a long way back to the light

by maharlika

Summary

A year in the life of the inhabitants of Kirkland House, a living community for the genetically-divergent. Eduardo Saverin deals with burnt-out light bulbs and temperamental toasters. Meanwhile, Mark Zuckerberg builds a website on a foundation of code and mutant social justice.

Notes

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See the end of the work for more notes

January

The thing about co-op housing, Eduardo supposes, is that it involves other people. Mornings like this—quiet, motionless but for the condensation blooming into frost on the windows—had been rare before the snow had arrived. And then suddenly half the house had gone off to be with their families and Wardo had been disconcerted by the echoing emptiness, waking up on his own time rather than to the bustle of house full of people. He’d spent a week accidentally making regular portions for his cooking assignments, and they’d been left with a fridge well-stocked for the march of the holidays.
The past weeks have been a comfort, though, with the silence blanketing the house as readily as the snow. Wardo's been getting repairs done all over the place, things he hadn't had time for in between juggling house responsibilities and coursework. The errands had filled his mind, and it'd been easy enough to forget the emails that he hadn't been able to erase from his inbox, his mother talking about how warm Florida would be this time of year. Eduardo had, in fact, spent most of his holidays warm and toasty whilst trying to coax the house's ancient boiler into steadily keeping up its duty as the cold wore on. It's a good boiler, cantankerous as those things go, but it seems to like its job just fine.

The toaster, on the other hand, is a different story, and the reason why he's up so early on this particular morning.

"Wardo!" Christy's voice rings loud and clear as he makes his way downstairs to the kitchen, where she's already in front of the stove, whipping up eggs as she watches the pancakes cook. The toaster, sitting on the opposite counter across their admittedly tiny kitchen, is going haywire, spitting up sparks and making ominous hissing noises.

Kitchen appliances usually take a liking to Christy; as far as Wardo can tell, her static mutation seems to interact well with electricity. For some reason, though, Christy and the toaster have been mortal enemies for longer than Wardo's been in the house. He's taken to keeping track of Christy's cooking assignments so he can make sure to coax the toaster into settling down while Christy mutters threats about replacing it.

"I'm on it," he says, reaching out and nudging the toaster into quiet.

"We need to get that defunct thing replaced," Christy says, over the sizzle of eggs on the pan. She hands Eduardo a plateful of pancakes, turning with her hand on her hip. "Wardo, come on, tell me we have room on the budget for it, I can't stand that thing anymore."

"I'll talk it over with Chris," Wardo says, "but no promises, all right?"

"Talk what over with Chris?" says Chris, appearing at the doorway to the kitchen.

Behind him, Erica is walking to the dining table with her eyes half-closed, pulling a fuzzy orange sweater over her head.

"That heap of useless scrap metal," Christy says, poking viciously at the pan.

"The toaster," Eduardo clarifies, taking the plate of pancakes over to the table while Chris opens the drawers and takes out plates, forks, knives and cups, hovering them above Wardo's head and attempting to settle them as neatly as possible on the table.

"Bring it up in the meeting tomorrow morning, when everyone's home," Chris says, and winces when one of the forks falls on Erica's head where it's laid on the table, pillowed on top of her arms. "Sorry!"

"Ow," she mutters, then, "Bring what up in the meeting?"

"The toaster," Wardo says, plucking a plate out of the air.

"Eggs!" Christy says from the kitchen. Erica dodges another one of Chris' ill-controlled utensils, and Wardo turns around as the toaster starts up again. As the four of them start to settle down at the dining table, the front door slams open and Dustin runs in, heaving his duffel bag behind him, clearly having just arrived. He yells: "The toaster—!

—right before it bursts into flames on the counter.
Erica grounds out a "Fucking Christ, it's too early for this." Christy cackles triumphantly. Chris buries his face in his hands and groans.

The thing about co-op housing, Wardo supposes, is that he wouldn't trade a million calm mornings for it.

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Breakfast goes more or less normally after Wardo's taken care of the dying toaster with their single fire extinguisher, and everyone has finished bemoaning Dustin's functionally-useless precognition. The rest of the day passes with their housemates trickling in from the holidays, Dustin yelling out their names just as they step up to the front door.

Cameron and Tyler arrive first, sporting tans from whatever tropical island their family had spent the holidays in. Then Divya, whose family doesn't celebrate Christmas, but who'll take any chance to go home. The twins haul him off to their room as soon as he arrives (well, they try, but it's hard to take hold of a mutant who can shapeshift into mist at will), and the rest of the house leaves them to it.

Amy arrives next, in the evening, with a round of sound from the trombone she'd gotten for Christmas, then another round with her own enhanced vocal cords. It turns into an impromptu dance party after they clear out a space in the middle of the common living room; someone gets drinks from somewhere and Wardo coaxes the lights into a soft dimness. Sometime in the middle of the night, Wardo's slightly tipsy and he feels so happy, he loves these people and he loves this house, and he turns around and Mark is standing by the doorway to the living room and watching him. He grins, delighted, and wobbles mostly steadily towards him, throws a hand across his shoulders.

"When did you get here?" Wardo says, and it probably means something that Mark leans in towards his touch, rather than away, but he can't parse it out right now.

"Early enough to see that truly appalling dance you did to that song about partying in the fifty legally-acknowledged states of America." Mark's mouth is curved into a self-satisfied smirk, and Wardo laughs.

"Mark, do you even know who Miley Cyrus is?"

Mark shrugs.

Wardo leans in closer, mumbles, "Hi." He feels stupidly affectionate. Mark's fingers brush his own.

"Hi," he says in return. He presses something into Eduardo's hand, and when Wardo squints at it in the muted light of the living room, it's a beautifully-sculpted wooden lion.

"Is this—?" It's a reminder of one of the first conversations they'd had in dimness of the basement, when Wardo had arrived in May. It feels surreal, remembering it now, like two images superimposed: Mark and Wardo and the piss-poor yellow lighting, nine months apart.

Mark says, "Happy holidays, Wardo." He sounds tired, looks tired as well, probably from traveling.

"Happy Holidays," Wardo echoes, "See you in the house meeting tomorrow?"

"Yeah," Mark says.
Wardo bites his lip, then draws Mark in using the arm he's thrown around his shoulder to give him a hug. "I missed you," Wardo says.

"Yeah," Mark says again. Wardo knows it's the closest thing to an admission that he'll get from Mark.

"Welcome home," Wardo says, and Mark nods, pulls away, and turns to go.

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One thing Mark has not missed about Kirkland house is the piercing shriek of the house bell at ungodly hours of the morning. He squirms out from under the bed covers and shoots a look at Dustin's side of the room, which is empty, but already messy despite him having arrived only yesterday. The house bell is ringing without pause now, which means it's probably stuck. Hearing Wardo's "I'm on it!" as Mark groggily climbs up the stairs confirms that.

He plunks himself down on one of the chairs in the dining table, and makes grabby hand gestures and frowning faces until Erica relents and passes over her coffee to him.

"God," Erica says as the bell finally stops ringing, "How did this house ever function without Wardo?"

Wardo, murmuring gently at the buzzer for the house bell on the kitchen wall, pokes his head out the doorway to beam at her.

She snatches her coffee from Mark and drags him up when Chris stalks into the dining room, looking stern, pens and papers following after him and bobbing in the air.

"The point of the bell—" he starts.

"Yes, yes, we know," says Erica, "House meeting in five, we're on it, chief."

Wardo rings the bell just a few more times, to a tune that sounds vaguely like Party in the USA. Mark groans, and pulls himself off the table.

It's time for the first house meeting of the year.

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February

As far as house meetings go, this one probably isn't the worst. The one they'd had in January, on the first day everyone was back in the house—that had been one for the books. In Mark's defense, he'd been sleepy and the loss of the toaster had come as a shock to his senses. If there was anything Mark relied on to fulfill the biological imperative to consume food, it was toasted Pop-Tarts. The ensuing debate on how to shift the budget around to afford a new toaster had lasted for hours, and had turned for the worse when someone—probably Christy—had questioned the necessity of a toaster in the first place. That had been one of the few times Mark had felt inclined to actually chime in on house matters. Toasters were serious business.

In comparison, this meeting is about how they can keep Mutant Awareness month from being overshadowed by all the Valentine's celebrations pushed by corporate greed and capitalism. Divya suggests using it instead, selling chocolates and sweets and raising funds for the Genetically-Divergent Center downtown. Chris calls a vote and everyone who agrees raises their hands in a thumbs-up.
While Mark has always thought that genetically-divergent is a bullshit euphemism for what they really are, but he raises his thumb up as well. Erica asks, "So where are we going to get the money for these extra baking supplies?"

This brings Wardo up to front of the room with the ridiculous clipboard in his hands where he meticulously keeps track of the house budget; when Mark had managed the budget, it'd been written on scraps of paper that kept getting misplaced. He had the necessary logical capacity to maintain it, but none of Wardo's eagerness and all of his own tendency to substitute the place of actual fruits and vegetables with apple juice and tomato juice—much easier to consume, in Mark's opinion—so no one had complained when he'd foisted the job over to the newcomer.

Objectively, it's nice to see Wardo speaking in confidently in their house meetings.

Mark can appreciate that, after more than nine months of living with this motley assembly of misplaced mutants, Wardo has learned to stop trying to please people all the time. For all that he still reflexively apologizes about things way too often, he's actually intransigent when it comes to sticking to the house budget and fulfilling house responsibilities, which Mark appreciates in a housemate.

Growing up as the older brother to three younger sisters had more or less prepared Mark communal living, for which the rules are the same as when he was growing up: do your chores, and eat all the food off your plate, and don't enter people’s rooms without knocking. But house meetings were never part of his home life, and Mark has always had problems focusing on things that he’s deemed as inconsequential. Wardo’s still talking about things like flour and eggs—looking annoyingly endearing while he does—so Mark tunes him out to let lines of code run through his mind, fingers twitching habitually on phantom keys.

If he’d had shitty parents, Mark knows he probably would have ended up more fucked up than most people he knew—but his mom had handed him an encyclopedia on animal physiology when he’d manifested, and his dad had given him a laptop when Mark’s report card had come back with As for his computer science classes.

Mark had been a teenager overwhelmed by the sharpness of his shifting senses, and he’d found calm in scrolling lines of code—mutation, adaptation, the old nature versus nurture debate—Mark doesn't see the point in painting his life in black and white. He doesn’t understand why people so often insist on doing so.

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The meeting goes on for a while, even after they move on from the topic of baked goods and budgeting, and on to the actual fundraising event that they’re going to have on Valentine’s Day. Mark’s been steadily stacking up code in his head, hazy ideas of a website in whites and blues that he actually jerks into a startled, “Okay,” when Wardo addresses him directly.

Mark backtracks quickly, coming up with nothing and muttering, “Yeah, okay,” to fill in for not knowing what the hell is going on. Dustin swivels around in his non-swivel chair so fast that he nearly topples over. Wardo beams.

"Um,” Mark says blankly as Wardo yields the floor to Chris.

What the fuck has Mark gotten himself into? He turns to Dustin to ask him, but the asshole just sniggers and shakes his head; everyone else is similarly unhelpful. Christy even flashes him a shark-like grin, which is ominous. Wardo's still beaming. He squeezes Mark's shoulder when he sits down behind him.
Chris is already talking when Mark tunes back in, determined to get to the bottom of it later, "—knew when you voted me as house president that I'd bring us back to focus on the co-op's main advocacy, which is and always has been centered on Mutant Rights. While this house is a safe space for us, we have to work on creating safe spaces for others, so I hope we can all work together on this Valentine's Fundraiser. Thanks for handling that, Wardo."

There's a smattering of cheers (this house is enthusiastic about everything, Mark can't help it if his own lips twitch into a smile), before Chris raises his hands to quiet them down and says, "On a more serious note, however, I'm afraid I've got to remind you all that recent incidents in this city have made the streets a bit more unsafe at night. I don't want anyone to get themselves in unnecessary trouble, all right?"

This has Mark slouching on his seat, frowning; he doesn't even go out of the house that often but the fact that he's made to feel that he can't just because of bigoted assholes and fucking police brutality makes him angry. He feels vindicated when Christy brings up this exact point, but the issue's been hashed out numerous times over the past week, and they soon turn the floor to Erica for the month's new work management chart, or, as Dustin likes to call it, the Wheel of Fate. After that, Cameron takes the floor to tell them that sign-ups for the Inter-Co-op Sportsfest are open, and towards the end of the meeting Wardo takes the floor again to update everyone on things like types of tomatoes and peanut butter, takes another vote, which Mark pays attention to.

After the meeting closes, Wardo approaches him and says, smiling ridiculously, "I'm really excited to be working on this awareness campaign with you, Mark."


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It's not Eduardo's fault that his memory of meeting Mark is forever tinged with the dim yellow light from the lone light bulb left working in the laundry room, all the others blown out and cold. When Chris asks him, three weeks into his stay at Kirkland, if could maybe check them out, Eduardo is hesitant, unused to having his "genetic-divergence"—his *mutation*, that's what they all call it here, bluntly and openly—addressed so casually. But he goes anyway, because he's the new guy, and Chris has been nothing but nice to him.

The basement is large and sprawling; there's a room that's shared by two of the house residents, a precog named Dustin, and another boy who he's only seen skulking around a few times. Another room opens to the laundry room, and inside from there is a set of stairs that actually leads up into the front yard.

The place should be something out of a movie or a novel, Eduardo thinks, musty and dank, but really it's just a regular room with three sets of laundry machines and dryers, and, unfortunately, busted light bulbs. There's also a boy sitting on top of one of the machines, on the farthest from the door; he's reading a book, which should be near-impossible in the darkness of the room. Eduardo makes an aborted attempt to wave at him as he enters, but the boy doesn't look up.

"Hi," he tries again.

"Hn," says the boy.

"All right," Eduardo murmurs. He coughs, awkward, then reaches out to the closest light bulb and coaxes its filament to life. The light bulbs here are old, have probably hardly ever been replaced, incandescent: they glow rather than shine.

"Is it hard?" comes the question from the boy in the corner.
“Hm?” Eduardo asks. He usually doesn’t need to touch objects to nudge them into doing what he asks, but it helps. “I, uh, might need a ladder?”

The boy finally looks up, and his eyes are two bright pinpricks in the darkness, like cats’ eyes.

“My name’s Mark,” he says, jumping down from the washing machine and stowing his book in pocket of his hoodie. When he looks back up at Eduardo, his eyes are human, though Eduardo can’t tell the color in the near-darkness of the room.

“Um, Eduardo. Eduardo Saverin,” he offers.

“Aren’t you going to ask?” Mark says.

“Aren’t you going to tell me anyway?” Eduardo replies. He cringes the moment he does, wincing out a, “Sorry.”

“Hm,” says Mark. His eyes turn feline again, glowing slightly red. He says: “Guess.”

Eduardo blinks. So does the light bulb overhead. “Ah,” he says, triumphant.

Before Eduardo can say any more, Mark says: “Lions have excellent night vision, and it’s not just because their eyes are different, but also because of white strips under their eyes to reflect the light—I’ve been trying to get them right, but it’s hard to emulate. Is it hard? Whatever you do?”

Eduardo breathes out sharply. Mark gazes at him steadily, his eyes shining. It feels, disconcertingly, like he can see right through Eduardo.

Eduardo clears his throat, thinks for a moment. Then: “No. Not always. It’s…harder when I’m trying to nudge things that have been quiet for a long time. It’s easy for them to forget, you know?” The urge to close down on himself is threatening to come up, but the sense of relief is stronger. Eduardo breathes out.

“They’re made of wire and electricity,” Mark nods. “I don’t expect them to have a capacity for memory.”

“Yeah,” Eduardo says, “but things usually just want to do what they’re made for—sometimes they just need a little—” He gestures with his hand, fingers trembling only slightly, placing his palm forward and pushing down on the air. All the light bulbs in the room flicker to life.

“A little nudge,” Mark says. He blinks, and his eyes are human again. In the new brightness of the room, they are very, very blue.

They share a moment of silence, interrupted by the sound of the washing machine beeping at the end of its cycle.

“Welcome to Kirkland, Wardo,” Mark says, before turning around to see to his laundry.

“I—thank you,” Eduardo says. How strange, he thinks. Not Ed or Eddie but—Wardo.

“Thanks, Mark,” Wardo says again.

Above them, the light bulbs burn bright, and Wardo feels the buzz of their energy at the tips of his fingers.

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Mark remembers leaving for the holidays with the realization that he'd actually miss Kirkland house, and he hadn't been able to shake it off, even as he buried himself in code, in the half-formed ideas for a social networking site for people like him. Coming back home that day in January and letting himself sink back into the familiar presence of the people he's come to know as friends had been easy, but it had been easier still to wait for Eduardo to approach him and curl an arm around him in affection.

He'd thought he just missed him, that his affection for Wardo was tied up to this house, to this space Mark has learned to inhabit, but a month on and he's still feeling distinctly wrong-footed when Wardo so much as smiles at him.

“This is going to be a problem,” Mark tells Dustin.

"It's not going to be a problem," Dustin tells Mark.

The two of them are in their room, staring up at the ceiling. Mark appreciates Dustin. He’d been the first person he’d started talking to about the website he’s planning on building, and Dustin had come back the next day with a stack of books on programming. He’s not sure if Dustin’s precognition is only an effect of a brain with a genetically enhanced capacity for calculating odds —there haven’t been enough studies on it. It’s a thought Mark shelves away for later. Research and development, social awareness—all of these things need a safe space. Safe, open, accepting: the colors white and blue appear in his mind again, and Mark lets them wash over him.

“I mean, it’s not like this project’s going to take up too much of your time, we’re not even sure of what we’re going to be coding—” Dustin continues, rambling.

“It’s not—it may not just be the time aspect of this that’s troubling me,” Mark bites out.

The bed creaks as Dustin sits up too fast.


"Urgh," says Mark.

"Oh my God," Dustin repeats. "Really?"

"Yeah," says Mark, resigned.

Dustin whistles. "I should have totally seen that coming. Get it? Because I'm—"

"Yes, Dustin," says Mark, pressing the heels of his palms up against his closed eyelids and letting out a frustrated noise.

Mark rarely gives in to these kinds of feelings, but it’s hard to ignore now that someone else knows about it too. Harder for him to keep himself in denial. He sort of wants to curl up under the blankets for the rest of his life. He can do that, right? He's never attempted as drastic a change of his physiology as changing his metabolism to that of a very small bird so he can live on bread crumbs and not have to leave bed as much as absolutely necessary, but, surely, if there were a time for it—

“What,” Mark asks.
“Nnnnothing,” Dustin says, but it’s clearly something, because he’s tamping down so hard on his excitement that he’s visibly vibrating.

“For fuck’s sake, Dustin—”

There’s a knock on the door, then Wardo’s voice: “Hey, uh, Mark?”

“Get up, go,” hisses Dustin, shoving Mark up and off the bed, muttering about Mark’s apparently skinny, bony shoulders.

“Coming,” Mark says, and flips Dustin the bird when he guffaws and says, “Yeah, you wish you were."

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They’re at the kitchen table on a Sunday night, Mark with his laptop open in front of him, and Wardo sitting on a stool, looking over his shoulder. They can both hear the strains from a movie some people are watching in the living room. Aside from that, things are quiet as they talk over a design that they’re going to print on their Valentine’s Fundraiser-slash-Mutant Awareness Campaign flyers.

Wardo has his phone in his hands, one that flips open and closed and was probably cool two years ago when his parents bought it for him. He’s fidgeting with it, for some reason. Wardo fidgets very loudly.

Distracted is what Mark would be if he allowed it; instead he focuses resolutely on the screen and not on the ridiculous urge to curl his fingers around Eduardo’s wrist, just to know what it would feel like.

Mark is very good at tamping down impulses; it’s something you learn when your form of puberty involves the urge to burst out into feathers every other day.

This doesn’t mean he works on being unobtrusive, no—for all that Mark claims misanthropy as a valid life choice, he knows that there are people dying out there because of something coded into their DNA, something that makes them fundamentally—different. And different does not mean dangerous, Mark knows. It’s been a popular slogan for the Mutants Rights Campaign for a long while. Mark even has a t-shirt with those words scrawled on it in red ink, wrapped, in the shape of a DNA double helix, around a clenched, raised fist. It’s a relic from when Mark was an angry teenager. He’s no less angry now, just quieter about it.

“Mark?” Wardo asks, peering at him with his ridiculous eyebrows pulled in tight.

“I’m fine,” Mark bites out.

“Okay,” Wardo says. “Could you try making the border red—yeah, like that. It looks really good, Mark.”

“Hm,” Mark says.

Mark clicks around for a bit, checking out the layers and saving his progress on the design they’ve got opened up on his laptop: adaptation is not an aberration in big block letters on the front of the page, and, for the back, details for the Fundraising Event scheduled on Valentine’s Day. It’ll probably be up to Wardo to use his awkward, long-limbed, charming self to figure out a way to get people to buy into this—Mark’s work is all done here.

And yet—“Did you know I went to the same high school as Samantha Parker?”
Wardo turns from the screen to face Mark. “I didn’t know that.”

“I did,” Mark says. “I went to high school with her and I didn’t even know she was a mutant.” Not until she’d been out later than usual, and had turned her fingernails into razor-sharp claws when a drunken man had attempted to force himself on her. People aren’t sure what happened, and Mark’s not naïve enough to accept the news on TV as it is, but the facts remain: on the 12th of January, Samantha Parker was shot twice in the stomach and denied medical attention until she died in agony. A girl was murdered and no one cared. The streets aren’t safe at night for their kind—they never were, no matter how much people like to preach about acceptance.

“Mark,” Wardo says, softly. He reaches out and turns Mark’s laptop off the manual way, rather than nudging it to sleep. Mark doesn’t stop him.

“That’s why we’re doing this,” Wardo says. He presses his shoulder against Mark’s briefly, before he stands up to go. Mark hears the muffled ringing of Wardo’s phone from the hallway, resists the urge to enhance his hearing and listen in on the conversation he must be having with whoever’s on the other side.

Mark sighs, closes his laptop. It’s not enough. Mark knows it’s not enough. It’s probably where this actually starts, on this kitchen table in a shared house, Mark’s thoughts beginning to coalesce into building blocks, foundations. Perhaps, Eduardo isn’t ready and that’s fine, that’s understandable.

But Mark Zuckerberg writes code and reads about how ants build houses because he knows that building something up is not the opposite of tearing something down. And something, he knows, must be torn down very soon.

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March

The start of spring finds the inhabitants of Kirkland house awash with hay fever except Erica, whose mutation, Wardo guesses, makes her immune to a range of sicknesses and ailments. Since any of her attempts to pass on the immunity to others only results in a series of very loud sneezes, they scrap that idea and instead stare balefully at her while blowing their noses.

Hay fever affects them in different ways: Amy wakes them all up in the mornings with sneezes that sound like dogs barking, or car horns, or, one time, the house meeting bell. Christy’s sneezes make electrical appliances go haywire and Chris sends things hovering an inch above their usual places.

Even worse is Divya, whose physical body has a tendency to disperse into mist every time he sneezes too hard.

“It’s sort of gross,” Wardo overhears Dustin saying, “You’ve become like the human personification of a sneeze, man.”

After a week of this, Christy sits Wardo down on the kitchen table and tells him they’re going to Do A Thing—she even says it in a way that implies the capital letters.

"What is it," Wardo asks flatly, already feeling a sense of dread creeping up on him. The last time Christy wanted to Do A Thing, half the house had gotten drunk and Mark had attempted to liberate zebras from the city zoo.

"It’s nothing illegal," Christy says, rolling her eyes. She also flips her hair back over her shoulder
for good measure, but Wardo just looks at her calmly.

"Okay maybe not totally illegal," she amends.

The thing is, the city has had an unarticulated curfew ever since the second week of January. Nobody's going to stop them from being outside after midnight, but, well. It's highly discouraged. You don't want people to get the wrong idea.

"People already have the wrong idea, anyway," Christy says to Wardo that night, when they're preparing to go out and Do A Thing. Her face is carefully casual but Wardo can just about see the static rising from her short, cropped hair. Christy loves being angry, but high-running emotions mixed badly with her mutation, and she'd ended up decided to cut her hair off to avoid having to deal with impossible tangles. "And any guy who thinks they have a right to an opinion about my hair gets zapped in the balls," she'd announced.

"If I wanna leave the house at 3 in the morning to go jogging, I should be able to," Christy says. She zips up her bag and pulls the hood of her black jacket down over her eyes, so Wardo can only see her Cheshire Cat grin. He hears Erica bustling down the stairs, also dressed in a dark ensemble, her favored orange sweater nowhere in sight.

Mark, much more quietly, follows after her. Wardo sighs when he sees him. Of course. This was probably all Mark’s idea in the first place.

Wardo rubs a hand through his hair and heaves his backpack over his shoulder. It rattles with all the spray cans inside it, and Mark looks up and grants Wardo the upward quirk of his lips.

"Let’s do this," Mark says.

The plan is simple. The Anti-Mutant Integration Committee, an atrocious organization set up by people Chris refers to as “literal shit stains on this planet”, has been busy at work, putting up nasty anti-mutant propaganda all over town. It irks Wardo, but it makes Mark practically incendiary. While he usually takes his anger out on bigots on the Internet, it probably hasn’t been enough for him this time around. The AMIC’s been around for years, but no one’s really taken them seriously. With what happened in January, though, the anti-mutant movement seems to have hit its stride, and things have been tense.

Thus: spray-painting. Wardo has to admit he’s a bit excited. He’s never really done anything like this before, but he’s willing to bet that Mark, Christy, Erica—and probably everyone else in the house, now that he thinks about it—have done this, and worse things, before. Sometimes anti-mutant propaganda posters and flyers are set on fire in garbage dumps around town. Wardo supposes he should have realized that his friends were in on it sooner.

They certainly act like they’re used to this sort of thing; they make their way around the city efficiently, strolling along the mostly-empty streets. It’s not that late, just a little after 1 am, but their neighborhood is a quiet one. Christy trails her fingers along the walls of buildings and shops, sparks rising where she touches them. Mark twitches every so often, hearing probably enhanced to mimic some sort of bird of prey, jerking his head toward sounds that Wardo can’t hear at all.

Most of the propaganda posters are set up on bus stops around the city, so they go through those first. Wardo mostly sprays over entire posters without finesse, grimacing at all the stupid bullshit that's been written on them: We make humans our priority! Make them yours too! Erica gets creative, spraying horns and wings onto the "wholesome" humans on the poster. Things are going fine, until Christy gets a sneezing fit and a man walking down the street actually notices what they're doing.
Wardo mostly hears him yelling about calling the police, but someone's pulling him away and into a run before he can hear much else of what the guy's saying. Christy and Erica go in one direction while Mark pulls Wardo in another. They end up in a dank alley somewhere, bent over with their hands on their knees, trying to catch their breath. When Wardo looks up and sees Mark, he laughs.

"What," Mark asks, leaning against the wall, still panting from all the running.

Wardo grins. "You're glowing."

"Huh. Firefly, I think," Mark says, looking down at himself. His lips twitch up into a small smile, and Wardo laughs again.

"This sort of thing really lights you up, doesn't it," Wardo says.

Mark groans. "That was awful. Even Dustin would have cringed."

Wardo rolls his eyes, though he doubts Mark can see it in the gloom.

Finally, Mark pushes himself off the wall and hands Wardo the spray can to stash in his backpack.

"Let's get back home," he says, already walking out of the alley. Wardo smiles to himself, and turns to follow.

April

It is sometime in April when the topic of the house roof comes up. The conversation happens over dinner, when Dustin looks up from his vegan curry spaghetti—you learn to eat strange things in a house when you live in a house with ten different people—and says, “So, uh, we have a roof on this house?”

There are at least three other conversations going on around them, so Wardo, sitting closest to him, absent-mindedly replies with a “Yes.”

“No, like, we have a roof on this house—Christopher! Why has no one ever told me that we have a roof on this house?” Dustin points his fork at Chris, who’s sitting across from him.

Chris blinks blankly at him, “Of course we have a roof on this house. I mean, there’s a set of stairs in the upstairs hallway that leads to it?”

“Huh,” Wardo says, acting like he’s realizing it for the first time. “Has that always been there?”

“You know,” Erica says, playing along, “I’m not even sure.”

“I thought it was a closet,” Cameron admits.

“I thought it was, just, you know. A door,” Amy shrugs.

Dustin stands up, his plate clattering. “Guys. You guys. We have to check it out.”

“There’s nothing on the roof to see, Dustin,” says Christy, “Nothing but a pile of dead leaves and beer cans.”

“Self-fulfilling prophecy time!” Dustin chimes in, “I just saw all of us gathering on the roof. My precognition is never wrong.”

“Dish clean first,” Chris says sternly.
Wardo just watches in amusement as everyone else around stands up and starts clearing their plates, and within fifteen minutes they’re all trooping up the dusty set of stairs to the roof—to their roof, he supposes.

“This is totally the coolest,” Dustin says, when they’re all standing in the open air, under the stars. The house is only three stories tall but it’s good enough to see up and down the neighborhood for whole blocks at a time. “How come we never come up here?”

“I think the last tenants left a litter of feral cats up here,” Erica tells him. Wardo’s not sure if she’s kidding.

“No,” Christy’s saying, “It was a swarm of territorial bees. A huge beehive.”

“A flock of escaped Skinner’s pigeons, you know, the ones who could play ping-pong and shit,” Tyler suggests.

Chris, who’s been living in Kirkland the longest, deadpans, “I was trying to you guys away from here so I could breed an army of mutant sheep.”

“Christopher!” Wardo laughs as his friends squabble about it. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Mark step up beside him, glowing faintly.

“Firefly?” Wardo guesses, glancing at him.

“Jellyfish,” says Mark. “Tried fireflies before—they manufacture a different type of luciferin—a different color glow. Yellow. I’m trying out green.”

“You look very good in it,” Wardo says, grinning.

Mark rolls his eyes, “I’m still trying to figure out how much of my physiology I change when I mimic an animal—fireflies emit light by using up ATP, like humans. Jellyfish are different. I suppose if I keep this up, I’ll feel a change in how I utilize energy.”

“It seems very useful,” Wardo says, “You can call for attention with that the next time you get yourself accidentally locked out of the house.”

“That happened exactly one time,” Mark scoffs.

“Guys, I just got something,” says Dustin, announcing it to everyone assembled on the roof, “It’s time for another self-fulfilling prophecy!”

“Great,” Mark mutters.

Dustin is silent for a moment, closing his eyes and concentrating, and then, in a confused voice, “A roof garden? Really?”

“You know,” Chris says slowly, “that’s not actually a bad idea.”

And, because everyone in the house is at least 10% thinking about how this will help the house budget (Wardo), and 90% eager to see if any of them have a capacity to make things stay alive (everyone else), the Kirkland House Roof Garden Project gets started.

They don’t have the money or the time for anything more sophisticated than a few rows of pots—
They don't have the money or the time for anything more sophisticated than a few rows of pots—just tomatoes, eggplants, cucumbers and lettuce to start—but there’s a lasting sense of accomplishment after they’ve patted the last seeds into the soil and Erica’s added “roof duties” to their chore wheel.

Of course, the next weekend has to bring a thunderstorm crashing into the city, and they sit around in the living room and worry about their plants. The Winklevoss twins decide to build a simple shed to keep their plants safe, and Divya offers a pot of tulsi from his room to place under the shade. Chris brings up a table and a couple of chairs and suddenly the roof’s become the most popular place in—on, technically—the house. Mark stays up there surprisingly often, which Wardo appreciates because he’d probably never get any sunlight if he didn’t.

And Wardo—well, he dotes on the plants. He and Divya are possibly the most invested in them, giving each other tips over meals and climbing up to the roof together to check on the progress. None of the vegetables will be ready for harvest until after at least two months, but Wardo likes the steady routine, the slow satisfaction that comes with nurturing a seed and watching it rise towards the sun.

Halfway through the month, Dustin brings up a small potted cactus and puts it on the table where Mark has taken to working, hunched over his laptop and, rarely, his papers from school.

“Because they’re both prickly,” Dustin mock-whispers over to where Wardo is checking on the leaves of one tomato plant.

Wardo smiles appreciatively. Mark rolls his eyes and keeps typing.

“Too bad we can’t plant any pines up here, huh, Mark?” Dustin, waggling his eyebrows, “Pines, you know, because you’re—”

Eduardo tunes them out and turns toward the tomato plant, frowning at the brown patches on its leaves. There aren’t any visible pests on the stalk or in the pot, and the soil is still damp, so it’s been recently watered. He worries his lower lip between his teeth before pressing a finger to the plant’s stalk and thinking: heal. His breath catches in his throat when the plant does more than that, instead shooting up almost a foot. Three red, round tomatoes burst into bloom.

"War-do!" Dustin exclaims, "Way to goooo!"

It's certainly unexpected enough that Wardo actually gasps: he’s tried coaxing plants before, insects and other small animals just on a whim, and though they never worked, the acts of attempting to always left a bad taste in his mouth. He’d stopped doing it when he’d left Brazil with his family, when hiding his mutation became a key normalcy, and normalcy a key to surviving in the strange new land his father had brought them to.

"Has that ever happened before?" Mark asks, as if he can read Wardo's thoughts.

"No," Wardo answers, standing up and brushing his hands on his pants, "I wasn't sure what I expected to happen but that—" He cuts himself off, wondering. Worrying.

"Hey, it's totally cool," Dustin says. "It's cool, right, Mark?"

"Yeah," Mark says. "Experimenting with your mutation isn't a bad thing, Wardo."

"I—yes, I know," Wardo says. He flashes them both a grateful, if shaky, smile.

Dustin glances between the two of them and says, “Well, look at the time. I need to go started on Dinner. Tonight.”
“It’s 3 pm,” Mark says.

“Bye!” Dustin calls out, loudly stomping down the stairs.

Wardo sits down on the chair across from Mark, lost in thought.

"It really is okay, you know," Mark tells him after a while.

"Is it?" Wardo asks.

Mark glances at him.

"They're living things, Mark," Wardo admits softly and then quickly, before he can lose his nerve, "I don't—there are so many things about my—mutation—that I don't understand. That I was never given the chance to understand. I don't know how things will respond to me and it's—uncomfortable. To have that power over something."

"Hm," says Mark. He's looking back at his laptop but not typing anything. Wardo can't see what he's thinking but appreciates that Mark doesn't reply right away, the way he usually does when he talks to someone, a diatribe or snarky comment right on the tip of his tongue.

"It's okay to not know," Mark says finally.

Wardo can't help but smile. "Really? Coming from you, that's a big deal."

Mark shrugs, "Wardo, you're, like, the least ill-willing person in the world. You don't have a bad wish for anyone and that's—not a bad thing." He's studiously keeping his eyes focused on his laptop, tapping out a few lines on his keyboard as he talks.

"The fact that you don't know what you're capable of isn't your fault."

Wardo closes his eyes and nods, taking it in. "I know," he says. "I understand. Or I'm—trying."

"Good," says Mark.

"Good," Wardo echoes.

--

The next day, Divya approaches him at the breakfast table and asks, "Wardo, do you know what happened to one of the tomato plants?" His eyebrows are furrowed in consternation.

"Wardo worked his magic on it!" Dustin exclaims through a mouthful of cereal. He even does jazzhands.

"What?" Divya asks. He frowns, "I think you have to come up and see it."

Wardo, still sleepy and now confused, follows Divya up the stairs to the roof. He's not quite sure what he was expecting to see, but it's not the withered, crumpled plant that only yesterday had been in the peak of health. Something is caught in Wardo's throat, making it painful to breathe.

"Fuck," he says, "Fuck, I'm sorry. I didn't—it wasn't on purpose."

"Hey," Divya says, reaching out for Wardo's arm and steadying him. Wardo hadn't even realized he'd begun to shake. "Eduardo, it's fine. It's not a big deal, I was just—wondering."

Wardo swallows, "Yeah, I. I thought—yesterday, I accidentally nudged it into growing, and it
was, it was fine. Mark and Dustin saw. I didn’t. I didn’t know.”

Divya is silent for a moment, allowing Wardo to push his panic down and clench his fists to stop the trembling in his hands. Finally, Divya asks, “Help me replant it?” and Eduardo, tremulously pulling himself together, nods.

They work efficiently, Divya digging up the dead plant by the roots and setting it aside so that Wardo can pat new seeds into the soil, keeping his mind carefully blank. Divya takes the withered tomato stalk and brings it downstairs, and comes back to Wardo curling his fingers into the soil, shoulders trembling.

“It’s not—it’s more than just—the plant,” Wardo attempts to explain as Divya approaches him.

“I know,” Divya says.

Wardo stands up and walks over to the, sitting down heavily. "I feel like I'm--overreacting, you know? But I just feel awful. If I could do that accidentally, what else am I capable of?” He focuses his gaze forlornly on the little cactus Dustin had brought up here. It makes him feel ill, knowing that he could reach out and unknowingly kill it too.

"You didn't ask for any of this. None of us did," Divya says. "But it's something we all have to learn to live with. And besides, that's what we're here for, isn't it?"

Wardo blinks up at him. "What?"

Divya rolls his eyes, pulling out the chair opposite him and sitting down.

"You're not alone in this, Wardo. I know you know that. Yeah?"

Wardo breathes in. Breathes out. Feels, at the tips of his fingertips, the life around him. "Yeah. Yes. Thank you."

"Good," Divya says. "Now I've been thinking of adding some ornamentals up here..."

May

“Guys, I am telling you, that bakery down the street is definitely the meeting place of some secret underground mutant terrorist group!”

“I don’t think it’s PC to use the t-word like that,” Erica says.

“Dustin, it’s just a regular bakery, we’ve been there hundreds of times,” Amy says.

“No wait, I’ve heard this one,” Tyler says, “There’s, like, a backroom on the second floor where they’re planning the next revolution.”

“I’ve been to that backroom, and the only people meeting up there are a bunch of college kids advocating for mutant education,” Chris says, rolling his eyes.

“It’s the perfect cover-up and you know it!” Dustin exclaims.

It’s one of the rare nights they’re actually all at home and not overwhelmingly busy. May brings the spring rains to their doors often, so to “promote a cozier environment,” Dustin had ordered them all into the living room for a blanket fort party, “because Mark and I just reached a goal for Super Secret Project we’re working on and deserve cuddles!”
Wardo is lying on the floor with his head on Christy’s lap, dozing quietly while they listen to the rain outside and trade stories. Dustin is going on about the bakery down the street, which not only makes the perfect scones, but also apparently shelters mutant activists.

“I’ve been to a mutant bar once!” Christy chimes in. She shifts around, jostling Wardo’s head, so he rolls over to find someone else’s lap to rest his head on, and ends up blinking up at Mark.

“Hi, Mark,” Wardo says.

“Wardo,” Mark replies. He’s the most relaxed Wardo’s seen him in a couple weeks, which he and Dustin spent loading up on Red Bull and working on their Super Secret Project into the night, only stumbling out of their rooms in the morning to go to class with eyes closed, probably still seeing lines of code scroll behind their eyelids.

“Hmm,” says Wardo, sleepy and tired. He feels warmer for the rain beating down outside, insulated in this bubble of gossip and conversation.

“And they had some sort of neutralizer behind the bar for when the fights got rowdy, you know?” Christy is still telling her story. “So this one guy, he morphs into this weird liquid physical form and starts trying to drown the other guy in his, you know, his body—so the bartender hits the neutralizer and the water guy shifts back to his human form, except—guess what? He’s completely naked!”

“I don’t want to know what kinds of bars Christy ends up in,” Wardo murmurs and Mark responds with a snort.

“I think it’s interesting that one of the first kinds of tech designed with mutants in mind were neutralizers,” Mark says.

“I guess,” Wardo says, “They don’t sound very nice from our point of view, but they’re probably useful in lots of ways.”

"I once met a girl who had to wear a neutralizer because her hearing was, like, a thousand times more sensitive than regular human hearing," Erica says.

"They can be useful," Chris comments, tuning in to their conversation, "But it becomes a problem when people define useful on their own terms, right? And not on the terms of the people who have actual need of them."

"Someone once asked me why I didn't just wear a neutralizer all the time," Divya says, "Didn't I want to feel normal?"

"People can be such assholes," Amy says.

"I used to wear a neutralizer," Christy says darkly. "It was exhausting. I felt numb all the time. I wanted to learn how to control my mutation, not suppress it."

"Ty and I tried it out too," Cameron says, "They wouldn't let us play on the football team without them, but they made us pretty useless."

"I wore one for years," Wardo says quietly.

Christy’s hand comes to grip at his ankle, squeezing gently.

It's rare enough for Wardo to volunteer personal details that everyone in the room hushes down, which makes Wardo wrinkle his nose. He shrugs, still lying down.
"It was hard to get used to, but after a while you just sort of live with it. I didn't even realize how good it felt without it until I finally decided to take it off." He remembers it only vaguely. The most lasting impression in his memories is where the skin underneath the neutralizer bracelet hadn’t darkened over exposure to daylight like the rest of his arm. It had been a pale circle around his wrist, a clear demarcation on the map of his skin, like a scar.

"That's awful, Wardo," Erica sys, sympathetic. "You never should have had to go through that in the first place."

"It was my choice," Wardo says. "Nobody forced me into it. I wanted it. I thought it would make me feel normal. I thought I was normal, because of it. But then it started to actually make me sick." It was a time in his life that he still finds hard to confide in anyone, those long days of lethargy and apathy. His memories of them are swathed in gray, fuzzy and indistinct now. He'd hidden himself for so long. Those days are difficult to think about now that he knows what it feels like to be out in the sun again, even if he's taking it in small doses, inching closer and closer to the light.

"My parents didn't know I was doing so badly. I had to find a way to get myself better without them knowing."

"And then you found us," Christy says.

"And then I found you," Wardo agrees. His eyes sting and his throat feels tight, but it's a weight off his shoulders. Mark, without looking at him, says, "We're glad you did."

"Group hug!" Dustin demands in a shout.

The others roll their eyes but comply until they're all a tangle of limbs and hair in a pile in the living room. The rain outside keeps pouring through the night, even after they've all picked themselves up and moved into their own rooms. In the morning, they all open their windows wide to let the clean, fresh air blow in. Everything always feels good after it's rained.

The rains come and go and suddenly it's the middle of the month. A year since Wardo arrived in Kirkland house, stooping on the porch and wringing his hands in nervousness. Dustin had opened the door for him. He hadn't thought he was brave, back then, just pathetic and sad, but he can look back at that now and realize that maybe he's capable of being strong too. He's capable of being content, even happy.

They next time it rains, Erica grabs Wardo, circling a hand around his wrist, and he grabs Dustin, who grabs Mark, and so on, each of them holding on to another person's hand as they step out of the house together. It's an awful cliché, dancing in the rain, but Wardo loves it. Even Mark doesn’t complain about it. It’s a good day.

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Not a week later, Wardo comes home to find Erica and Mark standing together in the kitchen, leaning against the counter with their faces turned to each other. Something uneasy settles in his stomach, and he tries to ignore the low simmering of what feels like jealousy in his blood. He knows, rationally, that he has nothing to be jealous of, but he is anyway, in a way he can’t even articulate. The jealousy only lasts for a moment though—the moment Wardo steps into the kitchen, Mark turns to him, and Wardo sees the other side of his face. He’s sporting a black eye and a split lip. Bruises storm down his high cheekbone, vivid against Mark’s pale skin.

The jealousy he’d felt earlier dissipates and gives way to anger, but Erica just shakes her head jerkily at Wardo, grabs Mark’s face back towards her, and lays her hand across his cheek. Past the
outrage that’s pooling inside him, Wardo still marvels at Erica's ability—she removes Mark’s pain and Mark’s bruises and takes them into her own body: they appear reflected, just for a moment, on Erica’s own face before her mutation heals her. Her hair brushes down over her cheek when Mark jostles her, stepping away, and when she tucks it back behind her ear, the skin of her face is smooth and pale. So is Mark’s.

"Thank you," Mark says promptly, after he and Erica pull apart and Wardo comes closer.

Erica waves a hand in exasperation. "Next time you think of taking on three guys by yourself, please don't." She turns to Wardo and says, "He's all yours."

Mark doesn't even let Wardo speak first, jutting out his chin defiantly and saying, "Look, I had to, okay, the amount of bullshit they were spewing—"

"You can't keep doing this Mark! You can't keep provoking people—"

"Provoking people? Like I asked for their bigoted opinions to be spat at my face? Like I told them I wanted to be looked at like fucking dirt?"

Dustin often teases Mark for his lizard-eyes, and for once Wardo can see the similarity. There’s something animalistic about Mark’s seething, narrowed gaze now, the way he holds himself with inhuman stillness.

The things in the room are starting to rock, almost imperceptibly at first, but getting stronger the more Wardo feels control slipping out of his grasp. He finds himself fucking angry, with Mark, with the people who hurt him, with himself.

He tries to rein it in, tries to remember the feeling of the neutralizer on his wrist, but the mark is long gone now. Wardo feels himself slipping. He rubs a shaky hand over his eyes. "I don't want to fight."

"No, you don't. But someone fucking has to, Wardo."

There's a single pulse of emotion that runs through Wardo before all drawers and cupboards jerk open, and cutlery spills onto the floor on a loud crash.

“Fuck,” Wardo says immediately, “Fuck, I didn’t—” He turns around to survey the damage, then turns back to Mark, a dozen apologies clawing their way up his throat—

Mark is smiling. He’s honest-to-god smiling, a full grin, wide and happy. Wardo takes his trembling hands away from his face and stares.

“I knew you could be angry,” Mark says with a nod at Wardo.

“Jesus Christ, Mark, I just—”

“You feel better now?"

“I could have hurt you."

Mark rolls his eyes. “I’m fine, Wardo. And so are you. Probably not when Chris finds out you did, though.”

Wardo lets out a tremulous laugh. His eyes feel wet. “Yeah, Chris is going to kill me.”

“I’ll protect you,” Mark says.
“You’re the worst,” Wardo sighs. He reaches out, almost unconsciously, to tug Mark closer.

“If you have to pick fights, please fucking look for an animal whose skin you can mimic to protect you from blunt force trauma, okay?”

Mark blinks at Wardo’s hands holding onto his arms, and then at Wardo’s face. He says, “Okay. I can do that.” He takes one more step, face resolute, and lets Wardo hug him.

“Okay,” Wardo says. He knows he should be letting go of Mark now, but he still feels shaky, like Mark is the only thing holding him up right now.

Mark seems to understand, content to let Wardo just stand there with him for a few long moments. Mark steps away first. Where there used to be no space between them, is suddenly filled with something else, something that makes Wardo’s hands ache.

He feels curiously like he’s just broken through the surface of water, and realizing how good it feels to breathe oxygen. Like standing nervously on the steps leading to Kirkland House and watching that imposing door open for him for the first time.

He thinks oh, and realizes he’s in love with Mark Zuckerberg.

June

Most people look at Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss and assume they’re both totally normal college kids, and they’d be mostly right, for a given definition of normal.

As it went with most children of the upper crust society, the Winklevii were registered the moment they were old enough to be tested and found positive for the mutant X-gene. Until a decade ago, the procedure had been nigh unaffordable for most of the population of the United States, but it was now offered for free for every baby born in a hospital in the great Land of the Free.

It’s something that irks Mark, the way people seem to always assume that a mutation will match a personality. The way people always assume that Mark’s penchant for technology and his abilities with computers is a mutation and not a result of his actual hard work is unimaginative at best, and, at worst, openly discriminatory.

Mark knows that if the Winklevoss twins hadn’t been born with their mutation, they probably would never have moved in the same social circles—he’d have hated how they practically reeked of old money, would have been derisive of the way they held themselves. It’s difficult to put them in that position now, difficult to put himself in that position, when he knows that they sought out Kirkland House because they wanted to live with others like them, instead of sheltering themselves in their parents’ mansions. And for all of the Winklevoss twins’ privilege, they bear themselves with a dignity that doesn’t seek to belittle others. They’re good people.

So it’s always a particular sort of pleasure for Mark to see the way people’s faces fall when they realize that the Winklevoss twins are mutants, and that their mutation isn’t anything benign or harmless or unobtrusive. The ability to secrete poison out of your pores isn’t a skill that is much appreciated by most people. It probably doesn’t help that using the mutation has the tendency to turn both the twins’ skin into a mélange of colors: bright purples and reds to indicate toxicity. A phenomena easily and often observed in the natural world. Mark has never seen the Winklevoss twins actually activate their mutation, but he knows he’d probably like to witness it once, if only to attempt to emulate it in himself.

"It was our dad that made us try out for the rowing team in high school," Tyler tells him one night. The three of them have somehow converged on the rooftop, and Mark has set aside his laptop for
once. Well—it's still open and running beside him, but Mark’s set the backlight down to a very
dim glow, at least.

"Minimal human contact," Cameron said, wagging his fingers. "I mean, it’s not like we ever
would have used it, but the lower the risk the better, right?"

"Hmm," Mark says.

Cameron laughs like he knows what Mark is thinking. Tyler, who has less of a verbal filter says,
"It’s bullshit, right? Friggin’ bullshit. They didn’t let us in any of the sports teams we tried out for,
as if we’d be stupid enough to use this mutation on anyone. It’s friggin’ unfair."

"And coming from us, that’s sort of ridiculous, isn’t it?" Cameron says. "Our lives are fine. They’re
great. I can only imagine how much more crap other people have to go through."

Mark gives another hum, then leans forward and says, "I may have a proposition for you."

--

Mark goes into overdrive on the website as they near the end of June. The Winklevoss twins pitch
in the money, and Mark buys servers and software and the domain name, thefacebook. He even
lets Dustin snap a picture of him, for his profile when the site’s finally up.

Sleeping ceases to become a priority; most nights—days—whatever—Dustin gives up and heads
to sleep long before Mark even becomes aware of his own tiredness. He finds himself slipping
with keeping his mutation in check, doesn’t realize that he’s been growing scales all over his body
every time he takes a shower until Chris points out a trail of silvery-blue plates following Mark’s
heels, shed from his skin.

One day, Mark’s working at his laptop when Wardo hauls him up by the arms and steers him
somewhere away.

“What,” Mark says, feels like he’s been doused with water when his bare feet step onto cold tiles.
Kitchen. Where’s the bright glow of his laptop? Has Wardo’s hair always looked that nice?

“Sit,” Wardo says. He pushes a plate of something hot towards Mark and crosses his arms, staring
Mark down.

“Eat,” Wardo says.

“This is totally unnecessary,” Mark says.

Wardo raises an eyebrow and Mark complies, realizes he’s too tired now to argue. He eats the
food. It’s some sort of pasta and sauce, thick and filling. Mark isn’t proud enough to stop himself
from inhaling it into his body, but he glares at Wardo while he stuffs his mouth. It’s mostly
ineffective.

He starts to feel sleepy after he insists on standing and getting a glass of water by himself, and his
hands must not be used to holding glass anymore because it slips through his hand and crashes on
the floor.

“Oops,” Mark says, furrowing his eyebrows at the shattered glass. Someone should do something
to make sure glasses don’t break. How are people supposed to drink properly if things keep
slipping out of their hands and breaking?

“Wow,” Wardo says, “Mark, you are so out of it right now. Also, people use plastic cups too.”
“Hmm,” Mark says. He leans against the fridge, barely keeping himself from turning his face into its cold surface, while Wardo leans down and nudges the pieces of glass back into place. Wardo is so good at that. Wardo’s mutation is awesome.

Wardo sighs. “Come on,” he says, tugging at Mark’s hoodie strings after he’s set the glass back on the counter. In terms of reminding Mark how adorable he thinks Wardo is, that hoodie-move is super effective.

“ Totally out of it,” Wardo mutters again.

Mark doesn’t remember how he gets to his room downstairs in the basement without breaking something, but then he wakes up and it’s morning and his laptop isn’t in bed with him.

On his bedside table, there’s a glass full of water. Mark drains it, and goes to look for his laptop.

July

"Guys," Chris says, "we may have a problem."

Chris is standing in front of the room, looking grim. It's 9 in the morning, and, after a rousing breakfast that involved Christy and the toaster having their usual stand-off, they’ve all come together for the first-of-the-month house meeting.

Wardo sees Mark jerk awake when Erica elbows him. Dustin is still off snoozing on Cameron’s shoulder.

"What is it?" Amy asks.

"We really need to use our heads for this," Chris says. He holds a hand up to his chin. "This is really just the tip of the iceberg."

"Christopher, what are you—" Dustin is finally awake, looking wonderfully perplexed. His face is like a muppet's.

"I don’t want to be melondramatic—" Chris manages to get out, before someone throws a pillow at him and his face cracks into a smile.

Dustin jumps out of his chair and takes a running sprint at Chris, throwing his arms around him in what can only be described as a glomp. Everyone else just groans.

"I'm sorrel!" Chris says, to another round of boos.

"What is happening." Mark says blearily.

"Beets me," Wardo says.

"No, okay, but seriously guys," Chris says. "Whoever's free tonight should come up to the roof to help us harvest. There's not a lot, so it'll be done really quick if we all mustard up our strengths—"

He takes another round of pillows to the face. Dustin whoops.

--

Chris is actually right, there’s not a lot to harvest from the garden but everyone pitches in to help anyway. Lettuce has to be eaten before it starts to bolt and go bitter, so they have salad for a few nights afterwards. Divya makes an amazing eggplant masala, and Amy makes tomato sauce and
pasta from scratch.

The week after the harvest finds Wardo on top of the roof again with a bag of pumpkin seeds for when it's Halloween. After he's done, he wipes his hands down and sits down on the table to soak in some sun with Mark's cacti. Wardo's been seeing more of them than Mark himself, who's taken to cooping himself up in his room more and more. He's working on a website that has something to do with mutants, that's as far as Wardo knows. Whenever Mark talks to him about it, the technical jargon just goes past his head.

The realization back in May has settled into him easily, to his surprise. Being in love with Mark, Wardo has come to see, has been the baseline all along. Nothing much has changed. He's dealing with it better than he expected to, but he misses him. And he worries.

Wardo sighs and stands up, brushing away the dust on his jeans. He might as well go and find Mark, and attempt to make him eat tonight.

--

Mark and Dustin's room in the basement is a mess when Wardo knocks and enters.

"How do you live in this?" he asks, wrinkling his nose. Mark barely twitches from where he's typing rapidly on the keyboard, but when Wardo comes closer, he swivels in his chair to face him. His lips are slightly curved up in a way that Wardo can now tell is his probably his happiest smile. Wardo is surprised when Mark beckons him over.

"It's about to go live," Mark says. He chews on the inside of his cheek, trying to look nonchalant.

"Right now?" Wardo says.

"Yeah," Mark says. "Right now."

"Congratulations?" Wardo says, but Mark has already closed his eyes, rocking himself slightly back and forth.

Wardo sits on the bed beside the desk, watches the light from the grimy window fall on Mark, and waits for him to finish.

--

Wardo can't help but blame himself for not realizing sooner what Mark's website is supposed to be about. It takes him more than a week to find out, and it's only because he finds Mark watching the news on his laptop at the dining table one morning, a spoon of cereal halfway to his mouth. It's 7 am. Wardo's only awake because he has a lecture to attend at 8, but Mark, on the days he feels like going to his classes, is usually never up until 10 am, at the earliest. Unless.

"Did you sleep at all last night?" Wardo asks worriedly. He shouldn't be surprised. Even after Mark had launched his website—we're calling it Facebook, Dustin had said excitedly, some reference to Cameron and Tyler's favorite movie, because they'd pitched in the money for it—he still worked on it, day and night. Wardo has no idea what he's even doing on it.

"Yes," Mark says curtly. There's a small splash when his spoon falls back into the bowl.

"Mark?" Wardo asks, "What are you watching?"

Mark doesn't say anything, just moves his laptop so that Wardo can see it too if he leans over Mark's shoulder. On the screen, the news scene playing out is about the protest that happened a
few days ago, somewhere in San Francisco. Wardo remembers it only vaguely.

"What is that?" he asks.

"Don't be obtuse," Mark says, but there's no bite to it. He seems almost—hesitant? Nervous?

"I mean," Wardo says slowly, "what does this mean? For you?"

"They organized this protest through Facebook, Wardo. Thousands of people—thousands of mutants came."

"Facebook?" Wardo says, incredulous. "Why would they organize a protest on Facebook?"

Mark looks at him in consternation, like he can't understand what Wardo's saying. "Wardo, that's what it's for."


"The government is fucking useless," Mark says. He's looking at Wardo with something that might be anger, but it's hard to tell, really. Wardo has the strange, awful feeling that he doesn't really know Mark, not at all. Not as well as he might have thought.

"You're helping these people put themselves in danger," Wardo hears himself say, through the haze of confusion in his head. He doesn't understand. He doesn't understand—why is Mark?—Mark's life isn't difficult, it's not like he's in danger all the time. He picks fights with other people but that doesn't mean—

"Our lives are already in danger," Mark says lowly, and he's standing up now. Wardo takes an unconscious step backwards. "We are in danger all the time, just because we were born different, just because some idiot somewhere decided that we weren't normal—enough—"

"You're from New York," Wardo says, feels his voice rising, "You have good parents and you're getting a good education and your life is fine, Mark, it's good, your life isn't in danger—"

"When are you going to stop being such a fucking coward?" It's the way Mark says it that makes Wardo flinch: quiet, like it hurts him to do so, but he drags it out anyway.

"You left your parents’ house and went here to live your life but you're still trying to be whatever society’s bullshit notion of normal is. You can keep going with the status quo if you want to, Wardo. You can pass for normal—that’s all you want, right? What are you even doing here, Eduardo?"

He doesn't know. He doesn't know—he doesn't—

Brazil, Florida, and Boston: Wardo feels like his life can be neatly divided into sections of him running away. Play the montage and cue the sad music. There's nowhere to run in this house, but he can always go up.

He just needs to breathe.

He doesn't look at Mark when he walks away.

--

Wardo sits down and feels something inside him splintering, breaking. There's a trembling that
starts from inside his chest and reverberates down to his fingers. It's hard to breathe. But he does. Slowly, the sun goes down, and Wardo's still sitting there. He startles when he hears someone scuffling up into the roof, and blinks in surprise at how dark it is all around him.

"Hey, Wardo," Christy says, padding softly towards him. Even in that, she is loud. The first time she'd met Wardo, she'd leaned over towards him and talked to him in a whisper that the entire room could have heard. Christy does not know how to be quiet, and she doesn't want to be. It's not something anyone can take from her.

"Hey," Wardo says, attempting to force a smile. Christy rolls her eyes. "I hate it when you do that," she says.

"Yeah," Wardo sighs, and lets his face drop. "I know."

She sits with him. That's all she does. Sooner or later, the words come, as they always do.

"You spend so much of your life hiding, you don’t know what it’s like to be out in the open anymore," he starts out, his voice barely a whisper. "The thought of thousands of mutant lives, laid bare like that, for anyone to see—it’s terrifying to me."

He has to believe that what the government does is right. How else is he supposed to live with what he did to himself? How could he live with his parents for letting that happen to him?

"I just...I need some time to get used to it," Wardo says. "I need some time. I don't know how to feel about this, but I'm trying—I'm trying. I'm trying."

What was the first thing Christy said to him when they first met? It had been a question. What have you got?, casual as anything. He hadn't understood her. She'd smiled at him all same. She smiles at him now. "I know," Christy says.

"You wanna go back in?"

"I think I'll stay here for a while," Wardo says.

"Okay," Christy says. She leans across the space between them to kiss Wardo's cheek. The brush of static when they touch is familiar, and that makes him smile.

He stays up there until he can't anymore, until he starts to feel restless. He nudges the chair underneath him, and it nudges back the way most wooden objects do, with quiet resistance that's carved into their fibers. It's how they hold people up, how they contain without falling apart, how they stand steady.

Eduardo isn't wood, though. He's bone and muscle and sinew, and so much easier to break. He's not brave, like Mark and Chris and Erica. Like Christy. Like anyone else in the house. He's afraid of failing, afraid of pain, afraid of being the monster that some people think he is, that his father had feared he would be.

He sits there for a long, long time, and finally, he goes back downstairs.

--

Things are tense between Mark and Eduardo, and it’s a feeling that spreads through the rest of the house. Mark keeps following the news. He stays in the house, monitoring Facebook, but sometimes Christy and Erica and Chris take long bus rides into other cities and come back tired, sometimes bruised, messy. Wardo tries not to worry.
Slowly, as the days pass, the ache of their fight begins to ease, and Wardo starts to unravel his own prejudices. He finds things online, reads article after article—things like passing privilege and erasure, two sides of one coin. Starts to understand what Chris is talking about when talks about how the government only acknowledges mutants who are palatable to them—mutants who can hide themselves and blend in without conscious effort, like Wardo. Learns about how far they’ve come in accepting mutants, and how much farther they have to go.

For days afterwards, Wardo feels fragile, sensitive. He’s starting to notice things now, cracks where he never even thought to look. A girl with green skin gets called a mutie by someone at the bus stop, and his hands itch to punch the asshole. He wonders if this is how Mark feels all the time. Wonders if this is why Mark doesn’t like going outside. It’s incredibly exhausting.

Eventually, it’s Dustin who approaches him.

“He doesn’t want to fight,” Dustin says, his face pulled tight. Dustin doesn’t like it when anyone fights. He loves people so much. He loves his friends even more.

“I don’t want to fight either,” Wardo says, in a sigh. In the end, neither he nor Mark really talk about it, but Wardo’s too relieved to rock the boat.

July ends uneasily, but moving towards something resembling calm. Mark spends days tracking numbers on his laptop, and, on the last day of the month, the residents of Kirkland troop up to the roof to see the Blue Moon. Mark, as always, glows in the darkness, quiet and small. Wardo tells himself to look away, swallowing past the familiar ache in his throat.

August

Alice rolls in on the last greyhound bus into the city with a thunderstorm at her heels. It’s Wardo who meets her first; it’s a Saturday and, since weekends are the only days of the week where no one is assigned to cook house dinner, almost everyone is out to grab food except him and Mark, eating Mac & Cheese at the dining table. It’s sort of nice, just sitting around like this, listening to Mark clack away at his laptop while he checks out the stock exchange on his iPad. They haven’t talked about anything serious since July, conversations carefully veering between “Can you pass the milk?” and “The cucumbers are looking really good this week, aren’t they?” Still, a truce is a truce. Wardo would rather have this, would rather have anything he can with Mark, than a broken friendship.

At one point, Wardo looks up and asks, “Do you hear that banging sound?” Mark, with his headphones on, doesn’t hear him.

He stands up, eyebrows furrowing. A moment later, there’s the sound of frantic knocking on the front door, followed by a loud crack of thunder. The steady sound of rain falling outside starts up as Wardo walks to the door, opening it to see a young girl standing on the steps leading up to the house, hand poised to knock.

“Um, hi?” Wardo greets, confused. “Can I help you with anything?” His confusion only grows when the girl flinches away, covering her ears with a whimper, eyes darting frantically to look anywhere but at him.

“Are you—are you okay?” Wardo asks, lowering his voice, taking in more of her now: her pale skin and her thin wrists, her hair dark and getting wet. Naturally he’d be loath to let strangers into the house—it’s a house rule to let only personal guests in—but he has a feeling this girl isn’t just some random stranger who’s come calling on a whim. The wind blows harder, rattling through the trees and shaking through both of them; the girl shivers, hard, her thin limbs shaking with it. Her mouth is moving but she can’t seem to form any words, her eyes going in and out of focus.
Wardo bites his lip—Chris isn't going to be pleased, but he can't turn anyone away like this. "Hey, why don't you come in, okay? I'll get you a towel," he says, gently, and the girl finally looks at him, eyes, clear and wide and—pained, he realizes.

"Kirkland House?" she asks, voice hoarse. She has a backpack with her, her hands clutching at the straps like a lifeline, her knuckles white from the pressure.

"Yeah," Wardo says, "that's us, come in, okay?" He opens the door wide and steps aside, still saying, “We’re a co-op that caters primarily to mutants,” because he’s pretty sure by now that she is—it’s just a question of why she’s appeared so unexpectedly, but Wardo already feels like he knows the answer, and he’s dreading it.

She nods, jerkily, starts dripping a puddle onto the floor when she comes in, and Wardo carefully closes the door behind him, rushing to the linen closet under the stairs to get her a towel. At the same time, he cranes his head up in the direction of the upper floor and yells, "Chris! I think you need to come down here."

The girl makes a soft noise of pain as she drops down on the couch, her fingers twitching at her temple, palms pressed up against her ears.

"Sorry," Wardo whispers, walking over to give her the towel and gingerly sitting down next to her on the couch.

The girl just nods, eyes scrunched in pain.

Chris comes down the stairs saying, "Wardo? What’s going on?"

Before Wardo can explain, the girl on the couch suddenly sits up like a puppet jerked by the strings, her eyes wide and staring straight ahead of her.

Wardo reaches over to touch her shoulder, and is suddenly pulled into her vision, images flashing before his eyes: the girl—Alice, her name is Alice, named after her mother’s mother who grew up in a tiny island in the Philippines—at a kitchen table, in the living room, in a pink-and-yellow bedroom—surrounded by people, by warmth, by the quiet murmur of loved voices—daughter, college student, part of a living community—the sunlight bright through the curtains and the roar of sound in her ears, a cacophony of voices overlapping each other—she blinks and she is looking at the city from the eyes of an eagle—blinks and she is staring at herself—blinks and she is looking through the eyes of someone who is falling, the ground rushing up to meet her—are you okay—what the fuck is wrong with her—manifesting, manifesting—isn’t she too old—we can’t let you stay in this house—a picture on the monitor—a website in blue and white—so tired, so tired sotiredsotired—rest—

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Wardo blinks awake and everything is loud

For a few awful moments, it's all a mess in his head, a cacophony of memories that he can't quite piece together. He has to close his eyes against it, trying hard to breathe. On his tongue he can taste Alice's—that was her name wasn't it?—favorite food, some kind of tropical fruit that is entirely foreign and wholly familiar. In his mind are her memories, jumbled with his: summers spent swimming in a lake, though his family had owned a pool; all the words to a poem in a language he doesn't speak. A chair creaks as someone sits beside him, and the steady sound of typing filters into his consciousness and soothes him. This is familiar.

His awareness comes back to him slowly. He realizes he's staring up at the ceiling, lying
horizontally on a couch. In the living room. It is dark. The noise in his head ebbs, trickles away slowly, and the sound of Mark—it has to be Mark—typing away anchors him. This is his reality. Mark is sitting parallel to him, so Wardo can glance sideways and see the glow that his laptop casts on his face. After a while, Mark closes his laptop and looks at Wardo with eyes that shine in the darkness. Lion’s eyes, Wardo thinks. He takes a deep breath and begins to feel settled.

"Hey," Mark says. His eyes shift as they roam over Wardo's face, turning blue and human once more. This is familiar as well. Wardo is pathetically grateful for it, and for the closeness of Mark's body, how he is turned into Wardo without hesitation.

Wardo twitches his fingers as he raises his hand to rub at his temples, and the lights on the living room turn on. He blinks against the sudden brightness.

"Hey," Wardo rasps out. His mouth feels like it's been stuffed with cotton; trying to move his limbs feels like swimming through molasses.

"You okay?" Mark asks. He sets his laptop on the floor beside the chair and stuffs his hands into the pocket of his hoodie.

"Yeah," Wardo says, "I just—" It's an effort to sit up, and he winces at the head rush that follows after. Mark's hands come out of his pockets to grasp at Wardo's shoulder, squeezing once and, surprisingly, staying put. Wardo is too tired to not press up into the touch.

"Head hurts," Wardo mumbles.

"You were—your mind, your senses, they were hijacked," Mark says. His hands slide down and away from Wardo's shoulders, but come instead to rest atop Wardo's hands, the joints of their fingers fitting close.

"Does physical touch help?" Mark says, inquisitive.

"Yes," Wardo says, because it does. Because it's the most they've touched ever since their tacit agreement to not argue anymore, and it feels so much better than the carefully-cultivated restraint that had filled the spaces between them for the past weeks.

"Hijacking is Alice's mutation," Mark continues to explain, "She manifested late, had to get out of her last co-op, found us through Facebook and came here.

"She found us through Facebook?"

"She contacted me. I couldn’t—I talked to Chris about it, and then we agreed she could come here. I trusted her."

"Did you know she was coming today?"

"No. She wasn’t going to come for one more week, but maybe things got too bad. I’m sorry, I didn’t—I promised I’d try to keep Kirkland House out of it but. She needed this, Wardo. She really needed this."

Wardo is silent for a long time, but when Mark moves to pull away, standing up, he grips Mark's hands in his. He takes a deep breath and slides their fingers together. Mark exhales sharply.

"No," Wardo says, "You were right. I was stupid, and, and scared, and I miss you and I'm not sure what's real or not right now, and my head hurts but please. Stay."

"Okay," Mark says.
Wardo sighs and stops trying to keep himself sitting up, leaning in as Mark sits down on the couch. Wardo presses his face tiredly into Mark’s shoulder, turning the lights off without much conscious thought, just because their brightness is still too much for him.

“It’s okay now, Wardo,” Mark says again, soft, and Wardo goes back to sleep.

--

They don’t really meet Alice for the first few days that she’s at Kirkland, still trying to acclimatize herself to her new surroundings. She does ask Chris to send her apologies to Wardo, who accepts it graciously. For a few days after having gone through a "super weird mind-meld thing" (Dustin's words, not his), he finds himself randomly standing in a certain part of the house and wondering how he's gotten there, confused when his feet followed seemingly-familiar paths that led to unfamiliar places. Sometimes he swerves into a language that he can’t comprehend afterwards, though the words seemed perfectly clear to him just a moment earlier.

Mark takes to keeping an absent-minded hand on Wardo's arm or elbow to lead him around and direct him around the house or around the city. Wardo doesn’t complain.

After about a week since Alice's arrival, they welcome her into the dining room with quiet introductions. The dark circles around her eyes has lessened some, but she still doesn't like loud noises and mostly walks through the house in a quiet daze. Kirkland House takes it in stride. Christy moves into Erica's room on the top floor of the house to give Alice her own room, and Dustin gives her three of the cacti from the roof garden to keep her company. She likes them, apparently, and the quiet way they sit and soak in the sun. Chris refers her to a therapist who handles mutants, and, slowly, Alice ventures out of her room more and more often.

On the good days, she sits with someone and observes them as they do something, anything, letting the quiet rhythm of their movements calm her. She watches Mark code in the basement, watches Wardo tend to the plants up on the roof, watches Cameron and Tyler play chess in the living room.

On the bad days, she stays in her room with the blinds pulled down, and everyone feels her discordant emotions permeate through the walls and the floors of the house. Mark, surprisingly, sits with her most often. They have a particular affinity for sitting down for hours on end; Mark codes and monitors Facebook while Alice fiddles around with the set of loom-bands Christy gives her. The repetition of working with the rubber bands and making bracelets is soothing. Everyone in Kirkland house gets one. Dustin wears his neon-pink and orange one with pride. Mark gets one in blue and white.

--

"You're moping," Christy declares, sitting herself down on the couch, halfway on Wardo's lap. One arm immediately goes around her shoulders while the other keeps his laptop steady on the arm of the couch.

"Are those weather reports?" Christy asks, peering at his screen. Then she looks back at him. "You're totally moping, Wardo."

"I am not moping," Wardo says. "I have nothing to mope about. Everything's fine."

"You should go talk to him," Christy says, nudging his shoulder. Then she wrinkles her nose and exclaims, "I can't believe you use the internet to check on weather reports, but won't make a Facebook account."
Wardo mumbles under his breath and tries to shove Christy off, but she only clings more. "What did you say?" she asks, in mock surprise. "You don't know how? You know, there's someone who could help you with that."

"Ugh," Wardo says.

"Suck it up, Saverin!"

"Why do I even need a Facebook account," Wardo says, flat.

"How else are you going to get updates on Erica's growing collection of orange knitwear? And you don't want to miss Chris' social justice speeches, do you?"

"You mean the same ones we hear over dinner?"

"Yes, except in writing, Wardo! Though, of course, what you're actually missing out on is stories about my awesome life."

"Christy--"

"Go, hop to it, venture into Mark's cave and let him teach you his ways!"

"At this point, I'm going to do it just to get away from you," Wardo mutters, closing his laptop and getting up from the couch. Christy flops dramatically into the space he's vacated, flashing him a huge smile.

"I knew you could do it!" she calls as he walks away.

"I have no idea what you're talking about!" he calls back.

He hesitates for a moment on the staircase, torn between heading upstairs to his room or downstairs to Mark's. He takes a deep breath to calm himself, and goes down.

--

Stepping into Mark's room gives him an acute sense of déjà vu: the piles of clothes on the bed and the scattered cans of Red Bull and Mountain Dew look just like they did when Wardo visited a month ago, when Mark had launched the website and Wardo had understood nothing.

Mark is sitting at his desk, and swivels around when Wardo comes in, waving hesitantly.

"Hey," Wardo greets.

"Hey, Wardo," Mark says.

"Suck it up, Saverin," Wardo thinks to himself, in a voice that sounds disconcertingly like Christy's, and says, "Um, I just wanted to ask--" at the same time that Mark says, "There's something I need to tell you--"

They both break off. Wardo says, "Go first."

Mark shrugs and says, "I realize I never apologized. For what I said last month."

"Which part?" Wardo says wryly, and laughs at the look of consternation that crosses Mark's face.

"Dustin said—"
"It's okay," Wardo says. He knows that Mark probably isn't sorry at all, but. He cares enough about Wardo to pretend to. Or, at least, Dustin's bothered him enough into saying it.

"Yeah," Mark says, like he knows what Wardo's thinking. "For what it's worth—I do regret saying those things to you. So, there's that. Um, your turn."

Wardo sighs, rubbing a hand against the back of his neck. "I was wondering if you could help me make a Facebook account?"

Mark's eyebrows shoot up at that but he only nods, and doesn't comment beyond, "Well, it's about time."

"I wouldn't even know what to do with one," Wardo mumbles. "I don't do any of the things that you do—I don't, don't talk about social justice or mutant rights or—"

"Wardo, the point is that you can do literally anything you want with your account. You don't have to be anything. All that Dustin's done so far is talk about aliens and conspiracy theories."

"I can do anything I want on it?"

"Anything," Mark says, face serious. "And you can make sure that no one can see your posts except the people you want to actually show."

"Okay," Wardo says. "Make me one."

Wardo's first status on Facebook is, *Mark made me an account :)*. Mark likes it, despite his usually vocal dislike of emoticons.

Even after that, Wardo doesn't use his Facebook often—mostly just to share things like predictions on oil futures and strange weather phenomena. Through a network of friends, he meets a mutant from Africa, who can control the weather and that pretty much seals the deal for him regarding the whole Facebook issue.

One time, he shares one of Chris' write-ups on workplace discrimination against mutants, and Christy comments, *there's our little activist!"

Mark comments: :)

Wardo takes a screencap.

**September**

The seasons shift from summer to autumn. Soon, everyone in the house finds a new rhythm. It's the way life goes: the trees hit their stride and start to parade their colors, the air gets colder and Mark sits up on the roof with his laptop and socked feet, keeping his eyes on the code and his ears on the birds. Most of the migrants won't come in until the season has truly set in, but there are always early-comers: warblers and thrushes and wrens coming in for the winter, and sparrows and swifts eager to go back home before the chill.

Facebook is up to more than a thousand members, and the privacy measures seem to be holding up. Most of the time, people on the website talk idly about their lives, but it pleases Mark to see casual conversation about someone accidentally growing a rose garden in their living room alongside the daily trivializations about homework and relationships. Today, he's clearing through his emails and systematically deleting anything with the phrase "reverse discrimination" in it. It's a mostly mindless activity, so he has to scramble to take an email out of the trash while his brain takes a moment to catch up with the fact that he's just received an email from Sean Parker.
Holy shit.

"You don't understand," Mark says to Dustin later, after he's done his version of yelling, which is to stare at someone intensely and without moving for a few moments. When he does this, Dustin usually pats his head and tells him that he knows he's vibrating on the inside. Mark doesn't deny it.

"He's an internet rockstar?" Dustin tries.

Mark stares blankly at him.

"Dude," Dustin says pointedly.

"Oh," Mark replies, "Right." Dustin had picked up on code so quickly and so efficiently that Mark had sort of forgotten that he'd virtually known nothing about it before he'd offered to help Mark on Facebook.

"He's a mutant internet rockstar," Mark says. His voice definitely does not go weird and breathy.

"Okaaay," Dustin says, "You're freaking me out with the weird hero worship vibes I'm getting from you."

"Shut up," Mark scowls. Dustin beams and says, "That's more like it."

After a beat, Dustin says, "Mark, you do realize you never told me what was in the email, right?"

"Oh, um. He just congratulated me on Facebook," Mark says, "A friend of a friend gave him an invite code and he said he liked it.

"I'm really proud of you, Mark," Dustin says, face serious. Then he grins.

"Boo-yah," he says, holding a fist for Mark to bump.

"I'm not doing it," Mark says.

"You are totally doing it," Dustin says. "Precog! I can see it, you're a real boy now Mark, you've got emotions and social awareness now, you're totally about to—"

Mark does it.

--

What Mark doesn't do, on the other hand, is tell Dustin that Sean Parker's email had been more than just congratulations: it had been an invitation. If Dustin doesn't know, then he has no reason to attempt to divine that future, which is to Mark's advantage.

The man’s a controversial figure, it's true. If the internet forums are to be believed, he uses his low-level enhanced empathy to scam business partners and charm young girls—but he also invented Napster.

And he wants to meet Mark and talk about Facebook, “and what this means for the future of mutants—we’re on the cusp of greatness, here, Mark Zuckerberg, we’re gonna rise like the goddamn Christ,”—his email is paranoid, ambitious, and, in certain places, brilliant.

He signs it off with a\(^{( `'0` )}\\textasteriskaccent emoticon. Mark forgives him.
The deal breaker is that Sean Parker lives in Palo Alto, and Mark lives in Boston. He thinks about it for a long while that night, possibly flying out to California and spending the rest of the winter season there but—

But.

Chris is going to be making cookies all the way from Halloween to Christmas. And Dustin is going to be giving last-minute predictions about Jeopardy! winners, and Erica will be practicing her knitting, filling the living room with yarn. As soon as October starts, Amy will be blasting holiday music enough to fill the whole house, and Divya will stage impromptu interpretative dance battles.

And Wardo.

Mark has been—he’s been so good at trying to ignore his feelings, at separating himself from the dull ache in his chest every time he thinks about how they’d fought. Mark still doesn’t regret any of it; he hadn’t understood Wardo’s hesitation, his reluctance to be a part of what Mark was building Facebook to be. He still doesn’t understand, not completely. But seeing Wardo after Alice had hijacked him—the blankness in his eyes and the way his body had fallen to the floor—how Mark had felt towards him before had paled in comparison to how he feels now, with the knowledge of what Wardo would look like if he ever—

No. He’ll just have to deal with it. He can have Facebook and he can have whatever little part of Eduardo he’s willing to share with Mark, and he can have his friends.

This is his home. He never expected it to be, not when he arrived three years ago on the suggestion of his mother and with nothing but the intent to live through the experience as painlessly as possible. It’s a powerful comfort, being able to feel like you belong. Mark is grateful for it.

He emails Sean Parker back that night, a brusque but embarrassingly honest message about not being able to leave home. He sends it off, and thinks that Chris would be proud of his self-awareness.

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The next day, Sean Parker turns up on the front door of Kirkland wearing expensive shoes and a charming grin. On Mark’s Facebook is a message from Sean Parker that says, no problem, I’ve got a teleporter friend who can hook me up with a trip over. we’re gonna ROCK YOUR TOWN just you wait zuckerberg

Mark had stared groggily at it that morning and had a couple of hours to somehow feel smug and panicked about it at the same time.

“We have, uh, juice?” Dustin offers, while Sean prowls through the house. Sharon, his uh, teleporter friend, smiles vaguely when Dustin holds up a carton of tomato juice.

“Cute,” Sean says. He turns to Mark, who is bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Why don’t we grab some drinks?”

“It’s 4 in the afternoon,” Dustin says.

Mark doesn’t know anywhere to drink. He doesn’t go to bars or clubs. Even when he does drink, he does it inside the house. The Winklevoss twins buy beer when they do the grocery shopping.
“Sure,” he hears himself saying, and Sean grins. Mark is reminded of a crocodile.

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Afterwards, he’s not sure what exactly happens. Sean Parker is talking faster than they’re walking down the street and Mark is still not wrapping his head around it. He’s talking about *taking down the traditional gatekeepers of the human world, exactly what we were trying to do when we democratized music with Napster, we’re ushering in a new era and you’re gonna live to see it happen* while Mark nods along.

They pass by a bus stop with one of the ridiculous Anti-Mutant Integration Campaign posters pasted all over and Sean stops to look at them for a moment. He tells Mark, “You know, Zuckerberg, what I like about you is that you’re angry. You wanna piss people off, don’t you? Keeping humans out of something for once, that’s what Facebook’s all about isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Mark says, because it is about that, about having a space that belongs only to them, but it’s also more than that, in ways he can’t explain.

When Mark thinks of Facebook, he thinks of safety, of Kirkland House.

Sean claps him on the shoulder, grinning.

At the end of the street, there’s a large gathering of “human rights” protestors standing around, making speeches with the same tired, bigoted rhetoric that Mark’s learned to ignore in the past weeks. There’s no changing these peoples’ minds. But Sean stops in his heels and stares.

“Would you look at this bullshit,” Sean says, laughs meanly. Mark thinks *exactly*, and gives Sean a nod.

“Sean,” Sharon says, frowning. “Don’t do anything—”

But Sean raises a hand and Mark feels a *wave* go over him. Sean Parker is a low-level empath. That’s what everyone knows. Why does Mark feel like he’s suddenly moving through molasses, his every molecule induced into calm?

“Watch this,” Sean says, voice low. He walks right into the middle of the crowd. As if magnetized, Mark and Sharon follow after him.

Sean Parker climbs up on the makeshift stage they’ve set up, reaches for a person holding a microphone. There’s a short scuffle, then Sean Parker, eyes frenzied, is grinning over the mic.

“Are you ready to get *fucking angry*?”

Suddenly, Mark can’t hear anything past the rushing in his ears as everyone around him is induced into white-hot *rage*. Any semblance of order breaks down within seconds. In the midst of the chaos, the tide of the protest turned against itself, Mark sees his rockstar idol burn bright, laughing, before being brought down. He falls, hard. The crowd starts to press into Mark, the swell of it like a tide. Someone rams against Mark in their panic, and he skids into the ground, his ankle jerking as he twists it. Mark’s instincts kick in, even in the crush of the crowd, and thick scales grow over his skin, and he finds it in himself to stand up. Everything is so *loud*.

Enhanced hearing, vision, smell. He feels his nails growing sharper. Mark is an animal. He runs.

--

He comes to himself hours later, in the darkness and in some unfamiliar part of town. His ankle is throbbing, pain lancing up his leg and through his body that he has to sit down on the closest
bench he can find. Miraculously, he finds that his phone is still inside his pocket. Through the haze of pain, Mark manages to shut down his overloading senses, though it takes him a few tries to shift his fingers into digits more adapted to using a phone.

Wardo answers on the first ring, sounding alarmed.

"Mark? Where are you? Why aren’t you home yet? There’s something on the news about a riot—oh, God. You were there."

"Wardo," Mark says tiredly. He tries to look around for signs but his vision’s starting to blur.

"Fuck, are you lost? Are you hurt? Mark?"

"There’s a—there’s a 7-Eleven, and a, a really nice tree outside. I'm really tired, Wardo. I think I need to sleep."

"I can’t fucking believe you’d do something so reckless," he hears Wardo snarl over the phone, and that comforts him. He likes it that Wardo feels okay enough be angry, even when it's directed at him. He doesn’t know where Sean is anymore. Maybe Sharon got him out. Maybe that’s what he was planning to do here all along. Mark can’t think.

Wardo is still talking on the phone.

"—going to find you, okay? Okay, Mark?"

"Yeah," Mark says.

"I'll be right there, but I need you to shine for me, okay? Just a little firefly glow."

"Luciferin," Mark mumbles.

"Exactly, yeah," Wardo says. "You have to wait for me, okay?"

"Okay, Wardo," Mark says. He closes his eyes. He waits.

--

When Mark gets off the phone, he sighs and tilts his head.

“Whoa.”

Mark blinks up and there’s a person staring at him. Probably a teenager, from the looks of them.

“Are you an angel?” they ask.

“No,” Mark mumbles.

“You’re glowing,” they say.

“Mutation,” Mark grits out. "Look it up."


Mark looks at the kid sideways and sighs. “Can’t. Twisted my ankle.”

“Oh,” the kid says, “wait riiight here okay?”
Mark raises an eyebrow and gestures to his foot, but the kid’s already gone.

When they come back, they hand Mark a red Slurpee and a small bottle of painkillers. Maybe he’s just really tired, but Mark can’t compute anything that’s going on. This entire day’s been a mess. He was under the impression that all teenagers were assholes. He definitely had been. Still is.

But he says, “Thank you,” anyway as the kid sits back down beside him. He drinks the Slurpee and takes the meds.

“No problem,” the kid replies, “Are you sure you aren’t an angel?”

“Yeah,” Mark says.

“Your glow is really cool,” the kid says, solemnly.

“Um. Thank you,” Mark says. The only other person who’s ever told him that is Wardo.

“My name’s Andrea.”

“Mark Zuckerberg.”

Mark doesn’t expect, of all things, for them to punch him in the arm.

“NO WAY,” the teenager says. “OH MY GOD. I LOVE FACEBOOK.”

Mark sips at his Slurpee. Before he can swallow, the kid’s done a lap around the block, blurring in Mark’s vision.

“Huh,” Mark says.

Andrea skids to a halt, and beams at him.

The next half hour they spend talking to each other is even more surreal to Mark than everything that’s happened today. Andrea talks about the mutant support group in school, how they’d come out as genderqueer on the same day they’d stopped wearing their neutralization bracers.

They talk and smile sheepishly when their words blur together, saying they’re still getting used to their mutation. They talk about their girlfriend. They talk about being in love. About how they love being able to change their relationship status on Facebook.

They punch Mark in the arm again, and tell him to include more gender options.

And Mark listens. He nods and he apologizes, and when he almost falls asleep on their shoulder, they try their best to keep still and not jolt him off.

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When Wardo finds Mark, he’s sitting on a bench with a Slurpee and a teenager.

“Andrea,” the teenager says, gesturing at themselves. “I’m assuming you’re Wardo?”

“That would be me. Has he been—?”

“Muttering for the past half hour. You should probably get him home.”

Wardo lifts an eyebrow, amused. “I’ll do that.”
The kid nods and stands up, patting Mark on the head and laughing when he makes a face.

“Bye, Zuckerberg,” they say. “And, uh, thanks, I guess.”

“You can thank me by staying in school,” Mark replies.

“REBEL AGAINST THE SYSTEM,” Andrea yells, and disappears in the time it takes Wardo to blink.

“Speedster,” Mark says absently.

Then he looks sheepishly up at Wardo and says, “Hi.”

“I have no idea what the fuck happened to you but I can’t even be angry, you absolute asshole,” Wardo says. He sounds very tired. Mark lifts the Slurpee up to him in a truce.

“These things are so unhealthy,” Wardo says, because he cares about things like that, but he sips at it anyway. Mark thinks, my mouth was just on that straw and wants to groan. His brain’s mutated into a bird’s. Birdbrain. He smiles dopily.

Wardo sighs. “Let’s get you home, yeah?”

Home. Mark really likes the sound of that. Wardo is amazing.

“You really have to work on your brain-to-mouth filter when you’re tired,” Wardo says.

He smiles and offers his hand, and Mark lights up the moment their fingers touch, like a light bulb tuned to Wardo’s mutation.

“I was really fucking worried, Mark,” Wardo says. His hand grips Mark’s tightly.

Mark thinks, please kiss me.

“Non-existent brain-to-mouth filter,” Wardo says wonderingly, and kisses him.

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For the next few days, Mark frantically follows the news, but all they’re reporting is that a protest went out of control, painting anti-mutant protestors as unruly and illegitimate. The vindication is soothing. There’s nothing at all to implicate Sean Parker in whatever the fuck happened that day, but Mark is still not sure how to parse most of it. He’s starting to do research on all the other possible places Sean Parker might have been, all the events he might have sabotaged. But Mark’s not much of a detective. As long as Sean Parker stays away from his friends, Mark will leave him alone. He’s still occasionally struck with a pulse of worry about Sharon, a sick feeling pooling in his gut at the thought of Sean Parker’s manipulative power. He wants her to be safe. He hopes her mutation can protect her.

Ultimately, September ends with more questions than answers, but these days, Wardo walks into the room and nudges Mark’s laptop into quiet, then nudges Mark himself into quiet by kissing him.

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October

It's very easy, Mark has learned from his past three years at Kirkland, to decorate a house when
you have a telekinetic mutant and two 6'5, 220-lb guys doing it for you.

Halloween in their neighborhood is weirdly intense. Mark's still walking around with a limp and elastic bandages around his ankle because Erica refuses to heal him on the grounds that he'd been "a total fucking idiot," but it gives him an excuse to laze on the couch while the others string decorations around the house. Halloween is sort of nice for Mark because he can eat all the Twizzlers he wants under the excuse of being one with the holiday, but he could live without it.

The thing is, Wardo loves Halloween. He'd taken it as a personal affront last year when Mark had told him he didn't dress up for it, but this year he's ditched the hurt-puppy persona and has aggressively thrown himself into the task of getting Mark to celebrate with him. And he's not above using dirty tricks like withholding kisses or affection, which, whatever, Mark is totally not going to fall for that.

"Wow," Dustin says, when Mark sits down on the kitchen table, glaring at the pumpkin that Wardo's set on the table for him to carve. "You totally fell for it."

"Shut up," Mark grumbles, and tries to remember how knives work. Wardo arrives a few minutes later with more pumpkins, heavy and ripe in his arms. They'd apparently burst into bloom in the last week of October, though Mark hadn't been able to go up on the roof to see them. Their dark yellow skin turned orange as the days progressed, Wardo watching over them as protectively as he's been watching over Mark.

Whatever snarky comment Mark has to make about pumpkins and false holiday cheer dissolve on his tongue at the look of ridiculous happiness on Wardo's face. There's also the way Wardo kisses him when he's set the pumpkins down on the table, slow and soft. Mark can't even complain about the dirt on Wardo's hands; his mind's too busy jumping to plant metaphors. He can't help it—he leans into Wardo like a tendril reaching towards the sun.

Then Wardo pulls away and says, "Mark, that is literally the most awful carved pumpkin I have ever seen. A six-year-old could do better."

"Wardo, there's no need to be a jerk-o-lantern about it," Dustin says, face completely calm for a second before it splits into a grin bigger than the one on his own demented-looking pumpkin.

"Hey, Dustin," Erica calls, bounding into the kitchen with the tiniest pumpkin in her hands. She shoves the pumpkin into Dustin's face, "Cut it out!"

"You guys, those are terrible. You need to squash those jokes," Wardo says.

"Oh my god," Mark says. "What have I done to deserve this?"

“One day, Zuckerberg,” Erica promises.

“Never,” Mark mutters, poking the knife back into his pumpkin. It does look awful. Whatever. Wardo seems pleased, if not by the actual carving, then by the effort Mark is putting in.

Eventually, Wardo says, "Well, this was all very sweet, but I actually do have some reports that I need to work on before the holidays." Then, he turns to Mark and very deliberately says, "I'll see you later, pumpkin."

And, fuck it all, Mark actually blushes at that. Halloween is the worst holiday in the world.

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Halloween is the best holiday in the world.
It was one of the few things Wardo had loved about America when he first arrived—even though his parents never let him go trick-or-treating, just putting on a costume was the best part about it. It's something he's never grown out of. There's something strangely soothing in the act of wearing the clothes of someone you could never be in real life.

He hasn't been able to keep it up through the years, of course, but it's nice knowing that it's something he could do. That for one day in a year he can dress up as something that other people regularly think is scary and have them just take it in stride. If he were Mark, Wardo suspects he'd be more bitter about this, but instead he's just grateful.

On the other hand, he could really do without all the people asking him why he celebrates Halloween but not Dia de Muertos. He's Brazilian, not Mexican. And he wouldn't have celebrated Dia de Finados anyway, because he’s, well. Jewish. Even then, they’d only gone out to churches and cemeteries because of his mother, while his father stayed indoors.

This Halloween though—it's going to be great, because he's convinced Mark to join, albeit with much reluctance, in their celebrations.

Since Kirkland House is actually inhabited by a bunch of homebodies (and Christy), their party celebrations consist of making as much popcorn as possible and watching a lot of awful movies. After which, at around 10 in the evening, they all go out in costume and roam the streets, just because it’s Halloween, and no one will think they’re anything but regular college students.

Mark and Wardo lose each other sometime during the night, mixing with the different crowds milling around, adults and children alike. Humans and mutants alike. Eventually, everyone ends up somewhere in the park. Wardo’s been with Amy for most of the night, talking about being able to pass as a non-mutant, its pros and cons. Amy declares that it’s "fucking bullshit to call passing a privilege, like it’s so damn great to be seen as normal," and follows it up with a loud, dragon-like bellow. Everyone around them startles and bursts into cheers.

Wardo drifts around for most of the night, trying to look for his—Mark. Instead he ends up sitting with Chris under a tree, talking to a group of kids who look like they're not going to stay awake past midnight. Wardo has a certain fondness of kids from afar, but Chris is amazing with them, showing off his mutation by making it rain candies from the sky.

Mark finds him eventually, when sometime after midnight, and Wardo feels like he’s consumed his body weight in sweets. They walk home together, trailing behind people who may or may not be their friends. A few blocks away from the house, they pass by a little girl standing on some steps, crying. Wardo can probably guess why: she’s dressed as a pirate, and the wooden sword she’s holding is broken in half.

He has only a moment to make his decision, and then he’s letting go of Mark’s hand with a small smile, and making his way over to her.

With a wink at the little pirate, he puts the two broken pieces of the sword back together and thinks, heal. When he lets go, it’s standing steady. She watches him with wide-eyed awe and he holds a shhh-ing finger to his lips. The girl nods in delight and runs up the stairs into the building, waving to Wardo enthusiastically before slamming the door behind her.

When Wardo turns around, Mark grabs him by the shoulders and kisses him. He makes a frustrated sound until Wardo laughs and gets off the stairs, and kisses him again.

They take quite a while to get back to the house.

November
"Maaaark," Dustin calls, rolling over on his bed to face said Maaark as he enters the room. "I haven't seen you in forever, buddy!"

"Dustin, we literally had breakfast together this morning." Mark says. He quickly goes over to his side of the room and starts rummaging for a clean hoodie in the steadily growing pile of clothes on his bed. He's going home in a week, when Winter Break starts, so there's no point in doing laundry here when he can just do it in his own house. There's also the fact that he's been spending most of his time not studying holed up in Wardo's room, doing things. With Wardo. Wardo things.

"You're thinking of Wardo, aren't you," Dustin says.

"I am not," Mark mumbles, muffled through the hoodie as he pulls it over his head. His arms poke out first. Dustin high-fives them.

"You totally were," he says, when Mark's head pops out. "Your face did that thing. That I'm thinking about Wardo and his gangly limbs and perfect hair and adorable eyes' thing."

"You think Wardo's eyes are adorable?" Mark asks, squinting at Dustin.

Dustin sighs, shaking his head. "I saw this coming and I did nothing to stop it. You should thank me for being such a good person."

Mark blinks at him. "You saw this coming?"

"Um," Dustin says.

"Dustin," Mark says, slowly and carefully, "You saw this coming?"

"My precognition is by no means a perfect gift—"

"When did you see it," Mark says. His voice is perfectly flat but Dustin can tell his hands are twitching, even though they're shoved inside his hoodie pocket.

"Ummmm," says Dustin. "Maaaybee in, like, sometime around, um, February?"

"Feb—February—? And you let us bumble around like idiots for months?" Dustin's pretty sure he's never heard Mark's voice go this high before.

"I had complete and utter faith in you," Dustin says. Then he tilts his head thoughtfully, "Well. Except for that whole time you guys were fighting about Facebook. Honestly, I didn't think you'd—um, but it's okay! You did it! You made it!"

"Months, Dustin!" Mark says.

"You can't mess with the predestined, Mark! Haven't you ever watched a movie? I had to let you find true love on your own!"

"Oh my god," Mark says.

"Oh no, I've broken you. Shhhh, it's okay," Dustin says, "Let's go downstairs and eat some cookies, I think Chris baked fresh ones."

"Months, for fuck's sake," Mark mutters, but allows Dustin to throw a hand over his shoulders and herd him out the room.

--
"I wish you didn't have to go," Wardo mumbles, pushing his face into the back of Mark's neck and nuzzling into his curls.

Mark's hands grip Wardo's where they're pressed up against Mark's chest, holding him close. In the cold of November, Wardo's room is perfectly cozy and warm. It's probably got something to do with how he's always spending time with the boiler down in the basement. Mark would be jealous if it didn't keep his feet warm. Before Wardo came, Mark would sleep curled around his laptop to keep warm during cold days, but now he doesn't just get the boiler's cooperation, he also gets Wardo's body heat to press up to.

"You could always come home with me," Mark says. He lifts Wardo's hands up to his eye-level, looking at them from up-close. Wardo has a strange fascination with his hands after months of watching Mark's fingers fly over the keyboard, but Wardo's hands are the prettier ones by far. Mark will never tell him this, but the way he's pressing kisses to the pads of Wardo's fingers is probably telling. Wardo's won't comment on it because he's nice like that.

"No, I couldn't," Wardo says. "I don't want to intrude. The holidays should be spent with family."

"Oh?" Mark asks. "So, when's your flight home, hm?"

Wardo huffs a laugh against Mark's neck. "Don't be stupid, Zuckerberg. My home's right here."

"You are such a sap," Mark says.

"Tree sap," Wardo says in agreement.

"Possums eat tree sap," Mark says sleepily.

"You'd make an adorable possum," Wardo says solemnly. The sky outside is starting to turn dark. In the morning, he and Mark are going to have to pull apart, and Wardo's going to take Mark to the train station to see him off. As Mark drifts off, Wardo lays awake actually considers packing his bags and following Mark to his home in New York. Mark wouldn't mind—he'd probably be happy for Wardo to be there, and Wardo's met Mark's parents and sisters over Skype. They're very nice people. He's glad that Mark has them. Wardo imagines what it would be like to spend Christmas with a family like that.

For a moment, while Mark is sleeping softly with Wardo's hands cradled to his chest, he lets himself really think about it, then sighs and lets the thought go. Small steps, he reminds himself.

The door to his room creaks open, and Divya, who is technically supposed to be Wardo's roommate but has an arrangement with the Winklevoss twins, creeps in. He waves at Wardo and winks. Wardo rolls his eyes and smushes his face into Mark's neck while Divya rummages around. Sometime between Divya finding what he's looking for on the bed and making his way back out the door, Wardo falls asleep.

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Wardo wakes up naturally when the light starts dipping into the room, dawn slowly making its way through the window beside his bed, warming his back. He and Mark are still curled the way they'd slept in the night, two commas pressed tight together. Mark sleeps curled up, like a cat, and Wardo, keeping close, has mimicked him.

They separate slowly, naturally, moving away but still close enough to touch. Mark sits up and rubs at his eyes blearily. His hair is a bird's nest of curls. Wardo remembers how Mark had once mentioned trying to mimic an avian species' flight, and not being able to hollow his bones. Wardo
doesn’t want him to, anyway, would rather have Mark strong-boned and nestled right here.

“Morning, pumpkin,” Wardo says, just to be cheeky, and Mark half-heartedly swats at him, still not completely awake.

Later, he and Wardo will stumble down the stairs for some breakfast, and then Wardo will watch as Mark hopefully tries to do all the packing he should have done the day before. Later still, they’ll go to the train station together, and Mark will lean up on his toes to kiss Wardo, and a vending machine in the corner will go haywire, and Wardo will have to coax it into silence. Tonight, Wardo will feel an ache in his chest at the thought of not waking up in the middle of the night to Mark glowing faintly in his arms, like a jellyfish or a firefly, a beacon in the darkness.

For now, though, Wardo can hide a smile against Mark’s shoulder, slide a hand under his shirt to feel the warmth of his skin, and, for the hundredth time, make Mark explain to him how to change his relationship status on Facebook.

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The first snow of the year starts to fall when Wardo’s making his way back to Kirkland House from the train station. He’s sitting on the bus, looking out the window as it rolls through the city. Wardo places his fingers against the side of the bus and feels its energy thrum down into his bones. The bus is an old thing, meek and used to its job, and Wardo has no control over its movements. It’s far too attached to its bus driver to listen to a stranger. It’s comforting. Wardo leans his head against the glass and dozes until he reaches his stop, clambers to his feet as the bus pushes and pulls itself into a halt.

He takes some time to be grateful that it isn’t snowing hard and he can make his way home without getting slush on his shoes. The house is quiet when he gets back; Dustin and Amy had left earlier in the week, and the Winklevoss twins are leaving tomorrow. From the kitchen, the smell of cookies is wafting through the air. Chris is a stress baker, and his finals aren’t until the very end of break, so he’ll probably be spending most of the holidays elbow-deep in readings and essays, while the rest of the house finds itself with an excess of baked goods.

By the end of the week, Wardo and Divya go back up on the roof to store their flowerpots, now devoid of plants until spring starts up again in March. Alice joins them, still shy but reaching out nonetheless. She presses her fingers into the soil and lets the quiet shuffle of microorganisms lull her. They only think about eating and sleeping and reproducing, she tells them. It’s not such a bad life.

November, to the end, is a quiet affair. Those left in the house let the comfortable silence fill in the space left behind, and huddle close together whenever they can.

Sometimes, when he remembers to, Mark calls him, but Wardo doesn’t really mind the days he doesn’t. One day, just because he can, Wardo leaves a long, embarrassing message on Mark’s Facebook Wall and patiently waits for Mark to grumpily reply or text him. What Mark actually does is spam Wardo’s Wall with pictures of puppies playing in the snow. It’s devastatingly cute and so unexpected that Wardo calls Mark up right away.

“Before you ask,” Mark says pre-emptively, the moment he comes on the phone, “No, I can’t actually shapeshift into a puppy for you.”

“Wow, deal breaker,” Wardo says.

“I’m rolling my eyes right now,” Mark says, and Wardo laughs.
“I actually had something important to tell you,” Mark says.

“Well, go ahead.”

“I love you,” Mark says.

“Yeah?” Wardo asks. He’s surprised at how steady his voice sounds.

“Yeah,” says Mark.


“Good,” Mark says, voice rough.

“Good,” Wardo echoes. He laughs. Across the phone, miles away, Mark laughs too.

December

The cold always makes Wardo melancholic and homesick; he misses the warm, steady climates of his motherland. The last time it had snowed in São Paolo, Wardo hadn’t even been born yet. He doesn’t like how numb the cold makes him.

He’d willingly put on his own chains when he was only ten years old because he’d thought it was the right thing to do—he was only ten, how was he supposed to have known? The thing about neutralization bracers is that they don’t just numb down your powers, but the capacity to feel. Wardo doesn’t know if there’s something wrong with him, or his heart, or his emotions; he doesn’t know the kind of person he might have turned out to be if he’d never tried to suppress his mutation.

He doesn’t know what sort of person he would have been if he’d been born without them. He’s not sure if these things really even matter, in the long run; not yet sure if he even subscribes to Mark’s ideas that his mutation is such an integral part of him that it sets him apart as a human being. What he does want to do, though, is make sure no kid ever feels like they have to hurt themselves to feel accepted. He’d like to do something about the societal pressure to put on neutralizers, and how it’s all wrong. With Mark, with Facebook, he sees these kinds of conversations all the time.

On the days Wardo can stand the cold, he takes the phone up to the roof and listens to Mark talk about code and syntax and mutations. About expanding Facebook, about an investor named Peter Thiel, a mutant who has wings on his back. He talks about the complexity of beehives and how scientists are still finding huge tunnels left underground, the abandoned homes of hundreds of thousands of ants. In Mark, too, Wardo's managed to carve out a home for himself, slowly: in the places where Mark lets no one else in, the doors have been thrown wide open for him. He's learning more about himself through Mark, through the sharing of their spaces. He nudges at Mark's things, sometimes, just to feel them nudge back with a sort of quiet exasperation.

"Wardo," Mark says, when his words have run out. He's not naturally effusive—he just knows that Wardo likes to listen to him talk, so he does.

“Mark,” Wardo says back.

If he tries hard enough, he thinks he might be able trace the signals sent across miles. Might be able to follow it through wire and metal and plastic, all the way to the warmth of Mark's fingertips at the other end.
End Notes

General idea for a housing co-op AU goes to idiopathicsmile for her fic, “In Defiance of All Geometry.” This fic also features a gross overuse of puns. And possibly massive plot holes. I apologize. In any case, it’s done! Finally done! I love this fandom. ALSO CHECK OUT ALL THE AMAZING THINGS MY ARTISTS MADE, WOW.

Art and fanmix by branquignole here!

Art and fanmix by savetomorrow here!

Art and fanmix by sweetmadness379 here!

The title of this fic is from "Recovery" by Frank Turner.

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