.” He complained, making a series of unpleasant noises to exaggerate his point.

His roommate chuckled from his seat, eyes remaining glued to the desk. “What am I, your dad? Read, or- draw, or something.”

The blonde pouted, rolling off of the bed and onto the floor, “But I don’t have any other books. Dennis is back in his hall so I can’t get more, and you know I can’t draw.” He mumbled, rolling himself across the floor until he was lying beside Miles’ chair.

Miles shook his head, finally putting his pen to the side in favor of giving Waylon some attention, “Way, seriously?” He asked, earning Waylon’s classic doe-eyes as a response. The brunette rolled his eyes, crumbling up another paper before tossing it at Waylon’s face. “Go hang out with your boyfriend, then. Guards are checking in ten minutes, maybe you could fuck or something.”

“Nyeah,” Waylon grumbled, slapping the legs of Miles’ chair. “I don’t feel like it. Still worn out from the showers yesterday.”

Miles choked on his own spit. “Woah, okay, too much information. Wait- how does that work with the cast?”

Waylon waved his hands over his head, eyes closed, “With noisy drain pipes, dedication, and a pair of really strong arms, you can achieve anything.” He opened his eyes, looking up at Miles. “What, did you actually believe me when I said a guard spent ten minutes yelling at us in the hall?”

Miles slammed his elbows down onto the desk, running his fingers through his hair. “Dammit Waylon, I don’t know what I did to make you like this but I’m definitely regretting it now. I miss when you were shy and innocent.”
“Technically I’m still both of those things. But define, ‘innocent’.”

Miles took five balls of crumbled paper, duping them all onto Waylon’s face. “Whore-Mouth.”

“Sir Asshole Skinny-Dick.”

“Cock-Jockey.”

“Sex-Depriver.”

“Fucklet.”

“Ass-cactus.”

“You really are bored, aren’t you?” Miles sighed, defeated. He stood up from his chair, Waylon watching innocently as his roommate grabbed both of his arms before pulling him out of the room and down the hall.

Waylon hummed, tilting his chin up at inmates that stared for a second too long. “Are we going on an adventure? Where are we going?”

“Hell.” Miles hissed, kicking Eddie and Chris’s bedroom door open. Both men were inside, looking up with a start as Miles dragged Waylon in.

“Miles?” Chris asked, standing up from his bed when he noticed Waylon grumbling and groaning beneath him. “Uh… What’s ah…? What’s going on?”

Waylon felt Miles let go of his wrists, and just like that he flopped the rest of the way down to the floor. Miles huffed, brushing his sweaty hands off on his jeans. “Chris, can you come over with me? Leave Waylon here, he’s being an inappropriate little shit.”

Chris raised an eyebrow. “And where do you think he got it from…?”

“Shut the mouth you call your own and just follow me.” Miles grumbled, storming out of the room with Chris in-tow.

Once the door clicked shut, Waylon flipped onto his stomach, face pressed into the floor. He knew where he was, but he didn’t care all that much as he inhaled the dust and dirt beneath him.

The room remained silent for the next few seconds before the only other person around decided to break the tension, “Darling,” Eddie began, and Waylon could hear the sound of a notebook closing. “What are you doing?”

Waylon didn’t bother picking himself up as he spoke, “I’m getting my cast taken off tomorrow, so if a big burly guard comes over and whisks me off my feet, don’t get jealous.” He mumbled, pressing his face further into the floor.

“Jesus Christ in heaven,” Eddie whispered, standing up. “What happened to you?”

“Boredom happened.” Waylon sighed, curling up into the fetal position. “Just let me sleep. I’ll wake up in five-thousand years, don’t worry. Can you hold it in ‘till then?”

“You slut, you better not be acting like this in the morning.”

“Ehhhhh...”
“Oh my god. Now I understand why Miles dumped you here.”

The doctor finished cutting off the white gauze underneath Waylon’s cast, peeling it away from his leg and dumping it into a bin nearby. Waylon watched the whole operation carefully, nearly having a heart-attack when the doctor had used a saw-like device to carve the outer layer off.

“All right,” The man said once he finished putting the materials away, looking back up at Waylon. “Try it out.”

Waylon bit his lip, lowering himself slowly onto the tile floor of the doctor’s office. Once his foot touched, he felt a chill run up his spine at the cool sensation beneath him, “It’s…” Waylon mumbled, wiggling his toes. “…Good?”

The doctor stepped to the side, allowing more room for movement in the small room. “Try walking, now.”

He did. Despite being slow at first, Waylon found himself moving about the area easily enough. It seemed to please the doctor; it only took half an hour for Waylon to be let out and brought back to Mount Massive afterwards.

On the ride back, all Waylon could think about was how this was a step forward for him and the guys back at Mount Massive. They’d been planning all week, and now they finally had something to set with his cast out of the way. A week and a half after its removal, they’d fake their way into solitary. It gave Waylon time to finish healing, as well as collect all of their bearings.

They could start to carry out the plan.

“It was real, tell me it was real.”

“Get dressed. Get moving. We all need to talk. It’s time to start planning.”

“Well sir, they could’ve been talking about anyone, or anything.”

“It was about Hope, you useless moron.” Blaire spat, storming down to the security wing. “If you want something done right…”

Andrew rolled his eyes, continuing to follow him despite the previous insults. “Why don’t you tell your father or Wernicke? I’m sure they could handle this problem efficiently.”

Jeremy stopped dead in his tracks, eye twitching. ‘What?’ “You’re telling me how I run this place isn’t efficient enough, hm?” He said, trying to maintain his cool as he swiveled to face the idiot that’d been assigned to him. “Even if I had the slightest inclination to do so, my father would take me out of the building. And Wernicke’s… Sick.”

Both men thought back to the old man’s diagnosis from his last hospital emergency. The fool had a month to live, at most. Tragic.

“Screw all of this bullshit,” Blaire hissed, storming into the security control room. “We’re taking him. As soon as possible. This ends now.”

Andrew raised his eyebrows, taking a step back. “Are… Are you sure?

“Yes.” Jeremy snapped, picking up the folder on his desk before ripping it in half. Fuck all of them.
They were going to pay. “Tomorrow morning, early. Take Upshur away and let’s finish this.”

Waylon tapped on his desk impatiently, looking around the room as the last of the students poured in. He spared a glance over at Chris; the larger man seemed to be doing the same thing. He could see Chris’s leg thumping up and down as he watched.

The blonde then looked over the empty desk in front of Chris. The one that was normally occupied by one Miles Upshur. Except he wasn’t there; not after breakfast, anyway.

“Something’s off.”

“What’s off?”

“Dunno. I just feel like someone’s eyes are boring into the back of my head.”

“Maybe they just find you attractive.”

The classroom door slammed shut, jolting Waylon out of his thoughts and back into the present. He whimpered, sinking into his desk as he glanced down at the camera resting beside him. Miles took it everywhere.

“Waylon, you mind holding onto the camera today?”

“Why?”

“Because why not?”

Andrew started counting inmates as usual, just like every other day. But it wasn’t every other day; Miles wasn’t in the room. Waylon had a bad feeling slowly starting to take up residence in the back of his mind, and one look at Chris assured him that the larger man was thinking the same thing.

When it got to Miles’ turn, Andrew checked a mark into his paper. That was… strange. Waylon was about to call out, but remembered at the last second he needed to raise his hand to get classroom answers. God, Andrew was a prick.

“What, Park?” Andrew demanded more than asked, voice uncaring as he kept counting heads.

“U-uh,” Waylon began, stuttering. He lowered his hand, twitching against the desk frame. “Where’s Miles?”

Andrew paused his count, giving Waylon a stern look. “Threw up in the bathroom hall. Sent him down to Trager.”

It was an answer, but not a good one. Waylon fidgeted in his seat, uncertain. Wouldn’t Miles have let them know he wasn’t feeling well while they were eating…?

The blonde looked back over to Chris, finding the man staring directly at him. He flinched, trying to communicate with his eyes and a few quick movements of his head. “Sounds like he’s lying.”

“Yeah.” Chris replied.

Miles gave him the camera, said he felt like someone was watching him, and suddenly he disappears from class? Oh yeah. Something was very, very wrong. And the only explanation he could think of? Murkoff. Jeremy… Jeremy Blaire.
Billy Hope.

There was still no sign of Miles when they were sent to the gymnasium. Nothing at lunch, either. Even Dennis seemed off, concern overtaking all other jabs at a change in subject. They couldn’t be sure, but Waylon knew all of them were thinking the same thing.

Waylon was sitting stock-still on the bleachers when Trager walked into the gymnasium. The doctor stopped just by the door, starting up friendly conversation with Officer Annapurna. The blonde stood, deciding it’d be a good time to ask about Miles.

“Uhm, excuse me, Doctor Trager?” The blonde asked shyly, approaching the two men still standing together. He didn’t like talking to people he didn’t know all that well, but if it was about Miles… it was necessary. He needed to know the truth; if they were all right in their assumptions.

Trager smirked, clapping his hands together as Waylon approached, “Ah, Park! Long time no see,” He greeted loudly, stretching his arms. “You and Gluskin on better terms?”

The blonde blushed at Trager’s words, taking a small step back, “Um, yeah.” He mumbled, shifting on the soles of his feet anxiously. “Uh… I was wondering if Miles was feeling better. I heard he was sent to the infirmary.”

“Upshur?” Trager asked, a look of confusion adorning his features. “Haven’t seen him in a while, either. If he’s anywhere, he’s not in the infirmary.”

Waylon paused, eyes widening as he tilted his head down. Once he managed to gain control his thoughts, he glanced back up to see Trager still staring at him like a mad-man, but Annapurna… He looked struck.

“Well, I’ve gotta head back to the ol’ office, buddy. Never know who’s gonna lose a couple of fingers ‘round here. Good talk, David.” Trager said, dismissing both Waylon and Officer Annapurna briefly before moving back out of the gym.

Once the door clicked shut, Waylon had to contain a whimper as Annapurna’s head whipped back down to stare at him. The blonde could feel himself twitching; he knew he was even as officer Annapurna gave him a look. A look that he couldn’t quite decipher, but it said enough. “It’s exactly who and what you think it is, Park.”

The officer pursed his lips, giving Waylon a quick nod before moving to join the other guards. Waylon felt ready to choke on his own breath as he ran back to his friends, double-time. Oh god; they were right?

“How’d it go, Waylon?” Chris asked apprehensively once Waylon neared. He looked fearful; damn right. He should be with this new information on the table.

Waylon panted, waving his hands to get the attention of the rest of his friends, one by one. “Alright,” He began, clearing his throat. “Miles plays the fool, but he’s not stupid. We’re moving the plan ahead of schedule-- starting tomorrow morning.”
“What?!” Dennis hissed, choking on his water bottle. “How the hell are we-?!”

Chris clenched his fists be his sides, “Waylon said that Billy told him they’d turned him into a monster. We can’t wait another week; the same thing could happen to Miles. We’ve already got what we need; the camera, and all of us. Minus one. We’re going.”

“Chris,” Eddie whispered beside him, face as hard as a rock as he stared him down. “Are. You. Sure.”

It wasn’t a question, really. Chris nodded, placing a hand on both Waylon and Eddie’s shoulders. “Yes. It’s your time to shine, kiddo.” He said, looking down at Waylon. “We’ll go fuck up some guards. Breakfast.”

And boy, did breakfast come quick and early. Before Waylon even knew what was happening, they were all at their usual table; but things had taken a turn. Eddie’s fist was deep in Waylon’s hoodie, the blonde forced off of his feet as the man holding him hostage raised a hand.

“Stupid slut,” Eddie hissed, tossing Waylon onto the floor painfully and efficiently. “Fucking whore!”

Feet skidded against the tile nearby, loud and ready. Chris didn’t bother giving Eddie any ahead-of-time warning; the man was pinned down to the floor in an instant, Chris’s hands wrapped around his throat as if trying to calm him down in the worst way possible. Were they doing okay?

“You idiot,” Chris growled as Eddie tried and failed to knee the other man away. Chris heaved, dragging Eddie off of the floor to the best of his ability. Waylon looked around; guards were definitely taking notice now.

As if reading his thoughts, Waylon felt a pair of hands grip his underarms once he stood up to try to ‘attack’ Chris. Waylon spewed out all sort of obscenities as Dennis tried to pry him away, knocking him onto Eddie and Chris with a scream that almost seemed inhuman.

“What’s going on over here?!” A guard yelled, shoving Eddie and Chris off of each other as a woman held Dennis and Waylon by the collar of their shirts. Another followed suit, Frank moving in from behind.

Frank glared at the four boys darkly, tapping his foot impatiently on the floor, “The fuck’s the matter with all of you?!” He demanded, holding up a hand towards the guard that tried correcting his language. He huffed, gesturing for the extra guard to grab Eddie while he took a hold of Chris. Both men were still struggling to get at each other; Waylon was amazed by their acting abilities.

After a moment of silence, the attention of the entire cafeteria was on them. Frank shook his head, gesturing for the guards to move out with the four of them in tow, “I really expected better of you. Take a good god-damn look at yourselves.” He mumbled angrily, escorting all of them out the double doors.

Waylon remained silent along with his comrades as they were led down towards solitary. He shifted in the woman’s hold; he could feel the weight of both Miles’ camera and his iPod in the front pocket of his hoodie. As long as they didn’t mess anything up… It was true; this was their only shot. One slip up and they were toast.

He didn’t want to start a fight alone. Once they got down to the solitary wing, Waylon soon realized he didn’t have to. When the doors closed behind them, Eddie thrusted himself out of his guard’s grip, throwing an elbow towards the man’s nose. The guard yelled, backing up while he felt for a weapon
against his belt.

Chris followed his lead, shoving Frank back into the wall before yanking the woman off of Waylon and Dennis. Waylon could see the look of hesitance on his face as he apologized, knocking the woman out cold. The blonde backed himself up against the wall, shaking. Of course Chris would apologize for hurting someone while Eddie could do without.

Eddie had finished up his end of the job, wrapping an arm around the neck of the solitary guard that’d stormed over mid-fight. The man’s struggles ceased as the larger of the two applied more pressure, lowering him down to the ground.

“STOP!”

All conscious heads turned towards Frank, who had a gun in one hand and his radio in the other. His thumb rested just above the call button, threatening. Everyone froze on the spot.

Panicking, Waylon let out everything built up inside of him, “Frank, we don’t want to hurt anyone. Murkoff; I can’t explain it all in one go, but they took Miles and the only way down there we know about is a trap door hidden in one of these cells. We’re trying to get to it.” He gasped, hands shaking as he held them up to both sides of his head.

The blonde could see Frank’s gun shaking in his hand, too. Waylon sucked in an uneasy breath, keeping his arms firmly in place, “Please,” He begged. “We need all the help we can get.”

Frank looked between the four of them, all eyes holding a silent plea. After a moment the guard lowered his brows, but not his gun, “Where.” He commanded, gesturing to the cells.

“I-I-I,” Waylon stuttered, gasping as he tried to keep himself upright, “T-the left side of the hall, I-I don’t know w-w-which cell.” He choked out, feeling the oncoming tears collecting around the corners of his eyes.

The guard looked to the left side of the room, moving into the first open cell. He pressed his foot to the floor beside both beds; nothing. He cursed, moving towards the second cell over, currently occupied by a troublesome inmate. Frank pulled out his keys, gun still firm in his hand. He commanded the inmate lurking inside to put his hands on the wall as he looked over the far-side bed.

Waylon watched as Chris took a step towards the guard, but Frank’s head whipped up instantly, “Get back!” He ordered, pressing his foot down onto the floor.

A short hiss followed the step, and suddenly a section of the floor popped out from under him. The inmate inside raised his eyebrows, looking towards the other four lurking outside his cell.

“Son of a bitch,” Frank hissed, moving to grab the inmate by the collar of his shirt. He dragged the man towards one of the empty cells, tossing him inside and locking it with a firm ‘click’. Once he turned back around, Waylon, Chris, Dennis, and Eddie all raised their hands above their heads.

Frank shook his own, holstering the gun onto his belt as he moved back towards the now-empty cell, “Put your damn hands down,” He sighed, opening the door.

Waylon gulped, finally peeking into what had to be Billy’s original cell. There it was; a latch in the floor leading down to complete darkness. The other three followed, everyone taking a good look down the deep hole.

“You kids,” Frank sighed, looking back up at the inmates surrounding him. He still had a hand on his belt as he spoke. “Have no clue what you’re getting yourselves into. We’ll call the state police.”
Chris shook his head, “I’m sorry Officer Manera, but there’s not going to be enough time. Murkoff, Wernicke, Blaire-- this is all going to go to shit if the police get involved, unknowing of what’s down there.” He sighed, placing a careful hand on Frank’s shoulder. “But we could use your help.”

Frank laughed humorlessly, eyes flickering up to Chris’s. “And how’s that, kid?”

“The four of us will go down; Waylon has a camera with night vision equipped into it. Please, as soon as the door closes behind us, call the state police. Make sure no one but them gets down here afterwards. That’s… That’s all we need. Time. Miles, Billy and the rest could be dead if state doesn’t make it fast enough. It’d take them an hour, minimum.” Chris pleaded, taking his hand off of Frank. “We know what we’re up against, believe me.”

The guard seemed to contemplate the offer for a moment before looking down towards the latch in the floor, “You’re all crazy, you know that?” As Frank spoke, he kicked open the trap door, eyes flickering back up. “You’re damn lucky I’m just a little bit crazy, too.”

Waylon let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, pulling Miles’ camera out of his pocket before flicking it open, “I think I should go first since I have the camera. Dennis follows, then Eddie, then Chris. Wait for each person to get down and give a signal.” He said, turning the night vision on.

Eddie gave Waylon a worrisome look as the blonde walked over to the ladder beside the trap door, “Miles, Billy… We’re coming.” He spoke softly, putting his foot on the first rail. “Well… here we go.”
Waylon held onto the bar with all his might, trying to control his rapid breathing.

“Darling! Are you okay?! Tell me you’re okay!”

“I think he’s afraid of heights…”

One, two, three. Waylon huffed, looking up towards the square of light a good few yards above him. Two heads were peeking down; silhouettes that already seemed so far away, “Y-yeah! I’m—I’m fine!” The blonde wheezed, putting his foot down onto the next bar.

“Hold on!” Dennis’s voice called out next, and a third head appeared in the light just above the hole. “Don’t move; I found a penny!”

Waylon gripped onto the bar with both arms again, squinting his eyes up towards his friend, “What’s a penny going to…” He began, stopping himself when he heard the slight ‘whoosh’ of a penny falling past him. Less than a second later the penny hit, clanging against dark metal just a few feet away.

“You’re almost there, then! Doing great,” Chris encouraged from above, waving his hand out in front of the light for Waylon to see.

The weight of the camera and iPod were starting to take on an unnecessary weight from where they sat in the pocket of Waylon’s hoodie. It even felt like he was getting close; just another foot down, maybe. But just as brought his second foot to meet the first, he slipped.

The blonde let out a short yelp of surprise as he lost his grip on the bar, falling off and onto the metal floor at the bottom of the ladder. It seemed like he’d only had a few more pegs to go anyway, since he landed somewhat-softly on his ass. Waylon groaned, leaning onto his side.

“Darling!”

“It’s fine,” Waylon called back, pushing himself up off of the floor before brushing away the dirt and grime that had collected on the knees of his jeans. “I’m at the bottom. Hold on!”

Once Waylon re-gained his balance against the cool metal floor, he pulled out Miles’ camera and flicked it open, turning on the night-vision. The blonde pulled it up to his eyes, scanning the dark area around him. After a moment’s hesitation he discovered that there was nothing but a small square of metal and a sliding door directly behind him.

He peeked back up towards the hole, finding the original two heads still looking down at him. Waylon turned off the camera, deciding it best to conserve the battery power for later uses, “It’s all clear! Dennis, are you ready?” He called up, waving his hands in case they could still see a silhouette of him.

One by one, the rest of them started down the ladder. Dennis climbed first, hopping off of the last few bars before landing in front of Waylon. They called up to Eddie next, hearing a few faint mumbles as the man descended. Once Chris followed down, they determined it’d only been him having a conversation about their plan with Frank.

Waylon looked up to see said guard standing above the hole, looking down at the four of them, “Alright. I’m contacting the authorities now; I’ll make sure no one gets in or out to buy you kids
time. If I don’t see all five of your heads attached to your bodies and standing in a straight row by the
time you get back, there’ll be consequences.” He barked, saluting down towards them.

“We got it!” Chris yelled next to Waylon’s ear, sending the same motion back up towards the light.

Frank’s silhouette disappeared from the trap door, and total darkness was quick to follow. Waylon
was already one step ahead of the game, camera lights back on as he tried fiddling with the door,
keypad and all.

Waylon slammed his hand against the metal, sighing, “Dammit. There’s a code,” He mumbled,
trying out a few predictable series of numbers.

“Oh,” Dennis piped up, and through the camera Waylon saw the teen rubbing his arm awkwardly.
“This is going to be a really stupid suggestion, but what if you tried one-two-three-four? The staff
here can do some pretty stupid things sometimes.”

Waylon heard Eddie grumble behind him, commenting about how the idea was, in fact, the worst
suggestion he’d ever heard in his life while Waylon pressed further. The blonde felt the door slide
open, light peeking into the small metal room, “Um, Eddie,” Waylon tried, gesturing towards the
lighted room once all three heads turned towards him. “It worked.”

Dennis covered his mouth with his hands, eyes wrinkling with delight as he looked up to the much
larger man. Eddie looked down at Dennis, then back to Waylon, “…Then let’s go, darling.” He
mumbled, pushing past him and into the next hall over.

“I can’t believe them sometimes,” Chris sighed happily, following Eddie out the door. Waylon made
sure to seal it loosely behind them once everyone was through, watching as Chris put his hand out to
the door release at the other end of the hall.

The blonde ran forward immediately, slamming his palm against the metal to block Chris’s path,
“Wait! I think we should make a plan first. We don’t know what’s on the other side of this door.” He
suggested shyly, fiddling with the camera charge.

Chris paused, looking down towards his hands at Waylon’s statement. He glanced back up to the
other three in the room, eyes closed, “It’s already starting goddammit.” He mumbled, furrowing his
brows. “I’ll admit; I might have hallucinations down here. I can already feel the start of what might
be one, and I don’t think I should open my eyes.”

Waylon pinched his nose, leg twitching as he tried thinking of a solution to Chris’s problem. He
looked between Eddie and Dennis; both men shrugged, clearly unable to offer any form of help to
their friend, either. The blonde looked down to the pocket of his hoodie, pulling out the iPod still
resting inside.

As a plan slowly began to form, Waylon took the device and placed it in Chris’s hands, the larger
man’s eyes still closed, “Here; you can film along with me. It’ll help you tell the difference between
an illusion and reality, too.” He said soothingly. “We’ll be here to tell you if something’s real, too.
Trust me.”

Chris heaved out a sigh, fingers closing around Waylon’s where they still ghosted over the device.
The larger man opened his eyes, quick to flick the camera app open from the lock screen before
scanning the hall carefully.

Everyone held their breath until Chris took the iPod down, sighing. “Nothing.”

Waylon nodded, “The password is two-five-three-six in case you need it.” He said, reaching for the
camera's 'record' button once more. “Alright. Are we ready?”

Everyone nodded at once. Eddie moved forward, nudging Waylon out of the way before directing Chris to stand on the other side of the door. He looked towards Waylon and Dennis next, motioning with his head for them to get back against the wall as he graced his fingers over the button to the door.

“What are you doing?” Waylon whispered, raising his eyebrows.

“Oooh…” Dennis sucked in a breath across from Waylon, pointing two fingers towards the door. “I never had that conversation with you, did I?”

If Waylon could raise his eyebrows further, he would’ve, “What conversation…?” He began to ask, but was cut off by the soft ‘woosh’ of a door opening, followed by a series of gunshots.

Waylon shrieked, ducking down onto the floor before placing his hands over his head as the sound of bullets and grunting filled the room. When the triggers were finally released, Waylon looked up between his fingers to find Eddie standing in the next room over with Chris, his arm wrapped around the neck of one of the guards who’d attacked them inside.

As he looked closer, Waylon could see a pair of legs from another guard peeking past the edges of the doorway. His breath hitched sharply, nearly toppling over walking until he realized that the other person was simply unconscious. Not dead.

“Where’s Miles Upshur? Where are the other inmates?” Chris demanded, kneeling down in front of the guard that Eddie was still holding. Waylon tried to control his breathing, leaning against the wall as he watched.

That was when he noticed a small patch of blood slowly dripping down Chris’s bare arm. Waylon gasped, gaining the man’s attention. “Chris! Your arm…”

“Grazed.” Chris assured, glancing over his shoulder to give Waylon a small smile, “I'll be fine.” He then turned back to the guard, fingers bursting against the man’s chest. “Where is he?”

The man hissed loudly, kicking his feet forward in an attempt to throw Eddie off. Waylon glanced over at Dennis, who’d already shuffled his way to the side. If the blonde hadn’t already seen him walk over, Waylon knew he would’ve screamed.

The teen had a straight poker face, eyes flickering to meet Waylon’s, “While you were gone, Miles and I did some research.” He spoke quietly, both watching as Chris repeated his previous action. “Chris used to have an affinity for science, and one of his studies was anatomy. Eddie has a strong sense of smell; he could tell there were guards behind the door. These walls aren’t too thick.”

Waylon furrowed his brows, listening in on the man’s faint mumbles as Eddie drew him into a state of unconsciousness. “That’s… A little disturbing.”

“Everyone’s a little disturbing.” Dennis mumbled, standing straight when the two men unlocked the next door, Chris stealing one of the small guns strewn on the ground.

Waylon jumped back at the sight of the weapon, putting his hands up in front of his face in an automatic defense reflex. His mind flashed to a memory from his past when his uncle had pulled a gun on all three of the bickering kids in his house. “Woah, Chris, let’s not…”

“It’s alright,” The larger man said, cutting him off. In one swift motion Chris pulled the pistol between his hands, snapping the weapon in half as well as crushing the other with the weight of his
foot. He kicked the shards across the room, wiping off his hands. “We’re not going to.”

Eddie pressed on to the next room with a key card attached to the guard’s jacket, walking into another empty hall. Chris motioned for Waylon and Dennis to follow; and who were they to refuse?

Once they knew they were secure, Chris turned back to the group, “Alright, I’ve got a plan. They already know we’re here; one of those guys had been radioing about the noise when we opened the door.” He said, gesturing to a much larger door across the hall. “We’re splitting up. After that door, I’ll take a left while you three take a right. You’re going to go for Billy, and I’m going to go for Miles.”

“Splitting up?” Dennis asked warily. “That doesn’t sound like a very bright idea.”

Chris shook his head, “No; Miles is going to be down the hall, in the next room over. I can get to him in less than two minutes. You three on the other hand have to go through… Another room before Billy’s hall pops out on the right. The inmates are all in little glass chambers; at least, that’s what the guard told me. It’s all we have.”

“What other room, though?”

The larger man scratched the back of his head nervously. “Ah… I don’t really know. The guy called it ‘The Engine Room’. Lots of computers and tech, and stuff.”

“It doesn’t sound that bad,” Eddie mumbled, unlocking the door into their next destination. “We’ll handle it. Waylon, Dennis, come on.”

Dennis chuckled, following Eddie through the door, “Holy shit, he called you by your name.” He laughed, gently hitting Waylon’s arm as they moved to the right wing of the hall.

Waylon looked back at Chris one last time, watching the other man start down the left side that was supposedly occupied by Miles. “Come back in one piece, Chris Walker. Or I might have to kill you if Miles doesn’t beat me to it.”

Chris let out a faint laugh, “Can do.” He said, waving his hand as a final goodbye before jogging in the opposite direction.

Waylon turned back to Eddie and Dennis, who were already moving ahead of him. He pulled out the camera, finding the hall a bit too dark for his tastes. He tried to remember Miles’ morals about videotaping—Document everything, right? Whether or not it was true, it sure as hell sounded like Miles.

As the three pressed on, the ceiling above them grew taller and taller. Waylon wanted to cover his ears when he began hearing wet dripping sounds all around him, confused as to where the source of the noise was coming from. He didn’t feel anything wet on his shoulders, and Eddie and Dennis didn’t seem to notice it.

Waylon turned the camera up, finding a strange symbol plastered across the walls. He made sure to document it carefully, not paying attention as he accidentally bumped into Eddie’s back.

The towering man flinched, looking down at what was only a nervous Waylon, fidgeting on the floor beneath him. He relaxed instantly, pressing a hand against the large blast door towering over the three of them; by the looks of it, the seal stretched all the way to top of the ceiling.

It was a set of double-doors; Waylon brought Miles’ camera up when he noticed the same symbol from before etched onto each slab. He glanced over towards Eddie, who was already scanning the
The doors opened into a huge, futuristic-looking room full of blue lights and computer screens flickering along here and there. The area overall was massive; it seemed like a hundred people could pile in with enough room to stretch out their arms. It had to be the Engine room, then.

But there was a problem with the area. And the problem was that there wasn’t a single soul residing inside.

“This smells fishy,” Eddie whispered, kicking a desk chair over as he passed by. “Murkoff would always have someone on staff, those stupid whores; they’re planning something. And I think we might just be at the end of it…”

Waylon gulped, glancing around quickly before moving across the room to a door on the right wall. “Well, we can’t do anything about it right now. Let’s just find Billy and get out of here.”

“Alright now wait just a second,” Dennis piped up, pointing an accusing finger towards Waylon’s chest. “You and Eddie both said that Billy’s turned into a monster. Who knows how hard it’ll be to get him out of here! I don’t know if anyone’s realized this yet, but we’re all just kids. I’m not sure if we’re in over our heads and about to pay the price.”

Eddie growled, whacking Dennis’s hand back down to his side. “I’m not a child. You two are the minors here. The whole reason we went through with this ridiculous plan was because any immediate state involvement would get covered up by Murkoff before you could blink. We needed to come. Are you suggesting we give up?”

Dennis glared right back at the older man, “No. I’m suggesting we get something else we came here for; stone-cold documentation. We’re only surrounded by, oh I don’t know, dozens of computers,” The teen said, spinning around with his arms out to exaggerate the point.

Waylon let his hand fall back to his side and away from the door, glancing at the computer closest to him. “Well, I don’t have a hard drive.”

The teen smirked, picking up a USB placed haphazardly on a desk beside him. He tossed it towards Waylon, who caught the device with shaking hands. “Murkoff may be a huge biometric security company, but their staff is really poorly trained. They set a password as one-two-three-four, for crying out loud.”

Waylon was already working through the Murkoff files as Dennis finished his short rant. He’d never seen so much access revealed in a company before; he’d take the time to look through everything he could if there wasn’t a security team on their ass. Instead, the blonde stuffed as many files as he could into the port, taking it out and shoving it into the back pocket of his jeans. “We can check it out later. I wouldn’t be able to read much without my glasses, anyway.”

Just as Waylon sat up from his chair, he noticed Eddie’s change in stance from somewhat-relaxed to disturbingly still. The blonde was about to ask what was wrong before Eddie was there, covering Waylon’s mouth with his hand. “People are coming. The way we came in.”

Dennis moved towards the other two, panicked. “How many?”

“I don’t know.”

“Dammit,” Dennis hissed, moving back over towards the door Waylon had been trying to open.
beforehand. “Eddie, is anyone on the other side of this door?”

Waylon was still in Eddie’s arms as the other man inhaled, narrowing his eyes towards what could be an elusive creature residing on the other side of the blast doors. After a few seconds of silence, Eddie spoke. “No one from what I can tell.”

The blonde pried Eddie’s hand away from his mouth, looking up at him nervously. “Did the door lock behind us?”

_BANG._

Both Waylon and Dennis screamed as the loud noise echoed against the walls of the mysterious computer room, a threat of what was to come at any moment. Eddie swept Waylon off of his feet instantly, placing him down onto the floor only when they were in front of the next room over.

Waylon could hear the blast door opening across the room where they’d entered as Eddie slammed his hand against the unlocking mechanism, pushing the two other men with him into the new hall before slamming the button behind them with an aggravated sigh.

But he wasn’t done yet. Once Waylon was able to collect his bearings enough to stand, he watched as the older man slammed against the keypad with his elbow and fist, effectively putting the scanner out of service.

“That’s not going to hold them for very long,” Waylon panted, bring his hands down to his knees.

“I don’t think we’ll need that much time.” Dennis spoke next, voice seeming far-off and distant.

When Waylon looked up, he found that he was half-right with his assumptions. Dennis was already all the way across the hall, standing in front of a glass window. His head was tilted to the side in wonder, eyes widened.

In fact, the entire hall was full of the strange observation windows. Most seemed to have been left unoccupied; except one, in which an older man was hooked up to a strange machine on the far side of the room he was trapped in.

The sight was a fairly gruesome one; the man didn’t seem all that alive when Waylon got a good look at him. Pipes and tubes ran along his arms, legs, back… The blonde gagged, trying to suppress his urge to regurgitate his breakfast as he continued over to where Dennis had been standing.

He jumped back in surprise when he saw the young boy pressed up against the glass, smiling wickedly at both of them. The boy brought a hand down past the window, closed eyes turning towards the newcomer. “Well, hello! Are you the boy from my dreams? I can hear you… I know you’re there… Your voice…”

The strange conversation the boy known only as Billy Hope was making had Waylon shaking on the spot; and that wasn’t even the worst of it. The boy had strange markings all along his arms and neck, and his droopy eyelids were beginning to make Waylon uncomfortable.

“Oh…’’ The blonde mumbled, trying to control his fear enough to speak properly. “We’re here to break Murkoff. You’re going to be free, Billy. We’re going to help you.”

Waylon jumped once more at the sound of Eddie’s voice, the man already standing behind them with a firm look on his face. He glanced down towards Dennis, then Waylon. Then back to Billy. “How come his eyes are closed?”
“Well, that’s easy!” Billy interrupted, giggling from the other side of the glass. He brought his hands up to his eyelids, prying them open with two fingers each. The boy’s voice dropped, taking on a much darker tone than before. “I don’t have any eyes to open, Mr. Gluskin.”

Waylon squeaked, covering his own eyes with his palms and backing into the wall. Dennis cringed beside him, and Eddie only snarled. “That’s enough, slut. I understand.”

Billy let go of his eyelids, rapping against the glass with a gentle fist. “Y’know, these walls are all soundproofed. Dumb little Blaire Bear didn’t think things through.”

Dennis sucked in a breath beside him. “He has a hearing disorder. I think he can hear more than the average human can; he’s right, though. Blaire—or whoever operates down here—took his eyes. It only worsened the disorder since one of his major senses was taken away; it enhanced the others.”

“Ding-ding-ding!” Billy laughed, sliding down from the glass window and onto the floor of the sterile room as his giggles and snorts only increased with time. “And now he’s come to play. I hope you stay safe out there! And make it a clean fight!”

Waylon slowly brought his hands down from his face, eyes widened in horror, nerves prickling against his sides. “What is he talking about…?”

CLICK.

All three inmates turned towards the metallic snap of a gun’s safety unlocking at the other end of the hall. The sliding doors into the computer room were pried open, and Jeremy Blaire himself was the one stepping through the mess, gun in hand.

“Oh god.” Waylon whispered, unconsciously moving closer to Eddie’s side.

Jeremy didn’t look in the least bit pleased. His face was contorted into an expression that seemed to be an emotion that fell between anger and pure hatred. He held the gun firmly, and Waylon could tell he was unsure of who he should point it at. In his spare hand was a small black bag, the contents unknown.

“I’m going to give you ten seconds,” Blaire began, deciding to point the gun at Waylon. “To kick the USB and camera over, stand against the wall, and give up the charade. I’m done fucking around.”

Waylon paused, pulling out both the USB and the camera. Dennis and Eddie looked towards Waylon, who was the current owner of both of the requested devices. Dennis shook his head nervously while Eddie moved in front of Waylon, taking the USB out of his trembling hands.

Eddie placed the device into the pocket of his flannel, rolling up the sleeves of his arms further as he sent a nasty glare towards Blaire. “Are you sure about that, whore?”

Waylon was expecting Blaire to threaten him again, or worse, pull the trigger at the man acting as his guardian angel. Instead then businessman began to laugh; an honest-to-god, genuine laugh. The blonde found the whole situation that much more horrifying; he flicked the camera on, handing it over to Dennis as he requested the teen to record Jeremy’s every move. They never knew what he might do next.

Once Blaire finished his laughing fit, he brought the gun down to his side only for a moment in favor of tugging the black bag open, ready to pull the contents out as he gave Eddie the worst smirk he’d ever seen on the man’s face.
Jeremy laughed, pulling the item out and tossing it onto the floor just a few feet away from Eddie. “Should’ve learned, Gluskin. I always get what I want.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to see what Blaire had left for them. On the floor, such a distant memory and as white as snow… was Waylon’s missing ear.

The color drained from the blonde’s face, head whipping back up when he heard an inhumane noise tear from Eddie’s throat. Oh god. Muscle verses machine. This was going to end badly, Waylon knew.

And yet all he could do was stand frozen in place and watch.
Countdown

Chris panted, hands on his knees as the metal door slid shut behind him. The run had been further than anticipated, causing him to take another, much longer path before he was led to the cell block he’d been looking for. The label outside had read correctly; now all he had to do was trust the guard’s word.

He looked up, cupping his hands around his mouth as he began moving forward, “Miles?!” The man shouted, pausing to listen for a reaction.

Chris jumped when something slammed against the glass wall beside him. He covered his mouth, turning towards the strange... being contained on the other side. Its mouth was torn at the edges and stitched back together again, and what little of their clothes remained was ripped to shreds.

The lights flickered against the ceiling above him. Chris’s breath quickened as he fumbled with Miles’ iPod, turning on the camera and flashing it at the figure to take a picture. He opened the photo album, convinced it was simply another hallucination of his. It couldn’t be real, could it?

...It was. Right there, clear as day on the center of the screen was that horrific looking inmate still staring at him with a smile that could hardly be considered human. What the hell had Murkoff been doing to them through all that time passed? This?

Chris’s nerves didn’t get any calmer as another inmate in a cell nearby did the same exact thing. The larger man huffed, walking over to the next deformed patient. They had an entire rack attached to their back, tubes and wires connecting towards where they’d nearly torn out of the inmate’s skin.

He took another picture. Yet again, it remained. The thing that had once been a person yelped cheerfully, sliding down the glass while leaving a thick brown gunk behind in the shape of their hands.

“Miles!” Chris yelled louder, hoping to god that the younger man hadn’t been subjected to the same fate as the other two. Neither could be him; one had skin much too dark and the other much too light.

“Hello?!” A muffled shriek called out near the far end of the hall. Chris whipped towards the source, stalking over as fast as he could while calling Miles’ name once more.

A few cells away Chris heard another call; this time it was undoubtedly his name being spoken. He jogged towards the cell, nearly jumping back when he saw Miles pressed up against the glass similarly to the last two patients. But unlike them, the brunette seemed to be untouched.

“Oh my god,” Chris gaped, pressing his hand against Miles’ on the other side of the glass. “It’s you! Are you okay? What did they do?!”

Miles shook his head, gesturing towards a small locking mechanism beside the glass window, “Chris, I need you to calm down for me. I’m okay, see? They didn’t do anything. Can you open the door?” He asked pleadingly, scooting over towards where the lock and door could still be seen by him.

Chris took a moment to process Miles’ request, nodding briefly as he took a look at the system. It was a large keypad with a small knob situated atop the metal frame, looking as if it could hold more than a four-number passcode.

Feeling lucky, Chris dialed the same number code they’d been punching since their arrival in the
basement. Instead of a green confirmation light, he was met with a bright red flash followed by a dull beeping noise.

“Are you serious right now,” Miles’ muffled voice asked pathetically from the other side of the glass. “One-two-three-four? I can’t see it, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know the first four buttons of a keypad.”

“Shut up.” Chris hissed through clenched teeth, trying a series of random numbers but to no avail. Dammit, if only Wa…

“Where’s Waylon?” Miles asked, tapping a finger against the glass. “Maybe he could do it?”

Chris growled, kicking the keypad in frustration, ideas swimming in and out through his fit of anger. A dark cloud began to creep around the lock, taunting him while sticking its thin claws towards his nose. ‘You can’t hack it. Give up, and leave him.’

The larger man yelled, raising his elbow before slamming it down onto the keypad, hard. The demon hissed, curling up like a snake against the floor as he hit the lock. Slowly, a solid idea began to form as he punched the lock again. And again. Fists, elbows, knees; anything would work at this point.

After one last knock of defiance the metal piece broke, falling pathetically to the floor. Chris looked up at the remaining knob coldly, tugging it hard enough that he snapped it in half, prying the metal door beside it open with hardened fingers.

Once the door was open enough that Miles could slide his body through, he did. The door slammed shut with a loud ‘clank’, rattling the already broken frame.

“Woah,” Miles mumbled in awe, finally looking up at Chris. “Chris, that was kind of badass—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Miles was pulled into the tightest hug he’d ever received in his entire life. He was yanked up from his previous position standing, feet barely touching the glossy metal floors as his chin propped up against Chris’s shoulder. The larger man shook, holding Miles as tightly as he could. He was alive, alive, alive—

After another moment of silence, Chris put Miles back down to the floor, holding onto the smaller man’s shoulders tightly. Miles let out a small smile, rubbing Chris’s arm in appreciation. “Now’s probably not the time,” He mumbled, brushing his long locks of hair back. “Thank you, Chris. But what do we do now? Where are we headed?”

A small hiss interrupted Chris’s thoughts. He looked down, finding the shadowy-looking demon sulking around on the floor beneath his feet. He gagged, kicking the creature away before pulling Miles’ iPod back up to take a picture of it. As soon as the lens flashed and he took the camera down, the demon was gone.

Chris sighed in relief, turning back to Miles, “Here, take your iPod. I think you could do a better job at visuals than me.” He laughed lightly, handing the device over to much more experienced hands. “Ed, Dennis and Waylon went to look for Billy. They have your camera. I’m not sure whether state police or the National Guard is coming to help us, but it’ll be one of them kicking down the doors eventually. We still have too much time until that happens; we need to find all four of them and get the hell out of here.”

“Okay,” Miles breathed, opening the video option on his iPod. After a moment’s hesitation, he looked back up at Chris. “You uh… Wouldn’t happen to have anything to write on, would you? They wouldn’t let me touch anything while I was in there; I’m dying, Chris.”
The larger man laughed, pulling out a small pad of sticky notes and a pen from his back pocket. “Thought you might. Snuck ‘em down from the cafeteria. I always come prepared.”

Miles chuckled, scribbling a few quick notes down onto the pad before ripping them off and shoving them into his back pocket. He pulled a few more, sticking them to his arm before putting the pen away in a different pocket.

Chris watched silently until he was done, frown slowly clouding over his previous smile. “Are you sure you’re okay? The inmates down here are… Are…”

“Sub-human?” Miles finished for him, clicking his tongue, “It’s awful. Fucking Blaire; other than a few bruises and scratches, I’m as dandy as I can be.” He smirked, nodding his head down the hall. “We can help them later. Shall we?”

Just as Chris went to respond, several rounds of gunshots could be heard on the floor just above the ceiling, startling them both. The lights flickered again for two whole seconds before turning off completely, replaced by loud sirens red flashing lights.

“Let’s move!” Chris commanded, grabbing Miles’ hand before the brunette had the chance to refuse, tugging him towards the opposite end of the hall away from where he’d come in.

Waylon choked pathetically, wiping his mouth in disgust. His stomach was strewn all over the floor in a nasty orange color, and he had to look away from the sight before what was left of his intestines repeated the process.

“What do we do?!” The blonde heard Dennis shriek, but it was clear the demand wasn’t directed towards him. No, when he looked up to question the startled teen, Dennis was staring directly into Billy Hope’s cell, eyes alight with fear.

Billy chuckled lowly, a crooked finger pointing to his left, “A lil’ lock will do the trick,” He laughed, head now tilting towards Waylon. “Tick-tock, little one.”

Dennis looked between the lock and Waylon several times before the blonde got the hint. He stood on shaking legs, stumbling his way over towards the keypad even as the side of his head missing his ear began to throb painfully.

Waylon worked through the mechanism, his vision spacey and distorted. He felt as if he was on the verge of passing out as he tried through a number of combinations, each one failing after the next. He glanced up towards a small knob above the pad, fingers gracing over it carefully before he dialed in another number. What was the passcode on that computer monitor again?

A small click followed the sound of Blaire yelling down the hall. Waylon tried to will himself to ignore it as he used what little strength he had left to flip the knob, creating a small crack in the door beside the cell before it began to open with a hiss.

“Oh my god, Waylon!” Dennis cried out as Waylon stumbled to the floor, the pain in his side becoming too much as he collapsed onto the floor just as two bare, pale feet greeted him on the other side of the metal plating. Waylon looked up to see Billy Hope staring down at him with a small smile, thick veins and wires running up his gangly legs.

He watched out of the corner of his eye as Billy disappeared beside him, and soon after a firm tug on his hoodie had him pulled back against the wall. The taller inmate propped him up from there, pressing an ice-cold hand onto Waylon’s forehead while his legs were pulled to the side.
“Uh-oh,” Billy mumbled delightfully, and Waylon noticed through his eyelids that the inmate was looking at Dennis. “He’s a bit sick. Not getting out of Blaire’s reign on his own, no-sir.”

“You’re dead, you filthy whore! I’ve been looking for the cause all this time…”

“I was doing you all a favor, getting rid of that stupid kid.”

*BANG.*

Four more shots followed. Eddie cursed loudly, taking the pipe held securely in his hands before charging at Blaire, swinging it across the side of the man’s head. Blaire’s smirk quickly turned into the blank stare of unconsciousness as he toppled against the door’s wall. The lights of the hall flickered off, exchanged for red sirens.

“F-fucking…” Eddie hissed, bringing a hand up to the bullet wound lodged in his upper thigh. After a quick inspection, he lifted the pole back up, now above Blaire’s skull. “Slut!”

Just as he swung down, a thin, veiny arm grabbed the pole and held it steady. There stood Billy Hope, smiling even with those closed eyes of his as he thrust the pole back and out of Eddie’s grip, approaching Blaire instead.

“You might want to hurry there, Eddie-o,” Billy chuckled, grabbing Blaire by the hair on his scalp. He then pointed down the hall, back to the other two. “Your other half isn’t looking too good.”

“I think Waylon has a fever, Ed.” Dennis called nervously, confirming Billy’s previous words.

As much as Eddie wanted to push Billy Hope aside and kill Blaire once and for all, he knew that his darling took first priority, always. Eddie seethed through his teeth, jogging back over towards the other two as Billy began dragging Blaire behind him.

He was careful to step over the pile of vomit before leaning over Waylon, “Darling? Waylon, are you awake?” He asked carefully, placing a hand on Waylon’s cheek. When the smaller man let out a small groan as a yes, he asked the next important question. “Can you move?”

Waylon didn’t do anything at all to respond other than a faint tilt of his head and a startled whimper. Eddie’s eyes traveled over to the empty section of Waylon’s hair where his ear should have been, the organ now left behind just a few feet away.

Eddie slammed his fist against the wall beside Waylon’s head before tugging the blonde up and into his arms, hooking his hands under the smaller man’s knees, “We have to get out, now. He’ll be fine as long as we don’t do anything to make the sickness worse.” Eddie commanded, gesturing towards Dennis. “Take his camera.”

None of them had noticed that Billy had already dragged Blaire’s unconscious body far past them, mutilated fingers reaching for the door at the other end of the hall. Eddie inhaled deeply, pupils dilating as he moved to try and stop the crazy teenager. “There’s someone on the other side of the door, you…”

Too late. Billy laughed horrifically as he slammed his fist on the button, greeted by two startled bodies on the other side of the door. Miles and Chris.

“Chris—Miles! Thank god you’re okay,” Dennis sighed in relief, pressing his hand against the wall. The flashing lights illuminated his face eerily as he covered his ears, already tired from the annoying sound. “We’ve gotta get out of here; guards are pacing the tech room where we came from, and Waylon’s sick.”
Miles pushed back his messy hair, glancing over towards Eddie to see that Dennis had been right, “We tried sealing the doors off behind us, but we could still hear them coming from where we came.” He huffed, looking down the unexplored hall to his left.

“Well that only gives us one option, and that option is here.” Chris said firmly, already starting down the hall. Miles glanced over towards Billy, who looked much different than what he’d pictured when he’d called himself a ‘monster’. He looked down to see the teen’s fingers snatched in Blaire’s hair, curling in and out of the dark strands.

“Okay…” Miles mumbled, looking between the three men left. “Alright, people. We’re moving out.”

Everyone, including Billy himself, was quick to comply. Miles made sure Eddie knocked the blast door shut behind him as they left, following Chris down the much darker hall.

The further they went, the fainter the sirens got and less light escaped through the cracks in the walls and doors. In fact, with more time that passed, the fewer places there were left to go.

“This is just fuckin’ peachy,” Miles mumbled, turning on the flashlight app on his iPod. It only worked to illuminate what was a few feet ahead of him, and nothing from the tall ceiling above them was visible. He paused in his tracks, listening. “Hey… Do you guys hear that?”

Everyone else stopped too, tuning in to the sound of the silent hall, “No…” Said Dennis, tilting his head in question.

“No, no, wait,” Miles mumbled, holding up a hand. Less than a second later, several drips followed his words. “That. The dripping noise.”

“Drip, drip, drip.” Billy mumbled lazily, re-adjusting his hold on Blaire’s hair. “The pipes that lead to the Engine, of course! They remind me of snakes sometimes, they curl along the ceiling…”

Everyone hummed in response, “Pipes,” Miles mumbled, writing more scribbles down onto the sticky notes lining his arm. He shook his head before turning the light of his iPod back on. “Great.”

Dennis held Miles’ video camera in his hands, turning it up towards the ceiling to see if he could see anything the others couldn’t. Miles could hear him using the zoom button, the teen’s eyes squinting. Dennis sighed, pulling the device back down. “Nothing I can see.”

Miles looked behind himself to the others since the only person leading ahead of him was Chris. He made sure Billy and Dennis were keeping up while Eddie hefted Waylon back up into his arms every now and then, the blonde letting out faint whimpers at the change whenever it happened.

When the brunette turned back towards Chris, the much larger man was already further ahead of them, standing still in front of something darker than the rest of the hall. When Miles flashed the light over him, he quickly found that it was a door.

“Shit,” Miles cursed, jogging up over to him. He flicked his thumb over the camera, taking a flash picture of the large symbol overlapping the metal of the door. “Where do you think we’re gonna end up?”

Chris didn’t answer; he waited until the others finally caught up before pressing his hand against the door. It slid open, slowly.

Everyone peeked into the room. It was just as dark as the hall they’d been in, save for a small sliver of light streaming down from a dying industrial light attached to the ceiling above. From what Miles could see on the floor was a pair of feet, scooted back up into a large black block of an object.
“The fuck…” Miles mumbled, taking a step forward. He tried calming his breath, thinking happy thoughts as he approached whoever was sitting only a few feet away. He could hear the steps of the others entering the room, but no one but Chris followed his lead.

‘Remember when you and Waylon did karaoke? That was fun. He was so flustered. Or maybe that time you convinced the four to play go-fish with you? Dennis nearly had a heart attack when he lost the seventeenth round…’

Miles reached a hand out, the light above still flickering on and off. “Uh… Hello…?”

‘You’re not scared. Think of all of your friends here alongside you; they’re with you.‘

The person reached a scabbed hand towards him, tilting their head out into the light. “You idiots. I would tell you to run, but it’s far too late.”

Stevenson stared up at him, eyes red. Oh god.

As soon as the words came out of the broken inmate’s mouth, the lights hanging from the ceiling above slowly flickered on one by one, revealing that the room was much larger than anticipated. Inmates shrieked from above, dozens hanging by wires and cables attached to a huge machine at the center of the room.

Miles looked up to the balconies surrounding the Engine room; there were Murkoff guards, lots of them, all with guns and weaponry pointed directly at them. At the front of the line stood two guards and one person Miles would recognize any day; Pauline Glick and David Annapurna, standing at attention beside Blaire’s father; co-founder of Mount Massive and Murkoff—whoever they were now.

Everyone in the room remained absolutely silent even as the doors they’d come through slammed shut, locking into place as Stevenson shrieked and retreated behind a section of the machine holding the long-lost convicts.

Mr. Blaire stepped forward, looking between all six of the inmates standing on the floor beneath him, “Well I must say, you gave an honest effort. Really, you’ve impressed me.” He said, clapping slowly as he looked each of them in the eye.

That was when Jeremy Blaire began chuckling at Billy’s feet; a soft, evil laugh that chilled Miles to his very core.

When the brunette looked back up, Mr. Blaire was glaring at his son, fingers tapping against the metal bars of the balcony. “You wanted to know so much; but everything comes with a price. My son should’ve learned his lesson by now.”

Jeremy stopped chuckling, hands falling from where they’d been trying to pry Billy’s fingers off of him. The teenager let go with a snort, tapping his feet against the floor impatiently.

“I could still use some of you, you know. We can stop all of this violence, the contamination slowly plaguing our world…” Mr. Blaire sighed, glancing down before focusing his eyes on Miles. “You could be very, very useful to me.”

Miles narrowed his eyes, chin tilting up in defiance, “What, we’re gonna come all this way and you’re not gonna give us even a snippet of what we came for?” He asked, flicking the audio recording of his iPod on behind his back, away from the attention of the guards.

Mr. Blaire chuckled heartily, motioning to the guards around the room. They all raised their guns
higher, now pointed towards each of the men specifically, “We make our patients into soldiers, kid. Lower IQ’s don’t make it past the first stage. We needed good meat as dummies and we found all of you. Simple as that. Happy? Do you have a clear conscience before you choose?”

Miles tapped the screen on his iPod impatiently. “Choose what, exactly?”

“Whether you live,” Mr. Blaire gestured towards the inmates hanging above them, all kicking and fighting furiously through fits of laughter and anger and rage. The older man clenched his fist, pointing a finger carelessly behind Miles. “Or die.”

The brunette sucked in a breath, turning his iPod audio recording to a dark screen and slipping it into his back pocket before glancing over his shoulder. Eddie was glaring up at Mr. Blaire even harder than everybody else, clutching Waylon tight to his chest.

Waylon was coughing and wheezing in Eddie’s arms. The blonde opened his eyes just a crack, looking at Miles helplessly before starting up another round of hacking.

A door slid open on the main floor a yard away from Miles, revealing a pissed-looking Andrew, gun in hand, “Put Mr. Park on the floor and back up, Gluskin.” Their teacher ordered, gesturing to all six of them next. “All of you! Separate!”

Miles noticed out of the corner of his eye that Pauline was no longer next to Mr. Blaire on the balcony. Annapurna looked apprehensive beside him, gun still pointed down towards them. The rest of the guards remained as still as ever, as if they were made of nothing but stone.

Eddie didn’t do as he was told. He growled lowly, backing away from the guards and Andrew opposite of the man’s orders. Chris and Dennis made their way over to Miles, and Billy left Blaire in place in favor of standing in front of Eddie and Waylon.

“Oh come on now,” Mr. Blaire groaned. “You’re really going to give me this?”

“The doctor is dead,” An inmate began mumbling from where he hung above them, over and over. Some guard’s attention was brought up to the inmate, crazy as he was. “Wernicke is dead.”

“KILL HIM!”

Everyone covered their ears at the piercing sound of the inmate’s shrieking, flinging himself around wildly in his restraints. Everything happened at the speed of light.

Annapurna threw himself at Mr. Blaire, wrapping an arm around the man’s neck and aiming his gun towards his skull. Most of the other guard’s attention was still stuck on the inmate, but slowly, more and more began to take aim between Mr. Blaire and David.

Pauline appeared next, racing out of the doorway Andrew had come from. Andrew’s head whipped around, but he didn’t fire towards her. Instead, he aimed for Dennis and Miles.

The bullets zinged just above their heads, both ducking at the last second once they realized what could happen. Pauline growled, ripping the gun from Andrew’s hands.

Andrew tried pulling the trigger once more as a last resort, but it was a futile attempt. In less than a second Pauline had her arm locked around his neck and then gun at his back, pulling to fire more than what was necessary.

Billy screamed in delight, throwing Eddie off on his injured leg as he tripped. Waylon fell out of his arms, skidding across the floor before trying to flip himself over. The blonde groaned, pushing
himself up onto his elbows; a guard stood above him, gun aimed directly at his forehead.

“No!” Miles screamed, watching as David got the message from where he still held Mr. Blaire tight. He pointed his gun at the guard, firing at the man’s hands. The guard yelped in surprise, dropping his gun.

“Everybody shut up!” Pauline shrieked, dropping a limp Andrew to the ground. Blood leaked out onto the floor, fingers twitching. “We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. Drop your guns, or the pretty Blaire’s faces,” She pointed her gun towards Jeremy while David had his back towards Blaire’s father. “Aren’t going to look so pretty anymore.”

The guards all looked between each other, unsure of what they should do. One by one, they began to lower and drop their guns. Pauline looked over her shoulder towards the six inmates behind her, giving them a faint nod of approval.

It was all a blur. Waylon looked between everyone around him, all moving as if time was slowed down. Billy Hope pressed himself against the wall beside Blaire’s groaning form, hands raking down his face as he laughed and giggled and snorted. Eddie, lying face-down on the floor just a few feet away. Miles, Chris, and Dennis all looking between themselves before Miles started towards him. The guards, lowering their defenses.

A loud bang went off, followed by what sounded like millions of proceeding footsteps. Waylon felt his eyes drooping as he fell back to the floor, feeling a shift of something underneath him and several mumbles in his ear as his entire world faded in and out. A final gunshot, both firing and hitting on the balcony above them.

The king was dead.
“Okay, next question. If you had to get a tattoo of anything, anywhere on your body, what would it be?”

“Oh god; and it’s permanent?”

“Well yeah.”

“You tell me your idea first.”

“Alright. I’d get a sick-ass dragon on my right arm. Full length, and it curls over three times.”

“That’s… actually kind of awesome.”

“Okay, now you.”

“Fine. Hm…”

“…”

“…”

“…I’m waiting, dude.”

“Well, this is a hard thing to think about! Ah…”

“…”

“I’d like… A little, tiny tree. Really basic; on my wrist.”

“Why a tree?”

“Because I’ve always liked the woods. Trees mean safety to me. I don’t know how to explain it, it’s weird. My dad saved me while I was surrounded by trees. I’ve always blamed the pavement and the ice.”

“Nah, I think it’s cute. I thought you would’ve said something corny, though.”

“Yeah, thanks. Also, I’m not cute.”

“Park…”

“Mr. Park…”

“Mr. Park.”

Waylon flinched, breaking out of his trance by a deep voice ringing in his ears. He looked up, his eyes meeting those of the investigator sitting at the desk across from him. There was an officer present as well, both looking at him with a much more patient attitude than he would’ve expected from people like them. Waylon coughed, letting his feet fall from the chair and back onto the floor. “Um, sorry, I’m listening.”
The investigator sighed in relief, gathering his papers up into a neat pile before him. “You’ve been very helpful over the last two and a half months, Mr. Park. I think we’re just about finished; we’ll take you and your friends out of the program within the next week.”

The blonde tilted his head to the side, hands folding over his lap, “Er… Right. Um… Nobody ever said where exactly we were going to be sent after this.” He mumbled nervously, trying to keep eye-contact but finding it a rather difficult task. These men were very intimidating.

But that was the truth, alright. In fact, nobody had told him anything since Mount Massive. It’d just been the five of them in the same facility for the past month since they broke into the basement levels of the reform school. No news, no reports, no information as to what was going to happen to them. Not even the verdict of the trial and everyone involved. Just three meals a day, basic entertainment systems, and constant interviews and questionings. Waylon knew he would’ve gone nuts by the end of it if his friends weren’t by his side.

Waylon snapped back into reality again when the investigator chuckled, bringing his papers down to a cabinet underneath his desk, “Don’t worry, Mr. Park. You kids were crazy for pulling off a stunt like that inside of your reform; but you did good. You saved a lot of lives. I’d actually been ready to drop the Murkoff case once and for all… and then the station gave me you five.” He rambled on, leaning his elbows forward onto the desk.

When Waylon didn’t reply, the investigator continued. “It’s been hell, Mr. Park. I know you’re all very eager to get out of this place. And the judicial system already made up their minds; you kids are getting a reward for what you did back there, and you’re going to be released back outside, good as new.”

The blonde furrowed his brows, confused by the investigator’s statement. “But, wait… we’re all convicts. And even if you were letting us out, then how would we support ourselves? Half of us don’t have anyone to turn to.”

The investigator shook his head, “You are getting released, Mr. Park. Don’t worry; all of you are going to have checks in until we get all of the hard details of this case sorted out, which won’t be for a while. We still have so much to do.” He explained, grumbling the last few words with a hint of annoyance. “Don’t question my higher-ups, Mr. Park. Unless you want to go back to reform…?”

The office fell silent for a few moments, and Waylon’s answer became clear. Finally, the officer in the room took the chance to speak, “Is there anything you’d like to know before you leave, Park?”

“Jeremy Blaire, Officer Pauline Glick, David Annapurna, and Frank Manera. And there were two patients named Billy Hope and… Stevenson, I don’t think I remember his first name. I know Blaire senior is dead, and one of the counselors, Andrew.” Waylon blurted, sitting back in his chair once he
was done. His memory had been getting rougher, he knew.

Both of the men looked at each other, having what appeared to be a silent conversation before the officer grunted in approval. The investigator was the one who chose to answer. “Blaire, Glick and Annapurna have all been taken into custody. Nothing’s going to be set in stone until next winter, but I’m certain that all three are going to be serving life-sentences.

“Manera is back at home, as far as we know. He got checked and interviewed, as well as testifying during the first half of the trial. Done and over with. The other two kids you mentioned, though, didn’t pass our mental or physical evaluations. They’ve both been sent to a psychiatric hospital to recover. That’s as much information as I can share.”

Waylon groaned, trying and failing to dissolve into his seat. It did feel good to hear he wouldn’t have to be afraid of Blaire anymore. The man was going to be locked up in one place for the rest of his life, and just the thought itself made Waylon happy.

Glick, Annapurna and the other two inmates, on the other hand, he did feel sympathy for. The guards had technically saved their lives, even though they’d been a part of the problem for who knows how long beforehand. And the other two didn’t deserve what happened to them down in those sublevels; they hadn’t asked to go mad.

Things were turning out as almost half of a happy ending after everything they’d gone through to get there. To hell and back. But Waylon was content with the verdict; enough.

“When are we going to be let out?” Waylon decided to ask next.

“As I said before, within the next week. Oh; and there was a woman that stopped by earlier. We couldn’t put a direct I.D. on her, but she said she’d wait. She claimed to be your sister.”

Waylon raised an eyebrow, confused. He didn’t have a sister; never had. Unless…

The blonde jolted upright, eyes widening, “What does she look like?” He asked desperately, scooting even closer over in his chair. He looked back and forth between the two men as if he could get an answer just by reading the looks on their faces.

The officer moved towards the door, yanking it open before gesturing back towards Waylon, “Why don’t we take you over?” The man offered, waiting for Waylon to walk through before he closed the door behind them. Waylon heard the investigator mumble a quick goodbye behind his back, but the sound was muffled in Waylon’s concentrated ears.

The hallways seemed endless; they weren’t, obviously, but that’s how they felt as Waylon followed the officer to what he could only assume was a lobby or visitation center of sorts. He gulped as the officer propped open another door, gesturing to a tall figure pacing back and forth at the other end of the room.

She looked older, but Waylon would recognize her any day. The blonde held back a sob as the woman’s eyes landed on him, her expression twisting to match his, “Oh, Waylon…” Was all she had time to say before Waylon ran at her, wrapping his arms around her torso in a secure hold.

“She looked older, but Waylon would recognize her any day. The blonde held back a sob as the woman’s eyes landed on him, her expression twisting to match his, “Oh, Waylon…” Was all she had time to say before Waylon ran at her, wrapping his arms around her torso in a secure hold.

“Lisa!” He cried, burrowing his face into his cousin’s jacket. He couldn’t believe it; after all that time, he’d believed she was gone forever. And now she’d come back? How was that even possible?

“I missed you too, little guy.” Lisa laughed, ruffling Waylon’s blonde hair as she pulled him closer to her chest. Waylon laughed along with her; how could he not? She was here.
They stayed secure in each other’s arms for another minute more before Lisa pulled them apart, inspecting Waylon up and down. She held his shoulders, biting her lip, “You’ve grown quite a bit, Way. I didn’t realize there was such a big difference between fourteen and eighteen…” She trailed off, obviously trying to blink away tears. Waylon knew exactly what she was thinking about; the day she left.

“It’s okay, Lis.” He mumbled quietly, pulling her back into their previous embrace. “I’m just glad you’re back. How dare you look all adult-like.”

Lisa laughed, louder this time. She tugged on Waylon’s sleeve, gesturing to one of the many rows of seats set up across the tile floors, “Wanna talk for a while? I know you definitely have questions for me. And you deserve answers.”

An hour later, Lisa and Waylon continued to giggle about past memories and current tales to tell. Lisa had started the conversation outright by telling Waylon everything; why she’d left, why she hadn’t come back, where she’d gone, etc.

Her plan had apparently been to get set up in an apartment complex she’d been looking at months in advance to her departure. She’d wanted to set everything up, and then get Waylon into her custody. She’d known all about Waylon and her parent’s relationship; her main priority had been to get him out of there, and as soon as possible.

But she’d run into problems. The apartment wasn’t suitable enough for both an adult and a teen at the time, and she’d just lost her job at a ski mountain nearby due to the minimum wage rise. She’d called them all “Cheap bastards,” on numerous occasions during the tale.

“Why didn’t you call, or try to talk to me? Why make my mind jump to the worst-case scenario?” Waylon had asked tiredly.

“Because I knew mom and pop would’ve had access to our communication before you did, and they’d already told me to never call again. Trust me; I tried.”

Once all of their questions and catching-up had been done and over with, they’d starting telling wild stories of all the crazy things that’d happened to them during their separation. Waylon had ended up having much more to say than Lisa, though.

“I’d read that article about you online when they first took you in, and I didn’t believe it for a second,” Lisa grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest. Her bottom lip jutted out into a pout, and Waylon couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m sorry I was too far away to visit; those two idiots they associated with you! I can’t believe they’re still out there…”

“Heh, yeah… Let’s not talk about that.”

Waylon told and retold his entire story of Mount Massive, including the friends and enemies he’d made along the way. It’d kept Lisa amused; until he got to his ‘accident’ with Jeremy Blaire.

“I swear, if I ever have the chance to meet that man I’ll kill him. I don’t care if I got to prison for it, he nearly killed you! He manipulated you, cheated you out, and did all those god-awful things…!”

Waylon scratched the back of his neck, feeling a blush crawling up his skin. “No Lisa, I’d much rather he be in prison than you. I think this is better.”

Lisa huffed, plopping back down into her seat. “Well, phooey. Anyway, what about you and your friends? Oh no, tell me about the one you said was technically your boyfriend first. If it’s juicy information, send it my way, Waylon. Describe what he looks like.”
“Uh…” Waylon blushed harder, shrugging his shoulders up awkwardly. “Well, he’s more than a foot taller than me, a muscular kind of guy with black hair shaved on the sides…”

“Ooh, sexy! What happened to him, anyway?”

“Er-- He’s still in the building with the rest of us…”

“He’s here?!?” Lisa shouted, jumping up from her seat from pure delight. “Oh no, now I’ve gotta meet him! I can act as your over-protective father figure giving my blessing…”

“Lisa, no-!”

She didn’t have enough time to meet any of the gang before the sun began to set; the employees had kindly asked her to leave. She’d promised Waylon she’s keep in touch as soon and as much as possible, offering up her new address and phone number as a parting gift. Waylon felt satisfied; it was as if just one more cloud out of many had vanished from his life. It allowed a bigger ray of sun to peek through all the rain.

Miles rocked back and forth in the squeaky chair as the investigator played with an SD card and several notebook papers that were currently scattered across his desk. When the man didn’t make any indication of acknowledging Miles soon, the brunette began to rock the chair at a much faster pace.

“Mr. Upshur, I’m going to have to ask you to stop doing that,” The investigator sighed, dropping the papers in his hands back down to the table.

Miles piqued an eyebrow in interest, ceasing all of his previous movements. “What do you want? I can’t even count how many times you people have asked me to come here, and now that we’re about to get out…”

The investigator rolled his eyes, “This will be quick Mr. Upshur, I assure you. Now,” The man mumbled, jogging his files together in a neat row. “I wanted to not only wrap up your sessions with a few final questions like I’d requested, but also to thank you for all of your hard work.”

That… Wasn’t what Miles had been expecting. The brunette gripped the edges of his chair, tilting his head. “Er… What?”

“Your documentation skills are remarkable, Mr. Upshur.” The investigator praised, holding up the notebook papers that now belonged to the evidence bin in his hands. “You recorded almost everything that’d taken place; both on paper and on video. There’s more evidence than we know what to do with; and it all helped tremendously in closing up not only the Mount Massive case, but the disappearance of Billy Hope as well.”

“Yeah, well,” Miles mumbled, throwing a hand forward lazily. “It’s just what I do.”

The investigator smirked, leaning over the desk towards Miles, “Mr. Upshur, have you ever considered becoming a reporter? I think you’d do well in the investigative department,” The man asked curiously, smirk growing wider.

Miles hummed, looking back down towards the metallic desk, “Hm. I’ve never really thought about it, to be honest with you. Didn’t have much time when I was free.” The truth.

“If not that, then maybe an author?”

The brunette’s eyes snapped back up towards the investigator, a smirk of his own slowly growing
across his cheeks. “I’d say both options sound good to me.”

It was then that the investigator stood, pushing his chair back into the desk as he stared Miles down. “Then you might want to look into it. Thank you, Mr. Upshur. I’m sure you’ll go far.”

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**NOVEMBER 14, 20XX; FIVE YEARS FOLLOWING THE MOUNT MASSIVE INCIDENT.**

Waylon sighed, taking a sip of hot chocolate while he watched Miles work at the kitchen counter nearby. The man had stopped by an hour before, asking if he could set up in Waylon’s kitchen and work through the rest of whatever it was he was finishing up currently.

The blonde climbed off of the living room couch, careful in his movements as to not startle Miles as he walked around the opposite side of the counter. The brunette glanced up when he’d noticed Waylon was on the move, but quickly refocused his attention back towards the screen.

“So is this another article, or the book you’re working on?” Waylon asked, pulling a box of mac and cheese out of a cabinet that was just a bit too high for his tastes.

“Book,” Miles answered, pressing Control-S onto his laptop before pushing it over to the side. “I finished up my last article yesterday. Shady sons-of-bitches…”

Waylon cackled, pulling out a fresh pan and dropping it onto the stove as he talked, “I’m feeling lazy, and Eddie said he wouldn’t be home until midnight. Want some mac n’ cheese?” The blonde asked, looking over his shoulder to catch Miles’ answer.

He saw his friend’s eyes trailed down to the golden band on his finger before they flickered back up to meet his. “Sure. You don’t have to feed me, you know. Got any beer?”

The blonde swiveled on his hells, sending a dark look Miles’ way, “You know that’s not funny. But other than that, you do know this is just mac n’ cheese, right? It costs a dollar a pack.” Waylon laughed, opening the package and leaving it beside the stove as he waited for the water in the pot to start boiling. He approached Miles, pulling up a chair opposite to him.

Miles rolled his head to the side, cracking his neck, “What’s Eddie doing that he needs to come home so late, anyway?” He asked, toying with a pen on the counter beside him while he waited for a response.

Waylon sighed, running a hand through his freshly-washed hair. “He’s got a huge commission for this snooty bride’s wedding gown, and he can’t bring it home to work on it yet because he hasn’t cleaned out the truck. I’ve only nagged him about it oh, I don’t know, a million times. And he knows I can’t do it; he’s always the one taking it out.”

Miles began to chuckle beside him, and Waylon couldn’t help but smirk. “You sound like a housewife with eight kids. But I remember when Ed first bought this place. If there’s one thing I’ll never forget, it’s when he’d crash on the couch at random hours back when we still had that apartment together.”

“Oh,” Waylon snorted, bringing a hand up to his mouth to stifle the disgusting noise that had followed, “I know, and he didn’t even live there. I remember we’d come home and find him passed out a couple times a week and then next morning ‘pop’, gone without a trace except for two hundred-dollar bills and a note labeled to me,” The blonde chuckled, trying to absorb himself in the memory to the best of his ability.
“Maybe it was for the best you two tied the knot and bought a house together; we were chaos back then.”

“Waylon holy fuck, look! Dude, guess who I found on the deck?!”

An eighteen-year-old Waylon dropped the storage box he’d been carrying into the living room, grunting at the stabbing pain from his old wounds as he heard his once-again roommate’s voice just outside the apartment door. He’d been moving their things in and out all morning; if he didn’t get a break, why did Miles?

Waylon’s eyes rolled into the back of his head as he brushed his hands off on his overalls, bare feet stepping angrily across the floor as he met Miles at the door. “Miles, we need to work! We have too much stuff left to unpack; we’ll take a break at lunchtime, alright?”

“But Waylon, you’ll never guess who I found,” Miles chuckled giddily, and Waylon had to restrain himself from decking his roommate over the head to knock some common sense into him when he noticed Miles’ hands behind his back.

The blonde whined, leaning against the doorframe of their apartment in defeat. “What, Miles…?”

His roommate’s hands were brought to the center of attention, revealing a short, rotted tree branch. At first Waylon didn’t understand what he was supposed to be looking at; at least, until he noticed the green inchworm crawling against the dirty bark.

Waylon’s eyes widened with delight as he hopped back and forth on his feet, holding his hands under the branch while Miles snickered beside him. The blonde gasped, petting the tiny creature residing on his friend’s stick as gently as he could. “It’s Wormy!”

“Hell yeah it is!” Miles laughed, pulling the stick back in order to pat Wormy’s back. “Who’s my special little guy; it’s you, isn’t it…?” Miles asked the creature, talking to it in a perfect baby-voice.

The blonde wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, coming down from his high as he continued to watch Miles interact with the worm. “Okay but seriously, we need to get back to work. We can keep him on the railing until we’re done, then we’ll come back to get him.”

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“Really?” Miles asked hopefully, placing the branch on the railing as Waylon had instructed.

Waylon only laughed harder, wiping his eyes more vigorously. “Yeah, man. Let’s go inside.”

Both men snickered at the childish memory. Waylon kicked his feet back and forth in his chair, smile still as prominent as ever. “We had some good times back then, Miles. Some goooood times.”

“Yeah,” Miles laughed, placing his pen back down onto the counter. “Remember when we both went down to the tattoo parlor once we got out first jobs, and you got your little tree, and I got my dragon?”

Waylon shook his head, laughing, “We were idiots.” He mumbled, eyes now drawn to the black outline of a tree on his wrist.

“I still think you should get it colored,” Miles said, reaching a dragon-painted arm forward to tap Waylon’s tree.

“Nah, I like it like this. Anyway, weren’t we talking about your closers?”
“Okay then… Oh, what about that time after we’d finished unpacking, and took our first trip to a grocery store together?”

“Dear lord, don’t get me started…”

Waylon sat in the center of the shopping cart, placing two loaves of bread in a neat row as Miles stuck to the front of the cart, feet pushing against the tile floors every now and then to keep them moving forward. To any outsiders, the two looked like a couple of kids screwing around and causing them more pain than what they deemed necessary in life.

“Oh, what’s next?”

“Hm…” Waylon mumbled curiously, looking down at the list they’d both scribbled on before departing. “We’re closest to the refrigerator isles. We need milk, a carton of eggs, and sandwich meat. Oh, and then we’ve gotta go to the deli and pick up a pound of sliced cheese.”

Miles grunted as he continued pushing the cart, only hopping down once they were in front of the milk. He grabbed a gallon of one percent before handing it over to Waylon, who placed it neatly in the back of the cart and away from the bread.

Waylon laughed when Miles closed the refrigerator door with his ass, the blonde turning in his perch to locate the eggs, “Okay, so now…” The blonde trailed off, unable to speak once he spotted an older couple just a few yards away from their cart.

“You okay, Waylon?” Miles asked, trying to figure out just what his friend was looking at. Waylon squinted his eyes; then suddenly, his blood ran cold.

“Waylon, what is it?” Miles asked, growing more and more concerned by the moment.

“My aunt and uncle,” Waylon breathed, wide eyes turning towards Miles. “They’re here.”

“Are you serious?” Miles asked sharply, just then focusing on the same older couple Waylon had been eyeballing himself. The woman was standing at the front of the deli line, hand gesturing against the glass containers while the man looked off somewhere else, clearly agitated just by being in the store.

Waylon continued to pat the chest of Miles’ shirt despite already having the man’s full attention. The blonde gulped, looking between Miles and his old family. “What should we do?”

Miles’ eyebrows shot up as he began pushing the cart in a different direction, “Fuck, nothing! You don’t need to talk to them; they’re assholes! They beat you and disowned you for something you didn’t do, or did you forget all that?” The brunette whispered harshly, trying to turn Waylon’s attention onto something else. “God, I wish Eddie or Chris were here right now, I’d love to watch them beat that couple’s ass…”

“What, so they can get arrested again? Yeah right!” Waylon squeaked, eyes flickering back over towards where his aunt was finishing up her order with the deli man. Just as she put the ham and cheese into her cart, her eyes slowly trailed up to meet Waylon’s.

Once both of them locked eyes, Waylon stopped Miles’ pushing of the cart with a firm hand. He whimpered, climbing out over the small metal cage before hopping on the ground. He began to approach the two, looking back over his shoulder at Miles. He raised his brows, gesturing outward
with his hands. “Well, now I gotta say something.”

Miles seemed panicked, but he made no physical movement to stop Waylon other than a seething whisper of, “What are you doing, you idiot?!?”

Waylon shuddered when his uncle saw him approaching, the man quick to start walking the other way and pretend he was on the hunt for something in a different isle. His aunt on the other hand held firm, hand curled against the cart as she watched her used-to-be nephew approach.

There was no possible way his relatives would be able to mistake him; Waylon had always hated the refrigerated sections of grocery stores and despite it being high summer, he’d brought his hoodie along to ward off the cold. The hoodie that both of them knew all too well.

“Um…” Waylon whispered as he approached, unsure of his aunt’s emotional state as he rubbed his arm with an awkward grimace. “…Hi. Again.”

His aunt nodded slowly, looking him up and down with a skeptical eye, “Hi there,” She greeted, fingers drumming against the handlebar of the shopping cart.

The silence was unbelievably awkward between them for the next couple of seconds. Waylon began to open his mouth, but his aunt beat him to it, “Look, he’s never going to come around.” She sighed, glancing over her shoulder towards where her husband had run off to. She turned back towards Waylon, sighing. “I’ve read all of the articles. About you and Mount Massive. It’s… good to see you’ve gotten better.”

“Yeah…” Waylon shrugged, looking over his own shoulder to see Miles glaring at him across the room, shaking his head back and forth slowly. When the blonde glanced further down, he noticed the quick tapping of his roommate’s foot, too.

His aunt seemed to take notice of his predicament, letting out a soft chuckle. “He a friend of yours?”

Waylon let out a laugh of his own as he turned back to his aunt, trying to ignore the feeling of deep brown eyes boring into the back of his skull. “Yeah; we’re roommates. Have been since… Stuff.”

His aunt nodded, “I understand.” She looked off to the side, biting her lip, “Look, Waylon, I’m sorry about what happened while you were still with us. We’re terrible people, and I know that; even though two men I know wouldn’t ever like to hear me say that.” She huffed, rolling her eyes. It was clear she was talking about her husband and son.

Another laugh broke free of Waylon’s throat, causing him to shrug his shoulders up further. “Well… You weren’t completely bad yourself. You used to read to me…”

His aunt made a small noise of distaste, waving a hand forward, “Used to. No, don’t just excuse me like that. Your friend looks a little impatient, though. You might want to get going, before either he or my husband blows a fuse.” She grinned, pointing over Waylon’s shoulder towards Miles.

Waylon let out a small smile, sending a small wave of goodbye to his aunt before he jogged back over to Miles. He grabbed the edge of the cart and hauled himself back in on the first try, now face-to-face with the burning gaze of Miles Upshur.

Both remained silent for a fraction of a second before Miles scoffed, beginning to push the cart forward again. You’re an idiot, you know that?”

The blonde chuckled, tossing a package of Reese’s Puffs back and forth between his hands. “An idiot with closure, thank you very much. Besides; it’s not like I’m ever going back there. They’re as
“dead to me as I’m dead to them.”

“Whatever.” Miles grumbled, looking back down at the list that Waylon had discarded against the metal bars of their cart. “What are we getting now?”

“We should wait for deli,” Waylon mumbled, scratching ‘milk’ off of his list. “Eddie gave us twenty for a rotisserie he claims he’ll put together as a full meal later, and I wanna get six cans of peaches for Dennis’s birthday next week.”

When Miles gave Waylon an awkward look, the blonde shrugged. “When I asked, he said he loves peaches. I already got him a ton of books; now, get me to the fruit aisle, peach boy.”

“Yeah, we were awful,” Waylon laughed, moving back towards the now-boiling pot across the kitchen. “We still are.”

“Well at least you got married before the guy realized what he’d gotten himself into.”

“Hey! I’m not that bad! …Am I?”

“I’m joking, Waylon.” Miles laughed, stretching his arms out above his head. “Look at you, living it up…”

Waylon poured the box of mac n’ cheese into the pot, turning on the timer above the stove as he began to stir. “Yes, because eating boxed kraft meals and having a week off from work out of three-hundred and sixty-five days a year is ‘living it up.’” The blonde shook his head, putting his stirring spoon off to the side. “You’ve got a boyfriend, you know.”

“Well yeah, but I’m not married to him.” Miles tapped his chin thoughtfully, looking off into the distance. “Maybe I should though, before Chris realizes his mistake…”

“Oh, will you stop it with that!” Waylon shrieked, gently smacking Miles over the top of his head. His friend looked back up at him over-dramatically, and Waylon couldn’t resist the urge to smile. “When’s the last time we took a trip as a whole gang, anyway? It’s been so long…”

Miles pulled his ponytail out, tossing the band carelessly onto the counter. Waylon eyed the hair accessory curiously before picking it up, using it to tie his own hair back into a microscopic ponytail as he continued to stir the food cooking on the stove.

“That was… Eh, a year and a half? I mean, we’ve all hung out around town, but another trip…?” Miles asked, plopping his head down onto the counter.

Waylon looked over his shoulder, grinning. “You know that had been fun, though.”

“Oh shit guys, there’s a drive-in!” Miles hollered from the driver’s seat of the truck, slamming his hands down onto the wheel excitedly. “D, D, see what movies they have listed!”

Dennis scooted even closer to the left window of the car, the tip of his nose ghosting against the glass. “It doesn’t look like a drive-in playing new releases…” He mumbled, squinting his eyes to get a better look at the sign already passing by.

Miles whined, slowing down the car a couple of miles to give Dennis enough time to check. “Well does it look like I care? GPS says it’s only ten minutes away from the rental. Hurry!”
“Okay, okay,” Dennis huffed, reading off the titles with great speed. “Uh, it says ‘Unfriended’ and ‘The Lego Movie’.”

Silence remained for only a second before Waylon piped up beside Dennis, stuck in the middle-back seat, “Well, on any other day I would say ‘Unfriended’ just because it sucks, but I love ‘The Lego Movie’, and I’m not passing up the opportunity.” The blonde giggled, peeking out the window along with Dennis.

Everyone’s heads turned towards Eddie, who was groaning from the passenger seat of the car. “Are you actually twenty, or have you been lying to me this whole time?”

“Wow,” Waylon mumbled, sending a glare his boyfriend’s way before slumping down into his seat. “Time is an illusion, bucko.”

An uneasy silence fell against the group. Once Miles pulled the truck up to a red light, he sighed, turning around to glance between the three men sitting in the back and the one beside him. “Alright then, we’ll put it to a vote. Raise your hand for ‘Unfriended’.”

Nobody raised their hand, including Eddie. Miles chuckled mischievously, eyes darting to meet Waylon’s. “Okay. Now ‘The Lego Movie’.”

Waylon, Dennis, Chris, and Miles all raised their hands simultaneously, Eddie leaving his firmly by his side yet again. All four who’d voted slowly craned their heads towards the undecided man, Miles raising his eyebrows up and down faster than what seemed possible.

Eddie sighed heavily, turning back around to face the front window before raising his hand in defeat. Everyone cheered loudly just as the light turned green, and they were on the road again.

Two hours later, everyone was finally situated at the rental house. The sun had already begun to set over the beach’s horizon, and after fifteen minutes of arguing on the way to the boardwalk, all five had finally agreed on a simple meal of pizza and fries. They’d walked all around the busy deck and streets, playing cheesy games and winning prizes that they’d dump onto each other afterwards.

The stars were already high in the sky when they’d begun heading back to the truck, “Hey, what time is it?” Chris asked curiously, glancing between the four men in case anyone had a watch on.

Waylon tilted his head up from Eddie’s shoulder; the man had been giving him a piggy-bag ride before the blonde was forced to hop off and back onto the pavement. He picked a tiny, outdated track phone out of his back pocket, flicking the device open. “It’s eight-thirty.”

“Wait, wasn’t the movie supposed to be at nine?” Miles asked around an obscenely long lollypop, looking back and forth between the buildings in search of different clock.

Waylon scrunched up his nose in disgust as he watched drool drip down the sides of the poor candy stick in Mile’s possession. The blonde looked away, holding a hand up to block his view.

Dennis jogged up next to them, grasping both Miles and Waylon’s shoulders. “How long is it gonna take to get to there from here?”

Before Waylon had a chance to protest, Miles yanked the track phone straight out of his hands, flicking it back open to make sure the blonde hadn’t been lying. He tossed it back into Waylon’s hands a second later, picking up his pace. “I bet we can make it in twenty.”

Driving a bit too fast for Waylon’s tastes, they had. Waylon and Dennis scrambled for popcorn in a little shop stationed in the middle of the lot while more cars pulled in to join them. They’d made it
back with enough time to spare. Chris had kicked down the trunk and gotten their things situated while Eddie pulled blankets out of the back seats.

Everything calmed down drastically once the movie had begun. Miles and Chris had situated themselves on top of the truck, Chris using a blanket to prop his chin up while Miles leaned forward onto his hands and elbows.

Dennis had chosen to use one of the pull-up chairs from the trunk along with a beach bag to prop his feet up in front of him. He had a thick sweatshirt pulled up to his chin, easily content with his position beside the vehicle. Eddie and Waylon, on the other hand, had the bed of the truck to themselves. Waylon had requested to be wrapped up in a blanket ‘burrito-style’, his head resting on his boyfriend’s chest comfortably. Miles had even tossed down a big, stuffed dolphin he’d won earlier that night.

Waylon had, regrettably, fallen asleep three-fourths of the way through the movie. He’d tried to stay awake by listening to Miles and Chris’s hysterical laughter, but the task had proved futile. The next thing Waylon knew was that he was being gently prodded awake by Miles, who had the back door of truck open in order to do so. When had he been moved, anyway?

“It’s after eleven, but you put up a good fight during Bruce Wayne’s business speech with Uni-Kitty,” Miles grinned, holding the door open for Waylon. “C’mon, let’s go inside. You look wrecked.”

The blonde yawned, replying with only a quick nod before sliding out of the truck. He dragged his hoodie out along with him, prying the garment over his head and flipping the hood up with a small noise of disapproval. Miles laughed, slamming the door shut before climbing up the stairs of the porch and holding the front door open.

“Am I a lil’ cute princess being escorted to her bedroom?” Waylon laughed through half-lidded eyes, head craning towards where the rest of their friends were standing around the main room. Once the door closed behind them, all eyes focused on Waylon and Waylon alone.

Miles moved in front of the confused blonde and over to Dennis, who was standing against the living room wall close by. Chris had his head tilted to the side, his lips bearing a small smile while Eddie stood just a few feet away from Waylon, hands clasped behind his back.

“O-okay…” Waylon hiccupped, trying to rub the tiredness out of his eyes. “This isn’t creepy or nothin’. Why are you all staring…?”

Waylon heard Eddie take a deep breath in before his boyfriend approached him, hands still stuck behind his back. Waylon piqued an eyebrow, until the man got down on one knee.

Waylon slowly raised the other eyebrow as he began to realize just what Eddie was doing. He inhaled sharply, bringing a hand up to wipe his eyes more furiously before his boyfriend revealed a tiny black box.

“Waylon, darling…” Eddie mumbled, flicking it open.

The blonde choked on his breath, still rubbing his eyes, “You couldn’t have done this while I was awake?” He laughed through his sleepiness, trying to keep his eyes open to the best of his ability. Eddie opened his mouth to speak, but Waylon cut him off. “Yes, you old sap.”

“Fuck, yes!” Miles hollered from his corner of the room, clapping his hands wildly along with Dennis as Eddie stood back up and pulled Waylon in for a hug. “We all knew he’d say yes! Did I
know it? Yes, yes I did.”

“You know,” Eddie mumbled only to Waylon, face buried in his lover’s hair. “I’m not old. I’m only four years apart from you.”

Waylon chuckled again, quieter this time, as he pulled back from the man’s hold just enough to place a finger against Eddie’s nose. The blonde narrowed his sleep-deprived eyes, smirking. “Old. Sap.”

Waylon grabbed his reading glasses off of the table, leaning over so he could see Miles’ computer screen. “So, what’re you doing now? Did you finish it?”

Miles chuckled, shaking his head as he pulled his laptop back towards him, “Almost. I’m just adding a couple of things at the end and then I’ll mark it as done. These conversations Way, I swear. Maybe I should use something like that…” He mumbled, beginning to type more information onto his spreadsheet.

“Then might I give a few more suggestions before you wrap it up?” Waylon asked curiously, jumping in fright as the timer for their dinner dinged above the stove.

Miles cackled as Waylon fidgeted, hands moving back over his keyboard. “Be my guest.”

Waylon screamed, slamming the bedroom door open in the noisiest fashion he could manage.

“Uh…” Eddie grumbled from his position on the bed, lowering his book to the sheets before furrowing his brows. “Darling? What are you doing?”

Waylon grabbed two pans underneath the stove for dinner, yelping as wind crackled against the roof outside. He dropped the cookware, the resounding clash against the floor loud and horrifying. The blonde covered his ears, shriveling up against the counter.

Eddie looked between the pans and Waylon, not even giving so much as a flinch as he stepped off the bar stood in favor of entering the kitchen. “Need help?”

Waylon waited beside the front door when Eddie pulled up into the driveway, practically yelling in the man’s ear as he entered.

Eddie raised an eyebrow, hanging his coat up by the door. “…Why, exactly, was that necessary?”

The blonde dropped his arms, posture slumping. “Are you kidding me?”

Waylon pouted against the dining table of the 50’s style restaurant, pulling his milkshake closer towards him before taking a tired sip. He was done. He was tapping out.

“Um…” Miles hummed nervously, sending Dennis a wary look beside him before turning his attention back towards the gloomy blonde lying across from him. “You okay, Way?”

Waylon continued to groan, picking his head up off of the table once their waitress returned with their food. Waylon crossed his arms over his chest, sighing. “It’s nothing…”

“What seriously, stop.” Dennis said, rolling his eyes as he held up a hand. “Just say it.”

Waylon tried sinking further into the bright cushions as he pulled a fry off of his plate, taking a feeble bite. “I can’t do it. He’s made it impossible. It probably is impossible.”
The two other men looked between each other, confused, “Uh… What the hell are you talking about?” Miles asked, ready to dig into his meal in a heartbeat if Waylon would just talk for once.

“I can’t scare Eddie.”

“…What?”

“I can’t scare him!” Waylon shouted louder than intended, taking three more fries from his dinner and shoving them into his mouth. “I’ve tried everything!”

Miles chuckled, earning a steely glare from Waylon. Dennis remained silent, but Waylon already hated the outline of a smirk he could see under his friend’s usually relaxed demeanor.

“Why don’t you just call him and pretend to be someone else? Like a robber,” Miles suggested, taking the first huge bite of his burger.

Waylon glared harder, his back and shoulders hunched. “You know that’s not funny. He would, quite literally, kill me for making him worry. No, it has to be a quick scare. Y’know, something that startles him.”

That’s what led to Miles giving it his all at their house two days later.

Waylon had counted, actually counted how many times Miles failed throughout the course of the evening. He’d been invited over for dinner by Waylon since Dennis and Chris were both out of town; Chris on a masonry job and Dennis on a weekend vacation with his father.

Eight times. Eight whole times Miles tried and failed to startle Eddie. By the end of the night Waylon was still as sad as ever that he wasn’t able to scare his husband, Eddie himself still having no clue as to what the duo was trying to pull off.

The next weekend, Waylon offered to take everyone out to dinner. Everyone but Eddie had accepted, his excuse being that he still had to work on the bridesmaid and groomsmen’s line along with clearing out their driveway of the snow that’d fallen earlier in the day. Shoveling and snow blowing was always a pain for them; their driveway was long, and the street overall only housed two other families that they couldn’t even see through all of the nature.

Luckily Miles lived close by; it’d snowed hard, and the brunette had gotten snowed in at their place while he’d been working the night before. It wasn’t his fault, really; he’d finished his interviews with Chris, Dennis and Eddie, and he couldn’t’ve predicted that the day he’d set up to interview Waylon months in advance turned out to be the day of a blizzard.

So Waylon offered to drive him to the restaurant and back to his apartment when they were done. Neither man really had much of a choice in the matter; unless Miles wanted to move in, which neither Miles, Waylon, nor Eddie wanted to ever consider.

Waylon fastened his seatbelt and started the engine of the truck, already beginning to pull out of the driveway. Miles noticed Eddie near the end of the road with their blower, obviously focused on his work.

The brunette slapped Waylon’s arm, pointing towards the man’s husband. “You might want to honk or something and let him know we’re leaving.”

Well, it was a logical argument. Waylon hadn’t told Eddie when he’d be coming home, after all. So he honked. And the result was amazing.
Eddie jumped, actually *jumped* back from the machine in fright, releasing both of the handles before bringing a hand up to his chest. Waylon was still processing what had happened while Miles laughed hysterically, smacking his head against the cushion of his seat.

The blonde joined in soon enough, the two a laughing mess as Waylon watched Eddie shoveling snow into his hands. When Eddie was done, he walked over to the side of the truck, tossing the snow angrily onto the outside of the window. Waylon and Miles laughed harder, then finally, Waylon decided to roll down the window.

When he’d mentioned their departure, Eddie only grunted in response, turning his back to the two morons as he continued his work.

Of course, the two had bragged about their success all throughout the first half of the night. It was such a petty victory and they knew it, but that wouldn’t stop them from basking in all of the glory.

Once the night was over, Waylon dropped Miles off and drove back to his old house in the woods. When he walked up the front porch, he couldn’t help but notice that every single light in the house appeared to be off.

Waylon felt his fingers twitch as he unlocked the front door, slowly glancing around the pitch-black area of the living room as he placed his keys in a little jar beside him. He locked the door, reaching for one of the light switches nearby. When he flicked it on, he nearly screamed in fright when he located Eddie Gluskin sitting on their small sofa across the room with his arms crossed over his chest, eyes dark.

It took the blonde a moment to realize what the man’s ghastly look could be about. Waylon chuckled faintly, ungracefully leaning over the winter cabinet by the door, “Uh, h-hey, I’m back. Uhm, what’s ah, what’s up?” He asked, stuttering through almost every syllable of the sentence.

Eddie only grunted in response, standing up eerily slow from his seat before he flicked the lamp on beside him. His husband stopped only a foot away from him, arms still crossed and expression still haunting, “You know darling,” Eddie began, running a finger under Waylon’s chin. “Sometimes I really think about the stability our relationship…”

“Oh come on,” Waylon laughed, for real this time, the tension from earlier slowly withering away. “You know that’s not true. If I’m being honest with you that might’ve been one of the funniest things I’ve ever seen in my entire life; not including that time you chased Miles around that shitty gymnasium back at M.M.R…” He trailed off, laughter from earlier in the day returning once more.

Eddie hissed, taking the one stride he needed towards Waylon before lifting the much smaller man over his shoulder. Waylon tried to flail, but it was no use; Eddie locked his wrists in one hand and his ankles with the other as he began to trek over to the second-floor staircase.

“Are you serious?!” Waylon shrieked, still struggling with all his might. Once he realized the attempt was futile he slumped against Eddie’s broad shoulder, defeated. “Alright, fine.”

“You got what you wanted, darling; now I get my revenge. It’s not pleasant, I know,” Eddie growled, but Waylon could detect a hint of a smirk in his voice.

Waylon lowered his brows, “Wait, you knew I was trying to scare you?” The blonde asked, his voice coming out in a much higher pitch.

“You didn’t make it very subtle.” Eddie replied sharply. Once he reached the top of the staircase, he turned in the direction of their bedroom.
Waylon huffed, trying to tilt his head up to get a good look at Eddie’s backside, “Okay so, on a scale from one to I’m being immersed into ‘Fifty Shades of Grey’, how kinky and screwed up are you planning to be?” He asked innocently enough, earning a hard shift of his husband’s shoulder in response.

“Try an overly-detailed fan-fiction about a crazy serial killer having sex with his new-found ‘bride’ level kinky.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a game I played last week…” Waylon pouted, lowering his head pathetically.

Eddie didn’t respond, instead tossing Waylon onto their king-size bed and slamming the door behind them.

“Hm… That last part was a little unnecessary.” Miles muttered as he continued to type.

“Well, that’s what happened!” Waylon shrieked, mixing the contents of his dinner together. He pulled out two bowls, tossing them down beside the finished pot. “Besides, I thought you told me that you were a man of hard details? You said to tell you everything when you’d interviewed me…”

Miles finished typing, picking up his pen again and pointing it towards Waylon, “Yes, but that’s because your perspective is the most crucial one. You’re my big, bright star.” He informed, gesturing back towards his laptop.

Waylon giggled, shaking his head. “Maybe it’d be worth mentioning the time we’d heard about Pyro and Silky’s arrest the year after they let us out? We had that whole party with the cake that said, ‘Go to hell’ with the smiley faces and everything…”

“I’ll mention it briefly. They were found back in Leadville, weren’t they? What was it…? Oh, didn’t Pyro light up a trash can or something in a back alley downtown?”

“Yeah—”

“Morons.”

The blonde hummed, pushing a now-filled bowl in Miles’ direction. “That reminds me. You didn’t ever tell me how your other interviews went. Not Chris or Dennis or any of us; the others.

The brunette ran a hand through his hair, trying to repress the memories Waylon had once again thrusted into his mind. He sighed, thinking back to when he’d gone out and done the research as to where everyone had been hiding out.

After another minute of silence, Miles finally decided to answer, “Frank was doing good, last time I checked. He didn’t have much to say though, which I kind of expected. Wished us all well, said he’d come around and visit sometime. I found Pauline; still kicking around the female side of the prison. She didn’t say a whole lot either, but she liked bragging about her triumphs over Andrew. God, that guy was a prick. I don’t blame her.

“Although when I figured out what asylum Billy and Stevenson had been sent to, the secretary told me those two weren’t taking any visitors and hung up on me. I tried going there in person but still, nothing. And…” Miles trailed off, staring down at his bowl of mac n’ cheese sternly. He didn’t want to discuss his last interviewee with one of the asshole’s victims.

“And…?” Waylon asked, moving around the counter to take a seat next to Miles. “What about…
Waylon’s tone had a shriveled pitch to it; Miles could understand. “He… Did and didn’t… Talk.”

Miles sat patiently at one of the many visitation tables, scanning the guards that lurked around every corner. The brunette sighed, beginning to put his pen and notebook away once he came to the conclusion that the man he’d asked for probably wouldn’t want to show.

But that thought was erased once he heard the sound of the doors from the prison block opening, and a man was escorted in by one beefy-looking guard. The inmate looked different from when Miles had last seen him, certainly. His formal attire had been replaced by a bright orange jumpsuit, and his once glossy hair was cut down close to his scalp. And yet he still wore that same cocky-grin and held a powerful stance as always; he hadn’t changed at all, actually.

The guard gestured towards Miles’ seat, the brunette trying to keep himself looking professional and all business as Jeremy Blaire took a seat across from him. The man continued to grin his ever-haunting grin even as the guard walked back to his post.

“Blaire,” Miles began, flipping his notebook back to the most current empty page. He wasn’t so sure he was ready to deal with this asshole, anymore.

Blaire cocked his head to the side, folding his hands over the table as he stared Miles down. “So. Big guy back there said you were here for some sort of ‘interview’.”

Miles grunted, trying his best not to deck the man across his perfect little nose. “Yeah. Surprised you didn’t tell him to go to hell.”

“Oh, it was tempting.” Blaire chuckled, getting comfortable in his seat while Miles could only narrow his eyes further. “How’s Park, anyway?”

“We’re not here to talk about him,” Miles snapped, clicking his pen open.

Blaire continued to grin even as he sighed, leaning further back into the chair. He looked down ignorantly, inspecting his nails. “Go find someone else to interview, then.”

Miles growled, knowing he needed whatever Blaire could give in order to continue writing up his book. He tried to calm himself down as he thought back on Waylon. “Married. Works in information technology.”

Jeremy tilted his head at the first comment Miles made. “Was it Gluskin?”

“Yes,” Miles answered quickly, gesturing back down towards his notebook. “And both living a lot better than you. Can we just get to the stupid interview?”

At Miles’ jab, Blaire’s smile finally fell. Bingo. The brunette positioned his pen above the paper, waiting for an answer.

“Fine.”

The whole thing had taken significantly less time than Miles had thought it would. Blaire didn’t answer every single question Miles asked, but he’d answered enough. When Miles had finally arrived at the incident involving Waylon, Blaire was glad to tell him every last detail.

It was a struggle to avoid getting sick, but Miles had powered through Blaire’s ramblings for the
sake of documentation. Waylon had already given him his o.k. when he’d mentioned talking to Blaire about the attempted homicide.

Miles left feeling fairly satisfied; not over the fact that he’d taken a plentiful amount of notes, but just knowing that Blaire was finally locked up for good. All of them deserved that much after the whole mess that Mount Massive had turned out to be. They’d done it. And it was nice.

“He was the real sick one at Mount Massive,” Waylon sighed, stuffing more of his meal between his cheeks. “So what now? You’re done, right?”

Miles nodded, looking between the computer and Waylon several times, “Yeah, but I still don’t have a title. If there’s one thing that sucks the most about writing, it’s giving the thing a goddamn title…” The brunette grunted, drumming his fingers against the kitchen counter.

Waylon thought along with him, scooping more mac n’ cheese into his mouth. “What about… ‘Survivors’?”

“Well that makes it seem all dark and depressing,” Miles chuckled, earning a small blush from Waylon. “What about ‘The Inmates’?”

“Now that makes it seem really basic and boring.” Waylon mumbled, sticking out his tongue.

Both men sat in silence a minute longer before Waylon looked up, raising an eyebrow. “Well, how does ‘Jailbirds’ sound? It’s got kind of a nice ring to it…”

Miles tapped his chin thoughtfully, opening and closing his file on the computer. After another moment of hesitation he sighed, opening the ‘Rename’ option before typing in Waylon’s suggestion, “It does sound kinda cute,” He laughed, hitting the ‘enter’ button triumphantly. “Alright. Jailbirds it is.”

Chapter End Notes

Having this story finally complete is both a huge relief and saddening. Jailbirds was a lot of firsts for me; my first completed multi-chapter, first (REALLY) long-fic, and the first story I got such a huge amount of support for. If there’s anyone I really want to thank, it's all of the people that took the time to read my crazy story. I hope the ending wasn't too bad; if there's one thing that I'd put on the same level as coming up with a title, it's writing a conclusion.

Our friends had a good ending overall, I guess you could say. Therapy of course followed them fast (For Waylon, Eddie and Chris, extensive) and I felt only somewhat bad Jeremy wasn't killed like everyone'd been hoping. ...Somewhat.

But other than that, I'd also like to thank all of the tumblr users who went as far as to make fan art! I highly recommend checking out their blogs as well. Thank you to:

- pikadoodle
- justapegacorn
- the-thorned-king
- m3chanicals
- valiet
-faiiart

If anyone wants to check out the actual tag with all of the final content (Including a shitty youtube playlist) It's right here.

LASTLY, I'd also made a post on tumblr with what I guess could be caled Jailbirds"Bonus Content" if anyone's interested here.

Thank you all for reading! That's a wrap. :)

End Notes

For updates/notifications/art on Jailbirds, visit here.

Works inspired by this one Fall Away by skittleluvr

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