

Alive

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Alive

by [ParkeRose](#)

Summary

Following what would have happened in Neil's life if his mother had taken help from his uncle while they were on the run.

[ON HOLD]

Notes

It's probably going to be a long one and I haven't posted anything on here before so fingers crossed, wish me luck. Thank you for reading if you do, Kudos and comments are always appreciated.

Part One: January

Seattle, USA.

“Abram. Abram, get up. We need to leave.”

Nathaniel blinked awake, slowly, and he was reaching for the gun under his pillow before he could even process whose voice had woken him. It was dark in the room apart from the streetlights streaming soft orange through the small window below which Nathaniel had been sleeping. His bed was made of a sheet on the floor and a lumpy, uncomfortable pillow filled with clothes that were too short on him now, belonging to every person he used to be. His hand holding the gun was shaking but his mind became startlingly clear as soon as he sat up. He was currently Neil Josten. He was in Seattle. It was his mother's voice that had woken him. He took in her appearance, searching for any obvious injury, as she zoomed around the practically empty apartment they'd broken into only a few weeks ago. She was putting everything she could find in their bags, hastily and he was up in an instant to help her. There wasn't much left to do so he told her quietly to sit and took up the task of cleaning up. Instead of sitting, however, Mary Hatford, or rather Rose Josten, began to pace the length of their stolen flat.

“Where are we going?”, he asked, his voice still rough from sleep. He didn't receive a response as he kept his gun inside and finished closing their duffel bags, grabbing the bottle of water left idle on the lonely table. He watched her moving across the room as he drank and kept the bottle away when she came to a stop in front of him. Her hair was back to her blonde, gathered up in a rough, low ponytail and the stray hairs falling across her face gave her a haggard appearance. He realized, belatedly, that she seemed more paranoid today than she normally was. She looked older than she was as a result of her anxiety.

“Did something happen?”

She leaned against the table and reached a hand up to cradle his cheek. Then, she *smiled*.

Something was *seriously* wrong.

“Nothing yet”, she said, her voice light as a breeze. He moved away from her hand and searched her uncharacteristically smiling face for answers she wouldn't give him outright.

She was used to his confused glares, so she looked away. For so long, they'd only had each other. Of course she was used to his movements and patterns. He watched her roll her eyes, observed her as her expression alternated between parallels of relief and tension. He didn't have time to ask more questions as a shrill ringtone interrupted the nighttime silence. His heart was hammering out of his chest as she reached for her burner phone with shaking hands. It wasn't a call, like he had thought, simply a message he read over her shoulder from an unknown number.

You know what to do

The message left a sour taste in his mouth as he mouthed it to himself. She powered off the phone, took out the sim card and broke it in half. She slipped it into the back pocket of her faded jeans and took a deep breath before speaking.

“I can’t tell you where we’re going yet, but you need to trust me, Abram. Please, this could be our only chance.”

The hope on her face looked more dangerous to Nathaniel than any form of anger would have. They’d been running for so long now. He dreaded to believe there was any semblance of hope left for them. She grabbed her bag and passed him his before pulling open the door to leave, expecting, rightfully so, that Nathaniel would follow. As they moved, quietly, steadily, so as not to disturb the neighbours, Nathaniel took out his own phone which only had his mother’s old contact programmed into it. He removed the sim and crushed it and they both threw away the phones in the trash can sitting outside the depressing building.

“Don’t look back”, his mother said, as if she could feel his need to stop and take in the home that had been theirs for a few days. For all the sentiments she’d tried to beat out of him, he never quite learned how to shatter his need to belong. He used to keep the keys of all the apartments they’d stayed at until she found them and threw them into the ocean. He could feel the bruises that had gotten him. So he didn’t turn, he didn’t look back. It was a great feat on his part.

There was a wide road they had to cross and a sleek, black car was waiting for them. It looked expensive and comfortable, both luxuries they couldn’t afford. A face he didn’t recognize at all was sitting in the driver’s seat and the silhouette of another figure could be seen in the passenger seat. They’d never taken help from anyone before and Nathaniel felt his heart fill with dread. He didn’t understand what his mother’s plan was. Running in the middle of the night was normal, but they usually ran away from people in cars, not towards them. She had asked him to trust her but he wasn’t entirely sure he did. He didn’t have time to figure it out as his mother turned towards him with an apology written on every inch of her expression.

“I’m sorry”, she whispered so softly he barely heard it. His eyes widened as she grabbed his hand and took off in a run across the street. He had no choice but to follow her. She opened the back door of the car and shoved Nathaniel inside before getting in herself. Nathaniel was still processing his mother’s apology when the reason for his mother’s regret became clear to him.

“Long time, Junior”, Lola Malcolm grinned at him, turning in the passenger seat, throwing a grin over her shoulder. A terrible shiver ran down his spine as he turned a betrayed look to his mother. Years running from this terror and she’d taken him to the backseat of her car willingly. He didn’t know what was at play here but he felt his life slip away from him. If Lola was in the car, there was only one place they could be driving towards.

His father.

Bile rose up in his throat and he forced it down. He couldn't look at his mother, anymore, sure that she'd turned on him. He looked at his scruffy, worn out shoes instead, willing himself not to puke, cry or scream. All valid and appropriate reactions to seeing Lola Malcolm. He only wondered what it would be like seeing his deranged father again. He thought about when his mother could have orchestrated this terrifying idea for a family reunion. He thought of the frequent calls his mother had been receiving, which he'd passed off as emergency contacts and debt collection from people who owed her, new passports, new ID's, all the crap he'd been naive enough to think would keep them hidden. He thought of the guns in their backpacks and wondered why they weren't using them. He wanted to pull it out and shoot Lola in the head, for the nightmare to be over before it began. He wanted to wake up so he could be sure he had been dreaming. He thought of jumping out the car. He thought of the message he'd seen on his mother's phone.

You know what to do.

The word betrayal coursed hotly through his veins and he shook in his seat, in the suffocating silence of the car. Lola had yet to acknowledge his mother, but he supposed they didn't have any reason to greet each other, formally. Were they friends now? Had his father managed to convince his mother to come home? She ought to know he wouldn't let her live, no matter how much of the money she returned or whatever it was she had promised him. His father would kill them in the bloodiest, most brutal way possible and his mother was leading him right to their death. He fretted and he trembled and he tried to breath unsuccessfully.

He was going to die.

The car sped across the empty roads of Seattle at 4 am on the last Tuesday of his life. Belatedly, he realized it was January 19th. The birth and death of Nathaniel Wesninski.

He managed to survive the car ride and as soon as they stopped next to a mortifyingly large warehouse, Nathaniel let out a choked whimper. The sound made Lola laugh. As soon as they stopped, he opened the car door, dropped his bag and managed to run a total of five steps before he was being held in a vice grip and his arms were held behind his back and handcuffed. The least he could do was be quiet, he didn't want these people to have the satisfaction of breaking him easy. He couldn't quite hold back the tears, though, and he felt warmth prickling in the corner of his eyes as Lola dragged his mother out of the car and handcuffed her as well. His mother cast him a fierce look that begged him to keep his head down and let her handle this, as he'd done so many times before. He squeezed his eyes shut, not a single speck of trust left in his body. It was at that moment he entertained the thought of giving up. He wanted to feel the fight slip out of him, to accept that he was helpless and die an unremembered death. No one would know who he was and no one would care to miss him. But he couldn't stop fighting. He struggled all the way into the warehouse until someone ran up to the man holding him and passed him a syringe full of transparent liquid. He felt it pierce his skin and slowly his body locked down and he felt his eyes slip shut, welcoming the darkness he was so afraid of.

He blinked awake when he registered pain. He could feel the skin around his left cheek stretching and blood mixed with sweat and tears dripping down his chin. A cigarette lighter

was held up to his right cheek by Lola. A startled scream of agony left his mouth when he realized what was happening and Lola laughed and laughed and laughed. He sobbed in pain and fear, his resolve finally, *finally*, crumbling.

“Don’t do this.”

Speaking the words hurt more than he thought it would. Now that he had noticed the pain he couldn’t ignore it as it flared back to life again and again.

“You know I have to, Nathaniel.”

His father’s voice behind him chilled him to the bones. He was tied to a chair and couldn’t turn his head to look but he was sure he didn’t want to. He hadn’t put in new contacts and he had yet to dye his hair a new colour and for now, his blue eyes and auburn hair would match his father’s exactly and he couldn’t bear the thought of staring into the cruel face that mirrored his own. He coughed and spluttered. His father walked towards him slowly, grinning a truly barbaric grin. It stretched out his skin and made it look like his face had been hooked into place. Nathaniel stared up at Nathan Wesninski and thought to himself, *this is it. This is where I’ll die.*

Nathan gripped Nathaniel’s chin in a fierce grip and squeezed, making blood gush out of the cuts on his cheek and tears flow down his face like an endless river. He shut his eyes, willing the horror to be over but his father’s backhanded slap made him shiver and open them again, his face turned to the right from the force of the hit. His face *burned*.

“You will look at me when I speak to you, Nathaniel.”

He automatically shifted towards his father and tried to steel his expression into one of apathy, but his discomfort showed. Nathan walked backwards where, Nathaniel now noticed, his mother was tied to a chair as well, her face pummelled with bruises and cuts and her right ear bleeding. Nathaniel thought grimly to himself that if she had truly betrayed him, then it was what she deserved. But he couldn’t ignore the pangs of horror that radiated in his chest at the thought of seeing his mother so grotesquely hurt. *There will be no stitching up these wounds, mom. This is the end.*

His eyes locked with his mother’s, a fire in them that had kept him fighting all these years. Looking at her still hopeful made him want to fight for himself, but he wanted to give up. He needed this to stop. He didn’t want the scars or the torment or the panic. He *needed* to give up.

His father wrapped his mother’s ponytail around his hand and wrenched her head back. She let out a grunt of pain and seethed, nostrils flaring. His father leaned down as if to whisper in her ear, but his words echoed in the empty warehouse room.

“Look at him, Mary. Can you believe you gave birth to that pathetic, sobbing mess?” he sneered. His mother remained silent and angry. “I don’t want him to be mine but he looks so much like me it’s making me *furious*.”

“Everything makes you furious, you wretched son of a bitch”, his mother gritted out, her jaw clenched in fury. His father looked amused and enraged at once. Nathan let go of her hair and twisted to crouch down in front of her.

“You’re not any less of a monster than I am, Mary”, he snarled. Mary glared at him, fearless before she spat a mouthful of blood on his face. Nathaniel flinched as if he’d been hit. He wasn’t surprised at her attitude towards his father and he didn’t doubt that she was a monster if only for the fact she had once made a conscious decision to marry Nathan Wesninski, The Butcher of *fucking* Baltimore.

Lola handed his father a piece of clean cloth he wiped his face with and it took him only a second to stand and punch his mother’s face. Mary’s responding grin was feral and full of emotion, so similar to Nathan’s and yet completely opposite.

Nathaniel distantly thought about dysfunctional families but he could barely put his thoughts in order.

Whatever drug he had been injected with still coursed through his system and he felt himself slipping into sleep again. He felt Nathan’s hands slip into his hair and tug his face up like he had done with his mother. Pain was distant now, all he wanted was sleep.

“It’ll be like killing myself from my youth. God knows I should’ve died then”, Nathan grimaced.

“You don’t believe in God”, Nathaniel said, even though his father’s statement hadn’t prompted a response. When his father slapped him again, Nathaniel surprisingly let out a deranged laugh. It bubbled up out of his throat like hysteria. He turned to his father and laughed through gritted teeth. What an image he must’ve looked like for his father’s eyes to widen. A laughing 17 year old reeking of blood, snot, tears and sweat. Through his laughter he heard himself say “Quit stalling and kill me already, you coward.”

His father smiled slowly, once more. “Perhaps you’re more like your mother than I thought.”

Nathan held out a hand and Lola placed his favoured cleaver in his hands. Nathaniel didn’t take his eyes off his father for a second as he stood and took a swing at Nathaniel’s neck, stopping an inch from his target as the door of the warehouse room blew open. Nathaniel startled in his chair and almost pissed himself. His breathing turned ragged as his father turned around to look at the intruder and was promptly shot in the head, chest and both his legs.

Nathaniel’s body splattered with Nathan’s blood, his eyes widening. His brain that had somehow been functioning through all this, came to halt as he watched the cleaver slip from his father’s hands and land next to his own tied feet.

Blood seeped into Nathaniel’s shoes as the floor turned red and the air filled with more gunshots. He couldn’t tell who had joined them, couldn’t tell if he himself had been shot because he couldn’t look away from the cleaver. His eyes travelled to his father’s body. Nathan Wesninski was dead. His chest rumbled. A curious sound left his mouth. Another laugh. He laughed with his mouth closed. He was only vaguely aware that he was laughing,

barely conscious of the fact that someone was calling out his name, untying him from the chair. He kept laughing until he opened his mouth to take a deep breath which turned his misplaced delight into a dry sob. His mother's injured face stared at him when he looked up and she stroked her fingers through his hair and hugged him to her chest. Nathaniel's face stung deeply from the pressure but he didn't, *couldn't*, push her away. He wasn't blinking. He should blink. He couldn't blink.

His mother helped him out of his seat, limping herself and Nathaniel started to follow her before he remembered her betrayal and pushed her away from himself. He didn't know if he could trust her anymore. He took deep breaths and felt a hand on his shoulder. Immediately he wrenched himself away from the touch. When he turned he saw a face that was weirdly familiar.

"Uncle Stuart?", he asked, breathless. A few dots connected in his head.

"The one and only. Listen, kid, I know this is confusing as all hell but you gotta come with us. We need to clear the building as soon as possible..."

Stuart's voice became faraway and distant as the overhead light caught on the shiny metal of his father's cleaver, half bloodied next to his dead body. Nathaniel took small steps towards it. When he leaned down and picked it up, he could roughly make out his reflection in the part of the metal that wasn't dripping his father's blood on his hands. He stared at the metal, unblinking. A few minutes ago, the blood streaming down it would've been his own. He didn't know if he preferred that to the alternative. He didn't know if he wanted to be alive anymore, now that he'd been so close to death. He heard his mother's breath hitch behind him.

"Nathaniel?"

He turned towards her, cleaver still in his hand. He could imagine what he must've looked like. The exact image of his father holding a cleaver. Her eyes filled with tears. She repeated his name on a shaking exhale. The fear in her voice was a trigger. Nathaniel blinked rapidly, dropping the cleaver. His breath shook. The blood on his hands made him choke. He turned around and vomited on his father's dead body. The conception of what he had done made him vomit more.

His mother laughed through tears. He looked at her, sighing. He smelt like shit. He felt like shit.

"You didn't tell me", he said, simply.

His mother rushed towards him, hugging him. She was almost the same height as him. He didn't wrap his arms around her, noticing that his hand was still covered in his father's blood and he didn't think she'd appreciate being covered in it. He didn't understand anything he was feeling. All he knew was that his father was dead and his mother was hugging him and he might not ever have to run away again. He wanted to sleep for a million days. His mother let go of him, brushed his hair away from his face.

"I'll explain everything. We're free, Nathaniel. We're safe." His father was *dead*.

“Safe”, he repeated.

It sounded like a dream; it tasted like damnation.

Columbia, South Carolina, USA.

“Andrew. Andrew, wake up. I need your help.”

It was a whisper outside the locked door but it was enough to wake Andrew, violently. It took him a minute to place his surroundings. He was in his brother's house in Columbia. He was in a room that his brother had said would be his from now on. It didn't feel like his room, he barely had anything there. Then again, he barely had anything at all.

There was only one person that could have been on his door. When he opened it, Aaron stood quiet and hesitant. The room and hallway were dark so Andrew didn't notice Aaron's injury until Aaron was in the room. He was limping, bleeding from a deep gash on his head and his eye was painfully squeezed shut. Andrew knew from experience that such a hit was going to leave behind a massive bruise.

He had figured their biological mother was up to no good as soon as he'd arrived in the house. It didn't feel like a loving home, it felt exactly like all the foster houses he'd had to stay at for the entirety of his wretched life. He didn't know the extent of the abuse Aaron was probably facing and he didn't know what he'd do if he ever found out. Aaron had drowned himself in clothes too large on his body, made sure to be as quiet as possible when doing anything, had flinched away from his mother when she reached out to pat his head or shoulder, sometimes gently, as if it would do any good. Despite his obvious pain, Aaron hadn't felt the need to tell Andrew he was hurt or ask for help, until now. Hesitantly, Aaron asked, “I can't see properly, can you clean the wound on my forehead?”

Andrew could do that. Alternatively, he could go downstairs and plunge a knife deep into Tilda's gut for doing this in the first place. “Sit”, he said, simply, before walking out of the room to find his way to the first aid kit he'd seen Aaron use, before. When he came back and turned on the light, Aaron was looking at the floor of the room, lost in his own thoughts.

He looked miserable. Scared. *He looked like Andrew.*

It was like looking at a mirror that refused to stay as emotionless as his own impassive face. Aaron was feeling everything Andrew had felt all his life and he looked too tired to hide or repress it. Andrew kept the first aid kit beside Aaron and took out the required items. He wasn't a stranger to any of this and he noticed Aaron noticing. When he was done, Aaron whispered a small ‘thanks’ before he got up to leave.

"I can help you."

Aaron looked at him, sitting back down.

"You can't."

"I will if you want me to."

"What would you want in return?"

Andrew would've done it for nothing in return. But he couldn't gain Aaron's trust so easily. Before he could think of something to offer, Aaron spoke again.

"I'll stick by you till graduation if you can help me out of this mess."

Andrew could work with that. He nodded.

"Deal."

His own injured face looked up at him with narrow eyed suspicion. Aaron nodded once, before leaving the room.

That was the most they'd talked since they had met.

The next morning, Andrew was awake before his brother. He could barely sleep after the incident and when he'd started to doze off, he'd heard something crash downstairs. He took the stairs slowly, knowing Aaron would be awake soon enough. Aaron had asked for his help and he was going to deal with this nuisance once and for all.

Tilda Minyard was a short, pale, blonde woman. Her hair was always a mess and she had the temper of a spoilt child mixed with the habits of a fifty year old divorcee. Her addictions and deteriorating health showed in her sunken cheekbones and constant red eyes. There were very few moments where she was sober and if she was she managed to fix that as soon as possible. There were many problems with Tilda Minyard.

Currently, she stood in the kitchen, trying to push aside the pieces of a broken plate with her bare feet. Andrew hoped she'd cut herself.

The kitchen itself was a mess. There were various bottles of alcohol littering the floor, the cupboards were stained with grease and if he were to open the fridge he knew he'd find nothing edible. Anger rose in him, slowly, as it always did. It was prickling up his chest and he knew he wouldn't be able to control it. This wasn't his battle to fight but he was going to fight it anyway.

Maybe he was trying to protect Aaron from her because he'd never been able to protect himself. He'd been weak in the face of his abuse. He couldn't hold Aaron accountable for not opposing his mother's actions when he knew how difficult it could be. But it wasn't his own life at stake here and even if it was he wouldn't care, he wanted to protect Aaron. He doubted the terrors in his life would ever stop but he could try and make Aaron's better. He had made a promise.

With rage coursing through his veins, Andrew took a threatening step towards Tilda. For the few minutes Andrew had stood there, Tilda had taken no notice of him. Now, she stared at him confused. She opened her chapped mouth to curse him out and choked on a cough.

"Good that you're awake, Aaron. Make me some breakfast, will you?" she managed to say, between deep breaths. Andrew was going to kill her, he promised himself.

"You won't hit him again."

His voice was different from Aaron's, though they both spoke in low tones. They knew raising their voice wouldn't do shit. Tilda recognized this, even through her hungover state.

"Oh. You're the one I left behind. Managed to claw your way back have you?"

He tried not to let the words affect him and was mostly successful.

"I will kill you", he threatened.

She remained unperturbed. He heard Aaron come up behind him, his limp must've taken him longer to get there.

"Andrew. Let her be."

Tilda's face broke out into a crooked grin. Her teeth were stained yellow. "There's my boy."

She moved to walk towards him, but Andrew stepped in her path.

"I mean it. I will kill you."

He saw fear flash across her face for only a minute before she backhanded him and he stepped back from the force of it. Aaron was at his side in an instant. He was tugging at Andrew's arm, trying to pull him back but Andrew wouldn't budge. He was just glad it was him she had hit. Aaron's frantic gaze turned towards Tilda.

"He didn't mean it, mom. It's fine. He won't do anything."

Andrew glared at his brother in silence. Tilda left the room, nostrils flaring and Aaron pushed Andrew away from himself. "Are you fucking crazy? If this is how you're planning on getting her to stop-"

"I made you a promise. Be glad it was me she hit, right now. If she hurts you again, I will kill her."

"You're not going to kill her, Andrew."

"Not if she gains some sense."

Aaron shook his head, disappointed and confused, before turning his attention towards cleaning up the kitchen and fixing up breakfast.

"She lost her job, last night. That's why she-"

"How many times have you made excuses for her?", Andrew's anger was consuming him whole and when Aaron had no reply, he turned and left the kitchen as well. He was well versed with trying to find reason in abuse. He'd wondered too many times what set off the people in his life to hurt him but there was never an easy answer. He was past justifying their actions and it was about time Aaron learnt to do so as well.

It was quiet for a few days. Andrew and Aaron went to a high school that wasn't very far from where they lived, was extremely boring and had an Exy court attached to it. Andrew found a past time in playing a sport he was fairly good at, and since Aaron had promised, now, to stick by him, Aaron had also started playing. He wasn't very good at it, yet, but he took to it as a release for his anger and frustration. At least, that's why Andrew assumed he did it. It also served as a way to stay out the house longer, now that Tilda had no job and a dwindling bank account running dry from her addictive adventures.

When Andrew and Aaron reached home mid- January, the door was wide open and there was an obscene amount of crashes and bangs. They entered a house in complete dishevelment. Tilda had knocked over almost every piece of furniture, cut open the sofa and was throwing every kitchen utility she could find on the unsuspecting floor. When she saw Aaron rush towards her, she threw a feral glance towards him and snatched him by a fierce grip on his hair. Aaron grunted for only a minute before Andrew was there to pull Tilda off of him. Aaron was stronger than Tilda, was even slightly taller than her, but he wouldn't hit his mother no matter what. Andrew slammed Tilda against the fridge door, keeping her in place with his arm against her throat.

"Get off of me", she spat.

"I told you *not* to touch him again."

"You don't tell me what to do. You're not my son." Her face was turning red from lack of air, but he knew he couldn't strangle her right there. He could hear Aaron speaking to one of the neighbours, telling them that it was just a small accident and no one had gotten hurt. People always believed what they wanted to believe and it was always easier to believe nothing was wrong.

"And you're not my mother. You know what I said I would do, don't be surprised when it happens."

He let go of her and she gasped loudly. She rounded away from Andrew and approached Aaron, who had shut the door and was standing in the entryway of the kitchen that opened to the living room. She didn't hesitate before she slapped him, her pointed ring leaving a cut on Aaron's cheek. Andrew walked briskly towards her. This woman simply didn't get the hint, did she?

"It's all your fault he is under this roof again. I hate you", she managed to say through her fury. Aaron held Andrew away from her as she walked away and Andrew pushed him away.

"How am I supposed to help you if you stop me?"

"She'll calm down. Something must have happened", Aaron looked distressed and it only fuelled Andrew's rage. Maybe it was genetic.

"Get it through your thick skull, Aaron. She doesn't care about you."

Aaron flinched, even though he had to have known especially when his mother had just told him she hated him. Andrew was struck dumb at his brother's humble stupidity.

"Just. Just, let it be, for now. She'll calm down."

"Are you telling me or yourself?" Andrew didn't stick around for an answer as he rushed up the stairs to his room.

Andrew didn't retaliate until a few days later. He pondered day and night how he should do it. Stared at the scars he'd put on his arms and repeated in his mind that his life was worth *nothing* when he came to a conclusion. Tilda would be going to the store tonight. He'd drained out most of her bottles of beer and vodka and left them lying around like she'd been the one to empty them. She needed more and he knew she'd go out to get them. He fixed his hair and walked down as she was getting ready to leave. She wasn't so much ready as she was grabbing her keys and wallet. When he entered, she looked up and he could tell she was high. He knew she was taking a various mix of things when he'd rummaged through her stash and he'd even seen Aaron digging through her supplies sometimes, whether it was to see what she was doing or for his own reasons.. He wasn't going to question it. He could save Aaron from Tilda but it would be much more difficult to save Aaron from himself. He let the thought linger at the back of his mind as he pulled out the remaining bottle of vodka to give to her.

"Mom, I'm coming with you."

Tilda didn't question it. She relaxed when she heard him regard her as his mother and offer her the drink because she had no reason to fear Aaron. Andrew kept his expression neutral as they got into the car and she took a swig from the bottle, keeping it safely tucked between her legs as the engine roared to life. He didn't have to do much. The drive to the grocery store wasn't very far but there was a street they had to pass though which was normally silent and empty at this time of the night. He didn't have to do much and he wasn't hoping to survive this.

As expected she drove like she was being chased by the police. She'd gotten a million speeding tickets and this played into his advantage. When they turned onto the destined street, Andrew braced himself. She was driving with no care with a hand out the window and he closed his eyes and reached out to swerve the steering wheel, driving the car towards the closest streetlight pole.

If she weren't speeding, it wouldn't have worked. If she was sober she would've fought harder. He thought to himself, it shouldn't have been as easy as this. The car crashed and Tilda, who hadn't been wearing a seatbelt broke through the windshield at the impact. When

she fell back on her seat, as the car stopped moving, Andrew felt his eyes open. Through his ringing ears he saw that Tilda's entire head was bleeding, her eyes stared at him open and empty. There was so much glass and so much blood, Andrew had to take a deep breath before he realized he'd survived. He also saw that the passenger seat's airbag had opened, but the driver's seats had not. He could barely feel his legs. Shuddering he reached out two fingers to feel under her nose for any signs of breathing.

Tilda Minyard was *dead*.

Someone approached the car as he winced, getting out of the seat. His legs shook and he could feel blood dripping down some parts of his arm and forehead. He was alive. He had orchestrated a *murder*. He had killed his brother's mother. And he was alive. He held his shaking knees with his hands as he crouched. *How was he going to face Aaron, now?*

"Are you okay? Is someone in there? Holy shit-"

He heard someone speak and heard them call 911. He sat on the sidewalk, trying to breathe.

"Hey, kid. Kid look here, are you okay?"

He had to play the part.

"My mom, she."

He stumbled over his words, as if he was in shock. Whoever it was, stroked his hair gently and it took all his effort not to flinch away from the touch.

"I've called an ambulance, kid. Pray she makes it."

He didn't believe in God but he hoped with all his heart that Tilda was on her way to rotting in hell.

West Virginia, USA.

"This doesn't change anything", Jean said, even though he knew it changed everything. Kevin stared at the ceiling, trying hard to believe Jean's words. They rang false in his ears. It was useless. Maybe because he wanted something to change. He sighed.

"David Wymack is my father."

"Yes, and he doesn't know. You can't go to him and say it. Now, that would change something."

"Maybe I *should* go."

"Maybe you shouldn't."

There was a tinge of fear in Jean's voice. He sat on the other end of Kevin's bed, hugging his knees to his chest. Kevin looked at him and felt protective and helpless. Jean fidgeted with the edge of Kevin's pajamas.

"Sometimes knowing something is true doesn't mean you can act on it. There's a million things keeping you from this, especially the Moriyama's. Your place is here, Kevin."

For how long?

He didn't want to stay here forever. He knew Jean was right, but he also knew Jean was scared. If Kevin left, he would have no one. They both suffered at Riko's hands but at the end of the day, they were there for each other. It was different for Jean, than it was for Kevin. Kevin wasn't *property* like Jean. Sometimes, after Riko would be in a particularly hostile mood, it was painful to even look at Jean. He'd endured more than anyone else and it would be foolish to abandon him. If he left he was sure Riko would kill Jean over it.

But Kevin still wanted to leave.

"You know I'm not saying that to keep you here, right? If you wanted to go I wouldn't stop you. I don't even think I can. There's just a lot at stake here."

Jean's voice was even, but his eyes spoke volumes. Kevin sat up, reaching for Jean's hand. "I'm not going."

It wasn't his imagination when he saw Jean relax and nod. With his left hand in Jean's, Kevin brought up the letter between them with his right. He beheld the writing of his mother, neat and cursive. He'd read it five times already but it was the only thing he had of hers and he was never going to lose it, he would read it till his eyes fell out.

"It's a little weird. Now I will keep picking out similarities between you two."

Kevin laughed, softly. It was a rare sound to be heard of in the Nest, but it wasn't rare, here, on Kevin's bed. Never when he was in Jean's company. He was the only person Jean talked to and despite what people thought of him at first, Jean had a surprisingly good sense of humour, albeit a dark one. They'd spent years trying to be there for each other, nitpicking Riko's stupid habits, holding and healing each other then laughing through their pain.

If Kevin ever left, he wished he'd never forget Jean's exceptional laughter.

Riko was gone for the night. A new freshman, older than him, had been bold enough to approach him and at first he'd been standoffish and rude but when the girl wasn't fazed by his behaviour he'd attempted to charm her himself. Last Kevin had seen them, they'd been making out quite passionately (ridiculously) near the bathrooms. He wondered what would happen if Riko got a girl pregnant and dreaded the thought of what the main family would do to another Moriyama child. Shuddering at his sudden thought process, he folded the letter and placed it neatly between one of the history books on the bookshelf next to his bed.

The master was rarely away, but those were the days Riko would give into finding pleasure in sex rather than torture. Though Kevin couldn't imagine either being good for the person experiencing it. The first night Riko had hooked up with a girl, he'd been away the whole night leaving Kevin and Jean to wander around the Nest, peacefully. They'd broken into Tetsuji's main room, quietly, feeling every bit rebellious as they could and they'd found a bottle of whiskey between many and knew it wouldn't be missed so they had stolen it. They had sat on Kevin's bed and laughed as they got steadily more drunk. Kevin was pretty sure they had ended up kissing for an indefinite period of time, but the next morning neither of them had said anything about it.

Kevin and Jean were a strange pair. The obligation that kept Kevin at Riko's side didn't exist between them and he enjoyed Jean's company. Jean was the only friend he had. Tonight, they had snuck their way into Tetsuji's office and roamed around aimlessly until they had found the letter.

Jean pet his hair and said in French, "Don't overthink it, Kev. What has to happen will happen."

Jean leaned his head on Kevin's shoulder as they sat side by side, holding hands as if they were each other's lifeline. Kevin couldn't stop thinking about it, though.

David Wymack is my father. Coach David Wymack of the Palmetto State Foxes is my fucking father.

He thought about what his father would think of him. He had to be proud, right? Kevin was perfect at a sport that he taught. He had to be impressed by Kevin's performance. By the effortless way he scored goals. Did he watch his interviews on TV? Did he tell his Foxes to be more like Kevin Day, the Son of Exy? *His* son.

If Kevin went to him, would he take Kevin under his wing? Would he accept Kevin like he accepted his broken Foxes? Would he be proud to tell the world that he had a son?

When Kevin fell asleep that night, he dreamt of himself in orange and white.

Part One: March

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

New York, USA.

Neil stared out the glass, floor to ceiling wall that gave him a view of the garden. It had become a habit to get lost in his mind as he looked through it but his thoughts were a jumbled mess. This wasn't what surprised him, though. What was truly shocking to him was how little of his thinking was compromised by fear now that his father was well and truly dead.

It had taken him more than two weeks to accept the fact that he lived in a world free of Nathan Wesninski. The only reason it became obvious to him was because he had seen his mother smiling more times in the past month or so than she ever had in the 17 years of his existence. His mother was happy. Overjoyed. Full of life. Happiness, joy and life had all been foreign concepts to them a month ago. He stretched out on the couch, like a cat stretching to soak in the sun and smiled at nothing in particular.

Mary Hatford had contacted her brother Stuart and practically begged him for help at the beginning of the year. He had curtly informed her that he would do everything he possibly could and then he had. Neither of them had expected it. Stuart had been hesitant to help Neil's mother because coming to America just to kill The Butcher of Baltimore would mean starting a war. Nathan was backed by the Moriyama's and a multitude of men who were loyal to him and whilst the Hatfords had loyalty and manpower they didn't trust anyone to play fair in a country they weren't familiar with. It was risky, but Stuart had understood their situation and taken the risk anyway. Mary had taken Nathaniel and run away when he was only eight years old, damning the consequences. Reckless instincts seemed to be a family trend, apparently.

Family.

Neil's smile slipped away. He felt the word like a dark thunder cloud over his head. It made the room look dimmer, the shadows more prominent and the fear that was still hidden somewhere deep in his heart began to claw its way to the surface. The nagging feeling at the back of his head reminded him that it shouldn't have been this easy. There was something his mother was hiding from him. They weren't on the run, anymore, but they were allowed to live comfortably, freely, safely. Neil didn't believe it. No matter how much he wanted to, he wasn't naive enough to believe it. He had been pretending, for the sake of his mother, but he didn't know if he could keep it up.

He remembered, suddenly, the night he had thought she had betrayed him. She had only meant to keep her plan a secret from him so that his father wouldn't be suspicious of his actions and reactions. He understood that but he didn't think he could fully believe anything

she told him now that he knew she was capable of lying to him. They were all they had. They didn't lie to each other.

The night Nathan had died, Neil had walked out of the warehouse as Nathaniel and passed out in the backseat of whatever car was driving him to wherever. His father was dead, what's the worst that could happen? He'd woken up with his injuries tended and panic had seized his chest. Every inch of his body hurt and his face burned. He was lying in a comfortable bed in an unfamiliar room (he was used to this) with his mother sitting on a chair beside his bed covered in bandages (he was used to this as well). He hadn't asked any questions that night. Everytime he so much as tried to cry, his mother would tell him to be careful in case he soaked the bandages on his face. He didn't because it felt like the extent of his tears would be enough to drown them both. Wouldn't that be a disappointing way to go?

He'd been brimming with questions the next day. They spilled out of him like he was a child intent on knowing every secret the world had to offer. His mother gave him detailed and brief responses both, which left him a bit more confused than before. There were too many gaps in her information. He would get to the bottom of this, eventually.

For now, he looked at the garden and took a deep breath. He heard his mother's footsteps behind him and felt her fingers run through his hair from behind where he lay on the couch. He looked up at her with the same wondering look he had when he was little. She was a fighter, through and through, and when he was a child he wanted to be just like her. Mostly because the other alternative adults in his life were complete and absolute trash bags. A flicker of doubt rang loud in his head and he ignored it.

"Why do you like the garden so much?" Mary asked.

"I don't know. It's nice. Green and fresh. Like a salad."

"You've never finished your greens or your salads, brat." She flicked his forehead and walked over and around the couch. He pulled his legs to his chest to give her space to sit. He wanted to ask her questions but he didn't know where to begin. After five minutes of silence he came to a conclusive one: *Where do we go from here?* He didn't get a chance to ask her anything, because she started talking, herself.

"It seems surreal", she began. "We can do whatever we want with our lives now. You can finish up high school, go to university. Be safe. Make friends. Hell, you could even get a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend. I am a very accepting and loving mother."

Neil smiled at her, more obligatory than fond. "Don't I know it."

She smiled back. It was still so rare to see her this way. This relaxed, carefree person barely felt like the mother he had become so used to. Things were changing, though. Another question came to mind, now that distractions were allowed and welcome.

"Can I play exy again?"

He noticed how quickly the smile fell from his mother's face and braced himself. She hadn't hit him again, not in the past few months, but he knew what she was capable of. She noticed

his posture and looked away.

"I can't let you do that, Abram."

He wanted to whine like he did when she had first taken him and run. The slap on his cheek from when he was eight rang loud in his mind. He wasn't past arguing though.

"Why?" He barely heard his own voice. *Damn it, Neil. Wise up.*

She sighed. "The Moriyamas are too invested in that business. You're good at other things. Math. Languages. Why don't you find another interest? Yes."

He couldn't respond because, as usual, she had answered for him. He simply nodded and looked at the garden, again, though his gaze had lost its wistfulness. She noticed.

"Anything but this, Abram. Ask me for anything."

He didn't want to understand, so he ignored her.

"I'll choose the school I go to. You can't tell me what to do anymore and you can't hit me again." He held his breath.

His mother was quiet for so long he thought for sure she was going to slap him across the face just for speaking out of turn. Old habits die hard. It must be instinctive for her too, no? But when he turned his gaze to her, she looked almost proud and very apologetic.

"I will never hurt you again. I promise." She nodded in agreement to his terms and got up to leave, leaving a kiss on his forehead he barely felt. He was used to his mother's expectations, demands and abuse but he didn't know what a mother's love was supposed to feel like. Maybe he wasn't past learning.

Columbia, South Carolina, USA.

"You killed her."

Aaron's voice was filled with sorrow and anger. Andrew was tired of hearing it even though his brother had only said one sentence. He had been waiting for the guilt of his actions to incapacitate him but he knew he couldn't feel something he didn't believe in. He knew because he knew himself and no one else did; no one else was allowed to. He didn't reply to Aaron. Didn't even look at him.

Tilda's death had done nothing to improve the state of the house. The bottles and the smoke-y haze now belonged to Aaron. It was as if he had taken to her habits as religiously as possible,

to erase the fact that she wasn't a part of his world anymore. Andrew was glad for it. He may be grieving but he was doing so without bruises and cuts.

"I should never have let you come here. I wish I'd never met you."

Aaron's words were full of hate but Andrew was used to worse. This meant nothing to him. He knew how useless wishful thinking was and had left it behind ages ago. He couldn't fault his brother for thinking this way, though. He sat at the table with a cigarette and a beer bottle of his own. When he finally gave in and looked at his brother he was surprised to find him crying. He could remember vividly the last time he had cried, because he never forgot anything. The memory suffocated him and for a brief moment he was unsure of the safety of his own surroundings.

"I hate you." Aaron sobbed, inconsolable. Andrew stared, intangible.

He didn't know how to deal with his brother's grief because he hadn't been expecting to. He wasn't supposed to live through the crash. It was a mistake that he survived and now had to suffer through the empty feeling of no guilt. Should he be guilty? Was he truly incapable of feeling such a simple emotion?

"Your cousin is arriving in a few hours. Are you going to greet him in this condition?" Andrew didn't really care. He wanted everything to stop.

Why was every word out of his mouth like a barbed wire? Andrew worried. Despite himself and his hate for everything he worried. This new cousin, Nicky Hemmick was someone Andrew was rightfully suspicious of. Aaron had only briefly told him that he was taking over as their guardian, at least until they turned 18 in November. From what he had heard, Nicky was loud, flamboyant and gay. Andrew could only tolerate(related to) only one of those characteristics and it wasn't loud or flamboyant. He didn't know much but he assumed the man would introduce himself in detail. For now, Andrew had taken to sleeping with a kitchen knife under his pillow.

Aaron sniffed and cleared his throat.

"Don't hurt Nicky. He's a good fucking person."

Andrew had a low opinion of Aaron's judgement of the word 'good'. Yet, he raised his arms in a show of innocence, though the cigarette and the bottle diluted the effect. They'd made a deal and though he didn't expect Aaron to keep his end he was at least glad to have kept his promise. He would only intervene between the cousin's if Aaron seemed to be in harm's way. It was difficult for him to wrap his head around the fact that Nicky was his cousin as well. He wondered if he looked anything like the twins.

He was proven wrong in only a few hours. Nicky arrived at the house around 11 pm and hugged Aaron immediately, tears streaming down his face. Nicky Esteban Hemmick was nothing like the twins, in face, height or personality. He was the kind of person Andrew pointedly ignored in school. When he was done hugging his brother, he moved towards Andrew, who stepped back just in time for Nicky to meet thin air.

"Not a hugger?" Nicky attempted a smile. Andrew walked away from him. Nicky followed behind him and let out an exaggerated gasp at the mess. "Look at the state of this place." He sounded disappointed. Andrew and Aaron shared a look that spoke volumes of their mutual irritation at the expressed disgust. They weren't used to Tilda caring about messes. Getting used to a new guardian would take a long time for both of them. Andrew took stock of his behaviour, trying to see if he could identify any giveaways of abusive tendencies. So far, he just seemed like a talkative, annoying yet harmless guy. He knew better than to trust such people but Aaron took to him with easy familiarity which eased Andrew's nerves a bit.

Believing for the first time in a few days that Aaron was in mildly safe hands he went to his room finally succumbing to his body's need for sleep. He woke up from a nightmare, phantom hands still roaming his skin and it took him half an hour to calm his breathing enough for it to be stable. He still felt as if he wasn't breathing at all. He followed the sound of rustling and was greeted with the sight of Nicky cooking breakfast.

"Hello!" Nicky greeted cheerfully. Andrew didn't reply naturally.

"Which one are you? I'm gonna have a lot of trouble telling you two apart, you know." Andrew reached the fridge, pulling out the milk. He reached for the cereal on the shelf next (low enough for both of them to reach) and glanced about the room as he shovelled spoonfuls into his mouth. The place had been cleaned up, a large trash bag placed at the kitchen entrance, Andrew assumed it was full of bottles and takeout wrappers. Nicky noticed his gaze and asked Andrew politely if he could take out the trash. Andrew wasn't impressed by his good manners and he trusted him even less because of his kindness, suddenly. Kind words were often a disguise for an ulterior motive. Andrew finished his cereal and left his bowl in the sink. He expected some harsh rebuttal but Nicky said nothing. He passed Aaron on the stairs, neither of them bothering with conversation, and slammed the door of his room shut when he reached it.

With Tilda out of the way, Andrew's only concern was the lingering side effects she'd left behind in the face of Aaron's new addictions. He couldn't save Aaron from his mother if he was so keen on following in her footsteps. Her presence, or lack of it, was like a heavy cloud that weighed in on them both. He spent the entire morning trying to think of ways to put a stop to Aaron's behaviour. When he decided what he wanted to do he went to inform their 'guardian' what his plan was. He didn't really care if Nicky agreed, he only needed Aaron to say yes.

"I'm going to lock Aaron in the bathroom with food and water. He's abusing his mother's old drugs."

Nicky's eyes widened. "I didn't know that. We should take him to rehab then, we can't just lock him in the bathroom!"

"He won't-"

"I won't agree to go to a rehab centre."

Aaron was slumped against the wall. His eyes were drooping shut and he was wearing the same clothes he had been wearing for the past week, reeking of alcohol and whatever bullshit

he'd been taking that day. Andrew felt queasy looking at him in this condition, so he hadn't paid mind to the fact that Aaron had been listening in when he'd entered the room.

"Precisely", Andrew replied.

"Sure you don't want to just off me too?"

Andrew glared at his brother, who gave him a lopsided smile. He hated looking at Aaron so much, he wanted to rip his own eyes out. It was unnerving how similar they looked and Andrew detested the fact that neither of them had gotten anything good out of the world. "I made you a promise."

"You promised to help me. You didn't need to--"

"I *am* helping you."

"Fine. You can lock me up in the fucking bathroom. You can do whatever you want Andrew but I will never forgive you for killing her."

He said it low enough so Nicky wouldn't hear from where he sat on the living room couch, but the weight of his words settled uneasily in Andrew's heart. He shook it off. He wasn't looking for forgiveness. He'd done the right thing even if his brother didn't believe him.

The next morning Andrew stocked the bathroom with bottled water and whatever food he found relevant. He wasn't expecting the process to be easy or clean. He couldn't help but remember the time he'd been locked in his room for days without any essentials. He remembered peeing in the corner of the room and trying hard to sleep through the smell. Eventually it was the smell that had gotten him out. How inconvenient it must have been to clean that up, he thought, sarcastically. His whole life was an inconvenience. He dumped blankets and pillows in the bathtub, put up a pile of toilet paper and left the bathroom to find Aaron. He was sound asleep on the living room couch and didn't even stir when Andrew called his name five times. Wanting to get the whole thing over with as fast as possible Andrew took a glass of water and dumped it on Aaron's shoulder. Aaron woke with a start raising his arms in the air as if read to defend himself from an attack. Andrew wanted to shake him and say *Do you see now why it was important to get rid of her?* All he could do, however, was wait for Aaron to realize that his mother wasn't standing over him.

As soon as Aaron blinked awake, Andrew gestured for him to follow. There were no instructions, no banter, no fights and as soon as Aaron entered the bathroom, Andrew locked it shut. He had barred the small window inside and Aaron had no way out of the room. Andrew carefully powered off Aaron's phone and kept it in the kitchen drawer. When he turned to leave the room, Nicky was standing there with his arms wrapped around his stomach and an uneasy expression on his face.

"Listen, I know I won't be great at this whole thing but if you ever need anything you can let me know."

"A car."

Nicky's eyes widened, likely because he hadn't actually expected Andrew to ask for anything. "You need a car?"

"Yes. A good one."

Nicky looked distraught. "Okay. Um. Andrew, we don't have enough money for a good car. I can get Aaron and you a job at this bar nearby and I'm sure we can figure out a way to-"

"Tilda's life insurance would be more than enough to get what I have in mind."

Nicky's eyes widened. He looked like a deer caught in the headlights. Andrew pulled out a cigarette and lit it as Nicky thought about what he had said. After a few moments Nicky nodded. "How's Aaron?"

"Ask him yourself."

Andrew walked out of the house. He'd taken to walking around the neighbourhood because being in the house suffocated him. He always made sure to carry a small knife with him even though he didn't really care what happened to him, he was still paranoid. The world wasn't safe for people like him and he would never admit how terrified he felt merely existing in this place. He'd taken to ignoring his emotions so skillfully most of them had perished. The strange mix of apathy and intense sentiment made him nauseated. His head hurt just thinking about himself so he thought about Nicky's offer of working at a bar instead and decided he'd take him up on the offer. They'd need the money and it would be a welcome distraction, it wouldn't do them any harm. He'd have to wait until Aaron was clean, though.

Unconsciously but not surprisingly, Andrew ended up walking to the street where the car crash had taken place. Tilda had died because of spinal injury and with the drugs and alcohol in her system it wasn't hard to rule it as a drunk driving accident. Andrew dropped his cigarette, crushing it with the tip of his shoe and tried to ignore the deep seated regret in his heart that he hadn't died with her.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Part One: April

New York, USA.

Neil was scared, now. Generally, he knew he had never stopped being scared but now that he had found out how exactly they had been granted access to the easy comforts of a life they'd been running away from for so long, he was absolutely terrified. The persistent voice at the back of his head telling him to run was silenced when he looked at the FBI agent asking him about the locations and names of his father's men. It was knowledge that he was so used to having sealed shut inside of him that it took him three tries to even open his mouth. But when he did, everything spilled out of him like a scared child looking for safety. Technically, that's exactly what he was. After they were done brutally interrogating him, Neil expected some kind of trap but when his mother came into the room and smiled at him his fear diminished a little. Someone slammed down papers in front of him, explaining that he was officially to be Neil Josten. He signed them.

He didn't know what it meant, yet. To be Neil Josten.

The last few months were a painful limbo, not knowing who he was or what he was supposed to be doing. His mother had taken to calling him Abram and since she was the only person he spoke to it wasn't really a problem for her. But every night when Neil would wake from his nightmares he would sit there and wonder who exactly it was plagued by such an intensely traumatic life.

Now, he was Neil. He was Neil Josten.

He smiled privately to himself, his lips closing around the name perfectly. He wanted to shout it to the world and he wanted the world to shout it back to him, so he would know. *You are real. You are safe.*

Neil had thought the house in New York would be another temporary living situation. He liked the place. It was quite big, less like a house and more like a mansion and he remembered being used to such extravagance when he was a child. When he could barely spell the words bodyguard, he had been surrounded by so many, trying to give him a false sense of security. They had always made him feel more uncomfortable than safe. The garden he was so obsessed with was kept clean and trimmed by an old lady who would smile at him every time she saw him. He made sure to smile back, hoping it didn't look like a grimace. There was a cook in the house now. A chauffeur. A maid. They got mail and parcels and his mother was always out shopping so the house was gradually becoming more and more...alive? It confused him, why his mother suddenly trusted so many people, why she was so comfortable, when he realized that she had always had a life before him. She was trying to go back to being the person she used to be but Neil was stuck. He was stuck.

He didn't know who he was supposed to be, didn't have any interests or hobbies that teenagers did. It felt like he hadn't existed before the moment he became Neil Josten, like he had been reborn and as the memories of his past began to fade from his mind, the only remnants left in his scars and nightmares, he began to worry. He became afraid in a way that he wasn't familiar with.

Staring at the wall of his bedroom, he began to understand what it was to be truly, irrevocably *alone*.

It took a few days of sulking in the shower and staring at the ceiling when he decided to do something for himself. Before, when they were running, his mother used to make conversation with him mostly to tell him what to do and what not to do. Sometimes she would go off on a tangent about her life before she had married a monster and those were always the most interesting parts. Still, he'd learnt not to ask. It only upset her and an upset mother meant bruises and pain. So, he'd learnt not to ask. But she'd promised not to hurt him, anymore. So he dared.

He ventured out of his room but instead of taking his place on the couch and looking out into the garden like he normally did, he decided to go outside. He didn't wear slippers and the grass was freshly trimmed and wet, surrounding him was the smell of earth and for a moment he thought he could get lost in it. Everything felt so new.

He walked around, breathing slowly and it calmed him so much he became afraid again. How would he go back inside, now? He wouldn't like it in there as much as he liked it outside. He stared into the glass wall, looking at the empty couch where he should've been. It was like that, the old lady found him. He was startled by her presence when she laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. He jolted. She laughed. It was the happiest sound he had ever heard. He was surprised someone could be so immensely consumed by their happiness that they wouldn't be able to hide it. He shook his head. The old lady was probably offended that he was in the garden she took such great care of. Maybe he had soiled it with the weight of his past and the confusion of his present.

"Your mother told me your name is Neil. My, I never thought I would get to see the day that little devil would have a son of her own, but here you are. How alike your noses are!" her voice was sweet and kind. His nose? He unconsciously reached up to touch it and that made her laugh again. Then he realized the woman had spoken of his mother intimately. He jumped at the chance to sate his curiosity.

"You knew my mother?"

The old lady stopped laughing.

Neil held his breath. She didn't say anything, simply stared at him. He was sure he had offended her so he stuttered out an apology. It was like he had forgotten how to function entirely.

Always asking stupid questions, Abram.

"I'm- I'm sorry. I'll go back inside. I'm sorry for asking. And for coming into your garden."

He turned around to leave but he stopped when the old lady said, "I knew her once, yes. I watched her grow up. But I am not sure I know her anymore. Tell me, Neil, how much do you think a person can change with time?"

He had been trying to find an answer for so long he had forgotten the question entirely. How much can time change a person? He had been so many people in such little time he didn't know what to say. He went back inside.

He walked into the kitchen to get himself some water and found the cook humming to herself. She looked only a few years older than his mother and he wondered if she had known her as well. Maybe Mary and her had been friends? The cook smiled at him and he stared.

"Would you like something, Neil?"

Neil. Everyone was calling him that now.

He shook his head, jerkily.

"You're nothing like your mother was, at your age", she said, after a moment of silence.

Neil felt triumphant. But he was in unknown territory and he didn't want to offend the lady, so he kept his mouth shut. Surprisingly, that worked in his favour.

"She was a true wild child. I was the daughter of the cook who worked for their family, you see. We used to play together when she was younger but when she grew up, she would barely stay a minute in the house. I can't count the amount of times I have let her into the house drunk at 3 am."

He wasn't looking to follow in his mother's footsteps but it sounded adventurous and he was bored. And alone. It didn't hurt to listen.

He paid attention as the cook continued to tell stories of his rebellious mother and her life. She kept working, cutting up vegetables, putting water to boil, all of it so systematic it, once again, calmed him. Often, the cook would look at him, her gaze expectant and a laugh bursting out of her lips and Neil found himself smiling at those moments, because some of the stories were funny. Just like that, they were interrupted.

"What's going on here?"

Neil's face fell. He swallowed air and turned to his mother, eyes wide, trying to search for an excuse. An explanation. A lie. An apology. But she was smiling. She greeted the cook, whose name he learned now was Katherine and beat himself up for not having asked for it. When his mother looked at his distraught expression, her smile grew sad.

"I asked Katherine to make some things you might like. What do you say to dinner together tonight?"

His mother had been out of the house so much, usually by the time she would get back Neil had eaten and fallen asleep. Or tried to fall asleep. Mostly, he would be thinking. He nodded

his head, not sure if he really had a choice. When he began to make his way to his room, his mother called out to him.

"I got you a few things."

There were a few boxes on the dining table and his mother was standing next to them, grinning. It was strange to look at so he busied himself trying to understand the nature of his new gifts. A laptop. A phone. A new sim card. Speakers. Headphones.

His room was sparse. It only had his bed, a cupboard and a dresser. He didn't have a lot of clothes and he had yet to buy new ones so he'd been making do with the stuff he had. It felt weird to be allowed more than he already had. He nodded gratefully to his mother, before chastising himself for not using his words. "Thank you."

His mother moved forward and he stepped back, dropping the box with the phone that he had been admiring. His mother's eyes widened with sorrow. She had told him she wouldn't hurt him again but Neil couldn't just... accept that. Pain was an intimate friend and he was lost in the anticipation of their meeting again. But it never came.

"Should I take it?", he asked, meekly.

His mother nodded, turning away. Neil hurriedly gathered his new things and went into his room. When he had placed it all on his bed, he began to unwrap the gadgets one by one, wondering which one of them his mother had bugged. Why else would she get them? She probably wanted to know where he was and what he was doing all the time. The distrust made him nauseated. What was he going to do? Run?

He wanted to storm out of the room but he was still shaken up. He wondered what unspoken boundary he had crossed by talking to the gardener and the cook. His mother hadn't seemed angry, but he couldn't ignore doubt once it had seeded itself in his heart. All the devices were brand new. They were wrapped in boxes that didn't look like they had been opened before. Neil wondered what he was allowed to do with them. There was a knock on his door.

He opened the door to his mother. She looked nervous and he braced himself for bad news as she asked him if she could enter his room. She didn't close the door behind her, but he didn't mind. Easy exit.

"Have you decided on a high school, yet?"

Neil looked down. "I don't really know any. I'll do some research today and tell you by midnight, I promise."

He felt like he was walking a tightrope. He had to be careful lest he fall and hurt himself.

"Take your time."

An uncomfortable silence settled over the room. In a momentary lapse of bravery, Neil muttered, "Are any of the devices bugged?"

Mary sighed. "By the FBI, maybe? Not by me or anyone who can cause you harm."

Neil nodded.

"Abram", she began, in a tone that he was sure he had never before heard from her. Concern? "I'm sorry for all that I've done to you. I know it won't mean much, and you don't have to forgive me, but trust me when I say this. I love you and I care about you a great deal more than you think I do."

Neil nodded, again. He felt numb. He forced himself to look up, in case she thought he was ignoring her.

"I'll let you know about school, mom. Close the door behind you."

There was no backlash. Mary nodded mutely and left the room. Neil's hands shook when he reached for his phone, wondering when he would start to feel real.

West Virginia, USA.

Riko was rambling. Kevin was sure he only talked because he liked his own voice considering he never had anything useful to say. There was a point in time where Riko had interests that weren't violent and fuelled by his superiority complex; when he would be competitive in more ways than Exy. Kevin wasn't proud of it, Riko had made sure to beat that out of him, but he *had* always been better at everything they did. Including maintaining their public image, it seemed.

"You should get into a scandal. A sex scandal. Those take time to die down."

Kevin caught Jean's eyes across the locker room. Their tired sighs weren't heard by anyone but them. Kevin usually had more self preservation skills than to face Riko head on but he was tired from practice and he barely heard himself when he told Riko to find something better to do.

The back of his head hit the lockers so hard his vision blacked out for a moment. Riko glowered up at him, short as he was and whispered brutally, "Be careful what you say to me, Kevin. I'm your fucking King. I'll always be better than you." Riko slapped him across the cheek before turning around and leaving. Jean was at his side in an instant.

He prodded at the back of Kevin's head and rubbed a soothing hand over his burning cheek. With obvious disgust, Jean mimicked Riko's words in a baby voice. "Spoilt piece of shit", Jean said, after a while. His hand was still on Kevin's face. Kevin laughed, softly. It was becoming more and more obvious to him that Jean was the only person he laughed around. A lot of things were becoming more and more clear about Jean, in his head. But he had learned the hard way how to ignore his thoughts. Jean smiled at him. Kevin tried to bury in his heart

the way that made him feel. He was sure he failed because Jean's smile widened and he looked away.

"Does your head hurt too much? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Can I?", Kevin whispered.

Jean stilled. The fact that they were alone crept up in his mind so easily even though in the Nest there was no need for privacy. But he never wanted anyone around, when it was Jean and him. If he could leave all this behind, to have only Jean by his side-

"Can you what?" Jean's voice was soft, as always, his head tilted to the side as if he was amused. Kevin cleared his throat. This was dangerous.

"Nothing. How's your leg? He checked you pretty bad out there."

Jean sighed, dropping his gaze. "I'll live", he said, as if he were ridiculously upset about his continued survival. Kevin lifted Jean's face with a nudge under his chin and raised his eyebrow. There was a minute of silent communication. Kevin's gaze read, *Don't say things like that*. And Jean...well, he rolled his eyes and shook his head. Kevin sighed.

Jean had become increasingly pessimistic in the past month or so. Most everything he did or said seemed to indicate that he doubted his continued survival in the Nest. He had confided in Kevin, begrudgingly, that he was sure Riko would kill him. Kevin couldn't describe the fear that had consumed him at the mere thought of Jean's death. He'd turned that terrified look on Jean but for all his talk of death, Jean didn't look or sound afraid. He said he was waiting patiently. That he couldn't wait to be rid of this torture. Kevin hadn't known what to say then and he didn't know what to say now. He'd only asked Jean not to have such fervent faith in his murder. He would do everything, *anything* to make sure Jean didn't die. Jean had smiled at him, then. It was a sad smile but a knowing one. As if he knew something Kevin didn't.

The gnawing feeling in his chest was there again. Kevin tried to ignore it but he couldn't think. If Jean gave up, he would have nothing left.

He thought about himself, as they headed out the locker room. At first he was thinking of his work on the Court but soon his thought drifted back to Jean. It was unconscious but as soon as he realized he couldn't stop. So much of his personality, his life, was dependent on Jean and he didn't know how to express it. He needed Jean, selfishly. He didn't care how much Riko hurt him, so long as he had Jean to care for him afterwards. He wasn't blind, though. He could see why Jean was so adamant on surrendering to a monster. Riko didn't hold back when it came to Jean. Kevin had tried to stop him a few times and often his anger would turn towards Kevin instead. Those were the good days. The times Kevin intervened and Riko noted his worry for Jean it became hell. All he could do was be there. He wanted desperately to leave this place, to take Jean with him somewhere he was safe and happy but such things felt like childish dreams. How was he to believe in dreams when Jean was praying for death?

His heart felt heavy with the grief of their lives.

Part One: May

Chapter Summary

angst.

Columbia, South Carolina, USA.

Somehow Andrew had gotten into Palmetto State University. He'd gotten a Sports Scholarship, the Coach was apparently impressed by his goalkeeping and Andrew didn't believe him for a second. That wasn't why Andrew signed. Coach Wymack was one of those people who Andrew felt an inherent distrust towards. However, he didn't pressurize Andrew, didn't waste his time and cut straight to the point. He wanted Andrew on the team only if Andrew was willing to consider it. Andrew considered it.

But. He had a deal with his brother he wasn't willing to compromise on. Aaron had gotten a merit scholarship easily at PSU. They had renewed their deal and for what it was worth Andrew wasn't willing to play without his brother on Court, anymore. And Nicky. Somehow it had become an unspoken rule that Nicky was under Andrew's protection as well. Looking at the sorry state of the PSU Foxes, Andrew was sure they would take just about anyone. Even Nicky, whose only experience with Exy was holding Aaron's racquet while he tied his shoes. Still, Coach Wymack had agreed to let the cousins play for his broken team.

Andrew would've been more suspicious if he wasn't so keen on getting drunk and forgetting he existed for a while. He knew it was dangerous to let his guard down this way when the bartender had been giving him the side eye since he got done washing dishes and moved up to the bar and Andrew needed to clear some things up. Firstly, the fact that he was underage and secondly, that he wouldn't always be. If the man didn't understand then Andrew wasn't past bashing his head in. Soon enough his eyes caught the bartender's and he motioned him to follow.

Roland was an understanding man, though not very interesting and he wasn't much older than Andrew. *Twenty-two*, he had said. They didn't do much more than talk. Roland smiled a lot and it grated at Andrew's nerves but at least he was tolerable to look at. Andrew knew he was fooling himself. The man was attractive. They were in the alley behind the kitchen and the bass of the song thumping from the speakers inside the club made the walls vibrate. Other than that, it was a quiet night, which was why it got their attention when they heard scuffles and a ridiculous stream of profanities. The sound of a body hitting the floor. There was a fight happening at the corner of the alley and Andrew was too tired to see what was happening so he decided to head back inside assuming it was another drunken brawl. Roland had already left but Andrew's gaze drifted to the fight again and he noticed a familiar face.

Then it was just him and the rage coursing through his veins. He didn't hesitate, didn't think twice. There was static in his ears and the choked sobs of his cousin on the cold concrete. There were four people, but Andrew was enough on his own. His head was bleeding from where he had been hit by a too sharp ring one of the assholes was wearing. Soon enough the men, who Andrew now realized were some stupid jocks from the football team of his highschool, were lying on the floor and Andrew was about to land yet another punch when someone grabbed his elbow.

"That's quite enough. If someone sees you, you'll be in trouble."

It wasn't a voice he recognized but it didn't sound afraid, even if it had just seen Andrew beat up four people. When he looked up the streetlight caught the frame of a boy who looked just about his age. He was short, taller than Andrew of course, because everyone seemed to be, and his hair was ridiculously red. For a moment he thought the devil was reprimanding him for doing his work.

Belatedly, he realized that none of the bouncers had shown up, they should have heard the sounds of fighting. He got up on shaky feet and stepped closer to the new arrival.

"Who the fuck are you?"

The idiot had the guts to laugh. "Trust me you don't want to know." There was a pause as Andrew tried to catch his breath. "There's a man crying on the floor. Do you know him?"

Andrew turned towards Nicky's cowering body and sighed. When he reached his cousin he crouched beside him and the redhead mirrored his position. Nicky was still crying.

"He needs-"

"The hospital, I assume. You have a car or do you need a lift?"

Andrew wasn't stupid enough to take a lift from a stranger no matter that he could take him in a fight a thousand times over. Besides, he had a car. The scars on the boy's face were startling clear suddenly, even in the dim streetlight. Andrew looked over his shoulder and found himself looking at a sleek, black car in front of which stood 3 men in suits. Guards. All of it screamed expensive. Andrew huffed out a breath. He didn't want to be involved with some meddlesome rich boy.

"Fuck yourself." Andrew's voice was rough and harsh. The boy laughed again. Andrew ignored him in favour of helping his mess of a cousin to his feet. He was walking away, slowed down by the weight of Nicky when one of the groaning men on the floor spoke.

"You're a dead man, Minyard."

Andrew didn't stop. He knew they had recognized him but he didn't care much for the consequences. If he could kill for his family, he was sure he could tolerate anything. There was the sound of a hit and another loud moan from one of the men. Andrew turned.

The boy's foot was pressed against the jock's face. Andrew's eyes narrowed.

"I can get rid of them for you." It was an empty voice and a practical sentence, an offer or a threat, he didn't know. He couldn't be bothered. He needed to get Nicky to the hospital. He was only glad Aaron had stayed home sick, though he doubted that was the real reason for his brother staying behind.

"Do it, then", he said, dismissively, turning back. He patted Nicky's pocket to check for the car keys and pulled them out. The boy didn't say anything else. When he looked over his shoulder, the boy was gone and he stilled for a moment, taking in his surroundings. The car was gone as well. His heart pounded in his chest and he blinked once. Twice. He would have thought it was a dream if it wasn't for Nicky's weight leaning on him. He didn't know what could be worse, though; if the boy had been real or if he had just been an honest hallucination of a tired mind.

West Virginia, USA.

Riko was choking Jean. Kevin didn't get there as fast as he should have. Jean held out a hand asking Kevin to stop where he was, even though his face was slowly turning red. He knew if Kevin touched Riko right now it would end badly for both of them. It burned that Jean's caution was his protection and he was useless to help. Riko spat some nonsense about *property* and making Jean pay and other disappointing crap. Kevin had never wanted to punch someone more and maybe it would be worth the bullshit he would be put through later but he knew he wouldn't suffer alone. Jean's life was expendable for the Moriyama's. As big of an asset as he could be in the future, they didn't seem willing to stop Riko from doing whatever he wanted. Still, he couldn't just watch. In a moment of rare bravado, he said, "The Master is calling you, Riko." It wasn't a lie.

Riko let go of Jean who fell to the floor, coughing and gasping. Kevin slid to the floor next to him, as soon as Riko was gone, the floor of the locker room cold against his knees. Jean was rubbing his throat in soothing gestures and Kevin ached inside quietly as Jean failed to conceal his pain. As soon as Jean's breathing was calm enough, he slumped against Kevin. There were other people in the locker room, players changing out and minding their own business. No one had looked Jean's way when Riko had started to strangle him and no one looked their way now. Kevin wrapped an arm around Jean's shoulder, his chin on Jean's head where it was resting against his chest. Jean was curling in on himself and Kevin belatedly realized he didn't know if there were other injuries.

"Did he do something else?"

Jean shook his head, breathing heavily. He let out a humourless laugh as he sat up, head pressed against the lockers now. "He's going to kill me one day, Kevin."

Kevin swallowed bile. "I won't let that happen. I-"

Jean's face was expressionless. His eyes gave the impression that he was already dead, so empty, as if they were looking *through* Kevin. He wanted to shake Jean, remind him that he still had something to live for even if it was just Exy. To tell him he was here, he would always be here that they were together in this. It was getting difficult to believe that for himself, but he had to try, for both their sakes.

"I will talk to him", Kevin said, definitively. Jean looked at him, drowsily. He frowned at Kevin in disapproval as if to remind him that talking never worked with Riko. Kevin didn't know what to do, anymore. Every day, Riko's violent fits got worse and worse, the more his family ignored him the more wretched he became. Jean had managed to keep Riko from scoring the entire time during practice and clearly, it had gone to his head. Riko had made blunders, stupid mistakes he would have hurt anyone else for making. His incompetence wasn't Jean's fault but Jean was a defenseless target and Riko was a terrible person. Jean's eyes filled with unshed tears as he stood up.

"Don't. He will only hurt you. You're powerless against him, we all are." Jean's voice, barely above a whisper sent a horrific chill down Kevin's spine. Jean had truly given up. Kevin stood as well, grabbing Jean's arm to stop him from walking away.

"I'm sorry, Jean. It breaks me, too, you know. I hate to see you this way."

Jean looked at him, then, with familiar pain in his eyes. A look marked through history as longing. Jean licked his chapped lips and sighed. Kevin felt Jean's arm slip away from his fingers as Jean turned away. Kevin wanted to scream loud enough to raise the dead. He couldn't lose Jean. The more distant Jean was from him, the more he realized that Jean was the only one he wanted closer. *Why do you feel so far away? He wanted to say. Don't give up, please. For me.*

"If you hate to see it then don't look."

That was all Jean said before walking away, leaving Kevin a helpless mess.

Part One: June

Chapter Summary

not angst.

West Virginia, USA.

"The entire concept of monarchies throughout history though, it's- why are you looking at me like that?"

Jean was smiling fondly. He couldn't see the expression on his own face but he knew it wasn't short of besotted. Of course, Kevin was too thick to understand the meaning behind his gaze. They were sitting cross legged, side by side on Kevin's bed. Riko was out there somewhere being brutally demeaned by his uncle for his poor performance and for the moment Jean could breathe. It would be so easy to ignore the reality of his existence. To give in to the urge to escape. Looking at Kevin, he knew it was impossible. He shook his head.

"It's nothing. Keep going. What were you saying about monarchies?"

"Did you ever learn about French history?"

Jean couldn't remember. He was so young when he came to America, France was barely a speck on the horizon of his memory. He shook his head once more. "If I did, I don't remember it."

Kevin nodded, humming. Sighing, he shifted his position and kept his head on Jean's knee. Thinking it would be uncomfortable, Jean straightened his legs and let Kevin rest his head on his thighs. Instinctively, his hand reached out to stroke Kevin's hair but he stopped himself just short of contact. Kevin's eyes were closed. Jean let himself look as he had been all these years. The only light in the room was from the lamp on Kevin's side table, dim and cosy. Kevin's face illuminated in such soft light seemed ever so fragile- Jean's fingers skimmed above the tattoo on Kevin's cheekbone, too afraid to reach out.

He wasn't going to stay.

The day they had found that letter from Kevin's mother, Jean had seen a hope once again reignited in Kevin's eyes that they had both given up on. Kevin wouldn't stay because he had somewhere to go to. Family. A home. Foreign words and concepts to Jean. The only comfort he had in this sinister place was the peacefulness of Kevin's presence when Riko wasn't around. This *was* his family. Kevin. And he was going to leave.

Jean wanted so desperately for him to stay. He'd thought and overthought of the moment it would happen- that he would beg Kevin not to leave him here and Kevin would stay *for him* ; that he was going to die inevitably but he didn't want to be alone. The mind was a complicated thing, wasn't it? Breaks so easily. Always confused. Always so ...scared. He wanted to believe he could become something in the future if only for the limitless amount of hours he had invested in playing Exy, but he didn't think he would live that long. Without Kevin, the future meant loss. Jean swallowed around the lump in his throat, missing Kevin's voice even though he had only been quiet for a few minutes. He was here now. Jean gave in.

Softly touching the edges of Kevin's hair, Jean rested his head back against the wall and asked, "You were telling me about monarchies."

Kevin hummed, relaxing more as Jean slipped his fingers through his hair. "Why don't you tell me something?"

Jean let out a breathy laugh. "Me? What do you want me to say?"

Kevin opened his eyes, meeting Jean's. He felt *seen*. It was terrifying - left him breathless. Or maybe it was just Kevin's eyes. Kevin sleepily blinked his eyes. He shifted his head to look at Jean directly but the movement caused Jean to wince. The fading bruise on his thigh throbbed with the echo of pain and Jean tried to school his features before Kevin would notice, but it was too late. Kevin was already sitting up. Jean shifted sideways, to put space between them, as Kevin returned to his former position. After a moment's silence, Kevin spoke into the space between them.

"Are you scared of me as well?"

Only of you leaving.

"You? Why would I be scared of you? All you do is whine about history or Exy."

Kevin smiled, softly. "I won't if it bothers you."

Jean stared back, stonily, feigning indifference. Kevin knew it didn't bother him. The truth was he could listen to Kevin drone on about anything for hours on end. Nothing calmed him down more than Kevin's voice, excited or determined, descriptive or wondering. He counted it off in his head as another thing he would miss about Kevin; his ceaseless rambling. Jean hoped somewhere in his heart that Kevin found someone in the future who liked listening to him as much as he did. "It doesn't bother me."

Kevin smiled at him again, rare and soft. "Good. Because I have *a lot* to say about monarchies."

Jean let out a breathless laugh and shook his head. "Go on, then."

Kevin began to talk slowly, easing back into his obsessive state of mind and when he took Jean's hand in his own, Jean's heart skipped a beat but he said nothing of it. He would miss this gentle touch.

Columbia, South Carolina, USA.

Neil tapped his fingers against the cold surface of the bar counter. He was trying hard not to shift his gaze around the room every few seconds as an instinctive reaction to expected danger. His mother was discussing 'something important' with 'someone important' in one of the private rooms out back. He couldn't be sure but it was likely they were talking about *how* exactly Mary was able to afford the ridiculously luxurious lifestyle Neil was slowly getting used to. It was so easy to let money get to your head. They'd been coming here for the past two months, an unsuspecting place called Eden's where anyone could be anyone. Neil had always been no one.

The problem, he had realized, after leading a life on the run for so long (ignoring the skittish looks and constant paranoia) was the boredom. He had things he should be worried about, like the FBI and his mother's contacts and what it meant for them to consistently be in contact with the Hatfords. He didn't know a lot of things but he was sure he didn't want to be associated with criminals for the rest of his life. Still, the false sense of security made forgetting his problems easier.

Neil wasn't drinking. It was there in his mind that he was here because of his mother and not to have *a fun time*, as if he knew what that was. Drunk shenanigans and reckless decisions weren't his thing, no matter how much he wished to let loose. It was also there in his mind that his mother's icy glare wasn't following him everywhere. He wasn't running. His leg bounced where he sat, a mixture of anxiety and relief settled deep in his chest. He decided to wander, release his restlessness.

He knew how to go unnoticed from years of experience and was taking account of all the exits in the narrow hallway beside the bar when he saw a door labelled **Kitchen**. He stared at the sign for a moment, until the door jostled as someone walked in hurriedly. Through the small opening Neil managed to catch a familiar flash of blond hair. His memory wasn't perfect but that wasn't a face he was willing to forget.

Last month when they had been here, Neil had ventured outside in an attempt to take in his surroundings, as he always did. Quiet, quiet, all the time, with no one to speak to, the silence weighed in on him that night. The scene he had run into was something he wouldn't normally have intruded upon, but his mother wasn't there. He wanted *something* to happen, at least. He had only just been walking away when he'd seen a very sudden attack and next thing he knew the people cursing were groaning on the floor. He wasn't concerned- he didn't know those people but for some reason he had felt the need to intervene or rather *interfere*. So he had.

That same nagging feeling made him push open the door to the kitchen. Everyone inside was busy and no one really expected anyone to enter the kitchen, what with the 'Staff Only' sign outside but here was Neil. Interfering. The lights weren't too bright and he couldn't help but notice the badly painted walls. He focused his attention towards why he was here and walked

towards the boy washing dishes. The boy in question looked up only when he heard footsteps approaching. Neil stared. The blond man paused for a moment, taking in Neil's appearance then promptly ignored him and went back to his job. Neil frowned. Another person who looked very similar to the man in front of Neil, handed the boy more drinking glasses and a few moments later a thin wad of cash which the boy promptly pocketed. Neil observed in silence as the man continued to ignore him. After a few minutes of staring, Neil looked around and noticed an exit on the side of the kitchen. He gave up on making friends with the short, and as memory served, rather violent man and walked out.

The cold air hit his face like startling reality. He yawned, walking the length of the alley where he'd witnessed the fight.

"What are you doing here?"

Neil stopped. Before turning around, he smiled to himself. He wouldn't have been able to live with the curiosity of his presence either. He turned.

"Am I not allowed to be here?"

The boy's eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

I don't know.

The question stirred in his gut, making him nauseated. He pushed the depth of it aside and offered his name.

"Neil. Neil Josten."

"You're not from here." The boy pulled out a packet of cigarettes, leaning on the wall next to the kitchen door, looking up as if he was avoiding looking at Neil for too long. Neil felt the ever present urge to scratch the scars on his face. He walked back slowly and placed himself a safe distance from the boy.

"You know everyone from around here, then?" He asked, hesitantly. The boy didn't spare him a glance or a response. He muttered something Neil couldn't decipher, under his breath. Neil didn't know what to say next. He didn't know how to begin a conversation much less continue it. He pursed his lips and looked up as well, tapping his foot on the floor.

"Did you tell anyone about-"

"No", Neil said, quickly. He expected the boy would be worried but once the guards had seen the others on the floor, last month, Neil barely had to utter a word before they handled the situation. The sudden convenience of his life was as astonishing as it was dizzying.

The boy's voice fell to a whisper. "Okay." Then, there was nothing more to say. They did not know each other and from the looks of it the blond boy didn't seem very social, even if he claimed to know people. Neil guessed working at a lowkey bar had its perks, though they were probably few. He was just relieved to have talked to someone that wasn't his mother,

the gardener or the cook. The boy threw his burnt out cigarette on the floor and stomped on it before turning to leave. Neil tried to find his voice.

“Your name?” The boy looked at him with blank eyes and an empty expression Neil was all too familiar with. Shrugging to himself, the boy spoke, “Andrew.” Neil stood silently as the boy left.

Andrew.

Neil smiled, but he didn’t really know why.

Hallucinations probably didn’t behave this way, right? He couldn’t be sure. Yet, Andrew wasn’t convinced Neil was real.

Maybe he was scared because he was curious. Maybe he was scared because he wanted Neil to be real.

Part One: July

Chapter Notes

aaaaa thank you everyone who reads and leaves kudos and comments!! i really appreciate it!! new intro in this one!

Palmetto State University.

Andrew shut his locker in the practice room and sighed. It was taking all his patience not to punch something. *Damn this stupid sport.*

Early practice started for the team he was now supposed to be a part of. The Foxes. It was ridiculous. They were all hopeless and he held no respect for anyone he had seen or met. Coach Wymack clearly didn't know how to handle them, the seniors didn't listen to Danielle Wilds(the captain) and Andrew couldn't be bothered to care about playing when the fights on Court were so much more amusing. Aaron looked just as tired as he felt and Nicky was constantly trying to sweet talk the others. He couldn't be bothered to tell the man he was embarrassing himself.

Just as Andrew had turned he noticed the commotion outside and leaned back his head to get a better view. There were three people, in similar black attire, but only one of them was speaking to Coach. He had a wild smirk on his face and his face dripped with condescension Andrew recognized from experience. Of the other two, the one with a 'two' on his face stepped forward to speak and the third simply stood quietly. Threatening? No. *Afraid.* Andrew understood slowly the dynamics, as 'one' tried to take over the conversation, with a bruising grip on 'two's' arm.

In truth, Andrew had recognized them, he simply did not want to acknowledge their existence. It wasn't up to him, it seemed, as Kevin Day noticed him. Andrew didn't look away.

Kevin stepped out of Riko's reach, startling the man for a moment, before he noticed Andrew as well. He smiled ferociously and Andrew paid him no attention, not even to see his grin falter into one of malevolence. They walked towards him. Day began to speak but was interrupted by Riko. It seemed like a habit.

"Andrew Minyard. Your Highschool Coach sent us your Exy statistics. *I'm* very impressed by them and-"

Andrew turned towards Nicky, who was staring at the men in shock. “Do you hear something?”

He saw Aaron shake his head and he thought Jean Moreau did as well, standing a safe distance behind Riko. Nicky spluttered. Kevin kept his composure and stepped ahead of a faltering Riko. Easily bruised ego. Arrogance. No consciousness. *Why is Riko Moriyama here?* Of course, his thoughts shifted to Kevin Day as soon as he began to speak.

“We’re here to talk to you about recruitment to the Ravens.”

Andrew stared expressionlessly for a moment. “I won’t talk with him here”, he said, nodding towards Riko, who looked ready to murder. Jean sighed quietly behind them. Kevin turned to Riko, asking him hesitantly to leave the room and was greeted with a glare. Still, he powered on and Andrew watched as Riko grabbed Jean’s arm before dragging him out of the practice room as well. Kevin sighed, looking a bit distraught watching them leave. Andrew observed.

“There’s nothing much to talk about”, Kevin said, turning towards him. “Will you consider it?”

“No”, Andrew deadpanned.

Kevin’s eyes narrowed. “Why did you send Riko out of the room then?”

“Don’t like him.”

Kevin shook his head. “You’d do well for our team. I’ve seen the way you play, I know talent.”

“Good for you.”

“It would be worth it. If you were to play for us.”

Andrew stilled at the implication. He *wasn’t* worth shit. Kevin Day was in over his head. “I said no. I won’t say it again. Leave before this gets violent.”

“Last time. Will you play for me?”

Andrew sighed, looking Kevin in the eyes, “For Riko. Are you sure *you’re* playing for yourself?”

Kevin’s eyes widened. Andrew continued. “Maybe you should leave.” He knew Kevin understood the meaning behind his words. Not leave the room, leave the Ravens. Kevin looked away before nodding. He left the room in a hurry. Andrew stared at his back, watching him leave.

He ignored the unhelpful voice in his head, telling him Kevin had heeded his denial.

New York, USA.

"I think we should get the canned peaches."

"You *do* really like canned peaches."

"It's your fault", Neil said, grabbing some canned peaches off the aisle and dropping them unceremoniously into the shopping cart. Mary rolled her eyes.

Neil's mother wanted to *bond*. Like they hadn't spent their entire lives together, running away in fear. She had decided over the past few months that they should spend *more* time together and it was unnerving if not a test for his faith in her abilities to keep her temper in check. So far, she'd been doing great(if expressions didn't count). She hadn't raised a hand on him in months, she'd barely even raised her voice. It was ridiculous, surprising and not unwelcome. It made him hate her a little less than he did before.

"So", she said, leaning on the trolley as they strolled down the aisle, Neil stopping every few minutes to pick out some form of canned fruit or beans. His mother interrupted her own thought process by making a disgruntled noise. "C'mon, Neil, pick out some junk, what is all this canned nonsense?"

Neil was startled for a moment at his mother's disapproval. The urge to turn towards the junk food aisle was so strong, he couldn't control himself, so he kept back whatever he was holding and started to guide the trolley towards the colourful arrangement of chips, almost on instinct. His mother looked at his pensive expression and the chips, then picked a handful out for herself.

"You don't have to. You never really liked junk food. My fault, remember?"

She smiled at him, apologetically. He didn't know what to do. It was another thing that had become common between them. The well worn smile of apology. He didn't know what forgiveness meant; didn't realize he would ever be put in a situation where he'd have the choice not to forgive. He was used to cruelty not comfort. Nodding at his mother, he dragged the trolley along and they finished the rest of the trip in relative silence. When they got back home, the cook was glad to see they'd brought back everything in appropriate amounts for the *party*.

A *party*. Neil was going to have to attend a *party*. A room full of rich, 'influential' people who kept up appearances for cameras and were involved in dishonest schemes behind them. He was nauseated with worry. He hadn't been in a room full of people where he had to *exist* since he was eight years old. His presence was supposed to mean nothing, he was supposed to be hidden. He wanted to believe he'd gotten better at talking but it was a lie. He would never be comfortable enough.

It was a formal gathering.

"Why did you think this was a good idea?" he asked his mother while filling a glass of water.

"I used to be much more social when I was younger. I'm just trying to revive that spark, you know?"

She wouldn't look him in the eyes. Never did when he asked serious questions. He was quite tired of it. He slammed the empty glass on the counter, hard enough to startle his mother, who had been engrossed in her phone. Neil sighed and asked in a low voice.

"What are you not telling me?"

Mary's eyes widened. He had never been this forward before but it had to have been expected. She was always up to something, even when they were on the run. Now with all the trips to Columbia and ridiculous parties, was he supposed to believe someone as paranoid as his mother was a fucking social butterfly? There had to be more at play. Despite his minute display of aggression, he didn't think he looked angry enough to warrant the shuttered expression on his mother's face. After a few moments of silence she gestured at him to follow her out of the kitchen.

It was evening, the sky turning its shades and fading to black. The remnants of its glow cast oily shadows, as Neil fell into step beside his mother in the garden. The lights outside were off but he preferred this; didn't want the peace to be disturbed. But it had to be.

"I need them on my side", she began.

He didn't look at her as they walked slowly; Mary fidgeting, Neil curious. After a while, she continued.

"I've been meeting with people who work for our family back in Britain-"

" *Your* family", Neil felt the need to interrupt, surprisingly.

She sighed. "Yes. My family. Stuart has always been more helpful than the rest, but they don't like me very much."

"Because you married-"

"Yes."

"That's a *very* valid reason to not like you."

Mary huffed out a laugh. "I know. I don't like myself very much either."

"So, why did you do it?"

"I mean I had the money I took from your father, couldn't exactly hand it over to the FBI, could I? But it wasn't a safe enough back up, I need support and I need to be seen. I need people. So, I've gathered up old contacts I trust and new ones that are suspicious but necessary. Doesn't exactly make me powerful, but I know how to disappear and I know equally well how to make sure people remember me."

Neil hummed, nodding at her explanation for sudden societal involvement. "Okay but that's not what I meant. Why did you marry him?"

Mary took a deep breath. There were too many emotions on her face, difficult to read in the low light of the sky but Neil recognized some; guilt and misery. Regret. He didn't expect an answer and he didn't get one.

"I'll tell you. One day."

Neil could work with that. Ever since she had convinced him of their relative safety, ever since he had seen his father die, he'd begrudgingly accepted that Nathan Wesninski wasn't the only parent he had grievances with. As good as Mary was trying to be as a person, she had never been a good mother. But he didn't know what family meant. Had he ever been a good son?

"It's so weird. Knowing he's six feet under." She sounded amazed.

He understood that feeling. It was too good to be true. They hadn't escaped without scars but they were away now. Resuming their walk in the large garden, he asked, "Is he?"

"Is he, what?"

"Six feet under?"

Mary hummed in thought. " *Someone* must have buried him."

"Uncle Stuart killed most of the people who liked him."

"Not the Moriyamas'. You can't kill the Moriyamas'"

Silence.

"I remember Riko. From before we ran away", Neil said.

"Yeah? Isn't he famous for that sport you really like?"

"Exy", he sighed. "Yeah, he is. An asshole, I bet."

"He did seem like a very petty child."

Silence.

Neil's thoughts rushed into Exy, as if a dam had been opened in his mind. He'd been watching games everyday for the past few months, taking note of different plays, checks, updating himself on the lives of the players. It occupied his time. It *interested* him.

"I want to play", he whispered. Mary shook her head almost immediately. Before she could begin thinking of ways to shoot him down- valid reasons he would think and overthink himself- he interrupted her.

"I *know* the risks. I know the Moriyama's are thoroughly invested in this. But it's not like you're keeping a low radar. You told me the Hatfords gave them what they wanted in return for the Butcher's death. They shouldn't be able to hurt me."

"Doesn't mean they won't- Doesn't mean they can't hurt you." Her voice was only a bit distraught.

They had stopped walking again and the sky was fully black now.

"Then, I'm no more safer with you than I would be out there."

Mary's eyes widened. Neil sighed, giving up on the conversation. "We should head back inside." With that he left her standing still in the darkness.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd worn a suit. It fit him perfectly, would even make him look decent if it weren't for the terrifying scars on his face. He felt hollow. *Fake*. What was his reality, anyway? This night was going to be a disaster.

The garden was massive, decorated in an appealing way, though Neil couldn't understand exactly what the appeal was. He bit his lower lip in anxiety and stuck to the sides as people filtered in. He'd managed to stay lowkey for an hour, observing his mother interact with pretentious people and more pretentious people interact with each other. These people were hiding in a different way than he was used to. It was giving him a headache. When he decided he had had enough he looked over his shoulder and started walking towards the back entrance of the house. He had a feeling Mary wouldn't object to him ditching her party but he was careful not to be seen. Of course, since he was watching his back he didn't look in front of him and stumbled, bumping into someone.

He apologized, quickly, helping up the lady who'd tripped in her heels. She scoffed and shrugged off his hands, standing up and he stepped back at a respectful distance. He stood beside her, trying to gauge if she was hurt or not, although she shouldn't be, the fall wasn't that hard. She stood up dusting off her gold dress and fixing her hair. Like he would have been moulded to be, she looked the image of a rich heiress to a large empire. He lived in fear of that impression but he noticed it was a reality for many of the people close to his age at the party- none of whom he had interacted with before.

"Are you alright?", he asked, politely. He didn't really care, he wanted to go inside.

"What? You think I'd break falling down? I'm perfectly fine", she said. She was texting as she said it and Neil hummed in acknowledgement before walking past her. He pulled out the keys to the door, locked in case anyone decided to step inside; his mother hadn't escaped caution completely. He'd only just opened the door when he heard the girl from before call out to him.

"Hey! Wait. I'm coming with you."

He turned, shutting the door faster than should be possible. "I'm sorry, I, uh, can't let you do that."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why are you sneaking about? Are you breaking in?"

Neil's eyes widened. Leave it up to him to look as if he was breaking and entering his own house. "I live here", he said, hurriedly. She made a sound of disapproval.

"How would I know if you're lying or not? Besides, I don't care if you're breaking in. Just let me indoors, I can't stand the sight of the brats outside."

Neil's mind contorted into a million levels of worry. What if his mother saw?

"You know, I'll just pick the lock if you don't open the door with the key I *know* you have. Did you steal it from someone? Sneak." She talked a lot. Neil hadn't heard someone talk this much in under two minutes forever. There were a lot of things he hadn't done. "I won't do anything, I swear. I just really don't want to go back there. My ex is here. C'mon, she's going to kill me if she sees me, just let me in I'll sit in front of you and you can go about your-"

Neil sighed in exasperation, tired of keeping up with her thought process. If she was going to pick the lock then might as well, he thought. He just wouldn't let her out of his sight. Besides, he was starved of company. If she talked too much, he'd zone her out. "You can come inside. Just don't be too loud."

She grinned at him, ruffling his hair as she passed by him, through the open door. He rolled his eyes and followed her. The door led to the kitchen and she didn't bother turning on the lights before she propped herself on the counter holding her phone. Texting with one hand, she pulled out the pins from her hair, dropping them next to her, some falling to the floor. Neil sighed, again. He'll have to pick those up later. He sat down on the floor next to the fridge in front of her, with a water bottle in his hand, placing the cool plastic on his forehead. Loosening his tie, he opened the top button of his shirt and gulped down water like a man stranded in a desert. Having only attended one in his life that he would now remember, Neil decided he hated parties.

Still thinking of the people outside and how little he knew of them, Neil was startled when the girl spoke again. It almost gave him a heart attack, hearing an unfamiliar voice in his house.

"I'll have some." She was looking at him, hands still holding her phone. "Water", she said.

Neil nodded, opening the fridge behind him to grab a bottle, too tired to stand up. "Catch", he said, before throwing the bottle. He thought it would drop to the floor and he'd have to pass it again but she caught it with one hand, without looking away from her phone. "Thanks", she said, dismissively, as his brows furrowed. That wasn't just an impressive catch, it was practiced. She shouldn't have been able to catch that, especially with the only light in the kitchen coming from the garden outside. She looked towards him after a while, and noticing his confusion, let out a laugh.

"I play sports. In the habit of having things thrown at me too, I suppose."

Neil nodded. "What sport?"

"She kept her phone face down on the counter and ran her fingers through her blonde hair. "Used to play basketball when I was younger. Switched to Exy in high school. Now I play for the Foxes. At Palmetto State."

Neil's eyes lit up. *NCAA*? The Foxes were one of the hopeless teams in Exy and Neil hadn't bothered to look into them. He was sure he would have recognized her, though, if he had. "Are you any good?" he asked. She scoffed.

"Better than you, shortie."

Neil rolled his eyes. Of course she was, he hadn't played in years. Couldn't, now. "Do you play?" she asked.

"No", he whispered, shaking his head. He looked at a random spot on the floor, feeling himself zoning out of the conversation.

"You clearly want to. Why don't you play?"

He looked at her. Was he supposed to be honest, now? Was truth allowed? A deep seated feeling of loneliness grew in his chest when he realized he didn't know how to act in an open conversation. Didn't know how to make a friend because he'd always been a liar. "I don't want to."

She raised an eyebrow, her face garnering exaggerated disbelief. "I don't", he repeated, louder this time.

Folding her arms, she kicked off her heels and leaned back to fully seat herself on the counter. Looking down at him, she had a spark of mischief in her eyes. She could see through such a blatant lie. It was too obvious.

"Who are the reigning Exy champions of the NCAA?"

"Edgar Allen. The Ravens."

"What position do you think I play?"

He narrowed his eyes, observing quietly. "Defence", he said, after a moment.

"Who coaches my team?"

"David Wymack."

"Who's better? Kevin Day or Riko Moriyama?"

"Kevin", he replied, quickly.

"What position do you want to play in?"

"Any-" His eyes widened, inhaling deeply. She grinned, victoriously. He couldn't believe he had fallen for such an easy trap. Shaking his head, he looked away and it took him a moment to realize he was smiling.

They took to each other after that. She tried to pry out of him why he 'couldn't' play but he refused to answer. They talked about Exy and she talked about her team and how weird it was. They didn't realize how much time had passed them by when Neil heard the front door opening. The party must be over. His eyes turned to saucers, anticipating harsh words as he watched his mother walk into the kitchen.

"Who is this pretty lady?" Mary asked, instead.

Neil realized he hadn't even bothered to ask for her name. To be fair, she hadn't asked for his either.

"Allison Reynolds", the girl said, offering a manicured hand for his mother to shake. His mother smiled at Allison.

"A Reynolds. How lovely. I've known your mother long."

"I feel sorry for you", Allison laughed, and his mother joined along as if it was an inside joke they had after having met for only a minute. Neil felt awkward. He stood up, his legs cramped from being in the same position. Clearing his throat, his mother looked at him as Allison looked through her phone.

"Your parents left without you. Will you be staying the night?"

Mary didn't sound comfortable asking. It wasn't so easy to ingrain new people into their lives.

"No", Allison said, hopping down the counter. "I called an Uber. Didn't expect them to wait."

Mary nodded. "It was lovely meeting you."

"Likewise. You too, shortie", Allison ruffled his hair as she passed by, walking out the back door. It was quiet again, with just his mother and him and he realized belatedly that he preferred Allison's constant chatter to his own hefty thoughts.

"Made a new friend?" Mary asked, with a smile. Neil ignored her, walking towards his room wondering how he had survived alone so long running from his father with no clue how to live with himself.

Part One: August

Chapter Summary

enjoy :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Palmetto State University.

He wasn't in the Nest anymore.

His ears were ringing, still.

It was such a profuse sound, one that made the entire situation feel like an out of body experience. It felt like he was witnessing the event happen to him and in a way he was. Memory was a stupid thing, wasn't it? His life had fallen apart in front of his eyes. All that he had worked for-

He fell to his back and let it happen. He couldn't have fought back as Riko swore at him. Spitting curses onto the floor of the room and in the dim light of the bedside lamp, the red and black making him look like the devil incarnate. Maybe even worse.

He wanted this to be a nightmare. He screamed at him to stop when Riko grabbed his own racquet and charged towards him. He told him to stop, it didn't work. It never fucking worked.

So he took it.

He should have left here long ago.

Staring at the ceiling of the now empty room, racquet thrown to the side streaked with his blood. The floor was bloody too.

His hand.

Kevin inhaled, shakily. Didn't turn his head to look but it hurt so much eventually, he had to. There were tears falling freely down his chin, his clothes were soaked in sweat and blood, bruises forming on various parts of his body. He couldn't look away from his hand.

He wouldn't play again.

The only thing that meant something to him, taken away.

“Kevin.”

He knew that voice. He wasn't afraid of that voice. His breathing became shallow as he swallowed, turning to look. Jean was standing at the edge of the bed, eyes wide. Kevin's eyes met his, both teary and desperate and then Jean was next to him. Running his hand through Kevin's hair, cradling his face, apologizing for things that weren't his fault. Were out of his control. They were both crying when Jean pressed their foreheads together. Kevin couldn't take it. He couldn't take it anymore. He began to sob and Jean held him close and cried with him, sharing the grief of his end.

Jean kept saying his name over and over again trying to bring him back, waiting for him to say something but all Kevin could do was cry. It wasn't uncommon to spend his days crying with Jean after Riko hurt them but this was different. This was different because Riko had taken away from him the one thing Kevin had given away his life to. All for the sake of wounded pride.

He heard Jean take a shaky breath.

“Kevin. You can't stay here.”

Confused, Kevin looked at him through teary eyes. What?

Jean looked away, helping him sit up on the floor, careful of his hand. It stung when he moved his arm and he winced, leaning his weight on the bed behind him.

“Do you want me to call the nurse?”

Kevin looked at him with wide eyes. “This isn't some scratch or bruise, Jean, he can't fix this. It's-”

“Broken. Yes. I-I know.”

Jean looked torn, confused. Terrified.

“It should have been me.”

“No”, Kevin said, shaking his head.

“I'm sorry, Kevin. I-”

“This isn't your fault, Jean.”

Kevin had stopped crying for the moment. His hand was limp beside him, he leaned his head on Jean's shoulder, sitting on his right. “I'm just-”

But when he looked up at him, Jean was looking at him with tears in his eyes. He looked scared.

“You need to go”, Jean said, again. What did that even mean? Where would he go?

As if he had read his thoughts, Jean’s voice broke. “Get out of here. Go to your father. I’ll- I’ll help you leave, it’s-” He looked around in a frenzy, wiping away his tears, his eyes bouncing off every surface of the room as if they would give him an answer. Kevin grabbed hold of his face with his right hand. It hurt him more that he couldn’t put both of his hands on Jean’s face. For a minute he wanted to try but he couldn’t imagine the thought of his blood on Jean’s face. Besides, it was too painful. Jean looked down, trying to breathe.

“You need to leave, Kevin.”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

Jean shook his head. “I can’t. I didn’t think it would be this fast. I didn’t think he’d do it, Kevin.” Kevin’s heart stopped.

He pulled away. His face fell more.

“You knew he was going to-”

Jean put his face in his hands. Kevin put his hand on the bed behind him, trying to stand. Jean reached forward to help, Kevin pushed him away with little to no strength. It took one too many tries but he was on his feet.

Jean reached out, again. Kevin moved away.

“I-”, he said.

“Kevin. I’m sorry. I’m-”

Kevin shook his head. “You didn’t tell me.”

“You- No. Listen to me. No. Kevin-”

But Kevin was past listening to anyone. Jean was right. He needed to leave. He needed to find a way to leave.

Shaking all over, he limped out of the room. Jean didn’t follow him out, immediately. There was no one in the hallway and when he, rather miserably and with great difficulty, started looking for Riko, he couldn’t find him anywhere either. No confrontation. He probably thought Kevin had been defeated. But it wasn’t just Riko who had hurt Kevin today. This was truly his end.

A part of him kept screaming that this wasn’t Jean’s fault. That Jean was as powerless to Riko as Kevin was- had been.

He was going to leave.

Riko had made the gravest mistake to think he could put Kevin down. And past all of that anger was the heavy feeling of betrayal. Both by brother and someone he had considered his

closest friend. He would have done anything for Jean. He would have told Jean. Would have saved Jean.

It was as if thinking of him had conjured up his image. Jean looked miserable, his eyes bloodshot. "Kevin", he said, his voice scratchy.

Kevin looked away, rummaging through his drawer for keys to the car he had barely used before. They weren't there. He opened another drawer and then saw them dangling in front of his eyes. Jean held them up to him.

"Riko had them."

Kevin grabbed on to them and Jean used it as leverage to pull him forward.

"Listen to me, Kevin. Go to your father, tell him whatever you like but be careful. You-"

"You've lost the right to tell me what to do", Kevin spat.

How often had his face been this close to Jean's? Even in this moment, with this bitter truth between them he wanted to press their foreheads together. He snatched away the keys, turning around, ignoring Jean's crestfallen face. He deserves this, Kevin thought. But he didn't believe it himself. He wiped the tears from his chin with the back of his hands.

"Kevin", Jean whispered and it sounded like what it was. A plea, one he knew wouldn't work. Don't go, it meant.

Kevin looked back. It felt like something was choking him. He wanted to go forward to Jean. But this was the end of his world and Jean. Jean couldn't help. He needed to go.

And here he was. He'd driven to the hotel, where Wymack was staying at after attending the fall banquet at Evermore, with great difficulty but he was used to working around his injuries. He retold the story as best he could, skipping out on mentioning Jean. By the end of it, he was so drained he wasn't past begging for a bed to sleep in. Wymack, always sympathetic to a lost cause had taken him in, of course he had. Now, he was in Coach Wymack's house and Wymack- *my father* , he thought - was looking at him with sympathy. The nurse for the Foxes, Abby Winfield, sat in front of him, finishing up the bandage on his hand. He was so numb, he couldn't even recognize that the pain in his hand was a real thing. And there was a familiar face behind them both.

Andrew Minyard was staring at him with his usual, stoic expression. There was probably more to that face but Kevin wasn't in the mood for deciphering unreadable expressions. Jean's face flashed through his mind. He- He wouldn't be safe, Kevin realized, suddenly.

Once Riko found out Kevin was gone, he would turn towards Jean and-

And Kevin wouldn't be there to-

He stood up.

“I need to go back.”

Wymack sighed. Andrew blocked his path instinctively.

“You aren’t going anywhere, kid”, his father said.

“No- I need to go back. I shouldn’t have come here. I shouldn’t have told you. They’ll-”

They would kill him when they found out. Kevin couldn’t breathe.

All he could think of was Jean. Who was going to look after Jean? Thinking he would have saved Jean had been worthless. *He* was the one who left Jean to the hands of a monster. Guilt raged through him at the hypocrisy but his mind dulled.

Abby and Wymack were talking in hushed whispers. He could feel Andrew staring at him.

Jean.

Did he remember his number? He tried to recall any way to contact Jean. Any way to reach him that wouldn’t be seen by Riko. Why couldn’t he *remember* Jean’s number? His eyes were drifting shut from exhaustion.

Had he brought his phone along? He didn’t remember using it at the airport. The bruising on his hand had been spreading...was hidden in his pocket...he didn’t remember carrying a phone?

He fell asleep with his head on the table.

New York, USA.

“I’m not going to fit in. I don’t know how to go to school.”

“What do you mean you don’t know how to go to school. It’s just school. Go.”

Neil snorted, shaking his head. “I mean, I wouldn’t fit in. Not exactly.”

“Why do you want to? Everywhere’s full of weird as fuck people, to be honest, you won’t fit in anywhere”, Allison grinned.

All the lights were on in his room, for once. Allison was lounging on his bed, scrolling through her phone and still managing to hold a perfectly reasonable conversation with Neil. It was the weekend and Allison had taken time off practice to visit her ‘family’. It had been an obligation more than anything and she’d drove over to Neil’s as soon as she had gotten the chance. She’d visited more than once in the past few weeks and it was overwhelming and comforting at the same time.

For some reason, his mother didn't mind.

"That's very nice of you to say", he said and she laughed.

"No, I mean", she took a pause to text someone, "I *mean*, I know people like me in college but I don't exactly get along with them."

"Yeah, but. You're you." He traced patterns on his desk avoiding her gaze.

"Ugh", she said suddenly. He looked up, afraid to have offended her only to find her groaning at her phone.

"What happened?", he asked.

"He's becoming our assistant coach. That hardass. I don't want to listen to him."

"Who?" Neil asked, absentmindedly, spinning around in his chair.

"Kevin Day."

Neil stopped.

"Who?", he asked again.

"Kevin", she said, looking at him like he was dumb to ask. Maybe he was. "You know him. He's literally the most famous Exy player, Neil."

Neil rolled his eyes. "Yeah. I- I know that. He's there?"

Why would Kevin be at Palmetto? The Foxes were nothing, the Ravens *everything*. Kevin wouldn't- couldn't leave Riko's side. He had kept up to date with Kevin's whereabouts for most of his life, because when his mother had told him snippets of real deal with the Moriyama's he needed to keep an eye out for Riko and where there was Riko, there was Kevin. But. Apparently not. He needed to do more research but it felt pointless, considering he wasn't running anymore. It was hard not to know what was happening in the Exy world since he kept track of the Ravens, at least. He had heard nothing of this.

"Why is he coaching you?"

"Apparently he broke his hand in some skiing accident. He can't play."

Neil blanched. "What do you mean he can't play?" He sounded miserable, like maybe his own hand was broken. It didn't feel right for Kevin to be suffering the same fate as Neil, to not be able to play after all that he had achieved.

"Don't be so heartbroken. He's a terrible snob, not the least bit impressive."

Neil knew the first part was true but he couldn't help but disagree with the latter.

Kevin *was* the best player out there. Him not being able to play...it felt like some sort of curse.

“His hand will heal, I’m sure.” His mind was racing. He was going to have to look into this.

Allison’s snort caught his attention. “Not unless Andrew breaks it again.”

Andrew.

“Andrew?” he asked.

“Another teammate. I haven’t told you about him?” Allison asked, finally switching off her phone and keeping it aside.

“No? I know Renee, Seth, Dan and Matt. You mostly talk about them. There’s not a lot of information about the Foxes on the internet except nonsense. No offense but you guys suck.”

In the middle of the conversation, he was struck with how weird it was to be having this conversation in the first place. He had, he thought belatedly, made something of a friend.

“Short. Angry blond guy. He looks like he’s always about to murder someone.”

Neil smiled. Sounded a lot like someone else he had met.

“Oh and his twin brother, they’re both so quiet and broody. Their older cousin is the exact opposite-”

But Neil had stopped listening after *twin*.

How many Andrew’s were out there with short height, blond hair and twin brothers?

“Do you have a picture?” he asked, interrupting her.

She thought about it for a moment then nodded. Grabbed her phone. He moved from the spinning chair onto the bed so she could show him.

And there he was.

Andrew.

What a terrifying coincidence, he thought, nonchalantly handing her back the phone. She caught on to his expression and asked if he knew him.

Neil shook his head. It wouldn’t do well for Allison to know the circumstances of meeting Andrew. Or the frequency of it. His mother was involved in something even *he* wasn’t fully aware of and he didn’t want to drag Allison into it. Or explain why he was at a bar at night as a minor. *If* she questioned that.

“Just thought I’d heard of him before.”

“I’ve heard his Exy stats are fucking insane but that’s a load of bull. He can’t be bothered to play.”

Neil grinned. “I don’t think any of you can”, he said. Allison threw a pillow at him.

His grin didn’t falter but he was left wondering.

Kevin and Andrew.

On the same team?

It felt like a ridiculous combination of his past and his present but he couldn’t quite blame anyone for this.

Ridiculous things were a part of his life, more so after his father had been killed.

“You should join. Next year.”

He zoned back into Allison’s words. “What?”

“Join the Foxes, next year. I know you want to play and I mean, you’ve got time to convince your mother. *I could-*”

“No”, Neil shook his head. “She won’t agree, it’s too risky.”

“Risky?”

Shit. Misstep. Fix this, Neil.

“Yeah, she’s just. Very overprotective.” That was one way to put it.

“She lets me in here. Maybe she’ll trust me enough to look after you over there.” The thought of his mother trusting anyone was so far fetched, Neil began to laugh.

“If you convince her to let me go, I’ll go”, he said, finally. He didn’t have the strength or the guts to argue against Mary. His mother was a different kind of monster than his father, but a monster nonetheless.

“Deal”, Allison said. And then she launched into another story about her past or college or herself and Neil listened as attentively as possible, which wasn’t much because his mind kept clashing two names together.

Kevin and Andrew.

Did he really have a chance to be on the same team as them?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much everyone who left kudos and comments!! I really appreciate it and they are always welcome! I was hoping to update this earlier but Kevin's misery was kind of difficult to write, either way, I hope you enjoyed this!

edit: updated a few details of kevin's situation

Part One: September

Chapter Summary

Loneliness, I guess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

New York, USA.

Neil had no idea what he was doing.

See, when someone was on the run, they knew what to do and what not to do. For example, don't share information, lie like your life depends on it (because it does), don't interact with too many people, blend into the shadows yada, yada.

Neil was used to running away. He was *not* used to this.

Walking into school, his dark red hair on display and eyes bright blue looking the spitting image of his father, he felt like his forehead read ' *Butcher's son* '. Especially with the way these people were staring. He felt too old and too young at the same time. He had to remind himself he was seventeen. Neil Josten **not** Nathaniel Wesninski.

He had chosen a school close by, out of fear. Instinct told him that if he tried to spread his feet out too far he'd suffer the consequences. His mother's avoidance of him didn't mean she wouldn't snap the next time she saw him. And if not next time, then the next. Or after that. Or after that. It was a continuous cycle of paranoia and as stupid as it sounded, it kept him sane. He was used to looking over his shoulder and being careful. He didn't trust anyone, not even Allison.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled out. Only three contacts on there. His mother, Allison and a guard who wouldn't tell him his name. Neil had saved his name as ' *person* '.

The message was from Allison.

good luck shortie

He didn't bother with a response, shutting it off and keeping it in his pocket. Allison messaged him often and he rarely replied. Still, she insisted on visiting whenever she was in New York. There was an added reminder now, that Allison was in college with people Neil knew and Neil was *here*. In *school*. And he knew no one.

He supposed having Allison around had been an advantage in its own sense. The makeup stuck to his face kept him slightly sane. If people didn't notice the scars, they wouldn't question them. Neil wasn't expecting anyone to get in his business if he didn't get in theirs.

In the simplest of ways, Neil felt proud of himself. He had gone through the process of obtaining his schedule and locker info by himself. Talking to people in official authority was terrifying but he wasn't unused to it. It was the people his age that were like hounds to him, now. What if there was a presentation? There shouldn't be a presentation on the first day of school, right? There would probably be an introduction. He took a deep breath and headed to his class.

There was an empty seat at the back and Neil took it, walking slowly. Unsuspiciously. He had nothing to hide. He settled down and for a lack of anything better to do, replied to Allison's text.

this is terrible

She replied a minute later. *one more year then u can play exy with all the rest of us broken people*

Broken people. That's what the Foxes were. A broken mess. He'd been researching them like a starving dog looking for scraps. He hadn't found any pictures of Andrew or his brother yet, the picture Allison had shown him had been a zoomed version where he happened to be in the background.

And the news of Kevin leaving the Ravens had blown up a day or two after Allison had told him. It was shocking to have it confirmed. That he was truly leaving Riko for good.

The folder Neil had on him consisted of random news and updates about their lives. Nothing too obsessive in his opinion but it was the only thing that helped him keep track of Exy. And Kevin. He didn't understand why he wanted to keep track of Kevin - curiosity or fear - but he had. He attributed most actions to fear. He wondered if Kevin had heard of what happened to Nathan.

It had been thrown under the rug pretty quickly. The Moriyama's were involved in many businesses and they had used those platforms to distract the world from the death of Nathan Wesninski who was their known face of slaughter. A lot of media was under Moriyama influence so Neil wasn't surprised. As long as they left him alone.

Still, there were things he didn't know. Things he didn't get the time or courage to ask his mother.

After his mother had told him the reason why she had run was for him, to save him from his imminent death; when she told him the truth about the Moriyama's and made him face the harsh reality of his life when he was just a child, he had realized that some things were better of remaining unknown. Knowledge had its power indeed but he wasn't the one who had the reins. Knowledge kept him safe, kept him afraid and working but he hated everything he knew. He wished he had a boring life with stupid things happening to him, not dangerous things.

Maybe a life like the guy who was staring at him and whispering to his friends. There was a prominent scar on his cheek which had Neil's eyebrows furrowing. Maybe not like him. He looked a bit familiar. The way he was looking at Neil didn't sit well with-

Oh.

Only fair for his interference to come and bite him in the fucking ass.

He remembered a night only a few months ago when he had seen Andrew in trouble and offered his help. As if *Neil* was capable of helping anyone. All he'd done was provoked the nearest beat up boy on the ground and they had thrown a punch towards him. After that it was the guards and whatever they did. Neil hadn't even needed to raise a finger after Andrew had walked away.

And now, one of those boys sat near him in class. He must have transferred out. Moved cities or something. Coincidence?

It was ridiculous. Neil groaned and kept his head down.

If he went to his mother and told her he was switching schools she would sense a problem. He didn't want her to interfere with his life any more than she already did, so he decided to bear with it. The boy had learnt his lesson, hadn't he? He wouldn't hurt Neil. He couldn't even come close to hurting Neil. Could he?

Neil decided he didn't want to know.

Going back home was as much of a chore as going to school had been. He felt listless, still. Like his form had not completely fitted into his body. Like he was barely existing.

It had been *months* and he spent every single day wondering when this was going to end. Wondering when his mother would walk away from a *party* and barge into his room to tell him his father was still alive and ready to kill him.

That couldn't happen. He had seen Nathan die with his own two eyes.

And with the way his mother was engrossed in her image now, he wasn't sure she would take out the time to warn him. He wasn't the child she had sacrificed years on the run for. She was

his mother, the person he had, sadly, been closest to, despite all that she put him through. The rules, all of which he was allowed to what? Break, now? He couldn't do that. It was too far ingrained in him. He had stayed here for too long now and he thought, maybe, it was time for Neil Josten to come to an end.

It sent him into a frenzy, that he wasn't being chased anymore. One would think he would have been calmer but he knew better than to believe anyone and-

He couldn't stop thinking about the Foxes.

It hadn't occurred to him to check if his school had an Exy stadium. Some part of him thought that if he looked at it, his mother would know. And then the long awaited fight would begin. He didn't have the strength to fight when he didn't even have the strength to exist.

He felt so terrifyingly alone.

He couldn't find it in himself to be grateful for a life he barely felt. There was no one around him to confirm that he wasn't Nathaniel Wesninski. Only his mother, living proof that he was not who he seemed and neither was she.

There was a knock on his door. And then it opened without him answering.

"I was going to head out to Columbia this weekend."

It wasn't a question so Neil nodded. At first it *had* been a question. 'Do you want to come with me?' and the answer had been fearful agreement. It had stopped being a question but the confusing part was whether it was because she expected him to agree or if knew she couldn't leave him alone while she was far away. Neil thought about saying he didn't want to go for a second just to see her reaction. He was so tired.

She didn't ask about school and Neil didn't know whether it was a relief or not. She closed the door behind her. He lay back down and stared at the ceiling.

Silence.

He felt like it was eating him alive.

There was nothing. It was radio silence. He looked forward to the next time Allison would come around but he didn't even have the words to tell her so. He didn't have words left. He didn't have anyone to talk to, now that his mother kept her distance. He was getting used to it, the lack of violence in his life.

Sometimes he thought it *was* boring. And that *was* relieving. All he had ever wanted was a boring life. Not to run or hide. Just exist.

But the boredom left space in his mind and heart for thoughts and feelings and all the like he had never bothered to notice before because he was too busy trying to stay *alive* .

He needed to fill this space and he could think of only one thing he was interested in.

He watched Exy reruns for hours until his mother sent someone to fetch him. He was still curious what business she had in Columbia but she wouldn't mention and he wouldn't ask. Ignorance was bliss?

The club came into view and Neil was out of the car faster than his mother. The slip up cost him a confused look from his mother and he steeled his face against the spark of worry he felt. If she asked him about Andrew he didn't know how easily he would be able to lie. She would see right through him.

He slowed his step when they walked in, no one stopped them and she dropped him at the bar with a pointed look that read 'stay here.' Neil rolled his eyes as soon as she turned away, leaning his elbow on the counter. When she was safely out of sight he headed towards the kitchen. Someone walked out as soon as he was about to push the door open. He stepped back, caught.

"Can I help you?" the man asked. He was one of the bartenders Neil had seen around. Familiar but not acquainted.

"Um", Neil said. "Andrew", he said after a moment. They would know each other if they worked in the same place, right? The man narrowed his eyes.

"I didn't think Andrew would have friends." It was a pointed statement, targeting Andrew's unfriendly demeanor.

For some reason, Neil felt the need to defend Andrew even though they had only had maybe two conversations both of which had been vague and weird. They weren't friends. Not exactly.

"Um", Neil said again.

The man shook his head. "He doesn't work here anymore."

Neil's heart fell. "Oh."

"Don't look so heartbroken", the man laughed. "He comes around every other weekend with his family. You might still catch him."

Did Neil look heartbroken? He didn't know what heartbreak felt or looked like. He didn't *think* he was heartbroken. He was only weighing the pros and cons of the situation.

Pros were that he wouldn't have to be careful around his mother anymore about hiding something. He was saved from possibly revealing to someone what his past was even though he wasn't sure he could ever willingly share that information. How would that conversation even go? *My father was called the Butcher of Baltimore because he used to cut people up as a profession. His weapon of choice was a cleaver. My mother is also from a British crime*

*syndicate and we have direct contact and recognition with the Japanese mafia. Anyway, how fucked up is **your** family?* Neil sighed.

Cons were that he had lost someone to talk to outside of the three people he did sometimes talk to. He was getting jittery and restless in all this silence, trying to keep his mother's attention away from him while still trying to stay sane. The only comfort in his life was that his father was dead now. But with all the secrets his mother was keeping, he wasn't convinced he was entirely safe, yet.

He nodded to the man before walking back to the place where his mother had left him. He frowned at the crowd wondering, not for the first time, that Andrew and Kevin were with people Neil knew. He wondered, not for the first time, whether Kevin and Andrew got along on their new team.

Palmetto State University.

"I'll cut off all my fingers if you make me play with him again", Andrew told Wymack, monotonously. Kevin followed him into the office shaking his head.

"You aren't even making an effort!" Kevin whined and Andrew rolled his eyes. Wymack shook his head at the state of them and pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing.

"You two need to sort out your issues. I can't have you picking fights with Seth and Andrew both, Kevin."

"I don't pick fights with Seth. Seth picks fights with everyone", Kevin grumbled.

"*Some* times you pick fights with him", Wymack stated. "I've seen you, kid. You're not exactly the most well-behaved."

Kevin stood straighter at that and Andrew narrowed his eyes. It was obvious Kevin cared about what Wymack thought of him.

"Spill your bullshit to Betsy. Both of you. I'm not gonna sort through these issues, you're here to play."

Andrew crossed his arms and looked away from Kevin. If he was being honest, he didn't really want to. Kevin was nice to look at. He hated it. Andrew realized he was being observed when Wymack cleared his throat and asked, "What will it take for you to make an effort, Andrew?"

Kevin looked at him pointedly, triumphant. Andrew rolled his eyes. He could do well with making a deal with Wymack but he couldn't think of anything he wanted. The things he wanted weren't so easily acquired, mostly because they were immaterial. Peace of mind was decidedly not on the list of things Wymack was offering.

"I signed you because I know you're good. You can't keep that up if you refuse to block any shots."

Andrew looked at the desk in front of Wymack, cluttered with paperwork and coffee cups and wrappers. Cigarette packets. He thought of asking for it but then decided against it. He could get that on his own, didn't want to bargain with his habits.

So he kept silent.

"Oh, c'mon", Kevin started and Wymack shook his head, after a minute of silence.

It aggravated Andrew but he kept his mouth shut and expression neutral. Wymack told them to figure it out and went back to filling out some paperwork. Andrew took his cue and didn't get a chance to slam the door shut because Kevin followed him out. He hated being followed around but didn't want to give Kevin the satisfaction of having bothered him so he let the man be.

He headed to the locker room and grabbed his things then gestured to Nicky and Aaron that they were leaving. They'd become accustomed to understanding him without words. This was also bothersome. He hated being known.

Everything was bothering him these days.

He hadn't seen the red-haired boy 'Neil' he was convinced was a hallucination anywhere around here. Still couldn't get him out of his mind.

That and the constant headache he had made everything intolerable.

When they reached the tower, Andrew waited for his *family* then ignored them, heading straight to his bunk as soon as they reached their dorm. He wanted so desperately to fall asleep.

It wasn't so easy with people around.

He knew better than to trust the word *family*.

Aaron was quiet. Almost as quiet as himself, he realized. But their differences were apparent to anyone who had been in their general vicinity.

Aaron was well-behaved if only for the way he had been raised to follow his mother's orders. Andrew was indifferent to everyone and everything. The only time Andrew interfered with anything was if he felt like Aaron or Nicky were in danger. He knew the team saw him less of a goalkeeper and more of a bodyguard for his brother and cousin. He could see the frustration lining the Captain's face when she had to remind herself that *he* was the one with the sport's scholarship among the three.

Aside from that, Aaron hadn't tried to make friends with anyone anymore than Andrew had. Well-behaved or not, they were both reserved. And they had a deal.

Andrew didn't like the thought of having a brother.

He wanted his brain to be blank. To get one good night's sleep. Was that something anyone was willing to bargain for?

For their part, Nicky and Aaron didn't bother him. Nicky checked up on him after a few hours, asking if he wanted food. He got out of bed and headed outside. A half-hearted meal eaten in silence. His headache hadn't eased and he felt suffocated. He walked out the dorm, saw their neighbour and teammate Matt Boyd stumble into his own, wearing a rather heavy hoodie than the weather called for and bags under his eyes that Andrew remembered seeing on Aaron's face in the past. He knew Matt was struggling with his addiction and he looked back at the closed dorm room, wondering how easy it would be for Aaron to relapse. Decided he didn't want to find out. He would need to intervene.

He walked up to the roof, wrestled with the rusted lock in the dark and then stepped out to a welcome breeze. Breathing deeply, Andrew walked in comfortable silence, glad to be alone. He didn't look down the edge but looking at the wide sky above him and walking made him dizzy so he sat down a little distance from the edge. Dusted off his hands. Looked up at the sky again.

There were countable stars. He took another breath.

Thought for a second that Neil would appear if he kept sitting there in the quiet. Maybe someone else would come upstairs and annoy him. But from the way the door had been jammed there was a high chance no one ever came up here.

There was peace in the knowledge that for a moment, he was alone. He saw his car parked and after a few minutes of contemplation, decided to go for a drive.

Unthinkingly, he ended up at the Court.

Exy wasn't something he was actively interested in. He was good at it but he was good at most things he gave his focus to. A large part of it was his memory which he cursed on a daily basis. He didn't have keys so he wasn't expecting to go inside but he knew the code to the main gate.

The lights inside were on.

Curious, Andrew parked the car and headed inside.

The doors inside weren't locked. There was a gym bag in the corner but the locker room lights were off. He walked out to the boundary of the court and wasn't sure if he was surprised to see Kevin inside trying to hit lined up cones and failing miserably.

Wasn't his hand broken? How was he doing this?

Belatedly, Andrew realized Kevin was playing with his right hand. He watched in silence as Kevin managed to hit a cone. His back looked tense and when he turned his face was unhappy. His shirt soaked through with sweat, Kevin had probably been here for hours. Maybe he had never left.

It took only a moment before Kevin noticed him.

The open shock on his face made Andrew roll his eyes and walk over to the stands. He settled down and watched the court in silence. Saw Kevin pile up the cones and walk out. Head to the locker room. Andrew's mind was blissfully blank for the few minutes of silence he received. A blank mind was a blessing, truly. He hadn't appreciated it to its fullest, he thought, as Kevin settled down beside him, showered and changed.

Andrew tried not to look at him as his thoughts slowly returned.

"Why don't you play?" Kevin asked, quietly.

What amazed Andrew in that moment wasn't the question but the way it had been asked. Kevin's voice was soft. Tired. Conversational. Easy.

He had, liked everyone else, become of the opinion that Kevin Day never stopped being whiny and demanding. He thought how hypocritical that was, for a moment, to have perceived Kevin's negativity without having known him. He knew bad people when he saw them and Kevin wasn't one of them.

He remembered when Kevin had come to him in the locker room. The fear in his gaze when he'd seen Riko leave with Jean. That was more of what Kevin was. He was afraid.

Andrew couldn't say he didn't relate to the sentiment.

"It's boring", Andrew replied, deciding to indulge him.

Kevin nodded, slowly. "I don't think so", he said, after a moment.

Andrew rolled his eyes. Everyone knew Kevin was raised on Exy. Of course he wouldn't think so. He didn't say anything.

They were quiet again and Andrew found it wasn't uncomfortable, only anticipatory. He knew Kevin wanted to ask more questions.

"Why do you think it's boring?"

Andrew looked at him with dead eyes. "I think everything is boring."

"I've seen you play. I know you're lying."

Andrew didn't like being called a liar.

"How's Riko?" he said, knowing it would hit a nerve.

Kevin blanched. Andrew told himself he didn't care.

He expected Kevin to leave after that but. He supposed he should have understood from Kevin's display earlier that Kevin didn't give up easily.

"He's going to come after me", Kevin said, after a while. Andrew needed to buy cigarettes.

It didn't come as a shock to him that he recognized the abuse Kevin had faced the moment he had seen him. It was nothing, only years of experience. He only had guesses of Riko's torture at the Nest and had been there to hear the story of Kevin's broken hand at Wymack's place.

"What did he do?" Andrew asked. He didn't know why he asked. Maybe he just needed to *know*.

Kevin was quiet for a long time after that. Andrew wouldn't be dismayed if he didn't receive a response. He realized he was still staring at Kevin's profile and wrenched his gaze away.

"Everything wrong. He isn't even that good at Exy."

Andrew found it in himself to want to laugh at the statement. He didn't. But he wanted to.

"You told me to leave", Kevin continued. "That day when I came here."

"I did because you should."

"I have", Kevin insisted.

"No", Andrew said. "You haven't."

Kevin grew silent again. Then:

"It's easier said than done."

"I know."

Andrew knew how difficult it was to leave.

"What do you need?"

Andrew raised an eyebrow in question.

"To play. Like Coach said. What do you want in return for making an effort?"

Andrew wasn't fond of making deals. But give and take was the only thing he believed in. He didn't believe people did things out of care for someone. They did something because they wanted something. Ignoring that fact of life would be idiotic and he made sure to base his life off of it. At least that what he told himself. If he would have protected his brother despite their deal and done anything for Nicky without one, well. That was for him to know.

"What can you possibly give me, Kevin Day?" Andrew asked, sparing him a tired glance.

"What do you want, Andrew Minyard?" Conversational. Easy. Tired. Soft.

What do you want, Andrew Minyard?

It was simple enough to say it.

"Nothing."

“Liar.”

Andrew glared at Kevin and Kevin smiled at the reaction he got. In provocation he'd given himself away, but he hadn't expected Kevin Day to be one to understand.

“You want *something* . If you really don't then I'll *find* you something.”

“I don't want anything. I never will”, Andrew repeated, but didn't stand up to leave. For some reason, he didn't hate this conversation. Perhaps because it was honest. Interesting.

“If I find you something to build your life around, will you play?”

Andrew contemplated. What could possibly change in a few years that would make Andrew *want*? Andrew knew himself. He knew he wanted more than he let on but his wants were not needs. He would never care enough about anything or anyone to want them.

In his head, the deal was impossible. It was a tether. Andrew could play forever if this went on. But wouldn't it be interesting to try and see Kevin Day keep his end of the deal; search for things that Andrew would be interested in? Andrew huffed, almost a humorless laugh.

“Deal”, he said, feigning boredom.

Kevin smiled like he had accomplished something. Andrew looked at him for a minute, it was difficult *not* to look at Kevin, then said:

“What have you got to live for?”

That was when the silence took a turn. Andrew sensed it like an oncoming wave. Saw Kevin's expression become distant and lost.

Memory. Kevin looked like he wasn't here anymore. Andrew's eyes narrowed. He had assumed that the reply would be Exy. He hadn't expected this. He snapped his fingers in front of Kevin's face, who blinked rapidly, taking a breath.

“I-”, he began, but didn't continue.

It settled down, the quiet, but Andrew knew Kevin was still lost in thoughts. He let his mind wander as well. After a while he began to think again of the redhead in his imagination. Maybe he *should* go and spill to the team's psychiatrist that he was seeing things. It was an interesting notion that rooted itself in the back of his head. Shrugging off the image of Neil's face, he stood up.

“You coming?” he asked Kevin.

If they'd made a deal then he could stick around, Andrew thought.

They drove back in silence.

Chapter End Notes

I can not thank you all enough for the support, I swear. I just really, really hope you enjoyed this and keep enjoying it. Thank you for reading, kudos and comments are ALWAYS appreciated. On that note if anyone wants to reach me outside of here my tumblr is [kevindavidday](https://www.tumblr.com/kevindavidday).

Part One: October

Chapter Notes

Lies, Andrew thought. No goddamn way to escape them.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

New York.

The worst thing about being left alone in a massive house was the restlessness that came with it. Eventually, Neil couldn't sit still for longer than one Exy game. There was only so much you could do when you were alone and paranoid.

He paced the entire house like a ghost and the only reason he didn't go out for a run was because he knew the guards would follow him. He wanted to leave this house, there was something remarkably uncomfortable about its pristine cleanliness and bland perfection. It looked empty despite the insane amount of things his mother had used to decorate it. The layout was *barely* anything like their house in Baltimore had been, but that was the last place he remembered staying at for as long as this. He counted in his head almost everyday how long it had been since he came here. More than half a year he had spent in this house and there was nothing about it that felt like home, only a haunting, aching sense of something *wrong*.

Neil knew to trust his instinct but it was a daily discomfort to remind himself that he was safe, whatever that meant. He didn't feel it.

The floor was cold under his feet but he didn't bother to put on shoes. They would make noise and he didn't want to alert his mother, even though he was sure she wasn't in the house at all. Something had changed. He knew something had been changing with his mother for a while now but his vague observance was magnified by the people around him. The gardener, though he rarely spoke to her, was grim-faced. The look was as unsuited to her as this house was to Neil. The cook was too quiet. Neil knew the humming that had flowed from the kitchen the first few months was a sign of ease. It had been mildly comforting to know that there were people in the house who were going about their day like nothing was wrong, even though he could never convince himself it was true.

Maybe he had been right.

He walked aimlessly, weaving through the corridors. He knew this house was fucking massive but it unnerved him more and more and he never got acquainted with it. Belatedly, he thought how much easier it would be to have Allison beside him. Or Andrew. He felt too

alone. When he reached the hallway lined with doors on either side, he almost gave up. This was the part he liked least.

There had been a hallway a lot like this in their old house. When he came across it the first time, Neil had turned around and left. It felt like if he opened one of these doors he'd find his father's face, alive and well, staring back at him. So, he'd never tried. He should've turned away this time as well but he was bored and curious and afraid enough to want to know what his mother was hiding now. He wanted to know why and what had changed and he knew she would answer no questions. Besides, he was too scared of her to try and ask.

He tugged open the first door. It was empty, completely. He shut it.

The second was empty as well.

His stomach plummeted at the pattern. He remembered this from the Baltimore house.

Was that part of the house his mother's design?

There were four doors and three of them were empty. The last one was locked but he knew well enough how to open a lock. He squinted at it, wondering whether he should give up or not. He was feeling rather meddlesome.

He rushed as quietly as he could to his room and rummaged in the dresser drawer for the lockpicks he had always had. He couldn't find them anywhere in the room. It was a possibility his mother had taken them away and the idea that she had been inside his room after all made him want to break down that door. He saw Allison's hairpins on his desk, didn't let himself think, only grabbed them and rushed back out as fast as he had gotten there. He slowed down in front of the door, then crouched.

Fiddling with the pins in his hand, he stopped breathing, trying to make as little sound as possible. The lock clicked open. He blinked.

Stuffing the pins in his pocket he grabbed the doorknob. Giving one last look down the hallway to make sure no one was there, he tugged open the fourth door.

The only light in the room was through the curtains on the window. Large bags sat in square shapes, looking daunting and reaching his mid waist. Neil had a faint idea what was inside them. He bit his lip and reached for the nearest one, the sound of the zip opening was like a chainsaws echo.

It was money.

The whole room was filled with money. Neil closed the bag and stepped back.

This wasn't stolen and this wasn't Hatford money. Neil knew because he'd seen the transfers his uncle did, they weren't liquidated and they were never dollars. This was someone else's money. Neil looked around the room in confusion and dread. He counted eighteen bags in total.

He felt as though he was observing himself going through this moment. He had no idea what was happening. This was more money than he had seen in a long time and why his mother had it stored in this room he didn't know. It was more than the money they had buried, more than he could ever believe they had.

He didn't know anything.

He shut the door and locked it again.

It wasn't a surprise that he wanted to run. What was surprising was the surety that he wouldn't be living here for long, no matter the reason. He knew he would leave, and a sullen idea cemented itself into his mind.

He was going to find out what the fuck his mother was hiding from him.

Columbia

Andrew sighed in relief to be away from campus for the weekend.

The Foxes had a game and since he hadn't been bothered to put in his weight for it they'd lost. He'd been listening to Kevin's scathing remarks for longer than an hour, wondering whether it was too late to back out of the deal. It was a silly joke he played in his own mind. He was the last to break a promise so he let Kevin drone on and on until they sat in their car and Andrew turned the volume of whatever was playing loud enough to annoy everyone. He drove recklessly, his mind a buzz.

He had gone to Betsy Dobson.

The required session had been in August and he'd skipped it to prove a point to either Wymack or himself. He went voluntarily.

When he got there, Betsy had smiled like she had known all along he would be there. Andrew had narrowed his eyes at her easy smile. Then he had sat in the chair in front of her as she asked him questions, ignoring every word she had said so he could observe her. He pretended not to hear when she asked him if she wanted hot chocolate, even though he did. He always wanted hot chocolate. When the hour was up, he left without a word.

He needed to know if she talked to Coach Wymack about what happened but Coach had neither reprimanded him or looked at him any differently the next day. Andrew was pondering whether he should go again. How was he supposed to talk about anything at all? He was neither good with words nor did he find them necessary. If people didn't understand him it wasn't his responsibility to explain.

He reached Sweetie's and stared blankly at Aaron's obvious eagerness for the cracker dust. Fidgeting and distracted, Aaron was texting someone on his phone. Andrew wasn't concerned, they had a deal and he knew at the surface it was ridiculous enough for Aaron to

break at any given moment. But he hadn't yet and Andrew wasn't going to be taking the first step to fix this. Looking away from the complicated mess of his brother Andrew's eyes followed Kevin's profile next.

Kevin had his chin resting on top of his folded arms, staring into the distance with empty eyes. Andrew looked behind him to see who Kevin was looking at it but it was just the wall. He wanted to wave his hand in front of Kevin to see if he would react but decided against it. It was only slightly concerning he told himself that Kevin looked half-dead. Nicky was asleep which Andrew would be grateful for if he was grateful for anything. It was already so loud at the restaurant he had no tolerance for chatting with Aaron's cousin.

It was difficult to align the fact that Aaron was his brother and worse even for him to accept that Nicky was related to him as well. Blood mattered little when you were Andrew Minyard, in every way possible. He had never had a family before and a part of his mind refused to accept that these two men were related to him. But, he was struck often with the realization that his need to defend them had only grown overtime instead of fading away. And now there was Kevin, too.

Andrew sighed.

They all downed their dust and Nicky, awake and slightly high, was a disaster waiting to happen so they headed towards the club with Kevin and Nicky engaged in some pointless conversation. Andrew noticed Nicky had a habit of speaking solely for the purpose to spite Kevin sometimes, whatever he had said about Exy had gotten a rise out of Kevin and as always it was followed by Nicky's amused laughter and further provocation. Andrew stared out the windshield but nearing the club Kevin fell silent and Andrew's gaze drifted to him in the passenger seat.

On Court, Kevin wasn't well-liked by anyone. He was ruthless with his comments and as assistant coach, Wymack let him get away with it. He usually had the right things to say, according to Andrew at least, but with the bunch of self righteous assholes that the Foxes were it was difficult to accept anyone's opinion above your own. Trust issues and all.

It was obvious Kevin was used to the ignorance and harsh comments that flew his way but he rarely fought back. For the most part, he minded his own business. Andrew had walked into the dorm on more than one occasion to find Kevin staring helplessly at his broken hand but Andrew wasn't interested in his self-pity. There was, however, the ever-present guilt in Kevin's eyes and as curious as Andrew was, the emotion had looked so all-consuming even Andrew hadn't dared to ask any questions.

He would.

Just, not yet.

He walked up to the bar and Roland noticed him before he had a chance to call on him. He asked him for the drinks and Roland said he'd be free in a few minutes if Andrew wanted to 'chat' where they had before. Andrew agreed but not for Roland's sake. He wanted to see if he would be there.

The red-haired figment of his imagination.

He carried the drinks back to the table and just as he had with the dust, Aaron broke into them with barely concealed relief. Andrew wasn't surprised but when Kevin eyed the drinks for a millisecond before reaching for them with the same eagerness, he was a little amused. Kevin didn't look like someone who had gotten heavily drunk before. They sat there as Nicky talked and Kevin drank and Aaron texted. Andrew looked out into the crowd and maybe it was because he was looking that he saw him because anyone else would have missed him.

Nicky jostled the table when he dragged Aaron out and they disappeared down to the dance floor. He looked at Kevin staring blankly at the table looking like he wanted to puke. Andrew was torn for a moment between going after Neil or staying there but then Kevin slumped down sleepily and Andrew told himself, *I won't be long*.

"Stay here", he said.

"Where the fuck would I go?" Kevin asked, five seconds away from drooling on the table.

"Great", Andrew whispered and left.

He walked fast, reached the back door and held his breath before opening it.

Neil had been staring out into the street the way he had when Andrew had seen him walking away last time. He startled at the sound and turned, eyes wide. Andrew looked back, schooling his expression into neutrality.

He walked out, nonchalant, pulling out the packet of cigarettes from his pocket and lighting it as he walked.

Imagination, he told himself. *He's not here*.

He didn't think he was so bad at lying, but even he didn't believe this blatant denial.

He ignored Neil, who was staring at him with a mixture of curiosity and confusion. The scars on his face made his face look broken, but Andrew didn't think he would know Neil without them. He looked, as Andrew observed, more tired than last time.

Andrew walked to the wall and slid to the floor, legs crossed. He blew out smoke, revelled in the low thrum of music from the club making the floor vibrate and looked at the streetlight so he wouldn't look at Neil.

Neil took hesitant steps before sitting down next to him.

And then, with none of the previous hesitation, stole Andrew's cigarette right out of his fingers.

Andrew glared weakly and held his hand out in silent demand. Neil ignored him, this time, and brought it to his lips instead.

Okay, Andrew thought. *Okay*.

He didn't want to admit it but Neil looked ridiculously attractive even though there was barely any light in the back alley to let Andrew see him.

Andrew sighed.

"Has anyone ever told you how annoying you are?"

"Almost everyone I've ever met", Neil replied, hastily, like he'd been waiting on this conversation. Andrew tried to ignore it. With a fake apology and a small smile, Neil carefully slipped the cigarette back into Andrew's hand. It took all his control not to let his hand shake at the barest of the gentle touch.

He sighed again.

"Still as unreal as ever", Andrew whispered. They were sitting close enough for Neil to hear, who, to his surprise, laughed.

"I could say the same about you."

"No, you can't."

"Why not?"

"You've seen me working. You've seen my doppelganger."

"Is it difficult living with yourself?" Neil asked, jokingly, at the mention of his twin.

Andrew stared at him silently and then blew smoke at his face. Neil swatted it away like a minor inconvenience.

"You don't know me", Andrew said.

"I'd like to", Neil said, honest. Obvious.

Andrew was not a big fan of indulging himself. He didn't know what brand of honesty Neil expected from him but he thought for a second, *why not?*

The answer didn't present itself but the door beside them jostled and Roland appeared, with a question on his face.

"Oh, sorry", he laughed "You found him then?" He directed the question at Neil who looked at Andrew's raised brow with amusement before turning back to Roland.

"Yes."

Roland shut the door behind him. Neil checked the time. Andrew took this as a sign and stood up.

"Where are you going?"

Andrew rolled his eyes. “You can’t expect me to sit here talking to myself.”

“You know well enough how real I am, Andrew.”

Andrew almost stilled at the mention of his name.

The thing about Andrew’s name was that no one ever used it lightly. There was usually an implication, accusation or a haunting memory attached to his name. And every variation of its nicknames as well. Andrew didn’t like his name very much.

Neil said his name like they were friends. Andrew turned to the door, deliberate and barely breathing. He dropped his cigarette to the pavement and stepped on it to ground it out.

“Will I see you again?” Neil asked and Andrew didn’t answer, opened the door and stepped back into the blinding noise of the club.

His walk back was almost as fast as the beginning but when he saw Kevin still asleep on the table, his steps slowed. They should head back soon. He flicked Kevin’s arm and Kevin flinched awake, inhaling sharply.

“How do you sleep with so much noise?” Andrew asked.

“I wasn’t asleep”, Kevin slurred, with his eyes closed. Andrew shook his head. Little lies, big lies, you couldn’t escape them really.

Andrew liked the control knowledge gave him.

Lately, everything sounded like a question with no answers. He hated it.

“I’m going to get the others”, Andrew said. Kevin looked up at him and nodded then looked behind him and straightened. His eyes were wide and he looked like he’d seen a ghost. He stared unblinkingly behind Andrew, breathing shallow. He looked terrified.

Andrew looked behind him but there was nothing. Once again Kevin was staring at a wall and giving it an unnecessary reaction.

Or had he seen someone?

“Who was it?” Andrew asked.

Kevin blinked, suddenly, all the breath leaving his body as he tried to relax. He shook his head.

“Nothing. It was nothing, I’ve probably had too much to drink.”

Neither of them looked convinced. Kevin pushed away the tray of empty drinks and said, “Can we leave?”

Lies, Andrew thought. No goddamn way to escape them.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, I have nothing to say for myself.
(Do check the tags and the updates on pairings, though <3)

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